

## The Memory Game

“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake,” says Stephen Dedalus in the second chapter of Joyce’s *Ulysses* to the narrow-minded, anti-Semitic schoolmaster Mr. Deasy.

Thus in *The Memory Game* the Yiddish poet/composer/singer/carpenter Mordechai Gebirtig, his wife Bluma and his three daughters—Shifra, Basha and Lola—try to awake from their history, their nightmare. Their attempt is symbolized by the ‘memory game’ they decide to play—a self-inflicted and risky effort to relive the life from which they have been brutally torn away. Finding the words for the final terror of their earthly existence may dissolve the nightmare and thus liberate them from a past they have not been able to come to terms with. Then life may become bearable again.

But can they play this game? As they come closer to the end, the ‘game’, i.e. the telling of nothing but the truth, becomes increasingly difficult and Bluma wants to give up. The quarrel that follows is decided by Basha’s urgent cry: ‘we must play the game’. Bluma gives in and Mordechai resumes his recollections of the ‘nightmare’. Lola wonders: ‘Can we bear the truth?’ The truth is that Mordechai was shot dead by a German soldier who did not approve of the smile on his face. End of the game, a dead end in the most literal sense of the word. And history tells us that if it had not happened then, it would have happened a little later. Mordechai’s wife and daughters were deported shortly afterwards.

As every player in *The Memory Game* is dead from the outset, there can be no winner. The hope for ‘liberation’ from the horrors of the past is ‘hope against hope’. Mordechai Gebirtig and his family have not succeeded in awaking from the nightmare of history: in that sense their lives cannot be redeemed. What remains is Mordechai’s heritage: his numerous simple, touching, beautiful songs that may ‘liberate’ us in their rejection of all violence.

Henk Romijn Meijer, librettist