

## THE SARAJEVO HAGGADAH

*The text of the Haggadah (Hebr., 'narration', 'telling') is used during PASSOVER SEDER. Containing liturgy, uttered at the Passover meal, and often luxuriously illustrated (illuminated manuscript), the Haggadah enables each family to tell the story of the salvation from Egypt, as instructed in the Torah (Ex 13:8). Its main body consists of biblical selections related to EXODUS, thanksgiving psalms, rabbinical sermons, hymns and nursery rhymes sung at the end of the meal. Along with directions for ritual consumption of unleavened bread (Hebr. matzo or matzah) and bitter herbs (Hebr. maror), and drinking wine out of four cups, the Haggadah also holds some of the most known and popular allegories and subjects of Jewish literature: FOUR QUESTIONS, raised by the youngest member of the family, and an enumeration of the TEN PLAGUES. When reciting the Ten Plagues a drop of wine is dripped for each plague, as an appeal to God to punish the gentile oppressors of Jews. The Haggadah is written in distinctively plain folk style and avoids scientific matters. Nevertheless it expresses the idea that the human is not delivered by his or her own action, but rather by God. In this text Moses' name is not mentioned, despite his central role in the biblical tale of exodus.<sup>1</sup>*

In old Hebrew haggadah stands for *story, testimony* or *legend*. It is a book with matters of faith, a unique religious codex prescribing, among others, the duties of worshipers during the holidays. The first Haggadoth emerged at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Up to this day about two thousand have been registered; the majority of these books are handwritten (manuscripts), creations of more or less efficient calligraphists, some of them true artists. Aside from rare exceptions most Haggadoth are, from a graphical perspective, black and white. Only some of them are illuminated, depicting scenes from the Old Testament in color illustrations using a special artistic technique. One of these outstanding books is world renowned as the Sarajevo Haggadah, and has been held by the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo (Zemaljski muzej Bosne i Hercegovine) for more than one hundred years. Many books and documentary films have been made about this miraculous book of great artistic value and hallowed religious importance. The Sarajevo Haggadah is the work of an anonymous artist from the beginning or middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It originates from Barcelona or Zaragoza (the exact location was never established), and was probably a wedding gift. After the victory of the Reconquista and the exile of Jews from Spain in 1492, the book, along with its owner or owners (researchers surmise it had several owners), roved through Venice and Rome to Sarajevo, where it finally settled down and received its present name. There can be no doubt that the book was in Italy for two centuries, since an inscription of a Venetian censor (inquisitor) in Latin from 1609, stating that the book contains nothing disqualifying and can therefore be used in religious purposes, can be seen at its edge.

There is no precise information of when the book and its new owners, the Sephardic family Koen, came to Sarajevo. However, it is acknowledged that in 1894 its current, financially burdened owners sold it for 150 Austrian crowns to Sarajevo's recently founded National Museum, at that time the largest institution of its kind in the Balkans. Shortly after, in the years 1896–1910, the book was moved to Vienna, where it was examined and studied by the Haggadah experts David Müller and Julius Schlosser, who estimated its authentic religious, historical and artistic value.

For several decades a discussion about the possible creed of the anonymous creator of this precious book took place. Some researchers thought he could be a Christian, for the simple reason that all the 69 illuminations on the topic of the Old Testament were figural, whereas it is known that the Torah forbids Jews to depict God in anthropomorphic manner. The remarkably talented unknown artist represented, among other things, the scene of the world's creation in a spherical form, with a round Earth. In the century of the book's creation that was an indescribably free-minded act, as well as lethally dangerous, if we recall what happened to Giordano Bruno two hundred years later. Other researchers into the religious persuasion of Sarajevo Haggadah's creator believe that the artist must have been a Jew after all, which they substantiate mainly with two arguments: firstly, the existence of the so called Hellenized Jews and therefore also Jewish artists creating figural illuminations; and secondly, they refer to archeological research in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Palestine, where remains of an ancient synagogue with sufficiently preserved frescoes demonstrating recognizably anthropomorphic forms were found. It is also not excluded that the artist was a Muslim, for in this era they cohabitated with Jews in tolerant and harmonious relations. Muslims were masters of calligraphy and illumination, but their religion also forbids them to depict anthropomorphic figuration.

