

Conversation with Josph Alpers at his home in Boputaswana, 10/85

I was born in 1949. I was born in a place called Umbumbulu, near Durban in Natal, 50 miles I am currently working at the University of Botswana I am chief photographer in the University, that's my my title but I do a.v. productions, video, and other media here.

Alex: I know your pictures where in that exhibition in 1983, "Culture and Resistance".

Alpers: It was in Havaroni (sp?) The only other thing was that Durban one, which, you know, was taken from "Culture and Resistance" one, "Nothing will separate us" and that book as well. I don't know where, but I think its Traveling in Europe

Alex: What publications would you like to mention?

Alpers: I did some photographs for the "Maids and Madams book" book. Other then that, covers for the "Reality" Magazine. Here's a picture of one of the founders of the ANC.

Alpers: I grew up mainly in Zululand. But I did all my schooling in Petermaritzberg. We got sent to boarding school...for white children in Zululand. My father was a magistrate. He was an active commisioner and magistrate. And he was part of a set up, he worked for the people who set up the framework for apartheid.

Father ussen

Alex: So he was part of the whole.

Alpers: Yeah he was part of the government.

Alex: And he believed in that at the time?

Alpers: I don't know, he died when I was pretty young. He came from a very poor background, so obviously, and he was quite a senior person, so he kinda worked his way up. I don't know what he believed in. I assume because he was working he must of felt something for that. I don't know. He worked with guys like " " who drew up the blueprint for Apartheid. . I mean, don't think he was a major player. He was sort of a senior magistrate, he worked for all the trouble spots.

Alex: What was that like for you growing up in Zululand. Where you pretty much isolated, in terms of other whites?

Alpers: We lived a very sort of colonial existance. There were lots of whites among the black people in Zululand then. And we were sent away for schooling, so we got to know the countryside quite well, but we didn't know many people. The people we ended up knowing were the other kids who went to school. We were very much apart from the blacks my own age.

We use to have a big household. I'm an only child, my mother... We had

five servants. One of whom was delegated to watch me. He was like my playmate. He was slightly older, because he had to make sure I didn't fall into holes and that sort of thing. It was a very colonial thing. I got to know him quite well. But I can't remember too well now. Because, I went to boarding school when I was six. And then I kind of, I mean all my experience centered around Petermaritzberg. Which is a very English thing.

Alex: You actually went away at age six?

Alphers: No, I would get back from school holidays. When I was in high school I was in boarding school. My father died and my mother moved to Maritzberg. It was kind of strange sort of thing, but it seemed kind of strange..now.

Alex: At the time did it seem strange to you or did it...

Alphers: Quite normal, actually.

Alex: Was there a time then that you started realizing something was going on in the country, or did it happen much later?

Alphers: Much later. I mean, that's the last few years of high school.

Alex: Was there any particular incident that made you aware of it?

Alphers: No, it happened I think because I was around people who were sort of questioning the system, that is just a matter of course. I mean people I knew. Well, when I was in high school. I knew several people who had been going to the university. I guess from just listening to people and hearing people and I finally put things together. But it really only came out when I started going to the university and learned the system. And I sort of understood more what it all was about.

Alex: What university did you go to?

Alphers: University of Natal. I studied law.

Alex: That would be what we would consider an undergraduate degree in law.

Alphers: Oh no, I did an undergraduate arts degree and then I did an llb, law degree.

Alex: But you could practice as a lawyer?

Alphers: I did my art course here. I did sort of internship...

Alex: So you have an undergraduate degree in arts

Alphers: It's in English and Political Science, liberal arts. And an llb in law, from the University of Natal

Alex: You were at school the same time I was, was there a highly political atmosphere? 1968-71.

Alphers: Yeah, I think a lot of that rubbed off on us here. Yeah, kinda very active young political scene in Europe and the United States obviously had quite an effect on us as well. In an indirect sort of way, because the issues are the same. The fact of young people who are involved in political activity.

Margaret: But the Civil Rights movement had happened and was still going on in the late 60's, were you aware of that?

