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English 10

6 March 2026

Maus's Bigger Picture: The Cost of Survival

The tragedy of the Holocaust, which claimed millions of souls, though over, still feels alive, rooted in the hearts of those who had lost their world in the bloody, meaningless, and inhumane battlefield.

Only a few Holocaust survivors were able to recount what they had gone through during the darkest nights of humanity, to keep those memories is like stabbing themselves in the heart all over again.

However, Vladek, one of the Holocaust survivors, who is Artie's father, survived the living hell and was able to tell the world of how bizarre, cruel, and inhumane the Nazi's annihilation was through

Art Spiegelman's art: *Maus*. Throughout the book, Art takes us on a time capsule, alternating between the present time and the past through the author's interaction with Vladek and Vladek's testimonies. It is interpretable that Vladek's behaviour and actions changed completely after the war, becoming a stingy, parsimonious person. Overall, surviving the Holocaust was, for Vladek specifically and for everyone who lived through it, not just a temporary endurance but a profound transformation that stole away their material and familial world, shattered their faith in humanity, and left behind a man who could no longer distinguish peace from the need for survival.

The Holocaust had undoubtedly turned one's physical life upside down, stripping away not only personal possessions, but also their family and the comfort of their home. Vladek had a relatively affluent life; he was kind, wealthy, and resourceful. His marriage to Anja was also filled with compassion and intimacy (Murphy, Jack, and Jordan Berkow, editors. "Maus Themes." *GradeSaver*, www.gradesaver.com/maus/study-guide/themes#past-and-present. Accessed 27 February 2026), a life people just dream of. However, things do not stay beautiful for long. Anja and Vladek were forced to be separated; they were separated into men and women at the Dienst Stadium (Page 90, Spiegelman,

Art. *The Complete Maus*. Penguin Books, 2003). Here, Vladek knew things would not turn out great, and sure enough, he starts to witness his loved ones slowly getting killed, his dad (Spiegelman 93), his son Richieu (Spiegelman 111), and then his wife Anja (Spiegelman 102). On a broader scale, roughly 6 million Jews were killed, and an additional 5 million other individuals, consisting of LGBTQs, Soviet prisoners of war, the disabled, "Gypsies", black people, ... (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "How Many People did the Nazis Murder?" *How Many People did the Nazis Murder*,

encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/documenting-numbers-of-victims-of-the-holocaust-and-nazi-persecution. Accessed 3 March 2026). Moreover, as brutal as it is, families were torn apart, children became orphans, and homeless people starved to death. Nonetheless, there are still survivors, but their loss will always be a missing piece of flesh in their hearts.

It is no coincidence that Vladek suddenly became stingy with everything; the direct cause for his behavioural change is the Holocaust. It is understandable that in a life or death situation, no one would sacrifice themselves for the safety of another person, this is shown clearly by Vladek's request for help being brutally turned down. "My God! It's the Spiegelmans! You'll bring trouble! Go away! Quickly!" says Jania, Richieu's governess (Spiegelman 138), "There's a Jewess in the courtyard! Police!" says Anja's neighbor (Spiegelman 139). Out of despair, Vladek and Anja had no other way of getting help from the others, they must rely on themselves, becoming independent, save what they can save to trade, always be on the look out for the Gestapos so they will not get caught, and that habit roots into their mind so much to the point Vladek is barely surviving, at one point, he saved 75 days of bread for a bottle of vodka to bribe and bring Anja closer to him (Spiegelman 224). After the war, the urge to save on things continues, deeper, and is shown through the image of Vladek not letting Art even waste a small quantity of food (Spiegelman 46), or only giving Mala 50 dollars a month for food and groceries (Spiegelman 132), or grabs paper towels from public rest rooms so he will not have to buy napkins (Spiegelman 134). In a broader sense, the Holocaust's severity and

cruelty had distorted human values. Even in peacetime, antisemitism continues, instilling fear into survivors' minds. For instance, a pogrom took place in Kielce, Poland, in July 1946, where 42 Jews were massacred, and about 50 were wounded (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Kielce Pogrom: A Blood Libel Massacre of Holocaust Survivors." *The Kielce Pogrom: A Blood Libel Massacre of Holocaust Survivors*,

encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-kielce-pogrom-a-blood-libel-massacre-of-holocaust-survivors. Accessed 3 March 2026). Putting that into perspective, after barely surviving the deadliest massacre, they were greeted with yet another one, but this time it was not their enemy; it was their neighbor, their friends, their relatives. This post-war experience is heartbreaking, as it is, and it has left the people who most deserve a big hug devastated, with nowhere to go. Not only that, but this experience had also deeply influenced their belief system. "My father was religious, today I'm not religious at all [...] I personally say the Jewish people are not the chosen people; we are not the chosen people, no way. Not whatever [had] happened with 6 million people being killed."

