

- [Home](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Presentations](#)
- [Courses](#)
- [Family Album](#)
- [Working Papers](#)
- [For Students](#)

Outsiders and Insiders: Venice, the Jews, and Italian Culture

Murray Baumgarten, April 7, 2008

Jewish Difference, Venetian Policy

Jewish Difference, Venetian Policy Jewish difference, for the Venetians, did not lead them to expel the Jews, as the English had in 1290, the French in 1319, and the Spanish in 1492. The liberal solution the Venetians adopted in 1516 was to restrict the Jews to the Ghetto, where they might live in order to do money-lending – today weâ€™d call it pawn-broking – which was essential to the economic and social wellbeing of the Venetian polity.

The onetime Senator and semi-official chronicler of Venice, Marino Sanuto makes the point forcefully in several places in his diaries, outlining the perspective which informed the decision to keep the Jews by sequestering them in the newly devised Ghetto. â€œHad I, Marino Sanuto, been a member of the Senate as I was last year, I would have spoken, though not to speak for the Jews, because I could describe many sharp practices of theirs in connexion with their loans. I would have . . . prov[ed] that Jews are even more necessary to a city than bakers are (dimostrando Ãˆ necessarii piÃ¹ hebrei e pistori in una terra), and especially to this one, for the sake of the general welfare.â€ No trifling comparison this, for a city that by the 13th century had learned how to store grain so that the guild of bakers could feed the city folk and even have enough left over between harvests to sell to other communities that did not have such a reserve.

Sanuto goes on to expand and defend his decision: â€œI would have referred to the laws, and to what our ancestors have always done, and to the opinion of the Doctors of Alessandro of Imola, Pietro of Ancarano, Baldus and others, who advise us that Jews be kept to lend upon interest.â€

In this fascinating entry, Sanuto also suggests that mercantile acumen and the collateral stuff of pawn-broking, as well as providing for the needs of the Jews living in the Ghetto, made it one of the best shopping districts in the city. â€œIt is true that I would not have wished them to keep shops dealing in second-hand goods, so as not to deprive Christians of a living, even though if they kept them goods could be sold very profitably (ancora che a tenirli sia gran beneficio di le robe si vol vender). Our countrymen have never wanted Jews to keep shops to trade in this city, but to buy and sell and go away again.â€ And then he clinches his point about the importance of the Jews to Venice: â€œBut there should be none of this humbug in our State about expelling the Jews when there is no Monte di PietÃ .â€

The contemporary Venetian architect and urban historian, Donatella Calabi expands on what emerges inadvertently from Sanuto. She notes that â€œDespite its often rather desperate state, by the 1630s, having reached its greatest size, the Venetian ghetto was clearly no longer just a refugee shelter for a minority group, as it had been in the first decades of the 1500s. Rather, it had evolved into an urban environment in which daily life was a rich tapestry woven from points of primary exchange and places of work.â€ The urban record indicates that â€œThere was a bakery for bread and Passover matzo in each of the two original

ghettos; there were also numerous shops for greens and fruit, for wine, meat, cheese, pasta. Not that the wealth of the Jews rivaled that of the great Venetian families – but the Ghetto had become a thriving commercial center, enriched now by the mercantile trade with the Ottoman Empire of the new group of Jews, the Levantines, who had been settled in the Ghetto Vecchio for that purpose in 1541. Calabi continues: “New food shops were continually being opened, like the one we find in 1627 obtaining a license for the sale of oil and other traditional foods.” There were specialty shops: “Some vendors sold oil of different sorts that were appropriate for the Germans and for the Levantines, others offered tobacco or wax candles. There were also the shops and stalls of a variety of artisans who provided services, including a barber, hairdresser, clothes mender, tailor, and wood carver, as well as a bookseller, who perhaps had an attached printing house and a workshop for binding. There was a nurse who looked after the local Jewish children, a vendor of alchemical supplies, and an inn for foreign Jews. Scattered among these were also sundry storerooms holding lumber, majolica, and coffins for the dead.”

It is not my intention to minimize the shaming of the Jews that their ghettoization produced. The badge they were required to wear upon leaving the ghetto also was demanded of prostitutes. They were walled up; it was believed that their very gaze could pollute the host, so windows were boarded up, and the water doors to the ghetto sealed. They had to pay the guards who watched them and, patrolling the island, forced them to observe their nightly curfew. But Calabi’s characterization of the rich urban fabric of their neighborhood is also part of the context for the meanings of difference that defined the experience of the Jews of Venice and the Ghetto.

