

Chapter 14

Reunion in Moscow

Nineteen thirty-two was a presidential election year. We communists greeted it as an opportunity to popularize our program before the millions of people impoverished by the economic crisis and ruling class offensive, as well as to stimulate and strengthen all the campaigns the Party was engaged in.

By this time, the Party had built considerable influence among the masses through an increasingly successful struggle against right dangers. We concentrated a good deal of attention on the struggle for unemployment insurance and immediate relief. Hunger marches on state capitals had taken place throughout the country, culminating with nationwide marches on Washington in December of 1931 and 1932.

In the struggle of employed workers, the Party found itself increasingly at loggerheads with William Green and the AFL. For instance, he supported Hoover's wage-cut policies against which we had waged many successful battles. In direct defiance of the AFL's no-strike pledge, the Party and the TUUL were leading strikes in the Kentucky mines and the needle trades.

Poor and middle farmers were then revolting against widespread evictions and foreclosures throughout the Midwest, and in December 1932 farmers from across the country held a National Relief Conference in Washington. As a result, the Farmer's National Committee of Action was set up – raising such demands as no forced sales or evictions of poor farmers, cash relief, reduction in rents and taxes, and an end to the oppression of Afro-American people.¹

With mass demonstrations and meetings throughout the country to free the Scottsboro Boys, the Party was becoming a respected leader among Blacks. We also helped organize the National Bonus March in July 1932. Some 25,000 veterans marched to Washington, demanding adjusted service pay, standing against the danger of imperialist war and for the defense of the Soviet Union and the Chinese people.

We began preparing for the presidential campaign early in 1932, nominating a national slate of William Z. Foster for president and James W. Ford for vice-president. Ford was called back from Germany where he had been chairman of the International Trade

Union Committee of Negro Workers. I had been briefly considered for vice-president, but it was felt generally that my appearance was too youthful.

Though the Party's vote was small – about 103,000 – we used the campaign to broadly publicize our minimum and maximum programs.² We had a slate of congressional candidates, among whom were many Blacks. The Party was on the ballot in forty states and conducted an aggressive campaign. Hundreds of mass meetings were held throughout the country, seven million leaflets distributed and one million pamphlets sold – all this in the face of vicious police harassment and repression. I don't really believe that the final vote was an accurate reflection of the Party's influence at that time – particularly in the South, where the Black masses were almost entirely disenfranchised.

In the summer of 1932, nineteen-year-old Angelo Herndon, a YCL member, was arrested in Atlanta, Georgia. Herndon was charged with “incitement to insurrection” under an old 1861 fugitive slave statute. Much of what I learned was from my brother Otto who was in Atlanta at the time and worked actively in the campaign.

That June, the Fulton County Commissioners had announced that there was no more money for relief. After all, there was no need for relief, they said – there was no one in the city of Atlanta who was starving. Then they invited any stray soul who might be hungry to come to their offices and they would investigate the **situation**.

The Communist Party and the Unemployed Councils immediately look them up on their offer. They mobilized 1,000 people – Black and white – to come to the county courthouse and demand relief. The meeting itself was historic – the first time that such a large meeting of Black and white workers had taken place in the South.

Herndon described its significance in his autobiography: “It was a demonstration of the Southern worker's power. Like a giant that had been lying asleep for a long time, he now began to stir.”³ Atlanta's ruling circles were appropriately alarmed and the next day they found \$6,000 for relief.

One week later, Angelo Herndon was arrested. His trial was an example of Georgia lynch justice and the local rulers through their newspapers were to use it to sensationalize the “red Jew” scare for many years to come. I think the prosecutor's remarks sum up the

situation pretty well.

Falling to his knees, the Reverend Hudson told the jury that he expected them to arrive at a verdict that would “automatically send this damnable anarchistic Bolsheviki to his death by electrocution.” The good reverend said that this would satisfy God and the “daughters of the state officials can walk the streets safely. Stamp this thing out now with a conviction.”⁴

Hudson didn’t get everything he asked for, but Herndon was sentenced to eighteen to twenty years. Before he was sentenced, however, young Herndon told the court: “You may succeed in killing one, two, even a score of working-class organizers. But you cannot kill the working class.”⁵

In the beginning stages of the case, the ILD had immediately taken charge of the defense, which was then in the hands of a young Black Atlanta attorney, Ben Davis, Jr. The case was linked up with the Scottsboro struggle as a symbol of the racist persecution of Blacks.

