

Jennifer Gohlke
Michigan State University
Professor Elizabeth Mittman
GRM 862
9 December, 2014

**Art Spiegelman's *Maus* - When Telling Confidential Stories and Depicting the Holocaust
through Animals becomes justifiable**

1 Introduction

The Holocaust was unarguably one of the most terrible and contemptuous events of the 20th century. Approximately six million people, most of them Jews, were murdered by the Nazis. Not nearly as many survived. And even fewer survivors wrote down their stories or testimonies. Soon, these testimonies will be all that is left. Later generations will not have the chance to interview survivors. They will have to watch movies, to learn from history books, or to read Holocaust literature, such as autobiographies. Since the number of autobiographies and other kind of witness testimonies is so limited, yet of great importance, the question arises, if the representation of the Holocaust should be regulated in some way. Not only to preserve the "quality" of the witness accounts, so only authentic information gets passed on, but also in order to respect the victims of the Holocaust.

These questions regarding the representation of the Holocaust are not new, but they are now demanding answers since soon, no survivors will be left. One of the most quoted dictums is Theodor Adorno's statement¹ from 1949 "nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch". Although this statement is often taken out of context (Adorno also modified it later); it can still be seen as the beginning of the ethical and aesthetical discourse concerning

1 In his essay "Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft".

the representation of the Holocaust. And yet, more than 60 years later, scholars are still debating. Marianne Hirsch, for example, introduced the term *postmemory* in the early 1990's to talk about passed on memory, especially regarding the Holocaust. This term constitutes an important aspect within the discourse of Holocaust representation, and therefore within this paper. The same holds true for John Eakin and his idea of *Relational Lives and Relational Selves* (1999), which allows us to examine, in the context of narrative representation, the status of survivors, and their influence on people in their environment, e.g. family members. Against this background, this paper's focus will lie on one particular autobiography, namely Art Spiegelman's² *Maus* in two volumes (*Maus I. A Survivor's Tale. My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *Maus II. A Survivor's Tale. And Here My Troubles Began* (1991))³. This is, *Maus* is not a traditional, conservative version of a written life story of a Holocaust survivor. Actually, at first glance, it seems to be highly controversial: it is the story of a Holocaust survivor, but it is being told by his son, who was born after the war. The present time back then and Artie's (Spiegelman's alter ego in the book) relationship to and the interaction with his father are also part of the book. Most debatable, however, are two aspects: First, Spiegelman presents stories in the book his father asked him not to publish, and second, the book is a comic, in which Jews are being depicted as mice and Nazis as cats.

This paper is an attempt to analyze this special and notable autobiography and to comprehend the choices the author made. The result, hopefully, shows that even a comic book with mice and cats, a book that, at first, could not find a single publisher who wanted to be responsible for its commercial release, can represent the Holocaust and survivor's stories in a legitimate way. In fact, I will argue, that the comic-form enables Spiegelman to represent relevant aspects, such as the connection of his father's Holocaust past with the present, better

2 Art Spiegelman (born Itzhak Avraham ben Zeev) is an American cartoonist, born in 1948 as the son of two Jewish Holocaust survivors.

3 The first story was originally published in serialized form (1980-1991) in a comic magazine called *Raw*.

than any ordinary book or movie could ever do. And if a comic like *Maus* has the ethical and aesthetical right to exist, (which it officially has since Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize for his work in 1992) then this would demonstrate that regulations on how to represent the Holocaust or other tremendous events are redundant if not even harmful.

2 Telling Secrets

Maus tells the story of Artie (Art Spiegelman's alter ego) and his father Vladek, who is a Holocaust survivor. The story contains two time lines: First, the present (1978/1979) in Rego Park, New York, including the informal interview sessions with Vladek, in which Spiegelman learns everything about his father's survival, and second, the past, during the Holocaust (early 1930's-1945). *Maus I* contains the story of Vladek's and Anja's (Spiegelman's mother) life in pre-war Poland, how they ended up in Auschwitz and got separated. *Maus II* starts in Auschwitz and ends with the end of World War II and the reunion with Anja, but also with Vladek's death in the present. The books, therefore, cover parts of both life stories. Artie's and Vladek's, as well as their relationship and interaction with each other. Anja is not part of the present, since she committed suicide in 1968.

