In Search of Lost Remembrances:  
Postmemory and WWII Trauma in Nora Krug’s *Belonging*  
and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*  

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Abstract  

This paper examines two graphic memoirs, Nora Krug’s *Belonging: A German reckons with history and home* (2018) and Art Spiegelman’s *The complete Maus* (1997), which both focus on World War II trauma and its effect on descendants of people who experienced the war and the Holocaust first-hand. The paper argues that memory and identity are interlinked on both individual and communal levels. Marianne Hirsch’s (2001) theory of postmemory is applied to analyze how descendants of Holocaust survivors and Germans citizens cope with the after-effects of trauma and guilt. Through a comparative reading of *Belonging* and *Maus*, the paper analyzes examples of how the protagonists search for an understanding of who they are among the fragmented remembrances they uncover through family histories and archival research. It appears that memories, often traumatic, are transmitted affectively and that the experience of postmemory carries its own burden of frustration and disappointment. By situating Spiegelman and Krug’s graphic memoirs in relation to Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) theory of collective memory, the paper concludes that the intertwined constitution of memory and identity is authentic, and that personal histories connect contemporary individuals to traumatizing historical events like World War II and the Holocaust.  

*Keywords*: trauma, memory, postmemory, Nora Krug, Art Spiegelman  

Foundational Concepts: War Comics, Postmemory, and Remembrance  

Since the 1990s, a significant number of comic-form memoirs and autobiographies have examined the long-term impacts of violent conflicts, in particular World War II, and explored war’s shattering effects on survivors and their descendants. With its intimately personal style of drawings that combine with segmented text to tell the story, the comics medium invites reader-response in affectively different ways than photography or traditional print texts do, most notably by forcing the reader to bridge the comics medium’s gutters (gaps between panels) and actively make meaning of the sequence of images in graphic narratives. As Wolfgang Iser (1974) argues in *The implied reader*, texts “not only draw the reader into action, but also lead him to shade in the many outlines suggested by the given situation” (p. 276), thus engaging the reader in filling in the text’s gaps and sort out its ambiguities. Author Tom Wolf (1977) seconds Iser’s position by noting that the “reading of words is but a subset of a much more general human activity which includes symbol decoding, information integration and organization” (p. 427). Such phenomenological aspects of reading graphic memoirs assign to readers an active role in the process of making the text meaningful within their own consciousness, and actively
immerse themselves in the author’s Weltanschauung, or worldview. This reader-response process happens via the graphic text’s artistic style and creative use of the comics medium’s expansion on the way we read literature. Ronald Schmitt (1992) contends that the comics form “represents a transitional medium that directly transforms the printed word and the framed picture, paving the way for a new type of literacy” (p. 160) and, hence, a new perspective on what literacy means because comics and graphic novels overturn common literary language patterns by inserting drawings as signifying literary text.

Like handwriting, drawing style is a unique, hard-to-duplicate mode of expression. Comics artwork is always-already visually imbued with the artist’s personal style and choice of colors, scenes, and mise-en-page. At the same time, words are rendered in a greater range of visual forms than in traditional print texts by the artist’s choices of various kinds of fonts, colors, and writing styles, including handwriting, word balloons, thought bubbles, sound blasts, motion lines, and sprawling lines of text that can weave between and within panels (McCloud, 2006, p. 37). Hillary Chute (2016) observes, “through its spatial syntax, comics offers opportunities to place pressure on traditional notions of chronology, linearity, and causality” (p. 4). The comics medium is uniquely suited for the depiction of violence, trauma, and memory because of its artistic malleability and complex visual and textual layering. Peeling back those layers of narrative content engages the reader’s response affectively and produces an original reading experience that is at once highly subjective on the reader’s individual level and at the same time broadly human on the collective level. Although the mass-market, violent action-hero comics published by DC and Marvel have created the popular impression that the comics medium celebrates gratuitous, excessive brutality, it is important to point out that graphic-novel memoirs and autobiographies that deal with memories and postmemories of war and crimes against humanity are typically not focused on the pain and horrors of war and violence per se, but rather on the ensuing psychological effects of war and oppression, such as trauma, shame, guilt, anger, and confusion.

Postmemory is a key term in the study of trauma and memory. It has been applied in particular to the study of Holocaust literature, which establishes a contact zone between past and present, witness and listener, testimony and memory, and individual and communal histories (Dragulescu, 2012, p. 139). According to Marianne Hirsch (2008), who coined the term “postmemory” in conjunction with an article she wrote on Art Spiegelman’s Maus and subsequently refined in her study of trauma and oral histories from Holocaust survivors and their descendants, postmemory is “a structure of inter-and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (original emphasis Hirsch, 2008, p. 106). Postmemory, and memory in general, are constitutional elements in the understanding and maintenance of individual identity and sense of self in relation to the external world and its events.

