

## Why Don't We Talk About It? :

### The Holocaust and Anti-Semitism in Jewish Made Comic Books 1963-1989

By Cameron Fontaine

“My parents didn’t talk in any coherent or comprehensive way about what they had lived through. It was always a given that they had lived through “the War” which was their term for the Holocaust. I don’t even think I heard the word Holocaust until the late 70’s but I was aware of “the War” as long as I was aware of anything.” - Art Spiegelman<sup>1</sup>

As Spiegelman wrote in *Meta Maus*, his parents really did not directly refer to or openly discuss the Holocaust until the late seventies. There was a similar trend in the comics industry. Many of the artists and writers in the early days of comics were Jewish immigrants or born into a Jewish immigrant families. So the question raised is why is to why is no one talking about the Holocaust? Why is there so little discussion of the hardships faced by Jewish immigrants? There are a couple of reasons why these themes do not emerge until later in comics. The Jewish immigrant experience and the legacy of the Holocaust were unpleasant themes not suited for the stringent guidelines of the Comics Code established in 1954. While themes of Jewish identity were discussed under the code they were not openly discussed until the abandonment of the code in the late 1970’s and early 80’s.

Comic creators discussed a myriad of different issues through the medium since the first issue of Action Comics. Action Comics No. 1, published in 1938, is considered the first comic book and the beginning of the medium as we know it today. Comics took off almost immediately. Everyone read comics because there were comics for everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> Art Spiegelman. *Meta Maus*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011, 12

Not just Superhero comics but Romance, Horror, Crime and Western comics were also popular. There was a comic for everyone. During World War II comics were extremely popular with troops overseas. During this time heroes like Captain America, Superman, and Batman emerged. Paul Buhle, author of *Jews and American Comics*, states

“Identifiably Jewish Superheroes would not have been an option in wartime comics.”<sup>2</sup>

The closest thing in the comic industry was Steve Rogers, a scrawny kid from the Lower East Side who became the super soldier Captain America. The mood of Superhero comics was one of patriotism and the sentiment was widespread. After the war, however, the comics industry took a major turn that shaped the next two to three decades of comics’ history.

After the war, comic book sales took a dramatic downturn. Men returning home from the war were no longer interested in comics as they rejoined the work force and started families. In the 1950’s America turned its attention toward the upward trend of Juvenile delinquency. The adults needed a scapegoat to explain this youth rebellion. Comic books were just the thing they were looking for. The industry included titles in Romance, Horror, Crime, and Western genres, as well as Superheroes. It was at this time that the comic book industry was gravely threatened by the crusade of Senator Estes Kefauver, based on one book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, by the misguided psychiatrist Dr. Frederic Wertham.<sup>3</sup> In 1954, due to congressional hearings enacted by Senator Kefauver, the industry faced extinction. Famously Kefauver’s committee cited an issue of Horror Comics cover that depicted the image of a woman’s severed head as reason that comics

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Buhle, ed. *Jews and American Comics: An Illustrated History of an American Art Form*. New York: The New Press, 2008, 56

<sup>3</sup> Loughheed, David. 2012. "THE COMING AND GOING OF THE COMICS CODE AUTHORITY." *History Magazine* 14, no. 2: 25-26. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 22, 2013). 25

were the cause of the trend of Juvenile delinquency.<sup>4</sup> William Gaines head of Entertaining Comics gave a famously flustered testimony in which he would state that he did not believe the cover was objectionable for adults. At this time, however, comics were still seen as a medium predominantly child oriented. So when Gaines said the cover was not objectionable, for the adult audience for which it was intended, the committee heard him condone this kind of entertainment for children. This is essentially the story of how the comics industry nearly failed.

In the wake of this disastrous hearing the comics industry was under a lot of pressure and as a result they decided to censor themselves. In 1954 the Comics Code Authority was established and developed the infamous Comic's Code which stifled the voice of comic creators until the 1980's. The Comics Code of ethics was a series of strict guidelines dictating what a comic book's stories and illustrations could and could not contain. Some examples of the types of restrictions that were enforced under the Comics Code Authority:

- "Policeman, judges, government officials and respected institutions shall never be presented in such a way as to create disrespect for established authority."
- "No comics shall explicitly present the unique details and methods of a crime."
- "No magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title."

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<sup>4</sup> Loughheed, 25

- “Respect for parents, the moral code, and for honorable behavior shall be fostered.”<sup>5</sup>

These are just a few of the many restrictions put on the industry by this code of ethics. Comics were forever changed by this code of ethics and the enforcement thereof. The free discussion of adult themes the industry enjoyed in the beginning was smothered by the Comic Book Code.

