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Daniel Pedersen



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Nelly Sachs' Swedish exile – An encounter with Erik Lindegren

Daniel Pedersen

When Nelly Sachs boarded a plane on the 12th of May 1940, leaving Berlin from Tempelhof Flughafen, she left a country that had been her home for almost 50 years.¹ She was born in Berlin in December 1891 and had lived alone with her mother since 1930 when her father passed away. The latest escape was preceded by months of intense work by friends, and the two women were saved at the very last minute. A few days before Sachs received her long awaited transit visa to Sweden, she had also received her "Stellungsbefehl" which ordered her to go an *Arbeitslager*. This grim euphemism meant certain death for her and her mother Margarete. The whole episode of Sachs' escape is symptomatic of a general lack of understanding about what was going to take place in Germany. Of course it is easy for us today, with historical distance, to see the signs and perhaps it is wrong to assume that Sachs and her compatriots even could imagine that such a horror eventually was planned for them. But the episode can shed some light on the brutal awakening she got in exile. Faced with the dilemma of having an order to go to work camp and having to get her visa she went to the police, asking them for advice on what to do. In a stroke of luck she met a policeman who persuaded her to tear up the "Stellungsbefehl" and take a plane instead of the planned train through Denmark. The women would surely not be allowed to cross the border and be sent back to Berlin the policeman said. Luckily, she followed his advice and survived. However anecdotal this episode might be, it is still remarkable how she, despite earlier encounters with Gestapo (as she described in the text *Leben unter Bedrohung – Living under threat*), still believed in the German police and authorities. Had she met someone else these words would probably have never been written. It's against this backdrop, the fine fabric of luck and circumstances that I would like to present the Jewish-German poet Nelly Sachs and give an account for her first years in Swedish exile.

Who was Nelly Sachs in May 1940 when she flew to Sweden? A short summary of her biography shows that she had never been employed nor did she ever finish any form of higher education. What she had learnt, she had read herself or had been

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taught by friends. Despite that, and prior to her escape, she published poems in different papers, mostly daily papers, and in one book, *Legenden und Erzählungen* (Legends and stories) – of which there are only a few known copies. Moreover, this was probably a privately financed printing – she considered herself to be an author and a poet. One would also think that the seven years spent under Hitler's rule in Berlin would radically change her literary preferences and way of writing, which indicated roots in German romanticism and in the Christian mystic tradition (especially Jacob Böhme). This does not however seem to be the case. She was deeply rooted in German culture and a Jewish identity was not adopted until after she had left Germany. The topic of my dissertation, a larger project on Nelly Sachs, is exactly how exile transformed her poetry, which she said at first to be naive and romantic, to eventually becoming a poet of the Holocaust and a Nobel Prize laureate. In this short essay I'll present a short sketch of this work and concentrate on her relationship to the Swedish poet, Erik Lindegren.

In order to show how Sachs changed in exile, it is necessary to briefly examine her origins. I will only give a few examples of her early poetry because Sachs explicitly forbade any publication of her early work. I will make some general remarks and thereafter quickly move to her first years in exile. Sachs published 29 poems in various papers over ten years, from 1929-1939. Most of them were "Lieder" (songs). For example: "Abendlied" (Evening song), "Biblische lieder" (Biblical songs), "Lied an den Tod" (Song to death), "Lieder vom Abschied" (Songs of departures/farewells) and "Nachtlied" (Night song). Most of her poems rhyme and they are written in a specific lyrical form. The most obvious example of this is a collection of sonnets that she sent to her literary role model, Selma Lagerlöf, in Sweden, around 1920. The majority of the sonnets has a religious theme, and focus on the longing for a distant and absent God. God is portrayed as a port that sends vessels to different planets, as a sea of stars float in the Creator's hand. Many romantic themes are also present. The intimate relationship between pain and love, as if they were two sides of one coin, is a legacy from the Romantic poets, and love's duality is something that Sachs really never gave up. These borderlands of love and death transcend human life, connecting it to the after life, with God's great love. This mix between a secular literary tradition and a religious theme is something to which I will return. One important reason for retracing Sachs' literary footsteps is to analyse her claim that she had not come into contact with what we could hastily describe today as literary modernism. She had not encountered expressionism *à la* Gottfried Benn. Even someone as important as Stefan George was no more than a name to her. Gertrud Kolmar and Else Lasker-Schüler, both Jewish female poets, were known to her, but influenced her little. Everything seems to point to the fact that it was first in exile that she really encountered literary modernism and was introduced to this movement by Swedish poets.

