

Michael Jackson and the Jewish nose

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

VIENNA (JTA) — Amid all the noisy outpouring over Michael Jackson's sudden death, the last place I expected to find him was in a Jewish museum. But there he was, his pale, mask-like, surgically engineered image featured as part of an exhibition at the Jewish Museum in the Austrian capital.

Called "Typical! — Cliches of Jews and Others," the exhibition deals with the use (and abuse) of ethnic stereotypes in popular culture. The exhibition, which runs until October, has been shown at the Jewish Museum in Berlin and the Spertus Museum in Chicago.

It was assembled long before Jackson died June 25 in Los Angeles.

In a life-size photograph from 2002, he is shown with lank black hair framing a long, square stubbly chin, pinched red mouth, huge made-up eyes and a tiny nose

with distorted pointy tip.

The photo is used to illustrate how, for better or worse, the King of Pop attempted to destroy stereotypes and, literally, to cut himself away from the confines of physical definition.

Jackson's "surgical transformations mirrored back to the culture the blurring of boundaries demarcating adulthood, sex and even race," Guy Trebay wrote in The New York Times after Jackson's death.

The "Typical!" exhibition deals with stereotypes commonly used to categorize African Americans, Muslims, women,



Poster for "Typical!" an exhibit at the Jewish Museum in Vienna that features a photo of Michael Jackson used to illustrate how the singer tried to crush stereotypes. (Ruth Ellen Gruber)

Native Americans and others.

But given that it is mounted at a Jewish museum, much of its focus is on stereotypes about Jews. The exhibition poster employs a few sketched strokes to conjure up some: corkscrew curls, a hat and a huge hooked nose.

Indeed, the multitude of variations on the (alleged) size and shape of the Jewish nose form a major theme.

"The paradigm for the 'typically Jewish' nose originated in the craniological studies of Johann Friedrich see NOSE page 19▶

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