In 1954, Charles F Murphy was appointed administrator of the Comics Magazine Association of America. He oversaw the enforcement of the “Comics Code” in its early days. Murphy was a father of three children who, of course, read comic books. Inevitably his children would bring home “questionable” comics that he would not approve of, Murphy burned these comics. Murphy’s approach to the position of Comics Code administrator was similar. He led a “Sweeping...purification drive” of the industry. During the first two months of the Comics Code Authority, Murphy and his staff screened 440 issues of 285 comic book titles. They rejected 126 stories and ordered changes of 5,656 panels.<sup>6</sup> Things looked grim for the comic book industry. Without the freedom to express themselves, how could these comic book titles stay afloat? This looked like the end for superhero comics. The code had been established under the assumption that comics were only for kids. Now under the authority of the Comics Code that notion became a self-fulfilling prophecy. There emerged a hero to salvage the industry from the jaws of defeat.

The Marvel revolution of the 60’s saved the superhero and found a way to tackle serious issues while still adhering to the code. Two of the most recognizable names in the

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<sup>5</sup> David Hajdu, *The Ten Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How it Changed America*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, New York. 2008 291-292

<sup>6</sup> Hajdu, 305-306

world of Marvel Superhero comics are Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the duo known for the creation of the X-men, Spiderman, and most of the great heroes of the Marvel Silver age of comics. Lee was born Stanley Martin Lieber in New York in 1922. The son of Romanian Jewish immigrants, Lee began work in comics as early as 1939 at Timely Comics, a company that later became known by its much more famous name Marvel Comics.<sup>7</sup> Lee is credited with the creation of many different superheroes including The Fantastic Four, the X-men, and The Amazing Spider-Man. These heroes created by Jews all have some little bits of Jewish identity in them, even if none of them are explicitly Jewish yet. None of these heroes are identified in the books as Jewish characters until the 1980's but even in the 60's they represented the hardships, and the triumph of Jews in America.

Stan Lee made incredibly important contributions to the world of comic books. The characters he wrote were more than just superheroes, they were people, and more importantly, they were people readers could relate to. This was a trait that was exclusive to superheroes created in the sixties, it hadn't been true for the godlike heroes of the Golden Age. The trend started in 1961 when Stan Lee was put up to the task of coming up with a new team of superheroes for a new Marvel book. At the time it looked as though superheroes were on their way out.<sup>8</sup> The public had lost interest, and The Code was making it hard to write about anything interesting enough to sell. However, when Stan Lee came back with the idea for the Fantastic Four, the face of the superhero changed.

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<sup>7</sup> Stromberg, 289

<sup>8</sup> Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Philadelphia Jewish Publication Society. 2008 92-93

Fantastic Four was a comic book about normal, everyday people who had powers thrust upon them. Four astronauts were on a mission when their ship was bombarded by cosmic radiation giving them strange and fantastic powers. What made these astronauts so interesting is the idea that these seemingly ordinary people are now extraordinary and they now have to decide what they are going to do with these powers. The most interesting character of the group was Ben Grimm, better known by his superhero identity The Thing. The other members of the Fantastic Four could hide their powers when not in need of them. Ben Grimm had been transformed into an orange rock skinned monstrosity which made him stand out. When he returned he no longer fit in with the society that he had previously been a part of. When the Fantastic Four landed back on earth and discovered these transformations they did not band together and vow to fight evil. Instead they were immediately at odds with each other. Eventually they would don costumes and fight evil but the idea was not present from the start as it had been in DC Comics' Justice League, or in the Golden Age of the 1940's.<sup>9</sup> This was truly revolutionary.

Jack Kirby was born Jacob Kurtzberg in 1917 in the poorer parts of New York. The son of Austrian Jewish immigrants it was fabled that he was a street brawler.<sup>10</sup> This would make sense as his artwork would later demonstrate the fact that he knew quite well how a human body would move in a fight. Kirby's illustrations were immensely popular as his depictions of action were some of the most detailed. The way Kirby depicted motion was absolutely fascinating. He took full advantage of a process that comic theorist Scott McCloud calls closure. In terms of comics this means reader participation in the illustration. Say in one panel you have Captain America winding up a right hook punch

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<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, 94-95

<sup>10</sup> Stromberg, 291

right into Hitler's face, in the next panel you see the punch completed and the path of his follow through sketched in. In this instance your eyes do not actually perceive motion but your brain makes the connection that this motion must have occurred.<sup>11</sup> In this way comics seem to come to life as you read them you can see characters flying kicking and punching. It is what makes comics exciting.

