

# Nelly Sachs And Shai Agnon: Joint Recipients Of The Nobel Prize In Literature

By **Saul Jay Singer** - 17 Kislev 5784 - November 29, 2023

Photo Credit: Saul Jay Singer



The 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature was divided between Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “for his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people,” and Nelly Sachs, for being the “bearer of a message of solace to all those who despair of the fate of man” and “for her outstanding lyrical and dramatic writing, which interprets Israel’s destiny with touching strength.”



Original newspaper photo of Sachs and Agnon in Sweden to receive their Nobel Prize



In an impressive ceremony, King Gustav VI Adolf of Sweden personally presented the Nobel Prize to both recipients, who shared the \$60,000 award. Because the award ceremony was scheduled for Shabbat Chanukah, it had to be delayed for Agnon who, viewing himself as a representative of the entire Jewish people on one of the world’s most prominent and prestigious stages, refused to

attend until after he *davened Maariv*, made *Havdalah*, and lit his menorah after Shabbat.

The two laureates, whom the press characterized as “both diminutive figures of great dignity,” were seated up front in the concert hall. Sachs, who was called up first, bowed before the king as she received her award and, in a brief speech, evoked memories of being a refugee from Nazi Germany, although she made no mention of Hitler or the Third Reich. Then Agnon, after bowing several times to the king, began his remarks by noting that a Jew must recite the appropriate blessing upon meeting a king, and recited in a bold voice (in Hebrew): “Blessed are you, Hashem, our G-d and King of the Universe, who has disseminated from his own glory to a king of flesh and blood.”

Agnon, a proud observant Jew wearing a velvet yarmulke atop his formal, white-tie attire, proceeded to briefly sketch his biography – in Hebrew:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem... In your choice, I feel humbled. I have never forgotten the Biblical direction enjoining us to go humbly before our G-d. If I am proud of anything, it is for the privilege of being able to live in the Holy Land, which G-d promised to our forefathers, and thus fulfilling His command.”

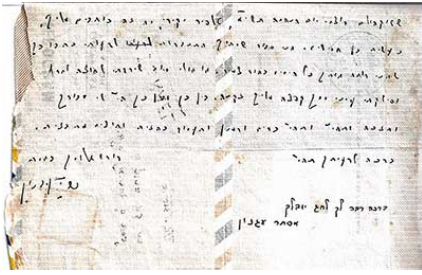
He concluded with a prayer for peace for Israel, for Sweden and for the entire world. The ceremony concluded with an address by Dr. Anders Österling, chairman of the Swedish Academy’s Nobel Committee, who said:

This year’s Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to two outstanding Jewish authors – Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Nelly Sachs – each of whom represents Israel’s message to our time. Agnon’s home is in Jerusalem, and Miss Sachs has been an immigrant in Sweden since 1940 and is now a Swedish subject. The purpose of combining these two prizewinners is to do justice to the individual achievements of each, and the sharing of the prize has its special justification: to honor two writers who, although they write in



Set of Keren Kayemet stamps (English and Hebrew) depicting a yarmulka-clad Agnon greeting the King of Denmark.

different languages, are united in a spiritual kinship and complement each other in a superb effort to present the cultural heritage of the Jewish people through the written word. Their common source of inspiration has been, for both of them, a vital power.



*Full signatures by both Shai and his wife, Esther, on an August 1951 air letter written from Stockholm when Agnon was nominated for the first time as a candidate for the Nobel Prize (he did not win until 1966).*

Addressing Sachs, he praised her for her lyrical poetry which has “given voice to the Jewish race’s worldwide tragedy” in moving laments, and added, “Your lyrical and dramatic writing belongs to the great commentaries of world literature, yet your sadness is free of hate.” The Nobel Prize website praises her work as “repeat[ing], develop[ing], and reinforc[ing] the cycle of suffering, persecution, exile, and death which characterizes the life of the Jewish people, and becomes transformed, in Nelly Sachs’s powerful metaphorical language, into the terms of man’s bitter, but not hopeless, destiny.”

Turning to Agnon, Österling praised him for his mixture of realism and mysticism with “strange, fairy-like poetry reminiscent of Chagall’s motifs from the Old Testament.” He declared “In your writings, we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science as antiquity knew it. Your great chronicles have a manifold message. We honor in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.”

Behind the scenes, Österling had played a leading role in deflecting political opposition to awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature to two Zionist Jews. He advised the Nobel Committee that “the suggestion is to split the prize between two writers from different linguistic backgrounds consolidated in a spiritual brotherhood that carries with it the gospel of Israel in modern literature” and argued that “if awarding the prize to both of them will be considered a gesture toward Zionism and awaken comments of a political nature, the academy can defend its decision and point to the human value within it – something that completely suits the will of Alfred Nobel.”





