

## 6 Literature and the Holocaust

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### Prose

The Holocaust poses special problems to the writing and reading of literature. Can one represent the murder of European Jewry in fiction? In poetry? Can literature still “make meaning” in the face of the near physical destruction of a people? Does the struggle with the limitations of language not end here—in defeat?

Elie Wiesel, survivor of Auschwitz and the author of *Night*, as well as many other books on the Holocaust, has made the argument most forcefully: “There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be.” By this, he does not mean that no one can write about the Holocaust. Rather, he suggests that the rules of aesthetic judgment that hitherto governed our approach to literature no longer seem adequate. Yet a compelling and rich body of literature about the Holocaust has emerged. This literature brings us closer to the experience of the Holocaust and challenges our notions of what literature can do and how we read. Lawrence L. Langer, one of the greatest scholars of this literature, has gathered essays, diaries, short stories, dramas, poetry, and sketches in an anthology titled *Art from the Ashes*. He chose this title, “not to proclaim a phoenix reborn from the mutilation of mass murder, redeeming that time of grief, but to suggest a symbiotic bond linking art and ashes in a seamless kinship.” Because of the subject matter, we should not allow simple identification or the desire for redemption or the longing for beauty conventionally conceived to guide our appreciation or shape our criticism of this literature. “Whatever ‘beauty’ Holocaust art achieves,” Langer writes, “is soiled by the misery of its theme.”

Holocaust literature encompasses a variety of different literary genres including novels, short stories, drama, poetry, diaries, and memoirs. Among the best-known and most widely read pieces are Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and Anne Frank’s *The Diary of a Young Girl*. These are important books, but there are many others. We include in this chapter a discussion of *Night* (Document 6.1) but focus more attention on *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* by Art

Spiegelman, in particular volume 1 (Document 6.2). The two texts are very different: *Night* is a memoir of a survivor of Auschwitz; *Maus* is the story, narrated as a cartoon, of the author’s father, also a survivor of Auschwitz. Both are true stories and both are father-son stories. But *Maus* narrates much more of the pre-Holocaust world of east European Jewry, with all the richness, complexity, and difficulties, even pettiness, that we associate with real life. *Night* evokes the world of east European Jewry but does not describe it, and the evocation is through the eyes of a boy. Moreover, *Maus* explores issues of genre, representation, human motivation, and loss with greater complexity. As such, it can be analyzed at many levels. *Night*, however, is more immediate. In simple language, it reveals the heart of death-camp reality.

We also include analyses of two short stories by Ida Fink and Tadeusz Borowski. The stories are based on the experiences of survivors. Tadeusz Borowski, a non-Jewish Pole, survived Auschwitz and Dachau. Borowski’s story, *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, is a brutal account of an Auschwitz prisoner who survives by cleaning the trains arriving in the camp (Document 6.3). Ida Fink, a Jewish girl born in Poland in 1921, survived the Nazi occupation of Poland, first in a ghetto, then in hiding. Her story, “The Shelter,” is about the experience of hiding, but more important it evokes a world in which the inhumanity of the Holocaust has come to be seen as commonplace (Document 6.4). Both *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* and “The Shelter” are works of fiction, but they are also documents and are based on direct experience.

### Document 6.1. Discussion of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*

Elie Wiesel’s *Night* is one of the most widely read books on the Holocaust, and for good reason. In sparse prose, utterly shorn of sentimentality, Wiesel tells about Auschwitz as seen through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old boy. It is a wrenching book that raises searching questions about the relationship of man to man and man to God.

Elie Wiesel was born in Sighet, a Rumanian town close to the border of Hungary, on September 30, 1928. In 1940, Hungary annexed the town; four years later German troops, aided by the Hungarian police, took Wiesel and his family and the other Jews of Sighet prisoner and subsequently deported them to Auschwitz. Elie Wiesel’s family all died there, except for his father, who died in Buchenwald.

Elie Wiesel vowed not to write about Auschwitz for ten years. Then, in 1956, he published *Und die Welt hat Geshwign* (And the world remained si-



lent), a memoir written in Yiddish and published in Buenos Aires. The book *Night*, which appeared in France in 1958, and in the United States in 1960, is a significantly shortened version of the work originally composed in Yiddish. Wiesel once said that *Night* is "the foundation. . . . All my subsequent books are built around it."

*Night* is a true story, a testimony, but it is also a literary work, shaped by literary tradition and literary convention. To focus on the literary is not to slight what happened. Rather, it helps us to disclose the more searching questions and the deeper meanings hidden in the text.

The book begins with "They"—the Jewish community of Sighet—and Moshe the Beadle, a deeply pious synagogue helper, a man who studies the spiritual truths of the Kabbalah. Eliezer, himself from a deeply pious family, asks Moshe to teach him the mysteries of the sacred texts. *Night* thus starts in a Jewish community, at the beginning of the boy's spiritual journey, with Eliezer searching for the highest truths about God. The subsequent narrative is not, however, about that journey to higher truths. It is instead about a descent into darkness, into night, into a world where human ties are severed and God is absent.

