



Karateka, researcher and author Itzik Cohen instructing at his dojo in Israel

INTERVIEW

KARATE UCHINA-DI

OKINAWAN KARATE, AN EXPLORATION OF ITS ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

INTERVIEW TO AUTHOR ITZIK COHEN

Photos: Itzik Cohen

For any karateka interested in the origins of the art he/she practices, the sociopolitical environment in which it developed and the masters who began to spread it, the publishing -currently only in English- of the book "Karate Uchina-Di", by Israeli martial artist Itzik Cohen, has certainly been great news, since it is one of the most serious, complete and historically documented works on the subject produced in non-Japanese language. Up until now, and with few exceptions, karateka had to be satisfied with the brief descriptions on the subject included, as a preface, in different books on karate techniques.

However, "Karate Uchina-Di" goes way beyond that, as it not only takes the reader by the hand back in time to the very origins of karate in its geographical locations, but also introduces masters and people who played a relevant role in its development, providing abundant data under detailed analysis. And very important too, it does not mix myths with historically documented facts. Unlike other books where authors have often resorted to speculation, Itzik Cohen is in a position to provide multitude of solid references, resulting from the extensive research carried out during his multiple trips to Okinawa, trips that he continues to do to date in order to train with his Okinawan masters, Minoru Higa (Shorin ryu Karate), and Hiroshi Akamine (Ryukyu Kobudo Shimbukan).

Although we had the chance to meet Itzik Cohen in Naha last year, none of us had time for an interview on that occasion, so we later emailed him the questions that make up the below interview, with the answers he kindly provided to each one of them.

- Traditional Budo: Cohen sensei, your book includes a detailed resume of your extensive budo background but could tell us your current rank and tell us who were the instructor/s that have inspired you the most along your way?

- Itzik Cohen: I currently hold the following ranks: 7th Dan Kyoshi, Kyudokan Shorin-ryu Karate; 5th Dan Shihan, Ryukyu Kobudo Shimbukan. Additionally, I previously got a 7th Dan in Sanshinkan Shito-ryu Karate and a 5th Dan in Practical Self-Defense & Military Empty Hand Close-Combat. As for your question about figures that influenced me, in my youth these were figures such as Bill Wallace (Super-foot), Chuck Norris and Dominique Valera. I remember taking the bus and go to the other side of the city to buy a monthly magazine. It was long time ago, before the internet era and such magazines were quite rare in my country. In those times, forty year ago, the trend was Full-Contact Karate. Fortunately, I have made progress since then and I suppose you are referring to the deep meaning of the term "sensei". Well, of course I owe respect and appreciation to my first karate teachers, Florentine Issac and the late Shachnovic Yossi as well as to my first kobudo teacher, Vermiglio Paul Sensei. I got great inspiration from Soke Weber Tamas, who was my sensei for nearly forty years. I keep warm contact with him also to this day. I also cherish my two colleagues and close friends with whom I have been growing for many years, Schleyen Effi Sensei and Levi Israel Sensei. The teachers who inspire me the most, not only technically but also in the spiritual sense and personality are my kobudo sensei, Soke Akamine Hiroshi and my karate sensei, Soke Higa Minoru.

- TB: Please tell us about your current activities as martial arts instructor and whether you run your own dojo.



琉球唐手術国際研究會

International Ryukyu Karate Research Society

Writer of the Year

The International Ryukyu Karate Research Society is pleased to name **Itzik Cohen** its recipient for our 2017 *Writer of the Year Award*. His dedication to the fighting arts, valuable contributions and ongoing efforts to study, preserve and promote both its practice and cultural heritage has been exemplary. As an ambassador for the traditional fighting arts, we wish Cohen Sensei the very best of luck with his continued studies.

The fighting arts condition the body, cultivate the mind and nurture the spirit in an effort to improve health, its holistic purpose; be better prepared to protect oneself, its defensive application; build moral character, its social aim; discover and overcome the source human weakness, its philosophical nature; and to know inner-peace, its spiritual essence.

Patrick McCarthy
Hanshi 9th Dan
Director



17 December 2017

"Last 2017, Itzik Cohen received the "Writer of the Year" award from the International Ryukyu Karate Research Society"

- IC: I practice Okinawan Karate and Kobudo in my own dojo in Tel-Aviv. I also teach Karate in Holon city. Additionally, I also instruct self-defense courses in varied frames. It is important to emphasize that there is a difference between the frameworks according to the audience's target and necessities. A civil organization course will be different than military or police training courses or other professional frames. The personal level and abilities also should be considered, and the course must be tailored to the professional demands as well as to the individual's abilities. However, I put the focus on Okinawa martial arts, practice, teaching and research. These subjects are close to my heart.

