DID THE SHOAH ENGENDER A NEW POETICS?

Reading in Time: The Wartime Poetry of Avrom Sutzkever

"*Tsi bin ikh der letster poet in Eyrope* / Am I the last poet in Europe?" Avrom Sutzkever asked himself on the 22nd of June, 1943. "*Tsi zing ikh far meysim, tsi zing ikh far kroen?* / Do I sing for the dead, do I sing for the crows?" (Sutzkever 1968: 79).[1] His immediate answer was to forcibly wrench together fire and water, heaven and earth, time and space:

> *Ikh trink zikh in fayer, in zumpn, in rope,*
> *Gefangen fun gele, gelatete shoen.*
>
> I am drowning in fire, in swamps, and in brine,
> Entrapped by yellow-badged hours. (ibid.)

The wrenching together of opposites is called an oxymoron, the poetic device that by June 1943 had become the staple of Sutzkever's response to the German onslaught. Swamps, always in the plural, was the closest analogy that Sutzkever could find in nature for the process of entrapment that had begun in the summer of 1941 with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. He who drowns in both fire and swamp is truly doomed.

Unique to his fellow-Jews was the drumbeat of despair created by the alliteration of "*Gefangen fun gele, gelatete shoen*". As a stand-alone metaphor, *gelatete shoen* is striking enough: hours that are patched, or patched-over, or bandaged, suggest a measurement of time when all of time is mortally wounded; but *gele, gelatete shoen* is strictly denotative, time-specific. These are the yellow badges of shame that only Jews were required to wear to distiguish and separate them from the rest of humanity.

The rhyme scheme too is designed to create incompatible pairings. Both rhymes in the opening stanza mix-and-match the Germanic, Hebraic, and Slavic components of Yiddish; let us recall that before the war, when still in his twenties, Sutzkever was already known as a virtuoso of Yiddish rhyme. The rhyme of *kroen:shoen*, crows with hours, is semantically unexceptional, since *shoen*, from the Hebrew, is the standard word for "hours." Here, the abstract and endless flow of time is yoked together with the menacing presence of black crows hovering overhead. But the Yiddish ear is shocked to hear the exalted, universal sound of *Ey-ro-pe* matched up with the low-Slavic word *rope* (from the Polish). Irrespective of their meaning, these like-sounding words do not belong together.

Most important, however, is the opening line, because it challenges and qualifies the title, "*Gezang fun a yidishn dikhter in 1943* / The Song of a Jewish Poet in 1943." Sutzkever does not ask, as we would expect him to, „*Tsi bin ikh der letster yidisher poet in Eyrope?* / Am I the last Jewish poet in Europe?". Not only would this violate the regular, amphiprachic meter, the meter of epic poetry in Yiddish as in other European languages, but also, according to Sutzkever, only the power of the poetic word can stand against the fire, the swamps, and the brine. Yet, for all that the poet alone stands in the breach, it is the precise fate of the ghetto Jews, branded with yellow badges of shame,

[1] Unless otherwise specified, all translations are made by the author.

that will determine the future of Europe. This catastrophe is happening in Europe to the signature people of Europe, in the apocalyptic year of 1943. Obviously the poet is a Jew, for who but a Jewish poet writing in a Jewish language is better positioned to take the exact measurement of historical time?

So this is where we begin. We begin at the end, with the awareness that the end has come. And what better way to begin than with the leading poet of the Holocaust who, because he dated his wartime poetry and because most of it survived, as did the poet – miraculously – himself, we have what amounts to a diary of a major poet in captivity? Armed solely with the tools of his trade – metonymy and myth, oxymoron and metaphor, meter and rhyme – Sutzkever the consummate poet was better equipped than most to take the measure of the new reality, to disassemble the unprecedented catastrophe into its recognizable parts.

To follow Sutzkever's month-by-month, sometimes day-by-day response to the *Aktionen*, the plunder, the terror, the starvation, the false hopes and the final liquidation, is an exercise in historical poetics. Sutzkever makes it possible for us to proceed slowly, to register the gradations of time during wartime: in hiding there was fugitive time; in ghettos there was the Judenrat's strategy of buying time, which ultimately did not forestall deportation time; there was, for the young and able-bodied, resistance time, and for Sutzkever and his wife Freydke, the time of miraculous liberation; but above all, there was Time Before / Time After: so long as the Jews were being excluded, confined and abandoned, they wrote one way. When all Jews were condemned to death, the few surviving writers adopted a new manner of writing.

Reading Sutzkever is a curriculum on how to read Holocaust literature. To read ethically is to read in time. His insistence on chronology – unique to his wartime writing – rests upon an ethics of unfolding, recovering, provoking and revoking. And the laboratory conditions for testing this curriculum was the Vilna ghetto; this, for five reasons:

1. Vilna was the first major community in eastern Europe to bear the full brunt of Operation Barbarossa, the formal beginning of the Final Solution. In the first six months of the occupation, from June-December 1941, the Germans and their Lithuanian helpers murdered 33,000 Vilna Jews in the nearby killing field of Ponar. Only a handful survived to recount the horror and what they recounted was literally unbelievable.

2. Not coincidentally, the first summons to Jewish armed resistance was issued in the Vilna ghetto when Abba Kovner read his Hebrew and Yiddish proclamation to the members of the Marxist-Zionist Young Guard (*Hashomer Hatzair*) on New Year's Day 1942. It began with a repudiation of the Prophet Isaiah (53: 3): "Let us not be led like sheep to the slaughter" (Porat 2010: 57-75).

3. Strange as it may sound, Yiddish was reterritorialized in the Vilna ghetto, which is another way of saying that Yiddish was a unifying force in the ghetto, the official language of the Judenrat, the Jewish police, the political underground, the theater, the places of worship, the schools (Belis 1964).

4. The educational, social, cultural and religious responses of the Jews in captivity preceded the armed resistance and proceeded from it. The major boundary, the demarcation line between Time Before / Time After was the line that divided culture as resistance and the culture of resistance.

