

destination

Venice

the Jewish ghetto of Venice

• by Craig Zeichner



The Canton Synagogue is tucked into a corner of the campo. The wooden extension, which continues behind the orange wall, houses the synagogue. This view also gives a good sense of how buildings were enlarged and extended to accommodate the ghetto's swell in population.

*t*he Jews must all live together in the Corte de Case, which are in the Ghetto near San Girolamo, and in order to prevent their roaming about at night: Let there be built two Gates, on the side of the Old Ghetto... This edict, passed by the Senate of La Serenissima, the Most Serene Republic of Venice, on March, 29, 1516, created the world's first ghetto.

There were Jews in Venice as early as the 12th century, falling in and out of favor until the 1516 decree forced them onto a tiny island set among the city's labyrinth of canals. The island had once been a foundry, and the word "ghetto" is derived from the Venetian verb "to cast," from which the word for "foundry" is also drawn.

The windows of houses that looked out on the surrounding canal were walled up, the ghetto was locked at night and Christian guards patrolled the canal in boats. In a bitterly ironic twist, the Jews were actually forced to pay for the gates that surrounded them and the guards who policed them.

The republic demanded that Jews wear identifying signs of their faith, and decreed that Jews were only permitted to work as money lenders, merchants, second-hand clothing vendors and physicians. Paradoxically, the republic also forbade violence against Jews, a measure that was

Photos by Beth Adelman



CASA ISRAELITICA DI RISOSO



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unheard of in Europe at that time.

The ghetto is divided into two parts, and the names can be confusing. Ghetto Nuovo means new ghetto, but it's actually the oldest part. Ghetto Vecchio means old ghetto, but it's the area the ghetto later expanded into to accommodate a massive influx of Sephardic Jews after 1492. The old Ghetto Nuovo is on the site of the new foundry, while the new Ghetto Vecchio is on the site of the old foundry.

Sitting in the campo (square) of the Ghetto Nuovo, sipping espresso with Claudio Ronco, a cellist, composer, writer and Venetian Jew, sets the stage for what we are about to see. Ronco waves his arm at the circle of houses enclosing the campo. "At the peak of the ghetto, 5,000 people lived in these buildings – 5,000 people in such a small space. Because there was no room to build horizontally, the buildings grew vertically, some as high as 10 stories." When you look at the buildings, many of them currently undergoing renovation, you notice that all are connected. Ronco explains, "Christians did not want to see Jews on the streets on the

Sundays, so there were passageways connecting each building, allowing Jews to move about without being seen."

Being forced into such cramped living conditions was particularly galling for the many wealthy Jews who lived in palazzi along the Grand Canal before the edict. In spite of this, the Jews remained Venetian in spirit and turned the ghetto into a thriving, culturally rich community.

The ghetto survived as an island in a city made up of hundreds of tiny islands. And the unique topography of Venice left its mark on the community. "The first printed edition of the Talmud was published right here in Venice by Daniel Bomberg," Ronco says. Bomberg wrestled with the problem of how to present the commentaries upon commentaries in a format that required single pages.

"If you look at the volume you'll see the text and then the commentaries encircling it. Do you know what that looks like? It looks like a map of Venice, a series of islands. Think of the Talmud as a map." It's an arrangement that survives to this day – a gift of the Venetian Jews.



DOOR OF THE LEVANTINE SYNAGOGUE

three names you should know

Leon de Medina (1571-1648) was the most famous rabbi in Venice. A colorful and sometimes controversial figure, de Medina's sermons drew huge audiences, including Christian church leaders. He was also a gambler, alchemist, translator and actor. De Medina acted as secretary and maestro di cappella of a music academy in the ghetto. His musical interests led him to spearhead a movement to reform liturgical music, and he was influential in publishing the sacred compositions of the Jewish composer **Salamone Rossi** (c.1570-c.1630).

Although Rossi was most active at the Mantuan court, it's his contributions to sacred music for which he is best remembered. His Hashirim Asher Lishlomo (Songs of Solomon), a collection of 33 compositions for choir, was published in Venice in 1623. Rossi's music reflects the influence of both Renaissance and Baroque masters.

Another supporter of Rossi was the Sullam family, whose most famous member was **Sarah Coppio Sullam** (1592-1641). A student of de Medina, Sarah Coppio Sullam was born in the ghetto and was a poet of the first rank. She presided over one of Venice's most prestigious literary salons, a center for Jewish and Christian intellectuals. Sullam became famous through a series of letters and sonnets she exchanged with the Genoese nobleman and monk, Ansaldo Ceba, who challenged her to convert to Christianity. Sullam defended her faith with wit and pride.