The first chapter of *Maus I* introduces the reader to the narrative pattern: Artie meets his father and asks him to tell him how he survived and experienced the Holocaust. While Vladek is telling his story, the comic vignettes visualize his narration, and every now and then, the present takes over again. Also in chapter one, the reader witnesses Vladek asking Artie not to mention certain stories in his book, since they are "private" and have "nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 23). Right after this, Artie raises his hand and says: "Okay, okay - I promise" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 23). Yet, the private stories are in the book, and, as the quotes show, Spiegelman even decided to let the reader know that he

made this promise, although he is breaking it at the same moment. The question is, why did Spiegelman decide to disrespect his father's wish and to publish these private stories anyway? It seems as he does not feel guilt or shame, since he speaks frankly about it. So, what is his motivation?

It quickly becomes clear that Artie grew up "in the shadow of the Holocaust" (Martinez-Alfaro 94), although he did not experience it first hand. However, he is very much affected by it mainly through his father. The first book opens with a preface giving the reader an impression of Artie's relationship to his father, and at the same time, it vividly demonstrates the omnipresent impact of the Holocaust on his life. It shows Artie as a little boy coming home to his father, crying because his friends left him behind in the park. His father's answer is devastating: "Friends? Your friends? If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week, then you could see what it is, friends!" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 6). What is depicted here, is what Marianne Hirsch describes with the term *postmemory*.

2.1 Hirsch's Idea of Postmemory

Hirsch used the term postmemory for the first time in the early 1990's, interestingly enough, it was within an article about *Maus*. She defines it as:

the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own rights (Hirsch 103).

Although, at first glance, the term does not seem to make sense in this context, Hirsch chose this expression on purpose. "Post" refers not only to the time that lies in between the traumatic event and the second generation, but it also represents the interweaving relationship. In other words, "post" describes a state *after* an event, in this case the Holocaust, but since someone saw the need to link this word to the event, it, at the same time, signals a recent, significant connection or interrelation. The present generation, for example, does not refer to

themselves as "post hurricane Katrina" generation, just because the hurricane occurred in 2005. It simple does not have as much impact as the Holocaust, and therefore, there is no need for a noteworthy explicit connection. The Holocaust, however, was of an unspeakable dimension. It traumatized nearly everyone who was somehow influenced by it - in particular the survivors. And exactly those traumatized people, pass not only on their knowledge, they also, unconsciously pass on their traumas - most often the parents to their children. This will become more clear when applied to *Maus*.

The term "memory"also needs explanation. Usually people only have memory of something that happened to them, events they have experienced themselves. Applied to the second generation that is not the case. They have not experienced the Holocaust. Yet, in order to spell out the impact the first generation's experience has on the following generation, Hirsch chose exactly this term. This passed on memory or trauma is of such crucial dimension that it gets internalized by the second generation and becomes part of their lives too, even though it might find expression in different ways compared to the survivors' memory. An important aspect of this form of postmemory is that its "connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 107).

In summary, postmemory describes the fragmentary knowledge and the undeniable, enormous impact of a traumatizing event that preceded the own birth, and which is passed on by the first generation, or in other words, the actual victims.

2.2 *Maus and Postmemory*

The scene described above, showing Artie as a child crying, exemplifies exactly what it means to grow up as a Holocaust survivor's child. It is also the only scene that introduces a third time line within the story of *Maus*, which already suggests some deeper meaning. An

event that can be considered part of the normal everyday life of a ten-year old, gets pulled out of the ordinary context and suddenly has to stand its ground compared to what happened during the Holocaust. It is no coincidence that Spiegelman decided to put this event in the beginning of his book; it constitutes the frame work, indicating the omnipresent character of the Holocaust in his life. However, this is not the only occasion mirroring his problematic relation to a past, he was not part of. Artie has a brother, Richieu, who died at the age of five or six during the Nazi-occupation of Poland. Artie never had the chance to meet him. Since he died that young and under such horrible circumstances (his aunt poisoned him, her children and herself rather than being deported), his parents seem to think of him as the ideal child. A further hint is given by Spiegelman in form of the books' subtitles: "My Father bleeds History" and "And here my Troubles began". "Bleeding" is an interesting term in this context, considering Spiegelman having the same blood as his father, he *inherited* it, and therefore his history, his experiences, and also his father's trauma. In addition, the bleeding could be a metaphor for the past bleeding or spilling into the present - a wound that was inflicted during the Holocaust, but is still bleeding in and into the present.

