

# From Catalonia to the Caribbean: The Sephardic Orbit from Medieval to Modern Times

*Essays in Honor of Jane S. Gerber*

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# The Merchants at the Casino: Sephardic Elites and Leisure Time in Eighteenth-Century Livorno

*Francesca Bregoli*

In 1712, a *casino* was established in the Jewish neighborhood of the Mediterranean port of Livorno. This venue, which stayed open until 1720, appears unique, as no similar Jewish institutions have been described in comparable communities. This essay explores the significance of the *casino* for the relationship of Livornese Jewry with Tuscan culture and the state by investigating internal documents from the Livornese Jewish community (*nazione ebrea*) in light of analogous Tuscan institutions. By considering an episode in the relatively little studied history of early modern Jewish leisure, we gain insight into values and aspirations of members of one of the principal Sephardic communities of the western Mediterranean, with broader implications for eighteenth-century Jewish historiography.<sup>1</sup> My discussion builds on an academic tradition greatly indebted to Jane Gerber, a pioneering advocate for the scholarly study of Sephardic history, whom I am also fortunate to know as a supportive colleague and generous mentor at our shared institutional home at the City University of New York.

## 1 Molho's Room for Entertainment

In March 1712, Moise Molho, a Livornese plume maker, sent a supplication to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de' Medici. For the past fifteen years, he claimed, "some members of the principal families of the *nazione ebrea*" had gathered in his workshop "for honest conversation and entertainment." Never had this gathering of merchants given rise to "scandal or any differences;" rather, his guests behaved "with the utmost decorum and friendship to each other."

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1 Some work has been conducted on early modern Ashkenazic Jews and leisure time. See Nimrod Zinger, "Away from Home: Travelling and Leisure Activities among German Jews in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 56 (2011): 53–78; Robert Liberles, *Jews Welcome Coffee: Tradition and Innovation in Early Modern Germany* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012).

Although the meetings had been “always permitted by the *massari* (lay leaders) and tolerated by the Governor of Livorno,” he stated, the current leaders had prohibited him from keeping the space open and forbade the gathering with a decision that demonstrated “little respect to the quality of the individuals” in attendance.<sup>2</sup>

In a move well documented among Livornese Jewish businessmen, Molho opposed the *massari*'s ruling, which evidently encroached on the extra income this activity brought him, by means of a personal petition addressed to the highest Tuscan authority.<sup>3</sup> Should his supplication be accepted, the Tuscan government would lend official approval to a previously informal, entirely private enterprise. To strengthen Molho's case, emphasis was placed not on the humble supplicant, but instead on the needs of his prominent patrons. The plume maker thus requested official permission for the merchants to continue assembling in his rooms “with his assistance, or anything else that will satisfy” them. For good measure, he also asked for protection from harassment (presumably by the current *massari*) for whoever assisted the guests.<sup>4</sup>

When the central government in Florence asked for further elucidation on the matter, Governor of Livorno Mario Tornaquinci confirmed that “many Jewish merchants among the most prominent of this hub” indeed used to gather in Molho's rooms, without causing any scandal. Having personally met with the *massari*, Tornaquinci additionally reported that the lay leaders themselves viewed the space as a boon for the local Jewish youth, “to distract them from other pastimes.” This was a significant departure from earlier precedents. When one Agnolo Azevedo sent a similar supplication to Grand Duke Ferdinand II de' Medici in 1641, his request was denied after the *massari*'s objection.<sup>5</sup> Molho was luckier. Tornaquinci recommended that the Grand Duke give his permission, which was issued on April 4, 1712.<sup>6</sup>

But what kind of entertainment room did Molho's manage? And why did the *massari* object to it, before eventually agreeing to its utility? In later

2 Deliberaçõims do Governo, September 26, 1712, libro B, 45v, Archivio della Comunità Ebraica di Livorno, Livorno (hereafter *Deliberaçõims*). Molho's statement, quoted in the minutes of the deliberations of the Jewish council of Livorno, dated from March 1712. I consulted these documents in a microfilm put at my disposal by the heirs of Professor Renzo Toaff, whom I wish to thank for their generosity.

3 For examples of individual supplications bypassing the authority of the *massari*, see Francesca Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment: Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 162–164, 171, 183–184, 191–192.

4 *Deliberaçõims*, September 26, 1712, libro B, 45v, quoting a document from March 1712.

5 Renzo Toaff, *La Nazione Ebraica a Pisa e a Livorno (1591–1700)* (Florence: L.S. Olschki 1990), 310–311.

6 *Deliberaçõims*, September 26, 1712, libro B, 45v, quoting the permission issued on April 4, 1712.

documents, the Tuscan and Jewish administrations refer to the space as a *casino*. In June 1713, for instance, Tornaquinci contacted the *massari* again regarding the “privilege [*grazia*] granted to the *nazione ebrea* of Livorno concerning the *casino* to offer solace to the merchants and all principal traders of said nation.”<sup>7</sup> The regulations that the *massari* issued the following year to control behavior within the venue also refer to it as *casino*.<sup>8</sup> The contemporary English word *casino*, while derived from the Italian, should not be confused with its early modern homophone. The term had a specific meaning in early modern Italy, which is worth exploring further.

