

Daniel Pedersen

## Nelly Sachs's Literary Transformation in Exile, 1940–1947

*This article examines the literary transformation of Nelly Sachs during her first seven years of exile in Sweden. It argues that her literary transformation went through three phases. During the first phase, “naïve exile,” she tried to have her previous poetry and prose from her Berlin period translated into Swedish. In the second phase, “silence, knowledge, gathering traces,” she understood the consequences of the Holocaust and altered her way of writing. The poetry of the third phase, in which she transformed into the poet we know today, is marked by “surviving and witnessing.” She saw writing as necessary to survival and tried to bear witness to what happened for those who were murdered in a literary form.*

*Dieser Artikel untersucht die literarischen Transformationen von Nelly Sachs während der ersten sieben Jahre ihres schwedischen Exils. Zugrunde liegt die Annahme, dass diese Transformation drei Phasen durchlief. Die erste Phase, in der sie versuchte, ihre früheren Werke aus der Berliner Zeit ins Schwedische übersetzen zu lassen, wird hier als „naives Exil“ bezeichnet. In der zweiten Phase „Stille, Wissen, Spuren sammeln“ realisierte sie die Konsequenzen des Holocaust. In dieser Zeit veränderte sich ihr Schreiben. Während der dritten Phase ist ihre Lyrik von „Überleben und Zeugenschaft“ gekennzeichnet, und sie wurde zu der heute bekannten Dichterin. Schreiben war für sie überlebenswichtig und mit ihrem Werk zeugt sie für die Ermordeten, für die die keine Stimme (mehr) haben.*

### Introduction to pre-1940: *Frühwerk*

Nelly Sachs refused to republish any of the poetry that she wrote in Germany before her exile in Sweden. On numerous occasions she stated that she was born as a poet through the horrific events during World War II and the Holocaust. This has also been the common view among researchers, but little if any effort has been given to analyse how this transformation looked. This article aims to provide a description of the first years of Nelly Sachs's Swedish exile.<sup>1</sup> It argues that there were three crucial steps in Nelly Sachs's literary transformation during a period of seven years that stretches from her escape from Berlin, in May 1940, to the publication of her debut, *In den Wohnungen des Todes* by Aufbau Verlag, in Berlin in 1947. The article is based on a few examples from the rich material that was the source of my dissertation *The Poetics of Tears*, a study that examined Sachs's literary development from the early 1920s to her debut. It aims, through close

<sup>1</sup> There are two notable exceptions: Dinesen, Ruth: “Und Leben hat immer wie Abschied geschmeckt”. Frühe Gedichte und Prosa der Nelly Sachs, Stuttgart 1987 and Hoyer, Jennifer M.: “The Space of Words”. Exile and Diaspora in the Works of Nelly Sachs, Rochester, NY 2014. Dinesen focuses on the poems published between 1929 and 1949, while Hoyer analyses and compares texts from Sachs's time in Germany, most of which are prose, with her exile poetry. But neither of the studies surveys the full extent of Sachs's *Frühwerk*.

readings of a few representative poems, to reconstruct the different stages of Sachs's literary development under her first years in exile.

What is little known is that when Sachs fled to Sweden with her mother, in May 1940, she was a semi-established poet in Berlin and part of a Jewish literary scene.<sup>2</sup> The bulk of Sachs's "early work" is some 300 poems, three longer collections of prose, and five dramatic works. Although she never succeeded in placing any of her work in a commercial publishing house, she regularly published in newspapers, like *Berliner Tageblatt* and *Israelitisches Familienblatt*, and magazines, like *Jugend* and *Der Morgen*.<sup>3</sup>

The first poem was published in 1929, but it was after Hitler's *Machtübernahme* in 1933 that she regularly started to publish, mainly in Jewish newspapers. Sachs's *Frühwerk* (including the 34 poems she published) is vast and contains almost 300 poems, several plays and three collections of prose.<sup>4</sup> It can primarily be found in the Royal Library in Stockholm.

