

## Open Days at the famous Mosque in Berlin

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A view from the cemetery of the minaret of the Mosque from where firing was exchanged between the German and the Russian forces and consequently the minaret was badly damaged.

This beautiful Mosque, built in the heart of Berlin in 1927, is a standing monument of Islamic architecture and the zeal and devotion of members of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement for the cause of Islamic revival in the West.

It was badly damaged in the crossfire and bombing between two armies during the Second World War. It is a miracle that this great monument of Islam survived and stands in one of the beautiful residential areas of Berlin.

My first visit to the Mosque was in 1967, as a guest of the late Imam Maulana Muhammad Yahya Butt. I saw the notorious Checkpoint Charlie and the Berlin Wall. It was like walking on the Pall Mall in London (the road leading to Buckingham Palace) and all of a sudden you have to stop in the middle of the road due to the huge wall in front of you.

Bro. Nasir Ahmad and I arrived in Leipzig, East Germany on Wednesday 9 September 2009 as guests of an exceptionally hospitable East German lady and research scholar, Sister Andrea Lathan, who lives some 200 miles away from Berlin. Our host took us to a restaurant for a *halal* dinner and then to a village hotel for the night, while she stayed with her parents. Next day, she drove us to her residence in the countryside.

It was my first experience of the east side of Germany. Wall or no wall, the gulf is still there in the hearts and minds of East Germans. When I had come to Berlin the first time, I had seen the big wall in front of me and I could not cross Checkpoint Charlie; this time I could feel through our host that a thick smokescreen still divides the East from the West.

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> was taken up with preparing notes and a leaflet for the Open Days and enjoying food and afternoon tea under the shade of a big tree in the lawn of our host.

Friday prayer and the two Open Days (public sessions) on Saturday and Sunday were, to some extent, tiring. I tried to improve whatever little I had learnt of the German language in welcoming and greeting the visitors. Bro. Nasir Ahmad helped me in explaining the

history of the Mosque and replying to the visitors' questions. I must say it was an educative and interesting experience. We enjoyed how a German sees things in his own typical perspective.

While in Leipzig I could see Bro. Nasir Ahmad deep in thought and earnestly praying for Muhammad Ali to arrive for the Open Days talks. I was not nervous, or at least I appeared to remain calm under the circumstances, also praying for the Open Days to be well organized and fruitful.

We breathed a sigh of relief when Muhammad Ali landed at Frankfurt Airport and talked to Sister Andrea while we were still at Leipzig. He reached Berlin by train three hours later. Sister Andrea wanted us to see various places in the surrounding area before going to Berlin but we wanted to be in Berlin as early as possible to help Muhammad Ali in finalizing arrangements for the Open Days. It must be noted that Sister Andrea Lathan not only willingly helped Imam Muhammad Ali but was ready to explain what the Ahmadiyya Movement stands for and the differences between the two sections etc.

We arrived in Berlin on Friday 11 September, just in time for the prayers at the Mosque. Bro. Nasir Ahmad said the call to prayer and Imam Muhammad Ali delivered the sermon in German and led the congregational prayers.

### **Open Days – 12 & 13 September, 2009**

During the two days we got only a few hours sleep. While helping Muhammad Ali in the preparations, my thoughts took me back to the days when we used to do such preparations for *Eid* at the Shah Jehan Mosque in Woking, England. The difference was that in Woking we used to have plenty of volunteers to take up the various duties, but here everything was being done by one person and we were just doing what he asked us to do. All the talking and answering of questions in German was being done by one person – Bro. Muhammad Ali – talking from 11 am. to 5 pm. He was confident and alert and always smiling, even when asked tricky questions.

The programme was to start at 11.00 am. The door bell rang much earlier than I expected and I saw a lot of Germans – young and old, men and women – on the pavement outside the Mosque, queuing, waiting for the gate to open. I realized that we were not in England but in Germany, and on Open Day in the heart of Berlin where no one would like to be late and miss the Open Days at the Mosque.



A view of the audience on the Open Days held on 13th and 14th Sept. 2009.

There were three sessions starting at 11.00 am, 1.00 pm and 3.00 pm each. Each session had a question-answer time. All three sessions were carried out in an impressive manner by Bro. Muhammad Ali.

