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# GIVEN NAMES



a film by  
**NURITH AVIV**

With: Chowra Makaremi, Edouard Rosenblatt, Gulya Mirzoeva, Hind Meddeb, Judith Guy  
Marc-Alain Ouaknin, Nathalie Bély, Rym Bouhedda, Sarah Lawan Gana, Tewfik Allal, Yue Zhuo, Zeynep Jouvenaux  
Camera: Nurith Aviv | Editing: Hippolyte Saura, Nurith Aviv | Produced by Serge Lalou et Sophie Cabon | Distributed by Les Films d'Ici

# GIVEN NAMES

A film by Nurith Aviv

82 min - 2025 - 16/9

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Link to download the press materials

<https://nurithaviv.com/Prenoms/prenoms.html>

## Summary

*"A given name is a gift, a choice, a message that can be questioned, interpreted, reinvented all throughout life."*

Nurith Aviv asked friends to tell their stories through their given names. They all speak in French, telling about their names that often come from other languages, other origins. Their personal stories weave into historical events, like colonization, the Holocaust, communism, May 1968, Tiananmen 1989, the Islamic Revolution. Although these stories are very different from one another, they resonate with each other, provoking unexpected links.



## Synopsis

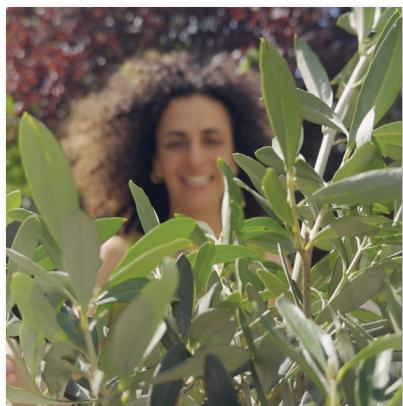
At the beginning of the self, there is a given name. A name often chosen by one's father or mother, sometimes by both, sometimes by a relative or according to tradition. Those who receive this name may adopt it or reinvent it out of an intimate necessity. Following the path of an abecedary, Nurith Aviv met with twenty-two of her friends. She asked each of them to tell their story through their given names. As a prelude to a future installation, her feature film *Given Names* invites us to listen to thirteen of them. "We carry a name, and it carries us," one of them says. This central chiasmus holds the promise of unsuspected relationships and unexpected echoes that the film sets in motion. Blending the French in which it is spoken with the diverse origins of the names, it is not a series of monologues but of fascinating polyphonic resonances.

logues mais de passionnantes échos polyphoniques.

### **Agnès Varda** filmmaker

Your parents had named you Arlette. You changed it to Agnès. Arlette was too marked by the period.

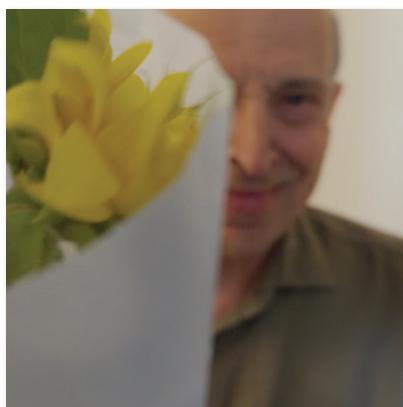




## **C**howra Makaremi

anthropologist

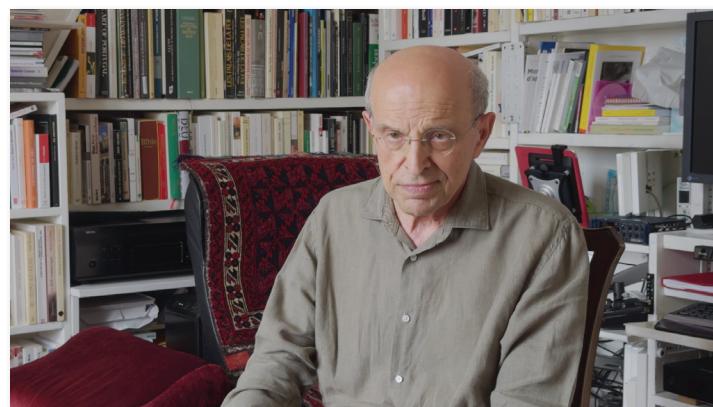
My parents named me Chowra, ("assembly" in Farsi) because my mother was a candidate in the parliamentary elections when she was pregnant with me, in 1980.