Her poetry could in general terms be described as having a *fin-de-siècle* mood; often it depicts nature and emphasizes the close relation between life and death, the recurring seasons and the suffering of animals. The published poem "Die Rehe" can serve as an example of the mood and style in Sachs's poetry from this time:

Sie sind des Waldes leise Legenden,  
Darin die Geheimnisse zärtlich verenden  
Der Bäume, der duftenden Blumen der Nacht.  
Im Auge des Springquells jenseitiges Leuchten,  
So wandeln die weither Aufgescheuchten  
Und streifen den Tau mit den Hufen sacht.  
Haar rauchend vor Scheu, und immer im Leide,  
Wenn eine Kugel auf traumtiefer Weide  
Hinpflügt, was nie ganz zum Tage geweckt –  
Es zeichnet der feuchte Schmerz sich im Moose,  
Ein müdes Blatt noch färbt sich zur Rose,  
Und Leben hat immer wie Abschied geschmeckt.<sup>5</sup>

The last line can in many ways be said to summarize Sachs's poetical expression: hypersensitivity for suffering, and death is constantly present. Many of the returning themes are clearly typically romantic themes (like referring to the night in close reference to Novalis and the propensity to focus on suffering, losses and farewells) and she did not engage in any dialogue with expressionism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or any other modernist literary movements. Even the rise of National Socialism and anti-Semitism is neither

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the Jewish cultural organizations, see: Schoor, Kerstin: Vom literarischen Zentrum zum literarischen Ghetto. Deutsch-jüdische literarische Kultur in Berlin zwischen 1933 und 1945, Göttingen 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For a bibliography of her published poems in German, see: Sachs, Nelly: Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe. Vol. 1: Gedichte 1940–1950, Berlin 2010, p. 230–231. See letter 1 in Dinesen, Ruth/Müssener, Helmut (Eds.): Briefe der Nelly Sachs, Frankfurt am Main 1985, p.17, for her attempt to publish a prose manuscript with J. G. Cottasche Buchhandlung. No answer from the publishing house can be found in the archives.

<sup>4</sup> For an assembly of all the early material, see: Pedersen, Daniel: Tårarnas poetik. Nelly Sachs författarskap fram till och med *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, Stockholm 2016, pp. 331–340

<sup>5</sup> The poem was published in *Berliner Tageblatt*, 26.2.1933. I cite from Dinesen, "Und Leben hat immer...", 1987, p. 248.

expressed nor in any way dealt with in her early writings. To the contrary, faced with the new political situation in Germany she turned inwards and wrote intimate poetry about family, nature, and animals. Her poetry simply does not touch upon political questions.

Later, she did not want to associate with or comment on her *Frühwerk*, unless in very dismissive terms. When her only book from her time in Germany, a collection of legend and stories (*Legenden und Erzählungen*) published by F. W. Mayer Verlag, a small publishing house, and probably paid for by her father, was brought up in a letter from her publisher Siegfried Unseld in March 1963, and when Sachs answered a question regarding her earlier writings, she almost denies the existence of such stories: “Erzählungen, die Sie erwähnen, habe ich nie geschrieben. Sie können wohl nicht die Schulmädchenlegenden der 15jährigen meinen, die kommen doch niemals in Frage mehr [...]”<sup>6</sup> And a month later she returns to the subject, in yet another letter to Unseld, this time in a discussion of the possibility of including previously unpublished poetry in a new collection: “Das einzige was ich gegen eine Herausgabe gesagt habe, sind die aus der Schulmädchenzeit entstandenen von Selma Lagerlöf beeinflussten Märchen und Legenden [...] und die sind Kinderarbeiten gewesen [...]”<sup>7</sup>

So, in general, Sachs deems that her early work does not have the artistic quality that she felt her later poetry had obtained. Sachs’s negative assessment of her early work, with her insistence that they were not to be published again, is perhaps one of the reasons that this part of her work was not researched for such a long time. This is the background of the poet who in 1940 finally escaped from Berlin to Stockholm.

