

Chanukah with Cantor Paul Kowarsky in Venice

By: Cantor Paul Kowarsky

I am on the train en route to Florence. I really had an amazing, interesting and great learning experience in Venice. My accommodation was quaint, beautiful and very conveniently situated. The first night I got lost and nearly walked down some steps into a canal. There is water everywhere with boats and bridges all around. This is a fascinating city - it is hard to believe that everything is built on the water.

I walked, went on the vaporetti, which are the motor boat buses going up and down the Grand Canal, which is like the main "street" in Venice. I walked through the ghetto, originally established in the 1500s; went on a guided tour of the ghetto and its 5 Shuls - hundreds of years old. Visited the Jewish Museum and the Old Aged Home, where there are 8 people.

I spent time and learned a little at the Lubavitch Yeshiva in the Ghetto, attended services there, and ate at the Rosh Yeshiva's House with his Chassidim. His name is Noam Wagner, and he comes from Toronto, where his parents still live.

On Shabbat I attended services in the famous Levantine Shul, which is the one that is used at this time of the year. It is beautiful. The service is so different from any I have ever attended. Apparently, it is a mixture of Italian, Venetian and Yemenite customs and traditions - many of them lovely. Before the opening of the Ark, I was given a big key, which I figured was to literally unlock and open the wooden Ark and the Parochet — curtain. Fascinating experience the whole service.

I had lunch at the only kosher restaurant in Venice, which is owned by the Chabad, and is used to feed all Jewish visitors, who want kosher food for Shabbat, and there is no charge. Amazing what the Lubavitch are doing all over the world.

Saturday night I went to a Concert in a magnificent 14th Century Concert Hall not far from my hotel. The Orchestra Di Venezia presented a concert of chamber music by Vivaldi, Albinoni and other Venetian composers, with dancers, solo violin and tenor soloist, who did an average job of 'Per la Gloria'. All in all it was wonderful as they were all dressed in typical 1700 Century clothing. Now I know where the Chassidim got the pants up to the knees with white stockings from - and also the wigs.

Sunday night I went to the Chanukah Lighting ceremony organized by Chabad in the Ghetto. There was a nice little crowd, and the square was set up with the large electric Chanukiah, and smaller ones with candles. There were tables adorned with traditional Chanukah foods, and a table with an olive oil press, and other stuff for using the oil to light the candles as they had done in the Beit Hamikdash. The Lubavitch Shaliach asked me to sing during the ceremony, and after the candle lighting by one of the Yeshiva boys, I sang to much applause and some kisses from the boys.

There was recorded music and dancing, and then the olives were pressed with the help in every way possible, by the kids standing around. Then the wicks were rolled by the kids, and put into the oil Chanukiah, and lit. What a fabulous learning experience for the kids! Of course, before the lighting started, a wonderful young Yeshiva boy, with whom I became very friendly, spoke to the people about Chanukah - in Italian, which is his first language

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since he comes from Milano. The older gentleman who had given me the key to open the Aron Kodesh when I was in Shul on Shabbat was there with his son. They were born in Venice and have always lived there. He is the Gabbai of the Community, and raved about my singing. He wanted to know why I did not tell him who I was when he handed me the key so that he could have given me Maftir. He asked me to stay another Shabbat to do Maftir- next time I promised to let him know in advance. Their last name is Foa — VERY PROUD SEPHARDIM — every morning when they say the Brachot, they add one: 'Blessed are You who did not make me an Ashkenazi.' Afterwards I went to the Yeshiva where I joined in Ma'ariv, and then lit my own candles there. Venezia was fabulous, and now I am looking forward to Firenzi.