

THE SOUND OF MUSIC by Beulah Gross

The long, narrow auditorium of the Montefiore Nursing Home is bright and cheerful. The audience is old and frail with a sprinkling of family visitors, including several children. Some of the aged are in wheelchairs, others have sticks or walkers, a few lie in hospital beds. Many, either too old or too demented, are clearly oblivious to their surroundings and I wonder why they're there at all. Surely they can't derive anything from a concert? Surely the singing and applause will disturb rather than soothe?

Members of the choir chat to the old people as they help the staff hand out biscuits and polystyrene cups of orange juice. Blank faces brighten, dull eyes suddenly shine and twinkle, cracked voices respond gratefully to the interest of strangers. Every so often, a cry or moan breaks the murmur of the small crowd but no one takes much notice; it's not unusual in a place like this.

I help too, holding cups to wrinkled lips which dribble saliva and juice, putting biscuits into stiff fingers that crush them convulsively. To get to the back row, I move a walker next to my chair. Its owner becomes agitated, putting out a tiny, trembling hand to grasp mine, spilling juice.

'Don't take it away.' She sounds desperate.

'No, dear. I just want to get behind it.'

As soon as I put the walker back, the trembling hand leaves mine to clutch it. To get more juice and biscuits, I have to move the walker several times and each time, despite my care and quiet assurances, its owner's anxiety increases. When I finally return to my seat, she grasps her walker, holding it throughout the concert. It is clearly her lifeline. I smile at her. She smiles back nervously.

Quietly, the fifty members of the choir file onto the raised steps of the portable platform facing the audience. The men wear black pants, white shirts and maroon skullcaps, the women black skirts and white tops. Each carries a black music folder.

Unobtrusive staff, helped by family and other visitors, collect empty cups and uneaten biscuits. I want to help but cannot get past the walker. She's holding it too firmly and I can't distress her anymore.

Ancient, bent bodies rustle as chairs scrape on the linoleum-covered floor. Cameras suddenly appear and a video is set up in one corner. More moans and muffled shrieks puncture the air. Again, no one takes any notice.

On my right is a man with fine, clear skin and rosy cheeks; he looks younger than he probably is. He is in a wheelchair, limp hands curled in his lap. He gazes at the choir, his spectacles reflecting the sunlight coming through the windows and partially glassed-in ceiling. I pity him being in a place like this because his faculties seem normal. Then his head drops to his chest and he mumbles and I know he's not.

A tiny, vivacious woman steps up to the microphone. The rustling stops. I look at her, grateful to be looking at someone else. 'My name is Rosie,' she says. Her voice is as vibrant as her flowered blouse. 'I'm so happy to be back here with this choir, my singing family, to entertain you. It's hard to believe that it's a whole year since we were here last. We hope you'll enjoy our music as much as we enjoy singing for you.'

It's clear from her wide, warm smile that she really is happy to be back.

Accompanied only by a pianist who plays with considerable expertise and joy, the choir sings in Hebrew, Yiddish and Ladino. Before each song, Rosie describes some of its history and translates the words into English. Despite being small, she is a commanding figure as she encourages her singers to greater efforts. They keep their eyes glued on her, hardly bothering to look at their music. They sing with enthusiasm and great feeling; their voices blend in perfect harmony.

With each song, more grey heads nod and mottled hands flutter on shaky knees, keeping time with the music. Some of the songs are happy, some are sad. Many evoke memories of happier times. A few of the audience are overcome and weep a little. So do several members of the choir. There are more moans and agonised calls. The man in the wheelchair groans loudly, his face lifted up. It falls to his chest again and he is quiet.

Rosie announces the wonderful Hebrew prayer, *Eili, Eili*. She tells us that it was written by Hannah Szenes, a young Hungarian Jewish parachutist who spied for the Allies in Nazi Germany until she was captured and tortured to death. The song is an affirmation of Hannah's faith and courage. Rosie catches a whisper that a relative of Hannah's is in the audience.

'Is this true?' she asks.

A large man with a hearing aid directly in front of her nods. He is a cousin and remembers Hannah well.

'What an honour!' Rosie speaks for all of us.

The sadness of this moment is lifted by a comic solo in Yiddish which soon has everyone laughing out loud and calling for more. I look at the woman holding the walker. Her face is lively and happy. She smiles at me but doesn't let go of her walker. The man in the wheelchair groans again.

'I see several faces I know here today,' Rosie announces. 'Some belong to people who were once members of this choir. I invite them to join us now, to sing with us again. Please, come up here. You'll know the music and words, I promise you.'

She beckons, opening her arms wide, as if to enfold us all. There is loud applause as five men and women make their way to the platform.

They take positions in the front and their eyes fix on Rosie. The perfect rapport of the past takes over and they sing easily with the rest of the choir. Then they sing 'Let there be peace', the song the choir ends every concert with. The words are simple and the audience joins in, singing with a gusto surprising in the very old.

The man in the wheelchair moans again, loudly. I look at him. His face is once again lifted as he gazes at the singers and I realise that the sounds he makes are not those of dementia. They are the sound of music.

Written by Beulah Gross

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