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The ghetto is small and can be walked in about 15 minutes. It is not a museum, although it is home to one; it's a living, breathing community with shops, cafes, and all the energy of any Italian neighborhood.

To get your bearings, do as the natives do. Sit down in the campo at an outside table of I Quattro Rusteghi, a non-kosher cafe that serves excellent espresso and cappuccino, and light snacks. You can see the entire Ghetto Nuovo from here.



THE ENTRANCE TO THE GHETTO NUOVO

the Scole of Venice

Three of the synagogues ("scole" in Italian) are located in the campo of the Ghetto Nuovo: the Grande Tedesca (Great German) was built in 1528 and is currently closed for renovations; the Canton was built in 1531; and the Italiana was erected in 1571 in a building fronted by four pillars – an architectural style usually reserved for theaters. The synagogues are difficult to recognize at first because they were built into the upper floors of buildings that served other purposes.

Two other synagogues, the only ones still active in Venice, are located in the Ghetto Vecchio and face one another across a small square called Campiello delle Scole. The Levantina was built in approximately 1538, the year Levantine merchants fleeing the Inquisition were permitted to live in Venice.

Banco Rosso

Start your tour at a simple brick building called the Banco Rosso (Red Bank). Venice's most important pawn shop was located here. The building takes its name from the red pawn tickets and promissory notes it issued. If you look over the doorway, you can still read the building's name.

Your next stop should be the Museo Ebraico Di Venezia (Jewish Museum in Venice). In addition to displays of sacred objects and documents, the museum provides guided tours to four of the five synagogues that are scattered throughout the ghetto. You can only see the synagogues on the museum tour, so be sure to sign up.

tips on travel in Venice

Italy can get pretty warm, and Venice is crowded during the peak summer months, so it's more comfortable to travel in the autumn. Early spring and late fall are rainy seasons.

There are no automobiles in Venice, so get used to walking and using the vaperetto, a ferry that travels up and down the main canals. They are a good way to see some beautiful parts of the city. Vaperetto travel costs approximately 6,000 lire each, and round trips are 10,000 lire.

English is spoken in most places, but you might

want to bring an Italian phrase book.

There is no lodging in the ghetto. The Ghetto is easily reached by public transportation.

• **Museo Ebraico Di Venezia**
Cannaregio 2902/b
30121 Venezia
Telephone 041 715359
museoebraico@codessultura.it
Open June 1st - September 30th, 10AM-7PM
October 1st - May 31st,
10AM-4:30PM
Admission is 5,000 lire and includes a guided tour of the synagogues

• **Gianfranco Penzo**
Decorazione Vetri Artistici
Campo Ghetto Nuovo
2895/6 Cannaregio
30121 Venezia
Telephone 041 716313

• **Arte Ebraica Shalom**
Ghetto Vecchio 1218-1219
Cannaregio
30121 Venezia
Telephone 041 720092
www.shalomvenice.com
e-mail:
fusetti@shalomvenice.com

• **Ristorante Gam-Gam**
Sotto portico di Ghetto Vecchio
Cannaregio
30121 Venezia
Telephone 041 715284

• **I Quattro Rusteghi**
Camp Ghetto Nuovo
Cannaregio
2888 Venezia

• **Antico Cimitero A S. Nicolú Del Lido**
Open year round.

Guided tours are offered on Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays. The tour costs 12,000 lire per person. Ticket and tour information are available at the Museo Ebraico Di Venezia. (The museum also offers private tours of the cemetery by appointment. Contact the museum to make arrangements.) The cemetery is easily reached by public transportation.

The Spagnola (Spanish), the largest of all the synagogues, was probably built in the second half of the 16th century. The German and Canton synagogues were Ashkenazic, the Italian practiced the Italian rite and the Levantine and Spanish were Sephardic.

The beautiful and sometimes bizarre melding of Venetian and ancient Jewish cultures come to life in these buildings. The synagogues were built by Christians who based their designs on the Venetian theaters, palazzi and churches that dot the city. (Jews were not permitted to work as architects.) A particularly good example of this cultural cross-pollination is the Scola Canton, whose ceilings feature paintings of scenes from Exodus. The artist's rendering of ancient Egypt bears an uncanny resemblance to Venice.

