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Obituary: Prof. Dr. Dr.h.c. Wolfgang Kasack. January 20, 1927-January 10, 2003

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OBITUARY

PROF. DR. DR. H.C. WOLFGANG KASACK
January 20, 1927–January 10, 2003

Wolfgang Kasack, one of the leading scholars of Russian and Slavic literatures in the twentieth century, has departed and left us with the question: Who will continue his monumental efforts to document the lives and works of Russian authors of the twenty-first century? Kasack is remembered here first and foremost for his groundbreaking and still invaluable *Dictionary of Russian Literature since 1917* (New York: Columbia UP, 1988). Several of his works have been translated into English, but they are merely the tip of an iceberg of over one thousand books, articles and reviews. He was not only a meticulous and relentless scholar, but also the foremost popularizer of Russian literature for the German speaking world, wonderfully accessible to the educated reader whose own grasp of Russia and its literature was not necessarily that of the specialist. All of these references have been collected and published in his lifetime, thanks to the efforts of Prof. Dr. Frank Göbler, *Wolfgang Kasack: Vollständiges Verzeichnis der Veröffentlichungen 1948–2002* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002). Few are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to see their own bibliography so celebrated in their lifetime. The volume is testimony to the singular and single-handed contribution that Prof. Dr. Kasack made to our field and our profession.

Kasack taught himself enough Russian to become a translator in a Soviet POW camp in 1945 and 1946. He pursued this interest with formal study in Heidelberg and Göttingen. Then he embarked on a civil service career with the Foreign Ministry, where he was assigned as the Head Interpreter for the Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Moscow from 1956–1960. From 1960–1968 he helped organize scholarly exchanges between Russia and Germany. In 1968 he became Professor of Slavic Philology at the University of Cologne where he remained until his retirement in 1992. From the very beginning his interest and love for Russian letters that would extend over half a century emerge in his publications. In 1952 he published a seventeen-page bibliography of the Slavic Periodicals at the University of

Heidelberg. In 1957 his first book on Gogol appeared. These parallel interests, a desire to document and a fascination with Russian writers, remained lifelong companions. His *Lexikon* published in German in 1976 detailed scores of Russian writers, and established his position as a leading authority on Soviet literature. It has been widely translated and is an indispensable research tool. But it was also a work in progress; he continued unabated his efforts to revise and expand upon his printed version. I received several letters and later e-mails from him as recently as last year when he was on the track of some obscure Russian writers of the emigration. His reviews and articles have been gathered together to provide a history of Russian literature in emigration of this past century. He was equally at home with living Soviet and dissident writers. Professor Kasack was active in German Slavic circles, sponsored dozens of future scholars, and edited his own series on "Arbeiten und Texte zur Slavistik." His work resulted in numerous studies that have enriched our knowledge of the literature he so loved. In the past decade his contributions were recognized by German and Russian organizations, including an honorary degree from the Institute of Russian Literature in Moscow. I remember him best as a gracious host, a marvelous colleague, and one ever ready to share his knowledge and wisdom with younger scholars bridging several generations. To be his guest was to live the life of the mind, to explore and discuss Russian literature non-stop from morning to night.

In the past decade he took on the major topic of the role of Christ in Russian literature. The confrontation of author and Christ or of reader and Christ are, as Kasack reminds us, essentially private and personal. The wealth of such experiences provided by Russian Literature was in his words "a gift" (*Christus in der russischen Literatur*. München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1999, 232). The same might be said of Kasack's own exceptional effort to document the appearances of Christ on the pages of Russian literature. More recently he turned to dying and death in the works of Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy. In his final year he traveled to India searching for answers to the mystery of death and life. He was the consummate literary detective, who was a first-hand witness of the figures of the times that marked those momentous years when Russian literature was a vital and essential aspect of cultural history. He solved many a mystery, unraveled many an enigma. Prof. Dr. Kasack has left us, but his legacy remains.

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