

SAMUELA MARCONCINI

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## The Conversion of Jewish Women in Florence (1599 – 1799)

On 14 June 1636 a Casa dei Catecumeni<sup>1</sup> (Catechumen House) was opened in Florence by the Carmelite monk Alberto Leoni<sup>2</sup>, which was created to accommodate and teach the »infidels« who wanted to convert about the Catholic faith, in order to prevent them from returning to their original faith, either because they were not »properly taught that they were to be baptised, or because after their baptism they would not receive the same consideration, which is necessary, or for other reasons«. <sup>3</sup>This Florentine religious institute served mainly »Turks«, for the most part slaves<sup>4</sup>, and Jews, whose conversions at the institution I would like to concentrate on in an attempt to build a long-term discourse centring on gender.

Before beginning this analysis, I feel it is necessary to first offer a methodological introduction in order to inform the reader of the degree of reliability of the data which I will present. The primary source used to calculate the number of converts in Florence during the seventeenth century is a list of requests for

- 1 The bibliography on this type of institution, which came to be following the creation of a Casa dei Catecumeni in Rome in 1543, has begun to be considerable. For example, see Marina Caffiero, *Battesimi forzati. Storie di ebrei, cristiani e convertiti nella Roma dei papi*, Rome 2006 and the recent work by Pietro Ioly Zorattini, *I nomi degli altri. Conversioni a Venezia e nel Friuli Veneto in età moderna*, Florence 2008.
- 2 For more information on father Alberto Leoni, originally from Revere, near Mantua, see the corresponding entry in the *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*; see also Marco Piccardi (ed.), *Santa Lucia alla Castellina*, Sesto Fiorentino (Florence), 1998, pp. 36-37. Alberto Leoni is actually better known for conceiving of one of the first hospital for mental illness; see Lisa Roscioni, *Il governo della follia. Ospedali, medici e pazzi nell'età moderna*, Milan 2003, p. 60.
- 3 So reads a letter, addressed to the archbishop of Florence, from Leoni himself; it precedes the statutes of the institution and is conserved in the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile di Firenze (hereafter, ACAF), *Pia Casa dei catecumeni*, volume I, unnumbered pages, and in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (hereafter, ASF), *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, file (f.) 1177.
- 4 There are numerous conversions of Turks during the seventeenth century (a total of 286), but this number is reduced considerably in the first few decades of the eighteenth century (there are only 22 recorded between 1700 and 1730) and then almost completely disappears as the century progresses. In addition, there are very few recorded conversions by Protestants or animists; I have a separate work currently in progress on these topics.

baptisms which is conserved in the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile di Firenze. This list was begun in 1599 (even before the opening of the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni); it proceeds non-continuously after 1636 and breaks off in 1724.<sup>5</sup> In order to verify that the request was indeed followed by the baptismal ceremony, I have searched for the same names in the baptismal registry in the archives of the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, which has conserved a record of all baptisms carried out in the Pieve di San Giovanni from 1450 to 1900.<sup>6</sup>

In the following period, the majority of which corresponds to the years the last Medici grand duke, Gian Gastone (1723 – 1737), was in power and to the first ten years of the Habsburg-Lorraine reign (1738 – 1748), and evidently due directly to the dynastic change of the grand ducal throne, the data are more incomplete and are found only in the document base from the subsequent period, which, for a number of different reasons, referred to past cases. The Pia Casa dei Catecumeni was later subjected to an economic and organisational re-structuring by the House of Lorraine, thus making it possible to sketch a much more exhaustive picture of the conversions which occurred between 1749 and 1799,

5 ACAF, *Pia casa dei catecumeni*, volumes I-III, unnumbered pages. The list was in the possession of the clerks of the curia, the last of whom, Lorenzo Borghigiani, was in office from 1677 to 1724. The list of requests for baptism is preceded by the statutes of the Casa dei Catecumeni and is interspersed with occasional requests for dispensation granted by the archbishop to Christian women to gain permission to take in the children of Jewish women in the Florentine ghetto, as well as a few licenses attributed to some ecclesiastics to operate as »baptists« (a »baptist« is the priest whose job it is to carry out baptisms within the parish, generally in the baptisteries of the cathedral churches).

6 More precisely, from 4 November 1450 to 31 December 1900, with a total of 445 registers, which are available in their entirety online at <http://www.operaduomo.firenze.it/battesimi>. The Pieve di San Giovanni comprised the lands which extended up to 5 kilometres outside of the city walls and also included some thirty rural churches; see M. Urbaniak, »La Registrazione dei Battesimi nella Firenze del Tardo Medioevo«, in: A. Prosperi (ed.), *Salvezza delle anime disciplina dei corpi. Un seminario sulla storia del battesimo*, Pisa 2006, pp. 159-213, here p. 201. This study underscores the »relative« completeness of the recording of baptisms during the fifteenth century. I am still not certain that not having found in this source the name of an infidel who had requested conversion to Catholicism automatically means that they were not baptised. The archivist at the Archivio dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence (hereafter, AOSMFF), Dr. Lorenzo Fabbri, in support of the extreme reliability of the source, points out the fact that the water used for baptisms in Florence was always from the baptismal font in the Battistero di San Giovanni (Baptistery of Saint John), and therefore, even for baptisms performed in prison, in hospital, in private chapels, or in institutions which performed non-public baptisms such as the Ospedale degli Innocenti, the baptism must have been recorded in the baptistery registry, which I was able to effectively verify. Also from the consultation of the fund I have been able to ascertain that on the other hand the baptisms performed in private in cases where there was a risk of death could be solemnly repeated at the Battistero di San Giovanni even some years later and were formally entered into the registry of the baptistery only if they were repeated, resulting in a sort of »un-doing« of the first occurrence.

based on a fund currently conserved in the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (the *Bigallo, secondo versamento*), which proceeded uninterrupted until 1870. In this way it has been possible to create a database of all the names of those who converted in Florence between 1599 and 1799. It has been possible to complete and expand this database with the data collected from other archival funds, such as from the Archivio di Stato di Firenze (*Auditore dei benefici ecclesiastici* regarding the most controversial cases), from the Archivio della Comunità Ebraica di Firenze (*Pia Casa dei Catecumeni* fund), and, to a lesser degree, from the Archivio della Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede in Rome.<sup>7</sup>

