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# Re-Evaluating “Authenticity” In Holocaust Literature – Memory And Trauma In Recent Holocaust Fiction

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RE-EVALUATING “AUTHENTICITY” IN HOLOCAUST LITERATURE – MEMORY  
AND TRAUMA IN RECENT HOLOCAUST FICTION

by

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Bachelor of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a structural and para-textual analysis of recent Holocaust fiction. Challenging the assumption of the superiority of “authentic” representations of the psychological effects of this historic event, I will highlight the cultural and pedagogical effects of fictionalized accounts of the Holocaust. A short analysis of the terms “memory,” “trauma,” and “history” as understood in the research field of Holocaust studies, will be substantial in debunking the failures of memory as perfect ways to recreate historical “truths.” Theories about trauma and memory by scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra will serve as reference points in the validation of fictional accounts of the Holocaust as important alternatives to first-hand accounts. I will demonstrate the writers’ awareness of a realistic representation of traumatic experiences without claiming that they represent the truth. The authors need to be aware of their positioning in the Holocaust discourse as writers of fictional accounts and make this aspect visible in their writings so that the texts cannot be classified as fraud or representations of appropriation of victimhood. Analyzed texts will include *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald, *Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *The Canvas (Die Leinwand)* by Benjamin Stein. These texts diverge from previous representations of the topic in terms of narrative technique and various literary methods that are combined into hybrid forms. In doing so, they emphasize the constructivist nature of narratives as such, and offer essential new ways of representation

that do not focus on historical “truths,” but on ways in which memory tricks people into presumably false identifications of identity and history. They thus represent poignantly the inner lives of traumatized persons and the people they are in contact with.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Memory, Trauma, and History in Post-War Literature and Culture .....	11
Chapter 2: Remembrance in Art Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i> – The Holocaust as Second Generation Testimonial.....	21
Chapter 3: Sebald and the German Empathic Narrator in <i>Austerlitz</i> .....	35
Chapter 4: The Importance of Authentic Identity in Benjamin Stein’s <i>The Canvas</i> .....	46
Epilogue: Do Facts Matter in Holocaust Memories?.....	53
Works Cited .....	61

## INTRODUCTION

Given the rise of new debates about modern forms of antisemitism, it is crucial to critically engage with Jewish history. It is especially in Germany that the critique of the politics of Israel as a nation state has emerged as a form of antisemitism. This can be seen in Günter Grass' prose poem "Was Gesagt Werden Muss" (2012). It might be likely that people mask their antisemitism with an "informed" critique based on political structures in the Middle East. Another reason for a renewed interest in the history of Jewish people is the fact that more than 70 years have passed since the Holocaust and most survivors have already passed away. This absence of live sources requires new forms of transmission of "history" and "memory." The realm of fiction especially offers various ways to compensate for the loss of first-hand accounts without running the danger of appropriating the unique experience of individual Holocaust survivors. However, this is nevertheless a sensitive topic and authors as well as readers have to be aware of what is acceptable and what potentially crosses the lines of what can be said in the discourse of Holocaust studies.

I claim that fictional literary accounts of persons that have not experienced the Holocaust first-hand can produce an equally adequate representation of the effects that the Holocaust had on the emotions and psyche of actual survivors. In my thesis, I analyze ways in which four writers from the United States and Germany have written about the Holocaust. I incorporate literature by Jewish and non-Jewish authors in order to see whether one can distinguish differences in the portrayal of the Holocaust. Thus, nationality

and the relation to Jewish people will be central factors in my thesis. The importance and the role of the Holocaust in the literary history of Germany will also be central in this discussion, as it offers crucial insights in how the two German states have dealt with this specific part of their history.

The main objective is to prove the fallibility of memory and its role in the reconstruction of history. The four texts I chose as basis for my analysis all pose a challenge to the assumption that memories of traumatic experiences provide the only possible position from which to convey an accurate “picture” of the past. Those works are *Maus* (1996) by Art Spiegelman, *Austerlitz* (2001) by W. G. Sebald, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *The Canvas (Die Leinwand)* (2010) by Benjamin Stein. I argue that these newer works of Holocaust literature make obvious that individual memory alone cannot be guaranteed to produce an effective account of the Holocaust. By portraying disruptions that show the flawed character of memories, the narrators in those different works are able to adequately describe the effects of traumatic experiences without claiming that it is a truthful or authentic representation of history. Therefore, all of these writers connect aspects of fiction with fragments of history to prove that both are similarly effective and offer a justification for fictional Holocaust accounts. In this thesis, I analyze the different approaches to narrative and metafictional techniques these writers employ to achieve their goals.

In order to understand important terms such as “memory,” “trauma,” and “history” it is important to distinguish these terms from their everyday use. In the discourse of Holocaust literature seminal works by critics such as Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra have been influential in the understanding of these concepts as part of

the Holocaust and trauma discourse. In the first chapter, I provide definitions of these terms as understood by Caruth and LaCapra. This theoretical background is substantial in the analysis of the four texts discussed in this thesis.

The Holocaust is perceived as one of the most traumatic events in recent human history. It was a genocide that cost up to six million Jewish lives, as well as those of other minorities and groups of people that did not fit the ideal of the national socialists. This “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” was a turning point in history as it affected nearly every aspect of life and proposed a complete renovation of (German) society; which posed a central challenge in post-war German history. But the Holocaust also had effects on a geo-political scale, following the mass emigration of Jews from Central and Eastern Europe, and the formation of modern Israel on then Palestinian territory.

It is no surprise that such a traumatic event needed to be worked through by individual survivors in different ways. Many survivors decided to shut this aspect of their life out of their memory. Others spoke publicly about their personal experiences in order to portray the horrors of the Holocaust, in hopes that such an atrocity might never happen again. A third option was the literary expression of the experience in different forms. The Holocaust memoir became a vivid genre in the representation of subjective history. Countless first-hand accounts were published in several languages in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Thus, the Holocaust memoir has become a standalone genre in literature.

However, the connection of literature and the Holocaust has oftentimes been seen as problematic. Theodor W. Adorno postulated in his essay “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” from 1951: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” (30). This often misquoted utterance does not imply that one should not write at all about

the Holocaust, as some critics understood the dictum, but rather how to write about the Holocaust without reducing the subject matter to an aesthetic expression. As one of the three founders of the seminal Frankfurt School, he belonged to the critical movement that questioned the effects of the Enlightenment on contemporary society, a society that allowed for the Holocaust to happen. In this sense, Adorno formulated this postulation to debunk the shortcomings of contemporary art, especially poetry. It is the tradition of (poetic) aesthetics that, according to Adorno, seem unfit to express the profundity of an event such as the Holocaust:

Der absoluten Verdinglichung, die den Fortschritt des Geistes als eines ihrer Elemente voraussetzte und die ihn heute gänzlich aufzusaugen sich anschickt, ist der kritische Geist nicht gewachsen, solange er bei sich bleibt in selbstgenügsamer Kontemplation. (30)

This quote illuminates that a mere self-sufficient aesthetic representation that does not penetrate the traumatic and psychological effects of the Holocaust cannot be adequate. This notion was implicitly challenged by poets such as Paul Celan. This kind of poetry proves that art (literature) after Auschwitz is possible, even needed, in order to commemorate this atrocity so that it will not be forgotten for the generations to come, as Bertolt Brecht argues in his poem “An die Nachgeborenen.”

Considering the coming generations is crucial as first-hand victims are ageing—cultural representations of the Holocaust by second generation survivors of the Holocaust become essential in the process of commemoration. However, this gives rise to the questions of how one can write about the Holocaust, and who can write about it? Furthermore, it is important to ask what genres and narrative techniques are adequate for people that have not experienced the Holocaust first-hand. In the second chapter, I analyze the possibilities of representing the Holocaust as a second generation survivor

that uses graphic art to recount his father's experiences during and after the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus – a Survivor's Tale* was first published in its entirety in 1996 by Pantheon Books. It consists of *Volume I: My Father Bleeds History* (1986), and *Volume II: Here My Troubles Began* (1992). This graphic novel is very interesting as it transcends genre boundaries. It is a semi-biographic account that the author reconstructs through interviews with his father. In a metafictional approach, the author situates himself and the process of researching and writing this text within the text itself. However, he uses the trope of defamiliarization: he symbolically refashions the Jewish people as mice, while the Germans are shown as cats. The equally important Polish people are represented as pigs.

In analyzing this account of a Holocaust survivor, I will show the importance of literary works of second (and following) generations of Holocaust survivors. The role of Holocaust survivors and second-generation survivors in the transmission of the cultural legacy of survivors and their linkage between the past and the present, as shown by the characters in the text, is of utter importance. I analyze techniques and genres the writers apply to create an "authentic" account of what happened. My thesis is that Art Spiegelman created a sober and, therefore, effective representation of the Holocaust that commemorates the Holocaust victims without being overly sentimental. In order to prove my thesis, I will follow three steps. First, I outline the importance of second generation survivors in Holocaust literature. In a second step, I take a look at the genre of the graphic novel and show what techniques render this genre adequate in the representation of the Holocaust. In a last step, I will focus on aspects of authenticity and memory as shown in *Maus*. In doing so, I turn once again to Adorno's dictum and show how *Maus*

adequately incorporates what Adorno set as requirements in the literary representation of the Holocaust.

The representation of the Holocaust is a topic that also depends on the country in which it is produced. Writings and receptions of Holocaust literature in Germany and the United States differ vastly. While American writers of non-Jewish descent write in a context that is not grounded in the question of guilt, German writers have always had to face scrutiny when writing about this specific topic. For a long time it was questionable how a generation of perpetrators and the following generations could possibly represent the traumatic experiences of a genocide. It was especially crucial to pay attention to the ways in which Jews were represented in the works of non-Jewish German writers. The literatures of both German states show a lack of Jewish characters. While not being completely absent, they are a marginal group in German works. Instead of focusing on the victims of the Holocaust, some German writers of the postwar period fashioned themselves as victims (see: Agnes Mueller, *The Inability to Love*). Complicating this problem is to distinguish who is allowed to write about the Jewish experience, and whether German authors are able to write about it without misrepresenting the experience (Prager 85). One of the most prominent works about World War II is Günter Grass's *Die Blechtromel* (1959) which is mostly set in Danzig, a region with a large Jewish community. However, this group is underrepresented, and furthermore described in terms of anti-Semitic stereotypes. In a later novel, *Tagebuch einer Schnecke* (1972), Grass creates a protagonist who is a "good German" and shows empathy and friendship towards Jews during the Nazi regime. However, this portrayal is also solely based on the German experience and does not attempt to show a critical analysis of the universal situation.

Brad Prager points out that German authors' "ignorance about the Holocaust and that literature of the postwar period [...] was defined by a lack of understanding for the victims and a constitutional incapacity to deal with the truth" (86). Winfried Georg Sebald was very vocal about this aspect of German authorship (and the social discourse in its totality) so that he distanced himself from such a notion (86). Sebald's literature is focused on the merging of traumatic experiences of both Germans and Jews which is mostly shown in the narrative structure and voice of his novels. Peter Morgan claims that "Sebald takes the stories of his subjects and represents them through his own narrative voice, blurring the boundaries between self and other, past and present, memory and history" (195). Critics questioned this method of affective writing if it is not critical enough to distinguish between the narrator and the victim.

