

## *In the Beginning*

Poetry often derives its eloquence from the longing of the imagination to bring order to chaos, to bridle the apocalyptic and demonic worlds, and to render the incomprehensible intelligible. In the chaos of the Holocaust, this lyrical yearning sought fulfillment in the whole spectrum of poetic genres, one of which was documentary poetry.

Since in this habitation of death, history was conspiring with the poets in unusual ways, poetics of testimony assumed unusual meanings. Frequently, its purpose was to focus attention upon the various aspects of the crisis, so that activities toward its containment might be generated. Thus documentary poetry often attempted to identify or name the facts in order to comprehend the exploding chaos and to galvanize those mechanisms that might help to cope with or resist it. When despair and terror overwhelmed the poet or reader, some of the poetry became a form of exorcism. Thus naming or describing hunger and grief, for example, was an attempt to control their domination.

Above all, testimonial poetry was a day-to-day chronicle of the unfolding cataclysm. Rooted in Jewish literary tradition, some of the poetry—even that which was written in Polish—takes its analogue, form, and lexicon from such antecedents as elegaic liturgy, the iconography of pogroms, and the general Jewish literature of destruction. Nonetheless, many of the documentary as well as other poems show unmistakable modernistic influences. Not all the poetry, however, is marked by the same literary quality. An abundance of literary amateurs, compelled to bear witness, resolved to record events for posterity. Consequently, there was a spontaneous explosion of folk poetry—a kind of simple *Urlich-*

*tung* and balladry, the chief of which was the *kina* or *kloglid* (*dirge*)—that documented while it lamented.

The testimonial imperative of both the literary poems and the simple folk songs reflects, more often than not, the collective destiny of the Jews. Although by no means all, much of this poetry eschews the narrow concerns of private struggles and subordinates them to the problems facing the community. Where personal hardships or individual grief are the center of the poems, they often belong to the author's early writings.

### *Władysław Szlengel:* *Initial Forms of Distancing*

Early attempts to grasp the significance of the unfolding events are exemplified in Władysław Szlengel's "Telefon" (Telephone). Not much is known about Szlengel or the other poets writing in the Holocaust, although some of their poetry was saved. Most of their biographical data is, therefore, conjectural; for, like other persons who knew them, the poets vanished.

In fact, of Szlengel we know more than about most of the other poets. Born in 1914 in Warsaw, he began to write poems, songs, and skits for the stage at an early age. His youthful writings appeared in school papers, while his mature work was published in various literary journals. Shortly before the war, Szlengel worked as literary consultant to and was director of a theater in Białystok. He returned to Warsaw in 1940, before the ghetto was sealed off, both because he was consumed by longing for the capital and by anxiety about the fate of his wife who remained there. Irena Maciejewska, the anthologist of Szlengel's ghetto poetry, writes that Szlengel took part in the September 1939 defense of his country. This fact is corroborated by Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian and Warsaw ghetto archivist.<sup>1</sup>

In collaboration with other writers in the ghetto, Szlengel founded and ultimately became the central figure of both an underground literary journal, *Żywy Dziennik* (Living Daily), and a cabaret, *Sztuka* (Art). Szlengel died during the Warsaw ghetto uprising, having produced a large body of poetry, songs, and other writings, of which only a handful was saved. But this handful is very compelling, for it includes poetry written during the unfolding events in the ghetto and, therefore, constitutes a spectrum of

the stages of a poet's consciousness in its relation to these events. Like many ghetto poets, he regarded poetry as the most appropriate idiom with which to immortalize the memory of the living, the dying, and the dead. Apparently, the power of his poetry was of such intensity that it resonated in various parts of the ghetto and in all its stages. Articulating despair, hope, and opposition, his poems and songs secretly circulated among many people and were recited by the poet himself not only in *Sztuka* and in literary circles in the earlier period of the ghetto but also in slave labor factories that were established later, after July 1942, the commencement of the final liquidation of the ghetto.

Szlengel's early ghetto poetry is marked by parodic, jocular, and often nostalgic tones, all of which achieved for himself and his readers a measure of distance from an intolerable reality. The inverse relationship between the escalating atrocities and Szlengel's parodic and comic temper produced an irony of singular corrosiveness. This discrepancy has its roots in the Jewish folk tradition that evolved a talent to "laugh off the trauma of history,"<sup>2</sup> as David Roskies writes, by comic juxtapositions perfected by Sholem Aleichem.

