

Abraham Sutzkever at 80

By GERALD STILLMAN

ABRAHAM Sutzkever was born in 1913. His eightieth birthday is being marked this year all over the world by people who speak, read or are interested in Yiddish. Sutzkever is the founder (in 1949) and editor of *Di Goldene Keyt* (The Golden Chain), a quarterly journal in Tel Aviv devoted to "Literature and Social Problems." Each issue contains some 250 pages of short stories, poems, novels in serial form, book reviews, articles on history, linguistics and analysis of Jewish social problems — all of high caliber. Sutzkever is also a poet and short-story writer. His writings reveal that his experiences in the Vilna ghetto and as an underground fighter there and later in the Lithuanian forests have marked him for life. He witnessed the horrors inflicted by the Germans, their humiliation and torture of innocent people. The horrors are not dwelt on but are alluded to in events that take place *around* them.

The hallmarks of his writing are a folkloric quality of expression, his surrealist view of horrifying events, his wonder at the mystery of courage, faith and humanity of simple folk who are subjected to unimaginable trials. In the tale which follows, "*Di Nevueh fun Shvarts-aplen*" (The Prophecy of the Pupils of the Eye), a first-person narrator invents "prophecies" to satisfy the needs of Badaneh, a simple woman, and thereby provides solace, and even joy, for her in a horrendous situation in which she is powerless. Affected by her faith in his words, he too begins to believe in them and in the power of his "magic"; his creative imagination is stimulated, and in turn provides him with solace and joy also. The ability of the narrator to use his "magic" to give pleasure to Badaneh

causes him to believe in himself when she responds.

Sutzkever is a creator of rich and unusual images and a very precise writer. For example, Badaneh has "a face hacked out of grey salt on top of a dwarf grown out of a dwarf" — an image which catches the reader by surprise. Written in 1986, "*Di Nevueh. . .*" is the title-piece of a collection of 32 stories published in 1989 by the Yiddish Department of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Strangely, the thoughtful introduction to the book by Ruth Wisse, currently head of the Jewish studies program at Harvard, appears only in English and Hebrew but *not* in Yiddish.

Sutzkever was born in Smorgon, Lithuania. World War I broke out when he was a year old and soon Smorgon was on the front line. Among the thousands of Jews transported to the interior of Russia was Sutzkever's family, which settled in the Kirghiz region of Siberia. In 1920, they moved back and settled in Vilna, then part of Poland. He began writing poetry in Hebrew in 1927, not having yet heard of Yiddish literature. In 1930-31 he came in contact with a left-wing group of young Yiddish poets and started writing in Yiddish. In 1937, his first book, *Lider* (Poems), was published in Warsaw and received with acclaim.

According to the *Lexicon of New Yiddish Literature*, Sutzkever, "a new poetic star. . . introduced a new world of imagery, a new poetic landscape, a new poetic language, new word formations, new rhymes. . ." When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, he attempted to flee to the Russian side with his wife and several colleagues, but the Germans had cut off all escape routes.

He returned to his mother's home in Vilna with his wife. During the first months, he was in hiding, but writing all the time — whether in a chimney, under a tin roof, or in a coffin in the Judenrat building. In February, 1942, he was awarded a prize in a literary contest (held under such conditions!) for one of the poems written during this period, "The Grave-Child." He worked with others to save YIVO documents, Yiddish books, rare manuscripts from the 15th and 16th centuries, etc., burying them or cementing them into walls to keep them out of Nazi hands.

Sutzkever belonged to the United Partisan Organization (UPO) in the ghetto. In the summer of 1943, he wrote a poem, "Kol Nidre," and got it to partisan forces in the forest, who transmitted it to Peretz Markish in Moscow. There, the Writers' Union devoted an entire evening to reading and discussing the poem.

On Sept. 12, 1943, the eve of the liquidation of the ghetto, he broke out of it with other UPO members and joined the Jewish partisan unit, "Nekhomeh" (Revenge), in the Narocz forests. There he wrote many poems, published in 1945

by the Yiddisher Kultur Farband in New York in a thin volume, *Di Festung* (The Fortress). On March 12, 1944, the Soviet Air Force sent a special plane to a partisan base to transport Sutzkever and his wife to Moscow. There he described the Nazi outrages on national radio. Ilya Ehrenburg wrote a long article about him, "The Triumph of a Man," in *Pravda*. In Moscow, he met Boris Pasternak (who understood Yiddish) and read his partisan poems to him; Pasternak translated his poem, "My Mother," into Russian.

