

# **My professional Adventures**

By **Robi Auscher**

## **In the US**

Over the last 5 decades have enjoyed the satisfying opportunity of frequently visiting the US. Attending conferences and meetings, study tours and a sabbatical. The destination of most of the visits being Washington DC, for briefings at the World Bank, at the mythological 1818 H Street address where the Bank's main block resides, one of the five or more huge blocks which accommodate a part of its headquarters staff out of the total of 10,000. Next to it the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) buildings and you have a whole citadel of the developed world's pulsing financial brain. Due to its generous remuneration scheme, the bank is able to be highly selective in its recruiting. I found many good thinkers among them but even among the leading professionals you come across a wide array of characters and backgrounds. On the other hand this natural variability might be the success factor of such a large system. I found the British carrying a remarkable general education and manners while many Americans, although excellent professionals, are fitted out with a lighter baggage. All in all, most World Bank employees were happy to work for the bank due to its challenging intellectual environment. Their travel load is extensive but are well paid and retire early.

My mentor, D. Benor, the World Bank President's special advisor, suggested that I deliver a seminar to the bank's agricultural extension-advisory group and expose them to my work as being in charge of introducing microcomputers into the extension-advisory work in our country. The person responsible for the seminars was Chuck Antholt, an American senior advisor on agricultural extension. He spent most of his professional career in India while his wife, a painter, continued to live in DC. Since my mission wasn't financed, Chuck suggested that I stay with them. We moved around by taxi in DC and Chuck talked in Gujarati with the driver. In fact, he was fluent in 4 Indian languages. Chuck was the first extension person in the bank who wrote up a critical paper on the "Training & Visit" extension system conceived by D. Benor and supported world-wide by the bank. He knew that I worked for Benor and also that the latter suggested that I present the seminar. Still, he was extremely friendly but we never discussed "T&V"-related issues. The seminar was successful and generated much interest at a time the bank lagged behind in its own computerization. Staff still used cumbersome electrical typewriters.

One evening we went together to attend the vernissage of a Romanian painter woman much beyond her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was held in her opulent villa in Washington DC. Noche Christ, née at Craiova as Maria Nicola Olga Ioan, married an American serviceman and seized the day to leave Romania in 1945. Her

husband, an Air Force colonel died years ago. She was well-known in DC's artistic circles and exposed quite often, being appreciated by leading art collectors. She was happy to host someone who speaks her native language. Her vast house was full and she entertained all visitors. In her well-groomed garden, a young housekeeper was sitting, bowing to the visitors. Apparently, her fancy man. She was clad in some pink saree draped nonchalantly around her. I was taken aback by the multitude of paintings hanging everywhere. They expressed more or less the same theme and style: a plethora of young nude women floating in the air chasing their beaus. All this in superfluous boudoir pink. Next morning, at breakfast have shared my visceral impressions with Chuck's wife, the painter, telling her that what I have seen is pure kitsch. Her schooled answer was that kitsch is also a form of art.

I met Dr. Michael Cernea, a Jewish Romanian rural sociologist, in Thailand on mission. He completed his PhD still in Romania and reached the US in 1974.



He was the first sociologist employed by the World Bank. The bank used to act as the third world's development agency. As such it employed economists, infrastructure specialists and agriculturalists. The projects' sociological, anthropological and environmental impact didn't receive any attention. In this context Michael played a pioneering role as rural sociologist and introduced the sociological thinking in the bank's approach and methodology and was highly appreciated. We used to touch base whenever I reached the bank's offices. He used to work with an open door. When he was busy writing, he raised a hand and we met the next day. Cernea made key contributions to laying the foundations of the socio-anthropology of development, a new field in applied social sciences. He won prestigious awards, the Kimball Award (1988) and the Malinowski Price (1995), for his pioneering work on basing public policy and development programs on social-science knowledge. He became a leading authority on forced displacement and resettlement.

