

## Congresses, conferences

### **Robi Auscher**

Professionals nowadays attend international meetings in their domain to be up to date on developments, on new concepts, meet peers and tell their story. Researchers in my country are well-endowed with travel funds and have no problem attending meetings at least once a year. In extension, we don't have the same funding mechanism and the ones we do, are turned by most into saving funds. We rely thus on fellowships or after reaching prominence, on invitations. These aren't paved roads.

Attended my first large international meeting in 1973 at the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of the International Society for Plant Pathology (ISPP) held at St Paul-Minneapolis, MN in mid-September, being invited as discussion leader in the extension plant pathology group. Following the meeting joined the committee as member. The Minneapolis campus, where most of the meetings were held, is a most impressive compound. Although the meetings were spread out between many buildings, they are all easily accessible through an ample subterranean network of tunnels. Minnesota is a very cold state and these tunnels are common to enable in-campus communication in harsh winters. Met there Malcolm Shurtleff, the chairman of the extension committee. Mal was an extension plant pathologist and professor with the land grant Urbana-Champaign University of Illinois. He was the father figure of extension plant pathology in the US. His ancestors were Mayflowers who reached America in 1620. Quite a pedigree. Here and there when free of meetings we would go to a pub and got wind of the American way of drinking beer right from the bottle, never from a glass. Took part in a few after-meeting professional trips and reached home in early October. On October the 6<sup>th</sup>, the Yom Kippur war broke out with the Egyptian army crossing the Suez Canal and the Syrian running over the Golan heights. Didn't have much time to adjust from the hype of the US visit to the quivering contrast of being called up on Yom Kippur to spend the next eight months in the military. Mostly in the southern front, and then at Fayed on the Egyptian side of the Bitter Lake, between Ismailia and Suez. Then up to the Golan Heights followed by the war of attrition with Syria, in the spring of 1974. Our elder daughter was born in October, during the war. Have been released but in May 1974. Back from reserve duty have been appointed as Director of the Crop Protection Division.

The next ISPP-IPPC meeting was held in 1979 in Washington DC at the Marriott. Shared a room with my good friend Yaacov Katan. Met Yaacov while students at the Faculty of Agriculture in the late fifties. He was by one year my senior. We served together our mandatory military service as instructors in a military agricultural school. After the completion of our 2.5 years service, Yaacov joined the Faculty to work on a PhD in plant pathology, while I joined Extension Service. We collaborated and published together. For his pioneering research on soil solarization he was granted, when already full professor of plant pathology, the Israel prize for agriculture, the country's highest reward. We shared a room for fun. We were busy all day long rushing from one session to the next following a precise road map that we worked out every evening to be able to attend next day the meetings we were after. In the evenings we could relax, dining together and then going down to the basement where various slot machines were located to try our luck and nimble fingers. Mal Shurtleff, by then in his sixties, asked me to take over the chairmanship of the ISPP committee for extension. Flattered by the proposal have accepted it and served in this capacity for the forthcoming fifteen years or the next three congresses.

While standing in line for lunch with Yaacov who was born in Baghdad, I see an Arab guy by his name tag, Shamoun, moving cannily around us. Have warned Yaacov, let's take care, this guy is circling around us. Dr. Shamoun was Canadian. He was an Eastern Aramaic-speaking ethnic Assyrian born in Iraq. As Christian he was coerced to leave his country during Saddam Hussein's rule and settled down in Canada. He looked forward to meet Yaacov and they were happy to schmooze in Baghdad Arabic, their onetime common idiom.

Meeting Arab participants at international conferences was always a problem. The encounter's prospects if any or its temperature depending on the political climate prevailing in the Middle East. There was one person, however, notwithstanding politics, who was always glad to meet Israelis, cultivate personal relationships and collaborate in symposia or sessions. This was Prof. Mohamed Besri, plant pathologist with the Hasan II Institute of Agronomy and Veterinary Sciences in Rabat, Morocco. He began his relationship with my predecessor J. Palti and we met for years at conferences in overt joy. He was active in the methyl bromide phase-out project and visited our country several times. We organized together a session at the ICPP meeting in Jerusalem in 1999. He invited me to Rabat but I could never make it.

