

GENERATIONS IN TOWNS:
SUCCESSION AND SUCCESS
IN PRE-INDUSTRIAL URBAN SOCIETIES

Edited by

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CHAPTER SIX

LOANS OF THE FATHER: BUSINESS SUCCESSION IN FAMILIES OF JEWISH MONEYLENDERS IN LATE MEDIEVAL AUSTRIA

EVELINE BRUGGER

Jewish moneylending began to flourish in medieval Austria during the thirteenth century. In the course of the same century, the number of Jewish inhabitants grew, as did the number of Jewish settlements. The majority of the developing Jewish communities were situated in bigger towns, although there is also evidence of Jewish settlements in smaller, rural towns or even in countryside villages. In most cases, however, these small rural settlements did not develop into full-fledged Jewish communities.¹ Likewise, most of the more prominent and wealthy Jewish moneylenders can be found in bigger, centrally located cities and towns, although there are exceptions to this rule as well.

There are several factors which must be taken into consideration when analysing Jewish business families in medieval towns within the geographical boundaries of today's Austria. First and foremost, there is the heterogeneous nature of rulership in these territories: by the second half of the fourteenth century most of them were under the rule of the Habsburg family, with the exception of the archbishopric of Salzburg and several smaller territories ruled by different noble families. Even within the Habsburg territories, however, several towns formed enclaves that were under the authority of other rulers. It was usually the lord of the respective town, rather than the community itself, who had the greatest influence on the town's Jewish inhabitants – although the lord of the town often found himself in competition with the ruler of the territory if these two were not the same person.² This is especially important with regard to the second crucial factor: medieval Jewish businessmen and their families tended to

¹ Brugger et al. 2006, 126–129.

² *Ibid.*, 169–203.; Lohrmann 1990, 145–171.

be very mobile, frequently changed residences and often had branch offices in more than one town or city at once. In most cases, it is therefore impossible to analyse the role of generations within Jewish business families within the confines of a single town. Rather, all the locations of the different family members, their interactions and changes in residence must be taken into consideration.

Early evidence of Jewish family cooperation in Austria

Sources on Jewish moneylending, especially business charters,³ from late medieval Austria indicate that “dynasties” of Jewish financiers were not uncommon among the economic elite of the Jewish communities. Some of the earliest sources on Jewish business transactions already document family members working together: during his reign in Austria, the Bohemian king, Přemysl Otakar, gave the Hungarian Jewish businessmen Lublin and Nekelo, who were brothers, the position of *comites camere*, i. e. ducal tax farmers. Their father Henel held the same position in the service of the Hungarian king, Béla IV; the business transactions of another brother, Oltman, are also traceable in Hungary.⁴

The first “Austrian” Jewish business family does not appear in the sources until three decades later, towards the end of the thirteenth century. A consortium of four Jewish brothers, whose father, Schwärzlein (Hebrew name: Asriel), had moved to Austria from Moravia, was active in the moneylending business for at least twenty years. Their business partners came from the higher ranks of society: the sons of Schwärzlein gave loans to several high-ranking noblemen from Lower Austria, besides doing business with citizens, particularly from the town of Klosterneuburg, and with the monasteries of Zwettl and Kremsmünster. All four brothers appear to have lived in Vienna, although one of them later moved to the small Lower Austrian town of Zistersdorf.⁵ The brothers mostly worked independently; we know of only one business charter that the four of them

³ On the ongoing research project for the collection and edition of Jewish business charters from medieval Austria see Brugger and Wiedl 2005. The results presented in this article are mostly based on materials from this project, which so far mostly covers sources from the fourteenth century. The huge amount of business charters from the fifteenth century is, for the greatest part, still unedited, and the results gained from the source material as it is known so far might have to be modified once the task of collecting and analysing these later sources is completed.

⁴ Brugger and Wiedl 2005, 50–51, no 38.; Berend 2001, 127.

⁵ Bretholz and Glaser 1932, 27–28.; Brugger 2004, 56–58.; Brugger et al. 2006, 52–53, 170.

issued together, since it dealt with the selling of a vineyard that they had inherited from their father to whom it had been pawned. However, there is evidence of occasional cooperation between several of the brothers, sometimes together with other family members.⁶

This practice can be found among many of the more prominent families of Jewish financiers during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It was not limited to brothers, although doing business together with one's siblings was a very common kind of family cooperation. There is plenty of evidence for other relatives (whether the relation was based on blood or on marriage) working together in their business dealings, and inter-generational cooperation was also quite frequent. Especially towards the end of their lives, many Jewish financiers cooperated with a younger family member who was thus trained to take over the business completely at some point.

