# Who do Poles see when they see a Jew... ...after October 7, 2023?

Report on the second edition of research carried out by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews





# Who do Poles see when they see a Jew... ...after October 7, 2023?

Report on the second edition of research carried out by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

#### Research authors:

Semiotic Solutions (Krzysztof Polak, Marzena Żurawicka)

#### Report:

Krzysztof Polak, Marzena Żurawicka

#### **Consultations:**

Julia Chimiak, Katarzyna Lewandowska, Dagmara Mańka-Wizor, Małgorzata Zając

#### **Project coordination:**

Dagmara Mańka-Wizor, Małgorzata Zając

#### **Proofreading:**

Dominik Wódz

#### Graphic design, layout and typesetting:

Anna Rabczuk

Warsaw, 2025

ISBN 978-83-976594-6-9

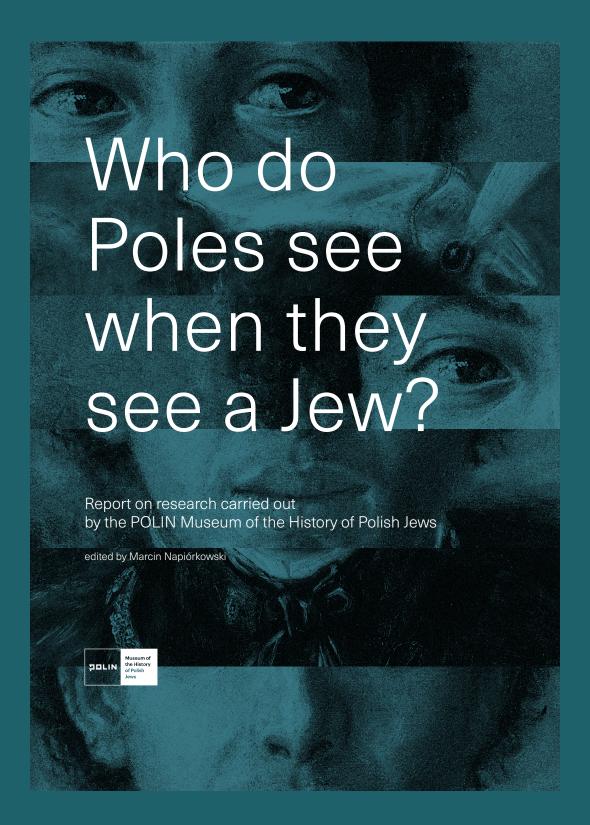
The publication was produced as part of the 'Comprehensive Programme to Research and Combat Antisemitism and other Prejudices in Poland' carried out by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

The research and publication of the report were carried out in cooperation with the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland thanks to the support of the Sills Family Foundation.



# Contents

2023 Report Summary 5	
2025 Executive summary 9	
2029 Executive Summary 9	
Introduction 13	
2025 Code Map 17	
Main areas of the image of the Jew and changes since 2022 21	
The most popular antisemitic narratives in 2023-2025 29	
Summary of key narrative tropes in 2023-2025 47	
Conclusions: How to act against social stereotypes and prejudices	5
Annendix Description of the research methodology 53	



### 2023 Report Summary

Published in 2023, the report 'Who Do Poles See When They See a Jew?' was developed as part of the research program of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The research project behind the report was intended to help develop a deeper understanding of the cultural mechanisms that influence the way Jews are perceived in Poland. The research project was both diagnostic and educational: on the one hand, it identified predominant cultural codes; on the other, it provided concrete tools to counter stereotyping and hate language in public life.

The main objective of the research project was to map the most important cultural codes that shape representations of Jews in contemporary Polish culture. These codes are considered to be cognitive scaffolding, or unconscious patterns through which we filter reality. Concerning the image of the Jew, the patterns may lead to bias and xenophobia just as well as they may result in empathy and understanding. The report attempts to capture which linguistic figures, images and narratives dominate the collective imagination of Poles and which emotional directions they are organised on.

# The research project consisted of three stages:

- 1. Semiotic analysis of cultural texts, media and mass product to identify cultural codes and to assign them to larger semantic blocks.
- 2. Workshops with experts, which helped to calibrate the identified codes and interpret their communication potential.

3. Focus studies in groups of diverse age and identity (Jews and non-Jews), which analysed the recognition and perception of the codes and their emotional reception.

#### An analysis yielded a four-field code map:

- Suffering/Weakness (e.g. Holocaust victims, the nameless, the wounded)
- Effectiveness/Power (e.g. rich, influential, kings of the underworld);
- Otherness/Mystery (e.g. mysterious rituals, a world behind the curtain);
- Familiarity/Understanding (e.g. my friend the Jew, neighbour, fellow citizen).

These four quadrants form a semiotic square of tension in which Polish culture 'plays out' the presence of Jews. Even if the actual presence of the Jewish community is limited to small numbers, the Jew still remains the 'default alien' upon which, often by contrast, the Polish identity is defined.

The research process found that non-Jews perceive Jews as a cohesive and easily defined group despite an actual lack of knowledge about contemporary Jewish life. For Jews, on the other hand, their own identity appears complex, multidimensional and often difficult to define clearly. This asymmetrical understanding of identity opens the door to simplifications, stereotyping and the false belief in 'self-formed knowledge' about Jews, a mechanism referred to in psychology as the illusion of explanatory depth (IOED).

Further in the report, eight key semantic areas are detailed (e.g. 'A knack for business', 'The Holocaust', 'Absence', 'Inaccessibility') and analysed through the lens of tensions generated in different social and generational groups.

The report addresses antisemitic narratives present in the press and social media. Prominent among them were conspiracy theories ('Jewish lobby', 'rulers of the world'), rhetoric of ingratitude ('Jews

do not show gratitude to Poles'), and more recently, narratives concerning the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, in which antisemitic stereotypes are transferred to other groups, like Ukrainians, Muslims or immigrants.

The report emphasises that antisemitism in Poland today may not only be a practice of discrimination against a specific minority but also a universal code, a language of fear, that can be used against any and all Others. Therefore, the fight against antisemitism is systemic and serves to protect the broader common good, which is a culture of dialogue and inclusion.

#### The final conclusions suggest the need for:

- shattering the false belief in one's knowledge about Jews by fostering a picture of a diverse, contemporary Jewish culture,
- tailoring communication to the age and competence of the audience (speak to young people differently than to public officials),
- · using local micro-histories to build empathy,
- the creation of educational and communication resources to identify antisemitism in everyday language and social practice.



## 2025 Executive summary

The report we now provide to our readers is an update and a supplement to the semiotic analysis of the image of the Jew in Polish popular culture that was published in 2023¹ by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The 2023 analysis included sources from 2019 to 2022. Sources from 2023-2025 are included in this edition of the research project. This enabled us to capture the persistence and reproduction of cultural perceptions of Jews along with the directions in which those perceptions are being transformed in a changing political, technological and social context.

Not unlike the 2022 research, this edition was based on a semiotic analysis of widely understood cultural texts — films, television shows, exhibitions, posters, comic books, online memes and media messages — along with an analysis of modern antisemitic narratives present in the public and digital domain. We focused particularly on the identification of cultural codes and their cultural function to ascertain whether the codes reinforce stereotypes or contribute to a more nuanced and empathetic image of the Jew.

The codes identified — both those from the first edition of the survey and the new ones — were categorised into four basic semantic areas: Suffering/Weakness, Effectiveness/Power, Otherness/Mystery and Familiarity/Understanding. Each semantic area tells the story of a different form of the relationship between the majority and the symbolic 'Jew', a relationship constructed through language, images, narrative patterns and cultural aesthetics.

In this edition of the research project, we found a significant variation in the dynamics of these four semantic areas compared to the 2022 edition.

<sup>1 &#</sup>x27;Antisemitic narratives that prevail in popular culture in Poland' – publication of the research project report | POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw (accessed: 20.06.2025).

The **Suffering/Weakness** area remained quantitatively dominant, but least innovative – established victim patterns prevail here, although there are also attempts at individualisation and emotional deepening.

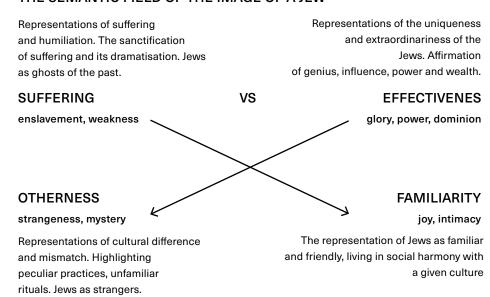
The Effectiveness/Power area has undergone the greatest transformation: it is moving away from the old figures of financiers and gangsters to more modern representations of power, agency and technological precision.

The Otherness/Mystery area has not changed – patterns of strangeness, ritualism and hermeticity have become entrenched, especially in digital culture.

The Familiarity/Understanding, on the other hand, although still the least exposed, has brought the most interesting qualitative novelties – such as narratives about Jews as ordinary people 'living in spite of' or the growing number of local initiatives to restore the memory of Jewish neighbours.

