# Part I: **Introduction**

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# Life after Life: Shifting Virtualities (and Realities) 20 Years after *Virtually Jewish*

In the 20 years since the publication of my book *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (in 2002), the concept I introduced has taken on a life of its own in ways I could not foresee. Though I wrote of a "virtual Jewish world" in a specific way – as an "intense, visible, vivid [Jewish] presence in places where few Jews live today" – others have taken the terminology I introduced and run with it in different directions.[1]

"Virtually Jewish" to some extent has become shorthand for describing ways in which non-Jews and the non-Jewish world enact, interact with, embrace, appropriate, question, and sometimes abuse (if not attack) the concept and manifold realities of Judaism and Jewishness. Some commentators, however, have interpreted the term "virtual" as a pejorative or as a shorthand synonym for "fake". Some have – inaccurately – attributed to my own views a dismissive attitude toward non-Jewish engagement with or interest in Jewish culture or see me as having somehow disparaged people I have described as "virtual Jews" and their activities. In an April 2022 article in Tablet Magazine about Ukrainian Jewish refugees in Germany, the imagery in *Virtually Jewish* was presented as being that "in which living, breathing Jews are mainly regarded in contemporary Europe as objects of historical fascination".[2]

Other terminology, too, has emerged in the past two decades as outside researchers, participant observers, philanthropic foundations, journalists, and also

**1** For this, which was a verbal presentation at a conference that dealt with my evolving experiences and ideas, I drew directly and indirectly on material that had appeared in various publications I had authored over the years. Besides *Virtually Jewish*, these included most notably the chapter "Real Imaginary Spaces and Places: Virtual, Actual, and Otherwise", in *Space and Spatiality in Modern German-Jewish History*, ed. Simone Lässig and Miriam Rürup (New York/London: Berghahn Books, 2017); the chapter "Jewish. Jewish? 'Jewish' Jewish!", in *Jewish Revival Inside Out: Remaking Jewishness in a Transnational Age*, ed. Daniel Monterescu and Rachel Werczberger (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2022); the forum essay, "Beyond Virtual Jewishness: Monuments to Jewish Experience in Eastern Europe", and my responses to essays written in response to my piece, in *Framing Jewish Culture: Boundaries and Representations*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2014); and the essay "Beyond Virtually Jewish: New Authenticities and Real Imaginary Spaces in Europe", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 99/4 (2009).

**2** Marina Sapritsky-Nahum, "Germany Wants Jews", *Tablet Magazine*, April 27, 2022, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/germany-wants-jews.


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local Jews and non-Jews themselves examine and try to make sense out of shifting paradigms and generational and other changes that contribute to the formation or at least the evolution of what I have come to call "new authenticities" and indeed new realities. Because, yes, the concepts of "real" and "authentic", while problematic, are and have been intrinsic in the evolution, if not the revival, of the way that Jews and others think of themselves and of the concept of what is, was, and even should be "Jewish". In many ways, and for all the changes, the description of my concept of "Virtually Jewish" that was provided more than a decade ago by the Polish writer and Jewish activist Konstanty Gebert and sociologist Helena Datner rings more true than ever: "a place where Jewish culture is no longer Jewish property, but rather an open field in which anybody can use the props – and [use them] as they see fit".[3]

Often overlooked in all these discussions, however, was my punning use of the term "Virtually Jewish" in reference to the fluid cyberspace concept of "virtual" identities, worlds, and communities that already, even 20 years ago, could be found on the Internet. There were already thousands of Jewish web sites, I noted in *Virtually Jewish*, some right out there with names like Virtual Jerusalem and The Virtual Shtetl. "People can enter, move around, and engage in cyber space virtual worlds without physically leaving their desks or quitting their 'real world' identities", I wrote. And I continued:

> Online, however, they can assume other identities, play other roles, and be, or act as if they are, whoever they want. Like virtual worlds on the Internet, various aspects of "Virtual Jewry" are linked together and overlapping. One can approach them either passively, as a mere consumer, or "interactively" as a participant through, for example, performance and interpretation. They may be enriched by input from contemporary Jewish communal, intellectual, institutional, or religious sources, or they may be self-contained within totally non-Jewish contexts.[4]

That all pretty much still holds true. Non-Jewish engagement with Jewish culture can range from intense enrichment to what might be called "cosplay" – though 20 years ago I didn't know that word. But my book came out in a world in which our relationship to cyberspace was quite different from what it is today. Back then, there may have been many Jewish web sites, blogs, and list servs, but there was no social media to speak of, and certainly no social media as we know it today. No Facebook. No Twitter. No YouTube. No Instagram. No TikTok. No Virtual (or

**3** Konstanty Gebert and Helena Datner, *Jewish Life in Poland: Achievements, challenges and priorities since the collapse of communism* (London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research, 2011).

**4** Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 21.

Augmented) Reality. Even Skype and MySpace weren't launched until 2003. And, certainly, there was no COVID pandemic that kept us at home and forced us to live *more* of our lives – including our Jewishness – online. All of this has caused an immense change in our thinking, and in our ways of acting and interacting. There's been much talk recently about a developing "metaverse", where *virtual* lives play as important a role as our physical realities. But what is "virtual" these days? What is "real"? And where indeed does authenticity fit in?

Already in the mid-2000s, there was talk of a "virtual diaspora", specifically in reference to the online 3D virtual world known as Second Life, where a first "virtual synagogue", Temple Beth Israel, was established in 2006. This was followed by numerous other Second Life Jewish sites and events, all located in that self-contained virtual world, a sort of parallel universe. Julian Voloj, who founded and edited a Second Life Jewish magazine called 2Life, wrote that Second Life's Jewish community was "more diverse than any Jewish community could be in the real world".[5] He wrote:

> There are also many religious seekers who use Second Life as a tool to explore their own roots, many of them with little or no Jewish educational background; and there are interestingly enough also many non-Jews. While there are Jewish users of Second Life who choose *not* to be Jewish in the virtual space, we find at the same time *non-Jews* for whom Second Life offers the opportunity to explore Judaism in a virtual space.[6]

In an article in 2Life magazine Julian wrote that Second Life Judaism was

> a unique intercultural dialogue within various streams of Judaism, within various Diasporas and Israel, within various age groups and with Jews and non-Jews. Judaism in Second Life is a mélange of different identities, in which age, origin, gender, and even religious affiliation are unimportant. It is an experiment with an uncertain outcome, but with obvious potential for new and creative ways to explore culture, heritage and identity.[7]

In preparing this contribution, I asked Julian about Second Life today. He told me that it still existed, but that 2Life magazine had folded a dozen years ago. He himself, he said, hadn't thought much about Second Life for a long time. He didn't know the fate of the Jewish sites he had documented in 2Life magazine, he said, but he didn't think they still existed. If so, sic transit a pioneering virtual Jewish world. I myself have never dipped into Second Life. But I spend a lot of time online, on platforms, groups, and other online sites that have taken the gamut of

**5** Julian Voloj, "Virtual Jewish Topography: The Genesis of Jewish (Second) Life", in *Jewish Topographies: Visions of Space, Traditions of Place*, ed. Julia Brauch, Anna Lipphardt, and Alexandra Nocke (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 345–56.

**6** Ibid., p. 355.

**7** Ibid.

Second Life-style virtual experiences far beyond the confines of that one virtual frame. And I have followed many of the developments on the virtual Jewish universe that I now coordinate – the web site Jewish Heritage Europe.

In the recent pandemic years, Zoom and similar platforms broadened the blurring between "RL" (Real Life) and the virtual even further. Virtual spaces have become lived reality – and creative realities, in the mainstream. These platforms have fostered real time interactivity, bridging living, breathing realities in ways that not only communicate conversations but creatively reach across, or maybe within, time, space, and cyberspace to be the conduit and inspiration for artistic collaboration and to build, or invent, community – and communities. Questions and experiences like these have led me to explore the notions of what I call "new authenticities" and "real imaginary" spaces, where borders (and identities) blur.

