



Yaakov (Jacob) Ofer
(1926 – 2022)

Dr Yaakov (Jacob) Ofer was born in Sofia, Bulgaria, on 20 September 1926, to David Afar, a carpenter, and Viktoria Afar, a housewife, being a second son between his two sisters. The spoken language in his family was Spanyolit (=Judeo-Spanish, Ladino), which he acquired as his mother tongue. In spite of the financial difficulties, Yaakov was sent to study in the Commercial High School in Sofia, to learn a lucrative profession as an accountant or a businessman. According to his son Yuval, this plan totally failed, as Yaakov completely lacked any business sense. However, the studies in this institution improved Yaakov's knowledge of the Bulgarian language and in general sciences, opening new horizons for him. In particular, these studies provoked and strengthened his interest in nature.

During the Second World War, the Jewish community in Bulgaria, about half of which lived in Sofia, suffered persecutions by the nationalistic elements in the pro-Nazi oriented administration, but was also widely supported by part of the local authorities, among them Boris III, the Tzar of Bulgaria, and by many ordinary citizens. Therefore, most of the Bulgarian Jews survived the Holocaust. In 1943, the Jews living in the cities were expelled and forced into exile to the outskirts

and villages. Yaakov's family escaped to Razgrad, a city in Northeastern Bulgaria, and remained there for about a year, before they were permitted to return to Sofia (Fig. 1).

Yaakov was a trainee, and later an instructor at Hashomer Hatzair (a Labor Zionist secular youth movement) in Sofia, and thanks to this he received an immigration certificate—the permission to immigrate to the Land of Israel—in 1946. His parents joined him in 1947 and, after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, so did most of his family.

After making Aliyah (repatriation to Israel) in 1946, Yaakov together with a pioneering group of Hashomer Hatzair settled in Kibbutz Dan. There he met his future wife, Rut Witkowski (Fig. 4), who was working as a teacher in the kibbutz. Rut was born in Berlin; she repatriated in Israel at the age of seven together with her parents and they lived in Tel Aviv. Her father was teaching English and French to high school students in Tel Aviv.

When he arrived in Israel Yaakov changed his original surname 'Afar' into purely Hebrew Ofer (=young deer). Despite hebraization of his name, later he called himself Jacob on his scientific publications written in English.

The Bulgarian pioneering group then moved to Kibbutz Yehi'am in the Upper Galilee, and later – to Kibbutz Revadim in Gush Etzion (the Etzion Bloc, a group of settlements in NW Hebron Hills). Immediately after the proposal of the partition of the Land of Israel between Jews and Arabs in 29 November 1947, Gush Etzion was attacked and besieged by the local Arabs supported by the Jordanian Legion, and, after fierce resistance, conquered on 14 May 1948. The Jewish settlements were demolished, about 240 Jews were killed, and the survived were taken prisoners of war to Jordan. Yaakov, together with other Kibbutz Revadim members, was imprisoned in Jordan for approximately ten months. After their release, he moved to the re-established kibbutz in its new location in the Judean Foothills, Rut joined him and they got married. Soon Yaakov and Rut moved to Kibbutz Elon in the Upper Galilee, on the border with Lebanon, where Yaakov started to work as a carpenter and later he was sent to study pedagogy and biology in the Oranim Academic College. Rut was working as a teacher in the kibbutz. After completing his studies, he returned to Elon and worked as a teacher together with his wife. Yaakov then set up a small zoo (ca. 0.2 ha) in Elon (Fig. 6) with various animals, including a young gazelle that he captured himself. In 1958 Yaakov and Rut left Elon and moved to Kibbutz Giv'at Haim Me'uhad, where Rut worked as a teacher while Yaakov was continuing his studies. In 1961, they moved to Herzliya.

Yaakov never obtained a matriculation diploma because the institution in Sofia where he studied did not provide matriculation diplomas. Despite this and thanks to his enrollment at Oranim College, he was accepted at Tel Aviv University in 1958 and completed his studies towards a Bachelor's degree in 1961.

During his university years, Yaakov became interested in ants and he continued his myrmecological studies towards the MSc degree at the Hebrew University of



Figs 1–7: (1) Yaakov, Razgrad, 1944; (2) Yaakov with his parents, David and Viktoria (sitting), his sisters (standing) and his daughter Netta, Israel, 1961; (3) Yaakov, after returning from the Jordanian prison, 1949; (4) Rut, 1949; (5) Yaakov looking for the ant nests, 1966; (6) Yaakov in his small zoo, Elon, before 1958; (7) Yaakov during the Six-Day War, 1967.

