

## Philip II of Spain and his Italian Jewish Spy

CALYMATH. Whom have we there? A spy?

BARABAS. Yes, my good lord, one that can spy a place Where  
you may enter, and surprise the town:

My name is Barabas; I am a Jew.

--Marlowe, *The Jew of Malta*

A bitter conflict between the Spanish and Ottoman empires dominated the second half of the sixteenth century. It was a war of empires and pirates—an early modern “global” conflict in which intelligence played a key role. The Duchy of Milan, home to Simon Sacerdoti (c.1540-1600), a Jew, had fallen to Spain. The fate that usually awaited Jews living on Spanish lands was expulsion—and there were signs to suggest that King Philip II (1527-1598) might travel down the same road.<sup>1</sup> Sacerdoti, the scion of one of Milan’s wealthiest and best-connected Jewish families had access to information coming directly from the highest spheres of Ottoman power. Such intelligence was highly valuable to Spanish forces, and Philip II was personally interested in it.<sup>2</sup> However, this required Sacerdoti to serve an empire—Spain—with a long history of harming the Jews, and to spy on the Ottomans, widely considered as the Jews’ supporters at the time. This article offers a reflection on Simon Sacerdoti’s story. Examining how a Jew became part of the Spanish intelligence agency, will help us understand how European and

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Arthur Francis Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Geoffrey Parker, *Philip II*, The Library of World Biography; (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978); Flora Cassen, “The Last Spanish Expulsion in Europe: Milan 1565–1597,” *AJS Review* 38, no. 01 (2014): 59–88, doi:10.1017/S0364009414000038.

<sup>2</sup> Carlos Carnicer and Javier Marcos, *Espias de Felipe II: Los Servicios Secretos Del Imperio Espanol* (Madrid, 2005).

Mediterranean secret information networks functioned. Exploring Sacerdoti's motivations for serving a king who was not seen as the "Jews' ally" at the time also sheds new light on questions of Jewish identity in a time of uprootedness and competing loyalties.

Many popular sixteenth-century myths featured the Jews as spies for the Ottomans. In this time of war, the Ottomans dominated the struggle until the last quarter of the sixteenth century. They had made it to Budapest, threatened Vienna, and were controlling the Mediterranean—Europeans feared Turkish power, and believed the Jews were on their enemy's side. The Jews' relatively successful integration into Ottoman society, as witnessed by Western travelers returning from the Middle East, added to these suspicions. Nicolas de Nicolay, a Frenchman, wrote that "Marrano Jews ousted from Spain have taught the Turkes diverse inventions, craftes and engines of warre, as to make artillerie, gun powder, shot and other munitions."<sup>3</sup> Henry Blount, an English traveler, commented that "every Otoman vizier kept a Jew whose experience of Christendome, with their continuell intelligence, is thought to advise most of that mischeife, which the Turks puts in execution against us."<sup>4</sup>

The alleged alliance of Jews with the Ottoman Empire was not limited to Marranos, New Christians, or Conversos—Jews and their descendants who had converted to Christianity but, in some cases, continued to practice Judaism secretly and for whom the Ottoman Empire was the only refuge from European intolerance. Even Jews would have

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas de Nicolay, *The Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages, Made into Turkie*, 1585, 130; quoted by Nabil I. Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Blount, *A Voyage Into the Levant* (Andrew Crook, 1636), 115; quoted by Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685*, 174–175.

acknowledged that special relationship. Manasseh ben Israel (1604-1657) was a rabbi, kabbalist, writer, and printer, born in <sup>5</sup>a Portuguese converso family that reverted to being openly Jewish in Amsterdam. In his *Humble Address* written to persuade Oliver Cromwell to readmit the Jews in England, he made the argument that Jews always worked to the benefit of their host countries. As prime example, he explained how the Ottomans welcomed the Jews and the myriad ways this benefited their Empire.<sup>5</sup>

Surveying English Jewish writers of the period, Nabil Matar concluded that “not a single Renaissance Jewish writer in England expressed the desire to destroy the Muslims.”<sup>6</sup> To both Christian and Jewish observers, it seemed natural, therefore, that, undesired and persecuted in Europe, the Jews’ loyalties lay elsewhere, and worse: with the enemies of Christendom.

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) immortalized that fear in his play, *The Jew of Malta*. Malta’s Jew is Barabas. Named after the thief crucified with Jesus, in Marlowe’s play Barabas is a villain and a spy who tries to help the Ottomans take the Island of Malta. Marlowe’s Barabas may not have been entirely a fictional character. Scholars think that he was modeled on Joseph Nasi.<sup>7</sup> Born around 1510 in Portugal, Nasi was the nephew of Dona

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<sup>5</sup> -1657 Manasseh ben Israel and Lucien Wolf, *Manasseh Ben Israel’s Mission to Oliver Cromwell: Being a Reprint of the Pamphlets Published by Menasseh Ben Israel to Promote the Re-Admission of the Jews to England, 1649-1656*; (London, Published for the Jewish Historical Society of England by Macmillan, 1901), 81–90. <http://archive.org/details/cu31924028590028> Accessed on November 28, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685*, 174.

<sup>7</sup> Cecil Roth, *The House of Nasi: The Duke of Naxos* (Publisher’s Row / Varda Books, 2002), 185; Robert A. Logan, *The Jew of Malta: A Critical Reader* (A&C Black, 2013), 6; Jonathan Burton, *Traffic and Turning: Islam and English Drama, 1579-1624* (University of Delaware Press, 2005), 215; Although Nicholl thinks David Passi, another Jewish spy, was the model Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

Gracia Nasi and heir to the wealthy banking and trading company of the Mendes family. The inquisition forced the family to leave Portugal and then Antwerp (in the Spanish Low Countries) in 1544; eventually they settled in Constantinople where Joseph became a confidant of the Ottoman Sultan Selim II.<sup>8</sup> In 1565, Nasi helped finance and engineer the Ottoman's siege of Malta. The siege ultimately failed, but King Philip II of Spain, who was leading Europe's battle against the Ottomans, ordered him killed for it.<sup>9</sup> Thus many believed that Joseph Nasi hated Spain. His vagrant life—his family's expulsion from Spain in 1492, the fear of the Inquisition, his escapes from Portugal, Antwerp, and Venice—and the losses that came with it had been caused by Spain's antiJewish policies. It was only in the Ottoman Empire that he could practice Judaism openly and live uninhibited by the constant threats of the Inquisition and Spanish intolerance.<sup>10</sup>

In Jewish historical memory, Nasi is a hero, a man who in times of tremendous geographical and religious disruptions for the Jews held on to his identity and achieved unprecedented financial and political success. However, from the perspective of Europe's

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<sup>8</sup> Cecil Roth, "Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 57, no. The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review, 2 (1967): 460-472; Rosenblath, "Joseph Nasi, Friend of Spain," in *Studies in honor of M.J. Bernardete; Essays in Hispanic and Sephardic Culture*, ed. Izaak A. Langnas and Barton Sholod (New York, 1965); A. Arce, "Espionaje y ultima aventura de Jose Nasi (1569-1574)," *Sefarad* 13 (1973): 257-286; Nabil I. Matar, *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 173-175.

<sup>9</sup> But Nasi's attitude to Spain may have been more complicated than it seems, Arce argues based on a letter in which Nasi offers his services and intelligence information to the King of Spain. A. Arce, "Espionaje Y Ultima Aventura de Jose Nasi (1569-1574)," *Sefarad* 13 (1973): 257-86; But Rosenblath thinks that the same letter may have been a forgery. Rosenblath, "Joseph Nasi, Friend of Spain," in *Studies in Honor of M.J. Bernardete; Essays in Hispanic and Sephardic Culture*, ed. Izaak A. Langnas and Barton Sholod (New York, 1965).

<sup>10</sup> Roth, *The House of Nasi*; Andrée Aelion Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Dona Gracia Nasi* (New York; Northam: Paragon House, 2002).

Christians—as Marlowe’s portrayal of him reveals—he was a feared political operative and a traitor to Europe at the same time. In the Ottoman Empire, though he had Sultan Selim’s trust, many suspected him of continuing to entertain secret relations with Europe.

That the spy “Barabas/Nasi” did not conform to older stereotypes of Jews as usurers, host desecrators, or blasphemers—was a sign of the times. The sixteenth century was “the first golden age of espionage” and saw an explosion of spying and intelligence activity.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes termed “the second oldest profession,” spying had existed since Antiquity, but only during the sixteenth century did European intelligence services reach levels of competence and professionalism to make espionage an essential tool of government.<sup>12</sup> Nascent centralized states were developing sophisticated intelligence networks, sending and recruiting agents across Europe and the Mediterranean. They used spies internally to control and subdue opposition, externally to keep an edge over competing or enemy states.<sup>12</sup> In Europe, England and Spain had the best spying operations. Farther east, the

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<sup>11</sup> Carlos Carnicer and Javier Marcos, *Espías de Felipe II: Los servicios secretos del Imperio español* (Madrid, 2005). The second “explosion” would be the twentieth century.

