TITLE
Smart visual media and cultural heritage. Thinglink: an immersive and innovative tool to explore Jewish cemeteries

Introduction

In October 2022, I attended the two-day training seminar in Bratislava on "Teaching Jewish heritage in your class" held by Centropa, the ESJF (European Jewish Cemeteries Initiative), the Foundation for Jewish Heritage (FJH), and Euroclio.
It was a great chance to explore the different ways that cemeteries could be used in class: it encouraged and inspired me to introduce my High School students to Jewish heritage and culture through a deeper and more complex approach.
This short article is aimed at presenting a user- friendly visual media tool, ThingLink, as a catalyst to implement Jewish cemeteries into motivating and immersive History lessons.

ThingLink

ThingLink is a multi-device online App aimed at the creation of interactive 360° images from photos and illustrations; it consents to expand and customize the uploaded material with a huge variety of content types in tags - including videos, GIFS, and carousels of images, as well as external apps such as Google Maps, Forms, Flipgrid, and YouTube.

Immediately after the seminar in Bratislava, ThingLink came to my mind as the perfect digital tool to design an immersive experience in Virtual Reality (VR) mode and to organize a three-dimensional Exploration of a Jewish Cemetery for my students, seeing that the closest one to our school is 25 km far away (the old Israelite Cemetery in Naples).

Using ThingLink with 360-degree images, allowed me to build personalized Virtual Tours which enhanced the learning process and guided students around an environment new to them: the Jewish cemeteries.

Procedure

As the first step, I introduced the theme with the ESJF Guide which is available in seven languages: we used the English version because my History lessons are regularly in CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) approach; this made it

possible to improve the learners' communicative proficiency in L2 while developing competences in analyzing primary sources and cultural heritage.

When my students were sufficiently acquainted with the topic, I decided on the setting to explore: the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague. I selected this place because it is among the oldest and biggest (about 12000 tombstones) surviving Jewish burial grounds in the world. Secondly, pupils had previously read some extracts of the novel *The Prague Cemetery* by Umberto Eco in order to understand the roots of anti-Semitism in Europe, so they were curious about "visiting" the real place that inspired the book. Finally, in the cemetery is buried Rabbi Löw, a great scholar who is said to have invented the golem, a giant of clay who watches over the safety of the Jews in the ghetto, and students love legends and mysterious tales.

If you do not already have 360-degree images of the Cemetery, as in my case, you should download the free App Street View Panorama, search for the place on Google Maps, select among the available 360-degree photos the one as the ideal background for your virtual Tour, copy the image's link and paste it into the Street View Panorama App, then you will be able to download and save the picture to export to ThingLink and work on it.

This is the Virtual Tour of the Prague Jewish cemetery I created for my students.
As you can see from the picture below, the Tour's pathway follows the hyperlinked tags that reveal the place's features.
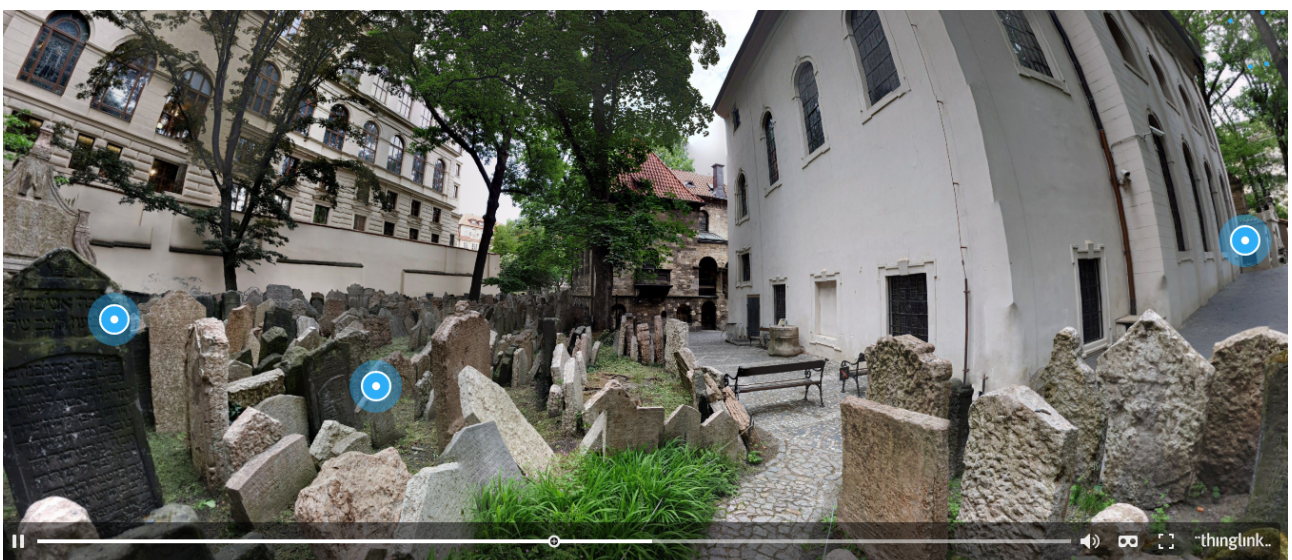

Figure 1: the Virtual Tour of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague created on ThingLink

The VR visualization of the Cemetery (our school is provided with an immersive classroom fully equipped with VR Headsets) and the carefully selected documentation, allowed learners to experience the 3D space of the cemetery

through hotspots enriched with meaningful images, texts, videos, and engaging sound effects (the background music track, was carefully chosen among the royalty-free ones provided by the Pixabay website).

