



CHAPTER TWENTY

Shakespeare Goes Global

THE PLAYS IN PRINT

On 22 July 1942, the German SS announced that all the Jews in Warsaw would, in the euphemism of the day, be 'resettled' to the camp at Treblinka. It was effectively a death sentence. There were, however, six groups of people who were to be exempted from the resettlement. The twenty-two-year-old Marcel Reich-Ranicki was one of those exemptions. Now over ninety years old and Germany's leading literary critic, he told his story to the German parliament in January 2012:

These included all able-bodied Jews of working age, all persons employed by German public authorities or in German production facilities or those who were on the staff of the Judenrat and the Jewish hospitals. One sentence suddenly set me thinking: the wives and children of the people in these categories were not to be resettled either.

A German-Polish Jew, he was working for the Judenrat, the Council of Jews set up by the Nazis. He had no wife or children, but he was engaged, and he realized that, if he acted straight-away, he could prevent his fiancée from being 'resettled'. He must marry her at once:

Immediately after dictating the order I sent a messenger to Teofila, asking her to come right away and to bring her birth certificate. She came immediately and was quite agitated because the panic in the streets was contagious. I quickly went with her to the ground floor, where a theologian worked in the historical records department of the Judenrat. I had already discussed the matter with him. When I told Teofila we would be married she was only mildly surprised and nodded in agreement. A theologian was authorized to perform the duties of a rabbi and raised no objections. Two officials who were working in the next room served as witnesses. The ceremony did not last long. I cannot recall whether in all the rush and excitement I actually kissed Teofila, I don't know. But I well remember the feeling that engulfed us, a feeling of fear, fear of what would happen in the coming days. And I still remember the Shakespearean line that occurred to me at the time: 'Ward je in dieser Laun' ein Weib gefreit?'

'Ward je in dieser Laun' ein Weib gefreit?': 'Was ever woman in this humour wooed?' It is a quotation from the celebrated German translation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* and it is an astonishing thing for a young German Pole to think of at such a moment. At the point of supreme agitation, the words that came to Marcel Reich-Ranicki were Shakespeare's.

In this book we have been looking at how Shakespeare's plays were crafted to speak to a particular audience and the uncertain, restless world which that audience inhabited. We have focused on what Shakespeare's words meant to a public that was not listening to the world's most famous playwright, but hearing for the first time the latest play by a successful writer for the commercial London stage. In this last chapter, we shall look instead at the many things that Shakespeare's plays have come to mean to the whole world. For hundreds of years now, people like Marcel Reich-Ranicki have found in Shakespeare the words to express their own deepest feelings. How has this supremely public writer

