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# Canvassing Generations: Art through Postmemory

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Canvassing Generations: Art Through Postmemory  
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**Abstract:** Investigated the legitimacy of postmemory, its relationship with art, and completed a creative project addressing the four generations of artists leading to the Norton family. What is postmemory? How does artwork allow for the conceptualization of memory? The research supported the existence of postmemory and led to an increased understanding, analyzing, and recreation of artwork from each of the previous four generations. This artwork served as a tangible form of my own postmemory.

### Introduction I

My Oma, at the time a child, rode her bicycle down a sidewalk in Germany. She saw a group standing about a block ahead and grasped that she was headed toward members of the Hitler Youth. She began to turn into the road, intending to cross the street, but they waved to her, calling her over. Scared, she cycled to them. They immediately engaged her in conversation and she realized: these were her classmates, and they were excited to see her. She was later told, “You’re fine, but then you’re not like other Jews.”

### Introduction II

Memories can be carried in objects, through memorials, photographs, and artwork. The last five generations of my family have been artists, leaving behind their visual memories. When I study their artwork I gain an understanding of how they saw the world. Their perceptions in turn color my own worldviews.

In an effort to understand the displaced memories I carry, I chose a piece of artwork from each of the previous generations of my family to interpret and recreate. These artistic reactions were based more on emotion and postmemory than on the literal content or medium of each piece. I found myself in a unique position to study postmemory through art, because of my third generation memory and a long familial trail of artwork. The purpose of this paper is to first outline the conversation on postmemory as it currently stands, and then to provide the visual and interpretative results of my experiential research project, *Canvassing Generations: Art Through Postmemory*.

### Postmemory

Psychology defines memory as the ability to procure, preserve, and recollect both information and sensation (Halas, 2010). This concept does not limit itself to the individual. Collective memory refers to the information absorption and application facilities of a group of people, and cultural memory narrows in on the memory of specific, established collectives. Cultural memory is typically associated with trauma. In the case of trans-generational trauma, the children of victims may exhibit symptoms despite their complete removal from the actual traumatic experience (Jilovsky). The study of postmemory reveals the impact of the first generation on their descendants.

When Marianne Hirsch proposed the idea of postmemory, she feared for possible misinterpretation of the word (Hirsch, 1997). The prefix “post” in no way indicates the remembrance of history. Postmemory is memory not through recollection, but instead through extremely powerful emotion with a direct connection to the past. Hirsch emphasizes the imaginative recreation of a narrative in response to a generation raised by victims. That generation emphasizes so strongly, and was immersed so completely into their parents’ psychological trauma, that they lose the boundaries between what happened before their birth and what is happening now. They may process new information in the same way as a victim. Postmemory is how they contextualize their perceptions.

Most discussion regarding postmemory revolves around the Holocaust. But it is important to inform that postmemory can refer to any widespread instances of trans-generational trauma following genocide or other traumatic experiences, such as exile from Palestine or even Southerners’ loss of identity after the civil war and their struggles with slavery (Abu-Lughod, 2012) (Edelstein, 2008). Usage of the term postmemory necessitates the trauma of a generation rather than a small group or individual. Hirsch agrees that the term postmemory may apply to other second-generation memories of cultural or collective trauma (Hirsch, 1997). However this paper will examine the postmemory following the Holocaust.

Postmemory begins with the first generation. This is the generation to experience the traumatic event firsthand, as both survivors and as victims (Van Alphen, 2006). As of 1998, of the hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors in Israel, nine hundred and fifty still remained in the hospital (Fishman, 1998). Psychiatrist Shalom Robinson of the Herzog University Hospital in Jerusalem said many suffered from “fragility, inability to cope with stress, and vulnerability from this massive prolonged trauma”. Avner Elizur, from Abarbanel Mental Health Center in Bat Yam agreed, “The Holocaust triggered a massive life-long psychological disintegration, leading in some cases to severe, chronic psychosis, schizophrenia, and affective disorders.”

Between 1933 and 1945, more than two hundred thousand Jews immigrated to the United States from Europe (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012). Between 1946 and 1948, ninety-six thousand more Jews immigrated as part of President Truman’s handling of the large number of displaced persons under the United State’s responsibility. Unlike most other large immigrant groups, the Jews did not arrive with large families. As in Israel, the majority did not end up in mental institutions, but all carried their traumatic memories. Their condition was at first called survivor syndrome, which is a pattern of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, social retreat, sleep disturbance, and survivor’s guilt. Survivor syndrome is encompassed by post-traumatic stress disorder.

