

In the Middle East

By Robi Auscher

I don't go to **Turkey** anymore on vacations and try to avoid any connections through Istanbul. Still, I enjoyed working in Turkey and with Turkish people. By the way it's an impeccably clean country. Whenever you're in the countryside you come across that little old and bent lady with a broom in her hand cleaning the sidewalk in front of her house. The same is true for the storekeeper who cleans the street himself and sprinkles it with water to reduce the dust or sends his apprentice to do so.

To kick off the first stage of the methyl-bromide substitution project, went on an identification mission with a senior official from the Ministry of Environment Protection in Ankara. He had clear Mongolian features. Told me about the late migration wave of his people from the steppes of central Asia to Turkey around the 12th century. The major wave of Turkish migration from Asia to Anatolia took place between the 6th and 10th centuries. His people practiced inbreeding within the kinship group, preserving their typical features. Although Moslem, he was loose about his faith and politically opposed to Erdogan's strong pro Moslem policy. Whenever we sat down for a meal he would gulp first at least three Ouzos to open up his appetite and mood. We visited two candidate institutions to coordinate the state-wide, UNIDO-supervised, prospective methyl bromide alternatives project.

The Bati Akdeniz Agricultural Research Center (BATEM) is located in Antalya's center, closely surrounded by the most expensive residential areas. It was established almost 100 years ago and it is declared by now as national reserve where no building or architectural changes are allowed. It is a green haven, a farm with hedges, orchards, greenhouses, arable land and utility buildings in mid-town.

Next visit to the Agricultural Research Institute and the Çukurova University, both in Adana. We preferred the Antalya-located institute, despite the fact that Adana kebab is the most delicious in the whole country. We drove the 500 km from Antalya to Adana along the Mediterranean coast, a mountain-forests-sea blend of unique beauty, comparable perhaps to California's Road No. 1, linking San Francisco and Los Angeles. At the Adana Research Station have met several times Dr. Seral Yücel. She is a prominent plant pathologist investigating soil solarization in Turkey. Her PhD thesis centered on the topic and much of

the successful promotion and adoption of solarization by Turkish vegetable and flower producers could be credited to her professional leadership.

Thus, most of this work took place in Antalya. A sought-after and liberal touristic spot on the Mediterranean coast with a huge bazaar and a whole row of hotels of various qualities from one to five stars, spread over kilometers of nice and sandy beach. Everyone who owned a piece of land around the beach turned to the hotel business. The large hotels were designed by architects and display taste and style. Most of the smaller hotels or guesthouses were built by local craftsmen and lack taste. Still, even the larger hotels with a clear architectural style are being orientalized with additional ornament which doesn't suit the original concept. As Dolly Parton used to say "it costs a lot of money to look this cheap". We used to spend summer vacations at such a five-star facility at Side, north of Antalya. The beach is perfect, sandy, sliding smoothly into the sea, still waters. Food was always fastidiously prepared and once a week ethnic dinners were offered sporting local, Italian, south American, etc. cuisines.

One evening being on my own in Antalya have dined in a local restaurant. The young waiter was nice and we exchanged a few pleasantries in English. After knowing where do I come from, he looked around whether it's safe to tell me that he just finished military service. He's Kurdish but no one in the military or in this place, knows anything about it.

BATEM was managed by an authoritarian director, Dr. Suat Yilmaz. He held a PhD in plant pathology from a US University where he ran a Plant Clinic for several years before returning to Turkey. This was typical of the Turkish education policy. The government went to great lengths to provide fellowships for graduate and post graduate studies in the US. In turn, the recipients were requested to serve in the Turkish government the number of fellowship years awarded. I worked with several of these young PhDs. Unhappy with the country's hierarchic managerial style and of their institute's, more specifically, they had the blues. They pondered to go back to the US upon the end of their commitment to government. Nonetheless, I liked to work with Suat. He sounded always upbeat. Am afraid he's been misogynous, skipping the promotion of well-performing women. Still, he espoused one clear rule: feel free to criticize us and we will adjust by your next visit. Said and done. This was the way we followed throughout the years of my visits to the fulfillment of both sides. This spirit was dispersed among all colleagues setting a frank collaboration framework. While in the office, in full Turkish tradition, every

couple of hours a waiter would bring little cups of strong tea. They were so strong and brought so often that after the first couple of servings and ensuing hypertension, have asked the janitor for lower-octane green tea.

