

# Italian ghetto stories: Toward a transnational literary history

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/foi](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/foi)**Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski**

Romance Studies, Duke University, Durham, NC, USA

**Abstract**

This article examines Italian ghetto stories, which are distinguished by confusions of time, continuities, tourism, reflections on collective identities, and movements in and out, in order to outline one potential literary history. In contrast to German-language and Anglophone literary ghettos, Italian ones are generally absent as a critical category from literary debates, though they appear in works by Leon Modena, Israel Zangwill, Rainer Maria Rilke, Umberto Saba, Giorgio Bassani, Elsa Morante, Caryl Phillips, and Igiaba Scego, among others. A transnational approach can bring together works that have not been considered collectively because of disciplinary formations. Italian ghetto fictions expose the disheartening continuities of prejudice and, relatedly, have generally not been considered together because of restrictive ideas about the nation as an organizing principle.

**Keywords**

antisemitism, Ghattogeschichte, tourism, Bassani, Scego, Zangwill, Jewish literature, Rilke, Saba

**Introduction**

In 1516 Christian Venetians restricted Jews to one islet, referred to as the “ghetto”. The term’s etymology has been debated, with explanations that it relates to a Hebrew word for divorce (*Get*), Yiddish for enclosed (*gehektes*), Latin *judaica*, the Italian *borghetto* (originally from the German), and the Venetian foundry (*geto/getto/ghéto*), among others (see Roth, 1934). While it is now generally agreed that it referenced the foundry where the first ghetto was established, these earlier theories indicate the multilingualism of Italian ghettos. This term, originally labelling an area of Venice which was then

**Corresponding author:**

Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski, Romance Studies, Duke University, Languages Building, Durham, NC 27708-0187, USA.

Email: [sez6@duke.edu](mailto:sez6@duke.edu)

transferred from Italian to multiple languages, describes spaces where marginalized people, Jewish and also later others, lived in substantial numbers.<sup>1</sup> The Nazis used the term to designate the areas, most famously in Warsaw and Łódź, where they compelled Jews to dwell before deportation. In English, “ghetto” is now most commonly understood as a description of racially segregated, poor urban spaces, especially African-American ones. The stories around and histories of the word “ghetto” show Italy’s transnationalism in terms of both the country’s development and its influence.

In German “Ghettogesichte,” ghetto stories, identifies a prominent subgenre focused on German-Jewish life in Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> In English, “Ghetto writers” indicates authors describing poorer, stigmatized urban spaces in Europe and America (Miller, 1972; Simpson, 2012), moving from a focus on Jewish, Irish, and Italian spaces to predominantly Black communities. Italian ghettos are meanwhile generally absent as a category from literary discussions, though they appear in works by Leon Modena, Israel Zangwill, Rainer Maria Rilke, Elsa Morante, Caryl Phillips, and Igiaba Scego, among others. The explanations for why Italian ghetto fiction did not develop into a subgenre are multiple: the long history of Italian ghettos—with literary imaginaries crossing a range of periods; the marked differences between diverse Italian ghettos (for instance Rome’s as opposed to Venice’s or Ferrara’s); the fact that Jewish-Italian identities were minimized in literary studies; and the multilingualism of the representations.<sup>3</sup> These points foreground Italy’s diversity and motivate a transnational inquiry. This article examines Italian ghetto stories written in multiple languages to investigate what a transnational literary history could look like and how a transnational approach can bring together works that have not been considered collectively.

If one element of transnational studies highlights how globalism shifts Italy’s cultural position, another draws attention to how past works were configured in Italian Studies and what it means to reconsider them in terms of *Transnational Italian Studies*. Loredana Polezzi (2020: 38) shows that a transnational perspective calls ‘into question the notion of national language and its association with national culture.’ This is true in terms of the great linguistic diversity within Italy and works from Italians outside the peninsula, but also the significance of works about Italy that contribute to how it is conceived and imagined. Italian literature plays an especially notable role in the country’s self-consciousness; not only Dante, but also Shakespeare, has shaped how Italy and Italians are understood. Various literary traditions have helped determine Italian culture and perceptions of it, from Vergil’s *Aeneid* (19 BCE), whose mythologies are foundational for the idea of Italy, to EM Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908), which contributes to a long, ongoing tradition of Italy as a site of passion and personal development.

While Grand-Tour Italy, including the literature it inspired, and Italian literature (as traditionally formulated), used to be considered distinct, scholars such as Fiore (2017, 2020) and Hom (2015, 2019) illustrate the limitations in keeping separate tourism, migration, and *italianità*. Emma Bond (2022: 109) argues that ‘the reception and reproduction of Italianicity worldwide demands critical attention in relation to multiple modes of cultural production and consumption across the globe.’ Transnational Italian Studies underscores how scholars inform what being “Italian” includes. Bringing together stories that

are not just in Italian, this transnational examination makes Italian ghetto fiction visible as a potential subgenre and reveals how a transnational approach can challenge nation-based literary histories, which at times also limit who is considered central to the idea of a nation. Italian ghetto fictions highlight the important and continuous, though sometimes overlooked, cultural presence of Jewish Italians. These literary representations of Jewish Italians in turn show how 20th-century ghetto writing connects to a long history that tends to be ignored in other ghetto fiction discourses, partially because of the restricting force of the nation as an organizing principle for literary studies.

Described by an author neither Jewish nor Italian, the most famous Jewish Italian character, Shylock, ‘embodies the unnamed Ghetto’ (Shapiro, 2022: 116). Maps of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* locate Shylock in the original ghetto (Roe, 2011: 114). The 2016 Compagnia de’ Colombari performance of Shakespeare’s play in Venice’s ghetto led to more work on the topic and indicates the rich history of actual and symbolic interactions between concepts of Shylock and the ghetto.<sup>4</sup> Shylock’s symbolic power means his name reappears throughout stories of ghettos, including in the ghetto fiction of Eastern Europe, for instance in Karl Emil Franzos’s story *The Shylock of Barnow* (located in Galicia).<sup>5</sup>

Shylock’s afterlives show the importance of multilingual literature about Italian ghettos. Debates around Shylock and the historical realities he could represent increased in the nineteenth century as the term “ghetto” took greater hold outside of Italian. While Israel Zangwill proposed that Shylock was a Spanish Jew, who had escaped the inquisition, the historian Cecil Roth (1933: 150) corrected this reading, arguing he must be a German Jew, because they were the group allowed to lend money at the time. These debates indicate how interpretations of Shylock move between symbolic and historical contexts. The exchanges between Italian ghetto spaces and literary ones are multidirectional and complex, revealing the important interplay between cultural imaginaries and reality.

The writings of Leon Modena (1571–1648), the most famous actual Jewish Italian of his period, enrich a consideration of Shakespeare’s settings. Like in *The Merchant of Venice*, there are significant interactions between Jewish Venetians and those outside the ghetto in Leon Modena’s works. Leon Modena himself was an important intermediary between Jewish and Christian understandings in the Renaissance and wrote what is considered the first explanation of Jewish rites for non-Jews (*Historia de gli riti hebraici: Dove si hà breve e total relatione di tutta la vita, costumi, e riti & osservance de gl’Hebrei di questi tempi di Leon Modena Rabi Hebreo di Venetia*, 1637).<sup>6</sup> His autobiography is a crucial source for understanding the Venetian ghetto and was discussed in considerations of the ghetto’s potentially positive aspects, an issue of considerable debate.<sup>7</sup>

To better understand the contours of this undefined subgenre, Italian ghetto fiction, the next section addresses three Italian ghetto stories from the same period. As with Shakespeare and Leon Modena, these stories are in different languages and by authors with diverse backgrounds: born in Prague, Rainer Maria Rilke published *A Scene from the Venetian Ghetto* (Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig) in *Geschichten vom lieben Gott* (*Stories of God*, 1900); born in Trieste, Umberto Saba published *Il Ghetto di Trieste verso il 1860* in *La Voce* in 1912 (later republished with the title *Il Ghetto di*

*Trieste nel 1860*); born in London to Jewish Russian immigrants, Israel Zangwill published *Chad Gadya* in *Cosmopolis* in 1896. The thematic and stylistic qualities of these three short stories both draw on earlier representations and serve as the basis for the analysis in the second section, Italian Ghettos after the Shoah.

## Italian ghetto stories, 1895–1915

While in Italian the term “ghetto” originated as a physical location that then is represented, reformulated, and read in literature, in German and English it began largely as a literary concept, with stories by Leopold Kompert and Israel Zangwill. The ghettos of Kompert’s *Aus dem Ghetto* (1848) have been characterized as pre-modern, nostalgic spaces and contributed to German understandings of German-Jewish identities.<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Hess (2010: 78) showed that ‘Kompert’s tales actively help consign the ghetto to the past, making way for a world in which the ghetto lives on in literature – and in literature alone.’ In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the earliest quotations of the word that does not refer to Italian spaces is from Zangwill’s bestselling *Children of the Ghetto: A History of a Peculiar People* (1892), which *Harper’s Bazaar* (1898: 504) reviewed as having ‘opened up a new field in English literature.’<sup>9</sup> In Zangwill’s *Chad Gadya*, included in *Dreamers of the Ghetto* (1898), the protagonist returns home to Venice, from Vienna. His father now lives in a palazzo outside of the ghetto, where he had grown up. Listening to “Chad Gadya,” a Passover seder song, at his father’s home, he realizes that he can neither continue with his father’s traditions, nor has he found new meaning in his own life. He drowns himself in a canal.<sup>10</sup> Zangwill’s *Chad Gadya* has been analyzed as representing modernity and western Jewish identity, as well as playing a significant part in Zangwill’s developing sense of self (Baumgarten, 2015; Evangelista, 2021; Rochelson, 2015).

Rilke’s *Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig* focuses on two characters who live in the Venetian ghetto, Esther, who has a baby without being married, and her grandfather Melchisedech, who climbs to the highest point of the ghetto to see the ocean, and perhaps also God. This story has been considered in terms of Rilke’s own spiritual search (Reynolds, 2021), but has not been included in *Ghettogesichte* debates, for reasons that will be discussed at the end of this section. Saba’s *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860*, which reflects on Trieste’s ghetto, its shops, and its changes over time, is examined in terms of the port city’s cosmopolitanism and Saba’s mixed heritage (Calimani, 1998). While Rilke’s *Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig*, Saba’s *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860*, and Zangwill’s *Chad Gadya* have been analyzed separately in German, Italian, and English Studies, respectively, they also share notable qualities when they are considered collectively, instead of primarily reflective of their authors’ identities and nationalities. The interrelated elements I will discuss that appear in these three works are: confusion or collapse of time; continuity; tourism; reflections on a community’s identity versus an individual’s; and movements in and out.

