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### Nelly Sachs (1891-1970)

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## Nelly Sachs (1891-1970)

[Amy Kepple Strawser \(Otterbein University\)](#)

Poet.

Active 1921-1968 in Germany; Sweden

The poet Nelly Sachs may be best remembered as the co-recipient (with S. Y. Agnon of Israel) of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966. Although a German native born in Berlin in 1891, she lived in Sweden, where she found asylum with her mother as a refugee from the Holocaust, beginning in 1940, until her death in 1970. She began writing poetry at a young age; however, she did not begin publishing her works in earnest until after the Second World War. Her volumes of poetry include *In den Wohnungen des Todes* [*In the Habitations of Death*, 1947], *Sternverdunkelung* [*Eclipse of the Stars*, 1949], *Und niemand weiss weiter* [*And No One Knows How to Go On*, 1957], and *Flucht und Verwandlung* [*Flight and Metamorphosis*, 1959]. Sachs' collected poems can be found in *Fahrt ins Staublose* [*Journey into a Dustless Realm*, 1961] and in the translated collections *O the Chimneys* (1967) and *The Seeker and Other Poems* (1970). *O the Chimneys* also includes her best-known dramatic work, *Eli: A Mystery Play of the Suffering of Israel* (1951). A collection of her works and essays about them entitled *Das Buch der Nelly Sachs* [*The Book of Nelly Sachs*] appeared in 1968. In addition to her poetry, Sachs wrote and published numerous dramatic pieces and translated the work of the Swedish poets Gunnar Ekelöf, Johannes Edfelt, and Karl Vennberg, among others, into German. Late in her life she wrote fewer poems and mostly dramatic scenes. Unfortunately her dramatic works have seldom found a place on the stage in Germany or elsewhere, perhaps due to their intensely personal and esoteric focus.

Of the German-speaking recipients of the Nobel Prize in Literature during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (who include Gerhart Hauptmann, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Heinrich Böll, and Günter Grass), Nelly Sachs is the only woman who has been honored by the award. In *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature*, Sachs does not have a separate entry as an author, but is highlighted under the heading “Nobel Prize Recipients”. An overview of the reception of Sachs in Germany can be summed up in a passage from this section:

In West Germany, however, her reception as the “poetess of the Holocaust” set in during the 1950s and 1960s, when she was awarded an impressive series of prizes and public recognition, culminating in the Nobel Prize. Even though Sachs' oeuvre is extraordinarily varied, consisting of poetry, dramas, and short stories, her critical reception in the Federal Republic of German (FRG) remains one-dimensional. A manipulative cultural industry exploited her work politically by creating a Nelly Sachs cult. Author and work were reduced to symbols of German-Jewish reconciliation, a problematic assessment especially in light of the blatant disregard for her work since the 1970s. (Margarete Lamb-Faffelberger)

Perhaps Sachs' work, whose poetic and dramatic themes indeed deal frequently with the Holocaust and the fate

of the Jewish victims of the concentration camps, has become emblematic of the postwar-era attempts at *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past) so prevalent in Germany during those decades. And she also may have been hailed for being both German and Jewish, despite the fact that the Nobel Committee recognized her as a Swedish citizen at that time. Yet another perspective would be that her writing merits attention and recognition not only due to its timely themes of Jewish suffering and redemption but also because of its overall literary quality and poetic impact.

Nelly Sachs led a quiet and sheltered girlhood amongst her well-off mercantile family. In her youth she studied music and dance and showed an interest in writing early on. She was extremely shy and pampered by her mother, father, and closest relatives through adolescence. She continued to live with her mother until her mother's death in 1950. Sachs never married; her one significant relationship during her young adulthood is shrouded in mystery. The name of the man is not known in the biographical sources about her early life. The relationship ended in disappointment, heartbreak, and one of at least several episodes of mental breakdown for Sachs. One of her closest friends, Walter Berendsohn, describes the young man as follows:

Er ist "ein nicht-jüdischer Mann aus guter Familie. Er wurde Widerstandskämpfer in der Nazi-Zeit. Er wurde (vor meinen Augen) gemartert und schliesslich umgebracht." [He is "a non-Jewish man from a good family. He became a resistance fighter during the Nazi era. He was tortured (before my own eyes) and finally killed."]

Sachs had no other known significant romantic relationships. During her youth and young adulthood she had several close girlfriends and confidantes. Through her literary interests she became acquainted with Drs. Max and Helene Herrmann, scholars of German literature at the University of Berlin, with whom she found intellectual and emotional support - and who later were deported and died in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, respectively. As a young woman, Sachs developed a keen interest in Christian and Jewish mysticism, and her literary pursuits involved the German Romantics, especially Hölderlin and Novalis. These influences are readily apparent in much of her poetry and drama.

Her close friend and mentor, the Swedish poet and Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf, played an important role in helping Sachs gain entry into Sweden in 1940. During her years in Stockholm after the death of her mother, she had a few close companions, but overall was a lonely and solitary person for most of her adult life, despite her many acquaintances and literary associates. Her friendship and correspondence with the poet Paul Celan are well known and documented, and she worked closely with the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger who helped her with the publication of her work. In 1961 she met and became close with the Swedish literary scholar Bengt Holmqvist, who oversaw the posthumous publication of her work, and his wife Margaretha, like Sachs a literary translator. Yet Nelly Sachs remained a recluse with a protective armor that shielded her from the public and even from her friends for most of her life. Throughout her adult life, Sachs periodically struggled with depression and mental illness, which entailed an extended stay in a psychiatric hospital from 1960-63 and involved shock treatments and medication for her paranoid psychosis. She was always extremely protective of her personal life and did not typically grant interviews. Even her autobiography for the Nobel Prize Committee is acutely reticent; only the most basic facts of her life are related: "Leonie Nelly Sachs, born in Berlin on December 10, 1891. As refugee, arrived in Sweden with my mother on May 16, 1940. Since then living in Stockholm and active as writer and translator".