Alphers: Yeah, things like, you mean, Martin Luther King and all that kind stuff, yeah. Although I, for myself, I mean I must of come across that in retrospect because it all happened and then I started to realize what had happened like five years later. It must have been, because there was always opposition and ... For the early sixties, mid sixties students were very much learning on their own. So yeah, I mean at university, I was getting caught up in all that.

Alex: Why did you go ahead and take that law degree, why didn't you go ahead and practice law?

Alphers: Well, I did a law degree because I didn't know what I wanted to do. And what most expected of me was to follow in my fathers footsteps. But he was a magistrate and civil servant...middle middle class. And the next stepping stone was to become a lawyer in private practice. So I sort of did it by default more than anything else. When I went to the University, I wasn't quite sure what I was going to do so did a liberal arts degree and followed with law, and then I still couldn't decide, so I just carried on with the law degree.

Alex: And then where did the photography come in?

Alphers: In 1974. That was actually my last year (of law school).

Margaret: What started you taking pictures?

Alphers: I don't really know. Looking back at it, it is probably because it was one way to articulate, I suppose, to communicate. Perhaps, tried to say something by taking pictures, without setting it out in writing or anything like that. But I actually started taking pictures because things looked so magic through a camera, and I got hold of a good camera and looked through it and it was wonderful. But I started, I didn't start taking any, I mean the stuff that I did was more kind of nature.

Alex: You didn't really start out thinking about cameras for the documentary type work. Instead, you were interested in photography.

Alphers: But fairly quickly, I mean, within about two years of getting interested in photography, I started taking pictures of more kind of people. at university I was involved in the wages commission. It was actually quite a turning point. I mean, you set up at university looking at wages, and the repercussions from that work was

quite enormous. I mean, it kind of, put the Union movement started off again, the black Unions, and this relationship to multinational companies.

Alex: Did you get into any hotwater for that sort of work?

Alphers: Yeah, well, I did get in quite a lot. I didn't get dragged away or anything. Yeah, I mean, yes, obviously a lot of people were arrested and banned. That was late 60's early 70's.

Alex: What sort of work, once you started doing more political work, what were some of the first things you worked on.

Alphers: Yeah, very ancient history, I mean, I started doing things like black workers, you know. It was very difficult to get access, to get in and out, you weren't allowed in the compound. It was a bit of a school boy thing. I started taking pictures when I came to the university. Well, then I went into, actually quite often, in a commercial studio in photography, I started as a schoolboy. I didn't get paid for three months. And then got on the staff, but it was all commercial stuff. But then, I hadn't really started taking much more than commercial when I started working for the newspaper, the Natal Witness

Alex: Do you work as a photographer on the newspaper?

Alphers: Yeah, I was a photogjournalist. When they couldn't find a reporter I did both. I wasn't a photo-journalist in the magazine sense, I mean, I did some writing. I did feature articles.

Alex: This would have been in the mid-70's?

Alphers: No, after, because I was overseas to find myself.

Margaret: What did you do overseas? And why did you go?

Alphers: Well, I went over for one year just to do the regular thing romp around. In Britain and have a look around. And I'd hitchhike all over Europe. It was all that compulsion when you are young.

Alex: Was the army hanging over your head?

Alphers: I went to Army. They started this thing for people going to university. You do basic training during your vacations. You camp every year in...

Alex: Its like what we have its called National Guards.

Alphers: It went on only for three or four years here and then it fell apart. It was very badly run.

Alex: Did you have to go through like a boot camp type thing and all that?

Alphers: Yeah, it was the basic training.

Alex: We've heard Paul and people talk about how the army experience was really a radical one. In terms of, making people move toward the right or to the left. Did it have that effect on you?

Alphers: Yeah, I think it definitely did. I can't think of any kind of particular sort of line, or anything, but it kind of, the experience the army made you have kind of understand about apartheid. Being in university, from the other side, then three months in the army. So, I mean, they were looking for me for years and years. When I was overseas, I mean I evaded. When I came back I had keep moving around, changing my address, things like that. But eventually I got discharged. They got fed up. Well, we were from a bad battalion, you see, we never got properly trained and they just didn't want to deal with it anymore. It was an experiment. It did really work.

