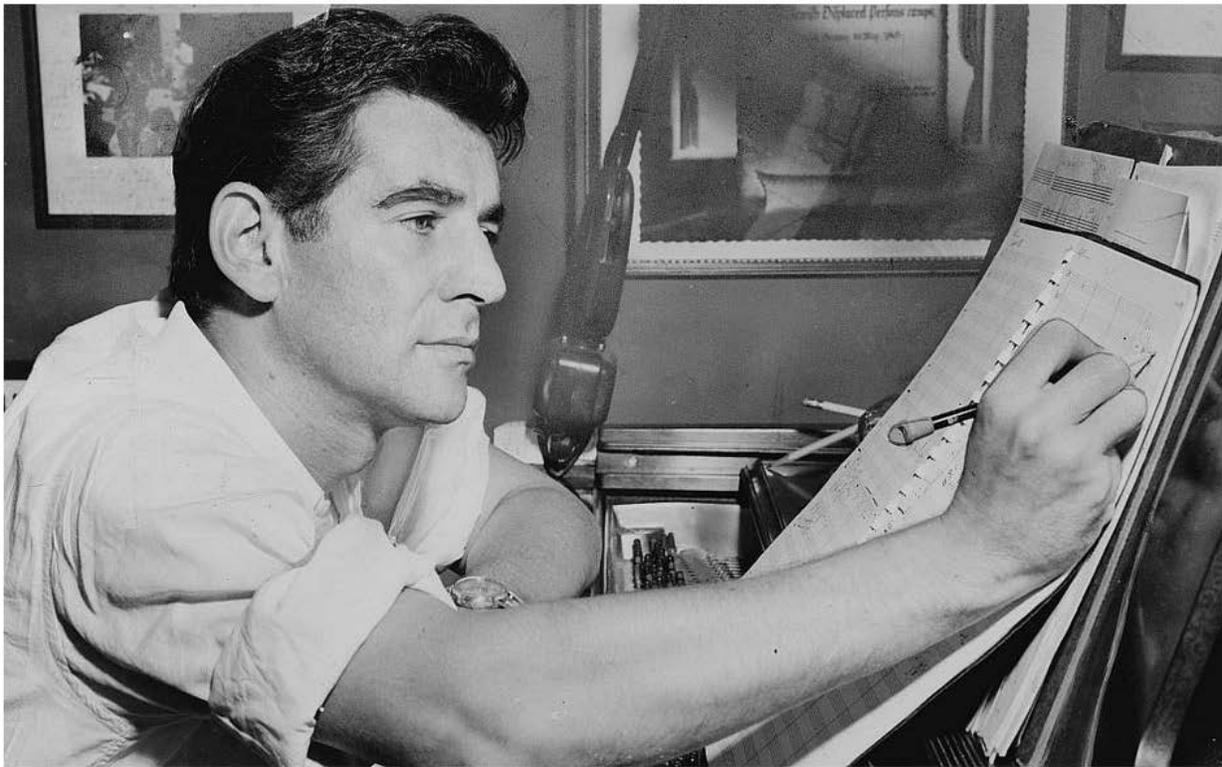


## THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

# For centennial, huge Bernstein exhibit highlights conductor's devotion to Israel

Ahead of his 100th birthday, Philadelphia's National Museum of American Jewish History opens show Friday to celebrate the renowned musician's pride of tribe

By PENNY SCHWARTZ | 16 March 2018, 3:55 pm | 1



The citation presented to Leonard Bernstein by members of the orchestra in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany after he led them in a concert hangs on the wall in this iconic 1955 image of a young Leonard Bernstein, composing in his studio. (AI Ravenna/Library of Congress)

In November 1948, Leonard Bernstein toured war-torn Israel during its War of Independence to perform and conduct a series of concerts with the Israel Philharmonic. The nascent nation was gripped by young Bernstein — and he by it.

It was a mere five years after the American-born son of deeply religious Ukrainian Jewish immigrant parents had catapulted onto the world stage. His famous leap to celebrity came from

stepping in for an ailing Bruno Walter as conductor for the New York Philharmonic, broadcast live over national radio.

Over the next five decades, Bernstein would go on to have a legendary career that included his 1958 appointment as music director of the New York Philharmonic. He was the first American-born and educated conductor to lead a major American orchestra.

He was a larger-than-life charismatic composer, conductor, educator and Broadway luminary, revered for his hugely popular musical “West Side Story.”

Now his story is being told in a massive retrospective exhibit in Philadelphia, [“Leonard Bernstein: The Power of Music.”](#) that opens Friday, March 16, at the National Museum of American Jewish History (NMAJH), where it runs through September 2.

