

VENICE, THE JEWS,
AND EUROPE:
FIVE HUNDRED YEARS
SINCE THE CREATION
OF THE GHETTO

Donatella Calabi

I.

The word “ghetto” now has a worldwide, everyday usage. Found regularly in newspapers and the media, in general it refers to cases of physical and social “isolation.” At times it has connotations of a high degree of urban degradation, or of people on the margins of society and evokes their interpersonal behavior. But in fact it is a blanket term for very different situations that may be remote both geographically and politically.

Five hundred years on from the creation of the Venetian Ghetto, thinking about its long history as the first ghetto in the world means reconstructing its everyday life, the many contradictions, complexity, and even its “porosity,” in order to try to grasp the meaning of “segregation” that the term gradually assumed in the past, and even in more recent times. But it also means understanding the cosmopolitanism closely associated with its history.

Modern-day ghettos are perceived as dangerous places, conditioned by economic precariousness and high levels of immigration. Nonetheless, they are still seen as potentially multicultural, given the opportunities for meetings, exchanges, and coexistence available to people of different origins.

Here it is worth remembering the words of Salvatore Settis, who, referring to a book by Richard Sennett, argued that “the experience of the Jews in the Venetian Ghetto suggested a way to mesh cultural and political rights destined to endure in time.” In what was then “the most cosmopolitan city in Europe,” indeed “the first global city in the modern world,” the Ghetto community developed a “sense of mutual solidarity” and “forms of collective representation” based on a knowledge of their own rights. In doing so, they made the Venetian enclosure the general emblem of a place in which “freedom of speech tended to coincide with the right to be in the city.”

Becoming familiar with this story leads us to the awareness that the Jewish identity is an integral part of European identity. Twenty-seven years on from the fall

of the Berlin Wall (1989), in a free and reunited continent, which is, however, incapable of governing the new waves of fear triggered off by huge numbers of migrants, this realization may arguably contribute to tackling the challenge now facing Europe: the challenge of avoiding a new age of concrete barriers and barbed wire fences, and of obviating the danger of a world with an “archipelago of ghettos.” As Nadia Urbinati put it, “borders are artifices that must be seen in relative terms and their closure justified” (*La Repubblica*, May 4, 2016), because, according to the Kantian idea, to be free individuals must be able “to leave their own state, carrying with them their own roots.”² This after all is what, despite the Ghetto, the Jews were capable of doing many times in the centuries considered here.

The decision to stage an exhibition on *Venice, the Jews, and Europe* in the Palazzo Ducale reflected our desire to grasp the opportunity of a special anniversary and to mark this date, 2016, with our eyes trained not only on the past but also on the future of our society, aware of the long and complicated developments that have shaped it.

The exhibition is the result of thinking on history, art, and documentary evidence. It aims to tell the story of the Ghetto of Cannaregio, the way it grew within itself, its architecture, social makeup, crafts and trades, material life, and the relations between the Jewish minority and the rest of the city, seen against the background of relations with other Jewish settlements in Europe and the Mediterranean basin. Paintings, drawings, books, documents, and multimedia presentations enable us to narrate a very long story, which is also characterized by permeability, an openness fostered by cultural relations and exchanges. The idea is to offer visitors to Venice the opportunity to gain a greater awareness of all the diversity in Europe and the blend of knowledge, skills, and customs that make up its principal heritage.