Along with this first generation, there is argument for a “1.5” generation, maintaining a need to distinguish those who experienced the traumatic event at too early of an age to remember (Geller, 2002). The psyche of the 1.5 generation rests somewhere in-between firsthand memory and postmemory.

The first generation led to the second generation, whose clinical symptoms should be understood through the lens of their parents’ trauma (Van Alphen, 2006). Common diagnoses associated with the second generation include depression and social anxiety. During a talk at the Stanford Medical School in 1977 an Israeli psychiatrist said,

The trauma of the Nazi concentration camps is re-experienced in the lives of the children and even the grandchildren of camp survivors. . . . The effects of systematic dehumanization are being transmitted from one generation to the next through disturbances in the parent-child relationship. (Epstein, 1979)

These disturbances referred to parenting methods stemming from the psychiatric conditions of the first generation.

The postmemory of the second generation evolved in numerous ways. There were many methods of passing on the memories of the Holocaust. Some survivors healed through telling their stories, even to their children. Others passed on warnings without appropriate context. They taught by behavior. Even if they kept to themselves, their photographs informed the second generation. Usually postmemory follows a combination of these methods.

Eva Hoffmann wrote,

“...they also spoke — how could they help it?—to their immediate intimates, to spouses and siblings, and, yes, to their children. There they spoke in the language of family—a form of expression that is both more direct and more ruthless than social and public speech. . . . In my home, as in so many others, the past broke through in the sounds of nightmares, the idioms of sighs and illness, of tears and acute aches that were the legacy of the damp attic and of the conditions my parents endured during their hiding.” (Hoffman).

There is continuity, but she also suggests an element of interpretation. She learned as much from her parents’ silences and behaviors as others might learn from direct speech.

Similarly, Epstein wrote of her place in the second generation:

Like most survivors, neither [parent] imagined how, over the years, I had stored their remarks, their glances, their silences inside me, how I had deposited them in my iron box like pennies in a piggy bank. They were unconscious of how much a child gleans from the absence of explanation as much as from words, of how much I learned from the old photographs hanging on our apartment walls or secreted away in the old yellow envelope below my father’s desk. (Epstein, 1979).

The poetic nature of their descriptions depicts postmemory as indirect, formed in a child’s mind like an imaginative nightmare.

Marianne Hirsch is more inclined to explore postmemory through the context of photographs. Hirsch suggests that through a familial relationship with the first generation, personality and current memory is imposed on a photograph, giving modern life to a relic from the past. (Hirsch, 1997). In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Hirsch narrates her fixation on photographs in the home, asking the poignant question, “Where am I in this picture?” With this question she embodies postmemory because she understood what already happened to another person as something currently happening to herself. Hirsch also refers to the enormous power of photographs in *Maus*, in which three photographs are reverently disseminated.

Postmemory and its psychological implications are explicitly clear in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, the graphic novel literature that inspired Marianne Hirsch to coin the term postmemory (Hirsch, 1997). Art Spiegelman is the narrator, telling his father's survivor story from the second generation perspective. The story is framed by his own life as he interviews his father and readdresses their old tumultuous relationship. In the first scene, Spiegelman goes to his father, Vladek, for comfort after being left behind from his friends, to which he is told, "Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, friends!"

Spiegelman did not receive comfort or a push to catch up with his friends. Instead Vladek mocked the idea of friendship with his rigidly black and white views, teaching his son not to trust his peers or expect sympathy from his family. And why should he receive sympathy? To Vladek, being left behind by grade school friends was an insignificant problem. Nearly any difficulty becomes trivial when compared to the troubles Vladek endured during the Holocaust. Spiegelman learned from his father how to think like a victim without the personal experience of trauma. The contact of second generation children with their victimized parents was a strong influence on their emotional health, social abilities, and outlook on life.

*Maus* is a firsthand account of what Hirsch would describe as postmemory. Most of the basis for postmemory comes from personal accounts, case studies, and studies conducted in clinical settings. The conversation about postmemory is multidimensional. Not everyone agrees that the "second generation" is distinguishable from other immigrant children. *Comparisons of Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors, Immigrants, and Nonimmigrants on Measures of Mental Health* poses the question, Could "children-of-Holocaust-survivors syndrome" be more prudently explained as "immigration effect" (Weiss, O'Connell, Siiter, 1986)?

