

A Visit to the Venice Ghetto (Venice, Italy, 1973)

In 1973, Peg and I decided to travel to Europe and Israel with her parents. Almost thirty years had passed since the decimation of the Holocaust. Peg's family had suffered great losses, with few relations surviving, and those that did were scattered throughout Europe and Israel. There was a hope to reconnect with the surviving members of her family.

Much of Europe remained in turmoil. The Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union made it difficult to travel and explore. Yet, this was an important trip for Peg's family to take – a step towards the healing from so much pain, from such loss.

My wife, her parents, and I had come to Venice to visit Peg's cousin, who had fled to this city to avoid death in Hitler's concentration camps. Her cousin's father had escaped to Venice, just as thousands of Jews had fled to one place or another, through the centuries to save their lives.

Ironically, this relative had found refuge in the very city responsible for constructing one of the first ghettos, a section where Jews of the city were forced to live. Venice had a Jewish ghetto as early as the eleventh century. We see an example of the ghetto referenced in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. Shylock, the central character in the play, typifies the anti-Semitic prejudice, as a Venetian Jewish money changer. Since it was considered a "sin" for Christians to deal in money lending and usury, the Church-State forced the Jews to become money-lenders, which, ironically, made some of these Jews experts in banking and finance. The Church's discriminatory policy forbid Jews from owning land, attending the university, joining a labor union, or working in most professions or jobs.

When the plagues killed thousands, the Jews did not die in the same numbers as others did because they were isolated from the general population, confined to their segregated ghettos in the towns. The conspiracy theories of this disparity did not consider the Jewish religious and cultural norms emphasizing personal and home cleanliness. As a result of these lies, violence and further layers of discrimination followed shortly thereafter.

The Jews of Venice were free now. No longer were they locked up behind iron gates at night with guards posted. Some were prosperous. Few still lived in the ghetto. The ghetto still existed, and we decided to find it.

For more than half an hour we had searched along the banks of the Venice canal. We knew the entrance to the ghetto was somewhere close by. We assumed that the entrance must be through one of the worn, stone archways with the narrow alleys.

“Excuse me. Where is....the....Juden....ghetto? The Jewish ghetto? Can you tell me, please?”

Despite being in Italy, the man seemed to understand our half-broken German and English approach. He looked us over carefully before pointing to a narrow alley. We must have passed that entrance at least six times!

“Graci, senior.”

Now that we had found the entrance, I began to feel a sensation of apprehension. Exactly why were we going here? Out of curiosity? A sense of heritage? What did coming here mean to me or to my wife?

On the other end of this narrow path, our ancestors were forced to live, imprisoned here just for being Jews. In 1516, the Venetians tore down the “Ghetto Iron Works” so they would have a place to confine the “undesirable” Jewish population that had migrated to their community. This ghetto was but the first of thousands of ghettos for Jews that would be created throughout Europe – Russia,

Germany, Austria, France, Poland, Romania, Italy. The bare-minimum of toleration for Jewish life, a precursor for wave after wave of anti-Semitic violence that would define our families' existence for over a thousand years. This was the beginning – and this ghetto still stood.

The archway entrance seemed thicker and longer, with more twists and turns than the others did in the city. How easy it must have been to lock the people inside. One guard could easily control the narrow passage. Rays of daylight hovered above on either side of the walls, but only shadows lay within. Derelicts had propped themselves against the stone walls. Were these Jews? None smiled. None looked up at us.

We found ourselves on a twisted street that opened on to a broken stone plaza, surrounded by dingy, deteriorating apartments. A few lethargic adults roamed the area, no children in sight.

There were no fresh canal breezes in this part of Venice. The air hung oppressively. It had a rancid feel, as if recalling a recent pogrom, the spilled blood of countless Jewish men, women and children.

My wife's grip tightened on my hand. Her parents, who had come from Austrian and Russian ghettos, walked as though in a daze. We didn't speak to one another. There was too much to take in, to try to understand.

Turning the corner, we came to a building that looked like a synagogue. The sign on the door said, in German as well as in Italian, that the caretaker, the "shamus," could be contacted for tours of the synagogue, but did not say where or how to contact him.

Farther down the street we saw a small store. Perhaps the proprietor could tell us where to find the caretaker.

Inside, the proprietor smiled at us as he leaned over a counter of souvenirs. He was a large man with a bristling beard and open-collared shirt. “Shalom, shalom!” His greeting was warm – his meaning unmistakable.

My mother-in-law spoke to him in Yiddish, asking for the shamus. A little crestfallen when we did not express interest in buying his souvenirs, he asked us to wait and left the store.

He returned a few minutes later, followed by a thin, stooped-shouldered man with the saddest eyes I had ever seen. He seemed to be in a state of perpetual mourning.

The shamus acknowledged our greeting by removing the toothpick from his mouth and mumbling a few Yiddish-sounding words through a yellow-toothed half-smile. There was no joy on his unshaven face – no excitement at meeting strangers in the ghetto. Though the gates were no longer locked by guards, and there were no armed men patrolling the canals in search of Jews trying to escape the ghetto after the hour of curfew, the man seemed still a prisoner.

Nodding to us, he turned and shuffled down the cobble-stoned street. We followed, careful not to walk too fast and over-take him.

He stopped before a narrow, carved wooden door. He pointed to a sign that read: “Sinagoghe Spagnola.” He fumbled with the keys, unlocked the door, and we entered.

The mustiness inside filled our noses and throats. Still, the stately grandeur of the synagogue spoke quietly of glories in the past. This, we read, once was the largest synagogue in the ghetto. It had been built in 1635. The main aisle led to an imposing Holy Ark, covered by a richly embroidered tapestry. Huge, round chandeliers hung from the ceiling. A second-floor wooden balustrade, finely carved, formed an elegant semicircle above, designating the women’s gallery. Such beauty in the midst of such a depressing environment. Such pride in glorifying the

name of God and the people of Israel. Yet now, only twenty families remained within the ghetto walls, with no rabbi to organize the community.

As we left the synagogue, we passed a tablet that listed the names of Jews deported from the community during Mussolini's and Hitler's regimes. It marked the final devastation of the ghettos and its people. On the arch of the portal was the inscription: "Blessed are they that dwell in Thy House and continue to praise thee." Words of perseverance, of commitment, but few remained to read them and remember.

We visited two other synagogues in the ghetto – one German and one Italian. Each had unique beauty and history, each covered with the thick dust of desertion.

At the end of our tour, we thanked the shamus and gave him some money. He had hardly uttered a word the entire time. He drearily shuffled away as we said our goodbyes.

We sat on a bench in the middle of the plaza and watched as thin boys in undershirts and short pants came out to play on a pile of twisted metal and shattered wood. A few girls leaned against the building walls, their attention torn between the boys leaping from metal heights and us, strangers in brightly-colored clothes. Though the children smiled, none ventured close enough to speak with us. Besides, what could we have said to each other? That we were Jewish, too? And that outside of these walls exists another reality for Jewish people?