

JEWISH CULTURAL STUDIES

VOLUME FOUR

Framing Jewish Culture Boundaries and Representations

Edited by

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Virtual Transitioning into Real: Jewishness in Central Eastern Europe

ANNAMARIA ORLA-BUKOWSKA

Socialistically Real Jewishness

In the spring of 1986 a Polish American classmate and I finally undertook to locate the Stara Synagoga and investigate the Kraków historical museum exhibition listed in the newspaper. Having lived and studied in the city for several months, we thought we knew it very well. Still, a map was needed to pinpoint ulica Szeroka, and to determine which tram to take and at which stop to disembark. Expecting a long ride to some distant and dark corner of the metropolis, we were quite surprised to arrive at our destination a mere two stops from the city centre. Looking back up Starowiślna Street, the clear view of the Mariacki Church roof confounded us; it was obvious we could have easily walked.

Truth be told, what registered during that first outing on Szeroka Street was a police station, abandoned buildings, and crumbling facades. Although depressingly grey disintegration dominated nearly all communist-era cityscapes, what we saw here surpassed the usual level of decay. After going through the museum, but not noting anything else of interest in the vicinity, we returned directly to the Old City, which was physically close yet mentally distant.

There was a lived Jewishness to Kraków at the time, giving lie to the often—and even recently—repeated slogan, ‘For 50 years the area saw very little activity, and not one Jewish person’ (Teich 2011). The Socio-Cultural Society of Jews (known as TSKŻ) officially carried on its activities in Sławkowska Street in the city centre; the Jewish Religious Community was functioning in Skawińska located on the traditionally Christian side of Kazimierz; funerals were occasionally conducted at the Miodowa cemetery just beyond the district, and services were held weekly at the Rema Synagogue. Nevertheless, only the last of these was situated in today’s tourist target area. Certainly all of this was undetectable to uninitiated inhabitants or any vacationers—then as scarce a commodity as goods in the shops.

Communist Evolving into Post-Communist

The above notwithstanding, various impetuses laid the foundations in the 1980s for a perceptible non-Jewish Jewishness. Diverse initiatives by Polish Christians generated an increasing number of articles and books (above and underground) about Judaism, Polish Jewish history, and the Holocaust; lectures and film screenings were held (which would eventually evolve into the Jewish Culture Festival); the Jagiellonian University established a Research Centre on the History and Culture of Jews in Poland (today's Jewish Studies Department), and work was begun to transform a former *beit midrash* into the Center for Jewish Culture. However, here again, only the last of these was actually taking place in the former Jewish quarter.

Nonetheless, by the early 1990s the Jewish Culture Festival was in full swing with the hub of activity now shifted to Kazimierz. The Center for Jewish Culture on Meiselsa was housing a packed calendar of events, and the first businesses—including Noah's Ark, Jarden, and what would later be branded the 'good' (favoured by locals) and 'bad' (ensnaring tourists) Ariels—were opening on Szeroka Street (see Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998). It was at this point that the earliest outside observers—among them Ruth Ellen Gruber (see esp. Gruber 1994)—began to report on a new form of Jewishness emerging in Kraków, in Poland, and in central eastern Europe. It was also then that questions first arose concerning its 'reality' or 'virtuality'—a dilemma unresolved to date, and the topic at hand.

Virtual or Real Jewishness in Central Eastern Europe?

The first issue one needs to place under the microscope is an attempted definition of the virtual and the real. Naturally, the question arises as to whether a boundary can be demarcated between them at all. Certainly the lines between enactment, performance, deception, and masquerade are always smudged (see Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998). A capacious matter up for discussion is what constitutes the difference between a nostalgic return to, for instance, bell-bottom jeans and sitars—considered natural—and a return to, for instance, Yiddish and klezmer music—considered artificial. Does one of these contribute something qualitatively 'better'? Is one more substantively 'real' than the other?

Then again, how authentically 'Jewish' are sundry economic and cultural market offerings anywhere, and how many bona fide Jews are consumers thereof? Among other things popping up in Poland in the 1980s was the Nissenbaum Foundation—a by-product of a highly profitable, early capitalist joint venture, the Pol-Niss liquor company. On the one hand, this company and foundation—which have not survived the transition from communism to capitalism—were seen by both outsiders and insiders as 'really' Jewish by virtue of the founding

owner being a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor who had settled in Germany after the war. Yet its vodkas and water, bearing rabbinic certificates, were, in fact, no more kosher than a run-of-the-mill, home-distilled version. On the other hand, the highly successful Jewish Culture Festival—which has survived through thick and thin—is often seen as ‘virtual’ because its founder and the great majority of its participants are not Jewish. This detail keeps hiccupping in discourse—sensed as an oddity, if not a ‘problem’—and contributes to the assessment of Jewish culture in Poland as not genuine.

