

The Witness of Poetry: Holocaust Representation in Abraham Sutzkever and David Fram

Hazel Frankel

Summary

This article discusses a selection of Holocaust poems by Abraham Sutzkever together with several written by David Fram as they epitomise how historical forces shape individual lives, highlighting how the differences in location and experience influenced their creative output. In order to do so, it locates the poets physically and aesthetically, and then compares several poems through in-depth analyses of their choice of metaphor and language. Affirming the continuing significance of Yiddish in the face of the almost-total annihilation of its speakers, the article also validates poetry as a form of testimony.

Although both poets were born in the Russian Empire, by the time World War II broke out, Sutzkever became a witness-participant in the Vilna Ghetto, Lithuania, while Fram was in Johannesburg, South Africa. Sutzkever's poems provide personal, instantaneous and localised focal points, and shed light on the immediate horrific reality, whereas Fram's symbolic reflections wrestle with what happened in the killing fields and so illuminate a broader, more panoramic view. They also emphasise his empathy. By bearing witness, these poems provide an arena in which to address Jewish suffering and keep the Holocaust alive and visible. In resisting amnesia of what once was and is no more, the poets also memorialise the victims.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bespreek 'n seleksie van Holocaust-gedigte van Abraham Sutzkever, tesame met verskeie wat deur David Fram geskryf is, terwyl dit toon hoe historiese kragte individuele lewens vorm en beklemtoon hoe die verskille in ligging en ervaring hul kreatiewe uitset beïnvloed het. Om dit te kan doen, vind dit die digters fisies en esteties, en vergelyk dan verskeie gedigte deur middel van diepgaande ontledings van hul keuse van metafoor en taal. Die artikel bevestig poësie as 'n vorm van getuigenis, en bevestig die voortgesette betekenis van Jiddisch in die lig van die byna totale uitwissing van sy sprekers.

Alhoewel albei digters in die Russiese Ryk gebore is, het Sutzkever met die uitbreek van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog 'n getuie-deelnemer geword in die Vilna Ghetto, Litaue, terwyl Fram in Johannesburg, Suid-Afrika was. Sutzkever se gedigte bied persoonlike, onmiddellike en gelokaliseerde fokuspeunte en werp lig op die onmiddellike gruwelike werklikheid, terwyl Fram se simboliese refleksies worstel met wat in die moordvelde gebeur het en so 'n breër, meer panoramiese uitsig belig.

Hulle beklemtoon ook sy empatie. Deur te getuig, bied hierdie gedigte 'n arena om Joodse lyding aan te spreek en die Holocaust lewendig en sigbaar te hou. Om die geheueverlies van wat vroeër was en nie meer is nie, te weerstaan, herdenk die digters ook die slagoffers.

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“Yidn, shraybt un farshraybt” (Jews, write and record)
(Simon Dubnow, Riga Ghetto, December 1941
in *Greenspan* 2014: 207).

This article discusses a selection of Abraham Sutzkever Holocaust poems together with several written by David Fram as they epitomise how historical forces shape individual lives, highlighting how the differences in location and experience influenced their creative output. In order to do so, the article locates the poets physically and aesthetically, and then compares several poems through in-depth analyses of their choice of metaphor and language, and validating poetry as a form of testimony.

Although both poets were both born in the Russian Empire, by the time World War II broke out, Sutzkever was a witness-participant in the Vilna Ghetto, Lithuania, and his work provides personal, instantaneous and localised focal points to shed light on the horrific reality face-to-face. Other Yiddish poets of the Holocaust include Jacob Glatstein (1896-1971) and Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973). Writing from a distance in Johannesburg, South Africa, Fram wrestles with what happened in the killing fields, and his reflections illuminate a broader, more panoramic view. Whereas, his South African peer, David Wolpe (1908-2007) described his personal experiences of Dachau concentration camp, Fram's poems evoke a deep sorrow for those whom he had left behind to their fate.

