

FORUM

Ester, a Missing Clasp, and Jewish Pawnbroking Networks in Renaissance Prague

Anna Parker

Faculty of History, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

Corresponding author: Anna Parker, email: ap800@cam.ac.uk

Abstract

In 1577, a petty pawnbroker named Ester lost a clasp belonging to a Prague noblewoman, Lady Juliana the Fifth. Having been traded repeatedly between anonymous pawnbrokers, the clasp was eventually tracked down in the Polish city of Poznań, by which time Ester had already fled Prague and taken refuge in Cracow. In this essay, I use the subsequent criminal court case to explore this illuminating episode in the history of the city's Jewish Quarter. Taking place in the late Renaissance, during what has often been referred to as the Jewish "Golden Age," I argue that this dramatic event provides access to the realities of an era often characterized as harmonious. I position pawnbroking as an industry that invited intimate and regular cross-confessional contact, and one that therefore offers up new opportunities to consider the nature of coexistence. By following the movement of both Ester and the pawned clasp from Prague to Poland, I also show how attention to pawnbroking can illuminate a constellation of transregional connections that stretched from Bohemia to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to its east, revealing the otherwise unrecorded ways in which Prague's Jews were connected to the Ashkenazi diaspora.

Keywords: Bohemia; Prague; Poland; Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; Renaissance; Golden Age; Jewish Renaissance; Jewish-Christian relations; Ashkenazi; pawnbroking

Prague's late Renaissance has been called the Jewish "Golden Age."¹ High levels of political toleration meant that scholarship, publishing, and crafts flourished within the Jewish Quarter, while beyond its walls, high status "Court Jews" took up influential positions close to Rudolf II. Prague had been home to a Jewish community since the tenth century, and in the thirteenth century a quarter was established between the Old Town and the curve of the Moldau River. Although long-established, Jews faced regular expulsions. Ferdinand I ordered Jews out of the city twice: once in 1541 and again in 1557. Ferdinand's successors, however, took a different approach. In 1564, when Maximilian II came to the throne, Jews were invited back to the city, and in 1571, they received privileges to trade. Under the reign of Rudolf II, king of Bohemia from 1576, the imperial court was moved from Vienna to Prague, making the city the seat of the Hapsburg monarchy and the center of the Holy Roman Empire. Prague transformed rapidly, with its population expanding from forty thousand in 1583 to seventy thousand by 1600—of which, Jews numbered between six thousand and fifteen thousand.² Jewish merchants and artisans worked in numerous trades, such as pawnbroking, goldsmithing, and purveying goods like wool, feathers, and fur, including on the second-hand market located in their quarter.³ Certain high-status Jews were invited to Rudolf II's court: in 1592, for example, Rudolf II

¹Jirina Šedinová, "The Jewish Town in Prague," in *Rudolf II and Prague: The Court and the City*, ed. Eliška Fučíková et al. (Prague, 1997), 305; Jaroslav Pánek, "The Czech Estates in the Hapsburg Monarchy (1526–1620)," in *A History of the Czech Lands*, ed. Jaroslav Pánek and Oldrich Tuma et al. (Prague, 2011), 218.

²Jaroslav Miller, *Urban Societies in East-Central Europe, 1500–1700* (Aldershot, 2008), 26; Tomáš Pěkný, *Historie Židů v Čechách a na Moravě* (Prague, 1993), 272, 390.

³Mark Wischnitzer, "Origins of the Jewish Artisan Class in Bohemia and Moravia, 1500–1648," *Jewish Social Studies* 16, no. 14 (1954): 335–50; Helena Krejčova, "Czechs and Jews," in *Bohemia in History*, ed. Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge, 1998), 347–48.

held an audience with the scholar and mystic Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel. Given these favorable conditions, Prague was a hub for the Ashkenazi diaspora: the quarter attracted migration from Germany, Poland, the Balkans, and Russia, as well as Spain and Portugal, with intellectuals, merchants, and religious leaders making up many of the settlers.⁴ Funded by the wealthier of these migrants, the physical fabric of the quarter transformed as new synagogues, streets, and homes were built in the Renaissance style.⁵ Meanwhile, Jewish settlers spilled out of the formal confines of their walls, as the richest set up house outside of the crowded quarter. In 1610, for example, the merchant Jacob Bassevi bought a house in the Christian quarter of St. Nicholas for one thousand bags of Bohemian groschen.⁶

Despite this incontrovertible evidence of the community's flourishing, the "Golden Age" narrative that has dominated the history of Prague's Renaissance is limited. While the scholarship on Prague's Jewish community is extremely rich, it is a history that, while recognizing the importance of movement to sustaining the quarter's vibrancy, is generally focused on people in place. There are few accounts that look beyond the quarter to link it to the other Jewish communities to which it was closely bound, or that draw on gender or social analysis to examine the precise nature of these connections.⁷ In this essay, I focus on the pawnbroking trade, an industry that linked Prague's quarter to Jewish communities in the east of Europe, particularly in Bohemia's neighboring Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. By doing so, I attempt to cross a historiographical barrier between the histories of West and East, a divide that has been built over a border that was, in reality, fluid and porous.⁸