Several years in the making, the exhibit, curated by Ivy Weingram, is taking place during [Leonard Bernstein at 100](#), a two-year global bonanza of concerts, programs and theatrical productions that marks the centennial of Bernstein’s birth, in Lawrence, Massachusetts, on August 25, 1918. He died in October, 1990, at age 72.

The museum brings to the fore less familiar aspects of Bernstein’s life – his Jewish identity, social activism, as well as his lifelong devotion to and passion for Israel and the pivotal role of its orchestra in shaping the country.

Throughout his life, Bernstein credited the music he heard as a child at his family’s Boston synagogue, Congregation Mishkan Tefilah, and the synagogue’s Russian-born, European-trained music director, Solomon Braslavsky, as powerful influences on his musical career.

### **After the battle in Beersheba**

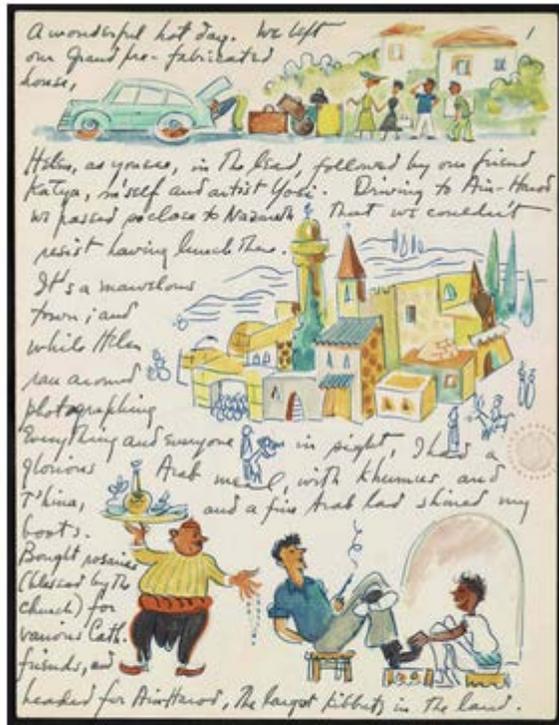
The 1948 tour of Israel was Bernstein’s second visit in less than two years. In 1947, he led the Palestine Philharmonic, as it was then called, in a series of nine concerts. Fast becoming a passionate supporter of the orchestra, his letters to family and colleagues conveyed



Leonard Bernstein conducting. (Paul de Hueck/ The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.)

a man as smitten by the nation and its residents as they were by him.

In a makeshift performance space in a packed amphitheater in Beersheba, where Bernstein and some 35 musicians arrived in an armored bus, he led a memorable concert for soldiers who defied a United Nations order for Israel to withdraw from the desert town that they had captured only weeks earlier.



Yossi Stern illustrated letter from Leonard Bernstein to his mother, Jennie Bernstein, November, 1948. (Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC)

The performance, that included Mozart's K. 450 in B flat, Beethoven's First Piano Concerto, and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," was hailed in the media as historic.

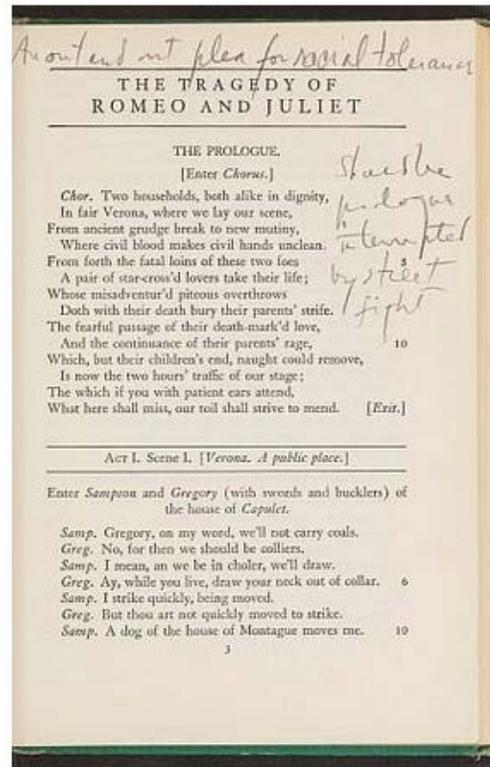
The 30-year-old maestro described his delight with his visit to Israel in a letter home to his mother, Jennie Bernstein, with colorful details about a lunch stop in Nazareth.

