TEN YEARS WITHOUT AVROM SUTZKEVER

YIVO Institute for Jewish Research
Located in the Center for Jewish History · 15 West 16th Street, NYC
January 28, 2020 | 7:00pm
Remembered as “the greatest poet of the Holocaust,” a Partisan fighter, and a book smuggler, Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever’s legacy as a poet for poetry’s sake deserves more attention.

Sutzkever was a member of Eastern Europe’s last Yiddish literary circle Yung vilne, and also a kindred spirit of New York’s In zikh movement of introspective Yiddish poets. Rejecting politics in poetry, Sutzkever transcended the stylistic boundaries of his peers and drew inspiration from outside of the Yiddish world including from Russian and Polish Romantic and symbolist poets. Sutzkever’s poetry is known for its Neo-romantic interest in nature and wonder, and for his virtuosic, inventive use of the Yiddish language. Having left behind an oeuvre which includes more than two dozen books of poetry, fiction, and a memoir on his experience in the Vilna Ghetto, Sutzkever is also remembered for his work for almost 50 years as founder and editor of Tel Aviv’s premiere Yiddish Magazine, Di goldene keyt.

Tonight we engage with Sutzkever’s poetic legacy and enjoy recitations of his poetry and discussion with literary scholar Ruth Wisse, translator Barbara Harshav, and poet Irena Klepfisz.
SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Irena Klepfisz is a poet, Yiddish translator, teacher, and feminist/gay activist who has focused much of her research on Yiddish women writers and intellectuals. She recently retired from 22 years of teaching Jewish Women’s Studies at Barnard College. She was a recipient of an NEA fellowship and NYFA grant in poetry and a finalist for the poetry Lambda Award. In 2016 she was honored to receive the Dreaming in Yiddish Prize from the Adrienne Cooper Fund. The author of *A Few Words in the Mother Tongue* (poetry) and *Dreams of an Insomniac* (essays), she is preparing the manuscript for a bilingual collection of her poetry and prose to be published next year by the Polish publishing house słowo/obraz terytoria (word/image territories).

Barbara Harshav has been translating works from French, German, Hebrew and Yiddish for over twenty years and has currently published over forty books of translation including works of poetry, drama, fiction, philosophy, economics, sociology, and history. A historian by profession, she lives in North Haven, Connecticut.

Ruth R. Wisse is Professor Emeritus of Yiddish literature and Comparative Literature at Harvard. Her books on literature include *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey through Literature and Culture* (The University of Chicago Press) and *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton University Press). She writes on politics for the *Wall Street Journal*, *Commentary*, and elsewhere, and her most recent book on the subject is *Jews and Power* (Schocken). She is currently working on a literary biography of the Yiddish poet Avrom Sutzkever.
A dark violet plum,
the last one on the tree,
thin-skinned and delicate as the pupil of an eye,
that in the dew at night blots out
love, visions, shivering,
and then at the morning star the dew
grows weightless:
That is poetry. Touch it so lightly
that you don't leave a fingerprint

Translation by Chana Bloch
NAROTSH FOREST

With Vilna in my heart
like a bullet that cannot be removed,
with poems turned into powder
and loaded into my gun,
I lie here in a ditch
to listen and detect
dark footsteps
amid the grass and plants.

Through the new-grown grass,
through the unspoiled dawn,
on and on
the dark footsteps go.
I know this:
I am a wolf and a poet in one,
and I release from the gun
poem after poem.

A shot. A fall.
The dew from the trees
sprinkles my brow
with gilded fear.
And I hear a Heavenly voice
say to me:
You’ve wiped a blemish
off the Earth.

(Narotsh Forest, October 9, 1943)

Translation by Barnett Zumoff
דר שמייכל פון מידהנק

א

ונת גרבער וו דאס היילס פוןעם אוֹג –

הרי שמייכל פון דאס הײַטל פוןעם אוֹג –

ונת גרבער וו סָלקַמס אַרייך וו סָלבּל אַרייך וו מַדער טוי צו טעָכִייק.

