

On the death of literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki (1920-2013): A passionate advocate of literature—Part 1

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This is the first part of a two-part tribute to the late Polish-born, German literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who died September 18, 2013.

“Thinkers are valued in this country especially when they poeticise – and the poets, when they don’t try to think” [1]

The death of literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki on September 18 marked the passing of one of the most important figures in German cultural life. He was more than the sharp-tongued, redoubtable and controversial “Pope of Literature”, as much of the media chose to label him. He loved German literature and music, although most of his family fell victim to the Holocaust, which he himself only narrowly escaped. He always rejected the attitude of despising everything German, or blaming all Germans for the crimes of the Nazis.

Nor did he ever subscribe to the pessimistic, anti-Enlightenment views propagated by members of the Frankfurt School such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Literature was for him existentially significant in the deepest sense of the words, and he wanted to communicate this significance to the general public by every means available. In fact, he saw his life’s work as an endeavour to counteract any further lapse into social barbarism.

Reich-Ranicki discussed probably every German author of note, ranging from the classical masters to novelists and poets of recent times, and his legacy includes profound judgements and assessments that will long reverberate. Again and again, he worked with publishers on new editions and anthologies, endeavouring to draw attention to half-forgotten or, in his opinion, no longer or insufficiently recognised literary figures and make them accessible to a wider public.

His reviews and essays are anything but dry dissections of literature. They are written in a clear and vivid prose, and, even if one disagrees, make entertaining reading. “Many writers and critics are suspicious of literature that entertains,” he wrote in 2010. “I say instead: Literature should not only be *also e* ntertaining; it must be entertaining!”

He also kept to this maxim in his own writings, although “entertainment” for him had nothing to do with superficiality. Rather, he felt that only well-conceived works, in which form and content were harmoniously integrated, could be entertaining.

He related the story of his life in his 1999 autobiography, [2] which sold 1.5 million copies within a few years and has again sold widely following his death. The book is more than a biography. It is itself a piece of literature and, among other achievements, conveys the horrific conditions of the Warsaw Ghetto to many readers for the first time.

Marcel Reich was born on June 2, 1920, in the Polish town of Wloclawek on the Vistula. His father owned a small building material factory. After the business went bankrupt, his mother, who came from a

German-Jewish family and loved German culture and literature, sent him off to Berlin. His parents hoped he would attend a German *gymnasium* (academic secondary school) and benefit from the greater economic opportunities that would result.

Owing to his Jewish ancestry, he was expelled from social and group activities such as school trips and gym classes by supporters of the Nazi Party. Increasingly isolated, he took refuge in reading. He was able to sit for the *Abitur* (secondary school leaving certificate) in 1938, but, like all Jews at the time, was not allowed to go on to university. While working as an apprentice in an export company, he got hold of theatre, opera and concert tickets as often as possible, before he was arrested in October 1938 and deported to Poland. During this time, literature and music were his haven, and a particular fondness for certain German writers began to emerge.

In the epilogue to *The Case of Heinrich Heine*, he writes about this period: “When I was reading the great German poet for the first time—it was a long time ago, it was in my Berlin school days in the thirties—I did so voluntarily and with enthusiasm.... I admired Lessing’s three great dramas, but they left me a bit cold. I loved Schiller...I venerated Goethe...Hölderlin seemed strange to me, but I bowed before him, trembling with awe. I suffered along with and was very fond of Kleist.... Büchner alarmed and transported me, Grabbe only irritated me, Hebbel was only interesting, Gottfried Keller amusing and delightful, Storm moving, Fontane captivating and rapturous, the young Hofmannsthal enchanting. But no one touched me more than Heinrich Heine. I could sometimes even identify with him”. [3]

In the Warsaw ghetto

After his deportation to Warsaw, he had to relearn the Polish language. It was virtually impossible for him to find work, particularly after the German army invaded Poland. In November 1940, his entire family was forced to move into the city’s ghetto. There, he was employed as a translator by the council of Jewish elders, known as the *Judenrat*. He also wrote concert reviews and assisted in the organisation of concerts.

When the deportations began, he married his girl friend Teofila (“Tosia”) Langnas, whose father’s despair had led him to suicide. So Reich-Ranicki was able to save Teofila from transport to the death camps, because the wives of *Judenrat* employees were initially permitted to remain in the ghetto. His mother-in-law, parents and brother were deported and murdered in Treblinka. His sister managed to escape to London with her husband in 1939.

