In our digital age, the open circulation of knowledge is instantaneous and open to almost anyone. We value the ideal of transparency and disdain the idea of secrets. However, in the past, this was not the case. In fact, the study of and trade in secreta or nature’s secrets was a way to attain a higher type of knowledge. The theme of this lecture is the early modern Jewish trade in secrets, a topic that has only recently been explored by scholars.

Dr. Kaye will take us into the intriguing world of Italian Jewish professori de’ secreti (“professors of secrets”), resourceful purveyors of useful and practical knowledge from medicine to business, espionage to weapons, but also of arcane secrets from astrology to alchemy. Taking a micro-historical approach, the lecture focuses primarily on the colorful figure of the 16th century Italian Jew Abraham Colorni, and explores how this multi-talented cryptologist became a well-known professor of secrets who served in courts throughout Europe. Aside from an overview of the history of Jewish secrecy in the early modern era, the material presented will allow us to raise questions about the Jewish trade in secrets and its implications for the dissemination of knowledge that led to the Scientific Revolution by 1800.

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