Banning of Robeson Laid to Fidler Story

Singer Accused of Dedicating Song to Eisler; Peoria Clerics Attacked

By A. RITCHIE LOW

PEORIA, III. — The real story behind the refusal of this city to permit Paul Robeson to appear in recital here on April 3 was revealed to me last week as the result of a rumor by Jimmy Fidler.

Mr. Robeson was scheduled to sing first in the local Shrine mosque. However, sponsors of that performance withdrew and efforts of others to present the noted singer in a public building were defeated by the City Council and mayor.

Since then, I understand, the ban has been extended beyond this industrial city to Albany, the capital of New York, whose board of education last week canceled a recital by Mr. Robeson at a high school on May 9.

Sang to Staid Vermonters

Mr. Robeson gave the same program he intended to present here in Peoria several months ago to a small audience in Vermont, and I was one of 2000 or so who paid $2.40 to have the pleasure of hearing him sing.

What made conservative Vermonters willing to hear him gladly and some Morarians unwilling even to extend a welcome? I thought at first the answer would be easy but visiting around town has proved it anything but that.

Here is the story as I got it from others. Tickets for the concert group has a binding contract for use of the Philip Livingston Junior High School auditorium, where the performance was to take place. Concerts were selling reasonably well and the sponsors looked forward to a crowded hall. Robeson never lacked an audience wherever he goes.

Fidler Rumor Blamed

Then something happened. It was this: Jimmy Fidler, in his syndicated column, told of the noted singer's appearance in Vermont and sported a column he had written in Los Angeles, dedicating one to Gerhardt Eisler, labeled as America's foremost communist composer. In the paper, the street the fat was in the fire.

The American Legion got busy and protested Robeson's coming. The sponsors, getting a whiff of what was happening quickly withdrew. Then at the Legion meeting the following resolution was discussed and passed:

"The American Legion deplores the actions of all individuals and organizations of any kind and especially of communists and their leaders and organizations involved in the dissemination of their subversive propaganda.

"City Council Takes Steps"

Later the Peoria City Council passed a resolution, stating that the members disagreed with the speaker and condemned him.

"I am not easily frightened!" Fidler replied, "and I'll be back in Peoria with adequate protection!"

While some were opposed to his coming, there were others who were as emphatic that the program go on "no matter how many black people come!"

Preference for American Cited

A Mrs. Julia P. White for example, chairman of the committee pointing out that the singer had been invited to come to town by private citizen and did not thrust himself on the people.

"She went on to say that Paul Robeson was a great man, one who has proved his greatness by rising superior to the prejudice, hatred and contempt that has brought him in his own country, the United States—the country with which he has chosen to identify himself rather than live in Russia."

Eisler Story Explained

When his attention was called to the Fidler statement, which started all the agitation, the baritone immediately stated that the story had been making the rounds for months and that he'd just recently seen it.

"I sing in Los Angeles," said Robeson, "not a Communist battle hymn but one called, 'The Leaning Tower.'" He has been referred to as an opponent of Hitler's victims in the Dachau prison camp as they were working for the study and development of chemistry.

He explained he'd dedicated this song to Eisler, not because of his communist connections but because Eisler had been one of the greatest opponents of Hitler and fascism throughout Europe.

Even had it been a communist song, Robeson went on to say, 'I can't see where it would have made any difference. As far as I know, we are not at war with Russia, and they are not our allies in the last one.'

Not Real Issue, Most Agree

Not a real issue, most agreed. But, allowing to this one and that one, there was one angle a number of local citizens stressed. It was this:

They wanted me to understand that this whole unfortunate affair had nothing to do with the race issue. As they saw it the real opposition to Robeson was based on his supposedly Communist convictions rather than his race being colored.

"Folks of all races get along pretty well together in Peoria," said Frank Haven, a common carrier and post office employee for over 30 years, told me.

"The colored population has increased quite a bit since the war and we all pull together. I hope this stuff about race is we get along equally as well as in the future."

Others stressed the same point:

"We have always been invited to attend church services and we have been accepted, although we have been black."

Commenting on the church's attitude, the well-known baritone of private persons. Tickets for the concert in town, white or colored, had opened its pulpit to him. This fact meant that the black School auditorium was taken, but the white seat, which was the sub-servient to the status quo.

Quickly following his statement, however, the Peoria Ministerial Association met and made arrangements to invite Paul Robeson back to town later to speak or to present a program.

No sooner had this action been taken than when the Peoria Star editorially deplored this approach.

"The pastors were well advised," the writer maintained, "to have the clergy of the city hadn't thought the thing through and there were imprints they overlooked."

Sang Before Friends

Mr. Robeson did sing in town after all, but it was before a small group in the private home of one of his friends, Alvis Patton of 663 W. Market St. Peoria. This followed the refusal of the mayor to permit the use of the city hall.

His powerful voice, it is reported, could be heard for a considerable distance through the open windows and a number of passersby stopped to listen.

Many Issues Raised

What began as an opposition to a noted singer's being given permission to use a local auditorium to give a concert winds up by accusing a Peoria pastor of economic heresy.

That is why pathey that different angles are mixed up in this issue, free speech, right of peaceful assembly, race prejudice, Bill of Rights and so forth.

I don't expect the local clergyman to let editorial writers get away with mixed up this issue, namely the right of local private citizens to come together in peaceful assembly to hear Paul Robeson sing.

In the view of this Federal Communications Commissioner, if our freedoms are today in danger we greatly enhance that danger by the means we select to defend them.