

**Jews and the Underground Comix:
The Reshaping of American Jewish Identity through
American Popular Culture**

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Digest

In the 20th century, American Jews played a disproportionate role in the creation of American popular culture outlets such as Hollywood, the Tin Pan Alley music scene, and television. The contribution of Jews in these medias not only significantly impacted the creation and dissemination of American culture, but also portrayed the on-going development of the American Jewish experience. The information in this thesis systematically continues the examination of Jews in popular culture medias and their impact on American culture and the American Jewish experience. By focusing on the distinctly American comic book industry, this study analyzes the seminally important role Jews played in its development, as well as the way in which Jewish comic book artists utilized the comic book to address identity issues facing American Jewry over the last two-thirds of the twentieth century. More specifically, this thesis critically examines how Jews influenced a new phase in the history of the American comic book, known as the “Underground Comix.” By tracing the roots of the Underground Comix movement and by identifying Jewish creative authors who contributed to this genre, this thesis will illustrate how the Jewish voices in Underground Comix contributed to American popular culture. It will further examine the historical factors that led Jewish creators of Underground Comix to no longer compartmentalize “Judaism” and “Americanism,” but rather project Jewish images into their art form. Finally, this work will discuss the role these comic books played in redefining the American Jewish experience.

Chapter One

Introduction

The study of popular culture provides insights into the changing cultural, political, and aesthetic tastes of the American experience. Unlike the analysis of strictly historical events, the study of popular culture offers historians a means to enter the 'mind-set' of a particular historical age. As scholar Jeffery Richards explains, "[Through the study of popular culture] the historian gets insight into the changing social and sexual roles of men and women, the concepts of work and leisure, class and race, peace and war, the determinants of change and continuity in the real world." One area of popular culture study that has shaped the American consciousness since the mid-1930s is the comic book.¹

The Rise and Growth of the American Comic Book

Begun in the mid-1930s, the comic book was a popular medium for kids, adolescents, and adults alike. Similar to other more modern entertainment business ventures, like Hollywood's film industry, the early comic book industry attracted a significant number of Jewish individuals. The work of Jewish comic artists reconciled their feelings about America and Judaism. This chapter contains an overview of the comic book industry's history. We then proceed to an analysis of why this industry has historically attracted so many Jews to its ranks.

¹ For more information refer to Briggs, Asa, Burke, Peter, Richards, Jeffery, Smith, Dai, & Yeo, Stephen. "What is the History of Popular Culture?" *History Today* 35, December 1985, 39-45. The quote occurs on page 42.

The American comic book was the brainchild of Max Gaines (1894-1947). He presumed that reprinting old Sunday comic strips into an “easy to carry size” would sell. He discussed his idea with his friend, Harry L. Wildenberg, who worked for Eastern Color Printing, and they decided to move forward with Gaines’ idea. The first edition of *Famous Funnies* was published in February 1934, and began the process that culminated in the establishment of the new comic book industry. The success for Gaines at Eastern Color Printing was short-lived because he was fired for unknown reasons in late 1934. Following Gaines’ success with *Famous Funnies*, he made a deal with the McClure Newspaper Syndicate to allow him to use their printers to produce a new comic book title. He would split the profits fifty-fifty, and as a result created *Popular Comics*.²

During this same period, newspapers produced various alternative comic strips to appeal to a larger audience. Two areas that proved successful were crime and adventure stories. The Sunday adventure and crime comics included *Dick Tracy* (1931), *The Phantom* (1936), and *Flash Gordon* (1934). Similar to *Famous Funnies*, the crime and adventure comics were soon reprinted into compilations including *Dick Tracy*’s appearance in Gaines’ *Popular Comics*. Although the comic anthologies were profitable, they were reprints and imitations of material that had already appeared in the newspapers. In order to gain a greater market share, publishers began to seek original material.³

² The information contained in this paragraph can be accessed in Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005 and Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 14-22, 97.

³ For more information refer to Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*. London and New York: Verso: 2004, 105.

Harry Donenfeld (1898-1962) and Jack Liebowitz (1900-2000)⁴ came together in 1929, Donenfeld needed an accountant and Liebowitz needed a job. Donenfeld distributed magazines, and his major monetary successes were in pornographic publications. Due to government pressures on pornographic distributors, Liebowitz convinced Donenfeld to redirect funds and business goals into the start-up comic book industry. Their entrance into the comic book industry began with the buyout of National Allied Publications from financially troubled Major Malcolm Wheeler Nicholson (1890-1968)⁵. Following the takeover, National Allied Publications released *Detective Comics*, which became the first comic book that housed a single genre of original material. Although the novel idea of *Detective Comics* was an important step for the comic book, it was not until 1938 when National Allied Publications released *Action Comics* that the industry was significantly transformed.⁶

Action Comics published the original *Superman* comic series. Created by Jerry Siegel (1914-1996) and Joe Schuster (1914-1992), two Jewish teenagers from Cleveland, Ohio, Superman had originally been rejected by a number of publishers. It was not until Sheldon Mayer (1917-1991) of McClure Newspaper Syndicate told Max Gaines about this muscleman action figure that *Superman* comics became a reality. Gaines took the idea to Donenfeld and Liebowitz. Although Donenfeld was reluctant at first, it was

⁴ In order to gain insight into the life of Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz refer to Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

⁵ Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson was a pioneer in the American comic book industry; however, financial problems caused his business ventures to fold. For further information on Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson and his influence on the American comic book industry see Goulart, Ron, *Ron Goulart's Great History of Comic Books*. Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1986, 60-61.

⁶ For more information refer to Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 98-125.

printed and *Superman* has subsequently become one of the most recognizable American symbols of American culture. In *Detective Comics* 1939, Bob Kane (1915-1998) and Bill Finger (1914-1974) followed the secret identity superhero storyline made famous by *Superman* with their creation of *Batman*. Both *Superman* and *Batman* became commercial successes, and were spun into their own comic book titles. While *Superman* and *Batman*'s stories and characters were innovative, the superhero sensation led to multiple imitations.⁷

In retrospect, most of these comic book superhero takeoffs lacked creativity. They appealed to American patriotism by focusing on real overseas' villains like the Nazis and the Japanese. However, historians tend to regard four superhero creations during this period as noteworthy. The first was *Captain Marvel* printed by Fawcett in 1941. National Periodicals (Donenfeld's company) sued Fawcett for copyright infringement; however, when Fawcett finally let go of *Captain Marvel* in the mid-1950s, it was outselling *Superman*. Second was *Captain America* by Marvel in 1941, which was written by Joe Simon (1913-) and Jack Kirby (1917-1994). *Captain America* was the epitome of an American compatriot complete with a red, white and blue costume; however, it became iconic with its initial cover, which portrayed Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face. *Wonder Woman* made her first appearance in 1942 by All-American Publishing, a subsidiary of National Periodicals. This character became the first and most successful woman superhero. Lastly, *Plastic Man* by Vital in 1943, which "tapped into the public's...fascination with plastic, then being hyped as 'the miracle material.'" Although superheroes dominated the comic industry throughout

⁷ Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism Online*, Fall 2003, 15.

World War II, there were other genres being produced including humor, western, romance, crime, science fiction and horror comics.⁸

After World War II, certain comic book genres began to expand; however, superhero comic books suffered in sales. By the end of 1948, a great number of superhero comic books had been cancelled. More importantly, the “big-name” heroes were geared to a more juvenile audience, which meant the publishers needed new material to regain the adolescent and adult market share.⁹ To appease the changing preferences, more sophisticated story lines appeared in the genres of humor, western, romance, crime, science fiction and horror. While humor, western and romance stories were well received, the crime, science fiction, and horror comics sold extremely well. The success of crime comic books like Lev Gleason’s *Crime Does Not Pay*, initially printed in 1942, and *True Crime Comics*, a comic produced by Magazine Village in 1947, proved that adults enjoyed comic crime and murder publications, when illustrated in mature ways. As we will see in the following paragraph, the growth of crime and horror comic books was due in some part to the untimely death of comic founder Max Gaines in 1947.

In 1938, Max Gaines, with funding from Harry Donenfeld, created All-American Publications, which, with National Allied Publications and Detective Comics, formed today’s DC Comics. Some of his major works included the *Green Lantern*, *Flash* and *Wonder Woman*. However, Gaines no longer wanted to produce superhero comic books,

⁸ For more information refer to Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. New York, NY. Phaidon Press Inc., 2002. For quote citation see pages 65-66.

⁹ For a more in-depth analysis refer to Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 234.

and he began to develop an interest in educational comic books. In 1944, he created Educational Comics, and produced volumes such as *Picture Stories from the Bible*, *Picture Stories from World History*, and *Picture Stories from Science*. In 1945, Gaines sold his share of All-American Publications to Donenfeld and Liebowitz, but retained the rights to his Educational Comics line. Max Gaines published Educational Comics without help; however, the titles sold horribly. In 1947, a boating accident took Max Gaines' life, and his failing comic line was left to his son, William "Bill" Gaines. (1922-1992). Following in his father's footsteps, Bill Gaines reshaped the industry.¹⁰

Bill Gaines, with the help of artist and editor Al Feldstein, reformatted his father's Educational Comics to include romance titles like *Modern Love*, horror titles like *Tales from the Crypt* and science fiction titles like *Weird Science*. He changed the name of his father's company to Entertaining Comics (EC), and the business began to prosper. EC also produced war comics. Unlike the nationalistic comics of World War II, the comic books created during the Korean War "could not always manage to portray a competent, loyal, and/or brave soldiery."¹¹ One of EC's newer artists, Harvey Kurtzman (1924-1993), who produced *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, concentrated on war's gruesome realities, while at the same time, examined war from the point of view of the enemy.¹² This trend irked the American military establishment, which considered these publications "un-American," and believed they were "subversive because they [tended]

¹⁰ For more information refer to Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 253-254.

¹¹ Savage, William W. Jr. *Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press/University Press of New England, 1990, 51.

¹² A further explanation can be seen in Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 21.

to discredit the army and undermine troop morale.”¹³ While Bill Gaines and EC did not conform to American government pressure at the time, the extreme amounts of violence and gore within the comic book led to increased government pressure on the comic book industry.¹⁴

The fear of communism intensified in America through the late-1940s, which led to government “witch-hunts” of suspected communists in America. The House Committee on Un-American Activities became a permanent investigative committee under the auspices of the United States House of Representatives in 1946. Its mission targeted suspected and actual communists in the United States. The comic book industry became a target of communist allegations in 1946. In response to these accusations, Lev Gleason of Lev Gleason Publications rebuffed the government’s subpoena, which led to his arrest. Even though the charges were dropped, this case marked the beginning of a more concerted effort to regulate the comic book industry. A few years later, in 1949, a noted psychologist by the name of Dr. Fredric Wertham (1895-1981)¹⁵ wrote a widely read book, *The Show of Violence*, which blamed romance, crime, horror and superhero comics for the troubling state of America’s youth. In the context of an American nation

¹³ The quote can be found within Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 257.

¹⁴ For more information regarding the history of government pressure on the comic book industry refer to Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

¹⁵ Dr. Fredric Wertham was a Jewish psychologist from Germany that immigrated to the United States in 1922. In 1932, he became the senior psychiatrist for New York City’s Department of Hospitals, which included obtaining psychiatric exams for all convicted felons. Wertham’s works and career centered on how the media, especially comic books, psychologically affected youth. For a more comprehensive discussion of Wertham’s life see Beaty, Bart. *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005. In order to better understand Wertham’s role in the comic book industry see Nyberg, Amy Kiste. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998.

preoccupied with communist infiltration and dismay over a perceived downturn in the morality of the younger generation, Dr. Wertham's book cast a grim shadow on the comic book genre. It became apparent that the comic book industry would need to regulate itself more assiduously.¹⁶

Wertham asserted that comic books promoted suicide, homosexuality and fascism. These criticisms played on American xenophobia and led to comic book protests by the media and the public. Indicative of the hatred that some of these comic books engendered, a *Hartford Courant* editorial described comic books as “‘the filthy stream that flows from the gold-plated sewers of New York’—a code phrase for ‘Jewish business’.”¹⁷ The most blatant of these attacks was in Binghamton, New York, where volunteers reminiscent of Nazi book burning went door-to-door to collect comic books then set them ablaze in the local schoolyard. Subsequently, the book burnings continued in other cities, including Chicago.¹⁸ Although Wertham's book, *The Show of Violence*, affected the comic book industry, it was his subsequent work, *The Seduction of Innocent*, which severely damaged the growth of the comic book industry.

The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency called Wertham to serve as a psychiatric advisor in 1953. Although the committee was concerned about a variety of juvenile delinquency matters, comic books became its primary focus for three days in May 1954. While most of the comic book industry decided not to testify, Bill Gaines, who was at that time the main producer of crime,

¹⁶ For more information refer to Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 239.

¹⁷ For a more analysis see Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 21.