Mini collection of Sachs stamps.

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Barely recognized as a writer and living on the margins of obscurity during her almost 50 years in her German homeland, Sachs's (1891-1970) early writing was rooted in German Romanticism more inspired by Christianity than Judaism. A very private person who mostly kept to herself, she suffered from health problems and never married. Much of her early work reflects the pain of a failed romantic affair in her youth with a non-Jewish man who was later murdered in a concentration camp; she would later dedicate *Prayers for a Dead Bridegroom* to him in an anthology published in 1947. Considered "the poetess of Jewish fate," her later work continued to reflect her sense of personal loss, including the death of her father in 1930, even as it reflects a fusion of grief with



Original newspaper photo of Sachs arriving in Sweden to receive her Nobel Prize.



subtly romantic elements when her mourning became less personal and more as a personification of the Jewish people in their historical relationship with G-d.

After barely escaping the Holocaust, however, Sachs became a poet forged by the trauma, loss and displacement of the Shoah whose fundamental theme became serving as witness to the Holocaust, and she became a poignant and powerful spokesman reflecting the grief and yearning of her fellow Jews. She viewed the State of Israel as a community bound by collective suffering, as a living memory of those murdered in the Holocaust, and as a homeland for Jewish survivors; contrasting herself with Agnon, she pithily observed that while he represented Israel, "I represent the tragedy of the Jewish people."

Raised in a strictly secular home in a culturally cosmopolitan environment to parents who had abandoned Jewish tradition and had fully assimilated into German culture, Sachs did not attend synagogue or celebrate Jewish holidays. After her father's death in 1930, however, she became an active member of the Berlin Jewish Cultural Society, which was established to promote the ability of Jewish artists to reach Jewish audiences. During the rise to power of the Third Reich between 1937 and 1939, she published her work only in Jewish magazines and gave poetry readings to Jewish audiences.

The Nazis arrested Sachs in 1937, but she bravely risked her life by refusing to identify a close friend who was active in the German Resistance. Badly traumatized after being interrogated by the Gestapo, and after witnessing her apartment being plundered by the Gestapo, she would later suffer several nervous breakdowns characterized by hallucinations, paranoia and delusions of persecution by Nazis, and she spent years (1960 to 1963) in a psychiatric institution, receiving repeated electric shock therapy. Along with her mother, she was able to secure one of the last flights to Stockholm (1940) a week before she was scheduled to report to a concentration camp, but her remaining family was murdered in the Nazi death camps.

Although Sachs had never self-identified as a Jew, her Holocaust experience forced her to examine her Judaism, and it was during exile in Sweden that she first began to confront her Jewish heritage, to examine her relationship with Judaism, and to r



Jewish teachings and traditions; grew inspired by Martin Buber's Chasidic stories; and became particularly intrigued by Jewish mysticism after receiving a translation of Gershom Sholom's first chapter of the Zohar (originally written in Aramaic) from a rabbi of the Great Synagogue in Stockholm. Studying Kabbalah in German, she replaced her agnosticism with spirituality, and the result was a melding of elements from Christian and Jewish traditions, both in her spiritual conceptions and in her poetry, which became a tool of remembrance and bearing witness to suffering and loss.

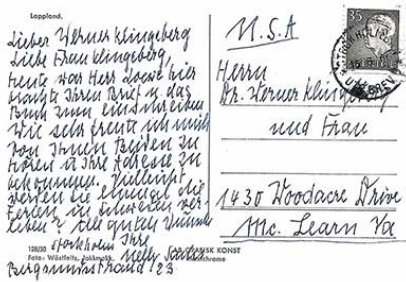
Beginning with the publication of her first volume of poetry, *In the House of Death* (1947), Sachs transformed the language of mourning and memory into poetic testimonials to the dead, lamentations over the Shoah, and dirges about the Jewish exile, sometimes influenced by Chassidism and Jewish mysticism, as discussed above, and evoking the prophetic language of the Pentateuch. Her collections *Eclipse of Star* (1949), *No One Knows Where to Go* (1957), and *Flight and Metamorphosis* (1959) develop and reinforce the cycle of suffering, persecution, exile and death that characterizes the life of the Jewish people.

Sachs looked for a way to harmonize the disjunctive relationship between faith, history and literature, and her work remains a unique attempt to find metaphors that bridge the gap between experience and belief. She viewed her poetic metaphors as "wounds" that enabled her to speak through the millions of murdered Jews, and her poetry, considered a model for how to speak to G-d about the Holocaust, walked the very challenging line between embracing the dialectic of religious tradition while not negating the truth and repercussions of history's ultimate cataclysmic event. Ironically, some commentators criticize her visionary and mystical Holocaust-related work because she continued to reflect the German romantic tradition in her writing style.