In the third chapter, then, I analyze W. G. Sebald's mode of writing in terms of narrative voice and discuss the inclusion of photography in the novel *Austerlitz* (2001). My aim is to prove that Sebald's method does not distort the Jewish experience, but garners a new insight of national and transnational evaluations of the Holocaust in the face of losing access to first-hand accounts of Holocaust survivors due to age. The new generations are responsible to counter this problem by creative writing when "history has moved to the point where memory no longer exists, [and] commemoration, rather than witnessing, will be the national focus" (Morgan 200). His work also offers a new critical analysis of the Holocaust from a German perspective. To grapple with Sebald's work, I first survey theoretical approaches to empathetic writing. I then apply these insights to a close analysis of the text in conjunction with the narrative voice. I also take the effect of photography into account and analyze how these photos support the text or create a

moment of pause and re-evaluation of the text itself. An aspect to keep in mind is the question of “authentic” memory. In a last step I compare the results of my analysis to a book with a similar topic, Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002), which deals with similar themes. Foer, however, draws upon family history as a descendant of Holocaust survivors, and writes from an American perspective. My comparison will be based on nationality and authorship as Jewish and non-Jewish writers.

The Holocaust holds an important place in German postwar memory. Yet, as Thomas Trezise points out, the Holocaust was for a long time perceived as “unspeakable.” But is the Holocaust itself therefore “incomprehensible,” “inconceivable,” “unthinkable,” or even “unimaginable?” The author pinpoints three different understandings of this term and addresses the aforementioned question. Trezise’s first notion of the term suggests that the Holocaust “exceeds any and all means of verbal representation at our disposal” (39). By referring to Adorno’s notion of “the unspeakable acts of Hitler,” the author underlines the second understanding of this term. Thus, the unheard and vile act is “entirely outside of the normative framework in which the judgement itself is articulated” (39). Finally, the term also refers to the quality of the Holocaust. It is perceived as “sacred” and therefore “*cannot* be spoken, because it lies outside the profane world and its language, or *may not* be spoken, because speaking it would be a profanation” (39, emphasis in original).

The problem of the unspeakable aspect of the Holocaust was already addressed by Adorno in his famous dictum “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch” (30). Here, it is not so much the fact that one cannot express the Holocaust at all but the mode in which the historical incident is represented in literature that is being challenged.

Adorno's dictum "refers primarily to the relation between ethics and aesthetics in the post-Holocaust era, and especially in the representation of the Holocaust itself" (Trezise 44). The problem in literature lies in the possibility of deriving pleasure from it.

Furthermore, aesthetic stylistics might take away from the horror of the Holocaust.

Therefore, in the first place

Adorno alludes to the immemorial association of art and sensation (*aisthēsis*), that is, pleasurable sensation, and in the second, to the redemptive function it has fulfilled as a sensuous realization of the ideal, as an imposition of meaning on the otherwise meaningless, of form on the formless, or of familiarity on the radical unprecedented. (44)

However, Adorno later postulated that committed literature is very much capable of conveying a valuable account of the Holocaust: "the literature of commitment tends to reproduce the very world to whose transformation it is declaredly committed (45). In his *Negative Dialectic* (1966), Adorno partially revises his dictum by stating that "[d]as perennierende Leiden hat so viel Recht auf Ausdruck wie der Gemarterte zu brüllen; darum mag es falsch gewesen sein, nach Auschwitz ließe sich kein Gedicht mehr schreiben" (335). This tendency is directed against the notion of historiography and its claim for "truthfulness." Ranked before historiography is the diary and the chronicle. They are described as "purportedly plotless and, what is more, both affording the greatest possible temporal proximity between events and their recording" (48). Another genre in representation, and maybe the most employed one, is the memoir. According to Lang,

[m]emoirs are unable to claim the temporal immediacy or the plotlessness of diary or chronicle while 'indulging,' more than historiography does or is willing to admit, in figuration or imagination and even in the critique of historical or literal representation itself. (qtd. in Trezise 48)

In the final chapter, I will examine the representation of memory and the importance of an alleged authenticity in the works of Benjamin Wilkomirski and Benjamin Stein. Both

have a very distinct approach to the notion of memory and identity in the context of Holocaust representation in recent German-speaking literature and culture. My main focus here lies in the question of authenticity in memoirs and in fiction, and whether such a claim for authenticity is of utmost importance in an age where first-hand witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust are at a very advanced age.

A comparative analysis of these four texts will show the beneficial contribution fictional texts have on raising awareness to this important part of history. After analyzing the individual texts, I connect motifs and techniques that are prevalent in these texts, such as the use (or mentioning) of photographs, hybridization of genres, the role of narrators in fictional Holocaust literature, and the techniques to question authenticity. Ultimately, I show which effects such writing evokes, and how these effects are produced.

Furthermore, I point out what kind of gaps such writings produce, and show that these texts do not offer closure in order to show that the process of Holocaust memory is an ongoing process and needs to be continued.

CHAPTER 1

MEMORY, TRAUMA, AND HISTORY IN POST-WAR LITERATURE

AND CULTURE

In his seminal work “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” (1989) historian Pierre Nora formulated a fundamental critique of the influence of history on human memory. In Nora’s words, there has been an “equation of memory and history” (8). This is for him a problem, as both concepts are thoroughly distinct:

On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory—unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth—and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than shifted and sorted historical traces. The gulf between the two has deepened in modern times with the growing belief in a right, a capacity, and even a duty to change. Today, this distance has been stretched to its convulsive limits. (Nora 8)

In short, memory is a living and integral part of society that is open to the dialectics of life, that is forgetting and remembering. History, on the other hand, is an incomplete reconstruction of the past. Nora concludes that “Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative” (8f.). He furthermore argues that history is detrimental to memory, which it continuously tries to destroy: “History’s goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place” (9). In order to uphold memory, Nora postulated the idea of the *lieux de mémoire*. Nora describes these containers as “fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it”

(12). They are an expression of a lack of spontaneous memory. One is therefore required to “deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally” (12). Nora argues that without such arrangements, history would “soon sweep them away” (12). Taking this into account, Nora argues that our notion of memory today is nothing more nor less than history. Accordingly, “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (13). This memory, however, is not primarily individual but a collective memory. Nora’s findings have initiated a “memory boom” in academia but have also been regarded as rhetorical exaggeration. Nevertheless, in the research of the Holocaust, this theoretical framework has been used frequently to analyze collective memory and collective trauma (Suleiman 2). The Holocaust is also seen as “a powerful prism through which we may look at other instances of genocide” (Huysen 14). Yet, herein lie essential questions and problems such as “who should remember the Holocaust,” and how can we “avoid the banality of pious generalizations?” (Suleiman 2). However, there is also a very critical opposition to the notion of a collective memory. Susan Sontag argues that

there is no such thing as collective memory. [...] All memory is individual, unreproducible—it dies with each person. What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the story in our minds. (85f., emphasis in original)

Suleiman contests this standpoint by arguing that “memories are communicable.” She states that “[i]f enough people consider a given set of individual memories significant, then those memories contribute to the formation of collective memory precisely as the stipulation of what is important to a group at a given time” (4).

However, “Psychologists as well as historians have shown that the memory of past events is not fixed but changing, influenced by the individual’s or the collective’s

present situation and projections for the future” (4). This adds a very important aspect of unreliability to the topic which will be more important in the discussion of “authenticity” in the fictional representation of the Holocaust. Suleiman calls this problem the crisis of memory. She argues that

[i]ndividual memories may become an object of public debate or conflict; they may help to establish a consensus or an “official memory” about the collective past, they may figure as representative of the experience of a particular group; and, finally, they may crystallize the difficulties of remembrance itself, self-reflexivity. (5)

In this thesis, an incident of such a public debate and conflict will be addressed with the Wilkomirski Affair of the late 1990s in Germany (Chapter 4). This literary debate is an expression of the importance of “authentic” memory in our society which is sometimes called “the era of witness,” which Suleiman furthers as “the era of memory” (8). It is axiomatic that:

Whether in the purely private realm, as manifested by the increasing practice of writing diaries and memoirs, most of which will never reach publication, or in the public realm, as manifested by the unabated interest in (and production of) memorials, anniversaries, documentaries, public commemorations, truth commissions, artistic representations, and literary memoirs—including especially the historical memoir that recounts an individual’s experiences in a time of collective crisis or trauma—memory and memorialization continue to be central preoccupations [...]. (8)

Some of the most influential works concerning the description of trauma in narratives are Cathy Caruth’s seminal works *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) and *Trauma. Explorations in Memory* (1995). Using a primarily psychoanalytic approach, the author tackles problems of traumatic experiences in several cultural artifacts. Caruth defines traumas as repetitive instances that are not in the control of the victims. Therefore, traumas are not “initiated by the individual’s own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events

to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside of their wish or control” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 2). As she points out, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Caruth, *Trauma* 4f.). This dispossession of one’s own control of an experience that is, nevertheless, part of the individuals themselves is symptomatic for traumas. However, it is important to mention that trauma, unlike its original meaning in Greek (a bodily wound), describes in modern psychological terms a wound inflicted upon the mind and only in later events effects the human being:

[...] so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way that it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (*Unclaimed* 3f., emphasis in original)

The fact that the origin might be unknown until the trauma manifests itself in the human, makes this aspect interesting for psychoanalytic theory and literature. People have been known to recall flashbacks of scenes without understanding their relation to their own experiences. Caruth calls this phenomenon a crisis of truth by referring to its paradoxical aspect: “that in trauma the greatest confrontation with reality may also occur as an absolute numbing to it, that immediacy, paradoxically enough, may take the form of belatedness” (*Trauma* 6). As Caruth argues, literature and psychoanalysis are “interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (*Unclaimed* 3). After all, such a wound cries out to in order to tell a truth that otherwise cannot be understood, as Caruth postulates. Yet “[t]his truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (*Unclaimed* 4). A term to describe the time between the traumatic experience and its symptomatic outburst is “latency” which is the time of unawareness. Caruth argues that this term “paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal

structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time” (*Trauma* 8). This will be especially important in the discussion of the portrayal of trauma in W. G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz* (Chapter 3).

