SHYLOCK'S VENICE

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The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto

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Introduction

Venice is an improbable place. A lagoon dotted with small, silty islands strung together to create a city. Not just any old city. A city that for centuries was one of the wealthiest and most powerful states in Europe. An empire without an emperor; a republic in an age of kingdoms and duchies and principalities. A seagoing state of merchant adventurers who built one of the most beautiful cities in the world; so beautiful that 14 million people visit it each year. An island city-state so pleasing to the eye, so exquisite its architecture, so enchanting its waterscape, that in the glory years of the Republic it styled itself *La Serenissima*, the Most Serene.

A financially astute trading centre governed by a patrician regime, Venice treated its Jews better than almost anywhere else in Europe. That's not saying much. The Venetians were dreadful, frightful, horrific to their Jews. But even so, if you were a Jew in times gone by and you had to live in Europe, you couldn't choose better than La Serenissima. For all its faults.

This is a book about the Venice Ghetto. The word ghetto is used today to describe an area whose residents share the same economic status, ethnicity or background. The impoverished quarters of major cities where refugees and immigrants crowd together are called ghettos. So are districts where those of a similar origin or faith choose to live. Even those who dwell in mansions within gated communities may think of themselves as living in a ghetto of sorts. But none of these places is anything like the Venice Ghetto,

the very first ghetto in the world. Prison is a more appropriate word for the area in which the Jews of Venice were forced to live. Or, if we are feeling generous, open prison, since the barred gates were opened during daylight hours and the ghetto inhabitants could come and go freely. Provided they returned by nightfall.

There was nothing particularly unusual about confining the Jews in Venice into one part of the city; most cities had quarters where those of the same nationality lived. Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Dalmatians, Albanians and Germans all dwelt in their own districts of Venice. German merchants were obliged to live in the *Fondaco dei Tedeschi*, where they were free to come and go as they pleased, though the Turks in the *Fondaco dei Turchi* did have constraints placed upon their movements. But Turkey was often a hostile power and the Turkish merchants tended to stay in Venice only for short periods, conducting their business, doing who knows what else and leaving again. One can understand why the Venetians might have been wary of them. The Jews though, barricaded at night in their prison ghetto, were not a hostile community. Far from it, they were only allowed to be in the city because they were useful to the Venetians. The Jews did what the Venetians were prohibited by religion from doing. They lent money, typically as pawnbrokers, and helped the city's many poor to put food on the table.

Moneylending was one of very few trades that Jews were allowed to practise in Christian Europe. It was also the stick with which they were beaten. The myth of the avaricious Jewish moneylender, the conspiracy theory of the world-dominating Jewish banker, only exists because Christians were forbidden to lend to each other on interest. Jews were forbidden too, under the same biblical stricture. But by the twelfth century, rabbis were coming round to the view that Jews should be allowed to charge interest. They had little choice. They couldn't earn a proper living. They were forbidden from joining the guilds, the trade associations to which all merchants and craftsmen had to belong, and they were excluded from all the professions, with the occasional exception of medicine.

The first Jewish moneylenders opened shop in Venetian territory at the end of the thirteenth century. The Venetians licensed them

to lend to the poor, charged them fees for the privilege of doing so, and regulated the rate of interest they could levy. They resented and distrusted the Jews, accusing them of deicide, telling them that they had been rejected and cursed by God for their failure to recognize the divinity of Christ; it was these sins which justified their status as serfs. This attitude towards the Jews was no different from any in Europe. But unlike in other countries the Venetians never expelled the Jews, nor confiscated their belongings. They didn't slaughter Jewish men, rape women, or forcibly baptize children. That wasn't the Venetian way. Rather, they took money from them through taxation. That was how the Venetians did things. That's why Venice was the best place in Europe for Jews to live.