¹⁸ For more information see Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 241.

horror, and science fiction comic books, was eager to testify. United States Senator Carey Estes Kefauver (1903-1963) of Tennessee interrogated Gaines about the extreme violence in his publications. Gaines was not up to the challenge, and his lackluster performance before that Judiciary Committee seemed to seal the comic book's fate. Following Bill Gaines' deposition, the comic book industry swiftly established a self-censure code.¹⁹

The Comics Magazine Association of America was formed to create the Comics Code Authority (CCA). The CCA prohibited the use of words such as "crime, horror, terror, and weird," and also "prohibited the depiction of vampires, zombies, werewolves, and ghouls." "Policemen, government employees, and other authority figures had to be portrayed in a respectful manner; evil characters could be depicted only for the purpose of illuminating a moral issue."²⁰ The CCA's guidelines made it difficult for horror, crime, and romance comic books to compete for an adult audience. Because of these restrictions and the decline in market share, the majority of titles and publishers folded during these years. As author Gerard Jones stated, "by 1956 the comics business had shrunk to half what it had been five years before." EC suffered from the CCA's new limitations, and was forced to do away with most of its titles. However, one of Gaines' comics would avert the CCA and, remarkably, revivify the industry.²¹

The comic book *Mad*, created and edited by Harvey Kurtzman, first appeared in 1952 in the anti-comic atmosphere that had been fostered by Wertham and Senator

¹⁹ For a more in-depth analysis see Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 274.

²⁰ The quote can be found in Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 22.

²¹ For a more information see Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005. The quote can be found on page 279.

Kefauver, but it was *Mad*'s rich satiric style that appealed to Americans during the Cold War era. One of *Mad*'s hallmarks was its deconstruction of the myth of conformity. *Mad* "contemporaneously and contemptuously began to unpick the very threads that upheld domestic US society during the Cold War years, while those very strands were being woven." As scholar Nathan Abrams pointed out, "Not only did *Mad* advise on how to be different, it even gave various categories for non-conformity—'ordinary' and 'mad'."²² This irreverence, anarchy, and anti-establishment viewpoints contributed to *Mad*'s success with adolescents and adults.²³

Initially, EC published *Mad* as a comic book; however, in order to avoid the restrictions of the CCA, *Mad* converted to a magazine in 1955. Harvey Kurtzman served as *Mad*'s editor until 1956, when he left for other ventures. Nevertheless, Kurtzman's earlier work with war comics and his work on *Mad* helped to shape the satirical style and anti-establishment viewpoints found within the next generation of comic artists. As comic book artist Art Spiegelman stated, "I don't think it's going too far to say that for my generation, the generation that protested the Vietnam War, growing up with Harvey's MAD and Harvey's war comics shaped the situation to allow our generation to protest that war. It was comics about media that made you question how you get your information, and that's a necessary component toward taking any kind of political action."²⁴ Scholars have taught us that the Atomic War, the Cold War, and McCarthyism

²² Abrams, Nathan. "From Madness to Dysentery: *Mad*'s Other New York Intellectuals." *Journal of American Studies* 37, 2003, 435-451. The quotes can be found on pages 445 and 448, respectively.

²³ The statement is influenced by the work of Skinn, Dez. *Comix: The Underground Revolution*. Avalon Publishing Group, 2004, 14.

²⁴ The quote can be found within Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 22.

of the 1950s led to an underlying sense of doubt and unease by the American public, while at the same time harnessed the revolutionary ideas of the following decade.²⁵ *Mad* provided Americans with a much-needed release for their uncertainty. It was a major influence in the creation of the Underground comic book movement, a radical comic book genre that would blossom in the 1960s. Prior to a discussion of the Underground comic book movement and Jewish involvement, we must first understand the reasons that the comic book industry from its inception was a predominately Jewish movement.

Jews and the Origins of the Comic Book Industry

Although non-Jews were involved in the start of the comic book industry, Jews have been disproportionately represented in the business as publishers and artists. There were three important reasons why Jews moved into the comic book industry. First, Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their children were equipped to venture into new fields of economic endeavor. Secondly, due to the effects of the Depression, many Jews were drawn to new career paths. Finally, the work provided Jewish immigrants and first-generation Jews a therapeutic outlet to express the identity issues they faced as Jews in America.

The large influx of immigration into the United States at the turn of the 20th century led to overcrowding and poverty in urban centers. While these obstacles were consistent between each ethnic community, in comparison to other immigrant groups, Jews climbed the American social and economic ladder much quicker. While social

²⁵ For more information regarding the topic, refer to Miller, Douglas T. & Nowak, Marion. *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977.

characteristics like sobriety, temperance, frugality, and commitment to education played a role in this upward mobility, Jews, more so than their non-Jewish counterparts, came to the United States with more marketable skills and more experience in business.²⁶

Statistics show that Jews “accounted for one-quarter of the skilled industrial workers entering the United States” between 1900-1925.²⁷ At the same time, Jews were familiar with the business of commerce, which resulted in a disproportionate number of Jews entering into business and commerce. As scholar Edward S. Shapiro explained,

The East European Jewish immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were overwhelmingly oriented toward business. In many areas of East Europe, Jews virtually monopolized commerce.

However, unlike Eastern Europe, which restricted Jews in various ways, American capitalism provided these Jewish immigrants with new opportunities for making a good living. American Jews took advantage of the economic opportunities America offered.²⁸ The attraction of immigrant Jews to the nascent Hollywood film industry is an example of this phenomenon. The minimal financial investment needed to enter the movie industry compounded with the Jews’ skills in enterprise, motivated Jews to try their

²⁶ For more information the upward economic mobility of Jews see Shapiro, Edward S. *We Are Many: Reflections on American Jewish History and Identity*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004, 106-114. Quote occurred on page 108.

²⁷ For more information on Jewish immigrant statistical information and the economic situation of New York’s Lower East Side see Dwork, Deborah. “The Immigrant Jews on the Lower East Side of New York: 1880-1914.” Sarna, Jonathan, ed. *The American Jewish Experience: A Reader*. New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1986, 102-117.

²⁸ For more information the upward economic mobility of Jews see Shapiro, Edward S. *We Are Many: Reflections on American Jewish History and Identity*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004, 106-114. Quote occurred on page 108.

hands in this new field.²⁹ Harry Donenfeld, the creator of Detective Comics, was an Eastern European Jewish immigrant as was his partner Jack Liebowitz.³⁰ While Jews found financial success in a variety of enterprises prior to 1929, business plans were forced to shift with the onset of the Depression.

The Depression destabilized the America economy. For Jews the Depression not only brought unemployment and economic instability, but also unleashed prejudice and bigotry. These conditions created an atmosphere that left many industries closed to the Jew. As scholar Lloyd P. Gartner noted,

All Jews knew of the large areas of the labor market that were practically shut to them. They had almost no chance in banks, insurance firms—except as brokers selling policies to other Jews—large corporations, department stores, as lawyers in large firms, as scholars in universities or as physicians in hospitals.³¹

Due to economic necessity, Jews sought opportunities in new and unproven fields. Jews like Max Gaines, Harry Donenfeld, and Jack Liebowitz's gambled on the comic industry. As Will Eisner (1917-2005), a comic artist and publisher noted, "[the comic book] business was brand new. It was at the bottom of the social ladder, and it was wide open

²⁹ For more information on immigrant Jews' attraction to the movie industry see Gabler, Neal. *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988.

³⁰ For more in-depth analysis of Harry Donenfeld and Jack Liebowitz's early life see Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

³¹ For further information on the effects of Depression on Jews see Gartner, Lloyd P. "The Midpaassage of American Jewry." Sarna, Jonathan, ed. *The American Jewish Experience: A Reader*. New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1986, 224-233.

to anybody. Consequently, the Jewish boys who were trying to get into the field of illustration found it very easy to come aboard.”³² As Jewish entrepreneurs paved the way for the comic book industry’s eventual success, young Jewish artists (often children of immigrants) were naturally drawn to careers and industries that were open and accepting. For example, Al Jaffee (1921-), an early comic artist, stated, “We couldn’t get into newspaper strips or advertising; ad agencies wouldn’t hire a Jew...one of the reasons we Jews drifted into the comic-book business is that most of the comic-book publishers were Jewish. So there was no discrimination.”³³ As for economic promise, Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, second-generation immigrant Jews, sold the rights to *Superman* for \$130 in 1937. Shortly afterwards, they were making \$300 per month to produce the comic book, which provided a nice quality of life for the both of them during the Depression.³⁴

Although economic factors played a major role in the dominance of the comic book industry, one cannot disregard the psychosocial dimension that spurred Jewish artists into this industry. The earliest Jewish comic book artists, who were second-generation immigrant Jews, lived through the Depression, witnessed an increase in the levels of prejudice at home, and saw the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe, sought to create characters that overcame their personal insecurities, their sense of powerlessness, and their feeling of marginalization as Jews in America. For these comic book artists, the superhero became the imaginary source of strength and security during the time of

³² The quote comes from Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 16.

³³ The quote comes from Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 16.

³⁴ For more in-depth analysis of Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster’s economic success during the Depression see Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 109-125.

uncertainty. For example, the original Superman and Batman did not work in cooperation with law enforcement, but rather worked outside the law to enact justice. As writer Arie Kaplan concluded, "A muscle-bound redeemer liberated [Jewish comic book artists] from the social and economic impoverishment of their lives."³⁵ At the same time, the dual identities of the superheroes provided the artists a literary mechanism for the Jewish desire to enter mainstream America. As one researcher observed:

"Superman was the ultimate assimilationist fantasy" for a Jewish boy of Russian stock experiencing the rise of native American fascism in the 1930s that was fed by the European variety in Germany...[Jules] Feiffer suggests that "Jerry Seigel's accomplishment was to chronicle the smart Jewish boy's American dream. It wasn't Krypton that Superman came from; it was the planet Minsk or Lodz or Vilna or Warsaw."³⁶

Not only did these artistic creations resonate with the Jewish immigrant's longing to fit in, but also the superheroes in these comics concomitantly served the immigrant as a vehicle for escaping emotional fears and social alienation.

Following World War II, comic books inherited a larger audience.³⁷ At the same time, communism and morals of the 1950s notwithstanding, Jews gained more social

³⁵ The quote comes from Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 15.

³⁶ This piece was a quote by Jules Feiffer in Schlam, Helena Frenkil. "Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 2001, 97.

³⁷ For more information see Abrams, Nathan. "From Madness to Dysentery: *Mad's* Other New York Intellectuals." *Journal of American Studies* 37, 2003, 436.

acceptance within American society.³⁸ President Eisenhower's famous quote, "our government makes no sense, unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is," suggested that religious belief could come in a multitude of forms, including Judaism. In the same context, Will Herberg's best-selling book, *Catholic, Protestant, Jew*, pronounced America as a "tri-faith" society, and showed that "religious differences were not only tolerated in America, but expected."³⁹ This new American openness led a few comic book artists to identify openly as Jews. For example, the predominately Jewish staff at *Mad* frequently sprinkled its issues with Yiddish words, which was unusual for that time. Its initial cover even depicted the expressive Yiddish title, 'Ganefs' meaning 'crooks.'⁴⁰ The Jewish component did not stop at "Yiddishisms," but it also touched on significant Jewish religious and moral issues. Writer Nathan Abrams quoting theologian Vernard Eller, observed that, "*Mad* is every bit as preachy as that old codifier Moses. Beneath the pile of garbage that is *Mad*, there beats, I suspect, the heart of a rabbi." At the same time, the Jews of *Mad* in contrast to the previous generation of Jewish comic book writers felt secure enough to spoof America's political leaders. One of *Mad*'s most famous parodies occurred in 1954 with an attack on the McCarthy hearings called, "What's My Shine!" The comic copies the format of the game show, "What's My Line," and combined the daily broadcasts of McCarthy's Senate Subcommittee Hearings. By focusing "upon McCarthy's sensationalism and use of

³⁸ For a more in-depth analysis refer to Diner, Hasia. *A History of the Jews of the United States*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2004, 261.

³⁹ The quote occurs in Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 310.

⁴⁰ The analysis can be found in Schlam, Helena Frenkil. "Contemporary Scribes: Jewish American Cartoonists" *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 2001, 102.

media, particularly television," *Mad* made its readers politically conscious of the disregard for civil liberties that these hearings promoted.⁴¹

Conclusion

The comic book industry was a product of the Depression. Jewish involvement was an outgrowth of the fact that the industry was open to all and, it offered the prospect of considerable financial reward. Although economics catapulted Jews into the industry, Jewish comic book artists created characters that expressed the identity issues, which they confronted in America. Once entrenched in the industry, Jews continued to play a significant role in the comic book. The surge in acceptance of Jews that occurred in post-World War II America emboldened some Jewish artists, like those at *Mad*, to include Jewish components and politically provocative themes in their work. The outward expression of Jewish elements and political satire led the next generation of comic innovators in the 1960s to make their Jewish identities explicit within their comic creations.

⁴¹ For more analysis refer to Abrams, Nathan. "From Madness to Dysentery: *Mad*'s Other New York Intellectuals." *Journal of American Studies* 37, 2003, 435-451. The quotes can be found on pages 439 and 446 respectively.