"It's a marvelous town... I had a glorious Arab meal with khumus and T'hina... bought rosaries (blessed by the church) for various Cath. friends, and headed for Ain Harod, the largest kibbutz in the land," he wrote.

His animated letter that reflected the maestro's flourish in all things, was embellished with vibrant watercolor illustrations by Yossi Stern, a Hungarian refugee from the Holocaust.

"You get a real sense of [Bernstein's] love of the land and its people and culture," Weingram told The Times of Israel in a recent phone conversation. The illustrations are beautiful, noted Weingram, the museum's associate curator.

The first page of the noteworthy letter, on loan from the Library of Congress, is one of more than 100 fascinating artifacts and other material showcased in the new exhibit.



Leonard Bernstein's annotated copy of Romeo and Juliet, William Shakespeare. (Leonard Bernstein Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress. By permission of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.)

The 2,400 square foot exhibition boasts archival photographs, Bernstein's piano, his conducting suit, recordings and filmed interviews with Bernstein, and others. Personal items include the mezuzah that hung in his studio, the Hebrew prayer book he traveled with, his wedding *ketubah* [Jewish wedding contract] from his marriage to Felicia Cohn Montealegre and the Talmud given to him by his father, Samuel J. Bernstein.



Leonard Bernstein with his parents, Jennie and Samuel Bernstein, circa 1921. (Leonard Bernstein Collection, Library of Congress, Music Division)

A highlight of the show is an annotated copy of “Romeo and Juliet” with notes by Bernstein and choreographer Jerome Robbins that offers glimpses of their early thoughts on transforming the Shakespeare classic into a modern-day plea for racial tolerance, according to the NMAJH.

For Weingram, one of the most stirring displays features a program and related items from a concert Bernstein conducted of Holocaust survivors in a displaced persons camp in May 1948. The concert took place outside of Munich, where Bernstein was traveling on a European tour.

There's a short film with testimonies from some of the musicians produced by the museum with the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, as well as a citation that the musicians presented to Bernstein.

“Museum visitors will find an individual who expressed the restlessness, anxiety, fear, and hope of an American Jew living through World War II and the Holocaust, Vietnam, and turbulent social change — what he referred

to as his ‘search for a solution to the 20th-century crisis of faith,’” the museum wrote about the exhibit.

### **Bernstein, through the frame of his Judaism**

The exhibit is a brilliant lens to view Bernstein's life, according to his son, Alexander Bernstein.

As part of the Bernstein at 100 celebration, Alexander Bernstein and his sisters, Jamie Bernstein and Nina Bernstein Simmons, have been traveling to scores of Bernstein programs across the country and world.

“What a ride it's been,” he said with enthusiasm, speaking with a tone and cadence that could easily be mistaken for his father's deep and resonant voice.

People who have met his father or been influenced by his work are eager to share their stories, Bernstein told The Times of Israel in a phone conversation.

After one program in Raleigh, North Carolina, he met a veteran Israeli soldier who was at the 1948 concert in Beersheba. “It was amazing to talk with someone who was there,” Bernstein said.



A young Leonard Bernstein at the piano. (Courtesy of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.)

Bernstein, who helped the museum gather material, said he is eager for the opening.

“My sisters and I are conscious of bringing our father’s legacy to a new generation, and the museum is doing a fantastic job doing that,” Bernstein said in a museum press announcement.

A full array of Philadelphia programs includes The Jamie Bernstein Takeover, a five-day event in April that includes music, film and conversation with the conductor’s daughter, in partnership with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Plans for the exhibit to tour other locations have not yet been announced.

Among other items that illustrate the elder Bernstein’s relationship with Israel is a record album cover of the 1967 Mt. Scopus concert Bernstein led a month after the Six Day War.

Notably, Bernstein conducted the Israel Philharmonic in 25 different seasons, including in the US and Europe, Weingram told The Times of Israel. He also brought the New York Philharmonic to Israel.

Only his roles with the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, and the Berkshire Music Center at Tanglewood rival for his much-in-demand time, according to information provided by the museum.



Young Leonard Bernstein composing. (Courtesy of The Leonard Bernstein Office, Inc.)

Bernstein's lifelong relationship with Israel reflected his boundless approach to his life as a musician, said Erica K. Argyropoulos, whose doctoral dissertation explored Bernstein's deep ties with his faith and Israel.

A man of many talents who wanted to "do it all," his strong Jewish identity informed his life's work, said Argyropoulos, now the music librarian at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

"His deep commitment to Israel was a profound means by which he nourished this intimate part of himself," she wrote in an email.