The connections between trauma and memory are as peculiar and paradoxical as the survivor’s relation to his or her experience. Caruth claims that “the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory” (*Trauma* 151). Recollection of traumatic events can manifest in either dreams or flashbacks. Both incidents have in common that the traumatized person does not actively provoke a recollection. Therefore, the memory which might be subject to “later repression or amnesia” is most likely “constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness” (152). As an experience that is not part of one’s own consciousness, a traumatic experience challenges the traumatized person in such a way that the recollection is utterly incomprehensible and almost impossible to process. This personal history is, therefore, impossible to integrate into the person’s own idea of their history. In opposition to that, “[t]he history that a flashback tells [...] is, therefore, a history that literally has no place, neither in the past, in which it was not fully experienced, nor in the present, in which its precise images and enactments are not fully understood” (*Trauma* 153). These factors evoke the difficulties in representing a truthful history by means of memory as it is perceived as an incomprehensible image. Scholarly debates also point out that memory itself is not infallible. Dominick LaCapra argues in *History and Memory after Auschwitz* that memory might also include a “nostalgic, sentimental turn to a partly fictionalized past that is conveyed in congenially ingratiating, safely conventionalized narrative form”

(LaCapra, *History* 8). According to LaCapra there needs to be an interplay between memory and history:

Memory—along with its lapses and tricks—poses questions to history in that it points to problems that are still alive or invested with emotion and value. Ideally, history critically tests memory and prepares for a more extensive attempt to work through a past that has not passed away. (8)

The author distinguishes two kinds of memory. First, there is the primary memory. This is the actual memory of the person that experienced the incident. It is liable to suppression or repression but also the more immediate form of memory. The secondary memory, however, is achieved by working on primary memory either by the witness himself or herself or by another person. LaCapra points out that memory can never be fully primary only, as traumatic experiences create gaps that are being processed and assimilated (20f.). Yet this secondary memory might also be a way to transmit memory. This is a topic that Caruth elaborated on in her research.

In the second chapter of *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth outlines the possibility to pass on traumas (25-56). This phenomenon has also been observed in the validation of accounts of second generation Holocaust survivors. Their accounts have often been neglected, but become ever more important with the loss of actual survivors. The term second generation was developed in the field of psychological studies, and later expanded to literary studies. The term refers to children of Holocaust survivors, and is representing both a “discontinuity and massive destruction wrought by the Shoah, requiring that history ‘restart’ with a first and therefore a second generation, and the continuity of Jewish history that is passed down between the generations” (McGlothlin 17). McGlothlin argues that “the most prominent aspect of these [second generation] texts [...] is the distinct sense of being marked by an unlived narrative, of carrying the trace of

the Holocaust past within the present” (8). This notion of an aspect of oneself that cannot be integrated within one’s own consciousness is reminiscent of the original trauma of the first generation. McGlothlin points out that the

children of survivors inherit their parents’ wounds, or more precisely, they inherit not the wound itself (the direct experience of trauma and physical damage), but the mere mark of the wound, the signifier for an experience not personally experienced. (8f.)

This results in, what I would call, a “secondary trauma.” Second generation survivors have no own memory or experience of the Holocaust. However, they are closely linked by that incident that does now allow to divorce from its effects: “The event that has marked the second generation [...] is inaccessible, yet the mark of that experience remains and, like the phantom pain, continues to haunt the bearer” (10). A way to work through this sense of absence is imaginative writing. McGlothlin argues that writers of the second generation

attempt to negotiate the crisis of signification and their severed relationship to the Holocaust through the process of imaginative writing, in which they attempt to explore through language an event that they do not personally know but that they nevertheless sense by its absence. (10)

In this attempt, the second generation “seeks to artistically restore some of the holes that riddle the memory of the catastrophe, to imagine an event of which one cannot be epistemologically certain” (10). A structure to overcome this seemingly impossible attempt is, what Marianne Hirsch called “postmemory.”

Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as a

distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. [...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow 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. (*Frames* 22)

However, the prefix “post” does not “imply that we are beyond memory and therefore perhaps, as Nora fears, purely in history” (22). The use of this prefix is uneasy, as it has different meaning in different theoretical concepts in intellectual discourses that seem to break with their intellectual predecessors. Hirsch argues that

[l]ike the other “posts,” “postmemory” reflects an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture. And yet postmemory is not a movement, method, or idea; I see it, rather, as a *structure* of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. (*Postmemory* 5f., emphasis in original)

However, it is important to stress that “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right” (5, emphasis in original)

According to Young, second generation accounts are also interesting because they portray “the uncanny middle voice of one who is in history and who tells it simultaneously, one who lives *in* history as well as *through* its telling” (53, emphasis in original). Faye claims that the accounts of the second generation also offer a valid representation of the Holocaust: “It proposes that the position of being *in* history, of being in a position thereby to ‘remember’ and to testify to the truth of the Shoah should not be restricted to the category of those who ‘directly experienced’ it as a historical event” (526, emphasis in original). Faye concludes her article as follows: “For repetition to pass to testimony requires that a truth be communicated to another, who then also takes on the (impossible) responsibility for communicating/narrating that truth to others again” (543). The author here clearly advocates the validity of second generation accounts. Does this notion of transmissible trauma, however, also count for authors who are not

descendants of actual Holocaust survivors? In recent literary works, various authors have made use of the notion of the “middle voice” to distance themselves from the claim of being authentic narrators of Holocaust memories.

Dominick LaCapra’s research of the use of the middle voice in literary fiction and history has also been very influential. He claims that both genres have in common that “all narratives ‘construct’ or shape and some narratives more or less dramatically distort their objects” (*Writing* 10). This is especially true for the use of the middle voice, as the narrator is always inside the story, while he or she is also mediating—thus works also on a meta-level of narration—outside of the story. LaCapra also argues

that narratives in fiction also involve truth claims on structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering a reading of a process or period, or by giving at least a plausible “feel” for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restricted documentary methods. (13)

This is especially the case when the middle voice is used in those fictional narratives as it serves as a means for oscillating between the active and passive voice. The notion of the middle voice was already discussed by Roland Barthes in his seminal essay “To Write: An Intransitive Verb.” It refers to a grammatical mode of Ancient Greek that lies between the active and the passive voice. Such a grammatical phenomenon is not given in any modern language “but may at best allow for a discursive analogue of it” (*Writing* 17-19). LaCapra quotes Barthes’ example of “sacrifice” to show the performative character of the middle voice:

the verb to sacrifice (ritually) is active if the priest sacrifices the victim in my place for me, and it is middle voice if, taking the knife from the priest’s hands, I make the sacrifice for myself. In the case of the active, the action is accomplished outside the subject, because, although the priest makes the sacrifice, he is not affected by it. In the case of the middle voice, on the contrary, the subject affects himself in acting; he always remains inside the action, even if an object is involved. The middle voice does not, therefore, exclude transitivity. Thus defined,

the middle voice corresponds exactly to the state of the verb to write. (qtd. in LaCapra, *Writing* 25)

This literary method is used in the context of trauma literature both in actual language use as well as in genre discourse which will be especially apparent in the discussion of Benjamin Stein's novel (Chapter 4).

In this chapter, I introduced essential terms and theories that are of utmost importance in the field of Holocaust and trauma studies. The reliance on historical "truths" have been central in the evaluation of Holocaust literature. However, historian Pierre Nora points out that history has a detrimental effect, as it generalizes the past, and thereby destroys individual and collective memories. He proposes the concept of the *lieux de mémoire* in order to promote the importance of memories. However, the study of trauma has shown that memories are at fault to adequately represent what happened in traumatic events. The works by Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra exemplify that the notions of "history" and "memory" need to be seen critical. Trauma, as a mental wound defies the "work" of memory and history, and renders any attempt to make sense of one's own experience as futile. Trauma, then rather, represents an experience that belatedly affects the traumatized person in ways that cannot be explained by person affected, as the trauma itself cannot be integrated within one's consciousness. Interestingly, this phenomenon can be passed down to the next generation, or even to strangers. The second generation developed ways to negotiate this inherited trauma by means of imaginative writing. Marianne Hirsch's structure of "postmemory" and Dominick LaCapra's notion on the use of the "middle voice" are techniques that are being used in the texts by the four writers analyzed in this thesis.

## CHAPTER 2

### REMEMBRANCE IN ART SPIEGELMAN'S *MAUS* – THE HOLOCAUST AS SECOND GENERATION TESTIMONIAL

#### 2.1 THE SECOND GENERATION SURVIVORS AND THE VALUE OF THEIR LITERATURE

Alan L. Berger opens his article on second generation Shoah literature by stating that “The Shoah refuses to disappear” (43). This touches on an important aspect of transmission of the Holocaust: Even people who were not part of the Holocaust still suffer from the side effects of the Holocaust’s aftermath. The children of survivors are urged to concern themselves with the Holocaust in their daily life. This, most often, happens in written form: “an international literary second generation has begun to transmit the *Shoah*’s memory with a compelling moral, existential, and religious urgency” (43). This aspect of transmission is deeply rooted in Jewish history, as Berger argues. In concordance with Elie Wiesel, he “asserts the necessity for all Jews to bear witness to the Holocaust” (44). Berger insists on the second generation’s importance as the “survivors are slowly disappearing and the solemn task of transmitting their legacy is being assumed by the second generation” (45). He describes the second generation as follows: “while not having personally experienced the Shoah, these ‘second generation survivors’ constitute the group of non-witnessing American Jews most intimately familiar with its continuing effects” (45). The stories written by the second generation are

therefore a powerful account of the longevity of the effects on survivors. Yet, these stories also exemplify the effect on the following generation of survivors and how this incidents plays a central role in constituting contemporary Jewish identity. The graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman is a good example of that. Central to the story is the narrator's troubled relationship to his father, Vladek, who survived several concentration camps. His father's distrustful attitude and the psychosomatic effects on his body determine his daily routine. However, they are connected through—of course, family ties, but also—the Holocaust: “Vladek's stories [...] reveal both the enormous gap between survivors and their offspring and the difference between both of them and the nonwitnessing world” (51). Although both appear not to be very religious, they constitute their Jewish identity through the father's story: “The son can, nevertheless, be viewed as having voluntarily entered the covenant tradition and confronted his own Jewish identity by immersing himself in the act of listening to and recording his father's Holocaust stories” (52). Berger sums up that “Second generation writings reflect, therefore, not only the fact that the Holocaust happened, but that its effects continue to be felt, and that all subsequent Jewish affirmation must be illuminated by the *Shoah's* flames” (60).

## 2.2 THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE GENRE OF THE GRAPHIC NOVEL

The notion of comics or cartoons as low-brow popular culture versus their more sophisticated counterpart the graphic novel is often debated in academia. However, they have in common that they “might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (Chute, “Comics” 452). This means that the reader is engaged in two ways: “a reader of comics not only fills the gaps between panels but also works with the often disjunctive back-and-

forth of *reading* and *looking* for meaning” (452, emphasis in original). This is especially important in reading *Maus*, as many gaps have to be filled by visuals as they appear to be unable to be spelled out, such as several depictions of hangings, or the masses of dead bodies below the desk of Art Spiegelman on page 201. Here, the author refers to the psychological distress the success of *Maus* cost him.