<sup>12</sup> For more on early modern intelligence services and a general fascination with secrecy at the time, see Paolo Preto, *I Servizi Segreti Di Venezia*, La Cultura. Saggi 499 (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1994); Carnicer and Marcos, *Espías de Felipe II: Los Servicios Secretos Del Imperio Español*; Daniel Jütte, *Das Zeitalter des Geheimnisses: Juden, Christen und die Ökonomie des Geheimen (1400 - 1800)* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011); William Eamon, *The Professor of Secrets: Mystery, Medicine, and Alchemy in Renaissance Italy* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2010). Although not as common as other stereotypes, the archetype of the Jewish spy also has a long history, see for example Elisheva Carlebach, “Attribution of Secrecy and Perceptions of Jewry,” *Jewish Social Studies* 2, no. 3 (April 1, 1996): 115–36, doi:10.2307/4467480; Garrett Mattingly, “The Reputation of Doctor De Puebla,” *The English Historical Review* 55, no. 217 (January 1, 1940): 27–46, doi:10.2307/554029; Daniel Jütte, “Trading in Secrets: Jews and the Early Modern Quest for Clandestine Knowledge,” *Isis* 103, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 668–86, doi:10.1086/668962.

<sup>12</sup> This included sophisticated counter-intelligence operations as well: Emrah Safa Gürkan, “The Efficacy of Ottoman Counter-Intelligence in the 16th Century,” *Acta Orientalia* 65, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 1–38, doi:10.1556/AOrient.65.2012.1.1.

Ottomans presided over networks that stretched across the Mediterranean and the Middle East. The Italian Peninsula, and the Republic of Venice in particular, occupied a privileged position at the intersection of many networks. Moreover, the Republic's preeminent commercial role in Mediterranean commerce naturally led to its emergence as a center for contact and exchange among diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions. Jews were intensely involved in what historian Daniel Jütte has termed the early modern economy of secrets.<sup>13</sup> But while Jews are known to have been part of the English and Ottoman networks and maintained a significant presence in Venice, almost none are known to have spied for Spain.<sup>14</sup> On the Jews' side it would have amounted to helping one's enemy, but there were serious reservations on the Spanish side as well, where traditional suspicions of Jewish malevolence were compounded by persisting doubts surrounding converso identity and beliefs that they were secretly plotting against Spanish Christians.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, King Philip

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<sup>13</sup> Jütte, *Das Zeitalter des Geheimnisses*.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Hector Nunez and Dr. Roderigo Lopez were working for the English spymasters Walsingham and Burghley. Nunez even makes a brief appearance in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta* as Nones of Portugal. Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 371.

<sup>15</sup> On the complex question of converso identity: Matthias B. Lehmann, "Introduction: Sephardi Identities," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (October 1, 2008): 1–9, doi:10.2307/40207031; Yosef Kaplan, "Wayward New Christians and Stubborn New Jews: The Shaping of a Jewish Identity," *Jewish History* 8, no. 1/2 (January 1, 1994): 27–41, doi:10.2307/20101189; David Graizbord, "Religion and Ethnicity among 'Men of the Nation': Toward a Realistic Interpretation," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (October 1, 2008): 32–65, doi:10.2307/40207033; Miriam Bodian, "Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: The Ambiguous Boundaries of Self-Definition," *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (October 1, 2008): 66–80, doi:10.2307/40207034. Accusations of Jewish spying in Spain: Cecil Roth and Arthur Dimock, "The Conspiracy of Dr. Lopez," *The English Historical Review* 9, no. 35 (July 1, 1894): 440–72, doi:10.2307/548218; Max Kohler, "Dr. Rodrigo Lopez, Queen's Elizabeth's Physician and His Relations to America," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* 17 (1909): 9–17; Boleslao Lewin, "'Las Confidencias' of Two Crypto-Jews in the Holy Office Prison of Mexico (1654-1655)," *Jewish Social Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1, 1968): 3–22, doi:10.2307/4466385. Daniel Jütte, *Das Zeitalter des*

II of Spain governed an enormous but also fragile empire. Stretching from the Americas to Italy, it faced threats on all fronts. Good

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*Geheimnisses: Juden, Christen und die Ökonomie des Geheimen (1400 - 1800)*  
(Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011).

intelligence coming from trustworthy spies was key to Spain's success. Understandably, the king doubted that Jews could be trusted.<sup>16</sup>

While suspicion of Jews would seem to preclude their participation in the major spy network of the time, one Italian Jew, Simon Vitale Sacerdoti, spied for Philip II of Spain. He was the "anti-Barabas": a contemporary of Joseph Nasi who worked against the Ottomans rather than help them. In fact, he was willing to betray Nasi, since he offered to use his connections to get close to Nasi and then send intelligence he gathered to Philip II. The Spanish governor in Milan sent Sacerdoti on missions to France, Central Europe and the Middle East. He transmitted crucial military information on Ottoman troop levels in the Mediterranean to high-level Spanish officials in Italy. And when Philip expelled all the Jews from Milan in 1597, he acknowledged Sacerdoti's contribution, allowing only him and his family to stay in the region.<sup>17</sup>

Scholarship on the Mediterranean has cast doubt on the idea of a "clash of civilizations" between East and West, demonstrating instead the deep interconnectedness of Christian and Muslims and people from a wide variety of backgrounds all around and

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<sup>16</sup> Carnicer and Marcos, *Espias de Felipe II: Los servicios secretos del Imperio español*.

<sup>17</sup> Cassen, "The Last Spanish Expulsion in Europe."



on the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>18</sup> The study of Venice and its contacts with the Ottoman Empire<sup>19</sup> has been especially useful in revealing just how fluid religious and ethnic boundaries (once assumed to be airtight) really were.<sup>20</sup> However, relations between the Spanish and Ottoman empires were a more complicated matter, marked by antagonistic politics, competing interests, and ongoing wars.

In Simon Sacerdoti these rival worlds intersected. He was an Italian Jew with connections in Istanbul, who became a subject of the Spanish empire as a result of European dynastic wars. His ability to conduct secret missions across religious and geographic boundaries suggests a remarkable grasp of Mediterranean social and political intricacies. But along with Sacerdoti's intellectual and political acumen, one must consider the Jews' situation at that time. Expulsions and resettlements in new lands, conversions to Christianity and back to Judaism (often by way of crypto-Judaism) shaped their experience, forcing them to become more adaptable.<sup>21</sup> By focusing on one man's story, and his possible

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<sup>18</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (University of California Press, 1995); Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea : A Study of Mediterranean History* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2000); David Abulafia, *The Great Sea : A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London ;New York: Allen Lane, 2011); Eric R. Dursteler, "On Bazaars and Battlefields: Recent Scholarship on Mediterranean Cultural Contacts," *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 5 (January 1, 2011): For recent reviews on Mediterranean historiography, see, doi:10.1163/157006511X590730; John A. Marino, "Mediterranean Studies and the Remaking of Pre-Modern Europe," *Journal of Early Modern History* 15, no. 5 (August 19 ): 385–412; Linda T. Darling, "Rethinking Europe and the Islamic World in the Age of Exploration," *Journal of Early Modern History* 2, no. 3 (1998): 221.

<sup>20</sup> See the recent groundbreaking work of Bronwen Wilson, *The World in Venice : Print, the City and Early Modern Identity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Eric Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople: Nation, Identity, and Coexistence in the Early* (JHU Press, 2006); E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects between Venice and Istanbul* (Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> David Ruderman argued that "mobility" was one of the defining features of early modern Jewry: David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton, N.J.; Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2011).

motivations and dilemmas, the article highlights that although the Mediterranean was an integrated and “connected” world, tensions between communitarianism and transcultural connections persisted.

### **Spain’s Spying Agency**

Intelligence gathering has played a key role in human societies since ancient times. Hebrew, Acadians, Romans, medieval Europeans, Arabs and Byzantines: everyone understood the importance of intelligence gathering. Though information was often transmitted through merchants and other travelers, there is evidence that in the early middle ages both the Byzantines and the Arabs had developed effective secret services. However, in Europe, one has to wait until the Renaissance to see the emergence of professional spies.<sup>22</sup>

As in many areas of government and diplomacy, the states of the Italian Peninsula led the way and quickly became a hotbed of intelligence gathering. Venice, as already indicated, was one of the principal spying centers where merchants and public officials from across the Mediterranean traded in goods and information. The creation of a professional diplomatic corps during the Renaissance, specifically the office of resident ambassador, added structure to the emerging spying networks.<sup>23</sup> The task of the ambassador was twofold: negotiate policy and provide his masters with sensitive information. As

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<sup>22</sup> Preto, *I Servizi Segreti Di Venezia*, 17-21.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Jacob Levin, *Agents of Empire: Spanish Ambassadors in Sixteenth-Century Italy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1955); Preto, *I Servizi Segreti Di Venezia*.

Michael Levin writes: "Ever since the development of permanent embassies, states and statesmen have understood that ambassadors act as political analysts, as well as outright spies."<sup>24</sup> By the sixteenth century, since large portions of Italy had come under Spanish control, the extensive espionage network built by Phillip II naturally found one of its centers in Italy. As opposed to England's intelligence agency, which was run as an institution parallel to the state by Sir Francis Walsingham, Philip II played a significant personal role in shaping Spain's network—so much so that he is often given credit for creating the "modern" intelligence services.<sup>25</sup> He understood and believed in the power and effectiveness of secret information. He needed it to successfully run his empire, and it came naturally to his suspicious temperament.<sup>26</sup>

[Philip's] suspicion became almost pathological. It led him to deceive his ministers; for he assured them that he would never listen to slanders against them, yet he encouraged their subordinates to spy and report on them.<sup>26</sup>

At times his predilection for secrecy, which shrouded his true intentions even to his closest collaborators, led to "administrative chaos."<sup>27</sup> But his subordinates and others who wished to serve him in Spain or abroad knew that one sure way to please him was with classified

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<sup>24</sup> Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy*; Donald E Queller, *The Office of Ambassador in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1967); Levin, *Agents of Empire*.

