

Emil Schoenbrun and the Violins of Hope

Arnie Milner

Note: Arnie Milner, President of A.B.I. for several years, gave this talk at the May 6, 2024, Lorain County Holocaust Remembrance Day program, Violins of Hope, at the Lorain Palace Theater.

Today I am here to tell you the story of the main reason I wanted to bring the Violins of Hope to this program. It's all because of this man, Holocaust survivor Mr. Emil Schoenbrun. It has been fifty years since I've seen this man, yet I still think about him often and a part of him lives inside of me. When I was growing up in Lorain, all Jewish children from the third grade to the eighth grades went to Hebrew school twice a week for two hours after public school. We learned to read Hebrew and the prayers that are said in Hebrew at our religious services every Saturday. Mr. Schoenbrun was our Hebrew school teacher. Growing up, we didn't know much about him except for the fact that he was a Holocaust survivor, was married to a very sweet, soft-spoken woman, and that he was an amazing artist who could make line drawings of anyone or anything. Almost every student, and we had 15-20 students in every class, would ask him for a drawing and most people to this day have kept theirs. Here is mine, I asked for Lincoln, and this picture hung on my office wall at work for thirty-six years until I retired. When former congregants heard I wanted to honor Mr. Schoenbrun they sent their drawings. So here is Kennedy, Herzl (considered the person instrumental in creating the modern state of Israel), Einstein, Mozart, Moses, and one young child at the time asked for a drawing of a zebra. The pictures are too numerous to show but here is a good selection of them.

Mr. Schoenbrun also taught me my bar mitzvah lesson, which meant that from when I turned 12 until the next year, my mother drove me every week to Mr. Schoenbrun's house and he taught me almost all the prayers that we say during our service on Saturday mornings, two hours' worth! I had to lead the congregation in a service one Saturday near my 13th birthday and this allowed me to be counted as an adult in our service. Needless to say, I became very close to him. Mr. Schoenbrun passed away in 1974.

It wasn't until five years ago that I heard the rest of the story of his life. About ten years ago, I started visiting a lifelong friend of mine, Holocaust Survivor Erwin Froman every week, and I did this until he passed away eight years later. He was my true hero and the most respected person at our synagogue. Every week he would give me a Hebrew lesson for one hour and go over many of the prayers that Mr. Schoenbrun had taught me 50 years earlier. I needed the review and after the lesson we would go to dinner. One day we were talking about Mr. Schoenbrun, and Erwin said to me, did I know how Mr. Schoenbrun survived the Holocaust? I said no, he never told anybody. And then he told me the story, that he was married and had two small children and when the family was taken to Auschwitz, his wife and children were immediately taken to the gas chamber and murdered. He, however, had his violin with him, because no one really knew where they were going or what they were being taken to. When the guards saw the instrument, they made him play. It turns out, he was a classically trained violinist and had wanted to one day play in the Berlin Symphony. When the guards saw his talent they put him in the orchestra outside of Auschwitz and for two years he was made to play there. This was an attempt by the Nazis to calm the people as they got off the trains. Mr. Schoenbrun knew that

almost all of these people were going to their deaths. (This scenario is summed up in a video where Amnon Weinstein talks about this situation.) Mr. Schoenbrun was one of these people.

He played outside of Auschwitz, but Erwin said once he was liberated and came to America, he never touched the violin again. Think about it, he lost everything, his wife, his children, his homeland, all of his family, his love of playing music, and he came to America with nothing. Yet through the grace G-d, he did find love again and got remarried, and as I got older I began to realize that he treated all of his students like his own children. He rarely called us by our first names. More often than not, he called us "dearest". I looked at all the drawings sent to me and they all said to "my beloved pupil" with their name and his signature. How could life be any better than when your teacher calls you his beloved? He wanted us all to be someone special, so he helped us students to grow up and taught us to be good people, and to feel valued and loved. It was not just our religion, but our culture and he wanted our families to go and continue as we have done for almost 6,000 years. That is how you beat what what happened during the Holocaust that he so painfully had to live through.

So tonight, I hope Mr. Schoenbrun is looking down on us because for the first time in America, he plays for us through the Violins of Hope. Playing for him is Professor Sibbi Bernhardsson from Oberlin College. He will be playing Sonata for Solo Violin, Movement Two Andante cantabile by Erwin Schulhoff. Mr. Schulhoff was a Jewish composer who died at the Wulzburg prison near Weibenburg, Bavaria, in 1942 from tuberculosis. Mr. Schoenbrun, may your memory be for a blessing and G-d bless.