

The Pesach Feast¹

by Erich Töplitz, Frankfurt a. M.

The illustrations are from the exemplary sample collection of the Gesellschaft zur Erforschung jüdischer Kunstdenkmäler, Frankfurt am Main

The Pesach or Passover feast is celebrated for eight (in Palestine only seven) days starting on the 15th of Nissan in remembrance of the Jewish homes being passed over during the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt and of the subsequent liberation from suppression in Pharaoh's country. Because of the hasty exodus, it was not possible to leaven the bread for the journey and, hence, the unleavened bread, "matzah," was kept as the feast's symbol. At the time of the Temple, the Pesach sacrifice was at the center of the ceremonies; in the wake of its destruction, a domestic celebration evolved, the Seder (order), which is accompanied by various symbolic activities and by the savoring of symbolic dishes. It takes place on the first two evenings (in Palestine only on the eve) of the feast and is observed by reciting the story of the exodus from Egypt and various psalms and prayers that are read from a small book, the Haggadah (narration).

*

The Seder Table and its Utensils

Among the utensils, the Seder plate, on which the three matzoth are placed, must be mentioned above all. This round flat dish is usually made from conventional pewter, similar to the Purim plate, with which it is frequently confused. Like the latter, it is covered with an abundance of engravings; Seder keywords, important sentences from the Haggadah, pictures of the exodus from Egypt, the Ten Plagues, and the four questioning children, the Passover lamb, and the baking of the matzoth, the story of the little lamb, etc. decorate the plate's rim and center.² In their primitive technique, these works are often highly interesting and of great vividness of expression; they are roughly from the 17th or 18th century, however, even today, Seder plates are still manufactured that display the same shape as those from the past. Apart from forgeries, which frequently reveal themselves through inverted inscriptions, this archaizing style is frequently found in Jewish (but also Christian) ceremonial objects. Most of the pewter Seder plates are from Southern Germany as indicated by names of places and persons. Seder plates from silver are extant as well; in recent times, they have transformed into veritable cabinets with racks for maror, charoseth, fresh green herbs, and for the symbolic allusion to the Pesach sacrifice. The interior, hidden by curtains, displays three compartments to separately accommodate the so-called shimurim-matzoth: Cohen, Levi, and Israel. A very rare sample of this kind, from Germany around 1800, is on loan at the museum in Frankfurt. Apart from the plain compartments and yellow damask

1 Töplitz, Erich: Das Pessachfest, in: Menorah. Jüdisches Familienblatt für Wissenschaft, Kunst und Literatur, vol. 2, no. 4 (April 1924), pp. 4-7.

2 See exhibition catalog on Jewish buildings and ritual objects for synagogue and home; Düsseldorf 1908, 79 ff. (also AJHE no. 1688) and much else. Mitteilungen der Ges. z. Erf. j. K. III/IV.

curtain, it features on the lid's rim six bearded figures standing on pedestals, carrying bowls on their heads, which they support with both hands. Between each of two bowl carriers, there is another figure: Moses with staff, Aaron in priestly robes, and Miriam with the tympanum (tambourine). At the lid's center is a candlestick resting on tendrils. Another rarity in the museum is a Seder bowl from Meissen porcelain, also from Germany around 1800, which is a gift from Rothschild. The rim is adorned with the keywords of the Seder, the bowl's interior with four images from the Haggadah. They depict: 1. Finding of Moses; 2. Moses before Pharaoh; 3. and 4. Egyptians in the flood and the rescued Israelites. Stylistically, the pictures overall follow the Amsterdam Haggadah, with black painting on white background and gold-plated in some places.



Horseradish bowl / silver / 17th century. In private ownership

The Seder keywords are formed by small pink flowers, with the emblem at the beginning: deer and lion holding a shield with the priest's hands, above a crown with the Hebrew inscription Zvi Arie Katz and the abbreviation for Frankfurt am Main. Unfortunately, so far it has not been possible to retrieve the mentioned owner or donor elsewhere.

