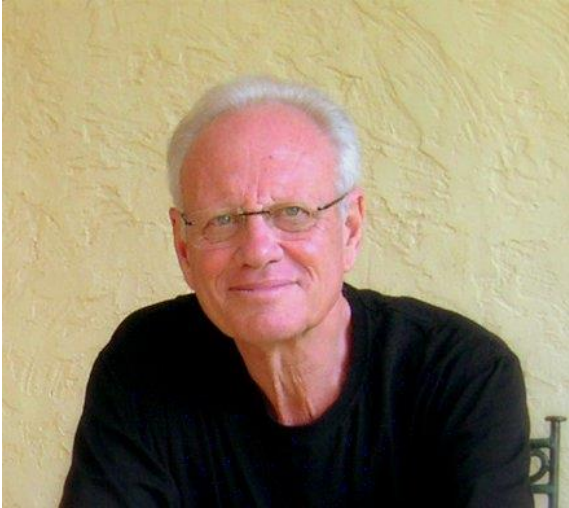


## Look What Happened to My Consultant

By Robi Auscher



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