Perhaps Sachs's best-known work is her verse-drama *Eli: A Mystery Play of the Suffering of Israel* (1943), the tale of an eight-year-old Polish boy who was killed when his parents were being dragged away to their deaths by an unknown enemy and the ensuing search by a cobbler for his murderer. The first Holocaust drama ever written, it became an acclaimed radio play in Germany in 1958. In *Eli*, Sachs made evident her belief that the future could not be built on the ruins of hatred and revenge; instead, she hoped that her poetry would be an agent of healing and a source of renewal.



In this handwritten postcard, Sachs writes to Dr. Werner and Mrs. [Susanne] Klingeberg:



Undated handwritten correspondence from Sachs to Dr. and Mrs. Werner Klingeberg.

Herr Loewe was here today and brought your letter and the book to be inscribed. How happy I was to hear from you both and to get your address. Perhaps some time you'll spend a vacation in Sweden?

Best wishes.

Yours, Nelly Sachs.

It is interesting that Klingeberg (1910-1982), who was a pro-Nazi who joined the NSDAP as early as 1930, asked Sachs to inscribe his book. As a leader of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), he traveled to the United States and helped manage the German Olympic team for the 1932 Los Angeles games, played a leading role in organizing the infamous 1936 Berlin "Hitler Olympics" games, and served as the official IOC Secretary-General throughout World War II. From May 1940 until the end of the war, he also served with the German News Service as branch director of the radio listening service for transmissions abroad in Paris, and some believe that he was a member of Germany's foreign intelligence department and a Nazi spy who operated under the perfect cover of the IOC. When the war ended, Klingeberg, on the recommendation of IOC leader Avery Brundage, served as a translator for the American and British occupying powers in Germany and, later, as the German ambassador to Gabon.

By the time of her death from cancer on May 12, 1970, and her burial in a Jewish cemetery, Sachs's work had been translated into fifteen languages. Sadly, she has been largely forgotten, and one of the most important poetic voices of the twentieth century has been generally lost to the winds of time.



Memorial plaque at Sachs's Berlin home.

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*Agnon portrait.*

A central figure of modern Hebrew fiction and a prolific writer in both Hebrew and Yiddish, Agnon's short stories, novels and anthologies drew from, and in turn strengthened, the national spirit of the Jewish people in the age of Zionism, the Holocaust and the founding of Israel. Attempting to recapture the fading tradition of the European shtetl, his works characteristically deal with the conflict between traditional Jewish life and the modern world, the disintegration of traditional life, and the loss of faith and identity. He is unique in his ability to paint the complexities of the human condition by placing these very human stories within the mosaic of the *mesorah* and Jewish tradition, and the resulting composite of his

biography with the history of the Jewish people is central to his oeuvre. Manifesting a distinctive linguistic style, mixing modern and rabbinic Hebrew, he also played a leading role in expanding the characteristic view of the narrator's role in literature.







Agnon anthology and original dedication by the author.

Although it is well beyond the scope of this article to analyze, or even list, Agnon's extensive oeuvre, his greatest novel is undoubtedly *Temol Shilshom* (1945), considered to be "the Great Israeli Novel," which provides a powerful description of Eretz Yisrael during the days of the Second *Aliyah* and portrays the archetypal tension between religion and secularism, faith and heresy, and tradition and modernity. Another of his renowned works is *Days of Awe*, a treasury of traditions, legends, and commentaries on the *Yomim Noraim*.

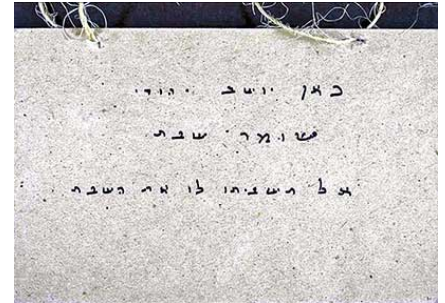
Throughout his stories, Agnon promotes the sense that the Jewish spirit will never be defeated by the cruelty of its enemies and will endure forever. Accordingly, he believed that Holocaust narratives are lacking when they dwell primarily upon devastation when a more fitting – and more authentically Jewish – approach would be to remember and explore the lost Jewish communities of Europe before the Nazis wiped them out.

