Maus

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ART SPIEGELMAN

Spiegelman was born in Stockholm, Sweden. His parents, Wladyslaw and Andzia Spiegelman (whose names he transliterated as Vladek and Anja in *Maus*, to make their correct pronunciation more obvious to his readers) were Polish Jews and Holocaust survivors who had been sent to Sweden as refugees following the end of the Second World War. The Spiegelman family immigrated to the United States in 1951. They settled in the Rego Park neighborhood of Queens, in New York City. Spiegelman studied art and philosophy at Harpur College (now known as the State University of New York at Binghamton), but did not graduate because he experienced a mental health crisis that forced him to withdraw from school. In 1971, Spiegelman moved from New York to San Francisco, and began to establish himself as a comics artist. He published work in several underground magazines, and edited an anthology of small-press comics called *Arcade*. In 1977, he married Françoise Mouly. The couple founded *Raw* magazine in 1980. By this time, Spiegelman had begun to interview his father, Wladyslaw, about his experiences in the wartime Poland and Germany, and to draw comics based on their conversations. He published the first of the comics that would eventually become *Maus* in the second issue of *Raw*, in December 1980. Over the next several years, until the magazine ceased publication in 1991, he continued to publish segments of *Maus* in each issue. The comics were published in novel form in 1986, and a second volume, which continued Vladek and Anja's story through Auschwitz and Dachau, was published in 1992. Both volumes met with critical and commercial success. Spiegelman spent ten years as a staff artist for *The New Yorker* magazine, where Mouly worked — and continues to work — as an art editor. His tenure lasted from 1992 until 2001, during which time he drew the iconic image that appeared on the magazine cover immediately after the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center. Spiegelman published his reflections on those attacks in his 2004 book, *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Spiegelman and Mouly have two children together, Nadja and Dashiell. He lives in New York, where continues to publish comics and other art.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1932, in the middle of a devastating economic depression, the people of Germany elected several members of the National Socialist German Worker's Party — known as the Nazi Party — to positions of power in the German parliament. A few months later, the Nazi Party's leader, Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor of Germany, the highest position of leadership in the German government. Hitler and the Nazi Party had gained significant public support in a very small amount of time. The nation was experiencing a social crisis as well as an economic one, and the Nazis made many people hopeful with their vision of a renewed, strengthened Germany. The Nazis' "hopeful" vision centered around the eradication of "undesirable" individuals. People they considered undesirable included ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities; people with disabilities; political dissidents; people who had committed crimes; and many others. More than anyone, though, Hitler and the Nazi Party targeted Jews. Nazi propaganda painted Jews as subhuman—more like animals than people — and blamed them for all of Germany's many problems.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Jewish-American novelists such as Saul Bellow and Philip Roth — along with countless others — have often considered the reverberations of the Second World War and the Holocaust in the lives of American Jews. Roth, in novels such as *The Ghost Writer* and *American Pastoral*, focuses on younger generations of Jewish-Americans grappling with many of the same issues that concern Spiegelman: cultural memory and a sense of inherited responsibility as they struggle to understand their Jewish identity. Graphic novels such as *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical novel about the Islamic Revolution in Iran; and *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel's memoir of homosexuality and family turmoil, have also used the comics style to explore serious questions of personal and political history.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*
- **When Written:** 1978-1991
- **When Published:** The first volume of *Maus* ("My Father Bleeds History") was serialized in *Raw* magazine, beginning in 1980 and ending in 1991, when the magazine ceased publication. The first volume was published in book form in 1986. The second volume ("And Here My Troubles Began") was published in 1991.
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Graphic Novel, Memoir
- **Setting:** Poland and Germany (1930s and 40s); Rego Park, Queens (1970s and 80s); Catskill Mountains (1979); New York City (1987).
- **Climax:** After years of moving between ghettos and hiding places, Vladek and Anja are sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- **Antagonist:** German soldiers and hostile Polish civilians are

obvious antagonists for the Jews who are struggling to survive amidst persecution. However, the story also explores the many ways in which Jewish people — and others were who suffered alongside them in concentration camps and in war-torn Poland — harm and undermine one another in moments of desperation. Though Vladek and Anja are beneficiaries of amazing acts of kindness and humanity, and often do their best to help others in return, Maus shows clearly how danger and privation breed selfishness and callousness.

- **Point of View:** First Person (Vladek and Artie); Third Person (Limited to Artie)

EXTRA CREDIT

Shoah. Some scholars and religious leaders have taken issue with the term "holocaust." Though the word has been used for decades to refer to the genocide of European Jews, and has been used to describe other mass killings in history, it originates from a Greek word that means "a completely burnt offering to God." Some argue that to refer to the genocide as a "holocaust" is to compare those murders to religious sacrifices — and that this comparison dignifies the violence and disrespects the victims. Many who disagree with the use of the term "holocaust" substitute "shoah," a Hebrew term that translates as "catastrophe."

A Controversial Metaphor. Spiegelman faced criticism, after *Maus*'s publication, for his use of animal heads in place of human faces. Because different animals correspond to different ethnicities, he was accused of perpetuating Nazi-like divisions between people of different races, and further dehumanizing the same people Nazis had tried to dehumanize through their violence. The book found a particularly harsh audience in Poland, where many were insulted by the depiction of Polish people as pigs.

PLOT SUMMARY

Artie Spiegelman, a young Jewish-American cartoonist, arrives for a visit at the home of his father, Vladek, after a long estrangement. Vladek is sick and unhappy, stuck in a bad marriage to a resentful woman named Mala, and still mourning the loss of his first wife, Anja, to suicide ten years earlier. Artie and Vladek have a tense relationship, but Artie has determined to write a comic book about his father's life. Vladek, a Polish Jew who immigrated to New York after World War II, is a Holocaust survivor. Along with Anja, and most of their family members, he endured life in the ghettos and concentration camps of Nazi-occupied Poland.

Through a series of interviews over more than two years, Vladek tells Artie his stories. He begins in prewar Poland, when he meets and marries the brilliant, charming daughter of a wealthy manufacturer: Anja. The two live happily together in the city of Sosnowiec, surrounded by their families. When war breaks out in 1939, Vladek is called to the front as a Polish soldier. Vladek is captured by the Germans as a prisoner of war, and spends months in a forced labor camp before escaping and returning home to Sosnowiec. Reunited with his family — which includes, by this time, a young son named Richieu — Vladek finds that the German invasion has had a dramatic impact on the situation of Poland's Jews. In the months following his return to Sosnowiec, violence against Jews becomes a common occurrence. Both German Nazis and Christian Poles are eager to marginalize and dehumanize Jews. Soon, Jews are forced to give up their homes and move into ghettos: segregated neighborhoods where they face constant surveillance, as well as random violence, from soldiers and police.

As more Jews are herded into ghettos, the Nazis begin deporting people to concentration camps — most notably, to Auschwitz. At this point, people are only beginning to learn the extent of the atrocities perpetuated in these camps: starvation, forced labor, and — most shocking — the mass murder, in gas chambers designed to maximize efficiency, of Jewish prisoners from all across Europe. The Spiegelmans send Richieu to a different ghetto, in the care of his Aunt Tosha, where they believe he will be safer. This decision turns out to be disastrous. When Tosha learns that the Nazis are planning to "liquidate" her ghetto and send all its residents to Auschwitz, she poisons herself and Richieu — as well as her daughter and niece, who are also in her care — to avoid the horrible fate of the gas chambers.

Eventually, the Nazis decide to "liquidate" the Srodula ghetto, where Vladek and Anja are living. Though Vladek has lost his parents and most of his siblings by this time, Anja still has her parents and her nephew, Lolek. The family manages to evade capture for a short time, but a stranger soon discovers them and turns them over to the Nazis. Within a few weeks, the family has been completely splintered. Mr. and Mrs. Zylberberg are sent to their deaths in Auschwitz, and Lolek — who believes his skills as an electrician will make him valuable, and so prevent the Nazis from killing him — surrenders himself for transport to the camp soon after. Vladek and Anja manage to evade capture by hiding out in bunkers and the homes of sympathetic Polish Christians, but they are caught after Vladek makes plans to flee the country with the help of Polish smugglers, who turn them over to the Nazis. After years of hiding, Vladek and Anja are sent to Auschwitz.

In Auschwitz, Vladek — separated from Anja, who is sent to nearby Birkenau — uses his exceptional charm and resourcefulness to win himself jobs as an English tutor to one of the guards, then as a tinsmith, and eventually as a shoemaker. In these positions, he is treated better than common prisoners, and saves himself from some of the back-breaking labor forced on his fellow prisoners. He does his best

to protect Anja from afar, who is small and frail and struggling to survive in Birkenau. They are in the camps for ten months before the Germans, facing a devastating attack from the Soviet Union and eager to escape Poland, evacuate Auschwitz-Birkenau and relocate its prisoners to different camps within the German borders. Vladek is sent to Dachau, while Anja goes through other camps, including Gross-Rosen and Ravensbrück. After they are separated, Vladek assumes Anja is dead. He is amazed and overjoyed when — after the end of the war and the liberation of surviving Jewish prisoners, when nearly everyone they know has been killed — they are reunited in Sosnowiec. A difficult and sad future lies ahead for them, but Vladek ends his story in a moment of triumph, as they embrace for the first time after months of separation.

As Artie narrates his father's memories of the war, he constructs a parallel narrative of his own experiences collecting those memories: his interviews with Vladek, which often dredge up feelings of resentment and disappointment that have shaped their relationship; and his experiences shepherding his father, whose health becomes increasingly poor as they delve deeper into his stories, through the difficulties of old age. As the book draws to a close, it becomes clear that Vladek is nearing death. His weak heart and lungs leave him frail and dependent. The complicated love he shares with his son comes to a head during a summer vacation in the Catskill Mountains, after Mala abandons him and Artie, along with his wife Françoise, is called upon to care for him. Though their relationship never reaches a tidy conclusion, the two men develop a deeper and more compassionate understanding during their hours of interviews and visits. Though still uncomfortable and uncertain about his relationship with his parents, Artie offers *Maus* as a gesture of love and forgiveness toward them — which, though painful and flawed, is sincere and deeply felt.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman – A young Jewish-American man who works to write a comic book about his father's experience during the Holocaust. Artie struggles with feelings of anger and resentment toward his parents, Vladek and Anja, as well as feelings of guilt. Though self-centered and often unkind, Artie is also curious and introspective. He is concerned about pursuing his work in the most ethical way possible, and thinks deeply about his own relationship to the stories Vladek shares with him, as well as his responsibility to his family and the larger Jewish community in telling those stories. Vladek and Artie have had a tense, difficult relationship since Artie's childhood, which was only exacerbated by his mother's suicide about ten years before he began work on Maus. But Artie develops a more generous and loving attitude toward Vladek as they progress through hours of visits and interviews. Their conversations allow Artie to better understand the forces that shaped Vladek's life, and to forgive some of his shortcomings as a parent. There is little separation between Artie in the book and Arthur Spiegelman, the author of Maus, who shares an essentially identical family history and relationships with Artie. One can think of them as being the same.

Vladek Spiegelman – Artie's father. A Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor, Vladek is burdened by memories of fear, suffering, and loss that, until beginning his interviews with Artie, he has not addressed in years. As a young man, Vladek possesses a shrewd intellect and terrific interpersonal skills, which help him navigate perilous situations throughout the war. Though age does not compromise his intelligence, Vladek becomes neurotic, stubborn, and miserly during his later years — characteristics that those around him, especially Artie, find hard to bear. Though Mala insists these traits are flaws in Vladek's character, rather than unfortunate relics of his war experience, Pavel — Artie's therapist — believes that they are expressions of the guilt and sadness Vladek feels about surviving the Holocaust. For all his shortcomings, Vladek is a loving father to Artie, whom he adores despite all their bickering, and a devoted husband to Anja, whom he misses terribly after her suicide and claims to think about constantly.

Anja (Anna) Spiegelman – Artie's mother and Vladek's late wife. A sensitive and highly intelligent woman, Anja survives the Holocaust but dies by suicide 1968. She dies almost ten years before Artie begins work on *Maus*, but her death continues to haunt both Artie and Vladek. Though she suffers from severe depression and anxiety throughout her life — illnesses whose effects are exacerbated by the trauma of the Holocaust, and especially by the loss of her son, Richieu, during the war — Anja draws strength from her relationships with her family, which allows her to endure the darkest moments of the war. Less invested in her own well-being than most people imprisoned in the camps, Anja cares for others even during the most frightening and difficult periods of her life. She inspires affection and loyalty in many people, and especially in Vladek, who continues to adore her long after her death.

Françoise Mouly – Artie's wife, a French woman who converted to Judaism after her marriage in order to please Vladek. Level-headed and even-tempered, Françoise is often called upon to defuse tension between her husband and father-in-law. She also offers Artie a sounding board for the depressive, anxious thoughts that disturb him while working on *Maus*. Though she occasionally becomes impatient with her husband's guilt-ridden neuroticism, Françoise is generous and supportive throughout all the Spiegelman family's most trying moments.

Mala Spiegelman – Vladek's second wife, whom he marries shortly after Anja dies. Mala feels stifled by Vladek, and resents him for his stinginess and his expectation that she will cater to

all his neuroses. Her frustration and resentment tends to manifest as an obsession with Vladek's estate. After years of caring for Vladek, she believes she is owed the bulk of his money and assets, and often badgers him about revising his will to increase her inheritance. Mala is a Holocaust survivor, who knew Vladek in Sosnowiec before the war. Though she makes occasional reference to her experiences, Artie never makes an effort to collect her memories. She is warm and respectful toward Artie, and gets along well with him even while fighting with Vladek.

Mr. Zylberberg – Anja's father, whom Vladek always refers to as "father-in-law." The wealthy owner of a hosiery factory, Mr. Zylberberg is a devoted family man who does everything he can to protect his wife, Matka, and their family from danger and privation after the war breaks out. His wealth is not enough to save him from Nazi persecution, however. He dies in Auschwitz, after Vladek's cousins Haskel and Jakov Spiegelman refuse to help smuggle him and Matka out of Srodula.

Richieu – Vladek and Anja's firstborn son. Richieu dies during the war, when his Aunt Tosha poisons him to prevent him from being captured by Nazi soldiers during the evacuation of Zawiercie. Though they never talked about him to Artie, Vladek and Anja kept Richieu's **photograph** in their bedroom throughout Artie's childhood.

Tosha – Anja's older sister. Tosha is married to Wolfe, and is mother to Bibi. After the war begins, Tosha carries a vial of poison around her neck at all times. When the Germans evacuate the ghetto Zawiercie, she poisons herself and the three children in her care (Bibi, Lonia, and Richieu, who Vladek and Anja thought would be sager with Tosha), rather than allowing the Nazis to send them all to Auschwitz.

Herman – Anja's brother. Herman is married to Helen, and is the father of Lolek and Lonia. Herman and Helen are in New York, visiting the World's Fair, when the war breaks out. They spend the war in the United States, safe from Nazi persecution. Herman is the only member of Anja's immediate family who survives the war. She is extremely attached to him, and is devastated by his unexpected death in 1964.

Helen (Hela) – Anja's sister-in-law. Helen is married to Herman, and is the mother of Lolek and Lonia. Helen and Herman are in New York, visiting the World's Fair, when the war breaks out. They spend the war in the United States, safe from Nazi persecution, and she is still living when Artie begins work on *Maus*.

Lolek – Anja's nephew. Lolek is the son of Herman and Helen, and older brother of Lonia. Because his parents are abroad when the war breaks out, he stays with Anja and Vladek throughout much of the war. When the Nazis evacuate Srodula, the ghetto where the three of them are living, Lolek refuses to hide with Vladek and Anja in a bunker. He is sent to Auschwitz, but survives the war and later becomes an engineer and college professor.

Mr. Ilzecki – A Jewish tailor in Sosnowiec, to whom Vladek sells black-market cloth at the beginning of the war. Ilzecki has a young son, about the same age as Richieu, whom he hides in the home of a Polish friend shortly after the war breaks out. He offers to help Vladek by asking the friend to hide Richieu as well, but Anja refuses to give up her son.

Haskel Spiegelman – Vladek's cousin, the brother of Miloch and Pesach. Haskel is the chief of the Jewish Police in Srodula. He helps Vladek, Anja, and Lolek escape the detention center in Srodula, but refuses to help Mr. and Mrs. Zylberberg. Haskel is unctuous and self-serving, always trying to ingratiate himself with the Nazis — Vladek calls him a crook.

Mancie – A beautiful, intelligent Hungarian woman imprisoned in Birkenau with Anja, who passes news and letters between the Vladek and Anja during their time in the camp. After the evacuation of Birkenau, Mancie keeps Anja close and protects her. Vladek tries to find Mancie after the war, to express his gratitude for her help, but he never discovers what happened to her.

The French Man – A prisoner in Dachau, with whom Vladek becomes friendly. He cannot remember the man's name, but remembers how they helped one another remain alive and sane through difficult days in the camp. He and Vladek exchange letters for years after the war, but Vladek destroys these at the same time as Anja's diaries.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Howie – Artie's childhood friend in Rego Park.

Steve – Artie's childhood friend in Rego Park.

Lucia Greenberg – A Jewish woman in Poland with whom Vladek is romantically involved before meeting Anja.

Yulek – A mutual friend of Vladek and Lucia, who introduces them.

Miss Stefanska – A seamstress who hides Communist documents for Anja during a police raid, and ends up spending months in prison as a result.

Matka Zylberberg – Anja's mother, a religious woman who cares tenderly for her children and grandchildren, and fights to keep her family together amidst the chaos of the war. Mrs. Zylberberg dies in Auschwitz, after Haskel and Jakov Spiegelman refuse to help smuggle her and her husband out of Srodula.

Orbach – A friend of Vladek's uncle, who claims Vladek as his cousin in order to free him from German custody during his time in Lublin.

Wolfe – Anja's brother-in-law. Wolfe is married to Tosha, and is the father of Bibi. He dies on a train to Auschwitz, shot while trying to escape.

Bibi – Anja's niece, the daughter of Tosha and Wolfe. Bibi dies during the war, when her mother poisons her to prevent her from being captured by Nazi soldiers during the evacuation of Zawiercie.

Lonia – Anja's niece. Lonia is the daughter of Herman and Helen, and younger sister of Lolek. Lonia dies during the war, when her Aunt Tosha poisons her to prevent her from being captured by Nazi soldiers during the evacuation of Zawiercie.

Mr. Spiegelman – Vladek's father, a religious man who owns a seltzer factory before the war breaks out. He is devoted to his family, and voluntarily follows his daughter Fela to a concentration camp in an effort to protect her and help care for her four children.

Mrs. Spiegelman – Vladek's mother, who dies of cancer shortly after the war breaks out and never knows the horrors of the ghettos or concentration camps.

Janina – A Polish woman who works as Richieu's governess in the months before and just after the war breaks out. Vladek and Anja seek help from Janina while they are trying to hide in Sosnowiec, but she refuses them.

Nahum Cohn – A Jewish man from Sosnowiec, and a friend of Mr. Zylberberg. Nahum Cohn owns a dry goods store, and does business with Vladek at the beginning of the war. German soldiers hang Cohn, along with his son and two other Jews, for dealing goods on the black market.

Pfefer Cohn – A Jewish man from Sosnowiec, and the son of Nahum Cohn. German soldiers hang Cohn, along with his father and two other Jews, for dealing goods on the black market.

Mr. Karmio – Anja's grandfather, and the father of Matka Zylberberg. He and his wife are sent to Auschwitz, where they are immediately killed in the gas chambers, shortly after the family moves to Stara Sosnowiec.

Mrs. Karmio – Anja's grandmother, and the mother of Matka Zylberberg. She and her husband are sent to Auschwitz, where they are immediately killed in the gas chambers, shortly after the family moves to Stara Sosnowiec.

Mordecai – A cousin of Vladek and the other Spiegelman's, who works for the Jewish Council. During the mass registration of Jews in Sosnowiec, the Spiegelmans present their papers to Mordecai, in the hope that he can help keep them safe.

Persis – Wolfe's uncle, the head of the Jewish Council in the Zawiercie ghetto. Persis has some influence with the German soldiers in Zawiercie, and takes Wolfe's family — as well as Lonia and Richieu — under his protection.

Moniek Merin – The head of the Jewish Council in the Srodula ghetto. Merin is only invested in his own well-being, and cooperates with the Germans instead of trying to protect the Jews of Srodula.

Ruth – A friend of Mala, who gives her a copy of Artie's comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet."

Jakov Spiegelman – Vladek's cousin, who helps Vladek arrange his family's escape from the detention center in Srodula.

Miloch Spiegelman – Vladek's cousin, the brother of Haskel and Pesach. Miloch works repairing shoes for the German soldiers. He allows Vladek and Anja to hide in his bunker during the evacuation of Srodula.

Pesach Spiegelman – Vladek's cousin, the brother of Haskel and Miloch. Pesach is a member of the Jewish Police in Srodula.

Avram — A young man who hides with Vladek and Anja in Miloch's bunker. Avram trusts Vladek's judgment, and decides he will not leave the bunker until Vladek does so.

Mr. Lukowski – The Zylberberg's longtime janitor, who helps Vladek and Anja hide when they return to Sosnowiec from Srodula.

Mrs. Kawka – A Sosnowiec farmer who allows Vladek and Anja to hide in her barn after they return from Srodula.

Mrs. Motonowa – A Polish woman whom Vladek meets trading goods on the black market after his return from Srodula. Mrs. Motonowa hides Vladek and Anja in her home throughout the winter of 1944.

Mr. Mandelbaum – A Jewish man from Sosnowiec, who becomes a close friend of Vladek's during their early days in Auschwitz. Vladek and Mandelbaum plan to escape to Hungary in the same smuggling party, and are sent to Auschwitz together after the smugglers betray them.

Abraham – A Jewish man from Sosnowiec. Abraham is Mr. Mandelbaum's nephew. He volunteers to be smuggled into Hungary first, so he can report about the conditions in the country and the trustworthiness of the smugglers.

Frank – One of Vladek and Mala's neighbors in Rego Park.

Pinek Spiegelman – Vladek's younger brother, who lives in Israel. Pinek deserts from the Polish army and flees to Russia with his brother Leon, where a family of peasant Jews take them in and keep them safe. He is the only one of Vladek's siblings to survive the war.

Mrs. Karp – One of Vladek's neighbors in the Catskill Mountains, who looks in on Vladek after Mala leaves him. Mrs. Karp is a Holocaust survivor, as is her husband, Edgar.

Edgar Karp – One of Vladek's neighbors in the Catskill Mountains, who looks in on Vladek after Mala leaves him. Edgar Karp is a Holocaust survivor, as is his wife.

Nadja Mouly Spiegelman – Artie and Françoise's daughter, who is born shortly after Artie begins work on the second volume of *Maus*.

Pavel – Artie's therapist, a Czech Jew and Holocaust survivor. Pavel helps Artie mine the complexities and moral problems

inherent to telling stories about the Holocaust, and helps him confront the frightening challenges of representing Auschwitz.

Yidl – A Russian Jewish man imprisoned in Auschwitz, who heads the tin shop where Vladek works after his arrival in the camp.

The Priest – A Polish man imprisoned in Auschwitz, whom Vladek meets on his first night in the camp. Though they meet only once, their conversation gives Vladek a sense of hope that sustains him through the dark times to come.

Felix – A young Belgian man Vladek meets in Auschwitz. Guards write down Felix's serial number during one selection, and he screams inconsolably throughout the night that follows as he waits to be taken to his death.

Shivek – A friend of Vladek's from Sosnowiec, with whom he reunites during the last days of the war. Vladek and Shivek spend their first weeks of freedom together, but are separated during the journey back to Sosnowiec.

Levek Zylberberg – Anja's middle brother, who flees to Russia at the beginning of the war, then returns to Poland and dies in Warsaw.

Josef Zylberberg – Anja's youngest brother, an artist who dies by suicide near the beginning of the war.

Sonia – Josef's materialistic girlfriend, who abandons him after he loses his money at the beginning of the war. Vladek blames Sonia for Josef's suicide.

Zosha Spiegelman – Vladek's younger sister, who dies in Auschwitz.

Yadja Spiegelman – Vladek's younger sister, who dies in Auschwitz.

Marcus Spiegelman – Vladek's brother, who is imprisoned in a labor camp called Blechamer near the beginning of the war. The man who tells Vladek about Marcus's death refuses to tell him how, exactly, he died.

Moses Spiegelman – Vladek's brother, who is imprisoned in a labor camp called Blechamer near the beginning of the war. The man who tells Vladek about Moses's death refuses to tell him how, exactly, he died.

Leon Spiegelman – Vladek's brother, who deserts from the Polish army and flees to Russia with his brother Pinek, where a family of peasant Jews take them in and keep them safe. Leon dies of appendicitis.

Sarah – Pinek's wife, a Russian Jewish woman whose family harbors Pinek and Leon during the war.

Jenny – A Jewish woman from Sosnowiec, whom Vladek meets in the Belsen displaced persons camp while looking for information about Anja.

Sonia – A Jewish woman from Sosnowiec, whom Vladek meets in the Belsen displaced persons camp while looking for information about Anja.

Mr. Gelber – A Jewish man from Sosnowiec, who is murdered when he returns to Sosnowiec at the end of the war.

Leo – Mala's brother, who lives in Florida.

Fela – Vladek's sister. When she is sent to a concentration camp with her four children, her and Vladek's father, Mr. Spiegelman, voluntarily sneaks into line with her in order to help her and her children. None survive.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE HOLOCAUST AND THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ITS SURVIVORS

Art Spiegelman, the author and narrator of *Maus*, is the child of two Polish Holocaust survivors: Vladek, his father, and Anja, his mother. Following a long estrangement from Vladek following Anja's unexpected death in 1968, Arthur — called Artie by many close to him — has decided to collect his father's memories of the Holocaust and narrate them in a series of cartoons. The Holocaust, which occurred between 1941 and 1945, was a genocide perpetrated by the nation of Germany, then under the leadership of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party. During the five-year period before their defeat to the Allied Forces, the Nazi Party murdered six million Jewish people, along with five million others who were deemed "undesirable" in their society (these victims included Roma people, homosexuals, and non-Jewish religious minorities, among many others). Artie, whose Jewish family was almost completely annihilated during the Holocaust, feels compelled to preserve his father's memories out of respect for the suffering Vladek endured, and in an effort to ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust are not forgotten. On a more personal level, he uses *Maus* to explore his own troubled relationship to his parents and his Jewish identity.

Artie understands that narrating his father's experience of the Holocaust is an enormous responsibility, and he struggles with the pressures of that responsibility — and with the sense that he is not fit to tell Vladek's stories —during hours of interviews and years of work on the book that will become *Maus*. The visual metaphor that defines *Maus* — Artie's use of **animal heads** in place of human faces, with a different animal representing each nationality or ethnic group — provides Artie with a platform for investigating his anxieties about his project, acknowledging Artie's distance from the events of his father's story while simultaneously binding him to the people about whom he writes. Artie has never met many of the people from

Vladek's life, and lacks sufficient information to create accurate representations of many of the scenes he describes. Artie does not know, for example, what his paternal grandfather or aunts looked like, since there are no surviving **photographs** of them. He struggles to imagine the layout of the tin shop where Vladek worked during his time in Auschwitz, and Vladek often draws Artie diagrams when trying to explain the layout of a bunker or a concentration camp. All these gaps in his knowledge highlight the limitations of Artie's imagination and experience.

At the same time, Artie's mouse head creates an undeniable connection between him and all other Jewish people. Artie shares his rodent features with his parents and other relatives; with the friends and neighbors in Europe who endured the war alongside them; with Jews he meets in his day-to-day life; and with the hordes of nameless dead he depicts standing in line in the ghettos, struggling for breath in overcrowded cattle cars, and dying in torment in the gas chambers and mass graves of Auschwitz. In drawing them all with the same mouse head, Artie unites the identities and experiences of all Jewish people, tying them together across continents and generations. Artie cannot relate to the horror of the Holocaust in the same intimate way Vladek can, but he has been shaped by those events. He is the inheritor of a tremendous intergenerational legacy shared by all Jewish people.

Yet in the moment where Artie struggles most with his decision to publish Vladek's story — where he feels overwhelmed by the pressures that accompany professional success, and afraid of misrepresenting the horrors his parents' generation endured — he appears to the reader wearing a mouse mask over a human face, his human ears and hair visible in profile. Just as the mouse head connects Jewish people across different nationalities and generations, the notion that Artie is hiding his true features — features that are different from those of his parents and other Jews — shows his anxiety about profiting off a story that is not necessarily his to tell.

