

# REFLECTIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST IN THE GRAPHIC NOVELS *THE BOXER* AND *MAUS*

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**ABSTRACT:** The study analyses the depiction of the Holocaust in the graphic novels *Der Boxer* [The Boxer] (2012) by the German author Reinhard Kleist and *Maus I – II* [Maus I – II] (1986 – 1991) by the American author of Polish origin, Art Spiegelman. Both texts are explicit in their anti-psychologism and emotional rationalism and base their aesthetic value not on the subject matter's originality but on the artwork's form. While *Der Boxer* is a realistic comic about boxing as a means of survival in the liminal situation of a concentration camp, the postmodern *Maus* captures the traumatic experience of genocide through the allegorical presentation of the main characters as animal beings.

**KEYWORDS:** Reinhard Kleist. Art Spiegelman. Holocaust in comics (graphic novels). Antisemitism. Jewish identity.

At the beginning of the study, several terminological definitions are necessary to clarify.<sup>1</sup> Like Jewish literature, the notion of Jewish comics is relatively polysemic and, in a way, problematic. We understand it primarily instrumentally, and therefore, for our purposes, we can see it (from the “identity” point of view) as a concept that includes: 1. the work of authors of Jewish origin and collective and individual self-identity (it is assumed, partly rightly, partly a priori and speculatively, that comics as a whole and its individual aspects are an expression of this identity or the stereotypes associated with it; 2. the work of authors with ascribed or recognised Jewish identity (e.g. derived from Halakhah rabbinic law, or the law of liberal and ultra-liberal Jewish communities); 3. work thematically focused on Jewish cultural and historical themes, issues, motifs, language, semiotic codes, and intertextual and hypertextual symbolism. Schematically written – these are works with a Jewish identity of the characters and their fates. In the third case, it is necessary to eliminate works (and also characters) that are unquestionably intentionally antisemitic (as an expression of anti-Jewish stereotypes or outright hatred) from the concept. In this “threefold” sense, we will use the term in connection with Jewish (at all levels of meaning) comics<sup>2</sup>, namely the theme of the Holocaust, which will be the subject of our partial study. In it, we will focus only on two titles that we consider representative of the given thematic area, i.e., comics about the Holocaust<sup>3</sup>. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Czech literature in translation has been slowly coming to terms with world comics depicting the Holocaust. *Der Boxer* [The Boxer] (2012) by Reinhard Kleist and *Maus I – II* [Maus I – II] (1986 – 1991) are included in the context of other renowned titles, such as *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Graphic Biography* from 2010 (in Czech

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<sup>1</sup> Text was translated by Orsolya Hegedűs.

<sup>2</sup> In this context, it is sometimes written about the “Jewish trace” in comics, in which one sees, on closer inspection, “shades of Judaism and Jewish culture” (Schwartz 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Or “Shoah”. For all of them, let us name, for example, the *X-Men* series by the New York publisher Marvel Comics (Chris Claremont et al., e.g. *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* from 1994 or *X-Men: Magneto Testament* by Greg Pak, Carmine Di Giandomenico and Matt Hollingsworth), *Auschwitz* (Pascal Croci 2003), *I Was a Child of Holocaust Survivors* (Bernice Eisenstein, 2006), *A Life Force* (Will Eisner, 2006), *The Plot: The Secret Story of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (Will Eisner, 2005), *Let It Be* (Miriam Katin, 2013), *We're On Our Own* (Miriam Katin, 2006), *Yossel: April 19, 1943 – A Story of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Joe Kubert 2003) and many more.

translation as *Anna Franková. Komiksový životopis* from 2013) by writer Sid Jacobsen and artist Ernie Colón, which was based on the motifs of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, apparently the most famous artistic text about the Second World War. Similarly, the graphic novel *L'enfant cachée* (2010; in Czech translation *Dítě s hvězdičkou* [Hidden: A Child's Story of the Holocaust] from 2013) by French author Loïc Dauvillier in collaboration with illustrators Marc Lizano and Greg Salsedo depicts the cruel life story of a Jewish girl, Duña (in French orig. Dounia), who tells her granddaughter in retrospect about her coping with antisemitism and hiding from Nazi persecution in the summer of 1942 in Paris. All of these titles belong to the genre of the “graphic novel”, black and white (a literal translation of the English-language term “graphic novel”<sup>4</sup>) and represent two differentiated approaches to the subject matter that demonstrate the expressive possibilities of socially engaged and historically framed multifunctional communications.

Let us state at the outset that we understand comics as an intermedial sign, as a synthesising and structurally syncretic formation, in which we find at least three relevant layers with dramatic elements in a specific relationship of coexistence and functional interpenetration, namely the level of visual (graphic) art, the level of literary (verbal) art, and the level of film art with hints of other genre practices. In contrast, comics cannot be reduced to any of them: they cannot be measured purely from the viewpoints of literary studies, only art studies, or above all, the criteria of film (film or theatre) science. Very schematically written: if it is specific to literary art (the art of the word, by its nature abstract) that it counts on the concretising (completing) effort of the reader, then for film, theatre, and visual art (by their nature “showing” media) the generalising (integrating and sensitising) effort of the perceiver is essential. Even in a comic depicting the Holocaust, we encounter a recipient who scales, experientially and intellectually, a chain of juxtaposed panels or sequences based on certain expectations, experiences, and cultural and historical codes. It is, therefore, a specific medium similar to film or literature. According to Scott McCloud, probably the most quoted theorist and creator of comics, it is about “juxtaposed pictorial images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud 1993, 9). Although the definition is unsatisfactory in many ways (it includes any drawn-out story, i.e., a fair song or a two-panel cartoon joke), it is pragmatically operative.