Although Szlengel probably had more than a passing familiarity with the Yiddish folk idiom, he is first and foremost grounded in the Polish literary tradition. His early ghetto poetry shares with the *Skamander* movement, popular in the first decade of the interwar period, a predilection for colloquial idioms, a lighthearted poetic voice, as well as satiric and ironic modes. His use of macabre buffoonery and the morosely grotesque, both of which dominate his later ghetto period, shows an affinity with the poets of the 1930s known as the "catastrophists." These writers divined from historical events not only the crisis of the individual and Western civilization but that of the entire world. In Szlengel's world their catastrophic vision was a prophecy fulfilled. Yet when Szlengel wrote his early poem "Telephone," he probably envisioned, like the rest of the incredulous world, neither the savagery nor the extent of the tragedy that was to come.

A long poem (twenty-four stanzas of four lines each with an uneven rhyme scheme), "Telefon," like all Szlengel's ghetto poetry, is marked by "unpoetic" language. From the very beginning of his incarceration in the Warsaw ghetto and his determination to record events, Szlengel apparently had the prescience to realize that he was writing his "documentary poems" (*wiersze-dokumenty*), as he called them, for and about the dying and the

dead. For them, Szlengel probably thought, high rhetoric was absurd. Since the world in which they lived could hardly be compared to any other one, metaphors and analogies were highly inappropriate.

Catapulted into the enclosed ghetto, Szlengel projects a vision of it, even in its early days (Szlengel did not date his poems, but we can surmise the dates from the poems' contexts), as a planet cast out of the universe. Suddenly separated from the world he once knew, his lyric imagination strains to recapture the lost world. But it is crushed by an awareness that for a Jew all lines of communication have been broken. Long-standing friendships with gentiles have been dissolved, as the Jew is forced to take "a different road" in 1939. Nonetheless, the poet reaches for the telephone to realize once again that the human nexus he had established with the Poles has been irrevocably severed.

### **Telefon**

*Z sercem rozbitem i chorem,  
z myślami o tamtej stronie  
siedziałem sobie wieczorem  
przy telefonie—*

*I myślę sobie: zadzwonię  
do kogoś po tamtej stronie,  
gdy dyżur mam przy telefonie  
wieczorem—*

*Nagle myślę: na Boga—  
nie mam właściwie do kogo,  
w roku trzydziestym dziewiątym  
poszedłem inną drogą—*

*Rozeszły się nasze drogi,  
przyjaźni ugrzęzły w toni  
i teraz, no proszę—nie mam  
nawet do kogo zadzwonić.<sup>3</sup>*



### **Telephone**

With heart rent and sick,  
and thoughts on the other side

I sat one evening  
by the telephone—

And so I thought: let me call  
someone on the other side,  
when I'm on telephone duty  
in the evening—

Suddenly I realized: by God—  
there is actually no one to call,  
in nineteen thirty nine  
I turned a different corner—

Our ways have parted,  
friendships have sunk in a swamp  
and now it's plain to see—there is  
no one I can reach.

Szlengel's bitter intoning of his growing sense of despair and isolation are reminiscent, but ironically so, of the writings of the Polish poet Jan Lechoń, whose sense of despair caused him to write the following famous lines:

*Nie ma nieba ni ziemi, otchłani ni piekła,  
Jest tylko Beatrycze. I właśnie jej nie ma.*



There is neither heaven nor earth, no abyss nor hell,  
There is only Beatrice. But she does not exist.

Since Lechoń's fame and influence were well established in Poland, Szlengel was probably thoroughly familiar with Lechoń's famous epiphany. This would render his influence on Szlengel singularly ironic. For while Lechoń's metaphysical loneliness reflects an interwar form of anguish, Szlengel's mirrors the deadly isolation of the Jew in the Holocaust. While Lechoń's anguish arises from the implacable cosmic void—a form of Sartrean "nothingness"—Szlengel's pain springs from the palpable fullness of an expanding hell. Szlengel obviously exploited the ironic juxtaposition of his and Lechoń's sense of isolation, showing the glaring absurdity of prewar influences on wartime poetry and on wartime reality. This mode—the ironic and parodic—came of age in the

Holocaust and was, therefore, in the tradition of both Yiddish and Polish ghetto writing.

