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Transcript of Paul Robeson: World Citizen, an interview conducted by Elsa Knight Thompson (KPFA-FM) and Harold Winkler, then President of Pacifica Radio Foundation. Robeson, African American singer, actor, civil rights activist and patriot. Broadcast on KPFA-FM on February 8, 1958. Pacifica Radio Archives number BB0534. Program length 00:31:31.

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Transcription

PAUL ROBESON: WORLD CITIZEN

Interviewed by Elsa Knight Thompson and Harold Winkler.

Paul Robeson (PR); Elsa Knight Thompson (EKT); and Harold Winkler (HW)

ELSA KNIGHT THOMPSON (EKT): I have in the studio with me Paul Robeson, who needs no introduction; and Harold Winkler, who is President of the Pacifica Foundation, which operates KPFA as most of you know.

Mr. Robeson has been known and loved as an artist all over the world for many years, but he has also, I believe, attracted considerable and worldwide attention in his role as a world citizen and as a person who was very deeply concerned about the society in which he lived.

I wonder, Mr. Robeson, if we could kick off by asking: When did you first become involved in the political aspects of... ??

PAUL ROBESON (PR): May I first say how happy I am and privileged to be with you here and how deeply I thank this station for its kindness throughout the years. I've been on two or three others this time, but always I knew I'd have a welcome here. So I want to thank you.

I would say as I indicate in a recent book which is now out, will be on the stand pretty soon Here I Stand: The Story of My Life As I Tell It, not too autobiographical. It began when I was a little boy in Princeton New Jersey (laugh) -- strange to say -- technically, this is the shaping of my views--a Negro boy born in Princeton, New

Jersey, in a college town where the students mainly came from the Deep South. You know Princeton (and Princeton, Harvard and Yale) was sort of the 'southern university of the north', whether you know that or not.

And so I grew up in Jersey, in a rather southern atmosphere, and my father was a minister, and I was shaped against that background. Technically, I entered the arena of the United States ,fighting for social justice for my people, in a concert. When I was in a concert in St. Louis, in 1947 -- it's in the [St. Louis] Post Dispatch. Where I was singing at the Keil Auditorium [one of the big auditoriums there], and the NAACP asked me in St. Louis, at that time, to come on a picket line -- because the Negro people could not even sit in the theater, which was just across the street.

And so I grabbed a banner and lo-and-behold, I saw Walter Huston coming down the street. He was in the play. So Walter walked out and joined the picket line too. And a few nights later, when I was doing the concert, I said that I could not quite resolve the contradiction

between singing to an audience in St. Louis-where there was no segregation of course-but also the same people, to my mind, were not fighting to see that the Negro could sit in the theater. It's been corrected since. And so I said that I was giving up my career technically for the moment to enter the realm of the day-to-day struggle of the Negro people, especially.

EKT: And this was your first political action?

PR: No, that was within this context -- this is very important to get in context -- My first actual... to come back to your question, was in London in 1933. It isn't very well known, which I clarify in the book, that I went to play Showboat in London in 1928 (Jerry Kern was with me, and Oscar Hammerstein) and we had a great success. And then I did concerts in 1928, and I became domiciled and lived in England. Domiciled there -- paid my taxes there -- from 1928 until 1940, after the war began.

Harold Winkler (HW): Does this mean, Mr. Robeson,

that you spent most of your time in England during this period?

PR: It meant that I came back now and then for concerts. I was here in Oakland [California] many times. But I went back and spent most of my time in Great Britain. I was there in 1930, [I] played Othello. So again, this is extremely important, at that time I said for the public to see, that I felt - I would explain it today in this way: We understand why many of my people have come to Oakland, to the vicinity, from Mississippi, and from the South. There have been migrations into California, I understand today from everywhere. But for many years, as you know, many of my people have left the South, because the conditions in the North were better. I felt the pressure so much in 1928 -- that instead of stopping in New York, I just went on to London.

EKT: And did you feel no pressures there, in the racial sense?

PR: I felt no where *near* the pressure. Now that does

not mean that you haven't the background of the English colonies and so forth, the pressure. But I say it's a difference between right here now and let's say the Mississippi of Mr. Eastland [Senator James Eastland, 1904-1986, Senator 1921, 1942-1978]. You understand. This is quite different. America's quite different. There are great differences. So I found England that much more of a difference, that's all. I found Canada that way.

When I was playing Othello some years ago, when we got to Toronto, the cast said to me after a week, 'well Paul, why are you so different?' The play is much deeper, you seem to be freer. I said 'that's quite true, that's quite true.' I'm in a country where this is not a question, I'm on a theater, on the stage, with many other white actors. This is not a problem here. So obviously I feel freer, that's right.

Now I don't feel the pressures that one would feel in the deep South all the time, but it would interest you to know, and I've put it, that I ...and I feel any Negro, if he were honest... would have to say that even in our democracy at

present, that he is *never*, ay any one second, unconscious of the fact that he is a black American, or a colored American. He can never be unconscious of it, in any part of the United States.

HW: Mr. Robeson, have you been back to England since the last war?

