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## Visualizing the Unspeakable: Graphic Novels and the Holocaust

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# Visualizing the Unspeakable: Graphic Novels and the Holocaust

*Madilyn Pflueger*

**S**ince the Holocaust (or *Shoah*), writers have struggled to accurately portray the trauma and enormity of the Nazi genocide through writing. The horrors experienced and witnessed, as well as the atrocities committed, are often felt to be indescribable to one who has not in some way been affected by them. In the words of the late Elie Wiesel:

Language had been corrupted to the point that it had to be invented anew and purified. ... [The artist] has to remember the past, knowing all the while that what he has to say will never be told. What he hopes to transmit can never be transmitted. All he can possibly hope to achieve is to communicate the impossibility of communication.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite its ineffability, the Holocaust has been documented meticulously by those loath to see its memory fade into the shadows of human history. Many writers assert that the Holocaust cannot be described, and yet this vast corpus of literature consists of “yards of writing that attempt to overcome the inadequacy of language in representing moral enormity at the same time that they

1 Quoted in Susan E. Shapiro, “Failing Speech: Post-Holocaust Writing and the Discourse of Postmodernism,” *Semina* 40 (1987): 65–66.

assert its presence.”<sup>2</sup> As time moves on, we draw further and further away from the *Shoah*. With the births of the second, third, and now fourth generations of Holocaust survivors, literature has moved from memoirs into post-Holocaust works. With the new realm of post-Holocaust literature comes a variety of genres through which post-Holocaust writers seek to express themselves. In the past thirty years, the genre of the graphic novel has, despite its reputation as juvenile, embedded itself within the corpus of literature, reaching wider audiences and communicating the enormity of the Nazi genocide through the intersection of text and art.

As in any other genre regarding the Holocaust, authors and illustrators of graphic novels must somehow convey their inability to describe an inexplicable event. For instance, in Art Spiegelman’s *Maus II, A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*, the protagonist Artie discusses how to portray a survivor’s story with his therapist, Pavel, quoting Samuel Beckett and revealing the author’s inner turmoil: “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness.”<sup>3</sup> Spiegelman uses this quote to reveal to his readers that words alone are redundant. In post-Holocaust literature, the simplicity of speech cannot convey the depth of utter despair felt not only by the survivors (real and fictitious) of the *Shoah*, but also by the authors and illustrators taking on this tremendous task. While Beckett and, to some extent, Spiegelman feel that language is inadequate, Susan Shapiro posits that it is also dangerous, and she points out that “[speech] may include too much and be too explicit, thus compromising that which is spoken.”<sup>4</sup> This inadequacy and danger culminate in an anxiety haunted by the chance of inaccuracy at the author’s attempt to reveal the experience of the *Shoah*. Speech makes reality too real and solidifies the abstract into the fact, which is perilous when the constant fear of *getting it wrong* hangs over the genre of the Holocaust narrative. Scholars have taken to referring to the instability and disjunction portrayed in Holocaust literature as rupture, the irreconcilable fragmentation of memory and the lack of language to express that memory. According to Victoria Aarons, for example, “Holocaust narratives committed to responsible representation create the conditions for discomfort and unease; they create a language and a landscape of rupture, of discursive disequilibrium and of narrative disjunction.”<sup>5</sup> Graphic novels face the same struggle as literary novels— “[t]he paradox of ‘telling’ the unspeak-

2 Berel Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 18.

3 Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996), 205/6.

4 Shapiro, “Failing Speech,” 67.

5 Victoria Aarons, “A Genre of Rupture: The Literary Language of the Holocaust,” in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Literature*, ed. Jenni Adams (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 29.

able.”<sup>6</sup> In this case, the graphic novel takes on the new dimension of showing through its use of images as well as text. Graphic novels about the Holocaust utilize both rhetorical and visual devices to address the paradox of explaining the inexplicable. Poems, short stories, and novels all employ the trope of omission to communicate loss and the gravity of a moment through omitting information. Artists exploit the trope of contrast to invoke visceral responses among their audiences and to emphasize a piece’s meaning. The tropes of omission and contrast emphasize the rupture that permeates Holocaust literature by creating an affective dimension to complement text-only narratives.