Bro. Nasir Ahmad and I were reluctant to speak to the public who were outside the Mosque either before or after the lecture, or inside the Mosque. However, after each session I took the opportunity to test a few of my German sentences, and thanks to God, I succeeded in being understood. Some persons, of course, could speak English, and with those we were better able to communicate and therefore answer their questions to the best of our abilities.

Let me mention in brief some of the questions asked:

1. What is the purpose of building a mosque in Germany?
2. Why should one face towards Mecca when saying prayers?
3. What is inside the Kabah, and who first built it?
4. Why is there a *mehrab* in the mosque, and who could lead the prayers?
5. What is written in Arabic calligraphy on the top the *mehrab*, and what does it mean?
6. Why do women stand behind men while praying?
7. Is it necessary for both men and women to cover their heads while praying?
8. What is the purpose of prayer mats in the first three rows in the mosque, while there are carpets all over?
9. Why is there a screen for women at the back of the mosque hall?
10. How do Muslims bury their dead – in a box or otherwise?
11. Is there a cemetery in and around the Mosque?
12. What does the Ahmadiyya Movement stand for?
13. What are the differences between the two sections of the Ahmadiyas?
14. What is the difference between a *khalifa* and an *ameer*?
15. Are Ahmadis, Shias or Sunnis different from mainstream Muslims?
16. What is your view about *Jihad*?
17. How do you explain *Jihadis* and the Taliban style of Islam?
18. What is your belief about the second coming of Jesus Christ and the Mahdi?
19. Who was Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and why did he found the Ahmadiyya Movement?
20. Do you believe him as to be a prophet?
21. What do you think about *Shariah* Law?
22. If you are given the chance to govern an Islamic country, what kind of *Shariah* law will you choose to enforce, keeping in mind the four schools of thought?

These are some of the questions we were asked by Germans who were well educated and inquisitive. Surprisingly, the people who came were students – young and old – professors, doctors and research scholars, who were keen to know everything about this Mosque and Islam.

Some of the questions were asked by two medical doctors from Tehran and Shiraz who came to Berlin to attend a medical conference at a place near to the Mosque.

A lady specially came from Cologne for this day. She was a professor doing some research about Islam. She also knew about the two sections of the Ahmadiyya Movement.



There were six public sessions in all, attended by approximately 700 to 750 persons. The weather on Saturday was sunny, but on Sunday it was cloudy and at times rainy in the afternoon. In spite of the bad

Bro. Nasir Ahmad explaining to a lady from Cologne about the significance of the Qur'anic verse (3:37) written at the top of the *mehrab* (niche) in the Mosque. It is a prophecy revealed to the mother of Lady Mary: "So her Lord accepted her (Mary) with a goodly acceptance and made her grow up a goodly growing, and gave her into the charge of Zacharias. **Whenever Zacharias entered the sanctuary to (see) her**, he found food with her. He said: O Mary, whence comes this to thee? She said: It is from Allah."

weather, people kept on coming.

Bro. Nasir Ahmad and I could only communicate with the visitors in English. Muhammad Ali, however, did an excellent job in fluent German, lecturing and responding during the question and answer sessions inside the Mosque, while we were trying our best with the English-speaking public who stood outside. My job was to initiate the conversation with phrases like "*Guten Tag*" or "*Entschuldigen Sie bitte Sprechen sie Enlich*" (Good day, or Excuse me, please, do you speak English). If the answer was in the affirmative, then rest became easy. Most of the tricky questions were tackled by Bro. Nasir Ahmad. That was how we were busy working outside while more serious questions and answers were being handled inside by Imam Muhammad Ali in German.



Mr. Gunter Paetz, President of the German Foundation for the Conservation of Ancient Monuments (DSD), and Imam Muhammad Ali addressing the audience.





Mr. Paetz replying to some questions about the structure and design of the Mosque.



Bro. Muhammad Ali and Bro. Nasir Ahmad at the book stall outside the Mosque.



Bro. Nasir Ahmad and Mr. Khalid Iqbal with two visiting Iranian doctors.



Bro. Muhammad Ali and Mr. Khalid Iqbal with Mr. Gunter Paetz and Mrs. Anika Probst.



A teen age girl, who aspires to become an architect, sketching the side wall of the Mission House (below left) with patches covering the fired-upon spots. (Below right) is the actual wall.



Map of the cemetery.



A view of the cemetery (across the road on the left side of the Mosque) from where firing was aimed at the soldiers who had taken positions on the minaret of the Mosque during the War.