**Coming of Age Through *Bande dessinée*: An Interview with Michel Kichka**

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**Abstract**

This interview with Belgian-Israeli graphic novelist and political cartoonist Michel Kichka covers his growing up in Belgium during the Golden Age of *bande dessinée*. The author discusses his early readings and influences, as well as the development of his own career in teaching and drawing. The discussion focuses in particular on the creation and the publication of his graphic novels *Deuxième Génération* [*Second Generation*] and *Falafel sauce piquante* [Falafel with Spicy Sauce], published in 2012 and 2018. These works foreground essential questions about Kichka’s experience as a second-generation Holocaust survivor and about his relationship with Israel. Taking an international perspective, the interview sheds further light on the emergence of the comics medium in Israel and the transnational reception of Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*. It also considers Kichka’s work and engagement as a political cartoonist. STATE INTERVIEW FORMAT (IN PERSON, PHONE, EMAIL, ETC)

**Keywords:** *Deuxième Génération*, *Falafel sauce piquante*, *Maus*, Golden Age, political cartoon, Cartooning for Peace.

Michel Kichka was born in 1954 in Belgium into a Jewish family with Polish roots, as the oldest son of Holocaust survivor Henri Kichka. He grew up in Liège but has lived in Jerusalem since 1974. He is Associate Professor in Illustration, Political Cartoon and Comics at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design. His two first graphic novels *Deuxième Génération* and *Falafel sauce piquante* have been published in French by Dargaud in 2012 and 2018.[[1]](#footnote-1) Autobiographical in nature, the first book offers a poignant family portrait considering the long-term impact of the Holocaust. Translated into multiple languages, the book is also in the process of being adapted into an animated movie. The second graphic novel considers Kichka’s Jewish identity through the lens of his experience in Israel. As a press cartoonist, Michel Kichka is affiliated with the international organisation Cartooning for Peace and blogs on <https://en.kichka.com/> and <https://fr.kichka.com> (both accessed 17 August 2021).

*FL and SL:* As you once stated, you do not feel that your Belgian family roots run particularly deep, at least historically speaking.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, growing up in post-war Belgium introduced you to the cultural universe of *bande dessinée* and comics from a young age. Before discussing these early influences, what are your general childhood memories of growing up as a Jewish child in an industrial town in Wallonia?

*MK:* Talking of my Belgian roots I meant that my generation—my two sisters, my brother and myself—was the first to be born Belgian. My father was born in Brussels in 1926, as the son of a Polish-Jewish refugee family. To me, as to my father, Belgium and Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium, Wallonia, were my natural ground, the cradle of my culture. I felt fully Belgian. I knew we were Jewish but had no idea what it meant. Our parents were not traditional Jews—my father was reticent about any sort of Jewish practice such as praying, going to the synagogue, eating kosher food, celebrating Shabbat. My mother’s parents, the only grandparents I have known, were traditionalist Jews and we did have celebration family meals at their home but nothing was explained to me. My being Jewish was a fact. An axiom. What I knew is that my father had been a prisoner in the Nazi concentration camps, where he lost all his family because we were Jews. I also knew I had a slightly different little penis compared to my friends in the showers after sport at boarding school. And my Congolese friends had the same! My pals were members of Catholic scouts and had their confirmation at the age of twelve. At the age of twelve I joined the Hashomer Hatzaïr, a Jewish socialist and Zionist youth movement, and that was the first time I met young Jews. The Jewish community of Liège was a small Ashkenazi society: all the parents and grandparents were Holocaust survivors and I was not aware of that as a kid and even as a teenager. My father was a silent survivor and only started speaking about his experience after he retired. So I can say I knew very little about my identity and my family story.

I was lucky enough to grow up in what is considered ‘the Golden Age’ of Belgian comics. The years when *Tintin* and *Spirou* weekly magazines were publishing comics that have become the ‘Classics’ of *la BD franco-belge*. Almost all young boys were readers of one of the two magazines, very rarely of the two. I was a *Spirou* fan. What attracted me to Spirou? I liked Tintin’s adventures but the magazine itself did not attract me so much. *Blake and Mortimer* was too verbal and too serious for me, *Michel Vaillant* was more for teenagers, *Chick Bill* was okay but so far behind *Lucky Luke*.[[3]](#footnote-3) *Dan Cooper* was not for me, *Alix* was great but boring, *Rick Hochet* was okay, but nothing more.[[4]](#footnote-4) Spirou offered me everything I loved: humour, action, imagination. First came the adventures of *Spirou et Fantasio* and *Gaston Lagaffe*, all created by Franquin, a genius.[[5]](#footnote-5) Then we had *Lucky Luke* by Morris and Goscinny, *Johan et Pirlouit* and *Les Schtroumpfs* by Peyo as well as his *Benoit Brisefer*, the great Tillieux with Gil Jourdan, *Boule et Bill* by Roba, *Jerry Spring* by Jijé and lots of others.[[6]](#footnote-6) *Spirou* was definitely my cup of tea! I was drawing all the time and found in *Spirou* my source of inspiration. At the age of eleven or twelve I discovered *Pilote*, in which *Astérix and Obélix* took me to new horizons, where I met Giraud’s *Blueberry* and Gotlib, my master.[[7]](#footnote-7) During my teenage period, around 1968-1969, *Pilote* renewed in the wake of May ’68, with Cabu, Reiser, Brétécher, Mandryka and their colleagues creating very critical and funny socio-political comics. These years with the transition from *Spirou* to *Pilote*, between 1960 and 1970, are the milestones of my own path, first as a reader and later as a creator.

