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Jewish Humor as a Source of Research on Polish-Jewish Relations

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Joseph Telushkin, a rabbi and author of the book *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews*, observed that “Jewish humor reveals a great many truths about Jews, but no one great truth.”1 One obvious fact is that Jewish humor mirrors the Jewish condition. It has served as a coping mechanism for a people confronted with their minority status in an often hostile environment. As a mode of communication, humor also expresses the nature and intricacies of interethnic relations. The religious status of Jews’ “Chosenness” and their role in society evoked antagonism among gentiles and contributed to Jews’ contradictory lives as guards of cohesiveness in the private sphere and outcasts in the public realm. Jewish jokes, used by Jews in response to their circumstances, reveal important information about the life and struggles of the largest pre-World War II Jewish population in Europe–Poland, particularly in the Pale of Settlement and Galicia.

Humor as such can be defined as a “frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life. It is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view, and one which has great therapeutic power.”2 In its function, on the other hand, the joke serves as protective behavior that relieves tension of the reality’s seriousness.3 As a “self-directed perspective-taking humor,”4 jokes allow people to identify with a social, ethnic, religious, or national group. Sigmund Freud distinguished between three forms-jokes, comic, and humor-and their respective roles. He viewed jokes as provocative stories that provide outlet for expressing sexual tensions. Comic served to preserve spirit when the outcome of things was not as expected. Finally, humor is an emotion-centered coping mechanism that helps people live through conditions that evoke strong feelings.5

I define Jewish humor as humor created by Jews, that applies to Jews, expresses Jewish sensibilities, is often connected to Jewish folklore of the shtetl [Eastern European village], and reflects changing aspects of Jewish life.6 Barry Sanders, author of *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History*, described the creation of a Jewish joke: “When the Jew makes jokes, he does it within his literary tradition by paying particular attention to the word, to levels of meaning, to a playful acknowledgment of context, and if at all possible, to an interpretation that will evoke a laugh in appreciation for his keen wit.” In doing so, “He turns himself into a rabbi with a sharp tongue; he becomes an authority
and a final interpretation unto himself. Riding on the edge of biting and witty sarcasm, the Jewish joker works through stealth, avoiding direct punch lines or obvious quips and puns.”

The virtues of Jewish humor lie in its structure and social critique. On the one hand, Jewish humor can be viewed as testimony to the Jewish people’s genius. On the other hand, Jews historically employed self-mockery in response to their situation. In his article, “The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor,” Elliott Oring argued that the meaning of Jewish humor is far deeper than any simple formula can explain. Oring claimed that “Conceptualizations of the Jewish joke are merely crystallizations of conceptualizations of the Jewish people, their history, and their identity.”

I would also argue that jokes provide a lens on how Jews perceived their position in the larger world and how intergroup relations affected the structure, language, and content of the jokes they created.

Jewish jokes are based in the past. Their purpose is to confront antisemitism and explain the Eastern European reality in which Jews lived. Jewish self-mockery in humor can thus be viewed as society’s way of dealing with modernity and the expectations of Jews for assimilation and integration. In light of this, Dan Ben-Amos’s article “The ‘Myth’ of Jewish Humor” evokes the idea of the “transitional Jew,” attributing his or her self-mockery to the difficulties posed by living on the verge of the larger world, while still being steeped in the Jewish world.

A baptized banker Rozenblum led to the engagement of his son to the daughter of the convert Kon:

“I’ve always wanted such a son-in-law,” says Kon to his friends, “a nice Catholic man from a good Jewish family.”

Jewish jokes are part of ethnic humor because they are told by Jews using stereotypes intended to reinforce group identity, assert superiority, and portray interethnic relations in a pluralistic setting. The power of humor lies in its flexibility to create both positive and negative stereotypes, as well as in its transferability across time and geography. I view stereotypes as generalizations about members of other groups that serve to construct social identities and hierarchies based on the ideas of excluding the outsiders while including the insider group. Arthur Asa Berger, author of *The Genius of the Jewish Joke*, explained that “Stereotypes play an important role in ethnic humor. These are group-held generalizations about members of other groups that are used to explain their behavior.” The outside world began to create their own stereotypes of Jews with the transmission of Jewish humor and folklore stories and through personal and group interactions. In ethnic humor, however, there is a difference between jokes told by Jews about themselves and those told by oth-
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ers about Jews. The latter jokes often focus on negative images of “the Jew” to sustain such stereotypes.

