

Nobel Prize in Literature 1966



Shmuel Yosef Agnon



Nelly Sachs

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1966 was divided equally between Shmuel Yosef Agnon "for his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people" and Nelly Sachs "for her outstanding lyrical and dramatic writing, which interprets Israel's destiny with touching strength".

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 honour two writers who, although they write in 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.

Shmuel Agnon's reputation as the foremost writer in modern Hebrew literature has gradually penetrated linguistic barriers which, in this case, are particularly obstructive. His

most important works are now available in Swedish under the title *I havets mitt* (In the Heart of the Seas). Agnon, now seventy-eight years old, began writing in Yiddish but soon changed to Hebrew, which, according to experts, he handles with absolute mastery, in a taut and sonorous prose style of extraordinary expressiveness. He was only twenty when he left his native town in East Galicia, where, as the scion of an old and respected family, he had been brought up in a scholarly tradition. He felt drawn to Palestine, where now, as an aged classical author, he can look back on the long struggle for national reestablishment, and where the so-called cultural Zionism possesses in him one of its finest creative champions.

Agnon's unique quality as a writer is apparent chiefly in the great cycle of novels set in his native town of Buczacz, once a flourishing centre of Jewish piety and rabbinical learning, now in ruins. Reality and legend stand side by side in his narrative art. *Hakhnasat Kalah*, 1922 (The Bridal Canopy), is one of his most characteristic stories, in its ingenious and earthy humour, a Jewish counterpart to *Don Quixote* and *Till Eulenspiegel*. But, perhaps, his greatest achievement is his novel *Oreach Nata Lalun*, 1939 (A Guest for the Night), which tells of a visit to Buczacz, the war-ruined city of his childhood, and of the narrator's vain attempts to assemble the congregation for a service in the synagogue. Within the framework of a local chronicle we see a wonderful portrayal of destinies and figures, of experience and meditation. The lost key to the prayer house, which the traveller finds in his knapsack only after his return to Jerusalem, is, for Agnon, a symbolic hint that the old order can never be rebuilt in the Diaspora, but only under the protection of Zionism. Agnon is a realist, but there is always a mystical admixture which lends to even the greyest and most ordinary scenes a golden atmosphere of strange fairy-tale poetry, often reminiscent of Chagall's motifs from the world of the Old Testament. He stands out as a highly original writer, endowed with remarkable gifts of humour and wisdom, and with a perspicacious play of thought combined with naive perception - in all, a consummate expression of the Jewish character.

Nelly Sachs, like so many other German-Jewish writers, suffered the fate of exile. Through Swedish intervention she was saved from persecution and the threat of deportation and was brought to this country. She has since then worked in peace as a refugee on Swedish soil, attaining the maturity and authority that are now confirmed by the Nobel Prize. In recent years she has been acclaimed in the German world as a writer of convincing worth and irresistible sincerity. With moving intensity of feeling she has given voice to the worldwide tragedy of the Jewish people, which she has expressed in lyrical laments of painful beauty and in dramatic legends. Her symbolic language boldly combines an inspired modern idiom with echoes of ancient biblical poetry. Identifying herself totally with the faith and ritual mysticism of her people, Miss Sachs has created a world of imagery which does not shun the terrible truth of the extermination camps and the corpse factories, but which, at the same time, rises above all hatred of the persecutors, merely revealing a genuine sorrow at man's debasement. Her purely lyrical production is now collected under the title *Fahrtins Staublose*, 1961 (Journey to the Beyond), which comprises six interconnected works written during a twenty-year creative period of increasing concentration. There is also a series of dramatic poems, equally remarkable in their way, under the joint title *Zeichen im Sand*, 1961 (Signs in the Sand), the themes of which might have been taken from the dark treasure house of Hassidic mysticism, but which, here, have taken on new vigour and vital meaning. Let it suffice here to mention the mystery play *Eli* (1950) about an eight-year-old boy who is beaten to death by a German soldier in Poland when he blows on his shepherd's pipe to call on heaven's help when his parents are taken away. The visionary cobbler Michael manages to trace the culprit to the next village. The soldier has been seized by remorse and, at the encounter in the forest, he collapses without Michael's having to raise his hand against him. This ending denotes a divine justice which has nothing to do with earthly retribution.

Nelly Sachs's writing is today the most intense artistic expression of the reaction of the Jewish spirit to suffering, and thus it can indeed be said to fulfill the humane purpose underlying Alfred Nobel's will.

Doctor Agnon - according to the wording of the diploma, this year's Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to you for your "profoundly distinctive narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people". We should be happy if you would consider this international distinction as a sign that your writing need not be isolated within the boundary of its language, and that it has proved to have the power to reach out beyond all confining walls, and to arouse mankind's sympathy, understanding, and respect. Through me, the Swedish Academy conveys its sincere congratulations, and I now ask you to receive the Prize from the hands of His Majesty, the King.

Miss Nelly Sachs - you have lived a long time in our country, first as an obscure stranger and then as an honoured guest. Today the Swedish Academy honours your "outstanding lyrical and dramatic writings, which interpret Israel's destiny with touching strength". On an occasion like this it is natural also to recall the invaluable interest you have shown in Swedish literature, a token of friendship which, in turn, has found a response in the desire of our Swedish writers to translate your work. Offering you the congratulations of the Swedish Academy, I ask you now to receive this year's Nobel Prize in Literature from the hands of His Majesty, the King.

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