

# The Holocaust Trauma Reacts on the Tense Father and Son Relationship in

## *Maus I & II*

論《鼠族》一書中大屠殺的創傷對父子關係的影響

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### Abstract

This paper will examine how Vladek Spiegelman's traumatic experiences render him unable to connect with his son Art Spiegelman, thus resulting in tense father-son relations. Firstly, I attempt to illustrate the contradict attitudes of facing the past between Vladek and Art that causes the initial conflict between them. Second, I plan to demonstrate Anja's position between them and their reaction to Anja's death in order to show how Art unconsciously inherited his parents' Holocaust traumatic experience since his childhood. Third, I want to discuss that Art lives in the shadow of his dead brother, Richeu, to show Art's inability to compete with Richeu in his parents mind. As a result, Vladek's trauma invades not only his present life after war, but also affects Art's daily life since he was young. Therefore, I argue that the tense relationship between father and son reacts from Vladek's trauma. And Art as a second generation child of the Holocaust although is unwilling but is fated to inherit it.

**Keywords:** trauma, *Maus*, father and son relationship

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* represents Vladek Spiegelman as a Holocaust survivor's to tell the disastrous story in Auschwitz and Artie Spiegelman as a second generation child to record his father's story. There are many themes about this book such as "the transformation of oral testimony in to visual narrative, the role of the listener and then the reader in that production, the place of his mother, Anja, in the family imaginary, and the failure or success of Art's work as a cartoonist" (Miller, 45). However, my focus on this essay is the strained father and son relationship through *Maus I&II*. Through Vladek's narration, Artie reveals what it means to be a survivor's child. In addition, during storytelling, Artie hopes to reveal more about his father's past. However, Vladek's unwillingness to face the past shows his inability to connect with his son's expectation. Moreover, tracing back to the period of the Holocaust leads to Vladek's unstoppable mourning for his wife and son, Anja and Richeu. Through interviewing with his father's recalling the memory, Artie seems to be an orphaned child in Vladek's traumatic history, and he is unable to replace Richeu's position in Vladek's mind.

At the beginning of *Maus I*, the Rego Park incident in the epigraph as a sign displays the initial problematical relationship between Vladek and Artie. When Artie fell down when his friend made a trick on him in childhood, he cried and walked toward Vladek for consolation. However, Vladek did not say anything to soothe Artie, but told him what a friend really was by comparing it with his own experience in Holocaust which showed his distrust toward friends. Indeed, their relationship is not intimate. Moreover, it is also a sign that Vladek's traumatic experience in the concentration camps during the Holocaust invades Artie's childhood to adult, and leads Artie to be unfamiliar with his father and builds up the strained father and son relationship.

Furthermore, Artie's conflicts with Vladek not only showed in their conversation, but also in Artie's drawing for specific and perfect image of what Vladek described in order to use comics to compete with his father's superhero image after war. In addition, Artie uses comics to convert his older brother's perfect image into a common person who may do something wrong. Nevertheless, he knows that all changes he wants to make are incapable to catch his father's eyes; consequently, only one thing he can do is to accept his identity and fated destiny.

This paper will examine how Vladek Spiegelman's traumatic experiences render him unable to connect with his son Art Spiegelman, thus resulting in tense father-son relations. Firstly, I attempt to illustrate the contradict attitudes of facing the past between Vladek and Art that causes the initial conflict between them. Second, I plan to demonstrate Anja's position between them and their reaction to Anja's death in order to show how Art unconsciously inherited his parents' Holocaust traumatic experience since his childhood. Third, I want to discuss that Art lives in the shadow of his dead brother, Richieu, to show Art's inability to compete with Richieu in his parents mind. As a result, Vladek's trauma invades not only his present life after war, but also affects Art's daily life since he was young. Therefore, I argue that the tense relationship between father and son reacts from Vladek's trauma. And Art as a second generation child of the Holocaust although is unwilling but is fated to inherit it.

Artie's relation to his parents is ambiguous because disastrous history has a disastrous effect on interpersonal relationships between parent and child. The conflict between Vladek Spiegelman and Art Spiegelman can be shown in their different attitudes toward the history of the Holocaust. Hillary Chute mentioned, "The concept of history has become and is excruciating for Vladek" as the subtitle for the first volume of *Maus, My Father Bleeds History* (203). The story is constructed in the way that "Vladek's bleeding is his son Artie's textual, visual (as well as emotional) rebuilding" (203). At the beginning of *Maus*, Vladek pedals on an exercise bike and asks Artie about his comic business. Artie answers that he wants to portray Vladek's story in his book Vladek protests at first by saying: "It would take many books, my life, and no one wants anyway to hear such stories" (*Maus I*, 12). These panels announce Vladek Spiegelman's negative attitude to recall and reconstruct the memory of World War II.