Our narrative casts light on the fact that in those early decades of the sixteenth century the Venetian Republic implemented an urban strategy of welcoming im-

migrants, offering them guarantees. At the same time a more or less strict surveillance was exercised over all the national and religious communities, which were important because of their economic activities, such as the peoples from the north (housed in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi), the Orthodox Greeks (who were granted permission to construct a church and college at their own expense), or Albanians, Persians, and Turks. Like other minorities, the Jews were “precious” for the Serenissima (this was the unusual term used in the documents). The city’s magistracies, some nobles, and even Doge Leonardo Loredan, who was the “prince” at the time of the decree instituting the Ghetto (March 29, 1516), were fully aware of this.³

The exhibition illustrates the distribution of Jewish settlements in Europe after 1492 as the background to the creation of the first real ghetto in the world in Venice. It explores the debate about its location, growth, and urban and architectural form in the subsequent extensions (Ghetto Novo, Ghetto Vecchio, and Ghetto Novissimo), and its relations with the rest of the city (the Rialto stores, the cemetery, and the excavation of the canale degli Ebrei). There is a focus on the regulations, prohibitions, abuses, conflicts, and exchanges as well as the Ghetto society, made up of different communities (German, Italian, Levantine, and “Ponentine,” or Spanish), who were different in terms of religious rites, language, and culinary habits. Lastly, their cultural production (music, art, and literature) are also a major part of the exhibition.

There is a need to explain the fact that in the first two decades of the sixteenth century Venice was going through a period of uncertainty with partially conflicting behaviors. Money-lending for pawns was one of the Jews’ main economic activities in Venice, as elsewhere in Europe. And arguably this occupation, especially in the stages of political and financial difficulty that the Republic was experiencing before and after the crisis of the League of Cambrai,⁴ explains the welcoming and subsequent settlement of Jews in the city.

pages 22, 23
Guido Costante
Sullam, *Pianta
dimostrante lo
sviluppo del Ghetto
di Venezia dal 1516
al 1797*, 1930, in
C. Roth, *Venice,
Philadelphia 1930*
(cat. 180.), full
view and detail

Other restrictive measures had been introduced in the fifteenth century. At the end of the century, after the decrees expelling the Jews from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1496), the migrations in the Mediterranean also continued during the times of political and economic difficulty for the Republic, confronted with the opening up of the new trade routes to the East and the Americas, and the dangerous crisis following the Battle of Agnadello, which had weighed heavily on the financial resources of its government organs.

This brings us to the Republic's decision to set aside a circumscribed area of the city for the Jewish minority. It was to be closed by two gates, which, as the Senate ruled on March 29, 1516 (cat. 8.), would be opened at the sound of the *marangona* (the bell of St. Mark's that dictated the rhythms of city life) and closed at midnight by four Christian custodians, paid by the Jews and obliged to live in the Ghetto itself with no family so as to concentrate better on their surveillance duties. Moreover, two high walls were to have been built (never actually constructed) to close the area along the canals going round the island, thus walling off the canal banks. Two Council of Ten boats, with guardians paid by the new *castellani* ("castle" occupants) were to patrol the canal around the island at night to vouchsafe security. On April 1, 1516, the same "cry" announcing the enclosure was proclaimed at Rialto and on the bridges of all the city quarters in which Jews resided. The political and economic difficulties led to new religious policies: The anti-Jewish turning point was decided by some illustrious patricians, such as the patriarch Antonio Contarini. At the same time an inquisition campaign was launched by preachers, Franciscan friars, and hermits. Their hostility, however, was not only directed at the Jews. In 1515, the patriarch intervened personally in a session of the Venetian Senate to prevent the construction of an Orthodox-rite church requested by the Greek community; he later ordered the confiscation of Luther's works, recently put on sale in a Venetian bookstore.

Whereas in Ferrara Duke Ercole I had already welcomed Jewish families from

Spain in 1493, in Venice some wished to keep them out of the city center, suggesting they be housed in the suburbs or on an island. This, however, required negotiation with the Jews already resident in Venice, evidently considered rightful "interlocutors" with whom to discuss the issue.

The exhibition covers a very long historical period: from the institution of the "courtyard of houses" for the Jews in 1516 to the events in Venice after the arrival of Napoleon and the removal of the Ghetto gates, and the whole of the twentieth century. In the latter part of the exhibition the aim is to highlight how the assimilation of the Jews and their access to professions, political positions, and property ownership developed hand in hand with the drive for better sanitary conditions and the process of modernization in the city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2.

