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## The Colossal Power of Memory and Transgenerational traumain “The Twentieth Century Riddle” by Blu Greenberg

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**Abstract:**

*“The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living”, said Marcus Tullius Cicero. Human life on earth becomes meaningful and accomplished when the treasured memories are preserved and transferred from one generation to the other. Memories are registered through the various forms of arts like painting, writing, filming, sculpting and photographing. Nevertheless, the memories of the victims of the Holocaust that are transferred to the second generation always bring eerie feeling to the hinge generation. This paper will reconnoiter the irrefutable power of memory among the transgenerational trauma victims in “The Twentieth Century Riddle” by Blu Greenberg.*

**Keywords:** Holocaust, Hinge generation, catastrophe, Postmemory, Transgenerational

The past lives in the present; the past was never really the past. The memories of the horrendous event of Holocaust that

happened many years before continues to haunt the humanity by multifarious ways. The embodiment of that catastrophe through narration has been a substantial medium so far.

BluGreenberg is an American writer who specialized in modern Judaism and women’s issues. *Black Bread: Poems, After the Holocaust (1994)* is her outstanding contribution to the literary field. The poem “Twentieth century riddle” is an extrusive poem taken from this collection. It is a subtle yet an ingenious satire on the strident effects of holocaust. The first reading of the poem creates a conventional meaning of an ordinary poem. But, once the readers comprehend the intended meaning in the poem, the essence of the poem’s satire turns out to be unparalleled.

The poem begins with a plain and straightforward question:



“Who is older than her  
mother? / Older than her grandmothers?”  
(Greenberg 89)

The answer also comes out to be  
very simple and straightforward. The poem  
describes a lady named ‘Lydia’.

Lydia.  
Auburn hair  
With gray-brown roots  
Wide green eyes  
Framed by soft crow’s-feet  
Fine skin  
With a wrinkle or two  
As befits a matron  
Of fifty-seven. (Greenberg  
89)

Lydia is 57 years old, with partly  
grey hair and hardly two wrinkles. She is  
considered as a person older than her mother  
and grandmother. Here, the re-reading of  
poem’s title suggests that the question is  
more of a riddle than a simple question. It is  
not a simple question anymore. The question  
and the answer are very tricky.

Lydia remembers her mother

.....  
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Lydia remembers the  
grandmothers

NagymamaSosha and Bubbe  
Clara

Two elegant Hungarian  
Ladies (Greenberg 89)

The grandmothers are from Hungary.  
The poem reveals the fact that they possibly  
could be Jews.

Taking her to the park

With her big brother of ten

(Ah, where is he now?)  
(Greenberg 90)

A mention of her big brother whom she has  
no idea about is yet another hint that either  
he’s lost or that he’s long dead for now.

Crowded with lotions and  
creams

Not a line in their faces

Skins fine, luminescent

Two elegant Hungarian  
grandmas

Who died without a wrinkle.  
(Greenberg 90)

These lines are clear evidence that, they did not die of old age but due to some other circumstances much before their last day. It is the memory of her mother and her grandmother that makes Lydia older than both of them. She is the living museum of her mother and grandmother.

Lydia not just remembers her grandmother and mother but the memories of holocaust that comes along with it. It is called as the 'Postmemory'. The poem is a tribute to the power of Postmemory. In *After Such Knowledge*, Eva Hoffman talks about the transferred memory or Postmemory:

The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth. It is also the generation in which we can think about certain questions arising from the Shoah with a sense of living connection.  
(xv)

For Hoffman, the knowledge and memories of catastrophic events that create collective trauma are transferred to the next generation or known as 'Postmemory'. She claims that they are a living connection between the past and the present. They draw a bridge between the past and the present through the transferred memories.

Though Lydia did not witness the Holocaust, she bears the memory of it that has been passed on to her from her ancestors.

The last two paragraphs reveal the exact year of their death – 1944.

“They all said a hurried good-bye /  
On a cloudless Budapest day, 1944 “  
(Greenberg 90)

On a hurried day, because they died a quick death which denotes the death in the gas chamber which was relatively quick. Lydia remembers her mother's final words. The words are written in Hungarian in the poem to bring out the essence of their identity.

Emlékezz

“Te egy zsidó vagy  
Drágálányom”

But tell no one  
(Greenberg 90)

Loosely translated into English as:  
“Remember !My dear daughter, You are a Jew , But tell no one”.The last lines of her mother mention the word ‘remember’ twice. The emphasis of the word ‘remember’ by her mother is an appeal of every Jew towards their next generation to remember their identity as a ‘Jew’ inspite of all the troubles that it brings forth. She warns her daughter not to forget her identity but also to be careful not to reveal her identity because it could get her killed anytime. The helplessness of her mother and the generation of Jews during the time of holocaust are invinciblyillustrated in these lines. In spite of their pride in their identity, their inability to proclaim it reveals the predicament of the Jews during the holocaust.

Like Lydia’s mother, the only tool through which all their pride in their identity and the pains that they went through could be passed on to the next generation is through ‘memory’. The memory is long living and it is by memory of her ancestors that she had carried forth, Lydia becomes older than her mother and grandmother. She

carries along the memory of her mother, grandmother and the holocaust,that makes her older than them.

Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation.( Hirsch 107)

‘Twentieth Century Riddle’ is a poem which strongly puts forth the power of memory especially postmemory of transgenerational victims. “To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them the second time” (Wiesel 46).

If not for the power of postmemory all the catastrophic events in the past will remain unsaid and voiceless. The Postmemory not only bridges the past with the present but also credits the sacrifices and sufferings of the ancestors by passing on their memories to the next generation. It is a quintessential phenomenon that the present generation attributes towards the lives of their predecessors' history.

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