Venice, the Jews and Europe. 1516 - 2016

Robert Bonfil (September 14, 2016)



Writer and cultural critic Alain Elkann in conversation with Donatella Calabi, curator of the 500th Anniversary exhibition on the Venice ghetto. Presented by Marsilio Editori and Rizzoli on September 19th in collaboration with Centro Primo Levi. Venice, the Jews and Europe 1516-2016 is a companion book to the exhibition by the same title mounted at Palazzo Ducale in Venice for the 500th Anniversary of the establishment of the ghetto.

We are delighted to publish Professor Robert Bonfil's essay "Venice, The Jews and Europe" (Marsilio 2016).

Should we assume, as we usually assume in ordinary parlance, that the word “symbol” signifies something beyond what appears at first glance, we should, I will argue, agree that Venice is indeed a symbol, a most intriguing element of cultural discourse, in need of what we call interpretation. For most people, Venice sends an inspiring message as a cultural symbol of west European history—through painting and poetry, prose and sculpture. It emerges from what historians have called the “myth of Venice”: a myth of internal security, stability, conservatism, and economic prosperity, rooted in a domestic order guaranteed by the most judicious—and pragmatic—institutions. Yet, for the Jewish people, Venice is also the city of the “ghetto,” a linguistic term for which this city may claim “copyright,” though the concept itself was scarcely a novelty in

1516, the year the Ghetto was established, and therefore also sends a really disturbing message. Can these contradictory messages merge in a congruent one?

Is Venice unique in such opposing situation? As everybody knows, the answer to that is definitely no. One could easily reel off dozens of analogous historical ones. One could recall, for example, the so-called “Renaissance of the Twelfth Century” yet an age that remained dark for the Jews. Or, one could recall the so-called discovery of the New World in 1492 and the resultant restructuring of Western civilization within the framework of the other so-called Renaissance, at the very same time the Jews were expelled from Spain, indeed from all Western Europe. One could further mention the experience of our own epoch, recalling how this age of unprecedented technological and scientific progress has also been the age of Auschwitz and Hiroshima.

Assuming then axiomatically that Jewish culture and history are integral parts of world culture and history, our first question is but a part of a more general one: How are we to assess phenomena which we believe represent positive moments in world history and culture as being coherent with such disturbing ones for the Jewish people? Can Venice be a symbol of Jewish history in the sense that we posit its symbolism for history in general? The answer, I will now argue, is definitely yes—Venice must be viewed as a most efficient metaphor, a visible case study of the enigmatic allegory of Jewish history, concretely proposed, among other things, to sensible observers leaning against the bridge at the Rialto and weighing the purely human dimensions behind the aesthetic perfection of Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice.

In the first decade of the sixteenth century, following one of those casual incidents that so often set historical forces in motion, the most Serene Republic found itself facing “the Jewish question.” After having permitted the Jews of its territory to enter the city as war refugees, the end of that war made it a compelling matter of deciding how to deal with them. In the eyes of the Venetians themselves, the issue at stake was the defense of the cultural values fundamental to their own self-perception. All the values, as it were, that the “myth of Venice” held most essential: justice, liberty, and welfare, all rooted in perfect government, and, most importantly, a defense of the Christian ethos, without which no justice or welfare was conceivable. Opinion was divided, yet what is most striking today is how compelling the persuasive force was on both sides. Arguing for principles of pragmatic utility or even humanity was certainly no more convincing than arguing for the divine majesty of law.

Let us listen to the Venetians themselves: “If they [that is the Jews] are kept,” warned one of the most powerful senators, “we should beware of the wrath of God, for in France and in Spain there are no Jews, and God makes those monarchs prosper.”1 These words were pronounced in November 1519—three years after sealing the Jews off in the Ghetto, when the terms for their residence were up for renewal.

The Venetians had their own categories for looking at history, and a profound respect for its teachings. France was then riding the crest of glory, guided by the bold self-assurance of the twenty-five-year-old Francis i, while Charles, the nineteen-year-old monarch of Spain, was only five months away from becoming Holy Roman Emperor. And France and Spain, of course, held most of Europe in sway. For Venice, which was then licking its wounds after the recent war against the Empire (that very same war which brought the Jews into the city proper), it was certainly no easy task to know which of these two kingdoms would eventually have the upper hand, once the inevitable showdown took place. Nor were their deliberations made any easier by the fact that yet another royal stripling, Henry viii of England, was moving toward a rapprochement with France, or by the reports filtering back from the Pontifical Court of Leo x, hardly a grey-beard himself.

