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A Soldier Once

By JOHN IRVING

PEELING THE ONION By Günter Grass. Translated by Michael Henry Heim. 425 pp. Harcourt. $26.

As a college student, I chose to take my junior year abroad in a German-speaking country — because, in 1961 and ’62, I read “The Tin Drum” twice. At the ages of 14 and 15, I had read “Great Expectations” twice — Dickens made me want to be a writer — but it was reading “The Tin Drum” at 19 and 20 that showed me how. It was Günter Grass who demonstrated that it was possible to be a living writer who wrote with Dickens’s full range of emotion and relentless outpouring of language. Grass wrote with fury, love, derision, slapstick, pathos — all with an unforgiving conscience.

In the fall of 1963, I went to Vienna and became a student at the Institute of European Studies, learning German and reading German literature; I wanted to read “Die Blechtrommel” as Grass had written it, in German. I was 21. (I would never learn German well enough to read Grass — even today, when he writes to me in German, I write him back in English — but it was as a student in Vienna that I began to see myself as a writer of novels.) I had marked certain passages in “Die Blechtrommel”; I’d memorized the English translations of these passages. It turned out to be a way to meet girls.

“Poland’s lost, but not forever, all’s lost, but not forever, Poland’s not lost forever.”

The novel's hero, Oskar Matzerath, refuses to grow; because he remains childlike, small and seemingly innocent, he is spared the political events of the Nazi years while others die. As Bebra the dwarf warns Oskar, "Always take care to be sitting on the rostrum and never to be standing out in front of it."

Oskar may survive the war as a little person, but he doesn't evade the guilt. He drives his mother to her grave; he is responsible for the death of his uncle (Oskar's biological father), and he causes his presumed father to choke on his Nazi Party pin while the cuckold is machine-gunned to death by Russian soldiers. After the war, Oskar finally resumes growing — in a freight car. A preternaturally talented drummer, he performs in a nightclub called the Onion Cellar, where the guests peel onions to make themselves cry. But Oskar Matzerath has no need of onions to help himself weep; he simply plays his drum and recalls the casualties he was witness to. "Just a few very special measures were all it took to make Oskar melt into tears."

"The Tin Drum" was the most highly acclaimed novel of postwar Germany; Oskar Matzerath's refusal to grow was declared symbolic of the country's guilt. In the page-and-a-half-long penultimate paragraph of the novel, "the onion juice that draws tears" is mentioned in passing — one image in a long list of more memorable images: "the wall that had to be freshly whitewashed" and "the Poles in the exaltation of death" were among the ones I loved best.

Grass himself, in this extraordinary first novel — published in Germany in 1959 — seemed to have much to atone for. The voice of "The Tin Drum" is all about atonement, as it shifts — sometimes in the same sentence — from a first-person narrator to a third-person narrative, again and again. But Grass was born in Danzig (now Gdansk) in 1927. He was 10 when he joined the Jungvolk, a feeder organization to the Hitler Youth; he was only a 17-year-old soldier in 1944, when he was captured by the Americans. (Even today, Günter's noticeably American English is better than my German, and when we get together, we speak mostly in English — with my occasional and excitable German thrown in.)

Grass was only a kid when Germany invaded Poland. What did he have to feel guilty for? I wondered. Was the burden of guilt in "The Tin Drum" the so-called collective German guilt? I was reading about this schuld in the newspapers when I was a student in Vienna. What I knew of what happened to the Poles — Jan Bronski's death in the attack on the Polish Post Office — I

knew from “The Tin Drum.” Later, the people of Gdansk would make Grass an honorary citizen — and why not? Oskar Matzerath’s tale — to me, even his refusal to grow — was heroic.

And one cold winter day in Vienna, when no one entirely in possession of his faculties would have been inclined to undress, I took myself to an academy of the arts off the Ringstrasse and volunteered my services as a model for the life-drawing classes. “I have experience, in America,” I said, but I wanted to be a model because Oskar Matzerath is a model. It turned out to be another way to meet girls.

