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“Das Muttermal” - “The Birthmark” - “דער מוטער-צייכן”

by Kristin Mlay-Kuhns

*The following creative translation project is a trilingual work of intertextual and transcreative poetry that merges personal memory with scholarly thought. The poem, titled “**Das Muttermal / The Birthmark** / דער מוטער-צייכן,” explores the catastrophic loss of a parent and the slow, painful process of redemption through acceptance, forgiveness, and remembrance. Originally composed in German, then translated and reconstituted into English and Yiddish, the poem stages a dialogue across languages, cultures, and inherited histories.*

Borrowing from concepts such as allegory, catastrophe, mimesis, and intertextuality, this project engages multiple intellectual traditions (Jewish mysticism, German literary heritage, psychoanalytic theory, and philosophies of trauma and healing) while remaining anchored in deeply personal experience. The central metaphor of a birthmark becomes an inherited “mother-sign,” a physical trace of lineage that binds ancestors and descendants together across time.

Rather than producing a conventional analytical article, this project demonstrates critical understanding through creative argumentation: it integrates research, translation theory, and literary allusion into poetic form. Intertextual poetry like this functions as a scholarly artifact, showing how catastrophe can be transformed, through language and imagination, into meaning, connection, and enduring memory.



Figure 1: The birthmark I describe in the following poem is most noticeable in the above photographs of my mother before I was born (left) and my mother and I in 2003 (right).

**“Das Muttermal”¹ -
Original auf Deutsch**

Es hat doch Wurzeln wie ein Baum
Tief in der Haut des Menschens
Aus der Erde des Seins
Aber wächst von Innerem bis Äuß'rem
Hat lange Ranken, die wachsen
Und mischen sich in dein Leben ein
Und hinterlassen ihre Spuren
Verändern dein Leben

Eine runde Beule auf der Brusthaut
Stammt aus einem Keim
Ein Keim, der aus den Ländern unserer Vorfahren kommt
Die Ahnen -
Ahnensie, was nach und vor uns steht?
Weil sie es auch überlebt haben?
Haben überleben müssen?
Diese Urwunde

Reiß das störende Muttermal gewalttätig aus.
Schneide es mit einem Spitzenpfeil heraus.
Lass das schreckliche Loch bluten.
Stopf es mit Vergessen und Gefühllosigkeit.

Aber das Muttermal verbindet uns immer noch.
Vorfahren und Nachfahren,
Zukunftsseelen und Urgroßmütter,
Vorläufer aller Zeiten mit
Nachkommenden aller Welten,
Verbunden für die Ewigkeit
Durch eine unsichtbare Kette -
Das Muttermal.

“Wenn du noch hier bist,
Dann existiere ich auch noch”²
Schreibt der Stift des Dichters,
Zwitschert der blutrote Kardinal.

“Wohin ich immer gehe,

¹I used the relationship between birthmarks and reincarnation in the Jewish mysticism of the Kabbalah to inspire the extended metaphor of the birthmark tying past and future generations together like an invisible string (inspired by Taylor Swift’s song “invisible string” 2020: “And isn’t it just so pretty to think that all along there was some invisible string tying you to me?”). A fuller discussion of the Kabbalistic ideas informing this metaphor appears in the “Process, Analysis, and Methodological Reflection” section.

² Translation of Sutzkever’s 1942 poem “My Mother”

Fühle ich deine Nähe”³
 Äußert das Lied des Lehars,
 Schmettert die mondartige Opernsängerin.

Jetzt muss das Leid eine andere Form annehmen,
 Um Erlösung und Verständnis zu erreichen.
 Eine Verwandlung des Wesens
 Anerkennung und Vergebung,
 Für mich und dich —
 Füttere deine wachsende Freiheit durch aktives Verstehen
 Gieß dein entwickelndes Wissen und Kenntnisse
 Mit heller Sonne und schuldigen Tränen

Einmal ein Spielzeug eines Kindes
 Auf der Brust einer kraftvollen Mutter.
 Jetzt ist es nur kaputte Asche in einem schönen Schrank.
 Aber die Erinnerung bleibt.

