

STUDY GUIDE

Poles as Pigs in Spiegelman's *Maus*: Distorting Holocaust History

Q & A

1. Why did Art Spiegelman depict Poles as pigs?

Literary critics have recognized that Spiegelman's intention in drawing Poles as pigs was a "calculated insult" directed at Poles. (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th edition (New York: Norton, 2007), Volume E, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, p. 3091.)

Spiegelman belatedly divulged his actual reasons in *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Pantheon, 2011). Pigs were chosen to acknowledge his father Vladek's "dubious opinion of Poles as a group." (P. 122.) Despite the fact that Poland had for centuries given sanctuary to Jews persecuted elsewhere, Spiegelman states, "And considering the bad relations between Poles and Jews for the last hundred years in Poland, it seemed right to use a non-Kosher animal" to portray Poles. (P. 125.) Thus the notion of bias functions on two levels in *Maus*: Vladek's and the author's.

Spiegelman shows, in *Maus* itself, how carefully he selected the animals to depict various nationalities when he considers how to draw his French wife. (There is more on this later.) The choice of pigs to depict Poles was, therefore, quite deliberate and sends a clear message that anyone with an understanding of the cultural connotations and the times involved would appreciate. The narrative then plays into the projected stereotype of Poles by its relentless focus on Poles who behave brutally, venally, and badly. Poles who do not fit this mould are the rare exception to the book's *leitmotif* of Poles as Nazi collaborators or profiteers (Kapos, denouncers, agents, etc.). A former secondary school teacher who develops educational materials aptly summed up the gist of the story in these words: "While cats in Nazi uniform shoot, bash and exterminate, emaciated mice scurry terrified and screaming, and pigs collaborate, offer succour (at a price) or avert their gaze to profess no awareness." (Roger Stitson, "Many layers of *Maus*," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 7, 2014.)

Spiegelman has dismissed, with characteristic condescension, objections voiced by Poles to their portrayal as pigs as "a squeal" – the sound pigs make. (*Art Spiegelman: Conversations*, edited by Joseph Witek (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2007), p. 193.)

2. Why is the use of pigs to portray Poles offensive?

The word "pig" is widely used as a term of derision. "You pig" is universally considered to be an insult. In many cultures, pigs are viewed as disgusting, filthy, and greedy animals. They are often considered to be vulgar and stupid. The implication, therefore, is that there is something unsavoury about the pig people.

For Jews, in particular, pigs are “unclean” animals. Jewish culture views pigs, and pork, as non-kosher, or *unclean*. According to the Chabad-Lubavitch Media Center,

There is probably no animal as disgusting to Jewish sensitivities as the pig. It’s not just because it may not be eaten: there are plenty of other animals that aren’t kosher either, but none of them arouse as much disgust as the pig. Colloquially, the pig is the ultimate symbol of loathing; when you say that someone “acted like a *chazir* [pig],” it suggests that he or she did something unusually abominable. (Internet: http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2376474/jewish/Pigs-Judaism.htm)

Moreover, Jews commonly considered Poles to be “stupid *goys*”. *Goy* is a derogatory word used for non-Jews and carries with it cultural stereotypes. Samuel Oliner, a respected Jewish scholar, recalled his grandmother’s lament, “Shmulek will grow up to be a stupid *goy!*” “The presence of a gentile defiled the home of a Jew,” he also recalled. (Samuel P. Oliner, *Restless Memories: Recollections of the Holocaust Years* (Berkeley, California: Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1986).) As Spiegelman has acknowledged (“it seemed right to use a non-Kosher animal”), he drew on these biases to portray Poles. This phenomenon is illustrated in *Maus* when Vladek describes the Polish priest he encounters in Auschwitz as follows: “He wasn’t Jewish – but very intelligent!”

Writing in the *Comics Journal* (no. 113, December 1986), Harvey Pekar voiced a strong objection to Spiegelman’s portrayal of Poles as pigs. Pekar contrasts Spiegelman’s use of anthropomorphism (ascribing human form or attributes to a being or thing not human) with George Orwell’s famous novel *Animal Farm*, which is based on the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 and the rise of Stalinism in the Soviet Union:

It undermines [Spiegelman’s] moral position. He negatively stereotypes Poles even though he portrays some hiding Jews from the Germans. ... I do not have general objections to anthropomorphism, but I do object to the way Spiegelman uses it. Art stereotypes nationalities, Orwell doesn’t. Orwell’s pigs do not represent a whole nation. They represent what comes to be the corrupt ruling class of a nation. Orwell didn’t portray the leaders of the animal revolution as pigs just to praise their intellects: he wanted people to view them as coarse and greedy, which is what people usually mean when they call each other ‘pig’.

3. Does the Poles as pigs metaphor “deconstruct”, as Spiegelman has claimed?

Maus is primarily a historical memoir. Historical captions, diagrams and illustrations have been included to enhance the air of authenticity and objectivity. The vast majority of readers will assume that Vladek’s story is literally true in every respect. Only those with a profound knowledge of the Holocaust and Polish history, as well as of local conditions, are in a position to embark on an informed, critical assessment of the veracity of the narrative. Literary tools do not lend themselves to “deconstruct” the narrative in that sense. They are not designed to unravel historical events.

