



500 Years of Jewish Life in Venice

A journey into one of the world's oldest Jewish ghettos, where this year a long, rich history is commemorated.

By DAVID LASKIN MARCH 9, 2016

Though you can still see the recesses in the walls where the hinges of the portals once hung, the Venice ghetto has not been a prison since Napoleon seized the city and tore down the gates in 1797. Today, no barrier or signpost marks where Venice ends and its ghetto begins. Cross a canal on an arched bridge, duck through a sottoportego (an alley tunneling through a building), disappear down a vent in the urban fabric — you come and go just like everywhere else in the maze of this island city.

But linger long enough in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo, the generous, frayed, tree-flecked plaza that anchors this corner of Cannaregio (the quiet northwest quadrant of the city) and you'll feel the wall of the past closing in. Half a millennium of history does not transpire without stamping the soul of a place.

Established by decree of Doge Leonardo Loredan on March 29, 1516, the Venice ghetto was one of the first places where people were forcibly segregated and surveilled because of religious difference. The term itself originated here; the area had been used as a foundry (“geto” in Venice dialect) and over time the neighborhood's polyglot residents corrupted the word to ghetto.

I traveled to La Serenissima in December to see how the city was gearing up for the anniversary of the establishment of the ghetto. A major exhibition called “Venice, the Jews and Europe: 1516 to 2016” (on view from June 19 to Nov. 13) was being

planned for the Ducal Palace, and during the last week of July, Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice" will be staged (in English) for the first time in the confines where its most hallucinatory scenes take place. Venice being Venice, there will also be glittering parties, celebrity-filled fund-raisers and fancy dress galas, starting with the invitation-only performance of Mahler's First Symphony at La Fenice opera house on March 29.

But in the course of my visit, what I became most curious about was the mood of the current Jewish community of 450 people. Venice is such an impossibly beautiful fantasy, it seems astonishing that ordinary people, Jews among them, actually live there. How, I wondered, did deep-rooted Jewish families feel about their past — and future — in this ancient, vulnerable city?

My first answer came inside the humble, rectangular sanctuary of the circa-1532 Scuola Canton, one of five synagogues still standing in the ghetto. The synagogues are open to the public only as part of guided tours offered by the Jewish Museum of Venice, and that morning just three of us (two other Americans and I) had signed up for the 10:30 tour in English. We were standing with our guide, Silvia Crepaldi, admiring the golden spiraling tree-trunk columns that support the arch over the bimah (podium), when the subject of rising sea levels came up.

"The city will be empty before it sinks," Ms. Crepaldi said ruefully. "Venice is shrinking before our eyes."

The urban exodus of both Jews and gentiles has been going on for some time, though the pace has accelerated in recent years.

When the ghetto was at its height in the 17th century, 5,000 Jews from Italy, Germany, France, Spain and the Ottoman Empire carved out tiny, distinct fiefs, each maintaining its own synagogue, all of them crammed into an acre and a quarter of alleys and courtyards. Confinement was a burden, but it also provided an opportunity for cultural exchange unparalleled in the diaspora. As Jan Morris, a Venice devotee and one-time resident, writes in "The World of Venice," the city was a "treasure-box" full of "ivory, spices, scents, apes, ebony, indigo, slaves, great galleons, Jews, mosaics, shining domes, rubies, and all the gorgeous commodities of Arabia, China and the Indies."

Jewish merchants and bankers were vital to the flow of these commodities, but as Venice declined, the Jewish presence dwindled. By the outbreak of the Second World War, Jewish Venice had shrunk to 1,200 residents. Today, with the city's total population hovering around 58,000 (down from 150,000 before the war), there are about 450 Venetian Jews left, only a handful of them residing in the ghetto.

“So now the ghetto is just a shell?” I wondered aloud as Ms. Crepaldi led us across the campo, over a bridge, down a street of intriguing-looking shops, and into a tighter, grimmer square (the Campiello delle Scuole or “little square of the synagogues”), flanked by the two Sephardic scuole.

