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The Transition from Comic Strip to Holocaust Graphic Novel: A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract: *Since its inception, 'comics' or 'comic strips' have always been considered to be a mean for entertainment, humour and laughter. However, with the gradual transformation of the comic strips into graphic novels, a change in both the presentation and reception of the mode of graphic narratives can be perceived. The objective of this paper is to trace the development of the graphic narrative form in the context of one of the most decisive events of the current history, the Jewish Holocaust, and thus establish the validity of the graphic narratives beyond a mere form of adolescent entertainment.*

Comic strips have a short history unlike other visual media namely painting, sculpture, drawing or even what we may call today caricatures. The history of comics though brief is scarred with impediments and paradoxical events. The first half of the nineteenth century saw the simultaneous birth of both photography and comics. Photography challenged autographic skills¹. and transformed visual culture. The artist at that period of time faced certain novel difficulties as they needed to cope with the new mimetic conception introduced by photography.² Until the late eighteenth century painters subsisted partly on painting portraits and landscapes and often religious subjects too but the onslaught of photography snatched away their meager income. In consequence, visual culture searched for something innovative which would be able to contend with photography and underscore the power and virtuosity intrinsic to autographic skills. One reaction to this skill was the artistic avant-garde, which offered an alternative to the frozen moment advertised by the early photographers. As a result, starting from the mid-nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century western art witnessed an extraordinary burst of creative energy that transformed the contemporary artistic view on the artist's position and the value of an art work. All forms of art – be it theatre, architecture, design, dance or music discarded the traditional artistic model and adopted an approach that emphasised both the artist's subjective and biographical expression and his political and social environment. Photographers on the other hand, declare that by capturing through the camera an

important or crucial moment constituting private or collective memory, they create a realistic experience. Thus from modern art, which since the primary stages blurred the boundaries between painting and sculpture, theatre and performance, dance and music, was born comics into this melting pot of hybrid arts which provided wonderful visual and narrative experiences. Comics as an art form was not prepared to fall behind other arts and it joined forces, creating new expressive avenues and establishing an artistic genre which was ultimately dissected into two separate but parallel paths: one is the written word and the other is the picture or in other words the written story and the visual illustration, either of which was not made the driving force of the story separately.

Comics did not have an age-old artistic tradition and history and so their legitimacy as a respectable artistic expression was not evident. Though the number of comics artists was fast increasing and Rodolphe Topffer (1799-1846) was still considered the father of modern comics, the art of graphic representation, for a long period of time, was not considered an art form for the adult intellectuals but viewed as children's art targeted exclusively for a young, shallow public, not bread in high cultural values. This derogatory reputation is based on ignorance and lack of openness in academic research which dismissed the comics when they first emerged contributing to the extreme difficulty the comics had in defining themselves as an artistic genre.

Since the 1950s the term comics became ingrained till Art Spiegelman proposed the term 'comix' for this hybrid art of words and pictures, which would help comics to be purged of its comic association. Before 'comics' became the established term, the genre was known in the official eighteenth and nineteenth century artistic language under a motley range of names.³ Topffer suggested the first term that can be called the closest to what we term comics today – *histoire en estampes* (stories in etching) – as a reference to the method he used (etching) and as an alternative to the word 'printed' which had already been absorbed by literature. Later terms referred to the property of comics as a visual medium: *histories en images* (picture stories), *recits illustres* (illustrated strips), *films dessines* (drawn films), *bandes dessinees* (comic strips, literally: drawn strips) and, of course, comics, the best known term for the genre.

The tags associated with comics have undergone extensive changes and there is a paradigmatic shift in their target readership. Primarily appearing in children's and young adult's magazines, the trend attracted adult readers during the latter half of the twentieth century and this gave rise to the graphic novel.

The introduction of adult themes in graphic novels inspired several artists to introduce this genre of art to the political and social events which pervaded the contemporary world. A budding medium of

expression, the graphic novels made their presence felt alongside the traditional genres of art like print literature, paintings, theatres and cinematic representations. As a result of this increasing attention to the graphic novels, the intensely personal, national as well as racial experiences also found their voice through this art form. Along with the other accounts, we find the history of Nazi occupation as well as personal experiences of the Second World War represented through stories and symbols in the graphic novels.

