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PAUL ROBESON VISITS PRAGUE

Like other progressive people of the world, we in Czechoslovakia had been following with profound interest the unceasing activities of that great singer and actor, Paul Robeson, in his fight for world peace and democracy. When therefore a journalist friend 'phoned and informed me of Paul's arrival in Prague on the evening of Tuesday, May 24th, I was so happy that I missed my friend's last sentence. Determined to be one of the first people to call and pay my humble respects to Paul, I left my home at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, May 25th, and went to the hotel where he was staying.

On inquiring at the hotel desk, I was told that Paul would be seeing visitors from around 11 a.m. As it turned out later, I was not the first visitor to call, as about six other people of different nationalities were already waiting in the hotel lounge to see the great man. I then joined them, and with introductions over, we ordered coffee. We were all so thrilled at the thought of meeting the famous man that we could have waited twelve hours for him. As we chatted away, good-humoredly, the time passed quickly. About 10:30 Paul's accompanist, the South African pianist, Bruno Kin, joined us. While he ate his breakfast, we continued our conversation. At 11:15 a.m. one of the receptionists came and announced to us that Paul Robeson was on his way down to see us. I can remember vividly the expressions on the faces of the other six people as we heard this good news. There was the lady correspondent of a Hungarian newspaper who got up down three times from her chair, as she could hardly conceal her excitement. There was the correspondent of a Polish newspaper who beamed with joy. Then again there was the correspondent of a Czech youth newspaper, who started tapping his feet on the thick carpet on hearing the news; and two officials, a man and a woman from the Ministry of Information, shook their heads. Finally I clasped both hands in order to calm myself down as I could feel my heart beating faster. Precisely at 11:20 that bright Wednesday morning on May 25th, Paul Robeson stepped towards us, and as he came nearer we all stood up and greeted him. Everybody introduced him or herself and in two minutes Paul made us feel at ease. I could feel the tension created by our joy relax as he cracked one joke after another.

The journalists were the first to open the more serious side of the day's business, with the many questions they asked Paul. He punctuated his clear precise answers with lively humour. Then followed the officials from the Ministry of Information, who had come to arrange Paul's programme of lectures and other official engagements. Before he started his interview with the others, he told me that I should wait till he'd finished with the others so that we could have a family chat. About 12:15 p.m. he had finished his interviews, at any rate for the time being.

When he said - "Well, let's go to the dining room and have lunch and talk." During lunch I told him a few details about myself, after which Paul told me something of his tour and experiences in Britain and mentioned some of the friends and comrades I knew and worked with in England. After lunch we went to his suite, where we continued our discussion. His concern and fight for all oppressed peoples (the working classes of capitalist countries included) is too well-known to be reiterated here. One thing, however, must be said - whenever Paul spoke of Africa, his face lit up with a kind of penetrating illumination I've yet to see in another person. There in his face I could read his deep and profound desire for freedom and independence for African people and peoples of African descent throughout the world. I listened intently to his words of wisdom until about 2 p.m., when we both went down to St. Wenceslas Square just in front of the hotel where we bought Russian-English newspapers. At 2:30 p.m. the Secretary of the Festival Committee (which organized the International Music Festival) came for Paul. After with his accompanist we drove to the great hall in Smetana Square where he gave his first concert in Prague.

As Paul was rehearsing for a part of the afternoon, I took leave of him for the time being. In the meantime the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had begun in the morning. The Union of Czechoslovak Youth had arranged a cultural evening to welcome the delegates. This took place

in the evening in the large park just beside the old fair palace where the Congress itself was meeting. As the news was flashed round in the afternoon that Paul Robeson would be appearing, you can imagine the terrific rush for tickets. As we sat among the over 20,000 people who gathered there that evening, the delegates began arriving. Public attention was focused on the foreign delegates, among them many great leaders of the international working-class movement. As soon as Paul was spotted about 100 yards away from the main grounds, the huge crowd burst into applause. Cheering continued until he sat down ~~in~~ near the Czechoslovak Prime Minister, Antonin Zapotocky.

After the audience was entertained by a Czechoslovak Army Chorus and orchestra to some items of music and national dances, Paul's turn was announced. As he stepped on ~~to~~ the rostrum, cheering began. He smiled and waved his acknowledgement to the very warm and enthusiastic reception of the Czech people. In a short speech in Russian he expressed his delight to be among the Czech people again after an absence of many years. He then sang a few songs, among them the ever-popular "Joe Hill", "Ole Man River" and "Soviet Fatherland" -- this which he sang in Russian brought the giant-crowd up to their feet and cheering continued for minutes on end.

At 9:30 that same evening Paul gave his first concert here to a very crowded house. Every square centimetre of sitting and standing space was occupied. The cheering ~~was~~ continued long after he left the hall.

At 3:30 p.m. Thursday, May 26th, he held a press conference at the Press Room in the National Club. That same afternoon he sang at several factories to workers in the Prague area.

