
European Cantors Association Newsletter No 8, December 2023

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The significance of the European Cantors Convention, Hannover November over Kristallnacht

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## CANTORS CONVENTION November 2023 HANNOVER

### Alex Klein, Director of ECA writes:

Dear friends

It has been a few weeks since we came back from Hannover from a very successful 15th ECA Convention. There were many historical firsts including singing in The Parliament of Lower Saxony with the Israeli flag flying proudly outside.

Alex Klein addressing the President of the Lower Saxony Parliament.



On 9 November, the actual anniversary of Kristallnacht, now properly recognised as the *Reichspogrom*, I was honoured to address the Parliament. The President, Hanna Naber, was genuinely interested in our presence. Another moving ceremony was at the site of the former Great Synagogue of Hannover attended by many schoolchildren, where our revered Cantor Abe Lubin recited the Memorial prayer. In the late afternoon we performed a concert at the university in the town of Lüneburg to over six hundred citizens, including the Mayor, Chancellor of the University and other VIPs. It was comforting to hear the German politicians firmly supportive of Israel in this horrific conflict.

I am grateful to our ECA team Russell Grossman logistic, programme and web manager, Matt Austerklein the programme coordinator and Barbara Rosenberg our hospitality manager, not forgetting Geraldine Auerbach manager of our communications and Adam Kaplan who looks after our finances who were not able to be with us in Hannover. I cannot thank enough Tova Harety and our partners in the Lower Saxony Association of Jewish communities for all they did to welcome us, to coordinate our activities make us feel completely at home.

We have just celebrated the Festival of Miracles, Hanukah and we need this now more than ever. We hope and pray for just and lasting peace in Israel

Am Yisrael Chai, Alex Klein, Director European Cantors Association

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Spending a week with 40 Singers



Barbara Rosenberg in on the coach on the way to Luneburg, sitting in front of Yvonne and Alex Klein

Barbara Rosenberg, ECA hospitality Director (London) wrote:

Imagine spending a week with forty people who all lead the singing in their synagogues. I just did and it was an exhilarating experience.

For the past 15 years I have been part of a small team organising annual ECA Cantors Conventions held in various European countries for cantors across all affiliations of Judaism, and for people who love the music of the synagogue. Three years ago, it was held at the Villa Seligmann – the Centre for Jewish Music in Hannover, and we were invited back to

commemorate the 85th anniversary of Kristallnacht on 9 November 2023. So back we went, even though the upheaval caused by the horrific events in Israel of 7 October and their ramifications meant we were there with reduced numbers. Some of the American contingent felt they needed to be at home with their own communities at this difficult time. Sadly, most of the Israeli delegates and teachers were unable to join us too. However, Aviya Nachshon, the wonderful young Cantor of Herzliya had been given special permission to leave his IDF post for a week to represent Israel. And represent his country he did.

At the civic commemoration service, which was held outside the original burnt out synagogue, he was interviewed by the press and appeared as front-page news in two newspapers, as well as appearing on the local TV station that night. What a heartfelt Prayer for Israel he sang at the Shabbat morning service.



The Convention was invited to sing at the Parliament in session on 9 November, a day that Germany commemorates. The President of the Parliament of Lower Saxony gave a warm welcome, pledging Germany's full support for Israel. So moved was she by the singing that she asked to attend the Gala Concert on the final night.

Her sentiments were re-iterated by the President of Leuphana, the University in Luneburg at the event to Commemorate the Victims of the Night of Broken Glass. (This was held in the Libeskind Auditorium, in the presence of Daniel Libeskind, who was in conversation with one of the professors). The President expressed total support for Israel and the need to eliminate Hamas. Present were local dignitaries; some having come from Hamburg for the occasion. No Jews have lived in Luneburg since 1938 so it was a very special event for them – and for us.

At our own final Gala Concert in the current Hannover synagogue, the Mayor and also the State Prosecutor once again uttered their support for Israel. It was a refreshing change to hear this from so many people, and we felt that holding the convention in Hannover had a significant impact on all the attendees.

