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by **Abraham Sutzkever**, translation by James Adam Redfield

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Introduction: While Abraham Sutzkever (1913-2010) needs no introduction as one of his century’s great Yiddish poets, publishers, and political figures, this poem reflects a crucial moment in his development. When Nazi occupiers conscripted Jews in the Vilna ghetto to sort through their documents and artifacts to be shipped to Germany or pulped, Sutzkever volunteered for this unit, known as the “[Paper Brigade](#).” Alongside other members, he risked his life to hide and save many Jewish cultural treasures, from Theodor Herzl’s diary to Chagall’s drawings, finding safe haven for some of them—and himself—in Soviet Russia after its alliance with Germany collapsed. This extraordinary story of the Paper Brigade has been told by David Fishman in *The Book Smugglers* (ForeEdge, 2017.)¹

Naturally, Sutzkever’s work with the Paper Brigade influenced his approach to poetry as well. In “The Lead Plates of the Brothers Romm” he makes bullets to fight the Nazis by melting down plates used for the Vilna Shas, the standard print of the Talmud (though Nazis had already sold the plates for scrap.)² Written in March 1937, “Grains of Wheat” places a mythological accent on the same theme of preservation and renewal, yet it is no less militant. Rescued books and papers resist the Jewish people’s spiritual destruction: stretching time, defying death. Figured as infant and elderly, like Sutzkever’s mother and infant son who were both murdered in the ghetto, “the Jewish word” is the life of

¹ James Adam Redfield, “[Fate on Hold: Jewish Collectors at War](#),” review of *The Book Smugglers* by David Fishman and *The Archive Thief* by Lisa Moses Leff, *The Revealer*, 10 September, 2018.

² A translation of the poem by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav can be found in *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California, 1991), 169–170, and another by Seymour Mayne, “The Leaden Plates of Romm’s Printing Works,” in *In Your Words: Translations from the Yiddish and the Hebrew* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Ronald P. Frye & Co., 2017), 42. A [resource kit](#) for this poem was written by Hanna Pollin-Galay for the Yiddish Book Center. I thank Mira Sutzkever and Rina Sutzkever Calderon (personal communication, 18 December 2023) for permission to translate this poem. I have benefitted from many discussions of the poem with my colleague and friend Eleonore Stump, whose *Grains of Wheat: Suffering and Biblical Narratives* is forthcoming with Oxford University Press in 2025.

the community. By burying these words and waiting for them to rise again, the community preserves its own potential to survive.

As Sutzkever represents this struggle with a new poetic technique of “reading history against the cycles of natural regeneration,” his recurring image of the seed/kernel/grain functions as what David Roskies calls a “holograph”: a fragment of a shattered whole, from which the original can be reproduced.³ As Roskies explains, the survivor—whether a scrap of paper or the poet—can thus witness the full extent of collective destruction while at the same time embodying the potential for life beyond destruction. Here Sutzkever returns to romantic individualism in defiance of his historical context. This is no retreat, however, but a fierce rearticulation of poetry as politics.

English readers may know this famous poem in Barbara & Benjamin Harshav’s translation in their standard anthology, *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). The Harshavs’ vivid and forceful translation remains faithful to the poem’s semantics and syntax at the cost of irregular meter as well as half of each stanza’s end-line rhymes. This new translation retains both the full ABAB rhyme scheme and drumbeat of the original: each line has 8 syllables, and the same pattern of alternating stress is maintained. Only minor variations in stress are allowed to suit more standard English pronunciations of a few words: AMsterdam [not AmsterDAM], MANuscripts [not manuSCRIPTS], MURder [not murDER], and finally, within a line in the final stanza, transFORMED [not TRANSformed]. To note another minor variation, both the original and the translation contain a line with only seven syllables. In both of these cases, stress pattern is prioritized over syllable count.

Rather than imitative, this close correspondence to the internal structure of the original aims to highlight how Sutzkever’s project of resistance resonates at the level of poetic form. As Ruth Wisse has observed, Sutzkever’s ghetto poems are in fact exceptionally formal within his corpus, using “classical meter and perfect rhyme” to produce “tiny man-made miracles of pairing, as a barrier against chaos.”⁴ Formalism conveys momentum and resolve, a will to reunite the survivor with the collective, in such moments as the final stanza: grain/stalk/claim/sustain/walk. Furthermore, as Wisse notes, Sutzkever’s use of rhyme often yields redemptive antinomies, “forging unity where none has been evident.” In this translation, for example, such rhymes are word/murder and tomb/bloom. While Sutzkever’s images speak for themselves, remarrying them to their order of sound and stress is crucial to evoking their power.

Formal symmetry, however, creates problems for another task of the translator: semantics. One line was expanded to fit the spirit if not the letter of the original: the classical phrase *erdishe velt* (“earthly world”—recalling the poem’s central agricultural metaphor) became “the earth where we toil and sleep.” In two other lines—echoing the

³ David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 244; 250.

⁴ Ruth R. Wisse, “Introduction,” in Abraham Sutzkever, *The Fiddle Rose: Poems 1970-1972* (trans. Ruth R. Wisse, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 15-32, at 22-23.

“arms” that save “the Jewish word” earlier in the poem—the image “hands” was added to personify the same idea. “Hands” now rediscover the grains in the ninth stanza (in the original, they are said to “be found” in the passive voice). Then, two stanzas later, the grains are watered or “nourished” by the “hand of fate.” Again, this personification differs from the original’s more general “*in sho in basherter*” (literally, “so-fated hour”). Whether such adaptations to formal constraints are overwrought or make virtues of necessity by drawing underlying meanings from the original (“sleep” = death; fate as the agent of collective survival) can and should be debated. By experimenting with new ways to strike a balance among his infinite poetic variables, translators can honor and continue in our own medium the work of preservation and renewal that Sutzkever has left us.

