500 years of the Venetian Ghetto
History and scenes of daily life

illustrations by Michal Meron
inspired by The Venetian Ghetto by Riccardo Calimani

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These paintings, which draw their inspiration from the history of the Venetian Ghetto and its inhabitants, have an extraordinary feature: the ability to convey centuries of often painful Jewish experience in joyous images. They succeed in expressing the Ghetto’s unique atmosphere and evocative environment.

The Jewish world of the Ghetto expressed in these pages is one of spontaneous exhilaration and irrepressible delight, characterized by a passion for life and the desire for peace. Through the paintings, feelings and aspirations are communicated with an exuberant intensity that a written text could not evoke.

The history of the Venetian Ghetto is the history of a small microcosm, whose vitality and astonishing tenacity can speak to the world. This book offers a portrait of this community, which is remarkable in its poignancy and strength.

Riccardo Calimani

Introduction

In the history of Jewish culture, Jewish Venice is remembered above all for the abundance of books that were printed there. These include the fundamental texts that form part of every Rabbi’s education: the Yerushalmi and Babylonian Talmud, the Mikraoth Gedolot (the ‘Rabbinic Bible’ which presents the Biblical text alongside some of the most important commentaries of Jewish history), prayer books and many more. Yet this is only the most prominent aspect of Venice’s legacy. Questions about ritual practice have always been an important feature of Jewish life. As always, the questions that were addressed to the Rabbis of the time reflected a way of life in continuous flux, which re-examined both its everyday habits and the numerous celebrations which characterise the Hebrew calendar.

Leafing through the book illustrated by Michal Meron it quickly becomes clear that its interest is not limited to specialists and friends. The illustrations express the great happiness of the Jews, despite being forced to live locked inside the Ghetto. Moreover, the Venetian Jews remained joyful even faced with the many restrictions that the Serenissima, or Venetian Republic, imposed on them. This ability to find opportunity in adversity has always distinguished the Jews, regardless of their location, and it still represents one of the fundamental elements of Jewish identity.

Today, Venice’s Jewish community continues to approach problems with the same optimism, because the history of a community like that of Venice deserves to be passed down for another 500 years, not through history books but by living people.

Chief Rabbi of Venice
Scialom Bahbout

Preface

These paintings, which draw their inspiration from the history of the Venetian Ghetto and its inhabitants, have an extraordinary feature: the ability to convey centuries of often painful Jewish experience in joyous images. They succeed in expressing the Ghetto’s unique atmosphere and evocative environment.

The Jewish world of the Ghetto expressed in these pages is one of spontaneous exhilaration and irrepressible delight, characterized by a passion for life and the desire for peace. Through the paintings, feelings and aspirations are communicated with an exuberant intensity that a written text could not evoke.

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THE ORIGINS OF THE JEWS IN VENICE

The origins of the Jewish community in Venice are obscure. Initially, the city’s ruling Council only allowed Jewish merchants to stay in Venice for short periods, favouring the settlement of small groups on the mainland in the neighbouring city of Mestre. In 1386 the Council granted the Jews permission to create a private cemetery on the Lido, a strip of land situated between the lagoon and the Adriatic Sea.

FOREWORD

March 1916: the world’s first ghetto was established in Venice.
March 2016: the five-hundred-year anniversary of the Venetian Ghetto.
This anniversary provides a good opportunity to find out more about the Venetian Ghetto and its history.
The gates of the Ghetto were thrown open in 1797 by Napoleon’s troops, but when talking about modern ghettos as places of marginalisation and discrimination, we should remember that the word ghetto originated in Venice.
This booklet is dedicated to all people of good will who want to live in a better world.
Finally, I would like to express my special thanks to everyone who contributed to the making of this book: to Katie our translator, to Francesca our tireless proofreader, to Alice our graphic artist, to Daniela Brunetti from the Jewish Museum of Venice for her ample historical knowledge and to Yehudah for his aesthetic input.