Chapter Two

Introduction

Jews played a prominent and influential role in radical movements in the 1960s and 1970s. The following study will demonstrate the way in which the comic book industry was not exempt from the influence of Jewish radicals during the countercultural comic book movement. This investigation begins by looking at the mainstream comic books of the 1960s, and their designation as the “establishment.” Subsequently, the examination will concentrate on the background of underground comic books and its roots in the 1960s counterculture movement. Finally, the analysis will explore the biographies of three Jewish underground comic book artists.⁴²

Mainstream Comic Book Industry of the 1960s

As the 1950s came to a close, the Cold War overwhelmed a majority of the American consciousness.⁴³ A good majority remained loyal to the American establishment. However, the civil rights movements⁴⁴ and the Vietnam War triggered American youth into a massive alienation from traditional American society, and a large

⁴² The predominance of Jews in the radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s can be further studied in the following: “The Jewish Role in Student Activism” circa 1968 in Glazer, Nathan. *Remembering The Answers: Essays on the American Student Revolt*. New York and London: Basic Books, Inc., 1970, 222-244 and Chertoff, Mordecai, S., ed. *The New Left and the Jews*. Lipset, Seymour Martin. “The Socialism of Fools’: The Left, the Jews, and Israel,” New York/Toronto/London/Tel Aviv: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1971, 103-131.

⁴³ For more information regarding the topic refer to Miller, Douglas T. & Nowak, Marion. *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977.

⁴⁴ Includes the civil rights movements for African-Americans, women, gays and lesbians.

number of Americans began to “question previously unquestioned loyalties.”⁴⁵ There were various ways in which the mainstream comic book industry dealt with these social and political realities.

One expression, championed by DC Comics⁴⁶, was to align with the American establishment. DC Comics promoted the validity of the American institution by using the superhero to create stories that advocated the importance of American values and the American institution. Scholar Bradford Wright explained:

DC aligned its superheroes squarely on the side of established authority, with which it naturally equated the best interests of American citizens. There was nothing unusual about that. In the pre-Vietnam era, the general public's confidence in the integrity of American values, leaders, and institutions remained high and—the challenge of rock-and-roll and the Beat notwithstanding—popular culture still tended to reinforce a blandly optimistic consensus of America premised on the virtues of anticommunism, corporatism, consumption, domesticity, and middle-class social aspirations.

⁴⁵ For more information regarding the shift of American attitudes from the 1950s to the 1960s towards the American establishment, as well as the importance of the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War in this shift see Rothman, Stanley and Lichter, S. Robert. *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians and the New Left*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. The quote can be found on page 9-10.

⁴⁶ DC Comics alongside Marvel Comics is one of the world's largest comics book publishers. Originated as National Allied Publication in 1934, it has created some of the most famous superheroes including Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. For a more detailed analysis of the origins of DC Comics see Fingerioth, Danny. *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Greatest Comic Book Heroes*. Boston/New York/Toronto/London: DC Comics/Bullfinch Press/Little, Brown and Company, 1995.

While DC Comics affirmed the traditional American value system and anti-communist sentiment, the other major comic book publisher, Marvel Comics⁴⁷, redesigned its superheroes to identify with an increasingly disenchanted youth culture.⁴⁸

As the sixties came, significant pockets of the American population began to question the establishment. In the early 1960s, Marvel Comics created new superhero comic books such as *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Spider-Man* to not only rival, but also defy the unquestioned loyalty of the establishment promoted by DC Comics. Known as a maverick by the comic book industry, Marvel Comics, as stated by Bradford Wright:

...[Introduced] ambiguity into the vocabulary of the comic book superhero fused the disorientation of adolescence and the anxieties of Cold War culture into a compelling narrative formula. The rejection of consensus and conformity found expression in superheroes who were misunderstood by the public and persecuted by authorities.

Not only did Marvel Comics offer superheroes with flaws, but also in the midst of the struggles for civil rights were the first publisher to introduce African-American

⁴⁷ Marvel Comics began as Timely Comics in 1939, and along with DC comics is one of the major comic book publishers. Major comic book characters that have been created under the Marvel name are Captain American, the Fantastic Four, X-Men, Spider-Man. For a more complete analysis of Marvel Comics see Lee, Stan. *Origins of Marvel Comics*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974 and Fingerioth, Danny. *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995.

⁴⁸ In order for a more detailed description of the American comic in the 1950s and 1960s see Wright, Bradford W. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore, MD, and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001, 180-225. Note that the quote comes from page 184.

characters into their comic books. However, the Comic Code Authority of 1954 limited the extent to which Marvel Comics could address the rapidly growing number of political and social concerns, which gained momentum as the 1960s progressed. Although they presented African-American characters and indirect references to persecution and bigotry, they never directly attacked the government concerning segregation. However, while Marvel was ahead of its time in its depiction of African-Americans, it did little for the advancement of Feminism. Even though Marvel superhero teams included a female member, the female was always inferior to the males. For example, both Invisible Girl in *Fantastic Four* and Marvel Girl in *X-Men* were vulnerable to fainting spells at inopportune times. At the same time, as the war in Vietnam began and advanced, Marvel created stories that stayed committed to Cold War consensus in that America was inherently good and communism was naturally bad. While Marvel Comics questioned the establishment, it by no means completely rejected the status quo. At the same time DC Comics and Marvel Comics dominated the mainstream comic book industry, a counterculture movement, predominated by Jews, started to surface that included the creation of a radical comic book movement, which rivaled the superhero genre.⁴⁹

Jews, Radicalism and the Underground

While mainstream society was only beginning to question the American establishment on behalf of political problems at home and abroad, a dissident voice began

⁴⁹ For further details regarding Marvel Comics new superheroes of the 1960s, its relationship to DC Comics, the analysis of its comics in its connection to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, and the inferiority of women in its works refer to the study by Bradford Wright in Wright, Bradford. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore, MD, and London: John Hopkins University Press, 2001, 204-225. The quote comes from page 217.

to arise from America's youth whose agenda was "fueled [by] a zeal for self-expression, a disdain for authority, and a mistrust of conventional wisdom."⁵⁰ Scholar Clinton

Sanders shows:

In the mid-1960s, aided by dope and political activity, a youth culture began to emerge out of the comfortable apathy of the 50's. A growing number of people found themselves increasingly alienated from the racist, cold war, property-over-people mentality of main-stream [sic] America.⁵¹

Up until the mid-1960s, American Jews, at most only three percent of the American population, represented a disproportionate number of radical movements' membership and leadership. As Lucy Davidowicz explained:

[American Jews] were the heart and sinews of the American Civil Liberties Union. They were more likely than others to be the liberals in the Republican Party, the reformers in the Democratic Party, the activists in the civil-rights movement, the absolutists in the civil-liberties movement, and the unflagging workers in radical groups.⁵²

⁵⁰ Streitmatter, Rodger. *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 220.

⁵¹ Sanders, Clinton. R. "Icons of the Alternative Culture: The Themes and Functions of Underground Comix." *Journal of Popular Culture* v. 8, no. 4, 1975, 839.

⁵² Davidowicz, Lucy. *On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982, 142.

Scholars Stanley Rothman and Robert S. Lichter analyze the dominance of American Jews in radical movements, including the New Left, and show that the radical outlook and behavior espoused by American Jews in the 1960s was a product of dormant radical views encouraged by family structure and a sense of marginality. According to Rothman and Lichter, radical Jews usually came from liberal or radical Jewish homes. They assert that while ideological differences might ensue between generations, Jewish radicalism, and especially American Jewish radicalism, is part of an on-going Jewish family structure. Secondly, radicalism espoused by Jews is “a mechanism for ending felt marginality by subverting the cultural categories that have defined Jews as subordinate and different.” In other words, Jews instinctively felt alienated from the greater Christian society to which they belonged. Rothman and Lichter explained, the social marginality that occurred for Jews also brought along psychological ramifications, which resulted in a strong identification with radicalism. Included in these psychological aftereffects were the matriarchal family structure complete with a controlling mother and ineffectual father, as well as personality features like “the desire to expose and shame authority.”⁵³

One area disproportionately represented by Jews’ liberal tendencies was in the media, and especially the underground newspapers⁵⁴. Scholars Stanley Rothman and Robert S. Lichter show:

⁵³ For further details concerning the analysis refer to pages 80-145 of Rothman, Stanley and Lichter, S. Robert. *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians and the New Left*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982. The study comes from Ladd, Everett C, and Lipset, S.M. *The Divided Academy: Professors and Politics*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1975, but is taken from page 103 of the above book. The first quote in quotations can be found on page 118 and the second quote comes from page 130.

⁵⁴ The underground presses were a revolt against the mainstream newspaper publishers and were circulated independently. They were connected to the counterculture movements of the 1960s. For more information regarding the underground presses see

Data from an earlier study by Johnstone et al. indicate that 40 percent of the Jews employed by the national media rated themselves as “left” or “far left,” more than four times the proportion among non-Jews. Johnstone found that 10 percent of the staffs of radical 1960s “underground” periodicals were Jewish. However, at leading exemplars of this genre, such as the *East Village Other*, the *Los Angeles Free Press*, the *Berkley Barb*, and Detroit’s the *Fifth Estate*, as well as “alternative” papers like the *Village Voice*, the key personnel were invariably of Jewish background.⁵⁵

The statistics illustrate not only the large number of Jews in the mainstream media that promoted liberal stances, but also that Jews were extremely influential in the most popular underground publications. The underground presses arose on college campuses in the early 1960s. These newspapers satirized campus life and concentrated on current political issues; however, their distribution was limited to the designated campus locale. Since the mainstream media ignored the momentum of student movements like the Students for a Democratic Society and the hippie culture, alternative presses like the *Berkley Barb*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, and *East Village Other* surfaced to offer larger distribution for activists to “[record] the activities of the movement and...[create] the

Peck, Abe. *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1985.

⁵⁵ Rothman, Stanley and Lichter, S. Robert. *Roots of Radicalism: Jews, Christians and the New Left*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, 107. The first sentence of the quote occurred in J.W. Johnstone et al., *The News People* (Bloomington: University of Illinois Press, 1976). The second sentence appeared in *Time*, July 29, 1966, p. 57 and David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America* (Los Angeles: J.P Tarcher, 1981).

vibrant new culture that was utterly at odds with many conventional American values.” These newspapers emphasized self-expression and personalization in journalism and layout. Included in this wave of personal expression a new style of comic strip appeared in which “some were juvenile, obsessive blurts, celebrations of the illegal...others were bright, satiric alternatives to mass culture.” The emergence of these off-color comic strips in the underground presses was the precursor to a more established underground comic book movement.⁵⁶

The halcyon days of the Underground Comix lasted from 1967-1975. These publications were characterized by a countercultural tone and expressed an anti-establishment attitude promoted predominately by Jewish radicals. These comix covered topics which included illicit material, religion, politics, and women and gay liberation. Underground artist Jack Jackson, who used the pseudonym Jaxon, noted that this genre deliberately sought to focus on topics that had heretofore been considerably off-color and even off-limits:

Comix—the ‘x’ suggesting x-rated or an adult readership—was our spelling for alternative books so readers would know at a glance that these were special

⁵⁶ For a more detail analysis of the beginnings of then 1960s underground presses in America refer to Streitmatter, Rodger. *Voices of Revolution: The Dissident Press in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 200-220, as well as, Peck, Abe. *Uncovering the Sixties: The Life and Times of the Underground Press*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1985. The first quote can be found in Streitmatter page 200, while the second quote comes from Peck page 154.

books, different than regular comic books. The subjects were dope, sex and altered consciousness of some sort as opposed to mainstream subjects.⁵⁷

Underground Comix historian Mark Estren similarly noticed that these publications dealt with “whatever subjects their artists wished, in uncompromising visual and verbal terms.”⁵⁸ The term “underground” came from the comix origins in the alternative newspapers, which typically had a limited availability. In contrast to mainstream comics, these publications were not readily available at newsstands or in bookstores, but rather they were sold either directly through the publisher or at “headshops.”⁵⁹ While radical Jewish ideas of the countercultural media led to the creation of the Underground Comix movement, it is generally agreed that Harvey Kurtzman’s *Mad* and his subsequent magazines, which were highly influenced by his Jewish upbringing, were the artistic spark.

As outlined in chapter one, *Yiddishkeit* played an extremely large role in the creation of *Mad*. At the same time, the early editions of *Mad* — and subsequent works created and edited by Harvey Kurtzman — were inspired by the liberalism created in his Jewish youth. Kurtzman grew up in a strongly communist household whose parents subscribed to *The Daily Worker*, a New York City communist publication and sent Harvey to Camp Kinderland, a camp with socialist inclinations. The left-wing influence

⁵⁷ Skinn, Dez. *Comix: The Underground Revolution*. Avalon Publishing Group, 2004, 12.

⁵⁸ Estren, Mark. *A History of Underground Comics*. Berkley, CA: Ronin Publishing, 1993, 20.

