In addition to numerous festivals of Jewish culture, one of the most characteristic elements of contemporary Polish imagery concerning the Jews is the expansion of a new iconographic motif, the so-called Jew with a coin. Given the association of its iconographic element with an explanatory inscription, it does, to some extent, derive from an age-old category of emblem – a Renaissance literary-pictographic genre consisting of an *imago* and a *lemma*, i.e. a motto. In the case of the ‘Jew with a coin’, the second element usually consists of the proverb, ‘A Jew in the room – a coin in the pocket.’ It is normally written at the bottom of the picture.

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Despite being viewed with embarrassment already in the 1990’s\(^2\), the popularity of this image does not decrease; on the contrary, this popularity clearly makes it one of the few Polish symbols of identity, with which almost everyone can identify, including the intelligentsia. The ‘Jew with a coin’ is not just another amulet (apotropaion) sold in a market stall. It is a unique, specifically Polish regional product. It can be found not only in houses, but also in legal firms\(^3\), banks\(^4\), in larger or smaller shops, workshops and studios, offices, mountain lodges, and even in kosher restaurants (such as the ‘Anatewka’ in Łódź), where customers receive figurines like these together with their bill\(^5\):


The presence of a ‘Jew with a coin’ on the website of a prosperous Polish business does not astonish anyone:

‘Now that it’s warm, various market displays offer a sight of a very popular image in Poland, that of a bearded Jew holding a pouch of money and looking at a lifted coin. Let this image imprint itself in the minds of investors. Those who have already printed out the Nikkei 225, had it framed and hung it above their desks, can now buy a picture of a Jewish banker and hang it up next to the Tokyo printout. Looking at those two images, you can learn a lot. The Jew does not lift

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\(^3\) www.chomikuj.pl/salcia6-postacie-żyd z sakiewką. See also other varieties at http://galleria.com.pl/reklama/obrazy_zyda_sklep.jpeg
\(^4\) ‘For your contribution to the Association of Polish Co-Operative Banks’, a commemorative letter of thanks and a small figurine representing a Jew with a coin, ‘for luck, and for even better financial results’: http://www.grupabps.pl/o-grupie-bps/aktualnosci/art,422,bank-spoldzielczy-w-sochaczewie-swietuje-110-lecie.html
the coin without a reason! He is lifting it and looking at it, because he is thinking what to do with it. It is obvious that his movements are not too fast, but full of reflection, just like those of a chess-player. The Jew in the picture has a pouch full of money, but this particular coin is also important to him, as his gesture of lifting it shows. He does not intend to make rash decisions, but is pondering the future of the coin. One might say – he is performing an analysis.6

The management of supermarkets such as Leroy Merlin showcases the ‘Jew with a coin’ in a tasteful exhibit.

A Leroy Merlin supermarket, Warsaw
Photograph by Anna Zawadzka, Warsaw 2011

The Internet provides us with a true flood of information on the topic of ritual use of the ‘Jew with a coin’. This is what the Internet user nicknamed Aga has to say in her post called ‘Jew’:

‘Apparently, there should be at least two images or figurines of a Jew in each house – one with the coins, another one with a lemon. The figurine of the Jew with a coin is meant to bring happiness and plenty to the members of the household. It is supposed to watch over our finances and bring luck in

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6 http://www.hotmoney.pl/artykul/ucz-sie-od-zyda-2577
business. The other Jew, with the lemon, is supposed to ensure that there would never be a lack of food or drink in our house. Proverbs constitute the wisdom of a nation, so there must be at least a grain of truth in that.7

‘Jews with a coin’ do not look like mourners or avengers. The kind-hearted ones with a gentle expression on their face are particularly valued. Such is the convention of the cultural landscape. It is impossible to contest the deformation of the Jewish image: the pre-war Jews are dead, and their potential heirs would face ridicule. A review of Jolanta Dylewska’s film Polin draws attention to the profits made from a similar appropriation. Elżbieta Janicka and Tomasz Żukowski accused the director, who was actually acting in good faith, of manipulation by compiling the film from the home movies made before the war in the milieu of Polish Jews for their relatives in America, and adding a melancholy commentary to it. By changing the audience of the film, she has at the same time deformed the message it contains. Janicka and Żukowski state that:

‘The manipulation is based on more than just creating the pretense of a dialogue, while actually depriving the members of a minority of their voice. Contemporary material added to Jewish archival shots gives an impression that the Jews appear to be speaking. But they actually speak the words of a Polish director, who has at the same time ensured that they could not say anything authentic about the dominant group in their own words. Movie images of shtetls and the message they contain become a part of the whole, which is completely dominated by a Polish narrator. The Jews are incapacitated. They are an instrument of a Polish narrative about themselves and about their treatment on the part of the Christian majority.’8

