

Only a comparison with Einstein will do

Interview with Andrew Ranicki about his father Marcel Reich-Ranicki, by Uwe Wittstock (FOCUS, 19 March, 2012)

We lived in Warsaw and I was 8 years old when my father asked me: "Which German writers do you know?" Not a typical question for a child in Poland. But since I could think, I had the many book spines on my father's shelves in front of my eyes, so I listed: "Goethe, Heine, Thomas Mann, Schiller, Anna Seghers ..."

My father thought I had read the names on the books. But I didn't need to. Though it wasn't important, I only needed to close my eyes and saw them before me. And at meals he would tell me about the books in such an exciting way that I loved to listen and many of these stories have stuck with me.

When my parents decided in 1958 to go to Germany and to send me to an English language school in Hamburg, my life became complicated. I was 9 years old and spoke neither German nor English.

But my father had a similar experience 30 years earlier. His mother sent him at the age of 9 from Poland to Berlin, and he had to learn German in just a few months so he could go to school. I have the impression that he mastered the language and literature rather well.

It turned out that my talents were not linguistic in nature, but mathematical. I fell in love with the world of geometry and still love it today. At 17 I went to Cambridge to study mathematics. If people ask me about what I do and I say that I teach algebraic surgery at the University of Edinburgh, many people are amazed that such a job exists.

My father is very demanding. If I had studied literature, it would have been hard to impress him. In the world of mathematics, he can't follow my career. But when he once met a colleague of mine, he immediately asked him: "How good is my son as a mathematician?" The colleague praised me, but told me that my father seemed a bit disappointed. I told him that only a comparison with Einstein would have been enough for my father.

My father once said that literature was his wife, and music his mistress. It is similar for me. My heart belongs to mathematics, but I can not do without music. It gives me great pleasure to listen to an opera or a symphony with my father. And for him also, I think.