The answer to my question was revealed inside one of these: the sumptuous Scuola Grande Spagnola (Great Spanish Synagogue), possibly the work of Baldassare Longhena, the renowned 17th-century architect of Santa Maria della Salute. After we had gazed our fill at the elliptical coffered ceiling and the black-columned pediment that frames the ark of the covenant; after we had craned our necks to glimpse the cherry wood balustrade and diamond-hatched panels that screen the upstairs women's gallery; after our eyes had bathed in the silver gleam of candelabra and the soft glow of crimson-curtained bottle-glass window panes, Ms. Crepaldi pointed to the brass plaques affixed to the pews. “These are the names of families who pay to rent their own bench sections,” she told us. “These families still pray here. This synagogue is used in summer, and in winter they switch to the Scuola Levantina because it's heated. The Venetian Jewish community may be small, but it's still strong.”

Calimani and Sullam — two of the surnames inscribed on those plaques — appeared in tiny letters by the buzzer I pressed at 10 o'clock the next morning. Riccardo Calimani, the esteemed historian of Italian Jewry and the author of a book about the Venetian ghetto, had given me very precise directions to his home off the Strada Nuova (a rare rectilinear thoroughfare stocked with shops catering more to residents than tourists).

What Mr. Calimani had neglected to say in his email is that he lives in a palace: a light-bedazzled, soaring-ceilinged, art- and book-lined Renaissance suite overlooking the Grand Canal. As he ushered me into his princely study, the ample,

urbane Mr. Calimani struck me as a kind of latter-day Jewish doge.

“My father’s family arrived in Venice from the north of Italy in 1508,” he said, slowing his Italian down to a tempo I could follow. “My ancestor Simone Calimani was the author of a *trattato morale* [moral treatise], printed in the 18th century when Jewish publishing was flourishing here. My grandfather was the cantor in the *Scuola Levantina*, even though our roots are not Levantine but Italian and German.” The Venetian history of the Calimani family, I realized, coincides almost exactly with the history of the ghetto.

The palace belongs to his wife’s family, the Sullams, Spanish Jews who took refuge in Venice after the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century. I knew, from reading Mr. Calimani’s “The Ghetto of Venice” (1988), that Italian and German Jews, the first and poorest to settle in Venice, had been consigned to selling rags and running pawnshops, while the great merchants of Venice were later arrivals from Spain and the Levant.

With tantalizing fragrances wafting out of the hidden kitchen and the velvety light of winter burnishing thousands of leather spines, I could practically taste the history that had made this room possible. The palace may be extraordinary, but the convergence of cosmopolitan currents in the Calimani/Sullam household is quintessentially Venetian.

Their families’ abandonment of the ghetto is also typical. As soon as the ghetto was abolished in 1797, Jews with means fled the high-rise tenements — the tallest buildings with the lowest-ceilinged apartments in Venice — for more elegant, and spacious, parts of the city. But the ghetto remained the anchor of Venetian Jewry. Since travel by gondola was deemed permissible on the Sabbath, the observant had no trouble floating back each week to pray at the *scuola* of their choice.

Today, the Jews of Venice, though still a proud (if dispersed) community, are invisible. (The black-garbed Hasids you see in the campo are not Venetian but followers of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement who have resettled here from other parts of Europe and the United States.) Mr. Calimani, like every local Jew I spoke to, said he moves unremarked in and out of Jewish circles. “The Venice ghetto,” he told me, “was always more open to the city than the Roman ghetto, which was beset by

the conversion mania of the church.”

The dispersal of the community had the unexpected benefit of sending me into unfamiliar neighborhoods in pursuit of interviews. I had been in Venice twice before, but far from growing accustomed to its gorgeous strangeness, I found it endlessly fascinating just to thread the maze, and inevitably get lost in it, on my way to appointments.

The Airbnb my wife, daughter and I rented just off Campo SS. Giovanni e Paolo — the heart of Castello, a still quasi-authentic quarter of working families, schools, neighborhood bars and the municipal hospital — is perhaps half a mile as the crow flies from the flat of Donatella Calabi, a professor of urban history who curated the exhibition “Venice, the Jews and Europe: 1516 to 2016.” But even though Ms. Calabi had emailed me a map with arrows pointing the way, it still required several forays across the nearby Campo Santa Maria Formosa before I hit on just the right “calle” (street in the Venetian dialect).

No matter; it just gave me more angles from which to admire this perfect urban plaza with an austere whitewashed church rising in the center and a perimeter of magnificently crumbling palaces now occupied by restaurants, hotels, banks and the delightful 16th-century house-museum of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia.