While *Ghettogesichte* have been characterized as bringing Jewish traditions into German literature, narrating places that most German readers would not have visited, the descriptions of Italian ghettos often refer not only to locations that existed in the

16th century, but also to spaces that one can easily walk through today. Though there is great regional variety in Jewish life in Italy, including the duration of the ghettos from city to city, often these areas continued to be referred to as the “ghetto”, even after emancipation, and some Jews continue to live there. This contrasts with an emphasis on belonging to the past in many of the earlier German stories and also with stories of immigration in later ones, as well as with the temporary, death-filled ghettos created by Nazis. In part because Italian ghettos, as an idea and space, have existed for so long, narratives describing them frequently confuse or collapse time.

The speakers’ inside-outside views in Rilke’s, Saba’s, and Zangwill’s stories lead to a mixing of time, with visual moments from the past made present. The narrators’ positions in these works reflect distance from the ghetto in terms of time, but also, simultaneously, the ghetto’s continuation, both through stories and physically. Rilke’s ghetto story is framed by a conversation, whose orality introduces certain indeterminacies. The narrator is unsure when the story is set: ‘I also cannot tell you when it took place. Perhaps under the Doge Alvisè Mocenigo IV, but it could also have been a little earlier or a little later’ (Rilke, 2009: 96).<sup>11</sup> Especially since the ghetto narrative is both framed as a separate space and a significant tale that should be passed onto children, the story itself seemingly becomes eternal.

Saba (1883–1957) characterized his stories collectively named “The Jews” (“Gli ebrei”), which include *Il Ghetto in Trieste nel 1860*, as recollections or memories, ‘memorie esposte in forma narrativa’ (Saba, 2001: 363), but many are from before he was born. The title includes the date “1860” but recounts a series of changes that happened over time, with a combination of distance and vivid details. Many of the descriptions also include continuous-time occurrences, such as repeated visits to the ghettos and the rhythms of the week. Zangwill’s story (1898) similarly recounts a father’s practices that connect to older traditions that are still ongoing. The protagonist reflects on and even envisions the past in the story:

He saw the earliest streams pouring into Venice at the commencement of the thirteenth century, German merchants, then Levantines, helping to build up the commercial capital of the fifteenth century. He saw the later accession of Peninsular refugees from the Inquisition, their shelter beneath the lion’s wing negotiated through their fellow-Jew, Daniel Rodrigues, Consul of the Republic in Dalmatia. (Zangwill, 1898: 497)

Starting with Zangwill’s own comments (1898: iv), critics note that his Venetian ghetto stories can be read as representations of the tensions between change and continuities for Jewish communities.

While many wealthier people relocated to other parts of a city soon after the ghetto’s emancipation, for other inhabitants poverty prevented moving. Italian ghettos are often centrally located in important cities, which provided an additional hindrance to leaving and relates to another issue, tourism, that distinguishes many Italian literary ghetto spaces from the ones described in other places. In *Chad Gadya* (Zangwill, 1898: 494), the protagonist contemplates if he can live distanced from his traditions, a mental journey that includes thinking about Venice like a tourist: ‘the floating homewards

down the Grand Canal in the moonlight, the well-known palaces as dreamful and mysterious to him as if he had not been born in the city of the sea.' This moment shows how the ghetto can simultaneously feel separate from the rest of Venice and also indicate the long traditions of tourism of the city where the first ghetto was founded.

The variety of visitors to the Triestine ghetto is a central theme of Saba's story (1993: 21), with the narrator describing how shopkeepers adapt their approaches to clients based on their background: 'language, dialect, smiles changed according to the age, sex, and nationality of the customer.'<sup>12</sup> The tourism of these cities contributes to how the stories present multiple identities to raise questions about belonging. In *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860*, the narrator's exact relationship with the Jewish community is unclear.

Rilke's *A Scene in a Venetian Ghetto* opens with a dialogue between two people who were prompted to speak because of their travels to Italy:

"I think we are the only ones here who have ever been to Italy."

"So--," I made an effort to pay better attention – "yes, then it is urgent that we should speak with one another."

Mr Baum laughed. "Yes, Italy – that's really something. I always tell my children – . Take Venice for example!" (Rilke, 2009: 95).<sup>13</sup>

Wassily Kandinsky provided an illustration for this story that highlights a famous tourist attraction, the Rialto bridge. With Kandinsky's painting and the initial conversation, tourism frames the ghetto tale that follows. The narrator and Mr Baum even test each other on their knowledge of Venetian tourist sights:

"When you've once seen it—that Piazzetta—don't you agree?"

"Yes," I answered, "I remember with particular pleasure the ride through the Canal, that soft soundless gliding along the borders of things past."

"The Palazzo Franchetti!" he exclaimed.

"The Cà d'Oro—" I rejoined.

"The Fishmarket—"

"The Palazzo Vendramin—"

"Where Richard Wagner—" he, as a German of culture, hastily added.

I nodded, "The Ponte, you remember?"

He smiled, well oriented. "Of course, and the Museum, not to forget the Academy, where a Titian ..." (Rilke, 1963: 68)<sup>14</sup>

The story suggests that being an "educated" or "cultured" German includes knowledge of Germans' experiences in Italy, such as Wagner's death in Venice. The story's tourism connects Rilke's work to the many German ones about travel in Italy, while the embedded tale, set in the ghetto, also ties it to the popular German tradition of *Ghettogesichte*. Ghetto stories set in Italian places tend to include tourism, weaving it with the ideas of sequestration that are also central in German stories.

After the touristic quiz in Rilke's story, the narrator rewards his partner with the story of Melchisedech and his granddaughter: 'Thus Mr Baum had subjected himself to a type

of examination that was somewhat strenuous. I undertook to compensate him with a story' (Rilke, 2009: 96).<sup>15</sup> While the ghetto, the setting of the story, is located within a few minutes' walk from many of the sights they had just listed, the narrator formulates it as a place unknown to the typical "educated German." The characterization of the ghetto as hidden also appears in Zangwill's story (1898: 499):

The Venetians had built and painted marvelous things and died out and left them for tourists to gaze at. The Jews had created nothing for ages, save a few poems and a few yearning synagogue melodies; yet here they were, strong and solid, a creation in flesh and blood more miraculous and enduring than anything in stone and bronze.

Distinguishing between tourist Venice and Jewish Venetians whose existence is less obvious, the protagonist underscores the continuity of this popular destination's Jewish presence.

Birgit Haustedt's *Rilke's Venice: The City in Eleven Walks* (2008: 61), aimed at tourists, claims: "Everything one can say about Venice has been said and printed," complained Goethe in 1786. But the master was wrong. One hundred years later, a young poet discovered a place that writers had avoided and the Venetians themselves had forgotten for centuries: the Ghetto.' This claim that the Venetian ghetto had been forgotten suggests a narrative that as the word ghetto moved from Italian spaces to other ones, those in Rome and Venice somehow disappeared and were only discovered by outsiders as a relic of the past, that these movements of the term through space and time erased its continuous Italian presence.<sup>16</sup> This idea is problematic both because people still lived there and because of Italian ghettos proximity to prominent sights in their cities. Bryan Cheyette's *The Ghetto: A Very Short Introduction* (2020) and Daniel Schwartz's *Ghetto: A History of a Word* (2019) do not ignore modern Italy, but their table of contents suggest how Italian spaces sometimes disappear in teleological narratives of how "ghetto" develops, as it moves from the Italian 1500s to 19th and 20th-century Eastern Europe to the United States of today. While a number of these spaces no longer exist, many of the Italian ones still do, with a combination of residents and museums that reflect on their past. The longstanding use of "ghetto" to describe some of the same spaces for centuries reflects the particular history of Jews in Italy, 'probably the only country in Western Europe in which the settlement of Jews has been continuous from before the Christian era to the present day' (Freedman, 1972: 90).<sup>17</sup> Whereas some ghetto spaces were seen as ones of transition, including modern urban areas immigrants lived before they could afford to move and Nazi ghettos, which were a step in a chain leading to murder, the Italian spaces have both a longer history and a continued present. A transnational literary investigation emphasizes these continuities, showing how the ghetto's chronology does not neatly map onto geographical locations.

In contrast to many other ghetto stories, narratives about Italian spaces describe multiple movements in and out of ghettos, partly because their ghettos are small spaces located within major cities.<sup>18</sup> These movements in and out are necessary and relate to why there tend to be reflections on both identity and interactions between people with different faiths and backgrounds, as in Shakespeare and Leon Modena's works. "In

and out” can describe both the movements of characters in these stories, but also where these stories are located in terms of critical debates. These stories trouble narratives of progression, from old world to new, from in to out, from past to present, and represent navigations between both poles.

Rilke and Saba interweave the practicalities of life in the ghetto with biblical imagery. *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860* describes a Saturday visit to stores in the ghetto, with well-off shops characterized as *una vera terra promessa*:

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 (Saba, 1993: 22).<sup>19</sup>

This promised land is not due to divine promise, but because the shop owners could afford to close on the sabbath, as opposed to the poorer ones whose businesses had to remain open. The irony of this sentence is even stronger in the Italian since ‘by God’ appears parenthetically.

Religious imagery is also treated ironically in Rilke’s story. The description of the ghetto’s edifices suggests the tower of Babel, with very different reasons for their notable height:

They tortured them with levies, robbed them of their goods, and restricted the area of the ghetto more and more, so that families that were fruitful and multiplied despite the dire circumstances were forced to build their houses upwards, one atop the roof of the other. And their city, which was not on the sea, thus grew slowly towards the sky, as into another sea, and all around the plaza with the well, there arose on all sides steep buildings, like the walls of a giant tower. (Rilke, 2009: 97)<sup>20</sup>

From atop this ‘giant tower’, Melchisedech seems to reach God: ‘And the crowd grew and did not take their eyes off him: did he see the sea or God, the eternal, in his glory?’ (Rilke, 2009: 99).<sup>21</sup> This high view and proximity to the heavens is, unlike with the tower of babel story, not caused by the hubris of the builders, but forced upon the Jewish inhabitants by the laws of Christians, who live outside in lower buildings, further from the heavens.

