

Conscience of a Nation

Crabwalk

By Günter Grass

Translated by Krishna Winston

Harcourt.

234 pp. \$25.00.

Reviewed by

Benjamin Taylor

Author, "Tales Out of School"

IN ONE of his best known parables, "The Aleph," Jorge Luis Borges tells of a mysterious point where all the disparate lines of the universe converge. The Aleph is a luminous concentration of everything, "the only place on earth where all places are—seen from every angle, each standing clear, without any confusion or blending." Written in 1945, Borges' tale has become decidedly less mystical: In our time the Aleph is the ubiquitous Internet, an everyday convenience full of marvelous potential but amenable to darker purposes too, abetting what is best and worst in us, dutiful to reason and madness alike.

Small wonder, then, that fiction has lately been recounting stories from cyberspace—"that newest dimension," as Günter Grass calls it. Among the most arresting examples is surely *Crabwalk*, his brief and busy new novel. Its narrator is Paul Pokriefke, who was born in the last year of World War II, reared in East Germany, and then made his way as a teenager to West Berlin shortly before the Wall went up.

When we meet Paul, the Wall has been down for over a decade. He is a middle-aged man scratching out a living as a minor journalist. He has a mother in the city of Schwerin in eastern Germany, and a son and former wife in Mölln, a town of the old Federal Republic. The son, Konny, has developed into a furtive, lonely, computer-consumed teenager with a Web site that is fanatically devoted to celebrating the legacy of one Wilhelm Gustloff. A leader of the Swiss Nazi Party, Gustloff was shot dead in 1936 by a

Jew named David Frankfurter and enshrined—alongside Horst Wessel, Ernst von Rath and others—in the pantheon of National Socialist martyrs.

Konny's fixation seems preposterously narrow till we learn what the name Gustloff signifies for the Pokriefke family. Tulla Pokriefke, Paul's mother, gave birth to him immediately after being rescued from a refugee transport ship, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, which had been torpedoed by a Soviet submarine in the Baltic. "My first cry," says Paul, "drowned out that other cry, blended from thousands of voices and carrying far and wide over the water, that final cry that came from everywhere: from the interior of the collapsing ship, from the bursting promenade deck, from the flooded sundeck, from the rapidly vanishing stern, and rising from the turbulent surface of the water, where thousands swirled, dead or alive, in their life jackets."

The sinking of the *Gustloff* remains the worst of all disasters at sea. Some 9,000 people perished amid the ice floes that night, most of them civilians fleeing the Red Army's advance into East Prussia. And yet it is an event largely forgotten by the Germans, not to mention everyone else.

Grass is not the only writer to note his countrymen's reluctance to grant their own civilian losses a tragic stature equal to those of less guilty nations. In the recent posthumous *On the Natural History of Destruction*, W.G. Sebald persuasively argues that a general amnesia has governed German responses to the devastation visited on their population in WWII. Hamburg, Düsseldorf, Cologne, Berlin, Dresden—these and many other German cities lay in ruins by the end of the War. More than 600,000 people, mainly women and children, died in the air raids. But they are not memorialized as are the dead of Guernica, Rotterdam, London, Coventry, Warsaw.

From the British and American point of view, the bombing in Germany represented "merited suffering," "just vengeance." It was paying the enemy back in his own coin. The sinking of an unarmed ship horribly overcrowded with refugees was undoubtedly also seen by the Soviets as righteous retribution. According

to Paul, there were inscriptions adorning each of the torpedoes fired at the *Gustloff*: "The first read FOR THE MOTHERLAND, the torpedo in tube 2 was marked FOR STALIN, and in tubes 3 and 4 the dedications painted onto the eel-smooth surfaces read FOR THE SOVIET PEOPLE and FOR LENINGRAD."

THE *Gustloff* story appears to have lived on chiefly among the handful of survivors and their descendants. Paul remarks: "Not long ago a documentary was shown on television, but it still seems as though nothing can top the *Titanic*, as if the *Wilhelm Gustloff* had never existed, as if there were no room for another maritime disaster, as if only the victims of the *Titanic* could be remembered. . . ." Konny, though, has made his Grandma Tulla's obsession with the *Gustloff* his own, and it becomes the motivating force of the novel.

For Konny, the ship embodies all the glory of the Third Reich. Christened in honor of a fallen Nazi hero, it initially took large numbers of working- and middle-class citizens on vacation cruises as a "Strength through Joy" liner. ("See to it that the German worker gets his holidays," Hitler had decreed in the halcyon days of his rule.) Subsequently, it was employed to bring German troops home from the Spanish Civil War. At the end of the 1930s it was refitted as a hospital ship, and in fact the first wounded German soldiers of WWII were brought aboard at Danzig. Later it was renovated again as a barracks for noncommissioned officers and enlisted men who were training for U-boat service.

On January 30, 1945—12 years to the day after Hitler took power—the vessel took on thousands of desperate refugees and sailed from Gotenhafen on its final voyage: "Conditions were chaotic. Children ended up on board without their mothers. And mothers lost hold of their children's hands in the shoving on the gangway and couldn't save them from being pushed over the edge and disappearing into the water between the ship's hull and the wall of the pier. It did no good to scream."

A comparable catastrophe on the Allied side would not have faded into obscurity. But in postwar Germany the right to outrage, to indignation, perhaps even

the right to grief, was sharply curtailed. "For years the need to accept responsibility and show remorse took precedence," Paul observes.

Since reunification, however, a nostalgia for National Socialism has asserted itself in the murkier corners of German society, and nowhere more boldly than on the Web, where anonymity grants full rein to any impulse. Konny Pokriefke's opposite number and "bosom enemy"—a young philo-Semite who identifies as ardently with Gustloff's assassin as Konny does with Gustloff—logs onto the lunatic Web site. What ensues is a dance of death between Jew-lover and Jew-hater, played out digitally and then in the flesh.

Konny's father says he feels "uncomfortable with anyone who has one thing, and only one, on his mind—my son, for instance." Although Konny has never actually met a Jew, he seethes with exterminationist hatred of "world Jewry," a plutocratic network responsible, in his mind, for all the world's troubles. This brand of vicious nonsense does survive in today's Germany, yet much less so, one hastens to add, than in other European countries—for example, in Slovakia, Hungary, Russia, and Ukraine. Or in France, for that matter. In fact, among Germans nowadays a Green-leaning pacifism appears to be the dominant attitude. And considering the two World Wars they started, there is every reason to rejoice in that evolution.

GRASS' PREOCCUPATION with Nazi residues in the current body politic might seem to mark him as yesterday's man. A decade ago, his vehement stance against reunification led many to conclude that he was out of touch with the world he was living in. Germany should remain divided, he argued, as perpetual punishment for the crimes of the Third Reich. In response, many of his countrymen have expressed dismay with the writer who has been their leading literary figure for over 40 years.

Grass has served long and well as the bad conscience of Germany. Every nation, even the most progressive, needs such a presence. For him, the shame and horror have not receded. For him, the Reich was yesterday.