*FL and SL:*What place did *bande dessinée* have in your home and school environment?

*MK:* During my younger years, comics were considered inferior culture by adults, lower-rated literature, literature for dummies. Comics were not admitted in schools, it was simply forbidden to bring comics into the classroom: they would be confiscated if you were caught reading. Paradoxically, comics were strictly controlled by the famous 1949 law regarding publications for youngsters. A law dictated by the Catholic Church in the very conservative Belgian society. At home my father knew I was reading *Spirou*, which I could afford to buy with my pocket money. He tolerated me reading that stuff, as he had himself been a *Spirou* reader until he was arrested by the Nazis in 1942, but he still wanted me to read books, not comics. He was afraid comics would be my only culture. He even forced me to subscribe to our municipal library and to borrow a book every week. Which I did. But I wasn’t really reading them all. I was cheating him. Every day before sleeping we had half an hour for reading in bed. I was reading my book when he was around and after he had turned the light off and given us a good night kiss, I would be reading comics with my little flashlight, hiding under my blanket.

When I was twelve I began to try to draw comics, just for myself, for the love of it and for the fun of it. I even published some of them in the local newspaper whose director was a friend of my father. Those first strips and the emotion of being published, were actually the beginning of what became my *raison d’être*.

I had a good friend at school, Sergio, who wrote a Western story for me, for which I drew one or two pages. Everywhere I belonged, at home, at school, at the youth movement, I was the ‘artist’, the one who draws funny drawings. Every day after school I did my homework to free up all the rest of the afternoon and evening to draw in my bedroom, a room I shared with Charly, my younger brother, who was talented too and drew as well. At the age of fifteen two important things happened. I participated in a comics competition organised by *Tintin* magazine and I discovered *Mad* magazine when visiting Israel in 1969 for the first time.   
 The *Tintin* competition consisted of writing a story and drawing the two first pages. I remember how exited I was when I drew my pages and when I received the answer from the magazine, a letter explaining I was not awarded a prize for my work that had been seen and noted by the jury members: Hergé, Morris, Franquin, Greg!

The discovery of *Mad* magazine opened up a new approach to comics, for a more adult audience, with a different humour and different drawing styles. I have adopted somehow a bit of their approach.   
 Later, in the early seventies, came *L’Écho des savanes* and then *Métal Hurlant* and then *(À suivre…).* I witnessed the beginning of these new directions in comics but I emigrated to Israel in 1973 and could no longer follow the evolution of Franco-Belgian comics because there was no internet, no TV cables, no French bookshops, no low cost flights. A disconnection of 15 years!

*FL and SL:* In *Deuxième Génération*, you identify Gaston Lagaffe as the (anti)hero of your childhood. Which other characters did you identify with, and why?

*MK:* As a teenager who destined himself to become a comics artist, I identified not only with the heroes but also with the creators. My choice went to a realist style with a twist of grotesque and caricature. Heroic comics were not part of my reading, nor were superheroes, who had not conquered Europe yet. Superheroes do not at all fit within the European mentality and culture. The only French superhero I knew was the *Superdupont* satirical comic by Gotlib, Lob and Alexis.[[8]](#footnote-8) To this day I have some difficulty connecting to the superhero genre. I probably miss out on some good things, I confess. The same goes for the Manga superhero style.

*FL and SL:*While Tintin was not a favourite of yours, he does feature as reference in *Deuxième Génération*, reflecting the difference in generation between your father and yourself (see Fig. 1). What role has Hergé played in your own *imaginaire* or toolkit?

*MK:* I liked *Tintin*, which was the best comic published in the weekly *Tintin* magazine. Hergé was definitely one of my influences in my early childhood. But my heart went to Franquin. Something in his style, the freedom of his drawing, this energy, his humour and the more grotesque approach to character design had much more influence on my taste and on my future development as an artist. As a teenager I wasn’t reading *Tintin* any more even though the series was still going on. I’m totally aware of Hergé’s influence on me. But I don’t consider myself a *ligne claire* follower. During the making of *Deuxième Génération* I suddenly realised Hergé was publishing *L’Étoile Mystérieuse* in *Le Soir* daily newspaper in 1942 during the Occupation.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Le Soir* had been ‘aryanised’, controlled by the Nazis and my father probably saw *Tintin* or even read it in daily strips. I also know Hergé was suspected of ‘collaboration’ with the Nazi Regime. This is why I decided to draw, on the back cover, my father dressed in plus fours (a ‘pantalon de golf’ à la Tintin, as he wears in the Kichka family photo that opens my book), holding *L’Étoile Mystérieuse* but having another mysterious star, the Yellow Jewish one, on his jacket (See Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE. Caption: Michel Kichka, *Deuxième Génération*, cover. © Dargaud, 2021

*FL and SL:*When or how did your readings and influences start to extend beyond Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* and *Mad* magazine?