As suggested by the building Melchisedech ascends, Rilke’s story can also be discussed in terms of the historical realities and architectural features of Italian ghettos. Melchisedech’s obsession with living in the highest place possible points to a common feature of many Italian ghettos, which housed the ‘first skyscrapers’: ‘The rich Melchisedech, in the whimsicality of old age, had made a strange suggestion to his fellow citizens, sons, and grandchildren. He always wanted to occupy the highest of these tiny houses, which rose in countless stories one above the other’ (Rilke, 2009: 97–98).<sup>22</sup> In *Chad Gadya* the protagonist recalls these ‘countless stories’ with nostalgia:



Yes, he was a Jew at heart. The childhood in the Ghetto, the long heredity, had bound him in emotions and impulses as with phylacteries. Chad Gadya! Chad Gadya! The very melody awakened associations innumerable. He saw in a swift panorama the intense inner life of a curly-headed child roaming in the narrow cincture of the Ghetto, amid the picturesque high houses (Zangwill, 1898: 496–7).

This architectural element, both picturesque and also a sign of the limitations imposed on Jewish communities, is still perceivable in cities such as Venice and Rome, where there were additional, shorter levels with lower ceilings, so as many people as possible could live in these confined spaces (Katz, 2017: 10).

The notable elements of Italian ghetto fiction, movements in and out, tourism, and confusions of time, reveal the complexity and importance of including Italian ghetto fictions in critical debates on ghettos. It also speaks to the importance of Jewish Italians to Italian identity, which has a long literary history that is apparent in Rilke's ghetto story, as evidenced by the characters' names. Melchisedech's granddaughter Esther became pregnant after the visits of Marcantonio (who is not Jewish) to the ghetto:

In the hours when she was alone with him, she had gazed at him so much and for so long that it seemed to her as if he had fallen deep into her dark eyes and died, and now, in her, his new, eternal life was beginning, the one in which he, as a Christian, had believed (Rilke, 2009: 98).<sup>23</sup>

Her pregnancy is potentially a virginal conception and her baby a new Christ-figure, but it is also, simultaneously, perhaps the result of a Christian taking advantage of a naïve Jewish girl, secluded in the ghetto. The narratee Mr Baum objects to the story of Esther's pregnancy, understanding it not as spiritual, but as a tale of seduction: 'Do you know, that young noble, this Antonio however he's called, is not a nice character at all, and then: the child, this child!' (Rilke, 2009: 99).<sup>24</sup> The modification of Marcantonio's name to Antonio evinces Antonio, the eponymous *Merchant of Venice*, in which Shylock's daughter is taken from her home and converts to Christianity.

Marcantonio/Antonio's behavior and name suggest a long line of literature, including *The Merchant of Venice*, in which interactions between an Italian Jew and non-Jew are initiated because the non-Jew intends to use the Jewish person for his own gain. In *Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig* Marcantonio and Melchisedech appear to have a friendship, based in large part on Marcantonio's stories: 'Here, Marcantonio sits on a silver-embroidered pillow, at the feet of the aged Jew, and tells of Venice, as if he were telling a fairy tale about a place that has never existed' (Rilke, 2009: 97).<sup>25</sup> His stories reveal Melchisedech's removal from the rest of Venice, but also the men's mutual interest in one another. At the same time, their relationship (and Marcantonio's tales) could be due to Marcantonio's desire for Esther, suggesting that he is using Melchisedech to seduce his granddaughter.

Antonio is not the only character in Rilke's brief story whose name suggests a literary lineage: Melchisedech evokes the Jewish figure of Boccaccio's story of three rings in the

*Decameron* (Civai, 2021: 259). The First Day, Third Story is summarized by its rubric as: ‘Melchisedech, a Jew, by means of a short story about three rings, escapes from a trap set for him by Saladin’ (Boccaccio, 2010: 42).<sup>26</sup> Boccaccio’s Melchisedech, like Shylock, is a moneylender, but his tale of the rings leads to friendship with the Saladin rather than conflict. The Italian tale offers a foundational representation of Jewishness and interfaith friendship that German authors drew upon, most famously GE Lessing for his play *Nathan der Weise* (1779), which explores interreligious exchanges. Similar to Boccaccio’s, Rilke’s Melchisedech is wise and sought out for his advice (Rilke, 2009: 98). Rilke’s references to Melchisedech and Antonio indicate that *Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig* belongs in a long history of literary works that investigate relationships between Italian Jews and non-Jews, showing the significance of considering the story not just as part of Rilke’s *Stories of God*, but also in terms of Jewish Italian traditions. Rilke’s relationship to these Italian traditions underscores that ‘Transnational reading and writing emerge as the norm, rather than the exception’, as Levine (2014: n.p.) has argued.

Though literature never remains within the restraints of national boundaries, nation-based and monolingual parameters often determine the shape of literary history and departments, which have ‘the somewhat dubious fortune of having established themselves in a historical period in which the social function of literature has been closely linked to the idea of the nation and national languages’ (Hayot, 2019: 491). German and English ghetto stories have been repeatedly examined as a group, because they have clearer outlines within language and nation-based literary histories. In *Die Ghettogesichte: Entstehung und Entwicklung einer Gattung*, Kenneth H. Ober (2001: 12) outlines his criteria for inclusion, starting with ghetto tales only written by Jews and in German. As other scholars, Gabriele von Glasenapp (1996) specifies that she is considering German stories in *Aus der Judengasse: Zur Entstehung und Ausprägung deutschsprachiger Ghettoliteratur im 19. Jahrhundert*. The exclusion of Rilke, since he described Italian spaces and was not Jewish, suggests how monolingual literary histories can exclude differences based not only on language, but also ethnicity, race, religion, and other identities. The prominence of ghetto stories has been credited with bringing the word into common German use, but ignoring stories like *Eine Szene aus dem Ghetto von Venedig* separates the German Jewish stories from ghetto’s Italian history, obfuscating ghetto’s transnational history.

While not as popular as Kompert’s stories in his time, Rilke’s work – unlike Kompert’s – is significant enough to have been translated into English repeatedly: as *Melchizedek on the Roof Tops: A Tale of the Venetian Ghetto* in *The Living Age* (1927), by MD Herter Norton in *Stories of God* (1963), by Stanley Appelbaum in *Great Stories by Kafka and Rilke* (2003), by Stephen Brown in *Rilke’s Venice* (2008), and by Linda L Gaus in *Stories of God* (2009). Whether understood in terms of circulation outside the original language, status, or the worldliness of the representations themselves, Rilke’s writings more clearly belong to “world literature” than Kompert’s, standing in contrast to Rilke’s nonexistent place in criticism on ghettos. As Emma Bond (2014: 417) has argued, discourses about world literature and transnational literature share certain qualities, since both reveal ‘a core desire to stretch or go beyond the

notionally tight confines of a national context, culture, or language.’ Rilke’s role in a transnational study of Italian ghetto fiction relates to Shakespeare’s significance to Italian ghetto fiction, since Shakespeare and Rilke are world authors but not Italian ones. Their stories are, however, key for a transnational literary history of Italian ghetto stories.

Italian ghetto fiction, unlike most others, contributes to a picture of their authors’ cosmopolitan investments. The stories of Rilke and Zangwill have been included in discussions of the authors’ European identities.<sup>27</sup> *Stories of God* draws from many of Rilke’s travels, for instance to Italy and Russia. While Zangwill’s *Children of the Ghetto* was located in his London, *Dreamers of the Ghetto* moves far beyond England, starting and ending with Venice in *A Child of the Ghetto* and *Chad Gadya*, respectively. Framing tales set in a range of other places, the two stories raise questions about if it is possible to thrive in the ghetto or exist outside of it. In his introduction Zangwill (1898: iv) explains:

I have placed “A Child of the Ghetto” first, not only because the Venetian Jewry first bore the name of Ghetto, but because this chapter may be regarded as a prelude to all the others. Though the Dream pass through Smyrna or Amsterdam, through Rome or Cairo, through Jerusalem or the Carpathians, through London or Berlin or New York, almost all the Dreamers had some such childhood, and it may serve to explain them. It is the early environment from which they all more or less emerged.

According to Zangwill, the stories set in the Venetian ghetto emblemize all Jewish experiences, connecting diverse geographical locations.

*A Child of the Ghetto* presents the Venetian ghetto as an expansive space: ‘No, the Ghetto was all his world, and a mighty universe it was, full of everything that the heart of a child could desire’ (Zangwill, 1898: 2). In the concluding story, meanwhile, the protagonist cannot return to the ghetto, physically or mentally. The protagonist of *Chad Gadya* reflects on the ghetto as a space of the past that had offered security and comfort that is now lost: ‘O Napoleon, arch-fiend, who, opening the Ghettos, where the Jews crouched in narrow joy over the Sabbath fire, let in upon them the weight of the universe’ (Zangwill, 1898: 506). He sees the seclusion of the ghetto as positive, despite the confinement: ‘Why had his brethren ever sought to emerge from the joyous slavery of the Ghetto?’ (Zangwill, 1898: 497). The story problematically frames emancipation as a burden.

Saba’s *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860* also configures the ghetto, beloved, intimate, and full of memories, somewhat nostalgically, as much because of community as because of religious practices: ‘Newly built houses, though sound investments for widows and those fearful of riskier adventures, 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 [*intimità*] and memories’ (Saba, 1993: 21).<sup>28</sup> *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860* is one of five stories, collectively called “Gli ebrei,” Saba published about Jewish life in Trieste. Saba’s mother Felicita Rachele Cohen was Jewish and his father Ugo Edoardo Poli a Christian who converted to Judaism for marriage but abandoned his family

before the birth of his son, who later legally changed his name from Poli to Saba. Like the word “ghetto”, the etymology of “Saba” has been debated. Explanations include that it was inspired by his much-loved nurse Gioseffa Gabrovich Schobar/Peppa Sabaz/Sabar’s Slovene surname; means “bread” or “abundance” to commemorate his Jewish heritage and show humility; that it was selected by his cousin Giorgio Fano; or derives from the Hebrew for grandfather as a tribute to his relative, the philosopher and poet Samuel David Luzzatto, who is also featured in one of the “Gli ebrei” tales.<sup>29</sup>

While several of the stories about Saba’s name emphasize his Jewish heritage, for most of the 20th century the Jewish heritage of Italian authors was minimized. In its 1934 and 1961 entries, the *Encyclopedia Treccani* mentions neither the potential reasons for Saba’s choice of name nor his Jewish background. An analysis of Saba’s ghetto stories contributes to a critical emphasis on the diversity of Italy, including that of its canonical authors. As Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò have argued (2021: n.p.), a transnational perspective centers Trieste instead of seeing it as peripheral to the idea of “Italian:” ‘As our prismatic object of enquiry, Italy can and should be observed from multiple vantage points.’ Since this emphasis on places like Trieste also highlights Italy’s significant Jewish community, a transnational study of Italian ghetto fiction underscores the importance of Jewishness for Italian literature and culture, offering a great contrast to a tradition, which was made policy under Fascism but did not end in the 1940s, of minimizing or erasing Italy’s Jewish presence (Ziolkowski, 2022).

