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Litvaks in South Africa: How to Photograph Nelson Mandela?

Karina Simonson

Lithuanian Jews in South Africa have maintained strong ties with their historical homeland and consciously preserved their cultural identity. They are actively interested in their origins and roots.

In this article, I will present part of my PhD research, which focuses on Litvak photographers in South Africa. First, I will briefly introduce the Jewish community and its role in the antiapartheid struggle. I will then define social documentary photography, as well as present a short biography of one of the Litvak photographers, Eli Weinberg from Libau. Last, I will discuss my case study of a Nelson Mandela photograph taken by Eli Weinberg, and discuss how this artwork was constructed. Also, I will raise a few other more personal concerns of research method, such as how to avoid the “*danger of a single story*” (Adichie 2009).

Quick Note on the Term *Litvak*

Litvaks are Jews from the territories of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania—present-day Lithuania; parts of Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia; and the northeastern Suwałki region of Poland. Litvaks, as a territorial and linguistic subgroup of Ashkenazi Jews, are carriers of the northeastern, or Lithuanian, dialect of Yiddish. The Yiddish adjective *Litvish* means “Lithuanian,” and the noun for “Lithuanian Jew” is *Litvak*. The term *Litvak* comes from *Litwak*, the Polish word for “a man from Lithuania”; however, this usage was discontinued in the nineteenth century, and was revived in 1880 in the narrower sense of “a Lithuanian Jew.” The term is sometimes used to refer to all Orthodox Jews who follow a “Lithuanian” (Ashkenazic and non-Hasidic, following the teaching of the Vilna Gaon) style of life and learning, regardless of their location and community of origin. The area where Lithuanian Jews live is often called *Lita*.

I would like to stress that the geography of Jewish origin plays a key role in my research and is not a question of religion.

Therefore, I will use term *Litvak*, having in mind Jews who came to South Africa from the territory of present-day Lithuania and parts of Latvia, Poland, and Belarus, as well as their children and grandchildren.

The South African Litvak Community and its Social Context

The first wave of Litvak emigration to South Africa began at the end of the nineteenth century. There were several reasons for this. First, pogroms started to occur in numerous places in the Russian Empire, and even though they did not take place in Lithuania, many local Jews felt growing anxiety and unease. Second, massive deposits of gold were discovered in 1886 on the spot where Johannesburg now stands, and the opportunities offered by the booming economy built around this looked very attractive. So at that time around 40,000 Jews from Lithuania and nearby territories left for South Africa (Newman et. al., 2006, 385).

The numbers dropped steadily beginning in 1927, and mass emigration had almost ceased with the introduction of the South African *Quota Act* of 1930. This Act banned Eastern European Jews from entering the country, as they allegedly did not assimilate into the white culture of South Africa. The Act did not apply to emigration from Germany, so 6,000 German Jews managed to escape Nazi persecution. However, in 1937 another piece of legislation—the *Alien's Act*—shut the door to the Jews from Western Europe. Many German Jews who otherwise could have been saved in South Africa perished in the Holocaust. Many Afrikaners felt sympathy for Nazi Germany, and organizations like Louis Weichardt's *Grayshirts* and the pro-Nazi *Ossewabrandwag* were openly anti-Semitic. Nationalist leaders led some Jews to believe that they, too, along with blacks and coloureds, would be given subordinate nonwhite status, perhaps as "East Europeans," the status that had already singled them out for immigration restrictions.

"We have around 80,000 to 90,000 Jews in South Africa [now], and about 80% of them are of Baltic descent, most of them from Lithuania," says David Saks, a historian and researcher at the Jewish Board of Deputies in Johannesburg, whose own grandparents came from Lithuania (Stoddard, 1998). "My parents' generation has grown under the long-time Lithuanian Jewish traditions. I think that all South African Litvaks were interconnected

by those traditions, even if this has not been named in words,” says Steve Felder, one of the younger members of the South African Litvak community (Degutienė 2013).

