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Autor: David Martin <http://www.mns.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/festival2.jpg>

## **Louis Lewandowski Festival in Berlin**

David Martin (MNS Director of Music) writes: As a member of the Zemel Choir I took part in the first Louis Lewandowski Choir Festival in Berlin, on 16th-18th December. You will all know many of Lewandowski's settings of so many parts of the Shabbat and High Holyday services, from *Ma Tovu* to *Adon Olam*. He was a prolific fellow! For those not familiar with him, here is a very brief history... Louis Lewandowski was a German composer of synagogal music and is affectionately dubbed 'The father of Jewish music.' He was born in 1821 in Wreschen, Prussia which is now Wrzesnia in Poland. At the age of twelve he went to Berlin to study piano and voice and became solo soprano in the synagogue. Afterwards he attended the school of composition for three years at the Berlin Academy. After graduating with high honours, in 1840 he was appointed choirmaster of the Berlin Synagogue. In 1866 he received the title of Royal Musical Director. Shortly afterward, he was appointed choirmaster in the Neue Synagogue, Berlin for which he composed the entire musical service. He died in Berlin in 1894 and he and his wife Helene are buried in the Weißensee Cemetery. On their gravestone is inscribed: *Liebe macht das Lied unsterblich!* (Love makes the melody immortal!)

We were extremely honoured to be invited to represent the UK along with choirs from Strasbourg, Johannesburg, Jerusalem, Zurich, Toronto, Boston and Berlin, in an event sponsored by the German government along with many local businesses. Apart from our air fares, the costs of absolutely everything were covered, including four nights' accommodation in the beautiful ... Hotel ... right in the centre of Berlin. The Zemel and the Berlin choirs were in this hotel and the other six choirs were in the ... Hotel which was a hundred yards further up the street. I suppose a location to compare these to in London would have been The Cumberland Hotel as we were just round the corner from Berlin's equivalent of Oxford Street. All meals were provided and on the days when there weren't planned activities, we were even supplied with packed lunches.

We were met at the airport when we arrived Thursday lunchtime and taken by coach to the hotel. We had the afternoon to settle in and explore the immediate vicinity...beautiful stores including the hundred year old KaDeWe which is similar to Harrods, boasting seven floors and 60,000 sq feet of luxurious goods.

That evening there was a reception ... for all the choirs. This was a huge undertaking, a bit like a monster sized kiddush but with cooked food as well. There were around four hundred people there including the organisers of the event.

A welcome address, followed by the first taste of something we were going to hear over the next few days: eight

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choirs from four continents...three hundred choristers singing Lewandowski's *Ma Tovv*. It was extremely noisy and unsophisticated at that stage as everyone was trying to sing louder than their neighbour. I compared it to chucking out time at a kosher pub where everyone had been hitting the Palwin's No.10 a little too heavily, but what a sound. It was just amazing!

At 9.00 (exactly!) the next morning, coaches took us on a guided tour of Berlin. It is a fabulous city which really seems to be going out of its way to welcome and encourage Jews to move back there. The wonderful thing to behold was that there were huge posters advertising the Lewandowski Festival all over the city. As you can see, the logo was a teddy bear wearing a kippah and tallit. The tour covered so many fascinating sights, Check Point Charlie, Brandenburg Gate...far too many to describe here but I can certainly recommend a visit.

The coaches then took all eight choirs to the Weißensee Cemetery. This is the largest Jewish cemetery in Germany with a staggering 112,000 graves. The guide warned us not to go exploring because we would definitely get lost. As one enters, there is a holocaust memorial with a circle of commemorative stones representing each of the death camps, under which some earth from each camp has been placed. The weather that day was absolutely fitting. It was very cold, windy and wet. We all gathered around the central memorial and sang *Ani Ma'amin* and then recited *Kaddish*. It was a most moving experience. We then moved on to the grave of Lewis Lewandowski where we, some forty members of the Zemel Choir sang his version of Psalm 116 - *Shuvi Nafshi*. It was actually rather a difficult thing to do as I was somewhat choked, standing by the grave of the actual composer singing one of his most beautiful melodies. We wondered what he would have thought. Possibly "Give it a rest folks." Who knows?

