

Beyond witness: Toward a phenomenology of Holocaust-era comics

Most accounts of the comics canon tend to begin with Art Spiegelman's intergenerational memoir *Maus*, first published in the 1980s. In a later interview, Spiegelman relayed that he "stumbled" across the literary-graphic predecessors of *Maus* only years later: comics authored by individuals incarcerated during the European Holocaust.¹ One example is *Mickey au camp de Gurs* (Mickey in Gurs Camp), a Disney parody authored by Horst Rosenthal during his internment in south-western France. His 15-page comic turns Mickey into a cartoon anthropologist: a mass-medial reimagining of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* who doesn't know what the word "Jewish" means.² Bewildered by the trauma of deportation and the poor living conditions in the barracks, Mickey decides that the air in the Pyrenees is not to his liking and escapes to the Big Apple by rubbing himself off the page (Figure 1).

The discovery of Rosenthal's *Mickey*, Spiegelman noted, had something of the uncanny, proof that his mode of telling had "deep roots". In fact, *Maus* unwittingly took up where many professional and amateur artists incarcerated in European camps and ghettos during the Second World War had left off. Against the odds, victims of Nazi persecution imprisoned in places like Gurs and Theresienstadt authored works of sequential graphic art, often working in secret with scarce drawing materials exchanged or smuggled through barter economies. Yet more incredibly, a significant number of these artefacts have

1 Art Spiegelman, *MetaMaus: A Look Inside a Modern Classic, Maus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 138.

2 Rosenthal's other comic strips from his time in Gurs are titled *La Journée d'un Hébergé* (A Day in the Life of a Resident) and *Petit Guide à Travers Le Camp de Gurs* (Short Guide Through the Gurs Camp). Along with *Mickey*, *Resident* was donated to the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris in 1978; nothing is known of their whereabouts up to that point. The third was smuggled out of Gurs by a Swiss nurse and donated in 1986 to the Skovgaard Museum in Viborg (Denmark). See Alister Wedderburn, "Cartooning the Camp: Aesthetic Interruption and the Limits of Political Possibility," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47, no. 2 (2019): 169–189.

survived the ravages of time. And yet, despite the compelling historical and aesthetic implications of this artistic practice, Holocaust-era comics remain largely absent from the critical genealogy of the medium and educational initiatives in Germany and beyond (Figure 2).

This lacuna deprives us of the richness of first-hand experience and its artistic expression contained within these fragments of counter-intuitive history: traces of the past that defy the legacy of erasure of which they speak. Their very material phenomenology points to the conditions of their authorship. Comics in the camps were frequently miniature. The illustrated diary of the Mannheim-born teenager Liesel Felsenthal, for example, is the size of a passport photo, while the drawings of Karl Schwesig fit on a surface area as tiny as a postage stamp. The German-speaking Czech artist Alfred Kantor fashioned the cover of his 22-page comic booklet *Brabag – 2 Wochen Schwarzhilde* using a distinctive striped camp uniform; other artists used materials including tissue paper, stamps, scrap paper and matchbox covers, communicating experiences of bodily confinement and deprivation in their physicality (Figure 3).

Beyond their material qualities, Holocaust-era comics express the refusal to submit to eradication. The marks on the page do not just narrate the experience of persecution but often parody the absurdity of incarceration. This use of black humor renders the deadly serious darkly comic and grants the artist agency. In her 2016 book *Disaster Drawn*, Hillary Chute argued that the picturing done by graphic narratives intervenes against the ‘culture of invisibility’ that characterizes historical trauma. We might take this point further: Holocaust-era comics resist ‘insensibility’ in their focus on the materiality of the body.³ The comic demands cognitive work of the reader to decode the visceral realities of internment — for example, hunger — thereby making them epistemically accessible.⁴ For example, Rosenthal’s *Mickey* satirizes the distribution of the daily ration as a bizarre ritual, whereby the pieces of bread shrink to ever smaller sizes, bordering, finally, on the microscopic. In one panel, the cartoon hero peers at the miniscule crumb through a magnifying glass.⁵

3 Cf. Hillary L. Chute, *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 5.

4 Chute writes about documentary at once as an epistemic and evidential practice (*ibid.*, 19).

5 Walt Disney stated in an interview that the character of Mickey Mouse was indebted to Charlie Chaplin’s ‘Tramp’, a figure defined by his ingenuity and inventiveness in the face of extreme deprivation. See Harry Carr, “The Only Unpaid Movie Star,” *American Magazine* (March 1931), 55. Reprinted in Gary Apgar (ed.), *A Mickey Mouse Reader* (University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

These comics do not just tell of deprivation; they attest to the power of imagination and faith in a peaceful future. In the single panel work, *For her 14th Birthday*, the Prague-born artist Helga Weissová depicted time in three panels separated by an undulating, colored ribbon: 1929, 1943 and 1957. In the center, an adolescent girl looks out from a bunk in Theresienstadt. A brown jacket hangs on the wall, its yellow star hinted at with a few strokes of the pen. If we spend time with the image, its motif of doubling becomes clear: the two white bed frames and names on the wall in the left-hand panel mirror the pair of bunk beds in the central barracks scene. And what appears to be one woman pushing her baby carriage in the right-hand panel turns out to be two mothers walking in tandem in a bustling cityscape. Each segment, we realise, is separated by an interval of exactly fourteen years, marking the birthday of Weissová's friend Francka with an equal jump forward and backwards in time. From the point of the image's creation in 1943, the artist pictures the young women's lifespans rewound back to their inception on the maternity ward. And from the time-present of the central panel, the figure gazes over the ribbon "gutter" (the technical term for the division between panels) onto a vision of post-war Prague yet to come (Figure 4).

