

Luck is great

Luck is great, but most of life is hard work.

Iain Duncan Smith



By **Robi Auscher**

The former head of the Extension Service in Israel, Danny Benor, a dominant, charismatic and dynamic executive left the Service for the World Bank in 1973. In early 1975 he called for a meeting in my office. Invited being Yaacov Golan, a state wide extension advisor in my Department and me. Danny described his activities in South East Asia. He covered already 15 states in India with his new agricultural extension-advisory project on behalf of the World Bank. He was about to expand his program to additional regions and countries and was in need of assistance. He further mentioned the countries where he intends to develop the program. Yaacov, being married to a Filipina, expressed his preference to work there. I had no preferences as far as the target country is concerned.

India

After a couple of months Danny who worked for the Bank in Washington but continued to reside in Israel, asked me to be ready to join him on a trip to India. We talked quite often over the phone to get ready. All my calls to his home had to be made at 6 am. There were no diplomatic relations between Israel and India. My visa was issued by the British Embassy in Tel Aviv. Picked up my ticket from the travel agency. Have not been briefed by Danny on the visit's details or objective. He was too busy. We'll talk on the plane. At boarding, Danny sees that for my full-fare first class ticket, got an economy boarding card at check in. He took my card and sprinted back to check in, to reappear with a red boarding card for first class. We got on the plane. Danny has been busy until the very last moment and up for a sleep rather than to brief me. He's vegetarian and teetotaler. I stretched out in the ample seat enjoying the champagnes served on Air France on the way to Teheran and Delhi. We hit Delhi at 5 am. The door opens and you get flushed by the sultry air blowing into chilly 1st class. Far beyond 30 degrees at 5 in the morning. A company car takes us first to the hotel

and to the railway station in the afternoon. A grim train and wagons await us for an overnight travel to Rajasthan. Power failure. Pitch dark everywhere. Danny gets on the train, I follow him despite being sick of the soot, smell and dirt. We wait for some time. A porter brings us sleeping bags, after all we're in wagon-lit. Danny opens the bag. I follow him with suspicion and climb up with my bag to the upper bed. Five fans whirl and buzz from the ceiling right into my face. What a night. We hit Kota, Rajasthan in the morning.



At Kota, Rajasthan. D. Benor on the right, with the back to the camera.

At noon the kick off a 3-day seminar on agricultural extension. Danny is the main speaker. He galvanizes the audience. Over the breaks, Indian brick-colored tea with milk and sugar is served. The seminar gave me a quick introduction into the heart of the matter. Began to understand why Danny skipped an earlier briefing. Next days we visit the fields and stay at a rural guest house. Back to Delhi by train, for meetings at the Bank's impressive building. First chance to ask Danny for some more details and raise a few points. I got at entry a visa for a 28 days stay in the country. Left my specs with the Bank's office so they could extend it, if necessary. We take the plane to Calcutta, West Bengal. Delhi is heaven compared to Calcutta. More homeless lying on the sidewalk than walking pedestrians. We get into a taxi. Still hit by first days distaste, am unable to

touch a knob, to open or close a door. Everything sticks. The local project manager is hospitalized with a heart attack. First thing we go to visit with him. You move along a dark hall in the hospital. Stretchers on both sides. All covered with dirty rags. Emaciated bodies underneath. You never know whether they're alive or stiff. Feeling of hell. Behind a dirty sheet, the project leader in a private room. He's privileged. His brother, a doctor at the hospital. The patient is not allowed to make any effort. Prohibited to speak. Danny holds the guy's both hands during his pep talk. I extend him a most hesitant hand shake. An odd pantomime is the name of the game. We leave and get into another sticky cab. Next days we visit the fields. Some fresh air. Another seminar. Danny brings the audience to ovations. He moves thousands of employees from one Ministry to the another in an inertia-afflicted bureaucratic country. Field advisers are happy to become fully-fledged professionals, free of multi-task and clerical responsibilities.