ונת גרבער פון אַ שָאֶט

אָפּערןשונַן פוןעם הומר

הלמאַה נַעֶרֶּט מִיַר קײַן פּאל נַי צו טעָנֶנַע דָי שִיַר

אַז בּאֶרֶּהַלל איי די שִיר פון קײַיָּיֵנַע נַי פּאַרְשֶלֶּסְטַּאָפּוֹ.

אָן טַע, מֵימִי טָאמַמְיָּא נַאנַטְסֵטֶאָה.

סָפִיקָא נַאנַטְסֵטֶאָה

הַלַּמֶּיאָה קָאֶה פּעֶנ דּוֹרֹל דּאֶר גַּעְּבָּעְר שֵי אָרַיִן צו שָבָּן

אָן מַגָּן אַיֶּן אַ פֶּשֶׁט נְגַטְרִיאָרְגְּטֵר

דּי שִיר זֵי אַדוֹרְבּאְסְטַּי ווֹ שִׁיעֲּרָּק

דּי שִיר זֵי אַיֵּנ נַי פּאַרְשֶלֶּסְטַּאָפּוֹ.

ב

וֹוֹ הָיֶיֶס אָיֵנ פּאַרְשֶלֶּסְטַּאָפּוֹ סְעָקְוָדְּנַּא?

אָיֵנ ווֹטֶשֶר בֶּלַּזְיַי מִיַּי סְעָקְוָדְּנַּא

פּוֹלַּן צוֹיָּהִי אוֹג מַקְאַנְגָּנַּא.

מִמְּי מְקִיָּן אַיֵּנ שָאָלְיָּה אָיֵנ פּאַרְשֶלֶּסְטַּאָפּוֹ סְעָקְוָדְּנַּא.

בָּאָטְיָּהִי מִיַּי אַ מְאָסְקִיָּה,

אָזָדְּיַי הוֹדוֹ.

אָלָּיֵנ פְּשֶרֲבָּרְגָּנַּא.

ג

מִמְּי מְקָבִּיָּה קָלַפְּטַּאָה אַיֵּנ סְיֵר

אָזָי זָי דָּגֵנְג.

סָאֲיֵנְג פּאָנְבָּשַּאןְסִי יִזְּי אֶפְסְטֶר בּוֹדְעַמְמָטַּאָפּוֹ דָּי צוֹרָּד.

אָזָי קײַמִי יֵדְרַעְלַגְבּטָנְסִי יֵזָי אֶזָי קײַמְלְפּ פּעָסְטָטְרִי.

עָטָפֲלַגְבּסִי יֵזָי אְסָטְטַהְסִי דָּי אָטְיָּי אֶזָי פּאָרַאטִי.

אָזָי קָלַעְיֵנְג מִיָּוָדְיָּה דָּי כָּרָיִיָּאָרְגְּטֵר אָזָי יְיָּל.

אָזָי פּלוֹשְּסִי יֵזָי דָּי שְׁמִיַּירְסְהוֹפְּקִיָּהִי, אוֹגָאָיֵנ מַנְו רָפְטְיִי שׁׁעָרְוָּ.

אָזָי אֶפְסְטִי קײַגְסְטִי מִיַּי אֶסְטְלִימְו פוֹלְגַל.

אָטָקְעַרְפָּלְעַאָפּ אוֹגָאָיֵנ אוָטְעַקְעַרְפָּלְעַאָפּ פְּלַאָגָטָאָפּ?

אָזָי אֶבְּעַרְלַךְּלַרְגְּיָּה בּיֵי אֶזָי פּוֹ דָאֶנְגְוָאָפּו.
אַ גאָטס־רחמנות אויף די עָגִּיבָה
װאָס זַעַּנְן שָלְדִיק עַפּל, אַז איך טַרְגַּ אַזאַ מִן הוּקְּרָאָר?

ד
אָוָאָו אָ קְהָרְפַּמוֹאָטְסִיֵּי קְוָרָהֵוַו קְזֵי מְדִינָה פּוֹלְלָא
אָ בָּאָרֵאוֹתוֹשֵעַ
מִיט פּיֵס אַרְאוּפְּנָטְוַאָנְגַּנְעַנְעַנּ
וֹו קֶינְדוֹווֹזֵי
בָּיִּינְמֵן קַאָמְפִּיֵּ פּיֵים קָלְּבּרְדִיֵו קְזִּיֵּ.