The subtitle [...], thus suggesting a wound that is both personal and historical. No matter how long ago it was inflicted, the wound still bleeds. It bleeds into the present, spilling suffering all over and creating ripple effects that seep though the years and through generations (Martinez-Alfaro 93).

The second book's subtitle "And here my Troubles began" also seems to address the problem of postmemory. It is not clear whose troubles are meant. On the one hand, they could be Vladek's since the first book closes with his deportation to Auschwitz, and the second covers the worst part: his survival in Auschwitz, an later in Dachau, while being separated from his wife. On the other hand, this states the point in time when Vladek got traumatized, and this constitutes the grounds for Spiegelman's troubles, because Vladek passes that trauma on to him. Emily Miller Budick even goes so far in her essay "Forced Confessions: The Case of Art

Spiegelman's *Maus*" to say:

Here my Troubles Begin does more than blur the distinction between father and son, making unclear whose troubles the tale tells and where the one begins and the other lets off. Rather, the subtitle levels an accusation against the father. It is as if the psychoanalytically informed narrative would force the father finally to fix the son ... (382).

Seeing *Maus* as a kind of psychoanalytical therapy for Spiegelman is an intriguing perspective. This point of view would also explain Spiegelman's decision to introduce an alter ego, Artie. After hearing about postmemory and Spiegelman's difficult childhood as a survivor's child, it is safe to say that he also is traumatized. In order to work through this trauma, it is not enough to analyze himself; it is necessary to occupy a more objective or at least a less involved role. Creating an alter ego in order to reflect on himself from another (outside) perspective is one way of doing so. Spiegelman, further, "must understand not only his experience of his father, but what his father's behavior in that experience encodes, namely, his own experience of the Holocaust" (Budick 387). In other words, Spiegelman needs to learn about his father's experience of the Holocaust in order to understand his father's behavior, which in turn allows him to understand himself. However, this seems to be more difficult than dealing with other kind of traumas. Spiegelman finds himself in a complicated situation, claiming that the Holocaust is responsible for his trauma, although he is not a victim or survivor of the Holocaust. It is important to clarify that "being affected by the Holocaust does not automatically turn one into a survivor or a victim" (Martinez-Alfaro 108). However, it is nevertheless possible to characterize Spiegelman as a survivor. He is a survivor of the Holocaust trauma he inherited through his father, for which, as mentioned before, his father's blood is also a metaphor.⁴ To get back to the psychotherapeutical approach, it is necessary for Spiegelman to become aware of his role and connection to the Holocaust, mainly through his father's trauma, but at the same time, he must not identify himself with a Holocaust victim/survivor.

⁴ Compare Budick 381.

Hirsch emphasizes this as follows:

being responsive to other people's traumas is productive only if the experience and feelings of the other are not subsumed in an "appropriative identification" in which "the viewer can too easily become a surrogate victim. (Hirsch in Martinez-Alfaro 95)

In fact, throughout the books, the reader witnesses Artie mirroring his father's behavior and neurosis. He is controlling, he even tells Vladek in what order to tell his story and what details to talk about: "Wait! Please, Dad. If you don't keep your story chronological, I'll never get it straight... Tell me more about 1941 and 1942" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 82). He needs to hear his father's story in the way he wants and the way it is helpful in order to "survive" his trauma - it is part of his therapy. At the same time, Vladek also still fights for his survival by exercising on his bike, taking and counting pills and by not relying on others - "For my condition I must fight to *save* myself" (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 26). While it seems as Vladek never comes to terms with his traumatic past, Spiegelman appears to succeed. Vladek dies in the end of *Maus II*, and his last words are: "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now..." (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 135). He mistakes Artie with his other son Richieu, who died during the Holocaust, an indicator that he did not work through this loss. Telling stories means for Vladek to remember, and to live through his terrifying experiences once more, which in the end, seems to kill him. Vladek dies, after all, as a victim of the Holocaust. Spiegelman, on the other hand, allows his father to have the last word in his book. He does not correct him when he calls him Richieu. All he does is to draw his father's tombstone, which he shares with his first wife and Spiegelman's mother, Anja. It seems as Spiegelman finally understands his father, his trauma and the resulting behavior. He allows him to have the probably only thing that comes somehow close to a happy ending - even though it is more an decisive illusion - he allows him to die, convinced he gained back control over his life after the Holocaust, reunited with his lost wife and son. Spiegelman, therefore, worked through his

own trauma with the help of his father, but also on his expense. Not everyone might agree that this process is really responsible for Vladek's death, however, at least it seems reasonable to claim that he humiliated his father by portraying him in such a negative way and by telling stories, Vladek asked him to keep secret.

