

European Business History Association 22nd Annual Congress

Ancona, 6-8 September 2018

Session A3. Merchants and Companies in International Environments

Conference Paper

**The Minor Role Played by the Jewish Community
in the Grain Trade in Genoa during the Eighteenth Century:
An Explanation ***

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Abstract

This paper aims to explain why the Jewish community of Genoa played a negligible role in eighteenth-century grain trade. While scholars have usually pointed out that for Jewish businessmen it was difficult to challenge the Genoese leadership in grain trade, we will demonstrate that other factors, endogenous to the Jewish community itself, should be considered. In particular, the number of Jews living in Genoa was rather small, and most of them lacked the capital and personal connections necessary to operate in the international grain trade. Conversely, few eminent Jews operating in the city succeeded in entering this business, just like other leading local or foreign merchants of the time.

Keywords: Jewish merchants; inter-confessional trade network; French diplomacy; Northern Italy.

JEL codes: N73; N 83.

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Introduction

In the early modern age, Genoa was the capital of a small regional Italian state, the Republic of Genoa. Since the Middle Ages, the city had become a leading Mediterranean port and a marketplace for primary goods, in particular raw materials, foodstuffs and colonial goods¹. Grain trade played a crucial role: not only was wheat one of the most commonly traded commodities, but it was also key to the survival of the city. Due to insufficient domestic production, Genoa always had to import large quantities of cereals and, above all, grain. This was the reason why in 1564 the Genoese government created the *Magistrato d'Abbondanza*, a public body established with the aim of preventing famine and organizing bread supply and distribution. Years later, in 1590, Genoa was declared a free port for grain. The aim of this decision was twofold: to attract an increasing volume of wheat in order to meet the local demand, while keeping prices low. This was of paramount importance owing to, on one hand, a rigid demand curve, and, on the other hand, supply fluctuations, as a consequence of alternating periods of harvest abundance and scarcity².

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Genoa was a city of 70,000 inhabitants, and, according to a Government report, the demand for grain amounted to about 175,000 *mine* (16,000 tons), mostly to be imported by sea³. Genoa's grain trade was under the control of local businessmen who, at least since the last few decades of the sixteenth-century, worked alongside several foreign merchant houses, mostly English, Flemish, and German⁴. In this context, Jewish merchants seem to have played a negligible role. Although not fully investigated yet, according to historians, the trading and financial activities of the Jewish community had, on the whole, a modest impact on the Genoese economy. Scholars usually explain it by arguing that local businessmen were already firmly rooted in both trade and finance. As a consequence, Jews could not enter these sectors. In other words, there was not enough room for Jewish merchants to challenge Genoese leadership in these domains⁵. In our view, however, this assumption is not enough to explain why Jews

¹ Grendi 1971; Felloni 2003; Piccinno 2017. More generally, on the Mediterranean context during the early modern age, see: Pagano de Divitiis 1997; Kirk 2005; Fusaro 2015.

² Grendi 1970; Grendi 1972; Gatti 1973; Massa 1998; Calcagno 2012. On the birth and evolution of Genoa's free port, see Giacchero 1972; Kirk 2005.

³ According to a 1684 government's report, in Genoa the annual grain consumption amounted to two *mine* and a half per capita. Archivio di Stato di Genova (hereafter ASG), *Antica finanza*, 1344. See also Gatti 1972.

⁴ Grendi 1971; Engels 1997; Grendi 2004; Zunckel 2007; Avallone, Zanini, Ramassa, Quagli 2016.

⁵ Giacchero 1973, pp. 144-145.

were only marginally involved in Genoa’s grain trade, while other foreign communities were quite active in this sector. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that other factors, endogenous to the Jewish community itself, should be taken into account.

The Jewish Community in Genoa

As a port city, Genoa had always been a pole of attraction for foreign merchants, looking for business opportunities⁶. However, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Jewish community in Genoa was rather small, in both absolute terms and when compared to other port cities such as Leghorn. Moreover, it was highly mobile, with a small stable core, and a much bigger fluctuating population, most of them coming from Leghorn or Southern Piedmont (especially Alessandria and Casale). Based on the few specific sources available, it is possible to report that Jews accounted for between one and four per thousand of inhabitants in Genoa, depending on the period (see table 1)⁷.

