

HANNOVER November 11th. 2006

Reichspogromnacht (Krystallnacht) Memorial Concert in the Marktkirche

After being invited to visit Hannover, Germany for the third year in a row, I had to wait awhile in order to collect my thoughts and prioritize my feelings about this monumental event that took place in the center of the City of Hannover this past November. What was different this time from all the other times I have been invited to my family's city and the city where my Uncle, the renowned Hazzan Israel Alter held the distinguished position of the "Oberkantor" (Chief Cantor) from 1925–1935, just as the Nuremberg laws of boycott appeared on the horizons of Nazi Germany?

The experience was overwhelming again. Just across the street from a coffee shop where I was told that my Grandfather used to visit often, I stood in the midst of the Marktkirche, the largest Lutheran Protestant Church in Hannover filled to capacity with mostly non-Jews, intoning the prayer "El Male Rachamin", reciting the Kaddish to an audience that seemed to seek some sort of reconciliation with themselves. Imagine eighty voices of the most incredible choirs from Hamburg and Hannover walking down on either side of the church responding antiphonally to my chanting of "BARUCH SHEM KEVOD MALCHUTO L'OLAM VAED". This magnificent arrangement of the end of the N'ilah service by Zoltan Kolday, vibrated through my body and spirit with a sense of affirmation that we are still hear. By the invitation of the Director of the Center for "Juedische Music" in Europe, Dr. Andor Izsak, I had the privilege to meet and perform in front of high local and government officials of the City of Hannover, Lower Saxony and leaders of both the Catholic and Protestant churches.

Both emotionally and musically it was a profound spiritual experience. Indeed, it was uplifting to be acknowledged, welcomed, recognized and appreciated by the Deputy Prime Minister of the country as the "Oberkantor" of Toronto, (even if it is not my official title). Moving and alerting were the heart rendering words of warning against anti-Semitism and terrorism. With much doubt and mistrust in my heart, I kept listening to the outpouring of feelings, which seemed to be honest emotions of regret, blame and guilt that marked a nation. "These catastrophic events done to our Jewish citizens will never be wiped out of German identity" were the words of the Deputy Minister of Lower Saxony. My heart tightened, my breathing heavy and my tears flowing down my face, there I was sitting in the vicinity of my family's "home", the place I heard so much about from my parents growing up in my homeland Israel. I kept telling myself it is over sixty years later and we are in a different place. Other dangerous situations are over clouding us these days. Fear of history repeating itself overcame me as I had to get up and sing in German the "Deutche Keddushah" (The German Sanctification as it is called) by the Jewish German composer Louis Lewandowski, the father and backbone of traditional North American synagogue music.) But being surrounded by a sympathetic crowd for the moment, I indulged myself in the power of the music, as the mood of hope and celebration prevailed resounding victoriously throughout the Church. Imagine singing the most magnificent rendition of ADON OLAM by Solomon Sulzer, our father figure of the modern Cantorate. This particular composition was recorded and is fabulously preserved in my Uncle Israel Alter's monumental recordings with the Hannover State Opera Choir from 1925. Feelings of continuity and renewed hope radiated within the grand acoustical chambers of the church. I am happy to be able to release and republish these extraordinary recordings with the help of German government funding and the support of my dear friend, the Director of the Center for European Jewish Music, Dr. Andor Izsak. These recordings will shed illumination and glory of the synagogue musical tradition of West Europe. It will also help our young cantorial students to reshape their concept and understanding of the authentic style of the Golden Age of the Cantor.

