The Nobels In Literature: Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke

by Hugh Fitzgerald

Several friends of mine always wait for the Nobel announcements to finish each year before they then tote up the "scores" for various nationalities and religions. Although these awards are for individual (and for the Peace Nobel, sometimes institutional) achievement, my friends can't help themselves: they want to know, first of all, "how many Americans won?" ("we got eight this year," a friend told me yesterday, as if he and I had had something to do with it). Another friend, though not Jewish, always wants to know how many Jewish Nobels there are, for he has long been impressed with how many there have been, and he can't figure out why ("an unusual year," he told me yesterday, "only two Jewish

winners this year"). Still another acquaintance, a Moroccan barber I know, told me today that this year "we got a Nobel — the Peace one. That's the best." By "we," he meant the world's 1.6 billion Muslims. He was referring to the Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who had a Muslim father and a Christian mother. But I didn't want to puncture his pride by pointing that out; still less was I inclined to note that while Ahmed's prize could be considered a "one-half Nobel" for "the Muslims," Ahmed's behavior suggests his Christian side dominates. I can find nothing in the public record that suggests he is now a practicing Muslim or, indeed, if he ever was one.

Which brings me to the two Nobels in Literature that were awarded. One was to the Polish writer Olga Tokarczuk, another to the Austrian Peter Handke. The first has an important positive link to Jews; the second has been almost alone in his denunciation of the Muslims in Bosnia, and his expressing over the decades his sympathy for, and solidarity with, the Serbs who have been painted as irredeemably wicked, murdering innocent Muslims.

Olga Tokarczuk's most ambitious work, *The Books of Jacob*, centers on the historical figure of Jakub Frank, a Jewish-born 18th-century religious leader. Frank, believed to have been born with the name Jakub Leibowicz, oversaw a messianic sect that incorporated significant portions of Christian practice into Judaism; he led mass baptisms of his followers. According to the critic Ruth Franklin, "the book delivers a picture of the many intricate and unpredictable ways in which the story of Poland is tied to the story of its Jews." "There's no Polish culture without Jewish culture," Tokarczuk told Franklin.

Tokarczuk has repeatedly described her own country, Poland, as one that had "committed horrendous acts as colonizers, as a national majority that suppressed the minority [Jews], as slaveowners, and as the murderers of Jews."

In recent years, she has spent many of her public appearances on denouncing antisemitism in Poland, which has won her enemies among some elements of the nationalist right. It will likely be one of the main subjects of her Nobel speech. She is not merely against antisemitism, but is positively philosemitic, as were two previous Polish Nobels in Literature, the poets Czeslaw Milosz and Wislawa Szymborska.

Peter Handke, a writer, scriptwriter, and journalist, is – outside of his writing – known most for his defense of the Serbs in the Balkan wars of the 1990s. He was virtually alone among non-Serbs in attempting to understand their fears and to stand up for them when no one else would. Handke thought the outside world was too quick to condemn the Serbs, not just for the atrocities they did commit, but for others that, he claimed, they did not commit, and furthermore, was willing to overlook many Muslim atrocities committed against the Serbs. For the world had already made up its mind. The Muslims were only innocent victims, the Serbs only cruel victimizers.

Handke was also mindful of Balkan history (his own mother was Slovenian, another people, like the Serbs, brutalized by the Ottomans). He understood the Serbian anxiety about Muslim behavior, reflecting such things as the Serbs' historic memory of the devshirme, which was the forced levy of Christian children by the Ottomans, who took the young Christians back to Istanbul, had them converted, and trained them to serve the Ottoman state as Janissaries. He spoke and wrote frequently about the Serbs, asking for an understanding of their history and consequent fears. And he asked that Muslim atrocities not be given a pass. In some ways he was vindicated. In 2018, for example, the Bosnian Muslim wartime commander Atif Dudakovic and 16 senior members of his unit were charged with carrying out atrocities against Serbs in western Bosnia during the 1992-95 war. Handke was concerned both with the failure of the West to look into Muslim misdeeds. He also wanted the people of Europe to learn more about Serbian history that he thought

would make them more understanding of Serbian fears.

His 1996 travelogue, “A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia,” caused a storm, and in 1999 he returned Germany’s prestigious Buechner prize in protest at NATO’s bombing of Belgrade.

Peter Handke attended the Serb leader Radovan Milosevic’s war crimes trial at The Hague and even delivered a eulogy at his funeral. In an interview in 2006, he said of Milosevic: “I think he was a rather tragic man. Not a hero, but a tragic human being. I am a writer and not a judge.”

In the same interview, he said he did not expect the Nobel Prize because of the controversy. “When I was younger I cared,” he said. “Now I think it’s finished for me after my expressions about Yugoslavia.”

Peter Handke clearly finds the long history of Muslim mistreatment of Christians – especially of Serbians – in the Balkans, as explaining and, to some extent, justifying Serbian behavior. Needless to say, there has been fury in the Arab and Muslim media – see Al Jazeera – over this Nobel award to Handke. In this country members of PEN huffed and puffed about Handke’s being given the prize. One would love to interrogate some of the offended to find out what they know about the history of Muslim rule in the Balkans, about the Bosnian SS divisions, about the plan of Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic for Islamic rule.

In Europe, the award should cause some to look again at the evidence of Muslim Bosniak and Kosovar atrocities against Serbs in the 1990s, and possibly to develop a modicum of sympathy, given not just recent history, but the centuries of Ottoman Muslim oppression, for the maligned Serbs.

The two Nobels in literature this year were thus, in their political views, to be welcomed. Olga Tokarczuk has been a stout defender of Jews, attacking antisemites – denouncing

those Poles who were “murderers of Jews” – with her accustomed ferocity, and bravely declaring, in a country where antisemitism is again in fashion, that “there is no Polish culture without Jewish culture.”

As Olga Tokarczuk has gone on the offensive against antisemites in Poland, Peter Handke was for a long time, and almost alone, on the offensive against the Muslims in the Balkans. He discovered evidence of their atrocities, until recently ignored in the West. He reminded the public of how the Ottoman Muslims, too, had treated the Serbs, which explained their fear of the Muslim Bosniaks. He took every occasion to stand with the Serbs; even attending Slobodan Milosevic’s trial for war crimes, and speaking at his funeral. He considered Milosevich not a sinister villain, but a “tragic figure” with a deep anxiety about his threatened people. He attacked the Bosnian leader Alija Izegtbegovic, who during World War II had supported the Muslim *Waffen-SS* Handschar Division, but was given a pass by the West. Handke reminded people of Izetbegovic’s published plan to set up a Muslim state, a prospect which terrified the Serbs – this plan, too, like Izetbegovic’s support for a Muslim SS Division, was ignored by the West. Yet it turned out that there was enough evidence to put Izetbegovic on trial as a war criminal; the investigation of his atrocities ended only because he died.

Handke has not commented publicly in recent years on the growing Muslim presence in Western Europe. But everything he has said in the past about the cruelties of Ottoman rule in the Balkans, and the Muslim Bosniak and Kosovar threat to Serbs in the 1990s, suggest that he is a well-informed critic of Islam and of those Muslims who take the Qur’anic verses commanding violent Jihad to heart. This is one aspect of his life and work that we should keep gratefully in mind, just as we should be grateful for Olga Tokarczyk’s philosemitism. And perhaps, when he makes his Nobel acceptance speech, he will return to this subject. It could be a salutary breach in the

wall of media disinformation about Islam, if Handke asks, and answers, what those tens of millions of Muslims now in Western Europe mean for its future.

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