We traveled a lot visiting vegetable growers. They grew their crops under plastic tunnels or in greenhouses. Whole valleys looked like plastic lakes from above. The development of this industry was incredibly fast and turned the area and the country into an exporting power. Thousands of trucks carried daily their produce mainly to south-eastern Europe. Smallholders were quick to adopt soil solarization as an alternative to chemical soil fumigation. The reason being that solarization entails covering soil with drip irrigation pipes and a plastic layer for 3-4 weeks to bask solarization's soil pasteurization effect. In other words, to develop moderately-warm soil temperatures but for a long period of time. The cost isn't high let alone the fact that the soil is busy for solarization's duration. The big growers, however, better endowed financially, stuck to chemical soil fumigation. The smallholders adopted most successfully the solarization technology putting Turkey among the earliest adopters. With BATEM's staff we have set up demonstration plots in various places of the region to lead the transition of growers from MB to its alternatives. Soil steaming, a cumbersome and expensive technology promoted by UNIDO was dropped in favor of solarization and chemical alternatives. The village-level extension advisors, mostly farmers themselves had good standing in their communities and have done a very good job in the adoption process of MB substitutes. The field work provided its goodies, we usually stopped at a cozy village or crossings restaurant. My company knew their way. We didn't visit only the coastal surroundings but also the inland. This meant taking a beautiful forest-covered mountain road from Antalya up to Isparta. And then out of the blue you discover Turkey's other facet. Villages and towns full of mosques and of head-scarfed women.

While waiting for a flight at Istanbul airport could watch a feud between an elder Turkish man and his evenly elder head-scarfed wife. After a heavy reprimand in which only his voice was audible, words turned into facts. He hits his heavy-set wife, she doesn't gripe. Kicks her until she falls weeping on the floor and shares with her a few additional kicks whenever she tries clumsily to get up on her feet. Lots of people watch the case. No one intervenes or tries to behave in any gentlemanlike way.



Greenhouses and plastic tunnels covering a whole valley



Field visit. In the middle: Alessandro Amadio, Suat Yilmaz, Reuben Auscher, Abdullah Ünlü.

Many Turks grew up and were educated in Germany. Have developed quite high fever in the hotel and asked for a doctor who sent us to a private clinic. The Turkish MD in charge spoke flawless German and showed top notch expertise. His treatment as well as his certificate filled out in German were highly appreciated first by us and second by the insurer's medical expert. Visited a very large and modern nursery. The owner and manager, a physicist who taught at one of the German universities. After retiring he returned to Turkey and invested in agribusiness. His nursery was a highly successful enterprise producing vegetables and flower seedlings for a large area in the country. We popped into a carpet store next to Antalya. The owners spoke authentic German and had business in both Germany and Turkey. Their service seemed reliable, the merchandise of quality at reasonable prices. The purchased article was delivered by mail, well packed and in time.



With our daughter, Orly, in Antalya (2005)

My local counterparts had the impression that I understand the language. It's not the case. Still, if you add up the 2500 Turkish loanwords in Romanian and the few hundred words that infiltrated Hungarian, you master a thesaurus which helps you following Turkish to a certain extent. Our capability to pronounce the unpronounceable, spewing out vowels such as ö, ő, ü, ú, common for Hungarian and Turkish just added fuel to the flame of suspicion. We were dealing a lot with glasshouses – geam-sera in Turkish, with aubergine – pătlăgea in Turkish. Caise in Romanian or alma, dió, körte in Hungarian, need no translation. Pite, tepsi, ibrik, joghurt, tarhonya are all well-known in the Hungarian kitchen. Food-related words in Romanian such as bairam, boia, capac, chef, chiftea, ciorbă, cioban, ciulama, cutie, chibrit, magiun, musaka, pilaf, sarma, sobă, ghiveci, tutun, covrig, briceag, etc. If you go further, most Hungarian livestock terms are Turkish loanwords: barom, ökör, bika, borjú, ürü, kos, kecske, disznó, tyúk, tóró, író, kuvasz as well as búza, árpa, őrlő, borsó, gyümölcs, alma, szőlő, bor, seprő, etc. This is just a partial, abridged listing. Anyone mastering Hungarian and/or Romanian is able, without being aware of it, to guess individual words of a Turkish conversation. In addition, an Israeli ear can detect in this language Arabic words such as merheba, ya ani, tembel, mangal and certain Arabic words which sound identical in Hebrew such as taarih -date, or merkez- center, ketab-book, memleket-country, miskin-lazy, sene-year, rais- president, hafif-light.