Born in the shtetl of Buczacz, Galicia, as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes, Agnon (1888-1970) received a traditional Jewish education in *cheder*, but it was his father, a rabbi who personally taught him Jewish texts and *Haskalah* writings and tutored him in German, which most affected his early religious thinking. At the age of eight, he began to write in Hebrew and Yiddish; he went on to become a regular contributor to *Ha-Mitzpeh* and,



before making *aliyah* in 1907, he had published about 70 pieces in Hebrew and Yiddish. Removed from shtetl life and placed amidst a new and evolving creative Hebrew literary center, he never again wrote in Yiddish. His first short story, *Agunot*, was published in Eretz Yisrael in 1908 under the pen name “Agnon” (which sounds like “*Agunot*”).

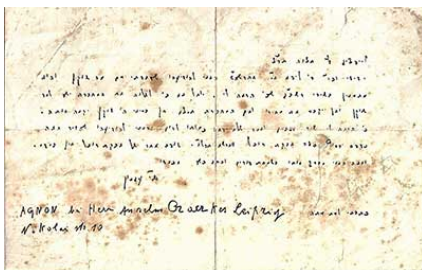
For a relatively brief period in his life, Agnon abandoned his strict religious observance, beginning with his arrival in Eretz Yisrael in 1908, when he joined the secular literary community of the Second *Aliyah* and broke with his Orthodox upbringing. Later, drawn to Germany, where he lived from 1913 to 1924, he developed close relationships with well-known Jewish intellectuals, including Martin Buber, with whom he collaborated on an anthology of Chassidic stories, and many of his early books appeared in Buber’s *Jüdischer Verlag* (Berlin). Always an active Zionist, he remained strictly observant for the rest of his life after his permanent return to Eretz Yisrael in 1924.



Sign on door at Agnon’s Talpilot home:  
“Here resides a Sabbath Observant Jew  
– do not disturb his Shabbat.”

Unfortunately for Agnon, not only did the sign fail to deter people from coming to his home, but many viewed the sign, which he would put up anew each week, as a signed souvenir ripe for the taking.

While in Germany, Agnon met Shlomo Zalman Schocken, a wealthy businessman who became his admirer, supporter, publisher and literary patron who would later play a leading role in promoting him for the Nobel Prize. From 1931 on, his work was published by Schocken Books and his short stories appeared regularly in *Haaretz*, a newspaper owned by the Schocken family.



Agnon’s letter re Schocken’s interest in the poems of Rashbag. (Note that the return address is “Czaszkes,” his original family name.)

In the 1930 letter from Leipzig exhibited here, Agnon writes to his friend regarding Schocken’s interest in the poems of the Rashbag which, he says, should be sent directly to him. Shimon ben Gamliel, aka the “Rashbag” (c. 10 BCE-70 AD), was a *Tanna* who served as *Nasi* of the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem just before the destruction of the Second Temple and who became one of the *Aseret Hirugei Malchut* (the Ten Martyrs) of Jewish liturgy. Agnon’s “chicken-scrawl” handwriting was

repeatedly illegible and often unreadable, and it fell to his wife, Esther, to regularly

type or transcribe his correspondence and work. (Her typewriter is on display at Shai Agnon House in Jerusalem.)

After a fire destroyed his home and his valuable Hebrew book collection, which included many significant unpublished manuscripts (1924), Agnon resettled in Jerusalem where, again, his valuable library was destroyed during the Arab riots of 1929. In his novel *A Guest for the Night*, he compares the two fires to the two destructions of the *Beit HaMikdash* and his sojourn in Germany as emblematic of the Jewish exile.

Aside from his Nobel Prize, Agnon was twice awarded both the Bialik Prize for literature (1934 and 1950) and the Israel Prize for literature (1954 and 1958). After his death and burial on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem, he – unlike Sachs, his co-Nobel winner – remains atop the pantheon of the greatest Jewish writers, and his writing continues to be the subject of broad interest and academic research. However, much of his work has become inaccessible, even to Hebrew readers in Israel, because his writing reflects an inherent assumption that his Hebrew readers would always be familiar with Jewish rituals, the language of Judaism and its basic religious texts, and the time-honored Hebrew literary tradition honed over many centuries. Sadly, most contemporary Israelis lack the requisite cultural literacy and religious background necessary to appreciate his poetry and prose.



*Original newspaper photo of Prime Minister Golda Meir and Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Shlomo Goren attending Agnon's funeral.*

Agnon's image, with a list of his works and his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, appeared on the fifty-shekel bill (in circulation 1985-1914). The main street in Jerusalem's Givat Oranim neighborhood, "Sderot Shai Agnon," and a synagogue in Talpiot near his home, are both named after him.

### Saul Jay Singer

Saul Jay Singer serves as senior legal ethics counsel with the District of Columbia Bar and is a collector of extraordinary original Judaica documents and letters. He welcomes comments at [sauljsing@gmail.com](mailto:sauljsing@gmail.com).



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