

# The Holocaust as Vicarious Past: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Afterimages of History

in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1998),  
pp. 666-69

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## *1. Introduction*

Following Walter Benjamin's lead in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Saul Friedlander wonders whether all historical interpretation is somehow fraught with redemptory potential. By extension, he asks whether the very act of writing Holocaust history might also redeem these events with meaning. Though as a historian Friedlander questions the adequacy of ironic and experimental responses to the Holocaust, insofar as he fears that their transgressiveness undercuts any and all meaning, he also suggests that a postmodern aesthetics might "accentuate the dilemmas" of historytelling.<sup>1</sup> Even in Friedlander's terms, this is not a bad thing: an aesthetics that remarks its own limitations, its inability to provide eternal answers and stable meaning. In short, he issues a narrow call for an aesthetics that devotes itself primarily to the dilemmas of representation, an "uncanny" history of the Holocaust that sustains uncertainty and allows us to live without a full understanding of events.

Here he also draws a clear distinction between what he terms "common memory" and "deep memory" of the Holocaust: common memory as that which "tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance," and deep memory as that which remains essen-

1. Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), pp. 61, 55.

tially inarticulable and unrepresentable, that which continues to exist as unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of meaning. Not only are these two orders of memory irreducible to each other, Friedlander says, but "any attempt at building a coherent self founders on the intractable return of the repressed and recurring deep memory."<sup>2</sup> That is, to some extent, every common memory of the Holocaust is haunted by that which it necessarily leaves unstated, its coherence a necessary but ultimately misleading evasion.

As his sole example of deep memory, Friedlander refers to the last frame of Art Spiegelman's so-called comic book of the Holocaust, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, in which the dying father addresses his son, Artie, with the name of Richieu, Artie's brother who died in the Holocaust before Artie was even born.<sup>3</sup> The still apparently unassimilated trauma of his first son's death remains inarticulable—and thereby deep—and so is represented here only indirectly as a kind of manifest behavior. But this example is significant for Friedlander in other ways, as well, coming as it does at the end of the survivor's life. For Friedlander wonders, profoundly I think, what will become of this deep memory after the survivors are gone. "The question remains," he says, "whether at the collective level . . . an event such as the *Shoah* may, after all the survivors have disappeared, leave traces of a deep memory beyond individual recall, which will defy any attempts to give it meaning" ("TT," p. 41). The implication is that, beyond the second generation's artistic and literary representations of it, such deep memory may be lost to history altogether.

In partial answer to this troubling void in Holocaust history, Friedlander proposes not so much a specific form but a way of thinking about historical narrative that makes room for a historiography that integrates deep and common memory. For the uncanny historian, this means a historiography whose narrative skein is disrupted by the sound of the historian's own, self-conscious voice. In the words of Friedlander, such

2. Friedlander, "Trauma, Transference, and 'Working Through' in Writing the History of the *Shoah*," *History and Memory* 4 (Spring–Summer 1992): 41; hereafter abbreviated "TT."

3. See Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*, 2 vols. (New York, 1986, 1991), 2:135; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

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“commentary should disrupt the facile linear progression of the narration, introduce alternative interpretations, question any partial conclusion, withstand the need for closure.”<sup>4</sup> These interruptions would also remind readers that this history is being told and remembered by someone in a particular time and place, that it is the product of human hands and minds. Such narrative would simultaneously gesture both to the existence of deep, inarticulable memory and to its own incapacity to deliver it.

Perhaps even more important for Friedlander, though he gives it equal weight in his argument, is the possibility that such commentary “may allow for an integration of the so-called ‘mythic memory’ of the victims within the overall representation of this past without its becoming an ‘obstacle’ to ‘rational historiography’” (“TT,” p. 53). Here, it seems, Friedlander would not only answer Martin Broszat’s demand that the mythic memory of victims be granted a place in “rational historiography,” but he would justify doing so not on the basis of “respect for the victims” (as Broszat had suggested) but as a necessary part of an integrated history.<sup>5</sup> Such history necessarily integrates both the contingent truths of the historian’s narrative and the fact of the victims’ memory, both deep and common. In this kind of multivocal history, no single, overarching meaning emerges unchallenged; instead, narrative and counternarrative generate a frisson of meaning *in* their exchange, in the working-through process they now mutually reinforce.

Despite his own brilliant attempt to write such history, Friedlander is still not convinced that such an antiredemptory, integrated kind of historywriting is possible.<sup>6</sup> He is asking for a narrative that simultaneously makes events coherent, even as it gestures toward the incoherence at the heart of the victim’s experience of events. Further questions arise: will the introduction of the survivors’ memory into an otherwise rational historiography add a destabilizing strain to this narrative or will it be neutralized by it? Or will such a working-through always remain the provenance of artists and novelists, whose imaginative flights bridge this contradiction even as they leave it intact? Friedlander is not sure. “Even if new forms of historical narrative were to develop,” he says, “or new modes of representation, and even if literature and art were to probe the past from unexpected vantage points, the opaqueness of some ‘deep memory’ would probably not be dispelled. ‘Working through’ may ulti-

4. Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*, p. 132.

5. Martin Broszat and Friedlander, “A Controversy about the Historicization of National Socialism,” in *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians’ Controversy*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston, 1990), p. 129.

6. With the recent publication of the first of his magisterial two-volume history, *Nazi Germany and the Jews* (New York, 1997), Friedlander may well answer his call for just such an integrated history.

mately signify, in Maurice Blanchot's words, 'to keep watch over absent meaning'" ("TT," p. 55).<sup>7</sup>

## 2. *The Commixture of Image and Narrative*

Here I would like to return to Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, not because it actually answers Friedlander's call for an integrated history of the Holocaust, but because it illustrates so graphically the very dilemmas that inspire his call. At the same time, I find that, by embodying what Marianne Hirsch has aptly termed an aesthetics of postmemory, *Maus* also suggests itself as a model for what I would like to call "received history"—a narrative hybrid that interweaves both events of the Holocaust and the ways they are passed down to us.<sup>8</sup> Like Hirsch, I would not suggest that post-memory takes us beyond memory or displaces it in any way, but it is "distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Post-memory should reflect back on memory, revealing it as equally constructed, equally mediated by the processes of narration and imagination. . . . Post-memory is anything but absent or evacuated: It is as full and as empty as memory itself."<sup>9</sup>

For like others in his media-savvy generation, born after—but indelibly shaped by—the Holocaust, Spiegelman does not attempt to represent events he never knew immediately, but instead portrays his necessarily hypermediated experience of the memory of events. This postwar generation, after all, cannot remember the Holocaust as it actually occurred. All they remember, all they know of the Holocaust, is what the victims have passed down to them in their diaries, what the survivors have remembered to them in their memoirs. They remember not actual events but the countless histories, novels, and poems of the Holocaust they have read, the photographs, movies, and video testimonies they have seen over the years. They remember long days and nights in the company of survi-

7. In his earlier *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*, trans. Thomas Weyr (New York, 1984), Friedlander was more skeptical of what he would later call postmodern responses to the Holocaust and more deeply ambivalent toward the very motives for such art. "Nazism has disappeared," he writes,

but the obsession it represents for the contemporary imagination—as well as the birth of a new discourse that ceaselessly elaborates and reinterprets it—necessarily confronts us with this ultimate question: Is such attention fixed on the past only a gratuitous reverie, the attraction of spectacle, exorcism, or the result of a need to understand; or is it, again and still, an expression of profound fears and, on the part of some, mute yearnings as well? [P. 19]

8. For an elaboration of "received history," see James E. Young, "Notes toward a Received History of the Holocaust," *History and Theory* 36 (Dec. 1997): 21–43.