Kirby always had a soft spot for Ben Grimm of the Fantastic Four. Kirby even had a drawing of him that hung in his house. What is more interesting about this relationship however is that this drawing that hung in his house depicted The Thing wearing a prayer shawl, a yarmulke, and reading a Jewish prayer book with Hebrew lettering on the cover. Ben Grimm was never identified as a Jewish superhero during Lee and Kirby's run on the magazine; however this drawing was special to Kirby so it is very likely that he identified with the character of Ben Grimm.<sup>12</sup> In a story from 2002 it was revealed that The Thing was Jewish. He said he had not revealed his Jewish identity earlier because he said "...there's enough trouble in this world without people thinkin' Jews are all monsters like me."<sup>13</sup>

Jewish historian Hasia Diner posits that if ever there were a "Golden Age" of American Jewry it would be the twenty years following World War II. This is not to say that American Jews did not face trials during this period only that they became more accepted and in the period Jews began to contribute more to popular culture and more specifically to the world of comic books.<sup>14</sup> Many Americans in the postwar period changed their views of Jews upon witnessing the horrors that the Holocaust had wrought.

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<sup>11</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, Northampton MA, Tundra Publishing 1993 64-66

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, 100

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan 98-99

<sup>14</sup> Hasia R Diner, *The Jews of the United States*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004., 259-260

There is a sort of peaceful coexistence not quite a complete acceptance but a tolerance that arose resulting in .

Moving into the sixties, America became embroiled in civil rights debates. American Jews participated in these debates. Rabbi Joachim Prinz made a statement in 1963 in which he said “When I lived under the Hitler regime, I learned many things” His lesson consisted of the idea that recognizing that discrimination against some diminished all and that ending discrimination against one minority could benefit the state as a whole.<sup>15</sup> These ideas worked their way into the popular Jewish rhetoric. Jews had been allied with African Americans in the fight for equality since the beginning of the twentieth century. The Jewish organizations and communities saw it as their moral obligation to participate actively in the struggle for civil rights.<sup>16</sup> However it was not only the Jewish organizations who took action. Jewish comic book artists and writers called attention to the movement.

In September of 1963 Kirby and Lee teamed up to create one of the most exciting and intellectually intriguing Superhero teams of all time, the X-Men. The X-men were a group of mutated humans who possess the Mutant X genes which provides them with superhuman powers. In the first issue of *The Uncanny X-men*, Lee and Kirby introduced Cyclops, Marvel Girl, Beast Iceman and Angel. Each of these individuals had their own unique power which is granted to them by the Mutant X gene. They study at Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters where Professor Charles Xavier, who is also a mutant, teaches them how to control the powers granted to them by the Mutant X gene<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Diner, *Jews*, 265

<sup>16</sup> Diner, *Jews*, 266-267

<sup>17</sup> Superheroes: A Never Ending Battle, Interview with Stan Lee.



The idea that Mutants are all together a different race than the humans presents one of the main themes of the X-men and that is the race that is outside of the rest of society. They are simultaneously an allegory for the Jewish experience and the struggles of the civil rights movement. Lee and Kirby a Jewish comic book super team presented a groundbreaking way to participate in the civil rights movement alongside the Jewish community, even under the Comic Code Authority. The code limited what they could print but Lee and Kirby presented their agenda in allegory. The X-men are Jews, African Americans, Chinese, Irish, and all groups that are being or have ever been discriminated against. This is why the X-men are so important and it is what separates them from the other Marvel superheroes.

The X-men present a very interesting example of how comics are used as a tool to comment on real world issues in a fictional setting. Even though the Comics Code was still being enforced in the 1960's, Lee and Kirby were able to tackle a number of issues, dealing with Jewish American identity, that if discussed plainly and openly would not have gotten the stamp of approval from the Comics Code Authority. This has always been the great advantage and at the same time the great curse of comic books as a medium. On the one hand it provides a platform on which to discuss issues of Jewish identity and hardship. On the other hand, under the Code Comics, were directed at children who would not have been able to pick up on the subtleties of the issues discussed. Kirby and Lee found a way to make the system work for them.