5. To trace and track the changes in poetics, the place to begin is with the individual poet, chronicler, or witness. There is no one-to-one correlation between what the

poets, chroniclers, and witnesses knew and how they wrote, but when changes did occur in their writing, these cry out to be interpreted.

In the Vilna ghetto, Avrom Sutzkever fashioned a response to the Nazi onslaught out of the inherited fund of Jewish responses, and the more he engaged the Jewish past, the more his voice was hearkened to. Sutzkever became the poet laureate of the Vilna ghetto on the strength of his epic verse, a genre he perfected during the war. "*Dos keyver-kind* / The Grave Child," the epic tale of a lone escapee from Ponar who sought refuge in the Jewish cemetery, there to give birth in an empty grave, was awarded first prize for poetry in July 1942 by the Union of Artists and Writers in the Vilna ghetto (Sutzkever 1968: 151-158). Sutzkever's most transhistoric poem "Kol Nidre," a mythic retelling of the terrible Yom Kippur "Operation Free-of-Jews" (*Aktion Judenrein*) of 1941, was the subject of heated debate among the ghetto intelligentsia (Roskies 2004, Sutzkever 1968: 161-181). And on May 10, 1943, Sutzkever completed his heroic epic, "*Di lererin Mire* / The Teacher Mira" (Sutzkever 1968: 68-70), which immortalized the everyday courage of the beloved Yiddish pedagogue, Mira Bernshteyn, who plied her trade before an ever-dwindling class of school children.

Me yogt iber khurves on broyt un on fayer,
Dos broyt iz a bukh un dos likht iz a blayer.

We are driven through ruins with no bread and no fire.
Bread is their book and a pencil – their only desire
(Sutzkever 1968: 68).

The curriculum the children were studying, according to Sutzkever, were the stories of Sholem Aleichem, the exploits of the Bundist freedom fighter, Hirsh Lekert, the poetry and stylized folktales of I. L. Peretz. That Sutzkever assumed the mantle of the national chronicler in the Vilna ghetto was by no means new for Jewish or European poetry since Pushkin and Mickiewicz, but it was new for Sutzkever.

Sutzkever's poetic diary reveals that alongside the epic poetry, designed to be read aloud in public forum, he wrote lyrical verse; elegies for his murdered mother, and poems of fearless self-confrontation. Here, the watchword, the marker of time when all of time was disastrously out of kilter, was the word *letst*, last (Sutzkever 1968: 52, Sutzkever 1989a: 10).

In letstn goyrl gib mir freyd un viln
Tsu derzen a palats in a khorevn gebay;
Ikh zol tsu yeder tsayt mayn tsayt derfiln
Un onklapn mayn gayst vi durkh a turemvant.

Last hour, when you come, bring strength enough
For me to see a palace in ruined masonry,
To drive my final moments to their given end,
To tap a message of my prisoner soul: be free!

That which gave him the inner strength to go on living, the freedom to believe, to desire, and to hate, was the ability to sing:

In letstn goyrl trayb in mir a shturem,
Aroystsuraysn yeder flek un vakldikn klang,
Un shmelts vi gold mikh iber in dayn furem,
Di psoyles zol zikh opteyln un blaybn zol gezang.

Last hour, stir up storms in me,
Bleach out my wrongs, untangle my cacophony.
Form me like molten gold into your mold,
Sear my chaff away, leave me in melody. (ibid.)

Sutzkever was not a believing Jew. He was a believing poet. He believed that when everything human betrays you, there must be a standard that cannot be breached. Beauty, for him, was the standard that cannot be falsified. The beauty of a flower. The beauty of a snow-covered landscape. The beauty of the poetic word. This was decidedly not a Jewish stance, but like religious faith, it inspired and demanded acts of self-transcendence.

Sutzkever was not alone in reaffirming his poetic credo in the face of everything that negated it. To create something new in conditions of absolute extremity, the poets, chroniclers and witnesses had first to lay out their articles of faith. Only then could that faith be put to the test. To understand the making of Holocaust consciousness even as the catastrophe was unfolding, we must begin at the beginning and read in sequential order. We cannot proceed from an *a priori* position of knowledge, driven by a postwar aesthetic standard. According to that standard, the enormity of the catastrophe – as determined after the fact by scholars and critics sitting in their book-lined studys – must be matched by a comparable, radically innovative style. According to that high modernist standard, established, let us say, by Paul Celan (in German), Charlotte Delbo (in French) or Dan Pagis (in Hebrew), everything that falls short is not the real thing, not really "poetry after Auschwitz." By turning instead to the discipline of historical poetics, by affirming an ethics of reading which is reading in time, we reject all such essentialist claims. We search neither for the ultimate poetic expression of atrocity nor for the so-called epicenter of evil, where Auschwitz is the be-all and end-all of the Holocaust. Before Auschwitz there was Ponar, and Babi Yar – and the Great Deportation. Before there was such a thing as Holocaust consciousness, the catastrophe, *der khurbn/shoah*, had emerged as its own archetype. For this to happen, however, one needed to assemble the sum of all available archetypes.

Yitzhak Katzenelson's Holy Dybbuk

No sooner did the Hebrew-Yiddish poet Yitzhak Katzenelson arrive in Warsaw as a refugee from Łódz than he organized and presided over public readings of the Hebrew Bible in his own rhymed Yiddish translations. The purpose of these readings was to demonstrate that the Prophets were never more alive, never more relevant, than today (Katzenelson 1984: 145-189). The most ambitious publication of the underground press in the Warsaw ghetto was his "*Iyev: biblishe tragedye in dray aktn* / Job: A Biblical Tragedy in Three Acts", published by Dror in about 150 copies on 22 June 1941. the day that Germany declared war on the Soviet Union (Katzenelson 1984: 497). Gracing the cover was Shloyme Nusboym's illustration of Job crouched on the ground, nursing his wounds (Katzenelson 1984: 499-609). While *Job* focused on the existential and erotic struggle of the Jewish individual, "*Bay di taykhn fun Bovl* / By the Waters of Babylon: A Biblical Folk Drama in Four Acts" described the plight of the nation, and ended with a verse translation of the prophet Ezekiel's Vision of the Dry Bones (Katzenelson 1984: 233-377).