In "Telephone" the only dialogue Szlengel is able to establish with the prewar world is the telephone dial-a-time whose naming of the passing minutes is a bittersweet evocation of memories from before the war. The long cataloguing of simple human pleasures is rendered in a rhythmic crescendo of dazzling, montagelike images. These include the poet's returning from a Gary Cooper film; buying a newspaper while noting the dawnlike neon reflections on the evening pavement; watching the strolling couples headed toward "Café Club"; inhaling the piquant aroma of sausages wafting from "Café Quick"; observing the after-dinner crowds; and listening to the cacaphony produced by speeding taxis and streetcars, counterpointed by the amplified voice of a popular crooner, Mieczysław Fogg. These memories, idealized by longing, increase the distance between the lost world and the infernal present.

Doomed to converse wholly with himself, the poet seeks to defend his integrity against self-pity by a progressive amplification of his comic voice. Hence the cadences of the closing strophes resonate with a blend of self-mockery and bitter irony, as he bids the dial-a-time, the only lady who did not reject his overtures, farewell:

*Jak dobrze się z tobą rozmawia  
bez sporu, bez różnych zdań,  
jesteś najmiłsza zegarynko—  
ze wszystkich znajomych pań—*

*Już lżej teraz sercu będę,  
gdy wiem, że kiedy zadzwonię,  
ktoś mnie spokojnie wysłucha,  
choć po tamtej stronie.*

*Że ktoś to wszystko pamięta,  
że wspólnie łączył nas los,  
i mówić się ze mną nie boi,  
i tak spokojny ma głos.*

*Noc jesienna pluszcze  
i wiatr nad murkami gna,*

*gwarzymy sobie, marzymy  
zegarynka i ja. . . .*

*Bądź zdrowa moja daleka,  
są serca, gdzie nic się nie zmienia,  
za pięć dwunasta—powiadasz  
masz rację . . . więc do widzenia.<sup>4</sup>*



How pleasant it is to chat with you  
without arguments, without any opinion,  
you are the most agreeable, dial-a-time—  
of all my lady friends.

My heart is less heavy,  
for I know that should I call,  
someone will calmly listen,  
even on the other side.

That someone remembers it all,  
that we were joined by the same fate,  
and is not afraid to chat with me,  
and has so calm a voice.

The autumn night is pouring in  
and the wind blows above the wall,  
we prattle and daydream  
the dial-a-time and I . . .

Be well my distant one,  
there are hearts that always remain constant,  
five to twelve—you declare—  
right you are . . . well, so long for now.

Such daydreams and reminiscences as Szlengel's, while obviously painful, were also healing. They nourished the starving spirit with a kind of idealized remembrance of the past. This practice was widespread during the entire Holocaust period—in the ghettos and, perhaps even more, in concentration camps. Some of the inmates in both engaged, whenever possible, in various reveries, composing poems and songs, and re-creating in them the lost

world as a realm of perfection. In doing this, they were immortalizing and sanctifying the past and, at the same time, creating oral epithets for fugitive tombstones. Moreover, these imaginative reconstructions had, as it were, the magic power associated with shamanistic rites. The incantations of the sacred images and the paeans in praise of the murdered family, friends, and shtetl had the authority to exorcise, even if for an hour, whether in the ghettos or concentration camps, the specter of starvation or the terror of the chimney. Listeners knew that the confabulating imagination was creating idealized verbal universes. Yet this did not break the spell of conjuration. Casting out stalking death and evil, even if for a moment, these romanticized verbal worlds returned to the exhausted people the past, sustaining the present moment by purging it of its cruelty.

Writing about human perceptions, Ernest Cassirer notes that adaptation to our world is contingent on our ability to create a symbolic superstructure that intervenes between the environment and ourselves. As a result of this, "no longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances."<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, such symbolic activity is a function not only of poets and ordinary people in extreme situations, but of those in normal and obviously primitive worlds as well. Apparently, both writers and their readers often seek in verbal superstructures compensations for an intolerable reality.

For the poets in the Holocaust, the paradox is that the painful memory of the past often generated a symbolic past-future axis. Moving backward in time and breaking through the wall of pain, the creative imagination was able to use the memory of a lost Eden as a possibility and perhaps even a promise of a regained one. Such symbolic processes helped not only to adapt to but also to transcend the wretchedness of the present moment. To remember the idealized past was to strain toward the future, toward the life-sustaining belief in the return of the prewar world. Hence, the evocative power of such simple, bittersweet poems as Szlengel's "Telephone" often had a cathartic and redemptive effect on the poet and reader alike.

