

## Thailand

### Robi Auscher

Stepped first on Thai soil 45 years ago. Nowadays it's a hot touristic spot and for good reasons. Despite the awful heat it was always an attractive country and I liked its people. Basically, the country is split between two categories. The ethnic Chinese, who being discriminated for years took Thai last names and obscure their identity, and the ethnic Thai. When you walk down a street and the store's door is opened up for you, and you're gently invited with a deep bow just to have a look inside and offered a glass of coke or cold tea, you deal with the Chinese. When you get into a store and no one responds to your "Swadikap" and the vendors go on with their chitchat, you're on Thai soil. The same is true for the Chinese tailors who deliver a men's suit in 24 hours and you see their whole family living, eating and working until midnight in the shop. The ladies' tailors excel too offering quickly-delivered very chic designs made out of beautiful Thai silk or other local fabric. I used to work with many government officials. There too, the more ambitious and agile had Chinese background. An analogy with our people is almost self-evident. Is discrimination a stimulus and is the ambitious stranger an a priori object of unfair treatment?

Thai people have a somewhat darker complexion especially if they come from the South. White skin is in high regard and Thai women very much as the Burmese shield themselves from the sun with colorful umbrellas. In Burma most women smear their faces with a wood powder, Thanaka to protect their skin and for beauty purpose. Din sor pong is a traditional white powder derived from limestone that many Thai women use for cosmetic and health.

Prakong Chobseng was the first Thai person we met. She was a doctoral student in the Weizmann Institute in the department in which my wife worked. She was very nice and very alone so we adopted her and she came often to our home for dinner or over holidays and was loved by our kids. She left for Thailand after her studies and when I began to arrive in Bangkok we used to get together. This was an audacious mindset on her side since a white man and a local woman seen together hint at a frivolous bond. We used to go to restaurants to raise old memories and she took me to Thai folklore shows and sightseeing. She married and we continued to see each other together with her

husband. In a few years she became a full professor with Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok.

Thai women enjoy an aura of unique beauty. In my humble opinion, the average Thai woman doesn't excel in beauty but the beautiful are extremely beautiful. Here again there are two distinct parties. The decent women who are expected to preserve very strictly their respectability, and the prostitutes. While we travelled in the field in packed trucks with female company, we had to be very careful not to touch them even on bumpy drive. In a plain vanilla sense, prostitution in Thailand is a big industry but it has not been geared to tourists. It was born for domestic purposes. A Thai man who respects himself will not go straight home from his work. He will pay first a visit to his massage parlor and to his steady massager. And only then fully relaxed will he reach home. One Israeli researcher took part in a binational Israel-Thai program. His Thai counterpart spent all his lunch breaks at the massage parlor. Quite untypical since most of them do this at the end of the work day. All hotels in Bangkok host massage parlors for the guests. They are not pushy. In the country hotels, however, when the evening sets in, girls knock on your door advertising unequivocally their merchandise. One of my teammates refused all offerings. The disappointed girl's response: maybe you want I bring you a young boy? Bangkok's Pat Pong street is by now world-famous for its bars and brothels, and a hit for tourists. A less show-offish version could be found along Sukhumvit at Soi Cowboy. But almost every other store in these neighborhoods offers carnal amusement from live shows, escort services, brothels and whatever in-between. You can see lots of elder tourists on the streets escorted by young girls rented on a daily or weekly basis.

Most prostitutes are poor country girls who had to leave home due to the prevailing wretched conditions, bound to make a buck for themselves and their families. They have no profession or the right education to make a more decent earning. Although ostracized while active, the community accepts them once they retire to their villages, usually burdened with a kid or two.

We found evidence of the fact that prostitution is first and foremost a domestic industry when a Thai colleague in Chang Mai, in the northern part of the country, took us for an evening stroll. He led us through various god-forgotten and poorly lighted streets. No neon lights, no signs. Just a row of faceless houses in the dark. We stepped down to the lower ground floor entry and in each house along the street there was a flat with 10-15 very young and unattractive country girls waiting for customers. Matter-of-factish all local. The

girls looked bored, uninviting and unmasked. So different from Bangkok's scintillating flashes of light and glittering boards. With huge houses of ill repute, massage parlors that offer much more than massage, with tempting young women in sexy-clothes sitting in transparent boxes, wearing numbers as race horses or athletes. Bangkok was far ahead the various Street Parades embraced by the western world, and around all these places transgenders, fags of all genders, sizes, tendencies and sleights could be found offering their wacky stuff in an unoffensive way.

