

Past Everywhere: Eternal Influence on the Holocaust Survivor's Family in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*

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Abstract

If people have ever read the bleeding history about the Holocaust, it is necessary to talk about the historical relationships between the Jewish people and the Germans. The roles of perpetrators and victims can be embodied in the tragic event such as the Holocaust. In this essay, we will take a look at Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, a novel which depicts about the survival experiences of Jewish people from the Holocaust and how these experiences causes permanent impacts on the survivor's mind, even on their future generations. *Maus* deals with such a trauma, postmemory and generational transmission. Moreover, we can even learn how the survivors flow through the fluid boundary between past and present, how they are overwhelmed by the traumatic memory circle in their daily lives. In addition, Spiegelman uses graphic cat and mouse to represent two groups of races: the Germans and the Jewish people. By using comic genre, it can lessen our mental burden when reading this realistic but cruel historical truth. So here I would like to discuss about how the Holocaust survivors cannot really get over their traumatized experiences and how the effects of experiences ubiquitously transmit from parents to children accompanied with some critics' articles.

Keywords: *Holocaust, traumatic experience, postmemory, generational transmission, past and present*

Have you ever noticed the interaction mode between a mouse and a cat? Art Spiegelman uses graphic cat and mouse to represent two groups of races: the Germans and the Jewish people. In *Maus*, we can clearly observe how the Holocaust causes permanent effects on the survivor's mind. Artie's father, Vladek, is one of the survivors who escape from the edge of death during the Holocaust. When Vladek retells his survival experience in the concentration camps, the horrible past come back to haunt him again. *Maus* is considered as an autobiography of Art Spiegelman himself through the construction of his father's Holocaust memory. The novel deals with such a trauma, postmemory and generational transmission. So here I would like to discuss about how the Holocaust survivors cannot really get over their traumatized experiences and how the effects of experiences ubiquitously transmit from parents to children.

Generally speaking, a traumatized memory will never easily disappear especially when it leaves deep marks on someone's mind. Even though the survivor fortunately avoids himself from death, trauma still plays a dominant role in the rest of his life. It is a no ending series of shadowy past. Through Art Spiegelman's drawings, we can understand the bleeding history of Jewish people with a more comical way. Spiegelman uses the image of mouse to depict the Jewish people of the Holocaust, which just represents the nature of mouse to look around and search for safe places for them to hide. Just like Vladek carries his families to move to another better place

from time to time, they all live in horror since the war had begun. However, if human beings who always lack a sense of security due to the outside surroundings, it's possible for them to have depression and anxiety. Take Anja for instance. She is often in tensional mood that once there's a change in her life, she would get mental problems. Although both Vladek and Anja survive from the Holocaust, there is still permanent effect on their lives. Some people would say that time is the best healer; but no matter how many years pass, some damage cannot easily be cured or recovered especially when it causes enormous shock on people's minds.

The past is like a shadow; a survivor is continuously haunted by the past memories since he or she cannot really get out of them. During those miserable days in the concentration camps, these painful memories of struggle and bitterness were deeply rooted in Vladek's mind. Vladek once was severely punished by a German guard just because a girl asked him if he knew her brothers in Auschwitz. "So he beat me, what can I tell you?" (II, 57) In the camp, the Jewish people not only need to do countless hard work, but also gain insufficient food for them to eat. Everyone looks either soulless or skinny; their lives were black and they saw no future. It is mercy if only they could survive after such hell-like lives. In my opinion, survival requires both wit and luck to survive successfully from such terrible life. In *Maus II*, Vladek was threatened by German officials and asked to repair their boots. "If it doesn't look brand new by tomorrow you won't be here anymore." (61) Then a sparkling idea flashed into Vladek's mind. He searched for a shoemaker's help, in exchange of his daily bread. Vladek had to sacrifice minor important things to exchange more beneficial ones in order to survive. In the beginning of chapter four, Vladek says: "Always I saved", Martia Grimwood refers to his obsessive economizing. He mentions that only by saving can he have something at his old age. (II, 102) He saved whatever he got by all means and this had become part of his habits. Therefore, his personality somehow changed due to his experiences in the concentration camps.

