

# Understanding the Other

Dialogue as a Tool and an Attitude to Life





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# Understanding the Other

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## Dialogue as a Tool and an Attitude to Life

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*This booklet is made by Steinar Bryn, Inge Eidsvåg and Ingunn Skurdal.*

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**Nansen Dialog Senter Prosjekt:**

Integrert Tospråklig Grunnskole

**”Fridtjof Nansen”**

Landsbyen Preljubishte, Jegunovce Kommune

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# Can Dialogue Create Social Change?

**Jegunovce is a municipality between Skopje and Tetovo in Macedonia, on the border with Kosovo. There were acts of war there in 2001. A consequence of the war was that all cooperation and contact between Albanian and Macedonian villages was cut off. The Nansen Dialogue Center in Skopje (NDC Skopje), consisting of Macedonian and Albanian field workers, began their work in the municipality in 2005. Text: Steinar Bryn**

The first step taken was to listen to the inhabitants - a survey of their needs was conducted. The parents were not happy about the tutoring their children were offered. NDC Skopje organized classes in computer technology. The classes were held in one of the villages, and transport by bus was arranged for the children from the other villages. This offer was followed by a visit to all the parents, to ensure them that we were serious actors.

**SOON THE NEED AROSE** for more advanced computer training. This was arranged in another village. The parents expressed a wish for tutoring in English as well, and these classes were held in a third village. Advanced English was taught in yet another village. This way, because the pupils had to travel to other villages, they got to know each other and each other's villages. The pupils expressed astonishment at not knowing each other's languages. After new, long talks with the parents, classes in Albanian for Macedonian pupils were arranged for the first time in 2007. Similar classes in Macedonian for Albanian pupils were also arranged.

**PARALLEL dialogue seminars** for parents, teachers, village leaders and municipal politicians were developed. Experience shows that it

is important to include everyone in these kinds of processes. Slowly, the need for a common school grew. The idea was never fronted by us as a final goal, but came as a result of an organic process in the municipality. On September 1st 2008, the first Fridtjof Nansen Primary School opened in Preljubiste. This was the first bilingual, multi-ethnic school in Macedonia. It was not an alternative school, but a part of the country's public school system. The state pays for transportation of pupils, the running of the school and the teachers' salaries. We cover additional expenses to make the school bilingual.

**THIS DID NOT HAPPEN WITHOUT** serious resistance. One year after the school opened, a commander was released from the local prison. He had gained a position as a self-proclaimed village leader and reacted strongly to Albanian children being sent to school with Slavic children. It is - after all - in school you should develop your ethnic consciousness and pride, and be motivated to fight for your people's rights, he argued.

**THE SCHOOL WAS ATTEMPTED STOPPED** Direct threats and mobile phone terror put pressure on some of the parents to get them to take their children out of school. There was

agitation in the media, and blocking of school buses and roadblocks to physically prevent the parents from delivering their children to the school. We oriented and sought advice from the police, the Norwegian and the American embassies, and international organizations like OSCE and the EU. These organizations and the embassies had no mandate to interfere. The police feared that interfering would escalate the conflict.

**THE PROSPECTS LOOKED BLEAK.** Some parents started carrying weapons when driving their children to school. Our peace initiative was in danger of resulting in new violent conflicts. Was dialogue as a tool not good enough? Should we admit the limits of dialogue?

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**This story concludes on page 38**

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We had no other choice than to support the parents' decision to keep the children home from school. Had our vision come to the end of the road??



# WHAT IS





# DIALOGUE?

Thirteen Tips for a good dialogue

*In our Western tradition, dialogue stems from Socrates (479-399 B.C.) and his pupil Plato (427-347 B.C.).*

*It was a method for gaining insight into the truth.*



# What is dialogue?

by Steinar Bryn and Inge Eidsvåg

## The Necessity of Dialogue

People have had conversations with each other since language began: conversations during work, by the fire, at the Thing. People have talked over what one should do with the drought, the cereal crops, punishment, tax collection and the choice of a new leader. Viewpoints were put forth, and one talked until one reached agreement. Or they decided to agree to differ - for the time being. Some traditions call this consultation.

The Swedish writer Göran Tunström once wrote that his picture of a good dialogue was one of his mother making bread and intertwining three long strips of dough which were tossed away from and then towards each other. A beautiful image.

Recently, it has become customary in some arenas to speak about dialogue with a certain degree of contempt. Here, dialogue is seen as a somewhat simple-minded naïve academic exercise which may be soul warming under the chandeliers in the seminar room, but otherwise of little or no practical significance.

I recently came back from a trip in the Balkans, where the Nansen Academy has worked with reconciliation and peace building since 1995. Once more, I have been reminded of the importance of dialogue. When parents and teachers in Vučovar get together to establish a joint school for Croatian and Serbian children - in the town that looked like Hiroshima after the war and where 75 % of the houses were destroyed - dialogue is no academic exercise. The children's future depends on the success of the dialogue.

Many of those who participate in this work say: "We don't have a choice. We must begin to heal the wounds of the war now. If we don't do that, we risk that our children inherit our enemy images and will kill each other in a few years time. As we did. Our greatest need, therefore, is reconciliation. The only possible tool for succeeding in this, is dialogue.

The Peace workers at the Nansen Dialogue Centres in the Balkans are often asked: Is it not more important to reconstruct buildings that are burnt to the ground and to invest in health and education than in having dialogue and



reconciliation? And what about demining and democratic reforms in counties and municipalities? They answer: Yes, all this is important. But none of this will happen without reconciliation between the ethnic groups. Without reconciliation, there will be no economic development, increased security or more democracy. For who will invest in a society where the rhetoric of war is still smouldering? What kind of security do people experience in ethnically divided towns where cross-border contact is seen as treason? Which democratic reforms are possible when those who are going to cooperate view each other as enemies? How can a democracy work when all parties are based on ethnic affiliation? And they add that all their experiences point in the same direction: There will be no peace in the Balkans before there is reconciliation between the ethnic and religious groups. There will be no reconciliation between the ethnic and religious groups before there is dialogue between them.

**We should listen to their experiences.**









Inge Eidsvåg

## What is dialogue?

The word originates from the Greek word *dialogomai*, which means to converse (*dia* – through; *logos* – word, reason). In our Western tradition, dialogue stems from Socrates (479-399 B.C.) and his pupil Plato (427-347 B.C.). It was a method for gaining insight into the truth, a truth which is an inherent opportunity in every human being, but which we forget when we are born. Socrates believed that conversation could release this truth.

**An example: In the dialogue Menon, Socrates and the slave Menon converse about what goodness is.** Whether it can be recognised, developed or learnt. In order to show that recognition involves calling forth knowledge from consciousness, knowledge which has existed there since we were born, Socrates begins by asking a slave questions about a geometrical figure. Through asking, he entices knowledge from the slave's consciousness which the slave himself was not aware he possessed. That is, he had the knowledge, but had forgotten it at birth. For Socrates, learning through questions and answers – through dialogue – became a means for remembering a truth that we all carry inside ourselves, but in a forgotten form. This has later been called midwifery (*maieutics*) because it resembles the way in which the midwife assists in delivering the unborn child.

**In the year that followed World War I, dialogue philosophy started to seriously gain ground in Europe with names like Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel.** They all saw dialogue as a method for gaining greater insight about oneself, the world and

God. Their point of departure was that a human being only becomes a "self" through encounters with other people. "In the beginning is the relation", wrote Martin Buber in his principal work *I and Thou* (1923). All real life is meetings. We must meet others in order to find ourselves. Only through the gaze of others do we see ourselves. For "no eye can see itself"

**The 20th century in Europe was the century of mass communication and mass education, modern newspapers, radio and TV.** But it was also the century of violence. At the peak of our economic and technological development, people of the 20th century killed more of their fellow-creatures in war than they have done in all previous centuries. Richer, more enlightened and more adept at communicating, we attacked each other, blinded by hate. With axes and knives, gas and rifles, bombs and rockets. Progress, humanity, human rights and barbarism existed side by side. Democracy and genocide. Side by side.

## Truth

**Socrates believed that dialogue should give insight into the truth.** But the concept of truth has many meanings. The concept started to take form in the 1700s. Historians claimed that a statement could only be understood correctly if it was placed in a historical context. What was regarded as true yesterday could perhaps be substantiated on the basis of yesterday's view of reality. The earth once stood still at the centre of the universe. Slavery was a God-given and natural arrangement. Women should not have suffrage. But today we must acknowledge new truths. "A normally constituted truth lives (...) as a rule seventeen or eighteen, or at most twenty years—seldom longer," says Doctor Stockman in Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* (1882).

**Sociologists told us that our "truths" often depend on our different positions in life.** Our cultural and social backgrounds, age, gender, education etc. decides our perspectives. "Do not criticise another before you have walked two days in his moccasins" states an old American Indian proverb. After two days, our comprehension may have changed.

**Language philosophers taught us that all descriptions of reality are descriptions in a language.** "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world," said Ludwig Wittgenstein, and underlined that we live inside language, with the limitations that this entails.

**Therefore, our understanding of truth fundamentally involves interpretation.** The answers we get depend on the questions we ask. Reality

emerges through the cultural spectacles with which we see. But we do not ourselves stand on the outside. We are part of the reality that we must interpret, and we live with an implicit understanding of how the world is and what people are like. "The truth" appears through continuous dialogue with the surrounding world that we want to grasp and comprehend.