Sometime in that academic year, 1963-64, before I left Vienna, a friend from the United States sent me the English translation of Grass’s second novel, “Cat and Mouse.” This time there was an unchanging first-person narrative, but the narrator remains anonymous for more than 100 pages; Mahlke, the main character, is identified in the first sentence, but he is referred to both in the third person and the second person throughout. The evasive narrator expresses his guilty feelings about what happens to Mahlke at the outset, when a cat is attracted to his Adam’s apple (“the cat leaped at Mahlke’s throat; or one of us caught the cat and held it up to Mahlke’s neck; or I ... seized the cat and showed it Mahlke’s mouse”). Later, when a schoolteacher is arrested (“probably for political reasons”), the still unnamed narrator writes: “Some of the students were questioned. I hope I didn’t testify against him.” And there are more onions to go with the collective guilt: “Perhaps if I rubbed my typewriter superficially with onion juice, it might communicate an intimation of the onion smell which in those years contaminated all Germany ... preventing the smell of corpses from taking over completely.”

What is it with the onions? I wondered.

And what did Grass mean about the silence? “Ever since that Friday I’ve known what silence is. Silence sets in when gulls veer away. Nothing can make more silence than a dredger at work when the wind carries away its iron noises.”

“Cat and Mouse” reads like a confession, but the crime (if there is a crime) is one of omission — we don’t see everything that happens to Mahlke. We simply know he’s another casualty of the war; we count Mahlke among the missing. “But you didn’t show up,” the novel concludes. “You didn’t surface.”

I left Vienna, with a young wife who was pregnant, at the end of the summer of 1964. My landlady burst into my bedroom with the future buyer of my motorcycle, which I was selling in order to pay my rent. There was the dog-eared, well-marked but unread German paperback of "Die Blechtrommel" on my night table. My landlady was surprised that it was taking me so long to read the novel; not wanting to admit my failures with German, I asked her what she thought of Günter Grass. Both my motorcycle's buyer and I were students; we smugly assumed that Grass was exclusively student property. And I didn't think my landlady was much of a reader; however, years later, someone of her generation would surprise me by repeating exactly what my landlady said to me about Grass. "Er ist ein bisschen unhöflich." ("He is a little impolite.")

This was my first awareness that Grass, to an Austrian and German audience — especially to those old enough to remember the war — was seen as more than an internationally famous and respected writer. To many Austrians and Germans, Grass is perceived as a merciless judge and unrestrained moral authority. Not only were his novels acts of atonement; he was a harsh critic of postwar Germany — he took everyone to task, not just politicians. (And not only Germans, as I would discover.)

In 1979, Grass wrote: "There's no shortage of great Führer figures; a bigoted preacher in Washington and an ailing philistine in Moscow." In 1982, following a trip to Nicaragua, Grass said he felt ashamed that the United States was an ally of his country. ("How impoverished must a country be before it is not a threat to the U.S. government?") In one of the essays collected in "On Writing and Politics," he states: "Individual Christians and Christian groups shared the utmost bravery in resisting Nazism, but the cowardice of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany made them tacit accomplices." And in "Headbirths," which I wrote about in Saturday Review in 1982, Grass was still takinghimself to task: "It was a mistake to imagine that 'Cat and Mouse' would abreact my schoolboy sorrows." Guilt, and more guilt — and more atonement. Boy, does this guy beat up on himself! I thought.

Nor did I escape Grass's disapproval. At a dinner party in New York, where I was living in the early 1980s, I organized a gathering of writers from West Germany and East Germany — Günter among them. (They had little opportunity to talk to one another in their then divided country.) There was a lot of wine; it was a very late night. And when Grass was leaving, he looked worried; pulling me aside, he said he was worried about me. He told me I wasn't quite as angry as I used

to be, and said good night. At the time, only “Garp und Wie Er die Welt Sah” and “Das Hotel New Hampshire” had been translated into German; this was his way of saying that the newer novel had disappointed him. The East Germans stayed on and on, but I spent the rest of the night resolving that I would get angrier and stay angry. If my hero — my model of the form, who’d written election speeches for Willy Brandt (in 1969) — found me lacking in firepower, I needed to fan the flame.

There is a photograph of us together in New York, around that time. We’re at an art gallery, where there was a show of Grass’s drawings. He was a sculptor and graphic artist before he was a novelist; he still draws all the time. I have four of his drawings in my house in Vermont, and in his studio in Behlendorf (near Hamburg) there are more of his drawings than there is evidence that he’s a writer — just one typewriter and a stand-up desk. In the photograph taken in New York, I am laughing about something, but Grass — also amused but not laughing, and scrutinizing me over the bowl of his pipe —seems faintly disapproving, even then. (I was laughing too hard or too much, apparently.) One’s mentors are difficult to please.

