
SZYK TRANSIT

The greatest work of a once-famous anti-fascist illustrator has been beautifully restored, but not without some conflict along the way.

By Steven Heller

IN 1940, THE POLISH ARTIST Arthur Szyk immigrated to New York City and quickly established himself as one of the most heralded and prolific visual satirists of the World War II era. He drew political cartoons for *The New York Post* and *Esquire* and biting cover caricatures for *Collier's Weekly* and *Time*, always with artistic virtuosity and, as often as not, unflinching anti-fascist imagery. Critics praised him: "To call Szyk a 'cartoonist' is tantamount to calling Rembrandt a dauber or Chippendale a carpenter," declared an editorial in a 1942 issue of *Esquire*.

Far beyond creating mere topical satire, Szyk (pronounced "schick") used art as a call for spiritual transcendence and human liberation. A victim of Nazism in his native country, Szyk—who had been forced to flee to France and England before finally settling in the United States—continued to fight fervently for a free Polish state and, later, for establishing an independent Jewish homeland. Almost everything he did—even his illustrations for fairy tales—were imbued with appeals for universal social justice. "So much of his art has a message—for freedom and justice and against oppression and tyranny," says Irvin Ungar, a rabbi and the curator of the Szyk Family Archives. "He translated his Jewish values into democratic ideals, being an advocate for mankind at large."

For Ungar and other experts in the field of historic Judaica, there is no more lasting testament to Szyk's humanist legacy than his elaborately illustrated version of the Haggadah, the printed story of Passover used as a text during the Seder. "[It was only natural] that

he would be drawn to the Exodus story and the need to confront oppression and to fight for freedom," says Ungar. "The story was not mythology for Szyk; it was an event once again happening in his own day. He recognized that in every generation there would be those who would rise up to destroy the Jews, and he felt it was his job to be a spokesman for his people."

Ungar first encountered Szyk's Haggadah in 1975 at Bloch's, a used bookshop in New York City. He was dazzled by the brilliance of its colors and the intricacy of its medieval-style illuminations, as well as by its spiritual richness and deep feeling. Indeed, upon its publication by England's Beaconsfield Press in 1940, it was hailed by the *Times* of London as "worthy to be placed among the most beautiful of books that the hand of man has ever produced." Unfortunately, Szyk's impeccable draftsmanship had been made unfashionable during the '70s and '80s by the art brut and neo-expressionistic raw-edged mannerisms that were then exerting a hold on illustration, and Szyk was eventually forgotten by the public.

By the early '90s, Ungar had become a rare-book dealer himself as the proprietor of *Historicana* in Burlingame, California. By chance, he happened on another cache of vibrant Jewish holiday prints completed by the artist. Ungar had thought that religion had been the sole theme of Szyk's work, but as he delved deeper into the

Opposite: Illustration for a 1940 Haggadah published by the Beaconsfield Press, England. Shown here, the end piece of the Haggadah, the Passover meal.



"We like to do some work that makes people's eyes hurt." —Tibor Kalman, quoted in "Oppositions: Tibor Kalman vs. Joe Duffy," page 161.

artist's history, he discovered Szyk's 1941 anti-Nazi book *The New Order* (G.P. Putnam's Sons), filled with blood-curdling caricatures of Axis leaders Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito. While these may well have been the most caustic propaganda artworks of the time, by the '90s *The New Order* and the limited-edition *Ink and Blood* (The Heritage Press, 1946) were virtually impossible to obtain, since they were not highly valued by collectors.

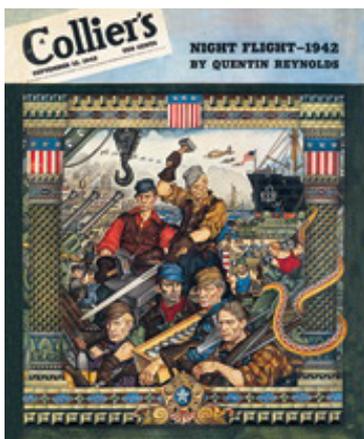
Ungar saw their worth and began making it his personal calling to restore Szyk to his rightful place in art and illustration history. He eventually befriended Szyk's daughter Alexandra, acquired the Szyk Family Archives, and took over the major responsibility for the nonprofit Arthur Szyk Society, which enables him to curate museum exhibitions of Szyk's art. Indeed, a major retrospective, curated by Ungar in collaboration with Berlin's German Historical Museum, will open August 28 for a four-month run. Ungar also edits the Arthur Szyk Society's series of *Art History Papers*; each issue contains an illustrated essay that further adds to the library of scholarly documentation of the artist's life and career.