**This is very similar to Mahatma Gandhi's conception of truth.** For him, truth (*satya*) was the most important reality in existence. Therefore, he thought that "Truth is God".

**Absolute truth alone is God. It is beyond reach.** At the most we can say it is *neti, neti* (not this, not that). The truth we see is relative, many-sided, plural and is the whole truth for a given time. There is no scope for vanity in it and the only way of reaching it is through *ahimsa* (non-violence). Pure and absolute truth should be our ideal. We can reach the ideal only by constantly meditating on it, and reaching it is attaining *moksha* (union with God). For the last sixty years I have been experiencing what I said above. I am still experiencing it (From a letter to Vamanrao Joshi, 7 November 1945) Indeed, Gandhi's only autobiography was entitled *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1927).

**Towards the end of the novel A Fugitive Crosses His Tracks** (1933), Aksel Sandemose describes the Halfway Mountain in inner Newfoundland. He has trekked around the mountain on a hunting trip, and then he observed how the mountain changed as he moved around it.

**You can get thousand descriptions of Halfway Mountain, and all of them are equally right.** I feel a strong urge to tell you this now, that the mountain is big, and that it is many-sided, but the one who lay in chains on earth only saw Halfway Mountain from the place where he was lying.

**Dialogue presupposes that one has a suspicion of seeing oneself only partially.** That is a useful suspicion. It doesn't mean an easy relativism or that we lower the rate of our own values. Rather, it involves an insight into my culture being one of many. I will patiently strive to understand the others better. But I will not give up what I maintain to be true and right, unless strong reasons convince me to do so.

**Maybe it can all be summed up in a few words that the German poet Schiller once wrote in a letter to Goethe:** "Follow the one who seeks the truth, but flee from the one who has found it."



## The strength of the better argument

After the Second World War, dialogue again became relevant. With weapons and barbed wires, the Nazis had forged a monstrous concept of truth. Their “truth” about the Jews, the gypsies, and the gays had horrifying consequences. Six million people were sent to the gas chambers.

**Could reconciliation ever be possible after this tragedy? And what about dialogue?**

Among those who set about to rebuild dialogue, was Jürgen Habermas. He was three years old when Hitler came to power in Germany. He was 16 years old when the war ended and peace was to be built on the ruins of gas chambers and bombed out towns and cities.

**Habermas, who had a communication**

problem himself because he was born with an open palate, grew up in a Germany where above all it was needed that people talked to each other. That one confronted one's Nazi background. That one listened to each other and learnt from each other. Which prerequisites had to be present for rational opinion formation in a democratic society?

**Habermas' entire philosophy builds on the**

view that humans are social and sensible beings. Together with others we can develop our communicative competence, something which constantly increases our ability to make sensible choices. But what is sensible can only be determined by means of an open, i.e. public and democratic, conversation between people with different experiences. Only then can ethics be anchored in a social and political foundation – and not only in the individual's conscience.

**In order to realise this ideal, Habermas sets**

some requirements for method and discussion form. First of all: it has to be in the public sphere. This entails that everyone affected by the action norms also must have the opportunity to contribute to establishing these norms. Therefore, discourse ethics puts great emphasis on information and participation.

**Another prerequisite is equality. This is one of** the pillars of democracy. In a discussion about political choices of action, all citizens are equally important. Differences in economic or social status are irrelevant for the debate. Here, the arguments should count, not who put them forward. This underlines the belief that reason, expressed through a rational discussion between different actors, should guide moral questions.

**The third prerequisite is that the participants** should be ready to allow themselves to be convinced by the better arguments of others.

“You don't know whether you are right until you have heard the argument of your counterpart, the philosopher John Stuart Mill once said. This is easy to say, but difficult to practice.

**Last, but not least: the conversation must be**

free from external coercion. When we discuss our way to common interaction norms, we cannot let ourselves be governed by fear of economic, social or political sanctions. It then becomes a game and not a real conversation. For just as we in science search for more and more true answers, we also search for more and more correct answers to political and moral questions.

## Dialogue, debate, negotiations

**The way we see it, dialogue is a meeting**

between people where the purpose is to learn from each other. Listen – learn – be changed – these are the characteristics of dialogue. Where propaganda seeks to persuade the other, we seek to understand each other through dialogue. Whilst we try to win over others through debate, we seek to overcome our own stereotypes and enemy images through dialogue. (In this context, changing one's opinion is not seen as a weakness, but as a strength.) Whilst we attempt to reach agreement through negotiations, we try to understand more through dialogue. A better understanding of the other also entails a deeper understanding of myself. I become aware that I could have been the other.





Steinar Bryn

## With whom can one initiate a dialogue?

A while ago, I was asked whether I thought that the 9/11 hijackers would have changed their plans if they had been invited to the Nansen Academy for dialogue. The irony was barely hidden, but the question deserves an answer.

No, I do not believe that they would have changed their plans the day they boarded the planes. But they would maybe have thought differently if they had been invited to dialogue one year earlier? Or five years earlier? We do not know. Neither do we know – nor will we ever know – whether they would have participated in conversations. What we, on the other hand, do know is that many Muslims in the Middle East, Europe and the US feel that they are not heard and are not treated as equals. They feel that they are not included.

Dialogue adherents are often called gullible and naïve. Many examples where dialogue has been tried, but has failed, are listed. If we scrutinise these examples, we often see that it was not dialogue that had been attempted, but debate or negotiations, where the relative strength was often uneven and the threat of using force lay just beneath the surface.

We believe that in principle, one can initiate dialogue with all people. The goal of dialogue is not that we must agree, but that we shall understand each other better. Then the dialogue will itself show whether it can continue and whether it will bear fruit.

The dialogue ends when the counterpart makes threats or directs a gun towards your head. Or when the dialogue is used as a medium for propaganda or manipulation. Or when the power relations between the parties are so uneven that the weakest part in reality becomes a hostage. Then the path of resistance remains. Until the dialogue can be resumed. (On the other hand, the alternative for being heard in a dialogue for the genuinely weak is not active resistance, but not being heard at all.)

Some have said that only the ones who are already conciliatory and peace loving participate in the Nansen Dialogue Network in the Balkans and in Lillehammer. Let us then call attention to the fact that many fought each other during the war. Today they are talking to each other. Let us call attention to the fact that more than twice as many civilians were killed in Srebrenica than were killed by Al-Qaeda in New York. 100 000 people were killed in BiH. After such horrors, it is not easy begin dialogue. But it is necessary. We have experienced that it is also possible.

Dialogue is not a panacea for creating reconciliation and peace, but it is one of the conditions making it possible. Without reconciliation, no lasting peace. So easy – and so difficult.

## The fifth province

In Irish mythology, there is a legend about the Fifth Province. The legend tells us that in the olden days, Ireland was divided into four clans and four provinces. When disputes arose and war threatened, the four clan chieftains got together in the Fifth Province.

The Fifth Province didn't exist in the daily or physical landscape, but was created when needed. In practice, it rotated between the four provinces. The Fifth Province was neutral ground, a no-man's-land, where rigid thoughts and prejudiced views could be severed from old moorings.

In the Fifth Province, different rules applied than in the other provinces. Amongst other things, the chieftains left their weapons and the symbols of their clans outside the province. This symbolized that they were now set free from the ties that bound them to their own clan. Here, the four chieftains should strive to listen to each other to enable them to see reality with new eyes. Only in this way, could the habitual gaze be broken. The chieftains were no longer responsible only for their own province. Now, they should take care of the destiny of their common world.

When the Fifth Province visit was over, they all went out, collected their weapons and returned to their own provinces - somewhat wiser and somewhat more prepared to solve their conflicts in a peaceful way.

The dialogue space is such a fifth province.

## Lessons learnt

Experiences from different dialogue projects can be summed up in two seemingly contradictory conclusions:

### DEBATE

- The goal is to win
- Convince/argue
- Talk
- Searching for the other's weak argument
- Making the counterpart insecure
- Moral judgement
- Confrontational body language
- To change one's opinion is a sign of weakness

### DIALOGUE

- The goal is to understand
- Explain/tell
- Listen
- Look for the counterpart's strength
- Make the counterpart feel safe
- Tolerance/self-discipline/self-criticism





### **1. Dialogue unites**

Where people meet face to face in a safe setting, something always happens. One discovers that the others resemble oneself. We share a common experience about being a human being. Fences which one previously thought were insurmountable are lowered. To our surprise, we discover that we share values and viewpoints with people we should programmatically disagree with. So remarkable can human encounters be.

### **2. Dialogue divides**

In a sincere dialogue, we might discover that the distance to the other is greater than we had expected. When we speak honestly, we see this. We may also discover that the divisions do not follow the divisions of faiths and life stances, but rather of characteristics such as age, gender, cultural background and personality.

**When the conflicts in Norway after the** caricature drawings of the prophet Mohammad were not on a larger scale than they were, we believe that this was due to the building of an infrastructure for dialogue and mutual understanding between people from different religions and life stances that has been in process for many years. It has taken place in schools, churches, mosques, The Norwegian Humanist Association, The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities, Norwegian Church Academies, the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, the Nansen Academy and so on. Painstaking work, in which people of good intentions have given willingly of their time to build trust and friendships.

