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FRANKFURT CRITIC SEES UNITY IN GERMAN LETTERS

By JAMES M. MARKHAM

FRANKFURT— "Heinrich Heine once said that the Jews had made a portable fatherland out of the Bible," remarked Marcel Reich-Ranicki, his elbows hovering just over his knees as he leaned forward on the edge of the couch to make a point. "I have made a portable fatherland out of German literature."

The man widely regarded as the most influential critic of contemporary German poetry and fiction chortled infectiously, as he sometimes does when talking about utterly serious matters, and made a poignant joke: "I would not like to have to carry it any further - this portable fatherland of mine. I hope that we will be able to continue to live in peace and quiet in this country."

On the post-Hitler literary landscape, Mr. Reich-Ranicki is a singular feature, a talisman and a sturdy signpost, a reminder that German poets, novelists and critics once had constituencies running from Warsaw through Budapest and Prague to Berlin, Vienna and Zurich.

Born in Poland, the 63-year-old editor of the much-feared literary section of the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung is today, aptly, a defender of the idea of the unity of Germany letters - whether written in East Germany, West Germany, Switzerland or Austria. The empire of German literature has shrunk in the east, but, he says, it has not been shattered by ideology. Resistance Organizer in Warsaw

In conversation, Mr. Reich-Ranicki likes to dispose of his biography rapidly, as if it were incidental to the matter at hand. Born in Wloclawek in 1921 to Jewish parents, a Polish-speaking father and German-speaking mother; educated in Berlin until 1938, when the Nazis deported him to Poland; resistance organizer in the Warsaw ghetto, which he fled in 1943 with Teofila Langnas, now his wife.

Then quickly: Lived underground for the rest of the war. Joined the Polish Communist Party in 1946, served as the Polish consulate in London and, in 1949, was thrown out of the

party because of "ideological estrangement." "They were right," he remarked dryly, adding: "Please don't write a hero story about me."

In 1958, he abandoned a career as a critic of German literature writing in Polish and, by moving to West Germany, immediately established himself as one of the most trenchant critics of German literature writing in German.

"I changed my address, but not the theme of my work," he said, a watery Polish accent coloring the marching cadences of his German. "Just before I left Poland, I wrote some essays about Max Frisch. After I got here I wrote essays about Max Frisch. It's like a musician who moved from Moscow to New York. The fundamental repertoire did not, could not, change." No-Nonsense Criticism

In 1973, he joined the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a stolid and conservative daily newspaper, bringing with him a reputation for no-nonsense, plain-speaking criticism, which he had established at the liberal weekly Die Zeit in Hamburg. From the pages of the Frankfurt daily - and through radio and television appearances - he exercises an enormous power over German letters.

"You ask me: 'Is there today a German writer who is as significant as Thomas Mann, or Kafka or Brecht?' " interposed Mr. Reich-Ranicki, framing a question that had not been asked. "My answer is: 'No.' But I ask you: 'Is there in England or Ireland a writer as significant as James Joyce? Or Faulkner or Hemingway in the U.S.A.? Or Marcel Proust or Andre Gide in France?'"

"We would all agree on the same answer, 'No.' " he said. "Why? No one knows."

In the German-speaking realm, maintained the critic, poetry is stronger than the novel, perhaps because poetry can give "punctual reactions" to the threat of ecological and military catastrophe that gnaws at many writers. 'It's All Mixed Up'

But this verse is very personal, preoccupied with unrequited love, eroticism and the fear of death. "The optimism of committed literature is over," he said. "Most of these writers have no illusions. They do not think they can change the world."

The division of Germany has not, surprisingly, led to the growth of two separate languages, two distinct literatures, he said. "Twenty-five or 30 years ago, it was believed that in the end the Germans in Leipzig and the Germans in Frankfurt would need a translator to communicate. This has turned out to be nonsense."

The penetration of East Germany by West German television has helped conserve one language, said the critic, while authors on both sides of the wall have access to each other's work. The immigration of some of the best East German writers to the West - poets like Sarah Kirsch or Gunter Kunert or the novelist Reiner Kunze - has not fundamentally changed their style or quality.

Mr. Reich-Ranicki jokingly called himself "a pan-Germanist," a believer in a German-speaking literature that is immune to borders. "Austrian writers have their books published here, and a lot of West German writers publish their books in Switzerland, and vice versa," he said. "It's all mixed up. And, generally, it's a very lively literature." Vestige of a Rich Tradition

He says it's an error of nostalgia to regard the Weimar Republic as having somehow been a better time for literature. He noted that Weimar's premier literary publication - Kurt Tucholsky's *Weltbühne* - reached only 15,000 in a German-speaking population of 100 million. "And of this 15,000 most were in Berlin and most of them were Jews," he said.

As a Jew, Mr. Reich-Ranicki acknowledges he is a lonely vestige of a rich tradition that, about the turn of the century, gave other Jews an extraordinary place in German literary criticism. He said that the 2,000-year-old habit of textual interpretation had made Jews "gifted for criticism," a bent that was reinforced by their exclusion from university professorships in the Wilhelmian and Weimar periods.

"There is no use speculating," he said, "but literary life would today also be different if the Jews had not been murdered. I will not say 'better,' but it would have been different."

What this difference might have been is suggested by the title of one of Mr. Reich-Ranicki's many books - "On Disturbers of the Peace: Jews in German Literature."

It has these words on the opening page: "This book about Jews in German literature I dedicate to those who were killed by Germans because they were Jews. Among these were my father, David Reich, my mother, Helene Reich, born Auerbach, and my brother Alexander Herbert Reich."

photo of Marcel Reich-Ranicki