2.3 Back to the Secrets

It is true, and proven by now, that Spiegelman tells stories he is not supposed to, and even worse, he represents his father in a not very charming way, revealing his neuroses, his control obsession, his avarice, and so on. Against the background of the psychoanalytical attempt, however, it is necessary that Spiegelman does this. Budick talks about this aspect as well and states:

Yet the cost of this successful course of therapy for the son - and perhaps for us the public, who share his position - is still the humiliation of the father and the exposure of secrets that the father asked the son not to tell. Any psychoanalysis is going to bring up secrets, which is why confidentiality is a given in the psychoanalytic relationship. There may as well be rules that pertain to the patient's [...] rights of free disclosure, especially if the secrets he or she has confessed aren't - and inevitably they cannot be - his or her own. Insofar as we all inherit one past or another, the question is again public as much as private and personal (387).

So, in summary, in order to be successful - to heal Spiegelman from his trauma - a psychoanalytical approach has to reveal secrets. A trauma is usually something buried deeply in the subconsciousness of a person; naturally an area that is not easily accessible, or in other words, a very secret area not even oneself has direct access to. Since Spiegelman inherited his trauma through his father, the secrets are consequently his too. A similar reason can be given to explain the exposure of Vladek's neuroses. Spiegelman has to engage with his father and his trauma to understand his behavior. By introducing his alter ego Artie, he can do so from a safe distance that allows for more objectivity and closure. An extenuation of his father's character would be counterproductive - as much honesty as possible is needed in order for the

psychoanalytical process to work. Interestingly, however, and also in Spiegelman's defense, the way Spiegelman works through this process and the way he displays it, lessens not only his negative judgment of his father but also the reader's, and replaces it with sympathy and understanding.⁵ Given that Spiegelman only struggles with a trauma because of his father, and given that his father is content to help his son to overcome this trauma, it might not appear as selfish and disrespectful anymore that he exposes his father's character and secrets against his will. In addition, it might not only help other survivor's children with an inherited trauma, it also nudges people who are not affected by the Holocaust to show direct and indirect victims/survivors understanding.

3 The Holocaust as a Comic

1983 was the year Spiegelman tried to find someone to publish *Maus* as a book after its chapters appeared in *RAW*, the avant-garde comix magazine Spiegelman and his wife Françoise started in 1980. Despite his many attempts, he received countless rejection letters, most often based on the comic form of the story. The editor of the *St. Martin's Press*, for example, wrote: "I'm sure you realize the difficulty of publishing this one -- a novel about the Holocaust in comic book form? You can imagine the response I've gotten from the sales department" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 77), and the editor of *Penguin Books* declined with the word: "In part my passing has to do with the natural nervousness one has in publishing something so very new and possibly (to some people) offputting" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 77). Overall, people do not like the idea of representing the Holocaust as comic, since "there is nothing comic about the Holocaust" (Martinez-Alfaro 91). The fact that *Maus* was classified as fiction after it was published mirrors the general opinion that a comic cannot be faith-

5 Compare Budick 388.

ful to the facts. Spiegelman might even partly agree with this public opinion, since, as Martinez-Alfaro puts it: "No representation can contain the Holocaust, which is too traumatic to be put in words or images. This is a story that resists being contained by frames, as is suggested by vignettes [in *Maus*] spilling over" (98). In other words, Spiegelman is aware of this problem, however, conventional books have to deal with the same problem. The comic form, in fact, enables him to overcome this issue - but more of this later. After all, *Maus* is categorized as an autobiography, and the story is based on extensive research, including maps, graphics, and pictures.

