

INTRODUCTION

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I OWE MY CAREER TO AVROM SUTZKEVER. HE WAS MY LIVING link to what Lucy Dawidowicz referred to as “that place and time,” a world in which one’s expression of Jewishness and one’s engagement with the world were synonymous with the project of building modern Yiddish culture. In the summer of 1994, when I called on Sutzkever in his modest apartment on Moshe Sharett Street in Tel Aviv after having spent a semester studying his work at McGill University, he was excited to learn about the questions that animated the newest generation of Yiddish studies scholars. Though he was not in the best of health, our conversation about his earliest years as a poet in Vilna energized him in ways that enlivened me even more. He leaned forward in his chair when discussing the antics of his colleagues in the literary group Yung-Vilne and young love consummated over books and strolls along the Viliye River. How strange, I remember thinking about myself then, to feel as if I had been born too late. By all rational measures, I was the fortunate one, raised in the freedom of Canada with the privilege of never knowing the humiliations, terrors, and ultimately mass murder that ended the first stage of Sutzkever’s career in interwar Poland. However, Sutzkever possessed something that neither I nor most of my contemporaries in North America had: birth into a Jewish language. Having

come to my advanced study of Yiddish and Hebrew belatedly, I learned from Sutzkever and his contemporaries that there was something deeply compelling about engaging in dialogue with the world from the perspective of one's own national languages and culture. Sutzkever might have sensed this himself when he handed me his newest volume with the Yiddish inscription "For my young friend Cammy," ending with a doodle of a self-portrait and a self-confident flourish of a signature. His career was marked at various moments by his role as a mentor, and I appreciated this encouraging gesture. As it happens, I went on after that summer to dedicate my graduate studies to the study of Sutzkever and his literary generation, an environment I refer to elsewhere as "when Yiddish was young." The news of his death almost sixteen years later affected me in ways that I could not have expected, as if my own youth had ended with him. I had now matured into a scholarly generation responsible for interpretation and transmission of a cultural and literary legacy that could no longer rely on him as its living standard bearer.

Sutzkever's birth on the eve of World War I in the Yiddish-speaking heartland of Lithuanian Jewry and his death in the Hebrew metropolis of Tel Aviv in 2010 are symbolic of the dramatic geographic, linguistic, and cultural shifts experienced by Eastern European Jews in the twentieth century. Sutzkever's career spanned an interwar secular Yiddish culture unprecedented in its creative scope and geographic range, its destruction at the hands of two totalitarian regimes, the dispersion of its remnants, and a commitment to its regeneration amid a completely transformed postwar Jewish landscape. Though Yiddish literature was blessed with many important writers who came of age at a time marked both by modernist accomplishment and broad popular appeal, few managed to combine Sutzkever's self-assurance as a champion of poetic aestheticism with as dramatic

a biography and sense of national responsibility for the postwar fate of Yiddish culture. In the course of a writing career of more than seven decades, he authored more than two dozen poetic volumes, several volumes of surrealist fiction, and a prose memoir of his time in the Vilna ghetto, while for almost half a century *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), the literary journal he founded and edited in Tel Aviv, was the leading international quarterly for discussion and analysis of Yiddish letters.

Sutzkever's importance, of course, is not only measured by his productivity and longevity but by the singularity and universality of his voice. He was the last Yiddish neoromantic, and as such his poetry was marked from its earliest articulations by a fascination with nature, wonder at existence, and celebration of the creative process. As a young writer in Vilna in the 1930s Sutzkever was criticized for privileging art over the context in which it is produced. Though history would later impose itself upon him, first as a poet and memoirist of the Vilna ghetto and later as one of the most refined Yiddish voices to explore the rebirth of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, he fiercely privileged the aesthetic integrity of the poem itself over any prosaic cause it might serve. Sutzkever liberated Yiddish poetry from the cacophonous politics of the Jewish street while setting for himself the task of crafting a poetic idiom that seemed protolitururgical in its groping for new ways to experience contact with eternity. Moreover, as a consummate master of Yiddish form, rhythm, musicality, and inventive wordplay, he was deeply influenced by the experimental New York writers of the Yiddish introspectivist movement *Inzikh*, with whom he shared the belief that the Jewishness of a Yiddish poet was not necessarily to be found in his subject matter but rather in the organic expression of the poet's relationship with Yiddish as artistic instrument. Sutzkever's *yidishkayt* is predicated, then, on the evident joy he

takes in exploring the creative potential of the Yiddish word itself, and pushing the boundaries of the language's prosody. Even after returning to witness the complete destruction of Vilna his primary allegiance to the sacredness of the Yiddish word and its conjuring powers remained unchanged: "I love the unadulterated taste of a word that won't betray itself, / not some sweet-and-sour hybrid with a strange taste. / Whether I rise on the rungs of my ribs, or fall— / that word is mine. A tongue burns in the black pupil of my eye. / No matter how great my generation might be—greater yet is its smallness. / Still eternal is the word in all of its ugliness and splendor." ("To the Thin Vein on My Head," 1945).

AVROM (ABRAHAM) SUTZKEVER WAS BORN JULY 15, 1913 IN Smorgon, an industrial town half way between Vilna and Minsk (then part of late tsarist Russia, today in Belarus), the youngest child of Herts and Reyne Sutzkever. His maternal grandfather was the author of a widely respected rabbinic treatise, part of Lithuanian Jewry's elite tradition of Torah scholarship. His father inherited a local leather goods factory but modeled the *Litvak* commitment to diligent study in his spare time. In 1915, the Jewish residents of Smorgon were falsely accused of espionage and ordered to leave their homes and businesses within twenty-four hours. The Sutzkevers sought refuge in the east, stopping first in Minsk before being encouraged to go on to Omsk, a city on the Irtysh River in southwestern Siberia. Though comparatively safe from the ravages of a continental war that caught large numbers of Eastern European Jews in its crosshairs, the family struggled with poverty, food shortages, an unfamiliar climate, civil war, and Herts Sutzkever's declining health, which prevented him from sustained work. What the Sutzkevers lacked in material security they compensated for in spiritual community by transforming the modest family home in exile into a local

intellectual salon. In his later poetry, he often credited his father, who entertained the family on his fiddle, and his older sister Etl, who was a promising poet, as important creative influences. His father's sudden death from a heart attack in Siberia in 1922, and his sister's subsequent death from meningitis in 1925, prompted Sutzkever to return to them often in his writing by situating himself as the inheritor of their artistic potential.

