

Peeling Günter Grass' Israeli Onion

Avi Primor

Avi Primor is president of the Israel Council on Foreign Relations. Among his many diplomatic postings, he was Israel's ambassador to Germany (1993–99) and to the European Union (1987–91). He is the founding director of the Trilateral (Israel, Jordan, Palestine) Center for European Studies at the Launder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy of the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Herzliya. His latest book is *An allem sind die Juden und die Radfahrer schuld* [The Jews and the Cyclists are to Blame for Everything], co-written with Christiane von Korff.

In 1995, Günter Grass published a new book entitled *Ein weites Feld* [Too Far Afield]. It was a story that revealed—at least from his perspective—the difficulties surrounding the reunification of Germany that had taken place just four years earlier. The book received a scathing review from Marcel Reich-Ranicki, the man widely considered to be the “high priest” of contemporary German literature. Reich-Ranicki is a Polish-born Jew and Holocaust survivor who has lived and worked in Germany since 1958. His influence on German literature has been immense. A positive review from his typewriter was able to turn a writer's work into an automatic bestseller and a critical one often buried it. Reich-Ranicki never counted himself among Grass' admirers. Even the now-classic *Die Blechtrommel* [The Tin Drum], Grass' greatest commercial success, did not find favor with Reich-Ranicki. Never, however, did Reich-Ranicki tear up a book the way he did with *Ein weites Feld*. The resultant exchange of angry letters between them attracted the attention of the German media for months. The enduring hatred between the two men is well known and has been played out in German intellectual life over the course of decades.

In 1995, I met Reich-Ranicki for a private lunch. Talk of his exchange of letters with Grass was unavoidable. Reich-Ranicki described in considerable detail the bitterness he harbored toward Grass. Nevertheless, he took pains to say that in the interest of honesty and accuracy, he had to mention something that was not always obvious, namely, that no one should consider Grass an antisemite. Reich-Ranicki went on:

You know that I have “killed” many books and many authors. Most of them vowed eternal hatred for me. With practically all of them I have had bitter exchanges. Many of them wrote emotional letters or even articles in the press in which some of them could not resist the urge to hint, in one way or another, about my origins. They were mostly only veiled hints, but

everyone could understand the code: “Reich-Ranicki is a Jew—he is not an authentic German.” Never, however, did I detect the slightest hint of any such language in Grass’ writings—neither in his letters to me nor in the articles he wrote against me.

Indeed, reading Grass’ books one cannot find even the slightest expression of antisemitism. On the contrary, the few Jews described in his novels are sympathetic characters. Grass never demonstrated any affinity for Nazism and constantly combatted it and other anti-democratic ideas. Grass’ contribution to the creation of the new parliamentary democracy in Germany is undeniable. His struggle for the democratic education of German youth has received worldwide recognition, and in politics he was always an advocate of humanism and human rights.

So what happened? What suddenly prompted Grass to excoriate Israel, and in such venomous fashion? Some suggest that until lately Grass had somehow suppressed his “authentic” self. After all, as a seventeen-year old, near the end of the war, he had served in the Waffen-SS and obviously did so out of conviction because he had volunteered. After the defeat of Germany—so say some of his critics—Grass realized that Nazism was not “politically correct” and concealed his past. In fact it was only in 2006, in the first volume of his memoirs, entitled *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* [Peeling the Onion], that he revealed his secret—his service in the Waffen-SS. Grass’ critics cite this fact as “proof” that the German writer is a closet Nazi. Even those less critical must wonder whether his vitriolic attack on Israel is not indicative of some genuine, deep-rooted antipathy.

In Grass’ generation, Nazi affiliation was hardly anything out of the ordinary. Only a small minority of Germans genuinely opposed Nazi ideology and ideas in their youth. Those who were not Nazis before Hitler’s rise to power became Nazis afterward—either due to the influence of Nazi propaganda and education or for opportunistic reasons. According to public opinion polls conducted by the American occupation forces immediately after the war, a preponderance of Germans continued to subscribe to Nazi ideology. To a lesser extent this was still the case well into the 1960s. The question is who in postwar-Germany sincerely recognized the evil of Nazi ideas, repented and actually mobilized themselves in the struggle against the ideology that had poisoned their youth and brought untold misery and suffering to so many? To be sure, Grass was one of those who did. Of course, one can then certainly ask why Grass hid his own Nazi past for so long. This is a question best addressed by a psychologist. The fact is that Grass did not remain loyal to his Nazi education and did a great deal to denounce and combat it. That is so even if he failed to acknowledge his own personal involvement.

