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Marcel Reich-Ranicki, German Literary Critic From the Warsaw Ghetto, Dies at 93



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Marcel Reich-Ranicki in 2012 receiving a lifetime achievement award.

By SAM DILLON
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Marcel Reich-Ranicki, a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto who fled Poland to become a powerful cultural figure in postwar Germany as a distinguished literary critic and a popular television talk show host, died on Wednesday in Frankfurt. He was 93.

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The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung reported the death but gave no further details. He had a long association with the newspaper, contributing reviews and columns as recently as 2012.

A Polish-born Jew who grew up in Berlin, Mr. Reich-Ranicki had a lifelong love for the German classics, reading the poetry of Goethe and Heine even while enduring the cruelest months of Nazi terror, when he saw SS troops march his parents off to the Treblinka gas chambers.

Over six decades he produced a stream of witty, sometimes barbed but consistently erudite commentary in a career that saw Germany through the cold war and national reunification. He became Germany's leading literary arbiter, and in the process helped pave the way for Jews to again play an important role in the nation's culture and

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politics.

He said he lived with the irony of loving the masterpieces, even of artists whose views he detested.

“The biggest anti-Semite in the history of German culture was Richard Wagner,” Mr. Reich-Ranicki once told an interviewer. “And the greatest opera I know is his ‘Tristan and Isolde.’ ”

The novelist Günter Grass once questioned Mr. Reich-Ranicki at a literary conference.

“What are you really — a Pole, a German or what?” Mr. Grass asked.

“I am half Polish, half German and wholly Jewish,” Mr. Reich-Ranicki replied.

He later said that the statement was untrue, that he felt himself an outsider everywhere. It was a lifelong tension with his own identity that energized his work.

Mr. Reich-Ranicki could be an irascible critic, fearless in defense of scathing judgments. Mr. Grass became a particular target. In 1995 — four years before Mr. Grass won the [Nobel Prize](#) — a photograph of Mr. Reich-Ranicki appeared on the cover of the newsmagazine *Der Spiegel* showing him tearing apart, literally, Mr. Grass’s latest novel, “Too Far Afield,” which dealt with Germany’s moral struggle to reconcile itself with its terrible past. Asked at the time by a New York Times correspondent whether he understood that he had insulted Mr. Grass, Mr. Reich-Ranicki said, “Of course.”

“He wrote a book that he considers to be the most important of his life, and he has to read in every newspaper that it’s junk,” Mr. Reich-Ranicki added.

And in 2012 — six years after Mr. Grass had stunned Europe when he revealed that he had been a member of the Waffen SS during [World War II](#) — Mr. Reich-Ranicki lashed out at Mr. Grass again, now over a poem he had published, “What Must Be Said,” accusing Israel of being a threat to world peace. Mr. Reich-Ranicki called it “disgusting.”

Mr. Reich-Ranicki was born Marcel Reich on June 2, 1920, in the industrial town of Wloclawek, Poland. (His mother spoke German.) When his father’s business failed in 1929, Mr. Reich-Ranicki was sent to live with relatives in Berlin, where he attended high school, became fluent in the language and grew enthralled by German literature and music. He read voraciously and attended the opera, even as conditions grew harsher for Jews in the 1930s.

As a Jew he was not permitted to attend university; his sweeping grasp of German culture since the Enlightenment was a product of his own self-study. In 1938, the Nazis arrested and deported him to Warsaw, where he rejoined his parents and brother.

In the ghetto, he saw German soldiers murder Jews on the street. Working as a translator, he was an eyewitness to crucial meetings between the Jewish and Nazi authorities. In one instance he typed out the transcript of a July 1942 meeting as a Nazi SS officer, Hermann Höfle, ordered Jewish leaders to assemble thousands of Jews every day for “resettlement” to death camps. Recounting the episode later, Mr. Reich-Ranicki noted that Nazi troops waiting outside in the streets had set up a gramophone to amuse themselves with Viennese waltzes.

Hearing that translators, and their wives, were exempt for the time being, Mr. Reich-Ranicki married his sweetheart, Teofila, that same day. (The marriage lasted seven decades; his wife died in 2011.) In September 1942, Mr. Reich-Ranicki watched his own parents board cattle trucks bound for Treblinka.

“My father looked at me helplessly, while my mother was surprisingly calm,” he wrote. “I knew I was seeing them for the last time.”