When Eliezer arrives at the platform in Auschwitz, his mother is separated from him in an instant, never to be seen again. Eliezer now has only one thought: to stay with his father. The struggle of Auschwitz is also the struggle of the son to maintain this tie. But among the men and boys all around him, he sees even this bond coming undone. There is Bela Katz, from Eliezer's hometown, who works for the special unit (*Sonderkommando*) and feeds corpses to the crematoria, his own father's among them. There is a boy in the adjacent labor camp of Buna who beats his father when the old man does not make his bed properly. There is Meier, who on the death march kills his father in a frenzied scramble for bread. And there is the son of Rabbi Eliahou, who runs ahead of his father when the father falters. Rabbi Eliahou was a good man, liked by all, and deeply devoted to his son.

As he is dragged ever deeper into night, Eliezer has more and more difficulty maintaining his devotion, and he prays to a God in whom he no longer believes "never to do what Rabbi Eliahou's son has done" (87). There are trying moments. When Eliezer's father is struck by a Gypsy, Eliezer "had not flickered an eyelid" (37). At Buchenwald the desire to lose his father, "this dead weight," plagues Eliezer, and he is "ashamed forever" (101). He gives his sick and dying father a piece of bread, but "with a heavy heart," and reflects: "No better than Rabbi Eliahou's son had I withstood the test" (102).

Eliezer is at once a boy who acts compassionately but who fears that in

the dark reaches of his heart he would also like to be rid of his father. To hold onto his father, to maintain the most basic human tie, is then both a struggle against the outside world of a hellish death camp and a fight against the hunger- and exhaustion-induced faltering of his own heart. It is also a struggle not to be alone. *Night* begins with the word "They"; it ends with "me."

Eliezer is also alone because God has left him. This too is a truth of Auschwitz, which Wiesel conveys by framing central scenes in ways familiar to the Western literary imagination. The first shattering of his faith occurs immediately when he arrives in Auschwitz. As the train nears the camp, a madwoman, Madame Schächter, sees the flames of the furnace. She is the only one to see the obvious, and the others in the boxcar try to calm her. The first night in the camp, Eliezer also sees the flames. They have turned "the little faces of the children . . . into wreaths of smoke." Angered, he pledges: "Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever" (32). The nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche similarly announced the death of God. In one of the most famous passages of his work, a madman enters the marketplace in the light of day carrying a lantern to illuminate the obvious: that God is dead and we have killed him.

But in Auschwitz it is God who has abandoned man. One of the central passages of *Night* involves a hanging framed as a crucifixion. There are "three victims in chains" and in the middle "the little servant, the sad-eyed angel." Eliezer watches as the three mount the chairs. "Where is God? Where is He?" a man behind him asks. The chairs are removed and the three hang, but being lightweight "the sad-eyed angel" dies a slow death, and as Eliezer walks by, the man repeats his question. "Where is He?" Eliezer's inner voice replies, "Here he is—he is hanging here on this gallows" (32–33).

Man has murdered God, again. But here God is also the father who abandons the child. There is therefore no hope of resurrection, as in the martyrdom of Christ, and there is no hope that a ram will be substituted for the sacrifice of the son, as in the story of Abraham. Accordingly, the prayer, or Kaddish, of Rosh Hashanah, the new year, is not a lamentation but an accusation.

This day I had ceased to plead. I was no longer capable of lamentation. On the contrary, I felt very strong. I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and without man. Without love or mercy. I had ceased to be anything but ashes, yet I felt myself to be stronger than the Almighty. (65)



This, then, is the final revelation of Eliezer's spiritual journey. It is not an elevating revelation; it is far from what he hoped for when he spoke with Moshe the Beadle; it is not a revelation about community; it is not about "they." In this sense, too, Eliezer is left with the last lonely word of the book, and from this he must reconstruct life.

Source: Elie Wiesel, *Night*, translated by Stella Rodway (New York: Bantam, 1986).

### Document 6.2. Discussion of Art Spiegelman's *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*

Art Spiegelman is a cartoonist who tries to come to terms with the story of his father, Vladek Spiegelman, a survivor of Auschwitz. Born and raised in the United States, Art Spiegelman sees his work as both biographical and autobiographical, an account of a lived experience and a narrative that exploits the possibilities of fiction. To represent what he has called "the central trauma of the Twentieth Century" in a way that is innovative, thought-provoking, and multilayered, Spiegelman has chosen an artistic medium that seems at once very familiar and shockingly inappropriate: the comic book.

In this comic book, the Nazis are cats, the Jews are mice, the Poles are pigs, and the Americans are dogs. At first glance, this device may seem crude. Yet the form succeeds in undermining easy identifications; it also foils simple attempts to turn the Holocaust into a morality tale. Moreover, *Maus* is in part an American story. By interweaving the story of a Holocaust survivor with that of his son, who happens to be a cartoonist in New York, the book situates the Holocaust as a theme in contemporary American life. Artie, the cartoon-artist, is not only trying to figure out what exactly happened to his father and mother and brother in the Holocaust but he is also trying to explore the ways the Holocaust has shaped his own life.

