

לקט

יִיִּדִישֶׁע שטודיעס היינט



Jiddistik heute

Yiddish Studies Today

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Der vorliegende Sammelband *לקט* eröffnet eine neue Reihe wissenschaftlicher Studien zur Jiddistik sowie philologischer Editionen und Studienausgaben jiddischer Literatur. Jiddisch, Englisch und Deutsch stehen als Publikationssprachen gleichberechtigt nebeneinander.

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יִיִּדיש װײַסגאַבעס און פֿאַרשונג

Jiddistik Edition & Forschung

Yiddish Editions & Research

Herausgegeben von Marion Aptroot, Efrat Gal-Ed,
Roland Gruschka und Simon Neuberger

Band 1

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From *Der tsirk* to *Erev mayn farbrenung*

The Transformation of Experience in Two Poems by
Avrom Sutzkever

Every literary treatment of an experience involves a process of transformation, and the theme of the חורבן (the Holocaust) is one of the key strands in Sutzkever's work that constantly undergoes development and metamorphosis throughout his poetry and prose, from his contemporaneous treatment of it until the end of his creative life.¹ A significant early example of this can be seen in three works based on an ordeal which Sutzkever endured in the Vilna ghetto in the summer of 1941. Together with an elderly rabbi and a boy, he was seized by a German stormtrooper and forced to dance naked round a fire, singing Russian songs and tearing up and burning Torah scrolls in front of a crowd of spectators. Eventually the victims were allowed to dress and escape.

This traumatic event gave rise to two poems and a prose account. The poem דער צירק (The Circus), written shortly after the event, in July 1941,² was not published until 1978, when it appeared together with other previously unpublished ghetto poems.³ The prose description is contained in Sutzkever's memoir ווילנער געטאָ (Vilna Ghetto), written between 1944 and 1946.⁴ In 1949 Sutzkever wrote a second poem arising from this incident, ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג (Before My Burning), publishing it in the volume אין פֿייער-וואָגן (In the Fiery Chariot),⁵ his first collection of poetry published in Israel.

In a talk given to launch the book, Sutzkever focussed specifically on ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג, saying:⁶

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| די ביאָגראַפֿיע פֿון אַ ליד איז אַ סך לענגער און עלטער ווי די דאַטע ווען ס'ווערט אָנגעשריבן. אַ ליד ווערט אויסגעשפּיגלט און אויסגעטיגלט לאַנגע יאָרן, אַ מאָל אַ גאַנץ לעבן [...] אָבער כדי | The biography of a poem is much longer and older than the date when it was written. The image and form of a poem evolve over a long period of years, some- |
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1 Cf. Valencia 2004: 217–239.

2 There is a discrepancy about the date of the actual event: in ווילנער געטאָ Sutzkever states that it took place in August 1941, whereas the inscription at the end of the poem דער צירק reads 1941 יולי (Written in a hideout, beginning of July 1941).

3 96/95 גאַלדענע קייט. The poems then appeared in book form: Sutzkever 1978.

4 Sutzkever 1947.

5 Sutzkever 1952: 115–117.

6 Novershtern 1983: 177. All translations are by the author.

דאָס ליד זאָל זיך געבוירן, מוז עס באַפֿרוכפערט ווערן מיט אַ „קלייניקייט“ – די קלייניקייט קען זיין די באַוועגונג פֿון אַ צווייגל, אַ בליק פֿון אַ חיה [...] צי אַ רעגן־טראָפּן אויפֿן פנים פֿון אַ שויב. אָבער אָן אַט דער געבענטשטער „קלייניקייט“, וואָס פֿאַרוואַנדלט ווערטער אין געזאַנג, כאַאָס אין האַרמאָניע, טרערן אין אויסלייזונג [...] קען דאָס ליד ניט געבוירן ווערן. און סע טרעפֿט אַז ערשט מיטן אַטעם פֿון טויט בלאַזט אַריין דער דיכטער אין זיין געזאַנג – לעבן.

times a whole lifetime [...] But in order for the poem to be born, its seed must be fertilised by a ‘trifle’ – the trifle can be the movement of a twig, the glance of an animal [...] or a raindrop on the face of a window-pane. Without this blessed ‘trifle,’ which transforms words into song, chaos into harmony, tears into redemption [...] the poem cannot come into being. And it may well happen that only with the breath of death does the poet breathe life into his song.

His singling out of this poem as a paradigm of the poetic process, coupled with the final sentence of these remarks – that the life of a poem can emerge from the טויט פֿון אַטעם – as well as the intriguing fact that the poem דער צירק was withheld from publication for so many years, are indicators that this incident and the works arising from it were of particular significance to the poet. A study of the evolution of ערבֿ מיין ערבֿ, taking into account the two earlier stages in its biography – the poem דער צירק and the prose description of the incident – affords insights into Sutzkever’s poetic process of transformation.

וויילנער געטאָ, written while Sutzkever was in Moscow between 1944 and 1946, bears witness to the atrocities inflicted on the Jews of Vilna by the Nazis and their collaborators. Its purpose is to give factual information, and Sutzkever’s description of this ordeal is very detailed. The stormtrooper’s mocking words of “comfort” to his victim, in which the origin of the title of the 1941 poem can be seen, are reproduced:⁷

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| <p>דיר [...] וועל איך נישט טאָן קיין שלעכטס. איך שווער בײַ דיטלערן! דו וועסט בלויז בײַ מיר שפּילן אין אַ צירק, מער גאַרנישט.</p> | <p>[...] I will not do you any harm. I swear it by Hitler! You’re simply going to perform in a circus, that’s all.</p> |
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The poet describes his fear, his attempts to bribe his captor with a watch, the appearance of the old rabbi, the boy’s terror. We witness the way their clothes were neatly laid in a pile and covered by the rabbi’s prayer-shawl, the tire marks all over the scattered Torah scrolls, the frail old man’s difficulty tearing the stiff parchment, and his suffering when pushed near the fire by the Nazis:⁸

⁷ Sutzkever 1947: 28.

