

Jews revisit Germany's virtual past

Synagogues Nazis destroyed live again, writes **Roger Boyes**

The brown-shirted stormtroopers were spraying spirit on the wooden pews of a Frankfurt synagogue when Franz Horenzyk came to pick up his prayer book. He knew what was about to happen — an arson attack on the synagogue he had visited since childhood — and he fled. "It did not burst into flames that day, they had problems setting it alight," said Mr Horenzyk, who now lives in Israel. "But they came back later and blew it up with explosives." In those frantic days of November 1938 — beginning on the ninth, the so-called *Kristallnacht* — more than 1,000 synagogues and other smaller places of worship were wiped from the face of German cities. After the Second World War, Jews slowly returned to Germany and a few synagogues were built anew. Then,

◀ Jews trying to recover their roots can tour the synagogue and see where their grandparents sat ▶

in 1994, neo-Nazis placed fire-bombs in a Lübeck synagogue. Unpleasant memories were stirred. The Far Right seemed to be on the march again. "That was when we got the idea of creating virtual synagogues, restoring the memory of Jewish life in Germany by using cyberspace," said Marc Grellert, an architecture student at the technical university in Darmstadt. He took the project to his professor, Manfred Koob, who became its intellectual patron. So far the 30-strong team has re-created three Frankfurt synagogues and the plan — to mark the 60th anniversary of the "Night of Broken Glass" — is to take on another 15. The results have been remarkable. Franz Horenzyk's synagogue in the Friedberger Anlage — once a huge place accommodating more than 1,000 male worshippers, 600 women and 60 choristers — was converted by the Nazis into an air-raid

bunker. Nowadays only a plaque reminds passers-by that this was once the biggest temple in the Frankfurt area. Now visitors — mainly, but not exclusively, Jews trying to recover roots which seem to have been burnt away by the Holocaust — can tour the building and see where their grandparents sat. It is all there: the separate entrances for men and women, the view from the women's gallery, the windows well above eye level, so as not to distract people from their prayer. It is all there, but only on computer, a digital memory.

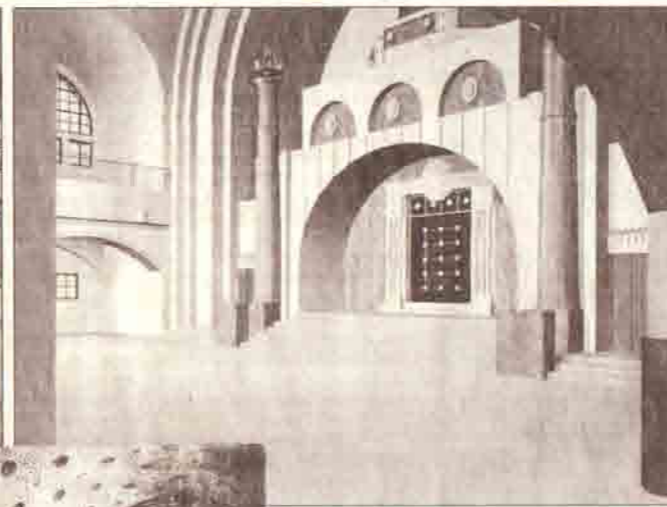
The quality is high, matching that of sophisticated Japanese animated film-makers or computer game designers, and the viewer is taken slowly through the temple as if he were on a guided tour. Sometimes the camera glances upwards to take in an arch, or it leads the visitor through doors, along rows of pews as if the worshipper is searching for a friend. The voice of the cantor, sneezing children, the rustle of clothing: it is easy to populate these cyberspace synagogues. Herr Grellert recently showed his reconstructions to Jews living in Frankfurt. "They were moved, the memories came flooding back."

The search for detail spreads wide, in Europe, Israel, the United States. Drawings, photographs, even — in the case of the synagogue on Börneplatz — a famous 1919 painting by Max Beckmann — all this helped to provide the raw data.

"This digital realisation is vital, because it restores something which should never have disappeared from the German urban landscape," says Salomon Korn, a German Jewish community leader, "and it shows something important about the history of the Jews — that their culture was blossoming at the very moment it was cut down." Herr Grellert calculates that the team needs about £12,000 to make a computer reconstruction of each synagogue. The Bonn Government has come up with a small grant of about £30,000 and at least one city, Nuremberg, has agreed to subsidise the work on its own destroyed synagogue.



Frankfurt's Börneplatz synagogue, burnt in 1938, was restored in cyberspace after studies a famous 1919 picture by painter Max Beckmann



The Nazis made an air-raid bunker out of the Friedberger Anlage, once holding more than 1,000 male worshippers, 600 women and 60 choristers. But virtual visitors can now tour it on computer, above and left, and see such details as the separate entrances for men and women and the windows, set above eye-level so people were not distracted from prayer

Naturally the university is looking for sponsors, but Herr Grellert stresses: "We are not looking for money from the victims, from the Jewish community." This was a German responsibility, a moral debt that should be repaid by people like himself, a 27-year-old researcher. The team does need one Jewish contribution: the advice of elderly Jews with good memories or old photographs. He appealed to them to get in touch through the project's Internet site (www.cad.architektur.tu-darmstadt.de). The next synagogues to get computer treatment are in Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Dortmund, Hamburg, Hanover, Leipzig, Nuremberg and Plauen. The reconstructions will

eventually form part of a larger documentary work on German-Jewish history — "digital memorial". The work thus presents a counterpoint to the political discussion in Germany about whether to build a central Holocaust memorial to the millions of European Jews murdered by the Nazis. That argument is being waged between those who believe the Holocaust should be artistically commemorated in the heart of Berlin and those who say that the most appropriate way to remember it is to restore and take proper care of the former concentration camps. The computer reconstruction adds a different dimension — it celebrates the lives of the Jews of Germany.

A night of ruination

THE assault on German synagogues began on *Kristallnacht*, the night of November 9, 1938. Two days earlier a German diplomat had been killed by a Jew in Paris.

In retaliation, SS security chief Reinhard Heydrich ordered the destruction of all Jewish places of worship in Germany and Austria. More than 32,000 Jews were sent to camps immediately after the "Night of Broken Glass". A 1 billion marks fine was levied on the Jews and state treasury took all insurance money paid for the broken windows.

In 1925, about 564,000 Jews lived in Germany, amounting to 3 per cent of the world's total Jewish population. After the Holocaust and massive emigration, only 20,500 Jews remained. Russian Jews are swelling the numbers and more than 75,000 Jews now live in Germany.