Even for a businessman who worked alone, the next generation could provide a safety net for the security of both their family's business and that of the (usually Christian) debtors in case of crisis. An early example for this is Lebman (Marlevi ha-Kohen), who was one of the most important members – maybe even the leader – of the Viennese Jewish community around 1300, and an important financier for a number of high-ranking noblemen and citizens of Vienna. Although several of his sons and sons-in-law became prominent moneylenders themselves, there is no evidence that Lebman worked together with them during his lifetime. When Lebman died in 1314, his widow and heirs apparently had problems with taking over his business at first: a settlement with a Christian debtor, Rudolf of Sachsengang, indicated that they could not find several of the charters concerning Rudolf's debts. The charter they gave Rudolf as confirmation of the settlement, thus declaring him safe from any further financial claims, was issued by Lebman's widow, his six sons and five daughters; two sons-in-law acted as witnesses.⁷

The question of inheritance in the moneylending business

One of Lebman's most spectacular business deals demonstrates that Christian authorities were well aware of the fact that pawned goods would pass into the hands of a Jewish moneylender's heirs, usually his immediate family, if he died before the pawn was redeemed. In 1305, the Austrian chamberlain Kalhoch of Ebersdorf, a life-long customer of Lebman's,

⁶ Brugger and Wiedl 2005, 167–168, no 165, 150–152, no 142, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 188–189, no 193.

gave Lebman his prestigious office in pawn to pay back a credit he had raised for the acquisition of the same office a few years earlier. This was an extraordinary deal, and the charter issued on the matter by the ducal court marshal stated explicitly that the pawned office should *not* pass into the possession of Lebman's heirs if Lebman died before the pawn had been redeemed.⁸ The strong emphasis put on this term indicates that it was considered an exception to the usual business practice.

Since charters concerning financial obligations were frequently addressed explicitly not only to the creditor, but also to his or her heirs, Christian debtors were very careful to protect themselves against additional financial claims from their creditor's family. A good example is the case of the Jew Abraham, son of Lesir and Rachel⁹ from St Pölten in Lower Austria, who was active as a moneylender together with his brother Paltram around 1300. In 1308, the provost of St Pölten issued a charter to prove that Abraham had claimed for himself a debt which the monastery of Melk owed to Viellieb, his late brother's wife, and her children and promised to protect the monastery against financial claims from anyone else but him. It seems likely that Paltram had died owing Abraham money and that Paltram's widow and heirs could only repay it by assigning him a loan they had given to the monastery of Melk. Abraham not only needed to appear before the provost and declare that he would protect Melk against any further claims, he also promised to bring a charter from the Austrian duke which would assign the loan exclusively to him. Most likely, both were done to make sure that the heirs of Paltram and Viellieb could not make any further financial demands concerning the loan against Melk in the future.¹⁰

Of course, this practice worked both ways: if a Christian debtor died, his debts would pass on to his heirs, who had to pay back not only the money owed, but also the interest that could sometimes surpass the amount of the original loan, depending on interest rates and the time that

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143, no 134. Instead, the pawned office was supposed to go to the court marshal Dietrich of Pillichsdorf, a relative of Kalhoch, who had issued the charter.

⁹ It was extremely rare for Jews in Austria to use the names of both their parents as a distinction, and even more so if the document in question was written by Christians. Use of patronyms was frequent, and matronyms were not unheard of either, although they were only used by Jews with exceptionally distinguished mothers.