It was for reasons of economic utility that the Venetians first permitted Jewish moneylenders to settle in the city. It was for similar reasons that they later permitted Jewish merchants to reside in the ghetto. A decline in the Venetian economy during the sixteenth century had forced the government to review their trade policies. Jewish merchants based in Turkey handled much of the trade to and from the empire; the Venetians valued their contribution to the economy, but the merchants themselves were discouraged by the petty restrictions and bureaucracy the Republic imposed upon foreign traders. Trading with Venice was so difficult that when they arrived with their cargoes they could not even find a place in the city to stay. Realizing that it was in their own interest to make life easier for the Jewish merchants, the Venetian government expanded the ghetto and set aside lodgings for them to rent when in town.

The merchants soon brought their families and in time their temporary lodgings became permanent. In their robes and turbans they brought colour to the ghetto and their liquidity provided a certain amount of financial relief. But like the moneylenders the merchants were few in number, there were never enough of them to drag the ordinary, barely employed residents of the ghetto out of their poverty.

Confined to their compound, taxed to the hilt, barred from nearly every field of employment, forbidden to own property, obliged to

wear a distinguishing yellow badge or cap, we might conclude that life for the Jews of Venice was miserable. As indeed it was. And yet, something remarkable happened in the Venice Ghetto.

For centuries the university at the nearby town of Padua had been the scholarly heart of the Republic. As one of the only institutions in Europe that would admit Jewish students, its medical school had long been a magnet for the ambitious. Padua had a *yeshiva* too, a school for rabbinic training. There had never been a lack of opportunity for the bright and scholarly among the Jews of Venice. But the establishment of the ghetto broadened the intellectual horizon for those who were not naturally attracted to formal education. Quite unexpectedly, almost as soon as it was established, the ghetto became the centre of a Jewish cultural renaissance.

We may never fully understand why it happened. Certainly the zeitgeist had much to do with it. These were the closing years of the Italian Renaissance, and even in their ghetto the Jews could not help but be touched by cultural upheavals in the outside world. The fact that Venice was Europe's preeminent centre of printing also helped; scholars flocked from far and wide to have their works immortalized in print. And the concentration in such a small space of so many minds, all raised in a Jewish culture that emphasized education, must have made a contribution too.

Whatever the reasons, the Venice Ghetto was arguably the place where the Jewish enlightenment began, where for the first time Jews, ironically enough, stepped out of what has been called their 'ghetto mentality' and began to engage with the world around them.

The Jewish enlightenment is traditionally said to have begun in Germany in the eighteenth century. That, it is claimed, is when Jews first started to study secular subjects, engage with contemporary culture, and integrate with the world around them. But such things were already happening in the Venice Ghetto two centuries earlier. Not, it is true, for everybody; many residents of the ghetto were too downtrodden to give much thought to anything other than scraping a few coins together or how to protect their children from plague and hunger. But a few, not many, wrote books on science,

philosophy and medicine. Some composed music or wrote poetry, delved into antique writings, or printed new editions of ancient manuscripts. Ghetto intellectuals conversed with Italian scholars and corresponded with European humanists. There was even a renowned artist, Moses dal Castellazzo; an occupation that in those days was the least Jewish of all cultural activities. If Florence was the home of the Italian Renaissance, Venice saw the flowering of its Jewish counterpart.

The ghetto occupies a distinctive place in the history of European antisemitism. The Venetians had been the first to effectively imprison their Jews, but as the years passed they grew noticeably more tolerant, more willing to engage with them culturally and in commerce. They still despised Jews of course, they weren't that enlightened; they continued to treat them as outsiders, cursing them as deicides, fearing the supernatural powers they irrationally credited them with. But over the two centuries of the ghetto's existence the anti-Jewish polemics grew fewer and the calls to expel them from the city died down. The hand of the Venetian State weighed less heavily: always anxious to exact as much money from the ghetto as it could, in its latter years the Republic became more open to negotiation and compromise. Maybe the change was brought about by the zeitgeist; by a world that was opening up, where communications were improving and attitudes towards foreign cultures and nations were generally becoming more tolerant. Maybe it was because the ghetto contained people of note, intellectuals and merchants who commanded a degree of respect, who made tangible contributions to the prosperity and cultural well-being of Venice. Although it never became as tolerant towards its Jews as Amsterdam, whose story was very different, in its latter years the Venetian Republic displayed noticeably little hostility to its Jews. It stands out as an example of a city that not only came to terms with the fact that Venetians had to live with an indigenous Jewish population but, recognizing their economic utility, encouraged other Jews to join them. Provided, of course, that the newcomers too were also economically useful.

