A Sing Along with Wiesel

The three day symposium in honor of Professor Elie Wiesel was an amazing event- the abundance of intellect, the quality of the lectures, the theological and philosophical questions raised were beyond our highest expectations.

Elie Wiesel is partial to his students. His so generous and warm, his former students remain students for life. We students were invited back to Prof. Wiesel's office for a reception; a chance to talk and relax. As I sat down, an elegantly dressed woman, obviously a survivor told me she had heard I sang last night at a dinner. "What did you sing?" she asked. I told her the Yiddish songs I did and her eyes grew wide and she practically jumped- "Please sing a song!" What could I say? I can never refuse an opportunity to sing in Yiddish, especially for a survivor in Elie Wiesel's office. I began to sing and the students, now mostly 30-50 year old scholars, rabbis and writers looked up. I began with Oifn Pripichik, then Rojinkes Mit Mandlen, and my old theme song, Abi Gezundt. Riki Lippitz was there and remembered our wonderful Boston Zamir Chorale years and sang the harmony and choral parts. I was 19 in an instant!

Luckily I had some songs with me for the coming Shirei Shabbat service. I'm not good about memorizing words and surely didn't want to mispronounce Yiddish words there! I found A Brivele Der Mamen and we all sang. Elie joined in with all the shmaltz the song requires. I asked Elie to please sing again the Vizhnitzer melody Tzave..tzave..y'shuot Yaakov. He began and we all joined in the most beautiful singing. On and on the songs flowed.

Soon we were standing in a circle. I was in the middle facing Elie with my travel guitar and the niggun got stronger and stronger. We were Hasids, academics and activists. We were singing with eyes closed and swaying bodies. If not for my 6pm flight we would have gone on and on.

As I put away my guitar the comments rang out...
Boston University will never be the same..
This is the highlight of my life.
I've never seen Wiesel sing like that.
I will never forget this all my life.

The community of spiritual seekers, of students who can never pay back their teacher, but as Rabbi Nechemia Polen so aptly put it, "we can only pay forward ".
This was a once in a lifetime singing circle.

We all attended a symposium on Memory that is now sealed in song forever in our hearts and minds. We will never forget that afternoon. The songs will play on in our deep inner recesses of our minds. This memory will resound and enrich our lives forever.
May it remain fresh and true.

Cantor Deborah Katchko-Zimmerman
Temple Beth El of Greater Buffalo
Tonawanda, NY
CantorDKZ@aol.com 1998