

YIDDISH AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

Edited and introduced by Joseph Sherman

BOULEVARD

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**'FARVANDLEN VEL IKH TOYT IN LEBN': TRANSFORMATIONS OF
THE HOLOCAUST IN THE POST-WAR POETRY OF ABRAHAM
SUTZKEVER**

Heather Valencia

The critic Mordkhe Litvin has characterised Sutzkever's poetic *oeuvre* as a spiral which moves in ever increasing circles, constantly absorbing and giving expression to new ideas and experiences, but within which everything is connected: the whole work is unified by a network of constantly evolving poetic themes and imagery.¹ This model is illuminating for an exploration of the way in which one of these essential strands, the theme of the Holocaust, is poetically transformed throughout Sutzkever's work: this theme cannot be seen in isolation, but is rather an integral part of the spiral. To do full justice to the topic, it would of course be necessary to examine in detail the interweaving of all the strands of Sutzkever's work. In this initial study I shall confine my discussion to the shorter lyric poetry, touching on key aspects of the development of the theme, and focusing particularly on the poetic transformation of the Holocaust in the poetry of his later period, particularly in the 'Lider fun togbukh'.

The term 'Holocaust', of course, carries different interpretations: in this paper I use it to refer to the events of the war years as Sutzkever experienced them, including his experiences in the Vilna Ghetto, as well as his responses to the genocide usually referred to by that term. I put forward the hypothesis that three phases in his poetic response to the Holocaust can be discerned.

The first period encompasses the war years, when Sutzkever is writing while actually experiencing the horror. In the poems written in the ghetto and the forest, three broad interwoven themes can be discerned. Many poems are addressed, directly or implicitly, to the Jewish people, stirring them to inner and physical resistance, such as 'Di blayene platn fun Roms drukeray' (The lead plates of Romm's printing house)² and 'A shtim fun harts' (A voice from the heart);³ secondly, there is the theme of personal suffering and tragedy, or the fate of particular individuals known to the

poet, for example 'Tsum kind' (To my child),⁴ 'Mayn mame' (My mother),⁵ 'Di lererin Mire' (Mire the teacher),⁶ and many others. Thirdly, many of the poems explore the issue which for Sutzkever was just as much a matter of life and death as the physical danger itself: the question of whether poetry is viable and has a future in the face of this immeasurable evil: poems such as 'Farbrente perl' (Burnt pearls),⁷ 'Ikh lig in an oren' (I lie in a coffin)⁸ and 'Gezang fun a yidishn dikhterin, 1943' (Song of a Jewish poet in 1943).⁹ All the poetry of this period has immense power, and even where Sutzkever is expressing grief or doubt in the future and in the craft of poetry, a sense of conviction and purpose emerges through the creative process itself. In a poem about the murder of his new-born child, for example, he is able to transform his despair into a vision of eternal rebirth: he gives the child to the snow of his Siberian childhood:

*vel ikh dikh avekshenken
dem rufndikn shney,
dem shney – mayn ershtn yontev,
un vest zinken
vi a shpliter zunfargang
in zayne shtile tifn
un opgebn a grus fun mir
di ayngefrirt grezlekh - - -*¹⁰

So I will give you away
to the snow which is calling
to the snow – my first Festival,
and you will sink
like a splinter of the sunset
into its still depths
and greet from me
the frozen grasses - - -

The child becomes a part of nature, a *shpliter zunfargang* which will nourish the frozen grasses. Moreover, the snow of Siberia symbolises for Sutzkever the realm of poetry,¹¹ so that in the image of burying the child in the Siberian snow, he is giving her immortality through and in poetry. Personal tragedy is thus transformed into Sutzkever's conviction that poetry can overcome death. This metapoetic theme, which has been a cornerstone of his work from the beginning, underlies all the poetry written during the war years. As Jacob Glatstein has written:

[Sutzkever] iz der eyntsiker yidisher dikhter, vos iz tsurikgekumen fun yomertol mit lider. Andere hobn geshribn oysgeshreyen, andere hobn gezogt kines, ober Sutzkever hot gehat a misye [...] tsu spiln oyf zayn farkishevter fleyt di lider fun grestn khurbm fun undzer tsayt.¹²

[Sutzkever] is the only Yiddish poet who came back from the vale of tears with songs. Some wrote screams of agony, others made lamentations, but Sutzkever had a mission [...] to play on his enchanted flute the songs of the greatest destruction of our time.

I consider the second stage of Sutzkever's poetic transformation of the Holocaust to begin at the end of the war and to extend for almost twenty-five years: this period is characterised by a poetry of memory in which the poet looks back to events, images and figures from the war years, memorialising them through his words. The immediate post-war period was the time for beginning to grieve and attempting to comprehend the dimensions of those crimes against humanity that were only then being fully revealed. In a letter to Glatstein, Sutzkever described his feelings after the 'liberation':

In geto hob ikh nokh gegleybt in vort un hob geknit far im un gezungen [...] Itst, in mayn 'bafraytkayt' volt ikh shoy n'kenen shraybn [...] Itster ken ikh shoy n'kenen vern ongetsundn. Ikh smolye zikh vi a nase tukh, a farratener fun ale geter.¹³

In the ghetto I still believed in the word and knelt before it and sang. [...] Now, in my 'liberation' I would not be able to write like that [...] Now I cannot become ignited. I am smouldering like a wet rag, betrayed by all the gods.

