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Four Women in Social Media: Representing Jewishness in Poland and Ukraine

Introduction

A worldwide phenomenon of social media popularity, existing in parallel to the real world, is connected to the fluid nature of contemporary life – marked by dynamic social connections, geographical mobility, evolving value systems, and, equally importantly, concepts of openness and closedness. Online platforms offer individuals the opportunity to express their belonging to various communities, as well as their religious and political views. In essence, crafting a distinct social media profile around a particular aspect of one's identity (e.g., scholar, woman, mother of ten children, etc.) is a conscious strategy employed by individuals to garner attention, typically reflected in the number of followers and reactions to their posts.

In a similar vein, interactions with representatives of minority groups on a larger scale demonstrate an interest in these groups within society, at least in certain segments. Prominent social media examples representing Jews in Poland and Ukraine, two countries under the same umbrella of Eastern Europe, connected by complex Jewish history and the rupture of Jewish life during the Holocaust, could serve as platforms for discussions about the similarities and differences in treating Jews as “the synonym of alien, bizarre, hostile, and scary”.¹ The surge of interest in Jewish culture and history, along with a notable revival of Jewish life – often facilitated by non-Jewish inhabitants of the region in the absence of Jews – was captured by Ruth Ellen Gruber more than 20 years ago through the concept “virtually Jewish”.² Recent years have brought challenges in delineating the boundaries between the real and the virtual, as well as the benefits of the revival of Jewish life in the physical world, evident in both Poland and Ukraine. The question of “Jewishness”, or “the fact of belonging to the group of people whose traditional religion is Judaism”,³ has now become a point of online declarations,

1 Alina Cala, *Jew. The Eternal Enemy? The History of Antisemitism in Poland* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018), p. 47.

2 Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

3 See “Jewishness”, *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995–2025), <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/jewishness>.

where it is supposed to be easy to check by others and thus it gives no to little space to falsification, especially in the case of popular public personalities.

In this chapter, I aim to address the following questions:

1. What is encompassed in the portrayal of “Jewishness” on the social media platforms of four personalities in Poland and Ukraine who identify themselves as Jewish?
2. What does the popularity of certain cases of interplay indicate about the status and perception of Judaism/Jewish culture in contemporary Poland and Ukraine?

This area of research – ethno-religious belonging, social media representation, and its impacts on society – is new and dynamic. Recent research on Instagram underscores the importance of ethno-racial identity characteristics in online self-presentations, including externally imposed characteristics.⁴ Social psychology highlights the existence of in-group favoritism, wherein individuals tend to favor others with characteristics similar to their own. This phenomenon could be leveraged as a marketing tool on social media.⁵ Highlighting the experiences of minority groups could promote greater visibility and awareness of these groups in society, as well as facilitate agency and identity-building for individuals with minority ethnic identities.⁶

Years of repression of freedom of speech and religion in the Soviet Union (where Ukraine was located) and its neighboring Socialist bloc (with Poland as a key element) made belonging to certain minorities not only inconvenient but also an unwanted topic for a long time. The emergence and development of blogs whose authors speak openly about their Jewishness signal the development of “Jewish spaces” – meeting points for both Jews and non-Jews alike, a concept offered by Diana Pinto.⁷ In this regard, a social media page led by a Jewish creator (author) becomes a “Jewish space” when it attracts wider audiences, implying

4 Nadia A. J. D. Bij de Vaate, Jolanda Veldhuis, and Elli A. Konijn, “Ethno-racial identity and digitalisation in self-presentation: a large-scale Instagram content analysis”, *Behaviour & Information Technology* 42 (2023): 2210–25.

5 Siddik Bozkurt, David Gligor, and Linda Hollebeek, “Ethnicity’s effect on social media-based comment intention: Comparing minority and majority consumers”, *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (2021).

6 Jiyar Aghapouri and Avin Ahmadi, “The representation and reconstruction of ethno-national identity on social media by Kurdish women in Rojhelat, Kurdistan-Iran”, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 21/2 (2021): 121–2.

7 Diana Pinto, “The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity”, in *Jewish Studies at the Central European University: Public Lectures 1996–1999* (Budapest: Central European University, 2000), p. 197.

non-Jewish visitors. Here, the concept of “virtually Jewish” gets new meanings – being engaged as a non-Jewish follower of a Jewish creator on a virtual platform, and being virtually present as a real-life Jew, adjusting to the needs and curiosities of non-Jewish audiences. Such a platform is still a “Jewish space”, as emphasized by Pinto earlier in this book, while Jews as authors define the boundaries of their page – in topics, structure, regularity of activities, etc.

