
The Holocaust and the Graphic Novel

Using *Maus* and Its Narrative Forms to Bring Credence to the Medium

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The following paper was originally written with the inclusion of sample images from *Maus*. We regret that, due to copyright laws, we cannot reproduce these images in *Kedma*. However, *Maus* is readily available at most bookstores and libraries.

When Art Spiegelman and his wife Françoise Mouly published the first issue of *RAW* magazine in 1980, neither expected much success for their biannual anthology of “underground comix.” By the second issue, their work had sold out across the East Coast.¹ What differed from the first and second issue besides readership? That second issue contained Spiegelman’s new comic *Maus*, which recounts how Spiegelman’s family survived the Holocaust and its lasting aftershocks. It tells the story of Spiegelman’s parents, Vladek and Anja, who move to New York after surviving Auschwitz in order to raise their second son Art after their first son, Richieu, died during the early stages of the Final Solution.² Art grows into adulthood in the shadow of his parents’ past, tormented by experiences he did not have and unable to relate to his troubled parents. As we learn throughout the book, Art is motivated to write *Maus* and inspired to interview his father as a way to better understand his parents. He wants to understand his parents’ struggles and come to terms with his mother’s suicide.

Spiegelman's *Maus*, as an intergenerational memoir, serves not only as a Holocaust testimonial, a biography of Spiegelman's father, and his own autobiography, but also as an extended essay on the pitfalls of "trying to represent the unrepresentable," the atrocities of the Holocaust in comic book form.³ In its simplest terms, *Maus* is a Holocaust memoir written in comic book form where the Jews are mice and the Germans are cats. To artistically represent the Holocaust in any medium besides photographic evidence presents "something of an aesthetic quandary."⁴ No matter how austere and reverent the tone, illustrations of the Holocaust can seem redundant or trivial against the realism of photographs. Spiegelman realizes that he is unable to compete with the real life horror recorded in newsreels and documentaries; he confronts this issue through simplistic drawings that require the reader's constant attention. In this way, Spiegelman is able to create a work that is "psychologically probing, dramatically gripping, and artistically ambitious."⁵ He elevated the comic book to the graphic novel, a medium that is fully capable of emotion, remembrance, and healing. *Maus's* great influence on later graphic novels of the Holocaust attests to the fact that the graphic novel is an appropriate, authentic, and historically correct medium to discuss the Holocaust.

The term "graphic novel," popularized in the late 1970s by veteran cartoonist Will Eisner in an effort to attract a new audience to his book-length projects, signifies a movement rather than a form.⁶ This movement's goal was to take the form of the comic book, which had "become an embarrassment to graphic artists," and elevate it to a more ambitious and meaningful level.⁷ Spiegelman's employment of the "graphic novel" appears to be at odds with the gravity of the memory being conveyed. Art, the character in the novel itself, worries that "reality is too complex for comics."⁸ However, it is questionable whether any medium exists that might adequately "contain the uncontainable or represent the unrepresentable."⁹ The graphic nature of the images allows the reader to experience the event in the present rather than imagine the events as existing separately in the past.¹⁰ Spiegelman's medium, then, successfully

allows the Holocaust to retain contemporary resonance, giving credence to his choice.

As innovative as depicting the Holocaust in illustrative form may seem, it is not without precedent. The creation of the comic book could not have occurred had it not been for the influx of Eastern European Jews into New York and other parts of the United States in the early twentieth century. Jews from the Old Country, fleeing European *shtetls* and pogroms, found a safe haven in New York's Lower East Side. Given both their parent's adherence to traditional and strict religious laws as well as the American desire for personal liberty, the children of Jewish immigrants grew up conflicted. They tried to invent a new identity that would merge the memory of their parents' experiences in the Old Country and their own, new lives on the streets of New York. With the creation of this new self, a new form of expression emerged: the comic book. Comic book giants, such as Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, Joe Simon, Jack Kirby, and Stanley Lieber all grew up as Jewish misfits. Their ethnic background and status as children of immigrants precluded them from fully assimilating into their American communities. They were two steps removed from the American mainstream but "more poignantly in touch with the desires and agonies of that mainstream than those in the middle of it."¹¹ In an attempt to free themselves of this conflict, they invented a cultural art form that could reach people of every class, age, and ethnicity, a form that would become an essential part of American culture.

