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## Comparative Analysis of Survivor Identity and Traumatic Memory

### Introduction

Traumatic memory and survivor identity are intertwined. When traumatic events occur, such as the Holocaust, the experiences which the survivors undergo will permanently change their perception of self and the world around them. This paper will analyze the relationship of traumatic memory and survivor identity in the graphic novel series *Maus: A Survivors Tale*, *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*, and the documentary *Hiding and Seeking*, and will discuss their similarities.

### **Maus: A Survivors Tale and Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began**

Art Siegelman explores the concept of survivor identity through the telling of his father's experience of the Holocaust in his graphic novel collection, *Maus*. The reader is introduced to Vladek (Art's father) at the beginning of the graphic novel. Siegelman depicts an interaction with his father when he was between the ages of ten or eleven where he fell while rollerblading and was abandoned by his friends.

VLADDEK: Why do you cry, Artie? Hold better on the wood.

ART: I- I fell, and my friends skated away w-without me.

VLADDEK: 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! (Siegelman, *Maus* 5)

Vladek's survivor identity after the Holocaust is characterized by his hesitancy towards others. He does not believe that friendship is developed through enjoying activities with one another, rather, he believes that true friendship is revealed in challenging situations. This hesitancy towards others could be due to Vladek being betrayed by Polish smugglers.

SMUGGLER: Do you have the rest of our payment?

VLADDEK: Yes of course. Here. Wh-where is your partner going?

SMUGGLER: He's phoning ahead to the mend who will meet you at the border. He'll join us on the train. Don't Worry!

VLADDEK: But, of course, we DID worry. So, all of us together started on our journey... We travelled less than an hour 'til we came to Bielsko-Biala. Here I used to have my factory. And here the smugglers disappeared. It was a big commotion...Gestapo came on every side.

GESTAPO: JUDEN RAUS!

VLADDEK: In Katowice, it was only to THEM the smuggler phoned.

GESTAPO: Here they are!

VLADDEK: They marched us through the city of Bielsko, we passed by the factory what once I owned... We passed the market where always we bought to eat, and passed even the street where we used to live, and we came 'til the prison, and there they put us. (Siegelman, *Maus* 155)

Vladek trusted the smugglers to take himself and his wife to safety and was instead met with betrayal. This betrayal led to Vladek and his wife being put in internment camps for the rest of the war. In these camps they both experienced and witnessed unimaginable horrors. It is not unreasonable to assume as the reader that the internment camps were a factor of Vladek's wife's'

suicide in the years following the war. If the smugglers would have not betrayed them it is possible that their outcome would have been much different and that they would have potentially made it safely to sanctuary in Hungary. The impact of the smuggler's betrayal and Vladek's distrust of others was visible during his time in the internment camps, illustrated by a conversation with his wife.

VLADDEK: Did Mancie bring you my letters?

ANJA: Yes and when she can, she gets me jobs in the kitchen! My friends wait outside and I bring them scraps.

VLADDEK: No! Save your scraps. What if you lose that job? What if sometime happens to Manice? Don't worry about friends. Believe me, they don't worry about you. They just worry about getting a bigger share of your food! (Speigleman, *Maus II* 56)

Traumatic memory is a part of shaping an individual's survivor identity. The experiences one undergoes will in turn shape their outlook on the world, and in turn, their self-identity. Vladek's experiences during World War two, the betrayal he experienced from the Polish smugglers and witnessing the horrors inflicted upon his prison mates in the internment camps led to Vladek developing a pessimistic outlook. He no longer trusted those around him and urged his wife and son to follow suit. Vladek's identity as a survivor of the Holocaust has been formed by his traumatic experiences. Individuals are a product of not only biology and their psyche, but their external environment as well. The traumatic events of the Holocaust shaped Vladek's survivor identity to become pessimistic and distrusting of others. Traumatic memory is examined throughout *Maus* indirectly. The events of the novel are told through memory recall by Vladek

and in turn relayed to the reader by Art. While it is not said directly, the reader understands that the events and themes they are presented with are traumatic and dark.

ART: So you don't know what happened to Mandelbaum?

VLADDEK: He got killed. Or he died. I know they FINISHED him.

VLADDEK: Maybe on the walk to work, a guard grabbed his cap away.

GUARD: Go get your cap- Quick!

VLADDEK: So what could he do? He ran to pick it up. And the guard shot him for trying to escape. The guard got a congratulations and a few days' vacation for stopping the escape. I don't KNOW if this was how it was with Mandelbaum- only that very often they did so... They wanted only to finish everyone out. It was very hard work and very little food... Maybe they kicked and hit him in his head because he couldn't work fast enough... or maybe he got sick. So they put him first in the "Hospital" and then in the oven. (Speigleman, *Maus II* 35)

Vladek reveals the normalization of violence that he witnessed in Auschwitz. Although he did not know the outcome his friend faced in the camp, he was able to imagine a multitude of various scenarios of what could have occurred. He speaks of these events casually while on a walk with his son which could represent the normalization of the trauma he experienced. It is not outrageous for the reader to assume that Vladek witnessed horrors that he did not tell his son about.

