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NELLY SACHS
(1891–1970)

KATHRIN M. BOWER

LEONIE (NELLY) SACHS was born 10 December 1891 in Berlin. The only daughter of Georg William Sachs (1858–1930), a wealthy rubber manufacturer and inventor, and Margarete Sachs, née Karger (1871–1950), Nelly experienced a sheltered and often lonely childhood. Her parents belonged to the Berlin Jewish community in name only, and she remained largely ignorant of Jewish tradition and religion until well into her adult years. As a result of her education in an assimilated household, Nelly developed strong affinities with German Romanticism (particularly with the poet Friedrich Novalis) and Christian mysticism (most prominently with Jakob Böhme). A painfully shy, sensitive, and introspective child, Nelly did not fare well in public school, and her parents had her tutored privately at home.

After completing her formal education in 1908, Sachs devoted herself to writing poetry and painting watercolors. This was also the year in which she met the love of her life, a divorced older man whom she was forbidden to marry. The unhappy outcome of this doomed affair threw Sachs into deep despair and she languished in bed for over a year, suffering from depression and anorexia, until she was gradually able to regain her strength and stability, in large part through writing poetry. She later maintained that the love affair that inspired such excess of feeling and despair was the real stimulus for all of her subsequent writing, and that it was then that she had first recognized that writing enabled her to survive. Long after this incident, Sachs referred to the therapeutic power writing held for her in a statement that is quoted repeatedly in Sachs scholarship: “Had I not been able to write, I would not have survived. Death was my teacher... my metaphors are my wounds” (Dischner, 1966, p. 108).

After the death of William Sachs in 1930, Nelly and her mother moved to a smaller apartment in Berlin. The peaceful, reclusive existence they shared met an abrupt end when Hitler came to power and increasingly repressive measures against the Jews forced Sachs to confront her identity. While she had never felt much affinity with Judaism before 1933 and regarded herself as a product of the German cultural tradition, she responded to the identity imposed upon her by the Nazis by delving into the roots of a tradition that had hitherto been foreign to her. She was particularly drawn to the Hasidic tales in Martin Buber’s translation as well as the tenets of Jewish mysticism. In the mid-1930s she became an active member of the Jewish cultural association in Berlin, and her poems were read at association events between 1936 and 1938. It was here that Sachs became familiar with the work of another famous Berlin poet, Gertrud Kolmar, who unlike Sachs, would not survive the Holocaust. In January 1939 the Third Reich implemented a mandatory second-name policy for all Jewish residents: men would take the second name Israel, women would be called Sara. Nelly Sachs’s last published poem in Germany before she fled the country appeared in April 1939 in the monthly bulletin of the Jewish cultural association under the name “Nelly Sara Sachs.”

Flight and Exile

After Kristallnacht in November 1938, Sachs realized it was unsafe to remain in Germany any longer, and set about finding a place of refuge for herself and her mother. Sweden was a logical choice. Since the age of fifteen, Sachs had been corresponding with Selma Lagerlöf, a Swedish novelist whose legends and sagas had captivated her and inspired her to write a collection of her own, Legenden und Erzählungen (Legends and Stories, 1921), which she had sent to Lagerlöf as a token of her admiration. Obtaining visas for herself and her mother, however, proved an arduous task, and
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...even with the benevolent intercession of the aging Lagerlöf, the situation seemed hopeless. The Swedish government would only accept refugees who could prove that their stay in the country was solely for purposes of transit to another safe haven, preferably the United States. Sachs was fortunate in having friends willing to sponsor her in America so that her visa papers would be acceptable. Just as the tension and danger were reaching nearly unbearable proportions—she had already received her deportation papers—the visas arrived, and Sachs and her mother were able to escape in May 1940, on the last flight from Berlin to Stockholm. Without the courageous support of friends and the assistance of both Lagerlöf and Prince Eugen of Sweden, Nelly and her mother would have been transported to the camps, with little or no hope of survival.