<sup>25</sup> Carnicer and Marcos, *Espias de Felipe II: Los servicios secretos del Imperio espanol*.<sup>26</sup> Although recently Henry Kamen has tried to paint a more positive picture of the king, overwhelmingly Philip's reputation remains that of a fanatical, extremely detail-oriented and mysterious man. Henry Arthur Francis Kamen, *Philip of Spain* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1997); H. G Koenigsberger, "The statecraft of Philip II," *European Studies Review* 1 (1971): 1-21; Carnicer and Marcos, *Espias de Felipe II: Los servicios secretos del Imperio espanol*, 59-69.

<sup>26</sup> H. G Koenigsberger, "The Statecraft of Philip II," *European Studies Review* 1 (1971): 1–21.

<sup>27</sup> John Jeffries Martin, *Myths of Renaissance Individualism* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 6.

information. He paid particular attention to the selection of his ambassadors, for they ran his intelligence network. Stationed across the empire, they were responsible for recruiting spies and agents, evaluating potential agents' trustworthiness, and relaying their information to the King. Philip's most trusted ambassador, Guzman de Silva, was sent to Venice, a hotbed of espionage, with the following instructions: "To know and understand through all possible ways, means and forms the news available to you."<sup>28</sup>

Yet in spite of the growing importance of spying, few spies were professionally trained. Most of the secret information that Spanish ambassadors had access to came from what historians Carlos Carnicer and Javier Marcos called *ad hoc* spies or correspondents: people who happened both to have information and to be in touch with a Spanish official. They were often merchants. The main difference was that correspondents operated on a regular basis, while *ad hoc* spies provided one-time information. Agents, however, were a wholly different matter. They came nearer to being what we would consider career spies, and their tasks involved frequent secret missions on behalf of the crown. Anyone—including renegades, prisoners, and even Turks and Jews—could become an *ad hoc* spy or a correspondent, but agents, as Philip explained to his ambassador to France in 1584, had to be "*personas de calidad*"—quality people. This meant they had to be Spanish, Christian, and, if possible, members of the high middle class.<sup>30</sup> Such criteria, added to the Jews' reputations as "Barabases," generally precluded Jews from joining the ranks of Philip's spying agents.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless some Jews were sought after for their access to information.

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<sup>28</sup> Cited by Carnicer and Marcos, *Espias de Felipe II: Los servicios secretos del Imperio español*, 146. <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 303-331.

<sup>29</sup> On the Jews as secret conspirators, see Carlebach, "Attribution of Secrecy and Perceptions of Jewry."

Joseph Nasi, of course, was in the perfect position. He headed a banking company with positions across the Mediterranean, and had connections with Jewish communities everywhere as well as direct access to the Sultan, whose trust in him appeared unshakeable.<sup>30</sup> When the grand vizier Sokullu Pasha said to him that Jews ought not to occupy high governmental position, the Sultan replied that Nasi had always been a good servant and that no one had better information on Christian affairs.<sup>31</sup> Although the extent of his role as a “double agent” is disputed, there is evidence to suggest that he was courted by Christian forces, including Spain, and that he made overtures in Spain’s direction.<sup>32</sup> However, his contemporary and at times rival, David Passi, was more explicitly a double agent. Originally from Portugal, he had become a confidant of Sultan Murad III, Selim’s successor, but he simultaneously served the king of Portugal. Both sides prized him for his knowledge of the others, yet no one truly trusted him. As Lipomano, the Venetian bailo said: “This David, for one truth tells a hundred lies; he would betray us if he could; he is agent of Don Antonio of Portugal and in the confidence of the King of Spain; he is the warm supporter of Venice and the trusted spy of the Sultan.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Roth, *The House of Nasi*.

<sup>31</sup> Letter quoted by Emrah Safa Gurkan, “Espionage in the 16th Century Mediterranean: Secret Diplomacy, Mediterranean Go-Betweens and the Ottoman Habsburg Rivalry” (Ph.D., Georgetown University, 2012), 378.

<sup>32</sup> Baron dismissed Nasi’s overtures to Spain as made up and impulsive, Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2d ed., rev. and enl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), XVIII, 92; Rosenblatt and Gurkan, on the other hand, see him as a shrewd political operator who would not have had any compunctions about giving information to Spain if it served his interests: Rosenblath, “Joseph Nasi, Friend of Spain,” in *Studies in Honor of M.J. Bernardete; Essays in Hispanic and Sephardic Culture*, ed. Izaak A. Langnas and Barton Sholod (New York, 1965); Gurkan, “Espionage in the 16th Century Mediterranean,” 383.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted by Gurkan, “Espionage in the 16th Century Mediterranean,” 387.

Jews without access to power were in a different situation. They understood the value of intelligence; indeed, it represented a potential avenue to power.<sup>34</sup> However, getting the attention of a spy master was a considerable challenge. In 1569, Joseph Ottolengho, a Jew from Cremona, claimed in a letter to have a relative in a faraway country who could tell him the secret of transforming metal into steel.<sup>35</sup> He asked for money to help cover his relative's traveling costs and demanded exclusive commercial privileges to sell this steel in Spanish territory. The king told his governor to verify that Ottolengho's allegations were true and if so, to assist him as he saw fit. Five months later, Ottolengho wrote with a different proposal, offering a secret scheme to help the governor recover taxes. Again the King ordered the governor to investigate the matter and to tell Ottolengho that he would be generously remunerated if his scheme proved workable.<sup>36</sup> There were no follow-ups to both these letters, suggesting that Ottolengho's plans did not prove feasible, or that he was not able to convince the governor. In both cases Ottolengho by-passed the governor and the ambassador to get the King's direct attention.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Jütte persuasively made this point in Daniel Jütte, "Trading in Secrets: Jews and the Early Modern Quest for Clandestine Knowledge," *Isis* 103, no. 4 (2012): 668–86.

<sup>35</sup> AGS, Secretarias Provinciales libro 1203, fols 119-121: "*Il doctor Giosepho Ottolengho hebreo tiene uno suo amico e parente in lontani paesi verso l'oriente quail ha un secreto con il quale converte qualsivoglia ferro in azzaiio.*"

<sup>36</sup> AGS, secretarias Provinciales libro 1203, fols 217-219: "*Porende os encargamos y mandamus qu dijendo al supplicante sobre la coseas contenidas en este memorial nos abiseis de lo que huviere en elleas asegurando al supplicante que no se sirviran de su abiso sin gratificacion suya.*"

<sup>37</sup> In the letter Ottolengho is just called doctor but he could very well be the rabbi and printer of Cremona whom Joseph ha-Kohen held responsible for the Talmud burning in Cremona. In his chronicle, ha-Kohen included a letter that he wrote to Ottolenghi explaining that a scholar of his stature should have known better than to associate himself with people of ill-repute who ended causing the burning of the Talmud. Ha Cohen and Ben Jacob, *Shene Sefarim Niftahim*, 160; Isaiah Sonne, *Expurgation of Hebrew Books. The Works of Jewish Scholars. A Contribution to the History of the Censorship of Hebrew Books in Italy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: The New York Public Library, 1943); Roberto

Philip II spent hours in his office reading and responding to his correspondents, and yet before a letter made it to his desk it went through his secretary, who filtered out materials that would waste his time. But as both of these letters promised secret information, Philip's aides, who knew his predilection for secrecy, must have deemed them worthy of his attention.

Simon Sacerdoti, one of the few successful Jewish spies in Spanish service, used a different strategy: he went through Philip's ambassadors in Italy. Since ambassadors were the ones in charge of the King's espionage networks, this was the most effective way for a spy to get the king's attention. But this was not easy. Ambassadors were busy and important men, fully taken up with the task of representing Spain in the world.<sup>38</sup> So how did a Jew from the small town of Alessandria manage to get their attention?

Sacerdoti's family background will help us understand.

### **The Sacerdoti family of Alessandria**

The Sacerdoti family was one of the major Jewish families in the region of Milan, but not much of their history is known. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, a Spanish official wrote to Philip II that Simon Sacerdoti was trying to help conversos, including some relatives of his, flee the Inquisition by moving to Savoy.<sup>39</sup> This suggests that the Sacerdoti family had Spanish roots and probably arrived in Italy after the expulsion of 1492. They

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Bonfil, *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, Littman library of Jewish civilization (Series) (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1993), 190.

<sup>38</sup> For more on the ambassadors, see Levin, *Agents of Empire*.