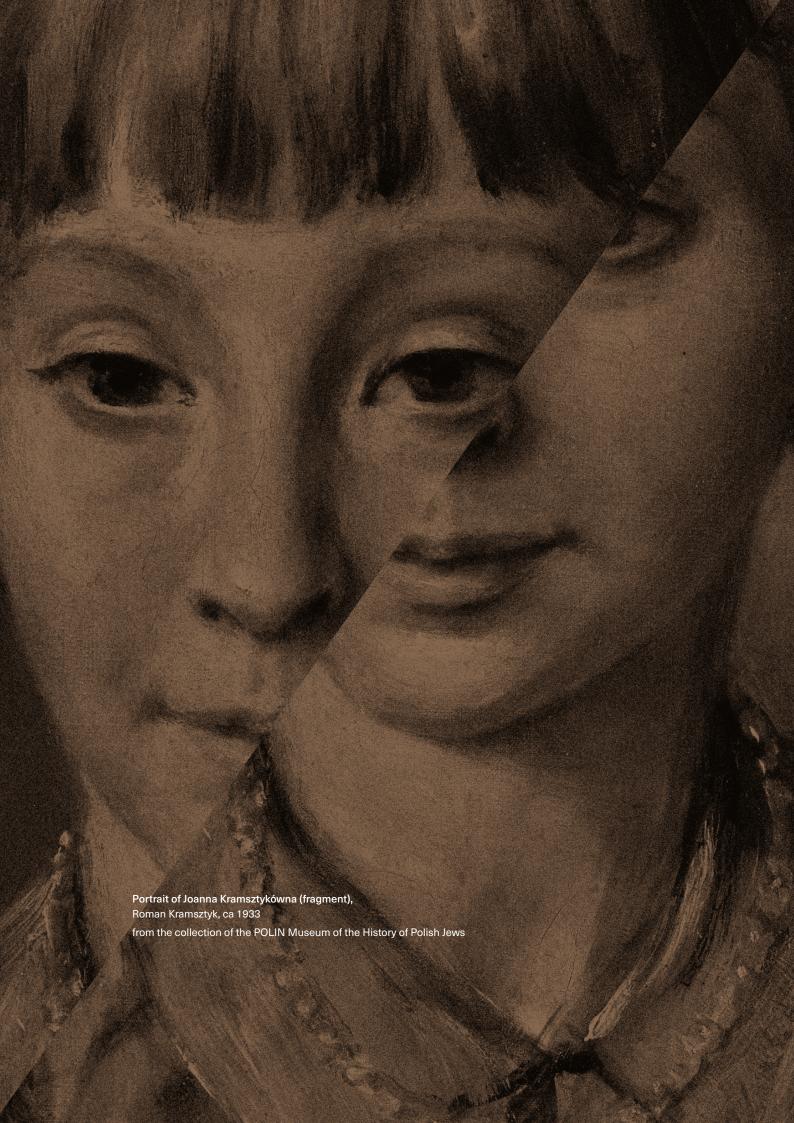
The analysis of cultural codes was complemented by an in-depth diagnosis of the most common antisemitic narratives operating in Polish public

#### THE SEMANTIC FIELD OF THE IMAGE OF A JEW



discourse between 2023 and 2025. This part of the project analysed press, social media, online comments and audiovisual content. Eleven narratives were identified – both continuations of well-known topoi (such as 'Jewish greed' or 'Jewish Communists') and new forms of communication (e.g. ironic praise such as 'I respect Jews, but' or accusations of 'memory appropriation').

Contemporary antisemitic narratives increasingly abandon the use of an openly hateful language — more often than not, they take the form of undertones, insinuations and apparent concern, aligning into the rhetoric of critique of elites, defence of freedom of speech or geopolitical realism. As a result, antisemitism is becoming a universal language of social frustration and exclusion, not just towards the Jews, but also other groups deemed to be 'alien' or 'privileged'. Although diverse, these narratives create a common grid of meanings that reinforces divisions, reproduces resentment and hinders real social dialogue.



#### Introduction

Looking at online comments, analysing memes and newspaper headlines or observing the emotions triggered by international conflicts, it is easy to see that images of Jews still feature strongly in the Polish collective imagination. Often not directly and not necessarily with the intention to hate, but through familiar linguistic, aesthetic and narrative formulas that perpetuate stereotypes. It is these repetitive patterns, or cultural codes, that make certain representations 'obvious', although not at all neutral.

Cultural codes act as automatic recognition mechanisms: they help us to assign meaning and to recognise 'who is who' without the need for deeper reflection. When they concern Jews, the codes are very often hereditary, seemingly familiar, but not aligned with today's context. Their strength lies in that they seem 'natural' and therefore do not require a rationale. Meanwhile, it is these codes that can play a key role in perpetuating distance, fears or feelings of exclusion, even if no one utters the word 'Jew' with hatred.

Cultural codes — as unconscious cognitive tools — shape our reactions, perceptions and emotions. An analysis of the codes helps us to better recognise the mechanisms of stereotyping while looking for points of breakthrough: new languages, new images, new ways of talking about the Jewish presence in Poland, not only as a thing of the past, but also as a real, complex and dynamic coexistence here and now.

This report is an update and expansion of the research project conducted in 2022 by the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The new edition of the project includes an analysis of material from 2023 to 2025 intended to test the persistence of previously identified codes and capturing their transformation and the disappearance or emergence of new semantic figures. The research work featured two main components: a semiotic analysis of popular culture texts (films, television series, exhibitions, and digital media)

and an analysis of contemporary antisemitic narratives in the media, on the web and in public debate.

The report has been prepared for those active in combating antisemitism and other prejudices, and for people whose main focus is not Jewish issues, but who may come across representations of Jews, both conscious and unconscious, in their work, whether in education, the media, public administration or social work. The report is specifically targeted to four professional audiences:

- politicians, local government officials and civil servants with influence on public space, remembrance policies, the education system and the law;
- law enforcement and judiciary officials for whom recognising prejudice and hate speech is part of daily professional practice;
- media and opinion leaders responsible for the language of public debate and the way minorities are spoken about;
- educators, teachers and those educating the younger generation, who are
  often the first to introduce the subject of the Jewish presence in Polish
  history and contemporary life.

Recognising cultural codes, both old and new, can be essential both where stereotypes and prejudices need to be countered and where we simply need to speak about Jews with precision, empathy and awareness. The Report you hold in your hands is an attempt to equip first and foremost those working in the public sphere — as well as all those interested — with a tool to identify and reformulate the languages, images and narratives that shape how Jews are spoken of in Poland.

'The Holocaust, during which many Jews lost their faith in God, became a kind of Jewish religion. A substitute religion, forming the glue of the Jewish people, building the Jewish post-war identity. A Holocaust with diminished culpability of the perpetrator will not fulfil this function. Hence the search for a substitute culprit, while reversing the moral order when the victim becomes the perpetrator. Poland is this loot.'

DoRzeczy, 19.07.2023, 'Pedagogy of shame' on Poles is part of the war on civilisation (04.08.2025)

'The snag is that Andrzej Duda's homeland is Ukropolin. And Tusk we all know where his "homeland" is.'

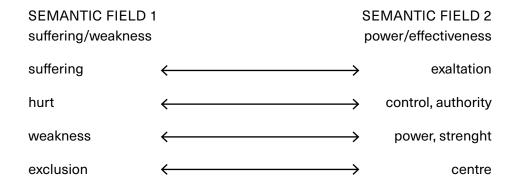
Platform X, comment posted 12.03.2025

## 2025 Code Map

Today's information culture, in which images, narratives and messages circulate in a flash, still relies on deeply ingrained semantic structures. One of them is the figure of the Jew, present in the collective imagination of Poles not only as a historical character, but also as a vessel for emotions, fears, admiration or suspicion.

As in the previous edition, we used semiotic tools (see Appendix 1 at the end of this report) to analyse a wide range of cultural texts – from films and TV shows, memes, posters or art installations, to online comments and official media statements. We analysed what images of the Jews are present and how they undergo changes, what emotions they trigger, and the way they are repeated, concealed, and transformed. We treat the identified codes as structures of the collective imagination which help to understand how Jewishness is recognised in the Polish cultural context.

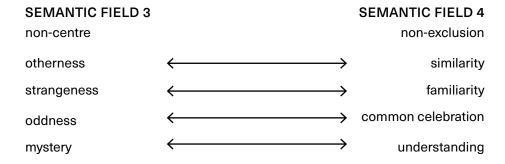
In this edition of our research, we used the semantic square developed in the 2022 research project. Let us recall how it was developed. The first stage in its development was to identify the two dominant semiotic fields that form the fundamental cultural opposition organising the image of the Jew in contemporary Polish popular culture:



It is an opposition between images of the Jew associated with suffering (semantic field 1), largely based on the imagery of the Holocaust, and those situating the Jew in a position of exaltation, control or power (semantic field 2). This strong dualism builds up a tension, or even a rupture, in the social perception of Jews, becoming a source of paradoxes that will be explored in the following stages of the research project.

On the basic cultural opposition thus identified a semiotic square was then built. This operation consisted of assigning a logical opposition to each semantic field, resulting in four interrelated quadrants.

After the logical categories were superimposed on the collected material, proposals for two more semantic fields emerged:



Thus four main semantic fields were obtained:

I	ll II
SUFFERING/WEAKNESS	EFFECTIVENESS/POWER
III	IV
OTHERNESS/MYSTERY	FAMILIARITY/UNDERSTANDING

In 2025, within this four-quadrant structure, we identified and analysed 25 cultural codes. Some of these are continuations of the findings from the 2023 Report; they have retained their significance, although sometimes their form or intensity of presence has changed. Others that are completely new have emerged from current social contexts, such as Israel's war against Hamas, migration crises, the growing role of digital media or the revision of the politics of memory. These codes reflect current narratives, often reinforcing or contributing to their formation.

