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de Waal, Edmund: A library of exile

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A library of exile: Edmund de Waal on Venice's Jewish Ghetto

In 1516, Venice's Jewish population was forced into one small area of the city. Now the writer and artist has created artworks expressing a history of displacement and loss



Place of voices ... Psalm's library installation in the Ateneo Veneto. Photograph: Edmund de Waal, courtesy the artist

Edmund de Waal

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My day begins in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo. It is early morning and I am nursing a cup of coffee and the first of my bag of almond *dolci ebraici veneziani*, still warm from the bakery. They are rather too good, a hardness that gives way to almond crumbs. It is quiet but I can just make out the sound of the water from the fountain as the children clatter on

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their way to school and the metal shutters go up across the canal.

This Venetian square is a very special place. There is no church, there are no public buildings, there are no grand thresholds with runs of stairs; everything seems held back, contained. You notice that there are five taller arched windows in one wall, that you can just see a modest domed skylight that indicates the apse of a synagogue. You notice the stone embedded in the wall has a Hebrew inscription from Psalm 32: “Many are the sorrows of the wicked, but he who trusts in the Lord, loving kindness shall surround him.” The tablet high up on the wall commemorates the deportations of 1943. This is the ghetto.

I have been invited here, but I’m not sure what I can bring. Venice in its Biennale months is cacophonous with galleries, parties and critics, the art world showing off to itself. It is also alive with extraordinary artists.



Campo Ghetto Nuovo from above. Photograph: De Agostini/Getty Images

This place and that world feel a dangerous conjunction. I’m an artist who writes. Much of my work is around the strange contingency of memory: trying to bring particular histories of loss and exile into renewed life. I’ve worked on projects in Berlin and Vienna but this feels as if there is even more at stake. Being in this place, returning repeatedly, is becoming another obsession. Trying to navigate the history of the ghetto is complicated. Some facts are undisputed: it was decreed in 1516 that all the Jews of Venice were to leave their homes and live “united” in the square of houses near San Girolamo in the Cannaregio area of the city. There were to be two gates, opened in the morning at the sound of the bell of San Marco and closed in the evening: the Christian guards were to be paid for by the Jews. New walls were to be built and the canals around this new area were to be patrolled by boats. All Jews who moved to Venice from this moment were required to live here, and all the Christian families living in this area were to leave immediately. New Jewish tenants were to pay rent at a rate a third higher. It was to be a place of safety - Venetians were to be safe from the contamination of the Jews. By extension, Jews were to be safe from the pogroms which had periodically swept through cities.

Everything else is contended: five centuries of debate about meaning and symbolism, about containment, a powerfully demarcated place of enforced separation, of the

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Edmund de Waal in Venice. Photograph: Fulvio Orsenigo

guarding of gates, blocking-up of windows, prohibitions and demands. As the Jewish population increased, the housing became denser: houses were subdivided, then divided again, with ceilings in new buildings dramatically lowered, so that a cross-section of the houses looks like an architectural impossibility. The overcrowding was notorious and the buildings were badly constructed, crumbling, dilapidated. It is a place at the very margins of the city: when you look at the great bird's-eye Renaissance maps of Venice, the ghetto is barely there, tilting off the city into the lagoon. Even the derivation of its name is contentious - possibly from *getto*, a place where the slag from the neighbouring copper foundry were thrown. The ghetto begins as a place for smelting work, and so, by extension, a place of exchange and transformation.

This place is embedded in metaphor. It is on the edge of the world, it is a place of concentration, a place of powerlessness.

There is another history, other metaphors. Sitting here I think of the great sweep of languages of this place, the mingling of high and low argot and slang, of the dialects and cultures of the German, Flemish, Persian, Ottoman, Spanish and Portuguese Jews alongside Italians, an almost unimaginable array of clothing, food and music. It was a place of constant translation, a testing ground for comprehension and nuance. It was noisy with learning, education, debate, poetry and music, liturgy and exegesis, with Hebrew as the only common denominator. I think of the great 17th-century Rabbi Leon da Modena, who wrote in his autobiography that he had practised 26 professions in his life, from teacher to cantor to judge, to composing poetry for gravestones, translating, printing and arranging marriages.

Everything is plural here, one history reaching out to another, a palimpsest of voices. And this is where this project finds its core. I thought of how the psalms work as songs of exile from the city, the ever-present absence of Jerusalem. Of how much the psalms work as songs that move between the singular and the plural, the solitary voice and the tribal, anger and despair, lament and joy. And how the psalms are cornerstones of all three Abrahamic traditions.

