

**KATARZYNA TABORSKA**

**AUTO-INCARNATION  
AS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY  
THROUGH MARCEL REICH -RANICKI'S WRITINGS**

Among the literary critics of contemporary Germany, Marcel Reich-Ranicki has awoken a myriad of interesting emotion. He has been dubbed as “The Lord of Books” and “The Pope of Literary Critics”. One German writer stated that “he writes of me therefore I exist.”<sup>1</sup> It should be stressed that the name of these titles and statements were bestowed upon him well before appearing in his own TV programme “Literarisches Quartett” (1988-2001). Ranicki having published critiques in such periodicals as, “Die Welt” “Die Zeit” and “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung”, could have well enough created his public persona without leaning on the weight of the mass media craze that we call television.

His body of work in Germany, which has been incessant since 1958, is surely a cultural and social phenomenon. One might add that this phenomenon called Reich-Ranicki has still to be identified thus is yet to be truly defined.

Ranicki's identity is issued out of three interwoven cultures: Jewish, Polish and German. He was born in 1920 in Włocławek (Poland). However he graduated from secondary school in Berlin before the WWII. In 1940 after being expelled from Nazi Germany (1938), he found himself in the Warsaw Ghetto. He survived the Holocaust

---

<sup>1</sup> see e. g. Über Marcel Reich – Ranicki. Aufsätze und Kommentare, Jenssen Jens (edited by), München 1985, p. 10

thanks to the help of Gawins (a Polish family)<sup>2</sup>. In the 1940's he was employed by the MBP the Ministry for Public Security<sup>3</sup>. Starting in 1951, he published articles in Polish periodicals primarily about so called "progressive German literature". He also released three books: "Postępowa literatura niemiecka w okresie hitlerowskiego mroku" /1953/, "Z dziejów literatury niemieckiej 1871 – 1954" /1955/, "Epika Anny Seghers" /1957/<sup>4</sup>. In 1958, he moved permanently to West Germany, and as noted by Reinhard Helling, he skillfully worked his way into the echelons of the German literary society by implementing the rules of the free market economy and inside connections.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that the first articles of Reich-Ranicki were published in Polish in the ghettos of the GG in "Gazeta Żydowska"<sup>6</sup> ("The Jewish Gazette") during the occupation (1941-1942), didn't come to light to the larger public for years after the war up until 1999<sup>7</sup>. However it was duly noted in Polish by Rachela Auerbach in 1967, that during WWII, Reich-Ranicki wrote under the pen name of Wiktor Hart<sup>8</sup>. It should be put forth that neither in Poland nor in Germany was this information disseminated. Before having published his autobiography ("Mein Leben" 1999) only a skimmed-overview had been recounted of these events in German. Thus presented as such one is unable to trace Reich-Ranicki roots back to "The Jewish Gazette" and Wiktor Hart<sup>9</sup>.

The peculiar functioning of Reich-Ranicki came into existence due to three very close circuit societies that make up his audience: the people confined to the ghettos of the GG (1941-1942), readers of his writings in the Polish People's Republic (1951-1958) and his West German audience since 1958.

Over the many years, the writings of Reich-Ranicki existed for three almost separate, if not, completely separate entities.

Marcel Reich-Ranicki is a critic who wears different hats and plays different roles depending on the circumstances. His first incarnation was for the German initiated "Gazeta Żydowska"<sup>10</sup> billing himself as an experienced music critic. The second phase of his writing career consisted of a new self-creation, that of a social-realism critic of German literature. His final self-realization is none other than that of the mass media authority of German literary critics. So it can be said that Marcel Reich-Ranicki, critic is wholly a self-creation.

