

# **The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel**

Stephen E. Tabachnick

The Quest for Jewish Belief  
and Identity in the Graphic Novel

## JEWS AND JUDAISM: HISTORY AND CULTURE

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# The Quest for Jewish Belief and Identity in the Graphic Novel

STEPHEN E. TABACHNICK

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*For Sharon, Daphne, Orrin, and Laurie*



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# Introduction

One of the most exciting literary and artistic developments of the past forty years is the emergence of the graphic, or comic book, novel. An extended comic book that expands the possibilities of the traditional comic book and that is unconstrained by the cheap production values and severely limited subject matter of the traditional comics, the graphic novel transcends verbal and visual limitations in order to tackle, often with great subtlety, the full range of subjects that traditional fiction and nonfiction cover, using the many resources available to all writers and artists. While the term “graphic novel” appears to indicate only fictional creations, this term as it is presently understood in the culture also covers nonfictional works, and therefore it is used in this book to describe autobiographies, biographies, and histories as well as fiction. To avoid any confusion, in my text I make it clear when a given graphic “novel” is an autobiography, biography, or history rather than a work of fiction. As a technical note, I should also add that I have included page references to the graphic novels when they themselves have page numbers indicated, but I have been unable to include page numbers when the graphic novels themselves do not have any.

The traditional American comics always included Jews among their creators. In the early period of the American comics, circa 1890–1930, there were such comics artists and writers as Al Hirschfeld, whose lively and original *Abie the Agent* was based on a Jewish character, and Milt Gross, whose *Nize Baby* used Yiddishisms and discussed the lives of Jewish immigrants into the United States. Gross’s *He Done Her Wrong: The Great American Novel* was a wordless, silent-film-like graphic novel (in the tradition of Belgian artist Franz Masereel and the American Lynd Ward), which satirically treated the typically American theme of the honest, straight-shooting outdoorsman versus the robber capitalist. That was the age of overt ethnicity during a time of mass immigration into the United States. In the period from 1930–45, superheroes flourished, and the creators of Superman (Jerry Siegel and

Joe Shuster); Batman (Bob Kane and Bill Finger); and, later on, the Marvel superheroes (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby) were Jewish. And (as Arie Kaplan and Larry Tye have pointed out), Superman has much in common with the Golem, who, according to Jewish legend, was an early superhero created by a wonder-working rabbi to defend the Jews against anti-Semitic attacks. After the war, *Mad* magazine was created by Harvey Kurtzman, who was working for William Gaines, the founder of EC Comics, whose father Max (né Ginsberg or Ginzberg) had created the comic book in the 1930s when he realized, while perusing old comic strips, that comics could be bound in magazine form and sold as separate issues on a regular basis. Both Kurtzman and Gaines were Jewish, and *Mad* spurred the age of counterculture comics, in which once again many Jews were prominent. The first graphic novel with words is attributed to Will Eisner, who was also Jewish. As early as 1941 he felt that comics could become a full-fledged, unfettered art form, but it was only in 1978 with his *A Contract with God* that this dream was realized. All of these writers and artists demonstrate the creative interaction of Jewish and American cultural themes.

As in the past age of the American comics, many of the new graphic novelists today are Jews and, quite naturally, one of their topics is Jewish religious belief or other, related beliefs—belief in the Jewish people (that is, in Jews as a group sharing a common fate) or Jewish identity; belief in Israel; and belief in the persistence of anti-Semitism. Since many Jews today are secular, it would not be unexpected to find many Jews skeptical of religious belief. Such is indeed the case with some graphic novel creators, but, not surprisingly, there is a spectrum in their works, too, ranging from denial and doubt to grudging belief and full belief. And there is also a spectrum of belief in identity with Israel on a political level: some Jews view Israel critically, usually from a left-of-center viewpoint; but even those politically critical of Israel, as well as all of the other Jewish graphic novelists studied here, seem to feel some identity with the Jewish people as a whole.

The purpose of this book is to expose the reader to the variety, power, and artistry of a group of more than thirty wonderful artists and writers who have dealt with the important themes of Jewish belief and identity in their work. It is a survey and analysis of these works, aiming to excavate and display the multitude of views that the reader will confront in them. What I have found is that while these graphic novels range from Orthodox belief to complete atheism, and while some creators identify with Israel and some do not, in terms of identity all of the Jewish graphic novelists in this book do identify as Jews and with the Jewish people. I have not included all graphic

novels by or about Jews, but only those that I find the most exciting, interesting, well done, and relevant to the topic of belief and identity.

I have tried to place these Jewish artists and writers and some non-Jews (such as Robert Crumb and Basil Wolverton) whose works have been inspired by Jewish texts such as the Hebrew Bible, on the spectrums of belief and identity and to analyze just what they are saying about those issues as they affect the Jews. The result is a nuanced look at the state of Jewish belief and identification today in all but the most devout—who, following their interpretation of the Bible’s prohibition on images, would not even contemplate creating graphic novels. There are, nonetheless, some graphic novels about Orthodox Jewish belief and identity, and they are analyzed in the final chapter in this book. One of the strengths of the Jewish community as a whole has always been its toleration of a spectrum of points of view—as the saying goes, with two Jews, you get three opinions—and these works are a testimony to the diversity of Jewish life at the present time.

I also survey and analyze outstanding works of Jewish interest written abroad; for example, the Frenchman Joann Sfar’s *The Rabbi’s Cat*; the Italian Vittorio Giardino’s *A Jew in Communist Prague*; and the Israeli Rutu Modan’s *Exit Wounds*. Sfar’s work examines what life was like for a Jewish rabbi (and a Jewish cat) in Algeria of the 1930s, and Giardino’s work analyzes the young Jewish character Jonas Finkel’s trauma owing to his father’s arrest in the anti-Semitic, Communist Czechoslovakia of the 1950s. Modan’s graphic novel shows what it was like to live in the Israel of the early 2000s, when suicide bombings were a frequent event. Notably, these works also reveal Jewish artistic connections across national borders, such as the influence of the American comics trendsetters Will Eisner and Jack Kirby on Joann Sfar; the influence of Joann Sfar on Steve Sheinkin, the American creator of the Rabbi Harvey graphic novels; and the influence of American Art Spiegelman, creator of the Holocaust graphic novel *Maus*, on Rutu Modan.

I also note artistic influences between Jewish and non-Jewish graphic novel creators. For example, Marjane Satrapi, the Franco-Iranian creator of *Persepolis*, which is about her difficult life under the Shah of Iran and then under the Khomeini regime, has said that she was influenced by *Maus*, while Rutu Modan’s “ligne claire” style has obviously been influenced by the Belgian comics artist Hergé, who began it, and Spiegelman has acknowledged his debt to the Belgian inventor of the wordless graphic novel, Franz Masereel.

Unlike most previous books about Jews and the comics, this book offers a close, careful reading of high-quality graphic novels concerning Jew-

ish belief and identity rather than a look at the role Jews have played in the popular comics or a narrow study of a particular creator, subgenre, or style. Among the previous studies of the Jewish graphic novel that the reader will find in the bibliography, two are especially noteworthy: Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* is an excellent overview of the work that Jews have done in the popular realm, with some attention to the graphic novel. Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman's edited collection, *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, takes a serious, academic look at the graphic novels created by Jews and has been very useful to me. Readers should also be aware of A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer's *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, which deals with many religious traditions.

Many graphic novels devoted to Jewish subjects are artistically and even spiritually inspiring, sometimes surprisingly so. Robert Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, for example, is the product of a non-Jewish underground artist known for his sexual taboo-breaking. But his *Genesis* is an excellent rendition of this book of the Bible because it follows the original text accurately and provides a wonderfully solid and convincing visualization of the characters in that book. Although Crumb says in his introduction that he does not believe that the Bible is the word of God but only of men, he has created a superb adaptation, which could conceivably inspire some people to believe. Similarly, on the basis of Art Spiegelman's father's testimony, *Maus* indicates that there must be a God who got his mother and father through the Holocaust even though this story is being related by a secularist, "progressive" son/artist who does not have much use for religious belief in his own life, as his self-portrayal in this work and in interviews seems to indicate. (I should note that the chapter on *Maus* was originally published in the Jewish journal *Shofar* in 2004 under the title "The Religious Meaning of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*" and is reprinted here, in slightly modified form, with the permission of Purdue University Press.) Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds* seems to demonstrate only the unreliability of the protagonist's father but inserts an almost subliminal message that God is indeed watching over Israel. The American progressive Sarah Glidden goes to Israel expecting to see its negative aspects and to solidify her certainty that Israel is guilty of oppressing the Palestinians but in the course of her journey she comes to see that is not exactly the case and she finds herself uplifted and inspired instead of depressed, leading to a renewed identification with the Jewish state and people. Will Eisner, while unable to believe in God after the death of his daughter, strongly demonstrates a belief in the Jews as a people with a common fate. Miriam Katin, too, is very skeptical about the existence of God, given her

experiences in the Holocaust as a child, but she does continue to identify as a Jew. These positive assertions of belief and/or identity, sometimes in spite of the overt beginning negativism of the creator, contradict the many skepticism that are also found in the Jewish graphic novel.

Regardless of attitudes toward God, all human beings face the difficulty of reconciling themselves to the eventual reality of death. Life can seem to be a rigged game with the outcome predetermined. Several of these graphic novelists confront this inevitable and unpleasant fact: people die, and everyone is in that situation together. Here Etgar Keret and Asaf Hanuka's *Pizzeria Kamikaze* has a special role, since it tells the story of what happens after death to people who commit suicide and includes the after-death testimonies of Palestinian terrorists as well as Israelis. Readers emerge from it with a renewed appreciation of life. Several of the Holocaust graphic novels also comment on death and how its closeness changes one's perception of life.

Anti-Semitism, too, appears in these works, as it has in contemporary life as well as in past centuries. In graphic novels sometimes attempts are made to counter this hatred, rather than to simply record it. Will Eisner's *The Plot*, which details the story of the invention of the completely fictional and infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, is one such example. But usually, anti-Semitism is noted as a phenomenon that enforces Jewish identity, as in Will Eisner's other works. Hopefully these graphic novels will make a difference in combating this age-old bias, but as W. H. Auden notoriously said in his poem memorializing W. B. Yeats, artistic creation is usually ineffective against strongly held, if false, viewpoints. But as many of these works show, Jewish graphic novelists, like many Jews, continue to hope that reason will prevail against anti-Semitism.

The graphic novel, as an old-new literary and artistic form (following Theodore Herzl's view of Israel as an old-new state), which is based on the format of the traditional popular comics but far surpasses the vast majority of them in seriousness, scope and artistry, has the ability to inspire and to provoke new thinking as few other literary or visual genres can. The fact that graphic novels are read in much the same way as purely textual works—in that the reader turns pages in a physical book and reads each page from left to right and top to bottom—means that going through a graphic novel (unlike viewing a film or a play for instance) is a very intimate, personal experience that is entirely under the reader's control in terms of how he or she scrutinizes a graphic novel and how long he or she takes to read it. The works of Eisner and Lemelman focusing on the American immigrant experience and New York City of the 1930s–50s, for instance, resonate even more in-

timately than a prose text with me personally since I grew up in New York in the 1940s and 1950s and am familiar with the social and physical landscapes that are so well described visually as well as verbally in their graphic novels. While graphic novels do not provide the sound and movement of a film or drama, readers meditate on the best graphic novels just as they do on purely textual works—with the difference that the graphic novel allows them to see the characters and the action with the eyes of imaginative artists rather than with their own, usually more limited, imaginations. And readers can study each illustration or panel in a graphic novel just as they can individual paintings, with the added experience of seeing a series of illustrations devoted to the same topic build on one another on a single page or across many pages, and having those illustrations illuminated by words as well as by purely visual elements.

The graphic novelists whose works are surveyed and analyzed in this book are among the very best creators that the new form has to offer, and many of their works belong in the highest echelon of graphic novels being produced today around the world. Regardless of their points of view, they reveal great artistry, honesty, and imagination and are therefore worth reading and certainly worth knowing about. No study of Jewish thought, sensibility, and literature and art today would be complete without a survey of the graphic novel, and this book hopes to contribute to the knowledge of that thought, sensibility, and artfulness.

# 1

## Adaptations of the Bible

Several graphic novels have recently appeared as adaptations of one of the earliest Jewish literary works, and certainly one of the most influential: the Hebrew Bible. Since the Bible has become a universal work, I have included non-Jewish as well as Jewish adaptors in this chapter because they present new and very worthwhile ideas about the themes of belief and identity in Jewish or Jewish-related works.

J. T. Waldman's *Megillat Esther* will be compared to two other versions of the Esther story: one by Yehudi Mercado and another by a Christian husband and wife team, Shirley and Ernest Graham. Robert Crumb, who is not Jewish but who is married to the Jewish graphic novelist Aline Kominsky Crumb (whose work is discussed in another chapter in this book), has rendered the book of Genesis. And Basil Wolverton, who not only has no particular Jewish connections but was a member of a Christian fundamentalist group, has depicted many scenes from the Hebrew Bible in graphic novel form. Each of their renditions offers a different attitude toward belief. In contrast to these adaptations, Douglas Rushkoff—who is the author of *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*, among other purely textual works—uses the biblical stories to create modern-day parallels in which science itself seems to be a god. All of these creators demonstrate some of the many possible applications of the graphic novel and some of its particular strengths and weaknesses.

The Hebrew Bible is a unique and uniquely powerful document. It inspires belief because its stories are so unusual that it is difficult to imagine their being invented; because at the same time that its stories are unusual, its account of human emotions is so accurate; and because it gives details, including personal and place names, for many people and events mentioned in it. In Genesis, for example, the stories about Abraham, Lot, Israel, and Joseph as well as Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah revolve around discussions with God, brothers who want to kill one another, a man who is sold into exile

by his brothers but who harbors no resentment, and the customs of the ancient Hebrews and Egyptians. It becomes clear that the Egyptians did not regard shepherds very highly and that they refused to eat with Hebrews. Yet while some of the strangeness of these stories has to do with the now-extinct customs of cultures in the ancient world, most of them are strange because they recount very unusual circumstances—Jacob being obliged to work fourteen years to receive Rachel in marriage and then being tricked into marrying Leah first because she was the oldest sister, for instance. The question becomes: if a writer could simply invent these circumstances, why he would do so? The uniqueness of the biblical stories also differs greatly from, say, Greek mythology, where many gods walk the earth and often act very much like men. In the Hebrew Bible there is one God, who sometimes walks the earth, as in the Garden of Eden, and who sometimes reasons with men, as with Lot, but who is clearly a superior force and who does not act just as a human being would.

While the biblical stories themselves are strange and unique, the human emotions displayed in them are completely true to reality. Potiphar's wife's desire to have Joseph sleep with her and her reaction when he refuses to do so seem completely convincing, as do Joseph's emotions when he sees his brothers after many years despite their ill treatment of him. Sarah allowing Abraham to sleep with his concubine and then regretting that and casting Hagar out also seems entirely persuasive. So the emotional element, too, enhances the believability of the biblical narrative and reinforces our belief in these stories, however strange they may appear.

Finally, the Hebrew Bible backs up its assertions with facts—the names of the descendants of the patriarchs, for instance, in long lists; and the occasional statement that a certain event happened in a given place, which is why it was given its name—for instance, Beersheva, the “well of the oath” because of Abraham’s oath taken there. The fact that these places, such as Beersheva, exist even today, often still bear these names, and have sometimes been excavated by archaeologists who have occasionally found relevant artifacts, gives further support to the apparent truthfulness of the biblical narratives.

Rendering these various stories in graphic novel form brings another level of persuasiveness to the biblical texts—readers can *see* these things happening, and to some degree seeing is believing, depending upon the realism of the rendering. Waldman, Crumb, and Wolverton, whose adaptations receive the most attention in this chapter, have chosen to portray these events in basically realistic modes suitable to the text, albeit in their own unique personal styles. Crumb, for instance, states in his introduction that “Every other comic book version of the Bible that I’ve seen contains passages of

completely made-up narrative and dialogue, in an attempt to streamline and ‘modernize’ the old scriptures, and still, these various comic book Bibles all claim to adhere to the belief that the Bible is ‘the word of God,’ or ‘inspired by God,’ whereas I, ironically, do not believe that the Bible is ‘the word of God.’ I believe it is the words of men.” Yet Crumb hewed closely to the spirit of the source material. The same may be said for Wolverton and Waldman, whatever their personal beliefs. They have stuck closely to the original text, which in Waldman’s case is rendered in Hebrew as well as in English translation. Insofar as faithfulness to an original text distinguishes an adaptation and separates a legitimate adaptation from what can be termed a “retelling,” these three works are both valuable and convincing, each in its own way.

The Scroll of Esther (*Megillat Esther* in Hebrew; also known as the book of Esther) is unique in the Hebrew Bible because God is not mentioned in it, not even once. However, God seems to be behind the events that transpire in the book and responsible for the Jews’ escape from destruction. In fact, this story of fourth-century BCE Persia is something like the Holocaust in reverse—with the difference that the Jews kill the anti-Semites not because of racial or religious motives, but because the anti-Semites threaten the Jews and want to steal their possessions. While slaughter is not a positive phenomenon whenever it occurs and many Jewish readers of the Scroll of Esther wince at the ending detailing the massacres of the anti-Semites, justice is done (however bloodily) and God’s order is upheld, so God is at least indirectly in the book. In a devoutly religious reading of the story, God *wills* King Achashverosh to choose Esther to be his queen so that she will be positioned to help avoid the calamity that Haman has planned for the Jews, and, indeed, Mordechai suggests as much (Waldman, 81).

Waldman’s treatment of the story, which took him seven years from inception to completion, is unique in many ways, even in this age of the flowering of the graphic novel. In an interview with the *Jewish Week*, Waldman said, “I’m a comic-book geek. My entire world view is defined by them.”<sup>1</sup> While he grew up in a Reform synagogue, went to Hebrew school, and had a Bar Mitzvah, Waldman was essentially a lapsed Jew by the age of fourteen. His was the normal stuff of childhood: comic books, video games, and Froot Loops. But when he was in college, studying in Spain, his Jewish identity became more apparent: “I was really called upon to represent my people, and I had no idea what that meant.” He began to immerse himself in Jewish history, liturgy, and literature, if not quite becoming Orthodox. But he never outgrew his passion for comic books and found a striking parallel between that art form and classic Hebrew literature. There was something Talmudic about the comic book, he said, with its central image only making

sense in tandem with the explanatory text surrounding it. In 1998, he began a project that has since become well known: according to the interviewer Eric Herschthal, *Megillat Esther* is “an illustrated version of the book about Purim. Those illustrations have been the subject of a traveling exhibit, which is currently on view at the Yeshiva University Museum.” Waldman is also the collaborator, with one of his comics idols Harvey Pekar, on a book about Israel, which is analyzed in a chapter of this book about the Israeli-centered graphic novel.

His *Megillat Esther* is innovative and stands out from other graphic novels. First, it is a dual language work, in which Hebrew and English are both on practically every page. The Hebrew is the dominant lettering, bold and large, and the English, lighter and smaller, is clearly the translation. This gives the book the feel of a prayer book. Second, the use of panels, large and small, is varied. Each page brings surprises. For instance, a full-page spread (8) contrasts with tiny, hieroglyphic-like panels (9). Very slanted panels reveal Haman’s anger (61, 62). Third, Waldman uses innovative techniques, including visual/verbal puns, throughout. Haman’s heart is shown on his chest (96) when the Hebrew text speaks of what he felt in his heart (fig. 1.1). Interjected commentary, such as the episode in which Elijah speaks (149), is lighter in print and in outline form. The faces of the main actors are very detailed (as in a close-up of Esther [51]), but on other pages the faces are blank because they symbolize everyman (100, 133). In another example, which occurs about midway through the book, just when the good guys begin to prevail, the book has to be turned over and read from right to left, as a Hebrew Bible or prayer book is read. Fourth, the characters look Middle Eastern rather than Western. Their faces have exaggerated characteristics, in keeping with comics, but they are realistically portrayed rather than Hollywoodish. Achashverosh is fat and Vashti and Esther are not particularly beautiful. Fifth, Waldman makes no attempt to hide or disguise unpleasant events, such as the hanging of Haman’s ten sons or the massacre of seventy-five thousand of their enemies by the Jews, although he has a commentator say “Heavy hands make strong deterrents” (138) in at least partial expiation of the latter action. Moreover, he portrays Esther with a sword in her hand (147). He does, however, have an interlude at the end in which Ezekiel points to “the end of all rivalries,” which could mean that between Jews and non-Jews (149, 151, 164). Sixth, at one point Waldman introduces a modern master of ceremonies with a microphone who presides over a television-like contest to interpret prophecies (30–35).

As often happens in graphic novel adaptations, however faithful to the original, the pictures impose an interpretation on the text. Waldman pre-



1.1. J. T. Waldman, *Megillat Esther*, 96. Building on a quotation in Hebrew from the book of Esther, Waldman shows the inside of Haman's evil heart.

sents the story from his point of view, making the viewer see it that way too. In his presentation, Achashverosh is a vain, obese, and foolish king who is not, however, devoid of some good instincts. He enjoys partying and would not mind showing off his wife, Vashti, to the assembled crowd—but she will have none of it. In a drunken rage, he divorces her when she will not appear naked before the crowd. One of his ministers, Memuchan, urges the divorce because, he says, her example will be bad for all wives in the kingdom, who will think they can disobey their husbands at will. There is also the fact that Vashti discouraged Memuchan's attentions and slapped him with a slip-

per, which has fed his animus against her (19). Waldman's interpretation of this event appears when Memuchan's calculating face is contrasted with the king's less intelligent look (22).

Yet there are humorous moments, which Waldman creates, too. When the king has all of the maidens from his many provinces assembled to compete to marry him, he has one of his chief eunuchs, Hegai, the keeper of women, powder them (40). Waldman shows the king sneezing when the dust gets in his nose, to the laughter of the assembled girls. He also calls for a hanky.

When he sees Esther, he becomes very serious, saying, "You are the one I've been waiting for" (42). The preparations of the maidens are shown in detail: frequent immersion in jars of myrrh over the course of six months and frequent perfuming during the same period. After the king sleeps with the maidens, they go off to the house of the concubines. When Esther's turn comes, the king prefers her to all other women and makes her the queen. Waldman gives her a full-page close-up as befits her status (51). She becomes a conduit by which Mordechai can inform the king that two men wish to do him harm. But her personality is unknown at this point.

That comes out in due course when Haman presents a danger. The king raises Haman up and Haman is obviously very pleased with his position, as the smile on his face shows (12). But when Mordechai refuses to bow to him, his face gets very ugly and the panels become skewed (13). He very skillfully presents to Achashverosh the case for destroying not only Mordechai but all of the Jews and attains his purpose in that the king promulgates an edict about it.

When Mordechai hears this new law, his face becomes distorted, and he then shrinks to a very small size as he covers himself with sackcloth and ashes (75). But later in the book, he is back up to his usual stature (146), and even looks a bit like a medieval knight. Esther too looks like a heroine on the facing page. Waldman has demoted Haman and promoted both Mordechai and Esther. His story sticks in one's mind primarily because the faces of the characters do.

Esther emerges as a heroine in the course of the work, as in the original. But Waldman details her development as a character. She is shown angrily telling the king about Haman's wickedness (110), and her finger pointing at him almost stands off the page because it is so large. She comforts the king (116) and her face becomes pretty; she is thoughtful because she is trying to figure out what to do about the king's law regarding the Jews because it cannot be revoked (112); and ultimately she is shown in a heroic light, holding a sword in one hand and a rose in the other (147), with Mordechai also shown

heroically on the facing page. The Hebrew lettering swirling around each page gives the whole work a feeling of authenticity.

Waldman's rendering upholds the basic sense of the Scroll of Esther—Esther has saved the Jews, Mordechai is righteous, and Haman is evil. The king is in the middle with the action swirling around and influencing him rather than with him in control of it all. All characters are rendered—correctly—as ancient Persians, with a different standard of beauty than Western standards. But Esther develops in the course of the narrative, just like a character in a novel, except that her development can be seen on her face. Dramatic events, such as the hanging of Haman's sons, which takes up an entire two-page spread (136–37), are powerfully portrayed, as seen in the struggling expressions on each of the hanged men's faces. While remaining faithful to the text, including the prominent use of Hebrew, Waldman allows the story to be seen with new eyes.

There are two other versions of the Scroll of Esther that deserve comment. Yehudi Mercado's *Throne of Secrets*, of which only volume 1 has appeared to date, adds details to the story yet makes it believable; and the husband and wife team of the Grahams, in their *The Unlikely Chosen*, follows the text faithfully. Neither of these other versions includes Waldman's use of Hebrew or his other unique techniques, so they are useful largely as more conventional adaptations.

Mercado's style uses color, conventional if varied panel sizes, and strong, expressive faces with large eyes—almost caricatures. Esther is pretty, with large, slanted eyes, a gently curved nose, and a small mouth. She seems soft and gentle as well as intelligent. The king has a sharp nose, small eyes, a mouth with teeth that always show, and a pointed beard and crown. He seems aggressive and decisive rather than obese and soft, as in Waldman's adaptation. Mordechai has a prominent nose, small but expressive eyes, and a strong beard. His hair is close-cropped and even has some white in it. He is very muscular and acts accordingly. Haman has a pointed nose and calculating eyes. All of the characters are rendered in color, with tan Middle Eastern skin, striking clothes, and black hair and beards. The style of drawing is on the whole rounded and open, and each panel has color contrasts in it.

The story as a whole makes a dramatic impression because it contains an angry king, an aggressive Mordechai, and a cruel Haman, as well as a pretty and smart Esther. Additions to the story include a grandfather for Esther, the application of Dead Sea mud to Esther's face, repeated anti-Semitic comments by some of the characters and Mordechai's violent treatment of those characters, illustration of Mordechai's time in prison, and the masks worn by the female contestants for the king's hand. Also, Haman's daughter

fails as a contestant, leading her father to banish her. The dialogue also adds to the story line with additions that are not in the original: Mordechai says Esther looks older than she did when he left her some time ago, and she replies that that makes him look “positively ancient” (18). A shopkeeper tells Mordechai to “run along, Jew. You’ll start to attract other rats” (25), and the king tells Esther that “a man would conquer worlds just to gaze into those eyes, Esther” (49) as he is smitten by her. Obviously, Mercado is trying to make the story resonate with a modern reader who is used to reading novels, and to some extent he does so. But except for the dress and the basic action of the plot, which he retains, the story is not quite the original because of the fleshing out that Mercado does. Yet for those who want a basic sense of the story and a quick read this is not a bad adaptation. Sometimes highlighted in larger panels, the faces of the characters, like Esther’s face (49), remain in the reader’s memory. But it is not as innovative a version as Waldman’s.

The version by Shirley and Ernest Graham is a faithful adaptation (both Grahams are Protestant ministers), using only the text of the original, and supplementing it with panels that illustrate those words. The style is black and white, with an emphasis on expressive faces. This is a pleasant and engrossing read because of its fidelity to the text (the relevant chapters are given on every page), and the illustrations that help the reader visualize the action well. There is no caricature, as there is in Mercado’s version, and points such as Esther not indicating her Jewishness at first are made clearly, as in the original text, while in Mercado’s version this is not stated. All of the characters in the Grahams’ adaptation aside from Haman are positive in terms of personality, including Esther, Mordecai, and the king, and their faces show it. They are not aggressive, or calculating, or mean. The king is misled by Haman into ordering the removal of the Jews because Haman is upset that Mordecai will not bow down to him. The dramatic scene in which the king orders Haman to honor Mordecai when Haman intended to hang him and thought that the honor would be for himself is very expressive; Haman’s face shows his shock in a long panel (66). The king’s anger during Esther’s feast when she points to Haman as the man who wants the extermination of the Jews, is powerfully rendered (67–68). The defeat of those who Haman had encouraged to attack the Jews is also shown, but not bloodily or sensationally (74).

Esther is portrayed as modest and positive throughout, and, when she is worried, her face clearly shows it. When she pleads with the king to spare the Jews, her face is serious and deliberate (71). The story ends with a description of the Feast of Purim and a final chapter showing an elevated and

smiling Mordecai (77). The Grahams' version is accurate in every way, well illustrated, and tasteful. Like Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, this is a Jewish book adapted and illustrated by very fine non-Jewish graphic novelists who are clearly moved by the story. The volume also contains the stories of Jonah and Amos, who, like Esther (according to the Grahams' introduction to the volume), "are unlikely people whom God chooses." The Grahams say that they chose the graphic novel format because it is "uniquely able to portray the social and historical context of the Bible in a way that speaks to a highly visual culture like our own." This is certainly the case with all of these adaptations. And in their acknowledgments, they thank the members of Temple Beth El in Alexandria, Virginia, who "helped Shirley broaden her perspective," so the work has some Jewish input.

Crumb's *Book of Genesis Illustrated* features this famous artist's usual, very solid characters and their very telling facial expressions. Crumb's black-and-white drawings give a sense of realism rather than hyped-up beauty and are, therefore, very believable. They give credibility and persuasiveness to the biblical story, and it is ironic that an unbeliever like Crumb may have done one of the most convincing adaptations of the Bible ever, in any format. The cover illustration, of Adam and Eve being sent from the Garden of Eden by God after having eaten the forbidden fruit, is a wonderful example of Crumb's style (fig. 1.2). God, as a ghostly, long-bearded man, looks both assured and angry as his finger points the couple toward exile. Eve looks backward, clearly guilty and worried about what she has done. She is not beautiful in a conventional sense. She is crying, but she, nonetheless, has a solidity and sexiness about her, in part because her breasts show through her ragged clothes. Adam looks downcast and his face is partially in shadow, showing his shame because of his sin. He clearly does not know what to expect in this new, harsher life that God has assigned to him. And he carries a primitive tool, a symbol of the life of work which he must now face because of his sin. Yet he grips Eve's hand strongly, and it is clear that they are a couple, perhaps even more so for being united in sin. The couple's clothes are primitive, yet adequate. The Garden of Eden itself has trees, flowers, and bushes, but as they leave they are walking across rocky soil, with bare mountains in the background. It is clear that they are moving into a desert. A better reenactment of the story could not be imagined. In the text itself, the illustration of Adam and Eve is different, and there the pair at first looks young and innocent but as their sentence is enforced by God they visibly age.

The cherubim or supernatural creatures who guard the entrance to Eden look like gargoyles with wings, and their sharp fangs and claws, slanted eyes,



1.2. Robert Crumb, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*. In Crumb's powerful and solid style, God drives a stricken Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. From the front cover.

and serious facial expressions—as well as the bones that are in front of them—are clear warnings about trying to approach the tree of life. The twisting sword looks like a fiery whirlpool and reinforces the message.

In chapter twelve, Abraham is frightened and upset rather than pleased when God tells him to set forth on a search for an appropriate land. He even shields his face from his vision of God. In typical Crumb fashion, Abraham has a density of expression, and every hair on his head seems to be drawn. Again, in typical Crumb fashion Abraham's wife Sarah is not particularly beautiful, even when she is shown as a young woman in chapter twelve—she has a large mouth and prominent teeth and eyes, and she looks rather heavy—so Abraham's worry that the Egyptians will think her beautiful is not particularly credible, although in his way Crumb wins us over somewhat to his idea of beauty. (He comments in his *New York Times* interview with Allen Salkin about his portrayal of Jacob's wife Rachel, for instance, that "I'm not very good at drawing attractive women actually. But Rachel has strong qualities that would incline one to suspect that she was some kind of priestess" [21]. The same might be said of his rendition of the young Sarah.) Abraham's aging as a result of his travels and his thoughtful look as he worries are masterfully done. The pharaoh who takes Sarah as his wife, think-

ing that she is unmarried, is stricken with affliction and looks like an old, bald man rather than a powerful ruler as he lies in bed. Again, Crumb gives a sense of realism. By the same token, the passage of Abraham and Sarah and their servants out of Egypt is very realistically done, as are the abundant battle scenes that fill the narrative. Blood spurts from wounds, throats are cut, and soldiers trample on the dead and dying.

However, Crumb's usual antifeminist streak comes into play when he states in the *New York Times* interview that "Abraham is kind of a take-charge dude. But even Abraham gets pushed around by his wife. They all get pushed around by their wives. The matriarchal traditions, which were suppressed when the priestly class modified these old myths for the Bible, come through more strongly when the stories are illustrated."

Crumb adds other interpretive elements. In the same interview, he says that his picture showing Abraham sleeping with many faces in the background was his attempt "to capture his vision of all this future suffering that is supposed to take place with all his people. In the background are all the suffering faces of his people. I made them dark and murky because it's a vision of the future. It's not a clear photograph of the future."

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is also powerfully expressive. The evil men of Sodom who want to harm Lot's guests are shown in full face and are very ugly. Lot himself is very disturbed first by the threat to his guests and then by his relatives' rejection of his call to them to flee the city. He is deeply bothered, as shown in his face. The fire that descends on the evil people of Sodom is rendered in chapter nineteen in a unique way. First they are on fire while they are living, then they become only shadows, and finally the fire leaves the people as burning shadows and the entire city as a cloud of smoke. Lot's wife very convincingly becomes a pillar of salt.

Crumb's characterization, while always true to the original text, also includes the occasional introduction of colloquialisms, as when Abraham in response to Abimelech's question about Sarah in chapter twenty, says, "Well, I thought, surely there's no fear of God in this place, and they'll kill me because of my wife." Because this is a graphic novel, such realistic dialogue is expected as is the occasional bolded emphasis upon a given word, as when Abraham says in the next panel, "And, in point of fact, she **is** my sister." But Crumb does this very sparingly and only where it seems very natural and indeed even necessary.

Crumb is also known for his sexy drawings, which are often odd to say the least. However, in this adaptation, he shows Rebekah and Isaac lying naked together, and like Adam and Eve, Rebekah is full-bodied and has strong features. There are no obscene gestures or postures, at least when compared

to Crumb's overt and exaggerated treatment of sexuality in his other works. The same is true of his rendition of Jacob and Leah's night together, as well as that of Jacob and Rachel. The couples are happy and have powerful features but are not paragons of beauty or in lascivious poses. However relatively mild his couples are in bed, Crumb has power when he shows them in the grip of rivalry or greed: when Rachel's maid Bilhah conceives sons for Jacob thus granting Rachel some equality with Leah (who has borne four sons for him), Rachel's face shows intense victory. And the sisters' rivalry, which is seen on their faces, reaches a peak in the scene concerning mandrakes.

Crumb's take on the book is seen in his commentary at the end. In it, he assigns a lot of weight to Savina Teubal's theories about a high priestess who must certify a man for rule—and uses this to explain Abraham's statements about Sarah as his "sister." Crumb hypothesizes that both Abraham and Sarah wanted the pharaoh and Abimelech to sleep with Sarah, whom they thought a powerful priestess, so that Abraham and Sarah could demand payment afterward when the pharaoh and Abimelech found out that she was Abraham's wife, not his sister. For Crumb, there is always some kind of struggle between man and woman, patriarchy and matriarchy, which can be witnessed in these biblical stories (as elsewhere), going back to the earliest years of humanity. So he adapts the stories through his own point of view, in which powerful men and women compete with one another, often using sex and birth as tools in their rivalry. One thinks of poet William Blake's belief that progress occurs only as the result of a struggle between opposing forces, and Crumb in his relative old age seems to have become reconciled to the eternal struggle between the sexes, through which humanity is able to proliferate and advance. Seen in this light, Waldman's *Megillat Esther* is also to some degree about the war between men and women. While the main battle is between Mordechai and Haman, Esther proves to be the person with the most influence over the king, and Waldman portrays her in all of her moods.

Basil Wolverton was an elder of the Worldwide Church of God, an evangelical Christian sect that believed in following Old Testament rules and in the truth of Revelation. He was also a comics creator whose work appeared in *Mad* and other places. According to Stan Lee, in *Secrets behind the Comics*, Wolverton won a public contest to depict "Lena the Hyena" (the world's ugliest woman, a character who was mentioned but not seen in Capp's *Li'l Abner*), a testimony to Wolverton's skill and imagination (81).

Wolverton's strengths as a comics artist can be seen most of all in part 8, "Funny Stuff," an appendix to the *Wolverton Bible*: distorted, caricatured faces with staring eyes and open mouths as well as huge teeth and noses, bulging eyes, food dripping over giant lips, heads and hairdos that are too

long, too short, too strange. He is at his best when confronting completely strange and horrible frights that cause people to lose control or when revealing their innate greed, snobbishness, and selfishness. He is surely one of the great caricaturists, and *Mad* magazine's editors understood that when they commissioned him to do his many features. Gary Groth, the founder of Fantagraphics Books, a major comics imprint, writes that "Wolverton's comic-book work had quite a profound effect on such underground cartoonists as Robert Crumb and Robert Williams, as well as on latter-day 'alternative' artists. . . . Wolverton never felt that he was slumming in the world of comics, . . . but he considered the work" represented in his Bible drawings "to be his most important." He adds that Wolverton "was not a serious illustrator who dabbled in comics, he was essentially a comic artist who took on the serious responsibility of illustrating the Bible" (*Wolverton Bible*, 9).

In his biblical work (except for some of his illustrations for the book of Revelation), Wolverton, while favoring excitement and drama, is far more restrained than in "Funny Stuff," where he revels in extremely distorted bodies and faces. He draws only certain scenes rather than illustrating the whole Bible, and the scenes he draws are among the most dramatic in the Bible: Eve deciding to eat the apple, people suddenly being unable to speak to one another at the Tower of Babel, the sacrifice of Isaac, and so on. His technique in such scenes is to bring out the drama, with very strong emotions obvious on the faces, but he never moves into caricature as he does in *Mad*. So, for instance, he draws Eve in a way that shows her furtive eyes and serious demeanor as well as her raised hand, which demonstrate that she knows that she is doing something forbidden, but nowhere is she caricatured. In fact, she seems very much like a movie star because of her modern-looking eyeliner, lipstick, and styled hair (23). This brings up a characteristic of the *Wolverton Bible* that gives it both strength and weakness: the characters look like contemporary Americans, especially when, for instance, King David is on his rooftop looking down toward Bathsheba (208). He is wearing what appears to be a modern T-shirt, and his hair is cut in a modern American style (fig. 1.3). He lacks a beard and does not look particularly biblical in any way. On one hand, this brings contemporary readers close to the biblical characters, especially the Hebrew ones. Occasionally the Hebrew characters do look more biblical in dress and hairdo, but the Amalekites, Canaanites, and other non-Hebrew characters appear in ancient dress much more often than the Hebrews do. In other words, they often have foreign appearances while the Hebrews are, for all intents and purposes, modern Americans. The Canaanite gods, for instance (179) look particularly foreign. The weakness of this approach, of course, is its ahistoricity. At the expense of wanting to bring



1.3. Basil Wolverton, *The Wolverton Bible*, 208. With a T-shirt and a short haircut, Wolverton's King David looks very much like a contemporary American.

Americans closer to the Bible, Wolverton has deliberately smoothed out the differences in dress, look, and circumstances between “then” and “now” unless it suits his purpose to do this differently.

This modernizing of the Bible often extends to settings as well. The walls of Jerusalem (247), shown during the Assyrian attack on the city, seem far higher and more evenly cut than the remaining walls of the city as they exist today would lead us to believe they could possibly have been. In Wolverton's version, they look something like modern buildings in their evenness and height, which again contributes to the sense that the past was not very different from the present. Other settings reveal Wolverton's power to create massive and yet believable landscapes, most notably when the Red Sea parts to let the Hebrews through (98–99). Here Wolverton uses drawings ranging in size from a half page to a full two-page spread to give the scale and strangeness of the event. He also reveals his skill when portraying Moses's face as pure light (112) or the fall of the walls of Jericho (142). Both events gain believability because of the plausible way in which he depicts these things.

In one particular way Wolverton is really able to bring his special caricaturing talents to bear: when catastrophe strikes, as when he illustrates the Christian book of Revelation, the eye dripping out of the skull of one stricken man and the skull-like faces of the others (283) bring home the deadly ideas of the end of time. Similarly, he brilliantly draws mutants as

he moves into a sci-fi mode (284). But this is an extreme. For the most part, Wolverton's biblical drawings are realistic and within the realm of the possible, while being heightened for maximum effect. The result of Wolverton's caricature and gothic ability is an abridged Bible that consists largely of difficult, threatening, horror-inducing incidents that are rendered as realistically as possible. Perhaps because they seem entirely believable, they are very unsettling. One does not easily forget his picture of the drowning people who refused to listen to Noah and who are now vainly scratching at the stern of his ark as the waters rise (45). And one sees the fear on the face of Abimelech the priest as Saul accuses him of treason (195).

The difference between the approach of Waldman and Wolverton becomes clear when looking at Wolverton's rendition of the Scroll of Esther (261–62). Again, Wolverton's people look like modern Americans—for example, in one panel where Mordecai (with an American haircut and wearing a bathrobe and T-shirt) overhears Haman plotting against the Jews (260). The gallows that Haman has constructed for Mordecai is very impressive and is shown in all of its detail, while Haman's face is obviously frightened as he learns that the king has turned against him (261). Waldman's people look more Middle Eastern, and the Hebrew written across the pages increases its authentic look. But Wolverton's faces make a stronger impression.

The three major—and two less powerful and innovative—versions of biblical stories discussed here enhance the believability of the Bible in its own way: Waldman's because it looks like a prayer book, Crumb's because of the solidity, power, and accuracy of its style, and Wolverton's because it brings the American reader closer to biblical characters. Waldman and Wolverton are believers; Crumb is not. And yet even Crumb must have had some reason for taking on this project, so unlike his other works. Is it that he is getting older and beginning to consider religious issues more seriously? In any case, his Bible, like that of the others, has the potential to bring readers closer to faith. Both Mercado's and the Grahams' versions of the Scroll of Esther are also worthy, if less innovative and striking than the other three works.

Douglas Rushkoff is a professor of communications at New York University, as well as the author of *Nothing Sacred: The Truth About Judaism*, a book that challenges Jewish tradition in light of contemporary mores. His graphic novel project *Testament*, published in four volumes, brings the Bible into the modern world and even beyond through a series of sci-fi stories based on the biblical stories. The basic story is about Jake and Alec, two underground heroes who fight against Pierre Fallow's artificial intelligence, which is intended to enslave them to his world vision by offering them unlimited consumerism. The underground is an odd assortment of cyber-rebels, who are

pitted against a political machine that wants to dominate the world. All of this action is overlooked by a mixture of Hindu, Judaic, and pagan gods, who seem to join one side and then the other as it suits them. The gods finally impregnate Dinah, one of the rebels, and the series ends as she is pregnant via immaculate conception and will give birth to a new being and a new order of things. Rushkoff's tale is thus a combination of *1984* and the myths of many religions, and Rushkoff's purpose is to inspire hope against human dictatorship, which according to him is facilitated by the new computer technology.

The mix between the Bible and the story taking place in the present is not always respectful, as the subtitle of the *Babel* volume indicates: "Shit Happens: The Book of Job." Yet at the same time, the use of this slang expression definitely brings the Bible into the real world of everyday American life. Job's statement that the Bible "is still being written" communicates the point of the whole series. In an echo of the Abraham and Isaac story, a scientist working for the government almost sacrifices his son (who is a member of a radical student organization). An idealistic American wanting to bring clean water to Iraq in the middle of the recent Iraq war is tested as Job was by the loss of all he holds dear. Once again, as in the case of Wolverton's Bible, the female biblical figures wear modern-looking lipstick and eyeliner although the men look more ancient in their clothing. The concession here is to the modern comics readership, and there is plenty of sex too—but the Bible is also full of that.

In *Testament: West of Eden*, Rushkoff shows Elijah and Melchizedek inventing a creation story—Genesis—worthy of a "new nameless, faceless god" while Krishna looks on approvingly. The idea is that people now need a new god to replace the old ones with whom they may have grown bored. So these two powerfully drawn and colorful men came up with that new god and with a story "like none other" to represent him. Clearly, Rushkoff's view is not that the Bible is a sacred text but rather an invented one.

Rushkoff's most interesting contributions are his rewritings of the biblical stories. So instead of Dinah's brothers killing all of the men of Shechem as a punishment for their rape of Dinah even after the men of Shechem have accepted circumcision, he has his character Jake *prevent* the killing of the police who may have raped Miriam. This humanizes a very brutal biblical incident in a way that would please most modern readers, if at the cost of the original story's stark realism and brutality. He also has Alec rather than Jake play the Moses role, even though Jake is the hero of his narrative.

As Rushkoff writes at the end of volume 3, however, readers do not need to know the biblical stories in order to comprehend his story. The basic idea

is that humans create gods rather than the other way around and that, in a world which would be ruled by computers and cyber-control, dictatorships are easier to establish than in the past and humanity stands little chance without some rebellious spirits to oppose the forces that would control us. Rushkoff is only slightly ahead of his time, if one thinks of the surveillance cameras everywhere these days, the Stuxnet virus that is capable of invading and taking over government computer systems, and the nature of some humans, which as in the time of Pharaoh, still push toward total control. According to Rushkoff, the only difference between Pharaoh, Hitler, Stalin, and the dictators of the future is the ability of computers and other cyber-weapons such as microchips imbedded in people (as they are in pets at present) to enforce total control.

He combines this vision of a dangerous future with the ever-potent power of sexuality (shown by Liam Sharp and the other artists in the series) displayed by Dinah and her female colleagues in a space-age bordello. All in all, he produces a vision of a dangerous new world order. While he does not consider the potential danger of a country like Iran (which is prominently mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as Persia) gaining nuclear weapons, the actual use of the reputedly Israeli- and American-created Stuxnet computer virus to attempt to disable the Iranian nuclear program in 2010 shows that he is on to something important with his idea of an all-controlling cyber network.

His final word of wisdom in the afterword to volume of *Testament* is that “when human beings choose to write the narrative instead of just following it, anything becomes possible.” For Rushkoff, faith in man replaces faith in God. He claims not to reject the Bible, only a narrow reading of it. Given the nature of man in the Bible and in *Testament*—where Dinah’s overt sexuality seems to be the dominant value—I am not at all convinced that the future will be better than the past if man writes the story rather than following the Bible’s prescriptions as if given by God. In fact, the future may be much worse in a world without God because humanity would then have nothing to respect, and without divine sanction, the rules against killing and stealing will be disregarded even more than they already are. Rushkoff shows the rebels defeating both billionaire Pierre Fallow and the gods, and facing a bright future with Dinah’s unborn child as their possible prophet of undefined future greatness. But one of the most impressive things about the three major graphic novel adaptations of the Hebrew Bible by Waldman, Crumb, and Wolverton analyzed here is that they reveal the ever-present and inherently dark side of man—Crumb in particular seems well suited to do that—and in comparison Rushkoff’s story of a bright future for humanity

must provoke some skepticism, although it is definitely in keeping with both the Hebrew and the Christian scriptures' vision of the coming of a messiah. Like the other biblical adaptors, Ruskoff shows that the Bible can be interpreted in many ways and that the search for faith will continue on the basis of many different visions.

## 2

## Religion and Identity in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

Art Spiegelman is at the forefront of contemporary graphic novelists. He is critically renowned for such work as his avant-garde journal *Raw*, edited with his wife, Françoise Mouly (who is also a graphic novelist and the art director of the *New Yorker*), his cartoons for the *New Yorker*, and his *In the Shadow of No Towers*, about his personal experience of the 9/11 attack. But his best-known work, and undoubtedly his best work, is his autobiographical biography *Maus*, which is the actual, true history of his parents' survival of the Holocaust and his own survival as their son growing up in Rego Park, Queens. The work won the Pulitzer Prize (the first for a graphic novel), has had exhibitions devoted to it at the Museum of Modern Art in New York among other places, and has been enormously influential. At its core lies an important discussion of religious belief.

Is Art Spiegelman, in his fact-based Holocaust graphic novel *Maus*, suggesting that life is a game of chance, or rather a series of events that are fated or at least influenced by a divine power? In one scene in the second volume of this two-volume work, Spiegelman's father Vladek discusses playing bingo at the Pines resort while the concentration camp tattoo on his arm is visible (volume 2: page 37; volume and page numbers are hereafter rendered as 2:37). This verbal and visual juxtaposition—one of Spiegelman's favorite devices—inevitably raises the issue of whether or not life is governed solely by chance and why, during the Holocaust, some people survived while others did not. I am convinced that Spiegelman is strongly suggesting that there is indeed a metaphysical dimension to life and that a supernatural power may well be ordering it. Moreover, in *Maus*, Spiegelman subtly suggests that Vladek and Anja survived, while many others did not, for a very special reason.

Some readers may argue that Spiegelman is a secular liberal and scarcely given to promoting ideas of divine intervention, as evidenced by the lack of any traditional religious belief in his self-characterization in *Maus*. In

*MetaMaus*, a retrospective look at how he composed this work, he says that he does not buy into “numerological mysticism, but that [his father] Vladek did” (20) and that “my own identification with my Jewishness had very little to do with religion ever since I was thirteen and went out for a slice of sausage pizza in the middle of a Yom Kippur service and wasn’t struck down by lightning” (132). He has also said in an interview with Andrea Juno in Joseph Witek’s collection *Art Spiegelman: Conversations* that he has “no strong interest in any religion, including Judaism” (174).

Despite these comments, it is clear from his work that Spiegelman is not entirely irreligious. To counter the view of Spiegelman (including his own view in the comments above) as entirely secular, I would call attention to the scene in the “Prisoner on the Hell Planet” section of *Maus* in which he quotes from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* during his mother Anja’s funeral: “O nobly born . . . in your journey through the formless void, remember the unity of all living things” (1:102). Spiegelman’s narrative explanation for his use of a Tibetan rather than the traditional Jewish prayer that his father recites during the funeral is that he was “pretty spaced out in those days,” meaning that he was something of a bohemian “hippie” type, interested in Buddhist mysticism and non-Western spiritual experience. So however far Spiegelman is from traditional Judaism in *Maus*, he is also far from being entirely secular. Moreover, he is obviously open to the idea that supernatural events such as the ones his father recounts at several points in his narrative can indeed occur, because he includes them in *Maus* without any qualifying skeptical comment, and he admits in *MetaMaus* that these events “seem central to my parents’ stories” (20). In an interview in the *Forward*, he praises the “great holy Jewish writings of [Mad magazine founder] Harvey Kurtzman and Franz Kafka,”<sup>1</sup> revealing a concept of Jewish holiness, however casually.

The key to the deep religious significance of *Maus*, as well as to Vladek’s character, occurs when Vladek dreams about Parshas Truma during his incarceration in the German labor camp for Polish army prisoners of war. This section of the Torah is Exodus 25–27, and the literal meaning of “Parshas Truma” is “The Offering Portion.” These three chapters of Exodus are normally read in synagogues in February or March as part of the yearly reading cycle of the entire Torah. Parshas Truma is wholly constituted of very detailed instructions concerning the construction of the Tabernacle and the Ark. It begins with the following two verses, which, with their injunction to the people to donate material to be used in building these two sacred institutions to house the Tablets of Moses, are the source of the name (“The Offering Portion”) of the entire three-chapter Parsha: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts: you shall accept gifts for

Me from every person whose heart so moves him.”<sup>2</sup> The importance of this entire Parsha appears at several points in the narration, and particularly in the incident of Vladek’s dream.

While in the labor camp, Vladek dreams that a voice that seemed to be his dead grandfather’s tells him that the very day of the reading of Parshas Truma (that is, the Saturday during which this portion of the Bible would be read in a synagogue that year) would be the day of his release (1:57). Vladek includes in his testimony, duly recorded by Art in *Maus*, the statement that he gave to a rabbi imprisoned with him, and with whom he prayed every morning in the camp, about his dream and asked him when Parshas Truma would be read that year. The rabbi replied that the day of reading Parshas Truma was “almost three months from now” (1:57). When the day of Parshas Truma’s reading arrived and the men miraculously were released just as the dream predicted, the rabbi himself reminded Vladek that this was indeed the day indicated by his dream, which Vladek had forgotten all about (1:58). After their release, the rabbi told Vladek that he is a “roeh ha-noled,” that is, “one who sees what the future will bring” (1:60). The idea of prophecy is, of course, deeply imbedded in Judaism, but this occurrence of it in the midst of a harrowing twentieth-century tale is startling. Spiegelman comments in *MetaMaus* that “referencing Parshas Truma allowed an indication of what Vladek’s religious upbringing was like” (20), but the incident goes way beyond that into the mystical, and Spiegelman makes no attempt to counteract it (or show any flaws in it) in any way as he does, for instance, when his father denies that there was an orchestra at Auschwitz and yet Spiegelman shows one playing there.

In *Maus*, Vladek says that during this early period of his life, he was “very religious” (1:54), probably making him more prone to accepting the idea of such prophetic interventions in human life. But Vladek does not say that about himself later, and there is no evidence that he has remained religious; in fact, he seems to have lost his faith as a result of his later experience in Auschwitz because he states about Auschwitz the chilling, Dante-like comment, “But here God didn’t come. We were all on our own” (2:29). And Spiegelman does not portray Vladek as traditionally religious during his later life in the United States, except for his knowledge of the “Kaddish,” the mourner’s prayer, which Vladek recites in Hebrew in the “Hell Planet” episode. The “Kaddish” is basic and known by most Jews, even those who are just minimally religious. Yet it is worth noting that the first sentence of the “Kaddish” translates as: “May God’s great Name be exalted and made holy everywhere in the world, which He has willed into creation,” which might point to Vladek’s belief in God even after Anja’s death, during the time of his

greatest trial, as well as to God's presence in the world. And as Alan Berger writes, "That Vladek feels compelled to tell [the story of the Parshas Truma dream and its outcome] to his son indicates some belief that divine providence played a role in his rescue and survival. . . . This would tend to undermine Vladek's assertion that God was not in Auschwitz."<sup>3</sup>

As Berger also points out, this dream and its achieved prediction of release is not the totality of the extraordinary events that occur around this Parsha. Vladek tells Art that the week of the Parshas Truma reading was also the week of Vladek and Anja's wedding several years before the dream occurred (1:59), a fact that Vladek did not realize until he checked on what the date of his marriage had been, long after the dream took place. He tells Art that Art was born during the week that this Bible passage was read, and that it is this very passage that Art himself read during his Bar Mitzvah ceremony. Except possibly for the Bar Mitzvah ceremony (and thus the related Bible portion) and Vladek's wedding date, both of which one has some discretion to choose, two of these events—Vladek's being released from the camp on a predicted day and Art's birth week—could not possibly be manipulated by Vladek before or after the fact. So Vladek's dream and the events that followed (and, in the case of his wedding, preceded) its prediction cannot be easily explained in any conventional manner.<sup>4</sup> And this dream is only the first of three major supernatural, difficult-to-explain, and positive predictive incidents in the course of the book that encourage Spiegelman's parents to survive.<sup>5</sup>

The second such major incident occurs when Vladek is put in Auschwitz and is crying to himself after having been told of the crematoria. A Polish priest, also incarcerated, approaches him unasked and uses Hebrew numerology to read the tattoo on Vladek's arm (2:28). He finds both the Bar Mitzvah year of thirteen—in Judaism, a lucky number—and the number seventeen, which stands for the ten men necessary for a prayer service and seven more, making it "like a strong prayer group" ("k'minyan tov," 2:28), another positive number. Moreover, as the priest further points out, read individually the numbers in Vladek's tattoo total eighteen, which is the Hebrew symbol for life. Vladek comments that the priest's numerological reading put "another life" into him. Vladek tells Art that whenever he thought that he could not survive, he would look at his tattoo and take courage from the priest's interpretation (2:28). Perhaps the priest's words can be seen simply as a self-fulfilling prophecy, something the priest cleverly says only to enhance Vladek's morale rather than a serious prediction concerning his survival. But if so how did this priest who happens to be particularly knowledgeable about Jewish traditions come to be in Auschwitz, and in the same part of Ausch-

witz at the same time that Vladek also briefly appeared there; moreover, why precisely does Vladek's tattoo consist of numbers that the priest could so easily read as a message relating to Vladek's survival; and why does the priest, coming from "another room" (2:28), approach Vladek in particular? The top left-hand panel on the page shows at least two other Jews and one Pole in Vladek's room; one would have thought that, even though Vladek is the only one crying, the priest might have first approached the Pole (in all likelihood a fellow Catholic), especially since his head is hanging down, indicating a depressed mental state akin to Vladek's. The priest's presence, his knowledge of Jewish traditions, his singling out of Vladek, and the particular tattoo number that Vladek was given might be coincidences, but they might just as easily be signs of divine favor shown to Vladek, just like the earlier Parshas Truma dream.

Why, however, would Vladek in particular receive divine favor in the form of these predictions? One reason might be that, unlike many other people, he was religious (at least before he got to Auschwitz): as he says about his praying while in the POW camp, "I was very religious, and it wasn't else to do" (1:54). But when he adds here that there was nothing else to do in the POW camp but pray, he indicates that even at his most overtly religious he was less than completely pure in his motives for praying. Surely more genuinely devout people were herded into Auschwitz and died there. So, again, why was Vladek so worthy that he was spared?

Here, the first two verses from Parshas Truma become especially important. Vladek is portrayed by Spiegelman as an incredibly stingy old man, who returns opened "Special K" cereal to the supermarket for a refund (2:89–90) and refuses to turn off the gas stove in his rented Catskill bungalow all day because the gas is provided for free by the bungalow owner (2:22) and he would have to use his own wooden matches to light the stove if he turned it off. He is also shown picking up a piece of old telephone wire from the ground to possibly use later rather than just buying some from the hardware store as needed (1:116).

But in Auschwitz, Vladek's "stinginess" has a justification beyond his own hunger and need. True, much of his saving is directed exclusively toward preserving his own life. As he says, "If you want to live, it's good to be friendly" (2:62). He bribes Yidl and a kapo with food, and he saves enough bread to pay for help when, ill with typhus, he needs prisoners to help him walk to the latrine and to march to the Swiss border (2:96–97). Because he has saved his thin blanket, he is able to place himself above the crowd in the cattle car and trade snow for sugar (2:86). But even during this incident, when he might well be excused for worrying only about his own life, he comments "So I ate

also sugar and saved their life” (2:86). This shows that even during this impossible survival test when his own life was constantly at risk, Vladek still cared about other people.

And this observation alerts the reader to a pattern in Vladek’s hoarding things in Auschwitz: his putting aside a portion of his food and material is often for the benefit of others as well as himself. Vladek goes to great lengths to save for the bribes that will bring Anja over to Auschwitz from Birkenau (2:64), and he also sends food to sustain her, always at great risk to himself as well as to her (2:57, 65–66). Mandelbaum benefits from Vladek’s efforts, too, when he asks God to send him a spoon and a belt, and both miraculously appear via Vladek (2:29), who has begged for them from the kapo, at no small risk to himself (2:33). Mandelbaum comments, “My God. My God. My God . . . it’s a miracle, Vladek. God sent shoes through you” (2:34). Another such incident, albeit without the predictive element in the Mandelbaum episode, occurs when he gives the condemned Belgian boy, Felix, a piece of bread (2:59) and tries to comfort him. These kindnesses are in fact offerings to God given freely by Vladek. Vladek, alone among all characters in *Maus* (except perhaps for the Polish priest), unhesitatingly follows the injunction in Parshas Truma to bring God gifts from the goodness of his heart and not because he is commanded to do so. This is all the more impressive because Vladek is not a do-gooder, and certainly not in Auschwitz. He warns Anja to save her scraps of food rather than give them to her friends (2:56); and Vladek does not believe in “friends” in general, as we learn from his comment, “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week. . . . THEN you could see what it is, friends!” in the first episode of the book when Art falls down while skating and his friends desert him (1:5–6). But Vladek does, apparently, believe in helping genuine “friends” such as Anja and Mandelbaum and the Belgian boy because he does help them. By donating a portion of his wealth to others of his own free will and at considerable risk, Vladek is fulfilling the injunction in the first two verses of Parshas Truma to make offerings to God.

Thus, the setting aside of a portion of his possessions, which Vladek continues to do throughout his life and which to the reader (and to Spiegelman, in his role as the anguished son of Vladek) ostensibly looks like simple miserliness, is actually a form of voluntary tithing that sets Vladek himself apart from all others in *Maus*, including other survivors. Mala comments that other people including her went through the Holocaust but did not emerge as “cheap” as Vladek did (1:131). Art admits much the same thing on the basis of the many camp survivors whom he knows (2:22). When asked why other people did not do what he did in saving portions of their food and even

paper and other small items, Vladek tells Art, “Ach! You know how other people are” (2:63). Just as the Polish priest predicts, Vladek survives Auschwitz and the Holocaust, and this is due in large part to his penchant for keeping things and for helping others, which is in effect a form of holy offering. In contrast to his own felt embarrassment about his father’s seemingly inexplicable miserliness (even when Vladek struggles to set aside an inheritance for Art himself), Spiegelman shows that in God’s sight this quality of miserliness is perhaps more worthy than some attributes that are considered good because it enables not only Vladek’s survival but also that of some fellow humans, including the non-Jewish Frenchman (2:93–94).

Another important fact about Vladek, at least according to his own testimony, is that he never commits a betrayal or any selfish act against another person while all the time managing to look out for himself and his family, unlike the Jew who “rats” out their attic hiding place (1:113). Vladek says that there were no more families at a certain point in the Holocaust (1:114), meaning that each person in a family had to be concerned for his or her own survival only, but he testifies that he continued to care about Anja even in Auschwitz. And after the war, he sends even the unworthy “kombinator” Haskel presents (1:118).