In addition, remembrance is a potent term in evaluating how memory and identity form. Remembrance can refer to the action of remembering, a memory itself, or a it can be an object that is kept or given as a reminder or in commemoration of someone (Oxford English dictionary 2002, p. 1210). Remembrance is also a keyword in the title of one of
the most celebrated works in the canon of Western literature, Marcel Proust’s monumental seven-volume À la recherche du temps perdu (Remembrance of things past), written between 1913 and 1927, which is infused with observations on nostalgia for lost times, mingled with skepticism of memories’ reliability. With a playful nod to the instability of memory, Proust argues, “remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were” (quoted in Wang, 2016, n.p.). However, considering the fluidity of memory in À la recherche du temps perdu, Proust’s statement also invites us to question if there really is only one way to remember the past, and further to consider – as the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) speculated – that the construction of collective memory and historiography is part of external cultural and internal psychological processes that link memory and identity. The tensions and possible inconsistencies between individual and collective memories are thus at the core of postmemory and trauma studies.

Questions of how identity is tied to memory and genealogy abound in long-form graphic memoirs. This paper will examine the representation of World War II trauma in two autobiographical graphic memoirs: Art Spiegelman's The complete Maus (1997) and Nora Krug's Belonging: A German reckons with history and home (2018). In the following sections I will first examine how Spiegelman and Krug respectively explore how war trauma is inherited by descendants of the people who actually experienced it, Spiegelman from the point of view of the son of Jewish concentration camp survivors, and Krug from the perspective of a granddaughter of a German soldier. Where Spiegelman's graphic narrative relies heavily on anthropomorphized animal characters and cat-mouse symbolism, Krug uses a collage method of piecing together historical clues, thus visualizing how gaps in knowledge about the painful past become existential lacunae. Both authors express confusion, shame, and frustration about their elders’ silence and seek to express, via the comics medium, how trauma and memory are transmitted from one generation to the next. In the last section of the paper, I will return to the foundational concepts of postmemory, memory, and WWII trauma in conjunction with autobiographical graphic narratives, and focus on individual and collective memory.

**Reckoning with Personal and Collective Histories: Nora Krug**

German-American writer Krug asks a basic question: “how do you know who you are, if you don’t understand where you come from?” (2018, n.p.). The question is superimposed on her own rendering of Caspar David Friedrich’s famous painting Wanderer above the sea of fog (ca. 1818) (Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer), which shows a solitary male hiker on a mountain peak gazing down on the mysterious cloud-covered mountainscape stretching out before him (Fig. 1 Left). An icon of the Romantic Sturm und Drang (storm and stress) movement, this painting is often interpreted as symbolizing a journey into the unknown. Another, more derivative, version of Friedrich’s painting adorns Belonging’s book cover, this time with a drawn figure representing Krug as the wanderer, looking over her shoulder, superimposed on a vintage photograph of a verdant German landscape which spreads out before her, placid and sunny with cozy farms, pastures, forests and a lake (Fig. 1 Right). Above this image of a peaceful, gemütlich (warm, cheery) German landscape, a few painted clouds are floating on yellow legal paper. The protagonist’s backward glance suggests her search for identity by looking back in
history, but also connects eye-to-eye with the reader, thus activating reader-response as part of the reading experience.

Krug’s use of yellow legal paper mimics Lynda Barry’s use of yellow legal paper in *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2017), a sprawling multi-media memoir which Barry refers to as an “autobifictionalography” (n.p.) (Fig. 2). Barry uses this term to question whether it is possible to completely separate autobiography from fiction. Krug’s intertextual gesture towards Barry is thus a subtle reminder that autobiographies may not always be entirely accurate versions of historical facts; that they are subjective; and - more broadly speaking - that the act of telling the story of one’s life, or one’s family saga, involves fictional conventions like narration, character development, plot, story arc, and figurative language. As the reader delves into *Belonging*, it becomes evident that the clarity of vision suggested on the cover is an illusion. More like the wanderer in the painting on the left, Krug faces a sea of fog as she begins to investigate her family’s experiences in Germany during World War II.
Like Barry, Krug’s artistic method is a mixture of scrap-booking, colage, and graphic narrative. She intersperses her comics with mixed pages of old photos, postcards, bric-a-brac, school exercise books, and official documents, which she has scavenged from her relatives’ attics or found in thrift stores. She wants to find out what her grandparents’ involvement was with the Nazi regime and why her parents have no connection to some of their closest relatives. But more than anything, she wants to come to terms with who she is. She lives in New York and is happily married to a Jewish American man, but she is frustrated by the shame she feels about Germany’s World War II atrocities. At the same time, she feels homesick for Germany; in fact, on the very first page of Belonging she introduces herself as “a homesick émigré” and offers reflections on “things German” that she misses and associates with Germanness (n.p.). She reflects, “after 12 years of living in America, I feel more German than ever before… and yet, the longer I’ve lived away from Germany, the more elusive my idea of my identity becomes” (n.p.). As she is looking at antique photographs of German landscapes, she feels haunted: “as I look, I feel as though someone were watching me from behind” (n.p.). The Jewish writer Eva Hoffman observes about the transmission of the Holocaust guilt, “writings deriving from intergenerational trauma frequently exhibit a haunted quality” (Harris, 2010, p. 129). Krug feels haunted by the foggy, silenced past that she cannot clearly see because no one in her family talks about it. She is confused about how it was possible for the Nazis’ systematic mass murder of millions of innocent people to take place in a landscape so rich in culture, and she wonders how her own family history inevitably is connected to those atrocious events in hidden ways.