Comics, let us repeat, is not a unit (type, kind, genre<sup>5</sup>) of literary art, although it is close to literature by its textual part and verbalised or verbalizable story (the same is true of film and television fiction). As the French theorist Thierry Groensteen points out, the concept of comics as a specific narrative type with a visual dominant is not generally accepted (Groensteen 2005, 19). Comics is neither a genre nor a type of animated film art. However, it is close to it in the sequential arrangement of “frames”, editing and montage, “comic camera” shots (objective or subjective, static, or dynamic, with close-ups and semi-close-ups, intercutting) and its artistic form must also be considered about the whole of “comic-ness” as a central synthetic category. Its aesthetic value is then objectified by comparison with other works of the same or different genres, such as – besides

<sup>4</sup> Although the term “graphic novel” cannot be used without reservation, as it is internally contradictory (the novel is a literary genre, epically narrative, and the adjective “graphic” refers to an artistic technique), on the other hand, it very well documents the syncretic historical roots of comics. Of course, we also perceive it as a synthetic, “indivisible” (as a compositional whole, it is, of course, analytically decomposable), relatively stable, i.e. governed by certain norms and conventions (genesis and reception), indeed a specific whole. The older term “comic series” (“cartoon series”) captures both the mostly serial arrangement of panels as plot sequences and the expectation of more and more “sequels”; it can perhaps be understood as one of the genres or formations of comics.

<sup>5</sup> However, the term/lexeme “genre” is also used non-terminologically and metaphorically, like the term/lexeme “legend” or “myth”.

the so-called graphic (comic) novel – also, for example, the so-called comics essay (or comics explainer), moral comics (with exemplary strategy, in Czech production especially Foglar-type series), Superman-like (*Superman, Spiderman, Batman, Avengers*<sup>6</sup>), spectacularly plotted comics, comics biography, sci-fi/fantasy comics. The search for the essence of the comic, and therefore of the graphic novel, consists in defining what can be defined as the principle of “iconic coherence” (ibid., 31), which can be identified at the level of language (langage) and also in what can be described as “an original set of mechanisms producing meaning” (ibid., 12). Nevertheless, from our point of view, it is a synthetic, compositional, and syncretic work, combining various artistic processes, but not eclectic (the eclecticism that is common in “amateur” comics teaching materials can be perceived as an artistic deficiency of comics, if it is not the intention and expression of an intermedial effort, and thus beyond the boundaries of comics).

After an extended introduction with methodological and terminological ambitions, let us move on to the analysis. The first of the analysed graphic novels was first published in German (under the title *Der Boxer, Die wahre Geschichte des Hertzko Haft* [The Boxer: The True Story of Hertzko Haft]) in 2012 by Carlsen Verlag (Hamburg). It was later translated into several languages (it was published, among others, by the London publishing house aptly named SelfMadeHero in 2014 and in the Czech language by the Prague publishing house Argo in 2015). If we concentrate on the viewpoint/focus, the time and place “narrated” is first “Miami, September 1963”; the first chapter is indeed narrated by Hercko Haft’s son, i.e. Alan (first-person narration, from his point of view), and then Europe and then the United States during and after WWII, with the story already told from the point of view of Hercko (Hershl/Harry), Alan’s father. Hercko thus becomes the narrator-focus (his own/first-person narration is also used) of all the subsequent chapters of the first and second part, and his son as subject or point of view completely disappears (although we suspect that he mediates his father’s point of view here<sup>7</sup>). Only the third part is again told from the point of view of Hercko’s son, Alan<sup>8</sup>. Hercko’s narrative is commemorative and begins in “March” 1939<sup>9</sup>, when he was fourteen years old (already as a child, he has the physiognomic features of an adolescent or relatively mature individual, at least from today’s perspective), in the Polish town of Bełchatów. Then, the epic narrative unfolds chronologically until 1963 to create an explicative and compositional time loop.

The second comic is much more iconic. It is by Art Spiegelman and is titled *Maus*. The first volume (*Maus I*) was published under the subtitle *A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (translated into Czech as *Příběh očitého svědka: Otcova krvavá pouť dějinami* [The Tale of an Eyewitness: My Father’s Bloody Pilgrimage Through History] by Torst in Prague in 1997) by Pantheon Books in New York in 1986. The second volume (*Maus II*) was published by the same

<sup>6</sup> Jay Schwartz said they all “sprang from the fevered Jewish imagination” (Schwartz 2023).

<sup>7</sup> Kleist’s work was adapted from a biographical book by Alan Scott Haft (1950) called *Harry Haft. Auschwitz Survivor, Challenger of Rocky Marciano* (2003); Reinhardt Kleist as the author of the comic does not appear as a subject of the plot at all, unlike Art Spiegelman as the author of the comic and the “deuteragonist”, the second most important character of both volumes of *Maus*.

<sup>8</sup> The narrator’s point of view, however, does not imply the adoption of a “subjective comic camera”, i.e., that we perceive reality as the protagonist sees, hears, and reflects it. The “comic shots” in both works being compared are so-called objective.

