Shanghai (1942)

Shanghai --
The city beckons
With a thousand passionate eyes.
Neon lights dazzle
A marvelous rainbow.

Changing colors, moving
Glittering mercury.
Up and down, down and up --
An electric thunderstorm.

-- Buy, buy these cigars
The brand "Two Times F"!
-- Women don’t be fooled
Silks, socks, the brand "Blef."

On houses
On roofs
On chimneys
And still higher --
Buy! Buy!

Signal lights,
Messages
Call and pull, allure
Remind and caress
Buy! Buy!
And at the side
Runs
A man in harness -- a horse,
Feet barely touch the ground.
Behind him -- ten, hundreds more
Run, hurry, noisily.
They must run faster, faster --
Otherwise how to be sure
Though at night he runs
Even twenty times in a circle
Whether there'll be
A small bowl of rice.

--
"Your eyes, your glances
have caught me" --
He fell into the street, there he lays
Drunken sounds --

"International Bar"
-- Enter
-- Whisky, beer?
-- Well I prefer liquor....

-- How nicely you dance this waltz...
One, two, three
One, two, three
-- I kiss your swan-like neck
One, two, three
One, two, three
Please not so rigid,
Not nice like this...the guests
-- But you have strange
eyes...
Not here. My room -- higher...
upstairs...
One, two, three
One, two, three
"International Bar"...--

And outside
"Dear Sir, Sir,
I have not eaten so long...
Shadows at the wall
Pale hands are thrust:
Mister, food...food...
"

Above -- jazz music
And drunken laughter.
Below a tight cluster
China's daughters
Stand at the wall
Together with their mothers
And above mocking them
A large lit advertisement:
Buy! Buy!

Shanghai
Nanking Road
The city screams
From a thousand throats
And from a thousand eyes.
Even louder, shriller
Shouts respond
Scream China! Shanghai, scream!
The Lament of my Mother (1941)

Through oceans and countries,
Through closures and walls,
I see my mother's
Cracked hands.

I hear my mother's
Sobs and laments
-- Where are my children
Lost and alone?

I hear her sobs,
Am aware of her grief
And each painful tear
Like a stone on my path.

My foolish heart
Races back toward home.
The heart knows no borders
Or artificial fences.

The heart knows no structures
Protected by guards.
Break down the gate,
I'm at her door.

I meet my mother
Already old with grey hair.
She hugs me, a caress,
And says:

"Flown away, flown afar like birds in autumn,
Tell, my children, my life, to that land.
Only yesterday have I rocked your cradle
Singing songs for you about golden happiness.

Today you flew away like leaves in the wind,
Already you're homesick, is it the truth my child?
Good, at least you've returned
To my dreams, my longing, my golden happiness."

Together I was
With mother.
No longer solitary
No longer alone.

I feel every tear that drops
On my like a blow.
Only at mother's side is it good --
Good, so...good....
A Letter (1943)

A word, a word about me -- I'll come for sure,  
To me the great world's strange and tight.  
Each night on firmaments I write  
A fev'rish letter to you, "I long..."  

I mark with all the brightest stars  
The most beautiful, tender song of faith.  
And when you hear the rustling evening song--  
Know, that it brings to you my greeting.  

And if the sun will once neglect to shine,  
Is barely seen through foggy clouds,  
Know, that it was extinguished by the flames  
Reflected in my longing dreams.  
A word, a word about me -- I'll come for sure,  
My storms carry me far like grains of sand.  
In wandering I have found neither  
Clarity nor true pleasure...  

In fev'rish nights I hear your name,  
Your scorching tears my body burn.  
Each wind whispers a reminder,  
In every sound I hear your longing call.

Joseph "Yosl" Mlotek  
July 25, 1918 - July 2, 2000

These poems, printed with the permission of the Mlotek family, were written while Yosl Mlotek was a refugee in Shanghai's Hongkou Ghetto (after being exiled from Kobe, Japan shortly after his arrival there). It was here, in the Shanghai ghetto that he was to learn of the horrors of the Holocaust and the fate of his family in Europe. He, along with his brother, Avram, were two of the last Jews to meet and be issued passports from Chiune Sugihara before he was recalled back to Japan. Their sister, Sore, was the only other family member to survive the Holocaust having had made her way to Siberia.

A very special thank you to Zalmen Mlotek, artistic director of The National Yiddish Theater-Folksbiene, son of the late Yosl Mlotek.