"Father, You're Driving Me Mad": Transmission of Trauma from Father to Son in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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Abstract
This paper deals with trauma as transmitted from Vladek Spiegelman to his son Artie in Art Spigelman's graphic novel Maus. *The trauma experienced by Vladek, who lived in Nazi-occupied territory during the Second World War and who experienced the Holocaust personally, has not been forgotten, although its victim has been relocated both in time and place. The trauma remained and had an impact on Vladek's son Artie, who was born after World War II. This transferred trauma is explored in both volumes of Art Spiegelman's* Maus, *in which Vladek Spiegelman's life is presented both in the past, showing the difficult period of the Second World War in Europe, and in the present – in the postwar United States between the 1950s and the 1980s. The problematic relationship between Artie and Vladek, who never becomes fully integrated into American society, is shown. In this paper I will focus on this particular level of the narrative, especially on the signs of trauma transmitted from Vladek to his son Artie.*

Keywords
Trauma, Transmission of Trauma, Art Spiegelman, *Maus*, Holocaust Survivor, Second Generation, Postmemory, Guilt

Both volumes of the graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* deal with the tragic story of Vladek Spiegelman, a Polish Jew, during the period of Nazi rule in Europe, as well as withthe story of his son Artie (Art Spiegelman), born after the Second World War in the United States. These two narrative levels are important because they provide information about the past as well as about the present, which is deeply affected by history. It is possible to trace how the trauma emerged in the Spiegelman family, how it influences the Holocaust survivor Vladek, and how it also indirectly influences his son Artie. How a survivor's trauma can influence their descendants is a relatively recentsubject of research and depiction. Although there was no doubt that people who lived through the Holocaust were deeply traumatized by their experiences, the role of parents' trauma in their children's psychological problems had been considerably underestimated in the past. It was in 1970s when important conclusions were made in the field of psychology: "[P]sychologists first began linking disorders among children of survivors with their parents' experiences, rather than subscribing to the Freudian wisdom of looking for infantile regression."[1] Although these people did not experience their parents' traumas first-hand, traumatic symptoms are apparent in the children, to whom their ancestors' trauma has been transferred in many ways. Efraim Sicher claims that "[a] latent damage was inflicted on the survivors' children through the intergenerational transmission of anxieties about food, fears of separation, expectancy of over-fulfillment, and constant reliving of traumatic experiences."[2] Art Spiegelman serves as an example of such transmission, evidence of which can be traced in his graphic novel *Maus*. To understand the problem more accurately, analysis of Artie and his family is needed.

1 Efraim Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 136.

2 Sicher, *The Holocaust Novel*, 133.

The initial concern should be the way trauma emerged in Spiegelman's family. Vladek Spiegelman and Anja Zylberberg, Artie's parents, came from Jewish families living in Poland. They were married in 1937 and the same year their first child, Richieu, was born. Then in August 1939, a month before Germany invaded Poland,Vladek was drafted to fight. After a short stint of combat, Vladek was captured and kept in the Third Reich (Germany) as a war prisoner. Luckily he escaped death and, pretending to be a non-Jew, he was reunited with his family in Sosnowiec. But conditions had deteriorated for Polish Jews – all Jewish factories and shops had beentaken over by non-Jewish fellow citizens. Jews were ghettoized and later taken off to concentration camps, with many new laws restricting their human rights. It was not unusual for Jews to be killed by Nazis in the streets. After being ghettoized, old Jews were transferred from Sosnowiec to Theresienstadt, and in May 1942 Anja's grandparents were taken (later the Nazis would transport them to the Auschwitz gas chambers along with all elderly Jews.[3]) A few months later, in August 1942, Jews had to have their documents stamped with a red letter "J." This process was selective, however. Out of 25 to 30 thousand, only 10 thousand Jews were left in Sosnowiec – those who were in good health, did not have many children and possessed work cards. Here Vladek lost his father. This loss caused Vladek huge pain, an agony which is articulated in *Maus*when Vladek tells Artie the story of his own father being taken off. Vladek finishes the narration and the drawing of his posture reveals his psychical suffering, although Vladek puts the blame on the physical exercise he was doing while speaking.[4]

