

**From the Lancet to the Page: An Analysis of Bloodletting as a Metaphor For
Bearing Witness and Its Potentially Deadly Consequences**

by

Ryan J. Severyn

B.A. Germanic and Slavic Studies , University of Victoria, 2010

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies

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University of Victoria

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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By investigating the metaphorical connection between bloodletting and the act of writing and drawing, this thesis examines the effects and potential dangers of bearing witness and recording witness testimonials as it is experienced by first-generation and second-generation Holocaust witnesses/authors respectively. Primo Levi's works as well as biographical records documenting his life and death are examined as the primary sources for the analysis of the survivor or first-generation witness/author. Art Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus* and *Maus II* provide the source materials for the exploration of the second or 'postmemory' generation's experience with recording their own inherited transgenerational trauma. To support this metaphorical and theoretical framework, I will engage the theories of Janet McCord and her study on suicide and Holocaust survivors as well as employ the works of Sigmund Freud, Dominick LaCapra, Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch in relation to their work on cultural trauma and memory.

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Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge the University of Victoria's Germanic and Slavic Studies department for their dynamic and challenging curriculum as well as their supportive staff and instructors who have enriched and enlightened me over the last seven years of undergraduate and graduate work.

My gratitude goes to my supervisor Dr. Charlotte Schallié for her encouragement, when I most wanted to give up, her positivity and her endless patience with my midnight submissions on the eve of my deadlines.

A special acknowledgement to my second reader Dr. Matthew Pollard, who has been an inspiration to me since I set foot in his Nietzsche reception class, and remains so to this very day. Thank you for your open door and diligent (although at times severe) edits.

Lastly I would be remiss not to mention Dr. Helga Thorson, who set me on this path many years ago, it has been a life changing journey. Thank you.

Dedication

First I must recognize and thank all the brave men and women who have borne witness to the most terrible and inhumane moments of their lives to enlighten the world and help to prevent further crimes against humanity. Your stories and lives will not be forgotten.

To my dearest Alexis, the truest and most precious love I have had the privilege to know, my best friend, it has been a long and at times trying journey, but we made it. My deepest gratitude for your love, patience, Herculean support and vigilant editing, I could not have done it without you.

To my mother, where do I begin? Thank you for everything. Your fiscal and psychological helped make my entire academic odyssey possible. But most of all thank you for being and island for me during stormy seas.

Last but never least, my son Liam, thank you for putting up with your stressed out and often grumpy father. You are the greatest source of pride in my life and inspire me to always try to be more than I am today.

Chapter 1: From the Lancet to the Page: An Analysis of Bloodletting as a Metaphor For Bearing Witness and Its Potentially Deadly Consequences

The original concept for this thesis, which examines the metaphor of bearing witness as akin to bloodletting was not a concept that I found, but rather one that found me. During my earliest research into Holocaust historiography one of the first texts that I encountered, much like many North Americans of my generation, was Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986). I had just enrolled in university at the age of thirty, when in my first semester a friend insisted I borrow his copies of *Maus and Maus II*. I had long been an avid comic and graphic novel collector, and when I went home that evening, I immediately began poring over the texts, reading them over and over, fascinated by the seemingly endless layers of the text and most notably by the complex relationship between father and son. I found myself haunted by the first graphic novel's subtitle, "My Father Bleeds History". I was baffled as to the title's meaning, particularly as it related to the story's conclusion, which features the death of the father. As my academic career evolved and became increasingly focused on the Holocaust, the themes of infection, contamination and the use of writing as an attempt to address trauma, all as a result of having survived the *Lager*,¹ continued to feature predominantly in the work of many post-war authors. Whether it was in the diverse accounts of Primo Levi,

¹ "*Lager*" is a German military word used to describe the various types of camps (concentration, death, labour or transit) which the Jews of Europe and other prisoners were sent to during World War II. "Glossary of Terms," *Voices of the Holocaust*, (2009), 29 June 2014, 19 May 2014 <<http://voices.iit.edu/>>

This thesis has chosen the word *Lager* rather than *Konzentrationslager*, or concentration camp, primarily due to its frequent use by Primo Levi. Although the term *Lager* is a somewhat frequent suffix in German, (i.e. *Ferienlager* loosely translated to mean 'summer camp') and is still heard commonly to this day, the use of the term *Lager* remains somewhat restricted due to its associations to the camps.

Imre Kertész, or numerous other examples, these repeated tropes became apparent to me.

As my studies progressed, my connection to the Victoria Jewish community strengthened and I was afforded the tremendous privilege and opportunity to meet with Holocaust survivors and document their experiences. I was even afforded the opportunity to take on the role of interviewer, recording the accounts of several survivors first-hand. As I faced the challenges of shifting my focus from literary analysis from an academic perspective to that of real world issues and challenges, I began to experience a strong emotional and psychological reaction. The Holocaust and its aftermath is such a sensitive subject and I was, and remain, in awe of the survivors' ability to have endured so much, that I became almost paralysed over how to conduct the interview. I wanted to ask the right questions, and avoid the wrong ones. I strove hard to remain objective and accurately record the accounts, while always seeking some hidden truth and the insights that contribute to undiscovered understanding. My thoughts became dominated by the experience of listening and learning from the interview subject, and the process of conducting such interviews became an obsessive and all-consuming experience.

At around the same time, I spent three summers in Central and Eastern Europe visiting many former *Lager* and modern memorial sites and talking to local survivors and witnesses. Upon returning home after contending with this subject matter for what had been four consecutive years, I found that my own health began to steadily worsen, and I began to think about the physical and emotional toll of surrounding oneself with such

difficult subject matter. To clarify, I was dealing with an underlying physical illness, but the emotional impact of immersing myself in such subject matter contributed to a worsening of my well-being, and I began to contemplate the cost of bearing witness even for a historically removed individual such as me. If this process of witnessing was taking a toll on me, a person far removed from any direct connection to the Holocaust, I wondered what the impact must be for those who have actual familial ties to the events, or even direct memories of these atrocities. *Maus* stirred again in the back of my mind, and I pondered how Spiegelman, son of survivors, himself survived the making of his acclaimed texts, and what this labour put his survivor father through.

At this time I was working with a local Holocaust education and commemoration society that organized several local functions and booked many survivor speakers, who were becoming increasingly difficult to find, both because of dwindling numbers but also because of the limited number who were willing to speak. As the years passed the number of speakers attending and sharing their stories at local events such as *Kristallnacht* and *Yom HaShoah* continued to decrease. Increasing age contributed to some of the refusals. However, a reason repeatedly stated for not continuing to speak on the subject was that it was 'just too hard to continue', or 'it just takes too much out of them'. Though initially disappointed, members of the society also understood and accepted the reasons given and moved on to the next possible speaker without taking much more than a surface glance as to what was being stated in these speakers' refusals. As historians, educators and even memory keepers our primary concern was focused on losing the speakers and the opportunity to employ their accounts for

educational and memorial purposes. Although these events had a dignified purpose, the impact on the survivors themselves was often not closely examined.

Scholars of the Holocaust in this century race against time's ravaging and eroding effects on memory and first-hand witnessing. The opportunity to record primary testimony has become increasingly rare. This fact provides a powerful motivation to uncover the unheard stories and expose them to the world, so that we may demand justice for the atrocities, pay tribute to victims and most optimistically prevent similar events from occurring again. Such motivations are common and well-intentioned, yet they arguably serve the interests of the current or future generation with the unintended result of ignoring or remaining oblivious to the traumatic effect that remembering and bearing witness to such extreme suffering has on the survivors. It is far less demanding for modern historians to espouse the responsibility to bear witness when they have no direct trauma to recollect. It is a different matter when someone has endured the trauma personally. The choice to delve into these dark oceans of memory may have dire consequences. In a life that may have been a battle against the memories, a survivor who may be emotionally treading water and just barely keeping his or her own head above water could possibly be overwhelmed and even drowned by re-immersion into these traumatic memories. Those who choose to bear witness to their traumatic pasts through writing are continuously tethered to their trauma, constantly remembering in order to document the crimes committed against them.

Though the demand for first-hand accounts of the Holocaust may be imposed upon survivors by academia, family and the extended community, it is not always a

pressure that is externally applied. For many of those who lived through the Holocaust, bearing witness becomes a powerful purpose for living as well as a compelling and inescapable drive to record that which the dead cannot. Though bearing witness is an important motivation behind most Holocaust memoirs, for some survivors, particularly those who were complicit in some way with their persecutors (i.e. *Sonderkommandos*²), the act of remembering and witnessing serves also as an attempt at dispelling the horror and the guilt of the Holocaust. The survivors, who are driven to write about their experience in order to bear witness, address issues of survivor's guilt, while their own traumatic memories carry a heavy burden. They write as a means to bring justice to the dead and cleanse themselves of trauma and guilt, and yet this process of remembering and writing extends their exposure to the source of their trauma. In a symbolic sense, the process of writing is analogous to the antiquated medical practice of bloodletting, which was according to beliefs at the time intended to dispel disease or affliction, but instead served to weaken the patient.³ Holocaust survivors attempt to purge themselves of their experience in the *Lager*, but are instead debilitated by such attempts. Metaphorically, through writing and bearing witness, these authors/witnesses are

² *Sonderkommando* was a title given to groups of prisoners, selected for their youth and ability to work, who were assigned duties in the *Lager* that included the collection and disposal of corpses, emptying the trains and sorting the influx of personal belongings that the inmates brought with them. These men, almost exclusively Jewish, often survived for longer periods and were afforded privileges in the *Lager* in exchange for the completion of their duties. However, few escaped the *Lager* as they were executed with great diligence after a certain period of time at least partially as a result of their complicity and the knowledge of the internal functioning of the *Lager* that the Nazis wished to conceal. Jacqueline Shields, "Concentration Camps: The Sonderkommando," *Jewishvirtuallibrary*, (2014) 29 June 2014 <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/index.html>>

³ The concept of writing/witnessing as a form of bloodletting as well as the depiction of witness as patient will be explored in greater detail at a later point in this thesis.

transferring their life onto paper, each word akin to a drop of blood, a slow and methodical process that in some cases leads to death.

In order to examine the phenomenon or double-bind of bearing witness and bloodletting in this first generation, I will focus on the life and work of Primo Levi, a survivor of the *Lager* who bore witness through his writing. Primo Levi's work is cited as it strongly illustrates the infective and corrupting nature of the *Lager*. He sought an elusive catharsis through writing, an activity which became predominant throughout the remainder of his life, but this thesis will argue that the process of this constant recollecting weakened him psychologically and ultimately contributed to his presumed suicide.

The second category of Holocaust literature⁴ addressed in this thesis is written from a postmemory⁵ or second-generational perspective, namely through Art Spiegelman's graphic novels *Maus* and *Maus II*. Through an analysis of these two texts, I will illustrate how the process of infection and subsequent catharsis through writing and drawing, though moderated and perhaps less self-annihilating, can transcend the

⁴ The subject of genre and even the categorization of Holocaust literature is one fraught with controversy and debate. Some critics such as Alvin Rosenfeld would suggest that the term Holocaust Literature should be a term restricted for use only by Jewish survivors. In fact, Rosenfeld argues that the genre of Holocaust Literature is in fact holy in nature. In his text "A Double Dying" published in 1980, Rosenfeld states in regards to genre, "it's a birth, a testament to more than silence, more than madness, more even than language itself, [it] must be seen as a miracle of some sort, not only an overcoming of mute despair but an assertion and affirmation of faith" (Franklin 7). However, even within this very strict interpretation of the genre arguments have arisen over whether those that managed to escape before Nazi occupation should be included in the genre of Holocaust Literature, or should the term specifically be reserved for only those of Jewish decent that survived the *Lager*. The definition of Holocaust Literature that will be employed for the purpose of this paper is, "all forms of writing, both documentary and discursive, and in any language, that have shaped the public memory of the Holocaust and been shaped by it" (Lederhendler 166).

⁵ Postmemory is a term coined by Marianne Hirsch which describes the relationship that the second generation bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of the first generation. This concept will be explained at length later in this thesis.

generation that directly experienced the trauma. Spiegelman, like many other second generation authors who contend with their connection to the Holocaust, is attempting to cope with a ruptured or 'buried' connection to the *Lager* (lived through by his parents) and the resulting inherited trauma. In order to explore this second generation infection, and the need to bear witness to events outside of one's lifetime, I will utilize the concept of postmemory that arose from the work of Marianne Hirsch. Expanding on Hirsch's theory, I will argue that the postmemory generation is compelled to pursue, revisit and in some ways demand the cleansing or closure of trauma which may have been avoided or buried by the first generation. Specifically, I will examine how for Spiegelman the telling of his parents' story was both a psychological necessity as well as a moral obligation, one that he not only took upon himself, but also forced upon his at times reluctant father, who died upon completion of the tale. Driven to discover his mother's story, which also embodies the bloodletting and bearing witness motif revealed in the analysis of Levi, Spiegelman searches out and even demands both his parents' stories from his reluctant father. In this way, I will assert that Spiegelman becomes the 'barber'⁶ in the bloodletting process, with his father as his 'patient'. This thesis asserts that although Spiegelman begins the process of drawing out his parents' accounts as a means of contending with his own inherited trauma, he ends up

⁶ Surgery during the four centuries from 1100 to 1500 A.D. was a very crude business. The barber-surgeon occupation developed during these years after a church edict by the Council of Tours in 1163 A.D. prevented monks and priests from continuing the custom of bloodletting. The barbers began to lance veins and abscesses as well as to perform amputations of arms and legs. The red-and-white barber pole designated a barber who did surgery as well as haircutting. Gilbert R. Seigworth. "Bloodletting Over the Centuries," *A Brief History Of Bloodletting*, December 1980, 25 June 2014 <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/redgold/basics/bloodlettinghistory.html>>

enveloped by his own postmemory perspective, and comes to occupy a dual role of both a patient as well as a barber-surgeon in the bloodletting process.

Expanding on Janet McCord's analysis of Holocaust survivors who bore witness only to end their lives, and challenging the claims of scholars such as David Lester who suggest that internal influences rather than the *Lager* precipitated the suicides of many survivor authors, the primary aim of this thesis is to investigate how Levi and Spiegelman (as respective representatives of first and second generation survivors⁷) address the infective and traumatic experience of the *Lager* through texts that embody the symbolic understanding of writing as bloodletting. Attention will be given to the nature of trauma and the state of psychological contamination which arose not just from the extreme deprivation and suffering of the *Lager* but also from the forced complicity and moral compromise that to varying degrees became a means of improving the odds of survival. Many survivors then emerged with an altered and alien perspective on reality, a drive to purge their infected psyches, and a sense of duty and guilt which demanded they give voice to the dead. In these attempts to witness and purge, many found themselves frustrated by the inability of words to express their pain or describe what they had endured. They found themselves overcome by the very trauma and past they were attempting to purge, and they were too weak to outlive upon completion of their act of witnessing.

⁷ This thesis employs two specific, yet differing populations of witnesses, to explore the potential deadly effects of bearing witness to the Holocaust. The first category is what this thesis refers to as first-generation witnesses, which is comprised of those who had direct or first-hand experience with the Holocaust and lived through the atrocities. In contrast second-generational witnesses are those who have inherited the memories and trauma. A generation removed from the original source of the trauma, the psychological wounds are passed down to the second generation from the first generation.

Diagnosing the Infection: What Is Trauma?

In order to clearly elucidate the primary motif of infection and bloodletting present in this project, a cogent and complete explanation of the use of the term trauma is required. To do this I will primarily work from the understanding of trauma as presented by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra.

In terms of etymology the word trauma is derived from the Greek word for wound, and historically it was usually employed to describe a physical injury inflicted on the body. However, at the turn of the twentieth century, pioneers such as Hermann Oppenheimer and Sigmund Freud began to employ the term to describe psychological injuries and symptoms, primarily in the sexual sphere. As a result of longer lasting conflicts such as World Wars I and II, the Korean War, Vietnam, and countless incursions in the Middle East, the fields of sociology and psychology have attempted to understand and classify the resulting non-physical trauma experienced by combatants. Numerous names and classifications have been created to describe mental injuries due to war service: traumatic neurosis, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, combat stress reaction, War Neurosis, Shell Shock. Simply put, on a psychological level, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11). As a result, trauma can create substantial and lasting damage to the psychological development of a person, often leading to neurosis. Trauma is a possible outcome of exposure to a solitary experience or a reoccurring and continuing event, which overwhelms the

survivor's ability to manage or assimilate the memories, experiences and emotional impact associated with the traumatic event. A period of latency may occur, lasting even decades, as the individual struggles to cope with more immediate situations.

Although Oppenheimer is accredited with the first foray into the field of psychological trauma, it is Freud's exploration of the phenomenon that creates the framework of the definition employed in this thesis. In his text *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud depicts a model of the apparently inexplicable and persistent psychological suffering experienced by some individuals returning from the battlefields of World War I. These individuals were haunted by nightmares, unrelenting re-enactments and repetitive behaviours which often took uncanny forms as the unconscious attempted to come to terms with the catastrophic event(s). Freud, referencing Oppenheimer's earlier work, refers to the phenomenon as *traumatic neurosis* and describes a pattern of relentless suffering experienced by certain individuals, particularly battlefield survivors. Freud asserts that,

[u]nlike the symptoms of a normal neurosis, whose painful manifestations can be understood ultimately in terms of the attempted avoidance of unpleasurable conflict, the painful repetition of the flashback can only be understood as the absolute inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event that has not been given psychic meaning.

(qtd. in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 59)

Freud explains that within certain survivors the experience of trauma is "inescapably bound to a referential return" (Freud qtd. in Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 7). He asserts

that due to the nature of trauma, the psyche at the time of the causal event cannot assimilate the damage, and so remains eternally separated from any sort of true knowing; yet paradoxically, the psyche also remains perpetually tethered to the source of suffering as the repressed memories surface and may manifest as an “unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 2). It is in this paradoxical relationship of knowing and not knowing, purgative and infection that these traumatic events and memories leave the survivor in an inescapable and torturous psychic limbo. These infected memories embed themselves in both the conscious and unconscious and often manifest emotionally despite attempts at repression. Speaking specifically about the survivors mentioned in this thesis, the search for catharsis through memory work is eternally bound to a constant struggle to purge the damaged psyche through bearing witness. Yet, because bearing witness requires the reliving of such painful memories, survivors find themselves repeatedly returning to the time and place of their wounds, illustrating one of the challenges in treating psychological trauma. Caruth states that

trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the Mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world--is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event . . . [that is] experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again,

repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.

(Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 3-4)

In the case of Primo Levi, the compulsive repetitive action or the manifestation of his trauma appears in the process of writing and bearing witness. When this understanding of trauma is applied to the cases of Holocaust survivors who attempt to bear witness to the catastrophic events that they endured, it creates an insurmountable hurdle in the dissemination of their witnessing and denies them the subsequent catharsis or purgative effect which they seek. They attempt to put into words that which defies description. These survivors on one hand strive for release from the horrific memories through the exhausting process of recording their accounts; yet on the other hand, release from the trauma in form of forgetting or moving past their memories could also be disturbing for many survivors as it might mean letting go the drive to bear witness, something which was often a strong justification for survival and a purpose for post-war existence. Caruth comments:

To cure oneself—whether by drugs or the telling of one’s story or both—seems to many survivors to imply the giving-up of an important reality, or the dilution of a special truth into the reassuring terms of therapy. Indeed, in Freud’s own early writings on trauma, the possibility of integrating the lost event into a series of associative memories, as a part of the cure, was seen precisely as a way to permit the event to be forgotten. (Caruth, *Trauma* vii)

Survivor authors, perhaps subconsciously, are in some cases working in the opposite direction of a cure. They struggle to remember every face, to report every account as

accurately as possible as they are often acting as a voice for the countless dead, including those who helped them in their own survival. The sheer gravity of the responsibility that these survivors feel is daunting and demands of them an exacting accuracy and vigilance as their reports will likely be scrutinized by historians, other survivors and skeptics alike. It is here that the metaphor of bloodletting becomes so apt. These survivor authors find themselves in a deadly double-bind. On one hand they seek to rid themselves of the diseased and infected memories of the catastrophic events that plague them daily, yet, it is in these memories that they have found their reason for survival. I contend that for authors like Levi, the writing and witnessing becomes the repetitive and neurotic act that weakens their psyches to such a degree that they become incapable of staving off the initial infected memories, leading arguably to death by suicide. Caruth comments that

[as] modern neurobiologists point out, the repetition of the traumatic experience can itself be retraumatizing; if not life-threatening, it is at least threatening to the chemical structure of the brain and can ultimately lead to deterioration. And this would also seem to explain the high suicide rate of survivors, for example, survivors of Vietnam or of concentration camps, who commit suicide only *after* they have found themselves in complete safety. As a paradigm for the human experience that governs history, then, traumatic disorder is indeed the struggle to die. (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 63)

Authors such as Levi literally wrote and witnessed themselves to death while attempting to purge their own infected memories. They carry within them not only the infection of the *Lager* and the guilt of survival but also the drive to perform the Herculean task of bearing witness for personal and collective reasons: “The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (Caruth, *Trauma* 5). A post-war existence that is fraught with traumatic memories, at least in the case of some Holocaust survivors, may be conceived of as being a state of neither true life nor true death, but rather a sort of limbo. Caruth describes these attempts at witnessing as a, “kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of survival” (Caruth, *Trauma* 7).

Employing the metaphor of infection to describe this type of psychological trauma is not wholly original to this thesis as it is alluded to in some of Freud’s earliest work on the subject of trauma. Caruth astutely points out that while developing his criteria and definition of ‘traumatic neurosis’ he describes the period of time that had elapsed between the traumatic incident and the presentation of the psychological symptoms as the “incubation period, a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 16). Just as a pathogen can attack the body’s immune system or a specific organ, eventually producing illness or infection, so too can an event of great suffering or stress invade the psyche, in turn producing a psychological or mental illness. The psychological illness as it is expressed through

trauma may foreseeably manifest as ailments such as chronic depression, anxiety, night terrors or compulsive behaviours. Psychological suffering is more intangible than an infected sore, and the survivor is left with no equivalent to an antibiotic, not to mention the stigma he or she will likely face because of others' lack of understanding. Arguably, a psychologist might be of assistance, but many survivors are left to devise his or her own therapy. The survivor of the *Lager*, within whom in all probability a lingering psychological infection remains, understandably may seek out bearing witness as a means to treat the trauma. Such a therapy is doubly useful as it also satisfies the need to act as a voice for those who did not survive to tell their own story of unspeakable injustice. Levi is one such example, and he survived for many years treating his psychological infection through his writing and his witnessing. Yet the 'impossible history' and trauma that he carried stayed within him until his death. Even during his life, his work and purpose were intrinsically bound to the constant return to and revisitation of the *Lager*. In Freudian terms, the incubation period may have taken decades before the trauma or infections of the Lager reclaimed him, but reclaim him it did. Like the Ancient Mariner he references (*The Drowned and the Saved* 7), Levi lived an existence somewhere between life and death, surviving only to bear witness to his guilt and the horrors he had witnessed. Anja Spiegelman, mother of author Art Spiegelman, also attempted on two separate occasions to record and perhaps pay tribute to those that she had met while in hiding and later in the *Lager*, but she, like Levi, was unable to find any peace through this process and was unable to escape the psychological malaise

inflicted by the *Lager*. She ended her own life, leaving an absence of testimony, which her son Art later attempted to fill.

In addition to Caruth's work on the subject, Dominic LaCapra's analysis of trauma and its relationship to both memory and historiography offers further nuances to the understanding of trauma and writing as a means to address this trauma within the context of this paper. Through his interpretation of Freud, LaCapra contends that trauma can be divided into two categories: "acting out" and "working through". While claiming no expertise in the field of psychoanalysis (*Yad Vashem* interview 141), LaCapra envisions these two intertwined, yet rather broad categories. 'Acting out' is described as being "related to repetition, and even the repetition-compulsion – the tendency to repeat something compulsively". The compulsive repetitive behaviour serves to anchor victims to the source of trauma, preventing them from having a present or future orientation: "This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past, to exist in the present as if they were still fully in the past, with no distance from it" (*Yad Vashem* interview). In 'working through', LaCapra suggests that the traumatized person tries to gain critical distance from a problem to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. However, this thesis will argue that in the cases of Levi and Anja Spiegelman, the separation between LaCapra's categories is a constructed division, and that the process of both "acting out" and "working through" are both experienced through their writing. The presence of both coping mechanisms exists in the act of bearing witness because the author must both "act out" his or her trauma through revisiting and reviving its

inception, which prevents healing, but on the other hand he or she also strives by writing to find meaning in the present through speaking on behalf of as well as honouring the dead and attempting to understand suffering. Levi, for example spent a lifetime 'working through' his trauma through his writing, and this approach seems to have been partially successful in that he continued to live and write well into his late sixties. Yet the fact that he presumably committed suicide, suggests that his writing was not a true path towards redemption or peace but rather a process of writing himself to death.⁸ The traumatic neurosis for an author/witness such as Levi was in fact witnessing and writing. Rather than acting as the cure through purgation, the process of bearing witness through his writing acted as the manifestation or symptom of the trauma itself. In Levi's case, he was successful in writing and bearing witness to his experience of the *Lager*; however, the attempts to achieve catharsis or escape his own trauma or psychic malaise in the end proved unsuccessful. It is analogous to the bad doctor's joke; "The good news is the operation was a complete success, the bad news is, the patient died".

In the example of the *Maus* texts, Anja Spiegelman also wrote and attempted to dispel the traumatic memories through two memoirs which were both destroyed, first by her captors in the *Lager* and second by her husband Vladek, who, in his attempt to repress his and his wife's traumatic history as well as to control his family's memory of the *Lager*, burned her diaries. Vladek may have been suppressing both his and his wife's traumatic history to protect his son from its infective nature, or perhaps to reframe his

⁸ In Chapter 2 of this thesis, which focuses on Primo Levi, a lengthy discussion is provided in regard to the disagreements over the circumstances of Levi's death. In my opinion, considering all the evidence provided, Levi's death was indeed suicide, and thus is treated as such in this thesis.

own survivor's guilt with a sort of survivor's pride as suggested by the character of Artie's psychiatrist in *Maus II*: "Maybe your father needed to show that he was always right - that he could always survive – because he felt guilty about surviving" (*Maus II* 44). In the *Maus* texts, Spiegelman never fully reveals his father's motives for obscuring the family story, but it is apparent in his work, which will be discussed at length in the third chapter of this thesis, that Spiegelman viewed his father as a selective and reticent 'patient' and an unreliable narrator due to his tendency to omit information or glorify his own actions. Anja's diaries were an unconscious act of both "acting out" and "working through" the infective trauma inflicted by the *Lager*, and therefore they contained an inherent and infective potential. Yet for Anja, not being able to fully "work through" her trauma meant that she could never heal the psychological damage that was born decades before. Isolated and unfulfilled, she ended her own life, leaving her son to attempt to recover her story and find release from his own inherited experience of trauma.

LaCapra's contributions to this thesis do not end with the notion of "acting out" and "working through". His recognition of the "contagiousness of trauma" is another important supporting point (LaCapra, *Writing History* 142). He suggests that trauma can be transferred between individuals and even generations, resembling an infection or contagion. This element of LaCapra's work on trauma parallels Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theory, which as an intellectual framework, is essential for elucidating the concept of bloodletting and bearing witness from a second-generation perspective. In

brief, Hirsch's postmemory theory describes trauma as potentially passed down from one generation to another:

[T]he relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before to experiences they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present.

(Hirsch, POSTMEMORY)

This thesis's analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II* leans heavily on Hirsch's concept of postmemory to expose how the infection of the *Lager* is transferred to the second generation. In the case of *Maus* and *Maus II*, it is no longer the author that sheds the blood in the witnessing process but rather the second generation author who in his attempts to seek a cure for his own mental malaise becomes the barber that collects the poisoned memories or 'blood' of the first generation. Trauma for the members of

the second generation is potentially imposed on them through the emotional residue of survival which permeates the family environment. This emotional residue may be expressed as an open wound and repeated discourse based on wartime experience, or the tendency to avoid or silence discussion of the family's past. It is the silence as well as the overt discourse which create the trauma for the second-generation.

Hirsch connects her theories on postmemory, and what this thesis terms inherited trauma, to the concept of "witnessing by adoption" introduced by Geoffrey Hartman.⁹ Hirsch states in relation to Hartman's concept: "[p]ostmemory thus would be *retrospective witnessing by adoption*. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences –and thus also the memories –of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them on to one's own life story" (Hirsch, "*Surviving Images*" 10). The adoption of memories therefore acts as a mechanism through which the postmemory experience is constructed. While I agree that the concept of inherited trauma plays a key role in the postmemory experience, Hirsch's wording seems to suggest a greater degree of agency or consciousness on the part of the second generation witness in the adoption of the first-generation's memories and trauma. Rather than using the term adoption I would again suggest that this second generation experience of postmemory manifests more as the perception of familial malaise or a hereditary affliction which is inflicted upon them, likely unintentionally, by the first generation. Hirsch later states that the second generation grows up "dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are displaced by the

⁹ In her essay, "Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory", Hirsch cites the work of Geoffrey Hartman and his text *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust*.

powerful stories of the previous generation, shaped by monumental traumatic events that resist understanding and integration (Hirsch, *Surviving Images* 12). This second citation does not sound like a selected legacy but rather an inflicted or absorbed infection. These second-generation witnesses likely did not choose to take on either the inherited silences or voiced trauma, but still they grew up dominated by both forms of discourse, and thus absorbed the trauma nonetheless. This postmemory environment lies at the center of *Maus* and *Maus II*.

Bloodletting as a Metaphor

“Writing is easy. You just sit down at the typewriter, open up a vein, and bleed it out drop by drop.” --- Walter “Red” Smith¹⁰

In order to clarify the metaphor of bloodletting, which will be a pervasive theme throughout the thesis, a clear explanation of the practice is in order. The arcane medical practice of bloodletting or Phlebotomy dates back over 2,500 years to ancient Egypt and Greece (Seigworth, *Bloodletting np.*). The second century Greek physician Hippocrates, who is often referred to as the ‘Father of Modern Medicine’ and whose name we still hear in reference to the Hippocratic Oath, followed the belief that all nature was made up of four basic elements: earth, air, fire and water. Within human physiology, the four elements were known as the four basic ‘humours’, including blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow. Subsequently, each of the ‘humours’ was centred in a specific organ and was correlated to one of the four personality types known as sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, and choleric (Magner 66-67). Illness was believed to be caused by having

¹⁰ Walter Winchell, “n.t.” *Naugatuck Daily News*, 06 April 1949: 4.

an imbalance of the 'humours', and equilibrium was sought through practices such as purging, dieresis, catharsis and bloodletting (Starr np.).

Despite a long history, the act of bloodletting is and was associated with impurity for patient and practitioner, since the latter also bore the burden of social marginalization for his trade, and the former could not escape without some stigma or implied weakness or infection. The association of impurity and isolation which are related to the practice of bloodletting further strengthen it as a metaphor that can be applied to the writing of survivor literature. These witness authors also often find themselves shunned and without an audience or receiver for their accounts, particularly in the years immediately following the Holocaust as the world was focused more on celebrating the victory over the Nazis, than on delving into Nazi atrocities. The Holocaust witness, much like the patient, found him or herself isolated by the very pursuit of daily survival and unable to shed his or her "bad blood".

The equation of writing and bleeding is a longstanding motif in literature,¹¹ yet when this metaphor is applied to the genre of survivor Holocaust literature the metaphor takes on a much more deadly context. For the purpose of this thesis the bloodletting metaphor is employed to illustrate how for some Holocaust survivors writing and bearing witness can be seen as a type of purging, intended to cleanse the survivors of their traumatic experiences, or in other terms extreme 'melancholia' and 'ill humours' (Seigworth 2022-2023). Yet more than being a simple purging process, the act

¹¹ The metaphor linking bloodletting and writing or blood and ink, has long tradition. Authors like Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Wolfe, Paul Gallico, Reverend Sydney Smith, Ernest Hemingway and sports writer Walter Smith have all been attributed with employing the metaphor. Garson O'Toole, "Writing is Easy; You Just Open Up a Vein and Write", *The Quote Investigator*, 14 September 2011, 20 June 2014 <<http://quoteinvestigator.com/>>

of re-living and recording these traumatic memories inflicted upon on the survivor in the *Lager* can be seen to have weakened or in extreme cases killed the author/patient, just as phlebotomy often resulted in deteriorating health or even death. Within the context of this thesis, the pen is equated to the lancet, and the page to the bleeding bowl, collecting the toxic or infected 'humours'.

Defining Suicide

This thesis proposes that writing is in fact, for many witnesses, an act of bloodletting which – as a voluntary choice – leads to the extinction of the author. Thus, as suicide is a predominate theme in this exploration, one that applies to both Levi and Spiegelman's mother Anja, further exploration and clarification of this uncomfortable topic is necessary. Simplistically, the term suicide is used to describe the act of taking one's own life. Yet, this definition is focused only on the outcome of the directly caused death while ignoring the related acts of suicide attempts as well as other self-destructive and self-harming behaviour. For example, if a chronically depressed drug-addicted individual overdoses, is it a suicide? Historian and Holocaust researcher Janet Schlenk McCord uses a definition created by psychologist Edwin S. Shneidman which I feel better nuances and represents the behaviour of suicide. It is Shneidman's definition that I will employ for the purpose of this paper: "Suicide is a conscious act of self-induced annihilation, best understood as a multidimensional malaise in a needful individual who defines an issue for which the suicide is perceived as the best solution" (McCord 25). Within this definition, the term 'malaise' suggests an inescapable internal illness that persists and contaminates one's lens on life to the point where continued

existence is a worse fate than that of self-destruction. This being stated, when examining cases of suicide, one must resist the urge to attribute extreme mental illness or disease as the primary contributing factor because such an interpretation diminishes an intensely personal and conscious act which encompasses every aspect of the person's being. McCord states, "suicide is an act which includes spiritual, cultural, psychological, philosophical, biological, metaphysical and interpersonal elements, all of which are contained in the context of a highly personal, individual decision to end one's own life" (McCord 24). McCord continues:

While it is statistically verifiable that persons with mental disorders commit suicide more frequently than the general population caution is urged when drawing conclusions regarding causality. Many people live long, unhappy lives as sufferers of various mental disorders with little hope of recovery, yet without suicidal behaviour or ideation. (McCord 24)

Suicide is caused by insufferable internal torment which results in the recognition that a threshold of suffering has been crossed. A permanent decision is then reached, that the uncertain and possible oblivion of death becomes preferable to the constant distress and emotionally malaise of life. Suicide is adjustive in nature, a response to pain inducing stimuli, an act which becomes the ultimate escape mechanism, similar to other self-destructive adaptive escape mechanisms such as drug abuse, self-injurious behaviour or sexual addictions, only more directly final.

Predominately, research reveals that suicide is not committed at the height of a depressive, psychotic or manic episode; rather the decision to ends one's life is typically

made when these extreme emotions subside, supplanted by a cold rationality and acceptance.

First, the patient finds himself in an intolerable affective state, flooded with emotional pain so intense and so unrelenting that it can no longer be endured. Second, the patient recognizes his condition, and gives up on himself. This recognition is not merely a cognitive surrender, even though most hopeless patients probably have thought about their circumstances and reach conscious, cognitive conclusions to give up. A more important aspect of the recognition I am describing is an unconscious, precognitive operation in which the self is abandoned as being unworthy of further concern. (Maltzberger 1)

This is not the description of a manic act but rather a calculated decision to choose death over suffering. The mania is produced in a perturbed state preceding this cognitive surrender, and it is during this first stage that one might labour frantically or engage in other manic behaviours in order to address the intolerable emotional state. In the case of Levi, his entire body of work may be attributed to the emotional imbalance that resulted from his exposure to the *Lager*.

The *Lager* were places of continuous danger, where life was under unceasing threat and morality was consciously undermined, leaving the prisoners in a state of constant stress. As McCord states, “[t]his kind of emotional hyper-vigilance remains within the traumatized person for years after the danger has passed, and leaves the individual with a chronic and indigestible bolus of suffering which can seem unrelenting

in its intensity” (McCord 30). Similar to this thesis’s central metaphor of bloodletting and infection, McCord also implies that the body of the victim plays host to a foreign contaminate¹². This ‘indigestible bolus’ infects post-war life, and although it may drive the survivor to bear witness, it also may produce symptoms of depression and isolation which may ultimately awaken in the witness the possibility of escape through self-annihilation.

Neither Levi nor Anja Spiegelman left a definitive suicide note, yet both left a final attempt at witnessing: Levi with his last novel *The Drowned and the Saved*, and Anja in her second attempt at writing a memoir, which she had hoped would carry her story to the next generation, “I wish my son, when he grows up, he will be interested by this” (*Maus* 159). This suggests that the second attempt at witnessing through her diaries was essentially a suicide note intended primarily for her son, the one person who might be able to find closure for the family trauma. Both Levi’s book and Anja’s diary function as their parting words and both seem written knowingly of the emotional cost it took to complete them.

The Imperative to Bear Witness

The impetus to bear witness is a primary motive behind the act of writing/bloodletting in the bloodletting metaphor and it would be remiss not to clarify some of the cultural context that surrounds such a brave act of remembrance. For some

¹² McCord does not suggest that this infection or contaminate is present or shed through blood but rather she implies that the contaminate takes the form of an ‘indigestible bolus’ which relates to the organs that control digestion, however the concept of the body becoming a host to a harmful foreign contaminate remains parallel to this thesis’s central metaphor.

survivors, a cultural imperative to bear witness for the sake of all Jews was likely a strong motivator; whether or not they were secular or practising members of their cultural group, bearing witness is a statement of defiance against antisemitism. For others, it was the religious responsibility of truth-telling¹³ and the responsibility to seek justice for their people which added further incentive to bear witness. Compounding these religious and cultural motivators, is the sheer number of Jews murdered, the entire family lines lost, the children never born, all of whom have ghostly cries demanding to be voiced and heard. Terrance Des Pres famously stated, “[t]he Holocaust produced an endless scream which, given time, transmutes itself into the voice of many witnesses” (Des Pres 672). Whether they were aware of Des Pres’s metaphor or not, the perception of this ‘endless scream’, both primal and inarticulate, would likely build within Jewish survivors a feeling of cultural and generational responsibility to speak for the masses who could not speak for themselves. Upon liberation, many like Levi found

¹³ In the Torah, the ninth commandment *Aseret Hadibrot – ‘Shaqer’ed Vere’akha Lota’aneh’* or thou shall not bear false witness, is commonly misinterpreted as merely the prohibition of lying; however, a more accurate interpretation of the commandment means to be one with G_d who is truth and to be a constant witness to the truth. The Hebrew word ‘emet’, meaning truth, is composed of the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, again reinforcing the inseparable connection between truth and G_d, but also illustrating how both are all encompassing. As the Torah describes the sacred nature of truth, it also clearly commands that injustice or sacrilege be exposed through witness testimonial: “The witness of grave offence, such as the enticement to idolatry, was bound by law to expose the offender” (Deut. 13:7ff.; cf. Lev. 24:11; Num. 15:33). If ‘enticement to idolatry’ is considered a ‘grave offence,’ one can only envisage the magnitude of the offence and subsequently the responsibility to bear witness to an atrocity like the Holocaust. Traditional scripture not only requires the bearing of witness but states that, “[a]ny person able to testify as one who has seen or learned of the matter who does not come forward to testify is liable to punishment” (Lev 5:1) and continues, “[i]f he does not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity” (Lev. 5:1). In this sense, the agency of the witness is completely devoid even in cases where harm may come to him or her for bearing witness. In the context of the Holocaust, even if the trauma of remembering is too psychologically damaging to bear, the scriptures as well as the traditional Jewish culture demand bearing witness.

themselves with an intense need or drive to tell the world what they had endured, and this drive also provided a purpose for survival.

