In 1948, Leonard Bernstein Led This Orchestra of Holocaust Survivors

A 29-year-old Leonard Bernstein heads to Holocaust survivors — members of the 40-voice scanner orchestra — through a tent at a Displaced Persons Camp in Germany. He was 29 years old, and four years after their liberation from the Nazi death camps.

This photograph is on display at the National Museum of American Jewish History in her special exhibition L豆ndred Bernstein: The Power of Music, which ends on September 2, 2018.

Center for Their Writings explained the story behind it, and the lasting impact of the moment in a caption:

We’re standing in front of a large photograph of Leonard Bernstein with a small orchestra of Holocaust survivors where he conducted in a displaced persons camp in May of 1948.

Bernstein was on a conducting trip of Europe that summer, and while he was in Munich he asked to take a short side trip to conduct this small orchestra, to accompany them on stage and music rehearsals and go right to do it.

He returned again to give another concert.

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There’s the fancy concert hall in the background. It was a moment of his long conducting career, that made a huge impact.

In the short film, we see in the exhibition we feature a scene of the survivors who were part of this orchestra, telling the story of Bernstein coming to conduct them.

We have a rig, a rig who worked for oil, who was an American, who tells a story about meeting Bernstein and then watching him take the wings and conduct and play in the concert, and watching the tears streaming down his face as he was playing the piano.

Bernstein never really overcame this experience, and in the end of his life he was writing Holocaust operas.

A transcript of center for their Writings’ Bernstein from an interview with Marilyn Davidson is March, 2018:

A Look at the Multifaceted Life of Leonard Bernstein at National Museum of American Jewish History

What does “kiddish” mean to Bernstein? He doesn’t know. Although he raises the question, he does not answer it. He does share his love for the Hebrew language.

As a child, he learned Hebrew in one of the “kiddush” classes he attended. Bernstein learned how to say “kiddush” in Hebrew, which he didn’t know how to say in Yiddish.

Bernstein was born in 1918 in New York City. He was a prodigy on the piano and by the age of 10, he was performing in public.

He was also a good student and attended Harvard University, where he studied under the famous conductor Arthur Judson.

Bernstein’s first concert in New York was a success and he was immediately invited to perform at Carnegie Hall.

His first major work was a piano concerto, which he composed when he was 18 years old. He was the youngest composer to have a concerto performed at Carnegie Hall.

He went on to compose many other works, including symphonies, operas, and choral works.

Bernstein was also a conductor and founded the New York Philharmonic in 1947, which he led for 22 years. He was also the music director of the New York City Opera for 20 years.

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