Jewish humor is an important part of Yiddish folklore. Nathan Ausubel, author of the anthologies *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore* and *A Treasury of Jewish Humor*, explained: “Folklore is a vivid record of a people, palpitating with life itself, and its greatest art is its artlessness. It is a true and unguarded portrait, for where art may be selective, may conceal, gloss over defects and even prettify, folk art is always revealing, always truthful in the sense that it is a spontaneous expression.” In this sense, Jewish jokes portray the way Jews saw themselves, which, in turn, influenced their image among non-Jews. It is difficult, if not impossible, to trace the origin of a joke. Nekhame Epshteyn, a pioneering scholar of Jewish folk humor at the YIVO [Yidisher Visnshaftlecher Institut] Institute for Jewish Research in pre-World War II Lithuania, discovered variants of and constant interchange between some jokes in oral and written sources. This observation led her to differentiate between the process of localization, or telling the joke with local people as characters, and modernization of jokes, describing how some jokes change from one generation to the next. As such, jokes are mobile, their duplications are inevitable, and they trace a particular motif while the secondary elements are adjusted in accordance with a particular situation.

The topic of how Jewish humor illuminates a view of Polish-Jewish relations and gentile perceptions of Jews poses several challenges. Selecting appropriate literature is a major obstacle. Owing to jokes’ fluidity, I cannot assert with full certainty that my sources originally referred to the situation of Polish Jews. Sifting through several humor collections and considering possible repetitions, I limited my choice pool to those jokes that specifically mentioned Poland and Polish Jews. The joke teller was thereby alluding to Polish reality. This brings us to the issue of geography. Poland’s borders continuously changed over the years. Jokes about Polish Jews, therefore, can often be applied to Jews from Eastern and Central Europe in general. There are, however, a number of jokes that reflect specifically Polish situations. Establishing the time period when the joke’s description was taking place causes yet another problem. Since I was examining thematic patterns, determining jokes’ dates was secondary to my interest.

I emphasize Poland because its land became the focal point of Jewish life and culture throughout the centuries. Jewish folklore designated it as a place where Jews should settle. Jewish jokes originated from Jewish folk tradition and reaction to daily life. They were created by Jews for a Jewish audience. With time, Jewish humor circulated in Poland in various versions, influencing Polish satire and humor [i.e., *szmonces*] due to its values and connections with
Polish land, its culture and fate. The tradition of Jewish humor remains popular in Poland, since its range of topics, punch lines, self-deprecating approach, and relation to real life renders it timeless.\textsuperscript{17} The proliferation of Jewish humor collections translated into Polish exemplifies this trend.\textsuperscript{18}

With the entrance of Jewish humor into the consciousness of gentile Poles, through both individual and group interactions, the image of “the Jew” contributed to creating a Polish collective perception of Jews. Speaking of a “collective perception” is problematic in itself. French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’s concept of “collective memory” provides clues to understanding my claim. Halbwachs’s notion examines the ways in which the past is remembered through ascribing meaning to present concerns. In essence, collective memory tends to simplify memories without engaging in their exploration. Halbwachs differentiated between social memory, or things experienced on an individual level, and historical memory, which is mediated by outside sources, including mass communication (such as humor). “Collective perception” denotes an understanding that a group possesses and creates about something. Hillel Levine, a religion scholar and sociologist, argued that “Perception is determined not only by the cognitive capacity or philosophical acumen of individuals. It relates to the collective meanings that are made socially available as well.” As such, society is multilayered, “and society is constituted of more than hierarchies of power, safe of social interaction, and structure of economic relations repeated and formalized.” When it comes to its function, “Society is available to be the object of reflection and analysis, as well as manipulation, embodying the subjective and intersubjective interpretations of its participants.”\textsuperscript{19}