Historian Shama Davidson views bearing witness in the following manner:

“bearing witness preserves for the survivor an important connection with the past with the survivor’s prewar identity, prewar and wartime experiences, as well as with the dead who cannot speak” (qtd. in McCord 21). However, Davidson continues by suggesting that, “bearing witness helped survivors with their reintegration into the postwar world.”(qtd. in McCord 21) It is with this second assertion that I would strongly disagree. I would argue against the integration aspect of Davidson’s perspective, because as McCord points out, very few non-survivors in the post-war period wanted to hear survivor testimony. The world that emerged out of the ruins of World War II became increasingly polarized by the Cold War, and most people on both sides of the Wall had little room and nothing to gain from exploring the dark and horrid details of the war. Even many of those who were somewhat complicit as perpetrators chose to see themselves as victims of the war, further discouraging an open discourse of the war’s atrocities. It was easier to think that the war was over and that the fascist enemy was banished. The *Lager* was a part of the war that everyone, including many survivors, wished to simply forget and leave behind. In the case of some of the survivors, forgetting was an impossibility. This collective cultural deafness left a witness with no audience, testimony with no jury, confession with no absolution, ghosts without mourners. So if the survivor managed in some way to even partially conquer the trauma by describing the indescribable events they endured and perhaps even committed in the

Lager, the act of bearing witness was often postponed or even halted by the lack of receiver. Therefore, due to this disconnect, it would seem implausible that bearing witness would necessarily facilitate an integration of survivors into Western post-war societies.

The lack of a receptive audience is only one of the many hurdles for the survivor in the act of bearing witness. Even if the witness managed to acquire an audience, language seemed to betray the witnesses, who experienced how words as incapable of conveying the horrors of their past. Famous Holocaust survivor, historian and author Elie Wiesel commented on the double bind in which the survivor often found him or herself immersed. Wiesel felt he had to survive to bear witness, yet he was painfully aware of his own limitations, commenting, “[w]e all knew that we could never, never say what had to be said, that we could never express in words, coherent, intelligible words, our experience of madness on an absolute scale” (Wiesel, *Why I Write* 201). He continues, “[a]ll words seemed inadequate, worn, foolish lifeless, whereas I wanted them to be searing” (Wiesel, *Why I Write* 201). Wiesel is acutely aware of the rupture between memoir and reality, and though the failures of language were no fault of his own, he nonetheless seemed to feel the failure deeply. He stated:

Even if you read all the books ever written, even if you listen to all the testimonies ever given, you will remain on this side of the wall, you will view the agony and death of a people from afar, through the screen of a memory that is not your own. An admission of impotence and guilt? I don't know. All

I know is that Treblinka and Auschwitz cannot be told. And yet I have tried
 God knows I have tried. (Wiesel, *Why I Write* 203-204)

Wiesel, in a separate publication, elaborated on the impossibility of truly bearing witness:

By its uniqueness, the Holocaust defies literature. We think we are describing an event, we transmit only its reflection. No one has the right to speak for the dead, no one has the power to make them speak. No image is sufficiently demented, no cry sufficiently blasphemous to illuminate the plight of a single victim, resigned or rebellious, walking silently toward death, beyond anger, beyond regret. (Wiesel, *One Generation After* 10)

Grasping for the right words and recreating only a shadow of a particular event or emotion is not an uncommon experience for the writer, or indeed the non-writer as well. Therefore, only a small amount of imagination or empathy on the part of the receiver is necessary to grasp Wiesel's frustration as he himself labours over describing the indescribable experience of the *Lager*. However, it is not just the restrictions of vocabulary that limit the telling. Wiesel points out that language, alongside the survivor, became corrupted by the *Lager*. What he refers to is more than what is known as 'Camp Speak', but has more to do with language's reduction to mere sounds of a brutal physical reality. Wiesel comments that he had to learn the language of the camps upon his arrival,

[w]here was I to discover a fresh vocabulary, a primeval language? The language of the night was not human; it was primitive, almost animal-

hoarse shouting, screams, muffled moaning, savage howling, the sounds of beating....A brute striking wildly, a body falling; an officer raises his arm and a whole community walks toward a common grave; a soldier shrugs his shoulders, and a thousand families are torn apart, to be reunited only by death. This is the concentration camp language. It negated all other language and took its place. (Wiesel, *Why I Write* 201)

How does one breathe life, or breathe death into their testimony? Is it even possible? The imperative to bear witness, to be one with truth is hindered by the mere approximation that written testimonial is when describing the harsh reality of the *Lager*. How many victims are forgotten or went unnoticed? Which details have been lost or never perceived? How does one convey this suffering, honouring it as it should be? The exacting witness must drive him or herself to try harder, to cut deeper, and yet he or she still must face that testimonial is only a two-dimensional representation of reality.

Survivors of the *Lager* have a matchless relationship with death that perhaps can only be understood by other survivors. For those who had worked as a member of a *Sonderkommando*, a *Kapo*,¹⁴ or occupied other positions which would have classified them according to Levi as 'privileged prisoners', death became intimately ever-present. They witnessed firsthand the deaths of family and friends, survived due to the acts of those who perished, or lost almost all they have ever known or cared for, including parts

¹⁴ *Kapos* were inmates who were given charge over a group of fellow inmates within the *Lager*. They were employed by the Nazis to maintain control over work details and barracks; in return these prisoners were afforded special privileges. Gary M. Grobman, "Concentration Camps: Kapos," *Jewishvirtuallibrary*, (1990) 29 June 2014 <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/index.html>>

of themselves. Even though death likely still remained frightening, it was also often uncannily welcoming due its familiarity and its offer of the cessation of pain and suffering. Often, the act of bearing witness in written form is at its very base a reconnection to the dead, giving them voice, communing with them: “The living do not understand them – it is with the dead that they feel most comfortable. It is to the dead that many survivors feel they owe their lives, their memories, and a responsibility to bear witness” (McCord 31). As Des Pres surmised, “survival was in essence a collective act and that the dead are therefore included within the postwar identity of the survivor. Additionally, for many survivors death has lost its threat and its essential mystery” (McCord 31). Authors such as Levi, in an attempt to give voice to the dead, had to live and write with one foot in the grave, always psychically close to the dead and the memory of the *Lager*. As McCord comments, “[t]he paradox or true challenge of survival, after the Holocaust, is accepting the challenge to remain alive while still being transfixed in the encounter with death” (McCord 31). In the second generation, as seen in *Maus* and *Maus II*, death is still a constant threat, whether it is the suicide of Art Spiegelman’s mother, or the declining health of his patient/witness/ father, the death his family encountered in the *Lager* looms ever present in his life.

There have been numerous examples over the past seventy years of survivor authors who after the completion of their work and the arduous task of bearing witness have ended their own lives: Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Tadeusz Borowski, Bruno Bettelheim, Richard Glazar, Joseph Wulf, and Piotr Rawicz are but a few examples of this phenomenon. This thesis’s initial focus on Levi illustrates a first-generation perspective

of this bloodletting phenomenon and outlines how the *Lager*, through extreme stress and suffering, forced complicity and the moral reductions imposed upon the surviving inmates, sowed the seeds of a psychological infection. The second half of the thesis will explore the demands and costs of bearing witness from a second generation perspective by analyzing Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and *Maus II*. Human nature and curiosity fuel the speculations as to the state of mind and the reasoning of the person that takes his or her own life; however, it is not my intention to try to discover the underlying psychological factors or engage in the discourse of attempting to glean the personal motivations for the suicides of Holocaust survivors, in particular those who bear witness in literary form. Instead, I intend to show that for these first-generation authors, suicide was in fact the final result of a deadly process that began with their exposure to the *Lager* and was unconsciously facilitated by their attempts to bear witness and purge their infected past. I propose that for Levi, the *Lager* acted as an incurable infective force that predetermined his eventual fate. Yet, his suicide was more than just a reaction to the initial experience of the *Lager*, it was also due to the weakening that resulted from the continued 'bloodletting' aspects of bearing witness, pushing him to finally succumb to the infection of the *Lager*, eventually perishing from the 'survivor's disease' (*Moments of Reprieve* 118) inflicted upon him. For the second-generation witness of Art Spiegelman, this paper will show that in the process of seeking a cure for his own inherited trauma, he inadvertently played the part of the barber-surgeon in his father's bloodletting with deadly results.

Chapter 2: Auschwitz in the Veins: An Examination of the Infective Trauma of the Lager through the Work and Life of Primo Levi

Above all, dear sir, I had in mind
 A marvelous book that would have
 Revealed innumerable secrets,
 Alleviated pain and fear,
 Dissolved doubts, given to my people
 The boon of tears and laughter.
 You'll find the outline in my drawer,
 In back, with the unfinished business.
 I haven't had time to see it through. Too bad.
 It would have been a fundamental work.
Primo Levi – "Unfinished Business"
(Collected Poems 47)

It could be argued that no author's life and work more accurately depict the deadly and infective nature of the *Lager* and the potential cost of bearing witness than that of Primo Levi. Prior to his incarceration at Auschwitz, Levi lived a comfortable and sheltered bourgeois life; yet, after his time in the *Lager*, the drive to bear witness proved both enduring and compelling for the remainder of his life. Motivating him to write was the deep sense of trauma that had been born during his war-time experience. As is illustrated by his poem "Unfinished Business", Levi felt that his personal history as a Holocaust survivor demanded that he write and bear witness, and through his work he sought emotional release and understanding, not only for his own sake but also for the sake of his "people". He recognized the elusive and unachievable nature of this task, and therefore he understood that his work he would always remain 'unfinished'. Despite this perception of futility, Levi wrote incessantly: prose, poetry and essays, all of which more

often than not addressed his experiences in the *Lager*. The publications most pertinent to this chapter include: *If This is a Man* or *Survival in Auschwitz*, *The Truce* or *The Reawakening*¹⁵ and *The Drowned and the Saved*.

Also of note in his poem “Unfinished Business” is the sense that Levi seems to be describing his work as his legacy and pointing to a future in which he, the writer, is no longer present: “You’ll find the outline in my drawer, In back, with the unfinished business. I haven’t had time to see it through”. This element of prediction or the cognizance of his own departure from the world could be seen as further evidence to support the common assumption that Levi’s death was indeed suicide, an act which this thesis contends to have been directly related to both the trauma of the *Lager* and the compulsive and unfulfilled experience of bearing witness.

Primo Levi, was born in 1919 in the industrial city of Turin as a Italian of Jewish heritage. His father Cesare, an electrical engineer, and mother Ester, a graduate of *Instituto Maria Letizia*, provided a liberal and educated childhood environment in which Levi flourished. He was sent to the prestigious secondary school *Lyceum Massimo D’Azeglio* before enrolling in 1937 at the University of Turin, where he completed a chemistry degree *Summa cum laude* (Patruno xi). Levi grew up, “at a time in Italy when being of Jewish ancestry had not yet become a cause of segregation or persecution” (Patruno 1). Although Levi did experience some minor antisemitic bullying in his youth that targeted his Judaic ancestry, his heritage did not seem to limit his opportunities.

¹⁵ The original Italian publications of the texts were entitled *Se questo è un uomo* (*If this is a Man*), and *La tregua* (*The Truce*); however in this paper they will be referred to by their American titles *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Reawakening*, unless referenced differently by a secondary source.

Levi's 'Jewishness' was not a defining aspect of his young identity; in fact, it was not until his graduate diploma was marked with the words, "*di razza ebraica*" or 'of the Jewish race' that he really gave the impact of his ancestry much thought (Patruno 1). The atmosphere of relative tolerance that had characterized Mussolini's Italy in Levi's early life was to be undermined progressively during the 1930's as the Fascist Party strengthened its ties to Nazi Germany, a move which brought about the gradual rise of state-sanctioned antisemitism (Pugliese 4). In 1942, in response to the political climate, Levi joined the antifascist Action Party (*Partito d'Azione*) and soon after he joined the resistance (Pugliese 4). On December 13, 1943, he was arrested, not because of his Jewish ancestry, but because he had been informed on for his partisan activities. It was during the process of his arrest, one of the many dark ironies of his life, that "he chose to admit that he was a Jew rather than own up to his partisan involvement" (Patruno 2). This admission led to his deportation, first to Fossoli, and then on February 22, 1944 to Auschwitz. Although he was liberated by the Soviets on January 27, 1945, his post-war existence was marred and twisted by the *Lager* and the infectious and haunting memories his past incited.

Levi's eleven months in Auschwitz were followed first by a stint in a Soviet camp for former *Lager* prisoners, and then by many months of circuitous train travel. He finally arrived home on October 19, 1945 (*The Reawakening* 193). On the exterior, Levi found Turin in a state of ruin. His family home was barely habitable, along with many other buildings in the city, but his sister and mother were still alive (his father had died in 1942 from cancer). Psychologically, Levi's homecoming was even more disturbing.

Levi was struck with the cold realization that his home no longer existed, at least not on an emotional level. Home, as a psychological term, calls to mind feelings of safety, security and comfort, and for Levi this home had been destroyed, corrupted and infected by the memories of the *Lager*. In *The Reawakening*, Levi describes the emotional distance that separates the survivor from his or her pre-war life, a separation which is caused by the toxic and pervasive effects of the *Lager*. The central metaphor of bloodletting is echoed in Levi's description below of the experience of the *Lager* as being akin to a poison contained within the survivor's veins. The survivor's challenge then, which according to Levi was met with apprehension and fear, was essentially to attempt to reintegrate the poisoned self into whatever remained of the previous daily and domestic life or to purge such toxins:

And how much had we lost, in these twenty months? What should we find at home? How much of ourselves had been eroded, extinguished? Were we returning richer or poorer, stronger or emptier? We did not know; but we knew that on the thresholds of our homes, for good or for ill, a trial awaited us, and we anticipated it with fear. We felt in our veins the poison of Auschwitz, flowing together with our thin blood; where should we find the strength to begin our lives again, to break down the barriers, the brushwood that grows in all absences, around every deserted house, every empty refuge. (*The Reawakening* 192)

In this passage, Levi clearly identified himself as an infected person unable to truly rejoin the living. He carried with him, in his blood, the 'poison of Auschwitz' long after he had physically left the *Lager* far behind.

The experience of collective trauma must have been palpable throughout Turin, indeed throughout much of Europe, as the population dealt with the aftermath of destruction and loss. Detainees, displaced persons and prisoners of war returned or did not return, and disease and food shortages loomed as threats for the coming winter. Yet Levi's experience of post-war trauma was vastly different from most of his civic neighbours as his time in the *Lager* had indelibly marked him and left him to live in a psychologically deadened state. One of Levi's biographers, Ian Thomson, writes, "Levi was in trauma, and disturbed in a way that only survivor friends could understand. After the nightmarish intensity of Auschwitz, everything seemed colourless, futile and false to him. 'I had the sensation that I was living,' he told me, 'But without being alive'" (Thomson, *The Genesis of This is Man* 43). The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman further describes the conflicted experience of the survivor. The survivor acknowledges his or her good fortune in surviving, and yet the sense of being contaminated or poisoned by the whole experience bars a complete return to normalcy: "the joy of escaping death was permanently and incurably poisoned among the survivors by uncertainty about the propriety of sailing safe out of the sea of perdition – with disastrous consequences for the survivors' will to live and to succeed in life after their rescue" (Bauman 234).

After the war, Levi's social circumstances seemed, at least superficially, to improve. He was a supportive son and brother, even becoming the bread-winner in the post-war context. In 1947, he married Lucia Morpurgo, and they would have two children and remain married for life (Paterno xi). Throughout his life, he is known to have had many deep friendships and to have written a great deal of correspondence. The routine of daily work and family life belied that Levi's internal battle surrounding his past and his survival raged on. Throughout his career as a chemist, and during his quiet hours as a family man, he continued to write to bear witness, and he did so for the rest of his life. His writing did on occasion extend beyond the Holocaust, notably in the case of *The Periodic Table*, a renowned book of short stories inspired by the chemical elements, but his writing consistently returned to the topic of his trauma.

The infection that took root during the *Lager* permeated another defining aspect of Levi's homecoming: his burning need to bear witness, to unburden himself through testimony, and to give voice to the dead:

Following his return to Italy in the autumn of 1945 the need to bear witness was so intense that Levi began to record, pell-mell, thoughts and events, conversations, things heard and seen at Auschwitz, on the backs of train tickets, scraps of paper, flattened cigarette packets, anything he could find. This frantic note-taking was in readiness for something extraordinary. 'Probably if I'd not written my book I'd have remained one of the damned of the Earth,' Levi told me. He was referring to Dante, the

state of souls after death. Driven to tell his story, Levi completed *If This Is a Man* in ten months. (Thomson, *The Genesis of This is Man* 42)

Levi testified to the horror of his experience so that the atrocity of the *Lager* would not be forgotten, but also because the guilt of his own survival pushed him to return to his debilitating memories. Writing became an attempt at treatment or therapy: “Levi has indicated that he found the strategy for writing for ‘inner liberation to be helpful, that writing about his experiences was the same as talking about them or the equivalent of lying on Freud’s couch’” (McCord 2). Although fundamentally I agree with McCord’s analysis of Levi’s motivation in regard to his writing being an attempt at catharsis or purgation of his trauma, the direct equation of writing with verbal discourse is somewhat problematic. Verbal witnessing is impermanent as it lacks a tangible, easily accessible and durable mode of preservation and reaches a more limited audience. In contrast, written testimony holds more truth value, as it inherently contains the potential to reach a much larger audience and cross both geographical and temporal boundaries. As for the reference to ‘Freud’s couch’, while personal catharsis does seem to be one of the purposes of Levi’s writing, Levi’s inner demons were not born from typical Freudian childhood trauma but rather resulted from real events and the literal ghosts of his past. Levi could have chosen to spend endless hours in therapy as his sole form of personal “working through”, but instead he chose to write and publish his wartime history, indicating a desire to reach a wider audience and contribute to a collective understanding of the Holocaust and not merely an attempt at personal catharsis.

Levi felt that both the drive to write and the material which he wrote about were aspects of his life that were thrust upon him due to his wartime incarceration. He felt he had little to no agency in deciding to write; instead, his writing became a desperate act, an attempt to purge his contaminated memories, a process which slowly bled him dry. Levi clearly illustrates this lack of agency in his statement “[i]t was the experience of the camps and the long journey home that forced me to write” (*The Reawakening* 216).

Literary scholar Nicholas Patruno discusses Levi’s motivations in these terms:

While the circumstances of his incarceration and liberation served as Levi’s initial impulse to write, his literary gift was fueled by a phenomenon that is now clearly recognized and understood, the lingering “guilt of survival” and by his sense of responsibility for providing witness on behalf of those who had perished. He devoted the remainder of his life to meeting his self-appointed obligation, in which, he admitted to Gail Soffer, “to tell the story, to bear witness, was an end to save oneself. Not to live *and* tell, but to live *in order* to tell” (Levi, “Beyond Survival” 12-23). (Patruno 4)

The experience of the Holocaust and the need to bear witness provided the deepest motivation behind Levi’s writing and survival. Levi did not inherently see himself as an author or journalist. He states: “if I had not lived the Auschwitz experience, I probably would have never written anything. I would not have had the motivation, the incentive to write” (*The Reawakening* 216). His experience of the *Lager* alone provided the all-consuming and infective drive to write and to bear witness. Although on one hand Levi’s

writing provided him with a reason to live, on the other hand, it became an obstacle to living in the sense that his emotional focus became deeply entrenched in the past rather than in the present or future.