The creation of the comic book corresponded to the times: in the 1930s, the world was desperate for a hero. The rise of Adolf Hitler's Third Reich threatened all of Europe, and especially its Jews, and the rest of the world seemed oblivious to the danger. It is not a coincidence, then, that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's *Superman* was published in June 1938, only months after Hitler's *Anschluss* of Austria that March.¹² During this era, American Jewish artists and writers began to create super-powerful characters who were "dedicated to protecting the innocent and conquering evil."¹³ These were

characters that could save helpless people when no one in “real-life” would. The creation of noble characters who assured good’s triumph over evil was a means of reconciling contemporary world events in a world where evil always seemed to win.

The superheroes invented during this time, and the comic books in which they lived, have many underlying Jewish themes. A good example is the baby, who would eventually become Superman, who was sent away from his home planet, Krypton, in order to avoid the mass destruction of his people, just as many Jewish babies were sent via the *Kindertransports* in the late 1930s.¹⁴ Perhaps the Jewish creators of these comics meant to send the message to whoever was reading them that it was necessary to take action in order to save the Jewish people of Europe.

Though Will Eisner, the so-called “inventor” of the graphic novel, said that he “never thought about being Jewish” when he did his work, many other artists consciously brought their Jewish history and agendas to the forefront, and used their influence and readership to try to sway public opinion.¹⁵ Jack Kirby and Joe Simon had heard about Jewish suffering from heart-wrenching letters written by relatives trapped in Europe.¹⁶ They used *Captain America* to strike back against the Nazis and boost American morale. The transformation of the main character, Steve Rogers, a meek, bullied child who grew up during the Great Depression and into Captain America gave readers a hero with whom that they could easily identify. Too sickly to enlist in the Army, Rogers volunteered for a “top-secret military medical experiment known as Operation: Rebirth.”¹⁷ During this experiment, Rogers was injected with “Secret-Soldier Serum” by a Dr. Reinstein and became Captain America. One of the superhero’s early assignments was to destroy a Nazi agent named the Red Skull.¹⁸ The tale of a submissive boy who gains courage and saves lives has many parallels to the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, which had occurred only two years earlier.

Even *X-Men*, which was not published until the 1960s, features strong Holocaust undercurrents. In *Classic X-Men* #19, published in 1978, Magneto,

the antagonist mutant in the story, reveals the motivation behind his evil character: “I endured one death camp...in Auschwitz...I will not see another people fear what they do not understand and destroy what they fear.”¹⁹ Magneto is plagued by the fact that he could have stopped the Nazis in Auschwitz if only he had been aware of his mutant powers. He adopts the “never again” dogma when he assumes the role of supervillain, vowing to control and destroy humans before they destroy mutants.

In this way, the subconscious discussions of the Holocaust and the atrocities committed by the Nazis in these first comic books predate *Maus*. These early comics also debunk the popular criticism of Spiegelman’s portrayal of his father’s story as “stark, disturbing, and unprecedented [by being] an episodic tale of the Holocaust in an anomalous format: cartoon panels.”²⁰ The Holocaust and the Jewish struggle had been discussed previously in the comic book form. What made *Maus* so different, however, were Spiegelman’s choices of narrative form and the novel’s formal qualities, including anthropomorphic characters and his desire to maintain historical accuracy.

Spiegelman first wrote *Maus* for the 1972 comic anthology *Funny Aminals* [sic].²¹ In this three-page strip, Spiegelman recalls a bedtime scene in which his father, Vladek, substitutes Holocaust stories for nursery rhymes when putting Art to sleep. Like the later, longer version of *Maus*, this original piece used the cat-and-mouse metaphor, but with a much more detailed, expressionist style. When Spiegelman started drawing the longer version for *RAW*, he rejected this style because it dictated to the reader too much how to feel.²² After he had finished six chapters, Spiegelman attempted to find a book publisher for his work. Rather than go through the normal comic distribution channels, Spiegelman sought a reputable publisher so that his work could overcome the stigma of “low art.”²³ After being rejected by “every publisher on the East Coast and beyond,” Spiegelman was finally able to see his work in book form through a “back door, second submission” to Pantheon Books.²⁴ *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History*, published in 1986, was met with

both critical and popular acclaim. While some critics wondered whether “a medium whose most pervasive representatives are the perennial best-sellers Snoopy-the-dog and Garfield-the-cat [could] possibly interest serious readers,” most were pleased with Spiegelman’s risk-taking.²⁵ Critics expressed “delight [in] Spiegelman’s mastery of cartoon technique.”²⁶ Most were quick to point out that Spiegelman’s “unique method neither trivializes nor glosses over the unknowable horror of his subject.”²⁷ Literary scholars and critics generally applauded Spiegelman’s genre, medium, voice, and choice of representation, agreeing that telling the tale in the form of a graphic novel did not diminish the authenticity of Spiegelman’s story.

