L'ISLE SUR LA SORGUE: (Provence)

Montparnasse Cemetery: This island exists in the shallow and crystal clear river Sorgue that flows through and around the town in various natural beds and canals, actually one of the largest springs on earth. The first settlement where l'Isle sur la Sorgue stands today was probably a fishing village in the swamps. During the unruly times after the fall of the Roman Empire, many people fled into the marshes for security reasons. The small fishing village grew into a small town, originally called St. Laurent, after the saint to whom the church was dedicated. Later it was renamed Isle de Venisse (after the Comtat Venaissin - not Venice) and later l'Isle sur la Sorgue. Fishing remained an important industry; the Sorgue and its many tributaries further downstream were the main source of fish in the Papal Territories in France. Over time the swamps were drained and the countryside surrounding l'Isle sur la Sorgue became an important center for fruit and vegetable growing. In the 14th century, most Jews were expelled from the Kingdom of France and many took refuge in the Papal Territories. They were allowed to settle in four towns, Avignon, Cavaillon, Carpentras and l'Isle sur la Sorgue, an arrangement which lasted until the French Revolution. As in most of Europe, their economic activity was severely restricted, primarily to used clothing, used goods, and money lending. In 1720 when the Pope allow them to work in silk and wool, l'Isle sur la Sorgue started to boom. 120 of the 200 silk works were owned by Jews. Up until the French revolution, a rich Jewish cultural life bloomed in the town. Today little is left; the synagogue was pillaged during the French revolution and the Jewish population was partially absorbed or left the country. Today only some street names (Place de la Juiverie) and the Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of the town remain. [January 2008]