3.1 Hybrid Characters

In this case, being a comic stands for more than the involvement of vignettes and word balloons: Spiegelman decided to represent people as *hybrid characters* (Martinez-Alfaro 92). This means, people all have human bodies, but animal heads. Jews, for example, are mice, Nazis are cats, Poles are pigs, and so forth. Interestingly, Hitler himself was Spiegelman's "collaborator" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 114) on this idea. During his research on the Holocaust, Spiegelman watched "Der Ewige Jude", a German pseudo documentary from 1940 that depicts Jews in one scene as rats, accompanied by a title card saying: "Jews are the rats", and "the vermin of mankind" (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 115). Spiegelman further states: "This made it clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project" (*MetaMaus* 115). It seems though, that Jews were given this identity whereas the Nazis chose to act like animals - to be cats. Vladek, for example, is depicted as mouse throughout the entire story, even in the present (1978/1979), over 30 years after the end of World War II. The use of hybrid characters allows Spiegelman to show that identities "defined by the role in the Holocaust remain unaltered in the presence" (Martinez-Alfaro 104). The same seems to hold

true for himself and/or his alter ego Artie. He also is a mouse, however, in chapter two of *Maus II*, he is depicted as a human, wearing a mouse *mask*. The paper will talk about this more in a moment, since this is also relevant for a possible justification for Spiegelman's decision to tell his father's secrets. First, more about the role of the hybrid characters. Ian Johnston, paraphrased by Martinez-Alfaro, emphasizes that "the experience of reading Spiegelman's *Maus* puts the reader under a subtle and continuing artistic pressure to place him/herself in the position of the mice" (104). He further argues, referring to another author, that "the simpler and more schematic the representation of an image, the more subjective it becomes and, thus, the more easily and quickly we can identify with it" (Martinez-Alfaro 104). Thus, although it sounds contradicting, the hybrid characters allow the reader to identify himself better with the characters and to engage with what happened during the Holocaust than "real" characters would. "When Spiegelman was asked 'Why mice?', he answered, 'I need to show the events and memory of the Holocaust without showing them'" (Martinez-Alfaro 110).

3.2 Artie's Mask - His Relational Self

All characters in *Maus* seem to have obtained their identities related to the Holocaust and/or their roles during that time. Spiegelman's parents are mice, since they are survivors, Artie is a mouse because of his inherited Jewishness and also the passed on trauma from his father which governs his life. Artie's wife Françoise is also a mouse, although the reader witnesses Spiegelman's/Artie's concerns and thoughts regarding her depiction. He considers drawing her as a frog, for example, since she is French, but in the end she insists on being a mouse, too, since she is Jewish and Artie is a mouse as well. In the context of the book, this choice seems to make sense. She is also affected by Vladek's trauma, and even more by Artie's, so that at the end of the day, the Holocaust (traumas) governs her life too, even

though she is not a survivor's child. In sum, all of their lives are represented as being *relational*.

John Paul Eakin introduces the idea of *Relational Selves, Relational Lives* in his book *How Our lives become stories - Making selves*. The basic idea is that "the subject of autobiography to which the pronoun 'I' refers is neither singular nor first [...] it is truly plural in its origins" (Eakin 43). In short, identity is a construct that is always dependent on others to recognize it, and a construct that is being formed through others, most often through the family. In this light, the categorization of *Maus* as an autobiography becomes comprehensible. By retelling his father's story "Spiegelman confronts the Holocaust and its consequences for his parents, his older brother, and himself" (Eakin 59). Although *Maus* seems to be mainly Vladek's story, it is being told by Spiegelman, and his motivation is to find out more about his father and the Holocaust, and therefore about himself. In Spiegelman's case it is fairly obvious that it is his father who had the biggest direct impact on his life. Vladek is characterized as a strong, strict father, whereas Anja, Spiegelman's mother, is depicted as weak and dependent, who commits suicide when Spiegelman was ten years old. Spiegelman does not have other siblings or close relatives. Generally, it is no coincidence that he tells his father's story - and as shown earlier, his father's story is always simultaneously the story of his experience of the Holocaust. It is safe to say that Spiegelman's identity relates strongly to Vladek and his trauma. In the beginning of chapter two of *Maus II*, Artie is wearing a mouse mask. The reader learns about Vladek's death, the commercial success of *Maus* and about Artie's self-doubts, especially in comparison to the Holocaust. "In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby... Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz..." (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 41). Overall, he struggles with his identity now that his father is dead. He lost his connection to the Holocaust, although it was dictating his life

and is responsible for his trauma. His father embodied a link, and was also the one who shaped Artie, and who passed on the trauma in the first place. Wearing a mask is a vivid metaphor for this lost *relation*. The same chapter shows Artie not only wearing a mask, but shrinking too, until he looks like a child, even asking for his mother: "I want... I want.. my MOMMY!" (Spiegelman, *Maus II* 42). This could illustrate the same process: his temporary loss of identity. He is a child again - representing the time when identity development mainly takes place. In the end, this might be a good development, since he finally has the chance to overcome this inherited trauma and establish a new, Holocaust trauma-less, identity.