## 2 *Casini* in Early Modern Tuscany

In the Renaissance the word *casino* (literally, “small house”) referred to a retreat surrounded by beautiful gardens, where the nobility might pursue leisurely activities in a refined and delightful setting.<sup>9</sup> In Tuscany, both villas in the countryside and town mansions featured such *casini di delizie* (or *di piacere*). By extension, in the seventeenth century the term came to indicate an exclusive venue for aristocratic male sociability, open only to a selected number of members and devoted primarily to card games and conversation.<sup>10</sup> In the *casini*, nobles generally interacted with peers whom they frequented outside of the venue as well, or with foreign guests of equal or higher social stature. The institution thus served to reinforce aristocratic mores and ties; relationships among the nobility could be defined and framed by behaviors displayed within the *casino*, which in some cases also played an important role in introducing younger people to polite adult company.<sup>11</sup>

7 *Deliberaçòims*, June 13, 1713, libro B, 51v.

8 *Deliberaçòims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 56r–57r. For an analysis of these regulations see below.

9 For a classic discussion of early modern leisure see Peter Burke, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” in *Past & Present* 146 (1995): 136–150; Joan-Lluis Marfany, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 174–191, and Peter Burke, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe: Reply,” *Past & Present* 156 (1997): 192–197.

10 Andrea Addobbati, *La festa e il gioco nella Toscana del Settecento* (Pisa: Plus, 2002), 197. In 1729 the Tuscan *Vocabolario della Crusca* defined *casino* as “properly in Florence, the site where nobility gathers,” as well as “a house of delights”: *Vocabolario della Crusca*, 4th edition, vol. 1 (1729), 583; <http://www.lessicografia.it/pagina.jsp?ediz=4&vol=1&pag=583&tipo=1> (accessed on September 23, 2015). When the *casini* opened membership to noble ladies in the eighteenth century, activities associated came to include elegant balls and receptions.

11 Jonathan Walker, “Gambling and Venetian Noblemen, c. 1500–1700,” in *Past & Present* 162 (1999): 28–69, 55–57.

This institution, known as *casino dei nobili*, was well rooted in Tuscany, where we find some of the earliest Italian examples. In Siena and Pisa *casini* for aristocratic recreation were founded in 1657 and 1692, respectively.<sup>12</sup> It has been suggested that the Sienese association, known as *Nobil Conversazione de' Signori Uniti nel Casino*, was the earliest private club ever established in Europe, well before famous English examples, such as White's in London.<sup>13</sup> In fact, a *casino* for nobles, devoted primarily to gambling, was already present in Venice in 1609.<sup>14</sup> Still, in contrast to the Venetian Republic, where the seventeenth-century *casino* was, in Jonathan Walker's words, only a "semi-permanent" institution, the Tuscan *casini* displayed remarkable longevity, articulated regulations, and an ability to adapt over time to the changing needs of their constituencies.<sup>15</sup>

The emergence of *casini dei nobili* in Tuscany should also be connected with a related, yet distinct contemporaneous associative venue, the aristocratic academy. Just like the *casino dei nobili*, this kind of academy featured a selected membership of nobles.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, some literary and theatrical academies were originally born out of noble gatherings in *casini*. In Florence, the so-called *Conversazione del Casino della Badia*, a literary academy, was active by 1638.<sup>17</sup> The illustrious *Casino dei Nobili di San Marco* (later known as *Accademia degli Affinati*), devoted to dramatic representations, was established around 1650 under the patronage of prince Leopoldo de' Medici (1617–1675).<sup>18</sup> While some overlap between the two sites of leisurely sociability seems to have existed, they also differed markedly. True, some of the academies' recreational activities may include polite conversation and card games. Still, their

12 For Siena, see Giulio Prunai and Sandro De Colli, "La 'Conversazione dei Signori Uniti': Le sue sedi ed il suo archivio," in *Bullettino senese di storia patria*, a. XIII, III serie (1954): 98–127, and Aldo Pezzana, "Il circolo degli Uniti di Siena e i suoi statuti seicenteschi," in *Rassegna Storica dei Comuni* 23, 84–85 (1997): 90–94. There is little research on the *Casino dei Gentiluomini* in Pisa, but see Franco Pratesi, "1691–1707: Cards at Casino dei Gentiluomini in Pisa," August 31, 2013, <http://trionfi.com/evx-casino-dei-gentiluomini-pisa> (accessed on September 23, 2015).

13 Pezzana, "Il circolo degli Uniti," 90.

14 Walker, "Gambling and Venetian Noblemen," 35–36.

15 Indeed, the Sienese institution, today known as *Circolo degli Uniti*, is still active.

16 A connection between *casino* and academy is drawn by Peter Burke in relation to Venice: Peter Burke, *Venice and Amsterdam: A Study of Seventeenth-Century Elites* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), 68–69.

17 Elios Maffei, "L'archivio dell'Istituto o Casino dei Nobili di Firenze," in *Archivio storico italiano* 125 (1967): 246–265, 251.