Jewish immigrants arrived in South Africa by ship, with the major port of embarkation being Libau (now Liepaja, Latvia). Shipping agents had subagents in the shtetls who took orders for passage to South Africa. Many immigrants passed through Hamburg, Bremen, London, Rotterdam, and Antwerp.

Although within the apartheid racial scheme Jews had a “white status,” they often faced social exclusion from English-speaking South Africans and, at times, fierce anti-Semitism from the Afrikaners. As Adler (2000) puts it, “Leaving a history of persecution in Eastern Europe, Jews arrived in South Africa not as ‘whites,’ but as ‘Jews,’ Christian Europe’s ‘eternal other,’ objects of Europe’s original and most enduring racism (9). They had no illusions about successful integration into the society of their adopted country, as was the case in Western Europe and the United States. Instead, they began to form their own separate Jewish community, constructing a rich network of schools, youth movements, cultural and press organizations, and welfare institutions.

Moreover, as Paulauskienė (2010) adds, whereas in the United States different brands of Eastern European Jewry were molded into a generic category of “Russian Jew,” in South Africa, Jews from Lithuania clearly dominated other Jewish immigrants in numbers.

The Role of South African Jews in the Struggle against Apartheid

It is important to emphasise that the majority of the Jews in South Africa could still enjoy all the privileges of whites. However, South African Jewry participated extensively in antiapartheid activities. Blacks, coloureds, and Indians comprised disadvantaged communities who were fighting for themselves and their interests. The Jewish dedication to the struggle was extraordinary because Jews were not getting any benefit from it, and could lose everything they had. They were risking their freedom and property, although they themselves were not directly victims.

The preeminent leader Mahatma Gandhi certainly sympathized with the condition of blacks during his time in South Africa

(1893–1914); however, he worked exclusively for Indian rights and never proposed a broader alliance. Incidentally, many of his closest white associates were Jews, who railed against the failure of other Jews to champion Indian rights (Adler, 2000).

Stoddard (1998) writes that public activities and politics of South Africa's Litvak community were rooted in Europe but flourished in the soil of oppression and opportunity found in South Africa. The reformist trait of Lithuanian Jews, who had faced anti-Semitism and repression in their home country, was carried on by a host of antiapartheid activists. "The striving for social justice for everyone is a very Litvak trait. It has carried on uninterrupted in South Africa," said novelist Mark Zingeris (as quoted in Stoddard 1998). "These were people coming to South Africa having experienced intense hatred against them, and they got to South Africa, and they saw hatred against black people," Litvak Grant Gochin said of South Africa's Jews (Gochin as quoted in Jewish Journal, 2011).

Longtime leader and ex-president of South Africa Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) wrote in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, "In my experience I found Jews to be more broad-minded than most whites on issues of race and politics, perhaps because they themselves have historically been victims of prejudice" (Mandela, 1995, 91). Mandela also counted many Jews among his lifelong friends and comrades in battle. Indeed, among whites it was mostly Jews who supported and encouraged Mandela. Along with nonwhites, Jews in the struggle against apartheid were assassinated, tortured, mutilated, and imprisoned. In every aspect of the antiapartheid struggle—political, military, legal, cultural—Jews participated in significant numbers compared to other members of the white population. This from a group that was only about 2.5% of South Africa's white population, and 0.3% of South Africa's total population (Adler, 2000).

On the other hand, after the official end of apartheid in 1990 it has become fashionable among Jewish South Africans to share in the limelight of activists and heroes from the past who fought against racism and apartheid. When unveiling of a plaque in Johannesburg acknowledging a Jewish family of Lithuanian origin—the Weinbergs—and their contribution to the antiapartheid struggle, Mark Weinberg, grandson of Litvak photographer Eli Weinberg said, "I'm very proud and grateful of my heritage, which

includes elements of selfless service to the broader movement in the broader context” (Weinberg, 2013). However, he stated that there was no need to tie the Weinberg legacy with Judaism: “We reject outright the efforts of Zionists in South Africa to enhance their credibility by presenting themselves as custodians of the antiapartheid struggle by claiming the acts of comrades with Jewish ancestry. In fact, we Weinbergs have been atheists for many generations” (Weinberg, 2013).

