

Martin Pollack

Born May 23, 1944, in Bad Hall, Upper Austria, Martin Pollack initially grew up in the house of his mother and his stepfather, the bank clerk and artist, Hans Pollack, in Linz.

The child had only fleeting encounters with his biological father, who was found murdered – Pollack was not yet even three – close to the Austrian-Italian border; he was 14 before he discovered his father's true identity, previously just hinted at in asides, as SS Major and chief of the Gestapo in Linz.

Pollack spent his early childhood in two different places due to the turmoil of the War and the post-war years: after the destruction of his parental home, he lived alternately with his mother, who had been evacuated to Styria, and with his grandparents in Amstetten.

After attending primary school in Linz, Pollack moved to a boarding school in Pinzgau, nestled in a remote mountainous valley in Upper Tauern. The nine years Pollack spent at this school, organised according to direct democratic principles and where he completed an apprenticeship as a carpenter for construction and furniture, were of profound influence; not least his friendship with Russian schoolmates planted a seed of curiosity for the East.

With secondary school completed, Pollack progressed to courses in Slavonic studies and Eastern European history in Vienna and Warsaw, working as a translator and journalist at the same time. He learned the ropes under Franz Marek at the reformed communist *Wiener Tagebuch*, for which he was employed as an editor from 1972 to 1984. In 1987, Pollack joined the editorial department of the Hamburg-based current affairs magazine *Der Spiegel*, reporting initially as a correspondent from Vienna, later from Warsaw.

Martin Pollack, who now lives in Vienna and in Bocksdorf in South Burgenland, has acted as a freelance author and translator since 1998, focussing with particular merit on the work by his Polish fellow reporter and friend, Ryszard Kapuściński.

Martin Pollack has received numerous prizes for his oeuvre. He is Holder of the Knight's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland (2003) and was awarded, among others, the Austrian Booksellers Prize for Tolerance in Thought and Action (2007), the Karl Dedecius Translator Prize (2007) and the Georg Dehio Book Prize (2010).

There is barely a thing of too scant or stellar magnitude for the *political historian of literature* (Erich Klein) Martin Pollack and his enthralling style. He has written with equal authority on the dark borders of Kakanian Galicia as he has on authoritarian sensitivities in post-war Austria. His work unites at all times the precision of a passionate historian with the imaginative potency of a major novelist.

Pollack's first book, *Nach Galizien* (1984), was originally an imaginary journey in a terra incognita; he had to assume that he would never travel there in person at the time of publication. At the start of the eighties, the journalist – the independent union Solidarność, having just emerged from the strike movement at the Lenin Shipyards in Danzig – had been declared persona non grata in Poland. Pollack set off to find a topic far from the beaten track of up-to-the-minute news and discovered the documentary prose that has remained his trademark to the present day – a literary art form between essay writing, the history of mentalities and narrative reporting, founded on meticulous archive research. But even when the period of his *forced historization* had long since passed, Pollack's interest in reconstructing the past, questioning false myths and deconstructing taboos remained lively. He speaks where silence most commonly prevails.

Two of his most successful books have revolved around fathers and their violent deaths: in *Anklage Vatermord* (2002), he reviewed the trial of Philipp Halsmann, a famous photographer, and at the same time penned a disturbingly relevant book on the Austrian justice system during the nineteen-twenties.

More than half a century after his murder in South Tyrol, *Der Tote im Bunker* (2004) pieces together his own father's life – a painful and intense forensic study in which Pollack paints a densely-researched atmospheric picture of the milieu that became the breeding ground for National Socialism.

In his latest book, this year's winner of the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding, Pollack once more submerges himself in the lost world of Galician smallholders, craftsmen and journeymen in the almshouse of the old Habsburg Monarchy, whose research formed the starting point of his literary career.

In *Kaiser von Amerika*, he describes the major wave of emigration that rolled over Galicia around 1880 and persisted until the outbreak of the First World War. Drawing on court records, old newspaper accounts and trips through the region, Pollack traces the fates of individual emigrants, describes the path of their suffering and the arduous life that awaited them overseas. He tells the tale of the perennial losers searching for a better life and also the winners who - then as now - squeezed profits from

the plight of others. Pollack makes no bones about whom he actually sympathises with. And the uncanny parallels to the present day, the practices of current human traffickers and the fate of many migrants we read in the text are no coincidence with an author of Pollack's qualities.

His friend Juri Andruchowytch, born in Iwano-Frankiwsk in the West of Ukraine, perfectly encapsulates what these are: *Keeping the past at arm's length while still digging in it relentlessly requires an unequivocal positioning, analytical courage and purity of research. This is the foundation upon which the creative phenomenon Martin Pollack has grown and which carries him.*

Selected publications

Nach Galizien. Von Chassiden, Huzulen, Polen und Ruthenern. Eine imaginäre Reise durch die verschwundene Welt Ostgaliziens und der Bukowina. Edition Christian Brandstätter, Vienna 1984

Des Lebens Lauf. Jüdische Familienbilder aus Zwischeneuropa. Christian Brandstätter Verlagsgesellschaft, Vienna 1987

Anklage Vatemord. Der Fall Philipp Halsmann. Zsolnay, Vienna 2002

Der Tote im Bunker. Bericht über meinen Vater. Zsolnay, Vienna 2004

Warum wurden die Stanislaws erschossen? Reportagen. Zsolnay, Vienna 2008

Kaiser von Amerika. Die große Flucht aus Galizien. Zsolnay, Vienna 2010