After returning to find the family home in Smorgon in ruins, Sutzkever's widowed mother moved with her children to Vilna (Yiddish Vilne, Polish Wilno), a city recently incorporated into the new Polish republic. According to local Jewish legend, Napoleon had been so impressed with its many establishments of Jewish learning that he referred to it as the Jerusalem of Lithuania. Vilna had a pedigree as a leading center of rabbinic scholarship, home in the eighteenth century to the Vilna Gaon and the proud center of Lithuanian Jewry's rationalist resistance to the spiritual excesses of Hasidism. By the nineteenth century Vilna was a major center for the publication of both traditional religious texts and the modern (secular) Hebrew and Yiddish literatures that were beginning to emerge. As the birthplace of the Jewish socialist Bund and an influential center of Hebraism, the city also served as a significant site for the political awakening of Eastern European Jewry. In 1902 shoemaker Hirsh Lekert became a local revolutionary martyr and folk hero after he was sentenced to death for his assassination attempt on the local tsarist governor. By the twentieth century Jewish Vilna's communal libraries, schools, self-help organizations, and press contributed to the city's dynamic cultural landscape, providing locals with substantive local pride. If Warsaw had a demographic advantage and Łódź industrial ingenuity, Vilna had cultural leadership. By the 1920s the city asserted itself as the unofficial cultural capital of a transnational Yiddish-speaking

homeland. Since no national community could claim majority status in Vilna, Yiddish played a prominent public role in the city's multicultural life and was promoted as a symbol of the national distinctiveness of Polish Jewry. Its Yiddish-speaking schools (including a gymnasium), teacher-training college, technical academy, athletic clubs, scouts, choir, theater groups, and five daily newspapers provided a way for the city's Jewish intelligentsia to rally Jews around Yiddish as a symbol of both civic and national solidarity. Yiddish was actively promoted as a component of *doikayt* (literarily, an ideological commitment to "hereness" that relied on Polish Jewry's sense of its cultural rootedness). When YIVO, the Jewish Scientific Institute, established itself in Vilna in 1925, the city could boast of hosting the leading Yiddish institution for advanced academic research in all of Poland, with projects focused on the history, folklore, philology, economics, demography, psychology, and education of Eastern European Jewry. Its expert scholars added to the city's sense of itself as a generator and exporter of ideas that drew inspiration from roots in a broad communal foundation.

It was in this environment that Sutzkever suddenly found himself as a young teenager. His mother settled the children in the working class Jewish neighborhood of Shnipeshik, across the river from both the traditional Jewish quarter with its narrow alleyways, arches, traditional study houses, and main synagogue complex, and the newer neighborhood of Pohulanka where many of the community's modern institutions and worldly intellectuals settled. The sudden death of his sister and his brother's decision to study in Paris and then emigrate to the Land of Israel left Sutzkever alone with just his mother. The family apartment overlooked an apple orchard, providing him with ample opportunity to gaze out at nature while recognizing in his mother's struggles the dignity of a life organized around cultural pride rather than

material riches. Their neighborhood would go on to give birth to an impressive number of fellow Yiddish poets and artists who came of age as writers alongside Sutzkever in the 1930s.

Sutzkever himself did not benefit from a formal Yiddish education despite growing up in this center of modern Yiddish culture. His mother sent him to the local Talmud Torah, which provided scholarships for children in need, and then to a Polish-Hebrew high school. His initial experiments as a poet were in Hebrew, not Yiddish. Only later did he immerse himself in the classical and contemporary library of Yiddish literature through a disciplined program of self-study at the long reading table of the city's famed Strashun library and in the collection of the secular Yiddish Central Education Committee. Deep friendships with local scholars and writers also influenced his literary education. Dr. Max Weinreich was a critical early influence. Weinreich took time away from his work as director of YIVO to model engaged cultural activism, serving as the head scout for *Bin* (The Bee), the local Yiddishist scouting organization into which Sutzkever had been recruited. Sutzkever's scouting years encouraged an intimate bond with the natural beauty of the Lithuanian countryside through weekend hikes and summer camping retreats that would prove deeply influential for his poetry of the late 1930s. Weinreich, who had Sutzkever swear an oath of service to Yiddish culture as part of his induction into the scouts, later took him on as a YIVO fellow with whom he studied premodern Yiddish literature, providing the young writer with a sense of the classical roots of Ashkenaz (Zelig Kalmanovitch and Noyekh Prilutski, YIVO's other prominent scholars of Yiddish literary history and linguistics, were also influential in this regard). Sutzkever's future wife Freydke Levitan, who worked as a bibliographer at YIVO and could recite Yiddish verse to him by heart, encouraged his literary ambitions at the same time that

she won his heart. His general literary education was rounded out by discussions of Russian romanticism and symbolism (and even an introduction to Edgar Allen Poe) in the apartment and summer home of his friend Mikhl Tshernikhov (Astour), whose father was a local intellectual and Yiddish political activist associated with Territorialism, a movement that sought to secure Jewish cultural autonomy in hospitable lands. The courses on Polish literature that Sutzkever audited with Professor Manfred Kridl at the city's Stefan Batory University allowed him to adopt the Polish romantics as an equally important crosscultural literary influence.