In a parallel search for a usable, secular literary past, Katzeneslon went back to Hayyim Nahman Bialik, marking his *yortsayt*, the anniversary of his death, in 1940 and 1941. In the summer 1940 issue of the underground periodical *Dror*, Katzenelson published a long and densely argued appreciation of Bialik's life and work (Katzenelson 1984: 125-130), prefaced by a translation into Yiddish of Bialik's first poem on the Kishinev pogrom, "*Al hashḥitah* / Upon the Slaughter," (Katzenelson 1984: 124). Bialik, he claimed, was now more alive than ever; not the lion's share of Bialik's poetic oeuvre, his lyric, epic, and neo-folk poetry, but his "*Shirei za'am* / Poems of Wrath". The single most compelling aspect of Bialik's poetic legacy, in other words, was his rage, or what we might call his romantic agony. Katzenelson coined an oxymoron to capture the ghoulish-yet-vital presence of Bialik in wartime. Bialik, he wrote, has returned to us from the grave in the guise of a "holy dybbuk" (Katzenelson 1984: 128).

Stripped of its metaphysics, Katzenelson's argument went something like this; the poet's rage was the product of profound and radical self-confrontation. The dybbuk that blasphemed was the rage that cleansed. Bialik's rage offered the only possible relief from the inner turmoil and dissociated pain, the inability of the victims to admit the inevitability of their fate, and to feel solidarity for others in pain. Paralyzed by the enormity of their grief, and by its utter inexpressibility, the people could achieve catharsis by hearkening to the cry of anguish that emanated from Bialik's *Poems of Wrath*.

However creative this feverish activity of Biblical translation and adaptation, of literary evaluation and exhortation, it signaled that as of yet, no radically new response was called for. By February 1942, however, the poet was already jotting down his angry thoughts about the self-betrayal of "apostates, Bundists, Left Labor Zionists and other *erev-meshumodim*, apostates-in-training" (Katzenelson 1984: 617), and by April, responding to the terrible news about the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto, he issued his first cry for revenge, "*Shfoykh khamoskho* / Pour Out Thy Wrath," appropriately tied to the festival of Passover (Katzenelson 1984: 626-628).

So rapidly was the poet's consciousness radicalized by the new reality that by the summer of 1942, when the Germans began the mass deportation of Warsaw Jewry, Dror had prepared for publication a volume of Katzenelson's own "*Tsorn-lider / Poems of Wrath*", which was to have included one of two epic poems that he wrote on contemporary Jewish martyrdom, "*Dos lid vegn Shloyme Zhelikhovski* / The Song about Shloyme Zhelikhovsky" (Katzenelson 1984: 642-648). The book's editor, the young Zionist fighter, Mordecai Tanenbaum, claimed that Bialik's "*Be`ir hahareigah* / In the City of Slaughter," was an idyll when compared to these poems. Before the war, Tanenbaum admitted in a letter to his sister, he had taken no interest in Katzenelson. "*Ober der fun Varshever geto, velkher hot tsuzamen mit undz, in shutfes geshafn, gesholtn, gerufn tsu nekome – undzer bruder iz er geven. Er hot geshribn nor yidish. Alts vos mir hobn getrakht, gefilt, gekholemt. Er iz oysgevaksn un zikh derhoybn biz di himl-heykhkeytn – hekher fun Byalikn*" ("But the one in the Warsaw ghetto, who was together with us, created, cursed and cried for revenge along with us – he became our brother. He wrote only in Yiddish. Everything that we were thinking, feeling, dreaming. He rose in stature and

raised himself as high as the heavens – even higher than Bialik") (quoted in Katzenelson 1984: 68).

On July 20, 1942, the completed manuscript of Katzenelson's *Poems of Wrath* was buried by the members of Dror Hechalutz in the basement of their commune, to be unearthed by a few surviving members after the war.

If we are to judge from Sutzkever and Katzenelson, as different as two poets could possibly be, a new poetics began to emerge within the war zone from a dialectical process of return, an act of radical self-confrontation accompanied by a reaffirmation of faith. Sutzkever renewed his faith in an absolute standard of beauty and Katzenelson discovered the cathartic, transformative power of rage.

Sutzkever and the Politics of Memory

If we are to judge from Sutzkever and Katzenelson, Vilna and Warsaw were as different as two Nazi ghettos could possibly be. Vilna was located in the newly occupied eastern territories; Warsaw – in the Generalgouvernement. In Vilna, the local Judenrat enjoyed the confidence of the ghetto inhabitants, and had a leader who convinced the Jews that labor would save them. In Warsaw, a parallel social service network competed to save the population from starvation and disease. Here, the Judenrat was vilified. In Vilna, Yiddish was the lingua franca while in Warsaw it was Polish. A variety of youth movements flourished in the Warsaw ghetto, with an active underground press. In Vilna, there was no underground press. But in both ghettos there was a critical mass of writers, intellectuals and activists to organize a cultural and political life, and there existed a powerful synergy between culture as resistance and the culture of resistance (see Kassow 1999).

For Sutzkever, there were only two ways to escape from *di gele gelatate shoen*: one was through the coming of spring, the regenerative cycle of nature, which for the poet was always linked to the process of artistic creation, and the other was through armed revolt. Thus in his wartime poetry, Sutzkever also tracked a paradigm shift that occurred in modern Jewish times. The New Jew, machine gun in hand, fighting as a Jew – the longed-for Jewish army finally fighting under its ancient banner – was born in 1943. From Sutzkever we learn that the labor pains attending that birth were terrible. From the text history of his wartime poetry we learn that the course of Holocaust memory never did run smooth.