The small number of Jews living in Genoa is partly related to the policies implemented by the Republic, which do not seem to follow well-defined guidelines. Apart from some short-term measures to overcome critical periods, differently from Leghorn, there was no organic design providing incentives and tax breaks for those who settled permanently in the city. It should be pointed out that on many occasions, especially when free port provisions had to be renewed, the issue of attracting prominent Jewish businessmen, likely to increase trade flows with the Levant, was discussed. However, these projects were never fully implemented⁸.

Table 1. *Jews resident in Genoa (selected years)*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Jews</i>	<i>Share of the urban population (‰)</i>
1662	204	4.28
1663	128	2.66
1667	182	3.39
1707	86	1.16
1710	210	2.80

Source: Felloni 1952; Urbani, Zazzu 1999, vol. 1; Zappia 2016.

⁶ On port cities as pole of attraction, see: Cesarani, Romain 2006; Jarvis, Lee 2008; Zacharov, Harlaftis, Katsiardi-Hering 2014; Blockmans, Krom, Wubs-Mrozewicz 2017.

⁷ Brizzolari 1971; Urbani, Figari 1989; Urbani, Zazzu 1999; Caffiero 2014, pp. 54-56; Zappia 2016. More generally on the relationships between Genoa and the “foreigners”, see Di Tucci 1932.

⁸ ASG, *Cancellieri di San Giorgio*, 1160.

In terms of social stratification, middle class members were prevailing. Some of them were involved in wholesale trade; they were not specialised in any single commodity, but rather preferred to deal with a variety of goods, above all textiles, spices, precious coral, jewels and precious stones, etc. There were also some retailers and small artisans⁹. As a consequence, from a socioeconomic perspective, most of them belonged to the lower classes, without the capital and personal connections necessary to work in long distance trade, including grain. However, there was a small group of affluent Jews, who lived in houses rented by Genoese patricians (such as the Centuriones, the Saulis, the Giovos, and others) and had business relations with the city elites¹⁰. For example Abram Roses, who was defined “ricco sfondolato” (rolling in money), was deemed to be a distinguished man, and had good connections with the city’s top economic and social milieu. Not surprisingly, in 1723, when his daughter got married, the most prominent Genoese noblemen attended the event¹¹. This proves, once again, that wealth and shared economic interests had the power to overcome religious barriers between people¹².

Even the wealthiest Jews were not fully integrated into the local society, but retained a distinct Jewish identity and endogamy. However, the most prominent of them would always enjoy some special social status, granting them important privileges: they were free to decide where to live, got special concessions regarding duration of permit to stay in Genoa. They were also exempted from wearing any distinctive signs (a yellow ribbon or a yellow hat)¹³.

Jacob Levi, Finale Sacerdote, and the Grain of the French King

Men such as Abram Roses can be considered members of the international economic and social elite. He did not only have close contacts with influential members of the Genoese ruling class, but also had personal connections with several foreign courts. This allowed him to seize some great business opportunities in trade and finance and to provide Governments with logistic and financial services.

Jacob Levi and Finale Sacerdote with his family are among the most striking examples. Since the last few years of the seventeenth century, they had been bankers

⁹ Urbani 1983; Zappia 2016.

¹⁰ Urbani, Zazzu 1999, pp. 589-591, 771-773.

¹¹ Levati 1910, p. 4.

¹² Trivellato, Halevi, Antunes 2014.

