

# DEATH OF AN ICON

SWASTIKAS ON JEWISH TOKENS ONCE COMMON AS 'GOOD LUCK' CHARMS



BY STEVEN H. KAPLAN

Until the late 1930s my grandfather sported a Charlie Chaplin mustache and my great-uncle Ignatz went by the nickname Natzi. Likewise, back then there were Jewish institutions and merchants who prominently displayed a swastika on their tokens.

However, by the late 1930s, these things had become so firmly associated with Adolph Hitler and the Nazis that grandpa bared his upper lip, Ignatz became Irving, and the swastika disappeared from tokens issued by Jews and gentiles alike.

Today, it is almost forgotten that the swastika ever had any other meaning, and the sight of a swastika on a Jewish token is startling.

*Images courtesy Don Moody*

*Coin legends and the Star of David on a 1923 token from New York City indicate the token was issued by a Jewish community organization.*

The swastika is actually an ancient symbol. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's webpage, *History of the Swastika*, the word comes from the Sanskrit "svastika," which means "good fortune" or "well-being," and in the decades before Hitler it was commonly used as "a symbol of good luck and auspiciousness."

This article was prompted by my discovery of two curious tokens issued by Jewish community institutions displaying swastikas as symbols of good luck, which were

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SWASTIKA FROM SANSKRIT "GOOD FORTUNE"



*The zany legend on the obverse of this Jewish Community Center token appears to be more in line with the philosophy of Howe than of Seward. Images courtesy Craig Murray.*

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sold at auction on eBay in 2013.

## Two Jewish Community Tokens

One of them is a 32 mm brass token dated 1923, and states on the obverse that it was issued by a "COMMUNITY HOUSE" with the address "312 W. 89TH STREET, N.Y.C."

The Star of David above the legend "LOSE NOT / THIS LUCKY / PIECE / AND THY / FORTUNE / WILL / INCREASE" indicates that the anonymous community house was a Jewish institution.

A *Daily News Bulletin* issued by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on December 26, 1923 reveals that a Community House at this address had just been transferred by The New Synagogue to Temple Beth-El, with which it had just merged.

As the merger occurred in the very last days of 1923, it is safe to

conclude that this is a pre-merger token, issued by The New Synagogue. In 1927, Temple Beth-El, in turn, merged with Temple Emanuel, creating what became New York City's flagship Reform synagogue.

The reverse of this token features a large right-facing swastika. In the four quadrants formed by the arms of the swastika are (clockwise, starting in the upper left quadrant) a horse shoe, a four-leaf clover, a wishbone and some odd symbols which are probably runic letters, but which have also been referred to as Egyptian hieroglyphs or as keys.

The legend around the swastika proclaims that these devices are the "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE DONT WORRY CLUB," followed by a "GOOD LUCK" wish to the holder of the token. Miniscule letters on

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## 'DON'T WORRY CLUB' ISSUED SUCH TOKENS



In what appears to be a misspelling, the jeweler's name is spelled "Myer" instead of "Meyer" on this 32 mm brass token. Images courtesy Richard Greever and TokenCatalog.com.

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the lower reverse indicate that the token was minted by "THE WHITE-HEAD & HOAG CO., NEWARK, N.J."

The other token is a maverick. It states on the obverse that it was issued by "THE JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER," which "EXPRESSES / THE WISH THAT THIS TOKEN / BRINGS YOU / \$1,000,000 / WORTH OF / GOOD LUCK," but contains no information from which the issuer can be identified.

Miniscule letters on the lower obverse stating "GRAMMES INC.," indicate that this token was minted by L. F. Grammes & Sons of Allentown, Pennsylvania. It is tempting to conclude that it, too, was issued by either The New Synagogue or Temple Beth-El (or even by Temple Emanuel), but this cannot be assumed, and the use of the name Community House on one token and Community Center on

the other suggests different issuers.

The reverse of this token also features a large right-facing swastika with a horse shoe, a four-leaf clover, a wishbone and runic letters within the quadrants formed by the swastika's arms.

The devices on the two tokens differ only in the orientation of the clover (stem down on the Community House and stem up on the Community Center) and the D-shaped rune (right side-up on the Community House and up side-down on the Community Center).