As we sat by the windows of her top-floor apartment watching the dome of San Marco go gray against the December dusk, Ms. Calabi spoke with animation of the coming exhibition at the Ducal Palace. “The ghetto provided an incredible occasion for cultural exchange” she said, “and the exhibit will focus on that exchange within the ghetto itself, between the ghetto and the city, and with the rest of Europe.” Artworks including Carpaccio’s “Predica di Santo Stefano” (St. Stephen’s sermon) on loan from the Louvre, virtual reconstructions of the ghetto in various periods, and sacred books will conjure up the rich complexity of this exchange.

Ms. Calabi became more somber when the conversation turned to the present. “Renaissance scholar Francesco Sansovino wrote that for the Jews, Venice was ‘quasi una vera terra di promessa’ — practically a true promised land,” she said. “But today Jewish Venice is a small community within a small city. The 500th anniversary is an occasion not to celebrate — you don’t have a festival for a ghetto — but to

commemorate. An unbroken stretch of 500 years of history will not happen again soon.”

I heard similar sentiments voiced later in the week at a packed meeting of an informal discussion group that gathers at intervals to consider issues pertinent to Venetian Jewry. The members had assembled that night in a pretty little house on a canal in Cannaregio near the Gesuiti Church, a Baroque pile that presides over a quarter once inhabited by artisans and artists (Titian and Tintoretto among them). My Italian, though not quite up to the rapid flow of ideas, was good enough to register the passion and erudition that these 30 or so men and women brought to a discussion of their deeply rooted community.

Amos Luzzatto, an esteemed Venetian-Jewish intellectual and the past president of the Jewish Community of Venice, was present, and we chatted for a few minutes about the small Jewish cemetery on the Lido, the “beit midrash” (study room) named for his family that is still in use in the ghetto, and the book by his renowned ancestor Rabbi Simchah Luzzatto that I had spotted in the Jewish Museum.

I didn’t have a chance to ask Mr. Luzzatto how he felt about the state of the ghetto today, but as I picked my way back to SS. Giovanni e Paolo through deserted echoing alleys and over black filaments of water, I thought of a comment he had made in a recent interview posted on YouTube: “The ghetto today belongs to the city of Venice — it does not belong to the Jews. The ghetto has become part of the panorama of Venice.”

The panorama was its most ravishing the day I met Venice’s head rabbi, Scialom Bahbout, for lunch in the campo. Maybe it was the dazzle of another clear December day or the adrenaline of the holidays (Hanukkah was ending, Christmas still a week away), but the campo, which had struck me as rather forlorn on prior trips, now looked like a stage set waiting for a play. (In fact, this summer’s production of “The Merchant of Venice” will be staged right here, notes Shaul Bassi, a professor at the University of Venice who is spearheading the production.)

Mothers pushed strollers in and out of shadows cast by the teetering ghetto “skyscrapers.” Booted and scarfed Venetians clicked their heels across a bridge and

disappeared into the inviting trattorias that line the fondamenta (bank) of the Rio della Misericordia canal. A small knot of tourists hovered by the entrance to the Jewish Museum, a charming warren of rooms stuffed with precious objects and books (and slated for a major makeover later this year under the aegis of Venetian Heritage, an international organization dedicated to preserving the city's cultural riches). I had just enough time before lunch to duck down an alley and browse the elegant Judaica pieces in glass and gold at Arte Ebraica Shalom.

The one jarring note was the makeshift police booth at the far end of the campo. Though there have been no attacks here, the booth is staffed around the clock by Italian police, rarely seen elsewhere in Venice, and the Jewish community has brought in its own private Israeli security guard. The juxtaposition of the armed police and the two Holocaust memorials (a series of bronze reliefs on either side of the Jewish old-age home that encloses one side of the campo) is apt. During the Nazi occupation, some 250 Venetian Jews, including its beloved chief rabbi Adolfo Ottolenghi, were seized from the ghetto and elsewhere in the city and sent to Auschwitz and a Trieste concentration camp. Eight returned.

The conversation touched only briefly on the Holocaust in the course of my leisurely lunch with the rabbi at Ghimel Garden, the popular kosher restaurant that opened recently beside the old-age home. Davide Federici, a local journalist, and the Venetian sculptor Giorgio Bortoli were present, and Rabbi Bahbout, who is highly regarded after two years in the community, seemed entirely in his element as the talk rambled around art, politics, history, cinema and food.