¹³ Urbani, Zazzu 1999.

of Louis XIV of France and, at the same time, started to work in Genoa: they established merchant houses, rented warehouses in the free port, and were granted licences from the government to deal in salt, spirits and coffee¹⁴. Moreover, due to their loyalty to His Very Christian Majesty, they enjoyed the protection of the French extraordinary envoy in Genoa, Monsieur de Louciennes; this paved the way to further growth of their business. From this point of view, the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1714) opened up an important opportunity. Although the Republic was not directly involved in the conflict, and at that moment Genoa was no longer playing any leading financial role, due to its geographical position it was crucial for supplying the French army in Lombardy¹⁵. Genoa could not decline to help Louis XIV. Despite its formal neutrality, after the decline of Spain as a military power, the Republic was forced to enter the French sphere of influence¹⁶. The troops needed weapons, munitions, gunpowder, clothing, foodstuff, and above all grain. From this point of view, Genoa was an ideal port to unload supplies to be dispatched in Lombardy, although it was necessary to cross the Apennines along winding mule tracks. The French crown charged Levi and Sacerdote with carrying the supplies from Genoa to the Po Valley. It was thus a strictly logistic role, which formally did not imply any buying or selling of goods. However, Levi and Sacerdote managed to take advantage of this situation and began dealing in grain¹⁷.

As mentioned above, one of the main concerns of the Genoese government was feeding its population. It should be pointed out that the sale of grain within the Republic of Genoa was subject to a grain tax, a customs duty, which was set at half a *scudo* (silver ecu) per *mina* of grain¹⁸. Merchants could enjoy a temporary exemption, up to one year, if they stored the grain in the free port warehouses. During that year period they would carefully monitor price trends in order to sell the grain *al meglio* (at the best price), either in the domestic or foreign markets. If the grain was re-exported by sea, no tax was due. Conversely, if the grain was sold within the state borders or re-exported by land (for example to the Po Valley), they had to pay taxes, which were also due when the year period expired. As a consequence, Monsieur de Louciennes asked the Republic to exempt the grain for

¹⁴ Urbani, Zazzu 1999, vol. 2, pp. 530-532.

¹⁵ Rowlands 2015.

¹⁶ On the relationships between the Republic of Genoa and the Kingdom of France, see Assereto 2003.

¹⁷ ASG, *Cancellieri di San Giorgio*, 1160.

¹⁸ The *scudo*, or *scudo coronato d'argento*, was a silver coin, which contained 38.39394 grams of pure silver. See Pesce, Felloni 1976.

the army from any taxes¹⁹. To meet this request, the Genoese government imposed some specific conditions. The grain had to be purchased abroad, to avoid any negative impact on the domestic market. Once the ship arrived in Genoa, the captain had to report the quantity of grain embarked to the local authority and show then the bill of lading. Then he had to sail to Sampierdarena, a small port along the western Riviera, close to Genoa, where the wheat had to be unloaded. This separate port of Sampierdarena had been selected in order to clearly separate the grain of the French King from that intended for the Genoese market. At the same time, it was also a suitable location from where the Po Valley could be reached by land²⁰.

When the grain was unloaded, tax inspectors would check the quantity received, record it in the entry side of a specific ledger, and compare it with the previous statement. In case of shortfall, they would allege that there had been illegal discharges en route between Genoa and Sampierdarena, and, consequently, would levy the grain tax on this shortfall amount. The wheat was stored in private warehouses, waiting to be shipped to Lombardy. When a consignment of grain was dispatched, it had to be recorded in the exit side of the above mentioned ledger. There were also several check points along the route between Sampierdarena and the Po Valley (in Pietra Lavezzara and Novi), set up to prevent any attempts of fraud²¹. All these rules were designed to prevent grain tax evasion. In fact, as the Genoese government repeatedly complained, there were many frauds, involving merchants, millers, and tax employees as well. Hence they tried to adopt some effective measures to fight this negative situation²².

The amount of unloaded grain for the French army was quite relevant: in 1705, for example, more than 28,000 *mine* were reported (about 2,600 tons). Although it formally belonged to the French crown, with the indulgence of Monsieur de Louciennes, Levi and Sacerdote seemed to be free to dispose of the grain at will, provided they complied with the King's orders regarding the total quantity of the wheat to be dispatched and the time of delivery. This was possible for two reasons: first of all the grain was a fungible commodity, and, furthermore, this operation did not involve any additional cost for the French government. Levi and Sacerdote, who were enterprising businessmen, managed to benefit from price fluctuations in the

¹⁹ Exemptions from specific duties were also requested for other goods to be shipped to the Po Valley. See ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752; *Antica Finanza*, 1448.

