

FOREWORD

How to approach a writer who spoke of tragic events in her past, but avoided concrete circumstances? A writer who, in the first epitaphs to her “dead brothers and sisters,” preferred to use initials rather than full names? Who, early as well as later in life, burned poems and letters she felt were too frank, too private? In short, a writer who wished to disappear behind her work?

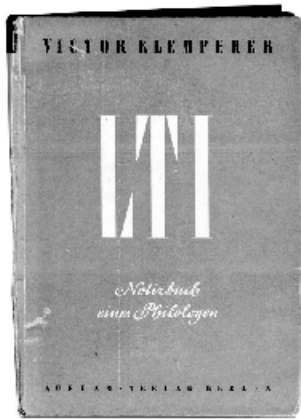
For Nelly Sachs, texts had to speak for themselves. No knowledge about the person behind the work was necessary; in fact, it could be threatening. Although she understood writing as an act of devotion which ultimately left no other mark than the traces of passion, her considerable correspondence — around 4,000 extant letters — shows how concerned she was that details of her private life should remain private. There are usually good reasons for respecting a writer’s wishes regarding such matters, and rarely any bad ones. Yet at the same time as Sachs withheld facts about the background to her work, she said that she was doing so. With one hand she pointed to what the other hand was hiding. This double gesture is significant. Perhaps it says something about how she viewed the interplay of life and letters.

In her correspondence with the Germanist Walter A. Berendsohn, Sachs repeatedly urged caution regarding information imparted in confidence. In order to underline the urgency of her request she used a drastic turn of phrase: if her friend were really going to write the proposed study of her life as a writer, he must understand that she wanted to be “extinguished” as a person. Sachs could hardly have been unaware that the German verb *ausschalten* sounded as if it came straight out of the Nazis’ vocabulary — that “diction of the Third Reich” or “lexicon of inhumanity” of which Victor Klemperer, Dolf Sternberger, and others amassed evidence after the war. Why did she use such a charged term? Was it in order to state emphatically the limits of what Berendsohn could include in his book? A demand that he concentrate on the work and leave everything else to “the reporters from the celebrity press,” as she also wrote? Or was it in fact a straightforward declaration of a more general problem: how to give expression to the defenseless without risking new exposure? Did she fear that the inclusion of biographical data would obscure the import of the poem and, paradoxically, cause more pain to be inflicted? “The heartrending tragedy of our destiny will not and must not [...] be diminished by the many items of information which are wholly unnecessary in this context.”

No doubt such considerations, and others, played a part. Still — “extinguished”? Despite its metaphorical proximity to the chimneys of the crematorium ovens, and despite its kinship with a verb such as the Nazi term *gleichschalten* (“leveling”), *ausschalten* may have suggested something else as well ...

During the first year of their Swedish exile, Sachs and her mother lived at temporary addresses. In October 1941 they were able to move to an apartment





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of their own, in a building in Bergsundsstrand on the south side of Stockholm. Located on the ground floor, it consisted of one room and a kitchen, and was dark and cold. According to notes made later, it was occasionally filled with the stench of sewers. After seven years without sunlight, in August 1948, the pair were able to move to a one-room apartment measuring 41 square meters, with a kitchen and dining alcove, a couple of floors higher up in the same building. Here Sachs would spend the rest of her life. Until her mother's death in February 1950, she devoted most of her time to caring for her. What small income she earned came from translations of Swedish literature, mostly poetry. Only at night could she write her own work — in the dark, as her mother would otherwise wake up.

This is the prototypical setting for Sachs' poetry: alone with the alphabet at night. She felt literally "thrown into an 'Outside,'" as she put it to the literary critic Margit Abenius. Although she may have been in a world governed by social conventions, she wasn't part of it. Paradoxically situated, hers was an eerie sphere, bound up with the dead and the sorrow they left behind. Much later, in a letter to her French translator, Lionel Richard, Sachs would term this her "Nightly Dimension." *Ausschalten* meant this, too: with the light extinguished, the person behind the work was no longer visible. Yet she was there all the same. The night was illuminated by the one thing that mattered: the writing. Whatever else there was, it should remain in the dark.