The poetry written in the eight or so years after the war illustrates the gulf described here between the purpose and poetic conviction of the years in the ghetto, and the inner desolation which assailed him in his 'bafraytkayt'. Most of the poetry of 1945 and 1946, written during years of wandering, reflects guilt, the disintegration of identity, and his struggle to reconstruct a sense of his role as a poet. A striking characteristic of this period is the way in which folk and fairy-tale motifs and imagery of nature – which is usually the vehicle of Sutzkever's metapoetic theme – are often turned into grotesque or negative images. A poem written in Moscow, for

example, begins with the child-like 'once upon a time' motif: *a mol iz gegangen a regn*, 'once upon a time it was raining'.¹⁴ The opening resembles an impressionist painting, depicting a garden of lush greenness, sunshine and gentle rain, where *mentshn in vayshe shtroyene hit*, 'people in white straw hats' wander at leisure. This idyll suddenly gives way to a nightmare vision of the present. All the positive nature imagery is turned into horror: the life-giving rain becomes a cloudburst of molten metal, forming a deluge in which twisted houses with rusted locks are carried downstream, in a landscape where the grasses and the rainbow (two of Sutzkever's recurring images of poetic creativity) are replaced by *a shteynerne foyst in zibn kolirn*, 'a stone fist of seven colours'. Here, and in other poems of the period, poetic creation itself is called into question by a conscious distortion and reversal of Sutzkever's key metapoetic images.

Some of these were poems of return, both thematically and literally: 'Shvartse derner' (Black thorns),¹⁵ written in Vilna in May 1945 when Sutzkever had gone back there, revisits a painful theme, the murder of the poet's mother in the ghetto. In the poem there is a macabre negative image of nature – the black thorns covering his mother's house, on which her spirit is hanging. The *ikh* deliberately pierces himself with the thorns. The ending of the poem is significant: the *ikh* twice exclaims: *Ikh vil do lebn, / Gut iz mir do, gut*, 'It is here I want to live, / here I feel at ease, at ease'. His inner desolation prevents him from moving on, but demands that he remain there with the spirit of his mother, dancing until the thorns blossom in his blood.

But even during this period, where personal grief predominates in the poetry, there is still the moral imperative to memorialise, which is embodied in many poems about individuals, and also in 'Epitafn' (Epitaphs),¹⁶ a series of short poems begun in the Vilna ghetto in 1943 and continued until 1946. Some of these are inspired by inscriptions that Sutzkever found on walls of the Gestapo prison in Vilna after the liberation. The poems are indeed epitaphs for the dead, but at the same time, since it is the victims who are speaking, their voices are heard, and the sense of continuity, of the *goldene keyt*, 'golden chain',¹⁷ stretching into the future, is integral to the cycle: it is present in Itsik Wittenberg's inscription, *Ikh shtarb farn lebn* (I die for life),¹⁸ in the Amsterdam *Tanakh* that is left by its owner to be handed down *biz in eybikayt*, 'for all eternity'¹⁹, in the last wish of a victim that his son in Tel-Aviv should bury a shard that would symbolise

him *in parden, vu di kinder dayne tantsn*,²⁰ ‘in the orchard where your children are dancing’, and in the pearls that the dancer Marie throws from the wagon carrying her to her death, which will be found and used by future generations.²¹

* * * * *

Sutzkever settled in Israel in 1947, and in the first volume of poetry published there, *In fayer-vogn* (In the fiery chariot),²² he establishes his new identity and rootedness in this land *vu yeder shteyndl iz mayn zeyde*,²³ ‘where every stone is my grandfather’, filling his work with images of the landscape, the sea, the people, the *eplroytkayt fun Yerusholayim*, the ‘apple-redness of Jerusalem’,²⁴ and drawing on the *Tanakh* and Jewish history and legend. The land of Israel has become for the poet the place of continuity for the Jewish people and, importantly, the hope for the survival of the Yiddish language and its culture.²⁵

The process of remembering is continued, however, in two separate sections in the books, ‘*Di karsh fun dermonung*’ (The cherry of remembrance),²⁶ containing poems written between 1949 and 1952, where the main emphasis is on the Vilna Ghetto, and ‘*Akordn fun shtoltsn vald*’ (Chords from the proud forest, 1948-1950),²⁷ poems centring on the partisans in the forest. From now on, in this second phase of remembering the Holocaust, poems with this explicit theme are usually grouped in separate sections in the volumes of poetry; this, and the titles of these sections – for example *di karsh fun dermonung* or *zeykher le-geto*²⁸ – signal that they are a return to events of the *past*, that they are poems of memory and memorialisation.

The title ‘*Di karsh fun dermonung*’ is an example of this trend. Throughout Sutzkever’s work, the cherry is a seminal image, one of many key images through which he approaches the ideal, the essence of the poetic. In the title poem, the eating of the cherry summons up the vision of two friends of the poet’s youth who had perished in the *Shoah*. The cherry, by means of which the *du* of a joyful early poem was enabled to experience the taste of eternity,²⁹ has now become the vehicle of painful memory, a glowing coal, searing the lips of the *ikh*, but nevertheless igniting the memory, and inspiring the poem:

*ven kh'hob a karsh genumen tsu di lipn –
hot di karsh
farvandlt zikh in heyser koyl un ongetsundn verter.*³⁰

When I put the cherry to my lips –
the cherry
transformed itself into a glowing coal and ignited my words.

Striking characteristics of many of these poems are the nightmare quality of the atmosphere, and the poet's anguished probing of his own guilt. The first poem in the group 'Oytoportret' (Self-Portrait),³¹ is a powerful vision of a deserted town through which the *ikh* wanders in search of a *mentshlekh n otem*, 'a human breath'. Two of his actions from the ghetto years return to haunt him: in his great hunger he had eaten a swallow, and now the bird takes her revenge by depriving him of his tears, that is, of his power to grieve:

*atsind, zikh dermont, hot di shvalb oysgetsvitshert
fun mayne shvartsaplen ir shvalbn-nekome.
nito mer in zey mayne trern,
der foygl
hot oysgepikt ale
in duln getsvitsher.*³²

Now, remembering, the swallow twittered out
on the pupils of my eyes her revenge.
There are no more tears in them,
the bird
pecked them all out
with her mad twittering.

The second of these actions was his desecration of a corpse by writing a poem on it:

*farshribn hob ikh mit a shtikele koyl
a lid oyf papirenem layb fun mayn shokhn.
atsind iz afile keyn toyter nito mer, —
baleydikte vayskayt
mit sazhe bahangen.*³³

With a little piece of coal I wrote
a poem on the papery corpse of my neighbour.
Now there is not even a corpse there any more, —

but only offended whiteness
hung around with soot.

