Leningrad (St. Petersburg)
We arrived at the Europa Hotel, located our room, turned the gigantic key marked “Leningrad,” and opened the door. From the entranceway we could see blue satin curtains, tapestries, and a little table with a tea service and matching tapestry chairs. First the large group of Soviet escorts at the Moscow airport, then the elaborate banquet, and now this room: it was clear that we were getting the best of everything. We can see the Philharmonia Hall with its large grey-white columns bearing a sign in Russian saying “Oberlin College Choir.” The next day I noticed that some of the tables were decorated with U.S.S.R. and U.S. flags bound together and placed in a small vase, to make us feel welcome.

First concert: We had been forewarned about a critical audience and possibly a cold reception, but what a surprise! Rhythmic applause (reserved for special praise of a performance) during intermission! At the end of the concert, audience members handed written requests for encores to our conductor. How exciting! At dinner after the concert, we proposed a toast to the “cold reception” we did not have!

Wednesday, March 4: We met the Leningrad Conservatory Choir members and heard them sing; then we all talked to each other in various languages and exchanged pins, pictures, and ideas. What a wonderful closeness I felt toward these people of my own age. It was so touching, so beautiful, to sing with them, dance with them, and be a part of an excited mixture of Russian and American students who scrambled onto the stage to take one another’s pictures. My first real contact with the Russian people – how wonderfully warm and eager to know each other we were.

Friday, March 6: I went to the Hermitage Museum with a new Russian friend named Rena, who speaks French and had introduced herself after a concert one night. Although at first she was quiet and reserved, her enthusiasm for the art museum was practically unbridled as she excitedly took me by the arm to show me everything she could as we entered the museum and stepped into some heavy cloth shoes (for keeping scuff marks off of the floors). I immediately noticed the ornate grandeur of the elaborately-decorated Winter Palace of the Czar, which now houses incredibly beautiful ancient art objects and original paintings.

...That afternoon, the choir visited the Pioneer Palace, and after we saw the Astronaut Club and the observatory, we were asked to join in some Russian folk dancing. The students asked us to teach them some American dances, so some of our group managed to put together a Virginia Reel after teaching “Jimmy Crack Corn” to the accordionist!

Sunday, March 8: We had dinner, and on the way back from the party, a male choir friend and I were standing on the stairs talking when a big Russian guy came up near us, stopped and took in the scene, then regarded us with a dreamy look in his eyes. Finally he went up the stairs, but then
peeked out over the railing at us with a peaceful, romantic, starry look in his eyes, as if to say, “Just like in the movies.”

**Moscow**

...Moscow! Of all the places in the world I least expected to be, this is it! We passed the Kremlin on the way to rehearsal today.

...It seems that in both Leningrad and Moscow, if anyone goes out without a hat, strangers will stop him and ask if he is cold, and will he not get sick? People are concerned about our health.

Wednesday, March 11: Everybody is buying fuzzy hats to look Russian.

...Tonight we saw Verdi’s *Don Carlos* at the Hall of Congress in the Kremlin. The mezzo was superb and sounded Italian-trained. The Grand Inquisitor and Don Carlos (tenor) were also especially good. The staging and costumes were magnificent. The Spanish dresses with their high collars actually seemed to be studded with jewels and embroidered with gold; perhaps they were.

... The scene changes took place behind narrow drop-panels, which were made to look like tapestries or various parts of buildings, and they could be combined in a number of ways almost impossible to describe!

... The audience loved our spirituals, and of course “Ezekiel” evoked a marvelous response. We sang at least six encores each night and could have gone on all night.

...One time we were eating dinner on the balcony, when the pianist from the band played the Thompson “Alleluia.” Everybody started to sing, so he got up and directed us from the stage. The people eating at the tables downstairs stood up and shouted, “Bravo” when we finished!

...The Cultural Affairs Minister of Goskonsert is accompanying our tour now. Someone told us that this is the only such official that has ever been sent with a cultural exchange group.

