

# The Jew with the Gold Coin

*By Ewa Tartakowsky*

---

**In Poland, one can purchase a strange good luck charm to become rich: the picture of a Jew holding a gold coin. What is the significance of this popular re-appropriation of the figure of the Jew in the context of post-Holocaust Poland? And how conscious are anti-Semitic prejudices in this representation?**

---

A tourist who visits Krakow and wanders about the Grand Square and its surrounding alleys discovers a city that is superb, historically rich and open to the world, and whose tourist agencies have long integrated in their offers a guided tour of Auschwitz. In so doing, he shops around, finding herself spoilt for choice between Boleslawiec pottery and the legion of wooden, glass and fabric angels that proliferate in T-shirt and other souvenir shops.

Yet at St. Florian's gate, Krakow's *Place du Tertre*, a portrait catches his eye. In the middle of a wall covered with a patchwork of pictures representing the pope, horses, a few naked women and inevitable sunsets, a Jew is standing. One recognizes him by his skullcap, his sidelocks, and dare we say, his nose. He is all the more recognizable since he holds a gold coin in his hand.

## The Jew as a "Good Luck Charm"

Incredulous, our tourist looks more closely and realizes with horror that this archetypal representation is reproduced in countless different forms: one Jew carries a well-filled purse, another presents his coin as an offering... Dismayed yet cautious, the tourist asks the salesman if he could tell him what this portrait is about, if he could explain what it means. Without hesitation, he answers: this is a good luck charm to become rich. And indeed, this "Jew with

the gold coin” (*Żyd z pieniążkiem*) is found sitting next to four-leaf clovers, horseshoes, as well as elephants with their trunks raised to the sky.

On the way to his hotel, and with this new knowledge in mind, our tourist notes that souvenir shops, too, display their “Jew with the gold coin,” in the form of magnets accompanied by explanatory phrases: “for fortune” (*Na fortunę*), or “for a bundle of cash” (*Na wielką kasę*). As he traverses the Grand Square, he comes across a few stalls where craftsmen-sculptors also sell representations of typical Jews, among which the famous “Jew with the gold coin”. Without quite knowing why, he becomes anxious again. He recalls those slightly or very hooked noses, those fingers gripping the coin, those cold eyes... He decides to get to the bottom of this. After a few hours spent on the Internet, he is still worried; but now he knows why.

The “Jew with the gold coin” comes with a manual. In order to be effective, it must be hung to the left of one’s front door—a likely mockery of the Jewish *mezuzah*. Preferably, the Jew should be wearing a skullcap, be very old and bearded, as if he had come from the depths of time. And he must imperatively be holding a gold coin, or, better yet, he must be counting coins or squeezing a well-filled purse against his body. An important detail: the picture must be equipped with two hooks. Indeed, one must be able to hang it both ways. Once these conditions are met, all there is left to do is slip a coin of one *grosz* behind the frame and turn the Jew upside down every Saturday. Money and fortune will follow.

The “Jew with the gold coin” is one in a long series of collective representations that associate Jews with money and whose origins go back to ancient times. Judas, Shylock, Gobseck, and other such figures populate Western culture. But there is something new about the “Jew with the gold coin”: it is massively present in contemporary commercial sites where it is sold or hung on walls as a good luck charm, including in the shops of the former Jewish quarter. Thus, it is not without interest to try and shed light on this phenomenon’s origin, nature, and relation to popular culture, as well as on the meaning attributed to it by those who hang the picture in their apartments or shops.

## Old Proverbs: Metamorphoses and Stability of Stereotypes

The first articles on the emergence of the “Jew with the gold coin” date from the 2000s, and their authors agree that the phenomenon is fairly recent. Its origins can be traced to the period of the 1989 political and economic transition, and it was popularized in the 2000s.<sup>1</sup> It is commonly found in tourist shops, on the website [allegro.pl](http://allegro.pl)—a sales platform comparable to