My study of the cross-cultural connections forged by Prague's pawnbrokers centers on a single dramatic episode within the trade. Pawnbroking took place when someone temporarily handed over their personal possessions in exchange for cash or credit, with the intention of buying back their goods at a later date. It was an activity dependent on a considerable degree of trust between customer and lender, a trust that was established through individual agreements (the exact nature of which will be discussed further in the text that follows). In 1577, the same year that Jews were given a monarchical promise that they would not be expelled and had their trading privileges extended, a climactic case over a broken pawnbroking agreement was brought to Prague's criminal court. That year, a noblewoman, Lady Juliana the Fifth, lent her clasp to a Jewish pawnbroker named Ester (no second name listed), the daughter of Enoch. Taking a risk, Ester pawned the clasp on to make more money, but, before she could buy it back, it was lost. The valuable clasp was pawned onward and onward, from broker to broker, until it eventually arrived in Poznań, a city in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, just over 310 kilometers away from Prague as the crow flies. Fearing prosecution, Ester escaped from Prague to Cracow, where she was confronted by locals, who by then knew of her crime, having been kept abreast through postal networks across Bohemia and the Commonwealth, which vibrated with speculation about the missing clasp. The case reached a head when Joachým, the caretaker of the Prague Jewish School, then on a visit to Poznań, was informed that the clasp was being held in a local pawnshop. When back in Prague, he promptly visited Lady Juliana to arrange its safe return. This event frames late Renaissance Prague within a nexus of connections to the Ashkenazi diaspora, highlighting the city's position as a crossroads to commerce in Eastern Europe. Attention to the particular connections generated by pawnbroking, moreover, reveals the delicate dynamics of power and interdependence that characterized daily coexistence between Christians and Jews in Prague's "Golden Age."

Ester, a petty pawnbroker who otherwise led a life untouched by the archives, and her role in losing a small but valuable clasp, is revealed by criminal records from the Old Town Court of Prague, which, at the time, was the court for the whole city. These testaments, compiled haphazardly in *knihy svědomí* ("books of conscience"), comprise of depositions from witnesses, collected before the trial and read out

⁴Krejčova, "Czechs and Jews," 347; Jonathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550–1750* (London, 1998), 33.

⁵Rachel L. Greenblatt, *To Tell Their Children: Jewish Communal Memory in Early Modern Prague* (Stanford, 2014), 18, 27.

⁶Hillel J. Kieval, "Jewish Prague, Christian Prague, and the Castle in the City's 'Golden Age,'" *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011): 207.

⁷As observed in Rachel L. Greenblatt, "Building the Past: Historical Writing on the Jews of the Bohemian Crown Lands in the Early Modern Period," *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016): 11.

⁸With the exception of *Studia Judaica* 19 (2016), a special issue devoted to Czech-Jewish and Polish-Jewish connections.

at the final hearing.⁹ Each witness would have crafted their statement to ensure that it compellingly presented their narrative, selectively including or excluding information to produce a good story that appealed to the sensibilities of prosecutors.¹⁰ As preparatory declamations, the statements are limited in that they do not include the interjections or interrogations that followed in the court chamber. Nonetheless, these records are extremely valuable, shedding light on little studied aspects of Prague's history and foregrounding the lives of the nonelites. Both Jews and Christians used the court: Jewish witnesses were permitted to swear on "their own God," rather than "on the Cross" or on their "conscience" as Christians did. Testators were drawn from across the social scale, including the very poorest (those whom the scribes noted had a "difficult life").

The long and convoluted testaments that made up Ester's case will be contextualized with other court cases to build a picture of common patterns of social behavior. Concerned with an alleged crime, the social behaviors recorded in court are not necessarily ordinary. Yet, through criminal cases, contemporaries created, negotiated, and then recreated the social and cultural boundaries that governed "normal" behavior. Many of these testaments are also full of quotidian detail, which provides a guide to the routines, practices, and unconscious assumptions that made up the experiential aspects of daily life. This kind of evidence is vital to build a fuller picture of coexistence, taking us beyond overarching narratives that divided Christian from Jew, and Jewish communities from one another. Unpacking the story of Ester and the missing clasp, I will reflect on the role of Jews in Prague's pawnbroking trade and consider what this tells us about the overlooked early modern connections between Bohemia and the lands to its east. I will first look at the roles and functions of Jews within the pawnbroking trade, positioning the industry as one in which intimate and daily cross-cultural contact took place. I will then consider the transnational reach of pawnbroking networks, before narrowing my lens and concluding by assessing the impact of this transregional trade on the status of Jews within Prague.