### Step 1, 1940–41: Naïve Exile

Shortly after Sachs’s arrival in Sweden, she acted to pursue her literary ambitions, not by writing about her experiences in Berlin under Nazi rule but, rather, by promoting her earlier poetry. During her first months there, she sought contact with a number of established Swedish poets and sent both poetry and prose to them. She also collected her poems that had been published in Germany and distributed copies to her friends. During this time, the most important person for her was Enar Sahlin, a retired principle whom Selma Lagerlöf had asked to help Sachs and her mother after their arrival. In several letters to Sahlin, Sachs emphasized that she would like to see her literary work translated into Swedish. The works she refers to and seeks to promote are works she wrote while still in Germany. She also explains to Sahlin that she is writing three more prose pieces, which have a background in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and that “ich trage ihren Stoff schon jahrelang bei mir.”<sup>8</sup> The second of the three stories is about a painting by Antoine Watteau, and Sachs explains that her fascination with the masters of the baroque is due to the fact that their works “zwischen Lächeln und Tränen schwebten,”<sup>9</sup> and she characterises the verses included in these stories as “eine deutsche

<sup>6</sup> Dinesen, “Und Leben hat immer ...”, 1987, p. 21

<sup>7</sup> Dinesen, “Und Leben hat immer ...”, 1987, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> The Nelly Sachs Archive at The National Library in Stockholm. Archive: L90 NS1982\_23. Letter from Sachs to Sahlin on 26.6.1940.

<sup>9</sup> The Nelly Sachs Archive at The National Library in Stockholm. Archive: L90 NS1982\_23. Letter from Sachs to Sahlin on 26.6.1940.

romantische Eigenart.”<sup>10</sup> Her literary strategy after arriving in Sweden is to re-use earlier works and adapt them to a Swedish context by adapting her nature poetry to Swedish conditions.

The reason for calling this period a “naïve exile”, a description Sachs probably would agree with since she never republished or tried to publish any poetry from this period after 1943, is that almost nothing of her experiences in Germany is articulated. This is surprising given the fact that she had been the victim of several acts of confiscations by the Nazi-German government and had endured seven years in Berlin. Despite this, Sachs continued after her arrival in Stockholm to write in the same vein as she had done in Berlin, and there are no apparent references to her escape, exile, or experiences of being persecuted. What is important from this period is perhaps not what was written, since it very much looks like her previous poetry, but the fact that Sachs tried to develop a strategy to promote her literature. It seems as if Sachs’s earliest conception of her life in Germany differs from how she later described it, and here one could quote from her prose piece *Leben unter Bedrohung*, written in 1956.

Zeit unter Diktat. Wer diktiert? Alle! Mit Ausnahme derer, die auf dem Rücken liegen wie der Käfer vor dem Tod. Eine Hand nimmt mir die Stunde fort, die ich mit dir verbringen wollte. Sie nimmt mir diese Samentüte daraus blaue Blumen sprießen sollten ohne einen Hauch von violett, das schon an Untergang erinnert. Ohne zu wollen atme ich im Garten einen Duft, aber die Rose ist schon anderen zugesprochen. Bereite dir aus Krumen eine Mahlzeit denn du bist krank und ich liebe dich so. Um dich zu retten möchte ich dich in einen Buchfink verwandeln, der vor dem Fenster an einem Blatt hängt, das der Frühling ihm schenkte. Aber der Frühling hat uns den Rücken zugekehrt. Blüht aus der Fäulnis. Wolken da oben. Wettbewerb im Sterben. Herrliches Fortziehn. Von dieser Erdenkugel abstoßen zu dürfen, diese Wurzelfüße herauszureißen. Gnade, Gnade des Nicht-mehr-Sein-dürfens. Höchster Wunsch auf Erden: Sterben ohne gemordet zu werden.<sup>11</sup>

It is, of course, not strange that it takes time to formulate an experience. However, it is remarkable that there are almost no traces, neither in her correspondence nor in her unpublished *Nachlass*.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that Sachs radically changed her perception of her escape and exile after she gained knowledge about the Holocaust. But, this initial silence could of course also have been a literary strategy in trying to adapt to a Swedish literary milieu. It was hard leaving one country for another, but she also left one literary milieu for another. It might very well be the case that she felt that a non-confrontational transposition of the German late romantic nature poetry to its Swedish counterpart was the best way for her to adapt. Whatever the reason, it is clear that Sachs in her early exile continued the literary path she began to follow in Germany.

