

# The witness

**תיאטרון ארצי**  
ליגת התיאטרון

# The witness

'The Witness' is a play about the Yiddish poet, **Avraham Sutzkever**, believed to be the greatest poet in the Yiddish language. Sutzkever was a partisan fighter and a key member of the Paper Brigade, responsible for saving Jewish cultural treasures in Vilna. Sutzkever was chosen by the Russians to be the only Jewish witness at the Nuremburg Trials. His evidence had an enormous impact in the trials. The play is the story of his great belief that poetry will save lives and human spirit.

**Theatroneto prize 2022**

Play by  
**Hadas Kalderon Oded Ehrlich**

Directed by <b>Moria Zrachia</b>	Set design <b>Neta Neeman</b>	Video <b>Roie Weinberg</b>
Lighting <b>Alon Yehezkel, Shaked shneller</b>	Music <b>Yonatan Rozen</b>	

**"With my poetry  
even between the  
ghetto walls I  
was a free man  
Abraham Sutzkever**

משרד התרבות והספורט מדר תיאטרון

play by Hadas kalderon, Oded Ehrlich

Directed by Moria Zrachia

Actor: Michael Hanegbi

Michael: Hi, I'm Michael, this is a show about World War Two, and it will last about an hour, which is four times a gas shower // and it will last a whole...o...caust // and it will last about six... million minutes (sound of stagadish). Sorry. This is a serious monodrama and here I am telling jokes. I knew this would happen and I also said to her, I said: Hadas, Hadas Kalderon, she is the playwright, Hadas I'm not the right person for this kind of play, me playing your grandfather, who was in the holocaust, what's it got to do with me? Why do you insist on me playing him?

"Why, Michael? Don't you remember what happened when we were in Germany, twelve years ago?"

(Sound of a mobile phone ringing)

Hadas: oh no... my mom is calling. Michael here, shoot it. Video. Yes mom... Avrasha passed away. (To Michael) My grandfather died... (to the phone) Mom, Can you believe the timing? I'm in Germany, a moment before the premiere of my play, a moment before I get to tell Avrasha's story to a German audience for the first time!! and he dies?! I'm a candle of remembrance! Okay... I need a moment to gather myself... okay... I'll talk to you later (hang up) did you film it?

Michael shakes his head. I didn't. I mean, I prepared it and everything, but I forgot to press the record button and... that's it really. We've been friends for twelve years and she reminds me how I stuffed up every time we meet. So that's why I'm here really. Guilt. She literally forces me to play her grandfather, Avraham Sutzkever. The only Jewish witness at the, the Nuremberg trials. (Sound of a phone ringing) oh, here's a cue. Someone is calling me, all the way from 1945.

Sutzkever: Hello, this is Avraham Sutzkever calling. Who?... yes, hello...what? Nuremberg? To testify at the Nuremberg trials, me?... no. No, I don't travel to Germany, I swore I will never ever set foot there. I'm sorry, I can't. Goodbye (hangs up the call) (v/o).

Poetry angel: Sutzkever you must testify.

Sutzkever: leave me alone. I did everything you asked me to.

Poetry angel: we had a deal.

Sutzkever: I carried my part of the deal, the world went up in flames and I wrote poems, every day. But that's it. The war is over and I'm done. I don't want to do it anymore, and I don't want to remember anything either.

Poetry angel: memory is stronger than death, as long as you remember them, they're alive. And you must seek justice for them.

Sutzkever: justice, for them? What kind of justice is it?! They're all dead!

Poetry angel: and what about the criminals? They'll just go on about their lives?

Sutzkever: so now I am responsible for eliminating all evil from the world? I want to start a new life. I want peace and quiet, I don't want to face the Nuremberg devils' nest.

Poetry angel: but they, the dead, they want you to stand up for them. You're the last remaining living testament. The only Jewish witness. You will stand there and the souls of the sacred victims will reverberate through your words!

Testify at the Nuremberg trials. I pinch myself, a masochistic, ruthless pinch and the sharp pain confirms – I am still alive. Awash by waves of memories. Suddenly I see my parents, they haven't aged a bit. Encircled by caretakers, each one carrying a shovel as if it were a rifle. I have to go.