Italian Jews have made their Seder plates, which also provide the names of the Jewish masters, from majolica or faience.³ The Jewish Museum in Vienna owns such objects, which feature the names Jacob Azulai , Padua 1532; Moise Fano, Urbino 1556; Jacob Azulai, Pesaro 1730, and Yitzhak Azulai, Faenza 1575 (Seder plates?). These are round plates with six resp. eight medallions; more of them have become known at the National Museum in Washington⁴ and formerly at the Anglo-Jewish

3 First Annual Report of the *Ges. f. Sammlg. u. Konserv. v. K. u. H. Denkm. d. Judentums*, Vienna, 1897, 49.

4 The Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the United States National Museum, Washington 1908 , Adler and Casanowicz, 718 ff.

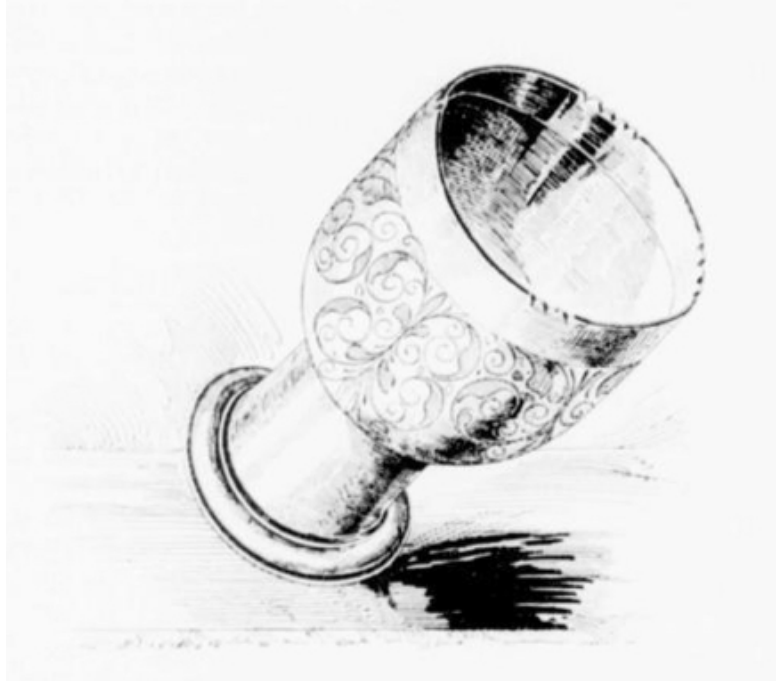
Historical Exhibition in London (AJHE).⁵ The best description can be found in the catalog of the Geldzinski Foundation in Danzig (1904), which reveals that the plate rested on a saucer that apparently served to hold the matzoth. It displays the blessing over the wine, the Seder keywords, on the rim two larger fields with flowers and two other fields with Biblical images (Josef reveals himself to his brothers, the Israelites eat the Passover bread in Egypt [!]), four smaller fields with the figures of Moses, Aaron, David, and Solomon. In its arrangement, it corresponds to no. 1697 of the AJHE whose images are, unfortunately, not accurately discernable. Descriptions of this and other objects are quite scant and do not permit any further conclusions. The Washington catalog provides better instructions; here, under no.78 (see illustration), the Kiddush can be found at the center, on the rim, four elongated medallions with Seder depictions (according to which Haggadah?) and two round ones with the Seder keywords resp. the Shabbat passage for the Kiddush. The date here is definitely wrong; there is no way that the object originated in 13th-century Spain and was glazed in Italy in the 16th century; all stylistic elements point to the 17th century, the archaic letters can be traced back to the copy of an older original. — Also erroneously designated as Seder plate (no. 80) is the silver plate mentioned there with images of the patriarchs Aaron, Moses, David, and Solomon and whose center is adorned with the depiction of the handwashing. It is likely a washing bowl that might have been used for the Seder, but probably for the Priestly Blessing. — All flat Seder plates either rest on a saucer that serves for keeping the three matzoth separate or this division is achieved by compartments, which in turn give rise to abundant embroideries that also adorn the Seder plate covers. On these textiles, one can see the Seder keywords, the Kiddush as well as all sorts of symbols and depictions from the Haggadah applied in the most varied techniques.⁶ Frequently, inscriptions provide information on date and place of manufacture as well as on the maker. Drawings and script are usually adopted from old Hebrew manuscripts and, therefore, display an archaic character.