Rather than “universalising or collectivising the Holocaust experience” (Waxman 2007: loc 44), this project seeks to “revive the particulars” (Waxman 2007: loc 37), as represented in Sutzkever and Fram's poems, thus expanding understanding of the diversities of identity, location and experience. While the Holocaust narrative has been articulated from many standpoints and in many languages, the use of Yiddish is particularly significant as it was the home language of millions of the victims. In affirming its continuing relevance as a source of Holocaust actuality, the article also provides insights into communal memory, and a monument to remembrance.

As Shoshana Felman suggests, “poetry [may be] an exemplary instance of testimony [...] work[ing] through the effects of suffering that are not yet fully understood” (in Rowland 2013: 21). While poetry and testimony on the Shoah may be different genres, one is not more valuable than the other

(Wieviorka in Greenspan 2014: 194), Sutzkever gives evidence of the vicissitudes of daily ghetto life by focusing on single, personal incidents and reflecting his state of mind. He would also have been aware of his role as a documenter, which would have guided his writing (Waxman 2007: loc 41). While the decimation was happening around him, Sutzkever's "Ikh lig in an oren" (I am Lying in a Coffin) (1941) focuses on his survival; in "Der tsirk" (The Circus) (1941) (Sutzkever 1979: 6-10; Schwarz 2015: 30), he reacts to a life-threatening incident; "Tsum kind" (To my Child) (1943) encompasses his soul-searching after the murder of his baby, while "A vogn shikh" (A Wagonload of Shoes) (1942) honours his murdered mother. "Difficult as retelling can be, the opportunity to remember the lost, [...] can mean a great deal" (Greenspan 2014: 203).

Imagining what his family were forced to endure until they were annihilated, Fram's "Dos letste kapitl" (The Last Chapter) (1945) calls attention to Lithuania's once-beautiful landscape, and the subsequent fate of its Jewish inhabitants. "An entfer der velt" (An Answer to the World) (1971) encapsulates the outcome of the tragedy, referencing his own family and incurring the poet's urge for revenge. His approach was influenced by his personal situation as a distant observer in the South African racialised context, where information was slow in coming and he would only have found out about his family's fate much later. These poems affirm Elie Wiesel's assertion that telling their stories gives those who did not survive "the voice that was denied them" (Kearney 2002: 48).

Sutzkever's life was at stake when the Jewish community faced day-to-day threats of food shortages and hunger, illness and disease, *Aktionen*, deportation and death in the Ghetto. His brief and pointed "Ikh lig in an oren" was composed in an immediate response to the barbaric decimation:

Ikh lig in an oren,
vi in hiltserne kleyder,
ikh lig,
zol zayn, s'iz a shifl
oyf shturmische kvalyes,
zol zayn, s'iz a vig. (1-6)

I am lying in a coffin
as I would lie
in stiff wooden clothing.
This could be a small boat
on dangerous waves,
this could be a cradle.

Surrounded by darkness after escaping a round-up, still and silent, waiting for danger to pass, the poet's imagination and his description nevertheless soar free. By transforming the wooden box into a place of safety like Noah's Ark, or the *Oren Kodesh*, the Holy Ark, or into a little basket, in which the

infant Moses was saved from Pharaoh, Sutzkever finds comfort. “An introspective poet, though his subject matter comes from outside himself” (Pollin-Galay 2016: 25), his imaginings offer the possibility of life, and perhaps even divine intervention.

The short, intense lines create the narrow shape of a coffin on the page; they are also practical, enabling easier recall should he survive the roundup. Written in the first person, “the authenticity of experience conveyed is important [...], whether the reader interprets the poetic ‘I’ as reporting the poet’s actual experience or [not]” (Lang in Greenspan 2014: 197). Even had the episode not happened, or not as described, the poem would still contain his emotional truth. Rendered physically helpless in a constricted suffocating space, his dynamic metaphors conjure a sense of agency. Sutzkever envisions himself calling out to someone he loves, “ruf ikh dir, shvester” (I call you, sister) (10); convincing himself that she can hear him “un du herst mayn rufn | in vayt” (and far away | you can hear me calling you) (11-12) gives him hope.

