Writers in Yiddish

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Abraham Sutzkever
(Avrom Sutskever)
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BOOKS: Lider [Poems] (Warsaw: Bibliotek fun yidishn PEN-klub, 1937);
Vadiks [Woodlore] (Vilna: Yidisher literatn-farayn un PEN-klub, 1940);
Lider fun geto [Poems from the Ghetto] (New York: YKUF, 1946);
Vilner geto 1941–1944 [Vilna Ghetto 1941–1944] (Paris: Farband fun di Vilner in Frankraykh, 1946; republished as Fun Vilner geto [From the Vilna Ghetto] (Moscow: Der emes, 1946);
Yidisher gas [The Jewish Street] (New York: Matones, 1948);
Gheymshote [Secret City] (Tel Aviv: Friends of the author, 1948);
In sayer vogn [In the Chariot of Fire] (Tel Aviv: Di golnedene keyt, 1952);
Sibir: poeme [Jerusalem, 1952]; translated by Jacob Sonnag as Siberia: A Poem (London: Abelard-Shuman, 1961);
In midbar Sinai [Tel Aviv: Peretz, 1957]; translated by David and Roslyn Hirsch as In the Sinai Desert (Providence, R.I.: Ziggurat Press, 1987);
Oasis [Oasis] (Tel Aviv: Peretz, 1960);
Gaystikhe erd [Spiritual Soil] (New York: Der kval, 1961);
Ferhantsike oyges un moyfun [Square Letters and Miraculous Signs] (Tel Aviv: Di golnedene keyt, 1968);
Tsaytske penemer [Ripe Faces] (Tel Aviv: Peretz, 1970);
Di fuldreyt (Tel Aviv: Di golnedene keyt, 1974); translated by Ruth Whitman as The Fiddle Rose: Poems 1970–1972 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990);

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Lider fun togbukh [Poems from a Diary] (Tel Aviv: Di golnedene keyt, 1977);
Dorin vu es nekhtikn di shtern [There Where the Stars Spend the Night] (Tel Aviv: Yisroel bukh, 1979);
Di erkhke nakht in geto [The First Night in the Ghetto] (Tel Aviv: Di golnedene keyt, 1979);
Fun alt a un yunge kvit-yada (Tel Aviv: Yisroel-bukh, 1982); translated by Barnett Zumoff as Laughter beneath the Forest: Poems from Old and Recent Manuscripts (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1996);
Tivibing-broiler (Twin Brother) (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1986);
Di nesun fun shvartsaplen (The Prophecy of the Inner Eye) (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University and Magnes Press, 1989);
Der yorger fun regn (Heir of the Rain) (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1992);
Baum leyemn penimer (Face Reading) (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University and Magnes Press, 1993);
Tseuklelent (Shaky Walls) (Tel Aviv: Di goldene keyt, 1996).

Editions and Collections: Fun dray viltn [Of Three Worlds] (Buenos Aires: Literat-un zhurnalism-farayn H. D. Nomberg, 1953);
Poetiche verk [Poetic Works], 2 volumes (Tel Aviv: Yoyvl-komitet, 1963);
Lider fun yan-hamoses [Poems from the Sea of Death] (Tel Aviv & New York: Farlag Bergen-Belsen, 1968);
Griner aktsarium [Green Aquarium] (Tel Aviv: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1975);
Kunos dumoj [Collection of Stilnisses], edited by Benjamin Harshaw (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2005).

Burnt Poems: Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever, translated by Seymour Mayne (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1981);
A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose, translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshaw (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991);


Abraham Sutzkever (Avrom Sutzkever) is among the most significant twentieth-century Jewish poets in any language. His more than two dozen volumes of poetry and surrealist prose, his memoir of life in the Vilna [today Vilnius, Lithuania] ghetto during World War II, and his editorship of Di goldene keyt (The Golden Chain), the most important Yiddish quarterly journal to emerge after the Holocaust, define an intensely productive career extending over seven decades. The events of his life coincide with the formative Jewish experiences of the twentieth century, experiences that are imaginatively interpreted in his poetry.

Though Sutzkever's favored genre is the lyric, the monumental nature of modern Jewish experience led him to significant achievements in epic poetry, surrealism, and memoir. His work is distinguished by a sense of poetry as the only remaining language of metaphysical wonder in a posttraditional world; modernist experimentation with new combinations of sound, meter, rhythm, neologism, and metaphorical language, counterbalanced by a neoclassic respect for precise poetic form; the mythopoeic creation of worlds in which people and places consumed by the passage of time and the forces of history are revivified; and an alliance with the uncorrupted, cyclical universe of nature.