David Myers has recently phrased the issue by asking how the “typical Venetian Jew in 1520” might “have made sense of the multiple social and cultural layers of his existence?” Though “he was now confined at night behind the locked gates of the ghetto,” they did not, however, “prevent him from crossing over to Gentile society during the day and engaging in regular economic, social and cultural exchange.” This meant that he had to internalize the values of the ruling culture in addition to his own “to experience difference and sameness from within and without. He had to be nimble enough to shift rapidly between the role of insider and outsider. This involved a psychic as well as sociological adjustment. We might say that this typical Venetian Jew lived the Ghetto solution, which mediated between, in the historian Roberto Bonfil’s phrase, “the chimera of unconditioned acceptance and the nightmare of expulsion.”

Visible Community

The ironies of space, time, and history from March 29, 1516, when the Ghetto was established, also meant that the Jews were transformed from itinerants into a settled, established, and visible community. The desire of Marino Sanuto and “our countrymen” never to have Jews keep “shops to trade in the city, but to buy and sell and go away again” was not to be fulfilled. For the Jews had been granted refuge by this city, itself devised as a sanctuary from marauding armies that could not cross the lagoon. The Ghetto thus highlighted their difference, and in some sense, also simultaneously dissolved the difference Sanuto and others wanted to insist on maintaining.

Rather than becoming marginalized the Ghetto became a microcosm of La Serenissima. As Shaul Bassi notes, “Contained within the narrow limits of an island, surrounded by water, a safe haven for refugees, multiethnic and multilingual, the Ghetto turns out to be a perfect microcosm of Venice, epitomizing the potentialities and contradictions of the city as a whole.” A city without an agricultural base, dependent for its existence on the exchanges of commerce, Venice had to offer access to all traders. It could control them through restriction and surveillance, limiting access through the terms of charters, but it could not banish them. Thus Bassi notes that “Venice is a place where identity has always been dynamic and negotiated

across different cultural boundaries, with foreigners quickly making themselves at home.â€ (Bassi 470)

As the Jews engaged in regular interchange with the Venetians, they also articulated their own communal institutions, in which the wealthier Levantines, engaged in trade with the Ottoman Empire, took the lead. Much of this is reflected in the dialect they developed. Bassi tells us that the â€œnewborn community . . . developed a Judeo-Venetian jargon, characteristically made of the local language enriched with Hebrew terms. . . . Jews referred to the Ghetto by the term â€˜hasser,â€™™ derived from the Hebrew hatzer,חצר, courtyard, which suggests an intimate and a familiar space.â€ (472) Quoting from the Venetian Jewish lexicon compiled by Umberto Fortis and Paolo Zolli – *La parlata giudeo-veneziana* (Assisi: Carucci 1979), Bassi notes that â€œthe entry â€˜Ghettoâ€™™ does not feature in this lexicon.â€ (479) Note also that the Roman Jews in their ghetto, which was established on the Venetian model in 1555, used the word, but derived it from the Hebrew word for marital divorce, the get. These linguistic usages are further evidence of their status as insiders. Though they lived on the sufferance of their rulers, and with each expiration of the condotta – the charter – granting them the privilege of residence in the Ghetto had to provide increasing tribute levied exponentially, it is important to acknowledge that they yet made of this place of exile, shame, and insult, their own diasporic urban home.

Jewish Difference and Venetian Jewish Irony

Thinking about difference here reminds us of the power of the point of view of the observer. For the Jews, however, this is doubled. There are two perspectives constantly present in their consciousness. Given their situation in Venice, they are insiders and outsiders simultaneously. As David Myers notes, â€œThe imposition of the ghetto and the publication of the Talmud,â€ – in the original Aramaic and Hebrew – the first print version which is also the first complete edition – which happen almost simultaneously, stand as â€œthe symbolic poles between which Venetian Jews forged theirâ€ personal and â€œcollective identity.â€ (Myers 6)

Jewish loyalty to Venice was remarked on after emancipation, but was already evident before the breaking down of the gates of the Ghetto. The devotion to Venice is evident in Leone Modenaâ€™™ s autobiography. He has a better job in Ferrara, better living quarters and greater acclaim in Padova, but he yearns to return to Venice. His Jewish difference gives him many roles to play within the community, which in his autobiography at one point takes equal billing with his pride at having preached a Shabbat sermon before notables including the brother of the King of France. Consider also that Sara Copia Sullam, who presided over a salon in her house in the Ghetto that was frequented by Jews and non-Jews, was incited to compose a sonnet sequence with Queen Esther at its center because the Genoese priest, Ansaldo Ceba wrote a play about Esther which he sent to her. Their literary correspondence had an erotic edge, with Ceba importuning Sullam to convert so that they might be united in Christian heaven.

