

# **My professional Adventures**

By **Robi Auscher**



## **Down the Home Lane (Part 3)**

In my second term, focus was on further expansion of integrated pest management, the phase-out of methyl bromide, an ozone depleting soil fumigant and the introduction of quality management in crop production and protection.

Under the resolutions of the Montreal Protocol, the United Nations (U.N.) launched a successful world-wide project of phasing out ozone depleting industrial and agricultural substances. The Ministry of Environment Protection was in charge of the program in close collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, Extension Service and Research. An inter-ministerial steering committee was established to work out the concept and framework of methyl bromide's substitution and phase out. Implementation was run in two adjoining channels. Research under the leadership of Dr. Giora Kritzman from Volcani. While field-level application was coordinated by me. At Extension we declared the project as a service-wide objective involving the partaking of vegetables and flower production regional advisors in addition to plant protection advisors. We devised a "model farm" approach comparing on-farm methyl bromide's (M.B.) performance with that of potential environment-friendly chemical and non-chemical alternatives on methyl bromide consuming crops. Growers hosting model farms were reimbursed for the extra costs implied. After a

two-year crash effort setting up forty model farms, we were able to develop a list of potential MB substitutes and recommend them to vegetables and flower growers. By 1995 the country was able to meet the UN target deadline and phased out methyl bromide with the exception of a few crops where further research and field work were still necessary.

Quality management is a wonderful tool. The impetus for its development came from the private sector, namely from the European marketing chains that import Israeli vegetables, flowers and fruits. The chains developed strict quality standards that the Israeli producers were requested to comply with. In order to reach the expected quality at harvesting, the entire production cycle had to be reformulated and turned into a transparent one. The formulation of crop production and protection protocols of export crops became a major mission involving growers, extension and quality management specialists. It upgraded the production technologies, keeping record of all production activities, enabling their continuous monitoring to reach end-product qualities as requested at consumers' end. This process was especially relevant to agricultural products supposed to meet tolerance levels of chemicals applied pre- or post-harvest. The spirit of quality management is expected to add a twist to crops grown for the domestic marketplace as well.

As Deputy Director of Extension became member of the Ministry's top management board. Attended a meeting devoted to the Ministry's five years development plan for agricultural development. A thick book full of graphs and tables was collated by the Ministry's Planning Authority. Arik Sharon, then Minister of Agriculture chaired the meeting. He didn't merely perform the chairman's ceremonial role but was in full command of both the plan's details and its big picture and ran the session with extreme competence. He was well prepared for the event exhibiting an impressive intellectual ability. I was scheduled one day to deliver a talk in a remote settlement deep in the Sinai Peninsula before a group of newly settled producers. Drove almost four hours to reach the place. In the middle of my lecture Arik Sharon and his entourage entered the lecture hall. One of his aides rushed to me requesting that I stop the talk on the spot since the Minister arrived and wants to address the group.

Arik Sharon interrupted his aide's attempt after finding out that I worked for the Ministry and made a big and scheduled effort to reach the place. He asked me to go on with the lecture. Waited patiently until its end and took over only when I finished the talk and ensuing questions and answers. Arik was a controversial public figure but extremely capable and gentlemanlike.

For all these years as manager have served as member on the various committees of the Pesticides Registration Panel of the Plant Protection Services, the Ministry's regulatory body. Meetings were held several times a month and entailed going through thick files of field trials evidence. It's a responsible evaluation and judgement role and extremely time consuming. Usually spent evenings or weekends studying the files of the pesticides marketing firms applying for registration of their compounds. The same is true for the membership on the Plant Protection Research Evaluation Panel of the Ministry's Chief Scientist evaluating, tallying up or rejecting all plant protection research proposals submitted for local or international funding. This led to an invitation to join the Technical Advisory Committee (T.A.C.) of the Binational US-Israel Research and Development Fund (B.A.R.D.).

Am glad I was given the chance to get to know the business world through "Weed Control Ltd." government company. Arie Nir, the managing director invited me to serve as director on behalf of the Ministry on the firm's executive board. Arie had that special knack for professional skill in the realm of weed control and for being an astute manager and economist. He never missed a beat as far as finances were concerned. First time in life have been exposed to quarterly balance sheets, tracing the firm's financial pitfalls or success stories. I owe this new perspective to Arie and the firm's accountant who orientated me at least every three months on the firm's business course of action. After a couple of years on the board have been elected its chairman. A twofold appointment of the Ministers of Finances and Agriculture. The firm addressed weed control on non-arable land. Its clients and joint founders being mainly large public bodies such as the Ministry of Defense, military grounds, airports, regional councils and their drainage areas and roads, the railway system, Keren Kayemet Leisrael forests, the Electric Corporation, etc. Tapping on its

professionalism, the firm was doing well, expanding its know-how, equipment and infrastructure. It fell victim to government craving to privatize its services. After more than 15 years serving on the firm's board, this government company was sold to a private entrepreneur who was after its real estate rather than its business. He didn't fulfill expectations and lost much of its clientele. It was bound to happen; the company's strength and activity have been downsized. Looking under the hood we could find cases where government firms perform better than privately owned ones. This privatization trend in the late 1990s was imposed by Prime Minister Netanyahu. Minister of Agriculture Raphael (Rafal) Eitan seconded it with no qualms about it.

The drumbeat of privatization swept the country and was jostled by Ministry of Finances and the Director General of the Ministry of Agriculture. The target organism being the Agricultural Extension Service. The extension service of the Netherlands was undergoing the process. That of the United Kingdom on its verge. The very idea of private extension became the standard of perfection with our two Ministries although no substantial empirical evidence has been accrued. The days of objective governmental extension were doomed. Director General Yonatan Bassi, woefully myopic, instead of addressing Extension Service management or initiating professional discussions with the various units and workers tried to bypass any head-on collisions. His poor management's deepest trough consisted of hiring two consultants with no previous experience in the extension-advisory domain. The two lightweights tried to beget individual meetings with extension employees to brief them on the future plan of privatized extension. Trade unions vetoed any contacts with the two who in turn began to sustain futile undercover meetings trying to coax individual extension employees. Y. Bassi, who dismissed Director of Extension E. Landes stalwartly opposed to privatization, just faked out our system. Most ridiculous brinkmanship abated only when both Director General and the Minister were jettisoned after elections. We dodged a bullet and learned a good lesson in disgraceful management. After about a year have visited together with newly appointed Director of Extension, Moshe Goren, the advisory systems of the Netherlands and the U.K. We found their experience being still too crude. We

couldn't recommend at that point in time any move in this direction to suit our home conditions.

Have retired at 65 at the end of 2001. The recent experience gained with the coordination of the methyl bromide phase-out project turned out to be a much sought-after card on the international arena. The same is true for the 25 years spent on strengthening of agricultural extension systems in the developing world over four continents. A smooth slide into non-stop international consulting was a sequel to these two fields, and the pinnacle of my overseas activity.