*MK:* The evolution of comics to graphic novels with the publication of Eisner’s *A Contract with God* and then *Maus* by Spiegelman in the mid-eighties attracted me to this new way of creating and of reading comics.[[10]](#footnote-10) I was in my mid-thirties at that time and needed contents adapted to my age. This is exactly what graphic novels did, opening or re-opening the comics field to a more mature audience, telling personal stories, not necessarily based on heroes and a happy end.

*FL and SL:*How was your early comics work in Israel, written in Hebrew, related to the Franco-Belgian tradition?

*MK:* I graduated from the art academy Bezalel in Jerusalem in 1978 and began my professional trajectory as an illustrator because comics were almost non-existent in Israel. There were just a few black-and-white local comics series printed in very low quality in two or three children’s magazines, which proposed one comics page a week! The style was low quality realism or minimalistic graphic style. I illustrated children’s books and had commissions from the daily press. In the mid-eighties a new children magazine was created (*Kulanoo*) with some colour pages, a revolution! The designer knew my work and proposed that I create a two-page comics monthly. That was an opportunity I was waiting for. I invented a little boy who has some conflicts with his parents and who adopts a dog he finds abandoned in the streets. It did not last for a long time: there were some budget issues and the comics part was cancelled after half a year. But to me it was a first try. I drew in a style that was identified in Israel as Franco-Belgian, the style I grew up with. This was what I could do but it was also a decision I made: showing young Israeli readers how a comic should look. Another approach, richer in details, in colours, in layouts. A non-heroic comics. Some of the American classics were distributed in Israel: superheroes, *Tarzan*, some low-rated Westerns. One or two *Tintin* albums had been published in Hebrew but with very limited success. In 1986 another new magazine was created (*Mashehu*), this time a full colour magazine on glossy paper. I was again commissioned to create a comic. The hero had to be a tea drinker because the sponsor was Israel’s leading tea industry. The hero’s name had to be ‘Mister T’.[[11]](#footnote-11) I found the idea very limited and even ridiculous, as I thought Asterix’s magic potion or Popeye’s spinach belonged to the past. But I deeply felt I could not refuse this opportunity. A new magazine is not created very often. I was confident I would be able to develop stories and adventures even if they had to feature a little tea bottle. *Mashehu* lasted until 1992. The chief editor gave me carte blanche – I could tell and draw whatever I wanted and I was very keen to create: I used more documentation, I drew in a rich classic style, with details, references, colour atmospheres, more research, more historical references and even some local political statements. I had six great years until the magazine closed, due to problems between the tea company owners. My comics became famous, kids between 8 and 14-15, boys and girls, loved the magazine and *Mister T* was the most popular part of it. Unfortunately, no album was printed. Comics albums were not a part of the tea industry strategy.

I must add a very important event. In 1987 the Tel Aviv French Cultural Centre invited seven French comics artists to visit the country: Rossi, J.-C. Denis, Régis Franc, Loustal, Petit Roulet, Rivière and Cornillon. They visited Israel for one week and held an exhibition with their comics. During the trip they sketched, took notes and photos in order to prepare a collective book based on their first impressions, published in 1990 under the title *Voyage en Israël*.[[12]](#footnote-12) As the only Israeli artist educated in Franco-Belgian comics culture, I was invited to meet with them and to take part in the book. I felt honoured but also boosted. It was a rich experience that really motivated me to stay in the game to improve my own work, to bring it to a higher level. It deeply challenged me. Rossi and I became good friends and we keep in touch until today. I have also had lots of opportunities to meet Denis and Loustal in Paris and to follow their publications.

*FL and SL:* You developed a career as an arts teacher as well as press cartoonist and illustrator. How have these practices cross-influenced each other?

*MK:* Most of my colleagues in Israel are teaching and working in different fields including comics, illustration, cartoon and animation. The Israeli market is very small compared to France, the comics market is limited. You can’t make a living from comics only.

But for me the reasons I work in different fields are not only economic. I really love political cartoons, I want to express my opinions in a tormented time, I love illustrating books and I love teaching, educating, sharing my experience and guiding new young talents. I feel that over the years my graphic style as a cartoonist has improved my drawing style in comics. It has something to do with spontaneity, quickness, strong composition, selective colouring.

*FL and SL:*Your first graphic novel, *Deuxième Génération*, which was published to large critical acclaim in 2012, describes the decisive impact of the Holocaust on your family and childhood. You have indicated that your own reading of Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* has been a major catalyst for this project. In what sense has *Maus* been revealing of the second-generation experience, for yourself and others?