“Warum erwähnst du deine Deutsche Mutter nicht?”
 Denn jetzt bin ich sie geworden.

"The Birthmark" - Direct Translation

But it has roots like a tree
 Deep in the skin of people
 From the earth of existence
 But grows from the inner to the outer
 Has long tendrils, that grow⁴
 And meddle/interfere in your life
 And leave behind their marks/traces
 Changing your life

A round bump
 Stems from a seed⁵
 A seed that comes from the lands of our ancestors
 The forebearers -
 Did they have a premonition of what comes before and after us?
 Because they also survived it?
 Had to have survived?
 These ancestral wounds⁶

³ Franz Lehar, *Das Land des Lächelns*, “Dein ist mein ganzes Herz.”

⁴ Here I am using the tree metaphor to mirror the *sefirot*, depicted as the *Tree of Life*, as explained in Peter Cole’s *The Poetry of the Kabbalah*.

⁵ This image was inspired by Sutzkever’s use of “stam” (*Stammbaum* - family tree, in German) in his poems about ancestors, and its connection to blood and ink..

⁶ The concept of “ancestral wounds” was also inspired by the poetry of Sutzkever and Margolin.

Rip the parasitic birthmark violently out⁷.
Cut it out with a sharp file.
Let the hideous hole bleed.
Plug it with forgetfulness and numbness.

But the birthmark connects us together still.
Ancestors and descendants
Future souls and great grandmothers,
Forerunners of all time
Successors from all worlds,
Bound together for eternity⁸
By an invisible string⁹ -
The birthmark.

"If you are still here,
Then I exist too"¹⁰
Writes the pen of the poet,
Chirps the blood red cardinal.

"Wherever I go,
I feel your nearness"¹¹
Voices the song of Lehar,
Belts the moon-like opera singer.

Now the pain must take another form,
In order to achieve redemption and understanding.
A transformation of nature¹²
Acceptance and forgiveness¹³,
For you and me —
Feed your growing freedom with active understanding¹⁴
Water your developing knowledge and skills
With bright sun and guilty tears¹⁵

⁷ I tried to use a corporeal, physical grounding, as Sutzkever does, in the composition of this poem. I'm thinking here of Sutzkever's "To the thin vein in my head" from *The Full Pomegranate*.

⁸ Here I was inspired by Sutzkever's poetry (specifically, "murmur hieroglyphics"), Margolin's poetry about ancestors, as well as Indigenous poetry that similarly treats ancestry and land as living memory, such as Joy Harjo's poem "Remember" in *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through: A Norton Anthology of Native Nations Poetry* (ed. Joy Harjo, 2020).

⁹ Reference to the Taylor Swift song, "invisible string."

¹⁰ Sutzkever, Abraham. "My Mother." PoemHunter.com.

¹¹ Translation of Lehar's *The Land of Smiles*, "Yours is my entire heart."

¹² This was inspired by Spinoza's belief that by understanding the necessary causes of events, even painful or catastrophic ones, a person can regain their autonomy and align with the rational order of nature.

¹³ Inspired by Nussbaum's "Chapter 3: Forgiveness: A Genealogy" from her book, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

¹⁴ Reference to Spinoza's views on redemption which were more secular in nature. Spinoza believed that redemption could be achieved through increased knowledge and understanding, freedom through understanding, and the recontextualization of painful/traumatic events. A shift from passive emotions to active understanding was also believed to bring redemption, according to Spinoza. Suffering doesn't vanish with redemption, but rather is reframed, understood, and accepted (*Ethics*, V). Spinoza's views were used for inspiration in lines 37-44.

¹⁵ Plenty of plant and natural imagery appears in the work of Avrom Sutzkever. Scholars such as Justin Cammy, Ruth R. Wisse, and Barbara and Benjamin Harshav note that nature (trees, seeds, springs, earth, growth, forest, rain, flora) functions as a key symbolic register in his poetry, often interwoven with themes of memory, cultural survival, and renewal after destruction.

