

Two Poems by Avrom Sutzkever

(Translated by B & B Harshav)

Grains of Wheat

Caves, gape open,
Split open under my ax!
Before the bullet hits me —
I bring you gifts in sacks.
 Old, blue pages,
Purple traces on silver hair,
Words on parchment, created
Through thousands of years in despair.
 As if protecting a baby
I run, bearing Jewish words,
I grope in every courtyard:
The spirit won't be murdered by the hordes.

I reach my arm into the bonfire
And am happy: I got it, bravo!
Mine are Amsterdam, Worms,
Livorno, Madrid¹, and YIVO².
 How tormented am I by a page
Carried off by the smoke and winds!
Hidden poems come and choke me:
— Hide us in your labyrinth!
 And I dig and plant manuscripts,
And if by despair I am beat,
My mind recalls: Egypt,
A tale about grains of wheat.
 And I tell the tale to the stars:
Once, a king at the Nile
Built a pyramid — to rule
After his death, in style.
 Let them pour into my golden coffin,
Thus an order he hurled,
Grains of wheat — a memory
For this, the earthly world.
 For nine thousand years have suns
Changed in the desert their gait,
Until the grains in the pyramid
Were found after endless wait.

¹ These cities were all centers of Jewish learning dating back to at least the Middle Ages.

² *Di Yidische Visnshaftlekhe Organizatsye*, now called The Jewish Research Institute, founded in Vilna 1925, now based in NYC.

Nine thousand years have passed!
But when the grains were sown —
They blossomed in sunny stalks
Row after row, full grown.

— — — — —

Perhaps these words will endure,
And live to see the light loom —
And in the destined hour
Will unexpectedly bloom?

And like the primeval grain
That turned into a stalk —
The words will nourish,
The words will belong
To the people, in its eternal walk.

Vilna Ghetto, March 1943

A Moment

A moment fell down like a star,
I caught it in my teeth, for keeping.
And when they chopped open its pit,
It sprayed on me a kingdom of weeping.

Each drop mirrored back to me
Another dream, another sense:
Here — a road winged with thousand arms.
Here — a bridge to a dream ascends.

Here — my grandfather, a snake at his head.
Here — my child smashed on a stone.
I also found there one free drop
In which I closed myself alone.

Vilna Ghetto, April 7, 1943