#### **SUFFERING EFFECTIVENESS** enslavement, weakness glory, power, dominion new dimension of suffering remarkable because they changed the world isolation and fear Jewish lobby nameless victims silent presence of the Holocaust financial geniuses kings of the underworld named victims knack for business murdered world power of the determined dangerously strong player lost youth symbols of absence indomitable and tenacious the world behind the curtain mysterious rituals my friend the Jew the joy of living 'in spite of' taming the Jew with humour on the other side money over everything Jewish fetishes yearning for diversity **OTHERNESS FAMILIARITY** oddness, mystery joy, closeness weakening code, less and less used stable, permanent code with no significant changes code significantly changed and transformed

new code that did not exist before

'Nationalists with Arabs don't kneel before payot.'

Contents of slap stickers, 2024, source: Czulent Jewish Association, Antisemitic incidents in 2024, Kraków 2025

# Main areas of the image of the Jew and changes since 2022

In this section of the report we briefly present four main semantic areas that organise the way Jews are represented, from victims and symbols of suffering through figures of power and agency, to the picture of otherness or familiarity. Each of these semantic areas reveals different mechanisms of cultural encoding—and different challenges for the contemporary audience.

The Suffering/Weakness area appears to be the most deeply rooted way of depicting Jews in Polish culture, one that is permanent, repetitive and still very much present in texts of popular culture. These are images based on the representation of suffering, humiliation and dehumanisation, often in the context of the Holocaust. The Jew is presented as a naked victim of history, faceless and voiceless, symbolic, collective, and often appearing as a ghost of the past. Although impersonal images predominate, the individualisation of suffering appeared in some codes, particularly in the case of children or young women.

This semantic area is **universal and timeless**; it is deeply engrained in Polish cultural memory. Despite the emergence of new epresentations, the basic message of **the Jew as a victim of historical violence** remains intact.

From 2022 onwards, however, a clear stratification is seen in the internal structure of the semantic area. The most established and prevailing codes of collective suffering remain, such as 'nameless victims' or 'isolation and fear', which do not evolve in meaning, but expand into new media forms. The message about the anonymous mass of Jewish victims devoid of identity is

still present in films, exhibitions and educational materials. This translates into the perpetuation of schematic images of striped uniforms, crowds being led to their deaths and visual metaphors of dehumanisation.

New codes are emerging to break this impersonal narrative. The code of 'named victims', shaped by contemporary events such as the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023, provides the individualisation of Jewish suffering. Instead of an anonymous crowd, we see faces, names, and specific biographies; the victims become persons with a past, emotions and a social context. This shift towards personal experience marks a significant change towards the contemporary, in which memory gains an empathetic and relational dimension.

The development of the Suffering/Weakness area also includes a deepening of the emotional layer. Codes like 'new dimension of suffering' and 'lost youth' focus on child victims and the moral dilemmas of their saviours. This reinforces the tragic nature of the images and introduces a multi-voiced perspective: it is not only the children who suffer, but those who try so hard to save them. The form of imagery is also changing, with comic strips and illustrated diaries in addition to the classic text-only memoirs, which appeal to younger audiences and better align with modern reading practices.

Representations of exclusion by absence are not without significance. The code 'symbols of absence' acquires new objects and signs that function as metaphors for lost lives: shoes, jewellery, or hats. Their power is not in their literalness, but in their emotional impact. The code 'murdered world', on the other hand, takes on a distinctly accusatory tone, ceasing to be just a melancholic memory and beginning to ask questions about responsibility and the repression of memory by contemporary Poles.

There is also a powerful new code emerging, the 'silent presence of the Holocaust', which shows the everyday life of the perpetrators as a backdrop to the silent presence of the Jewish annihilation. It is not about direct violence, but about emotional dissonance: a peaceful, joyful life played out right next to the cries and smoking chimney stacks of the crematoria. This code, rather than speak about the Jews directly, explores their invisible presence and the banality of evil.

The Suffering/Weakness area in 2025 is thus formally extremely elaborate, yet increasingly less dynamic in terms of narration. The repetition of familiar patterns prevails, accompanied by attempts to deepen and update them, particularly through the individualisation of characters and the development

of new media. Its power stems not from innovation, but from being rooted in the collective imagination. It is a semantic area that is not so much evolving as it is enduring as a cultural and emotional foundation whose importance can hardly be questioned. Yet it needs to be refreshed in order to remain viable.

The Effectiveness/Power area is a semantic field with great internal diversity and high narrative dynamics. The images of the Jew here refer to the representation of the uniqueness and extraordinariness of Jews. The codes affirm ingenuity, resourcefulness, wealth, influence and tenacity, as well as physical and military strength. The image of the Jew as a genius, a leader, a hero, a strategist and even a gangster stretches between admiration and anxiety, affirmation and ambivalence.

Since 2022, there has been a significant qualitative and tonal transformation of the semantic area. Codes have developed in two main directions: some have been weakened and simplified, while others have acquired a deeper meaning, been updated or transformed into new symbolic forms.

Some of the earlier codes, like 'financial geniuses', 'a knack for business' or 'kings of the underworld' are clearly losing their meaning. No new representations of these figures are emerging, and their presence in culture is limited to the reproduction of patterns of yore without a current context. The image of the Jew as a brilliant financier or powerful gangster ceases to be attractive to creators and audiences, becoming part of a cultural archive rather than a living narrative. The reduction of these codes often leads to their simplification; instead of complex characters, there are repetitions of stereotypes, lacking depth or emotional tension.

However, the Effectiveness/Power area is being significantly re-evaluated in other codes. Codes like 'indomitable and tenacious' or 'the power of the determined' reveal new, more nuanced ways of representing Jewish agency. Rather than be merely an object of admiration or fear, the Jew begins to represent moral strength, mental perseverance and emotional discipline. These new representations are stripped of their previous ambivalence: determination, willingness to fight or composure are shown in an affirmative and ethically complex tone, rather than with suspicion or ironic detachment.

Two new variants of power codes also play a special role. The first is the 'power of the determined' — a recasting of the earlier 'dangerously strong player' figure. It represents Jews as soldiers, citizens and settlers — characters ready to fight, defending their community and state. The second is the 'sophisticated player' — a modern figure representing power not as

brutality but as precision, control and operational efficiency. The Jew as a Mossad agent, cyber-security specialist or master of intelligence games becomes the protagonist of a contemporary thriller, representing a modern model of power based on intelligence and technology.

Against the backdrop of these developments, the code 'Jewish lobby' — although based on old conspiracy patterns — is also undergoing a partial transformation. In 2025, its variant 'Israel lobby' is increasingly common, changing the tone from ethnic to geopolitical. This shift, however, does not remove suspicion — on the contrary, it reinforces the figure of the Jew as an influential player who no longer operates from the shadows, but within modern diplomatic and state structures.

The Effectiveness/Power area in 2025 is not a homogeneous semantic field, but a complex space of competing codes — those expiring, stable and newly developing. This is the only quadrant in which a movement towards the future is clearly visible: the modernisation of figures of power, the updating of their media vessels and the shift in emphasis from wealth and ingeniousness towards agency and technological precision. It is therefore the area which, although not dominant in quantity, offers the most novelty, shifts and potential for reinterpreting the image of the Jew in contemporary culture.

The Otherness/Mystery area is based on representations of Jewish cultural, religious and social difference. Here, the Jew is portrayed as an other, not befitting our world, and often living according to strange rules, practising incomprehensible rituals, prayers and lifestyles. Spaces of orthodox religious communities, unfamiliar practices (such as circumcision, ritual slaughter, or kabbalah), and behaviour contrary to dominant ethics (e.g. the Jewish relationship with money) build up an image of the Jew as alien, isolated or suspect.

Another strongly present figure is of the enemy Jew — on the other side of the barricade — who is always opposed to values considered 'Polish', 'Catholic' or 'patriotic'. Alienation means not belonging to a cultural and national community.

Compared to the 2022 analysis, we do not find significant semantic transformations here — rather, the replication of pre-existing narratives, which have only gained new forms of expression, especially in digital media, dominates. It is a space in which otherness is not overcome, but rather aestheticised, exoticised or even demonised, and the Jew is presented as an inscrutable figure, incompatible with the community, often observed with distance or suspicion.

The most prominent code remains the 'world behind the curtain', which presents Orthodox Jews as a closed, exotic community that is as hermetic as it is fascinating. In 2025, the code has not only maintained its presence but has even established itself as a stable media formula. It has flourished particularly in quasi-documentary formats — vlogs, podcasts, or personal reports — in which outsiders report on their encounters with Jewish orthodoxy. However, these accounts do not lead to an understanding of the religious world of the Jews, but to reassuring the audience of its 'strangeness' and apartness. A voyeuristic aesthetic prevails: a focus on the details of dress, rituals, and rules of everyday life, devoid of philosophical or spiritual context.

Similarly, the code 'mysterious rituals' persists as a heavily emotive narrative in which Jewish religious practices are portrayed as menacing, magical, and disturbing. These narratives do not so much construct knowledge about Judaism as reinforce fears and stereotypes, often drawing on pseudoscientific sources, esoteric media channels and conspiracy theories. Images of circumcision, kosher slaughter or kabbalah are particularly strong here. However, they are not set in a religious context but in an aesthetic of horror or blasphemous otherness.