Sutzkever's professional entrée into contemporary Yiddish poetry is associated with his inclusion in the literary and artistic group Yung-Vilne (Young Vilna), the last of the major modernist Yiddish groups in interwar Poland. Yung-Vilne did not have an official ideological or aesthetic program to which members were obliged, allowing it to attract a diverse group of ambitious talents who all excelled in their own genre. It included the poet Chaim Grade (who would go on to renown as the greatest prose writer to capture the traditional world of Lithuanian Jewry as it confronted the forces of modernity), the parodist Leyzer Volf, the fabulist Perets Miranski, the symbolist Elkhonen Vogler, the proletarian poets Shmerke Kacerginski and Shimshn Kahan, the short story writer Moyshe Levin, and the artists Bentsie Mikhtom and Rokhl Sutzkever. They all integrated local concerns and settings into their work while keeping an eye on broader trends in contemporary Yiddish literature. In Yung-Vilne Sutzkever found a helpful combination of camaraderie and competition. His early poetry so resisted the leftist engagement expected of its membership that he was initially rejected by the group. Eventually, his publication elsewhere forced its members to take notice, and he was accepted into its fellowship. In "May Rains" (1934),

one of his earliest published lyrics, Sutzkever identifies his immersion in nature as the primal source of poetry: “I burst out free and uncontrollably / into shimmering distances. / And I sing a hymn / to the life that dawns!” The poem frees the reader from the month of May’s hackneyed proletarian associations to claim spring bloom as metaphor for poetic birth. Its speaker’s disorientation gradually gives way to modernist liberation, as he suddenly finds himself *hefkerdik* (unclaimed) in nature, bursting free from all civilizing expectations in order to compose a psalm to existence outside the strictures of traditional liturgy. Similarly, when Sutzkever introduced himself to an overseas audience in the New York journal *Inzikh* with the lines “*Ot bin ikh dokh—* Here I Am, blooming as big as I am, / stung with songs as with fiery bees”—he was counting on the contrast between his earthy Yiddish and the familiar resonance of his ancient forefathers’ Hebrew *hineni* (“Here I Am”) to establish his work as a fresh, contemporary idiom for revelation.

Sutzkever went on to become one of Yung-Vilne’s most productive members and enthusiastic organizers, bringing attention to its work through the prestige of his frequent publication in the leading Yiddish journals of New York and his riveting presence at local readings. He continued to represent the aesthetic, experimental wing of the group, who were in competition with its populists, debuting in the group’s little magazine in 1935 with the provocation that “The sun is my flag and words are my anchor.” Though Yung-Vilne would remain his creative home through his internment in the Vilna ghetto (where he organized an evening of readings in honor of its members as a way to raise communal spirits) in many ways he also was its anomaly. His thematic fascination with nature, faith in Yiddish poetry as a contemporary form of metaphysical exploration, and resistance to politics were out of step with the mood and expectations of Yiddish poetry in

the mid-to-late 1930s, prompting literary critic Shmuel Niger to note that “Sutzkever sings solo.” Sutzkever intuitively recognized this by reaching out to Arn-Glants Leyeles, one of the leading American Yiddish modernists and founders of *Inzikh*, whom he saw as a writer who shared his belief that poetry diminishes itself when it serves any cause other than itself.

Sutzkever’s ambitious sequence “*Shtern in shney*” (“Stars in Snow,” 1935) is an early case in point. It allowed him to challenge expectations of poetry set in Siberia, so often associated with exile and bleakness, while simultaneously showing off his neo-classical mastery over form and modernist interest in developing a metaphorical landscape for his emergence as a poet. Sutzkever divided the cycle into thirty-six sonnets, representing twice the numerical value of the Hebrew word for “life.” At its center was a half-sonnet that marked the dividing line between childhood innocence and the transition to adult awareness. Throughout, Sutzkever reveled in new word combinations (*fliferd*—flying-horse, *vundervelder*—wonderwoods, *funkenshney*—sparklesnow, and *klangfiber*—soundfever) that yoked together the language of childhood discovery and poetic experience. The cycle’s feast of light, color, and sound provides not only a distinctive visual and aural panorama but evokes the speaker’s exuberant inner mood. In Sutzkever’s hands, Siberia is transformed into a mythopoetic landscape of creative genesis, a world of endless wonder frozen in childhood memory and here translated into sound and color: “On the diamond blue snow / I write with the wind as with a pen, / drifting in the sparkling depths / of its childhood. I have never seen / such clearness that can overcome / all the lonely shadows of thought” (“Like a Sleigh in Its Wistful Ringing”). The beings with whom he communes—for instance, the snowman and the North Star—point to a moment before the vision of a child can distinguish between dream and reality, and before the

soul of a poet is fully claimed by civilization. "Every summer, a fire snows on me, / every winter, glinting, you kling-klang in me. / May unceasing memory / be drawn to your blue smile. / May its sounds, claim, / remain over me my monument" ("North Star"). Though the cycle incorporates a father's death at its narrative center, the material struggles experienced by Sutzkever's biographical self are elided in favor of a subjective formulation of his birth as a writer. In the speaker's relationship with Tshanguri, a native Kirgiz boy that Sutzkever befriended in Omsk, Sutzkever allows Yiddish to experience a mystical exoticism that is at one with the universe. With his green eyes, furry pelt, pet camel, and flute, Tshanguri and the poet-speaker take off for adventures so far away from the family home that it is but a tiny dot on the horizon. Resting under the stars, the self-restraint of Jewish civilization left behind, the friends "kiss each blade of grass and leaf" as if it were a lover. Tshanguri was as important a poetic influence on young Sutzkever as were his scholarly and literary mentors in Vilna. The boys' friendship taught Sutzkever how to engage the natural world as mystical nourishment for his words. In a poem composed after the completion of the "Shtern in shney" cycle he reflects on the difference between a childhood in supposed exile in Siberia and the fully realized Jewish world in which he was composing his poetry in Vilna, complicating assumptions about Jewish home and homelessness: "I once had a homeland of clarity / (not like now, but a real one, a true one) / where dew kissed the cherry trees / in the freshness of a sun-drenched orchard . . . / There I had my own private heavens / and stars; an alef, a beys, and a gimel / through which I read golden poems / in the turquoise blue nights. / The sky has since clouded. / Its wisdom consists of blood. / My alphabet torn apart by the winds. / And it has been quite some time since I read poems / in the turquoise blue night."

Though Sutzkever initially wanted to publish “Shtern in shney” as its own volume, ultimately it was included as the final section of *Lider* (*Poems*, 1937), his first published collection of poetry. He then reworked the cycle during and after the war before its publication as *Sibir* (*Siberia*, 1952), the version upon which the translations included in this volume are based.