²⁰ ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752. On the strategic position of Sampierdarena for trade with the hinterland, see Zanini 2017, p. 21.

²¹ ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752.

²² ASG, *Antica Finanza*, 1344.

city market and from any price differences between Genoa and the Po Valley²³. The two grain markets were not integrated, so prices would follow different trends, thus offering great profit opportunities. If the price in Genoa was higher, they could decide to sell a given quantity of grain within the city, thus paying the grain tax; in this case, they had to buy an equivalent quantity of grain directly in Lombardy to be delivered to the army. It should be pointed out that under the contract with the French crown, the King was to pay them proportionally to the wheat that was shipped, and this sum included transport costs from Sampierdarena to the Po Valley. The amount due did not change if the grain was directly purchased in Lombardy; so, in this case, their gains could be higher. For example, should they have bought all the grain declared for 1705 directly in the Po Valley (the above mentioned 28,000 *mine*), they could have saved about 17,000-18,000 *scudi* (silver ecus) on transport costs. However, both Levi and Sacerdote were fully aware of the advantages and risks of this business. If in the meantime the economic situation changed, for example the price in Lombardy grew suddenly, they could suffer significant losses, especially if they had already sold the grain in Genoa, and the delivery in Lombardy was urgent²⁴.

To manage such a complex system, Levi and Sacerdote could rely on an elaborate and highly structured network in terms of scale and function performed²⁵. In other words, they would need to receive a systematic flow of information on market trends, expected harvests, as well as on the evolution of geopolitical balances. The latter ones could lead to significant changes, such as the opening or closing of trade routes, areas of supply, and, of course, end markets. All these factors might have led to price fluctuations, and therefore they were crucial in order to choose the “best” time to purchase or to sell the grain. The network was also vital to ensure prompt execution of orders coming from the other ‘nodes’ of the web, to remit the funds necessary to finalize these transactions. These elements were *conditio sine qua non* to successfully operate in this business²⁶.

Levi’s and Sacerdote’s transnational networks integrated both Jews and Christians having different tasks. At a local and regional level, Giacomo Ottavio Rossi, a Genoese businessman, played a crucial role: he was responsible for reselling wheat; at an international level, family’s members and coreligionists were prevailing, if not

²³ Bonelli 1968, pp. 807-809; Giacchero 1973, p. 458; De Maddalena 1974, p. 379.

²⁴ ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752.

²⁵ On the crucial importance of networks in early modern business, see Caracausi, Jeggle 2014.

²⁶ Rollandi 2010, pp. 735-739; Avallone, Zanini, Ramassa, Quagli 2016, pp. 280-283; Zanini 2017, pp. 50-53.

the only parties involved. To be kept updated and manage the purchase and delivery of grain in Lombardy, they involved the brothers of Finale Sacerdote, living in Casale, and another Jewish family from Alessandria, the Buonagiuttis. All this occurred under the political patronage of the French crown, ensured by its envoy Monsieur de Louciennes, and with the help of the French consul in Genoa, Joseph-Marie Aubert²⁷.

Table 2. *Levi's and Sacerdote's network*

<i>Node of the web</i>	<i>Function performed</i>	<i>Place</i>
Louis XIV	Political patronage and international protection	Paris
Monsieur de Louciennes	French political patronage	Genoa
Joseph-Marie Aubert	Safeguard of French economic interests	Genoa
Giacomo Ottavio Rossi	Selling of grain in the Genoese market or abroad	Genoa
Bonagiutti family	Providing information, remittance of funds, execution of purchase orders	Alessandria
Sacerdote's brothers	Providing information, remittance of funds, execution of purchase orders	Casale

Source: Authors' data processing.

