

What's a Norwegian Protestant doing singing for pope in a synagogue?

NEW YORK - On Fridays and Saturdays, Daryl Henricksen, a Protestant, sings a cappella, in Hebrew, at the historic Park East Synagogue in New York. On Saturday evenings and Sundays, he's a member of the mixed adult choir and the cantor for four Masses at Resurrection Catholic Church in Rye, N.Y.

Rarely has there been any crossover - until April 18, when he sang for Pope Benedict XVI and Rabbi Arthur Schneier at a brief prayer service.

"It was a powerful, heady experience and very emotional, very surreal" he said after the service at Park East Synagogue on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

"The thing that is difficult for me to wrap my head around," he said, is that the pope, 81, and the rabbi, 78, are close in age and that as youngsters "they were at opposite ends of the spectrum of the Holocaust."

"Now they are at the peak of their religions and they are coming together on a world platform. It's such an extraordinary gift for the two of them to have this moment and for the world to experience it," he said in an interview with Catholic News Service.

The Austrian-born Rabbi Schneier and his family were sent to a ghetto in Budapest, Hungary, in 1938. He escaped the Holocaust and later emigrated to the United States in 1947 and has led the Park East Synagogue congregation since 1962.

In 1939, German-born Joseph Ratzinger, the future pope, was at a minor seminary when he, like other young students, was automatically enrolled in the Hitler Youth program, but he soon stopped going to meetings. He was conscripted into the army and, as the war drew to a close in 1945, deserted his unit and returned home. When the U.S. military arrived, he was arrested with others who had served in the army and placed in a prisoner-of-war camp for a few months.

He returned to the seminary late in 1945 and was ordained a priest six years later.

Henricksen is of Norwegian descent. He was raised a Protestant by his mother.

He is a bass-baritone who has sung in the chorus of the Metropolitan Opera for 12 years. "I'm fortunate at 51 to make my living as a professional musician," he said.

Describing a career that combines secular music with the music of two religions, he said, "It's clear that this is why I have this gift. For me, personally and spiritually, I am where I am supposed to be, doing what I am supposed to do, and I am grateful."

Henricksen said he shook the pontiff's hand.

"He took my hand and looked into my eyes. I was kind of blown away. And then it was over," he said.