18 Salomé Vuelta García, "Accademie teatrali nella Firenze del Seicento: l'Accademia degli Affinati o del Casino di San Marco," in *Studi seicenteschi* 42 (2001): 357–378; Maffei, "L'archivio dell'Istituto," 246–247.

main focus was on literary, theatrical, and philosophical explorations.<sup>19</sup> The key pursuit at the *casino*, on the other hand, was card playing, not culture. Moreover, while non-noble guests were admitted into an academy on occasion, the *casini* strictly barred commoners.<sup>20</sup>

In the Western Sephardic Diaspora academies are well attested, pointing to the continued appeal of Iberian culture, as well as the influence of contemporaneous Italian associative trends. In seventeenth-century Amsterdam, poets and merchants gathered in Jewish literary societies modeled after Spanish and Portuguese examples. The prominent Jewish diplomat Don Manuel de Belmonte sponsored two, the *Academia del Temor Divino* (1676) and the *Academia de Los Floridos* (1685).<sup>21</sup> Their direct inspiration was an earlier Livornese Jewish academy, the *Academia de los Sitibundos*, active between 1675 and 1679.<sup>22</sup> Jewish academies have been described as the chief extra-synagogal outlet for secular Jewish sociability in the Sephardic diaspora, thus providing an alternative to *yeshivot* and *hevrot*.<sup>23</sup> Their membership was never fully exclusive, including merchants, intellectuals, and local grandees.<sup>24</sup> And while modern historians have often depicted the themes of discussion as frivolous and formulaic, there is no doubt that the academies functioned within the traditional structures of the Jewish community and reinforced them. Indeed the widespread investigation of religious topics and a level of Hebrew creativity

19 See for instance Jean Boutier, "L'Accademia dei Nobili' di Firenze: Sociabilità ed educazione dei giovani nobili negli anni di Cosimo III," in *La Toscana nell'Età di Cosimo III: Atti del convegno Pisa-San Domenico di Fiesole 4-5 giugno 1990*, eds. Franco Angiolini, Vieri Becagli, and Marcello Verga (Pisa: Edifir, 1993), 206-224. For a broader study of Tuscan academies see Eric Cochrane, *Tradition and Enlightenment in the Tuscan Academies, 1690-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

20 Pezzana, "Il Circolo degli Uniti," 90.

21 While it is frequently mentioned that an *Academia de los Sitibundos* was established in Amsterdam in 1676, there is no clear evidence that this was the case: Valentina Nider, "José Penso e l'accademia sefardita 'de los Sitibundos' di Livorno nella diffusione di un genere oratorio tra Italia e Spagna: traduzione e imitazione nelle *Ideas Posibles* (1692)," in *Studi secenteschi* 51 (2010): 153-197.

22 Among the founders of the Livornese academy was the Amsterdam merchant Joseph Penso da la Vega. It was Penso who promoted the establishment of literary academies in Amsterdam, thanks to the report he sent to his intellectual peers about the Livornese activities. For a comprehensive recent assessment of the *Sitibundos*, see Nider, "José Penso e l'accademia sefardita," 162-171.

23 Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans: The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2000), 300-302.

24 Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 302. The Livornese *Sitibundos* welcomed rabbis as well: Nider, "José Penso e l'accademia sefardita," 162.

demonstrate well the academicians' intent to harmonize secular studies with Torah.<sup>25</sup>

*Casini*, on the other hand, are practically unknown in the Jewish world. When we pause to consider the blatant focus of this early modern institution on recreation for recreation's sake revolving around card playing, together with its exclusive nature, its appearance among Livornese Jews seems curious indeed. We may be tempted to think that its establishment is a sign of profound deviance from traditional norms, betraying a rampantly secularizing community that flaunted Jewish conventions. In fact, things are not so simple. Certainly, as we are going to see, the Jewish *casino* of Livorno represented a remarkable appropriation of aristocratic mores on the part of the local Sephardic elite, consecrated by the Medici Grand Duke. But it also turned into a deliberate attempt by the *massari* to embrace change in order to prevent greater transformations. By institutionalizing leisure time, it was assumed, communal boundaries could be protected.

### 3 “*Per Far Grazia Speciale alla sua Conversazione*”

The existence of a private gathering of prominent merchants whose sole purpose was recreation underscores the appeal of exclusive forms of sociability generally associated with the Italian nobility among the Sephardic elites of Livorno. In sending his supplication, Moise Molho acted with the full support of his esteemed patrons, who vouched on behalf of the honest and amicable *conversazione* (gathering) he hosted.<sup>26</sup> Molho's room for entertainment welcomed fourteen guests: three members of the Ergas family (Samuel, David, and Abram),<sup>27</sup> three from the Nunes family (Abram of Jeuda, Jacob, and Samuel), two individuals from the Zacuto family (Jacob and Heschiau), together with David Aghiar, Abram of David del Rio, Aron Bocarra, Moise Portello, Abram de Rios, and Rafael Farro.<sup>28</sup> Stemming from prominent trading families, most

25 Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, 300–301; see also the astute reassessment of the goals of the Livornese *Sitibundos* in Nider, “José Penso e l'accademia sefardita,” 164.

26 *Deliberaçõims*, September 26, 1712, libro B, 45v, quoting a document from March 1712.

27 On the Ergases and their economic activities, see Toaff, *Nazione Ebraica*, 466, and Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); for a specific discussion of the family see especially 23–34.

28 *Deliberaçõims*, September 26, 1712, libro B, 45v–46r, quoting a document from April 7, 1712.

of them had ties to the oligarchic government of the *nazione ebrea*.<sup>29</sup> Between 1708 and 1712, Samuel Ergas and Aron Bocarra had demonstrated their largesse and commitment to the community by providing conspicuous funds to build arches as part of the grandiose renovation of Livorno's synagogue.<sup>30</sup> It's reasonable to surmise that it was the fourteen merchants' political and economic capital within the Livornese community that eventually persuaded the *massari* to revise their initial objections and come to an agreement with the governor.

