

Chief rabbi of Venice works for return of Jewish community

by [Josephine McKenna](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

Five centuries ago the Jewish people of Venice were forced to live in a segregated community that became known as the first-ever ghetto, a cramped but bustling community that at its height boasted nine synagogues.

But as the population of Venice has fallen over the years due to mass tourism and spiraling costs, so too have the number of Jewish people.

Now the chief rabbi of Venice, Scialom Bahbout, says the city's Jewish community has to reinvent itself. Only 500 Jewish people remain in Venice, with another 500 in the nearby towns of Padua, Verona, and Trieste—a small percentage of the country's 30,000 Jewish population.

“Like the city of Venice itself, the community is becoming more and more of a museum,” Bahbout said. “We need a city that is alive.”

Bahbout's office sits above one of the community's hidden gems, the Scola Ponentina, or Spanish synagogue. Completed in 1580, it was built by Sephardic Jews who sought refuge in Venice after being expelled from Spain.

The synagogue, which is still used, lies behind heavy wooden doors and has an ornate wooden ceiling, large chandeliers, and a decorative stone floor. It is one of five synagogues that remain.

“Most young people are leaving for places where they are assured of a more comprehensive Jewish life; in Italy, that means Milan or Rome,” he said. “Many also move to Israel, Paris, or New York.”

Bahbout, who was born in Libya and migrated to Italy with his family in the 1950s, said the first Jews arrived in Venice in the tenth century. As the former Venetian Republic flourished over the centuries, many Jews from elsewhere in Europe sought refuge there.

In 1516 the city-state ruled that Jewish people were to be locked behind gates at night. They were deprived of owning property and forced to wear a yellow item as

identification, often a badge or hat, which was humiliating.

Strolling through the narrow alleys in the ghetto today, visitors see few reminders of how difficult the ghetto residents' lives were.

Nevertheless, Bahbout said, Venice became a center of learning, renowned for printing and publishing Jewish books and manuscripts, and paradoxically a place where Jews were able to practice their faith.

"Life in the ghetto was vibrant because the Jews were not homogeneous—it was a melting pot," said Riccardo Calimani, a historian who has published a book about the ghetto. "Through publishing they attracted intellectuals from abroad, and the community became a bridge between northern Europe and Constantinople."

Calimani, whose family arrived in Venice in 1508, is also a former president of the Jewish community in Venice.

The gates were finally removed from the ghetto when Napoleon Bonaparte and his troops conquered the city in 1797. Their civil rights restored, Jewish people played a prominent role in Italy's unification in the 19th century.

In 1938 Benito Mussolini introduced racial laws, and during the Nazi occupation of Italy, 246 Jewish people were deported from Venice to extermination camps. Only eight returned.

Last year, Venice hosted a major exhibition titled Venice, the Jews, and Europe: 1516–2016, which drew thousands of visitors.

Bahbout hopes the success of that event will energize the community.

"Even though we are a small community, we have deep roots," he said. "We need to reinforce and strengthen those roots." —Religion News Service