Literary critic Hillary Chute works extensively on visual texts. Against the backdrop of the blurry distinctions between comics/cartoons and graphic novels, she coined another term for texts such as *Maus*: the graphic narrative. She argues that “*graphic novel* is often a misnomer. Many fascinating works grouped under this umbrella [...] aren’t novels at all: they are rich works of nonfiction; hence my emphasis here on the broader term *narrative*” (“Comics” 453, emphasis in original). This graphic narrative is enhanced by infusing stylistic devices such as photography or other “authentic” media such as intertextual references about other of Spiegelman’s works. On pages 102 through 105, Art Spiegelman inserts his short graphic narrative “Prisoner on the Hell Planet. A Case History” (1972). In this account, he tells the story of his mother’s suicide. This is the only instance where actual human faces with clear expressions are drawn. The art, in general, differs vastly from the rest of the graphic narrative. Hirsch points out that there are “drawings of humans rather than mice and cats, they express grief, pain and mourning in much more direct, melodramatic, expressionist fashion” (*Frames* 32). Chute argues, that “graphic narrative[s offer] compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods, and modes to consider the problem of historical representation” (“Comics” 457). This historical representation of the Holocaust in graphic narratives benefits from the visual aspect, as Chute points out:

The most important graphic narratives explore the conflicted boundaries of what can be said and what can be shown at the intersection of collective histories and life stories. Authors like Art Spiegelman [...] portray torture and massacre in a complex formal mode that does not turn away from or mitigate trauma; in fact, they demonstrate how its visual retracing is enabling, ethical, and productive. (459)

Returning to the role of second generation survivors and their literary production, the graphic narrative offers its own ways of focalization and an interweaving of different voices. Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri identify Vladek as the intradiegetic verbal narrator (a narrator within the story) while Art is both intradiegetic narrator and extradiegetic narrator (a narrator that recounts the frame story) (339). However, “Due to this intricate meshing of narrative voices, the familiar problem of distinguishing between character-bound and narratorial focalization in graphic narrative [...] reaches a new level of complexity” (340). Yet I find this complexity befitting, as the memory of the Holocaust is one of transmission that connects different generations in order to constitute one aspect of modern Jewish identity.

It is also important to consider how Spiegelman uses the techniques of graphic representation. Graphic novels/narratives are drawn. In the development of the medium, these drawings have often been colorful and rather detailed. Yet, as Kornelia Freitag shows, the text is

ernsthaft und bewegend gestaltet. Dem Thema angemessen verzichtet er auf die Verwendung von Farben, die Geschehenisse verlaufen in traurig-ernsthaftem Schwarz, Weiß und Grau. Er hat sich für eine sparsame Zeichentechnik entschieden, um wie er in einem Interview erklärt, einer Sentimentalisierung und Banalisierung seines Gegenstandes vorzubeugen. (178)

The simplistic quality of the drawings also serve as a means of defamiliarization. By doing so, Spiegelman produces an artifact that does not pretend to be authentic. After all, the narrator was not part of the Holocaust itself. The author infuses other media to convey

a notion of authenticity that authenticate the writer's postmemorial work, but are arbitrary for the reader. Throughout the narrative, three photographs are inserted. They represent his mother (102, as part of the intertextual short narrative), his brother who did not survive the Holocaust (165), and his Father, Vladek, wearing his camp uniform (294). Those photos serve a specific purpose, as Freitag argues,

Der Komplizierung des Verhältnisses von Realität und Fiktion dient paradoxerweise auch die Einarbeitung einiger Familienphotos, die sich noch im Besitz des Vaters befinden. Die Schwarz-Weiß-Photos verschmelzen mit den schwarz-weißen Zeichnungen, so daß die Grenzen zwischen Wirklichkeit und Vorstellung von ihr verschwimmen. (178)

Kornelia Freitag sees in Spiegelman's work a response to the aesthetic debate about Holocaust representations as framed by Adorno. Freitag argues that it is especially through Spiegelman's art of visual graphics that the reader does not perceive something of elegance and aesthetic pleasure, but a modest medium that might circumvent notions that Adorno criticized: "Und er reflektiert darüber, daß möglicherweise gerade dadurch, daß er seine Erfahrungen im Comic verarbeitet hat, eine Möglichkeit liegen könnte, der Hybris in der Bewältigung des Themas zu entgehen" (Freitag 179).

### 2.3 REMEMBERING THE HOLOCAUST

Remembering the Holocaust should be essential in today's culture. Facing the fact that there are hardly any living witnesses, and the occasional Holocaust denial, literary and public (memorial sites) commemoration is more crucial than ever. Lisa Costello argues that "the traumatic memory of the Holocaust must be re-created contextually for every generation in order to combat the tendency toward what Saul Friedlander has called a 'premature foreclosure' of memory and what Ruth Wajnryb terms a 'generalized will toward amnesia'" (22). The representation of memory is more prevalent now than it was directly after the war. However, scholars have referred to limits of representation.

Costello argues that Art Spiegelman “recontextualizes this history by addressing limits of representation, functioning as a unique form of Holocaust memorialization” (22). She coins this understanding of memorialization “performative memorialization,”

a layered memorial activity that performs in every Holocaust genre to create a temporally fluid, Bakhtinian dialogic between the author and the subject (memory) and the event and the audience (history)—combating tendencies toward collective amnesia or foreclosure. (22)

For Costello, it is a logical development that Holocaust narratives have moved from mere autobiographies to hybrid forms. Especially *Maus* is seen as “an extreme case of hybridization, combining narrative, autobiography, biography, cartoon, film, and photography into a polyphonic genre” (23). The effect that is created by such a hybridization demands performative memorialization, as Costello argues, not only by the author but also by the reader. The fragmentation of this postmodern writing urges the reader to actively engage with the text and not just contemplate—an effect that Adorno requires. Costello applies Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” to discuss the relived experience, usually in connection to second generation survivors. According to Costello, such “postmemory” is also applicable to any reader (23). As mentioned earlier, “postmemory is *not* an *identity* position but a *generational* structure of transmission embedded in multiple forms of mediation” (Hirsch, *Postmemory* 35, emphasis in original). Active reading and knowledge of history is also important as the text leaves many gaps.

However, memory has often been described as faulty and selective. The subjective memory is always restricted to what one has personally experienced. This experience is never stable and underlies somewhat the urge to blend out or to include. In the case of *Maus*, “Vladek tells his story, it seems, more for the sake of his son’s

company than for the sake of history; it is a way to keep his son nearby, a kind of tether” (Young 692). For Artie, it cannot be about remembering the Holocaust as he was not part of his experience. The representation of the second generation survivor is shown as a very complicated aspect. Young argues that the “problem for much of Spiegelman’s generation, of course, is that they are either unable or unwilling to remember the Holocaust outside of the ways it has been passed down to them, outside of the ways it is meaningful to them fifty years after the fact” (698f.). In this sense, Holocaust memory is a way to understand one’s own identity as Jew.

The possibilities of graphic art offer a way to depict the process of “working through” traumatic memories in a special way. Hillary Chute displayed how “the medium of comics can approach and express serious, even devastating, histories” (“Shadow” 200). Unlike other authors, she not only focuses on cultural connotations but also includes “the form’s aesthetic capabilities—its innovations with space and temporality” (200). By the means of such visual cues, the longevity of the traumatic experience and its transmission to the present becomes visualized. Chute explains that “Comics are composed in panels—also called frames—and in gutters, the rich empty spaces between the selected moments that direct our interpretation. The effect of the gutter lends to comics its ‘annotation’ of time as space” (202). However, I would argue that these gutters oftentimes serve to build up a connection between past and present. Several times, the gutters are filled with interjections of Vladek while reporting to his son about his experiences, while the panels themselves are narrated through direct speech by the characters. This is a technique the author uses often. In general, though he tends to include as much information into one drawing as possible: “Throughout *Maus* he

represents the complicated entwining of the past and the present by ‘packing’ the tight spaces of panels” (202).

Memories are based on history. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first volume of *Maus* is titled “My Father Bleeds History.” I find the wording particularly interesting, given the value of blood in Jewish life and history, and also its status as ever-flowing within a living organism. However, the process of bleeding itself is also connected to a slow and painful procedure (202). Yet, this aspect of blood also alludes to any form of transmission from one generation to the next, which is especially prominent in Judaism—although it is more the matrilineal line that is important in Judaism. For that reason, Artie is especially interested in reconstructing the missing pieces of his mother’s past.

Therefore, history is something that connects families, but also transmits pain and torture. This is especially the case for Holocaust survivors and their children. Yet, Chute argues that both generations have different approaches toward history and its remembrance. This is prevalent in the relationship between Vladek and Artie: “All such things of the war, I tried to put out from my mind once for all... until you **rebuild** me all this from your questions” (Spiegelman 258, emphasis in original). Here we see the tension oftentimes perceived in Holocaust survivors. The wish to simply forget or put away the traumatic experience was very common. However, later generations sought to reconstruct what happened during the Holocaust. Vladek is regularly shown in his disinterest in dwelling on the past. During his encounters with his son, he would rather complain about his second marriage or about his illnesses. He also volitionally destroyed his first wife’s diaries that were written during the Holocaust: “These notebooks, and other really nice things of mother... one time I had a very bad day... and all of these things I **destroyed**”

(160, emphasis in original). Vladek explains this by saying: “After Anja died I had to make an order with everything... these papers had too many memories. So I **burned** them” (161, emphasis in original). Here, the reader is shown an attempt of a survivor to completely destroy one’s own memory. What I find most striking is the fact that he burns them. A process that the Nazis also used after they put the Jews to death with gas. Thus, it is not surprising that Artie calls his father a “Murderer” after leaving the house (161). For Artie, he is a murderer because he destroyed the last pieces of his mother that might have constituted her identity as a Holocaust survivor, and thus impeded him from rebuilding/reconstructing memories, both inside and outside the narrative. Artie’s mother has a special place in Spiegelman’s postmemorial work. As Hirsch points out

*Maus* is dominated by [the] absence of Anja’s voice, the destruction of her diaries, her missing note. Anja is recollected by others, she remains a visual and not an aural presence. She speaks sentences imagined by her son or recollected by her husband. In their memory she is mystified, objectified, shaped to the needs and desires of the one who remembers—whether it be Vladek or Art. (*Frames* 33)

I understand this treatment of the character Anja not only as a representation of Artie’s mother, but also see a personification of the Holocaust in the character of her. Vladek is haunted by the remnants of Anja and needs to dispose of her while still clinging to her as part of his identity. Artie, however, feels the urge to make sense of this part of his life that is absent but nevertheless hovers over him. This is an expression of postmemory *par excellence*. It is, therefore, not surprising that the sparse use of photography begins with the inclusion of her picture on page 102. This picture is the last remnant of his mother that Artie has. Looking at the picture poses the only way to make sense of what is absent in his life. Interestingly, the only pictures included are family related and represent what the Holocaust has taken away from Artie: his mother who committed suicide because of the Holocaust, his brother who he never had the chance to meet, and his father whose

relationship to Artie was strained due to the aftermath of the Holocaust. These photographs, therefore, serve as means for postmemorial work: photos “enable us, in the present, not only to see and to touch that past, but also to try to reanimate it by undoing the finality of the photographic ‘take’” (Hirsch, *Postmemory* 36).