The Publisher
Alon Baker, November 2015

RICCARDO CALIMANI is the author of numerous novels and books on Jewish history.
MICHAL MERON is an illustrator and painter living in Venice. Her work explores themes related to Jewish culture and history.
ALON BAKER is the publisher for ScalaMata Editions and the Studio in Venice.
29 MARCH 1516
The Senate of the Serenissima Republic of Venice issued the following declaration: “The Jews must all live together in the Corte de Case, in the Ghetto near San Girolamo; to prevent them from wandering around at night let there be built two gates, one on the side of the Old Ghetto where there is a little bridge, and likewise on the other side of the bridge, that is, one for each of said two places. The gates shall be opened in the morning at the sound of the Marangona [the largest bell of St Mark’s bell tower] and shall be closed at midnight by four Christian guards appointed and paid by the Jews at the rate deemed suitable by our cabinet.”

The place is La Serenissima, the Most Serene Republic of Venice; the date, March 29, 1516. The words of this edict would toll like a death-knell in the history of the Jewish diaspora, and the Ghetto’s walls – a physical barrier – were to become its most powerful and pervasive symbol.
WHERE DOES THE WORD GHETTO COME FROM?

There are numerous theories on the etymology of the word "ghetto". It could derive from the Italian word "borghetto", diminutive of "borgo" (little village or borough), or from "ghet", the Hebrew word for divorce. Alternatively, it may originate in the German terms "gitter" or "gasse" (street), or derive from the Provençal word "gaita" (guard) and be a reference to the guards that watched over the area. However, the most reliable explanation is that the word derives from the Venetian verb "getar" (to throw), as the first ghetto was situated on a site adjacent to the municipal copper smelters where foundry waste was thrown, hence the term "terren del Geto". Geto later became "ghetto".

THE FIRST CONDOTTA

In 1516 the Venetian Republic entered into a contract with the Natione Todesca, Jews originating from Germany. The Condotta (contract) set out the conditions under which Jews could settle and conduct business in Venice. It stipulated the smallest details, from interest rates, the number of banks and type of loans permitted to opening hours and the taxes that had to be paid.

THE YELLOW BADGE

A geniza document from 1121 (the geniza was the storage place in synagogues or Jewish cemeteries for worn-out religious Hebrew books) gives the following account of decrees issued in Baghdad: "Two yellow badges are to be displayed, one on the headgear and one on the neck. Furthermore, each Jew must hang around his neck a piece of lead with the word "dhimmi" (a social status assigned to tolerated infidels) on it. He must also wear a belt round his waist. The women must wear one red and one black shoe and a small bell on their necks or shoes.

In Europe the yellow badge or hat, and later a red hat, became a symbol of shame reserved for prostitutes and Jews. It was always dangerous for Jews who were travelling to be identified as such. Jewish doctors were usually exempt from wearing the badge. They had a special standing due to their international contacts, skills and knowledge of the latest medical advances.
TRENTO: A BLOOD LIBEL

Jews were often subjected to violent attacks, persecution and false accusations following epidemics or natural disasters. In 1475 these attacks culminated in blood libels when Jews were accused of ritual murder following the disappearance of a young boy called Simone in Trento, a small town in northern Italy. The entire Jewish community of Trento (both men and women) was arrested and forced to confess under torture. Fifteen of them were sentenced to death and burnt at the stake in the town square.

Following a trial a papal commissioner declared the Jews to be innocent. The real murderer was eventually found and the accusations revealed to have been an obvious fiction. Although the horrific double crime against both the murdered child and the unjustly accused Jews was proven, little Simone was beatified. He was included in the Book of Martyrs and removed only in 1965.

THE SYNAGOGUES OF THE GHETTO

The synagogues in the Ghetto date from the early sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century and are known in Venice as scople or schole. The word schole is similar to the Yiddish word shul, the Italian scuola, or the English school. Synagogues had to be built on the foundations of existing buildings, and due to their nondescript facades they are not easily identifiable from the outside. Their opulent interiors therefore come as a surprise. In Venetian synagogues the Aron ha Kodesh (the shrine where the Torah is kept) and the Bimah (the pulpit where the passages of the Torah are read) are always positioned at opposite ends.