<sup>39</sup> AGS, Estado, 1233 # 121. See also Haim Beinart, "Settlement of the Jews in the Duchy of Savoie in the Wake of the Privilege of 1572," in *Scritti in Memoria Di Leone Carpi*, ed. Attilio Milano, Alexander Rofe, and Daniel Carpi (Jerusalem, 1967), 88.

seem to have moved to the town of Alessandria in the Duchy of Milan near the border with Savoy soon after their arrival, for Simon's father, Vitale, was born there in 1510. Vitale owned a bank in Alessandria with his brother-in-law, Abramo della Torre. Astute businessmen, they were able to expand throughout the region and branch out into other businesses as well. Simon himself lived his entire life in Alessandria and the Sacerdoti family was still there in the eighteenth century.<sup>40</sup>

In 1540 King Philip II of Spain took over the Duchy of Milan. The transition from Italian to Spanish rule seems to have happened seamlessly for the Sacerdotis. Perhaps their business even benefited, since Alessandria was strategically located along the "Spanish Road" to the Netherlands.<sup>41</sup> The family quickly developed a good relationship with the newly installed Spanish governor, Fernando Gonzaga.<sup>42</sup> Vitale ran a large mercantile and banking operation that loaned money to noblemen and soldiers alike, and this brought him to the governor's attention. In addition, Vitale took steps that placed him directly in the service of King Philip II of Spain. In 1558, together with two other Jews, he loaned 5000

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<sup>40</sup> Renata Segre, *Gli Ebrei Lombardi Nell'eta Spagnola*, Memorie dell'Accademia Delle Scienze Di Torino 4, 1973; Renata Segre, "Sephardic Settlements in Sixteenth-Century Italy: A Historical and Geographical Survey," in *Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Mediterranean World after 1492*, ed. Alisa Meyuhas Ginio (London, 1992); Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan, A Documentary History of the Jews of Italy* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), volume 3.

<sup>41</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567-1659* (Cambridge: University Press, 1972).

<sup>42</sup> Renata Segre, *Gli ebrei Lombardi nell'eta spagnola*, vol. 28, Memorie dell'Accademia delle scienze di Torino 4, 1973, 24; Simonsohn, *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan*, 1128-1133. For example, in 1548, they were accused of selling wheat illegally and briefly imprisoned, but Gonzaga intervened to free them. A few months later, the governor helped the Sacerdote collect some outstanding debts. In March of 1550 Vitale was summoned before the governor to defend himself against an accusation that he was charging excessive interests. Two weeks later Vitale wrote to the governor requesting help in securing the reimbursement of the debts of Spanish soldiers.



scudi to the Royal treasury.<sup>43</sup> In 1560 Vitale made a large loan to Spanish soldiers.<sup>44</sup> Milan held a key military place in the Spanish empire and was subject to a constant stream of Spanish soldiers who needed to be paid and fed if mutiny and plunder were to be averted.<sup>45</sup> But as important as Vitale's role was in this respect, it was not uncommon for Jews to be involved in money lending, and when particularly successful, to make loans to rulers and soldiers. By becoming a spy, Vitale's son, Simon, took the family's service to the Spanish crown to the next level.

Unlike other Jews, Simon displayed a sophisticated understanding of how Spanish spies operated. Rather than contact the king directly, he managed to secure referrals from two sources close to the king: Don Martin de la Nuca, an Aragonese nobleman who was a close friend of Antonio Perez, Philip II's secretary; and Emmanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy and Philip's first cousin. Emmanuel Philibert had served as his governor in the Netherlands from 1553 to 1559, just when Joseph Nasi, fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition, settled in its commercial capital, Antwerp. There, Nasi and the future Duke of Savoy developed a relation. In a letter that he asked Simon Sacerdoti to carry to Nasi in person, Emmanuel Philibert wrote: "The friendship which was so long since contracted between us when we were both in the Low Countries." Clarifying Simon's role in the relation, he added later in the letter: "For this reason, I have decided to send to your illustrious Lordship

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<sup>43</sup> Simonsohn, *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan*, 1334, 1342.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1356.

<sup>45</sup> Antonio Alvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, "The State of Milan and the Spanish Monarchy," in *Spain in Italy: Politics, Society, and Religion 1500-1700*, ed. Thomas James Dandele and John A Marino (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Antonio Alvarez-Ossorio Alvariño, *Milan Y El Legado De Felipe II: Gobernadores Y Corte Provincial En La Lombardia De Los Austrias* (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal para la Conmemoracion de los Centenarios de Felipe II y Carlos V, 2001).

Simone di Sacerdote, a Jew who, as I understand from the good report that he had often brought to me of your generous nature (confirming even further what I already knew) is as devoted a servant to you as he is to me.”<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Spanish diplomatic correspondence reveals that Emmanuel Philibert frequently recommended Simon to Philip II’s ambassadors, his spymasters.

The first to bring to bring Simon Sacerdoti to the king’s direct attention was Don Martin de la Nuca. In a letter dated July 1567 he described how Simon Sacerdoti had approached him to offer highly valuable intelligence.<sup>47</sup> This letter tells us who Simon’s contacts were and how he made his case for being a spy. When Simon approached Don Martin, he had just returned from a mission to Jerusalem on the orders of the Duke of Albuquerque, governor of Milan. While there, Simon told Don Martin, he established friendships with a number of important Jews who had contacts in Istanbul. He was also a close friend of a factor of Joseph Nasi (Juan Michas in the letter). Though this in itself would be an important source of intelligence on the Turkish Empire, Simon added that he planned to use his factor friend and his own father to endear himself to Nasi. His friend would transmit Nasi a letter written by Simon but in his father’s name, in which he asked Nasi to take his son in his service for he was now too old to undertake the journey to Istanbul.

Both letters suggest that Simon was closely connected to Nasi’s network, through which he gained ears in the highest spheres of Ottoman power. He was offering such access

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<sup>46</sup> Cecil Roth, “Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, 2, 57, no. The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Volume of the Jewish Quarterly Review (1967): 469–470.

<sup>47</sup> AGS, Estado 1222 # 49.

to the Spanish king precisely when Philip II was preparing for his major naval battle against the Turks at Lepanto.<sup>48</sup> All the correspondence between Spain's ambassadors and Philip II concerning Simon Sacerdoti's missions was encoded and only rarely was Simon named. He was occasionally called "Simon the Jew," or "Vidal the Jew," but most often just "the Jew." However, by cross-checking sources and following the trail of the secret missions that they discuss, I can establish that this person indeed was Simon Vitale Sacerdoti. The evidence for this identification will follow, but first we must examine the adventures of the then-anonymous "Jew" who appears in Philip's letters.

### **Simon the Spy**

According to the archives of the Spanish Chancellery in Milan, between 1560 and 1584 ten payments were made out to Simon Sacerdoti for journeys and secret missions accomplished for the king of Spain. In 1560 he was paid eight scudi for a trip to Germany and Zurich. In 1562 again he took a trip to Zurich on the king's account, for which he was paid 20 scudi, and in 1568 he was paid 150 gold scudi for carrying out a *commissione secreta*. He accomplished another secret mission in 1569, for which again he received 150 gold scudi. In 1570 he traveled to Piedmont and was paid 20 scudi. In 1576 he was paid 200 scudi for expenses incurred on several secret missions on behalf of the governor, the Duke of Albuquerque. In 1580 he was paid another 60 scudi for missions accomplished on behalf of the king, and in 1584 he was paid a total of 65 scudi for the same.<sup>49</sup> The nature of

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<sup>48</sup> AGS, Estado 1222 # 49.

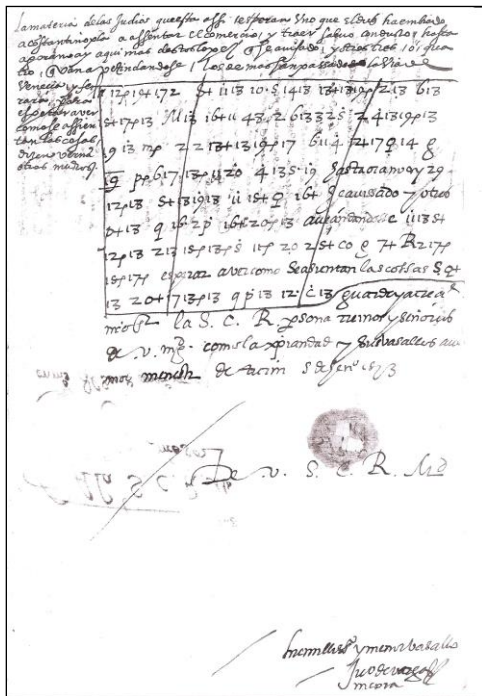
<sup>49</sup> Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Jews in the Duchy of Milan*, A Documentary history of the Jews of Italy (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 1367-68.

these secret missions is not made clear, for the documents preserved in the archives of Milan record only the payments. However, there is far more information in the correspondence between the king of Spain and the Spanish governor of Milan, and between the king and his ambassadors in various Italian states. These men competed to send the most valuable intelligence to their king, and their letters, containing confidential and sensitive information, were handled with great care. The secret parts were encoded, and they were preserved only in the archives of Simancas, a fortress located near Valladolid built by Philip II for the purpose of keeping his archives.