⁵⁹ A headshop was the term for alternative clothing and jewelry stores, which sold drug paraphernalia, and psychedelic posters. A fuller definition can be found in Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels – A History of Comic Art*. New York: Phaidon Press Inc., 2002, 94.

of Kurtzman's youth can be seen in *Mad* and his subsequent works through their unabashed attack on the establishment, which included political figures, celebrities, and the Comic Code Authority regulations. After leaving *Mad* in 1956, Harvey Kurtzman teamed up with Hugh Hefner of *Playboy* to create an adult humor magazine called *Trump*. Similar in style to *Mad*, in that it parodied celebrities and political figures, *Trump* collapsed after only two issues. Following *Trump*'s failure Kurtzman teamed up with Arnold Roth, who had contributed on *Trump*, to make the magazine *Humbug*. In Paul Buhle's words, "*Humbug* (1957-1959), an impossibly small and underfunded publication using the work of a cooperative...looked like an intense but squeezed down *Mad Comics*." However, like *Trump*, *Humbug* quickly failed. Following the collapse of *Humbug*, from 1960 to 1965 Kurtzman produced *HELP!* with Jim Warren, who published and contributed monetarily to the magazine. In contrast to *Mad*, *Trump*, *Humbug*, and other more traditional comic book layouts, *HELP!* used fumetti⁶⁰ to ridicule America's political and social establishment. At the back of each edition a more traditional comics section appeared, and here the work of underground artists Robert Crumb and Gilbert Shelton first appeared. One of the more famous comics to come out of *HELP!* was "Goodman Beaver." Kurtzman and fellow artist Will Elder made this strip, which featured "a naïve young cartoon character, a Candide-like figure—the innocent boob who can't deal with the problems of the world but nevertheless remains optimistic."⁶¹ The strip was taken to Hugh Hefner, who suggested the main character be reformulated as a woman. This suggestion gave rise to the long running *Playboy* comic

⁶⁰ Fumetti is a style of comic books popular in Spain and Latin America, which utilizes photographs instead of illustrations.

⁶¹ Kurtzman, Harvey. *Fram Aargh! To Zap!* New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991, 57.

“Little Annie Fanny,” which Kurtzman issued for over twenty-five years. The overt sexual themes and political spoofing found in Kurtzman’s work outwardly criticized the establishment, and acted as a model for underground artists of the 1960s to follow. At the same time, the instillation of a collaborative work environment at *Mad* and his other undertakings provided a model for underground artists to employ in the underground comic industry.⁶²

Typically in the mainstream comic book industry, owners and artists were two distinctly different groups. As writer Gerard Jones pointed out, “[the publishers] didn’t consider writers and artists their equals: They didn’t socialize with them or invite them to their birthday parties...to [them] the writers and artists were hired hands, what skilled cutters were to the rag trade.”⁶³ Comic book artists and writers, who were usually in their late teens or early twenties, were typically inexperienced in the realm of big business. With few exceptions, the writers and illustrators of the early comic book industry worked long hours and were underpaid for their services. They often forfeited the rights and royalties of their new creations to the publisher. Not only were the artists isolated economically and socially from the owners, but also they were forced to conform to artistic standards set by the publishers. The typical comic houses needed artists to illustrate pages, which severely limited the individual artist’s creativity. In contrast to the traditional comic book publishers, Kurtzman at *Mad* created a collaborative approach for the magazine’s development where the owner and artist intermingled freely and

⁶² For further information regarding Kurtzman’s Jewish upbringing and an analysis of his works see Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*. London and New York: Verso, 2004, 196-199.

⁶³ Jones, Gerard. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book*. New York: Basic Books, 2005, 228.

cohesively. As Harvey Kurtzman stated, “[*Mad*] opened [Underground artists’] eyes to the possibilities of a format they could work in creatively without having the artistic life squeezed out of them.” Imitating *Mad*’s successful and innovative approach to development, underground comic artists utilized this collaborative system. Instead of creating comic books in a production line atmosphere, comix artists controlled all aspects of their creations. They worked at their own pace and were not pressured by deadlines and economics. Unlike mainstream artists, comix artists owned the copyrights to their work, which enabled them to receive royalties. Since the comix artists exercised a great degree of artistic control over their work, they felt more confident in exploring controversial topics and challenging materials. While the first full-length Underground Comix was created in Texas, the social environment of San Francisco fostered the Underground Comix movement’s growth.⁶⁴

San Francisco was ripe for the Underground comix movement to flourish. The hippie movement centered there, which provided a large readership base. At the same time, San Francisco contained a prominent amount of alternative newspapers, as well as distribution outlets like headshops. More importantly, the move of comix artist Robert Crumb to the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco in January 1967 prompted the explosion of comix in the Bay area.

Robert Crumb is typically regarded as the father of the Underground Comix movement. He was influenced highly by Harvey Kurtzman both as a young reader of *Mad*, as well as at the beginning of his career as an illustrator with Kurtzman’s *HELP!* and “Goodman Beaver.” Although Robert Crumb was not Jewish, historian Paul Buhle

⁶⁴ For information regarding this topic see Kurtzman, Harvey. *Fram Aargh! To Zap!* New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991. The quote can be found on page 58.

shows that the influence of Kurtzman and his friend, Harvey Pekar, who was “a lifelong Clevelander with left-wing parents” and creator of *American Splendor*, led Crumb to take on a Jewish ethnic identity both in his personal life, with his fixation upon Jewish women, and his work. As Buhle states, “a look at any of the Crumb urban strips...are likely to capture ethnic (mostly Jewish ethnic) types.”⁶⁵ His attraction to the Jewish radical notions of Kurtzman and Pekar aided his entrance into the Underground Comix movement. In 1967 the publishers of *Yarrowstalks*, an alternative newspaper out of Philadelphia, sought Crumb to produce comix. The audience enjoyed Crumb’s work, and the publishers invited him to create an all comix issue, which was released as *Yarrowstalks* #3 in 1967. The publisher sent Crumb 500 copies of the paper to distribute and sell. He took the papers to head shops and sold them on street corners. Due to the personal distribution experience, Crumb realized he could create and distribute an Underground Comix magazine. In 1968, Apex Novelties released *Zap* #1, and Crumb personally distributed the comic book to headshops and sold them on street corners. *Zap* #1 contained graphic sexual content, explicit drug references, and anti-establishment politics in line with radical notions espoused by the American counterculture movement. The magazine became an instant success with the counterculture movement of San Francisco. Following *Zap*’s success, other Underground artists and publishers emerged

⁶⁵ For more information regarding Harvey Pekar and his relationship with Robert Crumb, as well as to gain a better understanding of Buhle’s analysis of Crumb’s assumption of a Jewish persona see Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*. London and New York: Verso, 2004, 199-202.

to capitalize on the alternative market and played a significant role in the growth of the comix movement.⁶⁶

As with other alternative mediums, Jews were at the heart of the Underground Comix movement. While there might have existed some common characteristics that led to the contribution of Jews to counterculture, the designated mold did not motivate everyone. By looking at the biographies of Trina Robbins (1938-), Art Spiegelman (1948-), and Aline Kominsky⁶⁷ (1948-), three Jews who made a career in the Underground Comix, the following investigation looks at how their Jewish background contributed to their radical viewpoints and subsequent involvement in the Underground Comix movement.

Analysis of Biographies of Jews in the Underground Comix

Trina Robbins' entrance into radicalism was a natural extension of her childhood upbringing. Her father, a communist sympathizer and writer for left-wing Yiddish papers, instilled in Robbins the link between Judaism and politics. In an interview dated April 5, 2007, she explicitly stated, "political radicalism is very much a part of Jewish culture." As she entered Queens College, Cooper Union, to pursue a degree in art, the radicalism of her youth quickly attracted her to the hippie movement of the 1960s. Although she was interested in comic books growing up, her decision to express her views in the Underground Comix occurred following her removal from college.

⁶⁶ For a more in-depth analysis of the Underground Comix movement's beginnings refer to Rosenkranz, Patrick. *Rebel Visions: The Underground Comix Revolution, 1963-1975*. Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2003, 9-122.

⁶⁷ Since her marriage to fellow Underground comix artist Robert Crumb in 1978, she now goes by Aline Kominsky-Crumb.

According to Robbins, she was bored in school because she felt the school taught “fashionable art” like abstract painting on canvas, rather than a variety of artistic styles. Her lack of interest in the curriculum resulted in minimal attendance and eventual expulsion. Although her college career ended, she continued to draw. Turned on by the new Marvel Comics superheroes Spider-Man and Thor, she tried to create a superhero comic book. However, she quickly realized superhero comics were not her strong suit and sought other avenues of artistic expression. She was shown a copy of the *East Village Other* and was fascinated by the comix “Gentle’s Trip Out” by Panzika a.k.a. Nancy Kalish. Upon seeing the comix, she realized not only that comics could be more than superheroes, but also that Underground Comix allowed her to convey artistically her life as a hippie and her political leanings.⁶⁸

Robbins first Underground Comix appeared in the alternative newspaper, *East Village Other* in 1966. At the time, she was one of a few female underground artists, yet she would shortly “become the foremost figure[s] among the circle of [female] artists.”⁶⁹ An analysis of Robbins’ work shows that she was concerned heavily with the feminist movement and the empowerment of women. In 1970, she edited *It Ain’t Me Babe*, a feminist underground comix anthology, which consisted of only women artists. Her reoccurring strip, “Rosie the Riveter,” found in *Trina’s Women #1* (1972) and *Wimmen’s Comix #3* (1973), used the World War II Rosie the Riveter⁷⁰ character as a symbol for the

⁶⁸ For more information regarding the biography of Trina Robbins see Robbins, Trina, interview conducted via telephone by Adam Grossman and a copy is housed at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5, 2007.

⁶⁹ Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*. London and New York: Verso, 2004, 243.

⁷⁰ Rosie the Riveter was a symbol used by the United States government to persuade women to work during World War II. Its meaning was reinterpreted and became an icon

current feminist movement. In her autobiographical strip entitled "A Visit with the Artist" in *Girl Fight Comicx* #2 (1974), she not only openly defines herself as a "Women's Libber," but also shares with her audience the difficulties of raising a daughter as a single parent. Even though the greater part of her work does not center on specifically Jewish content, it is clear from an April 5, 2007 interview that her feminist viewpoints stemmed from her Jewish upbringing. She stated, "Jewish Women are radicals, so naturally a lot of women would be involved in the feminist movement." While Robbins represented a number of Jews who were bred to contribute to radical movements, Art Spiegelman's entry into the underground scene was tied to his repressed youth.⁷¹

Art Spiegelman's upbringing as the son of two Holocaust survivors proved to be a difficult environment in which to grow up, and was a major factor in his decision to work in the radical comic book movement. Spiegelman's parents, Vladek and Anja, were married and started a family (they had a son, Richieu) prior to the outbreak of World War II and the mass transport of Jews to the concentration camps. Sadly, as the extermination of Jews by the Nazis became evident, Vladek, Anja, and Richieu suffered immensely. While Vladek and Anja would survive and reunite following the Holocaust, Richieu was killed. Even though Spiegelman's parents survived physically, unresolved emotional

for the feminist movement in the 1970s. For more information see Colman, Maureen Honey. *Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender, and Propaganda During World War II*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

⁷¹ The analysis of Robbins' work includes Robbins, Trina, interview conducted via telephone by Adam Grossman and a copy is housed at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5, 2007.

issues remained.⁷² As Spiegelman stated in an interview, “Suffering causes pain not ennobled figures.”⁷³

Born in Stockholm, Sweden in 1948, three years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Spiegelman and his family moved to Rego Park, a predominately Jewish neighborhood in New York City, when he was three. His youth was spent living in the shadow of his parents past, which led to a challenging relationship with his parents, especially his father. In his autobiographical graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*⁷⁴, which transposes Spiegelman's relationship with his father alongside his father's Holocaust experience, a scene depicts Spiegelman in a counseling session confessing, “Mainly I remember arguing with him...and being told that I couldn't do anything as well as he could.” The counselor responds, “And now that you're becoming successful, you feel bad about proving your father wrong,” to which Spiegelman states, “No matter what I accomplish, it doesn't see like much compared to surviving Auschwitz.”⁷⁵ Scholar Alan

⁷² As Jews were sent to the ghettos, Vladek and Anja escaped the ghetto. In order to try and save their son, they sent him to live with Anja's aunt in the Zawiercie ghetto. During a Gestapo raid, his aunt poisoned herself, her daughter, and Richieu. Vladek and Anja would be captured and sent to Auschwitz and Birkenau, respectfully. Both Vladek and Anja survived the camps, and would reunite in their hometown of Sosnowiec, Poland. Art Spiegelman describes these events fully in his two volume graphic novel *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1986 and *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*: New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.

⁷³ For more of the interview see Spiegelman, Art, interview conducted by Charlie Rose and a copy is housed at <http://www.charlierose.com/shows/1996/07/30/2/an-interview-with-art-spiegelman>, July 30, 1996.

⁷⁴ *Maus: A Survivors Tale* volumes I and II was a full-length graphic novel written by Art Spiegelman beginning in 1978 and culminating in 1992. Utilizing interviews with his father, the book chronicles his father's life focusing primarily on his survival during the Holocaust and his relationship with Art later in life. The book won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize Special Award.

⁷⁵ Spiegelman, Art. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*: New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, 44.

Berger shows this psychological dilemma is a typical relationship construct between survivors and their children born after the camps. In a NPR (National Public Radio) interview, Berger attests to the relationship complexities:

[Relationships between survivors and children are] very, very intense, what we know about children of survivors is that they are under enormous pressure...many are named after deceased relatives, many are expected to carry that burden of somehow making up for what was lost. The phenomenon of the impossible comparison for example, the idealization of the murdered child in the Holocaust and the expectation of the child in America...to be perfect, and in fact [while] children of survivors are quite high achievers...it is never enough."⁷⁶

While psychological counseling eventually helped Spiegelman to cope with the emotions brought about by his life as a survivor's child, in his youth, his times spent reading and drawing comics provided a needed outlet.