Jews in the Pawnbroking Trade

Pawnbroking was the backbone of the early modern economy, and the political toleration of Jews in the "Golden Age" was largely dependent on their role within this trade. Cash was limited and goods were of high value, so pawning was crucial for wealthy and poor alike.¹¹ As usury was considered a sin, pawnbroking had been historically forbidden to Christians in Bohemia, meaning Jews tended to fulfil this function. In the fifteenth century, Prague's municipal government also permitted Christians to lend, but, over the centuries, the cultural association between Jews and the pawnbroking trade remained powerful.¹² Certain Jewish lenders held prominent places in the economy of Renaissance Prague. For example, the Jewish merchant Mordecai Maisel was granted lending privileges by Rudolf II and assisted the monarch with the task of financing the kingdom's battles with the Ottoman Empire.

Contemporary depictions made much of the association between Jews and money. The English poet Elizabeth Weston settled in Prague at the turn of the sixteenth century, winning favor for her neo-Latin poems. Her piece "On Baptized Jews" drew heavily on stereotype. Weston polemicized "if money is at hand you have them close by, / if money is absent you have them far remote," branding Jews "gold diggers and faithless bandits."¹³ Other contemporaries displayed an unease at the relationships of power and dependency that lending created between Christians and Jews. When English traveler

⁹Hana Vobrátíková, "Knihy sporného soudnictví Starého Města pražského před rokem 1620," *Pražský sborník historický* 33 (2004): 29.

¹⁰For the most comprehensive and engaging study of how testators crafted testimony, see Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford, 1987).

¹¹On the importance of credit over cash, see Craig Muldrew, "'Hard Food for Midas': Cash and its Social Value in Early Modern England," *Past and Present* 170, no. 2 (2001): 86; or Anne E. C. McCants, "Goods at Pawn: The Overlapping Worlds of Material Possessions and Family Finance in Early Modern Amsterdam," *Social Science History* 31, no. 2 (2007), 213–38.

¹²Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, "The Usurious Jew: Economic Structure and Religious Representations in an Anti-Semitic Discourse," in *In and Out the Quarter: Jewish-Gentile Relations in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*, ed. Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia and Harmut Lehmann (Cambridge, 1995), 162.

¹³Donald Cheney and Brenda Hosington, eds., *Elizabeth Jane Weston: Collected Writings* (Toronto, 2000), 1:95.

John Taylor visited Prague on the eve of the Thirty Years' War in 1617, he recorded that the city's Jews "doe all live by broacage and usury upon the Christians and are very rich in money and Jewels."¹⁴

Beyond these two-dimensional representations of Jewish pawnbrokers, living "upon" the city through "usury" brought Jews and Christians into regular and sustained contact, a social reality that offers a more nuanced perspective on contemporary cross-cultural relationships. Prague's quarter was encompassed with walls, but Christian visitors regularly passed through one of the quarter's four gates to reach their pawnbroker. In a 1586 case concerning a counterfeit pawnshop receipt, the testator, a Jewish elder, evoked the social setting of the pawnshop.¹⁵ He described coming into the shop of the accused, Joseph Nosek, where he found a Christian nobleman standing around with some "other Christians." Silver jewelry was arrayed on the pawnbroker's desk. These jewels were being carefully weighed and valued by a goldsmith, who passed on his calculations for Nosek to note down.

No doubt a similar handover took place in 1577, when a small-time pawnbroker named Ester received a clasp from Lady Juliana.¹⁶ Clasps were costly and prominent items of jewelry, often beautifully adorned with intricate metal casting and set with gems. Given their high worth, these precious items of jewelry were regularly pawned. Listed in the 1595 inventory of the Old Town burgher Vaclav Walter was a "clasp with five diamonds," described as in the possession of the Jews.¹⁷ Instead of keeping the clasp in her possession, Ester pawned it on to make a profit—a plan that failed. The clasp was lost into a network of pawnbrokers stretching from Prague to Poznań, and Ester fled to Cracow to escape prosecution. Ester's case generated controversy because it upended an industry dependent on trust and security. Given that people visited the pawnbroker's shop out of necessity to hand over beloved, or, often, their few, possessions, the trade was governed by agreements that were intended to generate assurance. Without these confidences, the trade could not function.

There is no evidence that, in Prague, pawnbroking was governed by a set of rules that imposed a rubric for Ester and Lady Juliana to follow as they made their transaction. Instead, it appears that pawnbroker and customer made individual contracts, which, while "informal," were nonetheless strict. Agreements recorded the value of the object, and, crucially, in the event the customer could not buy their item back, the duration of time it was to be held before the pawnbroker could sell it on. For example, in a 1604 case, Anna Sulerc z Frankkrysteyn pawned damask clothes, golden rings, and rosaries with Joachým the school caretaker, who agreed to wait six Sundays before he sold them on.¹⁸ Such contracts were commonly renegotiated and extended. Once goods had been passed over the pawnbroker's desk, their owner might return to bargain for a longer pawning period. Customers continued to feel a sense of ownership over their pawned things. They returned to borrow clothes and jewelry for a feast day or celebration, probably in return for a small payment. During the time that a pawnbroker held their customer's things, they were bound to take care of them, a duty that customers actively oversaw. During the six weeks that Joachým held Anna's items, Anna regularly returned to his shop. Once she visited Joachým to request that he take special care of her embroidered bed sheet. She was reassured that he would treat it as his own, an assurance reflective of a certain intimacy and familiarity between the pawnbroker and their customer's possessions. Prague's criminal records show that when a pawnbroker failed to fulfil these obligations, their customers showed no hesitation at all in using litigation to recoup their things—as Ester found when Lady Juliana pursued her in court.