In the meantime, the International Union of Students and the Union of Czechoslovak Youth had completed their preparations for a reception in honour of Paul. Just before mid-day on Thursday, May 26th, I led a deputation from the above-mentioned organizations to invite him to the reception.

At 4 p.m. on Friday, May 27th, the President of the IUS, an Indonesian student, an English girl-student, and I formed a sort of guard of honour and accompanied him to the large hall in the National Club where the reception was held. As soon as he stepped into the hall, the audience of over 200 students from all parts of the world started cheering. Here were students from all continents of the world, of different colours, and different cultures, but firmly united in their will for world progress - united in their common struggle for freedom, democracy, and lasting peace. Here indeed was the symbol of the type of world which all progressive humanity, led by that mighty bulwark of peace, Socialism, the Soviet Union is today fighting for.

After being welcomed by Ken Tolhurst who was chairing the meeting, and Jella Grohman, President of the IUS, Paul Robeson expressed his thanks to everyone for assembling to meet him and to the President for his kind words. He told all the young students assembled that he has a son of about their age who was reared in the Soviet Union and hopes to be able to return to this part of the world in the autumn. He is now graduating from his college in the United States and intends to continue his studies in Moscow where he will be very glad to meet all his old friends again.

The struggle in America is very sharp, but there is a hard core of democratic and progressive students as there is amongst the rest of the people. He was happy to be able to say that the students were in the leadership of the Wallace campaign and that youth was in the vanguard of the whole struggle. He cited such examples as the youth fighting against the Mundt-Nixon Bill, and the rest of the anti-liberty bills. Apart from talking himself he would also like to hear from the young people present about their problems, the conditions in their countries, in Africa, parts of South East Asia, reports of their struggles, how they get to Prague, and how they feel about the situation.

Paul Robeson then sang six songs: "Love Will Find Out the Way", "Water Boy", "Joe Hill", a French song, "Široká Strana Moja Rodnája", and "Ole Man River".

Paul Robeson continued: "I have just finished a long tour and am about to return to the United States to what is and must be for a long time still a sharp struggle. The situation in America is close to 1931 Germany, in which men like Eisler and Busch struggled so hard against fascism, or in Vichy France, because a small minority of the American people see their only chance in a revival of fascism and their only allies in fascists. Once it was the task of the Spanish people to hold back fascism, and but for that ~~star~~ struggle we might not have been here today. With the growth of the people's democracies, of countries like Czechoslovakia and China, I am certain that Republican Spain will be born again. In all this the American people bear a great responsibility. At a press conference yesterday, I was asked by a Greek journalist what the Americans feel about the struggle there in Greece where the American government is trying to build up fascism again and to take the country away from its people. I assured my friend that the struggle is close to our hearts, to the hearts of progressive Americans, and that we shall do all in our power to see that Greece is returned to its people and the fascists in power are punished as they should be.

"I know what strength I shall take back to progressive Americans, the strength and warmth given me at this reception which I feel every moment here in Czechoslovakia. It is a great thing every once in a while to be able to walk the earth like a free man in full human dignity as I walked in the streets of Prague today. This is something denied the American Negro who does not often have the chance to feel free; this is also denied the African, the West Indian and the working class of the Western world. I shall tell them of the new dignity which human beings gain when they take over their own destinies. I shall take back the spirit of this struggle: freedom was not easily won here, and cannot be easily won in other parts of the earth. This is something you understand. We shall be willing to sacrifice everything and to stand firm whatever the consequences.

"It is a wonderful thing to see students and young people from all parts of the world. One talks often about democratic ideas but it is really wonderful to see the unity of all human beings in front of me today. You prove today that the human differences based on colour, on east and west, are nonsense and mean nothing - we are all dedicated to building a free life for the peoples, not for the few but for the millions. You go back to fight for the rights of the people below, to see that children can grow up in a rich and full life. My boy knows from his training that he must fight for his people and for the rights of peoples everywhere. I am proud to see the representatives gathered here dedicated to this great task.

"I am only here for a few days but I am sure that I shall see you all again in your own ~~land~~ lands. As a singer I give all I can to the struggle of the progressive movement. I will see you in Greece with the partisans. I will see you in Indonesia, in Africa, in many parts of the world where the struggle for the freedom of human beings goes on. I hope to visit ~~the Soviet Union, the New Democratic China~~ the New Democratic China and to see the Soviet Union again, to visit other countries where I can talk free and gather strength to take back with me, to my friends. I myself know how sharp the struggle is; there is no possibility today of anything but accepting the sharp struggle. When the ruling powers in America say they accept fascism, the millions say no.

"You see, they are nervous. I hear today that Eisler is free. This is a great victory for the British people. As soon as Eisler was taken off the boat, people protested from below. The result shows the power of the people, that they are able to defy the powers when they understand what is going on. Fascism is going too far. This case should show the British people that the United States Government can give orders to the British Government but not to the British people. This may mark an important moment. The struggle in Britain was led by Communists - this should show that it is not so simple to laugh off Communism in Great Britain.