I wondered often about the Turkish culture's legacy in Europe in the areas ruled by the Ottomans. Have reached two insights. They don't rely on any systematic quantitative fact-finding or analysis. It's a subjective, qualitative assessment. Scouring through observations of someone who grew up in the area and was exposed as such to various comparable social phenomena.

First, the longer the Turkish rule, the weaker the states' ethical systems and infrastructure. In other words, the predominance of corruption and nepotism.

The Ottomans ruled:

Walachia between 1417 and 1859, for 442 years,
 Serbia between 1394 and 1817 for 423 years,
 Greece between 1458 and 1822 for 364 years,
 Moldavia between 1538 and 1878 for 340 years,
 The Banat between 1552 and 1715 for 164 years,
 Hungary between 1541 and 1699 for 158 years.

These periods were not continuous and were interrupted by Venetian rule in Greece or Russian and Habsburgian in the others until independence was fully achieved. Right after being freed of Ottoman rule, the Banat and Hungary came under the Habsburgian sphere of influence. This brought about an infrastructural evolution consisting of drainage, canalized and navigable rivers, introduction of central-European administration standards and juridical rules, cadastral maps of arable land and real estate. In addition, the Banat was colonized by Swabian agricultural producers who set the pattern for a prosperous agricultural growth. Am taking the liberty of stating that the Banat, Transylvania and Hungary, due to their proximity to central-Europe, are less affected by the deleterious effects of a lengthy Ottoman rule in comparison with Balkan states such as Walachia, Moldavia, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, respectively, ruled by the Ottomans for significantly longer periods of time. However, we have to mention in this context the tolerant attitude of the ottomans toward non-Moslem populations once conquered: Sephardi Jews, Greeks, and other nationalities and religious beliefs. This was not the case e.g. during the autocratic and anti-Semitic rule of Empress Maria Theresa.

The icing on the cake is that Turkey left behind a delicious cuisine based on oriental spices, grilled meat, salads, stuffed vegetables or *au gratin* in layers. The longer their rule, the more tangible their positive impact on the local kitchen. The peculiarity of the Turkish way of cooking meat dates back to their long history spent in central Asia as tent-dwelling nomad shepherds. They didn't want to cook within the tent and grilled or smoked their meat or ground meat outdoors.



Cappadocia

In summary, the work in Turkey did pan out and was enjoyable professionally. Very much due to the open and friendly relationship established with BATEM staff and the frank collaboration guided under the leadership of Suat Bey. The field results were very good and the adoption rate of soil solarization surpassed all expectations. We vacationed 6 times at Side near Antalya having the unique opportunity to visit Cappadocia and enjoy the splendid beach of Side and its antique Hellenic ruins. All Turkish hotels are cheaper than their opposite numbers in Greece, Spain or Italy, attracting nowadays mainly cheerleading Russian and German tourists. Service was nice but sliding downwards with time. Istanbul is also a fascinating place. It offers the cruise on the Bosphorus from Istanbul up to the Black Sea, a visit to Topkapi's treasures, to the Blue and Agia Sophia mosques and to the city's streets, squares, restaurants and unique flavor.

Have organized back home three international workshops on methyl bromide (MB) substitution and many of my colleagues in Antalya as well as from other institutes in Turkey took part. This heightened our upfront friendly relationship. Some of the younger professionals wanted that we write together papers about our common work and came to visit with us during our vacationing next to Antalya.