---

<sup>1</sup> Ewa Hauser, “Zwolennik ‘politycznej poprawności’ odwiedza Polskę,” in Marek Czyżewski, Kinga Dunin, Andrzej Piotrowski (eds), *Cudze problem: O ważności tego, co nieważne. Analiza dyskursu publicznego w Polsce*, Łódź, Ośrodek Badań Społecznych, 1991, pp. 37-55; Barbara Pabian, “Nadzieja na szczęście? Portret Żyda w domach częstochowskich,” *Literatura Ludowa*, 2, 2008, pp. 39-49; Abraham H. Foxman, *Jews and Money: The Story of a Stereotype*, New York, St. Martin Griffin, 2010.

eBay—as well as on other websites that market decorative objects and souvenirs. One only needs to google “lucky Jew” (*Żyd na szczęście*). Arguments surrounding the production and diffusion of these objects initially bear on the quality of the painting or trinket, and then on its magical power. Thus, one Internet ad reads: “The Jew is the symbol of abundance, success, health, good luck.”<sup>2</sup> A picture framing and canvas printing company specifies: “A portrait of the Jew for good luck: a pleasant gift” (*Portret Żyda na szczęście na fajny prezent*).<sup>3</sup> Some sellers provide instructions for use on the Internet. Those who are interrogated in the Grand Square and those who sell paintings at St. Florian’s gate give similar answers: “Ah! This is our lucky charm,” “The Jew holds the grosz for luck and fortune.” It should be emphasized that in the semantic domain, the term “Jew” (*Żyd*) is sometimes accompanied by its variant “*Żydek*,” a pejorative diminutive that can be translated in English as “*Yid*.”<sup>4</sup>

A survey conducted in May–June 2015 by Paweł Dobrosielski, Piotr Majewski and Justyna Nowak confirms the important diffusion of the image of the “Jew with the gold coin”: 65% of respondents could identify it, 55% had seen one at the home of friends or relatives, 26% had seen one in a shop, and 18% had one at home.<sup>5</sup> Age seemed to have no impact on the degree of recognition, which tends to confirm that the practice is recent, all generations having been introduced to it at the same time.

This image is not only widespread: one in two respondents associated it with the superstition according to which it brings prosperity. But it does not automatically follow that people use it. According to Paweł Dobrosielski, “only” 24% of respondents knew that one must place a grosz behind the frame, and 13% that the picture must be turned upside down on Shabbat.<sup>6</sup>

While its diffusion is recent, the image of the “Jew with the gold coin” is rooted in the history of popular representations of Jews in Poland. In fact, this image is linked to two Polish proverbs from before the Second World War, and it is often accompanied by one of these proverbs. The first, “A Jew in the entrance hall, money in the pocket” (*Żyd w sieni, pieniądze w kieszeni*), suggested that as long as Jews remained at the entrance, the money in the house was safe. This meaning is now reversed: the picture of a Jew in the entrance hall inverts cash flows and their capture. Money then falls from the Jew’s pocket into that of the picture’s lucky owner. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir emphasizes that: “Given the power of connotations associated with

---

<sup>2</sup> URL: <http://www.e-telezakupy.pl/obrazek-scienny-zyd-p-564.html> [consulted online on 12 December 2016].

<sup>3</sup> URL: <http://allegro.pl/portret-zyda-na-szczescie-na-fajny-prezent-i6644089062.html> [consulted online on 12 December 2016].

<sup>4</sup> For examples, see the following ads: <http://allegro.pl/super-obraz-zyd-zydek-na-szczescie-ogromny-wybor-i5710668815.html>; <http://allegro.pl/zyd-zydek-na-szczescie-swietny-obraz-polecam-i6625591745.html>; <http://allegro.pl/obraz-obrazek-zyd-na-szczescie-zydek-7-wzorow-i6199562326.html> [consulted online on 12 December 2016].

<sup>5</sup> Paweł Dobrosielski, “‘Żyd z pieniążkiem’ jako praktyka polskiej kultury wernakularnej: Wstępny raport z badań,” *Kultura Współczesna*, 3, 2015, p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

contemporary history, this maxim takes on a bitter meaning, as it alludes to how Poles enriched themselves when they protected the Jews.”<sup>7</sup>

The second proverb, “He who has no Jew at home is moneyless,” (*Kto nie ma w domu Żyda, temu bida*), exemplifies a similar inversion of an original meaning. The latter stems from an earlier maxim, “When poverty comes, go to the Jews” (*Kiedy bida, to do Żyda*), which refers to money-lending activities once practiced only by Jews. It is well known that starting in the second half of the Middle Ages, all professions were forbidden to Jews except for usury, which was condemned by the Catholic Church. These two proverbs have recently given rise to other variants, such as the following (Polish) rhyme: “If you want the money to stay home, and to never leave the house, keep a Jew at home, he will keep the cash.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet there is no question of a “lucky Jew” in these two age-old proverbs. How, then, are we to interpret this recent transformation of the “Jew with the gold coin” into a lucky figure, based on a representation that is rooted in the oldest anti-Semitic stereotypes?

