

REVISITING THE VENICE GHETTO

By Robert W. Case

We first visited the Ghetto in 1995, on Shabbat. Needless to say, everything was closed! However, we did meet a woman from Miami who was *shomer shabbot* in what I remember was the rabbi's house on the square. We were traveling with a gentile couple, and I vividly remember the rabbi inviting us into his house to have some wine and kichel, and chat for a while. After an hour, the woman from Miami was going to return to her hotel (I remember she had brought an entourage with her, together with all the food they needed, since at that time there was no Kosher food available in the ghetto). She gave us a "mini-tour of the ghetto, and she pointed out the synagogues on our walk back through the ghetto. At that time there were very few Jews living in the ghetto –I remember it was less than 50.



Since then, I have been involved in studying Jewish history and culture around the world, and when the opportunity to re-visit the ghetto became possible, I e-mailed the Chabad rabbi to set up a possible visit. And now, as they say, *the rest of the story.....*

First, a brief history of the Ghetto.

The word "ghetto" is derived from the Venetian word "*geto*" (pronounced Je-tto) which literally means a metal foundry. Jewish settlements have been in Venice since the 4th and 5th centuries as evidenced by archeological remains. After 1492 , with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and

Portugal, many went to Venice. However, their residence was always precarious owing to the wavering policy of the government in power. Gradually, however, the importance of the Jews in the economy kept expanding. In March of 1516 a law decreed that the area where the Jews lived would be called “Ghetto Novo.”, because there was a new foundry there. It had only two entrances by land protected by two large gates, which were locked at night. An older foundry in the “Ghetto Vecchio” was assigned to the Jewish Community in 1541. Finally, in 1633, the “Ghetto Novissimo” (newest ghetto) was added to the mix. The canals, which surround the ghettos, were patrolled by Christian guards (who were paid by the Jews) patrolled the canals, preventing any escapes.

During the 16th century, Jews from different ethnic nations began to organize in small numbers, each with an autonomous administration, each with their own Rabbi and their own Synagogue. The first one, the German Synagogue, was built in 1528, followed by the Levantine Synagogue in 1531, and then the Italian synagogue in 1538. The Italian synagogue was built in 1575, and the last of the synagogues, the Spanish synagogue, was built towards the close of the century. The French, Spanish, and German synagogues are all on the second floor, and are interconnected by a secret passage between the synagogues. Today they are not in use (except once a year) and are more of a tourist site.



The Italian Synagogue



The German Synagogue

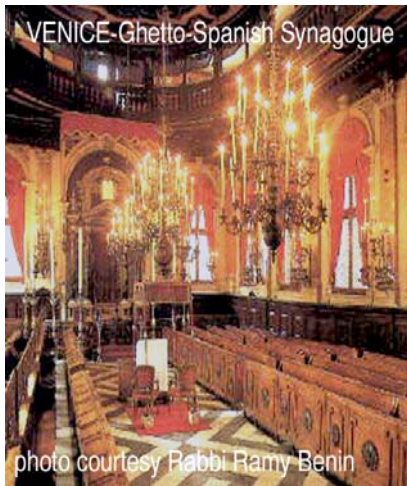


French Synagogue

Please excuse the quality of the picture above. Cameras were **not** permitted, And this picture was taken *sub rosa* without flash!

The other two synagogues, across the town square and are used regularly are The Levantine Synagogue and the Spanish synagogue. We were there on Tish'b'ov, and the synagogues were not open to the public that day. However, Rabbi Benin was gracious enough to forward me some pictures For this article.





Interior of Spanish Synagogue

Today, there are approximately 600 Jews living in Venice, but only 30 live in the ghetto, and another 80 live within a 10 minute walk. However, the community is very vibrant. There is now a museum, gift shop, A social center where courses are taught in Hebrew and Judaism, together with many cultural events. There is also a *Yeshivah* .



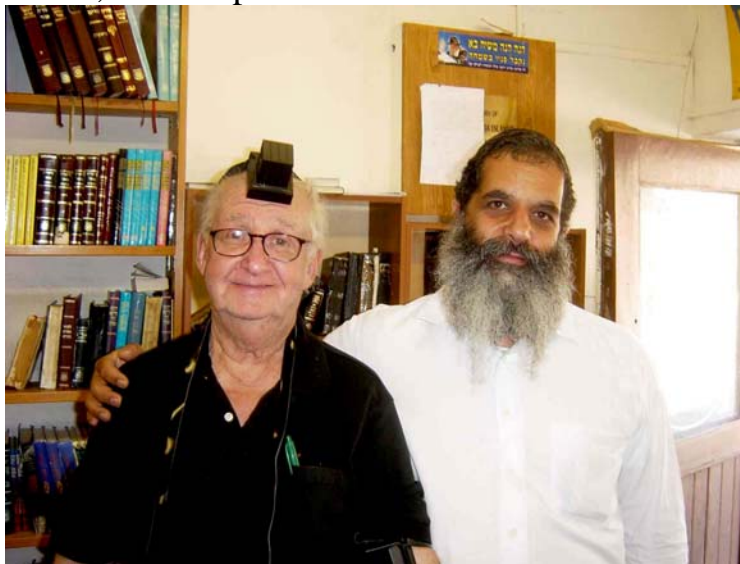
photograph by Robert W. Case

The miniscule number of Jewish residents does not really represent the community. A large number of tourists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, come from all over the world to visit the oldest Ghetto in the world !



Rabbi Ramy Benin & Cele Case in front of his restaurant

Before I end this article, I have to describe a new experience for me. I haven't "laid tfillin" since my Bar Mitzvah ! However, the rabbi Was very persistent, and the picture below is the final result.



The author wishes to express his profound gratitude for some of the pictures, Factual data, support, and encouragement for this article.

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