

## Chapter 5

### A Student in Moscow

Otto's delegation of Black students to the Soviet Union caused quite a stir in the States. The FBI kept an eye on their activities and, in late summer 1925, their departure was sensationalized in the *New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> The article attributed a statement to Lovell Fort-Whiteman to the effect that he had sent ten Blacks to the Soviet Union to study bolshevism and prepare for careers in tin communist "diplomatic service." The article concluded with a statement calling for action against such "subversive activity."

At the time, we all felt that any Black applying for a passport would be subjected to close scrutiny. Therefore, when I learned that I too would soon be studying in Moscow, I applied for a passport using the first names of my Mother (Harriet) and Father (Haywood). This name was to stick with me the rest of my life.

Several weeks after I received my passport, I heard the FBI had been making inquiries about me. By that time, I had become known as one of the founders of the ANLC. Therefore, as the time for my departure drew near, I hid out at the home of comrades on Chicago's Westside until arrangements were made. I went to the national office of the Communist Party, then in Chicago, and was informed by Ruthenberg or Lovestone that I should get ready to leave. Political credentials, typed on silk, were sewn into the lining of my coat sleeve. In order to avoid going through the port of New York, I left by way of Canada.

In the manner of the old Underground Railroad, I was passed on from one set of comrades to the next: from Detroit, Rudy Baker, the district organizer, forwarded me on to the Canadian Party headquarters in Toronto where Jim MacDonald and Tim Buck Were in charge. They sent me on to Montreal where comrades housed me and booked passage for me to Hamburg, Germany. Boarding ship in Quebec in the late spring of 1926, I sailed on the Canadian Pacific liner, the old *Empress of Scotland*. From Hamburg, I took a train to Berlin, arriving on a Saturday afternoon.

I had the address of Hazel Harrison the wife of a Chicago friend of mine who was a concert pianist studying in Berlin, where she had had her professional debut. (Years later, she was to head the Music Department at Howard University.) At that time, she was living at a boarding house near the Kurfurstendamm and I stopped there for

the remainder of the weekend.

This was the first time I had been in Berlin. Germany was then emerging from post-war crisis, during which currency inflation had reached astronomical heights, resulting in the virtual expropriation of a large section of the middle class. It was common to see shabbily dressed men still trying to keep up appearances by wearing starched white collars under their patched clothing.

The owners of the boarding house, two middle-aged widows who were friends of Hazel's, showed me a trunk filled with paper notes – old German marks which were now worthless. This had probably represented a life's savings.

Hazel and her two friends took me out to the Tiergarten – the famous Berlin Zoo. I was attracted by the sight of three lion cubs that had been mothered by a German police dog. The cubs were getting big, and it was clear that the “mother” was no longer able to control them. We watched for some time, fascinated. I turned around and realized that there was a crowd around us. At first I thought they were looking at the cubs, but then it became clear that Hazel and I were the center of attention. Blacks were rare in Berlin in those days – there were only half a dozen or so, mostly from the former German colonies of the Cameroons.

Monday morning I took a cab to the headquarters of the German Party, at Karl Marx House on Rosenthallerstrasse. It was a dour, fortress-like structure, with high walls surrounding the main building which was set in the middle. I entered into the anteroom just inside the walls, in which there were a number of sturdy looking young men lounging around. When I came in, they jumped up and stood eyeing me suspiciously.

They were unarmed, but I knew their weapons were within arms' reach. This was a symbol of the times for it was not long after the Beer Hall Putsch of Hitler's brownshirts in Munich, and the battle for the streets of Berlin had already begun. I presented my credentials to a man named Walters, who was undoubtedly the head of security.

It was on this occasion that I first met Ernst Thaelmann, a former Hamburg longshoreman and then leader of the German Communist Party. He was passing through the gate and Walters stopped him and introduced us. Thaelmann spoke fairly good English (probably acquired in his work as a seaman) and we chatted a while. He asked after Foster, Ruthenberg and others. Wishing me good luck,

he passed on his way.

Walters gave me some spending money and arranged for me to stay with some German comrades, a young couple who had an elaborate apartment. The husband ran a haberdashery store on Friedrichstrasse and was a commander in the *Rote Front* (the red front) – the para-military organization which the communists had organized for defense of workers against the fascists.

One day while walking down the Kurfurstendamm, I saw a cabaret billboard advertising the Black jazz band of Leland and Drayton and their Charleston dancers. It was a well-known band back in the States. I had little money, but I couldn't resist the temptation to stop in and hear them. I sat down at a table and ordered a beer. To my dismay, the waiter said they didn't sell beer, just wine. So I took the wine card and chose the cheapest bottle I could find.

A number of band members and dancers came over to my table and asked where I was going. When I told them I was a student going to Moscow, they said they had just returned from a six-month tour in Russia. They were the first Black jazz group that had gone to the Soviet Union. I asked if they had met Otto and the other Black students there. Yes, they had met them all and they had had good times together. So we all sat down to exchange news.

As we talked, I began to worry about the bill, and said I was low on money. "Oh, don't worry about that," someone said and ordered more wine. But when it came time to pay for the drinks, I got stuck with the whole tab and had to walk several miles across town to get home.

After a month in Berlin, my visa came through. I was on my way to Stettin, a city on the Baltic Sea which bordered Poland and where I boarded a small Soviet ship. After three days of some of the roughest seas I have ever experienced, we landed in Leningrad. It was April 1926, and we were already in the season of the "white lights," when daylight lasted until late into the evening.

As we entered the Gulf of Finland the following morning, we passed the naval fortress of Kronstadt about twenty miles out from Leningrad (the site of the anti-Soviet mutiny of 1920). The ship finally docked in Leningrad. Upon landing, I presented my visa and passport to the authorities. Addressing me in English, a man in civilian dress said, "Oh, you're going to the Comintern school in Moscow?"

"Yes," I replied.

He immediately took me in charge and got my baggage through customs. I assumed he was a member of the security police. We left the customs building and got into an old beat-up Packard. As we drove away from the docks, he informed me that the Moscow train would not leave until eight that evening. He put me up at a hotel where I could rest and go out to see the city.