Sachs greeted her new home with a mixture of gratitude and apprehension. She did not speak the language, and she and her mother had been forced to leave all their valuables behind. Destitute and dependent upon the goodwill of the Stockholm Jewish community, Sachs set about learning Swedish and within a few years became adept enough to earn a modest living as a translator. By the late 1940s, Sachs was recognized as an accomplished translator of modern Swedish poetry, and by the end of her life her translation work spanned seven volumes. Several scholars have argued that it was this exposure to modern Swedish poetry and the task of translation that brought about a dramatic shift in Sachs’s own writing. She left behind the traditional rhyme and strophes that characterized her early poetry and began writing free verse flush with genitive metaphors and anguished language. While changes in form may have been influenced in part by her contact with contemporary Swedish poetry, her content and imagery were undeniably the result of her growing knowledge of the events of the Holocaust and the ever-widening circle of victims it claimed. In 1943 Sachs learned of her lover’s death as well as of the deportations of Jews to Auschwitz. She was filled with sorrow and despair about the fate of friends and relatives, feelings mingled with a sense of guilt at having escaped their fate, and turned to her poetry as a vehicle for bearing witness to the memories of the dead and an instrument of mourning.

The poem cycles “Dein Leib in Rauch durch die Luft” (“Your Body in Smoke through the Air”), “Gebete für den toten Bräutigam” (“Prayers for the Dead Bridegroom”), and “Grabinschriften in die Luft geschrieben” (“Epitaphs Written in the Air”), and the lyric drama Elí. Ein Mysterienspiel vom Leiden Israels (Eli: A Mystery Play on the Suffering of Israel), were all written between 1943 and 1945 and include some of her most powerful and best-known work. In these poems, Sachs begins to develop the repertoire of images that come to characterize her poetry of mourning and remembrance. Most resonant are the repeated references to sand, shoes, and dust. In laments to the dead she asks who has emptied the victims’ shoes of sand and reflects on the force of death that inevitably turns all mortals to dust. Sand and dust combine to represent mortality and the cycle of death and regeneration that spares neither the innocent nor the guilty, but is also representative of the countless victims turned to dust and ashes in the Holocaust. The reference to shoes filled with sand evokes not only the victims’ nearness to death, but also the figure of the Wandering Jew, the tribes of Israel cast into the desert, and the exile bereft of home.

Sachs’s own sense of exile and her desire to find a home at least for her writings galvanized her search for a publisher. In the immediate aftermath of the war, this proved difficult despite the moving force of her poems. Eventually, with the assistance of a German friend, she was able to find a sympathetic ear among the editors of the Aufbau Verlag in Soviet-occupied eastern Germany, and the press published the collection In den Wohnungen des Todes (In the Habitations of Death) in 1947. It was the publication of this volume that established Sachs’s reputation as the “Dichterin jüdischen Schicksals” (poetess of Jewish fate). The dedication that opens the collection—“to my murdered brothers and sisters”—demonstrates the degree of Sachs’s identification with the victims as well as the newfound strength of her sense of kinship with the Jewish people. Two years later, she was again forced to search for a home for her poems, and found one this time with an Amsterdam publisher known for its support of exile writers. Sternverdunkelung (Darkening Star) was published by Bermann Fischer Verlag in 1949. Although celebrated in critical reviews, the book found little appeal with the public, and unsold copies were pulped. Germany in 1949 was more concerned with reconstruction and the conflicts of a divided nation than with pangs of conscience and reminders of a past most wanted to forget.

In February 1950 Margarete Sachs died. Nelly felt her loss acutely; her mother’s death after a long illness was the catalyst for a psychological crisis she sought to overcome by writing and intensive study of Jewish mysticism, particularly the Zohar (Book of Splendor). Although she was now alone in Sweden, Sachs had no intention of returning to Germany and felt that she was too old to start a new life in Germany. Sweden had become and would remain her adopted homeland—she became a citizen in 1952. But Sachs never relinquished her love for the German language, and used German exclusively as her idiom, producing in bursts of creative intensity an ever-growing body of poetry and lyric
drama. One exception in this string of lyric is a short prose piece she published in a small journal in 1956. Entitled "Leben unter Bedrohung" (Life under Siege), this essay is the only prose piece Sachs ever made public that directly addresses the conditions of terror and persecution she had experienced in Germany. It is based on an event in 1938, when she was arrested by the Gestapo and interrogated. Sachs was so shaken by this experience that she suffered a temporary paralysis of the larynx and was unable to speak for a week. This terror-inspired muteness is transformed into metaphors of silent suffering in her poetry and can be found even in her late work (as in "Als der große Schrecken kam" [When the Great Terror Came]). Drawing on her own experience of terror, Sachs speaks there for the multitude of victims whose voices had been silenced in a realm where words themselves had become refugees.