<sup>10</sup> The Nelly Sachs Archive at The National Library in Stockholm. Archive: L90 NS1982\_23. Letter from Sachs to Sahlin on the 7.7.1940.

<sup>11</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 4, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> In her personal correspondence, there are some instances where she refers to her earlier life in Germany. For example in a letter to Sahlin, but in vague words: “Sie werden daraus erkennen, wie das Herz mir schwer ist, nicht nur das erneute Leid meiner Brüder uns Schwestern, sondern nunmehr über alles, was nicht mehr in der Liebe leben darf.” See: Sachs, Briefe, 1985, p. 26). In this case it is in reference to poems from her first poems written in Sweden, the “Schwedische Elegien”, a short collection void of any references to her own experiences.

One example is the first cycle that was written in Sweden and not brought from Germany: the cycle *Miniaturen um Schloß Gripsholm*. Gripsholm is a castle on an island in Mälaren, a large lake not far from Stockholm and a place that Sachs visited with her mother. Later, not even Sachs is sure when it was written, even though the first manuscript can be dated through the letters to summer 1940, only a few months after her arrival.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to the composer Moses Pergament, she claims that they were written in 1941, and she writes: “Die Gripsholmer Lieder und die Abschiedslieder und meine ersten Bibellieder sangen auch noch, aber dann – das Unfaßbare kam, und da begann nur noch das Klopfen an das Geheimnis: Warum –?”<sup>14</sup> The cycle contains twelve poems and describes the journey by boat to the castle, a short sojourn by the castle and, finally, the return by boat. The eighth poem in the cycle has the title “Bauerngarten”:

Ich sehe zwei Schwalben üben  
Den Abschied, und sehe den Baum  
An einem Mäuerchen trüben  
Die Sonne mit nächtlichem Traum.

Die Ringelblume steht offen,  
Die Lilie duftet von weit ...  
Ein Engel pflanzte das Hoffen  
In die Beete der Einsamkeit.<sup>15</sup>

Sachs basically reuses the same literary imagery, but transfers the context to Swedish circumstances. The swallows practice saying goodbye and a flower is smelled from far away: when it comes to both content and form, it does not deviate from earlier poetry. The only difference is that a lyrical subject (an I) is hinted at. The poem “Sonnenuhr im Wirthausgarten”, the second in the collection, is a description of a sundial and nature. The second stanza reads as follows:

Im Luftgefängnis aus gebognen Stäben  
Wohnt hier die Zeit; sie wird gemessen  
Von einem Schatten; wer hat ihn vergessen  
Der Tod? O Reifen in das ew'ge Leben!<sup>16</sup>

Here it could be possible to see that the previous dialectic of being and disappearing, of living and dying, a “Leben hat immer wie Abschied geschmeckt” is still operative, but there seems to be a subject involved, especially if one considers the situation of someone standing close to the sundial and being caught “Im Luftgefängnis aus gebognen Stäben / Wohnt hier die Zeit; sie wird gemessen.” This is arguably so that the lyrical subject would have seen a second shadow, namely the own shadow simultaneously falling on the ground. So the sense of being a prisoner of time, bound to one place with no possibility of

<sup>13</sup> See Matthias Weichelt's “Einführung” in Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 280.

<sup>14</sup> Dinesen/Müssener, Briefe, 1985, p. 89; Sachs: Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p.101.

escape, with the purposes of measuring time to come and to be lost is perhaps a fitting way of describing the earliest days of Sachs's exile.

### Step 2, 1942–43: Silence, Knowledge, Gathering Traces

Since Sweden was neutral during the war it had a relatively free press, even if censorship was active and the newspapers were explicitly requested not to write anything that could be interpreted as propaganda against Nazi-Germany. But, there were other publications that did actually report on what was happening in Europe. In Stockholm, Sachs came into contact with the Mosaic Congregation and she regularly read *Judisk krönika* (Jewish Chronicle), which from September 1942 had a permanent section with the title "Utrotningskriget mot judarna" (The Extermination War against the Jews).<sup>17</sup> Here Sachs could read reports on the fate of German Jews as well as articles on the mass murders in Poland and Eastern Europe. Here it is possible to detect a *cesura* in Sachs's work.

