

'I never meant to be the Elie Wiesel of comics'

Nearly 30 years after publishing his first groundbreaking graphic novel about his father and the Holocaust, 'Maus'-man Art Spiegelman seems resigned to being a 'rootless cosmopolitan'

Hadani Ditmars

Art Spiegelman, the creator of the groundbreaking graphic novel "Maus," smokes a cigarette. Actually, it's a facsimile – an electronic one permissible in the likes of art galleries – that provides an oral placebo to augment his caffeine habit, the other fuel for his prolific creativity.

The child of Holocaust survivors, the slight, fine-featured Spiegelman appears to embody both the intensity and fragility of his mother Anja, who came from a well-to-do family and committed suicide when he was 18, shortly after his own failed attempt, and the street smarts of his father Vladek, a salesman who navigated the horrors of World War II with remarkable aplomb. Accordingly, the son's dance between the worlds of "high art" (he once said that having your work in a museum vault "is a fate worse than death") and "low art" (his proud affiliation with the blue-collar roots of comics) has benefited from that remarkable meeting of choreographies.

Indeed the man that broke out of the world of underground comics and into mainstream culture with the publication in 1986 of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Maus: A Survivor's Tale" – a graphic novel about the Holocaust – and who Time magazine named one of the "top 100 most influential people" in the world in 2005, is a character as densely drawn as one of his cartoon subjects.

"With manga," says the now 65-year-old Spiegelman, referring, in between puffs, to the Japanese cartooning form, "drawing a man falling down a flight of stairs could take dozens of pages. But I say: How compressed can you

make it? Comics are efficient at compacting information that you can then unpack in your brain."

As he offers a tour of the retrospective exhibition entitled "CO-MIX: A Retrospective of Comics, Graphics and Scraps" that is on at the Vancouver Art Gallery through June 9, Spiegelman speaks in rapid, deftly arranged sentences that spill forth like ink, his quick wit often masking the depth of his observations. His comments, like his comics, are both entertaining and illuminating, irreverent and moving at once, and they can take a while to mentally "unpack."

The medium he referred to in print once as "the bastard offspring of art and commerce" is one he has been smitten with since the age of 5. And it has offered him a rare opportunity to take it to the next level.

In his book "MetaMaus: A Look inside a Modern Classic," the 2011 volume that followed publication of "Maus I" and "Maus II" (in 1992), documenting their conception, creation and reception, he recounts being asked by a German journalist, "Isn't making a comic book about Auschwitz in bad taste?" To which he replies, "Actually, I think Auschwitz was in bad taste."

But as Spiegelman looks back on his 40-plus-year career (he began professional cartooning as a teenager), he says of the books that were based on interviews with his father, Vladek, "the idea was not to create a transparent window into Auschwitz. It was to see the delivery of that memory and how I was able to shape it – that was the real story."

Indeed, the two-volume graphic novel, while a moving exploration of the Shoah, (in which Jews are depicted as

mice, and the Nazis as cats) is especially notable for its depiction of Spiegelman's relationship with his father. Based on transcripts of taped interviews, "Maus," he says, brought the two closer. Even though Art may have been well into the final stages of drawing a panel, nuggets would still be revealed over coffee with his father: The story of an informant who had turned Vladek in to the Nazis that his father ended up burying, for instance, was quickly added to the sequence.

While their relationship was often a stormy one in his youth, "It [the deposition process] gave us a ground of comfort and solace," says Spiegelman, never missing a beat. "It was called Auschwitz, and it allowed us to spend time together. Before that he would always say 'nobody wants to hear such stories.'"

But now much of the world has heard those stories, and been profoundly affected by them, albeit not without some lost-in-translation hiccups. Protests erupted in Poland over the Poles being depicted as pigs (it was only published there in 2001). A Hebrew translation went initially afloat when the translator refused to accept that Vladek's broken English could be reproduced, since there is "no such thing as broken Hebrew." A German translation, on the other hand, had him speaking like a hip Berliner, since using any of the Yiddish inflections contained in the original would have been deemed "anti-Semitic." And one surreal moment some years later, while watching a documentary about skinheads in Germany, Spiegelman observed a young neo-Nazi with a poster of the cover of "Maus" in his bedroom. "I guess it was the only swastika he could find," he mused.