Ultimately, the graphic novel/narrative attempts to reconstruct and give order to the author’s/narrator’s parents’ experiences of the Holocaust. In a self-reflexive way, the author depicts this clash of generations, also showing in the clash of genres:

The comics medium, as Spiegelman makes us aware, is not only dialogic—able to represent the competing voices of autobiography and biography in one layered text—but cross-discursive, as when Spiegelman draws against his father’s verbal narration, turning what he calls the ‘cognitive dissonance’ between the two of them into representational collision. (Chute, “Shadow” 209)

This collision is visible in Vladek’s wish to disengage with the past, a past of loss during and after the Holocaust, and Artie’s wish to uncover the myths of the past and understand why his parents behaved the way they did, and also understand his own identity as a child of Holocaust survivors. Thus, both want to create order in their lives:

Both Artie and Vladek want to order historical narrative. But Vladek’s order—poignantly, understandably—involves a *degridding*. He wants to dismantle, destroy in order to forget [...]. While Vladek’s order is a defenestration, Artie wants to build windows, to resurrect [...]. (“Shadow” 209, emphasis in original)

A visual representation of the characters’ dissonance is depicted in a diagram on page 228 in which Artie tries to recreate a minute chronology of his father’s time in Auschwitz. Artie confronts his father with the fact that his accounts do not match up. Vladek then says: “So? Take **less** time to the black work. In Auschwitz we didn’t wear watches” (Spiegelman 228, emphasis in original). Chute argues that “While Artie emphasizes Vladek’s time there, Vladek insists on the space of his Auschwitz experience. [...] The diagram represents a disagreement; the son is ‘imposing order’ while the

survivor, caught up in his testimony, resists that historiographic impulse” (“Shadow” 210). The visual quality of this diagram is also of importance in the graphic presentation. The diagram is shown as overlapping the panel of the characters in the present. It is also covering Vladek’s speech bubble; interrupting him from finishing his sentence. I see this as a critical moment in the treatment of Holocaust survivors. This might be a direct critique of the media that used survivor accounts for their own purposes, wanted them only to recreate certain aspects of their experiences, and did not allow for diversion. However, it also is an expression of the entanglement of past and present: “The past not only interacts with, but erupts into, the present, and at times the present seems to be only a function of, or a diaphanous screen for, the past” (*History* 155). Chute also claims, “[w]e have, then, the present layered thickly by the past, framed tentatively by the present, and interrupted by a present-day exclamation, a burst of the banal: lunch time” (“Shadow” 212). Chute attests that Spiegelman “thus represents the accreted, shifting ‘layers’ of historical apprehension not only through language but also through the literal, spatial layering of comics, enabling the presence of the past to become radically legible on the page” (212).

The problem of memory and identity as depicted in *Maus* is that of its constructive character. Eric Berlatsky shows the shortcomings of constructing an identity from remnants of memory: “Vladek has contributed (in Artie’s eyes) to the forces of ‘forgetting’ against the forces of memory. Artie’s hope for a coherent remembered past from which to construct his own identity is denied by his father’s destruction of the diary” (105). This fact makes this work, in that matter, postmodern as “it does not declare memory as the immanent and essential replacement of history” (106). He furthers his

argument by stating that “In addition, (post)modernity’s consistent questioning of the capacity of memory to exist independently of forgetting, or of the representation of memory that inevitably reconfigures it, destabilizes the possibility of memory being deployed as a political bulwark” (107). Nevertheless, Berlatsky refers to the importance of memory in the Jewish community: “While the traumatic event often leads to the repression of memories of the event, as we have seen it also leads to the attempt to control, narrate, and give meaning to the event through recollection and narration” (123). The self-reflexive narrator is shown to understand that constructive character of memory and questions his ability to adequately express the content of his work:

Sigh. I feel so inadequate trying to reconstruct a reality that was worse than my darkest dreams. And trying to do it as a comic strip! I guess I bit off more than I can chew. Maybe I ought to forget the whole thing. There’s so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean reality is too complex for comics. So much has to be left out or distorted. (Spiegelman 176)

However, he does not stop writing the graphic novel due to its importance and the power of its cultural value: “Spiegelman continually foregrounds his story as text and not as truth, showing [...] that memory, history, and identity are all largely constructions that are always part of ideological/political discourse and oppression, whether this is conscious or not” (Berlatsky 136).

Michael Staub refers to the inconsistencies of identity as represented in *Maus*: “It is hardly irrelevant that a *Maus* portrait of a Jewish mouse, for example, may have a tail in one frame and none in another, may appear to be a human being with a mouse mask in one frame and actually *be* an (anthropomorphized) mouse in another” (38, emphasis in original). However, he also refers to the value of such identity constituting works of art:

*Maus* needs to be understood not only as a comic book, but also as an oral narrative, one that struggles to represent, in pictures and writing, spoken memories. As such, it is part of a larger tradition in twentieth century minority

and ethnic literature: narratives that rely on the immediacy and authority of oral encounters with members of persecuted and oppressed groups in order to counter “official versions” of history that marginalize or even deny these groups’ experiences and perspectives. (34)

As such, it might show the shortcomings of subjective memory, but nevertheless, fulfils its cultural work of remembrance of an imagined collective history.

#### 2.4 MAUS AND ADORNO

Adorno’s dictum is central in the discussion of *Maus*. However, it is important to understand its meaning correctly. Michael Rothberg formulates a good response to *Maus* as a Holocaust “production.” Yet, he makes a mistake that many others made before, he states that after Auschwitz “poetry and fiction are impossible” (670). The author includes the term fiction which was not explicitly given in the statement by Adorno (Adorno 30). Rothberg furthers his argument by stating that “it would be unseemly [...] to fabricate in the face of the need for testimonial and witnessing” (670). On the other hand, he also points out that “such a historical trauma also de-realizes human experience. Accounts of the death camps in memoirs never fail to document the fictional, oneiric aura that confronted the newly arrived prisoner” (670). This connects *Maus* to “authentic” documentations about the Holocaust: “Spiegelman captures the hyperintensity of Auschwitz—at once more real than real and more impossible than impossible” (670). In doing so, he “transgresses the sacredness of Auschwitz by depicting in comic strip images his survivor father’s suffering and by refusing to sentimentalize the survivor” (665). Thus, Spiegelman deflects the notions set by Adorno: “Spiegelman’s project refuses (and indeed exposes) the sentimentality of the elite notions of culture which ground the Adornean position” (671).

In a self-reflexive manner, Spiegelman constructs his narrative within the context of mass cultural representation of the Holocaust production:

Daß *Maus* trotz seines scharfsinnigen Umgangs mit der Darstellungsproblematik des Holocaust ein Produkt der Massenkultur ist und trotz seiner subversiven inneren Brüche und Unterbrechungen unter anderem dem Diskurs der Kulturindustrie angehört, wird selbst zum Thema der Bilderfolge. (Richter 94)

Richter, then, refers to Adornos *Negative Dialectic*. He returns to his statement that all culture after Auschwitz is trash (96). By this, Richter criticizes the cultural representation of the Holocaust:

Auf der einen Seite schreibt man sich durch seine Teilnahme an gewissen kulturellen Ritualen und Praktiken in eine abendländische Geschichte der Schuld ein, die unter anderem sowohl den Nazismus als auch den Holocaust hervorbrachte. Auf der anderen Seite jedoch führte eine radikale Ablehnung und Verschließung gegenüber dieser Kultur—eine Weigerung, sich zu bilden und zu kultivieren—lediglich dazu, daß man genau dem zur Katastrophe führenden Barbarentum anheimfiele, das den Kern faschistischer und totalitärer Regime ausmacht und von dem man sich zu distanzieren sucht. (96)

*Maus* is a way to use this stigmatization of mass “trash” culture to express an adequate need of a not over sentimentalized representation of the Holocaust that Adorno asked for:

Ist nach Auschwitz in diesem Sinne die Unterbrechung der idealisierenden Darstellung produktiv als Müll zu lesen, dann zieht *Maus* kontinuierlich seine Unbegreiflichkeit und die Unmöglichkeit seiner Darstellung in Erwägung, sein Dasein als Abfall in Trümmern und Ruinen, ein Dasein, das gleichzeitig als Potential einer neuen, fruchtbaren Lesart erscheint. (98)

In accordance with Richter, I argue that *Maus* represents an adequate representation of one family history about the Holocaust. Spiegelman was careful not to overly sentimentalize his narrative. The use of anthropomorphic characters allows the reader to defamiliarize from the horrific events, and thus be educated about the Holocaust and the story of Artie and Vladek rather than just feeling pity.

CHAPTER 3  
SEBALD AND THE GERMAN EMPATHIC NARRATOR IN  
*AUSTERLITZ*

3.1 EMPATHIC WRITING IN FICTION

Psychological interest has risen in recent years in research that focuses on reader expectations. The notions of empathy and affect have especially become a core element in recent critical analyses. However, the term empathy is still somewhat shrouded in mystery. There is no clear consensus of how to define it properly; especially in conjunction to empathic modes of writing in (non-)fictional narratives. In this chapter I examine the understanding of this term by Amy Coplan, N. Ann Rider, and Dominick LaCapra.

Amy Coplan describes empathy as “a complex imaginative process involving both cognition and emotion” (143). During this process the reader or empathizer imagines the experience of the other. Yet, while this person imaginatively experiences a similar experience, he or she never loses “the separate sense of self” (143). That implies that there is no process of complete identification with the other. Instead, the “cognitive component of empathy involves using the imagination to undergo a shift from one’s own cognitive perspective to the cognitive perspective of the target individual” (144). The technical term for this process is “role-taking.” (144) By only assuming a role, but not identifying with the target individual, the empathizer maintains the so-called “self-other

differentiation” which allows the empathizer to experience empathy on different levels, mainly as an imagination of the target’s experience, and simultaneously, as the empathizer’s personal experience (144). These qualities distinguish empathy from the concepts of emotional contagion and sympathy. Emotional contagion describes the moment when one loses oneself in the emotion of someone else. In this moment he or she loses the aspect of self-other differentiation. This makes it a process that is not imagined but experienced immediately. Therefore, there is no role-taking, but rather an assimilation or identification (145). Sympathy, however, means “having concern for another’s well-being, not imaginatively experiencing her mental states” (145). Based on this understanding, the reader of fiction can empathically engage with the character of a text without conflating his or her identity with the character itself. This aspect leaves “room in the experience of narrative engagement for the reader to undergo a great deal of psychological movement” (149). This offers a moment of critical analysis which I would deem fruitful for handling complicated topics such as trauma literature.

However, critics have pointed out that such a mode of empathic writing can also be detrimental to the evaluation of traumatic incidents such as the Holocaust. N. Ann Rider argues that an “emphatic over-arousal can lead to its opposite: a narcissistic focus on self rather than on the victim of suffering” (44). Rider adds another factor to the understanding of empathy: emotional regulation. This developmental aspect will allow the empathizer to put emphasis on the experience of the traumatized person without experiencing his or her own emotional distress. This mature empathic response will allow for a critical reflection (45). Such a mature response is also necessary in order to circumvent previously uttered problems about empathy in Holocaust literature. The critic

worries that the “danger of that assimilation for Levi and others is normalisation, or worse, trivialisation of the victim’s experience and by extension, of the Holocaust itself” (46). Rider emphasizes the need to step away from empathy that focuses on the reader itself and his or her identification with the victims. She asks for a more comprehensive representation of different persons involved in the Holocaust for readers to understand such an incident in its totality and critically engage with it (65). We can conclude, then, that it is important not to appropriate the experience of another person.