(Music and airplane sound)

Sutzkever: I'm on the plane to Germany; there are ten of us witnesses, four Russians, three women, two priests and one Jew – a poet. Me. I look at this group of people and feel the weight of the terrible responsibly this trip carries. We fly over Germany, in turbulent weather. The villages seem red from up top. Small houses, red roofs, each village has a red brick church in it. Everything is red. Soaked with our blood. I never imagined I would set foot on German soil again, that I would hear their language, breathe their air and here I am, about to land in Germany. I look through the window and see a group of workers clearing the snow from the landing strip. Could they be German? Germans clearing the snow for a Jew. Interesting. How life can turn upside down (Music). Berlin! Germany's jewel. Now all in ruins. The allies did a very good job bombing the hell out of it. They kept the sidewalks intact but they destroyed the buildings, completely crushed them to the ground. The grand Brandenburg Gate, where Hitler carried out his famous parades, now derelict and in ruins. The streets are nearly empty. in the corner of my eye, I notice a few Germans hovering around the piles of rubble, looking for food. Now they are the hungry ones. I like the sight of that.

Happy end FOR Berlin! I want to celebrate it all. Raise a glass (a bar sound). Behind the bar, a German beast smiles at me and hands me another round of beer. Her name is Frau Shultze, how many children burnt and choked at the sight of such a smile, a smile of hatred. The beer by the way, tastes like hatred too. Cheers Berlin! I hope you'll never recover (drinks).

From Berlin we travel to Nuremberg. Nuremberg! The 1000 years old city. Destroyed in eight days. The name Nuremberg will remain in the history books until the end of time. Nuremberg laws – Nuremberg trials. How symbolic is that. The same place that carried the message of the obliteration of the Jewish race, is where all the criminals stand trial. I stay at the very prestigious Grand Hotel, at the part of the city not ruined by the ally's bombings...

Clerk: willkommen Herr Sutzkever, guten tag... you're in room 213, please sign here. Danke Schön, and here... danke schön, and here, and here... danke, danke

schön. Dinner is served at seven punkt, not a minute earlier, until ten and not a minute later. For anything you need you may contact the reception desk vielen dank.

Ein moment bitte, we are missing a few bedding accessories so here, I will give you my personal pillow. Inshuldigong. Would you like some wasser mit gaz? Or una gaz?

Sutzkever: (looking cynically at the audience) he just asked me if I wanted water with or without gas... (goes back to the clerk) without.

Clerk: bitte schön, auf wiedersehen and guten tag. Danke schön danke wielen dank.

Sutzkever: nothing like the German manners. Even a few months ago, when they shot families into the grave holes in Punar, they did it so politely. (Sound of a phone ringing)

Sutzkever: hello, this is Avraham Sutzkever speaking... yes. Hi... yes I'm here. I've reached the hotel. So, I'll see you tomorrow?... sorry? I don't understand... I came all the way here to testify and now you're telling me that you're not sure I will take the stand? So why did you bring me here for? Sir, you know how many Jews from Vilnius survived the war? Seven hundred. Out of seventy thousand! And I'm one of them! I am the only one who can tell of the horrors the Jews of Vilnius went through! I'm a living testament to the immortality of my people! I have to testify! (hangs up).

It's hard for me to discern my feelings – which is stronger? the sadness or the need for revenge? I'm exhausted. I slump on the hotel bed, but I can't get my eyes to shut. The tears swell up. And waves of memories hit me hard, once again.

(Video 1 – Siberia) (music changes)

Sutzkever: Siberia 1921. I am eight-years-old, running through the Siberian snow that glistens like a field of diamonds. The sun caresses my body (sound – wolf howl). A long wolf howl, dad calls me "Avrasha, come here! Look what I found". He opens his hand, "wow! What's that dad?" It's a diamond. A big, beautiful diamond, it used to belong to the tsar. "To the tsar? But they shot the tsar, didn't they?"

Yes. A soldier sold it to Berger, the watchmaker, but Berger was too scared to keep it so he gave it to Moishe the baker, who was also too scared and gave it to Isaac the blacksmith who gave it to Lazer the shoemaker who... gave it to me for safekeeping.

But we are not afraid, right Avrasha? We will keep it. But it's a secret Avrasha, our private secret... our diamond will shine for even mein kinde..."