The only way to find out is to go back to Germany, so Krug travels to Külsheim (her father’s hometown) and Karlsruhe (her mother’s hometown) in southern Germany and begins to interview family members, community members, and to gather information from public archives. She learns more about why her father broke with his family. In part it was because of events that took place before he was born as a Nachzügler (afterthought,
latecomer in the family) in 1946, over a decade after his older sister’s birth and twenty years after his older brother’s. His older brother, “whose shadow my father has lived in all his life,” was killed on the front in 1944 at the age of 18 (Krug n.p.). Krug’s father’s awkward identity as a replacement child is cemented by the fact that he was given the exact same name as his dead brother, Franz-Karl, and that “all throughout his childhood, his mother told him that his brother had been a sweet and well-behaved boy, unlike [he] who was a stubborn and ill-tempered child” (n.p.). Krug writes, “my father talks about his childhood as if it had been lived by someone entirely unrelated to him. ‘Let’s change the subject,’ he says whenever I ask him about it” (n.p.). Krug tries to piece together the fragments she finds about her father’s family, but is often frustrated by the fact that her elders are either dead or that, if they do agree to talk with her, there are things they don’t want to discuss. Krug’s first cousin Michael, the son of her father’s sister, did not even know that Krug existed until she contacted him. She senses the family’s losses and anger behind the silence, yet she struggles to shorten the gap in time and memory between herself and her grandparents’ generation.

Krug identifies her father’s older brother as the central catalyst for the family’s loss, shame, and silence. She finds some of her uncle’s school exercise books in a drawer, written in the Sütterlin script, the so-called German handwriting that was taught in German schools from 1915-1941 (Fig. 3). The startlingly antisemitic content of the school writing exercise, “The Jew, a poisonous mushroom,” is followed by one of Krug’s interspersed pages of “Things German: From the notebook of a homesick émigré,” which features a poisonous mushroom and a description of how Krug fondly recalls collecting edible mushrooms with her family and frying them in butter at the end of the day. She relates, “the poisonous red, white-polka-dotted mushroom is depicted in many children’s books. On New Year’s Day, it is a symbol of good luck” (n.p.) (Fig. 3). She also includes photos of her mother as a child dressed as a poisonous mushroom. While most of Krug’s examination of German culture is quite candid, even when there are shameful elements, she also makes obvious omissions. Fig. 4 shows Julius Streicher’s children’s book Der Giftpilz (The poisonous mushroom) (1938), a piece of antisemitic propaganda printed in the Sütterlin script, which appears to be the source text for Krug’s uncle’s school writing exercise. However, Krug does not mention Der Giftpilz, thus leaving her own positive association with mushrooms as a cozy, folkloric remembrance unchallenged and her uncle’s writing as unrelated to the Nazis’ dehumanization of Jews, who apparently do not belong to the human species on the cover of Der Giftpilz (Fig. 4). However, as Tatiana Prorokova and Nimrod Tal (2018) point out, “the role of the reader in de- and reconstructing the story in the graphic novel is of great importance to the understanding of the novel as a mediator between real or imagined historical events and the reader” (p. 8). Reader engagement needs to actively question what the author presents and to identify gaps in the text.
Fig. 3 Left: Krug’s paternal uncle’s school exercise book. Right: Krug’s reflection on mushrooms as food and benign folkloric symbol in German culture (Krug 2018, n.p.).

Fig. 4 Antisemitism: Julius Streicher’s Der Giftpilz (The poisonous mushroom) (1938).

Despite this slippage in representation, Krug does analyze her uncle’s death at the front in relation to how this event shattered family dynamics. As she searches among the remembrances available to her, she discovers that much of her father’s family’s shame is associated with her paternal grandmother. Her grandfather died when her father was only one year old. Consequently, her father never knew much about his father’s side of the family. Laconically, Krug remarks, “and because there was no story, there also was no
history” (n.p.). Yet, on the following pages she summarizes fragments of rumors intimating that her father’s biological father was not her grandfather, but her grandmother’s lover. She also briefly outlines how her grandmother mistreated Krug’s father and essentially abandoned him at a Catholic boarding school “where the students could choose between the stick or the belt” (n.p.). Krug’s father’s estranged older sister tells her that their mother first had gone off to Vienna with some soldiers, and then “was condemned from the pulpit by Külshäim’s priest because she had joined the Jehovah’s Witnesses” (n.p.). When Krug tries to get her father to talk about what he remembers about the Jews in Külshäim, he contradicts himself. At first, he remembers that as a child he didn’t understand why his mother told him not to play in the Jewish cemetery. Then, when Krug asks, “did nobody ever talk to you about what happened to the Jews in town?”, he replies, “there was no memory of Jewish people in Külshäim” (n.p.). At the archives, Krug learns that the Külshäim Jews were deported in 1939, the synagogue burnt down, and Jewish shops and homes were trashed and quickly taken over by Germans.

