

Marcel Reich-Ranicki obituary

The great mover and shaker of German literature, dynamic as a critic in the press and on television for more than half a century

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Marcel Reich-Ranicki, seen here in 2010, was born in Poland to Jewish parents. Brought up in Berlin in the 1930s, he was a great champion of German culture, but capable of devastating reviews. Photograph: Thomas Lohnes/AFP/Getty Images

Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who has died aged 93, operated at the heart of European culture for more than half a century. The most influential literary critic of his time in the German-speaking world, he was feared by writers and enjoyed by readers for his often devastating reviews, which combined conviction, subjectivity and rhetorical finesse, making them immensely powerful. And as a media personality, his mission was to take literature to a wide public.

He was born Marcelli Reich in Włocławek, in northern Poland. His father, David Reich, was an unsuccessful businessman, while his mother, Helene (nee Auerbach), came from a long line of German rabbis; the artist Frank Auerbach was a cousin. Because of financial problems, the family moved to Berlin in 1929, where his maternal uncle, a successful lawyer, provided support.

From 1930 he attended the Werner-Siemens-Realgymnasium, moving in 1935 to the Fichte-Gymnasium in Berlin-Wilmersdorf. In 1938, after taking the school leaving exam, as a Jew he was denied a university place and was subsequently arrested, deported to Poland, and confined from 1940 in the Warsaw ghetto. There, in 1942, he married Teofila Langnas, and in 1943 they escaped and went into hiding. His parents and elder brother were killed in concentration camps.

Liberation of the eastern part of the country by the Red Army enabled Reich-Ranicki to join the Polish army in 1944. He worked as a mail censor for the ministry of public security and joined the Polish Communist party. He was posted first to the Polish military mission in Berlin in 1946, and in 1948 to London as vice-consul, then consul, in charge of the foreign news service. He was required to take the Polish name Ranicki as being more fitting to his position. In 1949 he was recalled, briefly imprisoned, and expelled from the foreign and security services and the party on ideological grounds.

The following year saw the beginnings of his literary career, as a publisher's editor for German literature, co-translator of Franz Kafka and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and freelance literary journalist. His first books appeared in 1955 and 1957: *Aus der*

Geschichte der Deutschen Literatur 1871-1954 (From the History of German Literature) and a monograph on the Jewish communist writer Anna Seghers.

In 1958 he went on a study trip to West Germany and never returned to Poland. He gained early access to West German literary life as an invited member of Gruppe 47, the group of writers working to regenerate German literature in the aftermath of the Third Reich.

Living at first in Frankfurt, he worked as a freelance for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Die Welt and for radio, moving in 1959 to Hamburg. There his regular contributions to the prestigious weekly Die Zeit for the next 14 years made his name as a literary critic. From 1973 to 1988 he was literary editor of the Frankfurter Allgemeine.

When forced by the newspaper's rules to retire, he moved on to a career of even greater prominence as a television pundit, leading a hugely successful book review programme, the Literary Quartet, broadcast by ZDF, the German equivalent of BBC2, until 2001. It folded in the wake of an unseemly dispute between Reich-Ranicki and the distinguished Austrian critic Sigrud Löffler.

From 1968 on he held a series of guest professorships in the US, Sweden and Germany, and was honoured with numerous literary, cultural and media awards, including honorary doctorates from the universities of Uppsala, Augsburg, Bamberg, Düsseldorf, Utrecht, Munich and Tübingen; the Goethe prize of the city of Frankfurt (2002); and the European prize for culture (2004).

The small child who pored over an illustrated encyclopaedia and lapped up adaptations of Oliver Twist and Robinson Crusoe at primary school, and who earned the nickname "Bolshevik" for defiantly setting out to disprove the legend "I am well behaved" that his mother had embroidered for fun on his school tops, grew up to have fraught relationships with many major writers of his day. Among them were Max Frisch, Martin Walser and Günter Grass, whose 1995 novel *Ein Weites Feld* (Too Far Afield) he very publicly condemned, appearing on the cover of *Der Spiegel* apparently ripping a copy in half.