Alex: You started having these ideas about possible documentary projects, when you were working on the Natal Witness? Did you get a chance to do any of your own work at that point?

Alphers: Well, yeah, I mean, full-time work on a paper is not a whole lot of time. But, I was obviously more interested in the socially conscious work.. And then ... I was trying to put things together, but actually, I didn't get anywhere--too much work. I was unable for years, it might have been ten years until 1978...And then I got offer a job on the Rand Daily Mail. I was just a photographer there. This was quite a valuable experience, working on a good paper...It shut down last year. It was a big sort of a liberal establishment. I don't know, I mean, as far as liberal papers, you know, it was a really radical paper as far as radical could be in a published paper.

Alex: It sounds like your Carnegie project was a real chance for you to begin to do the documentary that you hadn't really done.

Alphers: Yeah, I mean I have been doing little bits and pieces and I have been doing Reality covers for years. But that is partly because that were probably the first pictures, documentary pictures that were covers--were covers of Reality. And the way I got into that was that Helen's mother who was the editor. And she said, do us a picture, a cover. The stuff that I do then, because, I mean, its a obviously a political publication with those kind of pictures. But I mean, yeah, going to Lesotho, when I went to Lesotho, I wanted to do something on migrant labor, the labor pool. And I also found it never kind of got done properly because of all the other work I was doing at the time. I mean, if I took a few days off, and went to take pictures and I got the bulk of them that way. .but I could of. I mean, those, the pictures that you see are really unfinished. There is so much more...I'm also trying to get the framework for putting the migrant labor theme in a kind of framework so you can see what is happening. It is very difficult. I felt like I didn't know enough. You take the kind of pictures which when put together tell a story. But I didn't know enough about the subject. So I had to come and start reading up. I mean, by the time I got through those, I had to leave. I actually wanted to spend a year in Lesotho finishing it off, just finishing it off, because the political situation had changed in the four years

that I was there. And it was very difficult for later on because they had the Lesotho liberation army operating on the one side, and the Police Mobile units on the other. And we got a lot of flack from them.. If you tried to slip out of town to take pictures they could come and take you away.

Alex: See that is something that we have talked with a lot of the other photographers about is the idea, something we don't really have to deal with, is the kind of fear associated to doing this kind of work.

Alphers: Yeah, [because my personal experience with documentary photography, that is a major part of the whole process. Because there's somebody, you always have got one eye over your shoulder.]

Alex: Looking for who?

Alphers: Well, that depends where you are. [But documentary photography seems to be, nobody in Southern Africa is really in favor of it, as far as, the authorities go. I mean, in Lesotho, they don't want pictures because it was a poor country and they don't want conditions there advertised. In South Africa for obvious reasons--the whole apartheid structure. Getting into the kind of places where you can take the pictures that need to be taken, is very difficult. And you either get harassed or the security police along or people won't cooperate because they are terrified as well. And those kind of things makes it all, it is like a big invisible object that you are trying to get through. Its sort of easier just to turn away.]

Alex: That is another thing that we talked with other photographers about. They say, the atmosphere here "seems to be that sort of atmosphere either tends to crush you and keep from doing any work or invigorates you and gets you going." It sounds like it has done sort of both for you in a way.

Alphers: Yeah, Its been our circumstance. If it's impossible, not just for physical reasons, but because you feel so intimidated that you just don't think its worth staying in to do it. But, in other places, yeah, I mean, you think, there is something there and you've got to get it.

But in my personal case, not that many photographs have been taken. There is a number of projects I set for myself, but I haven't been able to do because of these kind of pressures.

Alex: What about your sense about what is happening in documentary photography in this country?

Alphers: I don't know if there is any direction. My personal view is that there are actually very few, relatively few, with respect to the size of the problem and the are to cover, There are relatively few people trying to do documentary photography. And I think there is really a handful, because most photographers are much more commercially oriented. They are either in the press and that breeds a certain kind of photography. I mean that is sort of hit and run type

SFA
US photo
Alphers

Doc photo
w. S.A.
Alphers

thing and the big picture. Which is very misleading in a way. I mean, the story doesn't really come out from that sort of, from press photography. I mean you get the dramatic things.