In their lives and work, and even more explicitly in their writing, Modena and Sullam incorporate and express a double perspective – that of their own Judaic perspective and that of the hegemonic culture that defines them as its other. Modena not only writes a commentary on the Talmud, as well as a Hebrew-Italian dictionary that also features comparative grammatical commentary, he also writes the first account of Hebrew customs and rituals for a non-Jewish audience in response to the request of the English Ambassador, Sir Henry Wotton. This ethnographic account circulates in England, is translated into French and then into Italian. The frontispiece of the Italian publication, *Historia de Riti Hebraici*, published in 1637, has a picture of Modena with uncovered head, as part of its presentation as an Italian and a Jewish book. Sullamâ€™™ s sonnets are in Venetian Italian, and in response to Ceba, have the Biblical Queen Esther at their center. Addressing Ceba and his writing, Sullam takes his Christian representation of Esther, and turns her as a Jewish figure into a muse they share. The doubled audience in her sonnets thus plays on this doubled

perspective, as a Jewish and an Italian writer. In their writing and lives Sullam and Modena articulate the experience of Venetian Jewish irony.

Perhaps we should not be surprised by the appearance of Venetian Jewish irony, by its status as a structure of experience for the Jews. Ariella Lang, one of the translators of Simone Luzzatto's *Discorso* of 1638 makes a convincing argument that it is an ironic treatise. Presenting a series of arguments to support his claim of the unique benefits the Jews provide the Venetian state – for unlike every other group the Jews are not allowed to own land and so must engage in trade, and that they are a peaceful people gladly depending on the authorities for their security – Luzzatto's message is different for Venetian and Jewish readers. He anticipates that the Venetians will buy into the literal terms of his argument, while the Jews will take them with many grains of salt. Irony here is a coping strategy for those without access to the apparatus of state power.

For irony thrives on a double perspective, and though they collide and contradict each other, neither can be abandoned or resolved into the other. Both sides of the contradiction are equally valid; both demand attention; neither can do without the other. The phenomenon echoes what W. E. B. DuBois has called the "double consciousness" of the oppressed. Given the restrictions placed on the Jews, the existence of a parallel phenomenon is not surprising.

As the Jews of Venice are pushed away from the center of Venetian life and society, they are also increasingly more vital participants in it. This is reflected most clearly in the status of four classes of Venetian Jews, each of which had the right under certain conditions to stay out after curfew: musicians, dancers, merchants, and doctors.

Jewish medical doctors were much sought after in Venice. It was common knowledge that most great Venetian family had its Jewish doctor. So did the Pope. At the same time, Jews were regularly accused, tried, and burned for the infamous blood libel that circulated throughout England and Europe from the thirteenth century on. To the credit of the Venetian authorities, only one such case ever occurred in its jurisdiction, at Portobuffole, and that only when an inquiry was not able to be held. Educated at the University of Padova, where some Jews even became faculty members, they brought the knowledge of Greek medicine to Europe from the Islamic world, which had preserved and extended it, and thus fulfilled an important function for Jews and non-Jews in the development of modern medicine. Much can be said about their importance, and they deserve further study. Jewish musicians and dancers also had the opportunity to be exempt from curfew: they received this privilege when they performed at celebrations in the great houses of the Venetians. My favorite is a singer named Rachel ebrei canterina, who regularly stayed out after curfew and, since she performed late at night, singing rousing songs while being rowed in a gondola, regularly appeared before the magistrates as a public nuisance. And traders bringing goods or exporting them, and thus dependent on the tides, could argue that they too had to be exempted from curfew. The state archives are full of the records of negotiations between Jews and the government that attest to the interest of the Venetians and the enterprise of the Jews in working for the benefit of both.