The inner working of the two Jewish businessmen clearly emerged in 1705, when a conflict between them and the Genoese government occurred. During that year, not all the grain of the French King was unloaded in Sampiedarena: more than 10,000 *mine*, accounting for 36 per cent of the total, were stored in the free port of Genoa, in a warehouse rented by the above mentioned Giacomo Ottavio Rossi, benefitting from the temporary grain tax exemption. This meant that Levi and Sacerdote intended to sell this batch of wheat on their own account, either on the local market, or abroad. Of course, they had to purchase the same quantity of grain in the Po Valley, when it had to be delivered to the French troops, hoping to get a good price. However, their forecast was wrong. On this occasion, Monsieur de Louciennes asked the Republic to grant an exemption covering 7,000 *mine* of the King's grain, stored in Rossi's warehouses, to be dispatched to the army. At this point an inconsistency emerged: it was not clear why, if the grain really belonged to Louis XIV, not only it was stored in Rossi's warehouse, but Rossi himself had already sold 3,000 *mine* of the grain on behalf of Levi and Sacerdote. Moreover, the Genoese government observed that Levi and Sacerdote had failed to comply with

²⁷ ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752. On the complex networks of Jewish merchants, see Trivellato 2009; Romani 2017, especially part two. On the French consul Aubert, see Mézin 1997, pp. 111, 692.

the agreed conditions, whereby the tax exemption would apply only for the grain unloaded and stored in Sampierdarena. This fact suggests that it was a deliberate decision to exploit market opportunities, which, quite evidently, did not occur. Despite this, the French envoy reiterated his tax exemption request, stating that an official refusal would have irritated the French King.

During that *querelle*, Jacob Levi claimed that the property of the grain was of paramount importance, well beyond the place of unloading and storage. Furthermore, he rejected the charge of being a speculator: quite the contrary, he had contributed to improving grain availability in the city market, and for this reason he claimed credit for being a benefactor. He also pointed out that, in that moment, it would have been cheaper to purchase grain directly in the Po Valley, but he had to comply with the King's order who, for his own reasons, explicitly requested that his troops were supplied with French wheat. To the surprise of the Genoese government, Monsieur de Louciennes firmly supported Levi's position. This strategy aimed to affirm the priority of the French interests over the Republic's tax regulations. In this way, the issue went from the economic to the political domain.

The Republic did not fully understand why de Louciennes took up the cudgels for Levi and Sacerdote, as it was quite difficult to unravel the relationship among these people. Genoa's government assumed that the individual interests of the two Jewish businessmen were so strong to influence the French position in this respect²⁸.

The intervention of the envoy Monsieur de Louciennes was successful, to the extent that Levi and Sacerdote continued to operate in the same way during the following years, always enjoying the protection of the French crown²⁹.

Concluding remarks

As already pointed out, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Jewish community of Genoa was small in number. Its members traded in a variety of goods, but hardly ever in grain. This picture was a consequence of the composition of the community itself, characterized by a prevalence of low social status members. It is thus an element endogenous to the Jewish community, and it did not depend on the competitive arena in which they operated, as stated in traditional historiography. However, inside the community, there was a small group of wealthy and influential Jews, who enjoyed several advantages in terms of legal and economic

²⁸ ASG, *Archivio Segreto*, 2752.

²⁹ Urbani, Zazzu 1999.

freedoms. Thanks to their international trading and financial connections, and to the patronage of foreign governments, they were actively engaged in long distance trade, including wheat trade. The case of Jacob Levi and Finale Sacerdote perfectly illustrates this specific situation. As we have shown, they were able to exploit their inter-confessional trade network to develop their business. Moreover, thanks to the essential services they provided to the French crown, they obtained Louis XIV's protection, which in turn allowed them to operate in a privileged situation. This clearly emerged when, on the occasion of a grain trade speculation, they were able to avoid potentially heavy losses, through the crucial intervention of the French diplomat in Genoa. Faced by this 'high' protection, the Republic waived its tax rights. On the other hand, Levi and Sacerdote had certainly strengthened their position on the international grain market.

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