

The *Storchen* is a place where people come to contemplate and meet others, as it was back in 1960, when an encounter of great significance to the literary world took place here.

PRESERVED IN POETRY

Zurich, At the Stork
For Nelly Sachs

Our talk was of Too Much, of
Too Little. Of Thou
and Yet-Thou, of
clouding through brightness,
Jewishness, of
your God.

Of
that.
On the day of an ascension, the
Minster stood over there, it came
with some gold across the water.

Our talk was of your God, I spoke
against him, I let the heart
I had
hope:
for
his highest, death-rattled, his
wrangling word—

Your eye looked at me, looked away,
your mouth
spoke toward the eye, I heard:

We
really don't know, you know,
we
really don't know
what
counts

Paul Celan (translation by John Felstiner)

The Hotel Storchen in Zurich is a magical place. Situated on the banks of the River Limmat, it has welcomed guests, including many great names, for over seven centuries. In 1960, an encounter of great significance to the literary world took place here: German poet Paul Celan met Nelly Sachs, who later won the Nobel Prize, on the terrace of the Hotel Storchen and recounted their conversation in a famous poem.

Nelly Sachs, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature and one of the most important poets of the 20th century, maintained a lively correspondence with the much younger poet Paul Celan for 16 years.



Paul Celan was 40 years old when he finally got the chance to pick up his idol Nelly Sachs at Zurich Airport in 1960. Deeply moved by their encounter, Celan wrote this poem for Nelly Sachs.

Nelly Sachs Paul Celan

“Zurich. At the Stork”: The events recounted in this poem by Paul Celan, one of the most significant figures in the German literary scene in the post-war era, took place in May 1960 on the terrace of the *Hotel Storchen* in Zurich. The poem is symbolic in several respects, as it recalls the first personal encounter between two German-speaking poets who had both been pursued by the Nazis and forced to flee Germany: Paul Celan (1920–1970) and Nelly Sachs (1891–1970).

The two poets had long been aware of each other, primarily through their work. By 1954 they had started corresponding. Both had suffered similar experiences during the Second World War. Nelly Sachs had fled to Stockholm with her mother. Living in a small one-room apartment, she devoted her time to writing, returning time and again to the subjects of flight and persecution. Celan had lost his parents in a concentration camp in Ukraine in June 1942, an experience that greatly influenced his thoughts and literary work from then on. Endless grief over his loss was coupled with the shame of the survivor, unable to protect his loved ones and obliged to continue writing in the same language as that of their murderers. Nelly Sachs, whose poems set standards in 20th-century German lyricism, offered to meet Paul Celan several times to discuss these oppressive questions. The opportunity

arose when she was invited to Meersburg on Lake Constance to receive the Droste Award: “On 25th May I will fly with a Swedish friend to Zurich”, she wrote to Celan on 30 April 1960. “From there to Meersburg on the 29th, then back to Zurich. Ticino from 2nd June, then back to Stockholm. This is the first time since fleeing that I have travelled abroad from Sweden. I would probably never have done so if the doctor had not urgently insisted on Switzerland. And so I have the day in Meersburg between this leap into the unknown.” Then came the crucial question: “Is there a chance to perhaps meet you in Zurich?”

Celan was waiting at the airport with his family on 25 May 1960. Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann, who lived in Zurich and was involved with Max Frisch, also came, as did the author and publicist Hans Rudolf Hilty (1925 –1 994) from Eastern Switzerland, who would be giving the address in honour of Nelly Sachs at the award ceremony in Meersburg. “It was so moving, everyone embraced me, unforgettable”, she wrote to her friends in Stockholm the next day from the hotel. “Flowers, flowers. In the evening, we ordered dinner in a restaurant with the same friends. Everything was wonderfully harmonious, and Max Frisch came too. It is unbelievable after so much darkness [...] And the hotel is on the lakeshore, just like the Grand Hotel in Stockholm.”

The next day, the long-awaited meeting took place on the terrace of the *Storchen*. Paul Celan was 30 years old, Nelly Sachs 68. Celan noted: “26th May at the Stork Hotel / 4h Nelly Sachs, alone”. After the award ceremony in Meersburg, where Nelly Sachs held a memorable acceptance speech entitled “We are all sufferers”, Celan and Sachs travelled on to Paris, where Celan finally put pen to paper and wrote this poem, which deals with the topic of religion and world affairs (see previous page) in the aftermath of the horrors of the Holocaust. Whereas Nelly Sachs believes in God, Celan expresses doubt. The final lines leave many questions unanswered: “We / really don’t know, you know / we / really don’t know / what / counts.”

The poem was published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* newspaper on 7 August 1960, together with the poem “Mund” (Mouth) by Nelly Sachs. It was printed for the first time in 1963 in the volume “Die Niemandrose” (Nobody’s Rose). Even today, guests come to the terrace of the *Hotel Storchen* to follow the traces of Nelly Sachs and Paul Celan. *Reto Wilhelm*