Erasing the Nazis’ existence by never mentioning the enemy by name, the poem also becomes an act of resistance,

Un itst in an oren,
vi in hiltserne kleyder,
zingt alst nokh mayn vort. (22-24)

And in a coffin now
as in stiff wooden clothing
my speech still moves into song.

Sutzkever wrote poetry to communicate with others, and to document the daily lives of the inhabitants of the Ghetto. Enclosed, hidden and alone, the poet realises that life is “Haynt do, morgn dort” (Here today, gone tomorrow) (20-21), and lines 22 and 23 echo lines 1 and 2 like a death knell. Still, by giving voice to his sense of dread, his words become a song giving him the will to survive, which lifts his spirits. Through the potent act of writing, the poet created an object of beauty, which, with its “redemptive detail, the play of words, images and sounds [...] secures life by transforming it into art” (Wisse 1981: 14). Despite the trauma, such “individual anecdotes, images and objects serve as ‘points of memory’, opening small windows on the past” (Hirsch & Spitzer 2010: xix).¹

Sutzkever’s “Der tsirk” (The Circus) (1979: 6) also invokes his community, “Zog mir, brider, mayner, zog, zog | Vos iz er, vos batayt er, undzer hintisher gerongl?” (Tell me good brother | What is it and what does it mean, this dog fight we’re in) (1-2). Thus he reveals his inner conflict,

1. Used as an alternative to Pierre Nora’s *lieu*, or site of memory (Hirsch & Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*: xix).

ignited by a high-risk, physical incident, and the poem captures a “deeply humiliating, personal experience” (Schwarz 2015: 31), which he also briefly described in his 1946 testimony: “In the first days of August 1941, a German seized me in Dokumenskaia Street as I was going to visit my mother. He said, “Come with me, you will act in the circus” (Nuremberg Trial Proceedings). Following the mocking and frightening order, the poet becomes the “der lets”, the clown, providing public entertainment at gunpoint: “Un ikh vos bin geven der lets in shendelekhn spektakl | hob nit gehat keyn mutvil tsu aroysshtameln a klole” (And I who was a clown in that disgraceful spectacle | Had no courage to stammer a curse) (77-78) (Harshav & Harshav 1991: 129).²

In this episode, he and his fellow captives become marionettes in a bitter display. Taunted by their captors, Sutzkever considers himself to be ridiculous. Unable to utter a single word to defend himself and fearing for his life, he is overwhelmed: “un nit tsu mol dem koakh zikh a varf tsu ton in toyt, | vi mayne brider in der tsayt fun adryan dem roymmer” (No strength to throw myself into the death, | As did my brothers in the time of Hadrian the Roman) (79-80). Instead, humiliated, he accedes to the soldier’s orders:

Nor merer nokh: ikh hob geknit a naketer far dem
Un mit tren vi mit shvartse pokn
Gebetn genod. (85-87)

Worse: I knelt naked before him,
And with tears like black pox,
I begged for mercy.

Focusing on “intense moments of subjective experience” (Rowland 2013: 6), the poet confronts his own reactions to the “catastrophic moment” (Rowland 2013: 6). Sutzkever, naked and defenceless, breaks down in front of his fellow captives and the enemy soldiers. Perceiving his passivity as a disease, he vents his anger, “against all the beautiful words he once used” (Roskies 1984: 231). However, as he deprives the Germans perpetrators of their power once again by refusing to name them, he consigns them to “verbal annihilation” (Roskies 1984: 231), in itself a form of resistance.

