

Beyond virtually Jewish: new authenticities
and real imaginary spaces in Europe.

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 **Beyond Virtually Jewish: New Authenticities and Real
Imaginary Spaces in Europe**

Ruth Ellen Gruber

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Abstract

This essay explores two “real imaginary” worlds in Europe – the “virtually Jewish” and the “imaginary wild west.” The author describes some of the ways that European non-Jews adopt, enact and transform elements of Jewish culture, using Jewish culture at times to create, mold, or find, their own identities. She also describes a surprising and remarkably multi-faceted Far West subculture in Europe that, stoked, marketed and even created by popular culture, forms a connected collection of “Wild Western spaces.” There are major differences between the “virtually Jewish” phenomenon and the “virtually western” European response to the American Frontier saga. One has to do with a real, traumatic issue: coming to terms with the Holocaust and its legacy of guilt and loss. The other is the embrace and elaboration of a collective fantasy and its translation into personal experience. But in certain ways they can be viewed as analogous

phenomena. Both have to do with identity, and the ways in which people use other cultures to shape their own identities. In addition, in both “virtually Jewish” and “imaginary western” realms, the issue of “authenticity” is involved, as well as the distinction between creative cultural appropriation and mere imitation. Both entail the creation of “new authenticities” -- things, places and experiences that in themselves are real, with all the trappings of reality, but that are quite different from the “realities” on which they are modeled or that they are attempting to evoke. The process has led to the formation of models, stereotypes, modes of behavior and even traditions.

Beyond Virtually Jewish: New Authenticities and Real Imaginary Spaces in Europe

RUTH ELLEN GRUBER

I strived for authenticity but never got beyond verisimilitude.

Lee Lorenz¹

A FEW YEARS AGO, I was sitting at one of the Jewish-style cafes in Kazimierz, the historic Jewish district of Krakow, Poland, which is now a major center of Jewish-themed tourism. I was there for the annual summer Festival of Jewish Culture, a nine-day extravaganza that already in 1992 had been described as a “Jewish Woodstock.”² As I sipped my coffee, Lorin Sldamberg, the vocalist of the American klezmer group The Klezmatics, came running up, excitedly holding out what looked like a rolled-up poster. “You have to see this,” he exclaimed.

Lorin unrolled the poster to reveal the menu for a restaurant he had come across on Krakow’s vast and elegant main market square, the Rynek Główny. The restaurant was called “Sioux.” Printed in sepia ink on a tan background, the menu was illustrated with old photographs of Wild West towns, tepees, Plains Indians in full regalia, a stagecoach, cowboys in a saloon. The fare on offer included “Rio Bravo,” “Big Sioux,”

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1. Cartoon in *The New Yorker*, June 25, 2007, 77.

2. Among the many articles about the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, see my essay “The Jewish Culture Festival, Krakow,” in *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry*, vol. 16: *Jewish Popular Culture and Its Afterlife*, ed. M. C. Steinkauf and A. Polonsky (Oxford, 2005), and my article “A Jewish Woodstock in Krakow,” *International Herald Tribune*, July 19, 1995. Cf. Aviva Kempner, “Jewish Woodstock in Cracow,” *Washington Jewish Week*, July 16, 1992.

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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
[+1 \(410\) 516-6989](tel:+14105166989)
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