But, I mean, none of them strive at that kind of thing that Omar does and Afripix and a few others. I mean, its not, a movement really, or a lot of people working, of course there is Goldblatt. And Streun Robertson now and again. I think, most photographers are concerned with, what they are there to do is make a living. And doing those kind of social documentary stuff isn't a way to make a living. I mean, partly there is nowhere to publish your pictures. I mean you don't really get paid to work for those kinds of pictures. You are not really paid to publish them.

The kind of photography thats been done by them, I have, I personally am torn between doing good photographs and getting the right content. I think a lot of pictures are taken with a political conscience sort of read into it by its photographer. You know, I mean, I'll take a picture, its probably a bad picture, but it is important because of the content. It doesn't necessarily convey that message because it is a bad picture. If you know what I am getting at. But I, I think that is a problem with the kind of photography that is going on here. On the other hand, just being a photographer and just trying to do, you know, better and better pictures, you know, trying to get the print to look right and that kind of thing, that is a whole other direction, that obviously, it is more important to do the documentary work.

Alex: I started to ask you, I would get the feeling that you might feel sort of guilty if you put your energy into making beautiful prints of landscapes etc, is that something that you would feel that you feel that, you maybe want to go in that direction but there is too much going on?

Alphers: Yes, quite, yeah. I think, going back to what I was trying to say, I think, good pictures will convey a message much more effectively. Which is why I think that good pictures of things that are going on, because I think really, I mean that good pictures...

Margaret: You mean good pictures means control of the medium so that you can produce clear, detailed...

Alphers: Yeah, right, however you are using it, but I mean, you know, technically good and compositionally good if it is a powerful picture. And the content is important. I think it is much more effective. I think that is what documentary photography should be, rather than just keeping up with anything that that happens. And hoping that will make the message come across. Because, I mean, from a lot of photography that I have seen, the pictures are printed because of the content. In other ways, I mean, the message is being muddled, either pictures tend to be so bad you can't see a thing in it or its badly composed and it is irritating to look at and that kind of thing.

Alex: There is something that goes on for photographers in the

states, that may or may not be what you are concerned with. .which is just issue of privacy of your subjects. In otherwords, you are going out to do the work on this project, was it a concern of yours in terms of what right do you have to be invading in these peoples lives, etc. etc. Is that something that you felt at all. or is it even an issue for the kind of work you do.

Alphers: For me it is an issue, in that, well, I mean I like to observe people rather than confront them. I tend to be a long lens guy and step back a bit see what is going on, and went for the moment, and that that kind of thing. But, on the otherhand, I don't like to take people's pictures if they don't want there pictures taken. And somewhere in between that, you have got to work out a mode of operating. So, perhaps In Lesotho what I did was on a public occasion, or lets say, like for instance guys playing soccer, I mean, they don't care if I am there or not. And of course, when you do portraits of people and you need to get their consent. I mean, there is there's is a twist in all of it, because you are taking pictures and they don't know what you are going to use them for. There is very difficult to explain. So you don't, you know, and I mean you get the picture and they are happy that they had their picture taken, but they probably would be very surprised to see their faces/pictures in the context in which it goes out. I don't know whether they'd be happy or not, but they might be quite surprised to see some of the pictures that were in "Culture and Resistance", in that context ...

And I find that, I have to kind of make myself known and get a kind of consent, or, you know, implicit or explicit. If I feel like they aren't going to object, then I carry on.

Alex: Do you feel that the pictures can ever make a difference in terms of change in this country. In otherwords, there is something you are doing because you really think this kind of thing will....I guess what I am asking what's the purpose of the pictures that you take? Who do you take them for?

Alphers: Well I think there's been a, well, there's two things, the one is that I think its important for these things to be recorded.

Alex: What kinds of things.

