

and told me about its 12-year-old owner, Motele Schlein," says Amnon.

Misha had found Motele sitting alone under a tree, clutching a violin.

"My family are dead," the little boy sobbed. "I escaped from the ghetto."

"Can you play this violin?"

Each violin took up to 18 months and £10,000, usually of his own money, to restore

The boy began to play Beethoven beautifully. Misha took him back to the group and forged a plan.

Motele was told to perform outside a tavern in a nearby town where the Nazis drank, pretending to be a beggar. As expected, soon he was invited to play regularly in the officers' canteen.

Each evening he smuggled in dynamite in his violin case and planted it in cracks in the walls. After one performance, he lit a fuse and fled the tavern. The explosion killed and injured more than 200 Nazis. Motele was a hero, but he died six months later trying to warn the partisans of a German ambush.

Amnon was able to restore the violin and, he says proudly, "It now hangs in Yad Vashem, the Jerusalem Holocaust museum—it's a living testimony to Motele and the battle against evil."

As news of Amnon's quest spread, the calls continued, but he also started looking for violins himself. Whenever he had a spare moment during lecture tours of Europe and the US he would scour antique markets for instruments. Many had been practically given away

to market owners by Jewish families clearing elderly relatives' homes, unaware of the instruments' history.

Amnon could identify an instrument that had been in the war by sight—even if he knew nothing about it—partly because of the Star of David and also

its condition. "When you see a violin that's full of dirt and the wood is weathered by sun, rain and snow, you know it's a survivor," he says. "Violins are not instruments to be played outside."

Each violin took up to 18 months of his time and £10,000, usually of his own money, to restore. And though 18 remain in his Tel Aviv workshop, the other six have gone to museums or back into private homes.

But Amnon's reward is seeing the violins being played in concert. The first time was in September 2008 next to Jerusalem's city wall, at a Jewish Remembrance Day concert. He is also acutely aware that they can't remain neglected in dusty cupboards; the violins are often the only reason some of the families that own them still exist.

Helen Livnat, 69, has an instrument that belonged to her father Fievel. She lives in Herzlia, Israel, but spent her early years in the Ukraine's Sharhorod ghetto. Its residents were escorted to the forests to chop wood in return for bread. Then the work ran out and they faced starvation.

A local Jewish dignitary, Judge Robinson (also confined to the ghetto), contacted Fievel. "I hear you are a violinist but have no violin," he told him. "I have a very good Amati that I can't play any more. Take it, and if you earn food playing it, share it with my sister and me."

Fievel took the violin and played it in the streets for weeks, bringing solace to the residents, but little money. Then a group of passing Ukrainian army officers asked him to play at a wedding. He was rewarded with the banquet leftovers and, true to his word, took the Robinsons a food parcel. He found them both dead. Driven by starvation, they had committed suicide.

Then the ghetto police, who decided who to send to the concentration camps, ordered Fievel to hand over the instrument to save his family. The violin was gone, but the reputation it had earned Fievel continued to protect him. Another Ukrainian, who wanted him to play at his wedding, found him a cheap violin and Fievel played it for money until 1945, putting food on the table.

"That's the violin Amnon restored for us," says Helen. "It saved us."

Apart from a concert in Calgary, Canada, last November, Charlie Siem's

London performance has been the only other Violins of Hope recital outside Israel so far. "You can play a great Stradivarius, but nothing compares to the emotional connection you have with these instruments," he says.

Amnon and his violins were brought to London by Jewish cultural charity Spiro Ark/Tzavta. Further concerts are planned for Switzerland in August. Wherever Amnon takes his collection, new violins and stories emerge.

Nitza Spiro, one of the charity's founders, was leaving her block of flats in London soon after the City Hall performance when the porter approached her and shyly handed her a battered violin.

"It was found by my father," the porter said. "He was one of the British Army liberators of Bergen-Belsen. I've kept it all these years, but I thought you might like to have it."

"I will carry on my search," says Amnon. "The violins are a vital reminder of the tragedy of the past and a lesson for the future."

» The concentration camps of Bergen-Belsen, Dachau and Buchenwald were liberated in April 1945.

For further information about Spiro Ark/Tzavta, visit spiroark.org.