⁸ Ibid.

דער רב האָט פֿאַרמאַכט די אויגן. דער רויך האָט
אים אַרומגעקנוילט. ס'האָט זיך אַרויסגעריסן
פֿון זײַן מויל אַן „אוי“.

The rabbi closed his eyes. The smoke
wreathed around him. Out of his mouth
came a groan: “Oy!”

Finally Sutzkever gives dispassionate details of the end of the ordeal:⁹

דער רב איז אַרײַן אין דער חרובֿער קלויז און זיך
געשטעלט דאָווענען. דאָס ייִנגל איז אַנטלאָפֿן,
איך בין אויך אין קלויז אַרײַן, זיך אַוועקגעלייגט
אין אַ ווינקל, אין דערוואַרטונג אויפֿן מאַרגנדיקן
טאָג.

The rabbi entered the destroyed study-
house and began to pray. The boy fled,
and I went into the study-house too and
lay down in a corner to await the next
day.

In this report, there is no suggestion of the existential questioning which underpins both poems, but several specific similarities and discrepancies between the prose account and the poems should be mentioned. Sutzkever comments on the comfort he derived from the old man's composure:¹⁰

איך האָב אַ קוק געטאָן אויפֿן זקן, און זײַן בליק
האָט אַפֿגעטייט מיין מורא.

I looked at the old man and the look on
his face conquered my fear.

The character of the old rabbi is of seminal significance in מײַן ערבֿ פֿאַרברענונג. Absent from the prose account is any comment on the behavior of the crowd, or on the writer's emotions after the ordeal. In דער צירק, however, these two aspects are very important.

As in all his prose writing, Sutzkever uses poetic strategies to arouse emotional responses. The image of the rabbi begins its transformation from human individual to the symbolic figure he becomes in the poems:¹¹

אַ נידעריקער, [...] ווייס ווי שניי, די שוואַרצע
לאַנגע קאַפּאַטע מאַכט אים נאָך נידעריקער.
מיר דאַכט, ער איז אַ קינד פֿאַרגרימירט פֿאַר אַ
זקן.

A small figure [...] white as snow, his long
black gaberdine makes him even smaller.
To me he seems like a child disguised as
an old man.

9 Ibid.: 28.

10 Ibid.: 27.

11 Ibid.: 26.

This is a dramatic visual image of contrasting black and white, and the idea of the child conveys the helplessness of the victim. He acquires stronger symbolic status during the enforced dance:¹²

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| <p>זיין דאָרער איינגעשרומפּענער גוף, אין שיין פֿון אויסגייענדיקן שייטער, האָט אויסגעזען ווי אַ וואַקסענע יאַרצייטליכט אויסגעבויען און געל.</p> | <p>His thin shrivelled body looked, by the glow of the dying fire, like a wax memorial candle, bent over and yellow.</p> |
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The image of the melting memorial candle links the rabbi to the idea of death but also to that of hallowed memory. A similar juxtaposition of Nazi desecration with Jewish holiness and beauty is present in the description of the defiled Torah scrolls:¹³

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| <p>אַ הויפֿן ספֿר־תּוּרוֹת [...] מיט צעריסענע פֿאַר־בלוטיקטע מענטעלעך, דורכגעזוימט מיט זיל־בערנע פֿעדעם.</p> | <p>A heap of Torah scrolls [...] with torn, bloodstained mantles bordered with silver thread.</p> |
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Sutzkever also introduces one of his key images, the sunset, in the description of the bonfire:¹⁴

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| <p>שפּעטער האָט דער פֿלאַקער מיט מער קראַפֿט זיך אַדורכגעריסן דורכן פֿאַרמעט און מיט אַ קנאַק אַ פֿלייץ געטאַן אין דער הויך צו דעם פֿייער פֿון זוננפֿאַרגאַנג.</p> | <p>Later the flames burst more powerfully through the parchment and with a crackling sound surged upwards to the fire of the sunset.</p> |
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As well as contributing to the visual power of the scene, this image brings together symbolically the iniquitous fire of the violators and that of the natural universe, the sunset, which emphasizes the grotesque dichotomy between the two, intensifying the desecration. The sunset image recurs at the beginning of פֿאַרברענונג.

It is clear, therefore, that although Sutzkever's prose narrative is detailed and factual, he subtly employs poetic devices to engage the reader and suggest moral issues, which are indeed the central focus of both the poems.

¹² Ibid.: 28.

¹³ Ibid.: 27.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 28.

צו אָט דער מדרגה האָט דער פּאָעט ניט דער-
גרייכט און דאָס ווערט דערפֿאַר [...] דער מקור
פֿון אַ שולדגעפֿיל, אָבער אין דער זעלביקער
צייט אויך אַ מקור פֿאַר זיין כּוח ווייטער צו
שאַפֿן און נעמען אויף זיך די שטראָף – צו זיין
אַ לעבעדיקער עדות פֿון אומקום דורך זיינע
לידער (שורות 88–89).

