

What Must Be Said

By: Gunter Grass

Why do I stay silent, conceal for too long
What clearly is and has been
Practiced in war games, at the end of which we as survivors
Are at best footnotes.

It is the alleged right to first strike
That could annihilate the Iranian people--
Enslaved by a loud-mouth
And guided to organized jubilation--
Because in their territory,
It is suspected, a bomb is being built.

Yet why do I forbid myself
To name that other country
In which, for years, even if secretly,
There has been a growing nuclear potential at hand
But beyond control, because no inspection is available?

The universal concealment of these facts,
To which my silence subordinated itself,
I sense as incriminating lies
And force--the punishment is promised
As soon as it is ignored;
The verdict of "anti-Semitism" is familiar.

Now, though, because in my country
Which from time to time has sought and confronted
Its very own crime
That is without compare
In turn on a purely commercial basis, if also
With nimble lips calling it a reparation, declares
A further U-boat should be delivered to Israel,
Whose specialty consists of guiding all-destroying warheads to where the existence
Of a single atomic bomb is unproven,
But as a fear wishes to be conclusive,
I say what must be said.

Why though have I stayed silent until now?
Because I thought my origin,
Afflicted by a stain never to be expunged
Kept the state of Israel, to which I am bound
And wish to stay bound,

From accepting this fact as pronounced truth.

Why do I say only now,
Aged and with my last ink,
That the nuclear power of Israel endangers
The already fragile world peace?
Because it must be said
What even tomorrow may be too late to say;
Also because we--as Germans burdened enough--
Could be the suppliers to a crime
That is foreseeable, wherefore our complicity
Could not be redeemed through any of the usual excuses.

And granted: I am silent no longer
Because I am tired of the hypocrisy
Of the West; in addition to which it is to be hoped
That this will free many from silence,
That they may prompt the perpetrator of the recognized danger
To renounce violence and
Likewise insist
That an unhindered and permanent control
Of the Israeli nuclear potential
And the Iranian nuclear sites
Be authorized through an international agency
By the governments of both countries.

Only this way are all, the Israelis and Palestinians,
Even more, all people, that in this
Region occupied by mania
Live cheek by jowl among enemies,
And also us, to be helped.



On Wednesday, Nobel-winning German writer Günter Grass published a poem denouncing Israel's nuclear program and aggression toward Iran. The poem, in which Grass says he has kept silent on the issue for fear of being labeled anti-Semitic, has [sparked controversy within Germany](#), where relations with Israel are often colored by a sense of national guilt for the Holocaust. Israeli Prime

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [called](#) the poem's assertion that Israel poses a greater threat to world peace than Iran a "shameful moral equivalence." The poem also laments Germany's decision to sell submarines to Israel that are capable of launching nuclear weapons.

Grass's history with regards to German-Jewish relations is complicated. The writer, now 84, spent decades pushing his country to confront its Nazi past, making him a hero to many Germans who share his desire to deal honestly with Germany's complicated and painful history. In 2006, he announced that he had served in Hitler's infamous Waffen SS division. He was 17 years old when the war ended in 1945, but the admission, coming so late, has darkened his previously bright legacy.

His poem, "What Must Be Said," is overtly and boldly political. It is not exactly the prettiest prose in its original German, and the English doesn't read much better. Translating it below, I've tried to untangle some of the needlessly Teutonic constructions where it doesn't undo the deliberately winding and parenthetical tone too much. Even more concise German can sound circuitous to an English ear, but Grass's writing here is an extreme example. The poem is, from a purely communicative standpoint, a relatively inefficient denunciation -- akin to writing up a paragraph of solid reasoning and then cutting it up and sticking little bits in fortune cookies.

Updated | 4:34 p.m. A new poem by the German Nobel laureate Günter Grass depicting Israel's undeclared nuclear might as a threat to world peace drew wide condemnation from Jewish groups and commentators in Germany on Wednesday, showing the strength of enduring taboos in German public discourse about Israel more than six decades after the Holocaust.

In the poem, titled "[What Must Be Said](#)," Mr. Grass, 84, asks why he has remained silent about Israel's nuclear might — which Israel has never publicly confirmed — and concludes that he had been constrained by a broader fear of being judged an anti-Semite.