Here one might ask if a bagel shop in New York City is more verifiably Jewish because there are more Jewish residents (a correlation between Jewish-associated products and the number of local self-identifying Jews), or because more Jews are eating the bagels (a correlation between the number of self-identifying Jews consuming the Jewish-associated product)? But then, is the New York bagel shop still ‘real’ if the customers are mostly not Jews, or if the owner is Armenian, or if it is not in a Jewish neighbourhood? Along these lines, is the ‘intense, visible, vivid Jewish presence’ to which Ruth Ellen Gruber attests less real because the Jews actually living in Poland are few? And hence is Kraków’s Klezmer-Hois restaurant and hotel more real than the rest because its owners are Jewish, and/or because Polish and non-Polish Jews do hang out there?

With reference to Poland, as well as other central eastern European states, oft-cited commentators label this trend—either as a whole or elements thereof—as kitsch or Disneyland. Tongue firmly planted in cheek, Jonathan Ornstein of the Kraków Jewish Community Center (JCC) dubs it ‘Jew-ra-ssic Park’ (Teich 2011). Even some Cracovians are wont to describe the Jewish Culture Festival as *Cepelia*, referring to the communist-era monopoly which produced and sold folklore goods. Again probing the boundaries, if an ethnologist in the United States studies old-time music in the hills of Kentucky and brings recordings back to ‘civilization’, triggering a craze for banjos and dulcimers, is this virtual or real? Or if a vinyl record aficionado discovers this same music and starts the fad, is that more virtual?

Does reality decrease if something initiated by devoted and sincere elites is subsequently consumed by ‘common folk’, who then prompt the business-minded to mass-produce, distribute, and sell it? Thus the next query about the branding of Jewishness, in Gruber’s words, ‘as a recognized and recognizable’ commodity (p. 336 above) is whether it is a less legitimate phenomenon when it pertains to commercial ventures and more so when it pertains to cultural ones. On the one hand, initial results from an ongoing research project reveal that the number one reason for non-Poles to attend Kraków’s Jewish Culture Festival is the unplanned discovery of the event, while for Poles it is to revisit something they have previously enjoyed (Orla-Bukowska and Tomanek 2012). On the other hand, running a very close second for Poles and non-Poles alike is a specific interest in Jewish culture. Whatever the case, one cannot help but notice that, as

Teich states, 'Whether real or just a simulated reality, Jewish culture is in high demand in Krakow' (Teich 2011).

Cultural or Commercial?

In truth, financial profit is always involved as 'money makes the world go round'. If you build it, they will come; if they buy it, you will offer it—including caricatures bordering on or undeniably crossing the line of good taste. While in London for a conference, a Sephardim-versus-Ashkenazim chess set making the most of physiognomic traits and clichéd garb drew a colleague's gaze to a Golders Green shop display.¹ Correspondingly, the stalls in Kraków offer carved wooden souvenirs, an undying component of Polish folk art: Górale with sheep, sleepy peasants holding a jug, plump housewives gripping a rolling pin, and Jewish traders with a sack or a grosz.

The 'Jews are good with money' stereotype is actually not negative per se: many people would be flattered to be seen as having a *kepele* for business. In truth, the role of Jews in middle-class socio-economic strata has been extensively documented; in comparison to their percentage in the general population, they were over-represented therein. Something about the stereotype, however, made a Jewish friend in western Europe flinch when he had to fight for his early retirement compensation. At the same time, as a social anthropologist stepping back to capture the big picture, I also consider the Italian restaurant in Kraków with Godfather-like figures standing outside and passers-by posing for photographs with the life-size Marlon Brando and son mannequins.

The goal of the first businesses in the former Jewish districts of central eastern Europe naturally had to be the opening of wallets, but this is a two-way street. These businesses were not only making a buck, but also making a connection with—as well as drawing attention to—the local Jewish artefacts and architecture. The enterprises (even the tackiest) have not merely 'taken advantage' but have also rendered the culture and history more attractive, more engrossing. A recent article bears witness to this balancing between maladroitness and graceful reality:

Jewishness has been adopted as a selling point, almost a badge of cool, in a way that is sometimes tasteless . . . Ornstein says: 'You have some fake Jewish-style restaurants, and I would love those to be restaurants run by Jews, kosher restaurants and actually be realistic . . . [but] we're moving in that direction. These days in Poland, the fact that you can call a restaurant a Jewish restaurant and that brings people in, is in itself a positive thing.' (Vasagar and Borger 2011)

In a similar vein, are Roma music, an Irish pub, an Oktoberfest tent, a French bistro, and Fourth of July fireworks not an added value in Poland? Do such phenomena become culturally counterfeit outside their 'native' lands? Should lines be drawn (and if so, where) in the globalization of cultural offerings as commodities?

Although ‘the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred’, as Eco reminds us (cited by Gruber in her essay above), some of what is taking place rings very true. Even if simulacra led them in, most of the participants are engaged for reasons leaning towards noble. It is the visibly virtual that draws drunken Englishmen to a stag party pub crawl on plac Nowy. Yet it also drew another Englishman, Prince Charles, to create the financial backing which built the Jewish Community Center on Miodowa Street in record time. Yes, there is clumsy cultural reproduction that is utterly superficial, literally mimicking layers of flaking history. But beneath the surface, on a day-to-ordinary-day level, cultural practice is much deeper and there is certainly much real cultural production.

