

## Eco-warrior for peace

Jewel Topsfield  
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THE most frightening phone call Gidon Bromberg ever received was during the second intifada, a wave of Palestinian uprisings in 2000 following the failed Middle East peace talks. He was told that his colleague, the Jordanian director of Friends of the Earth Middle East, which Bromberg had co-founded six years earlier, had been shot at while leaving his office in Amman. The bullet missed by millimetres.

Staff had always known it was dangerous work in the strife-torn Middle East. Bromberg, an Israeli-Australian, had already been branded an "Arab lover". His tyres had been slashed twice. But this was the first time there had been an attempt on the life of a staff member. "It was very scary."

Bromberg, the 44-year-old director of Friends of the Earth Middle East's Israeli branch, is sitting in an elegant Jerusalem cafe, the soft music and soothing terracotta tones a world away from the terrifying brutality of Jordan during the tense first weeks of the second intifada. His English still bears a trace of an Australian accent as he explains that the environmental group remains the only cross-border organisation in the region, with staff from Jordan, the Palestinian territories and Israel.

"People condemned co-operation between Arabs and Jews," he says. "On the outbreak of the second intifada, emotions were extremely high and people were willing to cause physical harm to those working together."

Bromberg suggested closing the Amman office until the police apprehended the gunman. But the Jordanian staff refused. "I think, by far, the Palestinian and Jordanian staff of the organisation have been the bravest because they are always the subject of the most violence, be it physical or verbal," he says.

With his cropped dark hair and neat, conservative shirt and pants, Bromberg looks nothing like a stereotypical hemp-shirted greenie. Despite one formative summer fighting to save the Franklin River in Tasmania, he is in some ways an accidental environmentalist. "I came to Israel with the idea I wanted to contribute to the peace process. I did not think I was going to be an environmentalist, I thought I might utilise my legal skills in human rights law."

That said, he admits to having learnt a lot from the Franklin experience. "This was a life-changing event in the sense that I learnt about the power of the law, particularly the use of international law."

Born in Israel, but migrating to Australia when he was three, Bromberg attributes his peace-building skills to growing up in multicultural Elsternwick in Melbourne's inner south-east. "The fact I was Israeli and grew up elsewhere really facilitated my ability to bring Palestinians and Israelis together to talk about common issues," he says.

The Bromberg family left for Australia in 1967, on the brink of the Six-Day War, in which Israel gained control of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Golan

Heights. "My father in particular didn't want to go through war any more. He had survived the Holocaust in Europe, he didn't want his children fighting wars and serving in the military."

For many years Bromberg was the only Jew at Elwood Secondary College. There were occasional outbursts of racism — "I hate the Jews because they run the country. My Dad has always worked for Jews" — which invoked spirited responses from other, non-Jewish, kids, such as: "You should be damn grateful to the Jews or your Dad would have been unemployed all his life!"

"What was so important about my formative years at Elwood was that people were outspoken about tolerating and accepting the other," Bromberg says. "Every wave of immigrants found themselves at the high school. I had a fantastic appreciation for what multiculturalism and diversity is all about."

Even in Elsternwick, the holy land was never far away. Hebrew was spoken at home. Letters arrived every week from his mother's eight siblings and his 30 cousins. Bromberg first returned to Israel at age 11 and was enchanted. "In Australia, TV was the big thing to do; in Israel it was playing football in the streets. Just before leaving, I said to my Mum: 'This is where I am going to live.' The energy of the place really stuck with me."

Throughout his teens, Bromberg pored over reports of the Middle East in the newspaper. A year into law at Monash University, he spent four months in Israel, two of them on a kibbutz. He returned to Australia to finish his degree but the trip had galvanised his desire to live in Israel.

As it turned out, human rights law was a crowded field, and Bromberg found himself the first voluntary staff attorney with the Israel Union of Environmental Defence. Then, during the euphoria of the Oslo peace accords in 1993, he received a fellowship to study a master's in environmental law in Washington. His thesis raised concerns that peace was actually going to help destroy the environment because the governments were preoccupied with economic development in a peaceful Middle East.

"There were massive programs for the development of tens of thousands of new hotels, super-highways, industrial estates and airports, but the environment was not even on the table. The conclusion of the thesis was the need to put sustainability into the peace process, and one way of going about that was for Palestinians, Jordanians, Egyptians and Israelis to start to get to know one another."

When Bromberg returned to Israel he met with a group of Palestinian environmentalists in East Jerusalem. "It was the first time I had met a Palestinian as an equal — a lot of Palestinians were working at that time in Israel as labourers. I had a bit of fear in my stomach because it was the unknown. But what a wonderful experience that was in identifying the common purpose we shared in wanting to work together on environmental issues."

At the end of 1994, environmentalists from Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories met in Taba, in Egypt. By the second day they had decided to create EcoPeace, the original name for Friends of the Earth Middle East, with the common objectives of saving the environment and building peace.

The group now has 38 paid staff and offices in Tel Aviv, Bethlehem and Amman (Egypt left the organisation in 1998, under pressure from its Government to no longer co-operate with Israel).