("Interviews with Holocaust Survivors Alex Kuechel, Ann Jenner, Miriam Borowsky." *YouTube*, uploaded by News 3 Las Vegas, 5 February 2015,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2mrg-Gsi_c&t=1249s. Accessed 27 February 2026).

Though the invisible scar that the Holocaust left on Vladek was not the possessions that he lost nor the relationship with everyone else, but that war is still raging inside his mind, one where peace is nothing but an illusion, and survival is what he lives on. "Vladek's survival in German-occupied Poland depended on his ability to hoard and save even the smallest of items, such as the paper wrapper from a piece of cheese, or the cigarettes from his weekly rations. These small items took on enormous importance to Vladek, and even many years later, he feels unable to throw anything away" (Murphy, Jack, and Jordan Berkow, editors. "Maus Themes." GradeSaver,

www.gradesaver.com/maus/study-guide/themes#past-and-present. Accessed 6 March 2026). Vladek saved every crumb, every cigarette, because that was the only way he was going to survive, and it

never stopped; it only followed him along. "Although Vladek's character flaws are understandable given his traumatic past, they remain a source of suffering for his second wife, Mala, another Holocaust survivor. Vladek unreasonably suspects her of dispossessing him of his life savings" (Kolář, Stanislav. "Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in Spiegelman's *Maus*." *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2013, pp. 227-41. *Digilib*, hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129161. Accessed 27 February 2026). So deeply submerged in the fear of the war rising again, he could not let his guard down even with the woman who shares his home. This further supports the fact that the war had not just changed him, but also made it impossible to leave it. "*Maus* argues that the present is inescapably shaped by the past. Furthermore, when that past is as drenched in trauma as the Holocaust is, it is nearly impossible to outrun" ("*Maus*: A Survivor's Tale | Full Book Analysis." *SparkNotes*, www.sparknotes.com/lit/maus/plot-analysis/. Accessed 27 February 2026). And nowhere can it be more heartbreaking than the very last bit of the book, Vladek looks at his living son Artie, exhausted from reliving his own past, and says, "I'm tired from talking, Richieu, and it's enough stories for now" ((Spiegelman 296)), calling Art by the name of his dead son from the war. His psychological clock had forever stopped in 1944 during the war, and nothing can get it back on track anymore. Unfortunately, it is not just Vladek, but hundreds of other survivors who have also gone through the same loss and emotional degradation. A clinical study on 124 Holocaust survivors found that 46% of them met the full diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with the most common symptoms being sleep disturbance, recurrent nightmares, and intense distress triggered by the smallest reminders of the war (Weisaeth, Lars, et al. "Symptoms of PTSD in 124 Survivors of the Holocaust." *PubMed*, pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1536271/. Accessed 6 March 2026. Meaning almost half of all survivors were, like Vladek, trapped in 1944, refusing to accept that the days had passed. In addition, the damage did not even stop there; research found that grandchildren of Holocaust survivors are overrepresented in psychiatric care by 300%, carrying forward anxiety and fear that was never theirs (PMC. "From Trauma to Resilience: Psychological and Epigenetic Adaptations."

PubMed Central, [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12274377/](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC12274377/). Accessed 6 March 2026).

"Survival" does not end with the war; it will carry on over generations like a haunting reminder that war trauma does not die, it is simply inherited.

In conclusion, *Maus* is not just a Holocaust survivor's tale; it is a story of what the Holocaust leaves behind, hidden through Art's skillful shadings, silhouettes, and scribbles. Through Vladek, he demonstrates that survival is not the end of suffering but rather a different shape of it. The Holocaust stripped everything a man can have, from possessions to relationships, tearing pieces out of them that nothing can replace. It destroys every bit of humanity left in people, framing their creator for the horrid crimes. Finally, it steals away something even more fundamental: the ability to live, not survival. Vladek's story, and another hundred thousand other survivors' stories, is a painful reminder that war damage does not count on how many grams of gold one loses or a simple death toll, but the intergenerational transmissions of the trauma no one deserves to experience.

"Interviews with Holocaust Survivors Alex Kuechel, Ann Jenner, Miriam Borowsky." *YouTube*, uploaded by News 3 Las Vegas, 5 February 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2mrg-Gsi_c. Accessed 27 February 2026.

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