

Report on The Jews in Venice before the Ghetto by Renate Segre¹

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Professor Renate Segre presented a fascinating look at how medieval historians piece together evidence to try to answer questions, penetrate mysteries, or enter into existing debates. In this case Professor Segre was entering into the debate on when there were Jews in Venice before the establishment of the ghetto.² Because of the disastrous war with the League of Cambrai where the Venetians lost their hold on their land empire in the Veneto, Venice allowed Jews from the mainland, primarily Mestre, to move into the lagoon after 1509.³ However, the question of whether there were instances of Jew communities living in Venice as opposed to small numbers of Jews living there and moneylenders just coming for fifteen days and then leaving for a set amount of time before being allowed back, has been the subject of much speculation but little evidence.⁴

First we were given some background on Venice and the myth of Venice, especially in terms of the relationship between politics and religion. While the commune was deeply religious, religion was not given any influence in politics. The cathedral, San Pietro in Castello, while originally built facing a busy marketplace, became marginalized⁵ with the development of commerce at Rialto and political power centralized at San Marco, where the basilica was the Doge's personal chapel. After the translation of the bones of St. Mark to the basilica in 829, the importance of Piazza San Marco was further enhanced, pushing the bishop and later the patriarch and the papal nuncio to what became the margins of Venice. In the myth of Venice, the city was the new Jerusalem as well as the

¹ While this began as a straightforward report on Professor Segre's talk to the 2008 NEH Institute members, I have amplified it with additional information and citations that I thought readers might find useful.

² Professor Segre makes a distinction between *in* Venice and *of* Venice. While historians agree that there were Jews in Venice before 1509, there does not seem to be a Jewish community in Venice and so there is a debate about who was there, when, how many, and why.

³ See Robert Finlay, "The Foundation of the Ghetto: Venice, the Jews, and the War of the League of Cambrai," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 126: 2(Apr. 8, 1982) 140-154.

⁴ See Benjamin Ravid, "The Jewish Mercantile Settlement of Twelfth and Thirteenth Century Venice: Reality or Conjecture?" *AJS Review*, 2(1977) pp. 201-225.

⁵ San Pietro in Castello was probably built in the eighth century as the diocesan church under the Patriarchate at Grado and became the cathedral in 1451 as well as the seat of the Patriarchate. The Basilica of San Marco only became the cathedral for Venice in 1806, when Napoleon decided that San Marco was the more appropriate church to be the cathedral of Venice. Professor Areli Marina of the School of Architecture at the University of Illinois is working on the architecture of San Pietro and its history in medieval Venetian life.

inheritor of Rome after the sack of Constantinople by Frankish crusaders⁶ led by Doge Enrico Dandolo in 1204.⁷

Also important are two other concepts that make up Venice's self-definition. The first is *Terra di Mare* or as Eric Durstler calls it *stato da mar*⁸. This encompassed the Venetian maritime empire, including large stretches of the eastern Mediterranean, the Adriatic Sea, the Dalmatian coast and parts of the southeastern Italian coast in Puglia as well as colonies taken as Byzantium weakened and then fell to the Ottomans including Candia (Crete), the Morea (the Peloponnese), and Cyprus.⁹ Competition with Genoa, Pisa, and the Aragonese had defined Venice's trade relationships in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the rivalry with Genoa continued throughout the fifteenth century, especially as they vied for trade relationships with the Ottomans after 1453. Later the Ottomans were by turns allies and opponents. Each needed to trade with the other but conflicts arose, especially over Cyprus, which Venice eventually lost to the Turks. However, despite their enmities, Venice was willing to ignore the papal ban against trade with the Ottomans and supplied glass, copper, irons and wood in return for various goods—especially silk and alum—trade in the latter allowing the Venetians to circumvent the papal monopoly on alum because of the papacy's control of the alum mines at Tolfa.

The second idea, which by the fifteenth century was equally important, was that of *Terra Firma*. After the battle of Chioggia, which was the large-scale naval engagement between Venice and Genoa, Venice began to make inroads in the area we now call the Veneto. Around 1400 Venice decided to change its policy of safe guarding overland trade through the Alps by diplomacy and encouraged Venetian nobles, who until then had been prohibited from owning property on the mainland, to start investing in terra firma which led the Republic to begin territorial expansion instead of just trying to exert political influence over various cities in the Veneto. Realizing the

⁶ Not all of the crusaders were French, but Frank was the general term used in the east for Western Europeans at this time.

⁷ The modern authority on Dandolo is Thomas Madden at St. Louis University. See his *Enrico Dandolo & The Rise of Venice* (2003) as well as his revision of Donald Queller's earlier edition on the fourth crusade, *The Fourth Crusade: The Conquest of Constantinople* (1999). Their interpretation of the fourth crusade is a revisionist view that refutes earlier historians of the crusades, most notably Sir Steven Runciman.

