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The Jews of Early Modern Venice

edited by Robert C. Davis, Benjamin Ravid,
 Professor Benjamin Ravid

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three harshest sentences in these two centuries were in fact passed on defendants charged with this offense: Felice Magalotti, alias Samuel Levi from Salonika; Pietro Vincenzo Maria Sandoval, alias Salomone de Cameo from Rome; and Francesco Leoncini, alias Mose Israel, also from Salonika,⁴² all sentenced to the galleys (for eighteen months, three years, and seven years, respectively). But it is important to remember that around two-thirds of the accusations of judaizing consisted of mere denunciations that did not lead to trials. Even when trials were actually held, with the exception of the above-mentioned cases, either they did not proceed to a verdict or else the defendants were condemned only to spiritual punishments.

Of course, when the Holy Office did aggressively pursue judaizing Conversos, its actions generally met the firm opposition of the Venetian authorities, as evidenced by such notorious cases in the first half of the seventeenth century as that of the Diaz family, one of Portuguese New Christians. In July 1621 Jorge Francisco Diaz, who was residing in the ghetto as a Jew under the name of Rafael Abendana, was arrested together with his son by the Holy Office on the charge that they had lived with their family as Christians in the Venetian parish of San Marcuola from 1602 to 1615. In response, Diaz produced a safe-conduct issued by Doge Antonio Priuli on 27 October 1618, granting him, his family, and his son-in-law, David Senior, permission "to contact people, deal with them, sail and negotiate, and live in the ghetto of [Venice] as freely as the other Ponentine Jews, in spite of the fact that they had lived in this city for a few years under Christian name, profession, and garments." Because of this privilege, the Senate decided that Rafael and his son should be set free but ordered them and the others mentioned in the safe-conduct to leave the lands of the republic within three days. The judges of the Holy Office were much vexed by this sentence, which they thought deprived them of all their authority. But when the apostolic delegate expressed the Inquisition's dismay to members of the Senate, pointing out that two of Francisco Diaz's sons had been baptized in Venice, Doge Priuli himself replied, in defense of the Venetian authorities, noting that the release of the Diaz family had been inevitable, out of respect to his own written word, but that they had been deprived of their safe-conduct and banished from the republic as soon as their crime had been established. After this,

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ished from the republic as soon as their crime had been established. After this, the Holy Office could only regret the way the release had taken place, rather than object to the release itself.⁴³

The sense of safety and impunity felt by judaizing Marranos living in Venice in the first half of the seventeenth century is also attested to by other, indirect, sources such as notarial acts testaments. In certain wills drawn up by the Venetian notary Giovanni Piccini in behalf of some Portuguese Jews, his clients'

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Jewish and Christian names appear next to each other, providing indisputable evidence that all of them were judaizers. For example, in a testament dated 1 March 1625 the testator appears as both Abram Baruch and Diogo Nunes. The fact that Iberian Jews could safely refer to their past as Christians in front of a Christian notary tells much about the atmosphere of protection and impunity that the Marranos enjoyed in Venice throughout the seventeenth century. The Holy See could hardly approve of this situation, and Cardinal Francesco Albizzi, *assessore* of the Roman Inquisition, complained that the ghetto had in fact become a shelter for anyone who might want to judaize; such crimes were impossible to investigate, and since the judaizers were protected by the same privileges granted by the republic to the Levantine Sephardic Jews, "neither will it be possible to punish them, under the pretext that they are granted with a public promise."⁴⁴

In short, the Inquisition found it almost impossible to prevent the apostasy of these New Christians, who could be quite fearless about revealing their Christian past. Thus, the Spanish-speaking Jewish shopkeeper Benjamin Cordovero, formerly Alvaro da Silva, told two Franciscans in 1654 that he had been born in Madrid and came to Venice in order to wear "a cardinal's hat" (i.e., the red head-covering required of the Jews of Venice), which had been forbidden for him to wear in Spain. Cordovero also denied the validity of the baptisms that New Christians had originally been given in Spain, because they had originally

