

**Robi Auscher**

## **My professional Adventures**



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## **Look What Happened to My Consultant**

Back in 1975 have been invited by a World Bank official to join a mission in southern India. At that time have been a full-time employee of the Ministry of Agriculture, Extension Service in Israel and entitled yearly to two months of unpaid leave. Used them for foreign consulting. Ensuing, have worked for 6 years in Burma on short-term Bank missions strengthening agricultural extension-advisory systems. Next have been involved for almost ten years in the Bank-financed National Agricultural Extension Project of Thailand and later on of Nepal. After promoting a rigid extension-advisory system in South East Asia for more than ten years felt the need for a change. In one of the stopovers in Washington DC at the Bank's headquarters, have asked for a meeting with Latin America's head of Agricultural Department. An Irishman. Have portrayed my domestic functions in Israel and the experience with Bank missions. Being happy with my credit, the chief agriculturalist of several Latin American countries, Mark Wilson, a Scotsman, has been invited to join our meeting which was extended in the latter's office.

Next day Mark set up a meeting between me and Steven Oliver, a British economist, project leader of an evolving comprehensive agricultural project in Paraguay. Steven briefed me on his project which focused on deforestation control, watershed management and the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices in a large region of the country. He was about to form and lead a mission comprising a wide array of specialists such as forestry, environmental protection, sociology, anthropology, due to the presence of indigenous populations in the area, satellite imagery, a.s.o. He added me to the mission as agricultural extension-advisory specialist. Bank staff have their own pet consultants. They keep them listed in little secret notebooks, swapping them between themselves, like card players, whenever they need to put together a mission with specific expertise. On this occasion Steven delivered his credo about his requirements of mission members. It boiled down, beside their expertise, to the fact that they should be apt to work in a team and still to work on their own on the ground. We reached the issue of my Spanish. Told Steven that I had attended one course a couple of years back. Further, have frequently worked in Italy and spoken French in francophone African countries. Matter-of-factish, I master Romanian, an already third Romance language. In practice, this could mean that I possess a sufficient amount of passive and related knowledge to read reports and attend meetings but unable to entertain an active conversation. This satisfied

the project leader who decided then to attach to me a local English-speaking counterpart. After a few weeks got the terms of reference for the assignment and the timelines. Followed by the announcement that an air ticket is awaiting at the travel agency in Tel Aviv that works for the Bank. Steven dispatched me in a most comfortable way on business so that I would be able to start working right after hitting Paraguay. First layover in Amsterdam, the next one in Rio, and on the third day the flight from Rio to Asuncion. On this last leg, business being quite empty, have indulged into a discussion with a neighbor. An Englishman by the name of Phil who lived in Canada and worked for the Bank in its newly established Environment Protection Unit. It was obvious in no time that we were headed to the same mission. Steven was to follow us within three days.

After landing a hotel van picked us up at the airport. Phil took the seat next to the driver while I sat down right behind them. The moment we drove off, Phil and the driver engaged in a lively conversation. It was my first visit to a Spanish-speaking country. Just to test my linguistic apprehension, got closer to them for a discrete eavesdropping. Couldn't understand one single word. Appeased myself telling that it's probably due to the fatigue of the long way. After a few minutes got again closer to them. Listened carefully for a brief while. Same devastating result. This time have blamed the noisy car. A third attempt ended in the same failure. Now I said to myself: "You left your successful projects in SE Asia to embark on a new area. But you're going to fail shamefully on your very first mission. You're about to lose both your worlds. Even if these guys talk quickly or in some sort of dialect you're unable to catch even one word. Steven will land in three days and it will turn out that you cheated on him. You have no passive understanding of spoken Spanish whatsoever." We reached the hotel. I went in bothered. However, been able to follow somehow the Spanish of the girls at the reception and of the waiters at breakfast next morning.

That morning Phil and I walked to the World Bank's office in town. I immersed myself there in going through the project documents and talking as much as possible to the secretaries. Trying to build up my shaky self-confidence. Over the next couple of days, we interacted quite a lot and I got closer to his background. Phil was born in Paraguay from English parents in a Menonite colony. Menonites are quite similar to Pennsylvania Amish. They manage austere medieval farming and form of life. Speak an archaic blend of German and Dutch. Thus, he grew up speaking English with his parents, the Menonite jargon with the colonists, Spanish and Guarani at school. Paraguay is the only South American country in which the local language of the

indigenous, Guarani, is being cultivated, taught at school and spoken by everyone. Usually the locals speak Spanish but switch smoothly to Guarani whenever they don't want the gringo to understand them. It reminded me of Rehovot, the town where we live, back in the fifties when shopkeepers used to switch from Hebrew to Yiddish back and forth, according to their clientele. Phil finished high school and left the country right away disgusted by the dictatorial regime of Alfredo Stroessner. Now at 45 it was his first visit in his native country.

He used the very first opportunity to practice his Guarani with the hotel van's chauffeur. Unaware of the fact that he pushed me on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

After completing several missions in Paraguay have been invited by the Bank to join a mission in Ecuador and then worked for almost 7 years on short-term missions in Venezuela. Building up my Spanish capabilities became both a must and an opportunity. So I took 8 semesters of Spanish courses in Tel Aviv while working actively in Caribbean Venezuela for the Bank and later on for another UN organization in most central American countries such as Honduras, Panama, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, Guatemala. During my studies in Tel Aviv with a wonderful Argentine teacher, got the task of putting together a writing in Spanish. I chose this anecdote as the exercise's subject matter. Put it this time in mended Spanish and decided to send it by email to Steven's office in DC. After all he was the one who witnessed my first stammering steps in Spanish. I never dared to tell him about my misadventure and haven't seen him for years.

After less than half an hour got a phone call from him. He was still laughing hysterically and told me that he almost fell off his chair while reading my story. Right away he formulated a circular to all Latin American departments and divisions in the Bank with my writing attached. He coined his circular's title as: "Look what happened to **my** consultant"!

Rehovot, January 2020

## Africa



What I enjoyed most and liked in Africa is its huge panoramic sky ornated with a most fascinating play of clouds. On the background of its reddish loess soils, the myriad cloud shapes and colors are so very different from what you see in other continents. The sky is much bigger and wider and the clouds, much richer. Under this wonderful canopy, you find a wide array of unusual

human looks and customs.

Since I worked with agricultural producers all over the world, the main conclusion of my encounter with growers, Africa included, is that farmers are smart. They could be toothless, very young or drooping, barefoot, wearing funny turbans on their heads, unshaved and clad in rags, but have to take daily decisions under changing environmental conditions, faced with crop losses inflicted by pests and diseases, fluctuating markets, unfriendly regulations and credit. Under these pressures, anyone who isn't smart is out of business in no time.

Years back in India, we promoted upland rice cultivation on raised beds instead of the traditional flooded paddies. Had discussions with growers in the fields about the two systems. The traditional one they were used to for generations and the new technical message. Debating the pros and cons of both, growers were able to come up with 9-10 arguments for each of the two techniques. Leading the same discussions with the faculty of the regional university, the professors brought up just 5 or 6.

Africa's fields are tilled by women. You follow their streams parading back home from the fields in the late afternoon, carrying in rhythmic almost dance motions a toddler on their back, a basket on their head, and tools in their hands. When you get closer to them, a bulging upper arm, revealing shaped muscles is what hits you most. This gene bank explains the sensational success story of black sportswomen and -men all over the world. The African farmer woman is an admirable blend of **brain and brawn**. The men take care of the livestock and lead a nomad life searching for grazing fields for their herds and market places to sell and buy their stock.

Throughout the day you see them under the shade of trees, chatting and sipping their drinks.



*Rice cultivation on raised beds in India*



*Flooded rice paddy in India*





*Men in charge of livestock*



*Women developing the dairy industry in Senegal*

The first country where I worked was the Ivory Coast in western Africa in the mid '90s. It used to be the pearl of Africa, a well-managed country by an authoritarian French-educated president, Felix Houphouët-Boigny. The country's cash crops such as cotton, pineapples, sugarcane, citrus were managed by Commodity Production and Marketing Boards. Their president used to be a local person while his deputy a Frenchman, relic of the colonial system, the kingpin of a successful power transition. A large group of French researchers and technicians could be found on the ground even in remote places deep in the jungle. They were deployed by the Ministry of Overseas and used to spend frequent vacations in France. You could see them in Abidjan or in Conakry filling the town's French restaurants. Wining and dining at lunch time with family. It isn't an easy task to rush back to work afterwards, so they usually cut it short going home. Nowadays, both the Ivory Coast in western Africa and Kenya in the East, two countries with once reliable power and water supply as well as other government services reached the lowest common denominator of many other African countries as far as quality of life is concerned. Kenya ousted its former British civil servants and the downfall came into sight.

Many of the local managers were talented and devoted. They usually came from the villages and their natural intelligence was enhanced by the French education system. We've been on a World Bank mission and we tried to promote the "Training and Visit" (T&V) extension-advisory system in the country in the framework of an identification mission. The French researchers and advisors resisted the attempt. In fact they didn't want to expose their turf to a system which doesn't come from a French source. We moved from



one research station to another and I had a hard time presenting the system and argue with them in my then rudimentary French. Finally we got a pilot project area for a demonstration. At the end of our lengthy visit, the senior Bank officials moved back from the field to Abidjan by car to continue discussions, while I the junior, had to take a flight from Bouake reaching the capital comfortably and ahead of time. The French left behind not only their language and manners but also their food. In every god-forgotten village you could always find fresh baguettes and in the smallest restaurants - avocat vinaigrette and other goodies of the French cuisine.

Next step was to train local farm advisors on T&V principles and mechanism. Another Israeli colleague, who grew up in Canada, and spoke French joined me as well as an arrogant but rookie Frenchman who worked for the Bank. My French was sort of a correct textbook language but I lacked many of the technical terms. I lectured and the audience complained to the Frenchman that they don't fully understand me. Instead of helping me out as a teammate should, he sort of lectured me. Didn't hide my dislike of his attitude. Requesting that we sit down with patience and let's go through my missing terms. Basically, we the two Israelis were the experts on extension advisory systems while he was new to the topic. Just didn't have yet the support of computer-assisted presentations all in French as in Burkina Faso some ten years later but talks improvised with chalk and blackboard. He gave in and we had daily sessions to upgrade my capabilities to save face and the workshop. What a difference from another Frenchman, a teammate while on a mission at Bamako in Mali. I had my computerized slide shows with French captions but without the five accents and all punctuations and orthographic signs which make French so unique and unmanageable. This teammate volunteered to take care of all my punctuations. He sat down with me in front of the laptop and corrected what had to be redressed for four hours. Apparently, accents are a matter of national pride. While in Paraguay, our team leader who spoke and wrote impeccable Spanish, didn't have Spanish accents on his machine. We submitted to the Ministry an important document. It was rejected with the request that it should be first fully accented.

In Abidjan we stayed in one of the capital's best hotels. It accommodated a vast casino on its ground floor. Here and there we popped in after work to watch the action. Customers were both foreigners and locals. Quite a few black women among them. Middle-aged, middle-class, still good-looking, clad in colorful local gowns. They were addicted gamblers who spent their time in the casino on a daily basis. When short of cash or broke, they

would duck out with someone to one of the hotel's rooms. After some time they were back again at the green roulette table betting on the red or the black, or on figures from 0 to 36, with well-earned cash in their wallets.

We travelled from Abidjan, the capital to Yamoussoukro, the future one where Houphouët-Boigny was born. A large part of Yamoussoukro and its infrastructure were built by Solel Bone, an Israeli construction firm. The center piece of their work was a huge Roman-Catholic cathedral. Solel Bone employed French-speaking Israelis from the planning, construction and roads branches. Most of staff were either Romania or Morocco-born. Who else is francophone in Israel? Some of the Romanian engineers were newcomers to Israel who found a lucrative job with Solel Bone in Africa. Often their Hebrew was almost non-existent. When asked in Hebrew whom do you work for, they could merely say: Solel Bone, in the heaviest Romanian accent on earth. It was a most impressive sight to see a modern and vast concrete town hatching from the jungle. The new town became the country's political capital but very few government offices and firms left Abidjan. Nowadays Yamoussoukro is being reclaimed by the same jungle.



*Basilica of our Lady of Peace, Yamoussoukro. Côte d'Ivoire. The largest Christian church of the world. Larger than St Peter's basilica in Rome*



*With The Guinea team and Jim Dean*

While in Burkina Faso we were invited to a meal in a village. The stew wasn't bad. Didn't worry then about the sort of the meat it was made of. It turned out that "agouti" is in fact a cane rat, playing an important role in the local diet.

In Conakry, Guinea have also worked on a World Bank financed agricultural extension-advisory system contracted by Tahal Consulting Engs., an Israeli consulting firm. A young American anthropologist, Jim Dean, was my counterpart. Not to be confused with the James Dean. Jim grew up in France, spoke superb French and was deeply dedicated and in love with Africa. He lived in Africa all his mature life. He didn't work for an international organization but consulted for local governments. Often he moved for jobs from one country to another. Subsequently his remuneration was modest. He was married to a black Jamaican woman who preferred to live in the US rather than in Africa with him. There were no cellphones at that time. Jim used to call his wife once a week from the Post Office to check, "whether he is still married"? We travelled and worked together all the time. At the end of the mission he wrote his report in French. I wrote mine in English and Jim translated it into French. He dealt with the social aspects of the project while I with the strengthening of the advisory system. We had a wrap-up meeting

with the Director General of the Ministry of Agriculture and his team. I reported first and been commended for my work and help. Jim who lived in Guinea, knew the ground better than anyone else, was the next speaker. The bosses asked him nasty questions, his report was **badly** criticized almost rejected. Have asked the Israeli Tahal project leader, what's hiding behind this show? There is a regulation in Guinea that upon the departure of government-employed consultants, their furniture and apartment content passes to the government. And the Director General was after his furniture. The devoted work of a foreign specialist who regarded his activity in Guinea as his life's mission was at the bottom of his stack. Jim bit the bullet. He had a nice rented apartment. Its main furniture being a long table refrigerator, the one used in supermarkets, where he kept his huge supply of beer. To supplement his earnings, he used to send containers of African wood carvings to his wife in the US, who marketed them at a nice price. We finished our field trip at the far end of the country at N'Zerenkore. The way back to Conakry had to be made by air. The only active plane on the line was a Russian propeller-driven machine. It had four Russian crew members. Watched with fear the eroded tyres that forgot how grooves looked like. We took off from a bumpy field strip. Basically, a domestic flight between two towns of the same country, Guinea. We landed first in Monrovia, Liberia's capital. A country under chronic emergency and martial law. As we landed the four Russian pilots took out their rifles and surrounded the plane. Passengers left the aircraft with their baskets, sacks, bags and chicken. Others began to board with more or less the same load. We remained seated on the plane trying to keep a cool head while watching the spooky patrolling of armed soldiers all over the airport. The pilots climbed back into the cockpit and stored their rifles. We took off relieved for Conakry.

On a free and sunny morning in Conakry grabbed my camera just for a walk through the town. Took a few snaps. Suddenly a heavy arm grabs me with force. The guard shouts at me, don't you see that picture taking is strictly prohibited here? And he starts to drag me to a checkpoint. It turns out that I photographed the state radio station. Horrible. Only after a lengthy explanation that I am a consultant working for the Ministry of Agriculture, did they release the spy.

The country's first president was Marxist Ahmed Sekou-Toure. "We prefer poverty in liberty to riches in slavery", Toure boldly said in his speech in 1958 when de Gaulle visited Guinea, hinting at his country's relations with France. On the heels of this statement, France withdrew all forms of financial-economic aid and recalled all of its technical and administrative

officers in Guinea. In one of the regional research stations that we visited, a French entomologist (insect research) did investigate for years the communication patterns between bees. He filled daily his logbooks with his observations but never published his findings. When the order to leave within 24 hours was given by de Gaulle, he was caught wrong-footed. Unable to take along his records, he used the last 24 hours left to draw on his lab's walls the bees language that he deciphered. Then he walled in the laboratory's windows and doors. Some three decades later, a young American Peace Corps volunteer arrived at the station. He broke into that lab and found to his astonishment the fresco-covered walls. Being raised on a farm and well-versed on bee-keeping he assessed right his finding's significance. He then spent his time decoding the signals and devised a dictionary of the bees communication patterns and language.