Abrasha Sutzkever joined the UPO, the United Partisans' Organization under the command of Itsik Vittenberg, soon after its founding. The famous hymns of the Jewish armed resistance were written in the Vilna ghetto, by Kasriel Broide, Shmerke Kaczerginski and especially, Hirsh Glik. Sutzkever added his voice on special occasions, as when, pretending to celebrate the coming of spring on May 1st, 1943, the UPO gathered to commemorate the Warsaw ghetto uprising that was still ongoing. The poem Sutzkever declaimed at that emotional gathering, *A nem ton dos ayzn*, was his most explicit call-to-arms (Sutzkever 1963, 1: 299-300). Beginning in 1943, Sutzkever began to play the role of the partisan-poet that Ilya Ehrenburg would soon make famous in the pages of *Pravda*.

What was the fate of the armed resistance in the Vilna ghetto? There are two competing, indeed, completely contradictory versions of what happened. Both are documented in Sutzkever's poetic diary. And both are true.

Let us begin with the better-known version, the one that appeared in print in the Soviet Union, after Abrasha and Freydke Sutzkever were airlifted to Moscow in March 1944, and later still, when the first of Sutzkever's wartime poetry was published in New York under American-Jewish Communist auspices. This is the version that we, the children of the Yiddish secular schools in North America and elsewhere, grew up on.

As in all his wartime poetry, Sutzkever's 24-line epic poem, "*Di blayene platn fun Roms drukeray* / The Lead Plates of the Rom Press", carries a specific date. September 12, 1943 was the day Abrasha and Freydke left the ghetto with the second group of fighters in order to join the Soviet partisan brigades in the Lithuanian forests. It was the day, in other words, of final leave-taking. Henceforth Jewish Vilna would exist in the poet's memory alone. Sutzkever needed a poem to mark this most significant date in his life, the moment when the link between the poet and the still-living, breathing, Yiddish-speaking communirty of Vilna was forever broken. The poem, which he actually wrote on February 18, 1944 and augmented after the war, was backdated to September 12th (Sutzkever 1968: 94, 1991: 168-170).

The poetic frame is pure legend. One night, young fighters in need of bullets steal into the building of the Rom's Press in order to melt down the lead plates of the Vilna Talmud, the towering cultural achievement of east European Jewry. This in turn recalls a still more ancient exploit, that of the Maccabees, whose pouring of oil into the candelabra of the Jerusalem Temple is akin to the lead of Hebrew letters being poured into bullet molds; and the alchemy succeeds, for in the last stanza the Jewish soldiers are now armed, the uprising has happened, and the ghetto in its final hours is likened to Jerusalem under siege.

As always, it is rhyme that underscores the meaning of the poem, and never more powerfully than when two of the three rhyme-words are from the Hebraic component of Yiddish. In the final stanza, Sutzkever rhymes *Yerusholaim* with *blayen* and *klezayin*. He forges a direct and powerful link between the destruction of Jerusalem, the lead of the plates, and the weapons wielded by the Vilna partisans in their desperate last stand against the Germans.

Un ver s'hot in geto gezen dos klezayin
Farklamert in heldishe yidishe hent –
Gezen hot er ranglen zikh Yerusholaim,
Dos faln fun yene granitene vent;
Farnumen di verter, farshmoltsn in blayen
Un zeyere shtimen in hartsn derkent.

And he who saw Jewish youth in their prime
Clutching the weapons in ghetto halls –
He saw the last struggler of Yerushalayim,
The heroic fall of those heroic walls;
Took in the words, poured in lead, out of time,
And heard in his heart: their ancient voice calls
(Sutzkever 1991).

But none of this was true! The lead plates had long since been plundered by the Germans, the uprising was aborted through tragic circumstances, and the central conceit of the poem was just that.

Why invent an imaginary link between present and ancient past? Was Sutzkever acting the role of a revisionist historian, intent upon turning defeat into victory? Was this

an attempt to cover up the fact, as Shloime Belis would later argue, that in Vilna they wrote the battle hymns and in Warsaw they did the actual fighting (Belis 1964: 313-315)?

And why did Sutzkever add yet another stanza, the one that compared the ghetto fighters to the Maccabees? Was this not done so late in the day in order to make the poem more politically correct, seeing as, on orders from Kaganovich and Stalin, Soviet Jews were encouraged to take pride in their ancient legacy of heroism and resistance? (The Soviet-Yiddish linguist Elye Spivak would later dedicate a whole chapter of his monograph on *Language in the Days of the Great Patriotic War* to similar Biblicisms in the writings of Shakhne Epstein, Ezra Finenberg, Peretz Markish (Spivak 1946: 24-27)). How literally did Sutzkever intend for this poem to be taken?

The matrix of the poem, the basis for its truth claim, I believe, was the fifth line, "*Mir, troymer, badarfn itst vern soldatn*! / We dreamers must now become soldiers!" How, Sutzkever asked himself, could a patriarchal, powerless people produce a cadre of young resistance fighters? In the symbolic language that he had perfected since the beginning of the German occupation, Sutzkever provided a metahistorical answer.

This young generation of east European Jews were products of a great civilization. They came from a place of learning, religious discipline, and idealism. All they needed was the magic formula, the key, the desperate desire, to transform one kind of energy into another. By knowing their history, this new generation was able to write a brave new chapter in that history. As an episode in guerilla warfare, the failed uprising deserved no more than a footnote. But in the annals of the Jewish people, the armed revolt against the Germans represented the greatest breakthrough in Jewish consciousness since the time of the Maccabees.

The counternarrative, the unheroic, unassimilable, and therefore almost unspeakable truth Sutzkever revealed at another public occasion. On February 17, 1943, Liza Magun, the main UPO liaison between the ghetto and the Aryan side, was caught and executed by the Gestapo. More than a tragic loss and strategic setback, Magun's death made clear to the poet that the UPO was fated to fight alone, because the ghetto population was utterly indifferent. Standing before his fellow partisans, who were gathered legally at a memorial ceremony for Magun on March 16, 1943, Sutzkever declaimed a thunderous poem of rage, written in the oracular mode of Hayyim Nahman Bialik.