An overview of the Jewish real and virtual worlds in Poland and Ukraine reveals that Jews constitute a tiny minority in both countries, comprising less than 1% of the population. The last Polish census conducted in 2021 uncovered that there are more than 17,000 people in Poland (out of 37.75 million inhabitants) who identify themselves as Jews.⁸ A well-known demographer, Sergio DellaPergola, calculated around 45,000 Jews in Ukraine (out of 44.13 million inhabitants) in 2020.⁹

The whole topic of being publicly Jewish has connotations of certain anxiety in both Poland and Ukraine – as something underprivileged and connected to traumas of persecutions. Years of Soviet repressions after World War II and emphasis on the common fate of all Soviet citizens erased public discussions about separate ethnic minorities, leaving room for private, sometimes secret, gatherings of people – e.g., commemorating the massacre of Jews in Babyn Yar. Poland, formally not belonging to the Soviet Union, was a satellite state of it with a similar strategy of nation-building without paying attention to ethnic minorities. Both countries had to deal with their own problems of the void and the return of Jewish property after World War II, many of which remain unsolved even today. In this regard, being publicly Jewish and advancing topics connected to Jewishness is a groundbreaking shift in both societies.

There are several bloggers both in Poland and Ukraine who correspond to the concept of “virtually Jewish” – while not being Jewish themselves, they engage with Jewish topics. An example from Poland is a popular Instagram account in Polish by Urszula Rybicka called “Żydoteka” (13,100 followers), positioned as “the first Polish media about Jewish literature”.¹⁰ An example from Ukraine is Helena Shot, founder of the Yiddish Vinkl project in both English and Yiddish

8 *Stan i struktura demograficzno-społeczna i ekonomiczna ludności Polski w świetle wyników NSP 2021* [The condition and demographic, social and economic structure of the Polish population in the light of the National Census 2021] (Warszawa: Główny Urząd Statystyczny, 2023), p. 115.

9 Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population 2020”, in *The American Jewish Year Book 2020*, ed. Arnold Dashefsky and Ira M. Sheskin, vol. 120 (Cham, SU: Springer, 2020), pp. 300–2.

10 Instagram, “Żydoteka”, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/zydoteka/>.

(1,825 followers on Instagram).¹¹ While most bloggers connected to Poland write in Polish, bloggers in Ukraine often choose between Ukrainian and Russian. This question became vital due to the weaponizing of Russian as an instrument of cultural warfare by Russia against Ukraine, and correspondent statements by Russian officials about Ukrainian as a non-existent language. In this regard, it is important to note the various initiatives around translating Jewish religious texts into Ukrainian (instead of the common use of Russian translations) since the Russian invasion.¹² At the same time, I assume that Russian propaganda about Ukraine as a state that needs to be “de-Nazified” has put an extra burden on the Jewish bloggers in Ukraine, including in their choice of language.

Public Jewishness on social media is connected to a general trend of greater popularity of blogging among women than men. In other words, “Jewish spaces” in this research are also places initiated and organized by women. However, having mostly women as Jewish bloggers raises questions about the place of the topics they cover within the social hierarchy, as well as their possible distance from political and socially significant issues in society.¹³ For instance, 90% of profiles labelled “the most influential” belong to men in Ukraine, with an additional emphasis on the importance of war in their posts,¹⁴ while 90% of Instagram profiles labelled “the most popular” belong to women.¹⁵ This leads us to a question about the case selection for this research.

Methodology and Cases of Analysis

In this research, I aimed to analyze cases of public personalities who write about Judaism and Jews, define themselves as Jews, and relate either to Poland or Ukraine. Moreover, I aimed to include different social media platforms, namely

¹¹ Instagram, “Yiddish vinkl”, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/yiddish_vinkl/.

¹² A known example of a translator into Ukrainian is Michal Stamova with 1,700 followers on her Facebook page, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100008591657550>.

¹³ Lenka Vochocová, “Witty divas, nice mothers and tough girls in a sexist world: experiences and strategies of female influencers in online political debates”, *Media, Culture & Society* 40/4 (2017): 3.

¹⁴ Sofia Broitman, “The 11 most influential bloggers in Ukraine have been named”, *Lux FM*, accessed May 19, 2024, https://lux.fm/nazvali-11-najvplivovishih-blogeriv-ukrayini_n135728.

