

Story Behind the Barring of Robeson

Banning of Robeson Laid to Fidler Story

Singer Accused of Dedicating Song to Eisler; Peoria Clerics Attacked

By A. RITCHIE LOW

PEORIA, Ill.—The real story behind the refusal of this city to permit Paul Robeson to appear in recital here on April 8 was revealed to me last week as the result of a rumor by Jimmie 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 up 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 Peorians 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 con-group has a binding contract for use of the Philip Livingston Junior High School auditorium where the performance was to take place. Cert were selling reasonably well

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and the sponsors looked forward to a crowded hall. Robeson never lacks an audience wherever he goes.

Fidler Rumor Blamed

Then something happened. It was this:

Jimmie Fidler, in his syndicated column, told of the noted artist's singing some communist songs in Los Angeles, dedicating one to Gerhard Eisler, labeled as America's number 1 Communist. When the papers hit 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 quietly withdrew. Then at the Legion meeting the following resolution was discussed and passed:

"The American Legion deploras the actions of all individuals and organizations who sponsor and encourage the advocates and supporters of Communism and their appearance at public meetings for the dissemination of their subversive propaganda."

City Council Takes Steps

Later the Peoria City Council passed a resolution, stating that: the members disapproved of any speaker or artist who is an avowed propagandist for un-American ideologies "regardless of artistic attainment, race, or any other consideration."

"I am not easily frightened," Paul Robeson 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 as originally scheduled.

Preference for American Cited

A Mrs. Julia P. White for example wrote to the Peoria Star pointing out that the singer had been invited to come to town by private citizens and had not thrust himself on the people.

She went on to say that Paul Robeson was "a great singer, a great man; one who has proved his greatness by rising superior to the incessant hardships his color 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 and radio artist stated that the story had been making the rounds for months and that he'd just chosen to ignore it.

"The song I sang in Los Angeles," said Robeson, "was not a Communist battle hymn but one called 'Peabog Soldiers' sung by Hitler's victims in the Dachau prison camp as they were being worked to death."

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 certainly were our allies in the last one."

Not Real Issue, Most Agree

As I moved around Peoria, talking 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 Communistic connections, not on his being colored."

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

"The colored population has increased quite a bit since the war but we all pull together. I hope this won't mean we won't get along equally as well in the future."

Others stressed the same point.

Churchmen Invite Return

Commenting on the church's attitude, the well-known baritone issued a statement saying no church in town, white or colored, had opened its pulpit to him. This fact to some meant that they were subservient to the status quo.

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

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

The pastors were ill advised, the writer maintained; the clergy of the city hadn't thought the thing through and there were implications they'd overlooked. And so on.

President of Group Blamed

This morning paper went farther. It called the president of the local ministers' association a communist sympathizer, reprinting excerpts of an address he'd made a year or more ago!

"We can hardly believe that fellow clergymen of this ministerial association are aware of their president's revolutionary prophecies and teachings," the editorial stated, "else he would not hold his influential position in the organization."

"But since his beliefs appear to parallel so closely those held by Paul Robeson, we cannot escape the doubt that his position in the ministerial association is somewhat connected with the association's decision to invite Robeson to come back to Peoria."

"In view of the association's invitation," the editorial continued, "it seems to us that it owes itself an investigation and the public a report of its findings."

Many Issues Raised

What began as 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 I say 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 clergymen to let editorial writers get away from the main 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.

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, Ajay Martin of 613 Shipman 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 passers-by stopped to listen.