This was "*Lid tsu di letste* / Song for the Last," which Sutzkever waited twenty years to publish (Sutzkever 1963, 1: 293-295, 1989b: 497-499). It appeared only once, in his two-volume *Poetishe verk* but not in his 1968 collection of Holocaust verse; an oversight, perhaps, as Sutzkever once explained to me, or as Yechiel Szeintuch and I believe, perhaps not. This scandalous poem marks the break, the caesura, the Time Before / Time After, in Sutzkever's Holocaust poetry, yet were it not for Bialik, who introduced the pseudoprophetic poem, the *Masa,* into Hebrew and Yiddish literature, it could not have been written (Miron 2010, Roskies 2005: 116-119).

Like Bialik, Sutzkever addresses his people directly. "*O brider mayne* / Oh, my brothers," he cries out to them,

Heybt aroyf dem kop
dem zinkedikn vi di zun, dem krankn.
Ikh vil aykh zen in ayer zunk arop,
Farnemen mayne eygene gedanken;

Lift your heads, your sick
heads sinking
like the sun: I want to see you as you sink
hearing at least what I'm thinking.
(Sutzkever 1963, 1: 293, 1989b: 497, ll. 9-12)

Like Bialik, he contrasts the moribund state of his people with the manifold, life-giving, blessings of nature. Nature represents that which is vital and regenerative, as opposed to the people – passive, self-deluded, and doomed.

A khaye, az me loyert af ir gang –
Zi lozt boday ir fel un pruvt antrinen.
Bloyz ir hot nit gefilt shoyn keyn gefang
Ir hot gemeynt: di fayl vet nit gefinen.

An animal in danger
will tear its own flesh to get free:
you never felt the trap close,
you thought the arrow could no longer see.
(Sutzkever 1963: 1: 294, 1989b: 498, ll. 25-28)

Animals have a survival instinct – the people do not. A forest attacked by lightning and thunder responds with greater honesty and self-awareness than they. With each successive metaphor, derived from the natural realm, the surviving ghetto folk are further reduced in stature until the poet delivers this thunderous, terrifying verdict, based on an untranslatable pun: "*A dorn zayt ir itster, nit keyn dor*, / Your nation's nettle are you, not its future generation" (Sutzkever 1963: 1, 294, 1989b: 498, l.47). Never mere wordplay, here the rhyme unlocks the secret of Jewish shame. *Dor*, from the Hebraic component of Yiddish, means a generation, that which guarantees a future time; *dorn,* from the Germanic component, means *thorn*, a painful presence, an open wound in the body politic.

As in Bialik, it is Sutzkever's rage that fuels this sweeping historical indictment, an exorcism of the people's manifold dybbuks, as Katzenelson might have said. Like Bialik, Sutzkever confronts his people directly, only to take leave of them, once and for all. When first he addresses the people (stanzas I-II), he speaks of them as "*brider mayne* / my brothers." As an insider, a comrade-in-pain, a son of the Jewish people, he issues the core of his indictment (stanzas III-VII), which is grammatically relentless: the words *ir, aykh* ("you" nominative and accusative) and *ayer* ("yours") are repeated incessantly, 22 times in all, sometimes twice in a single line (l. 48). All the more palpable, then, is the speaker's brutal disengagement when the "I" cuts itself off from the "you," in the last two stanzas, culminating in the last line: "*Mikh eklt der geduld fun aykh, ir letste fun milyonen!* / I am disgusted by your patience, you, last of millions!" (Sutzkever 1963, 1: 295, 1989b: 499).

The decision to mount an uprising inside the ghetto was born out of that impasse, out of the absolute certainty that there was no tomorrow. But after the commander of the UPO, Itsik Vittenberg, perished in the Gestapo prison and the uprising failed, Abrasha and his wife Freydke left to join the Soviet partisans fighting in the Narocz forest. On September 12, 1943, Avrom Sutzkever and his compatriots abandoned the ghetto to its fate.

Sutzkever, a poet first and last, never allowed history, mere chronology, the final word. If need be, he would bury his wartime writing in his private genizah until the time

was right. In the case of *Lid tsu di letste*, twenty years; thirty-five years in the case of *"Di ershte nakht in geto* / The First Night in the Ghetto", subtitled *"Lider, lidvaryantn, fragmentn, geshribn in di khurbn-yorn 1941-1944* / Poems, Poem-variants, Fragments, Written during the Holocaust 1941-1944 (Sutzkever 1979). These tracks can now be uncovered; the tracks that allow us not only to read "in time", but also to precisely gauge Time Before / Time After, the essential demarcation of time in the Holocaust proper. There is something still rhetorical about Sutzkever's question, *Tsi bin ikh der letster poet in Eyrope*? The regular meter and rhyme belie the lastness of it. There is nothing rhetorical, however, about *Mikh eklt der geduld fun aykh, ir letste fun milyonen!*

Katzenelson and the Confessional Diary

Of all Holocaust-specific genres, the diary has commanded most critical attention, because nowhere is the sense of durational time rendered more precisely. In these diaries, more than any other genre, the mundane, the frivolous, the protected realm of one's private, inner life, rubs up against the chronology of mass murder. With every passing day, the gap between survival time and killing time grows ever narrower. Outside the Secret Annex of the Frank family in Amsterdam, the streets emptied out so thoroughly that the sight of a few fugitive Jews was worthy of note. As they write against time, the war may or may not yield up its darkest secret – that Hitler was making good his promise to annihilate the Jews of Europe. At the heart of all Holocaust diaries lies that moment of truth: Time Before / Time After.

The sudden, arbitrary ending endows the last pages of durational diaries with great significance. How much of the truth did they really know? Because Anne and her confidante, Kitty, were exempted from the Moment of Truth, they have come to represent goodness, faith, and innocent sacrifice. Adolescent diaries have become such valued artifacts because young people were Hitler's most innocent and sometimes, most prescient, victims. Or as Ruth Wisse reframed the issue so memorably, Hitler's war against the Jews rendered its most vulnerable targets extraordinary against their will (Wisse 2000: 193).