In seeking “a unique language adequate to unprecedented experience” (Ezrahi 2008: 61), documenting the occupation and destruction to preserve the history of a people, Sutzkever’s poems made the plight of the Ghetto known. They “illuminated a corpus of ‘small’ life stories from a specific moment in time, both enabling their creation, and then preserving them as objects of historical worth” (Pollin-Galay 2016: 4). Fulfilling the objectives of testimony, which he also did at Nuremberg, they voiced his deepest

2. All translations are from Harshav and Harshav, *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (1991: 129).

concerns, “touching on *all* our philosophic questions, all questions of purpose, of right and wrong, of justice, of God” (Greenspan 2014: 194).

In “Tsum kind” (Valencia 2017: 94-95), Sutzkever asks how a father can be consoled for the murder of his newborn child during the greatest slaughter ever experienced (Roskies 1984: 231-232), and searches for a meaning to life,

Tsi fun hunger
tsi fun groyser libshaft
nor an eydes iz derbay dayn mame. (1-3)

Whether out of hunger
or my great love for you
only your mother can bear witness to it.

In his reconstruction in the Nuremberg courtroom afterwards, Sutzkever incorporated the names of the German perpetrators and their leader, Franz Muhrer, the expert on the Jewish questions. Sutzkever’s personal experiences rendered him unique, as a “direct victim of Nazi atrocities, an articulate activist, and an authority by virtue of both sense and conscience” (Pollin-Galay 2016: 12). Where his testimony states the facts, the dirge “Tsum kind” contains the details of his baby’s death; by occurring before his father’s, it disrupts the life cycle.

Sutzkever wrote “A vogn shikh” (A Wagonload of Shoes) (1936-1967: 41) after the Germans murdered his mother in 1943. Whereas his eyewitness testimony afterwards provides factual evidence, this poetic representation extends our understanding of his state of mind and emotions.

Di reder yogn, yogn,
vos brengn zey mit zikh?
zey brengn mir a vogn
mit staplendike shikh. (1-4)

The wheels are chasing, chasing,
What do they bring with them?
They bring me a wagon
With shaking shoes. (Harshav & Harshav 1991: 151)

The ghoulish “gift” of empty shoes, sent back to the Ghetto in a cart by the murderers, becomes a synecdoche for those who once wore them. Here, the intense rhythm and pounding rhyme and repetition emulate the sound of the wheels and the beating of the poet’s heart. The short lines with their repeated words, “yogn, yogn” (chasing, chasing), and the exact, emphatic rhyme scheme, “yogn” / “vogn” and “zikh” / “shikh” effectively convey the desperation of the cart’s tumultuous journey.

The poet is heartbroken when he sees the shoes that his mother kept for special occasions, discarded in the same cruel way as she and the other victims were.

Kindershikh un skraves
kh"derken mayn mames shikh!
zi flegt zey bloyz oyf shabes
aroyftsiyen oyf zikh. (25-28)

Through children's shoes and threadbare boots
I recognise my mother's pair!
She would only wear them on shabes
She kept them for best.

Using short lines and intense, rhythmic descriptions, Sutzkever "conveys the epiphanic moment of witnessing" (Rowland 2013: 6), so that the poet who was, "a simple victim and a leader in heroism" (Pollin-Galay 2016: 18), provides proof of genocide through personal experience. Such documentation and testimony was instrumental for providing evidence, and victims' "(w)ritings [...] were a protest against death, and a refusal of it, through the creation of memories that would outlive them" (Wieviorka in Greenspan 2014: 207).

Writing from a different viewpoint, Fram's poems tap into his deep sense of identity with and empathy for the victims, having once lived in eastern European milieu where antisemitism was rife and Jews were mercilessly persecuted even before the arrival of the Nazis. Furthermore, writing in the context of a South African society predicated on racial segregation between whites and blacks,³ these qualities are apparent in several of Fram's poems including "Fun shop tsu shop" (From Shop to Shop) (1984: 29), "Diamant" (Diamonds) (1953a: 17-18), and "Matumba" (Matumba) (1953b: 17-19), which express his concern for the indigenous labourers who bore the weight of that inhumane system.