Discussing Hiroshima and Holocaust survivors, Robert Lifton observes that the loving ruminations on painful details of their "death immersions" is an attempt on the part of survivors to break out of their psychic numbing. "For these memories are unique in that they enable one to transcend both the psychic



numbing of the actual death encounter and the 'ordinary numbing' of the moment."<sup>6</sup>

*Abraham Sutzkever:  
To Live Both for Oneself and for the Dead*

A related idea is expressed in Abraham Sutzkever's "Di Ershite Nakht in Ghetto" (The First Night in the Ghetto), a poem that takes its title from a slim anthology of poetry written in Vilna between 1941 and 1943, shortly after this city's ghetto was established (September 1941). "The First Night in the Ghetto," like most of Sutzkever's wartime poetry, both partakes of and stands in sharp relief against his prewar work. The latter shows not only refined and often delicate stylistic devices of versification but also brilliant linguistic manipulations and rhyming schemes of singular inventiveness. Coupled with these is the poet's penchant for pantheism, especially notable in his early work, and a predilection for things romantic: introspection, a preoccupation with the relationship between the external and his inner worlds, sensual lyricism, and a devotion to nature in all its multifarious splendors. In the highly politicized Vilna of the 1930s, Sutzkever was an avowed stranger. His poems, devoid of ideology, were rejected by the popular, leftist literary group "Young Vilna."

While his wartime poems were to undergo dramatic permutations, they retained their antebellum artistic integrity, allegiances, and proclivities. Much of his writing in the ghetto and the Narotch Forest, where he joined the resistance and survived the war, plays numerous variations on the theme of resistance, both armed and moral; on Jewish tradition as a vehicle of that resistance; and on nature as a source of succor and transcendence. Many of these poems reveal mythic, prophetic, oracular, and nature images that are structured toward a promise of redemption.

Other poems, notably those comprising the collection *The First Night in the Ghetto*, are informed by confessions of singular existential anguish and personal and communal chastisement for the "sin" of traditional pacifism that marked diaspora Judaism. In this he reflects Chaim Nachman Bialik, who in his famous Hebrew poem "The City of Slaughter," written in 1903 in response to the bloody Kishinev pogrom, pours execrations not only on the murderers but also on the victims for not having armed them-

selves, for having forfeited their right to self-respect and human dignity, because they saved their lives without fighting back.

Sutzkever's admonition also takes its analogue from Moyshe Leib Halpern's "A Night." The imprecations that mark this poem are similar to those expressed in "The City of Slaughter" and are directed not only against the murderers, against God, and against faith in religious and social redemption, but also against the victims for allowing themselves to be victims during the pogroms after World War I.

The phenomenon of self-blame, a form of "disaster complex," as Yitzhak Yanasowicz calls it, is peculiar to modern, assimilated Jews, who blame themselves for not being able to extricate themselves from their fate as Jews and, hence, scapegoats of history. In his discussion of *The First Night in the Ghetto*, Yanasowicz further notes that religious Jews are not subject to this self-implicating logic and do not feel guilty when they are able to save their lives. On the other hand, modern, worldly Jews are afraid both of the slaughter itself and of perishing in it like sheep.<sup>7</sup>

Consigned by history and choice to the class of modern Jews, as Yanasowicz suggests, Sutzkever lays bare in *The First Night in the Ghetto* his sense of shame and guilt for having saved his life while others, some of them members of his own family—his mother and child—were killed. These poems, therefore, reveal his resentment against the terrible reality into which he was thrust as much as they express vituperations against his faintheartedness and egotism, his perception that he bought his life at the price of others—a phenomenon rather typical of survivors of all disasters, small and large. "The Circus," for example, articulates the poet's deepening despair, his perception that his existence is bereft of sense, just as is the value of his heretofore cherished beliefs. Not surprisingly, both this and his confrontation with the mass death that accompanied the establishment of the Vilna ghetto, the inner turmoil associated with facing his own death and human dread of it—all these were pivotal in Sutzkever's development as poet and human being.