¹⁵ Alina Melnyk, “Top 10 Instagram bloggers in Ukraine”, *Comments.ua*, September 20, 2023, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://stars.comments.ua/ua/news/person/top-10-instagram-blogeriv-ukraini-scho-vidomo-pro-populyarnih-blogeriv-u-instagram-718390.html>.

Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Facebook is the most popular platform in both Poland and Ukraine, specifically for people in the 25–34 year old age group. Instagram similarly has popularity among this age group, but also among those aged 18–24 years old, while TikTok appeals to the youngest generation, up to 25 years old. In terms of content, Facebook is focused on more informative posts, Instagram on images, and TikTok on brief videos and more entertaining content. At the same time, TikTok has been specifically found to be connected to the spreading of misinformation about the Russian war in Ukraine, which broadens its influence beyond entertainment.¹⁶

My preliminary Internet search, as well as my existing knowledge in the field and consultations with colleagues, led me to select four cases for this analysis, two in Poland and two in Ukraine:

1. Miriam Synger, the most popular Jewish creator in Poland, with 73,400 followers on her Instagram account “jestem_zydowka” (“I am a Jewess”, in Polish).¹⁷ Miriam identifies herself as an Orthodox Jewish blogger and educator, intending to deliver her messages in Polish for non-Jewish audiences in Poland. In her public interviews, Miriam spoke about the inherited importance of sharing a written word.¹⁸ Growing up secular, Miriam chose a religious path at a certain point in her life. Miriam has five kids, and she places emphasis on their everyday life in her blog. One of Miriam’s side activities is hand-made jewelry, which she advertises through her blog. Miriam lives in Krakow.
2. Golda Tencer is a known Jewish activist and leader in Poland. Golda, born in 1949 in post-war Poland, is a unique memory keeper who lived in Poland during the 1968–72 anti-Zionist campaign, and the ensuing anti-Jewish harassment and correspondent mass emigration from Poland.¹⁹ She is the head of

¹⁶ Olga Robinson, Adam Robinson, and Shayan Sardarizadeh, “Ukraine war: How TikTok fakes pushed Russian lies to millions”, *BBC Verify*, December 15, 2023, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67687449>.

¹⁷ Instagram, “jestem_zydowka”, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.instagram.com/jestem_zydowka/.

¹⁸ Marta Szarejko, “Ludziom coś się nie składa. Rozmowa z Miriam Synger” [Something is wrong with people. A talk with Miriam Synger], *Dwutygodnik* 251 (2018): 11, accessed October 14, 2024, <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/arttykul/8106-ludziom-sie-cos-nie-sklada.html>.

¹⁹ The anti-Jewish political campaign in Poland was connected to the politics of the Soviet Union that withdrew all diplomatic ties with Israel after its successes in the Six-Day War in 1967. The campaign in Poland forced no less than 13,000 people with Jewish backgrounds to leave Poland. This painful time was discussed in some interviews with Golda Tencer, for example: “Gołda Tencer i jej historia jak z filmu: ‘Wszyscy moi przyjaciele wyjechali, zostały puste domy’” [Golda Tencer and her history as if in a movie: “All my friends left, only empty houses were left”], *Dzięk*

several organizations and initiatives in Warsaw: the Jewish Theater in Warsaw, the “Shalom” Foundation, the Centre for Yiddish Culture, and the Festival for Jewish Culture “Warszawa Singera”. She has about 8,000 followers on Facebook, communicating in Polish for a Polish-speaking audience. Golda is also an actress and a singer.²⁰

3. Vlada Nedak is an executive director of “Project Keshet Ukraine”, an international organization that focuses on Jewish women’s empowerment, and a Ukrainian Jewish community leader. On her Facebook page, where Vlada has 1,500 followers, she describes herself as a head of civic organizations who supports women and helps to connect businesses with the civic sector.²¹ Vlada lives with her family in Kryvyi Rih, a large industrial city in Central Ukraine, sharing mostly professional content in Ukrainian for her audience in Ukraine.²²
4. Nusia Verkhovska is a popular Jewish blogger from Odesa, Ukraine, with 29,000 followers on her TikTok account “nusia_jewish_odessa”.²³ Nusia is one of the heads of the Jewish Museum of Odesa “Migdal-Shorashim” (“Tower of Roots”, in Hebrew). She identifies herself as an Orthodox Jew aiming to inform others about Jewish traditions and Judaism in a playful manner, adapted to the typically forms, formats, and audience expectations of TikTok content. Nusia delivers her messages in Russian, attracting a wide Russian-speaking audience (including Russians in Russia), while at the same time emphasizing her strong support of Ukraine and towards her own city of Odesa. In this regard, reactions to Nusia’s blog are probably the most emotionally charged among our four case studies, as the commenters offer varied and different perspectives on Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Of the individuals mentioned above, most of the women belong to the same age group (around 30–40 years old), with the exception of Golda Tencer, who repre-