The experiential approach was an added value that aroused the students' interest and emotionally involved them in the discovery of the unknown learning environment: the mere knowledge acquisition was augmented with the contents' meaning acquisition. All the activities and tasks suggested in the mentioned ESJF Manual can be easily replicated in this VR space with a good level of immersion. Of course, a guided in-presence tour of the cemetery is always preferred, but this solution is excellent if there is no chance to visit it due to the distance or for other practical reasons.

A new approach to assessment

Instead of assessments that rely on static content, with ThingLink is possible to add an immersive and realistic interactive quiz or test which puts students into a real-life scenario.

An example is presented in the following lines.

With ThingLink it is also possible to custom 3D objects downloaded from Sketchfab, the largest 3D modeling platform website to publish, share, discover, buy and sell 3D, VR, and AR content.

On the Sketchfab repository I accessed the free photogrammetric model of a Jewish tombstone from the Jewish Cemetery of Unsleben, Germany (you can see the photo of the gravestone here), I uploaded the model on ThingLink enriching it with hotspots to ignite the students' observation and analysis skills, then I gave them a test to take on Google form. The quiz's good results proved the efficacy of the whole learning experience.
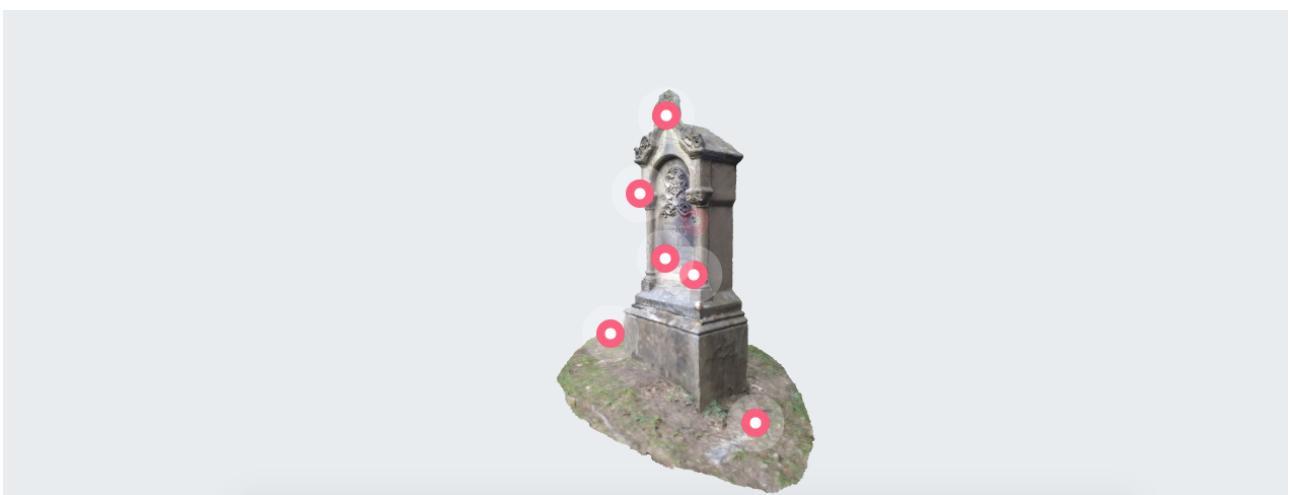

Figure 2: The 3D model of a Jewish tombstone uploaded on ThingLink and integrated with hyperlinks

Projects to come and final reflections

The innovative ThingLink experience worked as an original history Immersive Lab based on the virtual exploration of the famous Jewish cemetery in Prague: it effectively boosted my students' interest in Jewish cultural heritage. Stimulated by this activity, they are now autonomously working on the digital reconstruction of the *Jewish cemetery of Naples* on ThingLink so that it can be easily explored through a Virtual Tour to be widely recognized for its great historical value.

The study of old maps, the use of GIS tools, such as Google maps, the authentic material inserted within the ThingLink hub, and the panoramic photos of the place taken with a GoPro camera, will link our local history with the events of the Neapolitan Jewish community, allowing to preserve and revitalize a precious, fascinating architectural space kept in a state of decay and abandonment even though it deserves to be extensively known and appreciated.