(Video 1 – now the poem is written in Yiddish)

My father was only 30-years-old when his heart burst open... but his death gave me the gift of poetry. This diamond my father gave me glistens inside me, lighting up my path even in the darkness, allowing me to write and write and write...

Dad, how I ran after you,  
To grab hold of your memory.

I wanted to slide into the earth – like you  
Suddenly, a dove flew  
The sun shown its golden light  
And pulled me back to the land of the living.

(Video 1 – now the dove flies, and the video ends)

Sutzkever: I write poetry from childhood images in Siberia, and they keep on guiding me, always, even after I've been living in Vilnius for seventeen years. (Music – cheerful swing)

I arrived in Vilnius in 1938. There are so many Jews living here that the city is nicknamed Jerusalem de Lithuania. The Jewish community is rich and thriving. There are even streets named after Jewish rabbis, authors, merchants, actors and poets. Vilnius has entered the hearts of everyone. I try to get into a group of young, highly regarded poets called Young Vilna. Surely you've heard of them. Shmerke Kaczerginski, a poet and the group's editor, informs me I had not been accepted... "What? What is your reason for not accepting me? Mr. Shmerke Kaczerginski?"

Shmerke: (lights a pipe) we didn't accept your application since your poetry is incomprehensible, disconnected from reality, and mainly doesn't suit the zeitgeist! European Jews are persecuted, running like rats, and you're writing about a Siberian snowman! About grass, shining diamonds, talking trees! (Lights the pipe again)  
Sutzkever, this is a time for steel, not crystal, in Yiddish it sounds better. Di tseyt iz fun shtal nisht krishtal.

Sutzkever: so rude, this Mr. Shmerke. He doesn't want crystal? Crystal is the only thing he'll get. Beautiful shiny, diamond-like crystal. The role of the poet is to create a kind of healing beauty, which strengthens and gives people the power to keep on living. Hope!

But a mundane, mediocre poet such as Shmerke will never understand it.

(Sound – a phone ringing)

Sutzkever: hello? Avraham Sutzkever speaking. Frida? Frida!... oh! It was such a mistake coming here, can you believe I flew all the way to Germany and now they're not even sure they will let me testify... how come you're so sure that I will? Yes... yes... okay.. but... it's true... you're right... I can't miss such an historic opportunity... I have to testify! And I'll tell you something else – if need be, I will burst into the courtroom! How's that for you... what? Yes I'm eating... yes I'm going to sleep early... yes I have socks! I'll talk to you later? Bye (hangs up the call). My Frida. I've met kind people but Frida is the kindest of them all. She doesn't like pleasure or life's spoils – she'd much rather care for the needy and the miserable. And she will surly not want to go to heaven – there's no one there to help. My Frida... what would I have done without her...

(Video 2 – a woman dancing. After ten seconds the poem starts being written)  
(romantic music)

I invite you to dance, kid.  
I'm a springtime stream,  
And I sing you the song of my heart  
And then it's real.

When we dance together – you're always with me.

(Video 2 – images of wedding or a chuppah or a ring)  
(Music – happy wedding)

I give you this ring my mother gave me, and it shall be your forever and ever. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth".

(Video 2 – image of a bomb setting off finishes the video)  
(Sounds of bombings)

Sutzkever: a day after the wedding the German army invaded Vilnius! Fridenka and I start running wherever our legs can carry us, jets bombing the city relentlessly, fires flame up everywhere. We run towards my mother's house, "mom quick come, we have to run, come with us". But she doesn't budge. She tells me she's not going anywhere. She tells me to take Frida and save ourselves, that we're both young. I try to convince her but she's more stubborn than me. "Go", she tells me. And I will never forget the look on her face when she says to me "my life is inside you".

You speak to me  
And your voice rings nothing but truth  
Let me go, my son. Let me go.  
I can't, it's a sin. It's a sin.  
As long as you live, I will be right here, sparkling as ever.  
A pip, of a nearly ripe plum.

(Sounds of aerial bombings)

Frida and I escape the Nazi monsters – leaving all our lives behind us. I manage to grab only my poetry notebook. But the Nazi monsters get to us. German airplanes hover above us like locusts, tanks, tanks, tanks surround us from every direction. They pound and echo and deafen us. There's nowhere to run to, we have to turn back to Vilnius, we rush to find cover, in the distance, we see a swastika flag covering the Great Synagogue.