dobry. TVN (2020), accessed May 19, 2024, <https://dziendobry.tvn.pl/gwiazdy/golda-tencer-i-jej-filmowa-historia-wszyscy-moi-przyjaciele-wyjechali-zostaly-puste-domy-da309227-ls5329224>.

²⁰ Facebook page of Golda Tencer, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1499558332>.

²¹ As of 2024, Vlada has also launched a new podcast, “Tvoje. Moje” (“Yours. Mine”, in Ukrainian), on YouTube, where she invites guests to discuss various topics from an intergenerational perspective: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEC9YSzPyzC6L2xELkVkh3Q/videos>, accessed October 8, 2024.

²² Facebook page of Vlada Nedak, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/nedakvlada>.

²³ TikTok profile of Nusia Verkhovska, accessed October 8, 2024, https://www.tiktok.com/@nusia_jewish_odessa.

sents a different generational perspective on social media and publicity in general. All four women have different platforms for public representation, and I selected the most popular platform for each case. Each page chosen for this research is publicly accessible.

I employ a qualitative content analysis of their introductions on their respective social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) and any available public interviews, as well as on their most popular posts during 2022–3. The main aim of the analysis is to analyze existing patterns of representing Jewishness on social media in both Poland and Ukraine and the outcomes of these patterns in their respective societies. I consider whether it is possible to speak about certain Eastern European trends more generally, or if it is more relevant to talk about unique situations and the role of public Jewishness therein.

I initially selected a two-year period in order to allow for a full calendar cycle and eliminate any random pauses or periods of reduced activity on each platform. However, the period of research itself encompassed some challenging developments: the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the biggest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II, which made Poland the main international hub for refugees from Ukraine, including Jewish refugees; as well as the attack by the terrorist group Hamas on Israel on October 7, 2023, and the response of Israel in Gaza, which fueled considerable anti-Israeli and anti-Semitic sentiment internationally, without much differentiation between the two in the virtual world. Being a contemporary Jewish blogger posed new challenges and raised questions about the functions of each Jewish space, its relation to the past and the present, the personal, the communal, and the political.

Research Results

The whole dataset consists of 1,117 posts, with the largest share of posts being by Golda Tencer (538), and then relatively comparable shares of posts by Nusia Verkhovska (232), Miriam Synger (178), and Vlada Nedak (169). Notably, 87% of Golda's²⁴ posts are related to Jewish topics, similar to 81% of posts by Nusia, while this is relevant for 70% of Miriam's posts, and 46% of posts by Vlada. These numbers provide diversity in terms of both the intensity and focus on Jewish topics by each personality.

Each of the four personalities has a distinct profile picture displaying their face; Vlada and Golda appear more professional, whereas Miriam and Nusia look

²⁴ For the convenience of readers, henceforth I will mostly refer to each personality by their first name.

more theatrical. This general perception is also evident in both the format and content of their respective social media pages:

1. Most of the posts by Miriam and Nusia include images of themselves. Miriam consistently wears a headscarf, or a shawl styled as a turban, underscoring her identity as a married Orthodox woman. Similarly, Nusia appears in her blog wearing hats or a wig, aligning with Orthodox Jewish customs.
2. Golda's posts predominantly highlight her professional activities, showcasing photos from related events. She rarely posts personal images unless they are event-specific. Vlada takes a middle-ground approach, sharing both personal photos and event-related images, each accompanied by professional insights. Neither Golda nor Vlada emphasize their Jewish identity through clothing, with only occasional exceptions, such as when Vlada is wrapped in an Israeli flag to discuss topics related to Israel.
3. Both Miriam and Nusia explicitly reference their Jewish identity in their account names, reinforcing their cultural and religious connection.