As the time went on, Vladek and Anja were gradually losing their relatives, and after months of hiding they decided to cross the border. Nevertheless, the men who promised to smuggle them into Hungary gave them up to the Gestapo. In 1944, both Vladek and Anja ended up in Auschwitz. They managed to survive till the end of the war and, eventually, they were forced to march off and leave the camp. This death march was another extremely traumatic experience, as hundreds of people died of exhaustion, hunger and thirst; to exacerbate matters,Vladek did not know what was happening with his wife Anja. After a long march, the remaining survivors were placed in cattle cars, about two hundred people in each. Vladek describes how, after being closed in these cattle cars many days with neither food nor water, only about twenty-five people came out alive, including himself. They were moved to Dachau, where Vladek contracted typhus from lice. Although being seriously ill, he managed to make it into a train full of Dachau inmates strong enough to travel – going to Swiss border, they were to be exchanged for German war prisoners. However, due to the fact that it was almost the end of the war, they never reached the border. The train stopped somewhere in Germany, and the prisoners were forced to change trains and were moved to an unknown place farther from American troops. The Nazis then took these remaining prisoners to the forest intending to shoot them. Eventually, the prisoners were abandoned, as the Nazis ran away before the American army arrived. Thus Vladek survived the Second World War, found his wife and decided to leave Poland forever.Vladek and Anja's first son Richieu did not survive the war. Their second child, Art Spiegelman, was born on February 15, 1948, in Stockholm, Sweden, where they were waiting for visas to move on to the United States.

Although Artie did not experience the Holocaust first-hand, this family's history has been passed down to him. The fact that the family history had greatly influenced his

3 Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. Part I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986; New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 87.

4 Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 91.

parents – and thus, indirectly, Artie himself – leads him to feel as if he were a stranger in his own family, unable to understand fully the horrors that have shaped his parents. He wishes he had been in the concentration camps with his parents in order to know what they lived through.[5] He gradually receives pieces of information about what happened and tries to find himself in these memories, which are not his own. Because of the incompleteness of the information provided, the children of the survivors, called the "second generation," often use their imagination to fillthe gaps in their family's memories; becausethese recollections are second-hand, this gap-filling and piecing together of eventsis known as postmemory. Marianne Hirsch, who invented this term, explains that "[p]ostmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated."[6] Some times it even happens that "[t]he victim's trauma is transmitted to their children so intensely that the descendants create their own memories which may constitute an important part of their identity. Their trauma is muted, but it does not mean that its intensity is any lower."[7] For the second generation to work through their parents' trauma, "[t]hey must find ways to include their parents' trauma within their own story in a way that neither appropriates nor subsumes the parents' experiences into their own."[8] Some of the signs of postmemory in Art Spiegelman's case are, for instance, nightmares about SS men coming into his class or fantasies about Zyklon B replacing water in their shower.[9] Nevertheless, he is partly successful in the process of working through his parents' trauma, as he narrates his father's wartime trauma without claiming it as his own. He writes himself into Vladek's story indirectly using two levels of narration: the wartime history of the Spiegelman family is presented by Vladek and is situated in Nazi-occupied Europe, while the present-day narrative, situated in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is presented by Artie.[10] "The graphic interpretation of testimony in *Maus* is, to some extent, a synthesis of the memory and postmemory of the Nazi genocide."[11] The process of writing and drawing the book *Maus* serves as Artie's therapy. At the same time, his work is valuable evidence of how trauma causesdysfunctional family relationships.The damaged relationship between the Holocaust survivor Vladek and his child Artie is perceptible in *Maus*from the very beginning.

Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* starts with one pagewhich appears before the table of contents,seemingly outside of the novel itself. The story presented hereisof the ten year-old Artie, who is roller-skating with his friends in Rego Park, New York. After breaking one of his skates and being abandoned by his friends, Artie walks home, crying. His father Vladek, who is working outside, calls on his sonArtie to help him. When

5 Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale. Part II: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991; New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 16.

6 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photographs, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

7 Stanislav Kolář, "Introduction" in *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*, ed. JaroslavMarcin (Košice: Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, 2010), 16.

8 Victoria A. Elmwood, "'Happy, Happy Ever After': Transformation of Trauma between the Generations of Art Spiegelman's Maus: A Survivor's Tale," *Biography* 27.4 (Fall 2004): 703.

9 Spiegelman, *Maus II,* 16.

10 Elmwood, "Happy," 691.

11 Stanislav Kolář, "Trauma and the Holocaust in the American Novel" in *Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature*, ed. JaroslavMarcin (Košice: Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, 2010), 21.