For the delegates there were also teaching sessions on various aspects of Jewish music, as well as the opportunity to socialise with others who lead their services, and to exchange ideas. I feel I have come home after an annual injection of Jewish music and Jewish sentiment.

Barbara Rosenberg

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## A Tale of four civic Kristallnacht commemorations

**Matt Austerklein (Akron Ohio writes)**



Matt left with cantors Daniel Schwartz, and Alina ### and Russell Grossman

A Tale of four civic Kristallnacht commemorations which revealed to me some of the unique dynamics of Jewish life in Germany today.

### I. Addressing the Parliament

[I need a different picture here of a full parliament]

As delegates of the European Cantors Association (ECA) one of our roles was to enhance the musical voice of the Jewish community during a critical moment on the German calendar — the commemorations of the *Reichsprogromnacht*, previously known euphemistically as *Kristallnacht*. This year, the horrors of October 7th, 2023 had emerged as an eerie counterpart to those of November 9, 1938.



The many ceremonies which followed attempted a political exorcism of these twin spectres of anti-Semitism, restoring the German conscience through commitment to Israel and to Jewish safety in the Fatherland.

Our first commemoration was held at the Parliament of Lower Saxony, the legislature for one of Germany's nine states. Here, we were assigned with singing three songs in between many political speeches of the commemoration. The President of the parliament, Hanna Naber, spoke



eloquently and forcefully about the Hamas atrocities and advocating Germany's continued support of Jews and of Israel. The head of the Jewish community, Michael Fürst, spoke at length about creating a safe society for Jews (and against radical Islamists who, in a protest in Lower Saxony the previous week, had called for the destruction of Israel and for a caliphate in Europe). And our own ECA Director, Alex Klein, spoke from the heart about

our shared love of freedom, democracy, and humanity as Jews and Germans.

ECA Executive Director Alex Klein presents a certificate of recognition to Ms. Hanna Naber, President of the Parliament of Lower Saxony.

The parliament made a generous show of solidarity, which I deeply appreciate. Germany's support means a lot, as does that of every other country in this war for the soul of the West. But this ceremony was also a complex political interaction, with left and right parties jockeying for different solutions behind the scenes (and clapping for different things). A German friend of mine felt emotionally worn by the experience, sitting next to ministers from the AfD (Germany's far-right party) who are distrustful of muslims and have neo-nazis amongst their voter base. Even though we were bringing music and a message of solidarity, we were also clearly part of a multifaceted political act.<sup>1</sup>

There was one moment of musical levity (or at least it is funny now). The parliament had our cantors split into two groups, sitting dutifully in designated sections about thirty feet away from each other and with very bad sight lines. How, I thought to myself, were we going to sing *together*?



Our two options were either to all move down to the microphones or to somehow sing from our seats. But it was not clear that we were permitted to move freely about the parliament room. I was reluctant to do so, perhaps being overly sensitive to unstated rules of decorum in a foreign

land.  
So I  
chose  
option



two: Waving my arms widely like someone with a prior career in air traffic control, I conducted our de-facto double choir in three songs from our woefully distant places in the room (Actually, in the end it was four songs, as one of the speakers had stepped out and we needed to fill time).

Me conducting Hebrew songs in the Parliament of Lower Saxony. The singers are all facing our second cantorial choir, which was seated thirty feet away.

I went and watched back the video. It worked...okay. Like most music making, I think it would have sounded better if we were closer together. That's probably true for many other things in life as well.

## II. The Public Commemoration: Storytelling and Wreath Laying

From the Parliament, our second commemoration was the laying of wreaths at the site of the Old Synagogue of Hannover, a dramatically large building which had been destroyed on Kristallnacht. It was a cold morning and a crowd of a few hundred had gathered to observe along with dignitaries from the city. Our role as cantors, other than to be present, was to sing the *El Malei Rachamim* — the memorial prayer for our martyrs in the Shoah. This was sensitively and beautifully done by my friend and colleague, Cantor Abe Lubin. It is a peculiar thing to watch a cantor rehearse the martyrdom of his people and ask God to blot out the

German Nazis — in front of a large host of Germans. It was a powerful moment, but also a vulnerable one as well.