Albeit everything is in the eye of the beholder, in his or her interpretation of what is happening: the interpretation of the business entrepreneur, of the trekking tourist, of the researching scholar, and of the Jewish and non-Jewish observers. Whatever the packaging, for over a generation the phenomenon has been leading a number of average Poles (Jews but primarily non-Jews) to an increased interest in Polish Jewish history and culture, in Polish Jews, and in Polish Jewish identity. This still being quite noticeable and intriguing, an Israeli journalist was effusive: ‘I am moved anew by the authentic meetings with young Catholics, full of curiosity about Jewish culture, language, food and music’ (Hurvitz 2011). Moreover, a complementary interest in Jewishness has also been motivating an ever-growing number of non-Polish visitors—including members of Jewish ‘pilgrimages’ (on the earliest of these, see Kugelmass 1993)—to set foot in Poland.

Spatially the changes are evident. In the 1990s (to the naked eye) all seemed centred exclusively on Szeroka Street with the single ‘outlying’ venue being on Meiselsa. Today, however, Jewishness has seeped back and spilt throughout Kazimierz. Szeroka is no longer the only street in town: day-tripping down Miodowa today, one passes the Tempel Synagogue, the JCC, the Kupa Synagogue, and Klezmer-Hois, and finishes past the viaduct at the cemetery.

In fact, the geographical realm of Jewishness—virtual and real—is expanding. Visitors are setting foot not only in Kazimierz or the Old City, but progressively more often in Podgórze, with its Second World War ghetto sites including the Schindler Factory Museum and the site of Płaszów camp, also brought to the fore by Spielberg’s film. Real is the Podgórze branch of the Kraków History Museum, officially named Fabryka Schindlera, but whose exhibition (to the surprise of many a visitor) constitutes a general presentation of the city under German occupation. Virtual is that created by Steven Spielberg: apart from the fact that Amon Göth could not shoot into the camp from his villa, the film set is disintegrating not at Płaszów but over 2 kilometres away from the historic site. Moved by the disappointment of early post-premiere tourists who wanted to experience Spielberg’s ‘reality’, Zdzisław Leś, founder of the Jarden Bookshop, produced the

Retracing Schindler's List guidebook (Teich 2011). Some consumers seem to prefer the virtual, and concessions to this demand must be allowed as well.

All of the aforementioned taken into account, the Jewishness of Kraków and Poland today includes ever broader circles, which in turn inspires more enriched tour guide narratives. The non-Jewish tourist learns about Jewish history and culture, like the middle-aged resident of Będzin who excitedly recounted discovering the Jewishness of her own backyard, as it were, when the 2010 Jewish Culture Festival included a walking tour there. For the first time in her life, she saw how much Jews were a part of her home town's history.² Likewise, the Jewish tourist learns about Polish Jewishness and Judaism in its contemporary forms as lived by his or her Polish Jewish peers.

Phantom Pain

More than money is stimulating this package. One spur is that, as Antoni Sulek points out, 'Paradoxically, "Jews" do occupy much space in the social consciousness' (Sulek 2011: 1). More to the point, 'Jews' as a symbolic concept in the contemporary Polish collective imagination comprise a far broader entity than those living there presently, also signifying 'those who lived in Poland once upon a time—after the war, before the war, or even further into the past' (Sulek 2011: 1). Furthermore, this phenomenon is more broadly spread across this part of the continent. In Austria, for instance, 'the colloquial visions regarding the ratios are similarly false. In 1991, only 14 percent of the Austrians surveyed by the AJC knew how few Jews there really are in their country: less than 1 percent. Yet some 22 percent of the respondents thought that this percentage was higher than 10' (Sulek 2011: 3–4).

As Gruber asks here, 'How do local people choose to portray an important part of the population that was savagely removed, almost overnight?' (p. 344). And just as she (among others) has noted earlier (see Gruber 2002: 40–1), Sulek also reaffirms that, in central eastern Europe, 'Jews constitute a "phantom pain," like an amputated limb which continues to ache. Jews remain present in the social consciousness belying their almost complete disappearance in the region' (Sulek 2011: 4). The need to interact even with an apparition is a strong aching all across central eastern Europe—precisely the region in which Jews were once the most numerous and most densely settled.

Antisemitism or Anti-Antisemitism?

The reality of Jewishness in central eastern Europe is further questioned by Westerners due to their perceptions of above-average antisemitism in this region. Such an accusation reared its ugly head in the 2011 spat between Poland and Israel over football player Maor Melikson, whose dual citizenship gave him the option of representing either state. Harsh Israeli comments described his ten-

tative choice of Poland as a traitorous affinity for an antisemitic country. In a similar vein, American Jews habitually remark that antisemitism could never be found 'at home', ignoring (among others) the formalized discrimination of Jews in US clubs, hotels, and universities well after the Second World War.

