

Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

A Look Back at Burt Glinn

By Sarah Stacke Mar. 27, 2014

[Email](#)
[Share](#)
[Tweet](#)
[Save](#)
[More](#)

One of my most treasured possessions is a creased and well-handled black-and-white photograph. It lives in my living room in a floating, double-sided frame so that I can view its front and back, both of which I find mesmerizing. The photograph was made in 1957 by the Magnum photographer [Burt Glinn](#) and shows the Little Rock Nine, surrounded by armed and helmeted troops, ascending the steps of Little Rock Central High School on its first day of integration. The school's brick facade fills the frame, evoking a prison, rather than an opportunity. The back of the print features stamps and instructions Magnum used to identify and track its images when there was no other option than to transport physical photographs.

The photograph was given to me as a gift by Burt's wife, Elena Prohaska, in 2012. Burt died in 2008 at age 82, but it has never made sense to talk about him in the past tense. He was my first mentor. From Burt, I saw firsthand that what attracts me to particular images and the photographers who make them is intimately tied to how that photographer interprets and experiences the world.

I was 21 when I met Burt, who hired me in 2000 to begin digitizing the thousands of corporate, editorial and documentary stories in his archive. Every morning, I walked from my apartment in Harlem across Central Park's stone paths to his home on 96th Street. We sat in front of separate computers in the basement studio. The scene was chaotic. Binders brimming with negatives and notes, light tables, slides, folders and drawers filled the studio, each earnestly tagged with a piece of inscribed rectangular tape from his ever-churning labeling machine. CNN provided a constant background buzz.

Lunch — always turkey on rye with Russian dressing or egg salad on sourdough for Burt, Willie the dachshund invariably underfoot — was when I learned the most about him and his self-proclaimed, and humorously stated, “checkered past.”



David Anram entertaining at the Five Spot Cafe, New York, 1957. Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

The year 1959 in particular generated many memorable stories, told to me across the dining room table with a playful grin and crackled voice. On Jan. 1, recovering from a night of travel and the residue of New Year's Eve champagne, Burt arrived in Havana to cover the Cuban Revolution. Over the next nine days he photographed the mayhem, joy and seduction of Fidel Castro's slow descent from the hills and grand entrance into the capital. The massive crowds were so ecstatic in Havana that Burt was lifted out of his shoes along the Malecón, which means that he made his image of Castro entering Havana, the one in which every angle of limb and gun barrel screams triumph as brilliantly as a firework, in his socks.

Also in 1959, Burt captured memorable images of an introspective Sammy Davis Jr. leaning against a Manhattan window, the Midtown skyline softly fading, or forming, in the background; the back of Nikita Khrushchev's balding head as he contemplated the composition of America's 16th president atop the Lincoln Memorial; a sultry 27-old Elizabeth Taylor on the set of “Suddenly Last Summer”; beatniks in smoky cafes; the final moments of the debut party for young Lindy Guinness; and more.

Eudora Welty once said that photographers must “be sensitive to the speed, not simply of the camera's shutter, but of the moment in time.” The circumstances, gestures and particularities to which Burt paid attention speak to this quality.



The wedding of Judith Rathvon and Julian Plowden, New York, 1958. Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

