

## **‘Hidden’ Venice – the Ghetto**

*By Gerald Barton, Kingsdown*

Of all the cities I have visited across Europe, Venice is the most fascinating – a city truly like no other. When I first visited the city back in 1978, I had little conception of what it was like. In fact, I assumed it would be rather like other cities with an ‘old’ part (where I expected the canals to be) and much larger newer parts (where I expected I would be staying). However, emerging from Santa Lucia railway station I found myself standing by the Grand Canal which stretched away before me in the kind



**The Grand Canal from the Accademia bridge**

of vista seen in classic paintings – ‘instant Canaletto’ as I described it to myself. Only then did I begin to realise how fundamentally different Venice is from all other cities in Europe.



**Rubbish collection day in Murano**

Venice is built on a series of 118 islands reclaimed from the lagoon and mostly connected together by around 438 bridges. Transport is by water or foot. Everything moves around by barge, even the regular rubbish collections.

Final delivery of goods is by hand barrow pulled laboriously up and down the steps on the bridges. There is no wheeled transport, motor or otherwise, at all, not even bicycles. If you’ve never been there, it can be difficult to get your mind around the idea of a city without wheels, one that depends solely on boats, barges and walking.

This is what gives the city its fascination. Not surprisingly, it draws thousands of tourists spread throughout the seasons of the year but at the same time remains a living city albeit with a gradually diminishing population.

At its peak in the 1600's, around 200,000 people lived in the city. Now, it's more like 50,000. Now most Venetians, about 170,000 in all, live on 'terra firma' across the causeway on the mainland.

Most tourists congregate only in certain areas of the city, especially in and around the Piazza San Marco with its great basilica and bell tower and in the streets and alleys leading away to the Rialto and Accademia bridges. Start moving away from those main areas and the streets and alleys become noticeably quieter. Just wandering around the less visited areas is fascinating in itself.

On the north side of the Grand Canal in the Cannaregio 'sestiere' of the city is the Jewish ghetto. If you didn't know, you could just wander through without realising (I suspect I may have done that on previous visits to Venice) although the Wall of Memory commemorating Venetian victims of the Holocaust in the Campo Ghetto Nuovo now makes it a bit more obvious.

The ghetto first came into being in around 1516 when Jews were constrained to live in a defined area which had once been used for foundries. In the Venetian dialect 'geto' (pronounced with a soft 'g') means 'foundry'. However, Jews of Germanic origin could only pronounce 'geto' with a hard 'g' and the word became 'ghetto' as we have it today. The original area was known as the 'Ghetto Nuovo' (new ghetto) as it had been the newest of the foundry areas. Later expansion included the older foundry area, known as the Ghetto Vecchio (old ghetto, 1541) and the Ghetto Nuovissimo (newest ghetto, 1633). So, the oldest part of the ghetto is the 'new ghetto' followed by the 'old ghetto' and then the 'newest ghetto'. Confused? Not surprising.

The ghetto was closed off by gates at night and guarded by Christian sentries, which the Jews had to finance. Jews were allowed out by day but had to wear distinguishing caps or badges. They were only permitted to practice certain trades – money lending, trading in second hand goods and medicine. In fact, the only Jews allowed at night were those who practised medicine.

To cope with overcrowding, buildings were allowed to be taller than in the rest of the city but only by one third. Consequently, ceilings were often lower in order to fit in more floors and more living space, up to six or seven stories in all. Jews, however, were not allowed to own property themselves so all accommodation was rented.

And so, life went on thus for several centuries. However, the gates to the ghetto were torn down in 1797 on the instructions of Napoleon although it was only in 1866 that Jews were granted equal status with their fellow citizens. At its peak, the ghetto housed about 5,000 people. Now there are around 500 Jews spread

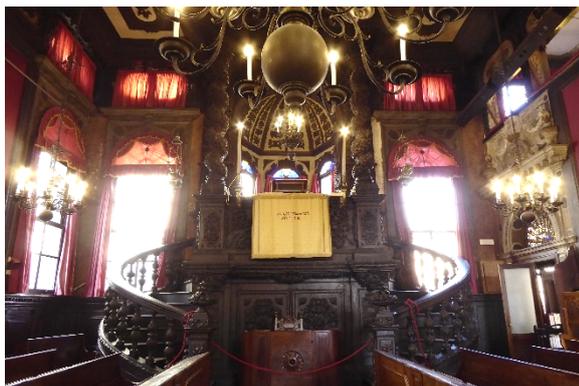
around the city although the ghetto remains the centre of Jewish cultural and religious life.

