

Arthur Szyk *and the* Szyk Haggadah

Jonathan Fishburn celebrates the work of 'the greatest illuminator since the sixteenth century'

As a small child, Passover was my favourite festival. The house buzzed with the excitement of the preparations and I eagerly awaited our family *seder* because I had the chance to retell everything my teacher had taught me about the wicked Pharaoh, the ten plagues, the baking of *matza* in a hurry, and the miraculous escape of the Jews through the Red Sea.

One of my favourite pre-*seder* activities was taking out the various *haggadot* that my family had collected over the years. It was my job to dust them down, double check for any stray *matza* crumbs from the previous year and allocate them to our guests. Whoever got the *Szyk Haggadah* that year was in for an extra treat. With its vivid pictures, especially of the four sons, bold use of colour and beautiful script, this *haggadah* belonged in a class of its own.

Many years later, as a bookdealer, I have come to appreciate the significance of Szyk the artist and, more specifically, the *Szyk Haggadah*, in its historical and political context. Szyk was born in 1894 into a middle-class family in Lodz, Poland, and left home at the age of 15 to study art at the Académie Julian in Paris, where he created miniature scenes and portraits, illuminated initial letters, decorative and symbolic border patterns, and learned calligraphy.

In addition to a strong Jewish identity forged at home, his love of Jewish history and Zionism was inspired by a visit to Palestine in 1914. He composed a series of miniatures on biblical themes such as Queen Sheba's visit to King Solomon. At the outbreak of the First World War, Szyk – a Russian subject in enemy Ottoman territory – was forced to return to Europe, where he was conscripted into the Russian army. By the mid-1920s, Szyk used his art to portray Jews as militant fighters against the oppressors, a theme which was central to his *Livre d'Esther*, published in France in 1925, after he returned to Paris. Designed for the festival of Purim, Szyk's paintings depict Haman's plot to murder the Jews, the resistance of Esther and Mordechai, the hanging of Haman, and the destruction of his forces by Jewish fighters. According to his wife, Julia Szyk, in her unpublished memoirs,



he considered this not only as an important piece of artistic work to be done, but also for his people. To him, it was the story of the liberation of his people, the story of their cruel persecution. It was part of his proud answer to the antisemitism of his times.

When Hitler and the Nazi party came to power in Germany in 1933, Szyk was just beginning to work on the *Haggadah*, which had a clear contemporary relevance for him. He told an American reporter in 1934 that

an artist, and especially a Jewish artist, cannot be neutral in these times. He cannot escape to still lives, abstractions and experiments. Art that is purely cerebral is dead. Our life is involved in a terrible tragedy, and I am resolved to serve my people with all my art, with all my talent, and with all my knowledge.



As part of this pledge, he promised to paint a swastika on every Egyptian in the *Haggadah* and to dedicate the work to the persecuted Jews of Germany. The publishers in Czechoslovakia and England, concerned about the political implications, forced Szyk to remove the swastikas. Yet allusions to events taking place in Nazi Germany are still clearly evident. Particularly famous is his depiction of the wicked son in German garb with a Hitler moustache.

Szyk worked on the *Haggadah* between 1932 and 1938, during a time of

great upheaval and imminent disaster for the Jewish people. It was published in 1940, in an edition of 250 copies on vellum: half were distributed in the United Kingdom and half in the United States. Cecil Roth, who edited the publication, wrote in his Introduction:

In the general deterioration of the art of book-production in the nineteenth century, the Hebrew Book considered as an aesthetic object sank to its lowest depths . . . The art of the scribe, the calligrapher and the illuminator . . . waned with the eighteenth century . . . It has been left to a contemporary, Arthur Szyk, to rediscover the secret and revive the art . . . To call him the greatest illuminator since the sixteenth century is no flattery. It is the simple truth . . . He does not illuminate a page . . . He thinks of each page in its relation to the text and to the volume, integrating calligraphy, illumination, illustration and narrative into one harmonious whole.

On the English dedication page, Szyk not only added an image of himself dressed in quasi-military uniform with palette and brushes as his weapons, but also included an inscription to the then British monarch, George VI:

At the feet of Your Most Gracious Majesty, I humbly lay these works of my hands, shewing forth the Afflictions of my People Israel.

Surrounding the inscription are drawings filled with symbols relating to the English monarchy, Judaism and Poland. It seems that Szyk was urging the English king to end restrictions on Jewish immigration to Palestine. Throughout the *Haggadah*, he added ancient warriors and heroic biblical figures that are not mentioned in the original text. Szyk portrayed a muscular Moses, whose weary arms are held high by Aron and Hur to guarantee triumph over their enemies. This image symbolized the need for Jews to battle continually against the enemy Amalek in every generation as well as to struggle for a Jewish homeland in Eretz Israel. In a contemporary reference, a group of disheartened eastern European Jews are shown against a background of the pyramids, the symbol of oppression, further illustrating the plight of the Jews in exile.

After the war, Szyk continued his advocacy on behalf of Europe's Jewish refugees, with works calling for the establishment of the State of Israel. In 1942, he joined the Committee for a Jewish Army of Stateless and Palestinian Jews and supported the work of Jabotinsky and Revisionist Zionism. His later work returned to the art of illumination, creating well-known illustrations for Andersen's *Fairy Tales*, *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In addition, he illuminated the Proclamation of Independence of the State of Israel and the US Declaration of Independence. In 1948, he became a citizen of the US and died of a heart attack in 1951 at the age of 57.

We are enjoined to 'tell the story to our children' of the Exodus from Egypt and there is a whole industry making child-friendly *haggadot* using animated cartoon characters. My nine-year-old daughter is ready to start dusting down the *haggadot* I have collected since I got married. No more cartoons for her: I think she's ready for her own *Szyk Haggadah*. ●

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Much of the information used in this article can be found in S. Luckert, *The Art and Politics of Arthur Szyk* (Washington: US Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2002).

The *Szyk Haggadah* was recently reissued in several different formats by Modan in Israel and is distributed by Lambda Publishers, Inc., in New York.