**Fame and Psychois**

After over a decade of near obscurity, Nelly Sachs's poetry was "discovered" in Germany in 1959, following the publication of two volumes by German presses and an influential essay on her work by Hans Magnus Enzensberger in the journal Merkur. Sachs's 1957 volume Und niemand weiß weiter (And No One Knows Further) and 1959 collection Flucht und Verwandlung (Flight and Transformation) extended the themes of persecution, suffering, and death found in her first two books of poetry, but also broke new ground in the form of poetic reflections on exile, the regenerative power of the word, the longing for dialogue, and the possibility of transcendence. It was particularly her treatment of language in these poems that caught Enzensberger's eye, and in his essay "Die Steine der Freiheit" (Stones of Freedom) he portrays Sachs as a healer of the German language and her work as a refutation of Theodor Adorno's dictum that there could be no poetry after Auschwitz. At the end of 1959 Sachs was named the recipient of the prestigious Droste prize, and in May 1960 made her first trip back to the country of her birth to receive the award.

The year 1959 also marked the debut broadcast on Swedish radio of an opera version of Sachs's play Eli (a radio play version adapted by Alfred Andersch had been broadcast in Germany in 1958), but Sachs's feeling that she had been betrayed by the composer, Moses Pergament, and misunderstood by the public planted the seeds of a persecution complex. The prospect of setting foot on German soil filled her with both hope and anxiety, and the tensions of the trip combined with concerns about the reception of her work took a toll. When she returned to Sweden in the summer of 1960, she suffered a nervous breakdown and was admitted to a psychiatric ward in a Stockholm hospital after being diagnosed with paranoid psychosis. This would be the first in a series of psychiatric treatments and extended stays in clinics and also the first warning sign of Sachs's growing paranoia and persecution mania, which deprived her of sleep and put a tremendous strain on her friendships.

One friend who could relate to Sachs's anxiety and paranoia was the poet Paul Celan, with whom Sachs had begun corresponding in 1957. Their letters attest to the depth of their growing friendship as well as to the strong affinity they felt for each other as poets and survivors. Both were concerned about the resurgence of antisemitism in Germany and about the fragile condition of the fledgling state of Israel. Yet Sachs's concern for Israel was mixed with a powerful fear that the persecuted could become persecutors, a fear that began to take alarming proportions in her mind when she learned of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. During the period of the trial, from 1961 to 1962, Sachs's delusions of persecution increased and she was convinced that she was being terrorized by Nazi spies in her Stockholm apartment building as punishment for Eichmann's arrest.

Under the influence of these paranoid fears and the psychiatric treatment, including electroshock therapy, designed to eliminate them, Sachs produced the cycle "Noch feiert Tod das Leben" (Death Still Celebrates Life), containing poems on Hasidic themes, syntheses of Jewish and Christian iconography, death and regeneration; and part of the cycle Glühende Rätsel (Glowing Enigmas). Despite the radical nature of the therapy she received, Sachs later remarked that the treatment designed to make her forget was unsuccessful in erasing the parts of her memory that continued to plague her ("I cannot work after the shock treatments—because I forget everything—only what I am supposed to forget, I don't forget" (Briefe der Nelly Sachs, Edited by Ruth Dinesen and Helmut Onüssener, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984.).

**Celebrated Poet or Mascot of Reconciliation?**

Ruth Dinesen, the author of the most detailed biography of Nelly Sachs, has argued that after the publication of Flucht und Verwandlung in 1959, Sachs was no longer concerned with attempting to reconcile her dual identity as German and Jew and came to resent
being pigeonholed as a distinctively Jewish poet. According to Dinesen, Sachs perceived this reductive label as one of the bases for the persecution she felt pursued her. Other scholars (including Bahr and Vaerst) have noted the shift in Sachs’s later work away from resonant images that evoke the genocide and the broader history of Jewish suffering to a sparer, more condensed, and hermetic language. What is clear from Sachs’s correspondence is that she had a strong aversion to organized religion and orthodoxy of any kind. In an environment where denominational faith had been deeply destabilized, Sachs turned to a synthetic and unbounded spirituality combining those elements of Jewish, Christian, and Eastern beliefs that appealed to her: “The not-bound, the fluid, the always possible is perhaps the only solace after the terrible experiences” (Briefe, p. 87).