Examples of the ‘Jews with a coin’

7 http://aga-oaza.blogspot.com/2009/02/zydek.html
There is a vast number of variations of the ‘Jew with a coin’: ‘Jew with a garlic’, ‘Jew in space’, ‘Jew not opposite the door to the apartment’, ‘St. Nicholas the Jew’, ‘the wandering Jew’, ‘Jew with a money pouch’, ‘American Jew with a coin in his left hand for luck’, ‘Jew with a candle and a coin for luck, happy’, ‘Jew with five rubles’, ‘Jew the lord of autumn’, ‘Jew the accountant’⁹. It is always a fatherly figure: an older man with a beard, often with sidelocks, wearing a hat or a kippah. He is usually equipped with the most ancient Jewish iconographic accessory that already appears in the Bible moralisé from the 14th century: a pouch or a coin¹⁰.

One of the Internet users posted the following ‘recipe for a Jew with a coin’:

He is supposed to be Orthodox, which means with sidelocks and a yarmulke. Ideally, leaning over his accounting books. In the version for those who are less imaginative, he is holding a golden coin in his left hand. Obligatorily in oil on canvas. Definitely in a golden frame. It can be painted by a fine arts student, because these charge lower prices than graduates. (…) An accountant, a tailor or a traveling salesman, clad in a long black smock, can be bought anywhere. Especially at the Sukiennice in Cracow. You can get a complete wedding band here, exactly like from Rachel’s Wedding or Joel’s Bar Mitzvah. Hava nagila, hava nagila. Hava nagila venis 'mecha – I can hear it in my head. I close my eyes and picture the basswood figurines of a violinist and a clarinet player. I have given one such band as a present to my friends in France. And now it is placed at the entresol of their house, between an old wine press and a huge wooden cicada painted in provencal motifs. And my friend’s business seems to have improved. Its presence at the Krupówki in Zakopane and the market in Gdansk confirms that the Jew is a universal present, associated with any place in Poland.’¹¹

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¹¹ http://moje50.blog.onet.pl/O-korzysciach-z-wieszania-obra,2,ID436597509,n
Considering the metaphor of Bloodsucker\textsuperscript{12} incorporated in this image, the ‘Jew with a lemon’\textsuperscript{13} merits special attention.

This variation is the topic of the following discussion on the Internet:

[Question] ‘As a present for my name day, I got a picture of a Jew, which is supposed to bring luck. And I have a problem with understanding its

\textsuperscript{12} Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, \textit{The Figure of Bloodsucker in Polish religious, national and left-wing discourse in the years 1945/1946. A historical anthropology study}, „Polin. Studies in Polish Jewry” (in print).

\textsuperscript{13} The painter of ‘Jews with a coin’ cited above thinks, however, that the Jew juicing a lemon is a health talisman: http://portret-zyd-na-szczescie-barbara-rabiega.blog.onet.pl/

\textsuperscript{14} My thanks to Tomasz Żukowski for providing this picture.
symbolism. It depicts a Jew juicing a lemon into a glass. It’s supposed to work the same way as the Jew with a coin, but I don’t understand – why the lemon???. Actually, lemon juice! Does anyone know anything about it?’

[Answer] ‘It’s a kind of metaphor. Traditionally, Jews are misers and scrooges, very stingy – they seem to have nothing, and yet it turns out they own the greatest riches\(^\text{15}\). There even is a proverb: ‘Stingy as a Jew’. And the lemon… Well, the Jew will squeeze all your money out of you, just like one squeezes a lemon for juice.’\(^\text{16}\)

Simply buying the picture does not work; you have to receive it from someone as a gift. Secondly, the image needs to hang upside down\(^\text{17}\) for a while; thirdly, a coin has to be inserted behind the picture frame.

