

72 Maus I

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73 Maus II

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These remarkable nonfiction memoirs about the life of Vladek Spiegelman, the artist's father, a survivor of Dachau and Auschwitz, prove that even comic book drawings can be made into a powerful artistic medium. History is reenacted through anthropomorphic characters—Jews are mice, Nazis are cats, Poles are pigs, and Americans are dogs. Art's story is woven into the text as well, as he tries to make sense of his father's past and the generational effect of the Holocaust.

The structure of the first book is based around the author interviewing his father. As his father recounts the past, Art takes notes and reminds him to stay in chronological order.

Art's voice is hip and colloquial; we're not struck by his eloquence, even though the text is well written, but by the story itself and the means through which he tells it. The author finds humor—and often irony—in the present and points it out to the reader. *Maus I* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992, but it would not be complete in itself; *Maus II* completes the story.

Many stories intertwine. There is the story of Art's father, and his mother Anja's unfinished one (she survived the war but later killed herself), and Art Spiegelman's account of surviving his father, whose tormented memories were casually recalled with unexpected candor during his childhood. Equally important,

there is the haunting memory of Richieu, Anja and Vladek's first son, who was poisoned by his aunt just before the Nazis were to take them to Auschwitz.

The black-and-white drawings have a timeless quality, which brings the animal images into the present so that the story takes on an immediacy. There are many instances of the books' graphic power—from huge mice limply hanging with nooses around their necks to Anja and Vladek walking down a street shaped like a swastika.

Maus I is subtitled "My Father Bleeds History," and opens with Hitler's quote: "The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human." When reading, one might be inclined to substitute "Nazis" for "Jews" in Hitler's quote, yet even that is untrue. Since Spiegelman portrays animals as people, there is an underlying suggestion that no one is really human. The one constant theme, when Spiegelman cuts to the present, with his father in Rego Park or his rented Catskills bungalow, is that even though the war is over, it never ended.

Chapter One, entitled "The Sheik (mid-1930's to Winter 1944)," opens with Art visiting his father in Queens to research his book. "The Sheik" covers the early years, and his parents' courtship. Framed by the real love story, complete with details about a past girlfriend who tried to prevent the marriage, we come to know Vladek. He moved from one part of Poland to the other to marry Anja, and was set up in business by his wealthy father-in-law.

In Chapter Four, Vladek recalls when the Nazis took over early on; his business associate Cohn and his son were arrested for trading in the black market; they were used as examples and hanged in public, where their bodies remained for a week. Recalling them, Vladek cries, and although one of his eyes is glass, that eye tears as well.

In "Mouse Holes," the fifth chapter, Art learns that Vladek and his second wife, Mala, have read a cartoon which Art drew years ago that appeared in an underground comic book he thought his father would never see. Entitled "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," it recounts his mother's suicide, and Art's massive guilt.

Since each chapter opens with Art portraying Vladek speaking in the present, there is also the subtext—what Vladek is like now that he has survived the war. Art expresses his concerns to Mala. "It's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about

him....in some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew."

Art tells Mala, "I used to think the war made him that way...." to which she replies, "Fah! I went through the camps....All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!"

Vladek's voice, ironically, is most sane when describing the war. It is calm and consistent, and interruptions—whether he's dropped the pills he's counting or getting off his exercycle—bring us back to the present. In other ways, Vladek seems immensely kind—even heroic in the way he puts himself on the line for a fellow prisoner who is also a friend.

One can't help but admire his constant ingenuity, as he reveals numerous episodes of quick thinking that helped him survive. Early on he built bunkers and hid with his family in them. He instructs Art on how to build one: "Such things it's good to know exactly how it was—just in case."

Art's diagrams are fascinating—revealing false walls and sometimes people behind them. Later, on a crowded train car, he takes his blanket and attaches it to hooks in the ceiling, creating a hammock in which he rests. Above the crowd, he can breathe and eat snow off the roof of the train.

One night, in Srodula, when the family was hiding in an attic bunker (the opening was behind the chandelier), they left it in search of food and discovered another Jew in the house. Skeptical, they questioned him and kept him overnight. He was searching for food for his wife and baby. They sympathized, and in the morning, gave him food and let him go. He was a traitor and turned them in. Anja's parents were taken to Auschwitz, where they were gassed.