For the Venetians, who were traditionally deferential of wise and experienced leadership, all these boy–kings playing at war and politics were undoubtedly a source of anxiety. And for the religiously-oriented, this was no doubt a time to be wary of God’s wrath. To clinch the argument, yet another great senator stood up and reminded the Assembly that not only had Spain driven the Jews out of its lands, but that they went to Naples and, there you have it, King Alfonso lost his throne. Moreover, the Duke of Milan had also been driven from power for showing the Jews favor. “And now,” said the amazed senator, “we are going to do the same thing and incur the wrath of God up against us”!2 Thus the tradition of centuries, supported by a genuine piety and fear of God’s wrath, no less than a healthy respect for the teachings of history, all conspired to keep the Jews out.

But there were other voices abroad in the Senate, one of which belonged to an eighty-six-year-old man, for whom the prospect of God's wrath was no doubt a matter of greater concern than for the younger politicians with a career to carve out. The main argument now was that the Jews had to be kept for the poor. If before we saw the Venetian categories of political thought in action, inspired by their own "myth of Venice," we now find another category at work, and another perception of that myth, one that combined the concept of perfect government with the Christian ethos of charity. Such is to say, the argument pointing to the wrath of God could be countered with another example of recent Venetian experience: After all, was it not "during the time that they [that is, the Jews] lived in Mestre that Mestre was burned down by our enemies, and then, when they came to live in the city, [that] we recovered our dominions?" Moreover, "when the Jews were driven out of Spain, they took with them much gold. They went to Constantinople, and Selim conquered Syria and Egypt."3

History's teaching, then, was not at all linear. From the Venetian standpoint, concerned with Turkish aggression no less than with the threat posed by France and the Holy Roman Empire, the growing prosperity of the Ottoman Empire was no less paradigmatic than that of France or Spain. For these men, then, history was telling them to harness the mythical Jewish riches to the service of Christendom. Hence a consciousness of the Venetian tradition of perfect government, sensitive to the needs of the poor, and a no less healthy respect for the teachings of history than the other side of the body politic, all conspired to keep the Jews in.

Given such conditions, little wonder that public opinion was seriously divided. The vote that followed the discussion we have just cited resulted in ten abstentions, sixty-four in favor, sixty-six opposed, so that for a while the Jewish settlement was seriously threatened. A subsequent vote reversed the previous decision and left the Jews where they were. So it was that the Ghetto became a permanent fixture in the Venetian landscape.

To be sure, any actual view of the Ghetto must conjure up a sense of basic intolerance, of frustrating constriction of vital living space, of the compelling necessity to expand vertically, and its axiomatic metaphor of yearning upwards, towards heaven, far away from earthly care. What, then, kept the Jews of the Ghetto from leaving? After all, they were not totally deprived of viable alternatives, as some of us might imagine; the road to the Eldorado of the Ottoman Empire was wide open to the Italian Jews, and a considerable number of them indeed took that route.

The Jews, it would seem, preferred to see the institution of the Ghetto as a step towards a new era of tolerance. They could thus quite reasonably even consider their situation as having turned the tide of Jewish exclusion from the European west. In Venetian parlance: a first fragile bridge between two diametrically opposed ideologies—Christianity on the one side, and Judaism on the other. Yet, from the vantage point of some five hundred years, historians less worried by pragmatic considerations and more inclined to ponder on the sense of history sine ira et studio may very well hold such opinion.

In fact, we may do well to rethink the Venetian experience, for this specific Ghetto conveys not only the idea of exclusion but also of inclusion, not only of segregation but of integration. As a mirror of exclusive, even imperialist, ideologies, the Ghetto forced these ideologies to come to terms with their own reflected image and, ultimately, to wear them away. Seen in retrospect, the Venetian Ghetto thus embodies a compromise as organic, as evolutionary—and yet as ambiguous—as any history has to show. As a symbol of Jewish History, this Ghetto may thus represent not only the enigma of coping with General History, but also offer a first step towards its solution. It may, that is to say, symbolize a major aspect of the convoluted path of Jewish experience in Western Europe, through the ambiguous and laborious process of bridging over exclusively imperialist ideologies. As a paradigm of Jewish integration in the fabric of Western society, the judgment of history cannot, in the final account, be wholly negative.

The special functional model of community life that took root in the Ghetto, devised by the various ethnic groups of Jews clustered within, is a phenomenon of the late sixteenth century, thus more or less contemporary with the institution of the Ghetto itself. Of course, the novelty was not in the mere fact of pluralism within Judaism: this was a tradition of old. In Venice itself, Italian and Ashkenazi Jews had lived under the same roof since the very beginning of Jewish settlement there. The novelty

was, rather, in including the Portuguese Jews under that roof, and in their integration within the framework of community life.

