Berghof
Research Center
Forschungszentrum
for Constructive
für konstruktive
Conflict Management
Konfliktbearbeitung

Dealing with the Past
in Israel-Palestine and in the Western Balkans

Story-telling in Conflict:
Developing Practice and Research

Dan Bar-On meets Peace Activists from the Western Balkans
Workshop, 14-15 February 2008, Berghof Research Center, Berlin

Report by Veronique Dudouet, Martina Fischer & Beatrix Schmelzle
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1. The Participants

Peace activists and action researchers from the Western Balkans, Israel/Palestine and Germany gathered at the Berghof Research Center in Berlin for a seminar with renowned Israeli psychologist *Dan Bar-On* on 14 and 15 February 2008. The workshop was organised and co-facilitated by Dr. Martina Fischer, the Center's Acting Director, and designed for partners who are active in peacebuilding and conflict transformation in the Western Balkans. Participants came from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, in particular from the *Centre for Nonviolent Action* which maintains offices in Belgrade and Sarajevo and from *Miramida Centre, Groznjan* (Istria, Croatia). In addition to this, some German colleagues from the *Bildungs- und Begegnungsstätte für gewaltfreie Aktion – Kurve Wustrow*, from the *Akademie für Konflikttransformation (Forum Ziviler Friedensdienst)* and from the *Berghof team* joined the event. *Tamar Bar-On*, who teaches at the Ben-Gurion University's Department of Social Work also actively contributed to the workshop as a resource person and observer.

Dan Bar-On, Professor of Psychology at Ben-Gurion University's Department of Behavioural Sciences and Co-Director of the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), is currently guest researcher at the Berghof Center, where he is working on an interim report on an action research project looking at the Israeli-Palestinian Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Initiative. Dan Bar-On has earned a world-wide reputation through many years of Israeli-Palestinian and German-Jewish dialogue initiatives, and in particular for his "story-telling" methodology. He has been engaged in pioneering field research in Germany and in Israel/Palestine since 1985, when he studied the psychological and moral after-effects of the Holocaust on the children of Nazi perpetrators in Germany (Bar-On 1989). Since then, he has brought together descendants of both Holocaust survivors and perpetrators for five intensive encounters in a group named "TRT" ("to trust and reflect"). Moreover, Dan Bar-On has gathered Israeli Jews and Palestinians in order to try to develop a shared view of the past and at the same time accept different narratives. More recently, Dan Bar-On has been working on a project addressing the psycho-social realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Together with his co-director at PRIME, Professor Sami Adwan, he is preparing a text book of dual Israeli and Palestinian historical narratives for use in history education (Adwan and Bar-On 2006).

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The *Centre for Nonviolent Action (CNA)* and the *Miramida Centre* both have many years of experience in peace education and training in nonviolent action, as well as further activities for dealing with the past in the Western Balkans.

CNA is a regional organisation based in Sarajevo and Belgrade which has, since 1997, gathered expertise in peace education and nonviolent action in particular. From 1997 to 2001, the team developed and offered various training formats that translated the concept of non-violence ("nenasilje") into the regional context and contributed to spreading it widely throughout the Balkans. Seven people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia make up the nucleus of the organisation. Since 2002 they have been strongly engaged in peacebuilding promotion, initially through work with ex-combatants and since 2004 also increasingly through the production of film documentaries and publication of books which are dedicated to the issue of dealing with the past. (For more information, see Fischer 2007a; Rill and Franovic 2005; Rill, Smidling and Bitoljanu 2007).

The *Miramida Centre,* based in Istria, also started as a training initiative and has cooperated closely with CNA in various activities, in particular working with war veterans. In addition, the Centre has experience in working with victims' organisations. It has developed training formats that provide space for the exchange of experiences, for supervision and burn out prevention for local activists working in the area of transitional justice and dealing with the past.