#### What Is *Maus* About?

Two stories interweave in *Maus Part I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*, published in 1986. The first story involves Vladek's attempt to save himself and his family from the reign of terror and displacement brought about by the Nazi invasion of Poland and the terror of the Holocaust. It is a story of love and fear, cunning and commitment, and survival. The second story involves Art Spiegelman and his attempt to understand his father and his family: the experiences they went through, the scars they bear, the wounds

that still afflict them. Divided into six chapters, *Maus*, volume 1, depicts Vladek as a suitor and lover situated in a rich Jewish life in prewar Poland ("The sheik"); then as a husband, father, and businessman ("The Honeymoon"); thereafter, beginning in 1939, Vladek joins the Polish Army, and is captured ("Prisoner of War"); he returns home only to be confined with his family to a Jewish ghetto ("The Noose Tightens"); then they go into hiding ("Mouse Hole") and are deported in 1944 to Auschwitz ("Mouse Trap"). In the course of all of this, Vladek and his family witness terror and narrowly escape death; they are confined and betrayed; they bribe others; and they survive where others do not. In a sense, they are lucky. But the questions of who are the survivors and does anyone ever survive is also addressed. Art Spiegelman's brother, Richieu, did not survive. And his mother, though she would survive Auschwitz in one sense, did not in another, and committed suicide in New York in 1968, when Art Spiegelman was an adolescent. She had written diaries in Auschwitz, and the diaries survived the war. But after her death, in a moment of depression and rage, Vladek burned her diaries. In the last frame of *Maus I*, Art Spiegelman calls his father "a murderer."

Whereas volume 1 recounts the tribulations of Spiegelman's parents until they are brought to the gates of Auschwitz, *Maus Part II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, published in 1991, is situated in the barracks of Auschwitz, with flashes to the present in the bungalows of the Catskills and the parents' apartments in Florida and Rego Park. Reluctantly, Vladek recounts everyday life in the death camp and how he and his wife survived against all odds. It is a taxing story. In the last frame of *Maus II*, Vladek says to Artie, "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now."

#### The Issue of Genre

Comics are associated with mass or popular culture, with entertainment, with laughter. Is treating the Holocaust through the medium of comics not sacrilegious? Does it not raise questions about the commodification of the Holocaust?

Spiegelman attempts to break out of the "elitist market of art" to bring a topic to the attention of an audience who might not think or read about the Holocaust. He is fully aware of the dangers of simplification and misrepresentation associated with the genre of cartoons. His anxieties and reservations even become part of the story. For example, toward the beginning of *Maus II*, Artie, the cartoon figure, justly observes: "There's so much I'll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too complex for comics. . . . So much has to be left out or distorted" (*Maus II*, 16). On the other hand, Mala, Artie's stepmother, seems equally right when she says:



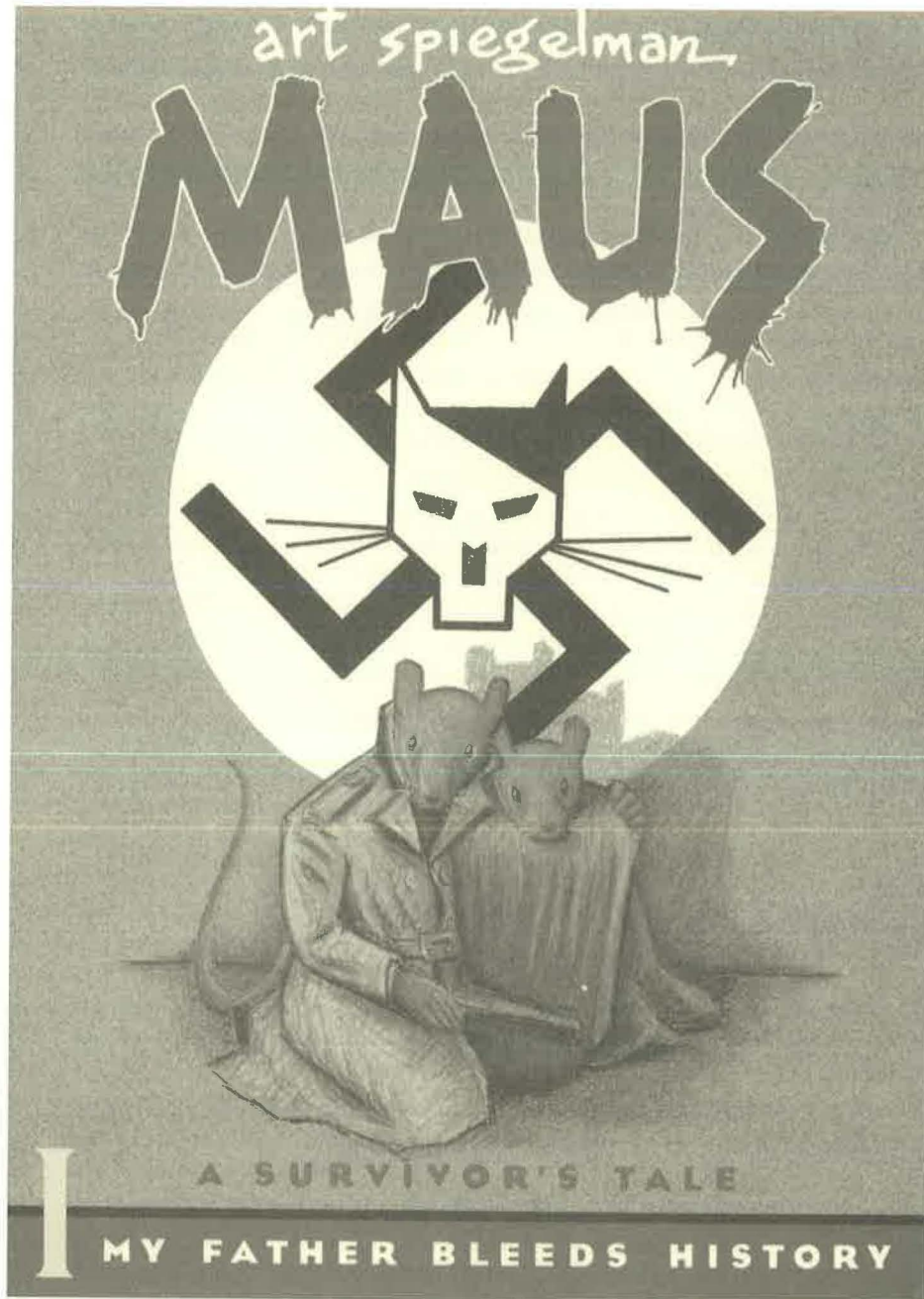


Figure 6.2a: *Maus I*, front cover. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

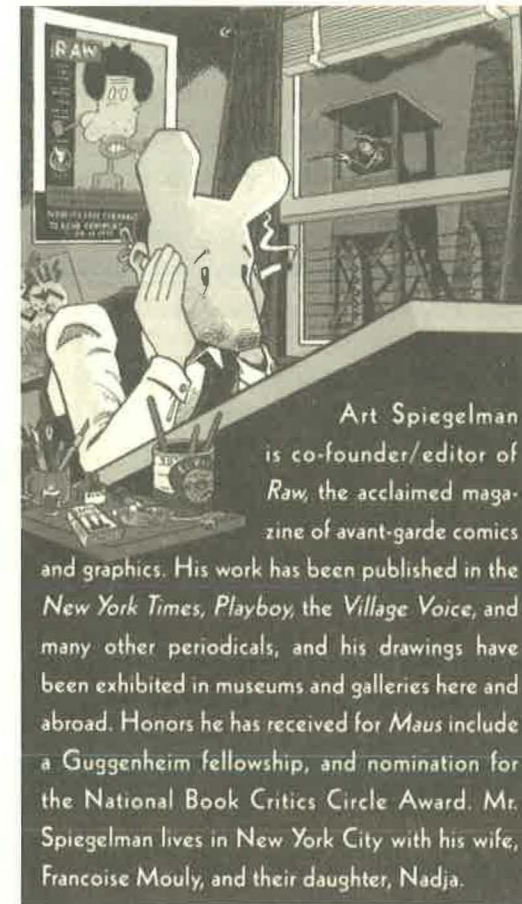


Figure 6.2b: *Maus I*, inside flap. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

"It's an important book. People who don't actually read such stories will be interested" (*Maus I*, 133).

*Maus* has been referred to as documentary art, pictorial literature, novelized comic, graphic novel, and oral history. A vehicle for testimony, a medium for memory work, *Maus* resists simple classification. Is it, for example, fiction or non fiction? Spiegelman himself protested the *New York Times Book Review's* decision to list *Maus* on the fiction list. He stated:

If your list were divided into literature and non-literature, I could gratefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that "fiction" indicates a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author, I believe I might have lopped several years off the thirteen I devoted to



my two-volume project if I could have taken a novelist's license while searching for a novelist's structure. . . .

I know that by delineating people with animal heads I've raised problems of taxonomy for you. Could you consider adding a special "nonfiction/mice" category to your list?

*Maus* is not made up, although it is obviously shaped and constructed. The form of the cartoons is an important part of this construction. For his sketches, Spiegelman chose a rough rather than a finished look, black and white rather than color. This choice suggests an aesthetics of open-endedness and the ill-suitedness of a finished, polished representation of the Holocaust.

### The Issue of Animals

Spiegelman uses animal caricatures to address identities. But this technique is not as straightforward as it first appears. The animal caricatures raise questions about the degree to which identities are fixed. Should Artie's French wife, Françoise, for example, who converted to Judaism, be depicted as a mouse, a rabbit, or a frog? The hollowness of racial prejudices, which assume a static sign of racial identity, is further undermined in the second volume. Spiegelman depicts an Israeli Jew not as a mouse but as a porcupine.

The animal drawings also allow Spiegelman to privilege the figurative over the real. The mice, after all, do not really look like actual mice, nor are they merely stylized as humans. Rather, Spiegelman uses the figurative to evoke distinctions of time and documentation. He does this by varying his sketches. In *Maus I* (29), he depicts himself and his father in the present as white mice, his father and grandfather in the past as black. Similarly, if more disturbingly, he blotches out with a dialogue box the smashed skull of a child whose head has been beaten against a wall (108). The dialogue box reads, "This I didn't see with my own eyes." Here Spiegelman uses images and nonimages to raise questions about the documentary character of testimony.

### Reading Cartoons

Because cartoons are both visual and textual narratives, they demand specific kinds of reading. As an art form, cartoons allow authors to adjust and break frames, to interrupt texts with images, and to put both texts and images into tension, sometimes even contradiction, with one another. In short, cartoons are extremely malleable, and, in the case of a reflective car-

toon like *Maus*, experiments with frames and panels and focus and dialogue boxes invite interpretation and discussion.