Generally, the activities of all four women are intertwined with Jewish tradition and Jewishness, albeit in varying ways. It is noteworthy that greetings for Jewish holidays are a common theme across all four cases, indicating both their involvement in celebrations and the audience's potential interest in understanding the significance of these events. In the case of Vlada, holidays serve a pretext for sharing some Jewish stories connected to her family. At the same time, Miriam and Nusia extensively cover general topics related to Jews and Judaism, often addressing questions from their readers. They both identify as Orthodox Jews, being remarried with children from previous marriages; they both became religious during the courses of their lives, implying they have an extensive knowledge of the secular world. Nusia's posts often delve into private relationships and marriage, in most cases infused with humor, setting her apart from the other three cases.

Identity Matters: Being Publicly Jewish in Poland and Ukraine

Despite the particular characteristics of each woman in my research, I grouped their Jewishness-related posts under certain similar categories: professional activities and social initiatives; Judaism; Jewish culture; historical events; identification with the place they live in while being Jewish; current war reflections; personal Jewish story; antisemitism; and Israel (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1: Number of posts by categories of Jewishness, 2022–3.

| | Antisemitism | Israel | Jewish story | Current war | Identification with place | History, Holocaust | General Jewish culture | Judaism | Professional activities |
|------------------|--------------|--------|--------------|-------------|---------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|---------|-------------------------|
| Vlada Nedak | | 5 | 9 | 10 | | 5 | 8 | | 87 |
| Miriam Synger | 9 | 5 | | | | 32 | 34 | 37 | 13 |
| Golda Tencer | | | 30 | | | 63 | 3 | | 411 |
| Nusia Verkhovska | 4 | 3 | | 32 | | 11 | 30 | 78 | 18 |

Importantly, professional activities connected to Jewish life take the leading place in terms of the number of mentions, mostly due to the rich cultural initiatives connected to Golda Tencer, but characteristic for all four women. The other category typical for all cases is connected to Jewish culture (in its wider meaning – holidays, food, everyday life). It should be stressed that Golda's professional activities refer to the domain of culture, so she tends not to discuss general questions in that domain. Interestingly, questions related to the domain of Judaism are discussed exclusively by Miriam and Nusia. In both cases, their declared religiosity plays a beneficial role for their blogging activities, making both women experts in Judaism “from the inside”.

While Vlada and Golda have occasional posts connected to their own Jewish heritage or Jewish lifestyle, Miriam and Nusia write about their Jewish life on a regular basis. This represents a paradox of the contemporary digital world – praising modesty and being discreet about personal matters as the highest value for Jewish observant women, the so-called “Woman of Valor”,²⁵ alongside the international success of public blogs with open discussions on any topic led by these women. However, this is not something connected specifically to Eastern Europe, but rather a global trend of interest in mass media and social media in a specific segment of Judaism labelled as Orthodox or even Ultra-Orthodox.²⁶ This surge of interest is influenced by the globalization of streaming services, the rise of so-called lifestyle blogging (which showcases the daily lives of individuals), originating in the US, and the increasing number of internet users across all segments of the Jewish world, including Ultra-Orthodox communities. I interpret the popularity of blogs about Orthodox Judaism globally as a fascination with something unknown and relatively closed, which implies certain exoticization of Jews as the “Others”. A particular niche in this regard is occupied by representatives of the Chabad-Lubavitch group, known for its outreach activities.²⁷ Interestingly, in terms of this research, it is only Nusia who belongs to the Chabad-Lubavitch community, although she does not speak extensively about it. Simultaneously, the fascination with Jewish culture as an attempt to distance oneself from the mono-

25 Karen E. H. Skinazi, *Women of Valor. Orthodox Jewish Troll Fighters, Crime Writers, and Rock Stars in Contemporary Literature and Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), pp. 217–22.

26 Chavie Lieber, “Orthodox Jews Are Finally Having Their Pop Culture Moment”, *The Wall Street Journal*, September 18, 2023, accessed May 19, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/arts-culture/television/orthodox-jews-pop-culture-tv-37c0a1d2>.

27 Oren Golan and Nurit Stadler, “Building the sacred community online: the dual use of the Internet by Chabad”, *Media, Culture & Society* 38/1 (2015): 15.

lithic Catholic majority is one of the visible developments in contemporary Polish society.²⁸

Questions of antisemitism and identification with the place where they live were also mostly discussed by Miriam and Nusia, which could be interpreted as a blogging tendency to discuss somewhat catchy and possibly divisive topics. Interestingly, the topic of the Holocaust was raised only by Golda, hinting once again at her special role as a memory keeper. Predictably, the war in Ukraine was discussed by the women from Ukraine, who experienced it firsthand – and this may have, understandably, made a profound impact on their identification as Jews from Ukraine.