2. Background, Purpose and Workshop Design

An important purpose of this workshop was to gather people from different conflict zones (Israel/Palestine and the region of former Yugoslavia) and to offer a space for learning and reflection on experiences in peacebuilding and dealing with the past in protracted social conflicts. The goals of the workshop were three-fold:

1) to focus on the consequences of World War II, the 3rd Reich, the Holocaust, etc. – and specifically the consequences of not dealing with the legacies of this period – for today's societies

2) to explore Dan Bar-On's personal experiences of working on the dialogue between the German and Israeli-Jewish society, and compare this experience with approaches used, and dilemmas faced, by those working in the Western Balkans

3) to discuss how psychological concepts can support processes of dealing with the past and how they can link up with other approaches and disciplines.

The workshop was organised in a flexible format comprising both exercises and discussion – in order to mix experience and reflection.

After a first conventional round of introductions, the *first session* invited all participants to introduce themselves by telling a story about their first or last name. The exercise brought to the fore many issues and themes that would be relevant throughout the workshop, and demonstrated how the individual past of all participants was interwoven with their collective history, and that there were many points at which the collective histories crossed. Names turned out to reflect connections with parents and grandparents, struggling with the past of World War II and the years that have followed. Names also reflected ethnopolitical and cultural affiliations, or the need to distance oneself from these affiliations. Some participants spoke of the hopes and fears that the parents had when naming their child; in various families surnames had been changed from being identifiable (for example, identifiably Serb), to something that would not give an ethnic association away immediately.

The *second session* was used for an exercise in triads. Rotating the roles of interviewer, interviewee and observer, participants got a glimpse of each others' family stories during World War II. Participants were introduced to the method of life-story interviewing, a very open, narrative approach that gives uninterrupted room to the interviewee to tell what he/she would like to tell, which is strikingly different from the research or expert interview.

The *third session* was devoted to an in-depth discussion of questions encountered in participants' work, both in the societies of the Western Balkans and the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. Discussions focused on how to deal with an (accumulating) legacy of violence from past phases of conflict. The question was raised how to approach processes of reconciliation and dealing with the past in multi-religious and multi-cultural societies, with sometimes exclusionary versions of *the* truth. Another strand of the debate focused on the question of

how the use of methods that seem primarily geared towards intra-personal, small-group work (story-telling, working on/in narratives) can contribute to achieving social change and conflict transformation in the overall society.

The participants also dealt with the following questions:

- How can one deal with the experience of victimisation in a society? What are the means for dealing with victimisation, and who are the actors in this process?

- How does one deal with manipulated narratives, or versions of "the truth"?

- What is reconciliation, and what is needed for it to happen?

- How does one keep hope alive, in order to continue to try and influence processes of social change?

- What criteria can be developed for knowing whether one's work is successful?

The *fourth session* started off with another in-depth exercise, which evolved around experiencing the creation of different and parallel narratives concerning the history of 1948 from the perspective of Israeli-Jews and Palestinians. The participants worked in two groups. Each group – the "Israelis" and the "Palestinians" – started off by preparing their story of what had happened in 1948 (the year of independence for the State of Israel, and the year of the "Nakbeh", of catastrophic expulsion and flight for the Palestinians). They then presented their narrative to the other group, who were allowed to ask questions. After this 'encounter' both groups considered whether, in response to the other side's narrative, they would want to change their own version.

The exercise exposed a number of mechanisms: blindness to other narratives; the danger of hardening of positions if first exposed to a challenging alternative narrative; the role of acknowledging the existence of each others' narratives; the dynamic of "we're sorry, BUT..."; the silencing of dissenting voices. These patterns resonated strongly with societal tendencies observed by the participants in both regions. After the exercise, the scope of this approach was discussed. Participants agreed that creating narratives can open up dialogues. They also discussed its use in wider history education as well as its transferability to different societies.

The *final session* of the workshop focused on the question of how visualisation and media can enrich and encourage peacebuilding and dealing with the past in a society. Both Dan Bar-On and CNA use film documentaries for peace work and educational purposes.

Overall, the workshop discussions focused on the dilemmas faced in dealing with the past and peace practice, and on the potential and limits of story-telling methodologies. The main themes and results will be summarized in the following section.

