



Image courtesy of Darmstadt Technical University

The "Hauptsynagoge," or Main Synagogue, is one of the images students helped create. By

the end of 1999, they hope to have 18 computer-generated images of destroyed synagogues.

Site 'rebuilds' old synagogues

Project gives virtual look at buildings destroyed by Nazis

By Regine Wosnitza

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BERLIN — What looks like a regular Internet address is the virtual key opening a view on lost treasures: Suddenly, Frankfurt's Main Synagogue appears in a residential area.

Unlock the door, enter the temple and stroll through its central hall. Climb the high-rising galleries and marvel at the colorful stained glass windows.

Sixty years after the synagogue was destroyed in Nazi Germany, assistant professor Marc Grellert and a group of non-Jewish students at Darmstadt University have made this animated walk through the building possible — via a computer screen.

"This is a political project, we do

not just want to reproduce nice pictures," said Mr. Grellert, who first had the idea four years ago. At that time, in 1994, xenophobia was increasing in Germany, and neo-Nazis burned a synagogue in Luebeck, the first such attack in Germany since World War II.

Frankfurt's Main Synagogue was lost on Nov. 9, 1938, when Nazis and ordinary citizens across Germany participated in an attack against the Jewish community. They demolished and looted 7,500 shops, imprisoned 30,000 Jews in concentration camps and killed about 100.

The Nazi rampage is known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass.

About 1,290 synagogues and prayer rooms fell victim to violence that night. But with the use of pho-

tos, blueprints and descriptions by Holocaust survivors, students in Darmstadt have already brought back three-dimensional "reconstructions" of three Frankfurt synagogues with a technique called computer-aided design.

At the end of 1999, they hope to feed 18 computer-generated images of destroyed synagogues onto the Internet.

"It is remarkable that the generation of the grandchildren reconstruct what the generation of their grandparents destroyed," said Salomon Korn, a Jewish architect in Frankfurt and adviser to the students. "In terms of civilization and culture, the destruction of the synagogues means an amputation of a German-Jewish architectural

Please see DESTROYED on Page 20A.

Continued from Page 18A.
style."

Mr. Grellert said, "I hope that this project is a small contribution so that German history does not fall into oblivion and that people become sensitive to the present, to minorities."

Today, Germany has a Jewish community of about 75,000. The influx of mainly young Jewish families from the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War has encouraged the building of new, real synagogues.

In Dresden, the 60th anniversary of Kristallnacht also will take on an added significance. Construction is scheduled to begin on a new synagogue there, adding a sense of justice and confidence to the memory of shame and mourning.

"The construction of the synagogue gives me a sense of satisfaction," said Roman Koenig, the head of Dresden's Jewish community and a Holocaust survivor, "because it shows that the injustice of what happened again reverts to justice."

Dresden's original synagogue was built in 1838. Exactly 100 years later, the place of worship for 5,000 Dresden Jews went up in flames.

Only two people who witnessed the terror still live in Dresden today. Heinz-Joachim Aris was 4 at the time and remembers his aunt's wedding far more vividly.

"On Oct. 11, 1938, it was the last wedding to take place at the synagogue, and we went there in a horse-drawn carriage," Mr. Aris said.

Mr. Aris' father was arrested after Kristallnacht and later had to dismantle the synagogue's ruins as a forced laborer.

"It was high-quality rubble," Mr. Aris said. "The Nazis used it to extend the road running left of the Elbe from Dresden to Meissen."

Ten years ago, Dresden had a Jewish community of just 50 people with an average age of 65. But an unexpected influx of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Germany in the past 8 years has increased that number to 250. And the community members now need an adequate place of worship and a social center.

Since the plans became known, the thought that Jews should pay for the damage inflicted by Germans was unbearable to Siegfried Reimann, a Lutheran priest whose relationship with the Jewish community dates back to the times under Communist rule.

In 1996, Mr. Reimann and others founded the "Charity Construction of the Synagogue Dresden" to raise money and find sponsors. It hasn't been an easy task: The reconstruction of the famous Lutheran Frauenkirche destroyed by British air raids at the end of World War II annually draws millions in donations, but sponsors in Germany apparently are more reluctant to contribute to a Jewish place of worship.

"Back then, Germans did not help Jews," Mr. Reimann said. "Now they can do something and at least help building the synagogue."

The university team in Darmstadt agrees. Although welcoming professional support of Jewish groups and experts like Mr. Korn, the team is adamant that non-Jews should pay for their computer project. But again, fund-raising has proved difficult.

"We expected an interest in what the students are doing, but [some] companies told us their business interests concerned Europe and they had different aims," said Professor Manfred Koob. "This is sad, but it is the reality, the current atmosphere in Germany."

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