Volumes have been written regarding the issue—and much has also been written about the problems in testing for it in any society.³ Yet equal attention should be on the other side of the coin. As Rabbi Michael Schudrich (chief rabbi of Warsaw and of Poland) elaborates: "The flaw in all these surveys is that—let's say they show that 20% of Poles have antisemitic attitudes—everyone misses what the other 80% is thinking" (Vasagar and Borger 2011). Among that remaining 'other 80%' are the activists—non-Jewish and some even strongly Christian—who continue to play a key role in the renaissance of Polish Jewish life. Most of them maintain close bonds to the living culture and community (see Cherry and Orla-Bukowska 2007). In fact, this author is proud to be among the cardholding non-Jewish members of the JCC Kraków.

Of greater validity is the question of the after-effects for societies traversing the virtual–real tightrope: what the participants in this phenomenon perceive, what this makes them feel, what it does to their attitudes, and, finally, what it directs them to actually do. Indubitably, as Gruber says, 'the rediscovery and even exploitation of the Jewish quotient has jump-started a general rehabilitation' (p. 345 above). In fact, there has been a 'decline in antisemitism among all age groups over the decade' (Vasagar and Borger 2011) and a survey illustrates that adult Polish Roman Catholic attendees of the Jewish Culture Festival are decidedly leaning towards religious and cultural openness in general, as well as towards anti-antisemitism and a social proximity with Jews in particular (Orla-Bukowska and Tomanek 2012). Interestingly, a recent study among younger Poles (aged 15–49) has shown 20 per cent to be decidedly or rather in favour of a synagogue being built in their neighbourhood (IIBR 2011).

Undeniably this is 'allosemitism': an awareness of the Jews as Others (keeping in mind that Christians have been as much the Other for Jews), but arousing as many positive as negative feelings these days. Poles' participation in (or being carried upon) the present wave of activity may well have contributed to the decrease in the number of antisemites in society, as well as a corresponding increase in anti-antisemites (see Orla-Bukowska 2007). Although a direct cause-effect relationship cannot be scientifically proven, it makes sense that 20-year-olds—who grew up on the Jewish Culture Festival and whose teachers (having undertaken continuing education on the Holocaust) took them to clean up the local Jewish cemetery or had them cook cholent—are the ones now enrolling in Jewish subjects at university and volunteering Saturday nights to sit down and talk to Israeli teenagers during the latter's Holocaust pilgrimages here. Such committed anti-antisemitism must correlate with strong antisemitism not rising.

Deeds do speak louder than words. One case in point is the civic engagement which makes the Jewish Culture Festival possible:

The festival founders, its growing contingent of volunteers, most of the tour guides, many of the course instructors, and, of course, the overwhelming and awe-inspiring crowds of those in attendance are Polish non-Jews. Apart from this broadening grassroots support, [its] honorary patron is the president of the Republic of Poland; apart from the financial backing of various foundations, it is granted funds from the national, provincial, and city governments. (Orla-Bukowska 2007: 276)

Another example is Kraków's March of Memory from Podgórze to Płaszów, retracing the route of the 1943 ghetto liquidation. Initiated by the same dedicated activists who started up the local Polish–Israeli Friendship Society and the cultural festival, it originally drew a mere handful of people; in recent years the marchers have numbered several hundred to a thousand. On an individual level of involvement, close to 200 non-Jewish Polish citizens have already been publicly recognized by the Israeli embassy—under the auspices of the Traison Foundation and with a formal ceremony included in the Jewish Culture Festival programme—for their local preservation of Jewishness (often with their own monetary contributions yet nary a reward). Representing every possible region of the country, and many of them from small villages, they restore physical landmarks or invent less tangible ways to connect with their missing cohabitants. Moving still further in this constructive direction, schoolchildren hear the testimonials of Polish Jewish Holocaust survivors and Polish non-Jewish recipients of the Yad Vashem Righteous Among the Nations honour; once forgotten Jewish cemeteries as well as synagogues are reconsecrated from Brzostek to Oświęcim, and new plaques announce where Mordechai Gebirtig, Natan Gross, and other Polish Jews lived.

Performativity?

For some people the aforementioned phenomena constitute 'performativity', what Gruber sees as engagement with simulation via auditory and visual prompts of Jewish life before the Holocaust. Here a certain elucidation is required: the dark wood, crocheted tablecloths, often mismatched porcelain, over-stuffed furniture, candlesticks, and the faux-old (or not) artwork on the wall—all sensed as synonymous with 'Jewishness'—actually more generally evoke the Habsburg culture of Prague, Bratislava, Budapest, Lviv, and Kraków (see e.g. Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998: 332). On the one hand, it is intriguing that nostalgia for the Austro-Hungarian empire is linked to Jewishness. Yet on the other, these cafés—and many are found in city centres, with nary a link made to any ethnicity—hark back to the romantic 'glory days' of semi-autonomous Galicia. Perchance this simply reflects a longing for the look and feel of pre-war central eastern Europe in all its multireligiosity, multiethnicity, and multicul-

turalism—of which Jewishness was indubitably a vibrant part. Kazimierz (at a time when it was far from attractive) was submitted by Poland, along with Kraków's city centre, to the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites; now Lviv seems to have followed suit with its Jewish district. This seems to imply that (to some extent) 'Jewishness' has been and is seen as part and parcel of the urban heritage complex. It would be interesting if Prague, Budapest, and other central European metropolises have acted in a similar manner.