Even as he chronicles his father's experience, Artie uses *Maus* to explore problems about the morality of telling Holocaust stories at all. His therapist, a Czech Holocaust survivor named Pavel, reminds Artie that "[l]ife always takes the side of life" — that people always share stories of triumph and survival when talking about the Holocaust, but in doing so erase the perspectives of the dead. Reverence for the survivors of the tragedy is inherently disrespectful to those who died, Pavel suggests, because reverence implies that the people who lived were somehow better or smarter than those who died, and therefore more deserving of life. Vladek clearly feels some trepidation around this problem as well. He dislikes the idea of Artie writing about his life before the war: about his courtship of Anja, or the woman he dated before meeting her. To write in a Holocaust narrative about things that have nothing to do with the Holocaust itself "isn't so proper, so respectful," he tells Artie. As a survivor, tied to those who have died through bonds of love and guilt, Vladek feels compelled to construct a story worthy of what has happened; one that takes seriously his responsibilities to those who cannot speak for themselves.

Maus acknowledges that the core narrative of the Holocaust — of rabid persecution and dehumanizing violence — is morally unambiguous, and Artie clearly portrays the cruelty of guards and collaborators. But condemning their actions is not the core project of the book. Instead, *Maus* explores difficult questions of moral witness, and considers the responsibilities inherited both by the survivors and the generations that follow them. Artie and Vladek both hold the power of authorship; in sharing their stories, they contribute to a larger narrative of the Holocaust, and to the multi-generational struggle to make sense of that tragedy. However, that power is not unambiguously good. As Pavel points out, the fact that the dead will never be able to tell their stories creates a troubling imbalance: the memories of the living persist, but the dead have no power to influence the narrative those memories create. Through their collaboration, Artie and Vladek bring forward a story of moral consequence, for which they must both take responsibility. That burden weighs heavily on both men, and each struggles throughout the act of telling to navigate his own difficult relationship with the reality that has shaped him.

FAMILY, IDENTITY, AND JEWISHNESS

While his interviews with Vladek keep a tight focus on the war, Artie's parallel narrative of recording those interviews and writing *Maus* considers the multitude of ways in which the war continues to influence Vladek in his old age, and shapes Artie's relationship both with his father and with his own Jewish identity.

Reverberations of the Holocaust are visible in almost every aspect of Vladek's life and character, and so have a profound impact on his relationship with his son. From the novel's first scene — in which Vladek scoffs to hear his young son refer to neighborhood boys as "friends," and advises Artie to test the sincerity of their friendship by "lock[ing] them together in a room with no food for a week" — it is clear that Artie's whole life has been colored by the catastrophes his father faced during the war. Nevertheless, Artie sees the Holocaust as an impenetrable barrier between him and his parents. He admits to his wife Françoise that he sometimes wishes he had been in Auschwitz with them, so he could better understand what they lived through and how it impacted them.

Because Anja and Vladek's experiences during the war are inextricably intertwined with their membership in a Jewish community — a network of family members, neighbors, business partners, and friends who all suffer and struggle together during the war — his own freedom from such suffering seems to undermine Artie's own sense of membership in that community. With the exception of Françoise, a convert, every Jewish person Artie meets is a

Holocaust survivor: Pavel, Mala, even the couple living next door to Vladek in his bungalow in the Catskills. Jewishness, as Artie understands it, is linked to the experience of survival. His inability to relate to that experience compromises his sense of his own Jewish identity, and creates distance between him and the family members about whom he writes.

Though Artie feels a tenuous connection to his family, it is clear that family relationships are central to the moral universe in which Vladek and Anja operate throughout the war. Their bonds with parents, siblings, and cousins sustain them materially — since relatives, even distant relatives, are more willing to extend help to one another amidst the chaos and privation of the ghettos — and play an even more important role in sustaining their sprits. In a letter from Birkenau, Anja tells Vladek that knowing he is alive is the only thing that keeps her from throwing herself on the electric fence and ending her life. Likewise, Vladek's father chooses to follow his daughter and grandchildren to the death camps rather than abandon them. Bonds of love and kinship are a source of meaning that persists even when many reasons to live have been stripped away. This makes Artie's alienation from his Jewish roots even more disconcerting to him; he lacks an intimate understanding, not only of his parents' lived experiences, but of the values that shaped their lives. Through writing *Maus* — a project that coincides with the birth of his own daughter, Nadja — Artie begins to address those feelings of alienation, cultivating deeper and more complete understanding of the connections that held his family together during the war, and the ways in which those connections have had repercussions for his own life.

GRIEF, MEMORY, AND LOVE

Vladek tells Artie that he has spent years trying to rid himself of memories of the war and the Holocaust, but he recounts his story in remarkable detail, recalling the names and eventual fates of almost every person who crossed his path during those years. Though his descriptions are straightforward and unflinching, he has clear emotional reactions to many of the events about which he speaks — he cries when he remembers four of his friends being hanged in Sosnowiec for dealing goods on the black market, and talks with passionate sadness about his dead son, Richieu. Love and compassion are what make Vladek's memories of the war so painful. But, just as he and Anja keep the **photograph** of Richieu hanging in their bedroom, he keeps those memories as tokens of the people he has lost, even when they prove to be a heartbreaking burden.

The memory of Artie's mother, Anja, hovers over every conversation between Artie and Vladek, as does their mutual uncertainty about how best to deal with the reality of her death. Anja committed suicide in 1968, when Artie was a young man. Though Vladek's stories suggest that Anja struggled with depression throughout her life, her death seems to have been completely unexpected. She does not leave a suicide note, and so Artie has very little insight into her reasons for choosing to end her life. While Artie tries to confront the complex feelings attached to his grief — to represent the anger he feels about his mother's suicide, as well as his continued love for her — Vladek does everything he can to preserve the best possible version of his wife, ignoring all the difficult and painful aspects of their relationship in the story he presents for Artie. He covers his desk with photographs of Anja, which prompts Mala to compare the desk to a shrine, and he tells Artie: "Everywhere I look I'm seeing Anja … always I'm thinking on Anja." Vladek's displays of uncomplicated devotion contrast with the Artie's tense silence on the subject of his mother. Except in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" — a comic he drew and published shortly after her suicide, which resurfaces during his interviews with Vladek many years later — Artie avoids talking about his relationship with Anja. He treats her as simply another character in the long narrative of Vladek's survival, albeit a more important one than many.

Vladek's desire to protect Anja's memory sometimes has disastrous consequences. Artie learns partway through his interviews with Vladek that Anja left a series of diaries telling her side of their story, and that Vladek burned these diaries shortly after her death. When Artie learns what his father has done, he calls Vladek a "murderer" — he equates the destruction of Anja's voice and memories with an act of violence. Though Artie's anger seems justified, it is also clear that burning Anja's diaries was a way for Vladek to shield her from unsympathetic scrutiny. By seizing control of her narrative, he guarantees that his gentler-than-life version of Anja and their relationship will be the one to survive; that her legacy is in the hands of someone who loves her and has her best interest at heart.

While scholars and activists often treat remembrance as a moral imperative — arguing that to forget the Holocaust would be an additional act of violence against those who suffered and died — *Maus* interests itself in the idea of remembrance also as an act of generosity and compassion.

GUILT, ANGER, AND REDEMPTION

In addition to being a narrative of war and survival, *Maus* is, in large part, a chronicle of Artie's efforts to understand his father despite the fractured bonds between them. Their difficult relationship bears marks of tragedies that have shaped them — the devastation wrought by the Holocaust, and the trauma of Anja's suicide — but their troubles are also a product of their basic human shortcomings, their native selfishness and neuroticism. Artie strives to be as honest as possible about his relationship with Vladek, and about his father's many shortcomings. He knows that Vladek, for all the strength, resourcefulness, and courage he displayed

during the war, is not an uncomplicated hero, and that it would be misleading to depict him as such — especially given his own lingering feelings of resentment toward Vladek, which an unambiguously positive portrait would disguise.

Though the most difficult aspects of this relationship never resolve themselves entirely — in the second volume of *Maus*, written after Vladek dies from congestive heart failure, Artie confesses that "[m]y father's ghost still hangs over me" — Artie's interviews with Vladek help bring to light the deep love at the center of all their family's troubles. Vladek showers Artie with warmth and affection, even as he stifles him with unsolicited advice and manipulative demands for attention. He expresses unwavering love for Anja, and on multiple occasions insists that their love for each other gave them strength to survive the most difficult moments of the war.

Artie gains some deeper understanding of his father through their interviews, but the loss of his mother's diaries means that he cannot use the book to explore or resolve the deeply conflicted feelings he feels toward her. In his comic "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" — which Mala, and later Vladek, finds and reads — Artie describes the overwhelming mix of anger and guilt that possessed him after his mother's suicide: he knows that friends and neighbors blame him for Anja's death, and admits that he has turned his back on his mother in moments when she desperately needed to feel loved, but nevertheless feels that Anja is the one who has "murdered" him, turning his life upside down and trapping him in a prison of guilt. His inability to sort through these conflicted feelings in the same way he examines his difficult relationship with Vladek leaves Artie in a state of unresolved tension, even after hundreds of pages and panels.

The final image in the book, of the gravestone that bears both Vladek and Anja's names, suggests Artie has relinquished his anger and is ready to let his parents' memories rest peacefully. Though his story does not have a neat or satisfying ending, Artie must release his pain before he can finish his work and move forward with his life. Yet it's important to note that his gesture of love and forgiveness does not completely heal Artie's suffering, or that of his parents. A difficult story like theirs cannot be redeemed easily, and given the scope and magnitude of the disasters that shaped them, may not be redeemable at all. To carry on in the face of all that has happened, Artie must settle for "good-enough" resolutions and learn to live with pain and uneasiness where he cannot overcome it.

DEATH, CHANCE, AND HUMAN INTERDEPENDENCE

The ghettos, cattle cars, and concentration camps through which Vladek and Anja move during the war are filled with death, most of which is a result of random and senseless violence. Though the Nazi regime is sometimes calculating about which people it will murder — as when Vladek's sister Fela, whose four children are considered an unnecessary drain on the state's resources, is sent to her death during a mass registration of Jewish families in Sosnowiec — soldiers also deal out death sentences for minor infractions, or for no reason at all. Likewise, illness and privation ravage the bodies of those in concentration camps completely indiscriminately; frail, skinny Anja survives Birkenau against all odds, while strong, healthy Vladek nearly dies of typhus in Dachau. Though Vladek is, as Artie puts it in his conversation with Pavel, "incredibly present-minded and resourceful" in his efforts to keep himself and Anja safe, their survival is a matter of luck much more than intelligence or merit. Pavel reminds Artie soberly of this fact, and warns him against thinking about the Holocaust as a contest that the living have won and the dead have lost.

While chance is the most powerful force determining Anja and Vladek's survival, they also depend on the compassion and humanity of those around them — people who share their knowledge and resources, sacrifice some of their own wellbeing, and on occasion even risk their lives to help Vladek and Anja. From the nameless priest who gives Vladek hope with an auspicious interpretation of the identification number on his arm; to the French man who shares food from his Red Cross packages; to Mancie, who carries Vladek's letters to Anja in Birkenau, the kindness of strangers gives the Spiegelmans both the emotional strength and the material resources they need to survive. Likewise, random indifference and undeserved cruelty — the unpredictable aggression of guards, or the fear of Jewish collaborators trying to save themselves at the expense of others — compromise the safety of innocent people, and trap some in deadly situations. Nearly all the men and women of *Maus*, regardless of their ethnicity or social position, are forced to make decisions that will determine whether others live or die. Though Vladek is pessimistic about human nature — he encourages Anja to think only of her own wellbeing, assuring her that her friends won't have her best interest at heart — many such people prove themselves generous and humane even in the worst of circumstances.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs in *Maus* can be divided into two categories: interpretations and reproductions. Interpretations are hand-drawn versions of real-world photographs, which translate the images into the comic's style

and replace human faces with mouse **heads**. Reproductions are real photographs, which are printed in the book exactly as they appear in life — human faces intact. Artie's decision to use both kind of photographs in his book highlights the way in which writing *Maus* forces him to straddle the worlds of reality and fiction. Though Vladek speaks of real people and events, Artie does not have access to the visceral realities of what his father experienced. The people and places that defined Vladek's life in Poland (and his experience during the war) are foreign to his son. Likewise, Artie has no basis for understanding the intense emotions and lasting traumas the war created. In interpreting his parents' photographs — most of which show relatives who did not survive the Holocaust, and who Artie will never meet —to suit the comic book style, Artie recognizes that his work is an act of imagination, as much as (or even more than) it is an object of historical memory. Though the faces of his lost relatives are accessible to him through photographs, he cannot truly know the people they depict.

ANIMAL HEADS AND MASKS

There are only three reproductions in *Maus*: the photograph of Artie and Anja in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet"; the portrait of Richieu that appears on the dedication page of the book's second volume; and the souvenir photograph of Vladek wearing a concentration camp uniform, which he sends Anja to announce his impending return to Sosnowiec after the war. Though his parents and brother are difficult characters for Artie to grasp — he maintains difficult, conflicted relationships with each of them, even after their deaths — his comics offer a way to make sense of their presence in his life, and to develop intimate, emotional connections with them even when true understand continues to elude him. While other relatives must always remain legendary or fictional on the most intimate level, his immediate family becomes "real" to Artie as he studies and shares their story.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Pantheon edition of *Maus* published in 1993.

Part 1, Chapter 1 Quotes

Vladek: But this what I just told you — about Lucia and so — I don't want you should write about this in your book ... It has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!

Artie: But Pop — it's great material. It makes everything more real — more human. I want to tell your story, the way it really happened.

Vladek: But this isn't so proper, so respectful ... I can tell you other stories, but such private things I don't want you should mention.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman, Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Lucia Greenberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.23

Explanation and Analysis

Early in the comic book, Artie and his father, Vladek, have a conversation in which Vladek asks Artie to omit some of the information they've just discussed. Vladek has been talking about his ex-lover, Lucia, who (years before, when Vladek was still a young man) tried to break up his engagement. Vladek doesn't want Artie to include such information in the book Artie is writing about the Holocaust. Artie disagrees, arguing that the personal information is crucial to understand the Holocaust.

First, it's important to see that Artie conceives of his project (he's writing a graphic novel about the Holocaust, as reflected in the life of his father, Vladek) as a humanistic story. To understand the Holocaust in fiction, we must understand the *lives* of the people who lived through the Holocaust--not just their experiences in concentration camps, but also their lives leading up to the Nazis' atrocities. Second, notice that Artie clearly disobeys his father--the fact that we are reading about Vladek's old lovers means that Artie includes the information Vladek wants omitted. Right away, Spiegelman raises questions about the morality of writing a comic book about the Holocaust. What purpose could such a book serve? What purpose does remembering the Holocaust at all serve? Don't the memories just cause more pain to survivors?

Part 1, Chapter 3 Quotes

I'm not going to die, and I won't die here! I want to be treated like a human being!

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.54

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek has been imprisoned in a POW camp for Polish soldiers fighting against the Nazis. In the camp, Vladek's life is incredibly hard--it's cold, he's hungry, and he's in danger of developing a serious disease and dying.

Above all else, Vladek is concerned with one thing: survival. When he learns that the German prison guards are offering Polish prisoners a chance for more food and better conditions, he takes the opportunity. Vladek will have to perform manual work for the Germans--essentially helping his enemies with their own war effort. While some of Vladek's fellow prisoners are reluctant to help the Nazis with anything, Vladek insists that doing so it worth it: he'll get more food and warmer clothes. (Also notice that Vladek--who's depicted as a mouse--insists that he wants to be treated like a human being; a reminder that *Maus*, despite its fantastical elements, is concerned with depicting human nature and humanity's struggle to survive.)

Vladek: Always I went to sleep exhausted. And one night I had a dream ... A voice was talking to me. It was, I think, my dead grandfather. It was so real, this voice.

Grandfather: Don't worry ... Don't worry, my child ... You will come out of this place — free! — on the day of Parshas Truma.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.57

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Vladek is still imprisoned in a POW camp, tyrannized by the Nazis. Vladek is tired and hopeless--he senses that he's going to die soon. But one night, he has a vivid dream in which his grandfather tells him that he'll be released on Parshas Truma, a day that Jews set aside for the reading of a special passage of the Torah. Later, the vision comes true, and Vladek is released on Parshas Truma.

What does the vision mean? Although Spiegelman is dealing with a deadly serious topic, the Holocaust, there are many scenes in the book which suggest an element of magic or fantasy. Spiegelman isn't saying that his father really did have a magical vision in which he saw the future--but he isn't denying the possibility, either. Perhaps people need to believe in fate or religion in order to get through the most difficult moments in their lives. Vladek gets through the Holocaust in part because of his faith in God and destiny.

This is for me a very important date. I checked later on a calendar. It was this parsha on the week I got married to Anja ... And this was the parsha in 1948, after the war, on the week you were born. And so it came out to be this parsha you sang on the Saturday of your bar mitzvah!

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman, Vladek Spiegelman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.59

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek explains the true meaning of the Parsha Truma for him. Vladek was released from his POW camp on the day of the Parsha Truma, just as he foresaw in his vision. Furthermore, Vladek married Anja, his wife, on the Parsha Truma--and later on, Artie was born during the week of the Parsha.

In short, Vladek spells out a series of incredible coincidences--coincidences which may or may not signal a divine presence in Vladek's life. Vladek has been miraculously lucky, of course--he's managed to survive the Holocaust, partly because of his own ingenuity, but mostly because of incredible luck. Vladek, a very religious man, seems to believe that God has blessed him with life--a blessing that's apparent in otherwise inexplicable coincidences like that of the Parsha Truma. Artie doesn't deny or agree with Vladek's beliefs, and we the readers are free to believe that Vladek has been blessed, or that he's just the beneficiary of some incredible good luck, and has found a sense of order in the chaos of life.

Part 1, Chapter 4 Quotes

Ilzecki and his wife didn't come out from the war. But his son remained alive; ours did not.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Mr. Ilzecki, Richieu

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.81

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek and his wife, Anja, had a first son named Richieu, and when Vladek explains his experiences during the Holocaust to his son Artie, he lingers on the memory of Richieu. Here, he tells Artie that his associate, Mr. Ilzecki, had a young son who survived World War II--despite the fact that Ilzecki himself did not. By contrast, Valdek *did* survive the war, though his first child did not.

There is no rhyme or reason in World War II, and in fate in general--indeed, as the passage suggests, the only "rule" of the war seems to be that no family emerged unscathed. Vladek was lucky and blessed to survive the Holocaust, but he could do nothing to pass on his good fortune to his child.

Cohn had a dry goods store. He was known all over Sosnowiec. Often he gave me cloth with no coupons. I traded also with Pfefer, a fine young man — a Zionist. He was just married. His wife ran screaming in the street ... Ach. When I think now of them, it still makes me cry.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Pfefer Cohn, Nahum Cohn

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.83-84

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vladek describes people he used to know, Nahum and Pfefer Cohn. The Cohn family was hanged by the Nazis to warn Jews to obey the Nazis at all costs. Strangely, Vladek is still immensely moved by the deaths of the Cohns, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that he didn't know them particularly well. (He just bought some clothes from Nahum now and then.)

Why do the Cohns' deaths move Vladek so greatly, when he's witnessed so many horrors? Why does he remember the Cohns years later? Perhaps the passage is meant to suggest that Vladek is an enormously compassionate man, capable of feeling sympathy even for people he didn't know closely. Or perhaps the passage conveys a more subtle point: the very fact that Vladek *didn't* know the Cohn family at all well makes their deaths more, not less, moving. Almost every single person Vladek knew died in the Holocaust--whether he knew them closely or slightly. Perhaps Vladek isn't crying for the Cohns so much as he's crying for the overall devastation of the Holocaust, and for the utter destruction of his previously peaceful, safe community--a place where he could trade goods on credit with people he knew and trusted.

Vladek: I couldn't see anywhere my father. But later someone who saw him told me ... He came through this same cousin over to the good side. Then came Fela to register. Her, they sent to the left. Four children was too many.

Mr. Spiegelman: Fela! My daughter! How can she manage alone — with four children to take care of?

Vladek: And, what do you think? He sneaked on to the bad side. And those on the bad side never came anymore home.

Related Characters: Mrs. Spiegelman, Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Mordecai, Fela

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.91

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek recalls a particularly frightening and moving moment from his Holocaust experiences. He and the rest of his family was being "relocated" by the Nazis; i.e., sent into nightmarish concentration camps. Some of the Jews in the area were sent to work (a blessing, relatively speaking, since it kept them out of the death camps), while others were sent to be murdered. Vladek's father was sent to work, since he was in good health. Yet when he saw his daughter, Fela, being sent to her death, he sacrificed his own life by going to the "bad side"--i.e., going with her to the camps.

Vladek's father's gesture is incredibly bold and compassionate--and it may have been even braver than he intended it to be (most didn't yet realize just how dangerous the "bad side" was). The passage testifies to the heroism of ordinary people, like those in Vladek's family. Many gave up their lives, simply to provide aid and comfort to the people they cared about. They preferred to die with their family than survive alone.

Part 1, Chapter 5 Quotes

He wants me to go help him fix his roof or something. Shit! Even as a kid I hated helping him around the house. He loved showing off how handy he was ... and proving that anything I did was all wrong. He made me completely neurotic about fixing stuff. I mean, I didn't even own a hammer until we moved into this place! One reason I became an artist was that he thought it was impractical — just a waste of time ... it was an area where I wouldn't have to compete with him.

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Françoise Mouly, Vladek Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.97

Explanation and Analysis

Artie has a tough relationship with his father. Vladek is a stern, overbearing father, intensely critical of his son. Vladek's behavior seems a little surprising, considering how much hardship he went through during the Holocaust. He attacks Artie for the smallest, most trivial of mistakes--as if constantly disapproving of Artie for having an easier life than Vladek's own.

Artie admits that he's spent a large chunk of his life quarreling with his father--indeed, he chose to become an artist because his father couldn't compete with him there. The passage is important in that it reinforces the tension between father and son, a tension that Artie is trying to alleviate by writing a book about his father's experiences. Spiegelman doesn't excuse or condone his father's behavior--being a Holocaust survivor doesn't make you a saint, or even a good father. Rather, he uses his comic book to show Vladek (and himself!) in all his strengths and weaknesses.

In 1968 my mother killed herself ... she left no note!

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.100

Explanation and Analysis

Artie recalls one of the saddest moments of his life--the suicide of his mother, Anja. Anja always had a difficult relationship with her son. In his last interaction with her, Anja woke Artie up in the middle of the night to ask if she loved him, and Artie sarcastically said "Sure, ma." Artie felt that his relatives blamed him for Anja's suicide--they believed that because of his own issues (he had recently been released from a mental hospital) Anja had killed herself.

Artie's description of Anja's suicide--focusing on the fact that she left no note--is interesting because it suggests Anja's pain or spitefulness, or maybe Artie's denial, or maybe neither. By refusing to leave a suicide note, it would seem, Anja was trying to cause her family as much pain as possible--or else she was in so much pain that she couldn't even write anything. But perhaps it's wrong to make assumptions about Anja's behavior, as Artie clearly does. The fact that Artie faults Anja for not leaving a note suggests that he's still trapped in his own sense of guilt and responsibility, angry at Anja because she left no way for him to resolve anything at all.

Well, Mom, if you're listening ... Congratulations! ... You've committed the perfect crime ... You put me here ... shorted all my circuits ... cut my nerve endings ... and crossed my wires! ... You murdered me, Mommy, and you left me here to take the rap!!!

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.103

Explanation and Analysis

Artie creates a comic book in which he tries to come to terms with his mother's suicide. In the comic book, he depicts himself in a prison cell, yelling at Anja. Artie screams that Anja has sent him to jail for murder: she's killed herself, manipulating the rest of the family to blame Artie for the tragedy. Artie will always be "trapped" in the prison of his own guilt and shame.

The passage is important for two reasons. First, it reinforces the tense relationship between Artie and his family: Artie is an enormously complicated individual, and in many ways he's still living out the legacy of the Holocaust, in the sense that he's living in the shadow of his parents' pain and suffering. Second, the passage reinforces why Artie writes *Maus* in the first place: as with Anja's death, he thinks that

he can use art, fiction, and even humor to move past his own pain and guilt.

When things came worse in our ghetto, we said always: "Thank God the kids are with Persis, safe." That spring, on one day, the Germans took from Srodula to Auschwitz over 1,000 people. Most they took were kids — some only 2 or 3 years. Some kinds were screaming and screaming. They couldn't stop. So the Germans swinged them by the legs against a wall … and they never anymore screamed. In this way the Germans treated the little ones what still had survived a little. This I didn't see with my own eyes, but somebody the next day told me. And I said, "Thank God with Persis our children are safe!"

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Persis, Bibi, Lonia, Richieu

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.108

Explanation and Analysis

As the situation deteriorates for Jews under Nazi rule, tragedy strikes Vladek's community. Nazis savagely murder hundreds of children--a crime that's virtually unspeakable. Vladek and his family have sent their own children into the care of Persis, the head of the Jewish council in the ghetto. Vladek believes that his child and his family's children will be safe with Persis, because Persis has some power with the Nazis. Little does Vladek know (at the time) that Persis will be murdered soon, leaving the children to be killed--ironically, by Tosha (Anja's sister).

The passage is enormously sad--so sad that there's almost nothing left to say about it. In the midst of tragedy, there's nothing Vladek can do but thank God that he and his own loved ones are safe. And yet the tragedy is even greater than he imagines, since his loved ones are anything but safe. Spiegelman suggests that the scale of suffering at this stage in the book is really beyond human understanding--we can only bear witness to it and remember.

Tosha: No! I won't go to their gas chambers! And my children won't go to their gas chambers! Bibi! Lonia! Richieu! Come here quickly!

Vladek: Always Tosha carried around her neck some poison … She killed not only herself, but also the 3 children. I'm telling you, it was a tragedy among tragedies. He was such a happy, beautiful boy!

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Tosha, Lonia, Bibi, Richieu

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.109

Explanation and Analysis

In this wrenching section of the book, Tosha (the sister of Anja) makes a big decision. She knows that she and her sister's children will be arrested by the Nazis and sent to their deaths in the gas chambers. Instead of allowing such an atrocity to occur, Tosha decides to kill herself, along with the children.

Vladek's grief at hearing that Richieu (his child) was murdered is beyond understanding. It's not even clear that Tosha did the "wrong" thing--she probably *did* protect Vladek's children from an awful, prolonged death, preceded by weeks of fear, starvation, and cold. As Hannah Arendt said, the Holocaust forced the Jews to do things that were neither wrong nor right--things that were simply outside the scope of mortality altogether. Spiegelman dares us to judge Tosha's actions--our own criteria of good and evil simply aren't strong enough to help us understand her decision.

Artie: Wouldn't they have helped you even if you couldn't pay? I mean, you were from the same family.

Vladek: Hah! You don't understand … At that time, it wasn't anymore families. It was everybody to take care for himself!

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman, Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Jakov Spiegelman, Haskel Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.114

Explanation and Analysis

One of the greatest tragedies of the Holocaust was that it

forced Jews to turn against other Jews. Just as the Nazis presumably wanted, Jews were forced to betray each other, fight with each other, and collaborate with the Nazis to murder each other--all because they wanted to survive. Here, Artie learns that Vladek's own blood relatives refused to help him without some money: Vladek had to pay his cousin Jakov to smuggle him out of the ghetto. Family loyalty often disappeared at the time: people looked out for themselves (or perhaps their children), but no one else.

It's all too easy for us to judge Vladek's relatives for refusing to help Vladek out of the goodness of their hearts. But Jakov is a human being: as much as he values family, he also values his own life. Jews had to sacrifice their ideals and loyalties to protect themselves--their sacrifice wasn't barbaric, but deeply human.

❝ Haskel took from me Father-in-Law's jewels. But, finally, he didn't help them. On Wednesday the vans came. Anja and I saw her father at the window. He was tearing his hair and crying. He was a millionaire, but even this didn't save him his life.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Mr. Zylberberg, Haskel Spiegelman, Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.115

Explanation and Analysis

In the ghettos, Vladek tries to use his family connections--backed up with some bribery--to get himself to safety, along with his family. In the end, his connection, his cousin Haskel Spiegelman, can't sneak Vladek's father-in-law, Mr. Zylberberg, out of the ghetto--the old man is simply too old and feeble to be moved safely. Mr. Zylberberg is so desperate to leave and survive that he gives away all his money and jewels as bribes--he's a rich man, with a lot of money to throw around. But in the end, no amount of money can save him, and he's taken away to the death camps like all the rest.