If emotional debts could be paid through written testimony, then the sheer volume of work that Levi produced and the depth and poignancy of his reflections should have been enough to release Levi. However, it seems likely that his attempts at finding absolution or catharsis through his publications were unsatisfactory (as so eloquently shown in the poem “Unfinished Business”). Perhaps the most important supporting point to the preceding conclusion is Levi’s final return to the subject of the Holocaust as documented in his last written work *The Drowned and the Saved*. In this psychologically incisive book, Levi discussed how on a personal level, despite all his labour in writing, the time spent in the *Lager* had marked his “entire existence” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 149), leaving him with a continual “sense of malaise” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 149). In addition to this personal admission, Levi also disclosed his frustration with his audience: he felt that he was, “not being listened to” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 199). On both a personal and transpersonal level, he perceived that he had in many ways failed to transmit his message well enough to either purge himself, or immunize the world from the same toxic patterns and infected ideals that continue to plague mankind and cause atrocities such as the Holocaust. Levi became increasingly motivated to continue his writing in part to combat those who would cloud, diminish or forget the facts of the Holocaust. Patruno comments:

It is evident that his chosen role of bearing witness to the Holocaust led him into dark corners and alleyways where he found no answers to his questions. Most distressing to him were those voices that, despite the overwhelming evidence, continue to raise doubts about or deny outright the occurrence of Holocaust atrocities. (Patruno 6)

Levi contended not only with Holocaust denial and the twisting of truth in his later years, he had also encountered the phenomenon during his days as a prisoner. He recounts the words of a Nazi guard spoken to him in relation to the war's end and its aftermath:

However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him. There will perhaps be suspicions, discussions, research by historians, but there will be no certainties, because we will destroy the evidence together with you. And even if some proof should remain and some of you survive, people will say that the events you describe are too monstrous to be believed; they will say that they are the exaggerations of Allied propaganda and will believe us, who will deny everything, and not you. We will be the ones to dictate the history of the *Lagers*. (*The Drowned and the Saved* 11)

This declaration of genocidal warfare on an entire cultural group and several living generations of Jews was a defining moment for Levi: it not only compelled him to survive and bear witness, but it also provided him with a moral imperative, a sacred

mission, which excused momentary lapses of his morality in order to achieve the end goal of survival and defiance of this Nazi oppressor. Levi states: "Certainly, I could have killed myself or got myself killed; but I wanted to survive, to avenge myself and bear witness. You mustn't think that we are monsters; we are the same as you, only much more unhappy" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 53). This 'unhappiness,' or melancholic humour, was something that was inescapable and remained a part of his life regardless of how many papers and books he wrote. Levi was caught in a deadly cycle that tied him to the very place he was trying to escape: the *Lager*. He was constantly forced to bear witness, to remember, to re-infect his present with his past and yet without bringing his life any peace or lasting relief. Finally, Levi was left only with the decision to rejoin those who haunted him.

From his first penned word to his last, the themes of infection, corruption and contamination pervade Levi's texts. As they form such a central motif within the context of both Levi's work as well as this chapter, a clear explanation of the infection process as a result of exposure to the *Lager* is required. Levi's work suggests that the *Lager* were not so much a place in his past but rather something he carried with him every day, long after liberation, akin to a piece of himself which had become infected and rotten. Contained within *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi's final book, is the highly influential and oft-quoted chapter *The Gray Zone* in which the author explores the moral cost of daily survival in the *Lager* and the themes of infection. In *The Gray Zone*, Levi avows that it was not the pure, pious or virtuous prisoners who managed to eke out an existence under the extreme and inhumane conditions of the camps. He asserts that it was those

who either possessed a morality subservient to their survival instinct, or at least were capable of moral or spiritual compromise, who in fact managed to escape extinction. Within the *Lager*, conventional social structures and standards were subverted and perverted to such extremes that survival demanded an entirely new code of conduct.

Zygmunt Bauman explains:

. . . the sole stake of the tragedy was to remain alive – while the quality of life, and particularly its *dignity and ethical value*, was at best of secondary importance and above all of no consequence; it was never allowed to interfere with the principal goal. The goal of staying alive took care of moral concerns and dwarfed and pushed of out sight such moral concerns as could not be consumed. What counted in the last resort was to *outlive the others* even if the escape from death required being put on a separate, and unique, list of privileged. (Bauman 233- 234)

In their pre-war lives, those who found themselves trapped in the hell that was the *Lager* would likely have valued qualities such as honesty, cooperation, generosity and honour. Yet once they crossed the threshold of the *Lager*, these ethical and moral values were often supplanted by attributes that contributed to survival, such as craftiness, duplicity, adaptability, as well as physical endurance: “[t]he survival of the ‘worst’ usually came at the expense of others. In other words, slyness and deceit often gave one a better probability of survival than bravery did” (Patruno 121). Levi states this fact quite clearly: “an infernal order such as National Socialism exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. It degrades its victims

and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities” (*Drowned and the Saved* 68). Those who could not make these mental and spiritual adjustments often perished quickly, ‘drowned’ in the vast ocean of death that was the camps. Levi seems to suggest that the infective and morally corrupting nature of the *Lager* was so pervasive that at least on some level no survivor could escape it. Even if one did not directly engage in activities that stole another person’s chance of survival, all were guilty of acts of selfishness in the name of self-preservation. Levi comments that,

. . . almost everybody feels guilty of having omitted to offer help. The presence at your side of a weaker – or less cunning, or older, or too young – companion hounding you with his demands for help or with his simple presence, in itself an entreaty, is a constant in the life of the *Lager*. The demand for solidarity, for a human word, advice, even just a listening ear, was permanent and universal but rarely satisfied. (*The Drowned and the Saved* 78)

The *Lager* themselves diminish and infect all that had the misfortune to be incarcerated in them, and the quicker one assimilated and accepted this new reality, the greater the chance of survival.

In addition to the physical trials of exhaustion, starvation and corporal punishment, and the mental stress of the daily battle to survive, some inmates took on more defiling camp roles. Physically and mentally weakened, they became ripe for infection or instrumentalization by the Nazi machine of death, creating perhaps the

most sinister form of victimization, that of complicity. These psychological infections were thrust upon the occupants of the *Lager* intentionally and systematically by the Nazi regime. Levi states, “[t]his institution represented an attempt to shift onto others—specifically, the victims – the burden of guilt, so that they were deprived of even the solace of innocence” (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 53). Bauman explains the structure of the extraordinary circumstance that was the Holocaust as such:

‘Ordinary’ genocide splits the actors unambiguously into murderers and the murdered; for the latter, resistance is the only rational response. In the Holocaust, divisions were less clear. Incorporated in the overall power structure, given an extended set of tasks and functions within it, the doomed population had apparently a range of options to choose from. Co-operation with their sworn enemies and future killers was not without its own measure of rationality. *The Jews could therefore play into the hands of their oppressors, facilitate their task, bring closer their own perdition, while guided in their action by the rationally interpreted purpose of survival.* [emphasis added]

(Bauman 122)

By severely limiting any aspects of self-determination or personal power and removing personal identity through pathological controls, such as the imposition of numbers rather than names, stripping prisoners of all personal belongings, and separating them from one another, the Nazi regime created an internal power vacuum among the prisoners of the *Lager*. Compounding these psychological wounds, the

trauma was given corporeal form in the form of a tattoo. The wound became a physical marker of the trauma inflicted upon the survivor. Stripped of agency and power, and constantly faced with the pursuit of survival, it is not surprising that some prisoners were seduced by the opportunity to oppress fellow inmates in order to reclaim a degree of personal power and to better their chances of survival. Through such acts of complicity, a sort of psychological contamination was transferred from Nazi oppressor to the complicit prisoner population: “power was sought by the many among the oppressed who had been contaminated by their oppressors” (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 48). Amongst those who sought primarily to survive, “no hesitation inhibits them from casting aside dignity and ethical behavior. Stripped of material belongings, some allow themselves also to be easily stripped of their moral values” (Patruno 16).

The extent of the Nazi pressure to ensure inmate complicity is expressed through the creation of *Sonderkommandos*, *Kapos* and Jewish Councils¹⁶ to accomplish some of the most defiling tasks, from collecting the belongings of recent arrivals, to loading the furnaces themselves. For the Nazis, successfully imposing complicity meant two things: firstly it provided the oppressors with a self-justifying morality of racial hatred by proving that they could turn Jews upon their own people; and secondly, it served to distance the Nazi officers from having to directly deal with death and the infective actions being committed. Levi explained how the Nazi racist propaganda was

¹⁶ Jewish Councils or *Judenräte* were Jewish municipal administrations that were required to ensure that Nazi orders and regulations were implemented particularly in the Jewish Ghettos. They were responsible for everything from: keeping census of the Lagers, organizing the orderly deportations and arrivals, and distributing food and medical supplies. Gary M. Grobman, “Judenrat,” *Jewishvirtuallibrary*, (2014) 29 June 2014 <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/index.html>>

deliberately reinforced by inmate complicity: "It must be the Jews who put the Jews into the ovens; it must be shown that the Jews, the subrace, the submen, bow to any and all humiliation, even to destroying themselves" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 52).

Furthermore, when discussing the role of complicity and the perversion of the souls and heritage of the prisoners through the employment of *Sonderkommandos*, Levi seems to suggest that once the choice is made to attempt to survive at any cost, "seduced by the many material advantages of the position" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 47), the morally compromised prisoner became contaminated and, "fatally intoxicated by the power at their disposal" (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 47). The phrase 'fatally intoxicated' is particularly revealing as it not only reinforces the recognition of the infected state, but also the finality of that state.

The devious Nazi strategy of imposing prisoner complicity served the killing process of the innocent and ensured the moral and psychic trauma of those engaged in the betrayal. Levi laments that, "the best way to bind them is to burden them with guilt, cover them with blood, compromise them as much as possible, thus establishing a bond of complicity so that they can no longer turn back" (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 43). This quotation seems to speak of the inescapable or inevitable nature of the camps. Once one had crossed the threshold, even if one escaped death, one never truly escaped the camps.

The persecutors, however, were not themselves immune to the effects of their own contaminating and infectious system. Levi recalled the revealing words of a Nazi *Lager* official, "[w]e the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we

are; if we so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but your souls, just as we have destroyed ours" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 53-54). This passage illustrates that from Levi's perspective, the spiritual and psychological warfare that the Nazis inflicted on the Jews also became an agent of infection for the oppressors. Like a contagion, exposure and complicity in the atrocities committed in the *Lager* left one scarred, infected, as well as morally drained, and in the majority of cases the infective memories ignored the clear battle-lines from which we chose to view these events today. Just like a physical infection, the psychological infection of the *Lager* could not be contained by sociopolitical boundaries or allegiance, and it took root indiscriminately. Levi observes:

Here as with other phenomena, we are dealing with a paradoxical analogy between victim and oppressor, and we are anxious to be clear: both are in the same trap, but it is the oppressor, and he alone, who has prepared it and activated it, and he suffers from this, it is right that he should suffer from it, as he does indeed suffer from it, even at a distance of decades. Once again it must be observed, mournfully, that the injury cannot be healed: it extends through time, and the Furies, in whose existence we are forced to believe, not only rack the tormentor (if they do rack him, assisted or not by human punishment), but perpetuate the tormentor's work by denying peace to the tormented. (*The Drowned and the Saved* 24)

This is not to propose that the oppressor occupied the same mental or historical space as the victim. Levi clearly delineated that "the oppressor remains what he is, and

so does the victim" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 25). But alternatively it does suggest that the nature of the *Lager* and their institutionalized structure began to take on a life-force (or death-force if you will) of its own, finding hosts to spread the trauma on both sides of the conflict. For the oppressors, however, these traumatic forces did not seem to compel the vast majority to bear witness, but rather it motivated them to do the exact opposite: to repress, hide, deny and remain silent about the role they played in these monstrous events. In relation to the perpetrators, Levi explained: "Without a doubt those who knew the horrible truth because they were (or had been) responsible had compelling reasons to remain silent; but inasmuch as they were depositories of the secret, even by keeping silent they could not always be sure of remaining alive" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 15). During the post-war period, the chance of reprisals, punishment and the fear of facing personal responsibility further discouraged the unlikely event of persecutors attempting to bear witness. Those who were both victims and complicit perpetrators occupied a treacherous place in this landscape of trauma and witnessing. They found themselves caught in a horrific and personally traumatizing double bind. On one hand as victims, they experienced a strong need to testify and seek justice, on the other as corrupted and infected survivors, their guilt and shame demanded silence. These men found themselves in the 'gray zone,' and suffered tremendously for it. "The Gray Zone" (the title of the final chapter in Levi's last book *The Drowned and the Saved*) is a conceptual moral and psychological place which is characterized by an, "unprecedented degree of moral ambiguity that renders a facile ethical judgment impossible" (Baird 193). The 'gray zone' as psychological space was

“Levi’s symbolization of the moral compromise that many desperate prisoners were forced to make in order to buy themselves more time” (Baird 193). These desperate prisoners, through the simple act of attempting to remain alive, found themselves committing morally reprehensible acts and sacrificing personal ethics in the name of survival.

Levi makes the argument in *The Drowned and the Saved* that the morally pure and virtuous did not survive the camps. He suggests that instead of the best, “it was the worst, those who adapted to life in the camps” (Kelly 36) who survived. Nevertheless, it would be unfair to conclude that all ‘privileged prisoners’ were guilty of the same degree of complicity. The most complicit prisoners were undoubtedly the *Kapos* and members of the *Sonnderkommando*, who were responsible for the most horrifying and contaminating duties. As previously stated, the Nazis were well aware of these men’s compromised and corrupted status. As such, the Nazis strictly limited the time that *Kapos* and particularly members of the *Sonnderkommando* could hold their positions before they were killed themselves. After all, they had been privy to the most horrific inner-workings of the *Lager*, and the Nazis were careful to keep this information secret.

In the rare cases that these highly complicit prisoners did survive, according to Levi, very few chose to tell their tale: “The survivors of the Special Squads were therefore very few, having escaped death because of some unforeseeable whim of fate. None of them, after the Liberation, has spoken willingly, and no one speaks willingly about their frightful condition” (*The Drowned and the Saved* 51). This passage not only elucidates the guilt and shame felt by these men, but also suggests that Levi’s own

'privileged prisoner'¹⁷ status did not involve such a sinister degree of complicity.

Whatever the degree of complicity, Levi felt his survivor's guilt acutely. He bore witness to honour those who had not survived, but also because the infection of the *Lager* had caught hold of him, and he wrote hard to exorcise it. His experience of this sense of guilt and defilement is expressed so eloquently and desperately in the following passage from his work *The Reawakening*:

We should have liked to wash our consciences and our memories clean from the foulness that lay upon them; and also with anguish, because we felt that this should never happen, that now nothing could ever happen good and pure enough to rub out our past, and that the scars of the outrage would remain within us forever, and in memories of those who saw it, and in the places where it occurred, and in the stories we should tell of it. (2)

After liberation, Levi was unable to psychologically cleanse himself through his writing, or forget what he had experienced, a struggle that was shared by many survivors among whom suicide became a not uncommon escape from any *Lager*-born emotional wounds or guilt: "The loss of morality played not so subtly upon those returning to the rational world, perhaps contributing to the high incidence of suicide amongst survivors which was rare during incarceration" (Patrino 120). The limited number of suicides in the camps is explained by Levi as being the result of the

¹⁷ 'Privileged prisoners' is a general term used by Levi that encompasses: *Kapos*, *Sonnderkommandos*, *Vorarbeiter* etc. This term referenced any prisoner that was afforded special entitlements and concessions in the *Lager*. While incarcerated in Auschwitz, Levi occupied such a position due to his education and training as a chemist. His duties included working in factory manufacturing synthetic rubber. (Patrino xi-xii)

assimilating and corrupting dehumanization of the *Lager*, which reduced the victims to their basic and most animalistic needs. Subsequently, higher-thought functioning was suspended in the name of subsistent survival. It was not until reintegration into the 'rational world' that these higher function needs and thoughts surfaced, bringing with them guilt and shame:

Levi proposes that suicide is the response to a deep sense of guilt about surviving that no punishment can ease. The prisoners' daily suffering in the camp should have exiated any guilt they might have had about surviving. On liberation, however, they experienced a deep sense of guilt. Some survivors who had integrated themselves into the camp system found it unbearable to confront their complicity. (Patruno 120-121)

This held true for Levi as well, as he never found a way to forgive himself for the compromises that he made for the sake of his own survival. He could not bear that he had not stood up to but rather capitulated to the *Lager* system, while others, "were dying specifically because of a commitment to human solidarity" (Patruno 121). Ironically, such prisoners perished "not despite their valor, but because of it" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 83). While Levi may not have felt as guilty as some, the guilt that he did carry contributed to his experience of the "survivor's disease" (*Moments of Reprieve* 118), a psychological condition which remained with him to the end of his life. For Levi, "[s]uffering was traumatic but devoid of meaning, like a misfortune or illness" (Levi, *Reawakening* 207). Tragically, it would seem that Levi sought to understand the reasons for the trauma he had experienced, however he was unable to find any

redeeming meaning in his tragedy. Levi was still left questioning, “[h]ave we – we who have returned – been able to understand and make others understand?” (*Drowned and the Saved* 36). Perhaps it was in part this elusive quest for meaning that left Levi unsatisfied, and consequently played no small part in his depression and eventual suicide.

Central to this thesis is the notion that the writing process, as an attempt to bear witness and purge the contaminated memories, proved detrimental to the psychological health of the author. In light of this evidence it can be asserted that Levi did indeed suffer disappointment and increased depression as a result of his many attempts at bearing witness, and that finally, unable to cope with the continued trauma, Levi chose to commit suicide. For the sake of academic objectivity, it must be noted that there are those who disagree with this treatment of Levi’s death. Firstly, there are those who do not view his death as suicide. Secondly, among those who can agree that his death was suicide, there are some who disagree that the experience of the Holocaust was central to Levi’s final decision. It is therefore pertinent to provide a brief summary and critique of these differing views.

As for the circumstances of his death, that Levi died by falling down the stairwell of his apartment from his third floor unit on Saturday, April 11, 1987 is an indisputable fact. The police and coroner assigned to the investigation both declared suicide as the cause of death. Nonetheless, a great deal of divisive speculation and controversy emerged to further support this conclusion or to refute it.

Among the supporters of the conclusion of suicide are counted many of those closest to Levi, including his wife, children, sister and a circle of close friends. Levi's writing was more than historical testimonial, it was also a personal testament which grappled both with the intrapersonal experience of deeply entrenched trauma and guilt and the transpersonal exploration of the potential for human cruelty and selfishness. It is through its function as a personal testament that the conclusion of suicide becomes a more plausible cause of death: It was as if Levi's writing attempted to conclude or come close to concluding his deepest existential battles through his writing; thus, his writing acted as a sort of last will and testament. Levi's son Renzo saw the connection between his father's writing and his own self-determined demise: "I think my father had already written the last act of his existence. Read the conclusion of *The Truce* and you will understand" (Gambetta 27). Italian writer and personal friend of Levi Ferdinand Camon appears to have come to a similar conclusion as Renzo, and he memorably remarked at the time of Levi's death that "this suicide must be backdated to 1945. It did not happen then because Primo wanted (and had to) write. Now, having completed his work (*The Drowned and the Saved* was the end of the cycle) he could kill himself. And he did" (Gambetta 27).