THE SYNAGOGUES OF THE GHETTO NOVO

The Canton synagogue

In Venetian dialect canton means corner. Its name could derive from the family who built the synagogue or be a reference to its location on the corner of the Campo del Ghetto Novo. From the outside the building is recognisable only by its wooden dome which overlooks the rooftops of the Ghetto. Erected in 1531, the Canton synagogue served Jews from Germany and follows the Ashkenazi rite, similar to the Schola Grande Tedesca. On the floor there is an ornamental mosaic circle. Tradition has it that whoever steps into the circle will get married the following year.

The German synagogue

The oldest of the Venetian synagogues is located in Campo del Ghetto Novo and was constructed in 1528 by the Ashkenazi community. It was rebuilt several times over the centuries and its harmonious interior is characterized by huge gilded decorations.

The German Jews (Ashkenazim)

The most important group in the new Ghetto were the German Jews (Natione Tedesca). They were of Ashkenazi origin and had fled persecution in the north. Initially they set up shop in the neighbouring area of Mestre from where they conducted their business in Venice. After the establishment of the Ghetto, they worked mainly as pawnbrokers.
The Italian synagogue
This synagogue was built in 1575 by the Italian Jews, who were the poorest group living in the Venetian Ghetto. It can be identified by its small onion-shaped dome and is the smallest and simplest of the Ghetto’s five synagogues. The appearance of the interior is one of restrained elegance, with dark panels and five large windows opening into Campo del Ghetto Novo.

The Italian Jews
In the second half of the sixteenth century a small group of Jews of Italian origin arrived in the Ghetto from central and southern Italy, especially from Rome. They sought refuge from persecution in their communities.

The Levantine synagogue
The Levantine synagogue was built between 1538 and 1561 by Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean and retains most of its original features. It is the only synagogue in the Ghetto to have a noteworthy exterior. Protruding from the facade is a polygonal structure characteristic of Venetian architecture known as a Liago.

To the right of the entrance is the Midrash Luzzatto, a small, very fine study and prayer hall which contains probably the oldest Torah shrine of all the Venetian synagogues.

The Levantine Jews were wealthy merchants of Iberian origin who were expelled from Spain in 1492. They arrived in Venice from Turkey and Greece and in 1541 they were allotted the area alongside the Old Ghetto. Due to the economic difficulties besetting the Most Serene Republic of Venice at the time, they were welcomed on their arrival. Although they had to wear yellow badges, unlike other Jews they were not forced to work as money lenders or sellers of used clothes.

The Levantine merchants brought Eastern customs with them to Venice. In the words of Rabbi Leone of Modena “they prayed after the Turkish manner” and, in contrast to the modest outfits of the German Jews, Levantine men wore ornate turbans while the women dressed in rich clothes and expensive jewellery.

The Spanish synagogue
This baroque synagogue is the largest scola in the Ghetto. It was built in the Old Ghetto in 1584 by Baldassarre Longhena, the most important Venetian architect of the time. Its rich interior is decorated with silver candlesticks and wood carvings.

The Ponentine Jews
The Spanish and Portuguese Marranos (Iberian Jews who had converted or been forced to convert to Christianity) arrived in Venice in the late sixteenth century. They soon became the strongest and wealthiest group in the Ghetto. Upon their arrival in Venice, Ponentine Jews usually reconverted to Judaism.

THE Ghetto’s ‘SKYSCRAPERS’
By the mid-seventeenth century the population of the Ghetto had reached almost 5,000 people. To address the shortage of living space, wooden partitions were used to divide houses further. Ceilings were lowered and additional floors were added to buildings. Even today it is possible to find apartments with such low ceilings that it is almost impossible to stand up straight. Some buildings reached nine storeys high and could be considered sixteenth-century precursors of modern skyscrapers.
THE PROFESSIONS OF THE GHETTO

The Jews of Venice were only permitted to practise three professions. They were not allowed to own land or property and could not become craftsmen, professionals or business owners. Initially, the only activity open to them was money lending. An exception was later made for the mercantile Levantine Jews who were granted permission to trade. Eventually, the Ghetto’s inhabitants were also allowed to become doctors and to sell second-hand clothes.