For all of its near-universal accolades, however, *Maus* was not always understood. Some more traditional Holocaust commentators argued that Spiegelman’s choice of the comic book form “trivializes the events and reduces the characters to stereotypes.”²⁸ Hillel Halkin, reviewing *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* for *Commentary* in 1992, argues,

The Holocaust was a crime committed by humans against humans, not – as Nazi theory held – by one biological species against another...To draw people as animals is doubly dehumanizing, once by virtue of the symbolism and once by virtue of graphic limitations.²⁹

Halkin’s objections assume a literal reading of the character’s animal faces, most of whom are alike. Unlike other reviewers, Halkin did not perceive the animal metaphor as simply a symbolic agent as opposed to a literal representation. Harvey Pekar, a graphic novelist and a contemporary of Spiegelman, was also critical of the anthropomorphic features of the work and believed that the work would have had more impact if people, instead of mice, were used.³⁰ To this Spiegelman responded:

Ultimately, what the book is about is the commonality of human beings. It’s crazy to divide things down the nationalistic

or racial or religious lines. And that's the whole point, isn't it? These metaphors, which are meant to self-destruct in my book - and I think they do self-destruct - still have a residual force that allows them to work as metaphors, and still get people worked up over them.³¹

For those who do not understand or believe in Spiegelman's metaphor, *Maus* loses all meaning. It is only by exposing the metaphors and the storytelling devices that the reader can begin to see the work's remarkable traditional strategy of relating oral narrative as accurately and authentically as possible.

To Spiegelman's detractors, the most unnerving of his storytelling techniques is his decision to draw Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, and other ethnicities as specific, stereotypical animal forms. Derived in part from the use of Zyklon B as rat poison, the vernacular and visual stereotypes of the Third Reich (i.e., Jews as "vermin"), and the all-American cartoon figure of Mickey Mouse, Spiegelman's anthropomorphication may seem crass to those who do not identify with its genius.³² The choice to turn people into animals, as the Hitler quote that opens *Maus I* makes clear ("The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human"), toys with biological determinism by metaphorically turning "ethnic and nationalistic conflicts into natural predator/prey relationships."^{33, 34} Spiegelman's detractors believe that he runs the risk of mystifying the historical bases of European anti-Semitism and German imperialism by showing cats simply fulfilling their natural roles as predators. Worse yet, detractors believe that the persecution and extermination of the Jews may be written off as a simple consequence of their own, "natural," mouse-like timidity.³⁵ Instead of being labeled as "inappropriate," the metaphor should be read as a comment on the "dehumanization of victims that allows genocide to occur."³⁶ This metaphor can be extended and viewed conversely, by giving credence to the popular belief that the Nazis were "animals" and not human. Ultimately, Spiegelman wants the reader to understand that the assignment of "race" as a method of segregating people is irresponsible and utterly destructive.

His metaphor is an ironic comment on this faulty assumption.

Spiegelman's metaphor plays with stereotypes, exposes their absurdities and lies, and ultimately destroys itself, thus exemplifying the senselessness of Nazi racial theory.³⁷ The fallacy of representing cultural differences as an outward trait (Jewishness as mousiness, for instance) is repeatedly thrust in the reader's face as a problem.³⁸ One way that Spiegelman shows the inadequacy of the metaphor, and thus racial theory, is by portraying his father with a pig mask trying to disguise himself as a Polish gentile. This masquerade is problematic considering that Vladek *is* Polish, but in Nazi racial theory and in Spiegelman's metaphor, individuals are given only one distinct ethnic identity despite belonging to many groups of ethnicities or nationalities. Spiegelman further shows the metaphor's futility in a scene in which Art is asked, "If your book was about ISRAELI Jews, what kind of animal would you draw?" and he responds "I have no idea...porcupines?"³⁹ Identity cannot translate into one static sign.