The front and back covers of the Pantheon edition are good starting places for interpreting Spiegelman's cartoons. On the cover, Vladek and his wife, Anja, are crouched under the centerpiece of the title page: the swastika with a cat face (Figure 6.2a). Here we are already introduced to the main characters. Whereas Vladek and Anja are individualized by being sketched in softer contours and dressed like human beings, their enemies are referred to through the well-known symbol of swastika and an anonymous cat face, evoking Adolf Hitler. The title appears in the color of blood and, as if to suggest the familiar horrors, bleeds into the white circle and the swastika. These horrors bear down on Vladek and Anja, who are rendered frightened and vulnerable (she more than he).

The back cover can be read as well. The maps of Poland with its neighboring states and of Rego Park, New York, situate the story in present and past. The insertion of Vladek and Artie, the main characters of the story, onto the map further suggests that this is a book about a relationship across time. Inside the book jacket, there are mice, mainly faces and upper torsos, male and female, young and old (though no children), dressed nicely and individually different. The darkness, almost blackness of the image as well as the yellow stars portend an ominous future for a Jewish community still intact, however precariously. Inside of the back jacket, one sees the same figures, but the image is extended, and there is a child at the bottom of the right page. Probably, he is meant to evoke Artie's older brother Richieu, who did not survive. The inside flap (Figure 6.2b), with Artie the cartoonist writing in a camp, his cigarette smoke complicitous with the smoke of the crematorium, folds down over the image of Richieu, suggesting again the importance of the complicated, guilt-ridden relationship of Artie to his dead brother. In the image on the flap, Artie wears a mouse mask. Is he really a mouse like the mice of the Holocaust? In *Maus II*, Spiegelman also sketches mice on the inside of the covers, but their faces are anonymous. They seem alienated from one another. An uncountable mass, they all wear the same striped uniforms of the camps, and the child has disappeared.



### Document 6.3. Discussion of Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*

Born in 1922 to Polish parents in Zhitomir in the Soviet Ukraine, Tadeusz Borowski was considered one of the great Polish authors of his generation. Interned in Auschwitz as a young man, he survived the war. But Auschwitz stayed with him, and, in 1951, three days after the birth of his daughter, he committed suicide by turning the gas valves on in his kitchen. He was not yet thirty.

His story, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, is unsentimental and unsparing. Borowski refuses to spiritualize or wrest meaning from the suffering in the death camp. Rather, he narrates in a matter-of-fact way, which has the effect of rendering the horror disorienting, and the dilemmas, for victims then and readers now, unsolvable.

The principle literary innovation of *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* involves narrative perspective. In thinly disguised autobiography, Borowski writes as a privileged inmate of Auschwitz. He is not slated for the gas chambers and survives by emptying out the boxcars of Jewish prisoners arriving at the ramp. He cleans out the cars and helps herd the Jews into lines, full-well knowing that they will soon be gassed.

In the story, the narrator asks to be assigned to the unit that cleans out the cars because he wants to get a pair of shoes. He is fortunate and receives his assignment. He prepares for the arrival of the trains, opens the doors to the boxcars (which are full to the breaking point with people), sorts the living from the dead, separates inmates, and assists in the selection of those who will be gassed and those who will work. He also cleans out the trampled infants from the floor and the corners of the boxcars. As he does these things, one task after the next, his inner compassion for the Jewish victims diminishes. He becomes detached, even contemptuous. He works mechanically, and loses interest in the pair of shoes. In the end, all he wants is to return to the camp, which seems to offer at least the comfort of an unmatressed bed.

The story considers an inmate who faces a dilemma that was commonplace in the death camps: should he bargain for his life at the cost of helping to liquidate his fellow inmates or face almost certain death? In this story, the reader is drawn into the dilemma. The reader encounters the fate of Jewish victims from the outside, from a distance, precisely analyzed by the narrator, who himself tries to distance himself from the people who are about to be gassed, if they are not already dead. But the narrator himself is also a victim and therefore cannot take on the role, or the views, of the killers,

German SS men. The reader is thus torn, drawn into a maelstrom of empathy with a privileged inmate and complicity in his actions as well as in his descent into detachment and indifference.

The story does not offer hope. Instead, it leaves the reader with a sense of a diminished self. This is why it is so unsparing, and why it poses questions of good and evil in what Primo Levi has called "the gray zone" in terms both radical and honest.

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Source: Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (New York: Penguin, 1976).

### Document 6.4. Discussion of Ida Fink's "The Shelter"

Born in Poland in 1921, Ida Fink survived the ghetto and in 1942 went into hiding and in this way lived out the war. In 1957 she emigrated to Israel. Marked by terse, arrestingly simple prose, her stories typically address issues of confinement and apprehension. They also address loss.

"The Shelter" appeared in a collection entitled *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*. Originally published in Polish in 1983, the collection has since been translated into Hebrew, Dutch, German, and English, and in 1985, the book received the first Anne Frank Prize for Literature. Ida Fink is also the author of *Journey*, which appeared in English in 1992 and chronicles the story of two Jewish sisters trying to use false papers to get out of Poland. More recently still, Ida Fink published a second volume of short stories entitled *Traces*.