DOCTORS

From the fifteenth century onwards Jews could study medicine at the University of Padua. Many young Jews devoted themselves to their studies and soon excelled in this field. Doctors were exempt from wearing yellow badges and were also able to leave the Ghetto after nightfall in order to tend to patients elsewhere in the city.

RAGTRADERS

At the end of the fifteenth century, Venice granted Jews permission to sell strazzaria, second-hand clothes and rags. To make a living they often sold new garments as old ones, adding small stains or other flaws, so that the garment, qualified as ‘used’, should avoid complaints by authorities.

PAWNSHOPS

In the mid-fourteenth century wars with Verona and Genoa and the outbreak of the plague created severe financial problems for the Venetian Republic. There was a deep need to bring moneylenders to Venice to satisfy the demands of the city’s poor and to provide merchants with credit. The government thus succeeded in deflecting popular hostility and resentment away from the authorities and, towards the Jews who ran pawnshops. These shops were indicated by the colours red, green and black.
At the end of the sixteenth century the Ghetto assumed its final form: a combination of lending banks, used clothes shops and synagogues distributed around the main Campo. It was a mixture of tall, narrow buildings and small, fashionable palaces inhabited by members of the Levantine community. Inside the Ghetto, alongside places of worship and study, there were a theatre, a music academy and literary salons.

The Ghetto became a trading centre not only for Jewish residents and visitors, but also for Christian Venetians, who poured into the area every morning when the gates were opened. The Ghetto remained ‘a thriving city within a city’ until 1630, when the plague wrought devastation on Venice and its inhabitants. The main calle (street) of the Old Ghetto was dotted with shops of every kind, from food vendors and stores selling everyday items, to booksellers in the Campiello delle Scole.
A description from Libro Grande: “Towards sunset the shofar (a ram’s horn) was sounded three times. When one Jew met another Jew coming from the Ghetto, he would ask him if the first or the second call had sounded, so they would be in time to stop their work at the third. Women lit the candles in their homes to greet the Shabbat. Alms were collected to pay the Shofar-blower.”

SHABBAT

The ‘Rejoicing of the Law’ is the last day of the festival of Sukkot. It is the day when the annual cycle of the reading of the Torah in the synagogue is completed and the new cycle begins. Giulio Morosini described Simchat Torah: “Spaniards, Levantines, Portuguese, Germans, Greeks and Italians sing, each according to his custom. There are no instruments but they clap hands, snapping their fingers and leaping and dancing. They parade around the synagogue at least seven times and the books of the law are kissed repeatedly.” Today in Venice Simchat Torah is the time when books and scrolls are passed from the Levantine Scola – the ‘winter’ synagogue – to the Spanish synagogue used in summer.
The message of this festival is the triumph of good over evil. Specifically, it marks the victory of Esther and her cousin Mordechai over the Persian courtier, Haman, who instigated a plot to destroy the Jews of the Persian empire. Rabbi Leone of Modena and Giulio Morosini described the festival: “Friends and family exchange gifts consisting of cakes and pastries. Children and teenagers wear their best outfits and parade around the ghetto with toy swords, guns, dolls, small chairs and cabinets, mirrors, tambourines and trumpets, in a bustle that would stun even a deaf man. They exchange signs of affection, kisses and smiles and clap their hands. Women greet each other from their windows, chatting about gifts given and received. People don masks and go to visit their friends and relatives where they dine and dance.”

Hanukkah commemorates the Maccabean Revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd century BC and the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem after its desecration by Antiochus IV. The holiday also recalls the miracle that occurred when the Temple was rededicated. Only enough pure olive oil was found to keep the Menorah in the Temple alight for a single day, yet it burned for eight days, enabling new oil to be pressed and made ready.
Pesach (Passover) marks the liberation of the Jewish people from slavery in ancient Egypt, as recounted in the Book of Exodus. According to the Hebrew Bible, G-d helped the Israelites, led by Moses, to escape from slavery by inflicting ten plagues upon the ancient Egyptians. In their haste to flee the Israelites could not wait for their bread dough to leaven and, in commemoration, no leavened bread is eaten for the duration of Pesach.

