

Avner Navin: My part in the history of Ex Libris

Positions held:

I was head of the Hebrew University's Organization and Methods Department from 1970 to 1983. The department was responsible for computer support for the university's administrative units.

From 1978-1983 the development, marketing and maintenance of ALEPH was carried out by employees of this department. Financial transactions (i.e. sale of the software) was carried out through the Hebrew University's marketing arm, Yissum.

In 1983 the university set up a company, ALEPH-Yissum, exclusively for development, marketing and maintenance of ALEPH, and I was appointed director of the company. In 1986 Azriel Morag created a company named Ex Libris, for the exclusive marketing of ALEPH. When ALEPH-Yissum and Ex Libris merged in 1995, Udi Arad was appointed director of the company, and I continued as administrative director until the end of 1999.

Early success of ALEPH in Israel

The early success of ALEPH in Israel can be attributed to the decision of the Planning and Budgeting Committee ("VATAT", a sub-committee of the Council for Higher Education) to support the implementation of common software at all university libraries.

At the time, in addition to ALEPH at the Hebrew University, the Haifa University Library had also developed a system. Shmuel Sever, the head of the Haifa University Library, suggested it be adopted as the national system for the universities. VATAT hired a consultant, Ya'akov Schweike, a faculty member at Bar Ilan University, to recommend which of the two systems should be chosen. ALEPH was recommended as the more suitable of the two systems.

VATAT decided to contribute 50% of the cost of the software to universities that agreed to implement ALEPH.

The centrality of the libraries of the Hebrew University in the Israeli university library scene was instrumental in the development of the software. Inter-library loan leaned heavily on collections of the Hebrew University, and was encouraged in order to effect savings in journal subscriptions.

Software developments

Of prime importance contributing to the success of ALEPH was its capability of dealing with multiple character sets and languages, written both left to right and right to left. Cataloging tradition in Israel has always been retention of the vernacular. Israeli libraries have always had separate catalogs for languages in Hebrew, Cyrillic, Latin and Arabic characters. Therefore, when ALEPH was developed at the Hebrew University for the Mt. Scopus Library project, it was

natural that the software took this requirement into account. The ability of ALEPH to handle multiple scripts made the software particularly attractive to libraries outside of Israel.

Advances in technology (communications and computers) drove advances in the ALEPH system. Initially developed on a mainframe computer (CDC) as a centralized system, within a short time ALEPH was able to run on in-house computers (DEC/VAX). Initially running under VMS, it was ready to run under UNIX when the demand required it. The introduction of personal computers brought GUI interface for the end user instead of the original line mode interface on terminals. In most cases, when there was a new market demand, ALEPH was already well on the way to meeting the demand.