In *Lider* Sutzkever showed off his intimate sense of fellowship with the natural rhythms of the environments that gave birth to him as a writer. The volume was divided into four sections, one for each of the seasons, and was subdivided into fifty-two poems, one for each week of the year. Its mood stood in deliberate contrast to the anxiety of his local readers who were confronting rising Polish nationalism and worrisome threats from Nazi Germany. Instead, *Lider* offered up a way to read oneself as an organic part of a spiritual whole, to seek out a way for Yiddish poetry to serve as a new psalter for a life led outside the contours of formal religion. For instance, in “Blond Dawn” the distinction between sacred and profane time is collapsed when the daily sunrise is experienced as a *yontev* (a holiday). Even when Sutzkever turned his attention to social themes, rarely did his verse give in to gloominess or self-doubt. His natural predilection was for celebration, as when he described a march of Jewish youth as “a rivulet of sound” driving out the shadows “like bridges of light” (“Gates of the Ghetto”). What others would have read as political activism Sutzkever transforms into a release of sound, light, and primal energy. In its conflation of the self with nature, and poetry with the unending seasonal cycle of creative regeneration, *Lider* staked out a claim for the nourishing powers of Yiddish poetry to transcend the immediacy of the political moment.

One of the centerpieces of his first volume of poetry was an eight-part ballad about Cyprian Norwid, the only sketch

of any writer to be included in his debut collection. Though Adam Mickiewicz (born in a town near Vilna) was the best-known Polish romantic in Jewish intellectual circles, Sutzkever was drawn to the inherent challenge of Norwid's verse and to his innovative use of archaisms that made room for neologisms and previously unexplored rhythmic possibilities. Of the dozens of poems dedicated to Norwid during the interwar burst of interest in the romantic writer among Polish modernists, Sutzkever's *Yiddish* ballad was the most monumental. It strategically anchored the section "Farb un klang" ("Color and Sound") devoted to exploration of the most elemental aspects of poetry. By holding up Norwid as a literary model above all other poets, Sutzkever claimed the entirety of the Polish literary tradition as his birthright. In the last years of the decade he published his own Yiddish translations of Polish poetry in the Vilna and Warsaw press in order to highlight kinships between two national literatures that shared the same borders.

Following the publication of *Lider* Sutzkever sought new ways to combine commitments to his art with his mounting public reputation. When anti-Jewish hooligans in the streets of Vilna attacked him in 1938, he responded by immersing himself even deeper in service to local Yiddish culture. He regularly mentored the next generation of aspiring writers in the newly formed group Yung-vald (Young Forest) and helped organize summer camps for the youth wing of the Yiddish Freeland movement. On the artistic side he took to excavating the premodern history of Yiddish literature as a way to draw inspiration for his work from classical sources. His intensive research with Max Weinreich at YIVO led to the publication of several experimental poems written in the Old Yiddish style. He also began work on a modern translation of Elia Bokher's early sixteenth century *Bove-bukh*, the most popular premodern Yiddish knightly romance.

Despite the storm clouds hanging over Europe, Sutzkever's poetic output in the years 1937–1939 showed a deepening faith in Yiddish poetry as a sacred realm. *Valdiks* (*Forested*), his second volume, appeared in 1940 when much of Polish Jewry was already under Nazi occupation and Vilna passed from Red Army occupation to Lithuanian rule. Given the context of its publication, its spiritual exuberance still surprises, as when he writes, "In everything I come upon I see a splinter of infinity," or, "Every moment without a hymn is a shame to me." Such lines were a statement of spiritual defiance, an affirmation of his claim over the Polish-Lithuanian landscape at a moment when Jews were regarded as alien, and an embrace of love over the paralyzing forces of fear or hatred. In the volume's confident sense of the self reflected in every manifestation of nature ("I see my body in the white of the birch tree / I feel my blood in the blooming of a rose") Sutzkever brings a neopantheistic streak into Yiddish poetry. Many of its poems follow the pilgrimage of an enigmatic forest-man as he communes with the "green temple" of nature in what Sutzkever refers to as *valdantplek* (forestrevelation): "The green doors open. / Eternal life, guide me to the mirror of my spirit." If white was the symbol of Sutzkever's Siberian genesis, like a blank page onto which childhood memories are carefully frozen in place, green emerges here as the signature hue to which Sutzkever would return for the remainder of his career. It was shorthand for the ways in which he saw his writing as an expression of a fundamental life impulse that transcended the profane challenge of time and proclaimed the sacredness of existence. Indeed, the final section of *Valdiks*, titled "Ecstasies," may be the most joyful release of poetic enthusiasm in all of Yiddish literature. To the cosmic muse he provides his poetic offering: "Now take up my word and my metaphor / And wherever you command, I will go." In later years Sutzkever observed that he

cherished this volume more than any others. In it readers would find the definitive statement of his aesthetic worldview: “I am youth, I am beginning. . . . / Tell me: Why do people put up barriers / when I give myself to / joy, to driving away / sadness? / People believe that my bright light / distorts perspective, / but in the end I am rhythm / soul, music . . .”

Even before the Nazis arrived, Stalin’s commissars returned to Vilna and seized it from the Lithuanian authorities. Sutzkever feared that his prewar affiliations and political unreliability as an aesthete might make him a target. He had written earlier to his brother in Palestine in an attempt to escape, but British limitations on Jewish immigration sealed his fate in Europe. Sutzkever and his wife Freydke attempted to outrun the German invasion in late June 1941 by fleeing east, but when the route became too precarious they turned back. During the roundup of local Jews in the initial weeks of Nazi occupation Sutzkever hid beneath the roof of his mother’s house, pecking a hole in it to allow in just enough light to write. When, a short time later, he concealed himself in an empty coffin to evade the Germans, he resolved that no matter what “my word keeps on singing” (“I Lie in a Coffin”). A local peasant woman whom he would refer to later as “my rescuer” then took him in. Years later, he would write about a return back to Vilna where he would, thanks to her, come face to face with “my own double,” pledging “I will tell it to my pencil.” Those who had taken Sutzkever to task for his aesthetic aloofness before the war soon discovered that his belief in poetry as a transcendent domain only deepened the authority of his voice.

Sutzkever’s two years in the Vilna ghetto reveal the full scope of his responsibility as a writer and as witness to the destruction of his community. During this period his artistic discipline and endurance were tested in unprecedented ways.