Assuming that Grass is neither a Nazi nor a “plain” antisemite, how can one explain his latest “poem”—a verse that aroused public indignation not only in Israel but all over the world, and especially in Germany itself? How can one explain his vitriolic critique of Israel, one that included the use of certain sinister images that reminded everyone—Germans in particular—of Nazi propaganda directed against Jews? When Grass writes that Israel is “a danger to world peace,” Germans who know their history (and usually they do) cannot but be reminded of the declaration made by Hitler in the Reichstag on January 30, 1939 to a cheering audience: “If the international finance-Jewry inside and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations into a world war yet again, then the outcome will not be the victory of Jewry, but rather the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!”

This is but one of the many images used by Grass to bash Israel when he suggests that it is only Jerusalem’s current policies that pose a threat to world peace. One explanation for this strange behavior might be found in the fact that Grass (who, despite his poem, is probably not the bitter enemy of Israel that one would imagine) had certain personal difficulties with Israel that were not necessarily of his own making. In the early 1970s, when diplomatic relations between Bonn and Jerusalem were still practically in their infancy, the German embassy in Tel Aviv invited Grass to visit Israel. The idea behind German diplomacy at that time was to break the Israeli boycott of cultural relations with Germany. That boycott certainly reflected the wishes of both the Israeli citizenry and their leaders. The German embassy thought that whatever the opinion of Israelis about German culture they would certainly welcome a man like Grass. After all, his books had been translated into Hebrew and had been well received in the Israeli market. He was thus well known and appreciated by Israeli intellectuals.

In spite of that renown, Grass was confronted with the anger of an Israeli public that booed him in successive public appearances. To be sure, the Israeli protestors were not targeting Grass personally and their anger had nothing at all to do with his literature. It was the German effort to establish cultural relations with Israel to which they objected. Grass, however, did not see it that way and may well have felt personally slighted.

I came to Germany as Israel’s ambassador in 1993 and did what every new ambassador does upon assuming his or her post. I called on a long list of important and influential personalities in the country to which I was accredited. The one and only personality who refused to see me was none other than Günter Grass. I never received an explanation as to why Grass declined to meet me, and was left to ponder whether it was something more than the residual feeling of offense that he still bore within him from his first visit to Israel. Still, I believe that Grass is not

really an enemy of Israel. In current affairs that touch on Israeli interests, time and again he has used his influence in favor of the Jewish State.

When Grass writes of “things that should be said,” he is referring to the discussion surrounding the Iranian nuclear project and Israel’s calls to neutralize it. He pretends that Israel suppresses any public discussion of this issue and intimidates anyone who sees it differently. This, of course, is especially strange because the country in which the public discussion started and in which it is has been carried on more vehemently than anywhere else in the world is Israel itself. When Grass says that Israel is a danger to world peace—Israel, and not Iran—nobody can take him seriously. Living in northern Germany, Grass can allow himself the luxury of treating Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his threats as mere bluster. Were he living within range of Iranian missiles and in a place targeted by those who control them, he might speak differently. Whatever the case, Grass simply ignores the fact that Ahmadinejad is not the only one who has promised to annihilate Israel or who allies his country with, and delivers assistance to, terrorist organizations that vow to destroy Israel. It is none other than the real ruler, the real “leader” of Iran, the Ayatollah Khamenei, who recently repeated the same threats and promised to eliminate Israel. For most Germans, the real issue is something else that completely transcends Grass’ “poem,” namely a clarion cry against what they feel is an attempt to curb their freedom of expression. When Grass claims that he knows well that in expressing his opinions he will be branded an antisemite, he is articulating the feelings of many Germans and others as well.

The most important question—the only one of any real significance—is not what Grass thinks or says or the way he expresses his ideas. Grass is a very important and influential person, yet no more important than many other individuals. What is most significant and should give us pause is that a great many Germans, particularly younger ones, demonstrate sympathy, not necessarily for the anti-Israel “poem,” but for the plight of its author who has been taken to task for writing it.