Reich-Ranicki must have inspired more literary figures than any other critic, appearing in fictionalised form, for example, in Peter Handke's *Die Lehre der Sainte Victoire*, in Grass's *Aus Dem Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (From the Diary of a Snail) and most controversially in Walser's 2002 novel *Tod eines Kritikers* (Death of a Critic), which gave rise to charges of antisemitism, as the fictional author apparently murders a harsh Jewish reviewer.

Though sometimes taken aback at the vehemence of writers' responses, Reich-Ranicki seems to have accepted their resentment with equanimity as part of the job, commenting: "Writing is provocation." He saw his abrasive interventions as therapeutic, and it was not entirely his fault if the public preferred the hatchet jobs to the praise he also expressed, especially about less well established writers.

He earned the half-ironic title *Literaturpapst* ("literary Pope"), but rejected the notion of infallibility, preferring to compare his role as critic variously to that of teacher, doctor, servant, lover, doorman and dustman. In 1992, in answer to the Swiss academic Peter von Matt's question "What is literature for: truth, education or enjoyment?", Reich-Ranicki chose the last, and his essays and reviews display the qualities he valued in others' writing: accessibility, conciseness, sensual appeal, suspense, firm structure and wit.

Speaking about Jewishness, he would explain that he did not share or practise its religious beliefs, but did see himself as linked into a strong Jewish cultural tradition, as epitomised by Heine, Karl Ludwig Börne, Schnitzler, Kafka, Karl Kraus, Kurt Tucholsky, Freud, Mahler, Schoenberg and Kurt Weill – a list that reflected his own taste for humour, polemics, short forms, psychology and music.

On TV discussions and in his stage-managing of public events such as the Ingeborg Bachmann prize competition he was a consummate showman. For all his diminutive size, he was a towering presence, fizzing with energy and intellectual agility. With his rasping voice and glittering gaze he engaged his audiences with his rhetorical skills, sometimes infuriating them – not least with his patronising utterances on women's writing and his limited view of the canon – but never boring them.

When it came to his own turn to receive a lifetime achievement award in 2008, he refused it, dismissing a medium "full of cooks, nothing but cooks" for its unedifying programming: "[I don't belong here among all this rubbish.](#)" Those he attacked could only hail it as [an all-time highlight of German TV.](#)

Reich-Ranicki published some 20 books, encouraged young writers and above all acted as an advocate for literature, reclaiming it from the ivory tower and putting it on the public agenda. In 1974 he inaugurated the Frankfurt Anthology, with the publication in the Frankfurter Allgemeine every Saturday of a German poem and short interpretation by a big name. It became a national institution.

His *Anwälte der Literatur* (Literary Advocates, 1994), containing 23 portraits of literary critics from the 18th century onwards, traced an important strand in European cultural history, and his major editorial project for the opening years of the 21st century – *The Canon: German Literature* – was another attempt to guide readers towards the best, by presenting multi-volume selections of German writing by genre. Like all attempts at defining the canon, this is a controversial enterprise whose value lies not least in provoking debate and counter-suggestions as to what should be read.

But it is possible that his most lasting contribution will turn out to be his autobiography, *Mein Leben* ([The Author of Himself: The Life of Marcel Reich-Ranicki](#)). This fascinating book, which remained on the top of the German bestseller lists for months when it appeared in 1999, shows an altogether warmer, more human and self-critical personality than his public persona may have suggested.

It is a gripping memoir, starting with his earliest years and alive to the turbulent times with which Reich-Ranicki actively engaged, without ever completely shaking off a sense of outsiderdom. From school in Berlin onwards, he retained a fear of barbarism, but that fear was "joined by happiness, fear of things German by the happiness I owed to things German". In later life, for instance, he saw no reason to let Wagner's antisemitism stand in the way of his love of Tristan and Isolde. The book is unsentimental, full of bon mots but never glib – a window not only on his own experiences, but on the cultural life of his times.

In 2012 he addressed the Bundestag in remembrance of the Holocaust, and was still contributing to the Frankfurter Allgemeine. His literary estate has been left to the German Literary Archive in Marbach.

[Teofila](#) died in 2011. Reich-Ranicki is survived by their son, [Andrew](#), a professor of mathematics at Edinburgh University, and a granddaughter.

- Marcel Reich-Ranicki, literary critic, born 2 June 1920; died 18 September 2013
- [English translation of Mein Leben](#)



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