When examining humor as a source of collective perception about Jews and interethnic relations, it is possible and necessary to correlate humor, as part of folklore, with the representation of “the Jew” in Polish folk culture. An important account of intergroup contacts and images preserved in Polish people’s memories was described in sociologist Alina Cała’s *The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture*. This study, however, limits the perspective, since it is only concerned with people’s attitudes toward Jews in the provinces and not in the urban areas. Nevertheless, it provides an important account of how ordinary Poles viewed their Jewish neighbors and evaluated intergroup relations based on various factors, including humor. In her ethnographic study, Cała observed that the image of the Jew was not marginal to the larger culture but an integral part of it.\textsuperscript{20} In the folklore and humor that the interviewees recalled, the fact that they saw the Jews as a distinct group did not necessarily lead to outright antagonism. Their perceptions were often shaped by indifference. But the personal and group interactions displayed contradiction, inconsistency, and ambivalence.\textsuperscript{21}
In the Polish language, the word Żyd [Jew] is not a neutral term. It possesses a dubious connotation and rarely conveys information just about one's ethnic or religious identity. The imagery that Jewish humor evokes of Jews stigmatizes the entire people. The idea of Jewish inferiority is partly a result of myths surrounding the Jews and in part the legacy of World War II, when Jews were actually excluded from life. The mutual isolation of both Jews and Polish gentiles strengthened various prejudices. The myth of inherent differences between the two groups served to explain “the other,” their origin, place, and fate in relation to the gentiles, as well as their characteristics that made them separate. The “Jew” characterized everything defined as “anti-Polish” or “not-Polish.” Perception of the Jews is therefore also a product of collective meaning attributed to the presence of Jews, and it is often explained by the Jews themselves in the humor that they created.

According to sociologist Aleksander Hertz, the definition of a Jew embraced an array of beliefs, as well as moral, political, economic, and legal attributes that defined the Jews’ societal functions and tasks. Hence the memory of Jews is an issue rooted in the history of collective definitions of “the Jew.” The comprehensive stereotypical image of “the Jew” that emerges from Jewish humor is not entirely negative. But there was a disdain for the businessman and for the middleman position of the Jew, a ridicule of strange habits, a suspicion of Judaism, ambiguity about their morale, but still a respect for the special wisdom the Jews were seen to have and admiration for their devotion to family life. Jews’ customs, by contrast, were mysterious and aroused anxiety. Through Jewish humor, gentiles’ perceptions were confirmed, and the Jews were expected to comply with the bases of the stereotype.

A societal hierarchy existed in which “the Jew” occupied a specific position. This phenomenon can be observed in the way Jews address themselves in humor to mock their own status and the way Jewish jokes refer to particular members of the non-Jewish population: “This sociology consisted of concise definitions applied to the inferior orders of Polish society: the peasant was a cham, the burgher a lýk, the Jew a parch.” Such definitions did not necessarily express fervent social antagonisms. They attested to the existence of deeper intergroup conflicts. In effect, such a ladder of inferiority expressed in terminology was not a sign of outright hate within the framework of intergroup relations but rather a voice of contempt for those being the object of the joke.

Hertz elaborated on the significance of “the Jew” in Polish folk culture and the image’s relevance for the way in which the entire Jewish people were perceived: “The derided Jew is an important motif in Polish folklore. It is not difficult to see that the true object of the derision is the caste and its characteristics.” For the audience, the subject of the joke was the Jews’ features: “Its sep-
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arateness, its customs, its activities make the caste highly comical. Comical also is the conceit of a Jew who thinks himself better than someone else but who is only a parch. The comedy now is not very different from what the noble felt about the peasant and the peasant about the noble.” In the end, what triggered laughter were the preconceived ideas the non-Jewish audience held about “the Jews” anticipated behavior: “To a great degree, the humor stemmed from the disparity between the behavior of a member of another group and the image considered proper for that group.”

Bringing the image of the Jew into the public arena, also through humor, as sociologist Iwona Irwin-Zarecka argued, may be called “Jewish memory project.” In the case of Poland, “to remember” is first to create a permanent space for “the Jew” in Poles’ collective memory, which can then be gradually filled with items of interest and relevance to those engaged in the memory work. The memory of the Jews is an issue rooted in the history of collective definitions of “the Jew.” Interestingly, the Poles’ perception of Jews has remained largely unchanged, and it has been reinforced by a longstanding lack of contacts and thus limited interactions with them. The near disappearance of Jews from Polish public landscape as a result of the Holocaust has left a void. Perhaps nostalgia and curiosity are the reasons why Jewish humor has remained alive and why its images, as a substitute for real people, are taken for granted.