9. Marianne Hirsch, "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning, and Post-Memory," *Discourse* 15 (Winter 1992–93): 8–9.

vors, listening to their harrowing tales, until their lives, loves, and losses seemed grafted indelibly onto their own life stories.

Born after Holocaust history into the time of its memory only, this media-conscious generation rarely presumes to represent events outside of the ways they have vicariously known and experienced them. Instead of attempting to portray the events of the Holocaust, they write and draw and talk about the event of its transmission to them—in books, film, photographs, and parents' stories. Instead of trying to remember events, they recall their relationship to the memory of events. "What happens to the memory of history when it ceases to be testimony?" Alice Kaplan has asked.<sup>10</sup> It becomes memory of the witness's memory, a vicarious past. What distinguishes many of these artists from their parents' generation of survivors is their single-minded knack for representing just this sense of vicariousness, for measuring the distance between history-as-it-happened and their own postmemory of it.<sup>11</sup>

As becomes clear, then, especially to the author himself, *Maus* is not about the Holocaust so much as about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery of it. In Spiegelman's own words, "*Maus* is not what happened in the past, but rather what the son understands of the father's story. . . . [It is] an autobiographical history of my relationship with my father, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, cast with cartoon animals."<sup>12</sup> As his father recalled what happened to him at the hands of the Nazis, his son Art recalls what happened to *him* at the hands of his father and his father's stories. As his father told his experiences to Art, in all their painful immediacy, Art tells his experiences of the storytelling sessions themselves—in all of their somewhat less painful mediacy.

That Spiegelman has chosen to represent the survivor's tale as passed down to him in what he calls the commix is neither surprising nor controversial. After all, as a commix-artist and founder of *Raw Magazine*, Spiegelman has only turned to what has always been his working artistic medium. That the commix would serve such a story so well, however, is what I would like to explore here. On the one hand, Spiegelman seems to have realized that in order to remain true to both his father's story and his own experience of it, he would have to remain true to his medium. But, in addition, he has also cultivated the unique capacity in the com-

10. Alice Yeager Kaplan, "Theweleit and Spiegelman: Of Mice and Men," *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Marian (Seattle, 1989), p. 160.

11. Among others in this generation, I would include installation artists Christian Boltanski, Ellen Rothenberg, Vera Frenkel, and Susan Jahoda; the photographers David Levinthal and Shimon Attie; the performance artist Deb Filler; the filmmaker Abraham Ravett; and the musician Steve Reich.

12. Spiegelman, interview with author, Dec. 1991; Spiegelman, "Commix: An Idiosyncratic Historical and Aesthetic Overview," *Print* 42 (Nov.–Dec. 1988): 196, hereafter abbreviated "C."



After dinner he took me into my old room...

COME-WE'LL TALK WHILE I PEDAL...



IT'S GOOD FOR MY HEART, THE PEDALING. BUT, TELL ME, HOW IS IT BY YOU? HOW IS GOING THE COMICS BUSINESS?

I STILL WANT TO DRAW THAT BOOK ABOUT YOU...



THE ONE I USED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT...



ABOUT YOUR LIFE IN POLAND, AND THE WAR.



IT WOULD TAKE MANY BOOKS, MY LIFE, AND NO ONE WANTS ANYWAY TO HEAR SUCH STORIES.



I WANT TO HEAR IT. START WITH MOM... TELL ME HOW YOU MET.

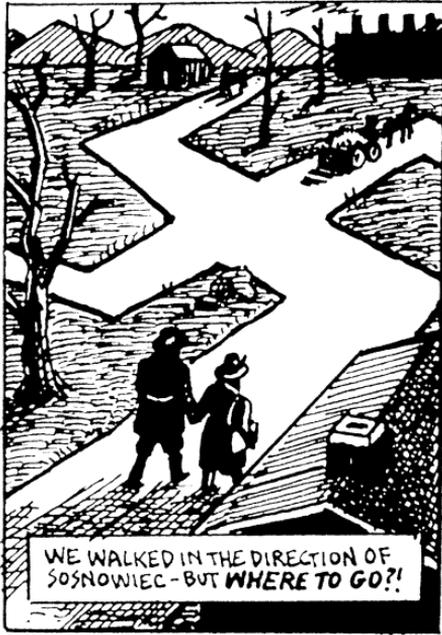


BUT, IF YOU WANT, I CAN TELL YOU... I LIVED THEN IN CZESTOCHOWA, A SMALL CITY NOT FAR FROM THE BORDER OF GERMANY...



I WAS IN TEXTILES-BUYING AND SELLING-I DIDNT MAKE MUCH, BUT ALWAYS I COULD MAKE A LIVING.

ANJA AND I DIDN'T HAVE WHERE TO GO.



mixture of image and narrative for telling the double-stranded tale of his father's story and his own recording of it.

While Spiegelman acknowledges that the very word *comics* "brings to mind the notion that they have to be funny . . . humor is not an intrinsic component of the medium. Rather than comics," he continues, "I prefer the word *commix*, to mix together, because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story" ("C," p. 61). Moreover, Spiegelman explains, "the strength of *commix* lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a 'mental language' that is closer to actual human thought than either

words or pictures alone."<sup>13</sup> Here he also cites the words of what he calls the patron saint of *commix*, Swiss educational theorist and author Rodolphe Topffer (1799–1846): "The drawings without their text would have only a vague meaning; the text without the drawings would have no meaning at all. The combination makes up a kind of novel—all the more unique in that it is no more like a novel than it is like anything else" ("C," p. 61). For unlike a more linear historical narrative, the *commixture* of words and images generates a triangulation of meaning—a kind of three-dimensional narrative—in the movement between words, images, and the reader's eye. Such a form also recognizes that part of any narrative will be this internal register of knowledge—somewhere between words and images—conjured in the mind's movement between itself and the page. Such a mental language may not be reproducible, but it is part of any narrative just the same.

Thus, in describing Winsor McKay, another pioneering cartoonist, Spiegelman further spells out what he calls the "storytelling possibilities of the comic strip's unique formal elements: the *narrative* as well as design significance of a panel's size and shape, and how these individual panels combined to form a coherent visual whole" ("C," p. 64). That is, the panels convey information in both vertical and horizontal movements of the eye, as well as in the analogue of images implied by the entire page appearing in the background of any single panel. The narrative sequence

13. Spiegelman, quoted in Jane Kalir, "Art Spiegelman: The Road to *Maus*" (exhibition catalog, Galerie St. Etienne, 17 Nov. 1992–9 Jan. 1993), p. 2.

of his boxes, with some ambiguity as to the order in which they are to be read, combines with and then challenges the narrative of his father's story—itself constantly interrupted by Art's questions and own neurotic preoccupations, his father's pill taking, the rancorous father-son relationship, his father's new and sour marriage. As a result, Spiegelman's narrative is constantly interrupted by—and integrative of—life itself, with all its dislocutions, associations, and paralyzing self-reflections. It is a narrative echoing with the ambient noise and issues surrounding its telling. The roundabout method of memorytelling is captured here in ways unavailable to straighter narrative. It is a narrative that tells both the story of events and its own unfolding as narrative.

Other aspects of Spiegelman's specific form and technique further incorporate the process of drawing *Maus* into its finished version. By drawing his panels in a 1:1 ratio, for example, instead of drawing large panels and then shrinking them down to page size, Spiegelman reproduces his hand's movement in scale—its shakiness, the thickness of his pencil line, the limits of miniaturization, all to put a cap on detail and fine line, and so keep the pictures underdetermined. This would be the equivalent of the historian's voice, not as it interrupts the narrative, however, but as it constitutes it.