The story "The Shelter" is about a Jewish couple who survive the war and then revisit the poor Polish family in whose house (in a storage space) they found refuge from the Nazis. In exchange for shelter, and if they survived the war, the Jewish couple had promised to provide the money that would allow the Polish man, Oleg, and his wife to build a new house. The Jewish couple returned to see the house, and Oleg showed it to them with evident pride. He then showed them "a shelter, as pretty as a picture" that he had built for them, "just in case something happens." The Jewish woman cried.

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Source: Ida Fink, "The Shelter," in *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories*, translated by Madeline Levine and Francine Prose (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1995).



## Further Reading

### On *Night*

- Langer, Lawrence L. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.
- Roth, John K. *Consuming Fire: Encounters with Elie Wiesel and the Holocaust*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1979.
- Rittner, Carol, ed. *Elie Wiesel: Between Memory and Hope*. New York: New York University Press, 1990.

### On *Maus*

- Doherty, Thomas. "Art Spiegelman's *Maus*: Graphic Art and the Holocaust," *American Literature* 68 (1996): 69–84.
- Hungerford, Amy. "Surviving Rego Park: Holocaust Theory from Art Spiegelman to Berel Lang." In *The Americanization of the Holocaust*, edited by Hilene Flanzbaum, 102–24. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.
- LaCapra, Dominick. "'Twas the Night Before Christmas': Art Spiegelman's *Maus*." In *History and Memory After Auschwitz*, 139–79. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998.

### On *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*

- Borowski, Tadeusz. *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*. New York: Penguin, 1976.
- Levi, Primo. "The Gray Zone." In *The Drowned and the Saved*, 36–69. New York: Summit Books, 1988.

### On Poetry

- Langer, Lawrence L. ed. *Art from the Ashes: A Holocaust Anthology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Volavkova, Hana, ed. . . . *I never saw another butterfly . . . : Children's Drawings and Poems from Terezin Concentration Camp, 1942–1944*. Expanded 2d edition by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. New York: Schocken, 1993.

## 7 Monuments and Memorials

**M**onuments and memorials are sites where individuals and nations go to remember and bear witness, where individuals go to mourn and nations attempt to work out their relationship to their historical past. They are places of individual as well as national memory. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial, for instance, offers visitors an intense, personal experience as they examine the names on the wall; its location among other monuments and memorials on the Mall in Washington, D.C., places it within a larger narrative of national identity. Pointing from its axis to both the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial references a larger national context. As Marita Sturken points out in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), the wall, made of black granite and set horizontally in the ground, works in opposition to the vertical monuments made of white stone on the Mall; yet its polished granite surface, which reflects the visitor's face as well as the Washington Monument, also mirrors the national setting. Hence, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial works both within and against national memory even as it offers a place for personal reflection. Its chronological list of names, for instance, personalizes and individualizes the memorial experience; yet, read in their entirety, the names offer a larger narrative of the war (the heaviest days and years of battle, for instance). The seemingly endless list of names, as well as the fact that names continue to be added to the wall, suggests the way that Vietnam continues to remain an open wound in the national psyche.

The extensive and heated debate over the political and aesthetic vision of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial underscores the complex historical, political, and aesthetic context in which national memory is constructed and in which a monument or memorial is understood. The V-shaped wall of black granite set into the earth has been seen alternately as a black gash of shame (a boomerang, a tombstone, a degrading ditch) and as a healed wound. For some, its modernist form endows it with a more flexible and hence a greater meaning; for others, the form turns the memorial into a monument to de-



feat. The political compromise to place a traditionally realistic statue of three soldiers by the site along with an American flag exemplifies how aesthetic issues can carry national meaning.

The complex contexts of a memorial affect how it is experienced and understood. A memorial's location, its visual and verbal cues, the political and historical circumstances of its origin, as well as the visitors who happen to be there at any given time all affect its meaning. Visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall when no one else is there is a very different experience from visiting it when people are there making rubbings of names or leaving personal mementos. The meaning of the memorial will be different also once the generation who experienced the Vietnam War is dead. Similarly, the Boston Holocaust Memorial is endowed with a particular national perspective because it is a stop on the Freedom Trail. Like the U.S. Holocaust Museum, on the Mall in Washington, D.C., the Boston Memorial asks visitors to situate the Holocaust within a U.S. narrative of national identity. The heroic iconography of Nathan Rapoport's monument, *Liberation*, and its location near the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island places the Holocaust within a U.S. national narrative of liberty and justice for all. Here, the United States is once again the place of refuge for the immigrant; unlike Vietnam, the Holocaust can reinforce rather than challenge U.S. identity. For those countries who acted as perpetrators rather than liberators in the Holocaust, the act of national remembering inherent in any memorial is even more vexed.