Black. Light on Michael, lying on the floor.

I've been lying here for six weeks. It's hard to move. The scorching July sun heats up the tin roof I'm hiding under, the space is small and suffocating... I'm here. Together with a few other miserable Jews. The heat is unbearable. I'm exhausted and sick and I feel like I'm losing touch with reality. How did I even end up here? Oh... Frida made me escape the ghetto and hide. A group of thugs is hovering the streets, wreaking havoc. Lithuanians, collaborators, even more cruel than the Germans, they kidnap Jews at every corner, people disappear and you never see them again.

(Sound – the poetry angel v/o)

Poetry angel: Sutzkever...

Sutzkever: (dazed) who's that?

Angel: wake up.

Sutzkever: what? Who's talking?

Poetry angel: Sutzkever... I'm here to strike a deal with you.

Sutzkever: a deal? What are you, a businessman?

Poetry angel: I'm the poetry angel.

Sutzkever: angel? Am I dead?

Poetry angel: no. You're barely alive though too. You have to keep on writing if you want me to keep you alive.

Sutzkever: what?

Poetry angel: you're a poet, right? So as long as you'll keep writing your poetry, you will live. That's the deal.

Sutzkever: you're crazy, the world is up in flames, around us there is only death, and more death and besides – I can't write – it's pitch black here and I don't have a pen.

Poetry angel: when the world is engulfed by darkness, it needs a poet whose words will shine like diamonds, write, Sutzkever. A piece of charcoal can become a fountain pen. Write.

Sutzkever: Suddenly I notice a dead Jewish man, lying right next to me. For a moment there, I completely forgot where I was. I lifted a piece of charcoal I'd found and began writing a poem on the dead body, as if it were a piece of paper.

(Video 3 – the poem is being written)

I wish to carry a prayer – to whom – I do not know.

He who once consoled me – no longer hears my words

To whom – I do not know.

(Video 3 ends)

(Music)

I want to go back to Frida, I miss her so much it's unbearable. I come out of my hiding place but I can't stand on my feet. After three months of lying down my legs had forgotten how to walk. But I had to keep on writing, after all I had struck a deal. Every letter I write empowers me, every letter imbues me with new strengths and the more I write, the quicker my legs heal. On the first day I managed to actually walk I marched straight back to the ghetto - to her.

I had reached the green bridge crossing the vilia river. The water shown like dad's diamond. Suddenly a German soldier stood in front of me. I froze. I couldn't go back and the river surrounded me on both sides. I don't know exactly what happened but I looked directly at him and before he managed to pull out his gun I pulled out my words: 'good to meet you, where can I run where there are absolutely no Germans?'. I gave him a psychological shock. The bewildered soldier who just now intended on hunting me, simply lifted up his hand towards the ghetto and said 'over there'... and I had finally returned to my Frida.

The power and wonder of poetry and the Yiddish language had been revealed to me at the Vilnius ghetto. there, in hell, I could finally say - life and death are held by language. The Yiddish language. It was the bewitched armor onto which the arrows of death had crashed. Poetry had turned me into a free man again – even in the ghetto.

The world is crumbling around me but my hands and my head are filled with poetry.  
I write and write, I must write to survive, to keep me and Frida alive...

Frida is trying to tell me something but I can't stop writing, she snatches the pages off my hand and doesn't give it back. 'I have to write what don't you understand about it?' I have to. I have struck a deal. In the heat of the moment, she screams at me "Avrahsa... listen to me! I'm pregnant!'

Silence engulfed the room. We both knew Jewish women were not allowed to give birth in the ghetto. The most precious moments a loving couple can wish for, sounded at that moment like a terrible tragedy.

What are we going to do, Avrasha?

(Video 4 – a baby ultrasound) (music).

Frida and I are at the nursery. The sound of newborns crying is heard in every direction. A German nurse passes one baby after the other dropping one drop into their mouths. After a few minutes the crying stops.

(Video 4 – the poem is being written)

My son,



You never enjoyed the rocking of a cradle  
The poisonous drop had burnt your mind  
You thought it was sweet, warm milk  
I wanted to swallow you into me, my child  
as I held your chilling body  
I wanted to taste the future that awaits me  
Perhaps, sometimes, you will flourish through my veins.