When Sachs started reading these reports she stopped promoting her earlier poetry and did not seek to have it translated. This change is important, since this had been a major strategy for her until this point. It is as if she re-evaluates her own escape, understands that she would have been murdered had she stayed in Germany, and therefore looks for a new literary expression to write for all those that had been killed in silence. From 1942, in late spring and summer, she began to work on a new cycle of poems with the title *Die Engel sind stark in den Schwachen*. For her this did certainly constitute a rupture but, with hindsight, we can also see that she maintained many of the specific characteristics of her earlier poetry, especially the formal treats.<sup>18</sup> One of the poems particularly exemplifies Sachs's literary work:

Ich male die ganze Nacht,  
Und habe keine Farben.  
Da habe ich die Farbe der Sehnsucht erdacht.  
Und male wie sie darben.

Ich male die ganze Nacht,  
Und habe keine Farben.  
Da habe ich die Farbe der Liebe erdacht  
Und male die Wunden als Narben.

Ich male die ganze Nacht,  
Und habe keine Farben.  
Da habe ich die Farbe Tod erdacht  
Und male wie sie starben.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See: Swanberg, Ingvar/Tydén, Matthias (Eds.): Sverige och Förntelsen. Debatt och dokument om Europas Judar 1933–1945, Stockholm 2005, pp. 205–215. (Eng.: Sweden and the Holocaust. Debate and documents on the Jews of Europe 1933–1945).

<sup>18</sup> Beside the change in content, there is also a significant shift in the formal expression in her poetry, a gradual disintegration of rhymes and meter. This shift can be partly explained by her encounter with Swedish lyrical modernism and especially the poet Erik Lindegren. On this, see: Pedersen, Daniel: "Mit den glühendsten Auf- und Untergangsfarben..." Über Nelly Sachs und Erik Lindegren 1940–1943", in: Text+Kritik: Nelly Sachs (November 2017). Forthcoming.

<sup>19</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1., 2010, p. 106.

It is fully possible to read this poem as not a very subtle comment on exile and the difficulties of creating as an *exilée*. It is almost as if her lyrical sensitivity and understanding of pain and death, which had been expressed somewhat naively earlier, has been directed not only towards contemporary events but also to her own history. “Sehnsucht”, “Liebe” and “Tod”: these words can characterise Sachs’s complete literary *œuvre* as such: they all have romantic roots, but in the process of writing for the victims Sachs redefines them. They are all present in her previous poetry, inspired by Romanticism, but since the historical situation so drastically had changed, so did her poetry. The way that, for example, Novalis wrote on death and longing is far from how Sachs understands them here. Death is no longer a state for reconciliation; it is silence and something that was forced upon her people. The connotations of the most common literary images in Sachs’s poetry are renegotiated.

In her second cycle of this period, *Elegien von den Spuren im Sande*, one can find the most obvious example in which Sachs’s reorientation is evident. The cycle contains 29 poems in two parts, with 13 and 16 poems. In the new edition of *Nelly Sachs: Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe*, part one is dated before August 1943 and part two before April 1944. Sachs herself saw this collection, and the cycle *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben* belonged to a period of “middle work” (“Zwischenwerk”).<sup>20</sup> Perhaps it is fruitful to read the cycle as a result of a collision between two lyrical paradigms: through this collision the scraps and remains create a new lyrical mosaic. If she earlier saw the night as a surface for projections, in this cycle she almost wants to enter into the night and collect something from it. Another quite significant shift is that she starts portraying herself as more of a medium, a spokesperson, someone who receives the poetry rather than creating it. In a letter she writes, “Ich habe nicht an den Elegien getan, ich habe sie niedergeschrieben, wie die Nacht sie mir gereicht hat.”<sup>21</sup> Even if this is nothing more than a rhetorical proclamation, it does say something about Sachs’s idea and her purpose for creating. It is no longer “only” literature, but a witnessing and a mediation of the voices of the murdered. The cycle is therefore an experiment, both with form and content.