That afternoon, everyone went to the Pestalozzistraße Synagogue where we had the official opening of the festival. This was followed by the erev Shabbat service led by the chazan and the Berlin choir...I must admit, it did go on a bit! The service lasted nearly an hour and a half and included a sermon (in German only) which was a bit pointless as the majority of the congregation were non-German speakers but hey, it was their synagogue! I did, however, manage to glean that it was generally about all nations and religions living in peace and harmony.

The next day, being Shabbat was free. There were reform and orthodox services which we could attend. I must admit that, because I'm normally in shul every Shabbat, I decided to award myself a morning off. There is a slight irony here, in that I toured the Christmas market! What an amazing array of gifts... and sausages and sausages and, well, you get the picture. I had previously thought it a myth, mit the sausages and the sauerkraut, but I kid you not, there were BBQ'd, pickled, fried, boiled, curried. I had no idea what they were made of but as I don't eat porky type things I opted for the safe bet and ended up in KFC where I knew what I was getting!

At 6.30 (exactly!) that evening, there were eight individual concerts staged at eight different venues around Berlin by eight Jewish choirs from around the world. Our concert manager asked the festival concert manager why he had arranged for all of these concerts to start at the same time, as we would have liked to attend one or two of the others. His reply was that it was arranged this way on purpose so as to give a bold statement: "We're back!" His words were actually rather more graphic but this is family reading.

The Zemel's concert was at the Martin Luther Memorial church, a fascinating venue. It was originally a Nazi church and there are reminders of this fact all over it. The fabulous organ was used at the 1935 Nuremberg rally and later shipped to Berlin. There was a movement in favour of demolishing the church after the war because of its Nazi links but it was decided that, because of the fabulous architecture, it should be saved. Swastikas (now illegal in

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Germany) were removed as were many of the friezes. There are, however, still some reminders, like the head of a German soldier. Our performance was extremely well received by an audience which was, I would say, half Jewish and half Christian. We actually had a standing ovation; a first as far as I can remember!

We were told that there would be a surprise after the concerts. This was a closely guarded secret not even known by any of the choirs' concert managers. At 9.00pm all the choirs converged on the Fernsehturm Tower, a similar building to our Telecom Tower in that it has a revolving restaurant (theirs is still operational, unlike ours, alas) which performs one revolution in every 30 minutes. At 368 metres it is the tallest structure in Germany. The festival organisers had taken the building for the evening and we were once again treated to a great meal with fabulous views of the city.

The next morning (Sunday) there was a selection of eight lectures which were available to all. To be honest, I had seen the subjects in advance and decided that my best choice was to hit the KaDeWe store, so I opted out. I do admit to not being particularly high brow. Those who did attend lectures said they were fascinating but I'm afraid I will just have to live with the loss!

Well, it had finally arrived...THE concert! The culmination of the whole event was the massed concert at the 1200 seat Rykestraße Synagogue. Completely refurbished just about two years ago, it is fabulous. There was a fifteen minute rehearsal slot for each choir and then a massed rehearsal for the three hundred strong multi-national choir. The capacity concert started with Lewandowski's 'Ma Tovv' and the sound of the singing in that beautiful synagogue with great acoustics was a million miles away from that rabble singing at the welcome dinner! What a sound we made! Once again, it was difficult to sing because I was so choked with the emotion of the whole thing. After that rousing start, each of the eight choirs sang two pieces. We sang Lewandowski's *L'Adonai Ha'arets* and *Lecha Dodi*. Although, in no way was this supposed to happen, it actually seemed like a competition! It has to be said that the Zemel Choir compared very favourably with many of the others and we were the only choir to receive "whoops and shouts" when we were finished. The concert concluded with the massed choir singing *Adon Olam* and rapturous applause echoed round the building. As if we hadn't been looked after enough, there was yet another reception in the synagogue for all four hundred choristers, organisers and noch schleppers involved. We flew home the next morning with a promise that this would be the start of an annual event. I for one, sincerely hope that I can repeat the experience.