Within half a year of the German arrival more than two thirds of the city's Jews were killed. Most were shot in huge pits in the Ponary forest, a few kilometers from the city center. Sutzkever's own mother was betrayed and dragged from their apartment, never to be seen again. His guilt over his inability to protect her might have consumed him had he not worked through his own mourning poetically to hear her voice revive him: "So long as you are still here, then I exist too . . ." ("My Mother," 1942). After the period of mass slaughter Sutzkever and his wife found themselves confined to the ghetto. Most of his colleagues from Yung-Vilne were no longer around, either murdered at Ponary or refugees in the Soviet interior. He and Yung-Vilne colleague Kaczerginski joined the ghetto underground, the United Partisan Organization (FPO). Sutzkever devoted himself to the role of cultural organizer as a way to boost morale. He coordinated lectures, theater performances, and poetry readings. He was assigned to a work group of other intellectuals and writers whose task was to sort through the vast bibliographic and archival holdings the Nazis had gathered from dozens of local and regional libraries. Their work was part of a Nazi taskforce that wanted to loot the most valuable items to display after the German victory. The mass of books and documents Sutzkever and company were tasked with sorting was a repository of Jewish history, attesting to a religious and cultural heritage that extended back centuries. Every day Sutzkever would leave the ghetto gates for the former headquarters of the YIVO Institute, where some of the materials had been dumped. During long days of work, his comrades often allowed him moments of solitude from the sorting so that he could continue his writing. Even in wartime, the work of a poet was respected as a form of communal service. Instead of following orders, Sutzkever joined the secret activities of the Paper Brigade who took to hiding from Nazi hands and the paper mills the most priceless manuscripts

and books by smuggling them back into the ghetto or to non-Jewish sympathizers for safekeeping. Their activities would have been a capital offense had they been discovered. Some of the group's rescued materials, which also included Sutzkever's own writings, were buried and retrieved after the war.

Sutzkever's poetic output during the war included meta-poetic meditations about the role of poetry in extremis, confessional lyrics about private losses and humiliations, and poems attesting to the stamina of the ghetto's teachers, cultural activists, and partisan fighters. His most famous poems of this period—"Teacher Mira," "The Lead Plates of the Rom Press," "A Wagon of Shoes," "To My Child," "Under Your White Stars," "Farewell"—are core works in the canon of Holocaust poetry. His lyrics were inspired by reality but not beholden to it, often-times groping toward the mythologizing needs of the moment. Sutzkever experimented with several longer works that reached toward the epic. "The Grave Child," inspired by the murder of his infant son in the ghetto hospital, has a solitary survivor of the killing at Ponary witness the birth of a Jewish child in a cemetery. Its haunting cry "The child must live!" helped earn Sutzkever first prize in the ghetto writers' competition in 1942. In "Kol Nidrei" the poet usurped the textual traditions of the high holiday liturgy and Hebrew prophets to compose a counter commentary on the fate of Eastern European Jewry. When "Kol Nidrei" was smuggled out of the ghetto to the Soviet Union, Ilya Ehrenburg published a Russian translation in *Pravda* that became one of the earliest accounts of the destruction of European Jewry to appear in the Soviet press. Despite the pressures of the moment his verse retained its prewar commitment to poetic precision by building on his preexisting belief in art as a counterforce to the powers of destruction. Several decades later, in the preface to an anthology of his wartime writings, he observed: "When the sun

itself was transformed to ash I believed with full confidence that so long as poetry did not abandon me the bullet would not penetrate me.” Though Sutzkever’s achievement as a leading Yiddish poet of the Holocaust is not the focus of this volume of translations, it is nonetheless important to read Fein’s selections with an awareness that everything the poet writes afterward is inflected by the tension between loss and regeneration.

Days before the final liquidation of the Vilna ghetto in September 1943, Sutzkever and Freydke escaped as part of a group of underground fighters. In the Narocz forests they joined up with a Soviet partisan unit. For the next six months, through a harsh winter, Sutzkever continued to write poetry and record the unit’s activities while evading Nazi forces and their local collaborators. When the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in Moscow was alerted to the fact that Sutzkever was still alive, a rescue mission was put in place to retrieve him. His reputation made him a valuable witness to Jewish sacrifice in the struggle against fascism. Once in Moscow with Freydke, Sutzkever sought out friendships with fellow Yiddish and Russian-Jewish writers, several of whom would be purged by Stalin just a few years later. His articles in the Soviet press and radio broadcasts about the fate of Vilna’s Jews, and Ilya Ehrenburg’s article about him in *Pravda* in April 1944 transformed him into one of the first public figures to provide an eyewitness account to the destruction of European Jewry, prompting readers and listeners to share their own stories with him as part of an early process of testimonial exchange. Fate would have it that the poet initially rejected from Yung-Vilne for his exoticism and neoromanticism was now looked to as representative of an entire people.

Sutzkever’s two years in Moscow were remarkably productive. He completed a Yiddish prose memoir of the ghetto (*From the Vilna Ghetto*), collected his wartime writings into two

volumes (*The Fortress* and *Poems from the Ghetto*), and joined a committee of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee to gather materials for *The Black Book*, a testimonial history of the destruction of European Jewry that was later censored by the Soviet regime. Upon Vilna's liberation in spring 1944, he returned home for a period where he met up again with Kaczerginski and Abba Kovner, a Hebrew poet and Zionist leader of the ghetto underground. They retrieved materials secretly buried in the ghetto and set up a Jewish museum in Sutzkever's apartment. Their distrust of the Soviet regime led to the decision to secretly ferry the recovered materials to YIVO's headquarters, now in New York, where it remains as the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski archive. Sutzkever was later tasked in February 1946 with testifying on behalf of Soviet Jewry at the Nuremberg Trials.

Despite his welcome in Moscow, Sutzkever's longstanding wariness about communism persuaded him that one does not escape one totalitarian regime to establish oneself in another. Along with their infant daughter Reyne, the Sutzkevers were repatriated as Polish citizens to Łódź, and then moved on to Paris where he joined with a group of Yiddish refugee writers on the Seine and deepened his engagement with French symbolist poetry. It was during this period that he completed his first epic poem, *Geheymshetot* (*Secret City*), about a symbolic community of Jews who survive the liquidation of the ghetto in Vilna's sewers. The book-length work composed entirely in amphibrach tetrameter showcased Sutzkever's use of tight poetic form to construct a statement of restorative balance. At the same time, in immediate postwar collections such as *Yidishe gas* (*Jewish Street*) he grappled with the full specter of loss. In one of its feature poems, the ode "To Poland," Sutzkever made extensive use of citation from Polish poetry in order to convey the profundity of historical rupture and betrayal. With his prewar belief in the

possibility of a Polish-Jewish cultural symbiosis now in tatters, its speaker struggles through the immensity of the task of bidding farewell: “How shall I raise a monument to the emptiness here? / How shall I reveal / for my grandchild’s grandchild all our yesterday / tomorrow?”