The passage underscores the terrifying randomness of the Holocaust--there was absolutely no way to predict who would live and who would die. Even a rich, powerful man like Mr. Zylberberg wasn't likely to live--money did nothing to help him survive. The passage also reinforces the total breakdown of society during the Holocaust: money (the cornerstone of any society, let's be honest) no longer worked.

❝ Anja: The whole family is gone! Grandma and grandpa! Poppa! Momma! Tosha! Bibi! My Richieu! Now they'll take Lolek! ... Oh God. Let me die too!

Vladek: Come, Anja, get up!

Anja: Why are you pulling me, Vladek? Let me alone! I don't want to live!

Vladek: No, darling! To die, it's easy ... but you have to struggle for life! Until the last moment we must struggle together! I need you! And you'll see that together we'll survive.

Related Characters: Anja (Anna) Spiegelman, Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Richieu, Lolek, Mrs. Karmio, Mr. Karmio, Bibi, Tosha, Matka Zylberberg, Mr. Zylberberg

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.122

Explanation and Analysis

As the situation for European Jews deteriorates, Vladek's wife, Anja, falls into despair. She's endured more suffering than most people would have to deal with in ten lifetimes: her entire family, more or less, has been killed, or is on the way to death. Anja can barely stand to live any longer, so great is her misery.

At this moment in the text, Anja relies heavily on Vladek for emotional support. Her desire to give up in the face of such horror is entirely understandable, but Vladek takes a different view. He tries to convince Anja to be strong and optimistic: he says that they have a profound responsibility--they owe it to their dead relatives to survive the Holocaust together. One great tragedy of the Holocaust is that even when the victims survived (as Vladek and Anja did), they had to live with the agony and guilt of being the last living members of their families.

Part 1, Chapter 6 Quotes

Mala: Pragmatic? Cheap!! It causes him physical pain to part with even a nickel!

Artie: Uh-huh. I used to think the war made him that way.

Mala: Fah! I went through the camps … All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him!

Artie: Mm … It's something that worries me about the book I'm doing about him … In some ways he's just like the racist caricature of the miserly old Jew.

Related Characters: Mala Spiegelman, Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Vladek Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.131

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Artie complains about Vladek to Vladek's wife, Mala. He wonders aloud if he should forgive Vladek for his stinginess and irritability because of the fact that Vladek survived the Holocaust. Mala insists that Artie should do no such thing--Vladek turned out irritable because of his own personality, not the Holocaust.

The passage is interesting because it confronts a traditional Jewish stereotype--the miserly, greedy, "Shylock" Jew. Artie is deeply concerned with how to represent his father in print--it seems wrong to make a stereotypical Jew the protagonist of a book about the Holocaust (a tragedy that was partly caused because the Nazis used anti-Semitic propaganda that trafficked in the very stereotypes Vladek echoes).

In short, the passage raises profound artistic and ethical questions--who should be the protagonist of a book about the Holocaust? Who is the "representative" figure of such a book? And what is the "correct" way to represent Jews in the post-Holocaust world? Of course, Spiegelman suggests, there is no such thing as a representative Holocaust victim--the Holocaust killed without any regard to people's personalities. By the same token, Artie chooses to present Vladek as he really is--despite the fact that in some ways he seems like a Jewish stereotype. Just because miserliness is a stereotype doesn't mean Vladek *isn't* really a stingy person. Artie's commitment to truth and accuracy is so great that he's venturing into dubious ethical ground.

And we came here to the concentration camp Auschwitz. And we knew that from here we will not come out anymore … We knew the stories — that they will gas us and throw us in the ovens. This was 1944 … We knew everything. And here we were.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.157

Explanation and Analysis

Vkladek and Anja are shipped off to the concentration camp of Auschwitz. There, they immediately realize that they're never going to see each other again--they're going to be murdered. They both know the rumors of gas chambers and mass graves, and now they can see that the rumors are true. The passage, in short, evokes utter hopelessness. Here, surrounded by machines of death and destruction, even Vladek feels his hope leaving him. He has nothing to look forward to; no relatives to bribe; no children to protect. His reasons for hopefulness are extinguished. But as we'll see, Vladek still summons the courage to survive--with sheer willpower, as well as lots of luck, he manages to brave the concentration camps and come out alive on the other side.

Vladek: These notebooks, and other really nice things of mother … one time I had a very bad day … and all of these things I destroyed.

Artie: You what?

Vladek: After Anja died I had to make an order with everything … These papers had too many memories, so I burned them.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman, Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.158

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vladek tells Artie about Anja's notebooks. Anja kept journals and diaries for many years—included in these diaries, it's implied, were discussions of her time in the Holocaust, her feelings for Vladek and Artie, and many other important pieces of information. To Artie's genuine

shock, Vladek hasn't preserved his wife's papers—after she committed suicide he destroyed them in order to escape from "the memories."

The passage illustrates a basic difference between Vladek and Artie: Artie wants to remember, Vladek wants to forget. Artie is writing a book on the Holocaust, but seems not to consider the ethical implications of what he's doing; by interviewing his father, he's asking him to relive the worst moments of his life. By the same token, Artie can't understand why Vladek would burn Anja's diaries—he's so hungry for information (information that could potentially absolve him of some of the responsibility for Anja's suicide) that he can't conceive of anyone who wouldn't want it.

❝ God damn you! You — you murderer!

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Vladek Spiegelman, Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: I.159

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after Artie learns that Vladek burned Anja's papers, he lashes out at his father. Artie is furious that Vladek destroyed Anja's writing, in part because he believes that the writing could have relieved some of his intense guilt, or at least given him a sense of resolution (Artie partly blames himself for his mother's suicide years before). His hunger for knowledge—and forgiveness, which he associates with information—means that he's furious with his father for denying him the chance for this forgiveness. Artie even calls his father a murderer--by burning Anja's papers, it's as if Vladek has killed Anja all over again.

In essence, Artie is making his father a scapegoat for his own lack of closure with regard to Anja's death. There's no guarantee that Anja's papers and diaries would have brought Artie any peace or comfort—so it's easier for him to get angry with Vladek than it is for him to face the facts: he'll never be truly at peace with his mother's death. Artie still feels that he caused his Anja's suicide—and so by yelling at his father, he deflects some of the guilt he (Artie) feels.

Part 2, Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ I never felt guilty about Richieu. But I did have nightmares about S.S. men coming into my class and dragging all us Jewish kids away. Don't get me wrong. I wasn't obsessed with this stuff ... It's just that sometimes I'd fantasize Zyklon B coming out of our shower instead of water. I know this is insane, but I somehow wish I had been in Auschwitz with my parents so I could really know what they lived through! ... I guess it's some kind of guilt about having had an easier life than they did.

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Richieu, Anja (Anna) Spiegelman, Françoise Mouly

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.16

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Artie tries to come to terms with his own guilt concerning the Holocaust. He tells his wife, Francoise, that he sometimes wishes he'd been a part of the Holocaust. Furthermore, he continues to think about his dead brother, Richieu—although he claims not to feel any survivor's guilt, it's clear enough that he does.

In short, Artie feels guilty that he's alive and his brother, Richieu, is dead: growing up, Artie sometimes felt that he was competing with Richieu (who died long before Artie was born) for his parents' love. Artie senses that there's always going to be a gap between himself and his parents: because his parents went through the horrors of the Holocaust, they'll never be able to understand Artie's "normal," trivial life.

Spiegelman doesn't reveal if Artie is right to point to a gap between his own life and those of his parents. Of course Anja and Vladek have had hard lives--but that doesn't necessarily mean that they're unable to love Artie fully (although this does help explain some of Artie's troubles with Vladek and his constant criticisms). Spiegelman implies that Artie is just burdened with guilt--even though his parents really do seem to love him, he feels a perverse desire to go through the Holocaust so that he can be truly close to them.

Priest [to Vladek]: Your number starts with 17. In Hebrew that's "k'minyan tov." A very Seventeen is a very good omen ... It ends with 13, the age a Jewish boy becomes a man ... And look! Added together it total 18. That's "chai," the Hebrew number of life. I can't know if I'll survive this hell, but I'm certain you'll come through all this alive.

Vladek [to Artie]: I started to Believe. I tell you, he put another life in me. And whenever it was very bad I looked and said: "Yes. The priest was right! It totals eighteen."

Related Characters: The Priest, Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.28

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek has been imprisoned in a concentration camp along with other Jews. He's hopeless, and convinced that he'll die. But here, Vladek meets a mysterious Polish priest (a Christian, not a Jew), who gives him some hopeful news. The priest explains to Vladek that his number—i.e., the registration number that's been tattooed on his wrist—is extremely lucky. Citing rules of Judaism (including the mystical Kabbalah), the priest shows Vladek that his number represents some key tenets of Judaism, suggesting that Vladek will survive the camp.

What does the passage (or the fact that Vladek does, indeed, survive the camps) prove? As Spiegelman admits, it might not prove anything—it could be a total coincidence that Vladek's number is lucky. But perhaps the point is more complicated—whether or not you believe in God, it's important to notice that the priest is using religion to transform a symbol of death (the registration number) into a symbol of life and luck. Perhaps this is what religion does, more than anything else—it help humans translate their pain and suffering into hope and meaning—hope that eventually becomes part of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Vladek believes that he's going to survive, and this belief then gives him the inner strength to survive.

Part 2, Chapter 2 Quotes

Vladek died of congestive heart failure on August 18, 1982 ... Françoise and I stayed with him in the Catskills back in August 1979. Vladek started working as a tinman in Auschwitz in the spring of 1944 ... I started working on this page at the very end of February 1987. In May 1987 Françoise and I are expecting a baby ... Between May 16, 1944 and May 24, 1944, over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz.

Related Characters: Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman (speaker), Nadja Mouly Spiegelman, Françoise Mouly, Vladek Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.41

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Artie contrasts his own work as a writer with his father's life and work. But he does much more: he compares his life with the lives of his ancestors, including the millions of Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust.

It's imperative that Artie keep the Holocaust "in perspective" as he proceeds to write a book about it. The Holocaust is a tragedy almost beyond the comprehension of any individual person. Artie's book isn't just about the Holocaust—it's about his struggle to try to understand the Holocaust. Artie talks to his father about his (father's) experiences, but even here, mere words can't convey the full extent of the tragedy to Artie. In the end, Artie's experience writing his book is a sobering experience. His own petty acts of creation—the book, the baby, the marriage—pale in comparison with the single act of destruction that took place in Europe during World War II. There is simply no decent way to write a book about the Holocaust that doesn't involve the acceptance that one's book is neither a solution nor a comprehensive response to the Holocaust.

Part 2, Chapter 3 Quotes

Vladek: What happened on you, Françoise? You went crazy, or what?! I had the whole time to watch out that this shvartser doesn't steal us the groceries from the back seat!

Françoise: What?! That's outrageous! How can you, of all people, be such a racist! You talk about blacks the way the Nazis talked about Jews!

Vladek: Ach! I thought really you are more smart than this, Françoise ... It's not even to compare, the shvartsers and the Jews!

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman, Françoise Mouly (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Vladek is driving in a car with Francoise. Francoise picks up a black hitchhiker--much to Vladek's distress. Vladek is sure that the man is a criminal or a thief of some kind. Later, Francoise calls out Vladek for his obvious racism--how is it possible, she asks him, that a victim of Fascist anti-Semitism could despise black people so completely? Vladek simply replies that blacks and Jews are nothing alike.

The passage confirms a troubling truth: just because someone endured a lot of pain and suffering does mean that they've become a kinder, more tolerant person. Vladek suffers through the Holocaust--the ultimate tragedy caused by racism--and yet he unironically perpetuates racism toward black people, confident that Jews are better than blacks (just as the Nazis were sure that Aryans were superior to Jews). Artie's challenge in *Maus* is that he has to learn to empathize with his father's enormous suffering while also recognizing that, in many ways, his father isn't a particularly good man.

Part 2, Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ More I don't need to tell you. We were both very happy, and lived happy, happy ever after.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman, Anja (Anna) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.136

Explanation and Analysis

Vladek here concludes his description of the Holocaust with a disingenuous happy ending: he claims that he was freed from the concentration camp, reunited with Anja, and went to live with her happily ever after. Of course, we know very well that Vladek's marriage to Anja is anything but happy. Surviving the Holocaust doesn't really teach Anja and Vladek to love each other better, enjoy life more fully, or deal with each other more patiently. Instead, Anja and Vladek's marriage is full of drama and sadness—and in the end, Anja kills herself.

One of the toughest lessons *Maus* teaches is that surviving a great tragedy doesn't necessarily make you a saint or even a better person. Vladek and Anja could be considered heroic for the bravery with which they survive the camps, and yet their bravery doesn't excuse their racism, their selfishness, or their inability to show love for other people. But Spiegelman's point seems to be that naïveté and optimism aren't necessarily bad. The fact Vladek and Anja don't have a happy marriage doesn't mean that Vladek shouldn't get to savor the memory of reuniting with Anja--and after all, his memory is the primary place she lives now, particularly since Vladek himself has burned all her documents.

❝ So ... Let's stop, please, your tape recorder ... I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now.

Related Characters: Vladek Spiegelman (speaker), Richieu, Arthur (Artie) Spiegelman

Related Themes:

Page Number: II.136

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of *Maus*, Vladek reveals, beyond any doubt, that Richieu (his dead son, a victim of the Holocaust) is just as much a part of his life and his consciousness as is his living son, Artie. Vladek has just finished talking to Artie about his experiences during the Holocaust. Tiredly, he calls Artie "Richieu" by mistake. Vladek's mistake could suggest that he's slowly losing his mind to dementia. But it's also a sign that he thinks about his son constantly--not because he's getting senile but because he's a loving father. More generally still, Vladek's misstatement suggests the way that he continues to remember all his experiences during the Holocaust--just because they happened a long time ago doesn't mean they don't continue to affect his life.

Artie's burden, we come to realize, is that Vladek will never have his complete attention. On some level, Vladek will always measure Artie against Richieu, his deceased son, and compare his American life with Artie to his old European life with Richieu. While Artie will never be entirely okay with his father's "divided love," he's learned to accept Vladek's behavior and respect his father's courage and heroism.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

It is 1958. Arthur Spiegelman, narrating from a distance of decades, remembers an incident from his childhood. He is ten or eleven years old, roller skating with two of his friends through Rego Park, their neighborhood in Queens, New York. All three boys have mouse **heads** on their human bodies, indicating that they are all Jewish. Artie's skate comes suddenly loose, and he falls. He shouts to his friends to wait for him, but the boys only laugh at his fall and skate on.

The fact that Artie separates this memory for the rest of the story, and that the childhood scene appears at all in a book that focuses almost exclusively on his adult life, suggests that this experience was extremely important to him. Though the scene of children roller skating seems innocuous, the sequence feels tense and significant.

Sniffling, Artie returns home. In the front yard of his family's house, his father, Vladek Spiegelman, works at a wood bench. Vladek also has the **head** of a mouse, and he speaks in broken English that suggests he is an immigrant. He tells Artie to come over and hold a piece of wood for him while he saws. As he works, Artie continues to sniffle. Vladek asks the reason for his crying.

Vladek appears in this scene to be a pragmatic, unsentimental man. He occupies himself with practical, unpretentious manual labor and manages his young son's emotions without showing much emotion of his own.

When Artie explains that his friends skated on without him after he fell, Vladek stops sawing and looks, somewhat incredulously, at his son. Artie should lock his "friends" together in a room with no food for a week, Vladek tells him – after starving for a while, Artie would understand what "friends" really are.

The lesson implied by Vladek's comment – that friends will turn on each other as soon as times get hard – is a harsh one to teach a young child, as well as a very pessimistic view of life and human nature. It is clear that Vladek has been hardened by his experiences, and that those experiences have impacted his parenting.

PART 1, CHAPTER 1

Artie, now a grown man, is visiting his father in Rego Park. They greet each other warmly, though Artie writes that they are not very close. He confesses that it has been "a long time" since he last saw Vladek, and notices that Vladek has aged during that time. "My mother's suicide and his two heart attacks had taken their toll," Artie observes. Inside the house, Artie greets Mala, his father's second wife. Like Artie's parents and most of their friends, Mala is a Polish Jew and a survivor of the Holocaust (she has the **head** of a mouse). She takes Artie's coat to hang in the closet, and Vladek berates her when she tries to use a wire hanger instead of a wood one.

The first lines of Artie's story introduce several enormous traumas: suicide, estrangement, medical issues, an unhappy marriage, and the shadow of the Holocaust hanging over the whole thing. Artie's childhood home is a museum of tragedies, and it is no surprise that he has kept some distance from the place as an adult. Still, it is very clear that Vladek loves his son. His fuss over the wood hanger, though inconsiderate of Mala, betrays his desire to make the visit perfect for Artie.

After dinner, Vladek leads Artie into a bedroom, so he can pedal on a stationary bicycle while they talk – this is good for his heart, he says. Artie tells Vladek he has been thinking about drawing a comic book about Vladek's life in Poland during World War II. Vladek tells Artie nobody wants to hear his stories. The serial number tattooed on Vladek's left forearm, a remnant of his imprisonment in Auschwitz, is visible as he grips the handle of the stationary bike. Artie assures Vladek that *he* wants to hear the stories, and asks him to tell how he met Artie's mother, Anja.

Vladek's tattoo is a sign that he has endured something of monumental historical importance. The serial number tattoos given to Auschwitz prisoners are among the most recognizable symbols of the Holocaust, and color the middle-class normalcy of the stationary bike with unspoken sadness. Artie's first question reveals that he knows very little about his father – basic facts about how his parents met are unknown to him.

With some trepidation, Vladek begins to tell his story. When he met Anja, he says, he was living in a small city in Poland called Czestochowa, earning a modest living in the textile industry. He was young and very handsome, and many women were interested in him. Vladek remembers one, Lucia Greenberg, who asked their mutual friend, Yulek, to introduce them. Vladek takes Lucia dancing. One panel shows her flirting audaciously with him, clearly angling for an invitation to his apartment. After this date, Vladek says, Lucia seemed to appear wherever he went, and was always trying to convince him to invite her home.

Since so much has already been made of Vladek's status as a Holocaust survivor – Artie's story in the prologue, his close-up drawing of the serial number tattoo – it is surprising that Vladek should start his story with memories of ordinary life in Poland. These memories remind Artie that Vladek is more than the violence he has experienced. Still, the reader knows that the world he describes is on the brink of destruction, and this colors everything with sadness.

Vladek tells Artie he had no particular interest in Lucia, but that she insisted on their being together. A panel shows Lucia stretched out on Vladek's bed in a slip, while Vladek sits beside her adjusting his tie. They have clearly been having sex – Artie confirms whether this was the nature of their relationship, to his father's embarrassment. She tells Vladek she wants them to get engaged. Vladek ignores her comment. Lucia's family was "nice," Vladek tells Artie, but they had no money for a dowry.

Though Lucia is clearly scheming to win Vladek as her husband, which does nothing to endear her to the reader, Vladek seems equally callous and calculating. He is not forthcoming with Lucia about his intentions, though he has clearly dismissed the idea of marrying her because she has no money to bring to the relationship. He sees marriage as a way to bring himself up.

The next panel shows Vladek disembarking from a train, while a woman on the platform – his cousin – waves to him. He has come to spend a holiday with his family in Sosnowiec, a town about 40 miles from Czestochowa. It is 1935. The crowd on the platform includes Jews, with their characteristic mouse **heads**, and Polish Christians, who have the heads of pigs. His cousin tells Vladek that she wants him to meet her friend Anja, who she says is an intelligent girl from a rich family.

Vladek is clearly close to his family. That his cousin meets him at the train station, rather than a parent or sibling, shows that this closeness goes beyond his immediate family – extended family members are also an important part of his life in Sosnowiec.

The next day, Vladek goes with his cousin to meet Anja in town. The two women talk in English, neither knowing Vladek understands them; Anja admits that she finds Vladek handsome and very nice. The cousin contrives to leave Vladek and Anja alone together, at which point Vladek teases Anja, revealing that he speaks English – he taught himself the language, despite having to leave school and begin working when he was 14 – and understood her comments about him. Anja is embarrassed, but she recovers quickly. The two soon sit down in a cafŽ, talking comfortably.

Vladek and Anja both appear at their best in this exchange. Vladek shows himself to be hard-working and intelligent, striving to better himself by learning English, despite the hardship that forced to him leave school. Anja shows herself to be graceful and self-possessed, moving on from her embarrassment with ease, and she is obviously well-educated and very intelligent herself.

Anja and Vladek make plans to talk on the telephone after he returns to Czestochowa. Vladek tells Artie that they began to talk every day, and that Anja wrote him beautiful letters. When she sent him a **photograph** of herself – Artie imagines the picture in a sketch, with Anja posing in a fur coat and hat – he bought a nice frame for it. Soon after, Lucia sees the photograph and gets upset. She insults Anja's looks. When Vladek tells her that he plans to marry Anja, Lucia throws herself at him and begs him to reconsider. Vladek admits (with some prompting from Artie) that Anja wasn't as attractive as Lucia, but claims she had a wonderful mind and that it was easy to fall in love with her once he began talking to her.

Though Vladek seems shallow and self-interested in his relationship with Lucia, he is obviously sincere in his feelings for Anja. His decision to buy a special frame for her picture, though a small gesture, is a very tender one, and his warm descriptions of her writing and brilliant mind show that Vladek was honestly in love with Anja – he was not just an opportunist in search of a wealthy wife. The photograph Anja sends, which shows her bundled modestly in an expensive coat, conveys her wealth and her conventionally good breeding. Unlike Lucia, Anja shows the demur manners expected of women at this time.

Vladek remembers visiting Anja's family for the first time. The Zylberbergs owned one of Poland's biggest hosiery factories, and were extremely wealthy. Before dinner, he snoops in Anja's closet to see whether she will be a tidy housekeeper. He finds several bottles of pills among her neatly folded clothes. Vladek does not want to marry Anja if she is sickly, and he writes down the names of the pills. He tells Artie that he later showed this list to a friend who worked in a pharmacy, and learned that the pills had only been prescribed because Anja was "skinny and nervous."

Vladek clearly loves Anja, but he is careful to safeguard his own interests nevertheless. He does not want to become entangled with a woman who can't keep a clean house, or who will demand lots of extra care due to illness. Vladek is an ambitious, self-made man who is pragmatic in all things – including his dealings with the woman he loves.

At the end of 1936, Vladek and Anja are engaged. Vladek is preparing to move to Sosnowiec when, one night, Lucia appears at his door. She throws herself on the ground and clings to his leg, begging him to take her back. Vladek runs away and calls Yulek to take Lucia home. Shortly thereafter, Anja receives a letter from a "secret friend," warning her that Vladek has a reputation in Czestochowa as a womanizer, and that he is only marrying Anja for her money. Vladek, who knows the letter must be from Lucia, visits Sosnowiec to sooth Anja's worries. She is tearful when he arrives, but believes him when he says Lucia means nothing to him. Vladek tells Artie soberly that he "went too far" with Lucia. The damage corrected, he and Anja are married in February 1937. Vladek moves to Sosnowiec to live with her. In one panel, the family toasts the newlyweds with vodka.

Lucia's vindictive letter is the punishment due to Vladek for his selfishness. He was happy to keep Lucia as a girlfriend while it was convenient for him, but he never valued her as a real human being. It seems that the near-disaster Lucia created with her letter was a sobering experience for Vladek – he sees that it was a mistake to let Lucia develop such strong feelings for him while never intending to follow through in their relationship. With this error corrected and learned from, however, he and Anja are able to enter into a happy marriage. The toast with their families shows that this was a festive, joyful moment in their lives.


Vladek pauses in his cycling. He tells Artie he does not want these stories included in Artie's book. They have nothing to do with the Holocaust, he says. Artie protests that the stories are "great material" that make the war narrative "more human." Vladek insists Artie should not mention these details of his private life – to do so wouldn't be "proper" or "respectful," he says. Finally, Artie promises to do as Vladek wishes.

The fact that these stories appear in the book shows that Artie did not keep his promise to Vladek, though it cannot be known whether Artie included them secretly or convinced Vladek to change his mind. It is clear that the two have very different ideas about what responsible representation of the Holocaust entails. Vladek wants Artie to present a clear, focused message about what happened, and to honor those who died by treating the subject with utmost reverence. Artie wants to present human lives in all their complexity: to show the people whose lives were thrown into chaos by the Holocaust as real people, full of love and neuroticism and kindness and selfishness just like anyone else.

PART 1, CHAPTER 2

For several months, Artie visits his father regularly to hear more of his stories. He arrives one day to find Vladek counting pills; Vladek reveals that he takes 25 or 30 vitamins every day, as well as six pills for his heart and one for diabetes. He tells Artie that doctors will only give him "junk food" – prescription drugs – but that he has devised a regimen of vitamins for himself.

Vladek's pills are evidence of his age and poor health, and Artie's surprise at seeing them is a reminder of how distant he has been over the past several years. Vladek is high-strung and controlling: he does not trust his doctor to give him the best treatments, so he concocts treatment plans for himself.

Artie shifts the conversation to his mother. He wants to know whether Anja had boyfriends before Vladek. She never had romances, Vladek says, but she had a male friend from Warsaw who she would rush to see whenever he visited Sosnowiec. This man, Vladek was to learn, was a Communist who relied on Anja to translate messages into German for him. Vladek, who was careful to stay away from Communists, only discovered this after a seamstress living in their apartment building, Miss Stefanska, was arrested for possession of Communist papers. (Anja, warned by friends that the police were planning to search her home, asked Miss Stefanska to hide the papers.) Vladek reports that he was furious with Anja – ready to end their marriage – but that she agreed to stop her Communist activity. He tells Artie that Miss Stefanska was imprisoned for three months, and that his father-in-law paid her legal expenses and gave her a significant sum of money to compensate for what had happened.

Communists – people who belonged to a political group that believed in populist and highly egalitarian government and social systems – were among the non-Jewish groups targeted for imprisonment by the Nazi regime. Communism was considered criminal in many European countries even before the Nazis rose to power, and Anja took a major risk in affiliating with a Communist organization. She clearly had some investment in the group – though it's unclear whether she believed in their political philosophy, or just wanted to help her friend – and this incident shows her caught in a web of conflicting values. She wants to do something good, but she harms Miss Stefanska in an effort to protect her own interests, and she chooses her life with Vladek over whatever obligations she feels toward the group. This moment exemplifies the ways in which moral reasoning can become tangled when important values come into conflict.

Around the same time as Miss Stefanska's arrest, Vladek's father-in-law offers to give Vladek money to open a textile factory. He moves to Bielsko to open the factory, visiting Anja on weekends. That October, 1937, Anja gives birth to a son named Richieu. At the mention of his first child, Vladek saddens. Richieu did not survive the war.

Richieu's birth highlights his absence from the life Artie and Vladek lead in the present. This is the first shadow of the Holocaust in Vladek's story: the joyous occasion of his son's birth is deeply painful in retrospect, because the events of the war would tear Richieu away from him. The Holocaust affected everything that came after it, but it also changed the way survivors related to all their experiences that came before it.

Noticing that there are only seven months between February, when Anja and Vladek were married, and October, when Richieu was born, Artie asks whether Richieu was premature. Vladek confirms that he was, then launches into a story about Artie, who was very premature and whose arm was broken in an emergency delivery. Recalling how Artie's arm would spasm when he was an infant – and how they would joke that the gesture resembled a Nazi salute – Vladek jerks his own arm into the air and knocks over his pills. His mood sours immediately. He becomes annoyed with Artie, whom he claims distracted him and made him spill the pills.

Vladek has fond memories of his son, and it seems from his story that he was an attentive father, at least during Artie's infancy. The joke he recalls, which makes a light-hearted reference to the war, suggests that – though the sadness and trauma of the war has lingered –Vladek and Anja allowed themselves to incorporate their memories of into everyday life, perhaps as a way of making them less painful. Vladek's moods are very volatile, and his intense reaction to spilling his pills shows how exhausting it can be to spend time with him.

Shortly after Richieu is born, Anja begins to experience bouts of severe depression. Vladek returns from Bielsko following an emergency call from the Zylberbergs, and finds Anja inconsolable; she tells him she doesn't want to live. Vladek's father-in-law tells him about a sanitarium where Anja can receive treatment, and urges him to take her there, leaving Richieu with a governess.

Many people who do not have mental illnesses experience depression after giving birth (postpartum depression). However, it is clear that mental illness was a significant feature of Anja's adult life: she was "nervous" (or anxious) as a young woman, and would die by suicide later in life. These stories raise questions about what Anja must have been like as a mother, and what special challenges her illness might have created for her and Artie.