Laid out in eleven rooms in the doge's apartments in the Palazzo Ducale, the exhibition is divided into chronologically ordered thematic sections. It starts from a reconstruction of the *Getto*, the copper foundry giving the place name to the enclosure of the Jews. The same room also illustrates the Jewish migratory flows in Europe, after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal, and briefly maps out the presence of other Jewish settlements in the Veneto area.

The next section describes where Jewish residents lived in Venice *Before the Ghetto*—that is scattered in the city, but mainly in the central area and around the Rialto market, as well as in Mestre. A few years after the first proposal to rebuild the old wooden bridge at Rialto in stone and the Senate's decision to restore the existing bridge, in 1515 a group of Jews acquired a series of shops in the lively commercial area that became a thoroughgoing "world-economy," to borrow Fernand Braudel's concept. This second room shows the liveliness of the trading area, thanks also to the reconstruction of the old cantilever bridge (which could still



be raised in the middle for vessels to pass through), as well as the canal banks, where “peoples” from every country did business, and the stores in the arcades (rebuilt after the great fire of 1514) in the small square of San Giacomo. The same section also focuses on the position of the future enclosure (Ghetto Nuovo) within the *sestiere* of Cannaregio on Jacopo de’ Barbari’s bird’s eye view map (1500).

Entitled *Cosmopolitan Venice*, the next room explores the contemporary presence of other national, ethnic, and religious communities in the city. This aspect is developed by considering two magnificent paintings by Vittore Carpaccio: *The Sermon of Saint Stephen at Jerusalem* and the *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*, on loan from the Louvre and the Pinacoteca di Brera, respectively. They illustrate the very varied population of the city, consisting of people with different national, ethnic, or religious origins in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The caricature physiognomy of the Jew, reflecting an ever-present climate of hostility, and the decision to welcome them are explored in the exhibition in a wonderful painting by Giovanni Bellini, *The Mocking of Noah*, from the Musée des Beaux Arts, Besançon. In the same room, the importance of Hebrew printing in sixteenth-century Venetian publishing is illustrated in a kind of “scriptorium,” stocked with valuable books from the National Library of Israel, the Biblioteca Nazionale di Naples, the Biblioteca Marciana, and the Biblioteca di San Francesco della Vigna. The books on show include an Aldine edition of Lascaris, Maimonides’ Torah printed by Alvise Bragadin and Marcantonio Giustinian in 1550 and 1551, respectively, the *Pentateuch* printed by Daniel Bomberg in 1525, Leone Modena’s *Ester* in 1619, and an extraordinary illustrated eighteenth-century encyclopedic work on astronomy, medicine, and anatomy by Tobia Coen.

The fourth room explores the shared life in the Ghetto of several communities of Jews, whose origins, provenance, customs, and languages (even their decorative styles, as found in objects and textiles) were so different that they barely understood each other. The themes considered mainly deal with housing: urban

Ketubbah of Rachele, daughter of Josef Baruch Carvalhio, and Jacob ben Jehuda Abraham Uzieli, Venice 1691, Vienna, Ariel Muzicant Collection, detail

density, the irregular internal fragmentation of buildings, their upward development, and their typical features (thin perimeter walls, long steep flights of stairs, low ceilings, and weak foundations). Other key topics include daily life to the rhythm of rites, and festivities, or childrens' games (see the *ketubbah* on page 26), permitted activities (money-lending, medicine, the second-hand trade), and forbidden but *de facto* practiced activities (such as printing), as well as the presence of food stores.

In the fifth room, the role of the five synagogues and the *yeshivoth* (schools), and their position in the Ghetto, are described in a video taking us into the Scola Tedesca in the Ghetto Nuovo and the the Scola Spagnola in the Ghetto Vecchio with a focus on the *tevah*, *aron*, and the decorations, as well as recordings of ritual chanting. The video exploration of the synagogues will be complemented by the presence in the exhibition of an engraving, ritual silver objects, and two gilt leather decorative panels from the Museo Ebraico, Venice and highly refined textiles.