I have been able to ascertain that 232 Jews were baptised in Florence between 1599 and 1724<sup>8</sup>: the majority (154) are men, versus around half that amount (78, which is equal to 33.62 % of the total) of women who converted in the same

<sup>7</sup> I am convinced of the need to confirm these data through the systematic perusal of the baptismal registries of the Archivio dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, though such an undertaking would require further study. However, mere systematic perusal of this source would not communicate the numerous requests for baptism which were not carried out, of those who fled and those who had second thoughts, and of the non-acceptance of applicants by the civil authorities overseeing the management of the Casa dei Catecumeni in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

<sup>8</sup> Of these, three names were not on the list conserved in the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile di Firenze and have been found in the registries of the Archivio dell'Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence. The first is Guglielmo del fu Felice Ebreo Modigliano, baptised on 27 October 1678 at the age of 44, being given the name Giovanni, at the Santa Maria Nuova Hospital, as he was near death; see AOSMFF, register (hereafter, r.) 62, photogram (hereafter, ph.) 65. Then there were two sisters who were six and two years old, Rachele and Graziosa Saiola, who were baptised together with their mother and brother on Wednesday, 29 October 1721, taking the names Maria Violante Beatrice and Maria Margherita, respectively, both with the surname Medici; see AOSMFF, r. 305, ph. 226. Additionally, a brother and sister, after having made their request to the archbishop of Florence, were baptised outside of the city (in Empoli, where they claimed to live). They were Ester and Salvatore, the children of Isach Ravà and Sincà (Allegra), baptised in the *Collegiate Church* of St. Andrea in Empoli eleven years apart (in 1699 and 1710, respectively), at the ages of nine and seventeen years; Archives of the *Collegiate Church* of St. Andrea, Parish Books, No. 43 (provisional number), p. 192 *verso* and p. 258 *recto*. I would like to acknowledge and thank Stefania Terreni at the Archivio Comunale di Empoli and Vanna Arrighi of the Archivio di Stato di Firenze for the information they provided on the subject. In addition, their presence in Empoli is further confirmation of the fact that the enclosure of the Tuscan Jews in the ghettos of Siena and Florence did not mean an immediate and definitive impossibility, at least for some individuals, of continuing to live Jewish lives even in some minor towns in Tuscany and in the absence of a Jewish community, as Lucia Frattarelli Fischer has noted in »Stereotipi, ruolo economico e insediamento degli ebrei nelle fonti statali ed ecclesiastiche del Granducato di Toscana (secoli XVII – XVIII)«, in: Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini (ed.), *Percorsi di storia ebraica. Fonti per la storia degli ebrei in Italia nell'età moderna e contemporanea* (Acts of the eighteenth Cividale del Friuli – Gorizia international conference, 7-9 September 2004), Udine 2005, pp. 45-84.

period. I was able to find only five baptisms of Jews which I am certain took place in Florence between 1725 and 1748, and three amongst these were women.<sup>9</sup> Between 1749 and 1799<sup>10</sup>, 59 Jews were baptised in Florence; amongst these, there are only slightly less women than men: 30<sup>11</sup> versus 29.

Above all, it is necessary to note that throughout the seventeenth century, Jewish women were less willing to convert than their male counterparts. However, this is a tendency which began to change, though almost imperceptibly, throughout the eighteenth century and was later stably established in the nineteenth century, as Roberto Salvadori's studies<sup>12</sup> have confirmed; these studies were resumed and expanded by Barbara Armani.<sup>13</sup> Ms. Armani compares the situation in Florence with that of Turin, as shown in Luciano Allegra's studies.<sup>14</sup> In turn, Mr. Allegra's studies underline how, for the period of 1720 – 1902, Jewish men to be converted are in the majority with respect to their female co-religionists. He interprets this fact not only as the demonstration of a greater attachment of

- 9 Moreover, there was one presumably performed in Arezzo, a city in Tuscany; there are only ten cases in which it is impossible to indicate, using the data currently available, the location of the baptism, and five cases in which the aspiring catechumens refused baptism; but the incompleteness of the data makes it impossible to obtain a statistic evaluation.
- 10 Despite it not being possible to discuss the events which occurred in the nineteenth century in this work, it is important to remember, though, that the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni in Florence remained active until at least 1870 (see also ASF, *Magistrato, poi Compagnia del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1176, insert 39). The Archivio Storico del Vicariato in Rome (hereafter, ASVR) has conserved a list (unfortunately not dated) from *cavaliere* (sir) Armellini, who affirms that in Italy there were around eighty Case dei Catecumeni and that one of the last to be closed was the one in Florence; ASVR, *Pia casa dei catecumeni e neofiti*, folder No. 22, position No. 11, unnumbered loose pages. Yet we know that other Case dei Catecumeni remained open even after the unification of Italy: the activity of the institute in Turin is documented until 1903 (see Luciano Allegra, *Identità in bilico. Il ghetto ebraico di Torino nel Settecento*, Turin 1996, p. 106, note 20), while the Casa dei Catecumeni in Modena continued to operate until the 1930s, as the last conversion there took place in 1914.
- 11 This becomes 31 if we consider a pregnant Jewish woman from Lisorno who was baptised in Lisorno, since she suffered pain due to pregnancy and could not make the journey to Florence as planned; see also ASF, *Magistrato, poi Compagnia del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1160, insert 4.
- 12 Roberto G. Salvadori, *Gli ebrei toscani nell'età della restaurazione (1814 – 1848)*, Florence 1993, pp. 101-150 and 179-257; the data collected from this are based exclusively on the *Pia Casa dei Catecumeni* fund at the Archivio della Comunità Ebraica di Firenze (hereafter, ACEF).
- 13 Barbara Armani, *Il confine invisibile. L'élite ebraica di Firenze (1840 – 1914)*, Milan 2006, pp. 294-307. Barbara Armani resumed Salvadori's research, completing it with data from the *Presidenza del Buongoverno* fund at the Archivio di Stato di Firenze.
- 14 Luciano Allegra, *Identità in bilico. Il ghetto ebraico di Torino nel Settecento*, Turin 1996.