### **Hiding and Seeking**

*Hiding and Seeking* is a documentary film by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky that examines the post-war experiences and inter-generational trauma of a Jewish family. Menachem Daum becomes concerned about a divide beginning to emerge between Jewish community and

non-Jewish individuals after hearing a recording of a rabbi preaching hatred of non-Jewish peoples. Survivor identity is examined through the interviews he conducts with the Holocaust survivors. When speaking about his father, a Holocaust survivor, Daum says that he is concerned that his children do not inherit his fathers' beliefs about all non-Jewish people. Daum asks his father what the Jewish people learned from the Holocaust, to which he answered, "Not to trust the gentiles. Not to trust them at all. Only when you see he's dead, can you believe that he's a decent gentile. Not before." (Daum 00:19:40-00:19:58).

Daum's father's survivor identity was shaped in part due to his belief that the Polish betrayed Jewish people by cooperating with the German Nazi's. This distrust extended beyond the Polish people and eventually came to blanket all non-Jewish peoples. This ideology was one that Daum wished not to be instilled in his sons and future generations of Jewish peoples. He hoped to teach his sons tolerance and peace towards other belief systems in order to create a better future for all people.

Traumatic memory, the events of the Holocaust particularly, shaped many of the interviewee's survivor identity. Daum's wife's father recalls the experience of the German soldiers searching for Jewish people as he was in hiding, "You can imagine what we were thinking. When we heard that they left we thought that now the gentiles were going to kick us out after the Germans, you understand? We were sure after this he would yell us to leave. He didn't. They said whoever would hide Jews would get killed." (Daum 01:08.00-01:09.09). The experience of being hunted was traumatizing to him and left him with a pessimistic outlook. When asked "Let's say the situation was reversed. He needed a place to hide, you would have been the Pole and a Jew would come to you for a place to hide, would you do it?" (Daum

01:10.27-01:10.37) he answered “In such a war, if your life was at stake, if they killed you for this, who would have taken such a risk, you understand? No.” (Daum 01:10.39-01:10.49).

Traumatic memory was explored directly in the documentary. Interviews were carried out and participants were asked directly to recall events in which they were exposed to trauma. Traumatic memory was then analyzed to show its impact on the survivor’s identity, particularly, the survivor’s alienation from the non-Jewish community. Their alienation is due to a distrust of non-Jewish individuals as a result of their belief that the Polish community was responsible betrayed the Jewish people to the Nazis.

### **Comparative Analysis**

Both the graphic novels and the documentary tackle the relationship between traumatic memory and survivor identity, particularly, how traumatic memory becomes an agent of alienation to survivors. Individuals who have undergone traumatic events may feel hesitant to trust other people again. In a case where an entire society deemed a group of people to be unfit (the Jewish people in Nazi occupied territory), the survivors of that entire group of people may not want to rejoin that society again afterwards. This can result in intergenerational trauma, as shown in *Hiding and Seeking*, and a divide is created. Both works aim to reconcile this divide and create awareness of the issue at hand. Through his graphic novels, Siegelman is able to tell his father’s story and experiences during World War two and keep his memory alive. Daum attempts to directly close the gap between Jewish and non-Jewish peoples through educating his sons and creating a documentary film that can further educate other people.

*Maus I* and *Maus II* indirectly explore traumatic memory’s impact on survivor identity. Siegelman’s choice of medium, a graphic novel, to portray his father’s experience tells the *story*. It uses caricatures of the people in his own and his father’s life, and everyone is portrayed by an

animal based upon their ethnicity. The usage of animals is based upon stereotypes of each nationality, and it explores the idea of separation in a visual manner. Germans are portrayed as cats, Jewish people as mice, and Polish people as pigs. This visual portrays the divide amongst people at that time: Everyone was not viewed as a part of human-kind, rather, as separate and different entities. This contrast's Daum's documentary in which he directly interviews family members about their traumatic experiences. The documentary is portrayed in a realistic stylistic manner and follows Daum as he attempts to reconcile the perspective differences between his sons and their grandfather. The overarching goal of the documentary is to illustrate the inter-generational traumatic divide that has occurred between survivors of the Holocaust and their decedents and attempt to repair it.

### **Conclusion**

Each person will express and deal with trauma differently, and in no way will each person fit a uniform depiction of a specific survivor identity. A survivor's identity is created by their experiences, and each person will have different experiences. Overarching themes and motifs can be examined across multiple people, such as the case with *Maus*, *Maus I*, and *Hiding and Seeking*. Each examines the feelings of distrust that can occur in the aftermath of a traumatic event, leading to the division of people. Both use inter-faith tolerance and respecting the memories of the survivors of the Holocaust as a way to create unity and passage forward for humanity.

Works Cited

*Hiding and Seeking*. Directed by Menachem Daum and Oren Rudavsky, First Run Features, 2004.

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