Yet, when we read the corpus of surviving diaries in their order of creation, we discover, yes discover, a new type of diary that came into being in Year Four of the war. For lack of a better name, we shall call it the confessional diary. It was exclusively an adult genre; mostly the work of men and not of women; of husbands bereaved of their wives, fathers bereaved of their sons and daughters, sons bereaved of their parents and grandparents.

The confessional diary was born at the fault line between Time Before / Time After. It was the writing of last resort by adults who up until that time had lived one way; from now on, and for as long as they could hold on, they would live another. It is adult reading, intended for adults only. Some of the surviving diaries are so scandalous, so far-reaching in their indictment, so devoid of hope, that they could not be published as is. Such was the fate of the Polish diary of the former Jewish policeman from Otwock named Calel Perechodnik. Such was the fate of the Hebrew diary of the poet and playwright Yitzhak Katzenelson.

On the very day that he arrived from Warsaw at the transit camp in Vittel, France, accompanied by his surviving son, 17-year-old Zvi, Katzenelson began to keep a diary (Katzenelson 1964, 1988). The date was May 22, 1943. Everything about this diary was

fraught with tension – especially the language in which to write it. *"Ikh mit mayn zun Tsvi,"* Katzenelson began in Yiddish. *"Ani im Tsvi beni* / I and my son Zvi" he glossed the words and continued in Hebrew (Katzenelson 1988: 29). Such a simple phrase as "I and my son Zvi" was for the diarist a statement of faith, because in all the surrounding rooms and apartments, Polish Jews, the last of the last, were making a point of speaking in Polish. But what was it that moved Katzenelson to switch from one Jewish language to another? Did writing in Hebrew automatically transform one's private testimony onto a metahistorical plane? Insure that the document would live forever? Render it more conspiratorial? Insert a psychological buffer zone? Or all four? Whatever his reasons, the confusion of languages signaled an attendant confusion of addressee. Who was this document intended to reach? Who was still left to decipher its contents?

Instead of bringing them closer together, he recorded, the catastrophe had driven the father and son further apart; both were going mad, in different ways. That distance, in turn, intensified the bereavement for three of the murdered millions, whose names – his wife Hannah and sons Bentsikl and Binyomin – Katzenelson would repeat as an incantation. Two weeks passed without Katzenelson writing another word. On July 21, the dam burst, the 22nd marking the first anniversary, the *yortsayt*, of the start of the Great Deportation in the Warsaw ghetto. From then on, Katzenelson backtracked to the slaughter, as if reliving it in real time, back to the liquidation of the Little Ghetto with all its orphans, who had performed the plays he had written for their benefit; back to the discovery that his loved ones had been taken to Treblinka; back to the cellar at Karmelicka 9, on the eve of the first armed resistance; back to finding his works strewn about the abandoned ghetto streets. *"Sof kayits arokh kanetsaḥ, kamavet, sof kayits shel shnat taf-shin-bet* / The end of the summer as long as eternity, as long as death, the end of the summer of 1942" (Katzenelson 1988: 91, 100). This is how Katzenelson begins two very long and detailed entries, written in September 1943, on the exact *yortsayt*. His fanatical attention to calendrical time, the specter of his loved ones, each recalled in their last living habitat, points to an essential feature of this and other confessional diaries: they labor to recreate what no longer exists. Each diarist inhabits a private Hell. Each labors to reconstruct a Paradise Lost.

Added to the gradations of time during wartime was a new measurement of time. In addition to fugitive time in hiding; ghetto time; the strategy of buying time; deportation time, resistance time, and killing time – the end of time in the death camps – there was now confessional time.

Each diarist, surviving under different circumstances, tried to balance the unpredictable flow of external events and the unstoppable flow of internal memories. But how? So great was the burden of the past, the burden of guilt towards those who had perished, the burden of rage towards those who were to blame – that there was no way to know from one day to the next what reality would demand its due. Katzenelson's so-called *Vittel Diary* was a fiercely Zionist reading of time – past, present, and future.

As a Zionist, Katzenelson had to preserve some vision of the Jewish people still capable of striving for self-determination. During the Great Deportation there was one group – the Jewish police – that through its behavior cut itself off from the shared fate of the Jews. *"Ani be'einai ra'iti, baḥalon,* / I saw it with mine own eyes, from the window," how the Jewish police helped to round up the children. Can it be, he asked himself, struggling to recall this most horrific of scenes, that they too grabbed the little ones

by their feet and smashed their heads against the walls, the trees, the pavement (Katzenelson 1988: 56, 12.08.43)? Katzenelson had no choice but to write them out, to erase them from memory.

As a bereaved father and spouse, Katzenelson struggled to come to terms with the murder of his loved ones, which he did by describing Treblinka in great detail. As a survivor, he tried to relive the slaughter, especially the last two days of the deportations, which he spent hiding in a cellar on Karmelicka 9. What happened to him in that cellar, his encounters with people both real and imaginary, his reveries and his fantasies of revenge, are a masterpiece of Holocaust testimony.

Writing this Hebrew diary allowed Katzenelson to work through the trauma. Three weeks after making his last entry he began to compose his Yiddish epic poem, "*Dos lid fun oysgehargetn yidishn folk* / The Song of the Murdered Jewish People", which took him six months to complete (Katzenelson 1980). The poem was dedicated to the memory of Hannah, his muse, the only source of meaning now that the heavens, in whose poetic mission he had once believed, were silent.

The transport that carried Yitzhak and Zvi Katzenelson from Vittel to Auschwitz arrived there on April 30, 1944. They were gassed the same day.