¹⁰ Brugger and Wiedl 2005, 164–165, no 161.

had passed.¹¹ Inability to settle the debts could lead to the loss of pawned goods, which, especially in the case of higher-ranking debtors, usually meant land: fields, vineyards, and houses were the most common pledges. Noble families in particular tried to avoid losing landed property that way and frequently relied on financial aid from their family members to prevent it. It is important to notice that this practice was not exclusively used in the case of Jewish loans; there is generally little difference between debts with Jewish moneylenders or with fellow Christians. Noblemen with financial problems often preferred to borrow from their family members in the first place so that unredeemed pledges would remain a part of the family property. With a few exceptions, members of the nobility regarded the services of Jewish moneylenders as a last resort if no other solution was available. The main reason for this was probably the close connection between the Jews of a country and the country's ruler – since the Jews were officially part of the ruler's chamber, i. e. his treasure, indebtedness with the ruler's Jews could render a debtor more dependant on the ruler's benevolence than most nobles would find comfortable.¹²

Austrian rulers did occasionally interfere in loan transactions on behalf of "their" Jews, which could well affect not only the debtors themselves, but also their next of kin. For example, in 1319, three prominent noblemen from Lower Austria agreed to take over considerable debts with the Jewish moneylender Gutman, son of Lebman, and his brothers, which the late brothers Hadmar and Rapoto of Falkenstein had left their children. The three noblemen who took over the settling of the debts were all related to the Falkenstein family. There might also have been some pressure by the Austrian duke, who feared that a group of Jewish moneylenders who were important for his own finances would suffer economic damage.¹³

In some extreme cases, the heirs of a debtor could be asked to repay a loan that had been taken up decades ago. One of the most remarkable examples is a claim made by the Jewish businessman Leb Walch, who lived in the Carinthian town of Völkermarkt. In 1473, he tried to collect a loan granted by the Jew Tröstel from Villach almost a century earlier. Tröstel's heirs had assigned the claim to Leb because his prominent position made it more likely that he would win the case. His claim was

¹¹ On the topic of interest and interest rates for Jewish loans see: Brugger 2004, 22–23.; Brugger et al. 2006, 146–149.; Gilomen 2007, 139–169.; Lohrmann 1990, 174–179.; Toch 1988, 89–90.

¹² Brugger 2004, 108.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39–41.

only refuted in court because the debtor's heir was able to produce a charter proving that the debt had already been repaid.¹⁴

The rise of Jewish business "dynasties"

In the course of the fourteenth century, the number of documented Jewish family enterprises in Austria was growing. We no longer only have evidence of a Jewish moneylender's immediate heirs taking over their father's business, but can now also document the existence of veritable business clans whose activities spanned several generations and frequently took place in more than one location at the same time. Of course, the source material is heavily focused on the elite groups of both Jewish and Christian society; there is little evidence for small, short-term loans and the pledging of everyday goods because such transactions usually were not important enough to warrant written records.

One of the most important Jewish business families in Austria traces back its origins to the Jewess Plume from the town of Klosterneuburg near Vienna. Plume can be counted among the most prominent Jewish moneylenders during the first half of the fourteenth century. Jewish women frequently appear in business charters, usually together with their husbands. It was mostly widows who did business on their own, and since Plume's husband is never mentioned in the charters documenting her business transactions, it is safe to assume that he was dead even though she is never referred to as a widow.¹⁵ Even though they were not legally required to have a male business partner, many widows appear together with their son(s) or son(s)-in-law in business charters. Plume, however, obviously conducted her business on her own, without the help of the younger male generation; only towards the end of her career do younger male family members play a part in her business transactions.¹⁶ In fact, her position must have been so important that her children and children-in-law were usually identified as descendants of Plume in their own business dealings. Matronyms are rare with Austrian Jews, yet they were regularly used to identify Plume's descendants.¹⁷

¹⁴ Wadl 1992, 144–146.

¹⁵ Keil 2003, 51; Keil 2008, 159–160. On the legal background of Jewish widows taking over their husband's business see Klein 2004, 89–90.

¹⁶ Brugger 2004, 137, no 24.

¹⁷ Brugger and Wiedl 2005, 228, no 260: Hendlein, son-in-law of Plume from Klosterneuburg. Mayer (ed.) 1897, 186, no 3055: Aron, son-in-law of Plume. Austrian State Archives, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Vienna, AUR Uk. 1348 VIII 13: Rötlein, son of Plume. On the use of matronyms see Keil 2009, 40–43.