The *ikh* finally stumbles into his old home where he sees a bent, dishevelled figure of whom he asks three questions: *ver bistu? derkenst mikh? neshome?*³⁴ 'Who are you? Do you recognise me? [Have you] a soul?' The stranger mockingly echoes his questions and the *ikh*, reaching out to strike him in anger, shatters the mirror which has reflected his own unrecognisable face. The poem ends on a note of defeat: *un ikh bin gefaln baym grenets fun gloz*, 'and I fell at the edge of the mirror'.³⁵ Motifs from this poem will be taken up later by Sutzkever and transformed, as will be seen.

These earlier post-war poems represent a stage of looking back to an as yet unresolved past which the poet divides off from his new life in Israel — this is symbolised by their being placed in their own separate sections in the volume *In fayer-vogn*. The past, however, is always breaking through into his everyday life in Israel: in 'Shvartse toybn'³⁶ (Black doves), the incident of cutting his finger on a bread-knife provokes his child's reaction: *loz arayn dos blut tsurik, / ikh kon oyf dem nit kukn [...]*,³⁷ 'Put the blood back in again, / I can't bear to look at it [...]'. These childish words provoke a painful train of thought in the father who finally asks his daughter for a solution: *entfer du, / farmogst dokh verter nayere – / vi lozt men take s'blut arayn tsurik / in ale tayere?*,³⁸ 'You answer this, / for you have newer words than I – / how can one indeed put the blood back again / in all those dear people?'

Sutzkever constantly returns to this world, trying to build bridges between these two spheres. The discontinuity between them, and the poet's anguish, are expressed in the unrhymed verse with lines of unequal length and jagged rhythms that are prevalent in the poems of this period. This is untypical of Sutzkever's work, of which rhyme and regular metric structure are a characteristic feature.

* * * * *

In the poem 'Ode tsu der toyb' (Ode to the dove),³⁹ written in 1954, the poet reviews his past and explores the nature and meaning of his poetic

mission. The vehicle for this exploration is a dialogue with the Muse, the dove magically created from the feather of an angel's wing in his Siberian childhood, who in the ode accompanies the poet through the horrors of the war years – expressed in surreal and violent images – and resolves his doubts about the viability of art after the Holocaust. At the end of the poem, the dove appears on his shoulder in the land of Israel, and in the joyous final stanza gives him permission to pursue his poetic work:

*taybele, bistu di zelbe, di fligl nit gro, iz dos meglekh?
zol ikh do boyen mayn templ, vi ikh hob geboyt im togteglekh?
zol ikh mayn tsoyberdik lempl tsegrinen oyfs nay un tsebloyen?
— boyen un boyen dem templ, mit zunikn seykh! im boyen!⁴⁰*

My little dove, are you the same as you were, your wings not grey, is that possible?
Am I to build my temple here, as I have built it day by day?
Am I to light my magic lamp anew with colours of green and blue?
— yes, build and build your temple, build it with the sunny light of reason!

This final line expresses an ideal of serenity and harmony which is mirrored in the balanced form of this great ode.

'Ode tsu der toyb' is a *khezhbm hanefesh*, a spiritual stocktaking, and a seminal turning point in Sutzkever's work. In it the poet achieves ascendancy over the trauma of the Holocaust and a sense of continuity: his own history is united with that of the ancient land where his people wandered *durkh fertsik tanakhishe yorn*,⁴¹ 'for forty *tanakh* years'. There is a sense of liberation for his poetic quest, expressed in the ode by several images of the freeing of the imprisoned poetic word, such as, significantly, that of the cherry:

*karshn, farmoyert in beymer, bafel ikh tsu baytn di erter,
kumen oyf purpurne fislekh tsu lebn vi karshn in verter.⁴²*

I order cherries imprisoned in trees to change their places,
And on scarlet little feet they come to live like cherries in words.

The inner liberation achieved in the ode leads to a period of about fifteen years during which Sutzkever focuses more and more on creating and giving expression to his own inner poetic universe. During this intense phase of poetic development, which Litvin has characterised as *dos*

*proyetsirn funem ineveynikstn neshome-bild oyf der velt, vos zi iz efsehr do bloyz [...] medium [...] far der zelvst-inkarnatsye funem vort,*⁴³ ‘the projection of his innermost soul on to the world, which is merely a [...] medium [...] for the incarnation of the word’, it is significant that Sutzkever writes comparatively few poems specifically referring to the past. In the 1950s there are several poems in the section of the collection *In midber Sinay*⁴⁴ (In the Sinai Desert) entitled ‘Der krayz fun di noentste’ (My nearest and dearest) which look back to Vilna, the partisans and the Polish woman who saved Sutzkever by hiding him, and there is the longer work *Gaystike erd* (Spiritual soil)⁴⁵ in which the poet unites various significant time-levels in his experience. From the vantage point of 1958-1960 he recreates the voyage to Israel on the ship *Patria*, during which several of the survivors retell the events of their immediate past during the war years. The chain of continuity is created in the gifts which they bring to the Land of Israel – the pendant from the neck of a dead lover, an unborn child. The second and third sections of the poem move to Israel. In them the poet gives a series of autobiographical sketches of his own experiences of the early days of the State of Israel, ending with a reunion, symbolically held on Masada, to mark the sixth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising. As Abraham Novershtern has noted, the poem is ‘say tematish un say formel [...] a hemshekh fun ‘Geheymshot’”⁴⁶ ‘[...] both thematically and formally [...] a sequel to ‘Geheymshot’, the epic poem of 1946-47 which describes the existence of a *minyén* of survivors in the sewers under the city of Vilna: the message of both poems is hope for continuity, and the fusion of past and present.