A long legal battle ensued. Mass meetings and huge petition campaigns were launched as part of the defense effort. The case was fought through to the Supreme Court, which at first sustained the conviction, but ultimately reversed it by a five to four decision. Herndon, out on bail, was finally freed in 1937.

As soon as we had received word of Herndon’s arrest, we began planning a nationwide defense campaign. The Negro Department was responsible for developing and carrying out a campaign in support of the ILD. As part of this effort I made plans to go to Atlanta to see the situation first hand.

Shortly before I was to leave, however, Browder called me into his office and informed me that he had just received a CI request that the American Party send three delegates to attend the Twelfth Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. Browder asked if I would like to go; the meeting was to be in Moscow in early September. He said that he was aware of my desire to bring my wife Ina to the United States, and he suggested that this might be a good opportunity. I, of course, enthusiastically agreed. Just a few days later, I was aboard ship – bound for the Soviet Union – with the other two delegates, Bob Minor and Henry Puro (a Finnish-American comrade).

We arrived in Moscow in mid-August and I had a joyous reunion with Ina. Not long after our arrival, the Twelfth Plenum of the

ECCI convened as scheduled. Its purpose was to analyse the current international situation and check the work of the Comintern sections, the affiliated parties.

The tone was set in the resolution on the international situation. It noted that capitalist stabilization had ended, that we were well along in the third period, and that although a revolutionary upsurge was developing in a number of countries, a revolutionary situation had not yet arisen in any important capitalist country. The resolution stressed the danger of war and the “preparation for a counter-revolutionary war against the USSR.” The enemy, it declared, was both fascism and social-fascism (social democracy), which stood for the maintenance and strengthening of capitalism. “Only by directing the main blow against social democracy, this social mainstay of the bourgeoisie,” it said, “will it be possible to strike at and defeat the chief class enemy of the proletariat – the bourgeoisie.”⁶

In the United States there had already been mass demonstrations of the unemployed, the veterans’ march and the strike struggles against wage cuts. The resolution called upon the U.S. Party to continue to strengthen its efforts in mobilizing the masses, and towards this end to “concentrate chiefly on the struggle for social insurance, against wage cuts, for immediate assistance for the unemployed; 2. for assistance for the ruined farmers; 3. for equal rights of the Negroes and the right of self-determination for the Black Belt.” It urged the defense of the Chinese people against foreign aggression and defense of the Soviet Union.

There was nothing new in all this. The Party was in agreement with all these points and had taken part in discussions which led to the formulation of his speech.

I visited the Lenin School where I reported on the Afro-American work in the Party. The student body was completely new to me; there were a number of American Black students as well as several South Africans. One was Nzula, the secretary of the South African Communist Party, a brilliant young Zulu communist. Unfortunately Nzula died of pneumonia shortly after I left.

In Moscow I also met members of the Black and white film group who had come to the Soviet Union at the invitation of the *Mezhrabpom* (Soviet film industry). The twenty-two young men and women were there to film a story about race and class relations in the Southern United States. Among them were the novelist and poet Langston Hughes; Louise Thompson (now Louise Thompson

Patterson), secretary of the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners and a former social worker and teacher; Ted Poston, a New York journalist; Loren Miller, a young west coast intellectual, later a lawyer and judge; and Henry Moon, a writer who later became publicity director of the NAACP. They seemed to be having a good time among the hospitable Russians who went out of their way to show them courtesy.

After a stay of several months and a number of attempts to get started, the movie was called off. The reason, according to *Mezhrabpom* officials, was the inadequacy of the scenario. It was not worthy of the kind of picture they had hoped to make, nor were the actors quite what they expected.

They were a group of intellectuals, not a genuine worker among them and only one professional actor. Most were from the north and knew little or nothing about the South. Some members of the group, however, contended that the reasons for cancelling the project were political – that the Soviets were backing away from the project in order to curry favor with the U.S. government.