...Last night our conductor posed for Associated Press photos, and he met Mr. Chesnikov, the arranger of our Russian folk songs. ...The last bouquet given to our conductor onstage at the end of the concert was sent from the Leningrad Conservatory Choir.

...This afternoon we heard the Moscow Symphony Orchestra rehearse Britten’s cello concerto. Britten conducted, Rostropovich played, and Oistrakh listened in!

**Minsk**

Monday, March 16: Every concert so far has had an ovation here in Minsk.

...Tonight after dinner, some of us came up to the lobby on the sixth floor. When I got there, a choir member was singing folk songs, and a group of Russians were listening. Slowly a crowd gathered, and finally a big Russian guy with laugh wrinkles around his eyes played honky-tonk piano, and we all sang “Midnight in Moscow” together. The whole gathering was beautiful in its
spontaneity, and I thought of how much I loved the people.

...In tonight’s concert, after the Tchaikovsky-Lermontov, a man in the second row actually put his head in his hands and wept.

Thursday, March 19: Last night after the performance, our group was just a riot (the usual hijinks for closing night). When we first arrive in a city, everybody is dignified and quiet, but the night before we leave, everybody goes wild! Departure will be at 7:20, with breakfast and luggage-delivery even earlier.

**Ryazan**

Saturday, March 21: Tonight was our 16th concert of about 36. The reception was great—rhythmic clapping for the Bach (and others), and an ovation at the end.

...The Bach has not always had ovations, perhaps because of the mood or the text (translated loosely as “I Long for Thee, Lord”); but our conductor told us he has heard that our music has stirred, confused, and thrilled audiences. The young people want to know about our religion(s) and if we are believers.

Sunday, March 22 (Palm Sunday): This afternoon we heard a program given by the conservatory choir, and I met two Russians, Rita and her friend Alex. He asked me many questions: What do you think about President Kennedy’s assassination? What is your opinion of Ruby’s death sentence? What about censorship? Who can vote in your country? Can the son of a laborer vote in your country? Does a voter have to be a cultured man and be well read? Do many Americans read the newspaper? How much does your education cost? Who do you think will win the election? Do students from your college vote?

...At the gathering, one of the Russian students asked a choir member about his background. Our friend spoke of how his father had labored and later had started his own business, which is now large and employs many people. What a commotion that caused!

...Tonight was our last concert in Ryazan. We talked and goofed off in the hall afterwards. Some of the guys were in T-shirts and jeans; others were in their p.j.’s, and others had on what they wore to dinner. It was fun talking and letting off steam.

**Trip to Kiev**

...After getting up at 5:00 a.m. and spending a few hours on a train, then an hour on a bus to the airport, we had to ride back to Moscow because of the weather, then spent about ten hours in the “pectopah” (restaurant). Finally it was decided that we would spend the night on a Pullman train, so we rode for an hour in a cold bus back to the train station and finally boarded the train. A friend and I roomed with two Russian ladies who tried very hard to communicate with us. Before we left the train, we gave them each a tube of lipstick, and they kissed us goodbye.

March 24 or 25: I slept all day today except for meals and a short rehearsal; then I was ready for the concert. What a great audience! The people followed us into the street afterwards, and then
we talked awhile. The response was very similar to that in Leningrad – this is great! The city itself is quite picturesque, with its trees, cobblestone streets, and rolling hills.

Thursday, March 26: At the conservatory today we heard a Puccini aria in Italian, and Gershwin’s “Summertime” from *Porgy and Bess* in Russian!

...At tonight’s concert it was so good to sing “Carol of the Bells,” a Ukrainian carol, in the capitol city of the Ukraine. After the concert, people were jammed up against the stairway, and as we came down the stairs, they parted to make a path for us and applauded. What a nice feeling.

...Arrangements are being made for a Town Hall concert in New York after Romania. It looks as if we will be going home after our concerts there.

...The people here are so funny sometimes. The man next door seems drunk and is singing at the top of his lungs. He has a nice voice.

Friday, March 27 (Good Friday): This morning we went to see a musical comedy in “Cinerama.” The scenery was gorgeous, the voices were beautiful, and the actors were charming and darling.