Vladek and Anja travel to Czechoslovakia, to the sanitarium. During their journey, they see a Nazi flag flying in the center of a small town. The sight of the swastika rattles the Jews on the train, and they trade stories about the horrible things happening to Jews in Germany: of businesses seized, synagogues burned, people beaten and carried away in the middle of the night. One panel shows a village street with a large, prominent sign that reads: "This town is Jew Free." In Artie's depictions of these abuses, Germans have the **heads** of cats. One of the Jewish men on the train tells another to pray the Nazis don't start a war.

The atrocities of the Holocaust are yet to come, but violence and discrimination are facts of life for Jewish people long before the war – and Nazi soldiers are not the only ones perpetuating that violence. Average German people have a hand in the exclusion, abuse, and other injustices inflicted upon their Jewish neighbors. The "This town is Jew Free" sign, in particular, shows how entire communities are joined in their disdain for Jews. This animosity forces Jews to rely on one another for support.

The sanitarium is beautiful and peaceful, and Vladek finds he has a talent for helping Anja through the hardest days of her recovery – he understands her illness, he tells Artie. One night, he takes her dancing in the cafŽ at the sanitarium. The cafŽ is full of people of different nationalities: German, Polish, Jewish, and others. To make her happy, Vladek tells Anja a lighthearted story about his family's relocation from the Polish border at the beginning of World War I: after packing all their things to flee the danger of the fighting, a pillow fell from their wagon, and his stubborn father rode a bony, saddleless horse for hours to retrieve it. Anja laughs at this story and tells Vladek she loves him. Vladek tells Artie that she was "so happy, so happy" that night, and that she couldn't stop herself from kissing him over and over again.

Vladek is sometimes brusque and often overbearing in his interactions with Artie and Mala, but these scenes show that he has not always been so difficult to connect with. In the sanitarium, he showers Anja with warmth and positivity. He puts his own needs aside and devotes his full attention to caring for her. It is clear from her behavior toward him in the cafŽ that Anja not only loves Vladek deeply, but also trusts him. He understands her needs and attends to them in ways that inspire that trust. The person Anja sees in the cafŽ is very different from the person Artie sees in Rego Park, a Vladek changed by time and experience.

When they return to Poland, after about three months at the sanitarium, Anja is significantly healthier and happier. However, they are greeted by the unhappy news that Vladek's textile factory has been robbed. Artie asks whether this robbery was motivated by anti-Semitism. Vladek does not think it was. With his father-in-law's help, he builds up the factory again, and soon he and Anja are living a comfortable life in Bielsko: the business is thriving, and they have a lovely home with a Polish governess, Janina, to help care for Richieu.

That Vladek is able to recover so quickly and completely from the losses of the robbery shows the power of the Zylberberg family's wealth. What might have been a disastrous event for another person was inconvenient and unpleasant for Vladek and his father-in-law, but ultimately not devastating. Wealth protects the family from normal vulnerabilities.

Vladek arrives home from work one day with the troubling news that there has been "another riot" in downtown Bielsko, with people yelling for the Jews to leave the city. Janina blames the Nazis for stirring up anti-Semitic feelings. Anja remarks that the Poles are already disposed toward anti-Semitism without the Nazis' help; Janina is hurt by this, and tells Anja she thinks of the Spiegelmans as part of her own family (she is cradling Richieu in her lap as she speaks).

The riots Vladek witnesses are evidence of rising tensions in Poland. Though the violence does not threaten Vladek and Anja immediately, the riots are a sign of worse things to come. Janina's presence in the scene shows that, though tensions between Jews and ethnic Poles are high, the Spiegelmans feel secure and integrated into Polish society. Poles are not enemies.

Vladek assures a worried Anja that they can always return to Sosnowiec if Bielsko becomes too violent. When Artie asks why Sosnowiec would be safer than Bielsko, Vladek explains that many people thought Hitler wanted to reclaim the parts of Poland that had belonged to Germany before WWI, but didn't care about the rest of the country. Bielsko had been part of Germany; Sosnowiec never was.

Though Vladek and Anja – like so many other people – are worried about the Nazis, they can only speculate about what Hitler wants and how to protect themselves. The things that lie ahead for them are more horrible than anyone can imagine, so they are unable to prepare adequately.


In August 1939, Vladek is drafted into the Polish army. This confirms that the war everyone has dreaded for so long has begun in earnest. Anja is terrified. Vladek sends her, Richieu, and Janina to live with Anja's family in Sosnowiec, and goes himself to the frontier to fight against the Germans. Explaining this story, Vladek spills his pills again. He tells Artie that his eyes have been causing him problems; his left eye was replaced with a glass eye due to glaucoma, and he has begun to get cataracts in his remaining eye. He tells Artie about losing his eye, how he almost died from hemorrhaging. Artie responds to all this with a semi-interested "uh-huh." Vladek says he is tired and wants to stop talking for the day; Artie agrees and stretches out in his chair while Vladek resumes counting his pills.

Tension escalates and then deescalates very quickly in this scene, as Vladek pauses in his story and turns his attention toward ordinary life in the present. Leaving for war is an intense experience, but the emotions are calmer from a distance of decades. Artie's bland reaction to the story Vladek tells about losing his eye shows a lack of interest or investment in his father's present life. Though his reaction is somewhat understandable since he has probably heard this story before – this is not shocking information – Artie's lack of basic politeness and consideration shows that he is very self-centered.


PART 1, CHAPTER 3

Artie is still visiting Vladek often, trying to collect as much information as possible about Vladek's past. Eating dinner at his father's house one evening, Artie tells Mala about the extreme lengths to which Vladek went, during Artie's childhood, to guarantee that Artie never wasted food. He always forced Artie to eat everything Anja cooked, even when he hated it, and never let him leave the table until his plate was clean. As they go into the living room to talk after dinner, Vladek begins to complain about Mala and her cooking, but Artie refuses to listen. He asks Vladek to tell him about 1939, after he was drafted into the Polish army.

Though Vladek and Mala are not happy together, it seems that Artie and Mala get along reasonably well – Artie talks congenially with Mala, and refuses to listen when Vladek tries to speak badly about her. This suggests that Mala isn't as horrible as Vladek makes her out to be. Artie's stories about the battles over food waste that raged during his childhood hints at a deeper tension and unhappiness in the family, one that is not so easy to talk about.

Vladek explains that, because he was part of Poland's reserve forces before the war, he had already received the bulk of his training before being drafted. When his draft letter came in 1939, he received only a few days of training before going into combat against Germans. Vladek explains that his father had tried to keep him and his brothers out of the army, starving them and depriving them of sleep for months before the medical examination to make it look as though they were too unhealthy for military service. Vladek failed his first medical review, but was ordered to return in a year for re-examination. He begged his father not to make him endure that privation again, and joined the army at 22.

Vladek's father cares more for his sons' wellbeing than for abstractions about honor and duty – the vague ideas that are often invoked to glamorize military service. As he prepares his sons to live in a hostile, dangerous world – a world where, as Jews, they are not offered the same kinds of protections as other people – he teaches them to place their own safety above anything else, and prepares them to go to extreme lengths to protect themselves.

Artie urges Vladek to focus on 1939. Vladek tells him about fighting in the trenches near the German border. Early one morning, during a bombardment, he tries to avoid firing his gun but is forced to shoot when he sees a German soldier just across the river. After two hours of fighting, Vladek is discovered in his trench by Nazi soldiers. His speaks to them in German – which impresses them and prompts them to refrain from beating him – and promises that he was only shooting into the air, not at the soldiers. Nevertheless, he is taken as a prisoner of war.

Vladek is fast-thinking and has a talent for manipulating other people's emotions. He uses his knowledge of German to make himself more sympathetic to the German soldiers, and lies to downplay his allegiance to the Polish army. Though he does not get everything he wants – there is nothing he can do to avoid imprisonment – this keen interpersonal intelligence helps him protect himself in a difficult situation.

Vladek, along with other prisoners of war, is made to load the bodies of the dead and wounded into Red Cross trucks. Vladek picks up the body of the man he killed, and feels mild satisfaction at the knowledge that he has done something for the war. He and the other prisoners are taken to a camp near Nuremberg, in Germany. Jews are made to stand separate from other prisoners, and the Nazi soldiers scream at them that the war is entirely their fault.

The Nazi soldiers regurgitate their government's anti-Semitic propaganda when they blame their Jewish prisoners for causing the war. Nazi leaders blamed Jews for all of Europe's many problems, and though these claims were not supported by real evidence, many average people believed Jews had conspired against their home countries to create international turmoil.

One of the Nazi soldiers orders Vladek, along with a few other men, to have one of the filthy stables cleaned within the hour. When they can't finish the job in time, they are denied food for the day. Artie accidentally spills some ash from a cigarette on the living room floor, and Vladek berates him for making a mess.

This moment creates a parallel between the past and present: as the guard shouts at Vladek to clean the stable, Vladek shouts at Artie to clean the floor. This highlights the huge differences between the two men's life experiences –one situation is obviously more intense than the other – but it also shows how memories of the distant past continue to influence Vladek's behavior.

After a few weeks working for the Nazis, Vladek and the other prisoners are taken to a bigger camp. Jewish prisoners are made to sleep in unheated tents with insufficient blankets, though winter is coming and the weather is bitterly cold, and they are given very little food. Meanwhile, the Polish prisoners of war sleep in heated cabins and eat two meals a day. Vladek bathes in the freezing river to keep clean. Many of his comrades who refuse to do so get frostbite wounds and develop infections. To pass the time, the prisoners play chess and pray (Vladek is very religious).

The disparities in the German army's treatment of its Jewish and Polish prisoners illustrates their disdain for Jews and their disregard for Jewish life. When he bathes in the ice-cold river despite the unpleasantness of the experience, Vladek shows that he is forward-thinking and wise about assessing the risks in his environment. He knows an infection could threaten his life, and the unpleasantness of bathing in cold water is a small concern by comparison.

Several weeks after he enters the camp, Vladek learns that the German government is seeking prisoners of war to volunteer as laborers in exchange for better food and housing. Most able-bodied German men have been called to fight in the war, and there are not enough left to perform manual labor for the military. Many of Vladek's comrades believe the offer is a trap, and say they would rather die in the prisoner of war camp. Vladek, determined not only to live, but to live under better conditions than those in the camp, signs up. Many of his comrades sign up as well, once they learn that Vladek has decided to do so.

In the harsh conditions of the camp, some prisoners are resigned to the idea that they will die in German custody. Vladek has an unusual will to survive, it seems. He is not only willing to endure pain and privation, but also struggles for something better when others feel passive and hopeless. The fact that so many people follow Vladek to the labor camp shows that he commands the respect and trust of those around him.

Vladek and the other volunteers are sent to work for a large German company. Their work, leveling hilly terrain, is extremely difficult, but they have a warm place to sleep and plenty of food, and are much better off than in the prisoner of war camp. One night, Vladek dreams of his dead grandfather. The old man appears to him wearing traditional Jewish yarmulke, tefillin, and tallit, and promises Vladek he will be freed on the day of Parshas Truma.

Vladek's grandfather appears to him wearing garments that emphasize his Jewishness: the tefillin on his head and arms are traditionally worn during prayer, as is the tallit around his shoulders. The yarmulke is a distinctive and recognizable marker of an observant Jewish man. Vladek's vision invokes an ethnic and religious history, as well as a personal one.

Artie asks what Parshas Truma is. Vladek explains: each Saturday of the year, Jews read a section of the Torah, their holy book. They follow a predetermined calendar, reading each section on a designated day. Parshas Truma is one of these sections – so, when Vladek's grandfather promises he will be free on the day of Parshas Truma, he refers to the day designated for reading that portion of the Torah.

Studying the Torah is a foundational part of Judaism, and Artie's ignorance about Parshas Truma highlights his distance from the religion and culture of his family. Vladek has already stated that he was very religious as a young man, so Artie's lack of knowledge is particularly surprising, and suggests that Vladek may have lost his sense of connection with Judaism over time.

Following his dream, Vladek asks one of the other prisoners, a rabbi, when they will read Parshas Truma. The rabbi answers that they will not read it until February, almost three months away. Miraculously, his grandfather's prophecy comes true: three months later, on the Saturday designated for Parshas Truma, Vladek and many of the other prisoners are released without warning and permitted to return home. Artie is amazed to hear this news, and Vladek reveals to him that Parshas Truma has been important for him throughout his life: it was Parshas Truma when he married Anja, when Artie was born, and the Saturday of Artie's Bar Mitzvah. During the train ride back to Poland, the rabbi tells Vladek that he is a "roh-eh hanoled" – someone who sees what the future holds.

The Jewish calendar does not follow the same cycles as the Gregorian calendar, which is the common calendar used by most Western countries. As a result, a parsha assigned to a certain week in the Jewish calendar might be read at different points in the common calendar. That so many of the most important moments in Vladek's life aligned with this particular parsha suggest that he is somehow special –that he is attuned to things other people cannot see, or has some predetermined purpose in life that is not yet clear.

To Vladek's dismay, the train designated to take him home passes through Sosnowiec without stopping. As the war has escalated, it turns out, Germany has split Poland into two sections: the Reich, which was seized as German territory and is now considered part of the German nation, and the Protectorate, which is still technically Poland though its government is under German control. Sosnowiec is now part of the Reich, but the Germans are only releasing prisoners from the Protectorate.

The division of Poland into the Protectorate and the Reich has significant consequences for Poles, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Though war often seems abstract for those who study it – as though the actions of armies and governments have no bearing on the lives of ordinary people – this moment shows the broad impact of military action and government policy.

Vladek is finally shepherded off the train in a town called Lublin, where he learns from another man that the Nazis have been herding released prisoners into the forest and shooting them. Artie can't believe that the Nazis would be permitted to do such a thing to their prisoners. Vladek explains that, as a citizen of the territory that had been annexed to Germany, he no longer enjoyed the protections of international law. In their dealings with people from the Reich, Nazi soldiers were bound only by German law, which permitted Jews to be murdered with impunity.

Artie knows horrible things are ahead for European Jews in Vladek's story, but he is still na•ve about many aspects of his father's experience. The abject lack of concern for Jewish life – and for human rights more broadly – is hard for Artie to imagine, even though he understands intellectually that the German soldiers had been conditioned to despise Jews.

Another man tells Vladek that it may be possible to get him out of the camp, if someone in Lublin will claim him as a relative. Vladek sends a message to his family friend, a man named Orbach, asking for his help. The next day, Orbach arrives to claim Vladek as his cousin. He wears a large Star of David badge on his coat – the Nazis have begun to force all Jews to wear these badges, which make them easily identifiable targets for persecution. Vladek goes home with Orbach and stays at his house a few days to recuperate. He is grateful for Orbach's help, but is eager to sneak across the border, back to Sosnowiec and his family.

Orbach's sudden, saving appearance exemplifies the interdependence of the Jewish community. Though he shares no special connection with Vladek, Orbach goes out of his way to help Vladek through a difficult time. Their shared status as outsiders means that Jews must rely on one another for support and assistance in difficult times, and draw on networks of loose connections to survive.

Vladek cannot legally cross into the Reich without paperwork, which he does not have. Regardless, he boards a train going toward Sosnowiec. On the train, he approaches the Polish conductor, pretending to be ethnically Polish himself – the panel shows Vladek wearing a pig **mask** over his mouse head – and asking for help sneaking over the border. Poles felt great animosity toward Germans, Vladek tells Artie, and the conductor was happy to hide him when Nazi soldiers began inspecting passengers' papers. Vladek hides in a closet, his pig mask in his hand, while the conductor ushers a Nazi soldier in the other direction.

Though ethnic Poles are not scapegoats and targets for German persecution to the same extent as Jews, German occupation has clearly been damaging and dangerous for them as well. Vladek must hide his Jewishness to make himself more sympathetic to the Polish conductor, but their successful collaboration shows that the interests of the Jews and Poles are aligned at this point. Bigotry hurts both Poles and Jews by preventing them from building solidarity against the German invaders.

Back in Sosnowiec, Vladek goes immediately to his parents' house. They are elated to see him, but it is clear that things are not well. His mother looks sick and weak –though he does not yet know it, she will die of cancer within a month or two – and his father reports that German soldiers have been harassing him and other Jews in the streets, and that Germans have seized his seltzer factory. He also learns that a curfew has been imposed on the Jews of Sosnowiec: they must be home by 7 p.m. each night. For this reason, his parents hurry him home to be with Anja.

The Polish army was defeated within weeks of the German invasion that forced Vladek to go to the front. Though he has been gone only a few months, Sosnowiec has changed dramatically in the wake of that defeat. German soldiers and officials now hold positions of authority in cities throughout Poland, and the government is now explicitly hostile toward Jews.

Despite all the distressing news, Vladek's reunion with Anja and Richieu is filled with joy. Although it is a difficult time, they are happy simply to be together. Wrapping up the interview for the evening and preparing to head home, Artie goes to collect his coat from the closet and finds it isn't there. Vladek reveals that he threw the coat in the trash. It was too shabby, he tells Artie, and he was embarrassed to have his son wear such a thing. Artie is furious at the intrusion, and tells Vladek that, as a grown man, he will decide how he is going to dress. Still, he accepts Vladek's gift of another (hand-me-down) coat. He makes his way home in the puffy garment, muttering to himself that he "just can't believe" his father would do such an intrusive thing.

Vladek is presumptuous and controlling when he decides to throw away Artie's coat. He believes his judgment is better than Artie's, and that Artie lacks the capacity to make his own decisions–which is why he acts without consulting him. Like many parents, Vladek continues to think of Artie as a child long after he has grown up, and he treats him as such. Artie tries to assert himself by berating Vladek, but when he is forced to accept the hand-me-down coat, he is relegated to the role of the child – Artie has to do what Vladek wants, even when it frustrates him.

PART 1, CHAPTER 4

The next time Artie visits Vladek, Vladek berates him for being late. He wanted Artie to climb to the roof and fix a leaky drainpipe, but now there isn't enough time. Artie tells Vladek he should hire someone to fix the drainpipe. Vladek, annoyed, says Artie is just like Mala – a spendthrift – and that he will fix the drainpipe himself if Artie won't help him. When they sit down to talk, Vladek on his stationary bike, Artie takes out a new tape recorder; taking notes by hand is too hard, he tells Vladek. Vladek asks how much Artie paid for the recorder. Artie tells him, cheerfully, that it was only $75. Vladek scoffs and tells Artie he could have found it for half that price. Artie, clearly exasperated, ignores the comment and asks Vladek to tell him what happened after he returned to Sosnowiec after leaving the prisoner of war camp.

Vladek's obsessive thriftiness is one of his defining character traits, and Artie's total lack of concern about saving money seems to be a reaction against those miserly tendencies. Even though their personalities are completely opposite in certain important ways, Artie bears signs of his father's influence, and he still seems to want to please Vladek. Despite his laissez-faire attitude about money, Artie is proud of the (in his opinion) low price he paid for the tape recorder –but Vladek's standards are impossibly high.

Vladek has returned to Sosnowiec to find that life in his father-in-law's house is very much the same as it was before he left. He, Anja, and Richieu are living in the house with Anja's parents and grandparents, as well as her sister, Tosha; Tosha's husband, Wolfe; their daughter, Bibi; and Anja's niece and nephew, Lonia and Lolek, whose parents, Herman and Helen, were in New York visiting the World's Fair when the war broke out. Food is very short – each person gets coupons for eight ounces of bread each day and a small amount of margarine, sugar, and jam each week – but the family has enough money to buy goods on the black market, which they do despite the fact that breaking even minor laws is very dangerous for Jews.

The Zylberberg family is large and close – all twelve people live together in the house and share familial responsibilities like childrearing, cooking and cleaning, and caring for older generations. It is not clear whether the whole family lived together before the war, but it seems that living together is a source of comfort and stability. Though Jews have been pushed to the margins of society, the family's accumulated wealth still has the power to protect them from some of the hardships others face.

After their first dinner with the now-reunited family, Mr. Zylberberg tells Vladek that all Jewish-owned businesses have been confiscated by the Germans. His hosiery factory and Vladek's textile factory have been taken over by German managers, and the family has no money coming in. Wolfe calls all the men together to play cards. He is lighthearted about the war, and assures Vladek that there is no need to worry, or even to think about saving money in anticipation of hard times. The war will be over before they know it, he says. Vladek and Mr. Zylberberg are both skeptical and nervous.

Like Vladek, Mr. Zylberberg is pragmatic. He anticipates bad times ahead, and has intelligent, clear-headed ideas about what the family must do to ensure its long-term safety. Wolfe, by comparison, has no sense of the urgency of the situation. In hindsight, Wolfe's optimism looks foolish, but in the early days of the war, when nobody could anticipate all the horrors to come, such opinions seemed more reasonable. It is hard to judge anyone fairly in hindsight, since the Holocaust was essentially unprecedented.

Shortly after he returns home, Vladek goes out into the city, determined to find a way to earn some money for the family. He wears an armband emblazoned with the Star of David, identifying him as a Jew. He meets Mr. Ilzecki, a tailor to whom he sold textiles before the war. Mr. Ilzecki now makes uniforms for German officers, but he tells Vladek that he still makes suits when he can get cloth. Vladek manages to get some cloth illegally, from a shop owner who owes him money but cannot pay. He sells the cloth to Mr. Ilzecki that same day. When Vladek brings home the money from the sale, Mr. Zylberberg is pleased to see that someone in his family is forward-thinking and industrious.

The Star of David badge, which did not exist in Poland before Vladek went into the army, is now an omnipresent feature in the day-to-day lives of Sosnowiec's Jews. Though things are changing rapidly, Vladek is resourceful – he is an excellent businessman, but even more importantly, he has the ability to identify and leverage personal connections that might be helpful to him. It is also clear that, unlike Wolfe, Vladek feels a need to prepare for the worst case scenario. He needs to feel productive in order to feel secure.

Some time later, Vladek is out on Modrzejowska Street – the area of Sosnowiec where people go to do business on the black market – when Nazi soldiers close off the street and begin inspecting everybody's working papers. Vladek hides in a building until the inspection is over, since he has no working papers and would certainly be taken away if the Nazis discovered this. When he returns home, he tells his father-in-law about the incident. Mr. Zylberberg arranges working papers for Vladek through a friend, the owner of a local tin shop who has been producing goods for the Germans. In case of another inspection, the shop owner says, Vladek should run into the building and pretend to be working. Vladek mentions to Artie that the skills he learned in the tin shop would become useful to him later, when he was in Auschwitz.

Working papers confirm that the person who holds them is employed by a legitimate business. Jews without papers are not productive members of society (according to standards set by the German army), and though Jews may be deported for any number of reasons – or for no reason at all – it is especially dangerous to move through public spaces without working papers. Vladek makes a passing reference to his time in Auschwitz, disrupting the chronological narrative to remark on things yet to come. In doing this, he reminds Artie that this is not a war story, but a genocide story – that he was an average man caught in an incomprehensible and horrible historical moment.

Over the course of the next year, Vladek says, life in Sosnowiec became steadily worse for Jews. One afternoon, walking past the train station, Vladek sees German soldiers grabbing Jews at random, beating them and shooting them. He fears for his life, but is saved when he spots Mr. Ilzecki, who lives nearby and pulls Vladek into the safety of his home. For hours, he sits with Ilzecki and his wife, listening to the screams and gunshots outside.

Hiding to escape violence has now become a prominent part of Vladek's daily life. He hides to escape deportation when he is caught without working papers, makes plans to hide in the tin shop during raids, and now is forced to hide from random threats on Jewish lives as he goes about his daily business.

Vladek tells Artie that Mr. Ilzecki had a son about the same age as Richieu. One afternoon, while the two children play together, Ilzecki tells Vladek that he has plans to hide his son with a Polish friend until the situation in Sosnowiec improves. Ilzecki believes his friend will hide Richieu as well. Vladek agrees to talk with his family. When he brings up the subject later, though, he finds that Anja and her parents are violently opposed to the idea of surrendering Richieu into the care of strangers. Anja clutches Richieu to her chest and swears, wild-eyed, that she will never give up her baby.

For a family as close as the Zylberbergs, the idea of being apart during dangerous times –and especially of separating parents from their children – is both frightening and painful. It shocks Mr. and Mrs. Zylberberg that Vladek would trust a stranger to care for his son's best interest, but Anja is more distressed, it seems, by the thought of what separation from Richieu would mean for her: the loss of a child who brings light and purpose to her unhappy world.

Vladek slowly stops pedaling his stationary bicycle. A defeated look passes over his face. Mr. Ilzecki gave his son to his Polish friend, he says, and the little boy survived the war even after his parents were killed. Richieu was not so lucky. In the end, Vladek says, he and Anja had to send Richieu away to hide anyway. He begins to tell the story – how, in 1943, Tosha took all the children into hiding – but Artie stops him. Vladek needs to tell his story in chronological order, Artie insists, or he'll never be able to make sense of it while writing his book.

Vladek's memories of Richieu, and of this crossroads moment in particular, are enormously painful. His sorrow is obvious, and yet Artie does nothing to comfort his father. It is clear that Artie does not know how to handle his father's emotions. Artie is uncomfortable seeing Vladek vulnerable and sad, so he steers him toward less difficult subjects with his insensitive insistence on keeping the story in chronological order.

Grudgingly, Vladek resumes his story in 1941, as the situation in Sosnowiec was escalating. At the end of that year, Germans post an order stating that all Jews are to be relocated into a segregated neighborhood, and that non-Jews will be moved into their vacated homes. Shortly thereafter, all twelve members of the Zylberberg household move into a small apartment in a part of town called Stara Sosnowiec.

The segregated neighborhoods – also called ghettos –mark the end of Jewish membership in ordinary society. In ghettos, Jews are forced to depend on the Germans to survive. Food and shelter are under German control, and Jews have limited power to influence their circumstances.

Vladek continues trading goods on the black market for a few months after moving to Stara Sosnowiec. That winter, four Jewish men are hanged by German soldiers as punishment for dealing goods on the black market. Among these men are Nahum Cohn, a friend of Mr. Zylberberg with whom Vladek has often done business, and Cohn's son, Pfefer. The Germans leave the four men's bodies hanging in Modrzejowska Street for a week, as a warning against dealing on the black market. As he remembers these men to Artie, Vladek starts to cry.

On the surface, it may seem odd that Vladek should be so moved by this memory. He knew Cohn primarily as a business associate, and since he would lose so many relatives and dear friends in coming years, one might assume that he wouldn't have the emotional energy to grieve for people he barely knew. But Vladek's tears speak to his sense of kinship with Nahum and Pfefer Cohn. He could easily have been hanged in their place, just as he could have died with so many other Jews in Poland. These deaths are community wounds, and Vladek still feels that intensely.

Artie asks what Anja was doing during this time. She spent a lot of time writing in her diaries, Vladek tells him. Artie remembers seeing Polish notebooks in the house when he was young, and asks whether these were Anja's diaries. Vladek tells him that the original diaries didn't survive the war, but that later in her life, Anja recorded her memories of the war in new diaries. Artie becomes excited – he needs Anja's diaries for his book, he says, and asks Vladek where they are. Before he can answer, Vladek begins to cough on the smoke from Artie's cigarette, and urges him to put it out in deference to his weak lungs.

Vladek has already talked at length about Anja's sensitivity and intelligence, and her extensive diaries of her war experience further emphasize those traits. That Anja spent so much time writing in her diary highlights her introspective nature as well. Nobody knows what she was writing, but the fact itself illustrates a desire to understand all that was happening around her by documenting and reflecting on it.

As Artie grudgingly stamps out his cigarette, Vladek resumes his story. After the hanging, he looks for less dangerous work. Gold and jewelry are easier to hide than cloth, so he begins to trade those on the black market. He also sells groceries under the counter, but is almost arrested by Nazi soldiers while delivering a bag of sugar –he escapes punishment by pretending to be the owner of the grocery store where he is taking the sugar. As black market business becomes more and more dangerous in Stara Sosnowiec, he seeks more legitimate work, in a carpentry shop managed by the Germans. Lolek and Mr. Zylberberg work in the shop as well. None of the men are paid for this work. Jewish men need working papers to move freely through the city, so they work simply to have the protection of a legitimate, German-approved business.

Vladek is frightened by the execution of the Cohns –he knows the Germans intend to maintain order by any means necessary, and aren't afraid to make an example of someone who steps out of line. Still, he continues with his illegal work because there is nothing else he can do to support himself. Severe restrictions placed on Jewish economic activity make it impossible for him to earn a living legitimately. Though he is not a risk-taker by nature, Vladek has no choice except to put his life on the line. This shows how tense circumstances can push people to do things they would never have imagined before.

