

THE VENETIAN GHETTO

Because of their central role in economic exchange—in foreign trade, loans to the state, and small-scale money-lending—Jews were seen in late medieval and early modern Europe as a necessary evil; they could neither be tolerated nor expelled. Jews had been lending money to Venice to fight its wars since the late fourteenth century. Venetian authorities, like others in Europe, felt uneasy about the close cohabitation of Christians and Jews, so they passed laws forbidding sexual relations between them.

The origins of the Venetian Ghetto can be traced back to the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when Pope Innocent III decreed that Jews should be forbidden from holding public office, should have clothing that distinguished them from Christians, and should not appear in public during Easter week. It was the responsibility of Christian magistrates to restrict Jewish economic activity. Segregation was seen as a simple way of enforcing these laws in Venice and elsewhere (Jews had been living in restricted quarters in cities like Prague since the late thirteenth century). Jews had been permitted to live in Venice in 1509, and soon secured the right to practice money-lending in return for financial payments to the state. They were tolerated as a source of revenue for the government and as providers of cheap credit for poor Christians. Unlike what we find in Shakespeare's play, Venetian Jews were forbidden to make large-scale commercial loans.

In 1516, after rejecting the idea of relegating the Jews to a small island called Giudecca, the Venetian authorities designated an area called the *ghetto nuovo*, or "new foundry," named after the copper

and bronze foundry there, as the locale where all Jews were required to relocate and to live in rented quarters. This is the origin of the now widespread use of the term "ghetto." High walls sealed off access and heavy wooden gates, guarded by Christians, were opened at sunrise and locked at sunset. At its peak, several thousand Jews lived in the Ghetto and a thriving community flourished.

Anti-Jewish actions intensified in the sixteenth-century Catholic Europe, part of a larger Counter-Reformation reaction by the Church. Copies of the Talmud were burned in 1553 and Jews who had converted to Christianity, and whose conversion was suspect, were persecuted. In 1555 Pope Paul IV declared, "Jews were condemned to live in a quarter set apart from the Christians." They also had to wear distinctive garb and were no longer allowed to own real estate. The Venetian Ghetto served as a model for other Italian cities. In the wake of Pope Paul IV's decree, similar restrictions were imposed on Jewish communities in Rome, Siena, Florence, Verona, Padua, and elsewhere in Italy.

Not until 1797, two hundred and eighty years after they had first swung shut on the Jews within, would the wooden gates of the Venetian ghetto be torn down and burned. The gateless Ghetto still stands, a living memorial to the story of Jews in early modern Europe.