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Representing the Holocaust

14 May 2013

*Maus II*: The Estranged Relationship Between Father and Son, Victim and Outsider

Years after his father has passed away, Art Spiegelman still finds himself haunted by his father Vladek’s stories from the concentration camps and the Holocaust. As Art attempts to represent these stories in the form of the comic book *Maus*, he struggles with his lack of understanding of his father’s experiences and his tense relationship with his father. Specifically in the second volume, *And Here my Troubles Began*, Artie deals with these issues while in parallel sharing Vladek’s incredible survival story from the camps at Auschwitz. At the beginning of the volume, Artie says, “I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through… I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams” (16). At one point, Artie draws himself in his present, when he is creating the second volume and years after his father’s death, surrounded by a giant pile of dead mouse bodies. Distinguishable outside of his window is the outline of a guard tower, like those of the camps. In this scene, Artie becomes overwhelmed and is at a complete loss for how to continue sharing his father’s story when there is so much that he does not comprehend about his father’s character and their relationship. Throughout the volume, Artie struggles with connecting his life to Vladek’s experiences, feeling a mix of incredulity at his father’s story, anger at his father’s stubborn qualities, and guilt at his inability to grasp the total atrocity that his father experienced. He even considers the question regarding the purpose of sharing Holocaust testimonies, and how they can affect people today when dealing with such a complex and traumatic event. To understand an individual’s account of the Holocaust from an outsider’s perspective is an impossible task. No matter how descriptive the words, how vivid the images, or how specific the details, feelings cannot be reproduced.

Although Artie is representing the story from his point of view, the story of the camps is always narrated through Vladek’s words. The story is being passed down through two levels – from survivor to son of survivor through testimony, and from the son to the general public in the form of drawings and captions. As Vladek tells Artie his story, Artie is not able to get a full sense of the experience without having been there. Furthermore, he must deal with trying to recreate the story as completely as possible in a physical form. The pictures are drawn through Artie’s interpretations of Vladek’s words. The action of each pane follows Vladek’s story, but Art is able to add subtleties and alter the scenes with his drawings to portray more of the bigger picture that is not limited to Vladek’s perspective. For example, when Artie draws the Jews marching into work in the morning, he draws an orchestra in the background (54). When asked about the orchestra, Vladek comments, “I remember only marching, not any orchestras… from the gate guards took us over to the workshop. How could it be there an orchestra?” (54). In the following pane, Artie draws the same formation of Jews, except now the marching Jews cover the orchestra, almost to the extent that it cannot be seen. The inclusion of this small scroll of the bass, and thus the existence of the orchestra, changes the scene completely from what it would have been without the orchestra. The orchestra is historically accounted for, but through Vladek’s perspective the orchestra does not exist. Art can add small subtleties such as this – through each drawing we are able to see context and background, rather than being limited to a witness’ perspective, creating a fuller depiction of the scenes presented.

In analyzing his relationship with his father, Artie tries to connect his father’s current emotions and happiness to his past – from before his mother’s suicide, to before Artie’s birth, to before the Holocaust. Vladek used to be a man surrounded by family, love, and wealth, yet Artie has never known this man. In particular, Artie compares himself with his brother, Richieu, who died in the war long before Artie was even born. The only form of Richieu that exists today is a photo, on which Artie comments, “…the photo never threw tantrums or got in any kind of trouble… it was an ideal kid, and I was a pain in the ass. I couldn’t compete” (15). To Artie, Richieu is a smaller representation of his father’s life before the war, when he was happily married and rich. These happy carefree memories are frozen in the form of pictures, and these pictures are all Vladek has left of that time. At the very end of the volume, as Vladek explains how he and Anja reunited after coming back from the camps, he says, “…we were both very happy, and lived happy happy ever after” (136). He then mistakenly calls Artie by the name of Richieu. As Vladek lies in his bed, health failing, he may be repressing the trauma of the Holocaust, and the aftermath of the atrocity and loss he experienced. His statement regarding his and Anja’s time together after the war seems to come from Vladek’s dreams, as Anja suffered heavily from depression and anxiety, eventually committing suicide. Vladek says to his son, “All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once and for all,” referring to letters he got rid of and memories of the aftermath of the war that he repressed. Vladek reverts back to the life he had without the weight of the Holocaust, which is only left in his memory and photos, and unfortunately Artie is not a part of that life.

In the present narrative, Artie shows Vladek in a rather negative light. Vladek is a stubborn, miserly, old man who continues to criticize his son for even the smallest of actions. Artie must balance his frustration towards his father with his admiration towards Vladek for surviving the camps. While he admits resentment towards his father for always telling him he was not good enough, Artie also comments that “… no matter what I accomplish, it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz” (44). The problem Artie faces here is that he remains in awe of his father’s survival, but he makes the mistake of comparing his own accomplishments to his father’s at the time of the Holocaust. The actions of the prisoners during this time cannot be compared to Artie’s actions, as they were in completely different settings and circumstances. Vladek’s story shows a completely different side of him, a side that Artie has never seen and is awed by. However, in the present narrative, Artie must give his perspective of a grumpy and irritable Vladek, because this is the only way Artie can connect the pieces between Vladek in the camps and Vladek the father.