In May 1942, the Germans announce a plan to send all Polish Jews older than seventy to Theresienstadt, a camp in Czechoslovakia. Anja's grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Karmio, are in their nineties and still living with the Zylberberg family. They desperately want to stay with their family. Though most Polish Jews don't yet know about the atrocities being committed at Auschwitz and other Nazi camps, Mr. and Mrs. Karmio know enough to be fearful of what may await them if they agree to go to Theresienstadt. The family hides them for more than a month, but soon see that doing so endangers every other member of the family. They are forced to surrender Mr. and Mrs. Karmio to the Gemeinde – the local Jewish government who have begun to cooperate with the Germans in hopes of winning some security for themselves and others in their community. Though they believed Mr. and Mrs. Karmio were going to Czechoslovakia, Vladek says, they later found out that they were sent to Auschwitz, where they were killed in the gas chambers.

The deportation of Mr. and Mrs. Karmio illustrates how the Germans forced the very people they persecuted to assist them in their work. The Zylberbergs are forced to give their beloved grandparents to the Germans because they fear the consequences of not doing so. Likewise, members of the Gemeinde collaborate with the Germans out of desperation, hoping their cooperation will protect them from the worst persecution. None of these people can know what lies in store for them, or whether the cooperation will pay off in the long run. Everyone is making choices blindly, struggling to do what is right for them and the people they love without any real information to guide them.

A few months after Anja's grandparents are taken away, a member of the Gemeinde announces that all Jews will be required to present themselves at the town stadium the following Wednesday to have their legal documents inspected and stamped. Many fear that this is a trap, but Jews without valid legal documents are extremely vulnerable, and most feel that they have no choice but to present themselves at the stadium. Vladek's father tells Vladek that their cousin Mordecai will be working at one of the tables, inspecting documents. If they take their documents to Mordecai, Mr. Spiegelman suggests, he might be able to ensure the family's safety. Since the death of his wife from cancer, Mr. Spiegelman has been living with his daughter – Vladek's sister Fela – and her four children. Though he doesn't know whether presenting himself will be dangerous, Mr. Spiegelman says he will accompany Fela if she chooses to go.

The Jewish people of Sosnowiec are not fools – they know presenting themselves at the stadium could lead to disaster. Still, there are very few alternatives. In the ghetto they cannot hope to evade German power for very long, and those who choose to hide during the registration will be in an precarious position afterward regardless of what happens. Mr. Spiegelman's commitment to protecting his daughter, regardless of what she chooses or what happens, highlights one way in which Jews do still hold power over their own lives even in such circumstances: they can make choices about their priorities.

On Wednesday, tens of thousands of Jews arrive at the stadium. Each person, after the Gemeinde check their documents, is ordered to go either to the right or to the left. People in the crowd quickly realize that old people, families with lots of young children, and people without work papers are being sent to the left. Though nobody knows what, everybody is sure something horrible is going to happen to these people.

The people being sent to the left are those who are not able to work, who might be seen as burdening the community with their needs. The Nazis keep Jews alive to work as laborers for the German war effort. Those who cannot serve that purpose are discarded like broken machinery.

Vladek, Anja, and Richieu are sent to the right – the good side of the stadium, for people who are able to work. Everyone from Anja's family is sent to the good side as well, but Vladek cannot find his father or sister. It is not until later that he learns what has happened: Mordecai approved Mr. Spiegelman's documents and sent him to the good side of the stadium, but Fela and her family were sent to the bad side –a mother with four children was considered a drain on the community's resources. Mr. Spiegelman, fearful that Fela would never be able to manage on her own, snuck onto the bad side of the stadium to be with her. Everyone sent to the bad side was killed, Vladek says –about ten thousand people, a third of the Jews in Sosnowiec, were sent to their deaths that day, and his father was among them.

Mr. Spiegelman and Fela disappear from Vladek's life in the span of just a few moments. He has no time to say goodbye to them, or even to notice them. If he had not met the unnamed person who tells him about Mr. Spiegelman's decision, he may never have known exactly what happened to his father and sister. This scene highlights the tenuous nature of relationships under the Nazi regime. Bonds that have defined Vladek's life are broken suddenly, and the landscape of his family is completely altered without any real warning. Though love and loyalty can and do endure, those defining connections are no longer stable.

Vladek sags on his stationary bike. He puts his head in his hands, and tells Artie he is too tired to talk more. He overexerted himself with his pedaling, he says. Artie suggests that Vladek take a nap, then goes out into the kitchen where Mala is drinking coffee and playing Solitaire. He tells Mala that he has just been talking with Vladek about the document inspection in Sosnowiec.

Vladek has been able to share very painful stories – of the POW camp, the massacre outside the train station, and even the hanging of the Cohns –in a surprisingly measured way. This moment, though, shows how exhausting it has been for him to talk about all this. Though he blames his pedaling for his sudden need to stop the interview, it seems memories have tired him out more than exercise.

Mala, who knew Vladek and Anja before the war and lived in Sosnowiec herself, says the Nazis took her mother away during this registration. She tells Artie about the fate of people those sent to the bad side as she pours him a cup of coffee and lights a cigarette for herself. The thousands of people kept at the stadium were imprisoned in a few empty apartment buildings, which were much too small to hold them all. Without food, toilets, or room to move around, people died of suffocation, or jumped out the window to end their misery. Those who survived were sent to death camps – though Mala was able to smuggle her mother out with the help of an uncle who worked for the Jewish council.

Artie has not expressed any interest in hearing about Mala's Holocaust experience – the project of his book is to understand his parents –but her remarks here serve as a reminder of how widespread and multifaceted the violence of the Holocaust really was. Vladek is just one of millions affected by the war, and each survivor has a unique experience. Even in places (like Auschwitz) and events (like the registration in Sosnowiec) that gathered thousands or millions of people together, everyone involved experienced something different.

Artie listens to Mala's story, smoking a cigarette. As soon as she finishes speaking –telling him that her parents both died in Auschwitz eventually –he gets up from the table and hurries into Vladek's den. Mala, confused, follows him. He tells her that he remembers seeing Anja's diaries on one of the shelves in the den, and begins sorting through piles of hoarded junk –hotel stationary, outdated calendars – in search of them. Mala, looking frustrated and sad, complains that this hoarding makes her crazy, and says she doesn't know how much longer she can stand to live with Vladek. Artie doesn't answer, just stands up and says he should start heading toward home. As he prepares to leave, Mala screams at him to put everything back just as he found it, or Vladek will give her a hard time about the mess.

Artie acts with characteristic insensitivity when he springs up from the table without acknowledging Mala's story, and he ignores her emotions again when she confesses her frustration and exhaustion in the den. He may be too self-absorbed to notice these things or simply too awkward about the emotions of other people to react to them appropriately. Vladek's stockpile of junk is a testament to his frustrating thriftiness – he would rather hoard hotel stationary than spend money on paper –but the garbage also suggests a reluctance to let go of the past. Vladek has a hard time parting with anything, even things that are no longer useful to him (like the outdated calendars).

PART 1, CHAPTER 5

Artie is lying in bed with his wife, Françoise, when the telephone rings. Mala is on the other line, yelling in frustration. Vladek climbed onto the roof to fix the leaky drainpipe, she says, and she had to rescue him when he got dizzy. Artie is exasperated. Vladek takes over the phone and begins insisting that Artie come to Queens to help him fix the drainpipe. Artie, still groggy – it is 7:30 in the morning – says he'll call Vladek after he's had coffee.

This exchange sets up a sharp contrast between the life Artie lives with Françoise – a slow, peaceful existence in which he set his own schedule and determines his own priorities –and the chaotic world of his father's house, where he is tangled up in obligations and idiosyncrasies.

As he makes their coffee, Artie tells Françoise he has always hated helping Vladek around the house – he was overbearing and critical of everything Artie did. Françoise asks whether Artie is going to help Vladek with the drainpipe, and Artie scoffs that he would "rather feel guilty." He calls Vladek back, and learns that a neighbor named Frank has offered to help with the drainpipe. "At least *somebody* will help me," Vladek says, in a jab at Artie.

Vladek implies that Artie is lazy and selfish for refusing to help him, but Artie's remarks to Françoise make it clear that it is Vladek – not the work – that he wants to avoid. Being with his father is stressful and frustrating for Artie, and though he seems to want to be a good son, he is not willing to endure the criticism and tension that helping Vladek with housework involves.

About a week later, Artie arrives at Vladek's house to find him sorting nails in the garage. Vladek refuses to make eye contact and seems extremely grim. He tells Artie to wait for him inside while he finishes sorting. In the house, Artie asks Mala the reason for Vladek's mood –he describes Vladek as seeming "upset" and "depressed." Mala reveals that Vladek has discovered a comic strip Artie published years earlier, about Anja's suicide. The comic strip, called "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," was published in an obscure, underground magazine; Artie says he never imagined Vladek would read it. Mala tells him that she found the comic through a friend whose son was an avid reader of the genre, and that she hid the magazine from Vladek for years because she knew it would upset him to see what Artie had written.

Mala has known about "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" for years, but has never said a word to Artie about the comic. Her silence is likely a product of her environment, in which people do not talk much about their feelings, but it also shows a certain amount of restraint and respect. She understands that drawing the comic is a way for Artie to explore grief, and does not call his process or his experience of the event into question. Hiding the magazine from Vladek protects him from the sadness of seeing Artie's anger at Anja, but also protects Artie from having that grief and anger interrogated.

Artie thumbs through "Prisoner on the Hell Planet." Unlike *Maus*, the comic depicts human faces rather than animal **heads**. Harsh lines and exaggerated features make those faces frightening and grotesque, and Artie appears wearing a prison jumpsuit in every panel. The comic describes Anja's suicide and the days that followed. Vladek found her in the bathtub, Artie writes, with her wrists slashed and a bottle of pills nearby. She had not left a suicide note. Artie, then a very young man, had just been released from a state mental hospital. Friends of his parents, who would appear to comfort him over the following days, were hostile toward him even as they offered condolences – it was clear that many people blamed him for his mother's death. He remembers his last conversation with Anja: how she came into his bedroom one night, and woke him from sleep to ask if he still loved her. Resentful of the manipulative question, he turned his back to her and grunted, "Sure, Ma!" in reply. The last panels of the comic show Artie in a prison cell, cursing his mother. By killing herself, he shouts, she has "murdered" him.

"Prisoner on the Hell Planet" is raw and honest, and it is almost impossible to imagine Artie ever expressing such powerful feelings of grief and resentment out loud, especially to his father. The facts of Anja's death – especially the absence of a note, which might have explained her actions – are painful in themselves, but Artie's sense of isolation is the most difficult aspect of the story. Overwhelmed by guilt, Artie feels disconnected from his father and the other people around him. Their twisted, inhuman faces express the bad intentions and hostility Artie now perceives in everyone he meets. He and Vladek are not able to support one another during this horrible time, and the comic expresses not only Artie's anger at Anja, but his pain at being left alone to deal with the overwhelming loss.

Mala tells Artie that the comic shocked her when she read it, but that it seemed "accurate" and "objective" – she remembers the days after Anja's death, and agrees with Artie's descriptions of that time. Vladek comes inside, and Artie brings up the comic, holding it out for Vladek to see. Vladek says he discovered the magazine while looking for Anja's diaries. There is a **photograph** of Artie and Anja printed at the top of the first page, next to the title – this photograph caught his attention, he says, and the comic made him cry when he read it.

This is the first time since beginning their interviews that Artie has initiated –or even expressed willingness to have – a personal conversation with his father. Though he did not believe Vladek would ever see the comic, it has now provided a foundation for some honest dialogue between them, which has not been possible before.

Artie apologizes for upsetting him, but Vladek says it was good for Artie to express his feelings. The comic brought up painful memories of Anja, he says – but, of course, he is always thinking of Anja anyway. Mala points out that Vladek's desk is covered with **photographs** of Anja; she compares these, bitterly, to a shrine. Vladek asks whether she would have him throw the pictures away. Mala walks away grumbling.

While Artie's memories of his mother are colored by anger and guilt, Vladek relates to Anja's memory in more loving, reverent ways. He thinks about her constantly, he says, but the "shrine" on his desk suggests that he is more in touch with his feelings of loss –sadness that Artie, overwhelmed by the guilt he writes about in his comic, has little emotional space to acknowledge. Vladek might feel guilty or angry about Anja's death, but sadness is clearly an easier emotion for him to confront.

Vladek and Artie go for a walk. Vladek resumes his story in 1943, when all the Jews who remain in Sosnowiec after the events at the stadium are relocated to the village of Srodula, a ghetto where they're more cramped and restricted than ever before. Each day, they are marched into Sosnowiec to work in German shops: Anja and Tosha in a clothing factory, he and Lolek in a carpentry shop. By this time, the Germans have installed Jews as guards and police in the ghetto – they act just the same as the German soldiers, Vladek says.

As the situation intensifies, bonds of solidarity between the Jews of Sosnowiec are starting to disintegrate. Jews appointed to positions of power as guards and police are just as brutal as their German counterparts – fears about the precariousness of their own situation manifest as hostility toward others in their community, with whom they know they could easily change positions at any time, because of their own vulnerability.

One evening, Wolfe gets a visit from his uncle, Persis. Persis is the head of the Jewish Council in Zawiercie, a town some twenty-five miles from Sosnowiec. His position gives him some influence with the Germans in Zawiercie, and he wants to bring Wolfe, Tosha, and the three small children – Bibi, Lonia, and Richieu – home with him, so he can protect them. Mrs. Zylberberg protests, saying the family must fight to stay together, but she soon concedes that the children must go where they will be safe.

Near the beginning of the war, Anja insisted she would never part with her son. Now, forced to give him over to Persis, she and the rest of the family have to confront their loss of power over their own lives. Like Mrs. Zylberberg, whose desire to keep her family together became impossible in the ghetto, Anja has no power to stay with and care for her child. Their circumstances force the family to do exactly those things they swore they would never do.

Vladek remembers the horrible violence that came to Srodula in the months after Persis took the children. During a roundup in which more than a thousand people –most of whom were children – were sent to Auschwitz, German soldiers beat crying toddlers to death in the streets, throwing them against brick walls with horrible force. Amidst all this violence, Vladek says, he and his family thanked God that their own children were safe in Zawiercie with Persis.

The gratitude Vladek and the rest of the family feel knowing their children are with Persis is an example of dramatic irony:Vladek and Artie both know that the children were not safe at all, and this makes the family's relief painful to remember.

Artie asks what happened to Richieu after Persis took him to Zawiercie. Vladek explains: a few months after the family separated, the Germans decided to clear out Zawiercie. New soldiers – people who could not be bribed – were sent into the ghetto. They murdered Persis and other members of the Jewish Council, then ordered all Jews to present themselves for transport to Auschwitz. Tosha refused to allow herself – or her children – to die in the gas chambers. It was her habit to wear a vial of poison around her neck at all times, Vladek says, and when she found out that they were to be sent to Auschwitz, she immediately killed herself, Bibi, Lonia, and Richieu.

For Tosha, suicide is an act of resistance against the Nazis. Knowing that horrors await her and her daughter, niece, and nephew in the camps, she decides to die on her own terms rather than submit to the pain, fear, and disrespect Jews face in Auschwitz. The loss of their beloved son is the great tragedy of Vladek and Anja's lives, but it still easy to understand Tosha's decision, and Vladek remembers the incident with sorrow, not anger.

It was a long time before the family learned what had happened to Tosha and the children, Vladek says – but when they found out, it was the greatest of all the tragedies they had endured. He mentions staying in "bunkers," and Artie stops him to ask what he means. Vladek explains that, in the months after the children moved to Zawiercie, Germans had begun to snatch people at random off the streets in Srodula. To avoid capture, he built a secret room in the Zylberbergs' house, hidden behind a false wall in the coal cellar. He draws Artie a diagram of this bunker, telling him it is good to know exactly how such hiding spaces can be constructed, "just in case."

Vladek draws Artie a diagram, not only so that he can better understand the bunker, but so he will know how to stay safe in a dangerous situation. Decades after the end of the war, Vladek is still tense. After watching his comfortable and happy life turn suddenly to chaos during the war, Vladek has lost his peace of mind. No longer confident in his own safety, he must be constantly on guard to protect himself and those he loves –and he wants Artie to practice the same vigilance.

In the summer of 1943, Vladek and the Zylberberg family move houses. He and Anja, Mr. and Mrs. Zylberberg, and Lolek are the only ones left. They build another bunker, this time in the attic. That summer, the Nazis evacuate the ghetto completely – more than ten thousand Jews are taken away in a single week. The family hides in their bunker, sneaking out at night to scavenge food. One night, another Jewish man discovers their hiding place. He insists that he means them no harm, and is only out looking for food. The family considers killing him to ensure that he doesn't reveal their hiding spot, but they let him go. The same day, the man comes back with Nazi soldiers, who arrest the family and take them to a detention center to await transport to Auschwitz.

The family's betrayal at the hands of a Jewish stranger –a man they considered killing but decided to show mercy to – shows how the most basic tenets of decent behavior have been corrupted by life in the ghetto. There is no moral code to unite the people of Srodula, and fundamental beliefs about the good or right thing to do in any given situation no longer make sense as foundations for decision-making.

Vladek has two cousins working for the Germans: Jakov, who does manual labor, and Haskel, who is the chief of the Jewish police in Srodula. While awaiting transport to Auschwitz, Vladek spots Jakov and offers to pay him for help escaping the ghetto. Artie asks whether Jakov wouldn't have helped Vladek without payment, since they were from the same family, but Vladek says the concept of family loyalty had broken down amidst the chaos of the ghettos – every person had to look out for himself.

Vladek's remark emphasizes the disintegration of the moral structures that defined Jewish life before the war. It also implies that the Zylberberg family was exceptional in their loyalty to one another – that few other families were able to maintain such strong multigenerational bonds.

Jakov brings Haskel to the detention center. Vladek bribes Haskel with a diamond ring. Haskel says he can get Vladek, Anja, and Lolek out of the ghetto, but that it will be too conspicuous if he tries to sneak out the elderly Mr. and Mrs. Zylberberg. Mr. Zylberberg is desperate to escape, and gives all his valuables to Vladek to use as bribes. Haskel takes the bribes, and begins to sneak the family, one by one, out of the detention center. In the end, though, he does not help Anja's parents. The day the vans arrive to take the detained to Auschwitz, Vladek and Anja see Mr. Zylberberg at the window, crying. All his wealth has not been able to save his life. The Zylberbergs go directly to the gas chambers in Auschwitz.

Unlike Vladek, whose father disappears without warning amid the stadium crowds, Anja is forced to watch from afar as her own parents are deported to Auschwitz and their deaths. The image of Mr. Zylberberg crying at the window captures the disempowerment of the entire family – he knows exactly what lies ahead, is in a position to communicate his need for help, and is seen by people who want nothing more than to save him, but the barrier between the inside and outside is still impenetrable. Information, connections, and wealth cannot keep him safe.

Vladek pauses in his story to pick up a piece of wire from the ground near a trash can. He pockets it, to Artie's mild disgust, for use in household chores. He goes on with his story: after Haskel smuggles them out of the detention center, he takes them to a shoe shop where his brother, Miloch, is working. Haskel was a crook, Vladek tells Artie, but Miloch was a good man. The two of them had another brother, Pesach, who was a crook like Haskel – a member of the Jewish police. Vladek begins to work in the shop with Miloch, repairing German boots.

Though foundational morality has fallen by the wayside, Vladek is still willing and able to identify people in moral terms –he knows that Haskel is a crook and Miloch is a good man, and he makes such judgments even after acknowledging the moral chaos of the times. Though Vladek places his own interest and Anja's above that of any other person, and accepts the same self-serving behaviors in others, he doesn't compromise his essential moral principles.

As he tells his part of the story, Vladek's heart begins to cause him severe pain. He carries a nitroglycerin pill in his pocket, and swallows it immediately to help regulate his heartbeat. He sits on a stoop to catch his breath, and tells Artie that Miloch survived the war and moved to Australia with his wife. He reveals that Miloch died only recently, after years of heart trouble, when he was caught during a seizure without his nitroglycerin pills.

Miloch's death is not nearly so dramatic as most of those described in Vladek's stories. Still, the combination of Vladek's chest pain and Miloch's sudden end captures the randomness and absurdity of death. People die because of bad luck and small mistakes –the same end waits for all of us, and those who survived the worst years of the war are just as vulnerable as anyone else.

Vladek and Artie resume walking. Vladek describes the last months of 1943: the Germans are clearing out Srodula, and sending the few remaining Jews to Auschwitz in weekly transports. Miloch and Pesach build a bunker in the shoe shop (Haskel has made escape plans of his own) and invite Vladek, Anja, and Lolek to hide with them when the time comes. Lolek refuses to hide. He is fifteen years old, and is tired of living in bunkers. His skills as an electrician, he believes, will make him useful to the Nazis and help him survive wherever he goes. Anja weeps and begs him to reconsider, but Lolek refuses to enter the bunker. Soon after, he is taken to Auschwitz.

Like his Aunt Tosha, Lolek is committed to dictating the terms of his own life. He has his own priorities – different from Tosha's – but he shares her insistence on making his own choices. His disdain for hiding is also a subtle challenge to Artie's mouse-head metaphor. Mice are typically depicted as timid, passive creatures who survive by hiding rather than confronting danger, but Lolek is bold and forthcoming, the opposite of a fearful "mouse."

With Lolek gone, Anja becomes hysterical. They have recently heard the news about Richieu's death – and the deaths of Anja's sister, brother-in-law, and nieces –and with the loss of Lolek, her family is broken apart completely. Anja tells Vladek she wants to die, but Vladek begs her to keep struggling for life. He needs her, he says – together, they will survive.

Here Vladek reveals his own priorities: he wants to survive, no matter how hard he has to fight to do so. His love for Anja gives him something to live for, but there is also a sense that Vladek believes in life and in a future after the war. He will keep struggling to live, no matter what.

Anja and Vladek hide in the bunker with several others. There is almost no food, and everyone is on the brink of starvation. Several of those hiding in the bunker try to escape by bribing the guards to look the other way while they walk out of the ghetto; the guards take their bribes, but shoot them as soon as they hand over the money. One man, Avram, says he will not leave the bunker until Vladek does –Vladek has good judgment, and Avram trusts that he will not leave the bunker until it is safe. Finally, after almost everyone in Srodula has been killed or deported, the Germans leave and the handful of people hiding in the bunker walk out of the ghetto. They part ways, all going in different directions. Vladek and Anja have nowhere to go, so they walk toward Sosnowiec.

Vladek has learned to work within a new moral code, and now knows better than to trust the guards. Avram, like the prisoners of war who followed Vladek to the labor camp, has confidence in Vladek's wisdom. More important, though, is the fact that Avram believes Vladek to be trustworthy, not likely to betray him to guards or otherwise lead him astray. Given the harrowing situation in which they met – starving and fearful in the bunker –it is noteworthy and even a little surprising that Vladek could make such an impression.

Vladek and Artie have walked to the local bank. Vladek asks the teller – an American woman, with the **head** of a dog – to make Artie a key to his safe deposit box. The two go into the back room, to look through Vladek's things. He wants Artie to have access to his valuables, Vladek says, because otherwise Mala will snatch them as soon as Vladek dies. Artie is uncomfortable talking about the prospect of his father's death, but Vladek ignores his protests. He shows Artie a diamond ring, which Anja saved for him from the time he was very young, with the intention that it should be given to his wife one day.

Designating the diamond ring for Artie's wife was a way for Anja to express confidence in the future. She believed (or wanted to believe) that Artie would find love and happiness with a woman, and also that he would live in a world where the ring – which, throughout the war, was kept as insurance, something Anja and Vladek could trade when they needed help – could serve its intended purpose, not just as a bribe.

Mala would be furious if Artie inherited the diamond ring, Vladek says – she is constantly badgering him to change his will and leave everything to her, with nothing for his one surviving brother (who lives in Israel) or for Artie. Vladek slumps over his safe deposit box and covers his head with his hands. He moans that he never should have remarried, then wails Anja's name three times. Artie pats his father's back, and tells him gently that they should go home.

In her earlier conversations with Artie, Mala has seemed blameless: the long-suffering wife trapped with a neurotic and controlling husband. Vladek's stories then cast her, and their relationship, in a new light. Though Vladek is not a perfect partner to Mala, it seems she may have things to answer for herself.

PART 1, CHAPTER 6

When Artie arrives at the house for his next visit with Vladek, he finds Mala crying at the kitchen table. Vladek has been making her miserable again; she complains about his stinginess, telling Artie that he refuses to give her money for even small personal expenses. She remembers how, right after they were married, Vladek tried to force her to wear Anja's old clothes rather than buying anything new. Artie wonders whether it was the war that made Vladek so painfully frugal, but Mala reminds him that she went through the camps herself, as did all their friends, and none of them are like Vladek. Artie tells Mala that Vladek's miserly character is one of the things he is most anxious about in drawing his book. Vladek resembles racist stereotypes about Jews that many people still believe, and while Artie wants to create an accurate portrait of his father, he feels conflicted about depicting all the negative aspects of Vladek's character.

Artie tries to explain away his father's less flattering traits by fitting them into a narrative about the Holocaust, but Mala rejects that as an easy excuse. The idea that Vladek, despite all his courage and resilience, might simply be a hard person to like –that the unpleasant parts of his personality should not be dismissed and forgiven without question – is a hard one for Artie to swallow. It is easier to excuse his father's shortcomings as results of trauma than to admit that he might be a flawed person. By depicting his father the way he really is, Artie risks giving ammunition to anti-Semites, or making Jews and more liberal people angry by perpetuating anti-Semitic stereotypes. He is torn between his need to be honest in his writing, and his sense of responsibility to both his father and the larger Jewish community.

Vladek comes in from watering the garden. Artie, changing the subject quickly, tells Vladek that he has begun sketching pages for his book, and takes drafts out of his bag from the scene where Vladek describes the hanging of the four Jews in Sosnowiec. The scene makes Vladek tearful. He and Mala both praise the work. Vladek tells Artie he will be as famous as "the big-shot cartoonist" – he has forgotten the name of Walt Disney. The atmosphere is pleasant until Mala remarks that she has an appointment with her hairdresser. Vladek makes a derisive comment about how often Mala visits the hairdresser, and the two of them begin to fight. Artie shepherds Vladek into the garden, away from the conflict. As he and Vladek settle into lawn chairs, he suggests that Vladek and Mala might benefit from seeing a marriage counselor to help them learn to get along better. Vladek brushes off the suggestion. Mala doesn't care about getting along, he says – she only wants his money.

When the pleasant discussion between the three Spiegelmans suddenly deteriorates, Vladek emerges as both the instigator of the conflict and the person responsible for prolonging it. He antagonizes Mala without provocation about her plans to go to the hairdresser, and when he dismisses Artie's suggestion that he and Mala see a marriage counselor, he makes it clear that he has no interest in learning to coexist peacefully with her. The fight – coupled with Vladek's frequent comparisons between Mala and Anja, and his remark (at the end of the previous chapter) that he never should have remarried – all suggest that Vladek might be creating conflict in his relationship with Mala as a way of atoning for his guilt about having married again after Anja's death.

Artie asks Vladek to resume his story in 1944, when he and Anja left Srodula. Vladek talks: The two of them walk toward Sosnowiec under the cover of dark, but don't know what they will do once they get there – they need to hide, but don't know where to go. On the outskirts of town, they recognize the house where Janina, Richieu's former governess, lives. Janina opens the door, and looks terrified as she recognizes the Spiegelmans. She tells them to get away from her house, saying they'll only bring trouble.

Janina once told Vladek and Anja that she thought of them as part of her own family. Now, however, she rejects them because she fears they will "bring trouble" – meaning that German soldiers will punish her if she helps them in any way. The Spiegelmans are outcasts not only because of Nazi anti-Semitism, but because otherwise good people now turn them away out of fear.

Desperate to get off the streets before dawn, when they are likely to be recognized as Jews, Anja and Vladek walk toward the house where the Zylberberg family lived before the war. Mr. Lukowski, the janitor, still lives in the house. He ushers Anja and Vladek into a shed in the courtyard. Anja is relieved to find that "there are still some kind people left." Mr. Lukowski tells them they must find a better place to hide soon –one of the neighbors will surely recognize them otherwise.

Anja's remark about the apparent disappearance of "kind people" highlights her growing sense that the world has become a hostile place for her and Vladek. Though she is not na•ve by any means – she suffered in the ghetto just as Vladek did –Anja's surprise at her neighbors' lack of kindness suggests she thought open hostility was limited to the Nazis. She didn't expect to find her own community turning against her when she returned home.