"The question of civil liberties in the USA is basically the question of the 12 Communist leaders on trial. If something happens to the, something will happen to 12,000,000 people and more. As a Negro and as an

"I say that freedom from oppression, freedom for art, mean nothing unless embracing a particular political philosophy can be put in jail for it. I am going back to take the stand, to testify in the trial of the 12. I see, what happens to these leaders is a matter of life or death to me.

"There are times when there is no longer a moment for hesitation. I have seen fascism at work in Spain and other countries; I have seen how that tremendous force and didn't beat down the Czech people".

Robeson then told a story of his American football days when, by leading up to an anti-Negro opponent at the beginning of the game, he said that he had no more trouble with him for the rest of the game. He did this to illustrate that the best way of defending oneself is to see it that the opponent is not there. "If when a fascist starts at you, he is up next at him - don't let him do anything - that's the best way to win."

"I certainly hope you will all take back the courage and strength I feel in this land. Something I feel very deeply - you are the future leaders of your people. The reward comes in a circle - one gives and gets back. It is a wonderful thing knowing that one spends one's life and education not as separate from one's people. You will be giving your lives and talents to building the new world. I am proud to be part of the world which you will build, and am proud to be here as a friend of the future leaders of the peoples' democracies all over the world."

At the end of his most inspiring speech we all stood and applauded for nearly ten minutes. Shortly afterwards, we went and joined the giant rally of over 500,000 people at the Old Town Square. This was the Czech people's demonstration to greet the 9th Congress of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. What an encouraging spectacle to behold. To feel that one belonged to the army of millions throughout the world fighting for a new society - already building a new and better society. Paul went to the tribune and had the other distinguished leaders of the international working-class - there was President Klement Gottwald; Rudolf Slansky, Secretary of the C.P.S.U.(S); G.M. Malenkov, Secretary of the Political Bureau of the C.P.S.U.(S); Harry Pollitt; Palmiro Togliatti; Andre Marty of France; Amado of Brazil; Chen Gung-hui of Democratic China; and several others from different parts of the globe.

In the afternoon of Sunday, May 29th, Paul gave another concert in the stadium to an audience of over 15,000 people. It was an unforgettable experience as the huge crowd rose to its feet again and again and cheered as Paul sang in English, Russian, Chinese, Yiddish, Spanish, French. He made a short speech towards the end of the performance, and ended by singing "Let Fatherland" in Russian. Once again the crowd rose to its feet and stayed cheering long after Paul had left the stadium.

Paul had the great honour of helping hold the music sheets on the piano for the accompanist, Bruno Raikin. To illustrate again his deep concern for the colonial and other oppressed peoples, Paul requested the Festival Committee to accept the entire proceeds from that concert as well as the fee he wanted to pay him to be given to the IUS fund which will be used to help many colonial students whose economic circumstances are hard to attend the World Festival of Youth and Students in Budapest in August. The Committee readily agreed to this suggestion, and today the IUS fund has received from another concrete proof of Paul's unceasing efforts on behalf of the colonial and other oppressed peoples. That same evening Paul was one of the many guests of honour who were entertained by President Gottwald's reception held in the Hradcany Palace.

That night I was among a group of friends whom Paul had invited to a chat with him. Among our group were a Canadian Negro lady journalist, an American Negro student, an English couple, a Czech composer, and a white man couple. Paul expressed his joy at the very warm and tremendous response he had received from the Czech people, and said this had added more strength to him in particular and the progressive forces of America in general. He told us a few amusing stories and incidents in his distinguished and varied career. A short time after midnight we decided to end this family

gathering, so that he could have the rest he so richly deserved.

On Monday, ~~May~~ May 30th, I was among the first group of people to arrive at the hotel by 11 a.m. Several of us were sitting with Paul in his suite, when two people brought up two parcels. They were for us as we soon learned presents to Paul and his accompanist from the President and Mrs. Gottwald. Paul's was an exquisite glass vase which was simply breath-taking in its artistic beauty. He immediately wrote a letter thanking the President and his wife for their wonderful gift.

With a group of several others, among whom were some officials from the Ministry of Information, the principal of the Prague Conservatoire (and also chairman of the International Music Festival Committee), I accompanied Paul to the air-port. At 3:30 p.m. their plane took off for Warsaw, where he will meet and sing to the Polish people. From Warsaw Paul will go on to Moscow where he will participate in the 150th anniversary celebrations of the birth of the great Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin. *

Paul Robeson's visit has been as memorable as it has been inspiring. We have already been immensely strengthened in our determination to carry on and intensify our efforts in the fight for national independence, democracy and peace. For me in particular his visit is one I shall always remember.

Pa. PF 44990

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FROM THE PRESS SECTION.

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'WE COMMUNISTS'

NEW YORK, Monday. — Paul Robeson, American negro singer, indicated that he is a Communist in a speech at a "Bill of Rights" conference here to-day.

After referring to "we Communists," Mr. Robeson said: "We're going to reach out for some of this great land that belongs in the hands of the American people."—Reuter.

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