One might argue that it is the Holocaust that most influenced her literary *œuvre* as we know it, and not necessarily her exile. From a theoretical perspective, exile is not a clear way to define an author since there are many forms of exiles, and I doubt that one could find any common thread among all exiled authors. That will be something beyond a biographical and geographical fact that they have been forced to leave one country for another. Early during her life in exile, Sachs sees her poetic creation as a way of allowing herself to be transformed into a vessel and thereby communicate with the voices of the murdered. One could in fact argue that she thought of this work to be an act of translation. And this might very well be the case, but I think that the research generally has been too obedient and followed Sachs' own statements to the letter and therefore disregarded the exile in Sweden where she lived the last 30 years of her life. With this I mean the very *vie quotidienne* that she experiences, the literature she read and how this affected her. It is during 1942 and 1943 that Sachs seems to transform her previous heartfelt romantic longing into something else, into something beyond this world, and articulate it in a very specific historical context: she began to write and speak for those that were no more. This has in part to do with her encounter with Swedish modernism, and also with the growing awareness of the scale and scope of the Holocaust. It started in late 1942 with reports in Swedish papers; the Jewish community also distributed testimonies from resistance fighters that had witnessed the murders. Up until the time when Sachs became aware of the Holocaust and the dreadful dimensions of the mass murder she did not give her Jewish background any priority. In her youth she seems to have considered converting to Christianity. The Christian mystic tradition and Christ as a symbol for the silent suffering followed her through her whole life. But before Sachs started thinking of any form of metaphysical translation, bringing the voices of the dead to this world, and as a possible way to escape the horrors of our time, she saw translation in a very practical way: as a means to both learn Swedish and earn an income.

It is with her reading and studies of the Swedish language that she encountered modernist poetry with widespread roots in an European tradition. She also had Swedish friends who probably advised her on what to read. It is however clear that she focused mainly on Swedish modernism and seems to have cared little for earlier Swedish literature. One of the first authors that she encountered was Erik Lindegren, who nowadays is viewed as a relatively minor author in Sweden and is probably unknown to the most (if not all) of our French colleagues. Lindegren made his literary debut 1935 with the collection of poems, *Posthum ungdom* (*Jeunesse Posthume*) that we might consider 'conventional poetry'. Throughout the collection, there is fixed meter and rhyme. He did however show that he was somewhat influenced by his contemporary European colleagues; for example, he penned a

poem about jazz in the collection. When, five years later in 1940, he had finished his second collection of poems with the title *mannen utan väg*, (*l'homme sans voie*), he broke with his prior conventionalism. But the path from creation to publication was difficult. Many attempts by him and fellow writers to persuade publishing houses to accept the collection failed and he finally resorted to financing a small edition of 200 copies with his own resources. Not until a few years later did he find a publisher for the collection, which gave the work a wider circulation. What is interesting is that Nelly Sachs owned one of these numbered copies and therefore probably read Lindegren long before the general public. In fact, her copy remains today at the Royal National Library in Stockholm. It is worn edition; the pages are almost falling out of the book. Sachs made numerous notations in the book, and one could almost say that some of those notations are first drafts of her translations. Quite a few pages are dog-eared and worn, indicating that her way of treating the book, especially in comparison to other books in her library, bears witness to her intense interest in it. In letters she would later express her admiration for Lindegren.

Lindegren wrote that if the collection *l'homme sans voie* had an apocalyptic overtone, it has more to do with the period in which it was written than with the author. The apocalyptic feeling has to do with the last days of autumn 1939, when Lindegren, in a poetic frenzy, wrote the last 35 sonnets of the collection. This was because of his disappointment with the Soviet-German treatise that allowed the Soviet Union to declare war against Finland. In an act of solidarity Lindegren volunteered as a soldier in the Finnish army (as did many other Swedes) and wrote most of the poems while waiting to be shipped out. This, however, never happened, since a truce between the two countries was subsequently negotiated. This radical step did change Lindegren in a profound way. The poems were written by a man who did not know whether he would return or not. It is probably a case of 'writing on the brink of death'. This is the first sonnet in *l'homme sans voie*, translated by Jean-Clarence Lambert (1962) and published by Pierre Seghers Éditeurs in the collection "Autour du Monde", directed by Alain Bosquet:

(non seulement Narcisse dans la salle des miroirs
trône sur son pilier désespoir sans vertige
l'éternité têtait en grimaçant
le pays des possibilités illimitées
dans la salle des miroirs où seul un sanglot contaminé
échappait à l'indifférence à ses fleurets croisés
et changait l'air en promesse en tereau

qui ruissèle à toutes les fenêtres de la ville
dans la salle des miroirs où les corps en série portent
prisonnière en eux la perfection découpée à la machine
où la parole se fait harakiri à la lueur des obus
où la trompette a goût de porcelaine cassée goût de sang qui meurt
dans la salle des miroirs où l'Un devient trop nombreux
et pourtant voudrait choir rosée dans la tombe du temps)

The first scene represents Narcissus in a hall of mirrors. It is not only Versailles with its failed peace that is invoked but also the surrealist fascination for mirrors: both as something that can liquify and as a metaphor for the second self, the unconscious. Here we meet Narcissus, whose fate is described in *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Due to his conceitedness, he is punished by the gods and falls in love with his reflection. The result of this love is death by starvation. Sitting enthroned on his pillar of despair, Narcissus is the only person in the poem, but he is not alone, read: "pas seulement". All that seems to be left of mankind are fragments, feelings without bodies: despair and indifference. The word commits suicide and language is lost. There are explosions and the landscape that Lindegren paints reminds us of an anonymous waste land. Lindegren has stated that he wanted to compete with Eliot in his critique of our culture. The first and second sonnets are within a parenthesis, as if they were stage directions for further reading of the collection. Moreover, the stage that both Lindegren and Sachs seem to perceive is one where only shadows and whispers of actors are present, and only the leftovers of humanity remain. Nelly Sachs probably bought the collection in 1942. This is a time when she begun to grasp the full consequences of the Nazi persecutions of the Jews. Let us therefore quickly follow Sachs during her first two years in exile, leading up to this encounter.

Just to give one example on how Sachs started in Sweden, I would like to quote her *Schwedische Elegien* (Swedish Elegies) that was written in August 1940, only a few months after her arrival, and as homage to her new homeland. The first lines of the fifth verse read:

Von einem Wipfel zum Anderen,
Der Wind sing und singt –
Die Fichte will wandern
Der Himmel erklingt.

Sie bebt in den Zweigen
Und hebt sie zum Tanz –
Ich winde mit Schweigen
Den Waldblumenkranz.²

This joyous example reveals Sachs' upbeat outlook on life. It is quite remarkable that this was written by a woman who had just been forced to flee for her life. She continues to write and sing about her new homeland as if the old one simply ceased to exist, and it is here, in Sweden, that all her romantic projections and fantasies of the land of Selma Lagerlöf are in full swing. This is a stark contrast to the first lines in her *Miniaturen um Schloß Gripsholm* (*Miniatures from the castle Gripsholm*), also written in 1940:

Grasen in dem Mittagsglanze
Mit gebogenem Hals die Pferde
Suchen grünes Glück der Erde
Hebt die Möve sich zum Tanze³

Sachs' almost childlike fascination for the horses, the grass and the dancing birds changed around 1942. It is also important to remember that the scale of persecution of the Jews was not fully known by this time, and what we know as the Holocaust had not fully begun in 1940. We know that Sachs read about the concentration camps and the mass murders in 1942, and she also got news that her childhood love, who would later become the dead groom in *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (*In the apartments of death*), had been murdered around this time. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that the apocalyptic atmosphere that Lindegren voiced was shared by her. In her debut the music was played by death and the bones are turned into flutes. Rather a different picture than the one in the poems above. Earlier, she had broken with her native country, but kept her mother tongue. So in the years 1942 and 1943 there were two important moments for Sachs. Firstly, she started to adopt a Jewish identity, a fact that had made its entry into her life only late, the first being with Hitler's *Machtergreifung* in 1933. Secondly, her confrontation with modern poetry, having been freed from lyrical and formal conventions, opens up a completely new way of writing. The desperate need to find a new lyrical form to once again write poetry and, more importantly, to write poetry in German, drives her to abandon and dismiss her earlier works. New times

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required new modes of expression. It is of course almost impossible to pinpoint the exact moment when Sachs started experimenting. It is thus important to differ how the form and the content change. The earlier longing for a loved one in religious terms, uncertain exactly who, is directed to the murdered. The question of continuation and break is central. She keeps some lyrical figures but their meanings are radically changed through the historical context.