Belonging to a Seder apart from the matzah shmurah is also the symbolic sign of the Pesach sacrifice, maror and charoset. In the past, special vessels⁷ were manufactured to hold them. The roasted egg was placed in a receptacle resembling a double goblet; for the bitter herbs, sometimes abundantly decorated bowls were used. The fruit paste—seen as recalling the mud the Jews had to pound in Egypt—was mostly served in a small wheelbarrow, from which people would serve themselves with silverware shaped after work tools. Four different activities open the Seder, only the four dishes described here render it ritually fully valid, children ask their fathers four questions, and four types of children are presented. This number four, which seems to have a special role in the Seder, is also stipulated for the number of cups of wine to be drunk. As a mark, so as not to forget to be attentive, one can sometimes find four grooves on Seder cups, with each additional groove meant to remind the host to refill the cup. Of course, it is assumed that he does not forget to regularly rotate the cup.

5 Catalogue of the Anglo-Jewish Historical-Exhibition, London, 1888. Compiled by Jacobs and Wolf.

6 See exhibition catalog on Jewish buildings and ritual objects for synagogue and home; Düsseldorf 1908, 79 ff. (also AJHE no. 1688) and much else. *Mitteilungen der Ges. z. Erf. j. K. III/IV.*

7 First Annual Report of the *Ges. f. Sammlg. u. Konserv. v. K. u. H. Denkm. d. Judentums*, Vienna, 1897, 49.



Seder cup with grooves at the museum of applied arts Düsseldorf

Existing cups are from silver, glass, porcelain. The largest and most splendid are those reserved for Eliyahu HaNavi. Haggadah images can be found also on Seder cups. Schlosser depicts one such object from Vienna in the Sarajevo Haggadah, page 238, whose representation of a hunt is combined with the known acrostic yaknehaz (yayin-wine, kiddush, ner-light, havdalah-differentiation ceremony, Shabbat end). However, at the AJHE (see catalog p. 107) there were further objects whose connections to the Seder seem, like those in Washington, to be solely based on tradition. The Guide through the Jewish museum in Vienna mentions (no. 97) one cup displaying the exodus from Egypt. Still, pictorial representations on Seder cups seem to be rarer than written decorations. Particularly beautiful ones can be seen on Bohemian glasses that were manufactured around the late 18th century. Frequently, however, only precious cups were used that lacked any pictorial or written references to the Seder; all show the importance that was placed on a festively set table.

Finally, one has to consider the Omer books. Those known thus far were not made before 1700; There are also some Kabbalist ones, not dissimilar to a Kabbalist mizrah. Additionally, Omer scrolls (AJHE no. 1708) are also in use, which have the advantage of always indicating, like a calendar, the respective day thus preventing confusion (no. 97)⁸ — Above all those utensils, whatever their artistic value, hovers the splendor of the Seder table no true Jew can elude.

⁸ The Collection of Jewish Ceremonial Objects in the United States National Museum, Washington 1908, Adler and Casanowicz, 718 ff.

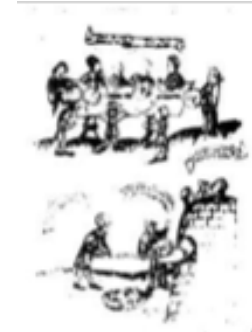
Illustrated Haggadoth



"Rabbi Gamiel as teacher", from a Haggadah from North Spain, 2nd half of the 13th c. / At the Landesmuseum in Sarajewo



"The Jewish children are to be thrown into the Nile", from a Haggadah of Italian provenance, 2nd half of the 15th c. / property of the Rothschild family, Paris



"Baking mazzah", Second Haggada at the Germanische Nationalmuseum at Nuremberg, Central Germany, 15th century