In the following pages we will read about life in the Venice Ghetto during the three centuries when Jews were confined there. We will meet its outstanding characters, the torchbearers of the Jewish renaissance. Leon Modena, who preached Judaism to princes and bishops, corresponded with Christian Talmudists, and brought music to the ghetto. Simone Luzzatto, whose manifesto on religious tolerance was read in Amsterdam and London, and Leone Ebreo the philosopher of love. We will hear how the poet Sara Copia Sulam was exploited by the Venetian guests she invited to her ghetto salon and read about Elia Levita, the author of courtly romances who lived for ten years in the home of a Cardinal, learning from him and teaching him. We will cross paths with Elijah Halfon, adviser to Henry VIII and Anselmo del Banco whose name tells us his profession, along with a sprinkling of mystics, alchemists, odd bods and false messiahs. Oh, and of course, Shylock, the most famous Venetian Jew of all.

1

Crossing the Lagoon

DON ISAAC ABARBANEL ARRIVES IN VENICE

In 1492 King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled their Jewish subjects from Spain. Most fled to the ports, desperate to cross the Mediterranean, to seek out new lives for themselves in lands they had scarcely heard of. The vessels they crowded onto were often unseaworthy, captained by men hoping to profit from the misery of the refugees, crewed by those hoping to extort what they could. Some of the exiles were murdered for their possessions before they were even able to set foot on the boats. Others managed to set sail, only to be sold into slavery on the north coast of Africa. A good few were driven by the winds back to Spain or drowned at sea. Only a small proportion of the refugees survived.

Those who did survive then fled to towns and communities across the Mediterranean. Many headed to the Ottoman Empire, where they would be at liberty to practise their religion and to live free of the persecutions and expulsions they had endured in Christian Europe. Some settled in Italy. One who did was Don Isaac Abarbanel (or Abravanel, scholars and experts cannot agree how he pronounced his name).

Don Isaac is well known in Jewish circles today for his biblical commentaries and his works of humanist philosophy, but his reputation in the late fifteenth century was for financial acumen and diplomacy. He was born in 1437 into a wealthy, aristocratic Jewish

family in Lisbon. He followed his father into the Portuguese royal court where he became one of King Alfonso V's leading financiers. Don Isaac (Don is a courtesy title) was the principal contributor to a substantial loan of 12 million reals raised on behalf of the king. And in 1471, when as part of a territorial grab the Portuguese army seized the Moroccan city of Arzila from the Islamic Wattasid dynasty, they sold members of the local population into slavery. Among them were 220 Jews. Don Isaac paid a considerable ransom from his own funds to free them.[1]

But when King Alfonso died in 1481, and the Duke of Bragança led an unsuccessful rebellion against the new monarch, João II, Abarbanel was accused of conspiracy. Sentenced to death, and with his wealth confiscated, he fled across the border to Spain, carrying only his reputation with him. He set himself up as a tax farmer – collecting taxes on commission – and won contracts to supply the Spanish army. He became fabulously wealthy again and ended up once more as a financier to royalty, this time to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. He helped to pay for their conquest of Granada and for the forced conversion they imposed upon the Muslim population. So immersed was Abarbanel in the Spanish court that he was taken completely by surprise in 1492 when the king and queen announced that all Jews in their kingdom were to be expelled. Abarbanel did his best; he petitioned the king three times and when that failed tried to bribe him, but to no avail. He and his family were expelled from Spain with their fellow Jews, sailing on the same dangerous and unseaworthy vessels, sharing the indignities they suffered, until they disembarked as refugees on foreign shores. In the Abarbanel family's case the foreign shore was Naples.