*Maus* implies that because of Vladek’s generosity and selflessness, he receives God’s favor in the form of the three major incidents in which a supernatural agency seems to be actively encouraging Vladek and Anja. The Parshas Truma dream and the Polish priest’s numerology are the first two such major incidents; Anja’s resort to fortune-telling is the third. As part of Anja’s search for Vladek after the war, she goes to a Gypsy woman (humorously characterized by Spiegelman as a “Gypsy moth”) who tells her, via a crystal ball, exactly what has happened (2:133)—that Anja has lost her whole family but that Vladek, after having been sick, is making his way to find her and will send her a sign before the moon is full. The fortune-teller also predicts that the couple will have a new life across the sea and another little boy. Soon after this, Vladek’s letter arrives; and eventually the couple does have a new life across the sea and a son, Art. So Vladek’s Parshas Truma dream predicting his release from the labor camp, the priest’s numerology predicting Vladek’s survival of Auschwitz, and the Gypsy’s fortune-telling to Anja all come true. There is some element of coincidence, perhaps, in these predictions that come true, but they cannot as a group be written off as mere coincidences because the odds are completely against that. The fabled methods of insight into the future—dreams, numerology, and fortune-telling—all turn out to be strangely valid in Vladek’s account in *Maus*. It must be stated that Judaism is typically concerned with sanctifying the pres-

ent rather than with predicting the future and that consulting a priest and a Gypsy fortune-teller about one's personal fate are not traditionally approved Jewish forms of understanding. Yet *Maus* shows that both the priest and the Gypsy fortune-teller are acting as messengers of the divine in these particular instances. The priest approaches Vladek, not vice-versa, and freely yet insistently offers his prediction, surprisingly using Jewish rather than Catholic terms, thus fulfilling the role of a messenger. As Art volunteers and Vladek agrees, the Polish priest is a "saint" (2:28), who, without regard for religious creed, served the Jewish Vladek as sincerely as he would have served a fellow Catholic, and even chose to approach Vladek rather than a Polish gentile in the same room. Anja very reluctantly consults the fortune-teller, knowing "it was foolish," but feeling that she should do so because she "only looked for some hope," in Vladek's words (2:133–34). When the fortune-teller's prediction comes true, it becomes clear that, like the Polish priest, she was acting as a messenger from the divine. Just as the priest gives Vladek hope, the Gypsy gives Anja hope for the future.

The back cover of volume 2 shows the book publisher's UPC symbol deliberately, I believe, superimposed on Vladek's camp uniform, making Spiegelman's point that for him as for the other characters (and for the reader of *Maus* as well), the past and the present continually intertwine (fig. 2.1). But in addition to the past and the present intertwining, these incidents provide a demonstration that, at least in Vladek's life, the future too can be read and is intertwined with the past and present.<sup>6</sup>

The question arises of whether the use of the predictive passages is just an artistic device that Spiegelman has imposed to make his father's story seem more meaningful and optimistic than it otherwise might have been, or if he is reporting true and amazing incidents that Vladek himself has related. I think that—with the possible exception of the Jacob's dwelling prayer in the POW camp (discussed in note 5)—it is clear that Spiegelman is claiming that these incidents really happened in his father's life, just as Vladek apparently reported that they did. In *Maus*, Spiegelman always admits when he is forced to fill in a gap in his father's story because of a lack of direct evidence. For the most part, the fact that he does not say that he is imaginatively filling in gaps in these cases must mean that he is not doing so. He usually alerts the reader to problems of verification precisely where they occur in his text. For instance, during a long dialogue with his wife, Françoise, he shows himself telling her that in real life she would never let him talk as much as he does in this episode in *Maus* (2:16). This is meant to be humorous, but it makes it obvious that sometimes an artist, even of an autobiographical narrative, might be tempted to depart from strict accuracy for artistic purposes, and that Art



2.1. Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, vol. 2, from the back cover. The bar code superimposed on Vladek's concentration camp uniform brings Vladek's experience into the present.

is not at all comfortable with that fact and will alert the reader whenever in *Maus* he is tempted or compelled to do so. He also shows himself asking his psychiatrist, Pavel, also a survivor, what a tin shop in Auschwitz might have looked like and worrying about how he might draw it accurately (2:46). He conveys that he drew it as faithfully as he could from Pavel's verbal description, although it still might not be just right. When there is testimony from an outside source that there was an orchestra as the prisoners marched to work at Auschwitz, but Vladek does not remember there having been one, Spiegelman reports his discussion with his father about this point and then shows one panel with an orchestra and a second in which the orchestra is almost covered up by the men marching (2:54). The dialogue makes it clear that this is a compromise between the two positions.

Indeed, Art Spiegelman goes to great lengths to make his story as accurate as he possibly can and to be convincing that it is completely truthful. For instance, in an interview with the *Comics Journal*, Spiegelman states that his use of cats and mice instead of people saves him from having to draw any particular German or Jewish face and therefore from the potential inaccuracy of in effect claiming that he knows the identity of a person who figures in a particular incident in *Maus* that he himself has not witnessed:

"I don't know what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing."<sup>7</sup> Also, in *Maus*, he has Mala testify to the accuracy of the events surrounding "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" when she says that "it was so . . . so personal! . . . But very accurate . . . objective. I spent a lot of time helping out here after Anja's funeral. It was just as you said" (1:104). By relating these incidents and showing his own personal difficulties in dealing with the problem of veracity (as when he reveals that he disregarded his promise to Vladek not to use the story of Lucia Greenberg in *Maus* [1:23] or when he worries about portraying Vladek as a miser and thereby denigrating him [1:131–32]), Spiegelman tries very hard to indicate the truthfulness of his story and his struggle to make it truthful. He shows that he has tried not to embellish Vladek's history or character in any way. Moreover, his insertion of a photograph of Vladek (2:134) into the pages of drawings, including drawn photographs, in the book (2:114–15) further demonstrates the authenticity of the story (fig. 2.2). As a result, and because it is understood from his frank portrayal of himself that Art Spiegelman is telling a ruthlessly honest autobiographical narrative as well as a biographical narrative based on his father's testimony, it is also understood that (with the possible exception of the prayer from Numbers, discussed in note 5, which might have been chosen for artistic purposes) the supernatural or uncanny incidents are reported just as Vladek, with no possible motive for lying, reported them to Art.

Art Spiegelman chooses to include these uncanny and apparently true incidents not only to make a point about the interaction of the past, present, and future or even to indicate that it might be possible to read the future. He is also not suggesting that it is only because of Vladek's "saving" grace that he is allowed to survive Auschwitz; after all, other highly moral people died there. Nor can it be just because of luck that Vladek survived because Vladek was, after all, betrayed, captured, beaten, ill, and starved on occasion and does not, therefore, seem to be particularly lucky. Nor is his survival based only on a superior survival instinct, although that is certainly attested to, even to the extent that Avram, one of Vladek's companions in the shoe bunker in Srodula, is willing to pay Vladek to advise him about when it is safe to leave the bunker (1:124). But even his well-developed survival ability betrays Vladek when, against Anja's pleas, he opts to try to escape to Hungary and both he and Anja are captured. Surely Vladek's grace, luck, and ability all helped him; but alone these things would not be sufficient to enable him and Anja to survive the impossible threats and hardships that they faced. The supernatural incidents in Vladek's testimony seem to indicate that it took something more than the courage and resourcefulness they could find on their own to get him and Anja through the Holocaust.



2.2. Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, 2:134. Spiegelman's insertion of a photo of Vladek into the narrative helps demonstrate the authenticity of the story.

Indeed, the existence of *Maus* itself leads instead to a stunning, additional reason for the couple's seemingly inexplicable, miracle-assisted survival. Spiegelman's tale and the supernatural incidents in it seem to imply that Vladek and Anja were divinely chosen and encouraged to survive in order to give birth to Art Spiegelman. Art Spiegelman created a memorable monument not only to his parents' travails and those of their generation but also to his, as a member of the second generation of Holocaust witnesses. And only Vladek and Anja Spiegelman could have produced a recorder of the Holocaust as original and unique as their son Art. Vladek and Anja had to survive to enable the eventual production of *Maus*, which stands alone in complexity, power, and accessibility among all attempts to memorialize this unbelievable event, which has often been said to defy artists' ability to render it. Only Art Spiegelman, the creator of Topps Entertainment's "Garbage Pail Kids," dreamed of using the formerly lowly genre of the comic book to address the mighty theme of the Holocaust, and only Art Spiegelman was able to pull this off convincingly and flawlessly, in the act creating a permanent, classic work of art.

This explanation of the reason for the couple's survival, paradoxically, also invests Anja's suicide with meaning, harrowing as it is. The most important event of Art's own life is undoubtedly that suicide. Since Vladek has de-

stroyed her journals, Art must depend upon Vladek's stories about her and Art's perceptions to give an understanding of her character. Given the evidence that Vladek and Art present, her suicide seems surprising since she was strong enough to be a Communist translator, unbeknownst to Vladek, even after she married him (1:26–29), and she also managed to survive the destruction of her whole family in the concentration camps, as well as her own tormented existence there. She was able to move to Sweden and then to the United States and to have another son, Art, in place of Richieu. Judging from the photo of her and Art and from Spiegelman's statement that she used to give him the food he liked (1:44) despite Vladek's insistence that Art eat leftovers, she seems to have been a good mother. Perhaps Vladek is right that the death of Herman, her elder brother and only surviving close family member, in a car accident in 1964, caused her to die a little all the time and eventually to commit suicide (2:114). Perhaps her early tendency toward depression, glimpsed in her postpartum breakdown after Richieu's birth that required a sanatorium visit (1:34–35) and augmented by the aftermath of Auschwitz, recurred. But as he shows in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," Art himself can never understand her suicide, except to feel guilty about the last time he refused to tell her that he loved her and to accept the disdain of his relatives for not having been a high-achieving son and for not having been sufficiently concerned about her well-being. He knows that instead of being regarded by his parents as a model son worth surviving the camps for (as Richieu, he feels, would have been [2:15]), he has spent time in the state mental institution and has a girlfriend, Isabella—probably not Jewish—whom they don't like.

Yet whatever the cause and however guilty or not guilty Spiegelman may feel concerning his mother's suicide, he sees that event as a nodal moment that started his career. Just as writer William Burroughs's tragic killing of his wife Jean Vollmer in 1952 began his writing career, so "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"'s first appearance in a minor comics journal in 1973,<sup>8</sup> five years after Anja's suicide, shows that Art, who until then had done mainly Topps bubblegum features, became a serious artist after Anja's suicide. As Joseph Witek comments, only in the "Hell Planet" sequence "do we discover Art's motivation for gathering his father's story."<sup>9</sup> Anja's suicide led Spiegelman to write the cri de coeur that is "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" and indeed *Maus* as a whole. So the larger or perhaps divine purpose of Anja's suicide, albeit certainly not her own motivation for it, was to provide the shock that forced Art into drawing seriously. Following through with the supernatural or divine thread pursued in this interpretation so far, then, in retrospect, there is purpose even in Anja's death, tragic though it is. Without that suicide, it is

possible that Spiegelman never would have taken to telling his parents' tale. This is clearly a very delicate issue, and understandably even the usually self-revealing Spiegelman does not discuss openly the trade-off between Anja's suicide and his desperate need to write *Maus*. But in his anguished address to Anja in "Hell Planet" he obliquely makes exactly that connection: "Well, mom, if you're listening . . . Congratulations! You've committed the perfect crime. . . . You murdered me, mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (1:103). A murdered man who is still alive and who has artistic talent must find an outlet for his suffering and that is what Spiegelman has done, unforgettably, in *Maus*. Of course he would have wanted his mother to remain alive rather than to feel compelled to write *Maus*, but he was never given that choice. Faced with her suicide, he had to tell his parents' and his own tale in the hope of finding some internal peace and perhaps some meaning in his family's never-ending, Holocaust-caused anguish, in which, projecting the guilt of the Nazis onto his own family and thus showing the pain of the Holocaust extending into the second generation, he brands his father a murderer for destroying Anja's diaries (1:159), calls his mother a murderer for killing him ("Hell Planet"), and feels like a murderer himself because of his rejection of her need for love ("Hell Planet").

Like the suicide of Anja, which forced open the floodgates of Art's creative expression, the death of his brother Richieu makes "sense" in this context. Richieu, always held up as a model by his parents, perhaps would not have had the artistic ability to do what Art has done in memorializing the Holocaust; or perhaps Art's impossible rivalry with the dead Richieu was another tool spurring him on to achieve. In any case, if Anja had not lost Richieu she might not have wanted to have a second child, and Art might never have been born. One of the richnesses of *Maus* is precisely that it is by a second-generation witness, a perspective that only Art could provide, since Richieu would have been a first-generation survivor of the Holocaust had he lived. Even the name "Artur" or "Arthur," perhaps unwittingly given him by his parents (both of whom, however, were always excellent students of English), points to the artist's profession via the nickname "Art," and it goes particularly well with "Spiegelman," which means "mirror maker" in German. Art, it seems, was born to hold the mirror of his parents' and his own Holocaust-caused traumas up to life. As a subtle confirmation of this thesis, Vladek tells Art that Anja always thought that Art resembled her brother Josef, who was a commercial artist in Lodz before the war; this points to inherited art-making talent (2:114). But inherited talent alone could not have produced *Maus*, nor could *Maus* have been created by any other person. Only Art Spiegelman, given his unique talent, possibly genetically inherited from

his uncle Josef, and his personal, unique experience as the second-generation son of survivors, and especially as an “only child” who had to deal, completely alone, with Vladek’s parsimony as well as with his mother’s suicide, could have created the unique and enduring work that is *Maus*. Art Spiegelman, then, is suggesting that there is divine intervention in life. Vladek and Anja, according to this clear thread running through *Maus*, were divinely guided toward survival and were deprived of one child in order to have another, Art. Art’s need to tell the incredible story in *Maus* was fated by his parents’ tortured history, just as his artistic talent was genetically fated.

Parshas Truma has an aesthetic as well as a religious dimension in its directions for the construction of the Tabernacle and Ark, and in its injunction to the people to provide the precious materials with which to build them. Through offerings to God given from the heart of the people, two awesome and also beautiful religious vessels were built. Art Spiegelman, who read from Parshas Truma during his Bar Mitzvah, has absorbed its aesthetic and religious teaching. Out of his own suffering, Spiegelman derived the “terrible beauty” (to quote W. B. Yeats in his poem “Easter 1916”) of the tragic but beautifully written and drawn work that he named *Maus*. And within the structure of *Maus*, Art’s autobiographical narrative is like a tabernacle that holds within it the Ark of Vladek and Anja’s epic story of survival; and that Ark in its turn holds within it—just like the Tablets of Moses that were given by God to man according to the biblical account—the message that God can and sometimes does intervene in human affairs. George M. Goodwin may be correct when he writes that “*Maus* offers no conclusion, explanation, or salvation”<sup>10</sup> in terms of an understanding of the Holocaust itself. But if my reading of the predictive events in the story is also correct, *Maus* does offer the redemptive idea that the divine is present in the world despite the Holocaust, and that, as in the case of the Spiegelman family’s odyssey, people are sometimes given a small glimpse into its workings. Another meaning of “truma” is “contribution,” as in the Hebrew phrase “truma la’enoshut,” or “contribution to humanity.” While not always expressed in traditionally Jewish terms, Spiegelman’s narrative is indeed a contribution to humanity, in that it offers to Jews and non-Jews alike both a striking warning about man’s inhumanity and a startling redemptive affirmation of God’s presence. At *Maus*’s core resides a religious as well as an aesthetic mystery, awesome to behold and electric to the touch.

## 3

## The Holocaust Graphic Novel

While Art Spiegelman's *Maus* raises many questions about the religious and other dimensions of the Holocaust, more issues remain. The Holocaust (or in Hebrew, the Shoah, which means "catastrophe") is fraught with unresolvable questions about how this tragedy can or should be remembered in artistic works. Given its enormity, with six million Jews and many, many other people killed in the Nazi concentration camps, can any form of art ever recapture this experience? And should artists even try, or is doing so a type of irreverence toward the dead? These questions have been debated in numerous works, with scholars such as Elie Wiesel and Theodor Adorno stating that it is impossible to deal with the Holocaust in words and images, try as one might; and Bruno Bettelheim and Alvin Rosenfeld countering that silence would give the Nazis a victory.<sup>1</sup> My response to this controversy is that the Holocaust is a human experience (in that it did happen and was caused by humans), and that as such it is going to be written and thought about because it is also human to reflect on events, whether positive or, as in this case, horrible. And in fact, as was pointed out during the discussion of *Maus*, art has indeed been created about the Holocaust in graphic novel format, not to mention film, theater, fiction and nonfiction writing, and painting. The unique contribution of the graphic novel whether it deals with fiction or nonfiction (as in the case of *Maus*), is that it offers a reading and viewing experience together. With the graphic novel, one can turn back or forward or linger on a particular panel or page. And unlike during a film or theater production, one can meditate carefully while one is experiencing the work of art, instead of being forced forward every second. As Scott McCloud and Marshall McLuhan before McCloud have pointed out, the leap between panels offers a process of closure or completion, in which the reader/viewer is able to use his own imagination all the time to fill in the gaps. Moreover, like film or theater, the graphic novel offers characters that one can see. In the case of *Maus*, which remains the most powerful and the deepest reflec-

tion on the Holocaust in the graphic novel genre, the characters are animals and the contrast between them, the people they represent, and Disney and other animal cartoons sets up a special resonance. In other graphic novels, the reader can see the human characters, as in a film or the theater, and so the graphic novel combines both reading and viewing, and the advantages of prose texts and visual media, in a special way. The graphic novel therefore offers its own very powerful portrayal of this devastating event, one of whose main themes is the seeming absence of God.

Although *Maus* occupies a place of its own, especially in terms of religious reflection, and therefore has an entire chapter in this book devoted to it, there are several other very worthy graphic novel Holocaust representations, and I will deal with them in this chapter. Each one is moving, and each one adds something to the accurate knowledge of and reflections about this event. All involve questions of personal identity and belief. Martin Lemelman's *Mendel's Daughter* and Miriam Katin's *We Are on Our Own* are both very moving and extremely well-done true memoirs of the Holocaust. Unlike *Maus*, they use people rather than animals as characters and are completely straightforward and realistic in their depiction of the characters and events that they describe. But they take opposite positions on the religious issues raised by the Holocaust, with Lemelman's book testifying to positive supernatural events and Katin denying the existence of a caring God. Because they both are convincing and because, to a certain degree, seeing is believing, these two memoirs, like *Maus*, are among the most powerful depictions of the Holocaust in any medium. They do not rely upon physical horror but rather on mental horror, which is all the stronger for being visually depicted on the faces of the sufferers. Similarly, the graphic portrayal of Anne Frank's life by Jacobson and Colón is an excellent visual and written rendition based on an extremely powerful written work, Anne's diary. Because Jacobson and Colón's work is a biography, in which Anne is often called "Anne," rather than "I" as she always calls herself in her diary, their work conveys a less intimate tone than her first-person account. Despite this disadvantage, which is true of almost all biographies in comparison with autobiographies, the graphic novel genre adds a visual, diagrammatic element missing from the original textual version of her diary, while the extra life events provided by the Jacobson and Colón biography fill out her story. Most of all, the realistic visual rendering of her appearance and those of her companions and of their condition gives a wonderful concreteness to the people and events described in Anne's diary. Trina Robbins's *Lily Renée* also tells the true story of a young girl who was caught up in the Holocaust, but with a much happier ending than Anne Frank experienced: Lily es-

capes from Europe and becomes a known comics artist. Joe Kubert's *Yossel* is an imaginative rendering of the last days of a young artist in the Warsaw Ghetto, based on both imagination and historical fact, while Pascal Croci's *Auschwitz*, a powerful fictional work, brings the past and present together. Pak and Di Giandomenico's *X-Men: Magneto Testament*, like *Yossel*, is another powerful fictional work recounting a boy's experience in the Warsaw Ghetto and in Auschwitz. Pinkus's and Morad's reflections on being Israelis in Germany bring the Holocaust's reverberations into the present, as Trina Robbins's and Sharon Rudahl's adaptation of the Holocaust theme (in their "Zog Nit Keyn Mol" in Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 200–201) does to broad issues of social justice in their graphic rendition of a Holocaust partisans' song. Finally, Alan Moore's use of the Holocaust in *Watchmen* shows the wider applicability of this event in a work of science fiction. All are powerful Holocaust dramas or make use of Holocaust themes, in the form of the graphic novel, but each has its unique style and attitude toward identity and belief.

*Mendel's Daughter*, Martin Lemelman's memoir of his mother, Gusta, transcribed from a video and told in her own voice, uses a very realistic style of drawing and privileges words as much as text. Instead of using speech balloons, it has separate panels for the words. This is a unique feature of Lemelman's style, and it gives the book the feel of an illustrated book as well as that of a work of sequential art. One could say that it is midway between both genres. Also, the panels are of differing size on every page; sometimes a face will take a whole page if a momentous event is happening, or someone explodes in anger, and sometimes the pages will have many small panels. These features help focus the reader on the story itself, and particularly on its characters.

The narration is very important here, since the story is entirely a narration by Gusta, with no dialogue between characters except as reported by her. As she narrates the story, Gusta looks like any older American woman, with glasses, a standard haircut, and tasteful but not unusual clothes. Yet her story is anything but the usual one an older American woman might tell. After Lemelman had a dream about his mother after her death, he found a videotape he had made of his mother talking about her life and decided to transform it into a graphic novel. Since he is an illustrator by trade this is a natural choice.

Unlike Spiegelman's story, which has three narrative lines—the *kunstlerroman*, which tells the story of Art's making of the book itself, the *bildungsroman*, which gives Art's autobiography as the son of survivors, and the *epic*, which includes Anja's and Vladek's story of survival<sup>2</sup>—this story has just

one narrative line and (apart from the introduction) is told without any intervention or commentary by the artist. This gives gravity and a solid testimonial feel to the story, which details how Gusta and her two brothers and one sister lived in the woods in a hole in the ground for three years and escaped the Nazis, unlike Spiegelman's parents, who experienced the concentration camps.

Lemelman's book has three main themes, which emerge gradually from Gusta's narration: the religious theme, in which a supernatural agency sometimes functions; the theme of anti-Semitism, in which non-Jewish friends and neighbors turn on Gusta's family once the Nazis arrive; and the theme of redemption, in which righteous gentiles help the Jews, and even the dead seem to have found some sort of peace.

Like *Maus* Lemelman's memoir has a religious dimension to it, this time involving an overt supernatural agency. In *Maus*, Vladek's dream about when the Jewish prisoners would be released from the work camp, which comes true, leads the rabbi in the camp, who is also freed, to call Vladek a prophet; and, indeed, this event cannot be explained in rational terms except as an enormous coincidence. In Lemelman, however, the supernatural agency seems to be more tangible than a dream. On the first page, Lemelman himself appears, saying that "I've always felt that my mother lived in a world of magic. She always claimed that her father, Menachem Mendel, spoke to her in dreams. And then there was Aunt Yetala. . . . Until the day she died, she spoke of an Angel of God who saved her from the Nazis. Needless to say, I was skeptical" (1). Here Lemelman speaks as a logical professor used to raising questions, and as a secular Jew. But in his artistic capacity both as a writer and an illustrator, he has reported the story as it was told to him, so that it all becomes more believable. At a vital moment, Lemelman shows Yetala's shoulder being touched by a hand—which the reader assumes is the hand of the angel about which Yetala told Gusta (124). And at the end of the book, when he has each of the dead members of Gusta's family speak for themselves, a hand is placed over their faces, and this also seems to be the hand of an angel (217). But this is Lemelman's own artistic device, and is clearly different from the hand that Yetala insists was placed on her shoulder.

Gusta's account of her sister Yetala's encounter with the angel (122–24) is reported as Yetala told Gusta about it later. As she was running from the Nazis, an angel called to her and told her to stop running. As a result, she witnessed her father being shot. According to Yetala, the angel tapped her on the shoulder and summoned a woman who took her to shelter. Gusta comments, "Did the Angel really touch her? I am not sure. I only know she was saved" (124). Lemelman shows Yetala looking backward at the hand on



3.1. Martin Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 124. In Lemelman's convincing drawing, an angel's hand touches Mattaleh's mother's sister Yetala.

her shoulder in the first panel and looking sideways at the angel in the second panel (124), and therefore the reader assumes that it was indeed a supernatural agency, since Yetala seems to have viewed the angel. (The reader however sees only the angel's hand, fig. 3.1.) Nowhere in *Maus* does an outside supernatural agency overtly intervene, and yet the events Vladek recalls about the priest's prediction and his own dream of being set free from the labor camp seem to indicate divine intervention in his and Anja's salvation. And as in *Maus*, Yetala has a dream in which her father tells her to go with two Christian women who will come to her. And this happens: her brothers pay two women to get Yetala and take her from the cellar, where she is hiding, to them in the forest (137). Lemelman reproduces a page from the prayer book for Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) in Hebrew (55), and translates part of it into English; it is the passage about "who will live and who will die," and how, in the coming year. At the end of the book, Lemelman shows another part of the same prayer book page: "Man's origin is dust and his end is dust. He spends his life earning bread. He is like a clay vessel, easily broken, like withering grass, a fading flower, a fugitive cloud, a fleeting breeze, scattering dust" (191). And on the last page, he quotes the Pass-

over Haggadah: “In every generation, one must look upon himself, as if he personally came out of Egypt.” Moreover, the chapter containing the “Action” in which the Nazis seized and killed many of the Jews in town, is entitled “Sh’má Yisrael,” from the prayer that starts “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.” In essence, his book shows the miracle of his mother’s salvation, the fragility of life, and the trials that his mother had to undergo, which were not less onerous than slavery in Egypt, and he does so on the basis of Jewish prayers. Clearly Lemelman wants to show a connection between the events and the prayers.

Part 1 is about Gusta’s life in Germakivka, a town that was sometimes in the Ukraine, and sometimes in Poland, depending upon the political situation. When she lived there, it was in Poland. Gusta speaks with a Yiddish accent, and her English grammar is not perfect. This creates a gap in the narration that the reader must fill in. A theme that emerges early on is the relations between her family and the non-Jews in the town, which appeared at first to be good—everybody used the well in their yard to get water and was allowed to do so. Their family was fairly prosperous, and they would hire as many as twenty non-Jewish women to come pick the fruit in their orchard. Everyone liked to eat the prune butter that the Jews made. The girls had Christian friends, and even wore the local, native clothing that they had been given. They went to school with the non-Jews too. She describes life in the town, which was quite pleasant for the most part. Her sister Jenny had lots of friends, both Christian and Jewish. She describes her studies in the Polish public school and her after-school religious studies. She also tells about the general store they had in her house (41–52).

In school there is one boy who does not like Jews (42), a sign of anti-Semitism under the surface of what are for the most part pleasant Christian-Jewish relations. But when the Nazis come, things become much worse. The Nazis are not only merciless but actually sadistic. They wound Chantze, her relative, and then shoot her to death in front of her mother and father before also shooting them (147). The question is how to explain this and how God could permit it. Lemelman never attempts to answer this question, and perhaps that is the smartest choice, since many other excellent artists and thinkers have found it unanswerable, too. However, Gusta mentions that “the rabbis and the religious say our trouble is from God” (94), as if the Jews are somehow responsible for their fate by having angered God, but no one comments on this assertion.

Yet, via Gusta’s testimony, Lemelman does show why the Ukrainians supported the Nazis. In Gusta’s words, “And then the Germans come. The Ukrainians are so happy. The Nazis promise them the freedom. No more will

Germakovka be for the Poles or for the Communists or for the Jews. Hitler promises the Ukrainians their own nation" (70). But this is a political explanation. It does not explain why the wife of the family's next-door neighbor tries to steal from them (72). And, as Gusta remarks, "So we started to give away our things to good Christian neighbors, to hold for us. We gave them away with the trust that we will live over the war and we will get them back. But, you know, these people were friendly before, but after . . . These Christians became greedy. They just wanted to keep what we gave to them. . . . They think they will get rid of the Jews and they will be left over the things! They will be rich" (73). So nationalism and greed—very human factors—explain some of it.

But not the cruelty that prevailed. The Nazis come after the Jews, and Yetala's (and Gusta's) father runs from them, along with Yetala. But even worse than that, perhaps, is the reaction of the people with whom Gusta has grown up, the people who patronized her store and with whom she went to school: "The Ukrainians watch. Such a good show!" (122). They enjoy seeing the Jews hunted by the Nazis. Moreover, her father lay by the bridge, wounded, the whole day, asking for water and nobody gave him any. Yetala reports that the Ukrainians say that they were afraid to help him, but they were not afraid to steal his shoes. Much later, after the Germans retreat and the Russians come, Gusta and her brothers and Yetala return to their house to find that a Christian family has taken it over. And "the lady is not very happy to see us" (181). They could not get their house back, and they were afraid to stay because, even with the Germans gone, "Ukrainian bandits was still killing Jews" (186).

And from there, the girls went into a displaced persons (DP) camp and the boys were in the Russian army. From both places, they managed to get out and come to the United States. Anti-Semitism is an ever-present theme from the time the aforementioned schoolboy expresses his dislike for Jews, but until it is openly approved by the Nazis, it does not become all-pervasive. And there were also Jewish police who did the Nazis' bidding in order, they thought, to save themselves. From all this, it seems that when a government agency approves an action, no matter how heinous, people will do it. And some people will do anything to survive, like the Jewish police. But Gusta's family never did any of these things, according to her testimony. The faces of Yetala, Gusta, and others are drawn very compassionately, and Lemelman's soft charcoal have the dual effect of softening facial expressions and giving the entire story a dream-like and melancholy feeling, even when its stark reality is very clear. Because of this softness, it is startling and moving when someone shows a fierce emotion. For instance, when Gusta tells her story,

regardless of the horrors she relates, her face is kind and objective looking rather than hard and bitter. But suddenly she is shown as a young girl exploding in anger against the Christian family occupying her house after the war, when they blame her for bringing lilacs from what was her own garden to the nun who had helped her during the war years (184). Also, because of Lemelman's use of photos (as early as page 13) and his drawing of his mother in old age (4, 9), the contrast between how she probably looked (photos are not always accurate, and he must imagine many of her facial expressions that he portrays) as a young girl when these events took place and her older age in America is always there; and the reader wonders how this ostensibly calm, older woman could have endured the loss of her youthful innocence in the sea of hatred that surrounded her. The reader also learns (once again) that he cannot know from exterior appearances what history people harbor inside of themselves.

But the third, much more positive, theme of redemption is also very strong. There were some righteous gentiles who helped Gusta during the war. These were true Christians, and in almost every case they were identified as such—the Catholic nun and the Seventh-day Adventist couple. Because of their faith and good hearts, these people showed humanity when everyone around them was demonstrating the opposite. The nun's face looks benevolent and her gesture is positive as she touches Yetala's hand (166). The husband of the Seventh-day Adventist couple was the director of the fields of a rich man. He takes an active role in helping Gusta and her family, even providing them with semilegal paperwork and allowing them to hide in the woods on the rich man's farm. He also talks another man into sheltering them. Gusta comments, "They are good peoples. They are good Christians" (102). When the Nazi "Action" begins, this man comes and tells Gusta and her brothers about it. He frequently comes to the woods to tell them who was being taken away, and he covers up their hiding place with leaves (148). But these were the exceptions, and Gusta unfortunately does not have many such stories of kindness to tell. Her narration calmly comes to a close with a recitation of how she married in the DP camp, how she and her husband got from the DP camp to America, and how her brothers also managed to do that, one after living in Uruguay for two years because America would not let him in at first.

What remains after all this is Gusta's calling Martin "Mattaleh," a Yiddishism indicating endearment, and Martin's pained and thoughtful face at the end of the book and in the photograph on the back cover flap. The reader understands Martin's quiet anguish as the son of survivors and his inability to believe that divine intervention may have saved his aunt Yetala and per-

haps his mother as well. He makes no overt comment about the nature of humanity and whether he regards it as good or evil. What also remains is the Gusta whose spirit shows through her photographs as well as Martin's sensitive drawings of how she might have appeared in different times and situations at a young age. Her (and Lemelman's) honesty can be appreciated when she says that her life with Martin's father, Tovia, was not that easy, and Yetala divorced the man she first married after the war and then married Kalman (210). Lemelman portrays a family marked by suffering and tragedy that continues into the present, which is not spelled out as much as in *Maus* (even though it is still there).

Lemelman concludes with the thought that in every generation Jews have to remember the passage from slavery in Egypt and to feel that all Jews have gone through it (219), which is indeed what Jews do during Passover and which probably accounts for much of the Jews' political liberalism. Lemelman leaves open the question of divine intervention. But he gives evidence for it, just as Spiegelman has, and in the even more direct form of the angel's hand on Yetala's shoulder. Reading Lemelman's work, the reader feels that he too has been touched by the family's tragedy—and even, through the act of reading the book, by an angel—and remembers the good people who helped the family and the possibility of God's presence even during these terrible events.

Miriam Katin works as a background designer for film companies in the United States and was a graphic artist in the Israeli Defense Forces as a young woman after she and her parents left Hungary in 1956. She came to the United States in 1963. She has illustrated children's books. Her Holocaust memoir, *We Are on Our Own*, unlike *Maus* and *Mendel's Daughter*, essentially makes her case against belief in God, but at the same time it includes some positive elements. The title gives a clear indication of her point of view. God did not intervene, and as Vladek in *Maus* says about Auschwitz, there God didn't come; the prisoners were all on their own facing Nazi barbarity. Perhaps surprisingly, Katin draws in a soft, slightly cartoony style while still retaining a realistic basis. Only a few interspersed pages, set in the present, are in full color; almost all of the other pages are in black and white.

Budapest in 1944, when the story begins, is still an elegant city of culture, and the women, Miriam's mother and her apparently non-Jewish friend, Eva, are dressed elegantly. But the Nazis are ruling, and the atmosphere from the beginning is horrible, even heartbreaking. Katin writes in her afterword that her only regret is that she "could not give this kind of comfort, a comfort of faith in the 'existence of God,' to my children. I was unable to lie." In an interview with Samantha Baskind, she also confesses to anger "against

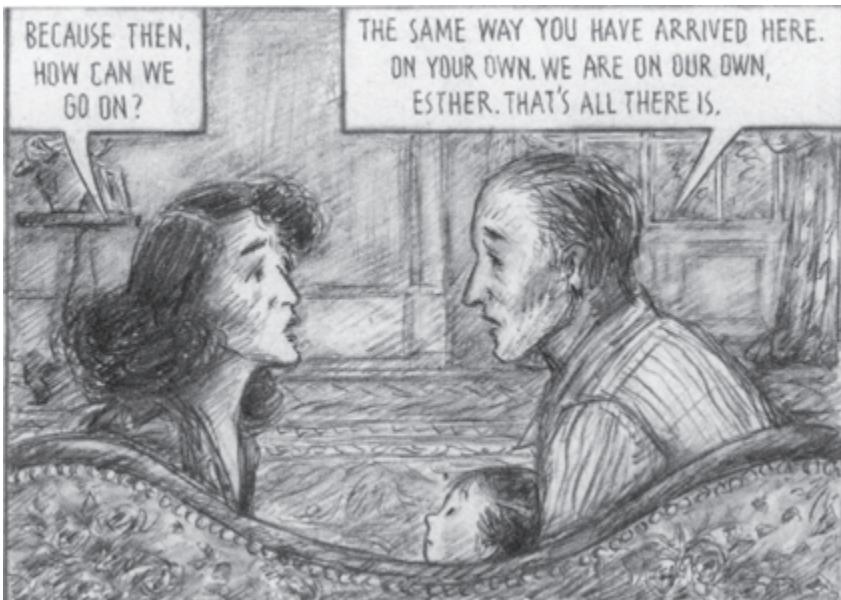
the faithful.”<sup>3</sup> Although she does not explain that anger, her work does explain her lack of belief. She follows in her father’s Socialist and atheist footsteps. And her mother’s story shows that at least as far as Miriam is concerned, if people are made in the image of God, then God must have two faces, one kind and one completely horrible—as in Blake’s poems “The Divine Image” and “A Divine Image.” But unlike Blake she does not ultimately try to explain this duality, only to show it as proof that a good God simply does not exist. She has said that “the atheistic aspect of the book would turn off many Jews—except those ready for an argument”<sup>4</sup> because she apparently feels that most Jews are agnostic or believers, but not atheists. Yet she makes it easy to understand her point of view.

Katin’s memoir agrees with Lemelman’s in terms of anti-Semitism. The superintendent of her building, who was once nice and got along fine with Esther, Miriam’s mother, is now hostile, saying “dirty Jews” when her back is turned (13). When he thinks that she has committed suicide, he worries only that he has to make a list of her property for the Nazis. Outwardly, he says that she and her daughter were a nice family but privately he again calls her a dirty Jew (28). On the other hand, Esther’s friend Eva—who seems to be non-Jewish—remains loyal, and the non-Jewish servant girl Anna is willing to work for Miriam’s mother for no pay and cannot understand the hatred driving the Nazis. Anna even gives Esther her St. Anthony’s pendant as a protection and is willing to lie to hide her departure by telling Esther’s made-up story that she committed suicide (23). Anna is obviously religious and hopes that God will forgive her for her lie. Her tears show genuine love of Esther and her daughter.

Despite these good people, it is understandable why Miriam would question God’s existence. In the first chapter, Esther must give up Miriam’s dog, Rexy, to the Nazis, by their command—Jews must give up their dogs. This was just one of the hundreds of small and large ways that Nazis systematically tried to demoralize and dehumanize Jews. Rexy does not want to go, but Esther must bring him in anyway. When the child Miriam comes home and finds Rexy gone, her mother tells her that Rexy died suddenly. Miriam wants to pray to God for his return (10–15). All of this raises the question of God’s existence in just a few pages in the most heartrending manner imaginable. If God allows a child’s dog to be taken away, then where is God? And they must face more trouble: the building superintendent tells Esther that she must move out after making a list of all her goods—another Nazi demand. And her husband is in the Hungarian army, at the front, so she must do all of this alone. Her anguish shows clearly in her face in the drawings (13–14).

Miriam's mother promises that God will be everywhere helping them as they leave with false papers declaring Miriam a bastard and her mother an unmarried servant (23). Yet one sees no evidence of God's presence. As Esther moves through a crowd of German soldiers, they address her in sexual terms, and she, playing her new role well, replies saucily (25). Miriam eats a pork sausage offered by a woman on the train, and Esther does not object to this nonkosher food in her new role as a Christian servant. After a German officer, who suspects Esther may be a Jew, forces her to become his mistress, she cries but she has no choice but to continue (43). Esther tells Miriam that God is in the wine barrels (50)—so while wine seems to be godly in that it makes one feel good, this statement also seems to imply that God Himself seems to be hiding from trouble. Miriam in the meantime has adopted another dog that she names Rexy after her first one. Katin clearly does not think that God may indeed be present in all of this: when the second dog befriended by Miriam is found dead—shot by a Russian soldier—the child Miriam understandably starts to think that maybe God is not watching and helping her after all. Yet despite the horrible pain caused the child Miriam by the loss of her two dogs, and though her mother was forced to have sex with a Nazi and to abandon any outward Jewishness, people perceived her mother's beauty, intelligence, and goodness, and her mother was wise enough to survive, and so she and Miriam got through the war. Someone reading this story might think that there is indeed a God who was watching over them, despite Miriam's overt views about this as both a character and an artist.

A good-hearted peasant man saves Esther and Miriam, even though his wife objects. Although Esther gives the wife her wedding ring as payment for living with them, the husband returns it to her when she leaves, along with some money (78). And the Russian soldiers she stays with turn out to be good men, in contrast to those who first invaded the village she was staying in who wanted nothing but vodka and women. Also, her friend Eva and the people in the first village in which she stays tell her husband, who is searching for her after leaving the Hungarian army (96–99), where she went and wish him well. Their hearts are good. A Russian soldier even cries as he points Esther's husband David the way to the train so he can find his wife (105). Yes, there are the Hungarians who say that the Jews are getting by without working, as always, and call them "Christ-killers." But there are, surprisingly, only a few of them, compared to the many good ones. Yet in the colored pages indicating the present, Miriam wants to prevent her child from going to Hebrew school because she learned from her experience only that God is hiding in a wine bottle (84). As a character, she refuses to see that



3.2. Miriam Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 118. Miriam's father speaks the brutal truth as he sees it to her mother, Esther, giving Miriam the title for her memoir.

God may have been in the good people she met—but despite herself, as an artist she is showing those good people and asking questions about her own position, even though she reaffirms that position in the afterword. True, some of these people do not know that she is a Jew—but some, like Esther's friend Eva, do, and help her nevertheless.

When Esther and her husband, David, reunite, Esther thanks God and it is David who says, “Esther, God has nothing to do with any of this” (117). He is also the one who says, “We are on our own, Esther. That’s all there is” (118) (fig. 3.2). Later, Miriam notes that he was always an atheist and that she has absorbed his philosophy. But Esther is upset that Miriam has heard this discussion, and Miriam never indicates that Esther ever gave up her belief in God despite her husband’s atheism. In the afterword she notes that her mother “is still living in New York” and “graciously hosting all the Jewish holidays.” So despite her horrible experiences, Esther apparently remains a believer. However, Miriam comments on her feelings as a child when she says “I prayed and I prayed. And Rexy did not come back” (119), so the seeds of her own future disbelief are sown. The last scene in the story (before the afterword) shows her plunging a knife into a doll and asking, “What if mommy burned that God after all,” as she thought her mother did when she

burned all of their personal belongings and photos in Budapest (122). But, again, David did come back and the family was reunited. Was it entirely because of their own efforts? Katin the artist leaves this open for the reader to judge, although unlike Lemelman, who as a character in his story cannot decide on this issue of God's existence, Katin as a person remains unable to believe. However, there is the fact that Esther, who has gone through even worse experiences than Miriam did—such as being forced to sleep with the Nazi officer—and was conscious of them with an adult's consciousness, never seems to lose her faith in God. As always, the reader must find his or her own position after reading Miriam's book, whose story is very affecting and whose overt championing of disbelief—despite her mother's continuing belief—is disturbing.

Anne Frank's diary, on the other hand, is full of references to God and to prayer. She clearly believed and continued to put her trust in God despite all difficulties. After a particularly scary incident in which burglars break into the warehouse near the annex and the hidlers including Anne are almost discovered, Anne writes on April 11, 1944:

God was truly watching over us. . . . We must put our feelings aside; we must be brave and strong, bear discomfort without complaint, do whatever is in our power and trust in God. The time will come when we'll be people again and not just Jews. Who has inflicted this on us? Who has set us apart from all the rest? Who has put us through such suffering? It's God who has made us the way we are, but it's also God who will lift us up again. In the eyes of the world, we're doomed, but if, after all this suffering, there are still Jews left, the Jewish people will be held up as an example. Who knows, maybe our religion will teach the world and all the people in it about goodness, and that's the reason, the only reason, we have to suffer. . . . God has never deserted our people. Through the ages Jews have had to suffer, but through the ages they've gone on living, and the centuries of suffering have only made them stronger. The weak shall fall and the strong shall survive and not be defeated!<sup>5</sup>

Whether she continued to state this when she was at Bergen-Belsen, where she died of typhus, cannot be known. But certainly she showed belief and courage during her two years in hiding.

Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón's *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* is true to the diary's honesty, tone, and contents, including this incident (108) in which they show her belief. Jacobson and

Colón are also known for their graphic novel based on the 9/11 report, in which they are also a model of accuracy. For their Anne Frank work, they used maps and other material provided by the Anne Frank House in Amsterdam, and their work has been edited for accuracy by staffers from the Anne Frank House. What do they contribute to the diary and why should people read their graphic novel in addition to the diary itself?

The issue of graphic novel adaptations of works in other formats is a complex one. The visuals add a new, viewing dimension to a strictly textual work, while the act of reading a graphic novel transforms cinematic works that have been adapted into graphic novel format, such as Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir*, which is analyzed in the chapter on Israel-centered graphic novels. Here Jacobson and Colón have added a visual dimension not only to Anne's diary but also to the story of her entire life, including periods before and after the diary was written. As noted earlier, a biography usually conveys a less intimate tone than a first-person autobiographical account, and in small sequential art dialogue and narration bubbles Jacobson and Colón cannot capture the full range of Anne's prose style in her diary. But their work also contributes a great deal to our experience of reading Anne's diary and to understanding her life and circumstances. So what do they add in intellectual, emotional, and spiritual terms? First, the information about Anne's life before and after her period of hiding fills out her story from beginning to tragic end and enables the reader to understand her personality more fully. Second, their illustrations fill in difficult-to-visualize portions of the diary, such as the layout of the place in which she was hiding for two years and the course of the "Final Solution" that Hitler planned for the Jews. A timeline at the end of the volume enables readers to envision all of the events of her life. Third, the reader can see Anne, her parents and sister, and all of the other people with whom she was in contact and that changes the way in which the diary is read and how she is thought of. She is portrayed as happy, sad, defiant, ill, and, again, seeing is believing. No matter how well readers may have tried to visualize her and her surroundings from her diary itself, unless they are visual artists, they are unlikely to have visualized anything like the clarity of the drawings in this graphic novel. Some editions of the *Diary* contain photos of some of the people and places involved, including of course Anne herself. Such photos are obviously irreplaceable in conveying a true vision of these people and places, but what Jacobson and Colón, basing their work in part on these photos, contribute is a convincing view of the many emotional states through which Anne and others momentarily passed, which cannot be reproduced in the available photographs.

Anne Frank's life in the annex as she hid from the Nazis and their Dutch sympathizers, worried about being struck by Allied bombs and confined as if in a prison without being able to go out, makes her diary a great testimony and probably the most-read work about the Holocaust. Beyond the striking events recounted there, Anne's amazing maturity as well as her typical teenagehood, with its brutal honesty about her parents, co-dwellers and possible boyfriend, give the diary an amazing reality. This is not a work of hype. It is the straightforward truth of what a thirteen- to fifteen-year-old girl felt as she matured under distressing conditions, rendered in very clear and thoughtful terms. Despite some eyewitness testimony, it cannot be known what Anne thought when she was in the concentration camps or how that changed her point of view. But as the testimony of a person in hiding and forced to live under difficult circumstances with seven other people, this work cannot be bettered. Anne wanted to be a writer and she possibly would have been a journalist had she survived.

So this is a difficult work to compete with in an adaptation, and even in a biographical adaptation that goes beyond the diary itself. Despite the impossibility of quite capturing all of the qualities of the original—including having all of the text available rather than the necessarily abridged narrative passages and speech bubbles in the adaptation—Jacobson and Colón have done a very good job. Their work is not simplified for children, it does not scant the Holocaust itself, and it does not try to achieve a pop-cultural sentimentality. Rather, they remain very close to the truth of the original and their work has a documentary feel to it.

It helps to know about Anne's father and mother before she was born because the reader needs some understanding of their personalities and how they came to be in business in Holland although they were born in Germany. The fact that Otto, Anne's father, served as a German officer in World War I reveals not only that many Jews were loyal German citizens but that, before the loss of WWI and the rise of Hitler, the Germans were reasonable people on the subject of Jews—no crazier than any other nation. Jacobson and Colón show that at the end of the war, Otto returned horses he had commandeered from a farmer, demonstrating Otto's positive character and morality. He and his wife both came from wealthy families and were eventually forced by the Nazis to leave Germany and to accept a much lower socioeconomic status. But they do not complain about that, which again seems to testify to the positive characters of both of Anne's parents. Jacobson and Colón, however, juxtapose Hitler's warm reception by the German crowd with Anne's loving reception by her family after her birth (15). It almost seems for a time as if the Franks could ignore the Nazis but of course

they could not ignore them forever; they probably never imagined that the country would be ruled by someone like Hitler. At first, life goes on as normal, but the threat is ever present and grows. Every few pages, signs of increasing Nazi power in Germany are revealed. Finally, after the Reichstag fire, the Franks move to Holland. The style of drawing is very realistic: the drawing of Hitler (23) looks like the widely familiar photos of Hitler, and the drawn renderings of Otto likewise look like the photos of him. The colored panels impart an almost cartoon-like sense of liveliness but also a clear sense of dangerous reality.

Otto's brothers left for America but he remained with his immediate family in Holland. Then Germany conquered Holland, and started imposing onerous anti-Jewish laws. Jacobson and Colón provide a map showing this conquest (49), and they show the countries to which Jews fled from Germany (44). This points up the usefulness of the graphic novel format and their style in particular. Everything is clearly diagrammed. When reading Anne's diary, the layout of her hiding place is not quite clear. This book makes it so. Jacobson and Colón show the main building of Otto Frank's business, and then the annex, as a cut-away illustration (51). Similarly, the illustration of the annex, where the family hid, marks the rooms in which each person lived (72) (fig. 3.3). This is information that it is very hard if not impossible to derive from the diary itself. Otto has daily lunch meetings with Christian helpers, including Miep Gies and Victor Kugler, two particularly sympathetic and helpful individuals. The supportive atmosphere of these meetings might be difficult to discern while reading Anne's diary, but it shows clearly on the people's faces in the graphic novel (79). A map shows the locations of all the concentration camps, with Bergen-Belsen, where Anne and Margot her sister died, particularly marked (126). Jacobson and Colón give careful attention to these important places and events, even depicting Anne's last days based on eyewitness testimony from friends who survived: she develops scabies and then typhus, and does not have food for days. The effect of this extra detail, going beyond the diary, is to undercut its optimism. Anne's statement from July 15, 1944, that "it's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart"<sup>6</sup> is not quoted in the graphic novel. Perhaps Jacobson and Colón felt that Anne could not still have believed that once she was interned in Bergen-Belsen. Although Jacobson and Colón do not invent any retraction of this belief on Anne's part, and wisely restrict their depiction of these last scenes to Anne's starved looks, memories of the past, and strained situation, those very details undermine any idea that she could have continued to believe that people were good. At the least, this idea is called into question. The one positive event



3.3. Sid Jacobson (writer) and Ernie Colón (artist), *Anne Frank*, 72. A diagram of the hiding places of the Frank family members demonstrates one of the strengths of the graphic novel medium.

they show is Anne and Margot celebrating St. Nicholas's Day and Hanukkah even at Bergen-Belsen, and singing Dutch songs. But there is no statement of Anne's belief then, and it cannot be known what it was, although her celebration of Hanukkah shows that she continued to identify with the Jewish people.

The graphic novel provides both more visual details and a fuller understanding of Anne's life than are available in her diary. Anne and her school friends look perfectly happy in a drawing copied directly from a photo (47). Anne's mother and father look justifiably worried while Anne goes about her happy and unaware way (48, 49). The famous photo that adorns most copies of her diary shows a smiling Anne seated at her desk with a book in front of her (64) and demonstrates how good Colón is in his use of her face to show happiness and sadness throughout the work. She is shown as thoughtful, worried, sad, and angry—just as she is at different times in the diary—and always with a good deal of fidelity to that photo. Colón must imagine how she looked from an angle, or in profile, or with a certain expression on her

face, and he does so very well and convincingly. When she is angry, she is not very pretty (98), so Colón is true to reality and has not tried to sugarcoat Anne. Only sometimes, for instance in one panel where she is crying, does he miss the mark and seem to portray Anne in a less than convincing way, because her profile does not seem to resemble her appearance in the rest of the work (111).

From the renderings, then, the reader gains a fuller understanding of Anne's circumstances and can visualize them better than from her diary alone. Anne's diary remains the basis for Jacobson and Colón's work, but in the diary's apt and honest expression, it will always be a work of writerly achievement that surpasses any adaptation, largely because of her first-person voice in the diary, which poetically captures her individuality beyond any recounting of the events that befell her; throughout, she simply has her own style, which cannot be fully duplicated in the biographic graphic novel's relatively brief excerpts and statements. In spiritual terms, Anne shows a persistence of faith and a steadfastness of belief. Why did she maintain that spirit while Miriam Katin could not do so? But, again, perhaps in Bergen-Belsen she finally lost that faith. The answer simply cannot be known. What is true, though, is that Anne continued to identify as a Jew and wished to be a writer and to do good in the world, and through her diary she has done so, perhaps more than she ever could had she lived a normal life. So perhaps God was listening to her plea after all.

Another biographical graphic novel that tells the true story of a young girl whose life was affected, like Anne Frank's (if not to the same extent) by the Nazis, has a happier ending: *Lily Renée, Escape Artist: From Holocaust Survivor to Comic Book Pioneer* by Trina Robbins (writer), Anne Timmons (illustrator), and Mo Oh (illustrator). This is the biography of a girl, Lily Renée Wilhelm, who fled Nazi-occupied Vienna to England and eventually to the United States, where she became a known comics illustrator. Robbins's story is especially suitable for teen-aged readers because it is very straightforward and clear, but adults can enjoy it, too. It is very appropriate for Robbins to tell this story, since she herself is a famous comics creator, and here she pays tribute to a predecessor, who was also a woman. In an interview with Alex Deuben, Robbins comments that "her story is so incredible. It's like a positive alternative to the Anne Frank story. Both of them are true, but this one has a happy ending and how great to tell this story. I couldn't have done this if it had a sad ending. Obviously I wouldn't have known about Lily if she had been killed, but if her parents had not survived, I don't think I would have had the heart to do this."<sup>7</sup>

The story is very well written, the visuals are clear, colorful, and striking,



3.4. Trina Robbins (writer) and Anne Timmons and Mo Oh (artists), *Lily Renée, Escape Artist*, 4. A photo of Lily Renée superimposed on a beautiful Viennese building convincingly shows her idyllic childhood in pre-Hitler Austria.

and the book makes a good point: persistence in the face of persecution and tragedy, combined with some luck and some help from others, will enable a person to survive. The first few pages are especially beautiful and striking, as the high culture of Vienna in 1938 to which Lily was exposed by her parents is illustrated—elegantly dressed women, old buildings, and the ballet. A photo of Lily as a beautiful child in a pretty dress is juxtaposed with an old building (4) and is especially effective at showing how she would have fit into the elegance of the city (fig. 3.4). But then the Nazis come, and everything changes. No matter how well dressed and sympathetic she is, Lily, like her parents, is subjected to numerous humiliations and scares. It does not matter

that her father was the head of the Holland America Line of ships, a major company. Finally she gets the chance to leave for England on the Kindertransport. She must leave her parents, which is not easy for her as a teenager, but she does manage to do so, and she lives with a friend who sponsored her. But the friend's mother is not very sympathetic, and Lily who is now almost eighteen, gets a job minding children and then another one in a hospital as a nurse's assistant. She bitterly misses her parents, but her intelligence and persistence enable her to continue, even when she, like many other European Jews who came to England at that time, is classified as an enemy alien. Throughout all this and during the Blitz, Lily's face shows her emotions very well and the faces of the other characters, including the police, are also convincingly portrayed. Panels are widened to attract attention during significant moments, and there are also whole-page spreads that show, for instance, Lily engaged in her many activities at the hospital (45).

Finally despite all difficulties, she learns that her parents, who had stayed behind in Vienna when she left for England, are safely in America, and that a Kindertransport ship will take her there, too. When she lands in New York, her parents look older. Her father works as an elevator operator even though he managed a huge ship line before the war. Her mother needs an operation because she was kicked in the stomach by a Nazi before leaving Vienna. Lily cries as she embraces her. But the operation is successful, and her father has tears running down his face (68–69). This conveys emotion very well, and the reader throughout is sympathetic to Lily and her parents.

Lily works hard in New York but still has little money. Then her mother suggests that Lily try drawing comics. She had always been a good artist, and in Vienna even had some works exhibited. She gets a job in the comics industry and eventually illustrates comics about female pilots and spies who fight the Nazis. She is best known for *Señorita Rio*, a counterspy fighting Nazis in South America. Lily loves drawing her high-end clothes, as well as fighting the Nazis vicariously. In an interview with Alex Deuben, Robins comments that

One thing that I have always found is that you can tell the difference between a man's and a woman's comics by the detail in the clothes. Lily's characters have great clothes. "*Señorita Rio*" has a fabulous wardrobe. A lot of guys, when they draw comics—well, nowadays they give women tiny little ridiculous outfits, but in the '40s they would tend to give the women your basic feature-less, knee-length, red dresses. They didn't have an eye for fashion. Not always, of course, but very often you can tell when something is by a woman by the details and the eye for

clothes. Lily had this great sense of style. It's been commented to me that there's a lot of Viennese expressionism in her work. I see hints of Egon Schiele. There's a hint of that kind of expressionism in her work, especially in the "The Werewolf Hunter," which is her most moodiest and design-iest and most expressionist work.<sup>8</sup>

In the end she gave up comics drawing in 1949 but created textile designs and jewelry and even wrote children's stories and plays, in addition to getting married and raising a family. It's an inspiring story, and well supported by appendices showing photos of Lily and her parents as well as historical notes on political events and on comics characters who were women fighting in World War II. Lily and her parents do not comment on religion, but they are disturbed when the Nazis burn their synagogue in Vienna, and Lily seems to display a faith that somehow she will survive, despite all discouragement. So, while Trina Robbins cannot be said to emphasize religion, she does show a strong sense of Jewish identity in Lily, and she does seem to allude to the importance of faith, if only faith in oneself. This is an important book for younger readers, and even older ones will enjoy it. It does not have the depth or complexity of Anne Frank's diary, but it presents a parallel true story of a young girl forced to deal with one of the worst horrors the world has known, the Nazis.

Because of the reference to younger readers, I will briefly mention here a book for even younger readers even though it is not a graphic novel per se: award-winning playwright Tony Kushner and writer and illustrator Maurice Sendak's children's book adaptation of the 1938 opera *Brundibar*. The music for this opera was written by Jewish composer Hans Krása, who died in Auschwitz. The opera was staged fifty-five times at the Theresienstadt concentration camp, and the children who performed it were subsequently sent to die in Auschwitz. Strictly speaking, Kushner and Sendak's work is an illustrated book rather than a graphic novel. However, although there are no gutters between panels here, as there are in most children's books, each page may be considered a panel in itself. Essentially the book, which is beautifully illustrated and well written, tells the story of two children who are sent to the market to get some milk for their ailing mother but have to confront the wicked, Hitler-look-alike organ-grinder Brundibar (meaning "bumblebee" in Czech), who tries to steal their money. The book, unlike the opera, includes the infamous sign "Arbeit Macht Frei" under a staircase and Star of David armbands on many people in the marketplace, as well as on the doctor who treats the children's mother. The children, helped by many people and animals, defeat Brundibar, get their money back, and are able to buy

milk for their mother, singing, “Tyrants come along, but just you wait and see! They topple one-two-three.” But the last page of the book ends with a chilling, sarcastic, and prophetic note from Brundibar stating that “though I go, I won’t go far. . . . I’ll be back. Love, Brundibar.” Kushner and Sendak have composed a “semigraphic” novel (as it were) for contemporary American children, most of whom (fortunately for them) will see this only as a story of some children fighting against a wicked organ-grinder and will not understand its allusions to the Holocaust. But the adults who read it will understand these allusions and then will have to decide whether or not they should explain them to their children.

Joe Kubert is a distinguished American comics creator whose work was honored with a lifetime achievement award and a show at the Israel Cartoon Museum in 2011.<sup>9</sup> His *Yossel, April 29, 1943* is an entirely fictional tale about a boy in the Warsaw Ghetto. Unlike the other four Holocaust graphic novels discussed here so far, it is not a true memoir or biography, although it takes the form of a memoir, with Yossel narrating it. But it could have been true; for instance, the date April 29, 1943, is ten days after the uprising of the Jews against the Nazis began. As the cliché goes, there is fiction in all autobiography and autobiography in all fiction. Moreover, as Brad Prager has remarked, this is a form of “allohistory,” or imagined history, in which Joe Kubert, who escaped the camps and therefore escaped an inked, tattooed number on his arm, uses his ink to imagine what it would have been like if he had been caught.<sup>10</sup> But, according to Prager, the ink drawings are not entirely clear, because Kubert was not there, in the Warsaw Ghetto, and therefore is imagining the settings and characters. Kubert points out in his introduction to *Yossel* that if his parents had not come to America, he could well have ended up in Yossel’s situation—hunted by the Nazis, living in sewers in the Warsaw Ghetto. Kubert also recalls that his parents always called him Yossel rather than Joe.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Kubert, an outstanding comics artist, began working in comics at the age of eleven—around the same age as the Yossel in the story. Therefore, he is well suited to create a young character who draws and whose models are those American comics to which his character has access in Poland of the late 1930s, much as Kubert had access to them in America then. It is ironic to think that the American Jews Shuster and Siegel invented Superman in part as an imaginative answer to the rise of Hitler, while here the young artist Yossel can draw Superman-like figures but must make them Nazis, since he is forced to draw flattering portraits for the Nazi secret police.

One aesthetic puzzle for the reader, however, is that Yossel does not emerge alive, and yet he tells his story in the present. This work doesn’t seem

to be structured as a diary, and his last moments are recounted as he dies, so in reality he could not have transmitted this memoir and the reader must suspend disbelief to imagine the story. Why Kubert chose not to make it into a memoir that is found after the action, or even a diary that is being written as the events are taking place and is then found later, is not clear. Perhaps this is another autobiographical feature tying Kubert to Yossel—Kubert identifies so fully with Yossel that he felt he was experiencing these events as he drew and narrated them, and he has put the reader directly into Yossel's mind and thoughts. Also, the advantage of this type of narration is that seeing the story as it happens as if watching a film, allows the drawings and the events narrated to bring the reader into the story with a striking immediacy, and perhaps that is what Kubert had in mind when he did not make it a written memoir or diary.

Yossel's family is sent from his small village to the Polish capital Warsaw and from there to the camps. He alone is allowed to remain in Warsaw because of his drawings, which the Nazis like. They love to see themselves portrayed as supermen (94), and Yossel draws them as such whenever he goes to the secret police headquarters, just to stay alive. The Nazi soldiers give him bread as well as drawing supplies. But in reality he is part of a resistance group, led by one Mordecai, undoubtedly named for Mordechai Anielewicz, who was in fact the major resistance leader in the ghetto. Yossel and his resistance group listen in shock to Yossel's former rabbi who has escaped from a death camp and tells the group what goes on there and what awaits anyone from the ghetto who is sent there. The group plans and mounts resistance, although the odds for success are minimal.