That day, Vladek goes into the city. He wants to get a feel for conditions, though Anja is fearful of what might happen to him. As when he convinced the train conductor to smuggle him across the border, he wears a pig **mask** over his mouse head to indicate that he is pretending to be Polish. As he walks down the street, Vladek becomes aware of someone following him. A man speaks to him in Hebrew, asking whether Vladek is a Jew. Vladek hesitates, but he answers in Hebrew. The man is pleased – he is a Jew himself, he tells Vladek. He turns in profile, and the strings of a mask can be seen holding his pig's face in place. The Jewish man tells Vladek he can find food and information about a place to hide on Dekerta Street. Vladek goes to Dekerta Street immediately, where he finds a woman selling black-market food. He buys an armful of eggs, sausage, and other luxurious foods, and takes them back to an amazed Anja.

Vladek's ability to move between different languages –he speaks Polish, Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and English with varying levels of fluency – works as a symbol for his tendency to move between different modes of interacting with the world and presenting himself to other people. Vladek has the knowledge and ability to disguise his Jewishness, so his decision to affirm it in this moment by answering the stranger in Hebrew is a subtle act of courage and boldness. Though he is frightened by the stranger's question and aware that it might be a trap, he takes the risk of standing by his Judaism rather than clinging to a language that might disguise it.

Vladek returns to Dekerta Street, where he learns of a farmer named Mrs. Kawka who, some of the young men suggest, might be willing to hide him and Anja in exchange for payment. Vladek and Anja move into Mrs. Kawka's barn, but Vladek soon begins looking for a warmer place where they can spend the winter. He goes to Dekerta Street often – much to Anja's dismay, since she fears for his life each time he leaves – and becomes friendly with a Polish woman, Mrs. Motonowa, who sells black-market food. She knows about Vladek and Anja's difficult living situation, and one day offers to have them move into her house with her and her young son. Vladek gratefully accepts, and the next evening, Mrs. Motonowa and her son escort Vladek and Anja from the barn on Mrs. Kawka's farm to their house in Szopienice.

When they begin trying to re-establish a life for themselves in Sosnowiec, Vladek and Anja enter a period of enormous instability. Their hiding places are all temporary and dependent on others, which means they never have the chance to rest without worrying about what to do next, and even the act of going out to buy food has the potential to be a deadly errand. When Mrs. Motonowa opens her home to them, she offers a chance for greater stability– a safe, long-term hiding place where they can have some relief from the pressure and stress of their current lives.

Mrs. Motonowa's house is more comfortable than the barn at Mrs. Kawka's farm. Mrs. Motonowa is a good woman, though she is exacting when it comes to her payments – Vladek pays her both for sheltering them and for bringing them food from her black market business. Her little boy loves Anja, who plays games with him and tutors him in German. Things in the house are relatively peaceful until one morning, when the Gestapo (the Nazi police) search Mrs. Motonowa and confiscate her goods while she is selling black market food in Dekerta Street. She runs home and tells the Spiegelmans they have to leave immediately, in case the Gestapo come to search her house.

Though living with Mrs. Motonowa seemed like a way for the Spiegelmans to escape the stress and danger of moving constantly from place to place, this moment of upheaval makes it clear that stability is realistically impossible in their world. There will always be some new danger to threaten them.

Cast out with nowhere to go, knowing it is dangerous for them to be on the streets after dark, Vladek and Anja spend the night hiding in a construction site. In the morning, they return to Mrs. Kawka's barn – the only place they can think to go. Mrs. Kawka, who has always been severe in her attitude toward the couple, softens when she sees Anja shivering and exhausted. She invites Anja to warm up in her house, and brings Vladek food. Vladek tells Mrs. Kawka he would do anything to get out of Poland. Mrs. Kawka tells him about two people she knows who have been working as smugglers, taking people to Hungary – they took two of her previous Jewish borders, she says, with good results. Vladek, who is clearly very excited by this news, tells her he'd like to meet the smugglers.

Vladek knows there is nothing left for him and Anja in Poland. As long as Germany occupies the country, there will be no chance for them to live without fear. Mrs. Kawka seems to be at the center of the smuggling operation she mentions – she offers her barn to hiding Jews, then connects them with the smugglers, whom she also seems to know personally. Though she talks about the smuggling operation like she has no personal investment in it – she raises the subject casually, and avoids using active language to describe her role –she is clearly involved.

Artie stops Vladek, and asks whether Hungary wasn't just as dangerous as Poland. For a long time, Vladek says, Hungary was safer. Near the end of the war, the situation would become truly horrible for Hungarian Jews – Vladek remembers hundreds of thousands of them coming into Auschwitz while he was there – but he had now way of knowing that when he decided to try escaping to Hungary. Vladek looks deeply sad as he talks about this, then quickly resumes his story.

Once again, Artie and Vladek confront the narrative problem of knowledge and hindsight. Listening to his father's story, Artie occasionally forgets that his father could not have anticipated the things to come. Vladek did not have the information to make the kinds of decisions that Artie, years later, assumes a wise person would have made.

Just a day or two after Mrs. Motonowa forces Vladek and Anja to leave her house, Vladek meets her again in Dekerta Street. She greets him warmly, apologizing for the panicked state in which she sent them away. The Gestapo never came to her house after all, she tells him, and he and Anja would be welcome to move in with her again. The couple return to Szopienice that same night. Soon, though, Mrs. Motonowa's husband, who works in Germany, returns home for a visit. Mrs. Motonowa hides the Spiegelmans in her cellar for the ten days her husband is home, knowing he would throw her out of the house if he discovered she was harboring Jews. There are rats in the cellar, which frighten Anja, but they cannot do anything about it –they must wait for the husband's visit to pass.

Mrs. Motonowa benefits from hiding the Spiegelmans, foras Vladek already mentioned, he paid well for her help. Still, when she reveals that helping the Spiegelmans forces her to rebel against her husband, assuming all the risks that go with doing so, it becomes clear that Mrs. Motonowa is a good person who is sincerely invested in others' wellbeing. The animal head metaphor, which constantly challenges and subverts itself, breaks down while Anja and Vladek are in the Motonowa's cellar. Anja is afraid of rats, though she is supposedly a mouse herself.

Mrs. Motonowa allows them back into the house after her husband returns to Germany, but Vladek has begun to feel that they are not safe with her. He wants to get to Hungary. After Mr. Motonowa leaves, he goes back to Mrs. Kawka's farm to meet with the smugglers. There, he encounters three other people hoping to escape to Hungary: Mr. Mandelbaum, an old acquaintance of the Spiegelmans who once owned a sweets shop in Sosnowiec; his wife; and his nephew, Abraham. The four of them talk with the smugglers together, then confer about their options, speaking in Yiddish so the Polish smugglers won't understand. Vladek is not sure whether the men can be trusted. Abraham volunteers to go with the smugglers first, then write to his uncle if everything is safe.

Hebrew, the language of the Torah and the Jewish intellectual tradition, is the language Vladek used to affirm his Jewish identity when questioned by the stranger near Dekerta Street. Yiddish – the more colloquial language of everyday life, which combines both Hebrew and Germanic languages – is the language he uses to build solidarity with other Jews and establish connections and codes that will keep them all safe.

Back at Mrs. Motonowa's house, Anja insists she will never go with the smugglers to Hungary. They are safe with Mrs. Motonowa, she says, sobbing in terror –leaving is too dangerous. Mrs. Motonowa begs Vladek to reconsider as well, but he refuses to budge. He tells Anja that he wants to be able to walk the streets as a free man; he wants to be treated like a human being.

Like Lolek, Vladek has grown tired of hiding. In another subversion of the animal head metaphor, he insists on living like a "human being," without fear. His frustration is understandable, but Vladek also shows remarkable stubbornness and insensitivity in asserting his decision. He shows Anja no sympathy, and makes no effort to understand her concerns.

Vladek goes to visit his cousin, Miloch. He has never seen Miloch's hiding place, but hopes to help Miloch and his family by putting them in contact with Mrs. Motonowa, so they can take Vladek and Anja's place in the house if they leave for Hungary. When he arrives at the house where Miloch and his family are staying, he is shocked by the conditions: their bunker is a small, freezing-cold crawlspace behind a garbage pit. Even worse, it is clear to Vladek that people know the family is hiding there. He tells Miloch about his situation at Mrs. Motonowa's, and promises to be in touch when he knows whether he's going to Hungary.

Miloch helped Vladek and Anja when he allowed them to hide in his bunker during the liquidation of the Srodula ghetto. Though it is dangerous for Vladek even to go outside, he feels a moral compulsion to return Miloch's kindness. The shocking conditions in which Miloch and his family are living serve as a reminder that, thought the Spiegelmans have had a difficult time, they have been luckier than many people – Mrs. Motonowa has been extremely good to them.

A few days later, the smugglers return with a letter from Abraham. The letter says he is safe and happy in Hungary, and urges them to follow him soon. Vladek and Mandelbaum make arrangements to leave in two days' time. Anja is terrified – she is convinced the smugglers have arranged some kind of trick, and begs Vladek to call everything off – but Vladek insists, and eventually, Anja relents. Vladek visits Miloch and tells him to move into Mrs. Motonowa's house. In an aside to Artie, he remarks that Miloch and his family spent the remainder of the war in Mrs. Motonowa's house, perfectly safe. He and Anja, though, had something else entirely in their future.

Miloch's experience shows that Anja was correct about Mrs. Motonowa and the safety of their hiding spot. If Vladek had listened to her, they might have waited out the war in relative peace and safety, just as Miloch and his family did. Though Vladek's desire to get to Hungary is understandable, Anja's instincts are also good. Since Vladek tends to portray Anja as passive and fearful, never taking initiative or asserting her opinions, this is a crucial moment in the development of her character. Though she ultimately follows Vladek, it is clear that Anja has opinions and priorities of her own, and that she is trying to take agency for her own life rather than simply submitting to her husband.

Two days later, Vladek and Anja board a train, along with Mandelbaum, his wife, and the smugglers. They are barely on the train for an hour – just passing by Bielsko, where Vladek once had his textile factory – when the Gestapo board the train and arrest them. The smugglers have double-crossed them, and delivered them into the hands of the Nazis.

It is ironic that Vladek's plans should meet such a devastating end so close to the place where he once had his textile factory. The factory represented power, as owning a large, successful business gave Vladek complete authority over his own life and allowed him to dictate how he would live and spend his time. Now, captured by the Nazis and unable to change his situation, Vladek is once again disempowered and has no control over his fate.

The Spiegelmans and the Mandelbaums are marched to a prison in Bielsko, where the men are separated from their wives and thrown into a cell with a few others. They spend several days there. Vladek helps a Polish man write letters to his family –prisoners are only permitted to write letters in German. When the man's family sends him a parcel full of food, he gives some to Vladek as payment. A few days later, the Germans load dozens of prisoners onto a truck, and Vladek and Anja are reunited. Though Anja insists she isn't hungry, Vladek forces her to take some of the food the Polish man paid him with, which he has been saving for her.

Loss of appetite is a common symptom of depression, and Anja's resistance to taking the food Vladek offers hints that she may be struggling with more clinical mental illness in addition to the feelings of fear and hopelessness that have been part of her experience up to this point. By contrast, the food is precious to Vladek.The difference between his excitement and Anja's apathy shows the way Vladek continues to cling to hope and a desire to survive, while Anja begins to lose her will to live.

The truck takes Vladek, Anja, and the Mandelbaums to Auschwitz. It is now 1944, and every Jew in Poland knows about the gas chambers where Jews are killed en masse, and the ovens where the piles of bodies are burned. Even as they entered through the gates of Auschwitz, Vladek says, the prisoners understood that they would not leave alive. As the prisoners file out of the truck, the Nazis push men into one line, and women into another. Vladek and Anja are separated, unsure of whether they will ever see one another alive again.

Vladek and Anja are separated in an anticlimactic moment of bureaucratic sorting. Guards shove them into different lines, but there is no struggle or time to say goodbye. Vladek and Anja lose one another the way they have lost so many other people: in a moment of confusion, without warning. They absorb the possibility of monumental loss in an instant, with little time to grieve before the struggle to survive goes on.

Artie asks Vladek to come inside with him and search for Anja's diaries. Vladek hesitates, then confesses to Artie that he has finally remembered what happened to the diaries. After Anja died, he says, he had a "very bad day" and felt overwhelmed by memories of her and of the war. In an attempt to "make an order with everything," he burned many of Anja's things – her diaries among them. Artie is stunned, then enraged. He screams at Vladek, cursing him and calling him a "murderer." His anger upsets Vladek, who tries to explain that his depression after Anja died made it difficult to think straight. He is clearly hurt by the things Artie has said, and Artie backs down from his shouting. He apologizes to Vladek, but makes excuses to leave the house as quickly as possible. As he walks away, he grumbles the word "murderer."

Vladek did not burn Anja's diaries out of malice –he was overwhelmed by grief, and had no idea how to live with all the painful memories her diaries evoked –but in calling him a murderer, Artie treats the act as an assault, not only on Anja and her memory, but on him. Depriving Artie of the chance to read his mother's memories and get to know her through her writing is as devastating as though Vladek had taken Anja away from him in the first place. By obliterating her words from the world, Vladek erases her memory as fully as killing her would have erased her body. It is noteworthy that Artie also uses the metaphor of murder in "Prisoner on the Hell Planet," when he accuses Anja of "murder[ing]" him by taking her own life.

PART 2, CHAPTER 1

It is summer. Artie and Françoise are vacationing with friends in Vermont. Artie is doodling outside, trying to decide how to draw Françoise in his book. On his sketchpad, he tries out different animal **heads**: a moose, a poodle, a frog, a rabbit. Françoise is French, and he wants to find an animal that both represents her and seems compatible with that nation's history of anti-Semitism. Françoise comes outside to sit beside him. When Artie tells her what he is working on, she insists that, if Artie is going to be a mouse, she should be a mouse too. Besides, she reminds him, she converted to Judaism when they got married, if only to please Vladek.

The question of Françoise's animal head raises interesting questions about the nature of Jewishness. The Nazis treated Jews as an ethnic group, and claimed that even a Jew who converted to Christianity was still a Jew –the religion was just a signifier of the race. Artie struggles to determine how much he agrees with this perspective. He is unsure whether Françoise can be a Jew without sharing the culture and history of Jewish-Americans in the intimate, lifelong way he has. In arguing that she should be a mouse as long as Artie is, Françoise argues for an idea of identity as something that can be shared and adopted. She is a mouse because she loves her husband, and has committed to being his partner in all things, including his compulsion to live out and pass on his Jewish heritage.

Artie and Françoise's friends run out of the house in a panic. Vladek just called, one of them tells Artie –he had a heart attack, and needs Artie to call him back. The four of them hurry into the house, and Artie calls Vladek immediately. A one-sided conversation ensures. Artie looks shocked. When he hangs up, he reports that Vladek didn't really have a heart attack; he made that up to ensure Artie would call him back. The real crisis, Artie tells them, is that Mala has left Vladek – taken money from their bank account and disappeared with their car. Vladek is spending the summer in a bungalow in the Catskill Mountains, and wants Artie and Françoise to come and stay with him.

Vladek's trick is manipulative, but it speaks to his lack of confidence in Artie. He senses that Artie would avoid calling him without an urgent reason to do so. Mala's abandonment comes as a surprise to both Vladek and Artie, but given the unhappiness of their marriage, it seems her thinning patience should have been obvious. That neither of them saw what was coming speaks to their mutual lack of sensitivity and interpersonal awareness – they both failed to respond to clear signals from Mala.


Reluctantly, Artie and Françoise get into their car and head for the Catskills. As they drive, Artie begins to tell Françoise about his anxieties over his book. He knows it is presumptuous to believe he can create a clear, comprehensible narrative around something as intense as the Holocaust, when he barely understands something as simple as his own relationship with his father. He remembers how, as a child, he would imagine that the Nazis were about to take his parents to their deaths, and that he could only save one of them and had to choose which one of them would survive. (He usually chose Anja.)

Though Artie never experienced the horrors of the Holocaust, he feels connected to the tragedy through Vladek and Anja. Their suffering is of paramount importance to him, because it impacted them as parents and people –and, by extension, it impacted him in countless profound ways. For Artie, understanding the Holocaust and understanding his relationship with Vladek are linked projects; he cannot grasp one without the other.




Artie wonders aloud whether he and Richieu would get along, if Richieu had survived the war. Vladek and Anja always kept a **photograph** of Richieu in their bedroom, he says, and as he grew older, he came to feel a sense of competition with this photograph. He felt that he could never compare to Richieu in the eyes of his parents, because Richieu had died before ever doing anything to disappoint them. He survived in memory as a perfect child, while Artie was a real person who often fell short of expectations.

Artie's childhood insecurities about Richieu are reflections of more general uncertainties about his relationship with his parents and his ability to make them proud. On another level, it also raises questions about the tendency of the living to inaccurately valorize the dead, remembering those who have died as being heroes or angels rather than ordinary people. Artie understands that his parents' reverence for Richieu is a way of coping with his loss, but his memories from childhood also illustrate how that reverence can create tension among those who are living with the memory of the lost loved one.

Artie remembers a few more details of his childhood obsession with the Holocaust: his nightmares about Nazi soldiers arriving in his classroom, about Zyklon B (the deadly chemical used in gas chambers) coming out of the shower. He tells Françoise that he wishes he had been in Auschwitz with his parents, so he could understand what they went through – that he feels guilty about having an easier life than they did. Trying to depict their suffering in his book, while knowing he has no way to understand it, makes him feel hopeless and inadequate.

The childhood nightmares and macabre fantasies that defined Artie's relationship with the Holocaust represent his effort to imagine himself into his parents' experience – to know the horror of standing in a gas chamber, for instance – and so build a connection with them using only his mind. This, in some ways, is what he wants to accomplish with his book. By drawing the cartoons, he is imagining himself into his father's experience once again.

It is late when Artie and Françoise arrive at Vladek's bungalow in the Catskills. Vladek has been waiting up for them. He embraces Artie, and leads the two "kids" (Vladek calls them both "kids" and "darlings") to the bedroom he has made up for them. He implies that Artie and Françoise will be spending the rest of the summer with him in the Catskills; Artie is quick to correct him, saying he and Françoise are only there for a few days. Vladek brushes off this comment and goes to bed, leaving Art and Françoise to speculate about his expectations.

Artie wants to do right by his father in this situation, but Vladek demands significant sacrifices from both his son and daughter-in-law. Going to the Catskills is a gesture of familial solidarity and a sign that Artie wants to improve his relationship with Vladek. However, Vladek's inflexible and unrealistic expectations impede this effort just as much as Artie's self-centeredness and neuroticism do.

The next morning, a little before 8 a.m., Vladek bursts into the bedroom where Françoise and Artie are sleeping. He opens the curtains and rouses Artie, who fumbles to get dressed as Vladek begins to list all the things on their agenda for the day. Artie makes coffee (Françoise has brought their coffee and pot in her bag) while Vladek tells him about the drama that led to Mala leaving. Back in Rego Park, they went to the bank together to renew some bonds Vladek had taken out. He intended to put one bond in trust for Mala, one for Artie, and one for Pinek, his brother who lives in Israel. Mala, who wanted Vladek to leave his whole estate to her, became furious and left Vladek at the bank. By the time he returned home, she had left – taking money, jewelry, and their car with her. Vladek says his lawyer has encouraged him to press charges.

Though it has already been established that Mala is protective of the inheritance she expects to receive from Vladek, the extreme reaction Vladek describes seems incongruous with the cordial attitude she has always had toward Artie. Vladek may be misrepresenting the nature of their argument, emphasizing Mala's greed and erasing his own role in the conflict, but it's also possible that Mala has been disingenuous in her interactions with Artie, treating him kindly in person but doing her best to undermine him to Vladek. In either case, the disintegration of their marriage illustrates how difficult it can be to know the truth about other people.

Françoise appears in the kitchen, yawning. Artie lights a cigarette, and Vladek berates him for using a wood match. He gets free paper matches from a nearby hotel, he says, and saves the wood matches, which he has to buy himself, to light the bungalow's oven. Artie, frustrated with Vladek's tightfistedness, goes out for a walk. He meets Vladek's neighbor, Mrs. Karp, who ushers him into her house to meet her husband, Edgar. The Karps are eager to know whether Artie will be taking Vladek to live with him, and distressed when Artie says he has no plans to do so. Mr. Karp badgers Artie, asking how a sick old man like Vladek can be expected to manage on his own. They have been looking after Vladek since Mala disappeared (a decision for which Mrs. Karp expresses sympathy) but insist that Vladek needs full-time attention.

Artie's conversation with the Karps highlights how difficult and urgent the situation really is. Artie has trouble facing the reality of his father's health, and helping Vladek after his separation from Mala means confronting Vladek's failing health and making accommodations for further decline. The tension between Artie and Vladek is the most obvious reason for Artie's reluctance to take Vladek into his home, or involve himself in Vladek's life in a similarly intense way –but his fear of confronting Vladek's mortality also informs his behavior at this moment of transition.

Artie hears Françoise calling his name, and leaves Mr. and Mrs. Karp's house as quickly as he can. Outside, Françoise tells him that being around Vladek makes her tense; he follows her around, straightening things as soon as she touches them. Artie says Vladek has always been uptight. Françoise wonders whether it is a product of his time in Auschwitz, but Artie points out that many people – including the Karps – lived through the Holocaust, and don't share his neuroses. If these people have been altered by their time in the camps, they have been altered in different ways than Vladek.

Attributing all Vladek's personal shortcomings to the trauma he experienced during the Holocaust is unrealistic, but it is equally unrealistic to assume that Vladek's neuroses are not trauma-related simply because other survivors don't exhibit similar behaviors, or to assume other survivors aren't traumatized simply because their reactions are different. This conversation highlights the importance of acknowledging different experiences of the Holocaust and respecting different people's way of coping with those experiences.

Vladek appears in the yard outside the bungalow, and asks Artie to come inside and help him organize his bank papers. A few hours later (they have been "tense hours," Artie notes) Vladek is haranguing Artie about a mistake in his calculations. Artie insists that the error is unimportant, which prompts Vladek to accuse him of laziness. Françoise urges Vladek and Artie to take a walk and let her fix the mistake.

Spending time with Vladek is challenging for Françoise, but her ability to intervene and keep the peace between Artie and Vladek is a testament to the specific intensity of family relationships. The tensions between Artie and Vladek are rooted in a shared personal history of love and resentment, and this makes it hard to resolve even minor issues.

As they walk, Artie asks Vladek what he plans to do now that Mala is gone. Vladek says he will go home when Artie and Françoise do – he has no reason to stay in the Catskills alone –and suggests that Artie might want to move into his house in Queens. To have Artie with him is "always a pleasure," Vladek says. Very kindly, Artie tells Vladek that he and Françoise have their own home, and aren't likely to move to Queens. Vladek insists that Artie doesn't have to give him an answer right away.

Though they have just been fighting, Artie is trying to be gentle with his father and turn down his offer in a respectful way. This is atypical, as Artie tends to be melodramatic and react strongly against Vladek in moments like this. His moderation is a sign that Artie has compassion for his father's situation, and that he sincerely feels sorry that he cannot give Vladek what he wants.

Artie has brought his tape recorder on the walk, and asks Vladek whether they can talk about Auschwitz. He asks what happened after Vladek and Anja were separated upon first arriving. The men were sent to a big hall, Vladek says. Mandelbaum is still with him at this point. They are afraid, but a veteran prisoner tells them that the Nazis do not intend to kill them right away; they have come to the hall so they can be processed and put to work. The men are stripped naked and their heads are shaved. New clothing – striped prison uniforms – is distributed to all the new arrivals, without regard for size. Some prisoners receive clothes and shoes that do not fit at all, but guards punish anyone who tries to replace them. The prisoners then receive their serial number tattoos. Many of the people administrating the intake process (including one who beats another man for asking to replace his too-small shoes) are prisoners themselves – Poles and Jews wearing striped uniforms.

The Nazis' intake process denies their new prisoners any signifier of an independent self or a life before the camp. They are not permitted to have their own clothes or belongings, and they are even robbed of their hair. Especially for religious Jews who grow their hair and beards in accordance with traditional laws, this is an assault on their religious identity and cultural customs. The serial numbers, which are used in the bureaucracy of the camp to replace prisoners' names, further undermine the prisoners' humanity, reducing their existence to a number and erasing family history and connections. Even the disregard for size during the process of distributing clothes shows the Nazis' refusal to differentiate between prisoners.

As they enter the camp, Vladek and Mandelbaum see Abraham, Mandelbaum's nephew who wrote to say he was safe in Hungary. Abraham reveals that the Polish smugglers understood Yiddish, and so knew Vladek and Mandelbaum were waiting for a letter to confirm Abraham's safe arrival. When he was arrested, the Gestapo held a gun to Abraham's head and forced him to write the letter Mandelbaum received. Vladek tells Artie that he never saw Abraham after that day– he thinks Abraham "came out through the chimney," gassed and cremated like so many others.

Abraham could have allowed the Nazis to murder him rather than participate in the entrapment of his uncle, aunt, and the Spiegelmans. His decision to cooperate instead shows how powerful a person's will to survive can be. Though Abraham may have known he was heading to the camps, and not likely to make it out alive, fear of death made him betray people who trusted him. It is difficult to hold oneself to high moral standards, or to reason clearly, when the threat of death is so immediate.

Throughout Vladek's first day in Auschwitz, he hears the same thing again and again: that the only way out of the camp is through the chimney, dead. He sits in a room with other new prisoners, crying to himself. Most prisoners ignore him, but one man sits besides him. The man is not Jewish – in fact, he is a Polish priest – but he is knowledgeable about Jewish numerology, and when he inspects the serial number tattooed on Vladek's arm, he points out that many of the numbers are good omens in the Jewish tradition. When added together, the six digits in Vladek's serial number make 18, "the Hebrew number of life." The priest tells Vladek that, though he cannot predict his own fate, he feels sure Vladek will survive the horror of the camps. Their conversation gives Vladek new hope and courage. Though he never saw the priest again, Vladek remembered their conversation and drew strength from it whenever things were especially bad.

The Polish priest gives Vladek strength not only because he offers an optimistic vision for Vladek's future at a time of intense despair, but also because he renews Vladek's sense of connection with his Jewish identity. Like the vision of his grandfather that helped Vladek endure the prisoner of war camp, the priest's reading of his serial number reminds Vladek that he is a person with a history, someone who has connections to the past and to a culture that has survived and flourished despite centuries of persecution. The priest reminds him that Jewishness is not defined by the Holocaust, but by faith, knowledge, and ties to a rich and resilient community.

Vladek struggles in the camp, but things are even more difficult for Mandelbaum. His clothes are far too big for him, so he must always hold up his pants with one hand. One of his shoes is too small for his feet, so he walks through the snow with one bare foot, always holding his shoe in case he finds someone who will exchange it with him. He fumbles through his days in the camp, overwhelmed by the frustration and hardship these two problems create. One day, he drops his spoon – each prisoner is issued only one – and another person snatches it.

Mandlebaum's situation might seem comical in different circumstances, but his poorly fitted clothes and shoes create urgent problems for him in the camp. He needs to conserve mental and physical energy to survive the harsh conditions, and the nuisance of holding his clothes in place keeps him from having a single moment's peace throughout the day. Even seemingly small missteps –like dropping a spoon or getting distracted at the wrong time – could have dire consequences in Auschwitz

Vladek and Mandelbaum live in an overcrowded barrack under the supervision of a kapo: a prisoner who has been designated as a camp administrator by the Nazi guards. The kapo in charge of Vladek's barrack is a cruel man, who forces the prisoners to participate in exhausting physical exercises and beats anyone who does not comply. One day, this kapo asks all prisoners who speak both English and Polish to come to the front of the room. He is trying to learn English, and wants a teacher. Of the hundreds in their barrack, only a few – including Vladek – come forward. Vladek's English is better than most, and the kapo chooses him as a tutor.

The kapo is both a victim of Nazi abuse and a perpetrator of that same abuse. The Nazis appoint prisoners to positions of supervisory power not only to ensure that prisoners feel outnumbered and surrounded by guards at all times, but because they need to sow conflict and animosity between prisoners to ensure the success of their operation. Prisoners are responsible for managing many of the camp's resources – food, munitions, clothes –and any cooperation or solidarity between them could be dangerous to the Nazis.