Leningrad (old St. Petersburg) was built by Czar Peter the Great in the sixteenth century and now renamed for the architect of the new socialist society. As I walked down the now famous Nevsky Prospekt, I thought of John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, trying to recapture some of the dramatic scenes in that classic.<sup>2</sup> I passed the Peter and Paul Fortress and then the Winter Palace – once the home of the czars and now a museum of the people. The storming of the Winter Palace in 1917 had been the crucial event in the taking of St. Petersburg by the Bolsheviks.

The people I saw passing me on the street were plainly dressed. Many of the men wore the traditional *robochka* and high boots; others were in European dress. Most people were dressed neatly though shabbily, and all appeared to be well-fed. They were bright and cheerful. It seemed they went about with a purpose – a sharp contrast to the atmosphere of hopelessness that had pervaded Berlin. People in Leningrad looked at me – and I looked at them. By this time, I had become used to being stared at and took it as friendly curiosity. After all, a Black man was seldom seen in those parts.

After several hours, I returned to my hotel. My friend from the security police showed up promptly at seven with my train ticket and took me to the station to put me on the train to Moscow. Filled with excitement and anticipation, I got little sleep on the train and awoke early to see the Russian landscape flowing by my window – pine forests, groves of birch trees and swamps. I was in the midst of the great Russian steppes.

When we arrived in Moscow at Yaroslavsky Station, some of my traveling companions hailed a *droshky* and told the driver to take me to the Comintern.

Moscow at last! We drove from the station into the vast sprawling city – once the capital of old Russia and now of the new. It was a bright, sunny morning and the sun glistened off the golden church domes in the “city of a thousand churches.” It seemed a maze of narrow, cobblestone streets, intersected by broad boulevards. While Leningrad had been a distinctly European city, Moscow seemed a

mixture of the Asiatic and the European – a bizarre and strange combination to me, but a cheerful one. Moscow was more Russian than the cosmopolitan Leningrad. Crowds swarmed in the streets in many different styles of dress.

We arrived at the Comintern, which was housed in an old eighteenth century structure on Ulitsa Komintern near the Kremlin, across the square from Staraya Konyushnya (the old stables of the czar). I paid the driver and entered the building. The guard at the door checked my credentials and directed me upstairs to a small office on the third floor. After producing my bonafides, I was told to take a seat, to wait for my comrades who would soon be coming for me.

About half an hour later, Otto and another Black man entered the room. I was overjoyed at the sight of him and his friend, who turned out to be a fellow student, Harold Williams. We embraced Russian style, and I began to feel more at home in this strange land.

Otto asked about the family. An expression of sadness crossed his face, however, when I asked him about the rest of the Black indentants. He then informed me of Jane Golden's serious illness. She was at that moment in a uremic coma from a kidney ailment and was not expected to live. Her husband was at her side at the hospital. (Though both were from Chicago, I had not met them before.)

The situation had saddened the whole Black student body, and for that matter, the whole school. In the course of her brief sojourn, Jane had become very popular. Otto described her in flowing terms – a real morale booster, whose spirit had helped all of them through the period of initial adjustment.

I was impressed. Here was a Black woman, not a member of the Communist Party, who had so easily become accustomed to the new Soviet socialist society. It seemed to me that there must be thousands of Black women like her in the U.S.

After we had greeted each other, we caught a *droshky* over to the school in order that I might register officially. In the course of the ride, the driver lashed his horse and cursed at him. I asked Otto what he was saying, and he gave a running translation: "Get up there, you son-of-a-bitch. I feed you oats while I myself eat black bread! Your sire was no good, you bastard, your momma was no good too!" This verbal and physical abuse, Otto told me, was typical of most Russian *droshky* drivers.

We finally arrived at the school administration which was

housed in another old seventeenth century structure, built before the Revolution. It had been a finishing school for daughters of the aristocracy. Before that, it had been a boys' school where, rumor has it, the great Pushkin had studied.

Otto introduced me to the university rector with what sounded to my untrained ear like fluent Russian. We then went to the office of the chancellor, where I was duly registered. I was now a student at the *Universitet Trydyashchiysya Vostoka Imeni Stalina* (the University of the Toilers of the East Named for Stalin) Russian acronym KUTVA. Otto and I then walked to the dormitory a few blocks away where I met the other two Black students, Bankole and Farmer.

We all immediately took a streetcar to the hospital which was located on the other side of the Moscow River. There we were met by Golden and some other students who informed us that Jane Golden had just passed away that morning. Golden seemed to be in a state of shock and the doctors had given him some sedatives. We went into the hospital morgue to view her body. Bankole broke down in uncontrollable tears. I learned afterwards that Jane had been a close friend – a kind of mother to him during the period of his adjustment to this new land.

We took Golden home to the dormitory. The school collective and its leaders immediately took over the funeral arrangements. The body lay in state in the school auditorium for twenty-four hours, during which time the students thronged past.

The funeral was held the following day and the whole school turned out. The cortege seemed a mile long as it flowed past Tverskaya towards the cemetery. The students would not allow the casket to be placed upon the cart, but organizing themselves in relays every fifty yards, insisted on carrying it the distance of several miles on their shoulders.

A good portion of the American colony in Moscow was assembled at the cemetery. The chairman of the school collective, a young Georgian, delivered a stirring eulogy at the graveside. One of the students who was standing next to me made a running translation *sotto voce* which went something like this:

The first among her race to come to the land of socialism...  
in search of freedom for her oppressed peoples, former  
slaves... to find out how the Soviets had done it. We were

happy to receive her and her comrades... condolences to her bereaved husband, our Comrade Golden, and to the rest of the Negro students... the whole university has suffered a great loss. Rest in peace, Jane Golden. You were with us only a short time, but all of us have benefitted from your presence and comradeship.

Turning to Golden, he said:

We Soviet people and comrades of oppressed colonial and dependent countries must carry on. We pledge our undying support to the cause of your people's freedom. Long live the freedom fight of our Negro brothers in America! Long live the Soviet Union and its Communist Party, beacon light of the struggle for freedom of all oppressed peoples.

Golden had borne himself well at the graveside, but we didn't want him to return to his room in the students' dormitory, which would only remind him of his grievous loss. So we went to the apartment of MacCloud, an old Wobbly friend of ours from Philadelphia, who had attended the funeral and who lived in the Zarechnaya District, across the river. He was a close friend of Big Bill Haywood and had followed the great working class leader to the Soviet Union. There we tried to drown our sorrows in good old Russian vodka, which was in plentiful supply.