Primo Levi, an Italian Jewish chemist and writer, born in 1919 and a holocaust survivor, when trying to relate his experiences during his eleven months in Monowitz concentration camp stumbled because he believed that his experiences were of a magnitude that cannot be expressed through conventional language or art forms: “Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offence” .⁴ He further stated: “ If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new born language would have to have been born”.⁵ This triggers a paradoxical tension between expressing a self experienced account and the inability to do so due to the lack of proper words. Probing deep into Levi’s words, it is enticing to perceive visual representations as an alternative approach of testifying to the experience of the genocide without resorting to an inadequate verbal language. However, these visual representations have their own limitations as well and they often integrate written description or narration into its presentation.

It is a widely believed notion that the artistic representation of an event as serious as the Holocaust is at best a folly and at worst an unethical trivialization and insult to the most devastating genocide in the human history. Theodor Adorno , Beryl Lang and Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi have all made this argument to varying extents, and it is also visible within a more popular discourse in the controversy surrounding Roberto Beghini’s 1997 comic film *La Vita e Bella* .⁶ On the other hand, it should not be ruled out that the holocaust survivors caught up in the genocide themselves felt an obligation, an overwhelming desire to visually record the nature of the events they were living through; to ‘put down every detail of this unfathomable place’.⁷ For these artists, visual representation was no less than the crucial act of witness, a vital response to the excruciating experience of the holocaust that they went through. Declaring these artistic endeavours inconsequential by comparison to the scale of the event is impossible when that endeavour is inextricably linked to the artist’s subjective self. Dismissing such images as frivolous would be derogatory to the artist’s experience of the genocide itself.

The problematic nature of the artistic representation of the holocaust is undeniable. If we go by the widely accepted view that the Final Solution is an event without analogy in the human history,

then in relation to artistic representation it seems fair to side with Elie Wiesel when he says that: "... it imposes certain limits. There are techniques that one may not use, even if they are commercially effective. In order not to betray the dead and humiliate the living, this particular subject demands a special sensibility, a different approach, a rigour, strengthened by respect and reverence, above all faithfulness to memory."⁸ Even if we deny this singularity and declare with Saul Friedlander that 'the extermination of the Jews of Europe is accessible to both representation and interpretation as any other historical event', it remains difficult to deny his subsequent claim that 'we are dealing with an event which tests our traditional, conceptual and representational categories, an 'event at the limits.'⁹ Both Wiesel and Friedlander, despite their differing views on the Holocaust's place in history, agree that representing it pictorially – as Levi argued in relation to language – requires 'a different approach', a rethinking of conventional representational technique.

To understand the history of Holocaust themed comics we have to go back to the Second World War. The first holocaust themed comic book was drawn in 1942 in a concentration camp in Gurs, formed just after the German invasion of France in 1940. As in other French concentration camps, in this camp also the prisoners were allowed to have some artistic activity. Created in the concentration camp, Horst Rosenthal's comics *Mickey au Camp de Gurs* survived. The creator died in Auschwitz in the same year.

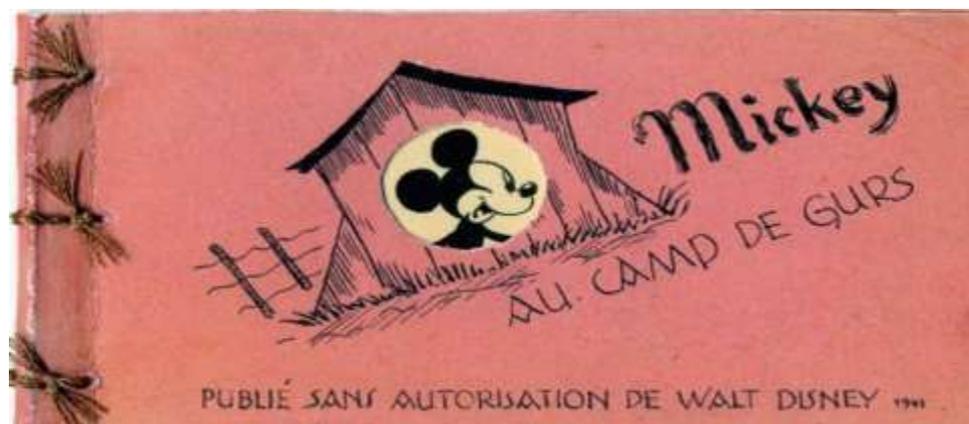


Figure 3: Horst Rosenthal: *Mickey au camp de Gurs*. 1942, Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris

In the United States, the first holocaust themed comics presenting Hitler as the principal negative character on the cover was the first volume of the mainstream comic book series *Captain America*. Written by Joe Simon and drawn by Jack Kirby, *Captain America* is an American soldier with special powers confronting Hitler and the Nazis, who personify the evil. Published in March 1941

just before America entered the Second World War, the author's desire was to support America's entry into the war. However, Captain America did not attempt to faithfully present the events in Europe. It aimed at highlighting the heroism of the American soldiers who fought against the Nazis.

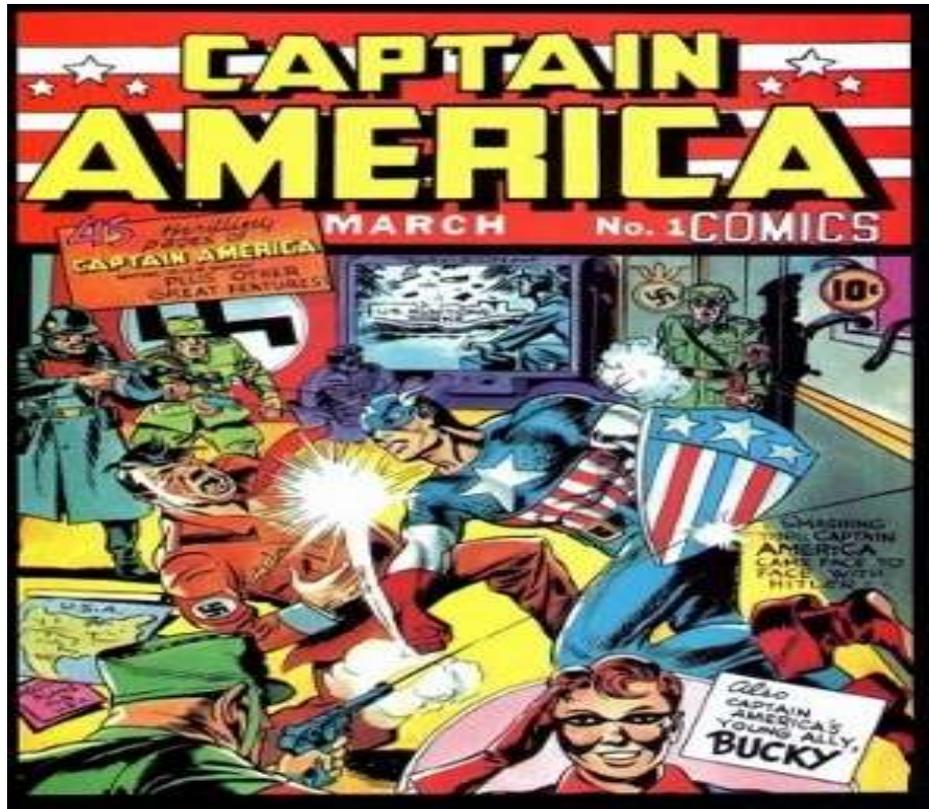


Figure: 4 Captain America, first volume (March 1941) – Cover

An upsurge in the public interest towards the holocaust was witnessed during the 1950s and 1960s due to the publication of Anne Frank's diary in 1952 and the Eichmann trial in 1961. As a consequence, in this period, several holocaust themed comic books appeared in the USA, although neither of them aspired for historical accuracy. Their principle aim was to tell stories about heroic American soldiers or superheroes saving the Jews. Sam Kveskin's comic book *The Butcher of Wulfhausen*, for example, presents the story of a cruel former German commander in hiding, who is discovered and killed by an American agent. The trend continues in Steve Harper and Neal Adams' *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, where the protagonist is a giant golem revenging on the Nazis for the murdered Jews.

In 1955 the publication of Bernard Krigstein's *Master Race* provided the world with a comic book of unique history and visual innovations. It tells the story of a former



Nazi camp commander hiding in New York paying off for his crime-infested past. The use of the variety of techniques borrowed from movies and several visual symbols in this text influenced Art Spiegelman in the creation of *Maus*. However, the principle value of the work is that it offers a fairly faithful picture of the Jewish population and the horrors of death camps in an early period when very little were said about these tragic events.