Over and above the story of the resistance, both Kubert's religious statement and his insight into the development of a young artist make this work particularly striking and unusual. The pencil drawings and their placement on the pages are very striking. These drawings, including the drawings of Yossel himself, could have been by Yossel, and here again are signs that Kubert considers himself a potential Yossel whose parents luckily made it to America on their second try. Yossel develops as a boy in a small town. He is lively and mischievous—and gets in trouble for drawing a caricature of his rabbi (11)—the same rabbi who will reappear in the ghetto to tell the horrifying story of the death camps. While impressionistically and vaguely drawn, the drawings are still precise in many ways. They give the reader a sense of a face but also more than that. The reader sees fear, bewilderment, superiority in the faces of the victims and the Nazis, and yet each face, whether of Yossel's father or mother, or Mordecai, retains its unique characteristics. Most of all, the drawings give an unrelieved sense of the Jews'

pain and difficulty, since they lack color and also seem to have been drawn hastily as if under the pressure that Yossel has to contend with. In the interview on YouTube, Kubert says that the drawings were meant to convey the idea that the artist is seeing the scenes depicted happening in front of him.

The scenes of greatest horror, however, are recounted indirectly. The Auschwitz scenes are reported by Yossel's former rabbi, who escaped and now relates them to the resistance group in the ghetto (39–73). The crematoria are seen from a distance (61), but on the facing page (62) are the saddened faces of the rabbi and other Sonderkommandos, whose job it was to cremate the dead bodies, and their faces are more horrifying than the crematoria themselves. A beating is shown vaguely (43). Kubert, while dealing with horrors, has not exploited them beyond what is necessary for the telling of his story. But everything that transpires is understood all too well, and the vagueness—like Robert Louis Stevenson keeping Mr. Hyde's face vague in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—may have the effect on the reader of making the horrors all the stronger.

Throughout this work, the difficulties and hardships facing Yossel grow and grow. At first even the Nazis have some appearance of humanity, while treacherously telling the lie that the Jews must relocate for their own good, rather than simply expelling them (14). But the conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto—twelve people in a room, people dying in the street, orphans with no one to help them—soon become clear. Before long, Yossel's family is deported from even the squalid conditions of the ghetto to a camp (the camp is not named, but most Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto were sent to Treblinka). While he undergoes the pain of separation from his family, he lives with a resistance group but never betrays them.

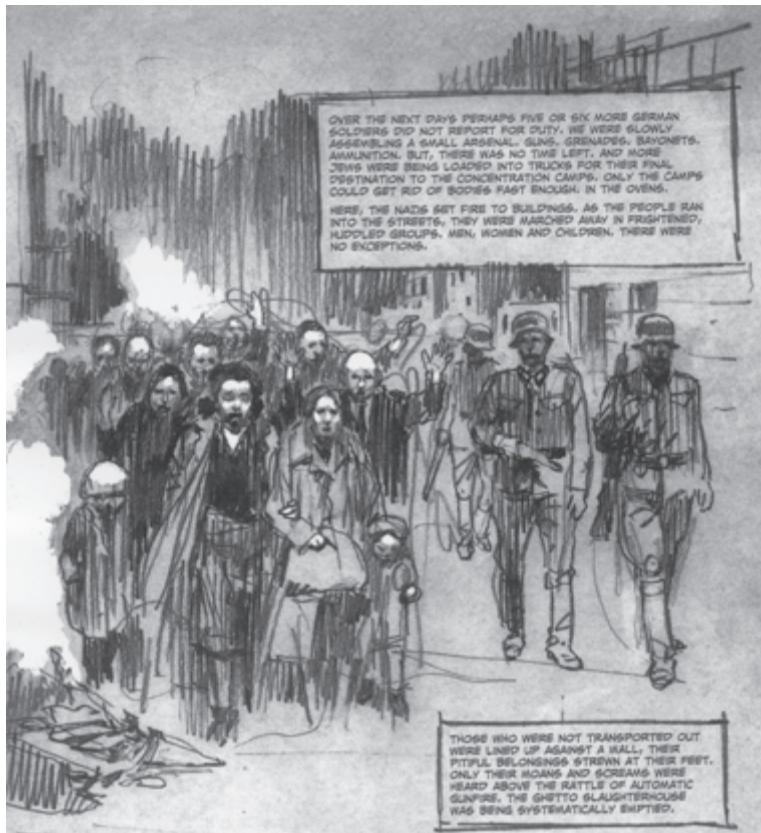
Then Yossel stumbles upon an old man who he brings back to the group. This turns out to be his rabbi, who as noted earlier, narrates the horrors of the death camp where he had been interned and from which he has escaped. He was determined to survive despite being emotionally shattered; he had been given some of the most odious tasks, such as shepherding people into gas chambers and then disposing of the bodies afterward. Kubert shows his shock and horror when the rabbi witnesses atrocities (59, 62). Then, however, he reveals the rabbi's determination as he prepares to escape. This, the rabbi manages to do, and he is therefore able to relate the tale to Yossel and the group. But the most telling moment comes when he asks Yossel if he recognizes him and Yossel is amazed that he is the rabbi who he once caricatured. Of course, his beard has been shaved off, but his face is also transformed by suffering. The most pointed moment in this story with regard to religion comes when in response to Yossel's disbelieving “You? The rebbe?”

the rabbi responds, "Rebbe no more. No more Torah. N-no more teaching. I have seen things . . . d-done things. I have learned there is no God" (72). Earlier, the rabbi had also said, "There was no God" (46). Coming from the mouth of a rabbi, this is a particularly powerful statement, and Kubert does nothing to contradict it in the course of the narrative. No one answers the rabbi, and in the end he is caught and hanged.

Yossel himself goes on to take part in resistance training. When the group knows that the Germans intend to liquidate the ghetto, they begin resistance. Yossel leaves two armed grenades in the Nazi police headquarters and walks out before they explode. But Yossel and his group are finally eliminated by Nazi soldiers with flamethrowers (120). Yossel feels no pain. But at the very end, his last piece of paper is thrown away by a Nazi officer. So nothing comes of Yossel's drawing talent as he is eliminated like the rest of his family.

In drawing this work, Kubert has used photos as well as his own imagination. He draws a widely published photo of a group of Jews marching out of the ghetto with Nazi soldiers at their sides (90) (fig. 3.5). Mordecai Anielewicz's last letter is dated April 23, 1943, and the book is entitled *Yossel April 19, 1943*, the day the uprising broke out. In Kubert's work, Mordecai appears religious, always wearing a black, Hasidic-style hat. He is not particularly handsome, but he is always determined (84), and he always seems to have an idea of what to do, even in the worst circumstances. Kubert's Mordecai is considerably older than Anielewicz was. And Anielewicz was a member of Hashomer Hatzair (the leftist Zionist movement), and therefore he was presumably not a very religious person. So Kubert has transformed Anielewicz into a believer in Judaism. Is Kubert deliberately contrasting the rabbi who denies God with Mordecai, who does not comment on that but seems to remain dressed religiously in order to show that religious ideas can indeed provide strength in adversity and produce leaders? Mordecai dies fighting and at least takes some Nazis with him.

It might be said that Kubert's real religion is art. That is what sustains Yossel and that is what gives him a special status among both the Jews and the Nazis. Moreover, American superheroes are glorified in the book, and their strength to provide inspiration and sustenance to Yossel is highlighted. As Christopher Knowles and Joseph Linsner would have it in the title of their book, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, Kubert has uniquely turned to the American gods to help the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto through Yossel's drawings. Kubert has written a superhero story about the resistance heroes Yossel and Mordecai much like Yossel's own drawings showing superheroes who could overcome the Nazi supermen (19), and in Yossel's and Mordecai's



3.5. Joe Kubert, *Yossel*, 90. Kubert's rendition of the famous photo showing Nazis forcing Jews out of the Warsaw Ghetto.

and the superheroes' failures to do so lie much of the power of this work. But there is also a historical irony here: according to Arie Kaplan, Shuster and Siegel, who created Superman, based this name on Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, which was adopted by the Nazis as a model for their own ideology of superiority.<sup>12</sup> So the American superheroes who give Yossel special status and inspire him were based on an ideology that also inspired the Nazis. And there is of course even more irony, of which Kubert was undoubtedly aware: in a 1998 Superman comic book by Louise Simonson and John Bogdanove, Superman actually intervenes to save the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto. The idea that Shuster and Siegel's creation, which has much of the Golem in him, as Kaplan and Larry Tye point out, fails in the end to help Yossel makes the story even sadder than it perhaps already is. It should also be noted that Ku-

bert himself, along with Robert Kanigher, wrote many Sgt. Rock stories in which various American heroes battled the Nazis.

The graphic novels by Lemelman, Katin, Jacobson/Colón, Robbins/Timmons/Oh, and Kubert are all about past events. Those that I will now discuss, beginning with the work of Pascal Croci, are about bringing the Holocaust into contact with the events of the present. They show the Holocaust's lessons for the present time. Pascal Croci is a non-Jewish French editorial illustrator, also known for his adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, whose fictional *Auschwitz* is inspired by the films *Schindler's List* and *Shoah* and is based on interviews with survivors. It took five years to complete. But his relationship to the Holocaust is less personal than Kubert's and he has drawn more of a philosophical and religious lesson from it. His haunting drawings feature "huge, desperate eyes" because they show "Unbearable fear" according to Croci, an interview with whom ends the book. A horrific drawing shows a room full of gassed bodies (44), and such scenes are repeated in more of Croci's intense, black-and-white drawings (48, 49). But this story of a couple who lost their daughter in Auschwitz and then fall prey, many years later, to the violence in the former Yugoslavia, brings the story of the Holocaust right into the present. The couple does not tell each other their full experiences until a short time before they are caught and executed in the Yugoslavian conflict. The narration begins with discussion between the husband and wife and then moves directly to what happened at Auschwitz to them and to their daughter; the story is a memoir in that it is based on their eyewitness testimony and remembrance of events. So the Yugoslavian civil war and the Holocaust are brought into contact in this work and the lessons seem the same: human groups just do not get along; they hate. So for Croci identity with a group or religion is not good and stands in the way of human relationships.

Croci has declared that for him the gas chambers are the worst of all the atrocities committed by the Nazis, and perhaps the most shocking narrative moment in his book is his description of people dying in the gas chambers and then his illustration of the remaining dead bodies, which look as if they are between dead and living because they have so recently been killed (44) (fig. 3.6). The story is very shocking as it shows Kazik, the protagonist, working as a Sonderkommando, or a prisoner who puts the bodies into the crematoria, and finding his daughter alive among the gassed bodies but then losing her when the Nazis take her and do not tell him what they will do with her. His wife, Cessia, fills in the mystery of what happened to Ann, their daughter, who it turns out died of typhus just two days before the Russians arrived at the camp.



3.6. Pascal Croci, *Auschwitz, 44*. Croci's drawing of the faces of gassed people adds intensity to an already horrific scene.

It is here, toward the end of the work, that Croci has the characters state the points that he has wanted to make. Ann is standing before the gas chamber destroyed by the Nazis as they flee the Russian advance. She says the prayer for the dead in Hebrew but adds, "This is the place where I died" (60), making it clear that she is praying for herself, and that she can never return fully to the land of the sane and normal because of her experiences. Her mother says that "we shall bear witness" but Ann answers, "But who is

going to believe us?" (61). Then she says, "Thank you, God, for having made us your chosen people! But please, couldn't you have chosen someone else?" Her mother angrily comments that "blaspheming won't help!" Ann asks her mother, "What is it that makes them act this way?", and her mother answers, "Hatred." Ann asks, "Couldn't we just hate each other in peace?" (63). A fellow survivor, Clara, who accompanies them as they walk around the deserted camp, says, "And just use words for weapons. . . . The little one is right." To which Ann's mother answers: "That's the utopian dream of an adolescent who's run out of arguments. Violence will always reign supreme." She goes on to say that "love one another" is more of a Christian ideal than a Jewish one (64) but continues, "Who can accept his neighbor wholeheartedly, without difference, without suspicion? We can't be infallible. And in extreme times like this, problems are always solved in the same way! Through silence or violence." When asked "but where does this hatred come from?" Cessia answers, "From our frustrations."

The talk moves to Hitler, and Clara comments that "all human beings started off as children, and no child is born a tyrant . . ." (65). So groups will never stop hating one another and teaching hatred to their children, but idealists hope that people might somehow learn to live together without actually killing one another. In answer to the interviewer's question about a philosophical message in the appendix to the work, Croci responds that "the persecution of the Jewish people throughout history has led me to think about religion. Christianity teaches people to 'Love one another.' In my opinion, this is a delusion! To avoid another Auschwitz, we have to face up to the contradictions at the heart of human nature. It isn't utopian to think that we can 'hate each other in peace.' When I make Ann say this, the words are not hers but mine" (77). However, the end of the story, showing Kazik and Cessia executed in Bosnia in 1993, almost half a century after the Holocaust, demonstrates that despite Croci's personal hopes the killing never ceases and that groups will not learn to live in peace with one another. And although Cessia believes in God, as her comment about blasphemy to Ann informs the reader, this is a God who seems absent from our affairs. Croci states in his interview that "my story tells of the power religion has to separate people. Members of each side think they own the truth, and they want to convince the other side that they are right—that is what is so dangerous!" (77). And his view of humanity and of God's failure to help people move away from violent tendencies, therefore seems just as pessimistic as Miriam Katin's stated views. Clearly, he is at one extreme end of the identity spectrum in thinking that identity, whether religious or ethnic, is not good and that humanity will remain tribal in its hate because of it.

From Spiegelman's assertion of a supernatural element in Vladek's survival, to Lemelman's faith amid doubts to Katin's doubts, to Anne Frank's definite faith (at least until she was in Bergen-Belsen), to Robbins's assertion of belief in oneself and the possibility of survival despite all difficulties, to Kubert's rabbi's loss of faith versus the reassertion of faith via Mordecai and to Croci's hopes for mankind contradicted by mankind's actions and group hatred, the writers of these Holocaust narratives have attempted to confront the greatest tragedy the Jews have known in recent times and to draw conclusions from it. The full spectrum from faith to atheism and from group identity to denial that group identity is good is on display here, and the power of each of these works convinces the reader, at least while he or she is reading them, of the validity of each author's point of view.

Beyond these memoirs and fictional memoirs, the Holocaust continues to reverberate in the contemporary world of the graphic novel and to serve as a metaphor for events in the present. Yirmi Pinkus is a member of the Israeli Actus Tragicus comics group. His "Black Milk" in *Cargo*—an innovative joint publication (edited by Tom Dinter and others), which includes Israeli and German graphic artists and shows the German view of contemporary Israel and the Israeli view of contemporary Germany—is a graphic adaptation of an abridgement of Romanian Holocaust survivor Paul Celan's great poem, "Todesfuge" (Death Fugue), about the death camps (Pinkus uses a translation by John Felstiner). Celan, who later committed suicide, begins his poem:

Black milk of daybreak  
we drink it at evening  
we drink it at midday and morning  
we drink it at night  
we drink and we drink

But instead of a concentration camp, the background in "Black Milk" is a present-day guesthouse in the Black Forest in Germany, and the owner of the guest house takes good care of Pinkus as he has his breakfast, which probably includes milk. The style is casually drawn, cartoony rather than realistic, and not at all horrible or worrisome. The poem (and the graphic adaptation) continues:

we shovel a grave in the air  
there you won't lie too cramped

And Pinkus gives a view of the fields and woods from his window, all very simple and peaceful, with a small animal eating. The poem continues:

A man lives in the house  
he plays with his vipers he writes  
he writes when it grows dark to Deutschland

And Pinkus shows his pleasant guest house and comments that he loves his “Zimmer,” or room, as he shows the shadow of a man in a room, presumably himself, possibly writing. It becomes clear that he is putting together the horrible past of the death camps, memorialized in the poem, with the very positive present, in which he enjoys being in Germany. But he cannot forget the past or get it out of his head, even as he is enjoying himself.

The poem continues “your golden hair Margarete,” and Pinkus’s panel shows a pretty girl with the caption “On the 29th of April, the Bild newspaper published a list of the 50 most beautiful people in Germany. Model Heidi Klum only rated fifth place.” The mundane contemporary world of celebrity and physical beauty here contrasts with Celan’s invocation of the Nazis’ ideologically approved blondness as a contrast with the dark hair of Jewish victimhood, but as always in this story Pinkus does not bring this out in his panel at all. He leaves it to the reader to make the connection. Similarly, the line “your aschenes Haar Shulamith” appears when he mentions his own mother and meets the Israeli and fellow Actus Tragicus group member graphic novelist Rutu Modan—the creator of *Exit Wounds*, which is analyzed in another chapter in this book—somewhere in Germany. The mixture of English and German makes the translation more authentic sounding. The dark-haired Jewish women are contrasted with the golden-haired present-day German women but not to anyone’s detriment, unless one contrasts the past and the present and understands that Shulamith’s hair in the poem is ashen because she has been gassed and cremated. “Aschenputtel” is the German title of “Cinderella,” and the ashen-haired Shulamith of Celan’s poem is also implicitly contrasted here with the fairy-tale Cinderella, who slept near cinders because of her wicked stepmother but who at the end of the story was happily married to a prince. Unlike Cinderella, there was no happy ending for Celan’s Shulamith, whose hair turned to cinders.

The graphic novel’s short story continues in a sad and yet sweet vein with Pinkus himself in the position of or on the side of the victim but without his being at all victimized. Rather, he is clearly enjoying his stay in Germany. At the end of the story, to the line “your golden hair Margarete,” a little girl

comes over to listen to Pinkus play the harmonica as he sits on a bench. Earlier, a line from Celan's poem, referring to the Nazi overlord, "He shouts play death more sweetly," appears in a panel; what does not appear in any panel is an earlier line from the poem, "he shouts . . . you others sing up and play / . . . play for the dancing." Pinkus is not "playing death," or death-like tunes, but amusing himself, and the little girl likes his music and asks him to play more when he stops. She is being compared to the Nazi asking the Jew to play but obviously everything is completely different and more innocent now. She has no idea of the sordid past, although he does. Also, to the line "he looses his hounds on us," Pinkus has a panel showing a little pug dog on a leash, probably held by the mother of the little girl. It starts drizzling, and rain closes the story, with the famous statue of a golden deer in the park, the Volkspark Schoeneberg, in the last panel—which may symbolize the older Germany, before the Nazis, or simply nature itself and the way in which the natural world prevails in the end. Yet the rain could be black milk, covering the deer, rendered in black-and-white drawing, as the older Germany is in effect covered by the black milk of the Nazis and the present cannot escape the memory of the black milk. Pinkus's work is a casual-seeming yet poignant testimony to the way in which the Jewish-German past, while passing away, cannot be erased even by pleasant circumstances in the present.

A second story in *Cargo*, by Guy Morad, a member of the Dimona, Israel, comics group, does not confront the Holocaust directly but references it at important moments in his "Memories," in which the present is suddenly and unexpectedly brought into juxtaposition with his historical knowledge of the Holocaust, showing how this catastrophic event is ever present in the minds of Jews, even when their thoughts are focused elsewhere.

The story begins with the unnamed Israeli protagonist lamenting his estrangement from his Israeli girlfriend, with whom he planned to go to a concert in Berlin. He boards a plane, commenting that he "can't believe" that he is going to Berlin without her. In Berlin, he goes to the hotel room that he had reserved for them both and sleeps alone in a double bed. Soon he begins sightseeing, starting with the zoo. But that is no diversion from his feelings of loss because a previously unknown couple asks him to take their picture and he sees them happily together in the camera's window, which clearly reminds him of a photo of himself and his former girlfriend. This is melancholy, but a more ominous note creeps in when the protagonist sees a stone on the sidewalk that is dedicated to a Jewish woman who died in Auschwitz.

He sets out for the concert on the subway but inadvertently leaves his bag on the train when he gets off at Alexanderplatz, the station near the concert venue. Told he cannot try to reclaim it until tomorrow, he is sitting deject-

edly on a fountain bench when a girl asks him for a cigarette. He decides to go with her to a party to which she invites him rather than to attend the concert for which he came to Berlin. It turns out that the girl is Turkish and that she and her parents first came to West Berlin in the 1970s and then moved to East Berlin when her father became a Communist but then were able to move back to the West when the Berlin wall came down. The party, it turns out, is a birthday party for a former boyfriend with whom she had gone out for a few years, just as Itay, the protagonist, had with his former girlfriend. As they leave the party and ride together to a lake on the train, Itay sees factory smokestacks spewing and he grows silent, leading the girl to ask if he is okay. Again the Holocaust overshadows the present, even when he is with this new girl who makes him happy. He does not tell her what is bothering him but to the reader it is clear.

When they arrive at their destination, the girl shows him her name—Sofie—that she carved on a tree there when she was younger. Again the theme of memory is struck. He adds something to the carving. Then they kiss. As they leave hand in hand, he has added his name to Sofie's so it is clear that they are now a pair. Here Morad shows that good things can come out of a troubled past. Just as Itay and Sofie can be friends and he and she get over their former relationships, so his trip to Germany, which began badly, is ending well. The message seems to be that Jews and Germans—including Muslim Germans—can be friends, and that good things can happen now. Itay remembers the horrible German past but Sofie and her parents, as Turks, had nothing to do with it. As in Pinkus's piece, the past is not forgotten but it does not keep positive events from blossoming in the present. Morad's style is very straightforward, with equal-sized rectangular panels almost throughout, and a shadowy drawing style allows detail to show through, including changes in Itay's face from troubled to peaceful. Belief in a new relationship replaces despair and doubt. This piece ends the *Cargo* collection, which undoubtedly draws its name from the cargo that Jewish-German relationships must always carry.

Another adaptation of the Holocaust to present-day concerns, albeit far removed from Germany itself, is on display in the work of Trina Robbins and Sharon Rudahl, both of whom are pioneers in underground comics of the 1960s and 1970s. They have adapted Hirsch Glik's (1922–44) "Zog Nit Keyn Mol" (Never say that you have reached the final road), the partisan's song from the Vilna Ghetto, to the graphic novel format and have applied it to American leftist political demonstrations.<sup>13</sup> Both Robbins and Rudahl are "Red diaper" types, committed to left-wing causes, and this shows up here. In an interview with Rabbi Adam Grossman, Robbins commented that "I

will always be culturally Jewish, and I will always be Jewish as long as a son of a bitch wants to stick me in the oven.”<sup>14</sup> They follow in the tradition of the Vilna and Warsaw Ghetto partisans, in that those partisans were affiliated with a left-wing Jewish Socialist movement, the Bund. In their work, a woman stops by her grandmother’s house to leave her books and looks at a sign for a rally “For Jobs and Freedom” and another sign urging the “US out of Central America” as she goes into the building. As she speaks to her grandmother, family pictures can be seen, including a couple in Palestine (obvious from the camel) and from Europe (obvious from the clothes and building outlines). The grandmother was herself a Holocaust survivor. The protagonist hugs her grandmother when the grandmother cuts her finger, thereby mirroring a line from the partisans’ song: “And wherever falls a droplet of our blood, there our courage and our strength will surely sprout,”<sup>15</sup> which is juxtaposed with the panel showing that event. The girl comforts her grandmother and then says that she promised her friends to go to the demonstration. The grandmother waves goodbye from a window as the girl joins her friends, signs in hand, with the line “A people sang this song in burning, war-torn lands, and we will sing it now with weapons in our hands!” appearing below the panel in which this is shown. The implication is that the Jewish partisans’ spirit is alive today among the Jewish-American Left but whether the partisans would have liked this implication is open to question. Whether the mixture of the Holocaust with a contemporary demonstration against America, the country that defeated Nazi Germany and that has given the Jews a freedom that they have rarely possessed in other places, is truly suitable or appropriate must be left to the political convictions of each reader. Also, whether or not the barbarism of the Nazis can be compared to America’s role in fighting the Sandinistas again must be left to the political convictions of the reader. But Robbins and Rudahl’s short feature shows the application of the Holocaust to a contemporary political theme.

The feature is written and inked by Robbins, and penciled by Rudahl. The style that they have chosen is very simple. It is not very precise in its portrayal of faces but one can make out a Jewish store where kosher meat is sold and then a Jewish bookstore where the sign about the demonstration is on the window. The heroine’s grandmother speaks in broken Yiddish-accented English, and pictures of family members in Europe and in Israel are on the table, along with Jewish ritual objects, including a memorial or Yarzheit candle. The closest view is in the next-to-the-last panel, in which one of her friends calls to the heroine, and for the first time they both look very pretty. The grandmother, in waving goodbye to the girl on her way to the demonstration, shows a tattoo on her arm. The panels are for the most part rectan-

gular, but there is one circular one, and one cut at an angle. There are a lot of words in and around all the panels. The piece has an older-style newspaper feel to it, which was probably thought by the artists to represent the grandmother's world and which is also used to represent the world of the present demonstration, which will be reported in the newspapers. So it has an old-new accent to it.

Robbins and Rudahl's work, like *Wimmen's Comix* in which it first appeared, is clearly restricted to an educated, left-wing audience interested in political demonstrations. A place where the Holocaust and the broader American popular culture come together in a very powerful way is Greg Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico's *X-Men: Magneto Testament*, which attempts to explain the origins of Magneto. Magneto is a major figure in the *X-Men* series, which was originally conceived of by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, both major comics creators and both Jews. The *X-Men* are an international group of mutants whose unusual powers sometimes put them at odds with ordinary humans. In fact, one group of disaffected mutants—the result of a special gene caused by the atomic age—wants to destroy the human race, although the others do not; the mutants who wish to destroy are treated as outcasts. (Here as with Superman, one sees the outsider theme strongly referenced by the Jewish creators, with the mutants occupying the position of the Jews.) Cheryl Malcolm carefully traces all the Jewish implications of the mutants, which have been inherent since the beginning of the series.<sup>16</sup> She pays particular attention to Magneto, who was conceived of by Chris Claremont, a British-born artist and writer whose mother is Jewish, and who was deeply influenced by his work on a kibbutz at which he saw the film *Judgment at Nuremberg*, which moved him deeply. When he came back to the United States, he got a job working on and then supervising the production of the *X-Men* series of comic books. In April 1977, Claremont produced a backstory about the character Magneto, which makes clear that he is not only a Jew but a Holocaust survivor.<sup>17</sup> This backstory explains Magneto often being at odds with the human race (as in the 2011 film *X-Men: First Class*), because he is committed to save his group—in this case, the mutants—from annihilation and is motivated by the epigram “never again.” And according to Claremont himself,<sup>18</sup> Menachem Begin, who began his career as a terrorist against the British occupation of Palestine and ended it with the Nobel Peace Prize because of his peace treaty with Egypt when he was prime minister of Israel, is the model for Magneto’s complex psyche. In one story in the *X-Men* series, Magneto meets fellow mutant Professor X while working at a hospital in Israel helping Holocaust survivors; and Magneto also serves in another story as a double agent for the CIA and the Mossad. Claremont also introduced

the character Kitty Pryde (in *X-Men* 129, 1980), shortened from Prydeman, who is an American Jew who can walk through walls (and whose name is a possible inspiration for the title of Robert Heinlein's 1985 sci-fi novel *The Cat Who Walks through Walls*). Kitty overtly celebrates Jewish holidays and reflects on her Jewishness. And as Cheryl Malcolm writes about the X-Men as a whole, "By eluding easy classification, mutants resemble Jews. Looking like anyone else, yet perceived as different, they are similarly misunderstood. They experience only provisional acceptance and a precarious sense of belonging. The language of those who persecute them is similar to Nazi rhetoric against Jews. The link is made throughout the comic books" (136).

While these inferences about the mutants mark their situation as similar to that of the Jews, at least by implication, Magneto, as a Holocaust survivor, makes these inferences very concrete. Pak and Di Giandomenico's 2009 graphic novel reveals for the first time Magneto's real name, Max Eisenhardt, family history, and full Holocaust experience. It concentrates solely on Max's history during the Holocaust, with no mention of his later association with the mutants. Therefore, their rendition can be treated as a stand-alone work, the powerful story of a boy—albeit one with exceptional intelligence and skill, if not yet an awareness of his supernatural powers—in the Holocaust. But because this is part of the X-Men series that deals with present events, the presence of Magneto throughout reminds the reader of the connection between Magneto's past and his present.

There is no supernaturalism or superman prowess in Pak and Di Giandomenico's rendition because Max was not yet aware of his power (he is like a magnet and can bend and attract metal). He is forced to be a Sonderkommando, responsible for burning dead bodies in the crematoria, making him a slave laborer forced to perform the most gruesome and humiliating tasks. Given this lack of supernaturalism, Pak and Di Giandomenico's work treats both Max and the Holocaust so realistically and at a sufficiently high emotional level that it can be called an historical graphic novel rather than a work of popular culture. It is not profound, but it is moving and intelligently done, and demands thought and the willingness to absorb historical fact on the part of the reader. The audience is also as wide as the audience for the X-Men is.

As Pak explains in his afterword to this work, Magneto's origins had never before been quite clear, although the idea that he was Jewish was always present. Although neither Pak nor Di Giandomenico appears to be Jewish, they have put together a very powerful and indeed emotionally compelling work that transcends the usual formulaic popular culture fiction. The work could easily be used in the classroom to help document the Holo-

caust. Not only does the work have footnotes but it also includes a final feature about an artist who worked in the concentration camps, as well as a fine teacher's guide by Brian Kelley. These features help bring this work into the present. If anything, this volume is concrete proof that the Holocaust has become part of the artistic consciousness and that it has affected not only Jewish artists and readers.

Di Giandomenico's panels include many facial close-ups, and these have the effect of bringing the reader into the story. It is difficult to ignore a worried face staring at you from the page. And as the story is told of the tightening of the restrictions on Magneto's—or Max Eisenhardt's—family, the coloring in the background of the panels seems to grow progressively darker. Indeed, even in the beginning of the tale there are not many bright, cheerful colors. His skill in delineating facial features, clothes, shadows, and backgrounds is usually very clear, but sometimes the darkness overshadows the faces and one cannot distinguish between the characters clearly enough, which causes momentary confusion in following the thread of the story. There are many different visual angles (equivalent to camera angles in a movie), so the reader is sometimes positioned above the action or on a level with it or witnessing events from a corner.

The story is tightly written and maintains the reader's interest, and the dialogue is clipped and short rather than lyrical. Pak, who studied at Yale, Oxford, and the NYU film program, has gone out of his way to ensure the accuracy of the story, including special thanks to Mark Weitzman of the Wiesenthal Center for his help with details. And indeed every chapter is footnoted extensively, and every reference is backed up by fact.

In parts One and Two, the Eisenhardt family is introduced, including Max's father Jakob, mother Edie, sister Ruthie, and uncle Erich. Max suffers at school despite his excellent grades and the help of a teacher named Kalb, and even when he excels in sports, his award is taken away from him. He is unjustly accused of cheating and expelled from school, since a Jew should not be able to beat Aryans. Soon the other students turn on him, and he gets into many fights. Already Magneto's exceptional qualities are clear when he can see better than anyone else, think very well, and outperform the other students at the javelin throw. But the noose continues to tighten. His uncle is beaten for consorting with non-Jewish women, and a man whose life his father had saved when they were in the army together is powerless to help him even though he now has a government job, which his father had too before he was kicked out of it by the Nazis. The man's reaction shows that he is reluctantly going along with the Nazis and has no choice. This is also a major theme of the excellent novel *Alone in Berlin* (1947) by Hans Fal-

lada, which shows that not every German was an enthusiastic Nazi. However, the happy faces and raised hands at the Nazi rally are all very ominous despite the party-like atmosphere surrounding this event. The bombing of the family's synagogue and Kristallnacht, the night of the torching of synagogues and breaking of windows in Jewish businesses and houses, prove the final outrages. These panels are very dramatically done, as the reader witnesses the family's fear and the brutality of the Nazis attacking other families. The one bright spot in this entire picture seems to be Max's attraction to the Gypsy girl Magda, who reciprocates his interest. The drawing of her face as she witnesses his triumph with the javelin, as well as the headmaster's angry face caused by that success, are powerfully portrayed. Di Giandomenico especially emphasizes eyes—either the wide-open eyes belonging to the witnesses to the Nazis' brutality or the eyes full of viciousness in the Nazis' faces. Max gives her a piece of jewelry he has made, another testament to his superior talent in many areas. The father does not want to leave Germany, but the family nonetheless plans to go to Poland to be with relatives. In all this is a somber chapter, with ugly and worried faces dominating.

In part Three, the Nazis invade Poland, and Max and his family are forced to run for their lives. Making another mistake, the father decides they should go to Warsaw, and there they face the agonies of the Warsaw Ghetto, which Kubert's work showed, too. Here, however, Di Giandomenico's color gives a sense of realism to *Magneto Testament*—for example, when Max returns a piece of bread to a hungry boy, who wolfs it down. Max's family is betrayed by a woman who promises to help them escape the ghetto. She betrays them because the Nazis were holding her mother. Max's father jumps in front of Max, saving him from a firing squad of Einsatzgruppen, the Nazi executioners, at the expense of his own life. But Max is found hiding in a village and put on a train for a concentration camp. A farmer witnessing the train going by draws a finger across his own throat, showing that he knows the train is a death train.

On part Four's opening page, the “Arbeit Macht Frei” sign over Auschwitz is shown, along with many shaven-headed prisoners, including Max, who is looking out in agony. This is a flash-forward, since the chapter begins with everyone forced out of the train in which Max was riding. His good teacher, Fritz Kalb, now also a prisoner, sees him and tries to help him. Even though Max is sixteen, Kalb tells him to say he is eighteen and ready to work, in order to save him from the selection. The tattooing and genuine shower they are given are pretty grim, but the barracks in which they end up in prisoners' clothing is not yet the worst. A sixteen-year-old boy who admits his age is taken out and shot instead of being brought to school as the guard

says he will be. Kalb tells Max that “God himself turns his face from us” and that “there’s no place for heroes here, Max.” (And in *Uncanny X-Men*, 150, 2001, Magneto himself comments that after Auschwitz, he “turned [his] back on God forever.”<sup>19</sup>) Kalb cannot get Max into a relatively clean position working with him, and Max instead ends up having to watch people get gassed and to cremate them for two years. One of the most striking two-page panels in the whole work shows all of the victims’ eyeglasses piled up, and the reader sees this just as Max does, from his point of view. On the previous page, Max stares with very wide-open eyes, but only after turning the page does the reader see the eyeglasses, which in effect stare back at Max and the reader. Max later sees Kalb’s body among those to be cremated and realizes that there is indeed no help for his situation. Ironically, a cross appears on the back of each Sonderkommando as a designation, and this symbolism seems to indicate that they are somehow priests or holy men. The only help for him in this situation seems to be when he notices Magda, still clutching his gift of jewelry. But the guard soon warns him away.

The last, fifth, part begins with a more mature Max looking like he’s seen far too much; a number of wires in red are reminders of his imprisonment in the camp and its bloodiness. His eyes too are red, as if reflecting all of the bloodletting. Camp inmates see American airplanes overhead and think that they will bomb the camp, but Max points out that if they do bomb it, the bombs will kill him and his companions. Again, the bright spot is Magda, imprisoned in the Gypsy camp, whom he tries to help by bribing the guard, among other things. He hears that they will “empty” the Gypsy camp at the end of July, and the revolt that he is involved in planning will take place on August 15. So he must try to save Magda before that. The Nazis continue executing Jews, this time from Hungary, and the bombers keep passing overhead without doing anything. The prisoners say, “Bomb us already,” but Max says, “Oh, God,” when he sees prisoners wheeling baby carriages, and another prisoner says, “God’s not up there, Max. Just the Americans. And they don’t give a damn.” Max manages to save Magda, who is hiding in the corpse pile and to defend her against the other men in the revolt who are afraid that her presence will cause the Germans to kill them. The revolt begins, and Max manages to escape to the woods with Magda. Although he and Magda escape, the work concludes with a corpse and captions detailing grisly numbers, including the seven thousand survivors out of the one million Jews, Gypsies, and others killed at Auschwitz. And the fact that the Allies never bombed the camp. In an epilogue that takes place in 1948, four years later, Max returns to the camp and digs up a letter that he had buried telling whoever finds it that he is dead and to tell everyone “Please. Don’t

let this ever happen again." He is dressed in civilian clothing, and the background is a sickly greenish color. There is truly no sunshine in this work, and the reader wonders how Max can face life in the future, which he seems to be doing. This work may not have the depth of Anne Frank's diary, but largely because of its adept writing and artwork, it does successfully capture the feeling of a true story. Max is lucky to be alive and is much luckier than Yossel, the hero of Kubert's work. And it is a combination of skill and luck that has kept him from dying; he is not larger than life but much like a normal human being. Now, however, he will be different after these experiences.

What, according to this work, are the lessons that should be drawn from all of these events? One very important theme emerges when Max's father tells him, "Sometimes in this life . . . you get a moment. A time when anything is possible. When suddenly . . . you can make things happen. God help us if we take that moment. And God forgive us if we don't." This idea helps Max when he saves Magda in the concentration camp and when he takes part in the revolt. As the prisoners say, they are on their own, without help from God—the same theme as in Miriam Katin's memoir. But she and her mother survived. And when Max finds the letter he buried in which he stated that when someone found it he would be dead, he understands that he has triumphed. Because of his perseverance in the face of horror and his desire to live for something beyond himself—Magda—he has come through it all alive. Finally, there are his words: "Please. Don't let this ever happen again," and that is the final message of the book. The message is that humanity should try to work against such events, instead of being indifferent, like the onlookers in the Auden poem "Musée des Beaux Arts" who turn their back away from the boy Icarus, Daedalus's son, who has fallen from the sky in the painting by Breughel, leaving him to his fate. Pascal Croci shows in *Auschwitz* that such things *do* happen again, as in the Bosnian war and Rwanda's genocide. Iran's former ruler Ahmadinejad threatened Israel with nuclear annihilation should Iran ever get the bomb.

As if to solidify its feeling of reality, *Magneto Testament* concludes with the true story of an artist, Dina Gottliebová, who had been forced to draw the Nazis in Auschwitz. This is part of a campaign by artists against the present-day Auschwitz museum that refused to return the drawings to her. In excellently detailed drawings, Neal Adams shows Dina's arrival in Auschwitz in 1942 from her native Czechoslovakia, her drawing of Snow White cartoon scenes on the wall of a children's barrack there, Dr. Mengele's demand that she draw Gypsies for him because his photographs could not adequately capture their skin tones and he wanted that to support his racial

theories, her threat to commit suicide unless her mother were also spared from death, and her portraits of her Gypsy subjects with whom she shared the food she was given and whom she deliberately took a long time to paint in order to keep them alive. After the war she married Art Babbitt, the lead animator of the Walt Disney Snow White cartoon, who was working in Prague. (This is an amazing coincidence, since Snow White is a character that Dina drew in Auschwitz.) They moved to Hollywood, and Dina became an animator for several studios. When her Auschwitz paintings were discovered, she tried to get them back, but the Auschwitz museum, which had bought them from local people, refused to give them up. And no amount of cajoling by other artists—including the famous Jewish comics artist Stan Lee, who wrote an afterword to her story in *Magneto Testament*—or the U.S. State Department, convinced them to do so. Dina died at the age of eighty-nine with her portraits still not returned to her, but the reader is not told this. It is a somber story but shows the solidarity of artists, Jewish and non-Jewish, in the face of what they perceive is an injustice.

Then follow excellent footnotes to the volume, which include explanations of Max's actions. For instance, in the next-to-the-last footnote (for page 17, although the pages are unnumbered), Pak writes: "In our story's climax, we wanted our hero to take action. But we felt it was important not to depict him as the actual leader of the Sonderkommando revolt. Real human beings led this revolt—we didn't want to detract from their almost unthinkable heroism by suggesting that the revolt was only possible because a super hero took charge." This note again reveals the scrupulous attention to fact and the integrity of Pak and Di Giandomenico's work on this story.

The volume ends with a teacher's guide by Brian Kelley. This, too, is highly sensitive and scrupulous. Not only are there apt historical activities, including a discussion of the way in which the book portrays the Nazis' use of lies to ensnare the Jews (such as telling the people below eighteen that they would be put in school rather than killed), but also very insightful literary and artistic activities (such as a discussion of the evolution of Max's character and the analysis of powerful images and the ways in which the words and images interact). And among the writing activities, there is a persuasive letter to be written to a hypothetical school board that wishes to ban *Magneto Testament* from the classroom because of the "violent" images shown in the book. Among the most impressive activities suggested is the introduction of Paul Celan's "Todesfuge" and suggested discussions of different aspects of the poem. Kelley even suggests following up the study of the book with student investigation of survivors' lives and other serious social issues, includ-

ing the violence then taking place in the Sudan. A bibliography of websites and readings accompanies the guide. All in all, the guide is a very fitting accompaniment to an exceptional graphic novel which, despite its origin in the popular comics, has (perhaps like Frank Miller's "Dark Knight" series about the Batman character) risen to the level of nonformulaic creation, and takes its place among other admirable artistic reactions to the Holocaust. Kelley's work also brings the Holocaust into the present because it can be used in school discussions today.

In Pak and Di Giandomenico's work, the reader sees the broad impact of the Holocaust on the wider, non-Jewish as well as Jewish society. Indeed, the Holocaust and the atom bomb have been said to be the main influences on science fiction written since World War II, and that is difficult to dispute. The enormous destructive potential of the atom bomb is clear, and the Holocaust represents the first time that people were killed using a technological, factory method. The literary influence of the Holocaust has been enormous, even on writers who are not Jewish and do not usually work with Jewish themes. The graphic novel is no exception. Another work by non-Jews, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, like *Maus* one of the most important graphic novels ever written, makes constant use of the Holocaust as a major theme. As the protagonist Rorschach contemplates the child killer who has been set on fire, his diary states that he "looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, when in the final chapter the character Ozymandias's monster has destroyed many people in New York, the band Krystlnacht is playing with the band Pale Horse, and the date is November 2. As I have noted earlier, Kristallnacht was the night that the Nazis destroyed Jewish houses of worship and businesses, and the date was November 9, 1938. "Pale Horse" reminds one of the four horses of the apocalypse in the Christian Bible's book of Revelation. Moore uses the Holocaust to describe a catastrophic event in New York, and his references to smoke filled with human fat show that he has clearly not been able to free himself from the images of people dying in ovens in the original event, and Rorschach comes to the conclusion, like Miriam Katin, that people are alone, with no God to help. The character Jon, on the other hand, becomes a god, and actually walks on water at the end of the book; moreover, he will leave earth possibly to found a new race somewhere else in the universe (chapter 12, p. 27), having given up on ours.

The graphic novels by Jews show that the Holocaust is now an inescapable part of Jewish identity and a challenge to Jewish belief in God. But the graphic novels by non-Jews show that the subject is also deeply affecting

for those who are not Jewish and a challenge to their belief in God as well. Clearly artists, including graphic novelists, of the world, Jewish and non-Jewish, will continue to reflect on the Holocaust because they cannot help doing so. Whatever lessons they draw from it, their images will continue to haunt and hopefully inspire their readers to avoid such evil in our own times.

## 4

# The Jewish Experience in Europe and Beyond

Graphic novels dealing with the Jewish experience in Europe before and after the Holocaust and in North Africa form the material for this chapter. Vittorio Giardino, an Italian, Joann Sfar, a Frenchman, and American James Sturm have created significant graphic novels about that experience, including elements of belief and identity. Famed comics creator Will Eisner has also created a graphic novel about the writing of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic pamphlet invented by the Russian secret police. These are very different creators, and each has his own style and message. Eisner uses a dramatic and sentimental albeit realistic style to make the history of this notorious false document compelling, and he shows its influence up to the present. Giardino works in the realistic style of a thriller writer like John Le Carré, and often invokes Jewish writer Arthur Koestler, author of *Thieves in the Night* and *Darkness at Noon*. Giardino shows the difficulty that Jews in particular faced in eastern Europe under Communism. Sfar has a whimsical style, verging on the cartoony, which he uses to invoke semiplayful but still serious religious issues and issues of tolerance among and between religious groups. And Sturm has a semirealistic style which he uses to deal with the emotional experiences of a Jewish artist facing economic difficulty in the eastern Europe of his grandfathers' day.

As was discussed in the last chapter about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism is a major part of the European Jewish experience in both western and eastern Europe, and it crystallizes early on in the infamous fabricated document called *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In the introduction to Eisner's volume *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, Italian writer Umberto Eco, known for his historical novel *The Name of the Rose*, discusses how the *Protocols* continue to reemerge even after having been proven false, and he attributes this to "people's profound need to single out an Enemy . . ." (vii). Eisner himself in his preface calls the work a "terrifying

vampire-like fraud” and seeks “to drive yet another nail into its coffin” (3). But, as his comment implies, this false document is like a vampire that continues to rise from the grave, however many nails are driven into its coffin. Whatever the reasons for anti-Semitism’s continuity in the face of all proof that most Jews have been a benign, even positive factor in the history of most nations that offered them a home, Eisner has performed a very valuable task by showing how this vicious document was written, and why. While no one has been fully able to understand anti-Semitism’s causes, the effects of anti-Semitism on Jews have been profound; few Jews have not felt them. Because anti-Semitism has deeply impacted Jewish identity by making some Jews more and some Jews less willing to strengthen their affiliation with the Jewish people, especially in Europe, which has been a center of anti-Semitic activity for centuries, this book is included in this chapter.

In his typically dramatic style, Eisner first tells the story of French writer Maurice Joly (1829–78), who wrote a book entitled *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, in which the Italian Renaissance philosopher Machiavelli’s antidemocratic remarks are based on those of Napoleon III, the contemporary ruler of France, whom Joly saw as an autocratic tyrant and deeply opposed. After being sentenced to jail several times for seditious books, including this one, Joly committed suicide. The tale begins there, because, as the reader will learn, the *Protocols* are based on Joly’s *Dialogue*.

Eisner shows the plot against Sergei Witte (1849–1915), Tsar Nicholas II’s liberal adviser, by two reactionary members of the government, who decide that if they can show that modernization of Russia as advocated by Witte is a Jewish plot, it will be defeated. The tsar (who ruled from 1894 to 1917), they point out, distrusts the Jews, so anything connected to them will be treated by him with disdain. Eisner’s authentic recapitulation of the clothes of the period, his close-ups of the plotting faces, and his use throughout of black-and-white drawing, give his story a convincing reality—and it is based on the most recent historical evidence unearthed by Russian historian Mikhail Lepekhine in 1999, as Eisner informs the reader in his introduction (2). The antimodernization plotters, who are associated with the secret police, decide to invent a document “revealing” the Jewish inspiration for modernization and to publish it in France. There they will plant it in the French press, and, according to their plan, it will then come back to Russia to influence the tsar’s thinking.

They will entrust the job to one Matthieu Golovinski (1865–1920), the son of an aristocratic family but a very duplicitous and politically ambitious

figure, who, while still in school, worked for the state police and also, according to one of his fellow students, had a hand in organizing unrest against the government. To establish his duplicity, Eisner shows him stealing a necklace from his mother while still a young boy and has his fellow students accuse him of being distant from them rather than a member of their group (34–35). Eisner also establishes Golovinski's role as a document counterfeiter early on by recounting a court case in which Golovinski is accused of fabricating false evidence for the police by the lawyer of a man who is found guilty and sentenced to ten years (38–39).

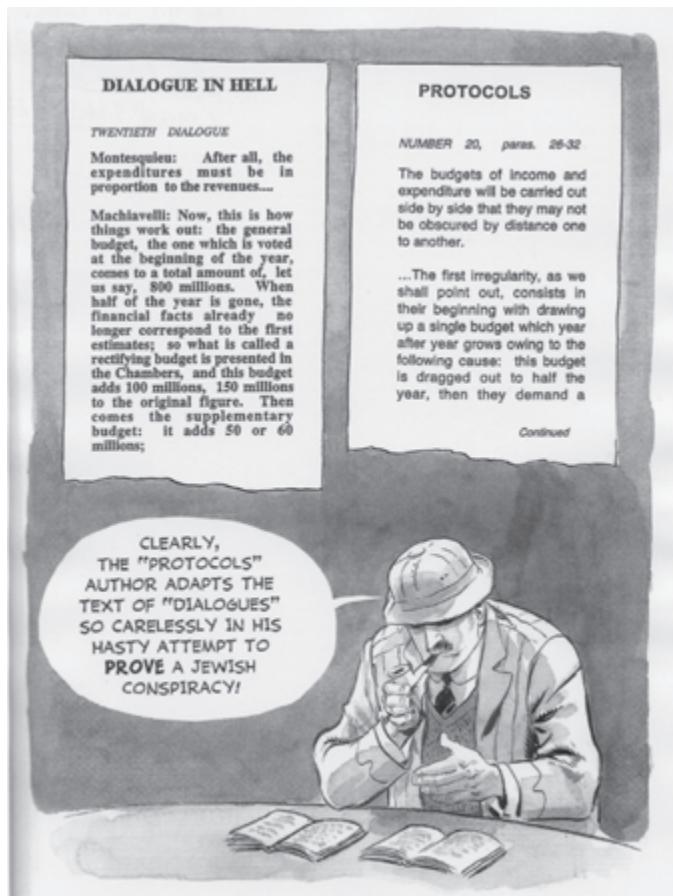
Golovinski, it must be said, is not made to look particularly evil or bad in terms of facial features or dress and is rather nondescript, just like any other person of the period, although Eisner has him remark to a government minister who hires him to invent documents that he serves loyally anyone who pays him (42), which again establishes his negative character. He soon is employed by a pro-tsarist religious group to create false newspaper articles and other documents implicating Jews in various conspiracies against the tsar and against Christianity. As the editor of the group's newspaper says, "In Russia religion and politics are the same" (48); and since the Jews are falsely thought to be opposed to the "purity" of Russian culture they must be destroyed. Lacking any conscience, Golovinski gladly helps construct the false documents. Eisner exposes the depth of anti-Semitism in tsarist Russia and the poisonous atmosphere that led to the *Protocols* while also demonstrating the political usefulness of anti-Semitism to the conservatives in the Russian establishment. But Golovinski is dismissed when his protectors die or lose favor in court, and the tsar wants to move forward with modernization as advocated by Witte. Golovinski is accused of provocation and of being an informer. He is exiled from Russia and ends up in Paris, where he is disbarred as a lawyer and then works for the Franco-Russian League, which tries to influence the French and other Europeans in favor of the tsarist regime. Again, any role suits Golovinski as long as he is paid for it.

Piotr Rachovsky, the head of the foreign branch of the Russian secret police and one of the plotters against modernization, needs a document blaming the Jews for a revolt against the tsar; and Golovinski is given thirty days to produce it. Rachovsky shows Golovinski Joly's *Dialogue* (59), and on that basis, Golovinski is able to produce the *Protocols* document. Professor Nilus, a competitor with the controversial holy man Grigori Rasputin in terms of mysticism and influence upon the tsar's wife, publishes the document in Russia and claims to be its author (63). Russia has just lost the Russo-Japanese war and there is revolutionary unrest, so the audience is ripe for the book. And sure enough the tsar reads the book, dismisses Witte, and takes

a more conservative turn. But in the Communist revolution of 1917 the tsar is deposed and executed (66).

Yet, as Eisner tells the story, the *Protocols* do not die out then, because they go with the tsarist exiles into all corners of Europe, and in fact, in 1920 the London *Times* calls for an investigation into the matter to determine if the *Protocols* are indeed true. Eisner shows this *Times* article paired with an article about Chaim Weizmann, the head of the Zionist movement, and the developing Jewish homeland in Palestine, on the same page (67). Eisner shows that the frightening thing is that although it was concocted and created by the tsarist secret police, the forgery continues to circulate—now also in an English edition entitled “The Jewish Peril”—and to find a widening audience even after the tsar is long gone and the original purpose of the forgery, to influence him in favor of conservatism, is no longer important. Even Winston Churchill as a member of Parliament, lends support to the possibility that the *Protocols* are true in an article in the *Illustrated Sunday Herald* of February 8, 1920, pointing out that many Communists and anarchists at the time were Jews, and that Bolshevism was competing with Zionism for Jewish allegiance (70). Clearly this was a time of great intellectual turmoil in the Jewish as in the wider world, and the existence of the *Protocols* only added to the non-Jewish world’s angst over what it might all mean.

Eisner highlights these newspaper articles as Philip Graves, the *Times* correspondent in Istanbul, meets a Russian émigré who shows him that the *Protocols* are modeled on Joly’s *Dialogue*. The Russian also tells Graves that the Okhrana, the tsarist secret police, ordered the invention of the document according to knowledgeable friends of his and that Golovinski was the author; and he wants payment for this information. Graves is understandably intrigued. In a brilliant and indeed scholarly move, Eisner sets no less than seventeen passages from the books side by side so the reader can read and analyze them as Graves does (73–89). As the reader compares the passages, on the bottom of the pages Graves points out obvious copying, inconsistencies, and illogical points in the *Protocol* passages, and the proof is conclusive (83) (fig. 4.1). So Eisner has actually demonstrated the plagiarism and forgery involved in the *Protocols* and has not just asserted it. The graphic novel’s powers to juxtapose visual elements—a strength that Art Spiegelman has pointed out—and to show rather than just tell are readily apparent, and have never been used to better purpose. This is a very powerful use of the medium. As Eisner shows in a reproduction of an excerpt from a 1921 article by Graves, Graves exposed the forgery (91). The next step would have been to get Golovinski to confess, which Graves’s editor suggested, but as Graves says, Golovinski died the year before the articles came out. As Eisner then



4.1. Will Eisner, *The Plot*, 83. London Times correspondent Philip Graves compares plagiarized excerpts from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* with their original source, Maurice Joly's *The Dialogue in Hell between Machiavelli and Montesquieu*, and Eisner allows the reader to compare the excerpts too.

says, the *Protocols* continued to circulate, including at the hands of Henry Ford in his anti-Semitic newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, starting in 1920 (93).

But the most dangerous appearance of the book is at the hands of the Nazis, some of whom, according to Eisner, know that it is a fraud but use it anyway. However, despite this knowledge on the part of some of the Nazi authorities, Hitler actually believes it (as Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diaries [110]), and uses it in *Mein Kampf*. Goebbels

himself thought the document a forgery but that its basic idea was true nonetheless. Despite the falsehood of Golovinski's invented book having been proved in a trial in Switzerland in 1935, in a retrial in 1937, and by Ford's recantation in 1926, the book's fame only continues to grow the more it is distributed. As recently as 1964, American Senators Dodd and Keating headed a committee of the Senate that wrote a report condemning the *Protocols*, and in 1993 a Russian court condemned the work as a forgery. But it continues to be published, as Eisner continually points out.

Eisner himself appears at the end of the graphic novel (113–26), discussing his project in 1993 with a researcher, who points out that the *Protocols* will continue to be published because people need to justify conduct "that they may be later ashamed of" (116) and prefer to be able to blame a small and vulnerable group for their problems. The researcher shows Eisner the proliferation of many editions of the *Protocols* in many languages. Eisner shows that in 1999 a Russian researcher discovered proof in formerly sealed tsarist files that Golovinski was the author, and this new research was published in an important French newspaper. Finally, it seems, the last nail had been driven into the vampire's coffin according to Eisner. But no, it goes on and on, and Eisner's book concludes with a statement of all of the anti-Semitic incidents provoked in part by the *Protocols* that continued into 2004, a year before Eisner's book was published. The fact that the very reputable publisher W. W. Norton decided to publish Eisner's book must have been a considerable source of pride for him, as well as a strong sign of how powerful and relevant Norton considers this work. Eisner's use of borderless panels, word balloons that extend beyond individual panels, very expressive faces, and documents gives the work a flow and a resonance that make it very interesting reading, even for a broad audience not particularly interested in this issue.

Perhaps the most important element of identity in this work is Eisner's own: he told Bob Andelman that he simply writes about Jewish life and culture without promoting it. He was just writing about what he knows, and what he knows are Jews,<sup>1</sup> much as Faulkner knows the South and Frank McCourt knows the Irish. A vital part of this knowledge and an important aspect of Eisner's own character will be gleaned from the works of his that are examined in chapter 5, "The American Immigrant Experience." While he is not religious, Eisner knows about anti-Semitism, and it certainly influenced part of his identity, as it influences the identities of many Jews. And the *Protocols* always lurk in the background as a cause of this continuing phenomenon, false as they have been proven to be time and again. Eisner could be proud of himself for this work, which reads very well and whose conclu-

sions about the forgery are demonstrated inescapably. It will not stop the *Protocols* from being published, but it will succeed in informing and influencing any fair-minded person who wants to know the truth about this work.

Artist Joann Sfar is the product of a marriage between an Ashkenazic mother from the Ukraine and a Sephardic father from Algeria. Sfar has worked on many comics—for example, his *Little Vampire* series of children’s books, which made a hit when he was just twenty-four, and his collaboration with Hector Guibert on *The Professor’s Daughter*, about a Victorian-era London archaeology professor whose daughter is in love with a mummy. He has also worked with Lewis Trondheim on the *Dungeon* series, and he has been a member of the French comics collective L’Association, which is responsible for many of the best French graphic novels. But again and again, he has returned to Jewish questions—in *The Rabbi’s Cat*, volumes 1 and 2, and *Klezmer: Tales of the Wild East*, to name only two of his Jewish works. He directed a film about the French-Jewish singer Serge Gainsbourg (2010), and in 2011, Sfar turned *The Rabbi’s Cat* into an animated film. Sfar was also himself the subject of a recent film, Sam Ball’s documentary *Joann Sfar Draws from Memory* (2012).

Sfar’s interest in Judaism and Jews is not surprising, given his closeness to both Will Eisner, who he met in Paris shortly before Eisner died, and legendary Jewish comics creator Jack Kirby. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview in 2008, Sfar praised Eisner as “the man who made comic strips enter the world of good writing.”<sup>2</sup> Sfar also pointed out that while his father’s family was religious, his mother’s family kept religion at a distance. Although Sfar had Hebrew lessons two mornings a week as a child, he was “encouraged not to take it too seriously.” He overtly stated his own religious position: “I’m not religious, my wife isn’t Jewish and I haven’t given my children a religious education, but I have a lot of tenderness for my religion, and I like to talk about it.” This explains much of the philosophical meaning of *The Rabbi’s Cat*, in which the skeptical cat seems to have more of Sfar’s voice and opinions than does the rabbi or any other character. Eisner’s influence can also be felt since although Eisner by his own admission did not relate to Judaism after his Bar Mitzvah, he did seem obsessed with Jewish topics, particularly anti-Semitism. For his part, Sfar seems equally obsessed with tolerance among Jews and between Jews and others.

Volume 1 of *The Rabbi’s Cat*, which is set in French-controlled Algeria—where approximately one hundred thousand Jews, who became French citizens owing to the Crémieux Decree of 1870, lived—and France in the 1930s, seems to be his most serious religious meditation, and it also contains a message about religious tolerance. Essentially, it tells the story of how

a rabbi, under the influence of his talking cat and a visit to the metropolis, Paris, becomes less rigid in his belief and more like the cat—willing to accept the idea that he does not know the answers to all religious questions and questions about life—and more tolerant of deviations from religious piety. Although it is set in the Jewish community of the past, the book amounts to a plea on the part of a Jew living today in an increasingly Muslim France for more social toleration all around. It struck a positive note with the organizers of the Angoulême Festival, where it won the Jury Prize. *The Rabbi's Cat*, volume 2, in which a Russian Jewish painter, in the company of the rabbi and others, visits central Africa and marries an African woman, points in the same direction of tolerance, but it lacks the religious questioning and subtleties of the first volume.

In the appendix at the end of his graphic novel *Klezmer*, Sfar comments that

I believe God loves those moments when we do without him. He thinks, “At last, they’re going to stop walking around with their nose up in the air awaiting some supernatural magic; they’re going to watch the snow and the trees and start to think a bit. They’re doing the job without me, inventing utopias that don’t have me as their essence; they are finding within themselves the reason for all things. In fact, without realizing it, they are understanding my Law, for it is the Law of the world.” They are behaving like the student learning the guitar who discovers that you improve more by looking at your instrument than by burying your head in a music textbook. We always feel a certain sadness when the kids grow up, but it seems to me that the Lord still finds it reassuring when his creatures stop giving credence to pipe dreams. Good parents are glad to see their children become adults. In the end, what makes these characters Jewish in spite of everything is this awareness of their frailty: nobody’s there for them. And this isn’t talking only about the absence of God, but also of their social and political vulnerability. (viii–ix)

The star of the first volume of *The Rabbi's Cat* is undoubtedly the cat himself, who tells the story. His character is based on the precepts espoused in both statements by Sfar that I have quoted; he wants to be a Jewish cat only because that will enable him to be with his mistress Zlabya, the rabbi's daughter, and since he is a cat, he expects nothing from religion and simply follows his instincts. He never disappoints, morally or otherwise, because there is never any expectation of him but what is inherent in his hon-

est animal nature, which places his survival and his loyalty to his mistress Zlabya and to his master, the rabbi himself, above all other priorities. From his point of view, it is okay to lie about eating the rabbi's parrot, if it ensures his own well-being to do so (7), and he likes to see humans, like one of the rabbi's pious disciples, acting on their sexuality (43), as he does, rather than hypocritically downplaying it. He shows no fear and speaks with complete honesty when he defends his mistress and master, as when he tells the "rabbi's rabbi" or spiritual teacher that Zlabya is true, like God, and that he wants to convert to Judaism only so he can be with her and when he tells the rabbi that the rabbi's rabbi is less intelligent than the rabbi himself. He is often very cagey in intellectual debate, as when the rabbi's rabbi denies that cats can become Jews because only humans are made in God's image and the cat asks him to show him a picture of God, in that case (11) (fig. 4.2). At the same time, despite his first claim that "God is a reassuring myth" (18), he learns that God exists when, out of concern for the rabbi, who must take a French test in order to keep his position and does not seem to the cat to be doing very well, the cat, hoping for a miracle, states the name Adonai (meaning "God" in Hebrew), saying, "I don't care if it's forbidden, I invoke the name of God" (66) and immediately loses his ability to speak. He did not lose this ability because of any of his lies or his amorality, but rather because he has broken a Jewish law against uttering God's name. (Although "Adonai," meaning Lord, is not equivalent to "Jehovah," which may never be uttered, "Adonai" must never be uttered except in formal prayer.) Thus, although Sfar's own statement seems to indicate a noninterventionist God who cares little about religious rules, nonetheless this incident makes it clear that there sometimes is a consequence for breaking them, even with good intentions. The existence of God again appears certain when the rabbi, who thought that he had done badly on the exam and even refused to open the letter containing the results himself, actually passes the exam. He is chided by his Muslim singer friend and distant relative whose last name, like the rabbi's (and like the author's) is also Sfar, when he reads the letter for him, for having insufficient faith: "Hmmm . . . you thought God was no longer with you and that's a great fault" (86).