<sup>9</sup> In the narrator’s speech, we read, “I was fourteen when the Germans occupied our town in March 1939” (Kleist 2015, 11). For the sake of factual objectivity, it should be stated that it is not clear which occupation is in question: the German attack on Polish territory did not begin until 1 September 1939; the correct form of the Polish town is Bełchatów, and the town was occupied only on 6 September 1939. However, the narrator may have confused two historical events, namely the occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and Poland in September of that year.

publishing house in 1991 with the subtitle *A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (translated into Czech as *Příběh očitého svědka: A tady začalo moje trápení* [The Tale of an Eyewitness: And Here My Troubles Began] a year later.) Art Spiegelman wanted to capture a tragic historical experience of modern history – the problem of the genocide of the Jews during World War II – in an original, expressively transparent way in the genre closest to him as an artist. This event strongly influenced his family's fate, and he coped with it all his life. Unlike other works depicting the Holocaust, he took the subject very personally. By choosing a symbiosis of verbal component and visual allegory, he gave the plot a strong emotional charge, which he achieved by combining the absurdity of violence and evil in man with the helplessness of little mice. The author, with a high degree of literary and artistic culture, thus depicted the sad story of a Jewish family. The graphic novel has an allegorical character; a swastika with a mask of a cat with a Hitler moustache and bloody letters seems to hover over the whole story; the Jewish characters appear as mice (with human figures and behaviour), the Germans as cats, in concentration camp scenes in the uniforms of SS officers. Throughout the story, there is a theme of brutality and violence, processed by the method of "reception shock" (Zelenková 2001, 138) perpetrated on Jewish victims, as well as the theme of artistic reflection on this violence, the attempt to cope with it (and to a certain extent to co-experience it, which is hugely demanding psychologically). It is a dialogic comic (the frame is a conversation between father and son), epic (with a significant role of the narrator, Vladek, but also the author of the comic, his son), self-reflexive (it creates the illusion of creating a comic directly in the comic story), in which various temporal and sujet levels are interspersed, the novelistic nature of the comic is underlined by the "narrative principle, it works with two parts, with chapters, a change of time, interweaving of time planes, it uses a distinctive range of the narrator" (ibid., 141).

In the story of "Jewish mice", we can identify three primary plot lines that are constantly intertwined: the first line – is the story of Art's father, Vladek, who copes all his life with the traumatic experience of surviving the Holocaust and the concentration camp in Auschwitz. In addition to family and private matters, it is mainly an allusion to historical reality and a reference to the emotional and value anticipation of the development of the characters on the axis of the plot; the second line – the story of Art himself and his complicated relationship with his father, coping with his past, his mother's suicide and also with the trauma of Jewishness and cultural identification. Art, as one of the main textual subjects, appears with a mouse mask (in the sequences in which he appears as the author of the comics) or with the face of a mouse – his problem of identification with the Jewish community and its historical trauma comes to the fore; the third line depicts the genesis of a specific comic text, i.e., it captures the creation of this graphic novel about the Holocaust. Importantly, each storyline is tied to a different way of presenting the plot and mode of representation – the line of the father (the poetics of the novel's structures), the line of the writing of the text (creative genesis, cinematic-reportage composition), and the line of Art, which, by drawing on both of the previous ones, is the most plot-driven and narrative.

The similarities and differences between two comic books are so striking that they invite at least partial structural analyses. First of all, both compiled "texts" (here we rely mainly on the translations into Czech, i.e., Spiegelman 1997, 1998; Kleist 2015) count on the participation of an intellectually mature audience, although both can be read/watched at the same time in much simpler codes by an undemanding recipient. *Der Boxer* is a comic book about boxing and offers a fascinating spectacle of fisticuffs in and out of the ring; *Maus* uses naive art techniques, transparent allegory, and "childishly naive" documentary panels, for example. The direct motivation for the creation of two comic books is, strictly speaking, different, but the motivation to tell the stories of Holocaust survivors, and especially their descendants, is the same. It is the need for intense intellectual and emotional immersion in the ancestral experience and the "compulsion and desire

to leave a meaningful legacy of their parents' experiences for future generations" (Krauskopf – Bates – Cook 2023, 1). Art Spiegelman wrote the story of his father Vladek, and this one is epically, verbally narratively suggested as completely, exclusively authentic, although people are graphically represented here with an animal head (with a human body; only on the cover of the first volume still with a mouse/rat tail). Kleist's graphic novel, however, is an adaptation not of his biography but of Alan Scott Haft's biography, *Harry Haft. Auschwitz Survivor, Challenger of Rocky Marciano* (2006). Thus, Kleist's comic book appears to be an impressive "adaptive medium" that conveys Alan's, especially Hercko's experiences.