Social Documentary in South Africa

In the decades of the racist regime, documentary photography became the dominant genre of photography and gained a renowned tradition of engaged social commentary in South Africa. Photography was consistently used in the service of news and the ideological struggle between the apartheid state and its opponents. These photographs played a crucial role in condemning the illegality, injustices, and brutal violence of a system that trampled on fundamental human rights, thereby raising individual and collective consciousness, attracting an audience to vehemently oppose the South African government, and demanding social and political change.

Journalist, art critic, and art historian Joyce Ozyński comments on that situation:

“For each individual photographer, there was the struggle to overcome the blind spots resulting from an internalised apartheid ideology. To see what had not hitherto been seen; to make visible what had been invisible; to find ways of articulating through the medium of photography, a reality obscured by government propaganda” (as quoted in Oliphant and Vladislavic, 1988, 163).

Two Theoretical Questions

I would like to point out the problem of the *danger of a single story* and the related question about photography as a *single witness*. In her talk, *The Danger of a Single Story*, delivered at a TED Conference in 2009, the renowned Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) expressed this thought: “The single story

creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Adichie believes in the power of stories but warns that relying on only one story about a person or nation may lead to manipulations of the truth. She opines that truth is revealed through a multitude of stories.

This insight supports my analysis of my position as an art critic towards the object of my research. I feel uneasy studying a single photograph and not connecting it with its political, social, and historical context, as well as with other photographs created at the same time. Analysing it as a single source and testimony may result in a simplified and easily manipulated conclusion. As Adichie (2009) put it, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” This remark is in keeping with the fact that during the apartheid era, the camera was directly linked to the distribution and manipulation of power.

Another crucial question for me as a European researcher is a problem of correct theoretical approach: Does methodology have an ethnic identity? As a result of applying the Western academic model, many inappropriate paradigms fail to relate to actual social realities or to hear the majority of voices in South Africa. What are South African concerns in the social sciences in general? As Partha Mukherji (2009, 129-146) remarks, “One of the most epistemologically relevant questions in the social sciences is: the social sciences that originated in the West, are indigenous to the West, are they necessarily universal for the rest?” Applying, consciously or unconsciously, theoretical and paradigmatic models derived from the West, to understand meanings in the South African situation, is an academic tendency in the humanities and social sciences. Unfortunately, this leads to a type of indirect rule of Western notions and therefore should be examined more closely.

Nelson Mandela and Eli Weinberg

The death of long-lived South African leader and ex-president Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) became a pretext for me to explore in more detail the creation of his image in the works of South African Litvak photographers. Mandela’s death was the catalyst for the widespread use of his image, as represented in different

periods and by various authors. Here I will focus on one peculiar image of Mandela, captured by Litvak photographer Eli Weinberg in 1961.

Eli Weinberg (1908-1981) was born in the port city of Libau (now Liepaja) on the Baltic Sea in Latvia. He survived the First World War and the October Revolution of 1917 while still a child, but was separated from his family. Weinberg's mother, sister, and other members of his family were later murdered in a Nazi concentration camp. He joined a trade union at the age of sixteen and became deeply involved in its activities. Later, he became attracted to Communism, and as a Jew, he was opposed to all forms of racism. Latvia was then an independent republic with strong leanings towards the Italian model of fascism. Later, the rise of Hitler in neighbouring Germany exacerbated this tendency. Due to political developments in his home country, Weinberg left Latvia and in 1929 arrived in Cape Town. In one of his letters to a friend he wrote, "I was full of illusions, a philanthropist, a pacifist, a Zionist. I loved the whole world. Slowly but surely my illusions have been broken one by one and I left Latvia, because nothing was left in me, but bitterness and hatred for our present social order, and love, joy of struggle for the Future and its progress" (Weinberg, 1930). Weinberg's emigration was a part of a larger wave of Jewish emigration from the Baltics to South Africa before World War II. In 1932, he joined the then-legal Communist Party of South Africa.

