The Holocaust

I have wept over too many graves.
—Magneto, in “God Loves, Man Kills”

The movie begins with cattle cars. Railroad cars full of people, bedraggled, hungry, frightened. They have arrived at a camp where they’re treated like cattle, separated like cattle, and soon, they will be executed like cattle.

Their captors wear gray uniforms and speak brutally. They separate families, mothers and sons. But one son will not go quietly. And when he resists—resists with all his might—he is dealt with violently.

These scenes are achingly familiar, but they are not drawn from Schindler’s List or any of the other Holocaust films and documentaries you have seen. It is the beginning of the first X-Men film (1999), and the graphic comparison between these haunted outcasts and others to come is made particularly real because the little boy we see here will grow up to become the archvillain Magneto. And then, after he has become an adult, he will see his people hunted, not because of anything they have done, but simply because of the blood that runs in their veins.

Not all stories of the end of things are fiction. In the twentieth century, the human race did manage to dodge total oblivion from many of the big world-enders: atomic weapons, poison gas, biological agents, natural disasters, famine. But there was one twentieth-century disaster that hit full on, one world that was almost completely ended, one set of villains whose evil plans weren’t thwarted by the forces of justice and democracy.

Between 1933, when Adolf Hitler came to power, and 1945, when Nazi Germany was defeated, the Holocaust destroyed almost all the Jews of Eastern Europe, many from Western Europe, as well as Gypsies, homosexuals, intellectuals, and political dissidents—well over six million people dead. It’s one of the greatest human tragedies of history, made all the more disturbing because it was a systematic attempt at genocide carried out by a civilized Christian nation, and we are still trying to deal with the implications of the Holocaust today in such widely scattered venues as politics, theology, and popular culture.

For the Jews, the question of how God could let such a thing happen has shaped their contemporary theology, while the fear of such a thing happening again has shaped the politics of the nation of Israel toward the Palestinians whom they share the land, and toward their Arab neighbors. For Christians, their complicity in the anti-Semitism that undergirded the Holocaust has led to hard questions about responsibility, religious intolerance, and interfaith relations. For people of all persuasions, the question has only been complicated by other attempts at genocide in this century, in places as far-flung as Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur.

Is it part of our nature to try and destroy people who are different from us? How can we be aware of these feelings—and stop genocide from happening again on such a grand scale? As with other momentous questions, comics have turned the problem over and come up with some answers, if we’re only willing to look.

Perhaps the most obvious example of comics responding to the Holocaust comes with a two-volume work by Art Spiegelman, Maus and Maus II. No other comic or graphic novel has ever received such mainstream critical acclaim: Maus is the only comic ever to win the coveted Pulitzer Prize, and both volumes were also nominated for the National Book Critics Circle...
Award—for biography. Because, you see, *Maus* is based on a series of interviews that Spiegelman did with his father Vladek, a Holocaust survivor, and the story he tells is our entry into a world so horrific that a story is really the only way to begin to comprehend it.

Spiegelman also made a controversial artistic choice: rather than draw the comic in a realistic way, he decided to make the different groups different funny animals. So the Jews are mice, the Nazis cats, and the Poles are pigs. Some people thought this underground comic convention trivialized the story, but most critics disagreed. As Don Markstein puts it, “Maybe the subject needs trivialization, just so the reader can wrap his mind around it. Nothing in the average person’s experience can prepare him for images of human beings behaving that way.” In practice, the “funny animal” trope just gives us a bit of distance; it doesn’t dehumanize Vladek or make his story less interesting or important. In fact, in some ways, the image of the Jews as mice at the mercy of the cats enhances our emotional response. We get a heightened sense of their danger, at all times, even when the cats seem to be playing nice.

What pulls us into the history of the Holocaust is the same thing that draws us in the example from X-Men at the beginning of the chapter; history becomes more accessible when we get to know the people involved in it. Otherwise, it’s just bleak statistics. In *Maus*, Spiegelman tells us of the brutality, the narrow escapes, but he also tells us the human stories of his parents’ courtship, and when his father protests that “This has nothing to do with Hitler, with the Holocaust!” Art tells his father, “Pop—It’s great material. It makes everything more real—more human.”

It’s the human story that *Maus* is most concerned with; the philosophical and spiritual questions are left to other comics to deal with. It’s enough—sometimes too much—just to walk in the shoes of this Holocaust survivor, to see the German death squads bashing the heads of Jewish children against the stone, to come to the gates of Auschwitz concentration camp and its famous gate with the slogan “Arbeit Macht Frei” (‘Work Will Make You Free) and hear Vladek say, “And we knew that from here we will not come out anymore. We knew the stories—that they will gas us and throw us in the ovens. This was 1944 . . . we knew everything. And here we were.”

