

The holocaust survivor



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Even in his old age, Vladek still does his best to take care of himself as he pedals on his bike. This tendency was hard-wired into him during his time in the concentration camps: only the fit and the strong survived as they were valued over those who were weak and sick. Artie has clearly talked about chronicling Vladek's life during the war before, and Vladek suggests he sticks to what he is good at instead, apparently reluctant to reopen old wounds.

In the fifth panel of the page, Vladek's prisoner number can be seen: one of the few remaining tangible reminders of the horrors he endured in the camps. It also hammers in the fact that Vladek is a survivor and that the Holocaust as it is for all survivors will always be a part of him.

Artie is Jewish; however, he is not a Holocaust survivor like his father. Vladek may be in denial or does not realize it, but Artie knows that Vladek's experience as a survivor is a tremendous responsibility. Artie knows he is not fit to tell Vladek's story, he has never met any of the people in Vladek's life and does not have all of the information necessary to authentically depict the scenes Vladek describes. However, that does not change the fact that Artie's family was almost wiped off the face of the planet during the Holocaust and he feels an obligation to preserve Vladek's memories out of respect for the suffering he endured and ensure the atrocities of the Holocaust are never forgotten. However, it is also worth noting that Artie's first question about his father's past shows how little he truly knows about him and how fragmented their relationship is. He does not even know how his own parents met. This foreshadows more unrest to come in later chapters. It is also a stark contrast from Vladek's life where familial bonds were an integral part of human life, even going so far as to sustain them and

kept them alive. Artie is clearly distant from his family and very independent of them.

Vladek and Mala are not happy together, but her and Artie seem to get along reasonably well. Artie treats her with respect and ignores Vladek when he tries to speak poorly of her, suggesting that perhaps Mala is not as bad as Vladek says she is. Artie's stories about food and the dinner table hint at deep tension and brokenness and unhappiness in his family that everyone present at the table wishes not to address.

Both Artie and Vladek's relationships have been fractured by the ruin of the Holocaust and the trauma brought by Anja's suicide. However, they are both selfish and neurotic, and both are too proud to address their shortcomings. The Holocaust's effects on Vladek are also present in almost every aspect of his life, especially in his interactions with Artie. It is apparent that even from the beginning of the first novel where Vladek asks Artie to test the sincerity of his friends by locking them together in a room with no food for a week, that the Holocaust has shaped Artie's entire life. He finds himself unable to relate to many of his father's seemingly strange habits and mannerisms. Artie even tells his wife Françoise that he sometimes he could have been in Auschwitz with his family so he could better know what they went through and how it impacted them.

Vladek is shown to be controlling and presumptuous by pitching Artie's coat. He believes he knows better than Artie and Artie like a young child cannot make his own decisions. Vladek still thinks of Artie as a child despite the fact he is very much grown up. Artie tries to prove himself a man by berating

Vladek but he is still forced to accept the hand me down, and like a child, he still has to what Vladek wants, even though it aggravates and that he is an adult.

Artie strives to be as honest and upfront about Vladek's shortcomings as he can. He knows that despite all of the admirable qualities Vladek displayed, Vladek is not an uncomplicated, flawless hero and it would do Vladek a disservice to depict him as such. However, an unambiguously positive portrait would serve also allow Artie to vent his frustrations towards Vladek, which often seems to be the case. Artie is also distant from the love and compassion of his Jewish roots that his family displayed during the war even when they had little reason to live or persist living. This disconnect does not enable Artie to relate to what Vladek does or even see the good intent behind his actions although presumptuous.

4.) Vladek grows sick of hiding and wishes to be treated like a human once more. His frustration is justified, but regardless, he displays remarkable recklessness and stubbornness in asserting his decisions. He does not make an effort to understand Anja's anxieties nor does he exhibit any sympathy towards her.

In such times of persecution, familial connections and friends were a crucial aspect to Vladek and Anja's survival. Parents, siblings, cousins, and friends all helped one another in any way they could even if they were not close before the war. While he is insensitive and reckless in this particular panel, Vladek still cares deeply for Anja, and Anja even states in a letter in Auschwitz that the fact he is alive is the only thing keeping her from

throwing herself into the electric fence. All they had was each other, and Jewishness as Artie knew it became synonymous with survival under these circumstances.

