

## **Comic Book as History**

**Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Connection**

**With the Second Generation**

Beth Galloway  
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In theory and criticism concerning literature and film of the Holocaust, there has been a long debate concerning the propriety of specific genres of representation. The question lies in what constitutes a “just” and adequate depiction of the Shoah. The rise of Hitler and the Nazi party marked a turning point in German history: power was controlled with an iron fist and the unbelievable cruelty of the National Socialist state became a reality. The Jewish victims who survived the atrocities of the Nazi State from 1933-1945 became symbols for strength, courage and even luck during the post-war period and through the present. But how can one possibly begin to describe and represent their experiences? Art Spiegelman conveys his answer to this question with his comic books *Maus I* and *Maus II*, which tell the story of his father, Vladek, who survived the Holocaust. Although his work is a seemingly simplistic representation of his father’s tale, the books are a powerful account of both the Holocaust itself and its effects. Relationships between protagonists play a central role in revealing the effects this history has on all generations. To this end, one could argue that the two sons, Richieu and Artie, symbolize past and modern Jewish societies: innocent and unsuspecting Richieu, son of the happy pre-war Vladek, who died during the war, and troubled, depressed Artie, son of the altered post-war Vladek, illustrate the transformations within Jewish society and how its members have dealt with their past. Although the sons are merely vectors of this complex cultural evolution, they reflect the changes of a thriving community before the war to a troubled and struggling society after the war. Most importantly, the comic book literary form plays an important role in this

evolutionary process as a vital connector between first and second generation survivors; it is a popular medium through which to inform a wider audience about this terrifying period in history.

When *Maus I* was originally published, many critics deemed Art Spiegelman's work an insult to his father's past; they considered the book to be a shocking oversimplification of Vladek's story. However, when beginning to read the second episode, it becomes clear that the narrative is a kind of therapy for Spiegelman, both as a character in the story and as an author. Because he can tell his father's story to a wider audience, Spiegelman is able to relate not only his own history, but the history of the whole Jewish community as well. With the help of this simplified, yet powerful story the modern-day Jewish community can connect with former generations and make an attempt to work through this horrendous past.

Author Amy Hungerford attempts to address this idea: "Spiegelman uses the phenomenon of transmission to resume narration and, in the work as a whole, to build a Jewish identity around the Holocaust. [Psychologist Dina] Wardi uses the idea of transmission both for therapeutic purposes [...] and [...] to account for the 'essence of the Jewish nation.'" (Flanzbaum in 1999: 122) The theory of "transmission" that Hungerford proposes consists of the idea that the children of Holocaust survivors must cope with the history of their parents, because it is the only way to form a positive identification with the older generation and understand them. The Holocaust is a part of the first generation's legacy and has been bestowed upon Artie's generation; the children of survivors

have no option but to accept it. Author Joseph Witek explains further: "Though the tensions between Art and Vladek are unresolved at the book's stopping point, the motivations of both characters are clear and convincing...For Art, the writing of the Holocaust book has become his closest connection to his parents..." (Witek in 1989: 166-117) When one considers the connection between generations and its intrinsic difficulty, the bond between Vladek and his two sons becomes increasingly significant.

The relationship between Vladek and Art is an interesting mixture of love, dislike, misunderstanding, and, in the end, respect. In *Maus I* and *II*, Art struggles to understand how his father survived the Holocaust and why he chose to live his post-war life in the particular way he did. However, during the writing process, Spiegelman begins to realize that his father's history is indeed his own, and that he too is a survivor. Not only is this his history, but also the history of the entire Jewish nation and all generations. Yet, Amy Hungerford puts forth an important question: "But how can Art be a survivor? How can the children of survivors be survivors themselves? Trauma theory [...] has provided the answer. [...] The belief in specifically intergenerational transmission of trauma turns out to be a powerful technology for recruitment to Jewish identity..." (Flanzbaum in 1999: 121) The trauma theory Hungerford refers to has recently been a topic of considerable attention and provides a method for understanding the symptoms exhibited by second generation survivors who have inherited their parents' painful past. Essentially, this theory advocates the communication and

expression of the trauma to an understanding witness in an effort to overcome its painful and destructive effects.