A parallel double perspective is evident even in Dickens's writing about Venice. Perhaps it is inherent in the structural geomorphic ambiguity that arises from the reversal of expectations of this city that rises from the water. As Dickens put it in his letter to Forster, "When I came on board here last night (after a five miles' row in a gondola; which somehow or other, I wasn't at all prepared for); when, from seeing the city lying, one light, upon the distant water, like a ship, I came plashing through the silent and deserted streets; I felt as if the houses were reality – the water, fever-madness." (Letters 216) And he expands this observation in the Venice chapter in *Pictures from Italy*, when he describes his journeying as "On we went, floating towards the heart of this strange place – with water all about us where never water was elsewhere – clusters of houses, churches heaps of stately buildings growing out of it." (331)

Absolute Ambiguity and the Symbolizing City

On the one hand, Venice is a dream-city, a phantasmagoric city, with majestic buildings that rise out of and are reflected by the water. On the other hand, it's a city whose wealth grew out of hard commercial calculation. It was a mercantile republic that thrived under Byzantine protection and in the mid-thirteenth century turned on its master, and took advantage of its location to become the major European port city with access to the Mediterranean, the hinge between East and West. When the new routes to the East were developed by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English, and European trade became centered in the Atlantic, Renaissance Venice reinvented itself as La Serenissima, and the spice trade made way for the export of culture.

At the center of the early-modern Venetian paradoxes, ambiguities and stories, there is the Ghetto – a space where Jews are walled in and shamed, but also protected, and thus develop communal institutions and articulate intimate experiences – where they can survive. Hence the city's appeal to the literary imagination, from Shakespeare, to Brodsky, to Amichai, to Dickens.

Dickens's evocation of Venice, which I discussed yesterday, is a first-person account, in which the observer is part of the scene observed. We discover it also in the accounts of other visitors to Venice, drawn in the days before Napoleon burned the ghetto gates, to observe and report on Venice by describing the customs and rituals of its Jews. I hope to comment more on their reports in another essay – but note that unlike other English visitors Dickens's observations are doubled ironically: they oscillate between the city's astonishing beauty and its stranglehold on personal liberty. He too is aware of Venetian experience as a doubled perspective. As I pointed out yesterday, this becomes a central theme of his writing, the attraction of repulsion which not only figures prominently in *Pictures from Italy* but also becomes a central theme of his other writing.

I reference these comments on Dickens to elaborate a comment of Georg Simmel that states more generally and in an abstract form what Dickens experienced, observed, and described. For Simmel, Venice is defined by its absolute ambiguity.

Bryan Cheyette notes that Simmel in his essay, *Venedig* (1922), "embraces the otherness of Venice as symptomatic of the strangeness of all cities."

The character of the squares is ambiguous, devoid of vehicles their narrow symmetrical enclosed nature gives them the appearance of rooms... Ambiguous, too, is the double-life of the city, at once a maze of alleyways and a maze of canals, so that the city belongs to neither land nor water— rather each appears like the protean garment, with the other concealed behind it, tempting as the true body. Ambiguous too are the dark little canals whose waters move and flow so unquietly without revealing the direction in which they flow, constantly moving, without going anywhere' (cited in Tanner *Venice Desired* 1992, 367)

Cheyette observes that Simmel, who "famously constructed 'the stranger' as someone who defies both temporal and spatial separation, thinks of Venice as, quite literally, estranged— 'constantly moving... going nowhere'— from the 'true body' of an ordered landscape. No longer the bastion of imperial progress, Venice is now a city of strangers, full of ghetto-like spaces — 'narrow symmetrical enclosed'— which threaten the mastery of the West from the inside."

Port-city, hinge of Europe, emporium of all the then known world's goods and pleasures, "Venice signifies the stranger within the heart of Europe." It is in the sixteenth century a laboratory for modernity: it becomes a theatre whose residents act out and perform the contradictions of their experience. Venice is the

city as theatre – as space and place of self-dramatization and self-presentation, and thus also prefigures, Cheyette claims, “the post-modern city of the future.”

The Jew, the other, the stranger in the modern city of strangers becomes in contemporary film and fiction “think here of Pinter’s *The Comfort of Strangers* and Caryl Phillips’s *The Nature of Blood* — the emblem of the absolute ambiguity of this world-historical city.