⁸ See Eric R. Durstler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁹ Cyprus was ruled by the Lusignan family, who were rewarded with the island by Richard I during the Third Crusade. In 1472 Venice persuaded King James II of Cyprus to marry Catherine Cornaro (1454-1510) of the very influential Corner family, who held sugar plantations in Cyprus. After an heir was produced James died suddenly (poison was suspected) in 1473 and the infant James III died in 1474. In 1489 the unpopular Catherine was forced to abdicate and gave the island to the Venetian Republic, retiring to Asolo. Pietro Bembo described her court in Asolo in *Gli Asolani*. She is portrayed in Gentile Bellini's famous painting "The Procession at San Marco," painted for the Scuole San Giovanni Evangelisti, now in room XX of the Accademia in Venice, where she is seen about to enter the basilica.

importance of having a land-based hinterland to help both with trade and with the provision of foodstuffs, Venice used mercenary troops and annexed Vicenza, Padua, Verona and Rovigo and attempted to take Ferrara and Mantua.¹⁰ Both Padua and Verona had connections with both the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy, which opposed the take overs, Venice won out in those cases. While the Venetians were not successful against the Estense and Gonzaga rulers, these latter two states became buffer zones between Venice and the Papacy as well as sometime allies in the war of succession in Naples that was involving city-states all over the peninsula.¹¹

Before laying out her evidence on Jews living in Venice before the sixteenth century, Professor Segre explained why using names as evidence was not useful.¹² Using first names to identify Jews can be misleading because Venice's strong connection with Byzantium meant that Old Testament patriarchs could end up as saints, the most famous being San Moisè. Therefore patriarchal names were sometimes used as first names by Christian Venetians. Also, family names once thought to be associate with the Jews, like Pesaro, were really used only by the Venetian aristocracy.¹³

With all this background to give the seminar participants a sense of Venice in the period around 1300 and later, the question arises, how can historians tell whether or not Jews lived in Venice in this earlier period? Because the moneylenders in areas such as Mestre, Treviso, Udine, Vicenze, Brescia, Bergamo, Padua and Verona, had relatively meager resources, Professor Segre does not consider it likely that Jewish bankers were permanently living in Venice before 1509. She argues that the Jews did not have sufficient financial resources to attract the Venetians because they were usually small

¹⁰ Professor Segre indicated that both Verona and Padua resent Venice to this day, but while that seems to be true in Verona, whether or not the Scaligeri were popular, the Paduans seem happy with a semi-Venetian identity and there is little left of the Carroza legacy.

¹¹ "Allied cities became clients; the traditional sphere of Venetian influence evolved into a web of colonies, and Venice established itself as a mainland power. In a fragmented and fractious Italy, little states carried out little wars, and big states carried out bigger wars. The major contenders for power in the northern end of the peninsula were Milan, Florence and the Papacy. Powerful, rich, and as unscrupulous as any of the others, Venice entered the arena as a contender whose economic and territorial interests threatened big and little states alike." James H. S. McGregor, *Venice from the Ground Up* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2006), 191. See also *War, Culture and Society in Renaissance Venice: Essays in Honour of John Hale*, eds. David Chambers, Cecil H. Clough, and Michael Mallett (London: Hambleton Press, 2003).

¹² This was reiterated by Joshua Holo in his presentation to the seminar on June 23, 2008.

¹³ The question of Venice and aristocracy is a complicated one. Many historians define an aristocracy as a group based on land ownership and the hereditary titles that went with certain kinds of land grants given by rulers. All of this goes back to concepts of feudalism. However, the Venetians did have their own nonfeudal aristocracy based on merchant wealth with a closed system that meant no one could become an aristocrat after the "Golden Book" was closed. See Dennis Romano, *Patricians and Popolani: The Social Foundations of the Venetian Renaissance State* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Other Italian states also had a nonfeudal aristocracy such as Milan, Florence, Urbino, and others where either wealth or the ennobling of a condottiere such as Federico da Montefeltro or Ludovico Sforza made the feudal distinction obsolete.

banking interests and were settled in places like Mestre, Treviso, Udine, Vicenza, Brescia and Bergamo and in the small villages around the larger cities of Padua and Verona.

However, looking at a document in the Venetian State Archives from the thirteenth century, Professor Segre found that while the only physicians officially allowed to live in Venice had to be members of the guild (and Jews could not be members of the guild), there was a loophole. If a noble felt that his health could only be preserved by a physician who was not a member of the corporation, that doctor would be allowed to live and practice in Venice. Professor Segre carefully pointed out that Jews were not specifically mentioned but Jews were well known as physicians who had studied at Salerno or Montpellier, where they had been allowed to take degrees. These Jewish doctors were considered desirable by nobles as well as by popes and were to be seen in courts all over Europe.