women to their ancestors' religion<sup>15</sup>, but also as the direct consequence of the Jews' confinement to the ghettos; as it was prohibited for Jews to own property, they would have chosen to invest heavily in a secure capital, comprising the dowries destined for the children, which were high enough to effectively discourage conversion.<sup>16</sup>

But we still need to understand what determined the progressive increase in conversions of women over time. The studies carried out in other cities lead us to believe that it is a phenomenon not confined to the territory of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany: Marina Caffiero has noted that the spontaneous conversions of Jewish women in Rome would also have followed precisely the same trend (there are less of these than conversions of men in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however there are more women converting in the nineteenth century)<sup>17</sup> and Tullia Catalan points out an increased presence of converted Jewish women between 1780 and 1848 in Trieste, a city which did not have a Casa dei Catecumeni<sup>18</sup>; it remains to be seen what might emerge from the research on the rest of the Case dei Catecumeni, if these are carried out from a gender point of view.<sup>19</sup>

In an attempt to respond to this question while limiting my answer to the Florence area, I propose beginning with an analysis of the converts' social and family situations, with their age when they converted, with their national origins, and with any other indication related to their life choices, obviously to the extent

15 The greater loyalty of women to their Jewish faith has also been found in families of converts, where the women continued to practice Judaism throughout their lives even in the presence of converted family members, and has been explained based on the fact that female intervention was relegated to the restricted world of the family, which was »less susceptible to being controlled from the outside«; see also Pier Cesare Ioly Zorattini, *Processi del S. Uffizio di Venezia contro ebrei e giudaizzanti*, volume 10 (1633 – 1637), Florence 1992, p. 17; the observations are resumed by Cristina Galasso, *Alle origini di una comunità. Ebrei ed ebrei a Livorno nel Seicento*, Florence 2002, p. 117.

16 Luciano Allegra, »Alle origini del mito della Jewish Momie. Ruoli economici e ideali domestici delle ebrei italiane nell'età moderna«, in: Claire E. Honess and Verina R. Jones (eds.), *Le donne delle minoranze. Le ebrei e le protestanti d'Italia*, Turin 1999, pp. 211-221 and 216-219. The scholar forgot to mention an important fact: Jewish women could have requested the concession of their dowries from their families even if they had converted!

17 Marina Caffiero, »I diritti di patria potestà: madri ebrei e convertite a Roma in età moderna«, in: *Donne nella storia degli ebrei d'Italia* (Acts of the ninth »Italia Judaica« international conference, Lucca, 6-7 June 2005), edited by Michele Luzzati and Cristina Galasso, Florence 2007, pp. 279-293, here p. 280, note 3.

18 Tullia Catalan, *La comunità ebraica di Trieste (1781 – 1914). Politica società e cultura*, Trieste 2000, p. 208.

19 Additionally, the data collected by Ilaria Pavan regarding the Casa dei Catecumeni in Modena appear to confirm this tendency: from 1804 to 1914 the conversions of women make up 62.1 % of the total (here I would like to acknowledge and thank Ms. Pavan for her kind direction).

possible using the sources available.<sup>20</sup> Analysing the age of the Jewish women converted in Florence, it is evident that the decision to change religions is (here, as in Rome, Turin, Modena, and elsewhere) typical of adolescence: more than two thirds of the women baptised between 1599 and 1724 made this decision between the ages of 14 and 20 years old<sup>21</sup>, and even in the second half of the eighteenth century 15 of the 30 women converted were in the same age range.<sup>22</sup>

Regarding the place of origin of the Jewish women who converted in Florence between 1599 and 1724, the data on this group are too fragmented<sup>23</sup> to indicate

- 20 The image would not be complete if it did not include those women who instead, after a series of vicissitudes, when faced with the concrete possibility of converting, opted for a complete refusal. There are five in this category (out of a total of nine Jews) between 1599 and 1724, amongst which two cases are well-documented and especially significant. The first is Sarra di Giuseppe d'Israel, a fifteen-year-old who lived in the ghetto in Florence. In 1618, after insistently being pointed out by her neighbours as wishing to abandon the faith of their ancestors, she was interrogated by Church authorities and declared to have been born Jewish and wanted to die as such (ACAF, *Pia Casa dei Catecumeni*, f. I, unnumbered pages). The second is Benedetta, the wife of Florentine Jew Raffaello Volterra, who was baptised along with their three children on 13 August 1651: she did not give in even in front of the Bargello attendants, who looked for her in the ghetto at her husband's request to show her the children that she would never be able to see again; see also ACEF, D.2.1.3, insert 3. Moving forward, there are two (out of a total of five) cases of refusal by Jewish women found between 1725 and 1748, and as many in the second half of the nineteenth century (no similar decisions made by men have been confirmed). These last two cases involve extremely difficult and painful decisions: Stella del fu Lazzero Tedesco, after having spent six months in the Casa dei Catecumeni together with her husband in 1782, abandoned it to return to Judaism (her husband, however, converted shortly thereafter); see also ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1161, insert 3; and Laura di Rosa Bolaffi, whose mother was a new convert and offered her to Catholicism twice: in 1771, when she converted, and then again when the girl was fourteen years old and was able to choose a complete refusal; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1162, insert 5. Moreover, there are five (out of a total of 21) Jewish women who fled the proposed location of their teaching (which was not always the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni) after varying periods of time, but no women's names appear amongst the four Jews who expressed a desire to convert and then did not appear at the Casa dei Catecumeni nor amongst those – a very significant fact – who were not ultimately admitted to the Casa dei Catecumeni, based on the new moral order imposed by the reformism of the Lorraines (that those who it turned out were too wretched or dissolute were not accepted by the institute), nor were there women amongst them who were shown to have a false vocation after having been baptised elsewhere.
- 21 More precisely, thirty one women converted between 14 and 20 years of age; twenty up to the age of 13; fifteen between 21 and 30; six between 31 and 40; and four between 41 and 50. In two cases the women's ages are not indicated.
- 22 There are four cases of girls under the age of 13 converting; eight women between 21 and 30 years old, and only one over 40 years old; there are two more whose ages are not indicated.
- 23 Although in only four cases the origin is not indicated at all, it is often not easy to distinguish the indication of place from the proper surname; however, the indication of place of origin together with the surname does not always make it possible to classify a Jew into a specific ethnic group.