Yet skeptics rallied against this interpretation of his death as suicide, and chose to view it as accidental for various reasons. There are religious reasons to support the accidental hypothesis. Such a stance was officially taken by the Jewish community of Turin, likely in order to avoid denying Levi honourable burial rites: "the Rabbi of Turin's community had to declare the cause of Levi's death uncertain—despite a coroner's

report of suicide—in order to justify his proper burial in the city’s Jewish cemetery” (Stille 211).

In addition to religious reasons, the supporters of an accidental death hypothesis contended that suicide would have been in conflict with what they perceived as Levi’s positive and serene character: “his readers around the world were deeply shocked because among Holocaust survivor-writers Levi was considered one of the most hopeful and even-tempered” (Druker 221). In addition to the perception of Levi as too optimistic and calm for suicide, many also felt betrayed by the idea that Levi’s death could have been suicide, as if they felt the manner of his death somehow negated his prose. Elizabeth Maklin, a writer for *The New Yorker*, wrote in 1987 that, “the efficacy of all his words had somehow been canceled by his death—that is his hope, or faith, was no longer usable to the rest of us” (Maklin n.p.). As historian Alexander Stille observes, “for the suicide deniers, a final gesture of despair would represent such a fundamental contradiction with the fundamental hopefulness and reasonableness of the great bulk of Levi’s work” (Stille 210).

The accidental death interpretation appeals to the drive of humanity in modernity to find some sort of redemption after the Holocaust, and subsequently in Levi’s prose and his life. Aside from wanting to read Levi’s work while maintaining an optimistic view, or having his life conclude with a ‘happy ending’, this perspective also reflects, “a deeply held, if unconscious, reflection of the religious belief in the fundamental impiety and shamefulness of suicide” (Stille 212). How could one who had survived despite such trials, written so poignantly, and at times with such optimism, kill

himself? In response, it could be said that entertaining such suppositions reflects the reader's preferred interpretation of Levi's work rather than the actuality of his life.

Those who view his death as accidental also cite the lack of a suicide note or last will as being a definitive sign that it was not suicide, stating that Levi would not be so inconsiderate. In response to the lack of a suicide note, as already mentioned, there are those (like his son, Renzo and friend, Camon) who view his writing as a sort of suicide note or testament. As for the judgment that Levi was too considerate to not leave an explicit suicide note, this point exemplifies the tendency of those that disagree with the conclusion of suicide to view Levi as an idealized image and not necessarily on how Levi saw his own life or emotional state at the time of his death. A key piece of information that speaks to Levi's emotional state at the end of his life is provided by Doctor David Mendel, who befriended Levi in the latter part of his life. Mendel received a desperate letter from Levi on February 7, 1987. Levi pleaded with Mendel: "I have fallen into a rather serious depression; I have lost all interest in writing and even in reading. I am extremely low and I do not want to see anyone. I ask you as a 'Proper Doctor' what should I do?" (*The Genesis of This is Man* 489). This passage written by Levi's own hand shows the desperation he felt at the end of his life, and indicates a state which would be compatible with suicidal ideation. Indeed, the speculation over the absence of a note seems insubstantial in comparison to the first-person testimony of his emotional state. To further strengthen the argument that Levi was depressed before his death, and that his dark reflection of the Holocaust had not ceased, was that *The Drowned and the Saved* was published the year before his death.

Though this thesis contends that Levi's experience in the *Lager* and his subsequent failure to exorcise these memories were what pushed him to suicide, there are several notable and respectable researchers and biographers who ascribe other emotional and psychological causes to explain his state of emotional distress.

One such biographer is Carol Angier, who has explored Levi's life in her book *The Double Bind: Primo Levi, a Biography*. Angier proposes that Levi's depressed state and finally his suicide were a result of acute sexual repression, which resulted from an overly-close relationship to his mother (Drucker 217). This supposedly suffocating pattern of female interaction was allegedly repeated in Levi's marriage, and compounded upon by his choice to live with both mother and wife. For Angier, it was this psychosexual conflict and not Auschwitz that drove Levi to suicide. This overtly, and perhaps overly, Freudian approach seems to almost ignore the traumatic events experienced by Levi in the *Lager*, an oversight which is negligent at best.

Ian Thomson, who wrote *Primo Levi: a Biography*, also does not definitively name the *Lager* as being the cause behind Levi's suicide. Although he admits that the Holocaust was Levi's initial impetus to write, he won't name it as the impetus for his suicide: "Auschwitz was the catalyst that turned Levi into a writer. But whether the depression that enveloped him in the final months was compounded by his terrible past can only be speculation" (Thomson, *The Genesis of This is Man* 57). Instead, Thomson focuses his discussion of Levi's emotional state and resulting suicide by discussing the pressures of Levi's domestic life, his ongoing battle with depression (which predated the war) and a family history of two suicides (Stille 212). Admittedly, this personal and

familial history is relevant to the discussion of Levi's suicide, suggesting that Levi might have been predisposed to suicide without the Holocaust. In response, it should be noted that although fifteen percent of people suffering from severe depression do take their lives (Stille 212), eighty-five percent of these people, "live long, unhappy lives as sufferers of various mental disorders with little hope of recovery, yet without suicidal behavior or ideation" (McCord 24). Furthermore, the family history of suicide would require further exploration in order to establish the motivation behind each death, and in particular whether chronic depression was a factor in common amongst all family members. In the absence of this information, genetics alone would seem insufficient as a predictor of suicide.

Although Levi's depression preceded the war, one cannot play at knowing the outcome of Levi's depressive tendencies without the *Lager*. His war-time experience infected his very life-force, and he continued to write and reflect on this contamination at least until the year before his death. In fact, Levi's post-liberation existence was almost entirely consumed by bearing witness through his writing. Levi began writing immediately following his liberation (Anissimov 257) and he continued to write until his death. Though he did return to his career as a chemist, first employed for Duco-Montecatini, where he stayed for just over a year, and then for SIVA,¹⁸ he still chose to retire early in 1975 in order to devote himself to writing full time (Patrino xi- xii). The vast majority of his work (with the already mentioned exception of *The Periodic Table*) related to the Holocaust. Therefore, to underplay the role that Auschwitz played in

¹⁸ Both Duco-Montecatini and SIVA were paint companies where Levi was employed after returning from Auschwitz. (Nicholas Patrino, *Understanding Primo Levi* xi- xii)

Levi's emotional state, his work, and ultimately his death, would seem to ignore the themes expressed throughout his lifelong literary body of work.

Through the insight provided by Levi's closest friends and family, it is known that although Levi had passed through very dark depressive episodes before, it seems his "last depression was deeper and darker" (Stille 216). It is true that at the time of his suicide his mother and his mother-in-law were ill, that he had a tumultuous relationship with his wife, and that he was suffering from prostate difficulties. But it was also the case that he was suffering from some cognitive changes that threatened his memory and his foreign language skills (Stille 216). It seems apparent that it was indeed the threat of further mental decline that was particularly distressing: "In this condition, he was unable to write and was convinced his future was an empty void" (Stille 216). For Levi, this may as well have been a psychological death sentence as his will to write was inextricably tied to his will to live. Without writing, it is entirely likely that Levi would have felt that he was losing his primary mode of addressing the traumatic and infective memories he carried within him as well as his primary purpose for living. Furthermore, it also seems possible that Levi felt doubly discouraged: he likely worried about his mental decline and its effect on his writing, but he also might have realized that a lifetime of writing had not been enough to bring him solace. Linguist and literary critic Gian Paolo Biasin postulates that "Levi's death resulted from his loss of faith in the capacity of literature to express the depths of the atrocity" (Kremer 13). After all, what Levi sought to describe was so foreign from daily life, and so extreme in deed and emotional experience that language could never fully capture it. Levi could not find the right

combination of words to give him his catharsis. This bind for writers on the Holocaust is double: either language fails the author in its ability to represent the unrepresentable, or the psychic burden of actually capturing and encompassing the horrific reality is too much to bear and the author is killed by success.

It is difficult to respond specifically to the notion that Levi's suicide is an admission of failure on the writer's part because, as yet, no one has offered a rigorously argued defense of this stance. Instead, there have been a few scattered remarks in support of the idea, which only raise more questions than they answer . . . a close look at Levi's texts reveals no such simple, redemptive formulation that his suicide would now disprove. From his first book on, Levi states emphatically that Auschwitz poisoned the world, that it was "an abomination, which no propitiatory prayer, no pardon, no expiation by the guilty, which nothing at all in the power of man can ever clean again". (Druker 223)

Levi on numerous occasions bravely faced the impossible task of seeking to express "in human terms that which is inhuman" (Patruno 12), but he eventually became exhausted, frustrated and succumbed. The limitation of language was a true impediment for Levi, but perhaps more harmful was the emotional state he subjected himself to in order to write. His writing required him to not only relive his most traumatic memories but to also grapple with the darkest of philosophical questions. Jorge Semprun, another survivor and author, took on a similar imperative to Levi, and his insight into this process supports the perception that the act of bearing witness is

detrimental to the writer's mental health. In fact, similar to this thesis's linkage of bearing witness to bloodletting, Semprun suggests that the repeated process of remembering and writing was actually more damaging than having survived the camps:

Semprun argues that writing about the experience of the camp, rather than being a cathartic process, makes life much harder to live. The detailed revisiting of appalling atrocities and infinite human misery wears the writer out and, in Semprun's own experience, makes him increasingly suicidal. In Semprun's view, Levi's demise could be interpreted not as a consequence of having been in the camp as such, but of having written about it. (Gambetta 32)

Dominick LaCapra suggests a structural paradigm for examining cases of traumatic memory caused by experiencing or witnessing deeply disturbing events such as the Holocaust. LaCapra states that once the trauma is inflicted, the sufferer then goes through stages of "acting out" and/or "working through" the experience. In order to elaborate on his theory, LaCapra cites a study conducted by psychoanalyst Dori Laub in which Laub interviewed a female Auschwitz survivor. This particular survivor described a historical impossibility: she spoke of an armed revolt at Auschwitz during which the prisoners had destroyed all four chimneys. Great debate erupted within the academic community about the validity of the testimony. In addition to her account contradicting historical records, an analysis revealed discrepancies between various versions of her own recollection. As a result of this discrepancy, the historical value of such eyewitness

accounts was called into question. Of significance in this study in relation to both this paper and LaCapra's argument is Laub's defense of this witness' account:

"The woman was testifying" he insisted, "not to the number of chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more critical: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. One chimney blown up in Auschwitz is as incredible as four. The number matters less than the fact of the occurrence. The event itself was almost inconceivable. The woman testified to an event that broke the all compelling frame of Auschwitz, where Jewish armed revolts just did not happen, and had no place. She testified to the breakage of a framework. That was historical truth. (Laub qtd. In LaCapra 88)

The validity or the accuracy of the testimony in regard to historical details becomes unimportant when held next to her personal truth. And more importantly to this thesis, this woman became so engaged in her recollection that a creative process took place, almost as if she was reliving the moments with a different outcome.

Indeed, Laub describes her as she remembers, and notes on the extent to which the witness is transported back in time: "She was relating her memories as an eyewitness of the Auschwitz uprising; a sudden intensity, passion and color were infused into her narrative. She was there" (Laub 59). The process of relating her account created an instant connection despite temporal boundaries. It is this concept of reliving the testimony that is of central significance for this paper. The 'traumatic memory' caused by the *Lager* is triggered, often unintentionally, by the act of bearing witness:

In traumatic memory the event somehow registers and may actually be relived in the present, at times in a compulsively repetitive manner. It may not be subject to controlled, conscious recall, but returns in nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, and other forms of intrusively repetitive behavior characteristic of an all-compelling frame. (LaCapra 89)

In the case of Levi, the perpetual drive to bear witness through writing arguably became his “intrusively repetitive behavior” or his traumatic neurosis. Although his writing brought him success, it consumed his every waking moment. His writing was almost always in some way tied to his experiences in the *Lager* and death, and it arguably could be seen as the only reason for his continued existence. Levi wrote at all costs; he was quoted as saying, “I returned from the camp with an absolute, pathological narrative charge” (Anissimov 257). The use of the word pathological is telling as it refers to the processes of a disease, which Levi describes in association with his drive to write. The exact history of the word is derived from the Greek words *pathos*, meaning ‘experience or suffering’, and *logia*, meaning, ‘an account of’. Levi, a man who rarely employed language frivolously, through the employment of this word effectively states that he returned home with an ‘account of suffering’, a study of the disease that he carried in his blood.

As previously stated, Levi survived “not to live *and* tell, but to live in order to tell. I was already aware at Auschwitz that I was living the fundamental experience of my life” (Levi, *Beyond Survival Prooftexts* 12-13). The traumatic experience of the *Lager* caused the infective memories, and the act of bloodletting, writing, and bearing witness fulfilled

the 'acting out' or 'intrusively repetitive behavior' aspect of LaCapra's paradigm. One would then expect a successful catharsis on Levi's part, yet this never proved to be the case. The act of bearing witness was in fact the intrusive behavior that caused the re-visitation of the very same traumatic memories that he attempted to purge from his infected veins; it is as though Levi, "relived it is as if there was no difference between it and the present" (LaCapra 89). This created a deadly cycle or double-bind for Levi, from which he never found escape. For many, if not all Holocaust survivor-authors who attempt to bear witness, the working through of the past is constantly ruptured by the inability to verbalize the events. Thus they are left without catharsis, and begin the process of reliving the past again.

As a concluding point in order to again elucidate both Levi's perception of his own personal trauma and his relationship to his writing, I will refer to three poignant literary references that Levi himself used within his body of work. The first is his frequent reference to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* in *Survival in Auschwitz* and *The Drowned and the Saved*. In Levi's mind the *Lager* was akin to the underworld or hell, a place of ever deepening levels of sorrow and suffering, the origin of his eternal malaise. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, the chapter entitled "Shame" contains reference to numerous cases of suicide that occurred among survivors following liberation; cases which Levi would mentally revisit in his darker moments of reflection and depression. Levi states that it is when these survivors look back to examine the "perilous water" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 75) of their memories that they are overwhelmed and resort to suicide. The metaphor of "perilous waters" that Levi uses is an allusion to Dante's *Inferno* (1:22-

27), and with this reference Levi also hints at his own inability to ever truly escape from his past:

And as he who with laboring breath
 Has escaped to the shore,
 Turns back on the dangerous waters,
 So my spirit which was still fleeing turned back to gaze upon the pass
 That no one ever left alive
 (Dante qtd. in Patruno 141)

The second allusion, this time rooted in Greek mythology, is the repeated motif of a tormented Sisyphus and his eternal and futile labor of pushing a boulder up a steep hill, only to have it roll back down time and time again. This is an apparent allegorical reference to the feelings of futility Levi experienced through his own life's work of bearing witness; his writing represents a kind of literary endeavor in which Levi occupied the position of both author and protagonist of an endless narrative. The pointless labor of the *Lager* is replaced by the impossible task of writing and bearing witness, and both are viewed as a sort of punishment or penance respectively. It seems that as he neared the end of his life he still felt his mission to bear witness as incomplete and unfulfilled and could no longer bear the role of the witness/ survivor, he could no longer act as the absurd protagonist:

Both in his prose and in the thoughts from which it emerged, Levi strove without losing his sense of humility not only to immortalize but to consecrate the millions who died. With the passing of time, Levi found himself at an inconvertible disadvantage in doing this, because having survived, he knew he could never fathom the final reality of those who did not. Nor as he explored at length in his last book, did he ever come to

terms with whatever compromises he or anyone else, unwittingly, made to survive. (Patruno 4)

The final literary reference found in Levi's work is to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's ballad *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, a poem which evokes the sense of haunted torment which became an inescapable part of Levi's life after the *Lager*: "since then, at an uncertain hour, that agony returns, and till my ghastly tale is told, this heart within me burns" (Coleridge qtd. In *The Drowned and the Saved* 7). This particular excerpt speaks clearly to Levi's recurring and intense need to bear witness. If one is to read Coleridge's entire ballad, the stanza preceding the quoted one introduces the intense need the Ancient Mariner has to tell his tale, providing greater detail into the compulsive cycle of narrative in which Levi was also trapped: "With a woeful agony, Which forced me to begin my tale; And then it left me free" (Coleridge Part VII). This cycle, as the Ancient Mariner describes, involved a sense of temporary catharsis upon bearing witness; yet, from the stanza that follows (quoted above from *The Drowned and the Saved*), it is evident that the speaker's pain would inevitably resurface and demand the retelling of trauma at "uncertain" hours from there on end. The Mariner's fate was then to wander in a state between life and death, and retell and relive his tale of death, loss, guilt and shame. The space between life and death was one that the Ancient Mariner was forced to occupy as he owed his life to the supernatural and nightmarish force personified as a deathly pale female sailor that Coleridge termed "Life in Death", who had won the right to the Ancient Mariner's soul in a gambling match (Coleridge Part III). Levi also likely felt a connection to this notion of "Life in Death" as it is eerily

similar to how he described his post-liberation feelings to one of his biographers Ian Thomson: “‘I had the sensation that I was living,’ he told me, ‘But without being alive’” (Thomson, *The Genesis of This is Man* 43). This sort of limbo between life and death is also reminiscent of Cathy Caruth’s description of the vacillation between the “crisis of death” and the “crisis of life” that many survivors of extreme trauma experience as they attempt to cope with both the source of their trauma and their continued survival (Caruth 7).

With such extensive references as Dante’s *Inferno*, *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, and the tale of Sisyphus, it is little wonder that Levi would ultimately seek escape from his own torment. But death was more than just an escape, it was also the final boundary for Levi, not only in his understanding, and consequently in his ability to witness, but also his own self-punishment in response to his sense of survivor’s guilt. Patruno comments on Levi’s death in the following manner:

There is a deeper, more painful and personal need that drives Levi. It is his guilt over surviving, which has become more burdensome and oppressive to him with the passing of time. Mystified and troubled that he had survived while many others had died, he finds it increasingly difficult to accept the idea that some unknown power has willed that he live so he can tell the story. His agnosticism makes him skeptical, and his emotional self offers him no answers. He questions his right to speak for those who cannot. How can he, who has not experienced the worst

outcome of the atrocities of the capture, truly express the experiences of those who were not spared? (Patruno 112-113)

Levi's attempts at catharsis and purging the toxins were rendered futile by the very act of surviving and the untellable nature of the *Lager*. Levi felt that his attempts to speak for the dead were obscured by the limited vision that survival had afforded him: "[w]e, the survivors are not the true witnesses . . . We survivors are not only an exiguous but an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it" (*The Drowned and the Saved* 83). For Levi, the true witnesses, those in full possession of the terrible truth are the dead, the drowned, the submerged, the annihilated, not the survivors. Levi states:

We who were favored by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our own fate but also that of the others, indeed the drowned; but this was a discourse "on behalf of third parties," the story of things seen at close hand, not experienced personally. The destruction brought to an end, the job completed, was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death. Even if they had paper and pen, the drowned would not have testified because their death had begun before that of their body. Weeks and months before being snuffed out, they had already lost the ability to observe, to remember, to compare and express

themselves. We speak in their stead, by proxy. (*The Drowned and the Saved* 84).