My wife was about to join toward the end of the congress to spend time together in DC and New York City. Upfront she's not a brave flyer and they had a bad landing attempt at JFK. They descended in bumpy cloud layers just to abort landing at last minute and fly over directly to Washington DC. Actually, her final destination. I was glad to see and appease her after this dramatic experience. Her bag arrived a couple of days later. Yaacov moved out, to fly to California, and Yehudit moved in.

The next ISPP conference was held in Melbourne, Australia in 1983. Have worked hard to put together three sessions in the domain of extension plant pathology. There were no emails at the time and all correspondence, recruiting presentations and creating an agenda was done by snail mail. Have asked Dr. John Fletcher from the Agricultural Development and Advisory Service (ADAS) in the UK to act as the Committee's vice-chairman and he gave me a big hand in the preparations. ISPP Presidents gave me their support: Prof. Friedrich Grossmann (1927) from Hohenheim, whom I met during my study tour in Germany in 1969, Prof. Johann Dekker from Wageningen, the Netherlands, whom have met the same year, and Dr. Jim Cook from the US.

Took Alitalia to get to Melbourne. Boarding at Rome, have seen Prof. Wahl, our plant pathology teacher from the Faculty of Agriculture, sitting in the plane. We landed in Melbourne after a very long haul at around 4 am and approached the ISPP desk. Since we were both booked for students dorms, we shared a taxi headed for the university. Wahl was quite frail and exhausted after the flight and the early hour. The cabbie had difficulties following the campus's street signs. I took Wahl's heavy bag and joined him in search of his apartment. Wahl was a whimsical tyrant and his students eavesdropped every morning next to his door to find out his actual mood. They would knock on his door only if they were sure that he's in his better temper. After a few days at the conference we met again. He says: You didn't do your Master of Science under my guidance? I said, yes, I didn't. This explains why were you so kind with me that morning. Usually, my M.Sc. students don't answer my hello while my PhD students cross the road to the other sidewalk when they see me. He invited me and my classmate, Prof. Yitzhak Barash with whom he still collaborated, for lunch. Wahl had a slight stutter which worsened whenever he was under stress. And he was most of the time. Still, he was a brilliant lecturer. He never used notes or papers and always charmed his audience. He used to say that the best improvisation is the one well prepared in advance. He married late and had no children. Three years later in 1986 we spent a sabbatical at Texas A&M University. Prof. Wahl visited there one of his few

friends, Prof. Browning. We invited him for dinner. Our little daughter, Orly, was then six years old. My dad, her grandpa, died the same year. Orly sat on the couch next to Wahl. Instinctively, feeling like he's her grandpa, she raised and kissed him on the cheek. Wahl, unused to kids, jumped up in horror as bitten by a snake. Wahl left quarreling the Faculty of Agriculture in Rehovot and moved to Tel Aviv University. He founded there the "Israel Institute for Cereal Crops Improvement" to explore for genetic resistance sources of cereals diseases. His concept relying on the fact that the eastern basin of the Mediterranean served as cradle of the domestication of cereals such as wheat, barley, rye and oat. The search for resistant genes would focus on their wild ancestors. The concept was based on the breakthrough of brilliant Bacău-born botanist and agronomist Aaron Aaronsohn (1876-1919) who settled down with family in Palestine in 1881. He carried out an Alliance Israélite-funded survey of the local flora and in 1906 discovered *Triticum dicoccoides* or the mother of wheat. Sara Aaronsohn, who committed suicide while under arrest in Turkish prison as member of "Nili" underground that spied for the British, was his sister. Aaron wrote a report in English after WWI for the British authorities describing his first-hand experience of the Armenians' genocide blaming both the Germans and the Turks. These parts were censored by the British. In 1919, under unclear circumstances, Aaronsohn was killed in an airplane crash over the English Channel while on his way to France. Some blamed the British government.