precisely how many of these were Sephardis, Ashkenazis, or Italians; surprisingly, the broad range of their places of origin, which mimics the men proportionally, demonstrated that internal mobility in the Jewish community in the so-called »age of the ghettos« applied to the women as well. If in fact the first group in quantitative order is comprised of native Livornese (23), followed by Florentines (11), we then have a modest quantity of Jews not only from various places within the Grand Dukedom of Tuscany (primarily Pisa, 7; and Siena, 1), but also from border areas (the Dukedom of Massa Carrara, 4; the Earldom of Santa Fiora, 3; Lippiano, 2; Piancastagnaio, 2; and Scansano, 1). Some of the Jewish women converted in Florence in this period came from Venice (4), others from elsewhere in Italy (one from Rome, one from Modena, and one probably from Feltre), often coming from all across the country (Rome – Pisa, 1; Venice – Pisa, 1; Ferrara – Livorno, 1). But there was not a lack of foreign Jews, amongst them two Germans (both from Hesse, specifically one from Frankfurt, one of whom was in the service of a Jewish family in Florence); two Frenchwomen (one from Nice, whose parents were Dutch; the other later moved to Livorno); one from Amsterdam and one from Flanders; three »Marranos« (one born in Andalusia, the other from »outside Portugal«, and one Portuguese woman born in Pisa); an Algerian; and a widow around 35 years old who had lived in Lorena and Brazil and who, after having left her twelve-year-old son in Amsterdam, where she managed a hotel, decided to reach Italy by sailing incognito on a boat destined for Paris, where she met with a customer from Venice who was in the service of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany and accompanied her to Florence (where she converted in 1650). The geographic spectrum of the Jewish women who arrived in Florence to change religions, as we can see, is extremely broad and therefore talking about the conversions of Jewish women in Florence in the seventeenth century is not the same as talking about the conversions of Jewish women in Florence in general. It raises the question of what it was that made Florence so appealing to these women – the foreigners in particular – that they would choose to convert here and not in some other place, or whether the place chosen for their conversion was rather, as in the case of the widow just mentioned, the result of a series of chance circumstances.

The situation changes completely in the second half of the eighteenth century, due to the reform policies regarding the institute implemented by the House of Lorraine, also touching the system for financing the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni, based at first only on alms. Shortly thereafter the institute, as could have been predicted, found itself on the verge of a forced closure, but was saved in 1694 by a gift in the will of a widowed Florentine noble, Virginia Ricasoli Scali.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>24</sup> Luigi Passerini, *Storia degli stabilimenti di beneficenza e d'istruzione elementare della città di Firenze*, Florence 1853, p. 117.



new phase of economic surplus probably favoured the acts of excessive spending perpetrated by Cosmo III and Gian Gastone de' Medici, which made it possible to at times provide the recently converted women with a solid monetary base (an average of 250 scudi), together with a job for their husbands, as well as providing the recently converted of both sexes and all ages with charitable monthly subsidies if they did not find an occupation or an arrangement that would allow them to be autonomous. After decades of such an expensive policy, the institute was drowning in debt and was handed over to the Lorraines. In 1748 it was decided to provide only the maintenance for the catechumens who were Tuscan subjects, with the purposeful exception of the »Jewish maidens of German origins, as they were the subjects of the house of Austria«. This decision was followed with a *motu proprio* on 3 March 1751, in which it was established that the fruits of the willed gift from Ricasoli-Scali should be used only for the maintenance of the catechumens, and not also for the new converts.<sup>25</sup> These decisions had an effect on the spectrum of origins of the Jewish women converted in Florence after 1748 (confining it, with some exceptions, to within the borders of the Grand Duchy): a third (exactly 10 out of 30) come from the capital city, but there was an appreciable reduction in the number of Jewish women from Livorno (3) or Pisa (3), while two arrived from the surrounding areas (Santa Fiora and Monte San Savino, respectively); or if they came from outside of the Grand Duchy, they could prove a long period of residence in the capital city, as in the case of the woman mentioned from Massa Carrara, who was born and raised in Florence, or the daughter of the rabbi of Ancona, who had been established in the Tuscan capital for fifteen years. However, the most substantial group, numerically speaking, immediately following the Florentines, is in fact that of the »Jewish maidens of German origins [who were] subjects of the house of Austria«: there were nine of them.

Therefore, in the case of Jews who were not residents of Tuscany, if they arrived at the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni in Florence they were immediately taken (at the expense of the Florentine institute) to Rome, so that they could be baptised in the local Casa dei Catecumeni.<sup>26</sup> This occurred in 18 cases, five of which were women<sup>27</sup>: they actually offer a peculiar case study, as they were indeed Ashkenazi

25 ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, inserts 1 and 3.

26 Or in the Casa dei Catecumeni in their place of origin, as in the case of a 35-year-old widow with seven children from Novellara, in Modena, who was sent to be converted at the Casa dei Catecumeni in Modena; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1160, insert 35.

27 Four of these were actually baptised in Rome, according to that which has emerged from the comparison with the data reported by Wipertus Rudt de Collenberg in »Le Baptême des Juifs à Rome de 1614 à 1718 selon les registres de la Casa dei Catecumeni«, in: *Archivum Historiae Pontificiae* 24 (1986), pp. 91-231; 25 (1987), pp. 105-261; 26 (1988), pp. 119-294.

Jews who should be considered Tuscan subjects (and they were in certain cases, as we have seen), plus one Florentine Jew.<sup>28</sup> Then what was it that impeded their baptism in Florence? It is suspected that it actually had to do with dismissal due to prudery, as was the case with Grazia di Mordechai from Augusta, who had resided for many years in Livorno, where she had become the lover of Samuele Vivanti, an important member of the local community.<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, the Casa dei Catecumeni in Rome for some time had been a concurrent pole of attraction for Tuscan Jews who wanted to convert, even after the opening of the Florence Pia Casa dei Catecumeni in 1636: Cristina Galasso has revealed that between 1614 and 1730, 93 Jews from Leghorn, 28 of whom were women, primarily Italian Ashkenazis (that is, those belonging to the minority and poorest group in the Livornese Jewish community), were converted in Rome.<sup>30</sup> By using the same sources as Galasso<sup>31</sup>, I have been able to count the conversions of another 24 Tuscan Jews for the same period, almost half of whom were Florentines<sup>32</sup>, but there were only three women in the group: a thirty-year-old who converted together with another German Jew, a girl whose mother was foreign, and one together with a man.<sup>33</sup>

28 The baptism of the Florentine woman, Lea di Emanuel Soschino, is not recorded in the registry of the Casa dei Catecumeni in Rome. The only »real« foreign woman sent to Rome was from Tripoli in Libya, having been sent there from Livorno. The Florentine was sent to Rome due to a lack of funds (having come to the door of the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni in 1748, before the Casa had been taken back up economically), but we can assume also that she was dismissed because, having abandoned her husband and children at the age of 64 years, it was difficult to find a sponsor willing to care for her; see ASE, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 3.