Many Jewish immigrants first arriving in South Africa experienced serious social dislocation, and that may also have played a role in attracting Weinberg and others to leftist politics. When family ties and organised religion receded, radical politics and the Communist Party provided more than just political affiliation. As Raymond Suttner (1997) states, "They offered community, human contact, the warmth and solidarity otherwise absent from their daily lives" (60). When asked to explain the significance of politics in her life, Weinberg's wife, Ray Alexander (Rachel Alexandrovich), also a very politically active Litvak woman commented, "The party was to me everything. Because it's from the party that I began to organise and develop myself to a full human being"; (as quoted in interview with Ray Alexander, Parker 1992)

Weinberg's interest in photography had begun in 1926, when he had assisted his friend in a photo studio while still in Latvia.

From the first months of life in South Africa, he worked as a professional photographer and later often participated in exhibitions and published his works. Many view him as a “people’s photographer,” and he photographed on assignment for newspapers, such as the progressive weekly *New Age*. He was also a popular “society” photographer, and this allowed him to earn a living at a time when his political and trade union activities had become almost impossible.

Weinberg was awarded a silver medal at the New York World’s Fair in 1964 for a colour slide of a group of Basotho women in the Maluti Mountains in 1962. The slide was one of the 150,000 entries from 58 countries submitted. He was still under a banning order and was unable to attend the presentation ceremony (South African History Online 2014).

Even during the period of his house arrest Weinberg continued to run a successful studio. Unfortunately, the greater part of his work was destroyed because he was unable to take his negatives with him when he left the country in 1976. Eli Weinberg died in 1981 in exile in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

Three Image Components

The black-and-white photographic image I will analyse here, made by Eli Weinberg in 1961, portrays a young Nelson Mandela, sitting on a wooden chair. He sits at a three-quarters angle, looking somewhere beside the camera. He is adorned with a beaded necklace and a leather bracelet with rivets on the forearm. He is wrapped in a light fabric, leaving a portion of his chest, abdomen, shoulders, and one arm bare. Three versions of this photo exist, each with a somewhat different composition and direction to Mandela’s gaze.

How is this photo constructed? What does it represent? As I analyse this image, I would like to draw your attention to three components: the needs of the historical and political environment of Mandela, Mandela as a photographic subject, and the artistic discourse of author Eli Weinberg.

The historical and political context is important because it includes hidden prerequisites for the establishment of such a portrait of Nelson Mandela as a political figure. Let’s begin with the fact that this photo of Mandela was captured at a difficult time. He was a member of the African National Congress (ANC) and

actively involved politically. He had managed to hide from the police and was not allowed to participate in the political meetings. At the time of the photograph, Mandela was forced into hiding at the apartment of another ANC and Communist Party member, political activist journalist and Jew Wolfie Kodesh, in the Berea district in Johannesburg. Given that it was not safe for Mandela to leave the apartment, Eli took the photograph there.

A classic men's suit, which as a lawyer Mandela wore every day, was not suitable for visual representation of an opposition leader. Any Western clothes would inevitably cause unwanted association. On the other hand, Mandela was well aware of the rise of nationalist and even racial ideas and attitudes amongst the black population; that is why he decided to be photographed wearing the traditional bead necklace and kaross—leopard skin mantle—of a Thembu aristocrat.

Eli Weinberg took this picture of Mandela on the eve of Mandela's secret trip in 1962 across Africa in order to strengthen support for the ANC. On his return, he was arrested and, while on trial in Pretoria, appeared dressed in "Africanist" costume. Women relatives in the visitors' gallery, including his wife Winnie Mandela, were in tribal dress too.

An interesting detail of this image is associated with Nelson Mandela's clothing. The overall picture is presented as if he were dressed in the traditional clothing of the Xhosa people, but this is not the case. Given the limitations of Wolfie Kodesh's tiny ground-floor flat in Berea, Mandela had no choice for this series of formal portraits but to wrap himself in Wolfie's candlewick bedspread to suggest a kaross. However, he did wear an authentic leather kaross at his trial.

