

## Amnon Weinstein, Who Restored Violins From the Holocaust, Dies at 84

Michael S. Rosenwald :



Amnon Weinstein, an Israeli luthier who restored violins belonging to Jews during the Holocaust so that musicians around the world could play them in hopeful, melodic tributes to those silenced in Nazi death camps, died on March 4 in Tel Aviv. He was 84.

His death, at a hospital, was confirmed by his son Avshalom Weinstein.

Mr. Weinstein was the founder of [Violins of Hope](#), an organization that provides the violins he restored to orchestras for concerts and educational programs commemorating the Holocaust. The instruments have been played in dozens of cities worldwide, including Berlin, at an event marking the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp.

“Violins of Hope, it’s like a huge forest of sounds,” he said in a 2016 [PBS documentary](#). “Each sound is standing for a boy, a girl and men and women that will never talk again. But the violins, when they are played on, will speak for them.”

There are more than 60 Holocaust-era violins in his collection.

Some belonged to Jews who carried them in suitcases to concentration camps, and who were then forced to play them in orchestras as prisoners marched to the gas chambers. Others were played to pass the time in Jewish ghettos. One was tossed from a train to a railway worker by a man who knew his fate.

“In the place where I now go, I don’t need a violin,” the man told the worker, in Mr. Weinstein’s telling. “Here, take my violin so it may live.”



Mr. Weinstein in his Tel Aviv workshop. He himself was the son of a violin repairman. Credit...Menahem Kahana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

The son of a violin repairman, Mr. Weinstein worked in a cramped and dusty workshop in the basement of an apartment building on King Solomon Street in Tel Aviv.

“Walking in there was like stepping in time,” James A. Grymes, a University of North Carolina-Charlotte music professor who [wrote a book](#) about Violins of Hope, said in an interview. “It really felt like you were in Stradivarius’s workshop — the smells of varnish, there’s parts of violins everywhere. It’s like he was the Willy Wonka of the violin.”

One afternoon in the 1980s, a man with a prisoner identification tattoo on his arm arrived with a beaten up violin that had, like him, survived Auschwitz.

“The top of the violin was damaged from having been played in the rain and snow,” Mr. Grymes wrote in “Violins of Hope: Violins of the Holocaust — Instruments of Hope and Liberation in Mankind’s Darkest Hour” (2014). “When Amnon took the instrument apart, he discovered ashes inside that he could only assume to be fallout from the crematoria at Auschwitz.”

Mr. Weinstein, who had lost hundreds of members of his extended family in the Holocaust, nearly turned the man away; working on such an instrument seemed too emotionally fraught. But he ultimately repaired the violin, and the man gave it to his grandson to play.

Mr. Weinstein didn’t reflect much about working on Holocaust-era violins again until the late 1990s, when he was training his son to become a luthier. The experience made him

reflect on the role of violins in Jewish culture, from the shtetls of Eastern Europe to klezmer bands to Itzhak Perlman's soaring concertos.

"It was kind of a must for the young generation to learn to play the violin," he said in the PBS documentary. "And when you have a violin, Friday or Saturday evening, always somebody was taking it and playing on it."

During a radio interview, he asked listeners to bring him instruments connected to the Holocaust. Soon, families began showing up at his workshop with violins that had been stored away in attics and cellars, each with its own haunting story.

Mr. Weinstein was especially shaken by those recovered from concentration camps after the Allied invasion of Germany in 1945.

"This was the last human sound that all of those people heard, the violin," he said in a 2016 radio [interview](#) on WKSU in Ohio. "You cannot use the name beauty. But this was the beauty of this time, these violins."



In his early 20s, Mr. Weinstein moved to Cremona, Italy — a city long known for its master luthiers — to hone his craft of violin making. Credit...Menahem Kahana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Amnon Weinstein was born on July 21, 1939, in Mandatory Palestine and grew up in Tel Aviv. His father, Moshe Weinstein, was a musician and violin repairman. His mother, Golda (Yevirovitz) Weinstein, was a pianist and a secretary in her husband's workshop. They had immigrated from Lithuania in 1938, just as the persecution of Jews was escalating in Germany.

Mr. Weinstein grew up helping in his father's violin shop. In his early 20s, he moved to Cremona, Italy — a city long known for its master luthiers — to study violin making. He

continued his training in Paris under [Étienne Vatelot](#), one of the world's most renowned luthiers. In 1975, he married Assaela Bielski Gershoni, whose father was a Jewish resistance fighter during World War II who was made famous in the 2008 film "[Defiance](#)."

After his father's death in 1986, Mr. Weinstein took over the family violin shop; he started Violins of Hope a decade later. The first concerts with the violins in the collection took place in Turkey and Israel in 2008. Others followed in Switzerland, Spain and Mexico, as well as in Ohio, North Carolina and Virginia.

"Each concert is a victory," he would often say.

Musicians, especially Jewish ones, have described playing violins from the collection as a soul-stirring experience.

"It's emotional for me because I'm not there to play this violin, I'm there to let it speak," [Niv Ashkenazi](#), a violinist who recorded an [album](#) featuring an instrument from the collection, said in an interview. "Our jobs as musicians is to just let these violins shine through."

In addition to his son Avshalom, who plans to continue the Violins of Hope project, Mr. Weinstein is survived by his wife; two other children, Merav Vonshak and Yehonatan Weinstein; and seven grandchildren.

In 2016, Mr. Weinstein was awarded the [Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany](#), one of the country's highest honors.

During the award ceremony, Germany's foreign minister at the time, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, spoke directly to Mr. Weinstein.

"A human soul lies behind each of your priceless violins," he said. "A human who was persecuted, tormented, silenced by unimaginable violence and cruelty."

Mr. Steinmeier spoke about the man who had tossed his violin from the train. He described a prisoner playing a violin in Auschwitz.

"Each violin represents a person, Amnon," he said. "And when your violins play, they represent six million people."