The title *Elegien von den Spuren im Sande* contains three parts: the elegiac, the traces, and the sand. From these three, one can characterise the poetic endeavour at this time. In exile Sachs has not the possibility to intervene in what was happening and therefore has to rely on articles, information from friends and second-hand accounts. At this time, she reads the Swedish poet Erik Lindegren’s collection *mannen utan väg* (the wayless man) and is struck by Lindegren’s firm belief that the poet has to bear witness to his time, and that the purpose of poetry is to show how the world really is and not to embellish or beautify it. This idea of the poet as a witness, as a “Zeuge”, is important: to bear witness for those who could not. But what time was it during the war? Lindegren’s almost apocalyptic collection is violent and non-narrative. It portrays the world and the times as broken into pieces. One of the poems that Sachs wrote during this period also begins with the question of the present time:

<sup>20</sup> Dinesen/Müssener, Briefe, 1985, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> Dinesen/Müssener, Briefe, 1985, p. 41.

Nun wo es spät wird,  
Und die Zeit sich hinunterbiegt  
Wie eine Hand  
Die den verlorenen Stern wieder  
An den Himmel heften will –  
Sehe ich deine Frühe, mein Volk.<sup>22</sup>

It is late, and time bows under pressure. It is perhaps too late for the Jewish people, and their night is almost here. Sachs focuses on the star that has been lost, which is of course not only a reference to it as a tool for navigation; it is also the mark that separated Jew from Gentile. The lyrical ‘I’ seems to belong to this people and seems to want to restore to its people a point of navigation. With the words that time is bending over like a hand the sensation is created that this is almost the end of time. If the star can be once again fixed in the sky, it might be a way for them to find relief from the suffering and find a way to God.

Of the three parts in the title the two first are present in the early poetry, but the last (the trace) is new. Early on, there seems to be a split between world and language and the poet tries to vanquish this difference. The trace is in one way a solution to this conflict, since through the traces it is possible to attain knowledge and speak for what is gone. Through poetic creation, this can be achieved. If the “I” in the quoted poem above seeks to help its people, there is another acting subject in the figure of the angel. It is as if the poet and the angel are alike; their agency is similar. In the fourth poem, we meet an angel that in one way functions as the poet.

Engel, du sammelst der Füße Spuren  
Die im Sande maßen die Qual wie Uhren,  
Des langen Sterbens Schrift?  
Hob hier ein Greis sich aus den Schritten,  
Hat er die Tiefe so gelitten,  
Daß sie des Todes Waage übertrifft?<sup>23</sup>

The traces, the footsteps in the sand, are the measurements of what is gone. Here the sand is not only a material, not only the Biblical desert sand, the sand in the hourglass measuring our brief time, but also a page on which the human can leave a mark. But the traces are abandoned; they are a secret cipher that has to be decoded. Here it is important to mention that these are the early instances of equating world and language, a cabalistic idea that later will be very important to her.

It is the angel that collects the traces, and it seems to be the poet that is bound to translate it for us. This idea that the world is broken and in pieces is also what Lindegren constantly returns to. The trace as the print, the negative, the absence of the human body, requires us to imagine the body: here again we return to the negated body (in *Miniaturen um Schloß Gripsholm*) already present earlier in the form of a shadow. Using the *trace* as a poetic mould to reinstate the person who is lost is a practice that Sachs later returns to.

<sup>22</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 121.

<sup>23</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 124f.



The sand is not mute, it is an echo of persons lost (both mythological and real); it is the creative negativity from which words are gained, a reverberation of the collected experience from Moses to Sachs and beyond. And it is with this background that Sachs begins giving testimonies for those gone: first for individuals (she started working with the *Grabschriften*) and later for collectives (“Chöre”). These cycles are also parts of her debut.