Jane Golden's funeral and the school collective's response to her death made a profound impression on me. Through these events, crammed into the first three days of my stay in the Soviet Union, I came to know something about my fellow students and the new socialist society into which I had entered.

## **THE BOLSHEVIKS FIGHT FOR EQUALITY OF NATIONS**

KUTVA was a unique university. At the time I entered, its student body represented more than seventy nationalities and ethnic groups. It was founded by the Bolsheviks for the special purpose of training cadre from the many national and ethnic groups within the Soviet Union – the former colonial dependencies of the czarist empire – and also to train cadres from colonies and subject nations outside the Soviet Union.

The school was divided into two sections – inner and outer. At the inner section there were Turkmenians, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Bashkirs,

Yakuts, Chuvashes, Kazaks, Kalmucks, Buryat-Mongols and Inner and Outer Mongolians from Soviet Asia. From the Caucasus there were Azerbaidzhanis, Armenians, Georgians, Abkhazians and many other national and ethnic groups I had never heard of before. There were Tartars from the Crimea and the Volga region.

The national and ethnic diversity found within the Soviet Union is hard to imagine. The Revolution had opened up many areas, for example through the Trans-Caucasus Road, and as late as 1928 the existence of new groups was still being "discovered." These nationalities were all former colonial dependencies of the czars and were referred to as the "Soviet East," "peoples of the East" and "borderland countries." The inner section comprised the main and largest part of the student body in the university.

We Blacks were of course part of the outer section at the school. It included Indians, Indonesians, Koreans, Filipinos, Persians, Egyptians, Arabs and Palestinian Jews from the Middle East, Arabs from North Africa, Algerians, Moroccans, Chinese and several Japanese (hardly a colonial people, but as revolutionaries, identified with the East).

The Chinese, several hundred strong, comprised the largest group of the outer section. This was obviously because China, bordering on the USSR, was in the first stage of its own anti-imperialist revolution, a revolution receiving direct material and political support from the Soviet Union. While KUTVA trained the communist cadres from China, there was also the Sun Yat-sen University, just outside of Moscow, which trained cadres for the Kuomintang.

Among its students was the daughter of the famous Christian general, Chang Tso-lin. Several Chinese, including Chiang Kai shek's son, studied in Soviet military schools during this period. A number of the Chinese students from KUTVA were massacred by Chiang's troops at the Manchurian border when they returned to China shortly after Chiang's bloody betrayal of the revolution in 1927. Otto told me that a former girlfriend of his was among this group.

As I remember, there were no Latin Americans at KUTVA during the time I was there, and the sole black African was Bankole. The student body was continually expanding, however, and later included many students from these and other areas.

We students studied the classic works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. But unlike the past schooling we had known, this whole



body of theory was related to practice. Theory was not regarded as dogma, but as a guide to action.

In May 1925, Stalin had delivered an historic speech at the school, outlining KUTVA's purpose and its main task. His lecture was the subject of continuous discussion and study.<sup>3</sup> It was our introduction to the Marxist theory on the national question and its development by Lenin and Stalin.

How did the Bolsheviks transform a territory embracing one-sixth of the earth's surface – known as the “prison-house of nations” under the Czar – into a family of nations, a free union of peoples? What was the policy pursued by the Soviets which enabled them to forge together more than a hundred different stages of social development into such extraordinary unity of effort for the building of a multinational socialist state – the kind of unity that enabled them to win the civil war within and to defeat the intervention of seventeen nations, including the United States, from without.

The starting point for us was to understand that the formation of peoples into nations is an objective law of social development around which the Bolsheviks, particularly Lenin and Stalin, had developed a whole body of theory. According to this theory, a nation is an historically constituted stable community of people, based on four main characteristics: a common territory, a common economic life, a common language and a common psychological makeup (national character) manifested in common features in a national culture. Since the development of imperialism, the liberation of the oppressed nations has become a question whose final resolution would only come through proletarian revolution.<sup>4</sup>

The guiding principle of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union on the national question was to bring about the unity of the laboring masses of the various nationalities for the purpose of waging a joint struggle – first to overthrow czarism and imperialism, and then to build the new society under a working class dictatorship. The accomplishment of the latter required the establishment of equality before the law for all nationalities – with no special privileges for any one people – and the right of the colonies and subject nations to separate.

This principle was incorporated into the law of the land in the Declaration of Rights of the People of Russia, passed a few days after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. Of course, the declaration of itself did not eliminate national inequality, which as Stalin

had observed, “rested on economic inequality, historically formed.” To eliminate this historically based economic and cultural inequality imposed by the czarist regimes upon the former oppressed nations, it was required that the more developed nations assist these formerly oppressed nations and peoples to catch up with the Great Russians in economic and cultural development.

In pursuance of this aim, the new government was organized on a bicameral basis. One body was chosen on the basis of population alone; the other, the Council of Nationalities, consisted of representatives from each of the national territorial units – the autonomous Soviet republics, autonomous regions and national areas. Any policy in regard to the affairs of these formerly oppressed nations could be carried through only with the approval of the Council of Nationalities. The Communist Party, through its members, was involved in both bodies and worked to see that its policy of full equality and the right of self-determination was implemented.

As this theory was put into practice, we learned that national cultures could be expressed with a proletarian (socialist) content and that there was no antagonistic contradiction, under socialism, between national cultures and proletarian internationalism. Under the Soviets, the languages and other national characteristics of the many nationalities were developed and strengthened with the aim of drawing the formerly oppressed nationalities into full participation in the new society. Thus, the Bolsheviks upheld the principle of “proletarian in content, national in form.” Through this policy, they hoped to draw all nationalities together, acquainting each with the achievements of the others, leading to a truly universal culture, a joint product of all humanity.

