



## Reshaping Germany's Narrative

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for a new Pesach Haggadah. We were resident at The Scuola Internazionale di Grafica di Venezia, a meticulously organised traditional print studio located very near the Ghetto. Etching on copper plates (a coincidental nod to the Ghetto's nomenclature) we were to respond to the original 1609 Haggadah, and be mindful of our contemporary context, and the associations we bring to the city. Venice is layered with the imaginations of other artists and writers; even before arrival we are familiar with its watery cityscape. As head artist I was responsible for leading the artists through the labyrinth of stories, history, traditional Jewish texts and contemporary reality, enabling them to develop their own relationship with the city and make associative links with the Haggadah.

Every cliché about Venice being magical is true, but the city is also in sad decline. It is swamped by tourists who outnumber the locals at a shocking ratio. We were neither residents nor tourists, but there to marinate in its stories and make art. Historically, Venice was an important centre for trade where goods were imported and then, with its artisans and workshops, stuff was transformed. Nothing naturally grows in Venice, everything from the earth in the gardens to the mighty building stones was brought in and adapted for use. And Venice transforms everything. Plaster is painted to look like stone, stone is carved to resemble fabric drapery, fabric is fashioned into flowers, flowers become hair ornaments. And hair can be styled into whatever shape you like to make the most phenomenal wigs. Today there are small pockets of specialised workshops—the boat yard that makes the particular weight for each gondolier, and we visited a paper-making artist who recycles art school students' drawings. But most of the craft-making has gone and Venice now resembles a huge immersive art installation, attracting art-lovers and tourists.

We were joined in the first week by the art historian Professor Marc Michael Epstein, who has written extensively, and entertainingly, on illuminated Haggadot. Marc enabled us to explore how the specific elements of the 1609 Haggadah can be translated and interpreted into our own art.

An important aspect of this project was the make up of the group. We were a deliberate mix of ages, backgrounds, countries and experiences; each with our own associations, and ways to engage with our shared Jewish heritage.

Each artist was to produce two 15 × 20 cm etchings, responding to specific passages from the Haggadah, and a smaller print, 4 × 4 cm. We printed with black ink on white paper. These strict artistic parameters led to diverse responses, reflecting the range of the group, and yet all took inspiration from the text and the city, and formed a cohesive whole.

For three weeks we lived, worked, drew, wrote poetry and played in Venice. Challenging and encouraging each other to develop our thinking and skills, we formed a small art community. In the final week we faced a seemingly impossible task of printing 600 prints. We achieved this, with time to spare, by the co-operation and community spirit that had built up in the group. I am still amazed that we did this. But magical transformations happen in Venice.

*Head artist, Jacqueline Nicholls (UK), was joined by Andi Arnovitz (USA/Israel), Josh Baum (UK) (Spring 2016 Cover Artist), Yael Simon Cohen (Israel/UK), Nathan Gotlib (Belgium), Sophie Herxheimer (UK), Kyra Matustik (Sweden) and Hillel Smith (USA).*

*The New Venice Haggadah is a project of Beit Venezia, directed by Shaul Bassi. Beit Venezia aims to retell the story of the Jews of Venice, inviting international artists, writers, musicians and scholars to reside in the city, make new work, and thus create an ongoing international arts community.*

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## Bruce Leimsidor *Reshaping Germany's Narrative*

¶ Many commentators have tended to view Ms. Merkel's throwing open of Germany's doors late last summer to hundreds of thousands of migrants, who were generally designated as refugees, as a search for redemption for the Nazi period and the Holocaust. But the significance of more recent factors should also be examined.

In 2010, when a public official published a vehemently xenophobic book claiming that the Muslim immigration was a serious threat to Germany, it immediately sold well over a million copies and prompted Ms. Merkel to acquiesce and state publicly that the German model of a multicultural society had utterly failed. Despite government efforts—and Germany's highest marks in Europe of ethnic and religious tolerance—anti-immigrant sentiment continued to increase.

Meanwhile, on the economic front, Germany began to impose her policy of fiscal austerity upon the other countries of the European Union, creating a wave of resentment that culminated when Germany imposed harsh measures on Greece during the negotiations to rescue its faltering economy. To make matters worse, both legitimate refugees fleeing persecution or war, and migrants simply



**Police intercept refugees and potential illegal migrants at Munich Central Station, September 2015**

seeking the advantages of Germany's favorable labour market and generous social benefits, continued to pour across her borders. By midsummer 2015, the figure was in the several hundred thousands.

According to the EU's Dublin accords, an asylum seeker must apply in the first EU country he enters; the main countries of entry, Italy and Greece, however, purposefully neglected to register them. Hence, there was no proof of their country of entry, and therefore, no country within the EU to which the Germans could legally return them. The mistake Ms. Merkel made was to try to exploit this situation and make it seem like an immense gesture of generosity. In doing so, she created an immense migratory "pull factor." People who had never thought seriously about migration to Europe started packing their bags and heading across the Aegean.

Had she left the door open, quietly observing human rights obligations but not loudly issuing the invitation, Germany's intake may have remained reasonable. Now that the situation has gone quite sour, she has started to make clear what she could have done all along: that both migrants and even those who received asylum in Germany may not be allowed to stay if they can be safely returned to their home countries, such as Syria.

Some migrants may be able to find their way around this stipulation, but the large majority will, in fact, be sent back once it is possible to do so. Last summer, when she invited 800,000 migrants to Germany in a year, she never told them that the invitation may have been only for a temporary stay; such clarification would

have, of course, discouraged many that were not in urgent and immediate need of safety. Why was it not said?

Publicising the temporary nature of the asylum would have resulted in much higher costs; it would diminish the migrants' motivation to integrate and find jobs, and would discourage prospective employers from hiring them.

Perhaps even more important to Ms. Merkel, however, was that early discussion of this limitation to German asylum would have detracted from the aura of generosity that Germany needed to project. Not only the government, but also the media was silent about this blemish on the face of Germany's *Willkommenskultur*.

While the German migration policy must appear to be moral and generous, it cannot run the risk of seeming naïve. The media has, therefore, concomitantly tried to minimise the apparent cultural difficulties Germany will have in assimilating this wave of migrants. Hence, the otherwise inexplicable initial obfuscation and delay in reporting the New Year's Eve sexual mayhem caused by migrants. In fact, there had been serious problems with sexually related violence in the migrant reception centres for months.

Germany's history creates perhaps a stronger humanitarian imperative than does that of other EU countries. The image of complying with that imperative has, however, in the case of the current migration, been constructed using a bit of smoke and mirrors.

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