In November of 1965 Lee and Kirby released *Uncanny X-men #14*. In this issue the X-men are recovering in the School for Gifted Youngsters after a near death experience fighting the nearly indestructible Juggernaut. Upon their recovery the team is

granted leave to relax after their strenuous battle. When associating with the rest of the world the X-men must hide their mutant abilities. Beast must wear special shoes to hide his oversized feet, Angel must tape down his wings, and Cyclops must wear special sunglasses to shield the world from his deadly gaze, and so on.<sup>18</sup>

This theme of covering up identities was a common theme among immigrant stories. Upon arriving in America many immigrant groups felt the need to assimilate and to do this they needed to conceal their true identities. Much like Angel taping down his wings to become Warren Worthington III, Jewish families were pressured to abandon parts of their culture when they immigrated to the USA. Whether it was abandoning their traditional dress for something more “American” or changing their last name because the administrators at Ellis Island could not pronounce it correctly. These were themes that many immigrants experienced and many people could relate to. The X-men are an allegory for the Jewish immigrant experience.

In the sequence in which the X-men cover up their powers there is a series of panels in which Angel conceals his wings. This is written in a series of three panels. In the first panel we see a depiction of Bobby Drake, or Iceman, helping Angel secure his wings. Bobby says in this panel, “How can you stand it Warren? It must feel like wearing a girdle.” To this Warren responds “That may be little friend but it’s better than giving away my identity to the human race.”<sup>19</sup> In the last panel in the series we see Warren/Angel in a shirt and in the process of tying a tie. This sequence shows the before, middle, and after processes of covering up his identity which makes excellent use of closure. Kirby presents us with the illusion of Angel the mutant transforming into Warren

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<sup>18</sup> Stan Lee, Jack Kirby *The Uncanny X-men* #14, 3-4

<sup>19</sup> Lee, Kirby. *X-men* #14, 4

the, by all outward appearances, human alter ego. This is a very intricate and interesting allegory to the condition of the Jewish American immigrant. Where the Jews come into the country they change their names and clothes so that might create an American alter ego just as Angel and the X-men do.

Another significant aspect in this sequence is the dialogue with Bobby/Iceman that Angel is concerned about the humans finding out his true identity. Even those not exceedingly familiar with Jewish history know of the prevalent trends of anti-Semitism that plague the Jewish experience. Ever since the destruction of the second temple in Jerusalem the Jews have faced persecution, pogroms, and a long running history of largely anti Jewish sentiment. Many of the Jewish immigrants coming into the country changed their name for fear of rekindling this anti Jewish sentiment or falling victim to discrimination.

The X-men have the same reservations about revealing their true identities to the public as the Jewish American immigrants did. They were right to have reservations because, as we see in panels on the previous page, they give rise to the anti mutant sentiment in the alternate X-men universe. In the first panel a close-up of a character, Dr. Trask, in an interview with the press presumably on television. He is saying “Mutants walk among us! Hidden! Unknown! Waiting...for their moment to strike!”<sup>20</sup> The word Mutants was drawn in bold by the letterer, which seems to denote a derogatory emphasis on the word, not unlike the way the word Jew has been used in a derogatory sense. Kirby and Lee both being from immigrant families, were most likely exposed to that kind of treatment growing up in New York City. Although it is more likely that Kirby, who came from the poorer, rougher area of New York, would have been exposed to these ideas.

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<sup>20</sup> Lee, Kirby. *X-men* #14, 3

The other panel which speaks to the idea of anti-mutant sentiment is a close up of newspapers rolling off the press. On all of these papers the headlines read “Mutant Menace!”<sup>21</sup> This idea that the authority figure, Dr. Trask, is stirring up an anti Mutant fervor based on false information and accusations is reminiscent of a document from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century doing much the same thing for the Jews. The document known as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* outlines a massive Jewish conspiracy to basically take over the world. The *Protocols* first appear in a Russian newspaper in 1903. They were presented as a series of twenty four secret lectures given by a Jewish elder outlining a world wide Jewish conspiracy to consolidate power and control the entire world.<sup>22</sup>

This information was disseminated into the hands of ignorant gullible people. These people in turn were frightened by the news and these forged documents were used as justification for the carrying out of pogroms throughout Russia. In the wake of the Russian Civil War many of the members of the defeated White Army fled west carrying with them copies of the *Protocols*. In this way the literature was spread to the west further fueling anti-Semitic sentiment.<sup>23</sup> This document which makes claims about Jewish conspiracy had a significant effect on the Jewish population.