## **E**duard Rosenblatt

psychoanalyst

They gave me the name of their dead child, Edzio. I don't remember how the transition came about, from Edzio, the Polish name, to Edouard, the French name.



## **G**ulya Mirzoeva

film director

My father decided to call me "Spring Flower". "Gul" means flower, "bakhor" means spring. When you pronounce this name in Tajik, it's beautiful: "Goulbakhor".

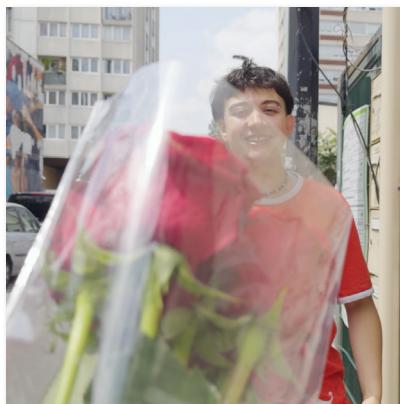


## **H**hind Meddeb

filmmaker

This name, Hind, my father chose it. I resented it a lot... It has always been a problem, since I was very little, because I was born in France, in Paris, and in France, people don't pronounce the aspirated H.





## Judith Guy

stagehand

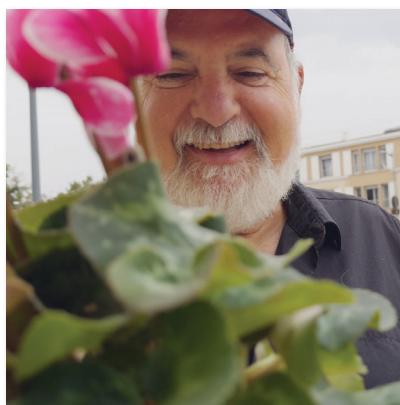
I was told that it was my father who chose to call me Judith. He said it was because Judith went well with Rachel, my mother's first name.



## Marc-Alain Ouaknin

philosopher and rabbi

My name is Marc-Alain. It's a strange name, Since my parents never called me Marc-Alain.



## Nathalie Bély

audiovisual production manager at the Mucem

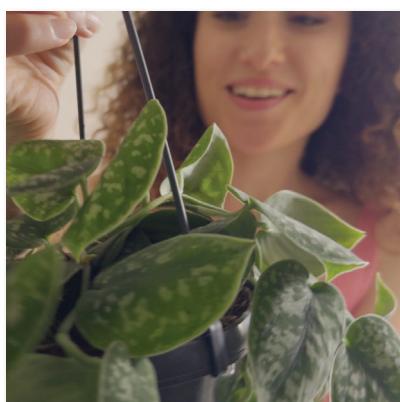
My first name, I'm sure my mother chose it because she loved a song by Gilbert Bécaud called "Nathalie".

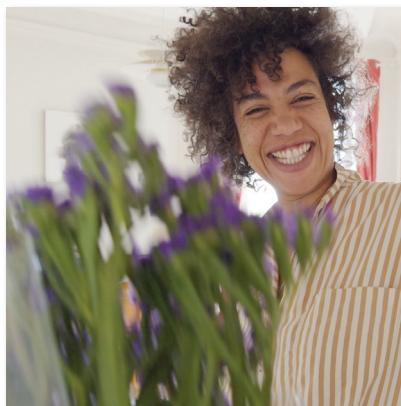


## Rym Bouhedda

filmmaker, editor and actress

This name, Rym, wherever I went. Everyone reflected back to me this strangeness, wherever I went. Even in Algeria.





## **S**arah Lawan Gana

engineer

My name is Sarah. I'm the daughter of Marie-Hélène. She is French, from Champagne, also a bit "Ch'ti", and of Goni, he is Kanuri from Niger. My parents named me after my paternal grandmother, who was called Zara.



## **T**ewfik Allal

proofreader

These three names, Tewfik, Tsoufiq, Tsoufi'e, I heard them on a daily basis. At school, in the street, at home.



## **Y**ue Zhuo

professor of French literature

In Chinese, we say the surname first, then the first name. My name in Chinese is Zhuo Yue. When my mother was pregnant with me, my father had already been sent to another city. A friend of hers suggested my name.