The trope of omission is the very act of using silence to describe the indescribable. Through its purposeful neglect of information, it seeks to convey the despair accompanying trauma. The technique of contrast, however, does not shy away from revealing information but rather relies on drawing connections between two ideas. In post-Holocaust literature, where the deaths of survivors severely limit memory, omission is a useful means of indicating the inexplicable for an author or illustrator who has no direct experience with the Holocaust. Similarly, contrast reveals themes of power, helplessness, and chaos, skirting past explanations for which these same authors and illustrators cannot give. The tropes, in this case, speak for their creators to assuage some of the anxiety that surrounds communicating the gravity of trauma. In graphic novels, the combination of art and text work in tandem to utilize these tropes. While the art reveals power and struggle through contrast, the text reveals rupture and emotion through omission.

Creators of graphic novels omit information in various ways—hiding scenes, erasing identities, and avoiding language altogether. In Croci’s *Auschwitz*, Kazik witnesses horrors unimaginable as a *Sonderkommando*, the unit of prisoners responsible for maintaining the gas chambers. Kazik, when ordered to clean out a gas chamber, sees horrors the reader cannot possibly imagine. Croci purposefully hides the images behind billowing grey smoke. The ragged-edged speech blocks hover over the ominous smoke, describing the horrors that lie beyond the door: “Where the Zyklon had been poured, there was nothing ... the people were injured, filthy, bloody, bleeding from their ears and noses ... some lay crumpled on the ground, crushed beyond all recognition by the weight of others. ... Children with their heads split open, vomit everywhere ... Menstrual blood, too.”<sup>7</sup> While the words on their own incite the reader’s imagination toward grotesque depictions of torture, connecting the words with the visual of the gas adds a new dimension to the experience, an anticipation of what lies beyond the gas, the extent of that torture. What Kazik

6 Aaronson, “The Certainties of History and the Uncertainties of Representation in Post-Holocaust Writing,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 31 (2012): 135.

7 Pascal Croci, *Auschwitz* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), 42-3.

is seeing *cannot* be shown, on account of how horrific it is. Furthermore, the dark, opaque clouds force the reader to wait with increasing levels of anxiety until Kazik opens the doors and is greeted by a sea of bodies, faces caught in agonized expressions. Still, much of the picture remains blurred, with only the faces and torsos of the dead distinguishable. The remaining smoke implies that the picture goes on, that the bodies never end. Without the art, the descriptions would have some effect on the reader, but the intense anticipation and anxiety evoked by the smoke would not be present.

Croci's gas chamber panels are replicated, apparently unintentionally, by Greg Pak and Carmine Di Giandomenico in *X-Men: Magneto Testament*. Here, Max Eisenhardt, a *Sonderkommando* like Kazik, must sort through all the belongings of the Jews that go through the gas chambers. In an eerie, breathtaking moment, he looks into a room at a mountain of glasses, a replica of the piles of belongings and hair at Auschwitz.<sup>8</sup> The scene, like its real-life counterpart, reminds the reader that these thousands of glasses no longer have wearers. With Max facing away from the reader, the audience experiences the panels from his point of view. We feel everything he feels—the despair that this is being done to his people, the overwhelming notion of just how many are dying, the powerlessness to stop the deaths. The next two pages are completely black except for the speech balloons, which detail the horrors Max witnesses as a *Sonderkommando* over two years, while he life consists of mountains of glasses belonging to the dead.<sup>9</sup> These panels mirror Croci's gas chambers from Auschwitz. Instead of projecting anxiety, however, the black panels exude only a sense of despair. Through these two pages, the weight of that burden transfers from Max's shoulders onto those of the audience.

