PAUL ROBESON

by

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cause you had always said you were going to give him his first grown up clothes"). Her efforts at retaliation—"Pauli was thrilled with your wire. I'm so glad you did send it. It was a little confusing, with the signature Paul Robeson. Pauli could not understand why it wasn't signed Daddy?"—did nothing to narrow the growing gulf between them.[30]

In the early spring of 1941, bowing to Essie's importunities, willing to indulge her stylish fantasies if simultaneously they would serve to remove her and her overbearing mother from his proximity (and give him, as well, the tax advantages of an out-of-state residence), Paul agreed to purchase an imposing two-and-a-half-acre, twelve-room Georgian-Colonial house in Enfield, Connecticut, for nineteen thousand dollars. Complete with servants' quarters, a swimming pool, and a separate recreation building that had a bowling alley and billiard room, the house was so large and in such disrepair that one of the workmen hired to fix it up told a reporter, "He's gonna hafta sing alotta songs to heat this place." Essie did some of the manual labor herself, including painting much of the house (Freda's brother, on a visit, was "shocked to come upon her balanced on a scaffold while putting a coat of paint on the staircase ceiling")—though Bob Rockmore's sense of fiscal propriety was nonetheless jarred by her expenditures. On May 1, 1941, Essie, Pauli, and Ma Goode were able to move into the Enfield house. "We are all simply crazy about the country," Essie wrote the Van Vechtens, adding that "Big Paul loves the quiet and low gear of the place, and flies home for every moment he can spare even when on tour." She was adamantly putting the best face on it, as her concluding comment—"it is all much too good to be true"—inadvertently acknowledged. Paul did occasionally spend time there, but his primary residence alternated between the Freda Diamond/Barry Baruch household and the McGhees', and the focus of his life was in New York, not at Enfield. Which is not to say Paul did not still have an occasional burst of affection for Essie. While in Los Angeles in August 1941, he wrote her a letter that began, "I miss you terribly and would so like to nestle [you] on my nice shoulder and be patted and called Sweetie Pie and oh so many things," went on to give her news of mutual friends, and then teased her good-humoredly with having met Hollywood celebrities:

> And most exciting of all, at a British benefit (swanky) I met all the stars, and had a special chat with—breathe hard—*Mr. Charles Boyer.* . . . I told him of you and he's waiting, he says. He came to my recital and told Morros [the producer] that he has all my records. So the ground is laid. I said the *ground!* I feel grand, completely relaxed and am sleeping thru anything.

He then went on to ask about Pauli: ". . . How's my boy. Everyone, everywhere asks about him and I tell them how sweet, intelligent and

thoughtful he is, what an athlete—and a few other things. They conclude I like him enormously and am very proud of him. I think they are perhaps right about that." He ended the letter with as sweetly tender a message as any he ever sent her: "I love you very, very much and miss you until it hurts. I do like my place so much both in Conn. and in your heart—and I feel I'm camping out until I get back to both." Although Paul was capable of dissembling, this does not seem such an instance. More likely, this complicated man was having a genuine spell of nostalgic affection for Essie. On her side—never one to indulge introspection or wallow in self-pity—Essie plunged into the maelstrom of painters, plumbers, and pipe fitters with renewed zest (Freda Diamond visited her frequently and helped her choose furnishings), establishing a home in which she knew she would, for the most part, live without Paul.[31]

The years from 1935 to 1939 had been the heyday of the Popular Front, a time when a substantial consensus was reached internationally on the left. The Communist Party/USA (CPUSA) refocused its sights away from revolutionary bellicosity and toward cooperation with mainstream liberalism in a combined effort to resist the rise of fascism abroad and to work at home in behalf of trade-unionism and racial equality. CP leader Earl Browder's declaration in 1936 that "Communism is 20th Century Americanism" plausibly affirmed this solidarity—and also signaled the marked influence Communism had come to have in American life: CP membership rolls dramatically lengthened, hundreds of new Party units formed, and Communists were welcomed to affiliate in large-scale coalitions with "radical democrats." The Nazi-Soviet pact in August 1939 effectively ended this antifascist unity.