Fig. 5 Krug pieces together the history of her maternal grandfather Willi’s Nazi affiliations (Krug 2018, n.p.).

On her mother’s side of the family, Krug makes some surprising discoveries about her maternal grandfather Willi (Fig. 5). Her mother had told her that the grandparents were apolitical, stressing that Willi “was no perpetrator” and was “softhearted” (n.p.). He owned a driving school. Then, through her archival research, Krug learns to her surprise that Willi had been “a social democrat and a member of the Nazi Party” (n.p.). When Krug shares this information with her mother, she responds, “Really?! . . . I would never have thought
that” (n.p.). Krug discovers that before the war, Willi had a Jewish employer who, apparently, turned over his driving school business to Willi when the Nazis came to power. Was this in exchange for helping him hide? Or did Willi betray his employer? What is most startling to Krug is that her relatives defend Willi’s membership of the Nazi party, arguing that he had no other choice because people were pressured into party membership. Another surprise is that Willi’s mother was said to be Jewish. Krug is uncertain about what to believe and realizes that the gaps in her knowledge about what happened inextricably bind her to her relatives’ fragmented stories and their shame. Their guilt becomes part of her historical Schuld (guilt) as a German. Against the blank silence of her family’s lack of remembrances about the deportation of the Jews, she reflects that “each new word that is added to my family’s narrative entangles me, [and . . .] I am irrevocably intertwined with people and with places, with stories and with histories” (n.p.). Their silences and the stories they tell become the postmemories that haunt her.

Belonging brings to the fore how memory and identity mesh. Krug’s central question, “How do you know who you are, if you don’t understand where you come from?” sends her on a remembrance quest in search of meaningful pieces in the complex puzzle of her own identity. As she is searching for clues to her existence among the shards of lost remembrances, she is frustrated by the sudden lacunae of silence and denial, in particular in relation to her family’s activities and experiences during the Nazi regime. However, at the end of the book she acknowledges, “this is the closest I will ever get” (n.p.) and concludes that “Heimat [home, belonging] can only be found again in memory, that is something that only begins to exist once you’ve lost it” (n.p.). Art Spiegelman reaches a somewhat different conclusion at the end Maus, though his Leitmotif is the same as Krug’s: coming to terms with his own existence by searching for lost remembrances.

Reckoning with the Holocaust and Trauma: Art Spiegelman’s Maus

In comparison to Krug’s collage-style graphic memoir Belonging, which mixes comics with photography, postcards, and bric-a-brac, Spiegelman’s Maus (1997) has a classic comics layout with eight or nine panels per page, black-and-white illustrations, and bold lettering. Maus is a frame narrative with the complex double narrative structure of a biography embedded in an autobiography, thus featuring two primary narrators. Spiegelman’s alter ego, the narrator Artie, interviews his father Vladek, a Polish Jew now living in New York, about the years leading up to World War II, when his parents met and married and later their ordeals at the deathcamps. Vladek’s narration is rendered in broken English when he is telling his story to Artie, while his grammar is perfect in the sections depicting his life in Poland, thus indicating that the latter are translations of Yiddish, Polish, and German. Artie represents Vladek as a short-tempered, self-centered, controlling elderly man in poor health, who is prone to heart attacks.