Gruber describes the clowning of Chabad Lubavitch in Hungary and tackily dressed waiters in Ukraine. Of course, masquerading is not unknown on the streets of France, England, or Belgium, though judgements seem more lenient there. That said, from a Jewish perspective, there is no room for forgiveness. *Regards*, a periodical for the francophone Jewish community in Belgium, did a cover story in April 2009 on carnival revellers in Aalst posing as Jews in repugnant masks and ersatz hasidic get-up. Then again, even if it all starts as make-believe, the interactivity of the crowds dancing to, singing, and playing klezmer music during the Jewish Culture Festival fuels their discovery of workshops on cantorial singing, Hebrew, and Yiddish, as well as lectures on Tishah Be'av and kashrut. Ben Zion Miller's 2010 lecture on the former filled the Kupa Synagogue; the workshops on the latter by a female *mashgiaḥ* always overflow. More meaningfully, this performativity has spread from Kraków to Warsaw and Łódź, but also to Włodawa, Chmielnik, Będzin, Bobowa, and Oświęcim. Further, going beyond the quaintness of restaurants and chanteuses luring customers off the streets, the movement encompasses musicians fusing personal styles with those of their past and present Jewish peers, as well as history tours, book fairs, film festivals, and so on.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was certainly no model for this kind of work in the Soviet bloc; undertaking grassroots efforts under- or aboveground under communism was a perilous endeavour. In the twenty-first century, doing this under capitalism—with, or oft-times without, government, private foundation, foreign, or national assistance—has entailed a rapid learning process. Some initiatives are carefully planned from within, but others come from 'bull in a china shop' outsiders, oblivious to the needs and desires of the local Jews and non-Jews. Passers-by are hard pressed to discern the difference.

However, looking at this from the perspective not of the tourists but of average (or perhaps above-average) Poles, the eateries, bookshops, festivals, and museum exhibitions—introduced at various levels and in various localities over the past three decades—all provide 'an opportunity for mediated and imagined interactions with [other groups], so the perceived boundaries between them could be, at least virtually and in a mediated fashion, transcended and yet maintained' (Gazit 2010: 403). This is true whether the Other is a phantom pain or is physically present.

Being

Gal Hurvitz (2011) recapitulates the previously noted assessment: in Poland, 'Judaism is cool'. And being cool has led to it becoming real. Assuaging qualms felt early in this process (see Gruber 2002), Jewishness has neither been hijacked nor reduced solely to symbols and food. Clearly neither a two-dimensional facade nor a fossilized archaeological specimen, it is very much a living culture with as many configurations in representation as there are Jews.

Yes, it is a small—yet certainly not extinct and, indeed, multiplying—Jewish population. Moreover, it is a community quite naturally diversifying religiously, with five rabbis (including a Lubavitcher and a female Reform rabbi) at ease with not only living in Kraków, but also walking its streets in *kipah* and *tsitsit*. As a matter of fact, in the initial post-communist decade, young Poles of minority status (not only Jews but Ukrainians, homosexuals, and others too) were highly into outing themselves—brandishing symbols and performing identity. Today members of the Jewish community are quite comfortable with their identity, feeling no need to flaunt it. They participate in services if they are religious; they do not if they are not. They keep kosher if this is important to them; they eat Polish ham if its taste reminds them of home. They wear the Magen David if branding is their style; they do not if 'no logo' is their choice. They are true to themselves. This pluralism among Polish Jewry is as good a sign as any that the fortress is not besieged; the community is safe and secure enough for each person to be able to go in his or her own direction—Orthodox, Reform, humanist, or whatever. 'Never better'—the slogan coined by Jonathan Ornstein (Gruber 2011)—is likely to apply to many Jewish communities across the region. A young woman in Budapest rapping in klezmer/hip-hop/fusion (see p. 343 above) is no doubt as real as the mix of musical styles and religiosity represented by Matisyahu in Brooklyn.

Belying the 'Jewish-style' boasts on businesses catering to tourists, most important is that Kazimierz does constitute an intact Jewish neighbourhood within which spatial *eruv* the local Jew can move on a Friday evening from the JCC to the synagogue, and back again for sabbath dinner, finishing off at the very postmodern pub, where payment for consumed food and beverages can nonetheless be made the next evening. The sense of a Jewish space and place is very obviously felt.

