

# [Maus: memory and what it means](https://assignbuster.com/maus-memory-and-what-it-means/)

While Art sits at his drawing board, a pile of emaciated Jewish bodies lies below him, seemingly unnoticed while reporters and businessmen climb over them, (Maus II. 41). These bodies represent the grave nature of Spiegelman’s subject matter, the millions of dead Jews demanding that their story be told, and that their trauma not be downplayed. And at first glance, as we see roughly drawn, animal versions of soldiers fighting in one of the most terrible wars in history, it may appear as though Spiegelman’s book does just that.

But as we read deeper into his novel, we soon discover the depth that his medium provides in its opportunity for an enlightening perspective. Through the use of this medium Spiegelman effectively shows that the Holocaust has affected more than those who experienced it. The children and grandchildren of the survivors have their own stories to tell, the experiences of those who lived through the Holocaust didn’t simply end with emancipation, they continued in ways we can only imagine.

In certain parts of Maus, some events Spiegelman writes about are not directly his father’s. In these scenes, Vladek did not experience everything first hand; instead, he either heard rumors by general word of mouth or heard about things that happened to his friends or family. For example, when the Germans were taking children to Auschwitz, a scene in which a Gestapo officer becomes violent with a kid is drawn somewhat vaguely in the comic. The German’s action of hurting the child is mostly out of the frame; the reader cannot see the child’s face. In the last panel of page 108, the reader can again see that his memory is imperfect and vague as a text bubble is covering most of that scene. The text reads, This I didn’t see with my own eyes, but somebody the next day told me (Spiegelmen, Maus I 108). Speigelmen carefully makes the artwork of these panels less clear to remind the reader that the memories we can retrieve are only a fraction of a larger occurrence. Another example of portraying the patchiness of memory occurs in Maus II, while Vladek is in his first concentration camp. Spiegelman’s father recalls a fellow prisoner that would always complain that he is German and therefore is unjustly being held there. In two sequential panels, the complaining prisoner is depicted as a mouse and right after as a cat. The image in the later panel is more faded than the first, and again there are text bubbles from Spiegelman and his father’s present day conversation covering much of the picture. When Spiegelman asks whether or not the prisoner really was German, his father admits that he didn’t know: Who knows. It was German prisoners also…But for the Germans this guy was Jewish! (Maus II 50). Without the comics accompanying the dialogue of this scene, the reader might not know that there is a degree of uncertainty to Vladek’s story. Through the use of combined pictures and narrative, Spiegelman is able to assert that memory is naturally imperfect. With this assertion, however, Spiegelman provides a certain level of honesty to his father’s story. Vladek doesn’t claim to know everything that happened, but his point of view still gives an important insight to what the Holocaust was like for many Jewish people.

Speigelmen’s imprecise drawings of the animals in his comics also help to communicate the events of the Holocaust. Depicting the people involved in the Holocaust as animals alone is a strategic tactic to help describe the nature of the events that took place. The obvious cat and mouse metaphor represents how the Germans treated the Jewish as their prey. The animals, too, symbolize the inhumanness of the living conditions and torturous situations Jewish people, and anyone in the concentration camps, were forced to endure. The use of comics allows Spiegelmen to utilize animals to complement the story in such a manner that would not work, or not work as effectively, in prose alone. In Maus I, when Vladek and Anja are hiding, Anja is frightened by the rats that infested their hiding place. On the last panel of page 147, a very detailed rat is located at the forefront of the picture; this reminds the reader that the animals in Spiegelman’s story are only filling the places of actual humans that lived this event. In his article, Remastering the Past: Art Spiegelman and the Second Generation, Versaci describes the purpose of Spiegelman’s loose usage of his animal metaphor: (Spiegelman) never invit(es) us to mistake the memory of events for events themselves (Young, cited in Versaci 1999). The animals remind the reader that this story is only a representation of the events. Spigelman is not trying to recreate the events exactly. Spiegelman’s use of animals is a unique method to form the memories his father tells to him. Because the animals are not as detailed as the rat on page 147, it also helps the reader remember that, though they are not drawn as such, the people of the Holocaust were actual people. The use of comics to depict that the characters of Maus I and II as animals helps Spiegelman communicate the events of the Holocaust in such a way that provides a deeper understanding of those characters as humans.

Through comics, Spiegelman was able to create an easily understandable, but still powerful, memory of the Holocaust. By revealing the conversations with his father and his feelings towards writing the story, Spiegelman was able to create an honest retelling of the Holocaust. He did not report any event outside of his father’s perspective, and even then showed uneasiness that he could not tell of things he experienced himself. In this way, Spiegelman creates memory, and doesn’t claim it to be more than it is. He provides the reader with only what he is told and makes sure to describes his feelings about retelling it. In this way, his limited connection to the Holocaust still provides the reader with a clear and strong sense of what it’s participants lived through.

Spiegelman, Art. Maus I: A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986. Print.

Spiegelman, Art. Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began. New York: Pantheon