*MK:* Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1986) was a turning point in comics culture, a revolution. No comics looked like *Maus* before: a fully autobiographical story about his father’s experience and survival in the Nazi concentration camps during WWII, based on a complicated relationship between father and son, over a terrible family story, drawn in a post-underground style, in black and white only. A comic with no hero, no fiction, almost no humour. A comic that took Spiegelman more than ten years to complete. A comic published in a rather small, unusual format, not a comic book and not an album. More than 300 pages! Everything was new and different. The theme of the Jewish Holocaust had almost never been treated in comics, except by Calvo in two frames in *La Bête est morte* (1945) and eight pages in Krigstein’s *Master Race* (1955).[[13]](#footnote-13) Maus indicated a new direction in comics. The graphic novel concept was born. When I read it I was emotionally shocked and deeply touched because I could identify with the author, with his story and the relation with his survivor father. I felt as if I had a sort of brother in New York, a second-generation comics lover with a strong personal story to tell. *Maus* showed it was possible to tell such stories and I was convinced I would do it ‘one day’! During the same second half of the 80s, movies like *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann were produced, Primo Levi’s books became popular.[[14]](#footnote-14) In 1979 the TV series *Holocaust* was screened in the US, followed by Europe and Israel in 1980.[[15]](#footnote-15) The Holocaust entered the field of research through writing and filming but also creation. The exhibition about Shoah and Comics that took place at the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris in 2017 and at Kazerne Dossin in Malines the year after gave a wider view on what has been created all over the world since *Maus*.

*FL and SL:*In *Deuxième Génération* you are coming to terms with the impact of your father’s story on your childhood and later life. As you already mentioned, the shadows of the past were definitely present but remained very enigmatic when you were a child. How has this impacted family relationships as you were growing up?

*MK:* As a kid and even as a teenager, in other words until I left home, I never paid attention to this question. I was just living my young life and not asking questions, not to my parents and not to myself. Younger readers today have to understand that in my generation parents were mostly giving orders and we, the kids, were supposed to obey, to behave well, to get good grades and to fulfil the expectations. There was no dialogue between parents and children. There was a distance that had to be respected. Same with our teachers. It is necessary to see this to have a better understanding of family life in the fifties and the sixties.

Within the Kichka family the situation was even much more difficult and complex. My father, as the huge majority of Holocaust survivors, was not able to tell us anything, to tell us what he went through, to find a way to explain anything connected to his past. My mother, who escaped occupied Belgium and had lived as a refugee in Switzerland with her whole family during the war, did not talk either. Her story was such a ‘Light Holocaust’ compared to my father that they both chose to keep silent. Doing so, they were convinced they would protect us. But human nature and human psychology work differently. As I came to understand when I became an adult, their silence, and most of all my father’s silence, appeared to have been a heavy burden on my shoulders. We were four kids and my mother was not able to deal with our education, to take care of us, for many reasons, health reasons and also her incapacity to mother us properly. My father, as I understood when I made my book, was probably in a constant state of depression, with ups and downs. Holocaust survivors received no help, had no status. He was married, had four kids but felt orphaned and alone in the world. We were all sent to boarding schools far from home. I’m the only one who stayed there for six years, during my whole primary school. I spent those six years in Spa, I was a happy boy, had good friends, had good grades, played soccer and drew all the time. Charly stayed only one year, he did not adapt. Annie and Irène spent two or three years at another boarding school for girls. When I came back to live at home I was twelve and restarted the family life experience.

*FL and SL:*Your father first started talking about his experience following your brother Charly’s suicide in 1988. His new role as a Holocaust witness then gradually took over his life and he became a key figure in the field of Holocaust memory in Belgium and beyond. Contrary to what is the case in *Maus*, you were looking to present your own story, rather than his, and to tell the things ‘you didn’t tell your father’, as the subtitle of your book indicates. How successful was the publication in establishing this new kind of dialogue between yourself and your father?

*MK:* I witnessed the first time where my father began to speak, to tell and share his nightmare that had lasted three years. It was during the mourning week after my brother’s suicide in October 1988. I travelled to Brussels to attend the funeral with my sister Annie (Khana) who lived in a kibbutz. I did not expect this would happen, I mean that my father would talk about his experience during that week where we were supposed, according to Jewish tradition, to talk about Charly, to prepare ourselves to live without him and with his memory.

My father’s trauma is the Holocaust, mine was the violent loss of my younger brother. That was the first time in my life I had to face the death of a very close family member. My feeling at that time was that a part of me left with him. I was 34 and that experience marked me deeply. But I was unable to understand what I was going through. At the age of 55 I did my book. Which means it took me 22 years to be able to look back and deep inside myself, to understand and analyse, to tell my truth, my version of our family life.

My main concern before I did my book was not hurting my father. I knew he would read it and would discover my reality, my truth, which was far from the one he had built in his mind. That was my way of opening a dialogue, of forcing him in a way to listen to us, to me. He had been blinded by his own suffering. To my surprise, it worked! Actually it took a few months for him to read it and to overcome the shock he had at first reading. I was patient, I knew telling the truth would heal our open family wounds. My best surprise was when he announced to me he would take not only his book but also mine to his conferences in schools and to his trips to Auschwitz with classes. He was proud of what I did and achieved.

My father passed away with Covid-19 in April 2020. I can affirm that the eight last years we had together, me in Israel and him in Brussels, visiting him five to six times a year, were our best years ever together. Everything was on the table, on paper, black on white, no silence any more, no secrets, no hard feelings.