My counterpart in Senegal, in the early 2000s was a clever and pretty young woman. She was educated in France and held a PhD in genetics. We visited together first government research stations and one international research group. Their equipment and staff were both impressive. Before leaving for the field trip we needed a car. Rental prices were exorbitant. So, my counterpart asked for my agreement to hire as driver, a relative of hers and a car from another relative, for a reasonable price. The professional driver was OK but in the twilight hours he turned the steering wheel dangerously towards the opposite lane. She was sitting next to the driver. I sat in the back. I jumped panicked two or three times when we veered away to the opposite lane and afraid of a crash, requested my counterpart to take over the steering wheel. She did. I was sure the driver was drowsing after a long day. Removed from the driver's seat, he revealed his story. He broke his glasses some time ago. Had no money to replace them. In urgent need for a job and a fund raising drive. He was able to manage the car at daytime but was lost at dusk and dark. Following year my well-qualified counterpart left Senegal and settled down in the US. Found a well-paid job in research. Typical Third World brain drain.





*The PhD in genetics counterpart, giving a hand to fix a punctured tyre in Senegal*

I didn't work in Kenya but visited it a few times. Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided that for security reasons, its personnel will fly to the Far East via Nairobi. Had to run a training course in Thailand. When flying from Tel Aviv to Bangkok you don't need a yellow fever vaccination but coming from an infested area such as Kenya, you do. I stopped over Nairobi for 3 days and an Israeli friend stationed there gave me a good time: safari included. Kenya is even well-known for hosting yellow fever. To be efficient the vaccine needs a two week incubation and I had to leave for Bangkok in 3 days and still haven't got a shot at all. So we go to the Health Office in Nairobi to take a shot but that day's stamp wouldn't suffice. For the first time in life folded a banknote and pushed it through the counter into the clerk's hand to get my medical certificate stamped with the date moved back by a full fortnight. My second time when in need of such a kickback occurred in another third world country, Ceausescu's Romania. That time in my native town, Timisoara. In the early eighties, rented a car in Belgrade and drove the 100 km to Timisoara to spend a couple of days with my uncle. Pulled up at the "Banatul" to look for a room. No vacancies. Miraculously available when a banknote was slipped into the receptionist's hand.

In eastern Africa's Rwanda been recruited for project work in the early 2000s by an Israeli firm that had dozens of economic interests in the country. In fact, our agricultural development program was a bonus offered by the firm to the government. Have visited the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, the capital town. You realize there that in Namibia, which used to be a German colony, genocide was practiced by the colonists between 1904 and 1907. 75000 people perished. It's been called the precursor to the Holocaust, and the "forgotten genocide". The massacre of the Herero and Nama people at the hands of colonialists in Namibia is considered the first genocide of the 20th century. The deep ethnic conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda which led in 1994 to the brutal death of around 800.000 people is attributed in the Memorial to the country's colonial past. The Belgian colonists were those who allegedly initiated the registration of ethnic affiliation in all personal identity cards. Seems a simplistic explanation covering up old animosity between the tribes. Travelling around the country you see quite often cohorts of detainees clad in orange prison garb marching on the road. They have been accused of murder, convicted and serve long terms. The heart of the matter, however, is that you feel everywhere in Rwanda a keen



desire and commitment to leave conflicts behind and build up a new society and a new country.



*Women always carry a load, men prefer to sit or squat. Kigali, Rwanda.*



*Genocide Memorial, Kigali. Rwanda*

#### A final word

“Africa’s fast-growing population and markets present important opportunities for business in an environment of slowing global growth. At the same time, greater innovation and investment from business is essential to meet Africa’s unfulfilled demand for goods and services, close the gaps in its infrastructure, create jobs, and decrease poverty”. This quote from Brookings Institute’s 2018 report is one of the numerous evaluation reports that appraise Africa’s potential.” After a slowdown prompted by the shocks of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the collapse of oil prices in 2014, Africa’s growth has recovered and its future prospects look buoyant. Two indicators from the World Bank underline the continent’s promise. First, of the 10 fastest-growing economies in the world in 2018, six were in Africa— with Ghana at the top of the world ranking. Secondly, in the World Bank’s 2019 Doing Business index, five of the 10 most improved countries are in Africa, and one third of all reforms recorded globally were in sub-Saharan Africa”. For my

money, corruption is public enemy no.1 in the attempt to draw out Africa's potential and accelerate the continent's evolution.

## Semana Santa

Even on my second mission to Paraguay I was still a rookie on the continent. In the hotel's lobby found a Chilean teammate. I was glad to find someone to chat with. He had a glass in front of him on the coffee table and a small bottle of Coke and was sipping diligently his drink. After some time I realized the guy's getting drunk slowly but safely. From a Coke? It was only then that I found out that he was savoring the most popular cocktail of Latin America- Cuba Libre. A blend of rum and Coca Cola. Tried it twice but got immediate headaches.

On this mission have travelled to the project area with a group of local project staff: government officials and employees of a private advisory firm. The latter was hired with Bank financing to assist project preparation. Celso, my English speaking counterpart was one of them. The interaction with the group provided lots of essential information and was most helpful interviewing producers, Ministry officials and purveyors of inputs. The project area, the Upper Parana, had a heterogeneous population. Steven Oliver the project leader, an English gentleman, wanted to save me anxiety and didn't tell me about the large German community that inhabited the area together with indigenous and Japanese settlers. So we reached this Bavarian style half-timbered guesthouse where we put up. German songs were played all day long on a loudspeaker.

First evening went out with Celso for dinner. He had ordered green salad. I liked the idea, forgetting the tabu on salads and tap water that gringos have to follow strictly. Next day we travelled the whole day and met leaders of the German cooperatives. In fact the German settlers came from adjacent Brazil where they lived in the forests since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. They cleared the forests and bush and tilled the land. Lived for generations in rudimentary conditions, detached from any Western culture. Have seen the women hand washing their laundry. Generators supplied power to the homesteads. Blond almost white-haired kids in the middle of the jungle were a common and weird show. Some fifteen years back they had the opportunity to buy cheap land over the border in Paraguay. For the price of 10 hectares in Brazil they could buy 100 hectares in neighboring Paraguay. Whole villages moved over. This was not the notorious area where former Nazis, helped by Vatican to flee Germany after WWII, were living overtly or in concealment. Still, one can never know.

Next day Montezuma's revenge hit me. This was a week before Semana Santa, the holy week of Easter celebrated in all the pomp by the pious

Catholics of the country. My team wanted to expedite the field work to reach their homes on time for the holiday. A medical doctor was called in to check up on me. He prescribed medication which was purchased by my colleagues. Began to take my pills regularly. Next day felt even worse. Began to throw up. Since by now have been losing liquids via two channels, the same doctor recommended that I better check in at the regional hospital. Said and done. The hospital's name was some sort of Santa Maria della Misericordia or so. Not exactly my natural environment. They didn't ask for documents. To play it safe have registered as American. All nurses spoke Spanish with suspicious German accents. Not exactly my cup of tea. By now attached to infusion, was glad to feel that dead cat bounce. One more day and they almost stabilized me. Semana Santa was just three days around the corner. In the wee hours of the morning my whole team rushed into my room requiring the nurse to take off the infusion needle. Snatched me out of the bed and off we were on our way to the van. Carried into the car where my luggage was already waiting. Got a bag of pills from the hospital and we hit the road. A seven hours drive to Asuncion. I was weak and felt bad. Not exactly in a moveable mood. Never skipped, however, medication times. On the way they provided me with their home phone numbers as well as that of the American Embassy's Clinic, open on holidays. Just in case. After the lengthy journey, checked again into the Excelsior, the best hotel in town. We broke up. They wished me quick recovery and I in turn, Happy Easter.

The hotel was almost empty during the holiday. Its only restaurant left open was the French one. However, my upset digestive system and overall feeling were not after sophisticated French cuisine. Popped into the posh restaurant the mornings for tea and toast, and at noon and in the evenings just for chicken soup. Felt my condition's worsening. So I gave up on the visits to the restaurant and asked the same austere menu to be delivered by room service.

Called first the Clinic of the American Embassy. No service over Easter. Called then the phone numbers provided by my team. They all left their homes in Asuncion and spent the holidays with relatives in the country.

Have approached reception to call a doctor. The MD on duty was a no-nonsense professional. After a few questions asked for the pills that I have been administered. "You throw them away, right away!", commanded clearly. The recommended rates seemed to be for veterinary purposes. Apparently, the provincial MD who prescribed them was under my team's pressure or just wanted to put me quickest back on track. The dosages



were three times higher than the licensed one. Once I stopped taking them, felt much better.

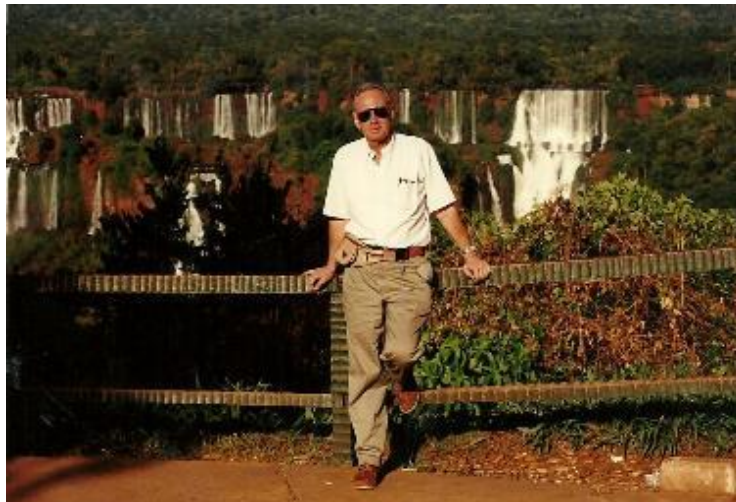
Same day Steven Oliver, the project leader called me from Washington. Just wanted to get an update on the project and on my whereabouts. Told him the story and he was struck with horror.

- Go to the best doctor in town. Don't mind the costs, we'll cover everything.

After half an hour, another call. A worried Mark Wilson, his supervisor, with the same insisting message.

I was doing better and in no need for another consultation. Steven was about to land in a couple of days and was relieved when he found me in shape ready to join him for a field trip. This time we went on our own leaving behind the local team. We reached The Triple Frontier, a tri-border area along the junction of Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil, wherethe Iguazú and Paraná rivers converge. This area is near Iguazú Falls and the Itaipú hydroelectric plant. We put up in Ciudad del Este on the Paraguay side, a haven for smugglers of all kind and a nest of Moslem terror. Steven wondered if I had ever visited the falls, one of the world's miracles and a must. Since I haven't, he insisted that I spend there a day and stay also overnight.

- So will I have to take the day off?
- Steven urging: No, it's on us.
- Thanks, Steven and Mark.



*The Iguazu falls and the hydroelectric plant were indeed a one in a lifetime experience.*

Rehovot, January 2020

## Si Ahmed



By **Robi Auscher**

In 2001 have attended a Plant Protection Conference in Turin. Just one year before retirement. In the years before have concentrated efforts on the reduction of pesticides use in the country, more specifically on methyl bromide substitution. Methyl bromide is a most effective soil fumigant applied in the intensive cropping of vegetable and flower crops. It is a powerful biocide with a very high vapor pressure rendering it to be released from the soil, to reach stratosphere and deplete the ozone layer. The United Nations drew up a global program for the protection of the ozone layer from ozone depleting substances (ODPs) such as methyl bromide used for the control of soil pests, diseases and weeds and for the control of insect pests in grain storage facilities. CFCs used as refrigeration gases in industry and household appliances like refrigerators act also as ODPs.

The UN project formulated in the Montreal Protocol and signed by around 160 countries aimed at the total substitution of ODPs by the year 2005 in the industrialized countries, the developing ones enjoying a 10-year grace period.

Methyl Bromide's (MB) substitution in Israel was carried out by two coordinated wings: a research program investigating the performance of various potential alternatives and an outreach program promoting the application of the promising alternatives at producers' level. As head of the Crop Protection Department of the Extension Service, Ministry of Agriculture have coordinated the second wing with the help of our department's field staff. The project became a major priority of the entire Extension Service.

The Conference at Turin accommodated a few talks on this subject including my presentation. I wished to get involved in the topic on the international arena after retirement. Everyone told me, if so, you have to see Si Ahmed. Si Ahmed acted as head of the ODP substitution program at UNIDO (United Nations Industrial Development Organization) in Vienna. He attended the conference. Have approached Si Ahmed, an Algerian citizen. We had coffee together. I told him about our MB substitution research and field



activity, the successful compliance with all MB reduction targets, the "Model Farms" pattern that we have developed and the alternatives that we found and applied. Mentioned to him my future availability and the fact that besides English I have a command of both French and Spanish. Si Ahmed listened amiably.

After a couple of months have received an email inviting me to join him on a mission to Burkina Faso in western Africa in order to run together a workshop on MB substitution in French. I had many presentations on the topic in Hebrew, English and Spanish but none in French. Have asked the help of a friend who translated the slideshows texts into correct French. Equipped with these presentations I felt being ready for the mission.

Si Ahmed asked me to be in Ouagadougou, the capital city a few days before the workshop's beginning to watch preparations on the ground together with the local organizers. To this end he would dispatch his assistant to give me a hand. This would give him time to join us right before opening. Met Vesna Petakovich, Si Ahmed's assistant, a young red-headed Serbian woman, at Charles de Gaulle. As common with Air France, the flight to Ouagadougou was cancelled and postponed to the next day. Had thus, sufficient time to get to know Vesna who worked at UNIDO on a rather menial job but studied for a PhD in Economics. She had family in both Serbia and Croatia and during the Balkan war moved back and forth under literal threat, smuggling food and clothes to her relatives so they could survive.

On the spot we got in touch with the organizers, checked the facilities, the lecture hall, the audio visual equipment, the field trip and demonstration sites and worked out the detailed 3-day workshop schedule. Lecturing was evenly divided between Si Ahmed and me with a few local contributions. We also planned one field trip and one field demonstration. Vesna was highly motivated but her share limited since she didn't speak French.

Si Ahmed landed the day before workshop opening and checked in to another hotel. He presided the opening ceremony and delivered an enthusiastic speech in superb French. His father taught French in Algeria but as a freedom fighter was imprisoned and badly tortured by the French authorities. However his son was an avid francophone. Si Ahmed told me upfront that he's Moslem, no Arab but Berber and has absolutely no problem with Israelis. The first day's morning session was mine. At coffee break Vesna came to tell me that Si Ahmed sent her a message. He's busy with meetings and asked me to go on with lecturing until lunch. According to the schedule, afternoon was my turn. Next morning, I began my session and then we left for the field trip. Afternoon, my turn again. Si Ahmed was still

scheduled for the last morning. Then Vesna brought the message that he is being held up with an important meeting. Filled in for him. To sum it up, he didn't deliver one single lecture. Later we left for the field. I demoed how to install irrigation tubes and cover the soil with plastic sheets in order to solarize. Soil solarization being an Israeli innovation, a non-chemical soil disinfestation technology and MB alternative. At closure, Si Ahmed was at his best. Summing up the workshop with cunning final remarks. Next morning we departed for Paris where we broke up. Vesna and Si Ahmed headed to Vienna while I to Tel Aviv.

I had no idea how to resume the event. Was he really that busy, did he have some better fish to fry or just wanted to watch how I run a show single-handed? No additional activities were planned for western Africa, countries of extensive agricultural production and low MB consumption.

In the background Si Ahmed masterminded a vast program for central America. Countries such as Guatemala, Costa Rica and Honduras were major melon producers. The produce being exported to quality demanding US marketplace. Melon was cultivated twice a year on very large farms, under highly intensive and professional management and frequent MB applications. In light of the prospective project's magnitude, UNIDO recruited a new staff member. A highly qualified Italian horticulturalist, Dr. Alessandro Amadio. However, Alessandro was new to MB substitution. Apparently Si Ahmed tailored the intensive series of workshops assigning me the tutorial role. Besides the three mentioned states covered several times, we visited together Panama, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic. Alessandro turned out to be an excellent scholar, a hard-working and meticulous professional. We trained the local professionals and monitored closely MB substitution at both policy and administrative levels. It's been a hard nut to crack. Melon growers associations had huge political power and played hardball. They were reluctant to give up on well-known and highly efficient MB and to comply with its phase-out. The missions were challenging, requiring lots of field travel, field experimentation, demonstrations to bring about a behavioral change of the powerful and resistant big growers. Our activity expanded considerably and we organized seminars and workshops for policy makers and various professionals such as Ministry of Health officials, customs officials, and personnel of regulatory agencies.