On Feb. 27, 1946, Sutzkever testified at the Nuremberg Trial about the crimes of the Nazis against Soviet Jews. Later in 1946, he left the Soviet Union and reached Palestine in 1947 with the help of Golda Meyerson (later Golda Meir). He served as war correspondent in the Israeli Army in 1948-9. In 1949, as we noted above, he founded *Di Goldene Keyt*, which he edits to this day, while writing poetry and prose.

Sutzkever's work is available in English in *Selected Poetry and Prose of Abraham Sutzkever*, translated from the Yiddish by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, Univ. of Cal. Press, L.A., 1991.

THE PROPHECY OF PUPILS OF THE EYE

By ABRAHAM SUTZKEVER

HER name was Badaneh: a face hacked out of grey salt on top of a dwarf grown out of a dwarf. Her protectress: the mother of all mothers — fear.

During the first night of the yellow terror, a night that lasted two full years, Badaneh found a thorny refuge in a devastated dwelling on Strashun Street.

Into this same cut-up dwelling, during that same night, I was booted by an iron hoof. And soon the space was filled with unfamiliar faces, like drowned people at the bottom of a well lit from above by the light of the moon. They are all sunk

away in my memory as a faceless family. Only Badaneh's face, hacked out of grey salt on top of a dwarf grown out of a dwarf, remains separate and current.

Although short, a tiny bit of a woman, one could say a tiny bit of an old woman, Badaneh became a hiding place for her only son, Leybeleh. She wanted to get him back into her belly so that no harm, God forbid, should befall him. But Leybeleh disappeared somewhere just as the yellow terror was approaching and the hiding place in his mother's belly was empty.

As a boy, I had read that primitive peasants in remote hamlets in China, who had never seen a clock and didn't even know that such existed, nevertheless know the secret of Time and its turning no less than do beclocked folks: pick up a domestic cat by its scruff and, by the little green-flashing hands on the dials in its pupils, the Chinese know exactly the point at which Time was in its turning.

I became just such a Chinese cat for Badaneh. And not merely for time-orientation, but also for the turning of fate and place.

During an abysmal pause between being and not being, Badaneh gets up on her spool-like legs and mirrors her face in my pupils to find the status of her only son. "My Leybeleh isn't used to wars. He should only come out whole."

I tell Badaneh that when the yellow terror was approaching, her Leybeleh showed a clean pair of heels and disappeared into the other side of the war. Smile-sparks lit up in her grey orbs.

On another occasion: "What is the name of the region where my Leybeleh has found himself a place?" I tell Badaneh about a locality that lives on in my dream. Her Leybeleh has found himself a place in a hamlet where my childhood developed — near the Irtysh River in Siberia.

It takes a moment for the sound "Siberia" to sink into her mind, but when it does, Badaneh claps both her short-fingered little hands to her head.

"I have heard that freezing weather rages there. If my Leybeleh will, God forbid, catch a cold, who will place a hot brick to his feet? Who will bring a dish of jam to his lips?"

A cluster of deep-seated dream images begins to unravel within me. The voice is indeed mine, but, at the same time, it is very distant.

"If you cover yourself with a bear-skin, you'll be as strong as a bear. Also, there is no lack of trees in Siberia. They

are tall and reach right up to the stars. With the wood from one such tree, you can heat up half a winter."

The next morning — no Badaneh. She vanished from the dilapidated dwelling. But, praise be to the Eternal One, she turned up again, white-haired, as if, in that region into which Leybeleh had escaped, a tall tree had leaned close to her and covered her hair with snow from its branches.

"Who cares what a foolish woman is babbling about?" she again demands fairness from the prophecy in my pupils. "If Leybeleh will want to get married, will he find a bride in that land, a Jewish child?"

Badaneh's faith in the prophecy of my pupils, in my clairvoyance and omniscience, wraps me in my own magic. I begin to believe in the strength that Badaneh has faith in.

"Leybeleh has found a bride already."
"Is she pretty?"

My tongue becomes a brush and paints the beauty of Leybeleh's bride in complete detail.

Badaneh unrolls something golden from a little piece of rag.

"Here is a wedding ring... It should be rolled over there..."

As the ring rolls on and on from Vilna to Siberia, another question arises.

"What is Leybeleh's bride's name? I need to know."

"Her name is Gutleh."

"An odd name. Maybe Giteleh?"

"No, Gutleh."

Dressed up, with three strings of coral beads over a dress of black burial shrouds which Badaneh had found somewhere in an attic, she looks into the distance through a small pane. Her hands are in front of her face of grey salt, as when blessing the Sabbath lights. She no longer seeks mercy from the prophecy of my pupils. She sees her Leybeleh herself through her fingers — him and his bride under a wedding canopy of stars. ■