Maus deconstructs the anthropomorphic metaphor even more by showing Art throughout the work as a mouse, a man, and a man in a mouse mask. Meanwhile, "real" animals – horses, rats, and dogs – appear side by side with Spiegelman's metaphorical ones. Art even directly refers to the faults of his metaphor when he draws "real" animals, asking, "Can I mention this, or does it completely louse up my metaphor?"⁴⁰ This unusual, direct engagement forces the reader to see the metaphor's artificiality. Moreover, Spiegelman's characters never refer to each other or themselves as anything but human. The reader is the only one who is privy to this literal masquerade. *Maus's* animal metaphor authenticates Spiegelman's account of the Holocaust by calling attention to its own artificiality.⁴¹

Photographs of actual humans appear as well, further dismantling the metaphor. Spiegelman's inclusion of three "human" photographs authenticates *Maus* by offering "analogical images of 'real' human beings."⁴² These photographs corroborate the truth of the story being told. While the presence of the real

photographs in *Maus* goes against Spiegelman's anthropomorphic techniques, they act like "corroborative references," showcasing the validity of his story.⁴³ The photographs serve as reminders of the reality of Vladek's story, pulling the reader back from any fantasy world that reading *Maus* might have created. The first photograph, and the only photograph in *Maus I*, that confronts the reader is one of 10 year-old Spiegelman and his mother, Anja, in Trojan Lake, New York, in 1958. The photograph is part of a larger comic *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, written by Spiegelman after Anja's suicide and prior to *Maus*. This photograph concretely testifies to a mother-son relationship that otherwise exists only in the book's past tense. Unlike the Anja we have come to know through Vladek's description, the Anja in this photograph seems happy. When we look at Art Spiegelman in the photo, we do not see angst or anguish; the legacy of the Holocaust is not part of his psyche. The four-page strip from 1974 about Spiegelman's own mental anguish portrays human characters in a fevered scratch-board technique, thus undermining Spiegelman's dominant animal metaphor by exposing the absurdity of racial theory and giving credence and validity to his artistic choices.^{44, 45}

Maus II: And Here My Troubles Begin is sandwiched by two photographs of the past: one of Richieu, Art's murdered older brother, and the other of Vladek, Art's father, after he has left Auschwitz. The photograph of Richieu, to whom *Maus II* is partially dedicated, is presented at the very beginning of the novel and prepares the reader for Art's discussion of his brother several pages later: "I didn't think about him much when I was growing up...He was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parent's bedroom...The photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble...it was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn't compete."⁴⁶ Art knows nothing about his brother. Richieu has been reduced to a static, "unknowable figure, an 'it,'" in an old photograph.⁴⁷ Like the photograph of Spiegelman and his mother, the photograph of Richieu sets the second of volume of *Maus* in a historical context, reinforcing the authenticity of the text.

The final photograph featured in *Maus* comes only two pages before the end of *Maus* and features Vladek in a “new and clean” concentration camp uniform.⁴⁸ The “human” Vladek appears shockingly real, in contrast to “his minimalist ‘mouse’” form throughout the text.⁴⁹ The neat, handsome photograph tilts out of the comic book frame at an angle, intruding into the drawn panels and the white space of the border of the page.⁵⁰ The angle of the photograph’s placement and the black space behind it amplifies its importance as an artifact. The image is shown in *Maus* after Vladek and Anja have been liberated, but are still separated. While Anja anxiously waits for news of her husband, whom she assumes is dead, Vladek has the portrait of himself taken so that he can send Anja proof of his survival. In the climax of this scene, Anja receives a letter from Vladek with the photograph enclosed and cries out, “my God – Vladek is really alive.”⁵¹ The photo foreshadows their final reunion and is an “object of great symbolic heft in the Spiegelman household.”⁵² “Anja kept this picture always,” says Vladek. “I have it still now in my desk!”⁵³ To the Spiegelman family, this photograph symbolizes hope; its inclusion in *Maus* is especially poignant because it links the reader to Vladek’s and Art’s story – the reader is forever part of their history. Spiegelman’s inclusion of the photograph of his father is an “ingenious instance of a text striving for authenticity by deliberately *writing against itself*, exposing the boundaries and limits”⁵⁴ of his art. With the three photographs, all doubts as to whether the people depicted in *Maus* are truly people or just characters are erased.