So is it more important what we experts see in analysis or is it more important what people feel and—most significantly—what that experience motivates them to do? The reasons for wearing a Magen David pendant, an Israeli flag pin, or a *kipah* by both Polish non-Jews and Jews are certainly non-commercial. If something between virtual and real Jewishness makes Polish Jews feel proud, inspires interest among local non-Jews in Jewish history and culture, and slowly but surely wears down intolerance, then, even if an abominable faux pas like the Golden Rose in Lviv—or the 'bad' Ariel in Kraków, or the less gauche Mandroga

in Lublin (see Hurvitz 2011)—occasionally comes into sight, perhaps it would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater to wholly discount this phenomenon. Once more: is the Jewish brand in central eastern Europe any different from the Jewish brand in San Francisco or Miami? Is kosher pizza in Toronto more real?

Postmodern Virtual into Real

Late on the night of Saturday, 4 June 2011 (coincidentally, the twenty-second anniversary of Poland's 1989 elections, which had whisked the country into democracy), starting with Havdalah led by a local rabbi, hundreds of Poles (Jews and, above all, non-Jews) embarked on a pioneering journey that would take them through all seven of Kraków's synagogues between 10.30 p.m. and 2 a.m. The aim of the now annual 7@Nite—co-organized by the local Jewish community centre, the Jewish religious community, and the Polish Joint Distribution Committee—is 'to educate non-Jewish Poles about contemporary Jewish life and culture' (Gruber 2011). The programme peregrinated from one synagogue to the next with concerts (including a DJ), prayers, lectures and talks, photography and multimedia exhibits, dance and art workshops, films, games, and family activities. Again, an idea was 'built' and—despite competition with other scheduled attractions as well as the late hour—the consumers of this cultural product came in droves: thousands of them, young and old, singles and families, priests and nuns and atheists, from Kraków itself or coming to town especially for this event. As Ornstein described the audience: '[H]ow many people came? 10,000. We were thinking 2,000 . . . maybe. But 10,000?!' (Teich 2011). If this had only been virtual wrapping paper, would they have come from farther away, from other cities and smaller villages?

Several days earlier, local newspapers had begun promoting 7@Nite in listings as well as articles (Żurawik 2011: 6). More significantly, regional news reports devoted more in-depth coverage to this event than to the annual Dragon Parade (Parada Smoków) with its fire-breathing monsters and fireworks on the river below Wawel Castle that very same night. On-air comments included the university student declaring that 'I'm studying Hebrew and about the Near East and so I'm interested' to a middle-aged couple announcing that 'We're going to Israel this year and wanted to get a taste of the atmosphere' (TVP3 2011). Tadeusz Jakubowicz, president of the religious community (and originally hesitant about the idea), summarized the goal: 'That the synagogues should live, that they should not be lifeless' (TVP3 2011). Clearly alive, all were full for all of the events. Of course, as Gruber points out above (p. 342), enactment—the most positive sort as well—is centred around 'the most easily visible (and publicly accessible)' sites.

An interview with one of the organizers reconfirmed what everyone already knows here: such events would not be arranged and certainly such crowds would

not attend if not for the foundation laid precisely by the Jewish Culture Festival and other forms of more or less virtual Jewishness. As Jonathan Ornstein admitted in one article, thanks to the festival, ‘the residents of Kraków know quite a lot about Jewish culture’ (Żurawik 2011: 6). The *modus operandi* initially involved some non-Jews, who facilitated a transition to central eastern European Jews promoting their real versions of themselves. The current, second, stage of Jews getting involved has been ‘totally made possible by this first stage’, as Ornstein emphasizes (Vasagar and Borger 2011). Journalist Margaret Teich elaborates: ‘In other words, it wasn’t just the movie [*Schindler’s List*] that brought about a new openness towards Jews in Krakow . . . And it’s not the movie that will keep people engaged’ (Teich 2011).

Not long ago, the Jewish Studies Department moved from the city centre to Kazimierz and is now kitty-corner to the offices of the Jewish Culture Festival. Moreover, the festival itself has opened the Cheder Café, offering a space in which to drink coffee, to peruse a volume pulled from the shelves, and to attend events of the year-round programme promoting multicultural tolerance (not only of Jews). Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the starting or end-point of the annual March of Equality (formerly March of Tolerance and organized as part of the Queer May program) has more recently been in Kazimierz. Up in the city centre guides point out where the Jewish community first settled in the Middle Ages on St Anne’s Street, and point to the plaques on Jagiellońska Street, where Żegota (the Polish non-Jewish partisan unit formed to save Jews from the Holocaust) had a local base, and on Szpitalna Street, where the Jewish Fighting Organization (Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa) bombed a German officers’ club in 1942.

Increasingly, the Jewishness of Poland is luring not only the elderly, who are nostalgic, but above all the young, who are curious. It draws people who want to learn about Judaism, who want to study Jewish history, and who want to enjoy Jewish culture. More importantly, it is inspiring Poles—young and old—to explore their country’s multicultural heritage and their own personal ancestry. This, in turn, can develop into increasingly real Jewishness—or Romaniness, Armenianness, Germanness, Ukrainianness, and so on. Pluralism is also clearly promoted by various institutions in Kazimierz—from Romani representatives speaking at the Cheder Café to Japanese being taught at the JCC.

