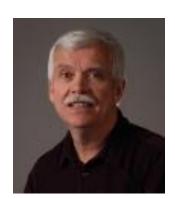# Interview of Barbara Rad-El, 26 Feb 2017, Jerry Specht

BR = Barbara Rad-El   *JS = Jerry Specht*

JS: This interview is being done as part of the Ex Libris History project, which is concentrating, for now, on the period from 1978-2005. I'll be talking with Barbara Rad-El, whose title is "Senior Librarian".   Barbara has worked with Ex Libris for 26 years.   I see that you report directly to Dvir Hoffman, Vice President of Product and Marketing Management.   In the government there are "ambassadors at large"; I guess you're sort of a "marketer at large"?

BR: Not really. In exactly the same way that I was doing presentations and pre-sales for Aleph, I have the same role today, but with Alma.

JS: But, unlike most marketers, you're not connected to a particular region; you're global, it seems.

BR: Yes, but it's not really marketing. It's presentation of the system.

JS: You joined Ex Libris in 1991. I believe you were (and still are) living in Tel Aviv, and that you had moved to Israel from South Africa. When did you move from South Africa to Israel … and what did you do before joining Ex Libris?

BR: I moved to Israel in 1970. I got married, I had children. When I went back to work I was, and still am, living near Tel-Aviv University. I got a job at the main library of Tel-Aviv University, and while I was working there, I studied librarianship.

JS: So you hadn't had any specific library background before that?

BR: No, but, you know, I've always said I was *born* a librarian.

JS: Was it Azriel or Udi who hired you?

BR: Well, both, in a way…. I was working at the main library in Tel-Aviv University. There was a librarian there who was called Josie Galron *[spelling]* . He was the Aleph coordinator for all the libraries of the university.   And when he left, I inherited his job.   There was a possibility of a big job in Sweden, for Aleph.   The company was very small.   There were looking for people who knew Aleph and who had a good knowledge of English to possibly help out with going to Sweden.   But not be hired, but to be sort of "lent out" periodically by the university library for various projects. The head of my library agreed.   Ultimately that Swedish project fell through,

but they needed people to give training at other institutions, and Judy was very busy with DTV and other projects, so they asked me to give these trainings. I was working with Udi but I travelled once with Azriel, to the United Nations, in Luxembourg. After we had traveled together and he saw what I was doing, he approached me, and asked me to join the company full-time. I was the first Ex Libris employee. [ALEPH Yissum, with Yohanan, Judy, Oren, and Natan, was separate at this time.]

JS: In my interview of Oren I expressed the idea that really good employees attract other really good employees.   I've been around the block a time or two, and I can say with absolute certainty that you just don't find people like Yohanan, Judy [Levi], Oren, Azriel and Udi in just any old company.   Did you have a sense when you first met them that these were really smart people who really knew what they were doing,… or did you just kind of stumble into it and realize only *later* what you'd found?... I assume that in the course of things you'd met Oren but probably not Yohanan so much.

BR: Don't forget that when I was managing Aleph for Tel-Aviv University, I *did* come in contact with them. I have a famous story about Judy. Judy is very bright, very smart, and she can be a bit intimidating if you don't know her. She was always very busy, and when I was working as the coordinator, I'd prepare the questions that I was going to ask, in advance, and then I'd phone her up very nervously, and basically I'd ask her all the questions without breathing, because, if I breathed, I was wasting a second of precious time. Of course she became a very dear friend and colleague: we travelled together, we worked together, but that was the initial thing….   Did you know Natan Lev?

JS: Yes, we overlapped. [See Natan Lev on early ALEPH Version numbers and history .]

BR: He was always very kind, very patient, very helpful. I also had contact with Yohanan, though not as much as I did later.   We had a very big project with Sandoz (now, Novartis), in Switzerland. We went there with a VAX/VMS and Yohanan did development on site with this computer, and I was with him.   I used to, literally, go and install Aleph on a university computer. When I think about it today, I can't believe that I did it! Sometimes, I'd phone Yohanan and he'd ask me questions and I'd explain to him what I'd done. He'd say "go here", "go there". Never *once* did he fail to help me get Aleph up and running. It's just amazing. When I look back on it, I just can't believe that we did what we did.

JS: At the time you were hired to work full-time for Ex Libris, did you have a sense that it had the potential to grow so much and that these were really super people (which I think they were)?

BR: I don't know if you ever had contact with someone by the name of David Ben-Haim. He was the Aleph coordinator at Haifa University. When Udi started trying to market Aleph abroad, he asked David to go with him and do an Aleph demonstration.   At one point the library manager put her foot down and said, "No more travel". So they turned to me and asked me to go. There was a project in Pisa, in Italy, and also with the libraries in the Vatican. That was when I did my first real travel for them. I just loved it. I loved representing the company and that we were marketing abroad. As I wrote in my blog I was very passionate about Aleph. It wasn't just showing someone how to use a washing machine or something. I felt at home in the company. It was a good fit for me, and it was a good fit for them, I think.

JS: We talked a bit about Judy. She always seemed to me like a very special person: smart, with extensive library experience, and just super, in-depth understanding of Aleph – not surprising since she was involved in creating most of it!   Was there anything Judy *didn't* know about Aleph functionality and configuration?