While it is true that the Portuguese Jews belonged to the same Iberian stock as the Levantine Jews, who came to Venice from the Ottoman Empire, the Portuguese were not simply one more variety of Judaism. They were Jews who had formally returned to the ancestral faith after having spent two or even three generations as nominal New Christians in the lands of the Iberian Peninsula. There was another aspect of Venice that brought the Portuguese Jews to its shores: the bustling commerce of a maritime power still capable of bridging between East and West and thus maintaining the vitality of that route, despite the fact that the sea-lanes of international commerce were shifting, and the discovery of the New World had affected Venetian trade routes. The economic activity in which the Portuguese Jews engaged, principally trade, was conducted through a ramified network of contacts stretching from the Netherlands to the Ottoman Empire, and extending over much of Italy.

But if the economic role of these Portuguese Jews was unassailable, their religious identity was another matter. Many of them did not openly return to Judaism, preferring to conceal their Judaism and to remain as Christians among Christians. A considerable number of these Jews settled in Venice. They lived outside of the Ghetto, even though it was common knowledge that they were Christian in appearance alone. Thrown into a world where religious identity was rigorously defined, the Portuguese Jews brought, then, a whole new set of meanings to the terms Jewish and Christian, simply by their very being.

They ran the entire gamut, from being a hundred percent Jews living inside the Ghetto to a hundred percent Christians living among Christians, all of them interrelated by ties of both family and business. A New Christian who returned to Judaism and lived in the Venetian Ghetto might quite often be related to genuine Christians living in Spain or in Portugal, to less genuine Christians living outside the Ghetto in Venice itself, as well as to genuine Jews off in the Ottoman Empire.4 In other words, the converso phenomenon had thrown down the gauntlet to Jews and Christians alike, for according to the reigning mentality, ethnic and religious self-definition was still coterminous with precisely defined norms of behavior.

Hence it was not only the traditional stereotype of the money-lending Jew that the Portuguese helped to dispel, there on the banks of the Venetian canals, but also the traditional categories of religious self-definition. One might almost see them as harbingers of the modern Jew, defining him- or herself more in terms of ethnicity than religion. And so it was that however unconscious, however unintentional or even unwilling, these Portuguese Jews helped to mediate between the old and the new, and to build yet another bridge between Jewish and Christian preserves.

Once Judaism was permitted to take root again in Western Europe, the Jewish self-government of later Sephardi communities such as those in Amsterdam and London modeled itself on the Venetian example. In other words, one may safely say that after having been eradicated from Western Europe, the Judaism that regenerated there followed the institutional and cultural model of Venice, which had first integrated the emerging new kind of Jew into its institutional and cultural melting pot. However, triumphant though the picture may be—and what is the Great Synagogue of Amsterdam, for example, if not an expression of confident Judaism—it must have been quite a painful experience, attended by a lingering sense of alienation born of the inability to integrate smoothly into the existing structures of Judaism, try as they might to discard the residuals of Christianity. Yet all in all, it must also have been a very rich and creative experience, one that was to have, in the long run, a tremendous impact for the shaping of European Jewish history.

From this perspective, both aspects of the Venetian Jewish experience symbolize the uneasy, often painful maneuvering between mutually exclusive ideologies, and of regenerating by setting across bridges of understanding and communication, to meet the rejecting as well as rejected Other. Both are equally representative of the ambiguity inherent in the very nature of such cultural bridges.

Venice is certainly the most appropriate place for talking about bridges. Those piles and bricks thrown over a tamed yet very often threatening sea are themselves part of the visual translation of the myth and history of Venice, as much as the great art and architecture with which the city abounds. And from the perspective of Jewish memory, the essential prerequisite of myth and history,

these fragile bridges may be even more powerful symbols than all the gilded splendor of St. Mark's Square. Steering our representation of the past and our quest to find meaning in the present, they inspire us while building our future.

While we are not so naive as to believe that history can teach us in the way that we were once told (historia magistra vitae), we should not feel too confident in dismissing it either. History can inspire by its symbols, in the sense that it can cause their interpretation to give meaning to cultural tradition, itself the only way of consciously perceiving one's existence in the present. That is to say, our task is one of balancing the demands of universal culture with the search for a proper definition of a specifically ethnic one—no matter whether Christian or Jewish culture—the task of translating the Venetian vestiges of the past into the concrete experiences of the present, of becoming a cultural bridge between East and West, in every possible sense of the word, one to which we must be as dedicated, as committed and, in short, as wedded, as ever Venice was wedded to its sea.

Endnote

1 M. Sanudo il giovane, I Diarii [mccccxcvi-mdxxxviii], ed. R. Fulin, 58 vols. (Venice, 1879–

1903, reprint: Bologna, 1969), vol. xxviii, col. 62.

2 Sanudo, vol. xxviii, col. 63.

3 Sanudo, vol. xxviii, col. 64.

4 B. Pullan, "'A ship with two rudders': 'Righetto Marrano' and the Inquisition of Venice," in

The Historical Journal, xx, 1 (1977): 37.

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