Bassi and Riccò’s ‘prismatic’ view creates spaces for regional and other differences, without separating them from the idea of Italy. While the Venetian ghetto has been a site of a great deal of inquiry, the idea of the Italian ghetto more broadly in literature has not. In *The History of the Jews*, Cecil Roth (1946: v) noted how separated explorations of different Jewish Italian communities had been, in part because their histories are so rich and varied: ‘Surprising though it may appear, this is first history of the Jews in Italy to be written in any language. The difficulties of the task are obvious enough.’ This regional separation lasted even longer in literary studies, with the 1990s and 2000s marking a significant turn in the study of Jewish Italian literature with H Stuart Hughes’s *Prisoners of Hope: The Silver Age of the Italian Jews, 1924–1974* (1996); Hassine et al.’s *Appartenenza e differenza: ebrei d’Italia e letteratura* (1998), Luca De Angelis’s *Qualcosa di più intimo. Aspetti della scrittura ebraica del Novecento italiano: da Svevo a Bassani* (2006); Raniero Speelman et al. *Contemporary Jewish Writers in Italy: A Generational Approach/Scrittori italiani di origine ebrea ieri e oggi: un approccio generazionale* (2007); and Sergio Parussa’s *Writing as Freedom, Writing as Testimony: Four Italian Writers and Judaism* (2008). Transnational Italian Studies’ inclusion of Jewishness offers one way to consider the historical diversity of Italian identity.

While comparative literature has long provided a space for readings between language traditions, a transnational approach foregrounds the geopolitical and cultural stakes involved in bringing together Italian ghetto stories. World literature often divides literary interactions into centers and peripheries, a system in which modern Italian literature has tended to fit awkwardly as a European country with important medieval and Renaissance traditions but less geopolitical power than France, Germany, or England. Lital Levy and

Allison Schachter (2016: 3) called attention to how Jewish literature was also missing from many discussions of World Literature: ‘theorists of World Literature continued to develop competing models based largely on notions of center and periphery while overlooking diasporic or other deterritorialized models of circulation characterized by the absence of a single center.’<sup>30</sup> Both Jewish literature and World literature debates have tended to overlook modern Italian literature, especially before Elena Ferrante’s fame. Mapping these Italian ghetto fictions shows how transnational literary histories can shift dominant narratives, with perspectives that aim to avoid dichotomous or supposedly closed structures (center-periphery, nations). Because Jewish Literary Studies has been shaped more by German and English studies than Italian, these Italian ghetto stories are also not ones that necessarily belong to the primary narratives of Jewish literary history. Focusing on Italian ghetto fiction reveals the connections and continuities of the concept “ghetto” and its stories, from 1516 Venice, to 1830s Galicia or Florence, to 1900 London or Trieste, to 1943 Warsaw and Ferrara, to 1960s New York City or Rome, to 2011 Nairobi or Bologna, to 2020s Venice (see for instance Bassi, 2021; Camarda et al., 2022).<sup>31</sup> This transnational perspective points to the tensions embedded in narratives of progress, especially ones based on nationhood, while also underscoring the continual significance of Jewishness for Italian identity.

## Italian ghetto fiction after the Shoah

As Rilke and Zangwill’s ghetto stories suggest the relevance of Italian ghetto fiction for contextualizing *Ghettogesichte* and fin-de-siècle English stories, later Italian ghetto stories can also be productively considered with ones set outside of Italy, and vice versa. Italian and Jewish migration to the United States, the Fascist Racial Laws, Nazi persecution of Jews, racism, and the use of “ghetto” for Black communities are all relevant to a comprehensive understanding of Italian ghetto fiction of the later-20th and 21st centuries, underscoring the simultaneous continuities and continual transformations of Italian ghettos. Regulations that impose financial burdens on their inhabitants are qualities of ghettos from 16th-century Italy to 20th-century United States. Rilke, Saba, and Zangwill’s stories incorporate the economic burdens that were imposed on the Jews of the Italian ghettos. Tales of ghettos complicate narratives that elide class (*borghese*) and Italian Jewishness, as Cavaglione (2006: 7) has shown, referencing the ghettos depicted by Umberto Saba and Elsa Morante. *A Gathering of Ghetto Writers: Irish, Italian, Jewish, Black, Puerto Rican* (Miller, 1972: 7) reminded readers that the Italians, Jews, and Irish of America had lived in areas described as ghettos, indicating their mutually compounding discrimination and poverty: ‘The historical fact is that immigrants and Blacks do share a common heritage. It is, for most of them, the experience of the ghetto.’ Yoonmee Chang’s *Writing the Ghetto: Class, Authorship, and the Asian American Ethnic Enclave*, meanwhile, explores how Asian American spaces have been ignored because of beliefs about class mobility in the United States.<sup>32</sup> American ghetto fictions show the interrelations of class, racialization, and racism, which can also be noted in Italian works.

Beginning with the Shoah (Primo Levi, Giacomo Debenedetti) and then moving to anti-Black racism (Caryl Phillips, Igiaba Scego), this section analyzes how Italian

ghetto fictions incorporate 20th-century histories, while also building on the elements discussed in the previous section: more recent representations of Italian ghettos can again be distinguished because of movements in and out, confusions of time, and tourism. While this section is not exhaustive and does not include authors such as Giacomina Limentani, analyzed in detail by Stefania Lucamante (2014), or Amitav Ghosh (*Gun Island*, 2019), it indicates one way later Italian ghetto works could be considered collectively in a transnational literary history. From Bassani and Morante to contemporary stories, many works written after 1945 focus on ghettos through the lens of the Second World War and the persecution of Jews. Nazi enforced ghettos have been sites of great historical inquiry, with memoirs and stories about them forming another field and changing the critical concept of the word itself. Zangwill's use of the term links the earlier Italian definitions and uses for urban spaces in the later-20th century, but the Nazi employment of "ghetto" shifted the connotations.

After the war Primo Levi returned to Turin with a coin he found in Auschwitz, originally from the Łódź ghetto (with a star of David and the word "getto" imprinted on it).<sup>33</sup> Levi explores the significance of this coin in both *Lilit e altri racconti* (*Lilith and Other Stories* and *Moments of Reprieve*) and *I sommersi e i salvati* (*The Drowned and the Saved*), focusing especially on Chaim Rumkowski, who was the "Elder" of the Łódź ghetto. Levi describes Rumkowski's four-year rule as a period in which he forced other Jews in the ghetto to do increasingly more for him, for increasingly less in return, helping to push the population toward starvation. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi includes the discussion of Rumkowski in *La zona grigia* (*The Gray Zone*), his important reflection on morality and power dynamics in the camps: 'His story is not strictly a story of the camps, though it does end there. It is a story of the ghetto, but it speaks so eloquently to the fundamental theme of human ambiguity fatally provoked by oppression that it seems to fit our argument almost too well' (Levi, 2015: 2449).<sup>34</sup> Levi's narration of Rumkowski's behavior becomes symbolic of the destructive nature of power and the individuality of survival: 'A story like this is not self-contained. It overflows. It raises more questions than it can satisfy, encapsulating the whole issue of the gray zone, and leaves us hanging. It cries out to be understood, to be seen as a symbol, as in dreams or heavenly signs' (Levi, 2015: 2545).<sup>35</sup> For Levi, Rumkowski helps to reveal the limits of solidarity, indicating how the camps are not a separate state of exception but part of a continuum of oppression. Levi ends this influential essay with the ghetto: 'We make our deals with power, willingly or not, forgetting that we are all in the ghetto, that the ghetto is walled in, that outside the wall are the lords of death, and that not far away the train is waiting' (Levi, 2015: 2456).<sup>36</sup> As many others', Levi's formulation of the ghetto moves between reality and symbolism, but this mental ghetto does not encompass any sense of nostalgia or protection, it is only a site of oppression and persecution, representative of the potential depths of human cruelty.

Levi's formulation of what ghetto means haunts not just postwar but also prewar uses of the term. In his analyses, Levi directly connects the Nazi ghettos to their pre-modern history: 'The Nazis, as they had in every city of a certain importance in occupied Eastern Europe, immediately established a ghetto, thereby reviving—with the addition of their

modern ferocity—an administrative system from the Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation’ (Levi, 2015: 2450). The publication history of Saba’s “Gli ebrei,” the five stories that include *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860*, highlights the links between fin-de-siècle representations of Italian ghettos and postwar ones. After the war, Saba (1993: 9) reflected on how his prewar writings about Jews sounded potentially problematic, commenting on how much has changed since writing the stories, which were composed when, in his words, ‘antisemitism seemed a joke; when I was able without remorse to yield to a benign irony, tinged with hidden affection for people and things.’<sup>37</sup> The characterization of the ironic promised land and persuasive shop keepers, both discussed earlier, could contribute to antisemitic stereotypes, which seemed much more problematic after the Shoah. Saba narrates being unsure if it would be appropriate to republish the stories.

Saba’s post-Shoah reflection on his earlier writings highlight what has irrevocably changed, as well as how relatively brief the post-ghetto (Italian, regionally determined), pre-ghetto (Nazi) period was. The emancipation of Italian ghettos took place at different times, with the papal authority of Rome making it among the last (in 1870). Despite Trieste’s ghetto having been abolished much earlier, in 1785, when Saba wrote “Gli ebrei” in 1910 he still considered the stories as memories and describes how Trieste’s “ghetto” outlived its prescribed presence. By the 1950s Saba hesitated to publish the works because of Nazi ghettos and the Shoah. The stories of Zangwill also ended up intertwined in the history of Italian fascism and the persecution of Jewish Italians. Zangwill’s *Chad Gadya* was inspired by dinners with the Grassini family, whose famous member Margherita Sarfatti (1880–1961) later translated Zangwill’s work (1914).<sup>38</sup> Despite being Mussolini’s influential lover, Sarfatti then had to leave Italy because of the Fascist Racial laws. The links between Sarfatti and Zangwill again underscore the connections between pre-20th-century ghettos and the 20th-century persecution of Jewish Italians, highlighting the long history of Italian anti-Jewish hatred, which is embedded in the origins of the word “ghetto” and its literatures. Postwar literary representations of time confusion, already prominent in the fin-de-siècle works discussed in the last section, draw attention to the continuities between forms of prejudice, segregation, and violence across history.

