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Zamir Chorale of Boston touches hearts at Jewish music festival in Berlin

The Zamir Chorale of Boston visited the German capital to represent the United States of America at the Louis Lewandowski Festival, a unique choir meeting and a new cultural event in Berlin. The festival which took place from December 15-18 brought over 200 singers from all over the world to Berlin. It was dedicated to the German Jewish composer Louis Lewandowski (*1821 - 1894) who became famous for his reform of synagogue music. Lewandowski was dubbed "royal music director" in 1866 and is known for arranging masterful ancient Hebrew melodies for choir, cantor and organ.

The festival is unique in the world and has become a new annual cultural event in Berlin. Most special is that many of the festival performances took place at locations around Berlin which had been targeted by the Nazis before and during the Second World War. Other choirs that participated in the festival came from Switzerland, Israel, South Africa, Canada, United Kingdom, France, to name but a few countries. The festival was held under the auspices of Klaus Wowereit, Governing Mayor of Berlin, and Lala Süsskind, Chair of the Board of the Jewish Community of Berlin. Berlin also hosts a range of other Jewish cultural events, including the annual Jewish Film Festival Berlin-Brandenburg and the Jewish Cultural Days Berlin.

Zamir is composed of forty-five volunteer singers who perform international, Jewish music spanning thousands of years. Their mission is to raise awareness of the scope and beauty of Jewish culture. The choir has been described by the American Record Guide as "America's foremost Jewish choral ensemble." 35 members of Zamir traveled to Berlin, their flight to the festival co-funded by the German Consulate General Boston. Before departing to Berlin, the choir had given a farewell concert at the Goethe-Institut on November 22, 2011, in the presence of Consul General Friedrich Löhr.

"I was unprepared for the enthusiasm with which the members of Zamir responded to the invitation," wrote Zamir artistic director and founder Joshua Jacobson in an e-newsletter about the choir's Berlin trip.

Zamir's performances at the festival included music from Louis Lewandowski, but also by other German-Jewish composers who fled to the United States after the Nazis came to power in 1933, including Kurt Weill, known for collaborating with Bertolt Brecht, and then music director at the Great Synagogue in Munich Heinrich Schalit. The Great Synagogue was built in 1887 and was the first Jewish Synagogue to be destroyed by the Nazis.

The chorale group's first concert took place at the Krankenhauskirche (hospital church), an old church building which was decorated for the occasion with both a Christmas tree and a Jewish Menorah. The Krankenhauskirche

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in East Berlin's Wuhlgarten is a church which is part of a larger psychiatric hospital. In the 1940s, most of the hospital's patients were killed as part of the Nazi euthanasia policy. It is especially unique that a Jewish choir performed in a building where the Nazis committed such atrocities decades earlier.

Later in the trip, the chorale toured Berlin, visiting the Jewish cemetery and attending services at the Pestalozzistrasse Synagogue located in the Charlottenburg district, this liberal Jewish temple was built in 1912 and it is one of the few pre-World War II synagogues still in use today. They also visited the Jewish Museum and Berlin's Television Tower.

On the final night of the festival, Berlin's Rykestrasse Synagogue hosted more performances from all eight participating choirs. The Rykestrasse Synagogue is the largest in Berlin and was built in 1904. During the war the synagogue turned into a school for Jewish children who couldn't attend regular public schools, and it managed to escape major destruction during the Holocaust. It was rededicated in 2007 and now seats more than 1,000 people. Writes Zamir's Joshua Jacobson: "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."