One of Friends of the Earth's main projects is to work with communities on either side of the Jordan River — "basically a sewage canal south of the Sea of Galilee" — to put pressure on the three governments to rehabilitate the river and save the Dead Sea.

The Jordan River does not respect borders and the water flows through several nations. The river is holy to Christians, Jews and Muslims — Jesus is believed to have been baptised in its waters and several companions of the prophet Mohammed are buried near its banks.

The Jordan Valley is also a wetland ecosystem, on one of the world's most important flight paths for more than 500 million birds migrating between Africa and Europe.

But today the lower Jordan River is almost dry, after 50 years of the nations that share its waters building dams and pumping stations to divert more than 90% of its flow. The trickle that is left is largely sewage, diverted saline springs and agricultural run-off. "You would be quite likely to come out in a rash if baptised in the site most people see as the historic place where Jesus was baptised, the site most pilgrims come to."

The reduced flow of the Jordan, along with industry in both Israel and Jordan that evaporates water in industrial ponds to extract minerals, has also led to the destruction of the famous Dead Sea.

The Dead Sea is a salt lake between Israel and Jordan. The level of the lake, which is the lowest place on Earth and so salty and buoyant you can float on it and read the newspaper, is dropping by a metre every year. A third of its surface area has already been lost. The rapidly shrinking sea has caused more than 2000 sinkholes to appear all along the coastline where the land has collapsed, a dangerous phenomenon that could jeopardise tourism.

"The tragedy creates the common impetus to work together," Bromberg says. "There is a strong peace message in everything we do — we are all a net loser if we don't work together to reverse the situation. Jordan has an interest in rehabilitating the Dead Sea because its hotels are suffering due to the drop in sea levels."

Friends of the Earth has launched a project called Good Water Makes Good Neighbours, in which communities on either side of the Jordan River are working together to restore water to it.

This month the project held a camp for Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian youth at Ein Gedi, on the shores of the Dead Sea. The young environmentalists learnt techniques for treating grey water through building ecological wetlands. They also hiked along the Neighbour's Path, created by the project, which highlights the Dead Sea's cultural assets — it was in a cave at Qumran near the north shore of the lake where Bedouin shepherds stumbled across the Dead Sea Scrolls — as well as the environmental threats it faces. Friends of the Earth then raises up to \$10,000 for each community to enable the young people to implement what they have learnt.

"The lesson we try to bring home is that in the worst of circumstances there are always practical actions that you can take to improve your own reality," Bromberg says.

Last November the US Senate passed a resolution applauding the "unusual and welcome spirit of co-operation" between Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority in working to address the region's serious water challenges.

But nothing is simple in the Middle East. Friends of the Earth has lobbied for the nomination of the Dead Sea as a United Nations World Heritage site, which would restrict development. But the nomination would need the imprimatur of Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Bromberg says Jordan has resisted the nomination because it backs the long-standing idea of a conduit to bring marine water from the Red Sea in the Gulf of Aqaba to rehabilitate the Dead Sea, and is concerned World Heritage listing would imperil the ambitious project.

Friends of the Earth opposes the so-called Red Dead Canal, raising concerns that pumping water out of the Gulf of Aqaba could damage coral reefs, and sea water from Aqaba could change the chemical composition of the Dead Sea, resulting in the loss of its unique characteristics. The group wants governments to study alternative solutions, such as restoring the Jordan River by using water more wisely.

"In Israel, agriculture consumes 50% of water resources yet contributes 1-2% of GDP. In Jordan agriculture takes 70% of the water and contributes 5% to GDP. We live in the desert, yet we grow tropical fruits often for export. It makes no economic sense, as water in this most water-scarce part of the world is heavily subsidised for farming, and certainly makes no ecological sense."

Dr Clive Lipchin, the director of research at Israel's Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, says that while the rehabilitation of the Jordan River would be ideal, the Friends of the Earth plan is unrealistic. "You would have to have a regional commission and massive restructuring of water policy in all the countries," he says. "Imagine getting all the countries to agree when they don't exactly have the warmest of relationships."

But Bromberg says water is a crucial aspect of the peace process. "What Friends of the Earth have done with environmental peace-making is utilise water as an issue of common dependence, to promote understanding and problem-solving amongst your average Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli. We don't need to be best friends, we need to just understand that our destiny is completely entwined through the common natural resources we share."

## **GIDON BROMBERG CV**

**BORN November 26, 1963.**

EDUCATION Elwood High, Monash University, American University, Yale University.

CAREER Environmental law, public policy.

■ Co-founder, EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East, 1994; Israeli director ever since.

■ Member, Israel Bar Association, Israel World Heritage Committee, Israel Inter-Ministerial Sustainable Development Committee, EastWest Institute International Taskforce on Preventive Diplomacy.

■ Regularly appears before UN Commission for Sustainable Development; US House of Representatives, International Relations Committee; European Parliament;

■ New Israel Fund Fellow American University Washington DC, 1993; World Fellowship on global leadership, Yale University, 2007.

HOBBIES Hiking, cycling, travel.

*Jewel Topsfield is an Age reporter. She travelled to Israel as a guest of the Jewish National Fund. This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/04/11/1207856824132.html>*