## One Image Among Others?

Intrigued by the omnipresence of this representation imbued with magical power, the anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir tried to shed light on the issue by conducting a study of Internet sites and forums.<sup>9</sup> Adopting a Freudian perspective, she likens the image of the Jew to a sort of “totem.” Hanging this image in the entrance hall would be a way of exorcising an

---

<sup>7</sup> Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Żyd z pieniążkiem,” in Joanna Tokarska-Bakir (ed.), *PL: Tożsamości wyobrażona*, Warsaw, Czarna Owca, 2013, p. 28. The article by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir was initially published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*: “Żyd z pieniążkiem podbija Polskę,” *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 18 February 2012, available for consultation online at [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,11172689,Zyd\\_z\\_pieniazkiem\\_podbija\\_Polske.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75410,11172689,Zyd_z_pieniazkiem_podbija_Polske.html) [consulted online on 25 August 2016]. On Jewish dispossession and the responsibility of Catholic Poles in the genocide of Polish Jews, see Barbara Engelking’s recent work, *Jest jak piękny słoneczny dzień: Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945* [“It is Such a Beautiful and Sunny Day”: The Fate of Jews seeking Refuge in Polish Villages, 1942-1945], Warsaw, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011; Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu* [Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland], Warsaw, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011; Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o tym, co się udało na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów* [Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust], Krakow, Znak, 2011. For a synthesis of these studies, see Audrey Kichelewski, “Hunts for Jews and Golden Harvest: New Research on the Holocaust in Poland,” *Books and Ideas*, 30 March 2012, URL: <http://www.booksandideas.net/Hunts-for-Jews-and-Golden-Harvest.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The Polish version: *Aby kasa w domu była, I się nigdy nie skonczyła, Żyda w domu trzeba mieć! On pieniędzy będzie strzec*. This poem is engraved on a kitchen wooden board, sold on an Internet platform. URL: <http://allegro.pl/eko-deska-grawer-na-szczescie-zyd-grosik-prezent-i6592987015.html> [consulted online on 12 December 2016]. A photograph of the object was also reproduced in: Erica Lehrer, “Introduction,” in Erica Lehrer (ed.), *Na szczęście to Żyd: Polskie figurki Żydów / Lucky Jews: Poland’s Jewish figurines*, Krakow, Ha’art!, 2014, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> J. Tokarska-Bakir, “Żyd z pieniążkiem,” *op.cit.* See the review of this book at <http://www.booksandideas.net/Anti-Semitic-beliefs-in.html>.

underlying feeling of guilt, which stems from having participated in or been responsible for the spoliation and destruction of Jews during the war.<sup>10</sup>

Paweł Dobrosielski reaches the same conclusion by analyzing the image as an element of vernacular culture. According to him, the “Jew with the gold coin’ draws on the anti-Semitic stereotype that associates Jews with money, but it also displaces this stereotype, tames it, gives it a positive meaning, and assigns it the role of supporting contemporary Poles in their search for wealth.”<sup>11</sup> The image would thus reflect a “reaction to the feeling of isolation produced by the highly complex Polish discourse on the Holocaust, and simultaneously by the internalization (via taking into account common interpretations) and contestation (via inverting its meaning) of that discourse.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Erica Lehrer qualifies the significance of these representations as unilaterally anti-Semitic. For this anthropologist, who runs a research team studying popular images of Jews in Poland,<sup>13</sup> these are indeed images, in the plural, in that the “Jew with the gold coin” is only one representation among others. The Jew is embodied in a wooden sculpture, with his traditional black dress, in a gesture of prayer; he morphs into a wooden statue<sup>14</sup> or a puppet to play in Christmas shows, etc. The complexity of these performances was even the subject of an exhibition entitled “Souvenir, Talisman, Toy” (*Pamiątka, Zabawka, Talizman*), presented by the Ethnographic Museum of Krakow as part of the Jewish Culture Festival in 2013.<sup>15</sup>

