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Let's Talk

I never thought I could be more disillusioned with Europe, but then I went to Venice

I won't be returning to what used to be my favourite city



The Holocaust memorial in Venice (Wikimedia Commons)

I was in Venice at New Year, and I visited the Jewish ghetto in the northern district of Cannaregio. I wish I hadn't. I know from Harry Freedman's superb new history, *Shylock's Venice*, that it is not the first ghetto — that was in Prague 250 years earlier — but it was the first to be named a ghetto, likely because it was built on a former foundry or "geto". The Jews of Venice, who fled Germany during the Black Death, and then Spain and Portugal, were ordered to this ghetto in 1516, and they remained there until the Republic fell to Napoleon in 1797. They printed famous books — the *Bomberg Talmud*, still the model — and negotiated their security with ruinous taxes. Eventually they were so indebted to the Venetian aristocracy, borrowing money to fund these taxes, they could not be expelled.

The world has many empty Jewish quarters, where the Jewish tourist can find the wreckage of its people. There are Jews in Venice, it is true, but they are remnants clinging on. I used to visit these places, naturally. Now I find I no longer want to. If non-Jews want to understand us, look at deserted sites in continental Europe and the Arab world. (The El Hamma synagogue in Tunisia was burned down in October after false reports that Israel had bombed a hospital, but there was no community left to terrorise.) Look at our death sites. I don't want to visit another pristine synagogue in eastern Europe, lushly renovated with American Jewish philanthropy, and with locked gates.

But because I read Freedman's book I felt I should visit the ghetto, and I did. It is a sullen place, even for Venice in mid-winter. When Venetian buildings aren't decorated — the ghetto is pointedly plain, the five synagogues largely disguised — you find only damp and decay. I have never understood people who think Venice is romantic. To me it is eerie and unreadable, a haunted shop of curiosities. I like how the ghetto feels Jewish: its plainness is so different to the gaudy cathedrals. Even Chabad — always the last to leave — weren't around that day, though I did find a junk shop with Jewish ornaments and a kindly shopkeeper to show them to me. The question is always: whose were they and what happened to them?

I found the Holocaust memorial, of course: a set of panels depicting I don't know what, but I am sick of Holocaust memorials. I would take, instead, a Jew who is not afraid, but I don't know many of them these days. This is Freedman's account: in 1943, when the Germans arrived, they visited Giuseppe Jona, a doctor and the head of the Jewish community, and gave him two days to provide a list of the Jews in Venice. He destroyed the documents, told Jews to flee, wrote his will and killed himself. Because of this, only 243 Jews were deported from a pre-war population of about 2,000, including Adolfo Ottolenghi, the blind chief rabbi of Venice. That's a victory — just 10 per cent! — and I hate that it's a victory.

I found something else. On the top floor of a high building, hanging from a window, I found a sign: "Never again for anyone". I thought: why was it in English? So tourists can read it? Who put it there? Someone who found the old Jewish ghetto charming — why? — and wanted to live there, now most of the Jews have gone? Is it fashionable?

I explained what this sign meant to a non-Jewish friend, who didn't understand my fury. It was framed as universal love, you see, but Jews read it as a rebuke, because it is a rebuke. It says: you think you are special, but you aren't. You only care for your own suffering, but not me: I have a broader gaze than you. You are the genocidaires now. All this is addressed to the ghostly residents of the

This was my least favourite visit to my once-favourite city. I feel so disillusioned with continental Europe: I didn't realise I could be more disillusioned and I should have known better than to leave Venice off the sites of disillusion. Even places of dispossession and murder — Giuseppe Jona was murdered — cannot welcome us for a piece of consolation. So I went to Café Florian for ice cream, glared at the ghastly cathedral of St Mark and thought something I never previously thought I would: I will never come back.

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