A place called home

JONATHAN KEATES

Shylock's Venice: The Remarkable History of Venice's Jews and the Ghetto
HARRY FREEDMAN
(BLOOMSBURY CONTINUUM, 256 PP, £20)

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A CRUCIAL observation regarding the Venetian economy is made by a character in *The Merchant of Venice* who tells us that "the trade and profit of the city consisteth of all nations". A staunchly Catholic society which nevertheless sheltered heretic Protestants and allowed Greek refugees to raise their own Orthodox Church, a bulwark of Christendom most of whose trade was carried on with Muslims, Venice was also, for at least five centuries, a place called home for flourishing Jewish communities arriving from mainland Italy, northern Europe, Portugal and Spain (pictured, one of the entrances to the Venice Jewish ghetto).

If their condition under the Venetian Republic was hedged about with grudges, scruples and restrictions, and the very issue of their permanent residence in the area known as the Ghetto, in the town's Cannaregio district, was always being contested, the Jews made themselves indispensable to Venice's survival and success as a free state. In *Shylock's Venice*, Harry Freedman pays tribute not only to the tenacity and resourcefulness of these Jewish Venetians, but to the various ways in which their presence helped to shape *La Serenissima*'s unique cultural profile.

Freedman highlights the Ghetto's fragmented character, with its three distinct communities: the Levantine merchants from the eastern Mediterranean; the numerous exiles from Spain following the Catholic monarchs' edict of 1492; and the "Germans" from countries north of the Alps. Each had their own synagogue, separate charters, privileges and obligations, but all came together in a so-called "University", an elected assembly managing everything from street-cleaning and safety measures to tax assessment and observation of the sumptuary laws imposed on them, including a requirement for all Jewish males to wear yellow hats.

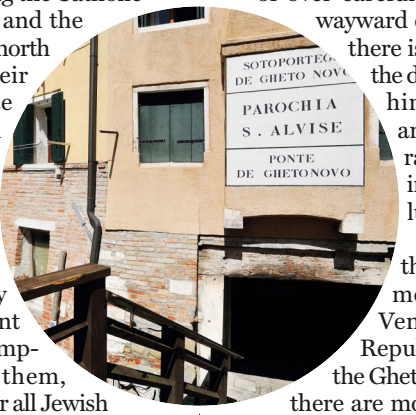


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Out of the Ghetto's appallingly cramped, often contentious but always exotic world, one of Venice's major curiosities for the foreign traveller, sprang exceptional souls like Rabbi Leone da Modena, polymath, orator, prolific author and interpreter of Jewish spirituality to Christian readers. Another such figure was his friend the poet Sara Coppio Sullam, whose 1621 Manifesto on behalf of her faith was a learned riposte to venomous accusations of blasphemy from a priest, the Archdeacon of Treviso, who had grown perhaps a shade too interested in her during theological discussions in the lively salon she opened in the Ghetto.

And Shylock, how authentic a Venetian Jew is he? Freedman rightly dismisses that "antisemitic" tag so lazily attached to *The Merchant of Venice*. Shakespeare invites respect and compassion for Shylock, whether as wronged litigant, victim of Gentile abuse or over-careful father betrayed by his wayward child. His world (which there is good reason to believe the dramatist actually saw for himself, though that's another story) is given a range of rich perspectives in this well documented, lucid and readable study.

I could wish, however, that the writer had spent more time on Jewish Venice following the Republic's fall in 1797. After the Ghetto gates were torn down, there are moving tales to be told of Jewish fortitude during the great Austrian siege of 1848–49 and of major contributions made by Jews to Venetian civic and cultural life in the early twentieth century. As for the impact on the community created by Mussolini's racial laws and the terrible round-ups of the Nazi occupation, all this deserves more than a mere two pages of epilogue, tacked on like an afterthought.

Perhaps Harry Freedman can be persuaded to pursue the subject, an essential chapter of Venice's story but mostly unknown to the general reader, in a further book.