It is especially interesting to see how two different currents seems to converge into one around this time in Sachs' life. One is Lindegren's broken lyrical form, the other is—and this would require further investigation—the influence of Jewish mysticism, and especially Gershom Scholem's book and the writings of Martin Buber. Scholem translated *Sohar* (Zohar – The book of Splendour) into German and Sachs read the translation around this time. The copy in Sachs library is full of notations and underlining. One of the ideas in *Sohar* that had a particular impact on her was the idea of a once divine language that had been scattered, a language spoken before paradise was lost. The idea that human language was a once a divine language broken into pieces made her want to translate, or re-translate, the world and in this process, give back, or give back again, some of the divine origins and dimensions to language. This religious idea seems to coincide with the lyrical dictum presented by Lindegren: it is man who destroys, who goes to war; it is the human language that legitimates these events. This is something quite different than natural disaster or accident – it is man who has to create a language to capture this. Sachs had started to reflect on her own, but the impulse by Lindegren made her realise that ravaged times required ravaged poetry. Torn poems, but a whole language. There was not just a need to find new means of expression but an assertion of the poet's role in reestablishing the divine nature of language. Through Nazi lies, the German language had been soiled and only reinstating a poetic dimension could *purify* the language (although the word purify has some nasty connotations in this context). Sachs seems to see the German language as a battleground. Therefore, it seems possible for her to see the Romantic longing, the *Jenseitssehnsucht*, as a complement to Jewish mysticism. But the longing isn't directed towards an impersonal 'you' anymore, a sort of idealised lover, love in itself, but towards people with names, towards people that once had existed but do not any more. In *In den Wohnungen des Todes* (1947) for example, she provides a cycle with prayers for the dead groom (*Gebete für den toten Bräutigam*). She also writes *Grabschriften* (Epitaphs) for people she knew and who were murdered by the Nazis.

One reason why Lindegren was so important to Sachs was that his own trajectory as a poet corresponds in part with Sachs' own, even if Lindegren was, of course, never subjected to dictatorship. Sachs could probably identify with Lindegren's existential and literary struggle since he tried to *dichten* in apocalyptic times. Another fact that

shows how Sachs pays tribute to Lindegren, long before they were personally acquainted, is that she included him in her volume *Von Welle und Granit* (*From Waves and Granite*), published in 1947, the same year as he had debuted, and in a volume where Sachs has translated 12 Swedish poets from the 20th century. It is easy to find a common theme between the collection and Sachs' own writing. This collection is perhaps a list of the poets and themes that inspired her. But that is only one aspect of it: the collection was also a good way for Sachs to approach many of the leading Swedish poets. Many of them were probably chosen due to their importance and power; a few of them were already members of the Swedish Academy, while others were seen as more experimental. One could say that this latter group was the bravest choice, given that their importance had not yet been proved. The most surprising choice was Erik Lindegren since he was a poet with only two published collections of poetry. And, as we indicated earlier, the second collection was only published after a struggle. 17 years later, in 1964, when Sachs was a well-known poet, she published a volume exclusively with translations of Lindegren, with a title taken from one of Lindegren's poems, *Weil unser einziges Nest unsere Flügel sind* (*Because our nest are our only wings*). This included older translations along with many new ones of Lindegren's later collections. The singing birds that were present in Sachs early poetry had here been transformed into representatives for a flight; it is only in movement that one can find a home. Or, as Sachs herself writes in her second collection of poetry, *Sternverdunkelung* (*Éclipse d'étoile*, 1949):

An Stelle von Heimat

halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt — 4

In her last will, Erik Lindegren is the only poet mentioned beside Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, who inherited the legal rights to her *œuvre*. Reading *l'homme sans voie* must have been a shock for Nelly Sachs when she bought the collection. One can notice Lindegren's influence in Sachs debut work, *In den Wohnungen des Todes*, but in this early piece, she hasn't fully broken with lyrical imagery, even if many of the poems have a free form. In the final section of this brief article, I would like to return to poetry and focus on three poems. The first is by Lindegren, which I will quickly compare and contrast with two poems by Sachs that show how she changed over the late 1940s. Sonnet 34 in *l'homme sans voie* reads:

Parmi les chorales aux dures lèvres et la scission consentie
 parmi l'haleine des meurtriers qui recouvre tout de brouillard
 parmi les mesonges qui pénètrent l'œil de la vérité

pour qu'il fixe enfin plus durement que l'œil des fouettés à mort
parmi les instants qui glissent sur les rails de la torture
et disparaissent soudain dans la gorge de l'irréel
ô silencieuses larmes noires dans le donjon empoisonné
creuset du cauchemar pour la douleur volcanique des forçats
ô main explosée ô récitatif aride de la mort
dans un écrin doré pour les feuilles fanées et révolutions
voix confuse de l'arc brisé ne fuis pas
avec ton écho vers un abri dans l'avenir
mais explique l'écrit illisible emprisonne la chute de marteau
vibrant contre un destin qui n'était pas encore le tien