But consider the question: if survivors themselves avoid confronting their own past, then who remains to complete this task? Gillian Banner comes to the conclusion: "The confluence of these images, the putting on of Vladek's coat and the appearance of the moon/spotlight is troubling as they seem to suggest that Art is being increasingly influenced by the time spent with his father, he is 'putting on' his father's past and the 'material' Vladek recounts, so that the impact of that past falls to a greater extent upon Art." (Banner 2000: 146) It is understandable that survivors' descendants must perform this task, while one can only imagine the shock survivors themselves must have experienced following the war. It is practically impossible to expect these victims simply to accept their own past, which is why Art is the perfect narrator to represent his father's life story. He did not know Vladek before the war and must therefore face the aftermath in order to understand his own history and, at the same time, his father's. By Artie taking on Vladek's role and accepting the task of coping with the past, Spiegelman illustrates the effect of the many changes on survivors and the consequences the second generation must endure. These consequences include the loss of identity and a distinct aversion to remembering the past.

Artie's older brother, Richieu, yet another victim of the Holocaust, also plays an important role in the book. Although Artie symbolizes the troubled first post-war generation, Richieu embodies a better time before the war, in which people were seemingly innocent and unknowing. As the young, "perfect"

(according to Art) son was killed during the war, so too was pre-war Jewish society. The wide-eyed Richieu is killed along with his culture's former personality, and Artie, the depressed and confused man who lives on, is dealt the task of coming to terms with the past and helping his community recreate their identity. James E. Young summarizes this idea: "For Spiegelman, the very period of Holocaust was not merely the sum of Jews murdered or maimed but also the loss of all that came before." (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2003: 32) The loss Young mentions encompasses not only the people who were murdered, but the entire Jewish pre-war culture, including belief and trust in people and God. The proof of this argument lies in the fact that the vast majority of the European Jewry no longer lives in Europe. Once-thriving Jewish communities are simply gone, like small Richieu. However, the problem is also that survivors themselves could not accept this loss. By creating *Maus*, Art Spiegelman accepts his role as a symbol of post-war Jewish society and as the bearer of the task of memory and transmission. Because many survivors are either unwilling or unable to directly express their Holocaust trauma, their children must forge ahead and continue the process. They must find a way to integrate their parents' history into their own lives in a non-destructive, non-traumatic manner. Young explains: "Indeed, Spiegelman is both fascinated and repelled by the way he can actually assimilate these stories so seamlessly into the rest of his life [...] Can we keep such stories separate, or do they seep into the rest of our lives – and how corrosive are they?" (Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer in 2003: 40) As Young suggests, there is a possibility that one can interpret these horrifying narratives

and learn from them. Such stories have played a critical role in the lives of the second generation.

While other second generation members have chosen to complete their work of mourning, or *Trauerarbeit*, through media such as sculpture or film, one must wonder why Spiegelman chose a comic book, arguably the most simplistic form of mass literature, and a form perhaps least conducive to Holocaust depiction, to tell his father's story. One possible answer to this question is that he realized a comic book would be his best means to deal with the past. Gillian Banner notices the changes between *Maus I* and *Maus II* and the effects on Spiegelman: "What becomes clear in *Maus II* is that in many respects, Art has no alternative, he is compelled to tell Vladek's story with something like a survivor's compulsion. Whereas in *Maus I*, it is possible to form a view that Art's relationship with Vladek's story is as controlled as his relationship with Vladek himself, such a view is not sustainable on reading *Maus II*. Vladek's story is with Art all the time, it has become Art's story too." (Banner 2000: 153) While the book becomes Art's story, it also becomes the story of the reader and other members of the second generation. The comic book is the medium Spiegelman selects to tell his own history; it is only natural that he would choose the same medium to tell his father's. From the beginning, he knew that a part of his father's story belongs to him. To this end, Banner writes: "Vladek's past, in the form of memories, is represented simultaneously with Art's present, permitting correspondence and negotiation between their very different lives. This format allows dilemmas concerning truthfulness and voyeurism to be recognized, rather

than repressed.” (Banner 2000: 140) When one reads *Maus* it is rather easy to identify with the protagonists. And through this connection one begins to understand that Vladek is only telling his tale; Art must assume responsibility for the story and realize the consequences of it in order to work through them. As Banner suggests: “Vladek has got on with life, in a manner and to an extent of which Spiegelman/Art has been incapable. Spiegelman’s ‘prologue’ suggests that the impact of the Holocaust may have fallen more heavily on the son of the survivor than on the survivor.” (Banner 2000: 136)