Rokhl Auerbach's Great Lament

Armed solely with the tools of their trade – metonymy and myth, oxymoron and metaphor, meter and rhyme, calendrical and confessional time – poets, chroniclers and diarists were better equipped than most to take the measure of the new reality, to disassemble the unprecedented catastrophe into its recognizable parts. Modern Jewish poets and prose writers, who could mix and match epic and lyric, the dybbuk and the muse, were the first to cross the great divide between Time Before / Time After in order to perceive the *khurbn/shoah* as its own archetype. Some, like Katzeneslon, already knew what we know, before he too perished in the abyss. Others, like Sutzkever, knew too much, and therefore tread very carefully between fact and eloquence, history and memory. And one, named Rokhl Auerbach, was able to comprehend and to commemorate the catastrophe in a manner that remains unmatched to this very day.

Before one can decide that something is "beyond analogy," one needs to find the closest analogy. Rokhl Auerbach began her requiem for the dead by recalling a flood she had once seen in the mountains. The date was November 1943. The place was the Aryan Side of Warsaw where she had been living on forged papers and with her impeccable Galician Polish since February. Although it was madness to be writing from right to left while any minute a *szmalcownik*, a professional blackmailer, could expose her as a Jew, this document about the destruction of Jewish Warsaw could be written only in Yiddish.

So Auerbach begins her jeremiad on the Great Deportation with the personal recollection of "*a farfleytsung in geberg* / a flood in the mountains." Facing the raging waters from afar, she was close enough to see the gaping mouths of the helpless victims, but not to hear their cries. Just so, standing on the far side of the river of time, she is close enough to recall the catastrophe in every detail, but far enough away to conduct a search for meaning. "*Azoy hobn gefleytst tsum umkum yidishe masn in teg fun oyszidlung. Azoy on hilf gezunken inem mabl fun fartilikung.* / And that's how the Jewish masses flowed to their destruction in the time of the deportations. Sinking as helplessly into the deluge

of destruction" (Auerbach 1963: 29, 1989: 460). To make this leap from a natural to an historical disaster, Auerbach substitutes a flood in the mountains with "*a mabl fun fartilikung* / a deluge of destruction." *Mabl* (from the Hebrew) signifies the primeval Flood. Likening the Great Deportation to a flood in no way implies that she accepts the Biblical belief that an act of God is a sign of divine retribution. To the contrary: The flood analogy means for Auerbach that the evil descended upon them from on high like a force of nature, fatally inevitable. The dead were blameless!

Auerbach can make sense of the Great Deportation only by layering one analogy atop another, like bodies torn loose from their moorings; from the natural realm to the historical, from a flood to the Deluge, from Warsaw to Jerusalem. She is the survivor trying the catastrophe on for size, comparing and contrasting. There is nothing facile or consoling about the art of analogy.

The comparison of Warsaw to Jerusalem breaks down the moment she remembers the active collaboration of the Jewish police: "*Un oyb ikh zol fargesn oyf eyn tog fun mayne teg,* / And if, for even one of the days of my life," she goes on, invoking the famous Psalm of Zion (137), "*vi ikh hob gezen dikh demolt, folk undzers, in yiesh un farloyrnkeyt, an oysgeliferts oyf farnikhtung, zol mayn nomen zayn fargesn. Un zol mayn zeykher zayn farsholtn, vi der zeykher fun di bogdim.* / I should forget how I saw you then, my people, desperate and confused, delivered over to extinction, may all knowledge of me be forgotten and my name be cursed like that of those traitors who are unworthy to share your pain" (ibid.). Exactly like Katzenelson in his *Vittel Diary*, Auerbach has erased the memory of the Jewish police from the annals of the Jewish people. Auerbach now proceeds to create a composite portrait of her people, recalling them group by group: the children and the youth, the women and the men, the idealists and assimilationists; yes, even the underworld – a distinct and especially vital branch of Polish Jewry – and finally, the grandmothers and grandfathers, the pietists and the beggars.

Exhausted by the effort to recall each group of Jews individually, despairing of the possibility of ever completing the litany of losses, her account of the flood becomes more personal – and more gendered. She turns to an incident that happened to her while riding the Warsaw streetcar, the jarring moment that birthed this very work. Sitting opposite her on the streetcar was a Polish Catholic woman, her head thrown back, talking to herself. Seeing and hearing that bereaved mother crying, like one mad or drunk, reminds the Jewish passenger of another woman who seemed drunk or mad with personal grief, Hannah in Shiloh, crying her heart out before God, because she is childless (I Samuel 1). But as a Jew living on Aryan papers, it is forbidden that she cry in public. What can she the passenger do? She can sit down and write this chronicle. She can return to the ancient rite of Jewish mourning, to the recitation of Yizkor:

> *Ikh tor nisht krekhtsn un ikh tor nisht veynen. Ikh tor nisht tsutsien oyf mir keyn oyfmerk oyf der gas.*
> *Un ikh darf azoy veynen, azoy krekhtsn. Nisht fir mol in yor, fir mol a tog vilt zikh mir zogn yizker.*
>
> I may neither groan nor weep. I may not draw attention to myself in the street.
> And I need to groan. I need to weep. Not four times a year. I feel the need to say Yizkor four times a day. (Auerbach 1963: 35, 1989: 464)

The first Yizkor service for the Great Deportation, which stands for the Holocaust writ large, was written (scandalously) by a woman. Her composite portrait of the living folk

underwrites her personal covenant with a people that now lives only in her mind. "Yizkor, 1943," then, can be read as a primer in Jewish collective memory. Using a grammar of remembrance perfected over time, applying her philosophical training, and drawing on her intimate knowledge of her subjects, Auerbach disassembled this unprecedented catastrophe into its constituent parts: a flood, a Deluge, a Hurban; a walled city, a social mosaic, a civilization-in-miniature; from personal bereavement, to national lament, to cosmic loss.

But let there be no mistake about it: Katzenelson and Auerbach were secular writers, however much they employed the Bible, Jewish religious myth or the Jewish liturgy. The return to covenantal language was just that – a late return, a studied response, a chapter in literary history – of a piece with something that we shall now, as we draw to a close, call "Jewspeak," the invention of a superidiomatic Jewish voice in an otherwise silent universe.

