



Jewish Passover Plates By Howard H. Cotterell, F.R.Hist.S.

FROM time to time, examples of Passover plates turn up at one or other of the London auction rooms and are passed over by the majority of collectors, who, in all probability, mentally relegate them to that limbo of pieces which have come to be regarded as of no particular interest. More often than not, this attitude is solely due to ignorance of the history of these plates, and of the meaning of their very poignant message. But that there is abroad a desire to know more about them is emphasised by the frequency with which one is asked for an explanation of their significance, coupled with the request for advice as to "what one ought to give for such a piece."

Some few months ago, these questions cropped up again, when my attention was called to a particularly fine example in pewter, in the possession of Mr. Alfred E. Green, of Warwick, an illustration of which is appended (see No. i.), and about which a few particulars may be of general interest.

A second illustration (No. ii.) shows the maker's mark, which appears on the obverse and proves it to be of Dutch origin, though the name and precise *provenance* of the maker are not known. The plate is 18 inches in diameter, and, as will be noticed, the engraving covers practically the whole of the face, and is the work of one Yigeal, son of Moses, of Belgrade, providing us, as will be presently seen, with the date of the piece (1766).

Mr. Green had already in his possession a rough and short translation, but in order to remove any possible doubt on the point, I secured his consent to my obtaining an unquestionable rendering from some recognised authority. On the advice of Major Charles Bailey, of the Department of Metalwork, Victoria and Albert Museum, the photograph was submitted to the School of Oriental Studies, London Institution, at Finsbury Circus, from whom I obtained the explanation

desired, and upon which much of the information forming the background of these notes is based.

It would appear that these plates were used to hold the three unleavened cakes prescribed for the ceremony of the *Seder*, in which connection the following words in Aramaic, around the rim, read:—

"Let all who are hungry come in and eat: let all who are in need come in and celebrate the Passover."

This is the declaration made at the beginning of the *Seder* service, held on the first two evenings of the Passover festival in Jewish households.

In the engraving from which the translation is made there is a curious mistake in one of the words, viz., "ת" for "ס," or "th" instead of "S," which proves that this work was done by an Ashkenazi Jew, whose pronunciation of "th" as "S" would account for the slip.

The last words around the rim read:—

1. "Pesah (*i.e.*, the Paschal Lamb), Matzah (*i.e.* unleavened bread), and bitter herbs."
2. One separate word: "Enough."

Obviously, this latter alludes to the song in the *Seder*-service which is known as *Dayenu*, meaning: "It would have been enough for us."

The Aramaic song, *Had Gadya* (One Kid), the chief feature of this dish, is recited at the conclusion of the *Seder*-service. It was for a long time regarded as an allegorical illustration of the history of the people of Israel. It is, in fact, merely a Jewish nursery rhyme, now known to have been fashioned after a popular German ballad.

Whatever its origin, it is certainly as sacred to the Jew as Liturgy, because the belief is still prevalent that it symbolises the tragic history of Israel and the fate which befell the persecutors.

The translation of the writing, and the meaning of the devices in the ring of circles, beginning

Jewish Passover Plates



NO. I.—PASSOVER PLATE OF PEWTER
BELONGING TO MR. ALFRED E. GREEN

ENGRAVED BY YIGEAL, SON OF MOSES, OF BELGRADE, 1766



NO. II.—UNIDENTIFIED (DUTCH) PEWTERER'S
MARKS ON NO. I.
(APPROX. ACTUAL SIZE)

Jewish Passover Plates

with the one at the top left hand, and reading down and round, is as follows:—

1. "One kid, which my father bought for two (*zuzim*).
2. And a cat came and devoured the kid.
3. And a dog came and bit the cat.
4. Then a staff came and smote the dog.
5. Then a fire came and burnt the staff.
6. Then water came and extinguished the fire.
7. Then the ox came and drank the water.
8. Then the slaughterer came and slaughtered the ox.
9. Then the Angel of Death came and slew the slaughterer.
(And in the central circle is the last stanza of the poem):—
10. Then came the Most Holy, blessed be He, and slew the Angel of Death, who had slain the slaughterer, who had slaughtered the ox, which had drunk the water, which had extinguished the fire, which had burnt the staff, which had smitten the dog, which had bitten the cat, which had devoured the kid, which my father bought for two *zuzim*; one kid, one kid."

The following words appear under the line in the central circle:—

"The word of (*i.e.*, the work of) Yigeal, son of Moses, blessed be his memory, of Belgrade."

And around this inner circle are certain letters giving the date:—

The year "526" in small number (*i.e.*, leaving out the thousands. The full number then is 5526, according to the Jewish era, corresponding to A.D. 1766).

The first words around the rim read:—

"Say the sanctification. Wash (the hands). (Take the) parsley. Divide (the middle cake). Relate the narrative. Wash (the hands, saying the Blessing). Say the Blessing, 'who bringeth forth bread.' (Eat) *Matzah* (unleavened bread). (Eat) the bitter herbs. Eat the horseradish and cake together (as a sandwich). Prepare the table (for the repast). (Eat) the *Hidden* (*i.e.*, the half of the middle cake which has been put aside).

Say Grace. Say the *Hallel*, or Psalms of Praise. Pray for the Divine Acceptance of the Service."

(This is the order of the service and meal combined on *Seder*-nights, *i.e.*, the first two evenings of Passover.)

Parts of this same story appear on most examples of this type of plate, though there is great variety in the scenes depicted upon them.

I have before me, as I write, rubbings of two other similar plates, which were sent to me in 1913 by the late Major-General Sir Charles Crutchley, K.C.V.O., Lieut.-Governor of the Royal Hospital, Chelsea.

Of these two plates, which are still in the possession of Lady Crutchley, the larger one, some 12¼ inches in diameter, bears the mark of a German maker, I. B. Finck, and has part of the same inscription around the rim. But the whole of the well of the plate is occupied with an engraved representation of the interior of a room where, apparently on a dais, several cowered figures are seated on benches ranged along either side of a long refectory table, whereon a feast is prepared, with ewers standing upon the floor in the foreground. On the left a serving (?) figure is carrying various articles from a side table.

The smaller plate, some 10 inches in diameter, is packed with circles of Hebrew and Aramaic writing, with the exception of one row, around the outer margin of the well, wherein are depicted lotus blooms and "demi-men" (couped at the ribs) carrying various emblems or making manual gestures. It bears an unknown, probably German, mark.

Parts of the same inscription appear on this as on the two preceding examples.

Mr. Green's unusually fine example is one of the most interesting which has come to my notice, the patches of corrosion which appear upon the surface being so inextricably pitted into the engraving as to remove any doubt, which might otherwise have existed, as to the latter being contemporary with the plate itself.

