

The *MAUS* that Roared*

Dr George Halasz ©

You need more than an appetite for the truth to read *Maus*. This daring family story's provocative images, despite its creator's claim to be 'an easy-to-take tale', 'fictionalized' comix, is anything but 'easy'. You need to be starving for the truth, especially if, like me, you are a member of a Holocaust survivor family.

This true-life comic-book memoir struggles to find elusive family truths, air the submerged feelings of Auschwitz and a family murder-suicide investigation. Every line, text and illustration, bears witness to the unfolding drama of social and psychological trauma, unmasking tears behind the many faces of the artist, Art, Artie, Arthur, and his generation.

Art Spiegelman is a cartoonist, editor of *Raw* magazine and author/artist of the 1992 Pulitzer prize winning comic book for non-fiction *Maus I: A Survivors Tale*, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*. That book created major controversy for its use of animal figures in his family history: Jews, including his mother, father and himself are mice, Nazi's are cats, Poles are pigs and Americans are dogs.

Currently part of the Jewish Museum of Australia's exhibition (21 March – 11 July 2004) *Maus* continues to generate controversy and debate. The Sydney Jewish Museum declined to host the exhibition citing that it would be too distressing and denigrating for its members. I can understand the profound impact such images would evoke in survivors. After all, the Nazi propaganda machine made use of rodent images in their anti-Semitic caricature, attempts to dehumanize our parents, our families.

I confess that I did not find this an 'easy-to-take tale'. As a second-generation reader, this extraordinary double autobiography, using metaphor, metonymy, blurring the morality of memory at many levels between 'real'

and ‘fictionalized’ confronted my sense of what is ethical in Holocaust representation.

My first reading/viewing bypassed a built-in protective barrier. The distinction between ‘safe’ and ‘risky’ blurred. The child-like cartoon’s ‘light-hearted’ images quickly transformed to deeply disturbing and unresolved identifications, stirring, panel after panel, page after page. In turn, as I unmasked *Maus*, it unmasked me. Behind the animal characters I gradually sensed the magnitude of his family trauma, as it mirrored parts of my own. You see, my mother and her family were those his father, Vladek speaks of: ‘It started in May and went on all summer. They brought Jews from Hungary – too many for their ovens, so they dug those big crematorium pits.’ (*MAUS II*, 232)

The silent psychological undertow of the Holocaust drowned so many victims, years later. Artie unmasks his many-layered struggle for selfhood, with brutal honesty in the section ‘Prisoner on Hell Planet: A case history.’ I froze in awe. How could he regain his sanity after that event? I reassured myself that he did after all relate the story I am now reading.

Art commented that during his interviews with his father he felt he ‘was taking a deposition’ (CD-ROM, *MAUS II* 159), a testifying under oath. (in Bosmajian, 2003, p29). I wondered if Artie’s *MAUS* served as a masquerade, to survive this father-son quest for truth, much like I ‘used’ psychology to survive my own enquiry with my parents. During the 1990’s I became a witness to my parent’s Holocaust testimony. A decade later I experienced many moment of self-recognition as I fell between the pages, the panels.

Artie’s cartoon, as literary device, distances the reader to create the relatively ‘easy-to-take tale’ as father’s survival unfolds against the odds, along with his mother Anja’s suicide. ‘Easy-to-take tale’ this is not. But how else could Art, the son, come to terms with such a family legacy? Why would he try to relate to, let alone document, his parent’s unimaginable experiences? Caught between the need to ‘tell’ at the same time unable to do so, Artie/Art is seemingly trapped, doomed.

Yet, during the 80’s, Spiegelman published *MAUS I* serially in his alternative comic book *RAW* using the very images, animals, that risk trivializing, or worse, making obscene this father - son story. Alan Berger noted that in survivor families, the *Shoah* is both a barrier and bond

confronting survivor and second-generation identities. The many-layered tension in those barriers and bonds are palpable in each panel.