## **Z**eynep Jouvenaux

film programmer at Forum des images

My name is Zeynep. It's a very common name in Turkey. My mother wanted to give me this name because she had a very complicated one. Her name was Pirilay, which means "the shimmering moon".



## Interview with Nurith Aviv

***“Given Names” focuses on the way we carry our given names, our first names, and the way they carry us. How did the idea come to you?***

The question of the given name has always fascinated me. A given name has an enigmatic status in language. This time, I wanted to experiment, to investigate the question, which concerns everybody while remaining quite singular.

Every one of my films gives birth to the next. “Wandering Letter” (2024) closed on the story of the invention of the alphabet by Canaanites working in a turquoise mine in the Sinai desert. I wanted to keep working with the alphabet, and I chose the Latin one. After that, I decided to go see my friends.

I love to give myself a constraint, a rule to follow. It’s a sort of game. Here I gave myself two constraints in this case: the alphabet, and friendship.

Over the course of weeks, every morning when I woke up I began linking one of the letters from the Latin alphabet to a friend. I wasn’t trying—necessarily—to account for all the letters. In fact I stopped when I came to twenty-two friends I found I wanted to see. And it happens that twenty-two is the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The Jewish mystical tradition holds that God created the world out of twenty-two letters. So I used the Latin alphabet, but only twenty-two of its twenty-six letters.

I first imagined “Given Names” as a video installation involving twenty-two tablets. That project was constantly delayed, so as I waited for it to



come together I began editing a film—which became this one, built on thirteen voices.

Thirteen is not an insignificant number in Judaism either. The Jewish mystical tradition says that “thirteen” has the power to transcend the material dimension of “twelve” (twelve months, the Twelve Tribes of Israel). In Hebrew, where every letter has a numerical value (the procedure known as Gematria), the number thirteen is the sum of the letters in the word “Ahava”, which means “love”...

***Does filming friends represent a particular filmic challenge for you?***

All my films involve my friends. Every time I begin thinking about a film I first go to see my friends. This is the first time, though, I decide to make a film only featuring my friends.

I think the political context played a major role. More than ever before, I felt the need—the emotional need—to work with accomplices, in the context of the greatest mutual trust.

For the film was shot during the two dark years following the shock, the astonishment, the trauma of the events of October 7, 2023; the terrifying response in Gaza; and the eruption of violence in the West Bank. A disaster at whose center sits the question of the name, of what name to give those events: the fortunes of war? War crime? Crime against humanity? Genocide? We’re short of words. I couldn’t see a way out: a sense of helplessness, powerlessness.



Depressed, I sought out my friends. I asked them to tell their stories through their given names. I found welcoming people, generous and intelligent, who agreed to accompany me for part of this path.

Friendship—that alliance between feelings and intellectual pleasures—is what matters most to me. I love the people I filmed in “Given Names”—each by him or herself, all of them together. I was eighty years old: I felt the need to deepen these friendships, knowing that the powerful experience of making a film together gives the relationship another dimension.

The stories I was told surpassed all my expectations. For the most part I did not know them before diving into the film. One doesn’t, after all, normally ask friends about the history of their given names. Last names, family names as their name indicates, are shared with other family members. Given names, first names, are mostly chosen. They are personal.

***Just as in your previous films, in “Given Names” you shoot each story in one space and one time, choosing a single take. How do you prepare for this uninterrupted, continuous take before beginning to shoot?***

Before filming, I have of course met with the person I want to film. We’ve begun a conversation... Together, we choose the clothes she or he will wear. I scout out the décor and lighting. Then, when we begin filming, I set a time-limit for the take of between five and seven minutes. The length seems about right to me if I’m going to keep the shot whole, uncut, in the final film. It’s not a text learned by heart, but an account whose trajectory one knows, whose development one has contoured.



I set the camera on a tripod, also the microphone. I choose the direction of the lighting; I choose a frame—just one. The camera remains still: it's thought that moves and it's the thought that I want to capture. I'm quite sure that the "right" take will not be the first one. The first take is like the dress rehearsal. It's always too long. The speaker will find her bearings, her rhythm. She will catch her breath and find her voice—that especially, her voice. Between takes we talk, come to agreements, shorten, change—then we throw ourselves into another take. A different take means a different set of emotions, a different mood, another rhythm. Sometimes it's the second take, often the third, that is the "good" one. It's centered and concise; the tone is right. I'm not describing a psychoanalytic session, though it has similar elements. I'm filming the "actors" of their own story, and what they offer is a "performance". I'm always surprised by what happens.