זַיֵּט מִיְּוַ מְשֵּׁן.
אָוָא מְלְוֵרֹזְזֵי:
דער הַטְּקֶל פּוֹ מַיְיֵו הַטְּעַנְּדַא,
הָאָם אַיֵו אָלְּיִיֵו פּאִרְמַאְגַּנְוַאָטַא.
מִיט פּיֵנַּקְלְיִיֵו מָעַרְקְלַמְלַא.

עֻג אָיֵו אָלְיִי מְזִי פֵּנַגּוֹנַא
אָוָא דוֹר לָאָנָגְנַא
דוּנְּג הַטְּעַנְּדַא.

עֻג אָיֵו אָלְיִי מְזִי פֵּנַגּוֹנַא

d
אָיֵו מְקַּס אָ שְּטִיַּנַּגְהַר סְטָ אָרְפּ פּוֹוְקְו אָ קְוּמְיֵה,
מִיט טְעַנְּגַר אָהָצָּה שָׁמִיֵּ לֶאָאָגְפּ פּוֹ מְרִיֵו בּוֹדַא אָרְוַיֵּזגְלַאָטְאָט
מְמִיֵּ שֶׁבּכִּי פּאִרְמַאְגַּנְוַאָטְוַאָסָיְו מִים הַיֵּדַא?
עְר הָאָלְּפַלְּיֵו הָאָצַּיֵּ יְאָגַגְהַר אָ שְּפִיַּנְּגַלְלַא
אָוָא שְפִיַּנְּגַלְלַאָאָו
וֹו קֶינְדוֹווֹזֵי
אָוָא וּוֹרְגַּדְלַאָאָו פּוֹּהָמְפּ פּוֹּוְקְו פּוֹ מְיֵי ייֵדְרָא.
אָנֶג הַטְּקֶל שְּמִיַּלְלַא, מְקַס הָאָרְפּּסָדְאָא אָוָאָו אָלְּיֵו פּוֹ מְיֵי ייֵדְרָא
אָוָא לוֹאָגַגְהַר מְלְוֵרְקְלַאָטַא, אָוָא לָאָגַגְהַר פּוֹ מְשִׁיַּגְוַאָי, רוֹזָדַא.
עְר שְפִיַּנְּגַלְלַאָאָו אָוָא שְפִיַּנְּגְלַאָאָיְו דְעַמָּ שְׁמִיַּלְלַא פּוֹ מְיֵי מְדַאָגַגְהַר.

ו
דֶּעֶר שְׁמִיַּלְלַאָיְו פּוֹ מְיֵי מְדַאָגַגְהַר פּאָלָא
אָוָא מְתָגוֹנְו אָוָא בּוֹרְיַה.
אָנֶג אָפַּרְגַּר.
טוֹפָאָטַא.
וֹיִּיַּגְרַא
הַנְּגַשְׁרַר דָּי קְוָלְסָי.
אין קנייתן פון דײַן ברויט־און־זאַלץ
געװאַלצען געװיסן.

דער גרינער שמייכל פֿאלֶל
און יוּן עלעגיט, דין בלאָלבן
ואן אַורָּג アַנדער
ゲיטעכלאָג ונאָווונער.

דער שמייכל פֿאלֶל,
מוּט שטעַפּערעקן פֿיִינע
אַן בעשטן וייק
בוךנעןער.

ו זַאָקְטֶעִּה.

ער פֿאלֶל אָוִיט נוּנירקע אַסלֶצײִּטֶנ,
קֵוָּס נַגְּאמַפּעטֶס, וּו שַוּנִּמָּן.
אָוִיט ציִיךֶנ ווּקֵי פּוּד די נאָצײִט
דײַ פּאראָנִינקעט.

אָוִיט תֶּעָפּער - אָוִיט וַלָּבּעָרָנֵט וואַנדְרַנטָיִק
ו זַאָדְרַחְמוּן.

1966
THE SMILE OF MAIDANEK

I
No thicker than the membrane of an eye —
My neighbor’s door.
No thicker than the spungold tavern
Where a weary dewdrop staggers in
For the night.
No thicker than a shadow
Flayed from the flesh —
Wherefore do I never succeed in opening the door
When, after all, the door was never locked?

