

Harry Freedman, *Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto*

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### Versione italiana

In 1516 the Jews of Venice were ostracized and forced to live in a contaminated section of Venice, that had formerly been a foundry. The first ghetto was born, gates were built, rents increased, yellow hats were required, and professions were severely limited. Acclaimed Jewish scholar, **Harry Freedman**, delves into the fascinating people, culture, relationships, and remarkable contributions made by a community that was persecuted because of its faith. His new book is a brilliant and beautifully crafted narrative that transcends history to contemplate the significance of the Venetian ghetto and a literary Shylock in our contemporary world.

What inspired you to write a history of Venetian ghetto?

Venice occupies a unique place in Jewish history. It is where the first ghetto was established and it is where the first sustained printing of Jewish books, including the Talmud, took place. I had been to Venice a few times, had visited the site of the ghetto and was intrigued as to how a city which banished its Jews to a distant, squalid corner could also become the most important place in the world for printing Jewish books.

The more I looked into it and the more I read I realised that early modern Venice was far more than just a centre for the production of Jewish books. Although the Jews were confined into a ghetto- the first in the world- Venice had become the most vibrant centre of Jewish life in Europe. So many fascinating characters had lived there and there were so many stories, including that of Shakespeare's character Shylock, that I decided the history of the Venice ghetto ought to be recounted in a book.





Harry Freedman

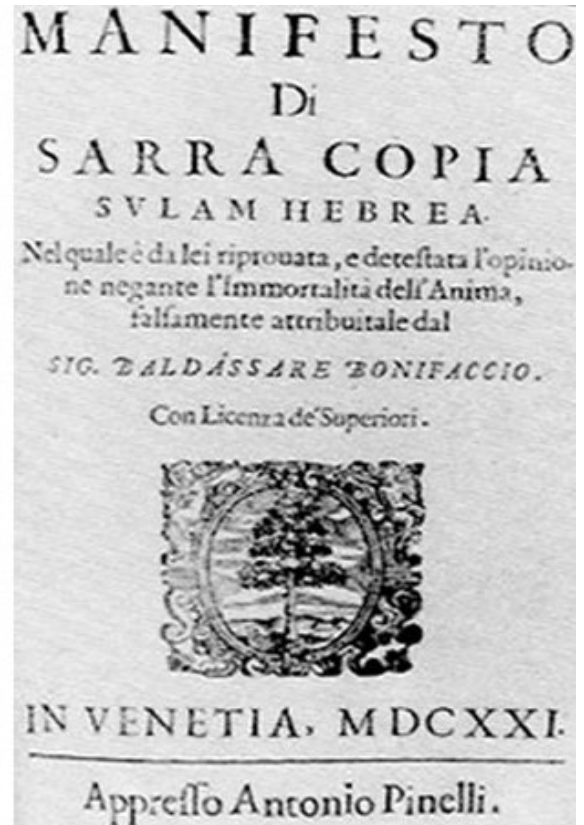
Venice has always had an outsized influence on Western history and culture in relationship to its physical size and this is also true of the ghetto. The intellectual and cultural influences of a small population of Jews contributed to a significant understanding of Judaism at a time when antisemitism was rampant throughout Europe. If it weren't for Daniel Bomberg and his 16<sup>th</sup> century printing press, do you think that the ideas that flourished in Renaissance Venice about Judaism would have had the capacity to change perceptions?

Bomberg's printing press was certainly important in helping to enhance the image of Jews and Judaism among Venetians. The fact that a Christian printer was producing Jewish books was remarkable enough; so too was the spirit of harmony and cooperation between the Jews and Christians who worked alongside each other in Bomberg's workshop.

But even without Bomberg's press, the Venetians' awareness and understanding of Jews would have flourished. Jews were not allowed to leave the ghetto at night but they interacted with Christians daily. When the rabbi, Leon Modena, preached in the synagogue, the quality of his oratory was so high that Venetian nobles and churchmen would come in to the ghetto to listen to him speak. Jewish doctors routinely treated Venetian patients, there were Jews who taught dance and music to Venetians and every year, at the Jewish festival of Purim, the Jews would put on a play that many Christian Venetians would come to watch.

