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A refrain of 'never again': Violins of Hope exhibit arrives in Elgin, showcasing Holocaust-era instruments



Violins of Hope, instruments played by Jewish musicians before and during the Holocaust, will be on display through August at the Gail Borden Library in Elgin. (Rick West | Staff Photographer)

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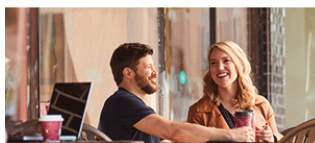


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Bringing a message to never forget the past, the Violins of Hope arrived in Elgin Monday.

The project is a series of concerts and exhibits based on a collection of string instruments that were played by Jewish musicians before and during the Holocaust. Each one was carefully restored by the father-and-son team of Amnon and Avshalom "Avshi" Weinstein in Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Avshi Weinstein was at the Gail Borden Library in Elgin to help unveil the exhibit Monday and talk about the history surrounding the violins.

"We have to make sure people remember," Weinstein said. "Hopefully we learn and we never make the same mistakes again."

It seemed predestined that Weinstein would one day help keep that history alive. His mother's family was part of the resistance against the Nazis in what was then eastern Poland. In fact, his maternal grandfather and his two great-uncles were the inspiration for the film "Defiance" starring Daniel Craig and Liev Schreiber.

"I grew up with the history of the Holocaust all around me," Weinstein said.

Weinstein said the collection started when his grandfather Moshe bought instruments from members of the Palestine Orchestra, which is now the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra.

"After the war, nobody wanted to touch anything German," he said. His grandfather bought what he could, knowing he wouldn't be able to resell them but understanding their significance.

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After word got out about the collection, other instruments were donated or bought from Holocaust survivors or their families. They now have about 100 instruments, 10 of which are on display at the library in Elgin. The exhibit there will run through August.

"The majority of these are very, very simple instruments," Weinstein said. "The Nazis knew what good art was and confiscated those."

Regardless of how simple, each instrument is painstakingly restored by Weinstein and his father.


"We try to bring them all to life, to bring them to the top of what they can do," he said. And while the violins are not on par with a Stradivarius, the history they bring is just as valuable.

"When a person plays on an instrument for a long enough time, he leaves kind of a signature," he said. "We can still have a little bit of what those people had when they played the instruments."

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JCC Chicago brought the exhibit to Illinois. About 70 of the violins will be featured in performances, demonstrations, lectures and exhibits throughout the state until August.

Jill Kahan, marketing communications program manager at JCC Chicago, said it's the largest Violins of Hope exhibit in terms of scope, size and duration. Exhibitions and concerts with the instruments have toured the world since 2008.

She said it was important to JCC Chicago leaders to do more than house the exhibit at their offices.

"We're giving it to the community so that people can go to places near them to be able to see them in action," she said.

Other local stops on the tour include concerts with members of the Elgin Symphony Orchestra performing on Violins of Hope May 18 and 20 at the Hemmens Cultural Center and a June 20 concert by the Northbrook Symphony Orchestra. Other exhibits will open later in the summer in Schaumburg and Arlington Heights. For a full schedule, visit www.jccchicago.org/violins-of-hope/.

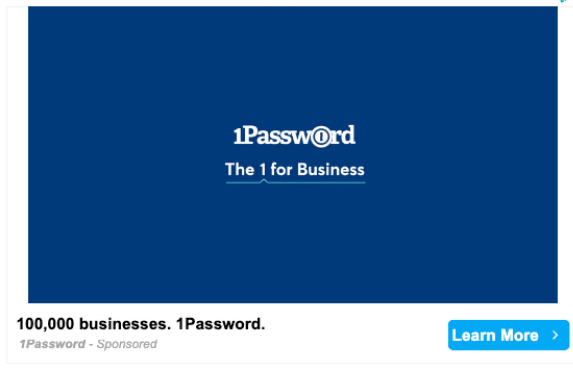
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Eric Pidluski of Chamber Music on the Fox was part of a quartet playing instruments from the Violins of Hope project Monday night at the library. The violin Pidluski was playing was originally owned by a prisoner who played in the men's orchestra at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

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"It's an honor that we get to play these instruments that have gone through so much," he said.

"We're living in a time where antisemitism and Holocaust denial are on the rise, and I think it's even more important to be able to share this and what it represents."

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