I never met Si Ahmed again after our visit to Africa. Seemingly, gained his trust on that mission. Otherwise he wouldn't have put me in the driver's seat in the newly launched central American operation.

Over the years have organized three international workshops in Israel on MB substitution. Have engaged UNIDO as co-sponsor and invited Si Ahmed thrice to attend. He didn't. But sent regularly two of his senior associates who played a major role in the organization of the meetings and contributed to their success as lecturers and discussion leaders. Down the road Alessandro asked me to go with him to Mali and take over Turkey's big state-wide project. Spending much time together on missions, we became buddies. Later Alessandro was appointed UNIDO's representative in Teheran. Unwilling to embarrass him, have ceased, willy-nilly, to communicate with him.



*With Alessandro in Mali*



*With Si Ahmed (in the middle) In Ouagadougou*

## **Luck is great**

*Luck is great, but most of life is hard work.*

Iain Duncan Smith

The former head of the Extension Service in Israel, Danny Benor, a dominant, charismatic and dynamic executive left the Service for the World Bank in 1973. In early 1975 he called for a meeting in my office. Invited being Yaacov Golan, a state wide extension advisor in my Department and me. Danny described his activities in South East Asia. He covered already 15 states in India with his new agricultural extension-advisory project on behalf of the World Bank. He was about to expand his program to additional regions and countries and was in need of assistance. He further mentioned the countries where he intends to develop the program. Yaacov, being married to a Filipina, expressed his preference to work there. I had no preferences as far as the target country is concerned.

### **India**

After a couple of months Danny who worked for the Bank in Washington but continued to reside in Israel, asked me to be ready to join him on a trip to India. We talked quite often over the phone to get ready. All my calls to his home had to be made at 6 am. There were no diplomatic relations between Israel and India. My visa was issued by the British Embassy in Tel Aviv. Picked up my ticket from the travel agency. Have not been briefed by Danny on the visit's details or objective. He was too busy. We'll talk on the plane. At boarding, Danny sees that for my full-fare first class ticket, got an economy boarding card at check in. He took my card and sprinted back to check in, to reappear with a red boarding card for first class. We got on the plane. Danny has been busy until the very last moment and up for a sleep rather than to brief me. He's vegetarian and teetotaler. I stretched out in the ample seat enjoying the champagnes served on Air France on the way to Teheran and Delhi. We hit Delhi at 5 am. The door opens and you get flushed by the sultry air blowing into chilly 1st class. Far beyond 30 degrees at 5 in the morning. A company car takes us first to the hotel and to the railway station in the afternoon. A grim train and wagons await us for an overnight travel to Rajasthan. Power failure. Pitch dark everywhere. Danny gets on the

train, I follow him despite being sick of the soot, smell and dirt. We wait for some time. A porter brings us sleeping bags, after all we're in wagon-lit. Danny opens the bag. I follow him with suspicion and climb up with my bag to the upper bed. Five fans whirl and buzz from the ceiling right into my face. What a night. We hit Kota, Rajasthan in the morning.



*At Kota, Rajasthan. D. Benor on the right, with the back to the camera.*

At noon the kick off a 3-day seminar on agricultural extension. Danny is the main speaker. He galvanizes the audience. Over the breaks, Indian brick-colored tea with milk and sugar is served. The seminar gave me a quick introduction into the heart of the matter. Began to understand why Danny skipped an earlier briefing. Next days we visit the fields and stay at a rural guest house. Back to Delhi by train, for meetings at the Bank's impressive building. First chance to ask Danny for some more details and raise a few points. I got at entry a visa for a 28 days stay in the country. Left my specs with the Bank's office so they could extend it, if necessary. We take the plane

to Calcutta, West Bengal. Delhi is heaven compared to Calcutta. More homeless lying on the sidewalk than walking pedestrians. We get into a taxi. Still hit by first days distaste, am unable to touch a knob, to open or close a door. Everything sticks. The local project manager is hospitalized with a heart attack. First thing we go to visit with him. You move along a dark hall in the hospital. Stretchers on both sides. All covered with dirty rags. Emaciated bodies underneath. You never know whether they're alive or stiff. Feeling of hell. Behind a dirty sheet, the project leader in a private room. He's privileged. His brother, a doctor at the hospital. The patient is not allowed to make any effort. Prohibited to speak. Danny holds the guy's both hands during his pep talk. I extend him a most hesitant hand shake. An odd pantomime is the name of the game. We leave and get into another sticky cab. Next days we visit the fields. Some fresh air. Another seminar. Danny brings the audience to ovations. He moves thousands of employees from one Ministry to the another in an inertia-afflicted bureaucratic country. Field advisers are happy to become fully-fledged professionals, free of multi-task and clerical responsibilities.

We fly to Bombay to do the same exercise in the state of Maharashtra. Two young Bank officials from Danny's inner circle join us and a senior advisor from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN. Field trip and seminar. Now I know better what is "Training and Visit" all about. From Bombay we fly to Hyderabad, in the south, the capital of Andhra Pradesh a predominantly Moslem state. Two weeks have passed since we hit India. The Bank's attempt to extend my stay doesn't yield any results to date. Meetings with the Agricultural Extension set-up of the state under the leadership of Hashem Ali. A conceptual plan is discussed. I will stay behind to work out its details. Danny and the team leave for Delhi. I get a "Sei gesund" from him and am left on my own. Got a companion, a driver and a car. Andhra Pradesh is huge. Its Moslems couldn't care less about the Israel-Palestine conflict or about us being Israelis. It takes time to move from one district to another, to meet with extension-advisory and research personnel, and with growers in the fields and in groups. Organizing all this takes time. It's my companion's role. Clock's ticking. I call the Bank in Delhi. They didn't get an answer yet from the Ministry of Interior with regard to my visa. We step on it and try to cover more than one district a day. I have to cover most districts to work out a state-level plan. At the end need at least 4 days to write up the report, print it out, discuss the draft with the local executives and get their approval before submitting it to the Bank in Washington and still catch a flight to Delhi, to leave the country within 28 days. What a stress. It's my first



assignment with the Bank. Have to pull it off. Draw up a new strategy. We work now all day long and travel dozing at night for the next 4-5 days in a row. Just check into a guesthouse in the wee hours of the morning, to take a shower, have breakfast and off again. After 4-5 such days got back to Hyderabad, accommodated at the Ritz to sit down on aching butts and collate the hand-written report. Every day's harvest was taken to the office to be printed out, proofread, back and forth to the secretaries. I was writing at daytime and thinking/dreaming of the report at night. The visa couldn't be extended. At the end of this calvary, local management liked the paper. Got home. Fatigue sapped my strength. At 39, however, you have much more left in your tank than you would imagine. Let alone the adrenaline.



*My car/mobile hotel in Andhra Pradesh.*

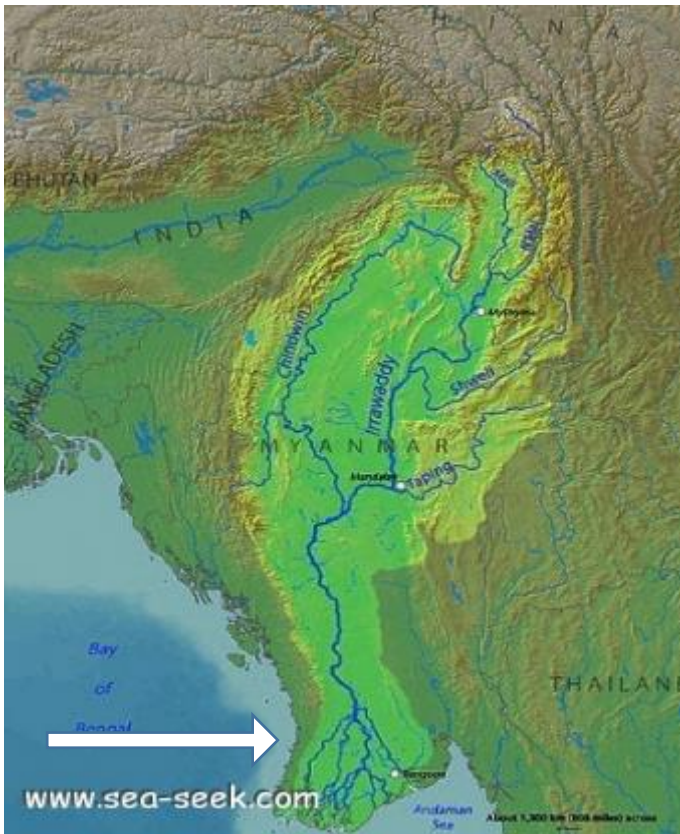
When visiting growers groups, we ate with them squatting in the field. Banana leaves serve as plates. Food is put on the leaves with sauce on top and you get a dripping heap. No silverware. You eat with your right hand. Left hand's role is to clean the body. Food is full of chili. What a mess. Used to ask the guesthouses just for a couple of hard-boiled eggs to get away from the chili, and for a spoon. I got two hard-boiled eggs rolled in chili and a spoon with a hole in the middle, the size of the spoon. Basically, I like Indian food. Only in the south it's repellingly hot. Otherwise it is well-spiced and rich. Danny had a field day with each meal, most of the restaurants being vegetarian. We often had meals in the office or at the seminars. When you finish your plate you just put it under the table. I travelled with two suitcases. Whenever we reached a hotel or guesthouse a guy from among

the many waiting idle at the doors grabbed them. I was embarrassed first to let others carry my load. Danny hinted that in this country it's his role. After all he waits for it all day long. While on the planes, Danny would write up telex reports to Asia Vice President. He showed them to me so I could go over his English. When he joined the Bank he didn't go through the usual hierarchy of advisor, senior advisor, division chief, etc. He installed himself in the seat of Special Advisor to the Bank's President. Beginning with Robert McNamara he got their full attention riding over the heads of technical and regional directors or Vice Presidents. Most newly appointed World Bank Presidents would join Danny on their very first field trip to follow on the ground "Training&Visits" achievements in the realm of agricultural extension. The chronically ailing domain to which he found a tangible remedy. Robert McNamara gave Danny his book as a present with a personal dedication in which he called him genial. In English the adjective genial has nothing to do with the genius substantive. It means expressing freely sympathy or friendliness (Merriam-Webster). I wonder if Danny was aware of this. Or did he show the dedication with extra pride knowing that the word's meaning isn't well understood?

He was hard-working and hated small talk. While we travelled together through India he would always take his breakfast early in the morning in his hotel room rather than sitting with the team and wasting time on "futile" talks. He could use this time going through papers and be the first to wait ready at the car. He spent more time on travel than any other Bank official. As such, he could reside in Tel Aviv instead of mandatory Washington DC. In all our field visits or meetings he was the one who ruled the roost.

## **Burma**

The next months were spent taking care of home base, the Department of Plant Protection in the Extension Service and of the family. The address of the next Bank mission was Burma. Knowing very little about the country, Micha Harish, my good friend from childhood suggested to bring me together with the former Israel Ambassador to Rangoon. I met him in the modest Ministry of Foreign Affairs campus in Jerusalem and got some valuable pointers. Danny Benor gave me a few directions based very much on our common trip to India.



*Irrawaddy Delta*

Burma, officially the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, was established as an independent state, at the same time as Israel, in 1948. Since 1962 it was ruled by a military junta. They issued and followed strictly the "Burmese way to Socialism" and isolated the country. Out of fear of their huge Communist neighbor, China and of any western influence. Every couple of years, being at a pinch, the country opened up to the west. Again and again. This was the window when a World Bank project for the rehabilitation of rice production and the

strengthening of the agricultural extension-advisory

system was formulated. The average person and all advisory staff, were happy to meet a foreigner. However, I realized only much later, everyone in the office I have exchanged a few words with had to report about it to the Deputy Minister of Agriculture. Have described the project and its needs to the right officials and a pilot area was assigned in the major rice producing area, in the Irrawaddy Delta. This huge area used to be the country's granary during the British rule, supplying the domestic market and exporting rice. However, since the ditches, canals, pumps were poorly managed and the growers lacked the right incentives, the country had to import by now its main staple food. The delta could be reached only by boat. [The Irrawaddy River](#) flows relatively straight North-South before emptying through the Irrawaddy Delta into the Andaman Sea. Its drainage basin covers about 400,00 square kilometres. About 20 times larger than my country. At each of my visits a government boat was allocated. However, since the delta wasn't free of ethnic rebels and terror, a military boat flanked us for a couple of days and the local police have been alerted of our future movements. Never said a word about it at home. For most of its independent

years, the country has been engrossed in rampant ethnic strife and its myriad ethnic groups have been involved in one of the world's longest-running ongoing civil wars. The boat hosted the captain and his assistants; my entourage, the local project head and officials who got on and off the launch at the various seawalls along the trip. And most important, an Indian cook from the Ministry of Agriculture in Rangoon.

U Hla Than was appointed as project manager and my counterpart. He seemed not to be part of the party establishment. He was a humble, most pious Buddhist professional. With his and his team's support, I could pick up all the necessary information on the five districts that the project was supposed to cover and could develop the project document of the agricultural extension-advisory component while the other components addressed the rehabilitation of the irrigation system and the economic aspects of boosting rice production.

The first identification mission was in the hot monsoon season. There was no cooling on the boat but one noisy fan. Had to sleep under mosquito nets as the whole area was malaria-infested. The whole trip was awfully hot and humid. Most locals and many of the employees were chronically ill with malaria. It was a common sight that for several days every couple of months they would feel weak and develop fever. They didn't use any medicine or protect themselves from mosquitoes.

We stopped at little jetties along the river to visit fields, growers and attend meetings. For some of these remote villages the visit of an overseas consultant was a holiday. The school was closed for the day and rows of children waved to us with little flags at arrival and departure. At meetings with growers I presented the project and its expected impact on them and answered questions. Everything had to be interpreted. After many such meetings, U Hla Than would take over and present the program, saving time on interpretation. All adult officials had good command of English. Relic of the lengthy British rule and education. Another relic of the British presence was the existence of many "anglos" of Burmese and British descent. Visiting agricultural vocational high schools in the Delta, found out regrettably that the younger generation was unable to communicate in English.

Our Indian cook used to buy fish, meat and vegetables on the open markets of the villages when we stopped our sailing. I better didn't watch the fly-covered fish and meat that he bought. But I was never ill in Burma. A country with irregular power supply and without refrigerators. I always fell ill on the way in neighboring Thailand, a modern and clean country. The Indian cook, bought the ingredients, cooked daily our meals and served them hot.

Burmese very much as Thai food is a most successful blend of the mild Chinese and spicy Indian cuisines. Plenty of salads, different ways of preparing a wide variety of fish, prawns, chicken, duck, pork and beef. Exotic sauces and original snacks or sweets. The meals on the boat were a gala for both eyes and palate.

Irrawaddy river and its arms in the delta are heavily tidal. The captain had an open tide chart by his steering wheel to know the exact daily ebb and tide oscillations so he could navigate firm into the right arms. The crew often used a long pole to check water depth in the shallow creeks.

People in the delta live literally on the water. Their light wooden houses are erected on the riverbanks. On the ground floor they keep their livestock, mainly pork and chicken. Women wash their cloth in the river and dry them on the bank. Everyone is washing and bathing there. Mothers squat on the riverside combing their kids' hair to get rid of lice. Large heavily overcrowded and overloaded boats move up and down the river. If they capsized and probably did, hundreds of dead would be fished out of the river. Would never be made public. We had a generator on the boat but on the islands the name of the game was power failure. Regional directors joined us with their company boats to discuss project issues, showing interest and a spirit of collaboration.

Elder women smoke cigars. Elder men chew the omnipresent betel nuts sold on the markets and spit an ugly red slime out of their receding, reddish gums.

In the project center a training and office building was erected quite quickly and served us for both purposes. The team working with us under U Hla Than was happy to disseminate new ideas and their standing with farmers improved as the project acquired a few jeeps. They could move on the embankments and reach the rice fields. Field advisers complained about muddy paddies and the danger of snakes in the fields. Regular training sessions were held and farmers visited more frequently. Demonstration plots were set up.