What about Vladek's influences on Artie? We still remember that in the beginning of this book, it demonstrates the strained relationship between Vladek and Artie. For example, when Artie told his father about the roller-skating experience and Artie felt alienated from his friends, Vladek just redefined the meaning of friend coldly by saying: "If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week ... then you could see what it is, friends!" Hamida Bosmajian concludes that the Young Artie had to learn quickly to take his father's experiences and feelings more seriously than his own ("The Orphaned Voice", 11). Vladek views his son's life as secondary or subsidiary to his own experiences. Like what Bosmajian mentions: "Vladek bleeds history not only in the sense of a possible therapeutic blood-letting of his own experiences, but in the continuous seepage of repressed and displaced memories that affected Artie every day of his childhood"(7). She argues that it is precisely this "seepage" that Artie's problems exist. He responds by writing the story of their respective traumas and their struggle with one another. Although Artie tries to make a connection with his father's past, there is still distance between them. Since Vladek is the survivor of the Holocaust, his second son, Artie, cannot truly experience what his father had encountered and suffered. Some critics view him as another sort of survivor who struggles to find his way into his father's Holocaust memory. He is burdened with the fallout of the historical event while not having encountered it firsthand ("A Bibliographic Essay," 147). Besides, Vladek transmits his past experiences to Artie since he cannot truly get rid of those painful memories. In other words, the past history and memory are interwoven with present lives. Like what Grimwood points out, she interprets *Maus* in a different form that it is not necessarily about a representation of the Holocaust, but more about a response to its

ongoing effects in the present. I agree with her opinion but I interpret in another way. Although Artie tries to integrate with his father's experience, I think Artie to some extent shows his incompatibility with his parents' past. As a second generation of the survivor, he neither experiences such historical event nor helps his father to recover from this painful trauma and it causes a sense of alienation. But some critics argue that Spiegelman's use of graphic narrative is a medium which challenges the redemptory potential of historical interpretation. For example, James E. Young thinks such kind of narrative choice invites Artie to explore the alienating gap between the experimental knowledge of the first generation and the secondhand discovery of the later generation through a constructed spatiality and temporality. In short, it provides room for Artie to articulate his relationship to the Holocaust through his father's memory, something reinterpreted within his own present time and space. In addition, if we check the photos in *Maus* carefully, we can refer to what Marianne Hirsch examines about the role of photography and the past that it captures:

The pictures of Artie's diseased mother, his brother Richieu, and Vladek in his concentration camp uniform indicate that the Holocaust is not merely a historical event with figures from an unfamiliar past. More important, it is Artie's present desire for safety, belonging, and familial continuity that are unsettled in his postmemory, and the symbolic and mimetic dimensions of the photographs allude to this threat (150).

For Artie, the photographs somehow become a gap for him between past and present moment. Since Artie was not one of the figures on these photos, he may lose a sense of belonging. In the last part of *Maus*, Vladek has some photos of his family members and Artie is surprised. Every figure on the photo has a story; Vladek explains each photo to Artie so that he can find some links to his families' past through listening.

Once in a while some intrusive traumatic images would make Vladek still live in the past and brings the effects on his current life. Vladek would subconsciously say some words which indicate the profound influence of the Holocaust. For example, during Artie's record, his father says: "For my condition I must fight to save myself" (I, 26). Vladek subconsciously uses words such as "fight" and "save." As a survivor, it is his awareness which makes him say so since he had gone through horrible experiences from the Holocaust. It is called "survival's mentality," which means one only thinks about the question of how to survive. Another scene is that when Vladek, Mala and Artie have dinner, Vladek asks Artie to eat up everything on his plate. Vladek had led a struggling life in the concentration camp, a place where food was never enough for the Jewish people to eat. He witnessed how people in the camps fought for each other in order to snatch something to eat, and Vladek knew the feeling of hunger so well. Therefore, Artie has to obey his father's "tyrannical" decisions. As a second generation of the survivor, Artie's current situation is deeply influenced by his father. For instance, one night Vladek moans when he sleeps and it scares Artie's wife, but Artie just explains peacefully as if he is accustomed to it. "He's moaning in his sleep again. When I was a kid I thought that was the noise all grown-ups made while they slept." (II, 74) Based on Artie's response, we see how traumatic experiences affect Vladek's life. Generally speaking, one should feel relax while he sleeps. On the contrary, it seems that those frightful memories continue to influence even in his dreams. Vladek is still bound by what he witnessed and experienced during the days in concentration camps. But at the same time, Artie also experiences his father's pains with a slighter pattern.