Escaping the ghetto in 1943, Mr. Reich-Ranicki and his wife were taken in by Polish peasants, who hid them in a cellar until the war’s end. Grateful to the Soviet Army for liberating Poland, Mr. Reich-Ranicki joined the Polish Communist Party and, posted as a diplomat in London, worked for Polish intelligence, a mission for which he assumed

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the pseudonym Ranicki. He later merged Reich with Ranicki.

In 1949, he was thrown out of the Polish Communist Party for “ideological estrangement” and jailed for a time. Afterward he found work for a government publisher and eventually as a freelance literary critic, writing in Polish. In that role he met prominent German writers, from both East and West, including Bertolt Brecht, Heinrich Böll, Siegfried Lenz and Mr. Grass.

Emigrating to West Germany in 1958, Mr. Reich-Ranicki leaned on his Rolodex of German authors and established himself as one of the nation’s most incisive critics.

From 1959 to 1973 he lived with his family in Hamburg, writing for the newspapers Die Welt and Die Zeit. In 1973 he moved to Frankfurt to head the literary section of The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, a post he held through 1988. He was still writing and editing literary columns for that paper in 2012.

Mr. Reich-Ranicki testified in at least two war crimes trials, including the 1962 proceedings against Mr. Höfle, the SS officer who had coordinated the liquidation of the Warsaw ghetto. But he “did not dwell on” those searing wartime experiences during the early postwar decades while he was building his literary reputation, according to his son, Andrew Ranicki, a mathematics professor at the University of Edinburgh.

“My mother and myself eventually urged him to write his autobiography before it was too late,” Dr. Ranicki said in 2012 by e-mail from Scotland.

The book, “Mein Leben,” published in 1999, became a best-seller in Germany, and the Israeli director Dror Zahavi filmed an adaptation for broadcast on German television in 2009. By then Mr. Reich-Ranicki had been a household name for years, having since 1988 been the host of “Literary Quartet,” a prime-time talk show broadcast on German public television. He remained as host until 2002.

The show so magnified his influence that his comments could make or break young writers. Newspapers called him Germany’s “literary pope.” On Holocaust Remembrance Day in January 2012, Mr. Reich-Ranicki addressed the German Bundestag, with Chancellor Angela Merkel and lawmakers listening in hushed silence.

On Wednesday, Ms. Merkel issued an unusually personal statement of mourning, saying of Mr. Reich-Ranicki: “We lose in him a peerless friend of literature, but also of freedom and democracy. I will miss this passionate and brilliant man.”

Mr. Reich-Ranicki discovered or promoted many talents, and made numerous enemies. In his 2002 book “Death of a Critic,” the novelist Martin Walser portrayed the murder of a fictional critic — clearly modeled on Mr. Reich-Ranicki — by an aggrieved author.

“On his television show Reich-Ranicki often played the clown, a mixture of Milton Berle and Jack Benny, but you always had to take him seriously because his knowledge of German culture was so comprehensive,” said Jack Zipes, a University of Minnesota professor emeritus who wrote the foreword to the English translation of “Mein Leben.”

Mr. Reich-Ranicki worked for many years editing a multivolume anthology of what he considered to be Germany’s greatest novels, short stories, plays, poems and essays, published from 2002 to 2006 as Der Kanon.

He is survived by his son and granddaughter. The London painter Frank Auerbach is a cousin.

Mr. Reich-Ranicki continued to produce criticism and commentary into his 90s, including writing a weekly column, “Ask Reich-Ranicki,” in The Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung in which he answered readers’ questions about world literature.

He also remained conflicted about Germany, as he wrote in his autobiography, published in 1999, in describing his youth in 1930s Berlin.

“On my first day at school in [Germany](#), I experienced something that I never quite managed to shake off, something that accompanied me all of my life,” he wrote. “Perhaps I should say ‘has accompanied me.’ I mean fear — fear of the German cane, of

the German concentration camp, of the German gas chamber, in short, fear of German barbarism. And what about the German culture which Miss Laura” — his teacher in Poland — “had so emphatically and longingly promised? That was soon revealed to me.

“Quite quickly I fell under the spell of German literature, of German music. Fear was joined by happiness — fear of things German by the happiness I owed to things German.”

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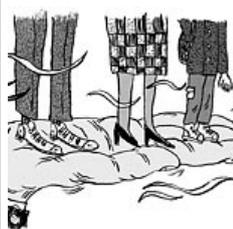
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