Apparently the turbulent emotions that mark *The First Night in the Ghetto* were the root cause of Sutzkever's reluctance to publish the book. One must assume that in the end the poet came to terms with this dilemma, for he resolved to publish the anthology in 1979, but not before he revised most of the poems in it. Indeed, Sutzkever is alleged to have edited not only these but also most of his ghetto poems before submitting them for publication. Al-

though, as Roskies notes, the poet was moved by reasons of aestheticism, his chief motives were ideological “when he consigned to oblivion the anger, guilt, and despair expressed in such poems as ‘The Circus’ and the ‘Three Roses’ [both contained in the anthology]. The survivor-poet wished to allow only his lyrical and dramatic voices to speak for the ghetto experience.”<sup>8</sup>

Roskies further states that Sutzkever’s self-censorship, much like that of other survivor-poets, was largely motivated by a reluctance to offend the memory of the dead. This concern was especially rife immediately after the war when the few thousand survivors were faced with a new peril: the Soviet secret police as well as the anti-Semitic Poles, Lithuanians, and a motley crew of former Nazi collaborators—“all of whom had good reasons to suppress the crimes perpetrated against the Jews.”<sup>9</sup>

“The First Night in the Ghetto” is one of the best poems of this period, documenting as it does Sutzkever’s initial response to the German commencement of the terror that swept Jewish Vilna. Like Szlengel’s “Telephone,” the opening stanzas of “The First Night in the Ghetto” are an evocation of the bewilderment of a poet, the integrity of whose youth has been violated. Yet Sutzkever’s poem is mediated by an inner vision and cultural retina that are radically different from those of Szlengel. While Sutzkever was anchored in Jewish culture and the Yiddish language, the more assimilated Szlengel was rooted in both Polish and Yiddish cultures. When immured in the Warsaw ghetto, Szlengel experienced a bereavement at the separation that was alien to Sutzkever. Although Sutzkever keenly felt the loss of the world outside the ghetto, notably nature with the primeval forests and the splendid pastoral landscapes of Poland, he did not bewail the loss of the non-Jewish social world of prewar Vilna, for his link with it was tenuous. His anguish seems to derive from the terrifying realization that the destruction of his people began with the establishment of the Vilna ghetto. Sutzkever’s sense of doom stands in some relief against Szlengel’s perception of the events, for the enclosing of the Vilna ghetto ushered in with full force the technology of the Final Solution, measures that were to be applied to the Warsaw ghetto in the summer of 1943, a year later.

### ***Di Ershte Nakht in Ghetto***

*‘Di ershte nakht in ghetto iz di ershte nakht in keyver,  
Dernokh geveynt men zikh shoyt tsu’—dos treyst azoy mayn*

*shokhn*  
*Di grine gliverdike gufim, oysgeshpreyt oyf dr'erd.*

*Tsi kenen oykh fazunken vern shifn in yaboshe!*  
*Ikh fil: se zinken shifn unter mir un bloyz di zeglen,*  
*Tseflikte un tsetrotene, zey valgern zikh oybn:*  
*Di grine gliverdike gufim oysgeshpreyt oyf dr'erd.*

*S'iz bizn haltz—*  
*Es hengt iber mayn kop a lange rine*  
*Mit zumer-fedem tsugeshpunen tsu a khurve. Keyner*  
*Bavoynt nit ire kamern. Bloyz brumendike tsigl*  
*Aroysgerisene mit shtiker fleysh fun ire vent.*

*Araynshpiln in rine flegt an ander tsayt a regn,*  
*A linder, veykher bentshdiker. Mames flegn untn*  
*Anidershteln emers far der ziser volknmilkh*  
*Tsu tsvogn tekhter, glantsn zoln mazldik di tsep.*  
*Atsind—nito di mames, nit di tekhter, nit kayn regn,*  
*Bloyz tsigl in di khurve. Bloyz di brumendike tsigl,*  
*Aroysgerisene mit shtiker fleysh fun ire vent.*

*S'iz nakht. Es rint a shvartser sam. Ikh bin a holoveshke,*  
*Farratn funem letstn funk un tomik oysgeloshn.*  
*A shvester iz mir bloyz di hurva. Un der faykhter vint,*  
*On-otem tsugefaln tsu mayn moyl mit mildn khesed,*  
*Bagleyt mayn gayst, vos teylt zikh oys fun shmatikn gebeyn,*  
*Vi s'teylt zikh dos flaterl fun vorem. Un di rine*  
*Hengt alts iber mayn kop an oysgehoybene in kholel*  
*Un s'rint durkh ir der shvartser sam a tropn nokh a tropn.*