The categorization of Sachs as a “poet of Jewish fate” was one that confined her, but it also served to cement her reputation and recognition as a Holocaust poet. While this perception has exercised an enormous influence on the criticism and reception of her work, it is her association with the Holocaust and her poetic tributes to the dead that garnered her the Peace Prize awarded by the German Book Trade Association in 1965 and, a year later, the Nobel Prize. In the presentation of the Peace Prize, Sachs was once again lauded as a healer of the German language and as a voice of reconciliation. Several critics have argued that Sachs served as a mascot for Germany’s demonstration of remorse for its past, while others have maintained that her poetry offered German readers the kind of aesthetic distance from the horrors of the Holocaust that made the past easier to bear. The splitting of the 1966 Nobel Prize for Literature, awarded to Sachs and to the Israeli novelist Shmuel Yosef Agnon, was a more obvious cause for controversy because of the Nobel committee’s rationale that the two writers were both Jewish and that their works together represented the fate of Israel.

The ironies of identity and public recognition culminated in Sachs’s award of honorary citizenship in 1967 by Berlin, the city where she was born and had spent over half of her life, but to which she had returned only once—in 1965—since her flight from Nazi Germany. In 1967 Sachs’s health worsened; she suffered a heart attack and a recurrence of crippling paranoia, which again required psychiatric treatment. In 1969 she underwent extensive surgery for colon cancer and spent months convalescing in the hospital, but never fully recovered and died on 12 May 1970, one month after her friend and kindred poetic spirit Paul Celan had committed suicide in Paris. Sachs was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Stockholm. The safe haven she had found thirty years earlier thus became her final resting place.

**Neglect and Revival**

After Sachs’s death, the second volume of her collected poems, *Suche nach Lebenden* (Search for the Living), was published, as a companion to *Fahrt ins Staublose* (Journey into the Vacuum), which contained poetry from 1943 to 1960. These two volumes, together with *Zeichen im Sand* (Signs in the Sand), her collected lyric drama, comprise the body of writing for which Sachs is known today. But the reception of this work has been uneven, subject to the vicissitudes of public and critical attention that inevitably turns on her designation as a poet of the Holocaust. Despite her status as a Nobel prizewinner and despite ever-growing interest in Holocaust literature, the volumes containing her dramatic works and correspondence are out of print, and the poetry collections are difficult to come by. In contrast, the more recent publication of Sachs’s correspondence with Paul Celan has been given wide distribution, and appeared in English translation soon after the German edition came out. This phenomenon only adds fuel to a hypothesis expressed by Michael Krämer that Sachs’s reception has been eclipsed by Celan’s dominance as the representative German-Jewish poet of the Holocaust.

In fact, existing scholarship has often compared Sachs to Celan, but others to whom she is compared also include Else Lasker-Schüler, Gertrud Kalmar, and Rose Ausländler, as well as Franz Kafka and Heinrich Heine. These comparisons place Sachs’s work in the contexts of broader debates about German Jewish identity, exile, the Diaspora, and estrangement. Numerous secondary studies have done much to illuminate central aspects of Sachs’s work beyond the association with the Holocaust, such as the influence of Romanticism (Berendsohn; Michel; Beil); her appropriations of mysticism and religious imagery (Michel; Bower); the ethics of her poetic project to awaken a sense of responsibility and moral awareness in her readers toward the memory of the victims of the Holocaust (Bower; Langer); and the modernity of her use of language (Dischner; Dinesen). But recognition has come in waves, the first in the 1960s following her “discovery” in Germany and the Nobel award, a second in the 1970s after her death. The marked drop in critical recognition in the 1980s has been attributed by one scholar to the suffering tone of Sachs’s poems and her image as a persecuted Jew (Falkenstein, p. 89), but this hypothesis sheds little light on the revival of interest in
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her work during the 1990s. Despite this recent upward trend in Sachs’s standing among scholars, there are no indications that a critical edition of her collected works or an expanded volume of her correspondence can be expected in the near future, nor has her work become more accessible to English-speaking audiences. The two existing translations of her work in English, *O the Chimneys* (1967) and *The Seeker* (1970), were hastily produced and do not do justice to the force of her language.