3. Themes and Issues

3.1 Dealing with the Past

Identities

Psychological insights suggest that there are always multiple layers to one's identity, and that "the other" can always be found in ourselves. Yet this is very difficult to accept for people in societies that are highly segregated and experience themselves as being under threat of extinction. Dan Bar-On described Israel today as being composed of 5-6 different societies; the participants from the Western Balkans tell of (at least) 3 different and parallel societies in their countries. To accept someone's position as multi-layered and situational, rather than a monolithic and permanent personal trait, can be liberating for true dialogue (for example in dealing with soldiers, with war veterans, or with people who exhibit contrary world views and convictions), yet it can also be very upsetting because it does away with clear boundaries that make life predictable and comfortable. To find a balance between openness and setting limits (for instance not to accept violence in words and deeds) remained a point of contention for many workshop participants. Through the various exercises, participants also came to realise the importance of exploring their own national (ethnic) identity or family history, and how these influence their personal values and work. Participants from Bosnia and Israel also discussed the necessity (and difficulties) of transforming their "multiple mono-ethnic societies" into multicultural societies.

Silencing the Past

The issues of silence, shame and taboo were recurrently mentioned during the feedback session from the individual story-telling exercise. Keeping silent about one's past can have very different meanings and sources. People might have the feeling of simply having nothing important to say, or they might refuse to talk, or pretend to share personal memories while deliberately omitting facts or lying. Dan Bar-On distinguished two forms of silence: a subjective need of people to keep silent about what they went through, and a socially-imposed silence on issues society refuses to hear about (taboos). Both complement each other and form a "conspiracy of silence". In fact, both families of victims and of perpetrators might share a feeling of shame, albeit for very different reasons. Paradoxically, in Israel, many Holocaust survivors are made to feel shameful and "less good" than those who died in camps or while fighting. On the contrary in the Balkans, one participant noted a sort of inter-generational competition, within families, over "who had had the hardest time" and suffered most during WWII or the wars in the 1990s.

Asymmetry

The discussion revealed that several forms of asymmetry exist in both regions, the Balkans and Israel-Palestine: an asymmetry of force; asymmetry of proxy powers; and also a (perceived) asymmetry in suffering and a resulting competition of victimhood. Dan Bar-On drew attention to the fact that he observed two forms of asymmetry in the Middle East which were

counteracting: 1) Israel as the dominant *military* power in the region (thus asymmetry "in Israel's favour"), and 2) Israel as the dominated *population* in the region (thus asymmetry in favour of the Arab people and thus the Palestinians).

