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Shylock's Ghetto: The Place of the Play

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I Exterior of the Ghetto Nuovo, showing building heights and once-sealed windows. Photograph courtesy Storti Guide, *Jews and Synagogues*.

Of all the ghettos in cities throughout the world, past and present, perhaps one of the least known is the one from which the term “ghetto” originated. Curiously, it is a place that is better known as the setting for a famous and controversial work of fiction than as the enclave of physical and social confinement that provided a generic referent for a succession of infamous places from Warsaw to Watts.

In 1516 the Jews of Venice were herded onto a small island walled off by its own windowlessness from the rest of the city. The gates were locked from sunset to sunrise. Few people are aware that the term “ghetto,” which has passed into contemporary colloquial usage, has antecedents in this area of Venice, which was then the site of a disused iron foundry. *Geto*, from the verb “to cast” (*gettare*), evolved into the word that is now almost universally given to places set apart for peoples of different religions, races, and customs and to whom are left by edict and/or custom those occupations, roles, and castes that society shuns or scorns. True to the origin of the term, ghettos are, then, wherever and whenever we find them, foundries of exploitation.

Eighty years after the edict that created the Ghetto of Venice, William Shakespeare completed *The Merchant of Venice*, a play that has since

generated much debate, interpretation, speculation, and, as John Middleton Murray remarked, “In Shylock Shakespeare created the only post-Biblical figure which has impressed itself on the imagination of the world and become a universal symbol of Jewry.”¹

There is much speculation about and controversy over the “message” of *The Merchant of Venice*. Students of it have given it various and divergent interpretations. At one level it may be viewed as Shakespeare’s seizing on a compelling dramatic opportunity. In his biography of the playwright, Anthony Burgess notes that there was an incident in London that may have stimulated Shakespeare’s interest in the subject. Dr. Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese, “christianized” Jew and physician to the queen, was implicated in a plot to poison her and was hanged and quartered in 1594. Christopher Marlowe’s *Jew of Malta*, dealing also with a villainous Jew, was playing very successfully when revived after the Lopez execution. The plot may have been based on yet another anti-Semitic play, *The Jew*, first mentioned in 1579 and since lost. Shakespeare’s England at about this time was also having an outbreak of traditional Jew-baiting.²

Emphasis in interpretation of the play has also been placed on the subject of usury, also popular at the time. The catalyst of Shakespeare’s play

is a loan, the lending of money at interest. In the present-day, highly mortgaged, and overcredited society, "usury" appears a quaint term. In sixteenth-century Italy, lending money at interest was considered un-Christian. Indeed, the Christian proscription of this financial transaction is likely related to the ethical teachings of Judaism (Exodus 22:25), which forbade profit on the loan of money. Ironically, moneylending was one of the few occupations permitted the Jews of Ghetto. Thus Venetian Jews were often forced into an activity that all but insured their being scorned and negatively characterized. This is not to imply that there were no Christian moneylenders. In northern Italy the term "Lombard" grew to be synonymous with "moneylender." A further irony is that Italian moneylenders may have been responsible for the fact that there were few Jews in Elizabethan England; because they were less constrained by Church authorities, Italian moneylenders were able to establish themselves in England. With this alternative source of loans, Edward I was able to expel the Jews from England in the thirteenth century. (Lombard Street in London's financial district garnered its name from the Italian moneylenders).

Owing to their expulsion, there is some question about how much contact, if any, Shakespeare might have had

with Jews. Jews are reputed to have filtered back into England from Spain and Portugal in the sixteenth century, although one authority maintains that in "Elizabethan and Stuart England no unconverted Jews were known to be living."³ They were not allowed formal readmission to England until 1665, under the dictatorship of Cromwell.