We fly to Bombay to do the same exercise in the state of Maharashtra. Two young Bank officials from Danny's inner circle join us and a senior advisor from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. Field trip and seminar. Now I know better what is "Training and Visit" all about. From Bombay we fly to Hyderabad, in the south, the capital of Andhra Pradesh a predominantly Moslem state. Two weeks have passed since we hit India. The Bank's attempt to extend my stay doesn't yield any results to date. Meetings with the Agricultural Extension set-up of the state under the leadership of Hashem Ali. A conceptual plan is discussed. I will stay behind to work out its details. Danny and the team leave for Delhi. I get a "Sei gesund" from him and am left on my own. Got a companion, a driver and a car. Andhra Pradesh is huge. Its Moslems couldn't care less about the Israel-Palestine conflict or about us being Israelis. It takes time to move from one district to another, to meet with extension-advisory and research personnel, and with growers in the fields and in groups. Organizing all this takes time. It's my companion's role. Clock's ticking. I call the Bank in Delhi. They didn't get an answer yet from the Ministry of Interior with regard to my visa. We step on it and try to cover more than one district a day. I have to cover most districts to work out a state-level plan. At the end need at least 4 days to write up the report, print it out, discuss the draft with the local executives and get their approval before submitting it to the Bank in Washington and still catch a flight to Delhi, to leave the country within 28 days. What a stress. It's my first assignment with the Bank. Have to pull it off. Draw up a new strategy. We work now all day long and travel dozing at night for the next 4-5 days in a row. Just check into a guesthouse in the wee hours of the morning, to take a shower, have breakfast and off again. After 4-5 such days got back to Hyderabad, accommodated at the Ritz to sit down on aching butts and collate the hand-written report. Every day's harvest was taken to the office to be printed out, proofread, back and forth to the secretaries. I was writing at daytime and thinking/dreaming of the report at night. The visa couldn't be extended. At the

end of this calvary, local management liked the paper. Got home. Fatigue sapped my strength. At 39, however, you have much more left in your tank than you would imagine. Let alone the adrenaline.



My car/mobile hotel in Andhra Pradesh.

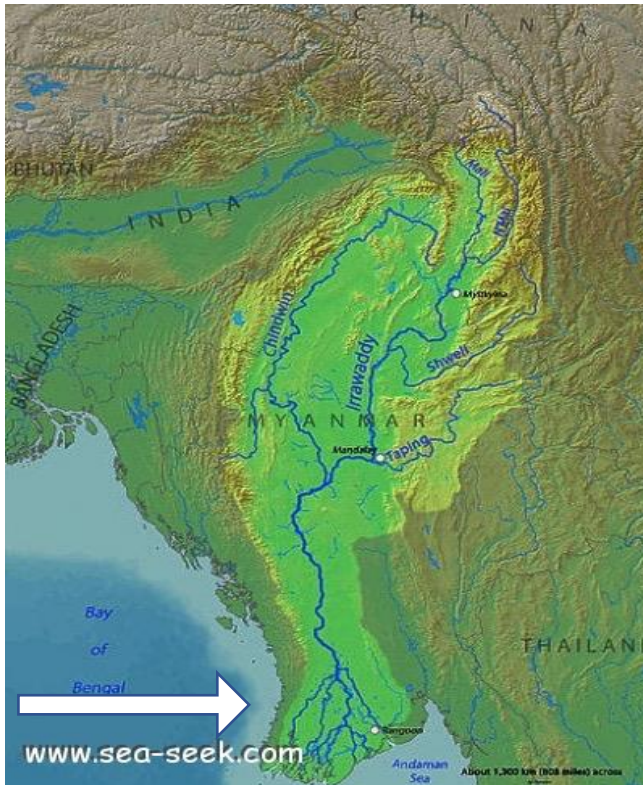
When visiting growers groups, we ate with them squatting in the field. Banana leaves serve as plates. Food is put on the leaves with sauce on top and you get a dripping heap. No silverware. You eat with your right hand. Left hand's role is to clean the body. Food is full of chili. What a mess. Used to ask the guesthouses just for a couple of hard-boiled eggs to get away from the chili, and for a spoon. I got two hard-boiled eggs rolled in chili and a spoon with a hole in the middle, the size of the spoon. Basically, I like Indian food. Only in the south it's repellingly hot. Otherwise it is well-spiced and rich. Danny had a field day with each meal, most of the restaurants being vegetarian. We often had meals in the office or at the seminars. When you finish your plate you just put it under the table. I travelled with two suitcases. Whenever we reached a hotel or guesthouse a guy from among the many waiting idle at the doors grabbed them. I was embarrassed first to let others carry my load. Danny hinted that in this country it's his role. After all he waits for it all day long. While on the planes, Danny would write up telex reports to Asia Vice President. He showed them to me so I could go over his English. When he joined the Bank he didn't go through the usual hierarchy of advisor, senior advisor, division chief, etc. He installed himself in the seat of Special Advisor to the Bank's President. Beginning with Robert McNamara he got their full attention riding over the heads of technical and regional directors or Vice Presidents. Most newly appointed World Bank Presidents would join Danny on their very first field trip to follow on the ground "Training&Visits" achievements in the realm of agricultural extension. The chronically ailing domain to which he found a tangible remedy. Robert McNamara gave Danny his book as a present with a personal dedication in which he called