While working in Paraguay for the bank, have been invited to spend a week in DC to write up a conceptual paper on extension-advisory work for Latin America. Have been accommodated in one of the bank's suites in town. Quite a placement. As I began to work next day on my desk at the bank, got a phone

call from my wife. Our son who was serving his mandatory military service, wasn't too happy with his new unit and deserted for a few days. He was tried and put in confinement. With two little daughters at home and working, she couldn't handle alone the situation. I advised my colleagues from the bank. It wasn't easy to explain them that my son's in jail, albeit in a military one. It was just out of their league to apprehend something like this. Got back to my desk with minimum peace of mind. Another phone call from her. Her mother caught pneumonia and put in hospital. I approach my colleagues with an ashen face to tell them that I got to furlough myself. Boarded the now defunct TWA to Tel Aviv. Sat morose throughout the flight, lonely in business, watching a sullen sky.

Usually when visiting the World Bank offices have met the direct counterparts involved in current project work. But there were a few additional bank staff that I always tried to touch base with. Dr. Gershon Feder is an Israeli economist with the bank's research group, involved in the evaluation of the "Training&Visit" extension system's impact. He looked at the system's diffusion in India, comparing intensively-covered areas with non-covered ones, knowledge diffusion between them and the ways the system bears on production and productivity at the receiving end, of the producers. Feder co-authored a major finding, namely that agricultural extension's high economic rates of return indicate its potential to bring about change. He definitely appreciated T&V's contribution in general, being critical about specific findings. I would have expected that the points he raised would have been incorporated in the system's management. Feder and his associates published another salient finding, the view that Farmers Field Schools (FFS) promoted by FAO are not an extension approach for disseminating information. They raised FFS cost issues and their relevance to the sustainability of this approach. One of the conceptual thinkers on agricultural extension in the Bank but with reduced exposure to field work was *Willem Zijp*, a Dutch agriculturalist and extension specialist. Willem spent some time in a kibbutz as a young man. He brought to the bank the Dutch school's approach conceived by Niels Röling, emphasizing agricultural and rural extension as an expanded concept of knowledge and information systems. The Agricultural Knowledge and Information System's strategic vision is not always consistent in its broader focus. I wonder to what extent is this trendy approach practical and whether it could be carried to the fields. Further, while in Washington DC, used to visit regularly with United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) mainly with the national coordinators of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) who fulfilled *grosso modo* the same roles that were under my responsibilities back home.

While waiting for a meeting at the bank's Latin American Department, I see an open door and on the wall hangs a large map of Israel. Stood up out of curiosity and got closer to see, to my astonishment, an old friend from Timișoara sitting at his desk. A successful hydrologist with Tahal Consulting Engineers in Israel, we met several times both in Tel Aviv and then in Bangkok where he was stationed for years. Later Peter Wittenberg moved from Tahal to the World Bank.

He made himself a very good reputation as a reliable, hard-working, down-to-earth professional. Unfortunately, we never had the occasion for a trip down memory lane.

Wanted to reach Washington DC following an FAO mission to China. Have called Lufthansa in Rome to check the feasibility of downgrading my business class ticket and use the accrued extra mileage to extend the flight from Beijing to DC. After giving all the details, my citizenship included, the salesperson told me that on the day of departure he will be on duty at the airport and he could more easily deal with the problem from that end. The Aryan-looking Lufthansa official was exceedingly generous in the conversion of my ticket. At the end he disclosed that his Slavic last name comes from his Jewish father who escaped the Holocaust and settled down in Germany. He was more than happy to meet Israelis and help them out. Still, he left his colleagues unaware of his Jewish roots.

U.S. National Academy of Sciences, Board on Science and Technology for International Development (BOSTID) invited me for an International Consultation for USAID on research priorities in support of sustainable agriculture and pest management in developing countries, held in Washington D.C. Met many acquaintances with whom have worked and collaborated on various aspects of Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and happy to realize that USAID is about to prioritize this approach to reduce the amount of pesticides used in the developing world.