The inclusion of photographs is not the only way in which Spiegelman is able to validate his account of the Holocaust. The narrative form of the graphic novel allows Spiegelman to take artistic liberties and express his father’s story in a truer way than oral narrative or written prose might have allowed. Spiegelman not only tells his father’s story, but visualizes it as well. The comic book form permits Spiegelman to draw the reader’s attention to discontinuities and connections that are difficult to render in prose. At the same time, the flexibility of the format means that the structure can be set

aside whenever necessary in order to provide emphasis or to manage material that may not otherwise be easily managed.⁵⁵ Relying upon sparse black lines and monochromatic color alone, Spiegelman is able to conjure the survivor's landscape with rough sketches, black silhouettes, and white space.⁵⁶ The pictures in the comic book frame lack detail but not depth; the low-definition medium enhances the involvement of the reader.

The speaker's emotion is conveyed via speech balloons with various degrees of intensity implied by letter size. Capital letters are always used for Vladek's story, representative of the emphatic reality he has experienced.⁵⁷ Spiegelman employs "cinematic style" to play against the traditional linear and sequential format of the comic book. Instead of a left-to-right reading of the page, Spiegelman will often show vertical top-to-bottom dialogue, as well as change the standard frame size to emphasize a particular aspect of the story, and cross out the borders/"gutters" to show a passage or jump in time, like Art and Vladek's conversations juxtaposed next to Vladek in *Auschwitz*.⁵⁸ These techniques allow the reader to jump into the text immediately so that words and images sit alongside each other, attaining simultaneity and equality.⁵⁹ Spiegelman is careful not to overdo his formal techniques, never dictating emotion to the reader, and refuses to fill in the picture so that the reader is left with the terrible knowledge of things that cannot be known.

Spiegelman designed panels that average two inches in height and uses this dimension to his advantage, creating emphases and effects through sudden changes in an otherwise uniform presentation. When Vladek and Anja see Nazism for the first time, its impact upon them and their accompanying fear emerges through the abruptly changed panel dimension. In a similar way, Spiegelman is able to reconstruct the magnitude of Vladek and Anja's arrival at the gates of *Auschwitz* by simply allowing his drawing to escape the page boundaries. The contrast of this drawing with the repetitive frames shown throughout the book, along with Vladek's simple narration – "And we knew that from here we will not come out anymore" – emphasize the enormity of their

arrival.⁶⁰ The lack of page margins or page numbers emphasizes the Holocaust's inability to "obey formal rules" and allows Spiegelman to in some way represent the "unrepresentable."⁶¹ These two depictions of the "unrepresentable" highlight the illustrative form as superior to other methods of testimony because it has the ability to convey a wide range of emotions and memory in a single image.

The use of diagrammatic representations also demonstrates the ability of the comic book to visually describe maps of hiding places that would be awkward to convey in prose or oral testimony. The diagrams also attest to Spiegelman's attempts to achieve authenticity by showing the reader exactly what is being portrayed rather than just a description of it. When Vladek describes to Art the setup of the bunker in which he and his family hid, he finds himself frustrated over the inadequacy of the oral description and insists that Art "show to me your pencil and I can EXPLAIN you...such things it's good to know exactly how was it – just in case."⁶² Vladek proceeds to draw a diagram for Art that is recreated for us by Spiegelman. The diagram, drawn in Art's spiral notebook, is showcased in a tilted panel that overlaps and is obscured by the two above it, creating an "illusion of volume and sense of intimacy (as if these found objects have been mounted in a diary or scrapbook)."⁶³ Although the reader recognizes the distinctive, mostly lowercase handwriting as not belonging to Vladek but Art, the reproduction of the actual drawing by Art shows the importance of it. Through the addition of this diagram, as well as maps, tickets, and photographs, *Maus* becomes not just a comic book but also a biographical and autobiographical documentary. This lends further validity to Spiegelman's attempts to claim authenticity for his genre choice.