Artie is sharing his childhood insecurities with Francoise and how uncertain he was about his relationship with his parents. It also reveals the living's tendency to glorify or valorize the dead. Richieu did indeed die a tragic death, but he was still an ordinary person like Artie. Vladek and Anja's laud of Richieu was indeed a coping mechanism but revering his memory created tension among the living that was almost never resolved.

Despite how hard Vladek has supposedly tried to forget about the Holocaust, he can recount the events in extraordinary detail and often cannot help becoming emotional as he relives his memories. He weeps when he remembers four of his friends hung in Sosnowiec and displays profound, parental grief when speaking of Richieu. Vladek displayed love and compassion constantly towards those around him, and that is what makes his memories so painful. Love like it did for so many Jews during the Holocaust, gave their lives meaning when the tyranny of the Nazi regime had taken all other reasons. Because Vladek and Anja loved so profoundly, they consequently hurt and mourn deeply as well. Nevertheless, comparing Artie to the memory of Richieu was unhealthy and contributed to Artie's inferiority complex and widened the gap between him and Vladek.

This panel portrays a number of different reactions to Vladek's life which perhaps represents how contemporary generations view the Holocaust. Artie remains firm in compartmentalizing his life and Vladek's, keeping them

distant from one another. Francoise is sympathetic and tries to be very kind to Vladek in light of what he had to endure. The grocery store manager likely wished to end the conversation early and give Vladek what he wanted and instead of hearing the tales of cruelty and tragedy that Vladek had to endure.

Both Artie and Vladek have a duty to share their experiences with the world. Both the survivors and those whose lives were touched by the tragedy have an obligation to share. By sharing, they contribute to the larger narrative of the Holocaust and help generations to come to make sense of the tragedy. Artie wrestles with whether or not it is right for him to share these experiences at all as he was not present and feels it is often not his place. The stories of the living, stories of triumph and overcoming impossible odds are often told, but in doing so, the perspectives of the dead are often forgotten. Artie is afraid he will misinterpret what Vladek tells him and in doing so dishonor the living and the dead. Nevertheless, while he cannot relate to the Holocaust the way that Vladek can, he has been molded by the tragedy, and the legacy of the event transcends generations. The Jewish people as a whole share it. While he is apparently willing to use his past to his advantage, Vladek still feels compelled to help Artie create an account worthy of the truth and gives those who cannot speak for themselves a voice.

The mask that Artie wears is symbolic of his feeling of falsehood. He does not feel like he is worthy of his identity as a Jew and feels as though the story is not his to tell that he is profiting off the dead. He is unable to disconnect himself from his book, and his book persona has become intertwined with his

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real self. The dates he names show the passage of time as well as touching upon the thought of life and death and how they are interlocked in regards to the Holocaust.

Artie is overwhelmed by the demands of success and his fear of doing the survivors and those who have perished a disservice. His ears and hair are visible from behind the mask he wears. The head of the mouse connects Jews over all nations and generations which suggests Artie feels as though he is a fraud and is hiding his true self. He feels as though he is unlike his parents and other Jews. This shows his anxiety about profiting off of a story that he feels he has no right to tell.

The tombstone shows that Vladek and Anja are reunited in death. There is undoubtedly pain and complication that will persist after Vladek's death, but the peaceful grave quells these concerns. This is clearly a tribute to Artie's love and forgiveness towards his parents. Artie knows that death does not resolve the relationship between him and his parents, but it is still a sign that Artie has moved forward and that love persists despite the conflict they endured in life.

Artie has relinquished his anger and respects their memory peacefully. His story does not have an easy or pleasant ending, but Artie acknowledges the fact that he needs to let go. Artie's peaceful release does not placate his wounds and suffering nor does it mend what his parents endured. The significance and depravity of a story such as their's perhaps has no redemption. The last page shows that Artie must settle for some semblance

of a resolution and learn to live with pain and anguish when he is unable to vanquish it himself.