PR: Oh yes, I was back in 1949.

HW: The point I wanted to get at is that when I was in England last year, I became aware of the large number of West Indians who are now about London, and I heard rather nasty overtones in my talks with some Englishmen that frightened me. ---

PR: No question about it. ---

HW: --- About a change that might take place in England.

PR: Again, if you want to go further, nothing could be

worse than South Africa. But I'm only saying (and I put these things down) what is most important is at the height (having lived many years out... and enjoying certainly the height of success in Great Britain) that I decided that I must come back to my own country to struggle in this, and to make the sacrifices that I have. That's the most important thing in this regard. And I'm here.

HW: Now, wait, spell this out again for me. You left England because England is not as attractive, or because you feel you have a greater mission in the United States?

PR: No, no, no. Let's don't get into that. There are many places in the world where personally it would be much easier to live than in the United States, for an American Negro.

EKT: In-other-words your commitment is definitely to what you feel you can do in this country?

PR: That's right. And Langston Hughes, in a book discussion before the Book Club in New York, just a

while ago, pointed out that every important Negro novelist (not only Richard Wright, but many others) -- that 95% of them live in Paris, or somewhere else in the world. Why? Because the pressures personally are much simpler.

HW: And yet in the foreword of your book that I have before me, you quote Frederick Douglass as saying ‘ A man is worked on by what he works on.’

PR: That’s right.

HW: ... ‘ He may carve out his circumstances, but his circumstances will carve him out as well.’

PR: That’s right.

HW: Is this part of the reason why you feel that you must be back in the United States?

PR: I made the decision some years ago. I say certainly that I spring essentially from here. Like .. the other day about the Indians in North Carolina. If you recall, that

was in Robeson County.

EKT: Yes I noticed that in the item.

PR: Now this is a very interesting thing which I point out in my book, and which explains a good deal too how I feel. Now I was born on the edge of Robeson County. And my father is a Robeson and was a Robeson because he was a slave, my own father, a slave of the Scottish Robesons who still control Robeson County in North Carolina. So I approach these problems from a very close point. But I have a home, and my people are tobacco workers and ship workers today. On plantations in that county. But a part of that soil belongs to me. That's my roots. These are my roots in this country.

On the other hand, also I felt that somewhere I could make some contributions from my background traveling about the world. However, I never expected, I am quite willing to say, that I would be restricted from traveling.

[laugh]

EKT: Well tell me Mr. Robeson, was your commitment to the political scene then largely as a result of your feeling about your own people? Or "our" own people, let's put it. Or did it have other overtones, like political conviction?

PR: First it starts as an American Negro interested in my own people. The other great change is very constant in my mind. I was in the Welsh Valley, and the Welsh people sing very much like we do, the Negro people, in many of our songs, beautiful songs. And I was one of the few outsiders who has sung at a Welsh Eisteddfod affair -- their national festival which has gone on since the time of the Druids. And I went down in the mines with the workers, and they explained to me that, 'Paul, you may be successful here in England, but your people suffer like ours. We are poor people. And you belong to us. You don't belong to the big wigs here in this country.'

And so I today feel as much at home in the Welsh Valley [Great Britain] as I would in my own Negro section of any city in the United States. And I just did a broadcast

by transatlantic cable to the Welsh Valley a few weeks ago. And here was the first understanding that the struggle of the Negro people, or of any people, cannot be by itself. That is, the human struggle. And so I was attracted then, met many members of the Labor Party, and my politics embraced also the common struggle of all oppressed peoples, including especially the working masses. Specifically the laboring people of all the world. And that defines my philosophy.

It's a joining one of 'we are a working people, a laboring people, the Negro people.' And there is a unity between our struggle and those of white workers in the South. I've had white workers shake my hand and say 'Paul we're fighting for the same thing.' And so this defines my attitude toward socialism and toward many other things in the world. I do not believe that a few people should control the wealth of any land, that it should be a collective ownership in the interests of all.

EKT: Is that a democratic socialism? or...?

PR: It would have to be a democratic socialism. There are many ways, however, to struggle toward democracy as I see that. In a place like China for example today, the Soviet Union and many other places, or take our own problems of Negroes. If we were free in the South tomorrow, to carry our weight, to vote, and do everything --would we now look around and try to find the ten billionaires among our people? Would we attempt to build them up? Or would we try to answer the needs of the great millions of our people?

And so I see other ways of life, socialism, as trying to solve the problems of millions and tens of millions of peoples at once. Instead of the way that, *we* would start from the individual to the masses, *they* start from the masses--this way. Now there are two ways, and there are difficulties each way. I have made the decision to join in a *collective* struggle. And the reason that my personal sacrifices mean very little in the struggle, in one way, when you see the children in Little Rock [Arkansas, USA]...What does not giving a few concerts mean?...if you can make some other contribution. It's in *that*

context. So nothing is perfect in the world. We're going toward it from different angles. I feel it's a great burden of proof on every society, on our *own* as well, today.

