the poetry of
ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER
The Vilno Poet, reading in Yiddish
edited and annotated by Ruth Wisse

An illustration from SIBIR, by Marc Chagall
ABRAHAM SUZKEVER

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The Poetry of ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER

"The Vilno Poet"

Abraham Sutzkever, one of the foremost Yiddish poets in the world today, editor of the literary quarterly, Die Goldene Keyt (The Golden Chain) in Israel, is now on a lecture tour in Canada under the auspices of the Canadian Jewish Congress. Mr. Sutzkever has had the mixed fortune of being a personal witness to the two greatest events in recent Jewish history—the destruction of Eastern European Jewry and the creation of the State of Israel. He spent the war years in the Vilno Ghetto and later fought in the anti-Nazi partisan units of the Polish forests. In 1947 he moved to Israel, and for the past 12 years he has been a resident of Tel Aviv. Both these backdrops form the panorama of his poetry; after the war he wrote on the theme of Vilno Ghetto, Geheimshof (Secret City), and Yiddishe Gass, and his most recent book of poems, In Midbar Sinai, was written after the historic late autumn of 1956.

Born near Vilno in 1913, Sutzkever spent his childhood in Siberia, where his parents fled in the wake of the invading German armies of World War I. His first long poem, SIBIR, commemorating these early years, has been illustrated by Marc Chagall, and will shortly be issued in English translation. Later he returned to Vilno and in his late teens, already a poet, he became a member of the group Young Vilno. Throughout the ghetto years, Sutzkever never ceased writing. One of his poems was written while he lay hidden in a coffin which sat the head of the local Gestapo. In 1943 he escaped to the forests and fought with the partisans, and he was later called as one of the main witnesses at the Nuremberg trials. In 1946, via Lodz and Paris, he went to Israel.

EDITED AND ANNOTATED BY ruth wisse
J. L. Gordon, A. M. Dick, A. D. Leibenson, M. L. Lillien- thal, A. Cahan and many other pioneering spirits of Jewish culture and literature are products of Vilno. A Rabbinical Seminary existed there since 1847, and in 1871 it was converted into the famous Vilno Teachers’ Institute which has since graduated a number of Jewish social and political leaders.

Vilno was also the cradle of the Jewish Labor Movement. In 1897 the “Bund” (General Union of Jewish Workers in Lithuania, Poland and Russia) was founded in Vilno. Vilno was also one of the chief centers of the “Hoveve Zion” (Lovers of Zion) Movement (founded in 1884).

The Schoolteacher Mira

The Schoolteacher Mira, one of Sutzkever’s best known poems, was written in the Vilna Ghetto in 1942. Mira, symbol of the courageous ghetto teacher, continues to lead her class although over night their number has decreased by half. When of the original 130 only 10 remain, she finds the spirit to organize a holiday celebration, to teach the small choir a hopeful song of spring. Until the tragic end she devotes herself to her children and to their education.

Mira Bernshtain, the Vilno teacher on whom this portrait is modelled, was also a member of the partisan group in the ghetto. Too weak to join her friends in the forests, she was deported and awaited in the chambers of Treblinka.

EAST POLAND

WILNO, VILNO

Vilno, “Jerusalem of Lithuania,” was always one of the most important cultural and spiritual centers for Lithuanian and Russian Jews. Jews settled there in the 14th-15th Century when Vilno was still the domain of the Lithuanian duchy. About 6,000 Jews lived in Lithuania at the end of the 15th Century, only several hundred of them in Vilno. But by 1764 there were 3,181 Jews in Vilno itself. During the 19th Century and up to the time of the First World War the number of Jews had grown rapidly, after that the percentage of Jews began to decline steadily. In 1897 Jews constituted over 45% of the entire population; by 1921 the percentage had dropped to 36%, and in 1939 it was as low as 30%.

Still, there were some 80,000 Jews in Vilno on the eve of the Second World War; almost all of them were murdered by the Nazis.

During the six centuries that a Jewish Community existed in Vilno, the Jews there experienced all sorts of hardships: fights with the Christian burghers who wanted to get rid of Jewish competition; decrees of the City Council prohibiting the Jews to conduct commerce or to enter trades and crafts, or to live in any part of the city outside of the narrow ghetto walls. However, in spite of all these persecutions, the Jews in Vilno developed a flourishing life. At the beginning of the 20th Century the Jews in Vilno occupied a very important economic position in the city. They owned 50% of the entire industry, and over 26,000 Jews were employed as workers. The Jews played an even greater part in the city’s commerce.

In religious and spiritual spheres Vilno was of great importance in Jewish life in the time of the “Vilner Gaon” (1720-1797), in the period of the Haskala (Enlightenment) and in the time when modern social and national-cultural ideas and movements began to develop.
The Lead Plates of Rome Printing House

The last Rome Printing House of Vilna was renowned for its beautiful and comprehensive editions of the Talmud. For over 100 years one edition after another had been printed from the lead plates. During the Nazi occupation of the ghetto, the Jewish porters melted down these lead plates into bullets. The poet suggests that the spiritual and the courageous were melted together in the blazing fire, as had happened before in Jewish history - in the battle for Jerusalem.