Linking these representations of racism to the Holocaust suggests how context may influence attitude and content. However, although "an equivalence is often assumed between racism and antisemitism, relationship has been complex and changeable" (Gilbert 2019: 2). Therefore, responses may be many and varied. In his elegy "An entfer der velt" (1971: 50), Fram conveys the heavy weight of loss and sorrow through long lines, and slow rhythm,

Ikh fil, ikh trog oyf zikh tsurik di gele late.
Fun vaytn knoylt zikh nokh fun kalkh-oyvn der roykh,

3. Racial segregation only became official South African policy in 1948.

THE WITNESS OF POETRY: ...

Vu s'hot zayn letstn Shma Yisroel⁴ oysgelebt mayn tate,
Vu s'hot mayn mame oysgehoykht ir letstn hoykh. (1-4)

I feel I wear the yellow star once again.
In the distance there still billows the smoke from the limekiln,
Where my father lived out his last *Shma Yisroel*,
Where my mother breathed her last breath of air.

Imagining himself as one of this group, the poet pins the infamous patch to his own breast so that the experience become his own. An instance when a “secondary [...] relationship with times and places [...] never experienced or seen” (Hirsch & Spitzer 2010: 9) may become “vivid enough so that it feels as if they are in fact remembered” (Hirsch & Spitzer 2010: 9). Thus, as opposed to the immediacy of Sutzkever’s real-life experience, Fram’s poem manifests a different kind of recuperation.

As his father’s prayer merging with the billowing smoke from the chimney above the ovens, Fram is not the unfortunate protagonist, but the image of the rank cloud still carries a huge and personal impact: these victims are not anonymous, but the poet’s parents and community: “Vu brider zaynen tsu dem toyt farlitene gegangen, | Vu oyfhelekh geshtelt hobn in vakt zeyer shtiln trot” (Where brothers went to their deaths with resignation, | Where they trod their quiet shaky steps) (“An entferr der velt”, 5-6). Well-aware of what awaits them, the group trudges wearily onward: “Ven laykhtste shtrof gevezn iz: – “farbren im, | Dos iz der psak – dem henkers shvartser kol” (When the lightest penalty was: “burn him”, | That is the judgment – the hangman’s black voice) (11-12).

Emphasising the all-inclusiveness and extent of the devastation, Fram also names the destroyed cities of Europe and numbers the victims:

Azoy zaynen gegangn Yidn tsu dem shayter –
Fun Varshe un Pariz, fun Kovne un fun Bon.
Milyonen hobn zikh getsoygn vayter, vayter
Tsum shvartsn eshafot ... oy, gantse zeks milyon! (17-20)

Thus did the Jews go to the pyre –
From Warsaw and Paris, from Kaunas and from Bonn.
Millions were drawn further, further
To black execution scaffolds ... oh, a whole six million!

The haunting rhythm augments these anguished images: “Hot men keseyder un z gehargt un gevorgn – | Vos greser s’iz der mord – alts freylekher iz zey” (They constantly killed and choked us? – | The greater the killing – the happier they are) (13-14), and describes the awful consequences, “Un

4. “Hear, Oh Israel ...”: The first words of the prayer recited morning and evening, and at the time of death (Deut. 6. 4-9; Num. 15. 37-41).

meysim kupes-vayz hot men gelozn lign, | Un nokhanand gebrent,
geshokhtn un gebrent ...” (And they left the dead lying in piles | Burning
continuously, slaughtered and burnt ...) (23-24).

In contrast to such scenes of mayhem, Fram’s “Dos letste kapitl”⁵ provides
lyrical descriptions of memories of his homeland, with which Sutzkever
would have identified:

Un s’vinken derhoybn tsu im horizontn
Mit heymisher ru, balebatish mit verde –
Tsu im, tsu dem Yid oyf litvishe erdn. (16-18)

And horizons winked at him politely
With homely calm, respectable and worthy
To him, to the Jew on Lithuanian soil.

