THE CAMERA ISN'T NEUTRAL / Shlomo Sheva

Boris Carmi was the first Israeli press photographer to be employed full-time by an Israeli newspaper (Davar, from 1952), as well as the first Israeli military photographer.

Born in 1914 in Moscow, he was educated in Germany and France and settled in Palestine in 1939. After serving with the British in Egypt and Italy during 1942-46 doing map-making, he was recruited by the Hagannah to their clandestine map department, while also pursuing free lance press photography. Soon he was transferred to the army magazine, Ba-Mahanah ("In Camp"), as a photographer. His photographs during this period provided comprehensive testimony of the War of Independence and the birth of the State of Israel. These photographs, which became among the best-known of all pictorial depictions of the war, did not focus on action or glory, but portrayed men who, at any cost or in any manner, retained their humanity.

Carmi’s approach to photography was unique in that he never forced his camera on, or tricked, his subject. Rather, he elicited unposed reactions from his subjects by virtue of his pleasant manner. Modest, he was not the hero.

After the war he worked as an independent photographer until he was hired by Davar in 1952 on a permanent basis — a first for a photographer in Israel. Documenting the first decade of the State of Israel in its magazine section, he recorded mass immigration, domestic roaming, the founding of new settlements throughout the country, ongoing terrorist infiltration and the Sinai Campaign. One of his photographs of that war became a symbol of it: a pair of shoes left in the sand by an Egyptian soldier in hasty retreat. His photographs were accompanied by articles written by his country's leading journalists, or they appeared on their own as photo essays. No other photographer of the time covered the development of the country as intensively as Carmi. Moreover, he left a discernable imprint on his pictures — the ability to capture the inner self of the subject. His camera was never "neutral" — it loved and respected human beings.

Carmi did not limit himself to national or official events. For example, he photographed the cafe life of Tel Aviv in the 1950s extensively, particularly the cafes frequented by veteran writers and artists whom he befriended, such as Alterman, Shlonsky, Leah Goldberg, Hanna Rovina, Mordecai Z’ev and younger stars such as Hayim Ovri, Moshe Shanan, Yossi Yadin and Hanna Meron, all of whom he captured on film. He photographed ordinary people as well — workers, beggars, shopkeepers, farmers, fashion models — everyone was a potential subject for him.

He had a particular love of photographing animals, spending a great deal of time at the Tel Aviv Zoo. He also photographed abroad frequently — in Africa, for example, where in 1960 he crossed the continent from east to west, photographing a region in political transition.

Retiring from Davar in 1976, Carmi continued as a free lance photographer while also publishing photography books. He continues photographing his hometown, Tel Aviv, to this day.

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