

*Congratulations on your appointment to the post of Director of the Institute of Agriculture at the University; I know you have held various part-time university appointments in the past. For how long have you been a member of the academic staff of the University of Malta?*

I have been a part-time member of the academic staff of the University for over 30 years, that is, since 1962. When the two Universities of Malta existed side by side, I held the posts of part-time lecturer in Pharmacognosy at the Old University and of Acting Head of the Department of Pharmacy at the New University.

In 1990, I was promoted to part-time senior lecturer and two years later I was promoted again to part-time associate professor while holding the post of Director of Agriculture and Fisheries.

### First agricultural chemist

*I suppose it is not often that a senior civil servant is also a part-time professor; of course your predecessor, the well-known botanist John Borg, was also a professor. Are there other heads of department with the title of Professor?*

In recent years I was the only Head of Department carrying the title of Professor. I earned the title after I had obtained my Ph.D. from Bradford University as an extramural student while actually holding the post of Director of Agriculture and Fisheries.

My studies for the Ph.D. degree were accomplished after office hours and I never neglected my onerous duties or requested any time off or vacation leave. I certainly burnt the midnight oil over my Ph.D. thesis!

*Most of your career was devoted to the civil service; how did you become a civil servant?*

In 1957 I was working as a community pharmacist and I was anxious to study at a British university; an opportunity to study abroad came with a call for applications for the post of agricultural chemist within the Department of Agriculture; I applied and was selected to proceed to Durham University to study for the degree of Bachelor in Agriculture.

On obtaining my B.Sc. Agric. I asked the Maltese Government to extend my scholarship so that I could read for the new degree M.Sc. (Soil Science) which had just been introduced at King's College of Durham University. I returned to Malta in 1962 to take up my duties as the first agricultural chemist in Malta.

*I suppose that after five years studying abroad you were more*

## MEETING PEOPLE

by Professor J. Aquilina

# Professor Anthony Scicluna-Spiteri

*than anxious to practise agricultural chemistry in Malta; what were your responsibilities on your return to Malta?*

Those were trying times; although I was an agricultural chemist I had no laboratory facilities for agricultural chemistry and being a professional civil servant meant a certain degree of isolation from the general service colleagues who tended to look down on professional persons as incapable of being good administrators.

I always believed that every cloud has its silver lining and decided to turn this adverse situation to my advantage; I established the first agricultural chemistry laboratories in Malta at a time when all other laboratories were planned and established by foreign experts and this provided me with a useful experience.

I learned the civil service procedures as quickly as possible so that I could dovetail with my general service colleagues in all administrative operations, I initiated a programme of agricultural research practically single-handed and established the Land and Water Use Section within the Department and became its head.

### Use of polyethylene

*You have mentioned a programme of agricultural research; what were the subjects of this research? Were the results published?*

My first experiments were fertiliser trials conducted on a proper scientific basis involving replication of treatments and statistical analysis of data.

I then moved to experiments designed to evaluate the use of black polyethylene as a mulching material; my first experiments were on aubergines and I had dramatic results indicating a 300 per cent increase in production as a result of the improved water use achieved by the use of black polyethylene.

I then tried black polyethylene on strawberries and after another success I initiated an extension programme to teach farmers the economic advantages of this mulching material.

I am indeed proud of the fact that I was responsible for introducing black polyethylene in Maltese agriculture. I was also responsible for pioneering hydroponics in Malta but this system of horticultural production never caught on as it demanded a high level of man-



PROFESSOR SCICLUNA-SPITERI - "the teaching of agriculture is extremely demanding on University resources."

agement. I also carried out research on the use of local seaweed in agriculture.

The results of this research programme were published in the annual reports of the Department of Agriculture.

At international meetings I referred several times to the results of my research programme.

*Did you ever participate at international meetings as a Maltese Government representative? Did you make any contribution at these meetings?*

At that time Malta had just been accepted as a full member of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations and I attended the various meetings organised by this international body as an official Maltese representative.

At Salonika in Greece, in 1964, I was elected vice-chairman of the Working Party on Irrigation and Water Resources of the European Commission on Agriculture and appointed rapporteur on "The Use of Sewage Water for Irrigation". My report was submitted at the next session of the working party which I chaired in Malta in 1966, and was in fact accepted for publication as an official FAO handbook, the only FAO publication written by a Maltese official.

At the FAO Regional Conference for the Near East Region held at ministerial level in Tunis in 1990, I had the honour of chairing

one of the sessions.