### Step 3, 1944–46: Surviving and Witnessing

From a biographical standpoint it is possible that Sachs understood through the reports in *Judisk krönika* that she had escaped a certain death. As an author, it seems as if she started seeing herself not primarily as a poet in exile but, rather, as a poet who had survived.<sup>24</sup> With knowledge of what was happening in Europe, Sachs began writing for those she suspected had been murdered, and through this her poetic vocation dramatically changed.<sup>25</sup> She acted like the angel in the quoted poem above, collecting the traces of what remained of them. It was clear that few would survive, and who would speak on behalf of all the murdered if not those who had survived. From late in 1943 she started writing *Grabschriften* for these persons. All but a few of the *Grabschriften* are dedicated to specific individuals. Exceptions are for example “Die Mutter” and “Das Kind”.<sup>26</sup> During the following years, this is her main preoccupation, and she writes several “Grabschriften” for individuals she knew in Germany. The cycle *Grabschriften in die Luft geschrieben* was to be included in *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, even if she excluded many poems from the manuscript. From 1945 onwards, she writes the poems that are included in her debut. In 1946, when the full scope of the Holocaust is known, Sachs understood that she needs the collective voice of the Jewish people in her poetry, so she gathers the individual voices together into choirs.<sup>27</sup> In her poem “Chor der Geretteten”, a collective lyrical voice describes the agony of the survivors with their bodies so close to death that they turned into instruments:

Wir Geretteten,  
Aus deren hohlem Gebein der Tod schon seine Flöten schnitt,  
An deren Sehnen der Tod schon seinen Bogen strich –  
Unsere Leiber klagen noch nach  
Mit ihrer verstümmelten Musik.  
Wir Geretteten,  
Immer noch hängen die Schlingen für unsere Hälse gedreht  
Vor uns in der blauen Luft –  
Immer noch füllen sich die Stundenuhren mit unserem tropfenden Blut.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See: Pedersen, Daniel: “Surviving through poetry. The Case of Nelly Sachs.” In: Jahrbuch Zentrum Jüdische Studien Berlin-Brandenburg (2017). Coming.

<sup>25</sup> On this, see also the chapter “Poetic Space after the Abyss” in: Hoyer, “Space of Words”, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 153.

<sup>27</sup> Vivian Liska has in the chapter “Die Stimme Israels und das lyrische Wir in Nelly Sachs’ Chöre nach der Mitternacht” in her book *Fremde Gemeinschaft. Deutsch-jüdische Literatur der Moderne*, Göttingen 2011, a fascinating analysis of the collective voice in Sachs’s poetry.

<sup>28</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 33.

There is an oscillation between silence and sound in the poem. It is the expression of the need to articulate the experience of the survivor by finding a voice and a language. This is due to the fact that the survivors are haunted: “Wir Geretteten, / Immer noch essen an uns die Würmer der Angst.”<sup>29</sup> This shows that the survivors not only have a special understanding of what has happened to the murdered, but surviving has brought them together with the dead. It is as if Sachs recognizes the common bond deriving from the possibility of a shared fate:

Wir Geretteten,  
Wir drücken eure Hand,  
Wir erkennen euer Auge –  
Aber zusammen hält uns nur noch der Abschied,  
Der Abschied im Staub  
Hält uns mit euch zusammen.<sup>30</sup>

The sentence “Hält uns mit euch zusammen” seems to indicate that the survivors form a third category beyond, or between, the living and the dead, as if they connected the two: we the survivors, the rescued, are still with you, the murdered. This specific bond is the reason that the survivor can be a voice for the murdered, as if by surviving she gained access to a transcendence through poetry. Sachs’s poetry seeks the literary form to express something that could not be experienced, since the voices in her poetry were absolutely silenced by death, and in this she also implicitly explains her ethical stand as a poet. She is as a poet obliged to follow the dead, to pass over to them.

The first draft of *In den Wohnungen des Todes* gives the impression that the world has been left in a void, that it has been deserted. The topos, “die Wohnungen”, of the dead is not only the place that they inhabited as living, but also the place where they were murdered. The first poem, “Dein Leib im Rauch durch die Luft,” begins: “O die Schornsteine / Auf den sinnreich erdachten Wohnungen des Todes”.<sup>31</sup> This elegiac beginning, the empty O – just like the top of a chimney – focuses on the void that has to be articulated by the poet. Being a surviving poet, a poet with her eyes fixed on the murdered, means not only to remember the victims, but also to identify the perpetrators. However, there is hardly any expression of revenge in Sachs’s poetry. From the very beginning, the murderers have an almost ghostlike presence. They are not often mentioned explicitly but identified through negativity and absence, both of life and love. They are almost like faceless and voiceless shadows that steal life.

