

The timing, of the last week in April 1851, is most interesting. This was immediately before the opening of the Great Exhibition, in Hyde Park, London by Queen Victoria on 1 May. This initiated the busiest ever period (up to that time) on the entire British railway system and probably the world. No fewer than six million people visited the Exhibition in the few months of its opening, at the rate of up to 100,000 per day. Many of these were from outside London and trains, hotels, etc. would generally have been rammed. Many excursions were chartered and relief trains run. Paradoxically anyone leaving London would have stuck out like a sore thumb – “But you'll miss the biggest show on earth!”

III. The jewellery and the diamond merchants

While the descriptions we have of the jewellery are not very detailed, it is worth looking at the information we have both about the stolen goods, and about Thonen’s employers, the diamond merchants Jacques Schwabacher and Louis Birnstingl.

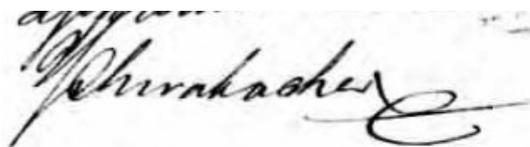
For this section, we rely to some extent on the members of the *Antiquers* forum, an online group of antique jewellery enthusiasts.⁸⁹ We are grateful for their input.

[TBD]

Jewellery that only used diamonds was not uncommon in the Victorian age. Nonetheless, the fact that the jewellery included no other gemstones or pearls has led to the suggestion that they could have been created for the sole purpose of transporting diamonds, trying to avoid taxes on loose stones.⁹⁰

The biographies of the merchants themselves are interesting, and may be important for understanding Thonen’s involvement in their firm.

Jacques Schwabacher⁹¹ was born on 20 February 1821 in Pressburg (now Bratislava), in modern-day Slovakia, then part of the Austrian Empire. He was a Hungarian Jew. Schwabacher became a diamond merchant, and after moving to England in the 1840s, he was in a business partnership with Jacques Bettelheim. Their office was located at 65 Fenchurch Street, London. In early 1850, they moved to 8 Broad Street Buildings. Their partnership was dissolved on 15 March 1850.⁹² Schwabacher applied for naturalisation in



Jacques Schwabacher’s signature, from his marriage record (19 May 1873)

⁸⁹ See the discussion at Rene_R (Bamberger, D.): “Diamond jewellery stolen in 1851”, in: Antiquers forum, 1 July 2023. <https://www.antiquers.com/threads/diamond-jewellery-stolen-in-1851.79180>

⁹⁰ Deborah: “Diamond jewellery stolen in 1851”, in: Antiquers forum, 1 July 2023.

<https://www.antiquers.com/threads/diamond-jewellery-stolen-in-1851.79180/#post-9481514>

⁹¹ Some additional information and links to sources about the two diamond merchants can be found at <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Schwabacher-5> and <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Birnstingl-2>.

⁹² The London Gazette, Jan.-Apr.1850, page 811.

https://www.google.de/books/edition/The_London_Gazette/DRIKAQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1&pg=PA811

England in 1851, which was granted in 1852. In March 1851, he was a lodger of Frederick S. Lee at 56 Christopher Street, St. Luke, Finsbury. He moved back to Fenchurch Street later that year. In January 1852, Schwabacher became a freemason.⁹³ He moved to France, where in 1873 he married Rachel Jenny Hirsch.⁹⁴ He continued to work as a diamond broker in France until his death on 4 February 1886.

Louis (or Lewis) Birnstingl was born in the town of Pest (now Budapest), Hungary, in about 1812. After moving to England, he got married to Helen Levy from Chelsea. In March 1851, he was the head of household in 38 Hunter Street, St. George, Bloomsbury, London. Birnstingl is listed in the 1851 census as a coral merchant, possibly indicating contacts to the middle east. His business partnership with Jacques Schwabacher was dissolved in October 1851.⁹⁵ In 1856, Birnstingl was trading under the firm of Louis Birnstingl & Co. at 8 Broad Street Buildings, and also under the firm of Solomon Maurice & Co. at Sydney, Australia. He declared bankruptcy on 9 February 1856,⁹⁶ and once again on 26 February 1857.⁹⁷ By 1861, he was a British subject, living in St. Pancras. In 1871, he lived in Kensington, and by 1881, he had moved to 26 Leinster Gardens, Paddington, where he continued to work as a merchant. He died on 23 October 1889 in Sydenham, Kent, England.