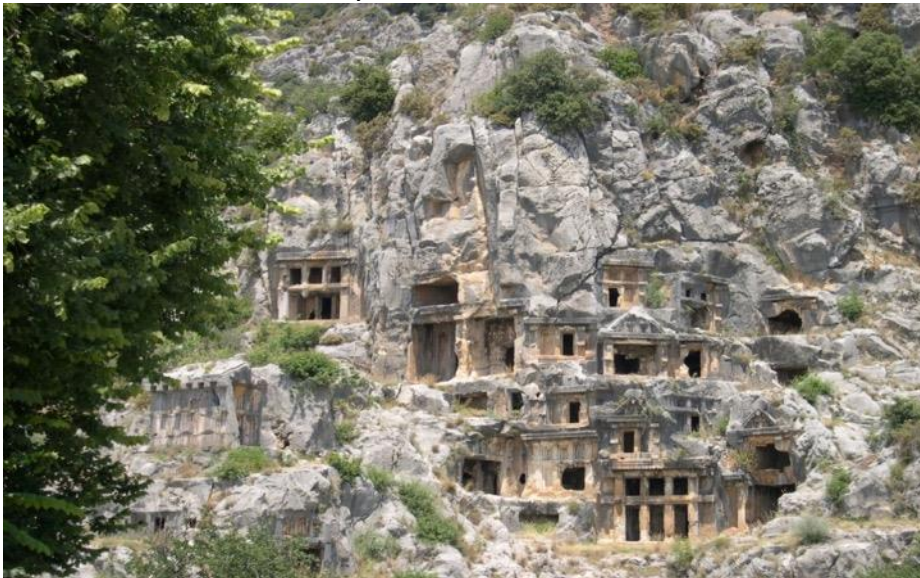
This geezer, Erdogan, views himself as a new Sultan. His dictatorial policy leads Turkey to a waterfall decline. In light of the war he wages against the Kurds, and his stubborn attempts to breed bad blood with my country, we looked for better fish to fry and spend our vacations in Crete or Rhodes. I wouldn't feel

myself safe in Turkey under this regime. A large part of the Turks themselves don't feel safe and free in their own country. His arrogant might will dissipate one day as mist on the breeze.