This is in sharp contrast to imperialism’s policy of forcibly arresting and distorting the free development of nations in order to maintain their economic and cultural backwardness as an essential condition for the extraction of superprofits. Thus, the oppressed nations can achieve liberation only through the path of revolutionary struggle to overthrow imperialism and in alliance with the working class of the oppressor nations. Stalin, proceeding from the experience and practice of the Soviet Union, emphasized the need for the formation and consolidation of a united revolutionary front between the working class of the West and the rising revolutionary movements of the colonies – a united front based on a struggle against a common enemy. The precondition for forming such unity is that the

proletariat of the oppressor nations gives:

direct and determined support to the liberation movement of the oppressed peoples against the imperialism of its "own country," for "no nation can be free if it oppresses other nations." (Engels).... This support implies the advocacy, defense and implementation of the slogan of the right of nations to secession, to independent existence as states.<sup>5</sup>

Without this cooperation of peoples based on mutual confidence and fraternal interrelations, it will be impossible to establish the material basis for the victory of socialism.

The test of all this theory was being proven in practice in the Soviet Union. The experience of the Bolsheviks demonstrably proved to us that socialism offered the most favorable conditions for the full development of oppressed nations and peoples.

At the time of the Revolution, there were many nationalities within the borders of the Soviet Union in which the characteristics of nationhood had not yet fully matured, and in fact had been suppressed by the czars. It was the Soviet system itself which became a powerful factor in the consolidation of these nationalities into nations, as socialist industry and collective farming created the economic basis for this consolidation.

I observed this firsthand in the Crimea and the Caucasus during my visits there in the summers of 1927 and 1928. The languages and culture which had been stifled under the czarist regime were now being developed. The language of the Crimean people was a Turko-Tartar language, but before the Revolution, almost all education, such as there was, was in the Russian language. Now there were schools established which used the native language. Otto and other students made similar observations when they traveled to different areas of the Soviet Union.

In the meantime, I was having my own problems with the Russian language. On first hearing it, the language had sounded most strange to me. I could hardly understand a word and wondered if I would ever be able to master it. As the youngest Black American, I applied myself seriously to its study. The first hurdle was the Cyrillic alphabet – its uniquely different characters intimidated me. But the crash course at KUTVA, lasting about an hour and a half per day, soon broke down this initial barrier.

In addition, I studied on my own for a couple of hours each day.

I would set out to memorize twenty new words a day. Then at night, I would write them out on a sheet of paper and pin them above the mirror in my room. I would then go over them again in the morning while shaving, and during the day I would make sure to use them in conversation with the Russians.

English grammar had always seemed irrelevant to me, but I soon came to appreciate the logic of Russian grammar. In fact, I learned most of my English grammar through the study of Russian. Its rules were consistent and understandable. The language soon ceased to be mysterious and revealed itself as being beautifully and simply constructed. In six months I was able to read *Pravda* with the help of a dictionary.

## **KUTVA: STRUCTURE AND STUDIES**

The school structure was fairly complicated, but, as I saw it, thoroughly democratic. There was the collective, the general body which included everybody in the school – from the rector, faculty, students, clerical and maintenance workers to the scrubwoman. The leading body of the collective was the bureau – composed of representatives elected by the various groups in the university. There was also a Communist Party organization which played the leadership role at all levels.

Originally established by the Council of Nationalities, KUTVA was now a Party school, administered by the Educational Department (AGITPROP) of the Central Committee of the CPSU. There was a direct representative of the Party, called a “Party strengthener,” in the school administration. Together with the rector and a representative of the students, he was part of the “troika” which constituted the top leadership of the school.

Students had the rights of citizens, voting and participating in local elections. The school discussed and dealt with all the issues which Soviet workers and peasants discussed at their work places. As with all students who pursued courses in higher education in the Soviet Union, we at KUTVA received full room and board, clothes and a small stipend for spending money. There was, of course, no tuition. We used to attend workers’ cultural clubs and do volunteer work, like working Saturdays to help build the Moscow subways. Education for us was not an ivory tower, but a true integration into the Soviet society, where we received firsthand knowledge from our experiences.

The curriculum (which was a three-year course) was based on Marxism-Leninism; that is, the teachings of Marx and Engels as developed by Lenin. It included dialectical and historical materialism, the Marxist world concept; the Marxist theory of class struggle as the motive force of human events; the economic doctrines of Marx: value and surplus value, as a key to understanding history by revealing the economic law of motion of modern capitalist societies; Lenin's analysis of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism; theory and tactics of the proletarian revolution and dictatorship of the proletariat and its Soviet state form; the problems of socialist construction; Lenin's theory on the peasant question – the alliance of workers and peasants as the base for Soviet power; the national and colonial questions; and the role of the party as vanguard of the proletariat. We also studied the specific history of the CPSU.

Our favorite teacher was Endré Sik, who taught courses on Leninism and the history of the Soviet Party. Sik was a striking young man. His distinguishing feature was a large shock of white hair, unusual for a man so young – he was probably in his thirties. He was soft-spoken and modest. We all loved Sik; he was an outgoing person who radiated warmth.

Sik was a Hungarian, a political refugee living in Russia. He had been a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian Army during the First World War. Captured by the Russians, he was converted to Bolshevism while in a Russian prison camp. On his release, he had gone back to Hungary and participated in the short-lived (133 days) Hungarian Soviet government of 1919 of Bela Kun. With the defeat of the Bela Kun government, Sik – along with hundreds of other revolutionaries – fled to the Soviet Union. Hungarian exiles made up one of Moscow's largest foreign colonies. In Moscow, Sik pursued an academic career. He was a graduate of the Institute of Red Professors and like many Hungarian intellectuals, he was multilingual.

For all his good nature, Sik seemed tired and harassed. He was teaching in many schools, in addition to activity in the Hungarian community. Seven years after the defeat of the Hungarian Soviet, the exiled revolutionaries were bitterly divided and factionalized, laying blame on each other for the failure of the revolution.

Sik became deeply interested in the question of Blacks in the United States and undertook a serious study of the question. He read all the books available and also asked the Black students at KUTVA to join with him. Unfortunately for our personal relationship, Sik

and I were to find ourselves on opposite sides of the fence in the discussion of Black Americans which took place at the Sixth Congress of the Communist International in June 1928.

Our teacher of Marxist economics was a young man by the name of Rubenstein, a Russian economist in the Gosplan (Governmental Planning Commission). The star pupil in that class turned out to be our modest friend Golden. Golden, who had known nothing about Marxism before coming to the Soviet Union, was able to grasp the intricacies of Marx's *Capital* and *Value, Price and Profit* seemingly without effort.