**Dialogue is no luxury, no pretext for doing** nothing. Rather, it is a nail mat that forces one to pay attention, to want to lift oneself up from the pain human beings experience after war, or the insecurity we feel when we face the unknown.

**Dialogue does not replace negotiations,** mediation, truth commissions and litigation. But it is a prerequisite for the success of negotiations and mediation.

**The 20th century was the century of the great** wars. During this time, more people were killed in war than in all other centuries put together. The 21st century must be the century of dialogue. The alternative is violence. Violence is the last step in a long chain of events. Often, violence is the dialogue that ended before it began – or that never got started.





# 13 Tips for a Good Dialogue

*by Inge Eidsvåg*

**"We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them." (Albert Einstein)**





## 1) Invite the participants to the planning

Dialogue is a joint project and cannot contain a hidden agenda. Everyone involved must be invited to participate in deciding on the goal, topic, working methods and schedules. This creates a sense of security and gives ownership to the project. Attempts of manipulation undermine all trust and are destructive to any dialogue. Openness and transparency must be present from day one.

## 2) Spend time getting to know each other

Don't begin the dialogue with the viewpoints and arguments. Begin with the faces, the shared meals, the life histories. Begin with the small stories. We are more than our viewpoints and arguments. And we have something in common: we share experiences about what it means to be a human being. We have parents and siblings, spouses and children, work and interests. We have experienced sorrows and joys. We have perhaps visited the same places, read the same books, listened to the same music. One thousand thin threads bind us together. It is important that we see these threads before we stare ourselves blind on what divides us. In this way, we create an atmosphere of community and safety.

In the dialogue, we meet to face to face. Faces are vulnerable. Therefore, we do not begin the dialogue by insulting the person we meet or by ridiculing what the other person experiences as sacred. When we are guests in each others' minds, we must tread carefully. How would we ourselves have wanted to be met by someone who held an entirely different point of view?

## 3) Create equality

A good dialogue requires not similar, but equal participants. No good dialogue will take place between the master and the slave if the master insists on being master and the slave accepts being the slave. In the event of major differences between the participants' education, level of knowledge and status, one has to establish human equality. The table must be round, the titles must be erased, the time allotted for speaking must be the same and there must be equal respect by both parties. During the course of the conversation it may turn out that the slave's human qualities by far outshine those of the master and that the poorest has the richest imagination and level of ingenuity. Then dialogue can give the voiceless an opportunity to be heard, and the monologue of the powerful can be broken.

## 4) Start with the easiest topics

Climb over the lowest part of the fence. This establishes faith in the ability to overcome greater obstacles. The ladder we use is called trust. It must be mutual. (The Norwegian word for trust, "tillit", reads the same way forwards as backwards.)

## 5) Listen actively

Every dialogue presupposes a will and ability to listen. If nobody listens, nothing that is said is of any use. Being ignored always feels painful and degrading. Dialogue requires empathetic listening in order to understand the others. Not only their viewpoints, but also their interests and existential situation.

We live in a culture where talking lengthily and eloquently has a high status. It also gives power.

In the dialogue space, the good listener is at least as important. What matters in this setting is to listen to the tentative, the uncertain, the unfinished. Being a good listener entails battling inattention, impatience and self-centredness. The good listener uses ears, eyes and heart.

## 6) Ask good questions

The person who thinks he knows everything has no questions. In Norwegian, the word to ask – "spørre" – is linguistically linked to the words "to trace", "to track down" – "spore, oppspore". An active listener is not silent, but asks questions. Good questions put us on the track of something we do not know, but would like to know and should know. Good questions are often open, and cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. The questions start with: What? How? Why? One interprets what the other says with goodwill. Vagueness is clarified. So that is what you meant! The dialogue can be a dance with words; one asks and answers, gives and takes.

But there are also other types of questions: the inappropriate and prying questions; the inquisitorial questions which become a poisonous weapon; the questions in the police interrogation that break down the suspect and make him confess even when he perhaps is innocent. These questions cannot be used in the service of dialogue, where the purpose is to create understanding and to build trust.



## 7) Do not force anybody into thinking the same way as you do

The purpose of dialogue is not to force or allure others into changing. That is the way propaganda operates. It often has the opposite effect when values are tried to be forced on a person from the outside. "I love to be moved, I hate to be pushed", T.S. Elliot once said. Many can endorse this. Dialogue knows no other coercion than what lies in the essence of dialogue itself; it consists of listening, learning and perhaps being changed oneself. One cannot change another human being if one not is open to being changed by the same human being.

## 8) Do not ascribe viewpoints to others which they do not have

Nobody should speak on behalf of others than themselves. Everyone should get the time and opportunity to explain and substantiate their own viewpoints. No one should have to wriggle in the definition net of others. ("After all, you Muslims think that...") No one should have to defend viewpoints they don't themselves have, but which other people in the same political, religious or ethnic organisation perhaps have upheld.

## 9) Compare your own ideals with the ideals of the conversation partner and your own practice with their practice

We often compare our own shining ideals with their neglects. When we place ourselves above the fraction line the calculation will always be in our favour. (Let us remember that for many

centuries, Christianity was seen as incompatible with religious freedom, democracy and women's equality. The inquisition and the crusades were a "Christian" invention, and slavery was justified with "the Book's clear message". This was at a time when many saw Islam as the religion of tolerance.) We should therefore compare our ideals with their ideals, our practice with their practice, our crimes with their crimes and so on.

## 10) Do not uncritically accept the arguments of others

I strive to understand the others' way of thinking. Not in order to uncritically adopt it, but in order to gain a truer image of the world. Tolerance involves that we tolerate, but not necessarily accept what the others say. We should openly challenge views we do not understand or cannot accept. That is to take others seriously. Clarity creates security. But it is the opinions and not the people that we dissociate ourselves from. Gandhi said it this way: "you should treat the thief in the same manner as you would have done if, when the light was turned on, you discovered that the thief was your father." Participating in dialogue therefore does not mean the same as easy relativism. We do not go around disguised as each other. I do not give up what I believe to be true and right unless strong reasons convince me to do so.

## 11) Be open and honest, but also set boundaries for what you want to talk about

Being frank is not the same as being loose-tongued. We don't talk to others about everything. Certain things in life we should keep out of view and away from the interference of others.

What is private should be possible to remain private. The Danish theologian and philosopher Knud E. Løgstrup (1905-81) asks us to have respect for the other's "untouchable zone". This is a good concept. The untouchable zones are the galleries of life; they protect the inner core and our most vulnerable areas against trampling boots and shameless stares. What one wants to protect can vary from person to person. After a war or other encroachments, some issues are perhaps so sensitive that we cannot bear to talk about them; maybe at a later point in time, but not now.

## 12) Accept and make room for feelings

We come to the dialogue as whole human beings with both thoughts and feelings. Even though the dialogue room is not a therapy room, there must be room to show joy, frustration, laughter, anger and tears.

## 13) The dialogue can always continue

When the dialogue ends, we are nearly always willing to continue on a later occasion. Then, other issues could be brought up, new people could join, and the framework may be different. Because dialogue is about mutual understanding we can rarely say to each other that we have understood enough. Even after the best dialogue there will always be a remnant of incomprehensibility. And we say to each other: We must talk more about this.





*The idea was that the academy should be “important in the fight against violent mentality, racism and intolerance” and it had to be “a main cause for the teachers to promote the freedom of thought and speech and the value of the rule of law”. And thus it became.*



# About Nansen Dialogue

**The Nansen Academy was founded in 1938 by Kristian Schjelderup and Anders Wyller. The academy was meant to be a humanistic project in opposition to all totalitarian ideologies. The opening of the academy took place on Saturday March 18th, 1939. Text: Steinar Bryn / Inge Eidsvåg**

## THE NANSEN ACADEMY

The founding of the academy happened in the shadow of the developing European disaster. This also characterized Anders Wyller's opening speech:

*The Europe of our time! One hundred people believing in the human spirit, against one thousand believing in violence. A few hundred with the love of freedom, against ten thousand turning away from freedom with scorn.*

On the backdrop of the violence and repression of the times, Wyller painted a picture of the other Europe:

*No army commander has enough soldiers to erase the footprints of love the Holy Francis of Assisi left on Earth. There are no drums and trumpets to drown out Descartes' quiet sentence: "I think, therefore I am." No laws, no corrosive liquids, no flaming pyres can make those words disappear that permeate European culture and that I mention in their correct order: The commandment of the oracle: "Know yourself" – and Christ's commandment "Forget yourself" ... This is Europe's other image. This is what the Nansen Academy has as its goal to keep alive also for the Norwegians.*

With this, the core of the Nansen Academy's program was stated, the main points being: Love your neighbour. Respect the human. Be loyal to the truth. Freedom comes with responsibility. Protect free rule by the people.

The idea was that the academy should be "important in the fight against the mentality of violence, racism and intolerance" and it had to be "a main cause for the teachers to promote the freedom of thought and speech and the value of the rule of law". And thus it became.

