

Paul Robeson Sings in Hartford!



PAUL ROBESON

▲ IN ▲

CONCERT



PAUL ROBESON'S record of achievement is a lengthy one. Mr. Robeson first attracted national attention while a student at Rutgers. In the field of sports, he won letters in football, baseball, basketball and track. As a scholar, Mr. Robeson was distinguished as a winner of the coveted Phi Beta Kappa.

In 1930, MR. ROBESON played the title role in Shakespeare's "Othello" in London. He was to repeat his magnificent performance in the United States in the Theatre Guild production which also starred Jose Ferrer and Uta Hagen.

MR. ROBESON was awarded the Donaldson Award for best acting performance and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences Gold Medal for the best diction in the American theatre; and in 1945, the NAACP presented him with the Spingarn Medal for outstanding achievement.

Lawrence Brown has been the musical associate of Paul Robeson for all of the latter's musical career. Himself a singularly gifted musician, Mr. Brown is a scholar in the field of Negro music and has arranged and published many spirituals.

Hope Foye, born in Hartford, began musical studies in Hartford after winning a scholarship through the Meriden Choral Club. Made appearances at Cafe Society Downtown, at Cafe Society Uptown and Village Vanguard in New York City. Broadway productions "Dance Me A Song", "Green Pastures"—"Just A Little Simple" and "Gold Through the Trees." Just recently returned from a concert and radio appearance in Europe.



Lawrence Brown, Accompanist

And Featuring

HOPE FOYE, Vocalist

THE JEWISH PEOPLES CHORUS

Saturday, November 15, 1952

8:00 P. M.

**Weaver High School
Auditorium**

Admission \$2.40 and \$1.20

★
Jewish Peoples' Chorus singing in Hartford for 25 years,
directed by Samuel Goldman noted New York Conductor.

Auspices: Peoples Party of Hartford

— 31 —

פאר ראובסאן זינגטיאין טאון האל



קאנצערט

צו פייערן דעם

32-טן יוביליי

פון דער

מארגן-פרייהייט

שבת דעם 3-טן אפריל

וועט אהיים

טאון האל, 150 נארד בראד

אין דער פראנקסער שטעטל אייף

פאר נאוויק

וועדקסטאר, מארגן פרייהייט

מאריס יו. שאפעס

מאריסטער היסטאריקער

אין אנדערע

איינערס

דעזערווייט — 2.60 טעקס אריינג.

אלגעמיין — 1.30 טעקס אריינג.

קינדער — .65 טעקס אריינג.

קינט בילעטן אין דער אים פון

דער מארגן-פרייהייט

317 סאוט 6טע נאס WA 2-2558

Concert to celebrate the 32nd Jubilee of the "Morgan Freiheit" at Town Hall, 150 N. Broad Street in an unidentified city. Paul Novick and Morris Shappes are also listed as participants.

(Thanks to Miriam Bodian and Leah Zazulyear for help with the translation.)

When Paul Robeson Sang To Me*

Leah Zazulyer
Rochester, New York

During and after World War II, once a month, my parents went to meetings of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order and the Brisker-Vicinity Aid Society. Members of the two organizations were the mainstay of their social life, links between a "Fiddler on the Roof" type past and a post-Holocaust American present. Although many of the same people belonged to both groups and sometimes activities were jointly sponsored, each organization was unique.

The Briskers were men and women in the Los Angeles area who had emigrated from shtetls in the province of Grodno near the city of Brest (called Brisk in Yiddish)—then Russia, sometimes Poland, and now Belarus. They had formed themselves into a group in order to send food, clothing, money, letters, and moral support to whomsoever from their villages had survived Nazi persecution in general and the death camps in particular. It was a region they knew all too well—a swampy, pogrom and poverty-ridden corner of the Pale of Settlement from which they had fled either before World War I, or between the two wars, or had barely survived World War II as partisans or prisoners.

Chief among the Briskers' fund-raising techniques was the concert or lecture, alternating with holiday get-togethers. These were secular events usually held in small dingy rented halls. Traditional religious rituals had long been replaced by fervent social action, which the Briskers devoutly believed would mend or restore the world, AND, of course, teach their children how to be good, secular Jews.

On the other hand, the Jewish People's Fraternal Order, a division of the International Workers Order, was initially set up as a means to provide life insurance, burial and death benefits—plus a kindershtul—for its many working-class members who did not have union benefits or wanted more. Since it was nation-wide, given the flavor of the times, it soon developed a political action agenda as well. The JPFO campaigned tirelessly for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, exposed the virulent Detroit-based radio anti-semitic Father Coughlin, a Hitler apologist, and gave fierce attention to the great civil rights issues of the day, which often pertained to black Americans, and ranged from protesting lynchings to supporting fair employment practices.