The main components of the Haggadah shel Pesach can be found in the Mishnah Tractate Pesachim. Its present compilation goes back to Rav (Rabbi Amram, 850), and several sections at the end of the nowadays common editions were added four centuries later (1250). As book of its own, the Haggadah appears for the first time as a supplement included in a work by Maimonides (1135 until 1204); illustrated examples exist from around the 13th century onward, so not much later. Barely hundred written Haggadoth are known today; moreover, a large number must certainly still be in private or state ownership unnoticed until now. However, only few of the known Haggadoth have thus far been researched and published so that it is extremely difficult to determine whether or not the images display distinctly Jewish features—within the general artistic sensibilities. Given the current state of affairs, all attempts to decide for or against must be considered premature at best; conclusions drawn from these assessments regarding the artistic skills of the Jewish collective must be rejected in any case. Naturally, Haggadah images also display characteristics of the various stylistic eras (even the Hebrew letters show clear traces of them), which, however, are not evidence of imitation but rather of an ongoing development of artistic concepts. This process always suffers from a delay relative to the environment; while it cannot be regarded as a distinct characteristic, a conservative trait can often be found in segregated communities. As stated above, nothing can be concluded from what is known so far; rather, more abundant illustrative material must be gathered first so as to perceive, apart from the more salient uniting aspects, the harder discernible separating aspects—though this would only document whether the phenomenon of Jewish art expression exists or not, and an explanation would only be possible based on a psychology of the Jewish mind. Unfortunately, this difficult field is until now nothing but a stonping ground for dilettante attempts, for onesided, usually negative value judgements, but not for serious studies; therefore, at this point, we have to make do with a purely factual discussion of the material from the Haggadoth researched so far.

The brief Pesach rite is the most frequently illustrated book of the entire Jewish literature and features the most varied images among all Jewish books with illustrations. Why did Jews illustrate their Haggadoth? So that also the illiterate and children would understand the Seder stories with the help of an image as was, for instance, the case with the Christians' *Biblia pauperum*? Until the start of assimilation, those unable to read Hebrew were rare among Jews, also children learned their ancestors' language already at a tender age. Hence, a practical reason could not have provided the motivation to illustrate; rather, this is about pure delight in the beautiful and the precious. The books treasured by Jews should be rendered even more beautiful and precious with these decorative images, in honor of the holiday for which they were used and for the joy in fulfilling the commandments to which they were dedicated. Apart from this connection between commandment and art practice, another cause led to the illustrated book: the political situation. Jews were not granted the pleasure of decorating the walls of their houses with pictures since they could never be sure how long they would be permitted to stay in their homes. Hence, art-loving Jews had no choice but to adorn their books with illustrations. That these illustrated books accompanied their owners' wanderings are evidenced by the notes in numerous manuscripts, for instance, in the Haggadoth at the British Museum⁹ and in that of Sarajevo. Undoubtedly, the latter¹⁰ was created in Spain; already in 1314 or probably in 1510 it was sold in Italy and redacted in Rome in 1609. From Italy, this Haggadah then reached the Illyrian shores where for a long time it was in the possession of a Sephardic family in Sarajevo before it entered the museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1844.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that strong religious objections existed against mural paintings serving solely enjoyment purposes, which were attenuated by images in books that served almost exclusively religious purposes. Similar attitudes are known to us from the Catholic world, which had, as did we, its share of iconoclasts who refused to tolerate any manifest symbols. All rigid tenets notwithstanding, there have always been people yearning for beauty who proved through action that life is stronger than any dogma. The easiest way for these lovers of beauty with a zest for life to carry through their wishes was by illustrating the Haggadah since, after all, this is an inherently buoyant and cheerful book imbued with a life-affirming spirit. (To be continued)

(Translation: Lilian Dombrowski)

9 See catalog details.

10 *Die Haggadah von Sarajevo*, by D. H. Müller and J. v. Schlosser, Vienna 1898.



Haggadah from the Cod. hebr. 200 / Munich / Scribe: Joseph bar Ephraim, Frankish, late 15th century



Sheet from the Haggadah. Printed in Mantua by Ruffinello (1571[?])



Sheet from the Haggadah. Printed in Venice (1621[?])