Perception depends on connotation of terms. For some, cleverness can signify a positive trait, like wisdom, while for others it may mean deceitfulness. The most absurd Jewish jokes, like the following, are about the Jews from the Polish town of Chełm:

A citizen of Chelm came to Warsaw, and wherever he walked he carried a pencil and notebook in his hand. A friend met him and asked what his reason was.

“Well, when I cross the street, and an automobile runs me over, I will immediately be able to mark down the license plate.”

The Chelemer wise are the quintessential fools, depicted as naïve and having their own unique explanations and solutions for every issue. These jokes illuminate the confirmation that the Jews themselves sought to establish intra-community boundaries by allowing some Jews to be less wise than others. On the other side of the spectrum is the perception of Poles, who retold those jokes noting that the Jews are really not stupid but, rather, quite cunning. By being able to twist the meaning of natural occurrences, Jews were believed to be ready to turn any truth to their own advantage.

A range of jokes appeared to gentiles as proof that Jews were inherently more intelligent than them. In Jewish humor, the phrase Yiddisher kop has
varied meanings, from a literal “Jewish head” to creative ways of approaching issues. But when used as juxtaposition to the *goyisher kop* [non-Jewish head], it clearly marks a division. This concept of a separate intelligence of Jews and gentiles originated in Eastern Europe when Jews found themselves in contact with illiterate, hostile peasants. For Jews, the biblical “People of the Book,” literacy allowed them to fulfill the religious requirements of studying sacred texts. This eventually led to the notion of Jewish inborn intellectual superiority. For the mostly ignorant rural inhabitants, wisdom and cleverness equated to sneakiness and cunning. This led the Poles to believe that Jews were disloyal to their host nation, did not play by the rules, but instead survived through swindling.37

The association of Jews with money led to the prevalent and dangerous stereotype of “the Jew” as a businessman and usurer, motivated by his religion. Jewish jokes mock this connection. Poles took it as a fact and saw it as proof that Jewish children not only inherited moneymaking skills but also learned them. This notion is contained in the following joke:

In religion class:

“Who can tell me,” asks the teacher, “what sin have Joseph’s brothers committed when they sold him out?”

Berek raises two fingers, “They sold him too cheap and without the box.”38

In the peasant system of values, business was a sin. Therefore, Jewish merchants were assigned negative traits, including laziness, dishonesty, craftiness, deceit, slyness, and greediness.39 Jews acted as middlemen for the *szlachta* [nobility] as administrators of noble estates, tax and toll collectors, merchants, craftpeople, lease holders on mills, and manufacturers and distributors of liquor and malt.40 The public believed that the economic role of the Jews was dangerous and harmful. Jews corrupted the nobles, which led to the entire population’s impoverishment.41 In fact, the sentiments about Jewish merchants as exploiters, who earned money through trickery rather than honest labor, exemplified more than prejudice against Jews based on stereotypes. More generally, they comprised means of expressing agrarian society’s cultural opposition to the idea of trade and capitalism, which were often associated with Jews and their economic roles.42

Climbing up the social ladder by attaining financial affluence was a major factor emphasized and mocked in humor:

In the monumental synagogue in Łódź, which was located on the corner of Kościuszki and Zielona [streets] before the Nazis have destroyed it, the prayer services were held only on Saturdays and holidays. Because this house of worship was mainly used by the
plutocracy, one had to obtain expensive entrance cards in order to enter it.

On Rosh Hashanah, a Jew in a caftan tries to enter the building. He is stopped at the door by the shammes [a sexton in a synagogue].

“What card? I have urgent business with factory owner Rosenblatt.”

The shammes says sarcastically:

“I already know you, you thief! You have no business to do with Mr. Rosenblatt. You came here to pray!”

Jews were inarguably active in the rapid growth of Łódź, the textile metropolis, where they represented the owners and managers of large factories. In other big cities such as Warsaw, members of the Jewish bourgeoisie also occupied prominent positions. They were largely polonized, mostly assimilated, and often converted. But the peculiar perception of Jewish economic domination remained. The view was that Jews had no regard for any sanctity, including their own. The synagogue was seen as the center of business transactions. The widespread belief was that if Jews could swindle their own people, they could certainly do the same to non-Jews.

Drinking was part of the daily routine, particularly in the Polish provinces. Jewish innkeepers were blamed for the spread of alcoholism among the peasants, who were going into debt over the purchase of drinks. Jokes about innkeepers and their gentile clientele abound:

Two tavern owners are discussing business. One asks the other:

“Tell me, do you sell whiskey on credit?”