The next day, while other prisoners are made to clean the barrack, the kapo takes Vladek into a private room for an English lesson. In the room is a lavish spread of food – rolls, coffee, sausage, eggs. It has been ages since Vladek has seen so much food. The kapo invites him to each as much as he wants. After their lesson, he takes Vladek to the room where shoes and clothing are kept, and invites him to choose clothes and shoes that fit him better. When Vladek explains Mandelbaum's situation – his too-big pants and too-small shoes – the kapo lets him take a belt and a new pair of shoes for his friend, as well as a spoon to replace the one Mandelbaum had stolen from him. When Vladek brings these things to Mandelbaum, he is so happy that he throws his arms around Vladek and weeps.

This scene addresses the economy of Auschwitz. There are resources available, and prisoners have to use whatever skills or connections they have to ensure that they can get what they need to live. True to form, Vladek tries to use his connection to the kapo to help his friend –though, notably, he does not ask after Mandlebaum's interests until his own are taken care of. Vladek is not given to self-sacrifice, except where Anja is concerned,but he is loyal and generous, and tries to help his friends wherever he can.

Vladek tries to use his influence with the kapo to keep Mandelbaum safe. Eventually, though, the Nazis take Mandelbaum away for a work detail. Vladek does not know what happened to his friend –he may have been shot by a guard, or beaten to death for working too slowly, or he may have collapsed from starvation or disease –but he does not see Mandelbaum again, and knows he must have died in the camp.

Neither Vladek nor the kapo has true power in the camp. as the Nazi guards are the ones who dole out death sentences. Though the prisoners can make small differences in one another's lives, they are all essentially helpless before the overwhelming power of the guards.

Vladek remains under the kapo's protection for more than two months, with better living conditions than most other prisoners. After several weeks, though, the kapo realizes he will have to send Vladek out into the camp as a worker – he can no longer keep him in the barrack all day. He is happy to learn about Vladek's work in the tin shop in Sosnowiec; skilled workers are treated better than common laborers, and the Nazis need good tinsmiths. He tells Vladek he will try to get him a job in the camp's tin shop.

Vladek takes a significant risk in presenting himself as an experienced tinsmith. His work in the Sosnowiec tin shop was minimal, and he faces serious consequences if he does something wrong. Vladek is willing to take that calculated risk for the chance of having a better, safer life in the camp. He trusts his own intelligence, competence, and adaptability.

Vladek and Artie come to a hotel called The Pines. There is a "No Trespassing" sign, but Vladek sneaks them around the back to sit on the patio. He tells Artie that he often comes to The Pines to play bingo, take dancing lessons, and use their gym – pretending all the time to be a guest. He remembers one occasion when he won a bingo game: prizes were delivered to the winner's room, but since he had no room number, he gave his card to the woman sitting next to him to make her happy.

Vladek clearly takes pleasure in things like dancing lessons and bingo, but he refuses to do these things at home because he does not want to spend money on them. His stinginess appears sad more than frustrating here, as Vladek denies himself even small pleasures for the sake of frugality. He has little, except his relationship with Artie, to bring him happiness.

PART 2, CHAPTER 2

The first panel of the chapter shows Artie bent over a drawing table. The panel shows him in profile, and only his head and shoulders are visible. Two flies buzz next to his head. Though he has the face of a mouse, it is clear that this face is only a **mask**. Human ears and hair are visible in the picture, as are the strings holding the mask in place. He turns to face the audience and begins to list a series of dates: Vladek died of congestive heart failure in August 1982. He visited him in the Catskills in August 1979. Vladek began working as a tinsmith in Auschwitz in 1944. He began drawing the page the reader is now reading in February 1987. In May 1987 – some time in the near future – Françoise is expected to give birth to their child. Over the course of nine days in May 1944, the Nazis gassed over 100,000 Hungarian Jews in the chambers at Auschwitz.

The human face beneath the mouse mask is a symbol both of Artie's sense of fraudulence – he does not feel entitled to his Jewish identity, and senses that his work about the Jewish experience is not authentic – and of the inescapability of his book's imagery and message. He cannot separate himself from his now-famous project, and so his identity has become fused, in some ways, with the comic book version of himself. The dates he lists mark the passage of time, but also note the recurrence of important themes throughout his history, and history in general. Birth and death are inextricably intertwined, and the landscape of a family's life changes with both.

As Artie recites his list of dates, the panels zoom out to capture more of his body and surroundings. He says another date – the first volume of *Maus*, which met with great success, was published in September 1986. A final image shows that his drawing table is perched atop a pile of dead bodies. The bodies are naked and emaciated, and each one has the **head** of a mouse. The silhouette of a guard tower is visible through the window. From atop this pile of bodies, Artie tells his reader that he has received four different offers to turn *Maus* into a television special or a movie. He remarks on the date of his mother's suicide – May 1968 – and reminds the audience that Anja left no note when she took her life. An unseen person calls to Artie: "Alright Mr. Spiegelman É We're ready to shoot!"

The image of Artie perched atop the pile of dead bodies illustrates his sense of having exploited the suffering of those who died during the Holocaust for his own personal gain. He believes he has built his career, metaphorically, on the bodies of murdered Jews. The comment from the unseen speaker, coupled with the silhouette of the guard tower outside the window and the double meaning of the word "shoot"– with a camera and with a gun – speaks to Artie's sense of being oppressed and held captive, both by thoughts about the Holocaust and by media attention.

A hoard of reporters and camera operators, all wearing animal **masks** over human faces, climb the pile of dead bodies and surround Artie at his drawing table. As they bombard him with questions, Artie begins to shrink in his chair, literally getting smaller with every question. By the time a leering man in a dog mask pushes his way to the front with promises to make him a millionaire, Artie is the size of a very young child. "I want absolution É I want my mommy!" he cries. He begins to sob.

Though Maus deals primarily with Artie's relationship with Vladek, the stress that comes with professional success forces Artie to revisit his relationship to Anja. Overwhelmed, he longs for the sense of safety and comfort his mother once offered him. What anger and resentment he still feels toward her coexists here with his need to feel loved and accepted – something she, as a person for whose death he feels partially responsible, is uniquely suited to provide.

The reporters vanish, and Artie – still as small as a toddler – sits alone in his chair. He tells the reader he finds it hard to believe that he is going to be a father soon. Though Vladek has been dead for years, he still struggles to make sense of their relationship. Artie wiggles out of his too-big chair and begins to walk down a street lined with dead bodies and barbed-wire fences. It is time for his appointment with Pavel, he says. Pavel, a Czech Jew and Holocaust survivor, is Artie's therapist. He sees patients at night, in a home overrun with rescued dogs and cats. (Artie notes that this fact creates problems for his **mask** metaphor.)

Holocaust imagery follows Artie out of his studio and into his ordinary life, showing how his anxieties follow him through each day. Pavel is an interesting choice for a therapist. Artie has spent his entire life surrounded by Holocaust survivors, and has struggled to understand the Holocaust as a context for his most difficult relationships. Pavel is well-positioned to help with that process, but the fact that Artie chose him of all the qualified therapists in New York suggests that Artie also craves the approval of people who survived the Holocaust as a replacement for the approval he never received from Vladek.

Pavel opens the door in a mouse **mask** – as with Artie and the reporters, his human head is visible in profile. Artie, still tiny, sits in a large armchair and tells Pavel that he has been feeling awful with no apparent cause. His career is taking off, and his home life is happy, but he feels depressed and lethargic, unable to do real work amidst business propositions and interviews. He tells Pavel that the idea of writing about Auschwitz is so "scary" as to be paralyzing, and that none of his professional accomplishments seem very impressive compared to Vladek's survival story. Pavel suggests that Vladek may have felt guilty about surviving the camps, and that his insistence that he was always right came from his need to believe that he had deserved to survive.

Though Vladek has expressed sadness during his interviews with Artie – about Richieu, the hanged Jews in Sosnowiec, and plenty of others – overall he has been remarkably reserved and matter-of-fact as he chronicles the horrors of those years. It is hard to believe that Vladek, who never seems to waver (as Anja does) in his desire to survive, could ever feel guilty or sorry that he came out of the war alive. Still, Pavel makes sense, and it is possible Vladek may have adjusted his story to disguise moments of doubt and despair – making it seem like his single-minded commitment to staying alive never wavered, and so avoiding confrontations with his own guilt.

Pavel asks whether Artie admires Vladek for surviving. Artie admits that he does – though Vladek was luckier than most people, he was also resourceful, resilient, and brave. Pavel points out the problem inherent in this admiration: if Artie thinks surviving is admirable, that implies that dying is not admirable, that the dead did something wrong. The living are always biased toward life, Pavel says – they assume, when talking about the Holocaust, that the people who lived somehow deserved life more than those who died. But life and death were random in the camps, he says. Some of the best people lived, and some died. He wonders whether people should give up on telling Holocaust stories at all, since they inevitably exclude the people who died.

This evocation of the unnamed, speechless dead harkens back to the pile of dead bodies at the beginning of the chapter. Just as Artie sensed that his success was built on an exploitation of their pain, so Pavel suggests that his success might also rely on their silence and marginalization in dialogues about the Holocaust. People want to believe there was some sense or order to the destruction that happened in the camps, and the triumph of intelligent, able Vladek allows that belief to persist even in people who know intellectually that such order did not exist.

Artie tells Pavel he has been struggling to imagine Auschwitz. He does not know what it felt like, but on a more basic level, he does not even know what it looked like. He has no idea what kinds of tools Vladek might have used in the camp tin shop – no documents exist to say. Pavel has an answer for this, it turns out; he worked in a tin shop in Czechoslovakia when he was young, and tells Artie about the cutters and the electric drill presses he used. Artie is amazed. As he walks home after the end of the session, he tells his reader that talking with Pavel makes him feel better, though he doesn't understand why. His tiny body grows gradually back to its normal size.

Formal history has lost track of the tiny details that made up daily life for so many people in Auschwitz and other camps. Though there is no shortage of scholarship on the Holocaust, it is impossible for Artie to recreate his father's experience except through his memories and the memories of other survivors. This moment emphasizes the importance of testimonies like Vladek and Pavel's. Any true narrative of the Holocaust would be an amalgamation of millions of individual stories, with unique points of emphasis.Scholars cannot synthesize those stories without losing the sense of the individuals behind them.

Back at his drawing table, Artie turns on the tape of his interview with Vladek. The tape begins with the two of them bickering – Vladek wants to talk about Mala, but Artie wants to talk about Auschwitz. As he listens to his own exasperated shouting, Artie's body begins to shrink. Once again, he becomes a tiny child in his chair. Still, Vladek's voice plays through the tape recorder, talking about the tin shop in Auschwitz.

Though Artie's conversation with Pavel helps him feel more confident in his ability to tell his father's story, he has not addressed the deepest problem still plaguing him: the guilt he feels about never repairing their troubled relationship. Vladek has been dead for five years at this point, but Artie cannot move past the burden of unresolved conflict.

The head of the tin shop is a Russian Jew named Yidl. Yidl is a Communist, and hates Vladek immediately because he has heard Vladek owned a factory before the war. Because Vladek never really worked in the tin shop in Sosnowiec – he had working papers from the shop, but his job there was only nominal, a way to ensure his safety while the Germans were sending the unemployed to camps –his situation is a precarious one, and he is afraid that Yidl might cause serious problems for him. On the advice of other tinsmiths, Vladek gifts Yidl some smuggled cheese – Polish workers who come from nearby villages are often willing to smuggle food to prisoners– and through this gift earns a little of Yidl's goodwill. Everyone was profoundly hungry in the camp, he tells Artie. They had nothing to eat but thin soup and small amounts of bread, and those who couldn't find other food to eat would die slowly of malnutrition.

Survival is the only commodity in the concentration camps: Vladek trades cheese, which Yidl needs to survive, for goodwill, which Vladek needs to survive. Future trades will reveal that small luxuries – like vodka and cigarettes – are still part of the economy of the camps, as are favors that improve life rather than simply preserving it, but the foundation of all these trades is recognition of the interdependence of all the camp's prisoners. The situation is too desperate to allow for many deep bonds of loyalty or friendship, but the prisoners can and must cooperate with one another.

Each morning and evening, the prisoners stand for an appel, a roll call of sorts when guards ensure that every prisoner is accounted for. He remembers one man who, during every appel, would insist to the German soldiers that he was one of them: a German, with medals from the government and a son in the military. Two panels, side by side, show the same man with two different animal **heads**: first a mouse, then a cat. Nobody could say whether this man was really a German, Vladek tells Artie – regardless of his nationality, though, the Germans considered him a Jew and treated him accordingly.

The two different animals heads Artie uses to depict the German Jew highlight the arbitrary, constructed nature of racial division. The Jewish "race" – not the religion, but the ethnic group – is the object of the Nazis' disdain, but this Jewish man is culturally, and perhaps even ethnically, German. The racist ideology of the Nazis is partly an instrument of social control –as in the camps, they divide people into imagined groups to create conflict and secure their own power.

Artie asks about Anja. Vladek explains that Anja was sent to Birkenau, a much bigger camp about two miles from Auschwitz. In Auschwitz, prisoners worked and were expected to live at least a little while. People in Birkenau, on the other hand, were simply waiting to be put to death. He tells Artie that he was able to get in touch with Anja through a Hungarian woman named Mancie, who sometimes worked in Auschwitz though she was imprisoned in Birkenau. Mancie is the mistress of a Nazi guard, who uses his influence to protect her. Vladek offers to pay Mancie for her help, but she tells him she does not want his food – she helps him without expecting anything in return.

Mancie is one of the only people in the desperate world of Auschwitz who is willing to help another person without expecting anything for herself. Her relationship with the Nazi guard, which likely allows her access to better food and more humane treatment than other prisoners, positions Mancie to help the people around her without regard for what they can give her in return. While her generosity is moving, it is also important to remember the unusual circumstances that allow her to act so kindly.

A few days after they meet, Mancie brings Vladek news of Anja. She tells him Anja is surviving but is very frail, and that she starting "sobbing with joy" when she learned he was alive. A few days later, she brings a letter from Anja. In the letter, Anja tells him that she often thinks of throwing herself against the electric fence to end her suffering, but that knowing he is alive gives her hope. Mancie reports that the kapo in Anja's barrack is very cruel to her, and assigns her to chores that are too strenuous for her small body. Passing letters and news between them is dangerous for Mancie – she is risking her life –but she is moved by the love Anja and Vladek share, and helps them regardless.

Anja is living under much worse conditions than Vladek, but she continues to struggle for life, just as he urged her to in the Srodula bunker. Knowing that Vladek is alive gives Anja hope, but it also gives her a sense of purpose. She fights to survive because she knows how important she is to Vladek, and though she does not share his ferocious commitment to her own survival, she is willing to care for herself as a way of caring for him. Mancie seems to need the comfort of the relationship as well – in a world full of people who are desperately protecting their own interests, the selfless love Vladek and Anja share is rare and encouraging.

Nazi guards occasionally ask Yidl to send workers to other parts of the camp for other jobs. Vladek is desperate to see Anja, and when the guards order Yidl to send a crew of roofers into Birkenau, he asks to go with them. This was a horrible time in Birkenau – 1944, when hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews were being transported to the camp. As he walks through the camp, he calls out Anja's name. Someone brings her to the site where he is working. They speak without looking at each other, afraid the guards may see them talking. Anja tells Vladek that Mancie has been getting her jobs in the kitchen, and that she has been slipping scraps of food to her friends. Vladek urges her to save the scraps for herself. "Don't worry about your friends," he tells her. "Believe me, they don't worry about you." He begs her to keep herself strong for his sake, and before they part ways he tells her, "I think about you É always."

"I think about you É always" becomes a refrain that follows Vladek through Auschwitz and into his old age. Talking with Artie for the book, he claims several times that he is "always" thinking about Anja. Though the significance of the statement changes over time, the sense that Vladek's identity is tied up in Anja remains constant as decades pass. Anja's lack of appetite, a possible sign of clinical depression, hints that her emotional strength is flagging. She survives, but to do so is a struggle on multiple levels. Her decision to sneak food scraps to her starving friends despite the risks shows Anja's compassionate nature. She craves connections with others, and finds meaning in her ability to care for people.

Occasionally, prisoners must submit themselves for "selektions," in which camp doctors inspect their naked bodies for sores and other signs of illness. If a man looks sufficiently healthy, he returns to work. The ones who look ill are sent to the gas chambers. Vladek remembers one young man, a Belgian named Felix, who presented himself for a selektion and saw the guards take down his serial number. Realizing he might be sent to his death at any moment, Felix wailed and screamed throughout the night. Vladek could not comfort him –it seemed inevitable that the Germans would come for Felix eventually, and indeed they took him away the next day. Vladek could only tell him to be brave in facing his death.

Felix knows well in advance that the guards intend to execute him, but he has no power to change his situation even with that foreknowledge. In Auschwitz, he is completely at the mercy of the guards. Vladek tries to empower Felix, but the situation is clear-cut. There is little for him to say in the way of comfort – he cannot do for Felix what the Polish priest, for instance, did for him. Even the small luxury of being able to care for others is taken away from Vladek in Auschwitz.

Next door to the tin shop where Vladek works is a shoe shop where guards take their boots for repair. One day, Vladek arrives at the tin shop and discovers that the shoemaker who worked there has been sent to another camp. Sensing an opportunity to escape Yidl and his hostility, Vladek offers himself to the kapo as a shoemaker. He bluffs about his experience level, claiming to have been a shoemaker since childhood. When asked to prove his skills by repairing a shoe, he recalls the few techniques he learned while "working" in Miloch's shoe shop in Srodula. The kapo is pleased with the repair, and takes Vladek on as a shoemaker.

Vladek exaggerates his skills and experience over and over in Auschwitz, claiming to have been an English tutor, a tinsmith, and a shoemaker. Though none of these things is true, he manages to thrive in every job, earning the respect of supervisors wherever he goes. Vladek has prepared himself for desperate times by collecting knowledge wherever he can. He has taken nothing for granted since he returned from the prisoner of war camp; vigilance and rapt attention to the world around him have left him with a store of information, and his social intelligence helps him identify the best ways to use it.

Vladek knows the basics of repairing shoes, but when a Nazi guard brings in a badly torn boot, he is forced to smuggle it out of the workshop to a trained shoemaker working in a different part of the camp. The shoemaker fixes the boot – Vladek watches intently while he does – in exchange for a day's ration of bread. When the Nazi guard returns the next day, he is so pleased with the repair that he brings Vladek a sausage as payment. Other guards begin to bring their shoes to Vladek, and to pay him for good work with gifts of food. He shares this food with the kapo in charge of the shops – "If you want to live, it's good to be friendly," he tells Artie.

Vladek differentiates between being friendly with the kapo and being his friend. He needs the kapo's goodwill to survive, but he cannot allow himself to trust a person who has such close ties to the Nazis. The kapo's allegiances must be to himself, and to the people who provide for him– the camp guards. Vladek knows this, and never believes the kapo is his friend. In fact, he has not had a friend in the camp since Mandelbaum. All this calls back to the first scene of the book, where Vladek comments bitterly on Artie's "friends" after his bike accident.

One day, in conversation with the kapo, Vladek learns that the Germans are building new barracks and plan to move some women to Auschwitz from Birkenau to work in the munitions factory. He writes to Anja with news of these barracks, and begins working to bring her over as a munitions worker. For weeks, he trades his daily ration of bread for cigarettes, then uses these cigarettes to "buy" a bottle of vodka as a bribe for the people who have the power to transfer Anja. After "starv[ing] a little" to save for the bribe, he pays for Anja's transfer. The day he saw her marching into camp with the other workers, Vladek tells Artie, was the only time he was ever happy in Auschwitz.

Even when Anja moves to Auschwitz, she and Vladek are not permitted to interact with one another. They cannot even allow the guards to see that they know one another. Vladek starves and sacrifices simply for the chance to look at Anja as she walks to and from work every day, and to sneak a few words or parcels to her when the guards aren't looking. It is such a small change in the scheme of things, but to Vladek and Anja, who have nothing in the world but one another, it is a source of deep comfort in an incredibly bleak time.

For a time after Anja's transfer, Vladek is able to toss her packages of food through the barbed wire fence that separates the munitions factory from the shops where he works. He is forced to stop sending these packages after a kapo spots Anja smuggling one and chases her through the barracks, threatening to kill her. Soon, they are separated again. Vladek is transferred from the shoe shop near Anja's munitions factory and taken back into the main camp for "black work" – taxing manual labor, which consists mainly of moving stones and digging holes. Black work wears out his body, leaving him skinnier than ever before. By the time the next selektion comes, he is afraid to present himself; if he looks too weak to work, which he fears he does, he will be sent to his death. He manages to save himself by hiding in the barrack bathrooms during the selektion.

Vladek's transfer undermines all the sacrifices he made to bring Anja to Auschwitz, as well as all the work he has done to build good rapport with guards and kapos to keep his place as a skilled laborer. Vladek has used his charisma and intelligence to build a bearable life for himself in the camp, but his fortunes turn on a dime just like anyone else's. Though he is healthy when he enters Auschwitz, and keeps himself in relatively good conditions as a skilled laborer, black work wears out his body just the same as it does any other prisoner. As his fortunes change, Vladek finds he is just as vulnerable as anyone else.

As Artie and Vladek return home, Artie tries to sketch a timeline of Vladek's imprisonment. Vladek says he spent ten months in Auschwitz: two teaching English, five or six in the shops, about a month doing black work, and two more as a tinsmith just before leaving the camp. Françoise greets Artie and Vladek in the front yard, telling them she has finished with the bank papers and made lunch. Vladek praises Françoise and complains about Mala as they all sit down to eat, but Artie doesn't pause in their interview – he presses Vladek on the question of his last two months in Auschwitz, wanting to know how he came to work as a tinsmith again.

This is the first moment when Françoise becomes involved in the interview process. In fact, Artie has never interviewed his father in another person's presence. Though it can be assumed that Artie has shared some of Vladek's stories with Françoise, the integration of these interviews into ordinary life – allowing the interview to become a conversation over lunch – speaks to how Artie's work and his life have become impossible to separate. Artie is seeking self-knowledge and reconciliation with the past in the act of writing, and these stories inform every aspect of his life. In relaxing the distinctions between the professional and the personal, Artie now admits that fact.


As the Russian army was closing in on Auschwitz, Vladek says, tinsmiths were sent to disassemble the gas chambers and crematoriums. The Germans planned to transport their remaining prisoners Germany, rebuild the chambers, and finish killing the Jews they had imprisoned. He saw the inside of the gas chambers himself, Vladek says. One of the prisoners who had worked in the chambers while they were operational told him, in gruesome detail, about the process by which people were killed, and the work of taking their bodies to the ovens for cremation. This was horrifying information for Vladek, as he knew that many of his family members had died in the gas chambers. During this time, Vladek says, he also learned about the mass killings of the Hungarian Jews who were sent to Auschwitz in 1944. There were too many to send them through the crematorium, so their bodies were burned in outdoor pits. Some were killed in the gas chambers first, but some were forced to jump into the pits alive, where they were burned along with the dead. Artie cannot understand why nobody tried to resist the Nazis; Vladek tries to explain how overwhelming and disempowering the camps were, but it is hard for Artie to grasp.

Even within the camp, Vladek has been sheltered from some of the most horrifying details of its operations. Pavel's point –that the dead have stories the living can never know –becomes especially painful and potent as Vladek confronts the terrible circumstances in which so many beloved people were murdered. The chambers and ovens and the vivid stories he hears from the crematorium worker all force Vladek to imagine the fear and suffering his father, sisters, and other loved ones endured during the last minutes of their lives, and the indignity with which their bodies were handled. Just as Artie feels guilt and sadness about his inability to empathize with his parents' experience in Auschwitz, so Vladek feels similarly about his inability to empathize with the experiences of those people who died in the gas chambers.





That night, after Vladek is asleep, Artie and Françoise sit on the porch and talk. Staying with Vladek has left them exhausted, and Artie hopes that Mala will come back soon, to relieve them of the burden of caring for him. Inside the house, Vladek is moaning in his sleep. This is normal, Artie assures Françoise. Observing the peaceful night around them, Françoise says it's hard to believe Auschwitz ever happened. Artie slaps at a mosquito on his arm, then sprays pesticide at the bugs hovering around them. He and Françoise go inside as the mosquitos fall to the ground, dead.

In killing the mosquitoes with pesticide, Artie recreates in miniature the Nazis' systemic murder of the Jews. Zyklon B, the chemical used in the gas chambers, was used originally as a pesticide – so, when Artie sprays the cloud of mosquitoes, he unwittingly evokes the spray from the shower nozzles in the chambers. The thoughtlessness with which he knocks out the tiny creatures around him is a sign that Artie is not any more sensitive to violence despite his exposure to Vladek's stories. Though killing insects and killing people seem completely different, disregard for the lives of beings they considered to be "lesser" than themselves was the foundation of the Nazis' "extermination" project. The small, everyday cruelties perpetrated by people who have been educated about the horrors of the past are evidence that human beings are still capable of great harm, despite all we have attempted to learn from the example of the Holocaust.

PART 2, CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Vladek announces plans for a trip to the supermarket, to return foods Mala left behind and buy groceries for the week. When Artie reminds Vladek that he and Françoise are only planning to stay for another day or so, Vladek grumbles that it would have been better for them not to come at all, if they were going to leave so soon. He tries to force Artie and Françoise to eat the sugary cereal and cake Mala left, which he can't have because of his diabetes. After his experience in the camps, Vladek says, he hates to waste any food at all, and he does not relent when Artie and Françoise tell him they do not want the food. Finally, Artie gets frustrated and snaps at him, telling him to save the cereal "in case Hitler ever comes back."

Artie's comment about Hitler is the first explicitly insensitive remark he has made about Vladek's Holocaust experience. He has finally come to understand what Mala tried on multiple occasions to explain: that his father's time in the camps does not automatically excuse all of his many shortcomings, and that Artie is not obligated to defer to Vladek simply because he invokes Auschwitz. The retort is unnecessary and unkind, but it also marks an important juncture in Artie's tense, reverent relationship with his parents' Holocaust narrative.

Driving to the supermarket later, Artie tells Vladek he has been reading about a group of prisoners in Auschwitz who revolted against the guards and blew up one of the crematoriums. Artie has had a hard time trying to understand why prisoners didn't rebel more often, and though Vladek has explained that the Nazis were much more powerful than their prisoners, with weapons and other resources that the prisoners did not have, Artie has continued to fixate on the question. Vladek remembers the people who bombed the crematorium. They were killed for their actions, and the four young women who supplied them with ammunitions were hanged as a warning to other prisoners. Their bodies were left hanging near Vladek's workshop for a long time, he says.

Artie does not explicitly criticize the prisoners for their failure to resist the guards, but his incredulity reveals a subtle disdain for what he perceives to be their passivity. His inability to empathize with the prisoners – his implication that defiance was the obvious choice for anyone in their position – exemplifies the bias Pavel cautions him against. Artie wants to believe that the prisoners retained some power over their lives and simply chose not to use it. It is easier to be critical of the prisoners' passivity than to accept that the camps robbed people of all agency and left them with no choice but to wait for death.

Vladek remembers the evacuation of Auschwitz, a few weeks after the bombing of the crematorium. A young man reports rumors that the Germans plan to abandon the camp before the Russian army arrives. He makes plans to wait out the evacuation in the attic of a bunker, then escape to freedom with forged papers. Vladek intends to join this young man, and helps him smuggle civilian clothes as a disguise, but they are forced to abandon their plan after hearing a rumor that the Germans intend to bomb the camp buildings once the evacuation is complete. Like thousands of others, they march out of Auschwitz into the snowy night, under the eyes of Nazi guards, heading toward an unknown location.

Though the Nazis operated thousands of concentration camps in multiple countries, few of their enemies knew about the mass internment or "extermination" of the Jews until the very end of the war. Aware that their prospects for winning the war were grim, and that there would be disastrous consequences for Nazi guards and government officials if their opponents learned about the camps, the Germans tried to erase the evidence of their crimes by destroying camp infrastructure and killing prisoners as quickly as they could.

The prisoners march about two hundred miles to Gross-Rosen, a camp within the German border. The camp is chaotic and overcrowded, but Vladek stays there only briefly. Within a day or two of his arrival, he is loaded – along with hundreds of others –into a train intended for transporting livestock. The train's cars are egregiously overcrowded; people are crushed together in the cattle cars until there is barely room to breathe. Vladek, who still has a thin blanket issued to him by the Nazis, manages to make a hammock for himself above the crowd, next to a small window. This saves his life when, shortly after leaving Gross-Rosen, the train stops, leaving the prisoners trapped inside without food or water. People on the ground begin to die, but Vladek is able to survive by eating snow that has gathered on top of the roof, which he can reach out the window.

