A HOLOCAUST POET AND PARTISAN TURNED A SIGHT OF HORROR
INTO A POEM THAT HAS ENDURED FOR GENERATIONS

Abraham Sutzkever was a poet living in the Lithuanian city of Vilna when the Nazis invaded. Tens of thousands of Jewish people were rounded up and forced to live in a small ghetto in the middle of the city. As the Nazis murdered Jews, they also destroyed precious historical documents and books. Sutzkever worked with fellow Jews as part of a “paper brigade.” They hid books and other papers from the Nazis, storing the materials in tunnels and crannies inside buildings. After the war, Sutzkever returned to Vilna, now called Vilnius, to help retrieve these treasures from the rubble. During the war, Sutzkever witnessed horrific scenes of cruelty and suffering. He wrote about them in his poems. “As long as I was writing,” he later said, “I would have a weapon against death.”

One of his poems, “A Wagon of Shoes” (below), describes a common sight in the ghetto: a wagon rumbling through the street filled with shoes belonging to murdered Jews.

**A Wagon of Shoes**

The wheels they drag and drag on,
What do they bring, and whose?
They bring along a wagon
Filled with throbbing shoes.

The wagon like a khupa*
In evening glow, enchants:
The shoes piled up and heaped up,
Like people in a dance.

A holiday, a wedding?
As dazzling as a ball!
The shoes—familiar, spreading,
I recognize them all.

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The wheels they drag and drag on,
The heels tap with no malice:
Where do they pull us in?
From ancient Vilna allies,
They drive us to Berlin.

I must not ask you whose,
My heart, it skips a beat:
Tell me the truth, oh, shoes,
Where disappeared the feet?

A holiday, a wedding?
As dazzling as a ball!
The shoes—familiar, spreading,
I recognize them all.

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All children’s shoes—but where
Are all the children’s feet?
Why does the bride not wear
Her shoes so bright and neat?

Mid clogs and children’s sandals,
On Sabbath, like the candles,
She’d put them on in glee.

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The feet of pumps so shoddy,
With buttondrops like dew—
Where is the little body?
Where is the woman too?

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The heels tap with no malice:
Where do they pull us in?
From ancient Vilna allies,
They drive us to Berlin.

—Vilna Ghetto, January 1, 1943

*A khupa is a canopy used in Jewish wedding ceremonies.

Shoes belonging to prisoners who were murdered at death camps during World War II.