



***La povertà degli ebrei: Voci dal ghetto.* By Luciano Allegra.  
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Luciano Allegra's latest, important monograph is at once a social history of the Jewish poor in Mantua during the first half of the eighteenth century and an effort to produce a dispassionate account that sidesteps the inevitable distortions that pepper primary sources as well as centuries of Christian prejudice on Jewish economic roles. The author aims to achieve the latter goal by means of incidental remarks more than a systematic exposition of his method, but his empirical findings are inseparable from his larger ambition to give voice to the protagonists of his story (as suggested by the book's subtitle, "Voices from the Ghetto").<sup>1</sup>

In Mantua, as elsewhere in the Jewish world, charity within the ghetto was funded by the taxes that every Jewish resident had to pay to the community; the burden was allocated proportionally along the social pyramid, and those who defaulted on their payments were threatened with public shame. All families in economic need received free medical care, and those who asked for help might be allotted weekly monetary subsidies (and, on occasion, other resources). The recipients of community largesse were at liberty to use these donations as they wished.

Allegra estimates that at least half, if not more, of the Jewish population in eighteenth-century Mantua lived in temporary or permanent poverty. His case rests on a meticulous excavation of the archives of the city's Jewish community, including a vast number of petitions written by those who requested monetary subsidies from a board comprised of three elected leaders ("i masari della carità," 29), who rotated in and out of the office every three years. Of the 1,627 petitions identified by the author across all community records for the period 1700–1750, 1,236 were prompted by poverty and were written by a total of 763 supplicants. A great many of these petitioners pleaded their case more than once (although these numbers do not square entirely with the

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<sup>1</sup>All translations within quotation marks are mine.

total of 1,228 supplicants reported two pages later [37]). A total of 763 supplicants means that each year, on average, fifteen new individuals petitioned the charity board for aid in a ghetto that counted roughly 1,800 inhabitants. Most nuclear families were composed of four to five members. Assuming that the supplicants were principally heads of households, this means that approximately 3,500 individuals sought to receive charitable assistance over the fifty years covered by this study.

One can only admire the breadth of Allegra's research, especially considering that the petitions claiming poverty are not collected separately but dispersed across 120 different folders. It is not entirely clear, however, why the first half of the eighteenth century was chosen as the focus for this inquiry or what to deduce from the variations in the average number of those in need who took to the pen seeking relief from their dire circumstances—zero in 1710 and some 300 in 1740. Given that it is not possible to correlate these fluctuations to macroeconomic conditions inside and outside of the ghetto, one is left wondering whether these petitions represented a new genre at the beginning of the eighteenth century and, if so, what are the implications of this novelty for the statistics built on them.

The majority (60%) of petitioners were men, but widows were the single largest group by gender and marital status (20% of the total and 52.5% of all women petitioners). While Allegra devotes several moving pages to the relationship between poverty and family crises, including to the plight of widows and their minor children, it might have been interesting to dedicate a separate chapter to widows alongside the existing thematic sections and chapters on physical and mental disability (a fresh and important topic treated with great sensitivity), family disputes, dowries, and living conditions. He does note that working-age children who could provide a source of income sometimes abandoned their mothers, but never their fathers. He also stresses that husbands could leave their wives without providing for them or their children, while wives could only seek divorce if their husbands converted to Christianity (an instance that occurred a mere six times in the course of the eighteenth century). Considering the reported conflicts about dowry restitution among male kin and in-laws, the assertion that “women were absolute owners” (175) of their dowries seems dubious.

Allegra argues fairly convincingly that these petitions were written by the supplicants themselves (as illustrated by the uncertain handwriting and language of the documents reproduced at pp. 158–74). In his telling, this feature sets them apart from the petitions analyzed by Natalie Zemon Davis in her *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987), which were jotted down by notaries with occasional intervention by men of law. Allegra is cognizant of the biases inherent in any claims made by those in need, including their tendency to dramatize their

situation, but insists that these petitions accurately reflect the “reality” (18) in which Mantua’s Jewish poor lived and are representative of their “voices” (124, 333). Some passages of the book are written with a passion that we more commonly associate with social criticism than academic prose. Allegra can be sarcastic when challenging the stereotypes that have clouded his topic, while displaying great empathy toward his subjects. Long excerpts from these petitions and touching renditions of their content offer a vivid sense of the extreme poverty in which the supplicants lived: they slept on floors in overcrowded spaces, were assailed by hunger, had to tend to elderly and infirm people, or deal with criminal relatives banned from the community. It is this everyday reality that Allegra seeks to recover.

But who are the “the standard-bearers of post-modernism” (17) against whom the author fulminates and who would supposedly deny that such a social history is possible? Only their equally elusive enemies (Arnaldo Momigliano and Carlo Ginzburg) are cited. If one of the impressive features of this book is the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, what instigates the need for a certain crude positivism? Allegra himself recognizes that none of the texts or numbers he encounters in the archives are transparent and objective. Why then pit rhetoric against truth? Is there anything we can learn from the way in which supplicants presented their case? Did women plead differently from men? Why did some write in the first and some in the third person? Was literacy universal among Jewish men and women? Were the illiterate impoverished?