My first visit to Bangkok, back in 1975 was on my way to Rangoon. Whenever, I went on mission to Burma had to layover in Bangkok both back and forth. What a striking difference. Bangkok, modern and tempting, its five-star hotels offering seven-star service. The streets exhibiting opulence, state of the art shopping malls, splendid jewelry stores, well-endowed emporia and posh restaurants. The suburbs full of wealthy villas in the middle of large citrus groves. Very much like Singapore at that time. Rangoon displayed a run-down center with its black mold-covered British colonial buildings, rough sidewalks, poor roads emanating a torpid rural character. On my first flight from Bangkok to Rangoon was seated next to J. Loewenstein, a seasoned World Bank advisor who worked in Burma some 20 years earlier. As we overflew the villages, the rice paddies, the roads, approaching Rangoon, he said - nothing has changed here over the last 20 years. I wonder if I would notice any difference from a 45 years perspective?

While on World Bank missions to Burma used to put up at the Dusit Thani in Bangkok as it was very close to the Thai Olympia building where the Bank's office resided. I was awed by the hotel's luxury, its posh shops and restaurants and spoiling, careful service. Many hotels have sprouted in the town over the years and the service of the good ones is impeccable. Thai people are clean and neat. Men wear well-ironed shirts and pants, their black hair shining of gel. Usually they don't shave since their faces are hairless. Women display a buttoned-down chic. Often government officials wear uniforms much alike the military. It grants them a sense of hierarchic authority. The King enjoys supreme respect but the government was volatile for many years. There were lots of cases while riding to the airport had to identify ourselves due to frequent lockdowns.

The road from the airport to mid-town was always jammed and it took at least one and a half hours at peak traffic. During the monsoons, the streets in low-lying Bangkok, were flooded and bicycles carried people from one side to

another for a few bahts. Meetings were always late since participants were always caught up in traffic. And still Bangkok had a special charm, the Chao Phraya river dividing it in two, and hosting its unique floating market. The Grand Palace. The wats/temples: Wat Arun, Wat Pho (Temple of Reclining Buddha), Wat Traimit (Temple of the Golden Buddha), Wat Suthat. The numerous shrines on the streets were all pedestrians and drivers passing by bow their heads in respect for Buddha. The rich and colorful markets and bazars and the women selling jasmine wreaths exuding all over the town their sweet heavy fragrance. Young girls holding jars with confined cockroaches for an addict smell of their perfume. I stayed at many hotels in various neighborhoods and got to know the place almost as a hometown. On my last visit in 2007 couldn't recognize the once beaten paths. Now you watch the town top-down. Bangkok's Skytrain has changed the city's streets, face and skyline. Together with the metro it is an indispensable mass transit system. Without it the town would have choked and wilted but it shed some of its hot and hazy charm.



*Chao Praya River, Bangkok.*

In Bangkok, my first and main contact was Mr. (Kun) Narong Minanandana, the head of the Agricultural Extension Service's Division of Plant Protection. In fact, he fulfilled the same position I had at home. Kun Narong was very keen on our cooperation and after our primary discussions wanted to visit with us in Israel. He knew how to give a good time. At our first meeting he drove us for a

weekend's stay at Pattaya, the sea resort that became a big touristic hit. Next joint sightseeing at Ayuthia, Thailand's former capital. His division was in

*With training course secretaries and with trainee and Yoram Melamed, Chiang Mai*



*Wat Arun, Bangkok (2007, 1976)*

charge of locust control and other area-wide emergency pest control operations. To this end he could rely on the assistance of a military helicopter wing. Our next pleasure trip was chopper-borne. Under perfect weather we've been on a lovely sightseeing flight of both hills and valleys and mountain pagodas. I boarded the chopper despite my deep aversion to this vehicle. Years back we carried out field trials with pesticides sprayed from a helicopter. I sat next to the pilot in that transparent bubble and we flew back and forth spraying at a height of 50 cm over Herzliya airfield at craziest speed. Had all the time the feeling that we're about to crash into the runway and at the end of