It was only Plume's grandson, David Steuss, who managed to surpass her in importance. David Steuss lived in Vienna and was the richest and most important Jewish businessman not only in the city, but also in the whole duchy of Austria from the 1360s to the 1380s. His business was passed on to his three sons, although the loans they granted were in many cases not as great as their father's. His daughter Hansüss was active as a moneylender too, as was her husband, Rabbi Meir ha-Levi. Hansüss kept emphasising the importance of her father's family by calling herself "daughter of David Steuss" even after her marriage to the famous rabbi.¹⁸ David Steuss died in the late 1380s, but his family remained prominent among the Viennese Jews until the Gesera of 1420/21, which wiped out the Jewish community of Vienna.¹⁹

Although their business connections extended far beyond the boundaries of the duchy of Austria, the Steuss family operated mainly from their family home in Vienna (even Plume seems to have spent the last years of her life in Vienna after her sons had moved there). This may be due to the importance of the city of Vienna as a political and economic centre and the size and wealth of the Jewish community there, while Jewish business families in smaller communities tended to be a lot more mobile and often had family members living and doing business in more than one community at a time. There were traditional connections between specific Jewish communities, such as Salzburg and Regensburg or Maribor (Marburg) and Ptuj (Pettau), which sometimes caused Jewish businessmen to move between these two places or to keep in touch via family members doing business in the other of the two communities.

The prospering Jewish community of Regensburg in Bavaria was not only in contact with Jews in the city of Salzburg, but the archbishops of Salzburg also made use of the far greater wealth of Jewish businessmen in Regensburg, especially during the thirteenth century, when the small Jewish community of Salzburg was still in its earliest stages. Wealthier Jewish financiers tended not to stay in the archbishop's territory, which offered few business opportunities. For example, the two most important Jewish creditors of Archbishop Friedrich III (1315–1338) both left the archbishop's domain after a few years: Isserlein went from Ptuj (an enclave in Styria under the rule of the archbishop) to Maribor; while Aron went from Salzburg to Regensburg, where the business transactions he

¹⁸ Keil 1999, 39. This use of her father's name in a German document is uncommon, since Jewish women mostly used their husband's name in addition to their own given name when issuing German charters; the patronym usually just appears in Hebrew signatures. Keil 2003, 44.

¹⁹ Maimon, Breuer and Guggenheim (eds) 1995, 1606.

conducted together with his sons and his son-in-law Efferlein, himself son to a Jew from Salzburg, can be traced.²⁰

The Jewish communities of Maribor and Ptuj (both then situated in Styria, today in Slovenia) were on much more of an equal footing than Salzburg and Regensburg, and we know of at least one Jewish family who held property and did business in both places over a prolonged period of time. This was the family of Isserlein, who lived in Ptuj until 1350 and then moved to Maribor. In Pettau, Isserlein was active in business together with his son Tröstlein;²¹ in Maribor he worked together with his two grandsons, Mosche and Josua. They counted several of the highest-ranking noble families of Styria among their customers and also served as financiers for the Counts of Gorizia. After Isserlein's death, it was especially Mosche who continued his grandfather's business with even more success, despite being sometimes in conflict with other members of his family.²² Although his main residence was Maribor, Mosche also had possessions in Ptuj, thus keeping up the family's connection with both communities. Maribor was under the rule of the Habsburg duke of Styria and Ptuj under that of the archbishop of Salzburg, but this does not seem to have caused any problems for Isserlein or Mosche. That was not always the case if a Jewish financier moved from one ruler's territory to another, though the Habsburg Duke Rudolf IV was especially keen on keeping wealthy Jewish businessmen in his own territory. When Mosche moved to Gorizia in the 1360s, thus leaving Habsburg territory without explicit permission from the duke, Rudolf IV confiscated Mosche's property and declared the loans he had given null and void.²³

Mobility and family connections: opportunities and risks

Duke Rudolf's determination to keep "his" Jewish businessmen within his own territories caused problems for several wealthy Jewish families. Perhaps the most prominent victim of this policy was Häslein, one of the most active Jewish financiers of his time, who first appeared in 1341 in the town of Friesach in Carinthia, which was under the rule of the archbishop

²⁰ Brugger 2005, 36.; Brugger 2001, 126–132.; Wadl 1992, 220–221.; Wenninger 1983, 748.; Wenninger 2008, 169.

²¹ Archives of the Republic of Slovenia, SI AS 1063, Zbirka listin 6220, 6771.

²² In 1364, Mosche challenged a Hebrew charter issued by his grandfather in which Isserlein had left a quarter of his property to Hakiḿ of Graz, the husband of Mosche's sister (Austrian State Archives, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Vienna, AUR Uk. 1364 III 12). Lohrmann 1999, 18–20.

