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From start to finish:  
The making of a Limmud



Judith Kessler

Toby Axelrod, right, with technical expert Benjamin Marcus and Limmud.de chair Sophie Mahlo, takes a break from the preparation for the recent Limmud conference in Germany.

By Toby Axelrod

Published: 05/22/2008

Berlin (JTA) -- **May 15:** Dear Limmud Diary: It's Thursday evening, the night before our first big Limmud conference in Germany. So quiet here at this former communist youth camp. We picked it because it's not too far from Berlin, but far enough that our guests won't be tempted by the distractions of the big city. Forest and fields sloping toward a clear lake where swans float, heads tucked under wings. Swallows chase mosquitoes above the glassy surface.

A car rolls up in front of house No. 7, where we've set up our provisional office and thrown our bags into the simply furnished bedrooms. Our first guests join the rest of us, stuffing room keys in envelopes for tomorrow's registration. We munch on kosher salami sticks and rolls. We drink a l'chaim with a bottle of Smirnoff's that had sat dormant in my closet for five years.

That's how Limmud.de -- "the event" -- began. With a quiet evening among new friends, a walk through the moonlit campus of the Werbellinsee European Youth Center, opening guest houses and dashing from room to room to drop candies on each pillow.

Like campers, we retire to our rooms, make our beds and collapse in them. We think we are tired.

**May 16:** It's 4 a.m. Where am I? There's an incredibly loud orchestra of songbirds tuning up outside my window. It will be many hours before guests arrive. Meanwhile, two young students from Berlin's Chabad center are outside climbing on chairs and ladders, attaching a thin wire from tree to tree. The Limmud Erev. Only a handful of participants will be Orthodox. But I figure the rest of us can cope with a little extra frumigkeit.

Now we have to prepare seminar rooms for lectures and films. We decorate the area with arrows and signs. Sophie Mahlo, our chairperson, writes "Limmud" in Hebrew, using masking tape on trees.

2 p.m: The first guests are arriving. Problems: For some reason, no one wants to share

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a double bed with a total stranger! And only one key per room -- another disaster.

The first workshops begin but hardly anyone is there to attend them. Lesson: Never plan lots of workshops on the first day!

Darkness is approaching and Rabbi Shmuel Segal calls frantically from his car. He's lost, and Shabbat services are to start in 15 minutes.

"Do you have a 'navi' [navigator]?" asks Limmud treasurer Assia Lewin. "Put in Joachimsthalerstrasse 20 ..."

In 15 minutes, the willowy Rabbi Segal arrives with his wife, Batsheva, and their four children. Services start almost immediately. They are packed.

A few hundred feet away, in the "disco," Cantor Yalda Rebling is leading an egalitarian service, which is overflowing. Afterward, one participant comments: Sarah, Rivka, Leah and Rachel -- why not?

A thought occurs to me as I hear Shabbat niggunim -- melodies -- floating out from the two very different venues: This is like the shtetl where my father was born, Luboml, where there were lots of little "shtiblach," congregations, each doing their own thing. And there's a story about one family where everyone had a beautiful voice. People would stroll past their house on Friday night, just to hear them singing at their Shabbat table.

Dear Limmud Diary: You ask why have we made this Limmud in Germany. The simple answer: It feels like a great way to contribute to the blossoming of Jewish life here.

A big step for me because for a long time, I have resisted being part of this world. I've lived in Germany since 1997, came here as a Fulbright scholar. As a journalist, I cultivated a supposedly neutral, observer role. Perhaps I also did not want to truly adopt Germany as a home. And so I forged ties with parties who seldom meet: rabbis who would never talk to each other; Jews who stick to their Russian, German, Persian or Israeli cliques; secular Jews and Orthodox Jews; Zionists and "post-Zionists"; old and young Jews, Jewish professionals and the Jews who love to prod them; halachic Jews and those with a Jewish father only; converts to Judaism and wannabee Jews; and even anti-Semitic Jews.

I did not know it yet, but these swirling constellations began to form a virtual, but not actual, Limmud.

I first heard about Limmud from friends who attended the original event, held annually in England for 27 years now. I finally went for the first time myself to Nottingham in 2005. More than 2,000 people on a college campus over the winter vacation. Hundreds of competing workshops each day. Theology, politics, history, culture, literature, film, music and dance. You run from session to session, you grab a sandwich and eat it while listening. And at the end of the day you collapse. It is a meditation: a total immersion.

I was quite amazed. And a bit afraid. Because I started to feel like I had slipped into Limmud like Alice into the rabbit hole: It's a topsy-turvy world where teachers become students, students become teachers. Boundaries fall away. You see something old in a fresh way and begin to see the timelessness of something "new."

It is addicting, but when you go home, you don't go through withdrawal. Instead you feel some unused muscles have been exercised. And you want to keep it going.

Limmud has become a phenomenon, with events around the world. It's a kind of "uber" movement that gently seeks to bring together Jews of different stripes, even for a few days. It appeals to me because I am an obsessive peacemaker: I don't like to see pointless arguing; I can't stand shouting or its partner -- the failure to hear. It may not yet be time for the lion to lay down with the lamb, but at least one can defuse some tensions and get down to constructive work.

So when Sophie Mahlo, a young attorney here, sent out an "all aboard" e-mail in 2005, I immediately responded. Half a year later, our small group of volunteers put on our first mini-Limmud in Berlin. In two months we crafted a daylong program and then sweated while we waited to see who would sign up. Three hundred people came.

In the spring of 2007, Munich held its own mini-Limmud. Another success. We started raising funds. All these years of trying to get grants for my own work, to no avail. Suddenly we're ticking off generous grants from too many groups to be named here.

Now we are about to see whether Limmud.de, the big event, really works. And we are all sweating. Will Jews from the former Soviet Union really mix with Jews descended from the survivors who settled here after World War II? Will secular and religious Jews mix?

It wasn't easy coming to this day. Over the past year there have been arguments, fruitless meetings, dropouts and tears. Anything that could go wrong did. So, Limmud Diary, when I lay on my camp cot the other night, I was wondering what would break down next. How could a small team of people -- some with fiery tempers, some shy, some with Russian, German or American background, some disorganized and others control freaks -- really pull off such an event?

The big aha is this: Limmud runs itself.

We set up the framework, find the place, urge people to join us, organize a program, financing, food, transportation and security. The participants then make it work.

There were far too few of us volunteers to handle the crowds. Most of us barely made it to two or three workshops. We were too busy getting coffee at midnight for a desperate caffeine addict; fetching our own umbrellas to lend, opening locked doors and setting up equipment; adding workshops to an overfilled schedule; sneaking away on Shabbat to rent a forgotten keyboard for that night's concert; comforting a guest whose lecture hall was empty; smoothing the frayed nerves of a volunteer who was looking like a Jewish version of a Hindu deity, with many arms and legs.

After all the guests were gone, a sense of euphoria buzzed around us together with the occasional mosquito. We toasted each other, and shared our worst and best moments. From the close encounter with a family of wild boars to the guest who verbally attacked another -- against Limmud principles! -- to the moment when a female guest, wrapped in a towel, discovered the shoes of a Chabadnik in what she THOUGHT was her room.

But it's over; we can relax and be happy.

Rrring. "Yes? Oh, you left your laptop? OK. I will check tomorrow morning."

Rrrring: "Hello. Your green dress is still hanging in the closet? Just a minute ..."

**May 19:** Dear Limmud Diary: They loved it! The letters have poured into my mailbox. People want to volunteer. There are rumors about more funding. Maybe we can subsidize more participants next time.

I'm already talking about next time. L'hitraot, Limmud.

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