Saba ultimately left the decision of whether or not to publish his Jewish stories together to Carlo Levi, with whom he had spent time in hiding during the war. Levi (1993: 3) emphasizes the importance of convincing Saba to overcome his ‘scruples’ and publish these works, which importantly provide, ‘the loving description of a distant world of memory, one that nevertheless belongs to us and lives in our heart.’<sup>39</sup> Levi here highlights how Italian ghetto stories continue not only in spaces, but also people, becoming part of an Italian legacy. Marguerite Caetani and Giorgio Bassani’s journal *Botteghe oscure* published Saba’s Jewish stories, along with with Carlo Levi’s introduction, in 1953, the same year Bassani published *The Stroll before Dinner* (*La passeggiata prima di cena*), which also highlights the proximity of an Italian ghetto, Ferrara’s (1622–1861), to Nazi ones.

Objects, architecture, and people’s own lives emphasize connections through time in Bassani’s story (2018: 38), which begins with a postcard that confuses time by linking

this physical object to the reader: ‘Even today, rummaging through some small second-hand stores in Ferrara, it’s not unlikely that you could turn up postcards almost a hundred years old.’<sup>40</sup> The Italian emphasizes the reader touching the postcards (‘mettere le mani su cartoline vecchie’). The image on the discussed postcard leads to the story of a prewar Jewish doctor, Elia, who marries a non-Jew: ‘They were married. At first they lodged with his father, Salomone Corcos, the old grain merchant, and there, in Via Vittoria, in the heart of what until not that long before had been the Ghetto, Jacopo was very soon to be born, and then Ruben’ (Bassani, 2018: 49).<sup>41</sup> The ‘until not that long ago’ (‘fino a non molto avanti’) contributes to a blurring of time. After connecting the former ghetto to Elia’s children, the story reveals in a parenthetical comment that Elia and his son Jacopo were both deported in 1943 (Bassani, 1980: 64). Bassani’s story underscores the links between pre-emancipation ghettos and Nazi ones. The postcard at the beginning, the placement of the ghetto, and Elia himself seem to collapse time. The story in fact ends with Elia’s strange look, ‘from above and, in some way, from beyond time’ (Bassani, 2018: 59).<sup>42</sup>

In *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis* (*Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini*, 1962) Bassani offers one of the most memorable examples of how the Jewish Italians’ continual presence can seem to collapse or confuse time. A young girl, unaware that she is sitting near someone Jewish, asks, ‘In the history book, the Etruscans are at the beginning, next to the Egyptians and the Jews. But, Papa, who d’you think were the oldest, the Etruscans or the Jews?’ (Bassani, 2018: 247).<sup>43</sup> The comment makes the father laugh, as the group reflects on the contrasts and connections between the ancient Etruscan tombs they are visiting, ancient Jewish history, and the contemporary presence of the Jewish narrator.<sup>44</sup> As is clear in, for instance, Zangwill’s story, Italian ghetto fiction’s sense of out-of-timeness, related to continuity, precedes the Shoah. In both a short story from before the Shoah and a long novel from decades after, Elsa Morante’s works also unsettle time in their descriptions of the ghetto. Morante’s *The Thief of Lights* (*Il ladro dei lumi*, from 1935), set in a Jewish ghetto, ends by collapsing time for the protagonist: ‘I was that little girl, or perhaps it was my mother, or perhaps the mother of my mother; I am dead and I died and was born again, and at every birth a new uncertain trial begins’ (2013: 125).<sup>45</sup> The girl’s unusual narrative position relates to Elia’s being ‘beyond time’ in Bassani’s *La passeggiata prima di cena* but also to the narrators’ unusual positions, discussed also in the stories by Rilke, Saba, and Zangwill.

Several of the sites of pre-emancipation Italian ghettos are also where Nazis rounded up and then contained the Jews of Italy before deportation. The best-known narrative about deportation from Italian ghettos is Giacomo Debenedetti’s *October 16, 1943* (*16 ottobre 1943*), written about a year after the deportation itself. When soldiers came to the Roman ghetto, many Jews were at home because it was the sabbath and also, Debenedetti suggests, because of traditions going back to the ghetto’s restrictions of the past:

The Jews of the Regola quarter were still in the habit of going to sleep early. Shortly after dark they were all in their homes. Perhaps the memory of an ancient curfew is still in



their blood; from the time, when at the first fall of shadow, the gates of the ghetto screeched shut with an inviolable monotony that routine had perhaps rendered gentle and familiar to them, a reminder that night was not a time for Jews; that at night they were in danger of being seized, taxed, fined, imprisoned, beaten (Debenedetti, 2001b: 22).<sup>46</sup>

Debenedetti ties current behavior to the ghetto's history, configuring the threat as being part of a continuum, though the danger now appears in the guise of Nazis. After the Shoah, the earlier ghettos could be read as part of a long history of separation and persecution that ultimately includes death camps.

A woman who comes to the ghetto to warn the inhabitants of the impending roundup is a sign of the movements in and out of the ghetto, throughout time: 'Even though she lives in Trastevere, Celeste has relatives here, in the Ghetto, and is well known to the entire *Kehila*' (Debenedetti, 2001b: 23).<sup>47</sup> Her arrival suggests both the continuities of the Roman ghetto and intimates the major disruption that the work describes, whose foretelling was unbelievable to its inhabitants. The themes and styles discussed earlier—continuity, tourism, confusion or collapse of time, reflections on a community's identity versus an individual's, and movements in and out—are apparent in his work, but are repeatedly connected to horror, most strikingly when German soldiers go sightseeing: 'It was irresistible to some of the young soldiers finding themselves with a motor vehicle at their disposal, even if it was full of rounded-up Jews, to take a tour of the city' (Debenedetti, 2001b: 58).<sup>48</sup>

While earlier ghetto narratives explored connections between the touristic sites of Italy and the ghetto's place in important cities, the link is now disturbing, with Germans visiting the sights of Rome with Jews headed for Auschwitz in their trucks. The contrast between 'ebrei razzati' and 'un po' di giro turistico' is shocking, especially since the horrors of the Second World War and tourism in Italy are rarely associated with each other. Present-day tourists to ancient, medieval, and Renaissance sites often ignore the years of fascism, whose history also changed these locations, most obviously in Rome. Jhumpa Lahiri's story *Hema and Kaushik* (2008: 295) includes the unsettling overlap of tourism and memories of persecution present in the Roman ghetto:

Well-dressed chattering Romans would pass by without a glance, while tourists would pause, gazing down at the excavations before proceeding on to the Theater of Marcellus. In front of the Portico was a little piazza where, according to the plaque Hema had managed to translate, over a thousand Jews had been deported in October 1943.<sup>49</sup>

The narrative describes Romans going about their daily life and tourists walking by the Portico di Ottavia, Theater of Marcellus, and a plaque commemorating the deportation. This last element of the ghetto is the least seen.

In Debenedetti, the narrator's liminal position as an insider and outsider takes on new meaning, one that reverberates throughout narratives that follow, including ones like Lahiri's. While in many of the earlier ghetto stories the narrator's outsider status partly related to the author's or narrator's position as non-Italian or non-Jew or both, in Debenedetti's work the Jewish Italian author is an outsider because he was not part of

the roundup: ‘The writer of this account spent the morning of October 16 in the house of a neighbor. This woman let it slip that she had anticipated the roundup’ (Debenedetti, 2001b: 56).<sup>50</sup> At times the work’s raw descriptions suggest that the narrator witnessed what happened, but other moments clarify that he collected numerous oral accounts. The construction of the piece, including the identity of “we”, draws attention to the narrator’s unusual position and relates to the narrative techniques of earlier stories about Italian ghettos: ‘Now we enter a house on via S. Ambrogio in the Ghetto. We’ll be able to watch the entire raid from here’ (Debenedetti, 2001a, 2001b: 41).<sup>51</sup> As in Zangwill’s story, the narrator shares visual details that he could not have seen, but that he describes vividly for the reader as if he had seen them.

The narrator includes how much he is unable to recount because of the sheer number of potential stories that were lost that day, suggesting the pain of those who survived. For instance, the narrator quotes one man’s question before deportation, ‘Che faranno di noi?’ (‘What will they do with us?’) and reflects:

These poor pathetic words are among the few left to us by those in the process of departing. In them we hear the voice of a human being restored for a moment to life, living with us, when he is no longer part of our lives and has already entered into that new, terrible, dark, existence (Debenedetti, 2001b: 46).<sup>52</sup>

*16 ottobre 1943* saves voices of the Roman ghetto, a place that still exists, but whose history and population was irrevocably changed that day.

Morante’s *History* (*La Storia*, published in 1974) draws on Debenedetti’s *16 ottobre 1943*, as she mentions in her afterword, and presents the ghetto as almost beyond historical time. One of the protagonists, Ida, who had previously not known anyone Jewish besides her mother, is attracted to the ghetto:

Toward the end, almost every day, on the pretext of having to buy some little article, but actually without any specific motivation, Ida, on leaving school, would set off for the Jewish quarter. She felt drawn there by a summons of sweetness, like the stable’s smell for a calf, or a souk’s for an Arab woman; and also by an impulse of obsessive necessity, like a planet gravitating around a star (Morante, 2007: 102).<sup>53</sup>

The description of what pulls Ida to the ghetto (a term used earlier in the novel to describe the same area, see Morante, 2003: 323), like a gravitational force, suggests the nostalgia of earlier works, but has here become almost subconscious or innate, beyond time. Life in the contemporary Jewish quarter is tied both to the place’s long history and the 1938 racial laws: ‘The inhabitants, for the most part, were peddlers or ragmen, the only trades allowed the Jews in the past centuries, though soon, in the course of the war, these would also be forbidden by the new Fascist laws’ (Morante, 2007: 63).<sup>54</sup> The Fascist restrictions are again characterized as building on those of the past.

For Ida the ghetto is also a location where she reflects on her own identity, a major theme of the novel. Because of the growing emphasis on Jewish identity in Fascist

Italy, Ida is unsure where and with whom she and her children belong. The ghetto's significance for explorations of identity is evident in Rilke, Saba, and Zangwill's stories, as it was in earlier ones, and continues as a site of inquiry in the fictions of the later-20th century and today. This is true for literary ghettos more broadly, with ones in the United States providing important sites of investigations of race, ethnicity, class, and language. Analyses of English-language writing, from ones that include Jews to ones that focus on Spanish-speakers' and Black people's experiences, reveal the significance of these areas and stories in the construction of racial identities in the United States (Simpson, 2012).