Dominick LaCapra argues that empathy is important “in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may [...] have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems” (78). However, in line with Adorno’s dictum, he points out the danger of fetishizing and making it a pleasure (78). In order to circumvent this quandary, LaCapra developed the mode of empathic unsettlement:

Empathic unsettlement also raises in pointed form the problem of how to address traumatic events involving victimization, including the problem of composing narratives that neither confuse one’s own voice or position with the victim’s nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure but allow unsettlement that they address to affect the narrative’s own movement in terms of both acting out and working through. (78)

All theoretical approaches about empathic modes in literature require that the reader or the narrator do not appropriate the experience of the victim in order to understand the victim as individual subject and respect the gravity of his or her experience. However, critics have often expressed a concern that Sebald’s narrators have blurred the lines between their narrative voices and the experience of the victims in the texts. This assumption will be topic of this chapter.

### 3.2 THE EMPATHIC MODE IN SEBALD'S *AUSTERLITZ*

The expectations of readers of Holocaust literature is that it is a “truthful” representation of the actual history, as long as it is an account by an actual survivor. However, every narrative is subjugated to a selection of incidents by the author. Given the fact that memorization of traumatic events is fallible, I deem this expectation as delusional. Nevertheless, the persistence of testimonials and documentaries is overwhelming. Authors of Holocaust fiction have discovered the genre of documentary fiction as adequate for their purpose. Richard T. Gray highlights Sebald as one of the exponents of this genre (279f.). Gray describes documentary fiction as a mode that “insist[s] on the imaginative elaboration of historical reality, while at the same time [...] appealing to the facts of that reality to serve as a skeleton that vouches for mimetic accuracy” (280). W. G. Sebald achieves this effect by a narrative structure in which the narrator is the mediator of the victim’s story, and by the inclusion of photography to create an effect of “authenticity.”

Sebald generally uses first-person narrators. The interesting aspect is the “embedding of first-person narratives within the context of an overriding first-person framework” (Gray 289). Emily Miller Budick understands it as “the ultimate humility, [that] the narrator would not tell the Jew’s story for him [...]; he would have the Jew tell his story by himself” (210). This mode of writing opens up a possibility of secondary witnessing of the informant’s experience and consequently allows for a moment of empathic interaction between the mediator and his informant. The problematic aspect in the case of *Austerlitz* is the fact that the narrator—though unnamed, and anonymous in general—is German, while Austerlitz is a Czech of Jewish descent and was brought to

Wales by means of the *Kindertransport* at the outbreak of World War II. As a German author, Sebald was aware of the problems of representing the Holocaust from a Jewish perspective. In order to circumvent this, he designed a narrator that mediates the story that he is being told by Austerlitz. I find this technique to be especially interesting as it refers to several problems about the transmission of information about the Holocaust. This mode also illustrates two different forms of postmemory: “Standing outside of the family, the narrator receives the story from Austerlitz and *affiliates* with it, thus illustrating the relationship between familial and affiliative postmemory” (*Postmemory* 41, emphasis in original). Throughout the novel, the narrator recounts the story of Austerlitz based on their interactions. In order to give Austerlitz a voice within the frame narrative, the narrator uses the device of reported speech, namely: “said Austerlitz.” Within the narrative itself, the reader is not always aware how thoroughly the two voices are interwoven. However, at those moments when the narrator refers to his role as mediator by means of “said Austerlitz” the reading process is interrupted as the reader is reminded that it is Austerlitz’s memory that is told. Lewis Ward points out that this structure is highly influenced by the technique as used by Austrian author Thomas Bernhard (5). This structure is complicated once Austerlitz travels to Czechoslovakia in search of his parents Agáta and Maximilian. There he encounters his nanny Vera who serves as another witness of both her memory, but also the memories of Austerlitz and his parents: “At the sight of these Nazi treats, Maximilian had said, [...]. Vera went on, said Austerlitz, to tell me that Maximilian [...].” (Sebald 167f.). There is a linkage between the different narrations as they are (mostly) from the first-person perspective. This implies that each narrator was at some point in direct contact with another. Nevertheless, this

transmission is, by the time of the overarching narrative frame, always removed by one mediator. Gray pins this down as a paradox, as each linkage goes further back towards the historical event that is described, and yet each mediator poses the threat of “personal distortion” (293). I find the use of this technique to be appropriate for both the text itself and also as a reference to the tradition of Holocaust literature. First, it distinguishes the empathic narrator from a narrator that clearly identifies with the target. While for single passages it is difficult to separate the two voices of the unnamed narrator and Austerlitz, this device of reported speech indicates that there is no direct identification and cultural appropriation of the Holocaust by a non-Jewish German narrator. After all, “in over-identification an excessive level of this incorporation leads to the denigration of the patient’s individuality or subjectivity” (Ward 7). For Gray this fusion of perspectives is not an expression of identification but rather a moment of unity of two individuals:

Implicit in this witness/informant interaction is a kind of interpersonal trust or bonding that accepts, without question, the accuracy, authenticity, and veracity of the reported testimony. In a word, the glue that fuses witness narrative to testimony is a profound form of empathy that brings narrator and informant into a kind of emotional union. (294)

This notion aligns with LaCapra’s concept of “empathetic unsettlement” which he describes as “a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (*Writing* 78). Lewis Ward claims that “Sebald’s technique, based around a particular use of narrative persona, thus combines the elements of proximity and distance necessary for an empathic approach to the victims of history, with whom he neither over-identifies nor objectifies” (13). This affective union crucial, yet seldom occurs in German Holocaust literature.

The second aspect that is problematized by Sebald's use of narrative technique is the historical transmission of traumatic events such as the Holocaust. The research of trauma and memory have shown that remembrance is often flawed and incomplete. This is furthered by historical transmissions from one generation to another. In this way "historical accounts are not simply secondary emplotments of a given set of first-order facts, but instead are tertiary or even fourth-order retellings of prior *narratives*" (Gray 294, emphasis in original). This is especially expressed in Austerlitz's interactions with Vera. Sebald emphasizes the importance of different perspectives and visions in the process of recreating traumatic memories. Austerlitz is only able to uncover hidden memories when he is in contact with other persons or environments. This is an expression of the latency and the belated aspect of traumatic experience:

[...] it was as if I had already been this way before and memories were revealing themselves to me not by means of any mental effort but through my senses, so long numbed and now coming back to life. It was true that I could recognize nothing for certain, yet I had to keep stopping now and then because my glance was caught by a finely wrought window grating, [...]. (Sebald 150)

This event also emphasizes the importance of vision. Throughout the novel Austerlitz is looking at sites that bring back memories. However, the first sets of photography in *Austerlitz* are two sets of animal and human eyes (Sebald 3f.). The narrator visits the Nocturama in Antwerp and by the sight of the eyes of nocturnal animals is reminded of the eyes of certain painters and philosophers. I find this striking as it is known that animals (especially nocturnal ones) perceive the world very differently than humans. This can also be said about painters and philosophers that often have a different perspective on the world than other people. This reference to multiple perspectives is crucial in the analysis of traumatic experiences and claims of authentication of universal truths about memory and history. The inclusion of photography in trauma narratives, therefore,

“illuminates both the complexity of this configuration and the paradoxes inherent within it” (Duttlinger 156). In the mentioned instance, the pictures are not self-explanatory, as the narrator does not mention whose philosopher’s and painter’s eyes he is reminded of so that the reader can make sense of this analogy. Duttlinger claims that “the photographs, despite their representational realism and apparent immediacy, do not necessarily provide straightforward access to the scenes or experiences they record” (157). The immediacy and truthfulness of photos break down in several instances throughout the novel. Photos seem to have an own memory: “as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives” (Sebald 182f.). This is shown a few lines later when Austerlitz cannot completely recollect his memory when looking at a photo that supposedly portrays himself: “Yet hard as I tried both that evening and later, I could not recollect myself in the part” (184). The description of his mother does also not overlap completely with the picture included on page 251. He described her as wearing a three-stringed necklace while there are only two strings observable in the photograph. Hirsch argues that the “two ‘maternal’ images in *Austerlitz* function quite differently: rather than authenticating, they blur and relativize truth and reference” (44, emphasis in original). Duttlinger claims that “photography is inextricably linked to the failings of memory, to the latency of remembrance and the notions of forgetting and trauma, which repeatedly disrupt and undermine the process of recollection” (170).

Miller Budick concludes,

Photographs in Sebald’s text would seem to be, at least on first glance, a gesture toward claiming the historical truthfulness and accuracy of his narrative. In point of fact, however, the photographs themselves are fictive representations of often

unidentified people, places, and things. The photographs confirm absolutely nothing at all except their own existence as photographs. (217f.)

This argument stresses the fact that photography as well as memory cannot uphold the claim of universal truth but are subject to distortion: “Thus the maternal image in Austerlitz provokes us to scrutinize the unraveling link between present and past that defines indexicality as no more than performative” (*Postmemory* 48, emphasis in original). Sebald does not hide that fact that the photography has to be fiction as the photographer “has no extra-textual referent” (Long 149). This entails an alienation on behalf of the reader as he is made aware of the fictionality of Austerlitz as a character (150).

The two techniques Sebald employs are somewhat oppositional. While the narrative structure engages the reader in an empathic mode, the inclusion of photography is counterintuitive to the assumed function of pictures. They make the reader aware that the text is narrative fiction. Thus, the reader is not exposed to the threat of over-identification with Austerlitz or the narrator. This is especially important as the text was written from a German perspective. Nevertheless, the relationship between the narrator and Austerlitz allows for a shared emotionality between different individuals.

### 3.3 THE JEWISH-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE: JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER

American authors have a different perspective on the Holocaust as Americans were not generally involved as perpetrators. Therefore, their representations are more unapologetic, as seen in *Sophie's Choice* (1979) by William Styron. However, his approach has also been criticized. More favorably reviewed accounts have been accepted by authors of Jewish descent. Jewish-American writing is also a type of literature that is interesting as it is considered an exponent of ethnic literature in the US. Thus, it becomes

a mixture of American and traditionally Jewish influences (Kramer 577f.). As a consequence, the characters are caught between both cultures and represent “a liminal figure both Jewish and American and neither [...]” (579). This liminal aspect leads to a sense of absence within the Jewish community and thus “the desire to return to the origins of the story is undefeated by time or distance, or even by the memory’s treacherous imagination” (Aarons 300). Aarons concludes that “the ever-increasing passage of time that separates us from the events of the Holocaust and the inevitable if not deeply regrettable failures of memory make it all the more imperative that we bear witness to the past” (306).

