Two New Books for the Preacher

James M. Rand
First Presbyterian Church, Worcester, Massachusetts

MAUS I AND MAUS II by Art Spiegelman. Pantheon, 1986 and 1991.

> "The Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art, and yet both must be used to tell the tale that must be told." (Elie Wiesel in 1986, announcing the architect to build the Holocaust Memorial Museum. *New York Times*, 11 April 1993. sect. 2.)

Art Spiegelman combines words and pictures ("language and art") to tell not one but two Holocaust tales: that of his father, Vladek, as a young Polish Jew before and during World War II; and that of himself as a young American Jew attempting to preserve his father's experiences on audiotape and paper, in order to understand what took place.

The result is two books, *Maus I* and *Maus II*, which have won numerous awards—including a Guggenheim fellowship, a National Book Critics Circle nomination, selection as an "Editors' Choice" for 1991 in the *New York Times Book Review,* and a special Pulitzer Prize.

Initially, though, I was hesitant to pick up these slender volumes. They are, after all, comic books; and, in spite of their accolades I thought that meant I could ignore them.

I was wrong.

These are not like the Richie Rich, Archie and superhero magazines I read in the back seat of the family car during summer vacations years ago. Instead of giving us escapist fantasies, Art Spiegelman has drawn and narrated a personal and historical memoir full of genuine human pathos, love, and surprising humor.

At the center of both books is Vladek, the father. As a young man in Eastern Europe, he is a "survivor" of Polish army life, prisoner of war camp, confinement in the Jewish ghetto, and imprisonment at Auschwitz. As an old man in America many years later, he is *still* a survivor—of two heart attacks, his wife's suicide, and a loveless second marriage.

However, what once were virtues necessary for survival (cunning, luck, and the ability to befriend or bribe enemies) have long since become vices. As if he were still held prisoner in a concentration camp, the aged Vladek picks up anything that might be useful some day (scraps of telephone wire), and hordes objects of little value (wooden matches). He even clings to racist attitudes, treating American blacks with as little compassion as the Nazis showed him.

All of this behavior is witnessed and recorded by Artie (Vladek's son, the author and character in these books). Over the course of many visits and much pleading, Artie draws out the story from his father, yet barely comprehends either the enormity of the Nazis' evil or Vladek's old-age eccentricity. Indeed, as the two men argue with one another, Artie begins to think that he too must become a survivor—of his own father.

It is at this level that the twin stories of Vladek and Artie take on significance for the preacher. We are exposed to the horrors inflected by the Nazis decades ago, and *simultaneously*, to the damning terrors and trials that beset families today. Just as "the Holocaust in its enormity defies language and art," so it is with Artie and Vladek—

both genocide *and* family life yield their peculiar devestations.

Like Jacob and Esau, Vladek and Artie represent one family but two nations (Poland and America). Like the Nazis and the Jews of World War II, father and son are inseparably linked, yet utterly divided. Like Israel and the P.L.O., they have a common history, but diverse claims for the present which must be negotiated to an uneasy peace.

Amid such divisions—global or familial—it is the preacher's task to evoke a reconciling word. Yet *Maus I* and *Maus II* remind us of the near absurdity of such an effort. Between nations, between races, and within families, such peace does not come easily or automatically. Finding words and images that resonate with redemptive meaning for human hurt is part of our calling. But an *elusive* part, at best—as these "survivor's tales" attest.

In fact, if any theme runs through the pages of these two books, it regards the inadequacy of words alone to express such meaning. At one point, when talking to his girlfriend, Francoise, Artie confesses, "I can't even make any sense out of my relationship with my father...How am I supposed to make any sense out of *Auschwitz*?..[or] the Holocaust?..." (*Maus II*, 14).

Later, parodying the interviews he endured after the debut of *Maus I,* Artie draws a comic strip frame in which a broadcaster thrusts a microphone at him and demands, "Tell our viewers what message you want them to get from your book."

"A message, I dunno," Artie stammers, "...I-I never thought of reducing it to a message. I mean, I wasn't trying to *convince* anybody of anything" (42).

Even Vladek, after suriving the horrors of the death camps and later life, admits the difficulty of knowing and saying the right words: "Yes," he laments, "...about Auschwitz, nobody can understand" (64). Could not the same be said of his relationship with his own son or his second wife, with whom he constantly fights?

Yet, amid the divisions and strain, a strange paradox of hope remains. Artie discovers it for himself while talking to his "shrink." "Samuel Beckett once said: `Every word is like an unnesscary stain on silence and nothingness,'" he declares. A pause follows—a comic strip frame notably devoid of speech, wherein Artie and the doctor ponder, and experience, the silence of nothingness. Finally, Artie punctuates his thought: "On the other hand, he *said* it" (45).

In that moment, Artie captures both the impossibility *and* the necessity for saying something about the horrors and tribulations of our human lives.

In the congregation I serve, and among our family's friends, I find situations that were unimaginable to me a few short years ago: A woman verbally (and perhaps physically abused) by her husband, but unwilling to leave him. A teenaged girl, pregnant on account of rape. Another teenaged girl in prison. A man accused by his wife of sexually abusing their infant son (the charges were unsubstantiated and later dropped; and the couple is still together, miraculously). All three of the other men with me in a "dinner group" losing their jobs in less than a year. A man dying suddenly of an infection, just when chemotherapy had cured him of cancer.

As with Artie and Vladek, the lives of these people resists figuring out. Our words do not readily make everything all right. As Vladek might say, "About [these things], nobody can understand." As a pastor, I at least have found no way to encapsulate their experiences in neat packages for human consumption. There are no quick fixes, no facile conclusions. If nothing else, *Maus I* and *Maus II* warn us against glib and sure answers.

Yet these books also rule out silence in the face of human terrors and divisions.

As Elie Wiesel noted, the tale that "defies language and art...*must* be told" none the less (emphasis added).

Indeed, in telling the tale of their lives, Vladek and Artie do manage to find meaning. Late in *Maus I*, Artie shows Vladek some pages form the comic book he is creating. Vladek (who has never gotten used to his son as a cartoonist) might well have been disgusted to see his life story treated in such a format. Instead, he is intrigued, "I don't read *ever* such comics, and even *I* am interested...Yes. I know already my story by *heart*, and even *I* am interested!" (*Maus I,* 133).

What their own story gives them, in short, is not the complete understanding they originally sought, but a sort of self-recognition. In the course of recounting their trials and tumults, they come to see themselves as they are.

Perhaps that is what we preachers and pastors are called to do also—to tell stories of death and life, suffering and survival—not to provide answers, but so our listeners may recognize themselves and know that they are known.

ATLAS erials

Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.