*FL and SL:* The main title of the book refers to a generational identity, whilst Spiegelman focuses more on his individual experience than on the representation of a generation; do you feel this is different in your case, because of the time difference or your experience in Israel?

*MK:* My perception was that by telling my own story and my own experience I would probably tell the story of my generation. Having lived in Israel for so many years, I discovered here that I belong to a whole generation of Israelis whose parents are also survivors and that we have a lot in common in the way we see our parents and behave towards them, in the way we face life and problems, in the way we somehow built ourselves on their experience. This is why I chose that title for the book.

*FL and SL:*As you indicate in the graphic novel, your father wanted his children to be his ‘revenge’ on Hitler and in many ways your achievements are weighed up in light of his expectations. In several instances in your comic book, you explicitly mirror yourself and your father, not least on the front and back cover (see Fig. 1). In that sense it is also striking that you link your own vocation as a cartoonist back to your father, notably portraying him as he draws a Hitler caricature for you. The scene shows how you both connect over humour and drawing, despite the divides of the past. However, how important is this ‘foundational moment’ in your own *Bildungsnarrative* and to what extent to you feel a sense of homage or duty towards your father, if not to his desire for (a symbolic) ‘revenge’?

*MK:* As a little boy I was doing everything I could to please my father, to make him happy and proud, I was a model boy I can say. I even succeeded more or less, sometimes more and sometimes less, in keeping to that line during my teenage period. It meant getting good grades, being always a ‘good boy’, polite, obedient, behaving well everywhere. I did so for him. I saw it was making him happy. I received extra love because I fulfilled all his expectations. All this slowed down my normal development, kept me from understanding who I was and what I really wanted. He was Geppetto and I was his Pinocchio, in a way. But the drawing talent was something else. It was a real gift, he was gifted and I was gifted. The circumstances of the war and the Holocaust made his artistic career impossible. It was too difficult to achieve, he needed to be supported and encouraged and also financially helped. He tried but had to give up after one year of evening classes at the Brussels Academy of Art. Nothing stopped me. I can’t say he really helped me but he followed my evolution with admiration.

*FL and SL:* In the epilogue of *Deuxième Génération* you describe the lengthy and hazardous writing process of this first book, which seemed to carry a high personal as well as professional risk. How do you look back on the process now?

*MK:* I did my book, wrote it and drew it in a one-and-a-half year process and I was coached all the way by Gisèle de Haan, my editor at Dargaud. This has been very meaningful to me. She gave me confidence in my project, she understood it was something important not only to me but to anyone who faced a family trauma in life, no matter which. She understood it was not a book for Jewish readers, for the Holocaust second generation only. She was the only person to see my work in progress. I was aware I was taking a professional risk and I needed to take this risk! That was my first writing experience. My first graphic novel. Even my wife Olivia did not see my work before it was published, she wanted to read it as a book and not as separated pages, and she wanted me to have a total free hand because she knew that was very personal and very crucial for me.

The main lesson I learned from making the book is that the truth does not kill. It is worth telling. But it depends on the way you do it. I did it with love, compassion, humour and art. It is called an act of resilience.

*FL and SL:**Bande dessinée* has become a key medium for portrayal of the Holocaust, genocides, war and violence. Which styles or works carry your preference in this field and which approaches appeal less to you?

*MK:* It’s true that the Jewish Holocaust in comics has had an exponential development since *Maus* and even more since 2000. I’m more attracted to stories based on true facts but mixed with fiction and imagination and art. They must be a creation to attract me as a reader. There are plenty of historical books based on research; historians did and still do huge and very important work based on archives, documents and witnesses. There are plenty of documentary movies, some are very good. I need to be touched and moved by a high-quality creation that adds something new to what is known.

I very much liked *Yossel* by Joe Kubert.[[16]](#footnote-16) A total fiction based on a real historical situation, the story was so credible and I had the feeling he talked about himself, about what could have occurred if he had lived through the Warsaw ghetto insurrection! I like the fact he did not ink it, the pencil work gave it a deep emotion and was far removed from the superhero American inking style. I very much like the great *Spirou* new saga by Émile Bravo,[[17]](#footnote-17) a masterpiece, for the same reasons but also because of the classic Belgian style for kids. It looks as if it was done for kids and actually addresses adult readers. A complete fiction in a real historical context and location. Even Felix Nussbaum is there with his wife and their problems. It’s so strong, delicate, clever, beautiful and courageous. I like *L’Enfant cachée*,[[18]](#footnote-18) in its *Peanuts* drawing style and its simple story telling, it is so moving and so unexpected as a graphic form for a Holocaust comic. I like *The Boxer* by Reinhard Kleist,[[19]](#footnote-19) tragic, dark, written like a *série noire* novel, beautiful black and white work. I like a few others too but there are also comics I dislike. Even some that I could not read to the end. When it’s too historical and too respectful to survivors or to hidden children who are still alive, the artists are not free to give a more personal interpretation to the story and in the end it does not take off to a higher level, it stays grounded to the truth. To me, as an adult reader, I need much more than truth and reality. This is, by the way, one of the reasons of *Maus*’s success, the freedom of his graphic and conceptual visual interpretation. If it had been drawn in the Franco-Belgian realist style, the one that was popular at Glénat in historical comics, I would never have opened those books. But I’m aware I speak for myself as a professional with an experience of reading comics since 1960 and of a comics creator since high school.