The next themes concern the extensions to the enclosed area of the Ghetto (the Ghetto Vecchio, 1541, and the Ghetto Nuovissimo, 1633). The opening of the Ghetto Nuovissimo to accommodate a wave of special migrants: wealthy merchants, mainly from the Ottoman Empire and considered to be useful for their business contacts by the Venetians. Morphologically, this marked a different settlement stage from the earlier ones. Moreover, from now on, no one in the city would call into question presence of Jews.

Section 6 will briefly explore the condition of women and a leading female figure. Watercolor marriage contracts (*ketuboth*) provide insights into daily life, in which women played a far from secondary role in Jewish society. One exceptional woman, Sara Copio Sullam, will be considered through her writings and intense intellectual relationship with Leone Modena, as well as featuring in a video presenting two imaginary dialogues. For this purpose, some original texts have been transcribed. The first dialogue is dedicated to the literary salon of the Accademia

degli Incogniti (in which she played an important role) and the second to the controversy involving Sara and Cesare Cremonini (her *Manifesto* rebuking his criticism is on show in the exhibition).

In Room 7 the theme is the important role played by Jews in Venice's Mediterranean and European trade, with a special focus on the intense relations that the Jews established with Constantinople in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A defining moment, marking a complete break with the past, in the long history of the Jews in Venice was the arrival of Napoleon in 1797, the fall of the Republic, and the removal and burning of the gates of the Ghetto on a bonfire in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo. These events were eventually followed by the gradual assimilation of the Jews into civil society. Room 8 documents the municipal authorities' coming to terms with the state of decay in the Ghetto as a peripheral area that had always been neglected in terms of building maintenance. This then led to remodeling or demolition work that partly changed the Ghetto's appearance.

A careful look at the whole city must inevitably include the story of the Jewish cemetery on the Lido, the "House of the Living," situated beside the monastery of San Nicolò and one of the two fortresses built to defend the nearby port entrance of the same name. A video narrates the story from the point of view of nineteenth-century travelers and describes the extension of the cemetery itself, with the addition of some fine eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architecture to the walls and monumental entrances. We then work back in time to the story of the boat route to the cemetery and the extension of the *Canale degli Ebrei* in the seventeenth century, its existence in the early decades of the Ghetto, and its foundation.

In Room 9, a large T-shaped area in the doge's apartments, another video touches on the importance and the role in creating stereotypes in world literature exercised by Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* and the innumerable film and theatrical productions of the play.

In the same large Room 9 (in the “Globe” area) there is a focus on the arrival of Jewish families from the outskirts of Venice in the nineteenth century and their acquisition of important *palazzi* initially in Cannaregio (Bonfadini-Vivante), then along the Grand Canal (Ca’ d’Oro, Sullam-Fontana), and then also in the San Marco area (at San Moisè, San Benedetto, Calle Contarina, and San Vidal). Some of the relevant buildings will be lit up in the stunning large model of the city, made under the direction of Egle Renata Trincanato in 1961 for the *Italia Nostra difende Venezia* exhibition at the Palazzo Ducale. The physical model is linked to a multimedia map of buildings associated with Jewish commissions and/or the many projects by Jewish architects as well as some significant episodes involving the families.

In the nineteenth century, an interest in collecting “modern” art (Francesco Hayez’s paintings are emblematic of all the works in the exhibition) was pursued by leading figures in the Jewish bourgeoisie, who were also exacting architectural clients (as evidenced by some of architect Giuseppe Jappelli’s drawings). Moreover, they had a keen interest in scientific knowledge and music, and were committed to enterprise and modernizing the city in general.