The purpose of portraying Poles as pigs is to cast them in an unfavourable light. The depiction of Poles in *Maus* is almost universally negative or unappealing, with only a few exceptions. Their portrayal as the brutal and sadistic Kapo contingent in the concentration camps is but one example of the falsification of

the historical record. (There is more on this later.) These negative stereotypes are reinforced by the graphic content – the numerous drawings of crude, hostile and treacherous pigs.

The portrayal of Poles is rooted in bias. Nations or cultures Spiegelman approves of are represented by noble or respectable animals, for example, Americans as dogs and Swedes as reindeer. However, cultures which he scorns, like the Poles, are symbolized negatively. The cloak of “postmodernism” is employed to hide the true import of the destructive portrayal of Poles, not to expose it.

Spiegelman’s own presence within the narrative (for example, during the discussion between himself and his French wife about how to depict French characters) would have allowed him, through the voice of his own mouse character, to call attention to those flaws within his father’s views. Instead, he purposefully endorses his father’s bias against Poles. In contrast, his own mouse character challenges Vladek’s racism against African Americans near the end of the book.

The claim that Spiegelman’s use of animals to portray nations simply reflects Nazi German ideology is not true. The Nazis did not portray the Germans as cats or the French as frogs. In the Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*, Jews are portrayed as filthy, disease-bearing rats that had to be exterminated, not as helpless, emaciated mice. Although the Nazis sometimes called Poles “swine,” as a form of debasement based on the Germans’ presumed racial superiority, this term was not directed solely at Poles. Jews, as well as others, were also often referred to as “swine.” According to extensive research, while the Germans often called Jews “rats” and insulted them with other animal names, their favourite epithets were “pigs,” “Jew-pig,” “swine,” and *Saujuden* (“Jewish swine”). (Charles Patterson, *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust* (New York: Lantern Books, 2002), pp. 46–47.) Therefore, choosing to depict Poles – rather than Jews – as pigs was clearly intended to deprecate the Poles as a nation.

Moreover, the pig metaphor does not accurately reflect the Poles’ actual place in the genocidal plans of Nazi Germany. While it is true that cats chase mice, pigs are not their natural enemies. There is no indication that Germany’s intention was not simply to occupy Poland, but to destroy it forever, and to enslave, starve and slaughter the Poles, which they did by the millions. Portraying Poles as well-fed pigs (while drawing the mice as emaciated) serves to underscore their alleged role as dull stooges. The *leitmotif* of Poles as Nazi sympathizers and henchmen reinforces the false image of Poles as a nation of collaborators. In fact, the Poles were one of the primary victims of National Socialist racial policies. Poland was the only country occupied by Germany that did not produce a collaborating government. The Poles mounted the largest anti-German underground, the Home Army, and staged the largest armed insurrection, the Warsaw Uprising of August 1944.

Poles Imprisoned in Nazi Camps

4. Why was Auschwitz built? Who were the prisoners? Who ran the camp?

Auschwitz was set up by the Germans, after invading Poland, as a concentration camp for Polish political prisoners. Poles began to arrive in Auschwitz in June 1940. Until mid-1942 most of the camp’s prisoners were Christian Poles. About half of the 150,000 Polish prisoners perished, mostly from malnutrition and

disease. The first mass extermination of prisoners – consisting of Poles and Soviet prisoners of war – with the use of Zyklon B occurred in September 1941. The larger sub-camp of Birkenau, known as Auschwitz II, began operation in 1942 as a death camp. It was intended primarily for Jews.

At least 1.1 million of the 1.3 million prisoners held in Auschwitz-Birkenau perished. Of the 1.1 million Jewish prisoners, about one million were killed, for the most part in Birkenau. Around 90 percent of the total victims of Auschwitz-Birkenau were Jews from various countries, mostly from outside Poland. Christian Poles were the second largest group and outnumbered all other non-Jewish prisoners combined. The next largest groups of prisoners were 23,000 Gypsies (Roma) and 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war, most of whom were killed.

The best source of information about Auschwitz is the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum website: <http://en.auschwitz.org/m/>.

In 2007 the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) formally approved the proper designation of Auschwitz-Birkenau as a “German Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camp.” See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/363>. It is highly improper and, indeed, offensive to refer to Auschwitz as a “Polish” camp, as some media outlets unfortunately do.

5. Who were some of the Polish prisoners of Auschwitz?

More Christian Poles perished in Auschwitz than the non-Jewish civilian death count in most countries occupied by Nazi Germany. Two of the outstanding Polish prisoners of Auschwitz were Father Maximilian Kolbe, who was made a saint of the Roman Catholic Church, and Witold Pilecki, a member of the Polish anti-Nazi underground.

Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest, performed the unheard of deed of offering his life up for a fellow prisoner, a Polish family man who was part of a group of prisoners that were to be executed after a prisoner escape. Father Kolbe was put to death in August 1941 by starvation and then lethal injection. Sigmund Gerson, at the time a 13-year-old Jewish prisoner, stated that Father Kolbe was “like an angel to me. Like a mother hen, he took me in his arms. He used to wipe away my tears. ... he gave away so much of his meager rations that to me it was a miracle he could live.” Another Jewish survivor, Eddie Gastfriend, recalled warmly the scores of Polish prisoner priests who were subjected to particular forms of degradation in the camp: “They wore no collars, but you knew they were priests by their manner and their attitude, especially toward Jews. They were so gentle, so loving.” Father Kolbe is the subject of a moving biography by Patricia Treece: *A Man for Others: Maximilian Kolbe, Saint of Auschwitz, in the Words of Those Who Knew Him* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982; Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1982).