Sutzkever was born on 15 July 1913 in Smorgon, a leather-tanning center southeast of Vilna that was then part of the Russian Empire. He was the youngest of the three children of Hers and Rayne Sutzkever, née Fainberg, and a descendent of Lithuanian Jewish intellectual and spiritual aristocracy: his maternal grandfather, Schabbay Fainberg, was the scholarly rabbi of Mikhailishok. Though Sutzkever's father earned his living from a leather-goods factory he inherited in Smorgon, he had studied at a yeshiva and preferred to spend his time in Talmud study.

In 1915 the Jews of Smorgon were falsely accused of being German spies and given twenty-four hours to leave town, after which their homes, shops, and institutions were burned to the ground. The Sutzkevers made their way to Minsk, where a Jewish factory owner encouraged them to take refuge in the industrial city of Omsk in southwestern Siberia. There Sutzkever's father, though in failing health, tutored the sons of local businessmen, while his children supplemented the household income by helping traders in the market. The Sutzkevers did all they could to retain intellectual refinement and culture in their home: the father entertained his children and the local intelligentsia on his violin, an experience Sutzkever later credited as a
formative influence on his birth as an artist. Another boyhood influence was a Jewish officer in the Austrian army who regularly visited the Sutzkever home to read modern Hebrew verse; he subsequently achieved distinction as the Hebrew poet Avigdor Hameiri. Sutzkever was enchanted by the vast expanses and native peoples of Siberia, and the language of the local Kirghiz tribes became his childhood tongue. He later mythologized the Siberia of his childhood—which he considered his birthplace as a poet—as a dazzling world of exotic colors and magical sounds.

After Sutzkever’s father died of a heart attack in 1922, his mother returned to Poland with her three children. With Smorgon in ruins, they settled in Shnipeshok, a working-class suburb of Vilna. Sutzkever’s sister, Ed, an aspiring poet, died of meningitis in 1925. Sutzkever memorialized her in his poem “Mayn shveste” (1937, My Sister):

Unexpectedly, from evening snows, blue silvery steps
My sister approaches on a dreamed-up bridge.
No, a silver legend or wonderful epic
Now spun from the rarest melody.
Sister, sister, I remind myself, you also wrote poems
When everything rose toward the good North Star.

By writing about his sister, and elsewhere his father, as if they were still alive, Sutzkever expressed his faith in what one critic has called “the real existence of the non-existent.” This belief system later became the defining feature of his aesthetic response to the destruction of his community.

After his brother, Moyshe, left to study in Paris, Sutzkever and his mother moved into two small rooms on the second floor of a house overlooking an overgrown orchard. To compensate for his loneliness Sutzkever organized dramatic performances and set up a lending library for neighborhood children in his apartment.

Vilna Jewry reacted to the German occupation during World War I and Polish nationalism by developing a sophisticated secular culture. Though Hebrew and Polish played important roles, Vilna’s intelligentsia rallied around Yiddish as a unifying national force. Vilna boasted multiple Yiddish-language educational establishments, including a high school and a technical academy; no other city in Poland had a higher percentage of children enrolled in secular Yiddish-language schools. Vilna was also home to five daily Yiddish newspapers; several important Yiddish publishing firms; major Jewish libraries; a Yiddish teacher-training college; Yiddish trade unions, youth movements, sports clubs, dramatic and musical organizations, and political parties; and the Yiddish Scientific Institute (YIVO). Sutzkever, however, did not attend any of the Yiddish secular schools: his frequent headaches led his mother to hire a private tutor for him. Later, he attended the local Talmud Torah and the Polish-Hebrew high school.

At first unaware of a serious tradition of writing in Yiddish, he made his earliest attempts at writing poetry, at thirteen, in Hebrew; but Vilna’s Yiddish cultural environment eventually led him to embrace the language as his artistic medium. In a disciplined program of self-education he spent hours in the reading room of the Strashun library poring over classic and modern works of Yiddish fiction and poetry. In 1929, in a fit of self-doubt, he burned all of his adolescent Hebrew poems in a private ritual that marked his turn to art as a proto-religious calling.

During this period Sutzkever established a friendship with Freydyke Leveitzen, who was three years his junior. Her ability to recite Yiddish poetry by heart—a result of her secular Yiddish education—was a source of wonderment for Sutzkever. Their friendship grew through the 1930s, when she worked as a bibliographer at YIVO, and they were married on the eve of World War II.