But he remains cagey about identity issues, having accepted at times his "unrooted cosmopolitanism" and consistently critical of what he calls "holokitsch."

"I never wanted to be the Elie Wiesel of comics," quips Spiegelman. He tells me of an "epiph-



Spiegelman in Vancouver, in front of one of his more provocative magazine covers. The artist splices together sacred cows with gusto.

'Grateful for good luck'

There are deeply personal stories revealed in "Maus" that are inexorably linked to Spiegelman's Jewishness. For instance, his father's dream that he would be freed from a POW camp in 1939 on the Sabbath on which Parashat Teruma (Exodus 25) is read (as he indeed was) and the fact that this happened to be the same Torah reading that Art chanted at his bar mitzvah. And in "MetaMaus," he offers an intriguing parallel that firmly grounds his craft in his ethnicity, noting, "All EC horror comics [published during the 1940s and '50s] were a secular Jewish response to Auschwitz."

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"I never wanted to be the Elie Wiesel of comics," quips Spiegelman. He tells me of an "epiph-

any" that he had after 9/11 – the tragedy that inspired his 2004 book "In The Shadow of No Towers": "I realized then that I really cared for my city at its most fragile and vulnerable. Before that, alienation was my dominant mode. But after 9/11, I felt like a rooted cosmopolitan."

When asked about Israeli issues, he remains as defiantly diasporic in his allegiances as can be expected from a man raised in New York, whose youth was spent devouring Mad magazine. "I'm so lucky my father came to America," he tells me, "rather than move to Israel after World War II, and I'm grateful for the good luck. As a result, I can afford to be a Diaspora Jew... I don't have to take on being a fascist as a response to World War II.

It's just too big a burden; I'm glad not to have it."

Spiegelman says he is a fan of Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" books, and of Joe Sacco's "Footnotes in Gaza." And when I ask him – given that his work has always touched a raw nerve in terms of politics and race in America – if he would ever consider doing a graphic novel on Israel/Palestine, he replies, "I've been thinking about it for a while."

But, he says, "I realized that whatever I did would be met by fury but no understanding. And I didn't need to believe I could be any smarter than, say, Amos Oz, or others on the subject – so I've avoided it."

"I understand how fraught it all is, but there was something wrong with the idea of Israel from the beginning.

After World War II, where we saw what the horrors of nationalism had brought the world to, maybe it would have been a good idea to have a real United Nations, rather than to say, Okay, you [the Jews] were the losers, so we'll give you this tiny slice of nation to protect like the rest of us. If there was going to be a nation, it should have been Germany, and that didn't happen, so this [the State of Israel] was just a silly solution."

Spiegelman splices together sacred cows with gusto, relating how his controversial 1993 Valentine's Day cover for The New Yorker of a Hasidic man kissing a black woman – painted in the wake of black-Jewish tension that turned into race riots in Crown Heights – succeeded

in outraging everyone equally: According to Spiegelman, a feminist complained in a New York Times op-ed piece about the "Jew's lascivious lips," while a column in the Washington Post complained about the "Jew's prim lips."

"I'm not such a great draftsman," says Spiegelman, "I can't draw prim and lascivious at the same time. Perhaps the problem was that the Jew had lips at all."

Later a woman rabbi told him it was the "most erotic image" she had ever seen, and a black preacher chided him for showing a "white man exploiting a black woman."

"The problem is that I'm a maker of graven images," jokes Spiegelman. And to prove his point that cartoons are all "Rorschach tests," he relates that a young girl wrote to him saying how nice it was that on Abraham Lincoln's birthday, he had drawn a photo of a black woman embracing the late president.