"Jewish ghettos" and "Italian ghettos" have been used to describe urban spaces in the United States, not just Italy. In *A Gathering of Ghetto Writers: Irish, Italian, Jewish, Black, Puerto Rican* (1972), Jews and Italians also appear in each other's stories. John Fante's story *The Odyssey of a Wop* (1972: 190) describes a young Italian American registering at a Jesuit school, "'Well, young man, you'll be at home here! Yes, sir! Lots of Wops here! We've even got Kikes! And, you know, this place reeks with shanty Irish!!' *Dio!* How I hate that priest!' Jews and Italians were the two largest immigrant groups at the turn of the century and the slurs in Fante's work indicate their related migration timelines and travails. The representation of Italians in Sholem Aleichem's *Mott the Cantor's Son* (2009: 303, written in 1916) discusses Italians as the other prominent group coming to the United States and shows the potential comradeship of people facing similar struggles in their journeys:

Do you think only Jews have problems on Ellis Island? Gentiles also have their troubles. A large group of Italians have been traveling with us, all wearing velvet pants and wooden shoes. When they walk, they clop like horses. They're fine Gentiles, excellent people. They're crazy about me. They call me strange names, *piccolo bambino*. They give me nuts and raisins from their velvet pants pockets, and I rather like that.

Sholem Aleichem's story depicts the linguistic and cultural intermingling of Italians and East European Jews in the United States.

Italians and Jews in the United States have been considered together in terms of both their important roles in labor movements (Marinari, 2019) and their shifting place in America's racial categories (Jacobson, 1999). Robert DeNiro's representations of immigrants in *The Godfather* (Part II, 1974) and *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) offers one example of how the same American actors have also played Italian and Jewish roles in films. Although Italians and Jews have been associated with each other in various ways in the United States, being Jewish Italian itself was questioned. Tullia Zevi (1989: XII), co-organizer of an important exhibit in New York that provided the 'first overall visual history of the Jews of Italy presented anywhere,' describes how her identity as Jewish Italian was interrogated in both Little Italy and the lower eastside: 'My double identity, Italian and Jewish, suspect to both Italo-Americans and Jews in the United States, lived on as I returned to Italy.' This exhibit resulted in an important book, *Gardens and Ghettos: The Art of Jewish Life in Italy* (1989), which underscored the historical, geographic, and artistic range of Jewish Italians. The term "ghetto" has been central for

recognizing the particular history and culture of Jewish Italians, whose presence has at times been overlooked in simplified or dichotomous views of identity.

In contrast to German Jewish culture, Jewish Italian culture was under-explored in the 20th century, in part because discussing Italian Jewishness generally requires some discussion of Italian antisemitism.<sup>55</sup> Prejudice is a key element of any history of ghettos. Italian education, collective memory, and scholarship used to largely ignore the role Italians had played in the persecution of Jewish Italians, as it did Italian colonialism.<sup>56</sup> *Il Ghetto di Trieste nel 1860* characterizes antisemitism as a northern problem or import in the city: ‘whose population had too much of a southern character for the northern affliction of anti-Semitism to take root’ (Saba, 1993: 20).<sup>57</sup> The word “ghetto” itself, meanwhile, suggests the varied history of acceptance and separation of Jewish Italians. Analyses of Jewish Italian ghettos expand some common ideas about Italian antisemitism as well as American ones about nationality, ethnicity, religion, and race.

The Kittian-British, Black Atlantic author Caryl Phillips plays an important part in the genealogy of non-Italian and non-Jewish writers whose reflections on the complexity of identity include exploring Italian ghettos. Phillip’s *The European Tribe* (1987: 52) considers the author’s experiences in the Venetian ghetto in terms of its and his own history:

The Venetian ghetto was the original ghetto, the model for all others in the world—places characterized by deprivation and persecution. ... 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.

Ghettos have offered authors another vantage point through which to consider the European racialization and oppression that is central in studies of colonization and decolonization. In a discussion of Kompert, Krobb (1999: 42) characterizes the emancipation of pre-modern ghettos as the ‘de-colonisation of the Jews.’ Michael Rothberg and Bryan Cheyette, meanwhile, do not directly compare colonization and ghettos, but explore their multiple cross-pollinations.<sup>58</sup> In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Rothberg (2009: 237) translates and analyzes how *France-Observateur’s* editors link the Shoah and 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris: ‘Marguerite Duras also asked questions, first to two Algerian workers and then to a survivor of the Warsaw ghetto. The questions are identical, the answers are eloquent. The time of the ghettos, which we thought had disappeared, had it returned?’ The ghetto here represents persecution and dehumanizing violence, and raises questions of if there is a continual (but not always noted) presence of the ‘time of the ghettos,’ rather than a ‘return.’

In an analysis of WEB Du Bois’s writing on the Warsaw Ghetto, Rothberg (2009: 113) reveals the importance of a transnational approach to ghettos to comprehend multiple, intersecting forms of oppression and community, which an exploration of Italian ghetto fiction also highlights. European ghettos challenge constructions of race and theories of racism that are based on the United States. They prompted Du Bois (1952: n.p.) to reformulate his ideas of racialization: ‘So that the ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against

race segregation, religious discrimination and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world.’ Scholars have examined the interrelations between Nazi ghettos and racism in the United States (Whitman, 2017). The use of “ghetto” in both places suggests related policies of segregating and penalizing marginalized people.

In Phillips’s short story *I Saw Mario Balotelli in the Ghetto* (2018: 8), the narrator follows the Ghanian-Jewish-Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli through the maze-like streets to reach an “Elder,” while they discuss European Jews and the United States: ‘A confident Mario led the way, and as we threaded our way through tight alleyways and along dark back streets we talked about his Jewish mother Silvia and her family, and the city in which I lived.’ Once in the ghetto, the Jewish Elder asks the author if he is comfortable in the United States. Balotelli answers on his behalf: ‘Of course he feels safe there. In New York City the black man is free to be whatever he wants to be. Even President. It is not like here in Italy. It is different in his country. In America they have to show him some respect’ (Phillips, 2018: 10). *I Saw Mario Balotelli in the Ghetto* ultimately challenges views that the United States represents an answer or positive contrast to European racism, since the narrator of Phillips’ work does not idealize the United States:

Mr Elder, I have been transported into your presence by Mr Yellow Hat and I am now attempting to imagine the awkwardly fraternal conversation that Shylock might have had with Othello; I am also pushing back against the disturbing images of poor Silvia’s relatives being swept away on their miserable journey to Poland. And I am trying hard to understand why Mario, the wandering footballer, thinks the United States is the answer to anything when a million American Muslims, and an unspeakable number of Native Americans, can tell him that behind his style and fashion, and his nicely affected Hip-Hop bounce, lies the ugly reality of that four-legged word “Home”. (Phillips, 2018: 11–12)

The narrator points to the history of oppression behind American exports that seems to suggest racial equity but obfuscates more complex truths. Phillips’ short work weaves together an enormous range of forms of prejudice and oppression, including Shakespeare’s Shylock, Othello, Nazi death camps, American Islamophobia, and the destruction of Native American populations.

The presence of Othello and Shylock underscores the long history of literary representations of Jewish and Black characters in Italian cities. Phillip’s tale (2018: 11) reflects on the Venetian ghetto in terms of both its 16th-century founding and the Nazi deportation of Italy’s Jews:

One morning the borders of your community were sealed and instantly you both belonged and you were also a stranger. You and Mario’s mother, Silvia. Welcome to 1516. Without any cogent explanation you were both of the place and not of the place. It is the European way. Please, may I pass by and go about my daily business? Neighbour, do you not know me? And then later, in 1943, something else, right? You know, I feel curiously reinvigorated in this house with you and my naive friend, Mario. But I am being unkind.

Mario is not naive, he is quietly desperate to be rooted, and that is understandable. I understand. Britain. The West Indies. Africa. After thirty years can I trust any of these places to recognize me and take me in? Well, Mr Elder, answer me that? Snow. Sun and Sand. Slavery. The search for a singular identity, a place of simplicity and safety. Really, who needs this clichéd certitude in the twenty-first century? This is a century of fusion and confusion.

The narrator reflects on how this century is one of ‘fusion and confusion’, but, at the same time, presents the long history of ambiguous belonging, as being ‘the European way’ since at least 1516. While in many other important works, for instance Rothberg’s, earlier ghettos primarily refer to those created by the Nazis, discussing Italian ghettos again engages a more extended layering of time. Contemporary Italian ghetto fictions like this one draw on not only the long Italian history of the word ghetto, but also anti-Black American racism (related to the word ghetto in English) and Nazi antisemitism (related to their use of the word ghetto).

The continuities between the very different representations of Phillips and the authors (Rilke, Saba, Zangwill) discussed in the previous section suggest the differences between “transnational” as object and method. Multiple transnational studies analyze Phillips’ works (McCluskey, 2013; Pulitano, 2016; Walkowitz, 2006), since the story about a traveling narrator, a Jewish Italian, and Ghanaian-Jewish-Italian, by a Caribbean-British-American author is transnational in terms of the tale’s location, the author’s background, and the multiple representations of global and local exchanges. English-language studies of Phillips tend to focus on him as transnational in terms of contemporary, global movements, whereas including him in a transnational Italian study engages a longer layering of time. His inclusion in this transnational literary history of Italian ghetto fiction reveals the significance of a transnational approach that also incorporates earlier works and time periods.

## **Conclusion: From Shylock to Scego**

Italian ghetto works present palimpsestic views of identities and history, as in the works of Rilke, Saba, Zangwill, Debenedetti, Bassani, Morante, and Phillips. Italian ghettos have existed as an idea, place, and literary space for longer than the United States of America has been a country. As the United States has become more and more prominent in analyses of identity, some of the nuances, differences, and continuities of the past have been minimized. Transnational Italian Studies, when Italy and Italian are both centered and reconceived, can help bring a longer past into debates about identity, showing how short of a time the idea of a “nation” (although formative for disciplines) has operated as an organizing principle, especially for literary works: ‘Reminding ourselves of the short-lived and historically porous nature of today’s borders allows us to challenge nationalistic, teleological narratives of continuous national cultures’ (Bowe, 2020: 195). While Italian ghetto fictions are all focused on areas in the peninsula that became part of Italy, considering Italian ghetto fiction in a transnational perspective reveals how these small spaces connect to Italian migration, colonialism, Jewish

migration, the Shoah, tourism, racism, the United States, England, Germany, and the construction of identities.