Participants from Serbia pointed out that in a dominant asymmetry, the experiences of other minorities (for example, the Sinti and Roma in the Balkans) can get lost. It was stated that perceptions of asymmetry were often related to a feeling of insecurity, which hinders the ability to develop trust. There was no clear prediction about how asymmetry would influence the willingness to enter into dialogue, or the way in which a group would engage – even though there are hypotheses that the less powerful group would pay more attention to issues of structural justice, while the more powerful group would focus more on relationship issues and might be more conciliatory in acknowledging the other side's suffering (e.g. Dudouet 2004).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation as a term and a process was seen with some reservation. Both the CNA's and Dan Bar-On's work aims at collecting local peoples' voices on how they understand and accept the concept of reconciliation (e.g. Dan Bar-On 2007; Rill and Franovic 2005). The group of children of Nazi perpetrators and Holocaust survivors who Dan Bar-On worked with in the 1980s and 1990s did not choose reconciliation as a reference point. Instead, the group worked under the framework of "To Reflect and Trust" (TRT). It was hypothesised that reconciliation is often imposed as part of an outside, international agenda, and that local people might not make sense of it at all. Even in the case of South Africa, it was pointed out, more critical voices are now being heard. Reconciliation, as Dan Bar-On suggested, is a process still strongly influenced by the Christian faith, and not deeply rooted in the Islamic or Judaic tradition.
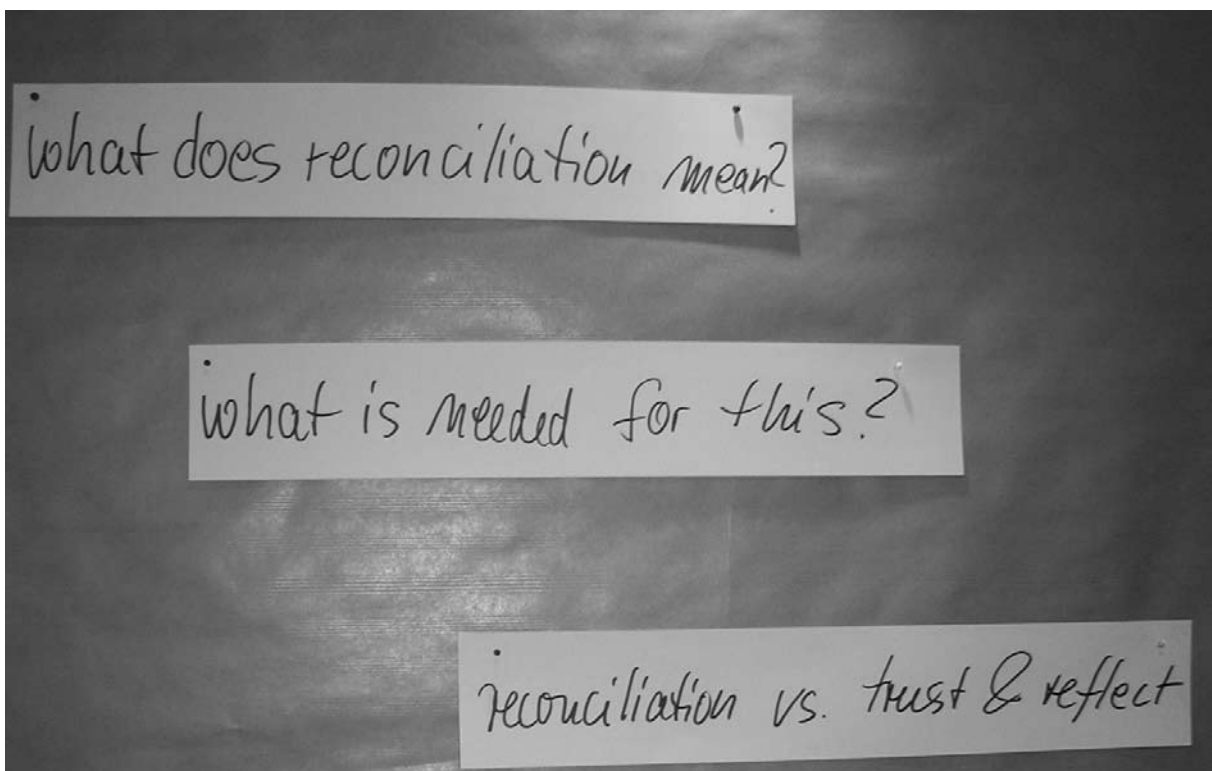
3.2 Dilemmas and Tensions in Peace Practice

The Tension of Being an Outsider Trying to Change the Societal Mainstream

With reference to Dan Bar-On's experience of working in Israel, it was proposed that the more pressing for society an issue is, the more taboo it is to deal with it. His work with Palestinians seemed much more "repulsive" to the broader society than his work with Germans. (As Dan Bar-On pointed out, in the view of many Israelis it was 'okay' to interview a Nazi perpetrator, but not to work with Palestinians.) Such boundaries and taboos can change over time (like, for example, the social atmosphere in Germany changed), yet the feeling of being excluded and suffering from that at times is real for those who try to deal with pressing issues while they are still taboo. There was a sense, on the other hand, that mainstream society is also paying a high price, by telling itself a lot of lies and having to live with them. Participants also realised that, quite strikingly, their position of marginality in their society affects their credibility and legitimacy, and alienates them from social groups with whom they want to work (ethno-nationalists and other unlike-minded people). Dan Bar-On's advice was to make a personal choice over and over again to stay connected to many people in society, to keep probing for places, persons and desires of change and to have good support networks in friends, colleagues and family. In his view, it is important to assume that there are always groups and individuals that want to change and to develop a peaceful society.