Spiegelman's artistic pursuits and interest in comics began at an early age, and would become the escape from his father. In a 1991 interview he states, "The reason I became a cartoonist was to side step where [my father's] authority would extend. He had no interest, no knowledge about it...being a cartoonist allowed me to find a bit of

⁷⁶ In order to listen to the interview see Berger, Alan, interview conducted via radio by NPR's Morning Edition and a copy is housed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4467947>, January 27, 2005. Professor Alan Berger is a Professor of Holocaust Studies at Florida Atlantic University and author of *Children of Job: American Second-Generation Witnesses to the Holocaust*, which analyzes the theological and psychological issues with children of survivors.

autonomy.”⁷⁷ As a child, he was so fascinated with comics that he used to look up the definition of comics in various dictionaries to see the variety of meanings each dictionary would give to the medium. At the same time, he realized the emotional power a comic book could provide. In one of his classes, a girl reading a romance comic book cried. Spiegelman remembered saying to himself, “Wow! Comics can make you cry?”⁷⁸ His interests led him to pursue art at the High School of Art and Design, centered in Manhattan, and from there went to SUNY-Harpur College (now known as Binghamton University) in Binghamton, New York. Although he never graduated college, it was at Harpur that he took classes with Ken Jacobs, a renowned underground filmmaker that advised Spiegelman and others, like network sitcom writer David Marc and media scholar Daniel Czitrom, in their popular media formats. While his life provided a springboard to challenge authority, the catalyst to pursue underground comix came at age twenty. Not only did he have an emotional breakdown, which included a stay in a state mental hospital, but also three months following his release, his mother committed suicide. Shortly following his mother’s death, he moved to San Francisco and became entrenched in the underground comix scene.⁷⁹ Similar to Spiegelman, Aline Kominsky’s attraction to underground comix concentrated on her revolt against her upbringing; however, unlike Spiegelman, she was not the child of Holocaust survivors, but rather a

⁷⁷ In order to listen to the interview see Speigelman, Art, interview conducted by Don Swaim and a copy can be found at <http://wiredforbooks.org/artspiegelman/>, 1991.

⁷⁸ In order to listen to the interview see Speigelman, Art, interview conducted via radio by NPR’s Morning Edition and a copy is housed at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=1611731>, January 26, 2004.

⁷⁹ For more information regarding Spiegelman’s background and relationships with Ken Jacobs and other underground artists see Buhle, Paul. *From the Lower East Side to Hollywood: Jews in American Popular Culture*. London and New York: Verso, 2004, 248.

middle class, Jewish girl from Long Island, whose parents' troubled relationship and value system greatly affected her decision to enter Underground Comix.

According to Kominsky, her parents' marriage was an unhealthy union. Her parents came from extremely different social backgrounds. Her mother, Annette, who was known in her comix as Blabette, was an affluent Jew, whose father was a car dealership owner, while her father, Arnie, grew up in a poor neighborhood. The attraction, as inferred by Kominsky, was her mother's desire to rebel as the middle child and her father's desire to gain an economic advantage. Her father's monetary aspirations led to career choices, which centered on unethical salesmanship and peripheral membership to organized crime. This lifestyle left Aline and her brother, Alex, with an absentee father and Annette with unresolved anger issues usually directed towards her children.⁸⁰ An example of this is portrayed in Kominsky's 1979 comic "Blabette N' Arnie: A Story about the Bunch's Parents" in which she chronicles her father and mother's relationship, as well as their relationship with Alex, known by the family as Akkie, and herself. Blabette asks Arnie to comfort his son because she feels Arnie's attention might help Akkie through his current emotional turmoil. Instead of acting on the situation, Arnie continues to lay in bed to which Blabette questions, "Arnie how c'm you lay there an' watch TV after I tell you that our son has serious problems!" Arnie responds, "Look Blabette, I've had a ruff day...an' I don't feel like screamin' at the kid awright?? Anyways, you scream enuff for the both of us." Blabette vehemently follows,

⁸⁰ The biographical information comes from the interview see Kominsky-Crumb, Aline, interview from Fresh Air from WHYY and can be heard at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7382111>, February 13, 2007. In the interview, Kominsky compares her youth to a *Goodfellas* lifestyle, which relates to the popular 1990 movie based on the true story of former gangster Henry Hill's life. She explains that a lot of the characters in the movie were acquaintances of her father.

“Is that so, Arnie?? Well if I had any help from you maybe I wouldn’t get so aggravated. I hafta do everything around here, I hafta be mother and father!” The scene ends with a violent confrontation between the two, and Aline hears the entire exchange.⁸¹ In order to compensate for the lack of nurturing in her youth, at the age of twenty Kominsky married Carl Kominsky, and moved to Arizona. In her work, “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman,” Kominsky explains the marriage led her to feel suffocated and desperate, so she quickly divorced. In order to compensate for her loneliness, she resorted to promiscuous sex and recreational drug use. At the age of twenty, she decided, “instead of hating myself, I was indignant at everyone else” and “finally after 22 years of trying to please other people...I set out to live my own style.”⁸²

In a 2007 interview, Aline Kominsky stated her entrance into the underground was a personal rebellion against her family structure in combination with the 1960s being a time of rebellion. Her degree in fine arts from the University of Arizona and her friendship with several comix artists led her to experiment with and build a career in the comix industry. However, unlike some women in comix, including Trina Robbins, Kominsky was not motivated by political rebellion such as feminism, but rather was focused on expressing her personal liberation. Like Spiegelman, Kominsky utilized comix to make sense of her troubled youth by writing autobiographical comix that

⁸¹ For a complete story of Kominsky’s parents and youth refer to her autobiographical work “Blabette N’ Arnie: A Story about the Bunch’s Parents” see *The Bunch’s Power Pak Comics*, 1979.

⁸² The comix “Goldie: A Neurotic Woman” can be found in *Wimmen’s Comix #1*, 1972. The story is a snippet of Kominsky’s psychological and historical background. Its use here signifies the reasons behind Kominsky’s decision to leave her husband and enter the Underground Comix movement. Kominsky confirms her autobiographical comix account in the interview Kominsky-Crumb, Aline, interview conducted by Sara Ivry and a copy can be found at http://audio.nextbook.org/podcast_feature536.mp3, February, 5, 2007.

focused on her life growing up. Because of this, according to Kominsky, the “Feminists did not think my Feminist consciousness was evolved enough.” Instead of trying to form-fit her style to the Feminist ideal, she alongside fellow female comix artist Diane Noomin⁸³ broke away from the feminists within the comix movement to create their own joint comic book called *Twisted Sister*. As Kominsky notes, “[The Feminists] saw themselves [Kominsky and Noomin] as bad girl feminists, we wanted to have sex with men and dress in sexy clothes...and still be in total control of ourselves.”⁸⁴

Conclusion

The 1960s in America was a time of political turmoil and cultural controversies. As with other mainstream media outlets, the growing anti-government sentiment affected the comic book industry. DC Comics remained committed to the American establishment, which included the commitment to the content of comic book story plots that promoted anti-communist stances and the cooperation with the American government’s authority. On the other hand, DC Comics’ main competitor, Marvel Comics, became an industry maverick by conceiving new comic book characters, which in line with the burgeoning youth movement, started to question the establishment. While Marvel Comics introduced a few radical innovations to the conventional comic book like the inclusion of African-Americans and an increase in the number of female

⁸³ Diane Noomin (1947-) was a Jewish Underground Comix artist, who along with Kominsky contributed as an artist to the *Wimmen’s Comix* anthology. She is the creator of *Didi Glitz*, which she continues to produce today. For more information on Diane Noomin refer to her personal website at www.dianenoomin.com.

⁸⁴ In order to listen to the interview see Kominsky-Crumb, Aline, interview conducted by Sara Ivry and a copy can be found at http://audio.nextbook.org/podcast_feature536.mp3, February, 5, 2007.

heroines, they were limited to far-reaching change by their commitment to the Comic Code Authority of 1954.

At the same time, galvanized American youth started to create more radical movements, which insisted on revolutionary social changes. In their infancy, Jews represented a disproportionate amount of the radical movements' leadership. Rothman and Litcher suggested the radical viewpoints espoused by Jews were inherent to their family structure and compounded over time by feelings of marginalization. One area where Jews dominated the growing counterculture was the media, which included the creation of the underground press. The underground press tested the standards of the conventional media, and produced work that politically and personally rebelled against mainstream society. Included within the underground papers were risqué comics, which circumvented the Comic Code Authority. Influenced by the work of Harvey Kurtzman and known as Underground Comix, these comix dealt with various topics including political activism and social taboos. As with other counterculture media, Jews made a significant impact; however, it seems that Jewish artists in the Underground Comix movement were drawn to this revolutionary medium through his/her distinct personal story. Trina Robbins was reared to be a political activist. Her work focused on feminist issues, and she believed that Judaism was the impetus to her connection to radicalism. On the other hand, Art Spiegelman and Aline Kominsky utilized the comix as a personal liberation from their intense family structure. While Spiegelman, the child of Holocaust survivors, used comix to connect to the difficulties of his parents' past, Kominsky utilized comix to express her emotional turmoil stemming from her youth.

Regardless of the source out of which these interests arose, Jewish comix artists drew upon their personal experiences to shape and influence their work. Combined with the times in which they lived, it was possible for these artists to use Jewish content in their work in ways their predecessors would not have dreamed about using. The motivating factor for Jewish comix artists to reveal Jewish characters in their comix work was not due to their connection to the Jewish religion per se, but rather to the existence of an innate Jewish ethos. In the following chapter, we will see how their upbringing, coupled with the era in which they lived, enabled them to make use of their Jewish background in ways the comic book industry was unable to do previously.

Chapter Three

Introduction

Even though the Underground Comix movement only lasted from 1967 to 1975, it brought minority and identity issues to the vanguard of the American consciousness. Its social critique of American political and social lives changed the way comic books portrayed religious and cultural heritage. In terms of Jewish content, subjects such as Jews relation to political activism, the Holocaust, and Israel became explicit topics in comic book literature. While early Jewish comic book artists redefined Jewish identity in relation to Americanism, the Jewish artists within underground comix were more prone to openly identify themselves as Jews and to interject Jewish issues into their work. By analyzing Jewish comix artists and their work, the next chapter will focus on the extent in which some Jewish comix portrayed their Jewish identity through their work.

Restructuring of American Jewish Identity

The acculturation that ensued between Jews and America produced new ways for Jews to express their Jewish identity. Jonathan D. Sarna described the process of cultural interchange that characterizes the American Jewish experience as “the cult of synthesis.” According to Sarna, the cult of synthesis is:

...the belief that Judaism and Americanism reinforce one another, the two traditions converging in a common path—encapsulates a central theme in American Jewish culture...Dating back well over a century, it reflects an ongoing effort on the part of American Jews to interweave their ‘Judaism’ with their

'Americanism' in an attempt to fashion for themselves some unified, 'synthetic' whole.⁸⁵

In her book "Jewish Life and American Culture," Sylvia Barack Fishman has similarly demonstrated that whereas Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries compartmentalized their "Jewishness," the last half of the twentieth century has witnessed a shift to a mode of cultural "coalescence." Fishman conceptualizes compartmentalization as, "a process whereby an individual employing two contradictory value systems either utilizes them in serial and separate fashion or becomes inattentive to their contradictions." In Fishman's view, the idea of compartmentalization allows American Jews to separate their Jewish and American identities, while at the same time feel comfortable in both spheres. Accordingly, the "psychology of compartmentalization is triggered by a desire to avoid discomfort or embarrassment."⁸⁶ On the other hand, coalescence, Fishman argues, "is a pervasive process through which American Jews merge American and Jewish ideas, incorporating American liberal values such as free choice, universalism, individualism, and pluralism into their understanding of Jewish identity." Therefore, while the Jew, who acclimates Judaism to American life, is conscious of the distinctive value of each structure, he or she determines which takes precedent over the other depending on the situation. Unlike synthesis, "which sought to deliberately bring together immersion in Judaic knowledge and law combined with familiarity with the best and finest of secular Western humanistic thinking and behavior,"

⁸⁵ Sarna, Jonathan D. "The Cult of Synthesis in American Jewish Culture" *Jewish Social Studies* 5, 1-2, 1998-1999, p 52.

