

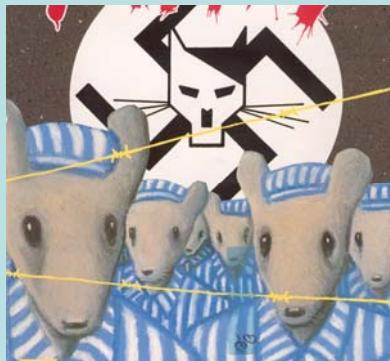
Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as Valuable Holocaust Resource

By Ariel Fried

Objective

Maus is not just a comic book. Through the illustration of his father's experiences in Nazi occupied Poland, comic artist Art Spiegelman breaches the boundaries of prescribed Holocaust study. Despite the disapproval that surrounds its' form, a closer analysis of *Maus* reveals insight into issues prevalent in Holocaust study today and provides an accessible vehicle through which we can discuss them.

Representation in *Maus*



-Art Spiegelman uses cartoon animals, instead of people, to represent the nationalities of his characters. He was influenced by an ancient Passover *Haggadah* in which the characters were drawn with bird heads. The authors believed that their story was too holy to be represented. Drawing their faces was like drawing God (CD-ROM).
-The prescriptions for appropriate Holocaust study do allow for the drawing of something as holy as the Holocaust, so Spiegelman only indirectly represents it.
-Tries to show "The way the victims of the Nazis experienced it: the Jews were like mice to the terrifying cats of the Nazis; many Poles were, to the Jews, like pigs in their comfortable complacency" (LaCapra, 168).
-These characterizations also reflected the Nazis' opinions of the Jews.

Holocaust Humor in *Maus*



-Terrence Des Pres asks if Holocaust humor is appropriate, when the general consensus is to approach this event with complete seriousness.
-As we see in Vladek's story, joking and laughter helped him deal with the horror that surrounded him (Des Pres).
-Dominick LaCapra notices a different type of humor is *Maus*. Gallows Humor adopts irony to lighten certain situations.
-If Vladek used this approach during his experiences, it is important for Spiegelman to write about it so that we have a fuller picture.
-Maus I, page 119

Maus as Vehicle for the Discussion of the Problems of Memory



-Primo Levi believes that Holocaust testimony should be read with a critical eye.
-Prisoners were unable to have a full understanding of their situation (Levi). Memory can transform itself consciously or unconsciously, through trauma, conflict with other memories, repressions, blockages and the passage of time.
-Vladek has problems associated with memory. He relays this to Spiegelman by describing the problems with his eyesight. (*Maus I*, page 39)

The Second Generation Perspective in *Maus*



-Maus tells two stories simultaneously, of the survivor and of the child of survivors.
-Incorporating the Holocaust into one's life and profession is a natural step for 2G's. The Second Generation uses the Holocaust in alternative and different ways.
-Parents' experiences have manifested themselves in the lives of the second generation, causing feelings of inadequacy and confusion.
-The stories are inherited and 2G's feel compelled to disseminate them.
Maus I, Page 5

Deep Memory and External Memory in *Maus*

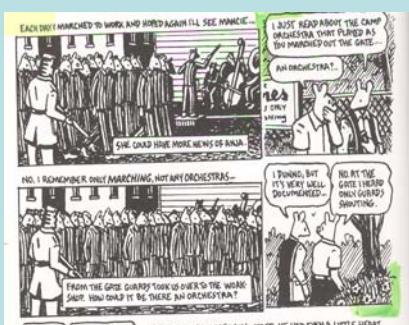


-Charlotte Delbo describes "Deep Memory" as the memories from Auschwitz that preserve its' physical imprints and sensations. Sometimes these compartmentalized memories break through into daily life and disturb the survivor's activity (Delbo).
-When Vladek discusses particularly painful memories, they reach the surface.
-One example of this is when Vladek tells Art that he used to call him "Heil Hitler" and this disturbing memory causes him to knock over his carefully counted pills (*Maus I*, page 30).

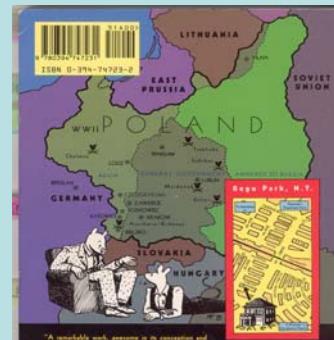


-Vladek mistakenly calls Art by the name of his deceased son, Richeu (*Maus II*, Page 136).
-This may be seen as a paradigm of deep memory, in which "The still apparently unassimilated trauma of his first son's death remains inarticulate- and so is represented here only indirectly as a kind of manifest behavior" (Young, *Afterimages of History*, 14).

The Importance of History and Testimony in *Maus*



-Mythologization defines the American approach to Holocaust memory. It evens out the complexities of multiple Holocaust accounts. Instead of yielding to the reader's desire for one all encompassing story, he presents them with another one, which includes unique characteristics and experiences.
-Spiegelman gives a voice to both history and survivor testimony. They add insight to one another.
-Although there are problems associated with memory, oral testimony provides us with two stories: we learn about the individual tragedies and the enormity of the collective one.
-Maus II, page 54



Results

The conversations that *Maus* provokes, and the theories that it represents, proves that Art Spiegelman has drawn a valuable piece of Holocaust literature. The comic medium does not diminish its' worth in representing the major problems and issues surrounding Holocaust study today, but rather enhances our ability to interpret and understand it. In addition, *Maus* adds to the pool of available and useful Holocaust resources. *Maus* benefits the reader by better equipping him to participate in the conversations about difficult Holocaust issues.