In Venice, the local Jewish community uses the old forno (bakery) once a year at Pesach to bake matzot (unleavened bread) and traditional Pesach cookies called Bisse.
Dona Gracia Mendes Nasi, also known by the Christianised name of Beatrice de Luna, was one of the richest women in Renaissance Europe. Born in Lisbon (Portugal) to an ancient family of conversos (Jews who had been forcibly converted), she married Francisco Mendes, a rich banker.

Dona Gracia developed a network of aid and support to allow hundreds of her fellow Jews to flee Spain and Portugal. Following the death of their husbands, Dona Gracia and her sister Brianda fled with their daughters to Venice to prevent a forced marriage between Dona Gracia's daughter and a prince favoured by Emperor Charles V, who sought to seize her fortune through the marriage. Although the sisters succeeded in obtaining the protection of the Venetian Republic, a family feud erupted. Brianda contested Dona Gracia's role in administering the family fortune and demanded half of the Mendes estate. The dispute escalated into a diplomatic incident and Dona Gracia was forced to deposit 100,000 gold ducats in exchange for permission to leave Venice for Constantinople.

The situation worsened when their cousin Joseph Nasi kidnapped Brianda's daughter and hastily married her in Ravenna. Once in Constantinople he tried and failed to obtain formal recognition of the marriage. He then made a u-turn, returning to Judaism and marrying Dona Gracia's daughter, Ana. He became a consultant to the Sultan who presented him with the island of Naxos.

In Instanbul Donna Gracia promoted the building of synagogues and schools. In 1558 she was granted a long term lease in the Tiberias region (in today's northern Israel) and began to rebuild abandoned towns in the area where Spanish and Portuguese refugees from the inquisition could resettle. She died in Istanbul in 1569.
THE PRINTING OF HEBREW BOOKS

In the sixteenth century Venice became an important centre of Hebrew book printing. Famous publishing houses like Bomberg, Giustiniani, Bragadin and De Gara published complete editions of the Babylonian and Yerushalmi Talmud as well as prayer books and commentaries by illustrious Rabbis.

THE BURNING OF THE TALMUD IN ST. MARK’S SQUARE IN VENICE

In 1568 a commercial dispute led to accusations of heresy and Hebrew books were burned in St. Mark’s square. The Venetian Republic imposed strict censorship rules which stated that books could be only printed if a “Licence from the Superiors” (“Con licenza dei Superiori” in the original text) was obtained. Con licenza dei Superiori thus appears on the first page of many old Hebrew books of this period.

THE BATTLE OF LEPANTO (1571)

In the sixteenth century the long-running dispute between the Venetian Republic and the Sublime Porte (the government of the Ottoman Empire) became an open war. In 1560, Cyprus, which was under the protection of Venice, became the target of Turkish wrath. The Serenissima built defences and sent troops to guard the area, but in July 1570 the Ottoman fleet reached Cyprus and, after a valiant battle, the entire island fell under Turkish control. Faced with Ottoman supremacy in the Mediterranean, Christian powers put aside their disagreements and formed a coalition known as the “Holy League”. On October 7, 1571, the allied fleet destroyed the ships of the Sublime Porte at Lepanto, in a decisive victory over the Ottoman Empire. This conflict put the many Venetian Jews with business links to the Ottoman Empire in a difficult position. There were protests against them and Council member Alvise Grimani was among those who advocated the expulsion of all Jews suspected of conniving with the enemy. The proposal was eventually shelved and the Jews were able to remain in Venice until February 1573.
RABBI LEONE OF MODENA
(1571-1648)

