
On the History of Agricultural Research in the Land of Israel: Milestones

By Dr. Menashe Horowitz (1929–2007) and Amalia Barzilay

Early in the twentieth century, the Zionist Organization (later named the World Zionist Organization) decided to establish in the Land of Israel a research body that would guide pioneer settlers. In 1921, at the Ben Shemen Farm in the Judean Coastal Plain, a parcel of land was dedicated to “The Institute for Biological and Natural Sciences – Agricultural Experiment Station”. In 1922, the office and laboratories of the Institute were moved to Tel Aviv, next to the Gymnasiyya Herzliyya School. The field experiments, though, continued to be conducted at Ben Shemen and, over time, as well as at other localities, including Gevat, Deganya, and Merhavva in the north.

The primary force behind the establishment of an agricultural research institute in the Land of Israel was one Dr. Yitzhak Elazari Wilkanski, who later changed his surname to Volcani. In his book *Ba-Derekh* (On the Way, published in 1918), he wrote that the basis of this institute would be “research by the learned with special equipment”. Wilkanski’s idea received the support of Dr. Arthur Ruppin, who purchased land and directed settlement activities for the Zionist Organization, and Dr. Otto Warburg, a world-renowned scholar who was the third president of the Zionist Organization. During the first years after the establishment of the Institute for Biological and Natural Sciences – Agricultural Experiment Station, Dr. Warburg was the Director of Biological and Natural Sciences and Dr. Wilkanski was the Director of the Agricultural Experiment Station. Then, in 1928, the two parts were geographically separated, the Biological and Natural Sciences being moved to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and, in 1932, the offices and laboratories of the Station were moved to Rehovot.

Dr. Wilkanski had presented a three-pronged operational program for the Station: research, extension, and teaching. From its establishment, he guided the Station to focus on research and extension. Teaching was added to the Station’s agenda in 1942, with the founding, immediately adjacent, of an Institute for Agricultural Studies which, ten years later in 1952, became the Faculty (College) of Agriculture, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

It should be mentioned here that, within the framework of the governing British Mandatory Palestine (1919–1948), there was a Department of Agriculture that operated experiment stations at various localities in the Land of Israel. The declared policy of the Mandate was to supply the needs of the Arab and Jewish populations, but not to support Jewish agricultural settlement. The operations of the Station in Rehovot, which had been established specifically for this purpose, suffered lack of funding for many years, yet its research thrived, mainly due to the Zionist zeal of its employees.

During the Second World War (1939–1945), there was a crisis in growing citrus crops. Much of the citrus produce had been intended for export, but could not be shipped because of the War. However, crops intended for the local market, including field, vegetable, and fruit crops, as well as animal products, brought prosperity to Jewish farmers and with it much research activity at the Station. Thanks to the knowledge and experience gained during this time, the Jewish agricultural sector was able to withstand the difficulties imposed by the War of Independence (1948) and adjustments to the new situation that occurred afterwards, including operating fields and orchards abandoned by Arab farmers (nearly 200,000 hectares) and supplying needed food and sustenance to the Jewish population, which at this time soared with great waves of immigration, with over 1,000,000 new arrivals.

From an organizational point of view, the mandatory system collapsed with the pullout of senior British and some of its Arab personnel. The newly established Ministry of Agriculture began operating

immediately with the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, but it was quite difficult to gather together, under one roof, the various units and institutions that had been set up and operated in parallel for many years under mandatory rule.

The Station had been supported by the United Jewish Appeal on land owned by the Jewish National Fund. However, in 1951, the State of Israel signed an agreement with these organizations whereby the ownership of the property and personnel of the Station in Rehovot was to be divided between the Hebrew University Faculty of Agriculture, for teaching, and the Station, which would become a government body devoted to research. Thereby the employees of the Station in Rehovot that, until then, worked for the United Jewish Appeal, would now become government employees.

During the early 1950s, one of the important tasks of the administration of the Agricultural Research Station (formerly the Agricultural Experiment Station) was to design a more efficient operating framework and consolidate agricultural research in Israel. The Station moved to a new, much larger campus nearby, within the bounds of the town of Rishon Le-Ziyyon, on the road connecting the town with the adjacent agricultural village of Bet Dagan. The name of the Station was changed, too, in 1963, to the Volcani Institute for Agricultural Research. The official name was changed again, in 1971, to the current governmental-generic Agricultural Research Organization. The central campus in Rishon Le-Ziyyon, though, retains the name of our institution's founder, the Volcani Center. The Agricultural Research Organization also has two smaller campuses, the Newe Ya'ar Research Center in the north of the country and the Gilat Research Center in the south.

Note: In 2016, the official postal address of the Volcani Center was changed from P. O. Box 6, Bet Dagan 50250, to 68 Ha-Makkabbim Road, P. O. Box 15159, Rishon Le-Ziyyon 7505101.