²³ Brugger et al. 2006, 183.

of Salzburg.²⁴ Häslein switched residences several times, moving first to the Styrian town of Murau where his father may have lived.²⁵ Murau was under the rule of the Liechtenstein family, who granted Häslein and the members of his household (an estimated number of 40-50 people, including siblings, their spouses and children, and servants²⁶) privileged status in their town. Shortly afterwards, Häslein can be traced in Judenburg, which was ruled by the duke of Styria. There too, he was granted privileged status (for which he had to pay an annual fee of 50 florins) for his whole household. It was common practice to attract wealthy Jewish financiers that way; the special privileges they were granted gave them and their whole family a legal and fiscal position separate from that of the Jewish community of the town where they lived. This was most important in matters of taxes – the holders of special privileges did not have to pay their share of the community's taxes, but paid separately, thus providing the ruler with higher tax revenue.²⁷

In 1359, when the ducal privilege expired, Häslein returned to Friesach, thus leaving Habsburg territory again. Duke Rudolf IV charged Häslein with fleeing from this territory, seized Häslein's remaining property and nullified several huge loans he had granted – even some which dated back to before Häslein had first moved into Rudolf's territories. This must have been a severe blow to Häslein's finances, for while he was earlier extremely active as a moneylender, there are hardly records of any business activity on his part afterwards.²⁸

Up to that point, Häslein seems to have been undisputed in his leading role within the family business. The privileges for his family always include his brothers, who were clearly part of Häslein's household together with their spouses and children. However, the brothers hardly ever appear in Häslein's business charters, which usually just mention "the Jew Häslein, his wife and heirs". There is evidence that Häslein's family members, and even their servants, sometimes granted smaller loans on their own, but overall, Häslein dominated the family business until the early 1360s. Then, the heavy financial losses he suffered when Duke Rudolf IV nullified his loans seem to have caused his retreat from this position while his son Merchel, later accompanied by his brother Jacob, took over, but on a much smaller scale. The family later moved (maybe

²⁴ Wadl 1992, 194.

²⁵ Lohrmann 1990, 218.

²⁶ Wadl 1992, 205.

²⁷ Brugger et al. 2006, 146–148.

²⁸ Wadl 1992, 195–202, 205.; Rosenberg 1914, 154–156, no 7.; Brugger et al. 2006, 181–182.

still during Häslein's lifetime) from Friesach to Strassburg in Carinthia, thus leaving the domain of the archbishop of Salzburg and entering that of the bishop of Gurk. Two of Häslein's grandsons can be traced there until 1396, but there is no more evidence of their economic importance.²⁹

Among the charters that concern the business activities of Häslein's family members, there is one exceptional document from 1360 when Häslein's brother Freudman converted to Christianity. We only know about this from a charter in which Freudman, who now went by his Christian name Paul, forgave two loans he had granted count Otto of Ortenburg together with Häslein, although it was stated that the count still had to pay back Häslein's portion of the debt.³⁰ Freudman/Paul's motivation may well have been based on the Christian limitations on moneylending; unfortunately, we do not know what became of him afterwards.³¹

The situation of Jewish converts to Christianity was usually precarious because they lost their inheritance together with the protection of the Jewish community.³² There is one case that has frequently been cited as a positive example for the career opportunities of (upper-class) Jewish converts: Nikolaus Taubensun, a Christian citizen of the Carinthian town of Villach who appears in sources around 1300, may have been the son of the Jewess Taube, who had been a well-regarded businesswoman in the same town. The only indication for Nikolaus' connection to Taube is his surname, which also appears in the latinised form (Nicolaus Columba). Speculation has even been taken one step further by equating Nikolaus Taubensun with the later town judge Nikolaus Fröhlich. However, there is no conclusive evidence for this equation, which should therefore no longer be regarded as fact, even though it has frequently been presented as such.³³

It has already been suggested that Christians too were aware of the importance of Jewish family connections and tried to use them to their

²⁹ Wadl 1992, 205–208, 228.

³⁰ Austrian State Archives, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv Vienna, AUR Uk. 1368 VII 16.

³¹ It has been speculated that the aforementioned Häslein may, like his brother Freudman/Paul, have converted to Christianity himself towards the end of his life, but evidence for this is extremely circumstantial: Wadl 1992, 206–208.