They claimed that equal rights were being sacrificed and the Soviets were betraying Blacks in exchange for diplomatic relations with the United States. At the time, the two countries were about to establish diplomatic relations, and a film depicting racial relations in the U.S. might be considered a violation of the proposed treaty of recognition which enjoined both parties to refrain from hostile propaganda against the other.

This charge was picked up, embellished and hurled throughout the world by the capitalist press. Added to it were accounts of “poor Blacks stranded in Moscow.” The *New York Tribune* headlined a story “Negroes Adrift in ‘Uncle Tom’s’ Russian Cabin – Harlem Expeditionary Unit is Stranded in Moscow.”⁷

A couple of years later when George Padmore left his post as editor of the *Negro Worker* (organ of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers in Hamburg), he made use of this incident to try to bolster his flimsy charge that the Communist International had deserted the African liberation struggles.

These charges were false. According to Langston Hughes, the group was on contract and continued to receive their salaries – higher than any of them had ever earned before. They were staying in a luxurious hotel, were wined and dined by the Russians, and were also invited by the theatrical union on a pleasure trip to the

Black Sea to visit the resorts of the Crimea and the Caucasus.

Langston Hughes also supported the Russians with respect to the inadequacy of the script. In fact, it was he who called their attention to it. He had read the script, written by a well-known Soviet scenarist whose knowledge of contemporary Black life was limited to the very few books on the subject which had been translated into Russian. He had evidently studied these and put together what he thought was a highly dramatic story of race relations in the United States.

The result, said Hughes, "was a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness. It was so interwoven with major and minor impossibilities and improbabilities that it would have seemed like a burlesque on the screen." He told studio officials that in his opinion, "no plausible film could possibly be made from it since, in general, the script was so mistakenly conceived that it was beyond revision."⁸

Mezhrabpom informed the group that they would be paid in full for the duration of their contracts and that transportation via London, Paris or Berlin back to the U.S. would be available whenever they wished to depart. With regard to the future, three choices were offered: exit visas at anytime, an extended tour of the Soviet Union before leaving, or permanent residence and jobs for any who desired to remain. All were invited to stay in the USSR as long as they wished.

Langston remained a year, visiting republics in central Asia and traveling in various parts of the Soviet Union. Two members of the group stayed permanently. Wayland Rudd, the actor, appeared in Moscow theaters and performed for the troops at the front during World War II. Lloyd Patterson, a scene designer who was a graduate of Hampton Institute in Virginia, married a Russian woman and stayed in the Soviet Union where he died during the Nazi invasion of Moscow. His wife, Vera, also a scene designer, was a friend of Ina's.

Homer Smith, a former postal employee from Minneapolis, stayed in the Soviet Union until the beginning of World War II. He got a contract with the Russian postal service and introduced the first special delivery to Moscow.

While I was there, Mother Wright (mother of one of the Scottsboro Boys) was on a tour of Russia and spoke to a whole series of mass rallies, culminating in a huge demonstration and parade of tens

of thousands of Soviet workers in Moscow. They went through the main streets of Moscow with placards and banners: “Free the Scottsboro Boys!” “Down with U.S. Imperialism!” and “The Soviet Union – Friend of the Oppressed Blacks.” This enthusiastic support of the Russians for the Scottsboro Boys further belied these slanders.

One day I dropped in at the Bolshoi Moscow Hotel to visit some members of the film group. Entering the lobby I saw my old KUTVA schoolmate Golden and we ran into a Russian embrace. He had gone back to the States in 1928 and had now returned to the Soviet Union with a new wife, a Polish-American woman. They had settled in Tashkent in central Asia, where he was professor of English literature at the university. His wife also taught there and they had a baby daughter.

Golden told me what had happened to him in the past years. Back in the U.S., he had found it difficult to fit into Party work. “I was neither an organizer nor an agitator and I felt I was too old to acquire these qualities,” he said. (He was then about forty.) “As you know, I never had any Party experience before coming to Russia.”