Once the play thing of a child¹⁶
 On the chest of a vital mother.
 Now it is only destroyed ashes¹⁷ in a pretty cabinet.
 But the memory¹⁸ stays.

“Why don’t you mention your German mother?”¹⁹
 Because now I became her.

“The Birthmark” - Poetic Reconstitution

Like a tree, its roots
 are skin-deep.
 From the earth of existence.
 But grow inside out,
 long tendrils that
 meddle
 and mark.

A round bulb under the breast,
 sprung from a seed,
 sown in ancestor-soil.
 Forebears -
 did they sense what stands before
 and beyond us?
 Survival drilled into them -
 Because they survived it?
 Had to survive it?
 This original wound

Rip the parasitic birthmark,
 cut it clean,
 let the hideous hole bleed,
 stuff it shut,
 plug it up,
 with numbness and forgetting.

But the birthmark connects us—
 still.
 Ancestors / descendants,
 before / beyond,
 time’s first and last,
 bound in silence,

¹⁶ Winnicottian reference here to “play.”

¹⁷ I used Yehoash and Sutzkever’s use of ash/ashes to inspire this line. Also, my mother was cremated and her ashes are in my curio cabinet in my livingroom.

¹⁸ Memory can also serve as a form of redemption. In Adichie’s *Half of the Yellow Sun* memory is used as a coping mechanism, “emphasizing how personal and collective recollections serve as both a means of preserving identity and confronting the haunting past. [...] It explores the concept of post-traumatic growth and resilience, showcasing how these individuals emerge from their traumas as stronger, more resilient beings” (“Memory, Trauma, and Healing in Chimamanda Adichie’s ‘Half of a Yellow Sun’”).

¹⁹ This is an allusion to Sutzkever’s poem “How come you don’t mention your Siberian father in your diary poems?” from *The Full Pomegranate* 194.

for eternity,
by an invisible string,
and its Stretch Marks.

"If you are still
here
then I exist, too,"
writes the poet as
blood-red,
the cardinal
chirps.

Voiced, the song of Lehar:
"Wherever I go, I feel your nearness,"
the opera singer,
a moon,
belts.

Now the pain must take another form.
Redemption is the body
learning another shape.
Pain turning green.
For us,
freedom fed by what we dare to know,
sun in the mind,
tears,
watering the root
of return.

Once a child's play thing,
held to a living mother's chest.
Now: ashes,
tucked inside a polished cabinet.
But the memory is stored,
still.

"Why don't you mention your German mother?"
I became her.

"Das Muttermal"

Es hat doch Wurzeln wie ein Baum
Tief in der Haut des Menschens
Aus der Erde des Seins
Aber wächst von Innerem bis Äuß'rem
Hat lange Ranken, die wachsen
Und mischen sich in deinem Leben ein
Und hinterlassen ihre Spuren
Verändern dein Leben

Eine runde Beule auf dem Brusthaut
Stammt aus einem Keim

Ein Keim, der aus den Ländern unseren Vorfahren kommt
 Die Ahnen -
 Ahnen sie, was nach und vor uns steht?
 Weil sie es auch überlebt haben?
 Haben überleben müssen?
 Diese Urwunde

Reiß das störende Muttermal gewalttätig aus.
 Schneide es mit einem Spitzenpfeil heraus.
 Lass das schreckliche Loch blüten.
 Stopf es mit Vergessen und Gefühllosigkeit.

Aber das Muttermal verbindet uns immer noch zusammen.
 Vorfahren und Nachfahren,
 Zukunftsseelen und Urgroßmütter,
 Vorläufer aller Zeiten mit
 Nachkommenden aller Welten,
 Verbunden für die Ewigkeit
 Durch eine unsichtbare Kette -
 Das Muttermal.

“Wenn du noch hier bist,
 Dann existiere ich noch auch”²⁰
 Schreibt der Stift des Dichters,
 Zwitschert der blutrote Kardinal.