In the long run—as Gruber and several others have duly noted over the last decade—the initially virtual draws the attention not only of tourists but of governments, philanthropists, and activists. In the long run it pulls in the political, financial, social, and ethical support which, in turn, pilots the ‘realization’ of at least some elements. Looking back at the past quarter of a century, it is clear that many benefits have been reaped from what was initially likened to sordid exploitation. Currently nostalgia plays a smaller, if any, role. Central east European presidents, clergy, and university rectors are here and now participating in various Jewish religious ceremonies organized by the thriving Jewish communities.

Would this be possible today if not for the first-stage Jewishness, which paved the way to this deeper level of enactment, this different type of performativity?

The Twenty-First-Century Virtually Real

Reading the first paragraph of this article, anyone who has come to Kraków in the more recent past will undoubtedly chuckle. A visitor can hardly overlook the Kazimierz district these days and, in fact, quite the contrary can occur: with attractions, lodging, and eateries in abundance in this neighbourhood, many groups disregard or dispense with the Old City. This is especially true of Jewish groups on pilgrimages to the Holocaust sites. As a case in point, a few years ago an Australian March of the Living delegation, though staying in a hotel which literally faced the Planty commons encircling the Old City, never managed to cross the street to enter the main market square. Likewise, these delegations usually see exclusively 'Jewish' Warsaw, Lublin, and Łódź.

In fact, the fundamental reason for my remaining in Poland since 1985 has been precisely this incrementally yet incessantly burgeoning interest in and access to 'things Jewish'. That said, Jewish branding in Poland actually preceded my relocation by centuries. It has historically included not only the pretzels sold on the streets of Kraków which the oldest residents still call *bajgle* (bagels), but also Polish words such as *cymes* (tzimmes), or *koszer* (kosher). Whatever one thinks about the bad taste of commercialization, the highly positive connotations in Polish society of something being *cymes* (Polish slang for 'the cat's pyjamas'), or *koszer* (connoting purity or fairness), or quite simply Jewish, doubtless convey an affirmative message.

It is a reinvention, but something has been built to which people come, and transformations have ensued. When describing and analysing the dialogue between the real and the virtual in Kazimierz a decade ago, Jack Kugelmass and I were taken aback by the appearance of the first non-Jewish-themed locale on Szeroka—a techno-disco whose advertising 'flaunt[ed] a fleshy, middle-aged woman wearing nothing but her violin' (Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998: 339). Even as social anthropologists, we, too, were not immune to the overriding idea that Kazimierz was and should be 'Jewish'. And yet such natural, organic development—the tangible and intangible—is precisely what has guaranteed that Kazimierz remains real and evidences its non-Disneylandization.

True, still playing a Jewish note, the 'good Ariel' has relocated up the street to the old *mikveh* and renamed itself Klezmer-Hois; the 'bad Ariel' has contagiously overtaken half of one side of Szeroka; there is the illegally built and disputed Rubinstein Hotel, and the legitimate Hotel Ester. However, as Gruber notes, this is now an integrated street: there is Bombay, which offers Indian cuisine; the former Nissenbaum Restaurant is now the upscale Szara na Szerokiej; and Ulica

Krokodyla—although referring to a work by the Polish Jewish writer, Bruno Szulc—does not pretend to be anything other than a pleasant hangout.

The 1980s interest in replanting some Jewishness in the most Jewish of Kraków districts, subsequently augmented by the 1990s capitalist investments (such as the Ariel) and activist undertakings (the Jewish Culture Festival), did originally appear to be leading in the direction of artificiality (not to mention virtuality). Yet illustrating that such festivals are not playing a broken klezmer record were the performances of Matisyahu at the 2010 Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków and at the 2011 Oświęcim Life Festival. Abraham Inc., Yemen Blues, and Sway Machinery, who performed at the 2011 Jewish Culture Festival, are also far from a time-frozen harking back to the past. Beyond a doubt, Jewish culture and communities found in central eastern Europe will never be qualitatively the same as they were before the war, and the consumers of contemporary Jewishness in this corner of the world will always be predominantly non-Jews. That said, as Ornstein reiterates, the current phase is one in which ‘people with Jewish roots [are] getting involved in the Jewish community’ (Vasagar and Borger 2011).

Along the way something real has happened. This is true in Kraków, but also in Lublin, Warsaw, and Łódź; it is true in Budapest, Prague, and Lviv. This reality is reflected in the Jewish Festival in Chmielnik (Poland), the renovated synagogue—a museum-cum-art gallery—in Trnava (Slovakia), and the Northern Transylvania Holocaust Memorial Museum in Șimleu Silvaniei (Romania). The Jewishness of the above examples is a postmodern fusion of nostalgic restoration and innovative creation, celebrations of the earlier local Jewish communities and commemorations of their demise in the Holocaust, as well as the return of former residents of these quarters (or, increasingly, their descendants) and the everyday life of contemporary ‘home-grown’ Jews. Indeed, boding well for the future, the virtual Jewishness, whose avant-garde was once non-Jewish, has been transformed into a real Jewishness led by demythologized and quite real Jews. Most significantly, the narrative continues in its natural physical context; Jewry here provides a ‘living dimension’ that is integrated, not isolated—an indigenous variety healthily embedded in its native soil.