This year (2022), I was fortunate to be able to attend a wonderful in-person seder. It was a large group, and there were two rabbis at the table, as well as scholars and artists. The discussion was both deep and entertaining, and all the food was kosher for Pesach, shipped in to a rather remote countryside location. But the previous two years, like many of us, I made do with Zoom – sitting alone in my kitchen, with my bottle of wine and matzo ball soup, but connected – directly connected, face to face – with beloved family members across half a dozen time zones who were virtually sitting at the same table. Next to me, I kept a pile of Haggadahs; it fascinates me to observe both the continuity and changes in them over the centuries. The ones I have range from a facsimile of the Sarajevo Haggadah, handwritten in the 14$^{th}$ century, to one illustrated by the contemporary Italian artist Lele Luzzatto, to the supermarket Haggadah distributed in the US since the 1930s by the Maxwell House coffee company. For one of the seders we used a brand-new Haggadah – rather different from the others. It was one specifically formulated for use at Zoom seders, and one of my cousins had downloaded it from her synagogue's web site and posted it to the Zoom chat so we all could see it.

One of my Haggadahs is the New Venice Haggadah, published in 2021 and illustrated with etchings created by eight international Jewish artists who took part in a residency program in the historic Venice Ghetto. Imposed in 1516, this was the first officially mandated closed and segregated district where Jews were forced to live; a Jewish place and space par excellence. Like Krakow's old Jewish district Kazimierz, the Venice Ghetto today remains an extraordinary complex of Jewish built heritage, with a Jewish museum and five jewel-like synagogues hidden behind anonymous walls. Very, very few Jews, however, live in the Venice Ghetto today. Fewer than 400 Jews live in all of Venice as a whole; their numbers – even in COVID times – are dwarfed hundreds, maybe even thousands, of times over by the number of Jewish tourists each year. On the main Ghetto square, the most visible Jewish presence besides the museum, a couple of souvenir shops, a Holocaust memorial, and a ko-

sher restaurant and hotel in the former Jewish old age home, is now an import – a Chabad House. The artists who contributed to the New Venice Haggadah were invited by the Beit Venezia cultural organization to create their works as a sort of update and commentary to a famous Haggadah published in Venice in 1609, when Venice was a capital of Hebrew publishing. The New Venice Haggadah, Beit Venezia says, is "informed by the spirit of the 'original' while being consummately fresh, contemporary and innovative". Beit Venezia calls itself "A meeting space for artists, scholars, students and the general public, Jews and non-Jews". Against all odds, it says, the Venice Ghetto historically became a "cosmopolitan crossroads of different Jewish communities and an influential site of cultural exchange between Jews and non-Jews".[8]

Inevitably at Passover, I think back to earlier seders in my life. Most were what one might term "traditional", even "conventional"; not overly orthodox, but enjoyed each year with friends and family, the same family that in 2020 and 2021 I Zoomed with in *unconventional* seders that are now, in many ways, a new norm. One seder stands out, though, as – like the new Zoom realities – an example of creation. It was more than 40 years ago, in Warsaw, when I was a news correspondent there. I actually remember little about it, except for one moment. I don't even remember who was the host or who was the leader. But we must have been a group of ten or twelve people – I do remember there was a long table. Most, like me, were young adults, but there was an older couple, someone's parents, I guess. At one point the leader of the seder asked a question: Had anyone present been at a seder before? As I recall, the older couple raised their hands, but I, the American, was the only other person at the table to do so.