Witold Pilecki was a member of the Polish underground Home Army. He volunteered to get imprisoned at Auschwitz in order to gather information about the operation of the camp. Pilecki escaped from Auschwitz in 1943, after nearly three years of imprisonment. He filed detailed reports that became a primary source of intelligence about the camp for the Western Allies. His main report was

recently published in English as *The Auschwitz Volunteer: Beyond Bravery* (Los Angeles: Aquila Polonica, 2012). Historian Timothy Snyder called it “a historical document of the greatest importance.”

Other important accounts about the experiences of Polish prisoners include:

- Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (London: Cape, 1967; Penguin Books, 1976)
- Jozef Garlinski, *Fighting Auschwitz: The Resistance Movement in the Concentration Camp* (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers, 1975; Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1975)
- Zofia Nałkowska, *Medallions* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000)

6. Who were the prisoners of Dachau?

Dachau was the first of hundreds of concentration camps to be established inside Nazi Germany. Opened in 1933, it was originally intended for political prisoners. Later it held “asocials” (Jehovah’s Witnesses, homosexuals, etc.) and prisoners of various nationalities including Jews. In 1940, Dachau became filled with Polish prisoners. From that time, Poles constituted the majority of the prisoner population until the camp was liberated in 1945. Dachau was also the principal place of internment for Christian clergy from all over Europe. A total of 2,720 clergymen were imprisoned at Dachau. The overwhelming majority, 95%, were Catholic and 65% were Poles. About 90% of the clergymen put to death were Polish priests, who were frequently selected for medical experiments.

Poles as “Kapos” and Collaborators

7. In *Maus*, the Kapos at Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen and Dachau are Poles. Is this factually true?

The depiction of Poles in Auschwitz is overwhelmingly that of cruel, greedy and brutal Kapos. The association of Poles with Kapos is a deliberate travesty. It is no mere coincidence or oversight: Spiegelman carried out extensive research for *Maus*, which he clearly makes known so as to enhance the authenticity of the historical narrative.

“Kapos” were prisoner functionaries who supervised other prisoners in Nazi German camps. They were appointed by the Germans from among the prisoner population to lead work details or crews made up of prisoners. Prisoners were not forced to become Kapos. Nor were generally forced to be brutal to their underlings. Initially, the Kapos in Auschwitz were German prisoners (mostly criminals). Later Kapos came from all nationalities represented in the camp, including Jews. When Vladek arrived in Auschwitz in 1944, the vast majority of new arrivals were Jews from Hungary – more than 400,000. There was, therefore, little use for Polish Kapos as they would be unable to communicate with the Hungarian Jews. Moreover, Kapos had no voice in the operation of the camp. Auschwitz was run by Germans, and some 8,000 to 8,200 SS men (i.e., *Schutzstaffel* or protection squadron) and 200 female guards – consisting of Germans and Austrians – formed the camp’s garrison.

Virtually *all* of the Kapos in *Maus* are drawn as pigs (Poles), except for one Jewish female Kapo in Birkenau, who performs a good deed for Vladek’s wife. From the moment Vladek arrives at Auschwitz, Polish Kapos are shown mistreating Jewish prisoners. The Polish Kapos are ubiquitous. They appear in

frame after frame – dozens of them spread over 40 pages of *Maus*. There is even a brutal female pig Kapo in Birkenau, even though the prisoners there were almost exclusively Jewish. *All* of the Kapos in Gross-Rosen and Dachau are also drawn as pigs. It is not surprising, therefore, that *GradeSaver*, a popular online student study guide provider, states (falsely): “A ‘kapo’ is a *Polish* supervisor at a concentration camp.” (Internet: [http://www.gradesaver.com/maus/study-guide/character-list/.](http://www.gradesaver.com/maus/study-guide/character-list/))

The historical record clearly shows that Kapos cannot be associated with any one nationality. Although there were *some* Polish Kapos in Auschwitz and other camps, the suggestion – repeatedly reinforced in *Maus* – that the Kapo function was almost exclusively Polish is simply untrue. There were also *many* German Kapos, as well as Jewish ones. *Hundreds* of Jewish testimonies describe the activities of Jewish Kapos in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Gross-Rosen and other camps. Numerous Jewish survivors attest to the cruelty of many of the Jewish Kapos. Some Jewish testimonies compare Polish Kapos favourably to Jewish ones, and even accuse Jewish Kapos of targeting Poles for abuse while sparing Jews. A large selection of such accounts are found in Appendix 1 of “The Problems with Spiegelman’s *Maus*: Why *Maus* Should Not Be Taught in High Schools or Elementary Schools” (Internet: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/2014/docs/maus_2014_why_it_should_not_be_taught.pdf):

Konrad Charmatz: “Pinkus (if I am not mistaken, his last name was Chmelnitsky) was the most notorious of all the block elders. He had come to the camp with a French transport and was a true sadist who enjoyed brutalizing his victims and drawing their blood. ... His helper, a certain Ziduna, a Jew from Lodz, also excelled in cruelty.”

Shavti Perelmuter: “I became sick with typhus and I lay in a terrible condition ... it is only thanks to my block commander, the Pole, Ludwig [Ludwik], that I was able to stay alive. ... The commander of Block 27 was a certain Greenboim, and he was from Warsaw. He distinguished himself with his brutality towards Jews. There was another one from Warsaw, Yosela and Laibeshel from Radom.”