"Spiegelman's scrupulousness" as a painstaking researcher is further portrayed when he allows doubts to arise regarding Vladek's account.⁶⁴ In one instance, Art's research and Vladek's own story disagree over whether or not there was a camp orchestra playing while prisoners in Auschwitz marched to work.⁶⁵ Vladek remembers "only marching" while Art insists that the presence of a camp orchestra is "very well documented."⁶⁶ Spiegelman illustrates the

inconsistency of his father's narrative by showing prisoners marching in front of the camp orchestra in one panel and, in another panel underneath, a longer procession of prisoners, whose marching rows obscure the orchestra completely with the exception of some instruments peaking out above the prisoners.⁶⁷ Thus Spiegelman upholds his own version of events while his use of visual detail implies an explanation for Vladek's divergent view: there were simply too many bodies between Vladek and the orchestra for that detail to register in Vladek's memory. By directly juxtaposing both of these memories, the reader can see that historical evidence and oral history do not always match up – both versions need to be told to ensure historical accuracy. Unlike straight prose, the comic book allows the artist to show one description while alluding to another without complicating the reader's understanding.

Spiegelman's portrayal of his father, himself, and their relationship accentuates the conscientious effort to accurately depict events and memories. Spiegelman does not portray his father as a hero or a saint but rather a flawed human being. While Vladek himself never seems to remember a "shamed or humiliated self," Spiegelman is sure to show his imperfections so that he can debunk the popular concept of the "heroic" Holocaust survivor.⁶⁸ Vladek remembers himself as a resourceful and determined individual, always doing things for the best, making decisions, making choices, and acting rather than being acted upon.⁶⁹ Spiegelman shows us a man with physical and emotional scars, vestiges from concentration camps, who helps others only when it benefits him personally. Vladek is often difficult to deal with and even more difficult as a source of testimony, due to the fact that his past frequently impinges on his "present," influencing his thoughts and actions.⁷⁰ Spiegelman's fidelity to the unvarnished truth is apparent in his unsparing portrait of himself as a sometimes-petulant son and his father as a generally insufferable human being.⁷¹ Indeed, the self-absorbed and thoroughly unpleasant Vladek comes off as something of an ethnic stereotype: "In some ways, he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew."⁷² Yet, for all of his miserly ways and somewhat absurd antics,

Vladek is shown as a caring individual, reminiscent of the past and hopeful for the future. Spiegelman challenges his medium by refusing to portray his father in a stereotypical “comic book” manner. Despite the color scheme and the cat-and-mouse metaphor, Vladek is neither black-or-white nor does he belong to one ethnicity’s particular characteristic features. He is a unique individual, not a cartoon character, and a fully realized human.

Vladek’s portrayal is made even more multifaceted by his recorded testimony. Spiegelman keeps Vladek’s testimony true to his speech; in fact, part of the power of *Maus* is derived from Vladek’s word order and evocative accent.⁷³ His first person voice-over is devoid of oratorical flourish or self-pity, remarkable in its exactitude and lack of bravado.⁷⁴ As shown in the CD-ROM version of *Maus*, very little changes between the recorded version of Vladek’s testimony and the written version in *Maus*.⁷⁵ Spiegelman differentiates between Vladek’s past and present comments, capturing the distinctly foreign sentence order of Vladek’s narrative in the present while changing the conversations of the past into correct grammar. In this way, Vladek’s speech stays historically true. While in Europe, Vladek would have spoken Polish, Yiddish, and German with the correct word order, which would have been reflected in the translated English that Spiegelman reproduces. However, in America, Vladek speaks with a specific Yiddish-English dialect, as reflected in the actual recorded testimony given by Vladek and duplicated by Spiegelman in the pages of *Maus*. Thus, the reader is assured that Vladek’s story is being presented in the graphic novel as authentically and accurately as possible.

Coupled with the authentic portrayal of Vladek is Spiegelman’s depiction of himself and of his relationship with his father. No matter how close Art is to his father’s story, he is still able to maintain a degree of separation from it, to the extent that he can see it as “material.”⁷⁶ Art seems less interested in his father as his father than as the object of a story that must be told. This objectivity, although somewhat callous, allows Spiegelman to stay true to his task. In spite of his desire to remain detached, however, Spiegelman cannot help but feel

guilty over making *Maus* and profiting off of his family's misfortunes and the "staging" of the Holocaust.⁷⁷