³² Haverkamp 2001, 266.; Mentgen 1994, 117, 138.

³³ Brugger et al. 2006, 207–208.; Brugger and Wiedl 2005, 169–171. The theory that Nikolaus Tabensun might be a Jewish convert and even identical with Nikolaus Fröhlich was formulated by Neumann 1965, 362–366. The fact that this is merely a theory with no conclusive source material to back it up has frequently been overlooked, which resulted in Nikolaus Fröhlich becoming the oft-cited epitome of a convert's career opportunities.

advantage. A remarkable case is that of two Jewish brothers in the territory of the counts of Cilli (Celje). The Cilli family were originally Styrian nobles, but tried to establish an independent domain for themselves outside the realm of the Habsburg duke of Styria. The first Jewish moneylender to make an appearance in their territory was Schäßlein in 1340; he was soon surpassed in importance by his sons and successors, Mosche and Chatschim. They served as financiers for the counts themselves; besides that, the counts of Cilli frequently offered security for other noblemen who were indebted with Mosche and Chatschim, acquiring the debtors' pawned goods if they could not settle the debts themselves.³⁴

In 1362, Duke Rudolf IV granted the Counts of Cilli, the brothers Ulrich and Hermann, the right to hold Chatschim (together with his wife and son) in fief, which was quite an extraordinary measure.³⁵ Mosche remained under the direct authority of the duke. However, around the turn of the year 1366/67, Mosche and Chatschim fled from the domains of both the counts of Cilli and the Habsburg duke, which caused Duke Albrecht III (speaking for himself and the counts of Cilli) to declare Mosche's and Chatschim's property in either territory forfeited. Interestingly, the brothers' property and the claims to the loans they had given went neither to the duke nor to the counts, but to the family of the two fugitive Jews, most notably to their brother Jonas.³⁶ The intention here was obviously not to ruin the fugitives financially, but to force them to return.

In 1368, Chatschim³⁷ caved in, went back to Cilli and submitted himself to the counts. From the charter that he issued on that occasion, we learn that his children were in the custody of the counts of Cilli and that Chatschim would get them back once he had fulfilled his obligations towards his masters, with the exception of his daughter Golde, who would be allowed to stay wherever she wanted. This clause suggests that one of the two counts had begun a relationship with Golde, either before Chatschim's flight or during the time of his children's custody.³⁸ It is highly unlikely that Chatschim approved of such an illicit relationship, which was forbidden by both Christian and Jewish law,³⁹ but judging from

³⁴ Brugger et al. 2006, 184–185.; Wenninger 1999, 145–159.

³⁵ Rosenberg 1914, 157–158, no 9.; Lohrmann 1990, 206–207.

³⁶ Besides, Duke Albrecht held six *Judenmeister* (Jewish community leaders) from the Jewish communities of Vienna, Perchtoldsdorf, Korneuburg, and Sopron liable for Mosche's return with a sum of 20,000 florins, so that they would pressurise the fugitives into returning. Rosenberg 1914, 159–160, no 12.; Wenninger 1999, 156.

³⁷ The date of Mosche's return is unknown.

³⁸ Wenninger 1999, 157–158.; Lohrmann 1990, 225.

³⁹ Toch 2003, 40–43.

the evidence of the charter, he was forced to accept it. There seem to have been no other reprisals against Chatschim's family (probably the only Jewish family living in Cilli) during the time of his absence; his son-in-law was even doing business there meanwhile.⁴⁰ The financial losses the brothers suffered because of their flight subsequently led to quarrels between them; those were only resolved in 1372 by a complete division of their property, which ended their long and successful business partnership.⁴¹ Chatschim's business transactions can be traced in Cilli for a few years afterwards, but he and his family no longer held the same importance for the counts. Around 1400, Count Hermann II of Cilli is said to have expelled all Jews from his lands – most likely, the last member of Chatschim's family had died, and since just this one Jewish family was held as a fief by the count, he saw no need to allow other Jews to stay.⁴²

Jewish family business in towns

Towards the late fourteenth century, the number of sources on Jewish loans taken on by the inhabitants of towns and cities increases. Unfortunately, many of the records on these transactions have been lost, but the surviving material still allows insights into the business deals of Jewish moneylenders with the citizens (both the urban elite and the poorer classes).⁴³ The city of Vienna in particular is well-documented in that regard;⁴⁴ here too, we find plenty of evidence that family cooperation was the norm among Jewish moneylenders, whether their customers were members of the town council or poor craftsmen. Not all Jewish creditors of Viennese citizens were from Vienna themselves; the majority of important Jewish business families in Austria had some kind of connection with Vienna, often in the form of a family member staying there permanently or at least temporarily.

