

The Yale Russian Chorus sings at a US State Department luncheon in Washington, DC for General Secretary & Mrs. Gorbachev on Wednesday, December 9, 1987.

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At the YRC Christmas Concert Friday night December 4th, Director Michael Schnack announced that he had selected 20 people to sing at a State Department luncheon in DC the following week, those whose attendance was the best at fall rehearsals. I had joined the chorus in September and dared not miss since I needed to take in the baritone line and Russian phonetics. Many of those who had been in the chorus for years and sung that night had not been regulars during the fall, so the decision brought outcries of anger and consternation. Members who had logged many tours, including the trip to Russia and England earlier that summer, were passed over for newcomers like me.

With a mounting cadence of anxiety and exhilaration, we rehearsed on Sunday and Monday evening, selecting 4 pieces from the repertoire. David Findley's solo in "Kalinka" was brilliant. The sound bred confidence that we could meet the challenge and sing before statesmen and national leaders.

Four of us had a long hard car ride from New Haven to DC on Tuesday evening. We arrived at the apartment of Howard, YRC alum, about 11:30 PM; most had arrived earlier. We got the tail end of a dinner of borscht and vodka which loosened us up. I left after midnight for a nearby hotel, too weathered to camp out on the floor in a sleeping bag.

The next morning I awoke well before dawn, adrenaline running, and ready to go. After breakfast I took a walk to the Lincoln and Viet Nam Memorials. The sun was just coming up, the only others were National Park Rangers and a worker sweeping the street. The mall was calm, the water glassy. I climbed the stairs to the Lincoln Memorial to view once again Chester French's awesome statue, sitting and contemplating his presidency. The Viet Nam black wall of names mirrored back my image, my shadow from the rising sun cast onto the black marble before me.

The birth of freedom for all people in our nation remains slow and arduous. I wondered if the fervor of glasnost might put some of our freedoms at risk. Washington was swept up with enthusiasm and optimism regarding the summit conference between Gorbachev and Reagan. The charisma and charm of Gorbachev had the nation in a stir; touching our deep longings for peace. I was puzzled by my cautious reflections on this early morning trek.

Back at the hotel I joined five YRC members who had come in at four AM from a special concert on Long Island the night before. We made our way to Howard's house where a morning rehearsal was held in his living room, all 21 of us, blue blazers piled on the

couch. Facing Michael we loosened up. Pam Coyle, New Haven Register reporter, took photos as we went over our ten minute repertoire. Max put up a picture of Gorbachev in the corner of a picture frame, just over Michael's shoulder.

At 11 AM we made our way to the State Department building. There were Secret Service agents everywhere with American and Russian press agents waiting in the wings of the foyer at security check. We cued up along an impressive line of flags representing nations of the world and a wall of large vivid photographs of life in Russia.

We were escorted into the Benjamin Franklin Dining Room on the 8th floor, 25 round tables set-up for the luncheon. It was a stately rectangular room with gigantic chandeliers, windows from floor to ceiling. We walked across a thick red carpet with the State Department insignia to try out the risers and acoustics. Waiters cautiously acknowledged our harmony. Escorted to an adjacent dining room, we found sandwiches and soda. It was 12:30 PM and we were told we had a two hour wait.

At 3:45 we cued up and made our reentry to a capacity crowd. We could readily see by the lectern Secretary General Gorbachev and Mrs. Schultz hosting one table and Secretary of State Schultz and Mrs. Gorbachev another. Secretary Schultz made his way to the podium. In introducing us, he indicated that the chorus had been to the USSR at least 11 times in its 34 years and had played a significant role in cross-cultural education. As a Princeton grad he could not help but render us, "one of the few good things to come out of Yale".

Our first was "Shto Smolknul V'eselia Glas?" music by Tchaikovsky, lyrics by the poet Pushkin. As we broke into rousing song, we could see Gorbachev enunciating "Pushkin" to others at his table. There was a thunderous ovation. My heart was beating out of my chest.

During the second song, "Mravel Zhamier", a Georgian folk song of celebration, Foreign Minister Shevardnadze came alive. His face lit up, he looked skyward and gestured, pushing back his wavy white hair with his hand. He commented to the people at his table; this was a song from his native land. He looked over to Gorbachev, who smiled and nodded, acknowledging the rather flamboyant gestures. At the end a voice yelled, "tochne, tochne", (i.e., perfection, excellence, bravo) amidst enthusiastic applause. The protocol chief gestured to Michael that we could sing one more song. Our religious piece was bumped for a popular one.

The passionate and popular folk song, "Kalinka" was the most successful. David was on. The audience clapped in rhythm. Gorbachev held his right fist up with his thumb skyward as the audience acclaimed approval. Taking a deep breath on the risers, we had done it!

We left the 8th floor and made our way down to the lobby in an attempt to sing to Gorbachev and Schultz as they were leaving but they passed by too quickly. Then the Gorbachevs locked arms, doubled back to where we were standing, and proceeded to

engage us in conversation, shaking people's hands. The Russian translator was particularly funny because he was trying to give us a translation while some in our group were saying, "we speak Russian, we understand Russian."

Gorbachev told us, "We will have a hard time changing our views on the world and on life. You are the younger generation and there is more possibility that you will be able to change." He called for increased exchanges between the Russian and American people, and a time of peace and understanding. Mrs. Gorbachev sparkled as she voiced her support of her husband's thoughts and the importance of educational exchanges. She told Skit that he had something like puppy dog eyes. The Gorbachevs were personable, direct, at ease, conveying a quiet charisma together. I could see what I had heard. Secretary Schultz returned to find his guests and in departing shouted, "You've done an excellent job; hold that tiger!" bringing a hearty laugh from the group.

We proceeded up to a second floor balcony overlooking the exit of the large, bright foyer where people were filing past the line of flags. We sang a half dozen songs and watched the parade of famous Americans, including Senators Edward Kennedy, Patrick Moynihan, Sam Nunn, former Secretary of State Edmund Muskie, Tom Brokaw, Peter Jennings and Dan Rather. Donald Trump, who had earlier given us the "V" sign from the back of the dining room, waved to us enthusiastically.

We made our way to depart and were thanked by a protocol officer. Standing outside the State Department building, our moment complete, we paused, baffled as to what to do next. Michael suggested that we walk over to the Lincoln Memorial for a photo, now 4:45 PM. By the Viet Nam Memorial we decided to go our separate ways and see each other back in New Haven.

Prior to leaving DC a few of us sat in a Greek restaurant with stories and silence. An amateur chorus of enthusiasts had sung before the head of our Cold War enemy, participating in an historic international moment. I will tell my grandchildren about a day of glasnost and détente.