We were quite a group of Israelis at Melbourne. On our day off we rented a car for a trip in the neighborhood. I was the only one in the possession of an international driving license and rented the car under my name. Prof. Blum, an agricultural education and extension researcher from the Faculty of Agriculture spent a sabbatical at the University of Melbourne. He drove the first car and I the second one. It was my very first experience driving on the left-hand side. I was able to follow him as long as we were close but whenever he pulled away too far and mainly at roundabouts, felt lost having a hard time to steer the car in the right way. Never again.



*Melbourne, 1983. With Prof. I. Wahl, Prof. I. Chet,  
Dr. Shula Manulis, Dr. E. Shabi, Ms. Blum, Prof. Y. Barash.*

Flew over to Sydney to meet family, in fact my wife's. Mona, a distant cousin from Israel travelled escorted by her mother when she was 18 to visit relatives and ended up marrying a gentile real estate businessman, 21 years her senior. He owns by now two Bentleys. One in Sydney and another one in Queensland where they build luxurious resorts for well off retirees. He acts as chairman of the Australian Bentley Owners Association. They put an empty apartment at my disposal and we had fun.

When she was 12 Mona told my girlfriend and future wife, wait until I grow up, will snatch your boyfriend from you. This didn't happen but we always entertained a warm relationship. Keith, her husband, had the imagination and flare for grandeur and Mona took care of the details. Keith retired spending his time on the golf course while she runs the business with a firm grip, assisted by one of her two sons. Keith tells that golf is a cyclical game. First you play most of the time. Then you play for a couple of hours and sit at the country club's pub, later you go right to the pub and then, you go. They let their sons decide to which congregation to adhere.

Next ISPP meeting in Kyoto, Japan in 1988. Have prepared again three sessions on extension plant pathology of 5-6 talks each with introductions, Q&A, and chairman's summary. Dr. Albert (Al) Paulus from Riverside, California was an outstanding extension plant pathologist. I always tried to bring him into our sessions. He was born in Wyoming and spoke a hard to follow cowboy twang. He visited Israel several times and we used to go together on field trips. A flying jacket was his trademark. His booming voice, quick wit and self-deprecating manner were legendary. I chaired the session in which Al was the first to deliver a talk. I froze when I saw him approaching the desk. He was

tanked, stinking of booze. Had to make up my mind on the spot. Whether to let him speak and risk a scandal. He might raise hell if removed or we risked to be booed by the audience. Let him talk after my introduction. He rambled around without any kinship to his paper's title. After five minutes have made him clear signs that his time is up. Al stepped down and left the room. Hopefully, have saved both his and my face.

I was regularly hit by dental root inflammations whenever traveling. Had to visit dentists in Caracas, Texas, Montreal and now in Kyoto. Reported to the organizers that I need dental assistance and was taken to a hospital. Had to register in full and open a file as member of the medical insurance firm. Been issued a card which opened all doors. Been taken to a large hall with some ten dental chairs. All dentists and assistants wore green caps, green masks, glasses and green robes. They were all short, same height, looked the same. After some consultation was taken for X ray, been walked back to the preparatory hall and then to the principal hall. Had no way to know who's who and who was my actual dentist. The only difference I could detect was in the shoes they wore. They were all brown but sporting different patterns. In classical cloak and dagger spirit, have memorized my dentist's shoes pattern and even when walked by others could know whether am in his or in others' hands.

Kyoto Japan's ancient capital has a lot to offer and we were taken to trips in the city as well as in its most beautiful surroundings. It goes without saying that the country is absolutely clean and pedantic. Cabbies wear white gloves, are utmost polite but with no English. On the bus from the airport to town have seen for the first time a GPS device presenting on a large screen above the driver his path, traffic density and options for shortcuts.



*Ancient Pagoda outside Kyoto.*

Back from a sabbatical in 1986 have led an Israeli delegation, to the E.U.-Israel Seminar on Perspectives for Advisory Work in the Context of the Future

Evolution of Agriculture, Louvain, Belgium. The seminar took place in a monastery laid out for this kind of meetings, producing a peculiarly spiritual environment. The meeting presented an Israel vs. EU dialogue on our evolution in computer-supported agricultural extension and the more theoretical Dutch school of information technology promoted by Prof. Röling. It was attended by extension-advisory leaders from France, Germany, Italy, UK, the Netherlands, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Greece, Portugal, Spain, and the EU Commission. Our good friend from Italy, John Scully represented the commission.