At the same time, *Maus* resonates with traces of Spiegelman's earlier, experimental foray into antinarrative. According to Spiegelman, at the time of his first *Maus* narrative in 1972, he was actually more preoccupied with deconstructing the commix as narrative than he was in telling a story. As Jane Kalir has observed, Spiegelman's early work here grew more and more abstruse as he forced his drawings to ask questions like, "How does one panel on a page relate to the others? How do a strip's artificial cropping and use of pictorial illusion manipulate reality? How much can be elided from a story if it is to retain any coherence? How do words and pictures combine in the human brain?"<sup>14</sup>

Later, with the 1977 publication of *Breakdowns*, an anthology of strips from this period of self-interrogation, the artist's overriding question became, How to tell the story of narrative's breakdown in broken-down narrative?<sup>15</sup> His answer was to quote mercilessly and mockingly from mainstream comics like *Rex Morgan* and *Dick Tracy*, even while paying reverently parodic homage to comics pioneers like Winsor McKay and his *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* (*Real Dream* in Spiegelman's nightmarish versions). In *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman combined images and narrative in boxes but with few clues as to whether they should be read side to side, top to bottom, image to narrative, or narrative to image; the only linear narrative here was that generated in the reading process itself, a some-

14. Kalir, "Art Spiegelman," p. 1.

15. See Spiegelman, *Breakdowns: From "Maus" to Now: An Anthology of Strips by Art Spiegelman* (New York, 1977).

"If the author of this little volume is an artist he draws poorly, but he has a certain knack for writing..."

"...if he's a writer, he's just meddling, but to make up for that he has a nice little flair for drawing."  
-Rudolphe Topffer, comic strip artist, 1837

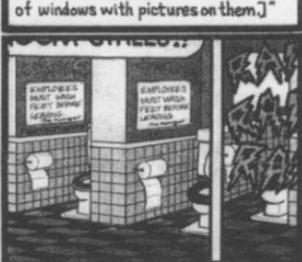
# INTR



My dictionary defines COMIC STRIP as "a narrative series of cartoons."

A NARRATIVE is defined as "a story." Most definitions of STORY leave me cold.

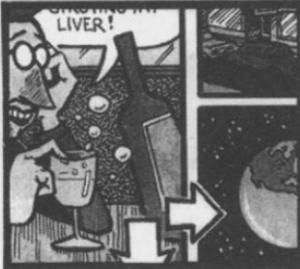
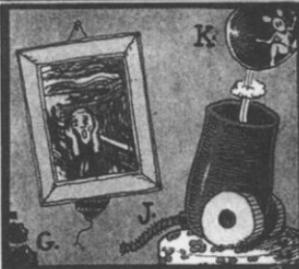
Except the one that says: "A complete horizontal division of a building... [From Medieval Latin HISTORIA... a row of windows with pictures on them.]"



The word CARTOONS implies humorous intent... a desire to amuse and entertain.

I'm not necessarily interested in entertainment... in creating diversions.

Better than CARTOONS is the word DRAWINGS; or better still... DIAGRAMS.



"It is up to the careful comic artist to see that he offends no one, hurts no group and that his strip is all in good clean fun..."

"...All in all, drawing comic strips is very interesting..."

"...in a dull, monotonous sort of way."  
-Chic Young, creator of BLONDIE



what arbitrary reassembling of boxes into sequential order. In his introductory panels to *Breakdowns*, Spiegelman even rejects the notion of narrative as story, preferring to redefine *story* as the “complete horizontal division of a building . . . [From Medieval Latin HISTORIA . . . a row of windows with pictures on them.]”<sup>16</sup> But while he exploded commix narrative into a kind of crazy quilt to be read in all directions, Spiegelman deliberately maintained a linear narrative for the Holocaust segment of *Breakdowns*. When, during one of our interviews, I asked why, he replied simply that he wasn’t interested in breaking the story of the Holocaust itself into incoherence, only in examining the limits of this particular narrative for telling such a story.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, what Spiegelman admires in the form itself, he says, he once admired in Harvey Kurtzman’s *Mad Magazine*: “It was *about* something—reality, for want of a better word—and was also highly self-reflexive, satirically questioning not only the world, but also the underlying premises of the comics medium through which it asked the questions” (“C,” p. 71). For Spiegelman, there is no contradiction between a form that is about reality, on the one hand, and that questions its own underlying premises on the other. It is clear that part of the world’s reality here is the artist’s own aching inadequacy in the face of this reality.

As for possible objections to folding the deadly high seriousness of the Holocaust into what some regard as the trivial low seriousness of comics, Spiegelman merely points to the ways in which the medium itself has always raised—and dismissed—issues of decorum as part of its *raison d’être*. Here he recalls that even the distinction itself between the high art of the masters and the low art of cartoonists is challenged by the manner in which “modern masters” like Lyonel Feininger, George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz, and Juan Gris divided their time between painting and cartoons. Indeed, as Adam Gopnik has suggested, the comics in the twentieth century have served as a “metalanguage of modernism, a fixed point of reference outside modern painting to which artists could refer in order to make puns and ironic jokes.”<sup>18</sup> As an unusually retentive mirror and caricature of styles in modern art, the comics have at once catalogued and mocked modern art with its own high seriousness, making them the postmodern art par excellence.

Written over a thirteen-year period between 1972 and 1985, the first volume of *Maus* thus integrated both narrative and antinarrative elements of the comics, embedding the father’s altogether coherent story in a medium ever-threatening to fly apart at the seams. The result is a

16. *Ibid.*

17. Spiegelman, interview with author.

18. For an overview of the comics’ place in modern art, see Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* (exhibition catalog, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1991), pp. 153–229.

continuous narrative rife with the discontinuities of its reception and production, the absolutely authentic voice of his father counterposed to the fabular images of cartoon animals. In its self-negating logic, Spiegelman's commix also suggests itself as a pointedly antiredemptory medium that simultaneously makes and unmakes meaning as it unfolds. Words tell one story, images another. Past events are not redeemed in their telling but are here exposed as a continuing cause of the artist's inability to find meaning anywhere. Meaning is not negated altogether, but what is created in the father's telling is immediately challenged in the son's reception and visualization of it.

In fact, the "story" is not a single story at all but two stories being told simultaneously: the father's story and Spiegelman's imaginative record of it. 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. Artie promises not to betray certain details only to show us both the promise and betrayal together. Indeed, it may be Artie's unreliability as a son that makes his own narrative so reliable.

Throughout *Maus*, Spiegelman thus confronts his father with the record of his telling, incorporating his father's response to Art's record of it into later stages of *Maus*. Like any good postmodern memory-art, *Maus* thereby feeds on itself, recalling its own production, even the choices the artist makes along the way. The story now includes not just what happened, but how what happened is made sense of by father and son in the telling. At the same time, it highlights both the inseparability of his father's story from its effect on Artie and the story's own necessarily contingent coming into being. All this might be lost to either images or narrative alone, or even to a reception that did not remark its own unfolding.

By weaving back into his narrative the constant reflection on his own role in extracting this story from his father, Spiegelman graphically highlights not only the ways that testimony is an event in its own right but also the central role he plays in this event. Moreover, as Dori Laub has already noted, "The listener . . . is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*."<sup>19</sup> That is, what is generated in the interaction between father and son in this case is not a revelation of a story already existing, waiting to be told, but a new story unique to their experience together. This medium allows the artist to show not only the creation of his father's story but the necessary grounds for its creation, the ways his father's story hinges on his relationship to the listener. Artie is not just a shaper of testimony during

19. Dori Laub, "Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening," in Shoshana Felman and Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, 1992), p. 57.