It is also doubtful that Shakespeare ever visited Venice. Biographies of him make no mention of a sojourn to Italy. Anthony Burgess repeats the assumption adopted by others that the playwright obtained details of Italian cities from his friend the Earl of Southampton, and W. Carew Hazlett, pointing to some anachronisms in the play, also expresses doubt that the playwright was ever in Venice.⁴

Nevertheless, Shakespeare was first and foremost a dramatist, and whether his more direct contact with the life of Jews of the sixteenth-century Venetian ghetto would have resulted in a different *Merchant of Venice* is conjectural. Still, his Shylock, as Murray has stated, has survived as an unfortunate stereotype and epithet, but the ghetto of which the fictional Shylock would almost certainly have been forced to be a resident is omitted in the play as a factor in Shylock's desire for vengeance.⁵



2 Facade of the Levantine School, Ghetto Vecchio



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3 South side of the Campo Ghetto Nuovo, showing the facade of the Italian School

4 Home for the Aged, Campo Ghetto Vecchio. Photograph by James Clapp.

For nearly three hundred years the Ghetto of Venice was a nightly prison into which, at its peak, as many as 5,000 Jews were forced to live at densities as high as eight persons to a room. During the day Jews could circulate freely throughout the city, pursuing the limited number of trades they were permitted (shoemakers, tailors, and hawkers, the poorest; moneylenders or shipwrights, the wealthiest). But by sunset they were required to return to the tiny island surrounded by canals before the gates were locked. Until sunrise the island, known as the “Ghetto Nuovo” (although it is the oldest section set aside for Jews), was patrolled by police in gondolas, paid for by taxes levied on the ghetto residents.

During the daylight hours the ghetto teemed with activity. In the morning trumpets sounded to signal the hours of ceremony; in the synagogues—there were five, Levantine, Spanish, Italian, and two Ashkenazic—called *scuole* (schools), Jewish émigrés from various points of the diasporic



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compass worshiped in their various rites, often with the interested attendance of priests and learned Venetians. The language of the ghetto was a patois of German, Spanish, and Italian elements laid over with Jewish expressions. In many respects it was a small town where everyone knew everyone’s business, with the unity of a common heritage and common circumstances. For nearly three centuries, this was the life of the Jews of the ghetto who were compelled to wear a yellow circle insignia on their clothing and forced to pay heavy tributes while being denied the most elementary rights conferred on other Venetians. They could own no real estate and could undertake few respected professions or arts. The best that could be said of their treatment was that they did so free of violence and purges, as frequently occurred in other cities, in a collaborative relationship with the Venetians, who were rarely openly hostile.

Venice itself began as a ghetto, albeit a relatively voluntary one. The people

of the Veneto founded their unique city on the mudflats of an Adriatic lagoon to escape the Gothic marauders picking the bones of the Roman Empire in the fifth century. The “barbarian” hordes lacked boat-building skills, and the stratagem succeeded: Venice was never invaded until Napoleon’s troops took it in 1797. By the time we hear of Jews in Venice, it was well on its way to becoming a maritime power, a bridge between the bazaars of the eastern and western hemispheres.

According to a census in 1152, approximately 1,300 Jews were reported to be living in Venice. Their numbers were further increased after the Venetian capture of Constantinople in 1204 in which Venice took possession of several islands in the Levant where Jews were numerous. In the beginning of the thirteenth century many German Jews arrived seeking refuge from persecution in the north and drawn by the commercial opportunities in the thriving seaport. The principal settlement for Jews at this time was not the city proper

but the Guidecca, a long island facing San Marco, which is reputed to have taken its name from its resident Jews. The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497 brought an influx of Western Jews and “Marrannos” (Christianized Jews).

Originally, Jewish money-lenders were allowed to open banks only on the mainland across the lagoon at Mestre; but, in 1366, they received permission from Venice to make small loans to the poor at interest rates varying between 10 and 20 percent.