29 See also ASE, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1161, insert 6; Wipertus (as note 27), 26 (1988), p. 208, case No. 1105. This hypothesis may be confirmed as true based on the fact that the men who were to be sent to Rome were all foreigners, except for two Tuscan residents who spontaneously requested to be transferred to Urbe and a man from Livorno who it was not possible to receive in Florence due to a temporary lack of space; however, this type of cases are not documented for women.

30 Cristina Galasso (as note 15), p. 114.

31 More precisely, the registries of the Casa dei Catecumeni in Rome studied by Wipertus Rudt de Collenberg.

32 Additionally, five were from Siena, one from Cortona, four from Pisa; there were also two from Lippiano and one from Pitigliano. In total, only six of the 24 Jews were baptised before 1636.

33 The latter presents some aspects that are not completely clear: the woman in question, twenty-two-year-old Brunetta del fu Iosef Todesco, was baptised together with twenty-year-old Sabato di Samuele Moscato in Rome on the Saturday before Easter in 1683, which in that year fell on April 17. The two Florentines, who at the time of their conversion are not defined as husband and wife, then returned to their city of origin where they were married four years later: it is

Amongst the studies regarding conversions to Christianity in other cities in Italy, it has been highlighted that people preferred to convert in shared company and that a person's conversion carried with it, in what was at times a very long cycle<sup>34</sup>, other components of the familiar nucleus, which I was able to verify in Florence as well. With this in mind, I would like to mention the observations of Cristina Galasso again, in which she says »the women's decisions to embrace the Catholic faith appear to mature within and with the family, not outside of or against it«<sup>35</sup>, while men generally convert while single in order to access a broader market for marriage, which may be the case for women as well, Galasso continues, though not as often and above all only after the unmarried girls find themselves marginalised by their families and without ties – in a word, desperate.

Towards this aim, the documentation in Florence regarding the cases between 1599 and 1724 offers very few possibilities to investigate the individual cases in greater depth, although the scant news available do not impede us from making any general observations. Together with the numerous cases of conversions »in sequence« (in which women very often follow the decisions taken by their husbands, fathers, or brothers – despite that there are still quite a few cases in which women are the catalysts, resistance of the women, children, or mothers cannot be silenced, even when facing the conversion of the entire family), as I have said, there are quite a few conversions of single women who arrived at the Casa dei Catecumeni alone. If we discount the phenomenon of compulsory conversions (a phenomenon which, while it is not the object of the present

difficult to imagine, however, that they were married after their conversion, since marriage between new converts was expressly prohibited by the bull *Cupientes Iudeos* issued by Pope Paul III on 21 March 1542; see Fausto Parente, »La posizione giuridica dell'ebreo convertito nell'età della Controriforma. La bolla *Cupientes Iudæos* (1542) e la successiva elaborazione dottrinale«, in: *Sefarad. Revista de estudios hebraicos, sefardíes y de Oriente próximo* 51/2 (1991), p. 344 and pp. 339-352. Assuming new Christian identities and the names Innocenzio Paci and Rosa Letizia, they had a daughter, Caterin Angiola, who they had baptised on 30 September 1687, having chosen another converted Jew as godfather, Francesco Galiboddi from Rome (whose name I was unable to find in the list of Jews converted in Rome and in Florence), who resided in the same parish (Santo Stefano) in Florence; see Wipertus Rudt de Collenberg (as note 27), 25 (1987), pp. 105-261 and p. 152, case No. 521; AOSMFF, r. 288, ph. 175.

34 For example we have the case of Dattero (Ioab) di Salomone Toaff from Arezzo and of Gentildonna Campagnano, who in 1773 claimed to have 27 relatives who had converted to Christianity (according to the Florentine funds, it turns out that one of his sisters was kidnapped, baptised, and shortly thereafter became a nun, while a brother converted at the age of nine, in slightly suspect circumstances, and shortly thereafter became a priest and the secretary to the Corsini family); he was sheltered once at the Pia Casa dei Catecumeni in Florence, from which he later fled, in 1772; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1160, insert 37, and f. 1161, insert 3; Wipertus Rudt de Collenberg (as note 27), 26 (1988), p. 236, case No. 1099.

35 Cristina Galasso (as note 15), p. 116.

work, I am planning to revisit elsewhere), there are around thirty women who converted alone. The majority are young women, and it is therefore possible to suppose that they wished to use conversion as a means of accessing a broader marriage market, which I have been able to verify in five cases.<sup>36</sup> It is therefore difficult to say whether these marriages guaranteed a socio-economic advancement for the newly converted<sup>37</sup>, not having the information available regarding the condition of the Jewish women before their conversion, or that regarding the condition of the Christian husbands (who, as indicated above, under the Grand Dukedom of Cosmo III<sup>38</sup>, were increasingly enticed into marriage with a new convert by the idea of receiving the dowry and a stable job, an arrangement which on the other side may have also been an indicator of difficulties, that is, of the need to find a way to repress the rejection which the Christians must have felt when living with an ex-Jew).

In some cases we are led to believe that the Jewish women's conversion represented a way to escape from a man they did not love any longer, but we must keep in mind that Jewish society (unlike Christian society) gave women the possibility of divorcing by requesting a certificate of divorce (*get*). The marriage problems which may have been underlying when choosing to completely join Christian society<sup>39</sup> should therefore be interpreted as the cause of a break not only with the woman's husband, but also with her entire extended family, as they were unable to express solidarity with the woman, who would only have

36 Consulting the baptismal registries at the archives of the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence unsystematically, I have confirmed three cases, in addition to two marriages proven in ASE, *Magistrato poi Compagnia del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, inserts 4, 21 and 43.