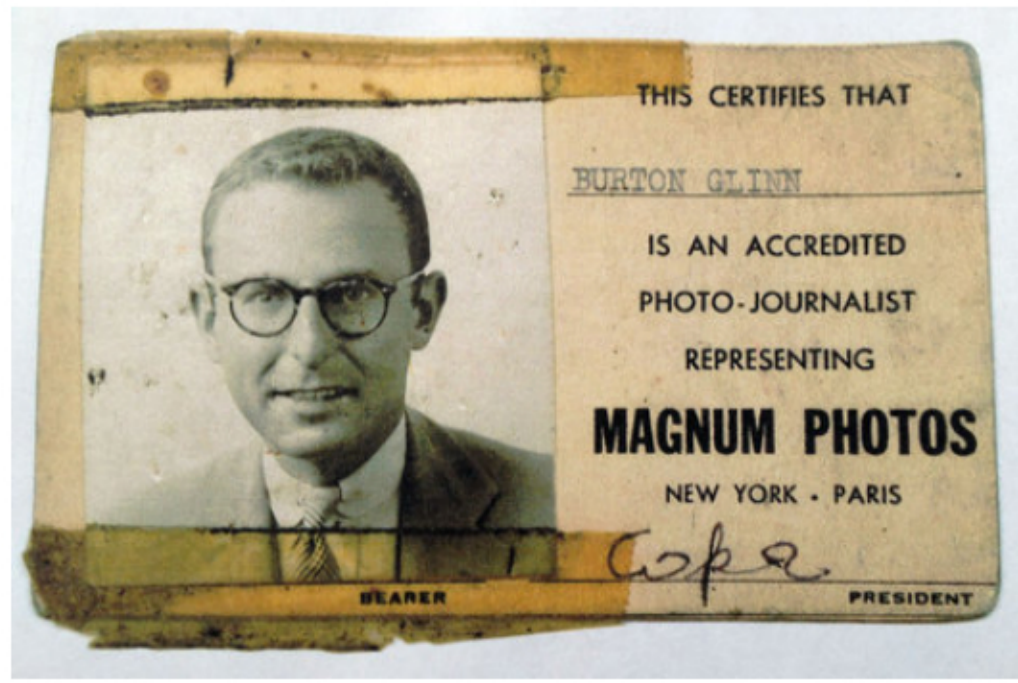
An image made in West Berlin shortly after the construction of the Berlin Wall shows an elderly woman, her white shoes balanced on a narrow, elevated bar. One arm raises a handkerchief to her eye as she searches for loved ones on the other side of the wall. A man and woman are below her, binoculars in hand. The man waves to someone in the distance, his face resolute. The woman holds the binoculars tightly to her face, her handbag wrapped around a pole in front of her, as if preparing to be there for a long time.

After nearly six decades of photographing, Burt — one of the first American members of Magnum — leaves behind a story that includes hundreds of celebrated people and many of the most momentous and beautifully everyday moments of the 20th century's second half.

The chaos of the studio has given way to a sun-filled space in East Hampton that is now home to Elena — who walked down the aisle with my family on my wedding day. I, now with my young son Errol, visit her often. The wire shelves lining the studio, and every other surface, are covered with a rotating selection of images made by Burt or his esteemed colleagues.

Elena doesn't like to put them away in boxes.

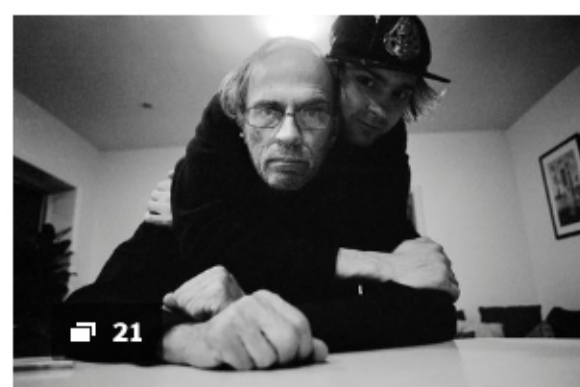
Photographers — and photographs — can open up the world. That's what Burt Glinn did for me, and his influences remain. Burt demonstrated kindness and the importance of doing things well. In hindsight, and as a new mother, perhaps two of the best lessons for any young person, photographers included.



Burt Glinn's press badge for Magnum Photos. Magnum Photos

Follow Lens: [Facebook](#) [Twitter](#) [RSS](#)

FEATURED POSTS



A Father, a Son, a Disease, and a Camera

By John Leland Jan. 18, 2018



Roger Fenton: the First Great War Photographer

By James Estrin Jan. 18, 2018



A Photographer Captures His Community in a Changing Chicago Barrio

By Evelyn Nieves Jan. 16, 2018



What Martin Luther King Jr. Meant to New York

By John Leland Jan. 11, 2018



Exploring the History of Afro-Mexicans

By David Gonzalez Jan. 11, 2018



Behind the Iron Curtain: Intimate Views of Life in Communist Hungary

By Sarah Moroz Jan. 10, 2018