

Evidence Cards

Read each card with your group. Decide whether it shows exclusion, protection, community and creativity, or more than one, and record your thinking in Part 1 of Appendix C.

1 The Decree of 1516

Venice, March 29, 1516

The Senate orders every Jew in Venice to move to the Ghetto Nuovo. Doors and windows facing the canals are to be walled up. Two gates will open at dawn and be locked at night, watched by Christian guards paid by the Jews. The Senate's stated reasons combine religious concerns with the city's need for Jewish loans.

Think: Why did Venice choose confinement rather than expulsion? What does the decree reveal about the city's priorities?

2 Marked in Public

Venice, 1500s and 1600s

Outside the ghetto, Jewish men had to wear a yellow hat, later changed to red, and women a distinctive head covering. Only Jewish doctors could leave after the gates were locked. Jews could not own land and were limited to a few trades, such as moneylending, the secondhand clothing trade, and medicine.

Think: How did these rules shape how Christians saw Jews, and how Jews saw themselves?

3 Building Upward

Ghetto Nuovo, Vecchio, and Nuovissimo

The ghetto held a few hundred Jews in 1516 and grew to several thousand by the 1600s. Venice added the Ghetto Vecchio in 1541, largely for Ottoman Jewish merchants, and the Ghetto Nuovissimo in 1633. Because the walls could not move, families built upward; some buildings rose seven or eight stories, with low ceilings and many people to a room.

Think: What do the expansions suggest about Venice's interest in Jewish trade? What was daily life like in such crowded conditions?

4 Five Synagogues

Built from the early 1500s to the mid 1600s

Inside the ghetto stood five synagogues, or *scole*: the Scola Grande Tedesca and Scola Canton (German Jews), the Scola Italiana (Italian Jews), the Scola Levantina (Ottoman Sephardic Jews), and the Scola Spagnola (Spanish and Portuguese Jews). From the outside they looked like ordinary houses; inside they were richly decorated. Each community kept its own prayers, customs, and languages, including Ladino.

Think: What does this card reveal about diversity within the Jewish community? Why might the synagogues have been hidden from the street?

5 Words Across the Walls

Venice, 1520s to 1640s

From 1520 to 1523, Daniel Bomberg, a Christian printer, published the first complete printed Talmud in Venice with the help of Jewish scholars, and its page layout is still used today. Christian scholars attended the sermons of Rabbi Leon Modena (1571 to 1648), and the poet Sara Copia Sullam hosted writers of both faiths. Yet in 1553, Church authorities ordered copies of the Talmud burned in Venice.

Think: Does this card show exchange, hostility, or both? What does it suggest about the limits of the ghetto walls?

6 Opening the Gates

1797 to 1944

When Napoleon's army took Venice in 1797, soldiers tore down the ghetto gates. Jews gained lasting equal rights when Venice joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, and the last ghetto in Western Europe, in Rome, ended in 1870. In 1943 and 1944, during the German occupation, more than 200 Jews of Venice were deported; only eight returned. A memorial in the Ghetto Nuovo honors them.

Think: Why did it take so long for the ghettos to end? How does the Holocaust change how we read the earlier history?

7 Another Walled Quarter: The Mellah of Fez

Morocco, fifteenth century

Decades before Venice, the Jews of Fez were moved to a new quarter beside the royal palace in Fes el-Jdid. Historians debate the exact date and reasons, often linked to around 1438. The quarter came to be called the *mellah*, likely from an Arabic word for a salty place. Like the ghetto, it was walled and gated, and moving there involved hardship and loss. Its location near the sultan also offered some protection. Later mellahs were built in Marrakesh (1557 to 1558), Meknes (1682), and other cities.

Think: How was the mellah similar to the Venetian ghetto, and how was it different? Was it protection, segregation, or both?

8 A Word That Travels

1516 to today

By the 1500s, “ghetto” described walled Jewish quarters across Italy. During the Second World War, the Nazis forced Jews into more than 1,000 ghettos in occupied Europe, where many died of hunger and disease before deportation to killing centers. In the twentieth century United States, the word came to describe urban neighborhoods, especially Black neighborhoods, shaped by segregation and discriminatory housing policies.

Think: What connects these meanings, and what separates them? Why should we use this word with care?

Written by JIMENA from My Jewish Learning, Smithsonian Magazine, the Jewish Museum of Venice, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and scholarship on the mellah of Fez.