Once again, the reverse legend proclaims that these devices are the "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE DON'T WORRY CLUB," followed by a "GOOD LUCK" wish to the holder of the token. The reverse legends on the two tokens differ only in the absence of an apostrophe in the word "DON'T" on the Community

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## JEWISH SWASTIKAS UNKNOWN TODAY

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House token and its presence on the Community Center token.

These tokens piqued my curiosity, and I discovered that a host of tokens were minted between the 1910s and the late 1930s which employ the swastika as a symbol of good luck.

On his webpage, *Good Luck Tokens*, Craig Murray classifies them based on the orientation of the swastika (facing left or right), and on the kind, location and orientation of the small good luck symbols appearing within the quadrants formed by the swastika arms.

Given the different orientation of the D-shaped rune, the Community House token is Type R1 in Murray's system and the Community Center token is Type R2. These two tokens are unusual only in that they were issued by religious organizations rather than by merchants or secular organizations.

### The Don't Worry Club

The greatest number of good luck swastika tokens, including these Jewish community tokens, were issued by "members" of the Don't Worry Club; Murray displays more than 325 on his webpage.

There are two traditions regarding the origin of the Don't Worry Club.

In an obituary published Sept. 1, 1902, the *New York Times* referred to musicologist Theodore Frelinghuysen Seward as the "founder" of the Don't Worry Club.

Seward was the author of three books, entitled *The Don't Worry Philosophy; Or, the School of Life Divine Providence in the Light of Modern Science* (1894), *Don't Worry: Or, Spiritual Emancipation* (1897), and most famously, *The Don't Worry Movement, a Wave of Spiritual Emancipation: A Gospel of Christian Optimism* (1898).

On Feb. 27, 1898, the *Times* quoted Seward as explaining, at one of his Don't Worry meetings held weekly in a Manhattan church, that there is "nothing . . . so ruinous to home life as worry." He advocated, as a cure for worry, "spiritual emancipation" through a change of mental attitude. "The 'don't worry' doctrine," Seward explained, "is not new; it was founded by Jesus Christ, but it has been so covered with dogmas that it has had to be unearthed."

Yet in the 1911-1912 edition of *The World To-Day*, W.E. Williams credits Edgar Watson Howe, owner of the *Atchison Globe* newspaper, as the "founder" of the Don't Worry Club.

Williams makes no reference to Seward or his books, and states that Howe started the club as a

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# FROM LUCK TO FORTUNE, IN SHOPPING

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scheme to increase the circulation of his paper.

Howe's inspiration was Charley Poehler, a local butcher, who refused to worry about anything.

After a chat with the butcher in 1901-1902, Howe published a declaration of principles for what he proclaimed to be "the first Don't Worry club on earth," and announced that his newspaper "was the best of all cures for worry."

According to Williams, the idea "took like wildfire . . . and it began to be said that wherever three Kansans foregathered, there was a meeting of the officerless, headless, clueless and gripless organization of smilers."

Bob Stewart notes, on his webpage *Going Places, 1898-1920*, that newspapers of the era contained "hundreds of references of the lighter sort" about the Don't Worry Club, which ranged from "little bits of humor . . . stuck between stories" to "longer humor pieces." This lightheartedness comports more with Howe's philosophy than with Seward's, and suggests that Howe should be viewed as the founder of the Don't Worry Club as it was popularly conceived.

## A Proliferation of Tokens

Whoever the founder, merchants soon began to exploit the fad's popular appeal. In his book, *United States Swastika 1907-1936: Tokens, Medals, Watch Fobs & Good Luck Charms* (2007), Gary Patterson writes that the first Don't Worry Club tokens were minted around 1905-1907, and the first tokens identifying the swastika as the membership emblem of the "club" were minted in 1908.

Jews were hardly immune to the appeal of the fad, and there are quite a few tokens issued by Jewish merchants (or at least by merchants with Jewish surnames; their status as Jews frequently cannot be confirmed) proclaiming their "membership" in the "club."