BUT THIS WHAT I JUST TOLD YOU-ABOUT LUCIA AND SO-I DON'T WANT YOU SHOULD WRITE THIS IN YOUR BOOK.

WHAT? WHY NOT?

IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HITLER, WITH THE HOLOCAUST!

BUT POP. IT'S GREAT MATERIAL. IT MAKES EVERYTHING MORE REAL - MORE HUMAN.

I WANT TO TELL YOUR STORY, THE WAY IT REALLY HAPPENED.

BUT THIS ISN'T SO PROPER, SO RESPECTFUL.

... I CAN TELL YOU OTHER STORIES, BUT SUCH PRIVATE THINGS, I DON'T WANT YOU SHOULD MENTION.

OKAY, OKAY- I PROMISE.

its telling, or after in his drawings, but an integral part of its very genesis, part of its very *raison d'être*. By making this telling and receiving the subject of *Maus*, Spiegelman acknowledges the multiple levels of creativity and knowledge-making here: that in the telling and that in his subsequent drawing. In this way, Spiegelman is both midwife to and eventual representer of his father's story.

### 3. Maus as Side-Shadowed History

Throughout its narrative, *Maus* thus presumes a particular paradigm for history itself, a conception of past historical events that includes the present conditions under which they are being remembered. The historical facts of the Holocaust, in this case, include the fact of their eventual transmission. This is why the "autobiographical history of the survivor's tale" necessarily begins, then, not in the father's experiences but in Artie's own. Neither the three-page 1972 version of "Maus" in *Breakdowns*, nor the later, two-volume edition of *Maus* opens in the father's boyhood Poland; but rather, both open with the son's boyhood in Rego Park, Queens. The 1972 version begins with Poppa mouse sitting on the edge of his adoring little boy's bed, telling him "bedtime stories about life in the old country during the war": ". . . and so, Mickey, *die Katzen* made all the mice to move into one part from the town! It was wery crowded in the ghetto!" "Golly!" says little mouse in his pajamas. Hence, the "real dreams" that follow in *Breakdowns*.<sup>20</sup>

*Maus: A Survivor's Tale* also opens in Rego Park, Queens, circa 1958, with the young Artie's relationship to his father. Indeed, every detail of his childhood life is already fraught with his father's memory, already shaped by his father's experiences. In the opening panel, something as innocent as being ditched by friends in childhood sparks the father's indignant comparison: "Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, THEN you could see what it is, friends" (*M*, 1:6). *Maus* thus opens with the father's seemingly inexplicable response to his young son's tears, a deep memory that becomes sensible only over the course of the narrative that follows.

After this preamble, Artie appears again, now grown, to visit his father for the first time in nearly two years. He is on a mission, a self-quest that is also historical. "I still want to draw that book about you," Artie says to his father, who answers, "No one wants anyway to hear such stories," to which Artie answers, "I want to hear it." And then he asks his father to begin, in effect, with his own implied origin: "Start with Mom . . .," he says. "Tell me how you met" (*M*, 1:12). He did not ask him to start with

20. Spiegelman, *Breakdowns*, n. p.

the war, deportation, or internment, but with his mother and their union—that is, his *own* origins. But, even here, Art's needs are frustrated by his father's actual memory: he begins not with Artie's mother, Anja, but with another, earlier girlfriend, Lucia, where *his* memory of Anja begins.

Though Vladek tells his son that Lucia and his other girlfriends had nothing to do with the Holocaust, Spiegelman includes them nevertheless. In so doing, Spiegelman not only extends the realm of Holocaust history forward to include its effects on the next generation, but also backward to include the rich, prewar tangle of lives lost. For Spiegelman, the very period of the Holocaust was not merely the sum of Jews murdered or maimed but the loss of all that came before as well. By including the quotidian and messy details of his father's love affairs before the war (against the father's wishes), he restores a measure of the victims' humanity. But, more important, he preserves the contingency of daily lives as lived and perceived then—and not only as they are retrospectively freighted with the pathos and portent we assign them now. At the same time, the artist shows how the victims themselves, for perfectly understandable reasons, are occasionally complicit in the kind of "back-shadowed history" Spiegelman now rejects.<sup>21</sup>

It is as if Spiegelman realizes that at least part of his aim here as skeptical son, as teller of "side-shadowed" history, will be to show the ways his father has made sense of his Holocaust experiences through many tellings, even as he would sabotage the ready-made story with his questions, his search for competing and contradicting details. The father might prefer a polished narrative, with beginning, middle, and end; but Artie wants to know the forks in the road, the paths not taken, how and why decisions were made under those circumstances, mistakenly or otherwise. In the nearly 1500 interlocking frames that follow, therefore, the survivor's tale includes life before the war: leaving Lucia; marrying Anja for a mixture of love and money; going to work for his father-in-law; having a baby boy, Richieu; taking Anja to a spa for treatment of severe depression; being called up by the Polish army in the weeks before war.

As a Polish soldier, Vladek sees combat on the front when Germany invades Poland, and he even kills a German soldier. But the Polish army is overrun, and Vladek is captured. He survives a POW camp and, through a combination of guile and luck, makes his way home again to Sosnowiecz. The details of the Polish Jews' ghettoization follow: hiding from selections, the gradual loss of hope and the breakup of the family, various acts of courage and betrayal by Jews and Poles, the painful send-

21. For a full critique of "back-shadowed" historytelling and an elaboration of "side-shadowed" history, see Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley, 1994).

# MAUS



WHEN I WAS A YOUNG MOUSE IN REGO PARK, NEW YORK, MY POPPA USED TO TELL ME BEDTIME STORIES ABOUT LIFE IN THE OLD COUNTRY DURING THE WAR ....



"IT WAS FENCES PUT UP ALL AROUND! NO MOUSE COULD GO OUT FROM THE GHETTO, NO FOOD AND NO MEDICINES COULD GO IN! THEY TREATED US LIKE WE WERE INSECTS... MOROSE? I CANT EVEN DESCRIBE!..."



REAL  
DREAM

"A HAND JOB" © Art Spiegelman 1975



SO I'M WALKING THROUGH A ROUGH AFRO-AMERICAN NEIGHBORHOOD, TRYING TO KEEP MY HAND IN MY POCKET, BUT...



ing of Richieu into hiding with a relative. The first volume ends with Vladek and Anja being caught and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>22</sup>

Volume 2 opens in Auschwitz, where Vladek and Anja are separated. Intercut repeatedly with scenes depicting the day-to-day circumstances of his telling, Vladek recounts the arbitrariness of day-to-day life and death in Auschwitz, finding work and learning new skills for survival, making and losing contact with Anja, liberation, the postwar chaos of refugees in Europe, and his search for Anja. The book literally ends with Vladek's description of his joyous reunion with Anja ("More I don't need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after"). Two final panels follow: "So . . . let's stop, please, your tape recorder . . . I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now." At the bottom of the last page, Art has drawn a picture of a single tombstone for Vladek and Anja, with their names and dates of life. Beneath the tombstone, Art has signed his own name and the dates 1978–1991, not his life span but that of writing *Maus* (*M*, 2:136).