Professor Segre has traced a Jewish physician, Elia of Ferrara, who turns up in the records in 1276. She thinks he may have been the same person as Elia Judeo from Genoa, who sold a slave to the Venetian ambassador to Genoa. This Elia was from Montpellier, which would make his occupation as a physician particularly plausible since Montpellier was the location of one of the universities that admitted Jews to train as doctors. Elia, if it the same one, turns up again in 1302-03 in Crete, where he was selling slaves to Alexandria, a way that the Venetians tried to circumvent papal injunctions against trading with Muslim Egypt. Jailed by religious authorities, he was freed through the intercession of the king of France, which indicates his own status. Elia died in 1326 and left a will that was published in the late nineteenth century. This publication was fortunate since the document disappeared from the archives in Venice in the 1970s. In the will Elia left a list of his books, which were primarily on medicine and philosophy and the list is in Latin. The book compilation was made in part so that his heirs would know how valuable many of the manuscripts were. The book connection is interesting because there is a book translated by Jacob ben Elia from 1280 with a colophon that thanks the king of Aragon for his patronage and states that he was helped in his work making a translation into Italian by Maestro Andrea and Maestro Padovina, who were Christians and who may have also been physicians in Venice. Elia's children, Luciano Alvise, and Marino by his first wife and Marcasina by his second wife were probably Christian converts.¹⁴

Other records found by Professor Segre in the Venetian archives include one on Gratia, a Jew from Ancona, who was allowed to deliver wine to his many upper-class friends in Venice. While Professor Segre makes no claims for this evidence since it is so scant, she sees the possibility that

¹⁴ Professor Segre, although warning about the problematic use of names as evidence, deduces that the children became Christians because they had Christian first names. It would be less usual for Jews to have Christian first names than for Christians to have Jewish first names. There seems to be no indication that the children had dual names, Christian and Jewish. That would have indicated a more fluid self-identity for them.

Gratia may have lived at least part-time in Venice both to build up his clientele and while he was delivering his merchandise.

By 1348, when the first round of the Black Plague swept through Europe, Professor Segre thinks it likely that there were no Jewish physicians practicing in Venice since Jews were routinely accused of causing the plague by poisoning wells and Jewish physicians were not trusted to tell the afflicted that they were dying early enough to arrange for last rites to be administered. Therefore Jewish physicians would probably have left the city or converted in order to continue practicing their profession.

While the evidence that Professor Segre produced for the possibilities of some individual Jews living in Venice before the sixteenth century, the real importance of her talk is in its illustration of the historical process. Her talk defines and explains the difficulties faced by archivally based historians working in the pre-modern period. While her example of Elia the physician and perhaps also the slave seller may be the records of one person who lived in a variety of locations and had names and personas that reflected these different localities and their realities, it is difficult to be absolutely certain that Elia the Venetian physician is the same Elia Judeo who sold slaves in Genoa and Crete or even that the Elia in Genoa, who was probably the Elia who came from Montpellier, was the same Elia who was arrested in Crete (although the involvement of the king of France makes that possibility more likely). Educated guesses can make these scenarios more or less likely but historians, unlike popes, cannot claim infallibility. The nature of the documents, which may be complete, partially complete, mostly illegible, mistranslated, lost, partly eaten by insects, or subject to many other indignities such as fire, water damage, and theft, means that the historian is frequently subjected to only one or two parts of a much more complex story and that the parts available may not be in a particularly comprehensible order. Also, when only a few reconstructions are available, the historian must decide whether these cases are exceptional or illustrate a larger body of lost or not yet recovered material. In this instance when Professor Segre was asked that particular question, she answered that these were the only pieces of evidence she had been able to uncover so she could not make the assumption that there were other Jewish physicians to be found, even though she had hypothesized that there were a number of Jewish physicians resident in Venice before 1348.

Besides the difficulties with the amount and condition of the documents, interpretation has its own set of pitfalls. For example, proclamations with loopholes such as the ruling on doctors in Venice presented by Professor Segre give the opportunity for speculation but not for firm conclusions unless other evidence is found such as court records indicating that the loophole was being closed because of misuse. Again, if something is prohibited by statute or other legal instrument and the law is recapitulated frequently or court cases turn up regularly, the historian can

deduce that certain practices are going on but this is arguing from negative rather than positive findings.

While archives can be treasure-troves of evidence, that evidence may be incomplete, tainted (documents can lie), or misleading. Therefore, in the spirit of caveat emptor, both the historian and the reader must be aware.