This memorial prayer was followed by several high-school students ascending the podium. They told the story of the fates of four Jews, all either victims or survivors of Kristallnacht. These students read with the same energy that a typical high schooler has when reading something that has been assigned in class. I suppose they did as well as could be expected. But as I learned once at Camp Ramah in Canada, communication is 55% body language, 38% percent tone, and only 7% percent words.

The wreath laying itself also yielded a contrast between the serious dignitaries and seemingly nonplussed youth. After the mayor and officials laid their flowers at the old synagogue memorial, two classes of high schoolers came forward, each student with a white rose in hand. Some looked bored, some were subtly trying to smile or sneak a joke with their friends, some looked sad. One of my colleagues stood by the exit to the memorial, personally making eye contact with each student and uttering a heartfelt *danke* (*“Thank you”*) to them. A few made eye contact in return. Even fewer nodded or responded. Many just walked on by.



Hannoverian High-Schoolers at the Rote Reihe Memorial.

Part of me can understand it. Cyclically remembering dead Jews and creating national identity and ethics based primarily on the atrocities of generations past is probably not the most effective way to inspire young people. Diaspora Jews have tried that, and even for us it has a limited shelf life as identity food. But the truth is that this narrative keeps Germany, for now, a fairly stable bulwark of philo-Semitic and pro-Israel politics. Without these ceremonies and Old Synagogues, would Germans still care?

### III. Leuphana University

The first two commemorations took the better part of the morning. After swinging back to the Villa Seligmann for some lunch and whatever rest we could find, we embarked on our third and perhaps most high-profile appearance — the *Reichspogromnacht* commemoration at Leuphana University in Lüneburg. This small town, where Bach studied music as a young man, has had no Jewish community since the war. Our concert thus represented the first major concert of Jewish music there in many a generation.

We performed seven songs, which served as short palette cleansers in the verbal eight-course meal of speeches from university officials, students, and community leaders. The program was two and half hours — a half hour of which was musical content. Here again, the political message was incredibly positive, supportive of Israel, and of the freedom of Palestinians from the Hamas-ISIS regime. Many hundreds of Germans gathered in attendance. It even featured a conversation with the famous architect and former Leuphana faculty, Daniel Liebeskind, who spoke about the power of memory and the dangers of indifference.

Of additional note to this audience was the presence of Cantor Aviya Nachshon, who had been interviewed at the wreath laying. Cantor Nachshon was proud to be there representing Israel, and he sang a beautiful piece of hazzanut.

For my own part, I was happy that I got to sing a German lied by Salomon Sulzer (1806-1890), whose non-synagogue compositions I have been gathering over the years. It was the only song that night in German. I am told that it went over particularly well, partly because of that. The lyrics, Sulzer's own, were also fitting for the evening:

**Trost** ("Comfort") by Salomon Sulzer

*Wenn meine Freuden mich verlassen  
Wenn meine Sterne all erblassen  
Und wenn mich niemand hier versteht  
Ist mir noch wohl in dem Gebet  
Empor, du müde Seele  
Schwing dich auf zu deinem Gott  
Und dringe mit jedem ihm bekannten Schmerz  
Voll Glauben an sein Vaters Herz  
Flieh, Kummer! Flieht, der Zukunft sorgen  
Auch meine Nacht wird bald zum morgen  
Wo tränenlos meine schaut  
dem Retter den Mein Herz vertraut.  
Empor...*

When my joy leaves me  
When my stars are all faded  
And when no one here understands me  
I am still well in prayer  
Arise, you tired soul  
Soar up to your God  
And press him with every pain you know  
With full faith in your Father's heart.  
Flee, sorrow!



