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### Holocaust Literature: A Saga of Suffering and Survival with Special Reference to Art Spiegelman's 'Maus'

The Holocaust is like "an atom bomb that disperses its radioactive fallout in distant places, often a long time after the actual explosion" (Kellermann 197). Holocaust literature as a genre includes texts not only about persecution of Jews in concentration camps (1933-1939) but also about the ghettos and extermination camps that were built after the Second World War had begun. Millions of lives were devoured in this Jewish Holocaust. The novel, *Maus* presents the gripping story of Art Spiegelman's parents who were Holocaust survivors. Interwoven with his father's memoirs is the writer's own perspective, as he tried to make sense of his father's plight. The story moves between the past and the present, the readers get to witness the immediate effects and the long term scars of the Nazi terror. It not only chronicles the story of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman who suffered in the concentration camps but also reveals how they survived. The book also presents the struggles of the second generation of Jewish people whose existence is extremely influenced by the Holocaust, despite the fact that they were born after it. The study also depicts the different techniques adopted by Spiegelman to present the horrifying situation.

**Keywords:** concentration camps, Holocaust, Jews, Nazi, resourcefulness.

The term 'Holocaust' is derived from the Greek term, *Holokaustan* which means 'that which is completely burnt'. It has been influenced by the word *shoah*, meaning 'catastrophe'. It was first used to refer to the slaughter of the Jews by the Nazis in 1939. It has now taken on various figurative meanings, summarizing the effects of warfare, natural calamity, epidemic diseases and even monetary failures. Holocaust mainly includes all aspects of the National Socialists' policies of persecution and extermination against all victimized groups, especially the European Jews.

Victims of the Holocaust left behind a genre of literature as documentation of the nightmare the Jews experienced. Since 1980s, the Holocaust literature has become an established genre which takes into account various literary texts. It was Susan Cernyak-Spatz, a literary scholar and survivor of the Holocaust, who initiated the concept of Holocaust literature as a genre. Diaries, journals, letters and memoirs all captured the daily horrors of life during the Holocaust. These personal accounts also testify to resistance of spirit, the will to survive and the efforts to retain simple human dignity under unbelievably terrible

circumstances. Even children, such as Anne Frank, as well as, famous historians, such as Emmanuel Ringelblum, left behind written testaments of human courage and determination. In doing so, they preserve the memory of their lives, and the lives of others who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis.

The inclusion of fiction and poetry in addition to the histories and memoirs is especially important because it offers a different level of understanding to the readers. Reading quiet expressions of hope written by a concentration camp inmate or by a Jew struggling to hide from the Nazis, can be a poignant and even unforgettable experience. Holocaust literature as a genre includes not only texts about persecution of Jews in concentration camps (1933-1939) but also the texts about the ghettos and extermination camps that were built after the Second World War had begun. Diaries and chronicles written during the wartime, and reports submitted by witnesses after the war, all fall into the category of this genre.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, writers began to meet the task of recounting in fiction the appalling world of the ghettos and concentration camps. The survivors of the camps provided the most primitive responses to the Holocaust. Some of the authors like Elie Wiesel and Tadeusz Borowski implemented a highly realistic style that blended fiction and memoir. Others, like Aharon Appelfeld, relied on allegory to illustrate the horrors of their experiences.

Art Spiegelman, born in 1948 to Polish Jews, is a critically acclaimed and highly influential artist and graphic novelist. In 1971, Spiegelman produced some comics including *Mr. Infinity* (1970), a ten-page booklet of explicit comic strips. Spiegelman's work also appeared in underground magazines such as *Gothic Blimp Works*, *Bijou Funnies*, *Young Lust*, *Real Pulp and Bizarre Sex*. He also did a number of cartoons for men's magazines such as *Cavalier*, *The Dude*, and *Gent*. In 1972, Spiegelman was asked to do a three-page strip for the first issue of *Funny Animals*. He wanted to do one about racism, and at first considered a story with African-Americans as mice and cats. Instead, he turned to the Holocaust that his parents had survived. The strip was called *Maus*. The Jews were depicted as mice while the Nazis were depicted as cats.