*Maus* is a comic strip in some ways postmodern: deliberately trivialised, perhaps even naive and minimalist, but at the same time highly intellectualised (Art even reflects himself as a mental illness sufferer and independent thinking intellectual – an artist), and in some ways playful; it has little in common with the glamorous series published for mainstream comic book consumers, consumers expecting colourful spectacle, minimal dialogue and monologues, but also appreciating ostentatious and imaginatively gestural plot actions, as well as some form of "saving the world" from the forces of evil (the world of "good" and "bad" guys here stand sharply defined concerning one another, much as in a fairy tale). *Der Boxer*, on the other hand, is a realistic comic with some naturalistic and, exceptionally, perhaps surreal scenes; it is hardly perceived as postmodern and ambivalent in meaning, self-reflexive, or even sophisticated in its simplicity. What is common to both comics is that they present "the theme privately and emotionally" (Zelenková 2001, 131), traumatically and post-traumatically. Written with hyperbole, both have an "autobiographical charge" (ibid., 132): in *Maus*, the author directly acts "as the subject of the plot" (ibid.), but Alan Haft would play the same role if he were not "only" the author of the text, but also the screenwriter and draughtsman of *Der Boxer*. Both stories, however individual, go beyond the private level towards the universal human experience or instead towards expressing the most stressful situations of human existence. As we have already noted, both comics also follow several storylines, namely the story of the fathers of the two co-narrators, with Art telling the story of his father Vladek Spiegelman and Alan telling the story of Hercko (Harry in the US) Haft, as well as the stories of both Art and Alan about their complicated relationships with their fathers.

In *Der Boxer* and *Maus*, both aspects (i.e., Alan's and Hercko's, Art's and Vladek's) are stylised not only in a verbally epic first-person narration but also in the manner of graphic representation – the emphasis on the central character manifests this. Kleist's comic camera is quasi-realistic and objective, only in some passages partly surrealistic (this is when it represents faces from Hercko's visions and dreams). As a son, Alan admires his father as a strong man and a "tough guy", but simultaneously, he is afraid of him: "He was not like the other dads in Brooklyn. I was often afraid of him. He was volatile, spoke poor English, and could barely read and write" (Kleist 2015, 172).

However, the latter fact is not "shown" to the Czech readers in any way; neither is the projected polylingual world depicted in the comics. The sentences written in *Der Boxer*, or in the original work, in German, are translated into relatively correct Czech "for us". It is not consistently colloquial or partially standard Czech ("wrap it up", "don't dawdle", instrumental with the unified ending "-ama") in dialogues. Just from hints, the recipient can conclude that Hercko speaks, on one level or another, several languages (Polish, Yiddish, German, English) in the diegetic world. *Maus* (naturally, both of its parts), on the other hand, is more "polylingual" in the sense that some sentences, although all spoken in the diegetic world, e.g. in Polish or German, are sporadically interpreted as such "for us", e.g. in German as "Er verblutete!" (Spiegelman 1997, 50), "Halt" (Spiegelman 1998, 59), or "Eins! Zwei! Drei!" (ibid.), or in Yiddish as "gefille fisch" (Spiegelman 1997, 19). There is also an expressive Polish or Hebrew script (Spiegelman 1997, 54). In *Der Boxer*, we read all the sentences in the inner diegetic world, spoken necessarily in different languages, "for

us”, the Czech perceivers, interpreted in Czech. We remind the reader of this because only very rarely and inconsistently do we find the short sentence “He is SS!” in a single place in Kleist’s work. It is carried by an American soldier who mistakes Hercko, dressed in the uniform of a “member of the SS”, for an elite Nazi. Only Hercko’s linguistic knowledge, passive or active, remains a question: he probably speaks Polish, or also (in a Jewish family) Yiddish – at least with one of the Americans who liberated him, the Jew Greenberg, he speaks this language, or at least understands it (this is not clear from the text). Apparently, he has also learned German (he must naturally speak German with Germans in the natural world), but with a distinctly Polish accent, which is not “shown”, but this gives him away after he escapes from the death march, which subsequently leads to the death of two spouses who wanted to turn him in as an escaped prisoner. In the US, he also learns colloquial American English (characterised as poor by his son Alan).

Hercko Haft and his extended Polish-Jewish family were undeniably from the poorer, impoverished Jewish classes, though not schnorrer; even in the USA after leaving the boxing career, Alan’s father supported his family by selling fruit and vegetables at the market. Some reviewers unilaterally see him as a “brutal and violent man” (Palán 2015), while the whole comic is perceived, due to the suggestion of the comic narrative, as wholly authentic, genuine, realistic, or even naturalistic (Badinová 2015, Mandys 2015, Šulc 2015). In his homeland after the annexation and partition of Poland, the future boxer smuggles various goods, and violence is an almost daily part of his life. Vladek Spiegelman from *Maus*, on the other hand, comes from a relatively (though not absolutely) wealthy family, also so branched out, has natural business and entrepreneurial talents, is intellectually and linguistically very advanced, and learns quickly. He is also physically fit, although he did not commonly encounter violence before forced labour and deportation (Hercko was a frequent subject and object of violence), manually skilled, highly valued by the prisoners in the concentration camps, imaginative and foresighted. Both actors, Vladek and Hercko, are fortunate, although they cannot thank their survival only due to coincidence. For example, neither of them eats or drinks everything they get from their captors right away, and they think about the future: to survive efficiently is the main motto of their “struggle for survival” in the concentration and extermination camps, although only Hercko’s fight is “who against whom”: for example, defeat in a concentration camp boxing match is a death sentence for the loser.

