Part III: **Heritage**

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Nostalgia Networks: Virtual Jewish Heritage and the European American Jewish Experience

Introduction

The European Jewish American imagination and community have certainly shaped the United States and the world at large. However, the current European American Jewish community is far more diverse and distanced from its roots, with many today finding their origins increasingly more distant. I hope to explore how the digital realm, particularly virtual reality technologies, can serve as a bridge for American Jewish identity to reconnect with European Jewish history and culture, using built heritage as a vessel for this reconnection. While working in the Jewish heritage field, I became particularly interested in virtual reality (VR) as a means to preserve Jewish heritage and connect American Jewish audiences with these spaces. Virtual reality is "the computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional image or environment that can be interacted with in a seemingly real or physical way by a person using special electronic equipment, such as a helmet with a screen inside or gloves fitted with sensors".[1] Virtual reality allows users to enter digitally generated spaces and create their own paths within them. With the rise of 3D modeling of Jewish heritage spaces, virtual reality naturally lends itself to utilizing these scans to create immersive, three-dimensional environments of European synagogues, making them more accessible globally. For this paper, I will particularly address the American Jewish population with European heritage.

Challenges Connecting the American Jewish Community with European Jewish Heritage

While there are many assessments of how virtual reality may change our lives, I would like to investigate how VR affects identity and memory and apply these

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1 "What Is Virtual reality? Definition from TechTarget", accessed June 15, 2024, https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/virtual-reality.

concepts to the European American Jewish community, bridging the gap between the US and European Jewish heritage and culture. Samuel Greengard writes, "At the heart of VR is a basic concept: it's possible to be anyone – including a different version of ourselves".[2] For the European American Jewish population disconnected from their roots, VR poses an opportunity for American Jews to connect with Jewish heritage on a visceral level from the comfort of their own home. As Diana Pinto states in her contribution to this volume, "Jewish Spaces in a Topsy-Turvy Europe", "the need to reassess Jewish references in its past [. . .] was ideally suited to create Jewish Spaces in which Jews and non-Jews alike could embark in egalitarian terms in the research and dissemination of Jewish knowledge and identity".[3] This paper investigates how virtual reality technologies can address the need to reassess Jewish references in the past and expand Jewish knowledge and European American Jews' conception of their own identity.

I noticed this gap between the American Jewish community and their European roots firsthand as the 2020 Jewish Heritage Program fellow at the World Monuments Fund. The Program works to preserve built Jewish heritage all over the world. In my role, I met with many American Jewish philanthropic organizations to discuss this work, and there was one interaction I will never forget. I gave my usual *spiel* about visiting my grandfather's synagogue in Reghin, Romania, and how this trip triggered my interest in European Jewish heritage. Walking through the synagogue while gaining insight into the building's condition, current use, and its significance to Jewish life and the city's fabric resonated with me. I felt connected to my grandfather, walking down the aisles of the synagogue. Still, it also boded a deep well of concern for the state of the building and its lack of contextualization and commemoration of the Jewish community it once harbored. I also felt I had to bring attention to the current state of Jewish heritage sites, particularly in Romania. On a particular call, I asked a Jewish attendee where her family was from in Europe, to which she replied, "Oh, somewhere in Russia, I think". This was not a particularly unique or surprising conversation. The question of why Jewish Heritage in Europe mattered became a central question for my day-to-day work, raising funds for its preservation. While my personal story regarding heritage had its effect, I realized I needed a more cost-effective and subjective tool for those who did not see the importance of these sites to feel a connection to these physical spaces without hopping on a transatlantic flight. What I found to be a key component in these conversations was also

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2 Samuel Greengard, *Virtual Reality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019), p. 162.
3 See Diana Pinto's chapter, "Jewish Spaces in a Topsy-Turvy Europe", p. 23, in this current volume.

revitalizing a kind of nostalgia, one for an old European world whose traces can still be discovered in Manhattan's Lower East Side. My hope through the use of VR technologies is to refer back to Pinto's reference to Jewish spaces, to use them to disseminate knowledge so that American Jews feel more connected and less alien to European Jewish heritage sites and form these connections to help shape their own understanding of Jewish identity in a broader historical context.