(Sound – angel)

Poetry angel: Sutzkever, memory is stronger than death.

(Video 4 ends)

(Sound – a telephone call)

Sutzkever: hello, this is Avraham Sutzkever speaking... yes. Before you say anything, I need you to listen to me for a moment, there is no way I am not getting up on that stand! I came all the way here to... what?... ha... so I am testifying?... (calms down), good because I have a lot to say... in Russian??? No no no I can't testify in Russian, I'm not fluent enough... I want to speak in Yiddish. The language the Nazi criminals wanted to obliterate... I'm a poet you see. A Jewish poet... a Jewish poet speaks in Yiddish – not Russian... what do you mean you don't have a translator? You can't find one Yiddish translator in the whole of Germany???... I wonder where all the Yiddish speakers had disappeared to! (Hangs up the call).

(Music)

There are no Jews left. I am on my own. I thought so then and I think so now. That when a poet is completely desperate, he grabs a random word and starts ponding it against a wall. He pounds and pounds it until he crashes to the ground, tired and despondent. And then, sometimes it happens that in a single, blessed moment, when he's completely desperate, his poem is suddenly revealed to him, the poem he so longed for, terrified and bleeding.

(Video 5 – autumn leaves fall down to the ground. The poem is being written)

Who will remain? What will remain? A simple syllable,

.  
. .  
. . .

(Video 5 ends)

(Thriller music, a disaster is lurking)

Vilnius 1943. (Panting) On the eve of the Day of Atonement, a rumor was going around that the Nazis had cleared Szpitalna Street and took everyone to Punar. Mother. My mother lived on 7 Szpitalna Street, I ran towards her house like mad. I run down the empty streets; a deafening silence engulfs me. On normal days it's hard to walk down the ghetto streets, and now they are completely empty. Prams without babies in it, shoes with no one to wear them, shops with no sellers... a moment ago there were people here... mom? I run down the stairs and open the door – mom?

(Video 6 – a candle about to blow off, after 10 seconds, the poem gets written)

(Sad music)

I walk into the room, where your last dream still hovers  
The candle you lit still fading, gently  
Your undrunk tea is waiting, exactly where you left it  
And around the teacup, fingers begin trembling  
The candle begging the fire to never blow out  
I pour my blood, all of it, into the candle to make sure it'll never fade.

(Video 6 – the candle blows out. The video ends)

(Sound – thick forest and birds)

Silence. Amongst the thick forest, something is heard in the distance. Blowing closer and closer. The treetops are covered in smoke.

(Sound – train)

A train!!

(Sound – bombing)

Dirt, bodies and steels enmeshed midair.

Carriages, many of them, filled with Germans and ammunition, exploded to bits. It was one of the first revenge attacks to rip Vilnius' silence. Everyone believed it was the work of German partisans. Nobody suspected that Jews from the ghetto planted the deadly bomb, not to mention building it using a pamphlet stolen and smuggled by members of the Paper Brigade.

(Music)

Sixty seconds on the Paper Brigade.

One of the plans of the Third Reich was to set up after the war, when there would finally be no Jews left in the world, "A Jewish Race museum". Their plan was to teach the world how they save eight from the infamous Jewish race.

When choosing materials for the Museum, the Nazis needed intellectual Jews to sift through the materials, for they did not speak Yiddish, so how could they discern between Bialik's work and that of Shalom Aleichem. This is why me and my friends from Young Vilna, yes, Shmerke was there too, were drafted and ordered to go through all those books and manuscripts. Whatever the Germans wanted for the museum we were ordered to keep in the right-hand pile... and the rest – to the bin. As a man of language and books I was witness to the burning of many of my people's cultural treasures. 2000 years of Jewish Vilna's culture was burnt before my eyes...

I couldn't allow it, and right under the nose of the Nazis, me and my friends began smuggling and hiding thousands of manuscripts, artworks, rare books and anything else we could carry on our bodies and save. We were mockingly called the Paper Brigade.

Soldier: Yuden Halt! What do you have there?

Sutzkever: nothing Herr Commander!