Rabbi Leone of Modena was born in Venice in 1571 to a notable French family migrated to Italy following an expulsion of Jews from France. By the age of two, he had learnt to read and at three years old he was translating passages of the Torah from Hebrew into Italian. Leone of Modena was an unyielding critic of emerging sects and fiercely opposed to Kabbalah. He pursued all sorts of occupations to support himself: preacher, gambler, playwright, poet, alchemist, teacher of Jews and Christians, prayer reader, interpreter, proofreader, bookseller, broker, merchant, rabbi, musician, matchmaker and manufacturer of amulets. Although he taught for years his only real love was writing. He wrote many important commentaries, ethical treaties and a dictionary. He died as a controversial figure, a contrarian both by nature and vocation.
Rodriga was a financier and wealthy Marrano merchant (Marranos were Iberian Jews who were forcibly converted to Christianity), whose business was based in Ragusa (Dalmatia). Ragusa represented a strategic link between the East and the port of Venice. Rodriga proposed to the Venetian senate to create a new port in Spalato (Split), thereby opening a trade route to the East. He offered to provide much of the necessary investment for the development and construction of harbours along this route on the condition that he was granted the protection of the Venetian fleet, and explained the many benefits of this plan for the Republic at a time of declining trade.

Rodriga wanted to involve a network of fellow Marranos in the project and sought to increase the influx of Levantine Jews to Venice. After convincing the council of five wise men in charge of Venetian trade to support his proposal, he presented a petition to extend the rights and privileges granted to the Levantine Jews to the Offentines (Jews who had arrived in Venice from Spain). His proposal was accepted in 1589 and ended discrimination between Jews from Spain and those from the Levant.

Shabbetai Zvi was born in Smyrna in 1626 and showed early promise as a Talmudic scholar. He was a devoted Kabbalist and mystic. In 1648 he declared himself to be the Messiah. He was banished from his hometown and began to travel through Greece and Turkey. His eccentric behaviour eventually led to his expulsion from the Jewish communities of Salonika and Constantinople for blasphemy and violating the commandments. In Salonika he staged a wedding ceremony with himself as bridegroom and the Torah as the bride.

The turning point in his messianic career came in 1665, as the result of a meeting with his self-appointed prophet, Nathan of Gaza. Zvi started to act the part of Messiah, riding majestically on horseback and anointing his followers apostles or representatives of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. He started a mass repentance movement to pave the way for the coming redemption. News of the Messiah spread like wildfire throughout Europe and detailed accounts of Shabbetai Zvi’s exploits arrived as far afield as Italy, Holland, Germany and Poland. Even in cosmopolitan European cities like Venice, Livorno and Amsterdam, leading rabbis and sophisticated businessmen were convinced by Shabbetai Zvi’s charisma.

In 1666 Shabbetai Zvi was arrested in Constantinople and brought before the Sultan. Given a choice between death or apostasy, he prudently chose the latter. He became Ayaz Mehmed Effendi, and wore a turban on his head to signify his conversion to Islam. In return, he was rewarded with the honorary title ‘Keeper of the Palace Gates’ and a pension of 150 piasters a day. His apostasy shocked the Jewish world. Many continued to expect a second coming. The faith in false redeemers continued into the eighteenth century and even until today.
SARA COPIO SULLAM (1592-1641)

Sara was a Venetian poet and intellectual who lived in the Ghetto in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. An extraordinary woman, she was described as a great beauty with blond hair and a gentle gaze. In 1612 she married Giacobbe Sullam.

Sara Copio Sullam established a literary salon in the Ghetto, which was frequented by Rabbi Leone of Modena among others.

In 1621 she was accused of heresy by one of her former admirers and was obliged to answer to the Holy See. She defended herself in *Manifesto of Sara Copio Hebrea*.

Her teacher and preceptor, a certain Numido Paluzzi, decided to take advantage of Sara’s good nature to defraud her. Through forged letters, he convinced her to send gifts to an invented French admirer. These gifts would supposedly be conveyed to Paris in a few hours by an airborne spirit. After Sara had bought Paluzzi clothes and food and provided him with a place to live, he suddenly decided to leave Venice, but not before persuading her to give him three months’ salary in advance and emptying the house of everything she had lent him.

The wretched Paluzzi soon returned to Venice. Sara again took him in, this time entrusting him to the care of her favourite maid, Paola, who she saw as a mother figure. The disloyal maid conspired with Paluzzi and other unworthy friends to systematically rob Sara, blaming the thefts on an imaginary ethereal spirit. Their treachery was finally discovered and Sara appealed to Justice.