Levi's life, career as chemist, and even his interests belonged to his previous life; a life that ended when he had entered the *Lager* and had a number tattooed on his flesh. The time that Levi spent after liberation was always spent with one foot in the grave and in debt to the dead. Levi, upon returning to Turin, recalls a recurring dream:

It is a dream within a dream, varied in detail, one in substance. I am sitting at a table with my family, or with friends, or at work, or in the green countryside; in short, in a peaceful relaxed environment, apparently without tension or affliction; yet I feel a deep and subtle anguish, the definite sensation of an impending threat. And in fact, as the dreams proceeds, slowly or brutally, each time in a different way, everything collapses and disintegrates around me, the scenery, the walls, the people, while the anguish becomes more and more precise. Now everything has changed to chaos; I am alone in the center of a grey and turbid nothing, and now, I *know* what this thing means, and I also know that I have always known it; I am in the Lager once more, and nothing is true outside the Lager. All the rest was a brief pause, a deception of the senses, a dream; my family, nature in flower, my home. Now this inner dream, this dream of peace, is over, and in the outer dream, which continues, gelid, a well-known sound resounds: a single word, not imperious, but brief and subdued. It is the dawn

command of Auschwitz, a foreign word, feared and expected; get up, 'Wstawàch'. (*The Reawakening* 193-194)

This passage, which concludes his novel *The Reawakening*, clearly reveals that although his life continued long after his liberation he was never truly able to escape the *Lager*, not through his survival and subsequent life, and not through his writing and penitent witnessing. Levi was unable to find true liberation because the toxins that he fled from infected his own veins. All attempts to bleed these toxins and infected humors weakened him word by word, drop by drop, finally leaving him an empty husk. In Levi's work and in his life it is clearly apparent that through the use of his pen he attempted to seek redemption for his perceived sins, give voice to the dead, understand his persecutors, and finally, albeit unsuccessfully, purge himself of the moral and spiritual defilement he suffered at the hands of his Nazi oppressors.

Without the experiences of the *Lager*, Levi never would have needed to purge his psychic infection, and he would have never been called on as a witness: "His memories of his agonizing experience were always the ink in his creative pen" (Patruno 5), and with this pen Levi wrote himself into the grave, rejoining the voices he spoke for.

Chapter 3: Drawing Blood: An Exploration of Uncovering First-Generational Trauma from a Second-Generational Perspective

Up to this point, this thesis has analyzed how the first-hand experience of the *Lager* created an infected psychic state among survivors, and drove many to seek a cure or remission through writing. However, this perceived relief actually served to weaken and deteriorate the author, akin to a psychic bloodletting and Primo Levi is the primary case presented. His large body of work focused almost exclusively on the Holocaust. Yet instead of being able to facilitate catharsis, Levi is seen to have exhibited declining mental health and a lack of closure relating to his wartime trauma, and finally it is widely believed that his life ended in suicide. In Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) and *Maus II* (1991), the traumatic experience of the first generation, in this case the accounts of his father and deceased mother's experience in the *Lager*, is repressed and manipulated by the father, which in turn, creates a second generation trace infection that finds expression by means of visual storytelling. Spiegelman's work and indeed his life had been deeply affected by this traumatic emotional inheritance. In response he is driven to bear witness to his parents' experience of the *Lager* as well as to his own postmemory or second generation experience of trauma and trace infection.

Perspective and Medium

Maus and *Maus II* are by definition postmemory¹⁹ works and therefore their format necessitates a discussion of the numerous perspectives and lenses at play within

¹⁹ This term will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

the texts. First, there is the voice of the author, who employs a proxy of himself, Artie, as protagonist in both *Maus I* and *Maus II*. It is through Artie's lens that the reader is drawn into Spiegelman's memory and subsequently into his father, Vladek's memory and also vicariously into the past of his mother, Anya. In the context of this thesis the author/artist will be referred to as Spiegelman and his literary *Doppelgänger* will be referenced as 'Artie'.

Making a clear delineation between the author, Art Spiegelman and his protagonist, Artie, is not a simple matter. Artie and Spiegelman are both postmemory witnesses who share a common story in that *Maus* and *Maus II* are Spiegelman's documentation of his family's history and the process of drawing out his mother's story from his father. Many of the similarities between author and protagonist can be confirmed through secondary sources, notably in Spiegelman's *MetaMaus* (2011), a text which is drawn from interviews with Spiegelman concerning the process of writing the *Maus* texts and the subsequent public reception of the books. The most insightful difference between the author and his proxy, is the temporally removed perspective from which the author writes: Spiegelman writes *Maus I* and *Maus II* many years after he had conducted the original interviews with his father.²⁰ The texts were therefore composed from past events and conversations, meaning that the author was able to infuse his protagonist Artie with the guilt, shame and the perspective granted from the passing of time and the numerous opportunities for reflection. The lapse in time between the interviews and the act of writing classify the *Maus* project as a

²⁰ Art Spiegelman began interviewing his father in 1972, however it was not until 1978 that he began to compile the interviews and started to draw and write *Maus* (*MetaMaus* 293).

retrospective examination on the experience of inherited trauma and on the process of becoming a postmemory witness. Staying with the language of this thesis's central metaphor, one could argue that the texts act as an emotional autopsy of the author's dead father who was once his patient in the metaphorical bloodletting process. In this way Spiegelman, the author/artist, actually fills three roles: patient (in his attempts to cure his own inherited trauma through his creation of *Maus*), barber-surgeon (in his efforts to draw out a repressed and suppressed history from his father) and forensic examiner (in his postmemory examination of the entire process and his father's death). So far mentioned, the lenses present in the text include that of Artie, Vladek, and Anja, all of which are encompassed by Spiegelman's overarching lens; yet another important perspective to consider is that of Art Spiegelman's interviewer, Hillary Chute, who contributes to the framework and content of *MetaMaus*. *MetaMaus* is therefore a sort of 'post-postmemory' work, which owing to the passing of time and greater chance for personal reflection, provides further insight into the experience of inherited trauma.

Another notable feature of the *Maus* project is Spiegelman's choice of medium, which separates his work from the vast majority of those who have attempted to witness the Holocaust. Spiegelman chose to employ the graphic novel format to record his account. The questions that inevitably surface when discussing the *Maus* texts are "Why comics?" and "Why mice?"²¹ As for the choice of the comic format, Spiegelman plainly answers this question by stating, "[c]omics are just the idiom that naturally came with trying to fulfill a mandate I wasn't conscious of fulfilling when I went back to *Maus*

²¹ The questions "Why Comics?" and "Why Mice?" are in fact the titles of two of the chapters of *MetaMaus*.

in '78 – my mother's desire that I somehow tell her story" (*MetaMaus* 165). However, aside from the fact that this was the medium that he had been trained with and was the format he was most comfortable with, it also allowed him a freedom difficult to access in other mediums: namely, the ability to illustrate and juxtapose the temporal shifts between the past the actual period drawing, writing and reflection.

On top of this temporal flexibility afforded to him by the medium, Spiegelman possessed no first-hand source material of the Holocaust, all of his information was second-hand or trace information; therefore any representation that he attempted of the events he was working with would be inherently a reconstruction. By employing both the comic book medium as well as anthropomorphized animals to depict his subjects, Spiegelman visually reflected the physical and temporal separation he had from the source of his familial trauma. Instead of being paralyzed by his lack of first-hand details, he embraced the postmemory aspects of his project, allowing himself greater creativity of representation.

Spiegelman's use of anthropomorphized animals begins with an early idea to create a comic, entitled *Ku Klux Kats*, depicting the difficulties of African-American life in early U.S. history (*MetaMaus* 113). However, the work was never completed as Spiegelman did not feel that he could truly lay claim to the subject matter (*MetaMaus* 113). As his career progressed, following the death of his mother, the concept of *Maus* began to take form. In order to specifically answer the question, "[w]hy mice?", additional historical background must be provided. The antisemitic comparison of the Jewish people to vermin goes back centuries in Europe. Spiegelman sardonically

employed the image of vermin, an association that was long used in antisemitic propaganda as a pejorative reference, to subvert and undermine the stereotype.²²

In addition, to Spiegelman's attempt to subvert and undermine stereotypes, Adam Gopnik suggested that the choice to use anthropomorphized animals to depict Spiegelman's characters was motivated by respecting the Jewish religious prohibition of graven images. Gopnik surmised that similar to the *Ashkenazi bird's head Haggadah*,²³ Spiegelman utilized anthropomorphized animals to avoid, "drawing something too sacred to show" (*MetaMaus* 117). Spiegelman conceded that although he was never conscious of the religious prohibition being a primary motivator in his choice, he was aware of the scripture and on a subconscious level it, "helped fuse that mouse face onto my work" (*MetaMaus* 117). The choice of cats for the representation of the Nazis was simple after mice were selected to depict the Jewish characters. Cats are the natural predators of mice, and within comic and cartoon context, the cat and mouse rivalry has a long-standing tradition.

The importance of the release of *Maus* and *Maus II* cannot be overstated in relation to the medium and genre that Spiegelman employed to create the texts. From *Maus* and its sequel's graphic novel format, to their postmemory perspective and even their subject matter, Spiegelman's texts challenged and pushed the boundaries of what was at the time considered appropriate to the genre of 'Holocaust literature'. The

²² Spiegelman explains at length the evolution of his use of mice to depict his Jewish characters in his texts in *MetaMaus* (*MetaMaus* 114-116).

²³ Richard McBee, "Bird's Head Haggadah Revealed – The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative & Religious Imagination," *The Jewish Press*, 29 March 2012, 29 June 2014 <<http://www.jewishpress.com/>>

medium of graphic novels and, by extension, the comic book industry were also significantly impacted the release of Spiegelman's texts as the seriousness of the subject matter as well as the project's factual basis was relatively new to the medium at the time. *Maus* upon its release instantaneously leant credibility and credence to the often ignored if not maligned medium of comics.²⁴ Spiegelman comments in a later interview, "*Maus* changed the face of the way the medium I work in is perceived. It demonstrated for many that comics could be a serious art form, and that's swell, but it also generated a lot of confusion because of its subject matter" (*MetaMaus* 74). The overall reaction to *Maus* and *Maus II* was favourable, albeit in Spiegelman's eyes slightly condescending as its first real recognition was a "Young Adult award" which initially relegated the texts to an audience not intended by the author (*MetaMaus* 103). However, Spiegelman, in his choice of subject matter, medium and anthropomorphized depictions, not only seemed to break new ground, but he also, in some people's opinions, broke the rules. Spiegelman employed humour, a pop culture medium, was not himself a first-person witness, and even embraced fictional aspects of his story. For some of the survivors who had been exposed to the *Maus* texts, this was too much to either comprehend or accept. In *MetaMaus*, Spiegelman described an interview experience in 1988 in Los Angeles where he was asked by an elderly survivor: "[c]ouldn't you wait until we were

²⁴ The term comics and graphic novel are essentially interchangeable terms that apply to the same medium. The term graphic novel is commonly employed to refer to an amalgamation of comics bound together collecting a story arc. "Graphic novels are similar to comic books because they use sequential art to tell a story. Unlike comic books, graphic novels are generally stand-alone stories with more complex plots." "What is a Graphic Novel?," *Get Graphic: The World in Words and Pictures*, 2007, 21 July 2014 <<http://www.getgraphic.org/whatisagraphicnovel.php>>

dead before you would make such a thing?" (*MetaMaus* 99). However, these types of responses were thankfully not the norm.

Visually Spiegelman crafted a masterful postmemory work that, both metaphorically and physically spills over and escapes the traditional frames common to the medium. This seemingly suggests that the contents or story of the text cannot be contained by or overflows the page. A strong example of this visual motif is clearly illustrated on the cover page for chapter two of *Maus II* with flies creeping outside the picture frame and seemingly off of the page, blurring the lines of fictional representation and his personal reality (*Maus II* 39).

In terms of a postmemory narrative, Spiegelman flashes back and forth between stories of the past to Artie's present telling not only his own story but the stories of both his father and subsequently his mother. Spiegelman comments: "*Maus* is about the Holocaust and its impact on the survivors and those who survive the survivors" clearly elucidating the multiple layers of memory and perspective at play within the text (*MetaMaus* 73).

Biography

Author/artist Art Spiegelman was born Feb. 15, 1948 in Stockholm Sweden to Auschwitz survivor parents Anja and Vladek Spiegelman. At the age of three, he and his parents immigrated to the United States, first to Norristown Pennsylvania, and then to New York, where in 1955 they settled in Rego Park, Queens. In 1963, as teenager, Spiegelman attended The High School of Art and Design in Manhattan and then he

continued his art education at Harpur College²⁵. His college studies were interrupted in 1968 when Spiegelman suffered a mental breakdown and was incarcerated in the Binghamton State Mental Hospital for a month; he subsequently discontinued his university studies. On May 21, 1968, shortly after his release, Spiegelman's mother, Anja committed suicide. In 1969, Spiegelman put distance between himself and his family environment and moved to San Francisco for four years. Also in 1969, his father Vladek married a long-time friend and Holocaust survivor by the name of Mala. In 1972, Spiegelman began to work on what would become the basis of the *Maus* Project when he began his first taped interviews with his father. Later in 1979, the first incarnation of *Maus* appeared as *Funny Animals* #1, published by Apex Novelties. The next year, *Prisoner on the Hell Planet* was published in the comic book, *Short Order Comix* #1. By 1975, Spiegelman had moved back to New York where he met Françoise Mouly, who two years later became his wife. Spiegelman began his work on *Maus* as a compiled book in 1978, and the first edition of chapter one was published in RAW (a magazine published and owned by him and his French wife) in 1980. As for Vladek, during this time, he and Mala had relocated to Florida where they lived for two years before his death in 1982; ironically, in the same year *Maus* received its first award (*MetaMaus* 293). Beneath this biographical timeline and at the root of his mental breakdown, as well as his temporary relocation to the opposite coast and especially of his work, was the emotional experience of being the child of Holocaust survivors.

²⁵ Harpur College is now defunct, it has been replaced by the State University of New York in Binghamton. (*MetaMaus* 292)

For Spiegelman in his youth, the Holocaust was a pervasive yet coded or obfuscated reality. He comments, “[m]y parents didn’t talk in any coherent or comprehensive way about what they had lived through. It was always a given that they lived through ‘the War,’ which was their term for the Holocaust. I don’t think I even heard the word Holocaust till the late ‘70s, but I was aware of ‘The War’ for as long as I was aware of anything, just from passing references in our home” (*MetaMaus* 12-13). Both ever-present and distant simultaneously, the Holocaust haunted and eluded Spiegelman throughout his life. In Spiegelman’s childhood, his father repressed the past or retold it in a more digestible manner. This selective telling by his father was done as much for himself as for his listener, and the traumatic affects, the infection of the *Lager* (as shown in *Vladek*), only manifested through secondary symptoms, such as extreme frugality, obsessive compulsive behaviour and nightmares. Anja on the other hand, did not hide the great depression she felt, and on rare occasions she would share with Art Spiegelman certain aspects of her experiences in the *Lager*. However, her story was never told completely to her son, and as Spiegelman stated, “[s]he’d refer to things without background, and they mostly served to terrify me as a kid” (*MetaMaus* 14). Through these fractured and distorted accounts, coloured by his mother’s depression and his father’s avoidance, the infection of the *Lager* was felt indirectly by young Spiegelman. He had inherited a postmemory infection from his parents. This second-generation infection drove him to uncover his parents’ elusive stories and witness both their experiences and subsequently his own.

Untangling Postmemory Trauma

Applying LaCapra's terminology to Spiegelman's work, the *Maus* project was part of the process of attempting to affirm his identity through familial history as well as to "work through" his inherited trauma. Unfortunately, by attempting to 'work through' his own trauma he, he ended up 'acting out' against his father. The deeply seeded motivation for Spiegelman was to fill emotional voids and repair his own internal postmemory trauma. His father, at least as seen through Artie's eyes, was ambivalent to the project from its inception, commenting, "[b]etter you should spend your time to make drawings what will bring you some money" (*Maus* 12). However Artie, and subsequently Spiegelman, felt the incessant need to uncover his mother's and consequently his own history. Spiegelman as author commented on the first interviews with his father an intrinsic need for his parent's history and thinking to himself "[o]h, I just need to know this. I just need to know it" (*MetaMaus* 40).

In order to understand the inherited or postmemory trauma which led Spiegelman down the path of a second-generation witness and a barber/surgeon, it is necessary to employ the concept of *postmemory*. The origin of the concept actually has a direct relationship to Spiegelman's work as Marianne Hirsch originally conceptualized the term after first viewing Art Spiegelman's three-page prototype for *Maus*, which originally appeared in the 1972 publication of *Funny Aimals*. Most plainly defined, postmemory is "the response of the second generation to the trauma of the first" (Hirsch 8); however, Hirsch states more specifically that,

[t]he term “postmemory” is meant to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary or second-generation memory quality, its basis is displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness. Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediate not through recollection but through representation, projection and creation – often based on silence rather than speech, on the invisible rather than the visible. That is not, of course, to say that the survivor memory is unmediated, but that it is more directly – chronologically – connected to the past. (Hirsch 9)

Hirsch has done much to illuminate the second-generation experience of traumatic events such as the Holocaust. It is her understanding that such events become embedded in the family consciousness, and are experienced as ‘real’ memories by the second-generation:

Postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 9)

Spiegelman’s work in the *Maus* texts documents the experience of postmemory all the while filtering their stories through with his own second-generation lens. In Spiegelman’s case, most of his parents’ memories were unspoken or peripherally

mentioned, yet they still left him with the kind of powerful yet chronologically impossible recollections that Hirsch describes. *Maus* in its final format is created both from the memories of Spiegelman's contentious relationship with his father Vladek in his final years, and also from the memories directly collected from Vladek for the purposes of telling his wife's and his own tale of the *Lager*. James Young summarizes the texts as such: "As his father recalled what happened to him at the hands of the Nazis, his son Art recalls what happened to him at the hands of his father and his father's stories" (Young 670). Young continues, "*Maus* is not about the Holocaust so much as about the survivor's tale itself and the artist-son's recovery of it" (Young 670).

Differing from traditional Holocaust memoirs and other first-person accounts, *Maus* is a multi-generation text that embodies and exposes the multiple perspectives on the impact of the Holocaust on the family of the survivor. Young suggests that 'the story' is not a single story at all but two stories being told simultaneously: "the father's story and Spiegelman's imaginative record of it" (Young 676) exist together in the text. Yet, such an analysis is incomplete as it fails to mention the important character of Anja, Artie's mother. Indeed, at the inception of Spiegelman's project, Anja's missing notebooks were the inspiration behind his work. Therefore, *Maus* contains three intertwined stories, viewed through several lenses. Spiegelman not only does not hide from the disrupted and disjointed aspect of his project, but rather he delves deeply into the disrupted areas and searches them for answers about himself, and the reasons for his own neurosis. Specifically, he suffers the same seemingly unavoidable compulsion to bear witness as Levi; yet in Spiegelman's case, the trauma causing his neurosis is his

obsession with telling or reconstructing his mother's lost account. Rather than being a purely historical document, the *Maus* texts are therefore a personal documentation of postmemory trauma. Young comments that Spiegelman did not ask his father Vladek to "start with the war, deportation, or internment, but with his mother and their union—that is, his own origins" (Young 678-679). For Spiegelman, the writing of this text was in some ways the search for his own missing identity. When his father first rebuked Artie's desire to hear about his parents' story during the war, Artie, undaunted, responds vehemently, "I want to hear it. Start with Mom" (*Maus* 12). The emphasis on the first person is notable. Spiegelman chose to emphasize the letter "I", both recognizing and reinforcing that the project was more about personal exploration rather than an attempt to document history.

Although this thesis focuses on the analysis of those who survived the *Lager* and bore witness in an attempt to purge the infected memories, not all survivors coped with the trauma in the same manner. In fact, in the context of Spiegelman's family history, his parents had drastically differing approaches to contending with the *Lager's* trauma. Anja fulfills the profile of this thesis's central metaphor of the writer/witness as engaged in a process metaphorically akin to bloodletting. Anja was interned in the *Lager*. She emerged after liberation a survivor, but with an unspecified mental and physical malaise that plagued her for the remainder of her life. She attempted to bear witness and find some sort of catharsis on two occasions through the writing of her diaries and notebooks, but she ultimately succumbed to the trauma of her past by committing suicide when her surviving son was twenty.