An exponent of such a work that tries to fill in the void of family history that is shattered by the Holocaust is Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). As in Sebald, we have two narrative voices here. However, they are made completely separate. Both characters, Jonathan Safran Foer’s literary persona that goes by the same name and Alexander Perchov, a young Ukrainian, compose a book about their trip to Trachimbrod where Foer’s family originated from. There they want to uncover what happened during World War II and look for a person that is pictured in a photograph that Foer found in his grandfather’s belongings. The book is composed of Foer’s rendition of Trachimbrod’s history from its beginnings in 1791 until its fall when the Nazis arrived in 1942, and Alexander’s accounts of their trip in the present to the place where Trachimbrod used to be. Interspersed are additional letters by Alexander that are directed towards Foer in which he writes about their book project. With both narrative voices, the author also introduces two different literary genres. While Foer’s history about Trachimbrod uses a modernist form that is rooted in myth and strategies of magical

realism, Alexander's account is more an expression of classic realism. Francisco Collado-Rodriguez argues that Foer "tries to illuminate readers by transforming them into witnesses of a real tragedy that appears to have mythical dimensions: the Holocaust" (55). However, the realist tendencies are challenged insofar as Alex is a highly unreliable narrator due to his lack of linguistic competences in English, and his trait as "self-confessed hyperbolic liar" (60). Nevertheless, their journey leads them to the woman that is portrayed on the picture, Augustine. Although she cannot reconcile her present form with that on the photograph, which speaks for the fallibility of photographs as universal truths, she is supposed to be the woman on the picture (Foer 190). She is, nevertheless, by no means able to help Foer in his quest to find his lost history. However, she hands the protagonists a box over that contains other memorabilia. In it the group will find a picture of Alex's grandparents, his infant father, and a Jewish family friend. It turns out that Alex's grandfather is guilty of the murder of his Jewish friend Herschel (228). Collado-Rodriguez states that "Jonathan's quest for his family roots eventually proves unsuccessful; he turns instead to mythopoiesis. By contrast, Alex's literary adventure helps him understand relevant facts about his family that change his future" (56).

Neither Austerlitz nor Jonathan (character) is, by the end of the texts, at their goal. Austerlitz is preparing to look for his father, while Jonathan has found the woman in the photograph but has no insights into what happened to his family and the village. Both texts discuss the failure of photographs as representation of authentic truths. The outcome of the texts shows that easy solutions are not possible with such a complex and traumatic event as the Holocaust, and that further work needs to be done.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTIC IDENTITY IN BENJAMIN STEIN'S *THE CANVAS*

#### 4.1 THE WILKOMIRSKI AFFAIR

In 1995 a book titled *Fragments. Memories of a Wartime Childhood* by a certain Benjamin Wilkomirski was published in Switzerland. In this “memoir” the author recalls his memories from childhood. Starting in Riga, Latvia, his family was deported to the Polish concentration camps in Majdanek and Auschwitz, which he surprisingly survived, although children are usually described as the first ones to be killed by the Nazis. The depiction in the work is very detailed and visualizes the brutality of life in the concentration camps in a very graphic manner. Some critics characterized the text as “*Gewaltpornographie*.” (Schuchmann 205). In conjunction with the narrative style, which was very simple, this account has been regarded as an expression of how the effects of trauma can shape the author’s (or, in general, people’s) language and identity (Hungerford 67).

However, by 1996 when the book was to be published in Germany, the authenticity of the memoir was questioned. A birth certificate surfaced that said that the author’s real name was in fact Bruno Dössekker and that he was born in Switzerland in 1942; much younger compared to the account given in *Fragments* and certainly too young to have been through the concentration camps of the Nazi regime (Hungerford 67).

To counter this claim, he included an afterword in the German version of the book and stated that this certificate was issued by the Swiss authorities to impose a new identity upon him. By doing so, he was able to silence most of the critics. Thus, the book was able to become a bestseller and won several awards (Hasian 235). The author was seen as a representative of a group that, until then, was hardly acknowledged: child survivors of the Holocaust (234). He not only was respected as an author but he also became a TV personality and held guest lectures at several universities. In a TV show that had him accompanied by a camera set to Israel, he met with another Holocaust survivor that was thought to be his father. The exposure in the media was therefore very high and made him a very well-known personality in the German-speaking countries (236).

But by the end of the 1990s, more and more claims against the truthfulness of the story surfaced. One of the first critics was a Swiss journalist by the name of Daniel Ganzfried who called Wikomirski “a seriously and sadly deluded person who has invented for himself a terrible history” (Hungerford 68). Other critics were not as harsh in their criticism and argued that Wilkomirski became obsessed with the Holocaust and was traumatized by the incidents so that he believed that he experienced them on his own (72).

Such a position is strengthened by an experiment by Yale professor Shoshana Felman who conducted it in her own class about Holocaust poetry. This experiment proved that the exposure to Holocaust testimonies produced symptoms of trauma that very much resembled the actual symptoms of Holocaust survivors (73). This is also buttressed by the results of Cathy Caruth’s work. The notion of transmissible trauma describes that trauma can very much be passed on from one person to another

(Hungerford 84f.). Amy Hungerford claims that this is exactly what happened to Bruno Dössekker. Starting in High School, he became obsessed with the Holocaust and studied it in depth. This increased in the 1980s when he suffered from a nearly fatal disease. Thus, the exposure to the Holocaust transformed him from Bruno Dössekker to Benjamin Wilkomirski, and he started to memorize the memories of actual Holocaust survivors (Hungerford 88).

Yet society was not ready to accept his account once it was revealed to be a *faux mémoire* (*Writing* 34). The problem was that it was presented as a memoir which claimed truthfulness. This includes the autobiographical pact between author and reader that was disrupted due to the false claims of alleged true experiences (Schuchmann 205). Eventually, a commission was established to investigate the case. Headed by the leading Swiss historian Stefan Mächler, the commission ultimately identified the author as Bruno Grosjean, an illegitimate child of Yvonne Grosjean. Bruno Grosjean was later adopted by the well-off family Dössekker. A DNA test was conducted in order to clearly identify the author's true family relations. His whole identity was eventually perceived as a fraud and the book was withdrawn from further publication in 1999 (Horstkotte 117f.).

For LaCapra, Wilkomirski

might be a figure in the gray zone—an indirect victim of the Holocaust who so identified himself or was otherwise distraught by events (or perhaps in good part by a documentary film as well as by his manifest desire for an identity as Holocaust victim) that he may actually have been confused about his own past and to some extent believed that he indeed had been a child in camps. (*Writing* 207)

However, what upset the public was that the text read was presented to them as an authentic text and that the described incidents took place in the outside world. To fictionalize the Holocaust in this particular text and debunk the writer's past as a fraud,

would also open discussion to Holocaust deniers whether the Holocaust itself was only imagined or propagated by the Allies. This real life incident serves as frame for Benjamin Stein's novel *The Canvas*.

#### 4.2 BENJAMIN STEIN: *THE CANVAS*

The novel is centered around the question of identity and memory. Central quotes from the text are “Ich bin, woran ich mich erinnere” and “Unser Gedächtnis ist der wahre Sitz unseres Ichs.” Those are quotes that were taken by Silke Horstkotte and Kathrin Schuchmann as titles for their articles. The English translations are as follows: “It is our minds that make us what we are. Our minds are where our selves truly reside” (Stein Z.3). The other quote is translated as: “I am what I remember. I don't have anything else” (Stein W.98). The two different kinds of citation are due to the fact that the book is conceptualized as a flip book, which means that the book has two beginnings, two strands of narrative that meet in the middle of the book. Both quotes represent the ideas of identity and memory of the two protagonists of the novel, Jan Wechsler and Amnon Zichroni. The two quotes already hint at the reliance on memories to construct identity, which is addressed in the novel. Both perspectives also express that memory and identity are fallible and unreliable: “But memory is volatile, always ready to change. Each time we remember, we reshape, filter, separate and connect, add in, take out, and replace the original bit by bit over time through the memory of a memory. Who, then, can say what really happened?” (Stein Z.4). Jan Wechsler is made to utter: “If the documents now appear to prove that a large part of my memory is unreliable, then I myself am unreliable” (Stein W. 98). The quotes show that memory—and identity that relies on the stability of memories—are deceiving and unstable. They are frankly unreliable and

always subject to change. Silke Horstkotte addressed general questions that Stein's novel touches upon in that context such as:

Was ist fiktional, was authentisch im Erzählen über den Holocaust? Wem gehört die Erinnerung an den Holocaust? Was, wenn einer subjektiv von der Wahrheit seiner Holocaust-Erinnerung überzeugt ist, obwohl sich diese faktisch nicht erhärten oder aber sogar widerlegen lässt? Welche Geschichte gilt dann? (118)

The problem is that the book gives no clear-cut answers to those questions. I argue that it does not want to give them either. The structure of the book allows no closure. The form of a flip book offers two beginnings of the novel and no explicit ending. The reader rather has to form his or her own conclusion based on the interplay between both strands of the narrative. This model of the flip book is not new, but the important fact in this novel is that, when both parts collide in the middle of the book, they do not match up and form a logical unit (Schuchmann 207). This is based on the subjective truths of both protagonists that are linked to each other through their individual relationships with another central figure, Minsky. Here is already one hint that there cannot be one universal truth to the story, and even to the identities of the protagonists. This makes the protagonists and the novel especially unreliable (Horstkotte 118).

The reliability is also challenged by Amnon Zichroni's paranormal ability to see and live through other people's memories by touching them, and Jan Wechsler's change of identity. Both instances are already hinted at by the names of the protagonists. Jan Wechsler's family name indicates the change of identity, *wechseln* meaning "to change" in German. Amnon Zichroni's name is very paradoxical, as Amnon is an allusion to amnesia, while the Modern Hebrew Zichroni can be translated as "my memory" (Schuchmann 208). The minor character Macht, a reference to Stefan Mächler, is also

quite telling, as he has the power (*Macht*) over Minsky's identity, the fictional character based on Benjamin Wilkomirski.

The frame follows mainly the historical development of the real Wilkomirski affair. Yet the characters are fictional and very different. Therefore, the narrative style of both flip sides differs extensively. Amnon Zichroni's account is written in retrospect and is closer to written language and its compository characteristics. Jan Wechsler's story is mostly a simultaneous narration of the protagonist's thoughts and actions in the present tense. It is interesting that both strands do not match up considering the time frames in which they play. This strengthens the moment of unreliability.

The unreliability of Jan Wechsler—both as narrator as well as character—is also shown in his identity, which is not clear-cut. When a piece of luggage is brought to him, addressed to a certain Jan Wechsler, he is quite confused because he cannot identify it as his own. In it, he finds things that he does not know, or remember. One of those things is a novel which is also written by an author by the name of Jan Wechsler, titled *Maskerade* which allegedly tells the “story” of the protagonist Jan Wechsler (Schuchmann 212). As a consequence, Wechsler questions his own identity and is confused. Eventually, it is revealed that Wechsler is a descendant of Jewish Holocaust survivors, but invented a story of an East Berlin convert to Judaism (Horstkotte 123). This story is therefore the exact opposite of the story as invented by Minsky/Wilkomirski. This can be read as an expression of affiliative postmemory and the creation of an identity out of material from cultural archives. Thus, identity becomes not the result of historic processes, but, as the title indicates, a canvas that can always be painted over, and hence constructed like a painting (Horstkotte 116).

