

Violins of Hope Cleveland: a visit to the Maltz Museum exhibition

by Mike Telin and Daniel Hathaway



As you enter the Violins of Hope exhibit at the Maltz Museum for Jewish Heritage, the first thing you see is a wall legend:

“Living Witnesses from the Lost World of Jewish Europe, 1933-1945

Embedded in Jewish culture for centuries before World War II, the

violin assumed extraordinary importance during the Holocaust. The violin released some Jews from captivity under the Nazis while sparing others’ lives in ghettos and concentration camps. For many, it provided a semblance of humanity in perilous hours, and for one a violin even helped avenge murdered family members. The instruments in Violins of Hope are living memorials to all who perished, but during the Holocaust they represented belief in a future in which music, life and beauty would persist.”



The exhibit, which runs through January 3, 2016, includes nineteen violins lovingly restored by Israeli luthier Amnon Weinstein, who brought them back to life as a living memorial to those who perished in the Nazi Holocaust — including some 400 of his own family members.

Entering the exhibit hall, you’re immediately struck by the pods displaying violins that belonged to professionals and amateurs,

classical, folk and Klezmer musicians, as well as to adults and children who used them — sometimes without strings — to beg on the streets of Europe’s ghettos. The subdued lighting of the exhibition room points up the brightly-lighted displays, succinctly described by the text on the walls and on identifying tags for each violin.



The exhibit is divided into seven sections: A mural wall featuring Amnon Weinstein; The Life Harmonious: Europe before World War II; Discordant Notes: The Rise of Anti-semitism; Cacophony in Captivity: Ghettos and Labor Camps; Orchestrating Annihilation: Concentration Camps and Extermination Centers; The Stage-Set City: Theresienstadt; Measures of Defiance: Jewish Resistance; and Coda: After the Holocaust. Historical photographs enhance the displays, and a mini-theater features a video of Cleveland Orchestra music director Franz Welser-Möst speaking about the Violins of Hope Cleveland project.



On the day of our visit, the room was filled with junior high and high school students led by docents in small groups who moved randomly from one section to the other as space became available. While the exhibit is most logically visited in chronological order, it works just as well wherever you begin your engagement and wherever you choose to go next. Either way, you're certain to be affected — this is as powerful an experience as you are ever likely to have in a museum.



That experience is heightened by affecting personal stories. Some have a local connection — like Rosemary Goldschmidt, who escaped Berlin in 1941 with her flutist husband, Günther. They changed their names to George and Rosemarie Goldsmith, and after taking a position with the St. Louis Symphony, Rosemarie joined the violin section of The Cleveland Orchestra in 1967. She retired in 1981.

The Nazi's "model" concentration camp at Theresienstadt (Terezín) has recently been highlighted in programs by CityMusic Cleveland (who performed *Brundibár*, the children's opera written and performed there). The scene of an astonishing spate of musical creativity and performance during its three and a half years in existence, the Third Reich bamboozled the rest of the world into believing that its inmates were

leading an idyllic life before sending nearly 20,000 of them to Auschwitz. A clip from a famous Nazi propaganda film that shows the Theresienstadt String Orchestra performing part of Pavel Haas's *Study for String Orchestra* documents this notorious lie.



At least one Jewish violinist unwittingly carried a hidden message of hate inside his instrument. In 1936, a Nazi-sympathetic luthier charged with repairing the violin pencilled a disturbing inscription inside before putting it back together.



The message of hope that Weinstein's restored violins represents is reflected in his own counter-inscription: inside a violin bearing an ornate Star of David on its back, he wrote this dedication: "to all young musicians whose music was lost in the Holocaust." Shlomo

Mintz played this instrument in Auschwitz in the documentary *Amnon's Journey*, leading Weinstein to declare, “The performance of [the] maestro...in that cursed place signifies to me the victory over total evil.”



Violins are not just historical objects content to sit in display cases. While the instruments are in residence in Cleveland, they're regularly being played — by members of The Cleveland Orchestra and the Israel Philharmonic, and by students and faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music (like James Thompson, below) and Baldwin Wallace University. Thanks to Amnon Weinstein, their voices still sing out today.



Photos by Anthony Gray and Sam Fryberger courtesy of the Maltz Museum. Photo of the Heil Hitler violin courtesy of Amnon & Avshalom Weinstein.

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