Vladek finds out what has happened, Vladek lessens his son's woes by comparing them with his own Holocaust experience. This story helps the reader to realize that Artie's problems have never been fully accepted with empathy or considered as real problems by his father, who has never helped Artie to work them through. It shows a problematic relationship between a Holocaust survivor father and his son even before the main story starts, and it explains Artie's reserved behavior toward his father throughout the entire novel.

Aaron Hass, who has interviewed many children of survivors, also notices that these survivor-descendant relationships are frequently damaged. According to Hass, the relationship between a survivor father and his child is often more aloof and problematic than between a survivor mother and her child. One of the reasons is that male Holocaust sufferers have more problems with their easily triggered anger.[12] This may be confirmed by Vladek's own behavior, an example of which can be seen when Mala, Vladek's second wife, uses a wire hanger for Artie's coat instead of a wooden one. Vladek gets very angry (shown in the way his face is drawn and the exclamation marks and bold lettering used in his dialogue) because he finds thisdisrespectful, and he hangs his son's coat on a wooden hanger himself.[13]

Another feature typical of male survivors is oftenalackof patience, and this problem – along with their depression, fear and pain– lead to their inability to build close relationships with their children. They are often unable to show or even have feelings. Vladek seldom expresses his emotions (except for anger) toward his second wife Mala, his son Artie or his daughter-in-law. He often talks about how he needs his children, especially after he is abandoned by Mala. Vladek uses their expressions of love to comforthimself,[14] but he neither encourages them nor listens to them.

Generally, "[s]urvivors have been described by their offspring as emotionally unstable, agitated, mistrustful of others, obsessed (with food, cleanliness, money), and uninterested in life apart from work or family."[15] Additionally, Holocaust survivors have been described by their children "as more depressed, fearful, suspicious, and withdrawn"[16] compared to non-survivor Jewish parents. These features of survivors fit Vladek perfectly. All these things literally drive Artie "crazy"[17] and "nuts"[18], and Artie realizes that he can never make Vladek happy.[19]

Moreover, Vladek often confuses time. This is caused by the fact that the traumatic experience is not integrated into existing mental schemes where it could be consciously accessible and placed in a certain chronological order. Instead it exists in a traumatic memory which is not accessible and exists outside of time.[20] People thus often cannot separate the present time from the past in which the trauma happened. This confusion

12 Aaron Hass, *In the Shadow of the Holocaust: The Second Generation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 93.

13 Art Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 11.

14 E.g. Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 13, 17, 24.

15 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 86.

16 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 86.

17 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 14.

18 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 23.

19 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 12.

20 Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 160.

of time is also seen in Artie as one of the manifestations of family trauma transmitted to him. One example is at the beginning of the chapter "Auschwitz (Time Flies),"[21] in which Artie is sitting behind adesk, mixing up information from Vladek's past and from his own life. The first sentence mentionsVladek's death in 1982; the next sentence says that Artie and Françoise, his wife, stayed with Vladek during the summer of 1979. The next panel contains information about Vladek's work in Auschwitz as well as about Artie's work on this particular page of *Maus*. Then Artie speaks of himself and his wife expecting a baby and, in the same frame, there is information about thousands of Hungarian Jews being gassed at Auschwitz in 1944. Artie is overwhelmed by the family trauma (Holocaust motifs are used throughout the first three pages of this chapter), and, depressed by his feeling of inadequacy in his attempt to write about the Holocaust or even to draw a cartoon about it, as he is neither an eye-witness nor a historian. He tells his wife: "It's so **presumptuous** of me," and continues: "How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? ... Of the Holocaust?"[22] The success of the first volume of *Maus* – and the "Holocaust business" that he is suddenly a part of due to his book's success – intensify his depression and lead to apersonal crisis. Depressed and guilty, his figure shrinks. He attends an appointment with a psychotherapist, who informs Artie about the syndrome of guilt transmitted from his father to him.

The syndrome of guilt is a common problem of many survivors and thus of their offspring to which it is transmitted. Pavel, Artie's psychotherapist, proves this fact when explaining to Artie: "Maybe your father needed to show that he was always right – that he could always survive – because he felt guilty about surviving. And he took his guilt out on you, where it was safe... on the real survivor."[23] Survivors often feel shame that they have survived the camps while other members of their family did not (or they feel shame at their deeds); children often feel guilty that they were not there with their parents, as has been mentioned. Spiegelman mentions this in *Maus II*, saying to his wife: "I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz **with** my parents so I could really know what they lived through! [...] I guess it's **some** kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did."[24] He is convinced that he would not have survived,[25] which adds to his feeling of powerlessness and guilt.

