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Holocaust Survivor Wins Goethe Prize

By DESMOND OATES BUTLER

BERLIN, Aug. 30— Marcel Reich-Ranicki, Germany's most prominent literary critic, was awarded the Goethe Prize this week for his contributions to postwar German literature.

The prize, given every few years on Aug. 28, the poet's birthday, was previously bestowed on German-speaking intellectual icons like Thomas Mann and Sigmund Freud. For Mr. Reich-Ranicki, 82, a Polish-born Holocaust survivor, the award is "the highest distinction I could have received."

Mr. Reich-Ranicki, who is commonly referred to as the pope of German literature, has recounted his own extraordinary story in his best-selling autobiography, "My Life." He was born to a mother who loved Germany and who packed him off to relatives and a school in Berlin when he was 9. He often says that in his youth he was so absorbed by the German canon that when he was deported to Poland nine years after his arrival, he took his "invisible luggage" of Goethe, Schiller and Mann with him.

A Jew, he and his wife survived the Warsaw ghetto and the Holocaust with the help of an unemployed Polish typesetter (whom he calls only Bolek) who concealed him until the end of the war with just one book, the Bible, in reach.

Bolek, he recounted in his autobiography, used to say after a few vodkas: "Adolf Hitler, Europe's most powerful man, decided that these two humans should die. And I, a little typesetter from Warsaw, have decided they should live. Now we will see who is victorious."

Soon after the war Mr. Reich-Ranicki, staying in Poland, became a diplomat. He was posted to London as the Polish consul general in 1948-49, where he also secretly acted as a spy. When his spying came to light in the early 1990's, he justified it by saying he did it out of gratitude to the nation that kept him alive until the end of the war.

Mr. Reich-Rinicki has had to confront the problem that the country and culture he is attracted to destroyed his family. This may help explain why a consistent theme in his works has been "the failure of the Age of Reason" to guarantee tolerance in German society.

This attraction ultimately pulled him to defect from Poland to West Germany in 1958. Almost immediately he was drawn into the "Gruppe 47," the literary circle of Walter Jens and Heinrich Böll, who sought to nourish a cultural transformation toward democracy in Germany.

He started as a literary critic at the German weekly Die Zeit in 1960 and has since been a ubiquitous voice in the literary establishment. Since the late 80's, his influence has been augmented by his television programs, where he has become famous for taking on the great and the small in German literature in his recognizable Polish-accented German.

In 1995 he provoked the giant of German literature, Günter Grass, by scathingly dismissing his book "A Wide Field" as "idiotic." He was then featured in a German magazine tearing up a picture of Mr. Grass. Recently, he admitted that Mr. Grass's latest novel, "Crab Walking," brought him to tears.

The jury in Frankfurt said it was honoring "one of the most important literature critics in the German-speaking world," who "through his decades-long work, in his singular way, made literature popular and won new circles of readers."

Not present in the crowd at Wednesday's ceremony was the novelist Martin Walser, who this summer delivered a thinly disguised parody of Mr. Reich-Ranicki in which the protagonist, a critic and Jewish Holocaust survivor, is murdered.