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership heretofore subsisting between us the undersigned, Louis Birnstingl and Jacques Schwabacher, of No. 8, Broad-street-buildings, in the city of London, lately carrying on business as Merchants and Commission Agents, under the firm of L. Birnstingl and Co. was, on the 1st day of this present month of October, dissolved by mutual consent. All debts due to and from the late partnership firm will be received and paid by the said Louis Birnstingl. —Dated this 9th day of October 1851.

L. Birnstingl.
J. Schwabacher.

The partnership of Schwabacher and Birnstingl is dissolved (9 October 1851).

Before he came to England, Louis and his brother Maurice (Moritz) Birnstingl spent some time in Australia, where they worked as master silversmiths and jewellery importers. In 1970, in his article *Blood and Gold* for the Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Egon F. Kunz mentioned the brothers' contributions to the construction of a synagogue in Sydney in 1845:⁹⁸

[W]e meet Isaac Friedman, the first Hungarian in Australian history. He arrived in 1833 and was prominent in establishing the Hobart congregation. His changing fortunes have been repeatedly referred to in the Proceedings of this Society, which are often quoted and acknowledged by the

⁹³ "Jacques Schwabacher", in: England, United Grand Lodge of England Freemason Membership Registers, 1751-1921, London 'B', #116-1204, fols 1-180, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/1576863:60620>

⁹⁴ "Jacques Schwabacher (52) marriage to Rachel Jenny Hirsch", in: Paris, France, Births, Marriages, and Deaths, 1680-1930, Archives de Paris; Paris, France; Etat Civil 1792-1902, <https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/7915177:62058>

⁹⁵ The London Gazette, Sept.-Dec.1851, page 2545, https://www.google.de/books/edition/The_London_Gazette/5hpKAQAAMAAJ?gbpv=1&pg=PA2545

⁹⁶ The London Gazette, February 1856, pages 714-715. <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/21853/page/714/data.pdf>, <https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/21853/page/715/data.pdf>

⁹⁷ The Jurist, part 2, 1857, page 90. <https://www.google.de/books/edition/Jurist/mrIDAAAQAAJ?gbpv=1&pg=PA90>

⁹⁸ Kunz, E.F.: "Blood and Gold. Hungarians in Australia", in: Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society, Vol.6, part 8, 1970, pages 549-550. <https://ajhs.collectiveaccess.au/Detail/objects/52866>

author. Friedman was followed in 1838 by Maurice Birnstingl, who together with his brother Lewis, was among the first outstanding silversmiths in Sydney. They were also generous contributors to the Synagogue Building Fund in 1845.

It has been suggested that Thonen's employment by the diamond merchants may not have been unusual, even though Thonen himself was a *goy* (a non-Jewish person):⁹⁹

In London, and I'm thinking Hatton garden, it wasn't uncommon for Jewish diamond merchants to employ trusted gentiles/goyim in lesser more menial roles.

For further discussion of the role that Birnstingl's "Australian connection" may have played in the claims that Edward Thonen himself was Jewish, see the chapter [Claims of Jewish descent](#).

Why did Thonen come to England?

FitzSimons has speculated that Thonen had been expelled from Prussia, and that this is why he moved to England. While we are certain that Thonen had not been expelled, FitzSimons may have a point. England was considered a kind of safe haven for political refugees from Germany, and Thonen may have been among those who found it more suitable than his homeland Prussia.¹⁰⁰

It is possible that the journey to England was just Thonen's first attempt to seek his fortune abroad, something he would speak of or attempt more than once during the remaining four years of his life.

Or the travel could have been business related. The fact that Thonen was meeting a friend of his family upon his arrival suggests that the journey maybe was not only planned, but was also sanctioned by Thonen's family. It is apparent that something went wrong. Maybe the purpose of his travel became obsolete when he was robbed of his possessions around New Year of 1851, but he decided (or was forced) to stay in England anyway. We cannot ultimately be sure.

Emigration to Australia

After his release from prison, and his subsequent return to Prussia in the summer of 1852, Edward Thonen did not pursue his earlier plans to move to Africa or America. Instead, he set his eyes on a new goal: Australia.

German newspapers at the time were full of enthusiastic reports of gold strikes in Victoria and New South Wales, and of the rising number of Britons who returned from trips to Australia

⁹⁹ Ownedbybear: "Diamond jewellery stolen in 1851", in: Antiquers forum, 1 July 2023.

<https://www.antiquers.com/threads/diamond-jewellery-stolen-in-1851.79180/page-4#post-9483775>

¹⁰⁰ Ashton, R.: "Little Germany: Exile and Asylum in Victorian England", Oxford University Press, 1986.