Sara died in March 1641 from “fevers”. Her epitaph by Rabbi Leone of Modena reads: “She was the support of derelicts and the wretched found in her a companion and a friend. May her soul enjoy eternal beatitude.”

RABBI MOSES CHAIM LUZZATTO 1707-1746

Rabbi Luzzatto, also known by the acronym RaMChaL, was an eighteenth century scholar, mystic and ethicist. Luzzatto studied secular literature and classical languages in addition to the Hebrew Bible and the *Talmud*, and at a very early age became the pupil of several renowned Kabbalists.

Aged twenty he joined a group interested in Kabbalah and alchemy and began to immerse himself in mystical studies. Rabbi Luzzatto wrote about his mystical experience to his teacher Rabbi Bassan: “While thinking about a Kabbalistic formula [...] I heard a voice which spoke to me in Aramaic: ‘I have come down to reveal the secrets of the holy King’ [...] the voice continued to reveal celestial secrets [...] until one day it told me it was a Maggid (celestial guide) sent from heaven.”

The letter fell into the hands of Rabbi Haggai of Hamburg, whose father had fiercely opposed the Shabbetai Zvi heresy. Haggai lost no time in writing to Venetian Rabbis to warn them about Luzzatto.

The leading Italian rabbinical authorities were highly suspicious of Luzzatto and threatened him with excommunication. His house was searched for evidence and he was forced to stop teaching mysticism.

The controversy raged and under pressure Luzzatto left Italy for Amsterdam in 1735. In 1740 it was there that he wrote his *opus magnum*, the *Mesillat Yesharim*, the text for which he is famous today.

In 1743 Luzzatto and his family settled in Acco (in today’s Israel). He died some years later in a plague epidemic, aged 59.

SARA COPIO SULLAM 1592-1641

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RABBI SIMONE CALIMANI (1699 – 1784)  
Rabbi Calimani was a Rabbi, author, linguist, poet and Talmudist with liberal religious views. Calimani was an educated Rabbi whose family had lived in the Ghetto for generations. He worked for a Hebrew printing house where he oversaw an edition of the Hebrew Bible. He also published grammar books and poetry and took a keen interest in the new Enlightenment movement. Among his works was a book critical of Kabbalah, in which two enlightened characters named Kalkol and Darda discuss the ills of contemporary society. Simone Calimani was also an educator in a strict environment which sought to provide children with a Jewish identity in the face of growing fears about too close contact with the ‘outside’ world. But by this time the first cracks has already started to appear in the Ghetto walls.

RABBI SIMONE LUZZATTO (1583 – 1663)  
Simone Luzzatto was a freethinker, a nonconformist. While still very young, he published a series of works titled *Responsa* (answers on matters of religious conduct). One work asserted, for example, that one could travel in a gondola on Shabbat (the day when work or travel are forbidden). This kind of thinking probably explains the popularity of his work. As a preventive measure, Luzzatto wrote a pamphlet in Italian in which he eloquently argued against the expulsion of Jews from Venice, presenting his ideas logically and rationally. Printed in 1638, the pamphlet was called *Discorso circa il stato de g’Hebrei et in particolar dimoranti nell’inclita città di Venetia* (About the state of the Jews and particularly of those dwelling in the illustrious city of Venice). Luzzatto's *Discorso* attracted attention and interest far beyond Venice.
THE OPENING OF THE GHETTO UNDER NAPOLEON