Joe Kubert also utilizes the hidden gas chamber in *Yossel: April 19, 1943*.<sup>10</sup> As in *Auschwitz*, Kubert does not show what actually occurred within the gas chamber. Instead, he draws the rabbi's face peering into a peephole on the door, mouth gaping: "I ran to look through the peep hole in the door. How can I describe what I saw? People were being gassed. Murdered. Some clawed at the door. At the walls. They crawled over one another in an attempt to breathe. It was horrific. Revolting. But, I could not tear my eyes away from that awful scene."<sup>11</sup> Like the rabbi, we too cannot tear our eyes away, but we are not witnesses, not in the way that he is. We can only recognize that whatever it is Max, Kazik, and the rabbi see, it is too grotesque for a flat picture on a page to properly do it justice. The combination of text without direct illustration of

8 Pak and Di Giandomenico, *X-Men: Magneto Testament* (New York: Marvel, 2008), 90-91.

9 Pak and Di Giandomenico, *X-Men*, 92-93.

10 Joe Kubert, *Yossel: April 19, 1943* (New York: Publishers Group West, 2003).

11 Kubert, *Yossel*, 58/2.

the descriptions speaks to the rupture throughout the Holocaust literary genre. When illustrations are present, the audience expects the drawings to match the text. Croci's and Kubert's gas chamber panels, along with Pak's and Di Giandomenico's time skip, obviously refuse to adhere to the norm. Thus, all three graphic novels engage in the genre's rupture that echoes the very experience of the Holocaust itself.

Obstruction is not the only means of employing omission—people are just as susceptible to the trope through the deliberate loss of their identities. In *Maus*, when Artie, Spiegelman's narrative alter ego, first starts interviewing his father, Vladek, the older man takes the opportunity to use his exercise bike to peddle. Halfway down the page, a panel shows only Vladek's torso and his arm, the numbers of his tattoo standing out as Artie looks on in the background.<sup>12</sup> The image serves as a reminder of the purpose of the tattoo in the first place: the Nazis' systematic dehumanization of their victims by taking away their identity. Without Vladek's face in the picture, Spiegelman reduces him to a body and a singular number, an echo of the Nazis' strategy in 1944. Obstruction of identity, to pay homage to Holocaust victims, is a constant theme throughout *Maus*. In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman provides his own commentary on his decisions in portraying different traumatic experiences. In a specific moment, in Srodula, Vladek recounts how someone told him about German soldiers swinging children against a wall to stop them from screaming. In the panel, Spiegelman draws the suggestion of a swing, along with a child's legs and torso and a blood splat on the wall, rather than the whole gruesome scene.<sup>13</sup> According to Spiegelman, he chose to draw a suggestion instead of reality as a means of respecting the blurred lines between fictional mice and the suffering of literal men. The moment happened outside the world of fiction, and to reduce that to one panel in a cartoon could not properly portray the trauma of the moment. A dead prisoner in Auschwitz gets the same treatment. When Vladek contemplates how his friend Mendelbaum died, the speech block covers Mendelbaum's face and half his torso.<sup>14</sup> Again, to reduce Mendelbaum's death, especially in the context of his position at the mercy of Nazis, to a cartoon moment would be an injustice. As such, only part of Mendelbaum's body is visible, but his death is all the more real due to the censoring.

While in *Maus* the omission of personhood works both to respect the sobriety of the Holocaust and to make the reader aware of that sobriety, Martin Lemelman obstructs facial features in *Mendel's Daughter* as a means of emphasizing the deaths of each person.<sup>15</sup> Gusta's father's first wife, Chanah, died giv-