So God does seem to exist in Joann Sfar's universe. But Sfar is not in favor of religious dogmatism, and his work seems to speak against that more than anything else: as he says in his statement, he has had religious training but was told not to take it too seriously. Look at Zlabya, the rabbi's daughter. In Algeria, she is a dutiful daughter. She knows how to respect Shabbat (the Sabbath), displays no hostility toward religion, takes care of the rabbi, and is angry when it seems that a new rabbi (who eventually becomes her husband)



4.2. Joann Sfar, *The Rabbi's Cat*, 1:11. The rabbi's cat cleverly disputes theological issues with the “rabbi’s rabbi.”

will displace him. On the other hand, she reads Stendhal, plays the piano, gossips with her friends, and does not seem to be overly concerned about religion. Once in Paris, she abandons even the outward marks of religion, although she is now married to a rabbi. Her main concern is to fit in with Parisian clothing fashions, just like her husband’s well-dressed sisters. Not only does she get him to go shopping with her on Shabbat, but she makes fun of his aversion to doing so and even pretends to be God, whispering in his ear that God wants him to buy his wife a nice dress (135). She gets angry only when her husband, Jules, does not want to make love to her in his par-

ents' house (125). In volume 2, she is angry when he seems to prefer his religious books to her company (53). For Zlabya religion is largely something one does, not something to be taken too seriously. She and her cat are very similar in that respect. Sfar has commented that his characters' faces change because he likes to present them from different angles and in different attitudes, and Zlabya's face is no exception: she ranges from unusually pretty to more usual and the only time she really seems to lose herself is when she is assessing new dresses on Shabbat in Paris and her eyes become wide with wonder and delight.

Neither the cat nor Zlabya represent the values of traditional religion, then, but one would expect more from the rabbi himself. And indeed, in Algeria, he follows all of the rules: he wants the cat to study the Torah once he announces his desire to convert; he brings the cat to his own rabbinical teacher—the rabbi's rabbi—to discuss whether a cat can become Jewish; he defends the biblical account of the creation of the world five thousand years ago—even in the face of the cat's mockery of it on the basis of carbon-14 dating—and he does not want the cat to lie or to spread rumors about his students. At no time does the rabbi appear to break any of the ritual laws, and he performs ritual ceremonies for the Jewish marriage of his daughter as well as last rites for the dead for one of his former congregants.

When in Paris, he at first adheres to all of the rules and laws. He does not want to ring a doorbell on Shabbat, he goes to synagogue (although as a Sephardic Jew—a Jew from an Arab country—he creates a ruckus when he does not follow Ashkenazic—or European Jewish—standards of decorum there), and he refuses to sleep in his son-in-law's house because they do not observe Shabbat there since his son-in-law's parents are not religious even though the son-in-law himself chose to become a rabbi. But things begin to change when, on his own, he finds the synagogue locked but sees an open church, where he sleeps for the night (110). He states that God is everywhere, even though the somber images in the church, including the effigy of Jesus on the cross, scare him. Then he goes to a restaurant and lies about having a lot of money with which to pay the bill. Even more shockingly, he orders as nonkosher a meal as possible (116–17). When the rabbi asks God to challenge his breaking of the law against such food or to say something about his wife having died in order to comfort him, a laughing gargoyle appears in purple (117). Sfar seems to indicate that the devil is laughing as the rabbi does these things. The cat comments that “the rabbi eats and the world doesn't fall apart” (116). The rabbi, referring to God, says that “tomorrow I'll go back to fearing you” but then he says a blessing (that he has clearly invented for the occasion) over nonkosher food: “Blessed are you, Lord our

God, who allows us to transgress.” (By putting a note, “Blessing for non-kosher food,” about this supposed blessing in a separate word bubble in the same panel, Sfar is clearly being tongue in cheek, because there is no such blessing in Judaism. One can be forgiven for transgressions, but not allowed them.) So eating nonkosher food and inventing and saying this “blessing” seems to be in the nature of an experiment on the rabbi’s part. The rabbi has decided to push the envelope and to see what will happen if he is not Orthodox for a day. He does, however, always keep his head covering on.

When his cousin Raymond Rebibo appears, the rabbi is shocked to learn that Raymond must sing, dressed as an Arab, on Saturdays (Shabbat) in order to make a living. Moreover, he is living with a female Catholic singer who is often drunk and who sleeps with other men but whom he loves. However, the rabbi overcomes his doubts about this situation when he and Raymond play music together (127). The cat asks if the rabbi really wanted to be a musician rather than a rabbi to start with; and later, it appears that is the case. When the rabbi is speaking to his daughter’s father-in-law, the nonreligious father of Jules, the rabbi honestly states that he did not originally want to be a rabbi. He wanted to marry a non-Jewish woman and then a rich Jewish girl but in both cases the marriages did not come about: the non-Jewish woman did not want to marry a Jew and the parents of the Jewish woman did not want him to marry their daughter. He was accepted by a rabbi, who taught him how to read, and so he too became religious and a rabbi (139). Paris has allowed him to rediscover the truth about himself, including his original love of music as well as his early secular leanings.

He does, however, try to tell his new in-law that even if the in-law does not go to synagogue, God is waiting for him. But he admits that he does not know everything about religion and can’t answer his in-law’s questions (138), including the one about why the in-law’s son turned to religion when he had brought his children up in a secular way. Here is the irony of two secular men—the rabbi and his son-in-law—becoming religious: the son-in-law’s turn to religion seems more genuine than the rabbi’s. The rabbi had chosen a religious vocation because another rabbi had been accepting of him when he was young, while the son-in-law did so out of a purely religious conviction.

Back in Algiers, the rabbi bravely speaks his newly discovered truth to his congregation. Perhaps this is what, most of all, makes him a good Jew—as he told the cat, religious Jews don’t lie. He points out to the congregation that he met a Jew who did not observe any of the Jewish laws and yet was happy. So, the question is, why should people observe the laws be if they can be happy whether they do or not? And the rabbi’s answer is “I don’t know” (142). The congregation goes wild because his honesty has let them down; they were of

course expecting an explanation of why they should indeed continue following the laws. But at the end, the rabbi finishes the service and it is clear that he is not himself going to be breaking the laws in the future or recommending that others do so. The cat smiles very happily to hear that the rabbi will continue to be religious but has no idea why he is doing so.

What has happened here? The rabbi has become more like his cat, who simply lives without trying to justify his way of life. The cat wants his mistress, sex, and food. The rabbi will remain perplexed, and he now sees that as good. He will not claim to know all the answers but neither will he disrespect the laws. This is what Sfar was aiming toward: a tolerant religious outlook that accepts religious divergence. Written to fit the France of today, in which religious liberalism on both sides would defuse some of the tensions between Muslims and Jews, Sfar is preaching a doctrine of tolerance, lack of dogmatism, and openness to other religious traditions, without discounting the importance of religious rules even if they are to be followed only out of habit.

In the second volume, this doctrine becomes even more clear. The cat, which is traveling with the con man Malka and his trained lion, is again the narrator and again questions religion, beginning with the idea that God speaks to people (1). Malka seems to save children from the lion's attack by having them say some prayers, and he is rewarded handsomely by the parents. But it is all a scam since the lion does Malka's bidding. A snake soon joins the group. But most noteworthy is the fact that the Muslim Beduins take to Malka, who is Jewish, as much as the Jews and other city dwellers do. He gets along with everyone, regardless of religion or ethnicity; the Beduins like him, and his wife is a Berber, a north African desert-dwelling ethnic group. Although there have been Jewish Berbers, Malka himself is not a Berber, and this again shows Sfar's point about being accepting of other groups of people.

As he journeys, Malka finds an ancient synagogue and prays there in several languages (25). When an Arab prince overhears him, he thinks he has heard a saint and he invites Malka home and gives him a rifle as a present. They become fast friends. The prince even insists that Malka must sing the Muslim call to prayer because his voice is so beautiful. After some misgivings, Malka acquiesces because the prince insists, but instead of singing he flings himself from the tower (29). The lion takes him away barely alive. Then the lion is shot and both Malka and the lion die together and are covered by the desert sands. The snake bites the repentant prince, who has renounced God (32) because of his disappointment, and kills him. But as upsetting as all this is for the reader, it turns out only to be a story that Malka

is telling children for payment and that Sfar has not warned the reader about (33). As always, Malka has his eye on earnings more than anything else but this story has a point: although it was only a story, it was wrong of the prince to try to force Malka to go against his religious conscience. As always, Sfar is on the side of tolerance, and having the reader believe that the story was real, if only for a short time, helps enforce Sfar's message.

Now Malka meets his cousin Abraham, the cat's rabbi from volume 1. They go into the city of Oran, where the mayor is a Christian priest—though one who has pretended in the past to be a water diviner and who is not a good Christian (as Abraham says). In fact, he stirs up anti-Semitism and a fictitious "Red Menace" (fear of Communism) (36). Abraham tells Malka how Father Lambert creates hatred between Jews, Muslims, and Christians; this is obviously his means of staying in power. In the 1930s, there was a great deal of anti-Semitism among the French settlers in Algiers because they represented the Jews' French citizenship. Again, Sfar's message is tolerance between groups, not the opposite.

Father Lambert is quite a hater; he speaks against "kikes and ragheads" (38) infiltrating France. By equating the two in terms of suffering from Father Lambert's prejudice, Sfar attempts to achieve some solidarity between Jews and Muslims in France. Malka accompanied by his lion walks up to Father Lambert and slaps him. No one does anything, but after Malka leaves, Father Lambert goes back to his anti-Semitic speech. However, the story of Malka's slapping of the priest spreads throughout Algeria among both Muslims and Jews, and Malka of the Lions becomes a hero. When a man who wants to organize a Jewish self-defense group appears in Rabbi Abraham's yeshiva, though, the rabbi drives him away, claiming that the Jews' enemies will always be greater in number and therefore stronger than the Jews, and so the only salvation for the Jews lies in Torah study (45). But one young man who studies with the rabbi begins to see the self-defense man secretly and becomes part of his group. Malka's lesson of self-defense in the face of intolerance has been learned, at least by this young man. And that is where part I of volume 2 ends.

Part II, "Africa's Jerusalem," is openly dedicated to the fight against racism according to Sfar's own statement at the beginning of that part (50). Just as Rabbi Abraham is based on Sfar's actual relative and is likewise named Rabbi Abraham Sfar, so the Russian painter who appears in the story is based on a friend of Sfar's, and the idea of a marriage between people of different racial groups is based on the family of Sfar's nephew, "whose mommy comes from North Africa while his daddy comes from black Africa," as Sfar tells us (50). Sfar also states that although many anti-racist graphic novels

have been written, they do not seem to have changed anyone's opinions, so he decided to write another one in the hope, however small, that it might have some effect on negative racial attitudes.

Zlabya and her husband are not getting along particularly well because she feels that he cares more for books and study than for keeping her company. The cat witnesses all this and is, as usual, the narrator, and in this case he is happy because she takes better care of him when she is estranged from her husband. But while she is walking through the city, her husband has opened a shipment of religious books and finds what seems to be a dead body inside (58). A group of rabbis and Jewish onlookers tries to decide what to do when the body wakes up and speaks Russian. No one understands him but the cat, and he understands the cat. He speaks to the rabbi but neither one understands the other; yet the reader can understand both as they speak past one another.

The Russian, who turns out to be a painter, explains that the Communist Party did not like the art school he was running in his small Jewish village. There was too much Hebrew in the paintings and too many animals and not enough art representing industrialization (65–66). So they sent someone from Moscow who took over the school and forced the students to conform, and the Russian painter was sent a letter forbidding him from painting or using Hebrew anymore. When the party wanted the village to collect their Jewish books so the party could sell them abroad, the painter hopped into the crate of books, which the Jews shipped to other Jewish communities before the books could be confiscated. Clearly he affirms his Jewish identity when it is attacked, even though he is not particularly religious.

He says that he finds God in painting, and that his painting helps celebrate God's creation, while a Kabbalist and Zlabya's husband try to say that painting is forbidden by the second commandment, against graven images (77–78). Sfar, like Sturm (as will be discussed), defends artistry in the Jewish community, which is no surprise, given his own profession as an artist.

A rich non-Jewish Russian who is living in Algiers, Vastenov, is enlisted to speak to the painter. First he informs the rabbi and his son-in-law that in Russia a Jew stays a Jew and is not considered a Russian (82). To a question about whether the revolution changed that, the man laughs. The painter tells Vastenov that he wants to go to Ethiopia but was sent to Algiers by mistake. He thinks that the descendants of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon live in Ethiopia and that a Jew will be able to find peace there. Sfar is obviously going off on a riff but it is one based in Jewish history to some extent, since the Ark of the Covenant was rumored to have been brought to Ethiopia, and undoubtedly there was trade between Judea and Ethiopia.

in biblical days, as the story of the Queen of Sheba seems to indicate. The non-Jewish Russian says that some blacks there are also Jews—which is of course the case; as the painter points out, there are Ethiopian Jews (whom he calls “Falashas,” though they are now more commonly known as “Beta Israel,” since “Falasha” is considered a somewhat derogatory term), most of whom have immigrated to Israel in recent years. But Rabbi Abraham disputes the idea saying that no one has ever seen a black Jew, and that in Africa, the North African Jews are the only Jews. He goes on to say that black people have suffered slavery and Jews pogroms and to think of black Jews suffering both is unbearable to him (83–84). So Rabbi Abraham is not a racist but rather someone concerned with Jewish suffering who asks how much suffering is possible. But he is clearly limited in his experience. The Russian Jew quotes from a report on Ethiopia written by a friend who was sent there by the party on a mission to relocate all of the Russian Jews, and it includes references to Ethiopian Jews and even to the fact that their capital is called Jerusalem and that there is an intact temple there. With this imaginative idea, Sfar is initiating a dialogue here about Jewish identity, with tolerance clearly in mind. As Rabbi Abraham speaks with his son-in-law, the non-Jewish Russian man, and the Jewish painter, his own darkness of skin is in contrast to their lightness. Sfar is very good at delineating all kinds of skin color and showing them as a natural spectrum, which again demonstrates his idea of tolerance.

Rabbi Abraham’s son-in-law thinks that the painter must be a Zionist who wants to set up a Jewish state in Ethiopia. Since Jewish emigration to Palestine was very well established by the 1930s when this story takes place, the son-in-law must mean that the painter wants to set up a second Jewish state, which is an unusual idea that no one else had suggested, although the Zionist Congress had considered settling Uganda—which had been offered to them by the British government—instead of Palestine in the early twentieth century. Whatever his Zionist intentions, the painter himself wants to paint the new countryside and is led toward Ethiopia by his art as much as by his Jewishness.

As a result of this conversation, even Vastenov is excited about a possible expedition to Ethiopia and agrees to pay for the trip. Now Sheikh Mohammad Sfar appears in the tale. Like Rabbi Abraham, this naming of a character with Sfar’s own name indicates perhaps that these characters are part of him. What is interesting is that this is a Muslim character, a singer, and he is in some way related to Rabbi Sfar, as a cousin. Again, Sfar is bringing together disparate parts of himself and perhaps his Sephardic and Ashkenazic family—as well as Jews and Muslims—with the message that hu-

mans are all one family. And the musical motif appears, as it does also in *Klezmer*. Sfar likens his cartooning, which includes irregular, hand-drawn rather than machine-made panel borders and a loose, colorful style of characterization, to music by including a musician with his own last name, and in the afterword in *Klezmer* he discusses the “musical graphic novel” (xiii). The painter also discusses with the cat how it feels to paint the landscape: he invents and uses whatever colors he pleases, but the new reality influences him and he paints differently from how he would in Russia, even if he is inventing to some extent (90–91). And he likes to bite into his subject, which he likens to the cat’s biting his prey. Sfar attempts to describe art here and to explain what it feels like to create.

The cat gets bitten by a scorpion and they must stop at the tents of a Muslim prince who has a faith healer with him. The cat is saved, but the healer objects to the painter’s doing a portrait of the prince to thank him, claiming that the Koran is opposed to representations of human images. The Muslim singer Sfar says only Orthodox Jews are against that and in the Koran there is no prohibition on representations of the human figure (97). The singer Sfar condemns fanaticism as again Joann Sfar makes his point about tolerance. Vastenov and a Muslim die after Vastenov stabs the Muslim and the man’s comrades cut Vastenov down. Here Joann Sfar makes the point that intolerance leads to death.

The painter starts falling in love with a non-Jewish black female African bartender and they are able to speak through the cat’s translation. The two Sfars, the Jew and the Muslim, have no problem with a romance between a black and a white person and welcome her on their trip, especially because the sheikh thinks that she will make better coffee than the rabbi does. The painter learns some French and can speak directly to his girlfriend without needing the cat’s translation (115). She assumes that he thinks she knows about all Africans in the different countries they pass through just because she’s black like them, but the painter denies that (119). Soon she is pregnant, and the painter wants the rabbi to marry them (120). The rabbi refuses because (since he is an Orthodox Jew) they have to be Jewish for him to perform a wedding, although the girl says she has no problem accepting her husband’s God as her own. But the rabbi says that it takes years of study to become a Jew (120). Yet he performs their marriage in the end, which once again testifies to his openness. In Asmara, they meet black Jews but no one has heard of a site called Jerusalem in Ethiopia except for the Russian painter. Everyone gives up the search except the painter and his now-wife and the cat, and after a long time walking one day they see a walled city (126).

The city is populated by very large Jews—literally, they tower over the



4.3. Joann Sfar, *The Rabbi's Cat*, 2:128. With Sfar's typical whimsy, a giant Ethiopian Jew tells a Russian Jewish painter that there are no white Jews.

painter and his wife—and everyone there is self-confident and not particularly friendly (126). In a whimsical twist of Sfar's, these isolated Jews say that no one has ever seen a white Jew or a black Jew and that the only Jews are like them—dark grayish in color. And so they kick the painter and his girlfriend out of the city (128) (fig. 4.3). Perhaps Sfar is saying what Jews might be like if they were giant, isolated, and had never known anti-Semitism. In any case, the picture of their self-confidence contrasts unfavorably with the Jews' demeanor in the rest of *The Rabbi's Cat*. Sfar seems to be saying that it is better to be a bit nervous and insecure perhaps than overconfident, provincial, and, again, intolerant. The painter and his wife go back to the Sfars but they do not tell them that they actually found the city.

What is the meaning of this tale? That the painter and his wife are tolerant, as are the rabbi and the Muslim singer he meets, who both turn out

to be related to the same person, named Messaoud Sfar.<sup>3</sup> But Jews who are hidden for centuries in their own city far from anywhere would be intolerant, just like the Muslim tribesmen who live in lonely stretches of desert. According to Joann Sfar, provinciality breeds intolerance and would do so even among Jews who have a history of being excluded by others if they had not had to suffer that circumstance. In refusing to relate the story of this new Jerusalem to the others, the painter comments to his wife that “telling things like they are is not my job” (130). As an artist, he is freed from reality and can live in the world of imagination—just like Sfar himself. He has no need to disabuse others by telling them the truth about the existence of this city. And truth be known, the Jews in that city do no one any particular good, so they are best left alone. This second volume is more fanciful than the first and less focused on reality. Sfar seems to have gone on a musical riff here but he does comment on Jewish identity. He sees Jewish identity not as something determined by membership in a specific Jewish religious denomination but rather as something that can be claimed by anyone who wants to be considered Jewish. His beautiful colors, uneven panel borders, and striking faces remain the same as in the first volume and lend an air of fantasy to this work, even as it consistently involves the reader in its story.

In *Klezmer*, Sfar tackles not his father’s Sephardic heritage and life in North Africa and Paris in the 1930s but his mother’s Ashkenazic background and the small towns and cities of pre–World War II eastern Europe, where millions of Jews lived at that time. In an unusual twist, this tale at least at the beginning shows hostility among Jews, even amounting to murder. Again Sfar—like Karl Emil Franzos in his *The Jews of Barnow* (1883)—seems to challenge religious Orthodoxy and in particular the strictness of the yeshiva (a Jewish religious school) and the shtetl (a Jewish village). Yaakov and Vincenzo have both been expelled from their yeshivot for stealing: Vincenzo for taking an apple to his dorm room every night because he couldn’t finish his meal in the prescribed fifteen minutes (food was often scarce in the poorer eastern European yeshivot) and Yaakov, the rabbi’s top student, for taking a coat (presumably, heating was also scarce in those yeshivot) with no second chance for repentance. And Chava is only too happy to escape her village and run away with a klezmer bandmaster whose entire band was murdered by another klezmer band to keep them from performing in the village. Although Sfar uses watercolors for this story, which gives it a feeling of fantasy, this is not the usual nostalgic ghetto of a Marc Chagall painting or a Saul Raskin drawing from his *Hebrew Rhapsody in 100 Drawings* and it is not sympathetic in any way to the strictness of Jewish Orthodoxy.

Vincenzo tells Yaakov (and the reader) that he did not like anyone at his yeshiva, but he did like the way he was always told what to do: “It was comforting,” he says (62). Sfar seems to point out the obsessiveness of Orthodoxy’s rules and rituals and its appeal to some personalities. Vincenzo says the world outside is too harsh for him, and the idea seems to be that if you live in a controlled world, however artificially controlled, you feel that you are safe against life’s vicissitudes. Yaakov compares the yeshiva to an army—or to a mental hospital for Jews (63)—and says that Vincenzo can join the army if what he wants in life is rules. In the notes in the back of the volume, Sfar himself speaks and says that the tsar and the anti-Semites won out against the Jews as a whole in eastern Europe because “the only Jews they left us think the Jewish soul is to be found in compliance with dietary laws” (ii). Sfar clearly does not agree with this strictness of belief, and for him the Jewish soul lies in its art. He also comments that “I believe God loves those moments when we do without him” (viii). And, in the end “what makes these characters Jewish in spite of everything is this awareness of their frailty: nobody’s there for them. And this isn’t talking only about the absence of God, but also of their social and political vulnerability” (ix). For Sfar, that is what makes a Jew, not religious observance. Jewish nervousness for Sfar is a good thing since it prevents arrogance. And this plays out in his story.

The two former yeshiva boys save the life of a Gypsy who is being hanged. He criticizes Yaakov’s banjo playing and wants to learn Jewish songs (76–78). Vincenzo is good with the violin it turns out, and Tshokola, the Gypsy, knows something about music, too. Jews and Gypsies are both outsiders in eastern Europe and so they get along well here. Yaakov begins to learn the chords under the tutelage of Tshokola (82). The murdered band, unbeknownst to the bandleader of that band, who does not know about the two yeshiva boys yet—this is a different plot line—is clearly going to be reconstituted, with Vincenzo, Yaakov, and Tshokola as its musicians, at some point in the future.

The bandleader and Chava come into Odessa, a city with a Jewish population of two hundred thousand, a substantial proportion of the entire population. Here the narration, provided by quotations from the Jewish writer Isaac Babel, offers a poetic and startling glimpse—fat, bourgeois men lying on porches in white socks while their wives make love to students of law and medicine; a place where much of the population is Jewish, but many Jews live in an impoverished ghetto; a place where men hang around coffeehouses looking to earn a ruble or two but where there is no money to be made; a place where the city government is corrupt; a place with ships from all over the world but a place that is slowly fading in importance, energy, and

finances. All of this melancholy and yet very striking narration surrounds Chava's effort to get the bandmaster to fall for her (66–69).

The two story lines come together in a night club in Odessa where the band leader is playing the piano and Chava is singing. Vicenzo, Yaakov, and Tshokola jump up on the stage and provide backup. Tshokola tells a "Jewish" story that has Gypsy and Christian parts to it, and the audience loves it. As Sfar himself comments, "They are Jewish voices, but they don't speak only to Jews" (xii), which can apply not only to Tshokola's adoption of the songs but to the audience's as well. As in *The Rabbi's Cat*, Sfar is clearly speaking of amity between groups. The only dissonance occurs when Yaakov shows the bandleader a clarinet that he says he inherited but which the bandleader recognizes as his own, lost when his band got killed, and there is almost a fight between them. But a rich old lady comes up and asks them all to play at her house and that saves the day.

Additional volumes continue the story but they are not yet available in English. The main message, however, is already clearly discernible: as Sfar puts it, "The fact that klezmer is still played today and with such gusto, and with so many non-Jews on stage and in the audience—which is great—says that plenty of people are willing to carry a bit of Jewish memory on behalf of the Jews. And as a result, klezmer is no longer music that is played by Jews for Jews" (xii).

Sfar's characters each achieve individuality, and the combination of their eccentric ways and the background of eastern European dangers and delights makes this an exceptional story. His artistry is unique in this work—colorful as always, but more impressionistic than in *The Rabbi's Cat*, particularly with regard to the faces. He seems to show that art dominates and that being able to create art takes precedence over other issues. As opposed to the rigidity of Orthodox belief, the world of music is free, open, and easy. And yet, at the same time in this story, this musical world is very Jewish. Tshokola learns Jewish songs, Chava sings in Yiddish, and Vincenzo and Yaakov express themselves in a way they were not able to do in their respective yeshivot. Sfar's attraction to a graphic novel about music seems to have arisen from the challenge such a work presents. As he puts it, "The idea of doing a musical graphic novel appeals to me hugely, because the graphic novel is a world of silence," and "To read a comic, not only do you need an active imagination, but you must also accept a whole array of conventions that are inherent to the genre. Whereas a spectator at the movies is a lazy creature that is only asked to plop its buttocks down in a seat and consume what is served," people "who prefer graphic novels or the theater are harder workers. These people accept that one actor can do all the voices, pretend not to see the back-



4.4. Joann Sfar, *Klezmer. Book One*, 98. The beautiful runaway Chava sings a Yiddish song, "As Beautiful as the Moon," in a cabaret in Odessa.

stage area, believe in the masks that are waved in front of them, enter into a succession of events governed by a clock that is not the timing of our world. They truly are good customers" (xiii). And in fact the musical scenes in this story are particularly lively: Chava's face lights up as she sings (98–99), and she is happier than ever (100) after the audience likes her singing. As the group plays together, Vincenzo and Yaakov are clearly having a wonderful time (100) too. Sfar's use of loose panel borders, bright colors, faces with big eyes, and musical notes helps bring out the free flow of music. One could say that the entire work is indeed a musical composition (fig. 4.4).

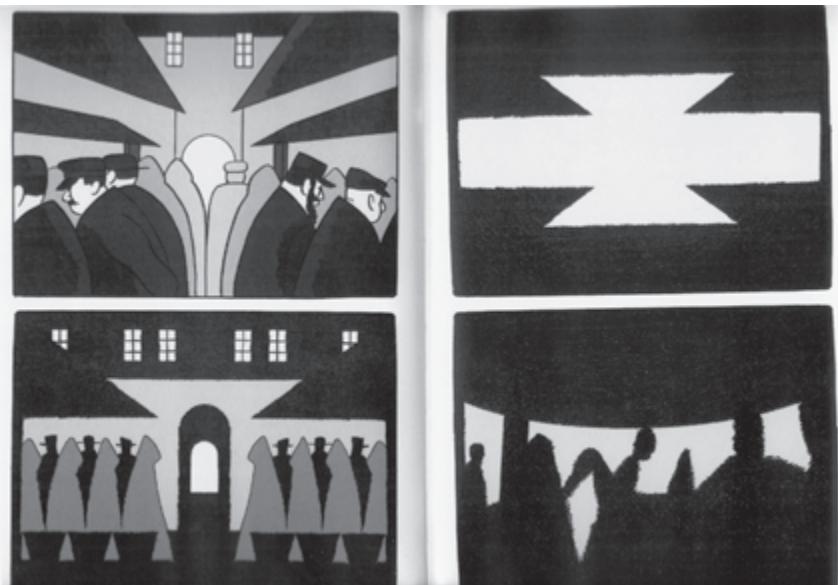
James Sturm, an American perhaps best known for his *Golem's Mighty Swing* about a team of Jewish baseball players (which is analyzed in another chapter in this book) and for his founding of the Center for Cartoon Stud-

ies in Vermont, has a darker message than Sfar, about survival itself, in *Market Day*, which is set in an early twentieth-century European shtetl. An artist who makes rugs is forced to confront economic realities when he has to support his family. As George Gene Gustines writes, “In ‘Market Day,’ . . . Mendleman, a Jewish rug maker in Eastern Europe during the early 1900s, experiences a momentous twenty-four hours. Mendleman, who fashions his wares by hand, realizes change is in the air (cheaply made goods are beginning to rule the day), and one of the many strengths of this graphic novel is its ability to convey the rug maker’s highs and lows during this transition.”<sup>4</sup>

Sturm’s colors in *Market Day* begin with black and brown and gray, and his protagonist, Mendleman, invokes worry and fear. Here is a story that seems to inspire foreboding from the beginning as Mendleman sets off to market with his rugs to sell, not sure of what he might find there and worried about leaving his pregnant wife, Rachel, behind. But there is a colorful interlude—when the protagonist thinks of the rugs he will create, and brighter colors come into the picture. It is clear that he is an artist who dreams of creating ever more vibrant rugs. A two-page spread shows him transforming some observations into abstract rug designs (fig. 4.5). After he arrives in the marketplace, a friendly rabbi appears and praises him for his work. Even the market itself, although the protagonist fears what might happen there, is at first portrayed in bright colors.

But now Mendleman’s foreboding becomes real. When he tries to sell his rugs to his usual merchant outlet, A. Finkler & Sons, it turns out that Mr. Finkler is no longer the owner—he has retired and moved closer to his grandchildren. His son-in-law now runs the business. The problem is that Finkler was something of a connoisseur and always knew good handmade merchandise from bad and sold only top-quality items, whether it was furniture or rugs or mezuzahs. But his son-in-law, the new owner, pays only half of what a furniture maker who accompanies Mendleman expects, and he tells Mendleman that he is overstocked on rugs. This is all very darkly and drably portrayed. He does not know, and it would not matter to him, that Mendleman’s wife is pregnant and that Mendleman must provide for her and for his new family to-be. Mendleman tries to sell his rugs to other merchants but no one is interested in their quality and true worth. Jews in this story are not helping fellow Jews survive.

This is perhaps the usual story of the starving artist, except that it is set among shtetl folk in eastern Europe, and the general poverty contrasts sharply with the beauty of Mendleman’s rug designs. The setting gives the story a special and unique reality. Beyond Chagall’s paintings, one does not usually think of an artist in a shtetl because of the difficulty of everyday life



4.5. James Sturm, *Market Day*. In Sturm's striking rendering, the Jewish rug maker's imagination transforms reality into abstract designs.

in such a place, and yet there must have been many craftsman-artists there, working on handmade goods. In the marketplace, Mendleman sees "the suffering" of "the miserable present" and smells its stench. Yet at the same time, the tale is universal. The idea that cheaply made goods replace quality and that artists and artisans must compromise with the world is scarcely limited to eastern Europe in the early 1900s. Rather, it speaks to us today and perhaps that is the most remarkable thing about this work—how its Jewish setting long ago and far away applies to the world today, including a United States in the throes of a serious economic downturn from 2008 on. This work raises questions for all readers about how they will manage to survive. And Sturm also shows how the beauty of the artist's imagination transforms even a drab present if unfortunately without any reward for doing so.

Mendleman's friend Leff tells him about a new emporium an hour south of the market, and off he goes to try to sell his rugs there. He is offered far less than his eight rugs are worth but takes it, having no choice. He also must sell his mule and wagon. But worst of all, he decides to sell his loom, and blames Finkler for having him imagine that he could actually live by making high-quality and artistically pleasing goods. As he moves through the landscape of the empty market, a shadow with his head down, the despair

of the genuine artist in all times and all places is understood. Few people appreciate and can pay for quality work at any time and place, Sturm seems to be saying. Mendleman stumbles on a group of drunkards who allow him to partake of a bottle with them. They descend into ribald revelry even as he starts to imagine a rug made up of fire and water, the elements near the bridge they are under. Here Sturm makes a mistake—however intentional—by unleashing from the mouths of the drunken men a host of Anglo-Saxon dirty words for female sexual organs. While such men at such a time may well have discussed female sexual parts, some Yiddishisms would have done better here. The Anglo-Saxon is too blunt and too contemporary, although Sturm may well have felt that it would make the story more understandable to a contemporary American reader. But this outburst pulls the reader away from Sturm's emphasis on Mendleman, the struggling artist, into the realm of stark vulgarity and an unhistorical vulgarity involving contemporary America at that. When, however, Sturm has the furniture maker give the finger to Finkler's son-in-law earlier in the story, this gesture, which has its origins in the ancient world, would likely be known to a Yiddish speaker in early twentieth century Europe as well as in America today. So this gesture's use by Sturm, while also starkly vulgar, may at least be historically accurate.

Mendleman warns himself to guard against self-deception and delusions of grandeur. He must realize his true situation—that he cannot live off of his art. He is angry but he can do nothing about it. He even allows himself to wish that he would have no family to take care of and is attracted by thoughts of a merchant's daughter whom he saw in the marketplace; and he immediately condemns himself for "such monstrous depraved thoughts."

He falls asleep and is found by two men from the village who are out looking for him. Mendleman is "a citizen of two nations that are suddenly at war," meaning that he wants to continue as an artist but that he knows he cannot do so because he must face the real world. He will do what he must do to support his family, and he hopes that he will not turn back to genuine art and betray his need to live in the world of reality. Again, this is an unpleasant story that could have been told in many times and places. Artists must compromise with the world in order to live. Whether Mendleman can do that is unknown because Sturm only lets the reader know Mendleman's sacrifice, in order to enable his family to survive, not what happens after the resolution to give up art.

Sturm easily imagines himself into Mendleman's life because as an artist he must know about this struggle himself. Set in the ghetto, with few resources available to Mendleman to try to alleviate his situation, it is particu-

larly stark and sad. Sturm includes several pages of shots of landscapes and roads where nothing happens. These arouse a feeling of emptiness, which matches Mendleman's situation. While Sturm's silent, evocative landscapes do not have the power of *Vladimirka Road*, which was painted by the great Lithuanian Jewish landscape artist Isaak Levitan and portrays the endless, heartbreaking, and hopeless road to Siberian imprisonment, they still make a stark impression. Another interesting feature of *Market Day* is that no one in the entire story appears particularly handsome or beautiful. Sturm tells the truth that most of humanity is ordinary; moreover, in *Market Day* few people have any particular reason to rejoice. They are at the market doing their shopping or selling, and except for children playing in one single panel, there is no particular joy in these activities. The whole story assumes a dark tone, which fits Mendleman's mood and situation, except when he is imagining the design of a new rug. At the end of the story when he disappears into his nondescript cottage among others just like it, the uniformity imposed by man's economic system, which helps crush creativity, is felt. In contrast to Sfar's bright colors, which shine not only in North Africa but in eastern Europe, here is only a rather solemn darkness. And this is a dark tale, in which an artist is forced by economic pressures to abandon his art. Mendleman will retain his Jewish identity but lose his personal identity as an artist, and that is a somber event whether it takes place in a ghetto a hundred years ago or in the modern world, which is what Sturm seems to be saying.

The previous stories, by Eisner, Sfar, and Sturm, are set in eastern and western Europe of the early 1900s and North Africa in the 1930s and re-introduce a lost world, which, however, still seems to have relevance to the present world thanks to the deft handling of their creators. Vittorio Giardino's *A Jew in Communist Prague* also offers a retrospective view, but this time concerning the years of Communism in eastern Europe after World War II. It speaks in the present through Giardino's powerful realistic drawing style—which is much the opposite of both Sfar's musical, relatively loose style and Sturm's silent, evocative landscapes—and is in the “ligne claire” tradition pioneered by the Belgian comics artist Hergé. In a very clear fashion, Giardino's style in art and writing portrays the trauma of the Communist period for everyone who lived in eastern Europe and for Jews in particular. Fortunately things have changed since the Gorbachev revolution of the 1980s, but Giardino's work is a forceful reminder of the many problems of the previous years in such societies. He also focuses on the politics of the pre–World War II period in his Max Friedman adventure stories set in Hungary and Spain—for instance, *No Pasarán* and *Orient Gateway*—but he does not there achieve the depth that he does with the story of young Jonas

Finkel, a Jew growing up during the 1950s in the restrictive, dangerous society of Prague, which had a Jewish population of approximately ten thousand. For this work, Giardino has understandably won a prize at the *Angoulême* festival in France and another at the San Diego Comicon.

Volume 1, *Loss of Innocence*, which is very appropriately titled, begins during a picnic in the mountains with Jonas's father telling him how cicadas cannot stand being locked up in cages and so they die, and also how maybe one day the family will go to Greece, as he was able to do when younger, to see the sights there (4). This scene sets the idea of imprisonment and restriction in place from the beginning, and immediately after it in the text (although the caption tells us that it is two months later, in October), when they are back in their apartment in Prague, Jonas's father is arrested at four thirty in the morning without any warning (5). Giardino captures the horror of that event as Jonas watches the policemen barge in and take away his father. In December, Jonas is involved in a fight with a boy at school because the boy has called him a "swine," presumably because it is known that his father is in prison for antisocial activity but also quite possibly because he is Jewish, too (6). Numerous constrictions begin to tighten around Jonas and his mother, just as prison has eliminated his father from their lives.

All of the settings including the buildings are very realistic throughout and give the story a feel of authenticity especially if the reader has been in Prague. The appearance of the Finkels' apartment, with the cracked walls outside and inside and simple furniture and stove (7), show the reality of life in Communist Prague from a material point of view, just as the arrest of his father without warrant and trial shows the antidemocratic reality. The straightforward honesty of Giardino's style enhances the story's feeling of truthfulness throughout the three volumes (fig. 4.6).

For Jonas the tightening restrictions steadily increase. His best friend's father tells his wife that Jonas must not be their son Jiri's friend anymore because they could be arrested, too, if the police think that there is any connection between the families (8). Despite Jonas's teacher's protest that he is one of the smartest students, Jonas is refused college admission because in the headmaster's words, they want to establish a classless society and Finkel is the child of "reactionary capitalists" (10). Clearly this is an excuse, and Jonas is being turned down because of his father's situation, again possibly compounded by his Jewish ethnicity. Jonas's mother, Edith, sees an older lawyer, who tells her that her husband has charges of espionage against him, but that he himself has stopped practicing law, and he castigates the present Communist system for imposing retroactive laws. He cautions Edith that she won't be able to help her husband but that she could actually lose him if



4.6. Vittorio Giardino, *A Jew in Communist Prague*, 1:7. Giardino's realistic style reveals the shabbiness of the Prague apartment of Jonas and his mother.

she is not careful. She is being shadowed by government agents, who watch her emerge from the lawyer's house (14). Clearly the Finkel family is now under siege. Yet the sun shines and the days go on, as if normally, in Giardino's straightforward and very precise rendering.

Edith is young and attractive when this story begins but she ages during it. Her friend Hanka does stick by her, while other so-called friends avoid her. Meanwhile, at the Department of Security they discuss Edith's visit to the lawyer and the letters she has sent them about her husband. She and Jonas are given a notice of eviction from their apartment because her bank account has been frozen so she's not able to pay the rent. And the party representative, Commissioner Muda, tells Edith that she must stop writing letters about her husband to various governmental agencies, and that henceforth anything that she has to say about her husband's situation must be directed only to Muda (37). While these political events could have happened to anyone, Jew or non-Jew, who was accused by the party, the fact that the Finkel family is Jewish causes additional trouble: for instance, because she is Jewish and of Austrian descent, the Department of Security considers accusing her of "cosmopolitan Zionism" (21).

Jonas in the meantime loses his job as a delivery boy for a seamstress because of a sexual episode with an older woman who falsely accuses him of attacking her when her husband walks in on them (32, 35–36). His and his mother's new apartment shows the deterioration of their economic situation; it is even more bleak than the first one, with more cracked walls, bare lightbulbs, and only a curtain to divide rooms (42). But the persecution does not let up. Security comes and takes Edith for an interview in the middle of a tutoring lesson that she is giving. The security man who is in charge of

watching her now prevents her from tutoring; she is only allowed a factory job. She comments that it is odd that the party—which supposedly champions labor—thinks that a factory job is some kind of servitude (44) compared to other types of work, and the security man threatens her for that ironic comment. But amid this misery at the end of volume 1, a former prisoner comes to tell Edith that her husband is alive, and he even brings her a letter from him written on cigarette packs. The former prisoner's other news is that Jonas's father has received a sentence of ten years. The prisoner looks suitably gaunt, and the setting near the river where they speak is slightly faded. Edith herself looks a bit older than in previous pictures (44). She tries to encourage Jonas by telling him that ten years is a long time but that his father's getting out one day is what matters. However, the stark look on Jonas's face and the tone of the whole scene tell the story—this will be hard. Jonas has certainly lost whatever innocence he had.

Volume 1 appeared in 1994 and volume 2, *Adolescence*, in 1997, which gives some idea of how diligently Giardino labors on his drawings. Every drawing, and especially those in or near buildings, records every crack in a wall, every exposed pipe, every stain. This, in addition to the seriousness of the story and the intense characterization of the protagonists' faces and even clothing, is what brings it to life and makes it convincing in a way that few other works are able to do. The images of Jonas's father were positive, and his mother does her very best to keep her morale in view of their difficult circumstances. The innocent family is under the shadow of an oppressive regime and no matter what they do trouble awaits them. And, as mentioned before, that they are Jewish adds to their problems.

As Giardino moves further into the story, one feels for Jonas and Edith more and more as the difficulty of their lives as the family of an enemy of the people is shown. The rigidity of the system and the run-down look of Prague in the 1950s are convincingly rendered. Jonas's mother is allowed to go on the day shift after two years of night work at the factory, and Jonas is given an apprenticeship in a construction crew (6, 8). They are finally officially informed, two years after his father's arrest, that he has been sentenced to ten years with no right to correspond, although they learned this earlier from the former prisoner. But since they are both working, things look up a bit for Jonas and his mother, at least as much as that is possible in their circumstances. News of Stalin's death in 1953 leads Jonas's mother to hope for change, and in 1954 Dr. Finkel is allowed to correspond with his family and even to receive two packages a year from them. Jonas accepts an apprenticeship with Mr. Slavek, a sympathetic plumber, with whom he works at the

construction yard (9). Things are getting better, but there can be no getting around the fact that Jonas's father has been removed from his family and put in jail for no reason; and the pain is always there.

Giardino always keeps the reader aware of relevant contemporary events such as the Slansky trial—during which the second in charge of the Czech Communist Party and thirteen other officials, eleven of them Jewish, were accused of Trotskyism and Zionism, put on trial in 1952, and executed for supposed disloyalty to Stalin—and the demotion of Stalin by the Twentieth Party Congress from an all-seeing genius to a near criminal after his death in 1953. At the Czechoslovakian Party Congress, a speaker praises the Russians for “self-critical courage” for the Twentieth Party Congress’s pronouncements and proclaims that while individuals make mistakes, the party never does so (18–19). In the meantime, Jonas has been offered a job at the bookstore that his father used to frequent. The only question is whether the Security Department will allow him to take it. Mr. Pinkel, the bookseller, tells him that he has indeed been allowed to take the job, with the condition that Mr. Pinkel keeps the Security Department informed of Jonas’s activities (21). By stating this outright, Mr. Pinkel reveals himself as a true friend of Jonas and an opponent of the dictatorial state—a position that one would expect or at least hope for from a bookstore owner and intellectual who remembers Jonas’s father fondly. The name Pinkel, like Finkel, may well be Jewish but this is not stated outright.

As Jonas comes to tell his mother about his good fortune and to ask her to celebrate at Kralik’s, the bar where he always goes with Slavek, she has visibly aged (22). Clearly, several years have passed since the end of volume 1, when the released prisoner came to bring her news of her husband. Not only has she had to pass more years without her husband and do hard manual labor in a factory, but she cannot celebrate Jonas’s good fortune on this occasion because she would lose her position in a long line at a store, where she wants to buy some wool so she can sew his father some socks that she will send to him in prison. So even at this happy moment, the reality of their situation is ever present, and Jonas’s disappointed face shows that (23). Giardino is very hard on, as well as very accurate about, the realities of life in Communist eastern Europe, with long lines of people constantly in front of many stores. In a restaurant, the Communist official in charge of the Finkel file, Muda, is trying to make time with the bartending waitress, but she refuses his advances while continuing to address him as “Commissioner” (24). At the same time, Jonas meets his friend Slavek for a drink in that same restaurant. Even if Jonas does not know Muda (although his mother does), this

vignette highlights the web always surrounding Jonas and that Communist officials, too, are interested in their own needs and are not particularly scrupulous about achieving them.

While working for the bookseller Jonas meets his old friend Jiri, whose parents forced him to dissociate from Jonas. They greet each other warmly, and Jiri introduces him to his friends, who belong to an intellectual reading group, the Odradek Club—named for a strange character in Kafka’s story “The Cares of a Family Man”—a meeting of which he is invited to attend (28). Mr. Pinkel notices that Jonas likes one of the girls in the group, although Jonas does not acknowledge that. In the meantime, Commissioner Muda orders Jonas to keep account of Pinkel. Just as Pinkel told him about being told to spy on Jonas, so Jonas tells Mr. Pinkel, who is unmoved and unsurprised, and responds that everyone is supposed to spy on everyone in their country, a truism about life in Communist eastern Europe (31–32). He asks Jonas to put a bunch of T. D. Lysenko’s works on a high shelf, almost out of sight, because then no one will access them, which is what Mr. Pinkel wants. He knows that Lysenko’s fraudulent work contradicting Mendel’s genetic theories is favored by the Communists because they do not want to recognize genetic but only social influences on people, since that fits their ideology. At the park meeting of the Odradek Society, Jonas learns that the group reads “everything that’s forbidden” (36), so this is a group that would be regarded as subversive by the authorities had they known about it. Jonas gets angry when the girl he likes reads a poem by K. Simonov about waiting for someone, since it reminds him of his father, revealing how sensitive he is on that subject. The girl, Tatiana, comes and apologizes and says she did not know about his father’s imprisonment. Nonetheless, he argues with her, and she points out that he’s not the only one in the world who suffers (40). Clearly Jonas has not come to terms with his father’s imprisonment. He talks to Slavek at Kralik’s and admits how much his father’s absence has caused him and his mother to sacrifice, even stating that there are times when he wished his father were dead because it would be all over (42). This is a very realistic and frightening touch that shows Giardino’s honesty in imagining this situation; even family members turn against one another, at least in their thoughts, because of what the regime subjects them to. Slavek tries to console him but a passerby—undoubtedly a party member or member of the government—objects that Slavek seems to be complaining about things as they are. Slavek says no, things are just as they ought to be (42). He clearly knows how to get by in Communist Prague, even by contradicting his own honest opinions. But his true positive feelings for Jonas and Jonas’s suffering are always clear when they are alone.

As volume 2 ends, Jonas apologizes to Tatiana for arguing with her, and she says that she has already forgotten the incident (46). But he can never seem to catch her alone, without her friends present. He now feels closer to her than ever despite his anxiety about the incident with her. The volume ends as he reads Kafka's brief poetic vision "At Night," and repeats its final line, "Someone must be present," before he goes to bed (48). This line seems to indicate that he knows that he must record events or at least be aware of what is going on around him as a testimony when others in his society are asleep. Jonas's adolescence then has flowered into a possible romance with Tatiana, and he has begun reading and thinking. He is on the verge of rebellion, which is the next step in the odyssey on which Giardino sends him.

So volume 2 ends on a hopeful note, in which Jonas seems about to exert some control over his life, at least intellectually, in place of feeling helpless, and to embark on a romance. At the beginning of volume 3, *Rebellion*, Jonas learns from Jiri that Tatiana is the daughter of the Russian business attaché and that the family has been in Czechoslovakia for six years. He also learns her last name and sends her flowers. In the bookstore, Jonas learns that Mr. Pinkel knows a poet, Blodek, who has been thrown out of the writers' guild for dissidence and forced to do manual labor, and that Mr. Pinkel even knew Kafka himself. Pinkel feels that the city has deteriorated since that time and that like Blodek, whose name and work have virtually been erased and who has been forced into the job of cleaning rail lines, all "good writers clean rail lines" (14) now instead of writing and having their works published.

At the next meeting of the Odradek group, the members run away when some militia see them, and as he runs, Zdenek, the group's leader, loses a volume of what turns out to be Arthur Koestler's writing. This will be dangerous should the militiamen find it because they will start investigating where the volume came from, since Koestler, as an anti-Communist, is a banned author. But on the positive side, while Jonas and Tatiana hide from the militiamen, they kiss (22).

Tatiana's mother is determined to learn who Tatiana's admirer who sent the flowers is and follows her and finds out about Jonas. In the meantime, Tatiana's father has checked on Jonas and tells her mother that their relationship must be broken off because it is dangerous for their whole family. Tatiana tells Jonas about this in Prague's Jewish cemetery (34), a famous site which is very convincingly rendered by Giardino. Tatiana makes a wish that they will be together and sticks it on a gravestone because of the belief in Prague that such a wish will be fulfilled, even though she's not Jewish (35), as Jonas points out. She will not give Jonas up, but they must be more careful about meeting. This shows Giardino's belief in the good hearts of some non-

Jews, including especially Tatiana and Slavek, who has never cared about Jonas's origins or his father's so-called crime.

In the meantime, the Koestler volume has been found by the militia and Commissioner Muda is told by his superior to find out who translated and published "this filth" (28). It turns out that Pinkel's friend Martinek is the translator of some of the forbidden literature that has been appearing in Prague including that possessed and read by the Odradek group. Tatiana and Jonas overhear a conversation between Pinkel and Martinek about this as they hide out in the bookstore at night for a secret romantic rendezvous. Pinkel supports and helps Martinek because as he tells Martinek, "I am only literature, I neither want nor can be anything else" as Kafka said (40). Mr. Martinek is Zdenek's father. Danger grows for all concerned as the bookstore seems to be under surveillance.

Mr. Pinkel confesses to Jonas that there are ten or more cases of forbidden writings in the basement, and Jonas says he knew that. Pinkel thinks that he is under surveillance rather than Jonas and asks if Jonas is "brave enough" to take these writings to his home. Pinkel comments ironically that he knows he will be arrested but it will be an honor because "there aren't many countries where literature is held in such high esteem" (47). Giardino's contempt for the dictatorial system of eastern European Communism is again clear. Pinkel is indeed arrested but in the meantime Jonas and his friends including Slavek have hidden the books in a warehouse.

When Jonas returns home, he learns that his father has been given an additional ten years of imprisonment, and his mother despairs that he will ever get out. And Tatiana writes Jonas that her parents have taken her to Moscow to get her away from him but still sends him her love (55–56). At the end of the volume, Jonas goes to Kralik with Jiri to get drunk. Nothing has turned out well—Tatiana is gone, Pinkel is arrested, and, worst of all, his father has been given another ten years of imprisonment. All of this except, perhaps, Pinkel's arrest is because of Jonas's father's arrest, which seems at least in part because he is Jewish. Pinkel too may be Jewish. So what is Giardino saying?

In his subtle way, Giardino is showing the never-ending constriction resulting from living in a dictatorial society in which the government considers Jews to be separate from the rest of the population because they are seen as a distinct ethnic group, and not quite "Czech." Jonas never practices his religion, and the closest Giardino gets to showing any possible religious observance practiced by Jonas's family is the inclusion of a menorah in Jonas's apartment in one single panel in volume 3 (17). The Prague Jewish cemetery and the synagogue near it are city landmarks and tourist destinations;

they are safe relics of the past and useful to the government for touristic purposes, although some of the population, like Tatiana, half believe in the superstition that placing a piece of paper with a wish written on it on a Jewish tombstone may result in the wish being granted. For the government however and for all practical purposes, religion—including both Christianity and Judaism—is dead after Darwin, as the teacher informs the class (36) in which Tatiana studies. So there is no possibility of any formal belief for any of the characters in the story, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, and a belief in the spiritual and intellectual value of literature seems to take its place. That is the one value that remains, it seems, even after all hope is gone and Dr. Finkel and Mr. Pinkel are arrested—which is symbolic because both are great believers in the value of books. Kafka is Giardino's god and the god of the young, free-thinking people in Prague. In terms of belief and identity, Jonas is left with Kafka, who symbolizes the contrast between the past, when Kafka's nightmares about society were literary, and the present, in which Kafka's worst nightmares have come true. Like Kafka, he is a Jew and an outsider in Czech society, whether of the past or the present.

No survey of the graphic novel dealing with the Jewish experience in Europe would be complete without an analysis of David Mairowitz and Robert Crumb's *Introducing Kafka*. With text by Mairowitz and illustrations of Kafka's life and graphic adaptations of Kafka's stories by Crumb, this is an important study of a man, however strange, who in many ways typifies the European Jewish experience in terms of both identity and belief. Many of Kafka's stories have been consistently interpreted as having Jewish content: *The Trial*, for instance, has been interpreted as being about the anti-Semitic ritual murder charge (known as "blood libel") leveled at the Jews, according to which they are said to make matzo with the blood of Christian children. In *The Trial*, a man is falsely accused of a crime of which he has no knowledge. *The Metamorphosis*'s Gregor Samsa has been interpreted as someone who has reverted to Orthodox Judaism and who is, therefore, regarded as a cockroach by his assimilated and indeed converted Christian family.<sup>5</sup> And many of Kafka's parables seem to be about man's relationship with God, which in Kafka's view is problematic to say the least. Moreover, Kafka admired the strong ethnicity of the Jews of eastern Europe while finding it difficult to maintain his own. He is therefore something of an archetype of the conflicted modern Jew, who hovers somewhere between belief and identification with the larger group.

In Mairowitz and Crumb's biography, many of these traits appear in the text and illustrations. Mairowitz writes that

Kafka's relation to his Jewish origins remained ambiguous, except towards the end of his life, when he seriously dreamed of escaping to Palestine. He certainly showed little sign . . . of any interest in Judaism as a religion (or in religion itself, for that matter). He did, however, show a strong intellectual interest in Hasidism. . . . What excited Kafka, and surely had an impact on his stories, was the mystical, anti-rational side of Hasidism, where earthly reality was continuous with unearthly reality, where mystical value was to be found in the details of everyday life, and where God was everywhere and easily contactable. (18–19)

Crumb's illustration for this passage shows an unhappy young Kafka with a yarmulke on his head, sitting on a bench during a religious service (18).

The arrival of a Yiddish troupe of actors from eastern Europe fascinated Kafka because of their folkloric and mystical plays, and he took an interest in Yiddish, according to Mairowitz. Crumb's illustration shows the troupe performing an obviously fantastic play featuring a distraught woman and an animal the size of a person (20). Mairowitz also makes a point about anti-Semitism in Prague, especially the Hilsner case, in which a Jew was charged with ritual murder, and Crumb's illustration shows a shocked young Kafka reading an anti-Semitic poem that has been distributed in the street (21). As a result, Kafka often was infected with self-hatred according to Mairowitz and was unable sometimes to see himself as part of the Jewish people, and Crumb's illustrations show an obviously anguished Kafka trying to deal with that (25). But when he begins to become a Zionist, he is influenced by the Zionist movement's demand for physical manliness rather than what it termed the weakness of the ghetto Jew, who studied to the detriment of his body (62); Crumb's illustration showing Kafka reading about this portrays an obviously embarrassed Kafka, who feels himself an intellectual and an anxious one at that and not a good physical specimen (especially because of his incipient tuberculosis) (62).

The greatest love of his life was for the Christian woman Milena Jesenska, to whom he felt far closer than to his previous Jewish girlfriends. But as the wife of a friend, she was unavailable to him. However, toward the end of his life he went to Berlin with Dora Dymant, a Jew from an Orthodox family. Although she freed herself from that background, Kafka began studying Judaism and the Talmud because of her. They dreamed of moving to Palestine, according to Mairowitz (139). But Kafka's illness—tuberculosis of the throat—intervened, and he died, after having composed the story "The Hunger Artist" (which is wonderfully illustrated by Crumb), as a result of his pain and inability to eat (142–53). After Kafka's death in 1926 and with

the advent of the Nazis, Milena and his sisters were sent to concentration camps, where they died. And Kafka has become a permanent part of world literature and Czech history. An illustration shows Mairowitz and Crumb, both sporting Kafka T-shirts, in contemporary Prague, where they traveled to research this volume (165).

As good as the text of the biography is, perhaps its strongest feature is Crumb's adaptation of Kafka's stories. There is nothing of specifically Jewish belief or identification in these adaptations, but Crumb's powerful sequential art adaptations, using panels, are one with his illustrations of Kafka's life and show the continuity between his life and his art. All of the stories Crumb illustrates show guilt, suffering, frustrated hopes, sometimes sexuality, and often death. It is clear that Crumb has been influenced by Kafka's life, including his conflicted Judaism, when making these illustrations in his usual black-and-white, realistic, and powerful style. The work concludes with Crumb's illustration of Kafka's role as a tourist attraction in Prague, with many places, including McKafka Hamburgers, named for the strange and reclusive Kafka (174–75). This book gives a sense of the assimilated European Jew of the early twentieth century attempting to come to terms with his situation and not being able to do so successfully except in his writing. Kafka, according to Mairowitz and Crumb, cannot come to terms either with Jewish belief or identity.

In their fictional representations, Sfar, Sturm, and Giardino each expresses the problems of Jewish belief and identity in his own way. Sfar sees Orthodox belief in both *The Rabbi's Cat* and *Klezmer* as too constricting and makes a case for religious tolerance between the Jewish and non-Jewish communities and even within the Jewish community itself. Sturm investigates the constriction of the economic system on the life of artists, especially but not only among Jews in a ghetto setting, demonstrating that no matter who one is, it is hard to make a living as an artist. Giardino examines what happens in a world where the government controls both religious belief and identity and can decide what thoughts are to be allowed and not allowed. While all three present the problems from a uniquely Jewish angle, they express a need for freedom for all people. Mairowitz and Crumb—like Kafka himself—show the difficulty for Jews dealing with their position in European society in the early twentieth century. America, too, presents a conundrum to the Jews as immigrants, but the resolution is far more possible and positive—as will be seen in the next chapter.

## 5

## The American Immigrant Experience

Since many of the most important Jewish graphic novelists are the children of immigrants, the theme of Jews as immigrants to the United States has understandably featured heavily in much of their work. Whether set in New York or Cleveland, the idea of Jews having to find their way into American society and to assimilate or to hold on to their identity and their beliefs as defined by traditional eastern European Judaism has remained a topic to which these creators continually return. Will Eisner, Harvey Pekar, and Martin Lemelman all write graphic novels centered on the urban Jewish experience, often beginning with the experience of immigrants, which is clearly based on their own personal knowledge. Pekar's and Lemelman's autobiographical works, and Eisner's strongly autobiographically based fictional work, also parallel the rise of the graphic novel into a force in literature generally. There are also powerful purely fictional works about immigration. Leela Corman writes about the late 1890s and early twentieth century in New York in her *Unterzakhn* ("Underthings") as she tells the fictional story of twin sisters, one of whom becomes a prostitute and then an actress. The story has something in common with Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, which tells of a woman living in sin who becomes a successful actress. Corman's work discusses a side of the Jewish immigrant experience that is often untold but one in which—unlike the story of Sister Carrie—Jewish identity and anti-Semitism play a role. Ben Katchor tells a fictional story of Jewish immigration to America during the earlier nineteenth century, making the point that the melding of the Jews and America into one unit worked both ways, as Jews were influenced by their new country and their new country was influenced by them. But it was not an easy journey, according to him.