Is it any surprise then that both Jewish organizations found themselves denounced as subversive during the full deflowering of democracy known as the McCarthy era, and each earned a place on the attorney general's long garden variety list of communist or pinko organizations? Progressive Jews were in good company in those days, sharing media vilification, costly court appearances, and disemployment with Paul Robeson and many another defamed American who still believed that politics and commitment had virtue.

Before they were forced by court order to disband, I was taken to most of their parties, concerts, and lectures during my pre-teen and early teen years, since I was too young to be left at home alone, and too old for a baby sitter. Besides, I grew up in one of those many Jewish households in which children were definitely to be seen, heard, included in conversations, and taken to events in order to listen, ask, and thereby learn. Mostly I liked going, even though right then in the midst of the fastidiousness of adolescence I had already been called a dirty Jew by some kid at school, and by then I had repeatedly heard talk about an international Jewish conspiracy—whatever that was!

What I had the most trouble with was just being reminded that I was Jewish, which I understood to be problematic, and somehow unfortunate because why else had Hitler almost succeeded in killing all of us? Frankly it was all beyond my comprehension, and I suspected it was even beyond the comprehension of the adults, judging by the answers they offered me. So I preferred to just skip the whole topic.

Yet the homemade delicacies brought to these events and sold before or at intermission to help defray costs certainly helped, if not to resolve my feelings about being Jewish, at least to momentarily push them deeply down. After all, as the Yiddish proverb I had often heard explained, “A sick person you ask, a well person you give.”

My parents were at their best those nights, even dressed up a bit, my lovely but too hard-working mother’s fine brown braids a crown across her head, her large hazel eyes dancing about as she laughed and visited with other shop girls and friends. Even my artistic and intellectual father was connected, stimulated, and almost animated on these occasions. If only they had all spoken good, unaccented English! But Yiddish was primarily the language of these events, or broken English, which was not something I could easily reconcile with my zealous English teacher’s fanatic approach to “proper” grammar, pronunciation, and spelling.

Often I was among the youngest in attendance and therefore treated to much attention, patting, praise, and questioning merely for being that wonderful creature, a child! Didn’t I look pretty? What grade was I in? How was the piano playing? What did I want to be? Was I a good student? And here, have another *latke* or *kichel*. Braces on or off, pigtails cut or not, I knew these people cared, and that perplexed me even more.

Since it was feared that complimenting one’s own children might visit bad luck upon them, my parents busily complimented the children of their friends. Meanwhile their friends in turn lavished compliments on me, and everybody eavesdropped on everybody else—all this in Yiddish, that gutsy language full of diminutives and endearments. Despite their terrible English, and everything else about them that was, if not un-American certainly non-American, when people called me Layala, or Layechke, I loved it as much as I

hated it. Though when they said I had a *Yiddishe ponim*, a Jewish face, I worried that they meant my nose and not my soul.

The programs were always organized on a domino theory. One person promising to be brief introduced the next speaker, who also only promised to be brief, but introduced yet the next speaker at length and with elaborate heartfelt plaudits, and so forth until the stage and the air were heavy with fraternal extravagances, pleas for money, and laudations for what was, interminably, to come . . .

But the night Paul Robeson was to perform both the announcements and the introductions were cut relatively short. What restraint! We were merely given to understand that he and we were comrades in the fight against McCarthyism and oppression everywhere in the world—and in the interests of time, only some of the everywhere's were enumerated. . . . The man who was giving the pitch for money could barely contain his excitement at having Robeson in the wings. He kept peering stage right, as if to make certain Robeson was still there, which caused him to forget what he wanted to say and repeat himself. . .

I could hear the main introducer's voice quiver with pride as he congratulated the audience, "this little band of Jewish working class people," for having sacrificed so, having scraped together by contribution and raffle ticket just enough, barely enough *gelt* to bring Paul Robeson! (The same Robeson I would later learn was unable to work because of blacklisting within this country and the government's refusal to issue him a visa to travel and work abroad. Jews probably put a little bread on his table in those times, but surely he came cheap!)

"And now, I present to you, the Jewish people of Los Angeles this great man, this magnificent artist, this citizen of the world" . . . is what he finally got around to saying, followed by a long list of Robeson's various credits, degrees, and accomplishments. I wondered could the deep-voiced person on my parent's scratchy old 78 rpm records be THAT special?

Suddenly, slowly but deliberately, a huge black man, maybe in fact an actual giant I figured, entered and immediately took possession of the stage. For once the voluble audience became totally and instantly silent. Smiling broadly, Robeson approached center stage; everyone leaped up and clapped hard!

