

My professional Adventures

By Robi Auscher



Down the home lane

Spending 38 years with just one employer. Quite unbelievable today. Nowadays professional mobility is much higher. High-tech labor force in the start-up industry swaps jobs every couple of years. At the time we graduated from the Faculty of Agriculture in the 1960s, most of us gravitated toward either extension or research jobs in the public sector. Most positions were offered by the Ministry of Agriculture expanding at that time while the private sector was much smaller. Pesticides industry was just at the beginning of its recruiting process. We regarded those joining the private sector with an air of superiority. It was 'in' to work for the public sector which was larger, enjoyed stability and the aura of serving the public. We regarded those working for the pesticide industry as serving their bosses, contributing much less to society. This was the prevailing atmosphere of an era in which a socialist party built and ruled the country.

I was happy to be invited to join Ministry of Agriculture, Extension Service and didn't have to write applications and go through auditions. Out of the blue found myself in the same room with two seasoned professionals. J. Palti was the head of the newly established Plant Protection Division and H. Shoham, his right hand, state plant protection extension specialist for field and vegetable crops. Both with plenty of mud on their boots. They were born in Germany. Palti was the visionary, the man

of the big picture, the one who had a firm foot on the gas pedal. Shoham completed him as the one in charge of the details, who would carefully check the feasibility of Palti's wild dreams. He had his foot on the brakes to slow down the car's course from hovering dangerously.

They had but one room in the office. On my first day of onboarding in office, they hand-dragged a heavy writing desk into that small room. It was to be my desk and I found myself star-struck, a rookie among two "giants". Usually, Palti dropped in for a few hours, checked his mail, handled the easy stuff himself and pushed the tough issues into Shoham's mailbox. He left then for the fields after one or two of his usual quarrels with the administrators. With me joining the office, the flow has changed. Palti still passed the difficult matter to Shoham but the latter hauled them into my box. Thus, I became busy overnight with my mail rack steadily filled up with a slew of hot potatoes, letters and reports expecting a detailed solution on clock-ticking deadlines.

Palti was abrasive and short-tempered. He drove a frail Citroën 2CV (deux chevaux) government car. The first time I joined him on a field trip, I was stunned. We left our Tel Aviv office's parking. The moment we joined traffic, in a fit of rage, he started to snarl at other drivers, cursing them with titles ranging from donkey to idiot. He used to pigeonhole people into black and white, into friends and foes. He disliked people who have joined his division being transferred from other units. He liked us, young university graduates, hand-picked by him. He built up carefully our career structures. He liked us but never showed it. He tried meanwhile to shake off the old hands who haven't been hired or shaped by him.



Dr. J. Palti (1969)



Danny Benor

He shaped the division's structure and conceived the basics of plant protection extension of the country. To fully grasp this, we have to go back and follow his own professional development. Joseph Palti (*Peltesohn*) was born in Berlin in 1915 and was part of the Jewish kids transports that evaded Nazi Germany and reached England. He was brought up there, graduating from high school and getting a B.Sc. in plant pathology from the University of Reading. He then immigrated to Palestine. His diverse professional biography and the way he conceived the country's prospective extension-advisory plant protection are inextricably linked. He began his career at the Agriculture Research Station (precursor of the Volcani Research Center) at Rehovot, assisting Prof. Israel Reichert who acted as head of the Plant Pathology Division. Reichert was the first plant pathologist of the country, a venerated figure but poor manager. Most of his works weren't published but filled up his drawers. Palti was a natural manager and an excellent editor and writer. He began supervising energetically the division that consisted mainly of women researchers. He pulled out all drafts from Reichert's bulging drawers, edited and published them in scientific journals. His command of English was a big asset at that time when most researchers were educated either in Eastern Europe or in France. There were moves to unite the Agriculture Research Station with the Faculty of Agriculture. Although an abortive attempt, Palti left, worried about his future standing in the unified institution. He always nurtured a business streak and joined

I.C.I.'s (Imperial Chemical Industries) local branch. This British manufacturer was in the 1950s the main supplier of pesticides in the country. He gained experience in the private sector, in the pesticides industry. Centering on field trials, registration, marketing. With funding of the Van Leer family, he founded "Chimavir" the first aerial spraying firm of the country. Palti's next venture was the establishment of a private advisory firm. Together with Shmuel Moeller he created a team of about ten experienced advisors in the domains of field-, vegetable crops and plant protection. The firm worked mainly with established kibbutz and moshav settlements on a contract basis. The firm provided field visits and advice, issued leaflets and organized professional meetings. The firm's jeeps were scattered in the regions of activity. The advisors reached them by public transport and after completing their weekly field missions returned home again by public transport. This was a unique operation. No parallel private advisory firm was ever founded in the country since. With the establishment of the Extension Administration (Minhal Hahadracha) in 1960 under Ministry of Agriculture providing free of charge advisory work, the private advisory company closed down.