The poet has not attained this level and
his failure therefore becomes [...] the
source of a guilt feeling, but at the same
time a source of his strength to carry
on creating, and to take upon himself
the punishment – to be a living witness
of the annihilation through his poems
(lines 88–89).

The final lines of the poem (lines 88–91) read:²⁰

איז דאָס דיין שטראָף צו זשיפען האַלב געטייט
און פֿרעסן גסיסה-כּאַרכל פֿון די ברידער.
ווייל דו האָסט ניט פֿאַרדינט די לעצטע פֿרייד
פֿון ווערן אויס – דאָס מיינט: פֿון ווערן ווידער.

That is your punishment, to gasp half dead
and gobble down the death-throes of
your brothers.
Because you have not earned the last joy
of dying – which means: of being reborn.

Szeintuch's analysis implies that there is, implicitly, an optimistic note in these final lines, the idea of expiation and poetic mission. In my view this is not the case: this poem ends in despair, and the sense of poetic mission is not realised until Sutzkever reworks the material eight years later in פֿאַרברענונג ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג. Szeintuch does mention at the end of his essay that „אין ליד, ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג' באַקומט, דער צירק' אַ תּיקון“ (In the poem “*Erev mayn farbrenung*” the poem “*Der tsirk*” attains completion) but he does not develop this. However, by comparing and contrasting both poems, it becomes clear that דער צירק is only the first stage in a complex process of metamorphosis through which Sutzkever transforms concrete experience into poetry.

דער צירק is divided into three sections. The first of these consists of four unequal parts, dealing with the question of collective and individual guilt and introducing the central moment of the poem, the “circus” in which the איך and the two other Jews were forced to perform. In the first three parts, which are in free verse with varying rhythms, the speaker questions himself and his fellow Jews. Here, as Szeintuch points out, the איך sees himself as part of the collective, and therefore he addresses his questions to a ברודער who stands for the Jewish people.

The poem opens with the first question:²¹

זאָג מיר, ברודער מיינער, זאָג,
וואָס איז ער, וואָס באַטייט ער, אונדזער
דיינטישער געראַנגל?

Tell me, my brother, tell
What is it, what does it mean,
our vile, servile struggle?

²⁰ Sutzkever 1978: 9.

²¹ Ibid.: 6.

The derogatory adjective הינטיש is repeated in the second part, and recurs, also in the context of guilt and self-loathing, in the 1942 poem מיין מאַמע (My mother), in which the poet castigates himself for his absence when his mother was murdered.²² In the latter poem it expresses the individual's self-loathing, but here it encompasses the moral degradation of the Jewish people. In his attempt to answer his own question, the poet depicts a state of madness – דאָס האַרץ איז דול – (the heart is mad) – in which even words have fled גלייך בינען פֿון אַ בינשטאַק אַ באַגאַרטלטער מיט רויך (like bees from a beehive wreathed in smoke). Here one of Sutzkever's early metapoetic images, poetic words as bees,²³ has been adapted to fit the dark times. The introductory section contains no answer to the poet's initial question, but ends with the observation that even *in extremis* the will to live asserts itself:²⁴

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| <p>נאָר ערגעץ אין אַ הינטערגעסל פֿון באַוווּסטזיין שלאָגט נאָך אַ צוקנדיקער פּיצל נערוו געראַטעוועט פֿון חורבן, אַ לעצטער קרעכץ וואָס ווידערשפעניקט יענע בלינדע שטילקייט וואָס ווערט פֿאַרחתמעט מיט אַ הויפֿן ערד.</p> | <p>But somewhere in a back street of our consciousness still beats a tiny, twitching nerve, saved from destruction, a last groan rebelling against that blind silence which will be sealed by a heap of earth.</p> |
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The imagery of these four lines precludes interpretation as a positive evaluation of the life-urge; its animalistic, instinctive nature places it within the negative category of the earlier epithet הינטיש.

Two further questions to the מיר of the Jewish people open the second section:²⁵

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| <p>ווער זענען מיר? וואָס איז דער זין פֿון אַלע אוינדזערע לייַדן?</p> | <p>Who are we? What is the meaning of all our sufferings?</p> |
|--|---|

Instead of an answer, the speaker can give only a nihilistic description of Jewish history, poetically conveyed through the reversal of positive motifs of Jewish life and faith into their negative mirror-image: if, in contrast to the Divine promise to the Jews, they are merely פֿון קרבנות (victims of a bloodthirsty master), then instead of human beings they should have been born as frogs – the cold-blooded frog suggesting the furthest extreme from the human essence. The second reversal is the rejection of Isaiah's promise of a messianic age

22 Sutzkever 1945: 33–37.

23 Cf. אַט בין איך דאָך, Sutzkever 1963: 27.

24 Sutzkever 1978: 6.

25 Ibid.

when “the wolf also shall dwell with the lamb”²⁶ as a lie that blisters the tongue:²⁷

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| די צונג איז אויפגעבלעטערט פֿון דער זשאָווערדיקער טרייסט, אַז וואָלף און לאַם זאָל הויערן צוזאַמען. | Our tongues are blistered by the blighted consolation that wolf and lamb shall crouch down together. |
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The unreliability of a promise from the תנך (Tanakh) signifies the collapse of the essence of Judaism, and as faith in the word is central to Sutzkever’s poetic credo, this negation of the holy word, as with the flight of אַלע שיינע ווערטער (all beautiful words) in the first part, is a powerful image of despair.