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Tehillim 2019 ... the call-and-response of porcelain, marble and gold. Photograph: Mike Bruce/Edmund de Waal, courtesy the artist

Psalm is a series of works installed in the beautiful spaces next to the Schola Canton on the top floors of the Jewish Museum in the corner of the Ghetto Nuovo. According to Talmudic tradition, places of prayer should be high up, should “rise over the city”: everything is about the journey upwards, about slowing down. It is firmly not an exhibition; works are placed above you on the turn of the stairs or on the threshold of the synagogue where the long benches allow you to sit. This installation, *Tehillim* - the Hebrew word for psalm - consists of 11 vitrines, each one holding a thin sheet of gilded porcelain of almost unimaginable fragility and a piece of translucent white marble. It is a call-and-response between materials. It is made to catch the reflected light from within the dense and dark goldenness of the synagogue itself.

Higher up is a table I’ve made for the Jewish poet Sarra Copia Sullam, who lived and wrote here in the ghetto in the 17th century and whose work is being wonderfully brought back to life - most recently in a book of responses by Meena Alexander, Rita Dove and Esther Schor. I’ve made Sullam her own table into which I’ve inscribed the words of Psalm 137, By the Rivers of Babylon, on to and into porcelain slip, brushed over gold leaf. Another palimpsest.



Memory ... the Sukkan. Photograph: Courtesy the Jewish Museum of Venice

Above this room is the *sukkan*. Sukkot, the Feast of the Tabernacles, is the festival that commemorates the 40 years of wandering in the desert. It is celebrated by taking shelter and eating meals in a *sukkan*, or temporary structure, often set up in a garden. This was originally open to the air, but retains its metal structure into which fruit and foliage could be woven as decorations. This is a place high up, a memory of a city. I’ve made an installation of porcelain vessels and leaning gold, the vessels held in a kind of sanctuary of towers. I was given Rilke’s story of an elderly man in the Venice ghetto and

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his yearning to move higher and higher: “Finally, they were living at such a height that when they stepped out of the narrow confines of their apartment on to the flat roof, their heads already reached a level where a new county began, of whose customs the old man spoke in dark words, as though half caught up in the raptures of a psalm.”

And, finally, I have made a library. During the Biennale it will be housed in the Ateneo, the beautiful 16th-century building near the Fenice opera house which has acted as a meeting place for two centuries. I’m taking over the Aula Magna room on the ground floor.

Working here in Venice I realised that this whole project was a reflection on the power of translation. That the ghetto was a place of voices, of language in flux and that this was, in itself, a manifestation of Venice as the powerhouse of printing in Renaissance Europe. This was the city where Daniel Bomberg, a Christian printer from Antwerp, created the great edition of the Babylonian Talmud in 1520-23. He worked with Jewish scholars and copyists to make books that hold the Hebrew text, an Aramaic translation and commentary within a single page. These beautiful books were ordered by distant Jewish communities from Aleppo to Frankfurt.

So this is a new library of exile, a place that contains 2,000 books written by those who have been forced to leave their own country, or exiled within it. This is a history from Ovid and Tacitus, through Dante to Voltaire and Victor Hugo. It is the history of the 20th century, the century of Walter Benjamin, Thomas Mann and Joseph Roth, of Osip Mandelstam and Marina Tsvetaeva. It is dissidents. It is poets and novelists forced from their homes, Ai Qing in China and Czeslaw Milosz in Poland, Ismael Kadare in Albania. I think of the recent decades of extraordinary writers from Lebanon and Syria, the literature of exile of Iran, Palestine, Tunisia and Turkey.

The external wall of the library is covered in porcelain, painted in liquid form over sheets of gold on which I have written a new text, a listing of the lost and erased libraries of the world, from Nineveh and Alexandria to the recent destruction of Timbuktu, Aleppo and Mosul. Inside this library is a quartet of new vitrines whose structure echoes Bomberg’s great Talmudic page.

This new library will be open for all readers from early May. There are books in 32 languages. There will be readings and conversations about literature, about history and translation, a new dance work, storytelling for children, and music. It will celebrate the idea that all languages are diasporic, that we need other people’s words, self-definitions and re-definitions in translation.

It honours the words of André Aciman, himself an exile from Alexandria, that he understands himself “not as a person from a place, but as a person from a place across from that place. You are - and always are - from somewhere else.”

Psalm is in the Jewish Ghetto, Venice, 8 May-29 September. More information at edmunddewaal.com and psalmvenice.org.