<sup>2</sup> The Yad Vashem Archives 03/2996

<sup>3</sup> see e.g. Gerhard Gnauck, (...) Die polnische Geheimdienst – Karriere Marcel Reich – Ranicki im Spiegel seiner Personalakte, "Die Welt" 12 VIII 2002

<sup>4</sup> see e.g. Agnieszka Grabowska, Marceli Ranicki – polnischer Kritiker der deutschen Literatur, Poznań 1991 (manuscript)

<sup>5</sup> Reinhard Helling, Sozio – biographische Studie über Literaturkritiker Marcel Reich – Ranicki und sein publizistisches Wirken in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1958 bis 1992, Hamburg 1993 (manuscript), e. g. p. 196

<sup>6</sup> see e.g. Barbara Engelking, Leon Teociak, Getto warszawskie. Przewodnik po nieistniejącym mieście, Warszawa 2001, p. 52 – 53

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Reich – Ranicki, Mein Leben, Stuttgart 1999, p.225 – 226

<sup>8</sup> The Yad Vashem Archives 03/2996

<sup>9</sup> Zwischen Diktatur und Literatur. Marcel Reich – Ranicki im Gespräch mit Joachim Fest. Frankfurt am Main 1987, p. 85

<sup>10</sup> Max du Prel chief of the Educational, Propaganda and Press Department of the GG published in 1940: „Eine eigene jüdische Zeitung die als Ersatz für die vielfachen im früheren Polen erschienenen jüdischen Organe gedacht ist, befindet sich in Vorbereitung” see Marian Fuks, Życie w gettach Generalnej Guberni na tle <Gazety Żydowskiej>1940 – 1942, „Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego” 1971 nr 3 /79/, p. 4

Reich-Ranicki would have never come in to existence without putting on these different hats and playing these varied roles. However what clues does he give about himself by playing communication games with such names as Wiktor Hart (the hard conqueror) and Ranicki (one who wounds)?

Texts published in the People's Republic of Poland in the 1950's written by Reich were signed Ranicki. The creation of his West German persona gave way to an interesting marriage of the pseudonym Ranicki to that of his real family name Reich, giving the West German literary world the creation of Reich-Ranicki the icon. This was not mere coincidence, first of all he could hardly enter the German literary market as a novice at the age of 38, therefore he enters that market as Reich – Ranicki; this gives him consequence and credit as a seasoned professional, due to his former writings in Poland. Although Reich-Ranicki had been copiously published in Poland, which helped him to open the doors to a German writing career, due to the language barrier and political situation, the contents of what was written was not verified by the German audience.

Of course, it was not his concern to acquaint his new public with his former social-realism texts, an important part Ranicki's career. Though in his German audience's mind it was literally "An Undiscovered World".

Equally as important by using the Slavic pseudonym, an interesting exotic mysterious and even distant effect were induced for the media. Yet having a double family name "Reich-Ranicki" simultaneously evoked familiarity, though a foreign and unique air, endowed with an unknown common cultural experience.

Coming back to the origins of Reich-Ranicki's writings, Emanuel Ringelblum the founder of the Warsaw Ghetto Archives "Oneg Shabat" made no bones about those who decided to work at "The Jewish Gazette". In his "Warsaw Ghetto Chronicles" he noted "no honest journalist works" [at the "Jewish Gazette"]<sup>11</sup>. This opinion was common in ghettos. According to the latter few journalists at "The Jewish Gazette" came forth with their real names, most of them resorted to initials, pseudonyms or anonymity.

This newspaper which still inspires contemplation and controversy, has yet to have had any all encompassing research on its background. "The Jewish Gazette" was undoubtedly a propagandistic tool of the occupying forces. Such a tool as this was created with one goal in mind, to facilitate Nazi tasks.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, "The Jewish Gazette" released varied classifieds which made communication amongst ghetto inhabitants somewhat easier. Said newspaper fabricated an illusory aspect of normal life; this lifted hopes which turned out to be nothing more than thin air, however, most likely, in a peculiar way helping them to exist under conditions that worsened on a daily basis. For Marcel Reich, this periodical was an opportunity to come into existence in the world of publication.