We can make a short discussion about the parental relationship between father and son. In general, when

one of the two siblings gets unequal treatment from their parents, he or she may be envious of the other sibling who gets more love or attention from parents. Artie would feel depressed when he realizes how important his dead brother was in his parents' minds. "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now." The final sentence of this book sharply demonstrates how the past traumatic experience still exists in survivor's mind. Artie might be a little jealous of his brother Richieu. I believe that Artie can sense how deep affection Richieu received from his parents and his significance in his parents' minds. "They didn't need photos of me in their room. . . . I was alive!" (II, 15) According to this sentence, it makes sense that what Artie cares is about his existence in Vladek and Anja's minds. We feel there's some kind of unbalanced love between Richieu and Artie. Right after the war, his parents still held little hope that Richieu was alive and even searched for him all over Europe. The power of the dead one remains for eternity. Not only Anja but also Richieu all "live" in Vladek's mind even though both of them had died. Artie suspects that, for Vladek, Richieu is, and always will be, the "survivor." (*Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation*, 70) So is Artie the replacement of his brother? Bosmajian also mentions that it is the lost son Richieu who is present for Vladek whereas Artie is blanked out. The generational confusion which is at once the root and the description of intergenerational trauma affected Artie when he was little. He needs to accept his father's past history and memory as his part; however, he never actually reaches an integration of his family. Being a second generation, he is located at an awkward situation: neither can Artie realize the pain of his father nor can he reject the whole family history. Past is everywhere in Vladek's life as well as in Artie's life. The past is not Artie's past; but through the transmission by his father, it makes him as if he can never get rid of these past experiences possessed by his parents and brother. Artie once says: "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." (II, 16) The continuing impact of parents' experiences appear to affect many survivors' children dramatically and it'd hard to disentangle from children's sense. (*Holocaust Literature of the Second Generation*, 69) People can find out that the psychological pain of Holocaust will never end. Although Vladek is willing to tell his story completely and this is often viewed as a sign of recovery; in fact, the survivor's past is like a shadow which follows him forever.

Sometimes the living people lead more painful lives than the dead ones because of mental torture. Survivors are occasionally haunted by past traumatic memories which will suddenly cause emotional depression in his present life. The past is so astonishing that it cannot be easily forget or overcome for them. Take Vladek for instance. Even though he is still alive, his life somehow has a missing gap within the present moment since Vladek is still haunted by his past experiences and he cannot make a true connection with the present. Such gap not only fills with his traumatic memory but also his inability to exactly recover from past. Sometimes it is not merely the survivor who feels painful; it is his family members get trapped with those historical past and influenced by survivor. Since Vladek had fought against and gone through these miserable experiences, it is Artie who at present starts to experience the "Holocaust misery" of his father's past. The Holocaust is a historical tragedy which cannot be eliminated. According to Grimwood, the survivor of the title not merely refers to Vladek but rather the post-Holocaust family as a whole. The power of the past stretches everywhere that people can't underestimate its profound influences. Through Spiegelman's graphic depiction, we read the solemn history with a more humorous way to understand the family and its survival under impossible conditions. In my

opinion, the past will never easily fade away for those traumatized victims and it needs a long period of time to recover. People can help them to alleviate their psychological burden instead of asking them to forget. For general people, time can gradually weaken the injury on mind. But for those survivors who have astonishing shocks in their lives, there is long road for them to step across traumatic experiences truly. Not to mention the second generation of the survivor like Artie, his mental troubles won't be lesser than his father. He can do nothing for Vladek or splits up himself from the whole family. For me Artie's position is awkward; I consider both Vladek and he as victims with two different forms. One survives from the Holocaust while the other struggles with his father's effects of past experiences. None of them can really get rid of the eternal influences of past memories.

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過往無所不在：存於悲傷世代中的永恆記憶之流

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論文摘要

漫漫長路的人生中，各位是否曾有過以下經驗：難以抹滅的記憶或是心裡留存揮之不去的陰影？如果有，也許本篇文章能引發些許共鳴。在進入正文之前，相信大家或多或少都對於納粹德軍屠殺猶太人的歷史事件有所了解，本文選用的小說 *Maus* 一書的作者 Art Spiegelman 的父親便是大屠殺歷史中的倖存者之一。透過 Art Spiegelman 的生動描繪與刻劃，選擇把沉重的歷史運用漫畫的詼諧形式呈現，不但可以引起讀者興趣，也能減輕在閱讀過程中所感受到的悲傷氛圍。因此，本論文中將著眼探討生還者的創傷經驗，看他們如何循著記憶的軌道漂流於過去與現在，以及在無法跳脫的創傷經驗裡迴旋，進而在不同世代的交替過程中帶來衝擊性的影響－記憶的填補和經驗的傳遞。透過生還者和家人之間的對話，不難發現大屠殺所造成的創傷經驗不斷地在日常生活中上演，對於逝者與生者之間也存有無形的聯繫，抱持的情感也愈發強烈。一個有過創傷經驗的人，倖存是否真意味著重生，抑或是將他推向黑暗的深淵？都值得大家省思和探討。本文也引用許多著名評論家對於 *Maus* 一書的看法，對於書中角色和故事做一個多面向的評析，將歷史與文學相互結合，以期能創造出更深層的文學況味。

關鍵字：大屠殺、創傷經驗、後記憶、世代傳遞、過去與現在