

# SPINNING TRUST BETWEEN JEWS AND THEIR NEIGHBORS IN THE HEART OF THE DIASPORA

The Big Read 2020: Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver*

Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, Associate Professor of History and Jewish  
Studies, Purdue University



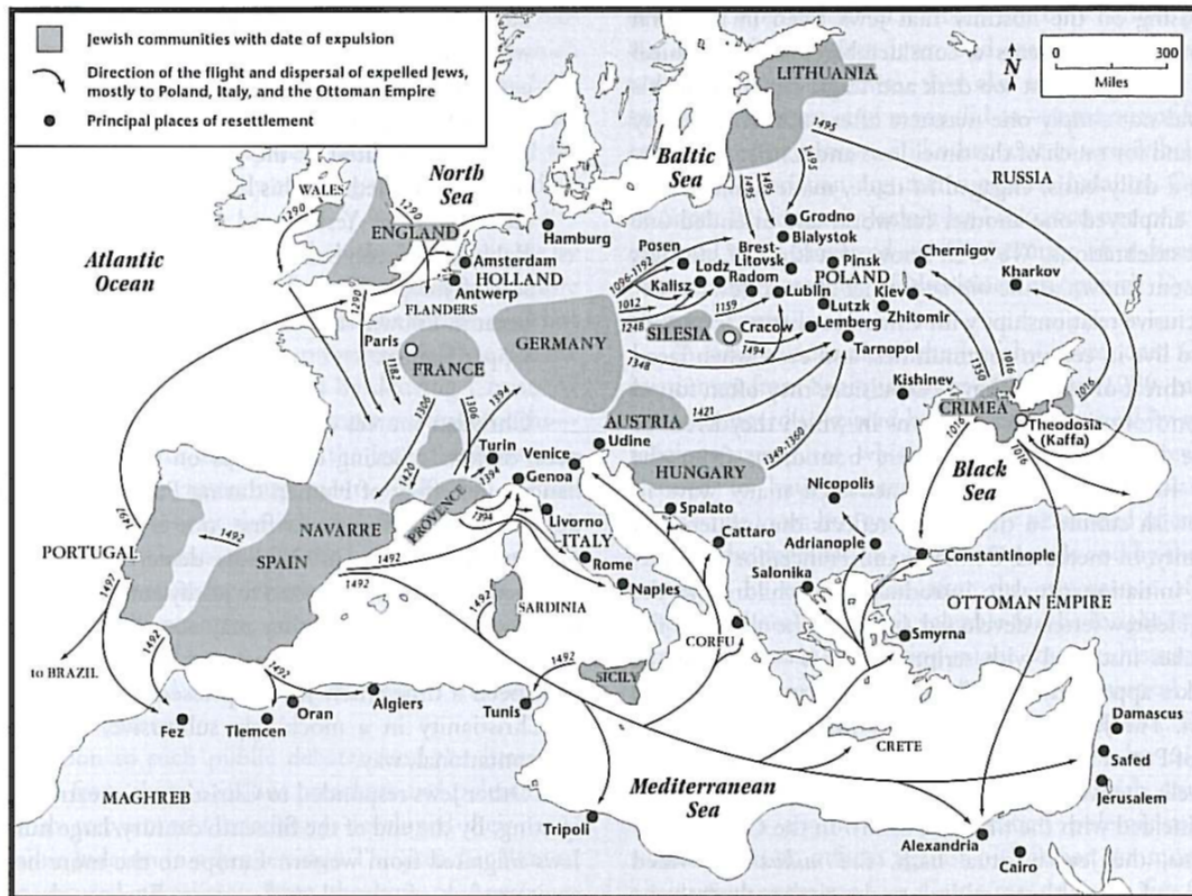


Map of "Poland-Lithuania, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries," From: Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, revised and expanded edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 60.





# CONTOURS OF THE EUROPEAN JEWISH DIASPORA



**Map 7-2** The Expulsion and Migration of Jews from Western Europe, 1000–1500.

From: Efron, et al, map 7-2, in *The Jews: A History*, second edition (Pearson, 2014), p. 204.

Overall trend in movement west to east to Poland: succession of expulsions of Jews from England (1290), France (1306), Germany (i.e., Ashkenaz: 1096, 1248, 1348), and, of course, Spain (1492)



## Poland-Lithuania, 16th-17th centuries

19a



# MIGRATION TO POLAND

- Jews began arriving from western and central Europe to Poland from 1250s: By 1500, 10-15,000 Jews lived in Poland; **by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century –the probable setting of the novel - 150-170,000 Jews lived there**
- Union of Lublin 1569 established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth
  - Who lived there?
  - Poles ~40% population: Ukrainians, Russians, Lithuanians, Germans, Italians, Scots, Jews
- Religions: Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish

Map of “Poland-Lithuania, 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries,” From: Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, revised and expanded edition (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), p. 60.





