

PREFACE TO THE 1997 EDITION

HAGGADAH AND HISTORY was completed in 1973 and published in 1975. Since then, of course, many new Haggadahs have appeared, some of considerable esthetic or other interest. Nevertheless, I have resisted the temptation to extend the original chronological limit of this book. To have done so would have expanded an already large volume to unmanageable proportions, violated its structure, and added nothing essential to its major theme — the Passover Haggadah as a mirror of Jewish history. Indeed, in what seems in retrospect a felicitous circumstance, the last edition reproduced and described is a Hebrew-Russian Haggadah published in Israel in 1972 for the use of immigrants from the Soviet Union. Its relevance not only remains, but it has been enhanced in a way I could not have anticipated. From today's perspective, that Haggadah seems almost a symbolic harbinger of the massive migration of hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews to Israel since the recent collapse of the former Soviet regime.

Yet I cannot quite close here. Although Haggadah and History is concerned deliberately and exclusively with printed Haggadahs, I feel compelled to draw the reader's attention to the fate of one manuscript that, in a different but uniquely dramatic way, reveals again the

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uncanny capacity of the Passover Haggadah to become implicated in history. I have in mind the so-called "Sarajevo Haggadah," arguably the most renowned illuminated Haggadah manuscript to have survived from the Middle Ages.

This splendid codex, written on vellum and adorned with superbly colored illustrations of scenes ranging in time from the Creation to Moses, of the interior of a synagogue with the congregants leaving to go to their homes for the Seder, and of scenes from the Seder itself, was almost certainly produced in the Spanish kingdom of Aragon in the second half of the fourteenth century. It was probably brought out of Spain by one of the exiles of 1492 and taken to Italy where, as a handwritten note indicates, it was sold in 1510. It was still in Italy in 1609, when an Italian ecclesiastical censor examined it.

How or when the Haggadah ended up in Sarajevo in the hands of a Sephardic family named Cohen is not known. In 1894 an orphaned child from this family brought it to the Jewish communal school in order to sell it. From the Jewish community the Haggadah passed to the new Bosnian National Museum in Sarajevo with which city, as its fame spread, it has been associated ever since.

The Sarajevo Haggadah in our century survived both World Wars. In World War II, when the city was under Nazi occupation, a German officer came to the Museum demanding that the Haggadah be handed over to him. At the risk of his life, J. Petrovic, the Museum's director, blocked the way and stalled him by claiming that another Nazi officer had already confiscated the volume. This gave a curator, Dervis Korkut (who was, incidentally, a Muslim) just enough time to spirit it out of the Museum and bring it to a farmhouse outside the city, where it was hidden until the end of the war. Subsequently the Haggadah was exhibited only on rare occasions. A facsimile was published in 1967.

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And then, some three years ago, came the horrific Bosnian War, with its deadly slogan of “ethnic cleansing.” Sarajevo, under siege, was shelled almost daily. Amid the general devastation the National Museum was not spared, and many of its treasures have been destroyed. Inevitably, rumors began to circulate concerning the fate of the Sarajevo Haggadah, suggesting either that it too had perished, or that it had been sold at a huge price in order to buy weapons.

As it turned out, both rumors were unfounded. The Sarajevo Haggadah had been hidden again, rescued once more by a Muslim, Enver Imamovic, the director of the Museum. To quell any lingering doubts, the Haggadah was brought under the tightest security to a communal Seder at the synagogue on April 15, 1995. In the synagogue were not only the remnant of Sarajevo’s Jews, but leaders and clergy of its Catholic, Orthodox, and Muslim communities, as well as Alija Izetbegovic, the Muslim president of Bosnia. In a moving address, he begged the Jews not to leave Bosnia and added: “Our wish is that this country should be a tolerant community of religions and nations, as it has been for centuries.” After its text had been read aloud, the Sarajevo Haggadah was whisked back to its hiding place. In the time that it had been visible in the synagogue it had transcended even its rich Jewish associations. It had become for all a testimony to the once peaceful coexistence of Sarajevo’s multiethnic and multireligious populations and a token of survival and hope in that martyred city.

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