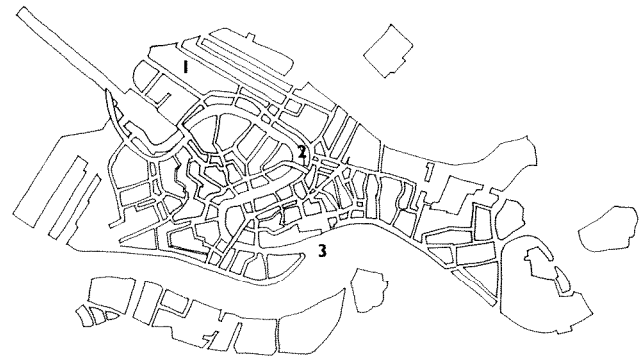
The residence of the Jews in Venice was tenuous at best. There were repeated charges and calls for their expulsion. Other Jews were taxed on their business transactions.⁶ All were made to wear a yellow circle on their clothing, which was later changed to a yellow hat, and by 1500, a red hat. Christian preachers fulminated against them, occasioning the intervention of the doge to protect them. Still, their situation remained precarious. Three Jews were burned at the stake in 1480, another stoned to death in 1506.

Mounting ill feeling toward the Jews and the degree of “freedom” that they enjoyed in the city increased pressures for a “solution,” partly as protection for the Jews themselves but also to retain the advantage their heavy tributes gave to the economy

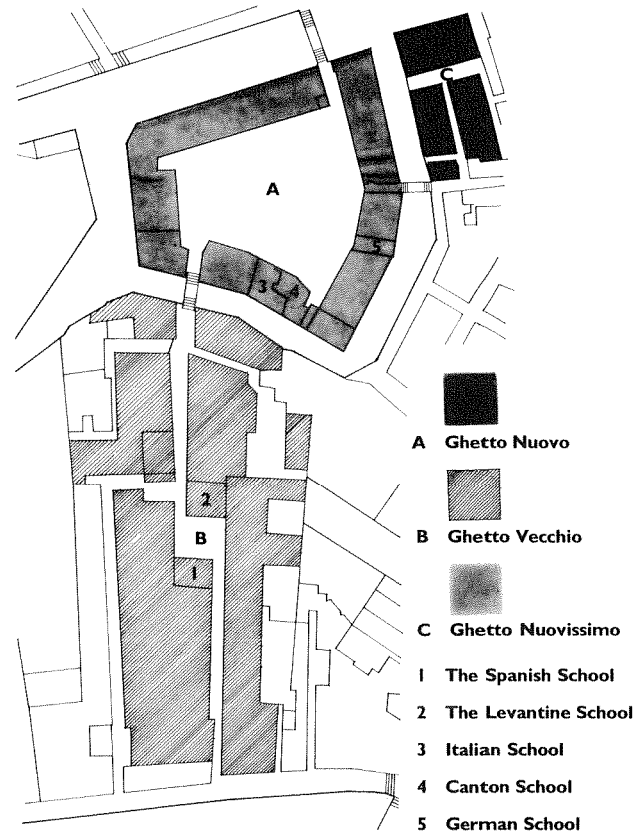
of the city. Segregation was chosen over expulsion, and the site of the new foundry (hence *Ghetto Nuovo*) was chosen over the Guidecca. On April 1, 1516, proclamations were issued commanding all Jews into the ghetto within ten days—an area, surrounded by canals measuring roughly 120 meters by 90 meters, facing a campo with a single well. Thus was first put into practice a model of segregation and exploitation that came to be repeated in many other cities and to be applied to other unfortunate peoples.

Seven hundred Jews, mostly “German” and “Italian,” moved into the Ghetto Nuovo. In 1541 Levantine Jews were moved into the adjoining “ghetto vecchio” (old foundry). The “Ghetto Novissimo,” a much smaller area, was added in 1633, populated mostly by Western Jews. At its peak population, the entire ghetto may have contained as many as 5,000 Jews forced to live at such high density that building regulations were relaxed to allow them to build the tallest residential structures in the city, some reaching seven stories.