The merchants' economic weight, moreover, could not but tip the scales in their favor in the eyes of the Tuscan authorities. Two months after Molho received his permission, a note from the central government in Florence made it abundantly clear that the real beneficiary of the Grand Duke's "benign rescript" was actually the *conversazione*, namely his patrons. Molho was advised that the gathering could take place in his shop or elsewhere, with either his assistance or that of other people selected by the merchants themselves. In sum, he should be careful not to abuse the gracious privilege he had obtained, which had been issued not out of a special regard for him, but rather for his guests.<sup>31</sup> The fact that the Florentine government agreed to the recreational desires of these Livornese Jews is evidence of the privileged relationship that existed between the early modern Tuscan state and the *nazione ebrea*'s elites, which was governed by a delicate set of considerations.<sup>32</sup> We should turn to examine briefly the roots of such a close—if obviously uneven—connection.

The Livornese Sephardic settlement flourished from the late sixteenth century thanks to the mercantilist policies of the Medici house, embedded in a charter of privileges later known as *Livornina*, which Ferdinand I de' Medici

29 Although possible cases of homonymy suggest some caution, evidence points to the involvement of many of Molho's guests with Livornese Jewish politics and communal life. The Ergas family played a continued, prominent role in the political life of the Jewish community: Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 468. Members of the Nunes family repeatedly served as *massari* from the middle of the seventeenth century on (Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 456–460). The Bocarra family, with Tunisian ties, also had a significant role within the Jewish government, with several members holding the office of *massaro*: Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 470. Rafael Farro was *massaro* in 1693 and 1699, and *gabbay* in charge of charity in 1688 (Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 175, 460–461). Abram of David del Rio was part of the governing board in 1693 (Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 175).

30 Samuel Ergas shouldered the expense to build an arch in the new synagogue in 1708 in honor of his father, while Aron Bocarra built an arch in 1712 to celebrate his son's *bar mitzvah* (Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 282).

31 *Deliberaçoims*, September 26, 1712, libro B, 46r, quoting a document from May 11, 1712.

32 Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment*, 28–34.

issued in 1591 and confirmed two years later.<sup>33</sup> The edict is now regarded as the most significant in a series of steps the Medici took in order to boost Tuscany's maritime trade in the Mediterranean. It granted extensive concessions, some of which unprecedented in early modern Italy, to foreign traders who settled in the port of Livorno. Although the *Livornina* called on "merchants of any nation, Levantine, Ponentine, Spanish, Portuguese, Greek, German and Italian, Jewish, Turkish, Moorish, Armenian, Persian and others,"<sup>34</sup> its privileges were in fact meant to attract above all Spanish and Portuguese New Christians and Jews of Iberian and Levantine origin, who were regarded as especially desirable because of their contacts across the Sephardic Diaspora and their perceived commercial prowess.<sup>35</sup>

With the help of the generous *Livornina*, the Medici's mercantilist gamble paid off. By the mid-seventeenth century Livorno had turned into a prime Mediterranean hub and Jewish merchants, thanks to networks that spanned the western and eastern Ottoman world and northern Europe, were indeed crucial in ensuring the port's commercial ascent. At the end of the Thirty Years' War, Livorno served as the most important Mediterranean center for the distribution of goods from northern Europe and the American colonies to North Africa and the Levant, and from the Ottoman Empire to capitals such as Amsterdam and London.<sup>36</sup> Sephardic firms based in Livorno acted as the chief agents of the resale of these goods in the Maghreb, the Balkans, and Turkey.<sup>37</sup>

In time, a governmental discourse developed that emphasized Livornese Jews' indispensable contributions to the development of the port. To protect the wellbeing of Jewish merchants, the Tuscan authorities reiterated Jewish prerogatives whenever external factors threatened them. By and large, the state

33 On the *Livornina* see Toaff, *Nazione Ebraica*, 41–51, 419–435; Attilio Milano, "La Costituzione Livornina del 1593," in *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 34 (1968), 394–410; Bernard Cooperman, "Trade and Settlement: The Establishment and Early Development of the Jewish Communities in Leghorn and Pisa (1591–1626)" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1976), 248–378; for details on the negotiations that led to the charter see also Lucia Frattarelli Fischer, *Vivere fuori dal ghetto. Ebrei a Pisa e Livorno (secoli XVI–XVIII)* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani editore, 2008), 36–43.

34 Toaff, *Nazione Ebraica*, 419.

35 Benjamin Ravid, "A Tale of Three Cities and their 'Raison d'État': Ancona, Venice, and Livorno, and the Competition for Jewish Merchants in the Sixteenth Century," in *Mediterranean Historical Review* 6 (1991): 138–162.

36 Michele Cassandro, *Aspetti della storia economica e sociale degli ebrei di Livorno nel Seicento* (Milan: A. Giuffrè, 1983), 57–112; Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism (1550–1750)* (Oxford and Portland, OR: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1998, 3rd edition), 93; Frattarelli Fischer, *Vivere fuori dal ghetto*, 137–145.

37 Israel, *European Jewry*, 144.

also deemed markers of status and honor, such as the ownership of vineyards in the countryside or horse-drawn carriages, acceptable for the Jewish elite, as long as they did not lead to scandalous behaviors.<sup>38</sup>

By extension, the same argument can be made about Molho's venue. It's safe to conclude that the authorities' willingness to grant the Sephardic socio-economic elite associative privileges normally reserved for the Christian patriciate stemmed from their desire to maintain a benevolent rapport with prominent merchant families, in recognition of their utility for the state's economy. The privilege was valid as long as decorum was maintained and the entertainment was closely controlled. Indeed, governmental concerns regarding the nature of membership at the Jewish *casino*, combined with the need to avoid disorders, eventually led the state to entrust the Livornese *massari* with its supervision.