In the Habitations of Death

Although Sachs herself never experienced the horrors of the concentration camp universe, the strength and degree of her identification with the victims and their suffering inspired her to turn her poetic voice to the task of bearing witness. In her letters from the 1940s, she repeatedly stated that her name and her person were not important, that it was the voice of the Jewish people that spoke from her poems and had to be heard (*Briefe*, pp. 54, 177). The first volume of poetry Sachs published after the Holocaust, *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, contains poems written after her flight to Sweden and the end of the war that can be read most directly as testimonies to the victims and the memory of their suffering. The poem that opens the collection is entitled “*O die Schornsteine*” (*O the Chimneys*). In spite of what appears to be a literal reference to the crematoria in the camps, the imagery and use of metaphor in this poem are indicative of Sachs’s attempts to represent the unrepresentable. The poem speaks not of extermination camps but of habitations of death, not of burned individual bodies, but of the collective body of Israel going up in smoke, not of selections and mass murder, but of chimneys as fingers marking the boundary between living and dying. The language of poetry must be distinct from the language of the witness even as the poem testifies to the suffering of the victims. For this reason, Sachs’s poems aim toward transfiguration rather than realism, not only because the event itself has rendered poetic traditions and conventional imagery obsolete, but also in order to express the implications of the horror rather than the horror itself.

*In den Wohnungen des Todes* consists of individual and collective testimonials to the dead, laments on the continuity of Jewish suffering, and attacks on the apathy and complicity of the bystanders. The bluntly accusatory tone of “*Ihr Zuschauenden*” (*You Onlookers*), addressing those who did nothing to intervene as their neighbors were murdered, refuses to accord these bystanders a position of moral ambiguity, unequivocally denouncing their indifference as a criminal act. Their punishment is to be haunted by the gaze of the eyes of the dead. Yet it is not only the complicit who are destined to be tormented by the past. In “*Chor der Tröster*” (*Chorus of Consolers*), Sachs addresses the problem of mourning a catastrophe of such proportions that it has left no one untouched. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, life cannot continue as before; the gap between yesterday and tomorrow is too wide to be bridged by either language or gestures. Sachs likens this rupture in time to a wound that should not be allowed to heal, a wound in the collective memory of a people that refuses consolation but must be expressed.

The cycles “*Gebete für den toten Bräutigam*” (*Prayers for the Dead Bridegroom*), dedicated to the memory of Sachs’s murdered lover; “*Grabinschriften in die Luft geschrieben*” (*Epitaphs Written in the Air*), poems bearing the initials of Sachs’s friends and acquaintances who had perished in the Holocaust; and “*Chöre nach der Mitternacht*” (*Choruses after Midnight*) combine the pain of personal loss and individual suffering into a dirge to the collective memory of all the victims. Many of the images in these first poems smithed in the fires of a growing realization of the extent and dimensions of the Holocaust would become recurring metaphors in Sachs’s work: flames to evoke both divine inspiration and destruction; smoke as the incineration of a people and a cipher of loss; dust and ashes as memory traces as well as symbols of the cycle of death and regeneration; night as the realm in which dreams, memories, and myth combine to reveal the convergence of cosmic and human time; butterflies as liberated souls; fish as representatives of mute suffering; abandoned objects as silent witnesses to persecution and death; the refugee as a seeker filled with restless longing for community and God.