Much was on my mind as to the state of anti-Semitism in Germany and the rise of Neo Nazism. While I was in Germany this time, we also visited Berlin, an incredible vibrant city. I inquired and asked for answers both within the Jewish community and non-Jewish sources. Yes, it is true that Neo Nazi parties are gaining power and some seats in local governments, but not in the Reichstag and federal representations. Outlawing the parties is impossible because of the democratic system. If they are outlawed, the fear is that they will go underground. Germany, I was told time and again, has larger problems than Jews. Unemployment is reaching up to 20% in East Germany and there is no end to it. The danger of history repeating itself is not far from anyone's imagination since Germany is the richest country in Europe. The social system is such that it can take care of its citizens. I am skeptical about much of what I heard but pray that it is true. This analysis and interpretation was very much the subject of discussion with a new acquaintance I have come to cherish in Hannover, Dr. Ingrid Shpikermann, the Bishop of the Lutheran Church of Lower Saxony, a woman who is the spiritual leader of over a half million people in some 285 churches across the country. Her husband, Dr. Herman Shpikermann is a Hebrew biblical scholar who teaches bible in a Lutheran Protestant Seminary. Both have shown me great friendship and warmth during my visits to Hannover.

There are no German Jews left in any significant numbers. We know what befell them and the horrific destiny which history has left us. Most of the new Jewish communities are made up largely of Russian Jews who fled the former Soviet Union. There is a sense of renewed life as educational centers both in the Liberal Jewish community as well as in the Orthodox are thriving. This was a good lesson and an amazing growing experience for me personally. I am attaching the newspaper article from the day after the concert. If you would like to view photos of the event, please e-mail benyzm@rogers.com.

As always I am happy to share my personal experiences with you.

Yours truly and, warmly
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My deep thanks to Mr. Walter Seaton for translating the article

A TOUCHING ADMONITION

Reichspogromnacht (Krystallnacht) Memorial Concert in the Marktkirche By Andreas Schinkel and Ludolf Bauke

Very softly the well-known chant drifts through the packed church. The tenor voice soars and reaches a unique high tone. With this thousand year old art of the cantor, Senior Cantor Benjamin Z. Maissner, who had traveled here from Toronto, opened a concert at the Marktkirche, Hanover on Saturday evening in memory of the Reichspogromnacht in November 1938. Maissner's uncle, the Cantor Israel Alter, sang in the Hanover Jewish Synagogue until 1935. Now his nephew has returned to revive the Tradition of the Cantor on this evening. However, Maissner had to sing in the Marktkirche, because the Synagogue of Hanover was destroyed by the Nazis on the Reichspogromnacht. The Cantor was accompanied by the Hamburger Synagogaalchor and the Ensemble for Synagogue Music of the University for Music and Theatre Hannover (HMTH). The whole concert was directed by Andor Izsak, Director of the European Centre for Jewish Music at the HMTH.

Not only touching music but also stirring words filled the church. In his opening remarks, Stadtsuperintendent Wolfgang Puschmann described his concern over the extreme right-wing element “in the middle of our society”. With this he referred to a study, recently released by the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, stating that nearly 18 per cent of the population have an anti-Semitic bias. In his address, Mayor Stephan Weil also urged all to reflect on the memories of “the start of the greatest terror in the history of mankind”, as he labeled the Reichspogromnacht. At the same time, Weil bemoaned that schools in Hanover are neglecting the history of National Socialism. “My son has just completed high school and has learned more about the conflict between the churches in the 12th century than the Holocaust” said the mayor.

The music underscores the admonishing words and mediates the past, present and future of the Jewish people. The lament over the Babylonian exile, set to music by the Renaissance composer Orlando di Lasso and intoned by the Hanover Ensemble for Synagogue Music contrasted with a solo rendition of the Jewish prayer for the dead. Called Kaddish, it is in remembrance of the Jews murdered in concentration camps. In the ambience of the psalms set to music not only by the legendary Louis Lewandowski but also Franz Schubert and Cesar Frank, the remembrance of the dead becomes a religious observance. The concluding piece was a jubilant “Hallelujah”. An auspicious finale to a moving concert.

Side-bar.

Emotive commemoration: Senior Cantor Benjamin Z. Maissner of Toronto (Canada) performed Jewish prayers (top). The Ensemble for Synagogue Music of the University for Music and the Hamburger SynagogaChor sang many songs together.