The clearest demonstration of Simon's importance and effectiveness as a spy comes from four documents written in 1585, 1591, and 1592. In those reports Philip's counsellors verified Simon's service to the crown to help the King decide whether and how much to pay him. The four reports concur that he helped foil French plans to take Alessandria and Savona, provided information about a projected Spanish mutiny, discovered several Turkish spies in Milan, and undertook a number of missions to Constantinople, Germany, and Provence upon orders from the governor and "for secret things of great importance." And as the governor of Milan added: "he has always been engaged in commissions and affairs involving secrecy and trust."<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> AGS, Secretarias Provinciales, 1796 # 33: "*al tiempo de la gueras de Piamonte descubrio un tratado que Franco Bernardino Vimercato governador de Valenza por franceses tenia en Alexandria ... descubrio muchas espias en aquella ciudad que ha ydo cinco vezes a Constantinople por orden de los gobernadores de aquel estado y por cosas secretas de servicio del Mgd y siempre ha sido ocupado en comisiones y negocios de secreto y confianca. Que asi miso descubrio el ano de 78 un motin de espanoles en Alexandria que fue de mucha importancia y no menos el haver descubierto ciertos Turcos espias en Milan.*" And AGS, Secretarias Provinciales 1795 # 333: "*descubriendo tratados e inteligencias de francese y muchas espias motines en Alexandria el Castillo de Milan y Saona y endo cinco vezes a Levante y otras muchas a Alemana, Provenca y otras partes con orden delos*



Above, a page out of a report by ambassador Juan de Vargas Mexia on a mission that Simon accomplished for the Duke of Savoy. A sensitive passage was encoded. After the letter reached Philip's administration in Madrid, the letter was decoded in the left margin and above the text.<sup>51</sup>

One such secret strategic affair was a plan to take Buggia, currently Bejaia, a fortified city on the Barbary Coast in modern-day Algeria. Spain had occupied Buggia from 1510 to 1555 when it lost it to the Ottomans. Re-taking it would have represented an important victory, and Simon's timing was judicious in this regard. He approached the Duke of Savoy about a year before the battle of Lepanto, a time when anxiety over Turkish domination of the Mediterranean Sea was particularly high and the Spanish navy was preparing for a major confrontation against the Turks. It probably helped that Philip had already heard of Simon Sacerdoti through Martin de la Nuca, for shortly after Simon

*governadores de aquel estado y por cosas secretas y de grande importancia.*" See also AGS, Secretarias provinciales 1794 # 323 and 1221 # 227-9.

<sup>51</sup> AGS, Estado, 1399 # 98

proposed his plan, correspondence on Buggia started flowing between Philip II and his ambassadors. On January 1, 1570, Guzman de Silva, the Spanish ambassador in Genoa, wrote Philip that he received a letter from the Duke of Savoy concerning some matters dealt with by “this Jew” and that, upon recommendation of the Duke, he sent the Jew on a mission. It is not clear what this mission entailed, but it seemed quite important and timely to the ambassador and the Duke because they dispatched Simon even before knowing Philip’s opinion on the matter.<sup>52</sup> On April 25<sup>th</sup>, a new letter from Guzman de Silva, written in code, reported on the mission. In it we learn that the Duke of Savoy had sent Simon Sacerdoti to Argel, currently El Jazair in Algeria, where he gathered information on Buggia. Simon, the Duke reported, had a friend in Nice, a sailor called Geronymo Nicardo, who told him that it should be quite easy to take Buggia because the city was badly guarded by only 50 elderly janissaries. Simon’s plan was a classic Trojanhorse strategy: he would visit the Caliph whom he knew well, carrying large gifts, which would require him to enter the city with a few men. Once inside, they would kill the caliph and send a signal to the soldiers left in the boats to storm the city.<sup>55</sup> He then added that once Buggia was taken, Argel could be taken as well, but that Argel could not be taken without Buggia.

On May 2<sup>nd</sup>, Guzman de Silva wrote another letter to the king after having received more information from Simon. He started by telling the king that he thinks that the idea is worth pursuing because “this man is known, has much experience with these matters and

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<sup>52</sup> AGS, Estado, 1399 # 8: “*Anoche tuve carta del Duque de Saboya cuya copi embio a VM ... me ha prescido despechar este hebreo conforme a lo que el Duque escribe por no aver tiempo de saber lo que VM sera servido ques e haga en ello.*” <sup>55</sup> AGS, Estado 1399 # 42.

has also opened a line of communication with a Castilian in Buggia.”<sup>53</sup> He then reiterated Sacerdoti’s assurances that the city could be taken with relatively few soldiers and few weapons because arms and munitions would be waiting for them there. Anticipating the king’s next question, he specified that he asked Simon to clarify who were the people who would bring the weapons to Marseille, Argel, and other places, information that Sacerdoti could not reveal. All he could say was that these would-be revolutionaries were smugglers who carried weapons in barrels of wine fitted with an internal compartment that concealed weapons while keeping them separate from the wine. The lead, Sacerdoti explained, came directly from England and was hidden under the ballast of ships originating there. Interestingly, Sacerdoti added that this was also how heretical books were smuggled out of England and into Spanish lands.<sup>54</sup> Evidently the plan had been thought through in detail, and the ambassador felt it was worth pursuing, but what was the king’s opinion?

On June 4th, the king’s reply arrived. He was interested in the plan but wanted further details verifying its workability: “If it is as easy as he [the Jew] claims then it should not be a problem to prove it.”<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, he instructed Guzman to collect as much information as possible pertaining to the plan and report back to him.<sup>56</sup> Philip was a prudent monarch who did not take military decisions lightly, and yet his interest in the plan was undeniable. June 1571 was five months before the battle of Lepanto; he was already busy

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<sup>53</sup> AGS, Estado 1399 # 43: *Y ame inclinado juzgar que puede tener algun fundamento este trato por ser aquel hombre conocido y que tiene mucha experiencia delo ally y particular comunicacion con castellano que esta en Bugia.*”

<sup>54</sup> AGS, Estado 1399 # 43.

<sup>55</sup> AGS, Estado 1400 # 81: *“Que si ello ha de tan facil como el lo haze poco se aventurara en provarlos.”*

<sup>56</sup> AGS, Estado 1400 # 81: *“Entre tanto podreis vos yros informando del todo lo que del se pudierre saber y avisarnos dello.”*

planning war in the Mediterranean. The fact that Sacerdoti was Jewish did not seem to have bothered him; he did not even comment on it. His only concern was the quality of the information. The ambassador complied with the king's request for proofs, sending him five more letters on the matter in June and July.

The Spanish ambassador in Turin, Juan de Vargas Mexia, was dealing with the case, too, and “a Jew,” Simon Sacerdoti, was his source of information. On June 2, 1571, he wrote Philip II that Sacerdoti had traveled to Marseille on the orders of the Duke of Savoy to meet with a French sailor. The information he brought back was important: the said sailor had been in Buggia when a ship belonging to the Duke of Florence arrived with at its head a French captain called Simon Lonja and twenty men on board. Their intention had been to capture the city but the Turks discovered them. Simon Lonja was now in Genoa, where, together with French soldiers and the Duke of Florence, he was rumored to be preparing an attack on Savona, an Italian city under Spanish control. Moreover, Mexia also informed the Duke that Sacerdoti had access to information on the city of Tunis through a renegade friend who was on good terms with local authorities.<sup>57</sup> Sacerdoti's information was rich and far-reaching: he was helping the Spanish foil a Franco-Florentine coup, was promising important inside information on a major North African fort at the precise moment when Spain was preparing to fight its largest battle against the Ottomans, and he was, also, sending crucial information to Philip on Francesco de Medici.

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<sup>57</sup> AGS, Estado 1230 # 88.



Francesco de Medici, the Duke of Florence, was playing an intricate game. Without informing Philip II that his operation to take Buggia had already failed, he wrote to him saying that a French captain from Marseille, Simon—presumably the same Simon Lonja—had assured him Buggia could be taken easily. Medici explained that twenty-five boats and considerable ammunition and infantry men would be needed to accomplish this, and offered the king the use of his own galleys and men. His only purpose, the duke insisted, was to serve the king.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, as we know from Sacerdoti, Medici was plotting against Spanish forces in Savona. Though the plot failed, its story highlights for us the intense maneuverings taking place in late Renaissance Italy. Florence, a small republic, may have tried to free itself from Spanish influence, which was so dominant on the Peninsula at the time. So the Duke of Florence was joining France in a plot against Spain, while appearing to be on Spain's side with a flawed plan to attack Buggia. Philip's reaction to Medici's machinations was simply to tell him that now was not the right time to take Buggia.<sup>59</sup> Meanwhile, he was warming to Sacerdoti's Buggia plan.

On September 23, 1571, Philip II asked Guzman to encourage Sacerdoti, whom he, too, called "the Jew," to proceed with the plan, and even to grant him a safe-conduct to come explain his plan at the Spanish court.<sup>63</sup> Five years after threatening to expel the Jews from Milan, Philip II was inviting one of those Jews to his court. Yet nothing came of that

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<sup>58</sup> AGS, Estado 1477 # 115.

<sup>59</sup> AGS, Estado 1447 # 141: "*Vra Carta de 15 de ago recibi sobrelo de Bugia con la relacion y discription de aquella plaza y he visto lo que por ella me scriuis de la inteligencia que deneys y el aviso que aveys senal- de que seria muy facil tomarla y aunque el negocio me ha parecido de consideracion, no me parece que se deve entender en esto por agora. por no dar a ello lugar las --- ocupaciones otras en que es menester /o s-rtr el tiempo/. y quando ho este fuere aproposito / yo os avisare de lo que en ella conberna que se haga/ y assi por hagora se podra sobre seer en este particular.*" <sup>63</sup> AGS, Estado 1400 # 88.

visit because the news that followed was bad. A day before Philip sent his September 23<sup>rd</sup> letter, Guzman had learned of a serious problem: “The Jew who dealt with the matter of Buggia” had been caught by the governor of Marseille and apparently confessed to the plan. The ambassador did not hide his disappointment: “*he tenido pena*”—I was sad—he wrote, revealing that he had believed strongly enough in the plan to develop an emotional stake in it.<sup>60</sup> Two days later, on October 20, Guzman de Silva sent the king a new letter saying that, in fact, Sacerdoti had not been taken. He had met him together with the Duke of Savoy and, once more, felt much hope for their project: “*El Duque y este hebreo estan tan confiados que me hazen tener mas esperanca.*” He added that the Duke suggested sending a soldier dressed as a sailor to inspect the place.<sup>61</sup> The circumstances of Sacerdoti’s capture and release were not satisfactorily explained, which seems to have tamped down the king’s enthusiasm for the plan. He responded two months later, on December 26, 1570, only acknowledging receipt of the ambassador’s letter.<sup>62</sup> The plan indeed seemed shady now. Sacerdoti’s capture had not been adequately explained, and having just won an impressive victory at Lepanto, Philip may not have attached the same value to Buggia as before. In addition, perhaps the mere threat of Sacerdoti’s divulging sensitive information to local authorities sobered Philip by reminding him of possible unintended consequences.

