

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 protoliturgical 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 Kalmanovitsh 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