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CANTORS ASSEMBLY POLAND ISRAEL MISSION JUNE – JULY 2009

Dear friends,

I normally write my reflection of my trips as they occur and share my experiences as they happen. This time, however, things have been different. It has been only a few days since I returned from the Cantors Assembly mission to Poland and Israel. To say the least it was the experience of a lifetime.

To witness the renaissance of Jewish life in Poland and, in particular, in Warsaw and Krakow was very encouraging but also confusing. Post Holocaust stories about Poland and the Polish people's attitude toward Jews has been a devastated saga of horror, programs, massacres, and waves of anti-Semitism. Many of us hesitated to travel to Poland and face the sad reality – the annihilation of Polish Jewry. Having lost both my maternal and paternal grandparents in the Polish Shoah, I felt that I must be there and witness for myself, thus closing the circle of the unknown.

We found the younger educated generation and government officials interested in the Jewish heritage and history as part of the Polish Lost Culture. Yes, there is still today open and demonstrative expression of Anti Semitism in the streets by the uneducated and the Catholic century's long doctrine of Jews as Christ killers and tax collectors. Nonetheless, today Poland is Israel's ardent ally and supporter in political, cultural and economic relationships.

It was not easy to travel and breathe the air of places where our people were slaughtered and tortured. It was not easy to walk through the "Gates of Hell" in Auschwitz and Birkenau's railroad tracks where Mengele, the Angel of Death and his helpers stood and pointed his finger left or right. but our voices, one hundred cantors strong, roaring "Ani Ma'amin" and "Zog Nit Kein Mol", the Partisan's song of heroism, answered the ultimate question: Do we move on with life? Can we blame an entire people and, in particular, the young generation today for the sins of their parents and for satanic forces and madness which possessed the earth during those years

Among many ceremonies scheduled for the week-long mission, we participated in the groundbreaking of the Museum of the Jewish People and History in Warsaw. At the same hour in front of the memorial to the Warsaw ghetto uprising, I had the privilege to sing the Yiddish song I always sing during our own Yom Kippur afternoon service, "Moishelech Shloimelech" of the Polish children no more. You can see some of the slide show photos by visiting <http://tinyurl.com/mlxb8g>,

The Canorate was treated royally. We were welcomed by dignitaries, high officials and ministers. We gave a concert at the Warsaw Opera House, and in attendance were the First Lady of Poland, the prior president and his wife, the Mayor of Warsaw, the heads of the Assembly and Senate, and many other dignitaries. It was thrilling to have all of us on the stage singing Lewandowski's Halleluyah and receive a five-minute standing ovation. What warmed the heart was a children's choir (not Jewish, of course) singing Ani Ma'amin and Hatikvah. Who would have thought it would have happened 65 years ago.

The pilgrimage to Auschwitz was beyond description. It was one of the most important and difficult parts of the trip. Having been a Cantor for so many years seeing and experiencing Auschwitz brought new meaning to my vision and mission as a Hazzan.

I was honored to receive an Aliyah Thursday morning at services held between two barracks. I could hardly get through the blessings and choked with tears and imageries of my grandparents struggling to survive on these grounds. The sight and sounds of T'fillah wrapped in Talit and T'fillin was an ethereal experience. An Israeli delegation of soldiers in uniform marched by as we lead the Shacharit service. They cheered for us and we of course cried out in joy to the sight of young Israeli soldiers with our blue and white flag waving in the wind over Auschwitz. A moving memorial service at Birkenau was created by one of our past presidents. We stopped at several locations on the railroad tracks to commemorate the last steps our Jewish brethren had taken. Each time the "El Male Rachamim" was intoned it sent shivers up our spines, as each person carrying out the prayer had a personal connection to the sight and occasion. The father of one of our members was in the "Zand command". He himself had to burn the bodies of the victims. He survived and to his testimony his son carried out the prayer for the dead.

Krakow is a beautiful city, with an immense market square that is filled with restaurants and stores. The city is splashed with Jewish symbols dating from pre-war periods. The Jewish quarter, known as Kazimierz, hosted the 19th annual Jewish Music Festival. There were performances by a wide variety of Jewish Klezmer bands and musicians from all over the world. Famous performers such as Pharaoh's Daughters, Benzion Miller and Sons, and many klezmer and part-Hassidic groups participated in lectures and demonstrations (many given by our own members) and there was Jewish materials for sale.

Part of the festival schedule included Shabbat services as we held an old-fashioned choir service in the Temple Synagogue which was beautifully restored by the Lauder Foundation. The Temple was built in 1638. Can you imagine hearing an awakening of Traditional Hazzanut in this building for the first time in 65 years? The souls of those who perished from this place must have been smiling. So full was the sanctuary both Friday night and Shabbat morning that people, mostly non Jews, were standing in the aisles and near windows to listen in amazement. There was not a seat left in the house as our colleagues lead services.

There are very few Jews left in Krakow, about 150 in total, nonetheless the Jewish Music Festival attracts tens of thousands to listen, watch and celebrate Jewish music. In the Jewish square over 10,000 people were jammed to cheer, sing and celebrate the finale of the festival. Here at 9:30 p.m. my colleagues and I were privileged to perform the familiar setting of "Havdalah" by Zilberts.

We were lucky to have Dr. Stephen Berk, an outstanding historian, lecturer and teacher, with us all throughout the trip, whose sessions were amazingly informative and mesmerizing. Dr. Berk debriefed us in every situation and helped us gain understanding, tolerance and insight into difficult questions. I recommend all of you visit his web site.