To ensure the trust of Christian customers like Anna or Lady Juliana, the contracts made between pawnbroker and client were overseen by the Jewish Quarter's elders. Taking us beyond shallow

¹⁴John Taylor, *Taylor His Travels: From the City of London in England, to the City of Prague in Bohemia. The manner of his abode there three weekes, his obseruations there, and his returne from thence: How he paft 600 miles downe the riuer of Elue, through Bohemia, Saxony, Anhalt, the Bishoprick of Madeberge, Brandenberge, Hamburg, and fo to England. With many relations worthy of note* (London, 1620), C4.

¹⁵Archiv hlavního města Prahy (hereafter: AHMP), *Kniha svědomí*, 1054.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 1051.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 1173.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 1065.

representations of the pawnbroking Jew, these precautions reveal the internal structures and regulations of the quarter, and the relationships of Jews to each other. Pawnbrokers kept track of their transactions with careful recordkeeping. In a 1565 case concerning the theft of jewelry, a Christian painter described going down the “Jewish street,” the main thoroughfare of the quarter, where he found his missing jewelry on sale at a pawnbroker’s shop.¹⁹ This stolen jewelry had been carefully recorded by the pawnbroker, who had written up a description of the jewels in Czech on one tablet and “in the Jewish tongue” on another, making it as readable as possible to both parties. In a display of careful inventorying, both of these tablets were laid in a wooden box, the box tied up with string and secured with a wax seal stamped by a signet ring. When goods went missing in the town’s other quarters, Jewish elders were asked to keep track of them, a task that included searching the records of the quarter’s pawnbrokers. In 1564, the clerk for the provost of Prague Castle’s Church had his house broken into and a number of things stolen, among which were twelve silver spoons, twelve silver knives, books, vestments, carpets, and clothes, including a velvet bonnet and a taffeta hat.²⁰ One of his church colleagues was immediately sent to the elders of the Jewish Quarter to warn them that these things had been taken and to pass on to the order that, if anyone attempted to sell them on to a pawnbroker, they must let the provost know.²¹

The careful oversight of the pawnbroking trade protected the industry and, relatedly, the reputation of the city’s Jewish populace, who through the necessities of the profession were brought into close and intimate relationships with Christians and their possessions. In the following section, I will show how the quarter attempted to deal with the particularities of Ester’s misconduct. I argue that the reaction to this incident reveals the networks that connected Prague to the Ashkenazi diaspora across East and Central Europe and, further, demonstrates how these transregional connections shaped the status of Jews in the city.

Pawnbroking Networks between Prague and East Central Europe

The Ashkenazi Jewish community of Eastern Europe was bound by dense trade and information networks. The clasp, lost from Prague, traveled down these pathways, swiftly followed by Ester as she ran from the city. These connections constitute a global “stage” of commerce facing east from Bohemia. The interrogation of these links provides an alternative perspective on late Renaissance Prague, which has been more often framed in relation to artistic disseminations from Italy and Southern Europe and centered on Rudolf’s court.²²

Ester’s movements illuminate a constellation of connections between Prague and the neighboring Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which, at the time, had Europe’s largest Jewish population.²³ Unable to buy back the clasp, Ester left Prague and traveled to the Polish city of Cracow.²⁴ At this time, Cracow was the capital of Polish-Lithuania (soon to be succeeded by Warsaw at the end of the sixteenth century). The city had strong, well-established commercial links to Prague. Trade routes between Cracow and Bohemia carried exports of grain, timber, livestock, hemp, flax, and wax.²⁵ Alongside raw materials traveled luxury global goods: cinnamon, originating in Sri Lanka, crossed Europe down a route that passed from Cracow to Prague.²⁶ These commodities were sold at

¹⁹Ibid., 1048.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²For example, see Thomas De Costa Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister & City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800* (London, 1995).

²³Jacob Goldberg, “The Role of the Jewish Community in the Socio-Political Structure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth,” in *Social and Cultural Boundaries in Pre-Modern Poland*, ed. Adam Teller, Magda Teter, and Antony Polonsky (Liverpool, 2010), 145.

²⁴AHMP, *Knihá svědomí*, 1051, f.52.

²⁵F. W. Carter, *Trade and Urban Development in Poland: An Economic Geography of Cracow, from Its Origins to 1795* (Cambridge, 1994), 195.