*Un plutsem—yeder tropn vert an oyg. Ikh bin in gantsn*  
*Adurkhgeoygt mit likht. A nets fun likht baym shepn likht.*  
*Un iber mir di rine tsu der khurve tsugeshpunen,*  
*A teleskop. Ikh shvim arayn in zayn geshlif un blikn*  
*Fareynikn zikh likhtike. Ot zenen zey, vi nekhtn,*  
*Di heymishe, di lebendike shtern fun mayn shtot.*  
*Un tsvishn zey—oykh yener nokhhavdoliker shtern*  
*Vos mamelipn hobn im aroyfgevuntshn: gut-vokh.*

*Un s'vert mir gut. Nito ver s'zol fartunklen im, tseshtern,*  
*Un lebn muz ikh, vayl es lebt mayn mames guter shtern.<sup>10</sup>*



### **The First Night in the Ghetto**

"The first night in the ghetto is the first night in the grave,  
Later one gets used to it"—thus comforts my neighbor  
The green, stiff corpses strewn on the ground.

Can ships actually sink on land?  
I know: ships do sink under me, and only the sails,  
Ripped and trampled, are scattered above:  
The green stiff corpses strewn on the ground.

I have it up to my throat—  
A long gutter hangs above my head  
Woven into the ruins with gossamer. No one  
Dwells in its rooms. Only roaring bricks,  
Torn from their walls with chunks of flesh.

Playful was the rain in the gutter in other times,  
Supple, soft, blessed. Mothers used to put out  
Pails to catch the sweet cloudmilk  
And shampoo their daughters' hair to bring luck's luster to the  
braids.  
Now—there are no mothers, no daughters, no rain,  
Only bricks in the ruins. Only roaring bricks,  
Torn from their walls with chunks of flesh.

It's night. Black poison oozes. I am a piece of ember,  
Betrayed by the last spark precipitously extinguished.  
The ruins alone are my sister. And the moist wind,  
Without breath falls upon my mouth with gentle grace,  
Escorting my spirit which detaches itself from my tattered  
skeleton  
Like a butterfly emerging from a caterpillar. And the gutter  
Still hangs over my head raised above the void,  
And from it black poison oozes drop after drop.

And suddenly—each drop becomes an eye. My entire being is  
wholly  
Permeated with eye-light. I scoop up the light.  
And above me the gutter woven into the ruins.  
A telescope. I swim into its smoothness and the eye-glances

Unite brightly. Here they are, just like yesterday,  
 The familiar, the living stars of my town.  
 And among them—the after-Sabbath star  
 That motherlips used to bless: a happy new week.

And I am resuscitated. There is no one to cast darkness over it,  
 to destroy it,  
 And live I must, for my mother's good star is alive.

While in "Telephone" the promise of redemption is merely implied, in "The First Night in the Ghetto" this promise is formulated as an unequivocal assertion. It comes at the end of the poem as the poet gazes at yesterday's luminous sky and at yesterday's stars, notably at the "after-Sabbath star that motherlips used to bless: a happy new week."

This affirmation of life, variously orchestrated in Sutzkever's wartime poetry, is not only an act of personal survival, but one of cultural continuity as well, an imperative that derives from the poet's fear that only a dying "ember" might be left of the Jewish community in Europe. In Sutzkever's poetic world, the primacy of individual survival is metaphysically and ideologically linked to Jewish continuity—a responsibility that is communally redemptive. Thus the dying "ember," Sutzkever intimates, will be ignited again; and his dead mother's star, among "the familiar, the living stars of my town," is a symbol of Jewish continuity that, he believes, is unextinguishable.

There is yet another purpose in rekindling the dying "ember"—namely, to bear witness, an imperative as commanding in the early stages of the occupation as in its later ones, when the poet feared that the very memory of European Jewry might be obliterated. The perception of an "ember" as historical witness is neither new nor peculiar to Sutzkever alone. In other times of disaster, other Jews, fearing the destruction of their community also perceived themselves as an "ember" morally bound to bear witness. One such prototype of a dying "ember" as historical chronicler is a medieval fragment that, as Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi writes:

has survived from Hebrew Lamentation literature of the fourteenth century, written by a man who returned to his hometown after a trip only to discover that a pogrom had wiped out every inhabitant and destroyed all the holy books, except one Bible. This one remaining man, who refers to himself as

the "last ember," wrote a brief account of the destruction of his town on the pages of the one remaining Bible.<sup>11</sup>

