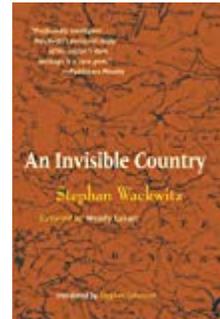




**Stephen Wackwitz.** *An Invisible Country*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2005. xiii + 254 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58988-022-1.



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### A Three-Generation Family Romance

This book tells the story of one family: the author, Stephen Wackwitz; his father, Gustav Wackwitz; and his grandfather, Andreas Wackwitz. At the same time, it is an interpretation of Germany's twentieth-century history and an account of how the generations born in 1952, 1922 and 1893 clashed with but could not escape from one another.

Wackwitz is not a professional historian and this book is not an attempted scholarly monograph. Instead, the director of the Goethe Institut in Bratislava, Slovakia, who holds a Ph.D. in German literature, has engaged in authentic story-telling. The result is an intelligent memoir with sometimes painfully poignant moments. The author is critical of himself, his family and his nation, but writes always with poise and thoughtfulness.

The book's title refers to an area in Upper Silesia that encompasses the town of Anhalt/Holdun<sup>3</sup>w, the site of the author's grandfather's pastorate from 1921 to 1933, and also Auschwitz/O<sup>2</sup>'wi<sup>a</sup>cim, a mere ten kilometers away. The invisible country is not only geographical, of course, but symbolic of a society that disappeared at the advent of World War II. Andreas Wackwitz's memoirs are

thus "the story of a man who in 1939 was shipwrecked for the rest of his life, a man who had as little use for the country in which he lived as he had for his grandson" (p. 19).

The narrative weaves together stories of the author's grandfather's life, as taken from his copious memoirs written in the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and Wackwitz's reflections on his own *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. He is scornful of the "vague, poorly thought-out, and peculiarly irresponsible way in which [his grandfather] formed his political opinions" (p. 101). Andreas Wackwitz was clearly a man of his times, for whom the kaiser was "the German people's inner and positive strength" (p. 86). Born into the lower middle class, he fought in World War I before becoming a Lutheran pastor, for him a pragmatic career choice. He took advantage of career opportunities available abroad, going first to Upper Silesia (at that time part of Poland) and then Windhoek, Southwest Africa. Andreas Wackwitz was fiercely nationalistic, stoically brave and unapologetically racist—a man who, in 1939, could sit calmly in a lifeboat in the South Atlantic, smoking a cigar and watching as the British navy sank

the steamer he and his family had been traveling aboard, along with all of his possessions (p. 8).

An important theme is that of the family romance (the original German edition is subtitled *Familienroman*). The term refers to Freud's description of a common childhood fantasy in which children imagine that their "true" parents are somehow superior to their actual parents (p. 246). Wackwitz's own family romance is evident in his strained relationship with his grandfather, a man whom he says, "came to need historical explanation in his own lifetime" (p. 18).

Wackwitz also interprets his generation's experience in Germany as a Freudian family romance. This generation came of age in the 1960s and found they had inherited the guilt of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Wackwitz was involved in the student revolutions of the 1960s and flirted, for a time, with communism. He writes of this period: "If the political performances of our red decade followed a strategy, it was that we acted out the fights and murders of the 1920s and 1930s as demonstratively and provocatively as possible, confronting the conditions of a country that, for all we knew, was not ours. We wanted those in power to show their real faces ... always ready for the moment when their masks would fall and they would revert to their true identities as Goebbels and Hitler" (p. 227).

Throughout the book Wackwitz paints a picture of a Germany that cannot evade its history by indulging in a family romance. There are too many seemingly coincidental encounters with infamous people and places. These reminders, lurking around the corner of a family history, are in no short supply in the author's family. Several accounts are included in the story, such

as: "Without knowing it, on June 24, 1917, my grandfather Andreas Wackwitz came very close to meeting Adolf Hitler" (p. 80). Wackwitz also describes how one of his grandfather's early parishes and "the site of the century's greatest crime were separated by nothing more than a longish walk and barely a decade" (p. 6). And of particular significance to the author is the fact that the town where Andreas settled upon returning to Germany was Luckenwalde, the home of Alfred Willi Rudolf ("Rudi") Dutschke (p. 39).

It does not matter that nothing dramatic happened: Andreas Wackwitz was not actually in Anhalt/Holdun<sup>3</sup>w while the Auschwitz concentration camp was in operation; it is highly unlikely that he spoke with Hitler, as he was a staff officer and Hitler a private; nor did he ever mention having spoken to the young Rudi Dutschke. The significance lies in the proximity, as though the one degree of separation brings the guilt of the past even closer. The author seems compelled to invest these non-incidents with import because, as he puts it, "[s]ometimes historic events, shaped by fleeting, mutable memories, come into being long after they have happened" (p. 177).

The scope of Wackwitz's family reflections reaches further than the typical memoir. For this reason, footnotes and an index would have been helpful. The numbered notes at the end give corresponding page numbers but no indications are found in the text of where the author has provided further elaboration. However, the book's purpose is not to present historical research. It is a personal family story, whose contextualization in German society and lyrical translation make for a gratifying read.

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