*FL and SL:*In the book you make several references to Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée* and you opted for a publication with a French publisher. How does the Franco-Belgian reception of the book compare to other countries and to Israel?

*MK:* I did my book in French because this is the language in which I grew up, the language of my childhood and my first readings and so my family memories are in French. The second reason is because the Israeli comics market is too small and not built to support graphic novel artists who engage in a long process. All the Israeli graphic novels of the last 15 years were published first in English or French and then translated to Hebrew. The reception of *Deuxième Génération* in France and Belgium was very warm and the interest for the book was huge. Dargaud has a powerful communication knowhow, and the comics culture is an inherent part of the main culture. Most of the journalist who interviewed me made the comparison between *Maus* and my book, drawing a timeline of twenty years between the two books. It made me understand that *Deuxième Génération* was seen as a sort of milestone in the bibliography of Shoah in comics. I was very surprised and also proud, I must confess. Basically I did this book for myself, for my brother Charly’s memory but once published it had its own life independent from me. That was something new to me.

*FL and SL:*As a work on Holocaust, the reception of your first book also depends on norms and expectations in the field of memory, in Israel as well as internationally. Has this impacted the reception and reading of the work and how do you see your own role in the current educational (but also politicised) context?

*MK:* I did not have these questions in mind when creating my book but once published it has had is own dynamic, its own journey. I knew it would be read by very different readers from different countries and cultures, but I could not imagine, for example, that it could be used as an educational tool. Which made me very happy, by the way. I know teachers use it in their syllabus, work on it, undertake research with their class on my family. I have been invited to meet classes, sometimes in high schools and sometimes universities, in France, Israel, Belgium, Germany, Poland, Italy, Mexico, Turkey… I give lectures all year long at the Yad Vashem School for Shoah Studies. I give lectures in public libraries in Israel, in teachers’ seminars, in survivors’ organisations… It has become a significant part of my activities. Besides that, dissertations are written on it in different countries. I mention all these just to explain that I could not have imagined or planned the book’s life. The huge interest it has raised made me understand that there was a fertile ground for such a book twenty years after *Maus*. These are also the years in which graphic novels have become a new way to tell stories and to get to people’s hearts.

*FL and SL:*Film adaptations from *bande dessinée* are not uncommon and sometimes co-produced or directed by the author, as in the case of Joann Sfar’s *Le Chat du rabbin.*[[20]](#footnote-20) What has been your own experience of the process?

*MK:* Vera Belmont’s proposition to adapt the book came some three months after its publication. I was totally surprised and enthusiastic. Dargaud too. I knew Art Spiegelman has always been opposed to any adaptation of *Maus*. He had his own reasons. The main one was that he had conceived his book as a graphic novel, that was his own story, it belonged to him, and any other form adapted by someone else would fail. I decided to accept Vera’s proposition because I was so curious to see it adapted. We met and she explained her motivations. During WWII she was a little girl (born 1932), her parents were Jewish Polish communists fighting in the Resistance. This is her family background and heritage. As a movie-maker she always wanted to make a film about that period. She was and still is a producer. Her movie *Rouge baiser* (1986) was mainly autobiographical.[[21]](#footnote-21) When my book was published her husband gave it to her and said ‘This is the one you are going to adapt!’. She read it, loved it, and decided to produce her first animated movie ever because she was deeply touched by my story and also by the fact it was drawn in the style of a children’s comic that addressed adults. I must confess I was very enthusiastic and excited. In a discussion with my friend Émile Bravo he told me that if I agreed for my book to be adapted, I needed to realise that this process would require me to be open to changes, even to the fact that entire parts of my story would disappear. He said that if I wasn’t ready to ‘part with’ my own ‘truth’, it would be better to leave it and not consent to an adaptation, no matter who would do it. I was convinced by Vera’s ambition and sincerity as well as by her experience as a writer, filmmaker and producer. After I gave my OK to the scenario, which leaves 50% of my book untouched and to which she added her own story, I decided not to get involved in the further process, to let her do her work her own way. My field is comics, hers is cinema. The film is produced by the ‘Je Suis Bien Content’ animation studio in Paris. They gave a totally new dimension to the visual approach, which is based on my style, but they have upgraded it. The graphic language of the movie is much richer than the way I drew, different angles of view, work on colours and shadows, camera movements, the creation of an atmosphere of the sixties based on rich documentation. I was able to preview some scenes, and they look as if the producer, Marc Jousset, grew up in my town in Belgium. The premiere screening should take place at some point in 2021.

*FL and SL:*Your second graphic novel, *Falafel sauce piquante*, deals more directly with your experience in Israel and is organised chronologically. Why did you indicate from the start that this had to be a separate story?

*MK:* The idea to create *Falafel sauce piquante* came during the making of *Deuxième Génération*. In my first book I did say that I moved to Israel for good at the age of twenty but decided that it was not the place to give the reasons for my decision. I felt I needed an entire book to explain it and to recount my life, my personal choices, my professional career, my political opinions, my cartoonist involvement, my teaching experience.