Another seminal influence on Sutzkever’s artistic development was Bin (The Bee), a Yiddishist scouting organization he joined in 1930. Bin blended the scouting value of self-reliance with a commitment to culture and social responsibility, and excursions into the wilderness reawakened in Sutzkever the appreciation of nature that he had felt as a child in Siberia. His first published poem appeared in 1932 in a Bin songbook.

During this period Sutzkever developed relationships with individuals for whom Yiddish defined national pride and moral refinement. Max Weinreich, one of the architects of Yiddish high culture in the interwar period, encouraged him to consider the extent to which language, history, folk culture, and art were crucial components in the formation of national identity. Sutzkever spent the summer of 1932 in the countryside with Miki Tishernikho (later Michael Astour), the son of a respected lawyer and community activist, hiking and swimming in the mornings and reading the works of Aleksandr Pushkin, the Russian symbolists, and the Polish Romantic poets in the afternoons and evenings. Finally, Sutzkever’s imagination was captivated by the charismatic personality of Leyzer Volf, a slightly older neighbor in Shnipeshok who was a published poet with a preference for the grotesque, and the two spent hours reciting their work to each other. Under Volf’s influence Sutzkever made brief attempts at expressionism, the grotesque, and exotic versified tales.

Volf encouraged Sutzkever to apply for membership in Yung Vile (Young Vilna), a coterie of Yiddish poets, writers, and artists. At its peak period during the 1930s the group included the writers Chaim (Khayim)
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Grade, Shmerke Kaczerginski, Moyshe Levin, and Elkhonen Vogler. Sutzkever's exotic poetry, nature lyrics, and refined aesthetic posture, as well as his defiance of the group's leftist political orientation at his initial interview, resulted in the unanimous rejection of his membership in 1932.

That year Sutzkever traveled to Warsaw to introduce himself to the city's leading literary figures. He continued to avoid political activism, seeking to transform Yiddish poetry into a release from, rather than a reflection of, political concerns. In 1934 he published poems in Warsaw’s Yiddish newspaper for literature, künzt un kultur (Weekly for Literature, Art, and Culture) and the Vilner torg (Vilna Day); in the latter he startled readers with his self-presentation in “Unter regns Maytke” (Under May Rain):

I burst out free and without direction on shimmering distances: and I sing a hymn to the life that dawns.

Instead of the political celebration of the month of revolution suggested by the title, the poem celebrates the liberation of being lekerdik (unclaimed) in the world of nature. The joyful sensuality of the work was a striking contrast to the gloom that dominated much Yiddish poetry of the time. In another poem published the same year, “Mayn lid—an aker-ayzn” (My Poem—a Flow-share), Sutzkever stresses the revolution he hopes to bring about in Yiddish verse:

Cut deeply, my song boldy and daringly break through stones encourage and inspire.

Yung Vilne accepted Sutzkever into its ranks in 1934. Kaczerginski, the group’s organizer and a Communist activist, later complained that while he and his other colleagues were busy hanging red flags on telephone poles at night, Sutzkever was occupied with esoteric nature lyrics: “We permitted him entry but I can’t say we were close to him... Why should we be interested in his green earth and blue skies when grayness and darkness are our reality?” As the political situation of Jews in Poland deteriorated, Kaczerginski reminded Sutzkever that “we are living in a time of steel, not crystal.” Nevertheless, in “Baym shvel fun a tog” (1935, At the Outset of a Day), his first poem published in the Yung Vilne journal, Sutzkever persists in his resistance to making poetry serve any ideology beyond art itself: “The sun is my flag and the word is my anchor.”

In 1935 and 1937 Sutzkever returned to Warsaw, where he contacted Y. M. Nayman, co-editor of the Yiddish daily Haynt (Today); the linguist Noah Prilutski; the poet Aron Tseytin; the painter Yanke Adler; and the Polish-language Jewish poet Julian Tuwim. Also in 1935 he wrote to Aron Glantz-Lyceles, the American cofounder of the Yiddish modernist Inizikh (Introspectivists) movement and co-editor of its influential journal, In izikh (In Oneself). The Introspectivists’ experimentation with language and versification, their belief in the poem as a reflection of the subjective world of the poet, and their defense of an author’s right to take up any theme that interested him represented the artistic freedom for which Sutzkever yearned. The regular appearance of Sutzkever’s poems in In izikh between 1935 and 1939 raised his prestige both in Poland and overseas.