⁸⁶ The above quote comes from Fishman, Sylvia Barack. *The Way Into the Varieties of Jewishness*. Woodstock, VT, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007, 214.

coalescence merges Judaism and Americanism, which results in their unification and an authoritative Judaism blurred by Jewish and American influences.⁸⁷

In relation to Fishman's theory, mainstream comic book authors were more likely to compartmentalize their Jewish identity prior to the emergence of underground comix. As we have seen, the early comic book authors were less likely to create identifiably Jewish characters.⁸⁸ The advent of *Mad* to the comic book scene marked a shift in the Jewish comic book author's representation of their Jewish identities; however, it was not until the late-1960s that Jewish artists started to discuss their Jewish identities openly. One reason for this shift was the greater pride attributed to identifying with ethnic roots brought about by the black pride movements in the mid-1960s. While the black pride movements influenced the creation of Jewish pride movements, Israel's victory in the Six Day War in 1967 and the more serious study of the Holocaust in the 1960s offered the vehicle for the greater outward expression of Judaism.⁸⁹

Secondly, the growing popular awareness of the Holocaust and the self-pride engendered among American Jews as a result of Israel's stunning victory in the Six Day War created an atmosphere in which an outward identification of Judaism by American

⁸⁷ In order to gain a better understanding of Fishman's theory see Fishman, Sylvia Barack. *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000, 7-13. The first quotation occurs on page seven, the second quote can be found on page one, and the third quote occurs on page 10.

⁸⁸ Jews in the infancy of American popular outlets did not seek distinguish themselves on screen or in print. Instead, they sought to assimilate to the ebb and flow of American culture. For more information regarding this see Whitfield, Stephen J. *American Space, Jewish Time: Essays in Modern Culture and Politics*. Hamden: Archon Book, 1988, 46.

⁸⁹ For more on the relationship to black pride movements and Jewish pride movements, as well as the importance of the Six Day War and the Holocaust to the Jewish ethnic pride movements, refer to Staub, Michael. *Torn at the Roots: The Crisis of Jewish Liberalism in Postwar America*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Jews became more broadly fashionable. As scholar Michael P. Rothberg quoted Jewish theologian Marc Ellis:

It is in light of the 1967 war that Jews articulated for the first time both the extent of Jewish suffering during the Holocaust and the significance of Jewish empowerment in Israel. Before 1967, neither was central to Jewish consciousness; the Jewish community carried on with a haunting memory of the European experience and a charitable attitude toward the fledgling state. After the war, both Holocaust and Israel are seen as central points around which the boundaries of Jewish commitment are defined.⁹⁰

Although it seems clear Jews spoke about the Holocaust immediately following the concentration camps' liberations through the 1950s, the topic was not broadly discussed until the 1960s. In fact, prior to the English release of *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), written by Anne Frank and compiled by her father Otto Frank, and *Night* (1960) by Elie Wiesel, the term "Holocaust" was used rarely. Following the 1960s, the Holocaust became such an important aspect of American Jewish identity that a 1989 survey of American Jews found that the Holocaust was the number one identifying marker of Jewish identity.⁹¹ At the same time, while studying the Holocaust was

⁹⁰ In order Rothberg, Michael P. "Art Spiegelman's *Maus* as Holocaust Production." in Geis, Deborah R. ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 151.

⁹¹ In his compilation of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Otto Frank was conscious of the American audience, and removed and/or altered material that victimized solely the Jew. Similarly, although *Night* was originally extremely particularistic in its portrayal of the

significant, Israel's victory reinvented the image of the Jew. For example as scholar Lucy Davidowicz pointed out:

American Jews felt that their own image was enhanced by that of the Israelis as self-reliant and tough Jews, the image of the Jews as pioneers and warriors replacing the image of Diaspora Jews, often seen only as the object of contempt and persecution.⁹²

Due to the shifting cultural backdrop, which embraced ethnic pride more generally, and the increased levels of Jewish interest in the Holocaust and Israel, "Jewishness" in America was no longer strictly linked to religious practice or theology. Now Jews could be an ethnic community like other American groups, and Holocaust awareness and pride in Israel would encourage American Jews to "define themselves by fighting their enemies and clinging to each other."⁹³ These socio-cultural developments combined to create an alternative view of Jewish identity based on ethnic distinctiveness, which the Underground artists utilized to openly represent Jews in their work.

Nazi victim as the Jew, it was changed to universalize the victim for the American audience. In order to see a more detailed portrait of this phenomenon, as well as to gain a greater understanding of American Jews relationship to the Holocaust post-World War II up through the 1970s see Whitfield, Stephen J. *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999, 168-199.

⁹² Davidowicz, Lucy. *On Equal Terms: Jews in America, 1881-1981*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1982, 146.

⁹³ For more information on the way in which certain American Jews transformed religious identity into an ethnic community see Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997, 370.

The definition of what constitutes American Jewish culture has been hotly debated. Historian Jonathan D. Sarna explains:

In defining American Jewish culture, minimalists look first to language. Anything not written in a Jewish language like Hebrew or Yiddish is... automatically excluded as not truly Jewish. Maximalists, by contrast, include under "American Jewish" anything created by an American of Jewish extraction, whether it has a Jewish theme or not. In between are those who search for certain defining commonalities in American Jewish culture...[which] involves Jewish ideals, the universal application of Jewish experiences, and the employment of what may be seen as a distinctive American Jewish style—shaped by immigration, urbanization, Yiddish culture, and rapid social mobility.⁹⁴

To be sure no Jewish Underground Comix artists strictly used a "Jewish language," and, at the same time, many Jewish comix artists created material that did not contain a snippet of Jewish content. However, in between these two extremes existed a number of Jewish comix artists, who outwardly confronted in their comix the contemporary issues facing American Jewry such as the explosion of Israel and ethnic pride, the greater awareness of the Holocaust, and the merge of radicalism and Judaism. The following analysis looks at the way in which three Jewish Underground Comix artists, Aline Kominsky, Art Spiegelman, and Trina Robbins, reflected upon these topics in their work.

⁹⁴ The quote occurs in his introduction to chapter 19 in Sarna, Jonathan, ed. *The American Jewish Experience: A Reader*. New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1986, 267.

Analysis of the work of Aline Kominsky, Art Spiegelman and Trina Robbins

*Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics #1*⁹⁵, a collaborative effort between Kominsky and her future husband Robert Crumb, came out in 1974, which was towards the end of the Underground movement. The premise of the comic book is an interpretive account of Kominsky and Crumb's relationship. Although sexually graphic and chauvinist in places, there are many components that attest to Kominsky's embodiment of the Jewish pride movement. The opening cover depicts Crumb naked, except for his hat and glasses to which he states, "here I stand, naked to the world..." Opposite of him, Kominsky stands naked except for a Star of David necklace and exclaims, "If you can do it buddy so can I!" While the symbolic stripping of their clothes represents their willingness to depict their "naked" lives for the audience, each of them have a marker that could be, but is not removed: Crumb's signature hat and glasses and Kominsky's Star of David. Kominsky's artistic choice to keep the Star of David suggests that her Jewish identity is embedded within her and should be proudly displayed. At the same time, Kominsky's reply to Crumb's implies that the identifiable Jew is not a passive bystander, but an active participant.⁹⁶

As one enters the story, a situation ensues where Crumb hoists Kominsky up a pulley. Crumb "accidentally" lets go of the rope, and Kominsky crashes through the floor. In retaliation, Kominsky chases Crumb with a pitchfork. As she gains momentum in the subsequent two frames, she transforms into a tank with a Star of David with an

⁹⁵ Aline Kominsky and her then boyfriend, Robert Crumb, produced this first of many joint collaborations. Some of the later works even include their daughter's Sophie's contributions. In order to see the entire amount works produced by the two together, see Crumb, Robert & Kominsky-Crumb, Aline. *The Complete Dirty Laundry*. San Francisco, CA: Last Gasp Publishing of San Francisco, 1993.

⁹⁶ *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics #1*, 1974, cover.

Aline's initial A in the middle marked on the side. The sequence insinuates that Kominsky is similar to the Israeli army: tough, quick, and ultimately shown in the next frame, victorious. Included also in the dialogue in which Kominsky catches Crumb is a square box in the middle of the frame that labels Crumb, the non-Jew "the victim." This points to a transformation of the Jewish image as submissive to assertive.⁹⁷

Moving forward, Kominsky and Crumb wrote a second edition to *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics* released in December 1977. The format is similar to the original, and continues to discuss the life together of Kominsky and Crumb in humorous and fictitious ways. Within the comix, a story develops where Crumb informs Kominsky that their financial situation is dire, and states that she would be best suited for the "real-world" job market because of her college education. Kominsky responds, "I'm a J.A.P."⁹⁸ I deserve only the best, why I should have a maid and a big new house an' a fancy car an' stuff, just like it sez in Cosmopolitan mag. (see Sept. 76 issue p. 212). And you want me to get up at 5 AM and work all day as a common laborer on the tomato machine with Mexicans?" Responding to her Crumb states, "Yeah, 'at's right 'princess!!" Crumb then exclaims in the subsequent frame, "An' if yah don't like it, yah can haul that big fat kosher keester o'yers right back ta Lawng Island an'stay ther with th'rest of th'yood'n!! Ha Ha!" After stating this degradation of Kominsky's Jewish heritage, Crumb comes out of character to the reader and notes, "tee hee! She gets so infuriated when I make derogatory remarks about "her people"—snicker!" While in other episodes Kominsky positively identifies with Jewish characteristics, in this case, she outwardly criticizes them. Alongside the meager living arrangements illustrated in the scene, her personal

⁹⁷ *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics* #1, 1974.

⁹⁸ Jewish American Princess

reference as a J.A.P, mocks the mercenary identity espoused by some Jewish women. Furthermore, the exchange challenges the idea that all Jewish women from Long Island engage in superficial desires. At the same time, within her criticism of Jewish characteristics, Crumb's narration to the reader stating Kominsky would not take the degradation of the Jewish people lightly demonstrates while Kominsky, as a Jew, may scorn the Jew, Crumb, the non-Jew, may not openly condemn the Jew.⁹⁹ While Kominsky produced work to personify Jewish ethnic pride in the wake of Israel's victory in the Six Day War, Spiegelman not only introduced the subject of the Holocaust to the comic book, but also made it a marker of his Jewish identity.

While fighting Nazis was a common comic book enemy during the 1940s, the direct discussion of the Nazis' crimes against Jews would not be discussed in the comic book until underground comix artist Art Spiegelman released a three-page comix entitled *Maus* in *Funny Aminals* [sic] 1972, and a one-page comix titled *Real Dream* in *Arcade* #2 1975. Art Spiegelman's three-page comix, *Maus*¹⁰⁰, is a symbolic reference of the Holocaust in which the victims are mice and the oppressors are cats. The opening frame of the story has a father putting his son to bed in which the heading states, "When I was a young mouse in Rego Park, New York, my poppa used to tell me bedtime stories about life in the old country during the war..."¹⁰¹ The reader is then transmitted to the "old country" and follows "poppa's" account of survival in situations of gloom and despair. While there is no explicit indication that the mice are Jews and the cats are German, Spiegelman's use of mice as the victim is quite suggestive. The characterization of Jews

⁹⁹ *Aline and Bob's Dirty Laundry Comics* #2, 1977.

¹⁰⁰ *Funny Aminals*, "Maus," 1972.

¹⁰¹ *Funny Aminals*, "Maus," 1972.

as mice evokes the Nazi propaganda film, *Der Ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew)¹⁰², which transposes images of Jews with rats scavenging for food. According to scholar Michael G. Levine's opinion, this allusion represents the transposition by Spiegelman of the German word for mouse, *maus*, "to mean not just 'mouse' but 'Jew,' and not just 'Jewish mouse' but 'plague infested vermin.'"¹⁰³ Whether or not Spiegelman was aware of this connection, his influence by Franz Kafka's (1883-1924) short story, "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk"¹⁰⁴ is apparent. Concerning the connection between Kafka and Spiegelman in the original *Maus*, Spiegelman stated:

The real origin of *Maus* was being invited, twenty years ago, to do a three-page comic strip for an underground comic book called *Funney Aminals* [sic], the only requirement being that I use anthropomorphic characters. Fishing around for something led me toward my center. A number of things helped. One of them was sitting in on Ken Jacob's film classes at SUNY-Binghamton where he was showing racist cartoons and at the same time cat-and-mouse chase cartoons. They conflated me and originally steered me toward possibly doing something about racism against blacks in America. Shortly thereafter, Josephine the Singer began

¹⁰² *Der Ewige Jude* was released by the Nazi Germany's Ministry of Propaganda in 1940. In order to find more information on the film and its use as Nazi propaganda refer to Etlin, Richard A. *Art, Culture, and Media Under the Third Reich*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

¹⁰³ In order to gain better understanding of his viewpoint, refer to Michael G. Levine's contribution "Necessary Stains: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History" in Geis, Deborah R. ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 68.

¹⁰⁴ According to Whitfield, Stephen J. *American Space, Jewish Time: Essays in Modern Culture and Politics*. Hamden: Archon Book, 1988, 58, published in 1924, Franz Kafka's short story, "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk," uses mice as a metaphor for Jews.

humming to me and told me that there was something closer to deal with and I began pursuing the logic and possibilities that the metaphoric device opened up.¹⁰⁵

Spiegelman's interview reference to "...there was something closer to deal with..." suggests his mission in *Maus* was to deal with his Jewish identity through his father's Holocaust experience. The use of the mouse to symbolize the Jew also makes a statement about Spiegelman's Jewish identity. By deciding to represent the Jew as mice, Spiegelman sees the definition of Judaism as racial. As scholar Andrea Most explains:

In substituting mice for humans, Spiegelman...in making all Jews look like one another and different from non-Jews, he deliberately engages in a type of racist representation...[Furthermore] there is something beyond religious identity at work in Spiegelman's schema, and, he implies, in contemporary Jewish communal rhetoric. What determines Jewish identity? Can a person decide to become a Jew, that is, a mouse? The ability to change one's "species" would seem to subvert the scientific language on which the idea of species is based.¹⁰⁶

This idea shows Judaism as an ethnic group not a religious group. Due to this, Spiegelman sees an individual's Jewish identity as something inherent, which one

¹⁰⁵ The response is taken from Michael G. Levine's contribution "Necessary Stains: Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and the Bleeding of History" in Geis, Deborah R. ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003, 70.