Vladek’s and Anja’s survival and return from the camps is a very rare story, and the means that they survived was extremely lucky. While Vladek demonstrated an extraordinary amount of quick thinking and useful skill, intelligence was never enough to warrant survival. Instead, it was the chance of being in the right place at the right time that saved survivors from the gas chambers. Artie’s therapist explains, “…But it wasn’t the best people who survived, nor did the best only die. It was random” (45). Thus, survivors must deal with guilt and face the question of why they survived over others. Vladek does not openly admit any guilt, but perhaps Vladek deals with his survivor’s guilt through his interactions with Artie. For example, through much of his work, Artie shows his frustration and anger with his father, emphasizing the more estranged relationship they had as he grew up. Many times, they fight over Vladek’s persistence in refusing to spend money and saving useless items, such as a piece of wire he picks up on the street. During wartime, Vladek’s resourcefulness saved him and Anja, and this trait in Vladek has remained. For example, when trying to convince Artie to take an almost empty box of cereal, Vladek comments, “Ever since Hitler I don’t like to throw out even a crumb” (78). Artie then blows up at Vladek, fed up with his stubborn nature, but maybe Vladek is simply trying to prove himself. With looming survivor guilt, perhaps Vladek wants to show that there was a reason he survived over the others. Especially with his son, who he was never particularly close with, he wants to emphasize that he deserved to survive. Vladek grows weaker as the narrative progresses, nearing his death, yet he is determined that he doesn’t need anyone else’s help to function. This is again Vladek refuting survivor’s guilt and showing that he can always survive, no matter the circumstances.

Furthermore, while Artie comments that Vladek was always hard on him, picking out his mistakes and telling him he was wrong, he worries that his depiction of Vladek is too irate and miserly. This harsh behavior could possibly be the result of Vladek pushing his guilt from the Holocaust onto Artie. After experiencing the unthinkable during the Holocaust, Vladek’s only explanation for his survival is that he was clever and skillful in dire situations, even though there were many just as smart and cunning as he was who perished. He projects these feelings onto his son, telling Artie that he is not good enough, as Artie is the true survivor who does not have to live through the Holocaust and have death looming over him at every step. Artie will never be in the same circumstances, so it is safe for Vladek to accuse his son of incompetence, which could easily have been the death of Vladek at the time of the war.

Spiegelman also draws on an interesting parallel by showing Vladek as a dismissive racist. Throughout the entire book we see Vladek and his family being shamed and racially discriminated against, yet in one present-day scene, we see Vladek cursing an African American hitchhiker. He stereotypes the man, saying, “It’s not even to compare the Shvartsers and the Jews” (99). Vladek is putting African Americans on such a low level that they are not even comparable as humans to the Jews. This is the same view that the Germans had of the Jews, which led to the Holocaust. However, the parallel is more likely to be drawn between Vladek’s treatment of the African American to the Polish treatment of the Jews. Vladek’s reaction seems to mirror many of the Pole’s reaction at the time of the Holocaust – his racism stems from an incident in New York, while the Poles grew wary towards the Jewish in times of fear and desperation. This shows that racism is an issue rooted much more deeply in history than just in the Holocaust, and that blame for racism cannot be completely pinpointed due to the reactions and spread of fear. Tying these two attitudes from Vladek’s past and the present allows Art to tackle the difficult issue of racism and show readers the depth behind the idea of dehumanization and blame.

Finally, A difficult question Artie faces is the purpose in sharing Vladek’s story, especially after Vladek has passed away. As he is creating this second volume, the Holocaust generation has started to pass away and the horror stories from the camps have become stories passed down to children and grandchildren. We have shared testimonies and built memorials to honor those lost. Yet, we again face the problem of not being able to fully understand the trauma faced during the Holocaust. Even with the stories and the testimonies, the survivors will never be able to completely tell their side of the story. This leads to the question, what is the point of continuing to share these stories if the story can never be told to its full truth?

To answer this question, we can again look to Artie and Vladek’s relationship. As readers we view their interactions from a relatively objective standpoint, similar to that of Francoise, Artie’s wife. We cringe not only at Vladek’s stubborn nature, but also at Artie’s anger and resentment towards his father. In this book, we not only see Vladek’s incredible and rare survival of the camps, but we also see how he must deal with the traumatic memories and aftermath of the war and how this affects Artie’s life. Although we cannot know how these victims felt as they experienced the camps, we can see how their attitudes and practices have changed after living through the camps. We can see how their family lives are affected and how following generations process and handle trying to understand the Holocaust. The guilt that remains, not only in Vladek for example but Artie as well, is perhaps one reason to continue to share this story; to let the world know that these horrors happened, and to account for as many stories as possible, even those who are not alive to tell them themselves.

In *Maus*, Art Spiegelman faces the challenge of visually representing a story that he cannot fully visualize or understand. In addition to this, he must also portray the estrangement of father and son. Vladek, prisoner of the camps, has lived his entire life since then in the shadow of the traumatic memories of the war. He lost so much of his family, friends, and happiness in those years. Artie, who has grown up frustrated with his father, realizes that the camps have changed him and made him the way he is, yet he still cannot maintain cordial interactions with his father. Many times in fact, the relationship between Art and his father seems to be a business deal – Art does not want to listen to Vladek’s personal problems or spend more time with Vladek than necessary, always pushing Vladek to continue recounting his story. There is a sense of urgency, perhaps for Artie to hear the full story so he can finally get a complete picture of his father and his experiences, smoothing out the tension between the two of them. However, this complete picture is not possible, and Artie struggles with the guilt of exposing his father and knowing that he will never be able to understand what his father went through. There is no way to pinpoint the purpose or goal of *Maus*, as Artie even says himself, “I never thought of reducing it to a message. I mean, I wasn’t trying to convince anybody of anything” (42). Art cannot tell us what to read or how to interpret his drawings. He can simply show us how the story of a man’s repressed experience unfolds, and how relationships are affected by the incomprehensible complexity of that experience. Although Art faces many challenges in this depiction of a Holocaust testimony, the connections he builds with his father through *Maus* give him a deeper respect and understanding for his father’s history, the consequences of being the son of a Holocaust survivor, and the more complicated intricacies of their relationship.

**This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.**