

My professional Adventures

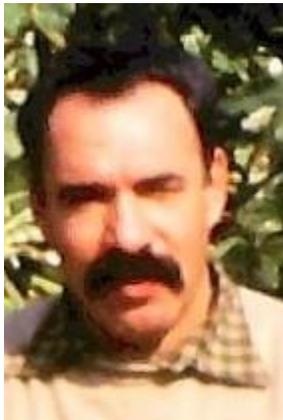
By **Robi Auscher**



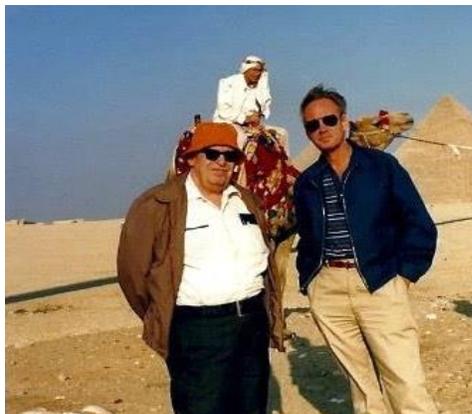
Down the Home Lane (Part 2)

In the summer of 1973, Danny Benor, Director of the Extension Service summoned me to his office. I was a regional advisor and he the top of the system, four or five tiers above me in the hierarchy. He asked me about my work and plans. Have talked about being busy with my field work and encroached in research for a Ph.D. in plant pathology. A week passed and Palti called me to his office to spill the beans. After 14 years on the job, he decided to move on and take the position of head of publications at the Volcani Research Center. He will recommend Haim Shoham as his follower and urged me to opt for Haim's job as State Plant Protection Specialist in Vegetable and Field Crops. Now I understood why Benor sent for me. In a few days the news fanned out stirring turmoil at the division's state level. The other two state-level crop protection specialists, both savvy professionals urged me, one out of ten regional advisors, to run for Palti' office. Shoham is the right deputy but he lacks the charisma and leadership to run the division. He seems to be bogged down in details missing the big picture. I didn't connive for the position though had coveted it. After a few days of reflection, without informing anyone, had asked for a new meeting with Benor. Told him that I wasn't aware of Palti's departure at our previous meeting and am interested in the position of division head. In the same way as at the first encounter, Danny didn't reveal his views.

In September have left for an International Plant Protection Conference held in Washington DC. It was a large and rich congress. The Chairman of the Committee on Extension of the International Society for Plant Pathology (I.S.P.P.) invited me to take over the Committee's chairmanship. I accepted and clinched it for 3 terms, for a total of 15 years. Reached home in late September after a nice visit of DC and NYC with Yehudit. On October the 6th, the Yom Kippur war broke out and the idyllic remainders of the visit to the US were gone with the first sound of the wailing sirens. Been called up on that very day and spent the next 8 months until May 1974 in fatigues. Meanwhile Palti moved to the Volcani Center, popping in once a week to check the mail. Danny Benor left and joined the World Bank as the Bank President's advisor on extension. Released in May from reserve duties have moved back to my regional office. Yaacov Sagiv was appointed Director of Extension. He called me to notify that I am his nominee for Plant Protection Division Chief in the same way as I was Danny's.



Yaacov Sagiv (1980)



With Haim Shoham in Egypt (1987)

On a rainy fall day, we rode with Yaacov to Jerusalem to pass the Civil Service's Commission tender for the position. Haim Shoham arrived by bus in an old fashioned trench coat, beret and umbrella. I got the position. Haim's chances in lack of an academic degree were below par. I felt embarrassed. After all he was my mentor and friend. To a certain extent he was relieved not to assume all liabilities attached and that I am the one who takes over. On the other hand, he was sad, reaching at

sixty the upper limit of his career. He backed off gentlemanly. Told our secretary that she should from now on release me of the chore of cleaning coffee glasses.

In fact, an Extension-advisory system is similar to a school. Very few teachers have real prospects to be promoted to managerial positions in the system and their advancement is lateral rather than vertical. Had the chance to change seven positions along the 38 years spent with Extension Service. Some of them were vertical, others lateral but the frequent replacements provided the right amount of adrenaline to withstand such a long service.

Have received a division with 12 professionals. Despite all headwinds scaled it up to 28. Upgraded the division to department. Have incorporated five citrus entomologists who were located in the Citrus division capping years-long resentment between Palti and their state specialist.