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Among the people who have been very important to me over the years in my own consideration of the concepts of Jewish identity and of Jewish space are Diana Pinto and Stanisław and Monika Krajewski. My first encounter with Staszek and Monika was really the first time that I began thinking seriously about Jewish identity. As an American growing up in post-World War II suburbia, I rarely, if ever, had cause to consider this. I was (and am) Jewish, I was (and am) American, and I could and still cannot separate these entwined strands of who I am. Looking back, our meeting was a seminal experience in what has become my career, not to mention, I think, in our lives. It was on the eve of Yom Kippur in 1980, only a few months before the Warsaw seder that I mentioned. I was a foreign correspondent with United Press International, in Warsaw to cover the birth of the Solidarity movement.

**8** "The New Venice Haggadah", *Beit Venezia*, https://beitvenezia.org/the-new-venice-haggadah/.

I'm not observant, but it was Yom Kippur, and I looked for somewhere to mark the holy day. At that time there was no functioning synagogue in Warsaw; the Nożyk synagogue, the only surviving synagogue in the city out of hundreds that had been there before the Holocaust, was empty and dilapidated. I did find a shabby room nearby, where a group of Jews had gathered. Most were elderly Holocaust survivors, but there were a few my age, and a couple of toddlers. There was no rabbi in Poland at the time, so everyone was more or less praying on their own. At one point the little kids were running around, making noise, and the old people vigorously shushed them up. "How can you shush them up?", I thought. "These are the future!".

Afterward, Staszek, Monika, and another young woman came up and asked who I was. When I told them, they appealed to me: "You're a *real* Jew", they said. And they asked me to come home with them and tell them what they should be doing to keep the holiday. When I protested that I was not observant, did not speak Hebrew, keep kosher, or even go much to synagogue, their response was, "No, but you have known all your life you are Jewish, and we are just finding out". So I went home with them. It was a powerful reminder of the present that their tiny apartment was located in a prefab apartment house built in the 1960s on the ruins of the destroyed Warsaw Ghetto – not far from where the magnificent POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews stands today. Later, they brought me into the so-called Jewish Flying University, a semi-clandestine group of Jews – and non-Jews – who were teaching themselves not simply Jewish ritual, traditions, and history but also, in a poignant way, the Jewish intangibles, the collective memories, the quirks of language and even sometimes of physical or facial expression that even assimilated Jews often retain.

They were *creating* something *new*; new Jewish identities; new ways of expressing them; new authenticities; they weren't *re-creating* the past. Those then-young people, my generation, became the anchors of what was to become, from the 1990s, the post-communist Jewish revival in Poland; and they are, more than three decades beyond that, now its old guard. It is their children and grandchildren now who are setting the parameters of Jewish definitions and practice. They are *real* Jews. But I vividly recall how members of the Holocaust-survivor generation distrusted those newly emerging, questioning, Jews, the Jews claiming or reclaiming long hidden or suppressed identity. The survivors, simply, did not recognize them as Jews. Marek Edelman, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, called them a fraud, a literary fiction. "The Jewish people is dead, and

you have simply thought yourselves up, looking for originality and exoticism", he told one of them in the early 1990s.[9]

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The young emerging Jews I met in Warsaw 30 and 40 years ago were filling in their own way what came to be called the Jewish space in Europe. The concept of Jewish space was elaborated by Diana Pinto, and the way she first articulated it in the mid-1990s struck home to me in a very powerful way, putting a name to a phenomenon I had been observing on the ground, grasping at what to call it or how to define it. At that time, Diana used the term "Jewish space" to describe the place occupied by Jews, Jewish culture, and Jewish memory within mainstream European society, regardless of the size or activity of the local Jewish population. "There is a Jewish space in Europe that will exist even in the absence of Jews", she stated at a conference in Prague on Planning for the Future of European Jewry in 1995. "The Jewish thing", she said, "is becoming Universal".