Will Eisner is famous for his comic strip *The Spirit*, his work as a teacher of comics art, and his pioneering use of the term "graphic novel." Some have even called his book *A Contract with God* the first graphic novel, although others bestow that title on earlier works by other creators. But his connec-

tion with Jewish topics in the comics came relatively late in his career, and his relation to Jewish belief—if not identity—is tenuous. He writes in his introduction to *The Contract with God Trilogy* that his parents were neither Orthodox nor Reform Jews, and he has shown little actual belief in God in his works—rather the opposite, especially after the death of his daughter from leukemia (xvi). Like many Jews, Eisner, who by his own account did not step into a synagogue regularly after his Bar Mitzvah,<sup>1</sup> is more concerned with the negativity of anti-Semitism than with the positive element of religious belief. He writes in his preface to *To the Heart of the Storm* that “perhaps the most indelible of my memories of those years was the insidious prejudice that permeated the world,”<sup>2</sup> which is not surprising given the advent of the Holocaust and the anti-Semitism that he apparently experienced growing up. To some degree, he reflects the view of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that without anti-Semitism there might be no Jews. Eisner’s *Contract with God* seems to show that even the religiously observant have no contract with God, so how much less are nonreligious Jews connected to God? The Orthodox Jew Frimme Hersh’s adopted daughter in *A Contract with God*<sup>3</sup> dies for no reason and so does Hersh just when he is about to lead a life of charity and renewed religious commitment and hope. Also, as Jacob Shtarkah, the protagonist of *A Life Force*, part II of *The Contract with God Trilogy*, learns, man is more like a cockroach than a noble creature, so in what way is he made in the image of God? This is a completely secular view that seems to indicate that there is no God—only human struggle in a meaningless world in which religious ideas are a refuge for the foolish or deluded. According to Eisner, religion *per se* is of no particular worth to humanity and even breeds delusions that God cares about individuals. Eisner’s view is that the only thing that separates Jews from other people is not a belief in the God of Israel but rather the struggle against anti-Semitism, as shown in *The Heart of the Storm* and in *The Plot*, Eisner’s historical graphic novel about the origin of the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which was analyzed in the previous chapter. Eisner denied that he was a Jewish writer in that he is simply, like Frank McCourt<sup>4</sup> or Faulkner, writing about what he knows, namely Jews as an ethnic group, and insofar as he does not see a positive worth in Judaism itself, he is not a religiously “Jewish writer”—he is an ethnic writer who writes largely about the immigrant era of his own group and of his life growing up as the son of immigrants. His lack of any religious faith is bleak. But he does believe in the ability of sequential art to expose his opinions about life to the world and to do so dramatically. So Eisner is perhaps the prime representative of the secular, left-leaning Jew who has little use for ideas of God but who does believe that because of the prejudice that the Jews face, they con-

stitute an interesting group to depict in graphic novels. And he is tireless in his attacks on that prejudice, as seen especially in his *Fagin the Jew*, which rewrites Dickens's *Oliver Twist* in a way favorable to Fagin. *Fagin the Jew* ends with a discussion between Fagin and Dickens in which Dickens admits the power of Fagin's argument against stereotyping and vows to treat Jews more favorably in future novels<sup>5</sup>—which he in fact did with the character of Riah in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Throughout his life and career, Eisner has displayed belief in the survival of the Jews as a group, despite all negative forces that oppose that survival. This is yet another form of Jewish belief that, like belief in Israel, is not traditionally religious *per se* but that is nonetheless belief in the sense that the believer has a core value that he or she supports despite all doubts or outside questionings. He is not, perhaps, able to glimpse an inner world of beauty in Judaism, but he fends off the outer world of harm. In this, he is much like many liberal American Jews of our time, who might not be Jews without the force of anti-Semitism to mold them into a common interest with other Jews.

Eisner's basic view is that life itself is the enemy and that everyone is involved in a terrible struggle for survival, which will ultimately be lost. His sense of melodrama and sentimentalism is very much in tune with that of the Yiddish theater, for which his father designed sets. He sees life as a drama in which triumphs are more than balanced by tragedies, and religion is of no help in righting this equation. Eisner himself is a very gifted artist, and the child of a gifted artist who began in Vienna. His *Spirit* comic strip, featuring a masked detective, was very successful for the length of its run from 1940–52. The Eisner Awards, probably the most prestigious annual American awards for comics art, are named for him. Yet he would undoubtedly have traded all of this for his daughter's life if such a trade were possible. Her tragic death from leukemia in her teenage years, transformed into the death of an orphan adopted by Frimme Hersh, provides the sentiment and the starting point for Frimme's argument with God in Eisner's *A Contract with God*.

Although Eisner is not able to achieve a belief in God or in traditional or even Reform Judaism (although he was a member of a Reform Temple largely for his children's sake, as Bob Andelman points out [387]), he has always remained identified with the Jews. His life has been shaped by the anti-Semitism that his father endured in Europe, by the anti-Semitism that he endured growing up in New York, and by the Holocaust, during which he served in the U.S. Army. He feels that the Jews are worth fighting for and saving as a group despite some bad individuals, and he has devoted his work to that end, while preserving a deep understanding of humanity in general.

His “thinly disguised autobiography” from 1991, *To the Heart of Storm*—in which, according to his introduction, “fact and fiction became blended with selective recall” (107)—explains where he is coming from by exposing his mother’s and father’s early lives, emigration to America, and struggle to survive in the form of an extended flashback as Willie himself is on the train to a U.S. army training camp during World War II. Eisner’s dramatic and full-bodied black-and-white drawing style, including many different panel borders, is very much on display here. Sometimes the reader is in the train looking at Willie looking out of a window (109) and sometimes in Willie’s old home watching him getting beaten up by some neighborhood kids (114). When Willie looks out of the window, only some of his face is in profile, and most is in shadow. The reader is not told what Willie’s attitude is toward what he is remembering, although the reader can guess, but all the reader has are Willie’s reminiscences, which are strongly emotional in Eisner’s depiction. Eisner’s strength is his portrayal of average faces, almost always in an agitated state, such as those of the fighting Italian and Irish news delivery men (181). The boys beating Willie up do not look refined, and their street grammar is not very polished (114). Eisner shows the emotions of anger (114) and humiliation (115–16) particularly well. Moreover, his use of open pages almost without panels (181) seems to make the action larger than life. This opens him to the charge of sentimentality and melodrama, and he would probably acknowledge the influence of the sentimental Yiddish theater on his own drama. In his defense, he is portraying dramatic scenes with emotional content to which readers can easily relate. The emotion in his works is hard to ignore because it is always on display, but then, he might say, life really is very emotional and often tragic, so he is simply revealing the truth about it.

The major influence on Eisner’s life according to this work is his attempt to integrate into American society and the difficulty he had in doing so because of his being Jewish in the 1930s and 1940s. The New York City he shows is a city of warring immigrant groups—Italians against Irish (180–81), blacks against whites, and just about everyone against the Jews, particularly a group of Germans, one of whom, Buck, the young Willie becomes friendly with and builds a boat with, who are influenced by Hitler’s policies and would not befriend him if they knew he was Jewish (253–54, 259–60). His potential girlfriend, Heidi, does not know that he is Jewish and her parents would intervene if they knew that. Willie resents his own parents’ warnings that his new German acquaintances could hurt his feelings and that “to them we are always foreigners like in Europe” (251), to which Willie retorts that the Germans are the immigrants and he’s native born, so he doesn’t feel

that “I’m any less than them, pop!” (251). His naiveté shows when he says “Pop . . . you’re always going on about how they feel about us. . . . I’ll bet they don’t even care! Besides, aren’t we making our own trouble by looking for it?? This isn’t the old country, y’know, Pop!!” As he says this, his father’s knowing and troubled eyes look out from above the newspaper, whose headline reads “Hitler wins Reichstag” (251). And his father is right because Heidi drops Willie when she learns he’s Jewish and when Willie much later meets Buck again, Buck mouths Hitler’s propaganda, saying that Jews “eat away at every society they infest” (297). So Willie learns that prejudice is real and that he cannot evade it. Mahmid, his companion on the train, says that people in the United States are prejudiced against Turks too, which is why he converted to Christianity (309). And even when Willie tells his newspaper syndicate representative that he wants to join the army and refuses his offer of a way to escape the draft through influence, the man’s response (which Willie does not hear) is an exasperated and negative remark, “Jews.” The man is exasperated because he wants Willie to keep drawing for the syndicate rather than join the army (307). So the reader sees even more instances of prejudice than Willie does. Eisner, of course, sees it all because he has put it into the book.

But the irony that Eisner reveals amid the fraught situation of the 1940s is that the Jews themselves are no less divided than the other groups, as when his mother insists that she does not like German Jews (284). And her dislike is confirmed when a German Jew says that “it is very humiliating we had to settle among them. . . . You know the Eastern Jews are such peasants. Ugh, feh” (285). The New York of Willie’s youth does not seem much better than his father’s Vienna of 1910, except perhaps that young men do not have themselves blinded in one eye in order to escape the draft, as he shows happening in World War I Vienna (204–5).

Eisner shows how experiences of anti-Semitism have shaped him. His aunt Goldie marries an Irish man, who tells the young boy Willie that he and his folks “are the good kind of Jews” (246). He is just a child and does not understand quite what Uncle Frank means, but the reader does—and knows that the older Willie does as he looks out of the train window (246).

Eisner’s father and mother of course played a huge role in making him who he was. His father, an immigrant from Vienna, came to the United States just as World War I was about to begin. He was an artist who worked for a major Viennese painter as an assistant, often in humiliating circumstances, and who then became a scene painter in the New York Yiddish theater—until, married (in part to escape the draft), he needed more money to support a family and had to work in a variety of non-artistic and commercial roles, in some of which he was unsuccessful. It is a comedown for a fa-

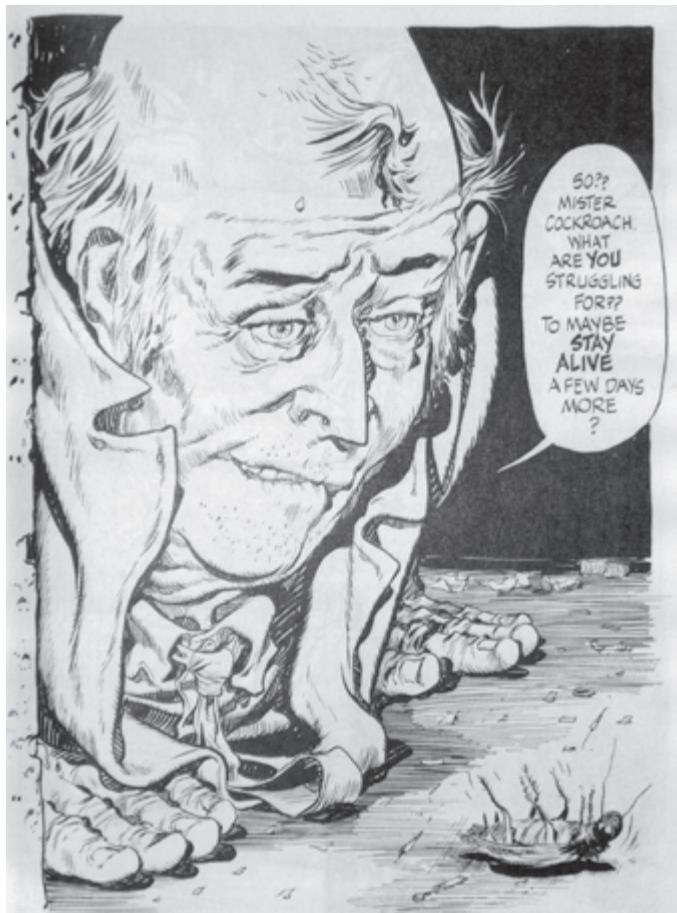
ther who wanted to live as an artist in the cultured city of Vienna circa World War I, but Eisner shows that Vienna was no haven for his father and that it had much in common with New York, especially a pervasive anti-Semitism. Moreover, in wartime Vienna, young men were willing to lose an eye (and a rabbi was ready to help them do so) to avoid the draft—which goes against the idea of Vienna as a cultured place. Eisner's father's story is presented (186–206) in the present moment, though it is clear that this is a retrospective memory of his father's discourse in Willie's mind (186). This is an advantage of the comics, as readers are put right into the presence of his father's memories and witness them happening in the present moment just as the young Willie does when his father recounts them. Moreover, the reader has the advantage of seeing these events transpire, including the details of the dress of the period, and Willie can only have heard his father's narrative; thus the reader knows even more than Willie as a character does.

In this narrative of old Vienna and after, his father Sam is presented as a cultured, positive person who is diverted into a business career. He is hounded by a nagging, uneducated lower-class wife who blames him for not bringing home more money, but he is nonetheless dedicated to his family. Willie's mother, Fannie (and Fannie and Sam were Eisner's parents' actual names) seems not to blame for her financial worries since he shows how she grew up in a home without a father and then had to care, unsuccessfully, for her younger siblings. His mother when young is happy simply to have a job, even if it is housekeeping for her older married sister and then sewing in a factory. Completely without education, his mother does her best but cannot stop worrying her husband over money. She is portrayed sympathetically as far as her motherly looks go (237), but, at the same time, she is definitely a nag. Eisner's drawings of her clothes (178) are very accurate for the time period, and will create some nostalgia in anyone who remembers his or her own upbringing in the New York of those days. On the other hand, Willie respects his father more than his mother because Willie, too, is good at drawing and wants to become an artist. He and his father look at each other sympathetically as his mother raves on about not wanting her son to go to art school and become a poor artist (229). (All of this, which is also related by Bob Andelman in his biography, *Will Eisner* [110], is apparently a very accurate description of Eisner's life.) Eisner is very good at portraying himself (as Willie) as well as his parents honestly. Like them he is not particularly handsome or intellectual looking although he is honest (184–86) and decent (256) and listens carefully to his mother's story (178) as she relates it. He is clearly trying to get a grip on who he is and why he is that way, and that element pervades this highly if not completely autobiographical work.

As he wends his way south on the train, his companion is the editor of a Turkish newspaper for immigrants. Mahmid, too, understands the immigrant experience that Willie's father has gone through. He has even converted to Christianity, and he points out that the soldier in the seat in front of theirs is prejudiced because he is speaking against black soldiers. But Mahmid makes his best point when he says that Willie, by looking backward at his memories, is like Hoja, a mythical Turkish wise man who rides his donkey backwards to see where he's been, since where he is going is in Allah's hands. So Willie, by walking into the army camp, does not know where he will end up and only knows how he got there. He joins up to be in the real world and here he is. Fortunately for Eisner and for his audience (since he might not have survived battle and then would never have left the rich legacy of his comics), Eisner ended up as a Pentagon-based warrant officer during World War II and applied comics to various military instructional matters. But he was ready to go into the heart of the storm and take the risks of battle, come what may.

Eisner's drawing style in *To the Heart of the Storm* is typical of his drawing style in all of his autobiographically based works. He uses large "splash" pages to begin chapters, and only rarely uses actual panel borders. Rather, his black-and-white drawings are set off from one another by a large patch of black, or a panel with borders is inserted into a page on which the other panels are without borders. He is very good with contrasts and variety. The panels in which young Willie sits in the train looking out of the window and thinking back on his life are heavily black bordered with the windows in white, like the inside of a darkened train, and the figures of Willie and Mahmid are rendered with an equal amount of black and white, while the actual memories are drawn with white backgrounds for the most part, except when the scene is bitter or dramatic. In this way, an indication is always given of whether a particular memory is traumatic or recapitulates a nasty scene. Eisner's free-flowing, minimally bordered pages keep the stories moving, almost like poetry that moves without rhyme or end-stopping but which has rhythm and wonderful imagery. On each page there seems to be at least one dramatic panel recounting a strong incident in the life of Willie or his family. Eisner's drawing style is realistic, and his characters are full-bodied and easily distinguishable from one another.

Using this realistic style in *The Contract with God Trilogy*, Eisner presents a story of Jewish immigrants struggling to survive in the 1930s in the Bronx, New York City. In *A Life Force*, the second story in that trilogy, Jacob Shtarkah, a carpenter, finishes an addition to a synagogue, only to become unemployed as a result. And his addition is named for the person who donated the money, not for him, so there will be no memory of his work. While



5.1. Will Eisner, *A Life Force*, in *The Contract with God Trilogy*, 197. Jacob Shtarkah—whose last name ironically means “strong” in Yiddish—discovers that he has a lot in common with a simple cockroach.

recovering from a heart attack—partially the result over his worry about being unemployed—in an alleyway he sees eye to eye with a cockroach and states their common attempt to survive (197–200) (fig. 5.1). Throughout the rest of the story cockroaches continually enter, as they are wont to do in tenements in New York City, and symbolize the main theme of the story: survival. Jacob wonders if life has any meaning—that is, did God create man or man create God (199)? All he knows is that survival is what matters, and his name, Shtarkah, is a Yiddish word meaning “strong,” which is what he proves to be emotionally.

The story takes place among the inhabitants of one tenement building,

which houses not only the Shtarkahs but also the non-Jews Angelo and his wife. It details their interlocking relationships as they develop business and other ties. Each immigrant group keeps to itself but they also occasionally interact, as when Jacob and Angelo go into business together. But when Elton Shaftesbury, a fallen but now rising member of the old Protestant upper class who also lives in the tenement, wants to marry Shtarkah's daughter Rebecca, this is a major problem. It is the 1930s and Jews and gentiles do not usually mingle to that extent, and Hitler's rise in Germany is raising concerns among the Shtarkahs about anti-Semitism. Other difficult situations develop as the plot becomes more complex. Frieda Gold, to whom Jacob had actually proposed in Nuremberg, Germany, when he lived there, needs help getting away from Hitler, and Jacob agrees to bring her to the United States, which is not easy. Moreover, Angelo's acquaintance, who supplies Angelo and Jacob with lumber, unbeknownst to them is a hijacker and therefore can sell them the lumber cheaply. Their business is thus based on crime.

On top of all this, Jacob, bored with his wife and trying to rekindle his youthful romance, proposes marriage to Frieda after he brings her to New York, but she is reluctant. He asks his wife for a divorce, which is difficult. He is in the midst of a conflicted situation and seems to be not much better off than a cockroach. He thinks that at least his lumber yard is a going concern, but it burns down. Luckily however Jacob and Angelo are spared because they have insurance and all of the records of their dealings with the hijackers are destroyed in the fire. Jacob fails to rekindle his romance with Frieda and they cannot even make love any more. When she receives a letter saying that her daughter is in Palestine and needs her, she decides to go herself despite his offer to go with her and start a new life. In the end, he returns to his wife Rivka and she takes him in again. His daughter marries Elton, who has now become a stockbroker partner and has helped put the lumberyard, now revived, on a good footing.

So what is Eisner's point? Despite Jacob's desire to try a new life, he must soldier on in the war of his old life. And that is all to the good for his wife and his two children since there will be no divorce and also good for Angelo, his business partner. In retrospect, this story seems like a tale of midlife crisis enhanced by the question of what life is all about as seen in the cockroach symbolism. God, if there is a God, seems to have made people into toilers whose luck, like that of everyone in this story, changes capriciously. If everything comes out well, that is a chance. When Jacob confesses to Rabbi Bensohn that he is confused, the rabbi responds that "only the true believer is never confused" (315). Clearly Jacob is not a true believer. In the last scene in his apartment, his wife insists on calling the exterminator, and Jacob saves a

cockroach by throwing him out of the window (320). The cockroach gets up and walks away to feed on an old banana. This mirrors the beginning, when after a mild heart attack Jacob felt a kinship with the cockroach. As the narration attached to this final page says, the cockroach's main quality is that "it has an unquestionable life force evidenced by its will to live" (321). And that, for Eisner, distinguishes the hardier members of our species as well. In the end, life is the enemy and humans are doomed to dissatisfaction; but people have the life force and continue to live as best they can given their particular circumstances.

This survival instinct apparently figured in Eisner's own life as well, because he often emphasizes it in his work. In *The Dreamer*, the second story in *Life, in Pictures*, a character named "Billy," who resembles the young Will Eisner, and a friend set up shop making comics for large publishers. After struggling, they do well. But Billy leaves to produce his own strip for a major syndicate even though the war is looming and he might well be drafted. In *To the Heart of the Storm* Willie (another obvious stand-in for Eisner) leaves the syndicate and joins the army. He doesn't know how things will turn out, but he has a survival instinct and therefore confidence. When he travels to his base, he thinks back on all of the incidents that have made him what he is. The negative incidents, usually involving anti-Semitism, seem to have influenced him as much as the positive ones. Perhaps he is thinking that by fighting the Nazis, he will help the Jews survive, even though his own personal survival might be threatened.

In the article "Drawing Contracts," Laurence Roth discusses Eisner's legacy. He writes that "the special contracts promised between America and its citizens and between Jews and their God are redrawn by Eisner as distinctly unglamorous and unfulfilled agreements."<sup>6</sup> According to Roth, Eisner essentially "interrogates heroism" and shows the contrast between a pulp hero like his own "The Spirit," which he drew for many years and finally gave up in 1952, and ordinary people, who must fight it out with life and who sometimes lose or at least don't win. Roth attributes this position to Eisner's upbringing during the Depression.

While Roth has the basics about Eisner right, I would go a bit further into positive territory. Man may be unfulfilled, man may be beaten up by life, but he does have obligations. He does have a contract, if not with God, then with other human beings. Eisner's characters break out of their immigrant ghettos and even their own limitations. When Jacob's daughter marries Elton, that proves good for Jacob and Angelo's business. When Frieda leaves Jacob to go to Palestine, that is good for his wife. When Frimme gives up on his own contract with God and dies as he tries to reassert it, a new

young Jew finds it and makes it his own. And when Willie decides to join the army during World War II, he will be fighting against Hitler whatever the cost. Therefore, Eisner's characters, as long as they are physically and mentally well, are never wholly lost unless, like the building superintendent in *A Contract with God*, who is victimized by a greedy and heartless young girl, another human being deliberately tries to sabotage them. God is not looking out for everyone and justice is not always done, but Eisner's people in most cases persevere if not triumph. Survival is primary.

While Eisner admits that Jews are not always worthy of their end of the contract with God, either—he has little love lost for the rich German Jewish family in *The Name of the Game*, the fourth story in *Life, in Pictures*, for instance—he remains committed to the survival of the Jews as a whole. He certainly examines anti-Semitism throughout his works; and that seems to be a major shaping force in his own life. Eisner does not show a positive faith in God, or in justice, prevailing in this world. But he does show Jewish perseverance, maybe like that of the cockroach, through many trials and tests.

One strong proof of his concern for the Jews as a group is his final, posthumous work—*The Plot*—an engrossing debunking of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* analyzed in chapter 4 about the Jewish experience in Europe. Here Eisner tackles the most spurious and yet most damaging anti-Semitic work of all time. The product of tsarist-era politicians and secret police officials jockeying for power, this invention, purporting to be a true document, condemns the Jews for their supposed attempt to control the world. Written knowingly as a falsehood this work has nonetheless had the power to enslave the minds of many people who would like to believe it. For Eisner, as he explains in his preface to *The Plot*, this was “a matter of immense personal concern” (1).

He goes on to state that his parents’ Jewishness is “not the only reason I remain a Jew.” He claims that he has a Yiddish *neshama* (soul). As a leftist student in the 1930s, he attempted to find the causes of anti-Semitism. Finally in 1999 the work of a Russian researcher was reported in the newspapers: he had found the authors of the calumny. And Eisner was inspired to use the new genre of the graphic novel to report on it, since as he says what is reported in newspapers is soon forgotten.

In his style of black-and-white drawing and full-bodied characters, he exposes the hoax, including also recent reissues of the book, which he describes as vampirelike since it keeps rising from the dead. As he says in his preface to *The Plot*, Eisner uses the comic form to bring the falsity of the *Protocols* home to readers who would not read the numerous academic tracts about it. In his last work, published posthumously, Eisner reveals his strong Jewish

identity and shows that it can exist even without Jewish religious belief. His awareness of his parents' struggle as immigrants and his own struggle to oppose anti-Semitism led him to this identification.

In *Two Cents Plain* Martin Lemelman also writes of the immigrant experience from up close—his parents were eastern European Holocaust survivors who owned a candy store in Brooklyn, where Martin and his older brother Bernard were brought up. While Lemelman may follow in Eisner's footsteps in tackling the subject of his parents' integration into America and his own search for himself, in *Two Cents Plain* he basically tells the story of a neighborhood—how the largely Jewish Brooklyn neighborhood in which he grew up disintegrated and decayed, and his parents' busy shop became a ruin. It is a familiar New York story, but his style is unique, as also evidenced in his memoir of his mother's Holocaust experience, *Mendel's Daughter*, which is analyzed in chapter 3 of this book. He uses a few large panels per page, perhaps two to four for the most part, and has separate panels, or blocks of print within panels, for the words instead of word balloons. Also in the panels sometimes are photographic or near-photographic representations of important objects from his youth, such as ice cream sodas or photos of people. The style is realistic and gives an excellent rendition of what Martin and his family members looked like. Moreover, there is a relatively heavy use of Yiddish in his mother's and father's speech, which increases the feeling of authenticity of Lemelman's work; that is probably its strongest suit. The reader rightly feels that he or she is seeing and hearing a true story, complete with all of its unpleasant as well as pleasant facets, including the expressions on people's faces.

In October 1978, at the age of twenty-eight, Martin drives back to take a look at the store that his parents had vacated ten years earlier, when the neighborhood deteriorated to the point that it was dangerous. Once a flourishing Jewish area, bordered by Pitkin Avenue, Strauss Street, and East New York Avenue, the neighborhood as Martin sees it upon his return and how he shows it to readers consists only of broken store windows and abandoned buildings; his father's candy store is now just a "shell" (5). There is a haunted look on Martin's face as he drives by. Now, once again, in 2008, he decides to revisit his parents' past and that of his family. He portrays Gusta, his mother, when she was young in Germakivka, Poland, and as she is when she is older, and under her picture is the Yiddish saying, "Everything revolves around bread and death" (9). It is clear that Martin is going to come to terms with his own boyhood and explain it as he does so. He shows photos of his relatives who were killed in the Holocaust and relates that only Gusta and two brothers and a sister, out of a much larger family, managed to survive

by living in a hole in the ground for the duration of the war—as also told in *Mendel's Daughter*. Their treatment by the U.S. forces under Patton was not very good, but Eisenhower considerably improved the displaced persons' (DP) living conditions. Gusta is shown as she learns to make soup, sees a black person—a U.S. soldier—for the first time, and then finds her brother Simon living in the same camp. Simon then meets Tovia Lemelman in the market where Simon was selling things, too, and brings him home, where he meets Gusta.

Tovia, who became Lemelman's father, had been a sergeant in the Soviet army for five years and so luckily avoided the fate of his relatives in the Polish town of Radziwill. Despite Stalin's own anti-Semitism, after the war he favorably responded to Tovia's request to be released from the army so he could look for his relatives in his town, and Tovia then discovered that they had been shot by the Nazis. So he went west, to get into the American zone. Later, in America, he shows Martin, or "Mattaleh," as he calls him, the spoon and fork he used in the DP camp run by the Americans. A photograph of the spoon is placed across three panels (28), but cropped so that the edges of the photo do not show and only the spoon is visible. It is not a fancy spoon, and its photographic concreteness strengthens the realism of the drawings on the same page and gives a very strong atmosphere of overall reality to his father's story. And the account of Tovia's meeting Gusta through her brother Simon while they were all in a DP camp, Neue Friesmann, has a strong effect on the reader because it is told in his father's and mother's voices. Also, his father's statement from beyond the grave, "Mattaleh, you should know, December is an important month for the mother and me. We married in December and in December we passed away. I died in 1984. She died in 1996" (33), shows his parents' continuing influence on Lemelman. In *Mendel's Daughter*, too, he begins by writing, "My mother died on December 8, 1996. Last night, she spoke to me." (3). He is clearly obsessed with his parents and their story, as his two books about them—and the books' contents—show. He states in *Two Cents Plain* that he keeps his mother's night table, filled with old prewar photographs of her and her family, in his studio (76). This obsession also touches the reader; Lemelman effectively paints a universal portrait of parents, even for a reader whose own parents didn't actually speak Yiddish.

As in the case of the many other props from the time period that he uses in this book, Lemelman's drawing of an old box of school crayons called "The American Surprise" (37), which are no longer manufactured, continues this nostalgic vein. On the page after this box of crayons appears, Lemelman recounts his older brother's birth on the Lower East Side of Man-

hattan, which was still a Jewish area in the late 1940s (although it was not as populated by Jews as it had been earlier in the century at the height of the immigration from Europe). Although I have never seen American Surprise crayons, the old box and the uneven crayons are nostalgic for me too; I can understand what they meant for Lemelman and why he wanted to include them, when I think of the crayons I used for school (and which I have not thought of for years). Similarly, his use of very realistic-looking and genuine props such as the Sunday comics front page from February 15, 1953 (80), a piggy bank (123), and the ice cream soda (102) testifies not only to the authenticity of the account but also touches the nostalgia for the past of anyone who has lived through the 1940s and 1950s. And for those who have not lived through those decades, these props offer an almost concrete sense of some aspects of life then.

As mentioned earlier, Martin's parents affectionately call him Mattaleh. Mattaleh's trip to the smelly fish store (74–75) also reeks of authenticity. I too used to love to see the fish swimming in the tanks in the store my mother went to, and I was fascinated as well as scared by the killing of the fish, just as Lemelman shows it. Lemelman's account of Teddy's—his father's—candy store is just as convincing. Candy stores were the mainstay of the children in the neighborhood, and of some of the adults as well, particularly those who would grab a newspaper or something to eat on the way to work. They were very important to the neighborhood, just as Lemelman portrays his father's store and its status. Lemelman makes it clear that Teddy's had very good ice cream, and he even gives the recipes for his father's malted milk (101) and whipped cream (106), thus adding to the authenticity of his account.

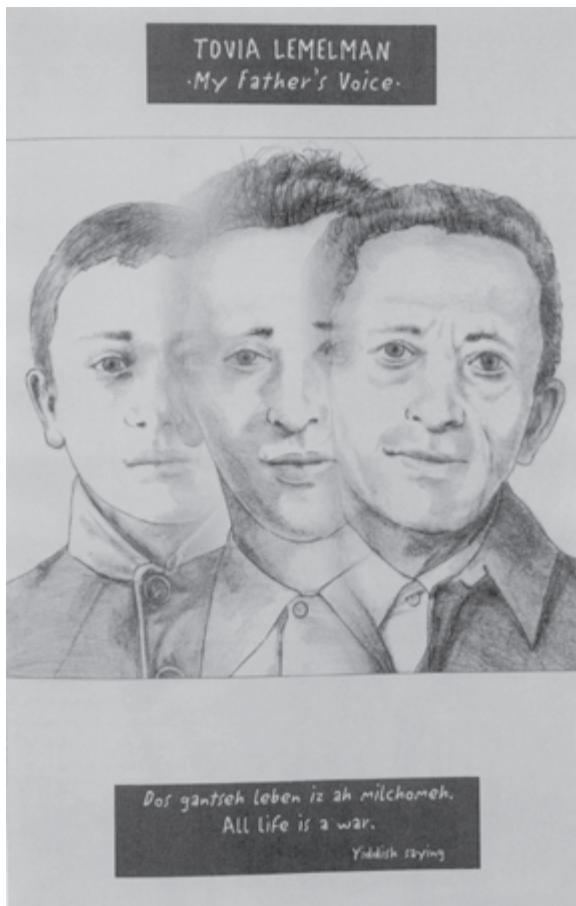
Lemelman is also honest enough to admit the problems faced by Teddy's candy store, including roaches, rats, mice, and human moochers, who claim that his father's drinks are too sweet in order to avoid paying for them. His account of his smashing a cockroach on his stomach (which he fortunately does not illustrate) is graphic enough. He does however show something of the butterfly he smashed inside a book, following his father's mistaken advice (139–41). The family's quarters at the back of the store, full of old boxes, and his brother having to sleep next to a refrigerator that turns on and off all night are all rendered with complete and convincing fidelity (74–75).

Lemelman's drawing style, particularly his use of soft pencils, is perfect for the combination of nostalgia and realism he wants to convey. These elements come together in strange ways, as when he remembers falling with an empty bottle that he wanted to bring down to the cellar, and then having his mother force him to urinate and wiping some of his urine on his brow while she spun him around and repeated words three times—all to ward off the

evil eye (65), a remnant of her superstitions in Europe. Her face as a younger and an older woman is convincingly drawn, as she insists that there are evil spirits and that Mattaleh does not know about them, smart as he thinks he is. The contrast between her younger face, with her 1940s long hair, and her older face, with eyeglasses and modern frames and shorter hair (159–60), makes her continued insistence on the existence of the evil eye all the more touching and compelling. But this relatively mild if still painful and indeed nostalgic incident is followed immediately by his father beating up a burglar in their house while Mattaleh watches and screams (159–68). The surprise, pain, and violence are clear in Mattaleh's fall on the way to the cellar, the beating of the burglar, and the faces of the parents, and yet both scenes are bathed in soft grays and blacks. These colors heighten the silent screams and “der Tate’s” scary face as he beats the burglar, and all this is part of Mattaleh's memory as understood by the soft colors and shadowy drawing style.

Most touching is Mattaleh's remembrance of his father and mother and their influence on the lives of himself and his brother. Even when his mother tells each of them that she will wake them up so they can see their favorite TV shows and then doesn't do so, her motivation is understandable—letting the boys get a good night's sleep. When she expresses her belief in the evil eye and tries to ward it off, her motivation is also good. Only when the nurse in the hospital takes Mattaleh from her for three days after he is born or when Mattaleh hurts his toe but doesn't tell her until much later is she really angry. His father does his best to make a living even though he does not particularly want to own a candy store and would prefer to live in what he thinks is the worker's paradise of the Soviet Union. The parents' broken immigrant English is touching, as are the Yiddish sayings that Lemelman tucks to the bottom of the pages of new chapters. And he usually ends each chapter with dramatic or unusual panels, whether showing the death of their cat in a car accident (154) or a machine-made series of four photos of himself at nineteen (186) looking very serious.

Perhaps most touching is when Lemelman shows his father as a boy, a young man, and a middle-aged man (21) (fig. 5.2)—which he also does with himself and his mother. The photos of himself and family members and original documents including his own handwriting, are effective in arousing emotions (230–31). As a Jew of Lemelman's generation who lived in the Bronx until age twelve, I feel that these could be my relatives. He has hit a nerve with his portrayal of the changes from youth to age, the Yiddishisms, and the artifacts such as crayons and children's toys from the period. His use of different panel sizes keeps the reader's attention shifting, as if he is always a bit off balance. The lack of word balloons makes the speaker's words



5.2. Martin Lemelman,  
*Two Cents Plain*, 21.  
Lemelman's layered  
rendering of his father,  
Tovia, as a boy, a young  
man, and a middle-aged  
man, shows the toll that  
life has taken on Tovia.

seem more important than they usually do in comics, as if they were text in a prose work. Spiegelman used photographs effectively if sparingly in *Maus*, and he can be said to have pioneered this technique, but Lemelman's more frequent use of photographs is no less effective in making a powerful impression (for instance, 54–55, 309).

Lemelman is also very honest about his parents' and his young life and does not always conjure up nostalgia. The truth is what is expected in a first-rate autobiography, and it seems to be given here. His father and mother did not always get along very well, each accusing the other of ruining his or her life (200). Mattaleh admits that he cringes when he hears them arguing. Also, he does not like the food that his mother makes for him since it is usually boiled and the meat has fat on it (207). And when he hurts his toenail,

he is afraid to tell her because of the fuss she will make (211–15). If he wants sneakers, she insists on his wearing regular leather lace-up shoes instead because she needs foot support, which she did not get when she was hiding in the forest, and to this day her feet hurt her, so she projects this feeling onto him, however unwarranted that is. Moreover, despite her modern appearance in the drawings showing her as an old woman with modern American glasses frames, she actually believes in the evil eye to the extent that she put his own urine on his brow to ward it off. Old Europe, the Holocaust, the difficulty of settling into America, and leftist politics are ever present, underlying all else—as they are for David Gerber, in his article “Visiting Bubbe and Zeyde” in *People of the Book*, when he writes of his grandmother that “folkish superstitions randomly entered her conversation. She often threatened to return from the grave to haunt us if a certain beloved granddaughter were still not married when she departed from the earthly *gehenna* (hell) of capitalist America” (119).<sup>7</sup> These remarks and others confirm the accuracy of Lemelman’s characterization.

Mattaleh, like his brother Bernard, ends up studying in the yeshiva (Orthodox Jewish religious school). The boys played games, learned Hebrew and Talmud, studied English and math, and looked up the second-grade teacher’s dress to see if she wore panties (*Two Cents Plain*, 235–42). All of this seems very usual. But one of his friends, Irv, had a collection of *Mad* magazines that he brought to school. Irv proposes creating a magazine, and Martin, who already loves to draw, readily joins in as comics editor and creates his own comic (247–50). While everything seems to be going well, the neighborhood is changing. All of a sudden there are fewer egg creams being sold, and more bags of pork rinds, which observant Jews would not eat. Salsa music blows in through the window on summer nights. And Martin and his friend Jan get robbed by an African American kid as they play dreidel (a traditional Jewish game played with spinning tops) for peanuts (264). Brownsville is still poor, but no longer homogeneous and socially comfortable. Now the Puerto Ricans and African Americans hold up Jewish boys on the way to yeshiva with knives bared. And they shout anti-Semitic insults as they attack (266–68). His mother cannot stand the idea that Brooklyn would become another Poland, in which Jews were attacked and killed. As recounted in *Two Cents Plain*, Malcolm X accused Jews of cheating their African American customers, but Gusta asserts that the Jews charged very little, always, and that they ended poor, just as they began. She also points out that Brownsville was a Jewish neighborhood long before African Americans moved there in large numbers, so it cannot be said, as Malcolm X charged, that Jews deliberately moved into the neighborhood in order to ex-

ploit African Americans (273). This is the autobiography of a neighborhood as much as it is an autobiography of a person. But as Gusta puts it the two are mixed because now, after having been robbed at knifepoint in a dramatic scene (202–3), she and her husband must run away from their store and their neighborhood, and this experience will change them and their two sons.

And so, at the age of fifty-nine, Lemelman, now a professor, returns to his old neighborhood, and everything is gone—the candy store, his friends' houses, the other stores. It is as if it were all a dream—and the gray drawings make it almost into a dream but somehow a dream that stays in the reader's head. After finishing this graphic novel, the reader knows what it was like to grow up in the back of a candy store in Brownsville in the 1940s and 1950s with immigrant Jewish parents even though that past is gone, never to return.

The reader watches Mattaleh grow and understands where he comes from, especially if the reader comes from a similar world. Despite its problems, it is a world of warmth and certainty, where almost everyone is the same ethnicity and even those who are not are supportive, until the character of the neighborhood changes. Since his parents were not in the concentration camps, their memories of World War II, however difficult, are not as bad as those of Art Spiegelman's parents as revealed in *Maus*. Lemelman does not focus on the strange and outrageous, or even on the overly dramatic, but rather just tells about his life as it actually was, with its ups and downs. His parents could not understand his becoming an artist but that is what he did, and the reader must be grateful for that. Like all autobiographies, it has a positive element that even the best fiction lacks, because the reader is always aware that these events happened in the life of an actual person who rejoiced or suffered through them, rather than in the constructed life of an invented fictional character, however well realized, who never experienced them.

Despite Lemelman's emphasis on his family's life in America, the close connection with Europe remains. Parents with accents, or relatives who survived the Holocaust, ensure that the younger generation of Martins and Bernards remain connected to Jewish life if not particularly to Judaism as a religion. They will not readily forget their beliefs or identity because their parents' stories are too real. The closer a Jew is to the European experience, with all of its negativities, the more likely he or she is to remain Jewish because one does not want to give up on something so many people suffered to preserve and, thus, hand the anti-Semites a prize. And yet the dying of Brownsville as a Jewish neighborhood shows that things change. Who knows how Lemelman's children—his website ([www.mendelsdaughter.com](http://www.mendelsdaughter.com)) says that he has four sons—view Judaism and the Jews?

Harvey Pekar, like Martin Lemelman, was the son of immigrants. Not Holocaust survivors, but Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. And his experience with them, and with Cleveland, made him what he was—completely unpretentious if very neurotic, nervous, and most of all obsessive about whatever it was that he was concerned with at the moment in all of his stories, however insignificant the problem might be, like a misplaced pair of glasses or having to listen to a colleague at work relate a boring story. A Jewish friend of mine, quoting a physician relative, holds that obsessiveness is a very Jewish character trait—perhaps even *the* Jewish character trait. If so, Pekar was very Jewish indeed. He belongs in this chapter because however original he was—and he was very eccentric and individual indeed, which suits his different appearance in each of his books, drawn by different artists, since he could not draw—he exemplifies Jewish obsessiveness at its maximum. This obsessiveness made it all the harder for him to adapt to the demands of his immigrant parents and those of daily life and career building in America. Despite or perhaps because of his obnoxious, nervy, and pushy self-portrayal, Pekar as a character in his own work often seems more of a presence than many people whom the reader may have known in real life. Besides his obsessiveness, the leading quality of Pekar as a person was his down-to-earthiness; he was never a snob or showed any pretension. In my experience, if a graduate student wrote him with a question, he answered, as he apparently did anyone who contacted him. He also spoke right up about whatever he felt. These remain very rare qualities in life or in art.

Lemelman and Pekar have a lot in common, even though Pekar grew up in Cleveland rather than New York. The son of immigrant parents who ran a store, albeit a grocery rather than a candy store, Pekar is essentially in the same position that Lemelman is, and his relationship with his parents is even more rocky than that of Lemelman with his—and again because of issues of American versus European identity and Jewish belief versus the beliefs of the broader Christian and secular society. But as Pekar writes of his parents in *The Quitter*, “I realized that, although we had different values derived from different cultures and wouldn’t agree on certain issues, they were good people, incredible people, and I loved and respected them.” They were not Holocaust survivors because they got to the United States before World War II, but they seem to have much in common with Lemelman’s parents and even with Eisner’s immigrants. Most of this is present in Pekar’s *The Quitter*, which is the closest one of his works to a full-scale autobiography, since it moves from his early years to older age.

Like Lemelman’s mother, Pekar’s insisted on academic perfection; even a report card composed of all A’s except for one B was not sufficient. Like

Lemelman's father, Pekar's was very tired after working from morning to night in the store and had little time for him, but unlike Lemelman's father, Pekar's spent what free time he had reading the Talmud and listening to cantorial music. Lemelman's father was pro-Stalin and was very proud of having served in the Red Army during World War II. In fact, he states that the family would be living in Russia rather than America if it were not for the anti-Semitism prevailing in Russia. Lemelman's father's friends also discuss politics. Similarly, Pekar's mother is a supporter of Communism. But while Lemelman became an art professor at a university and does not seem to show any particularly leftist tendencies in his work, Pekar became a file clerk and retained his mother's leftism, in the form of a working man's populism.

We wonder why Pekar, who was smart enough to write jazz reviews for excellent magazines, never found a solid professional path, as many Jewish boys eventually do. As a teenager, Pekar felt that fighting was his only strength. He was strongly built, and sometimes had had to defend himself in his old neighborhood against several boys at once. Fighting one at a time was relatively easy for him. He also had Jewish models for his fighting because, as he points out, in the 1920s and 1930s there were many Jewish boxers who were immigrants and found the sport a good source of financial support. But, as Pekar also states when he mentions this fact, he was proud of Benny Leonard and other Jewish boxers until his "anti-nationalist beliefs" took over, and he left behind his sense of pride in the Jewish group. (See the discussion of his *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* in chapter 7 in this book on the Israel-centered graphic novel.) This never seems to have occurred in Lemelman's case, so once again the question comes up, as it came up with Pekar's mundane job versus Lemelman's professorship, why is this so? Pekar is aware that many Jews attain good positions and comments about his cousins' marriages that they were doing okay as Jews went, "Not sensational, but okay." So why did he end up as a clerk in a VA hospital?

It should be noted that whatever his formal job and his down-to-earth, self-educated manner, Pekar always remained an intellectual. He early came to love jazz and to write about it. He became more interested in jazz than in sports or comics. Ira Gitler, a Jewish jazz critic in New York, continued to correspond with him. Pekar was clearly moving in an intellectual direction as oblivious as he was to external or formal success—and this intellectualism is very Jewish of him. He shows always that he remained very Jewish no matter what he may have thought about the Jews as a group or their place in society and despite his lack of religious conviction.

But his high anxiety led him to stop studying after high school. He was afraid of doing poorly in science and math, and that kept him from going

on. Clearly Pekar was anxious as well as obsessive. Some antianxiety meditation would have done him a lot of good—but then of course he might not have written his wonderful graphic novels. After failure in the navy and the post office because of his anxiety, he did in fact go to college. There at first he did well, and he fell in with some intellectuals, who, like him, admired jazz musicians and writings by Jack Kerouac and other hip artists of the period. He appreciated his English instructor. In the summer, he hitchhiked to New York where he worked as a waiter at a hippie hangout and then got to see his jazz mentor, Ira Gitler, who encouraged him to submit articles to a new jazz magazine. He got published there at the age of nineteen, while he was working at an inconsequential job. His parents did not warm up to this achievement; as in Lemelman's case, they only valued solid jobs that would provide support over the long run. And once again, his anxiety won out when he did poorly on a geography exam and decided to quit college. After a fight with his father, he moved out of the house.

As the narrator, Harvey looks back on all this in *The Quitter*, appearing as a balding, older man in Dean Haspiel's illustrations. Since Harvey could not draw and is drawn by different artists in each of his graphic novels and because he moves through life filling different roles and never settling down into one of them except graphic novelist, he is a “dramatic autobiographer,” in English professor William Howarth's terms.<sup>8</sup> Like Benjamin Franklin in his own autobiography, Pekar constantly shifts roles and foci and even his looks because each artist sees him differently. Here the difference between the young Pekar who appears in *The Quitter* and the older Pekar who narrates this autobiography is particularly stark, and it is difficult to find much commonality between them. The younger Pekar has his hair, wears nondescript shirts and pants, and has energy, while the older Pekar wears checked shirts, has little hair, stands in a sloppy way, and looks less than happy about life (fig. 5.3). But in one area, they do look the same: they have an obsessive, difficult-to-please look.

For all of Pekar's negativities—it is easy to understand why he was twice divorced—he has one very positive quality as a person and as a writer: honesty. This is what the reader expects in an autobiographical account and what the reader is convinced that he gets from Eisner, Lemelman, and Pekar. Pekar reveals the negative side of himself and his family, which occasionally resulted in physical fights between the men. And true to the title of his book, he shows how he quit college and various jobs before deciding to stick with a government clerkship in the VA hospital. He does not in any way paint himself as an extraordinary person or some kind of genius and perhaps it is his very ordinariness and his willingness to reveal it that makes his work so out-



5.3. Harvey Pekar, *The Quitter*. Dean Haspiel's drawing of Harvey's clothes and stance capture Harvey's down-to-earth, argumentative personality.

standing. The reader cheers Harvey on and hopes for the best for him. But Pekar also provides some evidence of a positive side, although it seems less developed in Harvey the problematic son and teenaged street fighter: Harvey relates not only that he was a good jazz writer, but that in the 1960s he recognized the importance of Robert Crumb's comics work at a time when almost no one else did. Perhaps because his own talents seemed relatively unrecognized for a long time, he displays an ability to recognize the talents of previously unrecognized people and wants to encourage them. As a result of this talent for being neglected and for recognizing neglect, he is very believable when he says that he found it hard to understand that he had finally achieved recognition, especially when the 2003 movie about his life, *American Splendor*, came out. But even then he remains Harvey, and the end of *The Quitter* shows him as insecure as ever. He ends the graphic novel wor-

rying about whether or not his luck and recognition will hold up, and if he will be able to provide for his family. He was sixty-five then and died at seventy. This inability ever to rest secure in his own merits and his refusal ever to brag about himself are his most winning qualities as a character in his own comics. When looked at today, the photos of himself that he provides at the end of this graphic novel produce a melancholy response, since they show Harvey when he was young, and he died in 2010. It is as if one has lost a friend, however difficult a friend, and is reviewing his life story. He has come and gone, and it is a wonderful thing that he left many good renditions of himself behind. Because of his honesty about himself, the reader genuinely likes Harvey, however difficult he may sometimes be in the portrait of himself that he gives in his works.

He has had the reader worried about him many times since he began doing his graphic novels in 1976. In 1990, for instance, he got cancer, and he and his wife Joyce Brabner wrote *Our Cancer Year* about that. Harvey and Joyce's leftism is on display in this work. Joyce is involved with a bunch of young people who have had horrible political experiences. This includes, of course, Israelis and Palestinians. Like many left-wingers, Harvey is ready to criticize Israel and seems to be reacting against his parents' Zionism—as in one of his final, posthumous works, *Not the Israel that My Parents Promised Me*. On the other hand, he learns that a Palestinian boy, Zamir, has made up stories about being manhandled by the Israeli forces because that makes him seem more sympathetic to the peace movement girls to whom he wants to cozy up. So Pekar and Brabner show the negative as well as the positive side of activism, even as Joyce ardently pursues it. And Harvey can barely manage his own house move, let alone war situations around the world. This honesty gives a sense of their objectivity and lays the groundwork for an objective approach to Harvey's cancer, which is brewing in the background since he has had an unexamined lump for a while. Whatever he and Joyce say, the reader accepts the fact that they believe what they are saying, whether the reader likes it or agrees with it.

Joyce visits Israel to be with her young peace advocates. Her account of the situation there on the eve of the Iraq war, when Israel expected to be hit with chemical weapons and the Palestinians supported Iraq's Saddam Hussein because he supported them, has the feeling of truth. She wants to encourage peace but learns how difficult the situation really is. Outside of her close feeling for Dana, her young Israeli colleague in the peace movement, and for Dana's family, she shows how difficult it is for all concerned to really respect and support one another. Once again, there is the feeling of truth in this graphic novel, which will then carry over into Harvey's bout with cancer.

The mother of Uri, an Israeli young man who is part of Joyce's group, tells Joyce that it is very Jewish to be compulsive, when Joyce says that Harvey is. This seems to be the key to all of Harvey's work. He can protest all he wants, he can be leftist in politics, he can oppose Israel on some issues, especially because his parents were pro-Israel, but in the end he is compulsive and nervous, and as Uri's mom says, Jews are—for good reason. Joyce goes to the Holocaust museum in Tel Aviv with Uri, and although no words are spoken, Frank Stack's illustration makes the connection between that museum and Jewish nervousness. Even when Dana tells Joyce that Israelis are supposed to show all foreigners the Holocaust museum and that it is a form of "Israeli bullshit," the reader realizes that Dana is Sephardic and her family was unaffected by the Holocaust and that is why she can feel that way. Again, Joyce's quotation of Dana's blunt words shows honesty on Joyce's part. Joyce gets sick when she gets home, and the subject shifts to doctors. Harvey's lump and Joyce's illness coincide with the idea of a sick world. At the same time, the theme is hope because just as Joyce brings together young people from around the world who have been traumatized, so Harvey finds a community of other people who have been similarly sick or know someone who has been. It no longer matters if he is Jewish or not—he becomes a suffering human being. He switches from a male Jewish doctor named Cantor, whose manner he doesn't like, to an obviously Christian female one named Rhodes. One of his new Christian neighbors, Marge, says she will pray for him. Several people tell him they know what he is going through. And as Israel is getting ready to be hit by Saddam during the first Gulf War and Joyce is in touch with Dana about it all the time via computer, Harvey is finding it difficult to work or even to go up the stairs, so he is fighting his own war.

Frank Stack's drawings are appropriately vague in outline. This is a tale of suffering, and too realistic a take would have turned readers away. Stack's faces, while recognizably individual, are still not sharp enough to show the scars and pustules on Harvey's skin in any detail, and while Harvey does not look very good or very happy during the worst times of his chemo treatment, the story can still be followed without the reader being repelled by it, despite its unpleasantness. Certainly the reader experiences the same process that the characters in the book do—we become one with Harvey and indeed with Joyce on the level of suffering humanity, and this transcends and erases any ethnic or other affiliations. The reader grows to care about them both and to wish them the very best in getting through this terrible ordeal.

What is particularly touching is that Harvey thinks about Joyce's well-being a lot and the trouble he is causing her, and she is thinking about him more than about herself, to the extent that her own health becomes pre-

carious. Harvey's suffering is evident on his face, as is Joyce's fatigue on hers, and yet they both care about one another, as the thoughts in their bubbles show. And they get through all of the difficulties. Joyce's friends watch out for her and she watches out for Harvey, with help from his brother Lennie and Dolores, a home helper. Sometimes Harvey can't walk, usually he can't handle his job, sometimes he thinks he should die, and yet he works on his ongoing graphic novel series, *American Splendor*. And at the end of all of the chemotherapy and radiation, he has no cancer. The peace movement young people that Joyce brings to the house so they can meet again end up consoling Harvey and in the final image in the book, he goes with one of them to a waterfall not far from his house. The water flows, and his life continues. He got through it all.

In all of his works, Harvey is true to who he is—a Jew who is the son of European Jewish immigrants. He is sometimes ashamed of his father's accent, and he does not always get along with either his father or his mother, but he does say "oy vey" at times, just like they do. He has a very strong identity, including his Jewishness, and he never denies it, even though he can be critical of Israel and in one short piece makes fun of Vladek in Spiegelman's *Maus* as a moocher on the goodwill of others.<sup>9</sup> But he is never actively disloyal to the Jewish group or to his identity and often writes about Jewish doctors and the Jewish ragpickers who he saw in Cleveland during his childhood. And despite all familial disagreements, his parents raised him as a decent, if anxious, person who became an important American writer. Harvey's basic decency and his writing artistry are what is seen in *Our Cancer Year* in particular. When Harvey is reduced to his basic humanity, he becomes one with the young folks who have also suffered from war and other problems, as well as with his neighbors and others (fig. 5. 4). With Joyce as his coauthor, he writes from where he is and connects to everyone, even those very unlike him. Most of all, the reader feels that he knows Harvey better than almost any other writer or artist, precisely because of Harvey's honesty in revealing his negative as well as his positive side. His ability to reveal himself is aided by the wonderful work of the various artists he worked with. With the help of Joyce he got through his cancer in *Our Cancer Year* and went on to produce other *American Splendor* volumes. It is almost as if the reader has gone through it as well. But in 2010 the story had an unhappy end, when a final bout with cancer claimed him at the age of seventy. While readers may miss Harvey, they must be grateful that he is here forever in his books.

One of Harvey Pekar's final pieces of work is the book *Yiddishkeit*, a compilation of texts and comics about "Jewish Vernacular and the New Land"



5.4. Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner (writers) and Frank Stack (artist), *Our Cancer Year*. A cancer-stricken Harvey is helped down the stairs by the sympathetic Ju, who with her sister survived the Cambodian massacres under the Khmer Rouge.

as its subtitle reads, edited by Pekar and Paul Buhle, an academic known for his previous work on comics. Essentially, this book tells, largely if not completely in graphic novel form, the story of the migration of the Yiddish language and literature from Europe to America, and the influence that Yiddish literature in particular has had on American Jewish life. Graphic novel participants in the collection include Barry Deutsch, the author of *Herville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*, and Sharon Rudahl, author of the graphic novel biography of Emma Goldman, both of which are analyzed in other chapters of this book. Only a few of the book's many comics features can be analyzed here, and I have chosen those that seem to bring together the Yiddish language and the American experience in the most poignant ways. But it should be noted that Pekar's history of Yiddish literature in comics format,

included in *Yiddishkeit*, is very worthy of being read. It is an excellent brief survey of a little-known subject and includes brief comics synopses of the major authors' works.

One of Pekar's pet peeves is the reputation of the Yiddish-American author Isaac Bashevis Singer, who Pekar regards as something of a charlatan. Pekar sees him as not a very good writer—because he writes about the shtetl (the European Jewish village) in a clichéd manner—but one who nonetheless seems to represent Yiddish literature in America. As Harvey sees it, even Singer's more open expression of sexuality than is found in most Yiddish writing only reveals the pop cultural, meretricious, audience-pleasing nature of his writing. Pekar complains that Singer received the Nobel Prize while James Joyce never did, which for Pekar shows the valuelessness of the prize itself. In "President's Day," reprinted from Pekar's *American Splendor* series,<sup>10</sup> Pekar records his all-day reading of the novel *Yoshe Kalb* by Singer's brother, I. J. Singer, hoping to find some good writing there.

What brings together the American element and I. J. Singer's Yiddish novel in Pekar's story is that Pekar chooses to go to his office at the Cleveland VA hospital on a bitterly cold day to read the book. So an American VA Hospital and *Yoshe Kalb* come together in a strange way. It's also President's Day and Harvey is expected to work one holiday a year, so he chooses this one. Again, the theme of Americanness and Yiddishism come together. He barely makes it in the zero temperature and snow. He sees some of his work colleagues when he arrives, but he quickly goes into his workspace to read. He recounts the plot, essentially about an unhappy marriage of a young woman to an older husband, as he reads. When he is hungry, he goes into the cafeteria for a snack from a machine. Then back to the story, in which the wife dies in childbirth along with an illegitimate child, and fifteen years later the true father of the child, Nahum, now named Yoshe Kalb (Yoshe the calf), finds himself in another town, where in an ironic turn he is more or less forced to marry to a girl who is pregnant with the child of a smuggler. Then Yoshe is accused by someone who knew him in his first town of being named Nahum rather than Yoshe and of being a swindler and an adulterer. Yoshe again wanders off and ends up sleeping in a cemetery as the story ends. The novel is about a sad sack, who gets nothing but trouble in his life, a dumb calf. Harvey is not pleased. As a character in "President's Day," he finds the "emphasis on sex, the melodrama, the contrived plot, the super-colorful characters . . . the reference to the supernatural at the end" (215) to be "just good pop literature" and nothing more. He yawns, has a drink of water, and leaves early since no supervisor is around. He can't believe that he has to work tomorrow since it feels like Friday to him.

Despite his interest in Yiddish literature because of his parents and his roots in eastern Europe, Harvey is saying that I. J. Singer is no better than I. B. Singer and that both are fraudulent. He is interested in people who do work, like himself, not strange characters, unlikely situations, and miracle workers. Harvey is, after all, a very down-to-earth, realistic writer himself, who deals with the trials of mundane life. But with Harvey's typical candor, "President's Day" makes the point that Harvey himself is a bit of a fraud since he came in ostensibly to work and did nothing except read this book and that he is amply repaid by feeling that he has wasted his own day as well as his employer's because of Singer's weak novel. The contrast between the standard American workplace and the shtetls in the story makes the tale of long ago and far away seem both exotic and improbable and, because of its pop nature, false in terms of morality as well. Harvey is not perhaps the best worker, but he is more down to earth than this story, as seen in Joe Zabel and Gary Dumm's drawings of Harvey, which are very realistic and stand in contrast to the relatively strange clothes and sad faces in the ghetto scenes. Harvey really looks pretty good in this story, and Yoshe Kalb does not. The upshot: Harvey is lucky to be in America, even in Cleveland with its freezing weather, because sometimes the snow lifts and he is in a clean, modern, real situation. He is pleased to leave early and to step out into the light of day. And most of all, he is better off than Yoshe Kalb because he does normal, mundane work and is not the subject of a contrived pop novel.

In contrast to Pekar's negative critique of I. J. Singer, Harvey Kurtzman (1929–93), a comics pioneer and the legendary creator of *Mad* magazine, whose Russian immigrant parents spoke Yiddish, comes off well in this collection. His story is told in this book by Joel Schechter in "Harvey Kurtzman—Mad Man." The art is by Spain Rodriguez, one of the founders of the underground comics movement in San Francisco in the 1960s. In two pages of colorful panels, Kurtzman begins drawing on the sidewalks in New York, then invents *Two-Fisted Tales* during World War II, and finally comes up with the idea for *Mad* in 1952, when he worked for Bill Gaines at EC Comics. In the pages of *Mad*, Kurtzman satirized Senator Joseph McCarthy and Superman, among others. The character Professor Joe Tsuris (from the Yiddish for "trouble")—a spokesman for Schechter—says that for Kurtzman every day was Purim and cause for a carnival atmosphere of parody and fun. Tsuris also mentions how Kurtzman and his buddy Bill Elder liked to draw pictures of streets full of posters and roadside signs, which contained puns and asides. Tsuris also mentions that Kurtzman learned Yiddish at a left-wing summer day camp called Camp Kinderland and that he was then in a position to introduce his readers to Yiddish-

isms in his comics work. *Mad* saved Bill Gaines's EC Comics from going out of business when Congress cracked down on horror comics and other comics thought to be inimical to children because *Mad* was called a magazine and was presumably for adults, but Kurtzman was not granted the terms he wanted for editing it so left to found other wacky magazines, none of which survived. But he did hire outstanding artists while editing some of these magazines, including Robert Crumb, and Gloria Steinem, who would go on to become a feminist activist, was one of his assistants. Then he did "Little Annie Fannie" for *Playboy*. Tsuris ends by calling him, perhaps with some exaggeration, "the most influential cartoonist of the twentieth century" (200). Like other features in *Yiddishkeit*, this one is relatively brief and straightforward, but it does make the point that *Mad* was greatly influenced by the Yiddish language, and in fact, a story in the first issue was entitled "Ganefs" (thieves). So Yiddish had a strong influence on the American language, at least from the advent of *Mad* if not before, and Harvey Kurtzman was behind that to some degree.

The third and final feature from *Yiddishkeit* that I will discuss also mixes Yiddish and Americanism in a major way. The pictures are by Sharon Rudahl and the words are from a song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," written by "Yip" Harburg to a tune by Jay Gorney. It's difficult to find a more intrinsic piece of Americana from the 1930s, but as the introduction by the editors points out, it is infused with eastern European Jewish sadness. So it struck a resonant chord during the Depression. In addition to the lyrics for that song, Harburg wrote the lyrics for "Somewhere over the Rainbow" and the rest of the songs from 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*, as well as for "Springtime in Paris." Like those songs, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," written when Harburg saw unemployment lines in Manhattan, was a great hit.

The song is very touching, and Rudahl's pictures bring that out. The speaker says that once he worked on a farm and built a railroad and worked on a tower and served in World War I, where they called him "Al." But now no one remembers his name as he sits on the street near his crutches, begging and collaring people and saying, "Say don't you remember, they called me Al, it was Al all the time. Say, don't you remember, I'm your pal, buddy, can you spare a dime?" Yet people including a well-dressed man with a tie, umbrella, and briefcase, do not remember or care, and Al, whose staring, unshaven face—very expressively portrayed by Rudahl—we see in the last frame, will have to go on begging just to stay alive (fig. 5.5). The editors' introduction noted how the tune expressed "hope gone badly awry, with falling minor chords" (183). So Yiddish-influenced writers and composers, who had the poverty of the ghetto in mind and also conjured up Jewish melodies



5.5. "Yip" Harburg, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" in Pekar and Buhle, *Yiddishkeit*, 183. This is Sharon Rudahl's touching rendition of the impoverished speaker of the Depression-era song.

from eastern Europe, gave a special tone to the struggles of the Depression in America in the form of this song.

