Bad news on the Rialto

TANYA GOLD

Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto

By Harry Freedman

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The Venice ghetto was the centre of late-Renaissance Jewish scholarship in Europe. It produced polyglot and philosopher rabbis and printed books of incalculable value.

Now it's a sullen district in Cannaregio. It's almost an island, with a few tourists wondering why, with its gloomy tenements (the five synagogues are disguised), it is the only part of Venice that isn't pretty.

Harry Freedman answers this question – in a confined space, you build upwards – in a history with a unifying idea: the search for Shylock, Shakespeare's invented Jew.

We never learn who Shylock was, though Freedman offers compelling candidates: Anselmo del Banco, for instance, whose son Jacob converted to Judaism and was accused of stealing a 2,000-ducat jewel, like Shylock's Jessica.

The word 'ghetto' is likely to have been named after the Venice foundry, or *geto*, on which it was built. But Venice wasn't the first city to corral its Jews into a ghetto, as it did in 1516. Prague had done so 250 years earlier

Christian Europe resented the Christ-killers. The first Jews in Venice arrived from Germany, where they fled pogroms sparked by the Black Death. Jews were expelled from Naples in 1288, and from England in 1290. Jews banished from Spain and Portugal arrived later.

But the Venetians were more ambivalent and grasping. Their empire declined after the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama opened a sea route to the east in 1497-99, thwarting their trade monopolies. They coveted Jewish taxes, moneylenders – Christians were forbidden from usury – and ransom. They allowed Jews to live in Venice, but on probation and subject to sanction.

Charters were granted for five or ten years, and vast payments were made in exchange for security: 1.5m ducats (or £157m in today's money) between 1644 and 1659.

In some ways, though, Venice was the safest city in Europe for Jews. Tens of thousands of eastern European Jews were murdered in anti-Jewish riots in the 1640s and '50s. The Venetian community raised funds to buy captured Jews from the slave markets in Istanbul and held a day of mourning.

But, still, the Talmud was burned in St Mark's Square in October 1553. By the end of the Venetian Republic in the late-18th century, the Jews couldn't be expelled: they had borrowed too much money from the local nobility. If they left, the debts left with them.

Freedman traces many such contradictions. When Jews are forced to live together, their own singular culture thrives: Venetian rabbis were learned and famous and were consulted by Jewish communities from Amsterdam to the Levant. But the ghetto was not, intellectually at least, an island: the gates were locked only at night.

Some Jews could read Arabic and, by translating Arabic texts into Latin, they made Arab philosophy available to Christian scholars and nobleman, who employed them. When Henry VIII wanted to divorce Catherine of Aragon, he sent an emissary to the Venice ghetto for a Jewish legal opinion and bought a copy of the 1520 Bomberg Talmud, which lived in the archives at Westminster Abbey until it was sold in 1980.

The Duc d'Orléans, the brother of King Louis XIII, came to Venice to listen to the rabbis. Jewish scholars were acquainted with the writings of Thomas More, Montaigne, Machiavelli and Galileo. They wrote dictionaries and secular philosophical tracts.

It is a truism that Jews mirror their place and time. As Venice declined, so did its ghetto: the centre of Jewish scholarship moved eastwards to the Kingdom of Poland. When the Venetian Republic fell to Napoleon in 1797, he ordered the ghetto gates destroyed. The Jews were asked for a final tax of 200 ducats for the Christian poor. They raised 314 ducats and were full citizens of Venice until the Austrians took power and removed Jewish civil liberties.

You know how it ends. When the Nazis arrived in Venice in 1943, they went to Giuseppe Jona – president of the Venetian Jewish community and a doctor, like so many Venetian Jews before him. They gave him two days to provide the names of all Venetian Jews. Jona burnt the identifying documents, told Jews to flee, wrote his will and killed himself. He was 77.

Hundreds acted on Jona's warning. Those remaining were transported to Auschwitz – Freedman puts the figure at 243 –including Adolfo Ottolenghi, the blind Chief Rabbi of Venice.

When I was there last month, the Venice ghetto was almost empty. I found it a place of bleak despair. Chabad, the Hasidic outreach movement, retains a presence, and you can visit the synagogues and buy Jewish religious objects. But these are remnants.

Freedman has written a worthy history of what came before.