The key takeaway learnt from Dr. Palti, who later completed his M.Sc. and Ph.D. on the job, was to lead the unit with a clear concept. Reducing the amount of pesticide use became the invariable target of the division. The methodology to reach that target consisted of the promotion of Integrated Pest Management (I.P.M.). Research and extension churned out new IPM techniques providing more precise pest monitoring and disruption tools of rampant insect pest populations. The first projects were commodity-oriented, covering annual crops such as cotton, corn, indoor vegetables. Later on, we addressed perennial crops such as avocado, citrus, apple and pears, grapes. To sustain the projects have launched intensive training programs for pest scouts, the professional go between linking growers and regional crop protection advisors. The scouts employed by the growers or their regional councils monitored regularly pest populations so that pest control could rely on objective measurable data-driven decisions. Spraying, only when necessary. The next step in IPM was the introduction of area-wide pest management (A.P.M.). A first attempt to this approach was made in the Arava valley. To control virus diseases of vegetable crops carried by insect vectors, a crop-free period was accepted by all growers in the area. In lack of host plants this period reduced to

zero the vector populations since the villages were surrounded by desert and there was no external intrusion of vectors. Backed up by research, Orna Ucko our regional crop protection advisor coordinated the project.

The same idea of multi-crop, multi-pest situation covered by one single IPM approach was brought from Australia by Yaacov Hameiri, our regional crop protection advisor in the Bet Shean Valley. The Bet Shean project encompassed field and vegetable crops and it was supported by a regional insect pest resistance laboratory. The latter was helpful in the annual scheduling of pest control applications aimed at a reduction of pesticide resistance build up throughout the growing season. In this case too, growers had to subscribe to a seasonal pesticides application policy. With funds of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) we further installed APM projects in the Bessor, Yezreel Valley and the Negev Heights on vegetable crops. Additional APM programs were implemented by our regional staff in the Carmel Beach on vegetables, in the Hadera area on fruit crops and grapes, in the Upper Galilee and Golan Heights on deciduous fruit crops and citrus.

After five years as head of Crop Protection, Director of Extension Yaacov Sagiv asked me in 1980 to coordinate the computerization process of the Service in the capacity of Deputy Director of Extension for Research and Development (R&D). We were in a euphoric and naïve period believing in the folly that all biological processes could be modelled and from now on all decision-making could be computer-supported. We tried to develop computer-supported decision-making models for the country's major crops such as cotton and potato and irrigation needs and technologies. Years of research on cotton production and pest control modeling yielded modest results although all the data collected served for a better understanding of the crop's needs and reactions.

After all this dog and pony show a more down to earth, decentralized approach supplanted the previous centralist approach. We provided all extension advisors with microcomputers and trained them in the use of commercially available

software. A lengthy training campaign was aimed at the ample capabilities of the Microsoft Office package and communication software. Equipped with smartphones and laptops, all advisors of the system were able to improve their time management, communications, data collection, presentations, and computing at large. This generated a major qualitative upgrade of the professional services provided by the extension system.

As Deputy Director have served on Extension Service management board for many years and on joint R&D committees with research. Sagiv's prescient concept was to converge now under one supervision both the "what" and the "how". In other words, both ends of the technology generation and dissemination processes. Thus, he added to my portfolio the management of the Extension Department in charge of all technology diffusion tools: training courses, field days, in-service training, monitoring of the visiting system and its efficacy, publications, radio programs, video support, audio visual aids, recruitment of new staff and their basic training. This paired assignment was extremely time-consuming and heavily loaded with administrative burden. After three years spent under tightened screws, had the chance to spend a six-month long sabbatical as visiting professor with the Texas A&M System looking into computer-supported extension entomology. Meanwhile Yaacov Golan managed the Crop Protection Division. Badly wounded during his military service and physically disabled, the burden on Yaacov was too heavy and he mulled over early retirement to set up on his farm a modern sheep operation. He urged me to return to crop protection and to leave behind my stressful administrative occupation. By the way, after completing his training and first year of service Yaacov Golan an outstanding professional, was not tenured because of his physical handicap. Palti, then division chief, travelled to Jerusalem raised hell and banged on personnel chief's desk until the issue was favorably resolved. Yaacov was a charmer but I had my own reasons to give in and return to my own professional turf.

Thus, I began a second term as head of Plant Protection. All in all, had managed this unit for 22 rocky years. A first term of seven years (1974-1980) and a second

one of 15 years (1986-2001) until my retirement in late 2001. For ten years have simultaneously manned also the position of Deputy Director of Extension.