Grains of Wheat

Caves, stretch yourselves ever wider,
Split under the weight of my ax!
Before the lead pierces my side
I'll bear you my gifts in a sack.

Folia, sky-blue and faded,
Tinted crimson on silver hair,
Words set on parchment, created
Through thousands of nightmarish years.

Like clutching a babe in my arms
I fly with the Jewish word,
Scavenge in every courtyard
To safeguard the soul from murder.

In the pyre I thrust both my hands:
The source is still here! – so I crow –
My portion is Worms, Amsterdam,
Livorno, Madrid, and YIVO!⁵

Swept off by a torrent of smoke:
A single leaf lost, how I ache!
Veiled poetry seizes my throat:
In your labyrinth – keep us safe!

I dig and I plant manuscripts,
And when despair wells up in me
I find my thoughts turn to Egypt,
The tale of the kernels of wheat.

I look to the stars then, and tell
Of how a king, in ancient times,
Built his pyramid by the Nile
To further his reign when he died.

He ordered his coffin of gold
To be filled with kernels of wheat –
A memorial for our world,
The earth where we toil and sleep.

⁵ These cities are historical centers for the publication of Jewish books that the Paper Brigade rescued in the ghetto. YIVO: The Yiddish Scientific Institute, originally based in Vilna, whose archive was partially rescued and eventually moved to its current location on the Upper West Side. See Fishman, *Book Smugglers*.

Nine thousand years passed by slowly
As the suns walked over the sands
Until the pyramid opened
And they held the grains in their hands.

Yes, nine thousand years, come and gone!
And yet, when the kernels were sown,
They sprouted up stalks like the sun,
They blossomed in row upon row.⁶

So will the words, perhaps, flourish
When daylight breaks into their tomb –
Will not the hand of fate nourish
The words that defiantly bloom?

And like the primordial grain
Which transformed itself to a stalk –
So too will the words that we claim
Be words that will feed and sustain
The folk in its eternal walk.

⁶ This reflects the science of “mummy wheat,” especially common in mid- to late-19th century Europe, which popularized the belief that one could still cultivate kernels found at Egyptian burial sites. See G. Moshenska, “Esoteric Egyptology, Seed Science and the Myth of Mummy Wheat,” *Open Library of Humanities* 3.1 (2017):1-42. I thank an anonymous reviewer at *In Geveb* for this reference and for thereby explaining a key allusion in the poem.

קערנדלעך ווייץ

היילן, דערלאנגט זיך אן עפֿן,
צעשפאלט זיך פֿון אונטער מיין האק!
איידער די קויל וועט מיך טרעפֿן—
איך ברענג אייך מתנות א זאק.

אלטינקע, תכלתנע דפֿן
מיט פֿורפור אויף זילבערנע האָר,
ווערטער אויף פֿאַרמעט, געשאפֿן
דורך טויזנטער גרויזיקע יאָר.

ווי ביים באַשיצן אן עפֿל—
איך לויף מיטן ייִדישן וואָרט,
נישטער אין איטלעכן הייפֿל,
דער גייסט זאָל ניט ווערן דערמאָרט.

שטרעק אינעם שייטער די אַרעמס
און פֿריי זיך—דער עיקר איז דאָ!
מיינס איז נאָך אַמסטערדאַם, וואָרעמס,
ליוואָרנע, מאָדריד און יוואָ.

אַ, ווי מיך פֿיניקט אַ שיימע
פֿאַרטראָגן אין רויכיקן ווינט!
סיוואָרגן מיך לידער געהיימע:
—באַהאַלט אונדז אין דיין לאַבירינט!

גראַב איך און פֿלאַנץ מאָנסקריפטן,
און גיט מיר דער ייאָוש אַ פֿלייץ,
קומט מיר אין זינען: עגיפטן,
אַ מעשע מיט קערנדלעך ווייץ.

דעמאָלט די שטערן דערצייל איך:
אַ מאָל האָט ביים נילוס געבויט
זיין פֿיראַמידע אַ מלך,
צו קיניגן דאָרט נאָכן טויט.

זאָל מען אין גילדענעם אָרון
אַנשיטן, האָט ער באַפֿעלט,
קערנדלעך ווייץ—לזכֿרון
פֿון אונדזער, דער ערדישער וועלט.

ניין טויזנט יאָר האָבן זונען
געביטן אין מידבר דעם גאַנג,
ביז מ'האַט די קערנער געפֿונען
אין דער פֿיראַמידע ניט לאַנג.

ניין טויזנט יאָר שוין פֿאַרגאַנגען!
נאָר ווען מ'האַט די קערנער פֿאַרזייט, —
האָבן אין זוניקע זאַנגען
צעבליט זיך אַ בייט נאָך אַ בייט.

אפֿשר אויך וועלן די ווערטער
דערוואַרטן זיך ווען אויף דעם ליכט—
וועלן אין שעה אין באַשערטער
צעבליען זיך אויך אומגעריכט?

און ווי דער אוראַלטער קערן
וואָס האָט זיך פֿאַרוואַנדלט אין זאַנג, —
וועלן די ווערטער אויך נערן,
וועלן די ווערטער געהערן
דעם פֿאַלק, אין זײַן אייביקן גאַנג.