

Treasures of the Jewish Ghetto of Venice

Restored by Venetian Heritage

Paolo Gnignati

President of the Jewish Community of Venice

It is a great honour for us that the treasures of our community, generously restored by Venetian Heritage, can be shared with the public of an important institution such as the Art Gallery of Western Australia. As we, the heirs of five centuries of glorious and tormented history, approach the landmark anniversary of the half millenium of the Ghetto (1516-2016), we feel that this exhibition is opening a new phase in the history of Jewish Venice. We have been a community of people contributing to our city and to society at large despite the severe restrictions and challenges to which we were forced in the past. *The Treasures of the Jewish Ghetto of Venice* is the harbinger of an even more ambitious project of restoring and expanding our Jewish museum, made possible by the continuing support of Venetian Heritage. A new museum is not only a celebration of the past but a new foundation for the future: it will enable us to re-establish the Ghetto, the Jewish quarter where the word 'ghetto' originated, as a meeting point of people, a crossroads of cultures, a gateway to understanding the history of the Jewish civilization. We hope that the Australian visitors will enjoy this exhibit, that some will be inspired to visit us (www.jvenice.org) and we invite them to join the effort to commemorate 500 years of a site that, founded as a site of segregation and isolation, has paradoxically served as the laboratory for modern Jewish culture.

Arnold Zable

author of *Jewels and Ashes* and *Café Scheherazade*

When I was invited to Venice I reveled in the opportunity, over a three-week period, to walk the city, its squares and alleys, to move upon its canals and waterways, to and from the Ghetto and as far as the outlying islands. I have emerged from this winter encounter with an understanding that the Ghetto is an integral part of Venice, woven into its very fabric, its history and its people. The Ghetto cannot be understood if viewed in isolation from the city, and the city cannot be fully understood in isolation from the Ghetto. Its history is a reminder of the injustice and tragedy of human prejudice, yet also a wonderful instance of triumph over adversity. Limited though they were, the residents of the Ghetto took their chances. They created a mini-civilisation, a city within a city, invested it with its own myths, its subtle glories. The Ghetto evolved into a miniature Jerusalem, a way stop for scholars and pilgrims, with five synagogues, one each for the German, Italian, Spanish, French and Levantine communities that settled here, each community with its history of dispossession, its journey in search of a new way to scrape a living. They made of the Ghetto a centre of culture, complete with literary salons, an academy of music, a theatre, book shops, renowned printing works; and a place of commerce with inns for merchants and travellers, banks and tailor's workshops. Venetians were drawn to the district as soon as the gates were unlocked at dawn. In time the boundary between ghetto and city became more fluid. Indeed, Venice at its best is a great cosmopolitan city that has

absorbed the influences of many cultures. It is the creation, initially, of refugees who seized their chance to construct a city of great beauty and grandeur out of swamplands. Yet the challenge remains, both in Venice, as it does throughout contemporary Europe, for its people to remain open, rather than turned inwards, and to remain alert to the prejudices that create ghettos of the mind, as well as ghettos isolated within enclosed walls.