

Interview with Levent Sinirlioglu about Undercover Journalist Günter Wallraff (1987)

Abstract

Marginalization, xenophobia and exploitation—Günter Wallraff's book *Ganz unten* [Lowest of the Low] (1985) revealed the devastating working conditions as well as the everyday racism experienced by Turkish guest workers in Germany. The book's success catapulted its author into the media spotlight. Months later, Levent Sinirlioglu, who had been working in Germany for over a decade and lent Wallraff his identity for his research, raised the question of the extent to which the author and the media treatment replicated the social conditions criticized in the book. Sinirlioglu later became a victim of police mistreatment: the body inspection he was subjected to led to the officer's transfer after Sinirlioglu had made his experiences public.

Source

“Perhaps [he has] become like his enemies”

SPIEGEL: Mr. Sinirlioglu, you are the Turk (Ali) who lent the undercover journalist Günter Wallraff his name for his rather dangerous research for the book *Ganz unten* [Lowest of the Low]. Wallraff himself spread word about this to his millions of readers in the acknowledgments for his book. The conspirative relationship between you two was so close that Wallraff referred to it as “a Siamese-twin story” in a Turkish newspaper. What do you think of your “twin brother” Wallraff today?

SINIRLIOGLU: Günter Wallraff is a man with two faces. Where business stops and political involvement starts for him is a mystery to me by now.

SPIEGEL: That is a harsh accusation, Mr. Sinirlioglu. But before you tell us about your experiences with Wallraff, what is actually behind Wallraff's strange phrase that you lent him your name?

SINIRLIOGLU: Wallraff needed valid documents for his undercover work, meaning the documents of a Turk living in the Federal Republic of course. I let him have those documents.

SPIEGEL: Which documents were those?

SINIRLIOGLU: Wallraff carried my ID in his jacket, drove with my driver's license, and used my work permit and income tax card.

SPIEGEL: But Wallraff worked in part for companies for which proper documents were truly unimportant.

SINIRLIOGLU: Not actually that unimportant. Even if the income tax cards are only lying in a drawer, they are filled out quickly in case of a check.

SPIEGEL: Wasn't it a considerable risk for a Turk living in the Federal Republic to let all his identification documents out of his hands for several months?

SINIRLIOGLU: The risk of fellow workers employed as black-market labor who have to put up with anything and everything is much greater. I would do it again.

SPIEGEL: But you didn't only help out Wallraff with your documents. For the book research, you also gave up your job as a taxi driver and accompanied Wallraff on his "assignments."

SINIRLIOGLU: Not on all of them. I first met Wallraff when he had already begun his work: at McDonald's in the Hamburg *Gänsemarkt*. But in the months after that, I was usually close by him and was available to him around the clock.

My job on the associate staff was mainly to smuggle Wallraff into the illegal contract laborer business. You cannot simply go there and say: Good day, I Turk, seek work, children much hunger. You only get in there if you are clean.

SPIEGEL: Being clean means having the trust of the illegal workers?

SINIRLIOGLU: Yes, and Wallraff couldn't have it. He didn't know the people, and he doesn't speak any Turkish. So I got it for him in several cases, by traveling with the author through half of the Federal Republic, talking to the fellow workers in their watering holes, and telling them that a good friend absolutely needed work.

SPIEGEL: The ugliest figure in the book is the Oberhausen contract laborer boss Vogel, alias Adler, who supplied workers, among them Wallraff, alias Ali, to Thyssen. Wallraff later worked his way up to being Vogel's chauffeur. Did you get him that job, too?

SINIRLIOGLU: Yes, together with Turkish friends. At the beginning of August 1985, in the role of Wallraff's brother Abdullah, I took over the job as Vogel's private chauffeur. Wallraff began writing the book, and in his place, I collected further information on the dealer in laborers.

SPIEGEL: Does that mean that Wallraff did not himself have all the experiences as Mr. Vogel's chauffeur described in his book?

SINIRLIOGLU: In *Ganz unten*, Wallraff reports about a curious story that I actually experienced for him. In front of Vogel's house, when I was waiting near the car for the next trip, I suddenly felt the need to relieve myself.

I rang and asked where the bathroom was. But as Mr. Vogel simply could not imagine letting his German john be contaminated by a Turk, he sent me back outside, like a dog. Well, you no doubt know the story from the book.

SPIEGEL: Is that the only experience you contributed to the book?