“Did you know sarde in saor” — sweet and sour sardines, a ubiquitous winter appetizer in Venice — “is typically Jewish?” the rabbi asked as the first round of plates appeared beside our glasses of prosecco. I was aware of the influence of ancient Jewish recipes on Roman cuisine, but it never occurred to me there was anything Jewish about the food of Venice, where shellfish (not kosher) figures in so many dishes. I'd also never seen an Orthodox rabbi sipping prosecco.

By the time the pasta arrived, the conversation had moved on to the rabbi's dream project: a Jewish university in Venice. “The challenge today is to sustain the vivacity of our culture and carry it into the future. What better way than with an

international Jewish university?” In Venice today, conservation tends to dominate other concerns — “but what we really need is to construct the next 500 years.”

The rabbi’s American-born wife, Lenore Rosenberg Bahbout, joined us for pinza, a thrifty confection of stale bread and spice. We were chuckling about all the celebrities (Barbra Streisand, Donna Karan, Diane von Furstenberg, Barry Diller) whom Toto Bergamo Rossi, the charming director of Venetian Heritage, had tapped to fund the ghetto restoration project. “It’s wonderful,” said Mrs. Bahbout. “But it would be even more wonderful if this money could be used to restore the soul of the ghetto.”

I contemplated the soul that Saturday morning, my last in Venice, at the Shabbat service in the Scuola Levantina. The high, dim sanctuary was about a quarter full, perhaps 40 men scattered around the benches that ran the length of the room between the massively carved bimah and the red-curtained ark of the covenant, with 15 or so women peering down at us from the upstairs gallery.

I’d been in Venice less than a week, but already I recognized faces — Paolo Gnignati, the current president of the Jewish community; Elly, the strapping Israeli security guard who had warned “no cellphones — they’re Orthodox!” before letting me enter the synagogue; and of course Rabbi Bahbout, distinguished and elegant in his fedora as he chanted the Sephardic liturgy.

Every Venetian I spoke to, Jew and gentile alike, had expressed deep pessimism about the city’s future. But as I sat in this sacred space in the hushed, carless city, listening to the Hebrew prayers and Italian murmur, I felt reassured, not discouraged, by the evidence of time. Since the ghetto was first established, doges, merchant princes, Shylock, Napoleon, the Austrians, the Nazis have come and gone (and in Shylock’s case, will soon return). Through that half-millennium of history, Jews have gathered on Sabbath mornings like this one at the serene cusp of winter to pray and gossip in the Venice ghetto.

IF YOU GO

The website of the **Jewish Community of Venice**,

veniceghetto500.org/?lang=en, has the latest information about events planned for the anniversary year. The **Venetian Heritage Council**, vh-council.org, is in charge of the coming restoration of the Jewish Museum and the ghetto synagogues.

“Venice, the Jews and Europe: 1516 to 2016” will be on view at the Ducal Palace (veniceghetto500.org/la-mostra/?lang=en, Piazza San Marco) from June 19 to Nov. 13. Tickets are 19 euros (about \$20) and can be purchased online.

“The Merchant of Venice” will be performed outdoors in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo on July 26, 27, 28, 29, and 31, with a rain date on Aug. 1. The production, in English, is being staged through a partnership between Compagnia de’ Colombari theater company (colombari.org/#!home/c1pbl) and Ca’Foscari University of Venice. For tickets and further information, see themerchantinvenice.org.

The **Jewish Museum of Venice** is open from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Oct. 1 to May 31 and until 7 p.m. from June 1 to Sept. 30. Hourly guided tours of the synagogues (in Italian and English) start at 10:30 (museum admission is €4; museum and synagogue tour is €10). The museum also offers tours of the Jewish cemetery on the Lido, with advance booking. Closed Saturdays and Jewish holidays. For more information, museoebraico.it/english/museo.html.

The Kosher in Venice website, kosherinvenice.com, lists kosher restaurants, hotels and food shops in the ghetto, including **Ristorante Ghimel Garden**, the recently opened **Giardino dei Melograni** guesthouse, and **Panificio Volpe Giovanni**, a bakery and grocery.

Correction: March 9, 2016

An earlier version of a homepage headline for this article incorrectly described when Venice’s Jewish ghetto was forcibly segregated. It was 500 years ago, not a half-century ago.

David Laskin, who writes frequently about Italy, is the author of “The Family: A Journey Into the Heart of the 20th Century.”

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