In 1980, Spiegelman founded *RAW (Real Art Work)*, a magazine of unconventional comics, with his wife, Mouly. With the intention of creating a book-length work based on his father's recollections of the Holocaust, Spiegelman began to interview his father in 1978 and made a research visit in 1979 to the Auschwitz concentration camp, where his parents had been imprisoned by the Nazis. This graphic novel, basically, comprises of two volumes, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale 1: My Father Bleeds History*, and *Maus: A Survivor's Tale 2: And Here My Trouble Began*. The first volume of *Maus* was first published in serial form within the pages of *RAW* between 1980 and 1985, and was released as a book the following year to enormous critical and popular success. After the second volume of *Maus* was published in 1992, Spiegelman was awarded a special Pulitzer Prize for his work. In addition to the Pulitzer, he has received several other awards, including a Guggenheim fellowship, an Eisner Award, and a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle Award. Spiegelman began teaching at the School of Visual Arts in New York in 1978, and continued until 1987, alongside his inspirations, Harvey Kurtzman and Will Eisner. Hired as a contributing artist in 1992, Spiegelman worked for *The New Yorker* for ten years.

In 2005, he was named one of the 100 Most Influential People by *Time* magazine. Art Spiegelman's recent works include *Little Lit*, and *In the Shadow of No Towers*. His work has been published in *The New York Times*, *Playboy*, *The Village Voice*, and *the New Yorker*. In 2011 *Meta Maus* followed which was a book-length analysis of *Maus* by Spiegelman and Hillary Chute.

*Maus* consists of two primary narratives: one that takes place in World War II Poland, and the other that takes place in late 1970s/early 1980s New York. The work skillfully utilizes a graphic novel format of illustrated panels accompanied by narration and dialogue in a complex and richly nuanced story.

The enthralling story of Art Spiegelman's parents, Vladek and Anja Spiegelman, who were Holocaust survivors, is the main crux of the novel. As he tried to make sense of his father's predicament in the light of his ghastly experiences, the writer has presented his own perspective interwoven with the memoirs of his father. With the story moving between the past and the present, the readers get to observe the immediate impact and the long term scars of the Nazi terror. The novel mainly deals with the theme of suffering and the will to survive as it not only chronicles the story of Vladek and Anja Spiegelman who suffered in the concentration camps but also reveals how their courage, resourcefulness and luck helped them to survive the Jewish Holocaust. Taking down his father's memoirs and recreating them on the page may not just be an effort to present the experience of the Holocaust realistically, but also reflects Art Spiegelman's attempt to make a connection with his father on a deeper level. In the first chapter he tells Vladek, "But POP-it's a great material. It makes everything more Real-more human. I want to tell Your story, the way it really happened" (Spiegelman 25).

The suffering and struggle of Vladek, begins when he is sent to the German front and from there is imprisoned as a Prisoner Of War (POW) in 1939. The time he spends in the prison reveals how from the very beginning he had suffered for being a Jew. The Jewish prisoners were given only crusts of bread to fill their stomachs and were made to live outside in tents in severe cold. After six months, when the Germans look for volunteers for other labor projects, Vladek volunteers. Although the conditions were better at the labor camp, they were still mistreated by the German soldiers. Vladek is soon released, but in order to reach his home, in Sosnowiec, he sneaks his way onto a train by hiding the fact that his true identity. He poses as a Polish soldier, trying to get home, and it works on the Polish conductor, who hides him in the train. This is the very first incident where Vladek suffers due to anti-Semitism, but at the same time survives because of his presence of mind and cleverness.

As soon as Vladek returns home, he realizes that his misery didn't end with the incident as the Nazi persecution of the Jews had extended to every area of life. Their business, their acquired wealth and property are all snatched away. He is told about the laws of the Nazis that "the Nazis take you off to work camp for breaking any minor law...And those that are taken away-they're never seen again!" (Spiegelman 77) Vladek loses his textile factory, and soon his father-in-law's factory is also taken over by the Germans. To make up for meager rations, the family has to barter in the black market. With an intention to segregate the Jewish race from the rest, all Jews are shifted into ghettos. All twelve members of Vladek and Anja's family were assigned only two and a half small rooms in that ghetto. From this ghetto they were soon shifted to an old village nearby Sosnowiec called Sordula which was

another ghetto. This ghetto was even worse than the earlier one; they were given lesser space and were forced to work for the whole day as Vladek recalls the experience and tells Art:

Every day we were taken to Sosnowiec, to work in German "shops"...Anja with her sister, Tosha, they worked in a clothing factory...And I went, together with my nephew, Lolek, to a woodwork shop. Every day the guards marched us about an hour and a half to work. The guards, it was Jews with big sticks. They acted like the Germans...And every night they marched us back, counted us, and locked us in. (Spiegelman 108)

Things worsen for the Jews as the Nazis were taking them to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. In order to protect himself and his family, Vladek uses his skill and builds a shelter under a coal bin, in which they hide during Nazi searches. He describes the cellar to his son:

In the kitchen was a coal cabinet maybe 4 foot wide, inside I made a hole to go down to the cellar. And there we made a brick wall filled with coal. Behind this wall we could be a little safe. Even when they came with dogs to smell us out-And they knew that Jews are laying here-But still they couldn't find. The dogs ran up and down. But in the coal bin was only coal. It looked full and they couldn't lift it. And the cellar, it was only a cellar. (Spiegelman 112)

From there they move to another house, and Vladek builds a shelter in the attic which is accessible through a chandelier in the ceiling. Starvation and fear dominate during this phase which Vladek and Anja and other Jews faced. At night whenever they sneaked out to bring something to eat, they were under constant fear of being caught by the Germans. Vladek says, "Never any of us had been so hungry like then" (Spiegelman 125). But, the primary motivation in them was survival.

The Nazi cruelty continues to worsen with the passage to time, and the instinct for survival begins to overpower the powerful bonds of Jewish identity. The frantic struggle to come out of the Holocaust alive had cut off the bonds of humanity, religion and brotherhood. It was every man for him, as Vladek says, "At that time it Wasn't any more families. It was everybody to take care for Himself!" (Spiegelman 116) Vladek's cousin, Haskel agrees to help him only after receiving a diamond ring. He even takes his father-in-law's jewels, but doesn't help his in-laws. People had become selfish and were afraid of being caught if they would help a Jew.

Vladek's experiences in the Holocaust also represent a constant struggle to survive from the sufferings. He had to combat tough conditions. For example, while hiding in Mrs Motonova's house, Vladek and Anja had to live in the storage cellar for ten days when her husband came, they had to live with rats and very little food.

Not only his resourcefulness and intelligence, but also his determination and hope help Vladek to survive the Holocaust. When Vladek and Anja hear the news of their son, Richieu's death, Anja is hysterical with grief and tells Vladek that she wants to die. Vladek responds by telling her that "to die, it's easy...but you have to struggle for life. Until the last moment we must struggle together! I need you. And you'll see that together we'll survive" (Spiegelman 124). Similarly, on his way to meet the smugglers who were to transport him and Anja to Hungary, a group of small German children see him and run away screaming,

calling out that he is a Jew. Rather than running away, he uses his presence of mind to approach the parents and patiently explain that he is a German and a loyal citizen of the Reich. In this way he manages to avoid death.

When Vladek and Anja are caught and sent to the concentration camp, they are separated from each other as Vladek is sent to Auschwitz while Anja is deported to Birkenau. Vladek's personal narrative illustrates the daily horrors he experienced during his imprisonment in the Auschwitz concentration camp. At Auschwitz, the prisoners are given clothes and shoes, most of which don't fit properly, and each prisoner receives a number tattoo on the inside of his arm. There is an awful, insidious smell like that of burning fat and rubber. The life of the prisoners are made miserable every day while they are living in fear, are famished to death, and are witnesses to the sight of other prisoners being erratically beaten or killed around them. For example, once a prisoner yells to the guards that he is a German, and that his son is currently serving in the German army. As a punishment, the guards take the man into an alley, push him down, and jump on his neck.

Anja also faces the worst time of her life at Birkenau. Auschwitz is a camp for workers, whereas Birkenau is just a waiting area for the gas chambers and crematoriums. Anja is frail and dejected, and contemplating suicide. Her Kapo treats her poorly, giving her jobs that she cannot perform and beating her when she fails. Not only does Vladek but also Anja lives with the will and determination to survive through this terrible time and reunite with her husband. It is the power of love that makes both the husband and wife fight for their survival. She writes in a letter to Vladek, "Each day I think to run into the electric wires and finish everything. Now to know you are alive it gives me still to hope" (Spiegelman 213).

Vladek on the other hand makes every effort to help Anja, in spite of the fact that she was in another camp. In order to arrange for Anja to be transferred to Auschwitz, Vladek saves food and cigarettes to bribe the guards. He keeps all that he saves in a box under his mattress, but one day it is stolen and he is forced to start over again. Eventually, though, he saves enough and Anja is brought over. Vladek throws packages of food to his wife so that she doesn't starve anymore. Anja survives because of Vladek. Vladek was always there for Anja to give her strength and to draw her away from any kind of self-destructive thoughts.