Avraham Harshalom (Friedberg): “The head of the interrogation block [Block 11] was the Jewish prisoner Jakob Kozolczik – a mountain of a man, all muscle. ... he endeavored to be lenient towards Jews, while tightening the screw principally upon the Poles, whom he heartily detested ...”

Judith Strick Dribben: “A plump girl entered. She wore good clothes, a sweater with a red yellow Star of David, and an armband embroidered “*Sauna Kapo*.” ... Suddenly the girl produced a big belt. She began beating the naked bodies and heads, leaving red welts. ... the *kapo*, helped by two other well-dressed girls, dragged her down and kicked her until she lay bloody and silent on the floor.”

Irene Shapiro: “Sally is a toothless Polish-Jewish blonde who screams at us in garbled German and who kicks and hits us more often than she screams. ... Every *Capo* (Camp Policewoman) feels free to kick and punch her subservients, and so does every *block*-Elder or other camp official in a striped uniform.”

Millie Werber: “The commander of our barracks was a Jewish woman from Czechoslovakia; she wasn’t much older than I – in her early twenties, I would guess – but she was hardened and cruel, and it pleased her to demean us. *Radomske [radomska] kurwa* – Radomer whore – she called each of us. ... When winter came and the cold tore at us, digging its fingers deep into our chests, when we were maybe just a little slow to get outside to stand for our endless appels, she would come into our barracks and beat us with her stick, curse us as whores, and make us move faster.”

Marysia Winogron, a cousin of Vladek's wife, who was in Auschwitz at the same time as Vladek's wife, recalls her physical tormentors, both Kapos and block commanders, as Czech Jews. She adds, "I never got beaten by the Germans." (Spiegelman, *MetaMaus*, p. 285.)

The same is true for the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. According to a scholarly study by Bella Gutterman, the Jewish Kapos in Gross-Rosen were noted for their unusual cruelty. Henry Freier, who worked in the kitchen under a Jewish Kapo, stated: "I was beaten up by this man every day." Peter Kleinmann recalled: "My Kapo was a Polish Jew and was merciless."

8. *Maus* shows ordinary Poles greeting other Poles with a Nazi arm salute and saying "Heil Hitler." Poles (pigs) are also shown wearing uniforms with Nazi insignia. Is this historically accurate?

It would have been almost impossible to find any Pole saluting Hitler to another Pole during the war. Yet a frame in *Maus* shows just that, thereby strongly suggesting that is how ordinary Poles assured one another that they were genuine Poles. Polish pigs are also shown wearing uniforms with Nazi insignia. However, Poles did not and could not join collaborationist military forces like the SS. This was not the case in other countries where hundreds of thousands of non-Germans volunteered for service in national SS formations.

Throughout occupied Europe, national police forces carried out German orders to round up local Jews for deportation to death camps. This was not the case in Zagłębie Dąbrowskie, which is the part of occupied Poland shown in *Maus*. This region was incorporated into the Reich as part of Eastern Upper Silesia and the Polish police disbanded. The Germans created a Jewish Council and Jewish police force to maintain order in the ghettos and to perform various other tasks such as assisting in the deportation of the Jews to camps and searching for escaped Jews. Jewish testimonies from Sosnowiec paint a dire picture of those events:

"The Nazis could not have succeeded without the cooperation of some Jews, and some Jews did indeed allow themselves to get drawn into the net. The Nazis established the Judenrat and a Jewish militia, both of which would help them carry out their plans for the liquidation." (Konrad Charmatz, *Nightmares: Memoirs of the Years of Horror under Nazi Rule in Europe, 1939–1945* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), p. 18.)

"SS-men, Gestapo, and the few remaining Jewish orderlies combed the Gentile neighborhoods to hunt down Jewish runaways. I was eventually arrested. ... A Jewish militiaman from Sosnowiec recognized me, grabbed me by my hair and pulled it, and cursed at me in Polish and German." (Edward Gastfriend, *My Father's Testament: Memoir of a Jewish Teenager, 1938–1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), p. 87.)

9. *Were the Polish smugglers shown in Maus Nazi collaborators?*

The claim that the Polish smugglers who agreed to take Vladek and Anja to Hungary were Nazi collaborators does not stand up to closer scrutiny. (Although an ally, Hungary was not occupied by Germany at that time and was temporarily much safer for Jews. That changed in March 1944 when Germany invaded Hungary. As a result, 550,000 Jews were deported to death camps, primarily Auschwitz, with the help of local collaborators.) The Germans did not set up smuggling rings to lure Jews

out of hiding. Smuggling people out of Poland, especially Jews, was an extremely dangerous undertaking. It was usually carried out by professionals and required bribing various officials. Most smugglers, including Jewish ones, did this for payment.

Maus implies that the Polish smugglers simply worked together with the Germans, and ended up in Auschwitz when they were no longer useful. However, the historical record, which is well documented, is quite different. One of the Polish smugglers, who had previously acted honestly and conscientiously, was caught by the Germans. In order to save himself, he agreed to cooperate thereby putting everyone at risk. (Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewin, eds., *Righteous Among Nations: Righteous Among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews, 1939–1945* (London: Earls Court Publications, 1969), pp. 153–158.)

