



French journalist pays tribute to IDF in new photo book

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The cover of "Tzahal".

Nellu Cohen spent more than a year alongside the soldiers of the IDF taking photographs. His work can be seen in his new book "Tzahal"

IDF Website

Nellu Cohn is a photographer and journalist. In 2009, he published "My Tel Aviv", a book with pictures featuring all aspects of the White City. Now in 2011, he is back with a new book entitled "Tzahal" paying tribute to the Israel Defense Forces. He reminisces about the project which took him more than a year and about his journey alongside the soldiers of the IDF.

Why did you decide to produce a photography book on the IDF?

For me, the trigger was the Goldstone report on Operation Cast Lead. Even if today the argument in support of war crimes has been withdrawn, I couldn't stand the media fury accusing the IDF of committing such crimes.

I saw the problem as follows: Young Israelis do their military service and all men a reserve period; how can I contribute? I know how to take pictures and transmit messages through my pictures. So, I decided to pay tribute to them, to pay tribute to the IDF.

How did the IDF welcome your project?

I got a meeting with Brig. Gen. Avi Benayahu, who at the time was the IDF Spokesperson. I showed him my book on Tel Aviv and explained my project about the IDF. He answered quite fast, directly ... and in French: 'You have carte blanche'. Then, I worked with the part of the Spokesperson's Unit which handles media and journalists relations, and they escorted me to all the visits that they were scheduling.

Do you now have a better understanding of the everyday life and the difficulties facing the soldiers?

Getting to know their everyday life made me understand how difficult their task was. It would be indecent to say that I have suffered from heat, humidity or dust; the soldiers spend three years of their life in these conditions. One day, in the Negev, it was more than 40 degrees Celsius, and a female soldier from a combat unit offered to put all her equipment back on so I could take my pictures. And, she did it with a smile. In one of the pictures, we can see an Ethiopian Israeli who told me his story between two exercises: he has been in Israel for 8 years; he is doing his military service in an artillery unit, known for being very physically demanding. When I left, I thanked him for his time, and he answered that he was the one who should be thanking me: 'You came from Paris only to take pictures of us!' He did not know how important these soldiers are to us, crucial to our survival as Jews.

Was it difficult to select the pictures?

I took thousands of stills during the preparation of the book and at first my book contained more than 450 pages. The most difficult was not to choose which pictures to keep but to remove some to reach 320 pages. The choice was not aesthetic, but above all sentimental; I wanted to pay tribute to these soldiers who moved me so much. The book is produced and made in Israel with an Israeli team, Michal Dalva, David Gary, and MEIRI, the printing house of great professionals, and this was very important to me, for their understanding of both the army and the aesthetic aspect of my project.

Why did you choose not to 'caption' your pictures?

I don't like captioned pictures, I think that there is no point; a picture must speak for itself. Information on a given plane or tank is largely available on the Internet. What was close to my heart was the graphical and aesthetic dimension on the one hand, and to illustrate the power of Tzahal by showing cutting edge materials used by the IDF, on the other hand. But, most of all, for me, are the portraits, the faces, the looks.

What inspired the idea of asking important figures to write texts that appear in the book?

I wanted to give rhythm to the book with unpublished texts of academicians, artists, writers, rabbis or politicians and that each one could bring his personal, moral, philosophical, spiritual, social or historical approach. I did not want texts from servicemen or politicians presently 'on duty', because the words of a figure who is not from the military or political world is more credible when he speaks about the IDF.

I challenge anyone to find a deceitful, or demagogic sentence. The texts are of profound intellectual honesty. Each testimony gives the keys to understand the strength, the meaning, the story and above all the ethics of the IDF.

What is your best memory of this experience?

It is not an easy choice... I spent a year on a cloud, going from base to base, meeting so many soldiers, crisscrossing Israel. But if I had to choose, I would choose two recollections: a trip at sea with soldiers from the Israeli Navy that I had the chance to meet a few days before the flotilla incident in May 2010. It was very impressive. And the second is the meeting at an air base, with 21-year-old girls who have the responsibility to get F-16s off the ground. This is the age where in other places you are still playing video games. The Israeli soldiers are amazingly mature. A combination of mastered strength, warmth and sensibility. In reality, they are a reflection of Israelis, which is normal. They are Israel.

'TZAHAL' by Nellu Cohn

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*Featuring texts from: Shlomo Amar - Ehud Barak - Michael Bar-Zvi - Oury Cherki – **Edouard Cukierman** - Raphael Dray - David Dudu Fisher - Edna Foa - Frederic Encel - Yehoram Gaon - Marek Halter - Serge Klarsfeld - Asa Kasher - Michel Kichka - Yisrael Meir Lau - Dubi Lentz - Frannois Leotard - Yitzak Navon - Daniel Rouach - Joseph Haim Sitruk - Avi Pazner - Shmuel Trigano - Elie Wiesel*