## THE EUROPE OF OUR TIME

During July 1992, while Lillehammer was intensely busy preparing the 17th Olympic Winter Games, the civil war raged in Yugoslavia. Sarajevo, the Olympic City from 1984 was besieged and under bombardment. Horrible images on the TV-screens reminded us that Europe once again was on fire. Line Urke, a mother of young children and an employee of the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee (LOOC) took a spontaneous initiative for a solidarity action for Sarajevo. This was the start of Lillehammer Olympic Aid, connecting sports organizations, aid organizations and Lillehammer municipality. The Nansen Academy was an active participant from the very beginning. The campaign extended into an action for global solidarity. It collected NOK 70 million and supported humanitarian projects in the former Yugoslavia, but also in Guatemala, Afghanistan, Lebanon and Eritrea.

THIS INTERNATIONAL solidarity project was the background for the project "Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution" which the Nansen Academy initiated in the autumn of 1994. The Norwegian Red Cross, Norwegian Church Aid and the Peace Research

Institute in Oslo were present from the start and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave financial support. The intention was to gather young people from the different sides in Yugoslavia for a three-month stay at the Nansen Academy. There, they would go through a training program and then return and keep working for peace and reconciliation in their home countries. What they all had in common was that they were potential leaders, or already had a position of influence in their communities. The method used was dialogue, a way of working that the Nansen Academy had employed through all its years of existence. This method now gained renewed relevance.

Inge Eidsvåg wrote about the intention of the course, "The course does not seek to be a place for negotiations and mediation, only to be a tool to strengthen the human resources in the work for peace. The study shall convey knowledge of democracy, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. It will change attitudes and offer skills training. Briefly: we want to empower people to make an effort for peace in areas torn apart by conflicts and war".

THE FIRST SEMINARS consisted of a process of trial and error. We tried to evolve a method that could contribute to greater understanding and cooperation - between people and groups where all communication had broken down. This was new and difficult for both us and the participants. After the first, careful steps in 1995 the work has evolved considerably both in form, method and content.







## CONFLICT - COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

Conflict analysis usually focuses on conflicts of values and/or interests. What is valuable and how should it be divided? Values and interests might include land, natural resources or political power. It is usually assumed that the parties agree on what they are fighting about. Our experience is that the way the parties communicate is underestimated or neglected in these analyses. Breakdowns in communication between ethnic groups expose them to one-sided nationalistic propaganda. The parties rarely have a common understanding of what the conflict is about. This is because the one-sided propaganda – starting in the homes, continuing in schools and then amplified by media and politicians – all too rarely is corrected. This is where dialogue is necessary. Through meetings and conversations with the other, one might get a better understanding of the complexity of the conflict, and at the same time become conscious of the effects of one's own injustices.

## WAR SEGREGATES

It was not ethnic differences that caused the war in Bosnia Herzegovina. The war created the increased distance between the ethnic groups. In the book: "The Myth of Ethnic War. Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s" V.P. Gagnon argues that the war became so violent because of the similarities and closeness between the people. This tight, social fabric had to be torn apart for the politicians to conduct a strictly ethnic policy. The bonds between people had to be destroyed to enable nationalistic politicians to consolidate their power after the breakdown of communism. That is why the war became so brutal and bloody.

**TO LIVE in a segregated society does not** necessarily mean to live physically segregated, even if cities like Mitrovica and Mostar are divided by the rivers Ibar and Neretva. It means to a larger extent to function socially and politically in ethnically pure spaces. All social and political life is organized by ethnic principles, from kindergartens to political parties. In this way, distorted understandings of reality are allowed to exist in relatively isolated spaces. The "truths" about what happened are "ethnic truths". In Bosnia Herzegovina there are 52 divided schools today. That is a poor foundation for a unified state.

**INTERNATIONAL PEACEBUILDING overvalues** the importance of state building, at the cost

of reconciliation work. The idea is that strong, well-functioning institutions will secure social stability. Our experience is that the institutions are not enough. It is difficult for them to function optimally if the reconciliation work is neglected. A state needs loyalty from its citizens. Democracy is often interpreted as majority rule. When politics are based on ethnicity, the ethnic majority feel they have a democratic right to power. The minority feel betrayed by what many of them think of as their homeland. New conflicts are bred. Are there strategies of reconciliation that can break this cycle, to stop the conflict from being a part of the next generation's heritage? These strategies must, in that case, take the "soft" institutions of home and school seriously.

## LOCAL FOUNDATION AND NETWORK

Even if the first experiences from the Nansen Academy were positive for the participants, it was difficult to be the only one in their home environments that had been in dialogue with the "enemy". Many opined that we could achieve more if we also organized local activities in the Balkans. Two women, one Albanian and one Serbian, Arjeta Emra and Snezana Popovic, established the first Nansen Dialogue Centre in Pristina in 1998 in the premises of the Norwegian Church Aid. They arranged a series of seminars for Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo. Even if the Pristina centre had to close during the war in 1999, the experiences gained there set a standard for the other centres that emerged in 1999-2002. Today, there are Nansen Dialogue Centres in Skopje (Macedonia), Pristina and Mitrovica (Kosovo), Belgrade (Serbia), Podgorica (Montenegro), Mostar, Sarajevo, Prijedor and Srebrenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Osijek (Croatia). These are local organizations with a strong anchoring in the Nansen Academy.

**THE NORWEGIAN CHURCH AID, PRIO** and the Norwegian Red Cross were partners on the first board of directors of the Nansen Dialogue Project. These organizations were absolutely central to the establishing and development of the project. They brought with them international experience and relevant academic competence that strengthened the project's foundations. Norwegian Church Aid and the Norwegian Red Cross also supported the seminars in Lillehammer financially. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs gave a lot of economic support and has been an important partner for us through the years. The Nansen Academy contributed its humanistic legacy

and pedagogical tradition, its openness to different views, as well as alternative methods of teaching.

**The aim of the project was formulated thus:**

- **NANSEN DIALOGUE seeks to - through** using dialogue as an idea and a method - strengthen people living in conflict situations' ability to contribute to peaceful conflict resolution and democratic development.
- **NANSEN DIALOGUE wishes to create a** neutral and open space where actors in serious conflicts can meet face to face. The intention is to break down enemy images and increase the understanding of each other's views, interests and needs. An important goal is to stimulate and facilitate conflict analysis and experiencing "the other's" point of view. Focus is not on who are right or guilty, but on how we build respect for democratic principles, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution. These principles are an alternative to national chauvinism and ethnic loyalty.

**THE CORE of the project is still the inter-ethnic** dialogue between people in divided societies.

**THIS IS the biggest international project ever** undertaken by the Nansen Academy and it has received attention internationally. In 1998, the academy was awarded an Honourable Mention by UNESCOS Prize for Peace Education. The following year the project "Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution" was awarded Amalie Laksovs Memorial Fund for the Protection of Human Rights. Steinar Bryn and Nansen Dialogue have been awarded the Livia Prize and Innlandets Humanistpris - both in 2010 - for "entering the eye of the storm – and staying there." Steinar Bryn and Nansen Dialogue have been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize six times since 2009.

## LILLEHAMMER AS THE FIFTH PROVINCE

Most of the work takes place in local communities in the Balkans where Nansen Dialog runs its projects. In addition, seminars are organized in Lillehammer on demand. The most important target groups are:

- **Local politicians and administrative leaders** in municipalities
- **Teachers and school leaders**
- **Parents and schoolchildren**
- **Refugees and the internally displaced**

**IN each seminar, care is taken to address the different groups' interests and needs.** If the participants are parents from a village municipality, they often wish to visit a Norwegian farm or a rural community. If they are a group of politicians, we arrange meetings with local politicians from municipalities in our region. If they are teachers, it is important to visit local schools.

**THE VALUE OF the seminars in Lillehammer is** acknowledged and confirmed by our colleagues in the Nansen Dialogue Centres and by the participants. The seminars are not holidays, but necessary parts of important reconciliation processes in their local environments. Lillehammer offers them a possibility to get away from their conflict-ridden daily lives, which give very little room for dialogue. Lillehammer is a safe place where they can breathe more freely and speak more openly.

**IN THE NANSEN ACADEMY they are free to** think new thoughts and express them. Freedom of speech becomes more than a principle, it becomes an experience. Staying together for a week, in a place far away, is different from having a seminar at home, because it gives the participants a unique, common experience. They live in the same dormitory, eat in the same cantina, visit the local museum Maihaugen, and go to concerts together. They get to know each other as people.

**A JOURNEY TO NORWAY makes Europe alive** and real to them. Many fly for the first time. Meeting an active democracy, visiting

companies, institutions and organizations, experiencing a well-organized state with a conscious policy of gender equality inspires and give them ideals. The visits to Norway also make the participants feel that they are being taken seriously, which in turn make them take themselves more seriously and develop a loyalty to future cooperation. From a European point of view, their problems seem less unique. The vision of a Europe where ethnic minorities live together might ease the local pressure. Neglecting this type of experience will simply delay integration in the countries in the former Yugoslavia.