But for some participants from the Western Balkans, a challenging question was whether there are ways to foster less nationalistic societies – societies that are not rallying around one flag, one language, one country. "Where", it was asked, "is the land for those who don't have that sense of belonging to a piece of soil?"

Regaining Hope

Working in the context of protracted conflicts, in which peace activism may seem like a drop in the ocean, requires a lot of personal resilience and strategies of coping and reclaiming hope. Dan Bar-On stated that it is important to acknowledge one's own position, to acknowledge the fact that there are always going to be low points, and to continue to listen closely to the ongoing, dominant and more hidden discourses. This can help to detect weaknesses and make the dominant discourse less overpowering and all-encompassing. Despite the feelings of disgust in response to the dominant discourse that peace activists from the Balkans described, Dan Bar-On insisted that it is the activist's responsibility to find links and the language to create bridges. One participant later acknowledged (in a feedback report) that "it is important to maintain that sense of faith even if real shifts and improvements [may only] happen after many years". Another added: "no matter how small our steps might look like, they are still very significant and strong because they show that change is possible".

The Value of Story-telling, Listening and Accepting/Acknowledging other Narratives

Story-telling, listening and accepting what one hears was presented as a necessary first step to move beyond the impression (or accusation) that "the other side has propaganda, not facts". The power of stories also can be very palpable, as shown for example by the Israeli Ministry of Education's first reaction to PRIME's initiative to work with Israeli and Palestinian history teachers to write and teach two narratives of Israeli/Palestinian history throughout the 20th century. Representatives of the Ministry had initially argued that learning about the others' narrative would make people feel insecure about their own narrative which – in their view – should be avoided.

The Difference between Accepting and Acknowledging

Dan Bar-On proposed a five step process of moving from acceptance to acknowledgement:

1) to know or to get to know something

2) to connect it to one's frame of reference

3) to experience an emotional (sometimes unsettling) reaction

4) to experience and endure opposing emotions and contradictions of frames of reference

5) to bring them together into a new meaning.

Acknowledgement, in this sense, is a fuller and more emotionally complex understanding of the importance and function of a narrative in identity formation. In this context, different identity forms were mentioned, among others the coherent self/identity and the fragmented self/identity. Dan Bar-On proposed again that fragmentation was normal and present in every person. This might also open a passage to thinking about different ways of building collective identities, as there would always be different fragments to build on, and there may be ways to reach an identity that accepts its fragmentation as a strength or given. Western societies, it was suggested, had more affinity to coherent constructions of the self, whereas Eastern societies might be more accustomed to fragmented self constructions. However, the question "where is the line between accepting, and having to deconstruct and oppose in order to change for the better?" remained unanswered.

Narratives – the Connection between Personal and National/Collective Narratives

Individual narratives – and work on such narratives – were experienced as being a very powerful approach to influencing interpersonal interaction. Someone also suggested that individual stories might be more readily acknowledged by others than societal narratives, which can easily be dismissed as 'propaganda'. As the exercises in the first session illustrated for the group, individual/personal stories and national/collective histories are closely connected. There is always an overlap, and individual stories are part of a collective one. The question was raised whether collective narratives might be no more than an aggregation of individual ones. Juxtaposing personal stories might help to fill the gaps left in each narrative (since everyone obscures details which they do not feel comfortable with), in order to come up with a more complete picture of history.

The feedback received from participants following the seminar stressed their interest in continuing to work through narratives (rather than 'facts', for instance), as the best way to picture the complexity of psycho-social realities. An example could be seen in discovering the power of children to become change agents, through the work with history teachers: trying to teach kids something that their parents are trying to suppress. One possible way to do this is beginning a conversation by saying "I would like to explain how we came to be a divided society" – thus starting with something that they can feel in their personal lives and experiences and will relate to in any case.

Yet some participants agreed that the approach has limited influence in relation to the dominant national narratives, as one person remarked.