The cattle cars, where people are left to die in slow agony –from dehydration, starvation, and suffocation–are particularly potent symbols of Nazi disregard for Jewish life. By herding their prisoners onto trains intended to transport animals, they assert their view that Jews are not really human, but they are more like animals. Vladek is remarkably lucky in this situation: that his thin blanket supports his weight, that the hooks were positioned next to the window, and that the train stopped during a snowfall when he would be able to have a stable water supply. To live through such awful conditions requires near-miraculous luck.

After a week, the Nazis open Vladek's car and allow the passengers to throw out the bodies of the dead. Very few have survived their imprisonment in the cattle car, and once their bodies are gone, those who remain alive have some room to stand and sit. They are relieved. The train goes on its way; more people die, and some lose their minds. The prisoners soon learn that they are going to Dachau, a camp in Germany.

The extremity of the Nazis' abuse puts Vladek and the others in the train in the horrible position of having to be grateful for the deaths of others. They need more space to survive, and each death is a relief because it leaves the car more livable than before.

Vladek, Artie, and Françoise arrive at the supermarket. Vladek intends to return the half-empty boxes of cereal and other partially used groceries that Mala left when she ran off. Artie and Françoise refuse to go with him into the store, insisting they won't help him return half-eaten food. From the car, they watch Vladek argue with the store manager. Françoise is still thinking of the cattle cars, and says she would rather kill herself than endure all the suffering Vladek did. She suggests staying with Vladek a few extra days, but Artie dismisses that idea. Vladek returns to the car with an armload of groceries. Once the store manager heard his story – about "my health, how Mala left me, and how it was in the camps" – he was willing to let Vladek exchange the used food. Artie is extremely embarrassed, but Vladek is content.

This scene presents a triangle of reactions to Vladek's story, which represent the different attitudes younger generations might take toward Holocaust survivors. Françoise is full of reverent sympathy, and wants to show Vladek extra kindness because of what he has lived through. Artie wants to avoid that sense of obligation, and is firm in asserting boundaries between his life and Vladek's. The manager in the grocery store, whom Vladek knowingly manipulates, capitulates as soon as Vladek begins talking about life in the camps – probably trying to end the conversation and avoid delving into thorny moral issues about what society owes Holocaust survivors.

As they drive back to the bungalow, Vladek tells Artie and Françoise about Dachau – a place he describes as being much more miserable and dangerous than Auschwitz. Prisoners are crammed into barracks with nothing to do but wait for death. The straw they sleep on is infested with lice, which spread typhus. In order to claim the small amount of food allotted to them each day, prisoners have to present the guards with a clean shirt, free of lice. This is nearly impossible given the extent of the infestation, and the prisoners became brutal toward one another as a result of their intense hunger.

The guards have knowingly set the prisoners up for failure, giving them no choice but to sleep on lousy straw, and then punishing them for having lice on their clothing. This is partly an excuse to deny prisoners food, but guards have power to do that unilaterally, and do not need the shirt inspection if that is their only purpose. It seems that the objective of the system is to shift blame onto prisoners – to make people believe, on some level, that they deserve to be punished in this way.

In Dachau, Vladek meets a French man. (He has the **head** of a frog.) There are few French people in the camp, and the man has not had anyone to talk with since arriving in the camp. He is overjoyed when he learns that Vladek can speak English – which he can also speak, a little – and the two become friends, meeting every day and talking to pass the time. Since the French man is not Jewish, the Nazis allow him to receive packages through the Red Cross. Whenever his family sends food, the French man shares it with Vladek. By bartering with goods from the food parcels, Vladek manages to acquire two extra shirts, which he and the French man keep clean and free of lice, and present to the guards each day when they go to collect their soup.

The French man is the first friend Vladek has had in the camps since Mandelbaum. The French man's predicament – that he has nobody to talk with, and is going stir-crazy from the isolation –is an interesting parallel to Vladek's situation. Though Vladek has always been able to communicate with the people around him, he has been very emotionally isolated. The effects of this isolation are not obvious in Vladek's stories, and may not be obvious to Vladek at all, but the French man is a reminder of the necessity of human connection.

After a few weeks in Dachau, Vladek contracts typhus. Many other prisoners have died of this disease; each night, when he walks through the crowded barracks to the toilet, he is forced to step over the bodies of other typhus victims who have died. Soon, he is admitted to the camp infirmary. His condition begins to improve. One day, while he is still in the infirmary, a guard orders those who are strong enough to travel to line up outside. The Nazis plan to take some of their sick prisoners to the Swiss border, to exchange them for German war prisoners. Vladek, stunned by his good fortune, presents himself at the gate. He is still very weak, and needs people to help him walk, but he presents himself nonetheless. At the gate, prisoners are loaded onto a train –one intended for passengers, not for livestock as the last train was – which is to take them all to Switzerland.

By this point, Vladek is being swept along on the current of events much bigger than himself. As the war comes to a close, things are changing rapidly, and he has no power to anticipate what is coming next or prepare for it like he has (occasionally) before. The image of him stumbling, weak and unable to support himself, toward the train that is supposed to transport him to Switzerland is a potent summary of his situation. He is physically and psychologically exhausted, and able to move – either literally or metaphorically –only by the grace of chance and other people.

Artie asks what happened to the French man after Vladek left Dachau. Vladek says the French man – he can no longer remember his name – survived and is living in Paris. The two of them exchanged letters for years after the war, he says, but he burned those letters at the same time he burned Anja's diaries. He tried to put all memories of the war out of his mind, Vladek says, until Artie began working on his book.

Vladek's occasional references to the time shortly after Anja's death, when he felt burdened by his memories and tried to purge them from his mind, are reminders of a much darker time in the Spiegelman family, when the traumas of the war and Anja's suicide were much more raw. Though Vladek and Artie don't have a wonderful relationship, their ability to talk about these events is a testament to the progress they have made since Artie was a young man.

Françoise spots a hitchhiker – a black man – by the side of the road. She pulls over to give the man a ride. He thanks her politely as he climbs into the car. Vladek is horrified to find himself sitting in the same car as a "shvartser" (a black person). He rambles to himself in Polish, cursing and saying Françoise has "lost her head," from the moment the man climbs into the back seat until Françoise drops him off at a house up the road. As soon as he gets out of the car, Vladek scrambles to check their bag of groceries; he expects the man has stolen something. Françoise, horrified by Vladek's racism, compares his remarks about the hitchhiker to something a Nazi might say about a Jew. Vladek brushes off this criticism, telling Françoise that Jews and "shvartsers" are not comparable.

Like Artie spraying mosquitoes without any notion of the irony of the situation, Vladek has no sense of the ways in which his remarks perpetuate oppression and the dehumanization of marginalized people. Though Françoise is quick to criticize him, Vladek's comment shows how oppressive ideologies can perpetuate themselves even after things have improved for one targeted group – most institutional oppression is interconnected. Although circumstances have improved for Jewish people since World War II, especially in the US, other groups (like blacks) continue to face similar oppression and discrimination.

PART 2, CHAPTER 4

A few months later, back in the house in Rego Park, Vladek is despondent. He cannot live by himself, he tells Artie – he is too sick, with diabetes and a weak heart – but does not want to go to a retirement home, or hire a live-in nurse. He still wants Françoise and Artie to move in with him, but Artie insists, as he has from the beginning, that this is out of the question. Mala has offered to come back to Vladek in exchange for $100,000. Vladek does not know whether to take her up on this offer, but the prospect distresses him.

After years of refusing to accept the limitations of old age and poor health, Vladek is now becoming acutely aware of his own impending mortality. At this frightening moment, Vladek clings to shared history and personal connections. He rejects the idea of accepting care from a professional who has no special attachment to him, and would prefer even his unhappy arrangement with Mala over such impersonal attention.

Vladek wants Artie's help installing storm windows. Artie promises to help, but asks Vladek to tell him about Anja first. He wants to know what happened to Anja while Vladek was in Dachau. Anja went through Gross-Rosen and through Ravensbrück, another camp, Vladek says. Mancie kept her close and protected her. She was freed before Vladek and went to Sosnowiec, but Vladek knows very little about her life during the time they spent apart.

It seems that Vladek and Anja spoke very little about their experience in the camps after their reunion. This is striking, since Anja, at least, seems to have felt a need to process her experiences – her postwar diaries are testaments to that need. Vladek, who has gone decades without sharing these memories, seems to be the one who enforced silence around the subject, perhaps also suppressing Anja by doing so.

Vladek and the other prisoners on the train –the ones designated for exchange – never reached the Swiss border. They disembark the train and march for hours through the German countryside. After marching for a long time, they are made to stand still and wait. It is during this period of waiting that they learn the news: the war is over. The prisoners rejoice, embracing one another and shouting their happiness. Shortly after the news arrives, the Germans herd the prisoners onto another train – a freight train, whose car is open on the top – and tell them the Americans will be waiting for them in the next town.

The war is over, but the prisoners are still at the mercy of their German captors. They can expect significant changes soon, but they will remain prisoners as long as they are surrounded by armed German soldiers. The end of the war is a joyous event, not because it solves everything, but because it means the Nazi regime cannot last forever – a better future for individuals and for the Jewish people in general now seems possible in a way it has not for years.

When the train arrives in the next town, there are no American troops in sight. The prisoners climb out of the freight car anyway, eager to seize their freedom. They walk in all different directions, many (including Vladek) without a clear idea of where to go. It is not long before German soldiers – different ones than those who put them on the train – begin to round them up again. The soldiers force the prisoners to wait together by the shore of a big lake, and surround them with machine guns to prevent escape. Rumors begin to circulate that the soldiers plan to shoot the prisoners during the night. As he waits, Vladek is surprised to meet Shivek, a man he knew in Sosnowiec before the war. They both feel defeated –after everything they have survived, they are trapped, with nothing to do but wait for the Germans to shoot them. They make plans to stay by the shore of the lake throughout the night, hoping they can swim to safety when the shooting starts. As night falls, people begin to cry and pray as they wait for death.

Vladek and Shivek have not given up on life. Though it may seem as though living is not worth the pain and effort that come with trying to survive in such conditions, their plan to jump into the lake shows that Vladek and Shivek are still willing to struggle for life. Vladek once told Anja that they had to fight to survive until the very last moment – implying that they could not allow their lives to be swallowed up in grief or hopelessness. Victory, for the Nazis, comes only when Jews are not longer willing to resist their own destruction – when they cease to see their lives as being worth the struggle of survival. Though the situation seems hopeless, Vladek and Shivek refuse to concede that point.

When morning comes, the prisoners find that they are all alive –not only that, but the Germans have fled, leaving their guns behind. One man reports that he was lying beside the head officer's tent and heard the man's girlfriend begging him to let the prisoners go, insisting the officer would be punished if he allowed the prisoners to be killed. Vladek is free.

This woman – the officer's girlfriend – saves the lives of dozens of people without ever making an explicit effort to do so. The argument by which she convinces her lover to leave is an appeal to his sense of self-preservation – she might be just as prejudiced against Jews as any Nazi. The lives of all these people are intertwined, and the actions of any one person can have great consequences for others.

Vladek and Shivek head out together, hoping to find food at a nearby farm. Soon, they are captured again. The cycle from the night before repeats itself: they are held in a barn, waiting for death, but find when day breaks that all the German soldiers have fled. Vladek and Shivek decide to find somewhere to hide until the chaos dies down and things are safer. They find an abandoned farmhouse, and the sound of explosions in the distance confirms that the Germans are retreating, blowing up bridges in their wake to prevent enemy troops from following them.

The absurd cycle of capture and release is a testament to the chaos that reigned during the last days of the war. The German army, famous for its discipline, has become totally disorganized and anarchical. Soldiers are not able to follow through on the things they start, because the larger and better-supplied Allied forces are constantly closing in on them.

Exploring the farm, Vladek and Shivek find milk –which they immediately drink in excessive amounts – as well as cows and chickens. Shivek, who grew up on a farm, kills chickens for them to eat. In the house, they exchange their camp uniforms for civilian clothes left behind by the people who abandoned the house. After months of near-starvation, the rich food makes Vladek and Shivek very sick, and they huddle in the house for several days, "in bad shape."

Even after the Germans have retreated, Vladek and Shivek's fates are not certain. Privation, sickness, and hard labor have left their bodies weak and very vulnerable. Though the most obvious threat is gone, the two men are still in a precarious situation.

After a few days, American troops arrive at the farm. The German troops – Americans use the derogatory term "Krauts" –have been defeated and driven out of the area. Americans plan to use the farm as part of their base camp, but agree to let Vladek and Shivek stay in the house as long as they help with cleaning and upkeep. The soldiers like Vladek especially, since he speaks English. They nickname him "Willie" (an Anglicization of his full name, Wladyslaw) and give him gifts of chocolate and other luxuries.

The American troops are healthy and hearty, seemingly more carefree than anyone Vladek has met in a long time. The sight of so many relaxed people – Vladek among them, to some extent – highlights just how exhaustingly tense the war has been. Along with their lives and their freedom, Nazis robbed their victims of peace of mind.

Vladek insists it is time to install the storm windows, but tells Artie he wants to give him something before he forgets about it. From a shelf in the living room, he takes a box filled with **photographs** left over from Poland. The two of them sit on the couch and sort through the photographs, Vladek describing the fate of each person pictured. They look at photographs of Herman, Anja's oldest brother, who survived the war but was killed in a hit-and-run car accident in 1964 – his death left Anja distraught, Vladek says, and her suicide followed a few years later. There are pictures of Lolek, who survived Auschwitz and became "an engineer and a big-shot college professor." Vladek tells Artie about Josef, Anja's brother who died by suicide shortly after the beginning of the war; and about Levek, another of Anja's brothers, who escaped to Russia at the start of the war, then returned to Poland and died in Warsaw.

These photographs evoke both the time before the war and the time after. Vladek's stories about Herman, Lolek, Josef, and Levek focus on aspects of the family history that have no relationship to the Holocaust, including significant tragedies that happened outside the camps and ghettos. The history of the Zylberberg family is not completely circumscribed by the Holocaust. The family experienced losses that had nothing to do with Hitler, and they bore witness to triumphs – like Lolek's professional success – as well. Though the Holocaust was a paradigm-shifting event and changed the lives of its victims in countless ways, history did not stop with the end of the war.

Artie asks Vladek about the Spiegelman side of the family – his own parents and siblings. Vladek names them, one by one: his father and Fela were taken in the stadium selection in Sosnowiec; his sisters Zosha and Yadja were with him in the ghetto, but were later killed in Auschwitz with their children; his brothers Marcus and Moses were taken to a camp called Blechamer near the beginning of the war, and the man who told Vladek that they had died refused to tell him how it happened; his brothers Leon and Pinek spent the war hiding with a family of Russian Jews, but Leon died of appendicitis. Pinek survived, married one of the women who helped keep him safe during the war, and lives in Israel. There are no **photographs** of his dead family members, Vladek says – he has nothing whatsoever to remember them by.

Vladek has spoken very little about his own family, but this moment illuminates a whole other aspect of his experience that Artie has not even begun to explore. It is not clear what role any of these newly-introduced people played in Vladek's life, either during the Holocaust or before it, and his omission of these people from his narrative may have been a deliberate misrepresentation or a reflection of some rift in the Spiegelman family. Whatever the reason behind them, these revelations make it clear that Vladek's story is far from complete – that the real narrative is more sprawling and complex than could ever be captured in a single story.

As they talk, Vladek's chest begins to pain him. He takes a nitroglycerin pill and lies down on the couch. He tells Artie that he is too tired to install the storm windows, and asks whether Artie can come back to Queens tomorrow to help him. This is impossible, Artie says – he's too busy to make the trip to Queens twice in two days. Vladek will have to wait a few more days for his storm windows, Artie tells him. Vladek groans. Artie looks suddenly contrite, and apologizes to Vladek for making him talk so much. Vladek tells Artie not to worry, calling him "darling" and insisting it is always a pleasure when he visits.

Artie and Vladek have gotten much better at resolving their conflicts since they began the long process of conducting interviews. Artie's willingness to apologize, and Vladek's warm, loving reply are both signs that their relationship has improved, even though the many problems and unspoken tensions between them have not necessarily been resolved. Their dozens of hours together have brought Artie and Vladek closer – and though they may have too much emotional baggage to become truly close, that process seems to have made them both better people.

PART 2, CHAPTER 5

It is winter. Artie is listening to the recordings of his interviews with Vladek – to the part of the story when Tosha poisons herself, Richieu, and the other children –when Françoise comes in to offer him a cup of coffee. Artie remarks on his frustration with the fact that Vladek left to spend the winter in Florida before they could finish their interviews. They have not heard from him since he left. Artie asks, a little helplessly, how he is supposed to take care of Vladek, since he and Françoise cannot and will not move to Rego Park. Françoise asks whether Vladek could move into their apartment. Artie instantly dismisses the idea. Françoise becomes annoyed. Artie complains that she is making him feel guilty, and she leaves the room in a huff.

Françoise is understanding about Vladek's predicament, and she is doing her best to make the situation easy on Artie by making it clear that she is willing to welcome Vladek into their home and cooperate in other ways if need be. Her open-mindedness, though, makes the situation harder on Artie. He is viscerally against the idea of having Vladek live with them. This opposition is a source of guilt in itself, but Françoise's flexibility makes Artie seem all the more selfish and unreasonable by contrast.

Artie goes back to his recordings, but the phone rings as soon as he turns on the tape player. It is Mala. She and Vladek have been living together in Florida, she tells him, and Vladek has been spending an unsettling amount of time in the hospital. Though he instructed her not to worry Artie, he has just been admitted to the hospital for the third time in a month because of water in his lungs, and Mala fears the situation is serious. As they talk, Vladek appears in the room with Mala – he has checked himself out of the hospital against the advice of his doctors. He wants to return to New York, he tells her, so he can be near Artie in case something happens. Mala begs Artie to come to Florida and help her.

Vladek has been out of touch with Artie and Françoise since going to Florida, and Artie has apparently been satisfied with that arrangement. Possibly, after spending so much time helping Vladek adjust to life without Mala, he is grateful to have a break from worrying about his father. Mala's call reminds Artie that such breaks are never really possible when one is caring for somebody as fragile as Vladek. Being a son can be a full-time occupation when a father is nearing the end of his life.

Artie arrives in Florida to find Vladek has exhausted himself with packing. While Vladek rests in bed, Artie asks Mala about their apparent reconciliation. She got a call from the hospital and went to visit him, Mala says. Though she swore she'd never see Vladek again, he somehow talked her into coming back. Mala is obviously unhappy with the situation, but says she feels trapped – Vladek is so sick and dependent, she cannot bring herself to leave him alone.

Artie has allowed Mala to become trapped by refusing to step in and help his father. His resistance to the responsibility of caring for his father has created a need that Mala feels obligated to fill, and for that reason, Artie is just as much to blame as Vladek is for her entrapment.

The next morning, before catching their flight back to New York, Vladek and Artie sit outside Vladek's Florida condo and watch planes leaving the nearby airport. Spotting a tiny airplane in the sky, Vladek tells Artie that it was a plane very like that one that took him from Poland to Sweden in 1946, after the war had ended. There was nothing left for him and Anja in Poland, but the Americans had imposed quotas for refugees, and it was impossible to immigrate directly to the United States. Herman – Anja's only surviving sibling, who had been visiting New York with his wife when the war broke out and was still living in the United States after it ended – helped them organize visas to immigrate to Sweden while they waiting for a chance to move to the United States.

At the end of the war, millions of people – Jewish and non-Jewish alike – were displaced from their homes and left with almost nothing. The last weeks of the fighting, especially, left countless homes destroyed, along with infrastructure such as bridges and roads that made daily life possible. In some cases, entire cities were left uninhabitable. The Spiegelmans' inability to gain entrance into the United States is a testament to the enormous needs of the postwar refugee population around that time. People had to go wherever the local and national government could support them.

In Sweden, Vladek works as a manual laborer, as do most other refugees. Eager to make a better living, he visits a department store – one whose owner has already assured him that there are no jobs available in sales – and asks for a chance to prove himself as a salesman. The store's owner tasks Vladek with selling out their inventory of knee-length stocking, which have gone out of fashion and have been impossible to sell. When Vladek manages to sell the entire stock, the owner hires him. Eventually, Vladek becomes a partner in the business. He and Anja are well off in Sweden, and he is sorry to leave when their American visas come through.

Vladek would happily have stayed in Sweden and enjoyed the life he and Anja built for themselves there. He goes to the United States because Anja needs to be near her brother. His comment from an earlier conversation with Artie, that a part of Anja died after Herman was killed in a hit-and-run, feels especially significant at this moment. Connections with her family are critical sources of meaning in Anja's life, and she needs her brother nearby to help her recover from all she has experienced.


After a long, problem-plagued flight from Florida, Vladek, Artie, and Mala arrive at the airport in New York. Françoise takes Mala home, while Artie takes Vladek to the hospital. The doctors run extensive tests to check Vladek's heart and the water in his lungs, then after several hours release him into Artie's care.

Vladek's situation is serious, but the fact that the doctor feels comfortable sending him home shows he isn't on the brink of death. In some ways, this makes Vladek's feebleness sadder and more sympathetic. After years of robustness and independence, Vladek now may face a long, difficult decline.


About a month after returning from Florida, Artie goes to Queens to visit Vladek. Upon arriving, he learns from Mala that they are planning to sell the house and move full-time to Florida. Artie is surprised that Vladek would agree to such a thing, but Mala tells him Vladek has been "listless" since returning from Florida – less adamant about having things his way.

Artie and Mala have both complained throughout the novel about Vladek's stubbornness, but now that sickness and fragility have made him passive, they both seem sad about the change. Vladek is easier to live with, but he is no longer the same man.


Vladek is resting in bed. The **photograph** of Richieu hangs on the wall above the dresser. Artie comes into the room and sits beside his father. Vladek is pleased to see Artie, but surprised –he has forgotten about their phone conversation the day before, when Artie said he would be visiting. Artie has his tape recorder. If Vladek feels well enough, he says, they can tape the end of his story.

Vladek's memory is fading along with his health, and the story Artie is trying to collect appears even more precious in the face of that distressing reality. When Vladek dies, or begins to forget the things that have happened to him, his important testimony will be gone as well.




At the end of the war, there are enormous numbers of refugees. Vladek and Shivek, who are still living with the American troops on the abandoned farm where they waited out the end of the war, receive orders to move to a displaced persons camp in another part of Germany. Life in the displaced persons camp is easy and peaceful, but some time after arriving, Vladek suffers a relapse of typhus. American doctors treat him, but warn him that something else is wrong. Vladek will later learn that he has developed diabetes.

Though he is stronger and better nourished than he has been in a long time, Vladek's body still bears evidence of all he has endured. The relapse of typhus is a meaningful symbol of the way his war experience has become embedded inside him. It is impossible to notice, most of the time, that Vladek has had typhus – but then the illness returns and leaves him just as vulnerable as it did the first time. Memories work in much the same way: they stay buried for years or decades, but are just as alive when one revisits them as they were when they were first formed.

Vladek and Shivek leave the displaced persons camp to visit the German town of Hannover, where Shivek's brother lives with his wife, a German woman who hid him throughout the war. Their children have their father's mouse ears and their mother's cat stripes. Shivek's sister-in-law asks Vladek whether he has been able to find any of his own family. Vladek has been searching for news of Anja, but assumes she has died – she was so thin and weak in Auschwitz, he tells the German woman, that it seems impossible she should have survived the evacuation.

Shivek's nieces and nephews are a sign that reconciliation between Jews and the rest of the world – the populations that, by and large, turned their back on the Jews during the Holocaust – is possible. The German woman is a reminder that empathy and generosity were not eradicated in the war. Like Mrs. Motonowa and many others who risked their lives to help Jews survive, she offers hope that Jewish people might find acceptance even in those communities that once ostracized them. These promising omens then contrast with Vladek's certainty that Anja has died. Though the new generation represents hope for the future, he has no hope of rebuilding his life with Anja.

Shivek's sister-in-law recommends Vladek visit the displaced persons camp in Belsen, a nearby town. In the camp, Vladek meets two women from Sosnowiec, Jenny and Sonia. Conditions in Sosnowiec are still miserable and dangerous for Jews, the women report. They tell Vladek the story of one Jewish man, Mr. Gelber, who tried to reclaim his family's bakery. The bakery had been taken over by Poles, and when he arrived they beat him and hanged him in the barn behind his family's house.

After the war, there is so little left in the way of commerce and resources that the people of Poland are at each other's throats in the same way they were during the Nazi regime. Poles who have seized Jewish businesses or property are scrambling to hold onto them, knowing there is little else to sustain them if the original owners regain control. All this desperation, coupled with anti-Semitism that has only grown stronger with the war, makes Poland an exceptionally dangerous place for Jews even after the Nazis are gone.

Vladek asks whether the women have heard any news of Anja. He is amazed to learn that she is alive and living in Sosnowiec. The Poles leave her alone, since she never tried to reclaim her family's property, and she visits the local Jewish organization every day hoping to hear news of Vladek. After their reunion, Vladek says, he would learn that Anja visited a Roma fortuneteller during this time, to ask about her future – a superstitious but comforting exercise. The Roma woman promised Anja that her husband, though he had been very ill, was alive and coming home to her, and that she would have a new life and a second son in a faraway country.

Many people dismiss things like fortune telling and dream visions as mere superstition, but like Vladek's dream about Parshas Truma, the prophecy Anja hears from the Roma woman turns out to be entirely true. Whether these brushes with supernatural power were authentic is for the reader to judge, but they were certainly important to Vladek and Anja, as they provided a foundation for hope and gave them courage that allowed them to endure in difficult times.

As soon as he learns Anja is alive, Vladek sends her a letter promising to return home immediately. In this letter, he includes a **photograph** of himself wearing a concentration camp uniform. In his travels through Germany, he tells Artie, he once came across a place that had a clean camp uniform, which people could wear for "souvenir photos." Anja kept the photograph for the rest of her life, Vladek says. He tells Artie that he still has the photograph in his desk, and Artie runs immediately into the den to find it.

The decision to take a souvenir photo in a camp uniform seems so absurd and strange as to be almost disrespectful – not only to the people who died in those camps, but even to those survivors, like Vladek, who are posing for the photographs. There is no way to make sense of the photograph – to say, for instance, that a certain amount of humor was necessary to go on after the war seems like an inadequate truism –and so it just exists, one of the many impossible-to-explain realities of the Holocaust and the years that followed.

Vladek trades his belongings to buy gifts for Anja: dresses and a fur coat. Shivek decides to return to Poland with him, but they become separated early in the journey. Vladek travels alone for three or four weeks before arriving in Sosnowiec. He arrives in the offices of the local Jewish organization, and someone rushes out to find Anja. The two of them are reunited, amidst a flood of tears and joyful embraces. After that, Vladek says, that is nothing more to tell: he and Anja were very happy, and they lived "happy, happy ever after."

Vladek's memories of his reunion with Anja are moving, but they are also dishonest to some extent. Though Artie has not said much about the way their marriage developed over the next twenty-plus years, the fact of her suicide undermines Vladek's claim that they lived "happy, happy ever after." As beautiful as this reunion is, it is not the neat resolution that Vladek imagines.

Vladek is reclining in bed. He asks Artie to stop the tape recorder, and rolls over onto his side as though preparing to go to sleep. "I'm tired from talking, Richieu," he says, "and it's enough stories for now."

Vladek is exhausted and, more generally, may be losing some of his mental agility. His confusion at this moment is a sign that Vladek is not as firmly oriented in the present as he has been at other points in his life, but the mistake also shows that Richieu is just as real and important to Vladek as his living son Artie. Richieu has not left his father's mind even though he has been dead for years. The living give the dead second lives in their memories.

The final image of the book is that of a headstone. The surname "Spiegelman" is engraved at the top, along with a Star of David. Beneath it, side by side, are the names "Vladek" and "Anja," along with the dates of their respective births and deaths. An eternal flame – a lamp designed to burn day and night without going out –sits at the base of the headstone. Just beneath the image is Artie's signature and the dates on which he began and completed *Maus*: 1978-1991.

After decades of separation, Vladek and Anja are finally reunited in death. Like Vladek's memory of that first reunion with Anja, Artie's depiction of the peaceful grave site erases the pain and complexity that persists after Vladek's death. Also like Vladek's memory, which works to keep the good moments alive while allowing the bad times to fade away, this last tribute to his parents is Artie's gesture of love and forgiveness. Though Artie and his reader both know that his complicated relationships with his parents are not resolved entirely by death, the gesture itself is a sign that something has moved forward, and that love persists in spite of all the complications and difficulties the family faced in life.

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