However, only the use of hybrid characters, in combination with the use of the masks, allows for the depiction of such a complex and internal process. And it also reveals, once more, that Vladek's story is also Spiegelman's story, and that Spiegelman therefore, can reveal it.

3.3 Vignettes

The most conspicuous element of *Maus* is evidently the comic form. The use of hybrid characters have already been examined and explained. What is left is the use of the vignettes.⁶

The vignettes, in fact, are, once more, a medium to express the idea of postmemory and relationality in the context of narrative representation. Spiegelman uses them in countless ways. Sometimes they are small, sometimes big, they can have borders or be borderless, they can be straight or tilt, in the background or in the foreground, etc. Since this is not an analysis of comics in general, the focus will lie on the use of over spilling vignettes. In *Maus I* Artie

⁶ Left only for this paper; of course the comic form has more elements that can be analyzed. The use of symbols, for example, is noteworthy. There is a scene that shows Vladek and Anja after they escaped from a ghetto. They do not know where to go, and the vignettes depicts them on something similar to a crossroad. The crossroad, however, is shaped like a swastika, indicating that, no matter which direction they chose, they have no chance of escaping the Nazis (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 125).

and his father, for example, are depicted at the end of the page and it seems like they are walking out of a vignette. This particular vignette, however, illustrates a scene from Vladek's past: the entrance to a ghetto he and his family lived in for a while (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 105). Another vignette from the past is embedded in a vignette that shows Vladek and Artie, it is positioned between the two characters (Spiegelman, *Maus I* 135). A third example is Anja's and Vladek's tombstone on the last page of *Maus II*. It is positioned in the foreground, overlapping other vignettes, and it has no borders. Spiegelman himself explains his use of vignettes:

What is most interesting about comics for me has to do with the abstraction and structurings that come with the comics page, the fact that moments in time are juxtaposed. In a story that is trying to make chronological and coherent the incomprehensible, the juxtaposing of past and present insists that past and present are always present—one doesn't displace the other the way it happens in film (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus* 165).

In other words, the vignettes are a particular suited way of representing the connections of past and present - what happened during the Holocaust is still relevant for the present. The hybrid characters and the idea of postmemory have shown the same effect. *Maus* in its entirety lives from these connections, Vladek and Spiegelman only have problems in the present because of the past. The closing scene, Vladek's and Anja's grave, can be interpreted as a new beginning, not just as an ending. The boundaries are missing, it is drawn in front of the rest of the story - there is room to go on. Artie might finally be freed of his ties. In general, this would match the therapeutic approach of *Maus*.

The vignettes also seem to work for the representation of the Holocaust. They illustrate that the Holocaust cannot be captured in frames, "no representation can contain the Holocaust, which is too traumatic to be put in words or images" (Martinez-Alfaro 98). Another facet is the consideration of the stories and aspects that cannot be told, maybe because they are too traumatic or maybe because the stories simply died with the six million people during

the Holocaust. Vignettes only show certain moments, they jump from frame to frame, sometimes even from the past to the present or vice versa. There are many moments and things left out in between. "Comic-book narrative is a rare combination of the two [photographs and written texts]. There is always more to be seen and heard than meets the eye and the ear" (Budick 396/397).

4 Conclusion

The Holocaust is a highly complex and sensitive topic to represent, due to all the emotional pain, traumas and deaths caused by this atrocity. Although there are no official guidelines on the representation of the Holocaust, there certainly seems to be a general opinion on that topic. The excerpts from the countless rejection letters Spiegelman received when he was trying to find a publisher for *Maus* demonstrate that. The Holocaust depicted as a comic, and not even by a real victim, just a survivor's son who is disrespecting his father's wish - unthinkable. Yet, *Maus* was published, even successfully. Spiegelman received a special Pulitzer Prize because of the special character of its comic; suddenly comics received scholarly attention instead of condemnation. In other words, *Maus* managed it to turn skepticism and rejection into enthusiasm. This is, *Maus* is not just a thoughtless or provoking comic, created to make Spiegelman famous and rich overnight. It is the sincere story of a traumatized man seeking to understand his family's past, in particular his father's experience during the Holocaust. The reader witnesses Spiegelman struggling - with his father, with himself, with his identity, the Holocaust, even with the success of *Maus I*. He depicts his father as troubled personality, not in order to put him in a bad light, but to show him as he is and what the Holocaust has done to him. It is an attempt to understand him and to sympathize with him - for Spiegelman, but also for the reader. Since the Holocaust had such great impact on his father,

Vladek unconsciously passes his trauma on to Spiegelman. Listening to his father's stories, and at the same time observing himself (his alter ego Artie) from a more objective outside perspective, can be seen as a psychotherapeutical attempt to overcome his own, passed on trauma. And in fact, the ending of *Maus II* suggests that he succeeded.