Lvov

Saturday, March 28: The concert was great! I felt so vital!

...Someone said that during the first half of the concert, the people outside broke down the door to the concert hall, and it had to be nailed shut to keep people out! I wonder if it is true. After the concert, some of us talked together, and I turned in at about 1:00 a.m.

Chernovtsi

...This afternoon we met some students. What a wonderful experience! Galla was rather quiet, but Tanya was bubbling with excitement. She said to me, “You are just like a Russian girl. You like to laugh and talk. I like you!” She bought us some ice-cream and bought me some books. She would not let me refuse. Every now and then she kept saying, “I like you!” We laughed and had such a good time.

...Then I met Sasha. The first words I ever heard him say were, “Hello, dear” to Tanya. He has personality plus. We really liked one another. I saw him again before rehearsal, and he said, “This afternoon I went back to my dorm and told everybody that I met an American girl who is very cheerful, and that I understood everything she said!” He and Galla sat together during the concert, and between numbers during the applause, I smiled at them. They saw me and smiled back. Later on I talked with Sasha and asked him if he had seen me smiling at him and he said, “Of course. I stared at you throughout the whole concert!” About the choir, he said, “Your faces are so expressive. In them I can see all the thoughts and dreams of each person.”

He’s so much fun. He calls me “My dear.” One time when we were walking, a soldier was close behind us; I was a little scared but kept on laughing and talking, and the soldier quickly disappeared. Sasha asked to meet me tomorrow and said, “You do not need to be afraid as long as I am here,” then laughed again! Later he said, “Seriously, I feel as if I am with a Russian girl.
You are so cheerful. I don’t feel as if I am speaking a foreign language.”

Thursday, April 2: Sasha stayed until our bus pulled away. I motioned for him to smile, but he shook his head. I will never forget the sad, meditative look on his face. “My one dream is to visit your country,” he had said. He will never be able to, I thought. His one dream. Perhaps he could come as an interpreter someday. The bus pulled out, and he finally smiled and waved. Then he was gone.

**Trip to Odessa**

...On the bus, I slept next to all the bags and coats, sandwiched in between the back window and the harpsichord.

Monday, April 6: Odessa is a nice city. We can see the Black Sea from the hotel! I just can’t believe I’m here! There are many parks which must be beautiful in the summer, and the harbor is lovely. The hall seats 3,000 and looks almost like a big church, with its gorgeous stained-glass windows. There are stairs leading up to the auditorium; it really seems like the catacombs back there.

...We visited the Odessa opera house and saw a rehearsal of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. The hall is gorgeous. A huge chandelier hangs in the middle of the ceiling, surrounded by beautiful paintings and carvings. The balconies are tiered, and each little box has a light decorated with elaborate gold-work.

Wednesday, April 8: It’s a gorgeous day here in Odessa.

**Yalta**

... From Simforopol to Yalta the landscape was green, except for one snow-covered mountain crowned with lacy white trees. There were lambs grazing on some of the hills. Red-bud trees, forsythia bushes, jonquils and apple trees were in bloom everywhere. Yalta is beautiful and is probably even more so in the summer. Besides the blossoms everywhere, there are many pines and even a few palm trees – quite a variety of vegetation.

...Our hotel room overlooks the Black Sea – the Black Sea! That’s the other side of the world! There are pines and blossom trees below us, and a lovely little park with a garden across the street. We have a balcony with a door leading onto it.

Friday, April 10: I walked all over town with friends and got some great pictures. Yalta is like a big garden. I’ve never seen such a beautiful place in all my life. If you turn to the right, there is the sea; if you turn to the left, there are the mountains; if you look anyplace else, there are blossom trees, grass and flowers.

...April 17 or 18: Last night was our last concert in the Soviet Union. After the concert I was crying because I would never see all those faces in the audience again.

...I like our interpreter Henrietta (called “Gayna”) so much. She always looks very neat and has
fine taste in clothes. She is soft-spoken and sweet. No wonder Glenn Gould and Van Cliburn both ask for her when they tour the U.S.S.R.