‘And me, I like Jews, even hanging on the wall, I don’t mind that he’s old, that he’s counting money, that there are mice under the table, the Jew is cool, the picture is cool, and when I’m broke, I hang the Jew upside down, and the money rolls out of his pockets, and everything is OK again…’\(^\text{18}\)

Some people claim that the picture should have

‘two hangers: a regular one at the top, and another one at the bottom, so that on Saturday (Sabbath?), you can turn the picture of the Jew upside down, so that all the money he has amassed would fall out of his pouches and remain in the house.’\(^\text{19}\)

Apparently, there is also a New Year’s ritual associated with this superstition:

‘When the year is nearing its end, the portrait is turned upside down, so that the Jew would lose the money and count it again in the coming year.’\(^\text{20}\)

It is confirmed by the following comment:

‘Some people hang it askew, so that the money seems to be falling into a pouch on the table (because that’s how he’s usually shown in the picture). On top of that, it’s supposed to be hanging at the entrance to the house and to be turned either on Friday (Sabbath) or at the end of the year, so that the pouch can start filling up again on New Year’s Day.’\(^\text{21}\)


\(^{16}\) http://forum.we-dwoje.pl/topics49/symbolika-vt2693.htm

\(^{17}\) A ‘Jew with a coin’ can be observed hanging on the wall in this position at a roadside diner on the way to Treblinka. I have recorded this information, which I have received from Elżbieta Janicka, in Warsaw in the spring of 2011.

\(^{18}\) http://www.klub.senior.pl/archive/index.php/t-4842.html

\(^{19}\) http://www.klub.senior.pl/archive/index.php/t-4842.html


\(^{21}\) http://40tygodni.pl/Category/008/Answers,30802,Wieszanie-obrazu-zydka-Znacie-ten-zwyczaj,1.html. Similarly, ‘a picture that depicts a Jew counting money should be hanging at the exit from the house /
The mythology of the ‘Jew with a coin’ as a demonic counterpart of the Guardian Angel is spreading very fast in Poland. A certain embroiderer has made an attempt to depict the ‘Jew with a coin’ in cross stitch.

‘I have just found out that hanging a picture of a Jew holding golden coins in your entrance hall brings luck in financial matters 😊 I thought that instead of buying a picture, I could embroider one. Unfortunately, I can’t seem to find a design anywhere. Ladies, do any of you have something like that in your collection?’

A Jew with money, garlic and a moth

The Internet user receives a cross stitch design of a ‘Jew with a coin’ from her friends; however, she describes it as too tedious. She answers:

‘I’ve been working on the embroidery of a Guardian Angel for my son for half a year now, and am running out of time. Can anyone maybe find something smaller?’

A warning comes in response to her post:

‘Dear friends! I must warn you! Recently, I have tried out the Jew myself, and I still can’t get over it! After a few months of hanging in the entrance hall, he just let us go bankrupt. My husband threw him in the fire, and he didn’t even allow me to keep the frame (it was a reproduction). (…) Best regards to all the embroiderers and I wish [you all] a lot of money, so that you don’t need the Jew.’

This comment indicates that the semi-supernatural entity, which the gullible Poles let into their homes, displays typical ‘Jewish ingratitude’. Instead of giving protection, it harms the house it has been let into. It is not surprising, then, that the angry inhabitants quickly get rid of the intruder.

This artifact could be considered an ethnographic banality, were it not for the unique scale of the phenomenon and its paradoxical context: Jews – the exploiters return as guardian spirits of Poles. It is difficult to resist the impression of ‘acting out’, when the narrative includes elements such as throwing the Jew into the fire or shutting him in a wardrobe.

The ignorance of the narrators, who do not realize the meaning of similar associations, shows how deep the rift between Polish and Jewish memory still is in Poland.

As an example of a ‘return of the repressed’, let us consider a tradition connected with the ‘Jew with a coin’, described by one of the Internet users.

‘An old proverb says: ‘Who has no Jew in the house, is as poor as a church mouse’. Proverbs are the wisdom of a nation, and so there must be at least a grain of truth in that.’

What the Internet user considers an ‘old proverb’ is in fact a twisted version of the pre-war ‘When you’re poor, go see the Jew.’ This was a reflection of Jewish loans, sales ‘on credit’. Given the realities of the pre-war segregation of Poles and Jews, which Bronisław Malinowski himself claims to have been more drastic than those in the South of the United States, the version supplied by the Internet user does not make sense at all. A Jew would...
be allowed to come into the entrance hall of a Polish house at the most – just like in the proverb ‘A Jew in the room – a coin in the pocket.’ Based on associations with the most recent history, the proverb acquires a bitter meaning as a reflection of the war-time profiteering of Poles on the Jews they were sheltering, ‘dropping them at friends’ houses like at pawnshops’. Just like in the following quote from a testimonial:

‘There’s also been a murder of Jews at Bogdański Marceli’s [house] in the village of Krobielice, Klimontów administrative district (…), those Jews were put there for safekeeping by Bajur Władysław from the village of Szymanowice, Jurkowice administrative district (…), but the Jews supposedly came from Opatów. I don’t really know who committed the murder, but I think it was Bogdański Marceli. The murder was committed in the spring of 1943. After this murder, partisans started coming over to Bogdański’s, asking him to give back the property of the murdered Jews. So Bajur Władysław from Szymanowice, as the commander of the Home Army organization in that area, told the partisans to leave Bogdański Marceli alone, as he was Bogdański’s brother-in-law, and so the partisans under the command of Tutak Waclaw [nom-de-guerre Burza, the Peasant Battalions] stopped coming over to Bogdański Marceli’s.’