Vladek exonerates his nephew, Abraham, who wrote a note with the message that he had been safely smuggled out of Poland, because he was forced to do so, but condemns the Polish smugglers as betrayers. Yet they were in no different position than Abraham, as they too were forced to cooperate with the Germans when the smuggling operation unravelled. While there was a remote possibility that cooperating with the Germans might save the smugglers, in Abraham's case, it was futile from the outset.

Polish Assistance for Jews

10. Was Polish help for Jews during the German occupation contingent on payment?

As of January 1, 2019, 6,992 Poles have been recognized by Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Jerusalem, as "Righteous Among Nations of the World," for having assisted Jews without payment. Poles constitute the largest group of rescuers of Jews from any country by far, about one-quarter of all those recognized as "Righteous." Most Polish helpers, however, have not been recognized. According to historian Gunnar S. Paulsson,

The 27,000 Jews in hiding in Warsaw relied on about 50–60,000 people who provided hiding-places and another 20–30,000 who provided other forms of help ... helpers outnumbered hunters by about 20 or 30 to one. The active helpers of Jews thus made up seven to nine per cent of the population of Warsaw ... ("The Rescue of Jews by Non-Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland," *The Journal of Holocaust Education*, volume 7, nos. 1 & 2 (summer/autumn 1998), pp. 19–44.)

The vast majority of Poles, however, were in no position to provide long-term assistance to anyone. The Germans imposed near-starvation food rations on the Polish population and exacted stringent agricultural quotas from farmers. In 1941, the food allotment for a Jew amounted to 253 calories, 669 calories for a Pole, and 2,613 for a German. The typical Polish family occupied one or two rooms in a tenement or farm house, without running water or a toilet. It was only natural that Jews who could afford to do so were asked to contribute to their own upkeep, as Vladek had been. There was nothing morally reprehensible about this, despite Spiegelman's indignant assertion to the contrary.

The much celebrated Danish rescue operation, for example, required enormous monetary contributions on the part of the rescued Jews themselves. The total cost of the operation was 12 million kroner, of

which Jews paid about 7 million kroner, including a loan they had to repay after the war. The average cost for the short boat trip to Sweden was US \$400 in the currency of the time, or about a half a year's wage. Because the operation took place with the connivance of the local German naval command, there were no casualties either among the Jews or the boatmen. (Leni Yahil, *The Rescue of Danish Jewry: Test of a Democracy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), pp. 261–265, 269.) Conditions in affluent and relatively tranquil Denmark, Hitler's model protectorate, cannot be compared to those in occupied Poland, from which there were no safe escape routes. Even the residents of unoccupied London, which was bombed relentlessly by the Germans, experienced far more hardship than the Danes.

11. Why might Poles have been unwilling to come to the assistance of Jews?

The penalty for assisting or even trading with a Jew in German-occupied Poland was death. This was not the case in most other occupied countries, a fact that makes comparisons with Poland blatantly unfair. In Western Europe, the punishment for hiding Jews was typically a fine or a short term of imprisonment. Often nothing at all happened to first-time "offenders." In occupied Poland, entire families including young children were killed by the Germans for the "crime" of helping Jews. More than 1,000 Christian Poles were executed or burned alive when discovered sheltering or assisting Jews.

A large selection of stories of rescue from the Zagłębie area are found in Appendix 2 of "The Problems with Spiegelman's *Maus*: Why *Maus* Should Not Be Taught in High Schools or Elementary Schools" (Internet: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/2014/docs/maus_2014_why_it_should_not_be_taught.pdf): Roman Kołodziej, a Polish liaison agent for the Jewish underground, was executed for smuggling Jews out of the ghetto in Sosnowiec. Mieczysław Kobylec and his father, Piotr Kobylec, were arrested and sent to Auschwitz for sheltering Jews.

Maus makes no mention of the penalty that Poles faced for helping Jews. Instead, Polish helpers are portrayed as unreliable, greedy and deceitful. The truth is that they were poor and frightened. None of the three Poles (drawn as pigs) who assisted the Spiegelmans at various times, namely, Mr. Łukowski, Mrs. Kawka, and Mrs. Motonowa (actually Mrs. Matoń of Szopienice), betrayed them. They were just afraid to shelter them any longer.

More importantly, *Maus* does not allow its readers to become aware that sacrificing one's life is not a simple act of kindness. No religious code, including Jewish, imposes such a requirement or condemns those who are not willing to sacrifice their lives for others. No one has the right to demand of others that they should help someone if it means laying down their lives. Many honest Jewish survivors who were rescued by Poles acknowledge this. Some have stated that they do not know if they would have been able to rescue Poles under such circumstances. Others have said emphatically that they would not have undertaken such a risk.

Henryk Prajs, who survived with the help of many Poles, stated: "I'm not surprised people didn't want to hide Jews. Everyone was afraid, who would risk his family's lives? ... But you absolutely can't blame an average Pole, I don't know if anyone would be more decent, if any Jew would be more decent."