Each wave of Jewish immigrants founded its own synagogue, thus preserving the distinctive rites of each group. At one time, there were five synagogues in the Ghetto, two of which, the Scola Levantina and the Scola Spagnola remain in use today. From the outside you wouldn't notice these synagogues as they were all incorporated into buildings with other uses as well. What they all had in common was that they were on the top floors as there had to be nothing between the synagogue and heaven.



**Scola Levantina exterior. The bay window is the main 'give away'**

The two remaining synagogues are the most lavish of the five. One is used in Summer because it's cooler and the other in Winter because it's warmer. Well, that's practical.

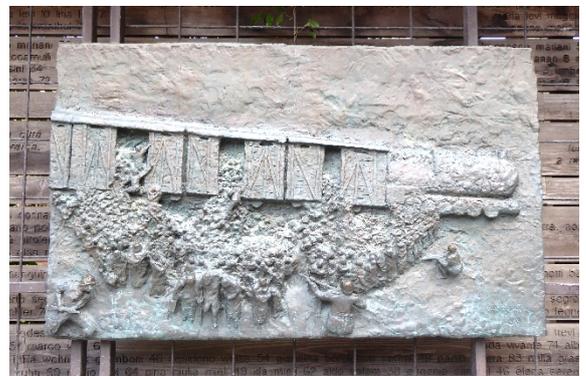


**Scola Levantina (1538)**



**Scola Spagnola (later 16<sup>th</sup> century)**

It was inevitable that Venice's Jewish population would not escape the effects of what we might now describe as the more extreme effects of 'othering' in the antisemitic laws and consequent privations forced on them by Mussolini's fascist regime. However, worse was to come following the Italian surrender and declaration of war on Germany in 1943. In that year and in 1944 a total of about 200 hundred Jews were deported from Venice to Nazi death camps. These events are memorialized in a series of reliefs by Arbat Blatas depicting aspects of the deportations set in a corner of the Campo



**"The Last Train"**

Ghetto Nuovo. The names and ages of all those deported are recorded on a second memorial nearby entitled 'The Last Train'.

Wandering around the Ghetto and elsewhere in Venice there are other reminders of the deportations – 'Stolpersteine' – in English 'stumbling blocks'. These are 10cm concrete cubes set into pavements outside the last known residence where deported people lived. Each bears a brass plate with the details of a person, who they were, their dates of birth, arrest and death etc. These cubes are part of an artistic project started by the German artist Gunter Demnig in 1992 to commemorate people who fell victim to Nazi terror. Placed in various cities across Europe, these 'Stolpersteine' mostly record Jewish victims, but also others as well, for example Sinti, Romani, homosexuals, disabled people, Jehovah's Witnesses etc.



Stolperstein from a group of six listing members of the Levi family – Vittorina, Silvana Alda, Angelo, Leonella, Lina and Mario all arrested on 5<sup>th</sup> December 1943, the eldest aged 17 and the youngest, Mario (shown left) just 3. All were murdered – five in Auschwitz and one in Bergen-Belsen during February 1944 with one date, that for the eldest, Vittorina, unknown.

Venice is a most beautiful and fascinating city and just wandering around is a delight. However, the memorials in the Campo Ghetto Nuovo and the Stolpersteine serve to remind us that the ugliest of things can happen in the most beautiful of places. Down the centuries Jewish people have been subjected to various forms of 'othering' culminating in the Nazi Holocaust. 'Othering' still goes on in many if not most parts of the world including here in the UK when particular groups, whoever they may be, are marginalised, vilified and oppressed. 'Othering' as we have seen can lead to particularly nasty ends – we should learn from past horrors.

In all, I have visited Venice about seven times, my last visit being in November 2025, about 21 years after my sixth visit. Maybe I will visit Venice again, but I'd better not leave it quite so long the next time around.

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