In the newly established government service, Palti was appointed as head of the Plant Protection Division and Moeller of the Vegetables Division. Based on his hands-on experience, Palti's concept was to design plant protection advisory work on a commodity rather than on disciplinary basis. In explicit contrast to research, strictly divided into disciplines such as entomology, plant pathology, bacteriology, virology, weed science, etc., Palti envisioned a general practitioner working at regional field level who would cover and master all crop protection disciplines. This advisor would specialize in the major cultivated crops of his area. In such a manner, the regional crop protection specialist would cope with all crop loss problems. The grower wouldn't have to decide whether to invite an entomologist, virologist or other specialist. All his plant protection problems will be handled by the same person. Interaction would be facilitated this way not only with growers but also with the crop production regional advisors who are matter-of-factish specialized along crops. This structure enables the plant protection specialist, knowledgeable also in crop production, to deal with pest identification and with the entire spectrum of non-

chemical and chemical control, compatibility of fungicides and insecticides, toxicological problems such as waiting periods prior to harvesting and pesticides application issues. Further, this integrative approach laid the fundament to a smooth transition toward the promotion of Integrated Pest Management. Researchers and regulatory plant protection specialists disputed with vehemence the new concept and expressed their doubts and resistance before the Ministry's Director General. They couldn't clobber him. Palti who had his own bare-knuckled tactics didn't give in. His steadfast and trigger-happy adage used to be: "over my dead body". This straightforward concept has fared well and is in faithful use to date after more than sixty years.

On a sabbatical with Texas A&M have closely followed the setup of their state-wide Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program. Plant protection extension being disciplinary, divided between entomology, plant pathology and weed control, the project had to recruit 20 county-level plant protection specialists to coordinate its IPM program. Back home, under an integrative approach, acting regional plant protection advisors assumed smoothly area-wide leadership of our IPM program. Several visiting extension plant pathologists from the US and UK warned us that our integrative approach might come to an end once the educational level of the producers might require more specialization in the various plant protection disciplines. The vocational educational level of the growers is on an a steady upward move, however, the system still copes with their increasingly advanced needs for technical assistance.

My first assignment with crop protection extension was Coordinator of Extension Activities. It meant taking care of all training courses for producers, in-service training, publications, radio programs, field days, expositions. Most of the 6-day training courses were held in winter and took place at the Ruppin Training Center in the Hefer valley. We issued a weekly leaflet based on phone reports of all our regional field staff. I used to sit on the phone with all regional advisors once a week, put together the findings and this raw material was discussed with our state-level specialists and formulated into field situations, warnings and recommendations. The

weekly paper was edited and sent out to a mailing list which had to be updated and kept up. The main points were submitted to Kol Israel, radio station and transmitted every Wednesday at prime time, 5 minutes before the 7 p.m. news. My assignment was a challenging one but it lacked field work. Have learnt the ropes after a year of hacking my way through the desk job. Then asked Palti and Shoham to be assigned for part time field advisory activity. Started working in the Jerusalem Corridor as regional plant protection extension specialist in field and vegetable crops. Have worked mainly in newly established cooperative moshav settlements as well as in field crops with collective kibbutz farms. Was very happy to get hands-on field experience and for 5 years (1963-68) ran this sort of twofold professional life. A position for regional specialist opened up in 1968 in the Sharon Valley (Raanana district) and I got it. The clientele consisted of established moshav vegetable growers, well-established vegetable growers of small towns such as Ramat Hasharon, Raanana, Herzliya, Petah Tikva a.s.o. and kibbutz units involved mainly in the cropping of groundnuts, potato and cotton. The interaction with progressive growers and their intensive cropping pattern was highly challenging and gratifying. I carried out many field trials whenever field problems had to be winnowed on the spot and took part in trials with new pesticides. Thus, have been able to bring new and relevant know-how to the growers and crack the hard nuts of newly emerging field problems that came along. I was in demand by both crop production advisors who invited me often to join their field visits and look closely at their problems and doubts, as well as by producers and enjoyed their esteem. Interacted actively with research, mainly on soil-borne diseases which affected the highly intensive almost monocultural cultivation of potato, groundnuts, strawberry and tomato in the area. These five years (1968-1973) were my professional life's heyday. I had soul in the game like never before or after. After all this time spent with growers have reached the conclusion that the private farmers were the best, while their public activists and growers' representatives, the worst.