At that time, I was traveling widely in Europe, documenting Jewish heritage sites and chronicling the post-Holocaust, post-communist revival and development of Jewish life. As I traveled, I had become fascinated by how, along with efforts to revive Jewish communal life and reclaim and reassert Jewish identity, as my friends were doing in Poland, this "Jewish space" in Europe was also often being "filled" by the activities of non-Jews. "Filling the Jewish Space in Europe", was in fact the title of my first lengthy examination of this phenomenon, a report I wrote for the American Jewish Committee in 1996.[10] I described how non-Jewish people documented synagogue buildings, Jewish cemeteries, and other abandoned Jewish heritage sites and spearheaded restoration projects; they formed klezmer bands and opened Jewish museums; they used Jewish themes in artworks, theatre performances, and literary compositions; they administered, taught, and studied in academic Jewish studies programs; they created the infrastructure for Jewish-themed tourism, opened "Jewish-style" cafes and restaurants – and much more. It was this phenomenon – the non-Jewish filling of the Jewish space – that formed what I later referred to as a "virtual Jewishness", or a "virtual Jewish world", peopled by "virtual Jews" who create, perform, enact, or engage with Jewish culture from an outsider perspective, often in, and often *as a result of*, the absence of local Jewish populations.

**9** Konstanty Gebert, "Jewish Identities in Poland: New, Old and Imaginary", in *Jewish Identities in the New Europe*, ed. Jonathan Webber (London: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1994), p. 165.

**10** Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Filling the Jewish Space in Europe* (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1996).

Over the years, these and related issues have inspired considerable debate, debate that has encompassed discussions of issues ranging from whether an overarching "Jewish space" actually *does* exist in Europe, to a more narrow focus on what entails more clearly defined "Jewish spaces" and specific "Jewish places", to what may or may not be regarded as "actually Jewish" amid constantly evolving local circumstances. As part of this, scholars, researchers, and others have explored the idea of "Jewish space" from within the Jewish world, too, investigating the relevance of space and place as environments and experiences shaped by Jews within living Jewish culture, communities, identity, and society. And also examining how the Jewish world engages with and reacts to the non-Jews in the scene. What, though, is meant when we say a place – or space – is "Jewish" or has a "Jewish character"? For synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, the definition is obvious. But function and religion, even historic designation, are just part of the equation. Elsewhere, clichéd or stereotyped visions, harking back to the bygone days of the old-world shtetl or to the Mitteleuropean intellectual coffee house, or even to Holocaust victims in so-called "striped pajamas", persist. But these too are only part of the story.

"Jewish" has much broader connotations that span a wide spectrum. Does "Jewish" mean Intellectual? Commercial? Dynamic? Educated? Artistic? Creative? Multicultural? Rich? Poor? Foreign? Assimilated? Excluded? Exclusive? Quaint? Israeli? Old-fashioned? Pre-War? Religious? Secular? Yiddish? Victim? Communist? Dead and Gone? "Other"? Does "Jewish" mean someone who believes in and practices Judaism, and, if so, what form of Judaism and what degree of practice? Or does it mean simply a person who can trace his or her genealogy back to Jewish ancestors – but how far back, and does it matter if the ancestors are on the maternal or paternal side? Does "Jewish" refer to kosher food produced under a *mashgiach*'s supervision or to any dish created according to an Ashkenazic, Sephardic, or Israeli recipe, or to commercial hybrids with such made-up names as "Rabbi's Pocket" or "Cheese Soup of Jealous Sarah" that are served in new, sometimes highly commercialized "Jewish" cafes and restaurants but mix meat and dairy and even may include pork? I loved it that at one point the "U Fryzjera" restaurant in Kazimierz Dolny, Poland, which did (and still does) serve forbidden meat, treated its choice with self-reflexive humor: its printed menu once marked dishes as "Jewish" and "not Jewish" – and also marked some of them as "non-Jewish, non-kosher, yet also recommended". Does "Jewish" mean something sepia-toned and nostalgic that harkens back to the pre-war past, or something that is "cool", here and now? Does it mean "Israeli" (and all those fraught and loaded connotations)? Does it mean Holocaust victim? Or all of the above? Or more?