Some critics analyze Vladek’s voice in Maus as “an act of ventriloquism. Art Spiegelman is ‘speaking’ in his father’s voice” (D’Amore, 2012, p. 218). The puppet-master scenario implied by the word “ventriloquism” suggests that Artie pulls the strings of his father’s performance. This is, of course, the case in the sense that Art Spiegelman is the author and that his alter ego Artie is the primary narrator in the frame tale. But
ventriloquism is not very helpful in identifying what Vladek’s distinct voice and bodily representation signify in *Maus*. I suggest that Vladek’s broken English grammar and broken health can be read as signs of how his life was broken by the Holocaust experience and hence as flagged signposts of his trauma. Trauma takes many forms and is difficult to pinpoint because it may be expressed in many different ways, though there are usually specific patterns. This is the case for Vladek, whose post-traumatic stress disorder expresses itself in his dysfunctional interaction with his family and in his hoarding and penny-pinching behavior. Diana Taylor (2006) reflects how “trauma is known only by the nature of its repeats . . . Past blows haunt our present and shake the individual or social body” (p. 1675). Artie inherits much of his father’s anxiety, but tries very actively to resist becoming like him. This struggle between father and son is a *Leitmotif* throughout *Maus*. Similar the central question in *Belonging* - “how do you know who you are, if you don’t understand where you come from?” - Artie tries to understand who he is by way of interviewing Vladek. Crucially, while Artie seems unaware of this, Vladek’s second wife Mala actually helps him understand Vladek’s background and fills in some of the gaps in the fragmented remembrances that Vladek presents Artie with. Mala is often entirely overlooked in scholarship on *Maus*. This is unfortunate, because in the absence of Artie’s mother Anja, Mala is the only woman of Anja’s generation to offer Artie any insight into how Jewish women experienced Nazi terror and the deathcamps. Vladek paints himself in flattering light in his narrative as very handsome, mentally strong, clever, and resourceful, while he depicts Anja as depressive, dependent, whiny, and needy (Fig. 6). Although Artie never directly questions Mala about her Holocaust experiences, her strong character suggests that to survive, Anja too must have been more resourceful during the Holocaust than Vladek lets on. Vladek’s derisive treatment of Mala also invites the reader to wonder how he treated Anja and whether her suicide had anything to do with his behavior and attitude.
Artie’s story of how he interviewed his father frames Vladek’s recollections of his experiences in Poland. Both parents, Vladek and Anja, were Holocaust survivors. They married in the late 1930s and had a young son, Richieu, who was killed along with his cousins by his aunt, Anja’s sister, in order to avoid deportation to Auschwitz. Art Spiegelman was born after the war in 1948 when Vladek and Anja lived as refugees in Sweden. They emigrated to the United States soon afterwards. Art Spiegelman grew up in Queens, New York. He recalls, “I don’t remember Vladek ever telling me much of anything when I was younger, about what he went through [during the Holocaust]. But when I asked as a young adult and he finally did slow down to tell me his story, he seemed to respond like it was my birthright to know these things” (Spiegelman & Chute, 2011, p. 14). The sense of having a right to know is an important element in the postmemory experience. Descendants are often frustrated by their elders’ unwillingness or inability to talk (as is the case for Krug), perhaps because their memories are too painful or shameful.

The most striking visual feature in Maus is Spiegelman’s choice of anthropomorphic character representation, with animal heads on human bodies. This technique is, of course, familiar from American comics and provides a humorous subtext to a serious topic, like a parody on the innocuous entertainment featured in the Sunday funnies and Disney animations. Spiegelman’s animal symbolism is poignant as he draws Jews as mice, Germans as cats, Poles as pigs, Americans as dogs, and so on. The cat-and-mouse symbolism can be meaningfully contextualized with the way that Nazi propaganda posters depicted Jews as vermin, especially rats, to the effect that when a Jewish artist like Spiegelman appropriates the racist slur, he replaces the nasty rat with a cute mouse. Spiegelman rationalizes, “the idea of Jews as toxic, as disease carriers, as dangerous subhuman creatures, was a necessary prerequisite for killing my family” (Spiegelman & Chute, 2011, p. 115). As discussed in relation to Der Giftpilz (Fig. 4), the dehumanization of Jews in Nazi propaganda aimed at justifying killing them. In analyzing Spiegelman’s choice of depicting Jews as mice, Fredrik Strömberg states, “it is easy to see that the relationship humans had with mice – where the former often subject the latter to various ways of extermination – will affect the reader’s interpretation of the story” (2010, p. 30). The reader-response generated through the representation of Jews as mice does indeed gear the reader’s sympathy towards the Jews as victims. Terry Barr (2009) discusses how, in his experience of teaching Maus to a Holocaust class, students are quick to discern that “Spiegelman wants us to identify with the mouse victims and thus experience the misery of Jewish life during the Holocaust” (p. 80). Barr points out, however, that the symbolism extends to Jewish experience of racism beyond World War II and in this way implies that as postmemory, the lingering effects of full-scale genocide is still with us. Barr writes, “by masking even contemporary Jewish characters as mice, Spiegelman asserts that questions of Jewish identity and stereotyping, as well as the lessons of historical anti-Semitism, transcend the Holocaust era itself and are still with us” (p. 80). Thus, the trauma that Vladek carries extends to his son as an after-effect of experiences so entrenched in his psyche that they have come to define who he is. Like many Holocaust survivors, he is haunted by
survivor guilt as well, which extends most recently to Anja’s suicide and his repeated role as survivor and guilt of outliving her.