Tosia and Marcel were able to escape from the ghetto on the way to the deportation assembly point. They were hidden by the extremely poor family of an unemployed typesetter, Bolek Gawin, and his wife, Genia, who only managed to feed themselves and their “guests” by selling self-rolled cigarettes. During long evenings, often spent in darkness due to power cuts, Reich began to retell to Bolek and his wife stories from classical dramas and novels to alleviate their fears and forebodings. This was how they managed to survive until September 1944, after the brutal German suppression of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising and the occupation of the right bank of the Vistula by the Soviet Red Army.

Following the war and in gratitude for his liberation, Marcel Reich offered his services to the Polish Stalinist government, working for the foreign affairs department and the Foreign Intelligence Service (MRP) in Berlin. Later he also served in Britain, where he gathered information about the activities of the Polish government in exile. In 1948, he became vice-consul of the Polish embassy in London. At the time, he worked under the name of Marcelli Ranicki, because “Marcel Reich” was too German-sounding, and Germans were so hated in Poland.

In 1950, he was dismissed from the intelligence service and foreign ministry, and excluded from the Stalinist Polish United Workers’ Party on account of “ideological disaffection”. Like many other victims of the then current Stalinist “cleansing campaign”, targeting “rootless cosmopolitans” and “Zionist spies [i.e., Jews]”, he ended up in prison.

Following his dismissal, he turned again to literature, working as a freelance writer and lecturer in German letters for a Warsaw publisher. However, the Polish authorities banned publication of his writings for a period. His book *From the History of German Literature 1871 to 1954* appeared in Warsaw in 1955. He was able to travel to Berlin in 1956 and visited, among others, writers Arnold Zweig and Stefan Hermlin. But when Heinrich Böll became the first German author to visit Poland after the war and Reich-Ranicki and his wife looked after him, few Polish writers were willing to attend a reception for Böll.

Despite the general anti-German sentiment in Poland, which was disseminated and fanned by the Stalinist bureaucracy, and although a German regime had sent most of his family to the gas chambers, Reich-Ranicki was never a supporter of the theory of “collective guilt”, and always regarded himself as an interpreter and defender of German culture.

According to his autobiography, the climate in Poland was “frightening” in 1957 (following the popular uprising in Hungary and workers’ protests in Poznań, Poland, as well the year before), especially for Jews. Intellectuals were increasingly harassed by the ruling party bureaucracy, bent on fuelling “populist” resentment against them. He asked himself why he was still living in this country, where he had been born, but to which he had not voluntarily returned. More and more, he came to understand that literature, especially German literature, was his real “homeland”.

On July 21, 1958, Reich-Ranicki took advantage of a trip to the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and remained in Frankfurt. His wife had previously travelled to London on holiday with their son, Andrzej, to facilitate the entire family’s emigration. From August 1958, he was able to get a job as a literary critic for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (*FAZ*). It was then that he adopted the double name, Reich-Ranicki. He immediately plunged into work. During his first six months in West Germany, he wrote 38 essays for newspapers and radio stations in a small and sparsely furnished room, thus laying the foundations for his subsequent career.

The conservative chief editor of the *FAZ*’s literary section, Frederick Sieburg, soon set about having Reich-Ranicki expelled from the editorial board. At the end of 1959, he moved with his wife to Hamburg, where he worked as a critic for the weekly *Die Zeit*, but was never officially included in the editorial team. He interpreted this as the consequence of a subliminally existing anti-Semitism. It was not until 1973 that he returned

to the *FAZ*, where he directed the paper’s literary editorial work until 1988.

The first East German literature published in the West

During this period, the cultivation of anti-communist Cold War sentiment was a significant feature of West German life under the chancellorship of Konrad Adenauer (1949-1963). Readers in the West were largely unaware at the time that remarkable literature, poetry and prose were being produced in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany). It was one of Reich-Ranicki’s considerable achievements to introduce East German authors such as Zweig, Anna Seghers and many others to the West, and encourage Western audiences to take them seriously.

Young readers were especially curious to take up the slim volumes of *Germany Is Telling Stories There Too* that he published in 1960, along with *German Literature in West and East* (1963) and *On the Literature of the GDR* (1974). His readers were struck by the way he judged the GDR authors, less on the basis of their officially professed ideological stance than with regard to the literary quality of their prose or poetry.

