

## PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES ABOUT THE BACK STORY OF STORIES FROM THE VIOLINS OF HOPE

### THE PROCESS OF RESEARCHING AND WRITING

#### THE ORIGINAL FILMED PLAY

I had not heard of the Violins of Hope prior to their first scheduled tour of Southern California in 2019, but I knew the power of true stories from my work as writer and dramaturg for The Braid, a theater company whose main focus is telling contemporary stories from a Jewish lens in a non-traditional play format. The prospect of writing a play about this collection of stringed instruments interested me from the beginning. My husband's family are Holocaust survivors, and in addition to hearing stories about their lives in Poland, I had researched Polish-Jewish relations for my novel, *A Day of Small Beginnings* – the story of three generations of American Jews who discover their lost family history buried in a small Polish town. Quite coincidentally, a klezmer tune plays a significant role in the plot, so I was aware of the rich musical life that existed in Eastern Europe at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I began the process of writing the play, *Stories from the Violins of Hope*, by reading about individual violins in the Weinstein collection and watching interviews about the Violins of Hope project. From these, I chose stories that represented the widest range of violinists – people from different countries, of different classes, with different experiences of the war. These included the musicians of the famed violinist/conductor Bronislaw Huberman's Orchestra of Exiles in Palestine, violinists who played concerts in ghettos, or were forced to perform in concentration camp orchestras. The more I read, the more I felt these stories should be heard. They deserved to be more than footnotes in a concert program.

But to simply tell one story after another does not make a play. I needed a unifying dramatic figure. I found one in Amnon Weinstein, the luthier who protected and repaired the Violins of Hope. Early on, I telephoned him in Tel Aviv to get a sense of who he was. I wanted to know what motivated a world-renowned violin-maker to give up making new violins and devote all his talent and experience to working on damaged and nearly destroyed violins, many of which had no particular monetary value. After that first conversation, I knew that *his* story and the story of his family was the trunk of this play from which all the violin stories would branch

out. It was also clear to me that I could tell these stories very effectively in The Braid's signature storytelling style of speaking directly to the audience.

The next step was to identify violin stories that were theatrical. Some required too much historical explanation or were too convoluted to condense. The biggest challenge was to find stories that illuminated why this project is called the Violins of Hope and how this story could appeal to audiences less familiar with the subject of the Holocaust.

The first story that stood out to me was about a Frenchman who, trapped in a cattle car, knowing his life was over, calls out to a railway man outside to take his violin so that it may live. He throws his precious violin to the worker, trusting him to take care of it. There's so much tragedy in this story, but also shared humanity between two strangers. The railway man protected that violin all his life and his son eventually brought it to Amnon Weinstein for inclusion in the Violins of Hope collection, "so that it may live."

## **RESPONSE TO BEING ASKED TO WRITE A FULL STAGE PLAY/ EXCITING/UNUSUAL/CHALLENGING ELEMENTS OF THE STAGE PLAY**

When I was originally approached in 2019 about writing this play, no one imagined that within the year, the pandemic would make it impossible to perform it live. We pivoted to a Zoom production, which was eventually filmed and enjoyed world-wide success, including a showing in 2021 at the United Nations Programme on the Holocaust to commemorate Kristallnacht.

But the Zoom format had its limitations. The musicians had to be recorded separately from the actors and the actors had to perform individually from their homes, making interaction between them awkward. I welcomed the opportunity to adapt the original version of *Stories from the Violins of Hope* as a traditional stage play.

Additional conversations I had with Amnon Weinstein provided answers to questions raised in the first play. With my co-writer Ronda Spinak, Artistic Director of The Braid, we established the full arc of this man's life - from a boy who suffered the inherited pain of his family's loss and wanted nothing to do with the Holocaust, to the octogenarian whose life is now devoted to restoring its

stringed survivors. The story also explores conflicts between a father and son, especially over what should be done with these restored instruments.

We wrote new scenes, added new characters, and even some new music, that makes this the definitive version of *Stories from the Violins of Hope*.

## **ELEMENTS OF REAL PEOPLE WHO WERE OF INTEREST – WORTH MENTIONING**

This is a play of memory in which Amnon Weinstein speaks directly to the audience about his own story and the stories of the Violins of Hope. It could not have been written without both Amnon and his wife Assi generously sharing their thoughts and memories with me. Through them, Ronda Spinak and I were able to imagine critical new scenes of the family, and of individuals who helped him make the fateful decision to take these violins from the workshop's rafters and let them speak to the world.

I share the Weinstein's hope that this theatrical production of *Stories from the Violins of Hope* will continue to introduce audiences to the extraordinary Violins of Hope project. It celebrates the best of humanity by putting these historic violins into the hands of students as well as the great virtuosi of our time, and the great orchestras, including the Berlin Philharmonic.

## **MY TAKE-AWAY FROM WRITING THIS PLAY**

Every life is precious. But one of the greatest tragedies of the Holocaust is the incalculable loss of talent. So many exceptional people were silenced, as these violins were silenced. How many scientific discoveries, how many writers and artists were lost who might have uplifted the world in significant ways? We get only a hint of the enormity of that loss through the achievements of some of the survivors.

For me, Amnon Weinstein's work is importantly uplifting. It reminds us not only of the voices we've lost but also of the beauty we are capable of creating. Despite the inhumanity and devastating violence of our time that seemingly leaves people and things irreparably broken, there is a possibility of restoration. What greater legacy can one person give the world?