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Vladek's Personality Change, a Social Cognitive Process

The graphic novel *Maus* is a brilliant work written by the author and cartoonist Art Spiegelman where he gives the readers a personal and in-depth view of the Holocaust through his father's own experience. There are many stories and books about the Holocaust; still, Maus manages to bring something new and fresh. Besides choosing to tell his father's story through a comic, which is something, different Art decided to present the races as animals. The main character in the novel is Vladek, who is Arts' father. The reader can connect directly to Vladek's story due to the amount of detail and transparency that is given. Vladek's personality and behavior changed drastically through life's path due to his experience surviving the Holocaust and how it affected him psychologically, turning him from a smart and skilled person into a stubborn and miser.

Vladek's drastic personality change can be explained with the Social cognitive theory. In their book *Social Cognitive Theory of Organizational Management*, Robert Wood and Albert Badura discuss how the social cognitive theory works.

"Social cognitive theory explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation. In this model of reciprocal determinism, behavior, cognitive, and other personal factors and environmental events operate as interacting determinants that influence each other bidirectionally" (362).

This explains why someone acting can change due to external factors in that person's life combined with other events. It is not one single situation that changes someone psychologically, but rather a compound of determining factors. These are social, personal, and behavioral factors.

First, Vladek was a survivor of the Holocaust; that left alone causes a series of emotional problems on an individual. Although the Holocaust was an event lived by millions of Jews, each experience was different. Some people lost their complete families; others were killed, tortured, and so on. Vladek lost almost his entire family. Death became part of his life. At some point, his wife, Anja, became tired of feeling threatened by death and stated she wanted to stop living, but Vladek answers to her:

"No, darling! To die, it's easy ... but you have to struggle for life! Until the last moment, we must struggle together! I need you! And you'll see that together we'll survive"

(Spiegelman 122).

Vladek had to be the pillar of Anja in that situation, and although it seemed that he was unbreakable, later on, all of that exploded years later, leaving; as a result, the stubborn Vladek.

To emphasize the sadness and oppression that Vladek is feeling and thus changed him; Art chose to draw the comic art in a particular way. The art style is harsh, dark, and stressful. This is mostly due to the way the lines are drawn. The comic is black and white with thick and messy lines and curves. In McCloud's *Understanding Comics, The Invisible Art* chapter 5, he gives a few examples of different cartoons and how they all express different moods, emotions, and sophistication based on the comic's curves and lines. Regarding this topic, he acknowledges, "The most bland "expressionless" lines on Earth can't help but characterize their subject in some

way" (McCloud 125). The way Art designed *Maus* made the story more relatable and easier to follow so the readers can connect with the gloomy mood and theme.

From an outsider's point of view, Vladek has a well-established life. He lives in a good house, has money, has a wife, has a son that is a well-known cartoonist; overall, he has a life with things most people consider blessings. His social, personal, and behavioral parts seem perfect. Although he has all these things, it looks like his life went away with his past. He has a house and enough money to fix the house's things, but he leaves things the way they are. He has a wife, but is always annoyed with her. It can't be known what the intentions of Mala were for complete, but one clear thing is that he was the one that was driving her crazy by holding all the money and wanting to do all things by himself. He has a son, but he doesn't seem to appreciate his work enough, and even though he is an adult, he still treats him as a child. There is something off with Vladek. He is affected by his past. There is a conversation between Mala and Art in which an important point is touched. Art tells Mala that he used to think that his father was the way he was because of the war. Anja responds by saying:

"Fah! I went through the camps. All our friends went through the camps. Nobody is like him" (Spiegelman 131).

Anja stresses that there is no justification for Vladek to act all cheap and compulsive; the Holocaust is not an excuse because many people lived it but aren't like him. John P. Wilson explains in his book *Human Adaptation to Extreme Stress* how not all the survivors of the Holocaust are affected the same way.

“More specifically, findings from these studies suggest that adequate health, higher levels of economic resources, and social resources, along with the type of coping and self-

disclosure, are important determinants of mental health among survivors of extreme stress. Therefore, it is essential that mental health professionals themselves with the empirical evidence from more recent research to understand better the experiences and service needs of survivors of extreme stress.” (171).

Based on Wilson's research, it is concluded what factors determined the mental health and stress under which Vladek was left living after the Holocaust and Anja's death. Here, the Social Cognitive theory is applied since the factors mentioned before were counted as interacting determinants.

In *Maus*, there is an emphasis on Vladek's health. Art lets the readers know that his father is suffering from a heart condition by including dialogues of his father talking about it and even mentioning he had two heart attacks. Vladek acts compulsively about this. He notes that he needs to work out for his heart. Other times, he blames his heart problem on Mala, saying that she is always getting into his nerves, and he also stresses out constantly about having to drink his pills because of how important they are. This point is crucial because it is a way of seeing how Vladek is trying to control something he can't control. By working out and drinking his pills, he gets a sense of power and ableness, which he didn't have during the Holocaust. This falls under the category of personal social cognitive factors since this is a personal problem that affects him and his self-efficacy. He also incurs into this practice by wanting to do everything by himself. For example, when he is talking with Art and drops out his pills, Art says that he will count the pills again, but he responds by saying:

"No, you don't know counting pills. I'll do it after... I'm an expert on this (Spiegelman 30).