"Which is the true historical project," Kaplan has asked, "the pin-pointing of an empirical cause or the trickier, less disciplined attempt to make links between past and present?"<sup>23</sup> In *Maus*, not only are past and present linked, but they constantly intrude and occasionally even collapse into each other. In relating, for example, the fate of his cousin, Haskel, an infamous *Kombinator* (schemer), the very memory seems to stop Vla-

22. Though Spiegelman wrote and conceived of *Maus* as a single work from the beginning, he agreed to allow Pantheon Books to divide it into two volumes, the first published in 1986. This was partly to preempt possible copycat "comics" and animated cartoons by those familiar with the sections of *Maus* already published in *Raw Comics*, the journal Spiegelman and his wife, Françoise Mouly, coedit.

23. Kaplan, "Theweleit and Spiegelman," p. 162.

Rego Park, N.Y. c. 1958



ARTIE! COME TO HOLD THIS A MINUTE WHILE I SAW.



WHY DO YOU CRY, ARTIE?  
HOLD BETTER ON THE WOOD.

I-I FELL, AND  
MY FRIENDS  
SKATED AWAY  
W-WITHOUT ME.



He stopped sawing.

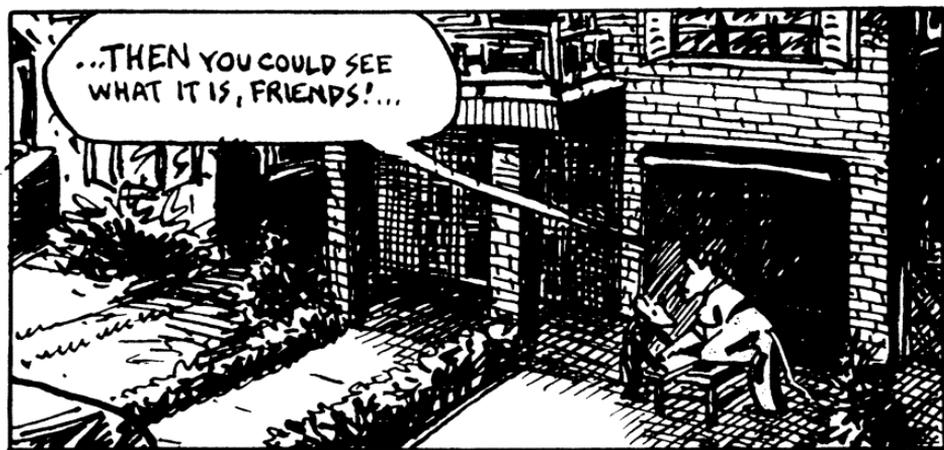
FRIENDS?  
YOUR  
FRIENDS?...



IF YOU LOCK THEM TOGETHER  
IN A ROOM WITH NO FOOD  
FOR A WEEK ....



...THEN YOU COULD SEE  
WHAT IT IS, FRIENDS!...



dek's heart as he grabs his chest. The narrative is one thing, the heart-stopping anxiety it produces in the teller is another. Both are portrayed here—the story and the effect on the teller himself—a kind of deep memory usually lost to narrative alone (see *M*, 1:118).

Earlier, as the father recounts the days in August 1939 when he was drafted, just as he gets to the outbreak of war itself: “and on September 1, 1939, the war came. I was on the front, one of the first to . . . Ach!” His elbow knocks two bottles of pills onto the floor. “So. Twice I spilled my drugstore!” He blames his lost eye and cataracts for not seeing so well and launches into the story of eye operations and neglectful doctors. On that day and in that chapter of the book, he doesn't finish his story of the Nazi invasion and says it's enough for today. “I'm tired and I must count my pills” (*M*, 1:39, 40). Which is fine with Artie, whose writing hand is sore from note taking. Both teller and listener need to recover from the storytelling session itself, though whether it is the activity of telling and listening or the content of the narrative that has worn them out is not clear. Throughout the course of *Maus*, the content of the father's tale of survival is balanced against the literal process of its recovery, the circumstances under which it is received and then retold.

By making the recovery of the story itself a visible part of *Maus*, Spiegelman can also hint darkly at the story not being recovered here, the ways that telling one story always leaves another untold, the ways common memory masks deep memory. In Spiegelman's case, this deep, unre-



— art spiegelman — 1978-1991

HASKEL IS ALIVE STILL IN POLAND, WITH A POLISH WOMAN, A JUDGE, WHAT KEPT HIM HIDDEN WHEN **HYAAK!**



MY HEART - ARTIE! QUICK! TAKE FROM MY POCKET A NITROSTAT PILL.



H-HERE...YOU OKAY?

HOOSH



I-I'LL BE FINE NOW. I HAVE ONLY TO CATCH MY BREATH STILL FOR A MINUTE.

JUST RELAX. DON'T TALK FOR A WHILE.

HOOSH! I MADE TOO FAST, OUR WALKING!



THANK GOD, WITH THE NITROSTAT IT'S COMPLETELY OVER RIGHT AWAY! WHAT WAS I TELLING YOU?

YOU SURE YOU'RE OKAY?



WELL... YOU WERE SAYING THAT HASKEL SURVIVED THE WAR.

YES. EVEN A FEW YEARS AGO I SENT HIM PACKAGES.



GIFTS? WHY? HE SOUNDS LIKE A ROTTEN GUY!

YES. I DON'T KNOW WHY. I KNOW ONLY THAT I SENT.



YOU KNOW, ONE TIME I WAS IN THE GHETTO WALKING AROUND...

HALT, JEW!



GIVE ME YOUR I.D. PAPERS... I'M GOING TO BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT.



AH. I SEE YOU'RE A MEMBER OF THE ILLUSTRIOUS SPIEGELMAN FAMILY... GO ON YOUR WAY THEN, AND GIVE HASKEL MY REGARDS.



.... SUCH FRIENDS HASKEL HAD.

coverable story is his mother's memory of her experiences during the Holocaust. Vladek does not, cannot volunteer this story. It takes Artie to ask what Anja was doing all this time. "Houseworks . . . and knitting . . . reading . . . and she was writing always her diary" (*M*, 1:84). The diaries did not survive the war, Vladek says, but she did write her memoirs afterward. "Ohmigod! Where are they? I need those for this book!" Artie exclaims (*M*, 1:84). Instead of answering, Vladek coughs and asks Artie to stop with the smoking. It's making him short of breath. What seems to be a mere interruption turns out to be a prescient delaying tactic. Vladek had, after all, burned Anja's memoirs in a fit of grief after her suicide. Was it the memory of smoke from the burned memoirs or Artie's cigarettes that now made him short of breath?

At the end of the first volume, Spiegelman depicts the moment at which his father admits not only destroying his mother's memoirs but leaving them unread. "Murderer," the son mutters (*M*, 1:159). Here he seems to realize that his father's entire story is haunted by Anja's lost story. But, worse, it dawns on the son that his entire project may itself be premised on the destruction of his mother's memoirs, their displacement and violation. I'll tell it for her, implies the father. Spiegelman does not attempt to retell Anja's story at all, but leaves it known only by its absence; he is an accomplice to the usurpation of his dead mother's voice. It is a blank page, to be presented as blank. Nancy Miller has even suggested, profoundly, that "it's as if at the heart of *Maus's* dare is the wish to save the mother by retrieving her narrative; as if the comic book version of Auschwitz were the son's normalization of another impossible reality: restoring the missing word, the Polish notebooks."<sup>24</sup> As a void at the heart of *Maus*, the mother's lost story may be *Maus's* negative center of gravity, the invisible planet around which both the father's telling and Spiegelman's recovery of it revolve.