BR: Look, you know, basically, Yohanan and Natan did all the programming, but she was the librarian that gave them the input, so you can say, in a way, that she wrote the specs. Also, it was a very special time. Yohanan had an apartment in Jerusalem, and he had another apartment one floor up from this apartment.   He used that as an office and he used to develop there in the evening. Very often Judy would go there and they'd sit together … and they'd develop Aleph. I used to go to that apartment when he was doing some new development and he wanted me to test something. It was like Steve Jobs,… the equivalent of "the garage" in the U.S. You should really talk with Tami Ezra. She was really working with the development there, she was working with Judy.   [See Tami's questionnaire response.]

JS: Yes, I worked quite a bit with Tami in the U.S. I always thought she had a very analytical mind and was definitely a big asset to the company.

BR: Judy and Tami have the analytical minds.

JS: I feel that people (including Oren himself) underestimate the role that Oren has played in the company. I believe that he's been absolutely critical to the company's success. He's been involved in so many important decisions: who to hire, what products to buy/develop, what ideas to go with – what *not* to go with. Do you have thoughts about that?

BR: You know, I haven't been in as close contact with Oren as other people, but I can say, for example, with that very first big project we got with DTV, in Denmark, there was an agreement that we have a person onsite for a year.   I think that Oren and Yohanan had a very good relationship with Mogens Sandfaer at DTV, who really helped us with some great ideas. Also, when we were developing Aleph 500, our first Aleph 500 customer was Ghent University, that was Herbert van de Sompel.   Oren had a very close relationship with Herbert, who basically developed the precursor to SFX.

JS: Yes, absolutely.

BR: Oren was very involved in helping the company to make the decision to buy the rights to SFX. Also, with Verde, he and Jenny Walker (you should also interview her) did a lot of brainstorming together. Look, he's been many years with the company, and the company has been very successful. I think you can definitely give him credit for a lot of the success.

JS: I think he's been especially important to the success in North America.

BR: Aleph was developed on CDC and then it was ported to VAX/VMS. Then everyone started talking about UNIX. There was a very successful company in the UK. I think it was called "Libis". They were also on VAX/VMS.   When we were trying to break into the UK, they had cleaned up the market. There was the same sort of thing in Denmark. Ex Libris was the only library company that managed to port their software from VAX/VMS to Unix. This is where you can see the brilliance of Yohanan.   The UK company fell by the wayside and the Danish company contacted us and they became our distributor in Denmark. And Aleph was introduced to all these Danish public libraries. This was the only country where Aleph was sold to public libraries, just because of the Danish distributor and the work that they did in making Aleph work for public library functionality in Denmark.

JS: Of the various Ex Libris staff, I probably know the least about the sales and marketing staff – but I definitely do understand how important **you** have been.   Are there other Ex Libris sales/marketing people who were especially important to the success of Aleph, SFX, Metalib, and Digitool in that early period?

BR: Oded (Scharfstein) was certainly important to the success of Digitool. With SFX, Lieve (Rottiers) (who came from Ghent), Nettie (Lagace), and Dana (Sharvit) (who was a developer of SFX). When we started having a booth at ALA, they were these three young girls…. Everybody wanted a demonstration of SFX, and they were *amazing*!

JS: We talked about it some in my interview with Oren, but, yes, they were amazing.

JS: I do also want to acknowledge that I've neglected the operations/financial/tenders side of the business – that's another area I haven't been involved with much.   But I *do* get the sense that the whole business part of the company has been very well run under Azriel and Udi and, post-2005, Matti.   And, now, of course, also Proquest.   Thoughts about that?

BR: Absolutely. Matti has said more than once that he has great admiration for Azriel, who took a very small company and managed to push it and market it. You know that the first customer in the US that didn't take Aleph because of its multi-lingual capabilities was Notre Dame. And this was a huge, huge thing for an American university to take a non-American software.   I did the demo there. I think they were very pro-Ex Libris and pro-Aleph. Judy had been there as part of a roadshow, and I came for an in-depth demo. We made commitments to do certain developments. We also committed to having someone on site for the project. We were young, we were enthusiastic, we were eager. We were prepared to go the extra mile that maybe a more mature company, with more customers, might not have been. I think that was one of the differentiators.

JS: Absolutely. I've been talking with the people at Notre Dame. They have said that, even though Aleph wasn't as developed as some of the other systems they were looking at, they felt that the people behind it were good and that they (Notre Dame) could have an important role in shaping certain parts of the system in the way that they felt that they should be. And I think that they *did*. It has to begin with a trust. When a company doesn't have the software that you need, you have to have confidence, first of all, that they have the ability to do it, and, secondly, that they will do what they say, that they will stick to their word. I think that they felt that, and I think that it worked.