Being a member of the Israel-Greece commission for agricultural collaboration have visited Greece in 1987. All Greeks smoke and the conference rooms stank of clouds of smoke. We had a fruitful stay which ended on May Day. An overall strike was touted by the trade unions. Had to hand-carry our luggage to a certain point in Athens where we were awaited by a car. Reached the airport and even boarded the plane. We had to wait long hours in a hot plane without air conditioning until take off was granted. May 1 demos, how obsolete and low could they still go?

The next meeting of the International Plant Protection Congress was held in the Hague in 1995. It was presided by Dutch plant disease epidemiologist Prof. Jan Zadoks, who carries a typical Sephardi name. Emphasis was on Integrated Pest Management, very much in line with my area of interest and objective back home. With the occasion of the visit have given a seminar at the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR). ISNAR was founded in 1979, and is located in the Hague, the Netherlands. It is a member of the global network of international agricultural research institutions coordinated by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). Have travelled in the Netherlands several times with ISNAR's deputy director.

A joint ISPP-ICPP meeting took place in Montreal in 1993. We renewed our traditional room-sharing with Yaacov and worked hard throughout the whole meeting to deliver our talks, rush to our selected sessions. I was in charge of the extension plant pathology group and organized the usual three sessions and a committee meeting. We played table tennis in the evenings and tried our best with the slot machines to relax from day's strains. Found Montreal being the most European town of northern-America. Unforgettable visit to historical Quebec City.

It was our turn to host the XIVth International Plant Protection Congress (IPPC) in Jerusalem in 1999. Yaacov Katan acted as the Organizing Committee's chairperson since the designated chair Prof. David Rosen passed away. I've been a committee member and suggested that we open the Congress with a videotape presenting the actual achievements of Integrated Pest Management in Israel. The suggestion was regarded as a good idea and I had to roll up now sleeves to get ready the 8 minutes movie. Matter-of-factish have approached Haim Zabrodowsky, the Extension Service's seasoned video-photographer. Have elaborated a scenario following Haim's guidance and we spent a whole week in various parts of the country to capture field-level implementation of IPM technologies. Being meant for an international meeting, had prepared the sound track's text in English. The day of the sound track's recording arrived and I waited for the broadcaster in Haim's laboratory. A tall bearded guy dressed in black kaftan from top to toe comes in wearing a big hat and all the ultra-orthodox paraphernalia. Haim didn't prepare me for the encounter and I was slightly shocked. He said Shalom in a dark baritone and American accent. Read the text but twice and ready he was for its recording. A true professional with a beautiful voice and impeccable pronunciation. He lived in Ashdod and rode daily by bus to Jerusalem to recite Kol Israel's news in English. Haim was born in Croatia. When his parents were sent to the extermination camps, he was pushed into a monastery. He grew up there for several years and reached Israel in the framework of Aliyat Hanoar, right after War of Independence. Had another friend, Yaacov Nakache, born in France who went through the same faith, raised as deacon-in-training. He then joined for all that a religious kibbutz acting for decades as pest scout and as the driving force in his region's research and development activities in crop protection.

In 1996 and 1997 have been invited by the British Society for Plant Pathology (BSPP) to attend their annual meetings held over Christmas vacation in one of their universities at the time the dorms were free of students. The meeting in 97 was held at Canterbury and the next one in York. Good occasion to take first our son, Yoad, along. Left him in London while I've been to Canterbury and then we spent a few nice but very cold days in London. The same cold days, next year with our elder daughter, Daphne. We took together the usual "hop-on hop-off" buses to visit London's tourist sites. I've been many times before to London. It was her first. Still whenever we were looking for the bus stop after a walk, she was always the one who would lead us back safely and shortest. To find out that she's endowed with an outstanding spatial orientation. While in York have met Dr. John Davis an ADAS extension plant pathologist. He lives in York and suggested to lead me, after the meeting, through a typical