Anja's death exacerbated the postmemory trauma that Art Spiegelman had experienced as the child of survivors, and the absence of her diaries became a painful void for him. He needed to know and understand the mother that had been in many ways stolen from him even before his own birth. Though it has been mentioned that postmemory is in part experienced by the second-generation through internalizing powerful family memories, the absences or the gaps in the family story are also likely to be equally as powerful for the children of survivors. *Maus* and *Maus II* are texts that are as much about absences as they are chronicles of the traumatic memories of the Holocaust. The absences are numerous and arguably drove Spiegelman to create the texts. Three of the most central include the rivalry he felt for a brother he had never met; his desperate quest for the lost diaries of his mother, a woman who despite surviving till his twentieth year, was in many ways a shadow of a person; and finally his own response to his father's preference to keep the details of the past buried or at bay. Nancy Miller has insightfully remarked that it was perhaps the desire to bring back his mother and her lost diaries which most propelled Spiegelman: "it's as if at the heart of *Maus's* dare is the wish to save the mother by retrieving her narrative; as if the comic book version of Auschwitz were the son's normalization of another impossible reality: restoring the missing word, the Polish notebooks" (Miller 24). Artie all but confirms Miller's statement during a disclosure to his fiancée: "When I was a kid I used to think about which of my parents I'd let the Nazis take to the ovens if I could only save one of them . . . Usually I saved my mother" (*Maus II* 14).

Much of the *Maus* texts centers around Artie's relationship with his father, best characterized as conflicted and resentful, as well as the haunting memory of his mother. His parents' past experience in the *Lager* was a defining feature of their familial relationships. Through the lens of postmemory theory it is observed that the knowledge of one's parents being survivors makes it difficult to see them completely free from the context of their pasts, and this pervasive influence was exacerbated by the depressive and reflective tendencies of his mother, and his father's opposing drive to repress and obfuscate the past. Symbolic of this oppositional approach to bearing witness, is Vladek's decision to burn Anja's Holocaust memoirs, an act which unhinged Artie, and ultimately drove him to force the recording of the stories, which had to be drawn from his father. Vladek is depicted as being repeatedly resistant to sharing his past with his son. He appears to attempt to shield young Artie from the hard truths about his mother and his own infected past. However, by limiting Artie's access to this history through this type of emotional quarantine, Vladek unwittingly feeds Artie's need for the exploration of his familial trauma. This paradox illustrates that it is the silences and voids that drive Spiegelman later in life to create his texts in order to fill the spaces in his identity and purge his own traumatic memories.

Artie is obvious about whom he would have preferred to address the family past with: "I wish I had got Mom's story while she was alive. She was more sensitive" (*Maus* 132). Perhaps it was Anja's sensitivity that made psychic recovery from the *Lager's* toxins impossible. Anja struggled living the survivor's life and bearing the *Lager's* poison. She suffered constant emotional and mental malaise of a medically undetermined

cause. According to Vladek, she was prone to depression, suffering her first severe bout during the outbreak of the war and shortly after the birth of her first child Richieu. Typical of his generation, Vladek seems inclined to dismiss these spells of depression as bouts of hysteria. Such a reduction of his wife's emotions can be observed in *Maus* where Spiegelman's depiction of Vladek seems to suggest that Anja's stay in the sanatorium was a result of a simple bout of postpartum depression, commenting that, "Giving birth was too much strain. She's always hysterical or depressed . . . A breakdown!" (*Maus* 31). Vladek's explanation of Anja's early bouts of mental illness ignored her involvement in politically subversive activities for the Communist movement, or that she had at the time witnessed the arrest of a friend, while barely escaping incarceration herself. Vladek views Anja's psychological issues from a gender-based perspective, blaming her difficulties on childbirth, while dismissing her political motivations. This omission illustrates another example of Vladek's censoring of the events after Anja's death, and also his tendency to repress, at least in Artie's eyes, Anja's emotional and mental trauma. Through this knowledge, it is not difficult to infer that Anja exercised more agency and will in her political life than Vladek would have liked. In fact, Vladek outwardly states clearly: "[w]hen I found out this story, I was ready to break marriage" (*Maus* 29). Vladek persists, "I told her "Anja if you want me you have to go my way . . . If you want your Communist friends, then you can't stay in this house!" (*Maus* 29) Therefore, fear of the then encroaching dictatorships, both political as well as familial, and her increasing feelings of helplessness are equally likely causes of her

shifting mental health.²⁶ Even in the *Lager*, Anja struggled more than Vladek, as she was less capable of adapting her morality to suit the environment. Anja, who had Communist inclinations (*Maus* 29), could not switch her communal and collective-based mentality to one where the individual took almost sole importance. Vladek was able through his privileged positions to sneak her packages of food and supplies to assist her in her survival, only to have her report later that she had given them away (*MetaMaus* 21). Little is revealed about how Anja was able to survive, although Spiegelman himself provides slightly more clarity in a later interview:

She managed to get through in ways very different from the ways Vladek got through. From what I could figure out, the strategies included something that comes up in *Maus* only en passant where she takes the bread she gets from Vladek and shares it with her hungry friends as if she wasn't hungry. If one tries to understand survival strategies --- if that's not too cold-blooded to say --- I think that she instinctively moved toward the version that had to do with creating a fabric of interdependent people who helped each other, more so than Vladek, who was a rather self-sufficient person. Sharing food with others made them protective of her.

(*MetaMaus* 21)

²⁶ It is of note that the suicide debate surrounding Levi's death brings up the question of a "pre-existing condition" in regard to mental illness; this same theme is a repeated motif in Spiegelman's depiction of Vladek's memory of Anja. However, within the context of this project, the question surrounding the presence of a pre-existing condition becomes irrelevant. As previously argued in this thesis, McCord aptly pointed out that many people lead long and full lives despite suffering from mental illness (McCord 24). However, what does become important in the context of this analysis is the question of whether or not the time in the *Lager* and its subsequent infection or trace toxins were the primary reason for both Anja and Levi's suicide. The presence or non-presence of a pre-existing mental condition only becomes relevant in the context of whether or not this condition made them more susceptible to the after-effects of the *Lager* and its psychic toxins.

In many ways, at least in Artie's young adult perspective, Anja is depicted as isolated and controlled by her husband. Previous to the outbreak of the War, she tended toward collectivism rather than individualism as is illustrated by her involvement with the Communist Party. Whether it was her sensitivity or a greater sense of social justice and compassion, as could be gleaned from her selfless behaviour in the *Lager* discussed in *MetaMaus*, Anja, from young Artie's perspective, maintained her sensitive perspective up to her death.

Anja attempted on two separate occasions to record her wartime experiences and both times her memoirs were destroyed. Her first attempt was written down in her "Polish notebooks" which were ultimately destroyed by her captors. Her second known attempt was the memoir which Vladek burnt after her suicide. Isolated by her traumatic experience and frustrated in her attempts to witness, Anja gave into her infected humours and succumbed to death. In this way, similar



to Levi in the previous chapter of this thesis, Anja herself displays the first-generation infection, witnessing and bloodletting metaphor, but more importantly for the context of this chapter, it shows that Spiegelman inherited his own experience of the trauma inflicted by the *Lager*. In *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, an early comic created by Spiegelman and included in *Maus*, Spiegelman mentions how upon discovering his



mother's suicide, he was also faced with the absence of a note. Yet, much like Primo Levi's last text, the burnt diaries were her note, but Spiegelman was not privy to their existence at the time. For Spiegelman, his mother's bouts of depression were not easily dismissed. In the final page of *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*, Spiegelman reveals the internal processing of the reasons for his mother's death: "Menopausal Depression, Hitler did it!" (*Maus* 103), as well as his subsequent emotional processing of her death. Both explanations are scrawled across the second panel, as are his conflicting emotions of ambivalence, remorse and misplaced anger given form in the two words "BITCH" and "MOMMY" (*Maus* 103) juxtaposed against each other. However, it is the frames that follow that are most elucidating. The time line shifts quickly to a guilt-ridden flashback of Spiegelman's desperately depressed mother entering his room and asking, "Artie . . . you . . . still . . . love me . . . don't you?" (*Maus* 103) to which Artie callously responds, "Sure Ma!" (*Maus* 103) as he resentfully turns away from her. Spiegelman seems to be expressing his own guilt for turning away and not listening to the cries of his deeply saddened and chronically depressed mother, not to mention regret at not having acquired her stories while she lived. This suggests that his mother died of a combination of loneliness and depression which stemmed in large part from the damage that resulted from her time in the *Lager* and her inability to find any type of catharsis through witnessing due to her lack of a listener. Spiegelman depicts young Artie at this time as being emotionally unavailable to his mother and deaf to her trauma. Perhaps self-preservation played a role: it could have been that at the time, he was not psychically strong enough to contain the postmemory trauma he stood to inherit, and

thus he unconsciously resisted its transfer. Anja's story, her haunting memories, her unsatisfying attempts to cleanse herself through writing, and her eventual death all allude to the bloodletting metaphor central to this thesis. Even the method of her suicide is worthy of note as she died as a result of cutting her wrists, an act of bloodletting in its most extreme form.

By contrast, Vladek contends with his own wartime trauma by attempting to bury and repress his own memories and the discussion of his past: "to him, it was really a matter of brushing it all aside to survive in the new postwar universe he had walked into" (*MetaMaus* 14). Even when Vladek is convinced to share these experiences, he casts himself in the role of hero or protagonist. Vladek seems to avoid the darkest elements of his past and instead portrays himself as a Rudolf Valentino-like hero: handsome, clever and not only able to survive but able to help save others. From the moment that Artie asks his father for details on Anja during the pre-war and war times, Vladek regales his son with stories of his young bachelor days. Vladek emphasizes his youthful conquests and the women desperate to garner his affections (*Maus* 12-20).

Throughout all his recollections, Vladek remains the protagonist of his story, a perspective which Artie finds frustrating on both a personal as well as a professional level. This framing of the past not only moderates and sanitizes the accounts of history that Artie had been attempting to uncover, but also diminishes the traumatic aspects of this past and the voids that Artie himself is tortured by. Whether it is outsmarting the *Kapos* and Nazi guards to afford himself special privileges, or helping those around him, even at the cost of his own corporal punishment (*Maus* 57), Vladek maintains his role as

victor and hero. Vladek seems to favour the telling of the events that cast him in the best light or illustrate his resourcefulness and adaptability. Vladek refuses to see himself as lesser than his captors; in fact, he seems to put himself above them in many cases, as well as just about everyone else. In Vladek's mind, his survival of the *Lager* confirmed his own abilities, and ultimately gave him a sense of self-righteousness. Vladek needs to appropriate meaning to his suffering, he could not accept his survival as a random event or even the result of unscrupulous behaviour, but rather his survival was the result of his strength and character. His survival proved to Vladek that his way of thinking and acting during his trials in the *Lager* and even after liberation was the right way because it was he who had survived when so many others did not. Vladek is able to repress or reframe his negative traumatic experience and his subsequent survival, where as someone like Levi, or even Vladek's wife could not. This self-righteous attitude is one that Artie battled with right up to the day of his father's death.

Artie's psychologist offers an interpretation of his father's behaviour suggesting, "maybe your father needed to show he was always right – that he could always survive – because he felt guilty about surviving" (*Maus II* 44). Such an explanation suggests that his framing of these events is a sort of defence or inoculation against his infected memories. Vladek distorts real memories into a form that is more palatable, and one to which he could assign both meaning and triumph, which only serves to frustrate young Artie because it further ruptures the distance between him and the truth of his mother's past. Despite Vladek's efforts to focus on his heroic behaviour or his ability to exercise control, his underlying fears and feelings of helplessness are confronted by both his own

unconscious and his son. Vladek struggles to keep these memories repressed, to maintain the silences and voids; subsequently, they unconsciously surface and are transferred to Artie. These refocused or reinterpreted versions of events create a rupture and a part of the void that Artie attempts to fill through his own version of second-generation witnessing.

Though Vladek represses the more traumatic memories of his past, and accentuates the aspects of agency, he carries his traumatic memories forth into every aspect of his life and unwittingly passed them to Artie. *Maus* and *Maus II* are riddled with examples of Vladek's underlying *Lager* acquired infection. For example, Vladek displays extreme frugality, from his cautious use of wooden matches (*Maus* 20), to his gluing back together a broken dish (*Maus* 73) and his incessant nightmares (*Maus II* 74). Such behaviour is common among people who have survived periods of extreme destitution, and in Vladek's case it reveals that even though decades removed, memories of the *Lager* still control much of his behaviour. In fact in many ways, Vladek does little to change after the *Lager*. Instead, many of the strategies that he utilized to survive were simply adopted and reapplied to his post-war reality. Vladek seems to be willing to employ emotional manipulation, guilt and even exaggerations of reality in order to get what he wants, whether it was to garner his son's affection or to return merchandise at the local grocery store. Vladek appears to always have been in control of the dissemination of his history, and while on one hand he is willing to share it, he does so only when he can gain from its dissemination. Young comments:

Indeed, as survivor *par excellence*, Vladek is not above bartering the story itself to get what he wants: first, as leverage to keep his son nearby, and then later as part of an exchange for food at the local market, where he receives six dollars' worth of groceries for one dollar, a partially eaten box of *Special K* cereal, a story of his declining health, and, of course, a little about "how it was in the camps" (M, 2:90). In a pinch, as it turns out, the savvy survivor can trade even his story of survival for food. (Young 692)

Vladek actually tells very little of the story that his son was seeking. In fact, it seems as though Artie had great difficulty in extracting Anja's story from Vladek as she appears very sparingly in the first text, and in only a few pages in the second. Spiegelman depicts how his attempts to draw out his mother's story were repeatedly frustrated, and every time the conversation came close to revealing Anja's story, it seems that Vladek is able to find reason to end the conversation or change the topic. Speaking as the author, Spiegelman comments on his struggle to understand his father's reluctance to tell Anja's full story: "They knew each other's stories. Though when I would ask Vladek about Anja's story, he didn't seem to have a clear memory of her specifics" (*MetaMaus* 22). He continues, "when I would ask, 'Well, where was Mom? What was she doing?' he would say, 'Well, she was like me, and she did this and that,' but it was vague; there wasn't a sense of her having had a separate orbit that I could get from my probings and questioning of him" (*MetaMaus* 22). Vladek's attempts at evasion seem to frustrate the relationship between father and son while also keeping Artie

coming back for more. Vladek seems to at least partially understand that in order to maintain the connection that he had with his son he had to reveal his, and particularly Anja's, story incrementally. Young states that, "Vladek tells his story, it seems, more for the sake of his son's company than for the sake of history; it is a way to keep his son nearby, a kind of tether" (Young 692). A secondary reason for Vladek's slow reveal of his and Anja's stories is that the memories of Anja's story were simply too painful to discuss with any regularity. They shattered the version of events that Vladek had constructed in order to contend with his own trauma and continued survival. Vladek survived not



through a process of witnessing and purging but rather through either employing repression and selective remembering, or revealing and trading his accounts when he deemed it necessary to assist him in achieving his goals and aiding his survival. Vladek could not cope with most of his infected memories, so his solution was to reinterpret them or simply deny them altogether. His apparent forgetfulness

may have been an attempt to keep his more disturbing and infective memories in a dormant state.

Vladek is willing to trade parts of his story for time with his son, but he still tends toward a slightly mediated version of events. Vladek in his attempt to repress his more disturbing memories states, "I can tell you other stories, but such private things, I don't want you should mention" (*Maus* 23). When Spiegelman published the short strip

"Prisoner on the Hell Planet" in the 1973 book *Short Order Comix*, it found its way into his father's hands and upset him greatly: "It is good for you to get outside your system. But for me it brought back in my mind so much memories of Anja . . . of course I'm always about her anyway" (*Maus* 104). For Vladek, such exposure is embarrassing and too personal, and it also ruptures the reconstructed and repressed memories that he constantly attempts to keep from surfacing. "Prisoner on the Hell Planet" not only reveals private material but it also cast Vladek as less of a hero. It showed his father as weak and needy, not emotions that Vladek worked through on a conscious level, yet at the same time while being seemingly oblivious to his to own infected state, he recognizes his son's need for purgation which suggests that he was, at least on a subconscious level, aware of Artie's inherited trauma. Anja is Vladek's Achilles heel, and the barely suppressed memories of her held the power to reduce him to a weeping wreck. Ironically, the memories that Vladek tries hardest to forget are those that Artie sought most intently to expose: "all such things of the War, I tried to put out of my mind once and for all . . . Until you rebuild me all this from your questions" (*Maus II* 98). It is in this paradox that the barber and patient relationship is established, a tug of war between the reluctant bloodletter and the persistent barber-surgeon. Artie is trapped in the voids, silences and all that was unspeakable, and has to act as barber in order to attempt to come to terms with his own trauma. Notably in *Prisoner in Hell*, Artie is depicted in the uniform of a *Lager* prisoner. This suggests that Artie himself in some ways is a prisoner as well of his parents' trauma. Hirsch comments,

In her extensive interviews with children of Holocaust survivors, Nadine Fresco describes the silences that separate them from their parents. The stories never get told, instead they are expressed symptomatically, acted out between parents and children: “the forbidden memory of death manifested itself only in the form of incomprehensible attacks of pain . . .” (Hirsch 28)

This brings us to the pivotal event in the texts: the destruction of Anja’s diaries. The event is of primary



importance because it creates the void at the center of *Maus*, an absence which is likely indicative of Spiegelman’s own feelings over the loss of connection to his mother and her story. Vladek’s reason for destroying Anja’s second attempt at bearing witness to the trauma she endured is never outwardly stated. We can assume from the fact that Vladek states that he never even read them, that they contained a reality and trauma that he could not allow himself to be exposed to again.²⁷ They needed to remain buried for his survival and he could not allow himself to be infected by her accounts of suffering. Anja’s recollections are tangible connections to trauma and they challenge the structured reality that he had created for himself. Anja’s diaries are something he could

²⁷ Although the diaries remained unread, the contents could never be truly known. However, Spiegelman recounts several exchanges with his mother that began as mundane daily activities, such as going to the grocery store (*MetaMaus* 14), that inevitably end with her sharing details of her experience in the *Lager*. Therefore, it is not much of a leap to argue that if the *Lager*’s infection invaded her daily activities, then it is likely that her diaries contained a similar content.

not mediate or control, stripping him of the agency he has in his own tales, and exposing the trauma he tries to ignore. For Artie, the destruction of the diaries is impermissible, and in harsh response he calls his father a murderer, revealing that for her son the destruction of her story is equivalent to the destruction of her life (*Maus* 159). Similarly, the destruction of Anja's diaries, as much as her suicide and the war, makes it impossible for Art Spiegelman to ever truly know his mother. As if to add further insult, the diaries (a potential door to Anja's past experience and inner world) were burnt; a fate which on a metaphorical level almost negated her survival of the camps, as ultimately her story/life was consumed by flames, the same as would likely have occurred had she died in the *Lager*. It is the absences themselves, the lack of knowledge that actually became the foundation for Artie's own mental malaise depicted in *Prisoner on the Hell Planet*. Spiegelman's response as an author, is creation of both *Maus* texts, and becomes a case study of postmemory trauma.

The Labour of Testimony . . . Spiegelman as Barber/Surgeon



When it comes time for the Spiegelman family story to be told, considering all we know about Anja's death, the destruction of the diaries, and Vladek's own reluctance and narrative subjectivity, it is not surprising that the telling of the tale is a strained and painful process, a sort of bloodletting if you will. The relationship and power structure

between Artie and Vladek is clearly delineated within the first pages of *Maus*. Despite the fact that Vladek is the keeper of the story, Artie wields power over his lonely and weakening father in order to extract the tale.