SINIRLIOGLU: No, all the experiences that Abdullah has in *Ganz unten* were my experiences.

SPIEGEL: But Wallraff reports the bathroom story in the first person (as Ali). There is no mention of Abdullah.

SINIRLIOGLU: I know. He cheated there. Maybe because he wanted to reserve the goodies for himself, but I don't have any problem with that. When Wallraff left a workplace, he left a replacement behind. In cases when such an associate experienced a more exciting episode than he had himself, that episode was attributed in the book to the central figure, Ali. That worries Uwe Herzog, but not me.

SPIEGEL: You mean the Bremen journalist who claims that he actually wrote twenty-eight pages of *Ganz unten*?

SINIRLIOGLU: Yes, we Turks always called Uwe Herzog the "little Wallraff," because he imitated the master down

to his gestures. We Turkish associates knew from the outset that we were not in it for our own glory. My God, who found out what really makes no difference; the result is what matters. As an aside, in Herzog's place, I would tone it down a bit. While he left the bar early in the morning, Wallraff was on the way to the Thyssen works.

SPIEGEL: Wallraff's credibility was questioned primarily by conservative critics of the book. Those critics accuse him of manipulation and maintain that his reporting paints too grim a picture of reality.

SINIRLIOGLU: The writer Wallraff not only portrayed the inhumane conditions in the black-market laborer business absolutely correctly, reproduced in a 1:1 ratio. I can also attest to the accuracy of all the other descriptions in the book.

SPIEGEL: Then what do you accuse Wallraff of?

SINIRLIOGLU: I don't accuse the writer Wallraff of anything at all. I am attacking Wallraff the institution. That is the point. After the success of the book, I only experienced Wallraff as an institution that wanted to dodge its political responsibility and played a nasty game with his closest associates.

SPIEGEL: As the firm Exposé & Co?

SINIRLIOGLU: As the firm Exposé without Co! Because he suddenly no longer knew that he had associates. And in his way, he treated the people who demanded their due from him just as highhandedly as the contract laborer head Vogel had. As a result, most people lost sight of what the institution Wallraff actually stood for: for political enlightenment and social justice or for shady dealings?

SPIEGEL: What do you mean by that?

SINIRLIOGLU: Let's first talk about his behavior in money matters. Wallraff presents himself in public as a champion for equality and democracy, but his associates could not be treated more unequally or more undemocratically than he treats them.

With his book he earned over eight million; we were not asked about the use of the money. And Wallraff handled payment of his people like any other boss who wants to get off cheaply.

SPIEGEL: Can you give examples?

SINIRLIOGLU: Some of us were presented with an explanation for giving up any claim to royalties from the film *Ganz unten*. They signed and were put off with 200 or 300 marks. From another person, I know that eight months after the appearance of the book a check for 5,000 marks from Wallraff with the ominous note "You will understand" came in the mail. Or take the example of the photographer Hinrich Schultze, who tinkered with Wallraff's hidden camera for half a year and then spent three and a half months at McDonald's for him.

Part of the results from McDonald's in *Ganz unten* come from Hinrich. But he is not even mentioned in Wallraff's acknowledgments to twenty-eight "friends and associates" in *Ganz unten*, and to this day all he received were 2,000 marks. The Wallraff associate Uwe Herzog, on the other hand, probably received 100,000 marks. I ask you, what criteria did Wallraff use for these crass differences?

SPIEGEL: What do you think?

SINIRLIOGLU: I have a depressing suspicion. The suspicion that he knowingly payed his German associates better.

They were professional journalists like Herzog, and those core money earners consisted of five or six people. With them, Wallraff handled the matter professionally. He chose another language for us Turks, the language of political engagement.

SPIEGEL: But the badly paid associate who built the hidden camera for Wallraff was a German associate.

SINIRLIOGLU: Yes, but such a quiet and decent one that Wallraff thought he could treat him a Turk used to being modest. That German associate once told me that he felt like Wallraff's private Turk.

SPIEGEL: How much did you get?

SINIRLIOGLU: Among the Turks I was the big earner. In total, I got 20,000 marks in pay for my work. However, when he at some point during the work on the book asked me while paying my wages whether I perhaps had used several weekend trips to my family in Hamburg to earn some extra money by driving a taxi, I banged his bills down on the table.

SPIEGEL: Where do you think he was going with that question?

SINIRLIOGLU: He probably thought that if I earned money some other way on the weekend, which I did not have a mind to do at the time, he could subtract that from my wages.

