

Here in Berlin, which he loved so much, against all the odds.

by Andrew Ranicki

Speech at the unveiling of the Gedenktafel (memorial plaque) for my father, Marcel Reich-Ranicki, and the Stolpersteine (stumbling stones) for his parents, David and Helene Reich, at Guentzelstrasse 53, Berlin on 12th September 2014.

Honoured Regierender Buergermeister, dear Hellmuth, dear guests

I always knew that my father had lived here with his parents, what happened to them afterwards, and what Berlin meant for my father. And it is not the first time I am here. Fifty years ago, in 1964, my mother and I came to West Berlin on a weekend excursion from our then home in Hamburg. My father stayed behind, working, but he asked us to pass by the house, telling us exactly where Guentzelstrasse was. He had plenty of other opportunities to visit Berlin. Undoubtedly the most important occasion was for his address to the Bundestag on the Holocaust Memorial Day in January 2012. Earlier, in 1999 he called on Guentzelstrasse 53 with Frank Schirmmacher (who sadly died earlier this year), who wrote a beautiful report about the visit in the FAZ.

My father did not himself apply for Stolpersteine for his parents, and of course not for the Gedenktafel for himself. Instead of a memorial in stone or brass, he set them a literary memorial, in words, which may even be more permanent: in his 1999 autobiography "My Life". I also found it informative, and learnt much from it about his life, and the life and death of his parents.

For example, it was here that he had his first deep relationship with a woman, the tenant Lotte. He experienced his first kiss on the balcony with flowers up there. "It was not at all bad, dear boy" he told Schirmmacher, as if he had to review that also. Maybe the balcony here will not become as famous as the Rome/Julia balcony in Verona, but may enter the history of literature all the same.

How did the combination of Gedenktafel and Stolpersteine come about? In February I read on the internet an article by Markus Hesselmann in the "Tagespiegel": "Telephone call to the Bezirksamt (District Council) of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf, the memorial committee: "Good morning, I am from the Tagespiegel and would like to know if there are any plans for a Gedenktafel for Marcel Reich-Ranicki on the house where he lived in the Guentzelstrasse?" -- "Good idea" said the friendly lady from the memorial committee, "would you like to apply for one?" -- "Umm, I am a journalist, I do not make news, I report it" -- "Okay, then I shall apply for one myself, and we shall deal with it at the next committee meeting".

Markus Hesselmann is here today, as is Frau Chrstiane Timoer from the District Council of Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf. It actually turned out that the Aktives

Museum had already applied for a Gedenktafel. (Frau Christine Fischer-Defoy of the Aktives Museum is also here). And then I thought that this would be a good opportunity for me to apply for the Stolpersteine for my grandparents. And this is how the combination came about.

I thank all those who helped, especially Frau Fischer-Defoy of the Aktives Museum, Herr Helmut Loelhoeffer and Herr Gunter Demnig of the Stolpersteine.

My father's pleasure at the Gedenktafel would have been unalloyed: it honours his life and work, here in Berlin, which he loved so much, against all the odds. The Stolpersteine are somewhat more problematic. He certainly was familiar with Stolpersteine, since we passed some on our daily walks near our apartment in Frankfurt. But it never occurred to me to ask if we should do something about Stolpersteine for his parents. I am fairly sure that he would have had the same attitude as he had some 20 years ago, at the time of the discussion regarding plans for the Holocaust memorial here in Berlin: "I am neither for nor against it. I do not need it, and my father, my mother, my brother and the many other members of my family who were murdered do not need it either. I have not uttered even one word in this matter." I can vouch that this was his opinion. But I did not apply for the Stolpersteine here on his behalf, but on my own account, for myself and the succeeding generations of my family.