The background information necessary to understand the early distancing between father and son is provided in the book's introduction. Here Spiegelman relates a childhood story wherein while out with friends he falls and is left behind. Upon returning home hurt, he goes to his father for comfort only to have his father rebuke his efforts for attention and invalidate his pain through comparisons to his own wartime trauma: Vladek retorts, "Friends? Your friends? . . . If you lock them together in a room with no food for a weekThen you could see what it is, friends!" (*Maus* 5) This passage, which actually precedes the first chapter of *Maus*, frames Artie's emotional state as being characterized by a sense of inadequacy and disempowerment; whatever pain or suffering he may have felt was perceived as inconsequential when compared to his father's trauma. In this sense he is also victimized by the psychological wounds of the *Lager*, only they are imprinted on him in a postmemory context. Furthermore, in light of his father's insensitive and belittling attitude, the animosity Artie displays towards his father as an adult, evident throughout the *Maus* texts, becomes more understandable.

There is evidence in both the *Maus* texts and *MetaMaus* that when Spiegelman (and his corresponding fictional character Artie) grew to adulthood, he began to actively avoid his father. It was obvious that the trauma of his home life had created a large rift between father and son. Within the very first frame of first chapter, Artie declares, "I went out to see my father in Rego Park. I hadn't seen him in a long time. We weren't that close" (*Maus* 11). Spiegelman the author elaborates on these feelings of avoidance further in *MetaMaus* commenting



5

"[w]hen I first came back to New York in '75, I didn't tell him I had moved back. For the first six months or a year, I'd put a towel over the phone and pretended to be talking to him from San Francisco! (I think I'd read that trick in a *Dick Tracy* comic as a kid)" (*MetaMaus* 24). It is Spiegelman's idea for a new project (the inception of *Maus*) which drives him to reconnect with his father. His motivation, at least on a conscious level depicted by the author in his self-characterization, is to draw out the buried accounts of his parents' and thus his own history. Young remarks, "Artie appears again, now grown, to visit his father for the first time in nearly two years. He is on a mission, a self-quest that is also historical" (Young 678). Throughout his quest, Spiegelman contends with the relationship that evolved between himself as author, postmemory witness, and his father's metaphorical barber. He is consumed by his project, and though he has to see his father more often, it isn't the case that he turns into a more understanding or

respectful son. Spiegelman, through Artie, confesses, “[f]or the next few months I went back to visit my father quite regularly, to hear his story” (*Maus* 26). In fact, there are a number of examples that clearly state that the sole purpose of his visits with his father is the extraction of the source material for his project: “I visited my father more often in order to get more information about his past” (*Maus* 43). For Vladek, telling his story is a time to see his son as Spiegelman explains: “Vladek seemed to be willing to cooperate, though it seemed mainly because it got me coming out and visiting every week” (*MetaMaus* 43). Their roles had shifted: no longer was it Artie pleading for the recognition and attention his father, but rather it is Vladek who craves the attention of his son, and trades his wartime memories for time with Artie.

When Artie sought out his father after such a long absence, Vladek seems to immediately understand that his son’s intentions are to gather his memories more as an act of defiance than a son’s intention to pay tribute to his father. When Artie arrives, Vladek anticipates the conversation he was about to become part of, and he invites his son to talk privately stating, “Come we will talk while I pedal” (*Maus* 12). Though Vladek agreed to tell his story, he expresses reluctance in doing so: “It would take many books, my life, and no one wants anyways to hear such stories” (*Maus* 12). Such reluctance likely stems in part from the pain that remembering causes him, not just as he addresses the suffering of his own past, but also as he is forced to revisit the loss of his tormented Anja: “Art forces Vladek back into the past of suffering and the double-loss of Anja” (Miller 398). Despite his father’s reluctance, Artie persists and as Vladek begins to relay his account, the wheel of his father’s stationary bike dissolved into his first memories as

a young adult. As a visual metaphor, the wheel contains a dual meaning: first, it illustrates the beginning of Vladek spinning his tale (*MetaMaus* 209), but secondly, and of more importance in the context of this thesis, it shows that the process of bearing witness is an exhausting labour for Vladek. In the *Maus* texts, Vladek's declining health is visually represented and linked to his bearing witness process. Whenever, the conversation with his son turns to something more painful or traumatic, Vladek is depicted as spilling his pills or becoming short of breath. In such moments Vladek's intention is to redirect or cease the conversation all together, but his symptoms also illustrate a very real and physical manifestation of his infected memories, and the threat that they place his life in. Even the very title of *Maus- My Father Bleeds History* elucidates and reinforces the act of bearing witness as physically draining and damaging as well as being a form of bloodletting. Spiegelman himself seems to recognize this stating, "[e]very once in a while, I'd find that I'd pushed him too far, and he would obviously be either physically tired from being on that Exercycle while talking, or something would be a bit too emotional for him to go further at a particular moment" (*MetaMaus* 28). This situation puts Vladek clearly in the role of witness/patient. Then what role does Spiegelman fulfill in relation to his father? The uncomfortable reality is that Spiegelman, whether it is conscious or not, ends up fulfilling the role of the barber-surgeon by collecting the words and testimony/blood in his book. This relationship has potentially



deadly effects, and in the case of *Maus* and *Maus II* the potential fatal consequences reveal themselves.

Vladek's health does indeed begin to fail beyond the mere dropping of pills and shortness of breath. At the end of one particularly painful memory, Vladek suffers a minor heart attack (*Maus* 118). He attempts to dismiss the attack as a result of walking

too fast, but it becomes apparent that the

recollections were overwhelming him and causing a physical manifestation of his trauma. Perhaps the most revealing frames in the *Maus* texts occur near

the closing of *Maus II* after the reader is given a

glimpse of Vladek and Anja as having just survived

the *Lager*. At the end of the flashback, Vladek pleads

with Artie, "So . . . Let's stop, please, your tape

recorder . . . I'm tired from the talking, Richieu, and



it's enough stories for now . . ." (*Maus II* 136). This quote indicates that Vladek had been

completely re-immersed in his memories of the *Lager*, to the point where he even

addresses Artie as his long-dead first son. Vladek fails in his attempts to keep his trauma

quarantined, largely due to his son's probing. Furthermore, this panel foreshadows his

approaching death: the end of his stories coincided with the end of his life. In the book's

final frames, the reader witnesses Vladek and Anja's gravestones, grimly paralleling the

reunion shown in the previous flashback frames of the couple together after the *Lager*.

Approaching his father's death, Artie is left holding his tape recorder like a bleeding

bowl. He collects every word till the very end. Now alone, it is Artie who is left to witness, left with the stories of both his parents as well as his own inherited trauma. He is able to bear witness for them in the shape of *Maus* and *Maus II*, and within these texts he also addresses some of his own inherited pain and guilt.

Artie finds himself caught in his own catch-22 (a term he uses himself in *MetaMaus* on page 20) or double bind: his quest to fill in the gaps of one parent's story draws the life out of the surviving parent, compounding his own guilt. Furthermore, Spiegelman's own survival, both psychologically and fiscally, becomes intrinsically connected to the project's completion. Although inherited from his parents, the *Lager's* infection mutates within Spiegelman, into a unique second generation form. In addition to embarking on a quest to uncover his mother's story, Spiegelman writes his books to



rebel against his father, a figure from whom he tries very hard to differentiate himself. Yet, ironically, in creating his famous texts he actually tethers himself to his father for two reasons: first, Spiegelman will forever be known as the author of his own as well as his parents' story; and second his experience of extracting his father's memories likely reinforces the family trauma and even instills in him a sense of guilt for forcing

his father to relive such suffering. As a child of survivors, life is all the more precious, and he wants to contribute to the world on a greater scale. Yet, instead of creating something of his own, his success comes from writing about his family's trauma and eventual death. Young comments:

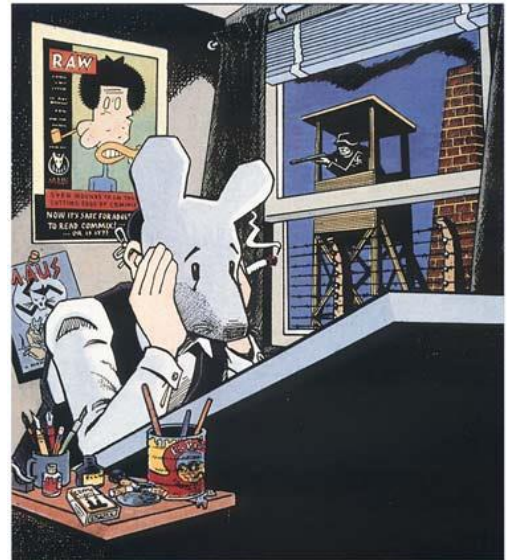
The Holocaust has been good to a starving artist who admits choosing his life's work partly to spite his father with its impracticality. And now it has made him quite comfortable, as well, which becomes part of the story in *Maus II* a recognition of his debt to his father's story, the way Art has traded it for his own survival. (Young 686)

Spiegelman seems painfully aware of his conundrum as is illustrated in *Maus II* (41). In these frames Artie is depicted laboring at his desk wearing a mouse mask over a pile of mouse corpses. This page is overflowing with symbolism, beginning with the pile of bodies that he writes atop, which seem to acknowledge the guilt he feels over, as Young stated, the selling of the stories of the victims of the Holocaust. The second semiotic marker of importance on this page is the depiction of the artist wearing a mouse mask rather than showing himself as a fully anthropomorphized mouse, as the other characters in his text are. The mask is an illustration of Artie's feelings of ineptitude as a Jew as well as the disruption and separation he feels from the *Lager's* direct trauma. The mask suggests in some way that he is pretending to be one of the Jews that he writes about; however, he is never truly one of them. He is not a survivor, and as an author/artist he recognizes his inability to ever truly capture or represent the truth of his parents' history and trauma; rather, he is reduced to reflecting traces of their past.

As Artie comments later to his analyst, “[n]o matter what I accomplish, it doesn’t seem like much compared to surviving Auschwitz” (*Maus II* 44). This is in some way a part of Artie’s second generation trauma. As Artie is confronted and surrounded on all sides by the success of his work, he feels increasingly inadequate, and the man behind the mouse mask begins to physically shrink in his chair (*Maus II* 42–43).

The infection has taken root in Artie. He is drenched in guilt, for having not endured the *Lager*, for having earned a living off of the stories of the dead, and for drawing these stories from a reluctant father. He is left alone to portray the impossible; to bear witness to the unfathomable. Even in the postmemory context, writing provided minimal relief, as is evident from Artie’s example. When confronted by a reporter questioning, “[c]ould you tell our audience if drawing *Maus* was cathartic? Do you feel better now?” (*Maus II* 42), Artie offers no answer, instead he is shown booking an appointment with his therapist. This suggests that writing had not provided any release from his trauma, but rather that he is still immersed in his familial trauma and in need of therapy. In a statement that is all at once deflating, humorous, sad and a declaration of the projects entire purpose, Artie cries out, “I want . . . ABSOLUTION. No . . . No . . . I want . . . I want . . . my MOMMY!” (*Maus II* 42). Yet both these goals remain eternally out of reach for him. Regardless of all the interviews with his father, the endless research about *Lager*, his writing and drawing, Spiegelman was not able to find catharsis or relief, nor was he able to bring back his mother. Spiegelman’s life, work and even success are eternally linked to the atrocities of the *Lager* and yet because of the *Lager*’s ethereal and unrepresentable nature, purging his own trauma remained impossible. Spiegelman

comments on his 'success': "Neurotically, the anhedonic way I experienced the success of *Maus* was to spend the next twenty years trying to wriggle out from under my own achievement" (*MetaMaus* 79). Writing and bearing witness to the trauma of the *Lager*, even within the second generation, did little to prove itself as cathartic or as a cure for the *Lager* and its infective trauma. Although Spiegelman's later work such as, *In the Shadow of no Towers* (2004) touches on the collective trauma of 9/11, the *Maus* project itself failed to free Spiegelman from the trauma he inherited from his parents. Spiegelman comments in *MetaMaus*, "*Maus* brought financial security and recognition, opening more doors than I could ever walk through, but one thing that I couldn't have ever predicted has been the weight of trying not to get in the way of the work that I'd spent so long doing. I'd incurred an obligation to the dead" (80).



The picture on the dust cover of *Maus II* suggests Spiegelman's lingering feelings of entrapment and of being haunted by his work. The author/artist/patient/barber now finds himself still wearing a mask, but this time with a Katzi guard, barbed wire fence, and a crematorium smoke stack just outside his window: he has become a prisoner to his own labour.

Conclusion

Elie Wiesel has famously and repeatedly stated, “I do believe [that] to listen to a witness is to become a witness in turn” (Verger para. 4) Despite the truth behind this statement, it does not address the cost or effect of the process of bearing witness for either the listener or the speaker. When modern historians record the accounts of first-generation witnesses for the noble reasons of paying tribute to the victims of the Holocaust and potentially preventing future crimes against humanity, they often do so without realizing that they as collectors of primary testimonials occupy a potentially damaging role due to the possible negative effects that repeated witnessing can have on the witness. Some survivors, such as Levi himself in *The Drowned and the Saved*, wrote, at least in part, with the same humane drive to document and reflect on some of the darkest moments of human history in order to come to some kind of understanding, resolution and hopefully positive change for the future. Yet, the experience of his life and work tell us that his repeated efforts to bear witness actually impeded his ability to shift into a present and future-oriented perspective in his postwar life. In fact, his bearing witness perpetually linked him to the source of his trauma as his work demanded him to continuously revisit the source of his greatest suffering. The truth for Levi as a personal survivor meant that bearing witness was not just done for humanitarian reasons but rather also for deeply personal reasons tied to his experience of survivor’s guilt and trauma. What might be overlooked by the average person, is the depth of trauma that formed within the survivor during his or her imprisonment in the *Lager*.

The concept of trauma is addressed in this thesis through the lenses of various psychologists and academics, such as Hermann Oppenheimer, Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra. What becomes evident from all their reflections is that trauma should be looked at as akin to an infection or a psychic wound, which once embedded in the victim persists long – even indefinitely - after the initial event of trauma has ended. The psychic wound, or trauma, is more resistant to treatment than a physical injury and survivors are often left on their own, among a general population who cannot fully understand them, to attempt to find a cure or relief for their ailments. Levi sought relief through writing, indeed he viewed it as the most important reason to stay alive, but his writing became a compulsive act which prevented him from finding solace. Levi was caught in a unique double-bind: if he succeeded in his attempts to bear witness and purge his damaged psyche of the *Lager* and its infections, then he would have fulfilled his purpose, and as a result he would have been deprived of the reason for his survival and continued existence. If Levi failed to transmit his account through his writing, he would have to endlessly try again in a nightmare similar to the tale of Sisyphus, until his body and his psyche could endure no more and he surrendered to death. Either way, in a metaphorical manner, writing, much like the archaic medical practice of bloodletting, in reality led Levi towards his death rather than a cure. Much like his close friend Ferdinand Camon and Elie Wiesel suggested, Levi had his fate sealed as he crossed the threshold of the *Lager* and was psychically infected with its vile toxins of complicity, shame and guilt. Levi survived only to bear witness, a task he felt he never was fully able to complete. He attempted for decades, to bear his soul, purge his guilt

and appease the ghosts of his past by writing countless pages on a period of his life that lasted only months, yet dominated his entire existence. As his mind and his words began to fail him, coupled with the realization that he would remain unable to ever speak the entire truth of the *Lager*, Levi rejoined those that had perished years before in the *Lager* through what is considered by some to have been a suicide. No amount of bloodletting or writing could save him.

The other half of this thesis dealt with the effects of the *Lager's* trauma on the second generation as exemplified by Art Spiegelman's graphic novels, *Maus* and *Maus II*. Spiegelman, the child of survivors, grew up in an atmosphere infused with the residual effects of the *Lager*. His story was the inspiration behind Holocaust scholar Marianne Hirsch's postmemory theory, a concept which describes how trauma is inherited intergenerationally through the overt and silenced discourses of the first-generation. Spiegelman's postmemory trauma was compounded by the fact that his mother Anja had committed suicide, and that her wartime diaries were burnt first by the Nazis then by her husband. The *Maus* texts were driven by the author's quest to recover his mother's lost accounts through the memories of his father Vladek.

Spiegelman's postmemory work in the *Maus* texts is deeply self-reflective and attempts to treat or 'work through' his own inherited trauma; however, the author in the recording of his story actually re-traumatizes Vladek through the forced and frequent revisiting of his traumatic past. This exchange or transference of trauma back and forth between Spiegelman and Vladek causes fairly significant ethical issues to surface. If the initial trauma/wound was the experience of incarceration in the *Lager*

(which infects the prisoner with its trace infection), then Artie, the protagonist of Spiegelman's texts, employs his pen like a scalpel to reopen the wounds or bloodlet a history (namely that of his mother Anja) from his reluctant and repressed father. Artie, in his effort to heal himself, goes from patient to becoming his father's barber-surgeon. This shift in the power dynamic between father and son is a phenomenon that Spiegelman seems to be at least partially aware of in his characterization of his protagonist as it is reflected in the *Maus* texts. This bloodletting process may in fact fill some of the postmemory traumatic voids that Spiegelman, and subsequently Artie, had experienced as a second-generation or postmemory receiver; however, he does so (even if unwittingly at the time), at the expense of his father's health. Herein lies the conundrum of the postmemory witness: how can the second generation address the issues of inherited trauma without damaging the mental and physical health of the first generation? Spiegelman never manages to answer this question, and indeed he shows signs in the conclusion of *Maus II* and in his subsequent work *MetaMaus* of his guilt and persistent trauma as a result of the role he played in his father's suffering.

The *Maus* texts were extremely successful as they reached a vast audience, provided fiscal security for Spiegelman and his family, and also paid tribute to the lives of his parents. Yet, on a personal level, despite all of these achievements, Spiegelman was left trying to wriggle out from under his own success, feeling an uncomfortable debt to the dead (*MetaMaus* 79-80).

It is my hope that this thesis has contributed to the scholarly discussion of Holocaust literature by adding greater awareness and thus greater sensitivity to the

experience of survivor-authors. It is difficult to find a balance between continuing to benefit from the lessons that survivors offer through their testimonial and testimony and the potential danger that bearing witness poses to their health. Indeed the audience is deeply privileged to witness vicariously the most private and vulnerable moments, and respecting that for the survivors' own psychological well-being it is perhaps best that bearing witness becomes a less frequent occurrence. Furthermore, I wonder whether it would have been possible for Levi and Spiegelman, and other similar authors or postmemory witnesses, to restrict the narrative drive that arose in them as a result of their trauma? It seems unlikely, as human nature often responds stubbornly and obsessively to subject matters which cause us the most distress. The Holocaust and the literature it produced contain, for some, an inherent infective nature, not only in reference to first generation witnesses, but for second generation receivers as well.

During the process of my Holocaust studies and the writing of this thesis (which effectively qualifies as postmemory work itself), I have found myself contending with the strain, both physical and psychological, of attempting to deal with this challenging and infective material. Subsequently, I have experienced my own personal double-bind: it is my hope that the world will remember and learn from the accounts of the brave survivors who have shared their experiences; yet, I despair that by becoming receivers of these accounts, we too, become witnesses and risk becoming traumatized by the same horrific events. This thesis, at the very least, will hopefully serve as a cautionary exploration of the potential dangers of both bearing witness for the survivor generation and drawing or demanding these accounts as second-generational witnesses. This is not

to suggest that we as modern historians should not record and preserve the accounts of the survivors willing to bear witness, but rather to recognize that the pages of these texts are metaphorically the bowl that has collected the infected humours of the witness in the bloodletting process, and thus contains a potentially deadly and infective material that must be handled cautiously.

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Chapter 2: Auschwitz in the Veins

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