

COURIER-NEWS

[ELGIN COURIER-NEWS](#)

Instruments owned and played by Holocaust victims now part of the Violins of Hope exhibit at Elgin library

By [Gloria Casas](#)

Elgin Courier-News

•

Apr 11, 2023 at 3:52 pm



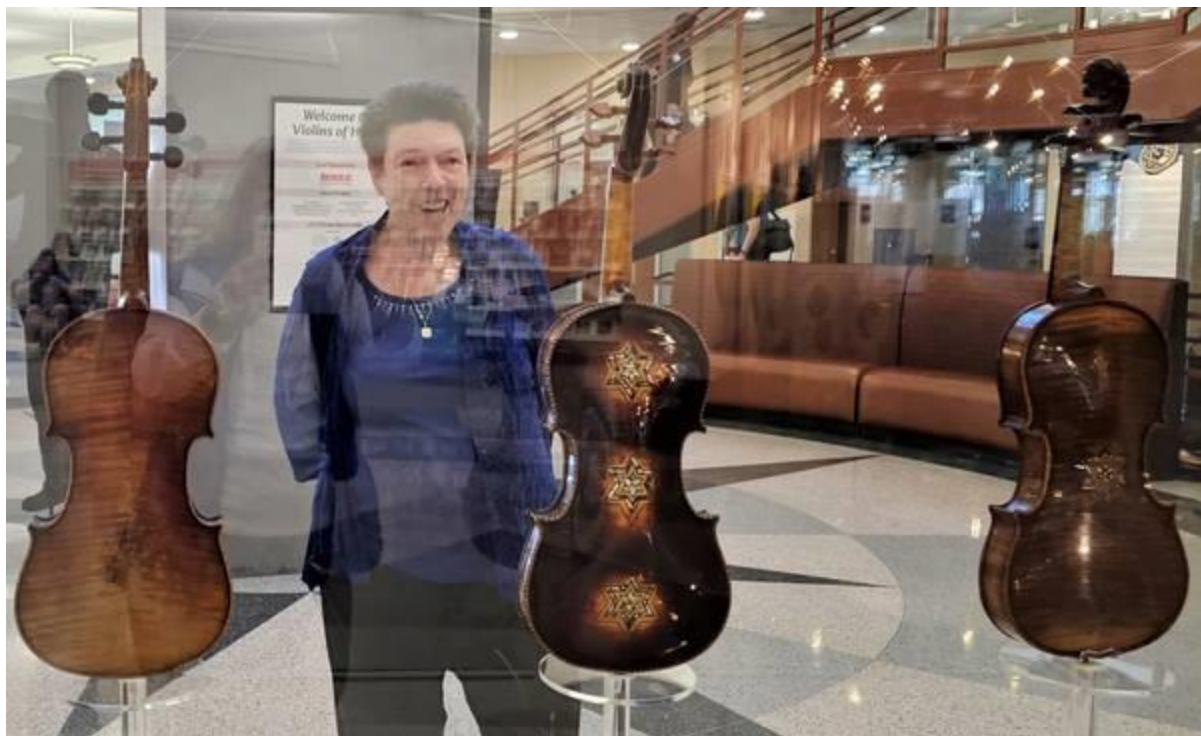
Violins of Hope, a collection of instruments once owned by people who did in the Holocaust, is on display at Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin through the end of September. Several programs and concerts are scheduled as part of the exhibit. (Gloria Casas / The Courier-News)

Ten heirloom violins played by musicians before and during the Holocaust, instruments that symbolize the strength, resilience and hope of the Jewish people, are part of a traveling exhibit on display at Elgin's Gail Borden Public Library.

Violins of Hope was cofounded by father-and-son violin makers Amnon and Avshalom Weinstein, who collected and refurbished dozens of violins and musical instruments that Jews brought with them when they were transported to Nazi concentration camps.



“When I think about this exhibit, you can’t help but think of the people who owned the violins,” said Ilene Uhlmann, director of community engagement for Jewish Community Centers of Chicago, or JCC, which is hosting Violins of Hope. “What I hope will happen is these violins will give a voice to people who had no voice. When you play those violins, you bear witness to the fact these people existed.”



Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein, of Congregation Kneseth Israel in Elgin, looks at the instruments that are part of Violins of Hope exhibit at the Gail Borden

Public Library in Elgin. Congregation Kneseth was one of library's partners in bringing the exhibit to Elgin. (Gail Borden Public Library / HANDOUT/Gail Borden Public Library)

Uhlmann contacted Gail Borden library officials about putting the instruments on display, and they in turn reached out to local organizations to set up concerts, lectures, programs and other activities centered on the exhibit, which will continue through September.