Absolute ambiguity – the phrase serves as a portal into Israel Zangwill’s *Dreamers of the Ghetto*. Zangwill, you’ll recall, was an important writer in the early years of the last century, now perhaps recovering from undue neglect. He wrote his first collection of stories, *Children of the Ghetto*, in 1872 at the urging and sponsorship of Judge Sulzberger, then head of the Jewish Publication Society of America. Six years later, *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898) evokes the ghetto of Venice as a touchstone against which to assess Jewish emancipation. In his preface Zangwill notes that “I have placed a ‘Child of the Ghetto’ first, not only because the Venetian Jewry first bore the name of Ghetto, but because this chapter may be regarded as a prelude to all the others.” Jewish emancipation emerges, Zangwill notes, from the Ghetto. “Though the Dream pass through Smyrna or Amsterdam, through Rome or Cairo, through Jerusalem or the Carpathians, through London or Berlin or New York, almost all the Dreamers had some such childhood, and it may serve to explain them. It is the early environment from which they all more or less emerged.”

Against the proud hopes of assimilation, Zangwill places these stories. They imply the need for the Zionism that in one form or another he was led to speak for. He notes in concluding his preface that “the stories all lead on to that which I have placed last. The ‘Child of the Ghetto’ may be considered ‘father to the man’ of ‘Chad Gadya’ in that same city of the sea.” And then clinches his fictional work with a judgment about Jewish emancipation: “For this book is the story of a Dream that has not come true.” (viii)

Readers of this collection of stories have commented on the way Zangwill plays inner thoughts against outside realities. His characters struggle to bring their dreams into realization in the external world, and fail consistently. For them the Ghetto they have left yet dominates their experience. Though invisible, it is ever-present.

How Difference Makes a Difference

Recall that Dickens responded to Venice by engaging the reader in the effort to imagine it and the modern city as a dream-experience. This city is a dream-vision, a palimpsest of the imagination, where actions, events, and experiences are at once sequential and simultaneously present, evident even as they are invisible.

To call the city invisible is to conjure up Italo Calvino’s novel, *Invisible Cities*, whose narrator, Marco Polo, admits that every city he has been describing is actually Venice, though he has not named her. In this invisible city, like so many others, symbolic experience is real. Dreams and fantasies have an equal status with buildings and everyday experience. In this city, Shylock and Othello are as real as Doge’s palace, prison, dungeon, granary, and bakers’ ovens. Perhaps as Joseph Brodsky indicates, it is all due to the reflective power of water—

“I always adhered to the idea that God is time, or at least that his spirit is . . . I always thought that if the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the water, the water was bound to reflect it.” Brodsky unpacks this if-then statement by personal elaboration, and the personal reflection leads him to an Einsteinian meditation: “The upright lace of Venetian facades is the best line time—alias—water has left on terra firma anywhere. Plus, there is no doubt a correspondence between ‘if not an outright dependence on’ the rectangular nature of that lace’s displays ‘i.e. local buildings’ and the anarchy of water that spurns the notion of shape. It is as though space, cognizant here more than anyplace else of its inferiority to time, answers it

with the only property time doesn't possess: with beauty. And that's why water takes this answer, twists it, wallops and shreds it, but ultimately carries it by and large intact off into the Adriatic." Joseph Brodsky, *Watermark*, pp.41 – 44.

Dickens too was on to something when he finishes his essay on a similarly personal note: "I have many and many a time, thought since, of this strange Dream upon the water: half-wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE." (*Pictures from Italy* 85)

Difference and Exchange

For Venice makes it possible to imagine symbolic experience to be as real as everyday life, and to conceive of their interchange. Not only the ghetto of exile, shame, and insult, but microcosm of negotiation across difference. Made possible by its absolute ambiguity, this is Venice as emblem of exchange.

That idea is central to one of Yehuda Amichai's poems about Venice. Section 21 of his long poem written after the liberation of the old city of Jerusalem in 1967, reads like a proof of this notion of the power of Venice as the city of exchange.

Works Cited

Donatella Calabi, "The City of the Jews," *The Jews of Early Modern Venice*, edited by Robert C. Davis and Benjamin Ravid, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Press, 2001, pp. 31 – 49. Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities*, 1611, reprint edition Macmillan 1915, online copy from Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto. Benjamin Ravid, "Christian Travelers in the Ghetto of Venice," *Studies in the Jews of Venice, 1382 – 1797*, Ashgate/Variorum: Aldershot, UK, 2003.

©2010 Murray Baumgarten. All rights reserved. [Sitemap](#)