Because many of your friends' given names have changed with the places they live, your film builds a sort of new Tower of Babel. I'm thinking in particular of the three different pronunciations, and spellings, of Tewfik. How do you think that "Given Names" extends your interest in translation?

What's astonishing in Tewfik's case is that with a single letter, the letter W, he shed light on the entire weight of colonization that he experienced. And as it happens another of the protagonists will talk about the same letter, while telling a completely different story.

All the film's protagonists speak in French. Many were born elsewhere, or if not themselves, then their parents or grandparents were. It's often in passing from one place to another, from one language to another, that something unexpected happens. Beyond the differences between lan-



guages, what's mobilized is the astounding fact of translation. Translation makes apparent what all languages try to express and is common to them all. Translation reveals their hidden relationship, and the resonances between them. As I listened to the film's protagonists recounting the stories of their given names, names from other places, I felt I was approaching, that I was coming to understand what Walter Benjamin describes in his essay on "The Task of the Translator." He speaks there of a "reine Sprache," that "pure language" that has nothing to do with languages' purity but designates the very structure of any and all human languages. Walter Benjamin defines it in this way: as the totality of what is meant to be said.

I'm not proposing that the protagonists' stories necessarily illustrate Benjamin's theory: they are associated with it. Take for instance my friend Gulya. Her father named her Goulbakhor, "Springtime flower," in his language, Tajik. Now, her father—a Muslim communist in what was then the Soviet Union—had chosen to speak Russian with his children, even though Russian speakers don't know how to pronounce the given name, Goulbakhor. As is customary in Russian, my friend would be called by the diminutive form of her given name: Gulya. It isn't until she's in France, that Gulya will have that name officially recognized as her first name, by a court judgement.

And I—who was born almost on the same day as Gulya, but in a different time and country—I also have a given name which is the name of springtime flower. It was at the end of the Second World War, in Palestine under the British Mandate, where the bloody 1948 war had not yet begun. My mother was not born in that country and hadn't mastered the language, a language which itself was in search of its words. At the



time, Hebrew was renewing itself. It was putting back into circulation the ancient tongue, while borrowing from other languages, both those of exile and the Arabic spoken by the Palestinian population. My mother gave me the name of a spring flower: Nurit. The flower's name had been invented some time before and so had the first name—both inspired in the word “nur,” fire in Aramaic and “light” in Arabic. My father, who had never really learned Hebrew, was the one who (like a good German Jew) added the H to the written version of my name, to chime with Ruth and Judith, which he knew.

***Flowers recur from take to take in “Given Names,” like doors to be opened into your friends’ stories. Flowers are your gift to them, before you receive theirs, their stories. Flowers then crop up, prominently placed, at the only cutaway shot in their narrative. How did this idea come to you?***

The flowers also come from “Wandering Letter,” though in that film they were “natural” flowers, wild flowers flowering in fields or on bushes or trees. Here they become “cultivated flowers,” cut and arranged in bouquets. For the first time in my career, I film my meeting with the person I’m going to film, at their door, flowers in my hand. More precisely, I’m carrying a bouquet of flowers in one hand and my camera in the other, and I find myself before a door that opens for me. Someone greets me, smiling. I say her (or his) name, I hand him or her the flowers, filming. We go arrange the flowers in a vase where I will film them, later. In exchange for the bouquet of flowers, a bouquet of words, of sayings. Humans and plants are part of the same world, and they are—here—the only elements in a minimalist cinematographic construction.



***Right after the prologue, the alphabet of "Given Names" opens with a friend who can no longer tell her story in the first person: Agnès Varda. Why was it important for you to begin with her?***

Initially I considered having no-one for the letter A and beginning with B. Genesis begins with the second letter of the alphabet, Beit. According to Jewish mysticism—again—the first letter, Aleph, represents the silence of infinity, and Beit is the moment when the infinite begins to speak...

Agnès was, as it happens, my friend—and I wanted her to be there, present in my film. The fact that she is the first in the film, thanks to the letter A, allowed me to extend the voice of the prologue, mine addressed to Agnès, telling stories that she had told me. She thus has that distinct place at the beginning of the film.