But it is not only the guilt of having an easier life that haunts Holocaust survivors' descendants. As survivor parents might constantly refer to their traumatic Holocaust experiences (as we saw in the opening story of the small boy Artie in Rego Park), they evoke a feeling of pity in their children,who are made aware of the horrors their parents went through. Therefore these children feel tension and stress because they are extremely afraid to do anything that would harm their parents. They do not want to add any more pain to their parents' lives,and try to satisfy them and make them happy, for example by fulfilling their parents' dreams for them.

Nevertheless, as survivors often idealize their pre-war lives, their plans for their post-war children are often unachievable. Such a burden placed upon the children, especially first-born children, intensifies the feelings of guilt and the longingto be good children to make their parents happy. This is also the case of Artie, who very soon found that he was not able to satisfy Vladek's idea of what his son should be like. Art

21 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 41.

22 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 14; emphasis and ellipses in original.

23 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 44; ellipsis in original.

24 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 16; emphases and ellipsis in original.

25 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 90.

Spiegelman explains to his wife that he has never been as good at fixing things as Vladek wanted him to be, which is one reason why Art Spiegelman became an artist: "It was an area where I wouldn't have to compete with him."[26] Vladek evokes Artie's feelings of inadequacy and incompetence in terms of pleasing his parents. Artiethinks that he is only an inadequatesurrogate for his dead brother Richieu.Although Spiegelmannever feels directly guilty about Richieu's fate, he does realizes that the loss of their first son has causeddeep,undying grief to his parents. Despite this, Artie jealously competes with Richieu. He calls it a "sibling rivalry with a snapshot,"[27] because Richieu's photograph (and the absence of Artie's) in their parents' bedroom leads Artie to the conclusion that Richieu would have been able to fulfill their parents' dreams if he were alive: "**He**'d have become a **doctor**, and married a wealthy Jewish girl… The creep."[28] Spiegelman mentions ways in which he himself failed to please his parents. Richieu is in Artie's eyes an opponent but, at the same time, somebody he cannot compete with as he is only a "ghost-brother."[29] This sibling rivalry is reinforced by the fact that Richieu was there with his parents during the Holocaust and is thus more closely connected with his parents (who are highly influenced by it), while Artie's absence in the Holocaust seems to distance him from them, making Richieu their favorite, rather than Artie, whose picture is not even wanted in his parents' bedroom. He is competing with someone he does not know, but the photo keeps him from forgetting his rival. It seems that Artie is living in a shadow of his dead brother, trying to win his parents' favor. This personal feeling of being a surrogate for Richieu reaches its climax at the end of *Maus* when Vladek, very old, seriously ill and confused, tells Artie: "I'm ***tired*** from talking, Richieu, and it's *enough* stories for now..."[30] Vladek confuses his living son Artie with his dead son Richieu and this confusion "is a culmination of Artie's frustrating rivalry and of his battle for the self-definition of his identity. The battle seems to be ultimately lost."[31] Still, Artie is strong enough to face his parents' expectations – although he believes that Richieu would have married a wealthy Jewish girl, something which would definitely have pleased his parents, Artie marries a gentile French woman who converts only to please Vladek. Among Holocaust survivors, the idea of their children marrying a gentile (even a gentile who had converted to Judaism) was unthinkable. Aaron Hass suggests that most survivors' children develop a fear and mistrust of the gentile world – feelings transmitted to them from their parents. We see such typical survivor behavior when Artie is asked by his father's Holocaust survivor friend: "Your wife, she's **Jewish**?"[32] This seems a striking question for a person you have known only two minutes and it shows how important it is for the man who asks.

The fear of non-Jews might be connected with the fact that people affected by a certain trauma may be drawn to others who share the same kind of traumatic experience. "[T]rauma shared can serve as a source of communality in the same way that common languages and common backgrounds can."[33] Thus the Jewish community is often described

26 Spiegelman, *MausI*, 97; ellipsis in original.

27 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 15.

28 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 15; emphases and ellipsis in original.

29 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 15.

30 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 136; emphases and ellipsis in original.

31 Stanislav Kolář, *Seven Responses to the Holocaust in American Fiction* (Šenov u Ostravy:Tilia, 2004), 165.

32 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 22; emphasis original.