With the advent of VR, I hoped to create a further impetus to call American Jews to do this work so they would have the opportunity to discover this heritage themselves without the obstacles of cost and accessibility that limit physical heritage travel. With current technology, one can discover where their family is from and the synagogue they frequented without leaving their living room. So, my immediate thought was to ask: What does this mean for American Jews? How can we use site-specific technologies to enable them to reconnect to their European past?

I must acknowledge the work of Vladimir Levin from Hebrew University and The Center for Jewish Art, who have made a tremendous contribution to documenting Jewish-built heritage. Without Dr. Levin's efforts, I could not discuss my topic today. I would also like to thank Jason Guberman of the American Sephardic Foundation and Pavel Katz of the Jewish Heritage Network for taking the time to speak with me to shape my research and contribute to this chapter. They have set the field's standard, and for that, I am grateful.

American Jewish Nostalgia for the Eastern European Jewish Past

The connection between American Jews and the nostalgia towards Europe can be found in many historical examples. With VR, one can reinvoke this intrigue and connection, but it is worth noting this nostalgia does not exist in a vacuum. The study of European Jewish nostalgia can be found in recent literature, such as Dara Horn's best-selling book *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, Rachel B. Gross's *Beyond the Synagogue: American Jewish Nostalgia as Religion*, and Markus Krah's *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past*. For the purposes of this chapter, I will use Svetlana Boym's definition of nostalgia: "Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a

romance with one's own fantasy".[4] Therefore, it is evident that nostalgia needs creativity and fantasy to exist – both elements factor largely in the person's memory and virtual reality experience. Memory is made from both an external object and from how the mind structures it,[5] and VR projects a new landscape and conjures elements from the past that the user has in their head – whether real or fantasy. Elements of creativity and imagination are critical for understanding the history of American Jewish nostalgia and how American Jews construct their identity. Such conclusions can also be found in more general American memory formation and politics analyses. In Alison Landesberg's *Prosthetic Memory*, she states that "[. . .] memory was invoked as a strategy for consolidating important new group identities" in the US.[6] Ultimately, fantasy and memory – key elements of nostalgia – have played a crucial role in shaping American Jewish identity. As such, VR experiences of Jewish heritage can effectively evoke a sense of identity through these concepts.

The nostalgia towards the European Jewish world often united the Jewish community as several models of American Judaism emerged.[7] As Markus Krah notes, "The mid-decades of the twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented, almost obsessive occupation of American Jews with the Eastern European past".[8] As European Jews immigrated to America, looking to the past grounded them to face the opportunities and struggles in the US.[9] Krah goes on to discuss how the community constructed narratives to form and understand their identity. He states, "Narratives play an important role in the construction of communal memory; rituals and other practices are other cultural factors in how a community establishes, expresses, and preserves a collective memory".[10] Thus, the American Jewish interest in heritage sites must be seen as a tool for the community to express and preserve communal memory. Dara Horn also notes how the American Jewish community perpetuated myths about their origin story to evade explicit discussions about antisemitism in the US.[11] This further emphasizes how central

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4 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. xiii.

5 Jose Van Dijck, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 34.

6 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 4.

7 Markus Krah, *American Jewry and the Re-Invention of the East European Jewish Past* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018), p. 6.

8 Ibid., p. 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 15.

11 Dara Horn, *People Love Dead Jews: Reports from a Haunted Present*, 1st ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021), p. 95.

narrative formation and memory are to the Jewish American identity. In the face of digitization and virtuality, this narrative formation is further expanded on and given a subjective dimension, thus forging both one's personal identity and that of the community. These historical examples synthesize how European heritage is utilized to create identity and community in a Jewish-American context, underscoring how the virtual space harkens back to this long-established reasoning for investigating one's European past.