The Jewish identity of Hercko and his family is a social rather than an intrinsically religious self-identity (“*We Jews were forbidden everything*” (Kleist 2015, 16); we see it unnaturally objectified by racial laws). Jewish identity would not have played a significant role for the characters (primarily workers and people engaged in physical labour) depicted in *Der Boxer* if it were not for racial laws that absolutized a person’s ethnicity and imprinted a collective Jewish identity where it materially took a back seat to other aspects, such as socio-economic ones. It is questionable whether Hercko received any Judaic education at all; the comic book world presents nothing of the sort. The future “Jewish boxing” star does not attend synagogue, pray, observe other Jewish customs and rituals, prefer kosher food and traditions, or socialise with rabbis; he speaks Yiddish perhaps (he certainly understands that language), certainly and naturally Polish (and German with a distinctly Polish accent), and however he used to bring “geese from the market” to the butcher (and one can assume to the Jewish butcher and for ritual treatment), he attended an elementary (general) “Christian Polish school”. Here, he encountered – at least with the teacher – antisemitism (the prejudice about the guilt of the Jews for the crucifixion of the Savior was suggested to him), and he did not attend school “as long as the other children...”. Hence, his partial illiteracy and later “just” poor reading and writing skills (in the US, he prefers comics to literature). Hercko was perhaps influenced by a certain Jewish spirituality, which can really only be hypothetically and speculatively deduced from two sequences in which Hercko completely and almost ostentatiously rejects the idea of God/Lord in the face of the crimes of the Holocaust: “*God no longer existed*” (Kleist 2015, 44 – 45).

In the depicted world of *Der Boxer*<sup>10</sup>, we do not find religious Judaic symbols (leaving aside the obligatory and, after the Second World War, emblematic sign, with a different meaning and content, the Star of David – even after liberation, this is how Hercko, iconically painted in lines in the sand, presents himself to American soldiers), nor practised rituals, or even thinking derived from thinking about the Torah and its commentaries: these are perhaps hidden somewhere beyond the possible, beyond the conceivable, but not directly depicted by the comic fictional world. The portrait of the Haft family, Hercko's parents, has an equivalent in Vojtěch Rakous's Czech humoresques *Modche a Rézi* [Modche and Rézi]. The Jewish identity is, however, "reinforced" by the names of the characters (Lea, Meir, Rivka, Brandel) and some rarely used expressions from the Yiddish language (meshuge). Hercko, however, has some conventional "Semitic" features, i.e., brown skin, dark wavy hair, a square head, a sturdy bony face, sometimes seen with a V-shaped chin, strong arches of the eyebrows, and bulging eyes. The boxer character's Jewish identity is not "resolved" of its own accord unless it is clearly attributed to them by racial laws (as something subhuman). Many look just like Poles, Americans, or Germans, with whom they would probably easily assimilate if they felt the need and if the social and other circumstances were suitable.

In *Maus*, however, the situation is radically different: Vladek Spiegelman is a "deeply religious" Jew (Spiegelman 1997, 54), and if possible, he prays daily; the rabbi even designates him as Roh-eh hanoled as "He who sees into the future" (ibid., 60). The day on which the "parashat truma" Saturday falls is Vladek's lucky day (this parashat was also recited by Art on the day of his bar mitzvah). Also, the ethnic identity represented by the faces and heads of the partially animalised characters appears to be significantly more important than in *Der Boxer* (it is entirely significant, shocking at first glance), perhaps even as something immutable and given in advance (by birth) – Jews are mice, Germans are cats (in SS uniforms), Poles are pigs, Americans are dogs, the French are frogs, the Swedes have moose heads. Of course, there is a corrective: contrary to the racist theory, it is, in principle, possible to change one's identity, e.g., by conversion (from French to Jewish), but then the face of the character and the physiognomy of the head also change. Moreover, when Vladek sometimes has to impersonate a Pole forcibly, it is presented in such a way that he puts on a Polish, here pig, mask. Although the Jews here appear as mice (or even rats, although the title *Maus* is more directed towards mice), with human figures and behaviour, "they refer to themselves as Jews" (Zelenková 2001, 135). The mouse (rather than the brown or the black rat) symbolises a helpless, frightened, and persecuted animal, primarily associated with damage, multiplicity, and, from a utilitarian point of view, a useless creature destined for extermination. Thus, a significant role, perhaps even a crucial one, is played here by ethnic identity, which is only somewhat relativised in the second chapter of the second volume, where the characters have masks attached to them corresponding to their ethnic roles in the comic. It is almost unquestionable, given unmistakably by the heads and faces of the characters, the dominant visual icons.

In *Maus*, also in contrast to the realistic and quasi-naturalistic *Der Boxer*, the role of something mystical and miraculous is in line with the symbolic or allegorical elements, as in Vladek's dream in which he hears the voice of his dead grandfather announcing to him with prayer thongs that he will be released from the concentration camp "On the day of Parashat Truma" (ibid., 57; the rabbi, who is among the prisoners, specifies the day as mid-February, on which the reading of the Torah passage in question fell). Anja Zylberberg, Vladek's wife, is also presented as "pious and old-fashioned" (ibid., 18), and although this may mean many things, she does not eat pork at first (cf.

<sup>10</sup> For spatial reasons, we leave aside the context of genre and thematically related works of art, e.g., literary or film works. The comic novel *Der Boxer* is naturally close to the specific thematic stream of so-called camp literary, or film works with the figure of a boxer as the protagonist of the plot, e.g., the films *I Survived My Death*, *Boxer and Death*, *Triumph of the Spirit* etc.

the Zylberbergs' first dinner, *ibid.*, 19) and there are no obvious Christian symbols (or Jewish ones, for that matter) in their dwelling. The later strict observance of Jewish customs in concentration and extermination camps, even in the ghetto, was out of the question.