*I have myself tried to propagate caper plants from seed sent to me from Pantelleria but the seeds failed to germinate. How can one propagate capers?*

Propagating caper plants is not so easy; when in 1975 Mr Dom Mintoff, then Prime Minister, wanted me to produce caper plants in large quantities, I was surprised to find out that the usual popular methods of propagation, i.e. by seed or by cuttings, yielded insignificant results.

This posed a great problem for me and after numerous trials I was extremely happy to discover that the best way to propagate capers was by rhizome (the underground stem-like shoots).

To mark my discovery I planted capers in the wooded area near Porte des Bombes; the caper plants have flourished and are still there today!

### Tree-growing campaign

*I have read somewhere about the Scicluna-Spiteri Shield for Schools participating in the "Kabbar Sığra" campaign; I think that this was a very interesting initiative which has now become an annual event for all schoolchildren. What was your involvement in this campaign?*

I had conceived the idea for this national campaign after I was appointed chairman of a committee whose objective was to instil love of nature in schoolchildren.

The idea was a great success; first of all school children were actually given the opportunity to see how a small seed could develop into a seedling under their very eyes; secondly they were encouraged to plant these seedlings in their own village or town and to watch their tree grow up as they matured in age; moreover, the teachers were anxious to be involved and participated in this campaign with great dedication.

The campaign has also been a great success for the Department of Agriculture because it provides some 20,000 trees each year which would otherwise need a large nursery to produce. I feel that this idea should be sold to other countries through UNESCO.

*What do you consider to be your most rewarding achievements as Director of Agriculture and Fisheries?*

As Director of Agriculture and Fisheries from 1988 to 1992 I have invested strongly in personnel training; I have sent personnel to study for national certificates and Master's degrees in the UK, I have sent others on short courses and I have introduced in-service training in the Department.

I established useful contacts with senior officials in the Food and Agriculture Organisation and served as a consultant to FAO for a week; and I have also acted as a catalyst in the unification and updating of the Maltese fisheries legislation which I presume will be presented to Parliament in the near future.

### Concurrent posts

*I understand that for a short period you served the Government as Chief Pharmacist while actually administering the Department of Pharmacy at the University...*

Yes, that was an unique experience; in 1988 I was seconded from the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries to the Department of Health to carry out the duties of Chief Pharmacist; later in the same year I was appointed Head of the Pharmacy Department of the University. I am the only person who has held these two senior posts in Pharmacy concurrently.

During those four difficult years

I felt I was being asked to conduct a funeral service on the pharmacy university course; instead of precipitating the end of the pharmacy course I managed to improve it by adding another year to the course and introducing a dissertation in the requirements for the degree.

*Would you describe yourself as a pharmacist or as an agriculturalist?*

This is a recurring question; in actual fact, my main research topic is the cultivation of medicinal plants which is best described as the overlapping area between Agriculture and Pharmacy. In actual fact, I could also describe myself as a pharmacognosist, or chartered biologist or soil scientist.

*As the Director of the new Institute of Agriculture, you face a great challenge to introduce agricultural education at the tertiary level in this country; how are you going to meet this challenge?*

Few people realise that the teaching of Agriculture is extremely demanding on University resources, probably second only to Medicine and Surgery. I intend to start with a diploma course and proceed to degree level as soon as facilities permit. Obviously a certain amount of lecturing will be carried out by visiting lecturers from abroad.

With the Rector's support and with the co-operation of my University colleagues and Department of Agriculture senior officials as well as with the assistance of my overseas partners in agriculture, I feel very optimistic about the future of the Institute of Agriculture.

### Use of pesticides

*Are you aware of the general apprehension about the excessive use of pesticides and their adverse effect on the environment and human life? Is anything being done to limit the use of pesticides?*

Excessive use of pesticides and artificial fertilisers could result in deleterious effects on the environment and human life and this has occurred in many countries including Malta; such mistakes result from ignorance on the part of the farmers.

I sincerely hope that the Institute of Agriculture will tackle this problem not only by teaching farmers the proper use of pesticides but also by encouraging the biological control of pests, using nature's own defence against pests.

*Do you think that the study of local medicinal plants could create commercial prospects?*

I have no doubt that the study of local medicinal plants could lead to commercial applications. There is a growing interest in the use of medicinal plants all over the world and as Malta possesses over 300 different species of medicinal and aromatic herbs, we have good prospects of exporting such herbs to European countries where there is a strong demand for them.

For my Ph.D. thesis I have studied the effect of cultivation on the therapeutic value of local squill (*basla tal-ghansar*) and the results of my research indicate that cultivation is a feasible commercial proposition.

The University has recently launched a Medicinal and Aromatic Herbs Project with the support of Commonwealth countries and the Rector has appointed me as its scientific director.



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