The ideas of anti Mutant sentiment suggest a comparison to these forged documents of the early twentieth century. Later in *X-Men #14*, Dr. Trask reveals his new inventions in a televised debate with Professor Xavier. Trask creates the Sentinels which are towering robotic foot soldiers who are programmed to locate and exterminate

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<sup>21</sup> Lee, Kirby. *X-men #14*, 3

<sup>22</sup> Green, Ronald S. 2000. "Scholars Contending with Delusional Ideology: Historians, Anti-Semitic Lore, and the Protocols." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 18, no. 2: 82. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 23, 2013). 82-83

<sup>23</sup> Green, 84

Mutants.<sup>24</sup> There are two important ideas that come through in this story. First of all there is the televised declaration of a Mutant Conspiracy generating anti Mutant sentiment rapidly escalating to the national level which, as mentioned before, echoes the ideas of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

Then there is the introduction of the Sentinels which echo another enemy of the Jewish people, the Nazi foot soldiers. The idea that the sole purpose of these sentinels is to exterminate mutant life forms gives them the exact same relationship as the Nazi soldier had to the Jews during the Holocaust. Through the X-men universe, the sentinels continue to be an ever present danger to the X-men as their sole purpose is to eradicate all mutant life.

*X-men #14* is an important issue for the Uncanny X-men. Marvel in the 60's was known for making Superheroes seem human. Making them relatable, giving them flaws and problems that readers of the comics might deal with. Spider-Man was a teenager who had his powers thrust upon him one day by a radioactive spider. The X-men were born different and there was nothing they could do about it. People hate the X-men because they are different and they do not understand what makes them different they just do not like it.

These examples from *X-men #14* show how Jewish identity and hardship were addressed even under the oppressive Comics Code Authority. The Comics Code Authority had for years controlled the output of any comic that you would find on your local newsstand. However a very important event takes place about six years after this issue is published which will put a crack in the code and begin to question its legitimacy and its necessity.

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<sup>24</sup> Lee, Kirby. *X-men #14*, 8-10

In 1971 Stan Lee was asked by the US Department of Health and Education to write an issue of Spider-Man in which Spider-Man captures a drug dealer and illustrates the evils of drug addiction and why drugs and drug dealing are dangerous and inappropriate.<sup>25</sup> Lee brought this issue, *Spider-Man #96*, to the Comics Code and they rejected it, because it states very clearly in the code that drugs cannot be mentioned in the narrative even if portrayed in a negative light. Lee then decided to go ahead with publication of the comic without the Comics Code's seal of approval. Generally this meant that newsstands would not carry the comic, but Spider-Man was so popular it seemed as though no one really took notice or at least if they did they bought the comic anyway.

This represented a momentous and exciting shift in comics themes and artwork. It was not immediate but once word got out that Marvel had sold out comics that did not bear the Comics Code seal, people began to see just how far they could push the envelope. Throughout the 70's a number of books would be released by main stream publishers without the Comics Code authority seal and many of them would do very well despite not being sanctioned by the Comics Code. The days of the Comics Code Authority were numbered and they knew it.

In 1978 there was another major breakthrough in the way comics were written and consumed. One of comic's big names took a step into the world of literature and produced the first graphic novel. *A Contract with God* created by Will Eisner is considered to be the first ever graphic novel. The graphic novel would later become a very important tool in the legitimization of the comic book industry. One of the critiques of the industry was that the stories were too short. Will Eisner changed that perception.

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<sup>25</sup> Loughheed, 26

Will Eisner was born in New York City on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1917 to Austrian Jewish immigrants. Eisner claimed that as a boy he never fully realized how impoverished his family was.<sup>26</sup> Eisner lived a thoroughly Jewish immigrant experience growing up in impoverished neighborhoods in New York. These experiences are things he later drew on for his graphic novel. Eisner had been active in the world of comics since before the publication of the first issue of Action Comics in 1938. Eisner was the author and artist of a newspaper strip called *The Spirit*. This is the start that put him on the map. Eisner would rise to become a giant in the comics industry.

*A Contract with God* is an unusual comic for the period it is written in. It is written during the Comics Code although it is not so much written for mass consumption in comic shops or newsstands. *A Contract with God* tells various stories of the lives of tenants of fictitious tenement housing in New York City during the Great Depression. The title story, *A Contract with God*, tells the story of Frimme Hersh a Jew living in a community in tenement housing. Unlike the representations of Jews in Marvel's superhero comics, Frimme Hersh is drawn and referred to as a Jew. He wears the garb of a Hassidic Jew and is drawn to reflect the dark curly hair and beard of traditional Jewish representations.<sup>27</sup> Marvel's Jewish characters and allegories do not bear this resemblance to traditional Jewish body type or dress.