Though it is a medium he is intimately familiar with, and his natural choice to tell Vladek’s story given his comic book writing talent and experience, Spiegelman understands above all the meaning of Holocaust literature in comic book form. Consequently, these books function not only as a way for Spiegelman to complete his *Trauerarbeit*, but also as an attempt to familiarize a larger and wider audience with the Holocaust. The reader must also realize that the power of the books lies in his own imagination. As Joseph Witek writes: “Art tells Vladek, ‘I want to tell *your* story, the way it really happened,’ then proceeds to depict Vladek’s passage through the hell of the Holocaust in a comic book with Jews and Nazis as mice and cats. In so doing he embarks on a project which ultimately proves that sequential art is a medium whose potential for truth-telling is limited only by the imagination and the honesty of the men and women who use it.” (Witek 1989: 118) What Witek so clearly identifies is the reality of Spiegelman’s work. History’s most powerful tool is imagination; when one learns about even one event in history, that understanding can only be as vivid as the

learner's imagination. Alternatively, one might consider that traditional forms of Holocaust representation have somehow lacked the imaginative power that precisely the comic book is able to provide. The beauty of the comic book medium is its ability to allow the reader to embellish in the way most effective and memorable to him. Once the reader identifies with the images and accepts the reality they depict, he can begin to understand how imperative it is to teach this history and learn from it. This is likely Spiegelman's goal: to teach each person about this period in history in the manner most befitting the individual, so that the consequences will be understood and an event like the Holocaust will never be repeated.

Aside from its use as a teaching tool, the comic book form has several other important attributes: an uncomplicated format that allows for access to a wider reading audience; a modern-day artistic style directly linking the past to the present; and assimilating the history of the Shoah into contemporary Jewish culture, marking the transformation of recollection and memory. The historical representation of the Holocaust in a medium such as a comic book has incited numerous outcries because it appears so informal and seemingly simple. Gillian Banner remarks: "It is also intriguing that this medium, which is usually employed to depict fantastic and incredible events, has here been successfully employed to represent real occurrences, emphasizing the extent to which the Holocaust bears a uniquely paradoxical nature, being, for many, unimaginable, unbelievable, yet true." (Banner 2000: 132) As Banner points out, this literary form ordinarily chronicles fantastic events or "people". But as noted earlier, Spiegelman depicts

a reduction of history, one which the vast majority of readers can understand and with which they can identify. Banner continues: "This medium also encourages and enables the reader to recognize more fully that for survivors the Shoah was never over or safely consigned to the past." (Banner 2000: 132) In this way, history itself assimilates to the culture it is now a part of; it is like the post-war Jewish community because it too has changed. The Shoah and its effects continue to impact the second generation, making it vividly clear that even the recollection of history cannot emerge unscathed from an event like the Holocaust. Spiegelman's literary work is an introduction to a new form of memory. Like the caricatures at the end of *Maus II*, the gravestones stand in recognition of the death of traditional memory.

Aside from the evolution of memory, Spiegelman's choice to record his father's story in such a popular form of mass literature is also significant because the comic book is such a typically American genre. When one reads the history of the Shoah in a comic book, one connects this history to the second generation – that generation which must strive to come to grips with its parents' troubled past. Young remarks:

Others will say that if the second or third generation wants to make art out of the Holocaust, then let it be about the Holocaust itself and not about themselves. The problem for much of these artists' generation, of course, is that they are unable to remember the Holocaust outside the ways it has been passed down to them, outside the ways it is meaningful to them fifty years after the fact. As the survivors have testified to *their* experiences of the Holocaust, their children and children's children will now testify to their experiences of the Holocaust. And what are *their* experiences of the Holocaust? Photographs, film, histories, novels, poems, plays, survivors' testimony. (Bernard-Donals and Glejzer 2003: 42)

And yet there is another important aspect of this argument: the comic book, not only outside the traditional literary canon, is also an obvious link to American history and culture. *Maus* is itself a child of the second generation – the generation of assimilated Jewish children who must work through the history of their parents and overcome this past. Banner arrives at the realization: “In a sense, Art is not only the conduit of Vladek’s story, but also perhaps of the emotions which Vladek has, of necessity, had to repress; Art is Vladek’s proxy and *Maus II* is Art’s story of the Holocaust.” (Banner 2000: 165)

In his mission to tell his father’s story in a comic book, Art Spiegelman creates an implied linkage between the second generation and their parents, who have been either unable or unwilling to undergo the necessary work of mourning. Two sons, Artie and Richieu, play important roles as symbols of the Jewish community before and after the war. Most importantly, *Maus* is a form of therapy for Spiegelman. His comic books are his method of understanding and coming to terms with the past – a method of carrying out his *Trauerarbeit*. As Banner writes: “The answer is that in *Maus* Spiegelman aims at a literal truth that photographs or realistic drawings would fail to convey: the truth that not only Jewish identity but all identities arise from the Holocaust and, more specifically, from telling Holocaust stories...” (Banner 2000: 124) With his use of the comic book form, Spiegelman also ties this dark history of Jewish society during the war with its American children. In this way, Vladek’s history becomes Art’s history, together with the other children of the second generation.