

# Illustrating the trauma of a man: art spiegelman

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“ I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip!” an anthropomorphic mouse— Art Spiegelman— tells his mouse wife. How can one translate the events of Auschwitz into “ wacky” characters and hyperbolic situations? In fact, Art Spiegelman himself says in a Tribune interview: it’s “ the kind of project (that) when people first hear about it, they roll up their eyes and say, ‘ This guy’s sick.’” However, the first volume of Maus was received positively when published in 1986, surprising to him, and the public. It went ahead and won the Pulitzer Prize, a first for a graphic novel, and has since been used a resource for Holocaust teaching.

While the topic might seem unusual and even insensitive to some for a graphic novel, Spiegelman’s choice of medium gives us an insight on the raw reality and misery of World War II through art, while portraying the effect it has had on a man’s life in addition to the guilt his son feels for having a better life. Spiegelman’s portrayal of his father’s experiences draws what words cannot say, experiences that would not hold up in mere words the way they do in illustration. He draws the dead bodies of people, of children, piled up to cover the bathroom floor; people forced to stand, sleep and defecate shoulder-to-shoulder next to a stranger. These are experiences that only most of us can imagine, but they were the reality of prisoners. Perhaps what is most unique about the Maus series is the characterization as the author uses animals to represent nationalities, though it is simultaneously one point of major criticism because it might be promoting stereotypes.

In “ Mauschwitz”, Spiegelman metaphorizes the German persecution of Jews as cats chasing mice (Germans as cats and Jews as mice), in addition to the <https://assignbuster.com/illustrating-the-trauma-of-a-man-art-spiegelman/>

drawing of the French as frogs, Americans as dogs, etc. This metaphor surges from Nazi propaganda that painted Jews as vermins— rats—, which is something we can find in the second volume's epigraph. Using visuals as a way to show us Vladek's story (and his own on their then-present relationship) makes our learning of the events that took place in World War II more intimate and absorbing, it being a true story fueled by the oral testimony from the survivor's memory. Vladek's Holocaust experience is summoned by his son inside and outside of himself father in the Maus series by using the then-present relationship between them both. An instance in which Vladek relives his past is near the end, in pages 98-99 of Maus II, when Francoise picks up a black hitchhiking dog, presumably American, and Vladek yells derogatory terms and continues to claim the hitchhiker would have stolen their groceries. Francoise scolds him for his behavior in page 99, much as I would have done, but what she says answers her own question: how could someone, after being abused for their race, act intolerant towards another one? Vladek unleashes the hate against race that has been implanted within him after his experience in Auschwitz, where he was persecuted as a Jew.

In *Days and Memory*, Charlotte Delbo, a French Auschwitz survivor, defined "Deep Memory" as the physical and sentimental memories of Auschwitz that are recorded in survivors— repressed memories that disturb daily life, similar to what happens to Vladek in these pages. In the very last page of Maus II (136), Vladek finishes telling his story upon his son's request. "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now..." he says. Mentioning his deceased son's name indirectly signifies the manifested behavior that surges

from this deep memory. Under this scene a tombstone is drawn, featuring both of his parents' dead dates. The tape recorder may have stopped for Vladek Spiegelman, but for his son, it is on constant playback with the guilt of privilege, of freedom, of living.

When we wear the mismatched shoes of Vladek and position ourselves in his world, we cannot help but sympathize with him, though in brief parts experience sympathy for his son, both in character and, presumably, in real life as well, having felt guilt as he lived a better life than his father. This, the feeling of incompetency and guilt, is the predominant theme from pages 41-46 in *Maus II*, represented in a psychiatrist visit where he expresses his difficulty in translating his father's words into art. He says that no matter what he accomplishes, "it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz." As the conversation continues, Artie (the character) asks his psychiatrist if he feels survivor's guilt, a mental condition that occurs when the survivor of a traumatic event feels that they did wrong because they were able to escape the situation, to which he responds with: "No... just sadness." These are characters who had people as walls, walls they had to climb by manipulating, dealing, sacrificing; there is no doubt they would feel guilt or sadness over their survival or the death of a companion. The remorse that is held within them transfer to their children, who then live a life of comparison to their parents for not doing anything as good as them or for living a safer life than they did.

"I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through!... I guess it's some

kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did." Spiegelman's mouse says in page 16 (Maus II).

The worry and self-reproach he feels affects his work on the novel, as he also tells his psychiatrist in page 46: "...Some part of me doesn't want to draw or think about Auschwitz. I can't visualize it clearly, and I can't begin to imagine what it felt like." Both of their guilt affects their relationship in Maus II resulting in an estranged relationship with his father where they mostly bicker.

However, these drawn elements of relationship do give us a real insight on the effects Auschwitz had and has on families, instead of giving us one-sided testimony on the events of the Holocaust. Contrary to popular thought, Spiegelman does not euphemize the Holocaust by translating a voice from it into a graphic novel. What Spiegelman has done here is not only illustrate the retelling of his father's story, but transport us on it with him to live, to be in the presence of the nightmare that has haunted him and millions of others for years. Instead of solely transcribing his father's word into paper, he does what he does best and cannot be outdone by his father: draw. The artist paints raw, gruesome, true scenes that put Vladek's traumatic past in focus and how it could and did record itself onto his flesh and bone (quite literally) and disturbed the rest of his life as well as his relationship with his guilt-ridden son.

Maus I and Maus II are not works of art, but rather gifts of art that in black ink and glossy paper gave voice—life to the truths of many, and has not ceased to do so for decades, and will ideally continue to for centuries.

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