In *Eli*, a lyric drama on the suffering of Israel written during the same period as *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, Sachs attempted to link the genocide with the Hasidic belief in the *lamed vov*, the thirty-six righteous born into each generation who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders without knowing it. The shoemaker, Michael, is one of the thirty-six, and witnesses the deaths of Jewish villagers at the hands of Nazi soldiers. One death in particular, that of the shepherd boy Eli, killed because he threw back his head and played a desperate plea on his flute to God, consumes him, and the bulk of the play is devoted to Michael’s search for Eli’s murderer. Michael’s special status is visible to others in the form of a mark on his forehead, and the power associated with this sign becomes manifest at the end of the play after he has a vision that leads him to the killer. The final scene transports the action from the level of history to that of myth as the
remorseful murderer turns to dust before Michael's eyes and Michael himself ascends into the heavens. God's intervention is a signal that there is a divine justice, but the balance of good and evil in the universe remains beyond human comprehension. Eli is the only one of Sachs's lyrical dramas performed during her lifetime, and she was adamant that Michael be portrayed as a miracle worker and a conciliatory figure rather than one filled with hatred and vengeance. While the radio play adaptation by Alfred Andersch remained true to Sachs's original text, Moses Pergamnit's opera version achieved the effect that she had feared, and the connection to the healing figure of Hasidic lore as well as the emphasis on responsibility over revenge were lost.

An Era of Victims and Perpetrators

In her second volume of poetry, Sternverdunkelung, Sachs moved away from the direct references to the event of the Holocaust common to her earlier poems, toward more universal images of persecution and suffering. It is here that she began to explore what would become a central theme in her later work: the cyclical and reversible positions of victim and perpetrator. The clear opposition of the two in representations of the Holocaust was disturbed in Sachs's mind by subsequent events—most significantly the establishment of the state of Israel with its dual role as a Jewish safe haven and aggressive independent state, and the 1948 assassination of Swedish diplomat Folke Bernadotte by Jewish extremists in Jerusalem. In a poem entitled "Auf daß die Verfolgten nicht Verfolger werden" (In Hope That the Persecuted Do Not Become the Persecutors), Sachs portrays the conflict between the persecuted and the persecutors as an eternal cycle in which now one, now the other plays the role of the victimizer. In the process, history itself becomes but a manifestation of the dictates of a cosmic time in which the hunter and the hunted are constantly in pursuit of each other.

Sachs produced many variations on the theme of pursuit and persecution in her work, alternately referring to the opposition as victim and perpetrator, victim and executioner, hunter and hunted, victor and vanquished, but the underlying message is the same: our time is an age of victims and perpetrators, our existential condition is one of perpetual fear, our landscape is a landscape of screams ("Landschaft aus Schreien"), and to be human is to be guilty (see "Beryll sieht in der Nacht" and "Nachtwache"). The guilt of humanity is manifest in Sachs's poetry and drama in the images of those who watched and did nothing—the bystanders who out of apathy, complacency, or self-interest did not intervene. Without being actively involved in murder and destruction, these bystanders are nevertheless accomplices to evil, and belong on the side of the perpetrators. In a letter of 1948, Sachs argued that it was this phenomenon more than anything else that enabled the Holocaust: "... how easy it would have been to save the small Jewish population back then, if, yes if, the half-heartedness were gone from the world" (Briefe, p. 89). Sachs remained far from sanguine that revelation of the Holocaust's horrors would inspire greater empathy in the future. In an untitled poem from Sternverdunkelung, she wonders whether a horde of prophets would have the power to penetrate humanity's deaf ear and awaken the people from their complacent sleep. She implicitly compares the prophets' search for a listening ear ("an ear like a homeland") to the exile's longing for a home (Fahrt ins Staublose, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988, p. 93), but leaves the reader with the sense that humankind remains mired in petty concerns, blind, deaf, and unfeeling even in the face of divine communication.

In the lyric drama "Abram im Salz" (Abram in Salt) allusions to acts of persecution by the Nazis against their victims are masked behind a mythical constellation of figures. This figurative strategy universalizes the victim and victimizer while bringing together legend and lived history. The lack of historical specificity is designed to illustrate the cyclical, eternal nature of the struggle between the hunter and the hunted, or as Sachs puts it in her notes to the play in Zeichen im Sand (p. 346): "the eternal contest on earth between the hunters and the hunted." The central conflict in the play is between Nimrod, king of the hunters, representing the Nazi perpetrators, and the young Abram, representing the collective suffering of Israel, and is set in a landscape of salt where all inhabitants are driven by thirst. Abram emerges from his torment and touches the wound of God, a signal that suffering is both a prerequisite for communication with the divine and a path to redemption.