For many years have been member of our Crop Protection Research Evaluation Panel. The group in charge of assessing in-country research proposals, tallying up the accepted ones and rejecting the ones that didn't meet our standards or requirements. Being ready for the meetings meant always to read critically a great deal of proposals which could be quite bulky; to fight and persuade for the acceptance of the good ones declining the ones that didn't show good prospects of success or didn't meet the Research & Development priorities set by the panel. The panel acted later on also as the evaluation board for the Bi-National (US-Israel) Research and Development Fund (BARD). The latter, a 100 million US dollar fund, became a main resource for research funding based on proposals submitted by collaborating researchers from the two countries in all areas of agriculture. All proposals were evaluated by ten commodity and discipline-based American and, respectively, Israeli panels. The final annual sorting out and decision among all prioritized proposals cleared by the 10 national panels was bestowed upon the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) comprising five American and five Israeli members. BARD chairman and executive director offered me to join TAC. Quite unusual since all members were leading researchers while I came from agricultural extension. TAC convened annually, once in Israel and next year in the US. The two sessions that I attended in the US were held in Madison, Wisconsin and Berkeley, California. In Israel we met in Bet Dagan, at BARD headquarters.

Researchers, especially on the American side, tend to constrain their views to their specific subject-matter although in the framework of TAC they were sitting on subcommittees of other topics as well. My ambit of interests, as extension person was broader by definition, and on top of that have met the heads of our extension divisions to get their input on the proposals bearing on their realm. With my homework done, took the liberty of expressing views not only in my particular domain but wherever had a particular message or priority. A big American fellow from the University of Mississippi took in a bad way the fact that I, a plant protection specialist, partook in his domain, field crops. We hashed out the issue at one of the breaks to quell his anger or in fact his skin-deep misinterpretation of TAC's role. Usually, after two-three days of intensive work, we indulged into a field trip organized by the host institution. We were five Israeli TAC members in a minivan with one American member and our executive secretary. The guide, a university person, explained and we used to pose questions. I also took part in the questioning that confused the guide. He knew that there is only one American in the car, and so he asked me: But you, where do you come from, from Boston? Our executive secretary burst into such a roaring laugh that she literally fell off her seat.

TAC was chaired for years by an American soil scientist. High time to transfer the wand to an Israeli chairman. At our next meeting in Berkeley, the executive director suggested my name as chairperson. TAC accepted the motion. We were four Israelis who travelled together to San Francisco and were joined there by our fifth member who spent a sabbatical in the US. This was Prof. Pinchas (Siko) Zusman an economist with the Faculty of Agriculture in Rehovot. Siko was a well-known public figure who thought big. He served as Director General of the Ministry of Defense under Shimon Peres and Ezer Weizmann and Director General of the Hebrew University. We never met before. As he witnessed my designation, he took me aside asking whether I know how Americans manage their meetings. Had no idea. So, he explained me in a few sentences. Had to come to grips with the problem since the next session was about to begin, this time under my chairmanship. *When someone puts through a motion, formulated so that a secretary could jot it down, the chairman asks whether there's anyone who seconds the motion. If seconded by one member, the motion is passed. If opposed, the chairman calls for voting.* Although we never met, I felt that it was vital for Siko that the newly elected Israeli chairperson succeeds in his assignment. I followed his advice *ad litteram* deeply impressed by his big-hearted move. Another TAC member present was a friend, Prof. Ilan Chet, Dean of the Faculty of Agriculture, appointed later as the Weizmann Institute's President.

Professionally, my closest ally on TAC was Prof. Fowden Maxwell, chairman of the Department of Entomology at Texas A&M University. We talked about Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and computer-supported decision-making in pest control. Fowden showed interest in my experience with the computerization of our extension service. He heard about our IPM system from two of his

associates who attended a workshop that I put together on the topic several years back with the occasion of an international agricultural exhibition held in Israel. After spending several days together on a TAC meeting, he explored for funds and extended an invitation for a mini-sabbatical of six months in his department to be dedicated to the two areas we were discussing. BARD's executive director offered to cover the sabbatical's airfare.