The Presence of Top-down and Bottom-up in Peace Processes

In Dan Bar-On's understanding, peace processes need to be moved forward from two directions: the political elites' top-down activities, and the grassroots organisations' bottom-up engagement. Both processes need to be synchronised – if they are not, there is little prospect for peace processes to be stable and successful. However, it remains very difficult to prescribe which circumstances the top-down and bottom-up processes can converge under. The dynamic is likely to differ from locale to locale. But when the processes do converge (as was the case in the German-Israeli context), which can be detected by careful, continuous and connected observation, new opportunities do arise for actors on both levels, and both levels share the responsibility for exploring them. In relation to actors in the political arena (e.g. Education Ministries), Dan Bar-On stressed that if they become active in processes for dealing with the past and peace work, it is never just *their* work, which means that usually the peace activists or grassroots actors have to engage in a lot of persuasion work. This work is indispensable.

This discussion around the need for complementarity between actions at the top and grassroots levels also reminded workshop participants that timing and sequencing in peacebuilding activities is important. Participants from the Western Balkans assessed, for instance, that in Serbia or Kosovo the time is probably not ripe for interventions in history classes that are based on the collective narrative-writing method. The question of when the right time would be was raised in this context, but not discussed extensively.

3.3 Methodologies of Story-telling

The 'Life-History Interview Method'

During the feedback session which followed the story-telling exercise on family histories during WWII, the participants pointed to some of the challenges they had encountered. They observed, for instance, that it takes a long time to open up, and therefore the time given was felt to have been too short. It was also difficult for the observers to maintain their non-interventionist role, for the interviewer to remain faithful to the technique (i.e. some interviewers felt tempted to ask direct questions and lead the interview in certain directions), and for the interviewee to decide whom to address (i.e. the interviewer, the observer, or themselves). Someone also noted the deeply emotional nature of the exercise, and the contradictions between the mind wanting to order everything we say, and the emotions coming to disrupt this order.

The Method of Dual/Parallel Narrative-Writing

The exercise which the group tested – creating collective narratives of the 1948 war as seen by Israelis and Palestinians – is usually performed by Dan Bar-On with school children or teenagers, with the teachers playing a crucial role as change agents: the pupils' reactions to other narratives, and their willingness to engage with children from "the other side", often depend a lot on the teacher's convictions, as well as the way in which they introduce and run the workshops. Although the exercise was applied to the conflict in the Middle-East, the participants felt that they could learn a lot of relevant insights for their own context.

Intra-group dynamics

Through the group exercise, the participants realised the difficulty of integrating different, heterogeneous discourses into a single collective narrative, even within one single-party context. As a possible reason for this it was suggested that group dynamics often lead to domination by 'hegemonic' voices, at the expense of dissenting perspectives; this is all the more the case in the process of writing down one's own version of history.

During the process of collective story-telling, one could also notice a phenomenon of re-creation and (over-)simplification of history, and polarisation of societal divisions into clear-cut group identities, thereby distorting reality. To reverse these tendencies, it would be interesting to also expose different narratives which appear in a single national or ethnic group. There may even be opposing narratives in one person; and it would be interesting to create a space to explore that further.

Some participants also realised, through this exercise and the following discussion, that they should put more effort into understanding their own society, into getting to know people who think differently from them, and whose ethnocentric narratives they find hard to respect and to deal with. As one participant's feedback report puts it, "reconciliation between 'Serbs' would lower chances for reconciliation with others".

Inter-group dynamics

Exercises on narratives might be done unilaterally, by working with each group separately, or through bi-national meetings, and Dan Bar-On uses both techniques, depending on the situation. In his view, both are important. It is, however, difficult to assess when the participants are ready to move from the stage of juxtaposing and exchanging each other's texts to the phase of direct encounter. This depends on the participants, and one should be careful not to introduce dialogue activities prematurely; the first step has to be the acceptance that the other narrative(s) exist. On the feasibility of combining the two (or more) narratives into a joint one, Dan Bar-On acknowledged that narratives are (hi-)stories that may have to exist alongside each other, and it might be impossible to ever reach a common understanding of the past. While he describes the Israeli-German narrative as a joint one, he does not see a joint Israeli-Palestinian narrative emerging. Yet he also argues that "there is nothing definite about narratives" – they do keep changing, so the listening and telling process is a continuous, recurring one.

