



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the presentation of the 2020 Heinrich Heine Prize to
Rachel Salamander
in Düsseldorf
on 29 August 2021**

The list of individuals who have been honoured with the Heinrich Heine Prize of the City of Düsseldorf over almost fifty years is impressive, indeed downright awe-inspiring – such as Carl Zuckmayer, the first prizewinner, as well as Richard von Weizsäcker, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Amos Oz and Jürgen Habermas. Rachel Salamander now joins these genuinely illustrious ranks with a highly deserving life's work that we will be honouring and celebrating today at this award ceremony.

Rachel Salamander was one of the most important facilitators of German intellectual life for many decades and remains so today. Her impact and her success are due primarily to the fact that, in everything she does, she never places the focus on herself, but strives to enable others to unfold their potential.

Rachel Salamander, you have given all of us who are interested in cultural and intellectual life a gift that I believe only you could have given. Your passion, your charm, your energy, just as much as your knack for friendship, your intellectual curiosity and your talent for organisation, have provided us with bridges to the literary world, to authors and books, to ways of thinking and feeling, points of access that we would not have found without you. The literary world is your world. And you have worked to make this "literary world" accessible and comfortable for as many other people as possible, not just in your long years as editor of the literary supplement of the same name.

Rachel Salamander is, in her own very special way, a modern embodiment of that facilitator, that inspired and inspirational figure whom Bertolt Brecht immortalised in his famous poem Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tsu's Road into Exile. A customs officer curious about the wisdom of the wise man who wanted to cross

the border had it dictated to a child, resulting in a book which could be read by anyone forevermore. Brecht's famous closing lines run:

"But the honour should not be restricted
To the sage whose name is clearly writ.
For a wise man's wisdom needs to be extracted.
So the customs man deserves his bit.
It was he who called for it."

In quite exemplary fashion, it was Rachel Salamander who called upon one of the most significant scholars of the last century to share his wisdom, or rather to share his path to this wisdom, namely the story of his life and thought, of his encounters and insights and thus of an entire culture.

I am speaking of Hans Jonas, whom we know as the writer of *The Imperative of Responsibility*. Rachel Salamander, together with her husband Stephan Sattler, was eventually able to persuade Jonas – who was well over eighty years old at the time – to tell her the story of his life once again. It was thus possible to record and transcribe it.

Without her patience and perseverance, without her warmth and dedication, we would not have the wonderful memoirs of Hans Jonas. These memoirs of the great philosopher bring to life that incomparable, irretrievable world of a German and Jewish culture, its abundance and richness, as well as its destruction. "So the customs man deserves his bit" – if Rachel Salamander had done nothing other than make this book possible, she would have merited every prize.

In her foreword, she quite casually mentions the culture that shaped Hans Jonas – and thus gives us a glimpse of what has fascinated her herself her whole life long and inspires and motivates her work to this day. "Like all Germans raised in cultivated circles before the war, this young Jewish man from a respectable family had known the poetry of Goethe and Schiller through and through and Heine's likewise. In his last years, Jonas fascinated us on many an evening with the treasures of German culture stored in his memory."

Here in the story of Hans Jonas, it is once again vividly, palpably present: German Jews' great passion for culture – and the irreplaceable contribution made by Jews to precisely this German culture. We know how early on the German Jews were declared foreigners by self-proclaimed "national authors", what poison the antisemites spread over generations, how brutally it was all ultimately destroyed. And we know how all of the significant representatives of Jewish culture were persecuted, murdered, driven to commit suicide or expelled and how, in this way, Germany inflicted upon itself a loss that can never be made good again.

Rachel Salamander was and is so fascinated by this culture and its representatives that she has dedicated her life to finding new ways of bringing Jewish culture, in particular literature, to the fore. She is – and this is where the comparison to Brecht's poem falls down a little – in no way a customs officer who checks that nothing forbidden is being smuggled over borders. On the contrary, she is a person who does not recognise any barrier or border between cultures. She has, indeed, consistently opened and held open such borders. She is also, when it comes to it, an experienced and talented smuggler who ensures that borders are no obstacle to the passage of unfamiliar contraband – new and innovative ideas or forgotten, suppressed intellectual heritage.

It is a contraband of the mind – a little like "the Prussian customs" in Heinrich Heine's "A Winter's Tale", which searches him while crossing the border:

"They sniffed everything, rummaged through
Shirts, pants and handkerchiefs, for hidden
Needle point lace or for gems,
And for books that were forbidden.
You fools that search inside my trunk!
There's nothing for you to find:
The contraband that travels with me,
Is hidden in my mind. [...]
And many books I carry in my head!
Let this be clearly stated:
My head is a twittering nest of books,
Of books to be confiscated."

With the founding of her literary bookshop in Munich, Rachel Salamander created what we might call an official trading post for a very particular, precious and almost extinct form of contraband. She herself said: "Nearly fifty years after the German book trade was purged of Jews, I set up a specialist bookshop for literature on Judaism with the aim of helping to at least rebuild the intellectual Jewish world, bringing together everything that had been preserved in words and texts, and renaturalising all those who had been expelled and incinerated."