If such fusion is achieved in the rhetorical narrative of *Gaystike erd*, the more problematic nature of this quest is exemplified in one of the poems of ‘Der krayz fun di noentste’, the moving ‘Roykhn fun yidishe kinder’ (Smoke of Jewish children).⁴⁷ Here the image of the fiery chariot of Elijah is again used as a central symbol of the history and stature of the Jewish people. The creation of the chariot by God, the bringing of Elijah to heaven, and the chariot’s subsequent journeying through the heavens are described, followed by God’s command that the chariot descend *tsum kenigraykh fun Ashmoday, dem tsinder un dem shinder, / un breng dem tatn zayne libe kinder*,⁴⁸ ‘to the kingdom of Asmodeus, the cruel burner and scorcher / and bring the father his beloved children’. The third section of the poem is a moving elegy to the dead children who have been reduced to smoke: the

mesmeric quality of the verses is achieved by the insistent repetition of the word *roykhn* and the echoing internal rhymes in the two lines of each couplet, which together create a powerful feeling of emptiness and absence:

*bloyz roykhn, roykhn, shvebedike roykhn,
di toyte kinder – lebedike roykhn.*

[...]
*di toyte kinder hiln zikh in roykhn,
di toyte kinder shpiln zikh in roykhn.*⁴⁹

Only smoke, smoke, hovering smoke
the dead children – living smoke

[...]
The dead children wrap themselves in smoke,
the dead children play in smoke.

In the face of such annihilation the fiery chariot itself despairs, empathising with the children to the extent that its divine power is on the point of disappearing and it feels itself to be *fun zelbn shtof, / un zayne reder – vakldike, lome*,⁵⁰ ‘of the same material / and its wheels – wobbly, lame’. The divine presence however intervenes, commanding the gathering and bringing back of the smoke, so that God may bring the dead children to life again.

The poem could have ended here, but in the final section the poet suddenly roots this mystical vision in the concrete situation of the here and now, in *oysgebenktn land*, ‘in the yearned-for land’ where he and all the people are still longing for the fulfilment of this vision of resurrection:

*bashtendik vartn mir un benken, do zol zikh bavayzn
der odlerdiker fayer-vogn zegndik dem nepl
mit kinder, kinder, nit keyn roykhn, zunike vi epl.
un Elyohu, er aleyn, zol zayn mit zey tsuzamen.*⁵¹

We are constantly waiting and longing that there shall appear
the eagle-like fiery chariot, sawing through the mist
bringing children, children, not smoke, sunny like apples.
And Elijah, he alone, shall be with them.

The dislocation in the poem is between mystical vision and actual fulfilment: there is not yet union of past and present, Israel and Vilna, death and life, but still only *vartn*, waiting, and *benken*, longing. However the theme of resurrection and the figure of Elijah as intermediary foreshadow

later developments in the integration of the Holocaust in Sutzkever's poetry.

The poems of the 1950s that look back to the Holocaust thus make up only a small proportion of Sutzkever's work, and this is even more true in the 1960s, where themes and images of the Holocaust seldom occur in his new work.⁵² There is, however, a group of thirteen poems written between 1965 and 1967 entitled 'Zeykher l'geto' (In memory of the ghetto).⁵³ The title is a conscious allusion to the moral imperative to remember, which is a constant injunction in Jewish tradition, resounding in phrases such as *zeykher le-khurbm*, 'in memory of the destruction [of the Temple]', and *zeykher le-tsiat mitsraim*, 'in memory of the Exodus from Egypt'. In the poems themselves there is a feeling of Sutzkever's urgent need, from a distance of twenty years, to keep this memory alive, to walk through what in one of the poems he calls the *genem-gas fun mayn zikorn*,⁵⁴ 'the hell-street of my memory', and summon up the tragic and often ennobling incidents and figures experienced by the poet, in order to honour them and keep their memory alive. There is nevertheless in these poems a certain unease, in my view: though there are powerful poetic moments, there is the occasional intrusion of forced rhyme and instances of bathos.⁵⁵ It seems as if Sutzkever cannot and does not want to forget, but has not yet found the way to integrate the past *anew* into the poetry of his mature years.

* * * * *

The main focus of the poetry of the later 1950s and 1960s is indeed on the present, the poetic *ikh* and the constant search for the essence of the poetic word. Many of the permanent key images – for example the cherry, the bee, the fiddle, grasses, granite, pearls, and many others – are gradually loosened from their concrete meanings and take on ever more symbolic identity in Sutzkever's metapoetic language. The poet explores his belief in the equivalence of all realms of experience – the lack of boundaries between the corporeal and the world of the imagination or of the spirit, between the word and the 'thing', between the past, present and future – and in the transformative power of poetry. This formative phase in his development leads to what I would call the third stage of Holocaust transformations: the synthesis of his poetic mysticism with his experience of the past. This synthesis is heralded in his 'Togbukh-notitsn' (Diary Notes) from 1962, where he writes:

*dem toyts kenigraykh iz shoyt atsind a legende. toyte lebn dortn oyf der ander zayt fun lebn. ikh shik tsu zey dikhterishe signaln, vi tsu vezns oyf an ander planet. ikh zikh beshutfesdike verter, mir zoln zikh farshteyn un lib hobn.*⁵⁶

Death's kingdom is has now already become a legend. The dead live there on the other side of life. I send them poetic signals, as to beings on another planet. I seek a common language, so that we can understand each other and love each other.

In this remarkable statement it is no longer a question of memorialising the dead but of *communicating* with them. From now on, rather than returning to the past, to the world of the dead, the poet now calls *them* into the present, through the power of his poetic word.

This impulse towards synthesis was first seen in the 1957 poem 'Roykhn fun yidishe kinder', and is developed in 'Tsvayg mit letste karshn' (Branch with last cherries) from 1968.⁵⁷ Common motifs link the two poems: as in the earlier poem, the figure of Elijah is the vehicle of the hoped-for resurrection, and in both poems the resurrected persons emerge through a mist which had hitherto obscured them from the eyes of the living. In the oxymoron of the first two lines the poet asserts the equal reality of the *heyim* where his mother is dead and the *bloye heyim* where she still lives:

*dortn, vu s'iz mer nito mayn heyim, nito mayn mame,
dortn iz mayn bloye heyim un dortn iz mayn mame.*

There, where my home is no more and my mother is no more
There *is* my blue home, and there is my mother.