In 1935 Sutzkever produced an ambitious sonnet sequence, “Shtern in shney” (Stars in the Snow), inspired by his memories of his childhood in Siberia, that offers a commentary on the dualities through which his poetry interprets life: as dream and reality, as remembered past and lived present, as untamed and civilized, and as childish innocence and adult maturity. The cycle replaces the conventional conception of Siberia as a desolate land of exile and punishment with an ode to the wonders of childhood:

On the blue, diamond snow, I write With wind as with a magic pen, Straying in the shimmering depth and light Of his childhood. Never seen, as then, Such lucidity, which grips, compels, All the lonely shadows of the mind. (Translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshaw)

Sutzkever’s Siberia is filled with dazzling neologisms such as datanglory, wonderwoods, sparklenows, soundsfever, and wonderdrum; bright colors and inventive musicality; and a parade of symbolic images and figures such as the synesthesia of the “snow-sounds” from his father’s fiddle that even the wolves come to sniff; the frozen Irtysh river; the purity of his friendship with Changuri, a Kirghiz boy; the soaring dove that turns the child-poet’s downward gaze into his father’s grave up toward the sun; and the snowman preserved in a “hut of sounds.” The poem moves from the enclosed intimacy of the childhood home to the wide expanse of the Russian tundra, from the deprived material world to a dawning metaphysical and artistic consciousness symbolized, in the poem’s final version, by the child-speaker floating above the earth alongside the North Star.

“Shtern in shney” formed the basis of Sutzkever’s first collection, Lider (1937, Poems), published by Warsaw’s Yiddish PEN club. The fifty-two poems, one for each week of the year, are divided into four sections, each of which corresponds to a successive season. The overall mood of the work is one of spiritual joy released
from the constraints of formal religion, suggesting that true faith cannot be mediated by the prayer book but must evolve through the individual's bond with his surroundings. Yet, Lider does not entirely neglect social realities. "Di tovern fun geto" (Gates of the Ghetto) celebrates the brazen confidence of youths who flood the city "like a rivulet of sound," lifting the spirits of a discouraged people "like bridges of light." Sutzkever's appreciation of Polish Romanticism is reflected in an eight-part ballad about the nineteenth-century poet Cyprian Norwid. By setting up Norwid as a universal artist who transcends national borders, Sutzkever offers a model of the way in which poetry might bridge the divide between Poles and Jews. (Sutzkever published translations of three of Norwid's poems in the local Yiddish press in 1939.) Contemporary reviews of Lider attest to the competing pressures on young Yiddish writers: while some criticized Sutzkever for losing himself in aestheticism and ignoring contemporary realities, others, including the reviewer for In zikh, praised him for precisely the same reason.

After a brief period of compulsory Polish military service, in April 1938 Sutzkever was attacked by anti-Semitic students while walking in Vilna. The incident prompted an uncharacteristically grim reaction in a 19 May letter to Glantz-Leyzer: "My only consolation is that revenge will come one day." Though he remained wary of the various brands of political messianism competing for his attention, the Territorialist program of the Freedom League, which promoted Jewish cultural autonomy, seemed to Sutzkever the most supportive of local Yiddish culture. Between 1936 and 1939 he helped to organize summer camps for Shaparber (Hawk), the youth wing of the Freeland movement, and served as an advisor to Yung vald (Young Forest), a literary group founded by Volf to encourage young local Yiddish writers.

Sutzkever hoped to capitalize on the success of Lider by establishing an international Yiddish literary journal based in Vilna, but the project never materialized. Instead, he spent the better part of 1938 studying Old Yiddish philology as Weinreich's student in YIVO's pregraduate program and produced a series of stylized Old Yiddish poems that were accepted by several Polish Yiddish journals and miscellanies; they were republished in his collections Yidiks (1940, Woodlore) and Yidisher gu (1948, Jewish Street). He also translated into modern Yiddish the most popular of medieval Yiddish knightly romances, Elia Bokher's Bove-bukh (1549). The Soviet Yiddish scholar Meir Wiener promised to publish the translation with his own introduction, but the manuscript was lost during World War II.

In the months leading up to the war, when much of Yiddish literature in Poland was obsessed with the grim political situation, Sutzkever worked on a new collection intended to express existential exuberance. In Valdiks, comprising poems composed between 1937 and 1939, he transforms Yiddish into a private liturgical language celebrating existence itself. By charting the wanderings of the central figure in the collection, the forestman, as he separates himself from humanity and sets out on a pilgrimage quest through the "green temple" of nature, Sutzkever liberated his readers at precisely the moment when Nazism was closing in on Polish Jewry. Though his poetic insistence that "in everything I come upon a splinter of infinity" struck more than one critic as representing all that was naive and self-indulgent about modernist artists, others read it as a spiritual evocation of deep Jewish rootedness in the eastern European landscape.