He smiled on, nodded, spread his hands for them to sit; they clapped again, loudly! When I asked my parents why they were clapping so hard when they hadn't heard a single song yet, they were too busy clapping to answer. Was it possible that all these people, the whole audience, knew this man? Who was he anyway? Why had the introducer with the thick Yiddish accent said that no matter how big Robeson was, he was with the little people, the common people of the world? And why was everybody so excited about a black man when this was a Jewish occasion?

Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.



At a children's camp, 1941.

He was the biggest black man I had ever seen, but not the first. Maybe, just maybe he was a male angel, something like the mysterious one in the real full name of Los Angeles, Our Fair City Queen of the Angels, which I had recently learned about in school. If so why had he come here, now? Or was this really Elijah? After all it was almost Passover time. Had I missed something, some explanation given in Yiddish, which when I couldn't understand it, tended to make me daydream? Meanwhile his accompanist, Laurence Brown, a man

of ordinary size, who had been lovingly introduced by Robeson, came on stage, and arranged himself at the piano expectantly. Another black man. More applause.

At first Robeson spoke, in his astonishingly deep voice, which resonated along the stage boards, out and up through the soles of my feet, until like a deaf-mute, I could both see and feel his presence. His voice was carried through both my ears and my skin to every nerve ending. He spoke simple words, of his travels, of Jewish life flowering despite all odds around the war-torn globe, and of his deep conviction that a new day was dawning for mankind.

Then he actually sang. Okay, I recognized he was good. Better than Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole. More like Jan Peerce singing *Kol Nidre* for the dead, or Jascha Heifetz and Yehudi Menuhin on the violin, certainly different than Pete Seeger. So I sat back and listened.

First came his songs, the songs as he said of "my people". Funny how one was called "Go Down Moses." Go figure that. "Deep River." "Old Black Joe." "Michael's Boat." *Porgy and Bess*. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Sometimes I did too, when I had done wrong!

Next he sang songs of other lands or other times, but each in its original language, in Chinese, Russian, Spanish, an African language, and more! How many languages were there in the world anyway, I wondered? Every song was prefaced with a story about where he had learned it or when he had sung it in that country. I was still trying to figure out how the audience knew so many of these songs, and when he invited them to join in did so, and why he raised his hand to cup his ear when he got to the lowest notes or the softest parts of songs—when, to my utter amazement he began to sing all the Jewish songs I had ever heard my Mother sing to me at bedtime, or softly to herself at the kitchen sink!

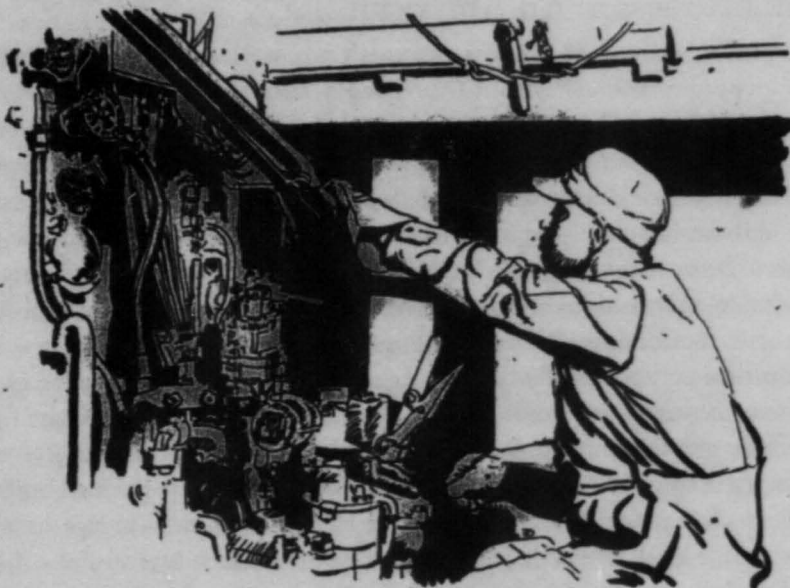
He who spoke perfect English was singing in Yiddish, and it was okay! "Tumbalalika," my favorite riddle song about love or life or both. "Raisins and Almonds," the lullaby about saying goodbye to the old world. "Freiheit" and "Zog Nit Keynmol," which he explained showed the world that the Jews were more than victims. Gently irreverent songs about Rabbis, about Jews who finally could own land and run tractors and cream extractors. Songs of willful girls who wanted to marry for love, and did!

As he sang, I forgot. About Hitler, about McCarthy. As the Yiddish proverb says, "He crawled into my heart with both feet," and in so doing displaced much, somehow making room for me to forego my enemies, love my parents, their friends, their stories, their language, and myself.

*This paper, presented at the Robeson Conference, first appeared in *Jewish Currents: A Progressive Monthly*, which holds the copyright. Reprinted by permission.

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