Feelings of guilt about writing *Maus* frequently emerge in the second volume: Art confides to Françoise, his wife, his sense of inadequacy in his attempts to reconstruct the reality of the Holocaust, compounded by the fact that he is doing so in comic book form.⁷⁸ Spiegelman shows us himself at his lowest point, seeking help from a psychiatrist who is himself a survivor. Spiegelman spares no detail in showing Art's suffering and anxiety. His emotional desolation – "Mostly I feel like crying" – is boldly showcased for his readers.⁷⁹ Art's tortured present, shaped not only by his own history but the act of historiography, the writing of *Maus*, is eased only when his psychiatrist tells him that he is the "real survivor" for having surviving his father's constant ridicule.⁸⁰ It is only by freeing himself from the guilt that his father indirectly imposed upon him (because of the Holocaust) that Art can continue to be objective and show the reader an unadulterated account of both Vladek's life and his own.

While Vladek is incapable or unwilling to recognize and acknowledge the hurt that Art has felt, Art is able to forgive his father and move on. That Spiegelman remarks that the only way he has been able to maintain a relationship with his father is through this work, speaks to his desire to produce a deeply true representation.⁸¹ Once again, the unbiased portrayal of himself and his relationship with his fathers shows that Spiegelman has nothing to hide. His story is as true as possible, and is able to be represented clearly and appropriately within the graphic novel form.

The graphic novel as an appropriate medium to discuss the Holocaust is demonstrated not only by *Maus* itself, but also by later graphic novels that it inspired. The Association of Jewish Libraries lists seven graphic novels about the Holocaust written since *Maus*, not to mention the countless others written on Jewish themes.⁸² Of the seven listed, all are presented using simple inked or penciled black-and-white drawings. None replicate *Maus*'s use of

anthropomorphism, preferring to show stylized humans instead. Joe Kubert, author of the graphic novel, *April 19, 1943: A Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, imagines what his life would have been like had his parents not left Europe before the Holocaust. Yossel, an artist and Kubert's speculative self, chronicles his time in the Warsaw Ghetto by illustrating the life and death around him, much like Vladek's oral narrative illustrates his own life. Kubert's intention was to "first pencil then ink" his drawings, but after doing preliminary sketches, he found that there was an "immediacy" in the pencil drawings that was important to retain.⁸³ Like in *Maus*, Yossel's life is graphically, yet simplistically, depicted. Images of sketchily-drawn, emaciated camp prisoners haunt the reader, while tiny details in each image force the viewer to look closer despite wanting to look away. *Yossel* does not follow the generic comic book form. Instead, it relies on large, frameless images of people with very little background information to tell the story. While different from *Maus* in style, *Yossel* is able to depict authentic emotion and transcend its comic form. Without *Maus*, Joe Kubert might not have had the courage to create this work.

Maus II concludes with both an end and a beginning.⁸⁴ Vladek has finished recounting his story to Art and ends *Maus* by saying, "I'm tired from the talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now..."⁸⁵ Indeed, the emotional journey that Vladek and Art had undertaken through the creation of *Maus* is over, yet healing still needs to occur. Art is finally able to come to terms with his troubled childhood and the memory of his brother. This is evidenced in the reproduction of his parents' tombstones, which are appropriately inscribed with their dates of birth and death, and his own time frame, 1978-1991, the years in which he began and finished *Maus*. It is almost as if by "burying" *Maus*, putting to rest his emotional journey, that Spiegelman is able to begin a new life, free from his familial burdens. Vladek and Anja's physical (though not mental) survival of Auschwitz no longer casts a long shadow over Spiegelman's own life. Through this cathartic event, Spiegelman concludes his quest to represent the "unrepresentable." At the end of the work, the reader, too, is left

with a sense of conclusion and satisfaction. Questions of authenticity and the appropriate nature of the graphic novel feel answered. The work itself, not just through its complex narrative forms but also through its simple honesty and starkness, answers all doubts as to whether the graphic novel is an appropriate, authentic, and historically correct medium to discuss the Holocaust.

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Notes

1 Arie Kaplan, *Masters of the Comic Book Universe Revealed* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2006) 113.

2 Art Spiegelman, *Maus I: My Father Bleeds History* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986) 109.

3 Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005) 139.

4 Thomas Doherty, "Art Spiegelman's Maus: Graphic Art and the Holocaust," *American Literature* 68(1996): 71.

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