Jews and Christians interacted outside the ghetto too. Jews were invited to attend the celebrated *Incogniti* Academy in the city, to provide insights into their ancient wisdom and to introduce the Academy members to Jewish manuscripts and antiquities.

Jews were also essential to the Venetian economy. One of the very few occupations that were permitted to work at was pawnbroking and small scale moneylending. The poor of Venice subsisted from week to week by coming into the ghetto to pawn their goods for a few coins with which to buy food. At the other end of the economic scale, Venice was an important port and mercantile centre; much of the trade was conducted by Jewish merchants arriving in the city from Turkey. So all in all, there would have been plenty of interaction between Jews and Christians, even without Bomberg.



L: Portrait said to be of Sara Copia Sulam. R: Her *Manifesto Di Sarra Copia Sulam Hebreia*

Sara Copia Sulam was a learned Venetian Jew in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A poet and musician, she hosted a coveted literary salon. Despite her invaluable contributions she was routinely taken advantage of and was the recipient of serious accusations and hostility by Christian scholars. In your extensive research were you able to identify other women in the ghetto who were able to succeed in their endeavours, deflecting the misogyny that often thwarted their efforts?

There do not appear to be any other women of the same stature or reputation as Sara Copia Sulam. However there were some women in the ghetto who managed to transcend the misogyny of the time. The singer Rachel was given permission to leave the ghetto at night to sing in the houses of Venetian nobles. The wealthy Mendes sisters, Brianda and Beatrice, fled to Venice from Belgium and would have stayed had the Venetian authorities not been too greedy, trying to confiscate their wealth when the sisters quarrelled and fell out.

Some women succeeded in trade; Madame Treves is pictured standing with her merchant husband in a painting by Bartolomeo Nazari. The painting is intended to enhance the reputation of a prosperous and successful Jewish family shipping business. Madame Treves occupies a central position in the picture, indicating the importance of the part she played in the business's success. Her son married Benedetta Bonfil, as a couple they owned the largest company in Venice. One of their vessels was the first to sail under a Venetian flag to America, carrying flour to the New

World and returning with a cargo of sugar and coffee.

It is great irony that the Jews were reviled as money lenders (being one of the only professions available to them) while every decision about their existence in Venice stemmed from the government's desire to increase their coffers. There was a vicious cycle of "economic utility" that allowed the Jews to survive in Venice but also branded them with a prejudice that has continued to this day. Have you ever wondered if their professions had not been so severely limited by the Venetian authorities, how Jewish culture during the Renaissance may have flourished in the fine and decorative arts?

It is possible that they would have thrived in these fields. In North Africa many Jews were jewellers and craftsmen, working in gold and tin. But even in the ghetto there was no prohibition on Jewish creativity as such, the renowned Jewish artist Moses dal Castellazzo received commissions from Christian patrons throughout northern Italy.

The prohibitions were on the type of work in which Jews could be employed, there doesn't seem to have been any ban on them making small items or artworks in the privacy of their own homes. Yet for economic reasons, either because they could not afford raw materials or because a market did not exist, Jews in Venice did not produce decorative artwork. Even by the late 18th century, as restrictions on Jewish trade were gradually lifted, Jews do not appear to have worked in the decorative arts. This supports the conclusion that they had no commercial incentive to do so. Of all the indignities suffered by Jews in the ghetto it is the nailing shut of their canal facing windows in 1560 that struck me as particularly inhumane. While touring the ghetto with a Venetian guide, this punishment was omitted. When I asked why, I was told quite vehemently that it never happened. Why would any of the restrictive regulations that the Jews living in the ghetto experienced be denied?

It is possible that the decree of 1560 was never fully implanted; the Venetian Senate and its various magistracies often failed to carry through by enforcing their own legislation. Equally though, the ghetto remains a symbol of shame in Venice today and perhaps there are some things that are never spoken of.