A class that stands out in my memory was one on how to make a revolution, to seize power once the situation was ripe. This course consisted of a series of lectures by a young Red Army officer. He had been a heroic figure in the Moscow uprising of 1917 and the subsequent seizure of power by the Bolsheviks in that city. A tall, handsome young man of bourgeois background, he had been a lieutenant in the army of the Kerensky government. Like many other soldiers, he had been won over by the Bolsheviks on the basis of their demands, which reflected the needs of the people: peace, bread and land. To him, the Moscow uprising against Kerensky, led by the Bolsheviks, was a model for the coming seizure of power in the big cities of the capitalist world.

He had a large map of Moscow on the wall and would use it to illustrate how it had been done. The call for the uprising, he said, had come to the Moscow Communist Party by telephone from Leningrad, where the revolutionary workers, sailors and army under the leadership of Lenin had overthrown the Kerensky government and seized power in that city.

In Moscow, the Party organization, already prepared, issued a call to the people for an uprising. His regiment, stationed on the outskirts of the city, together with red guards (workers' militia), responded and began to march towards the center of the city. The White Guardists were concentrated in the Arbot and in the Kremlin. Here he pointed out, in Russian and other European cities, the working class districts were centered around factories on the outskirts of the city and Moscow was circled by workers suburbs. Together with defected units of other regiments and with red guards, they marched towards Moscow's central area, whence fighting spread throughout the city – even into the trans-Moscow district. The reds finally wiped out the White Guardist strongholds, and the Kremlin, which

had changed hands two times before in the fighting, finally surrendered.

Moscow was ours!

## **CLASSMATES AT KUTVA**

Because of the language problem, we students from outside the Soviet Union were subdivided into three main language groups: English, French and Chinese. English and French were the dominant languages of the many colonial areas represented at the university. Spanish was later added when Latin American students began to arrive. In addition to ourselves, the English-speaking group included East Indians, Koreans, Japanese and Indonesians. I had many close friends in this latter group.

One of the most interesting and brilliant was an Indian student by the name of Sakorov. (They all took Russian names because of the severe repression which they faced back home.) A former machinist in a Detroit auto plant, Sakorov had been sent to the school by the American Party.

Originally from Bombay, Sakorov had gone to sea on a British ship at the age of twelve and had been subjected to very oppressive conditions his whole career at sea. He eventually jumped ship in Baltimore and wound up working in an auto plant in Detroit. Of all the group of students, he was the closest to us Blacks. He knew first hand the plight of Blacks in the United States, and as a dark skinned Indian, he had experienced much of the same type of racial abuse while there. After he left the school, he returned to India, where he became one of the founders of the Indian Communist Party.

Later, more Indian students were to come, including one sixteen year old – a tall, lanky boy who took the name of Volkov. He had been born in California; his parents were Sikhs who had migrated to the U.S. and worked as agricultural workers in the Imperial Valley of California. They were part of a foreign contingent of the Ghadr Party, a revolutionary nationalist party of Sikhs which had been organized in 1916. The Party would pick out young men to be future leaders; Volkov was chosen and sent to Japan for education and stayed there a year. Then he was sent to study in the Soviet Union, perhaps by the Japanese Party. He spoke Japanese and English.

Among the Indian students was a group of about half a dozen Sikhs, former professional soldiers, survivors of the Hong Kong massacre of 1926. On the pretext of quelling an “imminent mutiny,”

the British colonel of the regiment stationed in Hong Kong had called the unarmed Sikh soldiers into the regimental square and turned machine guns on them. (All regiments in the Indian Army included a British machine gun company as a safeguard against mutiny.) Several hundred were killed or wounded. As I understood it, the massacre was engineered to quell the protests over conditions which were being raised by members of the Ghadr Party and its supporters.

The group who arrived in Moscow were among the few who escaped over the walls; they had fled to Shanghai where they were taken in charge by M.N. Roy, an Indian and then Comintern representative to China. Roy sent them to Moscow. These students, some of them older grey-bearded men, had spent their whole lives in the British Indian Army. They represented a special problem for the school, because most of them had had very little education of any kind. They were not brought into our class, but were put into a special group under the tutelage of Volkov, Sakorov and other of the regular Indian students.

It was my good fortune to meet many of these Indian students again in 1942, when I was in Bombay as a merchant seaman. Most of them were leading figures in the Indian revolutionary movement. Sakorov had been a defendant in one of the Merut trials, having been charged with "conspiracy against the king." Since his return to India, he had spent eleven years in prison. Nada, another former schoolmate, was president of the Indian Friends of the Soviet Union and very active among the students and youth.

There were several Koreans and Japanese at the school, and two Indonesians. I remember Dirja particularly well. A Dutch-educated Indonesian intellectual, he was an old revolutionary who had spent many years in prison. There was another Indonesian, a young man (whose name I cannot recall), who later emerged as a communist leader and was killed in the Indonesian revolt of 1946.

Kemal Pasha (a party name conferred on him by Sakorov) was a grey-eyed Moroccan from the Riffian tribe of Abdul Krim. I met Kemal Pasha again in Paris during the Spanish Civil War. There were also two whites in the group – June Kroll, then the wife of an American communist leader, Carl Reeves; and Max Halff, a young English lad of Russian-Jewish parentage.

## **BLACKS IN MOSCOW**



We students were a fairly congenial lot and in particular I got to know the other Black students quite well. Golden was a handsome, jet-Black man; a former Tuskegee student and a dining car waiter. He was not a member of the Communist Party, but a good friend of Lovett Fort-Whiteman, head of the Party's Afro-American work.

Golden told me that his coming to the Soviet Union had been accidental. He had run into Fort-Whiteman, a fellow student at Tuskegee, on the streets of Chicago. Fort-Whiteman had just returned from Russia and was dressed in a Russian blouse and boots.

As Golden related it: "I asked Fort-Whiteman what the hell he was wearing. Had he come off the stage and forgotten to change clothes? He informed me that these were Russian clothes and that he had just returned from that country."