*In a muddy rice paddy. U Hla Than with white shirt in the middle.*

The missions began in Rangoon and ended there. At that time there were two hotels in town where foreigners could be accommodated. The "Strand", dating back to good ole' days of British rule and "Inya Lake" built by the Soviets and run in by Israelis. Elder Burmese who opened up, mentioned with crave the days when the British ruled the country. Both hotels were nationalized. In the Inya Lake, staff's indifference was its typical trait. In the crumbling Strand you could find a few old waiters trained by the British. They would gently tend to your table. Stand discretely behind you while you ate, and reappear noiselessly whenever you were in any need. Apparently hotel rooms were bugged in both.

While in town, Ministry of Agriculture would allocate a car and driver. Although he was friendly, I could imagine that he had to report on all my cloak-and-dagger moves.

Had two associates from the Bank with whom I usually visited the country. An unusually tall, middle-aged Thai hydrologist, Professor at one of the US Universities before joining the Bank, and a young American economist. The young economist used to act as mission leader. This drove the Thai crazy since he considered himself being the senior. We checked in the Inya Lake and left for our field visit after several days. My Thai peer never checked out from the hotel while away for almost ten days in the field, just to stick to the same room. An overt waste of Bank funds. Some other Bank staff strengthened our team, such as a procurement officer dealing with



engineering equipment and a senior Bank advisor, Israeli water engineer, Gaby Tibor.

All Burmese wear but shirts, a long skirt-like longyi tied on the waist and flip flops. This proves simplicity and evenness. However, the head of agricultural research, whom we used to pick up from the fenced neighborhood of the party officials, flaunted a Rolex on his wrist. There are equal and there are more equal.

Due to their frequent crashes, Bank staff were not permitted to fly Burma Airways. Once got stuck for a whole week in Bangkok together with my Thai teammate since Thai Airways were on strike. Our economist and procurement officer who had to go to Mandalay in the north, had to spend 20 hours back and forth on a wobbly train.



*Debbie at the Shwedagon, Rangoon*

Gaby took me to our Embassy and introduced me to David Marmor, the Ambassador. I was often invited to his residence for Friday dinners and was always welcome at the Embassy. The same was true with the following ambassadors, Shmuel Ovnat and Kalman Aner. Ambassador Marmor offered that one of the Embassy's secretaries help me out with shopping, dealing with the airlines and showing me around town. I was expected to invite her every time for a meal. Have done so with great pleasure since Debbie was a pretty young Tamil with polished British education. Debbie was always elegantly clad in distinct saris. I wondered how she could maintain her refinement and composure in the awfully crowded buses that moved on Rangoon's streets and on which she

was riding daily to work and back home. Apparently, Debbie was overqualified for her Tamil community in Rangoon. This being the reason for this good-looking and gifted person, in her early thirties, for not finding yet a groom on a par with her level. The center of our visits was the sparkling Shwedagon, Rangoon's main landmark. It dates back 2500 years and it is a



compound of thousands of pagodas and stupas, and an active place of worship. A Burmese secretary working in Washington for the Bank attended one of our missions. Debbie asked me then whether I could give her a hand to find a job with the World Bank (and escape from the country). Unfortunately, being a short-term consultant with the Bank, without knowing anyone at Personnel, I could give her no more than the futile advice of sending out her CV.



*Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon.*

The head of the state Agricultural Extension-Advisory Service was laid off from one day to another. So typical of an autocratic regime. We used to collaborate closely. He was an ethnic Shan, coming from Shan State in the northern part of Burma. He wanted to see me at the Inya Lake. The rooms being bugged and the lobby under surveillance, we sat down in the bar where music was the noisiest. He asked me to take with me his letter addressed to the World Bank and mail it once I reach Bangkok. And so I did.

Danny came for a very short 2 days visit. He flew in non-stop from Tel Aviv for almost 24 hours. Next morning, he set our meeting at 5 am. I somehow messed up the schedule believing that we meet at 5 at the dining hall, while he was waiting in his room. Finally, we got together at 6. I briefed him on the project's progress prior to having a major meeting with the Ministry of Agriculture's Director General and his team. Danny was again at his best and charmed the audience. All his proposals were accepted with little resistance or questioning. A foreign consultant with the Ministry who attended the meeting, called him the magician. He left the same day. We seemed to be pretty well lined-up for the project's next steps.

I usually visited the project once a year between 1975 and 1980. After three successful seasons, a few of our field advisors were transferred leaving us weakened in our field work. Ministry of Agriculture set up a mirror image of our project and was in need of trained personnel for this purpose. Project funds were disbursed sluggish and we felt being sidelined. In fact they established a competing project to be managed along the principles that we dispersed and seemed to be successful on the ground. Typical Burmese way to Socialism. I assume that the window of aperture to the west came to its cyclical end and the World Bank project fell in the government's disfavor.

In light of this new ball game, the World Bank pulled the plug on Burma and the project was discontinued.

After a couple of years, U Hla Than came to Israel to attend an international training course held at Rehovot, my home town. We spent much time together especially at our home. I was glad to see him and to help him get medication for his ailing wife. Quite basic medicaments, unavailable in his country.

Reviewing the 35 countries in which I used to work, Burma is definitely a favorite. People were always very nice. They were nice because they are nice but it also had to do with the hunger of people cut off from the rest of the world having an opportunity to meet someone who brings in a flavor of the outer world.

We began together, Yaacov Golan and myself, being invited by Danny Benor to a common meeting back in 1975. For me it's been a springboard that catapulted me into more than 30 years of most challenging international activity. The project in the Philippines that Yaacov anticipated came never to fruition. He just missed the luck of getting on the bandwagon. In less than 15 years, my close and admired friend was found dead in his peach orchard, with a bullet in his head and his pistol next to him.

## Eastern Europe

After finishing high school in Timișoara in 1954 have weighed three options. At the bottom of the stack, to continue with flute at the Conservatory in Bucharest. The other two, medicine or agronomy. My uncle, who acted as a surrogate dad whenever my biological one was imprisoned, was an MD and pathologist with the Medical Institute. He gravitated toward agronomy. This was in line with my naïve belief that every cloud has a silver lining. Had a daydream about a sought-after profession in far-away Israel. To get ready for the admission test, have spent the whole summer attending a group coached by a charismatic private teacher, hitting the books of biology, botany, zoology and other natural sciences.

We were around 200 testees in one of the written exam sessions. A short, broad and limping middle-aged guy who looked as a supervisor, stopped by my table. Looked at my name and asked in a stentorian heavily Russian-accented voice: "Are you the son of capitalist Auscher?" Stood up and had no choice but to utter a very soft: "Yes". To find out later that this was comrade Smolsky, professor of Marxism Leninism, the wire puller of the Institute, personnel unit inclusive. He usually wore a workers cap, to ooze out a healthy communist spirit. As the smoke cleared, it seemed indisputable to us that my background precludes admission. A series of verbal tests followed. They didn't turn out to be a breeze. Still my name was listed among the approved students. How did they let me reach finish line after that false start? Your guess is as good as mine.

A second screening came at the end of the first year. This time, the clearance for military service. One day all male students of the year had to report at the City Hall across the Capitol cinema. We had to strip off to appear one by one nude and defenseless, first for a medical and then for a political background interview. The medical was chaired by Dr. Naschitz who knew me but brilliantly inspired, didn't show any signs of recognition. Next stop on the runway at a woman who had a pile of papers on her desk. Expected the worst.

She asked first about my folks. Told her that I lived with my mom and she is divorced. This was true. She had to get a divorce from my father who spent his time at Jilava "house of correction". Only by using her maiden name could she get a job. As for my father, told her that we are in no contact with him. This was more than true.

Then she asked whether I had relatives in Germany.

The answer: No, which was true.

Do I have relatives in the US?

No, which was true.

Although I stood naked before her, she apparently wasn't impressed by the missing piece of skin, ritually removed at the time I was 8 days old. No questioning about relatives in Israel and I was dismissed, let off the hook.

Basically, with a non-Jewish sounding last name she seemingly thought I was one of the twenty or so German students in our year. This comrade didn't prepare her homework as meticulously as comrade Smolsky did.

A couple of years later, an agreement was forged between Israel and the government of Romania. About 200 active Zionists who were detained and sentenced, were to be gradually released to depart for Israel with their families. My dad was released after being sentenced for 15 years and in the summer of 1956 we were summoned to the Securitate in one of their offices by Traian bridge. Been told to get ready for the move within a couple of months. However, in the fall of that year, the uprising against Russian occupation broke out in Budapest. The move was stopped. Slight signs of riot spilled over Timișoara. Students held meetings and rallied. I played it safe and didn't stick out my neck.

In January 1957 we got the laissez passer. The three of us left by train for Belgrade. On the platform, Israel's ambassador awaited my father. I will always be thankful to Ambassador Locker for this gesture. After years of abuse and ill-treatment, my dad could feel the recognition of the state he dreamt about since 1939 when he visited Palestine. It straightened out his back and filled up his tank for the years to come. After a few days we moved by train to Vienna for a three-weeks stay. My parents knowing the town's all ins and outs felt right at home, and we began to roam around the Rings. First thing first: mom took us to "Gone with the wind" and to have our first coke. We moved then by train to Rome for a week or so. Mom rushed us first of all to the Basilica di San Pietro in Vincoli for a first-hand look at Michelangelo's Moses. And only then to the mundane. Next stop, Napoli, to board ZIM's "Israel" headed with tailwind to Haifa.

For some reasons the professional ties between Romania and Israel warmed up in the mid 1970s and hosted, on behalf of the Extension-Advisory Service of the Ministry of Agriculture, several visits of Romanian peers. Our turn for a repay visit arrived and twenty two years (1979) after leaving behind Romania and its citizenship, I was invited in the framework of an official mission. We were two. An official from our Ministry's Foreign Relations and me. We were accompanied in Romania throughout the whole itinerary by a former agricultural attaché at Romania's Embassy in Washington DC. It was obvious that he was either a Securitate person or some sort of hush-hush. On the whole, he was a resourceful guide. He spoke good English, entertaining my teammate who didn't speak Romanian.

We were taken to the beats of the officials who have been our guests. We spent some time in Moldova, in Suceava, inter alia, and had the chance to see the picturesque monasteries. And as a special gesture, we passed through the Banat and reached Timișoara. The meals in all collective and state farms were a show: exuberant three-four sorts of meat, appetizers, vegetables, fruits, sweets and drinks. In sum, we were wined and dined. The Lenauheim collective farm owned as many others mustered out tractors of various ancestries: east German, Russian, Romanian, etc. No spare parts were available anymore for these vintage tools. In a little on-farm workshop, however, three-four elder German smiths chiseled manually the missing parts keeping the farm machinery alive. I wondered who else would have the same craftsmanship in light of their imminent exodus. We had a rundown at the collective farm chairman's office. He looked 65ish. I ducked out from the conference room for the restrooms. A plump woman in her late thirties ran into me in the hall. She took both my hands, pushed me slightly to the wall, and leaning over deliberately told me almost cheek to cheek that she's got a friend in Israel and would like to send her a present. She would come to my hotel in Timișoara with her daughter to deliver it. Willy-nilly I gave her the address to free myself from her clutch and get back to the meeting. She was the chairman's young and horny wife. When we left the farm at the end of the day she appeared with two huge smoked pork gammons. One for me and the other one for my teammate. The latter being an observant compatriot, he passed it on to me. I wound up with two huge jambons. I left one with my uncle in Timișoara and schlepped the other one in my suitcase to the Holy Land. I will never know what I missed, since she never called or showed up.

While on a field visit around Timișoara we were guided by an agronomist from a regional research center. A party boss joined us and quite

brutally pushed him out of my car and sat down next to me. He was afflicted with a skin disease and in need of a prescription ointment found only abroad. He didn't want a lower-ranking to witness his compliments followed by a call for the stuff. He explained me at length how friendly the Romanians were with the Jews during WWII. We had to fly back from Timișoara to Bucharest. There was a storm in the area and all flights cancelled. We moved to Arad and boarded there. It's been hunky dory until the Antonov began its descent toward Băneasa airport. When out of the blue we hit clear air turbulence. Not the usual sensation of bumpy air pockets. The aircraft swung from side to side rocking us with great strength. A sensation of total loss of control. Although the wobble lasted not more than 10 minutes, it was my scariest airborne experience ever. And on top of that in an Antonov.

My mother succumbed to cancer within the next couple of years (1981) and I wanted to visit soonest with her brother, my uncle, who lived in Timișoara, to pacify his worries about the treatments she's been administered. The shortest way seemed to rent a car in Belgrade and drive the 100 km to Timișoara. After a two hours drive, all of a sudden found myself in the town's outskirts. Couldn't recognize any place from this angle and in no time landed in the town's center. Traffic was sparse. Parking no problem. I was a private visitor and no member of an official mission. The place offered its other cheek. The hotel clerk gave a room only after greasing his palm. No coffee at breakfast. Wanted to grab some hot dogs in the center, had to queue up in an endless line. Gone were the 4 sorts of meat at the state and collective farms. The lady clerk at the change office complained about her monthly dilemma. To buy food, heating material or medicine? My uncle's suits, pitifully worn-out. Suffocative environment. I came for just 48 hours. Almost upon arrival, I wished I could go home.

On the way back to Belgrade stopped for an elder hitchhiking country woman. She lived in a village in the Serbian Banat and commuted daily to her work in a Romanian border village. She stepped into the car and began to talk obsessively. It wasn't easy to follow her vernacular Romanian. Her only son was in the military when he was hit by lightning and killed. What I described here in one concise and frigid sentence she did unfold for more than an hour until we reached her place. I tried clumsily to express my sorrow for her bereavement. Her storytelling was so plastic and dramatic that just recording her words would have produced a fully-fledged well-written novel or short story. I was deeply moved by the event and by this woman's

gift to recount it. Wished I were a writer and could grab the opportunity to reproduce it.

Some twenty years later, in 1999, it was my uncle's turn to pass away at 91. We flew, my son and me, to Budapest and rode with relatives to Timișoara for the burial. I was kind of blasé when strolling through the town's streets but my son was impressed by the green parks, the historical buildings and the town's overall layout. The same happened later in 2006 when we spent a couple of days in Timișoara with my little daughter and her husband. They found that the green parks and the respectable albeit run-down buildings had a charm. I was happy that they were free of my own past's burden.

Have paid Timișoara some more visits. This time around the endless and still futile attempt to recuperate the family's abusively nationalized textile factory. It was a swooning experience to enter the premises of the place where have spent much time as a kid and where my grandparents lived. After 18 years of to and fro, our outlay seems to be higher than the anticipated reparations.

In the early 2000s after retiring from the Ministry of Agriculture in Israel, have been invited by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) with residence in Paris to consult for their Eastern-European program. UNEP had the mandate of awareness-raising, technical assistance, training and capacity building for the ozone-depleting methyl-bromide (MB) phase-out project. The program encompassed Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and Lithuania. I did some monitoring work in Romania and Bosnia-Herzegovina as well.

In South- and Eastern Asia as well as rural Latin America, areas with no Jewish population, you are viewed as Israeli per se, as the citizen of any other country. In Eastern Europe, however, you cannot head off the confrontation with the Jewish problem. I felt at ease in **Bulgaria**. They received me with much openness and sympathy. Historically, the relationship between Bulgarian Jews and their gentile neighbors was always good. On my first visit, had a meeting with the National Agricultural Research Institute's management. The head was a stored grain specialist and one of his associates a researcher in the same domain. At the end of the meeting they asked me whether I knew Dr. Calderon. Prof. M. Calderon was a stored grain entomologist (insect-pest researcher) with our Research Center. Although we worked in the same branch, we never collaborated. He was born in Bulgaria.



Although much older than me, was always keen to get updated on my work and progress. I told them that to the best of my knowledge he passed away a few months earlier. Both my Bulgarian hosts were deeply shocked by the news. They regarded him as a mentor and sharing the same language and background, they developed throughout the years a very close friendship and professional ties. Their frank sorrow was deeply moving. Without knowing Moshe's daughter, Dr. Ruth Calderon, who was a Knesset member at the time, have written to her about her father's reputation in Bulgaria. She was extremely thankful.