Recent trends on social media by American Jewish accounts have also started a resurgence of interest in the Eastern European past. For example, the New York-based Instagram page Old Jewish Men created a retail site that features a Ralph Lifshitz collection – using the Polo Ralph Lauren Logo but with the designer's European last name by birth.[12] This reclamation of the unassimilated name and choice to present it proudly on clothing is not only a wonderfully funny joke but, I would argue, an assertion to take up space and reclaim a group of young American Jews' European Jewish heritage. It is an embrace of the complicated history of generations, a dialogue between those who felt no choice but to assimilate, and a generation reclaiming their Jewish European roots. By embracing the Lifshitz name, the European American Jew demands space in public so that our names, no matter how *yiddishe* they are or hard to pronounce, are heard. The motion of this trend, I believe, will lead to more interest in not only the physical heritage sites of these groups' familial history but also a renewed interest in those stewarding these sites and their future. Additionally, I argue that this represents a desire to embrace the most authentic version of our identity, unfettered by antisemitism or the need to anglicize our European Jewish identity.

As evidenced by Rachel B. Gross's *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice*, she stipulates that the nostalgic narratives that construct identity and collective memory in the American Jewish community also serve a spiritual purpose beyond a cultural one.[13] She notes how American Jews' increased interest in American Synagogues relates to wanting to connect with the European Jewish communities who first built these spaces upon arrival to the US – and this through-line between the European past and American present is heavily drawn out to the public in these spaces.[14] This is yet another advantage of VR from the first-person perspective, as one can, quite literally, be in the position of those who

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12 See "RALPH LIFSHITZ", *Old Jewish Men*, accessed December 20, 2024, https://www.oldjewish men.net/lifshitz-collection.

13 Rachel B. Gross, *Beyond the Synagogue: Jewish Nostalgia as Religious Practice* (New York: New York University Press, 2021), pp. 3–4.

14 Ibid., pp. 79–80.

built these synagogues and, with the ability to add multimedia, demonstrate how they were built in an interactive and subjectively controlled experience.

Digital Jewish Heritage

Experts in the field of digital culture heritage have also echoed the sentiment that narrative memory accompanied by new digitization technologies creates more compelling experiences for the geographically distant American Jewish audience. I had the pleasure of interviewing Jason Guberman, who heads several organizations related to Jewish digital heritage mapping based in the US, such as Diarna, which focuses on MENA countries, and Bateinu, which includes Jewish sites worldwide. Jason frequently interviews American Jews, and agrees that American Jews are becoming increasingly interested in their European heritage and lineage.[15] The caveat, he stated, is that American Jews are simply unfamiliar with these countries today, where these sites are located, and the sheer scale of the heritage that exists.[16] Therefore, the potential and desire to connect American Jews with these existing spaces and non-existent spaces is great, both fueling the imagination and demonstrating the power of these sites on the American Jewish psyche. He said, "What I think has been most critical for Diarna is that it is place-based oral histories. When we conduct oral history interviews, we're not just asking for remembrances of different stories, but we're rooting them in the synagogues and cemeteries and schools, the shrine can connect to their lives".[17] Given the overwhelmingly positive response to Diarna's website, having nostalgia for these places grounded in a virtual setting has spurred interest and yielded more users. Ultimately, this highlights another advantage of VR: its ability to connect information visually and audibly, providing context and depth to these spaces in a way that simply clicking through online pictures cannot.

Although these initiatives focused on MENA Jewish communities in the US and MENA sites, I believe the results of Jason's work demonstrate a broader need for American Jews to connect with Jewish heritage sites. This also points to how interacting with these heritage sites in virtual reality makes them easier to conceive and appreciate. Furthermore, when enmeshed with multimedia content, this approach could serve as an ideal starting point for American Jews to reconnect with and rediscover the European elements of their Jewish identity.

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15 This is from an interview I conducted with Jason Guberman in 2021.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