¹⁰⁶ For a more in-depth analysis refer to Andrea Most's "Re-imagining the Jew's Body: From *Self-Loathing* to 'Grepts'" in Brook, Vincent, ed. *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2006, 24-26.

belongs to by birth—not by conversion. While *Maus* refers abstractedly to the relationship between his Jewish identity and the Holocaust, so too does Spiegelman's 1975 comix *Real Dream*¹⁰⁷, which identifies his Jewish connection to the Holocaust.

Spiegelman's seven-frame strip, *Real Dream*, narrates and analyzes a dream he experienced. In the comix, Spiegelman attends a party where the hostess carries a large sausage, and every few minutes she would shake the sausage then vomit profusely. The display delights the party guests; however, Spiegelman was disgusted. In order to regroup, Spiegelman goes to the restroom to wash his face. After washing his face, he looks in the mirror and sees his mustache has disappeared. At the bottom of the strip an interpretation of the dream by "Doctor Spiegelman" ensues. In the analysis Spiegelman shows that the party is the Nazi party, the hostess represents Odilo Globocnik, the head of the Polish S.S., the sausage symbolizes a map of Poland, and the "revolting" display represents the uprising of the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto. Above this analysis, a close-up picture of the hostess' regurgitation appears, and within the vomit, a number of Stars of David come forth. Finally, his vanishing mustache signifies the attempt "to wipe away the horrors of World War Two;" however, "he is, nevertheless, left face-to-face with the naked truth of this own upper lip!" The concluding tag line reads, "We must never forget the 6 million!"

While Spiegelman does not specifically mention the word "Jew" in this Holocaust-motivated drama, he uses three important "Jewish" symbols to represent his ethnic relationship to Judaism. If one looks closely, one finds written on the sausage, which represents Poland, the Hebrew word "*kosher*." *Kosher* in this capacity does not

¹⁰⁷ *Arcade #2*, "Real Dream," 1975.

seem to have a literal meaning, but appears to represent the Jewish population of Poland. This reference continues to suggest Spiegelman's racial distinction of Judaism. In this depiction, Jews are the other, which can never be a part of the Polish population. The second straightforward Jewish symbol is the Star of David, which emerges in the close-up portrait of the hostess. In Spiegelman's description the star symbolizes the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, and the word "uprising" in this explanation is in bold typeface. This artistic choice to direct the reader to the word "uprising" devalues the notion of the passive Jewish victim, and instead, cherishes the fortitude of Jews to fight back against the Nazi oppressors. Finally, the concluding line, "We must never forget the 6 million," which is also in bold, alludes to the accepted number of Jews who perished during the Holocaust. The use of "we" in this context, on the surface, gives the impression it is for a universal audience; however, it appears to work on a more particularistic level. This strip, considered in its totality, conveys a notion of Spiegelman's Jewish point-of-view vis-à-vis Jewishness, the Holocaust, and the Jew's place in history. Even though the universal audience might agree with the statement and even work to carry it out, according to Spiegelman's Jewish notion, the non-Jew cannot be Jewish. Thus, "we" seems to act as Spiegelman's rallying cry for Jews, as opposed for everyone. Similar to Spiegelman's use of the Holocaust as a frame for his Jewish identity in the comix, Trina Robbins (1938-) develops a connection to Judaism via Jewish peoplehood. At the same time, she identifies a connection between Radicalism and Judaism.

In a recent interview with Robbins, she states, "[Judaism is] one of the few religions that has both a culture or a religion, and you can be one or the other or both. I will always be culturally Jewish, and I will always be Jewish as long as a son of a bitch

wants to stick me in the oven.”¹⁰⁸ By this definition, Robbins’ does not connect with Jewish religiosity, but rather equates Judaism to the solidarity of the Jewish people. In fact, even though her current religious affiliation is paganism, she strongly connects to the idea of a communal Jewish experience. In her 1978 comix strip, “The Triangle Fire,”¹⁰⁹ she honors the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company Fire of 1911.¹¹⁰ Though Robbins’ account captures the historiography of the factory fire, her narration of the story exposes her connection to Jewish peoplehood as her Jewish identity marker. The four-page strip begins with two young women strolling by the Washington Square Arch in New York City. The first frame has one woman sharing her grandmother’s opinion on dating to which the other responds, “my grandmother burned to death when mom was a baby.” The retort initiates the reaction “Oh...Hitler’s ovens?” This response demonstrates that Robbins’ initial interpretation of burning to death references the Holocaust. Robbins uses the Holocaust assumption as a literary device to illustrate the connection of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire as a Jewish cultural experience.

Robbins’ rendition of the factory fire not only discusses the historical events, but also highlights Jewish participation in the early twentieth century labor movements. Her father, a socialist sympathizer, instilled in Trina the connection of Judaism and

¹⁰⁸ Robbins, Trina, interview conducted via telephone by Adam Grossman and a copy is housed at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5, 2007.

¹⁰⁹ *Coperate Crime Comics No. 2*, “The Triangle Fire,” 1979, 4-6.

¹¹⁰ The factory was a garment maker that occupied the eighth, ninth, and tenth floor of a ten story building in New York City. On a typical workday, the owners locked the workers, who were mostly Jewish women, in the factory in order to prevent them from leaving early. When the workers finally realized a fire raged below the lack of access trapped the workers in the building. While some perished by fire inside the factory, others jumped out of the windows to their death below. In all, almost 150 factory workers died. For a fuller description of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire see Von Drehle, David. *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. New York: Grove Press, 2004.

Radicalism, which Robbins implicitly states, “Radicalism is very much a part of Jewish culture.”¹¹¹ Most of Robbins’ work¹¹² does not candidly deal with Jewish topics, but rather promotes the radical idea of feminism. However, the comix, “The Triangle Fire,” explicitly associates Judaism and Radicalism. On the first frame of page two, the heading states that the owners of the factory had a history of labor trouble, and in 1909, workers went on strike to object to the working conditions. Robbins’ illustrates this point by drawing men and women holding up picketing signs. While some of the signs are in English, three of the seven contain strictly Hebrew caricatures. Although the Hebrew letters do not form actual words, the Hebrew usage forms a connection between the radicalism of the labor movements and Judaism, which is symbolic of Robbins’ notion of Judaism. In the following frame, this association continues with the police’s brutal attack on the picketers. The two visible picket signs in this frame are in Hebrew, which alludes to the picketers as not only radicals, but also as Jews.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Robbins, Trina, interview conducted via telephone by Adam Grossman and a copy is housed at the American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5, 2007.

¹¹² An analysis of Trina Robbins’ work showed that she was concerned heavily with the feminist movement of the 1970s. Most of her comics center upon the empowerment of women. Her reoccurring strip, “Rosie the Riveter,” found in *Trina’s Women #1* (1972) and *Wimmen’s Comix #3* (1973), uses the World War II Rosie the Riveter character as a symbol for the current feminist movement. In her autobiographical strip entitled “A Visit with the Artist” in *Girl Fight Comix #2* (1974), she openly defines herself as a feminist. Even though her work does not center on specifically Jewish content, it is clear from her interview that her Jewish background played a role in her activism. In a personal interview, Robbins refers continually to a connection between Judaism and Radicalism, which might show that Robbins’ connected feminism to her Jewish identity.

¹¹³ *Coperate Crime Comics No. 2*, “The Triangle Fire,” 1979, 5.

Conclusion

Certain Jewish artists in the Underground Comix Movement captured the reshaping of American Jewish identity in their work during the 1960s and 1970s. The work of Aline Kominsky and Art Spiegelman demonstrate the significance of Jewish ethnic pride movements in the 1960s triggered by Israel's victory in 1967 and a more serious study of the Holocaust. Simultaneously, Trina Robbins' comix illustrated her lack of a religious connection to Judaism by expressing a political link typified by the idea that Judaism and Radicalism were synonymous. The explicit references to Jewish characters, as well as the outward identification of Jewishness in these works were radical at the time for the comic book industry. As the 1970s made way for the 1980s, the mainstream comic book industry began to create outwardly Jewish characters, whose connection to Judaism was embedded in the Jewish ethnic pride espoused by Kominsky, Spiegelman, and Robbins.

Chapter Four

The Influence of Underground Comix on the Comic Book Industry

By the mid-1970s, the Underground Comix movement was already on the decline. The comix artists succeeded in testing the boundaries of politics, sex, race and religion, and because of this, new comix no longer shocked mainstream audiences. Eventually, the medium's anti-establishment point of view became part of the establishment. Comic images and story lines that had once been thought to be anti-establishment or "underground" in content slowly began to penetrate the world of mainstream comic books.¹¹⁴ Similarly, the outwardly Jewish components and characters introduced by Jewish underground artists such as Aline Kominsky, Art Spiegelman, and Trina Robbins laid the groundwork for the mainstream comic book industry's portrayal of Jewish characters and themes in the 1980s and beyond.

A cursory glance at the post-1979 comic book world suggests that Jewish artistic talent, and American Jewish culture in general, have continued to influence the industry's evolution. For example, in 1981, Marvel Comics released *The Incredible Hulk, The Vol. II #256*,¹¹⁵ which introduced the first superhero of Israeli origin, "Sabra." Two of the frames in this strip depict how an ordinary Israeli policeman named Ruth Ben-Sira became the superhero known as Sabra. In the strip's first frame, Ben-Sira stated, "the military are [sic] in no shape to go after the Hulk! That leaves me to stop the monster before he menaces the rest of Tel Aviv! Not as policewoman Ruth Ben-Sira of course..."

¹¹⁴ For more information regarding the decline of the Underground Comix see Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels – A History of Comic Art*. New York, NY. Phaidon Press Inc., 2002, 128.

¹¹⁵ Since her introduction, Sabra has continued to appear in issues of *The Incredible Hulk*, as well as another Marvel comic, *X-Men*.

to which the completely transformed Ben-Sira into Sabra exclaims, “But as Sabra super heroine of the state of Israel.” The comic book’s author explained that the superhero’s Israeli name “Sabra” referred to “a native-born Israeli...derived from an indigenous form of fruit—a prickly pear possessed of a sweet interior, and a spiny outer surface to protect it from its enemies.” In the comic book, Sabra’s transformation, as well as the super-heroine uniform she wears is suggestive of the dual meaning of the word “sabra.” In fact, the heroine’s uniform has a white background with blue strips across her wrists, waist, and ankles and a blue Mogen David centered upon her chest—clearly symbolic of the Israeli flag and the Israeli. Her cape appears to be made of a heavy blue prickly material, which represents the heroine’s connection to the sabra fruit’s spiky exterior. At the same time, by using the name “Sabra,” the heroine becomes not only an individual representation for the Jewish people in Israel, but also a symbol representing the Jewish people as a whole. The strip’s second frame underscores this concept. While the unindoctrinated reader may conclude that “Sabra” was all on her own in the pursuit of the Hulk, in the background, a Hebrew sign is emblazoned with the Hebrew phrase *klal Yisrael*, meaning “the peoplehood of Israel.”¹¹⁶ This phrase signifies that while some may assume that “Sabra” was a lone heroic figure, she was actually the embodiment of the Jewish population as a whole.

The link between mainstream and underground comic books can also be seen through the mainstream’s treatment of the Holocaust. Art Spiegelman’s exploration of the Holocaust in the Underground Comix of the 1970s paved the way for the mainstream comics that would subsequently draw upon this most dastardly of human events as a

¹¹⁶ *The Incredible Hulk, The Vol. II #256*, “Power and Peril in the Promise Land,” February 1981, 16.

source for characters and thematic development. Following 1979, Holocaust survivors began to appear as characters in the mainstream comic book industry. For instance, in October of 1981, Marvel introduced a Holocaust survival story for the most prominent of the *X-Men*¹¹⁷ villains, Magneto. In this particular comic book adventure, the comic writers revealed that Magneto was actually a survivor of Auschwitz. Magneto realized that in spite of his earnest desire to create a better world, he has actually acted more like those he despised.¹¹⁸ In another *X-Men* comic released in 1985, Magneto and one of the *X-Men* members named Kitty Pryde, attend a special reception known in the comic book as the National Holocaust Memorial in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the reception, as Magneto told Kitty Pryde, was for “you rise to the podium, announce your name and that of who you seek—and await a response. Often there is silence. But sometimes, there is news—and very rarely, if you are lucky, even a reunion.” Kitty Pryde’s connection to the Holocaust becomes apparent when she does indeed ascend to the podium in honor of her recently deceased grandfather, who survived the concentration camps, to ask for information on her great-aunt. At the end of her conversation, she states, “he tried to find her, but there was no record anywhere. It was like she’d been...erased—as if she’d never been.”¹¹⁹ The prominent role given to the Holocaust in

¹¹⁷ Originally created in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the comic book *X-Men* is a narrative about a group of “mutant” superheroes. For more information about the comic book refer to Sabin, Roger. *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels – A History of Comic Art*. New York, NY. Phaidon Press Inc., 2002, 158.

