

Foreword

I first heard of Stephan Wackwitz in the fall of 1989, when John Berger—a longtime consulting editor to *The Threepenny Review*, but better known to the wider world as an eminent writer, art critic, and filmmaker—told me about an article Wackwitz had written in German on the musician Tom Waits. At the time I knew no German, and very little about Germany: if you had asked me to free-associate on the subject, I would have come up with Adolf Hitler first and possibly Rainer Werner Fassbinder as a distant second. I suspect that most Americans of my age (born in 1952), ethnicity (Jewish), and education (good) would have had similarly limited associations. My trust in John Berger, however, trumped my ignorance about modern German culture, and I agreed to look at the piece.

It arrived in a rough English translation, accompanied by its German original, but even the roughness could not disguise the virtues of the essay—as a piece of criticism that was also social commentary, and as a piece of writing that effectively conveyed the personality of its author as well as its

subject. I can still, to this day, remember the enormously satisfying process of editing that essay for its English-language debut. For the whole of one evening, extending late into the night, I sat at my dining-room table, a German-English dictionary by my side, and gradually smoothed out every sentence. Years later, when I was to find myself in Berlin, surrounded by and infatuated with German, I traced my instantaneous love for the language back to that singular experience of grappling with Wackwitz's sentences.

Now that I have read Stephen Lehmann's elegant translation of *An Invisible Country*, I understand that this was no mere coincidence. It turns out that, of all possible guides to the contemporary German sensibility, Wackwitz is probably the best qualified to be mine.

We are, in some ways, mirror images of each other, exactly the same age, postwar babies from opposite sides of the unspeakable event that binds our two cultures together. (For the Holocaust has joined the Germans to the Jews as permanently as its perpetrators once hoped to keep them apart: you cannot be a thinking German these days without defining yourself in relation to the Jews, and vice versa.) Wackwitz left Germany at the age of thirty and has since then lived almost permanently abroad—first in England, later in Japan, now in Poland—whereas I stuck close to my native California ground and only visited Germany for the first time at the age of fifty-one. Our lives are curiously interconnected nonetheless. Reading this strange, complicated memoir of his, I was startled to learn that he has an aunt on Euclid Avenue, a few short blocks away from my Berkeley house. Even that American aunt, however, though she has been here for decades, turns out to be in many ways a citizen of the “invisible country” inhabited by the German Wackwitzes; the

fate is apparently not one that can be escaped just by emigrating.

An Invisible Country is actually three or four books folded into one—not folded neatly like paper or cloth, but folded as a marble cake batter is, with wide swaths of chocolate meandering here and there through the vanilla. There is the story of Stephan Wackwitz’s own life, and then there is the parallel but in some ways opposite story of his grandfather’s life, rendered through the memoir that Pastor Wackwitz wrote in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s after he had returned from his mission to Africa, and long after he had left his parish in Poland, just outside Auschwitz. And then (as this last-mentioned name will suggest to even the most casual reader) there is that other history, not just familial and personal, but national and infamous.

Germans are a history-minded people. They love to keep track of how far back their family goes in a single location, who inhabited what house for centuries, things like that. When I visited Lübeck, the hometown Thomas Mann immortalized in *Buddenbrooks*, I ate in a restaurant that had once been a private house, and the menu came with a list of all the people who had occupied that house from 1284 up to the present. Wackwitz himself can trace his own family back to 1402. This kind of unbroken record is virtually unheard-of among Americans. For us, time is a series of unconnected plateaus, brief historical high points that are surrounded on either side by unfathomable abysses. We cannot help but admire a culture that keeps such a close watch on its past; we also cannot help fearing it. Both responses are reasonable.

Early on in *An Invisible Country*, Stephan Wackwitz brings up a “famous story” by Johann Peter Hebel, about an eighth-

teenth-century man who dies in a mining accident just before his marriage, is mummified by the surrounding chemicals, and then gets unearthed fifty years later, still youthful-looking and fully preserved. A strikingly similar image ends the first of the four tales in W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants*, only this time the young man falls into an alpine glacier in the summer of 1914 and reappears, externally unchanged, after seventy-two years have passed. "And so they are ever returning to us, the dead," says Sebald, whose book—in this respect very much like Wackwitz's—is an oblique commentary on Germany's relationship to the Holocaust. For both writers, the story of the well-preserved young man has a poignance that we who are not German can only begin to imagine. To cheat time by embracing death is a Faustian bargain of the first order. But also, for a culture that so values historical continuity, there is the fearfulness of that gap in time (a gap not unlike the period 1933 to 1945, which is represented in at least one piece of German public art simply by a blank, black rectangle). The standard American analogy is the tale of Rip Van Winkel, who slept through the major events of his lifetime, only to come back and find everything altered. But the characters in Wackwitz's and Sebald's tales do not wake up; they remain oblivious to the changes that have occurred, and instead it is their own inalterability which strikes bystanders as ghostlike. These *revenants* pointedly recall, through their artificially preserved innocence, everything that has been lost in the meantime.

Wackwitz is both sharp and tender as an observer, both analytic and emotional. He understands how to use family stories in ways that will both move and horrify us, and he understands how to use himself as an element in those stories. He gives us his grandfather's writing, and then he gives

us his own perspective on that writing—most notably in the fascinating episode of the African cobra, a story that I do not want to give away, and that in any case I could not render with the utter delicacy, the Freudian-tinged but completely undogmatic intelligence, with which Wackwitz handles it. He also conveys, with the intensity of a dream (and often, in fact, *through* dreams, which he introduces quite skillfully), the uncanny power that certain places can hold over us. He makes us understand why the English word *wanderlust* harks immediately back to its German roots, and why the German word *Heimat* suggests more than either “home” or “homeland.” Most of all, he allows us to experience—vicariously, imperfectly, but nonetheless deeply—the strange situation of the contemporary German.

Even the impulsive decision to leave Germany and seek out a new life turns out, at the end, to be Wackwitz’s way of acting out his German destiny. Or, as he puts it:

When a person leaves the life he knows and sets out for the unknown—which has to be better than death, whatever happens—it may be the right decision, or one that is pleasurable, or even the only decision possible. This was the tradition of my ancestors, and it was completely consistent with, and perhaps even secretly waiting for, the ideology and the actions of the Nazis. The dreams and fantasies so violently released during Hitler’s climb to power became stronger than caution, reason, a sense of responsibility, or conscience. . . . Perhaps one has to imagine them as a state-sanctioned and state-protected dream afflicting 60 million people simultaneously: the castle park of Laskowitz joining with millions of other childhood memories of infinity, and suddenly stretching from the

Atlantic to the Urals. Once exposed, such megalomaniac fantasies are buried in the shame they have left in their wake.

Stephan Wackwitz may be writing primarily about his culture, but we are free to glean our own meanings from what he has to say. That is, the Germans are not the only people about whom one might observe that their most appealing traits are also their most dangerous ones. What would we Americans be, for instance, without our unquenchable optimism, our boundless energy? And yet where are these qualities leading us at the moment? As in the dark Germanic fairy-tales with which it has affinities, *An Invisible Country* holds up a tarnished, shadowy, ghost-ridden mirror into which, if we are wise, we might well be afraid to look.

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