While the accessibility of VR makes it a wonderful tool for the European American Jewish community to connect, one must acknowledge it is a bit of a double-edged sword. VR is relatively inexpensive, with some headsets available for around 30 US dollars. Additionally, VR has components that help support those with mobility, visual, and audio impairments, and it may be one of the few ways these individuals can interact with these physical spaces. This widens the audience who can "visit" these sites by offering a more cost-effective and inclusive experience that they can take at their own pace. A valid counterpart to the inclusion of VR in the heritage sphere is that it may discourage people from traveling and visiting these sites in person, potentially harming the income of the communities and individuals stewarding these sites. However, I would argue that the benefit far outweighs the potential drawback of VR, as increasing the visibility of these sites also increases visitorship. In 2019, the Belarusian-Jewish Cultural Center held a VR exhibition of multiple synagogues, and the result of such a project was that more people wanted to visit these sites for themselves.[18] While this is a local European example, I think it demonstrates how VR has the potential to spark an interest and make something more accessible than it is in its current state. Given the increasing use of digital media in our world, people are more used to zooming in on the details of images and exploring information at their own pace. Similarly, VR makes this kind of exploration possible in a way that it is not in-person; however, as advanced as VR is, it does not capture the scale, and also, more importantly, it does not have the interpersonal interaction that comes with visiting these spaces. For many American Jews, who are physically and communally distant from these spaces, the VR experience cannot replace interacting with the community present at these sites. Therefore, I do not think it poses a significant threat to deteriorating visitorships to Jewish heritage sites; conversely, it has the opposite effect.

Conclusion

In the American European Jewish imagination, connecting to heritage sites can reinvigorate one's connection to one's background and spark nostalgia, creating a new connection with the past. In John Suler's explanation of how the digital world affects our psyche, he states: "The digital world allows individuals to

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18 See "Exploring Jewish Cultural Heritage with VR – Our Case", *Exposit*, September 21, 2022, https://www.exposit.com/blog/rethinking-jewish-cultural-heritage-using-vr-exposit-client-first-hand-experience/.

narrowly or fully depict aspects of their 'real' identities from their in-person life-styles, to establish their online selves de novo as fantasy creations, or to construct something in between as a mixture of a genuine and imagined self".[19] Thus, the digital space of a synagogue or a city creates an idyllic environment for an American Jew, potentially disconnected from their own European heritage, to combine their identity's nostalgic and contemporary aspects. The heritage site becomes a site of transformation, where one's Jewish identity can be reaffirmed in a specific geography and history. The digital world allows them to function in the way visiting a modern-day site cannot; they can walk through these places as their ancestors may have before, unfettered by contemporary politics and limitations of time, thus allowing them to see themselves more deeply and connect to their identity. "The many different types of online environments can lead to a decentered, disassociated, and multiplied expression of self", and this decentering is exactly why digitization in built space can be an extremely powerful tool in reimaging the past but living it as a modern individual.[20] Suler continues, "The more readily people can immerse themselves into an online domain, the more quickly it becomes a transitional space, an extension of their minds".[21] Digitization of built heritage is also powerful because it is intuitive – walking through a space, especially one like a synagogue familiar to a Jewish user, can be easier and more accessible than navigating a website with endless options.

Personally, navigating digitized Jewish heritage sites as an Eastern European American Jew has been particularly rewarding and identity-affirming. Not only have I been able to see the depth and range of these sites in a short period, but digital heritage has also allowed me and researchers working on these sites to discover more about them. For example, in the summer of 2022, I had the honor and privilege to volunteer at the restoration of the oldest Jewish cemetery in Romania in Alba Iulia. The volunteers met with the team, which had done a digital typography map of the entire site and found a raised site in one section of the synagogue that would lead to future restoration. My personal connection to and interest in Jewish heritage in Romania initially drove me to volunteer. However, the potential for further discovery of these sites through digital heritage tools deepened my commitment to their preservation and research.

The intuitive nature of such digital experiences can better enable American Jews to feel the scale of these spaces and understand how they function. For

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19 John Suler, "The *Dimensions of Cyberpsychology Architecture,*" in *Boundaries of the Self and Reality Online: Implications of Digitally Constructed Realities*, ed. Jayne Gackenbach and Jonathan Bown (London, Academic Press, 2017), p. 2.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid, p. 6.

American Jews who have always used imagination to understand who they are in the US and the context of the greater Jewish diaspora, allowing the user to be at the center of the experience via virtual reality and undergoing the experience alone, one can better construct an understanding of themselves with elements of the Eastern European Jewish past. These digital nostalgia networks allow American Jews to more closely identify with their nostalgic history in the present and potentially shape a new reality where Europe and the United States do not seem to be separated by an ocean, a reality that can exist in the virtual sphere.

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