Ungar's mission to raise consciousness about Szyk has enjoyed a recent triumph: the release in January of a limited-edition Haggadah, which impeccably and flawlessly reproduces (using digital processes) the "luminosity and detail," in Ungar's words, of the original art that Szyk created for the book. Of course, the reproduction had to be as faithful to Szyk's original vision as

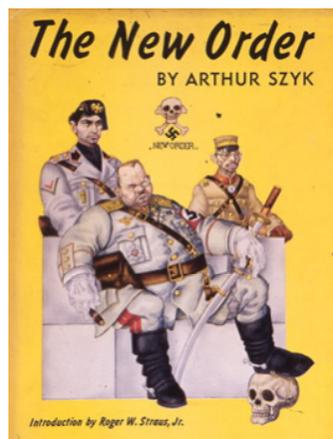
possible. To that end, Ungar hired book designer and typographer Scott-Martin Kosofsky, who had produced *A Survivors' Haggadah* for the American Jewish Historical Society in 1998. Kosofsky selected Claudia Cohen for binding and the Stinehour Press for printing and, with Ungar, selected the authors to write the companion volume essays (which Kosofsky would later design and edit). Kosofsky then enlisted the paper consultant Pavel Repisky, of Atlantic Papers, who persuaded Hahnemuehle, in Germany, to make a sheet especially for the book. The designer used his own Montaigne type—a French Renaissance letter influenced by the work of Jan Tschichold—for the Haggadah text that is meant to be read out loud; he set commentary sections in Lucas de Groot's *The Sans*, with titles in Lance Hidy's *Penumbra*.

Not every aspect of Szyk's Haggadah would be reprinted in its original design, however. Kosofsky thought it contained a few flaws, and set about fixing them with as much allegiance as possible to the artist's original plans. Szyk's talent as an illustrator was not matched by his skill as a designer, Kosofsky believed; for example, he says, some pages in Szyk's original Haggadah contain few words, while others are crammed with excruciatingly small text in long, tight lines. Szyk's basic plan had been for a page-for-page presentation of Hebrew (on the right) and English (on the left).

The English pages of the 1940 Beaconsfield edition attempted to mimic the geometry of Szyk's pages. Where Szyk had Hebrew text,



Collier's Weekly cover commemorating Labor Day, September 12, 1942.



Jacket of *The New Order*, a collection of anti-Axis cartoons (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1941).



Photograph of Arthur Szyk, circa 1948.



Pages from the 2008 edition of Szyk's Haggadah. **Clockwise from top left:** "Blessed art Thou, Lord God, King of the Universe, Who sanctified us by His commandments and has commanded us concerning the removal of Leaven." **Top right:** "The four questions" asked by the youngest child present at the Seder meal. **Bottom right:** Psalm 35:3: "Ready the spear and the javelin against my pursuers, and tell me, 'I am your deliverance.'" **Bottom left:** Exodus 12:27, for the second night of Passover: "So and ye shall say, this is the offering of the Passover."

"Advertising has an excellent opportunity to devote its notorious use of sexual propaganda to positive effect....Informing the public about AIDS demands a redefinition of morality." —"The Rhetoric of Risk," page 148.

the English text was placed in parallel; where Szyk had pictures, an English commentary was squeezed into an equal space; and where there was less English text than Hebrew, the space was filled out with type ornaments. This was all done in Monotype Plantin, the heavy face the British were so fond of at the time. "The English pages created tremendously noisy spreads," Kosofsky says. His design aimed to create pages that were clear and readable, complementary but not competitive. He continues, "Since I was the author of both the new translations and the commentary, as well as the designer and typesetter, I had an unusual amount of control, but still there were great challenges dealing with the most crowded pages."

A project like this requires a great deal of passion and investment, and ultimately, the respective visions of Kosofsky and Ungar began to clash. While Ungar acknowledges his gratitude to Kosofsky for "laying the foundation" for the book, once the prospectus was finished the two parted ways. Ungar then hired Irene Morris to complete the page layouts (retaining Kosofsky's type specifications), and Byron Sherwin, the director of doctoral programs at the Spertus Institute in Chicago, was hired as the new translator and commentator. "His translation is scholarly and true to the meaning of the traditional Haggadah text," Ungar says. "Yet, as [with] any translation, it is also a commentary, as it helps the reader to understand the text. And his commentary on Szyk's Haggadah makes clear what was behind his visual commentary." Sherwin's translation is set in black type, the commentary in blue. And in many instances, the text is set like a page of the Talmud, where the commentary wraps around the translation. "The final product now is as it was laid out in the original prospectus," Ungar says. The press run of 300 copies is available only through szykhaggadah.com in a premier edition and a deluxe edition; the creators' devotion to detail does come at a price: \$15,000 and \$8,500, respectively. Each set will contain a documentary film on DVD, of the remaking of the Szyk Haggadah.

Despite the unexpected drama, Ungar insists that the biggest challenge in producing the reissue has been, more than anything, simply fundamental: "What would Szyk have approved of?" he asks. "How does what I create provide the perfect match to what Szyk created? This, I believe, has become the essence of the project, providing the greatest challenge, yet the greatest joy and excitement." But ultimately, after the Haggadah reaches its audience, Ungar has an even larger goal in mind. "I believe Szyk is a mine so deep and so rich that the art world has yet to grasp how rich and diverse that it is—but when they do, they will realize it is a gold mine." 📍



By the '70s and '80s, Szyk's impeccable draftsmanship had fallen out of favor, replaced by the neo-expressionistic style in vogue at the time.

Opposite: Psalm 136, "The Great Hallel," portraying an Israelite warrior girded for battle against Amalek, the arch-enemy of the Jewish people.

Above: King David holding the words from Psalms 53:7: "O that the deliverance of Israel may come from Zion!"