

Obituary: Dan Bar-On (1938-2008)

Dan Bar-On, professor of psychology and co-director of the Peace Research Institute in the Middle East (PRIME), passed away following a long illness on 4th September 2008, in Tel Aviv. It is with great sorrow and sincere gratitude that we commemorate his life, which was devoted to intercultural understanding and has given great encouragement to those searching for avenues towards peace. The affirmation that Dan Bar-On leaves behind with us is that the time for silence will be followed by a time for telling stories; and that in seeking to understand ourselves we can forge our own identities and find empathy for the realities of others.

We look back at a thought-provoking time with Dan Bar-On. His stays at the Berghof Research Center were always inspiring and enriching for our own work. During his last visit, Dan held a workshop on “Dealing with the Past in Israel-Palestine and in the Western Balkans. Story-telling in Conflict: Developing Practice and Research”. He explored methods of story-telling with peace activists from the former Yugoslavia, and helped them to find new perspectives on their own context by drawing comparisons with the conflict in Israel-Palestine. In spite of his already frail condition, he succeeded with undiminished confidence in showing the participants ways to identify a viable future following a time of warfare, encouraging them to continue their peacebuilding work.

Dan Bar-On’s commitment to peace and understanding was unique and irreplaceable. In our recollections and in our daily work he will always remain with us.



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Biography

Dan Bar-On was born in Haifa in 1938. His parents, who were of German-Jewish descent, were able to escape the Holocaust by moving to Israel. After spending over twenty years at a Kibbutz Dan decided to study psychology, focusing on therapeutic work with Holocaust survivors. On completing his doctorate he began work on an unprecedented field study, investigating the moral and psychological effects of the Holocaust on the children of Nazi perpetrators. He wrote several books on the insights and results of his research, which were published by “edition Körber-Stiftung”.

Dan Bar-On developed initial approaches to a model of story-telling in 1992, when he founded the group TRT (“To Reflect and Trust”), bringing together the children of victims and perpetrators. Sharing their own life stories made it possible for them to connect individual experiences with collective ones. This way, controversial and seemingly irreconcilable narratives were endowed with mutual understanding, allowing participants to forge new relationships in which it was possible to empathise with each others’ situations. Dan accompanied the group for many years. In the late 1990s, his work with methods of story-telling was also expanded into other conflict regions.

In 1998, together with Palestinian and Israeli researchers, he founded PRIME (Peace Research Center in the Middle East), which he ran jointly with his Palestinian colleague Prof. Sami Adwan. The centre is dedicated to action research. Its main concern is to help create conditions for mutual understanding and lasting peace in the Middle East, using both practical activities and academic research. Dan Bar-On’s most recent projects were devoted to exploring the psychosocial realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Together with Prof. Adwan he was working on a history textbook to be used in schools, in which historical narratives from Palestinian and Israeli perspectives would be presented side by side and given equal right to be told.

Until 2007, Dan Bar-On was Professor of Psychology at Ben-Gurion University in Beer Sheva. From 2006 to 2008 he ran the “Dan Bar-On Dialogue Training” programme, which was implemented in cooperation with the Körber Foundation in Hamburg, preparing young mediators for intercultural dialogue work in Europe.

Although it was not uncontroversial at home in Israel, Dan Baron’s unwavering commitment to dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as between Germans and Jews, gained him worldwide recognition. He received many prizes for his work on intercultural dialogue and his impressive body of research. He was awarded the David Lopatie Chair of Post-Holocaust Psychological Studies in 1996, and received an honorary doctorate from Stockton College, New Jersey (USA) in 1998. In 2001 he was given the *Bundesverdienstkreuz* (German Federal Cross of Merit) and the Alexander Langer Prize. He was awarded with the Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize in 2003.

Dan Bar-On's best-known publications include:

Reconciliation Revisited for More Conceptual and Empirical Clarity, in: Janja Becnemann (ed.) 2007. *Darkness at Noon: War Crimes, Genocide and Memories*. Sarajevo: Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo, 63-85.

Tell Your Life Story. Creating Dialogue among Jews and Germans, Israelis and Palestinians. Budapest/New York: CEU Press, 2006.

The Indescribable and the Undiscussable. Reconstructing Human Discourse after Trauma. Budapest: CEU Press, 1999.

Fear and Hope. Three Generations of the Holocaust. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Legacy of Silence: Encounters with Children of the Third Reich. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.