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<sup>60</sup> AGS, Estado 1399 # 98: “*que al hebreo que trato delo de Bugia avia prendido el governador de Marsella y avia descubierto el negocio que el avia escrito sobre ello al duque de Saboya.*”

<sup>61</sup> AGS, Estado 1399 # 99: “*y que el duque querria que fese con este marinero un soldato platico para ver la disposicion de aquel lugar, vestido como un hombre del navio para que como confidente y platico queda dar buena razon de todo.*”

<sup>62</sup> AGS, Estado 1400 # 91: “*He holgado de entender la buena esperanca que tiene el hebreo que trata de lo de Bugia y de que el duque de Saboya quisiesse embiar persona platica para ver el sitio de aquel lugar para que tanto mejor se vealo que convenga.*”

Meanwhile a French plan to take Savona was quickly moving forward. Within a few days the Spanish ambassadors in Genoa and Turin informed the king of it. On November 5, 1571, Juan de Vargas Mexia, Spain's ambassador in Savoy, wrote that "the Jew who dealt with the Bugia affair" had given him information on a French plan to take the fort of Savona. Mexia describes himself as having taken a tough stance with Sacerdoti, telling him that if his information were solid he would be compensated, but that he should not dare to fool him. Sacerdoti replied that everything he said was true and that Mexia could put him in jail while he verified his assertions.<sup>63</sup> That being said, Mexia went on to explain the French plan, which involved poisoning Spanish soldiers' wine. The poison would either kill them all within seven hours or put them to sleep for twentyfour hours. French soldiers waiting outside would then scale the wall with ladders and storm the castle. Four days later, the ambassador in Genoa reported the same information.<sup>68</sup> Mexia's testimony confirms that "the Jew" ubiquitously present in the already-examined letters was Sacerdoti.<sup>69</sup> We already knew, from reports in 1585 and 1591, that Simon Sacerdoti helped foil the Savona plot. Now the ambassador from Savoy writes that the same Jew had proposed the Buggia plan, thus finally demonstrating that "the Jew" of Philip's other letters was indeed Simon Vitale Sacerdoti.<sup>64</sup>

There is more evidence that "the Jew" was Simon Sacerdoti. Although Sacerdoti was quite active and appeared in numerous letters in 1570-71, he temporarily disappeared from the record in 1572 and 73. When he reappeared in 1574, it was again to help Spain

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<sup>63</sup> AGS, Estado 1230 # 161: "*Yo le replica que y afirmando me lo le dize que si era cosa de fundamento y no vanidad lo tratasse conmigo que le gratificaria y saria gratificado pero que no me dicesse palabras certificamelo tanto diciendo que se ponia en prision hasta verificar lo.*" <sup>68</sup> AGS, Estado 1230 # 161. <sup>69</sup> AGS, Estado 1401 # 50.

<sup>64</sup> AGS, Estado 1230 # 161.

capture Buggia. In March 1574, the governor of Milan, the Marquis of Ayamonte, wrote to Philip II saying that a Jew named Vidal had a plan to take Buggia. Ayamonte thought highly of him: “Vidal the Jew is very intelligent and has served here since the time of the Duke of Sessa.”<sup>65</sup> Don Consalvo-Fernando di Cordova, Duke of Sessa, was governor of Milan from 1558 to 1560. Vidal may refer to Vitale Sacerdoti who, as we have seen, was actively engaged with the governor in the 1550’s and 60’s, but it could also be his son, Simon Vitale Sacerdoti, because the family used the name Vitale, or Vidal in hispanicized form, as their surname.<sup>66</sup> A report of 1585 listing all his accomplishments specified that Simon had served the crown for twenty-six years. This dates his service back to 1559, precisely in the middle of Sessa’s tenure as Duke. But the clearest indication that Vidal probably refers to Simon Vitale Sacerdoti is the plan that he proposed. Just as it had two years earlier, it involved an elaborate Trojan-horse strategy using merchant boats to hide soldiers. Sacerdoti had a friend with access to correspondence between the King of France and one of his secretaries, and in those letters the two discussed how easy it would be to take Buggia because the city was badly guarded. To take the city before the French, Sacerdoti offered to use one of his large merchant ships to carry out the attack. His plan was to travel there with four or five merchant ships in which 150 to 200 soldiers could hide.<sup>67</sup> The king’s response came fast. On April 27, he commended Ayamonte for having informed him of Sacerdoti’s offer and told him to be cautious about Buggia. With his usual prudence, he asked Ayamonte to gather more information before doing anything. However, he was more enthusiastic about the

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<sup>65</sup> AGS, Estado 1239 # 12: “*Vidal el hebreo es muy inteligente y ha servido ally desde el tiempo del Duque de Sessa.*”

<sup>66</sup> Segre, *Gli ebrei Lombardi nell'eta spagnola*, 24. According to her, Vitale had served as the family’s surname since the days of Simon’s grandfather.

<sup>67</sup> AGS, Estado 1239 # 12.

French king's correspondence and immediately declared it would bring much profit to Spain.<sup>68</sup>

Ayamonte pursued the Buggia plan, and after a few more conversations with Sacerdoti and his associate Manuel de Montagnana, sent the king clarifications on the number of boats, soldiers, weapons and other provisions that would be necessary. He also reported on further inquiries that he had made about Sacerdoti and Montagnana, reassuring him that they had worked with Spanish authorities for a while and had a very good reputation.<sup>69</sup> Philip was still interested in capturing Buggia and asked Ayamonte to discuss it with his brother, Don Juan de Austria. But on Sacerdoti, Philip had made his own inquiry and come to different conclusions: "On this Vidal who has proposed this plan; here he is not thought to be a man of much standing or seriousness and it is understood that very little will come out of this."<sup>70</sup> Had the earlier Buggia fiasco tarnished Sacerdoti's reputation? Or was there another reason for the king's skepticism? Sacerdoti was, after all, a man of many worlds, whose complex allegiances to Philip II, his governor and ambassadors, Duke Emmanuel Philibert, Joseph Nasi, and Milan's Jews were bound to create conflicts of interests, if not outright moral dilemmas. What was Sacerdoti doing in 1572 and 1573, when he was absent from the diplomatic correspondence?

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<sup>68</sup> AGS, Estado 1239 # 178.

<sup>69</sup> AGS, Estado 1239 #27: "*Estos son gente que han servido a VM algunos anos desto, dizen me que con satisfacion de los generales passados, y agora vendra aqui el Duque de Sessa y del podra entende major lo que destos nos podemos prometer.*"

<sup>70</sup> AGS, Estado 1239 # 192: "*Aunque aquel Vidal que os ha propuesto esta platica no se tiene aca por hombre de mucho fundamento y assi se entiende que se podria hacer muy poco desta.*"

## Simon Sacerdoti Thwarts his Spanish Masters

Emmanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy from 1559 to 1580, was close to Philip II. First cousins, they had grown up together at the court of Charles V. Philibert had served as Philip's governor in the Netherlands from 1550 to 1559. There he became friends with Joseph Nasi, who had settled in Antwerp after fleeing Portugal.<sup>71</sup> However, this friendship did not predispose Philibert towards all the Jews. A year after taking the reins of the Duchy of Savoy, Philibert resolved to expel them. This experience was traumatic for the Jews. Joseph ha-Kohen, the famous doctor, historian and chronicler of Italian Jewish life in the sixteenth century, recounted it thus:

Also Filiberto Emmanuel, the Duke of Savoy, wanted to expel the Jews from all the lands of Piedmont. The Jews were very frightened and threw themselves at his feet and before Margaret, his wife and the sister of King Henri, and brought her a gift. On that day, she accepted them and talked to their hearts<sup>72</sup>, and their stay was extended by four months. But Negron de Negri the Genoese,<sup>73</sup> a base man,<sup>74</sup> a thorn in their side<sup>75</sup> agitated the Duke against them, who then said: "Leave my land; be out in six days!" The Jews trembled in fear and cried out to the Lord who sent them a certain physician who was residing at the Duke's court. He spoke positively about them to the Duke, who made a covenant with them. And they have been living there to this day.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See the Duke's letter to Nasi which starts: "The friendship which so long since was contracted between us when we were both in the Low Countries" Roth, "Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy," 11.

<sup>72</sup> Hosea 2:16.

<sup>73</sup> The Negrone were indeed an old noble Genoese family. Negro de Negrone, Count of Stupinigi was treasurer general of Piedmont.

<sup>74</sup> Proverbs 6:12.

