

When legendary *Life* magazine photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt accompanied an exhibition of his photographs to South Africa, **MICHAEL ETTERS HANK** interviewed and photographed him in Johannesburg

# EISENSTAEDT

ALFRED Eisenstaedt is very old. He is also very famous. I think of the many, many books on photographers where I have seen his photographs before, never imagining that one day I would meet him in South Africa.

I ask him about the early days of photo-journalism, when he started taking photographs.

"I got my first camera from an uncle when I was 13 years old. That was in Germany," he says. "I photographed like an amateur and I soon gave it up to join the German Army as Europe was about to go to war.

"I was only 16 when I was wounded during the Flanders offensive. My fingers were frosted. I was shot through the legs," says Eisenstaedt. He tells me the year, the date, the time. Even at 94, the man has a memory as quick as a rat trap.

**After the** Great War, he became a button salesman in Berlin, but he took his Zeiss along on his various sales trips.

"In Johannesburg I photographed a woman tennis player and when I returned to Berlin I enlarged that picture and showed it to the editor of *Wereldspiegel*. He liked it and gave me three dollars. He wanted more pictures." Eisenstaedt hadn't realised that photographs could be sold.

Soon Eisenstaedt was photographing a range of social events for the Associated Press while still doubling up as a salesman.

"I was a very bad salesman and my boss told me to make up my mind. 'What is it to be,' he asked, 'you want to sell photographs or buttons?'"

Eight days later Eisenstaedt was on his way to Stockholm to photograph the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann. It was December 9, 1929. Once made, that decision launched the career of the 'Father of Photo-journalism', a career which has left us with some of the most enduring images of our times.



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His next assignment proved to be something of a professional disaster. Travelling to Assisi, north of Rome, he was to photograph the wedding of King George of Bulgaria to Sophia, youngest daughter of King Victor of Italy.

"I was fascinated by all the pageantry, all the wonderful art, the lanterns. It was so beautiful that I photographed everything, the pageantry, even Mussolini strutting by.

"When I got back, they asked me for my photographs of the bride and groom. I said, 'what bride and groom?'"

A telegram from London ordered that Eisenstaedt be fired. He laughs. "They couldn't fire me, I was a freelancer."

Eisenstaedt left Germany for America when war loomed again in Europe and joined *Life* magazine after a stint photographing filmstars in Hollywood.

**I ask** Eisenstaedt which of his many famous photographs is his most important.

"The picture I took at VJ Day when the war was over," he says. "Well, they say that is the picture... everybody knows that picture, I guess.

"*Life* covered the VJ Day celebrations in New York with five photographers. I was assigned to Time Square where I photographed everybody kissing each other.

"Then I saw a sailor grabbing every woman in sight, very fast... He was in navy uniform, many of the women he grabbed were also darkly dressed. You couldn't tell them apart... I ran ahead of him. Then he grabbed somebody in a white dress and kissed her. I clicked four times."

Eisenstaedt tells me how he put his film through at 8pm that night and forgot all about it until his editor saw him the next day. He says it was a snapshot, the perfect moment in a series of four frames that he captured on film for posterity.

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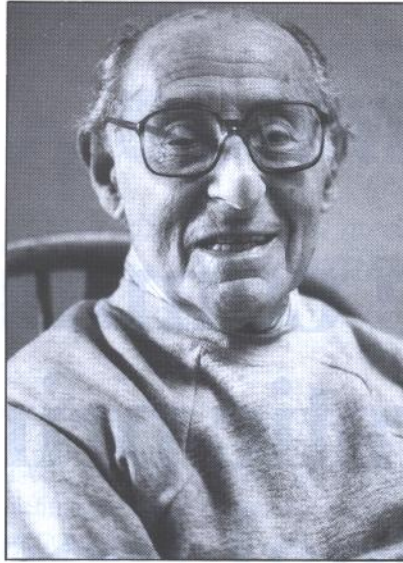
## EISENSTAEDT

To imagine a career that spans such a long time is not easy. I ask Eisenstaedt if the world has changed. "Everything changes all the time," he replies. "Reporters, young photographers, they ask me for advice. But I ask them for advice. They know more about modern cameras than I do."

However, Eisenstaedt says the eye for a good photograph is as important now as it has ever been.

"After my first exhibition, *Witness to our Times*, was over, about 30 people crowded around me to ask questions. Among them was this father and son. The father said, 'My son, I'm going to buy you the same camera Mr Eisenstaedt has so you can do the same'. I said, 'I have two hands and 10 fingers, but I can't paint like Picasso. I have 10 fingers but I can't play the piano like Rubenstein'.

"I always wanted one really beautiful picture in each story," he says. "I'm often asked why I have so many people in pictures. The editors thought I worked best with people. That is possibly why I have few expeditions and nature stories.



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I photographed more people than anybody else." Eisenstaedt has nine famous autograph books full of the signatures of rich and famous subjects of his lens. He still photographs them, but at a price and the money from these rare photo sessions goes to children's charities.

I am conducting this interview at the lovely Parkwood home of Eve Jammy, wife of Eisenstaedt's nephew. There is a skylight in the roof and Eisenstaedt is sitting in its soft glow looking frail and tired. He picks up a passing cat, holds it on his knee, then asks if we can go outside. He wants to sit in the sun as he suffers much pain from arthritis — the result of his war wounds. Eisenstaedt loves the sun. He says he is a sunbird and although he can fly no more, he has certainly left his mark upon our world. ●

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