There is one untitled poem, the fifth in *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, which does turn to the perpetrators from the victims’ point of view, and in this instance, the poet almost operates as an accuser or prosecutor on behalf of the murdered:

<sup>29</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 33.

<sup>31</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 11.

Auch der Greise  
Letzten Atemzug, der schon den Tod anblies  
Raubtet ihr noch fort.  
Die leere Luft,  
Zitternd vor Erwartung, den Seufzer der Erleichterung  
Zu erfüllen, mit dem diese Erde fortgestoßen wird –  
Die leere Luft habt ihr beraubt!<sup>32</sup>

And in the following verse she goes even further:

O ihr Räuber von echten Todesstunden,  
Letzten Atemzügen und der Augenlider Gute Nacht  
Eines sei euch gewiß:

The last verse focuses on what might be the task of the surviving poet, namely collecting what has been discarded:

Es sammelt der Engel ein  
Was ihr fortwarft,  
Aus der Greise verfrühter Mitternacht  
Wird sich ein Wind der letzten Atemzüge auftun,  
Der diesen losgerissenen Stern  
In seines Herrn Hände jagen wird!<sup>33</sup>

This passage echoes her previous “Engel, du sammelst der Füße Spuren”.<sup>34</sup> It is the angel that has to be strong in the weak, the angel that collects all the traces so that they will not disappear. The poet cannot do right by reversing the work of the murderers, but she can lend her voice to the victims. Sachs seems to see it as an archaeological work, finding hidden traces in layers of time and giving them a universal meaning. She can also re-appropriate the symbols and give them another sense. In the last quotation, she takes the star and turns it from a forced insignia of persecution to a symbol of something cosmological that will haunt the persecutors. Surviving for Sachs appears to demand the impossible: to express the silence of the dead with words. In this, she focuses on a few charged symbols, such as the star, and re-contextualizes it. Her literary strategy has changed, as well as her understanding of her own invocation as a poet. It is remarkable, when following Sachs through these years, to see how she develops as a poet. She slowly leaves metric forms, recontextualises certain aspects of her understanding of German romantic poetry, develops an acting lyrical subject and turns against the world and interacts with it. The gates to the *hortus conclusus* of her early poetry are opened and she turns it into a place to gather the dead. Given this development, it is fitting that the title of her debut collection of poetry echoes from the place she herself understands that she has crossed over to.

<sup>32</sup>Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup>Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Sachs, Werke, vol. 1, 2010, p. 124.

---

## Conclusion

By analysing a selection of representative poems from Sachs's first seven years in exile, I have tried to show a literary development in Sachs's exile poetry. Understanding these steps can hopefully help us adjust the perception of Nelly Sachs as a poet that simply overnight started writing for the victims of the Holocaust. This was the image of herself as a writer that she promoted, and most researchers have uncritically accepted it. Sachs's early poetry is marked by hypersensitivity for pain, suffering and death, and so is her later poetry. Later, in exile, Sachs tries to adapt to a Swedish literary scene, but when she almost simultaneously starts reading modernist poets and understands the mass murders of Jews in occupied Europe, she changes her literary style and content in order to give witness for those murdered. This process in exile can be described in three steps, from a "naïve exile" that through "silence, knowledge, gathering traces" finished with the "surviving and witnessing" poet we today know Nelly Sachs to be.

**Citation** Daniel Pedersen: *Nelly Sachs's Literary Transformation in Exile, 1940–1947*, in: *Medaon – Magazin für jüdisches Leben in Forschung und Bildung*, 11 (2017), 21, S. 1–12, online  
[http://www.medaon.de/pdf/medaon\\_21\\_Pedersen.pdf](http://www.medaon.de/pdf/medaon_21_Pedersen.pdf) [dd.mm.yyyy].

**To the author** Born 1978, is a Ph. D. in comparative literature at the Department of Culture and Aesthetics at Stockholm University. He researches Holocaust literature, censorship and modernist poetry. He has published several articles on these matters and is currently editing a Swedish edition of Nelly Sachs's Poems. He is also active as a translator and is the editor of Bokförlaget Faethon (the publishing house Faethon).