Have reached College Station, TX in February 1986. Rented a car at Houston airport and drove all the way down to College Station-Bryan. Have been awaited there at a gas station by an Israeli woman who lived there and rented apartments for students. Next days, meals at McDonald's, installed myself in the house and with the help of an Israeli researcher who also spent a sabbatical in town have bought a car, hooked up to cable TV and other utilities. Borrowed his car so I could pass the test and get a driver's license. When shopping at Krogers or at other stores had a hard time understanding the salespersons. Their southern drawl sounded like a foreign language. At supermarkets when paying with a credit card you were asked to present also an ID. Being born on December the 25<sup>th</sup>, the cashiers looking at my driver's license would usually cry out in awe: "Christmas baby!" Big deal in the Bible belt.

My host at the Department of Entomology was Dr. Mike McWhorter a tall and rich Texan whom I met in Israel before. My real partner, however, was Dr. John Jackman, a nimble-witted and fingered extension entomologist and computer specialist with whom I spent most my time. Although I was computerizing our service but had to get my feet wet as far as basics were concerned. John introduced me to the DOS operating system, then in vogue by now behind the time, and we would discuss the conceptual parts of computer-supported decision-making. Microsoft's Windows revolution would appear a couple of years later. John came from Michigan like many faculty from the north-east, attracted by the generous remuneration schemes of the A&M system. They would be called "those damn yanks" by trueborn Texans. I began to work on pieces of software and when stuck in a bug would call the central computer system for assistance. A young student would pop in after a short while. Usually they didn't have any prior acquaintance with my program but in a few minutes would get the picture and iron out any snag. They were the first computer wizards that I came across. Youngsters who grew up in a computer environment and as such were natural troubleshooters. The central system provided training courses and have attended courses on basics, communications, spreadsheets, etc. Department of Entomology was a huge institute accommodated in a very large four-storey building and lots of smaller on-campus houses with 70 professors investigating insect pests and other creepy-crawlies from spiders to millipedes damaging the state's crops, secretaries, technicians, undergraduate and graduate students. I visited with most of the faculty, spending time mainly with those involved in modeling and development of computer-assisted programs in entomology. Mike acted as Integrated Pest Management (IPM) state-level coordinator and hired 20 county-level IPM coordinators. We visited

together several counties, their coordinators, facilities and field work. Further have joined him at an IPM federal meeting held in Washington DC.

From DC I flew first to Little Rock, Arkansas to deliver a seminar at Winrock International's headquarters up in the hills overlooking Little Rock. They asked me to rent a car at the airport and drive up the twists and turns to Hqs. We were two Reubens as invited lecturers in the session: Reuben Johnson from the Arkansas Extension Service and me, Reuben Ausher. Reuben Johnson asked to be first so I wouldn't overshadow him (?). No problem, I was on deck and due to Winrock's interest in international development my talk focused on the World Bank's Training and Visit extension system applied in the developing world.

The models and programs generated by the researchers at the Department of Entomology were mainly stand-alone pieces of software. They didn't follow any particular common standard and didn't communicate with each other or had any prospective end user in mind. Often a researcher with a good idea would hire a software engineer. They would put together a piece of software which could be very elegant and look great as an innovative publication. Although have been the guest of the department of Entomology, had a few meetings with plant pathologists that I knew from previous encounters and a weed scientist. They were less involved in modeling and in computers. John Jackman as computer referent for his department played a major clearing-house and motivational role and have picked up the idea as a take-home message.



*Texas A&M campus, College Station*



*Department of Entomology building*

The A&M system like all land-grant universities consists of three sections: research, extension and teaching.

- Research is coordinated by the Director of the Experiment Station and all department heads report to him;

- Agricultura Extension is coordinated by Director of Extension and all extension employees on full or part-time appointments report to him through their department coordinators;
- Teaching is coordinated by the Dean of Agriculture, all teachers report to him.

In summary, the Department of Entomology hosted research, extension and teaching groups under one roof. This enhances collaboration and flow of information. Still their plans and programs are steered by the respective heads of research, extension and teaching. Many Israeli researchers who spent sabbaticals in the US system, admired it and would like to adopt it. I didn't judge this set-up with all its pros as game changer or take-home message. As a Senior Military College, Texas A&M is one of six American public universities with a full-time, volunteer Corps of Cadets who study alongside civilian undergraduate students. The cadets wear their military uniforms adding color and a certain amount of conservative aura to the venue. In addition to College Station, the system has large branches spread out over the state in San Antonio, Texarkana, Galveston, McAllen, Corpus Christi, etc. and a net of county-level experiment stations. In addition, the black communities have their own land-grant university system, the Prairie View A&M University.