When Marcel Reich's first article appeared in "The Jewish Gazette" in December 1941 he was a mere 21. As mentioned earlier, he incarnated the persona of a far more mature, seasoned and competent critic. He took on an emulation mode strategy skillfully imitating his predecessor L.O. and the style of pre WWII musical critics.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Emanuel Ringelblum, *Kronika getta warszawskiego IX 1939 – I 1943*, Warszawa 1983, p. 314 ( VII – IX 1941)

<sup>12</sup> Marian Fuks, op. cit. 1971 nr 4/80, p. 23

<sup>13</sup> see Elżbieta Szczepańska – Lange, Marcel Reich – Ranicki w Warszawie. Głosa do autobiografii, „Ruch Muzyczny” 2002 nr 16/17; Sobotnie poranki w Feminie, „Gazeta Wyborcza” 7-8 IX 2002

Reich looked up to the critic L.O. so highly that he appropriated a few lines from one of L. O.'s prior critiques.<sup>14</sup> Reich in a way didn't decide give himself a set of new rules, he adopted those of his predecessors.

The strategy here might be perceived as getting out of being labeled as a débutante critic. It is hard to find the hesitation or uncertainty of a young writer in his early occupation writings.

Wiktor Hart's self-conception is that of a trenchant critic who seems to overlook the grave condition of those who played in The Jewish Symphonic Orchestra.

He created his own little void, in which he disseminated to his public through the press, a void that existed outside reality, outside the confinement, and outside of the occupation itself. Rarely do Wiktor Hart's critiques illiterate the dire settings of the Warsaw Ghettos' confined.

Wiktor Hart's language is full of ceremonious and sometimes – didactic statements, which were unsuitable for life in the ghetto dating from 1941 to 1942. In Wiktor Hart's critiques and written renditions published in "The Jewish Gazette" appeared the individual characteristic style of Marcel Reich-Ranicki's: double epithets, synonyms and the repetition of words which extend his sentences. There are sometimes errors, for the most part stylistic, which shows a lack of professional proofreading.

Remark Wiktor Hart's statement "Our District" which might have given pause for reflection on the systematic inculcation into the mind-frame of being a member of "The Ghetto."

In addition, it should be duly noted that in "The Jewish Gazette" one could not employed the word ghetto. The official name of the ghetto was "The Jewish Quarter" The epithet "Our District" could be conceived as a factor of Wiktor Hart's identity. Therefore Wiktor Hart is no mere observer, but is an engaged participant of the events that unfolded at The Jewish Symphonic Orchestra.

There is a valuable note to be added here, and that is how Marcel Reich-Ranicki projects himself as a writer for "The Jewish Gazette" to his German public. After a few decades, he disclosed his activities apropos "The Jewish Gazette." In his autobiography he doesn't disclose the names of the other journalists in "The Jewish Gazette", ultimately not disclosing even the name of his predecessor the critic a.k.a. L.O. who was mentor to Wiktor Hart which Reich-Ranicki confesses in the book "Mein Leben."<sup>15</sup>

By not giving the names of other employees of "The Jewish Gazette" perhaps he is attempting to give them the right not to recollect and to bury the past, or he doesn't want to put himself in such a situation where he finds himself having to rationalize his past associations. What is seen here is the strategy of "medial" dropping of a piece of his past.

One year after the release of his book "Mein Leben", an album of watercolours painted by the Marcel Reich-Ranicki's wife, Teofila was published and distributed in Germany. This album illustrates shocking scenes from "The Warsaw Ghetto." Hanna Krall a well-known Polish author of books on the Holocaust but also known in Germany wrote not only her own commentary to the artwork but also edited chosen fragments of

<sup>14</sup> brought at my attention by Mrs. Elżbieta Szczepańska – the author of the first articles on Marcel Reich writings in The Warsaw Ghetto see footnote 13; compare L.O. Koncert symfoniczny z udziałem Marysi Ajzensztadt, „Gazeta Żydowska 1941, nr 94, Wiktor Hart, Koncert kameralny w sali <Gospody> „Gazeta Żydowska” 1942, nr .24

<sup>15</sup> Marcel Reich – Ranicki, op. cit. p. 227

articles from “The Jewish Gazette.” Amongst the texts chosen from the said periodical are four of Reich-Ranicki’s critiques, the translation revised under his supervision as stated in the album itself<sup>16</sup>.

Teofila Reich-Ranicki and Hanna Krall’s album proves that “The Jewish Gazette” is also a testimony of the daily life quest for survival and the tragedy of the thousands of those confined within the ghetto.

