

Hunting for History in Historical Fiction:

The Elusive Heroine of *Sotto Voce*

If I had to describe the trajectory of my project in Venice, I would have to say that it has been a winding path from “must have been” to “could have been.” As you all know, I am working on a novel entitled *Sotto Voce* whose central character is a Jewish *liutaia*, a woman violinmaker. Why? Because there “must have been,” I thought, as I sat at my desk in Berkeley. (And wouldn’t it be oh so romantic, AND a statement about women, AND very exotic...) Fortunately, since I’m working in the realm of historical fiction, I do not need to find a specific Jewish *liutaia*, but rather the conditions under which she could have existed: “could have been” is sufficient for me.

So here in Venice, I set out on my foray into historical research which was circumstantial at best, and what I did not find has, in many ways, been more instructive than what I did find. I would like to share some with you some things I learned, and then read two new scenes which I wrote here.

Before I arrived, I learned that the key here would be the Jews who came to Venice from Spain after their expulsion in 1492. My violinmaker mentor told me the Amatis, the founders of violinmaking in Italy, precursors of Guarneri and Stradivarius, were Jewish. And sure enough, I found a source that claimed that the Amati lineage can be traced to a family from Catalonia that came to Venice.

In a history of the viol, the generic term for instruments like the *viola da gamba* and *viola d’amore*, I learned that the Jews brought with them from Spain the *vihuela*, a stringed instrument based on the Arab *rabab*, which served as the basis for the development of the viol in Venice.

Once here, I was surprised to find little evidence of Jewish violinmakers in Venice. Even though I decided to set my story shortly after 1580 when the Jews were allowed to work in other trades, it seems that the rules of the guilds would have kept the Jews formally out of this craft. No one seems to know.

I spoke to Prof. Stefano Pio, foremost expert on the history of violinmaking in Venice. He says that his own research starts in 1640 but he does know that very little has been published on this. His suggestion: check the Jewish archives—whatever there is will be found with the Jews from Spain.

So back to the Amatis. I took two trips to Cremona. At a meeting with a *liutaio* there, I found, in an article published for the Triennale international competition in violinmaking, references to the Amati brothers' arrival from Venice to Cremona with a Jewish banker and questions about the nature of their association with this banker—why would a banker bring two artisans with him and why would they sing Biblical verses with him? Another article casually referred to the Jewish-Venetian roots of violinmaking in Cremona, as if it were a given. Could have been?

The librarian at the municipal library gave me a detailed history of the Amatis and Guarneris (with, by the way, extensive references to the work of Renata Segre. The title of Chapter 3? “La Questione degli Ebrei.” The Jewish question. Not only did I learn that the Doge sent a Jewish banker, Giovanni Leonardo da Martinengo, to Cremona (which was not uncommon in the Venetian Republic), but that the bank was part of what was called a *pataria*, which, from what I could understand, was a unique institution whose activities also included lodging for Jews in transit, music (religious and secular), and dance classes, possibly instrument building, the printing and sale of books, and other types of commerce. And it was in the workshop of this *pataria* that the Amati brothers from Venice began to build their instruments, the beginning of violinmaking in Italy. But, as Renata Segre reminded me: there's Cremona and there's Venice.

Must have been? Could have been? Did everyone go to Cremona? What about the expertise that remained in Venice? What about what we learned about the Jewish role in the printing industry? The Jews were very active in many aspects of the process, but their names do not appear as the actual printers. Could there have been a similar situation with the Jews and violinmaking? Hard to imagine that there would *not* have been some activity. Why can't I find any records? Was it a matter of not being able to officially take credit for the instruments? Or were there really no Jewish *liutai* in Venice at this time? Must have been? I'll still settle for could have been.

The issue of the women turns out to be much easier, by the way. I have read new information about women composers who had to attribute their works to the names of their male patrons which supports the scenario I suggested above. In addition, I found cases of wives and daughters of *liutai* who were violinmakers in their own right, and Sara Coppio Sullam helps me imagine a parallel situation in the ghetto of Venice.

I certainly need to continue to unravel this historical mystery, but, going on the assumption that there “could have been,” I have written two new scenes that I'd like to share with you. My *liutaia* has changed her name and address and the plot is undergoing serious remodeling, but here it is.

A very brief synopsis of the story so far: Bertrand Fleischer, a violinmaker from Boston, buys a trunk full of the pieces of what he believes to be an old instrument in a market in Provence. As he reconstructs it back in his shop, with the help of Natalie Yee, young violist from China who is studying at the local conservatory, he discovers an inscription hidden under the fingerboard which gives some clues to the puzzling configuration of the strings on what he thinks may be a viola d'amore and indicates that the instrument was built *con amore* by RDB for VT. But Bertrand doesn't recognize the initials of either the violinmaker or the recipient. It makes him wonder why he never made such a gift for his recently deceased wife, while Natalie imagines what it would be like to play an instrument made for her by a lover.