- TB: When the idea of writing the book came about and what was the motivation behind what surely must have been a demanding and time-consuming work?

- IC: Well, it actually begun as personal documentation long time ago. At that time I was also occupied in software engineering. The material was stacked in bulk, it was confusing and many questions were raised, so I decided to build a software web for collecting and documenting the large amount of stuff that I had accumulated. I was very curious about this subject and I looked for information that was missing in books at that time, trying to find the truth, taking the chaff out of the bowl. It was not easy. Years passed and I noticed that actually I had material for a book. From this point I started to edit this mountain of information for what later would become my book.

- TB: How long did it take, from the moment you decided to write your book to the time it was published?

- IC: The whole process including interviews and many conversations accompanied by more research took me about ten years. The last four years were very intensive.

- TB: What is the meaning of Karate Uchina-Di?

- IC: "Karate" obviously means "Empty Hand", as it is customary in the modern sense. "Uchina-Di" means "Hand of Okinawa people". My aim is to emphasize the fact that the roots and historical evolution of what is called nowadays "Karate" were originally developed in the Ryukyu Kingdom by the Okinawan people. "Uchina" is "Okinawa" and "Di" means "Hand" in Uchinaguchi (the Okinawan language). The ancient Ryukyūan combat did not have a specific name those days. Then, before the 20th century, the local Okinawan empty hand combat, for its various shades, had a number of names and nicknames such as Taodi, Tegumi, Mutō, Tigua and more. Toadi means "Hand of Tang". This name is Chinese oriented and at the beginning of the 20th century, the japanization process in Okinawa was intense. To make a long story short, it was decided eventually to call this local art "Karate" with the kanji (ideograms) of "Empty Hand" in Japanese pronunciation. In summary, Uchina-Di means "Okinawa hand", and this name was chosen to emphasize the origin of this art.

- TB: When undertaking a task such as writing that kind of book -where accuracy is not an option- I am sure that it was inevitable to draw upon many different sources. Can you tell what/who the main sources have been for you, both written and verbal?

- IC: It is a wide-ranging subject indeed which is compounded with many fragments of information, narratives and realities intertwined in fairy tales. Some sources are clear while others obscure, some reliable and others questionable. To that end, much of the sources I have chosen are considered reliable among academic historians. Yet, it does not indicate that any academic work can be counted on. I noticed quite a few academic papers written by students that embraced narratives and essentially perpetuated the uncertainty. Another phenomenon is bias opinions; some scholars are pro-Chinese while others are pro-Japanese. It is therefore important to stick to the facts as much as possible and to analyze the interpretations well. I leaned, for example, from official Chinese documents that have been examined and found to be authentic and accurate. In cases where it was difficult to find information that met the required criteria, I undertook in-depth research and cross-reference of information.



The research and data collection task undertaken by Itzik Cohen would last 10 years



Kata training at Minoru Higa sensei's dojo, the Kyudokan

Alternatively, sources of information that were not sufficiently reliable were disqualified. However, I did not ignore any sources and tried to trace and reach the truth as much as possible. It was an “ant job” that required research, considerable effort and time. Reliability is prime factor in my work. The idea was to analyze in depth the whole subject with its complexity and to provide concentrated and reliable information. It is important to draw a clear line in the local martial arts development of the Ryukyu Islands that constitutes the arts we call nowadays Karate and Kobudo. My sources include historic documents and findings, cultural sources and academic essays. I also picked sparingly a few karate books written by well reputed sensei and researches which I consider important and reliable. In addition, I had interviews and many talks and discussions with my sensei as well as other sensei and people in this field during my repetitive visits to Okinawa.

- TB: In your extensive research, how many karate myths have you found to be taken as real facts and could you mention some of the most common?

- IC: The answer to this question is easy on the one hand and difficult on the other. It is easy because I found such cases. It is difficult because I acquired a great love and respect for this subject, its sources and practitioners in the field. I also deeply appreciate the information we may find between the lines of this or that story. Sometimes oral story, legend or ancient songs collections may provide wire tips for disclosure. You asked me to mention a myth or uncertain information. In one of the cases I raise a question about Bushi Matsumura Sokon and I also provide answers. The issue is important because it is a relevant link in two aspects. One aspect is the major influence of Matsumura's successors. The second aspect is the transition of Okinawan combat from the military circle to the civil one. From my personal perspective, I do believe that the sensei(s) that were there before us had a lot of knowledge. If they succeeded to transfer to us more than seventy percent of it, then we are lucky.