Vladek is blessed with many skills and qualities - including the ability to speak multiple languages - that provide him with opportunities to survive within the confines of Auschwitz. He gets a job as a shoemaker because of his shoe fixing skills. While Vladek is working at the Auschwitz tin shop, he arranges for eggs, bread and sausages in order to please Yidl, the chief of the tinmen, who loathes Vladek's past as a factory owner. As a tinsmith, he had to take part in the construction of the gas chambers. Vladek tells Art about these gas chambers and the cremation pits:

And those what finished in the gas chambers before they got pushed in these graves, it was the lucky ones. The others had to jump in the graves while still they were alive...Prisoners what worked there poured gasoline over the live ones and the dead ones. And the fat from the burning bodies they scooped and poured again so everyone could burn better. (Spiegelman 232)

After Vladek was separated from Anja for the last time before their reunion at the end of the war, all his instincts focused on one thing: survival. It was now truly every man for himself, as he was marched through freezing woods and packed into a boxcar with two

hundred other prisoners. In these 'cattle cars' they were packed for many days without food and water. Vladek still has a thin blanket with him and is able to attach it to some high hooks to create a makeshift hammock. He sits above the shoulders of his fellow Jews for the duration of the ride. It was a very dismaying situation, as Vladek explains, "If someone had to make a urine or a bowel movement, he did where he stood" (Spiegelman 246). People were dying of exhaustion and hunger, and those who were dead were thrown out of the 'cattle car'. The condition worsened at Dachau. The prisoners were kept in barracks, which were filled with straw infested with lice, which carried typhus and even Vladek caught typhus. The condition in the camp was so brutal, that prisoners were reduced to fighting each other like animals for survival. Vladek says, "Like wild animals they would fight until there was blood. You can't know what it is, to be hungry" (Spiegelman 251).

Liberation still was not easy from there as a German patrol comes up while they were on their way to Switzerland. They plan to shoot the prisoners but the prisoners survive the night as one of the SS officers' girlfriend had convinced him not to shoot. Vladek and his friend, Shivek hide in a pit behind a garage, but the garage owner tries to get a German patrol to kill them. Vladek and Shivek next find an abandoned barn to hide in. They find some civilian clothes and some food. But their stomachs are so unused to food that they become ill. Finally the Americans arrive and station themselves in that house; they are made to serve them. In this way, Vladek escapes. Both Vladek and Anja are saved and they meet in Sosnowiec.

Although they survive the Holocaust, their suffering doesn't end. Vladek and Anja live with the horrendous memories of the Holocaust. Anja commits suicide while Vladek is changed forever. A part of him dies because of the Holocaust and Anja's suicide makes him bitter. In the opening chapter itself, we get an insight into Vladek's personality and the ways in which the Holocaust has shaped his life and that of his son's. Vladek takes a variety of pills and is clearly not healthy, suffering from both heart disease and diabetes. He tells his son that prescription medications are only 'junk food' and that to stay healthy, he must fight on his own to save himself. This determination recalls his fight for survival during the Holocaust, another example of how the Holocaust, though forty years in the past, continues to have an effect on Vladek's personality and actions. The scene at the dinner table, in the third chapter of Book 1, provides yet another example of how the Holocaust has affected both Vladek and Art. Vladek's insistence that his son eat everything on his plate has its origins in his experience of the concentration camps. He needed to eat whatever food he got in order to survive. These situations left him with an extraordinary aversion to wasted resources of any kind, and the preoccupation with food is only one example of this. Even his second wife, Mala complains to Art about his stinginess as Vladek gives her just fifty dollars a month and she is forced to use her own saving if she wants anything else.

Another example occurs in Chapter 4 of Book 1, when Art leaves his father to look for Anja's diaries in the library. The bookshelves are packed with useless items that Vladek cannot throw away. This compulsion to save developed during the Holocaust when food and other necessities were scarce, and the survival of a person often depended upon one's ability to hoard. Forty years later, Vladek continues to save every item that might be of some use. His relationship with Mala is strained and seemingly devoid of love. Prior to World War II, however, he exhibited none of these characteristics. He was kind, wealthy, and uncommonly resourceful, and his marriage to Anja was filled with compassion and intimacy. His experiences in the Holocaust undoubtedly played a role in these dramatic personality changes.

The book also presents a true portrayal of the life and struggles of the second generation of Jewish people whose existence is extremely influenced by the Holocaust, despite the fact that they were born after it. We clearly see how it has affected and it continues to affect almost every aspect of his life. The opening prologue of *Maus*, shows Art Spiegelman during his childhood, and from this short scene, we can see exactly why it is that the Holocaust plays such a dominant role in his life. In the scene, ten year old Art breaks his roller skate and falls, and his friends skate on without him. The boy goes and complains about it to his father. Vladek immediately compares the situation to his own suffering and says “If you lock them together in a room with no food for a week...then you could see what it is, Friends!” (Spiegelman 6) In chapter 1 of book 2, Art tells Francoise about his childhood, and how it was filled with fears of the past, “But I did have nightmares about SS men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away” (Spiegelman 176).