In the 1970s, as the survivors of the Holocaust began to disappear and future generations wanted to hear more about the past, the second generation Holocaust narratives emerged. It was in this period that Art Spiegelman created the first version of *Maus*, which was later published as a graphic novel in two volumes in 1986 and 1991. *Maus* was the first comic book to win widespread critical acclaim and prove to the audience that comics can be much more than tales about superheroes. Exploiting the tensions between the childish comic book genre and the serious topic as well as the significance of the Holocaust on its own certainly contributed to the serious reception of this graphic novel.

Inspired by the success of *Maus*, a plethora of Holocaust themed graphic narratives appeared after 2000, of which Miriam Katin's *We are On Our Own* is an excellent example. *We Are On Our Own* is an autobiographical graphic novel where the author tells the story of herself as a two year old child fleeing with her mother from the Nazi occupied Budapest. Reduced almost to paupers, they hide in the countryside with false identification proofs, waiting for the Second World War to get over. The work presents the escape and the hiding from the view point of little girl, Miriam, to mollify the horrors of the war through the discourse of an infant. The grave and grim mood of the narrative parallels the dark images created by the densely drawn pen lines. At the dramatic moments, the lines leave their frames, making the atmosphere even tenser. While the disastrous past is presented in black and white, the present is portrayed in vivid colours. However, the structure of the graphic novel with two parallel story lines, depicting Miriam's difficult childhood and its effects in her adulthood, is intensely comparable to Spiegelman's *Maus*.

While Miriam Katin incorporates her own memories in an autobiographical album, the Polish Jewish descent Joe Kubert in his graphic novel *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (published in 2003) imagined what might have happened to him and his family during the war in Poland had they not had immigrated to America in the 1920s. thus, Joe Kubert

presents true historical event of the Warsaw ghetto uprising with fictional heroes. The story is preceded by an introduction in which the author reports on the creative process. In spite of being fictional, the extensive research work behind the creation of *Yossel: April 19, 1943* imparts historical accuracy and immense credibility to it.

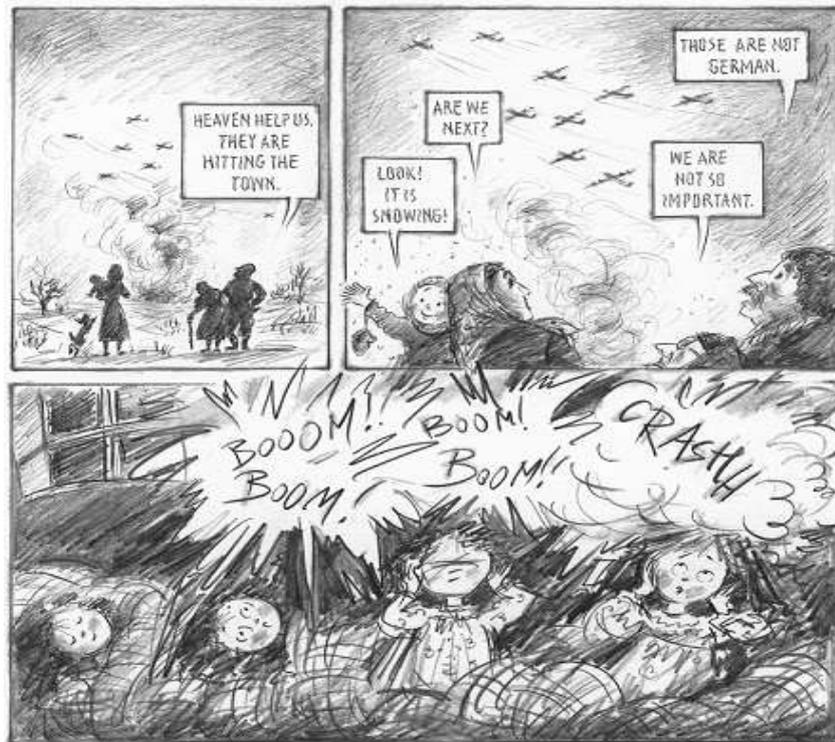


Figure 5: Miriam Katin: *We Are On Our Own*. Drawn & Quarterly, Copyright © Miriam Katin, 2006, page 48, panels 1-3