Bosmajian observed that far from the cozy images of the Father Mouse telling stories of Auschwitz to his Son Mouse, the artist admitted in an interview that ‘a reader might get the impression that the conversations in the narrative were just one small part, a facet of my relationship with my father. I was doing them *to have a relationship with my father*. Outside of them we were still continually at loggerheads (Weschler 64-66, in Bosmajian, 2003, p 29).

Those fraught attachments in Spiegelman’s family were further strained by tragedies after they arrived in America. Their newfound peace was shattered when Art was twenty. He recorded the events in four unnumbered pages, as if to emphasize the non-sequitor, the chilling images of his mother Anja’s suicide. She did not even leave a note. Hence the section *Prisoner on the HELL Planet: A Case History*. This story within a story is one of the epicenters of trauma beyond words – a soul murder whose legacy is the exiled self.

How did the son survive such a breakdown of trust? How could he reclaim his sanity? Some words echo with raw pain: ‘You **murdered** me, mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!’ The *MAUS* roars. Layered on top of his feelings of guilt for not having experienced the Holocaust, the son’s identity bears an added burdened: to speak ill of his dead mother.

To recover, such extreme trauma needs extreme remedy. Ordinary psychological ‘treatment’ for a normal child’s reaction to a world and a parent gone crazy is totally inadequate. In order to survive, this child took matters into his own hands – he draws. True, Spiegelman portrays the useful role psychiatry played in reclaiming his Holocaust legacy, but for his deepest wounds, in the final analysis, Art draws. He draws to regain his sanity, to repair his fragmented psychic wounds, going to pieces. Along the way, by articulating those wounds, working through what he can, he also repairs those of his generation, born in the shadows. It’s a long journey, salvation of sanity.

Children relate to animal drawings. So let’s try to see past the offence those images have triggered in some. Can we see how Spiegelman’s use of animal images might serve a greater purpose? Yes, these creatures do evoke a range

of distressing emotions. But precisely because they are not human, readers are distanced enough to read on. So, their profound message, their unbearable suffering, reaches a generation who otherwise would *never* know.

Spiegelman's double task in *MAUS* is to repair both his personal and family fragments of ravaged psyches. He achieves this heroic task by assuming a triple role: to bear witness to his father's testimony, then transform it, in order to create Art's *MAUS*. As the psychoanalyst Dori Laub noted the process of testimony 'includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of the *other* – in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude. The witnesses are talking to *somebody*: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time. (in Felman and Laub 70 –71).

In addition, *Maus* also becomes one of the earliest Holocaust family testimonies – to include detailed drawings even of the gas chambers (*Maus II*, p230) – a forerunner of the formal, systematic archives of Holocaust testimonies located at major repositories (Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, Simon Wiesenthal Centre in Los Angeles, Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimony at Yale University, Yad Vashem in Jerusalem and the Spielberg Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation).

Maus is difficult to categorize, being variously labelled as 'comic book', 'graphic novel', 'comic-book novel', '(auto)biography', 'autobiographical collaboration', 'cartoons of the self', 'true-life comic-book memoir', 'hybrid narrative', 'survivor narrative', 'coming-of-age for its medium and its author', and 'visualized prose'. In Spiegelman's own words 'I prefer the word comix, to mix together, because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story' (Comix 61, in M G Levine, 2003, p99), and 'fictionalized'. *Maus* is all these and more: a testimony of a father and son's shared labour of love, intimacy, repair and a last minute salvation of sanity. A miracle of sorts.

For his ordeals, Alan Berger confers on Art Spiegelman the title '...son of Job. His own witness forms a link in the chain of Holocaust transmission.' I conclude that in addition to creating a new form of communication, the

comix, Art Spiegelman's *Maus* roars a universal message we must hear: the Holocaust is not over.

References:

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* This article is an extended version of one published in the Australian Jewish News, op-ed, 2 April 2004. Due to editing error, the AJN version, in a key sentence referring to the son's reaction to his mother's suicide, replaced 'me' with 'my', thereby radically altering the author's meaning.