In *Maus*, readers are reminded that Artie, like Krug’s father, grew up under the looming shadow of his dead older brother and that he had a sense of being a replacement child for the murdered Richieu. Jealous and frustrated in the manner of postmemory, Artie complains to his wife Françoise that his parents had a large photo of Richieu hanging in their bedroom. But they “didn’t talk about Richieu . . . He’d have become a doctor, and married a wealthy Jewish girl … the creep . . . it’s spooky having sibling rivalry with a snapshot” (original emphasis Spiegelman, 1997, p. 175). As an example of postmemory, Fig. 7 shows Artie confess to Françoise how as a child he had nightmares about being taken away by the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, a Nazi paramilitary unit responsible for surveillance and supervision of the deathcamps). The haunting presence of the SS, which was known for its terror, is signified throughout *Maus* in the lettering. In the second panel of Fig. 7, Artie recalls fearful childhood fantasies of being gassed in the shower with Zyklon B, the poison most commonly used in the deathcamps. Although born three years after the war, Artie’s angst expresses postmemory of what his parents’ generation of Jews experienced at the camps. The double s in the word “obsessed” visually looks like the stylized double s in the SS’s logo (Fig. 8 Left). Similarly, Vladek’s prisoner tattoo (Fig. 8 Right) cues the reader with a visual symbol of the deathcamps. Artie’s cigarette smoke in the background also becomes a pervasive motif as smoking chimneys from the camp crematoriums drift across Vladek’s Holocaust narrative, possibly a double play on the historical meaning of the word “Holocaust” which is “Jewish sacrificial offering burnt on an altar” (*Oxford English dictionary* 2002, p. 678).
As a young man, Artie had a nervous breakdown and was committed to a state mental institution (*Maus* does not explain why). He was released on the condition that he move back in with his parents. While he was living with them, his mother Anja, who had a long history of depression, committed suicide. She did not leave a note. After Anja’s death, Vladek marries Mala, whom he and Anja had known in Poland. Their marriage is unhappy. Both Mala and Vladek complain about the other to Artie that indicate a breakdown in sanity. Mala shouts, “he drives me crazy!” (p. 95), and Vladek echoes, “Mala makes me meshugah [crazy]!” (p. 98).

Artie had never felt close to his father, and as the story develops, it becomes evident why: Artie is impatient, nervous, and often acts immature around his father, who is controlling, neurotic, and narcissistic. Vladek obsessively counts his pills, straightens and organizes his things, hoards useless items like old calendars and restaurant menus, and insists that Artie, a grown man, finish all the food on his plate. Artie worries about representing his father as the “racist caricature of miserly old Jew” (Fig. 9), while Vladek, in contrast, scolds Artie for smoking and being messy and wasteful (p. 180). These tensions inform Artie’s search for answers about his parents’ life in Poland and his effort to understand why they became the kind of people he grew up with, Anja depressed and suicidal, and Vladek short-tempered and obsessive. Obviously, his most nagging concern is why his mother killed herself without leaving a suicide note. Her absence in the book indicates a lacuna, or gap, in Artie’s identity and his connection to the past. Anja only appears once in Artie’s frame narrative of *Maus*, namely in a flashback narrative inserted as a story-within-the-story entitled “Prisoner on the Hell Planet,” where she asks Artie if he still loves her and he reacts with resentment (p. 105). Long after her death, Artie learns that his father burned the journals she left behind detailing her memories about the deathcamps. He reacts with anger and calls his father “murderer” (p. 161). The loss of Anja’s voice illustrates the fractured nature of Artie’s sense of self and his insecurities about his own identity.

In the frame narrative around Vladek’s remembrances of his life in Poland before and after the Nazi occupation, in which Artie visits his father and records his memoirs, Mala often complains to Artie about Vladek’s miserly and obsessive-compulsive behavior. For example, she bursts out, “I swear, sometimes I think he married me because I’m the same size as Anja” (p. 133). Vladek had insensitively suggested that she wear his dead wife’s clothes to economize – which Mala understandably refuses to do. The clothes of his deceased wife may be seen by Vladek, according to the definitions of remembrances offered earlier, as an affective token of his beloved wife Anja. Artie tries to soothe Mala by saying that Vladek “has always been – uh – pragmatic” (p. 133). Mala gets furious, “Pragmatic? Cheap!! It causes him physical pain to part with even a nickell!” (original emphasis p. 133). The insensitivity of Vladek’s suggestion also points to his on-going war trauma and anxiety, which is something that Mala, also a camp survivor, is aware of, but does not accept. She believes that his behavior is not an effect of trauma, but simply a
reflection of his inner personality. “FAH! I went through the camps . . . All our friends went through the camps! Nobody is like him!” (Fig. 9). Mala’s objection to Artie’s theory that “the war made him that way” (original emphasis p. 133) is an important voice of discontent to Vladek’s grand narrative and offers the reader reasons to think critically about the way *Maus* portrays memory and postmemory through specific narrators’ lenses.