The Jews of the ghetto quickly set about creating social institutions and maintaining cherished traditions. The building of the first synagogue, the German School, began in 1528, and by 1534 “universities,” small autonomous entities, each



- 1 Ghetto
- 2 Rialto Bridge and Markets
- 3 Piazza San Marco





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5, 6 Streets in Ghetto Vecchio.
Photographs by James Clapp

with their own administration, rabbi, and synagogue, were formed. Religious schools, among them the famous one where Leon da Modina gave lessons, were established, as well as a society for the ransom of Jews who were taken captive from Turkish ships and enslaved in Malta. In fact, the fates of Venetian Jews, particularly Levantines, often shifted with the vicissitudes of Venice's trade relations, competition, and wars in the Levant. Several near decisions to expel the Jews from Venice were aborted on the logic that Jewish trading skill would be more detrimental to Venetian commerce if they were added to the foreign competition.⁷

Owing to shared language and commercial integration, there was intercourse between Venetians and Jews at almost every social level. Many Christians attended sermons at religious services; Jews served as intermediates in trade and commerce (particularly the famed Solomon Ashkenazi); they worked in factories and at the *arsenale* (where it was reputed a galleon was built each day) and also hired Christians to work in trading vessels they owned. Christians attended salons, such as that of the poetess Sara Copia Sullam, who came to be regarded as one of the most illustrious writers of her time. Jewish physicians attended Christian sick (for which they were granted exit from the ghetto after curfew

hours); and, of course, as they were required to do, Jewish moneylenders loaned money to the rich and poor and even the state.

Still there were the constant accusations and threats from ecclesiastical authorities of expulsion or more severe restrictions.⁸ Displays of wealth aroused the enmity or suspicions of many Venetians. The curfews, clothing regulations, limits on their employment and mobility, heavy taxes, and their crowded ghetto, subject to fires, plagues, and epidemics, were ever-present reminders of their inferior and precarious position.

The Christian church had a longstanding prohibitive posture toward the lending of money at interest, culminating in the Third Council of 1179, which threatened the refusal of a Christian burial to moneylenders. Loans at any rate of interest were regarded as usurious.⁹ Thus, the circumstances under which Jews were forced to undertake (and acquired considerable skill at) the handling of money and other financial transactions amounted to a virtual formula for their subsequent condemnation, persecution, and exploitation.

Ironically, though it was the source of much of the derision and persecution to which they were subjected, the financial role of the Venetian Jews was, on

occasion, what spared them from outright expulsion. A threat of their expulsion in 1527 was averted by a loan of 10,000 ducats to the state.

In 1797 the gates of the ghetto were opened by the French, and the Jews were declared free citizens. Although some restrictions were imposed by the Austrians, to whom Napoleon ceded Venice, the Jews were able to take part to a larger degree in the life of the city. In fact, Jewish financial skill and contact with Byzantine markets had been increasingly relied upon to shore up the fading Venetian maritime sovereignty.

In 1938 the bitter memories of the past were rekindled with Mussolini's racist legislation that forced Jews out of many jobs, including banking, insurance, and public service. Some 200 Venetian Jews perished in the Nazi holocaust and are commemorated in a set of bas-relief plaques by Arbit Blatas on the Ghetto Nuovo's "holocaust wall."

Like the city of Venice of which it is a part, the Ghetto of Venice is little changed physically from the day when it teemed with nearly 5,000 inhabitants. The wells in the campo have been sealed, the building in which one of the synagogues was tucked away now serves as a museum of the life of the ghetto, and another building is a home for the aged. But next to the dark portals, the doors of

which were removed and burned in 1797, the stone plaques specifying the regulations governing the coming and going of the Jews remain, and here and there weathered Hebrew lettering, a Star of David, and the sealed windows facing the canals are mute reminders of the past.

Today, only 60 to 70 Jews reside in the ramshackle buildings and tread the narrow streets of the ghetto, now voluntarily, perhaps to be close to the Jewish bakery or the only synagogue that holds services. The remaining 700 or so Venetian Jews reside in other parts of the city. Many are respected members of Venetian professional communities.