Besides understanding the various contexts that inform a memorial's meaning, it is also important to understand how a memorial can simultaneously provide meaning and enable forgetting. By publicly marking a historical trauma, a memorial may relieve the viewer of his or her burden to remember and become a substitute for memory. Once a traumatic event has been officially dealt with—once it has been marked in solid stone—it can seem to offer closure to the event that in turn can lead to forgetting that event. Paradoxically, as James Young observes in *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), healing can lead to forgetting. The Holocaust monument in Hamburg-Harburg, he points out, foregrounds this dilemma (28–37). Often called the sinking monument, Hamburg-Harburg's Monument Against Fascism, built in 1986, enacts this process of forgetting. Located in the commercial center of Harburg near a shopping mall, the monument, a twelve meter high and one meter square pillar, forces viewers to bear the burden of memory. The plaque at its base reads: "We invite the citizens of Harburg, and visitors to the town, to add their names here to ours. In doing so, we commit ourselves

to remain vigilant. As more and more names cover this 12 meter tall lead column, it will gradually be lowered into the ground. One day it will have disappeared completely, and the site of the Harburg Monument Against Fascism will be empty. In the end, it is only we ourselves who can rise up against injustice." Ironically, as Young points out, the more actively visitors participate in remembering by signing the monument, the more quickly the monument disappears (30). In the end, the visitor is left with only a memory of the monument. Having been sunk completely into the ground, the monument itself is then covered by a tombstone that marks its absent presence. Like the traumatic history to which it bears witness, this memorial vanishes. In effect it becomes a countermemorial that points up the danger of all memorials: in the act of remembering memorials also enable forgetting.

Memorials take many forms. They do not necessarily have to be commissioned works of art or take the traditional form of the tombstone; they can be informal and ad hoc, like the memorials that often occur on roadsides at the site of deadly accidents or at the homes of celebrities who have been tragically killed. Nor do memorials have to be made of stone. In Sarajevo, a man goes to play the cello at the site of his family's death every day. In Israel in the Martyr's Forest a tree will be planted for each victim of the Holocaust. Also in Israel the whole country comes to a halt for two minutes of silence on Holocaust Remembrance Day. People become living monuments, enacting an ephemeral, performative memorial. In Berlin, a memorial consists of a simple sign in front of the Wittenbergplatz subway station reads, "Places of Terror That We Should Never Forget" above a list of the concentration camps. Destroyed buildings also stand—in their very ruins—as memorials. Despite the different forms they may take, memorials exist as a sacred space through which to remember.

Memorials are built to bear witness to that which we should not forget. In contrast, it is often argued, monuments, such as the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, honoring the victories of Napoleon, are built to commemorate triumphs. Nevertheless, the two terms are often used interchangeably: the most traditional form of monument, the tombstone, for instance, marks a site of mourning. The slight distinction between these terms may be useful to keep in mind when comparing the monument and memorial we discuss below.

From hundreds of possible Holocaust memorials, we have chosen two for our focus, both in Poland: Nathan Rapoport's Warsaw Ghetto monument (Document 7.1) and the memorial at Treblinka (Document 7.2). Each has a very specific location that shapes the meaning of the memorial and each approaches the question of representation and remembering in very



different ways: Rapoport's monument is realistic, while the memorial at Treblinka is more abstract. Both evoke a wide range of interpretations. The comparison between the two is meant to underscore the different ways a single nation has responded to the Holocaust and the many meanings any single monument or memorial may have. Throughout this section we are indebted to James Young's *Texture of Memory*, especially pages 155–89, for facts and interpretive insights.

### Document 7.1. Warsaw Ghetto Monument

The Warsaw Ghetto Monument, sculpted by Nathan Rapoport, a Polish Jew who escaped the Holocaust in the Soviet Union, bears witness to the largest and longest armed resistance against the Nazis, the Warsaw ghetto uprising. The monument was unveiled on April 19, 1948, the fifth anniversary of the uprising. Trained in the heroic school of realism, Rapoport uses epic realism to memorialize and mythologize the revolt. The monument is a free-standing wall of roughly hewn stone that represents the ghetto wall that divided Warsaw's Jews from the rest of the city. It also looks like a tombstone and evokes the Western Wall in Jerusalem. On the front side are seven figures symbolizing the various stages of life. They are strong yet skeletal. They carry the weapons of resistance—a rock, dagger, rifle, grenade—and appear to be coming toward the viewer, breaking out of the imprisoning ghetto wall through the frame of a doorway. The flames in the background signify the burning down of the ghetto and the fallen youth in the lower right-hand corner is a reminder of the ultimate failure of the resistance fighters. Despite these signifiers of the final destruction of the Warsaw ghetto, the vertical and raised position of the figures emphasizes their resistance.

While the front of the monument affirms the resistance fighters, the back laments their defeat. In a reference to the Arch of Titus, which depicts a triumphal procession led by the Emperor Titus after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish exile, twelve stooped and shrouded figures, referring to the twelve tribes of Israel, move across the back of the monument. These figures signify the archetype of Jews in exile. But the presence of the Nazis, whom Rapoport dehumanizes and strips of individuality by representing them through their helmets and bayonets, places this exile in the specific historical context of the Holocaust. In contrast to the composition on the front, which is vertical and raised, the composition on the back is horizontal and recedes into the rock. The rabbi, holding the Torah scroll, is the only figure looking up, as if to ask the heavens for help; the rest look down, as if resigned to their fate. The two sides, however, work in concert with each other. On the back the final figure at the end of the line is looking backward, forcing our eyes around to the other side of the monument; the fallen figure on the front echoes the stooped figures on the back. The inscription, which is written in Hebrew, Yiddish, and Polish, echoes the dual meaning of the two compositions, celebration and mourning: "To the Jewish People—Its Heroes and Its Martyrs." The use of a menorah, a candelabrum used in Jewish worship since ancient times, on each side makes clear the specifically Jewish context of this memorial.



