Prolegomenon

Dear Mr. L,

In honor of 500 years of Jewish life in Venice, and as part of our celebration of this special anniversary, the Committee on the Arts of the Jewish Venice Quincentenary is awarding residency fellowships in Venice, commencing next June 1, to artists in various disciplines.

Since our Committee is familiar with your work, we are pleased to offer you an appointment as a Venice Fellow. This one-month writing fellowship includes round trip air fare and a beautiful, large, furnished apartment in a palazzo near St. Mark’s Square.

For your part, in accepting, you agree to create a work inspired by the Jewish Quarter of Venice. If this appointment interests you, please write to the undersigned.

Once you have a project in mind, please send us your brief outline no later than one month prior to arriving. Be assured that as an artist you have complete freedom of expression, even to the point of changing your subject, should you so wish. The only immutable part is Jewish Venice as a subject or as background to your writing.

Other people in the arts have also been invited, but you are among the handful of writers chosen. We hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,
Samuele Ottolenghi
For la Comunità Ebraica di Venezia

PS Once you come, please do not be surprised at not finding me in Venice. I have to be in London during June, but I hope we can meet another time.
Dear Signor Ottolenghi,

I am honored by your invitation to become a Venice Fellow, which I accept gladly. I thank you for considering me and for giving me this appointment. Venice is one of my favorite cities and, as you may know, it is the setting of one of my novels. (Perhaps you or another member of your committee read Partita in Venice, and this may have prompted your invitation.)

As you may know, I teach Creative Writing and World Literature at Sage University and I am free during the months of June-August, so your proposed date is excellent timing.

In any case, even before I received your kind invitation, I had been thinking — for a forthcoming work of fiction — of choosing a noted Venetian Jew and telling his story.

As soon as I have something more definite I will write to you. Of course it will deal with Jewish Venice, but whether it will be a novel, novella, or long short story I do not know and probably will not know until I start writing.

I am sorry I won’t be able to see you, Signor Ottolenghi, for I am familiar with your family name. Your distinguished countryman, Primo Levi (who, alas, ended his life before getting the Nobel Prize he deserved), married an Ottolenghi, no doubt a member of your family, and I know that the Ottolenghis are one of the old and renowned Jewish families in Italy.

Again I thank you for your letter. I look forward to spending some time in your beautiful, enchanting city.

Sincerely yours,

CL
Dear Signor Ottolenghi,

In the intervening weeks since I responded to your kind invitation, my head has been buzzing with the idea of writing about Jewish Venice and a subject has slowly been developing.

Here is my plan, subject of course to possible changes, as your letter of invitation indicated.

I was thinking about the fascinating late 16th century Leone da Modena, who was born in Venice, spent time there as rabbi, and is buried in the Jewish cemetery in the Lido, along with other luminaries.

As his unique autobiography tells us, he was a man of many professions, rabbi, author, musician, writer of comedies, even gambler. Indeed, his life seems to call for fictional treatment, especially since he is an enigmatic and occasionally controversial figure.

A story about this riveting Venetian Jew almost writes itself.

I want to add that there cannot be a better place for a writing fellowship than Venice. If there is magic in this world, magic that does not disappear with the blink of an eye, it is this city, with its fabled aura of quiet, its canals, gondolas, palazzi, Piazza San Marco, and the historic Ghetto with its seven synagogues which, miraculously, survived the German occupation.

And, so then, soon I will be in Venice, where the project will unfold.

With best wishes,

CL
I look up over the Venice Ghetto roofs and see — once, and maybe never again — in the azure sky, the cloudless Adriatic blue silk sky, a lone large gray bird with white fuzz above its tiny sad eyes, casually paddling its wings, backwards, as if it were an experimental flying machine created by Leonardo da Vinci, lazily paddling, and gazing at the airspace it had just traversed.
1 Discovery near the Synagogue

That slanted finger-length indentation I had seen on a stone doorpost in the famous Ghetto of Venice began it all.