#### 4 Governmental Control and Local Elites

Molho's supplication to the Grand Duke set in motion a larger process that underscores the involvement of the Tuscan administration in the affairs of the *nazione ebrea* and the close ties of collaboration, as well as the potential tensions, between Jewish lay leaders and Tuscan administration. Belying the historiographic stereotype that depicts the Livornese community as an example of great early modern Jewish autonomy, the Tuscan government occasionally pressured the *massari* to bring the community in line with the state's political goals, effectively relying on them as its designated agents within the *nazione ebrea*.

At its inception, the Jewish *casino* of Livorno catered to an exclusive, small clientele of merchants. But the extent of this exclusivity and the nature of the recreation on offer created room for ambiguity. In June 1713, following what we may presume was a complaint by a guest turned away at the door, Governor Tornaquinci informed the *massari* that the Grand Duke wished the site to be available to both the principal Jews and the merchants of the *nazione ebrea*, "keeping the door of the *casino* open to everybody [...] without denying entrance to any civilized person of said nation." The *casino*, in other words, was to serve as a venue of civilized sociability for *all* eligible Jews, not only a handful of selected individuals. The fourteen original members were requested to

<sup>38</sup> Francesco Pera, *Curiosità livornesi inedite o rare* (Livorno: R. Giusti, 1888), 204–205.

admit whoever possessed those requisites of “civility” that made him eligible to partake in the recreation.<sup>39</sup>

As a result, the *casino*’s activities became more carefully regulated. The entertainment was to be limited to the permitted games of *minchiate* and *ombre*—the staples of early modern Tuscan social card playing, played for no or low stakes—and conversations ought to be “honest [and] without competition,” so that any “damage and prejudice to others” would be avoided.<sup>40</sup> In order to maintain quiet within the community and avoid possible disorders, the Grand Duke also ordered that the *massari* take over the supervision of the space.<sup>41</sup>

If we review Tuscan approaches to comparable non-Jewish sites of sociability, the request that the Jewish *casino* be open to all “civilized Jews” seems worthy of note. In some cases, the Tuscan authorities revoked or denied authorization if a *casino* was perceived as too open, and hence potentially dangerous. In the late seventeenth century, for instance, the French Consul in Livorno had been granted permission by then Governor Alessandro del Borro to open a *casino di giuoco di carte* for the exclusive use of French merchants in the port. When del Borro realized that a larger public frequented the *casino* to gamble, with young men from good families losing fortunes, he shut it down. The Governor, with the blessing of the Florentine authorities, repeatedly rejected all appeals by the French Consul to open the venue again, for fear of disturbances and scandal.<sup>42</sup>

A few years later, efforts by the Sienese *Nobil Conversazione de’ Signori Uniti nel Casino* to organize festive events for the local nobility raised eyebrows in Florence. This case offers a particularly interesting comparison, because this ancient association sought the Grand Duke’s authorization around the same time as the Jewish *casino* came to his attention. But in the Sienese case the response was tepid at most. Writing to the Secretary of State in January 1713, the Auditor of Siena Sozzifanti defended the Uniti’s gatherings with consummated apologetic flair.<sup>43</sup> During Carnival the members had organized card playing

39 *Deliberaçõims*, June 13, 1713, libro B, 51v.

40 These tarot-like games used numerous cards and were regarded as less likely to induce gambling because of their complexity and inherent entertainment value. They were popular among the higher classes.

41 *Deliberaçõims*, June 13, 1713, libro B, 51v.

42 Pera, *Curiosità livornesi*, 204.

43 Prunai and De Colli, “La ‘Conversazione dei Signori Uniti,’” 100, does not clarify the Grand Duke’s objections, but it’s likely that the mixing of dozens of gentlemen and ladies at the balls, and the more public nature of the entertainment, raised concerns.

activities, as well as two balls with many gentlemen and ladies, as an honest form of distraction. The entertainments had been carried out “with the due decorum, people had not played beyond the usual measures [...] and never the games of *bassetta* or other similar ones, dangerous and improper.”<sup>44</sup> Requesting that the Grand Duke concede his approval, Sozzifanti remarked that this was not “a *casino* open to disorder, danger, and scandal,” but rather an outlet for “innocent gaiety.”<sup>45</sup> The Grand Duke was not entirely persuaded. While he did grant authorization for the “*conversazione* of gentlemen and ladies,” its validity was tied to the Carnival season only, as the Grand Duke did not want to support the practice any further. A second supplication the following year, requesting authorization for the gathering as was the practice among nobles in Pisa, did not yield better results. Promptly, the prince reiterated his prohibition, adding that no *casino* existed in Pisa.<sup>46</sup>

In reality, a private association called the *Casino dei Gentiluomini* was active in that Tuscan town in 1714, seemingly unbeknownst to the Grand Duke and his ministers. Established by 18 Pisan nobles in 1692, the *casino* leased three rooms in a centrally located area, offering a venue for the aristocracy to play games and relax in conversation, attended by servants.<sup>47</sup> Guests mostly played *minchiate*, *ombre* and a backgammon-like game, *sbaraglino*.<sup>48</sup> This venue offers a further element of comparison with the Jewish *casino*: because the Pisan nobles never sought official approval from the government, unlike in Siena and Livorno, the authorities did not encroach on their activities.