<sup>1</sup> Summarized after: Alan Unterman, *Judovstvo, Mali leksikon, Ljubljana 2001, p. 95.*

Be that as it may, the Sarajevo Haggadah is thought to be one of the most beautiful books of its kind worldwide. Its content is written in the so called ornamented square script in Hebrew on finely prepared thin calfskin. The book has 142 vellum leaves, each 6.5 x 9 inches (16.5 × 22.8 centimeters) in dimension. The first part of the book consists of what is called the Passover Haggadah. On the first 40 pages are 69 miniatures (illuminations) with relatively little text. It presents the history of the Torah, which comprises the Five Books of Moses. The last part of the book is ritual in character and contains no illustrations. One of the reasons that the book has survived through all this time, around 650 years, is the fact that anthropomorphic, figural images of God appear in it, which is strictly forbidden by Jewish faith – as well as by Islam. This implies that the Sarajevo Haggadah was used as family relic and was not shown outside of the family circle until the sale to the National Museum in Sarajevo.

The Sarajevo Haggadah is also linked to fates of several people who were prepared to risk their own lives to save it and without whom this book would not have been preserved until today or would not have been in Sarajevo any longer. A well known part of the story of this precious book is from the time of German occupation during the Second World War. It is no secret that the German occupational authorities possessed a special service for stealing art work in the occupied territories of Europe. One such group, with Colonel Fortner as chief, came to the museum in 1941 and demanded that this valuable book were to be handed over to them immediately. The then museum director Jozo Petrović, Ph.D. virtually saved the Haggadah at that point. Even though it was in his desk drawer, he told the arriving officers that just a few minutes before a high ranking German officer had been to his office and that he had handed over the Haggadah to the officer on his command. When the colonel asked the surname of that officer, the director replied he had not dared to ask his name. After that incident the director gave the book to museum's curator Derviš Korkut so he would hide it. Some researchers claim that it was hidden in the basement of the museum, while others believe the curator handed over the book to a Muslim priest on the mountain Bjelašnica. Others again have their own version. All of these mysteries come with the stories accompanying this book. Anyhow, after the war the preserved Sarajevo Haggadah was returned to the museum.

During the last war, when Sarajevo was under siege (1992–1995), the Haggadah was in jeopardy once again – along with more than three million other exhibits. At the beginning of the war, when the museum was completely unprotected and its employees couldn't get to work due to daily bombardments of the city (during the war the museum was hit with more than 400 grenades), the university professor of archeology and history Enver Imamović, Ph.D. and two volunteers risked their lives coming into the museum, not even knowing where the Haggadah was located. After several hours of searching in the museum's basement they finally found it along with other precious exhibits. Thereupon the Haggadah was stored in the treasury of the Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina until the end of the war. When various media reports began to imply that the book had changed hands or that it had been sold to buy weapons, the political leadership of Bosnia and Herzegovina decided to transfer the Haggadah to the synagogue during the Passover holiday. Under appropriate security measures the book was indeed brought to the synagogue, while the event was covered by world press.

The eventual "market value" of the Sarajevo Haggadah has been the subject of great speculation. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the book was under expert appraisal in Vienna, its worth was estimated to be 50,000 Austrian crowns. Before the last war the book's price was mentioned once again, when it was set as at least 7 million American dollars. In fact the book has no price, for it is not for sale. The Sarajevo Haggadah is a national cultural monument of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who is also its owner. It is one of the historical and cultural witnesses of Bosnian multicultural and multiethnic environment, as well as its religious tolerance. We hope that the Haggadah will stay Sarajevo for a long time, for it undoubtedly deserves to hold this name.

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