Jerusalem until 1972, then towards a PhD degree until 1980, under the supervision of Prof. Aharon Shulov. During his Master's studies his research encompassed the entire ant fauna of Israel with a particular emphasis on the weaver ant (*Polyrhachis*). In his doctoral project, he focused on the ecology of harvester ants (*Messor*) and their effect on the soil and pastures, largely supported by Prof. Hanan Bytinski-Salz of Tel Aviv University. In 1982, Yaakov hosted the world-famous expert on social insects Prof. Edward Wilson of Harvard University (USA), and together they toured around Israel chasing ants (Fig. 10).

During his research on weaver ants in the Dead Sea region, Yaakov also dedicated extensive and tireless efforts to nature protection. He confronted the Nature Reserve Authority until they moved the hiking paths over Nahal 'Arugot in 'En Gedi Reserve beyond the cliff, so that the paths would not separate the weaver ant nests colonies on the cliff from their 'barns', where they were raising the treehoppers *Oxyrhachis versicolor* and the manna scales *Trabutina mannipara*, on the tamarisk trees near the stream.

In 1961–1991, Yaakov taught biology in the Kibbutzim College of Education, Technology and the Arts (Tel Aviv) continuing his myrmecological research.

Although Yaakov did not work at a university, rather at a college, he managed to proceed to post-doctoral studies from 1983–1984, in Darmstadt (Germany) and in Barcelona (Spain). In Barcelona Yaakov was invited to give a seminar to the local students; however, they only spoke Spanish and he only knew English and a little German. Finally, the seminar was held successfully: Yaakov spoke Ladino (which is actually an old Spanish), which he knew quite well from home. This was probably the only case in history when a scientific lecture on biology in general, and on ants in particular, was given in Ladino.

There is anecdotal evidence that Yaakov and his good friend Prof. Refael Ikan of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Fig. 9) developed an insecticide against ants, based on natural materials and friendly to humans and the environment. However, I has been unable to trace neither the exact formula of this concoction nor whether it was ever used.

Yaakov retired in 1991, lessening his teaching load and dedicating more time for myrmecology. After his retirement he was given a room in the Kibbutzim College, where he established and ran a laboratory for social insect studies for 20 years until his final withdrawal from professional work in 2011. In his lab he had an active beehive and artificial ant nests. In these years Yaakov developed the *namlul*—a word constructed of Hebrew words *nemala* (ant) and *lul* (baby cradle)—the artificial ant nest for developing new ant colonies: a small cage where the young mated ant queens can establish a nest. Yaakov cast these 'ant cradles' with a special moisture-transmitting gypsum mixture he invented, collected mated queens of harvester ants after their nuptial flight and housed the ants. Yaakov's intention was to encourage people to get interested in the life of ants, to raise ants at home as pet insects and in public institutions for educational purposes. Actually, relatively few people were



Figs 8–13: (8) Yaakov with students on Mount Hermon, 1973; (9) Yaakov in Nahal 'Arugot, 'En Gedi Nature Reserve, 1982, with colleagues and friends (from left to right): Prof. Evyatar Nevo, Yaakov, Prof. Refael Ikan, Prof. Dan Cohen; (10) Yaakov (left) with Prof. Edward Wilson (right), studying the weaver ants *Polyrhachis*, with Prof. Nevo and Prof. Cohen at the background, 'Enot Zuqim Nature Reserve (Ein Feshkha), the Dead Sea, 1982; (11) Yaakov looking for the ant nests on the Carmel Ridge, 1990s; (12) Yaakov participating in the nature photography course, 1994; (13) the front cover of the book *Nelekh el haNemala* [Let's go to the ant], 2000.

interested in raising ants; however, a few artificial nests were sold for educational needs to the National Park in Ramat Gan, the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem, the Gan haEm in Haifa, etc., where artificial nests were established.

In 2000, a book *Nelekh el haNemala* (Let's go to the ant) penned by Yaakov was published (Fig. 13). The name of the book is a paraphrase of the saying in King Solomon's Proverbs 6: "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest". It was then, and still is, the only book in Hebrew that provides comprehensive information about the ants of Israel, their distribution, nutrition and behavior, written in a clear language and accompanied by spectacular illustrations (by the famous animal illustrator Tuvia Kurtz) and rare photographs. The book was published with the help of Yaakov's son Yuval, who established a private printing house for publishing his fathers' book. The book has also been translated into English in 2018.

Yaakov Ofer died at the age of 96 on 19 June 2022, preceded by his wife who passed away in 2015. He has been survived by his son Yuval, daughter Netta, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

I thank cordially Yaakov's son Yuval Ofer and Dr Dany Simon for all their generous help and information has been made available to me. Most of the photographs from the Ofer family archive were kindly supplied by Yuval Ofer. I used also the obituary published by Ofer Aderet in Haaretz on 15 July 2022 (in Hebrew).

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