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Books of The Times; Rethinking the Holocaust With a Comic Book

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

'Maus II' A Survivor's Tale. And Here My Troubles Began. By Art Spiegelman 136 pages. Pantheon Books. \$18.

When the first volume of "Maus" appeared in 1986, it created a sensation: Art Spiegelman had chosen to recount the experiences of his father, Vladek, as a Holocaust survivor through the form of a comic book, a form associated in most readers' minds with the Sunday funny papers. That Mr. Spiegelman portrayed Jews as mice and the Nazis as cats, however, did not end up trivializing the event, as one might fear; rather, it served to goad the reader into looking at the event anew. By turns horrifying and funny, "Maus" created a moving portrait of one man's terrifying encounter with history and his son's frustrating attempts to come to terms with him.

Whereas "Maus" jumped back and forth between Vladek's experiences in Poland before the war and his current life in Rego Park, Queens, skirting the actual horror of the Holocaust, "Maus II" directly addresses Vladek's experiences in Auschwitz (or Mauschwitz, as it's sometimes called in the book). It's a riskier, more difficult proposition for the artist, and Mr. Spiegelman's character -- the mouse named Artie -- worries that the whole idea of the book is presumptuous. "I mean, I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father," he tells his wife, Françoise. "How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? . . . of the Holocaust?"

Yet by writing and drawing simply, directly and earnestly, Mr. Spiegelman is able to lend his father's journey into hell and back an immediacy and poignance. The story takes up where the last volume left off: having tried to escape to Hungary, Vladek and his wife, Anja, are caught by the Nazis and shipped off to Auschwitz. There they are immediately separated. Vladek manages to survive by parlaying a variety of skills into food and small indulgences. He teaches English to a Polish officer and in return receives some real food and a pair of leather shoes. He volunteers for a work crew that's being sent to Birkenau, where he's able to see Anja for a few moments; and at great risk, he begins trying to smuggle food packets to her. Always there is the threat of beatings, starvation, illness and death. Nearly every day "selektions" are being made, determining who shall be saved to work and who shall be sent to the gas chambers.

As the Russian army advances, Gestapo officers force Vladek and the other prisoners to march back toward Germany. Along the way, many die of hunger; others suffocate in the cattle cars that have been arranged as transports. In Dachau, Vladek tells his son, his real troubles began: lice, typhus, starvation. In the infirmary there is food and there are only two people to a bed, so Vladek buys time there by opening a wound in his hand but soon comes down with typhus. "Every night people died of this," he tells his son. "At night I had to go to the toilet down. It was always full, the whole corridor, with the dead people piled there. You couldn't go through. You had to go on their heads, and this was terrible, because it was so slippery, the skin, you thought you are falling. And this was every night."

Somehow, miraculously, through will and ingenuity and sheer random luck, Vladek manages to survive. He returns to the village of Sosnowiec, and there he is reunited with Anja. They later learn that their son Richieu, Artie's brother, has died during the war, and in time they immigrate to America, where Anja eventually commits suicide.

By cutting back and forth between Vladek's wartime experiences and his current existence in New York, Mr. Spiegelman is able to underscore the shocking discontinuities of life. Scenes of Vladek bickering with a grocer about returning a half-eaten box of Special K are juxtaposed with his reminiscences of nearly starving to death in Dachau; scenes in which he warns his son not to trust black people are juxtaposed with his reminiscences of being persecuted as a Jew in Poland; scenes of his terrible suffering in the death camps are juxtaposed with his efforts to use those memories to manipulate his family and friends. He rails against his second wife, Mala, for spending all his money, fakes a heart attack to get his son's attention and whines constantly about everything from the lack of matches to broken plates in the kitchen.

Even as the reader develops an understanding of this tormented, unhappy man, one comes to sympathize with his son's sense of exasperation. Artie the mouse (and presumably Art Spiegelman, his creator, who works in real life as a co-editor of the comics and graphics magazine *Raw*) feels an enormous sense of guilt and inadequacy in the face of his father's history. "No matter what I accomplish," he tells his psychiatrist, "it doesn't seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz." But at the same time, he feels anger and frustration.

In recounting the tales of both the father and the son in "Maus" and now in "Maus II," Mr. Spiegelman has stretched the boundaries of the comic book form and in doing so has created one of the most powerful and original memoirs to come along in recent years.