Yes, popping in for a weekend, the typical sightseer will be limited in his or her field of vision to the electric cart drivers hawking tours, the historical sites described in a guidebook, and the quaint photo-opportunity settings of some kiosks, shops, and cafés, and will thereafter speak of the expected and delivered Disneyland. The locals, however, see a neighbourhood through which they pub-crawl from Szeroka to plac Nowy to Bożego Ciała and even down to Mostowa, where intriguing art and handicrafts can be found, where a bite of most anything edible can be had, where concerts and performances of every genre are held, and, simply, in which friends live. While activity has not really bled over to the other half of Kazimierz—to the opposite side of Krakowska Street, which was traditionally ‘Christian’—still, contemporary Cracovians do cross paths on a daily

basis with Israeli groups, with one of the rabbis traversing the route between the Rema, the Izaak, and the Kupa synagogues, or with local Polish Jews headed for the JCC. Similarly, in Podgórze, anyone going to the so-dubbed Schindler's Factory museum passes by the equally new Museum of Contemporary Art Kraków (MOCAK), which shares the original factory space, and vice versa: whoever heads for MOCAK must notice the historical museum. As Jonathan Ornstein consistently underscores, it has never been better 'in terms of the way the Jewish community interacts with the non-Jewish community' (Gruber 2011) and so many of these interactions are anchored to the extant, physically Jewish neighbourhood of seven synagogues.

The state of affairs has been, is, and will most certainly be in flux: after all, both the non-Jewish and Jewish cultures have been organically changing, mutating, and adapting to each other for ages. More to the point, all the layers of the palimpsest are constantly and concurrently being negotiated. There is so much more here than meets the eye:

On a bright afternoon recently in Kazimierz a boy in a *kippah* (skullcap) walked along the street where a few hours earlier a golf cart filled with tourists had trundled past. Poland was once home to the second largest Jewish community in the world, and any revival is the faintest echo of what was destroyed—but it is a source of great pride to a city with 700 years of Jewish history. (Vasagar and Borger 2011)

These are truly 'closely entwined trends that are creating east-central Europe's new Jewish and "Jewish" authenticities' which Gruber has discerned (p. 344 above).

The historical and the postmodern, the Jewish and non-Jewish experiences, and the virtual and the real have become tightly interlaced. The twenty-first-century rebranding of Kraków (and not only of that city) now includes real Polishness, real Jewishness, and, most significantly, real Polish Jewishness. In other towns large and small across central eastern Europe, no doubt a deeper investigation of the consequences in everyday life and for average people would reveal more of this 'lacklustre' form of Jewishness than of the kitschy Golden Rose type so adept at attracting the limelight.

Whatever shape or form it takes, the Jewishness of central eastern Europe leads a young Ukrainian to taste central European Jewish cuisine, tourists to step into a synagogue (which they would never do at home), tour guides to enrich their commentary with annotations regarding Jewish life in other districts and localities, local governments to sponsor festivals (see Gruber 2013 for an expanding list), scholars of all generations to write and confer, and ordinary citizens to satisfy a deepening curiosity about Jewish history and culture—from medieval times, through the Holocaust, to today.

Even better, this Jewishness is leading the inhabitants of this part of the European continent to expand horizons and explore past and present

multiculturalism in general. Delving into the first footnote in Gruber's essay, one sees that, in 2008, Lviv was concurrently housing the Jewish Heritage and History conference as well as an exhibition celebrating the city's historical multiculturalism, 'Wo Ist Lemberg?/Lviv A World A Way'. This is the other wondrous miracle taking place: superficial attraction is often followed by a deeper interest in demythologized Romanis, Tatars, Karaites, and all the other cultures of the multifarious groups whose past (and, increasingly, present) is so embedded in this terrain. Diversity was already evident in the early period of Kazimierz rediscovery, in the 1990s confluence of various ethnic musical genres, cafés and galleries, diplomatic missions, tourist groups, and the like (see Kugelmass and Orla-Bukowska 1998). The contemporary landscape is reflecting history and facilitating rediscovery by today's inhabitants of the people who lived here before. Despite their initial gawky and ungainly blundering and stumbling, the societies of central eastern Europe (and of the world) are better, not worse, off for this—so long live virtual Jewishness and what lies beyond it!

Notes

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- 1 Erica Lehrer, also featuring in this volume, captured this expensive (over £1,000) Venetian glass item with her camera just before store closing (12 Dec. 2010). Ruth Ellen Gruber has also documented these in Venice.
- 2 Personal conversation, 4 July 2010.
- 3 Antisemitism not being the topic of this essay, I refer interested readers to the comprehensive and thorough analysis of trends in Poland and Europe over the past three decades found in Sulek 2011. Particularly intriguing is his comparison of disparate responses elicited by differently phrased questions.

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