The code 'on the other side' has also retained its position. The Jew functions here as the ideological enemy of Polishness, Catholicism or patriotism. Although its intensity shifts in 2025 against the backdrop of more recent political obsessions (such as Germany, the European Union or Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk), it nevertheless persists in far-right narratives. The image of the Jew as 'traitor', 'collaborator' or 'foreign element' has not disappeared, but has been relegated to the margins of mainstream public debate, where it continues to function as a rhetorical tool of identity resistance.

In contrast, the code 'money over everything' is virtually disappearing from current popular culture. It persists only as part of the historical repertoire; it is present in classic readings and school materials, but not developed in new texts or media narratives. This is an example of a deactivated code which, although still recognisable, no longer has cultural impact or narrative validity.

The Otherness/Mystery area in 2025 is therefore a space of repetition and stabilisation. There is no reinterpretation or attempt to overcome distance here — on the contrary, otherness is established as an aesthetic and media form, attractive through its dissimilarity, but shut away from dialogue. This is the most one-dimensional quadrant, in which the development of the figure of the Jew as a complex, contemporary and real person does not occur — rather,

the Jew remains an object of observation, suspicion or ritual otherness. In this sense, Otherness/Mystery turns out to be one of the most enduring ways of representing Jews in Polish culture, albeit it is narratively dead.

The Familiarity/Understanding area refers to images of Jews as familiar, close, and functioning harmoniously among Poles. In 2022, this was the least represented semantic field — nostalgic, archival, sometimes folkloric representations prevailed, with few contemporary or up-to-date images.

Nowadays, there is a clear shift in emphasis — away from nostalgia and ludicism towards modernity, emotional truth and local memory activity. This is the only area featuring codes that tell the story of the Jews not through the lens of trauma, uniqueness or otherness, but through ordinariness, everyday life and social bonds.

Many of the earlier assimilationist codes are losing their relevance today. 'My friend the Jew' shifts towards memoirism — modern representations of Polish-Jewish friendship are practically non-existent, and these relationships function primarily as episodes from the past, recalled with sentiment and nostalgia. Similarly, the code 'taming the Jew with humour', once based on shmonzes and self-irony, is losing its inclusive potential — in 2025 it functions mainly as a curiosity of folklore, a quote from the past which is devoid of contemporary cultural vitality.

However, two other codes — one strongly developing, the other completely new — present a vastly different dynamic.

The first code, 'yearning for diversity', is being given new life by a growing number of local initiatives, exhibitions, publications and events that bring back the memory of the Jewish presence in small towns, not just cities. This shift is significant not only geographically, but above all socially—memory ceases to be exclusively museum-like, becoming a tool for active presence in local communities, a form of recognition and empathy.

The second code is the most qualitative novelty of the semantic area discussed. The code 'the joy of living in spite of' is emerging as the only contemporary narrative that shows the Jew as a person living in the 'here and now', not only struggling with trauma but also enjoying everyday life. It is a completely new form of representation, without the burden of martyrdom or exoticism. Films and narratives that fit this code show ordinary life: friendships, relationships, emotions, and entertainment. They do not shy away from difficult topics, but neither do they reduce Jewish identity to suffering.

In this way, the Jew ceases to be a symbolic figure; the Jew becomes close, contemporary, and an equal.

The Familiarity/Understanding area in 2025 remains the least exploited in terms of numbers, yet it offers the most promising cultural shifts. Moving away from the figure of the Jew as an object of nostalgia or humour, it shifts towards representations of emotional closeness and contemporary presence. It depicts Jews not only as part of the past, but also as neighbours, citizens, and participants in a shared world. This makes it — despite its quantitatively limited presence — potentially the most forward-looking and inclusive semantic field.

## Analysed materials

Scope: January 1, 2023-March 27, 2025

→ PRESS: 6,325

Positive: 788 Negative: 1,169

Selected: first 1,000 negative comments with the highest reach

→ WWW: 72,806

Positive: 9,520 Negative: 12,291

Selected: first 1,000 negative with the highest reach

→ FACEBOOK AND BLOGS: 24,024

Positive: 3,907 Negative: 7,598

Selected: first 1,000 negative with the highest reach

→ TV: 3,511

Positive: 353 Negative: 455 Selected: 455

# The most popular antisemitic narratives in 2023-2025

Contemporary antisemitism rarely takes the form of open, violent hatred. Much more often it works through language and images — seemingly neutral phrases, 'common sense' comments, jokes, comparisons or understatements that have their origins in culturally established clichés and story patterns. Although the Jewish community in Poland is small, antisemitic stereotypes remain surprisingly very much alive — and not only in relation to Jews, but also as ready-made tools for excluding the 'other', the 'alien' or the 'inconvenient'. Antisemitism today often acts as a universal language for expressing resentment and social frustration.

In 2021, Poland officially adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism, according to which 'Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities'.<sup>2</sup>

In the spirit of IHRA's definition, and in line with the recommendations of the European Commission's Strategy on combating antisemitism and fostering Jewish life in the EU, the POLIN Museum of the History of

<sup>2</sup> Full text of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism: https://holocaustremembrance.com/resources/ working-definition-antisemitism (accessed: 20.06.2025).

Polish Jews continues its research and educational activities aimed at recognising, decoding and countering contemporary forms of antisemitism.

This part of the report is based on an analysis of media discourses from 2023-2025 and updates the 2022 research. We analysed extensive collections of press texts, online commentaries, audiovisual content, and social media. The aim was to capture the current forms and mechanisms of antisemitic narratives: not only what is said, but also how it is said, to whom and for what.

The analysed narratives function like a set of ready-made building blocks — plot scenarios, motifs and rhetorical tropes — from which a story that places responsibility, blame, suspicion or resentment on Jews can be quickly assembled. These may be classic tropes — such as 'Jews rule the world' or 'Jews as perpetrators of communism' — but they are increasingly taking on new forms and registers: using the language of human rights, anti-system slogans, ironic memes, or quasi-rational comments. This makes them more difficult to recognise, more adaptable to modern media formats and easier for audiences to digest.

Significantly, contemporary antisemitism is increasingly operating indirectly. It does not speak of the Jews openly; instead, it implies them. It uses geopolitical codes (e.g. 'the Israel lobby'), conventions of elite criticism ('financial manipulators'), or apparent concern for the common good ('Will we pay for it?'). It operates on emotions — fear, jealousy, a sense of injustice — and is part of a wider cultural landscape in which the boundaries between opinion and prejudice, between argument and innuendo, are becoming increasingly difficult to grasp.

It is therefore important to recognise and name these mechanisms. Antisemitic narratives are no longer just a marginal phenomenon. They can be present in mainstream messages, in educational spaces, or in the language of public institutions. Their presence not only perpetuates prejudice against Jews. It also opens the way for the normalisation of other forms of discrimination and exclusion: against refugees, sexual minorities, people with disabilities, etc. The analysis of these narratives is not only an identity-relevant matter, but an important tool for the social hygiene of language, debate and community.

Below are 11 of the most common narratives that are antisemitic or have antisemitic potential, along with a description of their construction. Each is a sample of how contemporary Polish culture transforms old fears and stereotypes into new forms — sometimes more subtle, but no less dangerous.

#### Prevailing narrative tropes:

- 1. Jews plan to populate Poland The Polin project.
- 2. Israel as a torturer state The 'new Nazis' and apartheid.
- 3. 'I respect Jews, but...' An oikophobic praise.
- 4. The appropriation of the memory of the Holocaust.
- 5. Jewish Communism The return of historical guilt.
- 6. Jews rule the world A transnational elite and invisible power.
- 7. 'Dead Jews yes, living Jews no' Jews accepted only as victims.
- 8. Property claims and Jewish greed.
- 9. Pedagogy of shame 'Jews make us excuse ourselves to no end'.
- 10. Antisemitism as a bludgeon to silence criticism 'It is not allowed to speak ill of Jews'.
- 11. 'A Jew will always be a Jew' Incapable of integration and inherently destructive.

# Jews plan to populate Poland – The Polin project

This narrative, which has clear antisemitic potential, appears in both conservative media and online comments. It is based on the belief that there is a secret plan to settle Jews in Poland, linked to an alleged geopolitical project called Polin. As part of this narrative, Poland is portrayed as a future 'haven' for Jews from Israel and Western Europe — people allegedly fleeing rising antisemitism and the threat of Islam. In this vision, Poland appears as a cheap, safe, compliant and culturally familiar country, making it an attractive settlement destination.

The amplification of this narrative is particularly observed during periods of tension in the Middle East and during debates on property restitution. A suggestion emerged that the process of 'populating' Poland is taking place under the guise of restitution activities and educational initiatives related to Holocaust remembrance.

The image constructed in these stories is based on strong tropes of a threat to national identity. Poland is portrayed as a country that can be quietly colonised — not by military coercion, but by diplomatic, political and cultural-economic action. Jews are portrayed as influential actors who are leading

the project of taking symbolic and institutional control of the state in 'white gloves'.

The rhetoric used within this narrative mixes the languages of irony and anxiety. There are phrases suggesting an idyll ('a Jewish idyll in Poland') and questions intended to raise fears of a demographic and identity threat ('Are we ready for millions of new citizens?'). Key terms include 'settlement plan', 'new Jerusalem' or 'Polin as a state within a state' — all referring to a phantasmagorical vision in which Poles lose control of their national territory.

This narrative combines classic antisemitic themes, like the notion of covert, supranational domination, with the modern language of geopolitics, cultural security and national sovereignty. Its strength lies in its ability to combine antisemitic content with current social fears, making it particularly difficult to clearly identify and challenge.