Nowhere else in the Italian regions where Jews resided from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries are similar petitions preserved in bulk, or they never existed in the first place. The last chapter of the book therefore takes recourse in a great many other types of records to measure the incidence of poverty in various Italian Jewish communities. The goal is to show that Mantua was far from an exception and that before emancipation the destitute constituted never less than 30 percent of the members of even the more well-to-do Italian Jewish communities. The data for this last chapter were gathered in part during a collaborative project financed by the Italian Ministry of Education, University, and Research (MIUR) and are now housed and available to the public in the Centro di Documentazione Ebraica Contemporanea in Milan.

The book is framed as a take-down of a prejudice that remains very much alive among the non-Jewish majority, especially outside of academic circles, to wit: “Jews are rich and have always been rich” (1). Here one should recall that Jewish history is hardly a large field of inquiry in Italian universities, where it is not even an official academic subject. Meanwhile, Italy remains a deeply Catholic country in which both manifest and covert antisemitism have deep roots. This context helps explain the intensity with which Allegra seeks

to dismantle stereotypes. At the same time, he aims to contribute to the recent historiography on the poor segments of the Jewish population, the scarcity of which he laments, mentioning only three monographs: Mark Cohen's *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton, 2005), Debra Kaplan's *The Patrons and their Poor: Jewish Community and Public Charity in Early Modern Germany* (Philadelphia, 2021), and Tirtsah Levi Bernfeld's *Poverty and Welfare among the Portuguese Jews in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Liverpool, 2012). In fact, if one takes essays and articles into consideration, the scholarship on the topic is richer. But authors who write from within the field of Jewish history have somewhat different premises and goals than does Allegra. They are less adamant about correcting the "sheer lies" (276) that recur in Christian writing on Jewish economic prowess and more intent on illuminating the internal dynamics of Jewish societies and their treatment of the poor.

Allegra describes the administrative apparatus by which the Mantua Jewish community fulfilled their charitable obligations as "well-articulated and efficient" (34). He also implies that the Jewish officials in charge of distributing subsidies to petitioners did so with absolute discretion regarding the sums that they allocated to each one. Thus, of the ninety poor who received a monetary alimony between September and December 1734, the subventions varied between thirty-six and 270 lire, with 78 percent of the beneficiaries receiving less than 130 lire. What principles governed this differential distribution? Was there an objective scale for deciding the amount of each subsidy? Nowhere do the primary sources appear to address this crucial issue, but Allegra is well aware that charity in the early modern period had the double task of relieving hunger and extreme economic distress and rebalancing social hierarchies that were considered God-given or at least necessary to social stability. A large literature discusses this topic with regard to Catholic and Protestant systems of poverty relief, and one wonders to what extent the two goals underwrote Jewish charity in Mantua as well. One also suspects that clientelism and personal animosity might have played a role in the highly personalized form of charity distribution adopted in the ghetto of Mantua, where everyone knew everyone else.

Petitions are by definition dialogic documents. Here we only hear the voices of the supplicants, although their fate depended on those in charge of hearing their pleas. Intent on offering a bottom-up perspective on Jewish poverty, Allegra appropriately stresses that Jewish societies were far from cohesive and harmonious. No natural solidarity bounded Jewish families and individuals together (except in the face of external threats). However, he does not mention any conflict generated by charity nor whether cleavages other than wealth informed the social stratification of the inhabitants of the ghetto. Elsewhere, as we know, Jewish leaders used charity to reinforce intra-Jewish

hierarchies and segmentation. In Livorno, one of the cities to which Allegra compares Mantua, access to dowry funds for poor maidens were restricted by “ethnic” criteria, and the poorest members of the community were occasionally sent off to distant locations to improve the public image of the resident Jewish community in the eyes of Christian rulers and subjects.

The advantage of Allegra’s noninternalist approach is the attention devoted to the influence of the antisemitic environment on Jews’ social conditions. In eighteenth-century Mantua, as in most of Western Europe after the late Middle Ages, Jews were only allowed to be occupied in banking, commerce, and certain artisanal activities or to serve Jewish institutions and patrons (such as rabbis, tutors, or kosher butchers). In Allegra’s estimation, the ultimate causes of the high rate of poverty in the Mantua ghetto and elsewhere were the (unfair) competition of Christian businesses and the (excessive and arbitrary) fiscal demands made on Jewish communities by the state and sometimes the church. The Jewish poor were everywhere: “the surprising thing is actually that, for better or for worse, they could get by” (290). Reforms enacted by eighteenth-century enlightened rulers to rebalance the fiscal burden assessed on real estate rarely benefitted Jews, who were forbidden from owning and renting out property (although in Mantua they were permitted to do so after 1779). By including an analysis of how antisemitic social and economic policy affected Jews in Mantua, Allegra points toward yet another axis of comparison: Were Jews poorer than the local Christian population, as he claims? Although we are not yet able to answer this question, his stress on Christian notions of Jews’ interlaced religious and economic infidelity reminds us of the importance of analyzing the intersection of cultural representations and social practices.

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