

*The Stories and
Recollections of
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Trieste's Ghetto in 1860

TOWARD 1860, the dirty, exotic ghetto of Trieste was still in full flower. Though its Jews, both native born and immigrant, had for half a century been equal to other citizens and exempt from special taxes and humiliating badges, many had not overcome their innate antipathy to mingling their daily lives with the feared (and therefore hated) "goyim." This aversion, which wasn't religious, and which baptism didn't vitiate, was rooted in millenia of persecution and segregation, and kept even those families wealthy enough to live in new houses on new streets within the enclave where their parents and grandparents had been, and still were, selling secondhand items from the picturesque and disorganized stores in which their power was rooted. Newly built houses, though sound investments for widows and those fearful of riskier ventures, were, it is true, the dream of many, but they were bought for resale, their new owners preferring to go on living in their beloved ghetto, so full of warmth and memories.

Tradition and a sort of mental inertia had transformed this attitude into a form of obsession, a weight more easily borne than set aside. It became easy for Jews contemplating the world beyond their own to imagine the existence of persecutions which had ceased decades earlier and which, in fact, had never existed in that great Austrian mercantile port, whose population had too much of a southern character for the northern affliction of anti-Semitism to take root. And so it was that hardly were the ghetto doors open when upper-class Jews, those free of prejudice and fear, were able—either because of the power of their accumulated wealth or because of their historical experiences as a people who perhaps are more idealistic in business and businesslike in idealism—to leap directly into the most lucrative and influential positions in the administration of banks and of insurance and shipping companies.

It was a time when Trieste's Jewish community was growing with the daily arrival of Jews who, attracted by the flourishing and prosperous trade, were visibly changing the old fishing town into an enormous and tumultuous marketplace. Many who disembarked at the San Carlo wharf wearing red fezzes and torn clothes, with nothing more to their name than perhaps a letter commending them to the rabbi or some old philanthropist, turned up after a few years, sometimes after just a few months, in formal attire, including top hat, at services at one of the three synagogues, the Italian, German, or Spanish, two of which served the

devout within the ghetto itself, while the third was close by in the Via del Monte.

The lower classes, people not venturesome enough to cut loose from petty dealings, went on doing business in the shanties of the piazzetta of the Jewish synagogue, or on the ground floor of the dank houses and brothels in the old city. Some of these stores, the size of cells, which produced colossal incomes, became legendary to the younger generation. Here, more than anyplace else, barterers, buyers and sellers of used clothing and furniture, battled out their disagreements in a business that has all but disappeared today. Customers were for the most part Slavs from the surrounding countryside or sailors from Illyria and Dalmatia, conscripts who needed a suitcase into which to put their few wretched belongings, or seamen who wanted to trade seedy clothing and worn-out shoes for clothes a trifle less seedy and shoes not quite so down at the heels. Larceny, swindles, and usury neither more frequent here nor more serious than anywhere else but more flagrant, more—to use a typically inappropriate term—“out in the open”—were practiced by all dealers, and to a greater extent by females, with absolutely sublime skill and uncanny insight into their victims' physical and psychological makeup. Every technique, whether for getting customers into their shops or for defeating competing dealers, was effective. The streets were narrow, the passageways crowded, and the open stores faced each other like enemy knights in the days when battles were won or lost in hand-to-hand combat. Passersby suspected of being potential purchasers were assaulted with the most brazen flattery, the kind streetwalkers used at night. If a young man came by, the female storekeeper would lure him with words praising his manliness, words that slipped easily from an indifferent enthusiasm; and she let him know that she herself was going to help him don the new pair of indestructible trousers which, because of her weakness for such a handsome blond, she was letting him have for almost nothing. But that “almost” was sometimes the total daily earnings of a family with eight children to feed, so that no one, once ensnared, ever escaped the trap, whether an hour or a minute later, without leaving behind some money. If instead of a young man a family man turned up, the brat scampering behind him was petted and proclaimed the best-looking child in town, with everyone wishing out loud to have one just like it; language, dialect, smiles changed according to the age, sex, and nationality of the customer. For more serious cases,

when after long discussions a deal threatened to founder, hidden behind the counter was a last resort—a bottle of brandy and one or two dirty glasses. The dealers, husband and wife or mother and daughter, talked to each other during negotiations in a mawkish Triestine jargon interspersed with Jewish words, totally incomprehensible to outsiders. Still more frenzied was the competition between dealers, who often battled each other to the point of physical violence; and it wasn't at all unusual for the victor in a struggle with two or more competitors to be the one with the least flabby arm muscles and thus the greatest ability to drag the flattered, distracted, and unaccustomed-to-being-fought-over "goy" into his store. At this, an unsuccessful contender standing in the doorway of his shop would vent his fury, howling out his rival's business secrets and domestic depravities. Or, suddenly switching to complaints, he'd catalogue his own miseries and the number of mouths he had to feed with a primitive logic and flashes of eloquence worthy of Jeremiah. It was, in short, a battle for survival, as furious and fascinating as those one watches between insects of the field or shore.

But the owners of already established shops, those with steady customers, took pleasure in fulfilling their religious obligation to keep them shut on Saturdays, the Lord's day, when until sunset Jews are prohibited from any and all work, even tearing off a leaf or lighting a match. I myself have heard old people tell with pride and emotion how the crowds thronged the doorways of these stores Saturday nights, waiting for hours for the owner or his wife to open up, because, the speakers would add, those stores were blessed by God. They were a real promised land.