²⁶Carter, *Trade and Urban Development*, 198.

neighborhood trade fairs that rotated between Lublin, Poznań, Prague, and Cracow.²⁷ As well as new goods, pawned objects also traveled down these channels. In a 1565 case similar to Ester's that concerned the whereabouts of a Prague nobleman's pawned jewelry, the gems were eventually found in a pawnshop in Cracow.²⁸ The Jewish pawnbroker concerned could not be reprimanded by the court, as he, like Ester, had swiftly left Prague and traveled to "a different country."²⁹ After her own travels to Cracow, Ester presumably took shelter in Kazimierz, the suburb that housed the city's Jewish community.³⁰ In the overcrowded Jewish Quarter, in which there was little privacy and a strong culture of neighborhood policing, news of her arrival spread quickly.³¹ Paying a visit to Cracow at the same time as Ester, the Prague resident Lev Vokatý tracked her down and asked Ester about the clasp, a question that led, as he reported to the court, to a "big argument" between the pair.³² The distance between Prague and Cracow did little to shield Ester from growing public interest in her case.

While Ester took refuge in Cracow, the clasp followed a different trajectory, one that plotted other points in the constellation of connections between Bohemia and Poland. The clasp was traded between pawnbrokers before arriving in Poznań, a center of Ashkenazi trade in Polish-Lithuania. Poznań was then the center of Poland's fur and leather trade, with a rapidly expanding Jewish Quarter in the north-east of the city. As in Cracow, the Jewish Quarter was densely populated, and the news of the clasp's movements spread quickly. Joachým Forman, the caretaker of the Prague Jewish School, reported that, when he arrived in Poznań on business, he was sent a message that a local pawnbroker had "some sort of clip" that bore resemblance to Lady Juliana's clasp.³³ Given that it had been traded through so many different hands, the clasp was on sale for eighty tolar, a significant inflation in its original value, which Lady Juliana had listed as forty tolar. Just as with the attention paid to Ester's movements, the clasp's final destination, as well as knowledge and discussion of its origin in Poznań, demonstrates an extraordinary degree of connection between Prague, Cracow, and Poznań. The single object of Lady Juliana's clasp evocatively illuminates the close interconnections of the Jewish community between Bohemia and the towns to its east.

Local knowledge about the clasp was largely sustained by the dense communication networks between Prague and the Jewish-settled cities of East Central Europe, in which the movement of objects and the personal connections that surrounded them were closely observed. Throughout 1577, letters were penned back and forth between Ester and her relations, and between Jews of Prague, Cracow, and Poznań, discussing the whereabouts of both Ester and Lady Juliana's clasp. Května, Ester's sister, told the court that Ester had written from Cracow to tell her the name of the pawnbroker with whom she had initially deposited the clasp, an attempt to remedy her mistake.³⁴ Května offered the correspondence to prove it, telling the investigators "all the documents are to hand."³⁵ This level of attention was a product of the changes of the sixteenth century. Letters between Ester and her relations, and between the residents of Prague, Cracow, and Poznań, were carried by an imperial postal system that was undergoing rapid expansion, increasing the speed and distance with which information traveled.³⁶

²⁷Jerzy Topolski, "A Model of East-Central European Continental Commerce in the Sixteenth and the First Half of the Seventeenth Century," in *East-Central Europe in Transition: From the Fourteenth to the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Antoni Mączak, Henryk Samsonowicz, and Peter Burke (Cambridge, 1985), 133.

²⁸AHMP, *Knihá svědomí*, 1048, f.136.

²⁹Ibid., f.143.

³⁰Carter, *Trade and Urban Development*, 178; Hanna Zaremska, "Crossing the River: How and Why the Jews of Cracow Settled in Kazimierz at the End of the Fifteenth Century," in *Social and Cultural Boundaries in Pre-Modern Poland*, 174.

³¹Discussed by Adam Teller in "Close Quarters: Privacy and Jewish House Space in Early Modern Polish Cities," *Early Modern Workshop: Jewish History Resources*, vol. 2, *Jews and Urban Space* (College Park, MD, 2005), 50.

³²AHMP, *Knihá svědomí*, 1051, f. 52.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Nicholas Schobesberger, Paul Arblaster, Mario Infelise, André Belo, Noah Moxham, Carmen Espejo, and Joad Raymond, "European Postal Networks," in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Joad Raymond and Noah Moxham (Leiden, 2016), 22.

Correspondence was carried by riders who took the letters over a single leg, changing over at regular staging posts, which vastly increased the speed of travel.³⁷

As well as relying on imperial postal networks, merchants arranged their own courier systems to sustain contact with cities with sizeable Jewish populations. For those who wanted to send off news or to carry it themselves, horses could be hired from Prague's quarter.³⁸ In the 1610s, several decades after Ester's case, the merchant Löb Sarel Gutmans arranged regular postal service between Prague and Vienna. He hired a messenger to send letters from Vienna to his wife in Prague, who distributed them to their recipients in the quarter.³⁹ The contents of a postbag seized on 22 November 1619 showed a healthy back and forth about trade and the qualities of objects, and displayed considerable individual expertise regarding the best locations from which to source certain materials. The Prague resident, Freidel, the daughter of Israel Hamserchlang, wrote to a friend in Vienna to tell her that she had commissioned for her a coat to be made "in the best and finest fashion in the world."⁴⁰ Freidel revealed that she had commissioned an agent to purchase "beautiful smooth otter fur" from Poland, which would be better than the "dye" local furs.⁴¹ These communications demonstrate the existence of an Ashkenazi "public" that shared knowledge and information surrounding objects. Given this context, it is little surprise that the Jewish community was able to sustain attention on the seemingly small matter of a missing clasp.