<sup>75</sup> Deuteronomy 33:55.

<sup>76</sup> Ha Cohen and Ben Jacob, *Shene Sefarim Niftahim*, 165.

Five years later, the Duke of Savoy again expelled the Jews. But a month after the Jews' departure, he changed his mind and readmitted them for ten years for a payment of 3000 scudi "to please persons in our special favor".<sup>77</sup>

After this, the Duke reversed his attitude toward Jews. Not only did he never expel them again, he also adopted a strategy to bring more Jews to his lands. Between 1569 and 1570 he opened the doors of his Duchy to expellees from the Papal States, and in 1572, he issued a privilege granting trading and banking rights and protection from inquisitorial proceedings to all Jews, including Spanish and Portuguese Marranos. His goal was to attract wealthy Jews from Spain and Portugal, as well as Jewish merchants from Constantinople, and to create a trading hub in Villefranche near Nice. Those who convinced him to embark on this project were none other than Vitale and Simon

Sacerdoti, both named in the first sentence of the privilege.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, the Duke sent

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<sup>77</sup> Segre, *The Jews in Piedmont*, 447-453. Joseph ha-Cohen recorded the 1565 expulsion too but got a number of the facts wrong. He dated it to 1566, called the Duke Joseph Filibert instead of Emmanuel Filibert, and wrote that the Duke "who was greedy" ordered the Jews to pay 4000 golden coins or leave his lands. The Jews left but few days later, they came back with 2000 golden coins, after which the duke readmitted them and granted them a new condotta, or "covenant" with a yearly tax of 1500 golden coins. Ha Cohen and Ben Jacob, *Shene Sefarim Niftahim*, 170. Apparently when not in Milan or Genoa, places Joseph was intimately familiar with, the level of accuracy of *Emek habakha* decreases.

<sup>78</sup> "*Havendoci humilmente supplicato Vital di Sacerdote, et Simone suo figliuolo, di voler conceder privileggi concessioni immunita a tutta la natione Hebrea di qual grado et conditione ... et a quelli che sono di detta stirpe cosi Italiani come Tedeschi, Spagnoli, Porthugesesi, Levantini, et di Barbaria, et di Suria ... che possano venir star et habitar ... et viver conforme alle loro leggi, con prohibitione espressa che contra di lor non si possi da inquisitore or altra persona ecclesiastica in tempo alcuno essercitare ne intentare veruna sorte d'inquisitione, visitatione, denuntiatione, accusatione et esecutione in esser chiamati ne citati in giuditio per causa di apostasia oo sia appocrisia, o per qualonche altro delitto di qual sorte si vogli, concernente materia di fede ... et che non possano esser astretti portar alcuno segnale differenziato dalli Christiani,*" published by M. Lattes, "Documents et notices sur l'histoire des juifs en Italie," *Revue des etudes juives* 5 (1882): 232-233. Haim Beinart, "Settlement of the Jews in the Duchy of Savoie in the

Simon to Constantinople with a letter to his friend Joseph Nasi, to ensure that the Jews who settled in Villefranche would have advantageous trading relations with Turkey.<sup>85</sup> The letter reveals Emmanuel Philibert's ambition to lead trade with the Levant:

“My present desire is to obtain a safe-conduct for some of my vassals and subjects from Villefranche and Nice and other places subject to me, to go freely into the dominions of the said Grand Signor on barks and other vessels only to trade and carry on their business-in the same way as I have granted a safe-conduct for Turks, Armenians, Persians, Indians and Levantines to come to my States and ports as they please to trade and conduct their business. In order that the said commerce may be carried on more conveniently and safely, I hope that the said Grand Signor will let these subjects of mine have a consul for the affairs that arise daily, whether in Alexandria or in Tripoli of Syria. I opine that this will be granted all the more readily since it will benefit the customs and import-dues, and will be useful moreover to his vassals and subjects in disposing of their wares and merchandise.”<sup>86</sup>

Although the privilege was nominally applicable to people from all countries, it was also an invitation to Spanish and Portuguese Jewish converts to move to Savoy and revert to Judaism.<sup>87</sup>

wake of the Privilege of 1572,” in *Scritti in Memoria di Leone Carpi*, eds. Attilio Milano, Alexander Rofe, and Daniel Carpi (Jerusalem, 1967), 72-118.<sup>85</sup> Roth, “Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy.”<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

<sup>87</sup> “*Havendoci humilmente supplicato Vital di Sacerdote, et Simone suo figliuolo, di voler conceder privileggi concessioni immunita a tutta la nazione Hebraea di qual grado et conditione ... et a quelli che sono di detta stirpe cosi Italiani come Tedeschi, Spagnoli, Porthugesi, Levantini, et di Barbaria, et di Suria ... che possano venir star et habitar ... et viver conforme alle loro leggi, con prohibitione espressa che contra di lor non si possi da inquisitore or altra persona ecclesiastica in tempo alcuno essercitare ne intentare veruna sorte d'inquisitione, visitatione, denuntiatione, accusatione et esecuzione in esser chiamati ne citati in giuditio per causa di apostasia oo sia appocrisia, o per qualonche altro delitto di qual sorte si vogli, concernente materia di fede ... et che non possano esser astretti portar alcuno segnale differenziato dalli Christiani,*” published by M. Lattes, “Documents et notices sur l'histoire des juifs en Italie,” *Revue des etudes juives* 5 (1882): 232-233. Haim Beinart, “Settlement of the Jews in the Duchy of Savoie in the wake of the Privilege of 1572,” in *Scritti in Memoria di Leone Carpi*, eds. Attilio Milano, Alexander Rofe, and Daniel Carpi (Jerusalem, 1967), 72-118. This document was not preserved in the archives of Piedmont-Savoy, which may reveal the care and secrecy with which the Duke surrounded this project. Lattes found a copy in the archives of the Jewish Emmanuel Philibert realized that Spain would disapprove of his policy but he underestimated the



strong resistance Spanish forces in Milan and Madrid would deploy against him. It started on the day that he issued his privilege, September 4, 1572. Juan de Vargas Mexia, the Spanish ambassador in Turin, sent a letter to Antonio Perez, Philip's secretary in Madrid, informing him of a rumor that "a certain rich Jew from Milan" (Vitale or Simon Sacerdoti) had made plans to come and live in Villefranche, along with wealthy Muslim and Jewish converts.<sup>88</sup> Mexia's letter was followed by an intense correspondence between Turin, Milan and Madrid on how to deal with this problem.<sup>89</sup>

This went on until Philip II brought the matter to the Pope, and in May 1573, Emmanuel Philibert was forced to expel Spanish and Portuguese Jews from his territories.<sup>90</sup>

This may explain Philip's reaction when Simon Sacerdoti tried once again to sell his Buggia plan. The man who had consorted with Joseph Nasi and conspired with him and Emmanuel Philibert to help conversos out of Spain was not to be trusted. And yet, his fall from favor was only temporary. By 1576, he was on a secret mission again for the Spanish governor of Milan; he was paid for at least two more secret missions in 1580 and 1584; in 1591 he obtained a safe conduct to travel to Spain; and in 1597 he and his family were the only Jews permitted to live in the Duchy of Milan. All the others had been

community of Padua, and Beinart located another copy in Simancas, Philip II's archive in Spain.

<sup>88</sup> Beinart, "Settlement of the Jews in the Duchy of Savoie in the wake of the Privilege of 1572," 86: "*Entre otras chimeras que andan entablado voy rastreando una que trata cierto judio rico del estado de Milan para venirse a vivir a este con algunos otros y que tiene correspondencia para el mismo efecto con particulares conversos moros y judios dessos reynos y en especial de Portugal. De los quales van viniendo segun me dizen personas ricas y traen consigo lo que tienen.*"

<sup>89</sup> The entire correspondence was published by Beinart, *ibid.*, 72-119.

<sup>90</sup> Segre, *The Jews in Piedmont*, 55; Beinart, "Settlement of the Jews in the Duchy of Savoie in the wake of the Privilege of 1572," 72-85.

expelled and forced to leave, but Philip granted him this favor in recognition of his services to the crown.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Cassen, "The Last Spanish Expulsion in Europe."

### **Back to Serving Spain?**

Given the failure of Simon's plan to take Buggia and the debacle at Villefranche, both of which sullied his reputation at the Spanish court, it is remarkable that Philip allowed only Simon Sacerdoti, a Jew who had disappointed if not betrayed him, to stay in Milan with his family. This special dispensation must have put Simon's family in a tricky position vis-à-vis the other Jews of Milan. The Sacerdoti family did not convert or assimilate; on the contrary, two hundred years later, they remain the only Jewish family in the state. So they must have maintained close relations with Italian Jewry. But did the Jews know what Simon did to stay? How did Simon maintain his alliances on all ends of the political and religious spectrum? Perhaps his deep involvement in Italian, Spanish, and Jewish politics can help us understand it.