“Wohin ich immer gehe,
 Fühle ich deine Nähe”²¹
 Äußert das Lied des Lehars,
 Schmettert die mondartige Opernsängerin.

Jetzt muss das Leid ein anderes Form annehmen,
 Um Erlösung und Verständnis zu erreichen.
 Eine Verwandlung des Wesens
 Anerkennung und Vergebung,
 Für mich und dich —
 Füttere deine wachsende Freiheit durch aktives Verstehen
 Gieß dein entwickelndes Wissen und Kenntnisse
 Mit heller Sonne und schuldigen Tränen

Einmal ein Spielzeug eines Kindes
 Auf der Brust einer kraftvollen Mutter.
 Jetzt ist es nur kaputte Asche in einem schönen Schrank.
 Aber die Erinnerung bleibt.

“Warum erwähnst du deine Deutsche Mutter nicht?”

²⁰ Translation of Sutzkever's 1942 poem “My Mother”

²¹ Franz Lehar, *Das Land des Lächelns*, “Dein ist mein ganzes Herz.”

Denn jetzt bin ich sie geworden.

“דער מוטער-צייכן”

Yiddish translation

עס האט וואָרצלען ווי אַ בוים
טיף אין דער מענטשלעכער הויט
פֿון דער ערד פֿון זיין
אבער וואַקסט פֿון אינעווייניק צו אַרויס
האט לאַנגע שטעקלעך²² וואָס וואַקסן
און זיך אריינמישן אין דיין לעבן
און לאָזן זייער צייכן
טויש דיין לעבן

א קיילעכדיקע בומפ אויף דער ברוסט הויט
שטאַמט פֿון אַ זוימען²³
אַ זוימען וואָס שטאַמט פֿון די לענדער פֿון אונדזערע אַבֿות
די אַוועס -
האסטו א מושג וואס ליגט פאר אונז און נאך אונז?
ווייל זיי האבן עס אויך איבערגעלעבט?
געדארפט איבערלעבן?
דעם אור-אלטן וואונד²⁴

גוואַלדיק אויסרייסן דעם באַליידיקנדיקן מוטער-צייכן.
שניידט עס אויס מיט אַ שפיציקן פֿיל.
לאָז דאָס שרעקלעכע לאַך בלוטן²⁵.
פֿיל עס אָן מיט פֿאַרגעסנקייט און אומגעפֿילספֿולקייט.

אבער דער מוטער-צייכן פארבינדט אונדז נאך אלץ צוזאמען.
אַוועס און אייניקלעך,
צוקונפֿטיקע נשמות און עלטער-באַבעס,
פאַרגייער פֿון אַלע צייטן מיט
די אייניקלעך פֿון אַלע וועלטן,
פארבונדן אויף אייביקייט
דורך אַן אומזעיקבאַרער קייט -
דער מוטער-צייכן.

"אויב איר זענט נאך דא,
דעמאָלט עקזיסטיר איך נאָך"

²² This was a word that proved difficult to translate into Yiddish. "Tendrils" in English was what I had intended.

²³ זוימען - Samen (German) - seed/semen/sperm (English) - This word also proved difficult to translate, as my original German word was "Keim." Using "Samen" gives it a distinct masculine tone when I was going for a more feminine one.

²⁴ "Urwunde" or "ancestral wound" was also difficult to translate into Yiddish or from German/Yiddish to English.

²⁵ In German, "bluten," "to bleed" in English.

דער פאָעטס פעדער שרייבט,
טשירפט דער בלוט-רויטער קאַרדינאַל.

"וואוהין איך גיי,
איך פיל דיין נאָענטקייט"
אויסדריקט²⁶ דאָס ליד פֿון לעהאַר,
זינגט די לבנה-ענלעכע אפערע זינגערין.