Alphers: [The kind of political, social and political structure, and what it makes people do and the effects it has on people in Southern Africa, particularly apartheid, it effects everybody. And obviously its broader than that. Its the whole kind of economic social structure. And I think its important to record that for future time as well. But also, I think some pictures can have an effect immediately and help to change things. But I think its more kind of an accumulative process People, like the resettlement thing. you know, some of those pictures actually got through to people. You know, They say "Well, if that is what the resettlements are are all about then it's not such a good thing. And they probably wouldn't have realized what it is like unless they had seen pictures, and I think that kind of thing that documentary photography is important for.]

Alex: So, your pictures really are for people in South African?

Alphers: Oh yes, very much so. ^{Audience} Directed towards change, towards the people here, because it sort of, I mean there are a few different worlds here...and you have kind of show the one lot to the other. I think the Overseas thing is sort of necessary, but in practical purposes, those pictures can make people here see what is going on in front of their noses. So they see, because they have been brought up not to see it and that is a very valuable lesson.. How effective it is, I don't know. I think it has a slow accumulative effect, these pictures. And then, when something really good comes out, something important, it has more effect because of what has gone before.

Alex: As a white South African is guilt one of the things that motivates you as a photographer, feeling guilty about your position in this society, or is that something that enters into it at all.

Alphers: yea, some time ago, I kind of got through that.

Alex: I feel it's something that we would both really struggle with, and even do in the states given our position there. How is that something that you can deal with?

Alphers: Well, yeah, I mean when I was a student, one of the major things was, yeah, the whole guilt trip and the big thing was to get out -- to leave the country rather than being part of the system and lots of people who chose to leave rather than stay. I mean we tried to leave as well but we just didn't want to live out of this part of Africa.

What I feel now, Obviously I've changed. I don't think I'm sort of motivated by guilt feelings about the things here. I am not responsible, I belong here, I was born here and my parents were born here. And that whole thing of being an alien. They are quite South African. I feel I that they also belong here as much as everybody else. And, yeah, I mean, whereas it was quite important thing before to motivate people to do things. I mean, for myself, I haven't, I find I'm moving away from that. And I don't feel that sort of, I don't know, I mean, I am doing things here because I feel I belong here. I am not guilty in the sense that I was before, you know, feeling that kind of pressure.

I suppose it just comes with experience and actually going through things like that. I mean, its kind of continual pressure and fear of what's going on here. Without doing anything enormously important, but I mean, if you survive it and you feel a need to, that kind of guilt motivation just goes away, in a sort of way you paid your dues, that kind of thing.

But I think a lot of people do feel guilty, the white guilt thing. I think living in a place like Lesotho for four years did a lot to kind of, I don't know, change my attitude to a more kind of normal response to things. It sort of having come out of a priviledge class. From the kind of background that I am from, and then going to the university which was quite a unsettling experience. It kind of turned

everything on its head. And it took quite a long time to find a, to come to some sort of rational decision about what you are and what are doing.

And living in a place like Lesotho, I feel its got to, its got to the stage where you could just appreciate people for what they are. Coming out of a liberal background, you know, I mean you sort of bend over backwards. I mean, its all in order to live here, this is the way I have been brought up. It's just impossible to get rid of it. I mean I find. I mean its built into my system. But, I find that I can now deal with people. If I don't like the black guy, well then I don't like the man. I don't feel guilty about it. Whereas before, one kind of, you know, always be nice to blacks and that kind, no matter what kind of people they were.

growing out
of guilt
Alpers

You know, I've sort of grown out of that. But obviously, sometime in the four years there, lots has happened. But, I mean, so I think didn't know from a bar of soap. And had to find out who they were. You know, in order to have black people in the project, in order to search around as my assistant. I mean, my assistant and I actually became very close. I mean, that was four very hard years out in the mountains and the relationships were quite important for me because it helped me kind of deal with some other person, deal with an individual on a long term basis. You know, it makes me...

Alex: Was that one of the first chances you had, just given the society, to get to know some one like that?

Alpers: Yeah, because it is impossible in a place like, even in a place like, Maritzberg, which is supposed to be more liberal, but is in fact a really very conservative place. I mean, to have the chance to just get on with people in everyday life. Its very valuable. And you kind of get a different perspective on people from dealing with people. Well, like I said, color consciousness will still probably be with me until I die.