Of course, Sutzkever already had an answer. He boarded the immigrant ship *Patria*, arriving in Palestine in late 1947 in time to witness the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Since Sutzkever had attended a Hebrew-speaking school as a child and had a brother in Palestine he did not harbor the same antipathies toward Zionism as did ideological Yiddishists. His reading of Jewish literature was sophisticated enough to appreciate that Hebrew and Yiddish were not competitors but complementary means of expression drawn from the same source. His experience with Zionist activists and poets in the ghetto furthered his belief that after the destruction of Polish Jewry the place for a Yiddish poet was among fellow Jews. Sutzkever was not unaware of the struggle that Yiddish speakers and writers faced in a new state ideologically committed to Hebrew, but he refused to engage in the language wars that had previously divided Eastern European Jews. “If the destruction was sung about in Yiddish,” he insisted, “so too must the revival.” Yiddish here plays an integrative role in holding the diverse chapters of his biography and Jewish culture together. Sutzkever could be both a proud Israeli and a Yiddish poet of the world.

In 1949, Sutzkever’s reputation as a partisan poet convinced one of the institutional bastions of Zionism, its Hebrew labor union the Histadrut, to support the creation of a new Yiddish journal for which he would serve as editor. Sutzkever chose as its name *Di goldene keyt* (*The Golden Chain*), symbolizing a bond of culture between generations. Its title pointed back to an early twentieth century drama by Y. L. Peretz, who was regarded as

one of the three classic writers to give birth to modern Yiddish literature. Peretz's spiritual drama spoke about the challenge of a time "between death and life, when the world hangs in doubt." It provided a vision of a Jewry with a sense of its own dignity, of "Sabbath and festival Jews" whose members danced and sang "with souls aflame." Words from the drama were engraved on Peretz's tomb in Warsaw, and it was this symbolic marker of Polish Jewry that Sutzkever imagined carrying on his back with him to the Land of Israel at the end of his ode "To Poland." Sutzkever insisted that his new journal, which borrowed its name from Peretz's drama, set the standard for postwar Yiddish scholarship and cultural discourse. For forty-six years it was the local address for Yiddish high culture, establishing Tel Aviv as one of the main centers of a postwar global Yiddish literary network. Since Sutzkever remembered well how important the literary fellowship of Yung-Vilne had been to him as a young writer, he was also an inspiration in the 1950s to the short-lived writers group Yung-Yisroel (Young Israel), which sought to encourage new Yiddish creativity in Israel.

Sutzkever encountered new Israeli landscapes with the same enthusiasm with which he had transformed his childhood in Siberia and the Lithuanian forests of young adulthood into mythopoetic landscapes of wonder and discovery. In *In fayervogn* (*In the Chariot of Fire*, 1952), his first volume of poems composed in Israel, he reveled in his new home's biblical terrains, pioneering agricultural communities, and ancient cities, just as he embraced the ingathering of Jews from far flung corners of the world. From its deserts where "Genesis exhibits its art" to Jerusalem's paranormal "mirror of stones" where one can "encounter eternity face to face and maybe not die," he saw Israel as a dynamic land of ingathering whose very existence was an occasion for poetry. Indeed, the opening section of the

volume is titled “Shekheyonu,” the traditional prayer of thanksgiving for the moment. At the same time, Sutzkever was under no illusion about the pressures on Yiddish in a young country where Hebrew was regarded as the ideological cornerstone for negation of diaspora, and the Holocaust was taboo as a subject in public culture: “We must not assimilate into Israel, we must assimilate Israel into ourselves.” Sutzkever took to balancing his wonderment at the building of Jewish life in Israel with a responsibility toward the memory of Polish Jewry. He saw this as a necessary tension that would enrich and keep both in appropriate perspective. “It is a great privilege for a poet from the Jerusalem of Lithuania [Vilna] to have the Jerusalem of eternity take up his song . . . Now in Jerusalem I dream of Vilna as when I was in Vilna I dreamt of Jerusalem.”

As witness to both the War of Independence (1948) and the Sinai Campaign (1956) Sutzkever saw continuity between his partisan comrades in Vilna and the spirit driving Israel’s young combatants. After the fall of Jerusalem’s Jewish quarter during the War of Independence he described his creative work in historical terms: “I saw how the Jews of Jerusalem erected ladders on rooftops in order to see the Western Wall. We writers must construct such ladders in poetry, so that [our readers] can observe the entirety of the Jewish world.” The short volume *In midber Sinay* (*Sinai Desert*, 1957) is not only a Yiddish intervention into the tradition of Israeli war poetry, but it also transcends the immediate events on the battlefield to seek out the meaning of the Jewish return to Sinai, the very terrain that first forged their religious and national consciousness. In its desert wilderness Sutzkever’s speaker communicated “a moment transparent to all time,” a kind of transcendent revelation similar to those encountered during his earlier immersions in Siberia and the green forests of Lithuanian. In *Oazis* (*Oasis*, 1957–1959) he

continued to explore how Israel spoke to and through him on the highest spiritual levels, as when he confesses in one lyric that “[t]here is a language here that does not require lips.” *Gaystike erd* (*Spiritual Soil*, 1961), Sutzkever’s second book-length epic, would be the apotheosis of what might be called his Yiddish-Zionist engagement. Returning to the period of his own immigration his poem is structured as a travelogue through the chaotic history of the years surrounding the birth of the Israeli state. Much like the ten representative Jews hiding in Vilna’s sewers in his Holocaust epic *Secret City*, the speaker here gives voice to the varied experiences of newly arriving refugees, each a witness to private horrors. When the speaker gazes overboard from the rickety ship carrying them to the Land of Israel he sees a vision of his hometown swimming alongside it as a partner in their rebirth. Each of the poem’s sections is devoted to a particular historical moment—the immigrant passage, the last days of the British Mandate, the Jewish underground struggle, the United Nations partition plan, the War of Independence. However, it is in its more intimate moments that the poem realizes the full scope of its ambition, as when he observes how the meaning of his daughter’s Yiddish birth name Reyne (purity) is deepened by its slight shift into Hebrew as Rina (song of joy). The poem’s epilogue is set on the ruins of Masada, one of the most popular Zionist pilgrimage sites, where the Jewish past was reinterpreted for contemporary ideological purposes. There, the speaker’s youth as a partisan fighter back in Poland and his Israeli present merge as he gazes out from atop the Judean desert fortress on the anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. His presence is designed to emphasize a chain of self-sacrifice that runs through Jewish history that has contributed to this moment. As the white clouds carrying spring rains float past the sky-blue of the heavens and the Dead Sea below, the volume ends with a vision of the colors

of Israel's flag, reading personal and political redemption onto the order of nature itself.