In the present, both Vladek and Art suffer because of their respective guilt; Vladek’s guilt of surviving the Holocaust in which all other friends and relatives had died and Art’s guilt of never having to live through it. Art himself confesses to Francoise, “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” (Spiegelman, 176).

Spiegelman uniquely portrays his father's story of suffering and survival as an epic parable of the Holocaust. Spiegelman's use of animal species to represent ethnic and national identities can be seen as an imaginative method for emphasizing the racial prejudices prevalent during World War II. As seen throughout *Maus I* and *II*, Jews are represented as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, French as frogs, and Americans as dogs. Spiegelman's use of animals enhances the reader's understanding of the state in which the Jews lived in during the Nazi's rule. Jews were instantly recognizable in Nazi occupied Europe, as if they were an entirely different species. In his new book *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman talks with Hillary Chute, a professor of English at the University of Chicago, about how *Maus* came into being and tells how he got the idea of depicting the Jews as mice:

The most shockingly relevant anti-Semitic work I found was *The Eternal Jew*, a 1940 German “documentary” that portrayed Jews in a ghetto swarming in tight quarters, bearded caftaned creatures, and then a cut to Jews as mice—or rather rats—swarming in a sewer, with a title card that said “Jews are the rats” or the “vermin of mankind.” This made it clear to me that this dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project. In fact, Zyklon B, the gas used in Auschwitz and elsewhere as the killing agent, was a pesticide manufactured to kill vermin—like fleas and roaches. (Why Mice? web)

Most of *Maus* is written through Vladek's flashbacks. Interwoven with Vladek's past is the present day relationship of the father and son. Spiegelman juxtaposes flashbacks of Vladek's tragic past to help explain his inability to function properly within his family and community in his present home in New York. By telling the story in black and white, he is sacrificing color to enhance the dark tone of the theme and plot as well as spare the reader from graphic depictions of death and suffering. In chapter 2 of *Maus II*, Spiegelman himself speaks to the reader in the first person. This is Meta-narrative, the story of how the story was written. He depicts himself not as a mouse, but as a man wearing a mouse mask.

*Maus* also includes *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, a short comic story drawn by Spiegelman in 1972, concerning his mother's suicide. It is notable because it is the only

section of *Maus* where humans are not drawn as animals. This comic-within-a-comic has a different style than the rest of the novel. Spiegelman uses human heads and even includes a picture of his mother and him on vacation in 1958. Through Spiegelman's innovative use of the comic book medium, *Maus* puts into question traditional notions of history, memory, and narrative, offering a fresh perspective on the legacy of the Holocaust.

Critics have applauded Spiegelman's use of a Frame narrative in which Art's process of recording his father's tale is incorporated into the storyline. Inside the frames, Vladek's recollections from the Holocaust are placed. Outside (or unframed drawings) portray the present-day interactions between Art, Vladek, and often Mala.

Spiegelman has also made use of diagrams and maps in the novel. The diagrams seem to outline things that Vladek constructed such as the coal cellar hideout in *Maus I*, the map of Auschwitz and Birkenau, boot repair, and the construction of crematoriums in *Maus II*. Each of these images is inherently connected to operations in which Vladek was involved. Lawrence L. Langer writes in his review for the *New York Times*:

It is to Art Spiegelman's credit that he scrupulously avoids sentimentalizing or melodramatizing his tale. He writes with restraint and a relentless honesty, sparing neither his father nor himself. Given his brother's death and his mother's suicide, to say nothing of the other extensive family losses, there is little to celebrate. (A Fable of the Holocaust. web)

Therefore, the different techniques adopted by Spiegelman makes the novel vivid and impactful. It clearly reveals the possibility of depicting the evils of the Holocaust in diverse ways. The study brings a warning for future generations and there is a universal element in the work. Through this study the audience sees what life was like in the Nazi camp systems.

As a record of one of the worst phases in human history, Holocaust literature and the writers have made a major contribution to our understanding of what man can do to man. The selected fictional work records the actual events and is filtered through personal experiences and human emotions. This paper is very much relevant in the post-modern era as the world faces the terrible challenges of terrorism, nuclear war, communal hatred, genocide and the massacre of millions of people simply because they belong to a different race.

Even Auschwitz survivor, Primo Levi was firm in his belief about the necessity to tell the story of those who suffered in the Holocaust because he felt that "Auschwitz is outside of us, but it is all around us, in the air. The plague has died away, but the infection still lingers and it would be foolish to deny it" (Levi 29).

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