

November 9, 2025

A speech by students from the Paffrath Integrated Comprehensive School (IGP) at the Holocaust Memorial in the park of Villa Zanders for the annual commemoration of the victims of Kristallnacht on November 9, 1938

Lisa-Marie Schröder, Laura Steinhoff and Charlotte Zimmer, students in grade 11 at the IGP, read excerpts from texts on the 87th anniversary of Kristallnacht. Charlotte concludes her presentation with her own thoughts on the texts. Questions she has for herself, and thoughts that she and other young people have today... questions that need answers and a strong, collective attitude.

Presentation:

Exposed to Nazi terror

Leonie ("Nelly") Sachs was the only child of wealthy Jewish parents. Her greatest wish was to become a dancer, but she also began writing at an early age. Many of her later poems revolve around the "dead groom," who was arrested by the Gestapo in 1940 and later murdered. On May 16, 1940, Nelly and Margarete Sachs arrived in Stockholm on the last plane from Berlin... her father had died in 1930. While struggling to survive and caring for her ailing mother, she began writing cycles of poems and dramatic poems. Despite her productive output, Sachs was ignored in West Germany until the late 1950s. In 1965, she became the first woman to receive the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, and in 1966, she became the first and, until 2009, the only German female poet/writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize.

The Nazis confiscated the Sachs family's homes. With almost no income, mother and daughter lived in a furnished room, awaiting the opportunity to leave the country or deportation. The poet was summoned to the Gestapo several times. One morning, SA men broke into her apartment and looted it.

Nelly Sachs wrote about it:

There were footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Footsteps pounded on the door. "Now!!" they said: "The time is ours."

The door was the first skin to be torn open.

The skin of home.

Then the knife of separation plunged deeper.

And this happened on Earth.

*Living under threat: rotting in an open grave without death.
The brain can no longer grasp.
There is nothing left to grasp here, not here!
All that has been lived – Here.
All that has been loved – Here.
The grace of no longer being allowed to exist.
The highest wish on Earth:
To die without being murdered.*

A poem:

Peoples of the Earth.
Do not destroy the universe of words,
do not cut with the knife of hatred
the sound that was born with breath.

Peoples of the Earth.
Oh, that no one should mean death when they speak of life.
And no one should mean blood when they speak of cradle.

Peoples of the Earth, let the words return to their source,
for it is they who can raise the horizons
to the true heavens.
(Author unknown)

My thoughts on this:

Strange looks,
insults,
humiliated in the street, persecuted, imprisoned, and murdered.
Arrested without cause.
Thousands of innocent Jewish people were brutally murdered on the night of November
9th to 10th.
Why must the world be like this?
Why hatred always and everywhere?
Everyone can imagine what hatred is.
Insults, violence, humiliation.
But what happened that night is much more.
It is dehumanization.
A feeling of cruelty.
A feeling that cuts to the bone.

Old women and men.

Adults. Teenagers. Children. Babies. *Human beings*.

But why am I saying all this?

All these difficult words that don't really change anything. Do they?

No.

I can't change what happened back then, and I alone can't prevent it from happening again.

But WE can. WE as a community.

Because I want the souls who were silenced back then to at least be heard today.

We can mourn the deceased and give them the appreciation and respect they needed back then.

(Charlotte Zimmer)