



Women's League

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THE ROTHSCILDS REUNITED



In the spring of 1950, Dr. Alexander Marx, Librarian of the Jewish Theological Seminary, received an intriguing letter from a Berlin book dealer who was offering for sale to the Library an Italian 15th century, illuminated Hebrew manuscript of extraordinary quality. Enclosed were photographs and a detailed listing of the contents. Fascinated by the offering, Dr. Marx immediately cabled the book dealer to send the volume on approval.

Thus began a tangled tale of four cities involving extensive detective work, correspondence and the search for stolen art, culminating in a lawsuit involving the Seminary and an international cast of characters.

When the volume arrived, Marx was overwhelmed by its unsurpassed beauty. Here was a remarkable compendium of Jewish knowledge and prayer: treatises on astronomy, philosophy, mathematics; moralistic fables akin to Aesop; Psalms, Job and Proverbs, all with commentary; daily Sabbath and holiday prayers; entries on Purim and

Hanukkah, including narration from the second *Book of the Maccabees*; *Pirkay Avot*; moral poems for children; a perpetual calendar; poems for weddings, birthdays and other occasions; and the text of the *Haggadah*. In all, more than 50 religious and secular works were bound in the more than 800 vellum pages. There were 222 exquisite miniatures, over 500 ornamental titles, and countless illuminations. Unques-

tionably one of the finest examples of an illuminated Hebrew manuscript, the *Miscellany* was a sumptuous work of art encompassing in minute detail virtually every custom of secular and religious Jewish life.

But Dr. Marx was troubled. A renowned scholar, he had recalled seeing reproductions of a few of the pages of the *Haggadah* in an obscure bibliographic text written in 1898 and had read an account of the entire manuscript

in a 1930 French periodical, *Revue des Études Juives*. Dr. Marx inquired of the Berlin book dealer regarding the provenance of the work. The dealer responded forthrightly: "The ms. has been given to me by a country squire who wishes to remain anonymous. The owner has given a written statement that the ms. is in the possession of his

family since a long time."

Now Dr. Marx was suspicious, for the article in the French periodical had attributed the work to the Rothschild collection. It had been explicitly catalogued as "Ms. Edmund de Rothschild, Paris, No. 24!"

During the summer months, detailed correspondence was exchanged between Dr. Marx and authorities in London, Paris and New York, as he persevered in his attempt to document the rightful ownership of the *Miscellany*. Marx wrote to Hannah Arendt, Executive Secretary of Jewish Cultural Recon-



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The Rothschild Miscellany includes 474 folios on 948 pages, all approximately 8 1/4" x 6 1/4"; 816 are illuminated with raised burnished gold, flat gold, powdered gold, silver and brilliant colors. (Left to right) Folio 1v - ASHREI HA' ISH "Happy is the man" begins the book of Psalms; Folio 45v - "There was once a man in the land of Oz whose name was Job"; Folio 105v - AL HAKOL YITGADAL "Magnificent above all" - The prayer preceding the Torah reading on Shabbat and festivals.

struction, Inc., an international umbrella organization whose constituent members included: Alliance Israelite Universelle; American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; Board of Deputies of British Jews; Commission of European Jewish Cultural Reconstruction; Committee on Restoration of Continental Museums, Libraries and Archives; Conseil Representatif des Juifs de France; Council of Jews from Germany; Hebrew University; World Jewish Congress; and the Jewish Agency for Palestine. One of the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction's representatives in Wiesbaden reported that, initially, Baron James de Rothschild (the son of Baron Edmund) was "very reluctant to give a definite reply to queries on the question of whether or not any of his most valuable mss. might be missing." He quoted a reliable source in Paris who suggested that perhaps Rothschild did not want to divulge family holdings. In actuality, Rothschild's hesitancy may have

stemmed from the fact that he could not identify the *Miscellany* because he himself had never seen it.

Early in the summer, Dr. Marx turned for legal advice and counsel to Alan Stroock, an eminent New York attorney. As Chairman of the Board of the Seminary, Stroock wrote directly to Baron James de Rothschild in London, formally informing him of the disposition of the manuscript and of Dr. Marx's suspicions concerning its ownership.

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Stroock sought to enlist Baron Rothschild's aid in identifying the manuscript, stating unequivocally that, while the Seminary was anxious to purchase the *Miscellany*, under no circumstances would it enter into a transaction involving stolen art.

Rothschild, in turn, contacted Andre Blum in Paris, who had been the librarian/curator of the collection of his father, Baron Edmund de Rothschild. Blum confirmed (letter dated July 21) that he had personally catalogued the manuscript as number 24, but that, unfortunately, all of his records and notes relating to the collection had been stolen during the Occupation. This correspondence was forwarded to Dr. Marx at the Seminary.

The final evidence arrived in a letter from Eugene Weill, Secretary General of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris, to Hannah Arendt (which she forwarded to Marx on August 11). In it Weill identified the manuscript as #24, "probablement le plus précieux volume de toute la collection ROTHSCHILD." The manuscript, indeed, the most precious volume in



(left to right) Folio 103r - NISHMAT KOL HAI "The soul of every living being" - Prayer expressing the gratitude men owe to God (called the BIRKAT HASHIR - Benediction of the Song); Folio 132v - ZOKHRENU LEHAYYIM "Remember us unto life" - Recited in the Rosh HaShanah Amidah; Folio 147r - HOSHANA "Please save us" prayer for Sukkot. Man wearing a tallit holds the lulav, etrog and hadas. Miscellany photos courtesy Michael Falter, Facsimile Editions, London.

the entire collection, had been stolen by the Nazis; it belonged to the Rothschild family and appeared on the French list of the Commission de Recuperation Artistique as being claimed by James de Rothschild, Edmund's son.

