

It's a frosty morning at City Hall on London's South Bank on January 26 this year. A distinguished group, including the capital's mayor, Boris Johnson, and the mayors of all 32 London boroughs, has gathered to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.

Concert violinist Charlie Siem places a violin decorated with a Star of David beneath his chin and plays No. 2 Nigun from the "Baal Shem Suite" by Jewish-Swiss composer Ernest Bloch. The violin seems to sob its emotional melody, the notes fading away across the River Thames. For 60 seconds there is respectful silence. Then rapturous applause.

The violin is one of eight that Israeli violin-maker Amnon Weinstein has brought to the event, from a collection of 24 he has spent 15 years finding and restoring. All of them were played by Jews in the ghettos of Europe, at concentration camps such as Buchenwald and Dachau, and in hiding in the forests of eastern Europe. Their haunting melodies were among the last sounds heard

(whose name he has long forgotten) brought it to his Tel Aviv workshop saying he'd played it at Auschwitz as people walked to the gas chambers.

"We were forced to play," he told Amnon. "The music slowed the prisoners down and calmed them so the Nazis could count them easily."

The man's music meant he was spared the chambers, but he hadn't used the violin since. Now he wanted the instrument restored so his grandson could learn to play it.

Amnon was reluctant to touch it. "It was breaking a taboo," he remembers. "We never talked about the Holocaust at home when I was growing up."

Amnon's father Moshe was a concert violinist and skilled restorer. He had emigrated to Israel from Vilna, Poland, in 1936, leaving most of a large extended family behind. When Amnon, born in 1938, asked his mother Golda where they were, she would show him photographs of the Vilna ghetto.

"That's where," she would say, her eyes filling with tears.

"The violin music slowed the prisoners down so the Nazis could count them easily"

by thousands and they have witnessed unimaginable horrors. But they also represent amazing stories of courage. He calls them the Violins of Hope.

Amnon first held a violin known to have been part of the Holocaust more than 40 years ago. A South African man

"Four of us sat around the table for family holidays like Passover," says Amnon. "But we were surrounded by 400 ghosts."

Moshe showed Amnon how to repair the violins that passed through his workshop and, in time, Amnon became a restorer of international repute.



Charlie Siem coaxes heart-rending melody from one of Amnon's violins at City Hall, London

Amnon dutifully repaired the South African's violin, but he put it from his mind. The Holocaust taboo was too ingrained for him to consider seriously the importance of such an instrument to himself or Jewish history.

In 1995 Amnon accepted an invitation from German bow-maker Daniel Schmidt to give a lecture about the history of German violin construction.

During his presentation, he told the story of the Auschwitz violin. It felt cathartic—a way of confronting the past. In an Israeli radio interview about the trip, he asked, "Would anyone who has a violin that has survived the Holocaust please bring it to me?"

The response was overwhelming; his phone rang off the hook.

The Krongold family from Jerusalem were among the first to contact him. A violin belonging to their Uncle Shimon had been kept in a cupboard, wrapped in blankets, for years. Shimon had fled the ghetto for Tashkent, then in the USSR, but died of typhus. The instrument's authenticity was confirmed by documents and, like many Jewish folk violins of the time, it was decorated with a Star of David. Amnon had his first Violin of Hope.

Another response came from Saffi Hanegbi, an old friend. Her father had been part of the legendary partisan group which was led by Dadya Misha and saved thousands of Jews by hiding them in the Ukrainian forests—a story told in the film *Defiance*.

"Saffi held out this worn-out violin