



Zamir Returns to Roots in Eastern Europe

From June 27 through July 11, 1999, the Zamir Chorale of Boston, a 50-member vocal ensemble dedicated to the performance and preservation of the classical, liturgical, and folk music of the Jewish people, went on an unprecedented two-week, seven-concert tour of Eastern Europe. Bringing this choral tradition to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences in Poland, the Czech Republic and Austria, each performance drew thunderous applause and generated profound and frequently unanticipated feelings in listeners and performers alike. The tour celebrated the 100th anniversary of the founding of the original Zamir Chorus in Lodz, Poland, as well as the thirtieth birthday of the Boston Zamir.

At the end of the last century, the Jewish Choral Movement arose out of a desire among Jews of many different stripes to express through music a sense of their cultural heritage. The first Jewish community chorus in Lodz gave itself the name "Ha-Zamir" (the nightingale). Within a few years Ha-Zamir choruses sprang up throughout Europe. With the rise of Nazi persecution in the '30's, what had become an institution of Jewish culture was totally decimated-along with the voices of many composers who had begun to write in this choral genre. The Boston Zamir tour, entitled "The Songs Live On," celebrated the musical and the creative voices that fell silent in these halls nearly sixty years ago.

Ambassadors of Jewish Culture and American Judaism

Many Chorale members returned with the sense that their accomplishment was not only musically significant, but socially and politically important as well. Zamir singer Heather Zacker, one of the tour's organizers, noted, "of the seven concerts we gave in two weeks, we received standing ovations at each one. It was moving to see non-Jewish Polish nationals weeping at the performances. It gave us a sense of the power that music has for building bridges."

The second day of the tour brought Zamir from Warsaw to Lodz for a performance at the City Museum, where they shared the stage with a non-Jewish Polish choir. Afterwards, founder and director Joshua Jacobson, likening the chorus members to ambassadors, commented, "We have brought Zamir back to its home town after a silence of 57 years and have shown a positive side of Jews to the people of Lodz. We came not to reclaim any property. We came to share our joyous harmony." A member of the largely Polish-Catholic audience attending the standing-room-only performance at the Izaak Synagogue in Krakow, when asked why he came to the concert, responded, "I

love culture. It doesn't matter if it's Jewish or Catholic or Polish or American."

A Bittersweet Pilgrimage

The Zamir trip also included some intensely moving moments, such as an afternoon Torah service held at the ruins of Auschwitz-Birkenau, and a spontaneous performance the choir gave at the enormous Lodz Jewish Cemetery. Conductor Jacobson recalls: "We came to sing to the ghosts in the cemetery. As we were singing, a butterfly settled on my shoulder and stayed there, listening to our music...When Joyce [Bohnen] sang her solo, it fluttered over to her and perched on her music. A music-loving butterfly! Perhaps the incarnation of the souls of the Lodz Jewish Cemetery?"

Zamir members saw themselves not only as ambassadors but as pilgrims as well. As Associate Conductor Cantor Scott Sokol expressed it, "we [were] pilgrims making the trip back to the seeds of Ashkenazic Jewry." Many felt an almost inexplicable need to personally see the places where the atrocities of the Holocaust occurred, while affirming that Jewish culture lives on. As Sokol put it, "I needed for [these images] to be pictures in my own mind, as horrible as that might seem, so I could say to my students, 'I was there-I caught a fleeting glimpse of that horror'." The Zamir tour included visits to the Warsaw ghetto, Auschwitz/Birkenau, and Terezin. Despite Zamir's official receptions in each city, the excellent press the concerts received, and the appreciative audiences, both Jewish and non-Jewish, the members of the tour could not escape noticing that antisemitism is still prevalent in some parts of Poland. Sokol recalls: "the anti-Jewish graffiti could be seen everywhere in Lodz, with Jewish stars and epithets scrawled all over them."

Documentary Film and New CD Forthcoming

The tour also included memorable performances in the beautifully-restored Spanish Synagogue of Prague and at the Festsaal of the Kultusgemeinde, and at the Universitätskirche in Vienna. The entire tour was filmed for an upcoming documentary produced by Arlington-based Spy Pond Productions, with additional support from WGBH. Zamir officials are hopeful that the documentary, which includes a historical perspective on the Jewish music movement, will be aired on PBS. All performances of the tour were recorded and a new Zamir CD, "The Songs Live On," is scheduled for release in early November.

The Grass is Greener

On a lighter note, Zamir members tell of an American couple touring Prague that went to great lengths to get a ticket to the Zamir concert. Asking some choir members they saw in town how they might get tickets for the sold-out concert that evening, the singers, out of curiosity, wanted to know where in the US couple was from. The couple admitted that they were from Lexington, MA-under an hour's driving distance from many of Zamir's Boston-area concerts-but that they had never heard of Zamir until now.

The Chamber Chorus of the Zamir Chorale will give its first performance following the Eastern European tour Sunday October 31, at 2:30 pm at the Old Vilna Shul, 14 Philips Street, Boston. For ticket information, call the Vilna Center for Jewish Heritage at (617) 859-0796. Further concert information is available, and the new Zamir CD may be ordered through Zamir's website, www.zamir.org.

About Zamir Chorale

Since its formation in 1969, this 50-member adult chorale, dubbed a "virtuoso outfit" by the Boston Globe, has remained committed to the highest quality performance of music spanning thousands of years, four continents, and a variety of styles. Its repertoire includes Jewish liturgical pieces, classical works, music of the Holocaust, newly-commissioned music by contemporary Jewish composers, and Israeli, Yiddish and Ladino folk songs. Zamir currently has eleven recordings on the Ha-Zamir label, ranging from Baroque masterworks to seasonal celebrations. Zamir Chorale has performed at concert venues throughout the northeastern United States, including Boston's Symphony Hall and Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood. In 1999, Zamir celebrated its 30th season, with performances across New England, as well as Eastern Europe. The chorale has also toured Great Britain and Israel, appearing with the Jerusalem Symphony and Israel Philharmonic Orchestras under Zubin Mehta and Daniel Barenboim. In 1978, Zamir received the Silver Medallion award from Boston's Association for the Performing Arts, in 1988 the Myrtle Wreath award from the New England region of Hadassah, and in 1992 the Klal Yisrael award from the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts.

Joshua Jacobson, Zamir's Founder and Artistic Director, is Professor of Music and Director of Choral Activities at Northeastern University, where he served for nine years as Chairman of the Department of Music, and for six years as Stotsky Professor of Jewish Studies. He is also Adjunct Professor of Jewish Music at Hebrew College, where Zamir is Choir-In-Residence.

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Zamir is in residence at **Hebrew College**.