The Bosphorus



Myra, Demre, southwestern Turkey



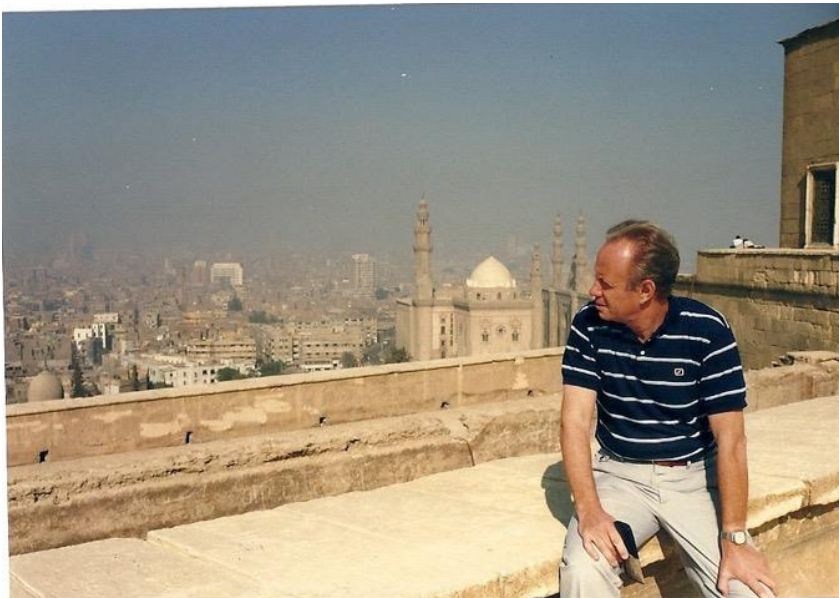


The blue mosque, Istanbul

Had the chance to visit **Egypt** three times. The first one in 1987 as tourist in a trip organized by our Ministry of Agriculture. A one in a lifetime experience. It was at the honeymoon stage with Egypt and all Israeli tourists were received with warm and inviting Hebrew words by friendly vendors. Egypt has so much to offer. First stop at the Museum of Cairo. Right at the entrance a replica of the hieroglyphed Rosetta stone (the original in the British Museum) on which Champollion deciphered the ancient script. Then you move from one huge dusky storeroom to the next containing huge statues, tables, mummies, coffins (sarcophagi). It's more a warehouse than a systematic collection although it contains world famous artifacts. Until you reach the intact contents of Tutankhamun's tomb extracted from the Valley of Kings, with all its golden artifacts. An overwhelming feeling of wonder and admiration for this well-preserved but poorly kept-up ancient civilization. At the Arab Spring riots of 2011 the museum was looted and precious artifacts were damaged and even lost. Unbelievably close to Cairo, right next to a neighborhood, the pyramids of Giza. You move in awe from the ancient to the last 5000 years old mortuary temples and the Sphinx. Back to Cairo and to the sumptuous Nile dividing the town in two. From the modern hotels, a ride to the City of the Dead where thousands of poor families live among the tombs. Next to the Ben Ezra Synagogue or the Genizah where 400,000 manuscripts and fragments were stored over a period of 1000 years of Jewish life. We took the night train to Luxor. My compartment partner, an elder bachelor colleague and friend whose main joy in life was eating, was badly hit by an upset stomach and threw up all night. Four thousand years-old Luxor Temple isn't less impressive than the

pyramids. Navigated on the Nile to reach colossal Aswan High Dam built with Soviet help after US withdrawal of funding. Just didn't feel like taking the small plane and fly to Abu Simbel. West of Luxor, the Valley of Kings, the principal burial place of the royal figures of the Egyptian New Kingdom. The valley has become famous for the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb (with its rumours of the curse of the pharaohs), one of the most famous archaeological sites in the world. Exploration, excavation and conservation continue in the valley.

Rainfall in Cairo is one millimeter per month and gives the town its dusty, yellow and drab appearance. Traffic couldn't be more chaotic. Roads are poor, upsetting the apple cart, and twenty million people are spending daily their time in thick congestion.



Cairo

United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program in the 1990s. Our focal point was the safe and reduced use of pesticides through the promotion of Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Egypt, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Israel being the participating entities. The meetings were held in Tel Aviv, Cairo, on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea and Bet Lehem. The professional teams met with the US group quite often and carried out field trips to the experimental plots. Our main demonstration was the Bet-Shean valley where we ran an Areawide Pest Management (APM) project applying a multi-crop, multi-pest approach in the area. The main problem of pest control programs is the build-up of insect-pest resistance. In order to monitor it, we established a pest resistance regional laboratory and worked out an annual

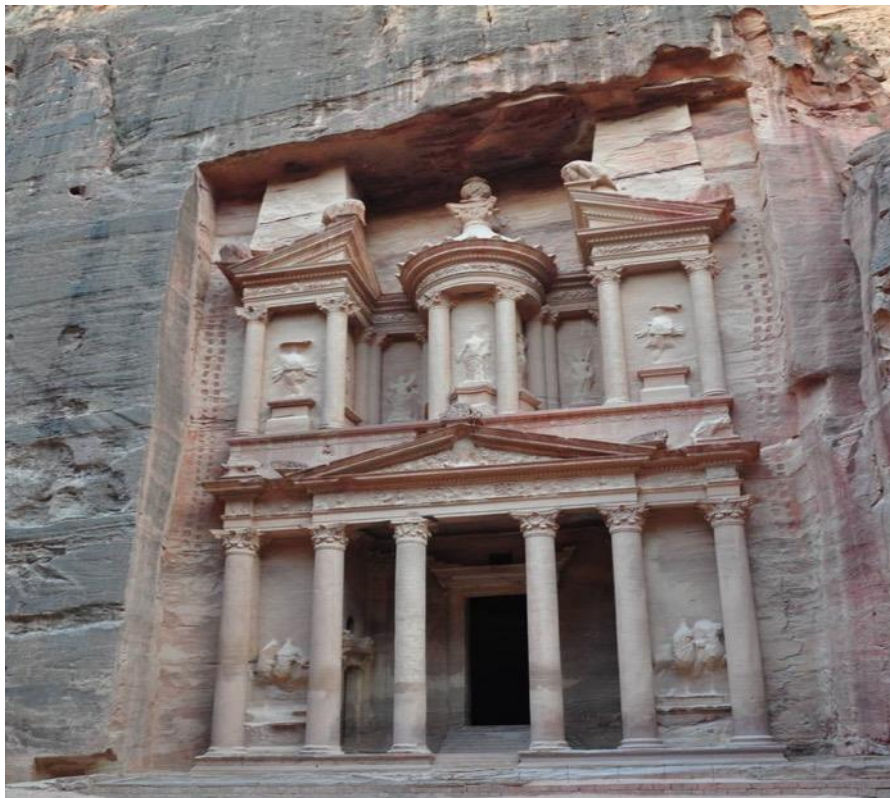
pest control schedule, alternating pesticides in order to subdue resistance. This scheduling had to be discussed and accepted by the growers in the region in order to benefit of its areawide impact. The Egyptian peers appreciated very much the concept and its implementation and visited the area quite often. Have developed a very close technical collaboration with the head of the Department of Entomology at Giza Research Station. He used to send me for my discrete evaluation research proposals submitted to his group. We presented a similar areawide approach in the Arava Valley, a self-imposed seasonal scheduling of applications and sanitation, this time to reduce viral infection of vegetable crops, with particular attention to the pepper crop, in a desert environment. Since the multinational team used to get together at least twice a year, very good personal bonds have been forged with the US team and among the regional representatives. We were impressed by the intensive vegetable producing effort of large Jordanian export growers along the Jordan Rift Valley, by net houses erected within the PA around Jericho and the strong Egyptian research groups. When in Cairo, we were taken on boat rides on the Nile with the mandatory belly dancers on board. The discussions with the hosts were open and comprehensive. A third visit to Cairo took place in the framework of a bilateral Egypt-Israel workshop on innovative pest control methods. The workshop was successful but the environment was stiff. The two parties ate at separate tables with less than the usual mingling. Have shared a two-bedrooms suite with Dr. Moshe Kehat, an outstanding cotton and date palm pests entomologist. We were Faculty classmates and good friends. He complained then about back pains, was diagnosed soon with ALS and passed away within a couple of years. The same fate hit my good friend and colleague, Yoram Melamed who passed away a couple of years after retiring at 65.