Isaac Abarbanel was one of the first Jewish Bible commentators to try to make scriptural passages relevant to the lives of his readers. His commentaries examine the historical and literary aspects of the text; unlike earlier exegetes he discusses entire stories and narratives rather than just explaining the meaning of individual words and sentences. From time to time he writes about himself. Abarbanel described his experience of being driven from Spain

in the commentary he wrote to the biblical Book of Kings. He peppered his account with quotations taken from Moses's *Song at the Red Sea*[2]:

> On one day 300,000 enfeebled people, young and old, children and women, myself among them, departed from all the king's domains, going wherever the wind would take them . . . Some went to the nearby kingdoms of Portugal and Navarre . . . Some made their way by sea, a pathway in the mighty waters. Yet even the hand of God was against them, to confound and destroy them. For many of the wretches were sold as slaves in foreign lands and many drowned in the sea, sinking like lead in the powerful currents. And some were cast into both fire and water, for the ships caught alight . . . I chose the way of those who went by sea, and I am in exile. I came with my household . . . here to the praiseworthy city of Naples whose kings are kings of righteousness.[3]

We should take the figure of 300,000 refugees with a grain of salt, but the rest of his description tallies with accounts from other contemporary sources. Of course, these days Abarbanel's story would have been different. Supremely wealthy exiles do not flee along with the masses into death-trap boats on the Mediterranean. They board private jets and continue their charmed lives elsewhere in the world.

Down and out in Naples was not the end of Don Isaac Abarbanel's story. He remade his fortune once again and became a trusted associate of King Ferrante (Ferdinand I). When the Kingdom of Naples fell to the French, Abarbanel fled with the royal court to Messina in Sicily. From there he went to Corfu and then to Monopoli in Apulia. As he travelled he found time to complete his commentaries on the books of the Bible, and to compose theological and philosophical tracts. Even in flight, Abarbanel was rarely idle.

Don Isaac finally settled in Venice in 1503. It seems that he went there with a specific purpose in mind, alert to a new financial

opportunity. Five years earlier the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama had sailed down the west coast of Africa, rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and discovered that India could be reached by sea. His discovery meant that those engaged in the lucrative trade in spices and silks from India to Europe no longer needed to board a ship to cross the Indian Ocean, disembark with their wares when reaching the Arabian peninsula, and endure a lengthy and dangerous journey across desert and mountain before boarding a ship once more at Alexandria, Constantinople or Antioch to sail homeward across the Mediterranean. Instead, they could ship their wares the whole way in one boat, saving themselves time, money and considerable danger. But the new sea route threatened to undermine the Venetian economy. Venice had grown prosperous and formidable as a seafaring nation, its boats and merchants dominating the Mediterranean shipping routes between Europe and the East. Should the spice traders circumvent the Mediterranean, Venice would lose a considerable part of its income. In straitened circumstances, it would become diminished militarily and find itself at the greater mercy of its perennial enemy, the Turks.

Venice was a powerful republic, with an empire covering a large chunk of north-eastern Italy, the Dalmatian Coast, Cyprus, Crete and several Greek islands. But its best days lay behind it. The fall of Constantinople in 1453, where Venice once had a large merchant community, had been a turning point, and the city had recently suffered a humiliating defeat in the Turkish–Venetian War (1499–1503). The threat to Venice's maritime trade due to Vasco da Gama's new sea route to India was yet another reversal in what seemed to be a never-ending stream of misfortunes.