The longed-for reunion with the mother is still a tentative possibility here, expressed through the future tense, which can *perhaps* be accomplished through an intermediary who can bridge the past and present, whom the *ikh* calls *Elyohu*, 'Elijah'. The *ikh* may be empowered to approach his mother for a moment: *bloyz a vayle. oyb es iz tsu lang: a halbe vayle*, 'Just for a while. If that is too long: half a while'. The vision of the mother is fragile; it is as if the *ikh* were approaching a *tsvayg mit letste karshn durkh a nepl*, 'a branch with last cherries through a mist', which he is scared of destroying. The key image of the cherries here undergoes a significant transformation – the emphasis in the poems of the early fifties was *dermonung*, remembrance, whereas now it evokes the bringing of his mother into his

present experience.

The potential fulfilment of the dream of resurrection in this poem (and in the earlier 'Roykhn fun yidishe kinder') is made actuality in the poem 'Di fidlroyz' (The fiddle rose), from the collection of the same name.⁵⁸ Here, two key Sutzkeverian images combine to form a strange new being. The motif of the fiddle carries within it the resonance of its earlier poetic manifestations: from the poem 'Sibir' (Siberia)⁵⁹ onward it was associated with the child-poet's earliest inspiration, his father's fiddle-music in Siberia. Then, in the poem 'Der geto-fidler' (The ghetto fiddler),⁶⁰ written during the war years, it symbolised the power of art to resurrect the dead. Roses too are imbued with strong symbolic significance: in an earlier poem they signified the death-wounds of the mother and the poet's grief, but also her eternal existence in his consciousness.⁶¹ All these associations are present in the mysterious *fidlroyz* which rises alone from under the earth, an image that is autotelic, but also seems to evoke poetry which is eternally reborn. The fiddle-rose, and therefore poetry itself, must encompass all these past experiences of grief and death, together with the pain and sweetness evoked by the paradoxical *bin, vos ir honig iz bitter / nor zis iz ir shtokh*, 'bee, whose honey is bitter, though her sting is sweet'. All these resonances combine in this image of rebirth and blossoming. Although it does not refer overtly to the Holocaust theme, 'Di fidlroyz' is a symbolic poem of resurrection and hope that signals the beginning of that phase in Sutzkever's work in which there is reconciliation and integration of the past into the present.

This is evident in a group of poems entitled 'Nodlshayn' (Needleshine),⁶² in which Sutzkever revisits specific events and figures from the past. These poems were written in 1978/79 and published in *Fun alte un yunge ksav-yadn* (From old and young manuscripts), the collection whose title and contents consciously unite Sutzkever's past with his present. They focus on individuals like the writer Shmerke Katsherginski and the painter Rokhl Sutzkever, or on specific remembered incidents: the creaking of the stairs leading to the poet's attic, the little pinpoint of light he created when he bored a small hole in the tin roof of his hiding place – the *nodlshayn* of the title. These poems are moving, but have an elegiac calm that contrasts with the anguish of the earlier poems of memory. In one of them, 'Beydemer in zunfargang' (Attics in the sunset),⁶³ the poet revisits the incident which gave rise to the earlier 'Oytoportret' – his search for someone left alive in

the deserted buildings of the ghetto – and a comparison of the two poems is illuminating. Here he dates the time of the search precisely – *Yuli 1944* – so that the poem is a record of an actual event rather than a nightmare vision. The guilty memories of the swallow and the corpse are omitted, and the poem is outward-looking, focusing entirely on his desperate search, and culminating in the mistake with the mirror. In contrast to the earlier poem, the ‘other’ seen in the mirror is not an image of horror or self-disgust – *a bavaksener mentsh, geboygn vi ikh*, ‘a hairy man, bent like me’⁶⁴ – but simply a face *mit zunfargang bavaksn*, ‘covered with sunset’, and the existential questions with their mocking echoes, followed by the violent rage of the *ikh*, are missing. The later poem ends not with despair but with the poet’s expression of faith that life *will* be found there: *iz loyf ikh nokhn viderkol durkh beydemer tsepralte / un gleyb nit, az nito in zey keyn eynikl un zeyde mer*, ‘So I pursue the echo through attics flung wide open / and do not believe that there exists no longer in them a grandson or a grandfather’⁶⁵. These final lines express the essence of the treatment of the Holocaust in all his later work. Rather than looking back in pain, he now believes in the eternal existence of the *eynikl un zeyde*, grandchild and grandfather, in the present of his poetry.

The climax of this third phase is found in Sutzkever’s ‘Lider fun togbukh’, the monumental collection of 166 poems and two poem cycles spanning more than a decade (1974–1985).⁶⁶ As in a diary, these poems trace the mature poet’s moods, dreams and reflections on life and death, and on the craft of poetry, during this extended period. There is a sense of the urgency of time passing, but also of the relativity of time: the collection opens with a typical Sutzkeverian paradox, *s’dernentert zikh di vayt*, ‘distance nears’.⁶⁷ The concept of *di vayt* suggests both the past and the future, as Ruth Wisse has commented: ‘A man advanced in years feels the past crowding in on him, but the provocative oxymoron also points forward, to the approach of endlessness, perhaps eternal life’.⁶⁸ Reflecting this fusion of past, present and future, ‘Lider fun togbukh’ contain no separate sections of ‘Holocaust poems’. Events and figures from the past are interwoven with all the other themes and images of the present and the future.

Key ideas throughout the series are resurrection and transformation. In a poem dating from the years 1975/1976, Sutzkever evokes the inner struggle of his past in terms of poison, which could be counteracted by *a*

kegn-sam, an eliksir fun klangen, ‘an antidote, an elixir of sounds’.⁶⁹ A needleful of this elixir still remains in his memory and can be injected if necessary, enabling a magical metamorphosis: *farvandlen zikh in oyern di oysgetsankte yorn / un hern fun an eylbertbletl dos geveyen fun mabl*, ‘The years which have flickered out transform themselves into ears / and hear from an olive leaf the weeping of the flood’. The years – his past experiences – are being transformed into the vehicle of his inspiration, into ears which hear the mysterious secrets of the universe. The last stanza expresses his credo of poetic transformation:

farvandlen vel ikh tsayt in rukhnies, ot iz mayn ideye!
farvandlen vel ikh toyt in lebn; ikh, der lang farlendter.
farvandlen vel ikh grozn in a kosmisher aleye,
farvandlen vel ikh zikh aleyen, in mentsh vos mir iz nenter.

