

Heritage highlighted at poetry event

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SLEEPY HOLLOW — Poets and storytellers from different religious and cultural backgrounds came together yesterday to read from their works and to acknowledge a historic time when Jews, Muslims and Christians lived peacefully side by side and the arts thrived.

The readings, at the Hudson Valley Writers' Conference in Sleepy Hollow, were part of the two-week Spirit of Andalusia festival, which honors the medieval age of Andalusia, Spain, that produced great art and architecture, and progress in medicine and mathematics.

During that time, poetry played a prominent role in the lives of all Andalusians, inspiring festival organizers to include a readings event in their lineup of activities.

"Poetry in Andalusian time was their lifeblood, an expression of love and beauty," said Salem Mikdadi, a board member of the Irvington-based Center for Jewish-Christian-Muslim Understanding, which sponsored the event.

The first poet to read from his works, Matthew Shenoda, used vivid imagery to depict the Nile Valley and included a poem about the diaspora of his Coptic ancestors in Egypt. He also read a piece about the slaying of a fellow Coptic Christian days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Sholeh Wolpé, who was born in Iran, read poems about violence against both Palestinians and Israelis and a humorous piece about racial profiling.

Herbert Hadad of Pocantico Hills read essays reflective of his Syrian-Jewish heritage, and about the passing of that heritage to his children.

Mansour Ajami read Andalusian poems in Arabic and played the oud, a half-pear-shaped string instrument that is the ancestor of the European lute.

As a place where Muslims, Jews and Christians lived together in harmony, Andalusia could serve as a model today, organizers and participants said.

"I think the festival is a wonderful thing because these are exactly the voices we need to hear at this moment," said Sara Kelsey of Dobbs Ferry, who attended yesterday's event.

More events are planned through Sunday, For details, visit www.cjcmu.org or call 914-591-8194.