These expressions of self-capacity and complete knowledge are attempts from him to make up for his incapacity to save the whole family during the Holocaust.

A similar action or attitude is seen in *Fun Home* with the character of Mr. Bechdel. In her article, Julia Watson comments on *Autographic disclosures and genealogies in Alison Bechdel's "Fun Home"* how Mr. Bechdel tried to fix his life through his compulsivity with fixing the house

“This and subsequent chapters depict Alison's for imaging her adolescent coming of age as always a coming-out story, and provide a context for imagining the story her father did not, could not, tell his family, and that, she suggests, fueled his artistic obsession with order and design, as well as authoritarian parenting" (39).

Through this method, Mr. Bechdel and Vladek found a sense of personal satisfaction, but that doesn't hide their realities. Their pain and frustration can't be erased.

It can't be said that Vladek was not a true warrior. He kept strong during an inhuman event and managed to find a way to save his life and his wife's life. He is a man with strong mental power, which made him survive the Holocaust. He was also very skilled, and that is seen through the many times he escaped and deceived the Nazis, but as time passed, Vladek lost these characteristics and became completely different. Vladek did not want to become a miser, but he did. Life made him that way. The psychological factors around him and the emotional distress he suffered made him that way. Here the environmental aspect has a lot to do since social influences from life at the Holocaust changed Vladek's' way of living and seeing life. Hass Aaron illustrates in his article *The Aftermath: Living with the Holocaust* the environment in which the Jews lived during the Holocaust.

“Some Jews spent most of the time hiding, and some eluded capture by posing as Gentiles, with forged papers as proof. Others lived in the ghettos and concentration camps and endured slave labor for periods of varying duration. At the same time, thousands more were exiled and confined in work camps in the Soviet Union. A handful fought in the forests as partisans. Survivors were not only affected by the diverse circumstances into which they were forced but by the details of those circumstances.” (1).

Vladek lived through many of these experiences. The environment around him was one of constant tragedy. All these circumstances can't be seen as a whole. They need to be seen as individual experiences with details. The only goal was to survive. That was all they had left to do.

At some point, Vladek had to also go through the situation of pretending not to be a Jew to save his life. Besides this being a dangerous thing to do, it was also tough for the Jews to do. It was to pretend to be their enemy for a moment to survive. Richard A. Lutjens discusses in his book *Submerged on the surface*, the thought process that Jews had to go through to survive and try to keep a normal life.

“On the other hand, because the pursuit of such a life almost always required concealing one's true identity and the public adoption of an "Aryan" persona, everyday life meant coming into frequent contact with ardent Nazis and their sympathizers. The result was that effectively camouflaging oneself as an Aryan often required a show of support for the regime, creating an ironic situation in which defiance was of necessity expressed as complicity.” (Lutjens 126).

In *Maus*, there are various scenes in which Vladek and Anja pretend to be Poles to travel on a train and save their lives. Art brilliantly portrayed this by making them wear pig masks to appear non-Jewish Poles. There is one scene in which Vladek is alone walking in the street when some Polish children point out at him screaming that there was a Jew. In this scene, Vladek had to take the quick but hard decision of pretending he was not a Jew by saying, "Heil Hitler." He was relieved he could escape, but he was not proud of how he did it. In the end, it was that or death; there was no other option.

The art style of portraying Jews as mice has a lot of impact in these scenes. When seeing different races as different animals, the readers can understand each scene better. McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics the Invisible Art*, chapter two; how readers identify with cartoons. He states:

"The ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea is, I think, an important part of their special power, both in comics and in drawing generally" (31).

In *Maus*, that is what Art achieved by drawing the cartoons as animals. If the comic characters were drawn as ordinary people, it would not be easy to identify the Germans from the Jews and the Jews from the Poles. Readers would focus too much on the drawing style than the story and idea that Art is trying to portray. The idea of the problems between the races is brilliantly expressed in the art style that Art chose.

Maus certainly shows a side of the Survivors of the Holocaust that has a lot to explore and deal with. Art had in mind this; he must have known that by telling his father's story in such a personal way, readers would want to know more about him. The life of Vladek is a life filled with things from others to listen to and explore, but it is important to understand the effect this

life had on him. Vladek did many heroic things, but Art's purpose was not to show him as a hero but to show his struggles and effects. People change because of different situations in life, and that is a psychological fact. Vladek has a lot of traumas that were not completely treated. Every person reacts differently towards the same situation. He became a miser and a stubborn man because of how much his cognitive area was affected. In a way, Vladek still has the Holocaust Vladek inside him, but it is too painful and hard for him to live with it. It was easier for him to create a new person to suppress those memories.

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