He felt that he could, perhaps, eventually become a teacher of Marxian political economy. “You know I was good at that,” he said. He was in fact, an extremely modest and retiring fellow, not one to blow his own horn. I would say the comrades in the States did not know of his qualifications in this respect. He had worked awhile as the manager of the Party restaurant in New York. Then he was sent as organizer to Pittsburgh, but, as he himself admitted, did a poor job there.

He was a loyal communist, however, and it occurred to him that there was one thing he could do for the Soviet Union and that was to organize a group of Black technicians to go there to work. Approaching his old teacher at Tuskegee, the famed Dr. George Washington Carver, he solicited his aid in getting together a group of agricultural specialists to go to the Soviet Union. Dr. Carver seemed enthusiastic about the project and immediately sought volunteers from among his former students.

They eventually got together a group of nine agricultural specialists, agronomists and agricultural chemists. There was also one young civil engineer, Charles Young, the son of Colonel Young – West Point graduate and highest ranking Black officer in the U.S. Army at the beginning of World War I.

The whole group signed contracts through the *Amtorg* (Soviet trading organization in the U.S.). Led by Golden, they left for the USSR. Otto told me he saw them off when they sailed from New **York**. He asked Golden when he was coming back. Repeating a verse of the once-popular song, Golden replied, "I'll be back when the elephants roost in the trees."

Golden died in Tashkent just before World War II. In addition **to his** work as a professor, he was at that time a member of the city Soviet. He must have been a very popular man because we heard that the whole town turned out for his funeral.

Most of the young Black technicians remained permanently, married and had families in the Soviet Union. One became head of the largest state poultry farm in the Soviet Union and another, Sutton, an agricultural chemist from San Antonio, Texas, invented a process for producing rope from rice straw.

My desire to bring Ina back to the States was made known to the appropriate authorities. We had no trouble at all. She was immediately given an exit visa. Naturally, her mother was sorry to be separated from her only child, but she approved of Ina's leaving – saying she wanted her daughter to be happy.

We left Moscow for Riga, site of the nearest American embassy (the Soviet Union was not recognized by the U.S. at this time). Arriving in Riga we proceeded at once to the American embassy to get the necessary papers which would allow Ina to enter the United States as my wife and become a permanent resident. At the time, I thought there was a possibility of getting immediate approval so she could come through with me. I knew that this had happened in some cases, but I was quickly disabused of this naive hope.

At the embassy I was subjected to a quiz; the ambassador himself took part in the questioning. I could tell by his accent that he was a polite Southern gentleman. Behind the mask, I could sense the hostility towards me. I told them I was a writer and had spent time in the Soviet Union a couple of years before. There I had met Ina, and we had gotten married. Now I had returned to bring her back with me. They asked me all sorts of questions about the Soviet Union – how I liked it, what it was like. I gave general answers. It was clear they knew all along who I was.

Finally I was told that they didn't handle visas from that office in this connection. I would have to go back to the United **States** and apply through the Immigration Department to bring **Ina in**.

They assured me I would have no problem. I should leave Ina in Riga. This, they said, was the normal procedure. The ambassador, keeping up the friendly facade, bade me goodbye in a polite way and wished me luck.

Fortunately, we had friends in Riga. The Armenian Vartanyan, a member of the YCI, had given us the name of his uncle, a wealthy doctor in the city, who had his own health sanitarium. Ina could stay there as a guest as long as she wanted.

The city of Riga was a notorious spy center. A listening post for the U.S., it was the nearest place to gather information on the Soviet Union for U.S. intelligence. Many of the anti-Soviet “experts” were centered there, and the city served as a lie factory. For example, they reported twenty million people had starved to death in famines in 1932. I was there that year, and while I saw some tightening of the belt as a result of the bad harvest, there was no starvation. Then there was even cruder stuff about the “nationalization of women” – all invented by newspapermen in the bars in Riga.⁹

I was in Riga just three or four days and regretfully left Ina with the doctor and his family. He assured me everything would be all right. We went to the station where I caught the train for Berlin; Ina and I embraced, and she watched as the train pulled out. I never saw her again.