Sofia, very much as Sarajevo, displays a unique blend of east and west. Next to the Greek orthodox churches you'll find mosques underlying the town's oriental flavor. The lengthy Turkish rule didn't leave behind much quality except a tradition of tasteful food. Even mom-and-pop restaurants carried a broad variety of very nice dishes. Stayed at a mid-town hotel reminding very much of the old socialist regime's style. One day just walked around the hotel and found a crowd around a building. They were at the intermission of the concert hall. I could walk in with no ticket and sat down on the gallery for the concert's second part. The upper windows of the hall were open.





*Greek-orthodox church, mosque and synagogue in Sofia.*

A thunderstorm broke out. The wind and the street's rain competed with the inner sounds. And then came a power failure. Pitch dark in the concert hall but the orchestra kept on playing. Several more power failures of very short duration followed but the show went on. You could imagine the standing ovation the conductor and orchestra received at the end of the concert.

We travelled quite a lot in the country visiting mainly the greenhouse industry, the main MB (ozone-depleting methyl-bromide) consumer. The post-communist change was bubbling. Private money poured into the former state farms to buy up the good ones. New technologies were introduced and

most of the produce - vegetables and flower crops - found its way to the quality-requiring Western European marketplace. We visited regional research institutes. An elder researcher worked at Plovdiv on soil solarization, a technology developed and investigated in Israel. It is one of the most promising non-chemical MB alternatives. He graduated from a Russian university, his English almost nil and had no ties with the western professional world. Didn't attend conferences or been on sabbaticals. We had a lengthy discussion on the subject. He was happy to be involved in our program.



*Cucumber crop in old-fashioned greenhouse in Bulgaria*

**Poland** focused its effort on the administrative reduction of MB (ozone-depleting methyl-bromide) utilization. In this effort the country had to coordinate its activity with the European Union, and to this end the project leader, my counterpart, visited Brussels on a weekly basis. I toured the research facilities such as the University of Warsaw, regional research and regional agricultural advisory services. All middle-aged and young professionals had a good command of English. My counterpart couldn't believe that I didn't speak Polish. He believed that all Israelis originate from

Poland and Polish is the country's second language. It was hard to persuade him that Polish might be heard not more than in one or two cafés in Tel Aviv where over the hill ladies born in Warsaw or Lodz would get together for a cup of tea. Have befriended a Professor of Entomology at the Warsaw University and he used to invite me to his nice suburban cottage whenever I reached Warsaw. He had spent many years in Kenya and we had much common ground to discuss cotton pest problems which were his main subject-matter while in Africa. He was born in Warsaw and remembered with nostalgia the town's cosmopolite character before WWII with its Jewish and German communities. While reconstructed after the war, the town is scarred by communist era's drab blocks and subsisting on its homogeneous, less colorful, Polish population. His wife came from a small town. And described the way the Jewish merchants, who usually controlled main street, would fight in concert any Polish traders who would dare to open a shop in "their" street. Travelled quite a lot together with a good plant pathologist actively involved in the investigation of MB alternatives applied for the control of soil-borne diseases. Have met him before at international conferences. He was a government employee who used to collaborate a great deal with a private chemical firm dealing in pesticides. When we visited the firm, he even showed me with pride the house he got on the premises of the firm's employees. To my money, a rather dented ethical code. At one field trip he had one glass too many. I took the driver's seat in his car for a long and rainy drive back to Warsaw. Polish food is the equivalent in Israel of poor taste, sweet fish and laundered chicken. I found the fried dumplings (pirozhki) with various fillings and sauces, starring on the menu of most restaurants and bars, as refined. On the top of it, young waiters in the bars and restaurants spoke very good English. The capital city offers various guided sightseeing tours, among them Jewish Warsaw. It focuses mainly on the Warsaw Ghetto uprising's sites and remnants of the once heavily populated Jewish quarter. Both have been razed by German forces.

Nowadays we witness a deep conflict of narratives between Poland and Russia concerning the roles they played in WWII. No doubt about Soviet Union's decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany. It is clear, however, that the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement signed on 23 August 1939 allowed Germany to invade Poland within a week. Basically, Poland became a victim of double aggression. The German invasion of September the 1st and the Soviet one on the 17th of the same month. Moreover, Poland was affected by the execution in Katin, following Stalin's orders, of 20.000 Polish prisoners of war.

After WWI Cieszyn (Teschen) was divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Right after the notorious Munich agreement, Poland invaded the area, annexing it with Germany's backing. Germany concomitantly invaded other parts of Czechoslovakia. A most fateful Polish step occurred between 1938 and 1939 when England and France realized that their conciliatory policy toward Hitler was a strategic error. They requested, in coaction with the Soviet Union, Poland's accordance to stop Germany's anticipated invasion by letting the Red Army to enter its territory. Poland refused. The coordination between the Soviet Union-France and England came to an end. Within a couple of days the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement had been signed in Moscow. One could guess that the Red Army's presence in Poland would have changed the outcome of WWII and of the Holocaust. The victim shouldn't be blamed. The major responsibility falls on Germany and the Soviet Union. But Poland never took responsibility for this act which paved the road to war.



*Warsaw Ghetto-underground opening and Memorial*





The Polish underground which received its orders from London didn't carry out significant resistance during the German occupation and it didn't extend any substantial help to the ghetto's uprising Jews in 1943 to prevent the extermination of Polish Jewry's remnants. The resistance acted only in 1944 while the Red Army was nearing Warsaw's gates to push out the already withdrawing German Army and to prevent Warsaw from being freed by the Soviets. This brief review relies on Prof. Shlomo Avineri's work. It throws light on the complex set of events of WWII and the current Polish-Russian feud on narratives. Topics that preoccupy anyone who visits Poland.

No doubt that my consultancy in Romania and Hungary rendered a particular edge, speaking natively both languages. Still, when in Bucharest, my counterpart, Dr. Bogoescu urged me, whenever taking a taxi to tell the driver but the address and sit still. The moment I would further engage in a conversation, the cabbie will find out that I'm a foreigner and charge three times higher. As for **Budapest**, the cabbie who picked me up at the airport told me right away that I came from Israel. Visiting the indoor market (Csarnok) in Budapest, have asked in Hungarian for some salami and paprika, the usual stuff. The vendor lowers on me a doubtful look and says:



You're not from here.

I say, I'm not.

Where do you come from?

I tell him, from Temesvár.

But you don't live there!

I say, I don't.

You live in Israel, was his verdict.

Quite a sharp ear!

My first meeting with the team I worked with in Budapest began with an apology. I was coached, years back when just joined Extension Service, that a lecturer should never apologize before his audience. He should get ready in such a manner that he will never have a reason for an apology. We entertained some small talk in Hungarian prior to the meeting and my lingo sounded colloquial although I could imagine that it struck them as frozen back in the 1950s. However, since have never frequented any Hungarian school, couldn't come to terms with the technical expressions. After the first minutes of briefing on my mission's terms of reference had to apologize and switch to English. Have stressed the fact that this is not a matter of being elitist but just at a pinch with the technical terms. It took me a few days of discussions and visits to get acquainted with them. Basically, have worked with two main groups: Ministry of Environment Protection and Plant Protection Service of the Ministry of Agriculture. Found well-prepared professionals, well-versed on MB matters. The field trips took us to the country's south east where the glasshouse industry is concentrated. One such little town was Szentes. In the town's center you could see the synagogue converted into a center for elderly. A uniquely impressive still active synagogue is the one in Szeged. Unfortunately it was closed. The glasshouses in the Szentes area were installed with Dutch equipment and technology and were practicing MB substitution. Further, we visited the Plant Protection Center of Hódmezővásárhely. For some odd reason, one of the researchers couldn't fully understand the fact I speak Hungarian and nevertheless am no Hungarian. I didn't want to play the trump card, that if had been living in that town and not in Romania, in the best case would have ended up in Bergen Belsen. Like my wife's grandparents from Makó or her

cousins from this very town. At the end we became friends with all visited researchers and officials, exchanged presents and sincere smiles to the camera. We worked out the program which would expedite the search for MB alternatives for the massive local glasshouse industry. To one of the officials we met in Budapest who originated from Makó, my wife's grandparents' last name sounded familiar. "Stolpersteine", cobblestone-sized memorials, have been placed in front of the house where they lived and were deported from.

**Lithuania** is a Baltic, northern country and the great share of its MB is consumed by the stored grain industry while soil applications, my specialty, play a lesser role. We visited huge storehouses. The first visit was in winter with plenty of snow around. The temperatures in the storehouses were bitterly low and chilled us to the bone. I joined a British stored grain consultant who played first violin while I couldn't visit any crops in that season, and focused on indoor planning sessions. Forgot my cap in a taxi. Have been utmost lucky that next to hotel there was a hat shop. I sprinted the 20 meters to reach it and bought the warmest and ugliest hat of my life. The old town of Vilnius is nicely renovated, turned into a touristic gem. It contains several interesting, sad Jewish relics. Beggars invade the old city in the evenings. You can see them displaying appalling leg wounds to arouse pity and fetch a few coins. Glimpsed one in the morning, making up his "wounds" with dyestuffs and pencils. From Vilnius had to fly non-stop to Budapest. Reached the airport but all flights were cancelled because of the storm. Huge lines being formed to rebook all passengers. Was lucky to be among the first in one of the lines and rescheduled for next morning. Back to town and hotel to report again at the airport very early next morning. To my money, the wind was even stronger than the day before. Still a bus hauled us to the plane. Living in the subtropics, have never experienced such a weather. The wind was blowing real strong and horizontally, shelling sharp with the thick snow. We boarded the aircraft. I awaited the worst. Couldn't believe that we could move. The plane taxied to the runway at zero visibility. Unbelievably, we took off. It wasn't the scheduled non-stop flight but I hit Budapest after all.

A few months prior to my assignment of monitoring the state-wide MB (ozone-depleting methyl-bromide) substitution project of **Romania**, have met my prospective counterpart Dr. M. Bogoescu at a conference in Corfu,

Greece (2004). We planned out the visit and have picked up early information. Bogoescu was the director of a horticultural research institute near Bucharest. Previously, he worked as sector chief of a state farm. Party officials used to visit frequently the farm requesting their allocation - boxes of fruits and vegetables and giving off direct and dilettante commands to the professional staff. They were ignorant and their interference became an unbearable nuisance. He left the service, completed his PhD and embarked on a more distant research career. We travelled together to the main glasshouse industry centers: near Bucharest, Braşov and Constanţa. In the glasshouses much compost and organic manure substrates were in use. Their high nitrogen levels had a suppressive effect on soil-borne diseases. They acted as natural MB substitutes. The national coordinator of the MB substitution project was a young woman with perfect command of English. To find out later that she was the granddaughter of Timișoara's former Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan. I told her how I interrelated to her Grandfather. The Jewish Lyceum neighbors the bishop's villa. We were playing football in the school's courtyard when a dog jumped the fences and frenzied by the running boys began his own amok and bit at least ten of the players. Me, at eleven, among them. If the dog was rabid or not, could be defined only by autopsy. The bishop rejected the idea and all affected kids had to undergo a series of subcutaneous shots in the bellies. The granddaughter seemed to be a very smart young lady. Left her domestic job to join UNIDO in Vienna. Have joined Bogoescu for a visit at the Academy of Sciences in Bucharest. The place was manned by seniors clad in outdated suits who spent a few daily hours at their clean desks to enjoy a complimentary cup of tea. They had no projects, funds, students, secretaries or assistants. Anyone who popped in for a brief chat made their day. I was invited to Bogoescu's block apartment for a meal of traditional koliva. Later he attended one of the three international MB substitution workshops I organized in Israel giving me the chance to play in turn the host's role.

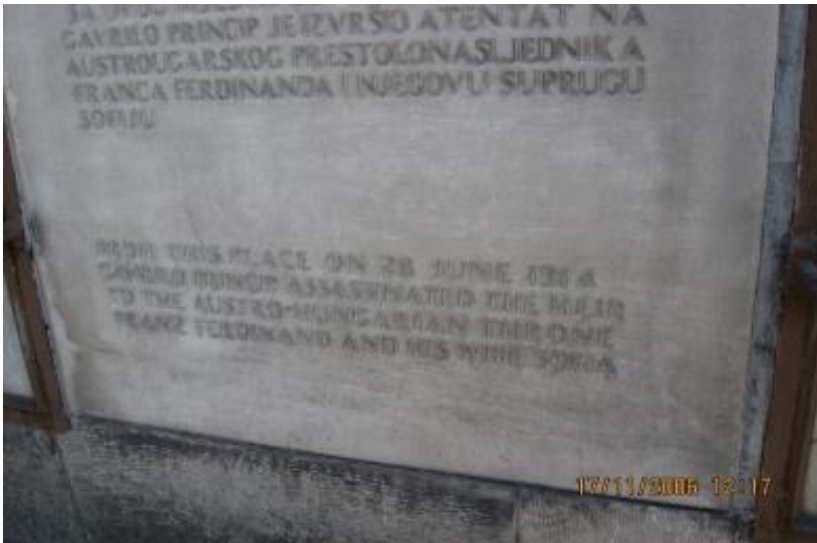
The mission to **Bosnia-Herzegovina** tackled the issue of quality management. To get the country ready to comply with western European marketplace's quality standards. The European Union launched a wide variety of projects to boost the country's agricultural productivity and export capabilities. The country's managerial structure following the war of 1992-1995 relied on balanced appointments between ethnic Serbs, Bosnians and Croats. This appeases ethnic sentiments but is counterproductive to merit-

based appointments. Bosnia is a Moslem country, still everyone we met emphasized that first and foremost they feel Europeans and only next Moslem. I wonder whether in light of the heavy influx of Saudi funds and their attempt to radicalize, this approach still enjoys the same broad support. Our counterpart was a young Bosnian. His family fled to Australia during the war and he grew up there. Out of pure idealism, he returned to Bosnia and put his capabilities and drive at the service of his country's agricultural development. He visited Israel several times guiding groups of trainees. We left behind a program based on environmental protection, reducing the amount of pesticides and introducing elements of quality management in agricultural production. We visited one of Sarajevo's synagogues but the world-famous Sarajevo Haggadah wasn't on display. Sarajevo's center is very oriental, hosting mosques, bazars and Turkish food. Many other quarters are typically Austro-Hungarian scarred by wretched Communist-era blocks.

After a first round of fact-finding visits to the project countries, I reached home-base, **UNEP headquarters in Paris**. Task Manager and contact was Christine Wellington. A Canada-educated, young, on the ball and down to earth woman from Barbados, where she coordinated her country's MB substitution project. We corresponded already in her previous position and I was glad to renew our ties. She tried unsuccessfully to set a meeting between me and the section head, Arjun Patel, an Indian official who gave me the cold shoulder. We sat down in the morning and I showed her the Power Point presentation that I prepared for the countries involved in the project. UNEP's role in MB substitution was awareness raising, training and capacity building. Other institutions such as UNIDO, UNDP and the World Bank were in charge of the projects' execution. Since I came from the agricultural extension-advisory sector, being involved in the same time in Research and Development (R&D), training, publications and outreach programs in both the industrialized world and in the developed one, could draw up the institutional support and mechanisms to put flesh on the bones of UNEP's mandate.



*Refurbished Ashkenaz Synagogue, Sarajevo.*



*The place where Prince Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in 1914 triggering WWI, Sarajevo.*



*"Don't forget '93", Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina*





*War memorial at Mostar, Bosnia-Herzegovina. With Ben (young Bosnian/Australian counterpart) and Yigal, Israeli teammate.*



*With Christine Wellington, UNEP, Paris*

Christine was awed by my outline. She has never seen such an all-terrain holistic approach to their mission. She scheduled right away a seminar for the whole group for that afternoon where I would elaborate on my proposal. Arjun Patel gave in and was ready for a meeting in his office. Neither could he allow himself to be absent from my presentation. During the next days and my next visits to UNEP, his office door opened up for me. Usually he was on the phone, talking to his travel agent, discussing the upgrade on his business class ticket. He apparently nurtured a lofty disdain toward women and didn't extend Christine's contract. She had to leave Paris and spent the next year in Barbados, her home country. Arjun's boss, a French-Jewish lady, took a firm stand and brought her back. Once my project proposal was accepted, the next field visits focused on putting its outline in place. Still, Arjun pulled off a new hat trick. He loved to hate foreign consultants. We were too expensive for his budget and his own people could

by now take over for less. Our employment was discontinued. Christine got married and left for the US to get a position with another UN agency. Although UNEP co-sponsored the international workshops organized by me in Israel, this quitter never sent any representatives. He was ready to address our audience through video-transmitted talks. That was the most we could see eye to eye.