I think Agnès would have had a good laugh at my telling the anecdote about her stay in a hotel in Tel Aviv, and her last name, Varda. We laughed a lot, yes, but when I was her cinematographer, we especially visited museums all around the world. We looked at many portraits, we observed how the artists treated light, how they had their models sit, where they had them look... In some sense I became her translator, by way of the image.

***"Given Names" folds in two. It is a film in thirteen stories, and it is an installation consisting of twenty-two voices. In what respect do these two complete each other?***

Each of my films reshapes the set of the films I've already finished and sets a new base for the shape they form. "Given Names" does this even



more sharply, as I had never before filmed twenty-two people for the same project. The idea I had had—of an installation for twenty-two screens—made it possible. So I saw twenty-two people, over the course of two years, always between April and October, at a time of year when the light of day is more often bright, and lasts longer.

The film features an ensemble of thirteen people. But I experience it as a film with twenty-two people. The scope of the installation makes possible many more connections between the persons filmed, allowing the relations and resonances to take on greater depth.

Comprehensively, this project is a gallery of world-portraits. Intimate, social, political worlds. The people filmed bear plural heritages. They don't know each other, but their stories call to one another. They touch below ground and make appear what Edouard Glissant called "Tout-monde," the whole-world or all-world.

*Interview conducted by Claire Allouche in Paris between July and October 2025  
Translated by Jacques Lezra*



## Biography

Nurith Aviv has made around twenty documentary films, making questions of language her main field of personal and cinematic exploration.

Retrospectives of her work were held at the Jeu de Paume in 2008, at the Centre Pompidou in 2015, and then, in 2025, at the Forum des Images in Paris, in New York, and in Geneva.

She is the first woman cinematographer in France to be officially recognized by the CNC. She shot the images for around a hundred films (fiction and documentary), including works by Agnès Varda, Amos Gitaï, René Allio, and Jacques Doillon.

In 2023, the filmmaker Zohar Behrendt devoted a documentary to her: *Nurith Aviv, Woman with a Camera*.

In 2025, the book *Nurith Aviv. Filmer la parole* ("Filming Speech", Éditions Exils) was published, bringing together texts by around forty authors on her films.



<https://nurithaviv.com/>

# Filmography

**Prénoms** *Given Names*, 2025, 82 min

**Son portrait, mon portrait** *Her portrait, my portrait*, 2025, 14 min

**Lettre Errante** *Wandering Letter*, 2024, 52 min

**Des mots qui restent** *Words that remain*, 2022, 52 min

**Yiddish**, 2020, 60 min

**Signer** *Signing*, 2018, 60 min

**Signer en langues** *Signing in languages*, 2017, 8 min

**Poétique du cerveau** *Poetics of the brain*, 2015, 66 min

**Annonces** *Announcements*, 2013, 64 min

**Traduire** *Translating*, 2011, 70 min

**Langue sacrée, langue parlée** *Sacred Language, Spoken Language*, 2008, 73 min

**L'alphabet de Bruly Bouabré** *The alphabet of Bruly Bouabré*, 2004, 17 min

**D'une langue à l'autre** *From language to language*, 2004, 55 min

**Vaters Land (Perte)** *Loss*, 2002, 30 min

**Passage, Passage** *Allenby, passage*, 2001, 5 min

**Circoncision** *Circumcision* 2000, 52 min

**Un lieu, un travail** *Makom, Avoda*, 1998, 81 min

**La tribu européenne** *The European tribe*, 1992, 75 min

**Kafr Qar'a, Israël**, 1988, 66 min



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**PRÉNOMS de Nurith Aviv**  
2025, 82 min, colour, 16/9, audio 5.1

**With**

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Nathalie Bély  
Rym Bouhedda  
Sarah Lawan Gana  
Tewfik Allal  
Yue Zhuo  
Zeynep Jouvenaux

**Camera**

Nurith Aviv

**Editing**

Hippolyte Saura et Nurith Aviv

**Sound**

Antoine Ruanlt et Yul Elia Berlowitz Tamir

**Mix**

Samuel Mittelman

**Grading**

Sylvie Petit

**Producers**

Serge Lalou et Sophie Cabon

Les Films d'Ici