37 Nadia Zeldes points out that in the Sicilian notary acts from the end of the fifteenth century and beginning of the sixteenth century which she analysed, the mixed marriages were always between a Jewish woman who was in a better economic situation with respect to the »old Christian man« who was looking for a wife, whose family had a better social position; see also Nadia Zeldes, »Aspects of married life of Jewish Women Converts in Italy«, in: *Donne nella storia* (as note 17), pp. 97-107, here p. 106.

38 This type of dowry, conceded as a personal favour by the prince through a *rescritto*, broadens the panorama of the establishment of giving the dowry to poor maidens studied by Maria Fubini Leuzzi, »Caratteri della nuzialità femminile in Toscana nell'età di Cosimo III attraverso lo studio delle doti granducali«, in: Franco Angiolini, Vieri Becagli and Marcello Verga (eds.), *La Toscana nell'età di Cosimo III* (Acts of the Pisa-San Domenico di Fiesole conference, Florence, 4-5 June 1990), Florence 1993, pp. 81-109.

39 There are six cases of married women without husbands who converted between 1599 and 1724 (in one case, the husband – also a cousin – returned the dowry); then we have another case in which marital problems are indicated, and finally the case of a woman who had recovered in the »monastero delle malmaritate« (»monastery of bad marriage«) usually reserved for the meretrix. For the problems regarding the need to obtain the *get* (certificate of divorce) before going on to marry a Christian, see Nadia Zeldes (as note 37), pp. 98-99, and Marina Caffiero (as note 1), pp. 304-312.

decided to definitively cut ties with her community of origin if she felt completely alone. On the other hand, Christian society offered women a possibility unknown in the Jewish world: becoming a nun. Between the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century there were still very few cases of new converts who joined the order in Florence.<sup>40</sup>

In the second half of the eighteenth century<sup>41</sup> the motivations for conversion emerged more clearly. If we analyse the group of Ashkenazi Jews separately, we can observe that it comprises single, unmarried women, often in the service of well-to-do Jewish families (presumably belonging to the Levantine nation, who had the opportunity to live outside of the ghetto<sup>42</sup>), and with limited economic

40 There were precisely three: two girls from Santa Fiora (the first, Rachele di Flaminio Passiglio, converted in 1691 two years after her sister Grazia was baptised at the age of seven years *invitis parentibus*; the second, Rosa di Jacopo Modigliani, was »offered« in 1719 by her father, who later, contrary to what he told the notary, did not convert) became nuns in a monastery in Monte San Savino (in November 1728, the second became a professed nun in the Benedictine monastery of Santa Concezione, after which Elettrice Palatina gave her alms of 25 scudi, to partially cover her dowry, which was a total of 300 scudi), while an eighteen-year-old Florentine girl, Bona di Abramo Blanes, who converted on 28 September 1717 taking the name Maria Maddalena Benedetta Venturi, on 5 September 1721 entered, with the name Cherubina, the Conservatorio della Pietà, located on Via del Mandorlo in Florence; see also ACAF, *Pia Casa dei catecumeni*, f. III, unnumbered pages, and for the first case: AOSMFF, r. 290, f. 218; ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 38; for the second case: AOSMFF, r. 304, ph. 198; ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1160, insert 45; ACDF St. St. CC 4 a, insert 9; and finally for the third case: AOSMFF, r. 303, ph. 243; ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 11; f. 1178, s. v.

41 As I have mentioned above, the data collected between 1725 and 1748 are statistically unusable; however, I will share them here briefly anyhow: of the three Jewish women converted in Florence, the first followed a newly converted brother, the second was baptised *invitis parentibus*, and only the third appeared to be motivated by a true calling, which was strong enough for her to enter a convent, a fate which was also shared by the second woman. The first later married the dance instructor on the Medici court; for the first case, see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 42; f. 1161, insert 7; f. 1160, insert 45; AOSMF, r. 309, ph. 195; for the second, ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 18; ACEF, D.2.1.3, insert 1; AOSMFF, r. 316, ph. 177; and for the third, see Giuseppe Conti, *Firenze dopo i Medici*, Florence 1921, p. 259; AOSMFF r. 316, ph. 295; ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 1.

42 Dora Liscia Bemporad notes that the Florentine ghetto was expanded in 1704 at the request of Cosmo III »not only because the number of Jews was growing, but especially to obtain, from the new buildings expropriated for the occasion, housing that was sufficient in size and dignity to tempt the richest sectors of the Jewish population, in particular the Levantines, to re-enter the Ghetto, after which, by maintaining privileges obtained by paying high fees, they could also live in the neighbouring area«; Dora Liscia Bemporad, »La scuola italiana e la scuola levantina nel ghetto di Firenze: prima ricostruzione«, in: *Rivista d'arte. Studi documentari per la storia delle arti in Toscana*, 38 (1986), pp. 3-48, here p. 26.

means: eighteen-year-old Sara di Sansone Ruben Furst<sup>43</sup>, for example, was in the Casa dei Mendicanti («House of the beggars») before deciding to convert. However, working for her coreligionists did not mean that she was able to enjoy better treatment, by any means: Tullia Catalan notes that in Trieste, Jewish girls from poor families who were sent to work in the homes of wealthier family members were sometimes treated worse than the other servants.<sup>44</sup> The relationships which developed between servant and master, often problematic, may have also been interweaved with unusual characteristics, generating long-lasting effects, as I will soon illustrate with two events which took place in Florence. In 1794 Giuditta, daughter of Joseph Baruch and Hanna Alfarino, was forty-three years old when she decided to abandon her husband Joseph Alfarino (a merchant from Livorno living in Florence) to become a Christian, after having threatened loudly with wanting to convert every time he behaved «extravagantly» and having escaped from the ghetto a few times (after each of which she returned, penitent, after tearful conversations with her husband).<sup>45</sup> To determine the final resolution, the memory of the determination demonstrated by her Ashkenazi servant, Giuditta di Abramo Moises<sup>46</sup> should not seem strange, as four years before (when she was barely 21 years old) she was sheltered in the manse of a church requesting to be baptised, and then later refusing any type of meeting with the master, as was within her rights.<sup>47</sup> If the thread that ties the stories of the two women

43 Her case is recorded in ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1160, insert 12 and f. 1161, insert 19, while her baptism, which took place on 15 December 1763, is recorded in AOSMFF, r. 326, ph. 285. Sara, who then took the name Maria Maddalena Sikaft, was not a subject of the House of Austria (in fact, she was from Copenhagen, Denmark): the Casa dei Catecumeni then took care of only the ceremony expenses, and the ceremony took place just a couple of days after the girl had requested it, without housing her in the institute.