The concept of the גאַלדענע קייט, the chain of Jewish tradition and continuity, is introduced as the third image which is turned on its head: instead of focussing on the proud aspects of Jewish tradition, the speaker sees only the tragedy and despair of Jewish fate:²⁸

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| און ווי עס ירשנט ענלעכקייט דאָס קינד פֿון טאַטע-מאַמע – ירשען מיר די ענלעכקייט פֿון דורותדיקער פּלאַג, פֿון זײַן פֿאַרקנעכטע קעלנערס בײַ דער וועלטס געגרייטן טיש און הינטיש דאַנקען פֿאַר דער צוגעוואָרפֿענער מטבע. דאָס איז די קייט די גאַלדענע וואָס בינדט צוויי טויזנט יאָר, די טרערן-קייט אויף אונדזערע נשמות. | And, as a child inherits similar qualities from his parents so we inherit the curse of generations of being enslaved waiters at the world’s set table and, like a servile dog, thanking for the coin thrown down for us. That is the golden chain that links two thousand years, the chain of tears upon our souls. |
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These lines encompass the whole history of persecution; reflecting the speaker’s bitter despair, the גאַלדענע קייט has become a טרערן-קייט through generations of humiliation and enslavement.

The third section continues the train of thought which castigates the collective מיר, bringing the focus onto the more recent history of the Jews. Sutzkever criticizes the Jewish people for the foolish political optimism of the נעכטן (yesterday), which one could interpret as the period which began with the Haskala. The participation of Jews in Europe’s wars and revolutions led them into an illusory dream of acceptance; Sutzkever uses the image of soldiers who believe they have an equal entitlement to a share of the booty:²⁹

²⁶ Isaiah 11: 6.

²⁷ Sutzkever 1978: 6.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.: 7.

– האָהאָ, מיר האָבן אויך אַ חלק אין דעם חלום־זאַקרויב, – Ho ho! we also have a share in the dream-booty,
 מיר צאָלן אויכעט צינדן מיט אונדזער בלוט די רעוואָלוציעס! we also contribute to the revolutions
 with our blood!

But the Jewish people have not learned from history; false hopes have concealed (the skulls of generations that have not come to rest), and the lion does not see the trap beneath its paws.

After this initial existential enquiry into the historical role and fate of the Jewish people in light of the present catastrophe, the fourth part of the first section of the poem brings an abrupt change of focus. The general becomes the personal: the broad נעכטן becomes the precise היינט (today) of the central event, and the collective מיר among whom the poet had sought refuge becomes the specific מיר, namely the three participants in the ‘circus.’ It is as if the איך, initially unable to contemplate the horror of the event he had just experienced, had taken refuge in general speculations about the Jewish people, but is now forced to confront his own individual guilt and the shocking event itself. The pause in the first line of the section: אין ערב נאַכט, אין אַן עיגול: (And today – – before night, in a circle) creates the impression of a momentary hesitation, before the writer can bring himself to plunge into the painful description. The און היינט און parallels the אַט נעכטן (just yesterday) of the previous section, and the reader expects a continuation of the historical, reflective mode; the switch to the personal plight of the איך is dramatic.

A further important marker for this change in perspective is the striking alteration in form and meter. The first three parts each consisted of between nine and twelve lines in free verse, with different line lengths. This gives way in the fourth part to a series of rhyming couplets, mainly of dactyls and trochees: a nervous, jumpy rhythm, evoking the insane dance of the victims. At the end, there is a broken line, a pause, and then a line standing on its own, without a rhyme:³⁰

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| און ווייטער, אויף קנױלן הויכע, | And further, in high smoke spirals |
| רייסט זיך אַרויף דער אָנכי | surges upwards the <i>onoykhi</i> |
| פֿון גיריק פֿאַרשלונגענעם פֿאַרמעט | from the parchment that is being |
| און גאַרניט – | greedily consumed |
| אויך ער איז דערווייטערט. | and there’s nothing – |
| | it too has disappeared. |

30 Ibid.

This dramatic pause, marked by the dash, creates an instant of suspense, followed by the final, tragic disappearance of the sacred word.

Here a motif which is merely mentioned in the prose account attains central significance: the tearing and burning of the Torah scrolls and pages of the Talmud. These writings represent the very being of the Jewish people, so that when the poet destroys them he is destroying himself: די אייגענע גלידער (my own limbs). In his description of their disappearance in the smoke, he uses images resonant with meaning: דער קול פֿון גן-עדן (the voice of Paradise), the אותיות פֿון בבֿל (letters of the Babylonian Talmud) and, most significantly, אָנכי, the word for “I” with which God identifies Himself at the giving of the Ten Commandments; the אָנכי therefore represents the living presence of God and the essence of Judaism. In Sutzkever’s depiction the אָנכי detaches itself from the parchment, but this does not denote survival: the last lines, quoted above, instead suggest that the sacred אָנכי has departed from them (דערווייטערט).