¹¹⁸ *Uncanny X-Men* #150, “X-Men vs. Magneto,” October 1981.

¹¹⁹ *Uncanny X-Men* #199, “Born Again,” November 1985, 13.

X-Men is suggestive of the increased public awareness of Holocaust material post-1979.¹²⁰

Even more telling is the critical acclaim given to Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*, written and released in two parts, the first appearing in 1986 and the second in 1992. The story was in fact an expansion on his original comix written in 1972, where mice represented Jews, cats symbolized Germans, and pigs represented Poles. The story transposed Spiegelman's father's experiences as a Polish Jew in Nazi occupied Poland alongside his current relationship with his father. The popular success of the *Maus* series, which included Spiegelman's winning of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1992, was noteworthy. Spiegelman's *Maus* betokened not only the impact of the Holocaust on the American consciousness, but also *Maus* marked the culmination of underground artists' contribution to mainstream comic books. The mass appeal generated by *Maus* actually resulted in researchers to explore the various themes in *Maus* and consider the various factors that influenced Spiegelman, including his Jewish background.¹²¹

The foregoing brief overview of the direction that Jewish representations took in the comic book industry in the post-1979 era suggests that ethnic Jewish content propagated in Underground Comix ultimately became mainstream comic book topics. The development of plots in mainstream comic books that discuss Israel, the Holocaust,

¹²⁰ According to Sarna, Jonathan D. *America Judaism*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004, 334 the Holocaust became a central component to American life. In 1978, the miniseries *Holocaust* and the establishment of the President's Commission on the Holocaust, while in 1979, yearly Holocaust commemorations occurred in the Capitol Rotunda. At the same time, schools began to require the study of the Holocaust, as part of their curriculum.

¹²¹ For more information regarding the impact of *Maus* refer to the introduction of Geis, Deborah R. ed. *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003.

and other overtly Jewish topics illustrates the ever-growing acceptance of Jewish themes by the American populace. At the same time, the inclusion and acknowledgment of these same Jewish themes bespeaks the significant role that the notions of Israel and the Holocaust played in the context of American Jewish identity, as well as the impact these themes had on American culture as a whole.

Epilogue

Arie Kaplan, a writer for *Mad* magazine and a comic book historian, recently noted, “the comic-book industry was built from the ground up at the height of the Great Depression by enterprising American Jews who fashioned a pantheon of the world’s most famous superheroes.”¹²² Indeed, many of the renowned comic creations were the creative work of Jewish pioneers, who contributed their talents to this fledgling industry. This distinctive genre of pop-literature evoked a cultural phenomenon that has influenced nearly every phase of American life. The comic book industry, now nearly seventy-five years old, is unquestionably more than a passing fad. Characters like Superman, Batman, and Captain America have had an enduring influence on American pop culture. These comic book figures have become inextricably linked to the American experience. From the early drawings of Superman in the late 1930s until today, American Jews have played a pivotal role in every facet of the comic book.

By examining and analyzing the history of the comic book phenomenon, this thesis seeks to contextualize American Jewry in the last two-thirds of the twentieth century by looking at how ideals and values held by the Jewish comic book publishers

¹²² Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, p 14.

and artists played a role in the formation of American culture as a whole. At its inception, the comic book, similar to the formation of Hollywood and the Tin Pan Alley music scene, provided Jewish publishers and artists a place within American culture “to secure themselves as citizens and purge the evils they associated with Christian civilization.” However, in a period of America history, which witnessed a substantial amount of anti-Semitic sentiment and feelings of xenophobia, the pioneering Jewish comic book artists shied away from creating recognizably Jewish characters or content. Instead the Jewish comic book artists formed idealized archetypes, which would express their desire for acceptance in 1930s and 1940s America. As comic book artist Will Eisner stated, “When you’re sitting down to write about an American hero within an American culture, you begin to devise those characters or characteristics that you regard as gentile.” One area where this materialized was the comic book’s innovation of the superhero.¹²³

While the original comic book superhero might have been designed to create an imaginary “super” American, the artistic representation offered the Jewish artists who created these characters, an outlet to cope with the compartmentalized identity issues that faced them as Jews living in America during this tumultuous period. The comic book also became a venue for exposing social ills that affected American Jews qua Jews. One area where this occurred was the creation of the superhero’s alter ego. These two distinct identities symbolized the Jewish artists’ and American Jewry’s need to compartmentalize

¹²³ For a complete picture of the creation of American culture by American Jews refer to Gabler, Neal. *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1988. The first quote comes from Heinze, Andrew R. *Jews and the American Soul: Human Nature in the 20th Century*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, 3. The second quote comes from Kaplan, Arie. “Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry” *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 20.

their public persona as an American and private life as a Jew. At the same time, during the late 1930s and early 1940s when the superhero was experiencing unprecedented popularity, American domestic issues prevented large scale support for war against Germany.¹²⁴ Jewish artists not only used the comic book to advocate against Nazism, but also to generate support to fight the Nazis abroad. For example, the first cover of *Captain America* in March 1941 (over eight months before America's entrance into World War II) depicted Captain America punching Adolf Hitler across the face. Later reflecting on this imaginary encounter, Jack Kirby, one of *Captain America's* creators stated, "I found a way to help the war effort by portraying the times in the form of comic characters. I was saying what was on my mind, and I was extremely patriotic!"¹²⁵

Following World War II, the defeat of Nazism and the dawning recognition of the irreparable and barbaric damage that Hitler inflicted upon Europe Jewry contributed to a sharp decline in overt anti-Semitism in America. By the 1950s, American Judaism had emerged as one of the American nation's three mainstream religions.¹²⁶ Even though a more tolerant America presented its Jews with greater freedom to publicly express their Jewish affiliation, the mainstream comic book industry, dominated by Jews, was still cautious to create openly identifiable Jewish characters and themes. Nevertheless, a handful of Jewish comic book artists began to express overtly Jewish ideas and content in their comic book creations. Perhaps the most prominent example of this phenomenon

¹²⁴ For a more in-depth analysis see Sarna, Jonathan D. *American Judaism*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004, 258-271.

¹²⁵ For more information on the connection between the superhero and Nazism see Kaplan, Arie. "Kings of Comics: How Jews Created the Comic Book Industry" *Reform Judaism* Fall 2003, 19-20.

¹²⁶ For more details concerning this idea refer to the argument articulated in Herberg, Will. *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*. Rev. ed. New York: Anchor, 1960.

would be Harvey Kurtzman, whose renegade comic book *Mad*, regularly utilized a variety of “Yiddishisms.” However, it was not until the dawning of the 1960s and the burgeoning anti-establishment youth movement that took hold toward the end of that decade that Jewish comic book artists and producers began to incorporate overtly Jewish characters, plots, and thematic content into the comic book industry. American Jews and the American Jewish experience began to appear front and center.¹²⁷

In the early 1960s, while a growing anti-establishment attitude pervaded American society, the mainstream comic industry remained committed to the promotion of “traditional” American values espoused by the inception of the Comic Code Authority in 1954. While Marvel Comics slowly pioneered unorthodox concepts like the inclusion of African-American characters, mainstream Jewish artists continued to show caution in the creation of Jewish characters. Simultaneously, a new brand of comic book succeeded this first generation of American comics. Known as “Underground Comix,” its authors reflected the countercultural trends of America in the 1960s. Similar to other media industries and similar pop-culture enterprises (including the early comic book industry), American Jewish artists played a prominent role in the development of this new genre of “anti-establishment” comics known as Underground Comix. Whereas the creation of the original superhero comic books was a vehicle by the early Jewish comic artists to clandestinely work through their Jewish immigrant experience, this new generation of Jewish comic artists overtly brought political issues, such as the widespread public dissention over the Vietnam War, the ubiquitous civil rights movement, and Jewish issues

¹²⁷ For a more information on the condition of American Jews immediately following World War II and into the 1960s counterculture movement see Sarna, Jonathan D. *America Judaism*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2004, 272-355.

like ethnic pride and the Holocaust to the forefront of Underground Comix. Through the examination of the biographies of Trina Robbins, Art Spiegelman, and Aline Kominsky, three prominent Jewish Underground Comix artists, we began to understand the reasons behind their decision to enter the alternative comic book movement.¹²⁸ While Jewish religious experience may not have been at the heart of their decision to explore Jewish themes in their work, a connection to an ethnic Jewish ethos now developed. It is this strong attachment to the Jewish ethos that soon becomes apparent in their work.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Jews, like other ethnic groups at the time, began to put a greater emphasis on ethnic pride. A series of events occurred in the late 1960s and early 1970s that collaboratively encouraged many American Jews to identify more openly and publicly as Jews. These occurrences included the stunning military victory for Israel in June of 1967, the growing public awareness of the Holocaust and the unspeakable devastation it wreaked on millions of Jews, and the remarkable post-World War II achievements of so many American Jews in the fields of science, literature, education, politics, entertainment, and, of course, the comic book. Because of this, Jews increasingly eschewed compartmentalization in favor of a coalescence of their Jewish and American identities.¹²⁹ By examining the Jewish thematic work of Kominsky, Spiegelman, and Robbins, this research suggests that each one of them explicitly portrayed a spirit of Jewish ethnic pride through his or her creative work. While Kominsky's comic book writing was fueled by her emotional pride in the newly

¹²⁸ The information was drawn from oral histories obtained by the author, as well as received by other interviews the artists had given.

¹²⁹ For a more in-depth analysis on the compartmentalization and coalescence of American Jewish identity in the last fifty years refer to Fishman, Sylvia Barack. *Jewish Life and American Culture*. Albany: State University of New York Press, Albany, 2000, 1-7.

reconstituted state of Israel, she also vigorously critiqued the stereotypically shallow American materialism that many American Jews embraced. It was this materialism that gave rise to the negative stereotype of the Jewish American Princess. Art Spiegelman utilized the comix medium to express his feelings of ethnic pride through the discussion of the Holocaust. Finally, Trina Robbins used comix to discuss political radicalism, which in her view was a direct representation and expression of her Jewish ethical heritage. Although Kominsky, Spiegelman, and Robbins' commitment to Jewish ethnic pride is not religiously based, all three confirm that their respective Jewish associations and upbringing unquestionably influenced their creative work in the comic book industry.

As the 1970s came to a close, the countercultural movement in America began to wane. However, the political and social changes secured by the movement shaped America as it moved forward into the final decades of the twentieth century. As for American Jewish identity, it was greatly affected by the Jewish ethnic pride movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As various population surveys repeatedly emphasized, American Jews were much more likely to identify ethnically rather than religiously.¹³⁰ Accordingly, the depiction of Jewish content in the work of Jewish Underground Comix artists laid the foundation for the creation of ethnic Jewish themes and characters in the mainstream comic book industry. The successful introduction of an Israeli superhero or the effective use of the Holocaust as the thematic background for some of the comic stories suggests that the general American population was ready to accept this new Jewish content. At the same time, the critical acclaim generated by Spiegelman's comic Holocaust narrative *Maus*, suggests a noteworthy influence that American Jewry has had on American pop-

¹³⁰ The information about these surveys can be found in Whitfield, Stephen J. *In Search of American Jewish Culture*. Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999, 239.

culture — particularly through the venue of the comic book industry. The historical analyses and original research contained in this thesis will, hopefully, lay a helpful foundation for more in-depth research on the role of Jewish comic artists' in the post-1979 comic book industry.

The analysis contained in this work seeks to show the way in which American Jews involved in the American comic book industry impacted the definition of what constitutes American culture. At the same, we have seen how the comic book industry had become a conducive means of earning a livelihood for American Jews who were using this particular artistic medium to reconcile the tensions they perceived between their Jewish culture and the general American culture in which they lived.

This thesis also demonstrates the many ways in which Jews played a seminally important role in the development of the American comic book industry during its nascency. We have critically examined how Jews influenced this genre's evolution over the past seventy years. By tracing the roots of the comic book industry and by identifying the Jewish creative authors who contributed to this particular literary genre, this thesis has sought to illustrate how Jewish voices contributed to American popular culture during the last two-thirds of the twentieth century.

The central focus of this current research has been on the ways in which Jewish creative artists influenced the Underground Comix movement of the 1960s and 1970s. We have demonstrated that the Jewish Underground Comix artists of this period no longer compartmentalized "Judaism" and "Americanism" in their work, but rather their careers exemplify what Sylvia Barack Fishman has termed coalescence to reconcile Judaism and Americanism and never to leave them at odds with one another. As

American Jewish identity continued to evolve over the last twenty years of the twentieth century, future researchers will have the opportunity to consider whether different constructs of how Jewishness and Americanism coexist will have fostered new ways to express these conceptions in the comic book industry and, more generally, in the world of American popular culture.

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