44 Tullia Catalan (as note 18), p. 210.

45 The first escape took place on 10 January 1792; the second on 3 April 1793; and the third and last on 4 April 1794; see also ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1164, inserts 4, 10, and 16; she was baptised on 7 August 1794 and took the name Anna Maria Gaetana Teresa Maddalena Gaspera Benvenuti; see also AOSMFF, r. 342, ph. 28.

46 Giuditta was from near Metz and was therefore of the House of Lorraine; escaped from the house of the merchant Alfarino on 7 November 1789, she was taken in at the Florence Casa dei Catecumeni on 9 December of the same year; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1163, insert 1. She was baptised on 5 February of the following year, and shortly thereafter took the name Teresa Maria Lucrezia Neretti; see also AOSMFF, r. 340, ph. 175. However, it is said that the Jewish community believes that the girl was convinced to convert by the prior of the San Ruffillo parish, who, in fact, in those years sheltered many Jews who had escaped from the ghetto before they were formally accepted into the Casa dei Catecumeni; see also ACEF, D.2.1.5, insert 6 and D.2.1.6, insert 5.

47 The possibility for a catechumen to speak with their family or, if they had no family, with representatives from the Jewish community during the catechumen period was conceded for

together is a kind of shared rebellion – silent in one case; loud in the other – against a male oppressor, the events that followed, then, tasted of a bitter victory. Rosa Orvieto from Monte San Savino, who was the adopted daughter of Sabato di Orvieto and Gentile d’Angelo Viterbi<sup>48</sup>, converted in Florence on 10 January 1785, when she was only sixteen years old. For some years she had worked as a chambermaid for the Jewish Usigli family in Arezzo.<sup>49</sup> Shortly after her conversion, she changed her new Christian name yet again, from Maria Maddalena Anna Agnese Amerighi to Sister Maddalena Maria Luisa, when she entered a convent. And in this new capacity, in 1797 she was part of a group of fervent Catholics (primarily women, in fact) accused of carrying out an *invitis parentibus* baptism on Salvatore, the thirteen-year-old son of Leone Usigli, when he at the time this occurred was a newborn. During the process, at the end of which the baptism was recognised as invalid, it emerged that what drove Rosa to testify in favour of the Christians was actually that the master had not paid some of her salary and the resulting resentment which she must have felt about it – perhaps the same which had driven her to convert.<sup>50</sup>

the first time in 1751, when a girl who was barely thirteen years old (Violante, daughter of Abramo di Pace Ravà and Anna d’Efraim Soschino) converted, who on Christmas Eve of the same year took the name Francesca Maria Maddalena Feroni; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, inserts 13 and 15; f. 1160, insert 34; f. 1161, insert 23; AOSMFF, registry 320, ph. 217. The Florence Casa dei Catecumeni was probably the only of the institutes of its kind in Italy to concede this right: Pietro Leopoldo had this in mind when he left the throne of the Grand Dukedom of Tuscany in 1790 to succeed to the imperial throne and, amongst other things, issued a license in favour of the Jews in Mantua which in chapter 21 regulated the phenomenon of conversion and established that »A holy place for catechumens for Jews who wish to embrace the Christian religion shall be re-established in Mantua [...] All newly converted Jews from the state of Mantua shall pass through this place, and shall remain there for a maximum period of six months [...] During this time, the catechumen will not be prohibited access to Jews, whether they be blood relatives or unrelated; rather, they should have contact with them, provided they are being honestly recognised, and have, in good faith, the freedom of speaking to them out of mutual satisfaction«; see also Paolo Bernardini, *La sfida dell’uguaglianza. Gli ebrei a Mantova nell’età della rivoluzione francese*, Rome 1996, pp. 207-209; ACEF, D.2.1.7., insert 1.

48 She was actually the daughter of Moisè David Fiorentino: the Fiorentinos were one of the richest families in Monte San Savino (see also Roberto G. Salvadori, »Famiglie ebraiche di Monte San Savino (1627 – 1699). Attività economiche e rapporti sociali«, in: *Zakhor. Rivista degli ebrei d’Italia* (1998), pp. 139-154, here pp. 146-147) and included a famous poet, Salomon Fiorentino, the first Jew to be accepted into a Tuscan academy, in 1785; see also Ulrich Wyrwa, *Juden in der Toskana und in Preußen im Vergleich. Aufklärung und Emanzipation in Florenz, Livorno, Berlin und Königsberg*, Tübingen 2003, p. 35.

49 See ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1162, insert 13; AOSMFF, r. 337, ph. 245.

50 ACEF, D.2.1.8., insert 1.

The hope that these young servants had of improving their social status through conversion must have been very strong, and sometimes it was effective, as in the case of Isabella di Leone Orefice, who was born in Habsburg and moved to Livorno. She later became a Christian in Florence and married Giuseppe Ducci, whose father worked for the auditor Mormorai. But the marriage held a bitter surprise for her on a personal level, since her Christian husband began to abuse and threaten to kill her, to the point that she wanted a divorce.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know how this story ended.

