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From Boston to Berlin

Strong pro-Jewish, pro-Israel ambience in Berlin

BERLIN – Three times a day, observant Jews pray the weekday *Amidah*, which includes the words, “*v’kabb’tzenu yahad mé-arba kanfot ha’aretz*” (“and gather us together from the four corners of the Earth”). The first Louis Lewandowski Festival in Berlin was a taste of this age-old wish come true.

From Dec. 15-18, eight choirs from four continents assembled in Berlin to honor the music and memory of maestro Louis Lewandowski (1821-1894), perhaps the most influential composer of modern synagogue music. Singers from the Zamir Chorale of Boston, representing the United States, gathered with singers from the Synagogal Ensemble Berlin, the Jerusalem Cantors’ Choir of Israel, the Johannesburg Jewish Male Choir of South Africa, the Zemel Choir of London, Les Polyphonies Hébraïques de Strasbourg, France, the Toronto Jewish Male Choir, and the Synagogenchor Zürich of Switzerland.

Our shared experience reminded us that while Genesis says God spread people throughout the earth and made them speak different languages because of the episode at the Tower of Babel, He never unraveled universal musical understanding. Though our choirs may speak different languages, observe Judaism differently, and regularly sing different styles of music, we were able to sing the same compositions in glorious unison and enchanting polyphonic harmony.

Besides walking in the neighborhood of our hotel and the guided bus tour of Berlin that took us to the maestro’s grave in the Weissensee Cemetery, the only Jewish cemetery in Berlin not desecrated during World War II, we had little time for sightseeing, but the opportunity to sing with these people for the Berlin community was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

At the entrance to the Weissensee Jewish Cemetery stands a haunting memorial to victims of the Holocaust. We read the stone monument’s inscription from Lamentations 5:1: “*zakhor Adonai meh hayah lanu*” (“Remember, O LORD, what has befallen us”). As the 250 singers gathered around the memorial, Cantor Isaac Sheffer of the Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue in Berlin, garbed in old-style cantorial robes and hat, chanted the *El Malei*, the memorial prayer, for the 6 million Jews who perished. We then spontaneously sang “*Ani Ma’amin*,” a song associated with Jews walking to their deaths in the concentration camps. As that song faded, someone in the crowd began to sing “*Hatikvah*,” the Jewish national anthem even before the founding of the State of Israel. Many of us

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Louis-Lewandowski-Festival
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sang through tears.

At the maestro's grave, the Johannesburg choir sang an *El Malei* for Lewandowski himself. Members of Zamir, eventually joined by other choristers, sang a life-affirming rendition of Lewandowski's "*Halleluyah*." But perhaps most potent, a septet of Zamirniks sang Lewandowski's "*Enosh*" in the reverberating Weissensee chapel. "*Enosh*," one of the pieces Zamir was privileged to perform later in the weekend at the Rykestrasse Synagogue concert, is a piece sung often during the *Yizkor* service about how fleeting life is, and how all humans are subject to God's kindness and mercy. Yes, here we were, in the oldest Jewish cemetery in Berlin, singing about mortality and life.

In preparing for this trip, I wondered how or whether Holocaust history has remained in German consciousness; this was a question that stuck with me throughout our tour. The answer? One cannot walk through the streets of Berlin without constant reminders of the tragedy that happened there. As one enters the Tiergarten train station, one sees a list of concentration camps, with a charge to "remember the horrors." *Stolpersteine*, "stumbling stones" installed in the ground in front of buildings throughout Berlin and throughout Europe, remind passersby of the Jews who once lived in these places and owned these properties. The Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue's prominently displayed plaque commemorates its desecration on *Kristallnacht* (Nov. 9, 1938) and its rededication 11 years later. This city is not in denial.

I was struck by Berlin's obvious pro-Jewish and pro-Israel ambience. Our festival, coordinated and supported primarily by Nils Busch-Petersen, a prominent gentile businessman involved in Berlin politics, was publicized on beautiful billboards featuring a teddy bear wearing a tallit and *kippah*. (The bear is the city symbol of Berlin.) Walking to shul on Shabbat, men wore their *kippot* – which one cannot do safely everywhere in the United States. We drove to a concert down "Ben-Gurion-Strasse" and passed "Yitzhak-Rabin-Strasse" near the capitol. Even the hotel's toiletries were made in Israel.

Zamir was privileged to pre-sent three concerts during our tour. The first two featured Zamir alone, in a "pre-opening concert" at a church in the largest hospital complex in Berlin, and another concert at the Jüdische Museum. The third concert included all eight choirs singing individually and together. The collaborative chorus opened the concert with Lewandowski's "*Mah Tovu*" and closed with his stunning "*Adon Olam*." In the cathedral-like hall, the *forte* produced by 250 singers together was enough to happily awaken the long-deceased composer; as for the piano, there is nothing so spiritual as hundreds singing softly together. We were privileged to perform this German synagogue music in the context for which it was specifically composed.

My experience in Berlin with the Zamir Chorale of Boston was incredible. We met so many new people, saw new sights, heard new sounds. Standing among 250 singers filling a synagogue sanctuary with vibrant, godly music, we felt the presence of *ruah ha-kodesh* (God's holy spirit). This is not a journey I will soon forget.

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<http://zcboston2berlin.wordpress.com/category/louis-lewandowski/>