For Mala, the very idea of wearing her husband’s first wife’s clothes is offensive, not in the least because it erases her own identity as a unique individual by suggesting that as a wife, she merely replaces Anja and is not loved or respected for being who she is. Taken in conjunction with Vladek’s many other odd habits such as pilfering paper towels from restrooms to avoid buying napkins and tissues (p. 134), returning open food containers to the supermarket for reimbursement (pp. 249-250), and sneaking into a members-only country club with Artie to get free coffee and play bingo (pp. 196-197), the suggestion that Mala should wear his deceased wife’s clothes brings to light his obsessions and anxieties. Always a resourceful person (at least, according by his own reckoning), Vladek’s survival during World War II depended in large part on his ability to accumulate things to barter, trade, sell, or bribe others with. Before the war, money flowed easily for Vladek because his father-in-law was a millionaire who owned factories and supported a large extended family, and Vladek had managed to work himself up to be his wealthy father-in-law’s right-hand man. As the threat of Nazi occupation of Poland became a reality, a diamond ring or a gold watch could buy passage and shelter from the Nazis. During the ghettoization of the Jewish population in Poland, a pack of cigarettes or a bar of real chocolate could save lives. At Auschwitz, a slice of bread or a handyman skill could buy life-saving favors. Using derogatory terms, Vladek complains to Artie that Mala is wasteful and a prodigious spendthrift. He cannot tolerate if she includes as much as a hairbrush in her grocery purchases, and as the narrative unfolds, he becomes increasingly obsessed with the idea that she only wants “the money, the money” (p. 129). What both he and Artie neglect to acknowledge is that Mala, too, is a deathcamp survivor. However, her full story is never told, and the absence of that invites the reader to question Vladek’s justification for scrimping and saving, even though he is a wealthy man with money in the bank (p. 128).
Fig. 9. Mala and Artie (Spiegelman, 1997, p. 133).

In a very brief section, where Artie talks with Mala, while Vladek is taking a nap, Mala mentions her own experiences in a Polish ghetto before deportation. Mala’s maternal uncle hid her mother in a coal cellar. She says, “then he got me a job scrubbing the people’s filth – vomit! excrement! – out of several apartments, and I managed to smuggle her out. Eventually she and my father both ended up in Auschwitz. They died there” (original emphasis pp. 94-95). As one of Maus’ slippages in narrative logic, it apparently does not occur to Artie that in the absence of his mother’s diaries about her World War II experiences, he could ask Mala, his stepmother, about hers. Oddly, Artie expresses no interest in pursuing Mala’s story. Consequently, her Holocaust narrative ends before it begins with Maus’ characteristic silence about Jewish women’s remembrances. Nevertheless, Mala’s brief story of doing filthy work to save her mother and to survive says a lot about the resilience of Jewish women like herself. Linguistically, this is underscored by her command of English grammar and syntax. Where Vladek’s broken grammar, poor health, and high anxiety level signify his trauma, Mala’s apparent good health, independence, and perfect command of language are signs of her ability to cope with adversity, adapt to new situations, and eventually overcome traumatic experiences.

Maus is a harrowing tale on many levels. As historical narrative it documents personal experience within the greater collective context of human suffering, loss, and survival during World War II and the Holocaust. The delicate balance between the personal and the collective creates a double consciousness. Like Belonging, Maus has a primary narrator who struggles to figure out his personal identity based on the fragmented pieces of remembrances told in stories. The drive to connect with the larger picture of nation and ethnic group is evidence of an urgent need to look beyond one’s own family and the
routines of everyday life to find meaningful answers to personal questions, not in the least because stories are part of our communal property and follow specific narrative patterns. Ken Plummer (1995) elicits, “as we tell our stories, discursive patterns guide, or compel, us to tell stories about ourselves in particular ways” (p. 26). Graphic memoirs like Belonging and Maus show how second-generation writing is selective about narrative patterns. Both works highlight how postmemory is a product of real events and real people’s authentic experiences. Powerfully provocative in their use of the comics medium, these two works reflect and refract historical events from within the intimate experience of personal remembrances and show how memory, like a ghost, informs and haunts people’s identity.

Collective Memory and the Spectral Turn

Memory and identity are deeply interlocked in the human psyche. Graphic memoirs like Krug’s and Spiegelman’s utilize a combination of words and illustrations to represent people, places, and events, often based on interviews with family elders. This method relies heavily on dialogic reconstruction of past events. It blurs the boundaries between past and present because the characters’ interpersonal relationships, emotions, and moods influence their memories and the way they communicate with one another. In the case of Holocaust literature, this method is referred to as second-generation writing, or, as previously discussed, postmemory. Postmemory “characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (Hirsch, 2001, p. 10). Postmemory is painful and highly emotive for second-generation writers. Often they are plagued by guilt, anger, despair, or feel fettered by the haunting presence of past events, unfree to create their own narratives because their parents’ or grandparents’ memories have become an integral part of who the younger generation is in the present, thus chaining the younger ones on the personal level to traumatizing collective experiences in the past. Second-generation graphic memoirs and autobiographies therefore invite us to consider how memory and identity are intertwined and how the representation of a traumatic past in words and pictures shapes both personal and collective memory and identity (Sicher, 2004, p. 266).