Had the chance to visit **Jordan** three times. The first as tourist in 1995 in the



Jerash

framework of an organized trip of our Ministry. Ancient Roman city of Jerash in northern Jordan is most impressive. Perhaps the best preserved Roman town with an intact subterranean canal system, the oval Forum and *Cardo maximus*. The capital, Amman itself, the Greek Philadelphia, hosts a series of Roman relics such as the Temple of Hercules, the Roman Theatre, the Odeon, and the Nymphaeum. The most exciting site is, however, the famous Nabataean rock cut town of Petra in the eastern part of the Arava valley, between the Dead and Red Sea. It was established around the 4th century BC. You reach it walking or horse-riding through a long gorge and out of the sudden you're fronted with the Rose City, one of the New Seven Wonders of the World 2020, famous for its rock-carved architecture and water conduit. It's an expanded site hiding fascinating corners, numerous tombs, facades, a theater, the dam.



Petra- the Treasury.

Two additional visits were held in the framework of the MERC program at a nice Dead Sea resort and the last in Amman, a steering committee meeting of DANIDA, the Danish-funded agricultural research and development project for the Middle East. We walked Amman's streets, but were warned to keep low profile and avoid speaking Hebrew. Just to play it safe.



Field visit in Israel with trainees from Gaza.

Have visited Jericho in the **Palestinian Authority** and its agricultural area several times. Same scenery as back in 1967, when we crisscrossed as first unit the town in armored vehicles. The green- and net houses were neatly managed using Israeli equipment and technologies. **Gaza**, frequently visited in the past on non-civil duties, consumed methyl bromide for its export crops of strawberry, pepper, melon and tomato. According to the Montreal Protocol, Israel was in charge of supplying the fumigant and phasing it out. In other words, Gaza Strip fell under a developed country category. Have organized, thus, two workshops on the topic for technical staff from Gaza in the early 2000s. The trainees were accommodated in the Faculty of Agriculture's dormitories in Rehovot. We engaged many Arab advisors from our Extension Service in the workshops and field trips. They lectured in Arabic and all others in English with interpretation. We knew some of the Gaza field staff, a few of them completed their M.Sc. degrees in the Faculty of Agriculture. Have developed an intense personal relationship with Muhammad Hamalawi. He was at that time the head of Plant Protection and later of the Gaza Agriculture Office. We used to talk often over the phone and he visited us several times in an impressive, black Mercedes.