Golden at first thought it was a put-on, but became interested as Fort-Whiteman talked about his experiences. "Then out of the blue, he asks me if I want to go to Russia as a student. At first, I thought he was kidding, but man, I would have done anything to get off those dining cars! I was finally convinced that he was serious. 'But I'm married,' I told him. 'What about my wife?'" "Why, bring her along too!" he replied. He took me to his office at the American Negro Labor Congress, an impressive set-up with a secretary, and I was convinced. Fort-Whiteman gave me money to get passports, and the next thing I knew, a couple of weeks later we were on the boat with Otto and the others on the way to Russia. And here I am now."

He had a keen sense of humor and kidded the rest of us a lot, particularly Otto. His Southern accent carried over into Russian, and we teased him about being the only person who spoke Russian with a Mississippi accent.

Then there was Bankole, an African who spent most of his time with the Black Americans. He was an Ashanti, from the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and his family was part of the African elite. The son of a wealthy barrister, his family had sent him to London University to study journalism. From there, he had gone to Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh.

He had been on the road to becoming a perennial student and had planned to continue at McGill University in Montreal, but was recruited to the Young Communist League in Pittsburgh. In the States, he was confronted with a racism more blatant than any he had met before. I gathered that this had struck him sharply and had

been largely responsible for his move to the left.

My brother Otto had become sort of a character in the school. He was popular among the students, who immediately translated his pseudonym “John Jones” into the Russian “Ivan Ivanovich.” Otto had absolutely no tolerance for red tape, and he had become a mortal enemy of the *apparatchiki* (petty bureaucrats) in the school. He had built a reputation for making their lives miserable, and when they saw him coming, they would huddle in a corner: “Here comes Ivan Ivanovich. *Ostorozhno* (watch out)! *Bolshoi skandal budyet* (this guy will make a big scandal)!”

Harold Williams of Chicago was a West Indian and former seaman in the British merchant marine. He had adopted the name of Dessalines, one of the three leaders of the Haitian revolution of the 1790s. Williams had little formal education and some difficulty in grasping theory, but was instinctively a class-conscious guy.

Finally, there was Mahoney, whose name in the USSR was Jim Farmer. Farmer was a steelworker from East Liverpool, Ohio, a Communist Party member and had played a leading role in local struggles in the steel mills.

There were only eight of us Blacks in a city of 4,500,000 people. In addition to the six students, there were also two Black American women who had long residence (since before the Revolution) in Moscow.

I only knew one of the women, Emma Harris. We first met on the occasion of the death of Jane Golden. Emma was a warm, outgoing and earthy middle-aged woman, originally from Georgia. It was evident that she had once been quite handsome – of the type that in the old days we called a “teasin’ brown.” Emma had first come to Moscow as a member of a Black song and dance group, a lowly hooper in the world of cheap vaudeville. Having been deserted by its manager, the group was left stranded in Moscow.

While the others had evidently made their way back to the States, Emma had decided to stay. She had liked the country. Here, being Black wasn’t a liability, but on the contrary, a definite asset. With her drive and ambition to be “somebody,” Emma parlayed this asset into a profitable position. She married a Russian who installed her, it seems, as a madam of a house of prostitution. It was no ordinary house, she once explained to me. “Our clients were the wealthy and nobility.” To the former hooper, this was status.

Such was Emma’s situation in November 1917, when the Rus-

sian Bolsheviks and Red Guards moved in from the proletarian suburbs of Moscow to capture the bourgeois inner city and the Kremlin. During some mopping-up operations, Emma's house was raided by the Cheka (the security police). A bunch of White Guardists had holed up there and the whole group was arrested, including Emma. They were taken to the Lubyanka Prison and some of the more notorious White Guardists were summarily executed.

Emma remained in a cell for a few days. Finally she was called up before a Cheka official. He told her that they were looking into her case. Many of the people who had been arrested at her place were counter-revolutionaries and conspirators against the new Soviet state, and some had been shot. Emma disclaimed knowledge of any conspiracy and stated that she was engaged in "legitimate" business and had nothing to do with the politics of her clients.

"You know the only reason we didn't shoot you was because you are a Negro woman," the official said. To her surprise, he added, "You are free to go now. I advise you to try to find some useful work. Keep out of trouble."

When we met Emma, she had become a textile worker. She lived with a young Russian woman – also a textile worker, whom I suspected was a reformed prostitute – in a two-room apartment in an old working class district near *Krasnaya Vorota* (Red Gate). Soon after the first Black students arrived, she sought them out and greeted them like long lost kinfolk.

At least once a month, we students would pool part of the small stipends we received and give Emma money to shop for and prepare some old home cooking for us. On these occasions, she would regale us with stories from her past life. At times one could detect a fleeting expression of sadness, of nostalgia, for her old days of affluence. One could see that she had never become fully adjusted to the new life under the Soviets. While not openly hostile, it was clear that she was not an ardent partisan of the new regime. Knowing our sentiments, she avoided political discussion and kept her views to herself. Our feelings toward her were warmest when we first arrived, but as we developed more ties with the Russians, we went by to see her less often. But we did continue to visit her periodically; she was a sort of mother figure for us, and we all felt sorry for her. She was getting old and often expressed a desire to return to the States. She was finally able to return home after World War II.

Needless to say, Blacks attracted the curiosity of the Musco-

vites. Children followed us in the streets. If we paused to greet a friend, we found ourselves instantly surrounded by curious crowds – unabashedly staring at us. Once, while strolling down Tverskaya, Otto and I stopped to greet a white American friend and immediately found ourselves surrounded by curious Russians. It was a friendly curiosity which we took in stride. A young Russian woman stepped forward and began to upbraid and lecture the crowd.

“Why are you staring at these people? They’re human beings the same as us. Do you want them to think that we’re savages? *Eta ne kulturnya!* (That is uncultured!)” The last was an epithet and in those days a high insult.

“*Eta ne po-Sovietski!* (It’s not the Soviet way!)” she scolded them.

At that point, someone in the crowd calmly responded: “Well, citizenship, it’s a free country, isn’t it?”

We were not offended, but amused. We understood all this for what it was.