My office was located in the extension entomology group. Usually had no problems communicating with the researchers, could walk into their offices or labs or call them for a quick question. My neighbors next door, the extension entomologists, didn't go by a nine-to-five job. They used to spend two or three days in a row in the field. When they came back to the office a high stack of notes awaited them with inquiries they had to call back. For the first one or two days after returning to the office they were sitting endlessly on the phone and in the best case we could exchange a few words at a brief unscheduled coffee break.

Was introduced in meetings as the Deputy Director of Extension in my country. A function that I fulfilled by then and have done so for ten years (1980-1990). For obfuscated reasons, Mike's attempts to set up a meeting for me with



the Director of Extension or his deputy were elusively unsuccessful. On the other hand, Director Neville Clark, head of the experiment station with whom I was less affiliated, invited me for lunch once he heard about the presence of Israel's Deputy Director of Extension. He served later as BARD's TAC member in the same way as Fowden Maxwell.

My department seminar reviewed the computerization strategy of our extension service. It wasn't my first neither my last talk still felt butterflies in the stomach. It was after all kind of an entrance test.

Mike told me about his father who was a Bible-scholar, keen on sharing views with an Israeli. This never happened. While traveling together long distance, Texas being a very large state, Mike expressed his deprecative views of blacks. They were lazy and promiscuous. I tried to link up their lacks with the fact that they were brought as slaves to America against their will and deprived of human rights for generations. He probably regarded me as a communist although have shared with him my own first-hand experience with a communist regime's inhumanity. I was invited but once to his home and met his wife and kids. He played his role by the book.

Have called a couple of meetings with researchers from "my department" as well as from Plant Pathology and Weed Sciences and we mulled over a coordinated inter-departmental framework of software development. Further, have presented the computing standards of the individual producers and of their associations to which an adjustment as end users would be absolutely essential. We carried to the fields one mature cotton pest control model developed by a team of research entomologists. Have hit the road with John Jackman to meet a group of growers and John trained them on the program's application and its benefits for improved decision-making. It's been a field day for the cotton growers, happy to get this kind of on-the-spot support. Gave a hand to John in sending out computer-processed warnings and forecasts concerning the control of the pecan weevil, the pecan's major insect pest. By the way the pecan tree is a native species of Texas.

Before my departure for home John and one computer technician spent two whole days with me just to copy various programs and utilities on diskettes so that I could carry that treasure to my department at home. In turn, have invited John twice. Once to a conference that I have organized in Toulouse, France for the European Plant Protection Organization (EPPO) on computer applications in plant protection and a second time for a week's visit in Israel when he trained our staff and spent much time with our computer referent. Besides being an outstanding entomologist and computer wizard, John was also an avid bird watcher and spent a stirring day with one of my regional extension advisors, an expert bird watcher. Unfortunately, Prof. John Jackman passed away at 60.



*Sara Ehrman with Ambassador Rabin*



*Dr. John Jackman*

Had a chance in College Station to be exposed to The American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) activity. Its moving spirit was Sara Ehrman who worked for the government in Austin. She was Hillary Clinton's mentor and very close friend. Mr. Clinton, used to introduce Mrs. Ehrman waving a long finger her way and saying: "That woman told Hillary not to marry me." She and a local attorney moved in a decrepit vehicle from one little Texan town to the another to visit the few and scattered Jewish families of the Texas plains to help them out and keep them together. This proved AIPAC's impressive grassroots grip of all Jewish communities. I was often invited by an Israeli family in College station. They served as a warm "home-base" to all Israelis who happened to spend a sabbatical with A&M. After 30 years spent in Texas they relocated to Israel and we meet every now and then. In College Station, Beth Hillel used to bring the little Jewish community of local families and students together over holidays and community events.