**THE SMALL TOWN LILLEHAMMER also has** many unique features to offer. They can stroll by the Mesna River on a summer day or slowly descend the Lysgård ski jump or participate in the social hour in Søre Ål school. Visiting the GLØR recycling station is an option, or meeting a family from the 1700's in Maihaugen, or visiting a modern sheep pen in Øyer, or watching a Lillehammer municipality council meeting. Just relaxing on the benches outside the Nansen Academy in the bright, nordic summer nights enables free-flowing conversation. These are all new and common experiences that tie the participants closer together, even if not all of them are fans of physical activity. (At least, they can bemoan stiff and painful muscles together after the trip.) Even agreeing that some Norwegian traditional food really is inedible might contribute to unity.

**SEVERAL INSTITUTIONS in Lillehammer have** for several years cooperated with Nansen Dialogue. Lillehammer municipality has received groups from the Balkans for the last fifteen years. (The municipality itself has run a project for several years, financed by the MFA.) By visiting the municipality, the groups get a general insight into how municipalities are managed in Norway. The divide between politics and bureaucracy is especially emphasized. In the Balkans, administrations are politicized, which results in great changes when there is a new mayor elected. In Lillehammer everyone gets to keep their job even if there is a new mayor.

**SEVERAL SCHOOLS in Lillehammer have been** active in different projects initiated by Nansen Dialogue. Kringsjø, Smestad and Røyslimoen schools have had exchange students from







Serbian schools. Søre Ål school has been strongly involved in the opening of an integrated school in Vukovar, Croatia. The idea behind these projects is not a direct transfer of Norwegian models of education, but two-way learning and understanding of each other's situation.

**NANSEN DIALOGUE** deliberately uses different institutions in the municipality to inspire the Balkan groups to think anew about their own work at home. The municipal waste disposal company (GLØR) has received almost all the groups visiting the Nansen Academy. These visits inspire and give ideas about how to deal with waste disposal challenges at home. They also stimulate reflection about attitudes to garbage.

**WHEN SOME** of our participants mention the "Nansen Spirit", maybe they refer to those common, positive memories? Or is it the calm and safety in Lillehammer and the Nansen Academy, in stark contrast to the situation at home? Maybe it is all about the real engagement they meet in students and teachers – and the fact that the Nansen Academy is an institution with values that ensures commitment? Or the intimacy that develops between people who share dormitory, dining hall and smoking breaks? It might also be the liberating experience of expanding your horizon mentally, geographically and politically. Fridtjof Nansen once expressed this:

*It is in us all, our strange longing to do something, fill our lives with something more than our daily walk from the home to the office and from the office back home again. It is our enduring longing to conquer hindrances and dangers, see what is hidden, to penetrate places outside of our path, it is the attraction of the unknown, the longing for that land beyond the borders of the known, the divine power rooted deeply in the soul of man that drove the first hunters into new land – the driving force, maybe, of our greatest actions – the drift in the human thought spreading its wings without knowing any borders to its freedom.*

*(From the speech "Spirit of adventure", 1926)*

**“But on distrust, hate  
and envy, no future  
can be built.”**

*Fridtjof Nansen 1861-1930*

**Nobel Peace Prize winner 1922.**

**Polar explorer, diplomat, humanist and scientist.**













# From the diary of a dialogue worker

*Text: Steinar Bryn*

**“The difficult can be done immediately, the impossible just takes a little longer” (Fridtjof Nansen)**

## THE NANSEN ACADEMY, AUTUMN 1997

It is the fourth group from the Balkans visiting Lillehammer. The seminars have begun to find their form. The participants come from Zagreb, Banja Luka, Tuzla, Sarajevo, Belgrade, Pristina, Skopje and Podgorica. They represent different positions and experiences. In the Nansen Academy, dialogue spaces are created where they can share their experiences. Hanne Sofie Greve is visiting. She deliberately conveys the investigations after what happened in Prijedor, Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 1992: a brutal ethnic cleansing of Muslims carried out by Serbian paramilitary forces. In scale almost the size of Srebrenica, but with a lot less attention paid to it. One of the participants from Belgrade, a news anchor, is shocked by what he hears. Not so much by the fact that people from his own ethnic group had done it, but that he had never heard about it.

### IT IS IMPORTANT that these stories get told.

At the same time, we work analytically. By incorporating analytical tools from different academic disciplines we might create a distance from the historical events. This enables a common understanding of the reasons for, and the consequences of, the breakdown of Yugoslavia, which can then be discussed. Within this understanding, the possibility of

reconciliation is explored. I had no reason to doubt the news anchor's surprise. It confirms the closed systems in which it was possible to live in the former Yugoslavia in the first half of the 1990s. But it also confirms how important it is to bring people together to share experiences. Alternative forms of communication are all the more important when the nationalistic propaganda is one-sided. The breakdown of Yugoslavia was not only an extremely violent dissolving of a state, but also a communication breakdown between the different peoples.

## HERZEG NOVI, MONTENEGRO NOVEMBER 1997

A bus containing ten Serbs and ten Albanians travels the road from Pristina in Kosovo to Herzeg Novi on the coast of Montenegro. Both groups are unsure whether they have been lured into a propaganda trap. I am very nervous. This is my first dialogue seminar in the field. A three month training course back home in Lillehammer is one thing. Mistakes can be corrected during that time. Now, a group of very sceptical and critical participants will be together for just three days. Stuttering, I present dialogue to them before dividing them into smaller groups. Three Serbs refuse to talk, they sit as if glued to their chairs. “Do you think we have problems speaking to each other? Some of my best colleagues are Albanians!” I don't feel

up to it. What can I do when people don't want to talk in a dialogue seminar? I sit down to talk with them and cooperation - between people and groups where all communication had broken down. This was new and difficult for both us and the participants. After the first, careful steps in 1995 the work has evolved considerably both in form, method and content.

I AM OFTEN tested by the participants. Both knowledge and attitudes are scrutinized. In situations like that, I lean on my intuition more and more. Be honest, admit insecurity and lack of knowledge. Of course, we will end up in situations where we feel embarrassed. Humility and respect for the participants are necessities. It is their conflict. Once, I was asked: “How do you think it feels, being bombed?” I answered that I could hardly imagine it and asked him to tell me. I don't interpret my own insecurity as defeat, but as a source for gaining new knowledge and experience.

EVENTS SELDOM happen as expected. I am provoked by seminar organizers in conflict resolution who have the program ready before they have talked to the participants. It is necessary to meet them to explore which possibilities are there. With experience I also feel more assured of my own reactions and my ability to see these possibilities.



**THE NANSEN ACADEMY,  
FEBRUARY 1998**

There are six participants from Kosovo in the group in Lillehammer. The conflict between them becomes more visible after the Serbian attack on the famous Albanian guerrilla commander Adem Jashari's village in the Drenica valley. More than 80 people were killed, among them many civilians, women and children. This splits the group in two. The Albanians are supported by Serbs from Sarajevo and Belgrade in seeing this as an atrocity. Civilian Kosovo-Serbs see it more as a part of the fight between the guerrilla and Serbian forces, and they think Jashari used women and children as human shields.

**WE NO LONGER DISCUSS a conflict far away. It is present here and now. Tension fills the room. The event puts my neutrality to the test. Our**

project is called "Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution." It demands a reaction to undemocratic actions, breaches of human rights and violent conflict resolution. But these are all done by people, not ethnic groups. All the participants join me in a memorial service for the victims in Drenica.

**ONE OF THE greatest challenges I got was to choose sides. All parties in a conflict have a strong feeling of self-righteousness. Still, they want confirmation that they are right. They want the dialogue worker to act as a judge and support them. In the dialogue room impartiality is a must. Especially in the evening many wish to talk, sometimes on a one-on-one basis. They want to ensure that I have understood their position. One way to avoid being trapped into acting as a judge is to show empathy. After listening to Albanian stories from Kosovo,**

it is not hard to say: "Were I an Albanian in Kosovo, I would probably have fought for an independent Kosovo". After listening to Serbian histories, it is equally easy to say: "Were I a Serb in Kosovo, I would have fought to keep Kosovo a part of Serbia".

**IT IS CHALLENGING to remain neutral, not least because we are taught to show solidarity. We are supposed to support the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich – David against Goliath. But showing solidarity in a dialogue room might be counterproductive, exactly because it is necessary to give everyone a sense of safety and respect. The dialogue room is not a courtroom, but a space where the parties can increase their understanding of each other's positions and experiences through telling their stories. This does not of course mean that we are indifferent.**



## HERZEG NOVI, MONTENEGRO, WINTER 1999

Another three-day seminar. The participants are sceptical on arrival. There is a lot of quarrelling the first day. The hurting stories are being told.

**“Do you know that my aunt lost her job as a librarian because of her ethnic background?”**

**“Do you know how my brother was beaten by the police?”**

**“Do you know that my grandfather had to flee from his farm?”**

**AFTER A LONG DAY of stories, the ground was** prepared for new conversations the next day. An important and necessary dialogue exercise might be: “What would you apologize for?” Another one might be: “What do you feel you have lost by living in a conflict area?” There are two Serbs and two Albanians in each group. In safe surroundings, they experience that the lost opportunities are a shared experience. They have all lost the opportunity to travel freely. The Yugoslavian passport gave them the freedom to go to both Leningrad and London. Now it is almost impossible to get entry to any European country. In addition, the conflict puts restrictions on travelling within their own country. Many have had their education interrupted. Both parties say they have lost their youth because they had to accept responsibility for their families too early, often also providing for them. Sharing these common experiences sow the thought that they are all victims. But who, then, profits from the conflict?