The second section of the poem is characterized by further changes of form. The biographical איך disappears, as if the poet cannot bear to contemplate his involvement in this degradation, and the central section depicts a macabre dance of death where the speaker addresses a דו whom he exhorts: פֿאַרברען אים – געפֿיל – נאָך אַ געפֿיל (If you still have a feeling – burn it). The new rhythm dramatically evokes the frenetic dance; the regular four-line stanzas of trochaic tetrameter with the rhyme scheme ABBA provides a monotonous rhythm for this inexorable קאַראָהאָד (circular dance).³¹

The grotesque atmosphere is heightened by the description of the sadistic behavior of the onlookers. In contrast to the prose account, which simply mentions a צונויפֿגעטריבן בײַ צײַטנס צונויפֿגעטריבן (crowd that the Germans had rounded up in good time for the spectacle), here we witness a peasant woman rejoicing, a prostitute sniggering at the victims’ nakedness, and stones being thrown which, it is implied, kill the old rabbi, who in the prose account had in fact gone back to the prayer-house after the ordeal. The indifference of heaven to his final prayer intensifies the pessimism of the poem:³²

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| פֿאַלן שטיינער. פֿאַלט דער רב | Stones fall. The rabbi falls |
| קושנדיק אין אַש די פֿונקען. | kissing the sparks in the ash. |
| און זײַן שמע ווערט אויך פֿאַרוונקען | And his Shema also sinks down |
| אין דער קאַלטקײט פֿון אײַן־סוף. | into the coldness of infinity. |

31 Both Yitskhok Yanasovitch (Yanasovitch 1981: 66) and Avrom Novershtern (Novershtern 1983: 131) comment on affinities between דער צירק and Moyshe Leyb Halpern’s apocalyptic poem אַ נאַכט (A night). This comparison is particularly apt with respect to the nightmarish atmosphere of this second section of Sutzkever’s poem.

32 Sutzkever 1978: 8.

This central section could be seen as a kind of interlude where the poet has momentarily moved away from his own raw anguish into the “refuge” of a vision of hell in which he himself is not involved. However, in the final section, consisting of two parts, the whole issue is finally confronted. Returning to the free verse of the poem’s beginning, the *איך* unequivocally admits his own guilt: using the circus image, he pictures himself as the *לץ* (clown) – a personage without dignity and often with negative connotations. His shameful role consists of two failures to act and one dishonorable action which, together, destroy the *גאָלדענע קייט*: he did not have the courage to curse his tormentors, nor could he summon up

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| <p>[...] דעם כוח זיך אַ וואָרף צו טאָן אין טויט, ווי מיינע ברידער אין דער צייט פֿון אַדרײַזאָן דעם רוימער בשעת דער גלויבן האָט דערשטיקט אין קערפּער די יסורים</p> | <p>[...] The strength to throw myself into death, like my brothers in the time of the Roman Hadrian, when their faith smothered the agony in their bodies.</p> |
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Confronted by another Hadrian, he was not the equal of his forebears. These two failures to act honorably are compounded by the only action which the speaker was able to perform, namely his begging for mercy from those whom he describes as having *געשענדט מיין טאָטן אין זײַן קבר* (defiled my father in his grave) – this image emphasises the disgracefulness of his action. Through these failures, he has broken the chain. In the first part of the poem the *גאָלדענע קייט* was described as a *טרערן-קייט* because of the two-thousand-year-long sufferings of the Jews. The reference to tears in this final section of the poem echoes this earlier image, but also contrasts with it: his own cowardly tears are *שוואַרצע פּאָקן* (black pocks), which he views with self-disgust.

In the final two four-line stanzas, the poem comes to its despairing conclusion, and in doing so returns to the relationship between the individual and the collective, but this time, in light of the event just depicted, the speaker gives a final judgment on his own inability to act as a true Jew. He calls himself *פֿאַרשאַלטענער* and in the first of the two stanzas questions his own identity:³³

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| <p>פֿאַרשאַלטענער! וווּ איז דיין אַלטע שילד וואָס האָט צעבויגן פֿעלקערלעכע שפּיזן? דערגרייכט דיר ניט קיין פֿאַרב פֿון יענעם בילד, האָט קיין מאָל זיך דיין אָפּשטאַם ניט באַוויזן?</p> | <p>Accursed one! where is your ancient shield which bent the spears of nations? Does no single colour of that image reach you, has your lineage never revealed itself?</p> |
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33 Ibid.: 9.

The questions are about the fitness of the איך to consider himself part of the Jewish people; the image is that of a hero who has lost his shield – the allusion to the מגן דוד is clear – and the implied answer to the second question is a negative one: he has also lost the vision of his noble lineage. For this he visualises his punishment:³⁴

איז דאָס דיין שטראַף צו זשיפען האַלב געטייט That is your punishment to gasp half dead
און פֿרעסן גסיסה-כאַרכל פֿון די ברידער and gobble down the death-throes of your
brothers.

He is condemned to remain alive – though spiritually dead – by nourishing himself parasitically on the death-throes of the other, braver Jews, who achieved what he did not. The word ברידער recalls the מיינער of the first line, but whereas at the beginning of his enquiry he and the ברידער מיינער were part of a מיר, now, having unflinchingly explored his role in the ‘circus,’ he realizes that he is separate and alienated from his brothers, surviving, as he sees it, at their expense.

The last two lines make the cause of his guilt absolutely clear:

ווייל דו האָסט ניט פֿאַרדינט די לעצטע פֿרייד Because you have not earned the last joy
פֿון ווערן אויס – דאָס מיינט: פֿון ווערן ווידער. of dying – which means: of being reborn.

He is not permitted to become a link in the chain – he has not died, and so cannot be spiritually reborn.

