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<http://njewishnews.com/article/8065/in-berlin-nj-cantors-honor-a-broken-musical-legacy#.TzmT17SIMgc>

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In Berlin, NJ cantors honor a broken musical legacy

Choral festival recalls city's Jewish past and incalculable losses

Remembering the rich Jewish cultural life in Germany before the Holocaust, two New Jersey cantors traveled to Berlin to participate in a Jewish music festival.

Cantor Joel Caplan of Congregation Agudath Israel of West Essex in Caldwell and Hazzan Sheldon Levin of Congregation Neve Shalom in Metuchen performed as soloists with Boston's Zamir Chorale, one of eight choirs from around the globe invited to the first Louis Lewandowski Festival.

The festival honored the famed 19th-century composer and arranger of synagogue music, who spent his more than 50-year career in Berlin. Neither cantor had ever been to Germany.

The experience exceeded the expectations of both cantors. It included performances at a historic synagogue, a church, and the city's Jewish Museum; lectures from scholars brought in from the United States, Europe, and Israel; enthusiastic receptions by Jews and non-Jews alike; and tours of a city that seems not to shirk from its complicity in the murder of six million Jews.

A highlight for both cantors was the gathering of all the choral singers at the large Reform Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue for erev Shabbat services. Lewandowski's music is still performed there by its organist, an eight-member professional choir, and a full-time cantor.

Caplan said they were greeted by Rabbi Tovia Ben-Chorin, the leader of Berlin's 12,000-member liberal Jewish community. About 70 percent of the city's Jews are from the former Soviet Union; another 20 percent are Israeli.

"It was the same music you would have heard in Berlin 150 years ago," said Levin. "It was like walking through a time tunnel."

The participating choirs came from Israel, France, South Africa, Switzerland, Great Britain, and Canada. The grand finale took place at the country's largest shul, the 1,000-seat Conservative Rykestrasse Synagogue, which was filled to capacity. Each choir chose two selections and all 300 singers combined to sing the opening and closing

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Louis-Lewandowski-Festival
Berlin, 16. - 18. Dezember 2011

numbers, Lewandowski's rendition of "Ma Tovu" and "Adon Olam."

The Dec. 15-18 festival was organized by Nils Busch Petersen, a non-Jew committed to bringing Jewish people and culture back to Germany.

Caplan admitted to being "astonished" not only by the welcome the choral singers received, but also by the way the city has owned up to the fate of its former Jewish residents.

Throughout Berlin are "stumbling blocks," or small plaques placed in the sidewalks in front of homes or businesses from which a Jew was taken away during the Holocaust. They are inscribed with names, birth dates, the day they were picked up, and the concentration camp where they died.

Even more impressive was the block-long Shoa memorial.

"It was just two blocks away from what I would describe as the city's Times Square," said Caplan. "While you expect the Holocaust museum to be located on the national mall in the United States, I wouldn't have expected the German government to put such emphasis on the Holocaust."

Caplan was also "floored" that the street in front of the capital was called "Yitzhak Rabin Boulevard" and to see a large plaque in a downtown subway station inscribed "Never forget these places of horror" and listing about 20 concentration camps.

"I'm not apologizing for the Nazis and I'm not saying things are hunky-dory wonderful for the Jews of Berlin," he said. "But the Germans are dealing with history and trying to come to terms with what the Nazis did."