Wechsler eventually defends the notion of the subjective truth and argues that facts cannot serve as marker of identity. He is shown to feel guilt that he took Minsky's memories, and therefore his identity from him (Horstkotte 130). Katja Garloff points out that "Wechsler, who throughout his narrative struggles with the unreliability of his memory, gradually finds out that he has committed an offense similar to Minsky's: that is, he has assumed a false identity" (147).

Yet the story overall is unreliable. The author makes use of this to provoke the understanding of fiction and reality and its value for representations of the Holocaust. The result is that the reader has to flip back and forth to come up with his or her own explanation of and justification for the story. The author cuts loose from the assumption of a universal truth and strengthens the subjective truth of individuals. He therefore dismisses the idea of an authentic Holocaust witness (Horstkotte 130f.). This is a reaction to the situation of losing first-hand witnesses due to ageing and death. It is a widely used new literary tradition, as more and more publications employ such literary methods (Horstkotte 115). Yet this book can also be read as a form of rehabilitation of Wilkomirski/ Dössekker. The underlying question here is whether such an approach is accepted by the critics and the public and whether facts matter in Holocaust memoirs.

## EPILOGUE: DO FACTS MATTER IN HOLOCAUST MEMORIES?

The commemoration of the Holocaust is more necessary than ever in the face of a growing sense of antisemitism in today's societies. The denial of the Holocaust and antisemitism have been detrimental to the remembrance of the Holocaust and need to be countered by powerful sources. However the circumstance that most of the Holocaust survivors have reached a very high age or have died already makes it difficult to create new productive insights of survivor's experiences. In order to create new and critical accounts of traumatic events such as the Holocaust that ought to be treated as a memorial of humanity, the literary scene needs to turn towards writers that are not actual survivors of the Holocaust but their descendants that can transmit their understanding of the experience as family of survivors but also as the role of a new generation that is still affected by the outcome of the Holocaust. However, non-Jewish writers such as Sebald and Stein (Jewish convert) have proven to be of equal value in the evaluation of Holocaust literature.

Art Spiegelman's *Maus* represented a landmark in the representation of the Holocaust in literature. Imbedded in the discourse of representability, Spiegelman understood how to use Adorno's dictum to counter tendencies to fall into the realm of the shallow and superficial genre of sentimental novels. As Adorno postulated, an adequate representation of the Holocaust could not be achieved in the manner of a mere self-sufficient contemplation of the aesthetic value. As a cartoonist, Spiegelman used his

medium to transgress the same. Instead of engaging in the tradition of visual narratives, he decided for a simplistic and sober representation that did not allow for concrete identification. The defamiliarizing quality of his graphic narrative creates distance both to the Holocaust as historical incident and to the story of the characters. This is mostly achieved by the use of anthropomorphic figures that have limited facial expressions which transport a variety of emotions (unlike the inserted episode about the narrator's mother's suicide).

The narrative serves as a means to commemorate the Holocaust and its effects on survivors and the second generation of survivors. However, by employing a postmodern technique of narration, the author shows the fallibility of memory and history. He poignantly describes how different people/generations of Holocaust survivors construct and manipulate their and their family's memory/history for their own purposes. It is also shown that the generational clash leads to alienation from one's self and one's family. The narrator/author displays this problem in a self-reflexive manner that debunks memory as constructed, but also as necessary in order to (re)construct a (personal) Jewish identity that is based on personal and collective experience during the dramatic incident of the Holocaust.

Jonathan Safran Foer and W. G. Sebald are authors with completely different backgrounds. However, they wrote novels that are similar in content and function. Both texts focus on traumatized persons who try to work out what happened in their past or their ancestor's past. For that reason both protagonists decide to (re)visit the site of their traumatic experiences. Eventually, they come closer to what might have happened but both texts display no final closure which indicates that the work on Holocaust

commemoration is not done, but depends on further exploration by Holocaust survivors and forthcoming generations. In the case of Sebald, his narrator also opens the door for non-Jewish authors to explore the field of Holocaust memories. His approach shows a sensitive and respectful dealing of a topic as important as the Holocaust. By employing a narrator that is empathetic without being self-centered, Sebald created a common ground for Germans and Holocaust survivors which was for the longest time a taboo in the German understanding of the Holocaust.

The narrative strategies that both Sebald and Foer employ debunk the problems of memory and its false claim of authenticity. Without challenging the status of Holocaust testimonials, such fictional works prove their value as pedagogical and educating works. They not only create an empathic reaction in the reader but also challenge alleged assumptions of claims of authenticity as allegedly provided by photography and documentary, and allow the readers to critically question traditional modes of representation and “universal truths.”

Returning to the notion of memory and memoir, Suleiman points out, the understanding of both terms are almost identical in the English and French language. However, memory is a “mental faculty, while memoir is a text” (159). Generally, one would assume that the writer of a memoir relates his own experiences in the text which can be “confined to a single event or a single moment in a life” (159). The genre memoir is strictly differed from the notion of a novel:

Memoirs resemble historical narratives insofar as they make truth claims—more exactly, claims for referentiality and verifiability—that put them on the other side of a boundary from novels. Interestingly, this conventional boundary becomes most apparent when it is violated. (162f.)

The consequence when this boundary is crossed is shock and unacceptance, as seen in the case of Wilkomirski.

The validation of such a case is difficult because there is no easy answer to the question whether a representation of the Holocaust can be fictionalized and offered as a truthful account at the same time. Debunking such a text as fraud can give rise to negationist attitudes towards the Holocaust. However, one single memoir cannot stand for the entirety of this gruesome act. As Suleiman argues, historians have never relied on one account alone. This aspect cannot be substantial in the validation of such a memoir (168f.). After all, “‘authenticity’ is a category easy to fake, and suggests that the difference between factual and fictional writing may be ultimately impossible to maintain” (Suleiman 170). The circumstance that memory is always fallible and writing is never a completely accurate mirroring of the actual “truth” speaks for the value of fiction. The reading of Benjamin Stein’s novel supports the notion that truth is always subjective and that memory is never reliable. Therefore, allegedly authentic texts are also always composed and highlight specific aspects of history or memory, while other aspects or incidents are neglected.

Furthermore, fiction does offer different modes of communication and stylistic devices that are not applicable in non-fictional texts—aspects like the middle voice, which in Stein’s novel is not used as a linguistic device but rather as a para-textual mode via the flipped format. These modes offer different manners of reading and a more thorough analysis and invite the reader to delve into the matter.

The theoretical background shows that memories and identities are due to change and never stable. This is due to subjective truths, especially as seen in cases of traumatic

experiences. Cathy Caruth's notion of transmissible trauma experience can possibly be traced in the real-life person of Wilkomirski. After extensive exposure to testimonies of Holocaust survivors, he experienced symptoms that actual Holocaust survivors suffered from. As a consequence, he might have believed that he really was an actual Holocaust survivor. The whole structure of Stein's *The Canvas* is a representation of the constructed character and unreliability of memory. Therefore, this novel functions as a redemption for Benjamin Wilkomirski and offers in a very elaborate and intriguing manner the importance of fictional accounts of Holocaust literature and a new way to re-evaluate authenticity as the only right way to represent the Holocaust in literary texts. Fiction has become an integral and necessary aspect of contemporary representations of the Holocaust.

The texts by Art Spiegelman and Jonathan Safran Foer are a testimony to the lasting effects of the Holocaust. Both authors try to make sense of their family's past by aiming to recreate a memory that is incomprehensible to both the survivors and their descendants. In doing so, they show that memories of traumatic events are always flawed. Cathy Caruth has demonstrated that a traumatic memory does not happen at will but is triggered in a belated fashion. Therefore, the survivor has no direct access to his or her memories. Furthermore, survivors can hardly make sense of their memories. Instead, they assimilate them with an "accepted" history of what occurred during World War II. This constructed character of memory makes them unreliable as sole sources of the history of the Holocaust. In doing so, they show that both narrative fiction and non-fiction are subjugated to the construction and selection of representation.

This moment of narrative construct is especially prevalent in the works of German authors W. G. Sebald and Benjamin Stein. Both authors employ narrative techniques that underline the constructed character of memory in their texts. While the first creates an empathic narrator that helps the eponymous character to uncover hidden memories only to come to the conclusion that memories cannot be traced on one's own account without the perspective of others, and eventually leave us with an unconcluded search for the protagonist's father; the latter discusses the dual and ambiguous character of memories about the Holocaust. Stein especially reveals the unstable nature of identity. Based on the real-life incident of "identity theft," Stein's novel revolves around the danger of transmission of Holocaust memories in an inadequate way that lead to taking over the role of a Holocaust survivor, and thus appropriating the traumatic experiences of survivors. Writers such as Sebald were aware of that. Only a few years after this incident, he wrote *Austerlitz*, in which the narrator is averse to stepping over this boundary of appropriation. In creating this emotional bond between a German narrator and a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Sebald reconciles a connection that has long been neglected in the German tradition of writing about the Holocaust.

The structure of postmemory in combination with photography takes an outstanding role in *Maus*, *Austerlitz*, and *Everything Is Illuminated*. This is especially the case for the first two mentioned texts. While employing different genres, both texts display a multitude of similarities:

a self-conscious, innovative, and critical aesthetic that palpably conveys absence and loss; the determination to know about the past and the acknowledgement of its elusiveness; the testimonial structure of listener and witness separated by relative proximity and distance to the events of the war (two men in both works); the reliance on looking and reading, on visual media in addition to verbal ones,

and the consciousness that the memory of the past is an act firmly located in the present. (*Postmemory* 40)

However, the narrators have completely oppositional backgrounds. One with family ties to Holocaust survivors as second generation, the other is of German descent. These two narrators embody different ways of postmemorial works. While Artie is an exponent of familial postmemory, the unnamed narrator in *Austerlitz* is a representative of affiliative postmemory. As Hirsch points out, “as a German, he also shows how the lines of affiliation can cross the divide between victim and perpetrator memory and postmemory” (41).

Eventually, the texts (with the exception of *Maus* which the writer designates as a non-fictional account of his family history) have an open end. The texts by Sebald and Foer show that the protagonists were not able to uncover all of their family’s history. In the case of Stein, the reader is left without a clear closure and explanation of the characters’ identities. I see this symptomatic about the current evaluation of the Holocaust and memories. There is still a need to continue with the commemoration of the Holocaust. Young authors need to address the aftermath of the Holocaust and try to make sense of it. More Jewish writers will no doubt write about their quest for a possible “unraveling” of their family’s past, and reconstruct their own identities as Holocaust survivors. In the German context, authors of non-Jewish descent will need to come to terms with their role in the evaluation of the Holocaust, and represent a more comprehensive approach to it, as seen in the work in Sebald. These authors display a critical engagement with the topic that demonstrates that fictionalized texts can evoke a similar effect on the reader as Holocaust testimonials without running the danger of

misrepresentation. Accounts like these will prove to be very productive in an age when Holocaust survivors will not be directly accessible anymore.

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