The impact of the poet's perception of the hell into which he and his neighbors have been hurled is immediate, even if conveyed by a neighbor. The neighbor persona is a device that allows the poet to distance himself from and ultimately to take cognizance of the brutality with which the Nazis established the Vilna ghetto. The reign of terror was such that it caused the trapped Jews to experience a form of mental catalepsy, which oscillated between a clear perception of the truth and an inability to assimilate it. Sutzkever reflects this phenomenon both in his assertion that "the first night in the ghetto is the first night in the grave" and in the bitter consolation that "later one gets used to it." The tension between the dawning of an extreme knowledge—namely, the possible destruction of the Jews in Europe—and the denial of this realization—expressed in the assertion that one can live in a grave—is singularly ironic. For this tension recalls the traditional optimism and pacifism of diaspora Judaism that had learned to adjust to calamity in order to survive. But since prewar disasters stand in sharp relief against the present assault, the two are implicitly and ironically juxtaposed. The irony also derives from Sutzkever's condemnation of this very pacifism, which is articulated in other poems of this and even later periods and is discussed in another chapter.

Moreover, there is a form of dramatic irony<sup>12</sup> in Sutzkever's apprehension of the end of the world in which "green, / stiff corpses strewn on the ground" are assured that life can continue. This peculiar kind of irony derives from the fact that terrible as the situation was in 1941, it pales by comparison with the conditions in the following years. The same irony is evident in the early entries of Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw ghetto diary. As early as September 12, 1939, Kaplan writes, "it is beyond my pen to describe the destruction and the ruin that the enemy planes have wrought on our lovely capital. . . . Dante's description of the *Inferno* is mild compared to the inferno raging in the streets of Warsaw."<sup>13</sup> Because of the growing daily horrors, each successive entry reveals yesterday's naivety, while the diary as a whole lays bare the shock Kaplan sustained in his confrontation with the *anus mundi*. The early writings of Kaplan, just like the early poetry of Sutzkever, reveal a truth most succinctly expressed by Edgar in *King Lear*:

And worse it may be yet: the worst is not,  
So long as we can say, "this is the worst."

Both Kaplan's and Sutzkever's later writings, however, recall Dante's agitation during his symbolic pilgrimage in hell: his fear of encroaching madness, his failing spirit and revulsion, his moral indignation and concern that he will not be able to record what he saw.

In Sutzkever's earthly hell, unlike Dante's metaphoric construct, nothing is symbolic, nothing allegorical, moral, or anagogical. Indeed so real is irreality that Sutzkever seeks moorings in such conceits as "ships sinking on land." This oxymoron heightens the irony of the assertion in the catechismal structure of the second strophe—namely, that it is possible for Jews, even when transformed into "green, stiff corpses," to survive in a disintegrating world.

The irony and the paradox of such assertions arise not only from the traditional optimism of Judaism, but also from those psychic phenomena associated by Robert Lifton with "extreme death immersion" or "death imprint." Speaking of Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors, Dr. Lifton suggests that their sense of vulnerability can be seen in two ways. One group manifests a heightened sense of vulnerability, resulting from

*the jarring awareness of the fact of death, as well as of its extent and violence . . . Yet as we have also observed, the survivors can retain an opposite image of having met death and conquered it, a sense of reinforced invulnerability. He may feel himself to be one of those rare beings who has crossed over to the other side and come back—one who has lived out the universal psychic theme of death and rebirth.<sup>14</sup>*

Since Sutzkever is keenly aware that, like nature, Jewish history is replete with ritual reenactments of death and rebirth, he may be drawing sustenance from this cyclical promise, even in the present terror.

It is this promise that makes its presence manifest in the poet's rebellious words: "I have it up to my throat." And it is this declaration that initiates the process of restorative mourning, for it allows the cognitive faculties to comprehend and evaluate the full weight of the tragedy, without which the process of individual or collective rebirth cannot be initiated. The grotesque nature of



death, often including daily enactments of mass murder, militated against the healing rituals of traditional mourning. This problem was exacerbated by a host of bizarre situations. All too often there were not enough individual graves to bury the dead or else there were no dead for burial, for the victims either vanished with the smoke or disappeared into some other void.