One of the most prominent of these was Meyer Rosenbaum, a Detroit jeweler who, according to the webpage, *Businessmen of the Boston-Edison Historic District*, opened Meyer Jewelry Co. in 1920.

Rosenbaum is famous for his 1944 purchase of the "Moon of Baroda," a 24.04 carat pear shaped yellow diamond, and for lending it to Marilyn Monroe, who wore it during the promotional campaign for her 1954 movie, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, in which she sang *Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend*.

Rosenbaum's 32 mm brass token reads on the obverse, "MYER /

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# 100s OF VARIETIES HAVE BEEN FOUND



This 32 mm brass token is one of the two left-facing tokens minted by the Buffalo Distilling Co. promoting its flagship product, Four-Cee (also known as 4-Cee) Canadian type whiskey. Images courtesy Craig Murray.

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JEWELRY CO. / GOOD FOR / \$1.00 / ON ANY PURCHASE / OF \$10.00 OR OVER / 341 GRATIOT / DETROIT."

The reverse features a right-facing swastika with a horseshoe, clover, wishbone and runes in the quadrants (Type R2 in Murray's classification), and, of course, the legend "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE DON'T WORRY CLUB / GOOD LUCK."

Another prominent Jewish merchant who jumped on the bandwagon was Gustav Fleischmann, an immigrant from Silesia in Austria-Hungary.

According to Jack Sullivan's website, *Those Pre-Pro Whiskey Men*, Gustav worked in Cincinnati for his older brothers, Charles and Maximilian Fleischmann, owners of the Fleischmann Yeast Company and creators of the still-popular Fleischmann's brand of liquors,

before striking out on his own in Buffalo.

Gustav founded the Buffalo Distilling Company, which operated from 1893 until it was put out of business by Prohibition in 1918. He issued three Don't Worry Club tokens advertising his flagship whiskey, one of which reads on the obverse, "CANADIAN TYPE / FOUR-CEE / 4-C / WHISKEY / BUFFALO DISTILLING CO."

The reverse features a left-facing swastika with clover, horseshoe, runes and wishbone in the quadrants (Murray Type L1), and the legend "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE DONT WORRY CLUB / GOOD LUCK."

## A Proliferation Of Types

Devoting the entire reverse legend to the meaningless Don't

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## EMBLEMS OF A LESS DANGEROUS TIME



This first token issued by clothier Max Rosenblum mimicked the more common tokens issued by "members" of the Don't Worry Club. It is cataloged as Lipscomb CL 4890. Images courtesy Craig Murray.

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Worry Club proved unattractive to many. Murray displays more than a dozen tokens on his webpage on which the familiar reverse legend was changed to, "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE BOY SCOUTS CLUB / GOOD LUCK," and more than 50 on which the familiar legend was changed by merchants to "MEMBERSHIP EMBLEM OF THE GOOD VALUE CLUB / GOOD LUCK."

According to Patterson, Meyer Rosenbaum issued such a token which is otherwise identical to his Don't Worry Club token.

Another merchant who mimicked the familiar reverse legend was Cleveland clothing magnate Max Rosenblum, an immigrant from Austria-Hungary, who, according to John J. Grabowski, in his book, *Sports in Cleveland, An Illustrated History* (1992), was one

of the founders of the American Basketball League and owner of the short-lived team, the Cleveland Rosenblums.

According to the book, *Prominent Jews in America* (1918), Rosenblum rented a floor of a building for his new clothing store in 1905 and was so successful that, by 1918, he occupied the entire building, operating as the largest individual credit clothier in the country.

He issued a 32 mm brass token from that location with the obverse legend, "IT'S EASY TO PAY THE ROSENBLUM WAY / CLOTHING / MEN, WOMEN / AND CHILDREN / \$1.00 PER WEEK / 2014 ONTARIO ST. / COR. CHAMPLAIN / CLEVELAND, OHIO / WE GIVE STAMPS." The reverse features a left-facing swastika with a clover, horseshoe, runes and wishbone in the quadrants

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## MORE 'LUCK' SYMBOLS BEGAN TO APPEAR



No longer mimicking the Don't Worry tokens, the reverse of this token by clothier Isaac Benesch & Sons carries a purely utilitarian commercial message. Images courtesy William L. Rosenblum, LLC.