In the story Hersh's adopted daughter takes ill and dies at a young age, at which point he abandons the contract he made with God. As is shown in the quote below this is directly related to Eisner's own life as he lost his own daughter at the age of 16. It is exactly this personalization that makes the story so potent.

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<sup>26</sup> Michael Schumacher, *Will Eisner: A Dreamer's Life in Comics*, New York Bloomsbury, 2010. 4

<sup>27</sup> Will Eisner, *A Contract with God*, 16

“My grief was still raw. My heart still bled. In fact, I could not even then bring myself to discuss the loss. I made Frimme Hersh’s daughter an “adopted child.” But his anguish was mine. His argument with God was also mine. I exorcised my rage at a deity that I believed violated my faith and deprived my lovely 16-year-old child of her life at the very flowering of it.” –Will Eisner on *A Contract with God*<sup>28</sup>

This story more than being the first graphic novel is a very personal story told through fiction which directly addresses issues of Jewish hardship and Jewish identity. This is one of the reasons that Will Eisner is such an important name when it comes to the issue of Jewish identity in comics. *A Contract with God* is so important not only in representing Jews as they exist in real life as opposed to mutants but also of discussing very specifically the Jewish immigrant experience. Will Eisner is said to have been the first one to use the term graphic novel. This term helped to take comics from the realm of children’s stories into a legitimate art form.

While Will Eisner was busy putting comics on the map academically, in the world of mainstream comics another important figure emerged. In the 1980’s Lee and Kirby had long since ceased their work on X-men. The new head writer of the reboot of X-men in the early 80’s was a man by the name of Chris Claremont. Claremont along with Len Wein, both Jewish, revamped the then cancelled X-men franchise. Under their leadership we see X-men become a platform for openly Jewish superheroes and villains to make their appearance and tell their tales.<sup>29</sup>

One of Claremont’s major contributions to the X-men line was one of the first if not the first major female openly Jewish superhero. Katherine “Kitty” Pryde aka

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<sup>28</sup> Schumacher, 196-197

<sup>29</sup> Kaplan, 117



Shadowcat is a young Jewish girl with the ability to phase through solid objects. Kitty is an example of Claremont's model of introducing stronger female characters to the X-men storyline. She is a slight Jewish girl who possesses great power. Claremont says he based Kitty and his new model for stronger female characters off of the women who served in the Israeli Defense Forces. He was introduced to them while living in Tel Aviv in the late 60's. "Cute babe, miniskirt, and Uzi. That pretty much summed up my writing style from then on"<sup>30</sup> Claremont represented Kitty in a stereotypical Jewish fashion. She was a "Cute Babe" who had long curly brown hair, and brown eyes which are typical Jewish physical traits. Kitty was openly Jewish and very important to one of Claremont's most important story arcs while writing for X-men.

On December 10th 1980 Chris Claremont and Marvel published Uncanny X-men issue #141 entitled *Days of the Future Past*. The basic storyline involves the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, the X-men's main enemies assassinating Senator Robert Kelly an anti-mutant legislator. As a result the Sentinels<sup>31</sup> are ordered into action rounding up all of the mutants they can find and placing them in concentration camps or murdering them on sight. In order to fight back a coalition of mutant resistance fighters send Kitty Pryde back in time in order to save the senator.<sup>32</sup> Two very important ideas come out of this story.

Although the Comics Code Authority still existed, this book did not get the seal of approval. *Days of the Future Past* is still a mainstream comic book title and contains direct analogy to the Holocaust. The scenario in *Days of the Future Past* echoes the Holocaust not only literarily but also visually. In the opening sequence introducing

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<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, 119-120

<sup>31</sup> Mutant exterminating robots. Discussed earlier when discussing The Uncanny X-men #14.

<sup>32</sup> Claremont, *The Uncanny X-men* #141-142

readers to the *Future Past* we see Kitty walking through the gates into one of the camps where the mutants are confined. The gates are guarded by the Sentinels much like Nazi troopers guarding the gates of the concentration camps. All of the mutants are forced to wear jumpsuits emblazoned with a capital M for mutant as well as inhibitor collars to prevent them from using their powers. These garments are reminiscent of the striped jumpsuits with golden Stars of David sewn onto their clothing and caps the victims of the Holocaust were required to wear. As Kitty walks into the camp she must walk through a field full of headstones marking the graves of the mutants who were killed by the Sentinels.<sup>33</sup> This imagery along with the narrative draws unmistakable parallels between the plight of the mutants and that of the victims of the Holocaust.