Oddly enough, as someone who came of age in the sex-drugs-and-rock 'n' roll era of underground comics, Spiegelman is a model of "family values." Speaking of his wife of 36 years and long-time collaborator, Francoise Mouly, he says, "We were just congratulating each other recently on how cool our kids are." They have two children, Nadja, 26, and Dashiell, 22. "They're damaged in different ways than I was by my parents," he relates, "and I'm proud of ways they're damaged. They're smart, inquisitive, functional – and they don't hate us."

"All is good," he says, smiling like the Cheshire cat against the backdrop of his Vancouver retrospective and taking another puff on his electronic cigarette. "All is good."

Hadani Ditmars is the author of "Dancing in the No Fly Zone: a Woman's Journey Through Iraq," (Haus Publishing). Her website is hadaniditmars.com.

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States to raise money for realization of the plan. Thus, in effect, the whole senior command level of the IDF – and not just the officers within it who wore skullcaps – became part of the initial stages of religionization of the army."

Professional vs. people's army

The IDF's failings in the Second Lebanon War, in 2006, provoked much debate in the army, with the senior command level adopting the professional approach anew. Libel explains that we are approaching a tipping point between those who believe that the "people's army" model answers the country's security needs, and those who believe that changes in the

as a mountain – i.e., a real and serious threat – political scientist Asher Cohen believes it is only a molehill. He writes that the apocalyptic scenarios related to the army derive from ignorance, prejudice and excessive scare tactics. According to him, many of those who are considered to be motivated by extreme messianism are not so messianic after all.

"Theirs is a ritual and symbolic messianism that lacks a practical political dimension," he writes, and most of these figures "adhere to an unconditional doctrine with respect to the sanctity of the state." The generalized and stereotypical discourse on this subject continues "as though the unconditional sanctification of the state characterizing most of the adherents of religious Zionism has not been proven."

For his part, journalist and researcher Yoaz Hendel, too, sees the army's so-called religionization process as boiling down to "perhaps a small and interesting hill" in the shadow of a mountain. According to him, the process derives from "the phenomenon of the distaste for issues concerning army and war in secular Western society, and ends in the vacuum left behind by elite groups from Israel's past."

A number of other articles in the collection are devoted to the ostensible competition that has developed between the skullcap beneath the beret and the exposed hair of women – symbolizing two minority groups in the army whose presence there is combined with presentation of a kind of challenge to the secular and masculine hegemony the army has historically had.

Military scholars Yagil Levy and Zeev Lerner point out that as religionization is growing stronger, the exclusion of women in the army is becoming more palpable, thanks to religious elements in the IDF, who invoke "universal arguments that justify excluding women – all of them, not just religious women – on the grounds that they weaken the fighting ability and the solidarity of the

military organization."

Approaching this issue from a different direction, Yifat Sela points to a gradual and steady increase in the number of religious girls who are enlisting. She assesses that the religionization is making service in the IDF simpler for the girls who are grappling with matters of religious faith. Researcher Ranit Budaie-Hyman reveals a study that shows that about one-fourth of the female graduates of the state religious education system are enlisting in the IDF nowadays, when they could with relative ease be signing up for civilian service. Thus, she contends, the religionization is excluding women with one hand, but with the other is in

fact bringing them closer.

In the book's final article, Reuven Gal tries to draw some conclusions. His main one is this: The religionization of the army is experiencing "does not at this stage constitute a real danger to the historical, national ethos of the IDF, but it is not free of political influences that are getting stronger, some of which are very far from national consensus."

I assume Gal was trying to reassure the reader, but I found no consolation in this. On the contrary: The words "at this stage" have not stopped echoing in my mind and shaking my transparent skullcap.

Yuval Elbasha's most recent novel, "The Masada Case," was published by Yedioth Ahronoth Books.

Asks Drori: 'How can a national army be reconciled with the selective assignment of tasks to units that are of a religious or sectarian nature? The willingness on the part of the IDF to compromise with the national-religious camp poses problems of principle to commanders.'

nature of the security threat necessitate adoption of a professional-army approach; and between those who aspire to deepen the ethos of the "army of the Jewish people," waging divinely ordained war against members of different religions and nations, and those who aspire to endow the IDF with greater professional knowledge and skills.

As opposed to those who see the process of religionization

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