Suffering and Salvation

In her poetry of the 1950s and 1960s (Und niemand weiß weiter, Flucht und Verwandlung, Die Suchende), Sachs began to focus more on the condition of the exile and refugee, drawing on religious and literary sources ranging from biblical figures whose faith and loyalty were tested by God (Abraham, Jacob, Job) to female icons of exile, wandering, and banishment that have
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their roots in Romanticism and mysticism (Mélusine, Genoveva, and Shekhinah). In the figure of the bereaved wanderer, the seeker compelled by longing for what has been lost, be it loved ones, community, homeland, or God, Sachs makes the link between remembrance and redemption. The seeker’s desire to return to a remembered or imagined state of wholeness is a spiritual search that leads her to the border between life and death, a privileged position from which she can commune with the victims and serve as their voice to the living.

Sachs’s portrayal of persecution and suffering as ineluctable conditions of human existence is at once mirrored and mitigated by the religious conception of Jewish history as a repeating sequence in which destruction precedes regeneration and death necessarily begets life. It is only through loss or absence that longing is born, and with it the hope for new life. The searching that characterizes her later poetry represents the hope that new life will rise from the ashes, that through suffering and seeking, one will find redemption. The conception of suffering as a path to God and to creative inspiration runs through Sachs’s work. Critical praise for Sachs as a healer of the German language fit well, during her lifetime, into her mysticism-infused perception of the regenerative potential of the word and the indestructible integrity of the alphabet (“Beryll sieht in der Nacht,” “Flucht und Verwandlung,” “Glühende Rätsel,” “Teile dich Nacht”). Language itself had been abused and corrupted; the old words were not adequate to bear witness to the catastrophe or to herald a new beginning. Sachs referred to the inadequacy of existing language on many occasions in her letters, while emphasizing that the wounds inflicted on it and on the victims must be preserved in the form of suffering that becomes inseparable from language itself (Briefe, pp. 85, 110). In her poetry, her frequent use of the dash at the end of a line is at once a visualization of a cut or rupture in meaning and an admission that the new language to express the inexpressible remained beyond her grasp.

Sachs in the Context of Holocaust Studies

It is one of the paradoxes of Nelly Sachs’s reception as a writer that the association with the Holocaust that brought her critical recognition also served as an obstacle to the wider dissemination and analysis of her work. Bahr and others have argued that Sachs’s status as the poet of Jewish fate placed a kind of halo around her writing that prompted uncritical affirmation rather than critique. Other scholars have insisted that in reading Sachs as a Holocaust writer, important aspects of her work have been neglected. It is undeniable, however, that her writing would not have developed as it did without the impact of the genocide, and even in studies that focus on Sachs’s mysticism, modernism, or representative qualities as a German Jewish poet, there is agreement on the central significance of the Holocaust.

The most contested issues in Sachs scholarship include her use of language, which has been variously called cathartic, psalmic, transcendent, modernist, and, in reference to the late poems, hermetic; the appropriate or inappropriate nature of her metaphors; and more sweeping concerns about the representation of the Holocaust. As the distance between scholars and the actual event of the Holocaust lengthens, more and more studies are devoted to questions of how the Holocaust can and should be represented. In the process, scholars without any experience of the event, lacking an essential sensitivity and awareness, pass judgments on the appropriateness or authenticity of imagery and language, and impose aesthetic standards on Holocaust literature that at times belie its ethical foundations as a literature of witness, testimony, mourning, and remembrance. While Sachs’s metaphors (which at times cross the line between pathos and sentimentalization) and images (presenting a diverse array of naïve, clairvoyant, and violent visions) can and should be subject to critical analysis, the key significance of her work for future generations lies elsewhere. In its unfolding as a complex yet very human testimonial to the struggle for spiritual balance, meaning, and hope, Nelly Sachs’s writing enjoins the reader to continue what is at once an individual and collective task: to mend a world that seems to have learned all the wrong lessons from the Holocaust and appears bent on perpetuating the very cycle of victims and perpetrators Sachs believed could one day be brought to an end.

Translations from the German by Kathrin Bower throughout.

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