One of the watercolours demonstrates the special role that the newspaper assumed as described by Hanna Krall in the following:

*“Hungertod*

*Der Mann ist letzte Nacht gestorben. Am Hunger, glaubt Teofila. Ebensogut konnte er am Typhus oder an der Auszehrung gestorben sein. Jemand hat barmherzig ein seltsames Leichentuch über den Toten gedeckt – die <Gazeta Żydowska>”<sup>17</sup>*

When analyzing the attitude of Marcel Reich-Ranicki as he presents “The Jewish Gazette” and the critic Wiktor Hart, there is an unusual skillfulness, which can be seen. That is to say the skill of putting himself in the public eye.

Reich also played the role of an imitator in The People’s Republic Poland in the 1950’s. This time as Marcelli Ranicki in front of the public he wore the hat of “a progressive Marxist social ideologist”. His texts of that time were that of a classic social realism, filled with pat propaganda and dogmatic formulae. Marcelli Ranicki fast become a critic of German literature typical in that epoch.<sup>18</sup> After October 1956, it was to be expected that the articles of Marcelli Ranicki slowly phased out the official stamp of an essay written according to the rules and regulations of the imposing authority. As this happened, there appeared more and more competition on the Polish literary scene with the same interest for German literature as Marcelli Ranicki.

After settling in Germany, Reich, for the first time in his writings career began to look for his own communication strategy, which would eventually lead a wide German audience to him but never forgetting his famous predecessors such as e.g. Alfred Kerr critic.

First of all he very quickly and skillfully pervaded the German literary world

His manifesto was to rid Germany of the classic academic critiques, and to communicate his critiques using uncomplicated language. This is how he has become the icon critic in the German tradition of critics that he has. He takes on a new incarnation that of the mass media superstar.

He never abandons the role of the emulator. However his pattern of emulation are base on his own auto-incarnations. He repeats his own rhetorical gestures, which are commonly understood. One can see e.g. when he analyses the function and the stature of Polish literature.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Teofila Reich – Ranicki Hanna Krall, Es war der letzte Augenblick. Leben in Warschauer Getto, Stuttgart / München 2000

<sup>17</sup> p. 44

<sup>18</sup> see e.g. Hubert Orłowski, Wo er stand und was er damals schrieb. Der historische Ort des Literaturkritikers Marcelli Ranicki in der Volksrepublik Polen zwischen 1951 und 1958, „Frankfurter Rundschau“ VI 1994

<sup>19</sup> see e.g. Marcel Reich – Ranicki, Erst leben, dann spielen. Über polnische Literatur, Göttingen 2002

Ranicki as each critic co-creates a communal imagination about the rules placed upon writers and the subsequent worth of said authors' works.

He has conceptualized his own media image and put it forth.

Being a superstar of the critic world may finally compromise the world of pure art. A superstar critic becomes an attraction of his very own in the eye of the vast public. With a trend such as this, art itself becomes less important than what is said or written about it. Case in point, a cartoon was published by *Börsenblatt* (9/7/1992) in it a client at a bookstore says "I would buy this book, but Marcel Reich-Ranicki hasn't published a review on it yet."

The aficionados of Reich-Ranicki critic, writer and journalist some with ulterior motives have contributed to the making of the myth of the man. Given the weight of his word, he has been endowed with the clout to make a literary career. Sebastian Haffner confirms this by stating:

*„Von Reich – Ranicki rezensiert zu werden, ist in sich selbst eine Auszeichnung, selbst wenn die Rezension ein Verriss ist. Denn von Reich – Ranicki verrissen zu werden, bedeutet immerhin, zur Literatur zu zählen“*<sup>20</sup>

The phenomenon that is Marcel Reich-Ranicki stems from the standards and rule for creation that the media sets upon its writers and public on the whole consequently defeating the odds of pretence and even those of political and social systems.

***Thank you Mr. Robert Roberson  
Ph.D. of Los Angeles, California  
for the help in the preparation of  
the English version of the article.  
Katarzyna Taborska***

---

<sup>20</sup> Über M. Reich – Ranicki, op. cit. p. 235