

Life in Stills

Rudi Weissenstein

The world-renowned Zalmania ("Photo House"), one of Israel's most valuable and monumental private archives of historical photographs, preserves and curates over a million negatives all taken by an Israeli photographer Rudi Weissenstein.

Rudi Weissenstein was born in Iglau (Czech Republic) in 1910 and studied photography, print and graphics in Vienna in 1929-1931. After immigrating to Palestine in 1936, Weissenstein worked as a photojournalist and in 1940 he opened the Zalmania photo store in the heart of Tel Aviv.

Weissenstein roamed the country taking pictures of early years of statehood. His camera recorded historical occasions marking the settlement of land, the fifth wave of immigration, the riots in Tel Aviv, the development of building industry, marches and parades, cultural events of all kinds as well as urban and pastoral landscapes. He was Israel Philharmonic Orchestra's home photographer and also the official photographer invited to document the Declaration of the State of Israel in 1948.

Rudi Weissenstein never regarded himself as an artist, neither in the 1930s when avant-garde and experimental styles emerged, nor in the post-ideological era of the 1970s, when photographers stressed the personal aspects of their work and related to the artistic community as a whole. He defined himself as a photojournalist and a freelance photographer who aspired to create a photography archive.

Nevertheless, this desire to document the Zionist enterprise together with the intensity of the times and the individual initiative of photographers has resulted in a record of the existential, political, ideological, social and artistic conditions of the period, saturated with the romantic Zionist passion that characterized the work of most photographers at the time. This constitutes a mother lode in the study of the history of local photography in Israel.

The Zalmania has been family owned and operated for three generations. Rudi met his wife Miriam shortly after his arrival in Palestine in the thirties. Miriam Arnstein, a physical education teacher, became an active partner in the business and devoted her life to maintaining the archive ever since Rudi's death in 1992. In the summer of 2011, Miriam passed away at the age of 98. After that, her grandson Ben Peter, who started working in the shop in 2005, became the successor and the manager of the Zalmania.

Considered to be Israel's largest and most important photography archive, Weissenstein's photographs have appeared on postage stamps and money bills. They have also been exhibited in Israel and overseas and have won prizes and awards. In the passing years, the Zalmania has turned to be a mythological institute. A retrospective exhibition of Rudi's work is now travelling in Europe and in the United States.

In the past three years, Ben Peter has been working to find support that will allow him to digitalize the one million negatives of the archive in order to preserve this very important documentation of the history of Israel.

Contact details:

<http://www.zalmania.co.il>

Zalmania – an archive shop since 1940