I shall transform time into spirit, this is my idea!
 I shall transform death into life; I, the long annihilated one.
 I shall transform grasses into a cosmic avenue,
 I shall transform myself into a human being who is closer to myself.

The transformation of death into life is accomplished in two other poems from the same year. In the first of these,⁷⁰ the poet’s words become a *kretshmele* for the dead who come to live there:

fun bikher-tovlen tsvey un tsvey, georemt un gevinklt,
kh’hob eygenhantik, eygnhartsik oysgeboyt a kamer
fun umbakante verter, koyen baloykhtn un bashprinklt,
un oyser dem reshus fun toyzntoygikn farsamer.

a kretshmele in vildn vald.

From book covers two and two, arm-in-arm, and squared off,
 I have with my own hands, with my own heart, built a dwelling
 of unknown words, poorly lit and stained,
 and out of reach of the thousand-eyed poisoner.

A little inn in the wild wood.

Into his homely *kretshmele* come the dead, bringing him their gifts, the *bagleyndike psomim*, ‘*Havdalah*-spices accompanying them’, of the last stanza. This is no solemn vision of death: the *ikh* is on familiar terms with

his *tayere geshtaltn*, his ‘dear people’: in his wood, the trees give birth to birds, the dead receive letters, and there is even sensuality in the image of the bashful flower of the penultimate stanza. This vision also extends into the future; there is space for many more, even for an angel to come and live in his *kretshmele*.

In the second poem, the dissolution of the boundaries between past and present, evoked by the first words: *di leym fun tsayt iz veykh gevorn*, ‘The clay of time has become soft’⁷¹, has enabled the dead to inhabit the present. They are presented as mischievous pranksters:

*di meysim zenen lang shoyt oyfgeshtanen! zenen hastik
antrunen do fun yener-velt, fun hoykerdiker mase
un makhn yoga, shpiln shokh un zenen fray un gastik,
balegern di opere un pikn oys ir kase.*

The dead have long since been resurrected! They have in haste
fled from the other world, from their burdensome hump
And are practising yoga, playing chess, and are free and sociable,
they besiege the opera and plunder its ticket-office.

They have been released from the trauma of their past, which from the perspective of eternity has become unimportant: *tsu vakldik un shvakh di tseyen men zol azoyns tsekayen*, ‘their teeth are too wobbly and weak to chew on such things’; instead they have entered into the delights of this world — which Sutzkever symbolises by the two strange bedfellows, *abstrakte kunst un kider-vider*, ‘abstract art and petty quarrels’ — rather than ponderous moral issues of guilt and punishment: instead of the mark of Cain, Cain wears the mark of Abel. They leave the business of redemption to the mysterious blind seer of the final stanza. The playful, almost ironic tone in which the poet evokes the *tayere geshtaltn* of the past indicates that they have entered his world and he feels at ease with them.

* * * * *

Throughout the ‘Lider fun togbukh’ the dead are present, even in poems where they are not explicitly mentioned, because of the resonances which are created by the ever-developing network of imagery that unifies Sutzkever’s whole *oeuvre*. Myriad strands of such resonances and metamorphoses can be traced in the later work: two striking examples are the

images of the cherry-tree and of grasses. One of the most abstract and mysterious poems of the 'Lider fun togbukh' is built on the image of the cherry-tree:

*nito dos fentster un durkh im der karshnboym der oyrekhh,
gekumen ibernekhtikn bay mir fun untervegns.
nito der karshnboym fun shtern, s'hobn zi tseganvet
kosmishe ganovim.*⁷²

The window is not there, nor has the cherry-tree, my guest
Come through it from its journeyings to spend the night with me.
The cherry-tree of stars is nowhere there, it has been stolen
by cosmic robbers.

This is a vision of absence, but the non-existent window and cherry-tree, and the absent *karshnboym fun shtern*, 'cherry-tree of stars', take on in the reader's imagination a mysterious presence, like the annihilated victim in Sutzkever's earlier poem, 'Farbrente perl' (Burnt pearls).⁷³ The poet appears to be describing a state of lack of poetic inspiration: throughout Sutzkever's work, cherries have been associated with the ideal, as in 'A ts vaygl karshn', and with the poetic word, as in 'Ode tsu der toyb', where the poet's muse assures him of his creative power by urging him to free the cherries imprisoned in the trees. Here the cherry-tree, his guest, and the cherry-tree of stars (the ideal cherry-tree?), are absent. The poet has been left *a mos gan-eydn-luft*, 'a measure of the air of paradise', which *can* enter through the absent window. This air of paradise, *arumgeramt mit fir din-dine shures*, 'framed by four fine, fine lines', becomes the place in which the poet's vision finds a home. This, it seems to me, is Sutzkever's evocation of the essence of poetry which is indestructible and divine. Through the frame of *this* window, the two cherry-trees can enter: the *karshnboym der oyrekhh*, the 'cherry-tree, the guest', and the *karshnboym fun shtern*, the 'cherry-tree of stars'. It would be invidious to attempt to dissect this mystical imagery for specific 'meaning', but one senses in it the poet's attempt to approach the ineffable ideal. The cherry-tree vision of this poem encompasses all the resonances of this image throughout Sutzkever's *oeuvre*, including the dead victims who were summoned up by the *karsh fun dermonung*, the 'cherry of remembrance'.