It was a place for a mezuzah on the right side of a hewn stone doorpost, a kind of fossil of a mezuzah, a space that showed a once-upon-a-time mezuzah. A space that cried out: the parchment with the prayer, Hear O Israel, is no longer here. Where is my mezuzah?

But this may be a bit romanticized, heightened for maximum effect, for the dream of it.

Here’s the story:

One day I was strolling on a side street in the Venice Ghetto. Remarkably, tourists just walk through the portal at the entrance to the Ghetto, marvel at the sign to the right of the entrance: Porto del Getto (yes, written there without an “h”) and then continue on to Piazza San Marco. Curiosity doesn’t pull them, as it does me. Wherever a little calle, I’m drawn, pulled, can’t resist, as if I, or it, were a magnet.

That calle was near the main synagogue, which impressed me with its history, continuity and sanctity. As I walked on that little side street, eyes wide open, I noticed a house with that indentation. A few years back I had discovered something similar in two small houses in Girona, Spain (the home town of Nachmanides, the renowned thirteenth century Torah commentator and communal leader), just north of Barcelona. This indicated that a Jewish family had lived there before 1401, after which year Jews were no longer permitted to live in the environs of Barcelona. That the
house had stood, unchanged, for more than six hundred years is another miracle.

At the door of that house in Venice, in that little calle near the main synagogue, I raised my fist to knock, then held back, thinking: What impertinence, intruding on a stranger’s privacy just to satisfy my interest in Jewish matters. And then I thought: If I don’t knock I may miss a fascinating story and I may regret my politesse. As these thoughts were chasing each other like melodies in a fugue I knocked before I had a chance to change my mind.

I waited a minute, got no response, and had already turned to leave, when the door opened. I saw before me a short, slightly built man wearing an old-fashioned cap, a white, open collar short-sleeved shirt and beige slacks. He had a little beard and appeared to be in his mid-thirties. Mid-thirties, yes, but still there was something old about him — the strands of white in his beard, the little wrinkles at the sides of his brown eyes, and his mottled facial skin. With his head covered and his beard he appeared to be an observant Jew.

I greeted him with Shalom and a few words in Italian. Actually, he didn’t have to be Jewish. Many men have beards and wear a cap. And just because he lived in a house that had a centuries-old indentation of a mezuzah, why should I assume he was a Jew?

But he responded amicably with a Hebrew, “Shalom u-vera-kha,” said a few words in Italian, then asked if I understood English. I said, Yes. As soon as he began to speak I heard a foreign lilt to his words, the music of Spanish in his English words.

I apologized for disturbing him and told him I was intrigued by that mezuzah space on his doorpost, for I had seen something
similar in Spain.

“Girona, no doubt, where Nachmanides lived. I saw that there too.”

His knowing this rather arcane fact surprised me. “That’s exactly where I saw it,” I told him. “And what a thrill it was walking on the same street on which this great man had walked.

And that little angled finger-size depression in the stone where a mezuzah had once been touched me. Said many silent words to me. And I am moved now too.”

“Come in, come in,” he said. “I see I have met a simpatico man.” Then he stretched out his hand, shook mine warmly, and said, “My name is Mo.”

I introduced myself and wondered how strange it was that this European had a typical American Jewish name from the 1920’s — Mo.

As if reading my thought, he said, “As you just heard, my name is pronounced with a short European ‘o’, and not long like the American word for ‘so’ or ‘go’.”

Probably short for Moshe, I mused. But since he didn’t offer to explain I didn’t ask further. Then I thought: Mo is also the first syllable of Modena, the Venetian rabbi I wanted to write about. What an interesting confluence.

“Mo. Modena,” I couldn’t help exclaiming.

“No, no,” he said. “No connection. But what makes you say that?”

“Well, I’m planning to write some kind of narrative about this famous man who was born here, served as rabbi here, and died here.”

“Leone da Modena? The gambling rabbi, huh? Matchmaker, parodist, ghost writer? Probably every facet of his life makes for
good fiction.”

“Imagine! A rabbi, a card player. Strange combination. So you know Modena?”