The despair and lack of resolution in the poem may be the main reason why Sutzkever did not publish it until almost four decades later, as Novershtern also suggests:³⁵

[...] ניט די שוידערלעכע איבערלעבונג האָט גורם געווען דערצו אַן סוצקעווער זאָל גונז זיין דאָס ליד אויף לאַנגע יאָרן, ווייל דער זעלביקער עפיוזאָד האָט שפעטער געדינט ווי אַ פֿאָן פֿאַר ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג (1949) וואָס איז גע- דרוקט געוואָרן אָן באַוואַרענישן. די אויסנאַמ- לעכקייט פֿון, דער צירק' באַשטייט אין דעם אַז די ספֿקות וועגן איבער זייער מעגלעכע פֿאַרענט- פֿערונג און דער פֿאַעט געפֿינט ניט קיין אופֿן ווי צו באַזיניקן די טראַומאַטישע געשעענישן. [...] It was not the dreadful experience itself that led Sutzkever to hide the poem for many years, because the same episode later served as the background for “*Erev mayn farbrenung*,” (1949) which he published with no inhibitions. The exceptional nature of “*Der tsirk*” is that [in it] the doubts outweigh their possible resolution and the poet finds no way of coming to terms with the traumatic events.

34 Sutzkever 1978: 9.

35 Novershtern 1983: 132.

The eight years between *דער צירק* and *ערב מיין פארברענונג* took the poet from the immediate experience itself, through a period of wandering, mourning and reflection, to a new, optimistic beginning in Israel, evoked in the opening poems of the volume *אין פֿייער-וואָגן* (*In the Fiery Chariot*), which appeared in 1952.³⁶ The book is divided into five sections, and most of the poems either celebrate Sutzkever's relationship with the land of Israel, or pursue his ever-present metapoetic theme. Though never absent from his mind or writing, the experiences of the *הורבן* are now in the realm of memory, and the poet places a group of poems specifically focussing on this theme in a separate section of the book, which he calls *די קאַרש פֿון דערמאָנונג* (*The Cherry of Memory*). Among the poems of this section is *ערב מיין פארברענונג*.

Formally there are significant differences between the two works: the first poem proceeds through a series of rapid, dramatic changes of meter and form, with rhyme and free verse, while the later poem consists of three sections of – with two significant exceptions – regular unrhymed trochaic heptameters, an unusual metre for Sutzkever.

Whereas *דער צירק* begins with the collective *מיר* of the Jewish people, this poem opens with the depiction of the *איך* in an imaginary landscape, a projection of his inner state, reflecting his isolation. This can be perceived in the opening image of the sunset, which, like all the other attributes of nature, emanates from the fantasy of the *איך*:³⁷

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| <p>ניט פֿון מערבֿ קומט צו מיר דער זונפֿאַראַגאַנג צו קוואַלן אַלע אָוונט, – נאָר פֿון אייגן האַרץ, וואָס קיינער זעט ניט. אַלע זונען, ביז-אים אָפּגעוועלטטיקטע, זיי פֿלייצן פֿונעם האַרצקוואַל, שלינגען און פֿאַרשלינגען גאַסן, מענטשן, און איך בלייב אַליין אין וועלט-סוד, ווי אין אַ פֿאַרפֿלייצונג ס'בלייבט אַ בוים שטאַק-עלנט מיט משוגע-גרינע אויגן, וואָס דערקענען ניט די צייט, די אַלט באַקאַנטע לאַנדשאַפֿט. וועגן-שטעגן, זאַנגענפֿעלד אַנטקעגן – ניט בנמצא. בלויז אין דער קאַפּויערקייט פֿון אָפּשפיגל אַנטפלעקט זיך אייגן פנים...</p> | <p>It is not from the west that the sunset surges towards me every evening – but from my own heart, which no one sees. All the already disappeared suns flood out from the heart-spring, swallow and devour streets and people, and I alone remain in the world-secret, as in a flood a tree remains, lonely, with mad green eyes, which do not recognise time, or the old familiar landscape. Ways and paths towards a field of corn – do not exist. Only in the upside down of my reflection there appears my own face...</p> |
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³⁶ Sutzkever 1952: 9, 10f.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: 115.

In Sutzkever's ghetto- and later poetry, he often creates a dark atmosphere by turning normally positive images of nature into their opposite, making of them something disturbing or grotesque.³⁸ These could be called "images of reversal." Two of Sutzkever's key images of nature are trees and sunsets. Here suns from the past³⁹ flow out of his heart and devour all outer reality. The tree, the only discernible feature in this inner universe, has reversed its normal Sutzkeverian function as an image of life and regeneration, to become a symbol of the poet's isolation and disorientation: it has attributes of human madness (משוגע-גרינע אויגן). The motif of the flood, used with reference to the suns and the tree, has resonances of the biblical Flood with its connotations of guilt and punishment. This reversal of all normal reality is conveyed by the repeated word קאפויערקייט ("topsy-turvyness"), which introduces the idea of the איך as an anti-Narcissus who sees in his reflection an image of horror rather than of beauty. The abbreviated line אייגן פנים (my own face) – the only irregular line in the whole poem – conveys the shock of seeing the face, which is ageing before his eyes:⁴⁰

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| <p>גארנישט זע איך. בלויז אין דער קאפויערקייט, פאָוואָליע, רונצלט קדמונדיק מיין פנים, עלעהיי אין אורטרוים וואָלט איך אים געזען שוין ווי אַ מאַסקע פֿון מיין שפעטער.</p> | <p>Nothing I see. Only in this topsy-turvyness, slowly my face wrinkles like the oldest human being, as if in a primordial dream I was looking at a mask of my later self.</p> |
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Thus the surreal landscape of the first section evokes the isolation of the איך from the outer world: His past reality is obliterated, his present is a flooded landscape without recognizable topographical or human features, and the ancient wrinkled face of a future without hope already exists within him.

The first section ends with a colon, the normal function of which is to suggest that what follows will explain or elaborate on what goes before it. The message given by this colon is that his state of mind in the opening section is to be explained by what is about to be described. Thus the expectation of a nihilistic ending is aroused. Sutzkever's achievement, however, is that in the course of the poem – that is, by means of the act of poetic creation itself – he reaches a resolution of the conflict.

