

Background Reading

Venice, 1516: welcomed and walled in

After the expulsion

In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ordered all Jews to leave Spain. Tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews scattered across the Mediterranean. The Ottoman sultan Bayezid II welcomed them to his empire, where cities such as Istanbul and Salonica became major Sephardic centers. Others settled in Morocco, North Africa, and Italy, including the great trading city of Venice.

Why Venice confined its Jews

Venice was a wealthy republic built on trade. For two centuries, Jewish moneylenders had served the city from the mainland town of Mestre, but few were allowed to live in Venice itself. When war came in 1509, Jews fled into the city. Venice valued their loans and taxes, but many preachers and residents wanted them gone. On March 29, 1516, the Senate chose a compromise: Jews could stay, but only on a small island in the Cannaregio district called the Ghetto Nuovo, the site of an old foundry. Venetians called a foundry a *geto*, the most widely accepted origin of the word “ghetto,” though linguists still debate it.

Life behind the gates

The ghetto's gates opened at the morning bell and were locked at night, guarded by Christians whose wages the Jews had to pay. Only Jewish doctors could leave after dark. Jews wore a yellow, and later red, hat, and they could work only in a few trades, such as moneylending, secondhand goods, and medicine. As newcomers arrived, the ghetto expanded twice, in 1541 and 1633, but because its walls could not move, families built upward, and some buildings rose seven or eight stories.

Inside these crowded blocks, Jews from Germany, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Spain, and Portugal built five synagogues, called *scole*, each with its own customs and language. Venice became Europe's leading center of Hebrew printing. Christian scholars came to hear Rabbi Leon Modena preach, and the poet Sara Copia Sullam hosted a literary salon. Yet the community also faced censorship, heavy taxes, and the constant threat of expulsion.

The word spreads

In 1555, Pope Paul IV ordered the Jews of Rome into a ghetto, and the model spread across Italy. The Venetian gates were torn down in 1797, when Napoleon's army took the city, and Jews gained lasting equality when Venice joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1866. In the twentieth century, the Nazis used the word for the ghettos where they imprisoned Jews before deporting and murdering them, and in the United States the word came to describe neighborhoods shaped by segregation. Today about 450 Jews live in Venice, and the ghetto's synagogues and museum welcome visitors.

Timeline

1298	Jewish moneylenders are recorded in Mestre, on the mainland near Venice.
c. 1438	The first mellah is established in Fez, Morocco, beside the royal palace (the exact date is debated).
1462	Frankfurt confines its Jews to a single walled street, the Judengasse.
1492	Spain expels its Jews. Many find refuge in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and Italy.
1509	War brings Jewish refugees from the mainland into Venice.
1516	On March 29, the Venetian Senate orders all Jews to live in the Ghetto Nuovo.
1520 to 1523	Daniel Bomberg, a Christian printer in Venice, publishes the first complete printed Talmud.
1541	The Ghetto Vecchio is added, largely for Ottoman Jewish merchants.
1553	Copies of the Talmud are burned in Venice.
1555	Pope Paul IV orders a ghetto in Rome; the model spreads across Italy.
1633	The Ghetto Nuovissimo is added.
1797	Napoleon's army takes Venice and tears down the ghetto gates.
1943 to 1944	More than 200 Venetian Jews are deported; only eight return.
2016	Venice marks 500 years since the ghetto's founding.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Smithsonian Magazine (2016); Jewish Museum of Venice; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; scholarship on the mellah of Fez summarized by JIMENA.