Here Spiegelman seems also to be asking how we write the stories of the dead without filling in their absence. In a limited way, the commixture of image and narrative allows the artist to do just this, to make visible crucial parts of memory-work usually lost to narrative alone, such as the silences and spaces between words. How to show a necessary silence? Art's therapist, Pavel, suggests at one point that because "life always takes the side of life," the victims who died can never tell their stories. Maybe it's better not to have any more stories at all, Pavel says. "Uh, huh," Art nods in agreement and adds, "Samuel Beckett once said, 'Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.'" "Yes," Pavel answers. And then we have a panel without words, just an image of Art and his therapist sitting in silence, a moment in the therapeutic context as fraught with

24. See Nancy K. Miller's deeply insightful essay, "Cartoons of the Self: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Murderer: Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *M/e/a/n/i/n/g* (Fall 1992): 49.

significance as narrative itself. For this is not silence as an absence of words but silence as something that actively passes between two people—the only frame in the two volumes without words or some other sign denoting words. On the other hand, Art points out in the next frame, “he said it.” “Maybe you can include it in your book,” the therapist replies (*M*, 2:45).

How to show the unshowable may also underpin Spiegelman’s use of animals for humans here. When Spiegelman is asked, “Why mice?” he answers, “I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them. I want to show the masking of these events *in* their representation.”<sup>25</sup> In this way, he can tell the story and not tell it at the same time. As ancient Passover Haggadoth used to put birds’ heads on human forms in order not to show humans and to show them at the same time, Spiegelman has put mouse heads on the Jews. By using mice masks, the artist also asks us not to believe what we see. They are masks drawing attention to themselves as such, never inviting us to mistake memory of events for events themselves.

At one point, Adam Gopnik echoes Spiegelman’s words, but with a slightly different twist. It’s not just that Spiegelman wants to show this story by masking it, says Gopnik, but that the story itself “is too horrible to be presented unmasked.” Moreover, Gopnik finds that Spiegelman may even be extending an ancient Jewish iconographic tradition, if for very untraditional reasons:

The particular animal “masks” Spiegelman has chosen uncannily recall and evoke one of the few masterpieces of Jewish religious art—the Bird’s Head Haggadah of 13th-century Ashkenazi art. In this and related manuscripts, the Passover story is depicted using figures with the bodies of humans and heads of animals—small, common animals, usually birds.

Now, in one sense the problems that confronted the medieval Jewish illuminator and the modern Jewish artist of the Holocaust are entirely different. The medieval artist had a subject too holy to be depicted; the modern artist has a subject too horrible to be depicted. For the traditional illuminator, it is the ultimate sacred mystery that must somehow be shown without being shown; for the contemporary artist, it is the ultimate obscenity, the ultimate profanity, that must somehow be shown without being shown.<sup>26</sup>

Though Gopnik goes on to suggest that this obscenity has also become our sacred subject, we might do better to keep in mind not this apparent

25. Spiegelman, interview with author.

26. Gopnik, “Comics and Catastrophe: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the History of the Cartoon,” *The New Republic*, 22 June 1987, p. 33.

I WAS FRIGHTENED TO GO OUTSIDE FOR A FEW DAYS... I DIDN'T WANT TO PASS WHERE THEY WERE HANGING.



AND MAYBE ONE OF THEM COULD HAVE TALKED TO ME TO THE GERMANS TO TRY TO SAVE HIMSELF.

AH. WHEN I THINK NOW OF THEM, IT STILL MAKES ME CRY... LOOK-EVEN FROM MY DEAD EYE TEARS ARE COMING OUT!



WHAT WAS ANJA DOING AT AROUND THIS TIME?

HOUSEWORKS... AND KNITTING... READING... AND SHE WAS WRITING ALWAYS HER DIARY.



I USED TO SEE POLISH NOTEBOOKS AROUND THE HOUSE AS A KID. WERE THOSE HER DIARIES?

YES, AND ALSO NO.



HER DIARIES DIDN'T SURVIVE FROM THE WAR. WHAT YOU SAW SHE WROTE AFTER: HER WHOLE STORY FROM THE START.

OHMIGOD! WHERE ARE THEY? I NEED THOSE FOR THIS BOOK!



COFF! PLEASE, ARTIE, STOP WITH THE SMOKING. IT MAKES ME SHORT WITH BREATH.

I THINK IT'S ALL YOUR PEDALING!



DON'T BE SO SMART! ...WHAT I WAS TELLING YOU? YES... AFTER THE HANGING I LOOKED FOR ANOTHER BUSINESS...

...I STARTED TO TRADE GOLD AND JEWELRY.



IT WAS EASIER TO HIDE THAN CLOTHINGS. I KEPT THINGS HIDDEN IN THE CHILD'S STROLLER, AND I MADE A FEW ZLOTYS.





(and mistaken) conflation of sacred and profane, but the medium's essential indirection, its simultaneous attempt at representing and its self-declared inadequacy.

Indeed, as Spiegelman attempted to ironize narrative, he also uses images against themselves. By adopting the mouse as allegorical image for Jews, Spiegelman is able to

caricature—and thereby subvert—the Nazi image of Jews as vermin. Subjugated groups have long appropriated the racial epithets and stereotypes used against them in order to ironize and thereby neutralize their charge, taking them out of the oppressors' vocabulary. In this case, the images of mice led in turn to other animal figures insofar as they are related to mice: the wily and somewhat indifferent cat is the obvious natural enemy of the mouse and, as German, the principal killer of mice here. The Poles are saddled with a more ambiguous figure: while not a natural enemy of the Jews during the Holocaust, as pigs they come to symbolize what is *treif* or non-Kosher. They may not be as anti-Jewish as the cats, but they are decidedly un-Jewish. The only other animal to resonate a Nazi cast would be the friendly, if none-too-bright dogs as stand-ins for Americans, regarded as a mongrel people by Hitler, but pictured here as the natural and more powerful enemy of the cats. The rest of the animals are more literally benign: reindeer for the Swedes, moths for Gypsies. But none of these, aside from the mouse, is intrinsic; witness Art's deliberations over whether to make his French-born wife, Françoise, who converted to Judaism, a frog or an honorary mouse.

Though he has tried to weave the process of drawing *Maus* back into its narrative, Spiegelman is also aware that as a finished text *Maus* may not truly capture the process at its heart. This is why two exhibitions, one at the Galerie St. Etienne and the other in the projects room at MOMA in New York, were so central to Spiegelman's project at the time. In these exhibitions, each entitled "The Road to *Maus*," the artist mounted the originals of his finished panels sequentially in a horizontal line along the walls of the gallery. Each panel in turn had all of its earlier drafts running vertically down into it, showing the evolution of each image from start to finish. Cassette players and earpieces were strategically interspersed along the walls of the gallery so that viewers could listen to Art's original interviews with his father. In this way, Spiegelman hoped to bring his true object of representation into view: the process by which he arrived at a narrative, by which he made meaning in and worked through a history that has been both public and personal. Though the ostensible purpose of the exhibition was, according to Robert Storrs, "to illuminate the final

Summer vacation, Françoise and I were staying with friends in Vermont...



WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DRAW YOU...

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DRAW YOU...

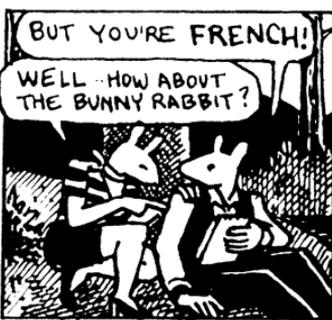


WANT ME TO POSE?

I MEAN IN MY BOOK. WHAT KIND OF ANIMAL SHOULD I MAKE YOU?



HUH? A MOUSE, OF COURSE!



BUT YOU'RE FRENCH!

WELL... HOW ABOUT THE BUNNY RABBIT?