These researchers imply that the support for trans generational transmission of trauma needs a more empirical basis than case studies. They reference some previous experiments and report a lack of consistency in the results. One group of researchers compared the children of Holocaust survivors to Canadian children using implements such as the Srole Anomie Scale and Child Behavior Inventory, and found that the survivors' children report a "greater sense of anomie and feelings of alienation".



However other studies in 1981, 1971, and 1978 found no significant differences between children of survivors and those of immigrants.

Weiss, O'Connell, and Siiter sought to add to the answers, as they felt that it was unfair any conclusions of transgenerational trauma are applied to the general population when its data was obtained from clinical populations. They also recognized the possibility of a confounding variable in previous studies: survivors' children should be compared to immigrants' children, not just to the children of people born in the country. Perhaps any differences found would also be found in the children of any immigrants. So, they took a sample of twenty-five children of Holocaust survivors, twenty-five children of other immigrants, and twenty-five children of American-born parents to compare mental health. These subjects, mostly college students, were of similar age and education level. Each subject completed a series of established questionnaires, scales, and inventories. The researchers found no significant differences between the second generation survivors and the second generation immigrants in terms of alienation, anomie, feelings of guilt, and mental health.

These findings do not at all delegitimize postmemory. The immigrants whose children were involved in this study were survivors of World War II. Their decisions to leave their home country to come to the United States were based on personal, economic, and nationwide trauma. As stated earlier, postmemory applies to the generations following cultural trauma, and not just to the children of Holocaust victims. The second generation of the Holocaust is characterized by the specifics of their situation and not by the symptoms of their mental health, as those symptoms can apply to other types of trauma.

Postmemory extends to the third generation, the children of the children of the Holocaust survivors. At this point, the original survivors are scarce, and mostly consist of people who were very young during World War II. Postmemory as a result of parenting techniques is less common, as the original methods passed from the first generation are diluted by the second generation. Personal contact and intimate connections are less common. Therefore the bulk of postmemory in the third generation stems from photographs and memorials. Where does postmemory end? Does it extend a fourth generation? Is Jewish postmemory confined to the Holocaust?

The answer is that there is a Jewish tradition of postmemory. Jewish holidays are bent on reflection. For example Passover, where the Seder participant is ordered to remember history as personal experience, is meticulous in its reenactment (Sicher, 2000). Seder, a word meaning “order”, is a ritualistic feast that both refreshes the story of Passover and instructs exactly how to remember what happened. Using a parable, it tells the tale of four children attending a Seder. The second son asks, “What is this service to *you*?” He is called the wicked child, because he has disassociated from the story. He no longer considers that what happened in the past has also happened to him, and by doing so he fails to learn, change, or grow. He is told, “It is because God acted for *my* sake when *I* left Egypt.”

This parable teaches in simple terms that the story of Passover should be actively engaged with as a memory, not passively told as a history lesson. The Seder participant must consider himself the original victim as he follows the ritual of eating bitter herbs to experience the tears of the slaves and eats matzo to remember how quickly they fled.

From childhood, I have learned that memories are inherited. My postmemory comes from my second generation father, a trail of familial victimization in Germany, Poland, and Russia, and from the artwork my family left behind. As we transition from the initial background research into the creative project, so will this paper become more of a personal account.

I first heard the term postmemory in 2011. In that first exposure I felt the gaps in my mind close as everything clicked into place. I felt as though I suddenly understood my father, and I also got closure regarding my own displaced emotions. I have grown up with a deep-seated dread, sure that catastrophe is always right around the corner. Holocaust stories fill me with panic. I look for myself in photographs of my Opa and when I sit with my Oma I feel as though we went through something together. To learn that what I feel has a name and affects an entire generation enables communication.

At the start of my research in May of 2012, I traveled to Israel to connect personally to Judaism. There I took thousands of photographs and started a sketchbook. This visit was invaluable in its depth of artistic inspiration.

Once home, I began my research and creative projects. My great-great-grandfather on my father’s side inked the first two pieces of artwork that I analyzed. He

used Hebrew letters instead of lines or dots. Initially I chose to study his version of the biblical story of Solomon. In this scene, King Solomon displays his infamous wisdom when two women come to him, each claiming that the other stole her baby. He declares that it will be cut in half and shared equally. When one woman begs that it be saved and given whole to the other woman, while that other woman applauds the decision to split the baby, the King recognizes that it must be the virtuous woman's child.