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(Murray Type L1).

Once mimicry of the Don't Worry legend was abandoned, the tokens took on a plethora of designs and legends. Murray displays around one hundred twenty five on his website. At least half a dozen merchants substituted the familiar reverse legend with, "WE INVITE YOU TO OPEN A CHARGE ACCOUNT / GOOD LUCK."

Among these were Isaac Benesch, who, according to Gilbert Sandler, in his book, *Jewish Baltimore: A Family Album* (2000), was one of the mainstays of the Jewish furniture business in that city. His 33 mm brass token reads, on the obverse, "ISAAC BENESCH & SONS / GOOD / FOR / TWO DOLLARS / ON A \$25.00 / PURCHASE / BALTIMORE." The reverse features a right-facing swastika with a wishbone, runes,

horseshoe and clover in the quadrants (Murray Type R6).

Max Rosenblum issued two 25 mm swastika tokens (as well as several encased cents without swastikas) after relocating his business within Cleveland.

On the more flamboyant of the two he displays his own bust on the obverse, with the legend, "ITS EASIER TO PAY THE ROSENBLUM WAY / 321 EUCLID AVENUE."

The reverse features a left-facing swastika with a rabbit's foot, wishbone, clover and horseshoe in the quadrants, all surrounded by a large inverted horseshoe (Murray Type L6) and the legend, "CLOTHIERS TO THE FAMILY / LUCKY PIECE."

His other token is rather nondescript, and bears the obverse legend, "WE CLOTHE THE FAMILY / ROSENBLUM'S / 321 EUCLID / 40

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## TWIN LUCK SYMBOLS ALSO APPEARED



This bronze token by Max Rosenblum has a milled edge, and is cataloged as Lipscomb CL 4870. It is one of only a small number of tokens with a rabbit's foot device. Images courtesy Craig Murray.



This brass token, also issued by Max Rosenblum, is cataloged as Lipscomb CL 4680. Images courtesy Craig Murray.



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WEEKS TO PAY."

The reverse again features a left-facing swastika, but with a clover, horseshoe, runes and wishbone in the quadrants (Murray Type L1), all surrounded by a horseshoe, and the legend "GOOD LUCK."

I imagine that, when confronted in the late 1930s by the notoriety of the Nazis and their pervasive symbols, it was easy enough for my grandfather to simply shave off his mustache and for my great-uncle Ignatz to morph from Nazi into Irving.

**A Fascinating Transformation**

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## SOME SWASTIKA TOKENS RE-CONFIGURED



The ends of the swastika arms can still be faintly discerned on the reverse of the token component of this Swann-Abram Hat Company encased cent. Images courtesy William L. Rosenblum, LLC.

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But what was the merchant with a quantity of undistributed swastika good luck tokens to do with the now-offensive things?

The Swann-Abram Hat Company, of Louisville, Kentucky, found a fascinating solution to this problem (According to volume 51 of *American Hatter* (1921), William J. Abram, founder of the company, died a member of the Calvary Episcopalian Church, and may not, despite his surname, have been of Jewish descent).

In 1939 the company converted its 32 mm brass tokens into encased cents. The token featured a swan on the obverse and the words, "WEAR SWANN HATS / THEY ARE GUARANTEED."

The reverse featured a right-facing swastika with a horseshoe, clover, wishbone and runes in the quadrants (Murray Type R1), and

the legend, "SWANN-ABRAM HAT CO., LOUISVILLE, KY." Miniscule letters indicate that it was manufactured by "THE WHITEHEAD & HOAG CO., NEWARK, N.J."

These legends remain as an integral part of the encasement component of the encased cent, although both the swan and the swastika devices are now obliterated.

The swastika as a good luck symbol is now long forgotten, obliterated from memory by the Nazi atrocities. These tokens stand as elegant witness to what was a common cultural phenomenon of a bygone world. ☐

*The principal sources used in the preparation of this article are all mentioned in the text. In addition to these, William M. Rosenblum LLC auction catalogs and Richard Greever's searchable website, TokenCatalog.com, were invaluable.*