There is so much more to write and express about every moment in Poland as it was indeed a unique experience. A unique exhibition about Galician Jewry interested me in particular, since all the family on my mother's side perished during the Nazi period. I have forwarded information and documents such as Nazi stamped passports of both my

grandparents before their transport to Auschwitz to the curator of the museum. This source of information I was told is crucial and of utmost importance to the research of the fate of Polish Jewry. This outburst of research and interest has been made possible only recently after the collapse of communism. Documentation and witness of the older generation of Poles makes it possible to dig into the dark fate of our people. All our tour guides were so well versed with Jewish history and showed great interest in finding out more about the roll and contribution Jews played in the cultural life of Poland throughout the centuries leading up to the Nazi period.

Yes! We were told all about progroms and Anti-Semitism then and now. Both Jews and Poles know of it, but the fact is it is also known that 80% of the area designated for the "Righteous of the World" "Chasidey Umot Haolam" in The Boulevard leading up to "Yad Vashem" is dedicated to Poles who hid and risked their lives to save Jews and Jewish children. Today we are told many middle aged people find out they are not really Catholic but that they are children of Jews who were taken in by Polish families and given shelter during the War years. Many of them are searching their roots, studying and inquiring to find out about their heritage.

For many of us here in North America it is difficult to comprehend and accept that there is a renewed Jewish life and presence in Poland. American and Israeli institutions are spearheading aggressive initiatives and foundations to build and support Jewish rebirth and a renewed presence in Poland.

For us, the modern Cantorate, it was a life's mission to bring the sounds of our culture and roots back to its birth place and reconnect with our heritage in order to grow again and continue the path and reclaim its authenticity.

The second part of our trip, our mission to Israel was as exciting, but naturally easier to experience. For most of us, of course, it was not the first time in Israel. Nonetheless, Israel always reveals itself in different ways. This time it was the message of music from the depth of our hearts and the voice of the Cantor. Not only for members of our congregations who came with us, but for ourselves as emissaries of our people. As "Shlichey Tzibur" we were committed to enhance and experience every corner of our mission with the sounds of our tradition rooted in our homeland. Whether in formal settings of concerts or ad hoc rehearsals in open air venues, the multiple roaring sounds of dozens of Cantors shed a new light to each ceremony and gathering we brought our people to.

Upon arrival in Israel we celebrated an incredible evening at the main air force base. We were addressed by high commanding officers and official representatives of what is the pride and strength of Israel – its Air Force. Deep sense of pride and feeling of security embraced us, as we realized that this force secures not only our brothers and sisters in Israel who live under daily threats, but for all of us, the Jewish people world over. One cannot imagine the impact of watching a movie of Israeli Air Force jets flying over Auschwitz Berkenau only a few short days after our own personal experience. The theme from "Shoah To G'vurah" came alive for us within a few short moments.

The different concerts throughout Israel demonstrated the variety of talents and skills our Cantors possess. Every new spot we visited was accompanied with a musical and poetic ceremony. For each occasion we had a designated Cantor/producer who was in charge of the selections and performers and the smooth presentation of the event. So it was

when we recited a special prayer for planting trees in “Eretz Israel”. Upon arrival on “Har Hatzifim”, as we entered the city over looking the breath taking view of the entire Holy City of Jerusalem, we were greeted officially but extremely warmly by its Mayor, Nir Batkat. The songs we know so well “Shalom Lach Yerushalayim” and Jerusalem of Gold, took on a fresh and emotional meaning.

Among some of the other highlights for me personally was the concert which I had the privilege of producing in the Town of Ariel. Here we shared our musical talent from the Diaspora. Cantors from different parts of the world sang from their ethnic traditions: Jewish music from Morocco, Latin America, Argentina, the USA, Russia and Israel made up the tapestry of sounds in a unique setting of an out door amphitheater. An extremely gifted band accompanied all the singers to a cheering audience. I had the challenge and privilege to conduct the Kibbutz Symphony Orchestra made up of gifted kibbutzim members and Israeli/ Russian musicians. Among the highlights of the evening was the music of renowned Hollywood composer Charles Fox, composer of the music for the movie “Entebbe”. To have shared and acted as MC for the evening with my dear friend Cantor Nate Lam who single handedly was the initiator of this entire world mission was very special. Our presence in Ariel was non-political, We demonstrated our support to the brave citizens of this flourishing town. Click here to view a link from the concert in Ariel of me conducting the orchestra with soloist Cantor Simon Spiro of Beth Tzedec. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Qw5Ui0EKsM>

The Cantors Assembly organized this convention, a series of educational tracks throughout our stay in Israel. Each participant could choose a daily track and join different programs. High Tec, Agricultural, Archeological, Arts and Culture, Cantorial and musical seminars, shopping and leisure were but a few of the many possibilities for all participants. Especially interesting was our day visit to an absorption center in Mevaseret Zion, a town near Jerusalem. Here we were touched by dedicated Israelis who made it their mission to help absorb Ethiopian Jews into the tapestry of Israeli life. The link (click here) speaks for itself.

<http://www.jewishagency.org/JewishAgency/English/About/Updates/Highlights/Archive/2009/jul14.htm>

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jewishagencyforisrael/sets/72157621789304614/>

Celebrating Shabbat together with colleagues and friends, singing Z'mirot and prayer services within a community, eating delicious good meals and just being in Israel for an extended period has renewed and lifted up everyone's spirit. We all made new friends and reconnected with old relations. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to experience this, and am far richer for having done so.

For Hope and me it was as always an enriching experience as we stayed on in Israel to be with our dearest friends and family. I will shortly edit my photos and videos of the trip and will try to share them with all.

Enjoy and warmest regards

Beny