The volume includes an ars poetica, "In a dikhter-shenik" (In a Poet's Tavern), a ten-part sonnet sequence responding to those who thought that Sutzkever had been too contemptuous of the social orientation of Yiddish literature when he visited the Warsaw Yiddish Writers' Union in 1937. Sutzkever is unapologetic, insisting that "I am a dreamer, a thief / of time. I believe that it is worth / being someone who believes and prays." The speaker defies temporal reality by robbing it of its authority over him; he subverts the collective mood of desperation through sheer will of imagination. The conclusion of the poem, remarkable for its sunny vision in the light of the context in which it was written, invokes tropes of contemporary proletarian literature in a life-affirming crescendo:

Comrades, cast aside your cards and climb on the benches: the sun is rising, the sun is rising, rising, rising with new wonder; Comrades, fill your glasses and toast "to life," to the sun, "to life," To our sunny banner, "to life."

Valdiks ends with a section labeled "Ectasies" that comprises twenty-eight untitled poems. At the moment when Polish Jewry stood on the brink of destruction, Sutzkever produced a volume of transcendent youthful optimism.

Yet, Sutzkever could not ignore completely the dangers threatening European Jewry. "Is the dream over?" he pondered in a lyric of April 1940. When war broke out in September 1939, the Red Army occupied Vilna; but it soon retreated to permit the emergence of an independent Lithuanian state, and Vilna Jewry enjoyed relative political and cultural freedom for almost eight months. Sutzkever's contributions to two Lithuanian Yiddish literary miscellanies in 1940, Unter-
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Sutzkever's wartime ghetto writings mark the first time that he precisely dated his poetry, indicating an awareness of his role as witness. In lyrics such as "Di lernerin Mire" (Teacher Mire), "Isik Vitenberg," and "Tsum yortog fun geto-teater" (To the Yiddish Theater) Sutzkever invents archetypes of cultural and physical resistance that are inspired by heroic personalities and events in the ghetto but not factually beholden to them. Other poems, such as "Tsum kind," "Unter dyayne vayse shtern" (Under Your White Stars), and "A vogn shikh" (A Wagon of Shoes), confess his private sorrow for his murdered family and friends. His service with the partisans produced more militant works, including "Di byayene plait fun Roms drukeryay" (The Lead Plates of the Rom Press), "Un azoy zolstey reydn tsym yosm" (This Is How to Answer an Orphan), "Lid us di lest" (Poem to the Last), and "Vi azoy" (How?). He rarely refers to the Nazis by name in his poems, a technique designed to obliterate their existence and provide maximum space for the resurrection of the dead. "Der novi" (The Prophet) includes an image of a bird pecking out the eye of an upstanding Jewish intellectual and placing it in the socket of a ghetto writer so as to enhance the latter's creative vision. The speaker of "Farewell" addresses his city and its murdered Jews with a promise that places the survivor in a continuum stretching back to the mythic origins of the nation.
You are my first love and that you will remain.
I carry your name through the world
as my distant grandfather
bore through the desert flame the ark on his shoulders.

Sutzkever’s wartime poetic stamina and the moral poise of his verse were fed by a preexisting faith in art as a counterforce to degeneracy. He later wrote in the preface to Lider fun yam-hamoeve (1968, Poems from the Sea of Death): “When the sun itself was transformed into ash I believed with full confidence that so long as poetry did not abandon me the lead [of the bullet] could not penetrate me.”

Sutzkever experimented with two longer works during this period. In “Dos keyver-kind” (The Grave Child), a dramatic chronicle dated April 1942, the fate of his murdered infant son isimaginatively reversed by a protomessianic description of a Jewish child secretly born amidst the graves of a cemetery. Sutzkever recited the poem for a gathering of Yiddish intellectuals in May, and it received first prize in a literary competition sponsored by the Union of Artists and Writers in the Vilna Ghetto. By contrast, “Kol Nidre,” dated February 1943, speaks of the tragedy of generational continuity cut short. Based on a roundup on Yom Kippur in 1941 in which four thousand Jews were sent to their deaths in Ponary, the poem is an extended monologue conveying in stark detail the brutality of Nazi extermination units and the struggle of the faithful to retain their beliefs in the face of unimaginable horror. With such biblical echoes as Abraham’s binding of Isaac, Job’s suffering, Ezekiel’s Valley of the Dry Bones, and the liturgy for the High Holy Days, Sutzkever’s work integrates contemporary destruction with preexisting tropes from the library of Jewish catastrophe. That the speaker relates the entire incident to a ghetto writer is a meta-poetic gesture signaling Sutzkever’s sense of collective responsibility. In July 1943 he smuggled the poem through partisan contacts to the Soviet Union. Ilya Ehrenburg published a Russian translation in Pravda, making “Kol Nidre” one of the earliest works in the official Soviet press to testify to the extent of Jewish destruction.