Nusia published many posts in relation to her hometown of Odesa, emphasizing her aforementioned attachment to the city.²⁹ An indicative example of the topics touched upon is the discussion of the so-called “Odesa language”. It is implied that the significant Jewish presence throughout the city’s history resulted in many Yiddish additions and the insertion of a degree of Jewish humor into local communication. Moreover, Nusia highlighted certain facts from Odesa’s history and advertised her museum. Nusia created many posts about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, taking a clear pro-Ukrainian position and having discussions with the Russian supporters among her audience. She characterized both herself and her daughter as “Ukrainian”, made reference to Ukrainian symbols, and described how her family missed being in Ukraine during their forced resettlement in Germany in 2022. She explained that her preference for Germany over Israel, as a shelter during the war, was due to the relative closeness of Germany to Ukraine and her long-term plans to live again in Ukraine, implying that it would be harder to return home from Israel than from Germany. It is indicative that Nusia stopped her blog after the resettlement and resumed it only after her return to Odesa.

Vlada stayed in her hometown of Kryvyi Rig and played an active role in providing humanitarian aid to people in the region. Interestingly, the number of her posts about supporting Ukraine equals the number of her posts about supporting Israel in relation to the events of October 7, 2023, and their aftermath. Describing both lands as “the land of my ancestors’ past” (Israel) and “the land of my kids’ future” (Ukraine), her self-identification with Ukraine is pronounced several times: “I am Ukrainian” (similar to Nusia’s use of this descriptor mentioned

²⁸ Genevieve Zubrzycki, *Resurrecting the Jew: Nationalism, Philosemitism, and Poland’s Jewish Revival* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), pp. 115–20.

²⁹ Odesa has played an important role in Jewish history since its foundation in 1794, being a centre for Jewish manufacture, literature, and art, as well as the birthplace of Zionism.

above). Her Jewish identity was manifested indirectly, through references to her family's Jewish history, mentions of Jewish holidays, and leading the Jewish organization "Project Keshet Ukraine".

Unlike the Ukrainian cases mentioned above, where Russian aggression endangered the existence of Ukraine and precipitated changes in many people's attitudes towards the subject of Ukrainian identity, the Polish cases did not require any such similar emphasis on Polish identity. For instance, Golda does not make any statements of her identification with Poland – this fact would perhaps be too obvious for one of the most important keepers of Jewish memory and culture. Golda's attachment to Jewish culture in Poland is seen both in her professional activities and in her family stories, as discussed in numerous interviews.

Miriam, who tried life in Israel and returned to Poland, demonstrates her identification as both Jewish and Polish. This self-definition is reflected in her book cover: "I am Jewess: Diary of a Religious Feminist, Patriot, and Polish mother of many kids".³⁰ The concept of a "Polish mother" is a deeply embedded cultural code in Polish culture, implying the full dedication of a woman to her children and her country. It is worth mentioning in this context that Miriam's second book (published in 2024) is a children's book in Polish – "Ruth's Diary". Miriam has discussed the topic of being Jewish in Poland in great detail – having an observant family, observing Shabbat and kashrut, and celebrating Jewish holidays in a Catholic country. She also wrote a few posts about the contemporary antisemitism she has faced as a Jewish blogger in Poland, once again emphasizing her attachment to Poland as her only home. In a few posts Miriam also mentioned her specific relationship to Germany: having a German father and a German partner as the father of her first child. Such posts generated significant interest and diverse reactions from Miriam's audience, which I attribute to fulfilling her role as a blogger.

The topic of Israel was discussed at least once by all women in the research, except for Golda. At the same time, Golda was among the organizers of the initiative "Empty Shabbat table" in Warsaw in November 2023, which was dedicated to raising international awareness about the people kidnapped from Israel. Her silence on social media could be attributed to various personal reasons, her own complex life story in a socialist Poland during the anti-Zionist campaigns, as well as by the surge of anti-Zionism online.

30 Miriam Synger, *Jestem Żydówką* (Krakow: Znak, 2023).

What Attracted the Audience of Each “Jewish Space”?

Vlada has consistently emphasized her commitment to being an “agent of positive change” in Ukraine, focusing extensively on women’s empowerment and entrepreneurship. Her most popular post, dated February 25, 2022, reflects her deeply personal response to her 18-year-old son’s decision to remain in Kyiv at the onset of the Russian invasion (305 reactions). This post captures the inner conflict between her roles as both a protective (Jewish) mother and a proud Ukrainian citizen, deeply admiring her son’s courage in such turbulent times.