Her head was and is at least as much of a "twittering nest" of books and literature as the head of the poet who gave us A Winter's Tale. She is a tireless mediator, constantly bringing people into conversation with one another, bringing people to books and books to people. Mediation itself is an eminently cultural act – and who demonstrates this better than Rachel Salamander? Rachel Salamander did not simply found a

literature business. It would be more accurate to say that her whole life, her life's work, has been about the business of literature.

And there is one other phrase that must be taken in all of its depth of meaning when we think of Rachel Salamander: presence of mind. in a dual sense: fully mindful, and fully present in the moment. For one thing, she herself has remarkable presence of mind, with her intellectual acuity and her ability to spot links between seemingly distant subjects. But, above all, she sees meaning in intellectual pursuits only when they have some significance for the present, for the here and now, for our contemporary lives and thought.

Tirelessly, single-mindedly and quite incomparably, she has thus kept a very special part of Jewish cultural heritage alive. Frank Schirrmacher gave this description in a deeply personal speech in her honour at the presentation of the Schiller Prize of the City of Marbach: "She also embodies something that has become a true rarity in Germany in 2013, that wonderful pre-war mixture of coffee house, philosophers' club and world stage, the communicative world of Joseph Roth and [Friedrich] Torberg and Elias Canetti, a world that is unproductive only in the eyes of the ignorant."

When Frank Schirrmacher writes that "she gathers ideas and inspiration like fuel," then we have in this last word, fuel, an amusing but accurate image which Walter Benjamin used in a quite different context. It fits very well with Rachel Salamander's often hidden but always effective work in the literary industry: "No one goes up to a turbine and douses it in machine oil. One squirts a little of it in hidden nipples and joints, and these one must know."

This ability to initiate or inspire just what is needed, where it is needed, the ability to connect the right people in the right place at the right time – this ability is what consistently defines Rachel Salamander and her influence. She of all people, we must add, who was born in a displaced persons' camp and forced to consider herself "displaced" for so many years in post-war Germany, while perpetrators and followers had long since regained a respected place in society.

"I never had the sort of home that others obtain by birth. This status was officially called 'homeless alien'. It would be more than forty years before the authorities of the Federal Republic of Germany would offer displaced persons a straightforward path to naturalisation."

She of all people, then, Rachel Salamander, a "homeless alien" who spoke only Yiddish and not a word of German when she entered primary school here, she of all people opened the doors to the world of German Jewish culture for us in Germany – a culture that we were able to recognise and rediscover as a part of our lost home, our shared intellectual and cultural heritage.

She herself, as she tells it, gained an idea of belonging for the first time one Christmas: "I was not yet six years old when I, the Jewish child from Föhrenwald displaced persons' camp, set out on the long journey to Wolfratshausen at Christmas to play Handel's adagio on the violin before a German audience. Today I know that this was the beginning of my path into the society of the Federal Republic of Germany."

It is poignant to consider what a long distance must be travelled from there to return to a time when a German Jewish existence seemed quite ordinary, as the Berlin Jew Walter Benjamin experienced so simply in his childhood around the turn of the last century – including at another Christmas celebration: "In the courtyards, the barrel organs began to fill out the intervening time with chorales [...] In my room I waited until six o'clock deigned to arrive. No festivity later in life knows this hour, which quivers like an arrow in the heart of the day."

What unfathomable depths of barbarity and destruction – at the hands of Christians! – lie between these two childhood Christmas memories. What a yawning abyss between that old, quite ordinary German Jewish identity and one which must be cautiously rediscovered, regained, which seems everything but ordinary – almost inconceivable, in fact.

Only when we contemplate this abyss can we measure what we owe to Rachel Salamander and her work. The "Jewish world of yesterday" that she has presented to us is no foreign world; it is our shared heritage, our shared homeland.

Anyone who wishes to continue rediscovering this shared homeland can set off, together with Rachel Salamander, on imagined journeys to explore the great names that she keeps in stock and keeps alive for us: the illustrious Gabriele Tergit and the upper middle class Jewish world of her Effingers, Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno, Paul Celan and Else Lasker-Schüler, Walter Benjamin and Sigmund Freud, Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt, Marcel Reich Ranicki and Norbert Elias, Hans Sahl and Ilse Aichinger, Billy Wilder and Paul Abraham, Hans Jonas, Nelly Sachs and Siegfried Kracauer.

We could continue for some time – even without adding those such as Franz Kafka who did not live to see the horrors of the war, nor those who are sustaining Jewish culture in Germany in the present day; this present day in which we must once again bear witness to antisemitism – also in the cultural sphere, an antisemitism often disguised as supposed criticism of Israel. And so our present once again knows the dreadful insecurity and incomprehension of the Jewish community in the face of the manifestations of a contemporary hatred. The shock that this causes must be felt by us all – only then can it unite us all. We are duty-bound to resist – not each of us for ourselves, but all of us with and for one another!

Indeed, Rachel Salamander herself, the displaced person who set out to find the right places for her life and who found something like home, sees her own work as more than simply the safeguarding of a precious heritage. Home is also the place where one plays an active part in shaping the prevailing conditions and circumstances. Home is also the place where one fights against every form of racism and antisemitism. Home is also the place where one recognises that other people may well be very different, but that they have the same dignity and the same rights.

Rachel Salamander, we are here today to honour you with the Heinrich Heine Prize. However, we know that we honour you much more still when we understand German Jewish culture not only as a part of our past, but as a part of our present and our future – just like the example you set for us.