

Valencia gives an illuminating overview of the poet's fascinating and tragic biography

Still My Word Sings

Avrom Sutzkever

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
HEATHER VALENCIA

Review by Simo Muir

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Avrom Sutzkever, one of the great Yiddish writers of the 20th century, was born in 1913 in Smorgon, now Belarus, and died in 2010 in Tel Aviv. He grew up in Siberia, where the family fled the First World War, speaking Kirghiz, and attended a Polish-speaking Hebrew high school after he returned and settled in Vilna. It is quite astonishing that he found his literary home among Yiddish poets. His early verse, combining traditional and modernist elements, is almost devoid of Jewish references.

The Holocaust had a profound effect on Sutzkever's life and creativity, and his poetry began to feature Jewish imagery more strongly. After emigrating to Tel Aviv in 1947, his use of Jewish imagery and biblical and religious motifs developed even more. During his long life Sutzkever strove for the continuity of Yiddish literature both in his new homeland and internationally.

Still My Word Sings, edited and translated by Sutzkever scholar Heather Valencia, is the first bilingual edition of his work that presents poetry from all periods of his creative life. Almost all his published collections are represented and the selection also includes two of his epic poems, *Siberia* and *Ode to the Dove*, which are essential for understanding the development of his poetic art. Rhyme and metre are prominent features in Sutzkever's poetry, and he often used colourful and evocative neologisms, all of which are extremely challenging to translate. Valencia explains that she wanted to create English versions that work "as poems in their own right, while keeping to the language, imagery and intentions of Sutzkever's Yiddish originals". Rather than striving to keep the rhyme at all costs she uses rhyme when it could "be achieved without doing too much violence to the original". This has resulted in elegant and contemporary translations.

The book opens with Sutzkever's 18-page-long Yiddish text *My Life*

and *My Poetry*, originally delivered as a talk in Montreal in 1959, which provides the reader with Sutzkever's own insights into the evolution of his ideas and his poetic credo. This is followed by the poems in Yiddish with their English translations and notes, and finally by Valencia's excellent essay about Sutzkever's life and work, which gives an illuminating overview of the poet's fascinating and tragic biography, an analysis of the main periods in his poetry and an insight into his "web of imagery", offering the reader useful tools for a deeper understanding of his work. The book is illustrated with Sutzkever's own drawings, as well as reproductions of his manuscripts and photographs.

"Who will remain, what will remain?" are the opening words of one of Sutzkever's famous poems, written in 1974:

Who will remain, what will remain? A breath of wind will stay,
and the blindness of the blind man, even though he goes away.
A fleck of foam will stay as a reminder of the sea,
and a wisp of cloud, caught in the branches of a tree.

Who will remain, what will remain? A syllable remains,
to bring forth grasses in a new Creation once again.
A fiddle rose will still remain, alone and in command,
her nature only seven of those grasses understand.

Of all the stars spread out between the farthest north and here,
there will remain only the star that falls into a tear.
A drop of wine will always remain within its cup.
Who will remain? God will remain. Is that not enough?

Sutzkever, with his rich and powerful poetic style, will remain esteemed and admired among those who continue to study and read Yiddish literature. But what will be his legacy in his native Eastern Europe, whose literature he embraced and became part of, or in his adopted homeland Israel? The continuity of Sutzkever's oeuvre, and of the vast terrain of modern Yiddish literature in general, is today increasingly dependent on good translations and volumes which provide a thorough background knowledge and analysis, something which Heather Valencia has succeeded in doing exceptionally well. **JQ**