The two Sephardic synagogues are the most lavish and reflect the wealth of their congregations. The Scola Levantina has a wooden pulpit, attributed to the artist Andrea Brustolon, that's carved with an ornate floral design, while on the opposite wall is a simple, elegant marble *aron*. The building was redesigned in 1635 by Baldassare Longhena, a noted Baroque master who designed a number of Christian houses of worship in Venice. The ground floor of this building was the home of a 17th-century religious school led by Rabbi Simon Luzzato, the spiritual leader of the ghetto during this period.

The Scola Spagnola's ordinary exterior doesn't prepare you for its internal splendor, including lavish brass chandeliers and banisters that are in the quintessential Venetian Baroque style.

Museo Ebraico Di Venezia

The museum houses a wealth of interesting artifacts, including 18th- and 19th-century Torah crowns, Shabbat items and a host of domestic wares. Perhaps the most beautiful items in the museum are a series of magnificent *rimmonim* from 16th-century Turkey and superbly wrought *yads*, representing the height of Venetian silverwork.

Pay special attention to two wonderful documents on exhibit: First you will be dazzled by a brilliantly colorful 18th-century ketubah. Best of all is a parchment document belonging to "The Holders of the Covenant," an organization that helped needy families fulfill the religious duty of circumcision. The

document shows a circle of faithful in 18th-century dress watching as an infant is circumcised.

After touring the museum (it should take about 90 minutes), be sure to visit the gift shop and kosher cafe. Most items in the bookstore are in Italian, but you will find plenty of books in English on all subjects, including theology, philosophy, art, fiction and cooking. Many of these books are not available in the U.S.

For 4,000 lire (approx. \$2 U.S.) per item, you can sit down and sample aggressively strong Yemenite coffee, falafel, juice, assorted pastries or a bagel with lox and cream cheese at the cafe.

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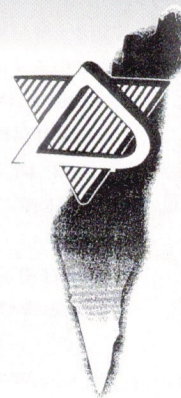
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Casa Di Riposo Israelitica and Holocaust Memorials

Before you start wandering the ghetto and shopping, there are two sights in the campo of the Ghetto Nuovo that are worth your attention. The first is the Casa Di Riposo Israelitica (Jewish Rest Home), founded in the 19th century. The building houses some community administrative offices, a residential section, and Venice's Orthodox community buys its kosher meat there, shipped in from Rome and Medina. (There are 35,000 Jews currently living in Italy; 600 of them live in Venice.) To the right of the Casa Di Riposo are two striking Holocaust memorials by the artist Arbit Blatas. The Nazis killed more than 200 Venetian Jews.

Shopping

There are two shops in the ghetto that are worth a visit. The glass shop of Gianfranco Penzo, in the campo of the Ghetto Nuovo, features astonishing, ethereal hand-painted Venetian glass. Penzo's designs are mostly based on illustrations found on illuminated manuscripts. If you have a particular motif in mind, Penzo can paint it for you. If you care to scan the many art books in his shop, Penzo can also paint one of the motifs that you select. The shop is located between the Canton and Italiana synagogues.

Arte Ebraica Shalom is owned by a Sephardic Jew named Diego Baruch Fusetti, whose family has been silversmiths and residents of the ghetto for 500 years. Fusetti's collection of hand-made silver religious objects is breathtaking, yet quite reasonably priced. The shop also

features hand crafted religious objects in glass, bronze, gold and silver. Located just over the bridge leading out of the Ghetto Vecchio, the shop can be found by looking for the sign with the menorah over the door.

Leaving the Ghetto

If you are hungry after your visit to the Ghetto, you might consider Ristorante Gam-Gam, a recent arrival in the ghetto run by Lubovitcher Hasidim. Gam-Gam's menu features a good variety of kosher specialties at moderate prices, 14,000-25,000 lire (\$7-12 US), with some interesting takes on pasta and fish.

Antico Cimitero A S. Nicolú Del Lido

After you leave the ghetto, you might want to finish up your exploration into Venetian Judaism with a visit to the recently restored Antico Cimitero A S. Nicolú Del Lido (Ancient Jewish Cemetery at San Nicolú). The site was given to the Jews in 1386 by the republic and is one of the oldest Jewish cemeteries in Europe. Two of the ghetto's greatest figures are buried in the cemetery: Rabbi Leon da Modena (1571-1648) and the poet Sara Copio Sullam (late 1500s-1641). The cemetery closed in the late 18th century but has been opened to the public thanks to a massive restoration project sponsored by several historic and charitable organizations – most of them American. **WAO**



Craig Zeichner is a freelance writer, who specializes in history and music and lives in Brooklyn, NY.

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