Another popular post, dated July 10, 2022, marked her receipt of an MA degree from the Business School at the Ukrainian Catholic University (235 reactions). For many, this post stood as a testament to the importance of education for women of all ages and backgrounds, and reinforced Vlada’s own advocacy for personal and professional growth.

On September 8, 2023, Vlada’s third most popular post drew attention to the physical impact of the ongoing war, describing damage to her apartment window in Kryvyi Rig (170 reactions). The reactions to this post highlight the solidarity of her followers and their shared indignation against the aggressor. These personal posts, though not directly related to Vlada’s social initiatives, reveal how her audience is drawn to her more intimate reflections. Through her personal lens, she explores broader social themes of motherhood, civic pride, educational aspirations, and a strong sense of community.

Meanwhile, Nusia’s most popular videos on TikTok, primarily measured by views, spotlight similar themes. Her top video posted during the period of this research documented the Hanukkah celebrations in Odesa on December 10, 2023, amassing 186,400 views. Its popularity was likely amplified by antisemitic comments questioning the appropriateness of public Jewish celebrations in war-torn, predominantly Christian Orthodox Ukraine.

Nusia’s second most viewed video, posted on May 14, 2023, delves into the subject of commonly used Jewish words in Odesa, drawing 97,800 views. This video hints at the linguistic and cultural nostalgia of Yiddish in Odesa, a reflection of the city’s unique heritage. Finally, her “love story” video from February 11, 2022, garnered 76,600 views by breaking stereotypes about Orthodox Jewish women; in this case, it highlighted her marriage after having two children from a previous relationship.

Miriam’s posts evoke similarly complex themes. Her most popular post, which generated 7,414 reactions on December 2, 2023, envisioned an idealized homeland for Jews, free from violence – a poignant message against the backdrop

of mounting international pressure on Israel. Another post, garnering 7,123 reactions, humorously explored the ways Hebrew names can sound peculiar in Poland, echoing the cross-linguistic themes Nusia touched on earlier. Her third most popular post, titled “What do I think about the situation in Israel?” (October 9, 2023, with 6,821 reactions), was striking in its ambiguity; here, Miriam chose to remain silent, perhaps reflecting her audience’s expectations and a preference for diplomacy over controversy. Miriam’s most viral video, “Don’t be afraid of me”, posted on June 4, 2023, with 430,000 views, is a response to the antisemitic stereotypes she faces in Poland: “You may sleep calmly”, she states. “I won’t take your house or your money. Just let me exist as a Jew”. This encapsulates her social media presence, where she often engages with challenging topics surrounding Jewish identity in Poland and her own relationship with Israel.

For Golda, the theme of family plays a central role in her most popular posts. Her top post, featuring a simple photo of her mother with the caption “Mom”, dated May 26, 2022, received 675 reactions. Similarly, posts celebrating her son David’s birthday on September 26, 2022 (571 reactions), and a photograph of her grandmother on January 22, 2022 (515 reactions), showcase her role as a memory keeper, particularly poignant around International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Golda’s role as the “A Yidishe Mame” is underscored by these posts, reflecting a cultural archetype in Jewish culture: the devoted, protective mother, managing both household and broader social roles. By contrast, Miriam Synger’s book highlights the concept of the “Polish Mom”, capturing her unique connection to Poland and her primarily Polish audience.

Manifestations of “Jewishness” and “Jewish Spaces”

Evidently, Nusia and Miriam engage with more controversial topics, contrasting with the professional and less contentious content shared by Vlada and Golda. This difference can be attributed to both platform choices and the bloggers’ objectives: while Nusia and Miriam aim to reach a broader audience, Vlada and Golda focus on strengthening their reputations and deepening connections with their existing followers. Nusia’s choice of TikTok, a platform popular among younger users, aligns with her goal of reaching a wider demographic. Observing the specificities and commonalities of each blog reveals two distinct expressions of popular Jewishness on social media.

The first is a *secular, community-oriented popular Jewishness*, characterized by family stories, professional achievements, and broad community engagement. Golda Tencer and Vlada Nedak exemplify this form.