Grasses are also a recurring image in Sutzkever's poetry. A late poem from 1988 describes how *tsveyfisike grozn, di penimlekh kentike*,⁷⁴ 'two-

legged grasses, their little faces familiar to me', approach the poet's bed. To his question, *tsi zol ikh atsind mayn yerushe aykh lozn?* 'Shall I now leave my legacy to you?' the grasses nod in assent. Who or what are these anthropomorphic grasses? Their symbolic associations have gradually emerged throughout the poet's work. In the final lines of the poem 'Tsum kind' he had dedicated his dead child to the *ayngefrirte grezlekh* under the Siberian snow, and since then grass, like the ant and the bee, has been one of Sutzkever's addressees in his poetic universe. The volume *In fayer-vogn* closes with a series of short poems entitled 'A briv tsu di grozn' (A letter to the grasses), which follows directly after the two sections of Holocaust poems. This series, written in 1948, ends with the words

*tsum viderzen
in tsimerl,
in kholem maynem, grozn.
tsum liderzen
in shimerl
vos ikh hob aykh geloyn –
un fargest nit oyfblien a mol bay mayn tsukopns.*

We will meet again
In the little room
in my dream, grasses
We will meet again in poetry
in the gleam
which I have left to you –
and don't forget, one day, to blossom by my pillow.

Starting with the end of the poem to the dead child, grasses have gradually become one of Sutzkever's key images; they are his confidants, they suggest the eternity of poetry, and its resurrective power. One of the 'Lider fun togbukh' describes how the poet is sent a letter containing *a grezl fun Ponar*, 'a blade of grass from Ponary',⁷⁵ from which he will never part, and which will be buried with him:

*ikh vel zikh mitn grezl fun der heymshtot nit tsesheydn,
mayn oysgebenkte gute erd vet makhn ort far beydn.
un yemolt vel ikh brengen a matone farn har:
dos grezl fun Ponar.*

I will not part with the little grass from my home town,

my longed-for good earth will find space for us both.
 And then I shall bring as a present for the Lord:
 the little grass from Ponar.

Through all these symbolic resonances the strange *tsveyfisike grozn* of the late poem can be approached, and the poet's leaving his legacy to them has the internal logic of Sutzkever's poetic universe.

Sutzkever sees his work as a legacy for the future: *farloyrn vert nit in di verter s' mindste iberlebenish*, 'in your words not even the tiniest experience is lost', says a speaker in one of the later 'Lider fun togbukh'.⁷⁶ In one of his most assured and majestic poems, he bequeaths his transformations to the 'cosmic poet' who will come after him:

*ikh tunk in zun mayn zigrling un shtet im in der fintster
 tsu hitn di farvandlungen. mayn kumendiker yoyresh,
 der kosmisher poet, zol konen zukhn un gefinen,
 un mayn gebeyn zol shmeykhlen.*⁷⁷

I dip my signet-ring in sunshine and place it in the darkness
 to guard the transformations. So that my future heir,
 the cosmic poet, shall seek and find them,
 and my bones will smile.

* * * * *

After the powerful and passionate poetry of the war years, and the earlier post-war poetry of grief and memory, there is a sense of liberation and poetic renewal. Sutzkever is enabled during the later 1950s and 1960s to return to the aesthetic, to nature and the quest for the essence of the poetic word. During this period, the Holocaust is rarely an explicit theme, though it is never entirely absent: the continuity inherent in Mordkhe Litvin's 'spiral' image of Sutzkever's work means that as the images evolve and take in ever more associations and 'meanings', their previous resonances still remain. The poetic assurance achieved in these years of development, together with the conviction that past, present and future, death and life, are all equally alive in poetry, lead to the integration of the Holocaust in the work of his later years, to its synthesis with the visions and imagery of his poetic universe.

NOTES

¹ M. Litvin, 'Der dritter periode in Avrom Sutskever's poezye', *Yikhes fun lid / yikhuso shel shir: Lekoved Avrom Sutskever* (Tel-Aviv: Yoyvl-komitet, 1983), pp.122-46.

² Avrom Sutskever, *Poetishe verk*, Vol. 1 (Tel-Aviv: Yoyvl-komitet, 1963), p.335. Henceforth *PVI*.

³ *PVI*, p.248.

⁴ *PVI*, p.278.

⁵ *PVI*, p.265.

⁶ *PVI*, p.307.

⁷ *PVI*, p.323.

⁸ *PVI*, p.249.

⁹ *PVI*, p.318.

¹⁰ *PVI*, p.278.

¹¹ See Heather Valencia, 'Sutzkever's Two Siberian Poems', *Chulyot: Studies in Yiddish Literature* 2 (1994): 181-95.

¹² Yankev Glatshteyn, *In tokh genumen: eseyen, 1947* quoted in Dan Miron, 'A tsvayg mit letste karshn', *Yidishe kultur* (March-April 2000): 34.

¹³ Letter to Yankev Glatshteyn, 3 October 1946, quoted in Abraham Novershtern, *Avrom Sutskever: Tsum vern a ben-shevim/Abraham Sutzkever on his Seventieth Birthday*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem (Jerusalem, 1983), p.171.

¹⁴ *PVI*, p.543.

¹⁵ *PVI*, pp.546-47.

¹⁶ *PVI*, p.427-39.

¹⁷ The golden chain is a seminal image in Sutzkever's poetry, denoting the continuity and survival through the generations of the Jewish people. *Di goldene keyt* is the title of the literary journal which Sutzkever founded in Israel in 1949, and which ran until 1995.

¹⁸ *PVI*, p.432. Itsik Wittenberg was the leader of the armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto.

¹⁹ *PVI*, p.433.

²⁰ *PVI*, p.435.

²¹ *PVI*, p.429. For a discussion of this poem, see Christina Pareigis, 'Poesie als

Erinnerungsraum. Die jüdische Lyrik Kadye Molodovskys und Avrom Sutzkevers im Angesicht der Shoah', in *Literaturwissenschaft als Kulturswissenschaft. Interkulturalität und Alterität. Akten des X. Internationalen Germanistenkongresses, Wien 2000*, 'Zeitenwende – Die Germanistik auf dem Weg vom 20. ins 21. Jahrhundert', Vol. 9, ed. Peter Wiesinger, with Hans Derkits (Berne: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 165-73.

²² Avrom Sutzkever, *In fayer-vogn* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1952).

²³ *In fayer-vogn*, p.9.

²⁴ *In fayer-vogn*, p.94.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of these issues, see Justin Cammy, 'Vison and Redemption: Abraham Sutzkever's Poems of Zion(ism)', in this volume, pp. 240-268

²⁶ *In fayer-vogn*, pp.107-56.