12 Spiegelman, *Complete Maus*, 14/5.

13 Spiegelman, *Complete Maus*, 110/6.

14 Spiegelman, *Complete Maus*, 195/3.

15 Martin Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

ing birth to Gusta's half-brother, Chunah (named for his mother). The image in which Lemelman divulges this detail of his family's history displays Chanah, eyes closed, as a hand covered by Chunah's picture descends over her face.<sup>16</sup> The hand, like the other ominous hands in the novel, implies a divine figure—an implication heightened by the *Unetaneh Tokef*—a prayer recited on the Jewish high holy days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in which the Divine decides who will live and die in the upcoming year.<sup>17</sup> Chunah's birth erases Chanah, the hand drawn over her face obscuring her both from view and history. The hand of the Divine does not stop with Chanah, though: on the following page, another hand holds the pictures of Gusta's mother and father in its palm.<sup>18</sup> Neither survive the *Shoah*. Out of Gusta's immediate and extended family, only she and three siblings survive. After the war, the four make one final trip to their childhood home and eat dinner there, shown in a panel that mimics its twin earlier in the novel.<sup>19</sup> Here, though, half the family (the half the Nazis murdered) has been erased—literally.<sup>20</sup> That erasure is an explicit omission of the dead and all the more poignant for its lack of statement. The children do not speak of their family's loss, but Lemelman ensures the audience understands that loss is felt. Furthermore, at the very end of the novel, Lemelman pays tribute to the parents and siblings killed in the war. Each picture, though, features a hand over the face of the dead relative.<sup>21</sup> Just like with Chanah's death and the deaths of Gusta's parents, the hand of the Divine erases each face from the narrative. However, the very presence of a Divine suggests the hope that Gusta's family is somewhere better than the hell they experienced on Earth, a suggestion that words could not hope to convey in a manner as succinct as the art does.

Lemelman's dead offer the promise of hope, while other creators insist, through the protagonists' avoidance of speech, that hope is futile. Though Yossel, through the illustrations on the page, artistically recognizes the Nazis moving into his life, he makes no textual mention of it at first. Yet on the pages where he draws his family together, he also features images of the Nazis hanging discriminatory laws and rounding up faceless masses of Jews. Despite the close proximity of the drawings, however, Yossel makes no mention of the roundups. He simply continues to show his family discussing his drawing habits and contemplating leaving Poland. This omission of information, of delving into descriptions of what the Nazis are doing, reveals a tension that otherwise

16 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 33.

17 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 55.

18 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 34/1.

19 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 13/1.

20 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 186/2.

21 Lemelman, *Mendel's Daughter*, 217.

would not exist. The drawings create a sense of urgency that Yossel's family must leave immediately, though unfortunately this is no longer possible. They also emphasize the ability of the Nazis possess to be everywhere at once. The very last page of *Yossel* features nothing but a blank, grimy piece of paper. Given that it once belonged to Yossel, whom the Nazis just shot, the paper implies that Yossel, and his future, have been erased.<sup>22</sup> There is no room for hope in Yossel's world. With the arrival of the *Wehrmacht* in Warsaw, all chance at survival is wiped out. Yossel is aware of this at the beginning of the novel, when Mordecai leads the resistance into the sewers, and Yossel dies knowing that his fate is inevitable. The panel does not need words to convey the hopelessness of Yossel's situation, and the blank page of drawing paper is more than sufficient.

Rutu Modan also utilizes this strategy of avoiding language in *The Property* to portray the pain Regina feels at returning to her childhood home.<sup>23</sup> Modan employs flashbacks in her story to depict Regina's experience back in Warsaw for the first time after decades. When visiting her old home, now a restaurant, Regina pokes around, stepping into a small room only to see the shadow of her old bathroom, a tear dripping down her cheek.<sup>24</sup> The whole page, all seven panels, lacks words, simply following Regina as she reacquaints herself with the space. The lack of words speaks multitudes for what Regina is feeling: she is speechless and lost in painful memory.

Omission carries with it the heaviness of the information that it lacks, relying on succinct emotional affectation rather than textual descriptions. Whether the creator uses the trope by obscuring the grotesque to convey trauma, destroying identity to reveal the extent of Nazi power, or avoiding language to communicate hopelessness and loss, there is only one purpose: to elicit a visceral emotional response to the scene. The art in the panels aids the text in its efficiency to affect the reader while contributing to the rupture of the genre, specifically in how the art and the text do not match. Just like the trope of omission, contrast relies on the relationship between art and text to reveal the power of the Nazi regime and the hopeless struggle of their victims without explicitly defining such themes. Instead, the emphasis of contrast urges the audience to pay closer attention to the panels, to reach the realization of power and struggle by way of shocking imagery.

