Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlör
Foreword: The Virtuality of Jewish Europe

In May 2022, our Universities of Gothenburg and Southampton hosted a conference, with Diana Pinto and Ruth Ellen Gruber as keynote speakers, on "A Jewish Europe? Virtual and Real-Life Spaces in the 21st Century". At the time of the conference, the world was slowly being released from the grasp of the global pandemic caused by COVID-19. While we were all in one way or another affected by two years of a mainly digitized reality, its impact on the presence and shape of Jewish culture in Europe seemed a particularly worthwhile topic to approach. Not because digital elements of Judaism or indeed pandemic effects on Jewish practices have not been studied. They have, and in doing so, researchers have highlighted the flexibility and resilience of the Jewish religion.[1] Our interest was linked to a longer trajectory of cultural processes in relation to European Jewish post-Shoah presence. The pandemic undoubtedly presented challenges on how to be Jewish, but it also underlined and intensified Europe's already existent "virtual Jewishness": museums, memorial sites, cultural events, interfaith dialogues, and art – present in both virtual and real life (IRL) forms, co-constructed by Jews and non-Jews.[2] And as the digital landscape became many people's only reality from 2020 to 2022, we saw the meaning of virtuality shift and stretch.

Indeed, the digitized world and its evolving possibilities have catapulted us long past the societal tendency to label all things virtual as fake. Scholars have even argued that the concept of virtuality should not be conflated with digitized fora: it is, as Pinto suggested over thirty years ago, a creative process, not a digital platform.[3] In bridging her conceptualization of Europe's co-constructed "Jewish Spaces" with the digitized reality imposed by the pandemic, our conference aimed to explore if and how the notion of virtuality can inform on the continuity of an integrated European Jewish life. In short, we endeavored to find the hope alluded to in Gruber's and Pinto's work in the Jewish (and human) experience of being in a crisis, thereby turning the question mark in our original conference title into an exclamation mark.

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1 Harriet Hartman (ed.), "COVID-19 and contemporary Jewry", *Contemporary Jewry* 41/1 (2021).

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

3 Diana Pinto, *The Third Pillar? Toward a European Jewish Identity* (Budapest: Central European University, 1999); Victoria Grace Walden, "What is 'virtual Holocaust memory'?", *Memory Studies* 15/4 (2022): 621–33.

Since then, another crisis has unfolded for European Jews (and non-Jews) in the last few years. Following Hamas's terror attack and kidnapping of Israeli inhabitants on October 7, 2023, and Israel's war on Hamas and Hezbollah within Palestinian and Lebanese territories, antisemitism has risen dramatically across Europe.[4] Jews are – yet again – uncertain about Europe as their home. On a much smaller (but for many of our writers no less personal) scale, some of the original conference papers that were to be used to explore all things virtual in this book were suddenly turned on their heads in the increasingly antisemitic (and Islamophobic) climate. Case studies developed and changed, altering results from the late 2010s and the first years of the 2020s. Our contributors have had to readjust and refocus, and ultimately rethink the very cornerstone of this book: Can the hopefulness inherent to the concept of virtuality have any bearing on today's Europe? Can "authenticity", or indeed "reality", be useful ideas to help understand how Jewish spaces, and the Jewish/non-Jewish relations they are meant to facilitate, face the challenges of the 2020s?

This book is an attempt to answer these questions. Based on case studies of digital tools, platforms and processes, and physical places, both of heritage and in the urban landscape, it merges theoretical aims with some very personal experiences. As a whole, this edited volume aims to evaluate and clarify the meaning of virtuality, expanding its original conceptualization as introduced by Gruber and Pinto. To do this, it brings together experts – both established scholars and younger colleagues – in anthropology, ethnology, heritage studies, history, literature, and cultural studies, who have written both essays and academic studies exploring the relationship between virtuality and real life. Given the situation we collectively found ourselves in following the events of October 7, with our work (and our personal selves) affected by this "polycrisis",[5] this book will not only push and develop the conceptual foundation for Jewish/non-Jewish spaces to catch up with our digital world, but it will also stand as a testament to the challenges Jews, non-Jews, and scholars in Jewish studies have to navigate in today's Europe in order to simply continue (to study) Jewish/non-Jewish relations.

To set the stage for this volume, the keynotes given by both Gruber and Pinto at the conference in 2022 form the introduction. In these two chapters, Gruber and Pinto revisit their conceptualizations of virtual Jewishness and Jewish Spaces and suggest how best to view these in light of both digitization and the rise of

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4 Anti-Defamation League, "Global Antisemitic Incidents in the Wake of Hamas' War on Israel", May 20, 2024, accessed January 14, 2025, https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/global-antisemitic-in cidents-wake-hamas-war-israel.
5 See Dekel Peretz's chapter, "From Lockdown to Warzone: The Digital Turn in Jewish -Muslim Encounters.", in this current volume.

right-wing, popular movements. The main body of the book is divided into three sections: digital practices, heritage, and public space, in which contributions connect to Gruber's and Pinto's hopes and worries. In the first part, Kyra Schulman, Alla Marchenko, and Dekel Peretz explore digital landscapes – a memorialization project connected to Łomża, Ukrainian and Polish personal accounts on Facebook and Instagram, and German Jewish-Muslim dialogues on digital platforms – and discuss how online environments affect, enhance, and hinder Jewish/non-Jewish relations, especially in times of crisis and increased political entrenchment. The potential of virtual reality for the continued relevance of the European Jewish past for American Jewry, the physical and digital afterlife of cemeteries in formerly German parts of Poland, and cross-temporal remains of Jewish experiences of the medieval ShUM communities (Speyer, Worms and Mainz) are investigated by Libby Langsner, Magdalena Abraham-Diefenbach, and Susanne Urban in the second section on heritage. Here, virtuality is presented as a mnemonic practice that encourages the continuous presence of a Jewish past as years pass and natural landscapes in and relations to European Jewish history change. This way, virtuality in spaces of heritage is not only understood as a digital practice but also perceived as an (in)tangible memory of the past that ensures the rootedness of European Jewish life. And, in the third section on public space, Susanne Korbel, Karin Brygger and Maja Hultman, and Marcela Menachem Zoufalá look into an urban street sign in Vienna, museums and cultural events in Stockholm, and scholarly endeavors in Israel and the Czech Republic, and find that the presence of Jews and Jewish history in European public landscapes is aided by digital sociability and believed crucial for democratic processes, but nonetheless stand reduced or questioned in the wake of October 7. Finally, in the concluding dialogue, we – Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlör – discuss the book's collective understanding, use, and development of Gruber's and Pinto's meanings of virtuality for spaces of Jewish history and memory, and Jewish/non-Jewish relations. In likeness with everyday lives of most Jewish individuals around the globe today, October 7 runs like a red thread through the book, against which the promises of Jewish/non-Jewish encounters in digital spaces, spaces of heritage, and public spaces reel and sometimes falter. Yet, as some contributions emphasize, virtuality, as a (non-)digital arena of relational possibilities that was and is envisioned to ensure the continuity of the history, memory, and contemporary life of Europe's Jewry, and thus the Jewishness of Europe, can also be achieved amidst skyrocketing anti-semitism.

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6 To view and read more about her Scrolls Project, see Karin Brygger, "The Scrolls Project: A performance working in the intersection of writing, movement, and Jewish Studies", *Mobile Culture Studies. The Journal* 8 (2024): 123–36.

7 Maja Hultman and Joachim Schlör (eds.), "European Virtual Jewish Spaces", *Contemporary Jewry* 44/2 (2024): 245–367.