While commercial relationships and news networks stretched between the cities of East and Central Europe, individual experiences of these remained highly particular and dependent on local conditions. As in the letter between Freidel and her woman friend, the network that clustered around Ester was predominately female, showing how gender and community inflected transnational commercial trade. In Prague, Lady Juliana entrusted her clasp to Ester, and then Ester pawned the clasp on to a female pawnbroker named Regina, who pawned it on again.⁴² When Ester realized her mistake and tried to buy the clasp back, she asked for assistance from her female relations. Struggling to afford the clasp, Ester asked to borrow money from Veruna, the widow of a rabbi, and then from (a different) Regina.⁴³

Ester's malpractice in pawning the clasp onward broke gendered expectations as well as those of business. While we know little about the realities of gender, women, and family life in Prague's quarter, Jewish women were often listed among traders in Renaissance Prague.⁴⁴ Before their marriage, Ashkenazi daughters helped their fathers in trade, and, after marriage, women worked in their husband's businesses as well as caring for their families.⁴⁵ Like their husbands, Jewish female traders were expected to act virtuously. In a 1609 edition of her conduct manual, *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women*, the Prague Jewish woman Rivkah bat Meir writes that wives should urge their husbands to be honest in trade, warning that God would punish any trader who made, "God forbid, a false oath, and engages in dishonest business."⁴⁶ Outside of trades shared with husbands, early modern Jewish women, like their Christian counterparts, pursued independent economic activities. Across early modern Europe, moneylending was an important dimension of women's work. While pawnbroking was at the heart of the economy, it was connected to the goods of the household, and could be thus performed informally and on a small scale.⁴⁷ Perhaps driven by greater

³⁷Ibid., 19.

³⁸AHMP, *Knih svědomí*, 1048, f. 219.

³⁹Franz Kobler, *Letters of Jews through the Ages: From Biblical Times to the Middle of the Eighteenth Century*. Edited, with an Introduction, Biographical Notes and Historical Comments by Franz Kobler, vol. 2 (London, 1952), 449.

⁴⁰"A Fashionable Ladies Coat Is Made in Prague," in Kobler, *Letters of Jews*, 474.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²AHMP, *Knih svědomí*, 1051.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Greenblatt, "Building the Past," 34; Frauke von Rohden, ed., *Meneket Rivkah: A Manual of Wisdom and Piety for Jewish Women by Rivkah bat Meir* (Philadelphia, 2008), 3.

⁴⁵Rohden, *Meneket Rivkah*, 1–2.

⁴⁶Ibid., 121.

⁴⁷Beverly Lemire, "Petty Pawns and Informal Lending: Gender and the Transformation of Small-Scale Credit in England, circa 1600–1800," in *From Family Firms to Corporate Capitalism: Essays in Business and Industrial History in Honour of Peter Mathias*, ed. Kristine Bruland and Patrick O'Brien (Oxford, 1998), 112.

trust and intimacy between one another (both qualities, which as I have discussed in the preceding text, were vital to the pawnbroking trade), women often pawned their goods with other women, a pattern that was replicated in Ester's case.⁴⁸

The gendered character of Ester's business associations reinforces arguments made by Francesca Trivellato and Cornelia Aust that Jewish transnational commerce was not impersonal but rather shaped by local and familial networks.⁴⁹ The links that stretched from Prague toward its lands to the east positioned the city as a nexus of trade, exchange, and communication for the Ashkenazi Jewish diaspora—yet, the experiences of these pathways were shaped by the nature of locality and individual, personal connections. Recognizing the need to combine both local and transregional perspectives, I will now examine the consequences of the missing clasp for Jews living in Prague's quarter.

