

GÜNTER GRASS: NOBEL AND NAZI?



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Carl Tighe

In December 1999 the German novelist Gunter Grass received the Nobel Prize for Literature and made what was to prove a very typical and rather controversial acceptance speech. Grass spoke of his work, his political beliefs, what he felt his responsibilities were, what he thought writers did when they wrote, and what writers could achieve with their writing.

However, six years later, in August 2006, Grass now aged 79, in a TV interview to publicise the appearance of his autobiography, *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel (Peeling the Onion)* admitted that in the closing days of World War II he had been conscripted and had served in the Waffen-SS (literally 'armed' SS).¹ Opinions as to the significance of this revelation varied considerably. The resulting fuss certainly generated more prejudice than enlightenment.



It had been thought that the facts of Günter Grass' life were fairly well established. Grass had been born in Langfuhr, a lower middle class suburb of the Free City of Danzig, in 1927 - the year that the Nazi Party first fought an election in the city.² The young Grass followed the usual path for Germans of those times: he joined the *Jungvolk* (Hitler Cubs) when he was 11, and graduated to the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth) in 1941. The following year he was conscripted into the Air Force and served in an anti-aircraft battery. Later he was transferred to an armoured infantry unit. As the German armies reeled back from the charnel house of the Eastern Front Grass was injured in a Russian rocket attack in the fighting around Cottbus. Eventually he surrendered to the US Army, spent some time in a Prisoner of War camp and after going through the Allies'

¹ G. Grass, *Peeling the Onion* (London: Harvill-Secker, 2007).

² C. Tighe, *Gdansk: National Identity in the Polish-German Borderlands* (London: Pluto, 1990).

de-Nazification process was released. At least that was what his readers had been given to understand through his novels and essays.

As an adult Grass became a novelist, poet and artist and the left-liberal scourge of the post-war West German government, the conscience of a state trying (and often failing) to deal with its Nazi past. He is probably best known for his semi-autobiographical novels, *The Tin Drum* (1959), *Cat and Mouse* (1961) and *Dog Years* (1963). Grass always took a moral position in his novels and he criticised Germans for their unwillingness to face the past or seek forgiveness from their former victims – ‘I was just following orders’, ‘I knew nothing about what was really going on’, ‘I knew, but what could I do?’. He earned international respect because through his novels and political speeches he created the possibility of an open-minded Germany which was finding ways of dealing with its Nazi past.³

Also Grass had identified from a very early stage with the post-war Social Democrat Party: he helped rally German intellectuals behind Chancellor Willy Brandt in the 1970s and he helped build political and creative bridges to Eastern Europe. Grass made no secret of the fact he thought this was the way forward for Germany. He wanted peace between Germany and Eastern Europe, between the heirs of Nazi Germany and its victims. Grass was admired and respected for his novels as much as his politics – hence the award of the Nobel Prize.

In *Peeling the Onion*, however, he explained that his history was actually a little more complex than many had supposed. At 15 he had volunteered for submarine duty but had been turned down. He said it was not so much a question of wanting to fight, but more of wanting desperately to get away from home. Two years later, in the closing months of the war, he had been called up into the Labour Service then conscripted into the Waffen-SS as a tank gunner. He said he did not realize he was to serve with the SS until he showed up for basic training. Shortly afterwards Grass was wounded in a Russian rocket attack. He spent some time in hospital recovering from his wounds, but most of his unit did not survive the attack.

When Grass surrendered he declared to the Americans that he had been a member of the Waffen-SS. He then went through the Allied de-Nazification process and earned his ‘Persilschein’ certificate (Persil-shine, after the soap powder, meaning he was washed whiter than white) before he was released from the PoW camp to civilian life. Thereafter, although the documents were publicly available and for several years could be seen on the internet as part of his entry in Wikipedia, Grass kept quiet about his membership of the Waffen-SS.

The *brouhaha* that followed the revelation in 2006 focussed on the role and functions of the writer in modern society and touched on a great many issues of responsibility. Grass was accused of hiding a Nazi past and of lying on a subject that still divides and shames Germany. The conservative historian Michael Wolffsohn claimed that Grass’s

³ C. Tighe, *Writing & Responsibility* (London: Routledge, 2004).

membership in the Waffen-SS had 'completely damaged' his life's work and on the television program *Aspekte*, said: 'What remains are fine words without value. The marvellous words of this great poet are a mere charade. Nothing more'. The literary critic Hellmuth Karasek accused Grass of 'duplicity' and 'dreadful hypocrisy', declaring that 'this is like someone who preaches one thing and then does completely the opposite'. The *Financial Times Deutschland* stated that the 'political-moral authority' of the writer had been ruined 'by his belated recollection'. The newspaper *taz*, with close links to the Green Party, published an interview with political scientist Claus Leggewie, who accused Grass of 'profound moral depravity'. In Poland, where the nationalist government led by the Law and Justice Party has used anti-German rhetoric to divert attention from its own bankruptcy and corruption, the Kaczynski twins demanded that Grass relinquish his honorary citizenship of Gdansk (the place of his birth) and the Nobel Prize, even though Grass is well known for encouraging better German-Polish relations.⁴

