

Stephan Wackwitz

Biography

Stephan Wackwitz (born 1952) grew up in Stuttgart, Iserlohn and Blaubeuren. His grandfather was a Lutheran pastor and church official in Poland and Namibia, his father, a historian, worked for the Goethe-Institut in Athens and in Paris. His mother was a freelance fashion illustrator.

In 1967, having passed the „Landexamen“ (a regional entrance-exam), he was awarded a scholarship to attend the „Evangelisch-Theologisches Seminar“, a boarding school, run since the 16th century by the Protestant church of Württemberg, where he prepared for education in the „Tübinger Stift“.

Wackwitz studied German, History and Philosophy in Munich and Stuttgart and received his doctorate 1981. His dissertation on Friedrich Hölderlin's elegies was supervised by Heinz Schlaffer. Between 1974 and 1980, he was a member of „MSB Spartakus“, the student organisation of the Communist Party of West Germany (DKP).

Having passed the first „Staatsexamen“ as a teacher for high school, Wackwitz taught as a DAAD-Lektor at King's College, London between 1982 and 1984 and joined the Goethe-Institut 1986, where he worked as language teacher, institute director and cultural program officer until his retirement in 2018, holding posts in Frankfurt/Main, Tokyo, Munich, Kraków, Bratislava, New York, Tbilisi and Minsk. He is currently living in Berlin.

In 1982, Wackwitz began writing freelance for the „Stuttgarter Zeitung“. His editor was Wolfgang Ignée, head of the cultural section.

From 1985 onward, influenced and mentored by John Berger and Michael Rutschky, he developed his literary genre – personal essays and creative non-fiction, first published in the „Düsseldorfer Debatte“, in the French edition of „Lettre International“, the „Threepenny Review“ and „Der Alltag“ (Zurich).

In 1994, Wackwitz's first book-length personal essay about Tokyo was published by Ammann in Zurich, recommended to the publishing house by John Berger. He also began publishing pieces in the German

monthly „Merkur“, edited by Karl Heinz Bohrer and Kurt Scheel. In 1995, his satirical novel „Walkers Gleichung“ came out at Steidl. In 2002, the publisher and essayist Jörg Bong brought Wackwitz to the publishing house S. Fischer.

In 2003, Wackwitz's combination of essayistic autobiography, philosophical reflection, travel writing and family history earned wider recognition with the memoir „Ein unsichtbares Land“, first in Germany, then in France and the USA – it was translated by Stephen Lehmann as „An Invisible Country“ and by Barbara Fontaine as „Un pays invisible“. It was academically read and written about in the context of „memory studies“ by Aleida Assmann, Daniel Fulda, Julian Reidy, Helmut Schmitz and others. John Coetzee wrote to the American publisher, that he had read it „with the greatest admiration“. Peter Sloterdijk wrote of „Neue Menschen“, a sequel to „Ein unsichtbares Land“, that the book „towered over the many books dealing with the Sixties“.

Since the early 2000s, Wackwitz's family memoirs, as well as his essayistic-autobiographical travelogues, have been published by the S. Fischer Verlag: „Osterweiterung. Zwölf Reisen“ (2008), „Fifth Avenue. Spaziergänge durch das letzte Jahrhundert“ (2010), 2014 and 2018 (enlarged new edition) „Die vergessene Mitte der Welt. Unterwegs zwischen Tiflis, Baku und Eriwan“ and in 2015, „Die Bilder meiner Mutter“, the third and last part of a family memoir mirroring political, philosophical and artistic tendencies during the last century. All have been reviewed favourably in German newspapers.

For the „Neue Rundschau“, S. Fischer's literary periodical since 1890, Wackwitz has written two constitutive essays about the methodology and origins of his essayistic-autobiographical oeuvre. In „Über Unverständlichkeit“ (3/2011) he traces the influences of Richard Rorty, German romanticism and American pragmatism on his writing, in „Gibt es nichtfiktionale Literatur?“ – he positions it in the essayistic tradition.

Over the last two decades, his reviews and essays have been continuously published in „Merkur“, „Neue Rundschau“, „Sinn und Form“, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung“, „Süddeutsche Zeitung“ and „tageszeitung“. His political writings about Eastern Europe were collected in a volume for edition.fotoTAPETA_Essay in 2019.

In 1996, Wackwitz was awarded a prize for young talents connected to the Heimito von Doderer literary award, in 2010, he received the literary award of Sachsen-Anhalt (Wilhelm-Müller-Preis), in 2012, a German-

Polish literary award named after Samuel Bogumil Linde and in 2016, the Wilhelm-Lehmann-Preis.

In January 2024, S. Fischer will publish „Das Geheimnis der Rückkehr. Sieben Weltreisen“, an intellectual autobiography concerned with three decades spent living abroad. During the last couple of years, he has been working on diaries he first began keeping in 1967. Perspectives into this massive corpus of texts will be made accessible in the historical blog-diary on this website.