each swath, the chopper just rose abruptly to turn and lower wild again toward the next stripe. The senior division chiefs of the Extension Service were appointed for a 2 years term as Directors of Extension. Narong was skipped for promotion since he filled his pockets with kickback money from the pesticide industry. Narong was a poker face, controversial personality. He had sharp professional senses but was corrupt and unreliable. I was invited to his house for dinner. One of his associates drove me to his home for a 6 pm meeting. We waited and waited, his wife busy with preparations, tried not to lose face. He appeared around 8 o'clock legless drunk wearing a frozen smile. Was propped right to the restroom to throw up. We left. He never apologized. He called me at one of my next visits and asked me to wear a suit. He didn't reveal the reason. Narong took me to a palace to be received by Princess Maha Chakri, the King's daughter. She awarded me an order of distinction for services rendered to the Kingdom. At another occasion, Narong invited me and the Israeli project leader for a weekend to his country house. We did show up but he left a message that he will join us the next day. To make up for his late arrival, two very young prostitutes awaited us on the porch. We sent them off. At one of the field trips, we put up at night in a country hotel. Just when I reached my room, I realized where we are. The whole ceiling was covered by mirrors. Looking out of the window have seen a divided parking lot where individual cars were parked and could be masked by curtains so their identity could remain unnoticed. Apparently this was the best or most cost-effective lodging in the region. Passed a silent night, without music or shady sounds.

Have fixed an appointment with Narong in his office in Bangkok on my way home from a conference in Kyoto. I called the office to be advised that his daughter was killed in a road accident. Rode to his home to pay my condolences. He died a few years after the completion of our joint project. I became befriended with his deputy, Vasu, an open-minded and down-to-earth professional. He used to raise horses on his farm. He got into horse betting and put everything on the line. Lost a fortune in his own right. Being at a pinch, borrowed money from his colleagues. The situation in the office verged on the impossible as he was unable to pay his debts. He was sent away. I heard after years that he was rehired in a much lower position. Narong was followed by Udom Dechmani, a decent and low-key senior plant protection specialist. We sustained good ties.

We developed a comprehensive collaboration program with Narong based on plant protection and extension methods involving bit by bit other subject matter areas in the program: farm management, honey bee management,

extension methodologies. We ran three mobile training courses on plant protection for Narong's division, establishing strong professional ties with his unit's regional and headquarter-based advisors. These activities were followed



*With HRH Princess Maha Chakri and Kun Narong. My suit is borrowed from the project leader, much shorter than me.*

by a visit in Israel of Thai Agricultural Research and Extension directors and several division heads, Narong included. Honey bee management became a very popular training course. It was attended not only by the respective specialists but by several division heads who then established their own private honey bee producing business. All these activities were carried out in the framework of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



*Lecturing in one of the plant protection training courses, Chang Mai.*



*Opening of training course in Chang Mai, 1<sup>st</sup> row from left: Y. Melamed, M. Atzmon, province governor, ambassador Dafni, head of extension, R. Auscher. 2<sup>nd</sup> row 4<sup>th</sup> from left: Narong, 3<sup>rd</sup> from right: Vasu. Trainees are standing.*

Thailand approached the World Bank for a state-wide project focused on the strengthening of its Agricultural Extension Services. The Bank teams led by D. Benor, the former head of agricultural extension in Israel, identified and appraised the project. On the background of the intensive collaboration with our country, Tahal Consulting Engineers Ltd. an Israeli consulting firm won the Bank's tender and was empowered with the state-wide project's execution for



its five years duration. This move structured the joint activity in a formal and financed framework. An Israeli project leader assisted by four Israeli regional coordinators was positioned and the program took off. As one of the lead consultants have been employed by Tahal on short-term missions centered on project monitoring and strengthening of research-extension collaboration.

The first Israeli project leader was a Tahal employee and head of the latter's small agricultural unit. He wasn't an extension person but served in Thailand before, knew both the people and the terrain and was able to jump start the project due to his easy-going charm and the friendly personal relations he established and cultivated. He was followed by an economist and citrus grower, a classmate of mine at the Faculty of Agriculture. His daily tennis matches were more important for him than going the extra mile expected from a project manager. He adopted a patronizing, colonial approach to the locals who disliked him. To head off an open confrontation, we monitored him closely. He was rotated out after two infamous years. The third project leader was a kibbutz member, a well-known cotton grower. He served first as a regional coordinator in Thailand and was well-versed on the project's nitty-gritty. He was born in Germany, around 70 years old. A hard working, meticulous person with mud on his boots but no formal education. He paid much attention to the details slipping here and there the big picture. It was our role, as lead consultants to mitigate his performance which was a very positive and respectful one, after all.