- Golda’s role as a memory keeper is strongly associated with preserving Jewish heritage and cultural memory, especially of pre-war Jewish life in Warsaw. Her social media presence is vibrant, filled with reports on Jewish events, interviews, and public gatherings. By engaging the wider Polish community interested in Jewish history and culture, as well as the local Jewish community, she builds a bridge between Poland’s present and its Jewish past.
- Vlada’s focus on female leadership showcases a dynamic Jewish space that promotes empowerment and social initiatives, particularly for women across Ukraine. Through sharing Jewish family stories and personal reflections, Vlada fosters a connection to personal history and encourages community involvement. While Golda’s professional endeavors are deeply rooted in Jewish culture – such as directing a Jewish theater and overseeing a Yiddish center – Vlada, though she leads a Jewish organization, participates in Jewish heritage events but integrates a broader array of social issues in her work.

The second form is a *religious, individual-oriented popular Jewishness* that serves as a means of exploring Orthodox Judaism. This is embodied by Miriam Synger and Nusia Verkhovska, each offering unique insights into Jewish life and belief.

- Miriam’s blog invites followers to explore Jewish culture and Judaism through her personal perspective, addressing complex social issues. Her online presence engages mostly non-Jewish Poles, as she navigates her Jewish heritage, secular background, and sociological expertise. Miriam’s content often resonates with a diverse audience and attracts interest due to her openness about both Jewish and non-Jewish life in Poland.
- Nusia’s platform combines humor and entertainment to explain aspects of Judaism, engaging a non-Jewish audience and attracting Russian-speaking viewers beyond Ukraine. Her interactive content covers Jewish traditions, holidays, and family life while firmly supporting a pro-Ukrainian stance amidst the ongoing Russian invasion. This stance draws controversial comments from pro-Russian followers, especially as she addresses antisemitism, Israel, and challenges common stereotypes about Jews.

In both secular and religious expressions, Nusia and Miriam often tackle contentious topics like antisemitism and Israel, while Vlada and Golda focus on heritage and leadership, showcasing the diversity within Jewish voices on social media.

Conclusion

This research identifies two distinct forms of popular Jewishness within the Jewish spaces of Eastern Europe, as represented by four women from Poland and Ukraine, moving beyond a simple division between Ukrainian Jewish and Polish Jewish spaces. The first form, *secular community-oriented Jewishness*, addresses communal needs and fosters awareness and agency, while the second, *religious individually-oriented Jewishness*, expresses Judaism and Jewish traditions through personal experiences and lifestyle. The presence of these patterns reflects similar social processes in both countries: a curiosity about certain aspects of Judaism and an interest in Jewish culture, adapted to be accessible and relevant in the Polish and Ukrainian contexts. In some instances, this reflects a fascination with the unique or “exotic” features of Jewish culture, and in others, it emphasizes a desire to build awareness about both the historical and contemporary presence of Jewish communities in the region.

Notably, each influencer’s physical location contributes significantly to their sense of geographical attachment within their respective Jewish space. The Ukrainian representatives are deeply rooted in their cities, such as Odesa and Kryvyi Rig, expressing a strong identification with these locations, particularly in the context of the Russian invasion, which has reinforced their connection to Ukraine. This manifests across various forms of content, from serious reflections to more casual, entertaining posts. In contrast, the Polish cases are embedded within the cultural landscape of Poland, with Golda’s connection specifically tied to Jewish cultural life in Warsaw.

The popularity of *religious individually-oriented Jewishness* on social media may indicate a broad interest among non-Jews in the perceived authenticity of religious expressions, with religious Jewishness seen as a genuine lens through which Jewish identity is viewed. Conversely, the popularity of *secular community-oriented popular Jewishness* suggests a potential for greater audience identification with creators who bridge, rather than separate, individual experiences within these Jewish spaces. The coexistence of both forms of popular Jewishness in Eastern Europe reflects simultaneous social processes: an appreciation of shared human experiences alongside a fascination with cultural differences.

It is important to acknowledge that the two Orthodox Jewish women examined here are unique within the religious world and attract attention because of their role as bloggers, which is less common in this domain. While this study focuses on the representations of popular Jewishness online, it does not encompass less popular forms within both the secular and religious realms.

Ultimately, this research captures and contextualizes popular trends at a specific moment, posing questions about the roles and functions of Jewish spaces in

contemporary Eastern Europe. These spaces interact with broader societal issues and the connections between past and present conflicts. The ongoing war in Ukraine has inevitably overshadowed many of these questions for Ukrainian Jews, pushing their relationship with Ukraine to the forefront of public discussions. Meanwhile, in Poland, Jewish topics often assume a more “safe space” within the cultural sphere or everyday life, with a degree of distance from current political debates and the situation in Israel.

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