On 12 September 1943, as the Nazis began the final liquidation of the Vilna ghetto after a failed partisan uprising, Sutzkever, Freydlke, and Kaczerginski escaped. They walked sixty miles through enemy territory until they reached the area around Lake Narocz, where they met up with the Jewish partisan unit Nekome (Revenge). During a harsh autumn and winter they lived in the forests and swamps, evading slaughter by Nazi forces, local collaborators, and the anti-Jewish Polish nationalist underground. Throughout the ordeal Sutzkever wrote feversibly, trusting that his poetry would one day serve as a testament to Jewish fighting heroism: “I am a wolf and a poet in one / my gun shoots / poem after poem,” he declares in “Narotscher vald” (Naroch’s Forest). When word reached Moscow that Sutzkever was alive in the Lithuanian forests, the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFD) initiated a rescue operation in which they were assisted by Justas Paleckis, the Soviet-appointed Lithuanian president. Sutzkever’s partisan commander assisted him and his wife to make their way to a secret airstrip on a frozen lake. On 12 March 1944, after the first airplane sent to rescue them was shot down, the Sutzkevers dashed through a clearing surrounded by mines and snipers into a plane that brought them to safety in the Soviet Union. In Moscow, Sutzkever was held up by the JAFD as an embodiment of the struggle against fascism, and
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his broadcast descriptions of Nazi atrocities and Jewish partisan fighting on Soviet radio drew an international audience. Inspired by Sutzkever's experiences, Ehrenburg published an article in Pravda at the end of April 1944 titled "Triumph of A Man" that elicited thousands of replies. The poet who had been criticizec in the early 1930s for being a socially unengaged aesthete suddenly found himself a spokesman for the fate of east European Jewry.

Soon after Vilna's liberation by the Red Army on 13 July 1944, Sutzkever returned to the city. The Jewish quarter was in ruins. He, Kaczerginski, and the Hebrew poet and partisan fighter Abba Kovner dug up the materials buried by the Paper Brigade and set up a Jewish museum in the apartment Sutzkever shared with Kaczerginski; it quickly became a meeting place for the few returning survivors. The materials were later sent to YIVO headquarters in New York, where they are preserved as the Sutzkever-Kaczerginski Archive. Sutzkever returned to Moscow, where he worked with such major figures of Soviet Yiddish culture as Peretz (Perets) Markish, David (Dovid) Bergelson, and David Hofstein (Dovid Hofshteyn), all of whom were later murdered in Stalin's purges; established a friendship with the poet Boris Pasternak; and was invited by Ehrenburg to serve on a committee gathering materials for The Black Book, a detailed history of the destruction of eastern European Jewry. In March 1945 Freydeke Sutzkever gave birth to a daughter, Reyne.

During his two years in Moscow, Sutzkever wrote Viner geit 1941-1944 (1946, Vilna Ghetto 1941-1944), a prose memoir of his ghetto and partisan experiences. He also collected his wartime poems in the volumes Di festung; lider un poems, geshibrn in Viner geit un yidn 1941-1944 (1945, The Fortress: Short and Long Poems, Written in the Vilna Ghetto and in the Forest 1941-1944) and Lider fun geit (1946, Poems from the Ghetto), both of which were published in 1946.

On 27 February 1946 Sutzkever testified on behalf of Soviet Jewry at the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals. Soon afterward, he and Freydeke were reapatrinated to Poland. The family lived in Lodz before settling in Paris in early 1947. Sutzkever found new artistic inspiration in Paris's fellowship of Yiddish refugee writers and through his exposure to French symbolist poetry. In 1947 he attended the Zionist Congress in Basel, where he asked Gdula Meir, head of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency, to arrange papers for his family's immigration to Palestine; he also represented Yiddish literature at the International PEN Congress in Zurich. In "Tsu Poyln" (To Poland) Sutzkever bade farewell to his homeland: "How shall I raise a monument to the emptiness here?" asks the speaker; he finds the answer while standing before the tomb of Issac Leib Peretz (Vitshok Leybush Peretz), the spiritual father of secular Yiddishism. He imagines carrying Peretz's tomb on his shoulders through all of his subsequent journeys, simultaneously denying Poland the privilege of sheltering Peretz's bones and taking Peretz's vision for his own.

