

## HOLOCAUST POETRY

### NELLY SACHS

How does one continue living in a post-Holocaust world, after having experienced the physical and spiritual dehumanization of concentration camp life? It is a question, which thousands of Holocaust survivors had to ask themselves after liberation from the camps. While there were many similarities in the answers they found, there were many differences based on a myriad of factors: How many loved ones did they leave behind in the gas chambers and crematoria? Were there family and friends remaining who could stand by them in their attempt to return to the world of the *living*? And—perhaps most important of all—did they possess the inner-emotional and spiritual resilience to reconnect with a world which had seemed to be so indifferent to their suffering? Could a faith in the goodness of mankind ever be restored to those who had lost so much? To be sure, no one ever returned from the Nazi concentration camp *not* dramatically changed. Many were able to regain a semblance of normalcy—even a return to a life filled with successful careers, new and loving relationships, and with the desire to bring a new generation of children into this safer world, albeit one which would always carry the burden of the Holocaust on its shoulders.

The closing passage of Elie Wiesel’s memoir *Night* written with words of unusual simplicity, yet with incredible power, describes the vulnerability of the Holocaust survivor as he faces a post-Holocaust world:

One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I wanted to see myself in the mirror hanging on the opposite wall. I had not seen myself since the ghetto. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they gazed into mine, has never left me.

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Avon Books, 1960) pg. 127

Please keep the thoughts of this survivor in your mind when you read below Nelly Sachs’ poem: **Chorus of the Rescued**. The discussion questions following the poem will guide you to a better understanding of how very tenuous life was for those who had lived through the dehumanizing experience of the Holocaust.

We, the rescued,  
From whose hollow bones death had begun to whittle his flutes,  
And on whose sinews he had already stroked his bow—  
Our bodies continue to lament  
With their mutilated music.  
We, the rescued,  
The nooses would for our necks still dangle  
Before us in the blue air—  
Hourglasses still fill with our dripping blood.  
We, the rescued,

The worms of fear still feed on us.  
Our constellation is buried in dust.  
We, the rescued,  
Beg you:  
Show us your sun, but gradually.  
Lead us from star to star, step by step.  
Be gentle when you teach us to live again.  
Lest the song of a bird,  
Or a pail being filled at the well,  
Let our badly sealed pain burst forth again  
And carry us away—  
We beg you:  
Do not show us an angry dog, not yet—  
It could be, it could be  
That we will dissolve into dust—  
Dissolve into dust before your eyes.  
For what binds our fabric together?  
We whose breath vacated us,  
Whose soul fled to Him out of that midnight  
Long before our bodies were rescued  
Into the arc of the moment.  
We, the rescued,  
We press your hand  
We look into your eye—  
But all that binds us together now is leave-taking.  
The leave-taking in the dust  
Binds us together with you.

Cited in **Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology**, edited by  
Lawrence L. Langer (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
1995) pg. 643

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the poem's title? Note the use of the *we* throughout the poem: Is there a connection here with the title? Why is this of particular significance?
2. There are two major parts of the poem. Can you identify them?
3. Summarize the experiences of those "rescued," presented in the first 13 lines of the poem, by putting into your own words the following metaphors:

"Our bodies continue to lament with their mutilated music?"

“The nooses wound . . . still dangle before us in the blue air—“

“Hourglasses . . . with dripping blood.”

“The worms of fear . . .”

“Our constellation is buried in dust”

4. Assume you were a therapist treating a patient who had survived captivity in a Nazi concentration camp. Describe the survivors’ emotional state based on the images in the second section of the poem. Make inferences to specific incidents in the concentration camps, which are alluded to in the poem through poetic imagery. (e.g., “the song of a bird,” “a pail being filled at the well,” “into the ark of the moment.”)
5. The image of *dust* appears several times in the poem. Can you interpret its significance?
6. Why is *leave-taking* the defining force, which seems to bind together the “chorus of the rescued?”
7. Can you find other ways of teaching a Holocaust survivor how “to live again?” Is silence and forgetting the horrors a viable solution? Is the poet supporting this approach or is it the *timing* and *how* one remembers past trauma, which are important in the healing process?
  - a. What might happen to the “corpse” whom Elie Wiesel sees reflected in the mirror, if this survivor had been exposed too quickly to the “sun” in Nelly Sachs’ poem?
8. According to the poet, what role did faith play in a victim’s survival in the concentration camp? Might faith play a role in post Holocaust life?
  - a. Who is the *you* referred to in the poem?