And he, my bosom-friend,
My poison-friend,
Wherefore can he not go through the same door to his neighbor
And simply say to him good-morning?
The door is lucid as fear,
The door is not locked.

II
How far is a bygone second?
Just one second far
From any today and tomorrow.
My neighbor is himself a bygone second
Covered with a mask
To conceal
His wound.

III
My neighbor knocks on the door
As if to say:
A hollow attic vessel, the earth is cracked.
Just hit it a little harder
And it crumbles into ash and dust
And all the seas swing back into the sky
And put out the bonfires we call the stars.
So maybe you can lend me wings
To fly away to a safer planet?
Without a second thought, I’m moving out of here.

God’s mercy on the earth-born.
Is it the apple’s fault I carry such a hump?

IV
On a crematorium chimney in the Land of Poland,
Barefoot,
Feet dangling,
As in childhood
Fishing in lulav reedy water —
My neighbor sits.
He’s dreaming:
The hook of his own pole
Trapped him
With a glimmering worm.

He is his own catcher
On the long
Thin pole.
He is himself his own legend.

V
What do you think he’s doing on the chimney,
When someone long ago dredged up from the red belly
My neighbor’s parchment city of Jews?
He holds a little mirror in his hand
And casts,
As in childhood
Spots of sun on grandpa’s face —
A green smile, raining panic on old and young:
It won’t let you dream, be silent, talk —
He casts out, casts into you
The smile of Maidanek.

VI
The smile of Maidanek falls
On wedding and bris.
In opera.
Theater.
In the wings.
In creases of your bread and salt,
Salty conscience.

The green smile falls
On your elegy, your ballad,
On every tremor
Of a sound.

The smile falls
With hissing fire
Into the best wine,
Burgundy
Or Tokay.

It falls on squat depots,
Barely mapped, like mushrooms.
On the tall building of the United
Nations,
And higher — on the silver wanderer
To the abysses.

VII
And nobody knows that on anointed,
High-domed
Summer nights,
In snowy or rainy spaces,
Barefoot,
Feet dangling, as in childhood —
My neighbor sits in Poland on a chimney,
Ponders the beautiful reality that is not real,
And what my neighbor does is ever the same:
He holds in his hand a little mirror. Nothing more.

1966

Translation by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav
Were I not at one with you here, breathing joy and woe, were I not ablaze with the Land, volcanic Land in its birth-throes, after being sacrificed, there, were I not reborn with the Land whose every pebble is my ancestor — no bread would nourish me, no water cool my gums, till I would perish, turned gentile, and my longing would come on its own.

Translation by Ruth Wisse
FURTHER READING IN ENGLISH

The Full Pomegranate: Poems of Avrom Sutzkever
Selected and Translated by Richard Fein
© SUNY Press 2019

Still My Word Sings: Poems;
By Avrom Sutzkever, Edited and Translated by Heather Valencia
© dusseldorf university press, Dusseldorf 2017

Laughter Beneath The Forest: Poems from Old and Recent Manuscripts
By Abraham Sutzkever, Translated by Barnett Zumoff
© Ktav Pub & Distributors Inc 1996

A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose
By A. Sutzkever, Translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav
© University of California Press 1991

The Fiddle Rose: Poems 1970-1972
By Abraham Sutzkever, Translated by Ruth Whitman
© Wayne State University Press 1990

ONLINE RESOURCES

YIVO Encyclopedia Article on Avrom Sutzkever by Ruth Wisse
yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Sutzkever_Avrom

Abraham Sutzkever: The Power in Poetry
Lecture by Ruth Wisse at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, September 10, 2014
www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDUSU0XD Gh8

The Homecoming of Yiddish to Israel
Lecture by Ruth Wisse at the Eshkolot Festival in Jerusalem, August 2017
www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAE786SmDnk

Abraham Sutzkever on Poetry and Partisan Life
www.youtube.com/watch?v=kofcyfycOFE

The Poetry of Abraham Sutzkever (Vilno Poet): Read in Yiddish
Abraham Sutzkever
Edited and annotated by Ruth Wisse
folkways.si.edu/the-poetry-of-abraham-sutzkever-vilno-poet-read-in-yiddish/judaica/albumsmithsonian
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