Other comics have dealt with the larger implications of the Holocaust, using it as the basis for stories or story elements. Concentration camps and death camps have often been depicted in comic books—including the internment camp for “bad” metahumans in *Kingdom Come* and a camp established by aliens for all superheroes in the relaunch of *Justice League of America*. But as I suggested in the beginning of this chapter, one comic title has consistently wrestled with the human and spiritual issues of the Holocaust in story after story: the X-Men.

In the 1960s, when the original series debuted, it may have been that the mutant identity of the X-Men was more closely attuned to race than anything else. The X-Men were “feared by a world they were sworn to save,” which sounds pretty similar to the ongoing fear and contempt some Gentiles have had for the Jews, who believe they have a special covenant with God passed down through his agreement with Abraham that through him and his descendants “all the families of the Earth will be blessed.”

As time has passed, though, in the decades since the first issue of *The Uncanny X-Men*, the themes of prejudice and oppression dealt with in the X-Men stories have expanded to include all people who are treated differently because of who they are. (Witness the film *X-2*, in which, after Bobby Drake “comes out” to his parents about being a mutant, his mother asks, “Have you tried not being a mutant?”) As Chris Claremont wrote in his afterword to “God Loves, Man Kills,” “Mutants in the Marvel Universe have always stood as a metaphor for the underclass, the outsiders; they represent the ultimate minority.” Being hated and persecuted simply because of who or what you are has become the grounding tension in the X-Men stories, and over and over again, the story lines draw the link between the prejudice the X-Men face and Hitler’s Final Solution.
The X-Men spin-off *Weapon X* makes the comparison obvious: one storyline centers on young mutant Billy Taylor, who is taken with his family to the mutant detention center called Neverland. The imagery is drawn directly from Holocaust films and photos: brutal guards, guard towers, lines of people standing in the snow waiting to be processed, tattoos. Billy overhears one of the characters in the camp making the comparison explicit: “This was modern day America, she shouted, not Nazi Germany!”

But the camp is what it seems, and in a one-page spread of panels done almost without words, the point of view alternates between Billy looking through a window where the guards have taken a group of mutants who’ve been separated and led away—and his reaction: shock, horror, tears. Billy sees what is going to happen to every mutant in Neverland who gets taken away from the others, and we can imagine that this is what a young Jewish boy would have seen—and felt—in Auschwitz. As with *Maus*, the story takes us into the horror of a single involved person—but it also grapples with the idea that genocide isn’t just a German idea; it can happen anywhere that people are so frightened by other people that they don’t recognize their common humanity. In the biting summary of this way of thinking by priest and activist Thomas Merton: “It is enough to affirm one basic principle: ANYONE BELONGING TO CLASS X OR NATION Y OR RACE Z IS TO BE REGARDED AS SUBHUMAN AND WORTHLESS, AND CONSEQUENTLY HAS NO RIGHT TO EXIST. All the rest will follow without difficulty.”

The persecution and hunting down of mutants has been a long-time motif in the X-Men stories, with an entire line of superrobots, the Sentinels, created solely for that purpose. The Sentinels have cropped up now and again over the years as tools employed by mutant-hating human beings, but never more powerfully than in “Days of Future Past,” originally published in *Uncanny X-Men* 141–42 in 1980. In these two issues, a guest visits the X-Men from an apocalyptic future where almost all of the X-Men have been killed, and gives a view of the Holocaust that awaits all mutantkind if things go on unchanged. (And that view is shown again in the days following the “House of M” story line, as Sentinels ring Professor Xavier’s school, making it a virtual concentration camp.)

That visitor is the only Jewish X-Man (-Woman), Kitty Pryde, and she comes from a future of genocide where classes of people are defined by the letter they wear on their clothes (like Jews in the streets of Germany emblazoned with the yellow Star of David to set them apart), and mutants survive only inside internment camps. As she walks back into the camp where she lives, she passes the gravestones of most of the X-Men—and many of the other, nonmutant heroes of the Marvel Universe, whom the Sentinels have killed for good measure.

It is a haunting scene.

Equally haunting is the public hearing Senator Robert Kelly has convened at the Capitol to discuss “the mutant question.”

He is, we’re told, a decent man, but he fears that mutants are so different from *Homo sapiens* that their coexistence is impossible. During his opening speech, Dr. Moira MacTaggart leans over to tell Charles Xavier (Professor X), “If you ask me, Charles, that sod’s already made up his mind. Registration of mutants today, gas chambers tomorrow.” As we’ve seen, it’s too short a step from fear to persecution to attempted extermination.