²⁷ *In fayer-vogn*, pp.157-72.

²⁸ Published in Avrom Sutzkever, *Firkantike oysyes un moyfsim* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1968), pp.53-71, and Avrom Sutzkever, *Lider fun yam hamoves* (Tel-Aviv/New York: Farlag Bergen-Belzen, velt-farlag fun di Bergen-Belzener, 1968), pp.457-75.

²⁹ *PV1*, p.118.

³⁰ *In fayer-vogn*, p.145.

³¹ *In fayer-vogn*, pp.107-09.

³² *In fayer-vogn*, p.108.

³³ *In fayer-vogn*, p.108.

³⁴ *In fayer-vogn*, p.109.

³⁵ *In fayer-vogn*, p.109.

³⁶ *In fayer-vogn*, pp.140-44. The black doves are a further example of the reversal of positive images of nature into their negative form.

³⁷ *In fayer-vogn*, p.143.

³⁸ *In fayer-vogn*, p.143.

³⁹ Avrom Sutzkever, 'Ode tsu der toyb', *Ode tsu der toyb* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1955), pp.7-16.

⁴⁰ *Ode tsu der toyb*, p.16.

⁴¹ *Ode tsu der toyb*, p.16.

⁴² *Ode tsu der toyb*, p.9.

⁴³ M. Litvin, 'Der driter periode ...', p.125.

⁴⁴ Avrom Sutskever, *In midber Sinay* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag Y.L. Peretz-bibliotek, 1957).

⁴⁵ Avrom Sutskever, *Gaystike erd* (New York: Farlag der kval, 1961).

⁴⁶ Abraham Sutzkever Catalogue, p.191.

⁴⁷ Avrom Sutskever, *Poetishe verk*, Vol. 2 (Tel-Aviv: Yoyvel-komitet, 1963), pp.320-22. Hereafter *PV2*.

⁴⁸ *PV2*, p.320.

⁴⁹ *PV2*, p.321.

⁵⁰ *PV2*, p.322.

⁵¹ *PV2*, p.322.

⁵² In his prose writing, which is principally concerned with figures and images from the past, there is a similar hiatus during these years: the *kurtse bashraybungen* (short descriptions) of 'Grine akvarium', first published in the volume *Ode tsu der toyb*, were written between 1953 and 1954, while the stories of *Dortn vu es nekhtikn di shtern* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag Yisroel-bukh, 1979) are all dated between 1975 and 1978, and apart from two stories from 1953, all the prose pieces of *Di nevue fun shvartsaplen* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1989) were written between 1979 and 1987. During the 1960s, however, Sutzkever reviewed and revised the poems of the Holocaust, publishing them in *Lider fun yam hamoves*, which is subtitled 'fun Vilner geto, vald un vander', in 1968. See note 28.

⁵³ Avrom Sutskever, *Firkantike oysyes un moyfsim* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1968), pp.53-71.

⁵⁴ 'In bloye hemder', *Firkantike oysyes*, p.54

⁵⁵ The impressive poem 'In bloye hemder', for example, is marred, in my opinion, by the banality of its ending – on the whole, the very few poems in which Sutzkever actually mentions *daytshe*, Germans, are among his less successful poetic creations.

⁵⁶ Avrom Sutskever, 'Togbukh-notitsn', *Di goldene keyt* 42 (1962): 164-67.

⁵⁷ Avrom Sutskever, *Tsaytike penimer* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag Y.L. Peretz, 1970), p.90.

⁵⁸ Avrom Sutskever, *Di fidloyz* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1974), p.7.

⁵⁹ Avrom Sutskever, *Sibir* (Jerusalem, 1953).

⁶⁰ *PV1*, p.315.

⁶¹ This is the poem cycle 'Dray royzn', of which one part was published as 'Mayn mame' in *Di festung* (New York: Ikuf-farlag, 1945), and another part, 'Fun der poeme "Dray royzn"' in *Di ershte nakht in geto* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1979). Both parts were written in October 1942. The cycle is still incomplete.

⁶² Avrom Sutskever, *Fun alte un yunge ksav-yadn* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag Yisroel-bukh, 1982), pp.91-110.

⁶³ *Ksav-yadn*, pp.95-96.

⁶⁴ 'bavaksn' can mean bearded, dishevelled, covered with hair, but 'bavaksn mit' means simply 'covered with'. It is surely not coincidental that Sutzkever used the same word to describe the *ikh* in both poems, with significant difference in meaning and mood.

⁶⁵ In the mention of the two generations we see again symbolised the idea of continuity.

⁶⁶ The first series of poems was published as *Lider fun togbukh* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1977), then again, with the addition of poems up to 1981, in *Ksav-yadn*. Finally the complete series was published in the volume *Tsviling-bruder* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1986). All references here are to *Tsviling-bruder*.

⁶⁷ *Tsviling-bruder*, p.9.

⁶⁸ Ruth R. Wisse, Introduction to Abraham Sutzkever, *The Fiddle Rose: Poems 1970-1972*, selected and translated by Ruth Whitman (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), p.30.

⁶⁹ *Tsviling-bruder*, p.37. None of the poems have titles, so they are referred to here by their first lines.

⁷⁰ 'Fun bikher-tovlen tsvey un tsvey, georemt un gevinklt', *Tsviling-bruder*, p.32.

⁷¹ *Tsviling-bruder*, p.36.

⁷² *Tsviling-bruder*, p.160.

⁷³ *PVI*, p.323.

⁷⁴ Avrom Sutzkever, *Der yoyresh fun regn* (Tel-Aviv: Farlag di goldene keyt, 1992), p.23.

⁷⁵ *Tsviling-bruder*, p.100. Ponar (Ponary) was the place near Vilna where thousands of Jews were shot by the Nazis.

⁷⁶ 'Vu zenen zey, di liblingen fun zumer, yinglekh, meydlekh', *Tsviling-bruder*, p.188.

⁷⁷ *Tsviling-bruder*, p.67.