From this review it becomes apparent that, once the Florentine government became aware of a *casino*, the authorities’ concern over order and decorum trumped the classical understanding of the venue as a self-regulating space of gentility where the moral values of its aristocratic patrons ensured that no impropriety would be committed, leading instead to significant state

44 *Bassetta*, dreaded by the authorities, was a simple card game played with fewer than eight cards, commonly associated with gambling and inappropriate behavior.

45 Prunai and De Colli, “La ‘Conversazione dei Signori Uniti,’” 100–101.

46 Prunai and De Colli, “La ‘Conversazione dei Signori Uniti,’” 102. It seems that the group continued to hold small-scale gatherings in private, although it was only from 1717 on that public activities picked up again for this association.

47 Pratesi, “Cards at Casino.”

48 While this *casino* has been considered a second-tier institution and mere gambling spot for local aristocrats, recent research suggests that this may not have been entirely the case: compare Andrea Addobbati, “Il Casino dei Nobili di Pisa e il disciplinamento delle aristocrazie toscane nel XVIII secolo,” in *Bollettino storico pisano* 62 (1993): 277–307, 278 and Pratesi, “Cards at Casino.”

intervention.<sup>49</sup> This line of thinking came to be applied to the Jewish *casino* for merchants as well, with multifaceted ramifications.

The 1713 letter from Tornaquinci to the *massari* shows the high degree of bureaucratic control that state institutions extended over the *nazione ebraica*. While limiting membership (or more drastically, shutting down a venue) was one proven way to avoid potential problems at a *casino*, concerns over possible jealousy within the Sephardic elite might have played a role in the decision of opening it up to all civilized persons of the community, rather than closing it. Hence, from a private institution authorized by the Grand Duke, the *casino* was transformed into a public venue for the elite and placed under communal supervision.<sup>50</sup>

There is no other known case during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century where the government attempted to reform the membership of a Tuscan *casino dei nobili*. Efforts in this direction are evident only from 1750 on, as the Hapsburg reformist state endeavored to bring local aristocracies under greater control than they had been during the Medici period.<sup>51</sup> While the nobles who gathered in the ancient Tuscan aristocratic *casini*, as Andrea Addobbati has argued, articulated leadership and associative ambitions that escaped state control and thus acted as rivals to the Medici Grand Duke's authority, this was obviously impossible for the mercantile elite of the *nazione ebraica*, whose freedoms ultimately derived from the Grand Duke's approval.<sup>52</sup> As prominent Jewish traders aspired to assert their socio-economic rank by adopting aristocratic practices, the state was willing to let them play that role, but only as long as it did not upset the established order.

## 5 The Merchants at the Casino

The Grand Duke's command to turn the *casino* into a public space open to all affluent and civilized Jews in the port put the *massari* in a rather delicate position. Presented as a site "not against the dispositions of the laws, to remedy the disorders in which youth is used to incur," they claimed that the *casino* fulfilled the "just goal of keeping youth busy and entertained without scandal."<sup>53</sup> It is

49 On the understanding of the *casini* as self-regulating sites of gentility see Walker, "Gambling and Venetian Noblemen," 48–52, 64–66; Addobbati, *La festa e il gioco*, 197–230.

50 Members of the Jewish lower classes were not admitted.

51 Addobbati, "Il Casino dei Nobili," 289. In 1749, the Grand Duke established a "public" *casino dei nobili* in Pisa, whose membership was mandatory for all local aristocrats.

52 Addobbati, "Il Casino dei Nobili," 290.

53 *Deliberaçoims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 56r.

tempting to speculate on the role that this associative venue may have played in shaping the tastes and careers of young traders, while keeping them away from forms of recreation in the non-Jewish world, deemed more dangerous by their parents and the Jewish authorities alike.

Still, permitting games in a communal space was no small issue for the Jewish lay leaders. While “professional” gambling and games of chance were always forbidden, recreational games of skills were occasionally allowed in early modern Italian communities in people’s homes, although with strong caveats.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the seventeenth century, the *massari* had repeatedly prohibited Livornese Jews from playing in public places, under the threat of excommunication (*herem*).<sup>55</sup> They were only allowed certain licit games, such as *minchiate* and *ombre*, in the privacy of their own homes, and never in the company or in the homes of Christians.<sup>56</sup> The board serving in 1714 was able to circumvent older stipulations by conceptualizing the communal *casino* as a *domestic*, not public, space. Indeed, its patrons were to be considered “individually and universally as *padroni di casa* (hosts),” endowed with “authority and faculty as in their own home.”<sup>57</sup> Since Jews were allowed to play certain games in their homes, this conceptual shift granted them permission to do so in the communal *casino*.

After renting some rooms on behalf of the community, the *massari* appointed one Isache Zamero as their “agent and minister” to manage the space for a period of three years, “on behalf and for the interest of the public of the *nazione ebrea*.” Zamero, wishing “to do something agreeable to his nation and assist in those rooms, keeping them clean, open at all times, furnished and well lit, pleasing the merchants in all honest things,” had approached the *massari* proposing to take care of the necessary tables, decorations, and lights, as well

54 On this question see the classic Leo Landman, “Jewish Attitudes Toward Gambling: The Professional and Compulsive Gambler,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 57 (1967): 298–318 and Leo Landman “Jewish Attitudes toward Gambling II: Individual and Communal Efforts to Curb Gambling,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 58 (1967): 34–62.