# Israel as a torturer state — The 'new Nazis' and apartheid

This narrative is based on a radical critique of the state of Israel. There is a symbolic role reversal here — from being a victim of the Holocaust, Israel is transformed in the eyes of critics into a perpetrator of violence. The Jews, as a people who experienced the Holocaust, are portrayed as the ones committing genocide today. In the period analysed in this research project, this narrative resonated particularly strongly in the socio-political space after Israel's response to the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, especially in relation to the escalation of violence in Gaza and the high number of civilian casualties.

Provocative comparisons of Israel to the Third Reich are a characteristic feature of the story. The term 'new Nazis' appears, and Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is described as a system of apartheid, ethnic cleansing or war crimes. Such analogies build a strong moral message in which the state of Israel becomes the epitome of the same evil from which the world was supposed to be protected after 1945. This portrays Israel as a state of brutal domination, while accusing it of weaponising the memory of the Holocaust in order to gain moral immunity.

This narrative often operates in the language of defending human rights, empathy and opposition to violence; yet underneath this guise, there is often

a dehumanising message. Using the terminology characteristic of the circles invoking these values, this narrative constructs an image of the Jewish state as a cynical, vindictive and ruthless actor on the global political stage. In this way, left-wing language is captured and transformed into a tool for the reproduction of antisemitic stereotypes, especially those concerning the 'double morality' and 'hypocrisy' of Jews.

A common theme in many variants of this narrative is the belief that the Holocaust has been 'monopolised' by Israel and has been used as an instrument of moral, political and symbolic blackmail. Military and repressive actions against the Palestinians are presented as a negation of the values that the memory of the Holocaust was meant to create. In this view, Israel not only betrays the legacy of Jewish trauma; it becomes the epitome of an oppressive system of power.

This narrative is not limited to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict — it connects to broader global ideological currents: a critique of the West, neoliberalism, militarism, and U.S. influence. Here, Israel becomes a symbol of geopolitical and cultural domination, while Jews—a figure of a privileged group that purportedly enjoys 'special rights' and is off limits to any criticism. In this way, classic antisemitic tropes — such as prejudice against Jewish exceptionalism and alleged impunity — are inscribed into current ideological and media disputes, significantly extending their reach and legitimacy in public debate.

# 3. 'I respect Jews, but...' — An oikophobic praise

This narrative takes the form of ostensible praise of the Jews, but its actual function is to deepen criticism of the speaker's own community — most often the Poles. In such statements, Jews are portrayed as an organised, loyal and effective group that can look after its own interests, while Poles are shown as weak, undisciplined and divisive. Thus, affirmation comes to the fore and is quickly used as a tool of self-discrediting.

At the heart of this narrative is the phenomenon of oikophobia — an aversion to one's own group, combined with an idealisation of the 'other'. In it, Jews become a figure of collective success and solidarity, often portrayed as those who 'can organise themselves', 'have their own lobbies', 'are effective', 'take

care of their own', as opposed to 'us' who 'only argue', 'can't play as a team' or 'lack community instinct'.

Such comparisons are not intended to foster a real intercultural dialogue — the Jew is not a person or a real community, but a symbolic reference point for the comparison authors' frustration. It is a kind of projection: the success attributed to the Jews serves to deepen the disillusionment with their own society, which does not meet the imagined norms of strength, unity and efficiency.

This narrative resonates strongly in the context of a crisis of social trust, disillusionment with elites, and nostalgia for a strong state and a clear national community. It often degenerates into demands to emulate the 'politics of interest' allegedly successfully pursued by Jews. It can also take on a tone of paternalistic philosemitism, in which affirmation of Jews serves to actually further humiliate the group of the affirming individual. Instead of real praise, we are dealing with a rhetorical tool to build distance.

As a result, this kind of 'praise' of Jews does not lead to intercultural rapprochement; quite the opposite, it perpetuates separation and mythologises the 'other' as someone who cannot be reached. It is a mechanism that does not reform the community, it reasserts its weakness through external idealisation. This narrative therefore acts not as a genuine expression of respect, but as a vehicle for frustration and division.

# 4. The appropriation of the memory of the Holocaust

This narrative emerges as a defensive reaction to real or imagined accusations of Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Its central premise is the belief that Jews have appropriated the memory of the Holocaust, using it as a tool of symbolic and political leverage. According to such perspective, Jewish suffering overrides all other wartime experiences, especially the memory of the tragic fate and immense suffering of the Poles, which, it is suggested, is systematically repressed or marginalised.

Central to this narrative is the notion of 'Holocaust memory supremacism', which serves to express the notion that the history of the Second World War has been entirely subsumed by a Jewish perspective. According to this

logic, any attempt to broaden this memory to include other experiences — especially Polish ones — is treated as undesirable or even forbidden, and those undertaking it risk being accused of antisemitism, revisionism or relativising the Holocaust.

This narrative is closely tied to a critique of contemporary educational and museum policy, which is dominated, according to the proponents of this narrative, by institutions and projects focused almost exclusively on the Jewish perspective. In this context, there are accusations of 'memory colonialism' or 'moral subjugation', which means a condition in which Poles are to be educated about their own history by forces 'from without', against their own identity and experience.

A feature of this narrative is the reversal of the victim and perpetrator roles. Jews cease to be portrayed as victims of the Holocaust and begin to play the role of those who dominate symbolic memory and deny others — especially Poles — the right to their own voice in history. Feelings of hurt, regret and injustice are particularly strong and exposed here as the result of imposed 'shame politics', compulsory education or alleged censorship in public debate.

Supported by current political and media disputes, this narrative finds fertile ground in the context of growing distrust of international institutions and increasing social polarisation. Under the guise of fighting for the balance of historical memory, it reproduces antagonism and undermines the legitimacy of commemorating the Holocaust as an experience central to European identity.

## Jewish Communism — The return of historical guilt

The narrative of the 'Jewish Communism', or 'Jewish Communists', is one of the most entrenched elements of the Polish antisemitic imaginary. Between 2023 and 2025, it assumed a new form, a guise of debunking history. In this version, Jews are portrayed as a privileged, elite organised group responsible for communist repression, ideological enslavement and national betrayal. There is particular emphasis on the alleged Jewish participation in power structures during the Stalinist era of the USSR and in institutions such as the UB (the Public Security Authority in the People's Republic of Poland between 1944 and 1956) and the Soviet NKVD.

The contemporary version of this narrative no longer relies solely on emotional rhetoric. It is increasingly disguised as seemingly factual analyses: it cites figures, names, or passages from records, resorting to the language of historical precision. Its purpose, however, is not to provide a reliable reconstruction of the past, but to build a message in which Jews cease to be victims of totalitarian systems and become their main architects and beneficiaries.

Once again, an important mechanism of this narrative is the re-evaluation of the perpetrator and victim relationship. Within it, Poles are portrayed as victims of 'Jewish Communism' and Jews as those who escaped responsibility by allegedly hiding behind national or religious privilege. In this way, the past becomes not only a source of resentment; it becomes a cornerstone for questioning the right to present Jewish suffering in the public space.

One of the most recurring themes is the motif of silence. It is the belief that Jewish involvement in communism is a taboo subject that has been deliberately erased from textbooks, museums and public debate. Such statements reinforce the narrative of alleged historical falsification and foster a sense of the need to 'reclaim the truth', no matter how simplistic, selective or based on manipulation.

This narrative also serves as a tool to justify contemporary antisemitic attitudes. Since — as the message goes — Jews were perpetrators in the past, they have no moral right to play the role of victims today. In this way, history becomes a convenient alibi for current prejudices, and anyone who questions this pattern can be accused of attempting to censor or whitewash crimes.

Contemporary versions of this narrative are particularly active in national conservative circles and intensify on the occasion of historical anniversaries which pertain to communism. During these occasions, there is an increase in publications juxtaposing Jewish functionaries of the repressive apparatus with Polish victims of the regime. Constructed in this way, the message transfers collective guilt while absolving the one's own attitudes, making resentment a tool for identity mobilisation.

The narrative of 'Jewish Communism' is therefore not just a meditation on the past, but an active tool for shaping the present. It serves to build polarisation, legitimise xenophobic attitudes and perpetuate historical simplifications that reinforce divisions instead of leading to a real understanding of the past.

## 6. Jews rule the world — A transnational elite and invisible power

This narrative is a contemporary version of the classic conspiracy theory of 'Jewish absolute control', still rooted in texts such as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, published in the early 20th century. Between 2023 and 2025, it acquired a modern form which is adapted to the realities of global politics and digital communication. Instead of direct accusations of 'controlling governments' or 'ruling the banks', there is an image of a diffused, hard-to-identify elite that shapes the global order according to its own interests through the media, international institutions and capital networks.

In this version of the narrative, Jews are portrayed as beneficiaries of the system and cannot be openly criticised because any attempt is immediately labelled as antisemitism. This type of message is based on the suggested existence of an 'untouchable' group of power, operating 'above nations', while effectively hiding behind the language of victimhood and the rhetoric of human rights.

The key mechanism of this narrative is insinuation. Questions and suggestions made do not point to anyone directly; instead, they direct the audience's thinking towards well-known stereotypes: 'Who controls the media?', 'Who decides what is allowed to be said?', 'Why are some topics taboo?'. In this way, antisemitism moves from the language of open hatred to the language of 'common sense criticism of elites'.