(Internet: <http://www.centropa.org> (Biographies).) Roman Frister, a prominent Israeli journalist, wrote:

“And what right did I have to condemn them? Why should they risk themselves and their families for a Jewish boy they didn’t know? Would I have behaved any differently? I knew the answer to that, too. I wouldn’t have lifted a finger. Everyone was equally intimidated.” (Roman Frister, *The Cap, or the Price of a Life* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 194.) In the words of another Polish-Jewish survivor,

“Would Roman risk his own life now to save others? ‘It’s funny that you should ask that question,’ he said, ‘because when I teach the children, sixth graders, and I tell them how Maria saved my life, I say to the children, ‘How many of you would be willing to risk your life to save someone else, knowing that if you’re caught you’ll be put to death?’ And, of course, after hearing my story, many of them say, ‘Oh, we would, Mr. Frayman, we would.’ But I say, ‘Put your hands down. Let me tell you honestly, if someone asked me if I’d do it, my honest answer is, ‘I don’t know.’ Would I be willing to sacrifice my children, my grandchildren, I don’t know. You don’t know that until you are in that circumstance. I don’t know how gutsy I am.’” (Cited in Bill Tammeus and Jacques Cukierkorn, *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* (Columbia, Missouri and London: University of Missouri Press, 2009), p. 69.)

The “Liberation” of Poland

12. Did the Soviets “liberate” Poland and Auschwitz, as Maus suggests?

Describing the Soviets as “liberators” is highly problematic. After the Poles defeated the Red Army outside Warsaw in 1921, the Soviet Union plotted its revenge. Ethnic Poles were the first national group targeted for repression in the Soviet Union. As American historian Timothy Snyder points out in *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), “The most persecuted European national minority in the second half of the 1930s was not the four hundred thousand or so German Jews (the number declining because of emigration) but the six hundred thousand or so Soviet Poles (the number declining because of executions). Stalin was a pioneer of national mass murder, and the Poles were the preeminent victim among the Soviet nationalities.” The “Polish operation” was in some respects the bloodiest chapter of the Great Terror (1937-1938), which took 680,000 lives. Of the 143,810 people arrested under the trumped-up accusation of espionage for Poland, 111,091 were executed. By comparison, the number of Jews killed in Nazi Germany before the outbreak of the World War II was no more than 1,000. At that time, Jews constituted a majority of the Soviet secret police (NKVD) leadership who oversaw the Great Terror, occupying 39 out of 70 key positions. (On this topic see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).)

On August 23, 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union entered into a Non-Aggression Pact (the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact), which paved the way for the invasion of Poland. A Secret Protocol provided for the partition of Poland. Germany attacked Poland on September 1, 1939, while the Soviet strike was delayed until September 17, 1939. Each side seized roughly half of Poland. As a result, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. The Nazi-Soviet alliance lasted for over a year and a half, until Germany turned on its Soviet ally in June 1941. During that time the Soviet Union was the principal

supplier of much needed raw materials for the German war machine that conquered much of Western Europe.

The Soviets arrested more than 100,000 Polish citizens and deported at least 400,000 civilians, mostly ethnic Poles, to the Gulag, where many of the deportees perished. In the spring of 1940, the Soviet secret police (NKVD) massacred 22,000 Polish prisoners, mostly officers, in Katyn and other places. During the occupation of Eastern Poland, some Jews, especially young men and women with Communist sympathies, collaborated with the Soviets. They became prominent in the new local militia and helped Soviet authorities in hunting down Polish officials, political leaders, and military officers. The legendary Polish courier, Jan Karski, who was made an Honorary Citizen of Israel for his role in warning the West about the Holocaust (and cannot be accused of animosity toward the Jews), reported in early 1940: "The Jews have taken over the majority of the political and administrative positions. But what is worse, they are denouncing Poles, especially students and politicians (to the secret police), are directing the work of the (communist) militia from behind the scenes, are unjustly denigrating conditions in Poland before the war. Unfortunately, one must say that these incidents are very frequent, and more common than incidents which demonstrate loyalty toward Poles or sentiment toward Poland."

Although the Red Army played a key role in the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany (once the Soviet Union stopped collaborating with the Nazis), the so-called liberation was in equal measure a conquest and subjugation of the nations of East Central Europe. Unlike Western Europe, a sense of normalcy for the population and the rule of law did not return to Poland. Stalin installed a repressive, puppet regime to rule over the country and launched an internal war against the pro-independence, anti-Nazi Polish underground. Former Nazi concentration camps like Majdanek and sub-camps of Auschwitz were turned into prisons for the enemies of the new regime. At least 100,000 Poles fell victim to this tyranny. Among them was Witold Pilecki, the previously mentioned prisoner of Auschwitz. Pilecki was arrested by the Ministry of Public Security on May 8, 1947. His investigation was overseen by Colonel Roman Romkowski and his interrogation, during which he was repeatedly tortured, by Colonel Józef Róžański, both of whom were of Jewish origin. After a show trial in March 1948, Pilecki was sentenced to death and executed at the notorious Mokotów Prison in May 25, 1948. During the years 1944–1954, 167 of the 450 top positions in the Ministry of Public Security, or 37.1 percent, were occupied by people of Jewish origin. (Ethnic Poles accounted for 49.1 percent, and the balance were filled for the most part by Soviet officers, who accounted for 10.2 percent of the cadre.) The overrepresentation of Jews, who constituted about one percent of the population, in the apparatus of terror was a primary reason for their precarious situation after the war. Jews accounted for no more than two percent of those killed during strife occasioned by the Soviet takeover of Poland. Unlike the vast majority of ethnic Poles, the Central Committee of Jews in Poland fully supported the Communist regime. Thus, the Polish and Jewish perspectives on this period, and the role of the Soviets as "liberators," differ. Although *Maus* shows Poles as hostile toward Jews after the war (Spiegelman even shows Poles hanging a surviving Jew for coming to reclaim his property), it provides no context for this state of affairs.