55 For other Italian opinions on games of chance see I. Abrahams, “Samuel Portaleone’s Proposed Restriction on Games of Chance,” in *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 5 (1893): 505–515; and Isaac Lampronti, *Paḥad Yiẓḥak*, Part 3 (Venice: Ventura q. Isach Fua, 1798), under “*herem*,” 53v–55v, which publishes Leone Modena’s opinion questioning whether gambling was a sin and should be banned. Venetian rabbis and lay leaders strongly objected to Modena’s stance.

56 Toaff, *Nazione Ebrea*, 312–313, 562, 613–614, 634. For a treatment of game playing among eighteenth-century Livornese Jews see Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment*, 152–180. Criminal court cases show that Livornese Jews gambled in public spaces and that they also played with Christian acquaintances.

57 *Deliberaçõims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 56v, referring to decisions taken on March 6.

to provide a servant to assist the patrons.<sup>58</sup> When granting Zamero license, the lay leaders took the opportunity to articulate a set of twelve clauses that would serve as guidelines for the *casino* activities, to which we now turn.

The regulations issued by the *massari* in 1714 display a combination of genteel aspirations and practical concerns. The leaders fixed fairly generous opening hours,<sup>59</sup> allowing players to gather in the space for two hours in the morning and another seven to nine hours in the afternoon and evening.<sup>60</sup> While in the space, attendees were enjoined to behave with respect and moderation, “without raising one’s voice.” Players were instructed to avoid dishonest or contentious talk and disputes, as well as to refrain from speaking “to damage and prejudice others.” Rather, they should discuss only “commerce, gazettes, public news, and historical information.” An unspecified yearly fee was required. Each attendee was to contribute to the rent and general expenses for the rooms, according to his “courtesy.”<sup>61</sup>

Aside from considerations of order and propriety, the regulations paid considerable attention to status and class divisions, which again points to the likely influence of Tuscan *casini dei nobili* and underscores the venue’s aristocratic ambitions. Although the space was defined as “domestic,” the guests were required to wear the same attire they donned in the city; hence, their appearance should be as presentable as in their business dealings with non-Jews. Moreover, while they could take their wigs off, they should take care to place on their heads “some decorous object, and not just white cloth.” They were forbidden from eating and smoking in the rooms, thus preserving clean and decorous surroundings. Finally, while Zamero and his attendants stemmed from the Jewish lower classes, no other member of that group was allowed to enter the *casino*. Servants were prohibited from attending their masters, and if they had news to deliver, they could only do so discreetly at the door.<sup>62</sup>

58 *Deliberaçoims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 56r. Moise Molho was evidently no longer involved in the operation.

59 In comparison, around 1630 Samuel Portaleone proposed that Jews, most likely in Mantua, be allowed to play privately only from noon until the afternoon prayer. Moreover, card games were only allowed on Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays: Abrahams, “Samuel Portaleone’s Proposed Restriction,” 508–509.

60 *Deliberaçoims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 56v, referring to decisions taken on March 6. In early modern Italy, the day was divided in twenty-four equal length units, with the first hour beginning soon after sunset. The casino was open for two hours before midday, and between eighteen and three in the summer, and between twenty-one and four in the winter. Depending on the season, this means that in the afternoon it opened six (or three) hours before sunset and closed three (or four) hours after the sun had gone down.

61 *Deliberaçoims*, 57r, referring to decisions taken on March 6.

62 *Ibid.*

The remaining regulations focused on the gaming activities allowed to the guests. Following the Grand Duke's license, the *massari* reiterated the permissibility of *minchiate* and *ombre*, setting low stakes, and resolutely banned any games associated with gambling (such as those that utilized fewer than eight cards) and craps.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, cards ought not to be played "continuously, but with interruptions, so that no individual [could] be accused of being an assiduous and constant player."<sup>64</sup> Finally, a telling detail points to an additional behavior shared by Livornese Jewish elites and Italian aristocracy. In Venice it was common for nobles to gamble upon their word, a habit that allowed them to display their stoic disposition, credit, and trustworthiness in case of loss, but that in some cases led to trouble and considerable financial stress.<sup>65</sup> Livornese Jewish merchants likely also staked their honor on the gaming table. In order to avoid scandal and prevent excessive monetary losses the *massari* explicitly banned the custom of gambling on credit; the money placed as a wager had to be displayed on the table, "and if anybody plays upon his word whoever loses is obliged not to pay," as if he had not entered into an agreement with his partner.<sup>66</sup>

The venue remained open until 1720. That year, the Livornese rabbis reiterated that *halakhah* did not permit games in public spaces and thus players were by default all subject to *herem*. Implicitly rejecting the notion of the *casino* as a domestic space, the Livornese *hakhhamim* could not approve of game playing even in this communal, supervised space, which they equated with a public gambling house. The *massari* complied, but proposed to contact other communities in order to see if there was a way to absolve the players from then *herem* and lift the prohibition.<sup>67</sup> I have yet been unable to find evidence of such an inter-communal exchange, and it is unclear whether this problem was indeed addressed. Be that as it may, the Jewish *casino* never resumed its activities.

63 Very simple games of chance such as rolling dice or *bassetta* and *primiera* could only entertain if they were played for stakes. Because of their association with gambling they were regularly forbidden by the Tuscan authorities.

64 *Deliberaçòims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 57r, referring to decisions taken on March 6. Players were allowed to bet no more than one *giulio* for a game of *minchiate*, one *paolo* for *ombre*, and four *crazie* (half a *paolo*) for the games of "compradiglio" and "inquiglio," which were variations of *ombre*.