It is not easy for a Holocaust survivor to express his feelings and experience during war time. Because Vladek's traumatic history revives the link to Holocaust which are disastrous in his life and Anja as his grief of losing his best accompanist during the war, he would never recall these sorrows again. Therefore, Vladek responds with his unstoppable recalling his past at the same time through the wheel as a media to trace back into the past. Also, his fragmentation of traumatic experience exemplifies his body fragmentation across the panels (*Maus I*, 12). In Artie's position, despite his father's protest, he continues to ask his father's history by saying, "I want to hear it. Start with mom... Tell me how you met" (*Maus I*, 12). The reason why Arties want to portray his father's story in his book is his wonder of what happened to his parents as victims in the Holocaust in order to know more about his parents. However, due to not intimate father and son relationship, Arties here seems to neglect the traumatic experience's burden on Vladek and prompts him into revealing the story for him to record and rebuild it into frames.

As Hemida Bosmajian argues, "Vladek bleeds history not only in the sense of a possibly therapeutic blood-letting of his experiences, but in the continuous seepage of repressed and displaced memories that affected

Artie every day of his childhood” (5). Vladek’s trauma actually invades Art’s life, and makes Artie unable to bear his father’s immediately put his traumatic experience into present times without conscious. For example, when Vladek describes his neatness was developed in cleaning a stable in one hour forced by a German or he would be killed, he suddenly jumps back to present time to banish Artie’s smoke smash falling on the floor (*Maus I*, 52). In addition, Vladek’s representation of his past is like fragmentation in Artie’s drawing due to Vladek’s inability to illustrate a complete story from the beginning to the end. For instance, father’s disturbance of story with complaining his second wife, Mala, makes his history fragmented. Therefore, Artie replied, “Please, pop! I’d rather not hear all that AGAIN. Tell me about 1939, when you were drafted”, it shows his unconcern for his father’s situation with Mala and his impatience with his father’s breaking of the story (*Maus I*, 44). Another example for Artie’s impatience with his father’s complaining is when Vladek tries to explain his buying a tape recorder on the sale with his comparison product’s price in different stores, Artie is out of patience and answers, “Skip it! Tell me about when you got back from the P.O.W. camp in 1940” (*Maus I*, 73).

Vladek’ denying his feeling during and after the Holocaust due to his crucial failing in his relation with Anja is what Artie could not understand because he never accompany with his father during World War II. As Helen Epstein claims that a parent, who is a survivor of the Holocaust, is frequently incapable of connecting with his or her children because of unresolved grief over lost ones, because of survivor guilt and because of a psychological block or lack of affect (92). The father’s wound is internal and unhealed; the son’s troubles begins with Auschwitz. There were no stories could cure the unhealed wounds in father and son. Thus, Vladek was unable to connect with Artie and Artie is impatient with Vladek led to their tense relationship.

Continuously, I will illustrate Anja’s position between Vladek and Artie. Vladek regards Anja as his only love who can accompany with him and live through whole life no matter in the happiness before war or bitter during the concentration camps. Both Vladek and Anja never speak to each other in detail about their literally unspeakable experiences in the camps. Artie, as an only child, who lives in the shadow of his dead older brother Richieu, he had been shaped by the unspoken history of his parents. Before Artie was born there was disastrous history which the survivors internalized and displaced into ordinary time where it contributed to Artie’s psychological breakdown and Anja Spiegelman’s suicide (Bosmajian 2). Therefore, in Spiegelman family, Artie seems to be an orphaned voice and lost his authority in his parents’ traumatic authority.

Furthermore, the way Vladek destroys Anja’s diaries results in his relationship with his son tenser again. In his autobiographical comic strip “Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A case History” (1972), Art expresses his feeling toward Anja as a stressful mother who keeps giving him a burden of her traumatic past that he is unable to bear but unconsciously accepted from his childhood to adult. Artie still wants to figure out what happened to his mother during the war time and tries to show more connection with his mother. On the other side, Anja has recorded her experience in journals and wanted to pass on Artie. Artie regards those diaries as a path to know more about her mother and also to assure his father’s description about the past. The diaries “tell us something about why Spiegelman might have decided to reproduce the early work and what his relation to his mother and her story has to do with the emotional effectiveness of the full-scale memoir” (Miller, 49).

However, Vladek found them are too full of history to remain extant after her death: “I had to make an order with everything. These papers had too many memories. So I burned them” (*Maus I*, 158). Vladek destroys all the things related to his traumatic experience. In Vladek’s position, his unwilling to face Anja’s diaries which depicts

precisely all things happened in the Holocaust leads him destroy all the things related to his past. Otherwise, Artie's desire to cultivate a stronger relationship with his parents leads him to collect all from his parents' memory, no matter in the form of conversation, drawing, or even Anja's textually writing. Nevertheless, Vladek's destroying of Anja's diaries represents his relationship with his son is tenser than before.