Venice's setback was Don Isaac's opportunity. As a result of Vasco da Gama's discovery the Portuguese were now offering to transport Venetian merchandise to and from India, effectively cutting out the ships owned by the Republic's merchants. The Venetian government had set up a commission to find ways of preventing a catastrophic economic collapse, but the situation appeared bleak. Although he was long estranged from the Portuguese court, Don Isaac had once been a powerful member of its elite. He believed he understood its

workings, its interests, and how best to deal with it. He travelled to Venice, where his son Joseph was already living, and obtained an introduction to the Council of Ten, the most powerful of the Republic's various governing bodies. He put himself forward as an intermediary, offering to negotiate a deal with Portugal. According to the hyperbolic account of his sixteenth-century biographer, the Council of Ten were so impressed with what Don Isaac had to say that they admitted him into their inner circle, revealing to him all their hidden secrets.

Documents in the Venetian archive provide a more sober account of what happened. They record that Don Isaac offered to send his nephew to Lisbon to seek a solution to the dispute. The Council of Ten replied that if he returned from Portugal with an agreement to which they could assent, Don Isaac could 'rest assured that the gratitude of our State will not pass over him'.[4]

The Council of Ten was one of the governing legislatures of the Venetian Republic. Unlike other Italian cities dominated by autocrats, like the Medicis of Florence or the Sforzas of Milan, where nepotism and corruption were endemic, Venice had a well-ordered, long-established and stable system of governance. It was not a democracy, most people had little or no political power, but among the ruling class, the noble families who had governed Venice for generations, power was distributed relatively equitably. The main governing body was the Great Council, a large and unwieldy assembly with a membership that sometimes exceeded 2,000, a gathering far too large to do much more than oversee constitutional matters. Day-to-day governance was devolved into the hands of the Senate, whose 120 members elected by the Grand Council sat together with a number of ex-officio dignitaries and officers of state.

The executive arm of the Senate, similar to a modern-day cabinet, was the *Collegio.* It was made up of sixteen *savii or* sages, of whom six, known as *Savii Grandi*, acted as the Republic's ministers. The role of chair of the *Collegio* was rotated between the six *Savii Grandi* each week. Power never rested with any individual long enough for them to abuse it.

At the apex of this pyramid of governance sat the *Doge*, or duke. Appointed for life, his role was mainly as a figurehead, one whose every public appearance was conducted with exaggerated Venetian magnificence, in a display of the pomp and splendour at which the city still excels today. Politically, however, his ability to make decisions was restrained by six councillors, the *Signoria*, who acted as a brake on his ambitions. Without their approval on any issue, he was unable to act.

Even the Church was subordinate in administrative matters to the Venetian government, powerless to interfere in matters of state. Venice had always managed to keep Rome at arm's length, fiercely guarding its independence while remaining ecclesiastically loyal and professing submission. Even the bishops in Venice were chosen by the Senate, Rome could only confirm their appointment.

There was one anomaly within this carefully constructed pyramid of power. The Council of Ten, to whom Don Isaac had sent his proposal, did not sit neatly within the hierarchy. Set up in 1310 to protect the citizens of Venice from the abuse of personal power, the semi-autonomous Council of Ten was elected by the Great Council and supplemented by the Doge and his *Signoria*, making the Council of Ten effectively a council of seventeen. Three members of the Council were appointed as *capi* to preside over its discussions; their post was rotated monthly among the Council's members.

The Council of Ten were extraordinarily powerful. More agile than the Senate, they could cut through red tape, take decisions quickly, and proactively intervene in matters on which the security of the Republic rested, which needed delicate handling or extreme secrecy. The Senate constrained them as best they could. Membership of the Council was for one year only, and when a member's year was up he could not be re-elected until another twelve months had passed. Nor could two members of the same family sit on the Council at the same time. And in the month during which they held office the three *capi* were forbidden to have any contact with the outside world. Confined to the Doge's Palace, the seat of the Serenissima's government, they were thus insulated from all threats of and attempts at bribery.[5]