When Vladek and Anja were in the ghetto, Vladek was given work in a shoe shop. He learned skills that would help him in the camps later: he did favors for Nazi officers by repairing their boots. In one shoe shop, a cousin showed him where they would hide when the Jews were evacuated. He was amazed to discover the room, made with shoes piled to the ceiling, with a tunnel and a room inside. And this is where they hid.

After the ghetto was emptied, Anja and Vladek left the inside of the shoe pile and hid in various other places, eventually making their way to Hungary—but were captured en route. *Maus* I ends with Vladek and Anja's arrival at Auschwitz: "We knew the

stories—that they will gas us and throw us in the oven. This was 1944.... We knew everything...and here we were.”

Vladek tells Art: “Anja and I went each in a different direction, and we couldn’t know if ever we’ll see each other alive again.”

Maus II: A Survivor’s Tale/And Here My Troubles Began brings us up to date on the Spiegelmanns’ lives, beginning with Art and his wife, Françoise, vacationing in Vermont with friends. Vladek leaves a phone message that he’s had a heart attack, and the couple quickly call back. They learn that he hasn’t really had a heart attack, but that Mala has left him. Feeling manipulated, they go to see him at his Catskills bungalow.

In the car, Art tells Françoise, “When I was a kid I used to think about which of my parents I’d let the Nazis take to the ovens if I could only save one of them.... Usually I saved my mother. Do you think that’s normal?” Françoise replies, “Nobody’s normal.”

Speaking of Richieu, he says, “I wonder if Richieu and I would get along if he was still alive.” “Your brother?” she asks. “My ghost-brother, since he got killed before I was born. He was only five or six. After the war my parents traced down the vaguest rumors, and went to orphanages all over Europe. They couldn’t believe he was dead. I didn’t think about him much when I was growing up.... He was mainly a large, blurry photograph hanging in my parents’ bedroom.... The photo never threw tantrums.... I couldn’t compete.... It’s spooky, having sibling rivalry with a snapshot!”

In *Maus I*, when Vladek posed as a Pole, he wore a pig mask; when Art writes about *Maus I* and its success, he portrays himself wearing a mouse mask. He brings us up to date on how unprepared he was for the success of *Maus I*, which brought an onslaught of publicity and profiteering. He also tells us that Françoise is pregnant, and he can’t believe that he is going to be a father. The shifting of time isn’t confusing because it’s clear early on where we are: Art is writing at his desk wearing a mouse mask, with Françoise, his father, or his doctor, or back in the war, with all the mice in striped uniforms in the camps.

Maus II is also filled with the technical details of running a concentration camp. In the same way that Art drew diagrams of bunkers, he shows how a crematorium operates from various perspectives, including an aerial view. Here Vladek gives an enormously detailed account of working at the crematorium,

including what he heard the bodies looked like after struggling. These are the most disturbing parts of the whole book, because they are vivid and utterly repulsive. ("Their fingers were broken from trying to climb up the wall... and sometimes their arms were as long as their bodies, pulled from the socket.") One picture shows a diagram with the ovens, an elevator for the corpse lift, and a room for melting gold fillings. "To such a place finished my father, my sisters, my brother, so many."

Maus II also deals with Art's attempts to come to grips with his past through therapy. He speaks with his psychiatrist who is a survivor, too. In sessions, both wear mouse masks. He tells his doctor he is having trouble working and can't imagine what it felt like to be at Auschwitz. "What Auschwitz felt like? Hmm.... How can I explain?... BOO!" This answer startles Art. "It felt a little like that. But always! From the moment you got to the gate until the very end."

After the war, Anja returns to her hometown. There, she consults a gypsy fortune-teller. Everything she tells Anja is true, including that her husband is alive, that he had typhoid, that there is a dead child (Richieu), and that there is a new life, another little boy.

Maus II ends after showing Vladek and Anja reunited. "More I don't need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after." At his father's request, Art stops his tape recorder. Vladek is tired, and rests. The last frame is Vladek and Anja's shared tombstone. Anja died May 21, 1968; Vladek on August 18, 1982.