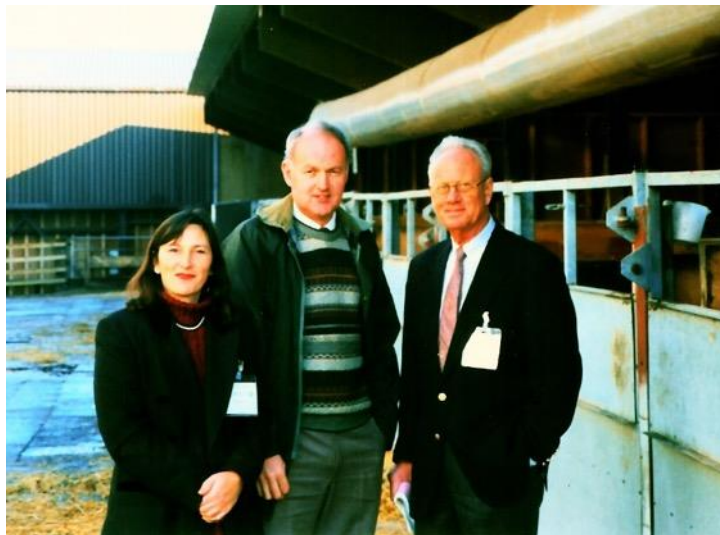
pub tour of York. We dropped in to several of the town's more prestigious institutions to feel their particular environment, clientele and assortments of beer. Quite a unique experience with the right guide. My talks focused on computer-supported extension plant protection. Had a chance to touch base with John Fletcher, who was elected a few years later BSPP President and with Dr. Nigel Hardwick who took over from me the chairmanship of the ISPP committee on extension.

Have been back to the UK in the same year, 1997. This time teaming up with Moshe Goren, the Director of our Extension Service. The Service went through an unsuccessful attempt to privatize it. Ministry of Agriculture's Director General, Yonatan Bassi led this unprofessional essay. Instead of showing leadership, presenting his ideas before Extension Service management and employees and lead a transparent process, he hired two consultants without any substantial experience in agricultural extension. The workers' union opposed the move. The two consultants tried in a dilettante manner to persuade individual employees to defy the union. Failure was inevitable. Ministry of Finances, the process's initiator, decided to retaliate and downsize the Service. The very concept of privatizing public extension took off in the UK, Netherlands and Australia. To follow up the developments, Director Goren asked me to join him and we visited the advisory services of the Netherlands (DLV) and the UK (ADAS) which were in the midst of a privatization process. In the Netherlands we came across a brand new service since many of the senior advisors left and young unexperienced ones were recruited. The offices looked like youth clubs rather than advisory bureaus. It was early to capture the transition's conclusions. The head of the Dutch service, an experienced and charismatic thinker and doer, was an ardent champion of privatization. In the UK the employees of ADAS, the state advisory and applied research service, acquired it from government turning it into one of the prospective private advisory firms of the country. Once ADAS lost its state-wide monopoly, many advisory firms emerged to compete for clientele. We got an insight into an evolving process but it was early to develop recommendations advocating a departure of agricultural extension from its public service philosophy. Moshe was grateful for the company and for a lesson I taught him during the trip. To enjoy an afternoon beer in a pub after a long day's vicissitudes. We had an enjoyable guide, Mandy, who drove us through the UK to stop by many ADAS extension and research facilities.



*With M. Goren, Director of Extension.*

In 1998, have been invited to deliver a keynote at the University of Torino's "Incontri Fitoiatrici 2000" initiative and the inauguration of an outreach competence center for innovative agriculture in Grugliasco. Have debated the issue of technology-oriented agricultural extension. Delivered it in English with consecutive interpretation to Italian. Due to the interpretation the encounter was quite slow but the meeting festive, in true Italian spirit. We visited then the new center and drove together with Yehudit to the Italian Riviera. Been back to Torino in 2000 attending the Conference on soil-borne disease management.