- TB: One figure that many budoka find difficult to accept is that of “Daruma” or “Bodhidharma” who, supposedly, took a simple fighting system/ physical exercises set from India to the Shaolin temple in China that would turn into Kung Fu, one of the most intricate, complex and extraordinary fighting system of mankind and “father” of karate. We would like to know your opinion about this.



With Minoru Higa sensei, who holds a copy of Karate Uchina-Di

- IC: Well, again we are dealing with a legend. I include in the book a chapter in which I discuss extensively about the Shaolin Monastery and analyze this topic from several aspects: historical, cultural, geographical, political and of course the combat perspective. There is some truth to the fact that karate is a kind of kung-fu, but we forget that sometimes half-truth is more misleading than a lie. Karate origin is nor Chinese neither Japanese, it is Okinawan. I also address the topic of Buddhism, Taoism and Karate in other chapters. Let's go back for a moment to the book's name: "Karate Uchina-di" that is "Karate - Okinawan-hand". As I mentioned, the name indicates the origin and development of Karate - Okinawa, or more precisely, the kingdom of Ryukyu. It is true that Chinese fighting had a huge impact on Karate development. There were also other significant influences such as the Japanese one and if we go back in time, possibly also that of Siam. But it is fundamental to understand that Karate is not a collection of other martial arts. Karate has a unique local development line from its historical, methodical and practical aspects. This line is evident in the concept, movement, internal body mechanics and character of the Okinawan Karate.

- TB: To what extend would you say that Okinawan karate and kobudo have been influenced by Chinese and Korean fighting systems and in what proportion each of the two?

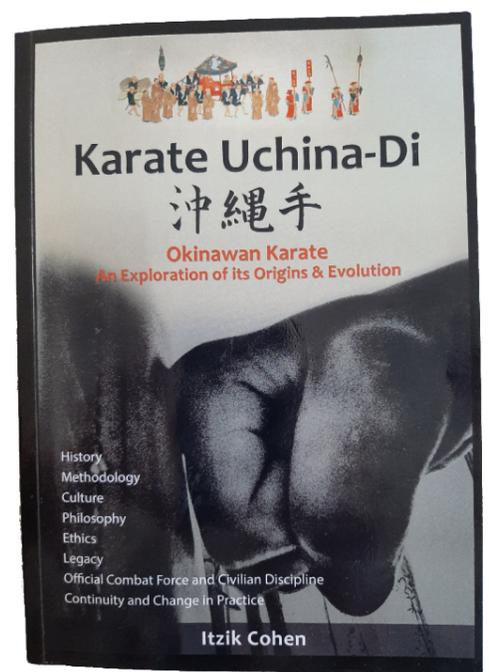
- IC: It is worth to mention that Okinawan Karate and Kobudo were developed together. Focusing on this question, I would say that Korean combat had less influence on ancient Okinawan Karate. Japan had a growing influence on Okinawan Karate since the Satsuma clan invaded the islands in 1609. From Meiji restoration onwards, there was cultural mobility and a growing influence on Okinawa and on karate too, which is part of Okinawa culture. Regarding Chinese influence, the Sino-Ryukyuan relations were unique and special in the whole area. The two kingdoms kept a warm and close bilateral relationship for centuries. This fact is reflected in all fields: culture and society, education, governmental structure, architecture, sciences, literature, poetry, philosophy arts and more. Mutual delegations and trade expeditions departed and returned between China and Ryukyu. There was a Ryukyuan settlement in southern China, including facilities set up for trade purposes. There was an important Chinese settlement near Shuri and Naha, in Kumemura (Kume village). Of course, there was a considerable Chinese influence on the local combat in the islands (today's karate). Once again, I emphasize the uniqueness of the Okinawan combat. For example, the Okinawan "Bo/Kun" differs in its material from the Chinese one. More than that, the difference in the nature of fighting and maneuvering these two weapons is clearly visible.

- TB: Where does the concept of "internal and external" or "soft and hard", prevalent in some Okinawan karate styles such as Goju ryu or Uechi ryu, originates from?