While it true that some Jews who sought to regain their property after the war faced hostility on the part of some Poles who had acquired that property during the German occupation, it was certainly not the norm. Ten of thousands of properties were reclaimed by Jews, without incident, under a special

restitution law that allowed dispossessed owners or their relatives and heirs, whether residing in Poland or abroad, to reclaim privately owned property in an expedited fashion with minimal costs. The *American Jewish Year Book*, which closely monitored conditions in Poland, reported that “the return of Jewish property, if claimed by the owner or his descendant, and if not subject to state control, proceeded more or less smoothly.” (*American Jewish Year Book, 5708 (1947–1948)*, vol. 49 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), p. 390.) Jews also faced problems elsewhere, where – unlike Poland – there was little wartime destruction. Hundreds of demonstrators marched through the streets of Paris in April 1945 shouting “France for the French,” “Jews to the crematoria,” and “Death to the Jews,” to protest the return of apartments to the Jews who had been expelled from them. Fights broke out, furniture was thrown out of windows and burned, and the police arrested Jews who tried to oppose the demonstrators. Although a large part of the Jewish population lived in dire poverty, as of 1951 only half of the Jews from Paris recovered their property. (Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England; Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press in association with United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2001), pp. 464–467.)

Interwar Poland

13. Were there ethnic tensions in interwar Poland?

As a result of the widespread destruction during the First World War and the Great Depression, interwar Poland’s economy was in distress and the population experienced widespread poverty and unemployment. Like other countries with a mixed population, the presence of diverse ethnic and religious groups gave rise to tensions, political and economic rivalry, and, occasionally, altercations. As Israeli historian Emanuel Melzer points out, the “anti-Jewish excesses” in the years 1935–1937 usually resulted from the killing of a Christian Pole by a Jew. In total, 14 Jews were killed, as well as many more Poles. Polish rioters were often shot by police who intervened to restore order whenever such incidents occurred. *Maus* mentions an “anti-Jewish riot” that allegedly resulted in two Jewish deaths in Bielsko. While there was a disturbance in that city in September 1937, in fact there was no loss of life – only windows in some Jewish shops and homes were broken. Moreover, it followed on the heels of the killing of a Polish labourer by a Jew. (Jolanta Żyndul, *Zajścia antyżydowskie w Polsce w latach 1935-1937* (Warsaw: Fundacja im. K. Kelles-Krauza, 1994), p. 48.) Spiegelman is quick to suggest that a robbery at Vladek’s factory may have been motivated by anti-Semitism, a claim that Vladek appears to dismiss. Spiegelman’s speculation lacks any solid grounding. In fact, there was a large Jewish criminal underworld at the time, and striking at business competitors was a frequent occurrence.

These disturbances pale in comparison to what was happening elsewhere. Riots broke out in a number of major U.S. cities in 1919, known as the Red Summer. The mob violence that engulfed Chicago for several days left 23 blacks and 15 whites dead, over 500 injured and more than 1,000 homeless. The 1921 Tulsa race riot was even more deadly. White mobs invaded and burned the Greenwood district of Tulsa, destroying 1,256 homes. 39 people (26 black, 13 white) were confirmed killed. In January 1923, mobs of whites descended on blacks in Rosewood, Florida, massacring between 40 and 150 people. Houses were torched and looted, and the black community was eradicated. Black churches were set on

fire throughout the state of Florida. Blacks were segregated in the U.S.A. at the time, including the military; Jews in Poland were not. Other groups were also under attack. Several thousand U.S. servicemen went on a rampage against Mexican Americans in Los Angeles in 1943, assaulting any young males, including children, they encountered. This list can be multiplied and extends well into the latter part of the twentieth century. During the Los Angeles race riots of April 1992, 53 persons were killed and more than 2,000 injured.

Race riots also occurred in Canada at that time. Thousands of people attacked Greeks and Jews in riots that broke out in Toronto in August 1918 and August 1933, respectively. Universities in Ontario imposed admission restrictions on Jews and Catholics, and non-Protestants were shut out from municipal jobs in Toronto. The internationally acclaimed architect Frank Gehry, who grew up in Toronto in the 1930s, recalled: "In Canada when I was a kid, I remember going to restaurants with my father that had signs saying NO JEWS ALLOWED. I used to get beaten up for killing Christ."

Moreover, violent racist attacks are widespread in many parts of Europe today. Since the reunification of Germany in 1990, at least 200 people – many of them Roma, Turks and immigrants – have been killed in racist attacks. Thousands of others have been injured. At least 30 Roma have been killed in racist attacks in the Czech Republic, and many hundred injured.

The Pitfalls of Memoirs

14. Are memoirs a reliable source of history?

Maus is essentially a historical memoir – but one that is conveyed through a narrator. Although memoirs add a personal dimension to historical events, leading historians have recognized that they are fraught with problems. Raul Hilberg, the dean of Holocaust historians, admitted candidly: "A great percentage of the mistakes I discovered in my own work could be attributed to testimonies." Hilberg cautioned, "Even the diaries are problematic because some are filled with hearsay." Samuel Gringauz, himself a survivor cited by Hilberg, cautioned that survivors' testimony is "judeocentric, lococentric and egocentric." For him, most of the memoirs and reports were "full of preposterous verbosity, graphomaniac exaggeration, dramatic effects, overestimated self-inflation, dilettante philosophizing, would-be lyricism, unchecked rumors, bias, partisan attacks and apologies." (Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Experience the Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2014), pp. 50–51.)