All of the works discussed to this point contain an autobiographical or biographical element in them, which is part of what gives them their power. Now starts an examination of two completely fictional texts—Ben Katchor's *The Jew of New York* and Leela Corman's *Unterzakhn*—which deal with unusual angles on the Jewish immigrant experience. Katchor looks back to the earlier days of Jewish immigration, and Corman to the experience of Jewish female immigrants in particular.

Katchor's *The Jew of New York* reaches back to a time before the Jewish immigration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to 1825, when Mordecai Noah—the descendant of Sephardic Jews and the most important Jewish leader of his time in America—envisioned a Jewish settlement in upstate New York. Here, close to the beginning of the American experience, according to Katchor's picture, the Jews are attempting to find a way to blend with their new environment and yet remain Jewish, while America, with its many cults and sects based ultimately upon Puritanism, is trying to find a way to blend its newness with biblical precedents. This dual story is told through several characters, each of whom symbolizes a different position in this mix of identities in the making. As Sarah Henkin notes, this graphic novel is really a drama of Jewish and American identity set in

Jacksonian America.<sup>11</sup> As such, it reveals the confusion infecting the Jews themselves, who must find their way between tradition and their new world, and the confusion of the people of young America, who cannot quite figure out how to relate to this group, which is like and yet unlike other groups.

Katchor's story is hard to grasp at first because several different characters are introduced quickly: The first to appear is Samson Gergel, who is charged with making the sets for Professor Solidus's drama, *The Jew of New York*, which will be staged in the New World Theater that season (1). Another important character is Nathan Kishon, who was disgraced as a kosher butcher in New York when kosher and nonkosher tongues got mixed up, and who subsequently spent five years living in the wilds of upstate New York after following Mordecai Noah there in a quest to establish a Jewish homeland and then remaining when Noah left (6). During this period, Moishe Ketzelbord, a lapsed Jew and beaver fur trapper now called Maurice Cougar by the Indians, is Kishon's host. Ketzelbord has abandoned a Christian wife and daughters that he had baptized and remains in upstate New York pursuing his fur business. He admires Miss Patella, a well-known actress whose career he has followed, and has several illustrations of her in various roles. He also worships John Jacob Astor, whose picture he pins to a tree (13–14). Isaac Azrael, who is waiting for a shipment of mother of pearl to arrive on a ship named the *Palamabron*, is yet another worried Jew in the cast of characters (3). Yosl Feinbroyt (32) is a believer in combinations of letters that will, via permutations, put one in contact with God, as explained in the Kabbalah.

Kishon is the major figure and very eccentric: he walks around in a sheet and sleeps on the ground at night, even in the middle of New York City. Most of the story is told by him and relates to his former host Ketzelbord's distress at the possible extinction of the beaver and his bizarre behavior as he slowly becomes a beaver himself, at least in terms of his physical actions. Kishon also tells of a strange cult of largely non-Jewish environmentalists called the "New Afflatus." As one of them, Septum Dandy, explains, they one day wish to see all English writing in America rendered in Hebrew characters. Kishon and Ketzelbord are ultimately expelled from the colony after Kishon kills a wild turkey, which is against the cult's precepts (27–30).

In New York, Nathan Kishon speaks to Mr. Abel Marah, who is a seller of Jewish religious objects but who, sensing a shift in the market away from Orthodoxy (he himself eats oysters despite the prohibition against shellfish), is attracted to the ten thousand beaver pelts that Kishon has stored in an ice house in Buffalo (34). And he is also attracted to the flesh-colored clothes or "silk fleshings" that an importer has offered him and, bursting with excitement, begins to envision strategies for selling them. At the same time,

he learns of a pill, made from beaver fluids, which is supposed to increase the human sexual drive. He cannot contain his commercial excitement over these new wares and laments the fact that he has “wasted” his time selling Jewish religious goods when people in America, including the Jews, “find spiritual solace in ballroom dancing” (69) rather than in religion.

At the same time, Mr. Enoch Letushim, an emissary from the Jewish community in Palestine, appears in New York (42). He bears a bag of soil from the Holy Land for Jews who might want to include some of it when they are buried, and his purpose is to collect donations. He meets a Mr. Francis Oriole (45), whose dream is to carbonate water from Lake Erie and sell it. Oriole tries to persuade Marah to help him with his scheme.

Letushim, the emissary from the Jews in Palestine, now enthralled with the forward-looking nature of New York versus the backward-looking nature of Jerusalem (especially the corrupt tourism industry in Jerusalem), meets a Native American who knows Hebrew prayers because he is taking part in a show that posits that the Native Americans are a lost tribe of Hebrews. The show is run by Hershel Goulbat, and its star is Elim-no-pee, a Native American from upstate New York (49–50).

These many characters and their stories cross to form a plot line whose point is that Jewish identity at this formative period in America was excitingly mixed up with the history of the Native Americans; with new commercial ventures, including wild ones; and with moving from strict Orthodox religiosity to something more compatible with the reality of the American city and culture. This is what sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman calls “coalescence.”<sup>12</sup> Katchor is attempting to show what happens when European and even Middle Eastern Jewish culture comes into contact with the amazing diversity and dynamic commercialism of the new America. In the *Jew of New York* graphic novel, commercialism wins out, driving most of the endeavors of these gentlemen, who have little thought of religion: Goulbat, for instance, who began his career as a Hebrew teacher, decides that if he can extend his province to teaching all Native Americans the Hebrew language, his business will greatly expand (55). Similarly, Abel Marah is all too ready to give up selling Jewish religious objects in order to sell beaver pelts instead (34, 40). This shows Katchor’s vision of America as driven (and driven mad) by business, especially in its early days when everything was open for exploitation.

Maynard Daizy, a Christian who will play Major Ham—ironically, a representation of Mordecai Noah—in the play, wants to learn what Jews are like and how they are coping with the new land in which they find themselves, now that, according to him, European social ostracism, persecution, and the

ghetto are behind them (58–59). When Samson Gergel, the scenic director of the play, introduces Daizy to Isaac Azrael, Azrael says that the Jews of New York who emigrated from Europe have been “thoroughly corrupted by European culture and are Jews in name only” (59). The dilemma of assimilation is depicted here. Will the Jews indeed stop being Jewish, in view of both their past attempt to assimilate in western Europe and their new freedoms in America? Katchor of course is the one asking this question. His answer is: not so. While the Jews like Azrael to whom Daizy (and the reader) are introduced are often involved with the very American romance of commerce on a grand scale or have lost themselves in nature, some of them still eat meals of herring, remain anchored to a synagogue or burial society with a Hebrew title, and worry about possible anti-Semitism. The irony is that the play *The Jew of New York*, on which the scene designer and the actor are working so hard, is composed by a European anti-Semite, Professor Solidus, who continues to write anti-Semitic tracts while in New York, and states that the Jews have achieved more economic control here in a few decades than in a thousand years in Europe (65). Yet Solidus worries that the Jews will assimilate into America and lose their unique characteristics as the American population takes on Jewish characteristics, and he will have nothing left to write about (68). Katchor, in *The Jew of New York*, seems to be saying that this hatred is inescapable, even in the New World, because it was transferred from Europe and that anti-Semites need Jews to feed their obsession. And he also seems to be saying that the idea that the Native Americans are a lost Hebrew tribe shows how the wild ideas associated with the Jews continue to take new shape on the new continent (and in fact this idea is a foundation of Mormonism, which began in the 1820s, around the time that *The Jew of New York* takes place). The Jew of New York may think that he has escaped the hatred and craziness of the Old World but that is simply not so.

Only the scope of commerce available to the Jews as to others has been widened, and it serves as a seduction from Judaism itself, according to Katchor. Moreover, Mr. Marah tricks Nathan Kishon into thinking that he will personally go to move the beaver pelts for shipment, and sends him a false letter indicating that Marah has died and the pelts were stolen, in order to sell them himself and to keep the entire proceeds (70, 72, 73, 74).

But on the positive side, Isaac Azrael, of the congregation “Shearith Batsal” (“The gates of onion,” in another of Katchor’s ironic plays on Hebrew, which includes also the writing of English words in Hebrew letters, as the New Afflatus sect advocates [fig. 5.6]) does try to help Nathan Kishon, if partially because he is afraid that Kishon’s aberrant behavior will reflect poorly upon the Jewish religion and community. And a new character, Vervel



5.6. Ben Katchor, *The Jew of New York*. Katchor cleverly spells out the book's title in Hebrew letters.

Kunzo, travels on behalf of the German Society for the Culture and Science of the Jews in order to study the Jews of New York. So while some things that are negative, like anti-Semitism, strange ideas regarding the Jews, corruption even among the Jews themselves, and worry among the Jews about how they appear to others, never change even in New York, some positive things remain, including self-help, the study of Jews by other Jews, and innovative ideas among the Jews. Kunzo however ironically declares that the Jew is not to be studied like a museum specimen (85) although that in fact is what happened to Ketzelbord, who became too close to the beavers and attacked Maynard Daizy on the stage like an animal and who after being shot is put in a museum as a specimen. Katchor's irony seems to show that all propositions about the Jews are possibly true after all. They are an exciting and innovative if strange group, in part because of the negative atmosphere with which they are sometimes surrounded, and New York, which is also full of strange ideas, is the perfect place for them. Professor Solidus might be right that all Americans have some characteristics ascribed to the Jews, even as the Jews themselves assimilate into the general culture.

Katchor renders all this in a unique drawing style. The book itself seems

like an old newspaper, with the illustrations printed in faded gray tones. The illustrations seem washed out, although the words are always easy to read—a good thing, since the word content in this book is unusually high for a graphic novel. Faces are sharply defined but the rest of the characters' bodies, dressed usually in frock coats and hats, are more undefined and standard. As in the case of the words that jam the pages, there are usually eight panels—more than the usual amount—on each page. The inclusion of playbills and ads gives a feeling of authenticity to the narrative. A map of New York, overlaid by what looks like arteries and organs from the human body, begins the work, while what looks like a newspaper article about the “Lake Erie Soda-Water Company” ends it. Clearly, in his invention and realization of this story, Katchor is unique.

Although Katchor's work is deliberately very wacky and absurd and not very straightforward in its meaning, it has a lot in common with the other writers about immigration whose works have been analyzed in this chapter. Eisner shows similar things, if more realistically, when he describes Willie's train trip south and how he fits and does not fit into the American army or when he describes Willie's situation in the comics trade. Pekar shows his embarrassment over his father's accent and he reveals his parents' difficulties with accepting the idea that their son may not finish his education and move ahead in life as they expect. Lemelman's father is in the United States but often would rather be in Russia, while Lemelman the boy has difficulty coming to terms with mediating between his parents' mentalities and the new world in which he finds himself. Katchor's work has the benefit of showing that this struggle between Jewishness and Americanism began early on and his idea that Americans will become Jews to some extent is his contribution to this picture. In fact, for many of its citizens, America is indeed the new Jerusalem.

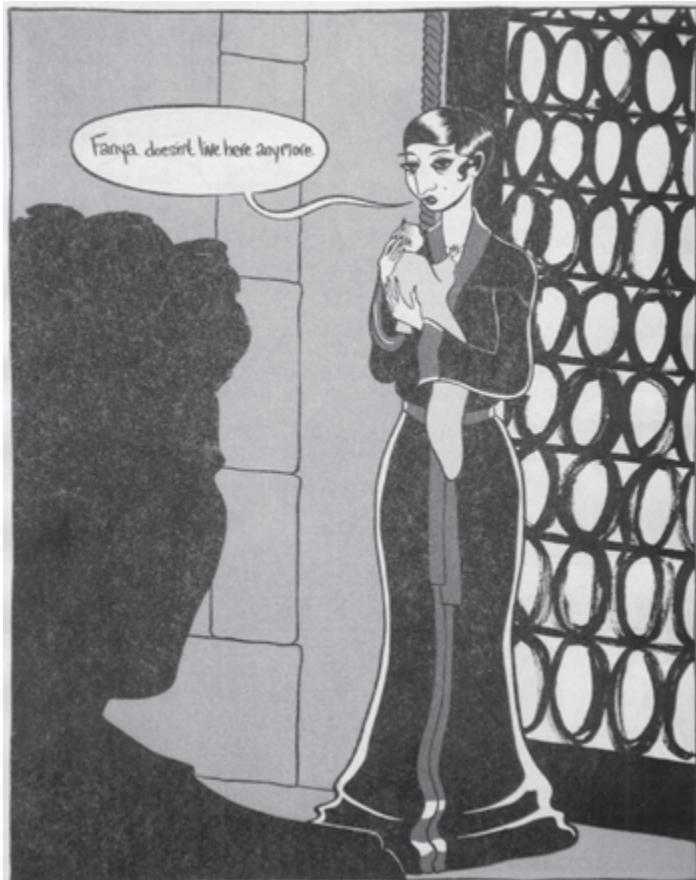
Leela Corman is a professional illustrator living in Gainesville, Florida. In the acknowledgments in her graphic novel *Unterzakhn* (“Underthings” in Yiddish), she thanks her older relatives for teaching her to swear in Yiddish and for perhaps being the models for some of her characters. Her graphic novel's plot has something in common with the life of the anarchist Emma Goldman, in that it tells the story of two immigrant sisters in New York, one of whom becomes a prostitute and then an actress and the other of whom is a birth control activist—she hands out “French sheaths” (condoms) to women who want to prevent pregnancy—and is therefore something of a political radical in terms of the feminism of the day. Even her boss, Bronia, who performs abortions, is worried that they will be arrested for openly speaking about birth control. But while Esther, who is the prostitute and actress,

becomes well off, like Dreiser's Sister Carrie, her sister Fanya, who tried to do the morally right thing for women by offering contraceptives, ironically gets herself pregnant by a married boyfriend, and becomes impoverished. Esther takes Fanya in and also helps her own old bordello madam, who is dying, allowing the madam to live in her house and taking care of her. But Fanya dies after childbirth, leaving Esther successful as an actress but with her sister's child. The story ends with Esther holding Fanya's baby and telling Fanya's boyfriend that Fanya does not live in her apartment anymore (a euphemism for Fanya's having died) (fig. 5.7), but the final episode, in effect an appendix to the story, is a flashback to the young girls playing together. This reminds the reader that the sisters could never know during their innocent childhood what shape their story will take. It is a largely if not completely tragic tale showing the hardship of immigrant women's lives in the New York of the early twentieth century.

Corman's black-and-white drawings give strong expressions to the characters' faces, with a particular prominence to their eyes, and she captures the dress of the period very well (see page 11, for instance). Esther's and Fanya's hair is always done in a very strong black, which often contrasts with the white in the rest of the panels on a given page. The sexual scenes are tastefully done (for instance, 140–42). She uses standard rectangular panels but varies their sizes for emphasis. In reading the story, strong emotions are found on almost every page, and these propel the reader on to the bitter-sweet ending.

The most touching element in the story is probably Corman's understanding of and sympathy for Esther as she becomes a prostitute. The girls' father—whose mother and sister were murdered by Cossacks (87–88) and who was in love with a Christian girl (109–12)—married their mother just because he got a free passage from Russia to America for agreeing to do that (117); and the girls' mother's parents were very ready to marry her off because of her being something of a disgrace to them (186). Even after she is married, she continues to have affairs, unbeknownst to her husband or to the girls. But when Esther becomes a prostitute, the mother disowns her, in an act of hypocrisy.

Earlier in the book, while working for her mother's corset shop when she was still young and innocent, Esther brings a package to a woman who is the proprietor of a brothel, which also stages dance shows at a burlesque house. Slowly Esther becomes involved and then is forced into a sexual situation with a client (62–64). She wants to continue with dance classes at the brothel, and she does odd jobs for the prostitutes there. Soon she has her mother's permission to work there, since her mother does not know that it



5.7. Leela Corman, *Unterzahkn*, 200. In Corman's very expressive style, the former prostitute and now-actress Esther holds the baby of her dead sister, Fanya.

is a brothel. Her mother likes the pay that Esther brings home (76); and her father, although he has had an interesting history as a young man in Russia, is pretty much a nonentity in the household and has no say about Esther's work. Before long, because she is young and desirable, Esther becomes a prostitute herself. But although she is not particularly well treated by the clients or the madam and develops a hard shell, she retains something of a heart and her list of clients grows (127–28).

But what is notable is the stereotyping she faces as a Jew in the brothel. She is told by a client that he thought that "Jews were hairier" (148), and another client (78) describes Jewish women's body types in a stereotypical way.

She is called a “tricky little kike” (145) by one of the girls, who sees her as a rival. And she even calls herself “a black-haired Jewish whore” (130) when a client offers to marry her. Corman seems to balance blame for the girls’ situations between Jews and Christians: the man who helps her begin her career as an actress, after keeping her as his mistress, is Jewish, while the boyfriend who gets her sister Fanya pregnant is not. Esther is ostracized by the Jewish community, especially the women, for being a prostitute. But the man who finally gets her into a theater of her own is a Christian patron of hers (168).

Corman seems to be making the point that talent will win out, as Esther’s talent for dancing and acting is recognized. Her work as a prostitute may even help her acting career, as the theater and prostitution have been linked for centuries. Acting was simply not considered a respectable profession for women throughout the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth; Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, for instance, is successful as an actress, but lives what was still considered an immoral life around the turn of the century. Esther’s Judaism is an obstacle to her becoming an actress but never a substantial one, and being Jewish actually helps her affiliation with the Jewish theater manager, who often uses Yiddish expressions in his speech (152). Corman says during an interview that “I grew up hearing a lot of Galitzianer dialect around me because my grandparents were Galitzianers from Poland. So it was kind of natural to throw that stuff in there and I wanted the readers to have some of it untranslated. I wanted people to have to go and look it up, what does this word mean?”<sup>13</sup> So this work, which was originally serialized in the newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward*, has an undeniably Yiddish accent to it, even though it discusses issues that are still relevant today and which to some degree affect all immigrant groups.

Corman also makes the point that one cannot know how life will turn out, as the do-gooder Fanya ends up with an illegitimate child and dead, while Esther is left to enjoy an acting career and to raise Fanya’s child. Despite anti-Semitism and the negative turns of fate, Esther is successful. The immigrant life in New York in the early twentieth century, particularly for Jews, was not an easy ride, as Sharon Rudahl’s biography of Emma Goldman (analyzed in chapter 6) also makes clear. And yet America clearly offers opportunities for success to those like Esther who can seize them.

In Eisner’s, Lemelman’s, and Pekar’s works, there are parents wrestling with the conflicts between the old country and the new and the tensions that they have passed on to their children as a result. These graphic novels remain a tribute to the struggles of the parents and an attempt to understand how Jews mediate this conflict, which has occurred often in Jewish history but never perhaps with the strength it has in America—a positive, prom-

ising, forward-looking country offering religious freedom, as opposed to more constricted and less positive venues in Europe and elsewhere in which Jews have sought refuge. In *Yiddishkeit* the reader learns of the influence of the Old World on the new via the influence of the Yiddish language on English, as well as the influence of the New World on the Yiddish-speaking immigrants.

Katchor is a bit eccentric, but he certainly shows the conflicts between the Old World and the New World, as well as the unique challenges and opportunities that America presented to the Jews. Leela Corman also shows opportunities being realized, albeit after a skewed path to success (which was also typical to some degree of the immigrant experience), and she shows that anti-Semitism was never far from that experience. But the proof of the value of the freedom that America offered to the Jews may be that all five of these creators became successful graphic novelists who have left a permanent, honest record, whether fictional or nonfictional, of the trials of immigrant parents and native-born sons and daughters.

## Some Female American Jewish Creators

Sharon Rudahl is the creator of, among many other works, *A Dangerous Woman*, a graphic biography of Emma Goldman, a famous and indeed notorious Russian Jewish immigrant to America who lived during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Rudahl's biography, which is based on Emma's autobiography, *Living My Life*, gives a view of the Jew as a political radical and to some degree explains how and why such an outcome could occur. Autobiographers Vanessa Davis and Aline Kominsky Crumb—who has been a collaborator with Rudahl—offer different takes on being Jewish than Rudahl's biography. Davis is much more centrist politically and comfortable with her Jewish identity, although she is not religious; she largely tells the tale of a normal girl trying to manage in life. Aline Kominsky Crumb, perhaps the first female autobiographer to work in the graphic novel genre, portrays herself as a stereotypical Jew who seems to embody all of the traits ascribed to Jews by the popular media and pokes fun at both herself and the stereotype when doing so. These two female autobiographers are each colorful, lively, unique, and honest in trying to determine the effect that their Jewishness has on their lives. Diane Noomin is a committed feminist and leftist who has collaborated with Kominsky Crumb and has created the memorable character DiDi Glitz, a personality who exemplifies middle-class Jewish social conformity as seen particularly on Long Island, New York, and who represents Noomin's satirical view of that. Melissa (or Miss) Lasko-Gross, who has created a naughty girl, Melissa Gross, in what appears to be her own image, shares with Noomin, Rudahl, and Kominsky Crumb a willingness to disturb usual middle-class beliefs. Melissa fights with everyone around her, especially religious believers, while identifying herself as Jewish. What is interesting is that all five women who are the subject of biographies or autobiographies—Goldman, Davis, Kominsky Crumb, Noomin, and Lasko-Gross—affirm their Jewish identities while

ignoring or even attacking religious belief. In this, they are typical of a wide swath of American Jews, both male and female.

The style that Sharon Rudahl employs for her life of Emma Goldman is black-and-white drawing with varied panel shapes and sizes on every page. She has a good eye for facial features and the dress of the period (2), and her realistic style sharply depicts the difficulties of Emma's early life and quickly wins the reader over to her side. Rudahl clearly wants the reader to like Emma, as she does. Rudahl strongly stresses Emma's Jewish identity; Rudahl begins by emphasizing the difficult position of the Jews in tsarist Russia and how, for instance, they were barred from owning land and working in many occupations (1). This is presented, perhaps, partially as an explanation for the bitterness of Emma's father, Abraham, including bitterness at having another daughter rather than a son when she was born (2). So Emma begins with a double dispossession—as a Jew and as a woman. But Rudahl is honest and balanced throughout this life: not only Emma's father but some of the women in Emma's family were not sympathetic to her either, according to Rudahl: her mother was distant and cold, and her half sister Lena, who was seven years older, was "inexplicably jealous and cruel" (3). Fortunately her oldest half sister, "timid, self-sacrificing Helena, protected and consoled little Emma" (2). The girls' mother had been widowed, and her marriage to Abraham was her second marriage and had been arranged. Abraham is Emma's father, but the stepfather of the older girls, Helena and Lena. Abraham uses his belt as an instrument of punishment unforgivingly, and, although he says prayers every morning, he does not seem to be religious in any humane sense (3). Growing up in such circumstances alerted Emma from the start to situations of unfairness and inequality. Rudahl seems to be explaining why Jews have sometimes become leftists and indeed radicals: Emma cannot connect with religion because her unfeeling father is religious, and in this case religion seems to do no good in terms of changing the world and resolving injustice. At the same time, her Jewish identity is important in terms of her ill-treatment on some occasions and her feeling of oneness with other oppressed groups. It seems natural therefore for her to forge an alliance with them.

Emma is especially moved by seeing such sights as peasant boys taken from their mothers for the Russian army, an unmarried pregnant woman expelled from society, and a soldier who has been wounded. Emma likes the young shepherd Petrushka, but he is sent away because she takes extra food for him from the family's pantry. Again Emma faces injustice at the age of eight, when she is sent to live with her grandmother and uncle, whom

her parents pay each month to send her to a Jewish school. But instead, her grandmother goes away and her uncle forces her to be a maid, treats her harshly, and sends false reports to her parents about her schooling (5). There was one positive result: when some caring women downstairs in the house write to her parents about Emma's condition four years after she was sent there, her father comes and takes her home, even embracing her lovingly (6).

But trouble lies ahead. Back in her parents' town of Popelan, her father loses his job as an inn manager because of anti-Semitism and bribery (6). Her oldest half sister Helena is forced to say goodbye to her one friend, a Lithuanian Christian. The family moves to Konigsberg, and finally Emma is enrolled in primary school. However, the geography teacher there attempts to molest her, though she fights back and runs away (7). Although the teacher is replaced, Emma gets bad grades, which greatly displeases her parents (8). She does finally do well enough on her exams to get into Gymnasium, but her religion teacher—whom she had tormented for the fun of it—refuses to give her a certificate of good character. When her parents move to St. Petersburg after her father is offered a job there, Emma eventually joins them. But the store in which Abraham is to work closes, and the girls have to work in factories to help support the family (9). Rudahl's telling of all of these incidents relies on her realistic style, and the variation in her panel borders and sizes keeps the reader focused on important moments, as when Emma says, for instance, that she will defy her father in order to go to a dance that she wants to attend (10). Also, Emma and Helena read "forbidden" works because St. Petersburg at the time was not only home to the most secular and richest Jewish community in Russia but was also a center of political dissent, including secret reading circles. She also has her first sexual encounter (11), with a hotel clerk, and finds it more brutal than she had imagined. From her early years then, Emma shows an independent spirit and does not follow conventional mores.

Because of the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, the Jewish community suffered greater repression, to the extent that a full one-third of Russian Jews left for America over "the next three decades," as the narrator informs the reader (12). Lena leaves first, and when Helena decides to leave too, Emma insists on going with her. But America does not bring the full relief that Emma and her sisters expected. Rudahl depicts America of the late nineteenth century, as seen by immigrants, as a land of sweatshops and slave-driving foremen, despite the welcome of the Statue of Liberty, which was built but not officially opened yet when Emma and Helena arrived in 1885 (13). The contrast between the promise of the statue and the actual work-

ing conditions for immigrants is a terrible contradiction between ideals and practice. Emma works ten and a half hours a day for \$2.50 a week, \$1.50 of which had to go for rent to the husband of Lena, the half sister with whom she and Helena stay in Rochester, New York. The factory where Emma works is owned by a fellow Jew and is “better lit and more modern than those in Petersburg,” but the working conditions are terrible. One early incident in the factory shows Emma helping a coworker who has fainted and being fired for this display of humanity (13). Fortunately she gets another job, for \$4 per week. Soon her mother and father and the rest of her family also come to join them, forced out by the pogroms in Russia, and Lena’s small house holds seven adults, two boys, and a baby.

Emma’s marriage to an older tailor starts to disintegrate (14–15). She finds freedom only in the Socialist meetings she attends with Helena. After the Haymarket bomb explosion in Chicago in 1886, Emma becomes an anarchist (16). She is shown to be superidealistic, thinking that anarchism will result in “no kings, no gods, no hunger or greed. . . . No reason to fight wars! All people living as brothers and sisters” (16), a thought that Rudahl accompanies with an idealized panel showing beautiful flowers and butterflies. Emma attacks a cousin who supports the government against the Haymarket activists, four of whom were put on trial and hanged. It is clear that Emma has become a full-fledged activist at the age of twenty. But given what Rudahl has shown of the injustices that Emma has faced in her life, the reader continues to side with her, even when she leaves her husband and her parents and sisters for good and seeks refuge with Hillel Solotaroff, an anarchist friend living in New York City. She seems bent upon making the world a better place for the working class and appears to be radically idealistic, like many people in their twenties, only more so. He introduces her to Sach’s Café, where all of the radicals from the Lower East Side of New York—the immigrant, particularly Jewish, section of the city—hang out. Here she meets Alexander Berkman, a strong anarchist who is two years younger than she but who warms to her instantly according to Rudahl’s biography (18).

Berkman introduces Emma to Johann Most, the publisher of an anarchist newspaper, and he takes to her instantly. Berkman becomes jealous because of Most’s attention to Emma. However, she is attracted to Berkman more than to Most, and they start a romance—but as someone who has already been married, she makes clear that she will no longer be bound by rabbis or the law and is therefore beyond formal marriage (21). Now Emma and Berkman establish an anarchist commune with two other members in an

apartment in New York. Emma continues working at a factory and Berkman works as a cigar roller. They participate in meetings and protests. Now Fedya, Berkman's cousin and a painter who lives in the commune, is also attracted to Emma. She wonders if she can love two men at the same time (22).

Emma embarks on an anarchism-promoting tour sponsored by Most (23). During one of her lectures, she becomes energized when she thinks of her youth full of injustices and captures the audience with her own vision. She has found her *métier*. When she returns, she leaves Most and decides that she can set out on her own; and he denounces her as a "heartless coquette" and "snake," because he is in love with her (24). Now only twenty-one, she helps organize a strike of cloak makers who work in sweatshops.

In Rudahl's rendition, Emma at this age is not at all beautiful, and her attractiveness to Most and to Berkman is based therefore on her spiritual allegiance to the struggle to improve the lives of the workers. She is shown speaking to workers (and is compared by Rudahl to Martin Luther King Jr., whose picture appears alongside her) (24–25) and expressing her respect for "life and joy," but nowhere is she presented as particularly attractive physically. She is, however, constantly presented as a heroine—she has sewed piecework up to sixteen hours a day to make ends meet while also agitating and keeping house, according to Rudahl's narration (26). Finally she and a few anarchists open a photo studio in New England, which fails; and then a lunch room, which succeeds. But Emma remains tied to the cause of anarchy. When Henry Clay Frick and his workers are at loggerheads in the Homestead coal field strike of 1892, Emma leaves the lunch room and returns to New York City where, with Berkman, she plans to go to Homestead to support the workers, this time even contemplating the use of dynamite bombs. This shows how far Emma is willing to go in support of her ideals—while Berkman studies and experiments with bomb material, Emma keeps watch (28). Rudahl portrays this development in a dramatic full-page spread, half of which is devoted to Berkman's study of bomb making and the other half to Emma's watchfulness (28) (fig. 6.1).

Berkman actually plans to kill Frick, and Emma helps in the planning. Here Jewish identification with left-wing causes at its most extreme is shown. She even tries to become a prostitute to enable Berkman to buy a gun. Finally Berkman enters Frick's office and wounds him (30) but is caught. Now the police seek Emma, too. She hides with a relative. When Johann Most publicly accuses Berkman of botching the assassination, Emma hits him with a whip that she has carried with her for this purpose (31). Frick recovers, the strike is broken, and Berkman gets twenty-two years in prison, but Emma



6.1. Sharon Rudahl, *A Dangerous Woman*, 28. Rudahl strikingly juxtaposes the intense faces of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman as Berkman learns how to prepare a bomb.

remains loyal to him. However, she is also cagey; as the narrator points out, it isn't until almost forty years later (in her autobiography), that she does admit her complicity in the plot (32).

But her friends and comrades know, and they shun her. Her landlord evicts her. Finally she finds refuge in a bordello, where she makes dresses for the prostitutes (34). She works for Berkman's release and visits him under an assumed identity. But Rudahl says that "Emma began to doubt if noble ends justify any means" (34). This seems like a Russian story taking place in the United States. Rudahl captures the atmosphere of turn-of-the-century radicalism as she tries to build sympathy for Emma. It is clear that left-wing

causes have become Emma's religion but even she has doubts, however infrequently, about her course of action. Her doubts endear her to the reader all the more in Rudahl's rendering of them.

Even when sick with tuberculosis (34), Emma rushes to New York during the 1893 economic depression to help set up soup kitchens and incite hunger demonstrations. Although Rudahl does not state this, she seems to imply that the unwavering dedication of the radical to his or her cause may be a form of displaced religious belief. Emma wants above all to help humanity and will stop at nothing to do that. Her god is the workers, and her Satan is the injustice that they must suffer owing to the economic system. And she will sacrifice herself for this cause. Also, by joining with other comrades, Jewish or not, dedicated to the anarchist cause, she reaches out beyond the Jewish group, thus fulfilling perhaps an unconscious need to break out of the Jewish ghetto.

Emma is sent to jail and receives a one-year sentence, and she becomes something of a celebrity. When she leaves the prison at the age of twenty-five, she is a famous anarchist. Now anarchist Ed Brady becomes her lover and the equivalent of a husband (39). Known as Red Emma, she continues to attack patriotism, the oppression of workers, religion, and marriage. Emma goes abroad to study and contacts more radicals and then returns to the United States. Her plans for freeing Berkman via a jailbreak eventually fall through (52), but she goes back to rabble-rousing. She goes off to England and has an affair with a Czech admirer (50). One of her contacts, Leon Czolgosz, assassinates President McKinley, and Emma is accused of inspiring his action (55). At thirty-two and back in the United States, she is in jail and yet sorry she was not able to do more for the cause. She gets released but is "hounded by authorities and a pariah to the left" (58) who are in favor of mass movements but not individual acts of violence. Everyone but Emma disowns Czolgosz.

But, interestingly, despite her loyalty to the Left in general, in Rudahl's account Emma also remains loyal to the Jews. She always remains conscious of her Jewish ethnicity and never denies that. When pogroms erupt in Russia in 1902, Emma participates in the protest in New York, albeit under an assumed name, E. G. Smith. She also remains interested in Russian affairs and helps a Russian revolutionary visiting New York by hosting her and translating for her (62). When the tsar is forced to concede some rights to the people in 1905, she is delighted. She also helps a Russian theater troupe, which presents revolutionary plays, when it becomes stranded in New York (63).

In the Progressive Era, which started with Teddy Roosevelt's election, she finds new allies—those who are against child labor and adulterated food.

Emma and her friends even establish a Free Speech League, a forerunner of the ACLU, according to Rudahl's narration (61). She ends up with her own magazine, *Mother Earth*, which is supported by the Russian theater troupe and a group of her friends, who form a publishing collective. The magazine did not publish poems that did not rhyme and so was formally conservative, even at a time of Modernism, but it did publish Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Proudhon and was a "bridge between European Enlightenment and New World social activism" (65), according to Rudahl.

Then Berkman, released from prison at the age of thirty-five after having been incarcerated since he was twenty-one, returns to New York and Emma. Ed Brady has died and so has Johann Most. Emma hopes to resume life as Berkman's lover, but they never again are physically intimate, according to Rudahl, and prison has changed Berkman emotionally (66–67). Berkman disappears and then returns to see Emma because he is contemplating suicide since no one seems interested in his message of anarchism any longer and he feels he has to see her one last time. Both Emma and Berkman look considerably older, and this is a very touching moment (68) as she leans on his chest and half of his face is shown.

But they are separated again when Emma goes on tour, including to Europe. She is now working together with the International Workers of the World (I.W.W.), the "Wobblies" union, and continues speaking after she returns to the United States despite laws against anarchism and attempts to annul her citizenship. Now she meets Dr. Ben Reitman, the "converted son of Jewish immigrants" who is a leader of the Wobblies. They have an affair, which lasts on and off for ten years (75). He is a womanizer, but she continues to love and argue with him, and he continues to be attracted to her. Their radical political beliefs seem to go together with radical sex. In San Francisco, they talk and argue with Jack London for three days (76). Emma converts a soldier to anarchism.

She continues to attract attention and be reviled by the authorities. Soon she confronts women's issues, including the vote, which she sees only as a way for middle-class, but not poor, women to have a voice (81). She moves into the area of birth control and other sexual issues, including homosexuality, taking a liberal position (83). Rudahl's position throughout is pro-Emma, as she continually portrays her as a paragon of ideological virtue and yet a sensitive soul who is capable of love. She makes Emma's positions on social and sexual matters seem ahead of her time and entirely reasonable, however radical they were considered then by the political establishment (if not by many of the ordinary people). When she is put on trial for her pro-contraception views, the entire courtroom bursts into applause, according to

Rudahl (83). Despite the support of the people in the courtroom, both she and Ben Reitman are sentenced to several months in prison.

World War I now begins to ignite and spread in Europe. Emma opposes it as a capitalist war, and in retrospect she again looks prescient for opposing such a meaningless war that could and indeed should have been prevented by better diplomacy. When the United States enters the war in 1917, Emma and Berkman start a league for conscientious objectors, again seeming prescient in their views. They are arrested again, this time for unpatriotic activity. And now the sentence includes not only a two-year jail term but deportation for her and for Berkman (86). Emma helps organize support for him even in Kronstadt, Russia, where Russian sailors, demanding Berkman's release, hold the U.S. ambassador hostage. When Berkman is released, he and Emma take further part in mass antiwar demonstrations in the United States. When the Russian revolution occurs in 1917 Emma feels hope, even though she opposes the dictatorial aspects of Marxism. Emma is put in the women's prison part of the Missouri State Prison system. There she again tries to oppose injustice to the prisoners and makes friends with other radicals. She helps improve conditions in the prison (89). She spends her fiftieth birthday in prison but with well-wishers from around the world supporting her (90). Emma's sister Helena's violinist son David, who volunteered for the draft, is killed in the war, confirming Emma's view of its futility.

Emma and Berkman are deported but when Berkman hears that Henry Frick, the man he tried to assassinate, had died, Berkman responds that Frick had been "deported by God" (92). She and Berkman write a pamphlet about deportation and share their cells with like-minded roommates, but it must have been very sad for Emma to have to leave the United States, where she had spent her life and where her family members, including the grieving Helena, still lived. But a rich supporter, Aline Barnsdall, gives her a five-thousand-dollar check to tide her over when abroad. Emma and Berkman and 248 others are deported on an old army transport (93). Despite the hardships and the danger of the journey from Finland to Russia, Emma looks forward to being part of the revolution at last and is accompanied by Berkman, so she is relatively happy.

In Leningrad, John Reed, the journalist and radical activist, comes to meet Emma (94), but Leningrad in the middle of the war between the Reds and the Whites is near starvation. When she asks for explanations for the large numbers of executions of counterrevolutionary people, about the existence of the secret police, and why anarchists are being arrested, she is always told that the revolution is fighting for its life with the assumption that when the Marxist revolutionaries win, there will be more freedom and everything

will be much better (94). She and Berkman even argue with Lenin, who, although he admires their stand against the American government, says that free speech is a bourgeois prejudice and advises them to find something useful to do (95). Emma does not want to swear fealty to the Communist Party and so cannot work as a nurse, but she and Berkman try to restore villas for use as workers' rest homes. Then they are assigned to collect papers and souvenirs of the revolution for a museum. They see a ruined Jewish village, in which a villager praises Lenin for putting an end to pogroms (96). Berkman and Emma are asked to join the free peasant militia against the Communists, but Emma sees this as too dangerous to do. And then their money gets stolen. When sailors in Kronstadt strike for better rations, the sailors are killed, although Berkman and Emma try to negotiate between the sides to no avail. Emma is finding that she can do nothing to help the people and that the Marxist revolution is no better than other dictatorial movements that she as an anarchist has opposed. While in Russia, they are shadowed by U.S. as well as Communist agents and are not allowed travel permits to any U.S. ally. (Once they leave Russia, they are able to travel more freely.) Their mail is read by the State Department. Rudahl continues to build sympathy for them, as she shows them just as unwelcome and unhappy in the Russia of the revolution as they were in the United States, and all because they selflessly want to do good for the people and to uphold values like free speech (95–96). After two years of disappointment, Emma and Berkman leave Russia for the last time, headed under false names for an anarchist conference in Weimar Germany (98). Berkman makes it, but it takes Emma longer, and she has a torrid affair with one of her admirers, a young Swedish man, on the way, even though he is twenty-nine years old and she is fifty-three.

Berkman and Emma live in Weimar Berlin past their visa allowance. Emma attacks the Russian revolution in her writing for the American press because liberal publications reject her articles about it. Her articles become a book, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (101). Emma and Berkman have trouble evading the German police. She meets an old pen pal, Frank Harris, the Irish author of the multi-volume autobiography *My Life and Loves* (1922–27), who was living in Paris to avoid charges because of the autobiography's deliberately in-your-face sexual explicitness, and he recommends England as a place of refuge for them. In England, she is treated like a celebrity by free-thinking British radicals, including Bertrand Russell and Rebecca West. The British Labour Party, however, liked the Russian revolution and the members of that party who had visited Russia said they saw no repression there (103). Again, Emma seems prescient and truthful compared to other run-of-the-mill leftists.

To stay in England, she marries an anarchist. But on May 26, 1926, Emma leaves England for France where Peggy Guggenheim buys Emma a small house in Saint-Tropez (104). Emma travels to Canada to defend Sacco and Vanzetti (104), who many people believed were put on trial because of their anarchist beliefs for a murder they did not commit, but she is not allowed into the United States. After Sacco's and Vanzetti's executions she returns to Saint-Tropez to start writing her autobiography. Rudahl has Emma comment that in all of her travels in Europe she never felt as alive and vital as she did while in the United States (104). Her *Living My Life* was published in 1931 to largely favorable reviews, probably because of the bite of the Great Depression. Emma tours Europe warning of Hitler two years before he is elected chancellor. She is allowed back into the United States for ninety days and speaks against Hitler despite the fact that she is supposed to stick to a talk about drama (105). In Canada, she has an affair with a blind thirty-six-year-old man (106). But she rushes back to France where Berkman is dying of prostate cancer and confesses to him that he was rooted in her being more than anyone else, even though she has had several affairs and he is with a younger woman (106). In 1936, Berkman commits suicide after first sending Emma a birthday telegram. Rudahl makes this a very sad moment because Berkman seems to be the man closest to Emma, and Emma is left, after all of her affairs, with no children. She looks after Berkman's last girlfriend, though (107), and continues to work for various causes, now including the anti-Fascist Loyalists in Spain, even at the age of sixty-seven; and she says that this is because she wants to continue to live up to Berkman's spirit (108).

Emma barely manages to escape to London before getting trapped in the internecine conflict of the Left, which is part of the conflict in Spain. She dedicates herself to working on papers for a Dutch exhibition on Berkman and misses him more than ever. In March 1939, with the Spanish cause lost to Franco and Hitler moving across Europe, Emma flees to Canada. She demands the right of Jewish refugees to come to Western countries and to Palestine, which the British were keeping them from (and Rudahl illustrates this with people holding signs in Hebrew [110]). At the age of seventy, her last act is to try to save four Italian Canadian anti-Fascists from being deported to Mussolini's Italy. Rudahl shows her speaking Yiddish and giving one of them "a bissel [a little] chicken soup" (110). But while waiting to give the four Italians a ride to an anti-Fascist meeting, Emma suffers a stroke, and dies on May 14, 1940. She is buried in Chicago, near the Haymarket martyrs, as Rudahl puts it. Rudahl includes a note from Emma herself saying that she would repeat her life as she lived it and that the pursuit of wealth and power is worthless, and Rudahl ends by saying, "Throughout her more

than half a century of fearless trouble-making, Emma's voice could not be stifled. Once heard, she could not be forgotten. . . . May we remember her today" (112).

Rudahl's pages, crammed full of historical events combined with the personal events of Emma's life, give a good picture of this tumultuous time in the early twentieth century leading up to World War II. Her use of varied panel sizes and shapes, her combination of narration and word balloons, and her occasional full-page spreads, bring the reader into an unusual life and—regardless of one's own political predilections—create strong sympathy for Emma Goldman, a woman who did what she believed in, who was honest in her rejection of political views, including Russian Marxism, that seemed oppressive, and who in terms of women's rights was clearly ahead of her time. Most of all, Rudahl shows that Emma always knew that she was a Jew and remained faithful to her Jewish ethnicity if not to any religious views.

Rudahl's "Author's Note" at the end (113–5) is most enlightening. She says that everything in the biography is authentically quoted but that she did take some liberties in editing for brevity and making up minor dialogue. Then she goes on to discuss herself, pointing out that she grew up near Washington, D.C., "in a suburban ghetto of second- and third-generation Russian Jewish immigrants whose parents or grandparents had been part of Emma's wave of immigration." She mentions how her grandmother had to beg to be taught to read when she lived in a ghetto in Europe and how Rudahl herself told her principal that Hanukkah should be included along with Christmas as part of the holiday program at her junior high school. Even though he threatened to expel her, she "stood her ground" and made the discovery that "anyone can be powerful if they are indifferent to consequences" (113). Then she details her involvement in the civil rights marches of the 1960s and her anti-Vietnam activities. She also took part in the sexual revolution and feels that Emma would have been very much at home in that revolution. Put in jail for her antiwar activity, Rudahl says she made the same discovery that Emma did: that most of her fellow jailmates were simply poor and ignorant people. Rudahl tried to live in Tito's Yugoslavia but returned to California to marry a professional chess master. She has however continued her protest activity, most recently being jailed for opposing U.S. involvement in Iraq. She quotes a Jewish folk belief to support her views, namely that every jewel on God's throne is a person who fulfilled his or her task in life. Although she is an atheist like Emma, she seems close to the Jewish tradition because she manifests it at times in the biography, as well as because of her inclusion in the book *Yiddishkeit*, edited by Harvey Pekar and Paul Buhle, which was analyzed in chapter 5. Her final statement is that "learning about

Emma and her colleagues gave me perspective on the outrages of our own day and comforted and encouraged me to never stop fighting or dancing. If these pages in any way encourage you to see more clearly and act more bravely, my work will have been well rewarded indeed" (115).

This is a very clear and indeed remarkable statement of how leftist political work has replaced the Jewish religion for Rudahl but how she nonetheless remains very much in the Jewish tradition of identity. Although she does not say so explicitly, Emma appeals to her in large part because she was Jewish and a model of how her Jewish roots led her to sympathize with the oppressed of all nations. In this combination of ethnic Judaism and leftism, and her lack of attraction to the Jewish religion itself, Rudahl no less than Emma Goldman is representative of many Jews. As Rabbi Adam Grossman has written, many underground Jewish comics express "a political link typified by the idea that Judaism and Radicalism were synonomous."<sup>1</sup> This biography seems to pinpoint the reasons for that combination of Jewishness and leftism, which has its roots in the oppression of the Jews in Russia during the tsarist period.

Rudahl's *Adventures of Crystal Night*, a sci-fi comic book rather than a graphic novel, follows in this vein of Jewish leftism. The character Crystal Night is obviously named for Kristallnacht (or "the Night of Broken Glass"), the night the Nazis destroyed many Jewish people's stores and houses of worship, leaving those buildings' windows shattered. Her grandmother tells her the story of her experience of Kristallnacht at the beginning of the comic, and in another Jewish reference, this one anti-Semitic, a woman mentions that Crystal's DNA "comes from an old kike" great-great-grandmother. Like a good political radical, Crystal is dedicated to destroying the power of the Aristos, the ruling class of her world, and succeeds in doing so with the help of aliens from outer space. As the story of Crystal Night and this adventure is told to a young girl many generations later by her mother, the point is that the evil Aristos' towers were destroyed along with their power. Although this comic is hard to follow and needs more explanation woven into it, the connection between Jews and an attack on oppressive forces is clear, so it is another demonstration of Rudahl's view of Jewish identity and belief in antioppression. While ironically its heroine is named for a night of oppression and even though it is set in the distant future, for Rudahl, Crystal Night is a precursor to Emma Goldman, since this comic was published in 1980, long before Rudahl's biography of Emma was published in 2007.

Diane Noomin, one of the creators of "Twisted Sisters," a feminist comic, and a close collaborator with Aline Kominsky Crumb, both of whom had problems with the women's comics collective in San Francisco, is, like Ru-

dahl, known for her left-wing views. In her collection *Glitz-2-Go*, one of the stories is the autobiographical “I Was a Red Diaper Baby” (122–3). It is created in a very realistic style, including photographs, which is the opposite of her “DiDi Glitz” style of black-and-white drawing, and reinforces Noomin’s statements about herself and her radical views. Noomin’s better-known character DiDi Glitz is not very political or even philosophical, usually being concerned with men, her own looks, and sexuality; but this particular feature is about Noomin herself and reveals the basis for her own political ideas.

Her parents move to Hempstead, Long Island, from Brooklyn in 1952 and are ordered by the Communist Party to which they belong to “fit in,” according to Noomin, who writes her book’s first-person narration in her own voice. But they do not entirely fit in, and Noomin and her Jewish friends in Hempstead are made to suffer in school for being Jewish. Diane wishes she has freckles and a pug nose (122) so she can fit in. Her parents have a mimeograph machine hidden in their attic with which they publish party propaganda, and many Communists come through their house. They eventually move back to Brooklyn, but now the FBI comes to investigate her mother, who had once signed a Communist petition and was dismissed from her job in the Social Security Administration because of that (123). Noomin ends by wondering if she should get the documents the FBI has about her parents via the Freedom of Information Act, or not. Once again, the connection between Jews and radicalism is made, rightly or wrongly. The question here is whether Diane’s family’s attraction to Communism is rooted in a desire to forget or get beyond their Jewishness.

In another feature, “George Bush Begged Me to Abort Our Love Child” (132–3), Noomin takes on the Right, this time by imagining an affair between George H. W. Bush (“Bush the father”) and DiDi Glitz. He indeed becomes a father because he gets DiDi pregnant and wants her to have an abortion (133) (fig. 6.2). She cries about the sanctity of the preborn, mimicking a Republican prolife stance, while making him seem hypocritical for wanting the abortion just for the sake of keeping up his political appearance. DiDi has the baby, and George is forced to go prochoice and buy his daughter a new convertible to keep her quiet. So he flip-flops, just as he did on taxes. This feature, in colors, with hearts strewn around the first few panels, seems like a story in a popular romance magazine, but its whole purpose is to show Bush as a hypocrite about being prolife when it comes to protecting his own situation.

But in most stories, DiDi is far more involved with sexuality and relationships than with politics. While most of the features in *Glitz-2-Go* are about



6.2. Diane Noomin, *Glitz-2-Go*, 133. In Noomin's rendering, the elder George Bush and DiDi look like cartoon characters, which accentuates Noomin's satire.

those topics, some have to do with a specifically Jewish take on them, for instance in "Life in the Bagel Belt with DiDi Glitz" (102) and "Back to the Bagel Belt with DiDi Glitz" (106). These stories aim to demonstrate that Jews in the suburbs and their children are obsessed with money and the latest trends. "Life in the Bagel Belt" begins with DiDi's teenage daughter wanting a big party boat to celebrate her sixteenth birthday rather than a dinner out at a Chinese restaurant (102). So the theme of extravagant spending and consumption is highlighted from the beginning, as it is in DiDi's last name, "Glitz." (Noomin also comments that "some Yiddish sources define glitz as 'glitter.'")<sup>2</sup> Then the talk moves to their friend Midge Weiner and a nose job and liposuction. Here the theme is finding ways to get away from being Jewish.

Now the story takes a strange turn as DiDi's daughter wants to help her boyfriend have a sex change operation so he can become a lesbian. Another woman says that her daughter and her boyfriend went out on their new boat and complained because there wasn't a king-sized bed on board. And another woman boasts that she told her son that she'd buy him a black

TransAm (104). While DiDi complains that she can't find love, the last two panels of the story show Plato, DiDi's daughter's boyfriend, dressed in a wedding dress, climbing down a ladder held by her daughter. They are obviously eloping to be wed as a lesbian pair. This strange event seems to be a normal part of DiDi's world, in which there is very little normality in terms of love or relationships.

In the second story, "Back to the Bagel Belt," Long Island is counted as "such fertile soil for misery," and a female comics artist tells DiDi that she'd like to do a feature about it but she doesn't want to hurt a friend, Rhonda, who lives there (106). The story is about a married woman—this Rhonda—who is in business with and who wants to have an affair with her husband's sister's husband. Rhonda's husband is being ignored, while her daughter wants one thousand dollars for a pair of jeans. Rhonda almost has a nervous breakdown when Eli—the man she is interested in—leaves the business because he just can't stand the guilt of being attracted to Rhonda rather than to his wife anymore. While other women in her circle show their off their diamond rings, Rhonda turns down such a ring for the twenty-fifth anniversary of her marriage because she says the marriage was not always a happy one.

And she ends up miserable. The cartoonist, it turns out, has told the story, even though she had said at the beginning that she did not want to hurt a friend (108). So once again the Jewish suburbs of Long Island are depicted as miserable places of infidelity, conspicuous consumption, and no interest in anything serious, like religion. In these features, Noomin is the equivalent of a stand-up comedian, who pokes fun at her upbringing and her ethnic group. While some of the tendencies she sees in Long Island may be there, in her comics they are clearly exaggerated. Yet her characters look normal and her style of drawing, while cartoony, is not unrealistic.

These cartoonists are radicals or at least leftists because that may come with the territory of the Bohemian Jewish artist, but can Judaism be taken as inherently leftist? Polls have certainly shown that a majority of Jews are Democrats and support many liberal causes but does that mean that they are radicals? Contemporary female graphic novel autobiographers may have something of Goldman in them, as Rudahl does, but they are so original in personality as in their art, that factors beyond the political seem to dominate their attention. Relationships, appearances, artistic inclinations, and quirky personality traits are more important than politics in the work of these female cartoonists; like Goldman to a certain extent, they may be seen as sexual as well as political radicals. Aline Kominsky Crumb and Melissa Lasko-Gross make a fetish of displaying odd or unusual traits and tying them in some cases to being Jewish. But Vanessa Davis is so normal that

neuroses, like politics, do not seem to be major issues for her and that may distinguish her among these other female comics creators.

Vanessa Davis's graphic novel *Make Me a Woman*—really a collection of her shorter features over several years—hits a nerve in terms of her description of the attitude of many American Jews toward their religion and their identity. Raised in south Florida, and having lived in New York and California, all centers of Jewish populations, Davis has a very real sense of these attitudes and exemplifies them herself. She is not making any ideological point and has no axe to grind but almost effortlessly hits the norm for many Reform Jewish temple-goers. Essentially, she identifies with the Jews, has many Jewish friends, and feels most at home in Jewish areas of the United States, but she has little religious belief or deeply held convictions about religion.

The virtue of Davis's autobiography—an introspective, poetic autobiography, in William Howarth's terms—is its honesty, especially about mundane matters like eating, working, shopping, and dating. She does not tell an extraordinary tale of unusual people, or even strange and wacky events, but rather a real story, showing how things happen in the real world. Having difficulty putting on a new dress, having her wisdom teeth out, and celebrating Hanukkah or Purim are things that Davis, like most ordinary Jewish people, discusses. Her personality is normal, and even though she is an artist, she makes no pretense to Bohemianism or eccentricity. She could be a next-door neighbor, a reasonable relative, or someone you knew when growing up. Julia Rothman has commented that “it seems like everyone can compare their experiences with hers. Her stories are real lessons of life: happiness, humility, love, obsessions . . . told with personality and without editing. The title *Make Me a Woman* couldn't have been better named. In these pages of everyday moments Vanessa learns who she is, and the reader gets a chance to reflect on his or her own memories of growing up. This book collects all of her best work from 2004–2010 and includes published and (as of yet) un-published comics and her sketchbook diary pages.”<sup>3</sup>

Davis's style of art, too, is casual, easygoing, and pleasing to the eye rather than disturbing or raucous. Like her whole story, this is an excellent achievement. Her style is just what it should be. The colors in her color features are pleasingly moderate with rare exceptions, and her pencil drawings are imprecise rather than greatly detailed. They look as if she has just drawn them in a few minutes, and yet she shows what she, as the main character, looks like at different times in her life, and each of her friends and relatives has individuality. She does not use panel borders, and each page that is populated by more than one image has them running into one another with only



6.3. Vanessa Davis, *Make Me a Woman*. Davis's honest rendition of her facial profile, showing that she is a normal woman rather than a movie star.

blank space in between, except for an occasionally crowded feature, such as “Modern Ritual Preparation Ritual,” in which she describes preparations for her Bat Mitzvah and the other life events in which she was involved at the time, giving a busy impression. The eye easily moves from one image or set of images to the next, and the order is not always clear. Again, all of this fits with Davis’s easygoing approach—which is disturbed only by boy trouble or an occasional tiff with her sister Ariella or some other annoyance. Davis is not a Hollywood star in terms of looks (fig. 6. 3) nor an enormously intellectual type, nor a self-consciously artsy type. Correspondingly, she’s just not a show-off and does not think of herself as someone special beyond the usual person’s sense of individuality. Her captions consist of her own handwriting and that, like her drawing style, enhances the sense of individuality.

Davis’s Bat Mitzvah is a ritual through which she must pass, though she does not particularly like her cantor or her rabbi. Her main feeling is a sense

of embarrassment because her Bat Mitzvah party was fancier than those of some others, but she remembers that people had a good time. She enjoyed summer “fat camp,” where she lost eight pounds, and she seems to have gotten something, however vague, out of her religious school, mentioning that “I feel a certain comfort, spiritually. For the moment, I’m okay with my religious affiliation (or lack thereof).” But she has some aversion to Jewish boys—perhaps a desire to branch out and to rebel against the restrictions on her dating. Also, she’s “against abuses of political power as much as any normal person,” but she gets “freaked out when people talk about Israel” because she does not feel comfortable when Israel is attacked by leftists for “ethnic cleansing.” But she always retains an identification with the Jews, and wants her kids to be raised Jewish even if she is thinking of marrying a non-Jew; and she has a love of Hanukkah. Just as many Christians feel about Christmas, she feels that Hanukkah has become too commercialized.

Otherwise, she shows her initiation into dating, and her friends’ discussions about that and other topics. She is conscious of social class, as when she visits her friend Bess’s house on the Fourth of July; it is in the fancier section of Palm Beach, Florida, while Davis grew up in West Palm Beach, the more middle-class section of the city. Some pages of this story are painted rather than drawn, and Davis’s style comes out then because you can see people’s faces and expressions more clearly defined in them.

Her biggest infatuation is with an Israeli, who, according to her description of him, is not very considerate or polite. She knows that she shouldn’t “hang out with him, but I think I wanted to prove us both wrong that our mutual low expectations were unfair.” Her relationship with him comes to an end when he says that he is not in love with her and doesn’t think that he ever will be. Other relationships are not rewarding either, as when someone says that one of her would-be boyfriends “thought he’d found himself a cute little JAP” (Jewish American Princess), showing what kinds of stereotypes she has to contend with sometimes.

Her mother is the head of the Palm Beach Jewish Film Festival, and Davis says that while there have been some weird Jewish movies shown at the festival, “I’ve been exposed to some of my all-time favorite movies by her. The festival is widely loved and critically acclaimed.” Even when she criticizes her mother for bringing up inappropriate topics or telling her what to do, she continues to respect her and to enjoy gossiping with her. But on Mother’s Day, when she comes down to Florida to be with her mother and sister, there are plenty of annoyances, even though in the end she doesn’t want to leave.

The stories about her artwork are interspersed with all of the other events,

so they, too, are part of the casual comedy (as Yeats would have it in “Easter 1916”) of her life. She tries to discuss her art at one point with someone—presumably her mother—who thinks Vanessa might want to create fiction one day, an idea which she rejects. And she tells her mother in another story that she is going to Washington, D.C., to talk about “Jewish women, body image, and comics.” But the great thing about Davis, unlike some others, is that while she may think about these things and wish she were prettier or slimmer, she never gets neurotic about it all and stays within the normal psychological range, although she has seen a therapist. Indeed, she discusses this issue in a story about her therapist, whom she credits with straightening her out: “Have Jews always been characterized as being ‘neurotic’? It seems like a relatively recent designation. As our lives get easier, there’s more time for our minds to wander. And how much of it is contrived, cultivated, as a new-beloved ethnic personality type?”

Davis admits to occasionally “freaking out” but is not sure if that is because of her personality or her ethnicity and comes to the conclusion that “it’s probably not a Jewish thing.” Her thinking is completely rational, and although she talks about freaking out, she doesn’t show many examples of it. Once again, she does not have to be extreme in order to interest the reader. This is a major contrast with Aline Kominsky Crumb, another very talented graphic novelist.

Davis feels that if she changes her place, she will change her luck (as a Hebrew saying puts it), and so she moves from Florida to New York and then from New York to California. Her worst crises come when she has to give up her friends each time that she decides to move. Her move to Santa Rosa, California, brings her into contact with Jews who are different from the New York Jews she has known. Her friend says that her family in Santa Rosa do not tell people that they are Jewish, while Vanessa always does because in New York it’s not an issue. Also, she makes a gaffe by mentioning openly that her Santa Rosa friend is only half Jewish, which gets the friend angry—the idea being that there is more intermarriage in California. In California, she admits that she misses the New York ubiquity of being Jewish—a completely normal reaction. As she puts it, “You can take the girl out of Brooklyn, but not Brooklyn out of the girl.” Even though she wants to escape her “old values,” the issue of identity stays with her.

She considers religion openly in “Holy Rollin” one of the last stories in her book. Essentially, she enjoys the rabbi’s sermons in her Reform temple, but does not like to spend the whole day there during the High Holy Days—a sentiment shared by many Jews, particularly Reform Jews. On the other hand, the first year that she did not observe either holiday, Rosh Hashanah

or Yom Kippur, her father died and she felt a superstitious dread that she tried to ward off by wearing a charm. Eventually she moves away from all ritual and stops fasting for Yom Kippur. She likes the idea that Judaism is about personal responsibility, and she identifies with the group and has internalized religious values to the extent that she is constantly self-reflective. She likes to be involved in liberal Judaism because it lets her “pull away” and still be part of the group. Here she speaks for many other Jews.

In her interview with Julia Rothman, she states that

I guess I don’t believe that practicing necessarily makes you spiritual. And to me, more religious does not equal being a “better Jew”—certainly not a better person. Even in the community I grew up in in West Palm Beach, a few of the most religious people turned out to have some real ethical problems, deep in their character. Ultimately, I’ve been taught that a lot of Jewish values are about navigating the world with integrity, and generosity, and being honest, realistic. Examining things, trying to understand and be open. Loving and respecting your family. I think I do all those things—at least, I try. I do want to learn more about Judaism. I haven’t devotedly studied it in many years, and it just seems like this massive intellectual and spiritual thing to tackle, which is exciting, and daunting. This is a big question!<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in her story “Talkin’ about my Generation,” she comments on the works of Robert and Aline Crumb, who are her models for autobiographical comics. Her criticism is that at some points in the *Genesis* adaptation, Crumb flags and shows his boredom with drawing “robed, bearded guys over and over” but at other points, “the drawings are so warm and touching, humanistic.” For the first time, Davis cries over a biblical tale, in this case the story of Joseph as rendered by Crumb. Her favorite characters in his work are the matriarchs, and she thinks that they were his favorites, too. Most of all, she enjoys connecting with these stories familiar from her childhood, especially since her own family does not seem to be growing anymore. After saying that in the past she has not liked Crumb’s political positions—although now she thinks there is something to them (and here she takes a swipe at right-wing radio personality Glenn Beck—she takes back her criticism of his work as “complacent.”