“Sometimes,” is the answer, “and when I do, I charge double. How about you?”

“Also rarely. But when I sell on credit, I charge the customer less than when I sell for cash.”

“What kind of sense does that make?”

“Don’t you see? Then, if they never pay me, I lose less.”

The tavern, like its Jewish owner, was an intrusion of the “other” into the countryside. Rural Jews who owned taverns represented to the villagers the abuses and wealth associated with noble estates and distilleries. The tavern quickly became a symbol of Jewish dominance over the peasantry. The Jewish tavern, the kretschme or shenk, also functioned as a meeting place where locals took in entertainment. It was a place for passing hours, gossiping, and engaging in fantasies. The inn was the locus of political activity, center of economic transactions, and source of local credit. It was also a wayside rest, sitting at the geographical and social periphery of the community.
men relationship with Jews. The kretschmer provided information about the outside world, served as a go-between in peasant relations with the landlord, and gave advice and assistance on issues ranging from medicine and familial relations to financial and legal affairs. In the end, a conflicting image of the village Jew emerges in humor, as a simultaneous informant and adviser.

In the context of Jewish humor, gender and age mattered. In humor with sexual undertones, the target was usually female, whose presence often served to ridicule the male. When presented as young, the Jewish woman was viewed as beautiful and easily classified as a prostitute, as in this joke:

Lejb Sobel got married and constantly boasts about the good qualities of his beautiful wife. One day he meets a friend, who takes him under the arm and whispers:

“Give it a break with this talking. You’re being laughed at. Do you know that your wife has four lovers?”

“So what?” Sobel smiles. “I prefer to have twenty percent in a good business than one hundred percent in a bad one.”

When the Jewish woman was old, she was represented as asexual, ugly, quarrelsome, loud, and gesticulating rather than verbally expressing herself. In some jokes the motif of mismatch highlights the bride’s ugly physique to emphasize the social awkwardness and helplessness of the Jewish male. In other sexual jokes, the image of the Jewish male is depicted as guilty of encouraging prostitution and robbery. He sells his own wife, if only he could profit from it. He has few inhibitions and little regard for females. Then, too, Jewish humor is full of jokes about older widowed Jewish men, who either look for or marry much younger women, which was a source of contempt for those who held it as religiously immoral. From the Jewish point of view, mocking such traits is an indication that such behavior did take place. From the perspective of non-Jews, obscene humor stimulated the ridiculing of individuals or groups that were generally disliked.

However disconcerting the perceptions of Jewish men and women taken individually, the projected image of the Jewish family is rather positive. The dominant position of the father was in tune with that in gentile households. The care for children was praiseworthy, and the children themselves were regarded as more polite than their gentile counterparts. Non-Jews admired the Jews’ respect for the elderly and a greater sense of morality. Hospitality extended to strangers was a trait often emphasized in jokes, even if the joke’s focus lay elsewhere. Overall, Jewish family life provided an idealized image of the Jews in the eyes of the Poles.

Even the Jews’ attachment to Judaism, however negatively the Christians might have viewed the religion itself, was held in high esteem. One form in
particular aroused both controversy and admiration. Chasidism was a popular religious movement that gave rise to the pattern of communal life and leadership and to a particular social outlook that emerged in Judaism in the second half of the eighteenth century. Chasidism extolled tsadikim, the charismatic righteous ones. They served as spiritual leaders of Chasidic communities, intermediaries between man and God, and miracle makers. Because the rebbe was believed to be able to converse with God, and it seemed as if he had answers to all questions, he too was often respected by gentiles. Although Judaism was regarded by Christian Poles as a tainted religion, the rebbe’s attachment to faith, his wisdom, and his intelligence were admired, thereby often making him not only a friend of the local priest but also an arbiter in Jewish-Christian disputes, whose verdicts and advice were respected by both sides:

There was a terrible draught. A delegation of farmers came to the rabbi to ask him for a miracle, so there would be rainfall. The rabbi made a stern face and said:

“There will be no miracle, because there is no faith in God.”

“How come, rebe? We came to you to ask for a miracle. How is that there is no faith?”

“There is no faith, because had you had faith in God, you’d come with umbrellas in the first place.”