This study is devoted to the interplay between life and letters, inside and outside in a body of work neglected by critics in recent years. Hence it is also concerned with Sachs' self-image. Her development as a poet is remarkable not least because she began the memorable part of her *œuvre* when she was over fifty years old. During the quarter-century that followed, her poems became ever more convincing from a critical point of view. Literary history boasts few such examples, if any. How was this development made possible?

The self-image that Sachs created from an experience of loss and parting, flight and metamorphosis, was predicated on the notion that the poems came to her, that they were dictated by horrific circumstances which forced her to speak. "The words came and broke forth in me — to the edge of annihilation," she said in an interview on Swiss television in 1965. This image fits in with the vision of a poet with an Orphic mission. It is furthermore easy to identify traits which are traditionally perceived as feminine. Sachs is less active than passive. She does not compose poems, but rather is overwhelmed by them. She is more receiver than sender.

Sachs' literary estate shows that she rarely rewrote or edited her texts. Many of them were printed in versions nearly identical — bar the odd word or comma — to the original. Yet must that mean she was a mere medium without intent — a handful of strings moved by the divine wind? At the same time

as the circumstances following her escape from Nazi Germany were far from comfortable, she conscientiously worked in the service of poetry. She had submitted texts to newspapers and periodicals already in her youth. After her flight she contacted Swedish writers and critics and began almost immediately to translate their work into German. Despite her isolation she built, over time, a wide-ranging “network of words” (*Adernetz der Sprache*, literally, ‘vascular system’ or ‘capillaries of language’) with coordinates near and far, among the living and the dead, exiled writers and representatives of the younger generation. And during the difficult years of the 1960s, scarred by the effects of persecution during the Nazi years, she was periodically committed to psychiatric clinics in whose protected setting she wrote what are perhaps her most powerful works, the “glowing enigmas” and the late dramatic poetry.

This study dwells upon such contradictions and upon other ones. Even if Sachs saw herself as a “battleground,” it was in her that the words broke forth — and they did so “to the edge of annihilation.” The same convulsions with which she was born as a poet also extinguished her as a private individual. In the end the words glowed from the inside. Like enigmas, they illuminated without explanation. Thus implying that a different sort of reading was required: one that doesn’t assume the meaning of a poem is a treasure to be unearthed and exported. Inaccessibility was part of its appearance. As was obscurity.

May the following pages contain enough of the latter for Sachs’ poems to gleam as only they can.

TEXT Dedication, IdWdT (NSW:I) · Klemperer, *LTI. Notizbuch eines Philologen*, Berlin 1947 · Sternberger, Storz och Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, Hamburg 1957 · Berendsohn · For letters to Berendsohn 06/25/1959 and Abenius 03/17/1958, see Briefe 140 and 125 respectively · Letter to Berendsohn 09/07/1959, ABerendsohnD · The apartment is described in a letter from Elvan Johansson 05/27/1980, ADinesen · “Weitere Aufzeichnungen.”, NSW:IV · Letter to Richard 01/30/1968 · Interview with Werner Weber, broadcast on Swiss television 11/10/1965 · The *Adernetz der Sprache* occurs in the poem “Da schrieb der Schreiber des Sohar,” Unww (NSW:II) · GR:I-IV, NSW:II · For the image of the writer as “battleground,” see letter to Gunnar Ekelöf 07/05/1965, Briefe 216 | **IMAGE 1** Nelly Sachs in 1960 (Photo Anna Riwkin, KBS) · **2** Bergsundsstrand 23, 1991 (Photo Esbjörn Eriksson, KBS) · **3** Victor Klemperer, *Lingua tertii imperii* 1947 · **4** Dolf Sternberger, Gerhard Storz och W. E. Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen* 1957