This narrative operates particularly intensely in anti-system, populist and anti-globalisation circles, where it finds fertile ground in an atmosphere of distrust of institutions, growing inequality and fear of losing control. Jews, a group perceived as integrated, influential and 'outside the system', become a symbolic recipient of social frustrations, even though the message rarely identifies them directly.

Further reinforcing this narrative are the contexts of global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the war in Ukraine. There, the tropes of 'invisible forces controlling the world' readily recur. In such situations, a notion is easily triggered by which 'Someone's benefitting from all of this', and the suspected beneficiaries turn out to be 'Jewish elites'.

This provides antisemitism with a new form, which is more difficult to identify. It ceases to be uttered directly; it begins to be smuggled into the rhetoric of

rational criticism, disguised as supposedly legitimate questions about the influence, dominance or 'untouchability' of certain circles. This makes this narrative particularly dangerous, as it blurs the boundaries between power analysis and ethnic bias, creating a semblance of intellectual curiosity where, in reality, old mechanisms of exclusion and suspicion are at work.

## 7. 'Dead Jews yes, living Jews no' — Jews accepted only as victims

This narrative is based on a deeply rooted asymmetry between symbolic respect for Jews as victims — especially of the Holocaust — and resentment towards their contemporary presence as an active social group. In this narrative, Jews are 'welcomed' when they represent the past and are present in memorials, plaques or rituals of remembrance. Any attempt by Jews to participate in contemporary public, political or cultural life — as subjects and not just objects of memory — is met with restraint, suspicion and sometimes hostility.

This narrative operates in the context of the prevailing model of commemorating the Holocaust as a historical event to be revered without generating contemporary consequences or requiring engagement beyond the realm of ritual and moral gesture. While Jewish neighbours of the past are often remembered with affection and pride, the real presence of Jews today — in public debate, in community organisations, in the context of restitution claims or anti-discrimination education — spurs resistance.

A feature of this narrative is the separation of commemoration from recognition. A Jew can be honoured on the condition that he or she does not speak out, does not formulate demands, does not require recognition of contemporary identity. The symbolic figure of the Jew is accepted in museums, textbooks or exhibitions only as a silent, absent figure, entombed in history. The modern Jew who speaks, reminds, confronts is perceived as a disruption of the order of memory.

This narrative is often a subtle message expressing respect for Jewish victims while distancing itself from the 'politicisation of memory' or the 'imposition of narratives'. It appeals to emotions: emotion over the tragic past and simultaneous weariness of its alleged instrumentalisation in contemporary public life. In this way, the presence of Jews in the past is

acknowledged, while their contemporaneity is rejected.

At a deeper level, this is the exclusionary mechanism hidden behind the gesture of commemoration. It relies on the fact that a Jew can be 'ours' if the Jew does not exist as a real person here and now. The Jew may be present as a memory, but not as a neighbour, a citizen, or a contributor to the debate. The Jew may be a victim, but not a participant in everyday life. As a result, this narrative goes further than reducing the image of Jews to a single historical role; it prevents a real recognition of their contemporary voice and subjectivity.

This is a particularly dangerous form of exclusion because it lurks behind a gesture of remembrance and respect. In practice, however, it prevents dialogue, perpetuates silence and reinforces the symbolic absence of Jews from contemporary collective identity. It reiterates the conviction that the Jewish presence in Poland can only be accepted if it is fully neutralised, both emotionally and politically.

#### 8. Property claims and Jewish greed

The axis of this narrative is the belief that the claims of Jewish communities for restitution of property, especially non-heritance property, are not only legally baseless but also morally questionable. Within the narrative, Jews are portrayed as a group driven purely by financial interests, seeking undue reparations from the Polish state, despite the fact that, as this narrative goes, 'Poland has already paid once' and the responsibility for the Holocaust lies with the Third Reich.

At the core of this narrative is a combination of two entrenched antisemitic stereotypes: the motif of Jewish greed and alleged parasitism, combined with a sense of national injustice and the injustice of the international system. This message suggests that Poland has become the 'scapegoat of Europe' and that the actions of Jewish organisations are a manifestation of the cynical use of history for financial gain.

A symbolic sign of this narrative has become the number '447' referring to the U.S. JUST Act<sup>3</sup>, which in Polish discourse has become a meme in character.

<sup>3</sup> The U.S. JUST Act – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Justice\_for\_Uncompensated\_Survivors\_Today\_Act\_of\_2017 (accessed: 20.06.2025).

The '447' functions as a slogan uniting far-right circles in opposition to the alleged threat of 'commandeering national assets' by Jewish organisations. The debate around this symbol is rarely based on substantive legal analysis; its foundations are more often emotions and conspiracy theories.

Within this narrative, arguments questioning the legitimacy and ethicality of claims based on the Terezin Declaration<sup>4</sup> are also frequent. These statements suggest that Poland has not signed any binding agreements and has no obligations towards Jewish individuals or organisations, especially if they are not direct heirs. There is also resistance to the transfer of property to non-Polish Jewish organisations being presented as foreign structures that are self-interested and have no connection to the Polish historical context.

An important feature of this narrative is the specific language. There are phrases with strong emotional and symbolic overtones, such as 'the Holocaust industry', 'business done on graves' or 'modern usury'. Jewish restitution efforts are described in terms of financial corporate strategies — as an organised lobbying campaign to 'snatch more assets'.

This narrative unfolds at the interface of memory and ownership. On the one hand, it expresses acceptance of the symbolic commemoration of the victims, while on the other it strongly opposes any property claims. Here, economic arguments mingle with the nationalist message of defending national dignity and state sovereignty. As a result, the refusal of restitution ceases to be a mere legal decision and becomes a moral and identity stance: 'because it is our land', 'because they do not deserve it', 'because history cannot be a bargaining chip'.

This narrative does not stop at reinforcing stereotypes of Jews as ruthless and greedy. It effectively hinders a matter-of-fact discussion of the principles of restitution justice. It fosters a climate of suspicion and rejection, in which the memory of the victims is separated from their legacy and the past is treated as a closed topic with no implications for the present.

<sup>4</sup> The Terezin Declaration – Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, https:// en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terezin\_Declaration (accessed: 20.06.2025).

### 9. Pedagogy of shame — 'Jews make us excuse ourselves to no end'

This narrative is based on the belief that Poles are forced — mainly by Jewish circles and the international institutions that support them — to constantly apologise for their alleged co-responsibility for the Holocaust. The slogan 'pedagogy of shame' functions in this context as a catch-all term, signifying the imposition of a particular model of historical memory along with an attempt to symbolically subordinate Poland to foreign powers.

Central to this narrative is a sense of injustice in the distribution of historical responsibility. It proclaims that the Poles — despite also being victims of the Second World War — were wrongly assigned as accomplices. Instead of commemorating the heroes who saved the Jews, denouncers of the Jews (shmaltsovniks) are being exposed. Instead of talking about Polish suffering, attention is focused on the Jewish tragedy. Constructed in this way, the narrative raises questions: why should Poles be ashamed of something they did not do, and why is their war experience marginalised?

Linguistically, this narrative uses terms such as 'dictatorship of memory', 'monopoly of Jewish suffering', 'forced education', or 'alien model of memory'. There are also comparisons and juxtapositions of victims — Poles and Jews — which do not serve the purpose of understanding shared history; they serve to fuel symbolic rivalry and the belief that 'our' (Polish) suffering has been degraded in favour of 'theirs' (that of the Jews). It is popular to suggest that the Poles suffered just as much or more, but 'nobody builds museums to them'.

This narrative is part of a wider political and identity discourse in which there is a growing need to 'take back control of memory'. It presents post-war history education not as a space for building a community of remembrance, but as a form of moral subordination and symbolic humiliation. An imbalance is highlighted: some groups have institutions, a voice and the right to judge, while others are condemned to silence and a perpetual obligation to apologise for themselves.

As a result, the 'pedagogy of shame' becomes a slogan that enables the rejection of reflection on one's own history and instead proposes a defensive narrative focused on regret, national pride and the need to 'win back one's voice'. This narrative is sometimes linked to other stories — of appropriated memory, greed, Jewish claims or alleged Jewish domination — creating

a coherent, albeit simplified and antagonistic, picture of conflict over the past. At its centre is the belief that Poles have been degraded to the role of 'secondary victims', whose history and suffering have been unfairly diminished or suppressed.

# 10. Antisemitism as a bludgeon to silence criticism — 'It is not allowed to speak ill of Jews'

This narrative is based on the belief that accusations of antisemitism are misused and serve as a tool to stifle criticism, whether against Jews as a group or against Israel, Jewish organisations or Jewish individuals. It suggests that there is a particular social category that is 'protected' from any negativity and that any critical speech is immediately discredited as a manifestation of hatred. The foundation of this narrative is the slogan 'It is not allowed to speak ill of Jews, even if the ill is true'.

Today, this narrative resonates particularly strongly in the context of tensions over freedom of expression, censorship and the limits of public debate. It is fostered by political and media polarisation, along with a growing distrust of institutions and mechanisms for the protection of minorities. Antisemitism is not seen here as a real social problem, but as a 'discrediting label' used to silence critics, limit debate and impose a particular worldview.

This narrative often includes ironic and rebellious slogans to build the image of a 'forbidden voice': 'Every inappropriate opinion today is antisemitism', 'You can speak ill just about everyone, but not the Jews', 'See who you are not allowed to criticise and you will see your real masters'. Such statements undermine the legitimacy of responding to hate speech by fitting it into the rhetoric of an alleged ban on speaking 'inconvenient truth'.