It is not only the form that is broken, but the violent subject matter of the poem also seemed to inspire Sachs. It has been said that the translator is the most attentive reader, and although Sachs never publicly commented on her relationship with Lindegren, one can see that she writes about him in her private letters, almost giving him the status of a prophet. It was probably an influence that stretched over several dimensions: not only the form and content of poetry, but also what poetry could articulate in relation to the world. Lindegren said about his sonnets that they had been torn apart. He phrases it like this: torn apart indicates that the poems have not been decomposed, collapsed, cracked or dismantled. It is not a fragment or an interrupted poem; it is an active act and it has been torn apart by somebody. In her debut, Sachs still holds to rhyme, such as in her poem 'Nacht, mein Augentrost', but she has a much more direct way of addressing the world. Words as murderer, blood and death are present, and through this Sachs also somehow admits that acts and horrors have human agents: their existences aren't pure chance. I have chosen this poem because it is a good example how she broke with the sonnet, but nonetheless keeps in rhyme:

Nacht, mein Augentrost du, ich habe meinen Geliebten verloren!
Sonne, du trägst sein Blut in deinem Morgen- und Abendgesicht.
O mein Gott, wird wo auf Erden ein Kind jetzt geboren,
Laß es nicht zu, daß sein Herz vor der blutenden Sonne zerbricht.

Mörder, aus welchem Grabstaub warst du einmal so schrecklich bekleidet?
Trug ihn ein Wind von einem Stern, den ein Nachtmahr behext
Wie Totenschnee hinab auf eine Schar, die sich zu Gott hindurchleidet,
Mörder, an deinen Händen zehnfacher Marterpfahl wächst.

Darum auch spürtest du nicht der Liebe Zittern im Morden,
Da sie ein letztes Mal aus soviel Küssen dich angehaucht —
Darum ist ihr, der Hiobzerschlagenen, keine Antwort geworden,
Die dich zu Ihm wieder, zu Ihm wieder, hätte untergetaucht!⁵

This poem shows a much more direct way of facing the world. It is the poetic subject who has lost its loved ones that enters the poem. The sun has turned into a planet which carries the blood. The previously unreachable planets have a direct link to the world and to humanity. The religious theme is present through the reference to Job. In fact, the whole collection begins with a quotation from the Book of Job, a Biblical character who emerges as a representative for those who have been unjustly punished by God. The love theme goes beyond living and dead. Establishing a direct influence, or a poetic dialogue, is always difficult, since most of the changes are subtle and happen over time. Lastly, I would like to quote a poem from Sachs' collection, *Sternverdunkelung*, in which the night is also present. Her treatment of both form and content are free and one can recognise Sachs' specific style. In one way she has surpassed Lindegren, making even braver choices than her predecessor.

Nacht, Nacht,
daß du nicht in Scherben zerspringst,
nun wo die Zeit mit den reißenden Sonnen
des Martyriums
in deiner meergedeckten Tiefe untergeht —
die Monde des Todes
das stürzende Erdendach
in deines Schweigens geronnenes Blut ziehn —

Nacht, Nacht,
einmal warst du der Geheimnisse Braut
schattenliliengeschmückt —
In deinem dunklen Glase glitzerte
die Fata Morgana der Sehnsüchtigen
und die Liebe hatte ihre Morgenrose
dir zum Erblühen hingestellt —
Einmal warst du der Traummalereien
jenseitiger Spiegel und orakelnder Mund —

Nacht, Nacht,
jetzt bist du der Friedhof
für eines Sternes schrecklichen Schiffbruch geworden —
sprachlos taucht die Zeit in dir unter
mit ihrem Zeichen:

Der stürzende Stein
und die Fahne aus Rauch!⁶

It is noticeable that the romantic night, poeticized by Novalis, has been broken into pieces and that a religious theme is present. The broken form of the poem is congenial with its motive. This is just one example how Lindegren's influence was important, even if he wasn't the only source of Sachs' inspiration. Recently, I have attempted to find different sources of inspiration for Sachs from the Swedish literary context of poetical modernism, a source that previously has largely been neglected in research. This is just one part of Swedish modernism; of course there are others. The last two poems are examples of how Sachs broke with the romantic night and staged its fragments on a new stage. With this work she left her own country behind and through exile found a new home in language and poetry. However broken her native *Muttersprache* German was, it was still in the only *Heimat* that she could transform, and through her poetry she felt that she could – almost in an archeological sense – rediscover and recreate the root of a once divine origin of language.

Daniel Pedersen

(Université de Stockholm)

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AUTEUR

Daniel Pedersen

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