And in her last feature, she considers leaving California, but her friend’s comment on the rabbi’s sermon on Yom Kippur admonishing confused people just to choose and pick something and do it appeals to her. This is what she will do, she thinks. Putting it all together, Davis is reasonable,

only slightly ideological, with feelings of identification and belief, albeit not strictly defined ones. Her work could be the statement of many Reform Jews and many American Jews in general. It is not profound, but it is touching, warm, honest, and rational. And that characterizes her art as well.

Aline Kominsky Crumb, on the other hand, proves the old adage that a screwed-up childhood is one of the best prescriptions for becoming a writer or artist, and her very screwed-uppedness attracts the reader to her work. In *Need More Love: A Graphic Memoir*, the reader follows her from life stage to life stage and watches as she loathes her parents and herself, and makes many mistakes. One of these is to get herself pregnant when unmarried. But she finds a Jewish adoption agency that treats her well, and she gives birth in June 1967 in Beth Israel hospital. As usual, she does not even mention the Six Day War in Israel that occurred at that time or anything else about the Jewish world except her own personal interactions with Jewish people. When young, she seems to be endlessly trying to escape being Jewish and yet a bit later on admits to being proud that she's a "crazy Jewish female." Throughout her work, she goes back and forth on the issue of Jewishness but never anywhere shows any sense of solidarity with the larger group and never gets into religious issues. This is all part of her Bohemianism and self-centered artist mentality. All that matters seems to be her feelings, having enough drugs, and her relationships. Although she discusses the daughter she has with her husband Robert Crumb—Sophie, who is also an artist—she never says anything about the child she put up for adoption. Perhaps this is too painful a topic for even Aline, who is frank about most of her obsessions and neuroses, to deal with. And she doesn't say anything about bringing up Sophie as Jewish or, indeed, Christian or anything else.

Aline is self-obsessed and neurotic because in her past, she had a failed marriage to a Jewish boy, was promiscuous, and had a baby out of wedlock. Moreover, her visual self-portrait is very self-deprecating: she usually appears in her own work as fat, pimply, and ugly. But, as Andrea Most has pointed out, her husband's own versions of her are much more attractive, as are some of the photos she includes, so she may just be demonstrating her own dissatisfaction with her appearance, and how hard it is for her to accept herself.<sup>5</sup> All of this makes for interesting reading/viewing, and self-exposure is her moniker as an artist (and apparently as a person). She helps her readers feel good about themselves—both those who have made many mistakes in life (because they obviously have company in her) and those who have not made as many mistakes (because she seems infinitely more screwed-up than they); and her being an artist does not quite compensate for all of the trouble she seems to have had and to have brought on herself.

A highlight of *Need More Love*, which includes text, photos, and many of her comics features and excerpts from others, is her depiction of her relationship with her husband, who seems to be the love of her life. Also neurotic, he was able to accept her as she is and to portray her as much prettier than she portrays herself. But he was having affairs with other members of the Wimmen's Comix Art Collective at the same time that he was going with Aline. Aline says that this was a "nasty backbiting group of women" (153), which is no tribute to feminism in its heyday. But with Diane Noomin, who was also something of an outsider to that group, Aline began *Twisted Sisters* comix. This was a raunchy no-holds-barred hippie vision set in San Francisco in the 1970s, featuring sexual acts and language and even a cover with Aline sitting on a toilet seat looking distressed and ugly.<sup>6</sup> Kominsky Crumb has provided an introduction to Noomin's *Glitz-2-Go*, which says that Noomin has inspired her own work.

In the end, after many ups and downs, Aline triumphed with Robert and married him. But the road there was not easy: his former wife Dana lived nearby at one point, and a woman who wanted to live with Robert showed up at their house one day. It seems like the model story of an artistic Bohemia, and maybe it is. One thing that brought Robert and Aline together was their art, which was similarly uninhibited. Together they did *Dirty Laundry Comics*, which suited them perfectly, as they enjoyed airing their dirty laundry. In these comics, parts of which she provides in *Need More Love*, she sometimes portrays herself as fat and unattractive, with a big nose; while Crumb draws himself as a wimpy, bowed-down guy (249). And she shows in an excerpt from *Dirty Laundry* included in *Need More Love* that she knows how to manipulate him. She causes him pain from a workout but then makes him food he likes and dresses sexily; and all of a sudden, she looks a lot better. She obviously knows her man, as she shows him trying to decide if he wants to hit her or to eat her food more (*Need More Love*, 184–86). There is nothing flattering here to either of them and perhaps that is the attraction for the reader.

Aline's Judaism is always presented as a factor—not as her religion but as her identity. She says for instance in *Need More Love* that Jews like Chinese food; she is obsessed with the size of her nose; and when she shows graves, they have Stars of David on them. She cannot free herself from her identity, and that is honest; she remains a girl from Jewish Long Island no matter how Bohemian and artistic she seems to become. In one feature, "Moo Goo Gaipan" (191), she obsesses over Jewish deli food even though she begins talking about Chinese takeout in her little rural California town. Her thoughts keep drifting to a New York deli, with real kosher mustard, rather than the "goyish" (193) mustard she gets in California.

She cannot ever fully reconcile herself to her parents and constantly attacks them in her work. Her 1981 feature, “Grief on Long Island” (196–97), also included (like “Moo Goo Gaipan”) in *Need More Love*, is a devastating look at her family during her grandfather’s funeral. They are taking medications to calm themselves, the benches for people to sit on at home are too tacky, she eats too many cookies, and she doesn’t like the cold New York weather. Although she shows herself crying in one panel, she says she’s sad but disgusted by everything she sees, and there is nothing about her grandfather or her reasons for missing him. Her distrust of her husband, with whom she has an open marriage in which anything can happen at any time, is a major theme in her work. A telenovela has Bob acting badly with a woman he has invited to their house while Aline is pregnant, but, in the end, he seems to strangle the woman for saying bad things about Aline, and they are once again in love (202–7). This is like a Mexican telenovela—in the worst taste—but it goes to show how they utilize all formats of the graphic novel and comics and it substantiates their relationship despite all potential wanderings. Her closeness to her daughter Sophie is also always in evidence in her work.

Her view of her mother however is far less generous. Her mother’s teeth look sharp and ferocious, and her skin lines show clearly (214–5). There is nothing positive about her, and Aline even names her “Blabette.” Aline claims that Blabette tortured and ignored her as a baby. This is not a normal mother-daughter relationship to say the least, Jewish or not. But it gives Aline’s work an original twist—no one can accuse her of drawing sentimental stereotypes about either her mother or her marriage. Yet she loves Robert, with whom she has been for seventeen years. In “Our Lovely Home,” written by both Aline and Robert, she announces that she is going to Paris with Sophie (217–25). Now she draws herself as fairly good-looking, while Robert, as usual, depicts himself in his drawings as a wimp. But they get along very well sitting on the porch and listening to Bob’s banjo, while Sophie plays various games. It’s all very pleasant and even bourgeois, until a neighbor makes a lot of noise with his truck and Aline shouts at him. This seems like a very good marriage, and the two artists somehow are able to get along and raise their little child. But she says that she started to have trouble when the neighborhood became fundamentalist and a preacher said that she was an agent of the devil (227). She does admit to being a “Jewish anarchist pornographer,” so maybe he has a point. In any case, it looks like time for a move. Aline spends six weeks in Paris in the summer of 1987 with Sophie and some girlfriends, and she decides to move her family to France.

In her comments on her newly adopted place of residence, Aline of-



6.4. Aline Kominsky Crumb, *Need More Love*, 249. This is Aline and Robert Crumb's rendition of their family's tension-filled move to France at her insistence.

ten brings in the Jewish issue. Now she seems to be obsessed with her Jewishness. In “Euro Dirty Laundry,” written and drawn by both Aline and Robert, Robert says he wonders why he got involved with a Wandering Jew, and Aline says she doesn’t want to be considered Jewish when in France because everyone hates Jews, especially her (249). So she makes a show of her own self-hatred (249) (fig. 6.4). In another feature, she also labels herself a Wandering Jew who has no sense of loyalty to a country (282). While this is half-joking, it points to a reality about her—she has trouble dealing with being Jewish. Of course, she also seems to hate her body, which develops fatty places and pimples and wrinkles (284), and so being Jewish is not her only problem. She wants to create a new version of herself, which is why she moves to France and drags her family with her (285).

She shows herself in a photo in a synagogue in Cochin, India, a town with a substantial Jewish presence, and does not seem at all shy about doing so with a caption that says she is “right at home” in “Jew Town, Cochin” (296–9). Of course, she also shows herself standing before an icon of the Virgin

Mary in Greece (300). But in her final interview with her publisher in *Need More Love*, she says that being an Ashkenazic (European) Jew gives one a high IQ but also dewlaps and jowls (332). She has all the clichés about Jews in here, and while she makes fun of them she also seems to believe them to some extent. She defines East Coast Jewish humor as exaggerating and making fun of oneself to make others laugh (333). She says that her style in comics is simply an application of that principle. And Robert says that Aline is a “fatalistic Jewish humorist-comedian” (368). Sophie, her daughter, says that Aline was the first female autobiographical cartoonist and totally original (370). She accompanies Aline to visit her mother in Miami for Passover. Sophie does not understand why she should take part in the reading of the Haggadah and seems highly neurotic. But Aline has faith in her nonetheless, and obviously feels that she should expose her to some Jewish practices.

In *Need More Love*, Aline shows a Bohemian artist and her family far from the conventional kinds of jobs, marriages, and children. Aline’s path has been crooked to say the least, but she has emerged as a known artist married to a known artist, and the mother of a child. Her family life can scarcely be called usual but it is a family life. Her view of Jewishness seems to be a caricature of a Long Island Jewish upbringing: Jews are smart, pushy, vulgar, constantly concerned with anti-Semitism and being viewed as cosmopolitan and therefore bad citizens of the countries in which they live, and hung up on their looks, especially the size of their noses. They also have bossy mothers and want to go to bed with Christians. In contrast to Vanessa Davis’s work, Aline Crumb presents a deliberately exaggerated view of Jewish identity just as she presents perhaps an exaggerated view of being a woman. But this is precisely her strength. She convincingly presents her feelings as realities, and in effect shows how she has been influenced by precisely the Jewish stereotypes that she speaks of. Even as an unconventional artist type, she still feels herself prey to classification as a Jew and unable to escape that no matter how unique and individual she actually is. And Robert corroborates this stereotype by seeing in her “Jewish” characteristics which may in fact be Aline’s characteristics, or New York characteristics, and not Jewish ones at all. The Crumbs’ contribution to our knowledge of Jewish identity is to put these stereotypes out in the open where they can be scrutinized.

Melissa Lasko-Gross, or Miss Lasko-Gross as she is professionally known, has created a unique, one-of-a-kind naughty girl named Melissa Gross, who has trouble fitting in—not only with her family, school, and friends, but also with her Jewish religious school and indeed her Jewish identity overall. The title of her first volume is *Escape from “Special,”* meaning the special education classes that she is forced to take because of her behavioral problems. At

a progressive school's Christmas and Hanukkah celebration, she kicks over a menorah by mistake and almost burns the place down. She accuses her father of racism against African Americans (51) and asks how that is possible since he gets so upset when people attack the Jews. When she has to go to temple, she vomits and gets to miss the service by staying in the car listening to music. Her complaint against temple is that "no one wants to be there, they just go because they're . . . *supposed to*" (55). And also that "everyone worships the God of their particular ancestors. Its so fucking automatic and primitive and unspiritual" (55). Of course, she never finds any religion to be spiritual about. She asks a Christian friend, "Cindy, do you believe that Jesus is God?" And when Cindy answers, "He's the son of God born to a human mother," Melissa responds, "Like Hercules or Akhenaten, it's kind of classic mythology isn't it?" And when Cindy says, "Except those are just *stories* and this is *true*," Melissa says, "Sure" with an icy underhang on the speech balloon, which, along with the doubting look on her face, indicates that she does not buy any of it (91).

With her open lines, black-and-white shading, and emotional faces, particularly Melissa's large eyes and expressive mouth, Lasko-Gross delineates a world of Melissa versus everyone else. She believes almost nothing that she is told by others, be they her parents or her friends, and so finds herself alone most of the time—as she herself says in "Of Little Faith II." In this one-page vignette, one of Melissa's friends in Sunday school denies Noah's flood, saying that "the 'miracles' are all crap" to which Melissa responds, "I *know!*," while she happily tells herself "I'm not the only one," thinking that she has found a like-minded buddy. But when the friend, despite her denial of miracles, says, "But *of course* I believe in God!" Melissa comes out with "uh . . . oh, ME TOO," while thinking "I really am alone" (115) because she emphatically does not believe in God despite her statement to her friend. So even here she is alone, without a true soul buddy (115) (fig. 6.5).

Lasko-Gross indicates a Jewish world similar to that of the previous two autobiographers: Jews who attend services out of obligation rather than genuinely deep religious feeling but who still remain committed to being Jewish in terms of identity, whether they relish that designation or not. Melissa never thinks of trying to opt out of her identity as Jewish or to deny it although she seems constantly at odds with religion itself. In "The Gruswerk's Sabbath," she is attending an Orthodox friend's Sabbath at home. But instead of reciting the *brachot* (blessings) over the wine and bread, like the friend and her family, Melissa chooses only to speak nonsense about toys, complains to herself about how annoying the Sabbath ritual is, and plays with a kippah (a man's head covering), all the while arousing the anger of



6.5. Miss Lasko-Gross, *Escape from "Special,"* 115  
Lasko-Gross's convincing rendering of Melissa's  
hypocritical "uh....oh ME TOO" in response to  
a friend's statement about belief in God, which  
Melissa lacks.

her friend's father, who asks her sternly to take part in the ritual or leave the table. Her final comment, "I'm glad my family isn't Orthodox and has a sense of humor" (64), like her actions, indicates a contempt for religion and its formalities and a willingness to demonstrate that publicly, even at the wrong time. She goes beyond what most guests at a Sabbath ritual would do, even if they were bored by it. But Lasko-Gross's own humor in large part comes from making Melissa's rebellious thoughts known. Whether or not this is funny, Melissa is at least honest with herself. And like many contemporary Jews, she is no believer.

Her attitude in religious school, in the story "Of Little Faith: Jew School" makes that lack of belief very clear indeed. Melissa says that everything her teacher is telling her is "total horse shit. We're all *already* 'good' or 'bad.' How DARE they tell us how to live" (80). She complains to her mother that she already has homework from "real school" and therefore does not want to do homework from religious school, too. She also says, "This means nothing to me. Nothing." And she goes on to say that her mother made her wait too long to attend religious school and now she's "too old and too smart to fall for any of it." Her mother answers simply that "it's part of your heritage." Melissa insists she won't go back there but the feature ends with her sitting in religious class again while she complains about it in her thoughts (81). So Lasko-

Gross, all told, seems to indicate that belief and the inculcation of moral lessons is nonsense. Melissa cannot escape her heritage and her identity as a Jew, but nothing can force her to believe. In this way, Melissa seems like Kominsky Crumb, while Davis seems at least relaxed with her situation as a Jew. Perhaps Melissa will become an Emma Goldman of some kind—except that unlike Emma she has not been subject to discrimination or oppression herself, although she stands up for others who she feels are oppressed.

In *A Mess of Everything*, the second Melissa volume, there is only one story that deals directly with Melissa's Jewishness: "Quebec Trip." On this trip with her classmates, Melissa finds a crucifix that she likes. It holds a "melted Jesus," or a Jesus figure that is indistinct. She buys it and wears it everywhere. Even when her father picks her up when they arrive back in her hometown, she has it on. But he doesn't say anything about it or even show that he notices it. However, in the story immediately following "Quebec Trip II," entitled, "Suspended," her Christian friends do notice it, and one of them says that "it's disrespectful for you to wear that as a Jew," to which Melissa remarks that "y'know, Jesus was a Jew." Her friends say, "No he wasn't" and "Don't be stupid" (69). In a second story, "Rebel," Melissa comments that she wants to appear "at least like a dumpy Jewish tank girl." So Lasko-Gross seems to be indicating that Melissa on one hand is unconstrained by any religious or social rules and acts to please herself alone, wearing a crucifix if it looks good to her, while remaining conscious always that she is indeed a Jew, however little that may mean to her in terms of belief.

What is learned from these very honest and indeed completely uninhibited<sup>7</sup> female creators? Besides their talent and inventiveness, they give their takes on their Jewishness. These range from being comfortable with their Jewishness, as in case of Vanessa Davis, to feeling that it's troublesome but they have to deal with it, as in the case of Noomin, Kominsky Crumb, and Lasko-Gross. In all cases, including that of Sharon Rudahl's portrait of Emma Goldman's anarchism, even when there is little or no belief, there is identity, for better or worse.

## Identity and Belief in the Israel-Centered Graphic Novel

Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds*, Etgar Keret and Asaf Hanuka's *Pizzeria Kamikaze*, Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir*, and Galit and Gilad Seliktar's *Farm 54* all deal with Israelis' perceptions of the contemporary world—what they believe and what kind of country they have built, as well as how they are seen by themselves and others. Miriam Libicki's *Jobnik!* shows Israel as seen by an American girl who volunteered to serve in the Israeli army; and Sarah Glidden's *How to Understand Israel in Sixty Days or Less* shows how a trip to Israel affects Glidden's own preconceptions about it. Harvey Pekar and J. T. Waldman's *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me* gives their feelings about Israel and the Palestinian issue but is not based on a trip to Israel itself. All of these books explore the relationship between Jewish identity and Israel; and sometimes they look at Judaism and belief, too.

Rutu Modan's *Exit Wounds* sums up the major theme of many Israeli or Israel-oriented graphic novels: the intersection of the personal and the political. Every aspect of Israeli life seems to be bound up with the political, and therefore personal identity and belief, as well as Israelis' self-perceptions, are also of necessity intertwined with "the situation" as Israelis themselves call it. The work of Modan, who is a cofounder of the Israeli comics collective Actus Tragicus and has published her work in many important magazines in the United States and Europe, shows the pressure put on a society by terrorism. It skews personal relationships and adds a special burden. The term "exit wounds" is both literal and metaphorical in this work: it refers to bodily wounds caused by a terrorist attack and also to psychological wounds. Indeed, in the course of this graphic novel, the term becomes even more metaphorical in that it refers not only to the emotional hurt caused by the protagonist Koby's father's possible death as the result of a suicide bombing but also to the wounds left by Koby's mother's death, his ongoing disagreements with his father, Koby's distance from his sister, and his own exit from his relationship with Numi, who is his (and previously was his father's) girl-



7.1. Rutu Modan, *Exit Wounds*, 57. The Hebrew statement from the Bible that is on the wall in the background, “I will set my sanctuary among them forever,” subtly shows God’s grace toward Koby, even when he does not expect it.

friend, as well as the death of his aunt’s son in Lebanon. But this is a story of redemption, in which the exit wounds are healed or at least alleviated when Koby finds a new identity and even a new faith in love.

Key to understanding the story is a phrase in Hebrew that appears on the wall of a building (57) at an odd moment. Koby’s aunt Ruthie, his dead mother’s sister, cries as she remembers her son Tulik, who was killed in the army in Lebanon. Koby has just been complaining that his father—who has apparently disappeared and might be the victim of a suicide bombing—cried during Koby’s Bar Mitzvah, embarrassing him. He thinks he has been rude to Ruthie when retelling this incident, but she is crying because she remembers her dead son’s Bar Mitzvah. At this moment, the sentence “I will set my sanctuary among them forever” appears on the wall behind them. It is the one of the few phrases in Hebrew in the book that is not also translated into English (57). This phrase comes from the Bible: “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Ezekiel 37: 26). Part of the first word, in Hebrew “I will set,” is obscured by a word balloon, but enough of it shows to make the meaning clear (57) (fig. 7.1). In this context, Modan is telling the

reader that regardless of the sadness caused by Koby's father to both Koby and Numi, and regardless of the pain caused by war and terrorism, God is always with the people of Israel, and everything will turn out all right.

This sentence, appearing where it does, on the wall of a nondescript building, which one can assume is a synagogue, is both strange and comforting, and it turns out to be true. Koby finally learns that his father, Gabriel, is not among those who have been killed by the blast. Numi recognized a scarf at the blast scene as one which she had woven for Gabriel, without knowing that Gabriel had actually passed that scarf to a different girlfriend, Atara Dayan. It was Dayan who was injured lightly in the blast and lost the scarf there. The grave where Numi thought Gabriel was buried turns out to be the grave of a criminal instead. But the worry and mental injury caused by the blast—to the wife of the deceased owner of the restaurant where it occurred, for instance—and the torture of not knowing who the unidentified victim was indicate the torment in which Israelis often must live. But God is truly on Koby's and Numi's sides, as indicated by the passage in Ezekiel, despite the severe tests to which He puts their relationship. Ezekiel prophesizes about dry bones coming to life (Ezekiel 37), and in effect that is what happens to Gabriel. He is not dead but very much alive, and, moreover, his spirit seems to hover over Numi and Koby and ultimately brings them peace.

Gabriel unexpectedly sends Koby and his sister Orly the proceeds from the sale of his apartment. Gabriel has married a religious woman without telling his family anything about it, which is the usual way he does most things. But Gabriel's largesse indicates that despite Koby's estrangement from his father, Gabriel is indeed thinking of him. Koby locates Gabriel's new wife, but as usual he cannot seem to locate Gabriel himself because he does not return from synagogue services on time and may again have disappeared; Gabriel has, however, apparently become religiously observant. So Gabriel remains absent and yet a presence and not only because of his giving money to Koby and his sister. He was Numi's boyfriend before Koby was, and she gets in touch with Koby because she needs him to provide a DNA sample to help discover if Gabriel was indeed killed in the terrorist attack or not. So it is owing to Gabriel that Numi and Koby meet. Unfortunately, Numi reminds Koby at an awkward moment that she went with his father, and they split up (137). This is a strange, even biblical-like situation, in which the son becomes the lover of his father's former girlfriend. But in the end, Koby returns to her and even trusts her to cushion his leap of faith from a high tree (172). Numi's name means "comfort" and Gabriel means "hero of God." In spite of the "exit wounds" caused to Koby by his father's nonpresence and to Numi by Gabriel's disappearance, in the end it is Gabriel

who enables them to come together. Without his affair with Numi, she and Koby would never have met. They find each other because of the possible exit wounds his absence causes and because of the exit wounds they cause one another by their separation. These wounds end up being healed when they get back together with shared faith in one another. Koby's name (short for Jacob) means "supplanter" in Hebrew, and he supplants his father with Numi and finds comfort with her and she, apparently, with him. The fact that she gives him a birthday present consisting of a T-shirt signed by the members of a soccer team he likes—to make up for Gabriel's having given him one from a team he hated, which shows Gabriel's lack of knowledge of his own son's preferences—shows that she too has supplanted Gabriel (116). Obviously, it has been a long road to this point, in the course of which she has to overcome Koby's unhappiness with his father's absence from his life and his mother's death, and he has to convince her that he cares about her although her looks are not as good as those of her mother—a former model—and sister, as well as the fact that she was his father's girlfriend. And yet, in one final, literal as well as metaphorical leap of faith, the story comes to a satisfactory conclusion for both of them.

What does this story mean in terms of identity and belief? First, that Modan has connected Israeli identity and the constant threat of terrorism. To be Israeli means to be existentially threatened, just as to be Jewish has also meant the same thing, if less intensely, because of anti-Semitism. But the promise of God as related in Ezekiel's prophecy about dry bones means that the Jews will be comforted despite these negative factors. And Gabriel's presence and absence attest to God's hand in human affairs and to man's lack of seeing the full picture. Gabriel seems like a negative force and does cause injury to others but in the end his absences and his possible death actually prove to be very positive. Thus God provides even when man does not understand His ultimate purpose.

Etgar Keret's *Pizzeria Kamikaze* is also a love story, albeit an even more unusual one than *Exit Wounds*, in that it is about a love between someone who has committed suicide and someone who was put in the suicides' netherworld by mistake. And its message is that life should be valued while it exists because nothing is as precious. Suicides in particular have not valued life sufficiently, and that is what they come to understand in the netherworld. While the identities of the Israeli (and non-Israeli) participants in *Pizzeria Kamikaze* are secure, this graphic novel presents a skeptical point of view about religious belief, a view which seems to imply that there is a divine order, but not one that can be readily understood—and moreover it seems to claim that what man often takes for a divine order when alive is really some

kind of scam. It is also a testimony to the inherent rebelliousness of mankind, which is never satisfied with what it has.

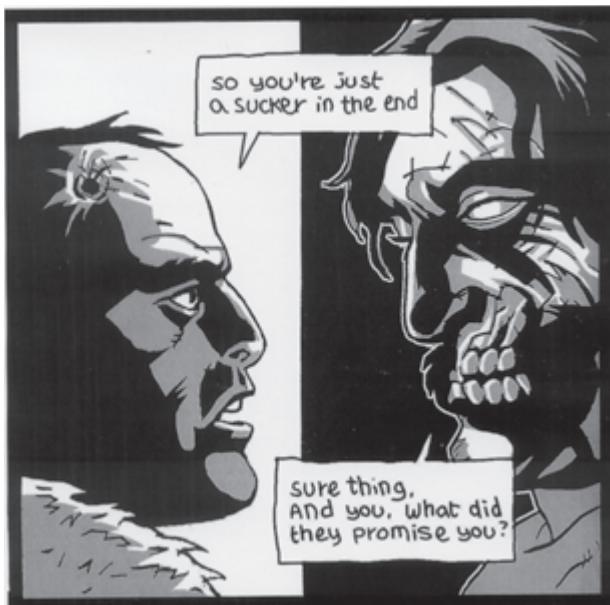
This graphic novel, first published in five issues in 2004, is based on Keret's short story "Kneller's Happy Campers" in his collection *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God and Other Stories*. The protagonist, Mordy—whose name (short for Mordechai) implies death ("mort" in French) but means "warrior" in Hebrew—has committed suicide and finds himself working in a joint called Pizzeria Kamikaze in a city that resembles Tel Aviv but might be anywhere. (The name Pizzeria Kamikaze was undoubtedly inspired by the destruction of the Sbarro Pizza restaurant in Jerusalem, with fifteen deaths, by a Palestinian suicide bomber in August 2001.) Mordy misses his girlfriend, Desiree, and thinks about her often. Other suicides populate the city, and he makes friends with one of them, Uzi Gelfand, whose entire family has committed suicide, but whose first name ironically means "my valor" or "my courage." Mordy learns through a former roommate who has also committed suicide that Desiree, too, has done that, and he sets out to find her outside of the city. With his friend Uzi at the wheel, they pick up a hitchhiker named Leehee, which means "she is mine" in Hebrew but "warrior" in Irish (there is, of course, room for all nationalities and religions in the suicides' world) (42). In the terminology of the suicides, she is a "Juliet," or a woman whose suicide wounds don't show because "Juliet" killed themselves via a nonviolent means such as poison. (The name Juliet is undoubtedly a reference to Shakespeare's play but here it is ironic, because in *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet stabs herself.) Leehee seems to be a special person, a bringer of light; while she drives, their old VW's headlights, which had seemingly been burned out, turn on at an important moment (49). The headlights prevent them from running over Raphael Kneller, who is asleep in the middle of the road, but because of the need to stop quickly, their car swerves and is wrecked. Kneller invites them to his "Camp Kneller," a residence of happy campers as its sign says. Gelfand soon enters into a relationship with an Eskimo woman. And Mordy starts falling for Leehee, who died accidentally when she tried to take drugs intravenously for the first time; she is, therefore, not a genuine suicide, and she wants to find the people who run the netherworld and who may perhaps reinstate her in life. Her quest and her belief in the possibility of returning to the world of the living shows that she is, indeed, a bringer of light, especially to Mordy. Because at first she seems to be a "Juliet," who deliberately committed suicide by nonviolent means, the implication is that Mordy will become her Romeo. The pet cat, Freddie, which Kneller had been seeking when he fell asleep on the road is located in the mansion of a "Messiah King" not too far from Kneller's camp. Desiree,

Mordy's lost girlfriend, is there, too. Now she is the Messiah King's girlfriend; as she tells Mordy, after he died, she found the Messiah King in the Galilee and he seemed to comfort her and offer her hope despite Mordy's death (86–87). But after the Messiah King died by plunging a knife into himself, while claiming to be able to separate body and soul and then return to life, she committed suicide, her last comfort gone. The Messiah King tries it again with a large crowd of suicides watching him, and he again dies rather than returning to life (93). Leehee and Desiree go away with the police that Kneller has somehow called. Kneller confesses that he is an undercover angel and tells Mordy that there is a good chance that Leehee will be allowed back into the world of the living (99). Mordy returns to his job in Pizzeria Kamikaze, where he hopes to, but does not actually expect to, meet Leehee again one day. But following her example, he does small rebellious things like tie his apron the wrong way and hang a sign in the window upside down (100). So even in the world of suicides some rebellion is possible.

Because of its visual element, the graphic novel adaptation brings quick, clear perception of the atmosphere of the story to the reader: the graphic novel reader *sees* Mordy, Leehee, Uzi, and the other characters, who are not described in as much detail in the original. Also, the black, white, and silver background in many panels imparts the idea of a parallel world beyond this world, silvery and shadowy. Because of this silvery, unreal treatment, a closeness to the characters cannot be established, although Hanuka does a fabulous job of drawing their expressions, clothes, and gestures. Clearly Keret and Hanuka do not want the reader to get too close to the characters; after all, they are like ghosts or other-worldly creatures who just happen to resemble humans and are living in a special afterlife reserved for suicides. While resembling the world like the one they lived in before they died, the suicides' world is far less exciting and less alive. The suicides' self-inflicted wounds show, their eyes are dead, their skin is a bit droopy, and yet they still have to work, and there are still ugly power stations in the background. While the male and female suicides try to get involved with one another, there is no hint that children can result, and none appear in the story. The existence of God beyond some ambiguous signs of a divine order remains very vague, and some sense of what God's intention when creating such a world might be remains even vaguer, unless this lifeless world is seen as a punishment for the crime of suicide. The suicides wished to escape life but they end up living it in a netherworld that has much in common with the previous world. This is a form of justice. And Leehee's being able to return to the world of the living shows that the ruling order does indeed include some justice, at least sometimes.

Keret and Hanuka are especially good at showing how mundane and lifeless the world of the suicides is, even when they seem to be having some fun. Their world is strangely familiar and yet alien at the same time. On one hand, the pizza shop where Mordy works looks like it is in Tel Aviv (7), but when he is in his apartment (23), the buildings outside seem to be European, and a church dominates the background scene. His German roommate says that it also reminds him of Frankfurt. So this city could be anywhere. The attitudes of the suicides, too, are familiar and convincing yet strange. Mordy comments that he doesn't like Uzi's friend Kurt, the songwriter, because "after you off yourself, the last thing you give a shit about is somebody singing about how unhappy he is." And also how he feels that "nothing really matters" now (14). But there is also a humorously grotesque element to this world, including a game show, where "the contestants meet people who offed on the same date, and they all have to say why—but it has to be funny" (19). In other words, Keret applies the rules of the mundane world of the living, however inappropriate, to the world of the suicides, but as Mordy says nothing matters, and it's all kind of lifeless. And before Mordy and Uzi leave to look for Desiree, Uzi calls his parents, who have also committed suicide, to tell them not to worry, which he might or might not have done when they were all alive. Mordy also admits that his parents' nagging always bothered him when he was alive, but that now he misses them (18). So on the positive side of the suicide world, the denizens' intimate knowledge of death makes them more appreciative of family members and of being together. This painfully gained wisdom might be their punishment for having committed suicide, for their world is indeed a kind of hell even if it is not as pronounced in terms of tortures as hell itself is usually portrayed in art and literature.

On the positive side, the suicides are now beyond the world of earthly nationalistic/religious hype and see through it. When Mordy and Uzi enter a bar, the Arabs there don't care that Israelis are coming in (37). Uzi admits that he feels uncomfortable among Arabs. But the bartender, who was a suicide bomber—perhaps even the one who blew up the Pizzeria Kamikaze—admits that he was a sucker to sacrifice his life. His teeth stick out as if he were a skull. He is not seeking any more violence. And he asks Uzi what they promised him to commit suicide (39) (fig. 7.2). As far as the reader knows, Uzi has not killed anyone but himself and was not promised anything to kill himself. But this episode shows that in the netherworld, all reasons for political conflict have ended and that they were foolish to start with, including the promise of seventy virgins to the suicide bomber. This Israeli work then seems to be saying that the only place that the personal and the political are not related is in the world of the suicides; in the world of the living,



7.2. Etgar Keret (writer) and Asaf Hanuka (artist), *Pizzeria Kamikaze*, 39. Mordy, a suicide himself, is speaking to an Arab suicide bomber, revealing that after death there are no politics.

the political and indeed the religious in some cases, remain very much motivating forces. In this one respect, the suicides' world seems better than the world of the living.

The language and art in the story are often witty: Mordy says that his shift manager was “cool” but then says that the job was “not too hot” while the panel shows him sweating (6). And in terms of meaning, although the conversation in this story does not usually turn to religious issues, religious questions resound throughout. Uzi asks Leehee, “When you were still alive, did you ever go looking for God?” (44). She responds, “No, but I didn’t really have any reason to” (45). Now that she is dead, she is going to look for “the people in charge” because she thinks it is unjust that she is considered a suicide when she died as the result of an unintended drug overdose while shooting up for the first time. She really speaks for all of the suicides, who did not seem to have any special use for God when they were alive—except of course for the Arab suicide bomber who was promised seventy virgins (39)—but who now seem to confront religious issues more seriously than previously.

Despite that, most life in the limbo of the afterlife is pretty meaningless and lacking in any real excitement. People just work, date, and are. The men

notice if women are pretty, and the “Juliet”s are preferred (since, as noted earlier, their methods of suicide don’t leave any marks). Leehee asks Mordy if he misses anything and he says he misses himself, the way he used to be. She says she misses even things she used to hate (69–70). In other words, life has something to offer but the suicides realize this only after they have died—too late to do anything about it.

The Messiah King’s mansion and party seem to offer something too; certainly the party attracts an eager crowd of people of varying religious persuasions. This episode shows that the suicides, like the living, have not given up their belief in religious salvation, or their gullibility about religious issues. Hopeful and gullible, they believe that the Messiah King by killing himself and separating his soul from his body will find his way to another, better, world and will then come back to lead them to it. Obviously, this story has commonalities with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and at least one eager member of the Messiah King’s audience wears a crucifix (89)—because the idea of a messiah who will personally lead the world to heaven is common to the three religions; and Keret as the author shows his lack of belief in such an idea by demonstrating the Messiah King’s fraudulence. Mordy’s old flame, Desiree, is the Messiah King’s girlfriend and assistant and again believes in him, as she did when she and the Messiah King were both alive. After Mordy’s suicide, Desiree’s guilt leads her to the Galilee—significant as a site connected with Jesus—and there she found Joshua (in Hebrew, *Yehoshua*, which is the name from which *Jeshua* [Jesus], is derived), the Messiah King, who made her feel better until he was unable to return after killing himself, thus leading her to do the same. On a diving board in the mansion’s pool, he again stabs himself in front of his many followers (92). But once again, instead of returning, he remains dead, and Kneller, who reveals himself as an angel and who seems to understand the structure of the world after death, tells Uzi that the people who kill themselves twice go to a place much worse than the place for those who kill themselves once. Earlier on, Kneller said that the Messiah King and his miracles seemed like a complete load of crap (74). Kneller even screams at Joshua and Desiree because Joshua has taken his cat, Freddie. In Keret’s portrayal, Joshua is a cult leader who believes and promises things that can’t and don’t happen. He cannot separate his soul from his body and he can’t return from the dead or even from a second death to the first. The authorities—called by Kneller on a kind of cell phone—who parachute in police to pick up Joshua’s body and to take Leehee and Desiree away, still rule the world. Uzi learns that Leehee had them check her file while all the Messiah King fuss was going on and that there really had been a mix-up and she might be allowed to return to the world

of the living, although this had nothing to do with Joshua, whom she never believed in, but with Kneller, who seems to be calling the shots. Desiree, who did believe in Joshua, is not mentioned anymore, and Mordy no longer loves her, having fallen in love with Leehee instead. While Kneller the angel can get things done, the Messiah King can't do anything besides small miracles like teaching a cat to talk—but no one, it seems, can defeat death except possibly for Kneller.

Keret seems to want to show that there is no known path to salvation. Yet there is an angel—Kneller—and a supernatural order of things, including a higher authority who watches over the world of the suicides and who can perhaps make good on a mistake, as in Leehee's case. In other words, Keret does not deny the existence of a higher being and admits that people need God. But he does deny any direct connection to this God in the form of a human intermediary, such as Jesus, Mohammed, or Judaism's promised messiah, and indicates that there is no escape from death—but that one can cling to life as hard as possible and not give in to death easily. The lesson of Leehee is that she did not accept death and came to love life more than ever when she was threatened with death. Mordy cannot escape his limbo, but he can keep hoping for Leehee's return and can perform small, rebellious acts in the meantime. Most people, says Leehee, are already half dead and the lesson is to live and to appreciate life for whatever it offers.

So here, although with a less happy ending than in Modan's *Exit Wounds*, there is a search for belief on the part of the secular Israeli writer who, as cynical as he tries to be, cannot quite find himself denying a supernatural order. The reader might care about Mordy but not as deeply as for someone who is actually alive, because Mordy cannot be as happy as a live person can be and his existence in the netherworld of the suicides will always be muted. He has found some faith, in Leehee, but perhaps a bit late; and there is no guarantee whatsoever that she will return, even though she gestures that she will from the van as she leaves (97). She will undoubtedly decide that she loves life more than she loves Mordy and will find someone else in the live world. Mordy is left in the netherworld with a very slim reed of hope. Perhaps if he had had more hope when he was alive and simply had gone to California, as Kneller said, he would not have committed suicide. Koby and Numi in *Exit Wounds* are easier characters to care about when they make a leap of faith. Keret's characters, like Desiree, make a leap but it leads to death rather than faith and finally to a nowhere land where they remain as lost as before, except with a sense that there is some kind of divine order that cannot, however, be discerned—and certainly not by a human intermediary. Kneller after all is not human but the Messiah King is. However, the story

has a commonality with *Exit Wounds* beyond that of being a love story: in a land where life can end because of a suicide bombing, life should be even more precious than it is elsewhere.

Ari Folman and David Polonsky's *Waltz with Bashir* brings together political and personal identity, this time in a war situation. But unlike Keret, the creators of this graphic novel do not confront the issue of belief at all; perhaps in the world they portray, things are so bad that it could not possibly be ruled over by any divine order and certainly not a benevolent one. Here, human politics dominate. In Israel, Jews have the capacity to fight back rather than feeling the impotence of diaspora Jewry in many situations, but this new role also brings complications. Originally an animated film featuring realistic human characters, the graphic novel adaptation successfully recaptures the story and makes it possible to linger over any points that the reader finds interesting.

The unnamed narrator, who identifies himself only as a scriptwriter but is obviously the author Ari Folman (because the narrator looks just like the picture of Folman on the cover of the book). Folman, who has won several awards for his films *Santa Clara* and *Made in Israel*, recounts a narrative about the 1982 war between Israel and Lebanon. He gradually finds his lost memory of that war, which he has suppressed, replacing it with a repeated, false vision of himself and some of his military comrades walking in the water near Beirut. His friend Boaz Rein, who, over twenty years later, in 2006, is still having nightmares about the war, reawakens Folman's own search for his true memories. Rein had been assigned the job of killing the dogs in Lebanese villages through which his unit passed in order to stop them from barking and alerting the enemy. Boaz is telling the narrator, Folman, about the dogs that haunt his dreams seeking revenge. Relating the story acts as a kind of substitute therapy for Boaz (8).

The narrator, while telling his friend Boaz that he does not think about the Lebanon war, has a flashback about it the night that Boaz tells him about his nightmare. The narrator suddenly remembers that he was not more than a few hundred yards away from the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, in which Christian Lebanese militia members killed several hundred unarmed Palestinian refugees while the Israeli army, albeit not knowing that a massacre would take place, secured the area (10–12). No wonder he has suppressed his memory of the war. The pages that show his face as rendered by illustrator David Polonsky—who has received awards for his children's books and teaches art at the Bezalel Academy—as he witnesses crying women and children streaming from the Sabra and Shatilla camp (115) and show their faces from his point of view, are very powerful, as are the photographs that

conclude the volume (115–17). Polonsky's colorful yet often dark and shadowy drawings provide a realistic look while distancing the reader from the action and allowing him or her to take a more casual look at it than would be the case if it were photographically drawn. Having remembered something about Sabra and Shatilla, the narrator is now committed to a search for his memories of the war. After consulting other friends who were involved in the war, the narrator heads for Holland because his friend Carmi, who was in Beirut with him during the war, lives there, and the narrator wants to see if Carmi can help him remember the events there. Carmi recounts his own dreams about and during the war, which seem to be a very honest picture of the stresses that accompany military action in the participants. Although Carmi tells of his shooting at a car that was later found to have a dead family in it, which obviously haunts him, he cannot remember anything about Sabra and Shatilla and doubts that he was with the narrator at that time (18–27).

After the narrator consults with Carmi, the war starts to return to the narrator's memory, especially an incident in which he, an inexperienced nineteen-year-old, took command of a tank and was told to drop the bodies of the Israeli dead and injured at a point where there were bright lights. He goes to see another acquaintance, Ronnie Dayag, a biologist—but he, too, does not remember being with the narrator. Instead, he tells his own story of his tank having been hit and then having run away and swum five miles till he was reunited with an Israeli unit. Dayag tells of feeling like a coward and guilty when he sees the graves of those who died (34–45).

The narrator remembers another friend, Frenkel, who is a martial arts champion. He hated the smell of Frenkel's cologne during the war (49), but he goes to see him anyway in the hope that he may help him recover his memory. Frenkel says that the narrator was there when Frenkel opened fire on a young boy who fired an RPG round at them in a forested area in Lebanon (49–57). But the fact that the narrator has to ask if he was really there during that incident has disturbed him enough to get himself to a psychiatrist who specializes in combat trauma, Zehava Solomon. She explains that he has dissociated himself from the memories, as if traumatic events that he experienced had happened to someone else (58–61). He can remember his home leave during the war but not, for instance, the incident involving the young boy. During that leave, he was concerned only with getting back his girlfriend, Yaeli, who had broken up with him just before the war. His friend Boaz recalls her too, since he also was in love with her. But the narrator's leave lasted only twenty-four hours, and he apparently did not get Yaeli back, another cause for his sorrow. He also mentions that during this

leave, his father told him that soldiers from Stalingrad in the Russian army during World War II got only forty-eight hours of leave per year including travel time, so they would get off the train they had traveled home in, kiss their girlfriends or wives, and then get right back on the train again (67). According to the narrator, his father “amazingly” thought that story would make him feel better, but it obviously has the opposite effect, increasing his sense of estrangement and loss. Polonsky draws the father’s story entirely in gray, indicating its status as a distant event.

When the narrator returns to Lebanon after his leave, he gets the word that the Christian Bashir Jemayel, who was an ally of Israel’s and for a short time the president of Lebanon, has been assassinated, and his unit is ordered to go to Beirut. In Beirut, they have a tough time with snipers and RPGs being fired at them from apartment buildings. At one point, Frenkel, who is with him there, too, borrows a Belgian “Mag” or 7.62-mm automatic rifle, and “dance[s]” with it out in the open as he fires at the snipers. This is one meaning of “waltzing with Bashir,” since Bashir was the hero of the Christian militias with whom Israel was allied: Frenkel is depicted firing the “Mag” and dancing about while a giant poster of Bashir is behind him (85). The deeper meaning of course is that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were “waltzing with Bashir,” that is, in league with him, and therefore when he died and the massacre caused by Bashir’s Christian militia occurred, the IDF was again waltzing with Bashir, if involuntarily. And of course that goes for the narrator as well.

The narrator cannot remember any details of the massacre, although it transpires that he was indeed only a few hundred yards away from the camps where it occurred. His friend the biologist tells him that because the narrator’s own family was in the Nazi concentration camps during World War II, he does not want to remember details of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre, and the only way to find out about it is to ask people who were there (91).

The narrator speaks to Dror Harazi, who was on the front line when the Phalangist militiamen went into the camps. Harazi says that his men started seeing the Phalangists shooting people. When he reported it, he was told that the Israelis knew about it and that it was under control. But a newsman, Ron Ben Yishai, says that an officer told him that people were being slaughtered in the camps. He reports it to Ariel Sharon, the minister of defense, who asks Ben Yishai if he saw it himself, and when he says no, Sharon simply acknowledges the call, and then goes back to sleep (102–8). When the narrator speaks to his friend Ori, the narrator tells him that he was in the second or third line of soldiers around the camp and may have fired flares to light it up. Ori tells him that because of the narrator’s proximity to the camp



7.3. Ari Folman (writer) and David Polonsky (artist), *Waltz with Bashir*, 115. The sober face of the narrator, Ari Folman, as he witnesses the results of the Sabra and Shatilla massacre.

and his possible firing of flares, he was involuntarily cast in the role of a Nazi and felt guilty (whether or not he actually enabled the killing and despite the fact that he would never have knowingly done so) and that he can't accept the possibility of his involvement, and so has deliberately forgotten just what he witnessed. The narrator looks intensely at him as he says this (107), and the reader knows that the narrator understands it is true.

The newspaperman, Ben Yishai, reports that an Israeli officer, Amos, ordered the shooting to stop and that stopped the massacre. Ben Yishai reports on the carnage he saw in the camp when he walked through it. And when he saw a pile of bodies of young men, he realized that this was a massacre. The narrator is shown walking into the camps, too, and seeing crying women as he does so (113–17) (fig. 7.3). The graphic novel like the film concludes with actual photos of dead bodies and a mourning woman. It is understandable why the narrator wanted to forget. Coming after the drawn illustrations and in contrast to them, the photos are very real and very shocking. Spiegelman in *Maus* pioneered the use of photos with artwork, and there, too, the results are very powerful and bring realism to what might otherwise seem a fantasy.

This is a very powerful work, which helps explain some of the traumas that can occur as the result of a war—what is now called posttraumatic stress disorder. In this case, the Israelis did not plan or participate in a massacre, but they were made into accessories to it because they surrounded the camps, thinking only that the Phalangists were going to clear the camp of terrorists. But the Phalangists, who got used to massacres during the Lebanese civil war and who were enraged by the assassination of their idol Bashir, were

only too ready to go way beyond this mission and into a killing spree. The Israelis might have foreseen that, but they did not, and continued to ignore reports of a massacre until it became very clear that a massacre and not just a military mission was occurring. To that degree, they, too, were culpable. So the narrator has blocked his memory until Boaz's account starts to bring it all back, twenty years later, and the narrator cannot rest until he understands his situation. He realizes that he waltzed with Bashir whether or not he wanted to and will continue to do so for the rest of his life.

What is the difference between the film and the graphic novel? Essentially, the graphic novel is a reading experience, which takes place entirely in the head of the reader: he must imagine spoken voices, sounds, and movements. The filmgoer hears the dialogue and sees the activity, and has to follow the film as it moves forward. The reader turns the pages but at his or her own speed. He or she can linger over a panel or a page, or move forward or back. In this case, reading the graphic novel brings the reader into a waltz with Bashir; the speed of it can be controlled, but once the reader is involved, the forward movement is unstoppable. The reader understands—because he or she can ponder on it at length if he or she wishes—how the assassination and subsequent massacre, have shaped the lives of all who witnessed it, whether or not they were guilty of allowing it occur. It is part of the mind and identity of the narrator, who was an unknowing accessory to it, forever. And he offers no religious sentiment to explain or ameliorate it. This is something that humans did, and that humans must live with. By virtue of being a Jew who knows about the Holocaust through his parents, the knowledge that he was somehow party to similar events has devastated the narrator. He has suppressed his memories but now has confronted them, and hopefully can move forward psychologically, although maybe he was happier when he had suppressed the memory of these events.

In terms of his identity, he has been forced to relive his parents' traumatic Holocaust memories to some extent—but this time in the role of perpetrator, however involuntary. As a Jew, it is particularly devastating to think that one has been party to such crimes, even though it was the Maronite militias that committed them and the Israelis did not understand what was happening until it was too late. Ariel Sharon was forced to resign because of the massacre; when the public found out about the massacre, there was a protest rally in Tel Aviv because Israelis recoiled at the idea that they would ever be involved in such a thing. But there can be no excusing it: the massacre did occur, and the Israeli army's presence and alliance with the Christian militia allowed it to happen, even if it did because of the inability of the Israelis to conceive of this kind of violence taking place under their noses. At the very

best, it was poor judgment on the Israeli side to allow the Christian militias into the camp after Jemayel had been killed. The narrator's (and all Israelis') sore spot has been touched, and he had to exorcise this demon by writing about it honestly. As Folman put it in a *New York Times* interview: "You can't come from a home of survivors and not be aware of where you come from: it's in your DNA. In a way, it influences everything in your life. It's a belief, a deep story. Your whole existence is about survival," he says. "And it's in the movie."<sup>1</sup> And in the graphic novel as well. Although the film is very powerful, the graphic novel is even more so because of the reader's ability to linger over every detail.

The last story, "Houses," in *Farm 54* by Galit and Gilad Seliktar also examines the traumatic feelings that occur when a soldier is forced to witness activities that he or she would rather forget. The very fact of Israel's existence in a very difficult Middle Eastern venue, surrounded by implacable enemies, forces it into a military situation that is inescapable. To stop terrorism, difficult measures, such as home demolitions, must sometimes be undertaken to deter future terrorists. But that does not make participating in such demolitions easy.

The Seliktars are a sister and brother team—Galit (the sister), a poet, writes the stories, and Gilad (the brother) illustrates them. The story is auto-biographical, in that Galit witnessed similar events while serving in the Israeli army in the West Bank. Both the writing and the drawing are very "poetic," that is, loose, impressionistic, and indirect rather than bitingly realistic and direct, as in *Waltz with Bashir*. *Farm 54* contains three other stories, about growing up on a farm, sometimes including tragic events like the death of a small brother by drowning or the death of the family's pet dog. But only "Houses" in my view touches upon the issue of identity and how it is bound up in Israel with politics.

The story begins with a woman, Noga, who works in an egg cooperative with Arab workers from Gaza and with one of whom, Asad, she is friendly. Noga is warned by her supervisor that Asad might be getting too friendly with her. So she begins with a connection to a Palestinian and with a connection with fragile eggs, which symbolize indirectly the delicacy of their relationship. She does not hesitate to tell Asad that she is enlisting in the army next week, and he smiles and says, "Bravo. I'm sure you'll be a good soldier." Moreover, he gives her what appears to be a musical tape as a present upon her leaving the cooperative. She seems to be very thoughtful as her mother drives her to the base. As an educational non-commissioned officer, she is tutored by the previous NCO, Einav, who shows her around. Einav points out a Druse soldier whom she seems to like. She resents another female sol-

dier, Efrat, who seems to be flirtatious. Noga seems to take a birth control pill in the barracks, and Efrat informs her that an officer might be interested in Noga. So far, everything seems to be normal, and Noga listens to the tape that Asad gave her before she left work and then falls asleep.

Einav asks Noga if she can go on a mission in her place because Einav has her period and does not feel up to it. The mission is not clear but obviously has something to do with home demolition, and so must be the demolition of the home of a terrorist or his or her family—a policy which has successfully, if painfully, combated terrorism in the West Bank. Einav tells her that her job is simply to follow the soldiers and make sure they do not touch the women when they evacuate the house. And she comforts her by saying, “They don’t demolish houses for no reason.” She also tells Noga not to worry because the soldiers would not touch an Arab woman in any case. So Noga goes to the truck that will take her on the house-demolishing mission. She notices Efrat in another truck, not looking upset in any way.

They descend on the Arab village. They get to the house and order the men to evacuate. The Arab men remove all of their own possessions, and so are “stage hands to their own disaster.” Once again, the elegant language of this particular graphic novel, along with its impressionistic artwork, makes it unique. An Arab man stops his wife from “yelling and cursing” at the soldiers by slapping her. Efrat sees a rabbit, perhaps a household pet, calls it beautiful, and cuddles it as an Arab boy looks on. Noga sees herself in a wardrobe mirror and she looks tired; her eyes “burn with weariness,” an obvious indication of her mental as well as her physical state; her eyes do not like what they are seeing. The soldiers rig up explosives. Efrat lets the rabbit go, and it runs off. A pigeon that was on the roof departs. And Noga comments that “soon, the houses too will fly up into the sky.”

According to Gilad, in the original story by Galit, Efrat takes the rabbit and the boy cries and wants it back. But Gilad points out that he softened the scene by showing Efrat cuddling the rabbit and letting it go, in effect saving it from the explosion. In the graphic novel, the child looks at her with the rabbit curiously or even approvingly, rather than crying (fig. 7.4). So Gilad has indeed softened the entire incident. And by the end of the graphic novel, instead of witnessing a strident protest against Israeli policies regarding home demolition as in the original, Noga is shown as upset about the whole incident. The protest is thus more subtle, perhaps, than in the original. It is clear that in view of her friendship with Asad and her view of the devastation that the soldiers’ presence has caused to the Arab family, including the children’s loss of their pet rabbit, she is very disturbed. Again, politics becomes part of an Israeli identity. She has been forced, largely unknowingly,



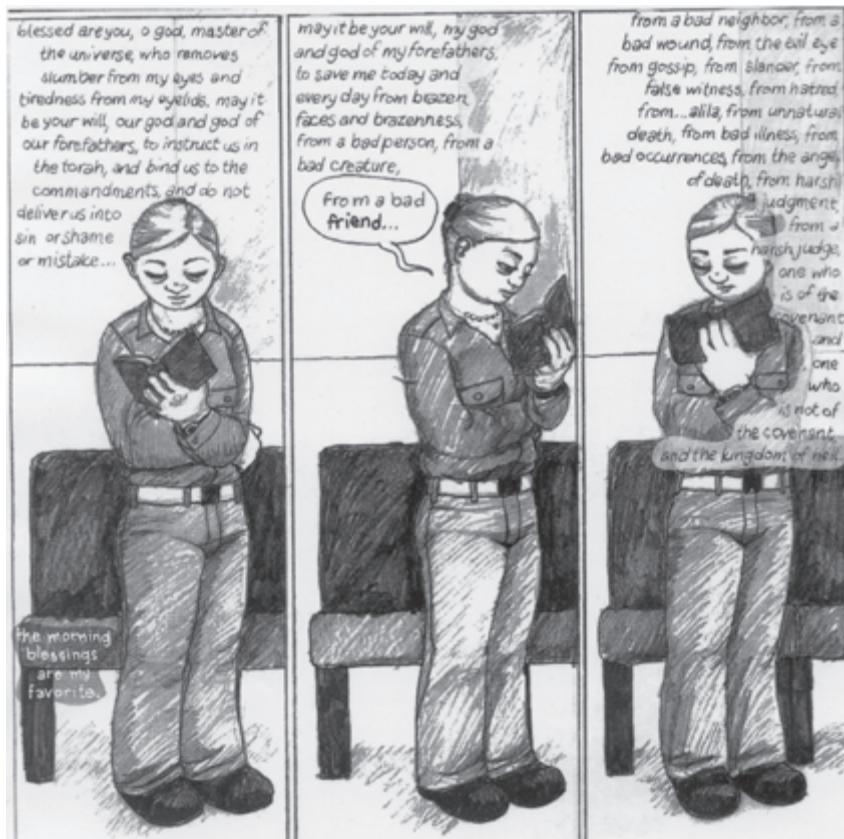
7.4. Galit Seliktar (writer) and Gilad Seliktar (artist), *Farm 54* “Houses” story. Efrat protectively holding an Arab boy’s rabbit as soldiers destroy his family’s house.

to participate in something she would rather not be part of, however necessary it might or might not be. “Houses” shows the unpleasant dimensions of the political situation and its toll on the personal identity of a sensitive participant rendered in a deeply poetic and therefore affecting style, both in the writing and in the drawing.

Miriam Libicki now identifies herself as an Israeli American living in Canada, which is a fairly complicated identity. But Libicki’s *Jobnik!*, written about the time when she moved to Israel from America and enlisted in the Israeli army, is less complicated concerning the identity issue—there are many dual citizenship Americans living in Israel. However, it is more complicated when it comes to religious identity. For this is the story of an Orthodox American woman’s largely sexual adventures in the Israeli army, and it combines sexuality and religion with a sense of the military dangers that Israel is always facing and how those dangers may influence personal issues. As in Keret and Hanuka’s *Pizzeria Kamikaze*, Modan’s work, Ari Folman and David Polonsky’s *Waltz with Bashir*, and even the Seliktars’ *Farm 54*, with its positive and negative interactions between Jews and Arabs, danger is always part of the religious and sexual mix, and it affects relationships and at-

titudes. Libicki's identity in *Jobnik!* is that she is an American Jew in Israel; while this is not exactly a simple matter, it is also not an unknown or highly unusual situation, since there are many Americans in Israel. Obviously, she has come to Israel seeking to fulfill her identity as a Jew and to become a member of a majority rather than always being in the minority. Although she has only a clerk's job, she is very proud to be in the Israeli army (146). She has fulfilled her desire for a strong Jewish identity although she enjoys being at a concert in Canada, too, and likes American singers like Joni Mitchell, and her American and Canadian friends respect that. The ambiguous element in her autobiographical account is her attitude toward religion. Can someone be Orthodox, or claim to be Orthodox, and also be sexually active, if not actually lose her virginity? Perhaps Libicki's book is an illustration of why Orthodox parents in Israel do not want their daughters serving in the Israeli army. Libicki does not seem to be completely comfortable being an Orthodox Jewish woman, because, as she indicates in several places, she does not conform to Orthodox dress and modesty codes (108). She also has difficulty with the idea of a *shidduch* (an arranged marriage), which is an accepted Orthodox practice. Her desire to tell the truth about her sexual encounters prevails over any attempt to hold back, and in that sense her artistic side seems to be more important to her than her Orthodox side. Also, her essay in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, edited by Baskind and Omer-Sherman, is similarly detailed, both in terms of sexual activities and her use of the graphic novel format. But on the other hand, the genuineness of her religious impulse cannot be doubted. Even though her parents came late to Orthodoxy, according to her, she seems to have embraced it readily except when it comes to the aforementioned dress and modesty codes.

When she prays (106), she looks sincere (fig. 7.5). Also, giving many of the words of the prayer on the page contributes to the genuine feeling because she could have simply said that she was praying without showing that she knows how to do it. She also prays during Yom Kippur (41). In an interview with Ranen Omer-Sherman, she stated that "morning prayers have a lot of may-I-merit-to-be-good supplications: let me not get angry, let me not cause offense, let me be humble. . . . Those prayers were very meaningful from the perspective of a powerless grunt. It made it a kind of grace, a kind of strength, to take crap from those corporals and sergeants who were probably younger and probably dumber than me. Also, it was quiet, solitary, and peaceful, which no other twenty minutes in basic training were."<sup>2</sup> She also said that "I keep Jewish law, as far as I keep it, to make a connection between my life and my ancestors' and because the rituals I perform have become very dear to me. The commandments I have kept vary with my



7.5. Miriam Libicki, *Jobnik!* 106. Miriam, an Orthodox Jew who does not always act like one, continues to pray regularly while in the army.

life situation, rather than being the results of epiphanies or similar.”<sup>3</sup> So she seems to practice a personalized Orthodoxy, which includes more religious practice than a secular or Reform believer would perform but which enables her to adapt to her immediate situation. Her seeming honesty about self-revelation in this interview, and in her work, is probably her most endearing quality. I say “seeming honesty” because in her own graphic essay on autobiography in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, she states that readers would not recognize the real Miriam from the drawing of Miriam in the graphic novel,<sup>4</sup> and she subscribes to a philosophy of bending things slightly to make her point. Yet whether real or slightly imagined, she has portrayed the events in her life and her own personality as a mix between Orthodox prayer and very non-Orthodox attitudes toward sexuality and modesty. At one point at

Frücon, a Canadian music convention, she is even in bed with two men (*Jobnik!*, 128). Although she does nothing with them as far as the reader can tell from her account, this is still a very un-Orthodox scene. And in her graphic essay on autobiography in graphic novels in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, she has no problem showing a very explicit Robert Crumb scene involving a sexual act in order to illustrate a point (255). Again, with Libicki, the artist predominates over the mundane and even the religious.

But the most powerful element in *Jobnik!* is not portrayals of sexuality—because graphic novels in general are replete with sexual portrayals, which are obviously an enticement of the very visual graphic novel format—but rather the way in which she shows the effect of the “situation” as the Israelis call it, on her personal life; her third chapter is even titled “The Situation,” and it begins with the horrible true incident during which two Israeli reservists were lynched in Ramallah, in the West Bank, during the Second Intifada. Watching the TV news about this, Miriam’s current boyfriend asks if she’s cold, and he puts his hand on her knee. The cold seems to be entirely a function of the awful account of the lynching, and his hand on her knee seems to be a comfort for them both, as she crosses her arms on her lap, as if sheltering herself from the vicious news. The concerned look on her face shows her fear (53). As she sits at her desk a few days later, she reads in a newspaper about gunfire on Gilo, a Jewish section of Jerusalem where the preparatory course that she took is located, and a friend calls her on the phone asking about it. She answers that “I’m ok, I’m an Israeli now, remember,” but her face shows that she is not very happy about this situation (58) although she is coping with it. Earlier, she worries that her potential boyfriend might have something happen to him because he is assigned to the territories or the West Bank (48). After she returns from Frücon in Canada, she is back in Jerusalem listening to more political news. The meaning is clear: she’s back in Israel, the place where the danger never subsides and the serious issues never go away. And yet she is happy because that is where she is one with her Jewishness.