³⁸ See footnote 30.

³⁹ The reader is confronted here with a Sutzkeverian neologism, אָפּגעוועלטיקט. Since the separable prefix אָפּ can mean a finishing or departing, the phrase suggests suns which have disappeared from the world before this sunset – all the suns of the poet's past.

⁴⁰ Sutzkever 1952: 115.

literated by a scythe, an image suggesting Death the Reaper. With this multi-layered image, Sutzkever suggests the foreboding of death.

So the apparently serene 'real' landscape, the בלויער האַרבסט, has gradually turned into a vision no less disturbing than that of the first section. Now, however, the poet must confront the central episode, which he does with a further moment of hesitation reminiscent of the earlier poem:

און היינט – – ערב נאַכט [...] (דער צירק) And today – – before night [...] (*Der tsirk*)
און – מע פֿירט אונדז [...] (ערב מיין פֿאַרברענונג) And – they lead us [...] (*Erev mayn farbrenung*)

In the depiction of the ordeal, there are significant differences between the two poems. The malice of the neighbors, dwelt on in painful detail in the earlier poem, is here reduced to three lines, and the poet's scornful attitude is conveyed merely by the quotation marks round „שכנים“:⁴⁵

נאַקעט. נאַקעט. נאַקעט. און אַנטקעגן אויף די ווילדע Naked. Naked. Naked. And opposite on the wild
עקלדיקע עפלביימער זיצן מיינע „שכנים“, disgusting apple trees sit my “neighbours,”
בייסן עפל, יאָגן אָפּ די פֿליענדיקע פֿונקען. bite into apples, chase away the flying sparks.

The speaker's humiliation is eloquently conveyed by the threefold נאַקעט, in contrast to the more direct description of the neighbors' taunts in דער צירק, and the message of the ironic „שכנים“ is further intensified by the transferred epithet of the ווילדע, עקלדיקע עפלביימער, whose apples they are enjoying as they watch. The economy of these images enables the poet to focus all attention on the central issue which forms the climactic final section.

Also for this reason, the figure of the boy has been omitted. The essence of the poem is the dialogue between the איך and the old man, and the symbolic importance of the parchment; the whole focus of the poem is the conflict between good and evil. This also explains the devil on the church spire, ringing the malevolent bells; he is the counterpoint to the old rabbi, who is transformed and elevated in this later poem. We have seen that in both the prose version and the earlier poem he was a human figure, albeit with an aura of sanctity, but here Sutzkever raises him above the purely human sphere: he is described as having a לייבן-גרייזע (lion's mane); like Moses, he carries the scroll as געשאַנק אַ פֿון סיני (a gift from Sinai), and he is able to walk on the glowing coals

45 Ibid.: 116.

as if on grass. When he goes into the fire, his body is transformed into a בלענדנדיקן גוף (dazzling body).

His answers to the speaker's questions therefore have absolute authority. The questions in דער צירק were about the suffering of the Jewish people throughout history; in the final section of this poem the question is an urgent personal appeal about the speaker's own young life:⁴⁶

– „זיידע, שעפטשען מיײנע ליפן, דאָס איז די באַלוינונג
פֿאַר מיין ניט דערלעבטן לעבן? האָט עס אַלץ אַ זינען?“ – Grandfather, whisper my lips, is this the reward
for my life not yet lived? Does this all have
a meaning?

The old man's answer draws the איך out of his private agony into the גאָלדענע קייט, into the collective מיר of the victims, who have an ethical framework for their actions, in contrast to the evil oppressors:⁴⁷

[...] „וואָלטסטו וועלן זיין ווי יענע
אויפֿן עפּלבוים אַנטקעגן, אָדער ווי די שלעגער?
זיין אַ ייד באַטײט: זיין שטענדיק גרייט אויף אַ נסיון,
אויף נסיון און אויף נס. [...]“ Would you like to be like *those* people
on the apple tree opposite, or like the persecutors?
To be a Jew means: always to be prepared for a trial,
for a trial and a miracle. [...]

In the earlier poem the איך gave in to the temptation of saving his life at the price of his honor, and thus forfeited being part of the miracle of the ever-regenerating קייט. גאָלדענע קייט. But in this poem the conflict is resolved through the symbolism of the scroll: in דער צירק the איך was guilty of destroying the scroll, but in פֿאַרברענונג, the moral damage is repaired and the way shown towards the redemption of the איך: it is through the scroll that the key motif of the poet's word is introduced as the essential factor in his salvation.

As the prophet-figure of the old man is consumed by fire, the word אָנבי leaps from the parchment, as in דער צירק; this time, however, the sacred word is not annihilated but gives the speaker the moment of illumination necessary to complete his redemption:⁴⁸

מיט אַ פֿונק צוזאַמען יאָגט פֿון פֿאַרמעט דער אָנבי, –
אַבער אינעם זקנס לײַב און לעבן איז צו זען אים.
וויל איך פֿאַנגען מיין אָנבי, אַז ער זאָל באַצווינגען
אַלע פֿײַנען, – פֿאַל איך אונטער אים אין סאַמע פֿלאַקער,
Together with a spark the *onoykhi* leaps from
the parchment,
but it can be seen in the old man's body and life.
I want to catch my *onoykhi*, so that it
conquers
all my sufferings – so I fall under him,
into the heart of the flames,

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 116f.