My rescuer in Bangkok was Yoram Melamed. Yoram worked in my department in Israel and was granted unpaid leave to work for FAO in Thailand as plant protection officer attached to the Ministry of Agriculture. He drew flak from our administration but resisted for five years its steady attempts to cut short his leave and come home. After five years he was entitled to UN pension, his and mainly his wife's ultimate wish. I was in need of rescue since the local bacterial flora and my digestive tract were dead incompatible. At the beginning I used to reach Bangkok returning from missions in Rangoon. Burma has no steady power supply or refrigerators and the hygienic conditions of the markets are below any standard. Still, I was never ill. After one or two days spent in Thailand, a modern, clean, well-refrigerated country, I was sick with regularity. I would call Yoram for a supply of medication and moral support. Often had to depart for scheduled field trips with Thai teammates, well equipped with pills but weak and on the verge of dehydration. They used station wagons with no air conditioning and these field trips were pure hell. One evening, before departing for Rangoon had dinner with Vasu and his wife

at a classy fish restaurant. They have seen me off at the airport. That shark fin soup was my nemesis. Began to throw up in a couple of hours on the plane. I had a consolation. My teammate while working in Burma was Thai. He lived in the US and before joining the World Bank acted as professor of hydrology at a US university. We were supposed to fly together from Bangkok to Rangoon. Thai Airways went on strike. World Bank officials were prohibited from flying with Burmese Airways an unsafe airline with a history of crashes. We spent a week in Bangkok waiting for the strike's end. Meanwhile my Thai colleague got stomach troubles and was laying in bad shape in his hotel room. He didn't let me visit him until he felt more presentable. Even then he was sea-green pale after losing a few pounds.



*With Kun Udom Dechmani (with glass) Kun Narong's successor.*

Thai are outgoing people. They love to eat in restaurants which usually look good, are reliable and serve very nice food. We used to dine out quite often together and although have ordered with attention, have been hit more often than not. They like to drink and when they pass the limit, become red in face and sweat, leaving behind their silent and calm manner. Usually, they talk *sotto voce* and are troubled by loud talk. Israelis are known for talking tough. When listening to Israelis talking among themselves, the Thai always had the impression that they quarrel all the time.

Had always maintained good relationship with our Embassy in Bangkok and got to know closely many of the ambassadors: Mordechai Lador, Abraham Cohen

and Reuven Dafni. The latter, who was one of the paratroopers dropped behind enemy lines in Europe in WWII attended the opening of our training course in Chiang Mai. He delivered his speech in perfect Thai to our astonishment and to the admiration of our Thai colleagues for his prowess.



*Israeli training team in plant protection and extension methods: H. Shoham, Y. Golan, R. Auscher and Thai counterparts, Bangkok, 1983.*

\* \* \* \* \*

En route home from Bangkok wanted to visit two places: *Singapore* and *Teheran*. In the mid-1970s Singapore looked as a small and sleepy Chinese town with its low buildings, its citrus groves, open water canals and green country gardens. Ten years later its skyline was shaped by modern skyscrapers planted amid well-groomed green parks, swish waterfalls, ponds and bridges, statues, shrines, blending the oriental with the western style. Singapore Airlines has an excellent reputation. I was about to board a flight to Paris on the eve of August the 31<sup>st</sup> to attend a meeting next day on September the 1<sup>st</sup>. However, the latter was the opening date of the school year. The airline bus was late for pick up from the hotel. We arrived late at the airport and the check-in counters for Paris were flooded by long lines of exhausted, mainly French passengers and their school-age kids. Conditions all chaotic, ground staff overburdened, unable to cope with a raging queue. Squeezed in the mob, much later than scheduled departure time, have reached the counter. Presented my air ticket and the clerk moved to the back office to reappear after 20 minutes. Then another one asked for my passport and vanished. I was

afraid that in the meddle, I'll never get it back. Another twenty minutes and instead of the non-stop flight they offer me another one with a stopover in Dubai. All nerves and soaked in sweat, I explain that with an Israeli passport cannot land in Dubai. After another 20 spooky minutes got a business class ticket for the overbooked and delayed initial flight. What a hassle with such prestigious an airline. A date to be avoided.

Stopped in *Teheran* still under the Shah's reign to visit with a classmate who was stationed there as citrus management long-term consultant. I liked mainly the snow-clad crests encircling distantly the town. Have landed in Tel Aviv and were on my way to passport control within the terminal when a muffled noise was heard. We were all rushed back to the airport's open space. The smoke cleared only after a lengthy time. An incoming woman's hand luggage was checked and it went off that very moment, killing her and the female security. Apparently, a bomb was planted in her handbag by a terrorist boyfriend without her knowledge. We were called back into the terminal and had to wait for a long time. They screened all handbags in search of a possible detonating device. I knew my wife awaited me at the airport. She had no information about the incoming travelers, neither did I know anything about her. While waiting there a whole glass wall cracked and fell on the expecting public. We went both through scary moments. After a couple of hours I was finally able to reach a public phone to call her parents. By then she was on her way home without knowing what happened to me. We met at home belated, enriched with another thrilling experience.