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PRESERVATION PHOTOCOPY

Conversation with Bernie Perez in Cape Town 10/85

Perez: (I was born) in 1948. (I was born) in a place called Vasco. It's in Cape Town, it's like a suburb?, you know. It is out in what they call the northern suburbs of the Cape. Well we were, it is a so-called colored township. I was staying there until about the age of 13 or 14. And then we were forced, or asked to move, by the Group Areas Act. We then moved out to Weinberg, which is another suburb in Cape Town. I was staying there up to the age of about 21 or 22. Then I moved out in town on my own. I stayed out in the Athlone area for some years. And then eventually I moved out to Green Point, it's about two or three kilometers from here.

Alex: You are now working simply as a freelance photographer?

Perez: Yeah, Precisely

Alex: Are there any kinds of exhibits, books or publications that you want us to mention?

Perez: No, not really. I haven't really exhibited.

Alex: Your pictures now are going to be in five traveling exhibitions and a book.

Perez: I haven't really had any publications this section on ...

Alex: I am just curious about growing up in Vasco and what that was like? Was there a point in your childhood when you realized that things were not right in this country?

Perez: Well, I suppose you, I was born in the very year the Nationalists party sort of took over in South Africa. So you could basically say that, you know, from childhood, I had this sort of thing hanging over my head. But, from childhood, school and everything, you sort of felt this. It wasn't as it is now. you know, at that time it was all being done covertly, but you sort of felt that something wasn't right. When it became quite evident, was of course, when I was about 13 or 14 and when I was told to move because the area that we were living in had become white. And of course, we, all non-white people, moved out to non-white areas.

Alex: What about for your friends and family, was that a hard time?

Perez: That didn't affect me that much because I am very much a loner type. In terms of friends, you know, it didn't really affect me. But they, we all, you know, I know it effected 90% of the people that were moved out were moved out from this... In some case, we were lucky, we moved into an area that we sort of choose to move in, we knew a few friends at least. But there were other people who were forced into areas they didn't like you know, they were forced to live next to a different class that they would want to live with. They had to remodel their lives after they had been shipped out.

Alex: Where your parents bitter about this, about being forced?

Perez: Well, there was quite a lot of bitterness, but you know, they sort of accepted it...there's no way that they could pick up a gun and fight. They just accepted it.

Alex: What about schools you were going to? Was it a good school system?

Perez: Well, I've only ever gone to racially segregated schools. That is from the, from the very start. They were always racially segregated. So, there is a disparity in education there is no getting away from it.... But again on has to, has to accept it, take it or leave it.

Alex: Did you go on to University afterwards?

Perez: No, I didn't.

Alex: So, what did you go through gradewise?

Perez: I basically would be called Standard 10, just before going to university. That is what you call for the end of high school.

Alex: Tell me about photography.

Perez: I was actually interested for quite some time while I was a young fellow. I never really got down to buy myself, you know, equipment and all this. I remember when I was about 15 or 16, I got myself a camera and black and white film. So the old 124mm, they didn't have much 35mm. And then I bought myself now, I bought myself a little contact printer and some chemicals. I sort of blacked out a bathroom, my mothers bathroom. I started making contact prints, you know, and then, I forgot about it some time. And then a few years later, I got myself a camera again and started taking some more photographs. And then I would actually have forgotten about it. But then, this friend of mine, Mike Barry, the two of us started talking about photography, that was before he started these courses at university. Then he said to me, he was sort of in a quandry, should he do photography or shouldn't he be. I said, "Well you know, it is quite a nice hobby and everything." And then he made up his mind, he's going to do photography. I think that in a way also gave me more, my interest was sort of heightened by this, and then you know, what he learned at University, he'd sort of share with everyone else, we started eventually started a darkroom. Myself and Michael and another guy, David. We were living in the same house and we decided to start a darkroom. We built our little darkroom, this was about five or six years ago. I'm not sure, which are my dates now.

Alex: What did you originally intend to do when you started photography?

Perez: I just liked taking pictures, I didn't have my heart set anything in particular. So it was just really a hobby. I was working up to about a year, its been a year now since I was working. So, I

Political  
awareness  
as a child

have now decided to give up working and start working for myself. And then, I actually met Wilfred through another friend of mine. He actually introduced me to Wilfred. I'd been going up to Beaufort West in connection with my own, sort of, photographic work that I was doing. And they asked me if I wouldn't, if I wasn't interested in taking some photographs for the project that they were working on. (Carnegie). So I got into that. I mean, that's how I started.

Alex: Tell me more about what that time was like going up to Beaufort-West.