The graphic novel *Man Loves, God Kills*, a major source for X-2, also spotlights mutants persecuted for no other reason than the blood that flows in their veins. In the first pages of the book, a boy and girl flee their armed pursuers—the Purifiers, they call themselves—and when they’re trapped in a school playground and the boy is shot, the little girl can only look up wide-eyed and ask, “Why?”

“Because you have no right to live,” is the answer, and when both children are dead, the Purifiers hang them up, with a sign reading “Muties” like a Star of David to indicate their offense.

They are meant to be an example, but they are discovered and taken down by one who has seen this before—Magneto, the little boy who survived the death of his family in the Nazi
death camps, only to become part of a modern world pursuing a new persecution. He is heartbroken, tenderly touching their corpses, and saying, “So young...so innocent...to know such terror and pain. Their only crime—that they had been born.”

One of the reasons Magneto is such a driven character—and a villain in the eyes of most of the world—is that he has power, and he will not willingly see such a thing happen again. The admonition to Jews to remember—“Never again!”—is one which Magneto takes seriously. In the words of Sir Ian McKellen, who plays him in the films, “Even if he’s evil...you can see that he’s doing things for a reason. He’s trying to resolve his people.”

When the comic-book Magneto takes over the nation of Genosha and establishes it as a homeland for mutants, it seems a clear analogy for the Jewish experience after World War II, the establishment of Israel in Palestine in 1948. Here, at least, they might think, we can be safe from people who would kill us for no other reason than who we are.

Magneto’s solution has always been separation and open antagonism—and the use of force, if necessary. But although the X-Men have had to fight over and over again, they have never embraced Magneto’s solutions, and unlike many comics, “God Loves, Man Kills” ends not with force resolving the issue, but with words. Cyclops tells his fellow mutants that it isn’t the Purifiers who are dangerous, but the ideas they represent. “If we don’t stand up to those...then all we’ve done is delay an inevitable holocaust.”

So Cyclops and the Rev. Stryker, the force behind the Purifiers, face off in front of a crowd in Madison Square Garden, and Cyclops answers Stryker’s charges that “whatever a man’s color or beliefs, he is still human. Those children—and you X-Men—are not!” Labels, names, categories; they are things we use to try and understand where things fit. But they can be dangerous, especially when we assign them to people and then think less of them because of the labels we’ve given them.

Many of the Jews who suffered through the death camps—or have reflected on them since—have suffered a profound crisis of faith. After Auschwitz, the influential book by Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein, argues that if there was a covenant between Jews and God before the Holocaust, it clearly no longer exists. God, if God exists, didn’t lift a finger to stop things; henceforth, the only thing Jews can rely on is themselves, and so they had better pursue power at all costs. Charles Xavier suffers a similar crisis of faith because of the public persecution presented in “God Loves, Man Kills.” He almost steps away from his lifelong belief that humans and mutants can live together in peace and embraces Magneto’s solution, violence and terror. Again Cyclops has to intervene, this time to remind Xavier how they differ from that vision of imposing order through force. To use the methods of evil men is to become like them—and to treat people as different, as evil, because of what they believe instead of trying to engage them through their shared humanity is to fail every ideal he taught them.

Chris Claremont wrote that, for him, the “crux of the conflict” in the graphic novel came from these questions: “Are we all in some manner or shape or form children of God? Or are some of us perhaps more beloved than others?...We need to cherish that which binds us, and accept with a measure of tolerance some of the things that make us different,” but he concluded sadly, that although twenty years had passed since the comic first appeared, “people are still judged more by the color of their skin, and the nation of their origin, and the faith they espouse, than their character.”

It’s tragic. And true. Although Buddhists speak of cultivating compassion for all living things, although the book of Galatians in the New Testament reminds us that because of Jesus there are no distinctions between us, although Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks of “the Rainbow People of God,” the truth is that too many of us haven’t yet attained this understanding that we are all linked. The X-Men stories remind us of the ultimate horror of prejudice and intolerance: that over and over again, we persecute and kill people just because they differ from us. And those who survive such persecution? Well, the survivors of the Holocaust—and the leaders of Israel today—seem too often to wind up like Magneto: They refuse to weep over any more...
graves. Only power will suffice. So they kill those who would
kill them, and so on. And so forth.
It's an ever-spiraling cycle of hatred and violence, and some-
times it seems that there's no way out.
But, thank God, there is.