Back in the 1930s the Polish-Jewish literary critic Artur Sandauer coined the useful (but rather little-known) term "allosemitism" to describe the idea of Jews as the perpetual "Other". Allosemitism can embrace both positive and negative feelings toward Jews – everything, as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman put it, "from love and respect to outright condemnation and genocidal hatred".[11] At root is the idea that, good or bad, Jews are different from the non-Jewish mainstream and thus unable to be dealt with in the same way or measured by the same yardstick. Diana Pinto's own evolving work has continued to influence these discussions. In later writings, she described Jewish space as a cultural but also material space of encounter between Jews and non-Jews – "an open cultural and even political agora where Jews intermingle with others *qua* Jews, and not just as citizens. It is a virtual space, present anywhere Jews and non-Jews interact on Jewish themes or where a Jewish voice can make itself felt".[12]

These words were echoed remarkably closely, years later, by Beit Venezia in Venice, which I mentioned before. An organization melding the physical site of the Venice Ghetto and its history with current creativity, its stated goals are to connect the Jewish and non-Jewish world: that is, "to promote Jewish thought and culture and serve as a bridge between people of all cultures and religions" (About us", Beit Venezia, www.beitvenezia.org). For me, despite the passage of years and the emergence of wide-ranging discussions, Diana's original formulation of "Jewish space" as something universal, something that exists regardless of the presence of Jews, still remains extremely powerful: and it continues most strongly to influence my own thinking. But, as I noted earlier, the evolution of cyberspace and the online rise of social media and platforms like Zoom have changed the game, moving the goalposts and blurring the boundaries.

Writing in 1975, long before the advent of the Internet or even cellphones, the Italian semiologist and author Umberto Eco anticipated blurred boundaries, in his essay "Travels in Hyperreality", an essay that also has had an influence on my thinking. He wrote of times and places where "[a]bsolute unreality is offered as real presence" and where "the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred [. . .] and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness'".[13] Again, what is unreality today and what is a real presence?

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**11** Zigmunt Bauman. *Jews and Other Europeans, Old and New*. London: JPR Policy Debate, Institute for Jewish Policy Research. June 2008, p. 3.

**12** Diana Pinto, "The Jewish Challenges in the New Europe", in *Challenging Ethnic Citizenship: Germany and Israel Perspectives on Immigration*, ed. Daniel Levy and Yfaat Weiss (New York/London: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 239–52.

**13** Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, [1976] 1986), p. 8.

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Over the past three decades and more a key and constant focus for me has revolved around what undoubtedly embody "real presence" – that is issues related to Jewish monuments and built, or material, heritage – Jewish brick and mortar *places*. In a way, that's where I began. The seeds of my interest in all the evolving elements I've explored were sown more than 40 years ago, when I visited a score of far-flung synagogues in Romania, touring with the then Chief Rabbi at Hanukkah in the frigid December of 1978. My first book, *Jewish Heritage Travel*, first came out in 1992 and was an attempt to put back on the map as many as possible of these often abandoned and long-forgotten places in central and eastern Europe.[14] After the Holocaust and under communism, Jewish heritage and history were virtually taboo topics in much of communist Europe. The recognition of these haunted Jewish places and their transformation, either physically or subjectively, into lived or living Jewish *spaces* is an underlying theme to just about all that I do and have done in the field. That's been even more relevant in recent years, as I have developed and also coordinate the web site Jewish Heritage Europe (www.jewish-heritage-europe.eu), an expanding portal to news, views, and resources on Jewish built heritage, which I'm proud to say is marking its 10th anniversary this year (2022).

