

Günter the Terrible

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STOP ME IF I have told you this joke before:
Somewhere in the US, a demonstration takes place.
The police arrive and beat the protesters mercilessly.
“Don’t hit me,” someone shouts, “I am an anti-communist!”

“I couldn’t give a damn what kind of a communist you are!”
a policeman answers as he raises his baton.

THE FIRST time I told this joke was when a German group visited the Knesset and met with German-born members, including me.

They went out of their way to praise Israel, lauding everything we had been doing, condemning every bit of criticism, however harmless it might be. It became downright embarrassing, since some of us in the Knesset were very critical of our government’s policy in the occupied territories.

For me, this extreme kind of pro-Semitism is just disguised anti-Semitism. Both have a basic belief in common: that Jews – and therefore Israel – are something apart, not to be measured by the standards applied to everybody else.

What is an anti-Semite? Somebody who hates a Jew because he is a Jew. He does not hate him for what he is as a human being, but for his origin. A Hebrew or a Shebrew (to quote a joke from Ambrose Bierce) may be good or bad, nice or nasty, rich or poor – for being Jewish, they must be hated.

This is of course true for any kind of prejudice, including sexism, Islamophobia, chauvinism and whatever.

Germans, as is their wont, are a bit more thorough here than others. The term “Antisemitismus” was invented by a German (a few years before the terms Zionism and Feminism), and anti-Semitism was the official ideology of Germany during the Nazi years. Now the official German ideology is pro-Semitism, again going to extremes.

Another Nazi word was “Sonderbehandlung”, meaning “special treatment”. It was an euphemism for something abhorrent: the killing of prisoners. But special treatment can also mean the opposite: according people and countries especially nice treatment, not because of what they do, but because of what they are - Jewish, say.

Well, I don’t like it, even when I am on the receiving end. I like to be praised when I have done something good, I am ready to be blamed when I have done something bad. I don’t like to be praised (or blamed, for that matter) because I happen to have been born a Jew.

THIS BRINGS us, of course, to Günter Grass.

Disclosure: I met him only once, when we were both invited to a conference of the German PEN Club in Berlin. During an interval I met him in a very good restaurant. I told him, quite truthfully, that I like his books very much, especial the anti-Nazi novel “The Tin Drum”, and that I like his later political activity. That was all.

I did not meet him during his many visits to Israel. On at least one of them he acquired a girl-friend, a well-known writer.

Now Grass has done the unthinkable: he has openly criticized the State of Israel! And he is a German!!!

The reaction was automatic. He was at once branded as an anti-Semite. Not just a run-of-the-mill anti-Semite, but as a crypto-Nazi, who could easily have served as a henchman of Adolf Eichmann! This was shown by the fact that at age 17, near the end of World War II, he was recruited to the Waffen-SS like tens of thousands of others and then – oddly enough – kept the fact hidden for many years. So there you are.

Israeli and German politicians and commentators vied with each other in cursing the writer, with the Germans easily trumping the Israelis. Though our Interior Minister, Eli Yishai, may have garnered the individual championship by declaring Grass persona non grata and banning him from entering Israel for all eternity (at least).

Yishai is a political hack, who has never written a line worth remembering. He is the leader of the Orthodox Shas party, not by virtue of being elected, but as a sidekick of the party’s strongman, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef. The powerful State Comptroller is accusing him of gross incompetence in connection with a giant fire on Mount Carmel and so his career is in danger. Grass came just at the right time to save his skin.

SO WHAT did Grass actually say? In a poem of 69 lines – actually a polemic in the guise of a poem – under the headline “What Has To Be Said”, Grass attacks Israeli policy concerning the atom bomb.

The ferocious counter-attack was focused almost completely on the axiom that a German has no right to criticize Israel, under any circumstances.

Let’s ignore this “argument” and look at the poem itself, not necessarily as a literary masterpiece.

Grass’ basic theme is that Israel already has a “nuclear potential”, and that it is therefore hypocrisy to blame Iran for perhaps wanting to acquire one, too. In particular he denounced the German government for supplying another submarine to Israel.

Looked at rationally, do his arguments make sense?

Grass assumes that Israel is planning a “first strike” preventive war against Iran, in which the Iranian people could be “wiped out”. This possibility only makes sense if Grass assumes that the Israeli “first strike” would be an attack with nuclear bombs. Indeed, the term “first strike” belongs solely to the lexicon of nuclear war.

It is in this context that he condemns the German government for giving Israel another (sixth) submarine with the capability of launching nuclear bombs. Such submarines are designed for delivering a “second strike” by a nation hit in the “first strike”. It is basically a weapon of deterrence.

He deplores the fact that nobody in Germany (and in the

Western world) dares even to mention Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, and that it is practically forbidden to "call that particular country by name" in this context.

He then asserts that "the Atomic Power Israel endangers the fragile peace of the world".

To avert this danger, he proposes that "Israel's atomic potential and Iran's atomic installations" be put under an unfettered and permanent international inspection regime with the agreement of both governments.

At the end, he also mentions the Palestinians. Only this way, he says, can the Israelis and the Palestinians, and all the other inhabitants of this "region occupied by madness", be helped.

WELL, I did not fall off my chair when I read this. The text can and must be criticized, but there is nothing there that demands stern condemnation.

As I said before, I see no reason for Germans to abstain from criticizing Israel. There is nothing in this text that de-legitimizes the State of Israel. On the contrary, he declares his solidarity with Israel. He explicitly mentions the Holocaust as an indelible crime. He also calls the Iranians "a people enslaved by a "bigmouth".

That said, Grass' idea that Israel might "wipe out" the Iranian people in a preventive "first strike" is wildly exaggerated.

I have already stated several times that all the Israeli and American blabbering about an Israeli attack on Iran is a part of the US-led psychological warfare to press the Iranian leaders to give up their (presumed) nuclear ambitions. It is totally impossible for Israel to attack Iran without express prior American

agreement, and it is totally impossible for America to attack - or let Israel attack - because of the catastrophic consequences - a collapse of the world economy and a long and costly war.

Let's assume, for argument's sake, that the Israeli government indeed decides to attack Iran's nuclear installations. This would not "wipe out" the Iranian people, or even a part of it. Only madmen would use nuclear bombs for this purpose. Israeli leaders, whatever one may think of them, are not mad.

Even if Israel had (or obtained from the US) tactical nuclear bombs with limited power and radius, the world reaction to their use would be catastrophic.

By the way, it is not by their own choice that Israeli governments have a policy of nuclear non-transparency. If they could, our leaders would brag about our nuclear might from the rooftops. It's the US that insists on opacity, so as not to be obliged to do something about it.

Grass' contention that Israel endangers "world peace" is, therefore, a bit of an overstatement.

As for Glass' practical proposal to subject both Israeli and Iranian nuclear installations to international inspection - I think this merits serious consideration. If both our countries freeze the nuclear status quo, it may not be a bad idea at all.

In the end, though, we need a nuclear-free region as part of a general regional peace that will include Israel, Palestine, the Arab League, Turkey and Iran.

AS FOR Günter Grass, I shall be happy to meet him again, this time for a good meal in Tel Aviv.