

The early history of ISBMB

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Recently, the Israel Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology has marked its 50th anniversary during its annual meeting at Bar-Ilan University. The Meeting was honored by the participation of Professor Ephraim Katzir and marked his devotion to support the cause of the Society. I will try and bring out a few reflections on the early history of Israeli biochemistry and the role of Professor Katzir in its development.

The ISBMB was created through the initiative of professor Ephraim Katzir and professor Shlomo Hestrin from the Hebrew University. I still remember the first meeting of the Society (then the Israel Society for Biochemistry) that took place fifty years ago in Jerusalem. Shlomo's students prepared some sandwiches and operated the slide projector. It was an exceptional stormy, cold and snowy day, when some of us braved the weather packed into a car in Rehovot and drove to Jerusalem. At the end of the meeting, we found the car covered with frozen ice and our attempts to unlock the car failed. We had to stay overnight in the defunct Eden hotel. Regardless of all these troubles, we shared the feeling that a bright future lies ahead for Israeli biochemistry.

It was through Katzir's activities that several Israeli scientists were invited to belong to the founding members of the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO). He also encouraged me to continue with my efforts to create international scientific links and collaboration that led to the acceptance of Israel as full member of the Federation of the European Biochemical Societies. Another meeting that took place recently was to mark the foundation of "HEMED" the scientific corps of the Israeli Defense Force of which Ephraim Katzir was its Commander for a short time at the end of the war of Independence. He later became Chief Scientist of the Army, 1966-1968.

Biochemistry teaching and research started in the early part of the 20th century in British-ruled Palestine by a small number of idealistic motivated scientists emigrating from Europe before the Nazi rise to power and founded the nucleus of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The most famous Israeli educated students were the Katzir brothers, Aharon Katzir-Katchalsky and Ephraim Katchalski-Katzir who contributed to the development, security and establishment of the State of Israel. Both brothers

became known for their original research and wide interest in biological problems as well as in science policy. Later, both brothers joined the Weizmann Institute. Aharon Katzir distinguished himself as a chemist, mainly interested in macromolecules and was one of the Institute's most eminent scientists, where he chaired the Department of Polymer Chemistry. His brilliant and dynamic career ended tragically when he was assassinated in 1972 at the Ben Gurion Airport.

Ephraim Katzir received a great number of prestigious awards and in 1973 he was elected to be the fourth President of the State of Israel. Upon completion of his five-year term, he returned to research, which he continued until his recent death. Ephraim Katzir occupied a leading position among Israeli scientists for his outstanding work on the synthesis and characterization of polyamino acids, which he utilized as models for the structure and function of proteins. In 1948 he joined the Weizmann Institute of Science and directed its Department of Biophysics that became internationally acclaimed for its excellent achievements. It educated many outstanding Israeli scientists and also attracted many foreign scholars. He is known for his contributions to the development of immobilized enzymes that found application for many industrial purposes. Katzir devoted himself to the promotion of biotechnological research in Israel and founded the Department of Biotechnology at Tel Aviv University. Through his influence, the government of Israel has heavily supported the development of biotechnology ventures and science-based industries. Katzir showed remarkable fortitude during his illness, continuing his research until the very end. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and colleagues.