Conflict in the “Golden Age”

The attention paid to the subject of the missing clasp, involving dramatic confrontations and hastily penned letters between Prague, Cracow, and Poznań, demonstrates how commercial mistakes or misconduct outside of the city had consequences on a local level. In 1577, the same year that Ester lost the clasp, Jews had received new status. Rudolf II released a charter promising not to expel Jews, thus conferring a level of political and commercial toleration on the community.⁵⁰ This was a shift in Christian-Jewish relations echoed across Europe: Jonathan Israel has argued that the 1570s was a decade of significant reintegration.⁵¹

Heralding the beginning of the “Golden Age,” Rudolf II's 1577 decree nonetheless attracted controversy. That same year, Jan Folk, a Christian shopkeeper in the Old Town, petitioned the Bohemian Chamber against the rights of Jews. He accused Jewish merchants of counterfeiting, usury, and unfair competition, before concluding that the Jewish nation “brings misfortune to Christians.”⁵² For the quarter's older generation, the effects of such critique remained within living memory, making clear that conflict had real consequences. Testifying in a 1565 case, a former Jewish elder recalled the moment when, six years prior, copies of the emperor's mandate decreeing that “all Jews should move out of this celebrated kingdom” were “nailed up” everywhere.⁵³ Grappling with this legacy, the 1570s were marked by intense internal conflict within the quarter as the Jewish community strictly policed itself, attempting to control its reputation to protect its new rights.⁵⁴ The 1577 case of Lady Juliana's clasp is an example of such a conflict. During their argument in Cracow, Ester told Lev Vokatý that she had left Prague when “the Jews started to shout” about the clasp's loss, revealing the anger and frustration within the quarter at this example of business misconduct.⁵⁵ By angering a noblewoman and bringing local pawnbrokers into dispute, the missing clasp was a moment in which the quarter perceived its status to be under threat, revealing everyday vulnerabilities during the harmonious “Golden Age.”

The clasp's loss was a moment of tension, leading the community to “shout” against Ester. This episode fits into a pattern of social conflict that reoccurred throughout the “Golden Age.” Christian burghers and Jewish traders often tussled over trading rights and standards, a feature that was as integral to the period as was Jewish high learning or political influence. The same year that Rudolf II

⁴⁸Ibid., 121.

⁴⁹Francesca Trivellato, *The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period* (New Haven, 2009), 20; Cornelia Aust, “Jewish Mobility in the Eighteenth Century: Familial Networks of Ashkenazic Merchants across Europe,” *European History Yearbook* 16 (2015): 16; Cornelia Aust, *The Jewish Economic Elite: Making Modern Europe* (Bloomington, IN, 2018), xxii–xxvii.

⁵⁰Israel, *European Jewry*, 32.

⁵¹Ibid., 29.

⁵²Bohumil Bondy and František Dvorský, *K historii Židů v Čechách, na Moravě a v Slezsku 906 až 1620* (Prague, 1906), 547–63. Discussed in Kieval, “Jewish Prague,” 203.

⁵³AHMP, *Knihla svědomí*, 1048.

⁵⁴Jan Herman, “The Conflict between Jewish and Non-Jewish Population in Bohemia before the 1541 Banishment,” *Judaica Bohemiae* 6:1 (1970), 46.

⁵⁵AHMP, *Knihla svědomí*, 1051.

promised not to expel Jews, he also reconfirmed their right to work in a range of trades beyond money-lending, including high-status crafts like goldsmithing. The connections between the Ashkenazi communities of East and Central Europe, which sustained a striking mobility in trade, contributed to burghers' suspicions of their trading counterparts. The pawnbroking routes that swallowed up Lady Juliana's clasp demonstrated Jewish connections outside of the city. These connections to foreign artisans meant that Jews could procure goods at cheaper prices, undercutting their Christian counterparts locally.⁵⁶ This connectivity was problematized by Christian observers. Visiting Prague in 1592, the English traveler Fynes Moryson wrote extensive notes on the quarter, including salacious claims such as the observation that Jews liked to "feede continually upon Onyons and Garlike."⁵⁷ Moryson estimated that some five hundred Jews lived in Prague, but he added that this number increased or decreased as "they have occasion to passe from one City to another for traffique."⁵⁸ This paints a picture of Prague's Jewish community as fluid, resisting settlement, moving always from one place to the next—a fluidity of which Ester made full use. Here, the transregional networks that sustained Jewish trade are framed as a threat to Christians, placing the community outside of the control of Prague's government.

Even within the city, Jewish economic "traffique" posed competition in trade, a source of continual friction between Jews and Christians. Pressured by the guilds, Prague's town councils often stepped in, attempting to limit competition and assert the superior position of Christian traders. In the goldsmith trade, for example, Christian artisans attempted to exclude Jews throughout the "Golden Age." In 1581, the elders of the goldsmith guild petitioned Rudolf II to regulate the "crafty" and "dishonest" Jews.⁵⁹ In 1601, these same guilds organized to present to the Old Town court a pair of Christian women who testified that a Jewish goldsmith had produced poor quality silver girdles.⁶⁰ They used the opportunity to denounce the Jewish population as a whole, claiming that "the Jews made fake things and cheated many people, and they sold belts made of adulterated silver as good ones, expensively."⁶¹ The town council promptly decreed to issue a resolution that goldsmiths must produce better quality work.⁶² Such disputes support Hillel Kieval's argument that interactions between Jews and the city's elites were shaped by "conflict, competition, and political vulnerability."⁶³ These examples speak to the everyday economic conflicts often overlooked in analyses of Prague's "Golden Age," in which the missing clasp was only one in a series of disputes.

