



Tamar Herzig. *A Convert's Tale: Art, Crime, and Jewish Apostasy in Renaissance Italy.* I Tatti Studies in Italian Renaissance History Series. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. viii + 388 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-23753-7.

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Published on H-Judaic (May, 2022)

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While historians are well aware of the long history of Jewish apostasy to Christianity in the premodern world, the depth of our knowledge about these converts and their experiences is bound by the extant historical record.[1] Sources pertaining to many converts are simply no longer accessible, and their stories thus remain elusive. Tamar Herzig has had the rare fortune to uncover a trove of archival material to reconstruct the life of one Salomone Da Sesso. Her new book, *A Convert's Tale: Art, Crime, and Jewish Apostasy in Renaissance Italy*, presents the life of Salomone—later baptized as Ercole de'Fedeli—and the advantages, trials, and tribulations of a convert in quattrocento Italy. Chasing Salomone and his family through the archives, Herzig connects this convert's life to the broader histories of artistry, patronage, intra-Jewish communal affairs, interfaith relations, and identity politics.

Salomone (born sometime in the 1450s) is not unknown in scholarship, but where previous studies have focused on his artistic accomplishments, Herzig rightly diverts the spotlight onto Salomone's conversion and its implications, not just for him but also for his family. *A Convert's Tale* is far from a flat biographical account; Herzig's micro-history extrapolates from the singular example of Salomone to explore why early modern

Jews apostatized, what the impact of apostasy was on their lives and identities, and how historians might come to understand the inner thoughts of apostates.

The book is neatly divided into four main parts that segment Salomone's life into pre- and post-conversion. Part 1 covers his early life, training as a goldsmith, and connections with the Ducal Houses of Este and Gonzaga. Part 2 details Salomone's apostasy, tracing the criminal charges brought against him, his imprisonment, and finally his baptism. Within this, Herzig uses the accusation of sodomy made against him to explore same-sex relationships in Renaissance Italy and the policing of sex in both the Jewish and Christian worlds. Part 3 extends Herzig's investigation of apostasy to include Salomone's family. It probes the advantages and disadvantages neophytes faced based on their gender. The final part sees the decline of Salomone and his fortunes, the impact on his family, and ultimately his legacy.

A Convert's Tale opens with what we know about Salomone's early Jewish life: he was born into a prominent family of moneylenders, married in 1478, and had at least seven children. By 1487 he was a prominent goldsmith at the Gonzaga court in Mantua, as well as the ducal court in Ferrara under the patronage of Duchess Eleonora.

Quite early on, the reader learns of Salomone's shady character, one who held loans and debts for unknown reasons. Herzig hypothesizes that these may have been incurred due to gambling or illicit pleasures. His dubious character is further compounded by his imprisonment in 1491 on charges of fraud. These charges were not the only ones brought against him, and Herzig pieces together the vague historic record regarding the "very enormous errors" that the Mantuan Jews accused Salomone of committing (p. 43). Herzig's thoughtful treatment of the charges against Salomone provides an in-depth look at the complex nature of internal Jewish affairs and the lengths to which a Jewish community would go to rid itself of an individual accused of jeopardizing the community's security. *A Convert's Tale* thus reveals the role that Jewish communities, perhaps unwittingly, played in Jewish apostasy. Indeed, while Christians could offer Jews escape from judicial execution through baptism, such an outcome may not have factored into the considerations of Jewish communities using Christian courts to prosecute their fellow Jews.

Herzig hones in on the Jewish community's general aversion to denouncing fellow Jews to Christian authorities. And yet more serious crimes that carried a sentence of execution—such as sodomy—could be weaponized by the Jewish community to get rid of troublesome individuals. Salomone was one such individual who had, in some way, upset the Mantuan Jewish community. Herzig, however, points out that the lack of extant documentation makes it impossible to reconstruct the full circumstances. In September 1491 Salomone found himself accused of sodomy, which saw him imprisoned and sentenced to death. This provides vital background to the situation that he ultimately faced: execution or baptism. Unable to truly know Salomone's mind, Herzig offers plausible explanations for his decision to opt for baptism: it would offer a fresh start, with new social opportunities, financial benefits, and the possibil-

ity of endearing him to influential Christian patrons.

Far from presenting a one-sided story, Herzig also examines how Christian patrons benefited from Jewish conversion, which was as much about saving souls as it was about aristocrats fashioning public displays of piety intended to emphasize a patron's religiosity. As Herzig explains, the theme of religious ideology versus social realities is reflected in Salomone's conversion tale, which was ultimately one in which pious patronage protected the convert from his enemies and supported him financially. Importantly, conversion was not always voluntary, and Herzig sets aside chapters 7 and 8 to probe how different authorities, including the Catholic Church, employed coercion. Here, Herzig notes that those who converted under pressure—either from judicial condemnation or financial disaster—were often perceived as untrustworthy, especially if they were willing to abandon Judaism for material gain. She deftly traces this thread throughout Salomone, now Master Ercole's, new Christian life.