Flee from future worries,  
For my night will soon be morning,  
Where my tearless eye will see  
the savior that my heart trusts.

A lot of classical singing is interpretation. After all, you don't have to be a good murderer to sing Verdi's *Macbeth*. What I've always liked about being a cantor, at least for me, is that there is less distance between text and person. And that night, I felt what I said.

It was a good concert. Many people approached to say thank you, one with tears in his eyes. So maybe we moved the dial, if only in this one sleepy university town. Like in Sulzer's song, our tired souls certainly needed comfort and divine presence in a time when joy and understanding are fleeting.

#### **IV. The Community Concert**

After a 16-hour day of three straight Kristallnacht commemorations, our group definitely needed a break. A delayed morning minyan and engaging presentations were followed by a wonderful Shabbat of hazzanut and communal singing. But straight at the end of Shabbat, we were back at it for the grand finale — a concert and Kristallnacht commemoration, this time for the Hannover community. The program succeeded in having equal proportions of speech and music, so it felt like a proper concert, complete with orchestra, choir, and soloists. The ground floor was reserved for a large host of special guests and dignitaries, including the Parliament President and her husband (who struck a very friendly tone with our ECA leadership). The upstairs gallery was for the general public and cantors not performing that night (I among them). Again, one could tell that this was a program greatly geared towards those in the orchestra seats.

I can't remember everything that was said, except to say that it was pretty much all supportive of the Jewish community and Israel. That was great. And once again, Alex Klein gave a great, heartfelt message and our colleagues and the ECA cantors did a fantastic job with their repertoire.

When the final medley of "Hava Nagila" (yes) and "Heveinu Shalom Aleichem" was complete, we breathed a sigh of relief. We had concluded our conference, and successfully completed our four musical commemorations. There was much conviviality and the cantors stayed up late into the night singing and talking. For me, this was a joyful time. But the weight of all of the commemorations had also taken its toll. In the shadow of October 7th, all of the German proclamations of *nie wieder* — never again — could not distract me from the real fear that yes, it could.

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Towa Harety, Cultural Affairs Coordinator for the State Association of Jewish Communities in Lower Saxony wrote:

15th European Cantors Convention in Hannover 2023.

The European Cantors Association has been a dear friend of our State Association of Jewish Communities in Lower Saxony for many years. In January 2020, shortly before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic, they were our guests for their annual Convention. This year marked the second time we had the honor of hosting them in Hannover. Numerous cantors from across Europe and beyond found their way to Hannover to share a wonderful experience. Five days of fantastic exchange, discussions, events, and high-profile visits—a fireworks display of emotions and feelings.



The State Association of Jewish Communities in Lower Saxony sees such conferences as an enormously important task for our next generations. Therefore, we tried to make everything possible to ensure that the cantors felt comfortable and could spend their stay as pleasantly as possible. The preparation naturally involved close collaboration with colleagues from England. We prepared the program very carefully and made an effort to consider all logistical and halachic aspects. (at dinner at the opening reception)



The highlights of this convention were undoubtedly the opening ceremony at the Jewish Community in the Hannover synagogue (above) and one evening featured an illustrated lecture by Dr. Peter Schulze at the beautiful Villa Seligmann, on the world-famous cantor Israel Alter (below).



A visit to sing in the Parliament of Lower Saxony on 9 November was followed by wreath-lying at the old synagogue and by a unique event at Leuphana University in Lüneburg which moved the entire Lower Saxony. There were several outstanding performances and reports.

The gala concert on Saturday night at the Jewish Community centre in Hannover was the concluding celebration. The audience was thrilled, and we were sad because we understood that these 5 days of wonderful exchange were coming to an end. We don't say goodbye; we say see you again because we believe that in the near future, we will welcome the European Cantors Convention again in Hannover.

All the best and shalom.

Towa Harety Cultural Affairs Coordinator State Association of Jewish Communities in Lower Saxony