# INVITATION TO POLAND

## Why the large-scale migration to Poland, in particular?

Boleslaw the Pious, Prince of Kalisz, invited Jews to Poland as useful and desirable subjects

Boleslaw issued a charter, guaranteeing legal rights and protections

King Kazimierz the Great extended the charter to all of Poland

Jews entitled to enjoy security of life and property, freedom of worship, and economic opportunities

**Poland became the heart of the Ashkenazic Jewish diaspora in terms of numbers and learning (rabbinic culture) ♥**



**Map 9-1** Jewish Communities in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

From: Efron, et al, map 9-1, in *The Jews: A History*, second edition (Pearson, 2014), p. 235.



# TRUST RELATIONS

- 1<sup>st</sup>: We remember that this is a work of fiction, even fantasy fiction, and that gives Novik room to explore and cultivate empathy development, i.e. story told in alternating first-person voices, perspectives. It need not match history 1:1.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: We remember contingencies of trust, the many gradations along the scale between trust and mistrust.
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: We remember that mechanics of trust are not fixed and unchangeable.
- 4<sup>th</sup>: We ask: how do they change? Under what conditions do people who have been conditioned not to trust each other shift their positions? How can trust be cultivated between people? How do we move beyond endless winter?
- 5<sup>th</sup>: We consider: common socialization, working toward shared goals, sharing food, unavailability of inter-reliance.
- *Spinning Silver* highlights humanization of the Other through intensified intergroup interactions. Trust is the coin of the realm.

See: Caputo, Nina, and Mitchell B. Hart. *On the Word of a Jew: Religion, Reliability, and the Dynamics of Trust*. Indiana University Press, 2019.







# **FIVE INTERACTIONS, FIVE INTERPRETATIONS**

For regional context, intergroup relations, Jewish history,  
customs, practices, self-conceptions

# 1) MIRYAM THE MONEYLENDER



The Moneylender and his Wife (oil on panel), Reymerswaele, Marinus van (c.1490-c.1567) / Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library  
[https://www.allposters.com/-sp/The-Moneylender-and-His-Wife-Posters\\_i1735938\\_.htm](https://www.allposters.com/-sp/The-Moneylender-and-His-Wife-Posters_i1735938_.htm)

Page 9: “I went to every house that owed us, and I banged on their doors. It was early, very early, still dark, because my mother’s coughing had woken us in the night. Everyone was still at home. So the men opened the doors and stared at me in surprise, and I looked them in their faces, and said, cold and hard, ‘I’ve come to settle your account.’

“They tried to put me off, of course, some of them laughed at me. Oleg, the carter with his big hands, closed them into fists and put them on his hips and stared at me while his small squirrely wife kept her head down over the fire, darting eyes toward me...I stood on their doorsteps, and I brought out my list, and I told them how much they had borrowed, and what little they had paid, and how much interest they owed besides.

“They spluttered and argued and some of them shouted...” - Miryam





# JEWISH LEGAL STATUS & OCCUPATIONS

- Jews had legal status as *servitudo camerae*, “Servants of the Treasury” - Who harmed the Jews, harmed the treasury (and the king)
- \*Legal status tied to interests of central authorities
  - No one coherent legal status
  - Some cities were *non tolerandis Judaeis*, i.e. no Jews permitted
- Jewish occupational structure organized on 3 levels:
  - Mortgaging, tax farming, commerce, money-lending, import-export
  - Handicrafts, agriculture, baking, tailoring (ritual clothing), weaving, tanning (leather)
  - Peddling (least desirable, most wide-spread)
- Ideal of Jewish man as scholar, woman as bread-winner



# LORDS AND JEWS, THE LORD'S JEWS

- How did Jews fit into the state economic structure?
- Most important factor for answer = power relations between king and nobility
  - Nobility more powerful than king → a nobles' republic by 1572
  - Nobles ruled nearly autonomously over their estates, with own courts, own armies
  - Polish nobility ruled over Ukrainian serfs, as Poland-Lithuania expanded
- Nobility needed trustworthy staff to run estate: oversee workers, administer, market produce & cattle
  - **Change in Jewish legal status to the “Lord's Jews”**
  - With changed legal status, Jews subject to noble, not king
- Jews became *arrendators* (leaseholders) of noble economic monopolies – managed:
  - Distillation and sale of alcohol
  - Salt mining
  - Toll collection
  - Jewish “middleman” or proxy economic role resented by peasants, townspeople, Ukrainians