A Convert's Tale draws out the implications of Salomone's conversion and the complexity of his experiences as a neophyte. In particular, Herzig shows how his baptism, alongside that of his wife and children, cemented the family's economic ties to their ducal patrons. Herzig compares Salomone's craftsmanship prior to his conversion to the types of commissions he received after his baptism, including a request to craft reliquary tabernacles for Duke Ercole, pieces he would never have been able to craft as a Jew. As Herzig highlights, economic benefits were a significant factor in the church's conversion policy, and there is no doubt that new professional opportunities were now open to Salomone because of his conversion. With Salomone so tied to his patrons, however, his economic fortunes were dependent on their goodwill and fortunes. Herzig follows Ercole's precarious situation from the death of Duchess Eleonora to the family's descent into poverty, which resul-

ted from two factors. First, the next generation of dukes and duchesses did not continue their patronage of Master Ercole. Second, even when their successors did support him, the economic impact of the Italian Wars led to a loss of commissions. As Herzig notes, artistic success did not necessarily translate into financial success, and indeed a combination of factors clearly led to Ercole's impoverishment, showing how the material benefits of conversion could be exhausted long before the death of an apostate.

Underscoring the role of gender in this history, Herzig reminds readers that if it is difficult to reconstruct the full biography of male apostates, their female counterparts are even more ephemeral in the historical record. In the case of Ercole's family, we know much more about his sons, Alfonso and Ferrante, than his wife and daughters, and virtually nothing about the three children born after his apostasy. Tracking the apostasy of the whole family as much as possible, Herzig points out that there was simply no choice for the couple's minor children, nor Salomone's wife, when it came to conversion. With her Jewish name unrecoverable, Herzig reveals that Ercole's wife, Eleonora, was baptized at a later date than her husband, and posits that Eleonora may have only accepted baptism so as not to lose custody of her children. Moreover, while most of the children received names related to Ferrara's ruling family to further reinforce their ties of patronage, Salomone's teenage daughter does not follow this pattern and is instead baptized as Caterina, suggesting initial resistance to conversion but eventual capitulation. Herzig thus concludes that men may have been more likely to convert on their own, while women were forced to accept baptism because of familial ties.

Male and female children of converts also benefited from conversion, albeit in different ways. Alfonso and Ferrante, for instance, were trained in the family business and worked as goldsmiths in the family workshop. Despite the patchy historical

record for their sisters, Herzig manages to find that Caterina and Anna, who both benefited from their conversions, were able to obtain social and religious positions that would have otherwise remained closed to them as Jews. Under the patronage of Duke Ercole, Anna was selected as a female attendant to Lucrezia Borgia, which came with a courtly education, a dowry, and a suitable match. Caterina was chosen as a novice to enter the convent of Santa Caterina da Siena, a development that may have been perceived as a symbol of the family's full integration into Catholic society. The silence of women in the general historical record can be deafening, but Herzig is able to showcase the voices of Master Ercole's wife, Eleonora, and Alfonso's wife, Sapienta, in the final chapter, through a *supplica* composed by the women that was sent to the Duchess of Mantua upon Alfonso's imprisonment in 1521.

Finally, Herzig shows that apostasy is inexorably linked with the question of identity. How Ercole identified before and after baptism and how others labeled and identified him are key elements of *A Convert's Tale*. Prior to Ercole's apostasy, the ducal registers listed him as "Salomone the Jew" (p. 35). These Jewish origins followed Ercole into his Christian life where he continued to be referred to as "the Jew" or "the former Jew." Similarly, his daughter's entry into the convent is recorded as "Caterina, the former Jew, daughter of Master Ercole, the former Jew" (p. 147). Evidently, Ercole's former Jewishness continued to set him and his family apart from their Christian contemporaries even after conversion, revealing the difficult barriers converts faced when it came to total assimilation into Christian society. Compellingly, Herzig shows that Ercole fashioned his signature as a means of self-validation. In pre-baptismal documents, Salomone signed off as "Salomone da Sexo the Jew" or "Salomone, goldsmith of the most illustrious Duchess of Ferrara," whereas, post-baptism his signature changed to "Master Ercole, Your Lady's goldsmith" or "Salomone, goldsmith of the most illustrious

(pp. 47-48, 173). Herzig interprets that Master Ercole's occupation as court goldsmith was an immutable part of his identity and the one constant identity throughout his life.

A Convert's Tale paints a vivid picture of "the exceptional normal," defined as an outstanding individual's life story that can, in turn, illuminate the realities of a larger social group (p. 7). Herzig is honest about the many unresolved questions that Ercole's conversion poses. For instance, based on the presently available evidence, we are unable to pinpoint the sincerity of his conversion and the details of his belief system. *A Convert's Tale* does its best to present what we can know, balancing discussion of the source material with interpretation. The book draws its strength from Herzig's meticulous research and her ability to put the voices of Salomone and his patrons front and

center, reproducing choice archival documents in full to reinforce her narrative. Where *A Convert's Tale* offers new ground is the revelation that Jewish conversion was not always at the behest of Christian missionary endeavors and that some Renaissance Jews—like Salomone—may very well have been pushed to the baptismal font by their own communities. This line of inquiry is certainly worth pursuing.

Note

[1]. See Peter A. Mazur, *Conversion to Catholicism in Early Modern Italy* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Paola Tartakoff, "Jewish Women and Apostasy in the Medieval Crown of Aragon, c. 1300–1391," *Jewish History* 24, no. 1 (2010): 7-32; and Tamar Herzig, "The Future of Studying Jewish Conversion in Renaissance Italy," *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 22, no. 2 (2019): 311-18.

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Citation: Marci Freedman. Review of Herzig, Tamar. *A Convert's Tale: Art, Crime, and Jewish Apostasy in Renaissance Italy*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

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