

## A family's work to restore violins saved from the Holocaust comes to the Sydney stage

By Siobhan Moylan

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Amnon Weinstein was working in his father Moshe's workshop in Tel Aviv when a young man brought in a violin for repair with ashes inside its case.

It was the first time he had encountered a violin dated from the Holocaust. Finding and restoring objects like it soon became his life's work, culminating in the Violins of Hope collection.



Amnon Weinstein in his workshop in Israel.

*CREDIT: MOIRA BLUMENTHAL PRODUCTIONS*

“It took me a long time to work with this violin, it scared me because I knew it was played on the way to the gas chamber, but I knew it must play again,” says Weinstein.

Weinstein and his father’s efforts to restore the culturally and historically significant objects are the subject of the play *Stories from the Violins of Hope*, which opens in Sydney at the end of the month.

At 83, Weinstein is still at work on the project with his son Avshalom.

He’s unable to make the journey from Israel to see the play about his life in Sydney, but says, “I am so happy that these stories are travelling all that way. After my father died I felt I had one choice and that was to have these instruments played. Violins cannot be left as furniture, they must have life and be the voice for those who lost theirs.”



A violin with a Star of David carved into its back from the Violins of Hope collection.

*CREDIT: MOIRA BLUMENTHAL PRODUCTIONS*

The so-called Violins of Hope have featured in books, print, film and television and now the stage, the play adapted from a short film that screened at the United Nations.

For decades, the violins hung mute in the workshop that Weinstein inherited from his father. Some had been rescued from musicians who could not bear to play German instruments due to their association with the Nazis; others came from survivors who arrived in Israel with little more than their violins.

“My father would pay tremendous amounts for these violins. Many were in terrible condition but he was just trying to support these broken people and couldn’t bear to see these beautiful instruments thrown out,” Weinstein says.

Written by LA-based author and playwright Lisa Pearl Rosenbaum and Ronda Spinak (Artistic Director at The Braid in LA), based on conversations Rosenbaum had with Weinstein, and with live music curated and performed by Dr Noreen Green (founder and conductor of the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony), the play interweaves music and stories of lives lost during the war.

Rosenbaum says there’s a universality in the stories that will touch a wide audience: “I chose some stories because they involve non-Jews taking part in rescuing these violins.”



Violinist Ben Adler performs in *Stories from the Violins of Hope*.

*CREDIT: MOIRA BLUMENTHAL PRODUCTIONS*

One such story is about a violin that was passed out of a train window by a Jewish person bound for a concentration camp. Knowing he would not survive, he entrusted it to a French railway worker, who kept it safe for the rest of his life. Years later his son brought the violin to Weinstein.

“I think that as a Jew, that makes me feel comforted. And I think it’s also important for people to hear that this is not just a Jewish story,” Rosenbaum says.

Some violins were played by humble klezmers (folk musicians) in Eastern Europe, others by the finest virtuosos in the world’s best orchestras. One was played by a boy who used its case to smuggle explosives into a Nazi compound. Another was played by a father who busked in a Ukrainian ghetto to raise money to feed his family.

The production is bringing a Violin of Hope belonging to Jewish ballerina and Holocaust survivor Joyce Vanderveen to Sydney. It will be played by Sydney violinist Ben Adler.

Weinstein says the Violins of Hope collection, including Vanderveen’s instrument, has only just begun. “We have received more than 100; I have actually lost count now. We always welcome more violins, maybe after the Australian show we will receive more.”

This is a family intent on telling stories that must never be forgotten.

***Stories from the Violins of Hope* is at Bondi Pavilion from May 31-June 18.**