But with Israel threatening to take military action against Iran's nuclear program, the German author writes: "Why do I say only now, aged and with my last drop of ink, that the nuclear power Israel endangers an already fragile world peace? Because that must be said which may already be too late to say tomorrow."

He also complained that by [supplying submarines to Israel](#), Germany risked becoming "a subcontractor to a foreseeable crime." Israel has threatened to launch a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, arguing that they are being used to acquire the capability of building

nuclear weapons. But Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. “I will no longer remain silent because I am tired of Western hypocrisy,” he said, according to an unofficial translation.

The publication of the poem in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* daily newspaper recalled earlier moments when Mr. Grass, author of works like the novel “The Tin Drum,” which recounts Germany’s experience in the Second World War, has projected himself as an iconoclast. He was [awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature](#) in 1999.

But his moral authority, once unimpeachable among Germans, was greatly undermined in 2006, when [he revealed](#) that he had served during the war in Hitler’s Waffen SS unit. Mr. Grass has said he was drafted into the unit as a 17-year-old toward the end of the war and never fired a weapon. But his admission, coming after decades during which he urged Germans to come to terms with their Nazi past, raised awkward questions about why he had waited so long.

Germany’s relationship with Israel is complex, defined by many red lines drawn partly by inhibitions and guilt and partly by an acute awareness of the Holocaust, which is taught to every German schoolchild.

As soon as Mr. Grass’s poem was published, several German politicians, Jewish organizations and intellectuals expressed affront, saying that he had inverted geopolitical fact, casting Israel as a threat to world peace while Iran should be depicted in that role.

The Israeli Embassy in Berlin said Mr. Grass’s poem, coming as Jews prepare for Passover, recalled other accusations. “What must be said is that it belongs to European tradition to accuse the Jews of ritual murder before the Passover celebration,” Emmanuel Nahshon, the deputy chief of mission, said in [a statement](#) posted on the embassy’s Web site. Today, he added, the Jewish state faces an existential threat from Iran.

In one verse of the poem, Mr. Grass claimed that Israel was threatening to annihilate the Iranians.

It is the claimed right to a first strike
that could wipe out an Iranian people
subjugated by a loudmouth and steered to organized jubilation
because the building of an atom bomb is suspected in their territory.

Denouncing the poem on the front page of another German newspaper, *Die Welt*, Henryk M. Broder, the author of “[A Jew in the New Germany](#),” [called Mr. Grass](#), “the prototype of the educated anti-Semite who means well toward Jews.”

“He is hounded by guilt and feelings of shame but at the same time driven to reconcile history,” Mr. Broder continued. (His article also incorrectly stated that the poem would also be published in *The New York Times*.)

As the German magazine [Der Spiegel reports](#) on its English-language site, although Mr. Grass “found support from the head of the German PEN chapter, Johano Strasser, who also warned

against exporting German weapons to Israel on Wednesday in a radio interview,” there was widespread outrage.

The Central Council of Jews in Germany has called the poem an “aggressive pamphlet of agitation.” Ruprecht Polenz, chairman of the German Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee and a senior member of Chancellor Angela Merkel’s Christian Democrats, told the daily *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung* that while Grass was a literary great, “he has difficulties whenever he comments on politics and is often wrong.” Polenz’s CDU colleague Philipp Missfelder said, “The poem is tasteless, ahistorical and demonstrates a lack of knowledge about the situation in the Middle East.”

One place that Mr. Grass’s poem was welcomed was in Iran. Press TV, Iran’s state-owned, English-language satellite channel, [lauded the writer](#) for “slamming the West’s hypocrisy over Tel Aviv’s nuclear arsenal.”

The Iranian channel’s report focused on Israel’s fleet of German-made Dolphin submarines, which can fire nuclear missiles. As *The Lede* reported last year, Israel already has three of the submarines, and two more are being built. In 2011, the German government agreed to spend nearly \$190 million to help Israel purchase a sixth submarine.

The Press TV report also observed, “Israel is the only possessor of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and it has never allowed inspections of its nuclear facilities nor has it joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty based on its policy of nuclear ambiguity.”