SPIEGEL: Did he stay with the pay of 20,000 marks?

SINIRLIOGLU: No, when the number of copies printed was at 600,000, he told me without being asked that he wanted to pay me special royalties. He made that kind of promises to many of us. Three months after publication, the number of copies printed had climbed to over a million; I asked him what he had meant with the special royalties. He suggested 10,000 marks. But at that number of copies printed I found 30,000 marks more appropriate; he probably thought it could have been worse and immediately agreed.

Of this amount, I spent 9,100 marks for a political purpose. Furthermore, I had to perform several special services for Wallraff that I don't want to go into.

SPIEGEL: Why not?

SINIRLIOGLU: Because I don't want to air any dirty laundry.

SPIEGEL: In the meantime, the number of copies printed is right around 2.75 million. Do you still have financial claims on Wallraff?

SINIRLIOGLU: No. When I saw how the film *Ganz unten* became commercialized, I consulted an attorney about what my friends and I are entitled to; we didn't want to let ourselves be played for suckers. But nothing could be done legally. Wallraff still owes some friends something. These money matters are long since repugnant to me, and I sometimes dream that I have won the lottery and as the first thing transfer 50,000 marks to Wallraff.

SPIEGEL: Couldn't you have caught on sooner to the methods of the Wallraff Co. and terminated your assistance?

SINIRLIOGLU: We participated in the undertaking out of political convictions. Wallraff used these convictions by repeatedly reminding us of the "cause" when payment came up. That made even me blind to the tricks of the Wallraff Co. for a long time. But while Wallraff filled his pockets with the "common cause," many of us are still

standing in the social welfare office and are forced to perform black-market labor.

When I chauffeured the enemy of the worker, Vogel, all over, he once said, “Five marks an hour is a lot of money for a Turk.” Perhaps the friend of the worker, Wallraff, has become like his enemy.

SPIEGEL: Aren’t you doing him an injustice there? After all, Wallraff donated 1.7 million marks from the proceeds of the book sales to the Duisberg *Zusammen-Leben* [Live Together] Foundation.

SINIRLIOGLU: That famous housing project on Flurstraße is an entirely murky matter, too. He was always very monosyllabic when we asked him about it.

I no longer believe a single word from him about the housing project and I’d like to use this opportunity to call upon Günter Wallraff to allow the entire affair and the so-called Solidarity with Foreigners aid fund to be investigated by an independent commission.

SPIEGEL: Do you also want to dispute that Günter Wallraff has championed foreigners on a very practical level and, for example, successfully opposed deportations?

SINIRLIOGLU: Shortly after the publication of the book, there were a couple of initiatives of this kind. Wallraff was able to prevent a deportation once by mobilizing the public and contributed to several foreigners being permanently employed by Thyssen on another occasion. That died down after a few months; of the mobilization, only the advertisement for his book and the company by the same name still remained.

SPIEGEL: There were countless meetings about the book in venues that were usually full to overflowing. How did they go?

SINIRLIOGLU: Not that Wallraff invited me, but to get an idea myself, I was there a few times. Wallraff almost always came a half hour late to the venue, “because of litigation” or “because I just prevented a deportation.” Then he regularly read at length from his book, even though almost everyone in the venue was familiar with it.

SPIEGEL: But there was a discussion afterwards?

SINIRLIOGLU: Wallraff avoided open discussions on how the solidarity that had arisen could be used, for example, to clarify the connection of the Aliens Act to illegal employment and to eliminate unjust provisions. He preferred to answer questions from fans like, “Weren’t you afraid to be discovered?” It was usually a pure personality show.

SPIEGEL: Did you sit on the podium?

SINIRLIOGLU: No, at these staged performances I would probably have been a distraction. But now and then he took along Turkish co-workers from Thyssen whom he brought with him like suitcases. They could hardly speak German and their role was limited to nodding their heads when the white man said something.

SPIEGEL: What was the echo of the Turkish public to *Ganz unten* like? Immediately after the German edition, a prepublication already appeared in a Turkish newspaper and then the Turkish translation of the book.

SINIRLIOGLU: We are a people that quickly becomes enthusiastic. Liselotte Funcke, the civil servant responsible for integration of foreigners, has been celebrated for a long time in the Turkish press as the “mother of the Turks.” In Günter Wallraff, our journalists finally found the father of the Turks.