I found it fascinating how my great-great-grandfather chose to depict each character. The King is the largest, the man is bigger than the pleading woman, and the lying woman is both the smallest and is off to the side. The King is the only character to have two colors and the guard is the only non-blue character. The power of men is emphasized above virtuosity.

When I visited the Western Wall in Jerusalem, I was not overwhelmed by its holiness. What defined my experience was the segregation between men and women. On one side, behind a divider, the men sung and chanted. I was entranced by their energy, but unfortunately I was forced to stand with the silent and often weeping women.

Later I stood with my American friends away from the wall. An Israeli man approached us as a wingman, because his buddy found my friend beautiful and wanted to convince her to stay in Israel, become an Orthodox Jew, and get married. While my friend went to talk to his friend (no, it didn't work out), the Israeli introduced himself to us to ease the tension. One by one my male friends said their name and shook the Israeli's hand. Last in the circle I introduced myself and reached out my hand, to which he

recoiled. I had forgotten that Orthodox men don't touch women that they aren't married to, and I respect this tradition, yet I was angered by his apparent repulsion.

I found my anger transferred to this second piece of artwork by my great-great-grandfather, in which Mordecai, the male, is bigger than Esther.



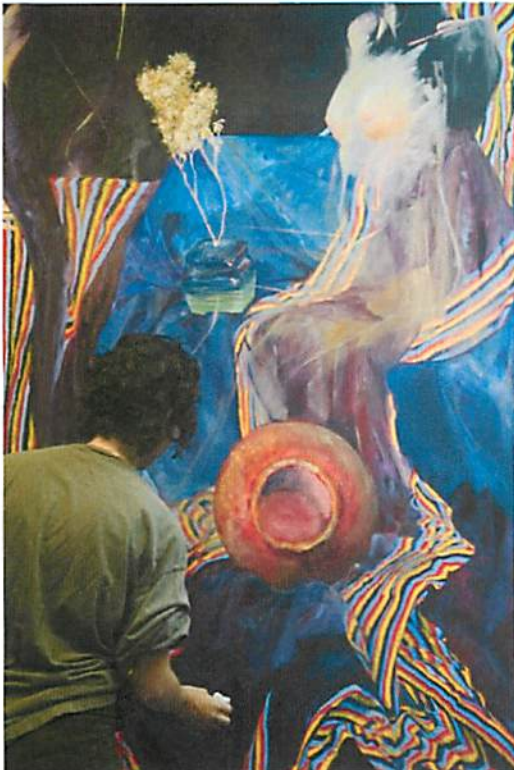
My anger at this piece stems from the content of its origin story. In the story of Purim, Esther, not Mordecai, is the heroine. She approaches the King on pain of death and saves the Jewish people. She does what no man was able to do and in doing so thwarts the plan of Haman, a male. I have never considered myself a feminist but the piece, my experiences in Israel, and the story of Purim resonated. These emotions informed the following painting, entitled *Esther at the Western Wall*.



Unfortunately I felt as though this one painting summed up my every thought about Israel and postmemory. It didn't help that I found the next piece, a still life by my maternal great-grandmother, to be rather uninspiring.



Gertrude Werner began painting around the age of sixty-five. I consider this to be her most accomplished piece because it has some character with its energetic stalks and high contrast. Yet hers was the only generation whose artwork did not invoke personal emotion. Eventually what inspired me was that at one point in her life she wanted to be a dancer, which led to this reimagining.