In highlighting the differences between the local inhabitants and the Jewish
newcomers, Fram also describes their previous amity: “Do lebn besholem
vet – er mit di Goyim, | Zey veln im ale derkenen” (Here he could live in
harmony with the Gentiles, | They would all acknowledge him) (12-13).
Thus, initially, their neighbours overlooked their Jewishness and his
community celebrated their age-old customs and traditions freely:

Der Yid hot farflantst dort a lebn in Yidish:
Shabosim, yon-toyvim, havdoles un kidesh!
Barmitsves un khasenes, zilberne menyres
Un bekhers, un koyses far simkhes un brisn –
Geburtn fun naye, fun yidishe doyres. (20-24)

The Jew implanted there a life in Yiddish:
Sabbaths, festivals, *havdolah* and *kiddush*!
Bar Mitzvahs and weddings, silver candelabra
And chalices and goblets for celebrations and circumcisions –
For the birth of new, Jewish generations –

As the community put down roots and settled in, they felt comfortable
enough to enjoy their festivities to the full:

Un zmires tsezungn bay vareme tishn
Mit tishtekher klore oyf shabes farshpreyte,
Mit likht in di laykhter un khales gegreyte. (25-27)

And Sabbath songs sung at warm tables
With clean cloths spread out for Sabbath,
And candles in the candlesticks and brides ready prepared.

5. Dos letste kapitl (The Last) (Extract), *Dorem Afrike* (January – March 1984),
12. My own translations provide the basis for the discussion.

The inclusion of the details of Jewish way of life emphasises its deep significance to them; contrasting with scenes of “grotesque brutality” (Davis 1988: 46), idealised descriptions of the way of life of the *yeshuvniks* (countrymen), the forest Jews, and innkeepers (Roskies 1984) give “an added poignancy” (Davis 1988: 46).

Unfortunately, this was also why their neighbours targeted them, so that in place of Sabbath songs “Dort trogt zikh arum itst a leydiker yomer” (There spills out an empty lament) (46) that offers no solace:

Un s’fel’n dort ale, ale – nishto iz shoyn keyner
Bloyz meysim, harugim un kupes mit beyner,
Afile on kadish, on treyst, on baveyner. (48-50)

And now there, all, all are missing – there is no one left
Except the murdered, the dead and piles of bones,
Without even a Kaddish, without comfort, without mourners.⁶

Fram also describes how the streets of his hometown in Lithuania ran with the blood of its citizens:

Di hent dayne zaynen mit blut haynt bagosn,
Dos blut vest shoyn keynmol fun zey nit farvashn,
Es hot zikh in dir dayn bizoyen farloshn
Un s’zaynen farfoylt itst mit mord dayne gasn. (58-62)

Your hands today are drenched with blood,
That blood you will never be able to wash away,
You have lost your shame,
And your streets are now rotten with murder.

The victims’ scattered belongings, a veil, a hat, a robe, evoke the lives of those who perished, and Fram imagines taking up arms, even though it is too late to save the victims.

Hence, “Dos letste kapitl” bears witness for all of those the men and women, grandmothers and grandfathers, brides and grooms and the children, who were unable to do so for themselves,

Oy vey iz mir, Lite – ot zaynen, ot lign –
Azoy fil harugim: – mayn khaver, mayn bester,
Mayn shokhn, mayn korev, mayn eynstike shvester. (74-76)

Oh woe is me, Lithuania – here they are, here lie –
So many slaughtered: – my friend, my best friend,
My neighbour, my relative, my only sister.