him genial. In English the adjective genial has nothing to do with the genius substantive. It means expressing freely sympathy or friendliness (Merriam-Webster). I wonder if Danny was aware of this. Or did he show the dedication with extra pride knowing that the word's meaning isn't well understood?

He was hard-working and hated small talk. While we travelled together through India he would always take his breakfast early in the morning in his hotel room rather than sitting with the team and wasting time on "futile" talks. He could use this time going through papers and be the first to wait ready at the car. He spent more time on travel than any other Bank official. As such, he could reside in Tel Aviv instead of mandatory Washington DC. In all our field visits or meetings he was the one who ruled the roost.

Burma

The next months were spent taking care of home base, the Department of Plant Protection in the Extension Service and of the family. The address of the next Bank mission was Burma. Knowing very little about the country, Micha Harish, my good friend from childhood suggested to bring me together with the former Israel Ambassador to Rangoon. I met him in the modest Ministry of Foreign Affairs campus in Jerusalem and got some valuable pointers. Danny Benor gave me a few directions based very much on our common trip to India. Burma, officially the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, was established as an independent state, at the same time as Israel, in 1948. Since 1962 it was ruled by a military junta. They issued and followed strictly the "Burmese way to Socialism" and isolated the country. Out of fear of their huge Communist neighbor, China and of any western influence. Every couple of years, being at a pinch, the country opened up to the west. Again and again. This was the window when a World Bank project for the rehabilitation of rice production and the strengthening of the agricultural extension-advisory system was formulated. The average person and all advisory staff, were happy to meet a foreigner. However, I realized only much later, everyone in the office I have exchanged a few words with had to report about it to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture. Have described the project and its needs to the right officials and a pilot area was assigned in the major rice producing area, in the Irrawaddy Delta. This huge area used to be the country's granary during the British rule, supplying the domestic market and exporting rice. However, since the ditches, canals, pumps were poorly managed and the growers lacked the right incentives, the country had to import by now its main staple food. The delta could be reached only by boat. The Irrawaddy River flows relatively straight North-South before emptying through the Irrawaddy Delta into the Andaman Sea. Its drainage basin covers about 400,00 square kilometres. About 20 times larger than my country. At each of my



visits a government boat was allocated. However, since the delta wasn't free of ethnic rebels and terror, a military boat flanked us for a couple of days and the local police have been alerted of our future movements. Never said a word about it at home. For most of its independent years, the country has been engrossed in rampant ethnic strife and its myriad ethnic groups have been involved in one of the world's longest-running ongoing civil wars. The boat hosted the captain and his assistants; my entourage, the local project head and officials who got on and off the launch at the various seawalls along the trip. And most important,

Irrawaddy Delta

an Indian cook from the Ministry of Agriculture in Rangoon.

U Hla Than was appointed as project manager and my counterpart. He seemed not to be part of the party establishment. He was a humble, most pious Buddhist professional. With his and his team's support, I could pick up all the necessary information on the five districts that the project was supposed to cover and could develop the project document of the agricultural extension-advisory component while the other components addressed the rehabilitation of the irrigation system and the economic aspects of boosting rice production.

The first identification mission was in the hot monsoon season. There was no cooling on the boat but one noisy fan. Had to sleep under mosquito nets as the whole area was malaria-infested. The whole trip was awfully hot and humid. Most locals and many of the employees were chronically ill with malaria. It was a common sight that for several days every couple of months they would feel weak and develop fever. They didn't use any medicine or protect themselves from mosquitoes.