65 Walker, "Gambling and Venetian Noblemen," 39–40. The practice was discouraged in 1634.

66 *Deliberaçòims*, March 13, 1714, libro B, 57r, referring to decisions taken on March 6.

67 *Deliberaçòims*, December 17, 1720, libro C, 67v–68v.

## 6 Post-Scriptum: Recreation, Tradition, and Modernity

The case of the Livornese Jewish *casino* helps shed light on the relationship between the *nazione ebrea* and the Tuscan state, on the one hand, and the intersection of Jewish and Tuscan culture, on the other. But the *casino* also brings up a broader historical question: what do attitudes to recreation tell us about shifts in Jewish culture during the eighteenth century?

In his 1958 work *Tradition and Crisis*, Jacob Katz suggested that Jewish leaders traditionally disapproved of “social recreation” for its own sake and limited diversions to appointed days and special events.<sup>68</sup> While mixed socialization between men and women was always viewed with suspicion because of the risk of erotic thoughts, even gatherings among men were associated with the sins of “gossiping, maligning and quarreling” and seen as a “waste of time” in a society whose norms prescribed complete dedication to Torah.<sup>69</sup> Of course, the ideal to devote one’s time entirely to Torah study could only be achieved by a small minority within any given Jewish group, but the theoretical injunction stood. In order to satisfy their needs to socialize beyond the strictly limited opportunities for secular recreation allowed by communal boards, Katz argued, Jews sought legitimate avenues for social diversion in activities revolving around religious confraternities and family life.<sup>70</sup>

Moving from Katz’s argument, Shmuel Feiner has recently reassessed the role of recreation in eighteenth-century Jewish society in his study on the origins of “Jewish secularization.” If Katz’s traditional community frowned upon entertainment but incorporated it into the accepted framework of traditional Jewish life with limited allowance at designated times, Feiner views the burgeoning Jewish adoption of recreational behaviors typical of eighteenth-century sociability (such as a visit to the opera, the theater, or a coffeehouse) as markers of modern acculturation that signal a transition from tradition to modernity. Many eighteenth-century Jews, according to Feiner, engaged in the pursuit of pleasures, and *halakhah* no longer provided the sole frame of reference for their lives. Secular “worldly temptations,” thus, were key factors in bringing about “Jewish secularization,” with loss of religious observance and Jewish identity.<sup>71</sup>

68 Jacob Katz, *Tradition and Crisis: Jewish Society at the End of the Middle Ages*, trans. Bernard Dov Cooperman (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 137.

69 Katz, *Tradition and Crisis*, 136.

70 *Ibid.*, 137–138.

71 Shmuel Feiner, *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe*, trans. Chaya Naor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011): 42–43. For examples of Jewish engagement in secular recreational activities see *passim*.

Despite their differences, Katz's and Feiner's arguments both pit a traditional Jewish society squarely against a modern one and thus risk obscuring the subtleties and contradictions of past experiences. In fact, the example of the Livornese Jewish *casino* tests the boundaries between "tradition" and "modernity" and the very nature of these categories in eighteenth-century Sephardic life. Profound Jewish acculturation and the adoption of secular attitudes, as displayed by the Livornese Sephardic elite and accepted by the *massari* in 1714, did not necessarily lead to the unconditional loss of tradition. Rather, radical novelty could be embraced in order to preserve the fabric of Jewish society.

The Livornese deliberations are not an example of modern acculturation as Feiner intends it, since the establishment of the *casino* took place within the communal framework and did not lead to permanent changes in Jewish life. At the same time, they do not fit smoothly within the Katzian model either, as the Livornese *massari* did not tie recreation to special days or events, such as weddings, births, or joyous Jewish festivities. Rather, they tied it to social class. In fact, contrary to Katz's static view of entertainment in early modern Jewish societies, in Livorno Jewish leaders came to *promote* certain leisurely activities, which were completely devoid of religious associations, for a subset of "civilized" members of the community. By embracing aristocratic game playing and framing it as a communal pursuit, it seems that they hoped to safeguard young people's morals (and presumably their parents' fortunes too), and police dangerous deviations associated with the mixed sociability of Christian coffeehouses, taverns, and theaters: illicit gambling, sexual promiscuity, and violence.

It can be argued that the initial acceptance of a space entirely devoted to the pursuit of secular pastimes "for the solace of the merchants and all the principal traders of the *nazione ebrea*" represented a compromise on the part of the *massari*. Faced with the Grand Duke's order in 1712, they could do little but comply. Still, it would be historically shortsighted to view them as merely passive recipients of Tuscan orders. Rather, by transforming the venue into a public *casino* under their supervision, they inscribed the space within a communitarian framework, and thus attempted to strengthen specifically Jewish recreation and socialization within a protected and monitored environment, in opposition to the non-Jewish space of the larger society and its more hazardous forms of entertainment.

At the same time, there is no denying that the *casino* created by the Livornese lay leaders and open between 1714 and 1720 was unlike any previously known Jewish space. With the passing of the regulations in 1714, the main goal of the *massari* seems to have been the establishment of an aristocratic-like venue

comparable to a *casino dei nobili*. In the process, an *alternative* Jewish space emerged, entirely devoted to the pursuit of secular activities—a new space that had nothing in common with the traditional sites of Jewish social organization, namely the synagogue, the *bet-midrash*, and the confraternity, where Jewish leaders were willing to turn a blind eye to halakhic concerns for a number of years, in order to please the community's most distinguished members.