*Sotto Voce*

New Venice Scenes

1

A light evening breeze lifted off the dark waters of the Grand Canal, gently rocking the long sleek boat carrying Rachele Dias Braza back to the ghetto. She brushed a brown curl away from her face. The view of the candles glowing in the windows of the majestic *palazzi* always left her breathless. To see their reflection playing on the waves was a rare privilege which she cherished—one her neighbors could only dream about. She clutched her well-worn leather case close by her side; the stringed instrument it contained was her key to this forbidden world. Only because she was a performing musician was she allowed to be outside the ghetto after sunset. Later, she and Signor Vittorio would agree that she would bring it to all their meetings to allow them more time, but he had only made his special request today, and she was still reeling from his proposition. Her father would have been so proud.

Signor Vittorio's servant stood behind her and steered their way through the tangle of gondolas and other boats and eventually crossed to a narrow canal on the opposite bank, choosing to avoid the busy Canal di Cannaregio. Slowly, they floated up the quiet waters. A baby cried. Rachele looked up at the modest houses on either side, light shining through some of the already shuttered windows, and wondered about the families inside. So close to her home, but yet so distant. Did they wonder about her also? Or was she invisible to them? Maybe to them, but certainly not to Signor Vittorio. He apparently had heard about her and sought her out. Rachele Dias Braza, daughter of Moisè.

They made a sharp left turn onto Rio di San Girolamo and glided along the wide straight canal, the boatman ducking as they went under a low bridge. And then, on the left, the ghetto stood before them: the tall buildings with the tiny windows—the tallest buildings in all of Venice—the houses rising up from the water. Rachele tried to see them as they must appear to the boatman: dark, closed, mysterious. How could he imagine the life inside?

The boat hugged the walls closely and quickly reached the bridge and the large, sealed gate. Rachele took a deep breath. She could not know how the guard would receive her. When she performed with a group she had no problem being allowed back in after dark, but this time she was alone and the guard would be more suspicious. Even last week, after a concert with two singers in San Polo, the guard refused to let them in until the rabbi himself came to the gate to assure him that they were musicians with special permission to be out after sunset.

The guard's silhouette on the bridge stood out in the moonlit night. Rachele shuddered. The boatman tied up the boat and stepped onto the bridge. He waited while Rachele wrapped her cloak around her and picked up her precious case, and he helped her out of the boat. She stood to the side while he handed the guard the sealed pouch which Signor Vittorio had given him. The guard went back to his post where there was light. Rachele saw him open the pouch and read the message. She did not know what it said, but the guard hastened back, sent the boatman off, and ushered her through the gate.

Rachele hurried through the covered passageway into the large courtyard of the Ghetto Nuovo. The ring of buildings looked down on her. The arched doorways of the banks and shops were dark, but above, many of the windows were still lit, and the night sounds of the ghetto reverberated among the walls: the clatter of pots from a kitchen, a mother calling to her son, a couple arguing. So different from the elegant world she had just left.

She walked quickly across the courtyard and over the bridge into the Ghetto Vecchio where she lived. She clung to the side of the narrow street, hoping not to meet anyone along the way, but just before she reached her building, she saw two figures coming toward her.

“Rachele?” A familiar voice.

She took a few steps closer and recognized Davide Sachi, her neighbor, walking with Anselmo Bueno, the teacher.

“Your grandfather has been waiting for you,” said Davide. “He’s asked me to come down twice already to see if I could find you. He should be used to your being out after the gates are closed, but after all that has happened, he cannot rest until he knows you are home.”

“Well, I am here,” she said, “I’ll go up to him.” She passed into the building. As she went up the narrow stairs, she could hear her name as they lingered in the doorway.

2

Rachele went into her room, put her case under the bed, and drew back the heavy yellow curtain. There was her work bench, as she had left it in the morning, so long ago. She picked up the back of the viol she had begun to carve and ran her fingers along its smooth curved edge. The center was still thick and rough. She needed several more days of scraping before she could begin the top cover.

Her father’s well worn tools were scattered on the table: the chisels, the knives, the tiny planes. She remembered how, as a child, she had been fascinated by the way he held each tool in his varnish-stained fingers, as if it were an extension of his hand. And, as she grew up, he had patiently taught her how to use his tools, giving each one a special name—“little helpers,” he called them—working together to make a beautiful musical instrument. But that was a long time ago, when they lived in Cremona. Now she was alone, and back in Venice with her grandfather. Everything had changed.

And Signor Vittorio. Who really was he? His soft brown eyes when he came up to her after the performance last week. That she was a fine player of the viola da gamba, he had just witnessed. But more so, that Master Leonardo, her father’s dear friend, had said she was a particularly gifted *liutaia*, violinmaker. She was sure she had blushed. And then the note asking for the meeting today, handed to her as she made her way to the Rialto market early yesterday morning.

But most of all, Rachele remembered the sound—the haunting echo of the Arab instrument her father’s family had brought from Spain, and the look on Signor Vittorio’s face when she showed him the matching set of strings extending just below the ones she plucked.

“This is the secret,” she had told him. “These strings are the soul of the music, for they reverberate long after the melody has moved on, and weave their own web of sound.”

He had been silent for a long time, and then asked to play the instrument himself. She hesitated, but finally passed it to him carefully. He plucked each string and listened to the echo of the string below it.

“If you can add even two strings like these to a viola da gamba, you will be richly rewarded. Only you can make this new instrument. Only you.”