- IC: I also devote a chapter to this topic, "Internal and External/Soft and Hard/Northern and Southern". In my humble opinion, the concept of "soft-hard" or "internal-external" exists in every martial art. Combat cannot be practical without this concept whose origin is attributed to Zhang Sanfeng (13th century), a legendary Taoist monk. His life was shrouded in mystery. In fact, this notion rose up only in the 17th century. Practically, the terms "soft-hard" describe a methodical approach and studying or practicing process rather than a system.

- TB: Have you been able to determine how the concept of "ki" was incorporated into karate or is it something that has always been there?

- IC: There are so many opinions about "ki" concept and its usage in combat. Different schools, sensei(s) and individuals use "ki" differently. It wears and simplifies identity and form few aspects such as body mechanic, sound, breathing (inhaling/exhaling), movement, focus and timing. There are various ways to produce "ki". In relation to karate, same individual may practice the same kata while producing "ki" in different ways. I would say that there are a number of themes such as "tanden" and "ki", which I believe the "scholarly academic" discussion will not produce any correct result. It is about consistent practicing with your sensei over years. It is something one hopefully internalizes during experience. To do so require what in Buddhism is called: a true endeavor or correct effort.



- TB: In your opinion, can karate be considered complete without kobudo and what do you think of the study of kobudo without karate?

- IC: In fact karate and kobudo were developed together for the same purposes by same people at the same era and same environment. These skilled warriors and guards used these weapons for security aims. Naturally, when the same people develop combat techniques with both empty hands and varied weapons, there will be mutual influence in both areas. This effect has two faces. The disadvantage is that a closed group has a certain concept, a way of thinking and modus operandi that is typical to this group (or individual). It is sometimes difficult to think "out of the box" hence the view may be narrow or limited. The advantage of course, is that a skilled and experienced professional sees things in depth and is able to develop things very efficiently. This topic is covered in the chapter "The Bond between Bare-Hand Art and the use of Weapons (Kobudo)". Despite the existing variance between karate and kobudo, many elements are common. More than that, in my humble opinion, it is important and even necessary to practice Ryukyu Kobudo in order to fully and deeply understand Okinawan Karate. Also, nowadays almost in every dojo in Okinawa we may also find weapons.

- TB: If you had to name just one, which of today's Okinawa karate styles would you say retains a more prevalent Chinese nature and why do you think so?

- IC: I wouldn't want to go where I should point to one style or another. Obviously, Goju-ryu and Uechi-ryu have a strong Chinese orientation, especially southern China. The answer is clearly present in the historical face of karate and its development. The two mentioned styles evolved in Okinawa in a relatively late period, within the civil circle. However, Shorin-ryu has its roots in Okinawa's development during the Ryukyu Kingdom era, in the official and military state circle, and from there it has influence from northern China as well as from Japan pre-Meiji era (such as Jigen-ryu), and other influential sources. I would sum it up as follows: there is a consensus among Okinawan sensei(s) that despite the differences in styles, Okinawa Karate is Okinawa Karate. I strongly think and feel that way too. For example, despite the obvious differences between Goju-ryu/Sanchin-kata, and Shorin-ryu/Naiifanchi (Naihanchi)-kata, there is an identity of the important elements such as stability principles despite the different stances, as well as about body structure, center of gravity and tanden. Yes, it is different, but still the same, Okinawan karate.

- TB: Okinawan karate has kept what it could be called a "spiritual component" lost in many Japanese styles that seem to only worship sporting trophies. Is this due to influence of foreign ways of thought and philosophies, or it is part of the Okinawan idiosyncrasy?

- IC: I think that the Okinawan approach is fundamentally different from the Japanese approach. This is true in general as well as in martial arts. Many sensei(s) addressed this issue in the early 20th century when Okinawa Karate partially arrived to mainland Japan and underwent changes and adaptation to the Japanese environment. But I would take precaution before classifying or make distinctions of schools or styles. I think modern life has brought new needs and as with other areas, martial arts have also moved on and continually adapt to present needs. Social and personal needs have changed. In the book, I draw chronological sequence lines and environmental circles in which karate evolved. I explain the transformation that karate has undergone, the reasons for these changes and the implications for the development of karate from past centuries to the present.

- TB: Unlike today when, with few exceptions, karate teachers prefer to keep their students away from other sources of learning, it seems that in the past the situation was different and that Okinawan masters did not mind their students learning from other instructors. Do you know if this state of affairs currently prevails?