Under the circumstances, the Seminary could not purchase a stolen work of art, nor would they return it to the book dealer, who, in the meantime, was impatiently chafing at the bit because Marx had not yet responded to the original offer of sale.

How could the Seminary insure the legal return of the manuscript to its rightful owner?

The Seminary's only recourse, according to Stroock's considered opinion, would be to have Rothschild file a replevin suit (an action to try the right to ownership of the manuscript) in the Supreme Court of New York, with the Seminary as defendant. On the advice of Stroock, Dr. Marx informed the Berlin book dealer of these developments and of the Seminary's legal intentions. The book dealer, who claimed to be of

Jewish origin, responded immediately, "I ask you to believe me that I am most anxious to have the matter fully clarified, not only because of my personal sense of Justice, but because of the reputation of my firm that has been in existence for 50 years." Repeated attempts on his part to contact the German "owner" were unsuccessful.

Baron de Rothschild retained a lawyer in New York; the case was brought before Judge Samuel H.

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Hofstadter of the New York State Supreme Court. In default of any evidence from the purported German owner, the judge ruled in favor of Rothschild on February 23, 1951, and ordered the return of the *Miscellany*. The book dealer was not implicated. To protect his integrity, the Seminary never divulged his identity.

The Seminary was to remain custodian of the manuscript until it could be delivered in person to Rothschild in London. During the interim, Marx tried through several channels to persuade Rothschild to allow the *Miscellany* to remain in the Seminary Library, either on permanent loan or through outright purchase. In a letter to Rothschild he wrote poignantly: "On the one hand, I am very happy to have been instrumental in identifying the manuscript as your property . . . On the other hand, I, as well as my colleagues . . . here have become so attached to the volume that, after giving





Illuminated pages from the Rothschild Mahzor, Italy, 1492: (Left to right) "Man carrying a Torah and an illustration for the Song of Songs," Passover service, Folio 125v; "Zodiac and Wheel of Fortune," a full page miniature with inscriptions in Latin and Italian as well as Hebrew, Folio 5r; "King Solomon and Other Figures" - opening of Ecclesiastes, afternoon service for Simhat Torah, Folio 395v. Photos courtesy of Rare Book Room, Jewish Theological Seminary Library.

it eleven months of temporary asylum, we find it difficult to part with it."

Curiously, it was Rothschild's wife, the Baroness Dorothy de Rothschild, who responded in a handwritten note thanking Dr. Marx for all his efforts on behalf of the family but apologizing that her husband could not accede to his request. It was the Baron's wish that the *Miscellany* go to Israel, and it is now in the Israel National Museum in Jerusalem.

Dr. Marx must have been dealt a crushing blow by the letter. He had no choice but to comply with Rothschild's wishes. In March 1952, on his way to Israel, Dr. Marx stopped in London to deliver the *Miscellany* to Baron Rothschild personally.

Marx, the persistent and learned detective, did not live to savor the fruits of his labor. The final chapter of the story was written in 1966, when Baron Edmund, the grandson of the Baron Edmund de Rothschild of the



French side of the family, personally presented to the Seminary Library the Rothschild Mahzor, another magnificent 15th century illuminated treasure from the family collection. Bound in its original velvet cloth, it, too, is an exquisite example of Italian High Renaissance manuscript art. At the formal ceremony, Baron Edmund de Rothschild expressed his sorrow concerning the fire which had ravaged the Seminary Library and recalled with deep gratitude Dr. Marx's effort in restoring the *Miscellany* to his family.

A final postscript: In 1985, Michael Falter of Facsimile Editions in London was granted permission by the Israel National Museum to have the Rothschild *Miscellany* disbound. In a process painstakingly developed by him and artisans in Milan, he has produced on parchment a facsimile edition of the *Miscellany*, true to size, handbound on parchment with hand-applied silver and gold leaf. Four years in production, the facsimile has now been completed in a signed and numbered limited edition. The Seminary Library has pur-

chased one, through the generous gift of Chairman of the Friends of the Library, Francine Klagsbrun, her husband, Dr. Samuel Klagsbrun, and her brother, Robert Lifton.

This Rosh HaShanah, the Rothschild manuscripts will finally be united under one roof - in the Rare Book Room of the Seminary Library - in their original Italian splendor.

OUTLOOK wishes to express gratitude to Dr. Mayer Rabinowitz, Seminary Librarian, for permission to reproduce photographs of the Rothschild Mahzor from the Seminary collection and to publish material from the archives of Dr. Alexander Marx; to Evelyn Cohen, Curator of Jewish Art; to Rabbi Jerry Schwartzbard, Special Collections Librarian; and to Dr. Menachem Schmelzer (who was Seminary Librarian when the Mahzor was acquired) for their assistance and cooperation in researching this article. The Rothschild Mahzor will be on public view at the Jewish Museum in New York City, beginning September 17, as part of the new exhibit: "Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy." □



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