### **Wrap up**

The UN's political credibility is a well-deserved low. However, its professional capabilities to launch projects of global significance is a different ball game. I state it without hesitation that the world-wide phase-out of ozone depleting substances is a success story. Methyl bromide used in agricultural production as well as chloro fluorocarbons (CFCs) used as refrigerants and aerosols were phased-out in the year 2005 in the industrialized countries and after a ten years grace, in 2015, in the developing world. One hundred and sixty countries signed the Montreal Protocol. A specially established Multilateral Fund financed and steered the project's activity in the developing world. It implied a major Research and Development effort as well as an ample series of administrative, legislative and law-enforcement measures. I am grateful for having been part of this challenging endeavor. Coordinating first MB's field-level substitution program in my country and adjusting the accrued experience to the developing world's needs: in African countries, in most central American countries, in Turkey and in Eastern European countries.

## Bel Paese

In the mid-1980s a European Union mission that visited Israel was impressed by our agricultural advisory system dealing with crops irrigation and fertilization. The advisory network relied on regional Crop-Water-Soil laboratories to which the field advisors were bringing in their field samples to base their recommendations on objective, measurable parameters. These laboratories were backstopped by weather stations. The accumulated data produced long-term regional databases, fine tuning the seasonal recommendations. All field advisors were involved in applied research. They carried out on-farm trials testing irrigation patterns, formula, equipment, new fertilizers, crop requirements, soil and water salinity surveys. They collaborated with crop husbandry advisors, with researchers and with private firms, purveyors of irrigation equipment and fertilizers.

Italy was chosen as the EU Mediterranean member country where the applicability of the Israeli model could be tried out. The EU-funded project comprised Greece, France, the Netherlands, Belgium as well as Italy and Israel. Three provinces in the Italian Mezzogiorno (South) were earmarked as project sites: Abruzzo, Lazio and Puglia. We formed an Israeli team coordinated by me, consisting of three regional irrigation and fertilization (IF) advisors, one for each of the earmarked regions, an economist, an extension methods specialist, the head of our IF department and one of its state-level advisors and three directors of regional extension-advisory offices. EU was represented by John Scully, project leader, an authoritarian Irish economist and respective professionals from the involved countries. France, the Netherlands and Belgium shared their know-how in matters of irrigation. The first meeting was held in our country where the group was exposed to the field work pattern and to the overall methodology in the framework of a workshop. The project was kicked off in 1984 and wrapped up in 1988. In Italy we worked with two sectors. With Ministry of Agriculture, the public sector and with the regional water supply associations (ConSORZI d'irrigazione), the private sector. Signor Leone, a former big fish in the Ministry of Agriculture in Rome acted as door opener. Without such a function, it is almost impossible to get around Italian red tape. Traditionally, our field visits began at the regional Ministry of Agriculture offices where we had to listen to a lengthy, emotional harangue of the regional director. He was talking loud into the microphone, heavily gesticulating, sounding angry.

Map of Italy's provinces and the 3 project areas: **Abruzzo, Lazio, Puglia.**



These introductory meetings never lasted less than 3 hours. First, he began touting his own deeds. And then, the reverberating buzzword became "*La legge*" or the law, which constrained him in the authorization of any move in our project proposal. After this ordeal, we usually left for the field. The director never kept us company to the fields. The trips were led by the Consorzio's people who knew their way and had good contact with the growers. Lunch was never skipped and it took *de rigueur* a couple of hours. They knew the best places on their beat and the best of the typical local cuisine. In Lazio, the regional government was in the hands of the communists. They weren't happy with Israeli presence but pragmatic enough to glean the best out of it. They minded business, took part in all field trips and workshops and lent a hand. Since this EU project was a multinational, multilingual one, we were trailed by an army of interpreters who were doing everything by the book of EU rules and regulations. At the state-level meetings in Rome or Israel, simultaneous interpretation was used. To this end booths for all

interpreted languages were set up with all the necessary wiring, microphones, headphones, amplifiers, etc. Each language requested a couple of interpreters who took turns and were allowed to interpret from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Their work time was limited to 45 minutes to be followed by a mandatory break. In summary, we had a long *derrière* of interpreters, technicians and equipment for simultaneous interpretation. However, the regional workshops held in Italy were streamlined, being consecutively interpreted only from English to Italian and vice versa. EU supported generously the strengthening of the agricultural production capabilities of its member countries putting funds at the disposal of agricultural extension and research. In no time, our Italian colleagues became top experts on drawing EU funds. Thus, equipment for the newly established Crop-Soil-Water laboratories and weather stations was quickly put in place and the project moved ahead. Still, John Scully, the tall, dominant, one tough cookie project leader disliked Italians. He didn't appreciate them for being loud, garrulous and chronic late. He didn't conceal his views and whenever the bus didn't leave on time, or the meeting was late, he scolded them merciless. A resembling approach was shared by one of our irrigation specialists. He came across some imprecise information given by his local counterparts and from then onwards was investigating them and their submitted documents with the ruggedness of a police officer. I began to get phone calls from Lazio Consorzio's head claiming his head. Giovanni de Senen didn't speak but Italian and we had a hard time to communicate over the phone. I explained him several times that our advisor was an eminent professional, this was acknowledged by the other end, but they were offended. My last ditch defense revealed a sad truth. Our teammate lost his son, a pilot in the October war a few years before. They gave in, with understanding for the particular case.

You could never know when landing in Rome whether the strike will paralyze the airport, hit the bus service or the railways. Usually, a private bus would wait for us at some distance from the airport to bypass the inveterate strikes of public buses.



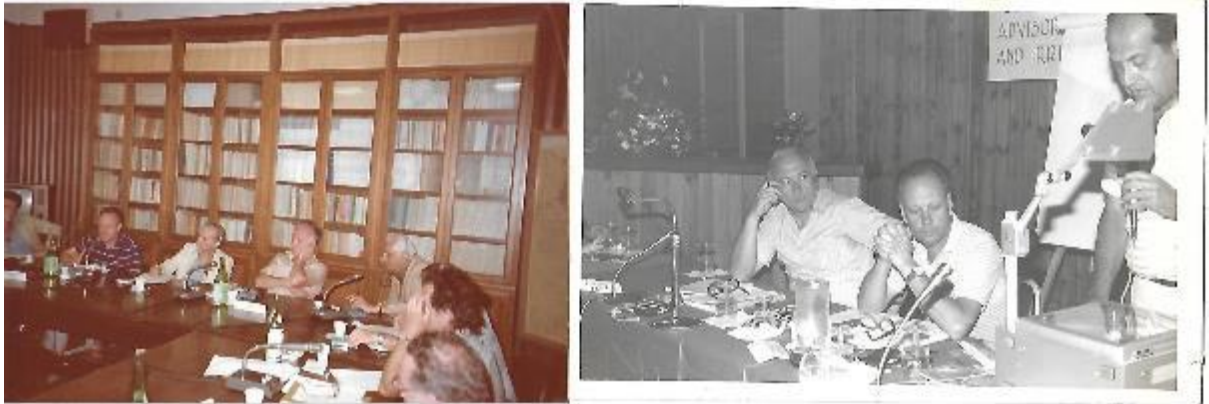
*Montecassino Abbey, bombed out and rebuilt*

It goes without saying that Italy is a charming country, *il bel paese*. Still, the two provincial capital towns where we worked: Cassino in Lazio and Foggia in Puglia were relatively new ones and didn't carry any historical or particular features. Pescara in the Abruzzo region, however, is a lovely and popular sea resort on the Adriatic coast. The work in Lazio provided the opportunity to visit Monte Cassino Abbey. The abbey's very long history culminated in WWII when the Allied forces bombed it from the air and destroyed almost all of it assuming erroneously that it accommodated German forces. We were guided by a monk who survived the attack, which killed many civilians. He shared with us his first-hand background. Closest cemetery to the abbey is the Polish war cemetery honoring the more than one thousand Polish soldiers of the Andres Army who stormed the bombed-out Benedictine abbey. Crossing Italy from west to east, from the Mediterranean to the Adriatic coast over the straight highways' splendid architecture is always an experience. On our field trips we were joined by teams from the Ministry of Agriculture in Rome. Hard to believe the still prevailing gaps between north and south. Most of the time our northern teammates couldn't communicate directly with Mezzogiorno's producers. They spoke an almost different language.

One day we visited a farm and the grower received us quivering, with tears in his eyes. He was still aghast by the early morning visit of the mafia with whom he played with fire, being slow to pay his debts. He got a gentle warning, they blew up his fountains leaving him without water for his house and fields.

All in all, the interaction between the European teams of professionals, the Italians and the Israelis created an excellent framework of creative imagination. The Israeli advisory model on the specific topic of irrigation and fertilization, based on the support of crop-soil-water laboratories and weather stations was played along and it upgraded the local system. It generated *in-situ* a replicable pattern for EU's Mediterranean countries. The Israeli advisors were happy to be involved in the program. They felt much professional satisfaction and enriched their personal record with valuable foreign experience. Real friendships were forged between them and their Italian peers rubbing shoulders in multiple mutual visits. The same is true for the project's managerial tier. We built up close and friendly relationships also with our colleagues from France, Belgium the Netherlands and Greece.





*Workshop in Italy (l) and in Israel (r), sitting with John Scully.*

John Scully used to come often to Israel to discuss with our staff the project's progress and to smooth out its impediments. Unfortunately, because of his wife's illness he retired early from his position in Brussels. His wife died shortly after, he was left on his own and out of job.

\* \* \*



*Dr. Ronny Adhikarya*

In the early 1990s began to consult in China on behalf of the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations (UN), namely with its Education and Agricultural Extension Division chaired by Dr. WD Maalouf, a Lebanese extension specialist. The chair introduced me to Dr. Ronny Adhikarya an Indonesia-born Chinese who graduated with a PhD in agricultural communications in the US. Ronny was in charge of the extension component of a comprehensive agricultural development project in northwestern China, while I acted as the field person. FAO is an executing agency. It has no funds of his own and it depends on the availability of such, mainly from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). FAO employs a wide array of professionals well-versed on the developing world. The World Bank, on the other hand, is a bank, a funding body employing mainly economists and some other professions for planning, appraisal and supervision

functions. Often the Bank engages executing agencies to carry out its envisaged projects. FAO used to have a good reputation at the time it was manned by foreign professionals who worked in the former British, French and other colonies and had a good knowledge of the developing countries. FAO's Director General between 1976-1993 was Edouard Saouma from Lebanon. Saouma considerably increased the number of professional staff from developing countries at the expense of professionals from developed ones, which resulted in certain decline in FAO's general level of experience and expertise. Under Saouma's leadership FAO lost a substantial share of support from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and from several industrial nations. Just to give one substantial difference between FAO and the World Bank, Ronny Adhikarya was in charge, as project leader, of a portfolio of almost 40 projects. World Bank's project leaders would oversee usually one, and able to devote most of their time to its detailed needs and promotion. Thus, at briefing have received project outlines from a project leader who never visited the project site. In spite of this precarious point of departure, Ronny was a highly motivated, inspiring and meticulous project leader who kept track of all developments. All briefings, before departing for the assignment and debriefings after returning from mission were held in Rome. At briefing the consultant was fitted out with his terms of reference, per diem provided in cash and the air tickets. The building's ground floor accommodated a large travel agency.



*F.A.O. headquarters, Rome*

I left the FAO building with a nice bundle of bucks in my jacket's inner breast pocket. Clad in a trench coat with open buttons due to the nice weather. Three little Roma girls were squatting on the sidewalk holding newspapers and

shouting after me, whether I want a paper in English or Italian? I just walked forth displaying self-confident lack of interest. Out of a sudden I feel my right arm being powerfully pulled. Instinctively I pushed away the little girl and continued walking. Put up even a bold front. Look how strong I still am. Two-three minutes down the road, I check my pocket. A part of the banknotes was gone. Looked back to the gate where all this happened. The gypsy girls were gone. I've been mugged. They pulled the following fast one on me: while I looked distracted to my ripped right arm, they raised a sheet of newspaper across my chest and sent sleek fingers underneath into the pocket. This trick can work on everyone no matter how big or strong you are. I hurried to the next police station to submit a complaint and got a written report. Police are helpless against the girls, they could be arrested but being below legal age, have to be released. I rushed next day to my department's administrator. Heard the usual wish-wash that cash isn't insured. Once this happens out of premises, they're not responsible, bla bla. I just hit the roof and went to see the head of administration. My argument being that FAO policy is to provide the consultants with per diem in cash and the trap was set up by choice to catch FAO consultants on their way out of the building. In a few days I was about to leave for China on an FAO assignment with a thinned out per diem. In a couple of days have been reimbursed for a good part of the missing sum, and to my biggest satisfaction a police car manned by two policemen was stationed every day by that gate.

This attempt to separate me from my money or goods wasn't the first one in Italy. I underwent four such attacks. Having the upper hand on two cases, buckling under in two. The score 2:2, just drew an inglorious tie.

Visited once Rome as a tourist. Carried a bag and boarded a crowded bus. The bag hung on my shoulder and was slightly pushed backwards. Apparently out of my sight. Someone took the opportunity and opened the bag's zipper to slip off the wallet. Only at Villa Borghese's counter did I realize the rip-off. Cancelled the credit cards, conceding the loss of some cash.

Reached Termini in Rome with a suitcase in each of my hands. Two punks came out of the blue to grab the one my left suitcase and the other the right one. With both arms blocked, could only kick them forcefully with lots of people around until they dropped by the wayside.

Walked down the street while a gypsy woman with a baby in arms shadows from behind. All of a sudden I feel a strange hand in my pant's pocket. When I hit on it, she ran away already. Without any loot.

Being a PhD student of rural sociologist Prof. Everett Rogers, Ronny paid special interest to the introduction and adoption of new agricultural technologies. In this context, a hot issue in the mid-1980s was the utilization of microcomputers in agricultural extension, education and training. Back in 1980 I have been appointed as Deputy Director for Research and Development (R&D) of our Agricultural Extension Service with the main assignment of computerizing the service. In this realm have found much common ground with him. We had discussions on the topic during my visits to Rome which were basically focused on the agricultural extension project in China. Ronny commissioned a report from his tutor, Prof. Rogers. This report presented case studies from the developing world and a state-of-the-art review on the use of microcomputers in agricultural extension, education and training. Our next joint step was to organize in 1992 a technical meeting at FAO headquarters in Rome on Microcomputer Applications. Ronny and me coordinated the meeting and I could bring up the experience accrued in Israel on the computerization of our extension service over the last decade. The point being to generalize this approach for the benefit of the developing world. To this end have been commissioned by Ronny to prepare a study on the Potentials of Microcomputers. Have edited the book together with my associates - Gelb, Marom and Blum and it appeared as an FAO publication. The meeting in Rome was a special opportunity to get to know Ev Rogers. His *Diffusion of Innovations* became the second most-cited book in the social sciences. He grew up on a farm in Iowa and worked as a county agent in the 1940s at the time new hybrid corn varieties were introduced. Observing his producers' adoption behavior of the new technology, he generalized his initial concepts. After serving in the Korean war he then studied sociology and acted as professor at several leading US universities and world-wide, and consulted in the developing world. He is behind the most known theories on diffusion of innovations. It was a unique opportunity to meet and spend some time with a cutting-edge researcher in his field, who speaks with everyone at eye level in a low-key, disarming style.

## Classical diffusion theory

When faced with **discontinuous innovations**, customers fall into **five broad categories** along an axis of risk-aversion.