BR: When we were just starting with Aleph 500 we had two customers interested: one was the University of Ghent, and the other was another European university.   Herbert van de Sompel came from Ghent, and a group came from the other university to HQ.   Our competitors were also developing a new generation software; basically, at that time, we had nothing to show. At that point we were down in the trenches doing the basic development needed. We had meetings. It was definitely Yohanan, and must have been also Oren. They explained the philosophy and how they were going to do it, etc. Herbert van de Sompel understood exactly what Yohanan and Oren were saying. He said, "Even if I don't see the product, I understand what they're saying. I can see their vision and I'm going with Ex Libris." And the other university went for the "safer", more conventional solution -- which I think ultimately did not meet expectations.

JS: I suppose you've accumulated several million frequent-flyer miles through the years,... so you must not mind traveling **too** much?   What places do you have the fondest memories of traveling to?

BR: First, I can tell you that I have traveled for Ex Libris to 44 countries, and I've been to every continent. It's not so much my fondest memories, I think it's *proud* memories: Harvard University, British Library. Five days of onsite demos with Judy. National Library of Japan: I was there for five days (with Jo Richardson).   The National Library of China. I think it's the national libraries that make me the proudest. These big libraries that took our software and said: "We can work with you." Austria: I did the Austrian colleges; Judy did the Austrian universities. Our first UK customer was King's College. I was involved with that. And, of course, Oxford: that was five very intensive days of demos, also with Judy.   I've got a lot of pride in what the company achieved and what I was able to help the company achieve.

JS: This is a link to the youtube (transferred from VHS) of your <u>visit to the library in Moscow in 1992</u> .

JS: Some people would say that a great salesperson is someone who can sell anyone anything -- even if that means convincing the customer to buy something that they don't really need or which doesn't really suit them. But it's my feeling that a really good salesperson is someone who chooses to associate themselves with a good product -- made by a good company -- and finds customers who **really would benefit** from this product and makes those customers understand *how it is* that they would benefit. Thoughts on that?

BR: I want to tell you that I think that the most important thing, from the point of view of being a salesperson,… and the feedback I got very, very often was that I came as a *librarian*. I presented the system with an understanding of what a library's needs were.   Rather than being a standard salesperson, doing a canned demonstration, who might not understand **why** – and be able to answer questions intelligently.   It's not that we were good salespeople, we were good librarians.

JS: In regard to Aleph, primarily, and, later, SFX/Metalib, who were Ex Libris' main competitors in the different markets, through the years?

BR: There were lots of different small companies. There used to be so many vendors. But with client-server and the graphical user interface, a lot of companies fell by the wayside. And especially in Europe. You'd have lots of German companies or English companies or French companies. There was this German company, Dabis. We actually bought the company, so we inherited their customers. Certainly Voyager was an important competitor. But to talk about our main competitors, it's very difficult to say, because the market was so fragmented.

JS: How about III (Interactive Interfaces)? Did you come up against them a lot?

BR: Very much. And I think we almost always lost. They had a very loyal customer base. Yes, III, Sirsi, Dynix -- Dynix, less, because Dynix was more the public libraries. Yes, III was a very strong competitor. And they weren't selling only in America. We met them in South Africa, in the UK.

JS: In trying to sell the system (Aleph) were there modules that seemed to the customers to be especially strong?

BR: If you look back now and ask customers not why they chose Aleph at the time, but why they continued to like Aleph, it was the flexibility of the configuration. If you had the capability you could do almost anything you wanted with Aleph. I know, especially, our German customers and our Austrian customers, they did things to the system, they were exporting and importing, and doing all kinds of things.   This is what they loved about the system. I think that was our main selling point. There were some customers: "Oh, it's too complicated." But places that had the staff and wanted to do things themselves, this was a big, big selling point for them.

JS: You write in your "Thirty Years of Ex Libris" blog: "Many of my activities in those early years involved travelling abroad to demonstrate Aleph to various university libraries"
   In the discussion with Oren that I recorded, I cited statistics showing that the Ex Libris systems (first, Aleph; later, Voyager, which Ex Libris had bought; and still later, Alma) are systems designed for and used almost entirely by academic libraries. Do you think that versions of Aleph could or should have been created for public, school, or special libraries? If not, why not? Are the differences really that great?
BR: The differences *are* great. I attended a meeting in Denmark, with Jo Richardson and others, and we drew up a long list of developments that needed to be done for public libraries: like the roaming bus [bookmobile], so many different things.   Loaning out sets of books to classes and schools.   So many developments. We tried a number of times but always pulled back: the development investment was just too great….
   And Aleph was just too sophisticated or too big for school libraries. It just wasn't suited for that.   Academic, you know, -- and top-end academic.
JS: In my interview with Oren I mentioned that the DRA Taos system had contracts not just with large academic libraries, like Harvard and UCLA, but also the Tacoma Public Library and the Fairfax County Public Schools. Trying to develop a system *from scratch* for all these different kinds of libraries seems like setting yourself up for failure.

JS: Looking back at these years, 1991 to 2005, what things are you, personally, most proud of having done?
BR: What I said: showing the Aleph software to the best of my ability and to the best of its capabilities; traveling round the world to show the system.   I have some wonderful memories. I've had some wonderful, wonderful experiences. I've met some wonderful people. It's been amazing for me, really amazing. I've been really lucky to have had the opportunity. It came at the right time…. I was just really lucky.
JS: I think that Ex Libris was really lucky to have had you too.