We stopped at little jetties along the river to visit fields, growers and attend meetings. For some of these remote villages the visit of an overseas consultant was a holiday. The school was closed for the day and rows of children waved to us with little flags at arrival and departure. At meetings with growers I presented the project and its expected impact on them and answered questions. Everything had to be interpreted. After many such meetings, U Hla Than would take over and present the program, saving time on interpretation. All adult officials had good command of English. Relic of the lengthy British rule and

education. Another relic of the British presence was the existence of many "anglos" of Burmese and British descent. Visiting agricultural vocational high schools in the Delta, found out regrettably that the younger generation was unable to communicate in English.

Our Indian cook used to buy fish, meat and vegetables on the open markets of the villages when we stopped our sailing. I better didn't watch the fly-covered fish and meat that he bought. But I was never ill In Burma. A country with irregular power supply and without refrigerators. I always fell ill on the way in neighboring Thailand, a modern and clean country. The Indian cook, bought the ingredients, cooked daily our meals and served them hot. Burmese very much as Thai food is a most successful blend of the mild Chinese and spicy Indian cuisines. Plenty of salads, different ways of preparing a wide variety of fish, prawns, chicken, duck, pork and beef. Exotic sauces and original snacks or sweets. The meals on the boat were a gala for both eyes and palate.

Irrawaddy river and its arms in the delta are heavily tidal. The captain had an open tide chart by his steering wheel to know the exact daily ebb and tide oscillations so he could navigate firm into the right arms. The crew often used a long pole to check water depth in the shallow creeks.

People in the delta live literally on the water. Their light wooden houses are erected on the riverbanks. On the ground floor they keep their livestock, mainly pork and chicken. Women wash their cloth in the river and dry them on the bank. Everyone is washing and bathing there. Mothers squat on the riverside combing their kids' hair to get rid of lice. Large heavily overcrowded and overloaded boats move up and down the river. If they capsized and probably did, hundreds of dead would be fished out of the river. Would never be made public. We had a generator on the boat but on the islands the name of the game was power failure. Regional directors joined us with their company boats to discuss project issues, showing interest and a spirit of collaboration.

Elder women smoke cigars. Elder men chew the omnipresent betel nuts sold on the markets and spit an ugly red slime out of their receding, reddish gums.

In the project center a training and office building was erected quite quickly and served us for both purposes. The team working with us under U Hla Than was happy to disseminate new ideas and their standing with farmers improved as the project acquired a few jeeps. They could move on the embankments and reach the rice fields. Field advisers complained about muddy paddies and the danger of snakes in the fields. Regular training sessions were held and farmers visited more frequently. Demonstration plots were set up.



In a muddy rice paddy. U Hla Than with white shirt in the middle.

The missions began in Rangoon and ended there. At that time there were two hotels in town where foreigners could be accommodated. The "Strand", dating back to good ole' days of British rule and "Inya Lake" built by the Soviets and run in by Israelis. Elder Burmese who opened up, mentioned with crave the days when the British ruled the country. Both hotels were nationalized. In the Inya Lake, staff's indifference was its typical trait. In the crumbling Strand you could find a few old waiters trained by the British. They would gently tend to your table. Stand discretely behind you while you ate, and reappear noiselessly whenever you were in any need. Apparently hotel rooms were bugged in both.

While in town, Ministry of Agriculture would allocate a car and driver. Although he was friendly, I could imagine that he had to report on all my cloak-and-dagger moves.

Had two associates from the Bank with whom I usually visited the country. An unusually tall, middle-aged Thai hydrologist, Professor at one of the US Universities before joining the Bank, and a young American economist. The young economist used to act as mission leader. This drove the Thai crazy since he considered himself being the senior. We checked in the Inya Lake and left for our field visit after several days. My Thai peer never checked out from the hotel while away for almost ten days in the field, just to stick to the same room. An overt waste of Bank funds. Some other Bank staff strengthened our team, such as a procurement officer dealing with engineering equipment and a senior Bank advisor, Israeli water engineer, Gaby Tibor.

