

Luciano Allegra, *La povertà degli ebrei. Voci dal ghetto* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2021), pp. 343.

by *Davide Mano*

The Italian historian Luciano Allegra is a professor of early-modern history at the University of Turin and a renowned specialist of Italian Jewry during the dark period of the ghettos. Over the last thirty years, he has offered some of the most influential studies on this topic, introducing a social history approach that was tremendously missing in the field of Jewish historical studies. I will mention two of his major achievements: his socio-economic history of the ghetto of Turin during the eighteenth-century, published in 1996, a ground-breaking study that opened many new perspectives in Jewish social history, including a previously unknown attention to the role of women in Jewish family and society;<sup>1</sup> and, paired with this monograph, the important volume he edited in 2009, on the demography of Italian Jewry, including some critical investigations into Jewish mobilities, onomastics and socio-economic occupations, through the early-modern and modern periods.<sup>2</sup>

Allegra's most recent achievement, dealing with Jewish poverty in the Italian ghettos, can thus be seen as a coherent step on his peculiar social historical path of investigation. This new book, provocatively titled *The poverty of the Jews: Voices from the Ghetto*,<sup>3</sup> has the merit to be the first monograph to investigate the connection between ghettoization and pauperization in Jewish history. Though mostly based on sources produced by Jews of lower strata in the ghetto of Mantua during the first half of the eighteenth-century, this study can be considered as a work of scholarship relevant for other contexts of Jewish ghettoization and pauperization throughout the Italian peninsula, such as Venice, Rome or other minor towns and villages. It thus offers a significant contribution to the history of the Italian ghettos as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Luciano Allegra, *Identità in bilico. Il ghetto ebraico di Torino nel Settecento* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Luciano Allegra, ed., *Una lunga presenza. Studi sulla popolazione ebraica in Italia* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> My translation.

This particular subject has attracted few historians. Allegra mentions only three major works that examined Jewish poverty in a social historical approach in other European and non-European contexts: the 2005 monograph by Mark Cohen dedicated to the Jewish poor in Medieval Egypt, the 2012 book by Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld on poverty and charity among Portuguese Jews in early modern Amsterdam, and the 2021 study by Debra Kaplan on Jewish charities' patrons in early modern Germany. These influential studies are presented very succinctly by Allegra (pp. 13-15), since the sources and their contexts are so different that also the respective analytical approaches are very different as well, to the extent of making any comparison impossible. Yet, some other important studies on Jewish poverty and charities in Europe and in the Mediterranean area, including some pieces of scholarship on Italian Jewry, are not mentioned in the bibliographical references, beginning from the pioneering work by Bracha Rivlin on Jewish confraternities in Venice and the recent work by Matthias Lehmann devoted to the emissaries from the Land of Israel.

The choice of the source material is central in Allegra's discussion. The author focuses his investigation on the Jewish community in Mantua in light of its impressive archival documentation, that has already attracted several scholars.<sup>4</sup> From among the internal sources of the community, Allegra chooses to examine a particular type, a body of more than 1600 petitions addressed by poor Jews to communal charity institutions between 1700 and 1750. He describes this body of sources as an "extraordinary unicum" (p. 16) in Jewish history in light of its particular nature: these are direct letters addressed by the poor to the chiefs of the communal charity without any notarial mediation or prescribed textual shaping. This is certainly a remarkable case from within the typology of petitions, otherwise a very common source in Jewish community archives, as much as in non-Jewish archives, such as town and state archives.

According to the author, this special body of sources from the Mantua community allows a comparative comprehension of both the struggle of the poor for survival and the charities' collective actions to help them survive. This is a central contribution in Allegra's study that shows great empathy toward the

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<sup>4</sup> It is worth mentioning the essential work of Shlomo Simonsohn, *History of the Jews in the Duchy of Mantua* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1977).

historical actors he describes. The author considers different social situations, from contingent and permanent poverty to misery (chapters 1 and 2); he connects them with infirmity and precariousness, as well as with communal conflicts and family breakups (chapters 2 and 3); he discusses the risky instability of dowries (chapter 4) and reconstructs Jewish struggles for a decent accommodation (chapter 5). In the process, Allegra bears particular attention to the narrative contents in the petitions, to the life stories emerging from them. In the last two chapters (chapters 6 and 7), he gives a quantitative image of Jewish poverty in the Italian ghettos, that he proposes to describe as a permanent, structural situation throughout the early-modern period. As regards Jewish charitable institutions, Allegra recalls the extremely pyramidal socio-economic stratification in the ghettos, as well as the Jewish traditional principle of redistribution, centered in the moral duty of *tzedakah* (alms). As already said, his study shows strong empathy toward the poor and their struggles for survival: in this sense, the book owes a debt to the celebrated *Fiction in the archives* by Nathalie Zemon Davis, while proposing a different reading of petitions that calls for further discussion.

Allegra's monograph is thus a remarkable study that puts together both individual and family biographies in order to reconstruct the social, collective, dialogical experience of poverty, such as it emerged within Italian ghetto societies. Allegra's book has also the merit to succeed in countering the stereotypical image of the Jew as a rich man, present in medieval and early-modern anti-Jewish polemics, as well as in antisemitic propaganda, up to its very contemporary variations.

A question remains to be raised about that particular association between poverty and minority status, socio-economic and socio-juridical poverties, inherent to the Jewish condition. What did it mean to be Jewish and poor? Such a condition of double dependence on both state tolerance and communal charity still needs further investigation.

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