Geheymshpot (Secret City), one of Sutzkever's two book-length epic poems, was composed in Moscow, Lodz, and Paris between 1945 and 1946. Published in installments in the New York periodical Di shvayg (The Future) between December 1947 and August 1948 and in book form in Tel Aviv in 1948, the poem has a tight structure—241 stanzas of amphibrach tetrameter—that testifies to Sutzkever's skill at using poetic order to restore balance to a world disintegrated by war. The work transforms into a myth of national survival and rebirth a story Sutzkever heard about a small group of Jews who hid in the sewers of Vilna between September 1944 and the city's liberation.

Sutzkever and his family arrived in Palestine aboard the illegal immigrant ship Parnis in September 1947, in time to participate in the establishment of the State of Israel. During the War of Independence he served in the army as a military correspondent in the Negev desert. He immediately set out to possess the land of Israel poetically, initiating the most sustained Zionist thematic in the history of Yiddish literature. His encounters with biblical terrain, renewed ancient cities, and virgin agricultural settlements; his sense of Israel as a crossroads for Jews from the East and the West; and the direct links he sensed between the partisan fighters of the eastern European ghettos and the Israeli soldiers fighting in defense of a Jewish home, become, in his verse, symbols of national continuity and restored dignity. He transcended earlier ideological battles between Hebrew and Yiddish by making Yiddish poetry a strong voice in Zionist self-expression: "If the destruction was sung about in Yiddish, so too must the revival."

In 1949 Sutzkever was the founding editor of Di goldene keyt, which became the world's leading Yiddish journal. By using a phrase from Peretz for its title and insisting on the highest scholarly and artistic standards in what it published, he reiterates his desire to transcend historical, geographic, and linguistic ruptures. He saw the journal as a legitimate home for Yiddish in the young Hebrew speaking state, uniting Yiddish writers and readers in Israel and the Diaspora, forging links between Yiddish and Hebrew culture, and ultimately securing Israel's place at the center of postwar Jewish culture. To serve the same ends, he was a moving spirit behind Yung Yisroel (Young Israel), a movement to promote Yiddish literature in Israel.
Sutzkever's first volume of poems composed in Israel, *In fayer vogn* (1952, In the Chiariot of Fire), alternates between ecstasy over his encounter with the Jewish homeland and anxiety that the destroyed world of eastern Europe and the record of Jewish heroism in the ghettos might be eclipsed by Zionist politics. Nevertheless, he marked his arrival in the Land of Israel by opening the volume with a Yiddish shehkiyanu, the traditional Hebrew prayer of thanksgiving, in which he imagines a Jewish attachment to Zion that is so visceral that even those who were murdered in Europe return to share in the rebirth of Jewish political independence. Sutzkever deemed it critical that his Yiddish discourse should absorb the natural landscape of Israel as sensitively as it had absorbed the landscapes of Siberia and Poland. From the deserts of the Negev, where "Genesis still exhibits its art," to Jerusalem's paranormally imagined "mirrors of stone" that allow one to encounter "eternity face to face and maybe not die," he recognizes the responsibility his art bears to the historic moment. In places he cautions himself and other writers not to emphasize the joy of national rebirth over the pain of national catastrophe but to synthesize both moods:

And if you paint over the image of the Jewish street
With a brush dipped in your new sunny palette
Know this: The fresh colors will peel
And someday the old colors will attack you with an ax
And wound you so that you will never heal.

Invited to visit and lecture to Jewish communities around the world, Sutzkever energized his audiences with his provocative, proud reading style and near-legendary status. In 1952 he reworked "Shtern in shney" as *Sibir* (translated as *Siberia*, 1961). A trip to Africa in 1950 resulted in the cycle *Helfanda bay nakht* (Elephants at Night), which exudes the joy of primal release, though the trauma of the recent past breaks through in scenes of sickness, animal savagery, and chaotic dance. *Helfanda bay nakht* makes up a substantial part of *Ode tsu der toyb* (1955, Ode to the Dove), Sutzkever's most innovative collection of the 1950s. The three sections display his stylistic mastery, contrasting the modernist free verse of *Helfanda bay nakht* with the neoclassical lyrics of the title section and the symbolic prose narratives, termed "prose poetry" by some critics, of the concluding section, "Griner akvarium" (translated as "Green Aquarium," 1982). The mininarratives of "Griner akvarium," vaguely set in the ghetto, with the partisans in the forest, and in the immediate aftermath of the war, are deliberately blurred by overabundant imagery and metaphor and by abrupt shifts between remembered past and poetic present. These episodes seek to demonstrate the power of art to keep the dead permanently alive in a nonmaterial realm and to offer metaphorical reflections on the function of art in an age of destruction. In a dramatic moment that makes all victims co-authors in Sutzkever's creative process, the speaker is gently interrupted by one of the dead when he begins to recite for her one of the poems he has composed in her memory: "My dear. I know all the words by heart. I gave you the words myself."