The changing character of the monument's location has, however, altered its meaning. Some of the meaning the monument conveyed when it was first built amid the ruins of the Warsaw ghetto changed when it became surrounded by apartment buildings. Whereas before it was the only solid structure in the area, now it is one square block among many, and where it once stood alone, it is now part of a larger memorial path. It also has taken on national significance by becoming the site of other resistances. Most notably, it was a gathering place for the Polish grass-roots resistance movement Solidarity in the 1980s. Also, it has been reproduced in Israel, and both Poland and Israel use an image of the monument on postage stamps and postcards. This monument, then, has become part of a larger national identity of resistance in each country.



Figure 7.1. Warsaw Ghetto Monument. From James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, Yale University Press, 1993.



## Document 7.2. Treblinka

What to do with the concentration and death camps has been a pressing issue. Should the camps be left to fall into ruins? Should they be restored and maintained? What does it mean to turn these places of death into tourist sites? The memorial at Treblinka attempts to deal with these issues.

In Treblinka 850,000 Jews were gassed and burned. The death camp was destroyed in 1944 by the Germans, who plowed it under and planted it over with pine trees and grain fields. The memorial at Treblinka was dedicated in 1964. Designed by the sculptor Franciszek Duszenko and the architect Adam Haupt, it consists of 17,000 granite shards set in concrete around a twenty-six-foot obelisk. Concrete railroad ties form a path leading to the memorial, reminding the visitor of the trains that brought prisoners to the camps. The lack of parallel tracks, however, insists that no train can ever go there again. Several hundred of the slabs bear the names of Jewish communities in Poland destroyed during the Holocaust; a separate row of granite stones stands in front of the clearing and names the countries of origin of the Jews who perished in Treblinka. A menorah is located at the cap of the obelisk. In this memorial, dedicated to registering the vast numbers of men, women, and children killed at the camp rather than accounting for particular individuals, the only individual commemorated is a Polish-Jewish hero, Janusz Korczak, who, as the head of a Jewish orphanage, chose to accompany his charges to Treblinka. The granite shards resemble gravestones and the entire field looks like a Jewish graveyard. The shards, along with the obelisk, which is cleaved from top to bottom, reflect the Jewish funerary tradition of layering tombstones and the Nazi desecration of Jewish graveyards. The theme of brokenness also reflects the fragmentary nature of remembering such horror. The past remains in ruins and Jewish culture has been destroyed. The Holocaust cannot be represented or remembered as a whole: it is too incomprehensible and memory is incomplete. The stone motif also reflects the Jewish tradition of laying stones at tombstones as an act of remembrance. By foregrounding the fragmentary nature of any act of remembrance, the memorial at Treblinka refuses to offer any easy meaning. The only narrative that is offered to the visitor is on a plaque at the base of the obelisk. It reads "Never Again" in Yiddish, Russian, English, French, German, and Polish.



Figure 7.2. Treblinka. From James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. Yale University Press, 1993.



## Questions

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1. Look at the images of the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial and the memorial at Treblinka. What do you see? Consider the background information in the text. How does knowing the background influence your perception of the two memorials? Compare and contrast the two memorials. Which one seems more meaningful? Why?
2. Visit and research monuments and memorials in your area. In the American South, for example, Civil War memorials, including the Confederate flag, may be especially useful for generating discussions of the historical, political, and aesthetic contexts of memory, for as V. S. Naipaul states in *A Turn in the South* (New York: Knopf, 1989), the South has a “monumental culture” precisely because of its history of defeat.
3. Choose a historical event and design a memorial or monument (out of clay or other materials) that speaks to the issue the event raises.

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## 8 Photographs

One has only to search online with the key words *Holocaust* and *photography* to discover that there are hundreds of thousands of photographic records of the Holocaust. Photography, whether in still photos or in 8-millimeter film, was a unique medium during the mid-twentieth century. Because it seemed to capture reality, photography convinced people of the authenticity of the events of the Holocaust when words sometimes faltered.

Each of the thousands of photographs was an attempt to record an event from the photographer’s perspective. Some photographs were taken by amateurs, some by professionals, some were damaged as they were smuggled in and out of hiding places, some were discarded, ignored, even doctored. Yet the sheer quantity of photographs, the consistency of their subject matter, and the many different sources of photographs conveyed something of the magnitude of the Holocaust to an incredulous world.

Photographs are especially powerful conveyors of meaning. They can be looked at over and over again to reinforce memory, to re-experience an emotion, to learn more, or to reinterpret. Unlike the original event, the images are there for the viewer who chooses to look. Moreover, many photographs have captions, and these can help interpret or carry the meaning. Sometimes the caption adds significantly to the power of the picture. In Figure 8.1, the caption tells the story of the older woman carrying the little boy. Without the caption, the picture would still be striking but would not convey so well these people’s desperation. With the caption, the photograph portrays a particular fate that would otherwise get lost in the staggering statistics of victims.

The act of photographing images of the Holocaust, with its devastating consequences, presented special challenges to photographers. Photographs try to tell a story, to create meaning. For the practiced photographer, decisions about how to do this are deliberate. Those who took photographs during and after the Holocaust had to make decisions about what to document, whether they wanted to shock or appeal to understanding, to concentrate on one aspect of the event or to capture a panorama, a symbol of something larger or a realistic portrayal. They also had to decide whether to assume the perspective of perpetrator, victim, bystander, or witness.