All Burmese wear but shirts, a long skirt-like longyi tied on the waist and flip flops. This proves simplicity and evenness. However, the head of agricultural

research, whom we used to pick up from the fenced neighborhood of the party officials, flaunted a Rolex on his wrist. There are equal and there are more equal.

Due to their frequent crashes, Bank staff were not permitted to fly Burma Airways. Once got stuck for a whole week in Bangkok together with my Thai teammate since Thai Airways were on strike. Our economist and procurement officer who had to go to Mandalay in the north, had to spend 20 hours back and forth on a wobbly train.



Debbie at the Shwedagon, Rangoon

Gaby took me to our Embassy and introduced me to David Marmor, the Ambassador. I was often invited to his residence for Friday dinners and was always welcome at the Embassy. The same was true with the following ambassadors, Shmuel Ovnat and Kalman Aner. Ambassador Marmor offered that one of the Embassy's secretaries help me out with shopping, dealing with the airlines and showing me around town. I was expected to invite her every time for a meal. Have done so with great pleasure since Debbie was a pretty young Tamil with polished British education. Debbie was always elegantly clad in distinct saris. I wondered how she could maintain her refinement and composure in the awfully crowded buses that moved on

Rangoon's streets and on which she was riding daily to work and back home. Apparently, Debbie was overqualified for her Tamil community in Rangoon. This being the reason for this good-looking and gifted person, in her early thirties, for not finding yet a groom on a par with her level. The center of our visits was the sparkling Shwedagon, Rangoon's main landmark. It dates back 2500 years and it is a compound of thousands of pagodas and stupas, and an active place of worship. A Burmese secretary working in Washington for the Bank attended one of our missions. Debbie asked me then whether I could give her a hand to find a job with the World Bank (and escape from the country). Unfortunately, being a short-term consultant with the Bank, without knowing anyone at Personnel, I could give her no more than the futile advice of sending out her CV.



Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon.

The head of the state Agricultural Extension-Advisory Service was laid off from one day to another. So typical of an autocratic regime. We used to collaborate closely. He was an ethnic Shan, coming from Shan State in the northern part of Burma. He wanted to see me at the Inya Lake. The rooms being bugged and the lobby under surveillance, we sat down in the bar where music was the noisiest. He asked me to take with me his letter addressed to the World Bank and mail it once I reach Bangkok. And so I did.

Danny came for a very short 2 days visit. He flew in non-stop from Tel Aviv for almost 24 hours. Next morning, he set our meeting at 5 am. I somehow messed up the schedule believing that we meet at 5 at the dining hall, while he was waiting in his room. Finally, we got together at 6. I briefed him on the

project's progress prior to having a major meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture's Director General and his team. Danny was again at his best and charmed the audience. All his proposals were accepted with little resistance or questioning. A foreign consultant with the Ministry who attended the meeting, called him the magician. He left the same day. We seemed to be pretty well lined-up for the project's next steps.

I usually visited the project once a year between 1975 and 1980. After three successful seasons, a few of our field advisors were transferred leaving us weakened in our field work. Ministry of Agriculture set up a mirror image of our project and was in need of trained personnel for this purpose. Project funds were disbursed sluggish and we felt being sidelined. In fact they established a competing project to be managed along the principles that we dispersed and seemed to be successful on the ground. Typical Burmese way to Socialism. I assume that the window of aperture to the west came to its cyclical end and the World Bank project fell in the government's disfavor.

In light of this new ball game, the World Bank pulled the plug on Burma and the project was discontinued.

After a couple of years, U Hla Than came to Israel to attend an international training course held at Rehovot, my home town. We spent much time together especially at our home. I was glad to see him and to help him get medication for his ailing wife. Quite basic medicaments, unavailable in his country.

Reviewing the 35 countries in which I used to work, Burma is definitely a favorite. People were always very nice. They were nice because they are nice but it also had to do with the hunger of people cut off from the rest of the world having an opportunity to meet someone who brings in a flavor of the outer world.

We began together, Yaacov Golan and myself, being invited by Danny Benor to a common meeting back in 1975. For me it's been a springboard that catapulted me into more than 30 years of most challenging international activity. The project in the Philippines that Yaacov anticipated came never to fruition. He just missed the luck of getting on the bandwagon. In less than 15 years, my close and admired friend was found dead in his peach orchard, with a bullet in his head and his pistol next to him.