In the two-year period following that pact, and until Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, Robeson took his position on the CP side of the sundered left-wing coalition. He sounded the themes and advocated the policies simultaneously being endorsed through the linked voices of the Communist Party, the newly powerful National Negro Congress (NNC), and some of the left-wing unions in the recently emergent Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The particular fortunes of the National Negro Congress illustrate the shifting general pattern of left-wing alliance and Robeson's own role within it.[32]

The Communist Party had played a prominent but not a controlling role in the creation of the NNC, joining forces with a diverse spectrum of black-activist organizations and leaders. At the first NNC convention, in 1936, eight hundred delegates representing a wide range of civil-rights organizations, church groups, fraternities, and trade unions gathered to form a broad coalition dedicated to struggling against fascism and for civil rights and unionism. John P. Davis, a black economist and Harvard Law School graduate (and possibly a secret CP member), was the leading figure

think they sing by the light of nature, you would never wish to hear them a second time. Now, he was a developed singer, very highly developed technically, but he sounded absolutely natural. And so you would think he was born to sing. . . . He had relative pitch" (interview with Alan Bush, PR, Jr., participating, Sept. 3, 1982).

Toward the end of the tour, Robeson started to cup a hand behind his ear in order to hear himself better; he retained the habit of ear-cupping thereafter. He also participated, during this same period, in an experiment with an electronic device ("Synthia") developed by Prof. Harold Burris-Meyer, theater sound-research director at the Stevens Institute of Technology, to enable a singer to hear his own sound without producing acoustical distortions or amplification in the concert hall (papers, newspaper articles, and correspondence surrounding the experiment are in RA).

30. ER to PR, Nov. 3, 5, 9, 1940, RA; ER to CVV, Nov. 7 (weight), 9 (parents' functions), 1940; ER to CVV and FM, Nov. 15, 1940, Yale: Van Vechten. "We've been hanging around for months, doing nothing, since 'John Henry' closed, and were beginning to get restless," Essie wrote John P. Davis, describing her own turmoil more than Paul's (ER to Davis, April 20, 1941, National Negro Congress Papers—henceforth NYPL/Schm: NNC).

31. Hartford *Courant,* April 2, 1941 (worker); ER to CVV and FM, Nov. 27, 1941 ("Big Paul"), RA; PR to ER, Aug. 29, 1941, RA; Freda Diamond ms. comment (scaffold). Essie bombarded Bob Rockmore with itemized bills and enthusiastic reports about the detailed adventures of settling in. Various friends —including Minnie Sumner, Hattie Bolling, Bert and Gig McGhee, Sadie Sumner, Essie's brother John Goode, Freda Diamond, and Walter White's son, Pidgy White (to visit Pauli)—came up for a look at the new place, and all expressed enthusiasm (e.g., ER to Rockmore, June 16, July 13, 23, Aug. 10, 25, 1941, RA). Rockmore periodically showed his exasperation with Essie's nest-building expenditures, writing her that until the last of the renovations and improvements were finally finished, there would "be no peace on earth for anybody" (Rockmore to ER, Aug. 12, 1941, RA).

32. Of special value in understanding the Popular Front years (though it is concerned primarily with the leadership, not the rank and file of the CP) is Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism* (Basic Books, 1984).

33. It's impossible to cite with any thoroughness the large literature on these issues, but I found of special value (along with Klehr, *Heyday*) Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression* (Greenwood, 1970), Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism* (Princeton, 1977), John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era* (University of Tennessee, 1980), and, above all, Naison's indispensable *Communists in Harlem.*

The Robesons were never more than marginally acquainted with the Ralph Bunches. In 1932 Essie interviewed Bunche for a book she was planning at the time on prominent black figures and found him "attractive and very, very interesting" (ER Diary, Sept. 26, 1932, RA). A telling anecdote about Robeson and Bunche was told to me by Jean Herskovits, daughter of Melville Herskovits: The family had recently returned from Trinidad where Jean (age four) had picked up fluent pidgin English. Robeson was the first black man Jean had seen since Trinidad, and when he swept her up in his arms on arriving at the Herskovits house, she enthusiastically greeted him in pidgin. Robeson and Jean's parents burst out laughing. "Thank God she didn't do that with Ralph [Bunche]!" Paul said. In 1949, when Robeson was under fire from the established black leadership, Bunche is quoted as saying, "I have always admired Mr. Robeson's singing more than his social philosophy" (as quoted in Gilbert Ware, *William Hastie: Grace Under Pressure* [Oxford, 1984], p. 229). Subsequently, Robeson apparently made a disparaging remark about Bunche (Corliss Lamont to PR, Dec. 1, 1950, NYPL/Schm: PR Coll.).

34. ER to Davis, April 20, 1941, NYPL/Schm: NNC; Rajni [Patel] to ER,



63. (LEFT) Ma Goode at the Robeson house in Enfield. 1940s

64. (BELOW) Freda Diamond





65. Paul, Jr., Freda Diamond. Essie. and Barry Baruch at Enfield. 1941