From an epistemological point of view, postmemory is related to haunting, ghostliness, and spectrality, as debated in the so-called spectral turn beginning in the 1990s, with Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx (2006) leading the way theoretically for deconstructing and analyzing the lingering effects of ideologically combustible historical events like wars and revolutions and their inflammatory political rhetoric. However, whereas Derrida focuses on how the past haunts the present as a discourse, specifically how the specter of Marx is “a figuration of presence-absence, the negotiation of which compels a ‘politics of memory, of inheritance, and of generations’” (Blanco & Peeren, 2013, p. 7), postmemory constitutes a much more experiential, personal memory of mind-numbing anxieties and horrors not experienced first-hand, but ingrained into the child’s mind as an effect of having grown up in families where the parents suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder or felt guilt over having survived horrific ordeals, like the Nazi deathcamps, where death was certain and survival random and often depended on
dumb luck. In postwar Germany, in comparison, many children grew up with parents who refused to talk about what had happened during the Nazi regime and their own involvement in it. World War II is present for the postwar German generations as an unacknowledged ghost, silent and cold, and for many it is a source of *Kollektivschuld* (collective guilt) to be German. Many Germans feel bitter and frustrated about their country’s history. Krug writes, “whenever I traveled abroad as a teenager, my guilt traveled with me. ‘Just say you’re from the Netherlands,’ my aunt told me before each trip. I should have taken her advice” (Krug n.p.). Krug then relates how she would experience hostility from people of other nationalities, even people spitting at her or yelling “Heil Hitler!” This goes to show that identities are tied to memories, both by insiders and outsiders. Being Jewish or German means to be part of social-group-specific collective identities and consequently to share in distinct collective memories pertaining to World War II and the Holocaust.

Collective memory is an important aspect of postmemory. The term *collective memory* was coined by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) after World War II to describe how a social group’s identity is shaped by shared memories and knowledge. In contrast to the way history is typically presented as a comprehensive, unbiased, chronologically accurate narrative, collective memory – much like personal memory – is fragmentated and emotive, and often structured narratively around a social group’s unique values and perceptions of other social groups. Bernice Eisenstein (2006), whose parents were Holocaust survivors, summarizes how her personal postmemory of her parents’ ordeal overlaps with collective memory of Jewish people in general:

> […] without the Holocaust I would not be who I am. It has seared and branded me with its stippled mark on my forearm and pulled me into its world, irrevocably, as its offspring. The collective memory of a generation speaks and I am bound to listen, see its horrors, and feel its outrage. (Eisenstein 2006, p. 25)

As *Belonging* and *Maus* demonstrate, many years after World War II both Germans and Jews still have intense feelings about the Holocaust and try to understand what happened and how it has shaped them. Spiegelman relates that when he was in Germany at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1987, a German reporter barked at him, “Don’t you think that a comic book about Auschwitz is in bad taste?” To which Spiegelman replied, “No, I thought Auschwitz was in bad taste” (Spiegelman & Chute 2011, p. 155). The past keeps haunting the present and breathing into our self-perception. Historian David Lowenthal (2015) writes, “irrelevant and irretrievable as the past may seem, it is by no means simply sloughed off. To assuage the grief of loss, the pain of rupture, the distress of obsolescence, we cling avidly to all manner of pasts, however alien and fragmentary” (p. 11). And nowhere is this as evident as on the personal level. For example, in remembering his father, Haruki Murakami reflects on a traumatic memory his father shared with him of witnessing a beheading.

> […] my father’s recounting of this cold-blooded beheading of a man with a sword became deeply etched in my young mind. To put it another way, this heavy weight my father carried – a trauma, in today’s terminology – was handed down, in part, to me, his son. That’s how human connections work, how history works. It was an act of transference and ritual… it would remain an open wound for both of us (Murakami, 2019, p. 21).
To write a memoir is also an act of transference of remembrances and a literary ritual that follows narrative patterns with characters, plotline, mood, tone, use figurative language, and other storytelling conventions. To use the comics medium for this purpose is to produce an “affective experience” with visual representation of memory, postmemory, and the contemporary life (Hirsch, 2004, p. 1211).

In conclusion, Hirsch's theory of postmemory has become essential in describing how descendants of Holocaust survivors and other human-rights atrocities cope with the after-effects of trauma. Hirsch conceives of postmemory as experiences that have been "transmitted ... so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch no date). Postmemory is a connection to the past, which is "mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch no date). Hirsch argues that although the traumatizing experiences happened in the past, "their effects continue in the present" (interview) and affect the next generations in ways that often defy comprehension. As Spiegelman and Krug’s graphic memoirs show, "memories are not personal or familiar. They are.... more broadly affiliative - mediated by public images and stories that are transmitted to us from overpowering historical events like the Holocaust" (Hirsch no date). Consequently, as graphic memoirs Krug and Spiegelman’s works show the complex intertwining of memory and identity in contemporary trauma studies.

References


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