*With Mandy and researcher at an ADAS research facility.*

Same year, 1998, we visited the Netherlands in a mission of four from research and extension. Our aim was to follow closely the Dutch methyl-bromide substitution process of flower crops. I joined the group two days later. After landing in the evening took a hotel next to the railway station of Amsterdam to

catch an early morning train and touch base with the team. One of our mission's members was born in the Netherlands. They passed WWII in hiding at a Dutch family with whom they still maintained friendship. He was a state-wide advisor in my department. Asked about my whereabouts in Amsterdam. He laughed loudly when I told him about the hotel where I put up at night. Obviously unaware, the travel agent booked me into a gay hotel. I spent a silent albeit short night since had to get up early to catch a first train. Been warned that the anecdote will be showcased at my imminent retirement party. It wasn't.

The next ISPP Congress's venue was Christchurch, New Zealand. Christchurch underwent two calamities since the Congress, a massive and destructive earthquake killing 185 people in 2010 and a terrorist attack on a mosque killing 51 people in 2019. Still, at the time of our visit it seemed the calmest place on earth. Before the Congress started have walked around the city center, got into a pub and been deeply impressed by the open-minded and relaxed local public. Chose an on-campus room and been quite isolated from the other Israelis, mingling with students and young participants. I was happy with this isolation. Was slated to deliver a talk to the plenary and spent much time in the room fine-tuning the presentation.

After the Congress have signed up for a one-week organized bus trip of New Zealand's southern Island, the more challenging and touristic one. On one island you're exposed to a widest possible array of geographic conditions, unique flora and fauna. We were four Israelis on the bus, Itzhak and Deborah Barash, Shula Manulis and myself. The others were Brits coming from Christchurch in the UK to get to know their twin town in New Zealand. The tour is just amazing taking you to Fjordland at Milford Sound, the glaciers of Mt Cook and the Fox glaciers of the west coast, the very English town of Queenstown and Lake Wakatipu, with its bungee jumps, the very Scottish town of Dunedin, the seals and sea lions, the rare little blue and yellow-eyed coastal penguins, Te Anau with water rushing through caves, the National Parks and the impressive green slopes where Harry Potter movies were turned. A breathtaking experience. There was a big group of very British spinsters from Christchurch, slim, and well-dressed. I was astonished by the contrast between their healthy appetite and slender appearance. They went daily, painstakingly through a typical British breakfast of juice, grits, ham and eggs, beans in tomato sauce, toasts, cheese, bacon, coffee and sweets. Coffee or tea at the 10 o'clock stop with the right muffins or tarts; a three-course lunch; five o'clock tea with scones; wrapped-up with a three-course dinner. They always changed

rigorously for dinner. Once I heard one of them asking stunned her friend: but Mabel, you didn't dress up for dinnah?

One of the Englishmen joined Deborah Barash for a walk in two. Told her that he was a sergeant in Palestine during the British mandate and aware of police and army's bias against the Jewish population and the preferential treatment given to the Arab one. He always felt bad about and was glad for an opportunity to apologize for his own and for his establishment's approach. The British were not uniformly pro-Jewish or pro-Arab, they often played both sides against each other as they traditionally did in most of their colonies ("divide and conquer").

An International Congress of Soil Disinfestation was held in Corfu, Greece in 2004. I presented our "Model Farms" concept for methyl bromide substitution as an on-farm experimentation and dissemination methodology. In the framework of the Congress we visited historical sites of the island, inter alia, the beautiful Achilleion Palace, 10 km south of the City of Corfu, the former residence of Empress Elizabeth of Austria known as the sad Queen Sissi.



*With Y. Katan, Corfu, 2004.*

We were all wearing congress name tags. A Dutchman looks at my tag and cries out: "You're Ausher! I use for years the Ausher selective medium you developed for the identification of *Verticillium* fungal colonies in soil samples. I didn't know there's a live person behind it". Who doesn't take a liking to a poignant recognition?



*With Prof. Tjamos (standing) Congress chairman and best friend, G. Austerweil, Corfu, 2004.*