Film as a Means for Change

Across the board, films were seen as an important tool to personalise and localise narratives. Participants agreed that "no words can replace a powerful image", that visualisation of personal encounters can be incredibly meaningful and moving, can create hope and act as a connector. Most of CNA's films are produced for a local audience; some of the films that document Dan Bar-On's work have had a more international focus. (A BBC documentary about the TRT group ("Children of the Third Reich" produced in 1993) was discussed in the final workshop session.) Dan Bar-On also shared that he has increasingly tried to look at the local level much more than the global one. For the CNA team, it was especially important to make people react and to raise an issue that society in general was reluctant to accept or deal with, using a more immediate and visceral medium, for instance film.

Films about the Work of Dan Bar-On:

Children of the Third Reich (BBC documentary) 1993
Caterine Clay / BBC-Time Watch

Beit Jebrean - Kiboutz Revadim 1948 - 2005
PRIME

Coexistence through storytelling: a Jewish-Arabic workshop
at Ben Gurion University, 2003/2004

Learning Each Other's Historical Narrative Palestinians and Israelis
PRIME

Documentaries produced by the Centre for Nonviolent Action
(Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian with English and German subtitles):

PTICU TI NE ČUJEŠ (*Not a Bird to Be Heard*) 2007
Nenad Vukosavljevic / Centre for Nonviolent Action

SVI BI RADO BACILI KAMEN (*All Wish to Cast a Stone*) 2006
Nenad Vukosavljevic / Centre for Nonviolent Action

NE MOŽE DA TRAJE VEČNO *(It Cannot Last Forever)* 2006
Nenad Vukosavljevic / Centre for Nonviolent Action

TRAGOVI (*Traces*) 2004
Nenad Vukosavljevic / Centre for Nonviolent Action

4. Open Questions

With respect to the *method of story-telling*, some open questions remained:

- How, in very practical terms, does one get from knowing facts to acknowledging narratives?

- How would one design a process of "working through", and how would one 'survive' it?

- How can one cross the borderline between dealing with the past and conflict transformation and peacebuilding by moving from deconstructing existing narratives to forming new, different ones?

- How should one deal with the insecurity that comes from fragmentation? Where does story-telling fit into such a process, and where does it actually take us?

Also with regard to *designing peace practice in general*, several challenging questions deserve further attention:

- How to define the right time for dialogue.

- How to move beyond working with already sympathetic audiences, and engage more with mainstream society or with political extremists (e.g. ethnonationalists).

- How to "engage with the narrative we hate".

- How to address institutions and authorities ("people with power and influence"), and actively link activities on different levels of society (political elites, middle level and grassroots level).

- How to define realistic goals for peace activism.

- How to maintain inner motivation and efforts when one's influence and leverage on society at large appears so marginal, weak and meaningless.

In addition to this, some more *general questions* remained. Insights and results from the work of both Dan Bar-On and CNA on different concepts of reconciliation have not been sufficiently and extensively discussed. The following questions need further exploration:

- Is a "shared view of history" a "shared view of the truth"? Are there constructive ways of looking at the past without insisting on any one "truth", or at least, of accepting different "truths"?

- How can one make progress in dealing with the dynamics of victimisation?

- Who would be the actors in this process (victims' organisations, veterans' organisations, civil society, governments and parliaments)?

Several participants voiced the hope that there would be a follow-up workshop that would offer room for further discussion of the questions raised during these two days. An invitation was issued to meet in Groznjan, Istria in the near future.

At the Berghof Center, we are grateful to all participants and especially to Dan and Tamar Bar-On for sharing their rich experience with us during this inspiring workshop. We are looking forward to future cooperation and in particular to Dan Bar-On's interim results from a research project developed by PRIME on truth, justicce and reconciliation in Israel-Palestine. We will inform all participants, colleagues and friends of the Berghof Center about this forthcoming publication.

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List of Participants

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