*FL and SL:*As a commentary on Israeli society, who is it aimed at and how has it been received?

*MK:* Today’s generations don’t understand the ideology that brought Jews from all over the world to settle in Israel at the end of the 19th century, before and after WWII. Zionism was a revolutionary ideal that came from visionary people who understood before all that the Jews need a land because they have been and are persecuted everywhere they are, in Europe and in Arab countries. The first Zionist congress took place in Basel in 1897, fifty years before the Holocaust. And still too many people think Israel was created because of the Holocaust. Israel is shown in the world media as a war zone and a land of conflict in which Israelis are the Bad and Palestinians the Good. A simplistic binary presentation of the reality. I’m proud to be a Jew, a secular open-minded Jew whose father’s family is among the six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. I wanted *Falafel* to shed light on my identity as a Western European educated boy and on my search for my roots, on my self-definition as a Jew who believes in man and not in God, who believes in Peace and fights for it in cartooning, writing and comics making. I love Israel and I’m very critical towards its leadership, its right-wing religious vision, towards occupation and settlements, about internal society problems, about the lack of long-term vision. I face a lot of dilemmas, contradictions, my wife Olivia and I have been involved in the NGO ‘Peace Now’ since the Israel-Egypt peace treaty by Saadat-Begin in 1979. I’ve served in Tsahal as an illustrator and our three sons served the flag for more than three years as officers in field units. I wanted to show the Israel Defense Force from inside as seen by us, soldier’s parents. And on the other hand there are so many beautiful things and people in this country in so many fields. The book has been very well received, in Israel and in France and Belgium. It showed a different way to deal with the reality here and was also a reminder of past events that changed the course of history. A reminder for those who forgot or preferred to forget and a ‘lesson’ for those who were too young or not born when things happened.

*FL and SL:* Despite its light-hearted title, its use of colour and humour, this work addresses both profound convictions and disappointments.

*MK:* By telling my relation to Israel I was convinced I would also tell the stories of others. So many Israelis were migrants, came from other cultures and mentalities, to make a dream come true. As a leftie I wanted to tell something different from the official narrative today. And it was very important to me to tell it to Israelis and to non-Israelis. I wanted to give a human face and a human dimension to my country.

*FL and SL:*This second book combines a wider range of styles than *Deuxième Génération*, with also some more realist drawings, which you had avoided in your first graphic novel?

*MK:* I had the intuition when sketching my pages that this new book was an opportunity to liberate myself from comics conventions, that I could mix realism in some scenes with my ‘cartoon style’, colourful pages with minimalistic colouring. I still leaned on documentation, I googled a lot to find newspapers, magazines and posters from the 60s and the 70s, I used my own photos shot during my first visit to Israel in 69. I really love this way of working. I felt free to give a new interpretation to those documents. The creative process of a comic should be exciting and jubilant.

*FL and SL:*How is the medium of *bande dessinée* developing in Israel and how do you perceive your own role or place in the field?

*MK:* The field of BD has been constantly developing in Israel since the mid-eighties. There are more and more new talents, every year there is a comics festival in Tel Aviv, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last summer, a comics and cartoon museum has been created in Holon (Tel Aviv suburb) in 2008, students are creating comics in the Visual Communication Department of different art schools, leading authors are published world-wide and are winning important awards such as Angoulême Award or Eisner Award, they are translated into lots of languages, and last but not least, those artists are teaching in all the art schools of the country. I can modestly say that I belong to this group and that I have initiated the first comics class ever in Israel at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem in 1992. The most important thing I did in the nineties was to introduce the Franco-Belgian style, which was unknown. The Israeli popular culture was America-oriented. Today it’s different because the graphic novel has become a form of global art, mainstream comics look more or less the same everywhere, the underground too, and the same with alternative works because comics also circulate on the net.

*FL and SL:*What are your recent readings and affiliations in contemporary *bande dessinée*, and how do you see its connections between tradition and innovation today, within the Franco-Belgian context and/or more internationally?

*MK:* I read and buy comics when I travel to France or Belgium. I love to enter specialised comics bookshops, staying for one hour or more, opening books, looking at new publications, discovering new artists, and in the end buying 3 or 4 books. I’m always excited to discover new artists, as well as to follow the evolution of artists with a great career who are able to re-invent themselves. The French comics market is very pluralistic, open to different styles, the best comics published in the world are translated into French. As a Francophone I must say I’m spoiled! The *école franco-belge* has deeply influenced the comics field in Europe. It has a storytelling style and a unique aesthetic based on tradition and innovation. American and Japanese comics have more difficulties in escaping their own limits.

*FL and SL:*As an internationally recognised cartoonist, you work across different languages and also self-translated *Deuxième Génération* and *Falafel sauce piquante*. How do you engage with various audiences and what role does language play in your work?