Innovators  
Early Adopters  
Early Majority  
Late Majority  
Laggards



*Everett Rogers's basic diffusion theory*

From a professional standpoint I used to wear two hats. First and foremost - plant protection. Being with Extension Service, have paid, however, attention to extension methodologies as well. In other words, the various ways of disseminating technologies, know-how and information to the producers as well as our advisors' in-service training. Thus, between 1980 and 1983 have acted as head of our Department of Extension. FAO includes a large Plant Production and Protection Division with which I used to sustain contacts for years. Have discussed with Dr. L. Chiarappa, the division head the concept of Plant Clinics as a means to strengthen plant protection activity in the developing world. Chiarappa showed much interest in the topic. He was replaced by Dr. N. van der Graaff. In order to expose FAO to the concept have organized in 1987 a Workshop/Expert Meeting on Establishing and Operating Plant Clinics Integrated with Extension in Developing Countries. The meeting was hosted by the German Foundation for International Development, Feldafing, Germany. It was attended by the host institution, van der Graaff and his associates from FAO, experts in the domain from developed and developing countries and Israel. Have published the proceedings together with Dr. J. Palti. Basically, FAO liked the concept but it didn't find funds to its implementation and embraced the Farmer Field Schools (FFS) concept as a way to disseminate plant protection know-how in the developing world. The economic evaluations of this program didn't prove any straightforward benefits and FFSs turned into producers' discussion tools

of general and not of specific professional nature. Have been invited by FAO to evaluate such a program in Indonesia but an entry visa had not been granted by then to holders of Israeli passports.

FAO employs thousands of consultants in the developing world. Many of them land in Rome, stay a few days and fly out to their missions. While in Rome they are accommodated in lots of hotels in FAO's neighborhood around Terme di Caracalla. I found one of these hotels, run by a Lebanese woman being the more attractive one. Every evening dinner was served at 8 pm on a very long common table in the dining hall. Consultants who prefer to have dinner at the hotel could gather there. The hall hosted a broad variety of people from various countries who work for FAO, in several parts of the world on various subject matter areas of the agricultural sector, *sensu lato*. It's a colorful mixture and you could always find someone affiliated with your professional area or with your target country and region.

FAO building is a huge and very confusing one. I have visited with many officials in the building. You always need a road map if you don't want to get lost and want to be on the button at your appointments. Have been impressed by one whose door was always open. An Indian personnel officer in charge of interface with consultants. Many non-stop consultants who make a living out of international consultancy are looking for additional opportunities and need to market themselves. This personnel officer had a picture of all upcoming projects and missions and their needs for subject-matter specialists, mediating between them and the various FAO units. He applied an open door policy and a laid back and supporting attitude, atypical of personnel officers. By and large, consultants are recruited only upon personal acquaintance with their prospective professional employer. *Curricula vitae* sent to various units rest for years in drawers and file cabinets until they turn yellow and obsolete. This person, however, displayed a commendable proactive recruiting manner.

Although have never studied Italian, could manage a basic conversation. This was most helpful in the EU project in the 1980s. It changed to the worse once I began to learn Spanish in a systematic way in the 1990s. Apparently, a well-sedimented language suppresses a weaker one in the brain's left frontal lobe. I had the same problem with Romanian, helpful up to a certain stage when learning Spanish, to disturb it later on. After retiring in the 2000s, we regarded Italy as a high priority destination of vacations and spent around ten days each in Rome, Florence, Padova, Genova, Bologna-Emilia

Romagna, Turin, Toscana-Umbria, Chiavenna-Soglio. By this time my hibernating Italian became useless and preferred to speak, while in Italy, right Spanish in the hope that it is understood more often than not. It was especially helpful wherever the hotel housekeepers came from Spain.

Took the train from Rome to Florence for a weekend sojourn. We were just two in the compartment. An elder Italian man and myself. Following the customary silence and a few veiled blinks, we exchanged words of courtesy. He spoke but Italian and some basic German. After the usual where do you come from, and what do you do for a living, we found common ground. He owned an aerial photography firm. His planes were parked in northern Italy and he carried out mapping, surveillance flights and was involved in some agricultural jobs. My department back home was keen on the development of aerial photography as a mapping tool of soil-borne disease patches and weeds as well as for an early detection of foliar pests and diseases. After mutual updating on this issue, he left for the restaurant or the bar and came back in good mood. He hesitated before opening up his heart. He was a high-ranking officer, in fact a colonel in the Italian (fascist) army in WWII. In charge of supplies. He visited Germany and Berlin quite often and met even Hitler in person. How the mighty have fallen. Due to a slip and ensuing falling out he was tried and sentenced. As such he was put into a particular division of the Auschwitz concentration camp. I took his story with a grain of salt, suspecting that he might hide its darker parts. At least some sort of embezzlement or much worse. It's the bottom line that counts. He talked with great emotion to conclude:

I have seen the Jewish people in the camp, in their darkest hours, emaciated, ill and beaten. In the shadow of the chimneys, threatened daily by imminent death. I admired the help they extended each other, the support, the friendship. You Jewish people are few but of quality. We the Italian, we're many. We don't stand out in quality.

We split up in Florence, deeply moved.



## China

### **It's a communist country after all**

August 1991 was the date of my first travel to China. The visit was carried out during the hardliners' attempted coup against Gorbachev in the Soviet Union and in the shadow of Tiananmen Square Protests of 1989. I consulted for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) in Rome. The project was a most challenging and complex one covering five huge provinces of northwestern China: Gansu, Shaanxi, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang. These are the less developed areas of the country and especially Gansu was hit by low agricultural production levels and even by famine in the 1980s. The project's primary focus was on Gansu, a province of 25 million inhabitants, with Lanzhou its capital city. The command area was a cold and arid high plateau of 2000 m, open to the cold winds blowing from Inner Mongolia, and a short cultivation period of no more than 6 months. The project envisaged massive resettlement of growers from the barren hilly areas in the newly irrigated valleys. These low-income growers, used to extensive rain-fed agriculture were expected to move to intensive irrigated production of vegetables, fruit crops and rearing of livestock. The engineering component of pumping water from the Yellow River (Huang He) and the housing were completed. FAO and the consultants were engaged in the training of the trainers in an attempt to upgrade their newly required production approaches and technologies.

Have been briefed on the project in Rome and reached Beijing via Frankfurt. It's been a long night flight. Ministry of Agriculture's liaison picked me up at the airport telling that they had difficulties to find a seat on the flights to Lanzhou and will probably have to wait for 3 days. Checked into a hotel and went to sleep. After a couple of hours the guy knocks on the door. They got a ticket. Off we go, but first to the bank. My US dollars had to be strictly changed at a government Bank dealing with foreigners to pay for the ticket and get some yuans.



*The Yellow River (Huang He) in Gansu*

He was kind and stood in line for me and after a lengthy procedure we ride to the airport. At the entrance my escort shows the ticket and says good bye. From that moment you're on your own. First day in China after a sleepless night. At security, a commanding tone tells that am late. Passed through nevertheless. Beijing's main airport looked more like a big bus terminal. No screens but squeaky loudspeakers spitting in Chinese and non-intelligible English the flight destinations. To me all names sounded the same gibberish: Anji, Banji, Hanji, Tanji or something like this. So had to go to a desk and ask each time a flight was announced. Finally, found a group of Canadians and two ladies from the FAO office in Beijing who were also headed to Lanzhou. What a relief. After the initial welcome telling that am late for the flight, had to wait for 8 hours. During the long waiting hours we were given once vouchers for a meal. Nibbled on some insipid food when an excited official came shouting: you're late and missing your flight. Rushed to the gate. It was late afternoon, we had to hand-carry all our luggage to a shabby bus and then to the plane. We all pushed our suitcases into the luggage department of the Antonov. It was dark when we took off and landed after less than two hours. We didn't reach our destination, Lanzhou, but landed somewhere due to mechanical failure. Took the luggage and towed it for 1 km until we reached a hotel or guesthouse. Didn't want to do anything else but to wash my teeth and go to bed. No water in the taps. Wake up call early in the morning. Same route to the airport where we got breakfast and saw an Antonov. Could never know whether it was the same one, fixed or replaced with another one. Took off again and landed in

Lanzhou. The team who was waiting for me there had spent 24 hours at the airport. They didn't get any info about the flight, its take off or expected landing. We got into a jeep and off for Baiyin, a one and half hour drive to the project site. A guesthouse was installed there recently for the consultants on a Ministry of Agriculture site.

Late in the evening all lights at the Ministry offices were still on. The young or not so young officials didn't have housing of their own and were living in their offices. They carried large rings with tens of keys since they were keeping all their belongings in drawers and closets. For the same reason most of the office rooms were locked day and night. Married couples obtained an apartment but were allocated jobs usually in two different townships. The women were staying in the houses while the husbands lived in the offices hundreds of km apart. Only after 5 or more years was a couple granted jobs in the same place. To enjoy this privilege they had to offer each holiday classy presents to their bosses. It's a communist country after all.

The overall scenery of this arid, cool high plateau reminds the desert-type Arava Valley in Israel with their brown, pink, yellow and black layers of rocks covering the slopes. And indeed both areas are rich in minerals. Baiyin was in fact a miners' township and they were better off than the agricultural producers. While visiting the remote and hilly areas of the Gansu province we were invited here and there to have lunch in farmers' houses. They were very modest. Lunch consisted of a large bowl of soup with grits and vegetables. They had meat once a week. Northwestern Chinese don't consume rice like the southerners but mainly cereals such as wheat, barley and millet. They are much taller. By and large their complexion is fair.



*Farmer in Gansu*

It's a very cold area. Nonetheless they begin heating the guesthouses not before November the 1st. While travelling there in the fall, I was literally freezing in the room. Electric heaters were usually broken. The only refuge while in a country guesthouse room was to stay in bed fully covered both day and night.

When we toured the townships, first visits went to the regional head of the Ministry of Agriculture and then to the Party secretary in charge of Agriculture. In this or reverse order. There was a power struggle between Party and Government with periodical ups and downs. These bosses had company cars and drivers. When I tried to drive for fun one of these heavy Russian jeeps, the Party boss was amazed. How come you can drive a car? It's a driver's job.

However, the real bosses of the field work were the drivers. Usually we visited fields in a convoy of vehicles with various officials attending the trip. During our field visiting drivers held busy meetings where the daily schedule was decided. Where and when to stop for tea break, lunch and even dinner, if it's been a long day. Everyone was pledged to their scheduling.

Once the driver I used to work with and used to pay for all his meals, picked me up at the guesthouse to take me to the airport. We sat down for lunch en route and 2-3 of his buddies joined us. It was clear that they were after this sucker to pick up the tab. Wanted to teach him a lesson and asked the waiter, through the driver's basic interpretation, to get me the check just for two. The driver and his buddies dropped the ball. Never seen them again.

I bought a short waves radio before the visit to China to stay in touch with the rest of the world. Once of a sudden, while on a field trip with a full entourage, I listen to the news that Gorbachev was overturned. What an earthquake. Been at limbo for a long time whether to tell them or not. Obviously local press didn't utter a word. My team seemed to be calm, unaware of any dramatic news. I didn't want to appear as a western agent who spreads rumors and might even get in trouble. On the other hand on the TV set at the hotel room in Beijin you could watch BBC. After lengthy and skittish hesitation, I unraveled them the news. And it struck a chord. These very political people, became extremely agitated and the only words I could discern from their indistinct loud and excited shouting was Gol-ba-chev, Gol-ba-chev, Gol-ba-chev in staccato. The news was brought by their media with a 3-day delay. They didn't thank me for the hint but I felt being from now onwards on a more equal footing. In fact, the interaction with western consultants is a ballgame of Chinese sense of superiority, on the verge of arrogance, which says that right now we do need your technologies. But wait, once adopted, we will rush forward and win the world hands down. This

was said thirty years ago. Not by a government spokesman in Beijing but by average Joe in the poor northwest. His vision is unfolding nowadays.

Consultants are usually nice and communicative people. Still some of them could be weird. On my first mission to China spent a few days with an Austrian seed specialist. We travelled together and attended a dinner with the locals. Since I fancy dumplings, had a crush on ground meat filled dumplings or Ghiao Ze in Chinese. When I finished my plate, the Austrian who has been several times in China before tells me that ground meat in China is one of the most dangerous foodstuffs. I wonder what was his teutonic brainbox after. To warn after and not before?

A Dutch consultant was a jogger. He used to jog a few times a week in and around the little desert town that we visited. The houses looked all the same being padded with mud. There were no street names or house numbers. One evening he got lost and couldn't find his way back to the hotel. He didn't speak any Chinese and unable to give an address. He spent the night somewhere and touched base with us only next day. Quite adventurous, on his way back to the Netherlands he took the Transsiberian. It takes this train two weeks to move between Beijing and Moscow.

The success of a consultant's mission in China depends very much on the quality and goodwill of his interpreter. My interpreter in the area was Mr. Ma or more precisely comrade Ma. On our very first common trip he chose for lunch a disgusting restaurant. Many of the countryside restaurants are poor while in the towns you could find very good ones. The waiter comes with a note. Mr. Ma lets me pay without winking. Found out later that all my meals were covered by the host unit and deducted at the end of the month. As of our first day together Mr. Ma let me pay twice. Mr. Ma wasn't only my interpreter but also my shadow. Wherever we travelled and stayed overnight, he took the room next to me. I couldn't leave the office area and go to town without his company. Apparently orders from above. One day we went to the bank in Lanzhou, a long drive to change money since I paid monthly from my per diem for lodging and food. The trip to Lanzhou gave the opportunity to go to the Central Post Office and book a phone call to home. Mr. Ma told me what's my monthly charge in yuans and I left that amount with him. After all he was my interpreter and go-between with local management. Next day, Ma went to a field trip with another team of consultants. Being at the end of my mission, stayed that day in the guesthouse office to work on the report. A young agronomist with command of English brought me an invoice from the treasurer's office. It contained my monthly bill with a full breakdown of all costs. The balance was lower than the one requested by Ma. I showed the paper to the lead consultant, an Irishman well-versed on China. It was clear

to both of us that Ma cheated on me. The lead consultant took up the issue with the Chinese project leader. Who went to Ma's room and found my intact envelope with the money in his drawer. I was reimbursed for the difference and Ma brushed down. The following days before departure haven't seen him anymore. At my next visit, I was struck. Mr. Ma interpreted for me again. When I asked about the young agronomist, I didn't get an answer first. Gradually found out that he was sidelined and exiled to some remote post. I've seen him some other time in the area but he was too spooked to get closer. In sum, Comrade Ma, well-positioned in the Party hierarchy was reprimanded but not suspended. Not even a slap on the wrist. He didn't have to eat his own cooking. The innocent youngster, got clobbered for an incident that he had nothing to do with. Apparently, he wasn't as devoted a Party member. It's a communist country after all.

Chinese fancy meals and parties especially if they are on company's dime. There were parties put up in my honor when we travelled and visited various area and local celebs. Right off the bat there are courtesies, talks, toasts. Gradually the locals detach themselves from the guest of honor and engage in heated discussions. The more they drink, the more agitated the discussions are. You expect your interpreter to keep you somehow in business, update you on the flow of topics and bounce back your reactions. Too often, immersed in the chatter, he prefers to please his boss and play an active role in the discussions. You're left on your own throughout the meal put up in your honor.

The most popular game in northwestern China is finger betting. You show a given number of your fingers and cry out a number. All this has to be in Chinese. No matter if you're a guest. Whenever the number and your opponent's fingers match, you win. In the evenings you can listen to the loud and rhythmic counting coming from almost every window. The loser has to gulp one sip of the omnipresent liquor. It's a multiple-distilled very strong booze, clear and clean. A foreign guest, has to drink in both cases, when he wins and when he loses. That's the game changer. In one long evening I both won and lost. Had to drink with each game. This strong booze knocks you out without any early warning. Next morning found out why the Irish project leader didn't play but as kibitzer. They carried me, the prey, apparently unconscious to my room. Woke up in the morning, fine and dandy. Lying dressed in bed. No hangover, no headache. The clean liquor, devoid of any auxiliary ingredients, knocks you out but it doesn't contain any hangover-inducing toxins.





Baiyin township's agricultural leaders were Messrs. Liu and Wang. Two elder, level-headed administrators who ran quite a large set up of professionals encompassing a very large area. Traditionally clad in Mao suits and cap. Topped off with work all day long, they spent all their evenings with finger betting and were real smart at it. Their main preoccupation was a refrigerating facility where fruits and vegetables grown in the area's state farms were processed and marketed off season at higher prices. Obviously it was their way to make both a fast buck and ends meet.







