

#8 Summer 2013 Cameraderie Sam Nzima (1934-)

Who is Sam Nzima?

You may have seen his famous photograph of the dead child Hector Pieterse being carried away from the police shooting in Soweto, South Africa on June 16, 1976. This happened at a schoolchildren's protest against being required to study only in the Afrikaans language. Here is the link to the Wikipedia image: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hector_pieterse.jpg. This is perhaps the paramount icon of the entire South African struggle for freedom. My wife visited South Africa on a Fulbright-Hayes grant in 2004, the tenth anniversary of South African independence, and this image was everywhere, even printed on paper shopping bags for her souvenir purchases. I cut out one such and framed it to put on her office wall.

Nzima was a photo-journalist for the South African newspaper, *The World*, and he was covering the children's protest. You can see several of his other shots of the protest here: [Sam Nzima Images](#).

The World printed Nzima's famous image the next day, and Nzima was hounded by police and feared for his life for some time after. He also had difficulty securing the copyright to the image, but eventually succeeded. The photograph is featured in a museum to Hector Pieterse, located near the site of the shooting in Soweto. Reports vary, but some several hundred school children were killed.

What makes this image the one from among many that was chosen, published, and rose to iconic fame? First of all, and simply put, the older boy and Hector's sister next to him are running in step. They both have similar expressions of anguish on their faces. The girl's open hand is simultaneously a sign of distress and powerlessness. None of the other images that Nzima shot have this fortunate coincidence of photographic elements, but this one fully expresses the brutality of the shootings that day. Nzima was lucky to get this shot, but he helped his chances by doing everything right to make it likely to get the shot. He was there, and when shooting started, he continued to shoot, even in the presence of danger.

We see this bravery again and again in photo-journalists who are willing to face danger or difficulty to get the shot. For most of us, this is hard to understand. We owe them gratitude and admiration for the shots and their willingness to go after the shots.