A Wagon of Shoes

This poem follows the rhythm of the wheels of a wagonload of shoes - the shoes of those of whom nothing remains but their shoes. A bride's shoes, children's shoes, his mother's shoes which she had permitted herself to wear only on the Sabbath, driven from the narrow streets of Vilna to Berlin.

So should you speak to the Orphan

The poet instructs the survivors of the ghetto disaster on how to answer the orphan's inevitable questions - Who am I? What is my Name? For whom do I exist? Tell the orphan he is a small remaining part, a microcosm of the whole; that his name is nation, because the entire destroyed Jewish nation must continue to live in him; that he lives for the sake of those who grew from the roots of his heart, and for those who are alive, shaping their own destiny. The poem ends on a note of incredible faith, written as it was in the abominable days of the war's end. The orphan - or the poet - foresees what actually came to pass in the rebirth of the State of Israel - that he will fashion new lives instead of fresh groves, and build great cities with his own hand.
Yiddish Gass

In the third of a series of poems, Father and Child, the father asks his child to take good care of her playthings, of the rocking horses, and of the dolls who have no mother of their own. He remembers with anguish a day in the ghetto at the height of the Nazi massacres, when there were seven streets filled with dolls, while in the city there remained not a single child.

1946

Playthings

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1946
At sundown the gentle deer come to the shore of the Dead Sea, refresh themselves lapping up the cool, rose-tinted water. And there they are wedded to the stillness.

When they finish, they run off. But the deer-like rays of the setting sun on the water remain, "licking the stillness of those who have gone."

Were I Not With You

The poet, having survived the Vilno ghetto, is reborn with the land upon his arrival in Israel, "where every stone is my grandfather". This is the first poem Sutkove wrote after coming to Israel in 1947.

The Snows of Mount Hermon

From the distance the poet sees the snowy peaks of Mount Hermon. They remind him of his childhood years in Sibera, and of his experiences as a partisan in the winter forests of Poland where so many of his fellow Jews were buried in the snow. He asks a bird – that same bird of M.K.S. Eshel's first poem, "To the Bird", to bring him some snow on its thin little wings, because without this "snow", and the memories it evokes, Shana "it will be cold in the flaming State of Israel".

ד"ע: שלומי אוסישקין

The Petitions on the Grave of Rabbi Simeon Ben Yochai

According to legend, Rabbi Simeon Ben Yochai is the author of the Zohar, the source book of the Kabbalah. Every Le'ila B'omer, on the anniversary of the Rabbi's death, thousands of Jews visit his grave in Niron near Safed in Israel, write out their petitions to God on scraps of paper, and leave them on his grave. The good Rabbi comes forth from his resting place and reads the petitions of the many Jews come together from various lands, written in numerous languages - Indian, Yiddish, Aramaic. With lyric humour the poet ends, suggesting that the Rabbi is pleased to find among the thousands of petitions, some also in Hebrew.

ואז הפעם מעבר למשק עתיד

1948
"The Well of Prophecy"

In "The Well of Prophecy" the poet sees a vision of the first Jew, the patriarch Abraham, in his first meeting with God, face to face. The poet hears God's first call: Ab-ram-ham — he hears it near the well of prophecy in the desert, and the well is like "the tongue of God". And the poet also hears the soft answer — Here am I — because #Someone must forever answer, Here am I. The poet's given name is also Abraham...

In Sinai Desert

When the Israeli forces marched into the Sinai desert in 1956, Sutzker was with them, and this poem is the result of that pilgrimage. Attention has been drawn to the form of the work, written in 10 stanzas of 12 lines each. Both numbers are evocative of "Sinai" where the Ten Commandments were given through Moses to the 12 tribes.

The poet walks with the young soldiers through the desert, through the pages of the Bible and the tragedies of his immediate past. Of the original tribes there are now representatives of all the countries of the world. The prophecy of the dead bones has been fulfilled: from a decimated Jewry has arisen a new nation, whose youth is new retracing the steps of their ancient forefathers.

The climax of the poem coincides with the poet's arrival at the holy mountain "more beautiful than all the others".

"A drop of blood points out—you're that one, that one, Just as the magnet's needle points due north."

In powerful, humble stanzas, the poet renews the bond with God at Sinai, asking for peace, that "the red sands become green". As night falls a soldier climbs to the top of the mountain to plant the Israeli flag; it seems to the poet that an unseen hand takes it from him... and blesses the young hero.

At the Memorial in Yad Mordechai

At the memorial for Mordechai Anielewitz — one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising — which stands in the Kibbutz Yad Mordechai in southern Israel, the poet sees the survivors of the great disaster as the living and permanent memorial of those tragic years, the memorial which will not vanish but will be rededicated when "Our grandchildren — mothers will kindle the lights The candles of life on Friday nights".
לידינו שלושת אמות, שלושה עשרים, שלושים ושלושה-
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1996