Another characteristic common to female conversions which took place in Florence in the second half of the eighteenth century is that the women converted alone, or that they chose to join the Catholic Church despite breaking contextually with their families. Bona, daughter of Samuel di Raffael Levi and Grazia di Gabriello Rivero, for example, converted in 1749 at the age of 25, together with Ricca, her eight-year-old-daughter, after having tried unsuccessfully to bring Aronne, her three-year-old son, with her as well. Aronne was returned to his father, Abram Tedesco, who remained a Jew, while his mother was later remarried to a Christian.<sup>52</sup> Two well-off women from Livorno, Rachel del fu Abramo Lusena and Ester del fu Giuseppe Sulema, one a widow and the other unmarried, chose to convert together in 1751, perhaps to face together the blame and disapproval of their families.<sup>53</sup> Let us also consider the dramatic case of Allegra Pacifici, who, while pregnant in 1791, decided to convert after her newly converted husband had *sold* their first child to a Christian family in Lucca for one hundred scudi

51 The baptism took place on 24 February 1781 and at this time the woman, who a short time before had been in hospital for incurable patients, took the name Maria Maddalena Elisabetta Luisa (it is not clear whether her surname was Ballati or Saccomanni); see AOSMFF, registry 335, ph. 174. In a 1783 letter written by friar Zanobi Campi, in whom the woman confided, reads: »she is very desperate, to have received from her impertinent husband new assaults which threatened her life, saying that he wanted to put a knife to her throat, therefore she is requesting, and demanding, a separation from him«; see ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1161, insert 14.

52 Both mother and daughter took the surname Bargigli and the forenames Maria Eleonora and Maria Giovanna; see also AOSMFF, r. 309, ph. 208 and 218. The mother was later remarried to Francesco del fu Domenico Bartolini di Figline, about whom we do not have any further information, while the daughter was apparently accepted into the Bigallo institute as having been abandoned; see also ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 5. There are no other cases of returning minors to their biological parents after that of Aronne being returned to his father Abram Tedesco in 1749; see also ACEF, D.2.1.4, insert 1.

53 They were baptised together on Christmas Eve 1751, taking the forenames Maria Laura Francesca Rosa Tempi and Maria Anna Francesca Antinori, respectively; see AOSMFF, r. 320, ph. 334; ASF, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 15 and f. 1161, insert 23. Their decision was accompanied by anti-Judaic riots in Livorno, which are also mentioned in ACDF, S.O., St. St. CC 1-d, unnumbered pages.



(though the baby was taken away almost immediately by the authorities who managed the Casa dei Catecumeni because it was decided that the parents were unable to care for him).<sup>54</sup>

Very frequently, an unwanted marriage was the trigger which gave a Jewish woman the idea of embracing the Catholic faith – the »dominant faith«, as we find it written in documents from the time (this highlights, once again, the unequal power relationships between the two religious communities). There were six married women who converted (two of whom had been married at a very young age – around 13 to 15 years old – to their paternal uncles, men much older than them<sup>55</sup>) with the hope of later moving on to a marriage with a Christian.<sup>56</sup> A couple of women chose to join a monastery: in addition to Rosa, the servant mentioned above, there was only one other unmarried girl, Violante, who became a Capuchin nun in the Santa Marta Monastery in San Sepolcro on 20 March 1757.<sup>57</sup>

In all of the cases, for these women spontaneous conversion appears to have been a means of affirming their individuality, of reinforcing the autonomy of

54 The baptism of the woman, who took the name Luisa Ferdinanda Carolina Leopolda Teresa Caiani, took place on 21 December 1791, approximately two months after she had given birth to her son, who had been named Giovacchino (which surname had been taken is not clear); see ASE, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1164, insert 5 and AOSMFE, r. 340, ph. 330. Her husband, Isacco Moisè di Lelio Bondi, who was baptised some months before in Livorno, took the name Vincenzo Sebastiano Andrei, and that was the surname Allegra *alias* Luisa took; as for Giovacchino, entrusted to a Christian nurse, his parents requested repeatedly, for many years, to have him back; the documentation available to us, again, does not contain information on whether they were successful.

55 The first is the livornese Sincha, daughter of Gioseffe Abbari from Tripoli and of Stella of Samuel Sultan, who converted on 17 June 1753, after five months of marriage to her paternal uncle, Salomone Azzulei di Fez; in order to determine her age definitively, the girl was subjected to an examination by two doctors, who affirmed without a doubt that she was 17 years old, not 13 as the Jewish community claimed. Sincha took the forenames Maria Anna and Nardi the same surname as her mother, who had converted years before in Livorno; see also ASE, *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 17 and AOSMFE, r. 321, ph. 212. This was an extremely controversial case, which was also mentioned in ASE, *Auditore, poi Segreteria del Regio Diritto*, f. 349, cc. 277-412 and f. 326, cc. 261-263. The other was twenty-year-old Giuditta, daughter of David di Raffaello Cardoso from Pisa and Ricca Sarra from Livorno, married for five years to her paternal uncle Moisè, a rich merchant, who she claims had been unfaithful, and who converted on 20 August 1757 taking the name Maria Maddalena Carlotta Ximenes; see also *Compagnia, poi Magistrato del Bigallo, secondo versamento*, f. 1159, insert 32 and AOSMFE, r. 323, ph. 290; her baptism was followed by a request to be able to marry a new convert, which was expressly prohibited in the bull *Cupientes iudaeos*, as noted above in footnote 33.

56 There were a total of five marriages of this type carried out in the second half of the eighteenth century.

57 We have discussed her above in footnote 47.

their decisions, and of re-opening the discussion of destinies already written. If these hypotheses were to be confirmed (even outside of the Tuscan territory), the increase of female conversions beginning in the eighteenth century could be explained by comparing them with the need for emancipation from a social and familiar role considered to be too strict: the image previously held of Jewish women as a key element in the passing on of Jewish culture and identity should therefore be revisited in light of their need for social liberation; for these women, conversion to Catholicism provided, in a sense, an escape. To simplify, it could be said that the Jewish women were willing to renounce their religion in order to express their personal independence: and this was an extremely dangerous game, with a result which was at best uncertain (as not even Catholic society stood out as offering «equal opportunity») and which perhaps even involved blackmail, which the women could not get away from. When they thought that their position in the Jewish community was fixed, they were attracted to the fascinating possibility of beginning a new life. This hypothesis is an attempt to partially explain the extremely complex phenomenon of conversion, the deepest motivations for which are destined to remain unknown in the majority of cases. This is, more than anything, an attempt carried out in full consciousness of having left behind the complicated problem of compulsory conversions, which are often hidden rather than revealed by Catholic sources (they tend to present them as spontaneous divine illuminations). However, it is undeniable that for some Jewish women, conversion represented – paradoxically – a ray of salvation.