



People surround dancers as they perform on stilts in honor of Saint Mary Magdalene in a street for the traditional 'Danza de Los Zancos' (Los Zancos Dance), in the small town of Anguiano, northern Spain, Saturday. As an ancient tradition for more than 4th centuries, eight young people from the town balance on stilts down the old street, turning to the sound of folk music played on a pipe and drum. — AP

Rescued violins bring back Holocaust 'escape' tales

Tucking the violin beneath his chin, the instrument's wood glistening under the packed auditorium's spotlights, Guy Braunstein's hand trembled from the weight of history. "I have done thousands of concerts, but I have never been as emotional and trembled the way I did when I took that violin from Auschwitz in my hand," Braunstein said backstage after the event. The soloist along with a group of Jerusalem chamber orchestra musicians performed in Tel Aviv as part of a project that collects and restores violins from the Holocaust.

The one that Braunstein played belonged to a man forced to perform at Auschwitz concentration camp as inmates left each morning for forced labor elsewhere and returned in the evenings. At the auditorium in Tel Aviv, some in the audience were in tears as the musicians played a Gustav Mahler composition. "It's smell was different," said Braunstein, who has made his career with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and has now performed twice as part of the project. "I had the feeling while playing that someone was sticking a stake through my heart because I knew its story."

The "Violins of Hope" project is the brainchild of 76-year-old Israeli Amnon Weinstein, with other concerts having also been performed in Germany and the United States. Weinstein is a luthier born into a family of Lithuanian Jews who escaped from the Holocaust.

He has spent the past 20 years in his basement workshop in Tel Aviv, where the smell of varnish hangs heavy in the air, restoring the violins which are often handed over to him in poor condition. He hopes his son Avshalom, a third-generation luthier, carries the baton long into the future. "That violin has been played before piles of human corpses," Weinstein said of the instrument played by Braunstein. "What it has seen can make you crazy."

Each one has a story
His mission was to find "any violin that escaped the Holocaust, bring it in, repair it and end up with a violin capable of being played in a concert." "I want these violins to be played, that what they have to say be heard," said Weinstein. His collection currently includes 60 violins and cellos, each with its own story, many of them tragic, about European Jews during the Holocaust. Most were made in Germany and the former Czechoslovakia, including those carrying a Star of David or a name inscribed inside them. Weinstein spends hours in search of violins on his computer, the only sign of modernity in his cramped workshop that harks back to another era.



He is sometimes contacted by people with a violin they think may interest him. A Frenchman recently handed him an instrument that he had inherited from his father. His father had been given the violin by a Jew being sent to Drancy internment camp in France, who told him: "I can do nothing with it where I'm going." Violins, along with clarinets, were popular in Jewish communities at the time in central and eastern Europe, where the Klezmer musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews thrived.

The Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and research centre in Jerusalem has its own collection and has worked with Weinstein in the past. It loaned one of its violins to the project and the instrument featured in a performance in the United States. "The artefacts department of Yad Vashem's museums division has a collection of 15 violins," Michael Tal, the department's curator, told AFP by email. "As with each of our artefacts, the violins in our collection each have a unique story and background."

Weinstein said: "In all testimony on the Holocaust, there is a violin story, of a man who grabs a violin and, despite the cold and the hunger and the fleas, plays. 'And those who listen to him can escape. They are transported. They fly-like in a Chagall painting. 'There is nothing else that can resurrect their voice and that will remain after us.' — AFP

A picture shows a violin which is part of a collection of old violins that were formerly owned by European Jews.



The Israel Camerata Jerusalem Orchestra play instruments from the "Violins of Hope" project during a rehearsal for a special concert performed on violins and cello from the collection of Amnon and Avshalom Weinstein.



Seventy-six-year-old Israeli violin maker Amnon Weinstein shows a violin from his collection of restored violins that were formerly owned by European Jews during the Holocaust at his workshop.



Amnon Weinstein shows his violin collection of old violins that were formerly owned by European Jews.



Amnon Weinstein restores a violin which he named the 'Auschwitz Violin'.



Seventy-six-year-old Israeli violin maker Amnon Weinstein holds a violin that survived the Second World War. — AFP photos