איצט מוז די ליידן אננעמען אן אנדערע פארעם,
צו דערגרייכן גאולה²⁷ און פארשטאנד.
א טראַנספֿאָרמאַציע פֿון דעם וועזן
דערקענונג און מחילה,
פֿאַר מיר און דיר —
נערן אייער וואַקסנדיקע פרייהייט דורך אַקטיוו פארשטאנד
גיסט אריין אייער אנטוויקלטע וויסן און סקילז
מיט העלער זון און שולדיקע טרערן

אַמאָל אַ קינדס שפּילציג
אויף דער ברוסט פון אַ לעבעדיק²⁸ מוטער.
איצט איז עס נאָר צעבראַכענע אַש אין אַ שיינעם שאַפּע.
אבער די זכרון בלייבט.

"פארוואס דערמאָנסטו נישט דיין דייטשע מאַמע?"
ווייל איצט בין איך געוואָרן זי.

Process, Analysis, and Methodological Reflection

This project originated in an offhand remark (“don’t drink your eyes”) that became an unexpected catalyst for exploring catastrophe, redemption, and the tension between imagination and reason. Although the line ultimately fell away from the final poem, it sparked the conceptual move toward a trilingual work engaging German, English, and Yiddish as sites of cultural memory and linguistic transformation. The project foregrounds translation not merely as linguistic transfer but as creative method: a movement among languages that reveals emotional and epistemological shifts. In this sense, translation functions as a form of epistemology, a means

²⁶ In German, “äußert,” “expressed” in English; this was also difficult to translate into Yiddish.

²⁷ “Redemption” was also a difficult word to translate into German and Yiddish. I finally settled on גאולה though that translates more to “Rückzahlung” in German, or “repayment,” which seems more transactional than “redemption.”

²⁸ “Kraftvoll” and “vibrant” was what I was going for here. This proved difficult to translate to Yiddish.

through which knowledge is produced rather than simply transmitted. Moving between languages exposes subtle differences in meaning, cultural context, and emotional resonance, prompting interpretive possibilities that would remain invisible within a single linguistic framework. As theorists of translation have argued, the act of translating does not simply reproduce meaning but reveals previously latent dimensions of a text (Benjamin), exposes the instability and slippage of meaning across linguistic systems (Derrida), and foregrounds the interpretive agency of the translator as an active shaper of meaning (Venuti). As Kwame Anthony Appiah similarly observes, what is translated is ultimately not the text itself but a particular interpretive path through it, reminding us that every translation reflects a situated reading of the original (Appiah). Each movement between German, English, and Yiddish thus becomes an interpretive inquiry through which questions of memory, inheritance, and loss emerge in new forms and new meanings.

The focus on maternal loss emerged through critical self-inquiry into catastrophe at an intimate level. Parental death can rupture identity formation, autonomy, and familial belonging; such experiences remain personally catastrophic even when not accompanied by visible violence. Choosing the mother's death, as well as the estrangement that preceded it, as a narrative and metaphorical entry point, the poem investigates how inherited wounds and concealed histories persist on and within the body. The birthmark, associated etymologically with *Muttermal* ("mother-mark") in German and with the Yiddish *דער מוטער־צייכן* ("the mother sign"), offered a potent central image through which to braid corporeality, lineage, and memory.

Within Jewish mystical traditions, bodily marks have occasionally been interpreted as traces of a soul's spiritual history, a concept that resonates with the symbolic use of the birthmark in this project. In Lurianic Kabbalah, particularly the teachings of Isaac Luria as recorded by

Hayyim Vital in *Sha'ar HaGilgulim* (“Gate of Reincarnations”), the doctrine of *gilgul neshamot* (transmigration of souls) proposes that souls return across generations in order to complete unfinished spiritual work or repair past wounds (*tikkun*). Within this framework, the human body can function as a visible surface upon which spiritual histories are inscribed.