Very recently, when presenting my research at the Warsaw Congress on Jewish Art, American art historian and professor Gail Levin pointed out a tiny detail in that photograph—a pocket on Mandela's attire, which might give this image a new interpretation: It is very possible that his attire was not a bedspread, as it was called in many titles to this photograph, but a chenille bathrobe. This discovery is particularly exciting for me, as it reinforces Mandela's image as a boxer, and his heroic masculinity. However its relation to the construction of his image as an African leader still requires more attention on my part.

It is important to emphasise that such choice of representation was not made by the European photographer, but was Mandela's own decision. This was in contrast to the case of the Irish photographer, Martin Duggan-Cronin (1874-1954), who documented various African tribes in the beginning of the century, and who coerced a certain artificial image of African leaders.

Nelson Mandela himself was also very suitable for the creation of such a portrait. First, at that time he had already emerged as a leader and declared to his colleagues that he would become the first black president of South Africa (*Economist*, 2013). Thus, his image was significant for him; it was necessary to present himself as a strong leader who could inspire people. Later, when Mandela started to go to the court in traditional clothes, he knew that it would emphasize the symbolic meaning, "I want our people to see me as a black man in a white man's court" (Hepple, 2012, 6). This electrified the nation.

Mandela was indeed of royal descent and had every right to pose with all relevant regalia. When he was ten years old, his father died, and he was taken into foster care by Thembu, regent of one of a dozen nationalities speaking the Xhosa language. Of course, as a grandchild of Ngubengcuka, one of the Thembu kings, from whom he inherited the traditional name Madiba, he was proud that he had come from the royal family (*Economist*, 2013).

Mandela's charisma was obvious from the time of his youth. However, his vanity was not infrequent as well. Mandela was well built and knew how to take advantage of his appearance. In his youth, he was extensively involved in boxing, and later also tried to train regularly. Due to the training the muscles of his torso were especially well formed and looked attractively sculpted, only slightly covered with a light cloth, and Weinberg took full advantage of this. Weinberg's creative contribution was, of course, also very important. His knowledge of historical, cultural, and aesthetic values influenced the precise composition of Nelson Mandela's portrait. Travelers from Europe at all times liked to compare local men and women to ancient sculpture. So Weinberg probably quite deliberately arranged Mandela's photo using the history of European art and ancient iconography that he was familiar with. Although the decision not to dress in a classic men's suit was Mandela's, it was Weinberg's aesthetic solution to expose the muscles of his chest and shoulder in such a way as to create an allusion

to the togas of senators of the Roman republic, and recalling the heroes of Greek and Roman myths. However, judging by Mandela's expression, this pose was not very comfortable for him.

Incidentally, none of the other influential members of the ANC was recorded in national costume; normally, all party men in the photographs of that time wore suits. The only exception was ex-president of the ANC Albert Luthuli, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1960 for his role in the nonviolent struggle against apartheid, and was pictured in Oslo with the royal regalia.

While popular resistance to apartheid gained momentum at home, it had also spread and became widely known beyond the borders. Foreign designers working in much better conditions than their South African counterparts were creating posters to support the cause. It is interesting to note how designers from different parts of the world confronted the fundamental problem of representing Nelson Mandela in the absence of any reliable image. This situation arose because during the twenty-seven years of his imprisonment, Mandela's portrait was officially banned for use in the domestic media. So those few images gained by the press were strictly selected and passed the censorship of the prison authorities.

Analyzing the antiapartheid images, be they posters, leaflets, stamps, or other resistance-related media, common images persist. This photo of Nelson Mandela, made by Eli Weinberg, is one example of such a popular illustration, which was many times stolen, cropped, half-toned, turned into a negative, or redrawn.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would like to point out two things. First, as with any other public image of a political leader, this photo of Nelson Mandela was highly constructed, by the society of the time, by the political leader himself, and by the photographer. Second, as in the case with Eli Weinberg, his Litvak heritage was overlapped with his European one. As a Jew who had experienced hardship and severities in Europe, in his political and social activities Weinberg identified with black Africans. However, as a Litvak artist he did not manifest himself, was just a European, without so-called "Lithuanian" character and originality.

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