At the same time, its very differences and peculiarities made Chasidism and its followers ambiguous and the objects of superstitious ridicule on the part of the gentiles. Non-Jews assumed that supernatural powers protected Jewish sacred places and sites. Hence non-Jews also inserted kvitlekh [request notes] in the tasdikim’s ohelim [graves] and sought advice from the rebbes. Because medicine was considered a dubious occupation, people maintained faith in the curative powers of this strange group. Anything foreign, however, had a suspected connection with the devil. Anything that was not integral to the coherence of the local culture was impure, as was the Jews’ presence. Jews, therefore, also mocked the reliance on the their spiritual leaders’ powers:

A chasid with his deaf daughter came to the tsadik of Bobrka. The Rabbi, long may he live, promised the worried father that he will cure his daughter. He took out his sable fur cap, held a stick, and hitting the floor three times, he cried out:

“Sara, daughter of Leah, I order you to speak!”

And the girl does nothing, and is silent.

“Sara, daughter of Leah, I order you to speak!” the tsadik repeats.

So, when Sara, daughter of Leah, remains untouched for the third time to the words of the tsadik, may he live long, he became angry and cried:
“You’re stubborn, so don’t let out any word from your indocile lips till you die!”

And so what do you think? The words of rabbi Elchanan of Bobrka, may he live long, have became reality—the girl is deaf till this day. Struggles with modernity led to the emergence of heretics, atheists, freethinkers, and converts to Christianity. Many Jews who rebelled against the Jewish way of life went to the extreme and acted according to the Yiddish proverb: *az men est khazer, zol es shoyn rinen ibern moyl* [if you’re going to eat pork, then let it run down your face]. As reality confirmed, Jews could not escape their association with Judaism. No matter their conversion or degree of assimilation, Jews were judged based on their appearance and behavior. The outer image of “the Jew” served to explain the Jews’ inner character.

From the Jewish perspective, conversion was seen as treason and a pathway to social climbing rather than conviction. Converts to Christianity were viewed as renegades and radicals, while assimilationists were regarded more favorably because they did not totally renounce Judaism. Most converts ignored those reactions because they believed, or wanted to believe, that they enjoyed support from their new religious group. It was obvious, however, that even the converted Jew is still a Jew in the eyes of a gentile. According to Polish ethnonationalists, conversion did not automatically mean inclusion in a nation. In fact, it was actually considered threatening to the unity of ethnic Poles and their future existence. In essence, then, Jewish converts—and assimilationists, for that matter—were seen as enemies of the Polish nation and Christianity.

The following joke illustrates the validity of my premise that Jewish humor can serve as source of research in the area of interethnic relations:

A Polish Jew converts to Catholicism in the nineteenth century.
The first Friday after the conversion, the priest stops by the home of his new congregant to see how’s he doing. The congregant is sitting at the table, happily eating a slab of boiled beef.

“What are you doing?!” exclaims the priest, “Don’t you remember I told you we don’t eat meat on Friday?”

“It’s not meat,” says the convert, “it’s fish.”
The priest says, “What are you talking about? I can see it’s meat.

How can you say it’s fish?”

“Simple,” replies the convert, “I just did what you did. You took me to the baptismal font, sprinkled holy water over my head, and said ‘You’re Christian.’ I took the piece of beef to the same font, sprinkled holy water on it, and proclaimed, ‘You’re a fish.’”

This joke illuminates the nature of Polish public perception of Jews and of Polish-Jewish relations. On the one hand, it depicts the profound suspicion
and distrust of Jews, even when they seemingly become part of the majority. It shows that Jews could not be truly converted either to the religion or to the Polish nation. On the other hand, it portrays the instrumental way in which some Jews might have treated their conversion in order to achieve a greater goal. The joke also elucidates the nature of Polish-Jewish relations as superficial, complicated, and conflicted. It is an example that illustrates the distrust that both groups had toward each other.

Joanna Michlic, a scholar of Polish-Jewish relations, argued in Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present that, by pursuing an analysis of anti-Jewish idioms over a period of time, one can demonstrate their power, persistence, and consequences while detailing their modifications, transformations, and discontinuities. She claimed that through such an analysis the interpretation of Polish-Jewish relations can be expanded. By the same token, it would be worthwhile to investigate the images of Jews and their stereotypical associations evoked in Jewish humor. Such examination would help illuminate particularly significant images and explore them in relation to the Polish situation. In addition, such an analysis can provide insight into how collective perceptions of Jews are constructed and discern general patterns of interethnic relations.