**DAY THREE is dedicated to possible solutions.** How to organize a bilingual society? How to establish a multi-ethnic police force? These are manageable obstacles, different possible solutions exist. During the evaluation of the seminar most express astonishment at the fact that this is the first time they have sat together for three days having conversations with the other side. Many admit that they have never even done this for three hours.

## OHRID, MACEDONIA, JANUARY 2002

A seminar for Albanian and Serbian journalists, with translation to both languages. The seminars in English are getting too exclusive, it is important to include larger groups. I speak English. It is translated into Serbian and Albanian. All the comments from the participants are translated into the other two languages. At first it comes across as cumbersome, but soon I get used to it and

begin to appreciate the little pauses between my own statements.

**TWO OF THE PARTICIPANTS, Ivan and Besnik,** discover that they have met before. They identify the hilltop and the time of day when they, three years earlier, shot at each other at the border between Kosovo and Albania. Ivan was a Serbian soldier, Besnik an Albanian soldier. This is the first time they meet for a conversation. They soon develop a friendship and a common sense of humour: “I could have killed you. I am glad I didn’t.”

**WHEN PEOPLE LIVE in divided societies they** are often subject to extreme propaganda from homes, schools, media and paramilitary groups. This constructs parallel ethnical perceptions of reality. Any new event is consequently interpreted within the existing ethnical framework with no room for alternative interpretations. Alternative interpretations are quickly vilified and labelled as treason against your own people. In divided societies, dialogue is needed because people living in closed spaces need to be confronted with alternatives to their own ethnical truths.

**THE EPISODE described above raises several** questions. What if Besnik had grown up in Ivan’s home – and what if Ivan had grown up in Besnik’s home? Would they still have shot at each other at that hill in April 1999, only wearing different uniforms? Are our enemy images formed by the propaganda apparatus that by coincidence surrounds the village we were born into? In such a way that those born on the north side of the river Ibar in Mitrovica grow up with an ingrained scepticism towards Albanians? In such a way that those born on the south side of the river grow up with an ingrained scepticism towards Serbs? When I ask this question, I am sometimes confronted: “It is easy for you to say, you are born in Norway.” Thus, my point is validated.

## THE NANSEN ACADEMY, JANUARY 2004

A group of Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo have come to the Nansen Academy because the OSCE (the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) acknowledges that they lack a dialogue component in their repatriation work. They contacted us and asked for help. Can dialogue be used as a tool and preparation of those who want to return? The participants are our first DRTeam (Dialogue and Repatriation Team). Dejan, one of the participants, goes home to Svinjare outside of Mitrovica. One

month later his home is torched and burns to the ground. It is the third time he experiences having his home destroyed. All the 132 Serbian houses in Svinjare are destroyed. As of March 18th, 2004, Dejan still works on returning.

**IT IS NOT ENOUGH to rebuild houses for** people to repatriate to. It is also necessary to rebuild the trust and respect that the war has ruined. Reconciliation is hard. The horrible memories create fear. I often get asked: “How can reconciliation be possible after all we have experienced and done to each other?” At the same time, there are many examples of peoples who have turned hatred and bitterness to respect and cooperation.

**RECONCILIATION IS a process including two** or more parties that have lived in conflict. Arguments stating how difficult reconciliation is are often picked from places where there has not been any active policy of reconciliation. The long-living hatred against Germans in some milieus in Norway is an example of this. I wonder if one of the reasons that so few engage actively in reconciliation work is that they believe it to be far more difficult than it really is?

**DIALOGUE IS a prerequisite for reconciliation.** Through dialogue the understanding between the parties is strengthened. The behaviour of the enemy might make more sense when it can be interpreted in his or her cultural and political context. I have heard a lot of stories from soldiers that were sure they defended themselves and what was theirs, and only later realized they were the attacking party.

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*Many actions are taken in fear of what the enemy might do. The reversed Golden Rule seems to be valid: “Do unto others what you fear they might do to you - just make sure you do it first!”*

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## THE NANSEN ACADEMY

MAY/JUNE 2005

**40 politicians from Presevo and Bujanovac in**

Southern Serbia are at the Nansen Academy to discuss concrete problems. An important part of the stay is to study how Lillehammer municipality works. Two Albanian mayors (from Presevo and Bujanovac) lead the May 17th parade ("the Norwegian constitution day") together with the mayor of Lillehammer. The program is important, but the spaces in between may be just as important. The coffee breaks, the meals, the walk down the ski jump, the long evenings – moments when the participants have time to digest their impressions. The participants know each other well, Bujanovac and Presevo are small municipalities. They know which roles they played during the violent conflict in 2000. The conversations quickly turn honest. There is no place to hide. They sit on the white benches by the academy's entrance until after midnight. The bright summer evenings have created a new dialogue space.

**FOR THESE SEMINARS the participants came** from municipalities where everything is politics, and the municipal administrations function on that premise. The election of a new mayor usually results in the whole administration being replaced and the supporters of the new mayor getting those positions. Your party connections are more important than formal qualifications. A lack of rules and procedures for employment leaves municipalities with strong ethnic conflicts especially vulnerable. The ethnic group in power will bestow favours on their own. The clear divide between administration and politics in Lillehammer was therefore provocative, as were Lillehammer's harsh regulations on corruption. A mayor cannot accept gifts. Participants come from a culture where receiving benefits when in power is the norm. At the same time, it is inspiring for them to meet an ideology that so strongly promotes what is best for the inhabitants.

**ALL POLITICAL PARTIES in this area are based** on ethnicity. Democracy is generally viewed as majority rule. The argument that the opposition party today might be in position tomorrow has no power among the ethnic minorities. Referendums are especially popular among ethnic majorities. Boycotting elections and participation in institutional life is common among minorities.

**THE CHALLENGE IS to define politics as a just** distribution of resources and opportunities, not as power and advantages to the ethnic majority. In this work, human rights are an important

instrument because they are tied to each individual, not to an ethnic group, nation or people.

**A SIMPLE dialogue exercise is to identify the** largest problems the municipality faces and then discuss the best ways of solving these problems together. In Southern Serbia, these problems are connected to infrastructure: water, electricity, roads, garbage disposal and economic development.

## OHRID, MACEDONIA, JUNE 2005

Ten Serbian and ten Albanian politicians from Mitrovica are gathered for the first long conversation in six years. The Serbian politicians ask the Albanians: "What did your conscience tell you when the electricity was cut in Serbian villages last winter, in minus 15 degrees?" In the following conversation, the fact that twice as many Albanian villages also lost their electricity surfaces. The Irish company responsible turned off the electricity for anyone who did not pay their bill. It thus becomes clear that the parties have a common interest in developing structures that would prevent a shutdown of the electricity next winter. Both parties have a clear idea that the living conditions are better on the other side of the river: there is more electricity there, more water, more money and warmer coffee.

**IN THIS CASE the Serbs were convinced that** the shutdown was ethnically motivated and they did not know that the other side had experienced the same shutdown. The Serbian and Albanian politicians attending the seminar were far away from each other's positions. The Albanians want an independent Kosovo. If that is to be, the Serbs want to split Kosovo in two, using the river Ibar that runs through Mitrovica, as a natural border. This is a bad starting point for a dialogue meeting. I therefore introduced the difference between dialogue and debate to make visible to them how dialogue gives them the opportunity to speak about the most sensitive and taboo-ridden of subjects.

**IN A DIALOGUE about the status of Kosovo,** the goal is not to find the solution, but to explore the different views and increase the understanding of why there is such a difference between them. It means practicing tolerance and active listening rather than passing moral judgments or look for the weaker arguments from the opposing party. As a next step one might try to find acceptable solutions for all parties involved and thus secure more stable solutions. Dialogue becomes a prerequisite for good negotiations.



## DIALOGUE = MAKE VISIBLE

*Dialogue is making yourself visible and letting others be visible to you.*

*We invited five Palestinian women to participate in a dialogue meeting with five Israeli women. The Palestinian women declined at first. To take part in dialogue with the enemy would be to show them the respect and confirmation they did not deserve. We had a long conversation about whether they thought the Israelis had enough knowledge about how they lived, if Israeli politicians, teachers, journalists and parents conveyed a true picture of life in the occupied areas? Of course not, they answered. Isn't it important that somebody tell them? Make yourselves visible! Does it give them more correct knowledge? That is what we invite you to do. They were bewildered and answered: "Is that dialogue? We thought dialogue was what went on at Camp David." No, that was political negotiations, often at the other end of the communication spectrum. They then decided to come. But I had to promise not to call it dialogue.*

Steinar Bryn






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*After two work-days we have a joint dinner with Macedonian, Serbian and Albanian music. Suddenly, most of the teachers are on the dance floor. The divides between them are bridged for a few hours and they experience a human community based on pedagogy, food, music and dance.*

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*Something happens during the dialogue process. Dialogue is more than words. Perspectives are broadened, attitudes nuanced. The relationship between people is changed, doors are opened. This is especially meaningful when the participants belong to the same type of institution. They might meet again under different circumstances. That means they have the opportunity and arenas for action. Dialogue is the material of the bridges that need to be built in divided societies.*

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**BASED ON THIS** a new willingness to talk might emerge, one that would not be there if top politicians were gathered to a negotiation meeting in Vienna. There, they would primarily defend their own positions. Their loyalty would be to those back home that they represented, not to negotiating results. In Tivat, it became increasingly clear to the participants: regardless of the constitutional solutions we might agree on, we will still need electricity and water - let us therefore not wait three months until we meet again.