Exploring Italian ghettos in a transnational perspective challenges the dominance of English-language—often American—perspectives, partly by bringing in Italian literature to English-language focused criticism that can be transnational but monolingual. The English publication of *I Saw Mario Balotelli in the Ghetto* is dedicated to Shaul Bassi, suggesting how Italian friendships and experiences helped inspire the story. Underlining how the circulation of images and stories flows in and out, in a complex set of reverberations enabled by translations and rewritings, a translation of Phillip's *I Saw Mario Balotelli in the Ghetto* is part of Shaul Bassi's collection *Nel Cortile del Mondo: Nuove storie dal Ghetto di Venezia* (2021), which also includes other translated works, from English, German, Polish, and Spanish, as well as ones originally in Italian, such as Igiaba Scego's, that can similarly be investigated in terms of multiple parts of identity—racial, religious, ethnic, class, national, and gender.<sup>59</sup>

Scego's *Il lungo viaggio della signorina Clara* (The Long Journey of Signorina Clara) describes 18th-century Venice, focusing on a relationship between a Jewish girl confined to the ghetto and an enslaved African boy, who go and see a captured rhinoceros being toured around Europe. The story brings together a wide variety of human abuses, against those with different religious backgrounds in their city (the girl), from other places (the boy), and species (the rhinoceros). The racist violence and prejudice limiting the girl and boy are connected: “‘Siamo ebrei. Non ci è permesso di fare tutto’ sospirava Esther. ‘Nemmeno a me è permesso di fare tutto, sono uno schiavo africano’ sospirava a sua volta Suleiman’ (Scego, 2021: 159). The story represents tourism, continuity, and movements in and out, as other Italian ghetto stories, as well as connecting it more explicitly to other long histories of racism and prejudice (Civai, 2021: 264).

Building on the past described in Scego's story, the Italian Racial Laws were imposed to foster racism, in order to facilitate colonialism in Africa, and antisemitism, which led to the marginalization and then persecution of Jews. Related to how Primo Levi sheds light on continuums of oppression, Italian ghetto stories reveal the multiple links between past and present prejudices. Scego's work has been foundational for critical reevaluations of Italian history, literature, and culture. Bond (2014), Brioni (2015), Orton (2012), and Wright (2004) have analyzed Scego in order to open Italian Studies to new perspectives that center on borders, belonging, migration, and postcolonialism.<sup>60</sup> Scego's multiple representations of Jewishness, not just in the short story mentioned above, but also in her novel *Adua* (2015), children's book *Prestami le ali: Storia di Clara la rinocerante* (2017), and short story *La chat* (2018), show the crucial role of Jewishness for these debates as well.

Recognizing Jewishness as a crucial part of modern Italian literary history and culture offers one path for discussing the historical diversity of Italian identity. Italian culture would not be what it is without its Jewish influence, as Primo Levi (1989: XVI) makes clear in a discussion of Turin: ‘if we hadn't been there, the city would have been different.’ Levi's statement is true for many Italian cities and across time. From music to food to literature, the Jewish presence has shaped Italian culture, including its international influence. Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon* (*Lessico familiare*, 1963), which has been translated into English three times, describes Adriano Olivetti's favorite

novel as *Dreamers of the Ghetto*, which ends with Zangwill's *Chad Gadya*.<sup>61</sup> Knowing the significant role Italy plays in Zangwill's collection enhances an understanding of this work's inclusion in Ginzburg's memories and adds to an understanding of Ginzburg's Jewish points of reference. The seder song "Chad Gadya" was reimagined by Angelo Branduardi as "Alla fiera dell'est" (1976), a popular Italian song, which was later also illustrated by the Jewish Italian artist Emanuele Luzzatti and included as a pedagogical resource in *Canta che ti passa: imparare italiano con le canzoni*. Jewishness is part of Italy's global presences.

While "ghetto" has been used more frequently than "spaghetti", "cello" or "gelato" in English-language writing since the 1960s, its Italian origins are less commonly known, perhaps partly because of the Italian history it represents.<sup>62</sup> Exclusion of people identified as other, often including Jews, is integral not just to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, but is fundamental to nation-building (Ialongo, 2018). Italian ghetto fictions partly expose the disheartening continuities of prejudice and have themselves not been considered together because of a focus on the nation as an organizing principle. Transnational Italian Studies aims to offer an approach that provides a critical space beyond the nation.

The construction of not just Italian national identity but also understandings of Jewish identities have contributed to why Italian ghetto fiction has not been a common critical category. In contrast to German, Polish, French, or English, let alone Hebrew and Yiddish, Italian literature is frequently ignored in investigations of what Jewish literature is.<sup>63</sup> The relative neglect of Italian works in Jewish literary studies is strange, given the long, diverse, and uninterrupted history of Jews in the Italian peninsula and the number of important Italian authors with Jewish heritage. Primo Levi (1989: XVI) characterized the Jewish Italian presence as remarkable: 'the integration of Italian Jewry is unique in the world.' Tullia Zevi (1989: XIII) makes a similar statement, focusing on the contrast between Italian ghettos and other segregated spaces: 'Our communities seldom found themselves in a situation of isolation or estrangement from their surroundings. Even our ghettos were never airtight shtetls.'<sup>64</sup> Jewish Italian literature prompts reconsiderations of some common frameworks for understanding cultures and a transnational perspective reveals some of the gaps in the structures that guide scholarship on identities.<sup>65</sup> Transnational Italian Studies shows how critical categories help to determine what is considered Italian, an identity of 'fusion and confusion' not only now, but also in the past.

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## Notes

1. For histories of the concept "ghetto" see Cheyette (2020) and Schwartz (2019).



2. 'The most prevalent form of literature produced and consumed by German Jews in the nineteenth century was a genre that concerned itself prominently and explicitly with the immediate Ashkenazic past: the genre of the ghetto tale popularized in the mid-nineteenth century by Leopold Kompert' (Hess, 2010: 72).
3. Numerous important works track the development of ghettos or explore the complexity of one particular site, see Bassi (2016, 2017, 2021) on the Venetian ghetto.
4. Characterizing the ghetto as a palimpsest, Shaul Bassi (2016: 139–58; 2017) has been instrumental in using the Venetian ghetto to reimagine *The Merchant of Venice* and the potential meaning of its spaces. See also Henderson (2017); Bassi and Rutter (2021). Further information on the production can be found at <https://www.colombari.org/>.
5. See Gilman (2017) on Shylock in German-Jewish literature.
6. For a full description of the publication history and analysis of this work see Cohen (1972).
7. See for instance the introduction and chapters by Robert Bonfil and Mark R Cohen in Ruderman (1992). See Salo W Baron's 1928 essay *Ghetto and Emancipation*, which was followed by much debate (1964).
8. Stemming in part from its representations in 19th-century German fiction, 'ghetto' began to refer as much to a mentality as a place: 'What the force of the Italian city-state had imposed upon the Jews in the sixteenth century had become at the end of the nineteenth a psychological phenomenon' (Baumgarten, 2015: 79).
9. In addition to being famous for bringing the term 'ghetto' to English-language literature, Zangwill is known for *The Melting Pot* (first staged in 1908), whose titular term also still plays a role in collective imagination.
10. Evangelista (2021: 204) provides a clear reading of the depressing end: "'Chad Gadya" projects a fundamentally pessimistic outlook on cosmopolitanism as a doctrine that divests the world of moral purpose and precludes the individual from developing a sense of community.'
11. 'Ich kann Ihnen auch nicht sagen, wann sie geschah. Vielleicht unter dem Dogen Alvise Mocenigo IV, aber es kann auch etwas früher oder später gewesen sein' (Rilke, 1998: 61).
12. 'si mutava lingua, dialetto, sorriso, secondo l'età, il sesso, la nazionalità del cliente' (Saba, 2001: 379). For a discussion of language in this story see Levis Sullam (2008).
13. "'Ich glaube, wir sind die beiden einzigen hier, die in Italien waren.'" "So–," ich bemühte mich etwas aufmerksamer zu sein –, "ha," dann ist es allerdings dringend notwendig, daß wir miteinander reden." Herr Baum lachte, "Ja, Italien – das ist doch noch etwas. Ich erzähle immer meinen Kindern – zum Beispiel nehmen Sie Venedig!" (Rilke, 1998: 59).
14. "'wer das einmal gesehen hat – diese Piazzetta – nicht wahr?" "Ja," entgegnete ich, "ich erinnere mich besonders gern der Fahrt durch den Kanal, dieses leisen lautlosen Hingleitens am Rande von Vergangenheiten." "Der Palazzo Franchetti," fiel ihm ein. "Di Cà Doro," – gab ich zurück. "Der Fischmarkt –" "Der Palazzo Vendramin –" "Wo Richard Wagner" – fügte er rasch, al sein gebildeter Deutscher, hinzu. Ich nickte: "Den Ponte, Wissen Sie?" Er lächelte mit Orientierung: "Selbstverständlich, und das Museum, die Akademie nicht zu vergessen, wo ein Tizian..." (Rilke, 1998: 60).
15. 'So hat sich Herr Baum einer Art Prüfung unterzogen, die etwas anstrengend war. Ich nahm mich vor, ihn durch eine Geschichte zu entschädigen' (Rilke, 1998: 60).
16. Bassi (2021: 14) discusses the minimal role the Venetian ghetto plays in Venice travel literature.
17. For Freedman (1972) this is part of the reason a Jewish traveller would want to visit Italy. Most analyses of Jewish Italian culture consider its longevity, see DiNapoli (2000), Pugliese (2002), Myers et al. (2008), Garvin and Cooperman (2008).