- IC: Since the beginning of the 20th Century, karate has undergone a big change. It went into the education system and widely opened to the public and became folklore in Okinawa. It was systemized, went under classification, schools and organizations. In Okinawa many sensei(s) keep professional contact as well as very friendly relations. There is no competition among them and they respect and encourage each other. In the past, a karate sensei could send his disciple to his friend in order to strengthen a certain niche, such as hip movement or learning/improving certain weapon. It may also happen today but only under acceptable terms. In general, you do not wander between sensei(s) or schools. The reason is obvious. Karate, and I mean a single school with a single sensei, is for a lifetime. If someone moves from one place to another, he/she will not comprehend the study in depth. "Got too much, got nothing". To learn from sensei means to accompany the sensei constantly and diligently. It means to go through the process with the sensei.



At Ryukyu Kobudo Shimbukan dojo of Hiroshi Akamine sensei, who poses with Itzik Cohen.



Itzik Cohen presents a copy of his book to his Kobudo teacher, Hiroshi Akamine sensei

- BT: We would like to evoke now several relevant karate figures of the past and ask you to kindly add just a few words to each of their names: Karate Sakugawa, Sokon Matsumura, Chotoku Kyan, Chosin Chibana, Ankoh Itosu, Ankoh Azato, Choyu Motobu, Uehara Seikichi, Miyagi Chojun, Kenwa Mabuni, Gichin Funakoshi and Higa Yuchoku.

- IC: I feel I should leave this privilege to others to come, anyone who belongs to the school or sensei he/she represents. In general, each of these respected people has contributed his own character and attitude to karate. Some were combat oriented while other took the philosophical, educational or health aspects. Some were concentrated in one line while others had broader views.

With your permission I would like to point out what is already known about my lineage which is Kyudokan Shorin-ryu Karate, headed by Soke Higa Minoru, and Ryukyu Kobudo Shimbukan, headed by Soke Akamine Hiroshi.

- Toadi Sakugawa (karate Sakugawa) was a member of the official Ryukyu delegation. There are three versions of his birth and death so this issue remains unclear. He was born in Tori-Hori village in Shuri and was named Teruya Kanga. Later he gained the title of Chikudan Pechin. Sakugawa visited Beijing and Fujian (South China). In addition, he learnt from the Satsuma clan in Kagoshima. These facts are significant since Sakugawa is an important link within the Shuri lineage.

-Bushi Matsumura Sokon had many names such as Machimura (local dialect), Kamiya (Childhood), Kiyo (Youth) as well as additional nicknames such as Bucho, Unyu, and Wu Chengda. Matsumura was well educated and served as head of security guards in the Royal House. Matsumura was born in Yamagawa/Shuri. There are several assumptions or hypothesis about his birthday date. I brought up this topic in the book and I thoroughly discuss it. I also analyze his relation to Itosu Ankoh. These facts are important because of the centrality of the two gentlemen in karate lineage. Bushi Matsumura Sokon was an outstanding warrior and left remarkable influence on Karate. He was also visited Beijing, Fujian and Satsuma/Japan.

-Higa Yuchoku sensei was the founder of Kyudokan Kobayashi Shorin-ryu Karate. He was born in Naha, on February 4th 1910. He started to practice karate under Jiro Shiroma sensei (Shuri-te). Higa sensei practiced with Shinzato Jinnan (Naha-te) and Miyahira Seiei (Shuri-te). He was also instructed by Miyagi Chojun (Naha-te).

In 1943 Higa sensei started to practice under Chibana Chōshin. When Chibana founded the Okinawa Shorin-ryu Karate-do Association, he appointed Higa Yuchoku as the first Vice President. Higa Sensei excelled in Kakidamishi (combat challenges) which was quite common and acceptable at that time. He was known by his powerful “Zuki” (punch) and intensive practice on the basic technique. Hence, he gained the nickname “Yuchoku no tijikun”, “Yuchoku’s powerful punch” in the local dialect. Higa Yuchoku held a practical approach. He was also a spiritual person and he stressed morality, tradition and the importance of the cultural heritage of Okinawa. Higa Yuchoku sensei coined the phrase “Kyudo Mugen” that is “The path of researching is endless/infinite”.

- TB: Do you believe that Okinawan karate along with its traditional training implements, will survive the 21st century?

- IC: In my humble opinion, classical art will continue to exist and survive for generations. This is true of music, dance, painting, sculpture and karate.