*Trainees and training session in Gansu*

Our project had a local project leader and a deputy manager. The project manager's wife was the guesthouse's housekeeper while the deputy's wife, our cook. The latter was a chubby, jovial auntie. Without any English. Every morning she asked each consultant what he would like for



lunch and cooked accordingly. Her kitchen had neither running water nor a refrigerator. There was a tap in the courtyard where she washed the dish. She went daily to the market schlepping back two full and heavy baskets. She knew by now that I fancy Chinese dumplings and cooked them with great pleasure. She even taught me how to prepare them, the ones filled with vegetables and freshly ground beef.

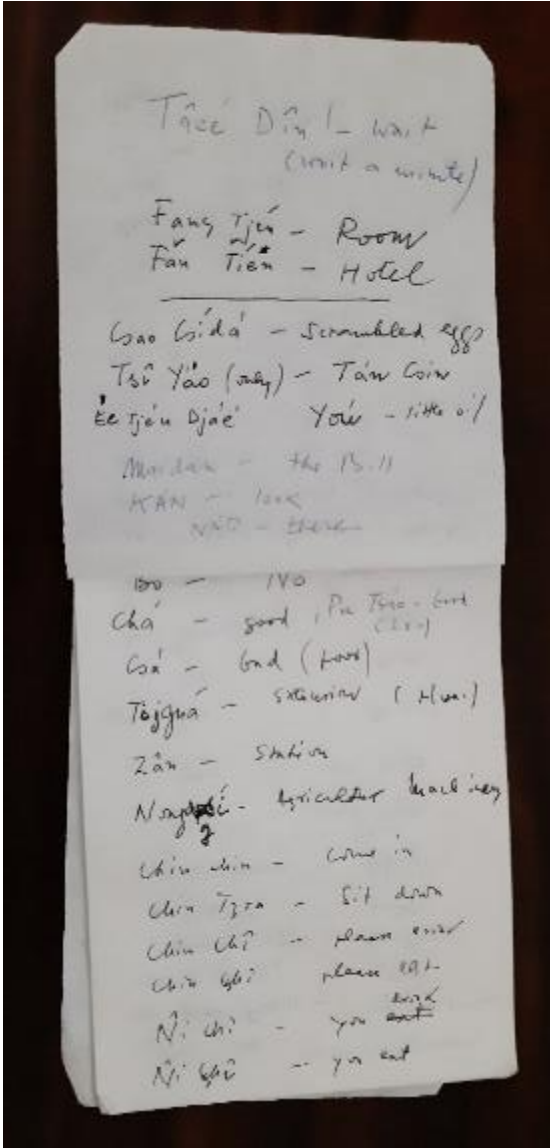


At the end of one mission, left for Beijing to catch a plane home. Was taken by jeep from Baiyin to Lanzhou seen off by a few local colleagues. Big mayhem at the airport. The flight to Beijing seemed to be overbooked. Waited at the airport for hours. In the nick of time, my team found a Chinese friend in the line. They asked him to take care of me. This became a mutual deal. His seat was now secured since he acted as my interpreter while I had support pushing my way through the crowd. However, "my interpreter" was a real pushy guy and in half an hour he was at the front of the line while I was still at its back. They let him through the gate as he presented himself as the interpreter of an important foreigner while I was still squeezed between tens of voyagers. After another hour have reached the gate and even the plane. My interpreter, all relaxed, was sitting with stretched out legs in the 2nd and wide row while I, on the ropes, in the last and crowded one. Finally, the noisy Tupolev took off and landed in heavy rain in Beijing. We got into the bus. Rain was so heavy that the bus didn't stop at the various hotels as usual but rushed straight to the end terminal. Spotted somehow a taxi. Being very late my buddy wasn't sure whether his state guesthouse is still open and wanted to spend the night in my hotel room. No way. Still I was ready to take his suitcase to my room. Paid the taxi to take him to his place. Got to bed at around 3 am. Phone call at 7. The guy wakes me up just to tell that he'll pick up his suitcase at 11.

At the end of another mission, flew again from Lanzhou to Beijing. Upon landing took a taxi from the airport line. After getting to the hotel in town the cabbie removed my two suitcases from the car. The fare: 40 yuan. I stepped out of the car and handed him a 100 yuan banknote. He smelled an opportunity. The guy looks around to see whether the ground is safe and steps on it. With my generous change. Checked in fuming of rage. On top of it they didn't have vacancies. Was about to crack down on the clerk on duty. The concierge who witnessed the cabby sailing down the river, rushed in to calm us both. Only then did they offer me a drink, a seat and a smile. After much back and forth, got a suite. Next day, two colleagues from the Beijing FAO team came to visit with me to work on some papers. They watched with awe my snazzy two-storey suite with all the VIP paraphernalia. It wasn't a free upgrade, after all have paid 60 yuan for the grandeur. And after all, it's a communist country.

Young Chinese are eager to learn English. This opens up doors, promises jobs and promotions. While I stayed at the guesthouse, every evening a few young agronomists working on the project came to my room to practice with me their English. I offered them a deal. We speak English for half an hour and then they teach me Chinese for the next half. Being a tonal language like many other far eastern languages, it is utmost unfamiliar to

our ears. I suggested to begin with words that I have heard them already a few times so I got used to them and they could explain then their meaning and polish my pronunciation. To catch and digest one single word and brush it up so that an average Chinese would understand me, took usually a two



weeks cycle. I found the biggest difficulty jotting down the exact phonetics of the words. The commonest vowel in Chinese seems to be one which resides somewhere between a Romanian "â" and "ă", with spillover to a Hungarian short "ö" or long "ó". As for consonants, you hear mainly that Hungarian-sounding "cs" or Romanian "ci" and "ț". In this context Romanian and Hungarian were highly helpful, otherwise wouldn't have been able to repeat a word without the accent signs which were close but never the real thing. After a lengthy effort, and taking notes of frequently repeated words or expressions, have reached a command of approximately 120 words which were helpful when being on your own in a cab or in a restaurant with no English menu. Or when you wanted to brag, especially when giving a talk or so. At that time, talks were supported with overhead projectors and transparencies. Have asked my interpreter to put my transparencies into Chinese. Since this was Chinese to me and unable to read it while lecturing, have inserted signs to know when to turn the

page/transparency.



*The Shaanxi team*

Travelling from Shaanxi back to Gansu, was hit by a bad flu. My team looked for a medical doctor but during the weekend couldn't find one. Willy-nilly we landed in a military hospital. The doctor, a lieutenant colonel, smiled with courtesy and said: "Sit down, please". I was happy, almost half cured to find an English-speaking MD. However, these three words were the only ones in his English vocabulary. Then came a lengthy debate among my team members which didn't lead us too far. They checked me into a hotel which seemed to be too expensive for them and they were gone in no time leaving me in the hands of an English-speaking young receptionist woman who was then solemnly appointed as my liaison person. Withdrew to my room, feeling bottomed out. Asked my liaison for just a little bit of chicken soup. After half an hour, a waiter appears with a huge bowl. Took off its lid and in a big pool of steaming soup a whole fat chicken was floating with its neck and head in place.

Hotels in provincial capitals such as Lanzhou have a policy of their own. You check in but you don't get a key just a room number. Now you go to the respective floor. At the end of the hall sits an elderly matron who holds the keys. She is unfriendly, shapeless and mustachioed. Reminding of the restroom ladies in the underground public pissoirs of Paris. When you get back tired at the end of the day, then it takes you time to find her. When a woman cleans your room while you're in it, the door has to be propped open, *de rigueur*.





*Dinner with the governor of Gansu Province*

While working in the province of Shaanxi, not far from Xian, have stayed at the guesthouse of the Agricultural University in Taigu. It wasn't a bad building, but its upkeep just awful. The rags were all dusty and stinking, the power wires were hanging out from their plugs and the water flow, capricious. Breakfasts consisted of a bowl of fish soup, followed by salted, smoked or other kind of foul-smelling fish. No bread, no coffee. Got thrashed after two such appalling breakfasts. Happy only after having found at the entrance gate of the University a little kiosk where eggs, bread and coffee could be found. Despite the language barrier could get a more or less decent breakfast. In this part of China no one drinks non boiled water. Everyone carries to work a jar of green tea with its leaves floating inside. As they drink, they fill up the jar with more boiled water. I brought a can of instant coffee and they made me a cup of coffee. Deeming coffee to tea, as I drank more coffee, they rushed to fill the cup with more water.

I had a bathroom but taking a bath was a mission impossible. The hose leading water to the showerhead came off the socket and the water flow stopped in the middle of the process. Always asked for a technician, who came, fixed the socket which lasted then for one whole day. Was fed up with this. Have been invited by the rector to attend a dinner in my honor. He came to pick me up from the guesthouse. I had to bring to his attention the way the university guests are being treated. Put everything on the line asking him to join me in the bathroom. Showed him the shaky hose, socket, taps, wires and the fact that his guest of honor was unable to take a decent

shower. A technician was dispatched in half an hour and he fixed the stuff which worked flawless for the next three days.

Mostly these people didn't have bathrooms in their homes. While working in the FAO offices in Beijing, have realized that at lunch break you couldn't use the restrooms. They were all taken and locked for a couple of hours. The secretaries didn't have bathrooms in their homes and were showering in the office at noon time. By the way, FAO Representative in Beijing was Pakistani. We got along pretty well.

While in Beijing, used to stay at the same hotel and take the meals across the road. The restaurant had English menus and decent food. Aquaria with fish were spread out in the main hall. Customers pointed at a given fish which was then cooked for them. One day a waiter brings with stretched out arms a huge wagging snake to the table next to me to present it before cooking. To steer clear of such an experience have moved to another restaurant. At the official meals you could find all sort of oddities, fried worms, cold donkey meat, camel paw, just to name a few. I indulged in frog legs, a known French delicacy and the cold donkey slices which looked and tasted as pastrami.

The students were living in packed dorms. These were not appropriate for studying and apparently the library space was also limited. Have seen hundreds of them strolling up and down in the campus park with open books or copybooks, reading silently but mainly loud. Getting ready for tests.

Have visited with many researchers and lecturers at the university. Briefed them on our project and tried to involve them in its professional support. The idea was well-received as well as the gesture of a foreign consultant to update them, asking for their opinion and collaboration. I came across two researchers who survived Mao's cultural revolution. At the time of my first visit to China in 1991, we were just 15 years after the end of this most cruel period in China's history (1966-1976) causing the brutal death of 20 million people. One of the professors, educated in the UK, passed five choppy years of the revolution hiding in his mother's country house. He was disconnected of his professional career throughout this period. Far from his spouse and children. He spent years in harsh conditions and lost not only five years of his career path but couldn't keep a cool head and unable to get back to cutting edge research. And if you're not there, you're out of business. At the time of our meeting he was a deeply disappointed person who lost hope to make up for the lost years. Another researcher was deported and spent years building terraces on the barren hills of northwestern China. Hardest physical work spent among his intellectual peers in a forced labor camp. Neither did he have much left in the tank. Have seen in Ningxia slopes with

all the abandoned and useless terraces built by millions of outcasts. This kind of information could be gleaned only from people who spoke English and communication didn't require interpretation.



*Abandoned terraces in the barren hills of the northwest.*

The university in Taigu was at an hour's drive from the UNESCO World Heritage site of the Terracotta Army clay soldiers. Sculptures depicting the armies of Qin Shi Huang, the first Emperor of China. It is a form of funerary art buried with the emperor with the purpose of protecting the emperor in his afterlife. The figures, dating from approximately the late third century BCE, were discovered in 1974 by local farmers outside Xian. The figures



include warriors, chariots and horses. It is estimated that the three pits containing the Terracotta Army held more than 8,000 soldiers, 130 chariots with 520 horses, and 150 cavalry horses, the majority of which remained buried in the pits.





*Terracotta Army in Xian*

While walking in Taigu's main street leading to the university came across Uigurs. They are Muslim, coming from Xinjiang, the huge northwestern autonomous region of China. Xinjiang borders the countries of Mongolia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan and India. They had their restaurants and shops in the main street. They spoke but basic Chinese although many of them were students. Were happy to talk English with a foreigner, invited me to their pubs. They always looked for an opportunity to gripe about the Chinese. And they couldn't care less about the fact that I came from Israel. On the contrary, were very friendly.

We travelled also to another project area, the much smaller autonomous region of Ningxia. It is inhabited by Muslim Chinese, ethnic Hui. Muslim men are easily recognizable, they all wear white caps. I liked their food. Matter-of-factish they don't eat pork but know their way with lamb. The main dish being a delicious lamb soup rich in vegetables. It's a high altitude, arid, desert-like region and the project's focus was on land reclamation and the massive development of canals and subsequent irrigation and improved water management.

Both on the way to the project area in the northwest and back, used to stop over Beijin. The capital's main avenues were filled with masses of gray Chinese men and women pedaling their bicycles. The only vehicles were trucks, buses, taxis and government cars. Ministry of Agriculture's Foreign Relations used to spoil me with sightseeing trips to the main attractions: the Wall, the Forbidden City, Temple of the Sun, Temple of Heaven, Summer Palace. The first McDonald's branch was opened and you couldn't get in. It's been swarmed for weeks. Used to pay visits to the Embassy of Israel. First, at the time when no full diplomatic relations have been declared yet. Prof. Yossi Shalhevet, the former Director of Agricultural Research, was the head

of the representation. We used to get together whenever I visited Beijing. Later, Dr. Yoav Sarig from Volcani Center, served as agricultural attache and we often exchanged experiences and ideas. On 4 November, 1995, have been invited to dinner in Yoav's home. Late in the evening, the news about Rabin's assassination reached us. We were all sure that it's the outcome of Muslim terror. Only in the morning got the awful news that the villain was Jewish. A new and sad page began in the history of Israel.

In the late 1980s, our book, J. Palti, R. Ausher: "Advisory Work in Crop Pest and Disease Management" was published by Springer, Berlin. Have received a letter from a young Chinese plant pathologist that he is keen on translating the book and asked us to come to grips with the publisher to authorize a Chinese version. I wrote him back that it's indeed a matter of the publisher and not of the authors but I will hit Beijing in several weeks and we could discuss the issue. We met at our Embassy in Beijing. I elaborated at length on the authorization procedure and its problematic when, he took out two books of his handbag. One for me and one for Dr. Palti. They were the printed copies of our book in Chinese. When walking through the famous Silk Market of Beijing, on display was all the knock off. Forged brand names of jeans, shirts, bags, accessories, etc. The same was true for disks containing pirate software. Under US pressure, police used to raid the market's streets to seize illegal pieces of software. When police appeared, vendors were long gone. They all had shelters, storage rooms in basements of the neighboring streets, where they kept their merchandise and could go underground until the storm was over.

Over the years, Israel's foreign aid installed 4 or 5 demonstration farms in various parts of China. They demonstrated technologies as drip irrigation, fertigation and water management; glass- or plastic house technologies of vegetables and flower crops; computerized management of dairy herds and others. Wherever have travelled in remotest northwestern provinces came always across researchers, technicians, farm advisors, officials and leaders of growers associations who have visited the Israeli demonstration farms. They were deeply impressed by the displayed technologies and eager to follow them. With a relatively low and cost-effective investment, Israel brought a significant contribution to Chinese agriculture. It created ample echo for itself, leaving behind a tangible impact. Chinese admire Jewish people for being smart. In fact their exposure to Jews was and is minimal. It's kind of an empathy nurtured between two peoples with a long history. The same applies to Israelis, admired for being non-conventional and leading in various technologies. While meeting with the governor of Gansu, the leading official of a province of 30 million inhabitants, he expressed strongly this view. He

expected Israeli assistance to reach Gansu in many domains, even before diplomatic relations were established in 1992.

The anecdotes and insights brought up here date back to the years 1991 and 1996 when I used to work in China. Throughout this period, the change became evident. In the last years, Antonovs and Tupolevs were out, Boeings and Airbuses, in. Pilots got rid of their Mao suits to wear the habitual white short-sleeves. The swarms of bicycles on the main towns' streets were shoved aside by private cars and ensuing traffic jams. Chains of chic foreign shops replacing the outdated government stores.

China became the second largest economy of the world. I tend to believe that the aid of the international development agencies, putting the flesh on the bones of China's upgraded agricultural policy and technologies, played its share, catalyzing the giant's evolution.







*With party bosses of agriculture in Gansu and typical Gansu village*



*With Messrs. Liu (l) and Wang (r)*