While the majority of Croci's panels are placed on a white background, when the transport arrives at Auschwitz he purposefully switches to a black one.<sup>25</sup> The darkness emphasizes the chaos of the Jews, desperate to stay with their friends, families, and loved ones. When an inmate attempts to save a

22 Kubert, *Yossel*, 121/1.

23 Rutu Modan, *The Property* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2013).

24 Modan, *Property*, 53/5.

25 Croci, *Auschwitz*, 8-9.

woman's life by passing her infant off to an old woman, the mother raises a fuss and a Nazi shoots the inmate, child still in his hands.<sup>26</sup> The black background makes the whites of everyone's eyes all the more stark, particularly as their faces display the horror the onlookers feel while they witness the prisoner's murder. Miriam Katin also utilizes this contrast between black and white in *We Are on Our Own* to emphasize the absolute power of the Nazis.<sup>27</sup> Katin starts her novel with the beginning of creation: light and darkness. Her mother, Esther, reads to her from Genesis. Slowly, the Hebrew on the page of the book comes into view: first, a black oval that takes up most of the page, then the suggestion of an aleph, followed by the Hebrew slowly shrinking until it fits on a page, and finally little Miriam and her mother reading together.<sup>28</sup> In between the panels reads: "and God said: let there be light. And there was light... And it was good."<sup>29</sup> The following page mimics this format, but instead of the images reducing in size, they expand. Through a window, in the first panel, the city is visible. Gradually, in each panel, a red Nazi flag comes into view, until nothing but the black and white of the Swastika is visible, taking up the whole window.<sup>30</sup> Between these panels the text reads: "And then one day, God replaced the light with the darkness."<sup>31</sup> This corruption of the Torah echoes the Nazis' corruption of Europe and the destruction of the European Jewish people. The mimicry says what the words cannot: yes, the Nazis are the darkness, but they are more than that. Their darkness is an all-encompassing one that rivals the power of the Divine itself. In comparing the holy to the profane, the Torah experiences a rupture and undergoes its own destruction under the Nazi regime, just like any human survivor.

Just as the contrast between black and white reveals the chaos between Nazi power and the victims' struggle, so too does emphasis. Early on in Katin's book, little Miriam watches as Esther burns all the paper that they own, erasing their presence from the apartment. Seeing her mother burn these things, little Miriam assumes her mother is burning the Divine as the religious texts go into the fire.<sup>32</sup> As a toddler, she does not understand that by burning the papers, Esther is saving them. All Miriam thinks is that Esther is burning God. At the very end of the novel, nothing has disabused Miriam of this notion. As she plays under the table with dolls, remembering her experience during the war,

26 Croci, *Auschwitz*, 9/6.

27 Miriam Katin, *We Are on Our Own: A Memoir by Miriam Katin* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2006).

28 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 4/1-5.

29 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 4.

30 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 5/1-6.

31 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 5.

32 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 23/4.

she thinks “and what if mommy burned that God after all?”<sup>33</sup> The repetition of the Divine’s lack of presence emphasizes Miriam’s hopelessness in the face of the Nazi regime. Even at the end of the novel, though the Russians have driven the Nazis out, little Miriam, haunted by her memories, is still under their power. Another little girl, Marianne, experiences the same daunting desperation in *Goodbye Marianne*.<sup>34</sup> Watts and Shoemaker maintain a motif of constant watching that speaks to the absolute power of the Nazis. The image of several Nazi flags hanging off a building, blowing in the breeze, appears on multiple pages.<sup>35</sup> In all but the last two of these panels, Marianne is alone beneath the flags. Compared to their surroundings, the flags are dark and foreboding, and their number overwhelms Marianne. Though older than Miriam, Marianne is still a young girl, and the repetition of the Nazis’ domination emphasizes her lack of strength. The Nazis infiltrated her life, disrupting it by terrifying her and breaking apart her family. Though the novel ends on a positive note, with Marianne shipped off to Britain, nothing suggests a threat to the Nazi regime. For all intents and purposes the Nazis are still at large in Germany, successfully rupturing Marianne’s family and separating her from her parents, as well as her parents from each other, possibly forever.