In light of Irwin-Zarecka’s premise, humor comprises part of a nostalgic mode of memory. It can neutralize the past, while also having a normalizing effect on the discourse about Jews. As a vehicle of nostalgia, humor transforms “the Jew” into “an other” once interesting and complex, and in idealizing the Jew’s image, nostalgia appeals to those who remember Jews and to those who do not. Jewish humor, therefore, has the potential to become a ground for exploring ethnic relations and to open an informed dialogue. In its current state, while Jewish humor has been incorporated into the fabric of Polish public life (especially cultural and artistic), the Jews as real, living people have remained essentially strangers. Taking this into account, I by no means advocate that Jewish humor comprise the main source of research. However, if critically examined, it can provide insights that complement other sources. It can also reveal the way it has been appropriated in remembering Jews.

Humor itself serves as an important source of information about interethnic relations and can tell us much about the history of ethnic groups themselves. Jewish humor is inextricably linked to Jewish folklore and history and the images that they evoke. Eva Hoffman, a scholar and writer on Polish-Jewish themes, argued, “Every time I hear Poland described reductively as an antisemitic country, I bridle in revolt, for I know that the reality is far more tangled than that.” Her statement indicates that the need to study collective
perceptions of both groups, existing within the larger framework of Polish-Jewish relations, looms large. As humor reinforces reality, the use of Jewish humor is a useful and valid source to elucidate these interactions, changes, and transmission of stereotypes, as well as their functions.

The role of folklore is often underscored in the study of interethnic relations. In fact, a multidimensional approach would help explain how the image and stereotypes of one group are reflected in the minds of the other group’s members. The Jews’ customs were unknown and mysterious and evoked anxiety and suspicion among gentile Poles. The stereotypes were a product of long historical experience, fragmentary and random generalizations, internal contradictions, and emotionally conditioned abstractions. Such perceptions are the outcome of daily encounters, interactions on various levels, and judgments. According to Hertz, all these factors possess folkloristic features. The research on ethnic relations must, therefore, include vast areas of folklore. And humor is part of it.

Jewish humor illuminates a view of Polish-Jewish relations and gentile perceptions of Jews. When examined alongside Polish folklore, Jewish humor provides a lens on a complicated topic by expounding on the views that one group holds about another. The situational descriptions reflect historical reality and speak to people’s reactions to changing circumstances. A careful study of patterns in and narratives of Jewish jokes has potentially greater implications for the study of ethnic relations in general. It illustrates not only intergroup perceptions but also the way that the Jews defined their place in society and the way that “the Jew” and his character were used to explain the modernizing world and society’s fears. Equally important is the role that Jewish humor, and the images of Jews that it elicits, carries for the notion of the memory of Jews as humans and not as abstract objects for the sake of the jokes’ comedy.

NOTES


Wilmański, *Ale czy Kuba . . . ?!, 5.


Ib., 150, 221.

Joanna B. Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew From 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 5.

Hertz, *The Jews in Polish Culture*, 68.


Ib., 72.

Ib., 74.


Ib., 5, 36.

The parallel town in the Polish public perception of themselves is Wąchock.


Chaim Bermant explained in his book, *What’s the Joke? A Study of Jewish Humor through the Ages* (London: Weidenfeld, 1986), 113: “Most small nations have a good conceit of themselves. Jews are no exception and if they will allow that some Jews are less wise than others, they will insist that they are absolutely tops in their folly. The wise, moreover, bred fools if only to be confirmed in their own wisdom, which is possibly how the legend of Chelm grew up.” In part, thanks to the popularity of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s literary work, the legends about the fools of Chelm have become part of the town’s history, making it famous in its own way.


Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other*, 31.

Ib., 47.


Safrin, *Przy Szabasowych Świecach*, 156.


Stuater-Halsted, “Jews as Middlemen Minorities in Rural Poland,” 55-56.

Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other*, 37.

Eilbirt, *What is a Jewish Joke?*, 64.
49 Stuater-Halsted, “Jews as Middleman Minorities in Rural Poland,” 47.
53 Jawerbaum, *Same Cuda*, 22.
54 Lefcourt, *Humor*, 64.
57 Ibid., 133.
60 Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other*, 99.
62 Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other*, 8.
64 Ibid., 37.