Whatever the interpretation, the ‘Jew with a coin’ becomes one of the numerous benevolent supernatural beings, such as the skrzat, chobold, kłobuk, lataniec, plonek, chowaniec, inkluz and sporysz, protecting Polish houses cleansed of the Jews. He is placed at the door (‘on the left side in the entrance hall or porch’), and Kazimierz Moszyński has linked this to the Finno-Ugric and ancient Slavic custom of placing the figurines of ancestors, and even to images of the holy corner.

‘Usually, Eastern Slavs call the house spirit simply domowy (Russian domovoj, Bulgarian damavik, Ukrainian domovyk); commonly also dziad, dziadek or domowy dziad (domovoj ded); besides that, they also call him a landlord, a neighbor, a provider…’

The house spirit, says Moszyński,

and suffered from scabies. They were untouchable, even more so than the Blacks in the South of the United States’. After: B. Malinowski, in idem, Dziennik w ścisłym znaczeniu tego wyrazu, ed. by G. Kubica, Cracow 2002, p. 7. Likewise, the proverb ‘A Jew in the room, a coin in the pocket’ points to proxemic customs related to business exchanges.

28 A variation: ‘Who has a Jew in the hall, has a grosz in his pocket’.
30 Joanna Tomicka and Ryszard Tomicki, Drzewo życia. Ludowa wizja świata i człowieka, Warsaw 1975, p. 130nn.
32 Idem, pp. 663-664.
‘Sometimes appears in human form, (...) its figure similar to that of the deceased grandfather or father. (...) It is a common belief that he supports the household, even by stealing from other farms. If he is treated well and fed properly, he generally lives in a close relationship with the members of the household: works for them, rejoices in their happiness, mourns their sorrows and warns them against all danger.’

The qualities commonly shared by the more contemporary Slavic spirits include a ‘very widespread motif of increasing wealth (money, crops)’ and ‘staying only with certain people: the wealthy ones, especially if their wealth is growing suspiciously fast…’

In a country whose society profited so much from the ‘disappearance’ its Jews, the benevolent ‘Jew with a coin’ is purely grotesque. The grotesque is based on associating the ridicula with the formidolosa, entertainment with fear, funny traits with scary traits. Grotesque means demonic transformed into trivial. It presents ‘that which is horrible under an innocent disguise, while its gaiety is always on the brink of breaking down under the pressure from the lurking horror’.

Freud provides another viewpoint in this search for the meaning of the bizarre concurrence of the ‘Jew with a coin’. In his Totem and Taboo, he elaborates on the concept of ‘deferred obedience’, closely connected with the evolution of conscience. From this point of view, the conscience does not emerge with the accompaniment of angelic music. It has its source in crime, in the founding murder of the leader of the primal horde by his rebellious sons. In Freud’s opinion, the sons-patricides ‘undid their deed by declaring that the killing of the father substitute, the totem, was not allowed, and renounced the fruits of their deed by denying themselves the liberated women.’ Consequently, the totemic religion, just like the conscience itself, is a product of the sense of guilt on the part of the sons, ‘an attempt to palliate this feeling and to conciliate the injured father through subsequent obedience.’ Freud claims the human society is based on guilt for the collectively committed crime, while morality is based on the need of expiation, which this sense of guilt demands.

As far-fetched as this viewpoint may seem, it enables us to see the grotesque practices of the Poles in a different, less irrational light. The ‘Jew with a coin’, protecting the Polish house from which he has been banished, would in this sense be not only a hunting trophy or the ‘return of the repressed’, but also a deformed sign of a moral initiation, which the Polish collective consciousness may be preparing for, if it possibly can.

33 Cf. „a coin has to be inserted into the picture frame”, http://www.klub.senior.pl/archive/index.php/t-4842.html.
34 Moszyński, Kultura ludowa Słowian, p. 663.
37 Idem, p. 55.
40 Idem, pp. 188-189.
http://www.flickr.com/photos/macgos/370064114/in/photostream/