

# My professional Adventures

## 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