

Avrom Sutzkever's "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/avrom-sutzkevers-lead-plates-rom-printers>.

Introduction

Avrom Sutzkever's poem "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers" draws heroic mythology out of Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, offering inspiration for downtrodden readers after the war. It interweaves history with fiction in order to tell the story of Jewish partisan fighters in the Vilna ghetto, who turn the Hebrew letters of a Jewish printing press into bullets with which they can fight the Nazis. This kit presents resources to help teach about the poem, the significance of Jewish Vilna, life in the Vilna ghetto, the life of Avrom Sutzkever, and the complex relationship between history and art.

Cover image: Simon Kogan's "Yiddish" sculpture, installed outside of the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts, in 2012.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Holocaust, Poetry, Yiddish, Translation

Reading and Background

- A [short biography](#) of Avrom Sutzkever is available online as part of the YIVO Encyclopedia.
- The Rom Printing Press was the largest Jewish press in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century. For more information about the press, see this [YIVO Encyclopedia entry](#).
- To read more of Avrom Sutzkever's work in translation, see *A. Sutzkever: Selected Poetry and Prose*, translations by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (University of California, 1991), or *In Your Words: Translations from the Yiddish and the Hebrew*, translations by Seymour Mayne (Ronald P. Frye & Co., 2017).
- For scholarly writing on Jewish literature and cultural creation during and directly after the war, see chapter nine of David G. Roskies's book *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Syracuse University, 1999) and Hannah Pollin-Galay's article "[Avrom Sutzkever's Art of Testimony: Witnessing with the Poet in the Wartime Soviet Union.](#)"
- To learn more about the FPO (United Partisan's Organization), which Avrom Sutzkever was a part of during the occupation of the Vilna ghetto, see [this resource](#) from Yad Vashem's Shoah Resource Center.
- In [this video](#), created by Jordan Kutzik for the Yiddish Book Center, Sutzkever talks about how writing helped him to survive the war.
- Watch this short [documentary film](#) from 1939, which shows both Jewish and non-Jewish life in Vilna. Note that the film shows both positive Jewish culture, as well as poverty and other negative aspects of the city.

Resources

1: Poem, Avrom Sutzkever's "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers," circa 1944, in Yiddish and in English translation, and audio recording of Sutzkever reading the poem.

By the fall of 1943, when the story of this poem is supposed to take place, the remaining Jews in Vilna had been imprisoned in the ghetto for two years already, where they witnessed the brutal death of most of their family and community members. They had been informed that the ghetto would soon be liquidated and all its surviving inhabitants deported. A small group of younger Jews in the ghetto, who had previously formed a group called the FPO (United Partisan's Organization), called for an armed revolt at this



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time. In this poem, Avrom Sutzkever, who was a member of the FPO, creates a courageous portrait of these resistance members and their will to change Jewish history through self-defense.

In the poem, resistance fighters sneak into the Rom Printing Press, the oldest and most famous Jewish printing house in Eastern Europe. They turn the lead plates with Hebrew letters on them into bullets for their anti-Nazi resistance. In truth, this event did not take place. It seems that Sutzkever invented the story in order to explore the notion of Jewish resistance at this moment in history. The melting down of bullets could symbolize a shift from traditional Jewish culture, based on books and learning, to a Jewish culture that includes armed self-defense when circumstances demand. The transformation of letters into bullets could also be autobiographical. Before the war, Sutzkever was not especially politically involved and wrote mostly about nature. He was criticized by his peers for creating art that was detached from history or politics. During the Holocaust, Sutzkever decided to take an active role in fighting for his community, both in writing and in deed. He changed his writing style to include pieces like this. His own transformation could be seen as melting down one set of letters and creating a new one.

Suggested Activities: As a class, listen to Avrom Sutzkever read the poem in Yiddish. Then read the poem, as translated by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, aloud. Discuss the motif of lead. What are all the things that lead becomes in the poem? Lead can signify letters as well as bullets, strength as well as stagnation, the erection of a new building as well as the sealing of a casket. Then discuss motifs of strength. Do the letters give the bullets strength or vice versa? When is it justifiable to trade in letters for bullets? When is it not?

Ask the students to note biblical references in the poem, especially to the Maccabees. What does it mean to compare Jews in the ghetto to biblical figures?

As far as we know, Sutzkever wrote the poem in February 1944, after he had already left the ghetto. But, he decided to publish the poem with the much earlier date September 13, 1943—a date just before the ghetto was destroyed, when Jews were debating resistance. Why would the poet do that? Is it okay to embellish history for the sake of communal inspiration?

Sources: Avrom Sutzkever, "Di blayene platn fun roms drukeray," *Di feshtung lider un poemes: geshribn in Vilner Geṭo un in yald 1941-1944* (New York: Yiddisher Kultur Farband, 1945), 62.

Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers," *A. Sutzkever: Selected poetry and prose* (Oakland: University of California, 1991), 169–170.