Alex: You have to deal with it.

Alpers: Going overseas, England is my link with the outside world. Like all issues there, I couldn't get involved in anything. And coming from a quite of sort of, politically hot place like the university and going in it all seemed sort of unreal. You know, people getting worried about municipal affairs and those kind of things, you know. With political issues there, I'm sure they are very important for the people there, but I just couldn't get involved in them. This is the place that I need to be. And this is where I'm...

Alex: Do you foresee any possibilities of your leaving South Africa.

Alpers: Yeah, well, I mean, we decided to stay. It was in 1976 we came back and we we're going to stay. And, I can't really ...Yeah, the possibility of leaving is always there, partly, you know, from the kind of physical safety issue out of the country. I mean, if we are threatened with destruction, then we'll go somewhere else. Preferably not too far away. But I mean, I would rather stay.

Alex: When you imagine that, is it from the right or the left at this point.

Alphers: It could be either, the more, more possibly from, when, in the near future change takes place here, I can't really visualize the form that its going to take, but the longer it takes, the more violent the whole thing is going to be and from the left I suppose, from the liberation point of view, well I mean, things are going to get quite hot. And they, its very difficult for them to discriminate amongst whites. I mean, with the fights going on, I mean, a white face is a white face. No matter what they think. But, that's the kind of thing that happens in a very particularly violent situation. Whereas, things are obviously going on in a place like this quite as it is. And, for example, the students at the University didn't want me to take any pictures of them, while they were marching not because of the security thing in their eyes, but because I was a white man. And they said, "You're a white man, go away." Which kind of put my back up, but you have to do that kind of thing, but understandable. Yeah, cause, I sort of, they were obviously trying to express some kind of support for what's happening at the moment and I... the fact of being white is another complicating factor. I mean, what you say isn't necessarily what people are going to take you for?

That's the first time it's happened in a while. But, I didn't feel like getting up and leaving. I just felt irritated. It was something I should have been recording and I couldn't. I mean they didn't want me to take pictures so I didn't take them. But I think, perhaps it could have been more dramatic and I should have been doing that. You have to be pragmatic about that sort of thing. If you got to get a picture you've got to do it. but it would have been provocative, you know.

I want to stay here. I don't want to be thrown out right now.

Alex: Is that something you've experienced from doing your work and showing it at places, getting it cut off or is that something you are just afraid might happen?

Alphers: It is probably more being afraid of what would happen than actually having had it had happen. But if you do start showing those kind of pictures then the wrong sort of people start taking notice. And then it is difficult to get, like I, I was politically involved as a student. And then got my legs chopped out from under me, then I kind of kept my head down for four or five years and but if I hadn't I wouldn't have gotten in a place like ...because you have to have official clearenc. because this is all that it refers to, comes from authority somewhere down the line. And if your name is called, then you are more likely to not be around.

But then is that going to seem like a cop out. And you generally don't do things because you think you are important enough to be noticed. And The state is probably not taking any notice of you at all. I came here because, you know, I needed a job. But I thought, I

whites as
targets -
compare to
OMAR !!

phobias
the state

guess it was all rationalizations, you know, I came here because I needed to work and a well paid job here. And, sort of excitement, possibilities just in ways of work, you know. I mean, setting something up and that sort of thing. I mean the rational was to come here and do a documentary here. I think quite important and I think the justification for that must be the work that comes out in the end. And if I haven't produced anything in five years time, then I obviously will have failed and would have been fooling myself. I should get on with doing it. The problem I have at the moment is finding what documentary work actually is.

Margaret: How do you answer that question?

Alpers: I was just reading a thing on British documentary, communalistic photography and then going into sort of worker photographers... Things that I hadn't known, I don't know that you have in the states, but it's not valid to take photographs unless you are part of the community and then find yourself inside of it, is what you do. And then those kind of, those other kinds of issues are so peripheral really. ...stuff like, ...and things like that... I can never get through any of that really