In one of my books, I described the surviving Jewish physical sites in parts of Europe as symbolic mezuzahs.[15] A mezuzah on the doorpost marks the home of a Jew. On the doorposts of houses across parts of Europe, you could often – and still can in some places – find the grooves or scars where mezuzahs had been removed or painted over during or after the Shoah. To me, these scars, often faint and sometimes nearly invisible, form symbolic mezuzahs that indicate a house where Jews *once lived*. In my book, I extrapolated further, positing that the surviving physical relics of pre-war Jewish life – synagogue buildings, Jewish cemeteries – even if abandoned, unmarked, in ruined condition, or transformed out of recognition for other use, also serve as symbolic mezuzahs to mark not just houses but towns, villages, cities, and even entire countries where Jews once lived and do not live (or scarcely live) now. I didn't have the terminology at the time – it was before I encountered Diana Pinto – but these physical sites not only inhabit Jewish space, but they anchor it. They are tangible talismans to the broken past and, increasingly they are tangible gateways to recovery and recognition, by Jews and non-Jews alike.

**14** The latest (fourth) edition is *National Geographic Jewish Heritage Europe: A Guide to Eastern Europe* (Washington: National Geographic, 2007).

**15** Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Upon the Doorposts of Thy House: Jewish Life in East-Central Europe, Yesterday and Today* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

At a conference on the future of Jewish heritage in Europe that was held in Prague in 2004, the British scholar Jonathan Webber said that "Heritage has a function in shaping and reshaping Jewish identity, both from inside and as seen by others". This is true. Throughout my career I've been both an observer and a protagonist in a process that is sometimes called "Jewish archaeology" – the recovery, restoration, and recognition of tangible, physical sites – as well as of memory and the historic record. My father was an archaeologist, so the importance of tangible traces, of literally "touching the past", and the importance of using material remains to learn from and teach about the past, was engrained in me from childhood.

There are, in fact, many ways now that this is being done, both formally and as a way of fostering public awareness. The process is very uneven, but Jewish heritage sites are increasingly recognized as "sites of memory" – even if sometimes sites of contested memory. They are also sites – tools – of learning, of teaching. And they are sites that – like Beit Venezia's vision for the Venice Ghetto – serve as the agora-like space (or place) of encounter between Jews and non-Jews that Diana Pinto described. There are Jewish studies university programs; vast web resources, and a wide variety of Jewish-themed books and publications dedicated to the physical realities of Jewish heritage – including guidebooks and travel apps that put Jewish heritage and history not only on the map, but in the pockets of tourists and local people alike. Synagogues and old Jewish quarters host exhibitions and festivals – some on Jewish themes, but others not. The annual European Days of Jewish Culture, established more than 20 years ago, is aimed at local – mainly non-Jewish – residents and features hundreds of well attended events anchored by Jewish heritage sites in more than two dozen countries. Many Jewish heritage sites, particularly in post-communist Europe, still stand tragically derelict, but many that I once found ruined have been restored over the past 30 years. Many of those now form civic or cultural venues, including Jewish museums and research centers. And with the revival of Jewish life in post-communist Europe some are even now used again for worship.

But what happens when there is no physical site to restore? No tangible talisman to connect with the past? Here, too, the virtual comes into play, once again challenging the concepts of reality and taking us on journeys through space – virtual space – and time. Thousands of synagogues and prayer houses were destroyed during World War II; and even after the war ended hundreds more were either destroyed, left derelict and abandoned, or converted for other use that often totally obscured their original identity. The online database Historic Synagogues of Europe, a joint project between the Foundation for Jewish Heritage and the Center for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, lists more than

3,400 synagogue buildings that still stand and provides information on their current status and use: fewer than 800 are used as synagogues.

For decades, photographs, plans, the occasional film record (and memories) were almost the only witnesses of how the destroyed, ruined, or transformed sanctuaries looked, both inside and out. There is a long history of making *physical* models of lost synagogues. But starting in the 1990s, new technologies including Computer Aided Design (CAD) have been bringing a wide range of synagogues to life – to a form of life, that is, thanks to 3D virtual reconstruction. Some of these reconstructions are static, often extremely detailed computer-generated images; some are interactive. A number of them can be "visited" online, allowing us to enter, walk around at will, inside and out and also, with a simple click, access historical and other information about the building. Two standout new projects, one in Poland and one in Hungary, feature extraordinarily detailed digital models and interactive 3D virtual tours of more than a dozen synagogues and a few other heritage sites. Some projects are even now linked to smartphone apps or other forms of augmented reality, allowing you to stand in RL (Real Life) and engage at the same time digitally – but also physically – with the Jewish past and Jewish space. These stem from different goals, ranging from academic and architectural studies to commemoration and the preservation of memory, to the promotion and enhancement of virtual tourism. Likewise, a variety of public and private institutions and individuals are involved in the creation of such reconstructions: universities and architecture departments, students, artists, Jewish institutions, and more.

