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A Personal Journey

MAUS
A SURVIVOR'S TALE
Art Spiegelman
New York Pantheon Books
1986.

Shimon Waldfogel, M.D.

Maus is a uniquely powerful book. It is a personal journey through the psychotic universe that became all too real in its efficiency toward a final solution. Maus is very different from the many personal and biographical narratives that attempt to touch upon the experience of the Holocaust. Maus, published in 1986, has come to be known as the Holocaust Comic Book. On the surface it is a contradiction, but perhaps the form has contributed greatly to its great impact and success. The book is a collection of installments that appeared between 1980 and 1985 in RAW magazine, an "underground" cartooning magazine edited by the author. The book is subtitled "A Survivor's Tale." On the surface it is just that the tale of Vladek Spiegelman, the author's father, as he journeys from Czestochowa in mid 1930s Poland to the gates of Auschwitz in 1944.

The story starts out in Rego Park, N.Y. when the author is ten or eleven years old. It is a brief introduction to the interaction between the author and his father, together defining friends. The father notes, "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."

The journey moves outward from Rego Park, where the author revisits his father to record his experiences of the holocaust, through Europe in the period of the Second World War. These transitions are masterfully done, allowing exploration of the developing father-son relationship with the holocaust story in the background.

The author's narrative skill and depiction of the characters in animal form (the Jews as mice, the Germans as cats, and the Poles as pigs) allow us to get closer to the characters than if they were depicted as humans. This technique allows us to feel the pain without being overwhelmed.

The author however, is most powerful as he takes us with him on his own personal journey through the tortured relationship with his aging father, a

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relationship built on the unique reality that is so common to "survivors." It is a reality that is dictated by the psyche's effort to adjust to being human after experiencing catastrophic trauma. It is clear that the author's quest is to understand how he too is a survivor, a survivor of this psychotic reality that occurred before he was born but has defined the essence of his being.

Recently there has been great interest in attempting to understand these children of Holocaust survivors. Efforts made to rigidly define this syndrome have not been successful. However, while efforts to define syndromes and generalize pathology have not been fruitful, the individual impact on the children of Holocaust survivors has been great. Grubrich-Simitis in her work on the analytic treatment of Holocaust survivors and their children has pointed out that the survival of the parents depended upon a special conformity of behaviors in the children born after liberation (1). Furthermore, these children were expected to function for their parents as a bridge to life—to free them from their inner deadness, to replace the lost.

Another area that the holocaust experience impacts upon the second generation is a central conflict of the parents manifest in severe pathology in dealing with aggression. Because aggression is associated with guilt, parents have difficulty with limit-setting and view with alarm the age-appropriate manifestations of aggression in their children. Grubrich-Simitis further notes the particular difficulty that these children have in separation from their parents, "To begin to lead one's own life, to differentiate from parents, means surrendering them to death." The author's personal account of his mother's suicide when he was twenty years old is one of the most touching and sensitive points of the book, as well as in any other book that I have read.

Seven years had passed between the publication of Spiegelman's segment about his mother's suicide and the first segment of the survivor's tale. We do not learn what had transpired with the author in these years, but I sense that he includes us in his quest for his own self development. As Grubrich-Simitis notes, "in the long run it is possible to establish relatively stable ego boundaries only to the extent to which the patient is gradually able to calm his anguished brooding about his parents' past and then be less at the mercy of the resulting acting out." Later in the same paper she notes, "It is only to the extent that the historical reality is ascertained that the patient will be able to approach his own inner and outer reality." I am grateful to Mr. Spiegelman for allowing us to share this most intimate quest with him.

REFERENCE

1. Grubrich-Simitis I: Extreme traumatization as cumulative trauma: psychoanalytic investigations of the effects of concentration camp experiences on survivors and their children. *Psychoanal Study Child* 1981; 36:415-450