Sutzkever, however, alone among the other "green, stiff corpses," under a gutter of a building in ruins, strains the limits of his will and rises to lament the building's empty rooms. Only the inanimate "roaring bricks, / Torn out of their walls with chunks of flesh," join him in his solitary mourning. This surrealistic image augments both the poet's anguish and the silence of the world outside his own. Furthermore, this image conveys the savagery with which the buildings in the ghetto were emptied of their inhabitants. Singling out but one of the buildings, Sutzkever renders the barbarism of the *Aktion* all the more palpable. The confined space and energies inherent in the ensuing images and associations break forth in an elegaic outpouring:

Playful was the rain in the gutter in other times,  
Supple, soft, blessed. Mothers used to put out  
Pails to catch the sweet cloudmilk  
And shampoo their daughters' hair to bring luck's luster to the  
braids.  
Now—there are no mothers, no daughters, no rain,  
Only bricks in the ruins. Only roaring bricks,  
Torn from their walls with chunks of flesh.

The world for which the poet grieves and the vehicle of his mourning reflect each other in a complementary relationship of solitary anguish and an isolated world.

Significantly, the lamentation for the vanished world, the poem itself, is the poet's temporary verbal shelter. Much like Szlengel's, Sutzkever's memory is a defense against psychic and spiritual disintegration. Thus the world suddenly destroyed is returned, albeit in ruins—ruins, however, that are sacrosanct and canonized into a transcendental spirit: "the ruins alone are my sister." This feminine image resembles the Shekhina,<sup>15</sup> the feminine emanation of the divine, who was alleged to have shared in Israel's exile and suffering (Megillah 29a). She is the generative source of creative energy whose divine presence prompts the redemptive "moist wind without breath" to fall upon the poet's mouth "with

gentle grace / escorting my spirit that detaches itself from my tattered skeleton / Like a butterfly."

The image of the "moist wind without breath" is a metaphor (and such metaphors abound in Jewish lore) of the souls of martyred Jews, the recent inhabitants of the now ruined buildings. They are the midrashic reminder that the events of Jewish ancestors are a sign to their descendants. They are, therefore, the phantom presence that transmigrates through the ruins to the poet's consciousness. Transfigured into wind and later into eyes and stars, this mystical transmigration of souls lifts the poet's spirit from the communal grave of the ghetto, linking it with the living spirit of Israel. The metamorphosis of the souls into stars is conveyed in the evocative images:

Here they are, just like yesterday  
The familiar, the living stars of my town.  
And among them—that after-Sabbath star,  
The one motherlips used to bless: a happy new week.

The transcendental presence of both the Shekhina and the martyred Jews is absorbed by Sutzkever not only in a mystical act, but one of conscious will as well. This union of spirit and will—a union that reflects Judaic theodicy, reenacted in the Holocaust—initiates the poet's rebirth process. In his organic universe, the murderers remain unnamed. Death is personified as "black poison" oozing from "the gutter," an intimation of a womb. These symbols are transfigured into the all-illuminating eyes and a telescope: into life and its womb:

And suddenly each drop [of black poison] becomes an eye. My  
entire being is wholly  
Permeated with eye light. A network of light as I scoop up the  
light.  
And above me the gutter woven into the ruins.  
A telescope. I swim into its smoothness and the eye glances  
Unite brightly.

In these transformations, the eyes become the living stars of the poet's town.

Sutzkever's rebirth is not only metaphysical but physical as well. The dying "ember" is reignited by both the promptings of the numinous souls of murdered Jews and his personal, telescopically

focused will. "And live I must, for my mother's star is alive." So the dead and the reborn are united in their consecration of life and, therefore, Jewish continuity. For in the Holocaust, the stubborn struggle to stay alive was often as much for those who were already killed as for oneself.

Even when documenting facts, Sutzkever's poems derive their power from their spirituality rather than graphic detail. Like many other poets of the period, Sutzkever eschews the mean and horrific. He seems unwilling to defile his aesthetic structures and, above all, the ethical world of the Jews with the sordid realism of the Holocaust. Moreover, Sutzkever was determined to uphold the highest criteria of art despite or perhaps because of the wretchedness of the ghetto. As Ruth Wisse writes:

Even before the war he had determined that the failure of humanity could not alter the basic criterion of art. In the living hell that followed, the uncorruptible standards of the good poem became, for Sutzkever, the touchstone of a former, higher sanity and a psychological means of self-protection against ignominy and despair. Even beyond this, he seems to have developed a belief in the mystical power of art to save, literally *save* the good singer from death.<sup>16</sup>

In a world gone up in smoke, the poet refused to surrender the thing one would expect he needed least. For in the end, art, for Sutzkever the regenerative power, helped him to sustain his belief in the supreme value of surviving, of living.