Romania
...Dinner was unbelievable! SALAD! Good steak. Dessert of little cream-puffs with whipped-cream and chocolate sauce, surrounded by LEMON ice cream! The band was really great – JAZZ (including Dave Brubeck’s popular “Take Five”).

...A man sat and talked with a group of us. Last year he was allowed to visit his parents (who live in Russia), for the first time in 17 years. He said, “When I left, my brothers were very little. When I saw them again they were married and had families. I went to Russia with my wife; I introduced her to my father. He didn’t even know her.”

Sunday, April 19 or so: Today we took a trip to the little valley town of Brashov. The town was picturesque, with its houses which looked like Swiss chalets. The restaurant we ate in was luxurious. A band played Polish and American music, and we ate caviar and drank a delicious dry white wine. After dinner we went to a bar where rock ‘n roll music was playing over the loud-speaker: “Who Wrote the Book of Love,” “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” and (get this): “What’d I Say?” in Romanian!

Monday, April 20 or so: We visited a cathedral, then walked through the city, where people followed two of our singers in mobs, parting for them like the Red Sea. Our friends really liked the star treatment!

...I hear that our conductor was practically knocked over by the crowd. Hoards of people pressed up against our bus, exchanging postcards and stamps and addresses. It was difficult to get the door closed because the people were mobbing the bus.

Bucharest
...WOW! What a city! It has beautiful archways and is clean and well-built. There are no propaganda posters. ...When I got off the bus, what a glorious feeling! The air was warm, and when I saw the lovely hotel, I put on my cocktail dress for dinner and felt really elegant for the first time in two months. There was champagne and an orchestra.

...Our conductor told us some things about our tour: We were the first American group which was allowed to have meetings arranged with Soviet groups; no others were allowed this privilege. The ambassador said that the Oberlin College Choir Tour was in every way the best that had been set up through the American-Soviet Cultural Exchange, and that the U.S. and the Soviet Union just signed a cultural exchange agreement for the next two years.

Saturday, April 25 or so: Yesterday was our last concert abroad. The Brazilian minister and representatives from Japan, England, and Red China attended. We were told later that the Romanians are talking about sending people to the U.S. to learn more about choral music.

...At the conservatory I met three very nice guys – all American jazz and folk-song fans. One is a
flute player aged 23 who plays “scene music” in a theater; he is a last-year student and is married. Another is tall and well-built and wears purple-tinted sunglasses. His father is an opera singer who also makes popular records; he gave me one. He speaks French and Romanian and calls me “Darling” and “My Funny Valentine.”

...I was surprised when two Romanians we met told us that there is much police control. One girl talked with tears in her eyes as she said she was taught as a child that Americans want war, but she does not believe it.

...Last night I saw the first two acts of Der Meistersinger. Major Mueller sang the lead in German, and the others sang in Romanian. Mueller’s voice was excellent, and the outstanding thing about him was his acting and stage presence. He is like a Shakespearean actor, with a quietly moving presence. He’s a huge man built with a sort of stalwart grace – hard to describe. It had quite an effect on me.

...As we approach the end of the tour, I’ve been thinking about the future. Although a long tour can be tough, I like a flexible schedule, and performing a variety of concerts and roles someday seems appealing to me; I now know that I love to travel, and I really like connecting with an audience.

...Tonight I’ll be home, where people can go where they please and say what they think. We have been together in a sort of suspended animation for two months. Not that we haven’t changed, but we remember the people at home as they were when we left two months ago, and that’s how they remember us. I wonder if they have changed.

We have.

Other Topics to Remember:
The Russian circus
Dancing the twist for an amazed kitchen crew
Making Limo floats
Café “The Frog” in Leningrad
Hijinks and more names than “Gloria” Mundi and “Agnes” Dei
Joking with the Russians in multiple languages
Singing “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean” with a Russian friend in the Czar’s Winter Palace
A parade with an elephant
A Romanian musician who imitated bird calls on his violin