Given these continual threats, the Jewish community carefully managed conflict between Christians and members of their quarter. The case of Lady Juliana's clasp ended when Prague's Jewish elders stepped in to mediate between Ester and her high-status customer. Returning to Prague from Poznań with news of the clasp, Joachým went to the house of Lady Juliana, knocked on the door, and waited for her come out. When Lady Juliana emerged, he told her that the clasp was in Poznań, where it could be bought for eighty tolar. He also reported that he had offered to lend Ester this amount, so that she could buy back the clasp and return it to Juliana.⁶⁴ While misconduct opened traders to criticism, Joachým's intervention is a reminder of how the pawnbroker (of any confession) played a prominent social and cultural function in city life. The proximity of pawnbrokers to their customers' objects, the broker's knowledge about their value, and their understanding of the broader social relationships into which these things were tied meant that they were closely embedded in the lives of their customers.

The association between Jews and pawnbroking meant that Jewish agents were often employed to resolve disputes between Christians, as well as—like Joachým—to mediate conflict between

⁵⁶Po-Chia Hsia, "The Usurious Jew," 162.

⁵⁷Charles Hughes, ed., *Shakespeare's Europe: Unpublished Chapters of Fines Moryson's Itinerary*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1967), 489.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹AHMP, Spisový materiál, *Suplikace zlatníků na císaře proti štolířům*, 178.

⁶⁰AHMP, *Knihá svědomí*, 1168.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Kieval, "Jewish Prague," 215.

⁶⁴AHMP, *Knihá svědomí*, 1051.

pawnbrokers and clients. In a case running from 1615 to 1616, the servant Sibilla was accused of stealing jewelry from her mistress Dorothea Turková.⁶⁵ She hid the jewelry in the bed of the household's serving boy before taking it to a Jewish pawnbroker in the quarter, returning with cash. Turková asked Israel Štiasný, a Jew, to adjudicate. She commissioned him to "go among the Jews" and ask the quarter's pawnbrokers whether they had seen her things. Štiasný claimed to know Sibilla well and promised to speak to her, a familiarity that likely stemmed from other testator's claims that Sibilla was a regular at the quarter's pawnshops, including one from which she once stole a large Bible. Štiasný tracked down Sibilla, confronting her and advising her to confess.⁶⁶ Christian and Jewish coexistence was shaped by tension and conflict over trade, but conversely, the same trades created a complex intimacy and interdependency that allowed Joachým to knock on Lady Juliana's door, or Štiasný to implore Sibilla to own up to her crime. Prague's "Golden Age" was marked by messy conflict and coexistence.

Conclusion

Pawnbrokers were at the center of early modern life. From behind their desks, they took the personal possessions of customers both rich and poor, valued their pledges, and negotiated payments and agreements. Key to the economy, the pawnbroker's relationship with and knowledge of their customers' items meant that they were also intimate with their social lives. Pawnbrokers mediated disputes over goods, or, given that stolen things were often sold off at the pawnbrokers, they either regulated or were pulled into the city's sizeable black market. Given their prominent role in the day-to-day of their customers, the social figure of the pawnbroker is deserving of further and more sustained consideration, especially analysis that goes beyond conventional and pejorative contemporary stereotypes. The relationship between the pawnbroker, engaged in a trade that—through both representation and practice—was often connected to the Jewish community, and Christian customer mimicked the nature of coexistence in Prague's "Golden Age." Pawnbroker and customer were closely bound, but at a distance. The integration and interdependence of Jewish pawnbrokers and Christian customers reveals the delicate balance of power between the quarter and the rest of the city. Performing a public function, Jewish pawnbrokers were drawn into conflicts generated by economic competition between Christians and Jews, a fact that complicates the narrative of the "Golden Age." These conflicts spread beyond the city, showing Prague to be a locale shaped by transregional networks. Items once passed over a pawnbroker's desk could travel far out of the reach of customers, following unresearched lines of connection that stretched out from Prague. Pawnbroking networks connected the communities of the Ashkenazi diaspora: the movement of customer's goods down these routes followed pathways between Bohemia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that were sustained by trade, the movement of people, and dense networks of correspondence. Both objects and information about them traveled fast, carried by letter or individual travelers; and once it arrived, news spread quickly through the cramped city quarters into which Jews were confined. The movements of both Ester and the missing clasp, as well as the highly public nature of the case, which drew attention across Prague, Poznań, and Cracow, demonstrates how transnational events were shaped by local dynamics and how these in turn influenced the status of Jews, threatening their security at the beginning of the "Golden Age." The small matter of the missing clasp shows how Bohemia was part of a fluid region, one that was shaped by multiple layers of interconnection that made Prague a nexus of connections between the Ashkenazi diaspora, a lively point of interaction on the "margins" of Europe.

Anna Parker is a History PhD student at the University of Cambridge, where she is researching the everyday material cultures of Renaissance Prague.

⁶⁵Ibid., 1069.

⁶⁶Ibid.