

Shmuel ben Shimshon, dates from 1389. The cemetery is located on the island of Lido at the south of the lagoon, called the “Door of Venice.” The island closes off the Venetian Lagoon and ships must pass by it to enter. Now it is filled with hotels and beaches, but in the 14th century it was empty, save for a monastery. For some reason, the Jews were given land right next to a church, which greatly displeased the local Christians, who intermittently engaged in grave desecration.

When Venetian government officials learned of the issue, they put a stop to it. They affirmed the right of the Jews to bury there and permitted them to build a fence around the area. As time passed, the community bought more and more land to add to the cemetery.

All the cemeteries of Lido suffered much abuse. In every war, opposing forces knocked down many of the tombstones so that enemies couldn’t hide behind them. As a result, many were not replaced in their proper places. The most ancient part of the Jewish cemetery, therefore, is a collection of old tombstones that are unlikely to be resting on the actual burial plots of the people they were made for.

Today, the cemetery is still in use, divided between the ancient cemetery, which is for tourists, and the new cemetery, which is currently used for burials. Seemingly, there are no Jews left who know that their ancestors are buried in the old cemetery. The current Jewish community is responsible for maintaining and restoring the site.

# The Glass of Murano



During its centuries as the epicenter of the finest imported and manufactured goods in Europe, Venice was the primary source of luxuries essential for any aristocrat, nobleman or monarch. One of the most popular and beautiful artifacts that could be obtained from Venice was the famed colored glass of the island of Murano in the Venetian Lagoon.

Today, colored glass doesn’t seem particularly special. It can be obtained without difficulty or expense. Hundreds of years ago, though, it was a rare, expensive and prized commodity that added striking beauty to glass implements. Murano glass stood out even then, though, because of the unique way it was crafted. Ordinary colored glass is plain glass with colored pigments applied to the surface. These will rub off or fade over time. The prized glass-blowers of Murano, though, possessed a secret method by which they were able to infuse the glass itself with color, ensuring that it would never fade.

Glassmaking had risen to become Venice’s main industry by the end of the 1200s. The Great Council passed laws banning the importation of foreign glass. Venice was very concerned to preserve its status as the premier fine glassmaker of Europe. It therefore jealously guarded the trademark glass-blowing methods of its craftsmen. Another law from the same period banned



A colorful and intricately designed Murano goblet, early 1800s.



Murano glassworker using his special glass-blowing technique.

## Photo GALLERY

### Venice’s Jewish Cemetery

The cemetery, established in 1386, has undergone many tough times. None of the headstones in the historic part of the cemetery can be placed with certainty upon the true resting places of those recorded in them.

Here, an official from the *kehillah* came specially to guide us around the cemetery, explaining the symbolism on the tombstones. Many important and wealthy families, especially those who escaped from Spain in 1492, carved special family crests and other symbols onto them.





the employment of foreign workers in the glass workshops. This would prevent any leaks of the top-secret glassmaking methods.

In 1291, Venice passed a law requiring all glassmakers to move away from the main part of the city to the island of Murano. The excuse lawmakers used was that they were concerned about fire. If the fire in one of the glass furnaces got out of control it could burn down the mostly wooden buildings of the city. The reality is that Venice wanted to isolate the glassmakers to ensure their secrets were never revealed. This became more obvious in 1295, when a law was enacted banning glassmakers from ever leaving Venice. The Glassmakers Guild was established and enacted stringent rules and regulations for the craftsmen.

Over time, Murano became known for a number of exclusive, beautiful glassmaking techniques. These included crystalline glass, enameled glass (a glass coating on another substance), aventurine (glass including threads of gold inside it), and millefiori (intricate, multi-colored patterns in the glass). Glassmakers used special tools to form the glass, including tongs to form the hot glass, iron rods to add finishing touches and glass-cutting clippers. In the 15th century, master artisan Angelo Barovier discovered the process for producing clear glass. This allowed Murano glassmakers to become the only producers of mirrors in Europe.

Glassmakers were subject to extremely strict policies. They could not leave the Venetian Republic—for life. Exportation of the professional glassmaking secrets was punishable by death. In exchange, and to encourage the continuation of the glass-making tradition, Venetians gave immense privileges to the masters. Glassmakers became the most prominent citizens of the island. They were allowed to wear swords. They were immune from prosecution, and their daughters were permitted to marry into Venice's most affluent families.

When Venice lost its grip on Mediterranean trade starting in the 17th century, Murano glass gradually declined along with



Paperweights made from colorful Murano glass.



A Murano glassworker adding color to his creation. In medieval times the methods for making colored glass were a closely guarded secret. Violators were subject to the death penalty.



Professional craftsman creating his next masterpiece.

the rest of the economy. It still remained a center for creative and quality glass-blowing until Napoleon conquered Venice in 1797 and abolished all the guilds. For decades, only a handful of glass workshops remained on the islands. Beginning in the late 19th century, Murano glass experienced a comeback and it is again today a center of production of fine glass that is exported all over the world. ■

## When America's First Lady Visits Venice

As *Zman* was going to print with this issue, Michelle Obama and her two daughters were beginning a vacation in Venice. As with anything in Venice, the water was of primary concern. The Obama ladies cruised around Venice in an exclusive, wood-paneled limo boat, flanked by a police motorcade... or is that "watercade"?



Special police divers and snorkelers scoured the canals for anything that might pose a security risk to the First Family.



Michelle Obama and her teenage daughters, accompanied by Secret Service agents, aboard a wood-paneled water limo, which is being escorted by a small fleet of Venetian police and security boats.