Compared to Vladek, Hercko is intellectually (and character-wise) relatively simple, straightforward, and direct, though not primitive, or even ruthless, and in some ways contradictory – the traumas of the Holocaust also affect his relationship with the surrounding society (Noel 2014). He is certainly not an intellectual in the ordinary sense of the word (neither is Vladek; only Art, Vladek's son and the creator of *Maus*, is reflected as such), although even Hercko is troubled (rather than by intellectual questions related to survival) by emotional traumas connected with memories of the events he lived through, extremely drastic ones. Even Hercko is capable of great emotions (Lizcová 2015), and the scene of his meeting with his old love ("she is dying of cancer") is lyrically touching and impressive. However, the smuggler, who, for many years, walked on the edge of the permitted and the prohibited (in all regimes, not only during the Nazi occupation, as if by compulsion, but also after the liberation), also does not distinguish much between the legal and the illegal. He was compelled by life's circumstances to obey commands, even if their moral dimension was not always entirely justifiable (the acceptance of the animal law of "live or let live"). Failure to follow an order would be equivalent to death, or at least close to it (in the regime of concentration and extermination camps). Hercko has no problem (co)founding a brothel in the villa of a former SS commander after the war, albeit in a villa belonging to a Jewish owner before the Aryanization. He offers Percec, whom he reunites with after the war, "money, women, booze!" he can also deal illegally in cigarettes; he even becomes a "wanted criminal" for a short time and has to change his identity to "Moses Friedler" (a borrowed or bought identity). Hercko is distinguished by a large, genuinely boxer-like physical foundation: he demonstrates his ability for effective, extreme physical violence not only as a boxer, e.g., as a child, he struck his teacher when he provoked him with antisemitic remarks, defended his brother in a fight, took revenge on "Mišo" who behaved "worse than the Nazis" in the concentration camp, angrily punished his son for wrongdoing. He is characterised by extraordinary strength in his arms, the ability to quickly learn the laws of survival, stamina, foresight (in combat), and an almost animalistic will to survive.

The motif, perhaps even the leitmotif of the struggle for survival, its peripeteia and moral consequences (in't Veld 2019) is fundamental; Hercko fights for his life and thus de facto annihilates his opponents defeated in the ring. Vladek's survival strategy, however, is not linked to the annihilation of a competitor, a fellow prisoner, but rather to the hero's above-average, though not exceptional, physical strength and endurance, stamina, extreme self-discipline, and highly clever strategy that includes cold water therapy and exercise. Vladek does not survive on the task of his fellow prisoners; he does not face the ethical dilemma of "kill or be killed" in the concentration camp. At several points, Spiegelman's story demonstrates the solidarity of the male or female prisoners who, for example, did not betray Anja during the roll call, even though it might have alleviated their suffering (Spiegelman 1998, 68). Vladek does not report in order to live; his behaviour is "ethically pure" from this point of view. Vladek does kill once, but in direct warfare: as a Polish soldier, a corporal, he shoots a masked German soldier before members of the Wehrmacht capture him. The whole *Maus* evokes emotions other than aggressive and violent, such as compassion for the human "mice" as victims of "predators".

Just as the characters of Hercko and Vladek differ, so do the two young "narrators", i.e., Alan Haft and Art Spiegelman. Both, however, maintain a certain distance from the behaviour of their fathers, whom they otherwise try to understand (Alan, for example, finds it hard to tolerate his father's violence and violent reactions, Art his father's extreme orderliness, thrift, and suspicion). Another distinction is the role of mental illness – Anja, Art's mother, suffers from occasional hysteria and depression, as does her son Art (severe depression). Anja "doesn't want to live" after



giving birth to her son Richard (Spiegelman 1997, 31). Hercko and his son, despite the traumatic memories, are mentally “normal” at first sight, himself physically and mentally strong enough (his self-control, strong will, foresight, knowledge of his body as a tool prevail) to survive not only in Poland and Germany but also in the competitive ring environment in the USA. An authoritarian type, he acts abruptly and sometimes in anger, straightforwardly but is inwardly sensitive and fragile, with a sense of justice in the dilemmas posed by the extreme conditions in which he finds himself. His desire to see again the woman he once deeply loved and with whom he lost his virginity is romantic, and the reunion scene (after years in Miami) is very moving. Even when raising children, he often resorts to physical punishment, appearing to be a despot who does not tolerate resistance. Vladko is similarly authoritarian but very orderly and suspicious; even after his departure to the USA, we would place him more in the so-called middle classes. Hercko has always “supported” himself with his work; he is a working-class member, and even as a fruit and vegetable shop owner, he has to do a lot to support his family. One more difference is noticeable – the main character of *Der Boxer* changes realistically during the comic narrative, evolving, however de facto, especially the physical foundation hidden in him. It is a Jack London type of self-made-man prose. Vladek as a character in *Maus* does not change in character; many of his life views, attitudes, and strategies remain the same, which refers to the proverbial extreme orderliness, latent suspicion, but also thriftiness, sometimes even harpagon-like, foresight and the need to primarily pursue, somehow defined his interests.