It must be said that by the time Grass was conscripted, SS membership was no longer required for those taken into the Waffen-SS. Apart from this, after the butcher's shop of the Eastern Front, the Waffen-SS was no longer the elite force it had once been and very little was left of the arrogant, apparently invincible, purely Aryan SS. Although the 10th SS 'Fruntsberg' Panzer Division (the unit Grass was assigned to) had fought hard on the Western front, particularly at the battle of Arnhem in September 1944, effectively helping to prolong the war, this was before Grass had been conscripted.

There has never been any suggestion that Grass took part in actions that might have been judged questionable or shameful. Indeed Grass has said repeatedly that before he could fire a shot his unit was virtually wiped out and he was wounded in a Russian rocket attack. However, Grass' revelation that, like most young Germans he was infected by the mythology of the SS and that he 'did not find the double rune on the uniform collar repellent' was not calculated to win sympathy. The fact that at the time he was wounded his unit had been attempting, as ordered, to break through to Berlin to save Hitler from the Russians was also not well received.

We have to ask - Why did Grass chose to speak about his membership of the SS at this point in his life, after saying little or nothing about it for more than 60 years? There is a general feeling that his revelation was not entirely voluntary – and there is some evidence for this in the style of the book. Almost certainly the East German Stasi had known about Grass' secret.⁵ Is it possible they had blackmailed Grass into saying things in his political speeches and writings which worked in their favour? Or even that at some point they had financed him? Even the hint of these things is enough to feed Cold War paranoia and do real political damage.

It is possible that historians searching through the surviving Stasi files had found his file and planned to 'out' him by publishing the documents. It is likely that with the historians

⁴ P. Schwarz, World Socialist Web: Website (19 August 2006): www.wsws.org/.

⁵ *Stasi*: communist East German security service.

about to go public, *Peeling the Onion* was an attempt to gain control over the story and pre-empt the manner of its revelation. In this new context, it is worth wondering if some corner of *Crabwalk*, *The Tin Drum*, or *Dog Years*, on some subtle level, might be disguised propaganda either for Nazism or Communism. Improbable though it might be, these possibilities have to be considered.

CHECKED AGAINST GROWCASS WANTED LISTS NOS 7, 8, 9 AND 10 NOT LISTED APRIL 15 - 46
 (PRINT CLEARLY - DEUTLICH IN DRUCKSCHRIFT SCHREIBEN)

GROWCASS
 24 APRIL 1946

GRASS Günther Pvt. October 16. ~~OKT~~ 1927 Danzig
(Surname—Zuname) (First name—Vorname) (Rank—Dienstgrad) (Date and place of birth—Geburtsdatum und Geburtsort)

Vater: Wilhelm Grass, Danzig-Langfuhr, Trabesweg 13 31 G-6078 785
(Name and address of next of kin—Name und Anschrift des nächsten Angehörigen) (Internment serial number)

8. Mai 1945 Marienbad
(Date of capture—Datum der Gefangennahme) (Place of capture—Ort der Gefangennahme)

18 1.71 65 brown braun braun brown
(Age—Alter) (Height—Größe) (Weight—Gewicht) (Eyes—Augenfarbe) (Hair—Haarfarbe)

SS-Pz-Div. Frundsberg-Pz-Abt. - 337 -
(Unit—Truppeneinheit) (Serial number—Nr. der Erkennungsmarke)

Keine none rifle-man Lade-Schütze - Schüler-pupil
(Distinguishing marks—Besondere Kennzeichen) (Occupation—Beschäftigung) (Army—Heer) (Civil—Zivilberuf)











7. Branch of service—Waffengattung: Air Corps—Luftwaffe - Army—Heer - Navy—Marine -
 W-SS: 10.11.1944
 8. Nationalität: ~~Deutscher~~ German
 9. Form. Nr. 19-X completed: 2.2.46
(Signature—Unterschrift)

MEDICAL RECORD: Date of stimulating dose typhoid 18.11.45
 Date atebine therapy started
 Other inoculations or medical data P. 18.11.45 Flg. 19.8.45 - 4.12.45

Date of arrival 3. Jan. 1946
 Date of transfer

PRISONER OF WAR PRELIMINARY RECORD
VORLÄUFIGE ERKLÄRUNG DES KRIEGSGEFANGENEN

P/W camp 29-1
 Group No.
 Theater 25FCT

Right Hand				
1. Thumb	2. Index finger	3. Middle finger	4. Ring finger	5. Little finger
				