On May 12, 1986, an interview with Günter Wallraff appeared in the newspaper *Millyet*. As the author of *Ganz unten*, he had only done his duty, he said, and asserted completely unabashedly that he had set aside 3 million of the then 3.5 million in proceeds from the book for his foreigner aid fund. In passing, the Turkish reporter told the astonished public that the famous German contents himself with a tiny three-room apartment in his homeland, that he walks around only in worn-out jeans and beat-up tennis shoes, and that he drives a 1977 car that is almost ready for the junk yard. I have never read so many “printing errors” in a newspaper in such a very small space.

SPIEGEL: Doesn't Wallraff have to be afraid that his former Turkish associates will unite against him?

SINIRLIOGLU: Since Wallraff has noticed that public criticism of his practices is becoming louder, he is feverishly attempting to sway his Turkish associates in particular. Now he is even using money. Two important associates who worked on the book and the film *Ganz unten*, Mehmet Ipek and Taner Aday, called me from Duisberg and said that after a long time Wallraff had contacted them through a middleman and asked whether he perhaps owed them money or whether they wished anything else from him.

When we associates talk about Wallraff again among ourselves, expressions are used that cannot be quoted. We are of the opinion that we stayed at the bottom, while Wallraff is now at the top.

SPIEGEL: Hasn't the success of the book at least encouraged Turks to stand up actively for their interests and not to allow themselves to be intimidated any longer?

SINIRLIOGLU: For some it has certainly had that effect. But for many of my countrymen, social reality has again suppressed the feeling of relief. Of course, Günter Wallraff cannot be blamed for that. But I do blame him for the fact that his entire behavior after the publication of the book actually made independent representation of their interests more difficult for the Turks.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe that *Ganz unten* has changed the attitude of Germans toward foreigners?

SINIRLIOGLU: Germans will know more about the hostility toward foreigners described there, since almost three million people have purchased the book by now. I am happy about that. Certainly, a real interest in the lives of “guest workers” is also among the motives of the buyers. However, for many it will probably only have been an inexpensive token for the bookshelf.

But even if some things have changed in people's minds, almost nothing's changed in the everyday life of the businesses and residential districts.

The labor providers have gotten more careful than before *Ganz unten*, but there are more, not fewer, contract labor companies than before. When the book had been on the market for a year, I researched for two months to find out if anything had changed. In Bavaria, I worked illegally for the lettuce harvest and at Mercedes-Benz. I noticed no sign of changed attitudes among Germans.

SPIEGEL: What do you say when Wallraff accuses you of adding fuel to the fire of his reactionary opponents with your criticism of him and that it was therefore “right-wing” criticism?

SINIRLIOGLU: I have to get my residence permit from the foreigners' registration office, and my work permit from the labor office. Should I now get myself a permit to be a member of the left from the Wallraff institution? No, I do not think Wallraff capable of that accusation; only Stalin muzzled his critics in that manner. If the right-wingers are agitating against Wallraff, I will naturally be on his side in the future. For one thing is certain: they are targeting

Wallraff and mean to hit us.

SPIEGEL: In the past year, Wallraff informed the media about his move to Holland. He did so as a safety measure against house searches, spying, and other kinds of stalking. What do you think about that?

SINIRLIOGLU: I believe that there is a less dramatic explanation: Wallraff was no longer equal to the responsibility for the Turks.

SPIEGEL: Then wouldn't anyone else in Wallraff's position have been just as overwhelmed, anyone who for months got non-stop enquiries and cries for help from Turks?

SINIRLIOGLU: But the point is that Wallraff put himself in exactly that position by always letting himself be celebrated as the lone warrior. Obviously, it is utterly impossible for one person to accomplish that. But he didn't need to be alone.

From the history of the Duisberg Solidarity for Foreigners bureau you can see how indifferent Wallraff really was to solidarity work. He did not lack money or associates. But he placed his own personal fame and success above everything.

You know, I know so many people who came to the Federal Republic at twenty and at forty left again with broken health. It is precisely Wallraff's book that has shown how they were betrayed at the cost of their lives. “

Günter Wallraff probably also suffers because of these circumstances. But at the same time, he is probably influenced much more by the success-driven thinking of this society than he himself admits.

Source of the original German text: “Interview mit dem Türken Levent Sinirlioglu über den Enthüllungsunternehmer Günter Wallraff,” *Der Spiegel*, no. 25, 1987, pp. 188–97.

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