Overall the comic form turns out to be highly qualified to represent and to deal with the underlying implications and problems of the Holocaust and its repercussions. As this essay has shown, the ideas of postmemory and relational selves play a crucial role in order to understand the relationship between Vladek and Artie, Artie's trauma, and his connection to the Holocaust. The way Spiegelman used his hybrid characters (and masks) to illustrate the relationality, especially in Artie's case, and also in order to show how identities were formed during and by the Holocaust, is unprecedented. The same holds true for his over spilling vignettes, depicting the close link between two moments in time and the past's omnipresent influence on the present. Further for how the vignettes call attention to the stories and moments that cannot be told because it is simply not possible to represent the Holocaust in its entirety with all its horror and tragedy. In sum, a comic has simply more options and ways of depicting complex problems, time lines and relations than, for example, a book or movie have, especially in the context of narrative representation.

What is left, is the promise Artie gave his father - the promise not to tell certain stories. He tells those stories anyway. Again, it is the idea of postmemory and relationality that justifies Spiegelman's acts. Through his father he inherited a trauma, he is ultimately linked to the Holocaust, although he did not experience it first hand, and his almost entire identity depends on and is related to this trauma, and his father. The only way of overcoming this is to understand his father, to listen to his life story, and in the end, to understand his own trauma and identity within this framework. In short, it is not only his father's secrets he tells, simply

because his father's story is simultaneously part of Spiegelman's story and identity - and by telling the reader about this broken promise, he guides the attention to this complex issue.

In sum, Spiegelman's *Maus* undoubtedly deserves the positive recognition it received. It is further a predestined example for the ineffectiveness, if not harmfulness, of rules and restrictions on how to treat the Holocaust in the context of narrative representation. If Spiegelman would have listened to the general disapproval of his work, *Maus* would never have been published. And it turned out that it was very much appreciated by readers and by scholars - Spiegelman received the Pulitzer Prize. It is not only a successful psychotherapy for him - it can be for any other survivor's children, too. *Maus* reveals the complexity of the identity forming process, and this can be useful for everyone, Holocaust victim or not. The claim here is not that a book has to be useful or that it has to teach some kind of lesson; this is only a possible justification of the accusation that Spiegelman used his family's tragic past, and accepted his father's public humiliation⁷ only to work through his own trauma.

In the end, there are countless ways of not only dealing with the Holocaust, but also of being affected by it. The introduction of rules and restrictions may result in the avoidance of a handful of disrespectful Holocaust representations, but more importantly, it would result in the loss of great, and Spiegelman's case, even helpful works. And after all, the Nazis humiliated people, took their rights away, killed entire families, and told them what they can and cannot do. Who are we to introduce new restrictions and to tell them, the second generation or any other person that is affected by this atrocity, how to work through their traumas? As seen, the unspeakable - deeply buried unconscious secrets are constant companions in the overcoming of the Holocaust's aftermath. Rules will not lure them out - freedom and tolerance will.

⁷ Which is not even the case, since, as mentioned earlier, the reader, too, undergoes a process and learns to understand and to sympathize with Vladek.

Bibliography

- Budick, Emily Miller. "Forced Confessions: The Case of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*." *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*. (2001): 379-98. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.
- Eakin, John Paul. *How Our Lives Become Stories. Making Selves*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999. Web.
- Hirsch, Marianne. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* (2008): 103-28. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Dec. 2014.
- Martínez-Alfaro, María Jesús. "Narrating the Holocaust and its Legacy: The Complexities of Identity, Trauma and Representation in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*". In *Other People's Pain: Narratives of Trauma and the Question of Ethics*, edited by Modlinger, Martin, Sonntag, Philipp, 91-113. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2011. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Nov. 2014.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: a survivor's tale. I: My father bleeds history*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: a survivor's tale. II: And here my troubles began*. New York: Scholastic Inc, 1993. Print.
- Spiegelman, Art. *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011. Print.