In another photo, taken in December 1992 at the Poetry Center of the 92nd Street Y, where I introduced Grass at a reading from “The Call of the Toad” — he read in German, and I followed with the English translation — we are similarly dressed and appear to be the exact same size. And there’s one more photo, from Behlendorf — Grass’s wife, Ute, took the picture. My wife, Janet, and my youngest son, Everett, are with us, and Günter is with his ever-present pipe and his dog; there’s a cow in the background. It was October 1995 — not long after the famous cover photograph on Der Spiegel of that senile tyrant but celebrated critic, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, ripping apart Grass’s novel “Ein Weites Feld.” (Some journalists in Germany resented the marketing of Grass’s “Too Far Afield” as a political novel about German “reunification” — as it was still called at the time.)

At the 1990 Frankfurt Book Fair, where I appeared on television with Grass and the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Grass had criticized the brand-new (official) unification of the two Germanies — essentially saying that unification, if it happened too quickly, would lead to economic exploitation of the East by the capitalists in the West. To many young people eager for the change, Grass’s criticism was especially unpopular. Five years later, Der Spiegel (what

amounts to the Time or Newsweek of Germany) depicted the tearing apart of Grass's new novel on its cover. The magazine might as well have conducted a book burning.

It's important to understand that the man has made enemies. Twenty-five books and the Nobel Prize (in 1999) precede Grass's autobiography, "Peeling the Onion," which was published in German ("Beim Häuten der Zwiebel") last summer to a chorus of controversy. While it was acceptable to Grass's critics that he had volunteered for the submarine corps at the age of 15, the revelation that he was drafted into the Waffen SS, the combat force of the SS, in 1944, when he was 17, was a shock. Grass spent the final months of the war with the force — later convicted en masse of war crimes by the Nuremberg tribunal.

Why had he waited so long to tell? his critics asked. (As if there had ever been a time when he wouldn't have been criticized for it!) A historian, writing in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, wondered why the revelation had come out "in such a tortured way." (As if there wasn't ample evidence of what was "tortured" about Grass in all the books leading up to this one!) Another writer in the Frankfurter Allgemeine conjectured that the last, unfulfilled mission of Grass's Frundsberg tank division was to get Hitler out of Berlin. ("In other words, Grass could have freed Hitler.") A writer in Die Tageszeitung accused Grass of "calculating"; shouldn't he have written to the Swedish Academy and offered a premature refusal? ("A former Waffen SS man would never have been considered for this prize.") A piece in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung said of Grass: "Posing as a self-assured moralist ... " and so on. Both the Süddeutsche Zeitung and the Frankfurter Rundschau complained about the lateness of the admission. But good writers write about the important stuff before they blab about it; good writers don't tell stories before they've written them!

I wrote an article for the Frankfurter Rundschau — in defense of Grass, of course. I also wrote Günter. I complained about the "predictably sanctimonious dismantling" of his life and work in the German media — "from the cowardly standpoint of hindsight." I wrote: "You remain a hero to me, both as a writer and as a moral compass; your courage, both as a writer and as a citizen of your country, is exemplary — a courage heightened, not lessened, by your most recent revelation."

Volker Schlöndorff, who directed the movie of "The Tin Drum," expressed compassion for his friend in Der Tagesspiegel; Salman Rushdie also spoke out in Grass's defense. Tilman Krause, in Die Welt, wrote: "Whether we admire the probing honesty of his unsparing peeling of the onion or denounce it as a lapse that we would have preferred not to know about, will depend on how we feel about the author, whether we wish him well or not." And, in the Süddeutsche Zeitung, the writer Ivan Nagel, who is Jewish (and was in hiding in Hungary while Grass, his contemporary, served in the Waffen SS), expressed empathy for the belatedness of the author's confession: "I myself had no reason to feel shame — after all, I was one of the persecuted — but nevertheless for 55 years I could not speak about it. I understand Günter Grass, who only now is able to talk about his shame, his disgrace. Life is not a reference book that you can flip through at will; it is no finished manuscript that you can publish at any time."