There was one occasion when Otto, Farmer, Bankole and I were walking down Tverskaya. Bankole, of course, stood out – attracting more attention than the rest of us with his English cut Savile Row suit, monocle and cane – a black edition of a British aristocrat. We found ourselves being followed by a group of Russian children, who shouted: “*Jass Band.... Jass Band!*”

Otto, Farmer and I were amused at the incident and took it in stride. Bankole, however, shaking with rage at the implication, jerked around to confront them. His monocle fell off as he shouted: “*Net Jass Band! Net Jass Band!*” As he spoke, he hit his cane on the ground for emphasis.

Evidently, to these kids, a jazz band was not just a group of musicians, but a race or tribe of people to which we must belong. They obviously thought we were with Leland and Drayton, the musicians I had met in Berlin. They had been a big hit with the Muscovites. We pulled Bankole away, “C’mon man, cut it out. They don’t mean anything.”

In the Soviet Union, remnants of national and racial prejudices from the old society were attacked by education and law. It was a crime to give or receive direct or indirect privileges, or to exercise discrimination because of race or nationality. Any manifestation of racial or national superiority was punishable by law and was regarded as a serious political offense, a social crime.

During my entire stay in the Soviet Union, I encountered only one incident of racial hostility. It was on a Moscow streetcar. Several of us Black students had boarded the car on our way to spend an evening with our friend MacCloud. It was after rush hour and the car was only about half filled with Russian passengers. As usual, we were the objects of friendly curiosity. At one stop, a drunken Russian staggered aboard. Seeing us, he muttered (but loud enough for the whole car to hear) something about “Black devils in our country.”

A group of outraged Russian passengers thereupon seized him and ordered the motorman to stop the car. It was a citizen’s arrest, the first I had ever witnessed. “How dare you, you scum, insult people who are the guests of our country!”

What then occurred was an impromptu, on-the-spot meeting, where they debated what to do with the man. I was to see many of this kind of “meeting” during my stay in Russia.

It was decided to take the culprit to the police station which, the conductor informed them, was a few blocks ahead. Upon arrival there, they hustled the drunk out of the car and insisted that we Blacks, as the injured parties, come along to make the charges.

At first we demurred, saying that the man was obviously drunk and not responsible for his remarks. “No, citizens,” said a young man (who had done most of the talking), “drunk or not, we don’t allow this sort of thing in our country. You must come with us to the militia (police) station and prefer charges against this man.”

The car stopped in front of the station. The poor drunk was hustled off and all the passengers came along. The defendant had sobered up somewhat by this time and began apologizing before we had even entered the building. We got to the commandant of the station.

The drunk swore that he didn’t mean what he’d said. “I was drunk and angry about something else. I swear to you citizens that I have no race prejudice against those Black *gospoda* (gentlemen).”

We actually felt sorry for the poor fellow and we accepted his apology. We didn’t want to press the matter.

“No,” said the commandant, “we’ll keep him overnight. Perhaps this will be a lesson to him.”

## **BIG BILL HAYWOOD**

In addition to the students at KUTVA and the two Black wom-

en, there was a sizeable American colony in Moscow during my stay there. There were political representatives of the Communist Party USA to the Comintern, the Profintern, the Crestintern and to the departments, bureaus and secretaries of these organizations – holding jobs as translators, stenographers and researchers.<sup>6</sup>

Soviet cultural and publishing organizations also employed U.S. citizens, and in addition to the political groups, there were a number of technical and skilled workers who came as specialists to work for the new Soviet state. I got to know a number of the Americans during my stay, both official reps and others in the colony.

Big Bill Haywood was perhaps the most famous of these. He was organizer and founder of the IWW, and a great friend of all Blacks in Moscow. At the time I met him he was in his late fifties and quite ill, suffering from diabetes. Physically, he was only the shell of the man he had once been. He called himself a political refugee from American capitalism. As a sick man, he had fled the U.S. to avoid a ten-year frame-up prison sentence which he knew he would never have survived. Bill was blind in one eye, over which he wore a black patch. I had imagined the loss of his eye had happened in a fight with company or police thugs and was rather disappointed to learn that it was the result of a childhood accident.

In the Soviet Union he had participated in the organization of the Kuzbas Colony. This project was to reopen and operate industry in the Kuznetsk Basin in the Urals, closed during the Civil War period. The colony was located about a thousand miles from Moscow in an area of enormous coal deposits, vital to socialist industrialization. The district, with its mines and deserted chemical plants, had been established by the Soviet government as an autonomous colony. Big Bill had brought a number of American skilled workers, many of whom were old Wobblies, to reopen the plants and mines.

Big Bill became a member of the CPUSA at its founding convention in 1921, and while in the Soviet Union he was a member of the CPSU. Bill and his devoted wife, a Russian office worker, lived in the Lux Hotel – a Comintern hostelry.

His room had become a center for the gathering of American radicals, especially old Wobblies passing through or working in the Soviet Union. Here they would gather on a Saturday night and reminisce about old times and discuss current problems. Often a bunch of us Black students were present. Sometimes these sessions would carry on all night until Sunday morning. There were only a few

chairs in the room, and Bill would sit in a huge armchair surrounded by people sitting on the floor. For us Blacks, listening to Big Bill was like a course on the American labor movement. He was a bitter enemy of racism, which he saw as the mainstay of capitalist domination over the U.S. working class, a continuous brake on labor unity. This attitude was reflected in the preamble of the IWW constitution, he told us. It read: "No working man or woman shall be excluded from membership in unions because of creed or color." This was borne out in practice.

The IWW was the first labor organization in modern times to invade the South and break down racial barriers in that benighted region. He recounted his experiences in the organizing drives among Southern lumber workers in Louisiana and Texas. This resulted in the organization of the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in 1910, an independent union in the lumber camps of Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. At its height this union had 25,000 members, half of them Black.

Big Bill described how the IWW broke down discrimination at the first convention of this union. He had come from the national IWW office to speak to the convention. They were all white, he said, and he inquired why no colored men were present. He was told that the Louisiana state law prohibited meetings of Black and white – the Negro brothers were meeting in another hall nearby. Bill recalled that he then told them: "Damn the law! It's the law of the lumber bosses. Its objective is to defeat you and to keep you divided and you're not going to get anywhere by obeying the dictates of the bosses. You've got to meet together." And the latter is exactly what they did, he told us.