33 Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 186.

as being coherent thanks to the Holocaust rather than thanks to the same religion, history, or customs.[34] Jewish identity is often very important to both the survivors and their children, who are naturally prone to share similar fears and mistrust of anything non-Jewish with their parents. They are often proud of the fact that Hitler did not win, that he did not defeat the Jews completely, and they want to marry a Jew and raise their own children as Jews as well. "[C]hildren of Holocaust survivors are more strongly identified Jews than their Jewish peers from an American background."[35]

Artie belongs to the group that is rebellious "against the Holocaust legacy and burden of suspiciousness and hatred."[36] To understand this phenomenon more deeply, Aaron Hass provides written records of interviews with survivors' children, one of them saying the following:

> I date almost only non-Jewish women. I've always been more attracted to non-Jewish women because of the dissimilarity from my overly protective, overwhelming mother, and to continue the assimilation process. I'm bothered by the stereotype of the little Jewish, the ghetto kid.[37]

Artie himself dated a Jewish girl as part of an attempt to "get over my [his] prejudice against middle-class, New York, Jewish woman."[38] This attempt, however, was apparently not successful. He explains that "they remind me [him] too much of my [his] **relatives** to be erotic."[39] Still, most of the children of survivors would see safety in a marriage with a middle-class Jewish partner – safety caused by the financial securing as well as by the same (Jewish) origin. The mistrust of anything non-Jewish might also be caused bythe fact that many Holocaust survivors left their home countries after the war, trying to establish new families in a new country. On one hand, they were more easily able forget past traumas in thenew country, on the other hand, the move to an unknown culture added to their fear and anxiety; many immigrants did not know the language or customs of their new culture, and had no surviving relatives or friends who could help them acclimate. Their children, by contrast, were fully at home in these new surroundings, as they were born there. They therefore provided essential help to their parents – writing official letters, answering phone calls and so on. This phenomenon – small children guiding their parents – caused mistrust and fear on the side of the parents (which was easily transmitted to their children) and led to feelings of guilt on the side of their children, who saw their parents' fragility and thus were often unable to leave the nest. This syndrome of guilt was strengthened by parents' tendency to hold their family bonds tight. In the case of Artie's father, this tendency is clearly visible – Vladek often mentions how he is happy to have Artie near him, and he persuades Artie and his wife to live with him. Artie eventually leaves the nest, but he remains aware of the guilt he feels afterwards.

Artie's feelings of guilt are caused by many factors: not being as good at fixing things as his father wants him to be, not fulfilling his parents' dreams of him having a respectable job, not marrying a middle-class New York Jewish girl. In addition, his troubles are constantly compared to his father's Holocaust experiences. Artie is also

34 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 120.

35 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 116.

36 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 110.

37 Hass, *In the Shadow*, 110.

38 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 12.

39 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 12; emphasis original.

haunted by his failure to show empathy to his mother, which mightpotentially have savedher from death. Artie is often depressed, e. g. Françoise asks him once: "Depressed again?"[40] because of his sense of guilt and incompetence, a feeling which is strengthened by his parents keeping a photograph of his dead brother in their bedroom but not one of him. Another reason for his depression which even leads to a deep crisis is his feeling of guilt and inadequacy in attempting to interpret his parents' Holocaust experiences by means of art. Finally,in another episode which might indicate his weakness, Artie spends some time in a State Mental Hospital after a nervous breakdown, as referred to in the comic strip "Prisoner on the Hell Planet."[41]

All these depictionsshow howArt Spiegelman is influenced by the trauma that has been transmitted to him by his Holocaust survivor parents. The most visible manifestations of trauma are the feelings of guilt and depression, along with his obsession with the Holocaust, which can be seen in his (often insensitive) desire to hear his father's wartime stories and to find his mother's diaries. When Vladek tells Artie that he the texts because "[t]hese papers had too many *memories*," Artie is so irritated that he even yells at his father and calls him a murderer.[42] Having no testimony from his mother Anja, Artie makes a book merely of his father's wartime experiences, including himself in the story by adding a present-time narration level, a move which serves as a means of placing himself within the family traumatized by the Holocaust. Thus,in at least some way Spiegelmanis able to overcome the trauma transmitted to him.

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40 Spiegelman, *Maus II*, 14.

41 Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 100.

42 Spiegelman, *Maus I*, 139; emphasis original.

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