Fact is, I was jealous. I thought no one knew about him. I didn’t want anyone else to know about him. Somehow I wanted to have Modena all to myself.

“Leone da Modena? Of course I know him.”

“What do you mean you know him? He lived some four hundred years ago.”

Mo laughed. It was a laugh from his mouth, not his eyes.

“I mean, in a manner of speaking. I know his fascinating autobiography. When you read a well-written autobiography you get to know a man. I tell you, anyone acquainted with the development of Hebrew literature should know him. So you’re a writer? Very impressive.”

“Imagine!” I wanted to tell Mo something he probably didn’t know. “At two-and-a-half he chanted the Haftora in the synagogue.”

“He mentions this too in his autobiography, but go believe it. It’s probably all self praise. There he also claims that at age three he read and explained Torah verses to a group of people. You can’t believe anyone with anything. Not with fiction, not with non-fiction.”

“Then what can you believe?”

“Poetry.”

For a moment we looked at each other. Then Mo said:

“But you’ve chosen an ideal, certainly a fascinating, subject. Good luck with it.”

I made a slight obeisance with my head that signaled thanks.
I regarded Mo closely. Did he notice my magnifying-glass eyes scanning his thin face, which was pinched just below both cheeks? I now saw that the beard served as a mask to hide pockmarks and scattered whitish discolorations, as if lentil-sized areas of his face had been bleached. Other tiny blemishes marked his forehead, cheeks and chin; perhaps he also had had papules once that were smoothed away by medication or a surgeon’s scalpel. And this is why he no doubt had a little beard — to distract the eye.

During a moment’s silence I looked around and saw there was little furniture in the room — an easy chair, a small writing desk, an inkwell and a quill — a quill? Now that’s unusual, perhaps for decoration — some sheets of paper filled with hand-written lines, and a waist-high bookcase. Then Mo lifted his chin — a polite way of saying, What is it you wish? Or, why did you stop by here besides asking about the mezuza?

But I anticipated his gesture and said:

“Are you a member of the community here, Mo?”

“Not really. I’m here on a visit. And since it’s a temporary residence, I’m sure you know that putting the tiny parchment with the Sh’ma Yisrael in the mezuza is not obligatory.”

I waited for him to continue. But he did not tell me what he was doing in Venice. Looking at his cap, I asked:

“Did you choose to live near the synagogue because of the short walk to services?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that,” he said, seemingly with forced patience, as indicated not by the tone of voice but by a slight narrowing of the eyes and a twick of the lips. The question, Are you secular? bubbled at the edge of my tongue but I did not articulate it. I admit, when I replayed my questions objectively in my mind,
I saw that they could be annoying and a touch obstreperous.

“Yes, a traditional Jew goes to services,” Mo said with a little smile, evidently to mitigate the effect of his earlier remark. “But I’m a loner. Then you might ask me, So why are you here? The answer is that I enjoy the ambience of this place, especially the synagogue’s history, its continuity, its sanctity.”

Hearing the very three words that had earlier gone through my mind, chills ran over me. I was about to tell him this but felt it sounded odd. How could those three words, and in the same order too, that I had said to myself be uttered so precisely by this man standing before me? Had he read my mind, or are such thoughts common to people of similar feelings and sensitivities?

His attitude towards prayer and services also struck me as strange. However, I didn’t want to provoke a person I had just met. Even though I don’t go regularly to the synagogue, it seemed to me that only when Jews gather in shul does sanctity of place become palpable. Otherwise, it’s just a building with history and continuity. But Mo, aside from one testy remark, seemed like a fine man. I did not want to introduce tension into the delicate amity that had been created the first few minutes of our encounter.

But then he concluded with a poetic touch:

“Sometimes I go into the synagogue when no one is there and then I feel all three words on the palms of my hands.”

Mo spread his hands as if he were going to show me the words on his palms.

A moment later, it dawned on me there’s another reason he doesn’t go to services. Why didn’t I think of that right away? But now it was so obvious. Things you forget and suddenly remember always play out as obvious. Mo didn’t want people staring at him in shul. He was probably embarrassed by the little blotches on his