In this sense, the nineteenth century was very eventful. The process of integration made progress in the world of the arts (Margherita Sarfatti played a significant role in promoting the Gruppo del Novecento) and the professions. Jews played leading roles in Venetian society (advocates, doctors, psychoanalysts, and public administrators, such as Grassini, Musatti, Luzzatto, and Errera), and they were from the same families mentioned earlier. An important part was also played by engineers and architects (for example, the Fano family or Guido Costante Sullam) in restoring the precarious buildings in the area of the “three Ghettos,” and in designing housing and public architecture. These aspects are explored in the books, photographs, and documents reproduced in the multimedia presentation.

[cat. 13.]
Vittore
Carpaccio,
*Presentation
of the Virgin in the
Temple*, 1502–1504,
detail



A very special example of the Jews' commitment to architecture and urban modernization is illustrated in Room 10: the Treves Garden in Padua designed by Giuseppe Jappelli with landscaped trees and plants, a bridge, *tempietto*, hothouse, and decorative details, unfortunately mostly demolished, but here reconstructed according to the complex, innovative project.

In the last room some very impressive works of art provide striking evidence of the Jewish participation in the artistic life of the city. They include Giacomo Balla's *Portrait of Letizia Pesaro Maurogonato* (1901), a perspicacious witness to the political unrest in the closing decades of the nineteenth century in Venice; Adolfo Wildt's plaster cast head of Margherita Sarfatti (1929); an urban periphery by Mario Sironi purchased directly from the painter by a Jewish family at the prompting of Sarfatti in 1922; and the *Rabbi of Vitebsk* by Marc Chagall (one of the acquisitions made by the City of Venice for the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Ca' Pesaro after the 1928 Biennale).

We are only too aware that this process of assimilation was then brutally interrupted in the dark years of the expulsion of Jews from schools and public office, and, above all, of the deportations. Here the ambiguous relations between Margherita Sarfatti and Mussolini have not been overlooked but summed up in letters and documents.

The exhibition comes to a close with the hopes raised by the reopening of three of the five historic synagogues, the association meetings in the Sala Montefiore, and the refounding of the Jewish Community immediately after the Liberation, without, however, allowing what happened in Venice during fascism to be forgotten.

The last exhibit, a multimedia installation and a mound of salt (alluding to the initial slag heap of the copper foundry) will enable people to leave a memento of their visit by choosing the item that impressed them most on the exhibition itinerary.

3.

Because the exhibition also addresses the present and the future, it can be seen as an initial survey of the contents of the nascent Jewish Museum (Museo Ebraico) in the Campo di Ghetto. The museum already houses objects, documents, and precious books, but needs to be extended, while the itinerary requires radical re-designing. At the same time the museum has been conceived to encourage its visitors to go out and see firsthand the places featured. This approach is based on the theory that the city cannot and must not be "museumified" but, on the contrary, the prime objective of an exhibition like this one, and of the "museum of the city" in general, is to intrigue and stimulate visitors to learn all about the narrated stories by physically exploring the sites and monuments. In this sense, in a city like Venice, so rich in museums dealing with all kinds of different themes, interests, and periods, the Museo Ebraico must be seen as one of the points in a network aimed at enabling the many tourists, but also the local residents, to further their knowledge of the unique story of the lagoon city.

In short, this Palazzo Ducale exhibition in particular wishes to offer an opportunity for knowledge and to diffuse in a wider, enduring way the blend of learning, skills, habits, permeability, and multiculturalism that has characterized the remarkable cultural wealth of the Venice Ghetto over the centuries. The exhibition makes use of new technologies and evocative ideas (the "copper foundry," or the "openings" providing glimpses of the surrounding city) and a series of videos to explain to a broader, nonexpert audience, including children, the original documents on show (paintings, drawings, official documents, and books).

