

The European Tribe



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VINTAGE BOOKS

A Division of Random House, Inc.

New York

In the ghetto

. . . the Jew must see that he is part of the history of Europe, and will always be so considered by the descendant of the slave. Always, that is, unless he himself is willing to prove that this judgement is inadequate and unjust.

James Baldwin, from an essay entitled, 'Negroes are anti-Semitic because they're anti-white', 1969

The Venetian ghetto was the original ghetto, the model for all others in the world – places characterized by deprivation and persecution. Legally created in 1516, it further isolated the Jews who had first come to Venice in 1373 to avoid mainland persecution. It was windowless on its outside to cut it off from the rest of the city. Jews were forced to wear a special hat, they were not allowed to move in and out of the ghetto after dark, and its iron gates were guarded by Christians. Today it is still a Jewish district, with its synagogue, Jewish bakery and kosher shops, and a small Jewish museum. As I wandered past the tall buildings that threw shadows everywhere, with open shutters and washing hanging out, the tiny streets were empty until I came to a large square. It was speckled with benches and a clump of young trees. An old man sat alone and concentrated hard, as though determined to wrestle on for a few more years. In the distance two boys kicked a tennis ball back and forth. I watched them for a while, then walked across to a memorial plaque inscribed in three languages (French, English and Italian) and dedicated to the two groups of Venetian Jews taken in 1943 and 1944 to die in the concentration camps of the Holocaust.

One of the aspects of black America that I have never been

able to comprehend fully, is the virulent anti-Semitism that seems to permeate much black thought. While still a student, I remember being surprised by Harold Cruse's words: 'The problem here is that the American Jew has a very thin skin, and believes that he is preternaturally free of all sin in his relationship with other peoples.' I was horrified by Louis Farrakhan's statement that the Jews faced 'God's ovens' if they continued to oppose him. But when I look again at Cruse's statement the word 'American' jumps out at me. Surely the Jew has not had to endure in America the persecution that has blighted 2000 years of his history in Europe? In fact, the American Jewish group has the highest per capita income ratio of any group in the United States – they have power. That an American black might respond with contempt to an American Jew who told him, 'I know what it means to be persecuted; I am a Jew', is easily understandable, particularly so when the tradition that is responsible for the European oppression of the Jew is a Judaeo-Christian one, the same one that continues to oppress black Americans. In Harlem, and most inner city areas of America, generation after generation of Jews have owned the shops, sold their goods to blacks, then locked up and left at the end of the day for more salubrious suburbs. I suppose what black Americans may be saying is, 'For 2000 years you might have been Europe's niggers, but now you're in America don't pretend you're not pleased to have discovered real ones. After all, one of your guys, Al Jolson by name, used to black up, mimic us offensively, and rake in millions. We never saw any of the cash.' Back in Europe things are not quite so straightforward.

For those on the right (and some in the centre and on the left too) the Jew is still Europe's nigger. I was brought up in a Europe that still shudders with guilt at mention of the Holocaust. Hundreds of books have been published, many films made, television programmes produced, thousands of articles written. The Nazi persecution of the Jews is taught at school, debated in colleges, and is a part of a European

education. As a child, in what seemed to me a hostile country, the Jews were the only minority group discussed with reference to exploitation and racialism, and for that reason, I naturally identified with them. At that time, I was staunchly indignant about everything from the Holocaust to the Soviet persecution of Jewry. The bloody excesses of colonialism, the pillage and rape of modern Africa, the transportation of 11 million black people to the Americas, and their subsequent bondage were not on the curriculum, and certainly not on the television screen. As a result I vicariously channelled a part of my hurt and frustration through the Jewish experience. Today, however, I find myself in agreement with the critic George Steiner in feeling that some of the policies of modern-day Israel, particularly with relation to South Africa, bring 'shame on the Jewish people'. But, as a black man living in Europe, I always remember the words of Frantz Fanon, who wrote in 1952 that, 'It was my philosophy professor, a native of the Antilles, who recalled the fact to me one day: "Whenever you hear anyone abuse the Jews, pay attention, because he is talking about you."' And I always pay attention. Perhaps this explains why I have never been able to admire *The Merchant of Venice*. Even allowing for the historical times in which the play was first produced – when it was highly unlikely that the average Elizabethan knew what a Jew looked like, his prejudice being more ignorance than hostility – there is no denying that the play is anti-Semitic in its assumptions. For the present-day audience this is all the more disturbing given the evidence of recent European history.

The Venice in which play is set was the hub of the world's business empire. It existed simply to make a profit from financial deals. Buying goods cheaply and selling them at a higher price, rather than producing them. Jews were tolerated as usurers, needed and patronized by society but shamefully castigated as outcasts in a manner similar to that in which modern society sneers at, and thereby attempts to reduce, the prostitute. Antonio, the hero of the play, spits on

Shylock's coat, then spits in his beard, and kicks him like a dog. Shylock has always been my hero. He makes it uncompromisingly clear that he wants nothing to do with Christians beyond his business. 'I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you.' He is advocating separatism and, as many black Americans will testify, there is a time when such a debate is necessary. Shylock further refuses to charge interest on his loan to Antonio, who is absolutely sure that his ships will arrive in time to repay the debt. Shylock is doing the man a favour, while showing him where the power lies. And finally, in the trial scene, amid all the high-flown self-righteousness about 'the quality of mercy', is it not Shylock who, in Othello's city where blackness is equitable with devil-worship, points out to the Christian Venetians that,

*You have among you many a purchas'd slave
Which, like your asses and your dogs and mules,
You use in abject and in slavish parts.*

In her book, *Out of Africa*, Karen Blixen describes how she 'explained' *The Merchant of Venice* to one of her houseboys, Farah, because 'Farah, like all people of African blood, liked to hear a story told . . .' But to Blixen's dismay Farah's sympathy was with Shylock. The Jew's insistence in going ahead and taking his pound of flesh, the moment in the play when we are theoretically supposed to lose our sympathy with Shylock, produced no such response in Farah. ' "Look, Memsahib," he said, "he could have taken small bits, very small. He could have done that man a lot of harm, even a long time before he had got that one pound of his flesh." ' Blixen was outraged, but Farah continued to think it 'a great pity' that Shylock gave up his pound of flesh. I think that most black Americans, despite anti-Semitic statements, would have some understanding of Farah's position, and by extension, that of Shylock.