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| <p>ווייל באשאַפֿן איז מיין וואָרט אין אומבײַט פֿון די היינטן, און אַ נאַריש פֿלעמל האָט אים אויסגעברענט פֿון צונג מיר. נעם איך מיט די ליפֿן די צעביסענע פֿון ווייטיק איבערזאָגן טראָף נאָך טראָף די פֿסוקים פֿונעם זקן, פֿסוקים אַלט געבוירענע אין אייביקע אַמאָלן און מיין לײַב ווערט אָנגעטאַן אין זינגענדיקן פֿאַנצער.</p> | <p>For my word is fashioned from the changing <i>today's</i>, and a stupid flame has burned it off my tongue. With my lips that are bitten in agony, I begin to whisper syllable for syllable the verses of the old man, ancient verses born in eternal <i>yesterdays</i> and my body becomes clothed in singing armour.</p> |
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This is the climactic moment of the poem: the old man is the embodiment of the immutable אָנכי, of the essential Word, and this leads the poet to consider the difference between his word and the אָנכי. The difference is epitomized by the two accentuated words היינטן and אַמאָלן: the היינטן of the poet's word represents transience and change, in contrast to the אייביקע אַמאָלן of the words of the Torah, embodied in the rabbi, which constitute the eternal קייט גאַלדענע קייט.

Only through the transformation of his word into something eternal and sacred (פֿאַנגען מיין אָנכי [catch my *onoykhi*]) can he become part of that continuity which eluded him in דער צירק. This is why he throws himself under the rabbi, into the fire. This striking image suggests a mystical union with the אָנכי, and the transfiguration of the איך is achieved by his reciting the words of the אייביקע אַמאָלן of the Torah verses. It is significant that his final triumph is conveyed by what is clearly an echo of the armor metaphor of the earlier poem – there the symbol of his guilt was the loss of his shield:⁴⁹

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| <p>פֿאַרשאַלטענער! וווּ איז דיין אַלטע שילד וואָס האָט צעבויגן פֿעלקערלעכע שפּיזן?</p> | <p>Accursed one! where is your ancient shield which bent the spears of nations?</p> |
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Now that the poet has found his אָנכי, that is, his word, which has achieved the status of eternity and continuity which the sacred verses embody, he is protected by a פֿאַנצער. The attribute זינגענדיקן פֿאַנצער is an allusion to the poetic word: the verb זינגען (to sing) is always used by Sutzkever in a metapoetic context.⁵⁰ So the איך has now emerged, protected by his poetic word, which has achieved the eternity of the

49 The words of God to Abraham (Genesis 15: 1) read like an answer to this question in דער אל תירא אברם אנכי מגן לך שכרך הרבה מאד: Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward). The אָנכי which springs from the parchment could well be part of this verse, answering the question of דער צירק.

50 For example in the poem איך ליג אין אַן אָרון / ווי (I lie in a coffin): [...] און איצט אין אַן אָרון / ווי [...] אין היילצערנע קליידער, / זינגט אַלץ נאָך מיין וואָרט of wood, / still my word sings). Sutzkever 1963: 249.

[...] צו די שטערנדלעך די פֿרישע [...] To the fresh new stars
 שוועבט ער אין אַ פֿייער־וואָגן, שוועבט ווי אליהו, he soars up in a fiery chariot, soars up like Elijah,
 און איך הייב זײַן שאַטן־מאַנטל ווי אַ מאָל אלישע. and I pick up his shadow-mantle, as did
 once Elisha.

אָנכי. This idea is cemented in the final lines of the poem, depicting the death of the rabbi:

Elisha took up Elijah's mantle and carried on his work; by using this image, the איך is affirming his place within Jewish tradition, not rejected and isolated, but a link in the גאַלדענע קייט. The two rhymes in the last three lines of the otherwise unrhymed poem give a sense of completion. The movement of ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג is the reverse of דער צירק: the earlier poem begins with the attempt of the איך to be part of the מיר of the Jewish people and ends with the isolated איך, cut off from the כלל (community) ; the second poem begins with the isolation of the איך, and ends with his integration and a clear vision of his role within the community of the Jewish people. ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג is the תיקון of the earlier poem, and it is here, not in דער צירק, that he finds the poetic word.

The two poems, considered together, are the first example in Sutzkever's work of a process which was to continue throughout his creative life: the constant poetic reworking and transfiguration of the חורבן within his monumental oeuvre. They are a confirmation of the transformative power of the poetic word itself. From the agony and guilt of the poem written just after the ordeal itself, Sutzkever is able to change the experience into a source of inspiration for his creative life. This happens during the course of the second poem itself: the disturbing imagery at the beginning of ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג evokes the poet's frame of mind as he begins the poem, and his bleak view of the future is conveyed through the image of the wrinkled face as a מאַסקע פֿון מיין שפּעטער. But by the end of the poem this despairing vision has been transformed through the process of creating the poem: the Nazi bonfire, which was the cause of his degradation and isolation from the גאַלדענע קייט in דער צירק, has become a symbol of purification in ערבֿ מיין פֿאַרברענונג, exemplifying Sutzkever's conviction, expressed two years earlier in the epic *Clandestine City* (Clandestine City), that a central function of his poetic mission is to transform pain into beauty:⁵¹

איך לעב! מיר איז באַשערט געווען צו זײַן I live! I have been destined to be
 אַ גרויזיק־שטילער לאַקערדיקער עדות a cruelly silent watchful witness
 פֿון פּײַן, וואָס מוז פֿאַרוואַנדלען זיך אין שײַן of pain, which must transform itself into light.

51 Sutzkever 1963: 443.

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