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Harmonious triumph over a barbaric past: London's Zemel choir hit a high note at a Berlin festival celebrating the work of a Jewish liturgical composer

Zemel sing Jewish music in 'Nazi church'

LETTER FROM BERLIN IGAL AVIDAN



► THE MARTIN Luther Memorial Church in the Berlin district of Mariendorf has hosted many

concerts before but the London-based Zemel Choir was the first Jewish choir to perform there.

The Protestant congregation was especially keen to be part of the first Louis Lewandowski Festival in Berlin (named after the Berlin-based, impor-

tant and influential reformer of synagogue liturgy) because of its still visible — and even audible — Nazi history.

The church was opened in 1935. The swastika-adorned tiles were removed after the war, but the Imperial Eagle, a symbol of the Third Reich, is still visible. On the pulpit, a *Wehrmacht* soldier, a Storm Trooper and a member of the Hitler Youth are depicted alongside biblical figures.

The organ was built in Ludwigsburg but, en route to the Martin Luther church, was used by the Nazis for their party gathering in Nuremberg at which the infamous antisemitic laws were adopted.

Now, however, invoking the spirit of Christmas and the memory of Lewand-

owski, both German Christians and Jews were set on reconciliation. Pastor Hans-Martin Brehm gave the Londoners a tour of the church, explaining its history and revealing that it had previously invited Jewish cantors.

"It's even more meaningful to sing Jewish music in this location," said Zemel marketing manager, Anthony Cohen. Mr Cohen relished the fact that Adolf Hitler would have been appalled by this concert.

For musical director Benjamin Wolf the concert was "a little triumph" and a positive gesture. "The fact that we can perform in this church with the Nazi insignia is a sign that things are far better now than in the 1930s."

Pastor Brehm also attended a con-

cert in Rykestrasse Synagogue in the former East Berlin, the largest in Germany. Eight Jewish choirs — four male Orthodox and four mixed Liberal — from four continents sang mostly Lewandowski tunes before hundreds of enthusiastic Berliners. Jewish historian Hermann Simon said it reminded him of the services he attended here as a child in Communist East Berlin.

Pastor Brehm declared that "Zemel was probably the best choir". In the highly moving finale, the festival's musical director Regina Yantian directed all 260 singers for *Adon Olam*.

The enthusiastic applause should ensure that the festival will continue next year with Pastor Brehm once again one of the hosts.

The Zemel Choir performing in the Rykestrasse Synagogue at the Lewandowski Festival.

From Zemel Choir, December 31, 2011

<http://www.thejc.com/video/the-zemel-choir-performing-rykestrasse-synagogue-lewandowski-festival>

The Zemel Choir performing Louis Lewandowski's *L'adoshem Ha'aretz* and Salomon Sulzer's *L'cho Dodi* in the Rykestrasse Synagogue at the final grand concert of the 2011 International Lewandowski Festival.