After the Venetian precedent, for almost two centuries the Jews in other Italian cities were confined to circumscribed areas, often surrounded by walls and called ghettos. Moreover, some of them adopted the Venetian Ghetto as the physical model for their own enclosures, even when located in more central areas of the city than in Venice and near the markets. The word defining such areas became a

symbol of how the Jews were considered to be a “separate people.” Paradoxically, their enclosures, which certainly forced them into separation and concentrations, were always portrayed as places of great comings and goings and cultural meetings, of associations involving people of diverse origins, in which differences were even celebrated. The Ghetto was a place of division but also of mediation between Jews and Christians. In short, a stigmatized, circumscribed place that was, however, a transition stage from expulsion to acceptance and assimilation; a place characterized by real boundaries that could be permeable or at times even protean.

At this point it may be worthwhile adding another brief footnote. When choosing a subject, historians almost always start from present-day issues. Of course, centenaries provide a pretext for reconsidering topics—and this, like others, is a particularly significant date—but they are not the prime reasons for being more or less keenly interested in a subject. This was almost certainly the case for the Committee “500 Years of the Jewish Ghetto of Venice”, which promoted the exhibition and for the whole team that took such great care over the details. In this sense we were influenced in our choice of working theme by the situation confronting us today, surrounded as we are by walls and barbed wire fences in Europe and elsewhere in the world.

As the curator of this exhibition on the subject of Venice, I would like to briefly mention a text by Marek Edelman (*Il guardiano*, 1997) dealing with another ghetto, the Warsaw Ghetto, apparently so different from the Venice Ghetto as almost to defy comparison. In the same book Edelman also speaks of the Europe of the Bosnian war and the resultant immigration. At a time that now seems both remote and close to us, he warned: “It’s absurd to think, as they do in the West, that a Ghetto for the wealthy can be maintained for any length of time. That the walls round Europe can halt the hungry. Hunger destroys all walls. And Africa’s

hungry will arrive here. No law limiting immigration will protect you. Here a new culture will grow. It’ll be a little European, a little Asian, a little Arabic, and African, the result of immigration, which neither cannon nor border will halt [...] a wall protecting the wealthy won’t resist for long, because hunger knows no borders or barriers. Millions of hungry people will flood through each little crack.”⁵ Almost twenty years have elapsed since that book was written. The wave of migrants arriving every day in the West appears to be on an unprecedented scale. But “there have always been large movements of masses of peoples. Moreover, we ourselves are the product of centuries-old melting pots,” Corrado Augias pointed out on commenting those same statements in reply to a letter published in *La Repubblica* on February 12, 2016.⁶

We must bear in mind that a few years after the Ghetto was created, Venice was described as a “homeland frequented by many peoples of all languages and countries”⁷—that is, a cultural melting pot. In Venice efficiency, public order, and morality were the objectives, and attempts were made to achieve them in a merchant society from the previous century onward. The tools adopted were financial and legal but there was also a gradual organization of the urban fabric, shaped by the ways of dwelling, working, performing rites, and establishing commercial and cultural bonds with other minorities. The fifth-centenary exhibition thus seeks to reconstruct the long story of an *enclave* that was an example of multiculturalism, which speaks of the past, but also of the present and the future.

¹ R. Sennett, *The Foreigner* (London, 2011); S. Settis, *Se Venezia muore* (Turin, 2014), 144–145.

² N. Urbinati, “I muri nel cuore d’Europa e i fantasmi del Novecento,” in *La Repubblica*, May 4, 2016, 31.

³ D. Calabi, *Venezia e il Ghetto. Cinquecento anni del «recinto degli ebrei»* (Turin, 2016).

⁴ R. C. Mueller, “Les prêteurs juifs de Venise au Moyen Age,” in *Annales. Économies, Société, Civilisations*, 30 (1975), 1277–1302; R. C. Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market, Banks, Panics, and the Public Debt, 1200–1500* (Baltimore–London, 1997), 403–450.

⁵ M. Edelman, *Il guardiano* (Palermo, 1997), 175, 211.

⁶ C. Augias, “Lettere al lettore,” in *La Repubblica*, February 12, 2016.

⁷ F. Sansovino, *Venetia città nobilissima et singolare* (Venice, 1581), 136b.