Avrom Sutzkever, "Sutzkever leyent 13 lider," audio collection of the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. Digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library. Accessed on April 26, 2019, https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/archival-recordings/fbr-976_4975/sutzkever-recites-13-poems-avrom-sutzkever.

2: Alternate translation of Avrom Sutzkever's poem, "The Leaden Plates of Romm's Printing Works."

When we read a poem in translation, we are reading someone's interpretation of the original text.

Suggested Activities: Compare this translation by Seymour Mayne with the translation by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav in resource 1 of this kit. Focus in particular on the first and last stanzas. What similarities do you see in terms of language and content? What are the main differences between the two? What might be some of the advantages and disadvantages of attempting to recreate the poem's rhyme in English?

Have students read the first and last stanzas of each of the translations out loud, listening to the meter and cadence of the texts. In the Harshavs' translation, the last two lines of the poem command listeners (perhaps readers like us) to hear the voices of ancient heroes. In Mayne's translation, it seems like readers are supposed to "recognize" themselves as part of the story. Ask students: which ending do you find more compelling, and why?

Sources: Seymour Mayne, "The Leaden Plates of Romm's Printing Works," *In Your Words: Translations from the Yiddish and the Hebrew* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Ronald P. Frye & Co., 2017), 42.

3: Song, A. L. Wolfson and Alexander Olshanetsky's "Vilna, Vilna," 1935.

To understand the Holocaust, we have to appreciate the Jewish culture that thrived beforehand. Over the course of centuries, the city of Vilna—home of Avrom Sutzkever and the Rom Printing Press—had earned the reputation as “The Jerusalem of Lithuania” thanks to the many Jewish scholars, rabbis, writers, artists, and political thinkers that lived and worked there. The Rom Press, which produced beautiful Hebrew-script books for readers all over Europe, was just one of many Jewish cultural institutions that had flourished in Vilna up until World War II.

This 1935 song, “Vilna, Vilna,” lyrics by A. L. Wolfson (1867–1946) and music by Alexander Olshanetsky (1892–1946) treats the city as if “she” were a person, a lover.

Suggested Activities: Watch and listen to a clip of the song. Ask students: How does the song describe Vilna? What kind of a character is “she”? How does this depiction of Vilna relate to Sutzkever’s poem “The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers”?

Then ask students: Do you have this kind of relationship with a city or a place? Ask students to create a poem or song about a city or place with which they have a special relationship, using “Vilna, Vilna” as loose inspiration.

Sources: Alexander Olshanetsky and A. L. Wolfson, “Vilna, Vilna,” performed by Fraidy Katz on *The Eternal Question* (Di Alte Kashe): Fraidy Katz sings Yiddish. Kame'a Media, 700261204406, 2006. Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnAstY693Ik> on May 14, 2019.

4: Image, page of Talmud printed by the Rom Press, 1886.

The imagery of Sutzkever’s poem assumes that readers will be familiar with the Rom Press, one of the largest and most culturally significant Jewish printing presses of the nineteenth century. In addition to a number of minor religious tractates and commentaries, in 1886, the press famously released a 37-volume edition of the Babylonian Talmud, one of the central texts of Judaism.

Sutzkever also assumes that his audience will know something about the Talmud, a text which consists of two elements: the Mishnah, a compilation of Rabbinic laws and traditions written down around 200 CE, and the Gemara, a series of commentaries on the Mishnah published around 500 CE.

Suggested Activities: Have students look at the page of Talmud printed at the Rom Press, paying close attention to the different fonts and placements of words. The Mishnah is in the center, surrounded by centuries of commentaries. Have students consider the third stanza of “The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers,” in which Sutzkever writes, “Ancient thoughts—in the letters that melted hot. / A line from Babylonia, from Poland a line, / Boiled, flooded together, in the foundry pot.” Ask students to consider the literal and metaphorical meanings of these lines, and how they might relate to this image from a Rom Press Talmud. How does this image affect their understanding of the poem? How does it add to the meaning of the lead plates in Sutzkever’s poem?

Source: First page of the first tractate of the Talmud (*Daf Bet of Masechet Brachot*) (Vilnius: Rom Press, 1886), accessed at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_page_of_the_first_tractate_of_the_Talmud_\(Daf_Beis_of_Maseches_Brachos\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:First_page_of_the_first_tractate_of_the_Talmud_(Daf_Beis_of_Maseches_Brachos).jpg) on May 15, 2019.

5: Video excerpt, oral testimony about the Vilna Ghetto.

Only a very small minority of Jews in the Vilna ghetto chose to join the armed resistance, like Sutzkever. Most sought to survive in other, more everyday ways. In this series of testimony excerpts, created by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Israel, survivors talk about life in the ghetto.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video with students, and discuss: What are some of the things people had to do to survive in the Vilna Ghetto? What do you think Raye David (4:06) means when she talks about “passive resistance?” What are some of the different kinds of resistance offered in these testimonies? What are some of the ways in which Sutzkever’s poem—which talks about armed resistance—might be about or relate to these survivors who reacted to their situation in other ways?