NAH. TOO SWEET AND GENTLE.

I MEAN THE FRENCH IN GENERAL. LET'S NOT FORGET THE CENTURIES OF ANTI-SEMITISM...

HMMMPH.



I MEAN, HOW ABOUT THE DREYFUS AFFAIR? THE NAZI COLLABORATORS! THE —

OKAY! BUT IF YOU'RE A MOUSE, I OUGHT TO BE A MOUSE TOO.

I CONVERTED DIDN'T I?

entity—a mass-produced work—by showing its complex genesis in the artist's mind and on the draftsman's page,"<sup>27</sup> the artist himself preferred to see the exhibition *as* the total text, he told me. "If I had my way," he said, "this would be the text of *Maus*, replete with how I got to the so-called final panels."<sup>28</sup>

With the advent of CD-ROM, the artist has had his wish at least partly fulfilled, for here is an interactive text in which the panels of *Maus* are accompanied by complete genealogies of their origins. Where did a particular story or set of images come from? How did they first enter the artist's consciousness? It's all here. We press the interactive screen on one of the colored boxes, and up comes a complete (pre-)history of that panel. Vladek's tape-recorded voice tells one version, with Art's interruptions. The artist's early sketches done as his father spoke tell another. Photographs and drawings from Art's library that inspired certain images appear one after the other, even video footage of Art's trip to Poland and Auschwitz. By making visible the memory of this memory-text's production, the CD-ROM version of *Maus* reveals the interior, ever-evolving life of memory—and even makes this life, too, part of its text.

#### 4. *The Ambivalence of Memory*

Finally, like other artists in his antiredemptory generation, Spiegelman cannot escape an essential ambivalence he feels toward his entire memory enterprise. For he recognizes that both his father's story and his own record of it have arisen out of a confluence of conflicting personal, professional, and not always heroic needs. Vladek tells his story, it seems, more for the sake of his son's company than for the sake of history; it is a way to keep his son nearby, a kind of tether. Indeed, as survivor *par excellence*, Vladek is not above bartering the story itself to get what he wants: first, as leverage to keep his son nearby, and then later as part of an exchange for food at the local market, where he receives six dollars' worth of groceries for one dollar, a partially eaten box of Special K cereal, a story of his declining health, and, of course, a little about "how it was in the camps" (*M*, 2:90). In a pinch, as it turns out, the savvy survivor can trade even his story of survival for food.

While this kind of self-interested storytelling might drive the son a little crazy, Art must face the way he too has come to the story as much to learn about his origins, his dead mother, his own *mishugas*, as he does to learn Holocaust history. In fact, the Holocaust-telling relationship liter-

27. Robert Storrs, "Making Maus," pamphlet for Projects Room Exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, p. 1.

28. Spiegelman, interview with author, Nov. 1992.

ally redeems the father-son relationship for Artie. "I'll get my tape recorder, so today isn't a total loss, okay?" he says after a particularly trying visit with Vladek (*M*, 2:23). Moreover, he recognizes not only that he too has capitalized on his father's story, but that in so doing, he has even delayed the rest of the story's publication. What with all the business and promotional deals surrounding *Maus* 1, Art could hardly find time to continue what had been a single project, now broken into two parts for the sake of publication. The Holocaust has been good to a starving artist who admits choosing his life's work partly to spite his father with its impracticality. And now it has made him quite comfortable, as well, which becomes part of the story in *Maus* 2—a recognition of his debt to his father's story, the way Art has traded it for his own survival. In this way, history is received as a gift and as a commodity to be traded, the sole basis for any relationship at all between father and son.

All of which generates a certain self-loathing in the artist, even as it saps the author of his desire to continue telling the story. The first five frames of the second chapter in volume 2 open with Art's morbid reflections on the production and success of volume 1. With flies buzzing around his head, he contemplates the stages of his parents' life weighed against the stages of his own, while trying to make sense of the yawning gap between their life experiences and his own. Out of his window, where one of New York City's signature water towers might be standing, we see what Art sees: a concentration camp guard tower (its base and outline not unlike that of the water towers). Now, flies buzz around crumpled mouse corpses littering his floor as Art slumps dejectedly onto his drafting board.

Part of what gets Art down, of course, is that he is not an innocent bystander in all this, a grateful vessel into which his father has poured his story. When he remembers his father's story now, he remembers how at times he had to wring it out of him. When his father needed a son, a friend, a sounding board for his *tsuris*, Art demanded Holocaust. Before rejoining his father's story in Auschwitz, Art draws himself listening to the tape-recorded session he's about to tell. "I was still so sick and tired," Vladek is saying about his return from a bout in the hospital. "And to have peace only, I agreed. To make [my will] legal she brought right to my bed a NOTARY." To which Art replies, "Let's get back to Auschwitz . . ." "Fifteen dollars he charged to come! If she waited only a week until I was stronger, I'd go to the bank and take a notary for only a quarter!" "ENOUGH!" screams the son. "TELL ME ABOUT AUSCHWITZ!" Artie shrinks in his seat and sighs as he listens again to this exchange. Defeated, his father returns to the story (*M*, 2:47).

Indeed, Spiegelman is both fascinated and repelled by the way he can actually assimilate these stories so seamlessly into the rest of his life. At one point, his wife, Françoise, peeks into Art's studio and asks cheer-

Time flies...

Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982...  
Françoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979.



Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944...  
I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987.



In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby...  
Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz...



In September 1986, after 8 years of work, the first part of MAUS was published. It was a critical and commercial success.



At least fifteen foreign editions are coming out. I've gotten 4 serious offers to turn my book into a T.V. special or movie. (I don't wanna.)

In May 1968 my mother killed herself. (She left no note.)

Lately I've been feeling depressed.



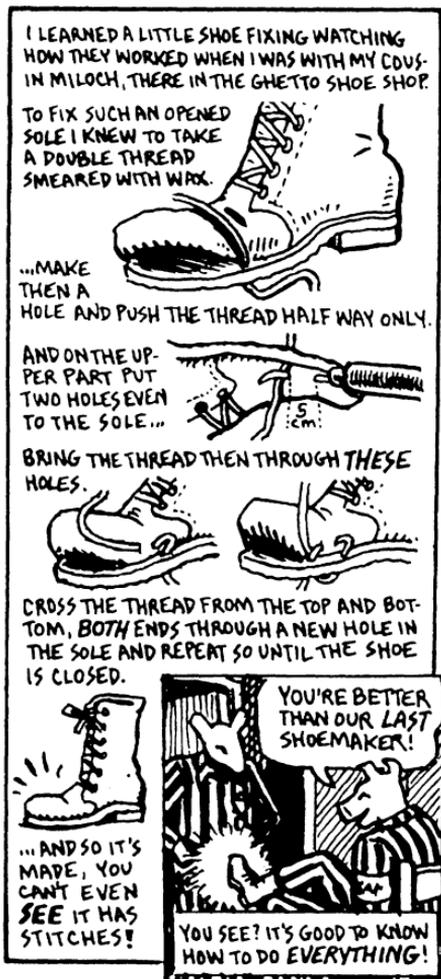
Alright Mr. Spiegelman... We're ready to shoot!!!

And so...



fully, "Want some coffee?" Art is replaying the tape recording in which his father describes the moments before his brother was killed. "And then she said, 'No! I will not go in the gas chambers. And my children will not . . . [klik].'" Art turns off the cassette and answers eagerly, "You bet!" (*M*, 2:120). What do these stories do to the rest of the lives in which they are embedded? Shouldn't they foul everything they touch with their stench? Can we keep such stories separate or do they seep into the rest of our lives, and how corrosive are they? Maybe, just maybe, we can live with these stories, after all.