The second idea that is conveyed through *Days of the Future Past* is the idea of tolerance. Aside from the obvious idea that intolerance leads to extreme and dangerous discrimination there is a more illicit lesson learned at the end of this issue. In issue #142 after Kitty Pryde saves the Senator, Storm confronts him and says “This...child is the person who just saved your life. Mutants, like people are both good and bad. You would do well to remember that Senator before you seek to condemn us all.”<sup>34</sup> Storm in this quote is talking about mutants but is speaking analogously for Jews and other minorities that are discriminated against by lawmakers and the American public in general. Claremont, in the end of this story, asks readers to differentiate between good and evil within groups and not to give into blind hate and prejudice. Claremont would make this line more blurred in the years to come. This is different from what Kirby and Lee were

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<sup>33</sup> Claremont, *the Uncanny X-men* #141, 4

<sup>34</sup> Claremont *The Uncanny X-men* #142, 20

doing in the 60's. Claremont is actively engaging with the issues at hand and taking a stance.

In August of 1987 Claremont published Magneto's<sup>35</sup> origin story in *Classic X-Men #12*. Magneto is henceforth a Jewish villain penned by a Jewish author. What is interesting about this decision is that this origin story starts in a death camp during the Holocaust. Magneto as a villain is a bitter and anti-human antagonist who calls for a war between the humans and the mutants. Magneto and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants look to start a war with the humans while Professor X and the X-Men seek to stop them. Claremont makes Magneto a much more complex character by adding the element that his world view comes from personal experiences of the Holocaust that lead him to believe that humans are no good at their core. In this issue, readers also learn that Magneto's daughter burned to death in a house fire because anti-Semitic neighbors refuse to help. In fact they beat up Magneto while he listens to his daughter burn to death.<sup>36</sup>

This depiction of intense anti-Semitism and Holocaust awareness are important as it is clear now that these themes are no longer being masquerading as mutant hate. Magneto was hated as a Jew before he was ever hated as a mutant, his quest to engage the humans in war stems from the idea of never again allowing himself to be dehumanized as he had been in his past. This new motivation changes Magneto from a ruthless villain antagonist to someone Jewish readers can relate to and someone all readers can sympathize with. This transition in motive makes Magneto into a morally ambivalent character and blurs the line between good and evil. Magneto even would lead the X-Men at one point, during this time Magneto would visit the Holocaust Memorial in DC with

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<sup>35</sup> Magneto is an old acquaintance and the also the oldest adversary of Professor Xavier and the X-men. His first appearance is in the very first issue of *The Uncanny X-men*.

<sup>36</sup> Claremont, *Classic X-men #12*

Kitty Pryde.<sup>37</sup> All these innovations in comics make Claremont an extremely important name in bringing Jewish identity and issues of anti-Semitism into the mainstream comics being consumed by the majority of comic readers in the US. Bringing Jewish identity to the forefront of these titles published by Marvel was huge for Jews in the industry and huge for the perception of comics as a storytelling medium.

Art Spiegelman is to this day one of the most important names in alternative comics. *Maus* was instrumental in changing the perception of comics and was one of the works that put comics on the map in terms of scholarship. It was his chronicles of his father's experiences during World War II that won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 and helped the world see the potential that the medium possessed.<sup>38</sup> Comics have always been an extremely accessible and effective medium through which to tell stories and in which we can discuss important issues. Though, until quite recently, comics had been seen as a form of entertainment primarily for children and therefore not really taken seriously in academic circles. *Maus* was instrumental in changing the popular image of comics.

*Maus* was originally released in pieces run in underground magazines for which Spiegelman used to write. Spiegelman began releasing these underground comix<sup>39</sup> around 1980. Underground comix was a movement that grew as a direct result of the oppressive restrictions of the Comic Book Code. Artists who felt stifled turned to self-publishing and distribution in head shops and at conventions. This became known as the Underground comix movement.

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<sup>37</sup> Kaplan, 120-121

<sup>38</sup> Spiegelman. *Meta Maus*, 294

<sup>39</sup> The spelling of the word "comics" as "comix" is not spelled incorrectly it is a way in which comic scholars and comic artists refer to underground comics. The reference is to R. Crumb's magazine Zap Comix.

The first collected volume of *Maus: My Father Bleeds History* was released in 1986 with *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began* being completed and released in 1991. In these books Art Spiegelman retells the tale of his father's experiences during the Holocaust through the use of mice as Jews and cats as Nazis. The stories that are told, however, are all real experiences and events that Vladek, Art's father, actually witnessed and lived through. The final collection of these stories into *The Complete Maus* comprises a graphic novel which is 286 pages in length.<sup>40</sup> This book is one of the major players in the rise of alternative comics. Alternative comics are books that exist outside of mainstream publishers.