The mirage proved half-true: Francka perished in Auschwitz the following year in 1944; Weissová returned to Prague and is currently approaching her 96th birthday in the family apartment in which she was born in 1929. In 2008, a selection of around 60 of Weissová's drawings from her years as a 12 to 14-year-old in Theresienstadt was shown to students of the Goch Gymnasium in North Rhine-Westphalia to commemorate Holocaust remembrance day. The title of the local exhibit put on for the high-schoolers was drawn from Weissová's memory of one of her father's last communiqués to her, smuggled over from the men's barracks: "Draw what you see". But the educational value of her work lies in the way that it goes beyond visual testimony, depicting not just what the artist saw, but what she was able to imagine.

Holocaust-era comics allow readers to recognize facets of human experience and consciousness that find no entry in the history books, often by actors or subjects whose voices are likewise lost, such as women and adolescents. These works of graphic witness offset radical intimacy with distance, bodily closeness with semiotic abstraction, just as they cast themselves out into an unknown future for reception by an age to come.

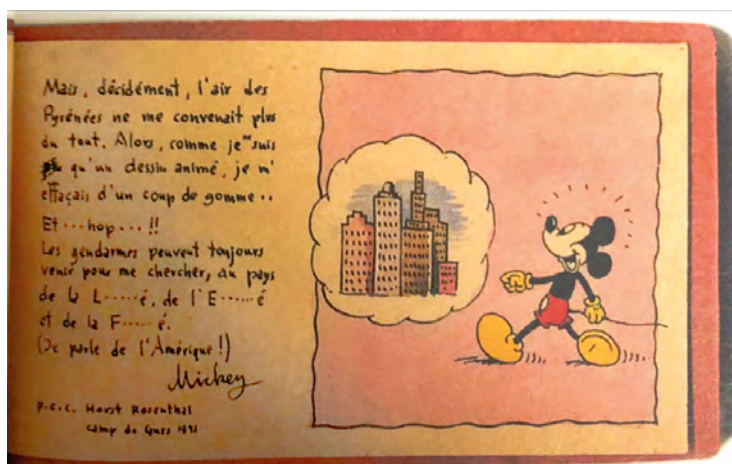
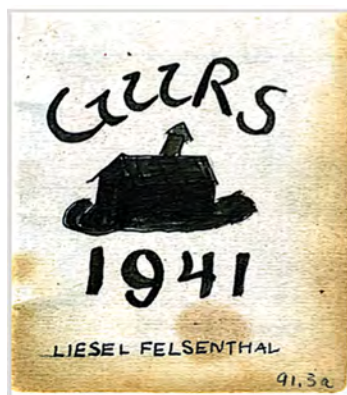


Fig.1: Horst Rosenthal, Mickey au Camp de Gurs (1942), DS-O.377, Centre de Juive Contemporaine, Paris



Fig.2: Liesel Felsenthal, Gurs 1941 (1941), Collection AR 2273, Leo Baeck Institute, New York

Fig.3: Alfred Kantor, Brabag – 2 Wochen Schwarzhilde (1944), United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C.



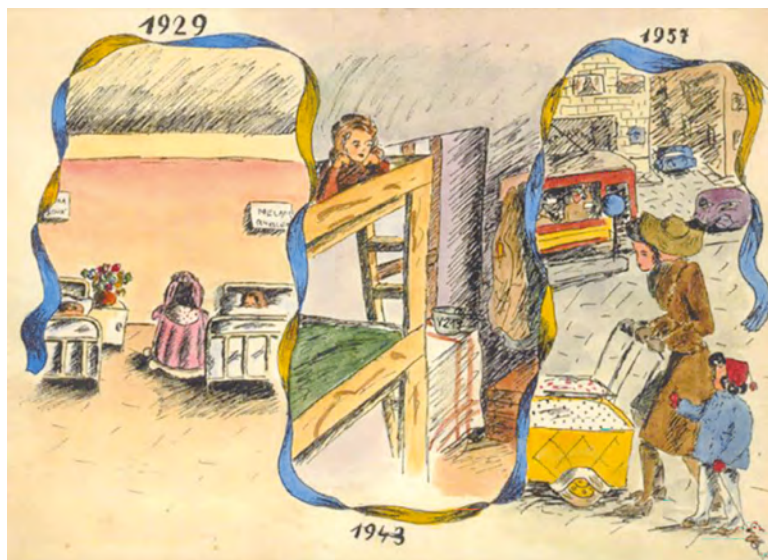


Fig.4: Helga Weissová, 1943
(© Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen)

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