Another sympathetic response came from the Swiss author Adolf Muschg — this in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. "The shame of survivors is not uniquely German; and because it is accompanied by certain taboos, even respectable ones, I think I can understand why half a century can pass before one can speak with relief about having gotten out alive from the Fuhrer's war." Muschg added: "The book is much more and much less than a confession. It has a lot to say."

In my view, the most unfortunate of the Grass attacks was Lech Walesa's declaration that he was glad he never met Grass — thus avoiding the plague of shaking Grass's hand, which the former Polish president said he would not do. In August 2006, Walesa also called for Grass to give up his honorary citizenship to the city of Gdansk — bestowed on the author for how he'd paid tribute to the suffering in Danzig in "The Tin Drum." Walesa soon retracted his remarks — he called them "too hasty." By the time I went to Warsaw, in early September of last year, my Polish publisher told me that the Poles were "divided" about Grass's revelation. What I noted in Warsaw was that Grass's many readers had already made their peace with him; those who had not read him, or those who had read only "The Tin Drum," were the ones calling for him to give back his Nobel Prize.

I was in Paris later that same September. A French journalist told me that there had been more demands in the French media for Grass to give back his Nobel than there had been similar demands for Yasir Arafat to give back his. ("Peeling the Onion" won't be published in France until

October of this year.) But in Germany, now that people have readthe autobiography, most of the criticism has stopped; the issue is what Germans call “kalter Kaffee,” or “cold coffee.”

I know some Germans who refuse to read “Peeling the Onion,” but they’re not Grass readers, or they disliked him before the Waffen SS revelation, and they are mostly on the political right — or they are those who branded Grass a member of the “unreconstructed left,” after his doomsaying in the giddiness of the 1990 unification. I was on a book tour in Germany at that time, speaking largely to university students — in Bonn, Kiel, Munich and Stuttgart — and everywhere I went the students were irritated with me for my friendship with Grass. (Why did I give Owen Meany the same initials as Oskar Matzerath? they kept asking. “Homage,” I kept answering, but they didn’t want to hear it.)

No one I know who’s actually read “Peeling the Onion” wants Grass to give back his Nobel. The memoir is as good as the very best of Grass’s novels, and it has an opening sentence that explains what his readers might have mistaken, in the earlier work, for a stylistic device — I know I did. “Today, as in years past, the temptation to camouflage oneself in the third person remains great: He was going on 12, though he still loved sitting in his mother’s lap. ...” Grass establishes at the outset that “memory is like an onion.” He also asserts, “The brief inscription meant for me reads: I kept silent” — adding, “the temptation is great to discount one’s own silence.” As a child and young teenager, Grass admits to hero worship. “It was the newsreels: I was a pushover for the prettified black-and-white ‘truth’ they served up.” This autobiography is a painful confession. “Over and over, author and book remind me of how little I understood as a youth and how limited an effect literature may have.” Danzig was pounded to rubble at the end of the war; the early chapters of this memoir focus on “the boy who left the city at a time when all its towers and gables were still intact.”

Calling to mind the rape of the widow Greff by Russian soldiers in “The Tin Drum,” Grass relates that his own mother never told him where and how often she had been raped by the Russians. “It was not until after she died that I learned — and then only indirectly from my sister — that to protect her daughter she had offered herself to them. There were no words.” Grass’s sister became a nun, then a midwife. “Her childhood faith, lost in the face of the violence committed by soldiers at the war’s end, had been restored.”

The author's faith isn't reclaimed. He admits to viewing the Waffen SS as "an elite unit." Once more camouflaging himself in the third person, Grass writes, "The boy, who saw himself as a man, was probably more concerned with the branch of service: if he was not destined for the submarines, which hardly came up in the radio bulletins any longer, then he would be a tank gunner. ... " Grass then acknowledges: "What I had accepted with the stupid pride of youth I wanted to conceal after the war out of a recurrent sense of shame. But the burden remained, and no one could alleviate it." Of the diary Grass lost in the war, he says only, "It is not an easy loss to write off: it has often made me feel lost to myself."

