

## The Twofold Narrative of 'survivor' in Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (A Survivor's Tale): *My Father Bleeds History*

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### ...Remembering is a construction of the past.

The revisiting of a past memory is always influenced by the present circumstances, and to isolate memory from the influence of the present is to negate the double-layered signification of that memory. Art Spiegelman constructs his graphic novel as a quest to understand his father, Vladek Spiegelman's experience as a victim of the Holocaust, juxtaposing it with his understanding of that experience. As a post-Holocaust victim, Art infers an indirect perspective, which is shaped by the inherited stories from his parents. The narrative delves into Vladek's past: his nonchalant affair with Lucia, his marriage with Anja, his success in the textile factory, his induction into the Polish Army, his detainment as a prisoner of war by the Nazis, his return to the annexed parts of Poland, and his close escapes along with Anja from the extermination, until they are arrested and finally sent to Auschwitz. Vladek narrates these stories as Artie records them simultaneously in writing, and also with the help of a voice recorder.

Spiegelman's narrative is a conglomeration of the series of events narrated to him by Vladek, thus, taking the form of an oral history. It is not only a testimony of the witness but also "the memory of the witness' memory" (670), as James E. Young articulates. It is not the witness' memory alone, as the impression of the receiver is embossed on it too. *Maus*, as a survivor's tale is Vladek's story of the Holocaust, and Artie's experience as the receiver of these stories. As pointed out by Spiegelman himself, "*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father's story" (196). The experience of the post-Holocaust survivor is intrinsic to understanding this superbly composed art.

Vladek, in narrating his experience to his son is remembering and simultaneously framing it. Artie's constant effort is to show the difficulty of remembering, and the dilemma faced by an oral historian as he records the narrative. Vladek's process of remembering is guided, and to some extent, also manipulated by Artie. Under the pressure of the rush of memories, or the need to explain certain things, Vladek constantly diverts from a single thought, thus, often distorting chronology. Every new session begins with Artie asking details about a particular event, thus channeling Vladek's thoughts. Artie does not only shape Vladek's testimony but also plays an important part in the genesis of the narrative, he becomes the *raison d'être*. *Maus* is thus, not only a re-telling of Vladek's past but also, in some sense, a re-creation of it.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

The act of Vladek's remembrance is situated in the present, of which Artie is in charge of. The past is continually challenged by the interruptions of present occurrences, and Artie's reception and visualization of it. Young articulates this dichotomy as:

It is double-stranded and includes the competing stories of what his father says and what Artie hears, what happened during the Holocaust and what happens now in Artie's mind. As a process, it makes visible the space between what gets told and what gets heard, what gets heard and what gets seen. The father says one thing as we see him doing something else. (Young 676)

The inherent nature of memory is in itself inchoate, which is aptly represented in the arrangement of the comic strips – there is no particular order in which the strips have to be read, and sometimes they follow a horizontal pattern and sometimes vertical. The images and the captions do not necessarily co-operate – they seem to be fleeting across the page, and one can make sense only when they are put together, and read as a whole. The trauma of the Holocaust is such that one can only return and re-return to it, and still only hope to make some sense of it. Spiegelman's art represents the continuum of trauma; passing from one generation to another, there is no hope to tear the present away from the past, or the past from the present. The two distinct narratives – of Vladek's past, and Artie's present, tend to blur. The past is not as much affected by the present, as the present is disturbed by the past. The present, becomes “a function, or a diaphanous screen for the past” (LaCapra, Dominick 155), and tends to also turn into its past. This is most effectively represented by the interjection of another of Art's comic Prisoner on the Hell Planet into the narrative. The strips portray the effect of Anja's suicide on Art, who is symbolically wearing the uniform of Nazi concentration camps, and seems to be locked in the prison of the inherited trauma (Fig. 4).

Holocaust memorialization is characterized by intricate predicaments: the second level of trauma is based on the survivor's fears of the disappearance of historical memory with the passing of survivor witnesses, or due to Holocaust denials and the entire history being passing off as 'myth'. To resist, what Ruth Wajnryb terms, a “generalized will toward amnesia” (79). Lisa A. Costello<sup>1</sup> deduces the need to re-create memory of Holocaust contextually, from generation to

<sup>1</sup> Lisa A. Costello. “History and Memory in a Dialogic of *Performative Memorialization* in Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*.” *History, Memory, Exile* (2006). JSTOR. Web.

generation. Holocaust and its implications have opened up newer discourses than were available right after the war. This questioning and relocating of the context socially, politically or in Spiegelman's case artistically, even as it tries to re-present, shows the very problem of representation. *My Father Bleeds History* brings out the difficulty faced by Artie. Although it is a narrative of Vladek's memory, Artie is unsettled by the many other possible narratives that he cannot have access to – one being his mother's. The irretrievability of Anja's diaries is a metaphor for the irretrievability of Holocaust narrative. Even Vladek's narrative has multiple facets, each of them leading towards a different understanding of his memory.



Fig. 4 – An illustration from *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*

Artie introduces these open-ended possibilities, and makes an effective point about the difficulty of approaching the memory altogether.