From Berlin I went to Bremerhaven and got passage home on the liner *Bremen*. Immediately on arrival in the States I went to the Immigration office on Ellis Island to apply for a visa for Ina. Here they were quite rude. One guy asked me, “Who is she – a communist? We’re not letting any communists in, you know.”

I said, “No. She’s just a Soviet citizen.” They gave me an application to fill out.

I then asked when I could hear from them and they told me it would be a month or so. “Why does it take so long?” I asked.

They said they had to investigate.

I kept in close touch with Ina assuring her that things would turn out all right. I also called the Immigration Department, constantly inquiring about the application.

After several months, I became convinced my application for Ina was being deliberately obstructed by the Immigration Department itself. So I started my own campaign, assisted by my friend William Patterson, then national secretary of the International Labor Defense. We felt the best way to get results was to threaten the im-

migration authorities with public exposure – it was a clear case of discrimination against a Black man!

We enlisted the support of several liberals, including the Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners headed by Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein and Malcolm Cowley of the American Civil Liberties Union. They addressed a telegram to the commissioner of immigration in Washington, demanding to know the reasons for the delay and denouncing this inhuman treatment. “Is it because she is white and Mr. Hall is Negro?” they asked.

We got an immediate reply from the commissioner himself. He denied the delay had anything to do with racial discrimination and said he would like to see Mr. Hall down in Washington so we could talk the matter over.

Pat and I went down to the office of the commissioner in Washington. Patterson, as my attorney, was on the offensive and launched right in. But the commissioner told him to hold back. There’s no discrimination here, he told us, but of course, we’re not going to let any communists in. We objected, saying she was not a communist, just a citizen of the Soviet Union.

Then the commissioner raised the question of my previous marriage. They as yet had no proof of the termination of that marriage. I replied that that was no problem; I would get the proof for them.

Shortly after I had arrived in Moscow in 1926, I had gotten a letter from my sister Eppa. She told me she had run into Hazel, my former wife. Hazel had told her she had divorced me, was remarried and had some children. So I assumed there would be no trouble getting confirmation of the divorce.

I immediately went to Chicago and saw my sister. She repeated what she had written to me, told me where Hazel was living and then took me there to see her. I explained to Hazel that I needed to get confirmation of our divorce. But she said she hadn’t divorced me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, amazed.

“You know, it’s against my religion. My church doesn’t approve of divorces,” she said.

I was astounded. Here she was living with someone else and with children, but she couldn’t approve of divorce!

I wrote Ina, telling her what had transpired and told her I thought the best thing to do was for her to go back to Moscow, I would get a divorce as quickly as I could and then go back.

But I got bogged down in work. There was no money for a divorce, and no guarantee that even with the divorce, I would be able to get Ina into the country. I felt very sad about this and we did exchange letters for a time, but I was unable to get back to the Soviet Union in the thirties and we eventually lost contact. I later heard from friends who had visited Moscow that she had remarried.

Notes:

1. (p. 380.) William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party*, p. 289.
2. (p. 380.) *Ibid.*, p. 291.
3. (p. 381.) Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 192.
4. (p. 381.) *Ibid.*, p. 238.
5. (p. 381.) *Ibid.*, p. 240.
6. (p. 382.) "The International Situation and the Tasks of the Sections of the Communist International: Theses on the Report of Comrade Kuusinen," *Imprecorr*, October 6, 1932, pp. 939-43.
7. (p. 384.) Langston Hughes, *I Wonder As I Wander* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 69-70, 73-80, 89-90, 94-99. See also *The Crisis*, January 1933, p. 16. See Louise Thompson's response in the February 1933 issue, p. 37. Delegation members Poston and Moon issued a statement in Berlin claiming that the "forces of American race prejudice have triumphed" in canceling the film. This statement was published in *The New York Times* and *The Amsterdam News* of October 10, 1933. Similar statements were also issued by two other members of the twenty-two member delegation. Hughes and fourteen others issued a statement repudiating these slanders. See *The Daily Worker*, October 5, 1933, and October 15, 1933.
8. (p. 385.) Hughes, pp. 76-77.
9. (p. 388.) Walter Duranty of *The New York Times* is the only American newsman I know of who wrote favorable and accurate reports about the Soviet Union in this period.