Unsurprisingly, the elite of Jewish business families rarely granted loans to the lower classes of citizens, although there are exceptions, and more remote relatives tended to be less exclusive in that regard.⁴⁵ Among the less wealthy Jewish moneylenders who granted small loans to these

⁴⁰ Wenninger 1999, 146, 157.

⁴¹ Rosenberg 1914, 160–163, no 13.

⁴² Wenninger 1999, 161.

⁴³ Keil 2003, 40.; Lohrmann 1990, 157–159.; Toch 2008, 196.

⁴⁴ Goldmann 1908, 1–111.; Geyer and Sailer 1931.

⁴⁵ For examples from the Steuss family in Vienna see Goldmann 1908, XXXVI. Among the prominent moneylenders who did grant small loans to Viennese citizens was Hetschel of Herzogenburg, see Grahammer 1994, 112.

lower-class customers, family businesses that spanned several generations were just as common as with the rich Jewish financiers. For example, the Viennese Jewess Gayla Chnoflachin, who started out with small loans during the 1390s, was succeeded by her son Ichel, who frequently appears under his mother's name, and his son-in-law Zärtlein. The extent of the loans Zärtlein was able to grant during the first two decades of the fifteenth century illustrates the economic rise of the family.⁴⁶

Finally, it should be pointed out that not all business families were in the financial business exclusively. It was quite common among the Jewish elite to have both rabbis and financiers among the members of a family, as we have seen with Hansüss, daughter of David Steuss, who was married to Rabbi Meir ha-Levi. It was not rare for rabbis to be moneylenders themselves, either, as the business activity of Hansüss' husband illustrates. One of the most impressive examples of a family who was famous both for the scholars and for the wealthy businessmen it produced is the family of Rabbi Israel of Krems. Israel's son Hetschel (Chaim) of Herzogenburg was among the prominent Jewish financiers in the Duchy of Austria in the second half of the fourteenth century, but also had a reputation as a scholar.⁴⁷ Hetschel's son Aron Blümlein was rabbi in Krems, then in Vienna, where he fell victim to the Gesera; his grandson Rabbi Israel Isserlein was a famous scholar in Maribor and Wiener Neustadt, but also gave small loans on occasion.⁴⁸ Many family members of these rabbis were active as moneylenders; several of the men also held the office of *absamer* (ducal tax collector) for the Jewry of their territory.⁴⁹

Conclusions

Charters on Jewish business clearly illustrate the great importance of family connections for Jewish moneylenders in late medieval Austria. Not all of these connections included family members from different generations, but such constellations can often be traced. Cooperation was not limited to parents and their children, but could also include grandchildren, nephews, or sons-in-law. Even Jewish financiers who worked alone for a long time often started cooperating with a younger family member towards the end of their career, most likely to train a prospective successor in the family business. This ensured that a Jewish

⁴⁶ Goldmann 1908, XLI.

⁴⁷ Grahammer 1994, 106–112.; Maimon, Breuer and Guggenheim (eds) 1995, 553, no 23.; Toch 2008, 202.

⁴⁸ Keil 1998, 122.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 122–123.; Lohrmann 1990, 281–292.

financier's heirs were able to take over not only unredeemed pawns and open claims, but often also the networks and financial connections that allowed them to keep their predecessor's business going. This led to the development of veritable "business dynasties" among the tight-knit group of the Jewish economic elite, but there is evidence for business activity that spanned several generations among the less wealthy classes of Jewish moneylenders as well. Research, especially on the business activities of the latter group, is still ongoing; for the period from the middle of the fourteenth century onwards, source material on Jewish business is at the moment being collected and analysed.⁵⁰ Once this process is completed, the results will allow more detailed insights into the roles of family ties and inter-generational cooperation, especially among the less prominent families of Jewish moneylenders.

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⁵⁰ Brugger and Wiedl 2007, 301–305.

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