Course title and description
FORGED IN VENICE
The year 2016 marks the 500th anniversary of the invention of the ghetto (Venetian for “foundry”). We shall examine the contested yet often surprisingly close relationships between Christians and Jews in the relatively tolerant Republic of Venice that also established the world’s first ghetto. Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” will be used to examine prevailing attitudes among Englishmen towards both Venetian society and the Jews in the Renaissance. To explore these relationships through the lens of individual experience, we will focus on three exemplary participants in the economic, social and religious life of Venice and its ghetto: merchant princess Gracia Mendes Nasi (1510–1569), protector of the Jews of Ferrara; poetess and socialite Sarah Copia Sulam (1592–1641), who founded a literary salon in the ghetto and maintained an intimate correspondence with a prominent monk; and the “Renaissance rabbi” Leone da Modena (1571–1648), who delivered sermons in churches and composed - in English! - a commissioned treatise on Jewish practices for King James I of Bible fame.

Brief CV
Michael Thaler is a professor emeritus of pediatrics at UCSF where he currently serves as president of the Emeriti Faculty Association. Following his retirement from UCSF, he taught undergraduate courses for 11 years as visiting professor of history at UC Santa Cruz. He has taught at OLLI-Berkeley for 10 years and currently serves on the Advisory Research and Evaluation Team. He gathered the documentary materials for the present course while participating in a 6-week NEH Summer Institute research program on “Venice and the Jews”.

Syllabus for OLLI Venice Course
Who was the Merchant of Venice? The answer is as astonishing as the historical facts behind the play’s main characters. Offered on the 500th anniversary of the world’s first ghetto, the course explores the complex relationships among Christians and Jews in the Venetian republic. Wedged between Christian Europe and the Ottoman empire, Venice became a vortex of cultural and political cross-currents that propelled the city to mercantile preeminence. The Venetians found Jews from Spain, Germany and the Levant to be crucial in these developments. The course will cover the historic origins, the compelling intellectual and spiritual concerns, and enduring footprint that distinguished the first ghetto in the
world, established by the Venetian Congress in April 1561. The lens of Shakespeare’s drama will help us bring into focus the historic stage and the Jewish actors who played central roles in developments that shaped the Renaissance and ushered in the modern era.

Class 1.
Historical Venice - The rise, preeminence and decline of the Most Serene Republic of Venice. Why the first ghetto was established in Venice at the dawn of modernity. Five hundred years of the ghetto (video): The ghetto is gradually established for 3 Jewish “Nations”, according to their place in the Venetian economy, each with its own distinctive synagogues, religious practices and customs. Jewish pawnbrokers and rag merchants who had escaped persecution in other parts of Italy and Germany moved into the Ghetto Nuevo in 1516; Turko-Jewish silk and spice traders from Constantinople and the Balkans were assigned the adjoining Ghetto Vecchio in 1541; finally, wealthy Jewish and “New Christian” merchants expelled from the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) occupied an added section (Ghetto Nuovissimo) in 1630. Tour of the ghetto with its 500-year old “skyscrapers” and 5 exquisite existing synagogues. An overview of the famous Venetto university at Padua, the first to allow Jewish students who were taught medicine and sciences by instructors who pioneered the scientific revolution (Galileo, Vesalius, Malphigi, et al).

Class 2.
Christians and Jews in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (ca. 1590): was Shylock really the merchant? Valid echoes, anti-Semitic stereotypes, Venetian reflections. Representative historical personality (the real Shylock?): merchant princess and conversa Gracia Mendes Nasi (1510–1569), “the woman who defied kings” (and queens).

Class 3.
A portrait of Shylock’s daughter: Amazing grace in the ghetto - leading ghetto woman doer and thinker, and her role in Venetian society. Representative historical personality (the real Jessica and her Christian lover Lorenzo?): poetess, beauty, and defender of the faith Sara Copia Sullam (1592–1641). Her epistolary relationship with a smitten Jesuit, and her polemics with a bishop wielding the Inquisition as his final argument.
Class 4.
Renaissance Venice - Christians and Jews living together and apart.
Representative historical personality: Rabbi Leone (Aryeh) da Modena (1571–1648), the complete Renaissance intellectual. Science, mysticism (kabbalah), identity, and the origins of the King James Bible.