The Duke of Savoy and the governor of Milan continued to support and employ Sacerdoti despite the king's increasingly negative assessment, and they were instrumental in helping rebuild his reputation as a servant of Spain. On the eve of the expulsion, when the time came to examine Sacerdoti's record, the governor vouched for him, enumerating the missions he accomplished in Spain's name. The governor's testimonial worked, as Sacerdoti was granted a lifelong pension in addition to the right to reside in Milan after the expulsion of the Jews.<sup>80</sup>

Sacerdoti's access to secret information probably justified keeping him on hand, despite Philip's misgivings. Both the Duke and the governor had reasons to seek independence from the Spanish monarchy. Savoy was a small Duchy "sandwiched"

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<sup>80</sup> AGS, Secretarias Provinciales 1796-35, 36, 37, 38.

between France and Spanish Italy and struggling to gain autonomy from both. The governors were close collaborators of the king; men he entrusted with considerable power and responsibility, and he expected them to act as his representatives abroad. But the Spanish Empire's vastness made gubernatorial independence almost inevitable. The trend increased toward the end of Philip's reign, when illness incapacitated him, and governors were torn between their loyalty to him and their own desire for more power. Under such circumstances, a supply of good information was crucial.

Sacerdoti dealt quietly with the problem of competing allegiances. His family had Spanish roots and Vitale, his father, had founded a successful business that flourished through the Spanish take-over of Milan. But unlike many Jewish businessmen who assumed leadership positions within their own communities, there is no trace of Vitale's involvement at that level, except for one mention by Joseph Ha-Kohen, who singled him out as a particularly trustworthy source of information on the relations between the Jews of Milan and Philip II. In discussing the circumstances surrounding Philip II's attempt to expel the Jews from Milan in 1566, ha-Kohen blamed an Ashkenazi Jew for Philip's decision. Such a grave accusation against another Jew demanded proof, and it says a great deal that ha-Kohen used Sacerdoti's name to bolster his case against an Ashkenazi

Jew.<sup>81</sup> True or not, this anecdote suggests the existence of Sephardi and Ashkenazi factions within Milanese Jewry, and shows Vitale's high standing among the Sephardim.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Cassen, "The Last Spanish Expulsion in Europe."

<sup>82</sup> Such factionalism has been documented in other Italian communities as well, see Bernard Dov Cooperman, "Ethnicity and Institution Building among Jews in Early Modern Rome," *AJS Review* 30, no. 1 (2006): 119–45.

Whether Simon identified as closely with the Sephardim as his father did remains an open question. After all, Milan's Jewry was a predominantly Ashkenazi community; and the anonymous editor who finished Joseph's chronicle and praised him for traveling to Spain to try to save Milanese Jews from expulsion, was an Ashkenazi.<sup>83</sup> Yet if instead of Jewish records, one turns to Spanish archival documentation, it appears that Simon spent much of his time in Madrid trying to secure his pension and his own family's future in Milan.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, on one occasion, he may have betrayed his father by offering to use his father's name surreptitiously to gain access to Nasi's information network in support of the Spanish war effort against the Ottomans.<sup>85</sup> Beyond early modern imperial and Mediterranean diplomacy, Simon Sacerdoti also had to navigate the treacherous waters of internal Jewish politics and family affairs.

Scholars of the Mediterranean have long argued that early modern identities were "fluid and protean."<sup>98</sup> This could be the key to understanding Sacerdoti and, perhaps, early modern Mediterranean Jewry more generally. (Nasi, Passi, and others seem to have shared his attitude.) If one looks at Sacerdoti as Jewish first, his actions, especially at the time of the expulsion, raise questions. However, when taking into account his many apparently contradictory loyalties, one may ask whether unmoored and versatile as they were, early

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<sup>83</sup> David, *Irascible historian: new light on the personality of the sixteenth century chronicler Joseph ha-Kohen from his personal correspondence* (Jerusalem: Bet David, n.d.); ha-Kohen Joseph, *'Emeq Ha-Bakha De Yosef Ha-Kohen.*, trans. P. Leon Tello, Biblioteca Hebraicoespañola; v. 8; (Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Arias Montano, 1964); Jacky Kessous, "La 'Chronique' de Joseph Ha-Cohen," *Archives Juives* 13, no. 3 (1977): 45–53.

<sup>84</sup> AGS, Secretarias Provinciales 1796-35, 36, 37, 38.

<sup>85</sup> Roth, "Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy." <sup>98</sup>

Dursteler, *Venetians in Constantinople*, 1–20.

modern Mediterranean Jews had adapted quite well to a fluctuating Mediterranean world. Was Simon Sacerdoti, to quote from the famous inquisition trial of Righetto Marrano, a “ship that [has] two rudders (...) with one rudder it sails with one wind, and with the other with another wind”?<sup>86</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The story and career of Simon Sacerdoti challenge our picture of what was possible for Jews in early modern Spain. Jews did not have the right to reside in the empire of Philip II of Spain, and if a person was suspected of being Jewish, his or her life was in danger. Yet a Milanese Jew became a spy for Philip II. He transmitted information and ideas to Philip who listened and took him seriously. When the opportunity arose to establish a trading hub in Savoy that would welcome Spanish and Portuguese conversos seeking to flee the inquisition, he did so even though it threatened to undermine his standing with Philip. But the relationship recovered, and a few years later Sacerdoti was again lending his services to the king. He carried on until Philip’s death and was richly rewarded: he and his family were allowed to remain in their hometown of Alessandria in the state of Milan, while all other Milanese Jews were forced to go. The boundaries for the Jews of that period were real and difficult to navigate, but Sacerdoti’s life is an illustration of how porous they could be.

To an extent, Sacerdoti was a product of the Mediterranean world of his time: a connected and fluid environment in which goods, people, and information flowed back

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<sup>86</sup> Brian Pullan, “‘A Ship with Two Rudders’: ‘Righetto Marrano’ and the Inquisition in Venice,” *The Historical Journal* 20, no. 1 (March 1, 1977): 37.

and forth across religious, ethnic, linguistic, and geographic lines. However, intelligence networks, upon which military victory and national security depended, were by necessity more guarded. Communications were coded, the trustworthiness of sources was thoroughly checked, and the veracity and usefulness of information needed to be confirmed and reconfirmed multiple times. Only a skillful political operator and master dissimulator could penetrate such formidable barriers.

Sacerdoti owed his career partly to his father's success in business, but mostly to his own impressive political acumen. He had a wide network, a sophisticated understanding of how the highest spheres of power worked, and he knew how to use these assets to obtain what he wanted. He was unafraid and did not shy away from applying shady techniques when necessary. For instance, when he first offered his services to the crown via Don Martin de la Nuca, the plan to get information directly from Joseph Nasi involved sending Nasi a letter in his father's name, presumably without his father's knowledge (otherwise his father would have written it himself). He was neither burdened by ideology, nor did he have a preconceived notion of whom he should work for. He certainly was aware of Spain's anti-Jewish history and policies. He knew, too, that many of his coreligionists feared and hated the Iberian empire. But he now lived under Spanish rule and cold pragmatism seems to have guided his actions. Philip needed good intelligence on the Turks, and his entire style of government was predicated on having trustworthy spies everywhere; Simon Sacerdoti, as a Jew, had unique access to contacts and information in the Ottoman Empire—he had something Philip wanted. One could see his attitude as an extreme application of the old Talmudic maxim “dina demalkhetei dina,” by which Jews accepted the law of the land provided it did not conflict with the Torah. But inasmuch as a potential Spanish victory

over the Ottomans endangered many Jews, he, in fact, could be seen as veering from that principle. It would be interesting to know what contemporary Jews knew and thought of him, but the only one to mention him, the chronicler Joseph ha-Kohen, does so in glowing terms. He praises him for traveling to Madrid to try to avert the Jews' expulsion, even though, as we know, the Jews ended up having to leave while he and his family could stay. What seems certain, however, is that the sixteenth-century stereotype of Jews consorting with the Ottomans—out of hatred of Christianity and deep loyalty to other Jews first—flies in the face of Simon Sacerdoti's story.

By its very nature, spying is a secretive activity whose motivations are rarely pure or easily categorized along clear moral lines. Nor is it uncomplicated to determine what was good for the Jews or Spain's safety. It is possible, perhaps even likely, that from the perspective of an Italian, Milanese Jew, Sacerdoti's actions were in Jews' best interests and represented their best chance for life in Milan. Moreover, would contemporary Jews have questioned the motivations of a man who publicly tried to create a safe haven for conversos in Savoy? Assuming ha-Kohen knew that Sacerdoti was also a spy (by no means a certainty) his positive assessment of his journey to Madrid would vindicate that view. But we don't know what he, or anyone at the time, knew. Spies, indeed, are complex characters who thrive on secrecy and the ability to dissimulate. Sacerdoti was a man who had mastered the art of inspiring trust. Other than the king, who never personally met Sacerdoti (but who also did not trust anyone), there is no evidence that anybody suspected he was anything else than who he appeared to be. He was a chameleon and a free agent who saved himself and his family from the fate reserved to the rest of Milan's Jews. He did not intend to let down his community, but the duplicity that one needs to be a good spy played a part in the

sequence of events that would eventually lead him down this road. As Alec Leamas, one of John Le Carre's spies, asks: "What the hell do you think spies are? Moral philosophers measuring everything they do against the word of God or Karl Marx? They're not! They're just a bunch of seedy, squalid bastards like me: little men, drunkards, queers, hen-pecked husbands, civil servants playing cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten little lives. Do you think they sit like monks in a cell, balancing right against wrong?"<sup>87</sup> Simon Sacerdoti may have been a respected personality in Milan's Jewish community and beyond; he may also have been a spy and a master of what Italians call "*l'arte di arrangiarsi*" at the same time. One does not exclude the other.

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<sup>87</sup> John Le Carre, *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold: A George Smiley Novel*, Reprint edition (Penguin Books, 2013).