## 2) THE MAGIC SPELL OVER THE BREAD



Page 19: “[Miryam] came back in the late afternoon with a hard face and dusty shoes and a loaf of dark brown bread fresh from the baker’s ovens, a pail of milk and a dish of butter, and a sack over her shoulders full of apples. She put out plates on the table, and laid one for me, which I didn’t expect. The moneylender said a magic spell over the bread when we sat down, but I ate it anyways. It tasted good.” - Wanda

### Image of proper bread:

<https://www.bigoven.com/recipe/russian-black-bread-borodinskiy/240660>

|                              |                               |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי           | Baruch ata Adonoy,            |
| אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם   | Eloheinu melech ha-olam,      |
| הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ. | ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz. |

Blessed are you God, King of the Universe,  
Who brings forth bread from the earth.



# A PEOPLE APART?

- Jews and non-Jews largely lived apart from each other
- Physical separation depended on region: ghettos, Jewish Quarters in the Holy Roman Empire in ~central Europe; Shtetls (majority Jewish market towns) in ~eastern Europe.
- Distinct appearance: clothing, physical markers unmistakable in mixed society:
  - Jewish hat, Jewish badge (outside of ghetto), peyes, yarmulke, kaftan, otherwise
- Language usage: Yiddish with regional differentiations vernacular, Hebrew for prayer, local languages for business, contact with mixed society
- What kind of contact between Jews and non-Jews was there?
- Mainly through business relations
- Adjustment of rituals based on need for economic interaction?
  - Halakhists [*Halakhah* = Jewish law]: fear of social intimacy, “a stricture relaxed in part, is a stricture relaxed completely”





# 3) SHABBAT IN THE STARYK KINGDOM



<https://depositphotos.com/stock-photos/shabbat.html>

*Light the candles and then recite the blessing.*

*Ba-ruch a-ta, A-do-nai  
E-lo-hei-nu, me-lech ha-o-lam,  
a-sher ki-de-sha-nu be-mits-vo-tav,  
ve-tsi-va-nu le-had-lik  
neir shel Sha-bat.*

ברוך אתה, יי  
אלהינו, מלך העולם,  
אשר קדשנו במצותיו,  
וצונו להדליק  
נר של שבת.

We praise You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who has made us holy with commandments and commanded us to kindle the lights of Shabbat.

Page 179: “I was sure he [the Stryk King] wanted me to feel small, with his mockery, and I didn’t mean for him to succeed. So when he finished jeering, I said coldly, “As I haven’t yet learned to make the snow fall to suit me, I’ll content myself with being what I am. And my next question is, how do I know when the sun has set, in the mortal world?”

He frowned at me. “You don’t. What difference can it make, when you are not there?”

“I still need to celebrate Shabbat,” I said. “It begins at sundown tonight--”

He shrugged impatiently, interrupting, “This is no concern of mine.”

“Well, if you won’t help me find out when Shabbat actually is, I’ll have to treat every day as Shabbat from now on, since I’m sure to lose track of days without sunset and sunrise to mark them.” I said. “It’s forbidden to do work on Shabbat, and I’m quite sure that turning silver to gold counts as work.”

- Miryam



## 4) WANDA IN THE JEWISH QUARTER



<https://www.jewish-heritage-lithuania.org/jewish-quarter/historical-jewish-quarter-in-vilnius/>

Page 303: ‘I had never seen any Jew but Miryam’s family before, except the woman on line and her son. Now I did not see anyone else. It was a strange feeling. I thought that when Miryam had to go to the Saryk Kingdom maybe it was all like this for her. All of a sudden everyone around you was the same as each other but not like you. And then I thought, but it was like that for Miryam already. It was like that for her all the time, in town. So maybe it hadn’t been so strange.’ - Wanda



## 5) MIRYAM WEDS THE STARYK KING



A Polish Jewish wedding in the Jewish Quarter  
<https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/252984>



Wedding contract (ketubah)  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish\\_wedding](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_wedding)

Page 466: “We were married two weeks later: a small wedding only in that little house [---], but my grandfather and grandmother came from Vysnia with the rabbi in the duke’s own carriage, and they brought with them a gift, a tall silver mirror in a golden frame, that had been sent from Koron. And my husband held my hands under the canopy, and drank wine with me, and broke the glass.

“And on the wedding contract [kettubah], before me and my parents and the rabbi, and Wanda and Sergey for our witnesses, in silver in he signed his name.

“But I won’t ever tell you what it is.”  
- Miryam