Sources: Yad Vashem, “Daily Life in the Vilna Ghetto: Holocaust Survivor Testimonies,” accessed on April 17th, 2019 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WA5ntgngqsk>

6: Poem, Avrom Sutzkever’s “From a Lost Poem,” Vilna Ghetto, October 1942.

Not all of Sutzkever's wartime poetry was so heroic. This poem, "From a Lost Poem," was written soon after Sutzkever's mother was killed in the ghetto.

Suggested Activity: Read the poem aloud with the class. Note the lack of historical or biblical references, in contrast to "The Lead Plates." Note the formal differences as well—the free form, almost ad lib structure in comparison to the tight structure of "The Lead Plates." Ask students to consider: What is the connection in these two poems between the form and the content? What does it say about the poet, that he used art both to express personal anguish and to strengthen collective morale? Is there one voice that you find more compelling or authentic?

Sources: Barbara and Benjamin Harshav, "From a Lost Poem," *A. Sutzkever: Selected poetry and prose* (Oakland: University of California, 1991), 150.

7: Letter sent to Sutzkever by two Jewish refugees in Tajikistan, April 1944.

In a way, it was poetry that saved Sutzkever's life. In September 1943, Sutzkever, his wife Freyde, and a group of FPO members escaped from the Vilna ghetto just before it was destroyed, joining partisans in a nearby forest. From the forest, Sutzkever sent a poem that he had written, "Kol Nidre," over the front lines to Moscow. In Moscow, Jewish leaders found the poem and were extremely impressed. In fact, for a wide variety of political reasons, they advocated to send an airplane to the Lithuanian forests to save Sutzkever and his wife. In March 1944, the Sutzkevers were airlifted out of Nazi-occupied Lithuania and brought to Moscow. Sutzkever's arrival in Moscow was greatly celebrated, especially by Jewish refugees who had fled to the Soviet Union after Hitler's invasion of Vilna and the surrounding region in 1941.

Jewish refugees all over the Soviet Union sent him hundreds of impassioned letters, responding to his poetry, telling him their stories, and asking for his help. This letter, originally written in Yiddish, was sent to Sutzkever in Moscow by two women in Tajikistan in Central Asia.

Suggested Activity: Read the letter as a class. Note the personal and urgent tone in which these women, who had never met Sutzkever before, wrote to him. What do you think these women saw in Sutzkever's poetry that inspired them to write him in this way?

Source: Esther Eydelman and friend to Avrom Sutzkever, 16 July 1944, 4/1564–10, Sutzkever Papers, National Library of Israel, Tel Aviv, Israel (trans. Hannah Pollin-Galay).

8: Video clip, Avrom Sutzkever testifying at the Nuremberg trials, February 1946.

Sutzkever was selected by the Soviet government to testify at the Nuremberg trials, one of the most important legal attempts to prosecute and punish Nazi perpetrators. While Sutzkever requested to testify in Yiddish, he was told that was not possible. Instead, he had to testify in Russian.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video as a class. Ask students to think about how Sutzkever's testimony here is different from his poetic creation "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers," and also about how the two expressions of his voice are similar. Ask: Is it significant that he was not allowed to testify in Yiddish, given that he was also able to communicate in Russian? Why or why not?

Source: "Avraham Sutzkever m'eid be-mishpatei Nirenberg [Avrom Sutzkever testifying at the Nuremberg Trials]," Nuremberg Trials (Nuremberg, 1946), accessed on April 29, 2019 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY4GnquFCmE>.

Original file hosted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum at <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1002254>.

9: Simon Kogan's sculpture "Yiddish," 2012, an audio excerpt of an interview with Kogan, 2012, and an undated drawing by Samuel Bak.

Poems and literature take on new lives through the people who read and interpret them. Two different visual artists, Simon Kogan and Samuel Bak, have turned Avrom Sutzkever's poem "The Lead Plates of the Rom Printers" into visual art.

Suggested Activity: Look at the images of Kogan's sculpture, which has "The Lead Plates" etched into it. Listen to the artist

describe this piece. Then look at Samuel Bak's drawing, which accompanies "The Lead Plates" in the book *A. Sutzkever: Selected poetry and prose*. How did the two artists interpret the poem differently? What motifs did each highlight?

Sources: Simon Kogan, "Yiddish," *cor-ten steel*, May 2012, Yiddish Book Center.

Samuel Bak, in *A. Sutzkever: Selected poetry and prose*, by Barbara and Benjamin Harshav (Oakland: University of California, 1991), 169. Used by permission of the artist.

Simon Kogan and Lee Hutt, "Out of Steel Comes 'Yiddish,'" interview with Aaron Lansky, *The Shmooze*, podcast audio, May 9, 2012, <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/the-shmooze/21-out-steel-comes-yiddish>.