"Why should we assume there are positive lessons to be learned from [the Holocaust]?" Jonathan Rosen has asked in an essay that cuts excruciatingly close to the bone of Spiegelman's own ambivalence. "What if some history does not have anything to teach us? What if studying radical evil does not make us better? What if, walking through the haunted halls of the Holocaust Museum, looking at evidence of the destruction of Euro-



pean Jewry, visitors do not emerge with a greater belief that all men are created equal but with a belief that man is by nature evil?"<sup>29</sup> As we see in the case of Vladek's own racist attitudes toward African Americans, the Holocaust may have made him even worse. And if the Holocaust does not enlighten its victims, how will its story enlighten the next generation? It is an irony with a very clear judgement built into it: the Holocaust was an irredeemably terrible experience then, had a terrible effect on many survivors' lives, and endows its victims with no great moral authority now. Categories like good and evil remain, but they are now stripped of their idealized certainties. Neither art nor narrative redeems the Holocaust with meaning—didactic, moral, or otherwise. In fact, to the extent that remembering events seems to find any meaning in them, such memory also betrays events by blinding us with our own need for redemptory closure.

### 5. Conclusion: Postmemory and the Evasions of History

At no place in or out of *Maus* does Spiegelman cast doubt on the facts of the Holocaust. Moreover, he is positively traditional in his use of documentary artifacts and photographs as guides to describing real events. When his book made the *New York Times* bestseller list in 1991, he was surprised to find it on "the fiction side of the ledger." In his letter to the *Times*, Spiegelman wrote,

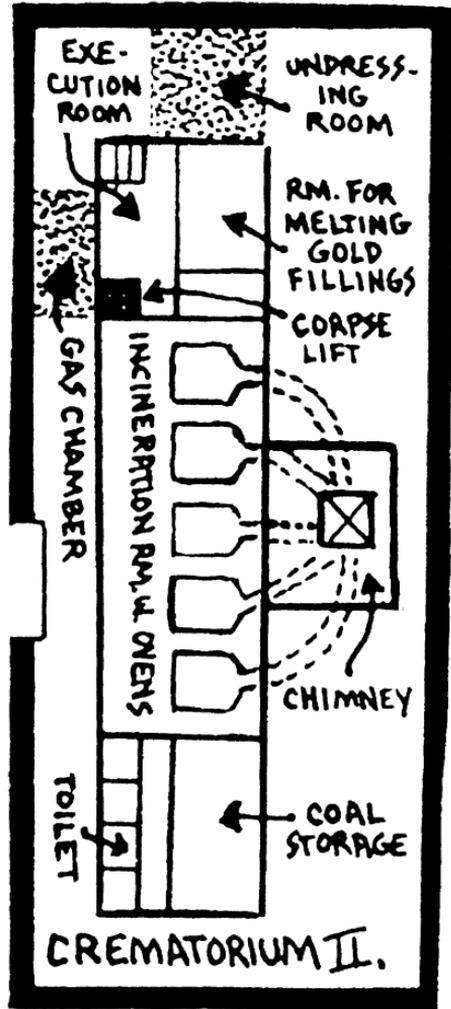
If your list were divided into literature and nonliterature, I could gracefully accept the compliment as intended, but to the extent that "fiction" indicates that a work isn't factual, I feel a bit queasy. As an author I believe I might have lopped several years off the

29. Jonathan Rosen, "The Trivialization of Tragedy," *Culturefront* (Winter 1997): 85.

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

The borderland between fiction and nonfiction has been fertile territory for some of the most potent contemporary writing, and it's not as though my passages on how to build a bunker and repair concentration camp boots got the book onto your advice, how-to and miscellaneous list. It's just that I shudder to think how David Duke—if he could read—would respond to seeing a carefully researched work based closely on my father's memories of life in Hitler's Europe and in the death camps classified as fiction.

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?<sup>30</sup>



In the end, the editors at the *Times* did not add this special "nonfiction/mice" category to their list, but they did agree to move *Maus* over to the nonfiction list. But in this context, it is not surprising that the author sees no contradiction between his fabular medium and his devotion to fact in *Maus*. For his positivist stance is not a negation of the vagaries of memory but that which makes the recognition of memory necessary. Together the facts of history and their memory exist side by side, mutually dependent on one another for sustenance and meaning.

Thus will a received history like *Maus* also remain true to the mistaken perceptions and memory of the survivor. What might appear as historical errors of fact in *Maus*, such as the pictures of Poles in Nazi uniforms (*M*, 1:140) and of others saying "Heil Hitler" (*M*, 1:149)—when it would have been almost impossible to find any Pole saluting Hitler to another Pole during the war or to find a Polish Nazi—are accurate

30. Spiegelman, letter to the editor, *New York Times Book Review*, 29 Dec. 1991, p. 4.

representations of his father's possibly faulty memory. The truth of such memory is not that Poles actually gave the Nazi salute to each other, but that Vladek remembered Poles to be Nazi-like in their hatred of Jews. Whether accurate or not, such a perception may itself have played a role in Vladek's actions during the war and so deserves a place in the historical record.

On the one hand, issues of historical accuracy and factuality in a medium like *Maus* are bound to haunt its author, raised as they are by the medium but impossible to resolve in it. Miller has put the question most succinctly: "The relationship between accuracy and caricature for a cartoonist who works in a medium in which accuracy is an *effect of exaggeration* is a vexed one."<sup>31</sup> But in an era when absolute truth claims are under assault, Spiegelman's *Maus* also makes a case for an essentially reciprocal relationship between the truth of what happened and the truth of how it is remembered. The facts of the Holocaust here include the facts surrounding its eventual transmission to him. Together, what happened and how it is remembered constitute a received history of events.

No doubt, some will see this as a supremely evasive, even self-indulgent art by a generation more absorbed in their own vicarious experiences of memory than by their parents' actual experiences of real events. Some will say that if the second or third generation want to make art out of the Holocaust, then let it be about the Holocaust itself and not about themselves. The problem for much of Spiegelman's generation, of course, is that they are either unable or unwilling to remember the Holocaust outside of the ways it has been passed down to them, outside of the

31. Miller, "Cartoons of the Self," p. 46.



ways it is meaningful to them fifty years after the fact. As the survivors have testified to *their* experiences of the Holocaust, their children and children's children will now testify to their experiences of the Holocaust. And what are *their* experiences of the Holocaust? Photographs, film, histories, novels, poems, plays, survivors' testimony. It is necessarily mediated experience, the afterlife of memory, represented in history's afterimages: the impressions retained in the mind's eye of a vivid sensation long after the original, external cause has been removed.

Why represent all that? Because for those in Spiegelman's generation to leave out the truth of how they came to know the Holocaust would be to ignore half of what actually happened: we would know what happened to Vladek but miss what happened to Art. But isn't the important story what happened to Vladek at Auschwitz? Yes, but without exploring why it's important, we leave out part of the story itself. Is it self-indulgent or self-aggrandizing to make the listener's story part of the teller's story? This generation doubts that it can be done otherwise. They can no more neglect the circumstances surrounding a story's telling than they can ignore the circumstances surrounding the actual events' unfolding. Neither the events nor the memory of them take place in a void. In the end, which is the more truthful account: that which ignores the facts surrounding its own coming into being, or that which paints these facts, too, into its canvas of history? Art Spiegelman's *Maus* succeeds brilliantly not just for the ways it side-shadows the history of the Holocaust, but for the ways it side-shadows memory itself, the ways it makes visible why such history is worth recalling in the first place.