Erica Lehrer, who was the curator of this exhibition, points out that “the Poles are mistaken when they naively look at these images, which are an inevitable part of these objects, without referring them to the long history of anti-Jewish symbolism; on the other hand, a large number of Jews are incapable of seeing in them anything other than anti-Semitism.”<sup>16</sup> In order to qualify the underlying anti-Semitism, she places these paintings, figurines and other objects in the context of their creation: a pensive Jew is contrasted with a Christ of pity; another Jew has a nose as crooked as that of a bishop, the two having been sculpted by the same artist; other Jews are resistance fighters; Korczak can be seen embracing a group of children.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> P. Dobrosielski, “‘Żyd z pieniążkiem’ jako praktyka polskiej kultury wernakularnej...,” *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>13</sup> See the project website, which includes several photographs: <http://jewishfigs.pl/> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>14</sup> See : <http://www.luckyjews.com/land-of-milk-and-honey/> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>15</sup> *Pamiątka, Zabawka, Talizman*, curator Erica Lehrer, Ethnographic Museum of Krakow, 2013. See the exhibition website: [www.luckyjews.com](http://www.luckyjews.com) [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>16</sup> Erica Lehrer, “Introduction,” in E. Lehrer (ed.), *Na szczęście to Żyd...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

## The Power of Anti-Semitic Stereotypes

And yet, while it is possible to consider some of these naive representations as belonging to a memory rooted in bygone observations,<sup>17</sup> the image of the “Jew with the gold coin” nevertheless entails, as emphasized by Bożena Umińska-Keff, all the main ingredients of anti-Semitism: a non-personalized man—“his name is Jew, Jew as such, common Jew”<sup>18</sup>—a soulless individual embodied by money, and against whom one can naturally indulge in enormous violence, at least on the symbolic level.

For according to the ritual associated with this image, the Jew must hang with his head down on Sabbath; on that day, when he is religiously forbidden from touching money, or even from thinking about it, he must metaphorically cough up. In turn, this reversal leads to excesses. Thus the Jew can be burned in an oven with his frame when he fails to bring in money.<sup>19</sup> In a country so painfully involved in the history of the Holocaust, these practices can only resonate with debates about the responsibility of Polish Christians towards their fellow Jewish citizens—debates that are often brutally divisive.

In this respect, the work of Jan T. Gross proved a catalyst for media storms in Poland.<sup>20</sup> His book *Neighbors*, about the Jedwabne peasants who burned the Jews of their village in a barn, functioned as a detonator. It was at the origin of an investigation by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)<sup>21</sup>—an institution in charge of research activities and judicial responsibilities regarding the crimes committed against the Polish nation—which confirmed the historian’s conclusions. President Aleksander Kwasniewski eventually went to the scene of the massacre on 10 July 2001, and asked the Jewish people for forgiveness on behalf of the

---

<sup>17</sup> Michał Bilewicz, “Powrót wypartego chałaciara,” *Dziennik Opinii. Krytyka Polityczna*, 4 July 2013, URL: <http://www.krytykapolityczna.pl/artykuly/sztuki-wizualne/20130704/bilewicz-powrot-wypartego-chalaciara> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>18</sup> Bożena Umińska-Keff, “Żyd o imieniu Żyd,” in E. Lehrer (ed.), *Na szczęście to Żyd...*, *op. cit.*, p. 208. The article by Bożena Umińska-Keff was initially published in *Przekrój*, and reproduced on the online portal *Rzeczpospolita*, 19 May 2012, URL: <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/877193-Zyd-o-imieniu-Zyd.html#ap-1> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>19</sup> Joanna Tokarska-Bakir quotes the words of a woman who complained on an Internet forum of the “bad luck” the picture brought her: “My husband threw it in the oven and didn’t even let me keep the frame. [...] I wish you plenty of money, but without the Jew.” Quoted in Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Żyd z pieniążkiem podbija Polskę,” *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> See the following works by Jan T. Gross: *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2001; *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, New York, Random House, 2006; with Irena Grudzinska-Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012. See also: A. Kichelewski, “Hunts for Jews and Golden Harvest: New Research on the Holocaust in Poland,” *op. cit.*; see also Jean-Yves Potel, “La haine après le meurtre. Violences antijuives après la Shoah,” a book review of Jan T. Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, *La Vie des idées*, 12 January 2011, URL: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-haine-apres-le-meurtre.html>.

