

MEET JOE SMITH

SOONER OR LATER EVERYONE DOES!



Image –Trevor Yerbury

Epiphany: a moment of sudden and great revelation.

Master photographer, Joe Smith FSWPP, FMIPP, FMPPA, FBIPP, ARPS, AFIAP had his epiphany eight years ago as he wandered along a narrow street in Birgu, a beautiful, culture-rich, stone-walled medieval city in his native homeland of Malta.

He was in town to photograph a street theatre production but a chance meeting with a charismatic old lady who smiled at him from her doorway, was set to change his life forever.

'I took one look at her and knew I had to get a picture,' says Joe. 'Although I was in a public street I decided to be polite and ask her permission. She just smiled and asked me if I was a local. When I explained that I was born and bred in Rabat, her face lit up as she told me she had been a refugee there in the war. Then for the next half hour I was totally mesmerised as Ines's life story unfolded before me.'

During the war, the old lady's sister, who had moved to the safety of Rabat before she did, called to say she had no milk left to give to her babies. Ines then began the eight-mile walk to her sister's house. She took milk – and her own eight-year-old son accompanied her. When she got to the house no one was in and the town was enveloped in an eerie hush. Ines hadn't realised she was in the middle of an air-raid warning and that her sister's family must have taken refuge in a shelter. Then the siren sounded again and Ines ran with her son towards the shelter. But before she could reach it a German bomb exploded close by, knocking her completely off her feet. When she came round she saw her son Harry still standing, but covered in blood. She panicked and assumed her son had been hit...but the blast had actually ripped her own arm from its shoulder socket and Harry was covered in her own blood. Ines was lucky. She was found by a relative who worked with the Royal Navy medical unit.

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After hearing the story Joe took his picture and went on to complete his street-theatre assignment. But later that day he met with the town's mayor for a drink and related his encounter with the old lady. 'The mayor told me there were plenty more characters like Ines in Birgu. People who had witnessed at first hand the ravages of war – which had left the fortress island itself honoured with The George Cross by King George VI. People who had richly detailed personal stories to recount. It was then I realised I just had to take time out and document these people and their rich heritage. It proved a life-changing event for me.'

The town mayor helped set up a programme of interviews for Joe – and the photo-mission that would ultimately take five years to complete.

'I knew I just had to make this record,' he tells *Imagemaker*. 'These people had so many stories to tell. Once they could see what I was doing everyone began inviting me to their houses. I decided to go to each home, listen to the story and try to connect it with the house visually.'

Every picture in his book: *Survivors – the ageing population of Birgu* is accompanied by an editorial summary of the family's experience. The images (a selection of which, formed an exhibition at The Societies' Convention in January) were all shot in black and white film and with a resonant, true-to-life poignancy attached to each one.

Karmena Agius (p20 of the book, opposite, centre right) worked as a nanny at a colonel's house. But the house was bombed and she spent many hours buried under the debris before being rescued. Lawrence Scicluna was the first Maltese person to be employed as cabin crew by British European Airways, now British Airways (opposite, top).

There are stories of pilots and teachers, a broadcaster, a navy cook and a canon. Scores of townspeople – all with a valuable contribution to offer. All captured in incisive and compelling style by Joe.

Throughout his life J. P. Smith has been obsessed by photography, art and graphic media.

'Art was one of my favourite lessons at schools,' he recalls. 'And back in 1980 I had a one-man exhibition in Malta of my semi-abstract and impressionistic landscape paintings. But photography has always been in my subconscious as a pure outlet for expressing myself.' He bought his first camera – a Nikon FM – back in 1979 in Canada and he never looked back. 'I love the theatre so it was a natural progression for me to start shooting performing arts. I love jazz too...and I became the official photographer for the famous Malta International Jazz Festival. I look at jazz and link it to what photographers often need to be able to do in their profession...improvise.'

Joe joined the Malta Photographic Society but admits he is mostly self-taught. 'I've learnt through exploration, experimentation and by reading books,' he confesses.

'The key thing is to get out there with your camera. But you can't train the eye to perform aesthetically without also thinking about the technical aspects of the shot. When I lecture I tell my students that in a way the danger of photography is its immediacy – the idea that you can just press a button, and that's it. Of course if you are a composer you have time to add or delete notes but, as a photographer, to train your eye and arrive at a point where composition comes naturally, there is just no alternative but to go out and shoot. Reading books or listening to another photographer speak just isn't enough.'

Joe shot film exclusively until four years ago.

He reveals: 'There was a time when I was really convinced I would never accept the digital environment. I used to be a darkroom man and I loved having control over the processing element. It was all about discipline. When shooting with film you had the security of a back-up but digitally you are in cyberspace. Sometimes with high technology things go wrong and occasionally it's not even enough when you've backed up two or three times.'

At that time Joe had made his mind up that the tonal range of film could not be matched by digital technology – but now he takes it all back.

'Since I converted there is no looking back,' he admits. 'I still keep some film in the fridge but my darkroom has gone. I still have a neg scanner though and a processing tank. I consider myself fortunate to have gone through the pre-digital era. Now I use Photoshop but only in a very subtle way to improve the image. I believe that the building block of an image must be there at the shooting stage. Every image has its own personality, its own message and its own emotion.' Joe hasn't gained a sackful of awards and qualifications by taking 'all the usual' photographs expected of a portrait and fine art photographer.

'My nature is not to always go for the traditionally accepted shot. Where one photographer might plump for a short medium telephone lens for a certain shot, I might go for the fisheye lens instead.'

And he is a master of the application of design in a photograph. He says: 'You have to have a good design structure to the image – and that discipline for me came from my early art education. That training was always the mainstay in classical composition with great artists like Da Vinci and Raphael. With photography the more you shoot, the more you find that compositional decisions like where to place the main subject, thirds, etc come to you automatically. You end up doing it subconsciously because you have trained your eye to compose in an instant.'

Two years ago an iconic image of a village cobbler in Malta beat off stiff competition from thousands of entries from across Europe to win the overall prize in a special European Union photographic competition entitled, 'Cultures on my street.'

'I am extremely proud of that shot,' reveals Joe. 'I knew this cobbler and I had always wanted to take a picture that perfectly summed up his environment.'

Joe was one of 150 seminar speakers at our 2010 Convention – and now he's looking forward to next year's show.

'Phil and Juliet have done a masterful job in developing The Societies and their annual Convention,' he concludes. 'They are tireless in their desire to help all photographers improve the quality of their output. It is frankly impossible to turn up at these events and not learn new and useful things.'

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