### **GATHERING OF TEACHERS, OHRID, MACEDONIA, AUGUST 2005**

**Macedonian and Albanian teachers from** Jegunovce, Macedonia. Serbian and Albanian teachers from Obilic, Kosovo Polje and Mitrovica in Kosovo. Serbian and Croatian teachers from Vukovar in Croatia. Serbian and Albanian teachers from Bujanovac in Southern Serbia, 65 in total. They all teach at monoethnic schools and most of them believe this to be for the best. I go there together with Inge Eidsvåg, who introduces themes that interest him: What kind of positions do teachers have in these societies? How to teach history? How to teach religion? How to teach peacebuilding? Do the teachers contribute to the conflict by transferring it to the next generation, or are the pupils trained to see the world with a fresh gaze?

**THESE GATHERINGS do not take place in a vacuum.** The follow-up is just as important. The Nansen Center in Osijek is deeply involved in creating a common school for Serbs and Croats in Vukovar. Teachers from Vukovar were present and told us about this. The Nansen Center in Skopje has similarly created common extracurricular classes in English and computer skills for Macedonian and Albanian children in Jegunovce. They work to ensure that the children can be taught in a common environment. The idea of multiethnic schools often seems distant after a conflict. There is no use in pressing for solutions, they must grow organically. But we can stimulate the process by raising the question with the pupils, parents and teachers.

**This is especially meaningful when the** participants belong to the same type of institution. They might meet again under different circumstances. That means they have the opportunity and arenas for action. Dialogue is the material of the bridges that need to be built in divided societies.

**PRISTINA/BEOGRAD, OCTOBER 2005**

I have just finished a seminar on the possibilities for repatriation of refugees to three villages in Kosovo Polje municipality. Six refugees met the village leaders for the first time in many years. It had been a stimulating seminar. I had to cut it a little short, having made an appointment to meet bishop Artemije in the mountains north of Novi Pazar. Together with Norwegian Church Aid we have planned a dialogue seminar for religious leaders from Kosovo. The Catholics and the Muslims have permission. The orthodox bishop does not

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*Patience and endurance are important prerequisites. There are no quick solutions to deep conflicts and dialogue workers must realize that these processes take time. Dialogue neither creates big headlines nor quick results. It is painstaking work, and takes a long time.*

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want to bless the meeting however. After an eight-hour drive we are ready to meet the bishop to get him to reconsider. We draw our breaths and exit the car – only to find out that the bishop has left. He thought the meeting was the day before. Today, he is in Belgrade. We return to Pristina to sleep, get up at 06.15 and drive towards Belgrade. We have to wait one hour at the border. The meeting is friendly, but he has no faith in this type of dialogue seminar. There have already been several such gatherings. He himself participated in one in Norway in 2001 without it leading to any improvement of people's lives in Kosovo.

I make it clear that one of the distinguishing features of Nansen Dialogue is the follow-up. But his bitterness and resignation is there for all to see. He repeats several times that because of all those who have been killed, all the churches destroyed, all the houses burnt down – after the KFOR came in 1999 to secure peace, he has lost all faith in the international community, especially because of the lack of investigation and arrests of perpetrators.

**THE SEMINAR IS CANCELLED, many miles and hours to no use.** Or just the opposite: we have established a direct relation to the bishop. We need to involve religious leaders in reconciliation work. This is a time-consuming process. We can't expect to convince a bishop in a short meeting. Maybe it will be possible next year. This work is full of breakthroughs and setbacks. When the bombing started in Kosovo in 1999, one of my children asked me if I was one of the losers. The feeling that the dialogue work was set back years was there, that what we had achieved was torn apart by others. But the future proved it was possible to restart it.

When it comes to peacebuilding in areas like the Middle East, Northern Ireland and Kosovo, a generation is a realistic perspective.

**SOME VIEW dialogue as "soft". It does not** challenge the deeper structures and power relations in society. A diplomat once clearly told me: "The problem, Steinar, is that many view dialogue as too feminine". My experience is that dialogue has a radical effect, because it challenges the participants' individual and ethnic self-understanding and view of the world. This is often a prerequisite to question the deeper structures.

**LILLEHAMMER, NOVEMBER 2008**

Friday, November 14th starts with a visit to Lillehammer municipality. A powerful group of seven women and four men from a municipality in Bosnia and Herzegovina visits our mayor and deputy mayor, both women. Two of the Bosnian women hold seats in Republika Srpska's parliament. One is president of her local municipal council. The other eight also hold important positions in the municipality.

**BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA'S war history** is brutal. It is a story about systematic brutality. Hanne Sofie Greve led the international investigation into what happened in this area. 50,000 people disappeared. According to Greve, most Muslim leaders, intellectuals and other prominent members of society were executed.

**WE REMEMBER the pictures from the concentration camps Omarska and Trnopolje.** The author Rezak Hukanovic was a prisoner in Omarska. He wrote a book about the horrors he experienced there. The book is translated into English, with a foreword by Elie Wiesel, as *The Tenth Circle of Hell: A Memoir of Life in the Death Camps of Bosnia Herzegovina*. He is part of the group.

**I MET this group for the first time in August 2008, 15 years after the war.** We spoke for two days. All the participants stressed that many had returned. Life was relatively good. The municipality grew and evolved. They tried to convey an optimistic image. From the conversations, I understood that the real problems were put aside to keep the hope of a common future alive. It was clear to me that they were about to repeat Tito's mistake – to bury the problems

instead of developing an active policy of reconciliation that could help them process the evil to which they had been subjected.

**THEY CAME to Lillehammer three months later.** Our strategy was the same as always: Let them land, visit the ski jump, the main street, some inspiring lectures – then go deeper into the subject matter. How has the conflict affected your life? Followed by the opportunity to ask each other questions. This is my diary entry from the evening of November 14, 2008:

*A long day of dialogue is coming to an end. It is half past nine in the evening. How to make these dialogue experiences more visible? Through the day, the participants showed me how they master the art of dialogue. They listened to each other and thereby expanded their horizons. E.K, a Serb connected with the SDS says: "I have lived in Prijedor for 11 years, but today I learned things I did not know about my hometown. Today, I heard things I have never heard before."*

*B.O. tells about how she was taken to the Trnopolje camp as a 13-year old and tortured. To her, it was a torture camp. A Serbian member of parliament says: "I did not know this. I had no idea. I have believed to this day that the Trnopolje camp was collecting ground for those that were deported."*

*Nobody in the group knew about B.O.'s experiences, even though many of them knew each other before the war, even though we have had several gatherings. She never told. The parliamentarian adds: "Without this seminar, I wouldn't have known."*

*T. K., who recently buried the remains of her husband who died 15 years ago, tells us that those who killed him still live in the municipality. She knows who they are. And she knows that they know that she knows. This is a daily reminder of the evil brutality that hit her.*

*The president of the municipal council tells us how her parents were killed. She then describes how she escaped together with 250 others. Then she tells us how she was raped and robbed. Then she says: "This is the first time in my life I tell this story." In the August meeting, she remained calm and spoke of how all was going well, now she says to the Serbs: "We are filled with fear, and this is the only thing that can help us. We wish to live here. This is our country. People in Sarajevo or Tuzla can't help us. Only you can help us get rid of this fear."*



*N.N., a woman from a mixed marriage rises and starts talking about the pain of not being accepted among her own, the Muslims, because she married a Serb. She is not accepted among the Serbs either, because she is a Muslim. She is considered a traitor. "I thought we were done with this. Now I realize we have only put it aside."*

*Another member of the parliament says: "Imagine if we had started to talk about these things right after the war. Then the politics of today could have been about education, creating jobs, caring for the sick and elderly – instead, we are trapped in the same old conflict."*

*E.N., a Serb working in the police force says: "Imagine if we had these words in 1992 – instead of guns. This is the first time I have experienced this method. We came into a dialogue room where it became possible to talk with each other for the first time."*

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*B.O. says: "I have been to many seminars, but none has ended as positively as this. That is because we were allowed to tell our stories, not just argue our opinions."*

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November 14 is over. Another day confirming that dialogue is more than words. From the tears and these strong stories, a hope grows that Bosnia and Herzegovina will be a good place to live for everybody.



## LILLEHAMMER, MAY 2009

We have invited 12 representatives of the International Commission for Missing Persons in Kosovo, Serbs and Albanians. I have to promise in advance that I will not speak of dialogue and reconciliation. They come to explore if they together might reach through to the governments in Belgrade and Pristina. They also wonder if the other part might have valuable information.

**THE FIRST day we do very little. Again, I see** how this is disarming the participants. They get their shoulders down and that evening, they are motivated: shouldn't we talk about something? They step out of their defensive positions. The next day, they talk about how the conflict has affected their lives. They acknowledge that they all have lost a lot, this is why they are part of the International Commission for Missing Persons.