<sup>21</sup> See “The Ministry of memory,” *Books and Ideas*, 27 November 2014, URL: <http://www.booksandideas.net/The-Ministry-of-Memory.html>

Polish nation.<sup>22</sup> The debate then focused on the need for “self-flagellation,” a position some denounced by countering that the Holocaust was the work of the Third Reich, that Poland had been its victim, and that the country had the highest number of Righteous Among the Nations. The terms of the debate have since changed radically.

With the coming into power of the Law and Justice Party (PiS) in 2015, a number of initiatives in the field of “historical policy” have signaled a clear turning point. As regards the history of Polish Jews, this is attested to by three recent declarations.

The first concerns the prosecution of Jan T. Gross for “insulting the nation,” a criminal offense punishable by three years’ imprisonment. The researcher’s alleged crime was to have published an article in the German newspaper *Die Welt*, in which he argued that: “The Poles, who are justifiably proud of their anti-Nazi resistance movement, killed more Jews than Germans during the war.”<sup>23</sup> The court overseeing the case acquitted him; however, only three days later, the judicial hierarchy challenged this decision, extending the investigation to 9 April 2017 on the grounds that the judgment had been “hasty.”<sup>24</sup> Andrzej Duda, the PiS candidate elected president in 2015, even considered stripping Jan Gross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland, thus triggering a wave of solidarity with the researcher in the country and abroad.<sup>25</sup>

The second declaration was that of the Minister of National Education, Anna Zalewska. In a television broadcast on July 13, 2016, she denied the responsibility of the Poles in the Jedwabne massacre: “A large number of historians and well-known professors present a picture

---

<sup>22</sup> On the reception of his first book, *Neighbors*, and on the memory of the massacre in Jedwabne, see especially: Anna Bikont, *The Crime and the Silence: Confronting the Massacre of Jews in Wartime Jedwabne*, translated from the Polish by Alissa Valles, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; special issue “Po co nam Gross?” (What is Gross good for?), *Znak*, 670, March 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Jan T. Gross, “Die Osteuropäer haben kein Schamgefühl,” *Die Welt*, 13 September 2015, URL: <https://www.welt.de/debatte/kommentare/article146355392/Die-Osteuropaer-haben-kein-Schamgefuehl.html> [consulted online on 12 October 2015].

<sup>24</sup> See especially Wojciech Czuchnowski, “Odwołane umorzenie: prokuratura PiS nie odpuszcza Grossowi. Będą szukali w jego tekście pogardy dla Polaków,” *Gazeta wyborcza*, 27 October 2016, URL: <http://wyborcza.pl/7,75398,20902311,odwolane-umorzenie-prokuratura-pis-nie-odpuszcza-grossowi.html> [consulted online on 12 December 2016].

<sup>25</sup> In Poland, see “Prof. Gross zasłużył na ten order. Kancelaria Prezydenta chce reglamentować wolność słowa?,” 11 February 2016, URL: <http://wyborcza.pl/1,95891,19612362,prof-gross-zasluzyl-na-ten-order.html#ixzz4SeQo4Bim> [consulted online on 27 February 2016]. In France, an appeal by a group of researchers was published on *Lemonde.fr* website. See: “La Pologne s’est grandie en se penchant sur son passé sombre. Un retour en arrière serait terrible,” *Le Monde*, 25 February 2016, URL: [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/25/la-pologne-s-est-grandie-en-se-penchant-sur-son-passe-sombre-un-retour-en-arriere-serait-terrible\\_4871725\\_3232.html?xtmc=jan\\_gross&xtcr=3](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2016/02/25/la-pologne-s-est-grandie-en-se-penchant-sur-son-passe-sombre-un-retour-en-arriere-serait-terrible_4871725_3232.html?xtmc=jan_gross&xtcr=3) [consulted online on 27 February 2016].

that is totally different” from that put forward by Jan Gross in his book *Neighbors*. She also denied the responsibility of the Poles in the Kielce pogrom of July 1946.<sup>26</sup>

The third declaration was made by Jaroslaw Szarek, then candidate for the position of Director of the IPN. On July 19, 2016, at the session of the Parliamentary Committee on Justice, he stated that: “The perpetrators of this crime [in Jedwabne] were the Germans, who used in their own machine of terror a group of Poles under duress.”<sup>27</sup> His appointment as Director of the IPN took effect on 22 July.

