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## Marcel Reich-Ranicki, literary commentator, 1920-2013

By Quentin Peel



Polish-born German writer and literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki at the opening of the photo exhibition 'My Life in Pictures' featuring 53 photos of the critic's life at Holzhausenschloesschen in Frankfurt

It is hard to think of a country other than Germany where a literary critic could become a national hero. Marcel Reich-Ranicki was just that: unashamedly argumentative and highly erudite, he was admired, revered and also feared – not least by some of the authors whose works he had panned with brutal directness over five decades of newspaper and television reviews.

The mass-circulation Bild daily produced a page on his life. Der Spiegel magazine devoted its

front cover to him – the day before a general election. The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung printed five pages about the man who presided over its literature section for 15 years, under the headline: “Thanks!”

It came in recognition of the achievement of someone whose love of books and devotion to promoting good writing – in part through his many excoriating reviews of bad works – played a big role in the revival of German literature after the second world war.

Reich-Ranicki survived the Warsaw ghetto to live to 93; his parents, brother and many other relatives died in concentration camps. He revealed his full story only late in life in a moving autobiography, *Mein Leben*, published in 1999, which topped the German best-seller lists for a year. It was translated into 19 languages, published in English as *The Author of Himself*.

Asked in an interview in 2005 (with the Swiss magazine, *Weltwoche*) why he did not tell his story until so late, he said: “I was afraid – afraid of remembering all those things, and of being unable to do justice to them.”

He became a TV star at 68, fronting a show called *Das Literarische Quartett* for 13 years, which provoked high passions and frequent rows but remained unashamedly intellectual. “This is no chat show,” he declared when it was launched. “We will offer nothing more than words, words, words.” It ran for 77 episodes.

“Suddenly he was famous,” Volker Hage, who began his own career as a critic under Reich-Ranicki at the FAZ, wrote in *Der Spiegel*. “Wherever he went he was accosted and asked for his autograph. Now the Germans loved him. He could not escape their love. Nor did he want to. But it would be a mistake to think that he felt he had finally arrived. He remained sceptical.”

The show and his acerbic reviews had such an influence on book sales that he became known as the *Literaturpapst* – the high priest of literature. But his blunt criticism also cost him friends, such as Martin Walser, whose novel *Jenseits der Liebe* (“Beyond All Love”) he described as “trivial, bad, miserable . . . it is not worth reading a single page”.

Born of Jewish parents on June 2 1920 in the Polish town of Wloclawek, Reich-Ranicki was brought to Berlin at the age of nine and fell in love with German literature at school, only to be deported in 1938. Incarcerated in the Warsaw ghetto, he escaped in 1943 with his wife, Teofila. She died in 2011 and he is survived by their son, Andrew, a mathematics professor at Edinburgh university.

After living out the war hidden in a cellar, he became a communist and briefly worked as a spy for Polish intelligence (which was when he assumed the name Ranicki as a cover) before being recalled and expelled from the party for apparent disloyalty. Only then did he turn to his first love of German literature to make a living as a freelance journalist and reviewer.

Yet none of his extraordinary story did he reveal when he fled back to Germany in 1958. His encyclopedic knowledge of German books and authors won him a job at the FAZ, and then the rival daily, *Die Welt*, before he joined the weekly *Die Zeit* as a full-time reviewer. He returned to the FAZ in 1973 as literary editor.

He was showered with honours but the one for which he is best remembered is the TV prize he rejected in 2008 – a lifetime achievement award. As the room rose for a standing ovation, Reich-Ranicki declared: “I don’t accept it.” He condemned the “rubbish” he had been forced to sit through. The ceremony became a hit on YouTube.

It merely confirmed his cantankerous reputation. Invited to address the Bundestag last

year on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, he told the story of the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto and the murder of its inhabitants without passing judgment. “I did not come to Germany to lecture the German people about their responsibility,” he had said in an earlier interview with chat-show host Michel Friedman. “I am very proud to lecture them about what is good and bad literature.”

In another interview with Der Spiegel in 2000 he said: “I am not a German. I wasn’t one, and I won’t become one. But no one can take away my Germanness – and that Germanness is all about German literature and German music.”

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