The theme of the Holocaust reappeared in the mainstream comics in 2008 with the release of the first of the five issues of *X-Men: Magneto Testament* by Greg Pak, Carmine Di Giandomenico and Matt Hollingworth. This series depicts the childhood of Magneto, one of the major anti-heroes from the well known Marvel Comics series, the *X-Men*. The setting of the story is Nazi Germany during the Second World War and it narrates how Magneto as a young Jewish boy survived the events and as a result of his traumatic childhood became the negative superhero of the later *X-Men* stories. Although the original series is a fictional story of a mutant human species, in *X-Men: Magneto Testament* the authors produced a historically faithful presentation of the era of Hitler's Germany as a result of the collaboration with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre. The series



shows a classic mainstream format: traditional round speech bubbles for the dialogues, rectangular ones for the explanations and monologues and regular frames filled with grayish colours. While some of the eminent graphic narrative artists deliberately chose black-and-white drawings to highlight the tragic events, in *X-Men: Magneto Testament* bright and glossy colouring is adapted which can distract the readers. Here, the splashing of red blood in violent scenes strongly reminds of action comic books, jeopardizing the aimed attempt at the historical accuracy which is underlined in the epilogue.

In 2007, Eric Heuvel in collaboration with Ruud Van der Rol and Lies Schippers presented *A Family Secret* and *The Search*, a two book series of authentic Holocaust narrative published by the Anne Frank House. Originally in Dutch, the books were subsequently translated into English, German, Hungarian, Polish, and other languages. The intended purpose of this production was to teach the subject of the Holocaust to students from thirteen to sixteen years of age, given which, the project was handled with utmost care. The website of the Anne Frank Centre in Amsterdam declares its authenticity by stating that the “historians from the Netherlands and abroad evaluated and advised on the project at all phases of its development, and many teachers and pupils also collaborated in the production of the book.”¹⁰

In *A Family Secret* and *The Search* the long lost friends Helena Van Dort, the daughter of a Dutch police officer and Esther Hecht, the daughter of a Jewish doctor retrospect their experiences in the Nazi occupied Netherlands during the Second World War. The use of the vivid colours for the present and muted ones for the past complies by the subject matter dealing with a dim and dark past compared to a brighter present. The two texts parallelly present to the reader the holocaust experience in the Netherlands from the perspective of both the Jewish and the non-Jewish characters. The non-Jewish resistance to the Nazi atrocities is presented through the character of Wim Van Dort, Helena’s brother while Theo Van Dort, the second brother represents the pro-Nazi youth. In spite of not being an autobiographical narrative, this series of two graphic novels are historically accurate to the utmost and impress the adults as well as the teenaged readers alike.

As with other genres, the comic books devoted to the Holocaust are largely uneven. Works of very mediocre quality or of little public interest rub shoulders with true successes. At least until the present, the biggest successes have not been the titles demonstrating the greatest willingness to historicize. Since *Maus* the number of stories

broaching the Holocaust has multiplied and several signs indicate that the treatment of the subject remains neither simple nor insignificant. The choice of black and white graphics largely dominates as if “the unspeakable” cannot be done in color. From Spiegelman’s *Maus* to Croci’s *Auschwitz*, this bi-chromatic choice is the prerogative of stories that try to draw nearer to the Shoah. In the work of Miriam Katin, color is reserved for the passages set in the present with past in sepia, whereas in Kubert’s illustrations, besides the absence of color, the choice not to ink in the drawings delivers an unfinished product. In addition, each album is accompanied by a preface, afterword, or explanatory texts. In an introduction Joe Kubert explains the reasons why he created *Yossel*; *Auschwitz* includes a ten-page dossier presenting, among other things, a glossary of camp vocabulary, the testimony of the survivors, and Pascal Croci’s explanation of his approach. Despite the legitimacy conferred to the genre by Spiegelman’s work, comic book authors still must justify their approach, which is not the case in literature or in cinema. However, the fact cannot be denied that the evolution of the comic book these last thirty years and its maturation into graphic novel, in which *Maus* played a major role, have permitted the genre to broach the most delicate and heretofore taboo subjects and more than often have been successful in fathoming the horrors and infinite pathos of such a sensitive historical reality as the holocaust.

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