Perez: Well, the people, the people acted really positively. They, in Beaufort-West, the black township, where people lived, they were very, very bitter about the conditions they were living in. It was terrible there. I was telling Omar, the houses they were living in were built in 1913-1914, and they hadn't been renovated. They were practically falling. If you look at in a few days you would get a shock if you saw it. And these blacks, they're living there, but they are, they have been living there for most of their lives, but they are not accepted as being legal residents of this area. They are not, the authorities they don't acknowledge their existence. As far as they are concerned, they are not there. Although they have been living there for fifty-sixty years, they are not being recognized.

And when I explained to them what I was doing, I was taking all these photographs. And then I explained to them and I interviewed a couple and told them what it was about, and they said to me, you know, "You are the exact person that we have been looking for." There is so much in this area here that we have gripes about. And, you know, there is a lot of unemployment, they are starving.

Alex: So basically, they took you by hand...

Perez: I was accepted right away.

Alex: Did it make a difference to you that you were I think it would be kind of a good feeling that you were working on a project that twenty or so other people were doing the same thing all over the country. Did you have the sense that when you were working there that other people were doing this kind of job?

Perez: Yeah, but, well, Wilfred himself, they were working in areas that were 50 to 100 kilometers away So we sort of felt ...It was like we were part of a big project. At that time I was still busy working, so I had basically weekends. I would leave here on a Friday. Friday evening I would leave Cape Town, drive up and get there late Friday evening. Saturday morning and Sunday I would be, sometimes, if I was lucky, we would have a holiday, and then I would have the Monday, or maybe the Friday, or something like that. And then, so do basically end up three four days...

Alex: Any other incidents of photographing people there who were interested just to, like that one incident of the people dancing there was, that should was ...interesting. In terms of people you ran into or, was there any suspicions from other people why you were there, or

basically was everyone pretty open to you?

Perez: Uh, no. No there wasn't any, even as far as whites. No not really, because I wasn't really, I was more in the Black Side. But a friend of mine, actually said there was a farm that he would like me to go to. And he would actually take me to the guy, the owner of the farm or something. And he went and asked this guy if he would mind if we go up there. And we went to ask this guy, a white farmer, he was a bit suspicious of me. And he said, "What's this about." And, well I didn't speak, he spoke to this guy. And the guy just said to him, you know, I'm terribly sorry about that. He can't allow something like that. He went on to say that maybe at some later stage, you know, he would be able to give us permission.

Alex: Is that the kind of thing that you have noticed a lot in your life? That kind of sort of distrust between different races here, or is there more now than before?

Perez: I think it is more now than before. But uh, that is something that's always been like that. They, these white farmers wouldn't allow you to go into the premises because they are scared that ...

Alex: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Perez: Yeah, I got three brothers and two sisters. Two brothers are in Australia. They immigrated. The rest of the family, they also are actually thinking of moving to Australia. I'm not keen on the idea. I would really like to stay.

Alex: Is that because things are getting rough now, and they're ready to leave?

Perez: It's not, it is that to a certain extent. You know my, they have been thinking for some time now, going, but they think what does, what's going to happen. They feel that there is no future in this country. (Is that why your brother took off?) Yeah, but that was about five years ago.

Alex: Have they decided that they are going to try to make a life in Australia? Are they younger?

Perez: They one is younger and one is older. My parents are...I think they sort of had enough of living in this country and they feel that they better, you know, they don't seem that there is a future for them. But I mean their lives are, they are quite old already though. They are thinking more about my brothers and sisters, my other brothers and sisters.

Alex: What has it been like for your parents. What kinds of jobs did your parents have?

Perez: My father was a barber here. He had a business up until the age of 14 or 15. He was born in Cape Town. My mother was just a housewife. I think my father was about 15, maybe younger. He closed his business down because it was also geared to the "Group Areas Act".

See the people in the area that he was living was working in had all been shifted out of the area into the townships. And his business just gradually, You know the customers went down, down, down. Eventually, he had to close it. He would have been put out in any case by the Groups Area because it was also in district six. And then, he worked there. I went to school in district six. So eventually, he started to close it up and he went to work as a night watchman. A boiler attendant. He was working at night--a twelve hour shift -- from seven in the morning to seven in the night. And some weeks he would come in from seven in the night to seven in the morning. And he'd get, I think a day or two off. So he worked at that job until he retired. And now he's a pensioner.

Alex: So now he's on one of these famous pension where he doesn't get a lot of money?

Perez: I think he gets about 82 rands. That is not a lot.

Alex: That is not a lot. To pay rent...

Perez: And my mother, my mother also receives a pensions and she works, she works a part-time job. She works wednesdays and Saturdays. Are you familiar with the Race Course. She is one of those people who sits behind those computer terminals, selling, selling those race tickets. She is 72-73. She works, with 90% of the people working there are under 25 and she's about, I think she is the oldest person who works there.