Sutzkever served as a war correspondent with an Israeli army unit during the 1956 Sinai Campaign. His poetic account, *In midlber Sinai* (1957, In the Sinai Desert), celebrates the young nation's fighting spirit while exploring a physical and spiritual reconnection with the desert that first molded the Jewish people's religious and national consciousness. Sinai becomes his new metaphor for poetry's attempt to grapple with eternity. The biblical imagery of *In midlber Sinai* metaphorically transforms Sinai from the traditional site of *malan torey* (the giving of the Law) to that of *malan geure* (the giving of heroism), a new holy ground of restored Jewish national dignity.

*Gaystike erd* (1961, Spiritual Soil), Sutzkever's second book-length epic, was inspired by his 1947 voyage to Israel. The regular meter and structure of the work impose order on the chaotic period of Israel's rebirth that included the ingathering of refugee exiles, the end of the British Mandate, and the military and political struggle for independence. The greater part of the poem is a travelogue in which the speaker explores with wonderment the new people, sites, and language of the Land of Israel. The speaker's former and current lives merge as he stands atop the desert fortress of Masada on 19 April 1949, the sixth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. By recalling Jewish resistance fighters in the eastern European ghettos at the site where ancient zealots defended the idea of Jewish independence at the very time when Israeli forces were once more fighting to secure it, Sutzkever highlights the chain of heroism and self-sacrifice that runs through Jewish history. The volume concludes with a vision of the spring rain reflecting the colors of the Israeli flag onto the blue heavens and white clouds, situating national redemption in the order of nature itself.

became the first recipient of the newly established Itzik Manger Prize for literary creativity in Yiddish.

Though Sutzkever continued to publish well into his eighties, his mature period is best represented by the poetry collections Togteke penem (1970, Ripe Faces), Dif fulbroys (1974; translated as The Fiddle Rose, 1990), and Lider fun togbekh (1977, Poems from a Diary) and the volume of symbolic prose Dorkn vu es nekhten di shtern (1979, There Where the Stars Spend the Night). This period is marked by intimate, metapoetic works that stake a claim for poetry in a cynical age and for the poet as a seeker of eternal truths. Many of Sutzkever's most familiar poetic symbols recur in these retrospective and existential musings. For example, the central symbol of Dif fulbroys yokes together the fiddle (associated with his father), with awe at nature's spontaneous blossoming such that art takes on its own natural momentum: "The fiddle-rose does not need a fiddler, there is no one left to praise or curse her. She plays without a player, with joy and faith in honor of a reborn string" (translated by Ruth Whitman). In Lider fun togbekh his speakers ponder such questions as "Who will remain? What will remain?" that reflect the anxieties of a postmodern age in which all received truths are automatically suspect. By locating eternity in the most ephemeral vestiges of nature—a passing wind, a flimsy cloud, the foam on a wave, or a blade of grass—the poet rejects fatalism in favor of an ever-present receptiveness to revelation.

Sutzkever suggests the most Jewish of answers as he turns the question back on the reader: "Who will remain, God will remain, is that enough for you?" Another poem in Lider fun togbekh refers to "the unique inevitability of my mission."

The Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem hosted an exhibition honoring Sutzkever's life and work in 1983; two years later, he was awarded the Israel Prize in Literature, the Jewish state's highest literary honor. As late as 1988 he could still write, "Inside me, a twig of sounds sways toward me, as before. / Inside me, rivers of blood are not a metaphor."

Abraham Sutzkever's oeuvre communicates a link with Jewish tradition through its celebration of the beauty inherent in creation and its respect for the power of the Jewish word to discipline chaos. His ability to forge poetic harmony out of modernity's disharmonies and his faith in the transcendent power of poetry to preserve into eternity the worlds and peoples he loved made him one of the most challenging and spiritually nourishing poets in Yiddish literature.

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