This narrative ties in strongly with broader anti-system, anti-elite and anti-globalisation themes. Defenders of free speech treat the protection of minorities — including Jews — as a manifestation of ideological blackmail and moral engineering. Instead of seeing it as a response to real social threats, they see it as a form of censorship to maintain the influence of 'cosmopolitan elites'.

Statements in this narrative often take a defensive form in advance, warding off potential accusations. A common strategy is to 'counter the allegation' formulated by statements like these: 'I'm not antisemitic, but...', 'It's not hate, it's just an inconvenient truth', 'These are facts that are not allowed to be spoken out loud'. Thus, it becomes possible to communicate antisemitic content in the form of apparent neutrality or 'honest criticism'.

The distinguishing feature of this narrative is the reversal of the logic of discrimination: it is not Jews who are presented here as victims; the victims now are individuals who supposedly 'courageously' speak the truth and face ostracism in return. The protection of minorities is thus deconstructed as privilege, and antisemitism is no longer treated as prejudice, becoming the status of the 'defiant commentator'.

This narrative is particularly prevalent in debates about political correctness, moderation of social media content, academic freedom, and the limits of criticism of religion or identity. It creates the figure of the 'patriot' or 'free thinker' who supposedly has the courage to say what 'everyone thinks but it is not appropriate to say it'. Thereby, it allows prejudice to continue to spread, hiding it behind the veil of the fight for freedom of expression.

# 11. 'A Jew will always be a Jew' — Incapable of integration and inherently destructive

This narrative is based on the belief that Jews, regardless of their place of residence, historical preconditions or adopted culture, remain a permanently alien and incompatible group. The narrative assumes that it is not just about religious differences or cultural traditions, but about an alleged internal, immutable identity that makes Jews impossible to fully integrate into majority societies. This approach appeals to deeply rooted archetypes of European culture: the Jew as a guest who never becomes a household member, as an intruder who remains outside the community even while formally belonging to one.

Today, this form of narrative often takes on a tone of apparent rationality. It is presented not as hatred, but as 'objective historical analysis' or 'reflection on the national experience'. Jews are described as a group that 'does not

take root anywhere', 'creates enclaves' and 'keeps to itself'. Their alleged reluctance to assimilate is often highlighted, contrasted with other minorities who have 'merged' with society.

The theme of disloyalty is also a strong component of this narrative. Jews are portrayed as those who, although welcomed by society, 'betray' their hosts in moments of crisis, allegedly siding with the enemy, assuming influence or acting to the detriment of the community. In this view, antisemitism is not a prejudice but a defence mechanism, a natural reaction of society to the action of a 'foreign element'.

This narrative is reflected in a number of contemporary contexts: disputes over history education, controversies over property restitution, assessments of Israeli policy or debates about settlements with the past of the People's Republic of Poland. Regardless of the specific topic, Jews are portrayed as a group that 'never cares for non-Jews', 'does not speak with one voice with Poles' and 'does not represent a common interest'. In this way, it also fits in with anti-elitist, anti-liberal and anti-European rhetoric.

A particularly disturbing aspect of this narrative is its naturalisation feature. The otherness of the Jews is presented as something innate, irremovable and rooted in their 'mentality' or 'nature'. Metaphors taken from the language of biology and pathology appear here: 'foreign organism', 'parasitic element', 'internal decomposition' which reminds of the most dangerous patterns of 20th century propaganda.

This narrative becomes particularly relevant during periods of cultural and geopolitical crises, such as migratory tensions, globalisation, war or social instability. At such moments, there is a strong need to defend the 'purity of the community' and the Jews become a symbolic threat to community integrity. It is a story that excludes and denies the possibility of change, assuming that a Jew never ceases to be an 'outsider' regardless of the circumstances. This narrative leaves no room for dialogue, recognition or community, as it presupposes an impassable distance in advance.

# Comparison of antisemitic narratives 2022 vs 2025

#### Persistence and updating of old narratives

- Most of the narratives from 2022 remained present in 2023–2025.
- Narratives such as 'the Jewish lobby', 'Jewish influence in communism' and 'the domination of Holocaust memory' were maintained.
- Their language changed from aggressive to more rationalised and subtle.
- Quotes take the form of moral outrage rather than open hatred.
- Narratives are updated contextually they are adapted to contemporary topics of public debate.

#### New themes and reformulations

- · New, previously absent antisemitic narratives have emerged.
- Examples: 'Dead Jews yes, living Jews no', 'Israel as the new Nazism',
   'Antisemitism as a club to suppress criticism'.
- These are a response to:
  - · the escalation of international conflicts,
  - the increased visibility of Jews in public debate,
  - disputes over property restitution and the memory of the Holocaust.
- These themes are strongly embedded in the current political and media context.

#### Changed dynamics of language and communication space

- · Antisemitic content has moved from traditional media to social media
- · Currently, memes, abbreviations, hashtags and viral comments dominate.
- · Content is faster, simplified and more vivid.
- Antisemitism is entering the digital mainstream, reaching beyond intellectual elites.

### The transformation of antisemitism into the logic of resentment

- · New narratives rarely refer to ethnic prejudices.
- They more often use language associated with:
  - injustice,
  - exclusion,
  - · the struggle for truth and memory,
  - resistance to 'symbolic domination'.
- · Antisemitism fits into narratives about the alleged defence of Polishness.
- It is gaining acceptance among people who do not identify with open antisemitism.

### Antisemitism under the guise of criticism of the system

- Contemporary antisemitism does not use direct hate speech towards Jews.
- It often takes the form of:
  - criticism of globalism,
  - opposition to elites, liberalism and political correctness.
- In these narratives, Jews are portrayed as:
  - · the 'privileged Other',
  - a group protected by the system,
  - · beneficiaries of institutions and capital.
- This language is subtle, but no less harmful and socially dangerous.

# Summary of key narrative tropes in 2023-2025

The analysis of antisemitic narratives from 2023-2025 reveals that many classical motifs have not disappeared; instead, they are transformed and updated, adapting to contemporary forms of communication and political and social contexts. Some of the tropes, such as 'Jewish Communism', 'world conspiracy' or 'property claims', no longer appear as closed and coherent stories, but as **scattered topoi** that are present in different narratives and taking the form of comments, allusions, comparisons, or memes. They are not so much finished stories as sets of semantic figures that can be flexibly integrated into other stories.

Today, for example, the 'Jewish Communism' functions simultaneously as part of a narrative of national betrayal, of an inability to integrate ('a Jew will always be a Jew'), and as a component of a broader critique of elites, combined with theories of supranational Jewish domination. Similarly, 'pedagogy of shame' and 'appropriation of memory' are entwined with narratives of greed, claims and critiques of history education to form a common core of stories about the alleged symbolic and economic injustices that Poles are supposed to experience.

These narratives no longer operate solely on the language of open hatred. Today, they more often take the form of irony, apparent reflection, criticism of the system or defence of freedom of expression. Antisemitic content is embedded in the rhetoric of the 'forbidden voice', examples of which are 'lt's not allowed to speak ill of Jews', 'lt's not antisemitism, it's facts', 'We will not apologise for ourselves forever', which makes it difficult to clearly identify and promotes its normalisation in public debate.

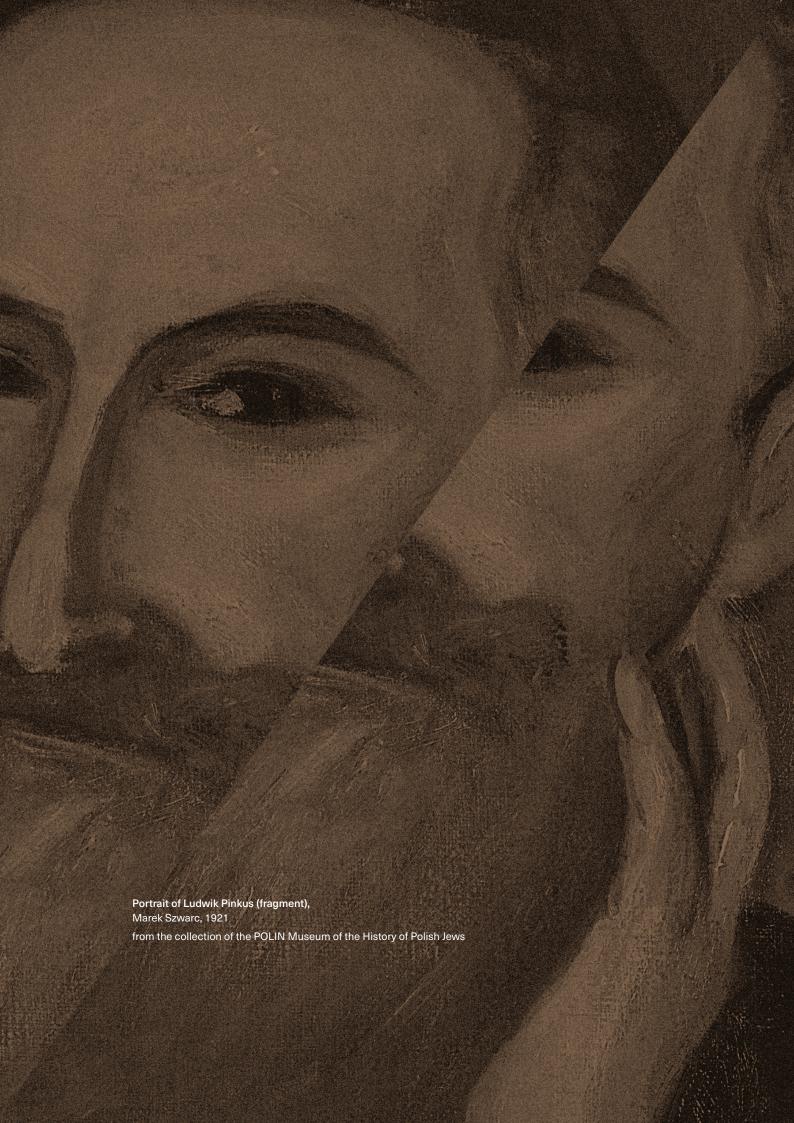
The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the growing significance of antiglobalisation and sovereignty narratives have created fertile ground for the revival of antisemitic clichés. As a group, Jews have begun to be portrayed not only as beneficiaries of history, but also as a universal symbol of an 'untouchable elite' that is tied to the West, international institutions, capital or the media. In this formula, antisemitism becomes the language of a broader resentment towards the 'foreign', the 'influential', the 'uncontrollable'.

