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Violins of Hope, dedicated to instruments from the Holocaust, is coming to L.A.

Violins of Hope is a project dedicated to telling the stories of stringed instruments from the Holocaust.

(Violins of Hope / The Soraya)

By Makeda Easter

Feb. 25, 2019

7 AM

For more than 20 years, Tel Aviv violin maker Amnon Weinstein and his son Avshalom have collected and restored instruments played by Jewish musicians during the Holocaust — instruments often lost or abandoned as their owners attempted to escape the atrocities of World War II. The instruments lived on as their owners perished.

To tell the long-forgotten stories of these stringed instruments and the people who played them, the Weinsteins created Violins of Hope, a traveling project dedicated to their collection of more than 60 restored violins, violas and cellos.

From March 22 to April 26, 2020, the project will come to L.A. for the first time with a series of concerts, exhibitions and educational programming featuring instruments from the collection.

The [Younes and Soraya Nazarian Center for the Performing Arts](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-ca-nazarian-donation-vpac-20170717-story.html) at Cal State Northridge will host a concert series featuring musicians playing instruments from the Weinstein collection, including an opening night performance by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony with violinist Lindsay Deutsch.

Other performances include the Los Angeles Lawyers Philharmonic at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre in L.A., the New West Symphony at Oxnard Performing Arts & Convention Center and the Long Beach Symphony at the Terrace Theater.

“It’s one of those really, really rare moments when arts organizations across the vast geography of L.A. work together to do something like this,” said Thor Steingraber, executive director of [the Soraya](https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/culture/la-ca-nazarian-donation-vpac-20170717-story.html).

Not all of the violins will be played in concerts. Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust will display violins, including some that are not in playable condition. Although some of the restored violins were world-class instruments, others belonged to amateur players, street musicians and klezmer musicians, Steingraber said. “Every violin has a different pedigree and a different history and a different story.”

L.A. musician Niv Ashkenazi is the only North American violinist authorized to possess one of the rescued Holocaust violins. He will lead about 40 educational workshops with K-12 students in the San Fernando Valley.

Ashkenazi will use the tragic stories behind the violins — like the instrument thrown out of a train en route to Auschwitz or a violin that saved the lives of people who played in a concentration camp orchestra — to explore the history of World War II. Ashkenazi will be joined by Holocaust survivor and chairwoman of Violins of Hope in L.A. County, Susanne Reyto, who will share stories of her experience with students.

Reyto and Steingraber spent the last year planning the arrival of Violins of Hope, which had its North American debut in 2012. During one meeting that coincided with a [deadly attack at a Pittsburgh synagogue](https://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-pittsburgh-synagogue-20181027-story.html) last October, Steingraber was reminded of the project’s timeliness and importance.

“If you held the violin that had once been played in a concentration camp, if you listened to it being played today … there’s a different kind of resonance that that instrument conveys, one that is both historical and also just very visceral,” he said.

Added Steingraber: “I’m hoping that the presence of these instruments acts as a powerful reminder not only of the Holocaust but more generally of our collective perseverance and our collective need to build bridges between communities, cities, religions and nations.”