There is a precedent to the Grass affair. In 1998, during the Frankfurt Book Fair, the celebrated German writer Martin Walser received the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* [the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade], one of the most prestigious awards in German society. In his speech in the historic St. Paul’s Church in Frankfurt, he called memories of the Holocaust a “cudgel” that was constantly wielded against Germans.

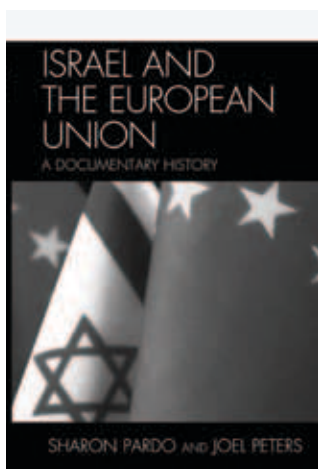
The protests in the German media and in certain public quarters against Walser’s speech were overwhelming. According to public opinion polls, however, a substantial portion of the general public—and in particular German youth—

expressed sympathy for Walser. I was still ambassador in Germany at that time, and was flabbergasted by these findings. I therefore made my own inquiries and came to the conclusion that German youth did not really stand behind Walser's declarations but rather identified with what they felt to be his protests against the ritualization of the memory of the Holocaust. They felt that out of political correctness, the way in which they should remember and commemorate the past was being dictated to them. A constantly-repeated and hypocritical ritual would be permanently imposed upon them. The new generation of Germans loathed and resented everything that had to do with Nazism was being pushed around by hypocrites who were themselves not always very "pure." The understanding expressed in the surveys regarding the Grass affair is somewhat similar to that. People see Grass' "poem" as a protest against the prevailing tendency to muzzle free speech concerning Jews and Israel. They feel that one is not allowed to express even the slightest critique of Jews—and particularly of Israel—even when that critique may be rooted in fact and totally justified. As soon as one dares to express a candid, critical view, one is attacked from all sides and accused of antisemitism—so they believe.

Without granting the slightest credibility or legitimization to Grass' "poem," Israelis should take into consideration the feeling of young people in Germany and elsewhere in the Western world in this respect. It is true, and understandably so, that we are extremely sensitive to all criticism. The bitter history of the Jewish people, including that of the State of Israel, which still faces existential threats, is at the core of this extreme sensitivity to criticism—all the more so when it comes from Germans. Many Israelis believe that "they are the last people on earth who should preach to us." However, in preventing our friends from genuinely expressing their opinions, and by muffling their thoughts, we do not do ourselves any favors. Many of those who criticize Israeli policies today are neither antisemites nor enemies of Israel. Very often the best friends of Israel are the ones who are prepared to express their misgivings about some of our actions. Of course, we cannot ignore the existence of real antisemites who camouflage their antipathy to Jews behind stinging attacks on the Jewish State—but these are not people who should guide or influence us.

It is difficult to nurture genuine friendships when the dialogue with your friends is neither sincere nor open. Modern-day Germany is a proven friend of Israel in practically every respect. Israel needs this friend and will secure its relationship with Germany only if it nurtures an open and honest dialogue between the two peoples and not only between governments. When criticized, we should use—very dispassionately—arguments rooted in facts and logic to counter the criticism. We should try to convince. We should not put our interlocutors against the wall. Israel today is not a small, defenseless Jewish community, hopelessly locked

behind ghetto walls. It is a country that can defend itself and can allow itself to be criticized. Israel is hardly the first country in the West that has faced severe criticism. There was also a public outcry against the French and the Americans, who were taken to task for their actions during the wars in Algeria and Vietnam respectively. However, this criticism was linked to specific policies. That censure was all the more intense because both the French and Americans were and continue to be seen as members of the democratic and cultural heritage of Europe. The outcry against them was not based on race, religion or ethnicity. As soon as the disputed policies changed, the criticism evaporated. The severe attitude of “members of the family,” so to speak, toward others in the “family” who are seen as having strayed from certain norms includes Israel as well. There is no reason for Israel not to have self-confidence when faced with criticism that is not rooted in irrational hostility or prejudice. When Israel adopts such a stance, the Günter Grass episode will become little more than an inconsequential footnote to history.



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