Importantly, many narratives analysed as antisemitic reveal their universal potential as 'myths about strangers'. Motives such as 'disloyalty', 'entitlement', 'parasitic lifestyle' or 'inability to integrate' are easily transferred to other groups — Ukrainians, Muslims, immigrants, LGBT+ people, and even women. Contemporary antisemitic narratives do not therefore operate in isolation. They provide an arsenal of ready-made patterns for describing any group deemed 'alien' or 'dangerous'.

It is difficult to clearly define the direction of this relationship. Perhaps it is the centuries-old presence of antisemitic codes that makes them the first cognitive reflex in crises. It is possible, however, that it is the universality of the myths about 'aliens' that makes Jews — as the 'default strangers' of the Polish imagination — their most frequent vessels. In both cases, it is crucial to recognise the narrative mechanisms that allow this content to be sustained, transformed and disseminated, often without full awareness of its antisemitic nature.

'In many countries, including Poland, Jews (and even people of quite distant Jewish origin) have been given an almost carte blanche to do all sorts of mischief.'

PHC24 Polonia Christiana, 22.04.2024, Andrzej Pilipiuk: LGBT+ and Jews. From extreme dislike to gregarious adoration - this is how public opinion has been groomed - PCH24.pl (4.08.2025)



# Conclusions: How to act against social stereotypes and prejudices

In order to effectively counteract societal perceptions of Jews that carry the potential for exclusion or prejudice, communication activities are needed that span different dimensions of perception: from the image of a victim to representations of power to issues of otherness and familiarity. Each of these areas poses different challenges — along with different opportunities to change the narrative.

At the centre of the reflection is the question of how to shift the cultural image of the Jew from the past to the present — from a historical character that is abstract or characterised by suspicion, to a more complex, contemporary and relational representation. It is about moving beyond monodimensional figures (of a victim, enemy, or stranger) and restoring Jews to subjectivity as real people who are present here and now, with their everyday life, emotions, relationships and agency.

The discussion on how to act should not only be limited to educating about the past, it needs to address how to build spaces of shared storytelling that is multi-voiced, alive, and rooted in everyday experience. The starting point can be local narratives, emotions, personal relationships, representations in media, pop culture and art. The key question becomes not only how to combat the stereotype, but also what to replace it with; what images, stories and languages can support inclusivity, curiosity and understanding.

This kickoff invites further conversation on **how to create a culture of resistance to antisemitism** that is both a defensive measure and a positive project of social and symbolic coexistence.

'Mass genocides gassing extermination camps something terrible but it was the Jews who inflicted this fate on the Jews! Mostly Poles Czechs Slovaks and all other nations were killed and not jews, the numbers are inflated!'

Facebook, comment posted 8.02.2024 (original spelling)

# Appendix. Description of the research methodology

#### Two domains of semiotic analysis

- 1. Update of the map of cultural codes identified in the original research project of 2022. Not unlike in the original project, popular culture texts depicting the image of the Jew were analysed. This time, however, the focus was exclusively on material produced between 2023 and 2025. As many diverse sources as possible were considered: from films, television series and books, to advertisements and posters, to internet memes, everyday products and gadgets with elements of Jewish iconography. There was particular emphasis on visual materials as those that often have the strongest impact and most quickly perpetuate stereotypes.
- 2. An analysis of contemporary antisemitic narratives, based on an extensive corpus of texts from the print media, internet and television from 2023-2025. The material was collected by Instytut Monitorowania Mediów (Media Monitoring Institute), which has been carrying out systematic monitoring of media coverage for the POLIN Museum for years. The aim was to capture not only content with explicitly antisemitic resonance, but also more subtle narrative mechanisms that can lead to the perpetuation of exclusionary or suspicious attitudes towards Jews.

Both of these domains were analysed in parallel by two independent research

teams, who did not communicate with one another during the analytical process. This compartmentalisation allowed methodological transparency and comparability of results to be maintained.

#### 1. Code map update

The main objective of this part of the research project was to update the map of cultural codes describing the figure of the Jew, first developed in 2022. These codes — which are sets of symbols, motives and associations present in popular culture — play an important role in maintaining or weakening stereotypical perceptions of Jews.

The Semiotic Solutions team gathered new material using Google's non-profiled search engine, treating the results as an indicator of the availability and popularity of a motive in the culture. The starting point was a set of keywords built around the notion of 'Jew' and additional terms linked to different cultural formats: film, book, meme, poster, cabaret, article, gadget and others.

The corpus collected in this way included, among others, films and series broadcast in Poland, cabaret/standup programs, literary and academic publications from 2023-2025, as well as texts from Internet portals, utility objects and visual memes — both of an affirmative and openly or indirectly antisemitic nature.

The material collected served as a basis for comparison with the codes identified in the 2022 research project. New codes were identified where fresh clues, previously absent, appeared. For already known codes, the focus was on updating them by analysing changes in the intensity of appearance, the new contexts in which they appear, and the interpretative potential in a changed cultural landscape.

Further searches were conducted according to the 'snowball principle'— each identified motive provided an outset for exploring further related content. In this way, it was possible to establish the frequencies and connections between the various codes in the wider universe of popular culture.

#### 2. Analysis of antisemitic narratives

The second component of the project was focused on the analysis of contemporary antisemitic narratives, both classic ones and those updated or reinvented in their form. The objective was to identify stories that not only explicitly express dislike of Jews, but also those that may subtly contribute to reinforcing prejudice and exclusionary beliefs.

The analysis was based on a corpus of texts collected by Instytut Monitorowania Mediów between 2023 and 2025. A filter based on an algorithm that classified content according to its emotional overtones was applied. Of the material categorised as negative, 1,000 texts were selected from each medium (with the highest reach) and, in the case of television, all content meeting the criterion. The total corpus analysed included:

- 1,000 texts from the press (out of 1,169 classified as negative),
- 1,000 texts from online portals (out of 12,291 negative ones),
- 1000 Facebook and blog posts (out of 7,598),
- 455 television materials (all negative).

The entire corpus was then analysed with the aid of artificial intelligence models, including systems based on the OpenAl and Anthropic architectures. These tools allowed the rapid extraction of the main narrative tropes/motives, their classification and the identification of characteristic quotations and rhetorical phrases.

The next stage was a comparative analysis, confronting the 2023-2025 results with the narratives identified in the 2022 research project. This made it possible to capture the dynamics of change, as well as to distinguish the 11 most frequently recurring narrative patterns with antisemitic potential.

We are pleased to present you the results of further semiotic research in which we examine the image of Jews and antisemitic narratives present in Polish popular culture in the years 2023–2025. We conducted the first research of this kind in 2022.

We wanted to see whether and, if so, to what extent significant political and social events in recent years have influenced this image. The results are presented in this report.

Unfortunately, the conclusions are not encouraging.

I am writing those words just a few days after a Polish member of the European Parliament denied the existence of gas chambers in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Various sides of the political dispute are introducing antisemitic rhetoric and hatred into the public debate, thus gaining new supporters, media attention and reach on social media. Antisemitism has become fuel that drives political discourse.

All this is not only disturbing and deserves pause for thought, but should also lead to urgent systemic action: in the area of criminal law, the implementation of national education programs, and changes in the logic of the functioning of the media and mainstream political groups.

The role of cultural institutions is also important, and the POLIN Museum will continue to strongly oppose antisemitism, as it has been doing tirelessly for over a decade through its educational, cultural, and scientific programs.

I would like to believe that we will not be left alone with a handful of brave activists and social organizations, because antisemitism is not just a Jewish problem.

The growing strength of this repulsive phenomenon in Poland means that with each passing day, we as a society are becoming a little worse. And these bad days are increasing.

It is high time to turn back.

Zygmunt Stępiński

Director of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews

The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is the first public-private institution in Poland created jointly by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage, the capital city of Warsaw, and the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland. In accordance with its mission, it protects and restores the memory of the history of Polish Jews, counteracts manifestations of antisemitism, discrimination and exclusion, building mutual understanding and respect through, among other things, numerous educational, social and promotional programs, as well as through the permanent exhibition '1000 Years of the History of Polish Jews', which opened in 2014, and temporary exhibitions.

Appreciated by audiences and experts from around the world, it has been honoured with, among others, the European Museum Award of the Year (EMYA) and two European Heritage Awards.