The Merchant of Venice staged in Campo Ghetto Novo in July 2016, directed by [Karin Coonrod](#)

From the first time you sat in an audience and watched the Merchant of Venice being performed to the most recent time, how has your own perception of Shylock changed?

Shakespeare's Shylock is one of the most ambiguous characters in literature. Is he a villain, or a victim? The Jew who demands a pound of flesh may be presented as a monster but the Jew who asks 'if you prick me do I not bleed' is making one of the great literary pleas for tolerance of all times. It is possible to read the Merchant of Venice as either anti- or philo- semitic, or even both simultaneously.

I believe that the only way to approach the riddle of Shylock is to look at Shakespeare's personal attitude towards Jews, bearing in mind that he lived in an England from which Jews were excluded (although a very few did come in). I have taken this approach in the book, drawing on what we know about the attitudes towards Jews in Shakespeare's age, comparing The Merchant of Venice with the contemporaneous, virulent Jew of Malta by Marlowe and pointing out possible parallels between Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock and the experiences of the del Banco family in the Ghetto.

My personal opinion is that Merchant of Venice is not an antisemitic work. It is too complex a play and contains too many contradictions to be summed up so neatly.



Holocaust Monument (1980) project by Franca Semi, work by Arbit Blatas, Campo del Ghetto Nuovo (©



Giovanni Leone)

Tourists in Venice don't often make time to visit the ghetto. And when they do, I often hear comments of derision stemming from misguided expectations that lead to disappointment. How would you encourage the ghetto to be experienced?

Compared to the rest of Venice, the ghetto is a sad and unexciting place. But it was always so. It was an insalubrious slum, a prison town, packed with unhappy people. It may have been culturally vibrant but it was not a happy place to live.

The bronze bas-relief panels at the far end of the campo created by Ardit Blatas are a sober reminder of the ghetto's worst days, the Shoah, and the destruction of the few remaining Jews who had not been able to flee. Wherever you walk in the ghetto there are plaques and stones bearing the names of those who were slaughtered. As such the ghetto is a place of memory and this is how it should be experienced.

We are fortunate that the city of Venice has not turned the Ghetto into a theme park or a tourist experience; they could so easily have done so. It is therefore ideally suited to contemplation, a largely unspoiled reminder of how its inhabitants lived, a testament to persecution, suffering and the eternal, indomitable spirit of the Jews.

With the rise in antisemitism and the horrific wars in the Middle East, has the relevancy of the Venetian ghetto and its history shifted in importance?

The Venice Ghetto has always been a symbol of the appalling treatment meted out to Jews in earlier centuries. Napoleon recognised this as early as 1797, giving orders for the ghetto gates to be torn down as soon as his forces entered the city. Sadly the persecution only grew worse; it was only due to the bravery of Giuseppe Jona that the Nazis failed in their attempt to exterminate Venetian Jewry.

Giuseppe Jona was the 77 year old leader of the Venetian Jewish community. When the Nazis entered Venice they demanded that he give them a list of all the Jews living in the city. They gave him two days to do so. Giuseppe Jona warned the Jews to flee or, if they could not, to hide. He spent the next two days destroying every document he could find relating to Jews and the Jewish community. When he had done as much as he believed he could do, he wrote his will and committed suicide. The Germans never got their list of names. Two days later, when the Nazis raided the ghetto they found just over 100 people. Giuseppe Jona had taken his own life to save more than 1,000 others.

The current wave of antisemitism, in response to the barbaric Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent invasion of Gaza, can be considered in its historical context. Like Auschwitz, the

Venice Ghetto is a physical memorial, a place to remember the lives of people who were tormented simply because of their identity. Unlike Auschwitz, the Ghetto today is a place where people live and work, their lives as free and unconstrained as anywhere else in the country. This gives us cause for optimism; the Ghetto allows us both to remember the past and to realise that life will return to normal; that we can look forward to a better future, free of the senseless persecution of strangers.