

In 1948, Leonard Bernstein Led This Orchestra of Holocaust Survivors

By MERIDEE DUDDLESTON • APR 9, 2018

PROGRAM Arts Desk

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Leonard Bernstein (far right) pictured with members of the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra, May 10, 1948, Munich, Germany

GIFT OF HENNY DURMASHKIN GURKO, MUSEUM OF JEWISH HERITAGE, NY

A 29-year-old Leonard Bernstein stands next to Holocaust survivors—members of the Ex-Concentration Camp Orchestra. They're at a displaced persons camp in Germany in May 1948, four years after their liberation from the Nazi death camps.

This photograph is on display at the National Museum of American Jewish History in the special exhibition [Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music](#), which ends on September 2, 2018.

Curator Ivy Weingram explained the story behind it, and the lasting impact of the moment it captures:

We're standing in front of a large photograph of Leonard Bernstein with a small orchestra of Holocaust survivors whom 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 was asked to take a short side trip to conduct this small orchestra, to accompany them—singers and musicians—and he was glad to do it.

He returned again to give another concert.

It was quite a moving and emotional experience for him. He had not served in World War II, so this is really his first encounter with the tragedies of the Holocaust. He was only 29 years old.

I love this photograph in the exhibition because it's really really haunting. Unlike most photos you see of Leonard Bernstein—jovial, exuberant, on the podium at Carnegie Hall—he looks pretty worn down by this experience, and the musicians are uplit.

There's no fancy concert hall in the background. It was a moment for him, in his long conducting career, that made a huge impact.

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

We have another gentleman, who worked for the UN, who was an American, who tells the story about inviting Bernstein and then watching him from the wings conduct and play in this concert; and watching the tears streaming down his face as he was playing the piano.

Bernstein never really overcame this experience, and at the end of his life he was writing a Holocaust opera.

(A transcript of curator Ivy Weingram's comments from an interview with Meridee Duddleston in March, 2018.)

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jeanettefriedman • 4 months ago

My friend's parents played in that band. Her name is Sonia Beker and she wrote a book about it called Symphony on Fire. There is going to be a presentation in Landsberg in May.

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