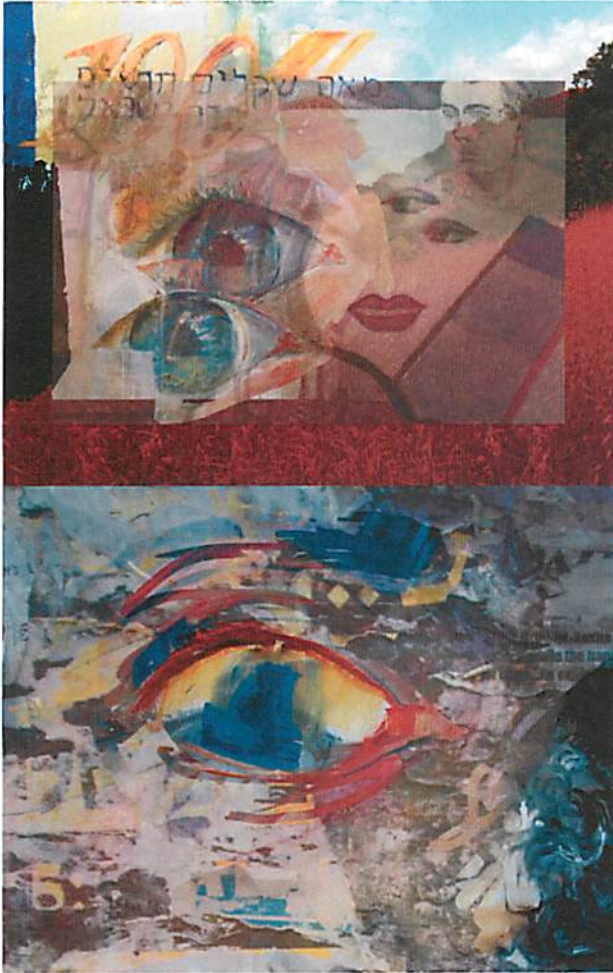
She was never a dancer, because she paused that part of her life to have a family. By the time her family was raised she was too old to dance and had to work anyway. She took up painting after her retirement, and ultimately received recognition for neither. Her painting is of a still life, but it's her life that I perceive as still. I painted her still body into a still life, and named it *Gertrude's Still Life*.

In the background of that painting there is a faded second character. Throughout my project I approached the idea of dualism. Each painting is of someone else's life yet I claim their experiences through postmemory inheritance. I am the shadowy figure and yet ironically, each piece of artwork is completely defined by me. They have no say in the inaccuracies of my perception.

However, this next piece has been described to me by my Oma many times, so my perception of it has at least a basis in accuracy.

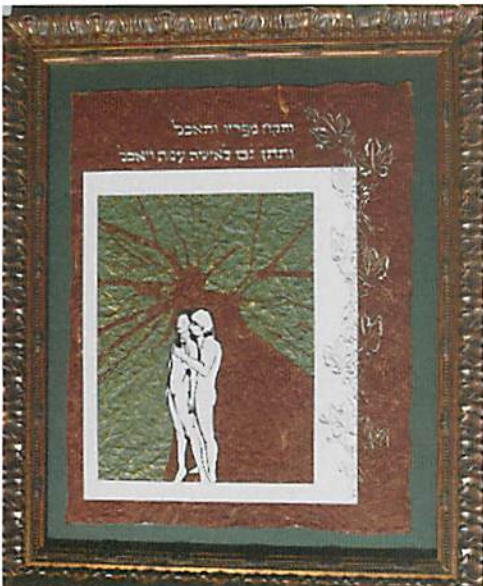


Eerily, in this painting my Oma talks about World War II and life as an immigrant yet completely excludes any mention of the Holocaust. In the distance, across the ocean, she painted an explosion that she says is Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Coins, symbolizing society's obsession with money, are a trail of death, directed by crossbones. The male model and the mannequin, paired with the makeup-coated eyes and lips, indicate peoples' fixation on beauty. My Oma tells me that this is meant to be a modern painting, which is her explanation of the blocks of color and the juxtaposition of images. I responded with two paintings, started with oils and finished digitally. These pieces are untitled.



These paintings, and the rest of my paintings as well, are not meant to be defined by the artist. They are instead contextualized solely by the viewer.

The last piece, by my mother, brought me full circle back to the Torah.



The characters in this papercut are Adam and Eve. This piece of artwork must be seen in person because its details are intricate and essential. Adam has a barbaric expression with his heavy brow and slack jaw. Eve stands proud and dominant, seemingly incognizant of Adam's arm around her and his body leaning on hers. The tree behind her is rich in texture and towers over Adam and Eve. I again responded with two paintings, entitled *Eve's Eden* and *The Tree's Escape*, respectively.





After responding to each of the four generations, I concluded with a sculptural piece to mark my postmemory, third generation from the Holocaust but fifth generation within my family of artists. This piece will eventually take the form of an installation.



As a whole, my body of work is meant to take the viewer from my own personal experiences into a broader context, where the lines between my memories and your emotions blur.

### Conclusion

I stood beside my elderly Oma, watching an old Jewish Russian couple through the window. She remarked bitterly, "Look at those people, see what they have done to the area. They call themselves Orthodox but who even knows what goes on inside their 'kosher' restaurants? Inside their homes? They are not really Jews."

The couple looked up, saw us and waved, shouting "Shabbat Shalom!" My Oma smiled, waved back, and said quietly, "But those two, such nice couple, they are different."