These different stands led to a clarification in the form of an open letter, written by academics who wished to counter the manipulation of contemporary history in Poland.<sup>28</sup>

While the representation of the “Jew with the gold coin” is not an expression of state anti-Semitism, it nevertheless benefits from the “disinhibition” of xenophobic speech, but also from the indictment—in both its literal and figurative senses—of all those who are designated as enemies of the nation. This explains why it can circulate without being challenged. Erica Lehrer reports that Jonathan Ornstein, Director of the Jewish Community Center in Krakow, complained to a souvenir seller located in front of the Remuh Synagogue, arguing that it was an offensive representation, especially in such a place. In response, the seller replaced all the “Jews with gold coins” with figurines of Jews holding a Star of David.<sup>29</sup>

To understand this absence of challenge, one must consider the context of Poland. The conception of freedom of expression that imposed itself after 1989 differs from that prevailing in France. It is closer to the American model, which gives precedence to freedom over prohibition. Thus, the sale of objects incarnating the Third Reich (whether genuine or not) is authorized, as is the press specialized in (anti-German, anti-Ukrainian, anti-Russian) xenophobia and anti-Semitism, which can be found in both supermarkets and large bookstores. The question of justifying the ethics of the object being sold is not asked.

Consequently, non-Jewish Polish buyers see no particular anti-Semitic connotation in this image. Some declare their admiration for Jews’ alleged talent for doing business and making money. Others claim it is “merely” a good luck charm, nothing but a simple “*grosz na szczęście*.” Others still refute the charge of anti-Semitism by pointing to the fact that, precisely, they have a Jew at home...

---

<sup>26</sup> See the *Kropka nad I* broadcast of 13 July 2016, URL: <http://www.tvn24.pl/wiadomosci-z-kraju,3/anna-zalewska-w-kropce-nad-i-o-jedwabnem-i-pogromie-kieleckim,660799.html> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>27</sup> Dziennik.pl, 19 July 2016, URL: <http://wiadomosci.dziennik.pl/polityka/artykuly/526800,kandydat-na-szefa-ipn-o-jedwabnem-wykonawcami-zbrodni-byli-niemcy-ktorzy-wykorzystali-polakow.html> [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>28</sup> See: [http://www.petycjeonline.com/list\\_otwarty\\_nauczycieli](http://www.petycjeonline.com/list_otwarty_nauczycieli) [consulted online on 25 August 2016].

<sup>29</sup> E. Lehrer (ed.), *Na szczęście to Żyd...*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.



Yet this re-appropriation of the figure of the Jew, in the context of post-Holocaust Poland, compels us to question its content, if only to disclose its profound ambiguity: what image of the Jew is being appropriated or tamed? Is it the image favored by contemporary critical historiography or a stereotype informed by anti-Semitic representations? Even though the Jewish population of Poland today is mainly composed of wooden or clay figurines, magnets and other kitsch pictures that supposedly bring luck, the question cannot be avoided. For the benevolent attitudes of non-Jewish Poles—like “an iron fist in a velvet glove”<sup>30</sup>—contribute to the maintenance of toxic stereotypes, and hence to a political context that is more and more worrisome.<sup>31</sup>

Published in *Books&Ideas*, 24 April 2017.

---

<sup>30</sup> Mary Jackman, *The Velvet Glove: Paternalism and Conflict in Gender, Class, and Race Relations*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> On this political context, see especially: Georges Mink, “L’Europe centrale à l’épreuve de l’autoritarisme,” *Politique étrangère*, 2, 2016, pp. 89-101; Ewa Tartakowsky, “La Pologne, de mal en PiS,” *La Vie des idées*, 18 May 2016, URL: <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/La-Pologne-de-mal-en-PiS.html>