

**Report by Ronnie Scharfman, Professor of French and Literature, Purchase College, SUNY, on Professor Donatella Calabi's presentation, "City of the Jews"**

Professor Calabi, an expert on the history of Venice, the space of the Ghetto, and town planning in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, teaches at the Institute of Architecture, the University of Venezia, L'Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, has been a visiting professor in many other distinguished universities, and has published widely on Venice, *The City of the Jews*, "The Market and the City." Her work has been translated into many languages.

The main thrust of Prof. Calabi's lecture was to contextualize the presence of the Jews along with other foreign communities in Venice. The Ghetto was about exclusion and segregation. The word "ghetto" is a toponym and designates the place where they threw away the detritus from the copper works. The Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants to Venice read and pronounced the "g" as hard, giving the spelling in Italian of "gh" instead of "gettare."

In 15<sup>th</sup> century Venice, how important were communities of foreigners? At the time, there were "outsider" communities of Germans, Turks, Greeks, Lucchesi. The Germans were obliged to live in the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, store their merchandise there as in a depot, and keep to their own way of life, but only men lived there, not families. This provided a kind of civic guarantee to difference. Such division within the city avoids conflict. At the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after a big fire, the Fondaco dei Tedeschi was rebuilt as both a residence and, along the lines of buildings common throughout the Mediterranean, with an atrium/interior court/patio.

The Fondaco dei Turchi was a building of the same type, an ancient palace with an interior court and arches on the Grand Canal. The system of arcades was closed to the exterior, as the Turks were considered dangerous. Their building was controlled by guardians. The lateral façades were closed so as not to be able to look out and not to be seen.

The Greeks lived in a small district that was quite organized, but not in a single building, and they had their families with them. They asked to be able to build an Orthodox Church so as to be treated like other "foreigners" in Venice, the Jews and the Armenians.

The arrival of Jews in the Ghetto must be seen in this larger context. Jews as foreigners were important to the commerce of the city, but needed to be controlled. The first idea was to put them on the island of Murano, but they didn't accept that. They negotiated with the Venetians to be within the main part of the urban texture. The Ghetto was an easily controlled island, between two parishes and therefore without a church. Its gates were really gates. But there is a fundamental ambiguity between being locked in and protected.

How did the Ghetto get so crowded so quickly? The Jewish population was very dense – there were many large families there to begin with, and they told relatives from elsewhere to join them. A schematic drawing from the time shows a "skyscraper," with thick walls and low ceilings. There was also a rapid increase in the number of services: shuls, hospitals, etc. Each community had its shops. Water was brought in in buckets. The Ghetto functioned in an autonomous way, but related to the city in a dialectical way. It had its own logic within the city.

1541 – the establishment of the Ghetto Vecchio. Although there was always outside control of the Ghetto, there was also always a dynamic back and forth between laws and their abuses. What is permitted and what is usually done is not the same thing (c.f. the concept of “jus hazaka.”) An example of stretching the law was the roof-top garden or terrace on the water, the “altanella,” where merchandise could be displayed to the city outside the Ghetto walls.

The anecdote of the English visitor arguing with the rabbi in demonstrates the importance of space to identity and vice versa.

For Padova and Modena, the models of reference were the Ghetto square. In synagogue building, windows were extremely important. Did Longhena, the architect of the 17<sup>th</sup> century baroque church, the Salute, work on the Italian shul? Jews could not be architects. Maybe his workshop worked on it, as they did on other “minority” buildings.

Cemeteries: The one at the end of the island on the Lido was given to the community in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. When the Ghetto was instituted, the original cemetery became more crowded. How were funeral rites organized, since the cemetery is at the entrance to the harbor? They had to travel down the Grand Canal by boats, but boys threw stones from the bridges at the funeral cortege. The Jewish community obtained the right to excavate a canal, the Canal degli ebrai. Did it promote silting? For dredging, there were discussions in all of Venice.

Napolean made the symbolic gesture of burning the gates when he liberated the Ghetto in 1797. This was destabilizing. The city had to take over responsibility for its Jewish community. Rich Jews could now afford to buy outside the Ghetto. Some nobles were ruined at the end of the Venetian Republic. Some important palazzi were bought by Jews, renovated, decorated modernly and innovatively. The Jews quickly made deals for expansion after emancipation. The first palazzi were bought near the Ghetto. The Ca’ D’Oro was bought by Jewish bankers and rented out as apts. It was in the possession of two Jewish families for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Palazzo Trevis is brick, not stone.

“Possession” meant they could rent and pass on inheritance, embellish and change the interiors. Nobody was really responsible for the buildings any more. The true owners didn’t care. There were many fires which were important for renovation. This is Prof. Calabi’s current area of research.

Sansovino’s guidebook speaks of the Ghetto as the promised land.

The etymology of the word “fondaco” has three sources: fondouk, the Arabic word for warehouse; pandokeion, the Greek work for warehouse; and fontego, the Venetian dialect.

Submitted by Ronnie Scharfman, 30 August, 2006