In 1797 the Ghetto ceased to be an enclosed area. The Ghetto's Jewish citizens convened in the Spanish Synagogue where the citizen President delivered an eloquent speech, reading the rights and obligations of man and advocating love, concord, fraternity and charity. On July 9 of the twenty-second Messidoro (Napoleonic year), the French authorities ordered the demolition of the Ghetto. To the sound of beating drums civil guards, in dress uniforms holding unsheathed weapons, entered the Ghetto: they were an impressive sight. The celebratory crowd included French soldiers, Jews and Christian Venetians. The keys to the Ghetto gates were passed to the workmen and, amid great rejoicing and to cries of "Viva!" and "Freedom!", the gates of the Ghetto were torn down one by one. Music filled the air and men, women and rabbis danced together. Catholic priests from the parishes of St. Geremiah and St. Marcuola were also present and were applauded by their parishioners in acknowledgement of the end of segregation irreconcilable with sacred democratic ideals. The Ghetto gates were carried to the centre of the square, then borne in triumph by the crowd, hacked into pieces and consigned to the flames accompanied by cries of joy. Later, several public addresses were read. Citizen Vivante jumped on a wall and harangued the crowd, but his heartfelt words were drowned out by the noise of the crowd. A tree of liberty was set up and decorated with the national cap donated by one of the women present. The day ended with the sudden illumination of the Spanish Synagogue and a speech by citizen Massa, president of the Patriotic Society.

THE GHETTO IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY

By the end of the 19th century, much of Venice's Jewish population lived outside the Ghetto and were integrated into Italian society. Jews could now buy property, set up businesses, enlist in the army and take public office. They could also become members of cultural associations and students of the Academy of Fine Arts. Besides the synagogues several Jewish institutions remained in the Ghetto, including a school, a kindergarten, the old matzot (unleavened bread) bakery, and a home for the elderly. In 1938, when the Racial Laws were enacted, there were still 1200 Jews living in Venice. When the Germans occupied the city, the president of the Jewish community Giuseppe Jonah committed suicide rather than hand over a list of its members to the Nazis. Between 1943 and 1945 about 200 people were deported, among them the old and almost blind Chief Rabbi Adolfo Cattolengo. Only very few returned.

THE GHETTO TODAY

Today, the Jewish community numbers around five hundred people and there is a Chabad presence of the American Chabad Lubavitch movement with a Yeshiva. The community has regained its cultural vitality. There is a pre-school, a Talmud Torah, an old people's home and a Jewish library.

PLAQUE AGAINST BLASPHEMY FROM THE ENTRANCE OF THE OLD GHETTO (1704)

*His Serene Highness and our Lords the illustrious and Most Excellent Gentlemen Executors against blasphemy make it known that it is strictly forbidden to any Jew or Jewesses who have converted to Christianity to enter the Ghetto of the city under any pretext whatsoever, or to enter the homes of any Jews or Jewesses. In the case of disobedience, the guilty person will be punished with the rope, jail, galley, slavery, whip, pillory, and other severe punishments at the discretion of their Excellencies. Regarding the character of the crime and to facilitate investigation of the offenders, inquisition trials will be formed. Secret accusations will be received through the usual box, and after their truthfulness is confirmed, transgressors will be strictly punished with the above mentioned penalties. The accusers will receive a reward of 100 ducats and additional 6 lire and 4 coins to be paid from the assets of the offender. This proclamation is published and carved in stone in the most visible place in the Ghetto to ensure clear understanding of its inviolability as the determined and resolute will of their Excellencies. Everything that is here stated must therefore be obeyed.

Issued by the undersigned Magistrate on Sept. 20, 1704.
Vincenzo Da Mula, Administrator. Alvise Pisani, Procurator Executor."
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29 March 1516. The Senate of the Serenissima Republic of Venice issued the following declaration:

“The Jews must all live together in the Corte de Case, in the Ghetto near San Girolamo; to prevent them from wandering around at night let there be built two gates, one on the side of the Old Ghetto where there is a little bridge, and likewise on the other side of the bridge, that is, one for each of said two places.

The gates shall be opened in the morning at the sound of the Marangona [the largest bell of St Mark’s bell tower] and shall be closed at midnight by four Christian guards appointed and paid by the Jews at the rate deemed suitable by our cabinet.”

The place is La Serenissima, the Most Serene Republic of Venice; the date, March 29, 1516.

The words of this edict would toll like a death-knell in the history of the Jewish diaspora, and the Ghetto’s walls – a physical barrier – were to become its most powerful and pervasive symbol.