

And if the letters are returned...

Translated by Freda Hodge (2015)

“Once a little bird
flew over distant seas“ ...
the child's eyes fill with tears,
weeping is left to its mother.

Let death be fruitful and multiply
as it marches with old man's limbs,
let the sounds of young fathers be silenced
like church bells at close of day.

Look, the moon has taken its own life,
it hanged itself on telegraph wires.
Day sits hunched over, held captive.
Naked clouds flee from the city.

They are the weak ones, who fear anger.
You repeat to yourself: "there's no law, and no judge!"
And it must not distress you that the stones in the street
cry out and go crazy from pain.

Thunderbolts wrap around Jewish windowpanes,
whirlwinds tear down locks and bolts.

The blazing synagogues are red doves,
which bear flaming letters under their fiery wings.

But how you will grieve when the flaming letters
cannot find their way, and return.

Your heart will waver and fall like a drunken ship,
and the sea will spit you out piece by piece.

And many years later on a night dripping with honey,
while a warm wind caresses the window,
a mother lost in thought will smile as she looks out
and with a lullaby she will rock her crying child:

“Ay lu, there was once a story,
Liu liu, the story is very jolly,
Ay lu, the story begins with
Ay lu-lu, a staff sergeant who was a king.”

ed.: this bitter comment on Germany's *Krystalnacht* (9.11.1938) was published in the
Warsaw Bundist newspaper *Folktsaytung* on 25.11.1938 - notes follow:

A Jewish mother has written to the father in a camp, but the letter is Returned to Senderí

The poem begins and ends with lines adapted from familiar songs; the inverted commas used in this translation are not in the original poem.

Contemporary readers would have recognized the phrase "There's no law and no judge" as a reference to the popular poem of I L Peretz "Meyn nisht di velt iz a kretchme", which thunders "don't think the world is without law or judge".

Germany's ruler Adolf Hitler had been a lance- corporal in the Bavarian infantry in the First World War.