*Maus* is a comic about the creation of comics; however, more of its thematic content pages, not about its technique. It is a testimony to Art and Vladek, the author of the comic and the character who survived the Holocaust and motivated the creation of the work. Sometimes, Art recedes into the background and becomes only the medium of Vladek’s stories; other times, it is Art as the leading actor; however, the “shadow” of his father, with whom he was not so close, is always present. It is a self-reflexive comic that shows how it is created, or instead shows the conditions of its creation, pointing out the author and his preferences, which are not always in agreement with the preferences of the character who is the protagonist of the story – Art’s father, who would not have inserted some of the narrated fates into the narrative – and asks his son to do the same. *Maus* reflects, e.g. Art’s fears “that he took too big a bite” when he decided to “reconstruct a reality [...] worse [...] than my darkest dreams” (Spiegelman 1998, 18) but at the same time he makes it clear that his comic is not a record of reality, but a modification and modelling, a stylisation of it, since, again in a conversation with his fiancée and later wife, he says that “in real life, you would never let me talk for so long without interruption” (ibid.). The textual narrative itself is quasi-objective; through allegorical exaggeration, it is dialogically composed as a collection and interpretation of material for a book about Vladek Spiegelman; the first-person narration of Art’s authorial objectifying narrative is determined by self-reflections (also about mental illness, i.e., about the severe depression he suffered, loss of self-confidence, conversations with a psychiatrist). He even has a dialogue with himself in front of his readers: “Should I mention this, or will it ruin my whole metaphor?” (Spiegelman 1998, 45). *Maus* also features postmodern genre self-reflection – writing comics directly in comics. Spiegelman affirmed the possibilities of comics moving away from conventional cartoon stories, to take full advantage of the limitlessness of expressive means and techniques. For example, it is the idea that the author as a plot subject writes a comic book story, but directly in the text, another comic book is being read (here the critical moment is that human characters are already appearing in it as if from another reality). Temporal, spatial and plot levels are constantly intertwined, which, for example, is evident in the sequence where a hand is holding another comic book page, and Vladek claims that he never reads comics. In this comic, everything seems to be shifted to another level, thus creating a contradiction between the expected reception

of the genre and the actual reception of a specific, unique comic, which treats historical facts in an allegorical form in a somewhat detached but even more absurd way.

The precise temporal framing is related to the realistic basis of the historical theme. However, due to the dialogic form of the treatment, as we have already stated, there is a constant temporal intermingling, not only compositionally but also visually (even within a single sequence). Therefore, Spiegelman works with the subjects' consciousness, an uncharacteristic element in comics but not graphic novels, as the characters develop physically and psychologically. This case suggests a genre's transformation to another genre's boundaries. The graphic novel thus implies the poetics of the novel structure, which it evokes through its narrative principle. There is a constant work with two parts and chapters, with the change and overlapping of time zones and the disruption of the narrator's expressive zone. Although real historical facts are used – based on allegory, the real essence of the story is emphasised, which, despite its cartoon form, has a generalised and typified character. The comic techniques, using the connection with the film, i.e., editing and montage, allow the author to play with individual sequences, with time, and thus hyperbolise the artistic gradation along with the linguistic ellipsis. For Spiegelman, this is made possible by specific relieving elements such as interruptions in the story (e.g., a jump to the present – the father pedals a stationary bicycle during the narration or interrupts the story's presentation in the concentration camp for dinner). These details underline the authenticity of the story, its personal character, and its almost self-deprecating tone.

*Der Boxer* is a comic (graphic novel) that does not avoid partially naturalistic scenes (Šulc 2015). However, these are graphically implied and not drawn in detail. Such is, for example, the murder of a fellow prisoner in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, the removal of his organs, and a hint of cannibalism. However, the term “naturalistic scenes” must be understood as shocking themes of brutality and violence, but the actual depiction does not deviate in style or concept from the chosen technique. Alongside this, however, *Der Boxer* employs other symbolic techniques – the deportation from Flossenbürg to Grossrosen takes place along a road lined with electric poles, without wires, resembling crosses, evoking martyr-like, Christian parallels. It is an action comic with solid dynamics and acceleration of the plot, which is especially noticeable in the boxing sequences, depicting a fight, some fist or shooting duel, or a threat to life with a firearm. Compared to Kleist's work, *Maus* is seemingly trivial; for example, in Spiegelman's work, symbolic and allegorical, elementary emotions (such as fear, pain, amazement, anticipation) or sounds are already represented in a very relief-like way with interjections. In *Maus*, unlike *Der Boxer*, there are overtly and intentionally trivial practices, such as the illustration of the alignment of two hills (Spiegelman 1997, 56) ostentatiously augmentative, quasi-primitive exaggerations of quotation marks (sob, whimper, boo, yawn, boo! Yeeee!) and many others, reminiscent at times of the genre of the “comic book explainer” or “comic book manual” for simple, lay users of a commodity or service. The semantic relationship between language and visual code is characterised by so-called intensification in *Maus*. In this conception, language and the image constitute an integral sign system in which the written text completes the obligatory elements of the image. However, its code does not cancel it out but extends it by its properties – for example, a text in bubbles (semi-text) in which a coherent linguistic utterance is divided into several successive sequences. Spiegelman thus intensifies the content of artistic information expressed in a drawing. The verbal component thus accomplishes the process of textuality only in conjunction with the non-verbal component. By its very nature, *Maus* belongs to comics with a close syntactic connection and thematic continuity, whereby the individual statements create a storyline.