I remember that a few days after one of these gatherings we telephoned to tell him that we were coming over, only to learn from his wife that he had had a stroke and was in the Kremlin hospital. She said that he was getting along OK, but couldn't see visitors. After several weeks he returned home. Still weak, he received many of his friends, and many of the delegates to the Fourth Congress of the Profintern which was in Moscow at the time. Big Bill had been a leading participant in this organization since its inception.

Then suddenly, he was back in the hospital, where he died May 18, 1928. The whole American colony turned out for the funeral. There were delegations from the Russian Communist Party, of which he was a member, and from the various international organi-

zations in which he had played a role. The Fourth Congress of the RILU adjourned its sessions, and representatives of trade unions from all over the world attended the funeral.

I'm sure for all us Black students, our meeting and friendship with this great man were among the most memorable experiences of our stay in Moscow. A stalwart son of the American working class, Bill's life and battles represented its best traditions. To Blacks, he was a man who would not only stand up with you, but if need be, go down with you. This was the iron test in the fight against the common enemy, U.S. capitalism. Big Bill obviously understood from his own experience the truth of the Marxist maxim that in the U.S., "labor in the white skin can never be free as long as in the Black it is branded."

## INA

I first met my second wife, Ekaterina Ina – in December 1926. We were both at a party at the home of Rose Bennett, a British woman who had married M. Petrovsky (Bennett), the chairman of the Anglo-American Commission of the Comintern and formerly CI representative to Great Britain.

Ina was one of a group of ballet students whom Rose had invited to meet some of us KUTVA students. She was a small young woman of nineteen or twenty, shy and retiring, and sat off removed from the party. After that party, we met several times, and she told me about herself.

She was born in Vladikavkaz (in northern Caucasus), the daughter of the mayor of the town. It was one of those towns that was taken and re-taken during the Civil War, one time by the whites, then by the reds. On one occasion when the town fell to the reds, her father was accused of collaborating with the whites. The reds came and arrested him and she never saw him again. Ina was about eleven at the time; she later learned that her father had been executed.

Her uncle was a famous artist in Moscow and after her father's execution they went there to live. Ina told me of her trip to Moscow at the height of famine and a typhus epidemic; they rode in freight cars several days through the Ukraine, and saw people dying along the road. Her uncle took charge of them and got them an apartment on Malaya Bronaya. He investigated the case of her father and discovered that a mistake had been made, and her father was posthu-



mously exonerated. As a sort of compensation, she and her mother were regarded as “social activists,” and Ina entered school to study ballet. She later transferred from the ballet school to study English in preparation for work as a translator. We lived together in the spring of 1927 and got married the following fall, after my return from the Crimea.

In January 1927, I was stunned by the news of the death of my Mother. One morning, when I was at Ina’s house, Otto burst in. Overcome by emotion, he could hardly talk, but managed to blurt out, “Mom’s dead!” He had a letter from our sister Eppa, with a clipping of Mother’s obituary from the *Chicago Defender*.

Under the headline “Funeral of Mrs. Harriet Hall,” was her picture and an article which described her, a domestic worker, as a “noted club woman.” She had been a member of the Black Eastern Star and several other lodges and burial societies. The article mentioned that she was survived by her husband, daughter and two sons, the latter in Moscow.

I was overcome with grief and guilt at not being home. Deeply shocked, I had always assumed that I would return to see Mother again. Born a slave, her world had been confined to the Midwest and upper South. She had once told me, “Son, I sure would like to see the ocean,” and I had glibly promised, “Oh, I’ll take you there someday, Momma.” I felt that I had been her favorite; I was the responsible one, and yet I hadn’t been able to do what I had promised. Worse yet, I wasn’t even there when she died. It took me some time to get over the shock.

#### **Notes:**

1. (p. 148.) The January 17, 1926, edition of the Sunday *New York Times* carried an article titled “Communists Boring into Negro Labor.” It included such sensational subheads as:

- Taking Advantage of the New Moves Among Colored Workers Here to Stir Unrest
- Not Much Progress Yet
- Ten Young Negroes are Sent to Moscow Under Soviet “Scholarships” to Study Bolshevism
- Nuclei Sought in Unions
- Labor Federation and Older Leaders of the Race Seek Antidotes in Real Labor Unions.

2. (p. 151.) John Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World* (New York: Boni and Liverwright, 1919).

3. (p. 157.) Stalin saw the university having two lines of activity: one line having the aim of creating cadres capable of serving the needs of the Soviet republics of the East, and the other line having the aim of creating cadres capable of serving the revolutionary requirements of the toiling masses in the colonial and dependent countries of the East." J.V. Stalin, "The Political Tasks of the University of the Peoples of the East," *Works* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), vol. 6, p. 382.

4. (p. 157.) See J.V. Stalin, *Foundations of Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), pp. 72-83.

5. (p. 159.) *Ibid.*, p. 77.

6. (p. 171.) Permit me briefly to define these terms which I will be using quite often throughout the rest of the book.

The Comintern (Communist International or Third International) was founded in Moscow in March 1919 and dissolved in 1943. The Comintern was founded in a period of revolutionary upsurge and in direct opposition to the leaders of the Second International, who had endorsed support for their own imperialist bourgeoisies in the First World War. A voluntary association of communist parties, the Comintern gave revolutionary leadership during a very important period in history, building communist parties around the world and developing united fronts against fascism in the thirties. Particularly significant among its theoretical contributions were the theses on the national and colonial questions.

The Crestintern, or Peasant International, was founded at the International Peasant Conference in Moscow in 1923, with the express purpose of "coordinating peasant organizations and the efforts of the peasants to achieve workers' and peasants' internationals." It was dissolved in 1939.

The Profintern, or Red International of Labor Unions (RILU), was founded in 1921 and played an important role in the development of the labor movement until its dissolution in the late thirties. The Profintern's program called for the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat. To this end, it gave leadership to the struggles of the working masses worldwide, adding, as Foster wrote, "a new dimension" to the labor movement by carrying trade unionism to the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

See also William Z. Foster, *History of the Three Internationals* (New

York: International Publishers, 1955).

The District Organizer, also referred to as the “D.O.,” is the head of the leading body in the Party district and is in overall charge of the district’s work. The D.O.’s primary responsibility is to give political leadership in carrying out the Party’s line.