Spiegelman's decision to use mice as the anthropomorphic allegory to the Jew is a highly debated topic amongst comic scholars. In *Meta Maus* Spiegelman talks about how he came to that decision. Nazi and other anti-Semitic propaganda had commonly used the depiction of Jews as rats. Spiegelman cites the 1940 movie *The Eternal Jew*, a propaganda "documentary" that portrayed Jews in the ghettos swarming in tight quarters, and the cut to Jews as mice or rats swarming in a sewer. With a title card that read "Jews are the rats" Spiegelman said "This made it clear to me that dehumanization was at the very heart of the killing project."<sup>41</sup> The dehumanization effort that the Nazi employed is the same that any country uses when they must justify killing other people. The United States did the same to Japan when they declared war. Racist cartoons and the use of the term "Jap" distanced the everyday citizen from the enemy. This way the violence is easier to stomach. If that is the point then there are definitely points in the story which Spiegelman wants us to feel the whole force of violence.

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<sup>40</sup> Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, (Pantheon Books New York) 2003

<sup>41</sup> Spiegelman, *Meta Maus* 114-115

One such instance occurs in chapter five of *Maus I*. Vladek is recounting the experience of Nazis taking people and many children to Auschwitz. A sequence of panels in this section recounts that the children were “screaming and screaming and they couldn’t stop”. The next panel the text reads “So the Germans swung them by the legs against a wall... and they never anymore screamed.” The picture to accompany shows a German soldier swinging a child at a brick wall with a significant blood splatter pattern on the wall.<sup>42</sup> The interesting thing about the illustration and the reason it is so effective is that when drawn from behind the soldier and the child have no distinguishable animal features. This panel effectively shows human on human violence. The representation of the Jew as a mouse ceases to exist in this panel and it is instead a human child that is being killed. This is why Spiegelman’s representation of the Holocaust is so haunting; he manipulates his art style in order to deliver a hard-hitting and accurate account of the atrocities of the Holocaust.

The beginning of chapter two of *Maus II* contains one of the most interesting panels in the whole novel. Art is depicted sitting at his desk recounting the timelines of working on the book and how they coincide with Vladek’s life. He is no longer a mouse instead he is drawn as a human wearing a mouse mask. The last panel on the page shows Art slumped over his desk and his desk is perched on a mountain of emaciated mouse corpses.<sup>43</sup> Art seems to be saying that he feels guilty or perhaps shameful for building his success on the bodies of the victims of the Holocaust. The fact that he draws himself as a human wearing a mouse mask seems to suggest that in this moment he feels like he is masquerading as a Jew. This idea suggests that there is something integral to the Jewish

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<sup>42</sup> Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, 110

<sup>43</sup> Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus*, 201

experience about the Holocaust. Something in that experience legitimizes your identity as a Jew. He ends the dialogue with a balloon that says “Lately I’ve been feeling depressed” it is hard to tell if this depression he feels is due to the fact that he feels his Jewish identity is a mask, or if it is because he is dealing with the Holocaust which is probably the single most depressing point in all of Jewish history. Regardless Spiegelman’s contributions to Jewish identity and representations won him a Pulitzer Prize which not only put Jews in the forefront of comics but also helped to put comics in a position to be taken quite seriously as a legitimate form of art and literature combined.

“I was trying to figure out what was the most transfiguring event of our century that would tie in the super-concept of the X-Men as persecuted outcasts. It had to be the Holocaust” –Chris Claremont<sup>44</sup>

As this quote shows the Holocaust was a great influence and a common bond in the discussion of Jewish identity. Jews have been active in the world of comic books since the very beginning. The Holocaust and other themes of Jewish hardship and identity are discussed clandestinely throughout the 1960’s and into the 70’s. Lee, Kirby, Eisner Claremont, and Spiegelman all played crucial roles on bringing the Jewish experience to comics. In doing so they have elevated comics to an intellectual level above and beyond what the Comic Code Authority had attempted to limit comic books to be. As the industry moves forward there are limitless possibilities. The Comics Code Authority remained in use by DC and Archie comics until January 2011. By this time comic books like those published by Marvel had developed a rating system. Just as the Jews were liberated from Auschwitz so have comic books been liberated from the code.

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<sup>44</sup> Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews Comics and the Creation of the Superhero*. New York: Continuum, 2007, 123

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