The addition of another layer – a narrator who "distils" Vladek's oral testimony into written dialogue – further compounds this problem. Did the author convey Vladek's story accurately? Are there intrusions by the narrator? Some problematic examples already mentioned are the treatment of the Bielsko riot, Kapos, rescuers, and smugglers. Are these distortions attributable to Vladek or the author?

Providing background information and drawings gives *Maus* a false air of authenticity and objectivity, given the many problems with the historical record conveyed in this memoir. However, without an in-depth knowledge of the history of that time and place and of socio-cultural conditions, readers will not be able to assess the very real flaws in the book's presentation of Polish-Jewish relations. *Maus* cannot be treated as history. In many respects, it represents a perversion of the historical record.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Spiegelman choose to draw Poles as pigs?
2. What are the religious and cultural connotations of a “non-kosher” animal like the pig?
3. Is depicting Poles as “pigs” offensive? Explain your answer.
4. Given that the Germans’ favourite epithets for Jews were “pigs” and “swine,” what reasons would Spiegelman have for not drawing Jews as pigs?
5. How does Spiegelman use drawings to project his biases?
6. How is the portrayal of Poles skewed? How does *Maus* diminish the experience of the Poles under Nazi German occupation? Provide some examples of cultural biases and historical inaccuracies. To whom are they attributable: Vladek or the author (Spiegelman)?
7. Can historical memoirs be treated as reliable? What concerns do they raise?
8. Provide examples in *Maus* of the following phenomena associated with historical memoirs of the Holocaust: judeocentric, lococentric, egocentric, verbosity, exaggeration, dramatic effects, self-inflation, “dilettante philosophizing,” “would-be lyricism,” unchecked rumors, bias, partisan attacks and apologies.
9. What punishment did Poles face for helping Jews? Does *Maus* acknowledge this fact? Should Spiegelman have done so?
10. Was Mrs. Motonowa under a moral obligation to help Vladek and his family? Do you think Vladek would have risked his life for Mrs. Motonowa?
11. How would you assess the behaviour of Vladek’s nephew Abraham, who after falling into the hands of the Germans when his attempt at being smuggled out of the country failed, led Vladek on to continue dealing with the smugglers knowing that he would thereby seal his own fate?
10. Can it be demanded of someone to risk their life to help another person, especially a stranger? Under what circumstances? Why do you believe this to be so? Should you sit in judgment of a person who makes a different choice than yours?
11. Would you come to the assistance of another person if there was no risk involved? What if it entailed financial hardship? What if it could result in a fine or a short term of imprisonment? What if the penalty was death? What if the death penalty could extend to your family members as well? Why do you think you might or might not help someone under those circumstances? Would you be right or wrong in doing so?

12. Provide examples of the kinds of help you or family members have extended to others that entailed financial or other hardship. Has your family sponsored a family of refugees or a poor child overseas? Have they taken in a homeless person? Have they given up a vacation to help someone living in poverty?

13. You are a young woman/man who has been hiding in a village with a widow who owns a two-room cottage. She has three young children ages 4, 5 and 7 and has difficulty supporting her family because food is scarce. The widow took you in because she knew your parents, shopkeepers in a nearby small town, and took pity on you when she saw you wandering begging for food. You are concealed in a small pantry during the day (the house has no basement or attic). You have no money or belongings and are not paying for your upkeep. The Germans have posted signs warning people that they face death for helping Jews. Searches of houses in the area have led to the discovery of Jews, and they together with their rescuers' entire family were executed on the spot. The widow sheltering you is visibly distraught and fears for the safety of her family. What would you do? What if she begged you to leave quietly during the night and not disclose who had helped you to survive? What if you were caught by German gendarmes and promised not to be executed, but sent to a work camp, if you disclosed your benefactor?

14. If you were a health care worker with young children of your own, would you have volunteered to care for the sick and dying during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa? (The Ebola epidemic took 12,000 lives at a time when no cure for this highly contagious disease was available. Health care workers were particularly vulnerable.)

15. What part did the Jewish Council and Jewish police play in the liquidation of the Sosnowiec ghetto? How would you assess their behaviour? Did they volunteer for these duties? What benefits could one derive from being a policeman? Would you accept such an assignment if it increased your chances of survival?

16. What were Kapos? From what groups were they drawn? Were they volunteers? Is being a Kapo specific to or characteristic of a particular nationality or group of people? Would you become a Kapo if it would greatly increase your chances of survival? Why do you believe you would pass up such an assignment? What might happen to you if you did refuse?

17. Is a book that deliberately sets out to malign a group of people a good teaching tool? Could such a book promote tolerance or affirm humanitarian values? What if its use results in students of that background being harassed by other students? Does this impact their human rights?

18. It has been argued persuasively that *Maus* sets out to disparage Poles. Are you aware of any other book on the school curriculum that is intended to malign a group of people?

19. Do educators have a responsibility to inform students of historical inaccuracies and cultural biases that the students would not otherwise be aware of? What if they don't do so?

Further Reading

Poles as Pigs in *Maus*: The Problems with Spiegelman's *Maus*

Internet: <http://www.kpk-toronto.org/obrona-dobrego-imienia/>

© Canadian Polish Congress, 2019

REVISED May 2019

These materials were prepared for the Canadian Polish Congress by a team of researchers and reviewed for accuracy by historians at the Institute for World Politics, Washington, DC.