With the exceptions of its somewhat taller buildings, its more derelict appearance, and scattered signs, some new, some old, in Hebrew lettering, there is little to distinguish the ghetto today from other low-rent residential areas of Venice. There is little evidence of the contemporary world. A small neon menorah above a religious articles shop is one of the few indications among the worn paving stones and faded and cracked stucco buildings (some requiring shoring between the narrow streets to keep them erect) that time has touched this sad place.

The most pronounced difference is atmospheric. There is a melancholy mood



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that pervades the campo and calli, even on the brightest day. Contraposed spatially and emotionally from the gaiety and opulence of tourist-thronged San Marco, the ghetto is a place more likely to be sought out by visitors with a special intent. The prevalence of yarmulkes, folded prayer shawls, and snatches of conversation in Yiddish or Hebrew attests that many have come by way of pilgrimage. Most pause in a hush at the holocaust wall to be rudely reminded of later ghettos of barbed wire, to be reminded that “ghetto” is as much concept as place.

The gloom of the ghetto is amplified if one remains until sunset, when mists creep into the narrow streets and the campo. At dusk the imagination may well evoke from the past the slamming of the gates, and one might seem to glimpse, dissolving into the mist, the spectral figure of the defeated and disgraced Shylock, a symbol of how a people were set apart, restricted to a few and often scorned social roles, only to have to bear the opprobrium and stigmatism that these conditions all but guaranteed.

NOTES

- 1 Foreword to Hermann Sinsheimer, *Shylock: The History of the Character or the Myth of the Jew* (London: Camelot Press, 1947).
- 2 Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare*

(New York: Alfred Knopf, 1970), pp. 136–137. This, of course, raises the question of anti-Semitism in Shakespeare himself, although there is varied opinion on this as well. Cf. H. B. Charlton, *Shakespeare's Jew* (Manchester University Press, 1974), p. 7. Several other contemporary sources have been mentioned as possible inspirational sources for Shakespeare's play. Two other lost plays, *The Venesyan Comodye* (performed in 1594) and Oekker's *The Jew of Venice* (ca. 1596) have been cited. Shakespeare's plot also strongly resembles that of Florentino's *Il Pecorone*, a possible source of the bond involving forfeiture of a “pound of flesh.” Cf. Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 86–90.

- 3 J. L. Cardozo, *The Contemporary Jew in Elizabethan Drama* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1925), p. 329.
- 4 Burgess, *op. cit.*, pp. 135, 137; W. Carew Hazlett, *The Venetian Republic*, vol. II (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1915; reprinted New York: AMS Press, 1966), pp. 339, 341. Ernest Crillo speculates that Shakespeare did visit Italy in late 1592 or early 1593, on the basis that he knew much detail about Italian cities and that the plague was virulent in London at that time and dramatic performances and other public gatherings were suspended. *Shakespeare and Italy* (New York: Haskell House, 1973), pp. 132–140.
- 5 The name Shylock does not appear to be of any Jewish origin, although it may have been derived from the Hebrew “shalakh,” for a bird of prey, usually translated as a “cormorant,” a sea-fisher of such enormous appetite that it personifies “greed and voraciousness.” Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* (New York: Avenel Books, 1978), p. 510.
- 6 Brian Pullen, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 508.
- 7 Simon Dubnov, *History of the Jews* (London: Thomas Yoseloff, 1969), p. 557.
- 8 The Inquisition caused many copies of the Talmud and storehouses of other “blasphemous” literature to be burned in 1553.
- 9 Werner Keller, *Diaspora* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1969), p. 215. As noted earlier, Jewish condemnation of money-lending is found in several places in the Old Testament and in Talmudic maxims. Biblical sources, however, have a residue of ambiguity. Although condemned altogether in Exodus 22:24, Deuteronomy 23:21 permits loans at interest to “foreigners” but not to Jews.