Art Spiegelman works with a technique of static scenes, “black and white images”, indeed saturated with the plot but maximally schematised and “trivialised”, which he arranges side by side and whose integration creates the impression of a coherent plot. Any “lyricization” is avoided,

as if the brutality of the reality depicted excludes such an approach. Kleist does not shy away from lyrical scenes. However, they are limited to love situations, comparing the first “date” of Hercko and Lea with the mirrored surface, a bed of tall grasses, tree branches as a canopy, with sketches of light reflections and shadows, an elegiac deserted landscape (an empty bridge and the stillness of night, all perhaps illuminated by moonlight – as if to suggest a sense of “*post coitum omne animal triste*”). Kleist’s “comic book camera” does not capture characters and environments from the same distance and angle, sometimes focusing only on the characters and “erasing their environment” and other times emphasising detail and semi-detail, the overall shot and even the overhead. “Boxing” films, and others, are dominated by movement, action, brutality, and violence, with sharp sounds suggested by spikes protruding from the point of impact. Some of them are addressed to subjects standing outside the depicted world, perhaps to Alan, perhaps to the viewer, and in them, Hercko seems to be apologising for his “collaborative” actions and his unwillingness to resist brutal power, simply a strong will to survive in an extreme situation (“*I was sure they would shoot me if I resisted*” (Kleist 2015, 65), and to use all available options effectively to survive. He was even nicknamed the Jewish Beast by the SS. The characters also express their feelings intensely and are, to some extent, individualised. However, the collective shots of concentration camps and transports all resemble living corpses (including extremely malnourished ones) or reanimated mummies, and the space for individualisation is seemingly minimal.

Nevertheless, even here, in some semi-details, we find specific physiognomic differences (the size of the eyes, the shape of the cheekbones, the shape of the skull, cf. the portrait of Hercko and Peretz after the deportation from Jaworzno). The individualisation of the characters in the allegorical work *Maus* is much more complex; all the mice seem to merge into one whole, which is understandable in the mass scenes from the concentration camp, but they also intensely express feelings and emotions. Details such as the glasses on the nose, the subtlety of the body, or the clothes (conventionally male and female) distinguish them.

With the existential significance of its theme, *Maus* projects an archetypal form of human existence, consciously entering into human memory, into the dialogue between the author and the reader and the broad sphere of human culture. In this reception aspect, we can see a particular affinity with the phenomenological way of perception and the search for the object’s essence because here, the emphasis is on explicit narration. Comic literariness, as realised by Spiegelman – writer and artist in one person – removes everything coincidental and empirically imposed in the process of interpretation and is, therefore, the result of the reduction of the genre invariant and its reader-coded instructions to the recipient subject. The author has deliberately opted for visual and verbal simplicity – the dialogues are realised through unbranched syntax, a suggestive line, and black and white surface conception. The simultaneous representation of the plot areas and their interweaving in the text and image is also linked by an emphasis on factual detail and the means of “high” novel poetics. Frequent entries into the plot both “alienate” the story and colour it with a distinctive preoccupation, often resulting in a self-reflective tone and humorous insight into the characterisation of differentiated human nature. Spiegelman, therefore, does not understand his Jewishness militantly but identifies with it “*as a certain social and intellectual disposition*”.<sup>11</sup>

Both analysed comics about the Holocaust show the considerable artistic possibilities of comics in presenting such severe topics as the Holocaust and coping with its consequences. Approaches close to realistic, even naturalistic spectacular drawing and epic narrative on the one hand, but not abandoning some romantic scenes, as we see in the comic novel *Der Boxer*, on the other hand allegorical, quasi-naïve and to some extent even ambiguous postmodern approaches,

<sup>11</sup> S Artem Spiegelmanem hlavně o jeho slavné Myši. Rozhovor Jana Macháčka s Artem Spiegelmanem. 1994. In: *Respekt* 5/43, 10.

well analysable in both *Maus* works, point to two legitimate possibilities of artistic grasp of the material, which, however, do not exhaust the expressive possibilities of comics, as an analysis of other comic books with the Holocaust theme would show<sup>12</sup>. Both comic texts are particularly impressive for their anti-psychologism and a deliberately primary “rationalism”, constituting an extraordinary comic reality that decomposes the depicted space-time and enables its perception from multiple sides. Both comics make “absolute” use of their genre principles while denying some practices that consciously shift to other genre aspects. Like other areas of artistic creation, such as literary, film, theatre, or visual art, in its syncretic and synthesising form, it represents a semiotic universe in which careful “reading” and integrating perception is vital to recognise (decode) all the reception instructions and information embedded in comic communication and encoded by specific means.

## SUMMARY

The study is based on the interpretation of two comics (graphic novels) from the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, which depict the traumatic experience of the Holocaust and manifestations of antisemitism in a highly original and aesthetic way. The two comics are *Der Boxer* (2012) by German author Reinhard Kleist and *Maus I – II* (1986 – 1991) by Polish-American author Art Spiegelman. Both texts are explicit in their anti-psychologism and emotional rationalism and base their aesthetic value not on the subject matter’s originality but on the artwork’s form. While *Der Boxer* is a realistic comic about boxing as a means of survival in the liminal situation of a concentration camp, the postmodern *Maus* captures the traumatic experience of genocide through the allegorical presentation of the main characters as animal beings. Despite their genre-thematic differences (*Der Boxer* works with a realistic narrative, *Maus* subscribes to the postmodern), the Holocaust themes of both comics convey sensitive issues of Jewish identity, pointing to two legitimate possibilities of artistic grasp of the material.

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<sup>12</sup> As Rachel E. Mandel showed, “a spectrum of the types of Holocaust representation in comics” is extensive, and these “comics are a legitimate medium for depicting and analysing the Holocaust both as a historical event and through the lenses of trauma and memory” (Mandel 2015, iii).

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