

# Berlin cheers on a Jewish music revival

*Editor's note: The writer is founder and director of the Zamir Chorale of Boston, which just returned from the Louis Lewandowski Festival in Berlin. He is also on the faculties at Northeastern University and Hebrew College.*

I don't believe in ghosts. But when Boston's Zamir Chorale was in Berlin last month, I had the eerie sensation that we were channeling the spirits of Germany's departed Jewish musicians.

The Louis Lewandowski Festival committee had invited us to come to Berlin and represent the United States at its celebration of the life and work of the greatest 19th-century composer of synagogue music. I had a feeling we would be interested, but I was unprepared for the enthusiasm with which the members of Zamir responded to the invitation. Thirty-five singers – along with a handful of spouses and partners – were eager to travel and pay for a rather expensive flight. But none of us could have anticipated the experience that was about to unfold and change our lives.

The festival was organized and underwritten by Nils Busch-Petersen, an influential philo-Semitic Berlin lawyer who has served as district mayor of Berlin-Pankow and a top executive for several trade associations. He is also CEO of the Friends of the Berlin Synagogal Ensemble and the author of four books on German Jewish merchants.

Huge billboards all over Berlin advertised the festival, and the choirs were treated like visiting royalty. I never got the chance to ask Nils how or why he, a non-Jew, became such an enthusiastic supporter of Jewish culture in Berlin. But his actions seemed to reflect the prevailing attitudes in today's Berlin.

Our first concert was in the Krankenhauskirche in Wuhlgarten, a neighborhood of East Berlin, and a 75-minute bus ride from our hotel. United Berlin is a huge city! The Krankenhauskirche is a former church turned concert hall on the grounds of a former hospital. Both a Christmas tree and a Chanukah menorah decorated the building. The acoustics were gorgeous (unfortunately, they don't seem to make them like that in America anymore). The capacity crowd, almost entirely non-Jewish, loved our program of Jewish music and appreciated that I delivered my program comments in German. At the conclusion of the concert, the organizers handed a red rose to each member of the choir.

Our repertoire focused primarily on the works of Lewandowski (1821-1894), the Berlin choirmaster whose majestic music became a staple of the city's synagogues. Today, Lewandowski's melodies are sung by Jews around the world (think of the tunes for Friday night Kiddush and "Tsaddik Katamar Yifrach").

We also performed music by several German Jews who immigrated to the United States after the Nazis came to power in 1933. Heinrich Schalit had been the music director at the Hauptsynagoge in Munich. Shlomo Carlebach was born in Berlin and came to New York in 1939. Kurt Weill, best known for his fruitful collaborations with Bertolt Brecht, was the son of Albert Weill, the chief cantor of Dessau. Berlin native Max Janowski moved to Tokyo in the early '30s, heading the piano department at the Musashino Academy of Music for seven years before



Boston's Zamir Chorale performs at the Rykestrasse Synagogue at the culmination of the Louis Lewandowski Festival in Berlin.

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One of the composers was particularly special to me: Herbert Fromm, who had been opera conductor in Bielefeld and Würzburg, and later active with the Jüdischer Kulturbund in Frankfurt, a cultural organization formed after the Nazis had excluded Jews from Germany's mainstream culture. When I was a college student, Fromm was music director at Boston's Temple Israel, a post he held from 1941 until 1972. Fromm kindly served as my extra-mural thesis advisor, as well as a general mentor and role model in the field of Jewish music. It was now time for me to re-pay Dr. Fromm for his kindness, so I added his beautiful setting of Psalm 23 to our Berlin programs. During the performance, I could swear I felt his spectral presence in the room.

After the concert Thursday night, we had a chance to meet the singers from the other choirs. There were more than 200 of us – from Boston, Toronto, Johannesburg, Jerusalem, London, Zurich, Strasbourg and Berlin. We spoke different languages and hailed from four continents, but we shared a common passion for Jewish choral music. Zamir established special connections with the Zemel Choir of London and the Polyphonies Hébraïques de Strasbourg (one of Boston's sister cities), and promised to arrange exchange concerts.

Friday we were all treated to a tour of Berlin, and then an emotional visit to the Jewish cemetery, where we sang at Lewandowski's grave. His children chose an apt epitaph for the composer's monument, "Liebe macht das Lied unsterblich" ("Love makes the melody immortal"). Friday night services at the Pestalozzistrasse synagogue were enhanced by the gorgeous singing of Cantor Isaac Sheffer and the resident choir, the Berlin Synagogal Ensemble.

After the services on Friday night, the choirs convened again at the Crowne Plaza Hotel for a festive Shabbat dinner, with excellent food and wine, and hours of singing, line-dancing and border-busting camaraderie.

Shabbat was appropriately a day off. Several of us walked down the street to



Zamir director Joshua Jacobson with the Berlin mascot – the bear.

the Joachimstalerstrasse synagogue. Most of the regulars at this Orthodox synagogue are émigrés from Poland and Russia, with a handful of Israeli ex-pats. The Jerusalem Cantors Choir, which had been invited to lead the morning services, presented quite an impressive musical davening; it had us in shul from 9:30 in the morning until 1:30 in the afternoon. Perhaps it is possible to have too much of a good thing.

Saturday night we hopped back on the bus for our concert in the glass courtyard of the Jewish Museum. This striking new building, designed by Daniel Libeskind, has become one of Berlin's most popular attractions. The museum had asked us to include music for Chanukah, which was just three days away, so we added holiday songs from Italy, Serbia and England.

After the concert, we were treated to a wonderful surprise. All the choirs were bused to the Television Tower, Berlin's tallest building. The festival organizers had rented the entire building for our pleasure. We were whisked up 669 feet in 40 seconds to the visitors' platform and the revolving restaurant, where we enjoyed a sumptuous kosher buffet and

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panoramic views of the city.

Sunday morning was time for learning: Participants could choose from eight lectures on topics relating to Lewandowski and the music of the Jews of Berlin. They were presented by professors and cantors from around the world, including myself.

That night the festival culminated with its main event: all eight choirs, singing individually and together. The concert took place at Berlin's largest shul, the recently restored Rykestrasse Synagogue, an enormous neo-Romanesque building. Zamir performed Lewandowski's tender setting of "Enosh kechotsir yomov" from the Yizkor memorial service, and the majestic "Ewiger, and den Himmel reicht deine Huld" from the composer's collection of Eighteen Liturgical Psalms in German. Our performance was greeted with the most sustained applause of the evening.

Jewish life in Berlin today is experiencing a renaissance. The Jewish population – 160,000 at its pre-war peak and virtually wiped out during the Holocaust – is now up to 25,000. Besides its synagogues, Berlin boasts kosher shops, schools and a new seminary that trains rabbis and cantors. Of all the European countries today, Germany may be Israel's most supportive ally as well as the strongest combatant of anti-Semitism.

And if the Lewandowski Festival is any indication, the people of Berlin – Jews and non-Jews alike – greatly appreciate the historic Jewish contribution to German culture. The singers in Zamir felt a tremendous satisfaction in having lent a hand, and a voice, to the revival of Jewish life in Berlin. We really could feel the presence of the grateful ghosts of German Jewry past.