In June 1974, Reich-Ranicki undertook something unprecedented in the history of German newspapers: he arranged for poems from every era of German literary history to appear and be interpreted by a renowned commentator in the Saturday editions of the *FAZ*. Approximately 2,000 poems were published in this way. He thus brought to light and renewed interest in a literary genre usually condemned to a shadowy existence.

It was also to Reich-Ranicki’s credit that he strove to acquaint the German public with authors who had been forced into exile during the Nazi period and found neither readers nor publishers in the post-war years. He published the volume *The Unloved: Seven Emigrants* in 1968. He dedicated another book, *About Troublemakers*, to a subject that was very important to him: Jews in German literature. His concern was to reveal and explain the role of authors of Jewish origin. As he writes in the preface, the Jewish origin of these writers had been emphasised and slandered by anti-Semites. In contrast, he wanted to draw attention to the exceptional qualities of these authors—among whom he also must be included—and their importance for German culture. [4]

He recounts in his autobiography that the first person who “sincerely and earnestly wanted” to be informed about his experiences in the Warsaw Ghetto was a young woman journalist from *North German Radio*, none other than Ulrike Meinhof (later a leading figure in the Red Army terrorist group). She asked him the question: How could this [the Nazi terror] have happened? [5]

Shortly after his arrival in Germany, Reich-Ranicki was invited to meetings of the then-leading organisation devoted to contemporary German literature, Group 47, where writers—most of whom had yet to absorb and deal with the experience of the Nazi period and the war—read from their new works and received criticism from both their colleagues and invited critics. He participated in the group—which included such authors as Böll, Ingeborg Bachmann, Ilse Aichinger, Eich Günther, Martin Walser, Hans Magnus Enzensberger and Günter Grass—until its dissolution in 1967. His praise or rebuke was never taken personally; it always targeted the respective work. He often sharply criticised a book, or a portion of one, although he had highly praised the author previously.

Group 47 played an important role in the 1960s. Because many of its members—although by no means all—had distinct socially critical, left-wing views and were often inclined towards Social Democracy, the conservative Christian Democratic Union and Christian Social Union milieu treated the group with intense hostility, reviling it as a new “Reich

chamber of literature” (*Reichsschrifttumskammer*), the official watchdog group overseeing German writers during Hitler’s Third Reich.

The end of Group 47 coincided with the widespread radicalisation of young students in the late 1960s. Reich-Ranicki certainly welcomed the new spirit of optimism and the “long-overdue confrontation with the ‘Third Reich’.” However, he observed the “role of the writer in this turmoil” with great suspicion. He was particularly distressed by the fact that many joined political movements “whose relationship to art and literature was marked by contempt. Writers were no longer supposed to speak on behalf of the individual, and defend the individual against those institutions that use and abuse him or her for their own purposes. Rather, the function of literature was primarily to politically mobilise the individual. It had to serve as a tool for ideologues; it had to contribute to the attempt to change the world. The people calling most loudly for this were paradoxically precisely those who should have been most interested in the autonomy of literature: i.e., the writers”. [6]

Here he alludes to so-called “purely political” literature, tendencies prevalent in the 1960s based primarily on Stalinist-Maoist “socialist realism” or agitprop. Reich-Ranicki had always insisted that literature should always address social issues and the suffering of people. Especially in his early years in Germany, he repeatedly indicated that literature had to deal with the present and not shy from social criticism. “Around 1968, when everyone spoke of society and social criticism, and the worst forms of nonsense were formulated in regard to literature, I can only say: This is not what I wanted”. [7]

Of course, Reich-Ranicki by no means sought to encourage a cult of the individual in literature. In a review of the correspondence of German writer Hermann Hesse by Peter Suhrkamp, he wrote: “When I hear the word soul, I immediately sense empty prattle”. [8]

Notes

[1] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Der Fall Heine* [Munich 2006], 14

[2] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* [Stuttgart 1999] [Translated into English as *The Author of Himself: The Life of Marcel Reich-Ranicki*, Princeton University Press, 2001]

[3] *Der Fall Heine*, 110f

[4] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Über Ruhestörer: Juden in der deutschen Literatur* [Stuttgart 1989], 9

[5] *Mein Leben*, 459f

[6] *Ibid.*, 462f

[7] Peter Wapnewski, *Betrifft Literatur. Über Marcel Reich-Ranicki* [Stuttgart 1990], 177

[8] Marcel Reich Ranicki, *Nachprüfungen* [Munich 1990], 137

To be continued



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