Alex: Were either of your parents political when you were growing up. Was politics something discussed when you were growing up. What has amazed me since I have been in South Africa, it seems like you've got, everytime you turn around the corner, two people sit down and start talking about politics.

Perez: Not really, you know, we, I don't know. My father he is a very quiet person, a very introverted person. And my mother, she is more extroverted. My mother she has her political beliefs and everthing, but you know, it is like, we sort of learned it from her, you don't, politics is not something you can mess around with. Even I don't like politics, you know. It isn't something that is, how can I put it. You see, politics its quite for me, it is a little pain. I don't like it to be involved in politics. I mean its alright for politicians, but I personally don't get want to get involved because...that's why I, I don't really, I'm not really involved in any of these things that are going on now.

Alex: What about the photography, can't that in a way be a political, if you are working and Beaufort-West was in a way political. Or wouldn't you see it that way? I mean, is there a purpose for you taking those pictures?

Perez: Yeah, I suppose it is in a way. Well, okay. I, I'm not saying that I am apolitical ...but, you know, I just hate to get too involved, too involved because I think one can burn oneself..if you get too involved. So, I mean, through my photographs, I might have

been wanting to make a statement. I don't think that I made a statement as such, I think that, taking photographs, I'm really documenting what was there. I mean its for anybody else to draw their own conclusions. I'm not, I'm not sort of, I mean it is actually what is happening and That I think is what documentary is all about.

Alex: That is an interesting point. Something my wife and I talk about all the time. As an artist or photographer, do you have the right to not get involved in the politics, simply do your own work. If your own work is showing the truth and what is there. Is that in a way is enough.

Perez: I certainly wouldn't go out of my way to document a certain section of South African politics, South African life. I wouldn't go out of my way to sort of concentrate myself in one particular area. Well, I mean, any particular area, to sort of use it to blow it up as an issue. I think that is actually wrong. One should actually, in the type of work that you are involved, We should actually document what is there and finish, thats it. I don't think One can become too involved in the political things and still be honest about it.

Alex: Since I've been in this country, a lot of the people I've spoken to really see the politics of photography, just hand-in-hand, hand in hand and ...And a, but it is not true for everybody. I can see it is not for you and a few of the other people it is not.

Perez: No I don't think it goes hand and hand. Photography is not a tool to further the beliefs of some organization or whatever, of some political belief. That's my personal opinion. Well, that's the way I was brought up. Yeah, thats what I really believe.

Alex: What about this city you must have seen, incredible changes in Cape Town. Do things seem the same now as they did?

Perez: No, they have changed quite a lot. You probably have heard a lot about district six. That's, you know, its like a, you probably have got the same kind of thing in your country. On the outskirts of town you would have a slum area. It actually, well a lot of people have said that the easiest things to, it sort of gives life and vitality to the city, but now, they can move all the people out of there. The Center of Cape Town at night is dead, dead, dead, At ten o'clock you will not find two people walking the streets of cape town.

Alex: Did you use to spend time in district six?

Perez: I went to school there. In pre-high school. And I went, I spent two years in high school in district six as well.

Alex: What was it like in terms of its vitality. Was there a lot of life there.

Perez: Yeah, there was. You know, you had a concentration of people living in district six. They'd been living there for, for eons, so to speak. It was, district six was formally a jewish community and then eventually, they sort of went on into a slum area, and then eventually

Photog + Propoganda

Photog + Propoganda

it was colored people living there. They had a fish market there. something that is gone from here.

Alex: Was your neighborhood at all like this.

Perez: No, it wasn't. In the suburb...it's very big.

Alex: You know everyone abroad, really wonders what is going to happen in this country. I'm sure you are too. Do you have any guesses as to what direction it will turn? Do you think it will be a compromise or a crackdown?

Perez: Well, like I said earlier, you know, if the government wishes to maintain the country like this. If they do, they could get lucky, but, certainly wouldn't be able to stop them. I feel that that you know, a blind deaf mute can see, that people are suffering and, anyone with sense would have made changes years ago, but the present government, they don't want to see. Thinking about it. I think the longer they are delaying with the changes. They can change, you know making changes basic human rights changes. The longer they delay making these changes, the more lives will be lost. And the more, a lot of people have already said it. The best chance it will be to compromise now.

Needs for  
Change  
Compromise

Alex: It seems so crazy what is going on right now. Its, ...trucks of shooting, jumping out and shooting kids with rocks.

Perez: Well, that is actually murder. I mean, you are not really allowed to, those kids, they might have been stoning, but in London, for instance, British cops, the way they handle the unrest, I mean, its, that is the way I think it should be handled. The way they handle the rioters here, Its unbelievable. I don't know how much you've seen the country up to now. Well, yeah in Cape Town.

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