The sense of despair and fear, which often dominated her psyche as a refugee and Holocaust survivor, also permeates much of her writing. In particular, her poems:

[...] repeat, develop, and reinforce the cycle of suffering, persecution, exile, and death which characterizes the life of the Jewish people, and becomes transformed, in Nelly Sachs's powerful metaphorical language, into the terms of man's bitter, but not hopeless, destiny. ("Nelly Sachs - Autobiography")

One of her most famous poems, "O die Schornsteine" ("O the chimneys") opens with a quote from the book of Job in the Old Testament: "And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God". This poem directly laments and addresses the horrors of the gas chambers and crematoria, where at least six million Jews were annihilated:

O die Schornsteine  
Auf den sinnreich erdachten Wohnungen des Todes,  
Als Israels Leib zog aufgelöst in Rauch  
Durch die Luft -  
Als Essenkehrer ihn ein Stern empfing  
Der schwarz wurde  
Oder war es ein Sonnenstrahl?

[O the chimneys  
On the ingeniously devised habitations of death  
When Israel's body drifted as smoke  
Through the air -  
Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,  
A star that turned black  
Or was it a ray of sun?]

The repetition of the opening line and the variations on it five more times throughout the poem add emphasis as an incantation of sorrow and a holy invocation against the pain and deaths of her people.

This kind of appellation is repeated several times in another poem, "Wir üben heute schon den Tod von morgen" ["We rehearse tomorrow's death even today"], to similar effect:

Wir üben heute schon den Tod von morgen  
wo noch das alte Sterben in uns welkt -  
O Angst der Menschheit nicht zu überstehn -

O Todgewöhnung bis hinein in Träume  
wo Nachtgerüst in schwarze Scherben fällt  
und beinern Mond in den Ruinen leuchtet -

O Angst der Menschheit nicht zu überstehn -

[We rehearse tomorrow's death even today  
while the old dying still wilts within us -  
O humanity's dread not to endure -

O death-accustoming down into dreams  
where night scaffolding breaks into black fragments  
and moon glows like bones on the ruins -

O humanity's dread not to endure -]

The metaphors of ruins, fragments, night, and moon for death and a sense of apocalypse in this poem are reminiscent of the cryptic imagery in the poetry of postwar writers such as the Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann (“Die gestundete Zeit,” “Botschaft”) [“Mortgaged Time,” “Message”] and the Romanian-born Paul Celan (“Todesfuge”) [“Death Fugue”]. Sachs is also lyrically indebted to her predecessor, the Expressionist German Jewish woman poet Else Lasker-Schüler, with regard to biblical motifs and apocalyptic imagery. Another Jewish woman poet of Sachs' generation, Gertrud Kolmar, also wrote about the concentration camps through first-hand experience and indeed perished in one.

Nelly Sachs seems to have been plagued by survivors' guilt, and much of her writing is an attempt to reckon with this dilemma. Another of her oft-cited poems, “Chor der Geretteten” [“Chorus of the Rescued”], shows this perspective:

Wir Geretteten,  
Immer noch essen an uns die Würmer der Angst.  
Unser Gestirn ist vergraben im Staub.  
Wir Geretteten  
Bitten euch:  
Zeigt uns langsam eure Sonne.  
Führt uns von Stern zu Stern im Schritt.  
Lasst uns das Leben leise wieder lernen.

[We, the rescued,  
The worms of fear still feed on us.  
Our constellation is buried in dust.  
We, the rescued,  
Beg you:  
Show us your sun, but gradually.  
Lead us from star to star, step by step.  
Be gentle when you teach us to live again.]

Sachs has invoked the memory of those lost by speaking for those who have survived and appealing to the beneficence of an unnamed group of people (are they other survivors or the victims in the afterlife?) for the spiritual power to overcome the perils and horrors of the Holocaust. Her lyrical strength to do so forms the major force of her oeuvre, and the haunting beauty of her poetry still resonates today, sixty years after the end of World War II.

Indeed the lyric and dramatic work of Nelly Sachs warrants closer examination and study. And if in fact she became a cult figure of Jewish-German reconciliation with the many awards and honors she received in the 1950s and 1960s, then the reception of her writing *has* been largely one-dimensional for a writer whose production was so prolific and multifaceted. Yet Sachs' reception may be symptomatic of a larger issue within German literary criticism and scholarship, which is the neglect of the genre of poetry in general and specifically that of women writers. Prose fiction remains the genre most often discussed in the secondary literature produced by male and female Germanists alike. Feminist scholars especially have forsaken the discussion of poetry on the whole with the exception of the work of poetic giant and literary superstar Ingeborg Bachmann. This negligence is not nearly as pronounced in the literary criticism of Anglo-American women poets, and the reasons for this discrepancy are beyond the scope of this biography. The consequence of this is complex and far-reaching and has no doubt impacted the apparent scholarly disregard and superficial treatment of the poetry of Nelly Sachs. Her legacy should not have to speak for itself.

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