Left Hand				
6. Thumb	7. Index finger	8. Middle finger	9. Ring finger	10. Little finger
				

TO ACCOMPANY PRISONER

Note amputations in proper space

W.D., A.G.D. Form No. 19-3
 28 July 1944
 (Old W.D., P.M.G. Form No. 2-1,
 11 March 1944)

We might not yet be at the end of the scandal or the revelations, but we have to ask if the controversy dented Grass' sales or did substantial harm to his reputation. The initial print run of 150,000 copies of his autobiography was released in mid-August 2006 and was sold out within a week. A second printing of 100,000 copies was undertaken immediately. His publisher rejected suggestions that the furore had led to increased sales, pointing out that even before the storm broke bookshops had ordered 60,000

copies, and that his previous novel, *Crabwalk*, had sold 400,000 copies in just four weeks.⁶ And when the English edition of *Peeling the Onion* appeared BBC Radio 4, without hesitation, serialised it as their 'Book of the Week'. Does this popularity indicate that Grass is still seen to speak for the liberal German left, or that a new readership of secret Nazi sympathisers had found his books? Or are people just keen to buy into a scandal, whatever it might be?



⁶ Richard Lea, 'Grass Takes on Critics over SS Revelations' *The Guardian* (18 August 2006): www.theguardian.com/books/2006/aug/18/news.richardlea.

The poet and translator Michael Hoffman, who found Grass' autobiography 'un-winning, un-resonant, unstylish and unconvincing', has made it clear that he does not consider the book to be a 'voluntary exercise', but rather something produced under pressure of revelation and he went on:

Depressingly he seems not even to have understood (...) Grass tried to limit the damage (...) and has generally gone on as though nothing has happened; but this is not something that will get better or go away.⁷

That may have been the feeling at the time, but several years later the memory of the incident and the suspicions about Grass seem to have faded away, leaving us to pick through the debris, wonder what it was really all about and what this episode means for writers...

Further Reading

- Grass Nobel Prize Speech 'To be Continued': www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1999/lecture-e.html
- Daniel Johnson, 'A Nation Betrayed: An Open Letter to Gunter Grass', *New York Sun* 17 & 18 August 2006: www.nysun.com/arts/open-letter-to-gnter-grass/38082/
- Neal Ascherson, 'Even Now', *London Review of Books*, 2 November 2006: www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n21/neal-ascherson/even-now
- James Meek, 'Look Back in Anger', *The Guardian*, 23 June 2007: www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/23/secondworldwar.germany

Follow-up Work

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of writing and responsibility?
- How is the content of Grass' Nobel speech relevant to the theme of writing and responsibility?
- Is it responsible to make a speech like this to (a) to a German audience (b) to a global audience?
- What are the main issues of writing and responsibility highlighted by this case?
- If Grass had already revealed to his US captors that he had been a member of the SS, and had subsequently gone through the Allied de-Nazification process, why should his admission cause a scandal or damage his reputation?
- Does this revelation of his SS membership make Grass a hypocrite? If so, why? If no, why not?
- Should Grass have made his involvement with the SS clearer earlier in his career? If so, why? If no, why not?
- Did Grass' 'moral strength' derive from his books and the power of his fiction or from the facts of his biography? Does the revelation that he served in the SS change the way we read his books?

⁷ M. Hoffman, 'Now I remember, now I forget', *The Guardian* (7 July 2007), 16.

- Is there a distance between what he wrote in his novels and said in his Nobel speech, and the fact of his membership of the SS?
- In what sense is it reasonable and sensible to criticise a 17 year old army private, a recent conscript, for the commands given to his unit?
- As a 17 year old conscript in Nazi Germany, how much freedom of choice or opinion could Grass have had?
- Is it likely that any German living in Germany in 1945 could have avoided something of a Nazi past?
- Is the sense of betrayal among German critics artificial? Did the people shouting loudest in the tabloid press actually read his books - did his critics produce any evidence of Nazism in his books, poetry and essays?
- Is there any truth in the accusation that, after all this time, the revelation of a Nazi past was just an attempt to boost the sales of Grass' autobiography?
- Read Grass' speeches and his essays in *Speak Out!* and *On Writing & Politics 1967-1983*. Do these appear to you to be the writings of a Nazi? If yes, why do you think so?
- What do you think are the political and practical differences of life for Grass aged 17 and for Grass aged 79?
- What are the differences between the writer under Nazism and in a democracy?
- 'You are what you write.' True or False?
- Do you think Grass should have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature?
- Make up your own mind – are writers just entertainers, jesters and clowns, bland twitterers and tweeters, or are they truth tellers and serious writers with an important point to make?