IMAGING HASIDIM IN WOOD AND PVC: 
HASIDIC FIGURINES MADE TODAY IN 
POLAND, UKRAINE AND ISRAEL*

Shifra Epstein
Independent scholar, Ann Arbor, MI

For the student of culture, the figurines of Hasidim,¹ made in three countries with a different culture and history, provide an entryway into how a Jewish icon has been imagined, appropriated and reproduced by Jews and non-Jews, to create a complex and dynamic corpus of artifacts. These artifacts, as an expression of folk tradition, are flexible and capable of expanding iconography, style and material to fit the tastes of those purchasing them.

As I will show in the course of this paper, pivotal to this iconography is the place that Jews and Hasidim occupy in the collective imagination of Poles, Ukrainians and Israelis. In the following, I hope to show how their image of Hasidim contributes to the selection, shaping and construction of these figurines.

Field Work

From 1988 onwards, I visited Poland and Ukraine several times as part of my study of Hasidic pilgrimages to Eastern Europe.² During these visits I was able to interview wood carvers and conduct fieldwork. It was during my travel to Uman, Ukraine, in the Summer of 2008 to visit the shrine of the Hasidic Rebbe, R. Nachman of Brazlav (1772–1810), that I discovered the most recent Hasidic dolls.

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² For my study of the Hasidic pilgrimage to Poland, see ‘Les pèlerinages hassidiques de Pologne,’ Les cahiers du judaïsme 100–111. I was the co-producer of a film in Poland entitle, Pilgrimage of Remembrance: Jews in Poland Today (1991). The film received Honourable Mention, American Film/Video Festival, 1992. Distributed by Ergo Film.
During my stay in Tel-Aviv in 2008–2009 I visited many souvenir and antique shops and interviewed sellers and buyers in the Artisan Market in Nahalat Binyamin. I also visited the flea market in Yaffa. I have also expanded my study into the virtual world of commerce, looking at websites of individual artists as well as commercial shops. I also entered chat rooms where people describe and discuss dolls they have seen, and propose their interpretations of those artifacts.

Poland

Tourism has been the major force behind the popularity that figurines of Hasidim have enjoyed in Poland in the past twenty years. After the collapse of Communism in 1988/1989 and the opening up of Poland to western tourism, wood carvers went back to their trade. Blessed with an abundance of birch and linden trees, Poles were known for hundreds of years as talented wood carvers who made figurines with religious and non-religious themes. Hence, figurines of Hasidim have been known as early as the nineteenth century and were part of the larger repertoire of religious and secular figurines made by wood carvers. They were sold at church fairs during Easter side by side with the Nativity figurines of Jesus and Mary as well as the Devil.3

The revived figurines are male, in various sizes, styles, and levels of craftsmanship. Commonly from 15 cm to 50 cm in height, some are painted while others are not. Their identification as Hasidim is expressed through attire and appearance, including long coats, a tallis, a shtrleimel, white knickers and shoes without laces. The articulation of the faces, all with long beards and only some with payes are sad and melancholic, with long exaggerated noses, often hooked.

With the long history of Jews in pre-war Eastern Europe and the fact that very few Jews have been living there after the Holocaust, the revived Hasidic figurines have received a great deal of attention from scholars and non-scholars of different religious denominations and