*MK:* I have a deep love for languages (I’m fluent in French and Hebrew). Words mean a lot to me. This is why, for example, I decided to translate my two graphic novels from French into Hebrew myself. I felt I was making an adaptation, not a translation. Language in comics is different from language in literature or language in everyday life. And not only that, text in comics is usually hand written by the artist himself. It has a strong identity. It is a part of the visual world of the artist. When I write a text, a dialogue, a narration in a comic, I give great attention to each word, to each sentence. I can re-write a text three or four times until I have the intuitive feeling of what works best.

*FL and SL:*With Cartooning for Peace, you are part of an international network of cartoonists that aims to promote democratic values and freedom of expression through press cartooning. How would you define your political and creative commitment as a cartoonist locally and globally?

*MK:* In 1997 I began my career as a political cartoonist in a morning show on Israel’s 2nd Channel. I was drawing live cartoons. In 2000 I contacted *Courrier International* because I was cartooning about the intifada and I wanted my work to be seen outside the borders of my country. In 2006 I was invited by Plantu and Kofi Annan to join the Cartooning for Peace initiative for a one-day seminar entitled ‘Unlearning Intolerance’ at the United Nations in New York. The rest is history. I mean, Cartooning for Peace has gradually deployed an intense international activity with world leading cartoonists, it became a strong association with a strong voice, a strong presence in the media, an involvement in helping cartoonists threatened by their governments in different countries, and after the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attack, Cartooning for Peace began to create pedagogical workshops in more than ten countries around the themes of democracy and freedom of expression. In Israel I consider myself as belonging to the opposition as a citizen and as a cartoonist. My cartoons on Israel’s policy are very critical and I publish them on my blog and on Facebook in two languages, in Hebrew and French. I have a particular sensitivity to all forms of racism, to antisemitism and to democratic liberal values. I think my opinions are clear in my works, I’m not afraid to express them. My enemies are Political Correctness, hatred, violence, fake news, intolerance (see Fig. 2).

FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE. Caption: © Michel Kichka: Cartooning for Peace

*FL and SL:* As a political cartoonist you inevitably balance needs for freedom of expression with critical positions and humour. How has this balance evolved throughout your career, bearing in mind precisely events like *Charlie Hebdo*, but also broader issues relating to propaganda or antisemitism in cartoons?

*MK:* This is a huge question but I want to mention two topics, in relation to antisemitic cartoons and education. First, antisemitic cartoons published in *Der Stürmer* after Hitler’s election, succeeded in dehumanising Jews to a point that they were seen by the population as animals that brought diseases and had to be exterminated to ‘clean the Aryan pure race’. By the way, this is the reason why Art Spiegelman named his book ‘Maus’. Those cartoons were used as a tool in the Nazi ideology that led to the ‘Final Solution’. The cartoonists who drew them and the publishers who published them were pawns in the system. Those cartoonists drafted by the Nazi Party were actually propagandists, they were not independent, not free to express themselves, to oppose the system or the leading line of the newspaper. The Nazi regime is an extreme case. Antisemitic cartoons have been and are still published in a lot of countries, lots of them traditionally in the Arab World. In a way the limits between antisemitic cartoons and anti-Zionist or anti-Israel cartoons is moving all the time and modern anti-Zionism is very often a new form of new antisemitism. I’m very vigilant on that point but also very open-minded and ready to accept strong criticisms of Israel even if some of them are borderline.

Second, education is the key word for a better humanity. No one is born a democrat. You can be educated in the spirit of democratic values, in the spirit of Human Rights. When I cartoon I know I also act as a non-formal ‘educator’. This is why I impose limits on myself, limits of good taste, limits in provocations. Because in my opinion a cartoonist must be provocative and tolerant at the same time. You can say it’s an impossible goal to achieve. But for me it makes my profession a real challenge.

*FL and SL:* The combination of *bande dessinée* with influences from political cartooning has made your work very accessible. Does the cartooning style also equip your other work and drawings with a more critical dimension?

*MK:* As a cartoonist I need to make very clear statements in a very short time. When something happens in the news, I try to make images with an immediate and strong visual impact, I challenge myself every day and sometimes have to draw new cartoons on the same conflicts, same political situations, same environmental questions. I need somehow to re-invent myself and do my best not to repeat the same things, looking for new approaches, for different ways to treat news that almost do not change. A cartoon is the concentration of an idea.

When I create a graphic novel another part of me is in action. I dig inside my own experience, my memories, into feelings, in a sort of introspection to recall things from the past and to analyse them and put them and turn them into a consistent story with words and images. This is a long process in which I go step by step, writing a lot, erasing. I like this process, which is opposite to cartooning. Cartooning is a 100-meter run, creating comics a long-distance run, more than a marathon.

I feel at my best in those two art forms and can’t drop one of the two. I need those two forms to be totally me. I can compare them to the two phases of respiration: inspiration and expiration. Comics is inspiration. I take air deeply inside. Cartooning is expiration, I strongly reject the sick parts.

*FL and SL:* Having established yourself in these various areas of your profession, what might come next in your fascinating journey?

MK: I’m in the writing process of a new graphic novel, just the beginning. Another introspective journey. I cartoon several times a week, I illustrate children books once or twice a year. I teach and give conferences. I spend good moments with our four grandchildren, though much less since Covid-19 crisis: their smiles, sense of humour, joy of living and energy keep me optimistic.

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