Libicki has her own drawing style to bring this all off. People seem to be short and squat for the most part, with big, expressive eyes. As Libicki herself says in her graphic essay in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, the comic book Miriam is “passive and lumpish” (264), and no one in the entire story seems to be particularly pretty or handsome. This may simply reflect her view of the world, a view from which she apparently excludes beautiful and brilliant people in favor of the more average. And as an artist, she usually divides her pages into standard, regular panels, but sometimes she has a more open page, without panels, and this, in contrast with the more mundane square

and rectangular panels, changes the reading rhythm and sparks the reader's interest (for instance, *Jobnik!*, 72). She is very good about using news events as an intrusion into her personal life, as when the news overwhelms her (63), where the newsprint containing unpleasant incidents makes up the background of almost every panel, while she, superimposed upon that background, looks increasingly glum. But all in all, a static impression, characteristic of her life as a clerk in a boring army job, emerges. She did something brave and praiseworthy by joining the army and by portraying her experiences openly, but the stifling army atmosphere (despite the dangers from without) in a sense reduces her character to the external. There is no deep meditation or intellect or questioning. What is shown is a decent, prayerful, average-looking and average-thinking woman looking for love in a very constrained situation that does not allow full personal expression. This is no doubt a conscious choice of the artist, who has gotten close to the truth of her military service, while revealing the comfort that her Israeli army identity and her religion, as tailored to her needs, provide for her.

Sarah Glidden, like Libicki an American (she was born in Boston and now lives in Brooklyn), stares cagily out of the corners of her eyes in a photo on the dedication page of *How to Understand Israel in Sixty Days or Less*. She has won awards for her minicomics. She has also given several interviews since creating this book. But the real truths of her mind and personality come through best in this very honest and convincing graphic memoir of her Birthright trip to Israel. Birthright trips are offered for free to every young Jewish person who has not been to Israel before and who desires to go. Glidden took the trip because she seems to have been caught between on the one hand the attitudes of her boyfriend, whose father is from Pakistan and who is not enamored of Israel (6), as well as her own anti-Israel leftism, and on the other hand, her lingering loyalty to being a Jew. At least when she starts her trip, she is typical of a mindset (common among leftist Jews today) that sides with the Palestinians and sees Israel as a colonialist, imperialist power allied with the wicked West. Glidden's views are characteristic of what pollster Frank Luntz found in 2003, as Peter Beinart points out in a much-quoted *New York Review of Books* article about young Jews and Zionism:

First, "they reserve the right to question the Israeli position." These young Jews, Luntz explained, "resist anything they see as 'group think.'" They want an "open and frank" discussion of Israel and its flaws. Second, "young Jews desperately want peace." When Luntz showed them a series of ads, one of the most popular was entitled "Proof that Israel Wants Peace," and listed offers by various Israeli governments to with-

draw from conquered land. Third, “some empathize with the plight of the Palestinians.” When Luntz displayed ads depicting Palestinians as violent and hateful, several focus group participants criticized them as stereotypical and unfair, citing their own Muslim friends.<sup>5</sup>

Sarah fits this mold very well. Moreover, according to her own account in *How to Understand Israel*, Sarah has few Jewish friends and when she was younger she had a bad experience—which she illustrates—with a Hasidic man who groped her after she had helped him (14). She is certain that her view that Israel is an unjust, colonialist power will be confirmed and that the Birthright people will unsuccessfully try to propagandize her into believing the opposite. But, as she shows in subtle ways, under it all there seems to be something else pushing her to make this trip besides her desire for confirmation of her political opinions and the fact that it’s free. She is really looking for faith, some kind of faith that she feels she might find in Israel, other than her politically oriented secularism. This emerges slowly but surely over the course of the narrative and although she ends it conflicted that very conflict is an advance on the one-sided political, moral, and nonreligious certainty with which she set out.

Glidden’s drawing style is straightforward if not exactly realistic. Her photo on the dedication page and her drawings of herself bear little resemblance. As she told Martyn Pedler in her *Bookslut* interview, she was attempting to make her face more generic so many people could identify with her, following Scott McCloud’s idea that the more generic a comics face is, the easier it is for many people to identify with it.<sup>6</sup> In *How to Understand Israel*, she is very good at facial expressions, including the expression of her bewilderment and slight disbelief that appears in the cover drawing. In Glidden’s realistic style, people are represented without embellishment, and her renderings of the Israeli landscape, architectural settings, and manner of dressing are very accurate. The colors are soft. The panel size remains just about the same throughout the book, with a standard six to nine rectangular panels per page, and there are no exceptions except the beginning of each of the seven chapters, where a map takes up a full page. Clearly Glidden is out to present her personal development rather than to sensationalize external events. While outside events are important, whatever really happens, happens in the mind of Sarah as she feels her way into the Israeli social, political, and religious situation and finds it more complicated than she ever dreamed when imbibing her boyfriend’s and her own milieu’s leftist ideas. When she reverts to a Bat Mitzvah girl of twelve in the face of an El Al guard’s questions, Glidden shows this story is largely happening in Sarah’s

mind, although it must of necessity revolve around the actual events of her trip (8). This is a genuine journey of discovery in which Sarah does not quite reach faith but still moves a long way toward it.

She is constantly forced to reexamine her own beliefs during this trip. Sarah comments that *Haaretz*, the left-leaning Israeli newspaper, which is available in English as well as in Hebrew, has replaced the *New York Times* as her news source since she began thinking about going to Israel for a trip but that represents little change in her thinking (11), since both newspapers support the Left. However, in the course of her trip, she is forced to change her thoughts about being propagandized by Birthright. The guide, Gil, does not try to evade the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict but delves into all the difficult issues, including, for instance, the presence of the separation wall (25) and the question of whether or not the Golan Heights should be given back to Syria if there were a peace agreement (45). A fellow participant who Sarah thought was antigay because her friend misheard him forces her to reassess her judgments of other participants as well (15, 69–70). The idea that a Purim parade in Tel Aviv includes marchers critical of Chinese suppression of dissent forces Sarah to admit that even in a country like Israel, which she still thinks is guilty of similar offenses, people have a right to criticize other countries since it is a democracy (85–86). Speaking to her cousin Matt, a fellow American who has been in an Israeli medical school for a year, she admits that the country is not what she expected (92) and that she would consider coming back to get a master's in ancient history.

She finds that she feels at home in Israel and fits in better than in other foreign countries she has visited (83), even though she doesn't like the rudeness and shoving of people moving along the street there. Moreover, she feels emotionally drawn to the Jewish state despite her political ideology, and she actually cries because she is being pulled both ways (100). She says that she felt she could cut Israel out of her life completely and that was why she took the trip, to prove that to herself; but now she feels a connection (104) despite herself. At the Western Wall, she feels that she is hoping for the same thing that other people are praying for under different names (176), a unique feeling of solidarity with religious people of which she did not hitherto seem capable.

Glidden also includes a lot of objective history, including for instance the number of times that the city of Jaffa has changed hands. She corrects one misconception in her opinion, by claiming that the conflicts over the Holy Land for thousands of years have not been religious but largely about land (87). Whether the reader agrees with all of her opinions, her book serves as a personal tutorial about a complex subject, which progressively involves

the reader as he or she grows in knowledge along with the character Sarah. Sometimes, a Jewish character in an old poster or photo speaks up and says, for instance, that he had no alternative but to come to Palestine because he would have been killed in Europe (95). Sarah's face looks serious as she hears this, and it is clear that the Jews' side of the story is indeed making an impression on her. She even engages in argument with an artist shown in a self-portrait, who came to Tel Aviv in 1925, contradicting his claim that she would have come there too by stating that she would have gone to the United States instead. He reminds her that the United States had quotas then, which she is forced to remember and consider (96). Earlier, she engaged in dialogue with the Jewish characters in a play who respond to her various arguments about the Arabs (62), so she gives the Israeli side a fair hearing. On a trip to Masada, she cites Josephus's original account of the Sicarii against later romanticizations of their character—including their expulsion from Jerusalem by the Zealots, who found them too extreme, and their massacre of the inhabitants of the village of Ein Gedi in order to provide themselves with food—and she may have a point (127). Inevitably, over time, accounts of resistance by any group to its enemies (including the Jewish Sicariis' resistance to the Romans on Masada) become glorified. However, anyone who has stood on Masada and seen the scope of the conflict between the eight hundred Jews in the fortress and the much larger Roman forces around it will be impressed, regardless of the character of the defenders of Masada. The fact of their refusal to be conquered and their suicide remains memorable, as even Sarah acknowledges as she looks through the gift shop there (136).

As much as Sarah tries to question what she is being told by her Birth-right guides, to hold herself aloof from her own Judaism, and to strike a balance between competing claims, she proves unable to do so in the end. At the Western Wall, she, too, puts a prayer into the wall even though as a secularist she seemingly has no reason to do so (176). She hears Rabbi Hartman of the Hartman Institute, the advocate of a more spiritual and less ritualistic Judaism, speak and she feels pulled toward religion (199). Her friend Melissa, who is discovering her own roots after having had them hidden from her all of her life by parents who did not ever want to discuss being Jewish (68), provides an excellent counterpoint, too. She sees where Sarah is trying too hard to deny her own Jewish identity and is acting judgmentally and arrogantly. Glidden includes her to provide a constant balance against Sarah's going off on political tangents. But Sarah herself sometimes breaks down—she cries, she gets depressed, she is upset with herself.

She carefully weighs the evidence for and against what she is being told (48), when she tries to decide if her guide's story about the Syrians chaining

their own men to a wall in a bunker in the Golan Heights during the 1967 war to force them to fight is true or not (44). Her conclusions, that the story could be true and that the Israelis would not have done such a thing to their own men, already show her cutting Israel a bit of slack. The Israelis are better in her view than the Syrians. But she wishes for a movie about the Six Day War so she could understand it better and is exhausted by thinking about all this on her first day in Israel and so falls asleep. However, from the start she is attracted by the idea that the place is very old, and that many groups have come before her, about which she dreams (51–54).

She doesn't care for Shabbat food and resents the service for Shabbat, but her friend Melissa, who has been denied Shabbat services by her parents' refusal to worship, finds it pleasant and interesting (65). Thus Glidden presents a counter to her own views. Perhaps she is taking her Judaism for granted? This is the theme again when there is a discussion about what it means to be a Jew, and she finds that some participants in the trip are converts or are half-Jewish and value religious feelings much more than she does, while she can point only to a kind of cultural Judaism involving food and arguing (66–67). Once again, Glidden shows not only her own feelings but contrasts them with those of other people so the reader can make up his mind about her.

Glidden shows her dilemmas as when she tells one of the guides that "I'm Jewish so that means I'm supposed to support Israel no matter what, right? But according to a lot of people, any support for the Palestinians means that you don't support Israel. At the same time, when it comes to politics, I'm left-wing and progressive. You're supposed to be anti-Israel. . . . Any sympathy with Israel means that you don't support the Palestinians. So see? I'm stuck!" But the guide, who has identified himself as left wing too answers, "I don't understand how you can be 'progressive' and 'anti' anything though!" (77). Gradually, her hard-line stance becomes more and more tempered owing to exchanges like this, which always have the virtue of seeming convincing and an accurate record of what transpired on her trip.

At a Purim carnival in Tel Aviv, firecrackers go off, and Sarah is startled. She is beginning to understand what it means to live every day in a place where the firecrackers might have been a bomb. She tells her cousin that "I would never make aliyah or anything. . . . But I kind of like it here. Maybe I'd come back here to study ancient Middle Eastern history or something" (92). When on a tour of Independence Hall in Tel Aviv, the guide tells the group that they are here because Israel is their birthright, too, Sarah says she doesn't want to get emotional but then walks off, sees some young soldiers, and starts crying (100). This is a very clear sign that the conflict between her political beliefs and her feelings about being in a Jewish state are coming to

a head. Intellectually, she knows of Israel's problems, but emotionally she is beginning to feel committed to the place because she likes the people. As she tells the guide Nadav, "I came here. . . . I think I wanted to know for sure that Israel was the bad guy. I wanted to know that I could cut it out of my life for good. But now I don't know. I don't know anything. I can see why Israel did some of the things they did. You guys are good people. At least, some of you are. Or maybe I'm just being brainwashed just like everyone said I would be" (103). Glidden's honesty in exposing this conflict and all sides of the issues is what makes her book especially appealing.

Her boyfriend, whose father is Pakistani, has warned her about getting brainwashed on the trip, and after she calls him on the phone she tells Nadav, "This is exactly what I was afraid of. He thinks I'm in the tank for Israel now, which is totally not true. I'm just . . . trying to see the other side, that's all" (139). She is touched when she gets to Jerusalem (166), and she puts her hopes for peace into a crevice in the Western Wall, just like the other worshippers (176). When she walks through an Arab neighborhood, she gets uneasy and wants to be back in the Jewish quarter. And when she is back there and attends a play at Hebrew University, she says that she is "ashamed to admit that I like this feeling of being in this room. I'm even more ashamed at how much I don't like being outside of it" (196) because she feels safe with Jews. When a ride to the West Bank with a peace group fails to materialize, Sarah and Melissa attend a lecture by Rabbi Hartman instead. Rabbi Hartman's institute is devoted to a progressive Judaism that subordinates rules to spirituality, and he wants to reform many of the harsher rules in the Hebrew Bible. He preaches caring about other human beings and insists that he is a religious Jew and wears a kippah. Sarah says it almost makes her want to be religious when she hears him speak (199). She disagrees with Nadav, who is now a friend rather than a guide since the formal Birthright tour is over and she has remained a few days, when he insists that she is too idealistic about arriving at peace, even though he also insists that he respects Arabs. She spends a last evening with him and his friend, dancing, and then goes off to Istanbul. At the hostel there she is asked by youthful non-Jewish travelers to explain the situation in Israel, and all she can say is "Well—," which is where the graphic novel ends (206) (fig. 7.6).

Sarah has not found religion in Israel, and she has not even found political faith in Israel there. But she has come to realize that the situation is a lot more complicated than she thought, that there are many good people in Israel, and that she is as emotional about being there as any religious person and feels a definite connection with the place. She will think twice before



7.6. Sarah Glidden, *How to Understand Israel in Sixty Days or Less*, 206. Glidden hesitantly tries to explain the social and political situation in Israel to outsiders at the end of her book.

she badmouths Israel again and may even have arrived at a deeper sense of her own Judaism both in terms of ethnicity and religion.

Harvey Pekar teamed up with J. T. Waldman, the creator of the graphic novel adaptation of *Megillat Esther*, to create *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, Pekar's last work, which was posthumously published and which essentially chronicles Pekar's movement over his life from strong support of Israel to criticism of it. In *Our Cancer Year*, Pekar critiques Israel, but he does not include the history of his thinking on the subject. However, for all his criticism, Pekar is far less critical of Israel than some of Israel's tougher Jewish and even Israeli critics. Waldman also offers his own suggestions for a settlement of the conflict with the Palestinians based on economics, and even the more critical part of the book, which begins with Pekar's reactions to the 1967 war and the territory Israel acquired then, is relatively short (140–72). The rest of the book gives a very reasonable rather than polemical his-

tory of the Jews in the Middle East and in Europe from biblical times, and then in Israel, accompanied by Waldman's excellent historical illustrations.

Pekar is only moderately leftist in this work, and much milder than even some of the Israeli opposition parties are. While feeling that Israel should never have put settlements in the West Bank and that Jews should not be running other people's lives after all the things that they have been through, he does not ignore Palestinian errors, too. Pekar is trying to be reasonable and to arrive at a solution. At one point toward the end, he says, "Look, there have been atrocities on both sides, so what you gotta do is just try to end it. Anybody can say, well, what if they do this over again, or they do that over again? But ya can't. Then yeah, then you're paralyzed" (160). In other words, he wants to get to a peaceful solution rather than continually rehashing the conflict and bringing up each side's errors. But while he struggles with this issue, which is not what he says his parents' strong Zionism and one-sided support for Israel would have mandated, he also admits to Waldman, who holds a dialogue with him throughout, that he is indeed Jewish when he says that he would not have come over to America on the *Mayflower* "with those WASPs" (162). He says this in response to a question from Waldman about whether he would have taken a big chance in his life in coming to a new place, and the WASP remark does not really fit. Waldman has commented that the world would be happier if the Jews were in outer space and has asked if Harvey would go up there if necessary. Pekar's remark about WASPs, which is not really apropos except in indicating that he would not have been happy conquering new lands, just shows Harvey's own prejudices and assertion of his Jewishness. That remark to some extent undercuts his whole point in the book about Jews having to be more tolerant of the Palestinian desire for a national home because it shows that Harvey harbors some prejudices too, however mild, even if they are not directed against the Palestinians. He clearly sees himself as Jewish and cannot see himself as part of another group. Once interested in moving to Israel because he was out of work during a recession, he was put off by the Israeli consular representative in Cleveland (92–95). But in fact, the man seems to have asked the appropriate questions, and Pekar probably would have found Israel very hard going indeed, especially since he has not studied how to speak Hebrew and had gotten kicked out of the U.S. Navy because he couldn't even wash his clothes, as seen in *The Quitter*. More importantly, Pekar has not ever actually taken a trip to Israel to see it with his own eyes, and so a move there would have been a major shock. So in the end, in his own self-portrayal in *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, he is something of an armchair philosopher despite his early attempt to forge a tie with Israel. By contrast, Sarah Glid-

den took a trip to Israel to explore her feelings and to learn the facts on the ground, and she came back changed by that experience.

The book ends with Pekar sitting alone in the library where most of the dialogue takes place, while Waldman goes off with the librarian to find some books about Cleveland. Nothing has really been resolved by their conversation. Then follows an epilogue, also in sequential art, by Pekar's third wife, Joyce Brabner. Brabner is also a graphic novelist, especially known for her previous work with Harvey, *Our Cancer Year*, which, interestingly, included her attempt to work with Jewish and Palestinian youth to resolve their issues. In her epilogue to *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, she recalls Harvey's mother's funeral, where she first met his relatives. She recalls that the rabbi at the memorial service did not pronounce his mother's name correctly—it should be "Pee-kar, like piss" (170) according to her—and he seemed to care only about how much money she and her deceased husband had donated to Israel. He also made a pitch for those present to donate to Israel, too, and Joyce comments to Harvey as they sit in the chapel that "this is like an infomercial" (170), to which he responds, "Yer right . . . it's a shakedown." He also commented that when he dies, he "don' want none of that stuff" (172) at his funeral. Joyce states that when he did die, on July 12, 2010, she tried to bury him "with[out] any of that stuff" being brought up at the funeral. She did not even have a rabbi or cantor present. And she goes on to say that "I was walking in my sleep, but determined to organize something for him that was, as he was, proudly Jewish, but not nationalist. Musicians from the Workmen's Circle played. A friend who was (appropriately) 'kicked out of Yeshiva University for asking too many questions' wrote a guided gentle service in which he substituted Cleveland, instead of Israel, as Harvey's place of belonging" (172). In other words, Harvey like many of the other comics creators who I have analyzed in this book, felt Jewish by identity but not by religious belief, and he was not an extreme nationalist but rather a tolerant person, like many Jews in America and indeed in Israel itself.

Waldman's art gives a very realistic black-and-white view of Harvey's face and gestures, and Waldman seems to portray himself convincingly too. For instance, Waldman gives an honest view as they eat and drink fast food (91) (fig. 7.7). The biblical and other historical backdrops are well done, as they are in Waldman's *Megillat Esther*, and change style with the period that is being discussed. The reader comes out of this work liking both Waldman and Pekar and wishing that Pekar had indeed taken a trip to Israel to see for himself.

All of the graphic novels discussed in this chapter have shown a journey toward a more complex but also a strong Jewish identity in the protagon-



7.7. Harvey Pekar (writer) and J. T. Waldman (artist), *Not the Israel My Parents Promised Me*, 91. Pekar and Waldman, the creator of the graphic novel *Megillat Esther*, have become fast friends and are eating fast food together in Waldman's realistic rendering of himself and Harvey.

nists based on the political situation and the choices or lack of choices that it forces on them. Sometimes more religious belief results from their journeys, but often no belief at all exists to soften their situations. The Israel-centered graphic novel is a unique form of the Jewish graphic novel because it shows what happens when Jews actually gain some political power and become not underdogs but people who are in charge of their own fate. And that transformation while in many ways positive also carries its burdens.

## The Orthodox Graphic Novel

Unlike most of the other graphic novels discussed in this book, which usually stress identity at the expense of religion, the best graphic novels about Orthodoxy reinforce belief. Although it was created by a self-avowed secular artist, *Herville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*, by Barry Deutscher, gives a positive view of Orthodoxy. Steve Sheinkin's three volumes detailing Rabbi Harvey's adventures also give a positive view of an Orthodox rabbi serving in, of all places, a small town in Colorado during the days of the Wild West. James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* brings Jewish baseball players, some of them Orthodox, into contact with the broader public in small town America during the early 1920s, and explores the problems inherent in this cross-cultural situation. As in the case of *Rabbi Harvey*, Jewish wisdom is useful and protects and humanizes those who know and use it. So in this final chapter, there is a reaffirmation of Judaism, which is in contrast to the doubt and questioning that has often come before.

Deutsch, a comics and left-leaning political cartoon creator, has stated in an interview with Melodye Shore that he was "raised in a very liberal home" and that he does not have the same beliefs as his characters.<sup>1</sup> But he seems to know a lot about Jewish Orthodoxy. Deutsch's book *Herville: How Mirka Got Her Sword* is about an eleven-year-old Orthodox girl who wants to be a heroine who fights dragons. Although it's about a young girl, the book can be read and enjoyed by adults as well. Most notable, perhaps, is Deutsch's positive view of Orthodoxy. Although Mirka's religion does not tell her about dragons, she has a secular book hidden away under her bed, which does. In other respects she is indeed Orthodox although also something of a free-thinker. She certainly knows how to argue like an Orthodox student. For instance, when her stepmother, Fruma, tells her not to drop stitches as she is sewing, Mirka answers that God must have preordained that so it's okay. When Fruma says that God also may have preordained that Mirka will fix a dropped stitch, Mirka asks if Fruma is saying that God cannot make up his

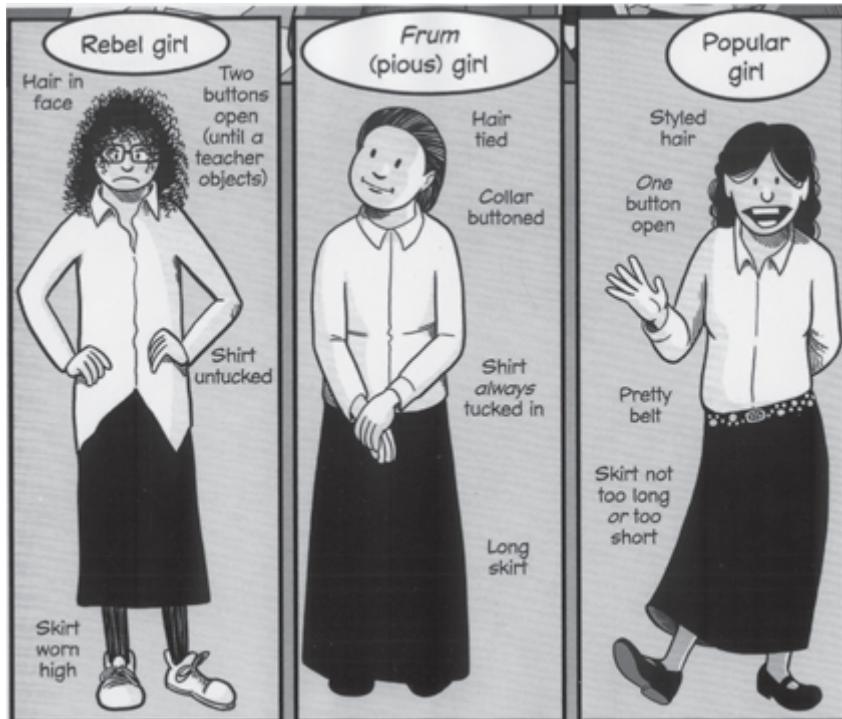
mind (1). This shows that Mirka believes in God and can argue about His will with the best yeshiva student. Also, when a wild pig attempts to drown her, Mirka asks for God's help (59).

Deutsch is very skillful as a comics artist, and he won the national Charles M. Schulz award for best college cartoonist in 2000. His style employs a full range of muted colors, which is very appropriate since Orthodox people do not usually wear bright clothes, and the whole story, however exciting at times, seems to take place in a calm world of quiet colors. The faces of his characters are very expressive. He is also good at using pages and panels. For instance, when Mirka first sees a witch, only Mirka's startled face is shown looking upward on a half-page spread (13), and it is not until the reader turns the page that he sees what has startled her so.

Deutsch captures the interaction between Mirka and her many other family members very well. Like many children in Orthodox families, Mirka has many siblings, and she is usually engaged in conversation with them, either trying to defend or to justify herself or to get them to see things her way. This makes for a lot of dialogue, usually contentious. But Deutsch is also good at showing otherworldly things, like a frightening pig who talks and wants to exact revenge because Mirka ate one of his grapes; trolls; and the witch herself, who appears at important moments.

Deutsch is also good at portraying the slightly different types of dress worn by the Orthodox and classifying them: for instance, he shows in detail the difference between a pious girl, a rebel girl, and a popular girl, all Orthodox (37). Sometimes the difference in dress amounts only to styled hair and a button open on a shirt or a dress that is worn slightly higher than a pious girl's dress (fig. 8.1). In view of the quiet nature of these differences, Mirka's attempt to confront dragons and her battle with supernatural creatures is very exciting and out of the ordinary. But it fits because the world of Orthodoxy involves miracles and other supernatural events if not of the nature of dragons, trolls, and talking pigs. It may be though that these creatures are more believable in an Orthodox world than they would be in the secular world that many Jews inhabit.

In Hereville, everyone is Orthodox, so there is a question of where the pig comes from (since pigs are not kosher) until a boy suggests that the witch who owns the pig is not Jewish (39). As they speak, the characters often use Yiddish expressions—since that is the everyday language of European-based Orthodox Jews in many places—which are translated at the bottom of each page, giving the story a feeling of authenticity (39). Also, Gittel, Mirka's fourteen-year-old sister, is already concerned with marriage and the reputation of the family, especially in connection with Chaya, their eighteen-year-



8.1. Barry Deutsch, *Hereville*, 37. Deutsch wittily portrays the significance of three Orthodox girls' different dress styles.

old sister who is on the marriage market. Gittel feels that Mirka's references to the pig are damaging to the whole family (42–43). The importance of marriage and reputation in the Orthodox community is clear, and this again gives the work a feeling of authenticity. And the story includes miracles, which is also appropriate for a group that strongly holds otherworldly beliefs. When the wild pig tries to drown Mirka, her dead mother miraculously appears to rescue her in response to her prayers to God for help. This may have been a vision on the part of the drowning Mirka, but the reader sees it too (60) and, given Orthodox beliefs, it could well be real. Throughout this work, Deutsch allows things to be seen from an Orthodox point of view.

At the same time, there is some unexpected action. Two older yeshiva students bully Mirka's brother Zindel, and when they also attack the pig, who has agreed to stop persecuting Mirka and who is helplessly tied to a tree, Zindel and Mirka attack the older students and free the pig (64–68). So justice is done, especially since one of the bad boys had said that “negiah,” the

prohibition against touching of boys and girls in Orthodoxy, would not protect Mirka (68). Within the Orthodox community just as outside of it there are some people who do not follow the rules and do not have good hearts. But they get their punishment as the pig chases them furiously.

The Sabbath or Shabbos (the Yiddish-influenced pronunciation of the Hebrew Shabbat) is rigorously observed in the Orthodox community, and it is treated the same here. Deutsch views this with good humor, as the narrator comments that “During Shabbos, which lasts from sundown on the sixth day to sundown the next day, no work can be done. No cleaning, no homework, nothing! Preparing for all that *not* working takes a lot of work!” (76).

Even the toilet paper must be preripped (77). Some of the guests are the “Spiegelmans,” which is likely a reference to Art and *Maus*, if an indirect one, subtly indicating Spiegelman’s influence on Deutsch’s work. The references to Shabbat are all positive and good-natured, such as “Naps on Shabbos afternoon are *twelve* times as refreshing as naps taken any other day! It’s a scientific fact!” (82). But one cannot speak about trolls on Shabbat, and as soon as Shabbat is over, Mirka asks Fruma, just as the witch instructed her to do, how to kill a troll.

What’s interesting about Mirka’s stepmother, Fruma, is that she has a long nose that makes her look as if she’d be nasty and that she is critical of Mirka and her siblings for not doing various tasks (1–2)—but the witch insists that she’s the only smart person in the town. So the reader, like Mirka, is forced to reassess his or her judgment. Fruma may not *look* good but in the end she *is* good. Interestingly for a comic, readers are forced to revise their judgment when it is based solely on looks, showing that Deutsch is aiming at something higher than a simple adventure tale. When Mirka tells her that she has seen her dead mother but that she doesn’t want her mother to be a dybbuk or spirit, Fruma comforts her and tells her that Fruma’s own mother died when she was just fourteen and so she sympathizes with Mirka, and she also tells Mirka that people can see strange things when they are deprived of oxygen.

But the most important part of this story is Mirka’s willingness to fight dragons and trolls. She has a brave spirit. Most Orthodox girls are considered suitable for marriage and child rearing, not dragon fighting. Her brother Zindel says that “troll fighting is for men,” not girls (109). But Mirka insists on doing that. She is indomitable in her desire and goes straight to the troll’s house after an encounter with Zindel, who tries to stop her. However, when she meets the troll and he says that he will eat her for breakfast if she loses, she tries to run away, but it is too late. She has no choice but to stay and fight him. The fight turns out to be a knitting contest, to see who can

make the best sweater. In a full-page spread, Mirka fantasizes about winning and chops some trolls up in her imagination (126–27). Two of the trolls even wear kippot (head coverings), making them into Jewish trolls.

To win, Mirka uses her head. Although the troll is right that his sweater for her is much prettier than hers, she insists that the one she made for him, with its many armholes and other irregularities, is the better sweater—and she makes a case for its being the more creative and artistic sweater as opposed to his more conventional model. As the sun comes up, the troll melts into a ball of yarn, which Mirka threatens to untie, leading the troll to concede that she has won (133). Thus, she gains the troll's sword, which is what she has wanted so she can slay dragons. But she leaves it with the troll because her family would never let her keep it at home (134). She is happy simply that she has won her battle with the troll.

The witch confronts Mirka on the way home and says that Mirka beat up Mirka's little brother Zindel and also risked getting killed and that Mirka did it all for a sword that she did not take home. The witch mocks her as a false hero (136). However, when Mirka finds Zindel and they come home together, they are welcomed with joy because they were missing and no one knew where they were. "Yelling and punishments came later." Mirka now knits better than ever after what she has been through but in her mind she holds an "entirely different needle," namely the sword (139). So, having triumphed, she is smiling and happy as she knits.

What is the meaning of this enchanting tale? That an Orthodox girl can be heroic and dream, just as a secular girl can. And that an Orthodox girl has to deal with family members and parents just as a secular girl does, even if there may be more siblings around. Mirka would be a heroine in any society, but the key is that she remains loyal to Orthodoxy and to her family and to Judaism and a belief in God. She has emerged from this story enlightened and strengthened. Deutsch has not made Orthodoxy itself into something heroic, but rather something normal—this is simply Hereville, a normal place in the present time—which can be accepted just as being secular is accepted. Given his own non-Orthodox outlook, this is no small achievement and reveals his tolerance and broadness of perception, which come wrapped up in his excellent and unusual artwork.

Steve Sheinkin was a writer of textbooks but grew bored with that role and decided to try something else—the explication of Jewish thought for both younger readers and adults in a form that would be appealing. Like Deutsch's *Hereville: How Mirka Got Her Sword*, all three Rabbi Harvey volumes put Orthodoxy in a good light, this time in the form of a story about an Orthodox rabbi who lives in the American Old West, in a small town

named Elk Spring, Colorado, in which many of the inhabitants appear to be Jewish. His Orthodoxy is apparent from his beard and black hat. Many if not all of the characters in the stories are Jewish, like Rabbi Harvey. They, too, often wear black hats and clothes, if not always. The reasoning in the tales is Talmudic, and they usually turn on very clever and unexpected angles, as Rabbi Harvey uses his intelligence to solve problems that are presented to him. And in notes at the end of the last two Rabbi Harvey books, Sheinkin indicates which Talmudic, Midrashic, or other story he has used as the basis of each tale.

Rabbi Harvey is also generous and kind, even to those who do not deserve it. Once again, as in Mirka's case, Orthodoxy looks very positive indeed. According to Sheinkin's work, Orthodoxy endows the believer not only with belief but with intelligence, too. And Americanism endows Rabbi Harvey and others with a good life in a wide open territory, free from oppression. In his introduction to *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey*, the first volume in the series, Sheinkin points to his love of western stories—and western films—and Jewish stories and states that he decided to combine them. So his stories are a unique combination of American, particularly western, folklore and Jewish folklore. Rabbi Harvey often sings western songs to himself as he journeys. Sheinkin himself lives in Brooklyn, New York, so his Wild West is drawn from his own imagination, aided by the western films he has seen and admired.

But it was not easy for Sheinkin to get his first Rabbi Harvey book published. In an interview, he commented that “the first Rabbi Harvey book went through about eight years of steady rejections before it was finally published by Jewish Lights in 2006. The concept of setting Jewish folktales in the Wild West, and doing it all in graphic novel format, is a bit strange, apparently. At least, that’s what publishing companies told me.”<sup>2</sup>

Sheinkin is not aiming to produce popular art, but rather to show traditional Jewish wisdom in a new way in books that will appeal to adults as well as older children. Harvey does not look particularly handsome. In fact, in one of the stories in *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey*, “The Juice Princess,” the rabbi’s student Lisa says that he is “not very handsome” and even ugly (27). His eyebrows are in one solid line above his eyes, and he has a thick beard which hides most of his face, as his black hat and clothes hide his body (fig. 8.2). But the Rabbi turns Lisa’s comment into a lesson for her. When she ruins her father’s fruit juices by putting them in gold containers—juices go bad in open metal containers—the rabbi makes the point that juice is best stored in a plain clay container and that wisdom is “best stored in a plain head.” To her question about whether it’s possible for someone to be smart and beau-



8.2. Steve Sheinkin, *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey*, 27. Rabbi Harvey, looking very sober as usual, attempts to tutor a rich girl.

tiful at the same time, he responds, "Think how much smarter they might be if they were a little less beautiful" (31)—which makes the point that smart people are often not very beautiful or handsome but that does not matter if the point is using intelligence to solve problems.

Despite Harvey's lack of personal physical beauty, Sheinkin's drawings have a nice combination of muted colors, with different colors for many word balloons, and most of the male characters resemble Harvey, with moustaches if not beards, and full heads of black hair, and yet one can always distinguish Rabbi Harvey because of his one straight eyebrow. The panels are usually rectangular and there are usually four to six on a page. These elements and the stolid faces of Harvey and his clients allow the focus to remain on the point of each story, much like studying Talmud. Sheinkin has said that he was influenced by Art Spiegelman and Joann Sfar, among other comics creators. Yet Sheinkin's style is unique, and he has devoted it to showing why Orthodox rabbis are respected for their intelligence: Harvey's role is to solve the problems of the petitioners who come to him all the time.

Sheinkin treats ignorance of Orthodoxy lightly, as when in *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey* a reporter tells Rabbi Harvey that he and wisdom go together like ham and cheese, and Harvey responds that "I'll have to take your word for it" (38). Harvey relates a story about a talking tree with a man hidden inside it to enable his daughter to steal some money. Harvey discovers the man by saying that the tree should be burned down, leading him to leave the tree. The same reporter to whom Harvey relates this story tells

Harvey that he should go into politics, given his wisdom (49), but the rabbi rejects that idea. Solving personal problems remains his area of expertise.

As is also shown in *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey*, Harvey, who studied in New York and then came West to try to get a job without much luck at first, finally gets his job in Elk Springs by defeating the gangster Big Milt Wasserman, who makes him play several games and tries to rig them all so the rabbi will lose and be executed. But the rabbi turns them around with his smarts and defeats Big Milt's plans (65). So he becomes the rabbi of Elk Springs while Big Milt and his crew are forced to leave town. This is akin to being the sheriff who drives out the bad guy in a usual western story. As always, Rabbi Harvey uses his brains to accomplish this feat—when he is to choose a piece of cardboard out of a hat to settle his fate, he says that he ate one of them by mistake thinking it was a piece of matzo, so the one left in the hat must say the opposite of the one he ate. Since Big Milt dishonestly wrote “the Rabbi dies” on both pieces of cardboard, the piece in the hat must say that, and therefore the rabbi’s proposition, that the one he ate must have said “the Rabbi lives” prevails (64). In this contest of wits, he has defeated Big Milt, and takes up his new position.

In answering various dilemmas, Rabbi Harvey often uses Hasidic stories of famous rabbis. For instance, in *The Adventures of Rabbi Harvey* he tells a woman who has a lot of children but a small house to bring a cow into the house, too, because then when the cow is taken out, she will appreciate how much room she has. This is a story originally told about an important Hasidic rabbi. Also, Rabbi Harvey says that he fears that in heaven he will not be asked, “Why weren’t you Moses?” but rather “Why weren’t you Harvey?” (104). By inserting these old Jewish stories into a more recent American West, Sheinkin reinvigorates them and turns the western, surprisingly, into a Jewish art form.

In *Rabbi Harvey Rides Again*, Harvey attends a rabbinical convention in Leadville, Colorado, where the rabbis are told to search for the most valuable thing they can find and bring it back in a few hours to see who has done the best in this vein. Harvey gets a rare Shabbat candlestick from a friend nearby but a thief tries to steal it. In his typically intelligent fashion, Harvey not only tricks the thief into wasting all of his bullets and knocks him down, but then discusses life with him. The thief repents, saying that he really wanted to become a dentist. The rabbi catches one tear of repentance in a wine bottle and presents that as the most valuable thing he could find. Of course, he wins the contest—and rightly so (57). Sheinkin teaches morality through Harvey’s adventures, and in a surprising way. The drawings, with their light colors that set off Harvey’s and the other rabbis’ black

clothes, remain unique. As the reader gets used to his demeanor and presence, Harvey comes to look more and more like a sheriff, especially when he is seen to wear a Star of David badge much like a sheriff's badge, and he seems to fit into the landscape of Colorado well.

One of Rabbi Harvey's most interesting activities is to answer people's questions. In *Rabbi Harvey Rides Again*, a soap maker asks him about the value of Judaism or any religion (63). The rabbi asks him if his soap is good. He responds, "Yes," and then they see some dirty children. The rabbi asks how his soap can be good if the children are dirty, and the soap maker responds that they have been playing in the mud and his soap is only good if people use it. The rabbi says that it's the same with Judaism: people should be religious because it brings good things if they are, but if they don't use it, it won't (64). It is difficult to argue with his logic.

In the third volume of the series, *Rabbi Harvey vs. the Wisdom Kid*, Rabbi Harvey shows that he is willing to die rather than give up Judaism. A man he rescues wants to repay him, and he finds a way to do so by making Rabbi Harvey aware of how much he loves Judaism (6–14). Sheinkin makes the point about how important religion is to Rabbi Harvey. Rabbi Harvey is always honest with himself as well as with others, and he is very humble. He is also not rigid about religious rules. By using a deed of the famous rabbi, the Vilna Gaon—as Sheinkin says in his notes at the end—he finally defeats the Wisdom Kid, a false rabbi who sets himself up in opposition to Rabbi Harvey and is in fact interested only in making money from the petitioners for his advice, while Rabbi Harvey shows no interest in anything but his own soul and that of others. In fact, Rabbi Harvey exemplifies all of the positive qualities of Judaism and does so in the most unlikely setting—the small-town American West of the past century—which makes his wit and wisdom all the more impressive. As the book ends, the rabbi is sitting with a teacher named Abigail, and is likely to propose marriage to her. Orthodoxy places a very high emphasis on marriage, and so Harvey should be getting married at some point. Once again, Orthodox values are affirmed, and in such a way that makes clear that they produce morality, honesty, and humility. Belief in God and in his own intelligence gets Rabbi Harvey through all situations, even the most demanding.

James Sturm's *The Golem's Mighty Swing* does not at first sight fit the Orthodox framework, since as Noah Strauss, the Zion Lion who is the team's leader, says, the Stars of David team does play on Shabbat when they have to (88), which would have disappointed his father, who was obviously far more observant than Noah is. Also, one of the team members says "goddammit" when he is frustrated, and team members eat at nonkosher restaurants. But

one player, Fishkin, usually wears a hat, has a beard, and knows about the Kabbalah, and he as well as some other players seem to look Orthodox (105). Also, a name like Moishe or Hershl is not an assimilatory American name and would probably not be given to a child by secular parents. The compromises with Orthodox Judaism that the team must make are part of the conditions of their touring small towns, just as in the South Jewish people ride to synagogue on Shabbat because of the heat and the distances, and sometimes eat out at nonkosher restaurants but still consider themselves Orthodox. When Noah's brother Moishe gets married, an obviously Orthodox rabbi performs the ceremony (184), and it takes place under a chuppah (a canopy over a Jewish couple during their wedding). Part of the team's attraction is that it is openly Jewish both in terms of identity and belief, and that is new to small-town America in the Prohibition era, when the story takes place. Some people turn out just to see Jews. Roxanne Harde points out that Sturm has based "his Stars of David loosely on the House of David barnstorming team that grew out of a Michigan religious colony founded in 1903." This was not "a specifically Jewish sect" but there was a synagogue within the colony for its Jewish members, and the sect forbade the cutting of hair.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, Sturm makes a major point about the team's Jewish identity and the problems and strengths associated with that designation. When a young team member walks into a small town, the kids want to take his hat so they can see his horns (110), which shows the misunderstanding of Jews—based on the mistranslation of the Hebrew *keren* (ray of light) for "horn," which is also seen in Michelangelo's sculpture of David—still prevalent in that time and place. On the other hand, the vegetable man in town gives him a box of apples for his team after he discusses baseball with some men, showing goodwill. Baseball and its history are obviously a common denominator for discussions among men in this town, and it doesn't seem to matter whether a Jew is joining in the discussion. If one loves baseball, then one is an American. An opposing team is told by a coach not to try to outsmart a Jew, but rather to overpower him, which is a backhanded compliment endorsing the stereotype that all Jews are smart (130).

And it is a Christian publicity agent who comes up with the idea that the black non-Jewish player Hershl (Henry in real life) could be dressed up like a Golem—a man-made monster who defends the Jews against their enemies, from European Jewish mythology—because that would get the team a lot of publicity.

Yet overt and nasty anti-Semitism is everywhere. One of the players in another town, Putnam, talks about giving the Jews a second circumcision with a fastball. When a Jewish player comes into the bar where this player is

located, he and his friends call him a “sheeny” and they beat him up, breaking his arm (136). Moreover, the editorial in the Putnam paper just before the game states that “there is a greater threat [than the Golem] that the Putnam All-Americans must vanquish, the threat posed by the Jews. These dirty, long-nosed, thick-lipped sheenies; they stand not for America, not for baseball, but only for themselves. They will suck the money from this town and then they will leave” (137). Here the theme of the Jews as aliens who care only about money is shown.

So the stage is set for the big game between the All-Americans and the “sheenies” who are not American in the eyes of the nativists. And when during the game, a Jewish player jumps up near the stands to catch a fly, the people in the stands throw him out, saying, “Go home, Jews” (164). And the crowd keeps shouting “Jews Go Home.” When one of the All-Americans is struck by a fastball pitched by the Golem—Henry—the crowd descends on the field to attack the Jewish players, but the Golem, looking particularly powerful and determined (fig. 8.3), protects them as the team crowds into their dugout (170). Mo sings the Sh’ma—the basic prayer of Judaism, declaring God’s oneness—and Noah, invoking his Orthodox father’s voice, prays to God for help (171). Clearly these players are much more religious than they seem from their outward actions and their nonobservance of some rituals. Fortunately, the game is rained out, the crowd disperses, and the team leaves the city. The team eventually disbands, and there is only the memory of this group of ethnic players fighting for recognition and even their lives on a field slanted by anti-Semitism. But this experience has obviously strengthened their belief in God and the efficacy of prayer.

Sturm’s style seems to be intended to replicate past printing methods. His colors are black and white and a greenish tan, and the word balloons have more or less standard lettering in them, so the reader feels like he is reading a newspaper circa 1922, which is when the story takes place. The chapter divisions are in the form of advertising posters for the games, including a frightening picture of the Golem on one of them. People are portrayed realistically, with no one on any of the teams being especially handsome or striking, and their uniforms are more or less similar. The Jewish players appear to be as strong and competent as the Christian players and are different only in that many of them have beards, and so look Orthodox.

Roxanne Harde points out that the Stars of David challenge the masculinity of the Christian teams by showing that Jews could be good athletes, too, and do not fit any stereotypical image. Moreover, the Golem threatens them by promising to be more masculine than the Christian players on the other team are. Essentially, the Stars of David are proving both their Jewish-



8.3. James Sturm, *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, 170. An African American player, looking like a powerful Golem, holds off a mob that angrily confronts his Jewish baseball team as it tours rural America.

ness because they retain their identity, and their Americanness, as they hold their own against Christian teams in a quintessentially American sport. According to Harde, baseball has always attracted Jewish interest, and of course Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax were especially admired by Jewish boys. It is also the basic, native American game. So what Sturm has demonstrated here is that Jews can compete and paradoxically assimilate into America, even as they retain their identities as Jews.

In the final chapter of *The Golem's Mighty Swing*, Noah attends a minor league baseball game ten years after these events take place, demonstrating his continued interest in and indeed love of the sport. Being Orthodox, as

some of the players are, does not make them worse ball players and may even strengthen them, as during the dugout scene when they recite the Sh'ma. Sturm has in effect made Orthodoxy and strong Jewish identity thoroughly American—just as Rabbi Harvey fits into the small-town American West.

Sturm himself has commented that in order to do this book, he learned more about being Jewish. He looked at photos of the House of David team and felt that they looked Jewish and the Stars of David recapitulated the experience of the Wandering Jew, far from home and returning home which is, in his words “central to baseball.”<sup>4</sup> He also commented that “in the second part of the book, their identity as baseball players is eclipsed by their identities as Jews and now they’re the other. That’s one of the interesting things about this country: how your identity is constantly in flux.”<sup>5</sup> So in the end, this is a story about identity—including Orthodox Jewish identity, and how it fits into America, which is capacious enough to absorb all identities.

Sturm’s *America: God, Gold, and Golems*, in which *The Golem’s Mighty Swing* appears, also has two other stories about America, neither of which involves Jews—*The Revival*, set in 1801 and *Hundreds of Feet below Daylight*, set in 1886. *The Revival* is about a religious revival meeting during which a devoutly fundamentalist woman and her husband hope that a faith healer will revive their dead daughter, but he fails. *Hundreds of Feet below Daylight* is about a dying town and a failing mine, and the hunt for money by the town’s inhabitants. The mine does not seem to produce much for those who have unjustly taken it over by dispossessing Chinese workers there, and the only money in the town is buried not hundreds of feet below the surface like ore, but only a few feet down. Ironically, a young girl, who has not sought money, ends up with all of the buried treasure after her mother has been savagely murdered. *The Golem’s Mighty Swing*, which is set in the early 1920s, fits into this trilogy about the development of America because it combines the themes of religious belief, the search for success (monetary or athletic), prejudice, and violence. It seems that through the conjunction of the stories in this trilogy, Sturm wants to show that Jews, often discriminated against, have made a painful journey that has finally led toward their integration into an American culture, which, while deeply religious, is also prone to intolerance and violence.

All three writers attempt to bring Orthodoxy and Americanism together, be it in Mirka’s dreams of fighting dragons, Rabbi Harvey’s life in the small-town West, or the Jewish baseball players in *The Golem’s Mighty Swing*. In these renditions, belief in God and Orthodox Jewish religion seem to give strength to those who believe in them, and even allow them to stand against the anti-Semitism prevalent in provincial settings. These works give one end

of the spectrum from religious belief to disbelief that has been seen in this book, along with a strong emphasis on Jewish identity. But it must be emphasized that all of the graphic novels surveyed and analyzed in this book stress Jewish identity, even when they do not express belief in God.

Graphic novels by Jews have made and are making an important contribution to the graphic novel explosion now taking place in America, Europe, and beyond. Sarnath Banerjee, the Indian creator of *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, which is based on the legend of the Wandering Jew and which includes a character who is an Orthodox Jewish merchant from Syria, has pointed to the influence of Will Eisner and Art Spiegelman, among others.<sup>6</sup> The graphic novel's many Jewish creators have pioneered in the development of the medium itself and they continue to exhibit great skill in melding words and images into powerful and unforgettable stories. Moreover, these creators often probe the themes of religious belief and ethnic identity with unique intensity. These themes are fundamental elements in all national cultures, and (because America is a country of immigrants from many lands) in American culture in particular. So graphic novels by both Jews and non-Jews which are based on the Jewish experience once again demonstrate the importance of the Jewish story not only for Jews, but for many other people as well. And they do so in a wonderful new way.

# Notes

## Chapter 1

1. Eric Herschthal, “J. T. Waldman, 33, the Talmudist of Comic Books,” *Jewish Week*, June 15, 2010, accessed October 17, 2013, [http://www.thejewishweek.com/special\\_sections/36\\_under\\_36/jt\\_waldman\\_33](http://www.thejewishweek.com/special_sections/36_under_36/jt_waldman_33).

## Chapter 2

1. Quoted in Jonathan Rosen, “Spiegelman: The Man Behind Maus,” *Forward*, January 17, 1992, 1, 9, 11. Also, as Helena Frenkil Schlam notes, Spiegelman is very aware of the contribution to the comics made by Jewish creators in particular (“Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists,” *Shofar* 20, no. 1 [2001]: 104).

2. *Hebrew-English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), Exod. 25:1–2.

3. Alan Berger, “Bearing Witness: Theological Implications of Second Generation Literature in America,” in *Breaking Crystal: Writing and Memory after Auschwitz*, ed. Efraim Sicher (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 202.

4. One might postulate that even though Vladek consults the rabbi about when Parshas Truma will be read, he as a devout Jew at the time subconsciously remembers the date around which this Parsha is normally read—that is, in February or March—and perhaps subconsciously too was, in his dream, estimating the date of his release. But even if that is the case, he could not possibly have made the dream of his release come true on the precise date on which Parshas Truma would be read, or come true at all, since it was entirely determined by the Nazis. The possibility of these events being coincidental is so unlikely as to be almost impossible.

5. It is worth noticing another biblical quotation in this episode (1:54) as well, the prayer that Vladek and his companions say in Hebrew which translates “How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings O Israel” (Num. 24:5), is from the story of Balaam and Balak and is a regular part of the Jewish prayer service. At this point, Vladek is in a German POW camp in which the Jews, living in tents, are treated worse than the other Polish army prisoners, who are in bungalows. At first sight, this biblical passage is being used ironically by Art Spiegelman to contrast the minimal tents in which the Jews find themselves in the camp with the beautiful dwellings

that Balaam sees in the Israelite tents. But very soon after they pray, Vladek and some other Jewish prisoners are suddenly offered, and accept, the chance to be transferred to the German labor camp in which he eventually has the Parshas Truma dream. At the labor camp, they are miraculously placed, much to their amazement, in “nice wooden houses” with stoves, beds, and even sheets and pillows (1:55). Not only has Vladek’s and his fellow prisoners’ prayer from Num. 24:5 about the beauty of Jacob’s tents led, it seems, to better dwellings for them, but there is also an indication in this prayer that the Jews, if they are mindful of it, can dwell in the spiritual splendor of the Tabernacle and Ark even when their external circumstances are less than splendid. The question here is whether Vladek prayed this precise prayer about dwellings, or if, for artistic purposes only, Spiegelman filled in this line of prayer from his own knowledge of the Jewish service. If the latter is the case, then clearly this is not one of the prophetic incidents but only an artistic use of prophecy. Because this issue is not clear, as it is for instance in the Parshas Truma dream where the fact of Vladek’s prediction is unassailable, I have placed this incident in a footnote.

It is worth noting, however, that in Num. 24:9, a few verses after the prayer about Jacob’s dwellings, Balaam states, “Blessed are they who bless you, Accursed they who curse you!” referring to the relations between non-Jews and Jews and that this alerts us to yet another possibly supernatural set of events in *Maus*: that those non-Jews who helped Vladek and Anja, such as Mrs. Motonawna, in whose house they stay; Mr. Lukowski, who shelters them in his barn; Mrs. Kawka, who does the same; the Polish priest in Auschwitz; and even the brutal kapo, as well as the French prisoner who shares his food with Vladek, are not harmed (as far as Vladek’s account communicates), while those who hurt Vladek and Anja, such as the smugglers who betray them to the Nazis, themselves end up in Auschwitz. Similarly the Nazis and even the German civilians in bombed-out Wurzburg, about whom Vladek comments that it was good for them to receive even a little of what they did to the Jews (2:130), are devastated by American attacks. The Jewish “rat” who harms Vladek and Anja by betraying their hiding place to the Nazis ends up dead himself, killed at the order of Haskel, Vladek’s ghetto police chief relative (1:113, 117), once again confirming the curse in Num. 24:9, this time with a narrow application to Vladek’s family rather than to the Jews as a whole. And to return for a moment to the predictive power of the original prayer in Num. 24:5 about Jacob’s “fair dwellings,” it is worth noticing that when the Spiegelmans survive the Nazi onslaught and move on to New York, they do attain a “fair dwelling” in Rego Park, Queens, as well the liberty symbolized by Liberty, New York, which is indicated (along, incidentally, with the now-defanged Catskill Mountains, another deliberate pun) on the map on the back cover of volume 2 of *Maus*.

6. For an admirably exhaustive discussion of the difficulty of separating the past and present in Spiegelman’s narration in *Maus*, see Erin McGlothlin, “No Time Like the Present: Narrative and Time in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*,” *Narrative*, 11, no. 2 (2003): 177–98. However, McGlothlin, like most other commentators on the use of time in *Maus*, has neglected the predictive future dimension which is, I

contend, ever present in the work and indeed essential to its narration and deepest meaning.

7. Quoted in Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989), 102.

8. *Short Order Comix*, vol. 1 (1973).

9. Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 100.

10. George M. Goodwin, “More than a Laughing Matter: Cartoons and Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 21.2 (2001): 167.

### Chapter 3

1. See Gene A. Plunka, *Holocaust Drama: The Theater of Atrocity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11–16, for an excellent discussion of this issue based on the works of Adorno, Bettelheim, Wiesel, and others.

2. For an analysis of the three narrative lines in *Maus*, see Stephen E. Tabachnick, “Of *Maus* and Memory: The Structure of Art Spiegelman’s Graphic Novel of the Holocaust,” *Word and Image* 9.2 (April–June 1993): 154–62.

3. Samantha Baskind, “A Conversation with Miriam Katin,” in *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, ed. Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 240.

4. Baskind, “A Conversation with Miriam Katin,” *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 242.

5. Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (New York: Pocket Books, 1984), 260–62.

6. Frank, *Diary*, 332.

7. Alex Deuben, “Trina Robbins Discovers ‘Lily Renée.’” *Comic Book Resources*, January 25, 2012, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=36220>.

8. Deuben, “Trina Robbins.”

9. Hannah Brown, “Kuberts Bring ‘Heroes’ to Holon,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 17, 2011, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://www.jpost.com/Arts-and-Culture/Books/Kuberts-bring-Heroes-to-Holon>. Kubert was accompanied by his son, Adam, also a comics creator.

10. Brad Prager, “The Holocaust without Ink,” *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, ed. Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), 116–17.

11. “Joe Kubert Yossel,” YouTube interview with an anonymous interviewer at the Joodsmuseum, Amsterdam. October 23, 2007, accessed October 17, 2013, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjw\\_Y-tJ-O8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjw_Y-tJ-O8).

12. Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 11.

13. Trina Robbins and Sharon Rudahl, “Zog Nit Keyn Mol,” *Wimmen’s Comix*, no. 10, 1985; reproduced in Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 200–201.

14. Trina Robbins, interview with Rabbi Adam Grossman, “Jews and the Under-

ground Comix: The Reshaping of American Jewish Identity through American Popular Culture," MAHL thesis, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 2008, 57.

15. Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 201.
16. Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, "Witness, Trauma and Remembrance: Holocaust Representation and X-Men Comics," in Baskind and Omer-Sherman, *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 144–60.
17. Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 119.
18. Malcolm, "Witness, Trauma and Remembrance," 144.
19. Ibid., 150.
20. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen* (New York: DC Comic, 1987), chapter 6, p. 26.

## Chapter 4

1. Bob Andelman, *Will Eisner: A Spirited Life* (Milwaukie, OR: M Press, 2005), 346.
2. Bridgid Grauman, "The Man Behind the Rabbi's Cat," *Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2008, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB120785868731405779>.
3. For further discussion of issues of identity in Sfar's work, see Marla Harris, "Borderlands: Places, Spaces and Identity in Joann Sfar's *The Rabbi's Cat* and *Klezmer*," in Baskind and Omer-Sherman, *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 181–97. See also Nicole Goldberg and James Goldberg, "You Wouldn't Shoot Your Fellow Jews: Jewish Identity and Nostalgia in Joann Sfar's *Klezmer*," *Shofar* 29.2 (Winter 2011): 100–119.
4. George Gene Gustines, "In One Sad Day, an Old World Artisan Confronts a New World," *New York Times* (April 25, 2010), accessed October 17, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/26/books/26book.html>.
5. About these interpretations and Kafka's relationship to Judaism, see Ritchie Robertson, *Kafka: Judaism, Politics and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

## Chapter 5

1. Andelman, *Will Eisner*, 346.
2. Will Eisner, *To the Heart of the Storm*, in *Life, in Pictures* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 107.
3. Will Eisner, *A Contract with God*, in *The Contract with God Trilogy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 24.
4. Caitlin McGurk, "Will Eisner Week: Researching Religion in Eisner's Work," interview with Martin Lund, March 8, 2012, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://library.osu.edu/blogs/cartoons/2012/03/08/will-eisner-week-researching-religion-in-eisners-work/>. See also Andelman, *Will Eisner*, 346.
5. Will Eisner, *Fagin the Jew: A Graphic Novel* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).
6. Laurence Roth, "Drawing Contracts: Will Eisner's Legacy," in *Graven Images*

ages: *Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, ed. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 46.

7. David Gerber, “Visiting Bubbe and Zeyda,” in *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity*, ed. Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 119.

8. See William Howarth, “Some Principles of Autobiography,” *New Literary History*, Winter 1974, 363–81.

9. Harvey Pekar, “The Man Who Came to Dinner—and Lunch and Breakfast,” in *The New American Splendor Anthology* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991).

10. Harvey Pekar, “President’s Day,” in *New American Splendor Anthology*.

11. Sarah Henkin, “Professional Impostors and Authentic Jacksonian Jews: Negotiating Identity in Ben Katchor’s *The Jew of New York*,” *Shofar* 28.2 (Winter 2010): 22–44.

12. Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Jewish Life and American Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

13. Alex Deuben, “Leela Corman Talks about Her ‘Unterzakhn,’” *Comic Book Resources*, April 24, 2012, accessed October 18, 2013, <http://www.comicbookresources.com/?page=article&id=38320>.

## Chapter 6

1. Rabbi Adam B. Grossman, “Jews and the Underground Comix: The Reshaping of American Jewish Identity through American Popular Culture,” MAHL thesis (Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 2008), 159.

2. Diane Noomin, *Glitz-2-Go: Collected Comics* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2011), 12.

3. Julia Rothman, “Interview with Vanessa Davis about Her New Graphic Novel *Make Me a Woman*,” November 8, 2010, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://www.book-by-its-cover.com/comics/interview-with-vanessa-davis-about-her-new-graphic-novel-make-me-a-woman>.

4. Ibid.

5. Andrea Most, “Reimagining the Jew’s Body,” quoted in Vincent Brook, “*You Should See Yourself*: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture” (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 22–23.

6. Reproduced in Noomin, *Glitz-2-Go*, 127.

7. On the uninhibited aspect of women’s graphic novels and Aline Kominsky Crumb in particular, see Hilary Chute, *Graphic Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

## Chapter 7

1. Joan Dupont, “Ari Folman’s Journey into a Heart of Darkness,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2008, accessed October 17, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/arts/19iht-ari.1.13005821.html?pagewanted=all>.

2. Ranen Omer-Sherman, “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki,” in Baskind and Omer-Sherman, *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 250.
3. Omer-Sherman, “A Conversation with Miriam Libicki,” 251.
4. Miriam Libicki, “Jewish Memoir Goes Pow!, Zap!, Oy!,” in Baskind and Omer-Sherman, *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 263.
5. Peter Beinart, “The Failure of the American Jewish Establishment,” *New York Review of Books* June 10, 2010, 1.
6. Martyn Pedler, “An Interview with Sarah Glidden,” *Bookslut* December 2010, accessed October 17, 2013, [http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010\\_12\\_016913.php](http://www.bookslut.com/features/2010_12_016913.php). Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 36.

## Chapter 8

1. Melodye Shore, “In the Author’s Tent: Barry Deutsch,” October 7, 2010, accessed November 12, 2013. <http://newport2newport.livejournal.com/255075.html>.
2. Barbara Bietz, “Welcoming Steve Sheinkin and Rabbi Harvey,” March 16, 2008, accessed October 18, 2013, <http://jewishbooksforkids.com/2008/03/16/welcoming-steve-sheinkin-and-rabbi-harvey/>.
3. Roxanne Harde, “Give ‘em another circumcision’: Jewish Masculinities in *The Golem’s Mighty Swing*,” in Baskind and Omer-Sherman, *The Jewish Graphic Novel*, 68.
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