6. Mourner’s prayer; also uttered on the anniversary of death, the *yortsayt*.

Having earlier evoked the “Jewish paradigms of living” (Pollin-Galay 2018: 2) now he envisages revenge in the hope of relieving his anguish:

Un demolt vet efsher azoy dokh nit vey ton,
Un s'veln nit shtikn azoy mikh di tremn,
Un efsher, efsher mayn veytok vet laykhter dan vern (91-93)

And then maybe it would not hurt so much,
And maybe my tears would not choke me,
And perhaps, perhaps my pain would then become lighter

The Jews of Panevezys were forced into a ghetto in June 1941, where they suffered abuse, degradation and starvation. Fram’s poem serves a memorial to all those who were murdered in the nearby forests by the *Einsatzgruppen* and their Lithuanian collaborators, when, the wake of the apocalypse, it is the “yomer fun kreyen vos pikn di beyner” (a lamentation of crows that picked the bones” (“Dos letste kapitl” 47).

However, in “An entferr der velt”, there is also hope, where: “s’iz erd gevorn faykht, bafrukhpert fun di toyen, | Vos aynggezapt hot zat do yeder boynt un kveyt” (Earth became moist, fertilised by the dew, | Which each tree and blossom absorbed) (35-36). Thereafter, “Di retshlekh fun a folk, der iberblayb fun plite | Vet opvaksen tsurik un lindern dem brokh ...” (The remnant of a people, the remaining refugees | Would grow back and alleviate the disaster ...) (“An entferr der velt” (53-54). Ensuring the future survival of the whole, “Der faygnboym in ru vet vaksn bay dayn tir” (The fig tree begins to blossom by your doorway) (50), and “... himlen iber unz gekukt hobn derfreyte | Mit shabesdikar ru oyf pratse fun der vokh ...” (... heavens above us look down gladdened | With sabbath-like rest after the toil of the week ...) (55-56).

The two poets’ contrasting experiences affected their attitudes and viewpoints, and their feelings of anger, guilt, and sorrow; as they tried to find meaning in chaos they “clothe adversity in poetic form [and so] immortalise it in an everlasting monument” (Chaim Kaplan in Aaron 1990: 9). Sutzkever’s carry a sense of immediacy and urgency; Fram’s poems offer us insights into the experiences of his community from afar. Both oeuvres translate personal experience and communal history into communicable and transmissible form.

At presentation in Montreal, Canada in 1959, Sutzkever professed how

Der koakh un vunder fun dikhtung un fun Yidishn loshn hot zikh antflekt far mir der iker in vilner geto. Dort kon ikh beemes gekent zogn: “hakhayim vehamoves beyadekh Yidish loshn”. (Valencia 44)

The power and wonder of poetry and the Yiddish language revealed themselves to me above all in the Vilna Ghetto. There I was able to say truly: “Life and death are in your hands, Yiddish language”. (Valencia 45)

Although created under vastly different circumstances, Sutzkever and Fram's poems inscribe the personal and greater catastrophe by situating the murder of loved ones at the heart of the matter. The poems attest to what Waxman refers to as the heterogeneity of Holocaust experience (2007: loc 41). The Holocaust was not just one event, but many, experienced and/or witnessed by different people in different time spans and covering many geographical areas. Sutzkever's wagonload of shoes, box-basket and clown, as well as Fram's images of the yellow star, the columns of people, the gas ovens, the limekiln, and the chimneys vomiting out black smoke, all become valuable vessels for bearing witness. Distilling the suffering and "trauma of the Jewish world" (Dorot 2011: 79) to evoke the wounds, "[n]ot only is poetry possible, it is necessary" (Sicher 1998: 299); filling some of the historical gaps, it provides an arena in which, as witnesses of the witnesses, we too may address Jewish suffering. Further, emblematic of resistance to the erasure of a language with its speakers, Sutzkever, the ghetto-chronicler, and Fram, the reflector, both keep the Holocaust alive and visible. In resisting amnesia of what once was and is no more, their oeuvres counteract the complete annihilation of a language, a culture and a people, and also memorialise them.

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Hazel Frankel

University of the Witwatersrand
hazel.frankel@wits.ac.za