**THROUGH this conversation they** acknowledge that the others are victims to a larger extent than they were aware of. The others also have their tales of suffering. The next two days we go through questions and answers. Their shared experience of losing close family members ties them together. The fifth day we spend in Oslo. We have a constructive meeting with Svein Mollekleiv of the Norwegian Red Cross about their work to find missing persons. On the way home to Lillehammer, when crossing the bridge in Minnesund, one of the women begins to laugh. When we pass Espa, everybody is laughing. I use the cell-phone to send sound images to everybody I know. It is unbelievable. People who initially did not want to talk about reconciliation are laughing together - a vivifying and conciliatory laughter!

**THE LAST DAY we are going to plan a future** conference. I separate them in one Serbian and one Albanian group, because I assume they have different challenges they need to address at home. They answer me by refusing to be split. "After what we have experienced together this week, you want to split us?" They find it unacceptable. They want to plan the conference together.

**I THINK: Most of the critics of dialogue as a** method in my work have never been to a dialogue seminar. They haven't found the time.

## NEUM, BOSNIA, MARCH 2011

I sit by the river Neretva, looking toward the bridge between the Croatian and Bosnian parts of Mostar. I have just finished a dialogue seminar for teachers from the high school in Stolac. The school is divided. The Croats attend the morning shift, the Bosniaks the afternoon one. There are separate classrooms and teacher's rooms. This is the first time any of them say hello and introduce themselves to each other. We have spent millions on building a strong state in Bosnia and Herzegovina following the Dayton Accords in 1995, but neglected reconciliation work between people living in the very same state. Homes and schools are considered less important institutions. During 2009 and 2010, we held a lot of seminars for students, teachers, parents and local politicians from Stolac. A Nansen classroom has been built in the school's basement where the pupils can meet between the shifts. A group of Croatian and Bosnian students have formed an editorial staff for a school newspaper. Five issues have been published. One was about the visit to Lillehammer. Dialogue enters directly into the conflicts. Would you like to teach on our shift? What do you think about using religious symbols in the school building? Is it possible to make a joint end-of-year ceremony? Again, I experience that only three days of dialogue make several of them exclaim: "Why haven't we talked with each other before? If we had only known that this is what you thought, we would never have..." It surprises me that the international community doesn't leave more room for dialogue and reconciliation work in its peacebuilding efforts. There are more than 50 divided schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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*During the closing ceremony, where they receive a memorial diploma, an Albanian woman, 44, says: "This is the first time in ten years I feel like a human being again." 70 year old Beiram says: "Being here eases my pain."*

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*A county council has used dialogue as a method in the conflict between harvesters of wild and farmed salmon. Photo: Norwegian Aquaculture Center*



# Can the experiences from the Balkans be used in Norway?

**Dialogue as a tool is needed not only in the Middle-East or Kosovo, but also in our own families, neighbourhoods and workplaces – indeed most places where people meet.** *Text: Steinar Bryn*

**THE TRAIN** rushes past Brummunddal and Moelv, only half an hour more until I am at home. What about our own society? How is the communication between ethnic Norwegians and Norwegians with immigrant roots? Even Norwegian families live as divided societies where the communication has broken down, either between mother and father, parents and children or between siblings.

**Dialogue is a tool needed not only in the Middle East and Kosovo**, but also in our own families, neighbourhoods and workplaces – indeed most places where people meet. I think for a fleeting moment about the communication between my own children and me. They grow up quicker than I can fathom and live through their toughest moments while I am in Pristina or Sarajevo. Too far away to be of any help, maybe too far away even to be able to understand. When the taxi reaches my driveway, the house is dark. It is 2 o'clock in the morning. Everybody is asleep. I tiptoe into the living room and leave a bag of Snickers on the table. This is no longer a surprise gift, just a sign of my well-known bad conscience. I sneak in under the blankets – hear a whispered “welcome home” – and promise myself to talk more with those close to me, tomorrow.

**NANSEN DIALOGUE is more and more frequently invited to** contribute our experiences with dialogue to conflicts in Norway. County Governor Kåre Gjønnes in Sør-Trøndelag has invited us several times to engage in the conflicts between the Sami and the mountain farmers regarding the use of the mountain areas in the county. The administration has

used dialogue as a method when dealing with the conflict regarding wild and farmed salmon. They work by gathering all those involved for a dialogue to increase each other's understanding of the other's interests and why this conflict is so hard to solve. These dialogue gatherings do not in themselves solve the conflicts, but create a better foundation for lasting solutions.

**COUNTY GOVERNOR GJØNNES admitted that they hadn't** developed a good culture of dialogue between state, county and municipalities and he put developing dialogue as a way of communicating on the agenda. This inspired the County Governor in Nordland to do something similar. We have also had visitors from municipality executive committees and business boards, organizations and schools. This shows an increasing realization that knowledge about, and training in, dialogue is needed.

**ESPECIALLY DURING election campaigns, we can see how** Norwegian politics is ridden by an extreme culture of debate. The politicians position themselves and there are very few signs of movement in attitudes and points of view. Rather, the politicians repeat themselves and should one of them, contrary to custom, change their view, it is interpreted as weakness.

**THE INTERESTING PART IS that when we talk about our** experiences in the Balkans, people in Norway nod their heads. They recognize themselves.

# Yes, dialogue creates change

The Fridtjof Nansen School in Jegunovce was to become a concrete test of the strength of dialogue. The decisive element of the threatening situation that arose was whether the parents would be true to their persuasion that the bilingual school was what's best for their children. Through long conversations, several visits to Norway, after having walked the thousand steps in the ski jump in Lysgårdjordet, they had evolved unity and a common vision. But was this vision strong enough when they were met with hard resistance from the commander who saw himself as the village leader? *Text: Steinar Bryn*



*Even principals from schools in Oslo have visited the integrated school between the mountains in the Tetovo valley for inspiration. Through dialogue we have taken part in the changing of a whole country's education policy.*













**FOUR STUDENTS** were removed from the school following threats, but also because their parents were related to the commander. The rest of the parents demanded the election of a new village council (nine representatives) and a new village leader to decide if the commander really did represent the village. The mood was tense before the election. We needed at least five members in the village council that supported the school. We got seven! The commander then realized he no longer had the support of his own village.

**ABOUT THE SAME TIME** the school was subject to national media coverage. Two old friends from the teachers' college in Skopje reunited on Facebook. One worked at the Fridtjof Nansen School in Jegunovce, the other in a Macedonian school in a Turkish part of Strumica. Through visits to each other, inspiration and training, another bilingual school was initiated – The Marshall Tito School in Strumica.

**ON SEPTEMBER 1, 2010** a bilingual high school opened in Jegunovce. It too was named after Fridtjof Nansen. On September 1, 2011, three more municipalities wished to initiate integrated schools. Both Strumica and these three municipalities are economically responsible for these new Nansen schools. Nansen Dialogue contributes ideological thinking, which means involvement of parents, children, teachers, village leaders and politicians. The decisive factor is that everybody feels equal and respected.

**THE MACEDONIAN GOVERNMENT** has really put efforts into integration, which is reflected in the country's education policy. President Dr. Gjorge Ivanov asked to visit the Nansen School in Jegunovce. Plans exist for the municipalities Vasilevo, Karbinci, Karposh, Butel and Tabanovce to initiate similar projects FØLGOPPSETTEINN

**THE SCHOOL RECEIVES VISITORS** from a number of countries containing ethnic groups with different languages, like Switzerland and Belgium. Even principals from schools in Oslo have visited the integrated school between the mountains in the Tetovo valley for inspiration. Through dialogue we have taken part in the changing of a whole country's education policy. Maybe the walk down the stairs of the ski jump in Lillehammer contributed to keeping the parents united when the situation was at its worst?

**THE HISTORY** of the Fridtjof Nansen Schools in Macedonia is important, but the Nansen Dialogue Network has achieved several similar results. In Srebrenica, Bosnia Herzegovina, known throughout the world for its tragic wartime history, Serbian and Bosnian children have attended joint classes for the first time since the war – though outside of school hours – and a joint coordinating board has been established in the municipality. In November 2009, a dialogue centre was established in the municipalities of Bratunac and Srebrenica. The goal of the local Nansen Coordination Board is to reach out to the remote villages with dialogue meetings. In this way, there is continuity from the start in Lillehammer in 1995, to dialogue work 18 years later.

**IN PRIJEDOR**, a dialogue centre initiated by the local Nansen group opened in 2010. In Stolac, a joint Nansen classroom for Croatian and Bosnian youth was opened in the otherwise fully segregated secondary school. In the spring of 2012, they held the end-of-year ceremony together. That is a breakthrough. The Nansen Centre in Osijek has been directly responsible for the optional course "Cultural and Spiritual Heritage of the Region" in six schools in the region. They contributed to break 11 years of segregation policy through their active support of the new mayor, elected on a multi-ethnic platform. The Nansen

Centre in Bujanovac has been important in establishing the Serbian-Albanian coalition in the municipality. They have started working to establish a multi-ethnic kindergarten in an area marked by ethnic tension. In Mitrovica the Nansen Center has for several years actively supported one of the few multiethnic neighbourhoods, Mikronasalje, that exists in Kosovo. This pearl of a human community is hardly known, even among Kosovo's own inhabitants.



Ingunn Skurdal