As scholars of Jewish mysticism have noted, Kabbalistic literature frequently treats the body symbolically, mapping spiritual realities onto physical form and reading corporeal features as potential expressions of hidden metaphysical processes (Matt; Dennis). Although Jewish mysticism does not provide a systematic taxonomy assigning fixed meanings to specific birthmarks, the broader Kabbalistic view of the body as a spiritual text allows such marks to be interpreted metaphorically as traces of lineage, memory, and inherited spiritual experience. In the context of this project, the birthmark therefore operates not merely as a biological feature but as a symbolic “mother-sign” - a corporeal trace linking ancestors and descendants across generations, echoing mystical ideas that the body can carry the imprint of both past lives and ancestral histories. This interpretive framework complements the poem’s central metaphor of the *Muttermal* as a visible sign of intergenerational connection and inherited memory.

The work is in conversation with intergenerational trauma as articulated in Holocaust and post-Holocaust literature, particularly Avrom Sutzkever’s poetic negotiations of mourning, guilt, and maternal absence. In poems such as “My Mother,” Sutzkever renders the maternal voice as an enduring presence, insisting that “If you are still here, then I exist too” (Sutzkever). As Justin Cammy observes, Sutzkever’s own writing became a mode of resistance against erasure, a way to keep the mother’s voice present. That insight opened a generative question for this project: Might writing, especially writing in the mother’s maiden tongue, enact its own form of redemptive survival?

Literary and philosophical frameworks contributed further threads. The poem draws on metamorphic imagery of seeds, roots, and vegetal growth to imagine recovery after rupture. These motifs resonate with both Kabbalistic cosmologies, particularly the symbolic structure of the Tree of Life, and with literary traditions that use vegetal imagery to articulate continuity, regeneration, and survival. At the level of language, this symbolism also shaped the translation process itself. For example, the German noun *Keim* (germ, sprout, or generative seed) proved difficult to render across languages. In the Yiddish translation, the word זײַמען (*zoymen*), derived from the German *Samen*, carries additional connotations of semen or generative seed, introducing a more explicitly masculine resonance than the original German word intended. This lexical shift foregrounded the tension between biological generation and inherited lineage that runs throughout the poem, revealing how translation can subtly reshape symbolic meaning. As Appiah notes, translators continually negotiate between the literal meanings of words and the broader tonal, cultural, and sonic landscapes in which those words operate, balancing semantic precision with aesthetic and contextual considerations (Appiah). Similar vegetal imagery appears in other literary contexts, such as Bessie Head's agricultural symbolism, where seeds and growth become metaphors for renewal after historical rupture. Concepts of forgiveness and emotional transformation engage Spinoza's claim that redemption arises not through the erasure of suffering but through its recontextualization into active understanding. Winnicott's theories of maternal holding environments further complement the poem's attention to play, touch, and the continuing presence of the maternal body even after death.

Translation functioned as both poetic process and interpretive inquiry. Composing first in German, my mother's native tongue, created an affective distance necessary for expression, while translating into Yiddish and English revealed meaningful semantic slippages. Lexical

choices around terms such as “redemption,” “wound,” and “seed” required careful negotiation of theological, cultural, and emotional registers. Moving cyclically among the three languages exposed the poem’s evolving logic and emphasized the role of translation as an act of mourning and reconstruction. As Appiah suggests, translation can generate new literary meaning as words enter new relationships within a different linguistic system, creating possibilities that did not exist in the source language alone (Appiah).

Ultimately, this creative translation project aims to demonstrate how poetic form can braid personal experience with theoretical discourse and cultural history. Writing in three languages enabled an exploration of catastrophe and renewal across temporal, geographic, and familial lines. The poem thus seeks to inhabit the liminal space where the personal becomes historical, where memory becomes material, and where writing becomes a site of both reckoning and repair. Yet such repair cannot be understood as a restoration of what has been lost. Rather, writing becomes a way of reworking the traces of loss, allowing memory, grief, and inheritance to be revisited through new linguistic and emotional configurations. In this sense, the act of reckoning remains fundamentally unfinished. It evolves alongside the daughter herself, shifting as her understanding of her mother, her lineage, and her own place within that inheritance continues to change over time. What writing offers, then, is not closure but an ongoing process of rearticulation - an ever-renewed attempt to translate loss into meaning.

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