I want to conclude by discussing a moment last September (2021) when elements of both universal and specific Jewish space converged at a Jewish place. I found the congruencies at the time remarkable, but in the context of this paper, they are even more so. It was in Bratislava, during the visit to the city by Pope Francis. Francis met with representatives of the Slovak Jewish community in one of the most significant and symbolic places of Jewish history in the country: Bratislava's Rybné Square, the site where the grand, twin-towered Neolog synagogue stood next to the Roman Catholic cathedral until the communist regime destroyed it the late 1960s; it's the site today of the country's main Holocaust memorial. "I have come as a pilgrim, to visit this place and be moved by it", the pope said. The square, he said, "keeps alive the memory of a rich history".[16]

**16** See the pope's speech: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210913-bratislava-comunitaebraica.html. Also see the Jewish Heritage Europe post: "Slovakia: Pope Francis met with Slovak Jews in a highly symbolic place: the site where Bratislava's grand Neolog synagogue stood until the communist regime destroyed it the late 1960s. Now

The Neolog synagogue was built alongside the cathedral in 1893. It was demolished when the communist regime built a major bridge and highway right through what had been the historic Jewish quarter of the city, razing most of the district – in his speech, the pope described this as "an effort to eradicate every trace of the community". With the fall of communism in 1989, young activists painted a big picture of the synagogue right on the pavement of Rybné Square where it had stood, with the angry caption "Here there stood a synagogue!". A few years later, a memorial to the more than 100,000 Slovak Jews murdered in the Holocaust was built on the spot. It incorporates a silhouette of the destroyed building. Years later, in 2012, a two-thirds scale replica of the synagogue, made of scaffolding and canvas, was erected on the spot temporarily as part of a memorial project sponsored by the Slovak-Israel Chamber of Commerce. And in 2019, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the destruction of the synagogue, the Bratislava Jewish community unveiled a virtual reconstruction of the synagogue, which also included an on-site exhibit in the square itself that incorporated digital augmented reality. Online, you can virtually "visit" the synagogue, inside and out, and you can also virtually visit the streets and neighborhood surrounding it. The visuals are accompanied by a soundtrack – street sounds as well as cantorial singing. And by clicking on certain delineated spots you can learn about the history of the synagogue and the community as well as some of the personalities who contributed to its construction.

Today, Rybné Square is not just the site of commemorations marking the Holocaust, but it also forms the backdrop for celebrations of Jewish life by the local Jewish community – such as annual public menorah lightings at Hanukkah. "Though the synagogue on this site was torn down, the community remains present", the pope said in his speech. "A community alive and open to dialogue. In this place, our histories meet once more". The pope clearly recognized the power and symbolism of a Jewish *place*, that is nonetheless set within expansive and perhaps expanding Jewish *space*.

I'm not sure I want the pope to have the last word here. So I'll just say a little more about Jewish Heritage Europe. Since going live online in February 2012, the web site has become a go-to clearing house for both current news and a wealth of

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the site is a both a Holocaust memorial and site of Hanukkah celebrations", September 17, 2021, https://jewish-heritage-europe.eu/2021/09/17/slovakia-pope/.

resources, including a growing inventory of Jewish heritage in cyberspace. Moreover, it tackles a range of intangible issues and concepts. What is Jewish heritage and what is its relevance? What are the strategies and challenges? What is the role of the arts and photography? Of technology and education?

And, importantly, another key question: Who all is Jewish heritage for?