During the summer vacation of July-August the family joined me. The kids enjoyed the torrid heat of Texas which culminates in the afternoon hours. They spent much time in the swimming pool and playing with our Korean neighbor's kids. Texans say that air conditioning saved their state. At the end of the stay we drove all the way down to Florida and spent a few lovely days at Disneyworld and Cape Kennedy, to fly home with stopovers in Washington DC and New York City.

On various other occasions have had my fair share of visiting in addition to Texas and Washington DC the research and extension facilities of St. Paul- Minneapolis, Minnesota; College Park and Beltsville, Maryland; Lafayette, Indiana; Madison, Wisconsin; East Lansing, Michigan; Wooster, Ohio; Berkeley, California.

A fortnight before leaving have advertised my car in the local newspaper. A few calls but no action. Finally, get a call and the guy wants to come to see the car that very evening. An old truck stops next to our driveway with 5 blacks on it. They were so black that in the evening light you could see but their eyes and

lily-white teeth. My wife, filled with fear kept a steady eye on them and stated categorically: only two get into the house, the others wait outside. Small talk leads to a big turn. When they find out that we're Israelis their eyes start to glow. They came from British Virgin Islands, a territory in the Caribbean to the east of Puerto Rico, and were Sabbath observers. Regarded Israelis as their brethren. We settled on the price. Have requested a banker's check as payment rather than an unpredictable personal check or cash. No problem, let's get together in the neighbor town where they live and go to the bank. My wife opposed the idea. It's a trap. They will rob your car in the best case or even kill you to get it, in the worse case. I drove over to their ghost town on the set date. There are plenty of such ghost towns spread along the highways of the area. They were abandoned once the black gold's boom was over. In the decaying downtown live poor blacks, debris and misery. We went to the bank and I got a crisp check. As for delivery, they asked me when do we leave the place and although I cashed the check, could stay with "their" car leisurely until our departure.

Meanwhile a challenging bi-national project was about to be born. With the contribution of the Jewish National Fund under the leadership of Sara Ehrman, the Texas-Israel Exchange (TIE) was established. TIE's rationale being to boost the agricultural development of the Rio Grande valley with the assistance of Israel's agricultural know-how in the fields of drip irrigation and intensive production of vegetables. A demonstration farm of 100 acres in Laredo was contributed by the local college of agriculture. The joint leaders of the program were Commissioner of Agriculture, Jim Hightower on the Texan end and Deputy Minister of Agriculture Katz-Oz on the Israeli one. Katz-Oz looked for an Israeli coordinator. I just came back from Texas and knowing Sara Ehmman, the Texan coordinator, volunteered for the assignment. The first step was to find the right Israeli expert to be sent over to Laredo to manage the demonstration farm. I have looked for an extension specialist in vegetables from our service with good in-country record and experience in developing countries. Found someone with these qualities and with good knowledge of both English and Spanish. Minister Katz-Oz came up with a name, a kibbutz member from the Yezreel Valley. Have interviewed his candidate together with the head of our farm management division. We found him unqualified for the job. Have advised Katz-Oz of our negative recommendation and its grounds. Katz-Oz overruled us and sent his protégé to Texas. He spent a week on the spot and fled to Washington DC. After desperate distress, our agricultural attaché persuaded him to return to Laredo. In all these preparatory stages used to meet Katz-Oz on an almost weekly basis. Usually when I entered his office he would shout into the phone: Shimon, Shimon. He was talking forever to then prime Minister, Shimon Peres. Have been in steady phone contact with Sara Ehrman, trying to save face and bring the problem to an end. On the spur of the moment, Katz-Oz sidelined me. Apparently accused for opening up a direct line of communications with Texas behind his back. He called the Director of Extension, my supervisor, to take over the coordination. Complaints about the bad egg, the Israeli farm manager,

began to flow sweeping in. His English was ominously poor and his communication ability very low. When it rains, it pours. Before the end of his first year another mystery was unraveled. He used to lend the demonstration farm's machinery to neighboring farms for a fast buck. They've had it up to here and Sara Ehrman requested his immediate removal or he would be sued. My candidate was sent out to replace him. He spent there two years and did a superb job. Next, Abraham Katz-Oz moved up in a world, being promoted to Israel's Minister of Agriculture.