Fig. 5

Spiegelman, in his work, tries to refute the identity condoned to the Jews by the Nazis. The narrative thus, does not embody only the effects of Holocaust on the next generation, but also moves backward to show how normal lives were tangled and deformed by the extermination. He includes Vladek's affair with Lucia, against his wishes, and other minute details from his daily life to restore Vladek's humanity that had been denied to him. In doing so, Artie constantly tries to insert meaning and recover the un-understood meanings. This performance of remembrance is unique in the sense that the process of narration is shaped by the relationship of a father and son. Artie, as a son tries to delve into his father's traumatic experience, and Vladek uses this chance to meet his son. The interstices that occur between the interview session rises from this relationship. His domestic squabbles with Maya, the complaints about his health, or about Artie's extravagant nature – all form the second layer of the narrative. It thus becomes crucial to analyze also the narrative that is not part of Vladek's memory of the Holocaust. The narrative is constantly interjected with the interruption of present occurrences:



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

The interstices are mostly a reaction to something that reminds him of his past. The cigarette ashes and the littering that Artie unmindfully causes reminds him of the stable he was made to clean by the Nazis as a prisoner of war; the cigarette smoke probably reminds him of the gas chamber. The shortness of breath and his chest spasm are a result of the stress caused by his rapid recollection of the past, and its horror. It is interesting to note that in most of the interview sessions, Vladek prefers to paddle in his bicycle as he narrates. As part of his daily exercise to maintain his health, it is also symbolic of the healing process that he undergoes while disburdening the stories off him, or his capability to return and re-tell them.

Spiegelman, structures Vladek's history as anti-Reich, in its narrative form and technique. Susan Sontag elaborates in her essay, *Fascinating Fascism* about the Nazi obsession with beauty as a form. She says:

Fascist art displays a utopian aesthetics – that of physical beauty and perfection. Painters and sculptors under the Nazis often depicted the nude,

but they were forbidden to show any physical imperfections... They have the perfection of a fantasy. (Sontag 40)

As a comic, *Maus* refutes this notion of Nazi beauty. The characterization of the people has neither the anatomical perfection, nor the physical appeal fostered by the Nazis. As a minimalist art, it also does not partake of the sexual power portrayed in Nazi cinema and photography. Thomas Doherty elucidates: "A medium of rough edges and broad caricature, of pre-sexual creatures and anthropomorphic animals, it evokes rather than records the human form" (7). It is efficient in defying the Reich ideal and thus, the conscious creation of an image that is not influenced by the Nazis is significant. Spiegelman skillfully uses the comic-book composition to portray the incarcerating effect of Nazi politics:



Fig. 9: Vladek and Anja trapped in a zigzag of roads shaped like a swastika. Fig. 10: Vladek pinned, as if under the spotlight of anti-Semitism.



Fig. 11: Tattooed serial no. on Vladek's arm from the concentration camp.

The interstices between the Holocaust narrative project the humdrum nature of this family, and the chaos that is characteristic of a regular life. It is in contrast to the treatment of these people in the Nazi camps, which negated human quality from their daily activities.

Spiegelman's use of the mouse metaphor thus, needs to be understood in this context. The images invoke a sense of irony, as there are constant disparities that challenge the anthropomorphic representation. The epigraph in quoting Hitler's "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human", seems to enforce this vision onto the readers. The Jews are not really mice, but only *depicted* as mice. One does not read the narrative as belonging to animals, as the context is immediately understood as those of humans. The disjunction between the animal representation and a subject that is essentially human drives Spiegelman's point home. The artist himself articulates the irony he intended to create:

You can't help when you're reading to try to erase those animals. You go back, saying: no, no, that's a person, and that's a person there, and they're in the same room together, and why do you see them as somehow a different species? And, obviously, they can't be and aren't, and there's this residual problem you're always left with. (108)

The already doubtful image of animals are further destabilized in various places –as the Jews wear masks of pig to pass as Poles; sometimes the Jews are also shown as wearing mouse masks; when Vladek and Anja take refuge in a Polish house, the strip shows a real rat against the mouse-masked Jews:



Fig. 12

Through the animal imageries of Nazis as cats, Jews as mice, Poles as pigs, and Americans as dogs, *Maus* makes palpable the social stratification of national and cultural identities based on stereotyping. Joshua Brown comments on this categorization as Europe's sudden explosion into "an orgy of racism", and explains Spiegelman's art as "tackl[ing] Hitler's metaphor to undermine it. The horror of racial theory is not rationalized or supported by the metaphor; it is brought to its fullest, tense reflection" (108). Spiegelman confronts the nature of Shoah (translates to 'annihilation' in Hebrew) through his indictment of the Nazi propaganda, which he presents in a masked form. The problem that the contemporary artist faces is that the subject is too appalling to be depicted in naked form; to show the viciousness of the subject without really unmasking it Spiegelman's use of mask achieves the purpose.

*Maus* is thus, a re-creation of Holocaust history which also captures the difficulty of the post-Holocaust generation to figure in this narrative. Spiegelman's art is not so much an effort to heal Vladek's trauma, as it is mainly an effort of self-therapy. Having grown in a different place, he fails to fathom the context of his parents' constant anxiety, and yet has to feature in the legacy of being Holocaust victim. The disjunction of not being a victim and still suffering the trauma is explicitly dealt with in *Maus*. It is impossible to get rid of the burden of this memory, and it seems to define every single action of the victim; the way Holocaust has changed these people makes Holocaust an irredeemable, terrible experience. Art's struggle to understand his father's experience and a search for closure is dismantled when he discovers that Anja's diaries were not destroyed by the Nazis but by Vladek. Costello's proposition to re-create memory for every generation does not seem valid here, as Vladek denies to be freed from the responsibility of carrying the memories. He would rather hold fast to it and re-live the experience. The difficulty that permeates the text is thus, the very nature of Holocaust narratives. *My Father Bleeds History* ends with a sense of unknowability. The meaninglessness seeps from past into present, and the present is made indistinct by its very effect.

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