Uhlmann said viewing and playing the violins is an emotional experience. A musician who played one for a seder for Russian Holocaust survivors at the JCC last week was so moved by the experience that his hands “literally shook” as he began to perform, she said.

The exhibit opened Tuesday and docent-led tours will start Thursday. It will be set up in the lobby of the downtown Elgin library, 270 N. Grove Ave., through the end of May before moving to an upstairs location through September.

JCC staff delivered the violins Monday, said Denise Raleigh, division chief of public relations and communications.

“It came with a sense of excitement and honor that was just inspiring,” Raleigh said. “As we put them into the cases, it was inspiring to think of what these violins have been through and the hands they have passed through.”



Violin makers Amnon and Avshalom Weinstein created the Violins of Hope exhibit by collecting and refurbishing dozens of violins and other instruments that Jews brought with them to Nazi concentration camps. The instruments can be viewed at the Gail Borden Public Library in Elgin. (Gloria Casas / The Courier-News)

The stories behind the violins are very moving, Uhlmann said.

“They speak to hope, resilience and resistance. I hope people hearing these violins, seeing these violins and hearing the stories can look at one another as human beings and realize all human lives are valuable and precious. I can’t think of a time when we needed that kind of message more,” she said.

A grand opening event to be held at 7 p.m. Monday, April 24, will feature an appearance by Avshalom Weinstein, a performance by the Chamber on the Fox and the recitation of an original poem written by Elgin poet laureate Gareth Mann.

A series of musical performances will also be held, including a concert by The Elgin Symphony Orchestra with guest conductor Matthew Sheppard at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, May 20, at the Hemmens Cultural Center of Elgin, 45 Symphony Way. (Go to www.elginsymphony.org/concerts-tickets for ticket information.)

Gail Borden library partnered with the Seigle Foundation, Elgin-based Congregation Kneseth Israel, the Elgin Symphony Orchestra, Elgin Historical Society, School District U-46, the city of Elgin and Chamber Music on the Fox on the exhibit and programs.

“The ESO is proud to be involved in a community-wide collaboration,” said Marc Thayer, CEO of Elgin Symphony Orchestra. “Violins of Hope aims to bring awareness and insight by telling the stories of resilience, resistance and unity through the power of a musical experience. Rather than Holocaust statistics that, in their enormity, can be difficult to fathom, Violins of Hope uses the violins and the music to explain the sufferings and hope of Jewish people.”

JCC is planning to bring similar exhibits to Joliet, Aurora, Arlington Heights and Schaumburg over the next few months. Violins of Hope then moves to Pittsburgh in September.

Among the programs being presented in April and May, all of which will be at the main library unless otherwise noted, include:

- Historian Richard Renner will talk about “Luminaries: Distinctive Lives of Elgin’s Jewish Experience,” exploring the city’s Jewish families, culture and 130-year-old Congregation Kneseth Israel, at 7 p.m. Thursday, April 27.
- The film “Defiant Requiem,” the true story of a conductor in the Terezín concentration camp who taught 150 fellow prisoners to perform Verdi’s Requiem, will be shown at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 2.
- South Elgin High School drama students will present Elgin native Phyllis Zimmler Miller’s play, “The Thin Edge of the Wedge,” featuring first-person accounts of Holocaust survivors in their own words, at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday, May 9.



Yaacov Zimmerman's 1929 five Stars of David violin was included in the Violins of Hope exhibit when it was on display in Northbrook. (Stacey Wescott / Chicago Tribune)

- The Elgin Symphony Orchestra's string quartet will perform using the Violins of Hope, and accompanied by music students from area high and middle schools, on Thursday, May 18, at the Hemmens Cultural Center of Elgin, 45 Symphony Way.
- James A. Grymes, author of "Violins of Hope," will speak about the instruments and the collection at 2 p.m. Saturday, May 20.
- The Elgin Symphony Orchestra will present music using the Violins of Hope with guest conductor Matthew Sheppard at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 20, at the Hemmens Cultural Center of Elgin, 45 Symphony Way. The concert will include the "Theme from Schindler's List" by John Williams and music by Mahler and Mendelssohn.
- Congregation Kneseth Israel will hold a program on the music and artists who perished in the Holocaust, including Gideon Klein and Ilse Weber, and featuring Andre Previn's Clarinet Quintet, a contemporary work composed as a living memorial to the Terezin concentration camp musicians, at 3 p.m. Sunday, May 21, 330 Division St. Free tickets are available at www.eventbrite.com/e/lost-voices-tickets-601876046457.

Gloria Casas is a freelance reporter for The Courier-News.