Beginning in the 1950s Sutzkever became a speaker in significant demand on the international Yiddish lecture circuit. His dramatic declamation in the tradition of great Russian poetry riveted audiences who were thirsty for a living link to a lost Atlantis. But as the speaker in one of his poems reminds him: "And if you paint over the image of the Yiddish street / with a brush dipped in your sunny palette / Know this: the fresh colors will peel / and someday the old colors will attack you with an axe. . . ." Sutzkever's personal aesthetic challenge, then, was to balance the collective need for a language of memorialization with his natural disposition toward a modernist, affirmative language of existential communion. The two came together in his most stylistically ambitious volume of the decade, *Ode tsu der toyb* (*Ode to the Dove*, 1955). Its three sections synthesize and complement his various commitments, while allowing each a distinct realm. The opening section and title poem exhibited Sutzkever's neoclassical delight at working within boundaries of strict poetic form and exploring the meaning of living poetically. In its opening ode the speaker recalls his childhood rescue of a dove. The bird and child engage in a pact to ensure that the gift of the muse remains with him throughout his life: "So long as I inspire you / come whenever I call you, in rain and in snow and in fire." By contrast, the volume's middle section, inspired by a visit to Africa a few years earlier, performs primal, modernist release through the free-verse cycle "Elephants at Night." The volume's concluding, phantasmagoric section consisted of "Green Aquarium," experimental prose narratives set in the shell of the former ghetto where the narrator is confronted by lone survivors who come to him with their stories. Its metafictional considerations include the reminder to mind one's aesthetic choices as

if one's life depends on it: "Stroll through words as you would walk through a minefield: one false step, one false move and the lifetime of words strung on your veins will be blown apart with you." Here, the green aquarium serves as a metaphor for the power of writing to provide eternal life, so long as one invests completely in the highest standards of artistry.

The 1960s were an important moment for Sutzkever to take stock of a career that had already spanned three decades and to turn his attention to the task of anthologizing. In rapid succession he published a two-volume edition of his collected poetry *Poetishe verk* (1963), divided chronologically and geographically between a volume of his European writings and another that begins with his arrival in Israel. Then he coedited the groundbreaking anthology of writings by Soviet-Yiddish writers *A shpigl af a shteyn* (*Mirror on a Stone*, 1964), which served as a testament to the culture decimated by Stalin. In 1968, Sutzkever compiled *Lider fun yam-hamoves* (*Songs from the Sea of Death*), an authoritative edition of his Holocaust writings. The following year he was the inaugural recipient of the Itsik Manger Prize for Yiddish. He would go on to win the Israel Prize, the country's highest cultural honor, in 1985.

The late 1960s inaugurate yet another stage in Sutzkever's writing. His poems take on a retrospective and more philosophical character, marked by deeper metaphysical and meta-poetic musings, poems about other writers and artists, and ongoing experimentation with Yiddish versification. *Di fiddle-rose* (*The Fiddle-Rose*, 1974) and *Lider fun togbukh* (*Diary Poems*, 1977) are astonishing statements of poetic self-confidence in an age that regarded the Yiddish poet as an anachronism. In *Tsviling-bruder* (*Twin Brother*, 1986), Sutzkever once again constructs a volume of thirty-six poems, the Hebrew numerical equivalent for double-life, as a distillation of his multiple twin

selves—the autobiographical self and the poetic “I,” the prewar and postwar self, child and adult perspectives—which he puts into conversation by circling back to and expanding on some of his most intimate early symbology. In these later works, his father’s fiddle, the snowman and North Star from his prewar *Siberia* cycle, and Edenic greens reappear, though not primarily in the service of memory. Rather, Sutzkever establishes creation as the only convincing alternative to oblivion, poetic beauty as the antidote to the moral ugliness of history, striking a tone that resists cynicism in favor of communion. It is for this reason that some readers consider his work from this period akin to a contemporary Yiddish psalter, “writ[ten] with lightening on parchment clouds.”

Fein borrows the title for this volume of translations—*The Full Pomegranate*—from a poem of this period. Long an ancient motif of fertility (and the title of one of the most visually stunning Yiddish periodicals in Weimar Berlin), in Sutzkever’s hands “the full pomegranate” is a metonym for poetry, each of its genesis-seeds a unique expression of creative potential embedded in the red flesh of experience: “The pomegranate, full—youth is in its oldness, / oldness is in its youth. It holds both / inward in its full root cellar— / death and life unwilling to separate.” The speaker’s invitation to “live in my pomegranate arch, / radiant and sliced open” proposes life in poetry as a transcendent act.

When the speaker of one lyric from his diary poems asks the universal human question “Who will last, what will last?” the speaker responds by locating eternity in the most fleeting vestiges of nature—the ocean’s foam, a cloud snagged in a tree, a single syllable, a drop of wine in a jug—only turning in the final lines to a Jewish rhetorical strategy by answering a big question with one of his own, unlikely to satisfy believers or skeptics alike: “Who will last, what will last? God will last. / Isn’t that enough for

you?” During this period Sutzkever also deepens the partnership between his personal ghosts and his own creativity, acknowledging them as beloved interlocutors in metaphysical discourse: “They [the dead] love to hear my poems, so I read to them. / I say: There is no death. Then I hear a protest: / Death is our life; is there, then, no longer life either?” (“Elegiacally,” *From Old and Young Manuscripts*). Such musings prompt the ongoing development of his belief in eternity as the simultaneity of past, present, and future moments, as “time steal[ing] across borders” (“Twin-Brother”). His late poetry eschews cynicism or postmodern angst in favor of integrating the synchronic and diachronic strains of his mythopoetic worlds so that their intimate, national, and cosmic strands are realized as a unity: “All that is past, experienced, previous, / now floats through me and through my temples / like twilight clouds, in order / to re-live what was outlived, / and to see again what was seen” ([“All that is past . . .”], 1996).