The Nazi regime corrupts everything it touches, and creators of graphic novels depict that corruption in a variety of ways, from rupturing of the family dynamic to defiling of light imagery with dark. In *Hidden*, Dounia faces a foreboding darkness and the terror of Nazi power.<sup>36</sup> When the Nazis storm her house in the middle of the night, Dounia hides behind a false panel in the dresser at the insistence of her parents, curled in a fetal position. The panel of Dounia curled up like a fetus is shrouded in darkness. She does not truly understand what is going on and she can only make out noises. It is obvious she is afraid. Her position and the darkness invoke images of the womb, but unlike the womb, there is no safety here. In Hebrew, the words for womb (*rachem*) and compassion (*rachmones*) share a root. Thus, in Jewish ethical thought, the compassionate embrace of others is likened to the safety a fetus experiences in its mother’s womb. By contrasting the protective association between a child and its mother’s womb along with the sheer terror induced by the Nazis, the panel suggests the precariousness of Dounia’s situation and the absolute fear she feels. Furthermore, the Nazi presence corrupts the safety to which the womb imagery alludes, creating another rupture. As the Nazis take Dounia’s parents

33 Katin, *We Are on Our Own*, 122.

34 Irene N. Watts and Marianne E. Shoemaker, *Goodbye Marianne* (Toronto: Tundra Books, 2008).

35 Watts and Shoemaker, *Goodbye Marianne*, 1/1, 3/4, 13/3, 23/1, 31/1, 36/5, 60/3, 103/1.

36 Loïc Dauvillier, Marc Lizano, and Greg Salsedo, *Hidden* (New York: First Second, 2012).

away, the only comfort she finds is in her dark hiding spot, which is not truly a comfort at all. Meanwhile the Nazi regime tears her family, and thus her safety, apart.

Contrast in colors, emphasis, and imagery, express the emotional turmoil featured in post-Holocaust graphic novels. Croci's white panels on a black background reflect the chaos of the Jews entering Auschwitz. Katin and Marianne, and their families, suffer under the absolute power of the Nazi regime, whose dominance is emphasized by repeated notions and imagery. The Nazis destroy the very idea of safety for Dounia, her fetal position being at odds with soldiers invading her home and breaking her family apart. Ultimately, contrast reveals the corruption accompanying the Nazis wherever they go. The total lack of safety experienced by the characters in these graphic novels creates an anxious tension, and the stark contrast of images and ideas exacerbates that tension beyond the ability of words without pictures and pictures without words.

Aarons provides guidelines for narratives that seek to portray the trauma of the Nazi genocide to the best of their creators' abilities, and the genre of the graphic novel implements omission and contrast to fulfill these guidelines. The many panels depicting gas chambers with hidden horrors, the erasure of identity, the avoidance of language when it is not enough, the magnifying properties of black accompanying white, the emphasis of repetition, and the corruption of light by dark all "create the conditions for discomfort and unease ... a landscape of rupture, of disequilibrium and of narrative disjunction."<sup>37</sup> These tropes expand upon what words alone cannot convey. The combination of art and text adds an emotional depth to the post-Holocaust narrative. Thus, the graphic novel is an important addition to the rich corpus of literature surrounding the Holocaust. Words on their own may be both not enough and more than enough to properly convey the horrors of the *Shoah*, but accompanied by art, the narratives can rely less on debating the futility of language and more on displaying the rupture inherent in such a trauma-filled experience as the Holocaust.

*Madilyn Pflueger is a senior majoring in English. She prepared this research as part of a Mellon Undergraduate Summer Research Fellowship under the direction of Dr. Victoria Aarons (Summer 2016).*