

Ghetto: A Contribution of Italian Jewry to Everyday Discourse

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The history of the Jews of the Italian peninsula is significant for many reasons. Rome is the only city in the West where Jews resided continuously from late classical antiquity to the Nazi round-up of 1943. Also, Rome has been the seat of the Head of the Catholic Church, whose policies have played a major role in determining attitudes toward the Jews until the present. Another significant reason for the study of Italian Jews is that after the

Spanish expulsion of 1492, they constituted the only native non-Ashkenazi Jewish ethnic group in Europe, and accordingly their language, religious customs, and cultural patterns all serve as a reminder that the so-called “World of Our Fathers” of Eastern and Central Europe, which is so often considered to constitute the “real” or “authentic” Jewish lifestyle, actually represents only one strand in the many-faceted Jewish experience. Additionally, among the many experiences of Italian Jewry is a word that has now entered into everyday parlance: “ghetto.”

From their earliest days in the Diaspora, Jews chose voluntarily to live close together, reflecting a practice commonly adopted by groups dwelling in foreign lands. Initially, their quarters, often referred to as the Jewish quarter or street, were almost never compulsory or segregated, and Jews continued to have contacts on all levels with their Christian neighbors. However, the Catholic Church looked askance at such relationships, and in 1179 the Third Lateran Council stipulated that Christians should not dwell together with Jews. This vague policy statement had to be translated into legislation by the secular authorities, and only infrequently in the Middle Ages were laws enacted confining Jews to compulsory segregated and enclosed quarters, and even then, those laws were not always implemented. The few such Jewish quarters then established, such as that of Frankfort, were never called ghettos, since the term originated in Venice and became associated with the Jews only in the 16th century.

In 1516, as a compromise between allowing Jews to live freely throughout Venice and expelling them from the city, the Venetian government required

them to dwell on the island known as the Ghetto Nuovo (the new ghetto), which was walled up with only two gates that were locked from sunset to sunrise. Then, when in 1541, visiting Ottoman Jewish merchants complained that they did not have enough room in the ghetto, the government ordered twenty adjacent dwellings located across a small canal walled up, joined by a footbridge to the Ghetto Nuovo, and assigned to the merchants. This area was already known as the Ghetto Vecchio (the old ghetto), thereby strengthening the association between Jews and the word “ghetto.”

Clearly, the word “ghetto” is of Venetian rather than of Jewish origin, as sometimes conjectured. The Ghetto Vecchio had been the original site of the municipal copper foundry, “ghetto” from the Italian verb *gettare* (to pour or to cast), while the island across from it, on which waste products had been dumped, became known as “il terreno del ghetto,” and eventually the Ghetto Nuovo.

The word “ghetto” in its new usage did not remain for long confined to the city of Venice. The hostile Counter-Reformation bull of Pope Paul IV, *Cum Nimis Absurdum*, issued in 1555, provided that the Jews of the papal states were to live together on a single street or, should it not suffice, then on as many adjacent ones as necessary, with only one entrance and exit. Accordingly, the Jews of Rome were moved into a new compulsory, segregated enclosed quarter which apparently was first called a ghetto seven years later.

Influenced by the papal example, local Italian authorities gradually established special compulsory, segregated and enclosed quarters for the Jews in most places where Jews were allowed to live on the Counter-Reformation Italian peninsula. Following the Venetian nomenclature, these new residential areas were already called “ghetto” in the legislation that established them.

In later years, the Venetian origin of the word “ghetto” came to be forgotten, as it was used exclusively in its secondary meaning as referring to compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarters, and then in a looser sense to refer to any area densely populated by Jews, even if they had freedom of residence and lived in the same districts and houses as Christians. Eventually, “ghetto” became the general designation for areas densely inhabited by members of minority groups, almost always for socioeconomic reasons, rather than for legal ones as had been the case with the initial Jewish ghetto.

It must be noted that the varied usages of the word “ghetto” has created a blurring of the Jewish historical experience, especially when employed loosely in phrases such as “the age of the ghetto,” “out of the ghetto,” and “ghetto mentality.” Actually, the word can be used in its original sense of a compulsory, segregated and enclosed Jewish quarter only in connection with the Jewish experience in a few places in the Germanic lands, and not at all with that in Poland-Russia. If it is to be used in its original sense in connection with Eastern Europe, then it must be asserted that the age of the ghetto arrived there only after the Nazi invasions of World War II. However, there was a basic difference: unlike ghettos of earlier days, which were designed to provide Jews with clearly defined permanent space in Christian society, 20th-century ghettos constituted merely temporary stages on the planned road to total liquidation.

Finally, to a great extent because of the negative connotations of the word “ghetto,” the nature of Jewish life in the ghetto is often misunderstood. The establishment of ghettos did not lead, as for example shown strikingly in the autobiography of the Venetian rabbi Leone of Modena, to the breaking off of Jewish contacts with the outside world on any level, from the highest to the lowest. Additionally, apart from the question of whether the ghetto succeeded in fulfilling the expectations of those who desired its establishment, from the internal Jewish perspective many evaluations of its alleged impact upon the life of the Jews and their mentality require substantial revision. In general, the decisive element determining the nature of Jewish life was not so much whether or not Jews were required to live in a ghetto, but rather the nature of the surrounding environment and whether it constituted an attractive stimulus to Jewish thought and offered a desirable supplement to traditional Jewish genres of intellectual activity. In all places, Jewish life must be examined in the context of the external environment, and developments—especially those subjectively evaluated as undesirable—not merely attributed to the alleged impact of the ghetto.

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