AS WE READ RICHARD FEIN’S FRESH TRANSLATIONS OF Sutzkever I return to what it has meant to me to be fortunate enough to have Yiddish poetry in my life. My twenties were marked by seminars (and long nights before open dictionaries) that revealed a library that at one point had provided a vocabulary of contemporary existence to Yiddish readers grappling with rapid geopolitical and cultural challenges. As I get older, my appreciation remains for the experimentalism of American Yiddish modernists. But their belief in Yiddish poetry as world poetry that could not only compete with the latest trends in modernist verse but even serve as its vanguard ultimately could not sustain a generation of readers beyond its own. Similarly, the abandon of revolutionary Yiddish poets such as Moyshe Kulbak (“*Hey, lomir geyen, lomir geyen! / lomir do iberlozn di shvakhe . . .*” [Hey, let us go, let us go! Let’s leave the weak ones behind . . .]) and Perets

Markish (“*Mayn nomen iz: ‘atsind’ . . .*” [My name is: “Now” . . .]) continues to thrill, but the promise of their enthusiasm cannot be read without the knowledge that the very revolution that raised their hopes ultimately devoured them. Itsik Manger’s radical rewriting of biblical lore remains the greatest accomplishment of poetic midrash, just as Rokhl Korn’s “other side of the poem” and Kadya Molodowski’s “paper bridge” are suggestive tropes for wrestling with Yiddish verse as the repository of cultural memory. Each of these Yiddish poets (and there are so many others!) became for their readers an interpretive window onto the world. Yet only Sutzkever provides a body of poetic writing that remains accessible even as it consistently renews itself, and in so doing renews its readers. No other poet maintains as deep a respect for the powers of Yiddish creativity to seek out beauty in chaos, and harmony from the bloody disharmonies of twentieth century Jewish experience. Quite simply, Sutzkever is the most spiritually nourishing poet in the Yiddish poetic canon.

It has already been a generation since Barbara and Benjamin Harshav’s *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (1991) showcased Sutzkever’s poetic and prose oeuvre in a single volume. Over the years English translations of discrete Sutzkever volumes have included *Siberia: A Poem* (trans. Jacob Sonntag, 1961), *Burnt Pearls: Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever* (trans. Seymour Mayne, 1981), *In the Sinai Desert* (trans. David and Roslyn Hirsch, 1987), *The Fiddle Rose: Poems 1970–1972* (trans. Ruth Whitman, 1990), and *Laughter Beneath the Forest: Poems from Old and Recent Manuscripts* (trans. Barnett Zumoff, 1996). Sutzkever translations are featured in such classic anthologies as *The Golden Peacock* (1961), *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse* (1987), and *An Anthology of Modern Yiddish Poetry* (1995). Ruth Wisse’s translation of his prose masterpiece *Green Aquarium* in *Prooftexts* (1982) will be joined soon by my own translation of

his memoir *Vilna Ghetto*. From translations of individual poems by established American poets such as Jacqueline Osherow to a new generation of Yiddish poet-translators such as Maia Evrona, Sutzkever remains one of the enduring representatives of Yiddish to world literature.

Richard Fein's *The Full Pomegranate* now joins Heather Valencia's *Still My Word Sings* (2017) in allowing us to encounter Sutzkever anew through a volume of carefully curated verse. Fein's selections eschew comprehensiveness in favor of reengaging Sutzkever as a writer who draws the reader back to the spiritual and aesthetic powers of the Yiddish poem itself, or as Sutzkever would have it, where one can "... see the eternal that remains outside of death; / I even have a name for it: radiant core." Fein accords the Yiddish poems full respect alongside his translations, allowing those with access to Yiddish the added interpretive pleasure of reading Sutzkever simultaneously between languages. He recognizes that translation is a strategic craft designed to serve both poet and reader, and he is faithful in his responsibilities to both.

Since Sutzkever's life was very much a life lived in and through poetry it is fitting that he is translated for us here by Richard Fein, a contemporary poet who has contributed to the cultural landscape of Yiddish in America for more than three decades, through his essays (*The Dance of Leah*, 1986, and *Yiddish Genesis*, 2012), translations (*Selected Poems of Yankev Glatshteyn*, 1989, and *With Everything We've Got: A Personal Anthology of Yiddish Poetry*, 2009), and an original lyric voice that is often in conversation with his most beloved Yiddish writers. Few contemporary American poets have sustained as substantive an engagement with Yiddish in their own writing as Richard Fein, and none has written as meaningfully about the ways in which his translations from it are "a dimension of himself." Fein's

relationship with Yiddish is visceral, even preternatural. In his essays he acknowledges that “I often feel that Yiddish possesses me rather than the other way around. . . .” He has confessed the ways in which “[t]ranslation for me is a form of second birth,” and how “the allure of Yiddish poetry . . . is not so much to translate it as to absorb it until it becomes part of my own poetry.” I am moved by the ways in which he situates the source of his own poetry in the dialogic act of translating others. “It was through Yiddish—those sounds of my instinctual being I once fled—that I came back to the writing of poetry.” Let us end, then, with Fein’s own poetic voice. If the remainder of this volume is an exercise in his generosity—for what is the act of translating a fellow writer other than the gift of reincarnation?—we should take notice here of the intimacy of his profound relationship with Yiddish.

You reach to me like a lover
wanting one more kiss.
How long it’s taken for us to embrace,
for our tongues to find each other.
(“Yiddish”)

I take Fein’s image of tongues reaching out for one another as an invitation to think anew about the relationship between Yiddish and contemporary Jewish culture lived beyond Jewish languages. In Fein’s imagination, they engage in the most passionate desire as lovers who seek out, and ultimately rely on, one another to realize their full meaning. Here, Fein grafts his own permanent link onto Sutzkever’s golden chain, providing a new generation of readers with a definitive statement of why Yiddish, and Sutzkever, continue to matter.

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