Moreover, Vladek and Artie's reaction toward Anja's death is apparently different. The most striking instance of representing their different attitudes together in *Maus I* is the inclusion of "Prisoner on the Hell Planet: A case History", during Anja's funeral, Vladek shows his intense mourning to Anja's death and Artie is petrified with his father's behavior and wants to leave. The father and son relationship becomes more unfamiliar as well as Bosmajian's argument that "Vladek cannot see the pain of his, but is reminded only of the grief he, Vladek, experienced at Anja's suicide. Artie remains a blank for Vladek, a blank that is both painful and empowering for the son" (7). Vladek is incapable to face the Anja's death and shows his deeply grief as his life is lost and died with Anja. For Artie, in contrast, he shows his resentment through his drawing in German Expressionist style to the angry emotional content of the strip. Also, Artie posits himself as a prisoner imprisoned by his parents who unremittingly transfer their traumatic experience for the past to his present life. Thus, as Hillary Chute mentioned, "Artie inherited the burden that the uniform represents, in a natural transfer of pain that wasn't consciously accepted or rejected but seamlessly assumed. He earned his stripes at birth" (208).

At last, I want to discuss that Art lives in the shadow of his dead brother, Richieu, to show Art's trying to compete with Richieu in his parents mind and his father's description of the Holocaust, but in vain. Lawrence Weschler notes, "Art's relationship with his father is a continual torment, a mutual purgatory of disappointment, guilt, and recrimination. This relationship is as much the focus of Art's story as is his father's reminiscence" (69). The overwhelming intrusive and traumatic images for Vladek are what Artie can't experience because he never accompany with his father during the war time. To give an example from Hamida's essay, Elie Wiesel is able to pass as adult in Auschwitz and develops with his father a relationship that truly has shared adulthood in the nightmare of history. Such a relationship is not possible between Artie and Vladek because Artie never incorporate with his father.

Moreover, the ideal child Richieu is incompatible in Vladek's mind makes Artie have complex feeling about his parents and Richieu. Vladek regards Artie as a substitution for his dead older brother Richieu and never acknowledges that it may have been difficult for Artie to be a child of survivors. Even at the end of *Maus II*, Artie is omitted through his father's saying: "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now..." (136). Here, Artie is the odd child out. After the war, his parents still believed that Richieu is alive in somewhere, so they went to orphanages to search for Richieu. It represents that both Vladek and Anja couldn't accept the fact of Richieu's death. Therefore, they regarded Richieu as "an ideal kid" and even imagined his successful career as a doctor and wealthy marriage with Jewish girl through his photo so that Artie couldn't compete with the dead brother (*Maus II*, 15). Artie's envy of Richieu is well described in his drawing of Richieu who is not as good as what his father depicts in order to convert his ideal image (*Maus I*, 75).

Also, Artie feels guilty due to his birth after war and blank experience in the Holocaust. His guilt is enlarged and showed as a second generation trauma through his fame which is built by his father's bleeding history (*Maus II*, 41). Artie is unable to compete with Vladek's superhuman image which was proved in his survival of the Holocaust. However, to show his resistance against his father's superhuman idol, he put much effort on his

drawing of what his father is capable to do in the concentration camps. For example, his father tells him that he is capable and omnipotent on everything in order to catch every opportunity to be safe. In Artie's drawing, he tries to show more and how specific and delicate "figure of fixing shoes" (60) and "timeline in Auschwitz" (68) is in order to balance his father's narrative. Moreover, Artie tries to interrogate the accuracy of his father's description through his drawing in marching in the concentration camps with and without orchestra juxtaposed (*Maus II*, 54). Consequently, Artie uses frames and panels to convert the ideal image of Richieu and compete with his father's survivor tale in order to against with his father and show the unbalancing father and son relationship through his drawing.

As what I have examined through how Vladek Spiegelman's traumatic memory effects his disconnection with his son Artie Spiegelman, thus resulting in tense and strained father and son relationship. At first, their original attitude toward rebuilding history of the Holocaust causes their conflict in to father-son relationship. Also, Anja's diaries and death represent Vladek's unwilling to face his traumatic experience then renders to Artie's unable to find the complete himself through his parents' history as an orphaned child but fated to inherit his parents' trauma unconsciously. At last, Artie's strike back with his father's description of ideal Richieu and survival experience in the war time by converting Richieu's image in to mischievous child and drawing as delicate as he could to compete with his father. All these situation result in strained father and son relationship between Vladek and Artie.

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