The soldier rips off my coat and every piece of paper I carried on me flies down to the floor (papers falling off him). What is this? Are you smuggling paper into the ghetto? He pushes me down on my knees, cocks his guns and puts it against my head. "Herr Commander... it's cold... it's just to warm up... it's paper waste... what can we possibly do with paper?"

The soldier looks at me and miraculously lets me go... (begins collecting the papers off the floor).

Inside that pile of "paper waste" were Tolstoy's letters, manuscripts by the Vilna Gaon, Herzl's diary and dozens of other documents... one of them was a pamphlet of "instructions for the creation and planting of mines". We smuggled this pamphlet and gave it to the ghettos' underground unit, who created the bomb using it, and headed out for their first mission: blowing up a German supply train.

(Sound – explosion)

Following the train blowing up, the underground unit members informed us we had to escape, that the ghetto is going to be obliterated. We escaped, Frida and I, and joined the Russian partisans in the forests (puts a tie over his forehead). This is where I gave a Russian partisan my poetry notebook, which I had written in the ghetto, to take to Moscow with him. If I won't survive, at least some of my poems will. And I added a note...

(Video 7 – forest, a note is being written)

"Dear reader, you are probably a normal person, for whom the term Vilnius Ghetto is something that even your wildest imagination will fail to grasp the horrors that happened there. But I ask you to read this notebook with full conviction that

everything I wrote here is nothing but the truth. Truth may be too grand to become literature - but if that is the case, literature is stronger than death" A. Sutzkever, 1943.

(Video 7 – still the forest, but the note is gone)

We hid with the partisans in the frozen forests of Lithuania for eight months, hungry, freezing and exhausted. But we were together, and we were alive. One day panic broke out; a division of 15,000 German soldiers entered the forest, accompanied by ferocious sniffer dogs. Frida suggested we hide in the swamps so the dogs wouldn't find us. We lay there for three days, the swamps turned icy around us. The boots froze on our feet. We ate wild blueberries, and some peas we hid in our pockets. But Frida was right - we were not caught.

One day I heard a voice calling out my name... "Comrade Sutzkever"... it was the Russian partisan I had given my notebook to.

Russian partisan (heavy accent): comrade Sutzkever. Comrade Sutzkever, your poetry notebook is in Moscow! They held a reading of it. All of Russia's most prominent writers came to listen. It reached as far as Stalin himself. He is sending a plane to rescue you from the woods!!! Comrade Sutzkever, literature is stronger than death.

(Video 7 – something glistens inside the forest – the video ends)

Poetry angel: literature is stronger than death

(Sound – an airplane taking off)

(Takes the tie off his head and puts it around his neck) We land in Moscow, on a plane that Stalin himself sent us. I am hailed as a hero. Two days ago, I was chased in the swamps by Nazi dogs and today everyone wants to hear what I have to say, they hold an event in my honor, 3000 people, the Russian cultural elite, come to hear the only poet who survived the ghetto.

(Sound – people chattering)

(Puts on a jacket, takes out a note from his pocket and checks the mic). "The world should know that in the forests of white Russia and Lithuania there are hundreds of proud, brave Jewish partisans, who are all fighting to avenge the blood of their dead brothers. On behalf of those Jewish partisans and in the name of the remaining survivors of the Vilnius ghetto I call you, my Jewish brothers everywhere, to stand up, fight and take revenge'.

(Sound – poetry angel)

Poetry angel: as long as you remember them – they are alive. You must seek justice, on their behalf.

(Sound – a phone ringing)

Sutzkever: hello, this is Avraham Sutzkever speaking.. yes. I'm ready. Yes, I know I have no choice. I will testify in Russian. See you tomorrow.

(Hangs up the phone and prays)

(Music – “Unter dayne vayse shtern”)

God, please turn my Yiddish into Russian, give me words, the likes of which no one has ever heard. Keep me away from fear, and help me stand in front of them all with a confident heart, and testify with my eyes wide open and from the depths of my soul, as I tell everything I have heard and seen. Yitgadal ve'itkadash shmey raba.

(Sound – Sutzkever's testimony)

Image 18: The Trial

(Video 8 – Sutzkever's testimony)

(Sutzkever's real testimony is played in the background).

As we listen to it, Michael takes off Sutzkever's outfit and watches the screening together with the crowd.

THE END.