The Reinvention of Jewspeak: Jacob Glatstein and I. B. Singer

In 1943, the arch-modernist Jacob Glatstein, cofounder of the Intropsectivist movement in American Yiddish poetry, published *Gedenklider*, Memorial Poems, or Poems of Remembrance (Glatstein 1993). These poems attempted to anchor the shock of Jewish history within the personal experience of the poet, a poet who until then had snubbed his nose at overtly Jewish themes. By contrast, this slim volume opened with a Biblically-inspired section called "*A mandlshtekn blit in midber* / An Almond Staff Blossoms in the Desert." The second section was devoted to the current crisis, some of the poems carrying specific dates: "*Vegener* / Wagons" (June 1938), "*Afn yatkeklots* / On the Butcher Block" (June 1939), "Lublin, 1941."

This book of poems was the first significant poetic response to the Holocaust to be published in the Free Zone. Through their muted lyricism, their emotional range, through the extravagant use of neologism and rhyme, Glatstein endeavored to turn the deathscape of the Jews of Europe into a lifescape for the surviving Jews in America. But it was his last addition to the volume, written in the year of publication, 1943, that had the most-far reaching consequences – for Glatstein, for Yiddish literature and for postwar Jewish culture as a whole.

In a cycle of poems called "*Der Braslaver tsu zayn soyfer* / Nahman of Barslav to his Scribe," Glatstein adopting the persona of Rabbi Nahman of Braslav, whom he recast as a down-to-earth yet profoundly introspective religious thinker (Glatstein 1986). A dramatic monologue in free verse, *Nahman of Braslaver to his Scribe* began with Reb Nahman proclaiming, "*Nosn davay haynt nisht trakhtn,* Come on Nathan, let's not think today, *host shoyn a mol gezen aza velt / mit azoy fil loytere prakhtn* – Did you ever see a world / with so many beautiful things?" With the reimagined voice of one of the great Hasidic masters, Glatstein reintroduced the lost art of Jewspeak.

Jewspeak is not a real language of social intercourse. It exists only in performance, on stage, screen, or in works of the imagination, to identify the speaker as a community-of-one; in this poem it is spoken by a great religious thinker revealing his inner thoughts to his chief disciple. The inventor of Jewspeak as a literary artifact was Sholem Aleichem, most notably in his monologues of Tevye as performed live for the benefit of the writer, Sholem Aleichem, and the shrewspeech of Sheyne-Sheyndl, as preserved in the vitriolic letters to her hapless husband, Menakhem-Mendl (Finkin 2010: 24-28, 100-108).

In 1943, Jewspeak resurfaced in two iterations: in the weighty, folksy, playful, exuberant, speech of a reimagined Rabbi Nahman ben Simcha of Braslav – Glatstein in Hasidic drag – and as Bashevis Singer's *yeytser-hore*, his Yiddish-speaking Devil, the narrator and prime mover of a cycle of brilliant demonic tales, beginning with "*Zeydlus der ershter* / Zeidlus the Pope" (Sherman 2003, Singer 2004).

Here is not the place to compare and contrast these two giants of the Jewish literary imagination who, from first to last, occupied opposite ends of the cultural-ideological spectrum. Here may be the place to ask, how for all that, they both adopted the same poetics at the same time and in the same place: New York City, in Year Four of the war, 1943.

For Bashevis, it represented the culmination of an artistic process that had begun a decade earlier, with the serial publication in Warsaw of his masterpiece, *Satan in Goray*.

As for Glatstein, only once before in his career, in 1935, had he adopted a Jewish persona and a folksy manner of speech. The name of the poem was "*Yosl Loksh fun Khelm* / Yosl Loksh of Chelem," the famous comic rabbi of the famous town of fools (Glatstein 1969). Here, instead, we meet none other than "the Braslaver." He appears to have reached a turning point in his journey. Tired of so much intellectual endeavor, he has just decided to take a break, and with Reb Nosn as his sole companion he goes in search of simplicity, direct, embodied experience, and melody. It seems as if, for the first time in his illustrious life, he is truly free.

So in 1943, both Glatstein and Bashevis made a momentous discovery: that their ticket to artistic freedom was to reinhabit the infinite reaches of Jewish time. The secret of successful time travel was that neither Glatstein's Reb Nahman nor Bashevis's Devil made any mention of Hitler, the Holocaust, or the destruction of European Jewry. Each inhabited a perfectly reimagined, autonomous, and sometimes heretical, Yiddish-speaking past. Each opposed the radical diminution, the violent contraction, of Jewish space in the present by breaking down the barriers of Jewish time.

What is gained by restoring Glatstein's Braslaver and Bashevis's *yeyster-hore* to their original wartime context is a glimpse at the beginning: seeing how great writers grappled with aspects of the Holocaust before such a thing as "Holocaust consciousness" existed. Of course they didn't yet know what we know. What they did know is that sometimes the most direct response to the enormity of a subject is a detour through the distant past. The restoration of Jewspeak, even if only by a lone speaker, represented a defiant stance in the encroaching silence. Holocaust literature began concurrently in the Free Zone – where the imagination roamed free.

Did the Holocaust engender a new poetics? Did the gradual, growing awareness that something utterly without precedent was happening in Europe necessarily translate into a new poetics, and if so – when?

It is fashionable in academic circles to speak of a time-lag, an inevitable "cultural lag" between the emergence of the new and the development of a vocabulary – be it conceptual or artistic – to describe it (Levi and Rothberg 2003: 6). There could be no "adequate response" to the Holocaust, so the argument goes, until long after the event; some say, a whole generation after (Wiesel 1972). By reading in time; by adopting the

discipline of historical poetics; by looking closely at what was actually written in the order in which it was written; by proceeding poet by poet, writer by writer, genre by genre, it is possible to see what others have refused to see: That the Holocaust did engender a new poetics.

The beginning of Holocaust consciousness can be dated with precision. It began in 1943. It began both inside the war zone and without.

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