18. 'the ghetto walls did not prevent him [the typical Venetian Jew] from crossing over to Gentile society during the day and engaging in regular economic, social, and cultural exchange' (Myers, 2008: 6).
19. 'Io stesso ho udito dei vecchi raccontare con orgoglio e commozione che una vera folla si accalcava il Sabato sera alle porte di quelle botteghe, attendendo per ore il padrone o la padrona che le riaprisse. Perché – aggiungevano – quelle botteghe erano benedette (da Dio); erano una vera terra promessa' (Saba, 2001: 380).
20. 'sie quälten sie mit Abgaben, beraubten sie ihrer Güter und beschränkten immer mehr das Gebiet des Ghetto, so daß die Familien, die sich mitten in aller Not fruchtbar vermehrten, gezwungen waren, ihre Häuser aufwärts, eines auf das Dach des anderen zu bauen. Und ihre Stadt, die nicht am Meer lag, wuchs so langsam in den Himmel hinaus, wie in ein anderes Meer, und um den Platz mit dem Brunnen erhoben Seiten die steilen Gebäude wie die Wände irgendeines Riesenturms' (Rilke, 1998: 64).
21. 'Und die Menge unten wuchs und ließ ihn nicht aus den Augen: Hat er das Meer gesehen oder Gott, den Ewigen, in seiner Glorie?' (Rilke, 1998: 67).
22. 'Der reiche Melchisedech, in der Wunderlichkeit des hohen Alters, hatte seinen Mitbürgern, Söhnen und Enkeln einen befremdlichen Vorschlag gemacht. Er wollte immer das jeweilig höchste dieser winzigen Häuser, die sich in zahllosen Stockwerken über einander schoben, bewohnen' (Rilke, 1998: 65).
23. 'Sie hatte ihn in den Stunden, da sie mit ihm allein gewesen war, so groß und lange angeschaut, daß ihr schien, er wäre damals tief in ihre dunklen Augen gestürzt und gestorben, und jetzt begänne, in ihr selbst, ein neues, ewiges Leben, an das er als Christ doch geglaubt hatte' (Rilke, 1998: 65).
24. 'Wissen Sie, da ist dieser junge Adlige, dieser Antonio, oder wie er heißt, ein ganz und gar nicht schöner Charakter und dann: das Kind, dieses Kind!' (Rilke, 1998: 68).
25. 'Hier sitzt Marcantonio auf einem silbergestickten Kissen, dem greisen Juden zu Füßen, und erzählt von Venedig, wie von einem Märchen, das es nirgendwo jemals ganz so gegeben hat' (Rilke, 1998: 63).
26. 'Melchisedech giudeo con una novella di tre anelle cessa un gran pericolo dal Salaino apparecchiatogli' (Boccaccio, 1992: 78).
27. Rochelson (2015) and Evangelista (2021) have both read Zangwill's work set in Italy as part of his efforts to construct a more cosmopolitan image for himself: 'Zangwill equally sought to solidify his credentials as a significant figure in European thought, a commentator not just Jewish, but cosmopolitan and modern' (Rochelson, 2015: 138).
28. 'le case nuove, costruite come eccellente impiego di capitali per ricche vedove e timorosi di rischi maggior, erano, è vero, sogno di molti; ma, acquistate per speculazione, i nuovi proprietari continuavano, per conto proprio, ad abitare in quel ben amato Ghetto, pieno per essi di intimità e memorie' (Saba, 2001: 377).
29. While not as well known as Saba's poetry or novel *Ernesto*, these five stories are now crucial in analyses of Saba's identity. For more on Saba's Jewish identity see for instance Calimani (1998) and Parussa (2008).
30. This co-written article built on an earlier one in *PMLA* that is also relevant for the questions around the intersections of World Literature and Transnational Studies, *Jewish Literature/World Literature: Between the Local and the Transnational* (Levy and Schachter, 2015).
31. While Italian literature is not part of his analysis, Dan Miron's idea of 'contiguity' (2010) is significant for considering the long history of Jewish Italian literature.

32. 'The illegibility of Asian American ghettoization is central to shoring up larger national investments in denying class inequity, in legitimating the myth of America's exceptional classlessness' (Chang, 2010: 2).
33. Many Jewish Italians, more so than Jews from most other places, returned to their same cities after the Second World War.
34. 'La storia di Chaim Rumkowski non è propriamente una storia di Lager, benché nel Lager si concluda: è una storia di ghetto, ma così eloquente sul tema fondamentale dell'ambiguità umana provocata fatalmente dall'oppressione, che mi pare si attagli fin troppo bene al nostro discorso' (Levi, 2016: 1181).
35. 'Una storia come questa non è chiusa in sé. È piena, pone più domande di quante ne soddisfa, riassume in sé l'intera tematica della zona grigia, e lascia sospesi. Grida e chiama per essere capita, perché vi si intravede un simbolo, come nei sogni e nei segni del cielo' (Levi, 2016: 1185).
36. 'col potere veniamo a patti, volentieri o no, dimenticando che nel ghetto è cinto, che fuori del recinto stanno i signori della morte, e che poco lontano aspetta il treno' (Levi, 2016: 1186).
37. 'antisemitismo pareva un gioco; ed io potevo, senza rimorso, abbandonarmi alla comprensiva ironia, venata di nascosta tenerezza, verso persone e cose' (Saba, 2001: 363).
38. See also Sorensen (2018) for a brief description of Sarfatti's life that includes Zangwill and other bibliographic sources.
39. 'l'amorosa descrizione di un mondo lontano nella memoria e tuttavia nostro e presente nel batter del cuore' (Levi, 1953: 424).
40. 'Ancor oggi può succedere, frugando in certe bottegucce di Ferrara, di mettere le mani su cartoline vecchie di quasi cento anni' (Bassani, 1980: 45).
41. 'Si sposarono. Si allearono da principio presso il padre di lui, il Vecchio mercante di grani Salomone Corcos, e là, in via Vittoria, in quello che fino a non molto avanti era stato il ghetto, nacquero Jacopo, subito, e poi Ruben' (Bassani, 1980: 57).
42. 'dall'alto, e in qualche modo da fuori del tempo' (Bassani, 1980: 66).
43. 'Nel libro di storia gli etruschi stanno in principio, vicino agli egizi e agli ebrei. Ma senti, papà: secondo te erano più antichi gli etruschi o gli ebrei?' (Bassani, 1980: 250).
44. This history relates to the term 'the most ancient of minorities,' at times used to label Jewish Italians, and which also provides the title for an important collection on Jewish Italian literature and history (Pugliese, 2002).
45. 'quella ragazza fui io, o forse mia madre, o forse la madre di mia madre; io sono morta e rinata, e ad ogni nascita si inizia un nuovo processo incerto' (Morante, 1994: 16–17).
46. 'Gli ebrei di rione Regola hanno conservato l'abitudine di coricarsi per tempo. Poco dopo scesa la sera, sono già tutti in casa. Forse la memoria di un antico coprifuoco è rimasta nel loro sangue; di quando, al cadere delle tenebre, i cancelli del Ghetto stridevano con una invertebrata monotonia l'abitudine aveva resa familiare e dolce, a rammentare che la notte non era per gli ebrei, che per loro la notte era pericolo di essere presi, multati, imprigionati, battuti.' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 4)
47. 'Sebbene abiti in Trastevere, Celeste ha parenti nel Ghetto ed è ben nota all'intera *cheilà*' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 5).
48. 'A taluni di quei giovanotti non sembrò vero di poter disporre di un automezzo, sia pure carico di ebrei razzati, per fare un po' di giro turistico della città' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 44).
49. Jhumpa Lahiri discusses her relationship to Rome's ghetto in *In Other Words (In altre parole, 2015)*.
50. 'Chi scrive questo resoconto passò la mattinata del 16 ottobre in casa di una vicina. Costei si lasciò sfuggire che la razzia era preveduta' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 42).

51. 'Entriamo ora in una casa di via S. Ambrogio, nel Ghetto. Potremo seguire la razzia in tutte le sue fasi' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 25).
52. 'Queste povere parole sono tra le poche lasciateci da color nell'andarsene. Ci fanno sentire la voce di un essere tornato per un moment nella nostra vita, tra noi, quando a lui vivo la nostra vita ormai non apparteneva più, e già era entrato in quella nuova esistenza oscura e terribile' (Debenedetti, 2001a: 30)
53. 'Da ultimo quasi ogni giorno, col pretesto di qualche piccola merce da acquistare, ma in realtà senza una motivazione precisa, Ida all'uscita di scuola si avviava al quartiere ebreo. Si sentiva attirata là da un richiamo di dolcezza, quasi come l'odore di una stalla per un vitello, o quello di un suk per un'araba; e insieme da un impulso di necessità ossessiva, come di un pianeta gravitante intorno a una stella' (Morante, 2003: 363).
54. 'Gli abitanti, per la maggior parte, facevano i venditori ambulanti o gli stracciauoli, che erano i soli mestieri permessi dalla legge agli ebrei nei passati secoli, e che poi fra poco, nel corso della guerra, gli sarebbero stati proibiti, anche questi, dalla nuove leggi fasciste' (Morante, 2003: 324).
55. For more on the construction of memory and identity in Italy after the Second World War see Foot (2009).
56. Scholars have called attention to the ambiguities of antisemitism in Italy, see for instance Klein (2018), Levis Sullam (2015), and Stille (2003).
57. 'dove la popolazione aveva un carattere già troppo meridionale perché la malattia nordica dell'antisemitismo vi potesse attecchire' (Saba, 2001: 377).
58. The many complex and varied discussions of how colonialism, racism, and antisemitism intersect and are in tension are beyond this article. See especially Cheyette (2000, 2014, 2017) who not only focuses on this topic throughout his scholarship, but is also the author of *The Ghetto: A Very Short Introduction* (2020). In Cheyette's *Diasporas of the Mind*, which examines the intricate crossings between ideas of race and Jewishness, Shylock is a key point of reference, especially in works by V.S. Naipual and Caryl Phillips.
59. Bassi's introduction to his edited collection of Venetian ghetto stories begins with a reflection on how uses of the term in 2012 Nairobi connect to Venice's long, continuous history of the term (Bassi, 2021: 11).
60. For a thorough examination of this shift see Duncan (2019).
61. 'Aveva amato, nella sua giovinezza, un solo romanzo: *I sognatori del Ghetto* di Israel Zangwill' (Ginzburg, 1999: 167).
62. This is according to n-gram: [https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=ghetto%2Ccello%2Cspaghetti%2Cgelato&year\\_start=1800&year\\_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct\\_url=t1%3B%2Cghetto%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Ccello%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cspaghetti%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cgelato%3B%2Cc0](https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=ghetto%2Ccello%2Cspaghetti%2Cgelato&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Cghetto%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Ccello%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cspaghetti%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cgelato%3B%2Cc0) (accessed 29 April 2023).
63. See the minimal presence or absence of Italian in Wisse (2003), Miron (2010), Jelen et al. (2011), Wirth-Nesher (1994). For significant collections that include Italian literature, see for instance Liska and Nolden (2008) and Zepp et al. (2020).
64. The use of shtetl here suggests the range of other terms associated with 'ghetto,' which are beyond this article because of their complexity. See for instance Parati (2017: 152–3) on 'banlieu.'
65. Jacob Katz's *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation, 1770–1870* (1998: 3, originally published in 1973) hardly mentions Italy, leaving it out of this important analysis that future scholars drew upon: 'It was only in *Western Europe – Germany, Austria, Hungary, France, Holland, and England* – that Jewish emancipation, in its wider sense, occurred more or less simultaneously' (emphasis added). Italy is not seen as central, or

even necessary, for this exploration of Western European Jews. Since Italian Jews are a mix of Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Italkim, and more, they are also often harder to place in works that focus on these distinctions.

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