While Grass notes that he "never looked through a sight, never felt for a trigger and thus never fired a shot," the exchange of his Waffen SS uniform, with "those ornaments" (the double rune) on the collar, for "an ordinary Wehrmacht jacket" was the work of an older private who took the 17-year-old Grass under his wing — the first but not the last "guardian angel" to look after the budding author. But the private who organized Grass's uniform change loses both his legs; Grass is wounded by shrapnel. "I made not a sound; I just stood there in my piss-soaked pants, staring at the innards of a boy I had just been shooting the breeze with. Death seemed to have shrunk his round face."

It is after the war when the artist-in-progress observes: "Anyone who has seen not only individual corpses but corpses in piles looks on every new day as a gift." As a P.O.W., when he is shown pictures of Bergen-Belsen, Grass says simply, "I couldn't believe it." He writes: "First, incredulity, when the concentration camp pictures startled me with their black-and-whiteness; then, speechlessness."

At the age of 18, when he is released by the Americans, Grass confesses here that he didn't feel any guilt. Slipping once again into the third person, he refers to "the aimless black marketeer who bore my name." He speaks of his three hungers — the ordinary one, to eat (he was near to starving in the P.O.W. camp), "the desire for carnal love" and his hunger for art ("this desire to conquer all with images").

Only much later does the need to speak out emerge — Grass titled a book "Speak Out!" And in Tel Aviv, in 1967, he recalls, "I was 39 ... and had the reputation of being a troublemaker because of my tendency to bring out into the open what had too long been swept under the carpet." The

to and fro, between concealment and revelation, makes “Peeling the Onion” both fascinating and searing. “I, the war child badly burned and therefore inexorably attuned to contradiction,” he describes himself. “I found anything with a whiff of the national repugnant.”

Nearer the end of the book, Grass bluntly states: “I practiced the art of evasion.” What is breathtaking about this autobiography is Grass’s honesty about his dishonesty. From this, “I was completely and utterly taken up with my own existence and the attendant existential questions and could not have cared less about day-to-day politics” — to this, “I have to admit that I have a problem with time: many things that began or ended precisely didn’t register with me until long after the fact.”

And throughout the book are the origins, the actual sources, of details readers will remember from Grass’s novels; the reference to Oskar Matzerath, who “got himself a job as a model,” had special meaning for me. There’s also the appearance (in a small town in Switzerland) of “a boy about 3 years of age ... with a toy drum hanging from his neck” — enough to give readers of “The Tin Drum” a chill — or this quieter observation: “One never knows what will make a book.”

It is the moral certainty, the holding himself accountable, that makes this memoir resonate so powerfully. First loves, first wife and everything that leads up to the writing of his first novel — they are all captured here — but, as always, Grass is best at taking himself to task. “Even if an author eventually becomes dependent upon the characters he creates, he must answer for their deeds and misdeeds.”

Although this autobiography abruptly ends upon the publication of “The Tin Drum” in the autumn of 1959, when the young novelist and his wife went to the Frankfurt Book Fair “and danced till morning,” it is hard to imagine there will be a sequel. Grass finds an eloquent way to call it quits — “from then on I lived from page to page and between book and book, my inner world still rich in characters. But to tell of all that, I have neither the onion nor the desire.”

It was last August when I read on Spiegel Online the musings of a former Waffen SS man named Edmund Zalewski, who had done some research of his own after he heard about Grass’s revelation. (Nobody Zalewski contacted could remember a Günter Grass.) After the war, Zalewski “never lost touch” with his former SS colleagues. He is still the secretary of the Frundsberg

Comradeship — a veterans' group whose members meet annually at various war sites. "At this point, we are down to 60 comrades," Zalewski reported. "That used to be different, of course, but now we are all at least 80 years old."

Imagine this: Grass still feels guilty for being drafted into the Waffen SS at 17 while some of his older fellow soldiers from the Frundsberg tank division are attending reunions! Yet Grass's most egregious critic — Christopher Hitchens, in Slate — calls him "something of a bigmouth and a fraud, and also something of a hypocrite." It is Grass's craven critics — the fatuous Hitchens among them — who should feel ashamed.

This fall, Günter Grass will turn 80. There will be birthday celebrations for him throughout Germany; I already know of one in Göttingen and another in Lübeck. I'm planning to go to the party in Göttingen — if not the one in Lübeck, too.

The dedication to "Peeling the Onion" reads: "Allen gewidmet, von denen ich lernte." ("Dedicated to everyone from whom I have learned.") In my opinion, every writer who's truly read Günter Grass is in his debt. I know I am.

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