



500 Years of the Jewish Ghetto of Venice (1516-2016)

Venice is deservedly famous for its incomparable beauty and history that have long been the source of legend and inspiration. Less known is the fact that, for centuries, Venice was also a focal point of Jewish life and culture.

Against all odds, the famous Ghetto, founded in 1516 as a place of segregation, became an important crossroads of various Jewish communities and a place for dialogue between Jews and non-Jews. This is where the very word Ghetto originated, but also the place where Jews from different countries, languages, and traditions created a truly cosmopolitan community, built their magnificent synagogues, enabled the printing of the first Talmud and of many other Hebrew books, and became a crucial presence in the life of the city and a focal point for the Jews of Europe.

Today tens of thousands of people visit the Ghetto every year: they tour its synagogues and museum, gaze in wonder at the tall tenements and remnants of its famous 'banks', they read the memorial plaques dedicated to the Holocaust. The multiple meanings of the Jewish experience, its tragedies and its achievements, its signal contribution to world civilization are all recapitulated in this small but uniquely evocative site. The small but vibrant Jewish population treasures its own traditions and participates in the civic and cultural life of Venice. At a time of political uncertainty in Europe, the Ghetto has precious ethical and cultural lessons to educate the public about the Jews, about human rights, cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue.

To honour the historical anniversary marking 500 years since the establishment of the Ghetto of Venice (1516-2016), to foster the Jewish heritage of the site and guarantee its future as a key religious, cultural and artistic site open to people worldwide, the Jewish Community of Venice and the Municipality of Venice have formed a Committee ("I 500 anni del Ghetto di Venezia") whose function is to promote and coordinate all events that reflect and respect the spirit of the occasion, in collaboration with UCEI and other national and international institutions and individuals.

Program

The Committee "I 500 anni del Ghetto di Venezia" has decided to promote and sponsor three major projects, which constitute the core framework of the anniversary. The Committee will make it a priority to organize and raise funds for these initiatives, inviting partners and sponsors to support them:

- An **official ceremony** on the day of the anniversary (29th March 2016) to be held at the Fenice Opera house, with a concert and the presence of international personalities, Jewish leaders, and famous artists. This event will officially mark the quincentennial and will be used as the major platform for the dissemination of the messages of peace and dialogue connected to the anniversary. The Committee and La Fenice have preliminarily agreed to invite Israeli conductor Omer Wellber to lead the Fenice symphony orchestra for the performance of Gustav Mahler's Symphony no. 1 in D Major.
- A major exhibition to be held at the Doge's Palace on '**Venice, the Jews, and Europe. 1516-2016**' illustrating 500 years of Jewish Venice and its contribution to European culture. This event (scheduled for the period 19th June-13th November 2016) aims at reaching a wide and varied audience, and to develop scientific contents that will ideally benefit the renovated Jewish Museum. The exhibition is curated by Donatella Calabi and is organized in collaboration with the Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia.
- The restoration of the **Jewish Museum** and of three synagogues, supported by Venetian Heritage (vh-council.org). An 8 million-euro campaign is ongoing, and will redesign the main tourist site of the Ghetto. A fully renovated Jewish Museum is considered key for the future of the area and the city as a whole, with its strong artistic and educational function.

The Committee also endorses a number of other projects:

- July 26th-31st 2016 : The first performance of William Shakespeare's **The Merchant of Venice** in the Ghetto, where the play is ideally set (Compagnia de' Colombari, USA).

- June-July 2016 (date to be confirmed): A concert provisionally called “Ghetto boat songs” curated by New York-based **Frank London**. The project involves the creation of new songs inspired by the Jewish-Venetian language that was spoken in the Ghetto until the 19th century.
- June 19th 2016 (date to be confirmed): Concert of the music ensemble La Compagnia del Madrigale **Il Pomo d’Oro** (dir. Riccardo Minasi), at the Doge’s Palace. Program: Salomone Rossi, Benedetto Marcello, Louis Saladin, Abraham Casseres, Volunio Gallichi etc.)
- The reclamation and transformation of two abandoned orchards adjacent to the Levantine and Spanish synagogues into the **Secret Gardens of the Ghetto** (fundraising is ongoing)
- Several **academic programs** connected to the Quincentenary are being prepared in collaboration with local and international institutions. A few examples: “...li giudei debbano abitar unidi...” The Birth and Evolution of the Venetian Ghetto (1516--1797), (organized by Medici Archive Project, 5th-6th May 2016), a conference on “Jews, Venice and Europe in the 19th and 20th century (Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, September 12-14 2016), a lecture by rav Jonathan Sacks on famous Jewish books, a conference on “The Ghetto as Global Metaphor” promoted in Venice by Princeton University and the conference on “(Re)Constructing the Ghetto: Minority and Ethnic Quarters in Texts and Images”, organized by Ca' Foscari and IUAV Universities.

We welcome expressions of interest from individuals and organisations that would like to contribute to the overall programme or to specific activities of the 500 years of the Ghetto.

Paolo Gnignati

President of the Jewish Community of Venice

Chairman of the 500 Years of the Ghetto Committee

Members of the 500 Years of the Ghetto Committee:

Paolo Gnignati (Chairman)

Amos Luzzatto (Honorary Chairman)

Shaul Bassi

Alfredo Bianchini

Paolo Gnignati

Sandro Parenzo

Claude Sciaky-Menaschè

Maria Luisa Semi

Enrico Shohet

The Mayor of Venice, Luigi Brugnaro

For any inquiry please contact:

info@veniceghetto500.org

or the events office (Barbara Del Mercato): +39 334 371 1427

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Checks payable to AFJCV (mail to: Alessandra Rovati, 125 West 92nd Street # 1, New York NY 10025

– email: ale.rovati@gmail.com, tel. +1 917 4707424).