HW: Mr. Robeson, some years ago, I was talking to a French member of the Communist party. And in the course of our discussion, he said to me, 'You, Mr. Winkler, are a "Jeffersonian Democrat". You can afford it in your *rich* land, but in my land and in other lands, we must give up our freedom *now*, to certain men, in order to achieve freedom for our children in the future. This is an act of *faith* for me', he said, 'giving up my freedom now.' ...Do you find yourself sympathetic?

PR: I would put it quite differently. Nor do I think that's *any* part of any Socialist philosophy or Communist philosophy, as far as I know. That we struck it during the War under Roosevelt for example. [World War II]...We had to give up many privileges. They're practically telling us we have to do that again. I mean in any sort of a war economy, in England for example, they have not eaten eggs almost for years and years, because of certain

pressures.

And it seems to me in Socialist lands, the Soviet Union, China and many places that that's quite true. It's one thing to say today that they don't have as shining a power as we do, but they have made tremendous scientific progress. And within a one generation so to speak, within forty years, have become one of the most powerful countries in the world. But they've done it by great sacrifices, and not by -- to my mind -- they feel that the country in one sense, the man in the street, may not in every essence belong to him, but he feels it's much more *his* than say I do in Charleston, South Carolina.

When one American southern Negro explained to me that I was in that state of 'our great plantations.' And I said, "Are you sure about that? Our great plantations?" [laugh] I don't feel that they're *my* plantations. But in one sense, people who, in Socialist lands feel the country does belong to them, in a real sense. Now as far as the basic concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat and so forth, I would say, again bringing it back to our own history,

there was as we know, a dictatorship of the North over the South in the days following the Civil War. When that dictatorship was removed, the colored people reverted practically into a kind of servitude. I could've conceived of a dictatorship over the South for quite a longer period from my point of view, quite frankly.

HW: In your book Mr. Robeson, Here I Stand, you have a chapter entitled "The Power of Negro Action." What are some of the specific "acts" which you recommend ?. And perhaps in the order of priority?

PR: In any Negro ... it seems to me rather startling to many of my friends. Nobody would be startled,[if] say, we're taking the vote, the power of an Italian action, or a Polish action in Detroit, or a Catholic action in New York, and so forth. That the vote would be a block and the power of the Negro vote in the North in certain states. This is one very important aspect, very clear... We have tremendous economic power in this land today. There should be tremendous support of Negro business, of Negro banks and loan associations, and so forth. But the

prime thing is, is that I'm convinced that...

HW: Taking this last illustration of yours, have you not found that as Negro bankers become richer that they grow away from your people? [**PR:** No I don't...] .. Or do they remain a part of total Negro action?

PR: There's no way, as I said before, for any American Negro, however wealthy, however famous, to be anything ... at this period of our history, at some point, than an American Negro. If he doesn't know it, he'll find out.

EKT: That I can see, but from a racial standpoint Mr. Robeson, but from the political standpoint of socialism, which you were discussing a few moments ago, surely a Negro capitalist, if he had the opportunity, would undoubtedly behave according to the lights of his own ...

PR: But I know many of the most wealthy, and often I feel that they don't help as much as they should, but he's forever conscious..his children, suffer the [same] things as a poor Negro's children. And at some point, he finds a

way to help...it's a little different, even there...

EKT: In-other-words, you feel it cracks through in a different way? ...

PR: What I'm trying to say is that somewhere for our own dignity, I see -- that is Africa, but you understand, Ghana today -- *unifying* with its own sort of nationalist strength, is that clear? [yes] I feel in America, strange to say, especially in the South, that even with all the good will of white liberals in the country, that it's very important for the Negro people to know what they want and to unify to do it. Often in a very simple case of fighting segregation, one group of Negroes can be drawn aside because of political pressures, other pressures. We should unify too. We should unify. I feel there's got to be a unity in order to integrate. That's what I feel. I feel that we just can't integrate as individuals.

HW: But isn't the example of Liberia for example, a sorry example, as set against Ghana?

PR: Oh yes, because that's very simple. Firestone has taken care of that. It has been exploited to its hilt by Firestone Rubber if you don't know the facts...

HW: Yes, but it still remains that an economic rather than a racial...[crosstalk]

PR: And so has Ghana.

HW: .. that racial unity question. It remains an economic question in its fundamentals rather than the unity of the Negro people.

PR: I think that Ghana also has the unity of its own nation, the same as Chinese or Indians...it's very close to India. They have a culture and a history that has its own national characteristics.

HW: What will prevent Ghana from becoming another Liberia? [crosstalk]

PR: Liberia today is completely controlled by Firestone,

not by Africans. But I feel that Nkrumah [Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister, and first President of Ghana] is going to control the economy of Ghana, and at some time be strong enough to say to the European 'Either you sit here and acknowledge that *we* run our own country, like Nehru, or else you go!' But I don't see the day when Liberia can tell Firestone to do that. Oh they're quite different. They're quite different. Liberia is a complete vassal state of American capital, finance capital, without question. They have nothing to say, nothing whatsoever.

EKT: What is your reaction to the 'passive resistance' as practiced in Montgomery? [Alabama]

PR: I think there was a magnificent movement and .. as far as the general theme of a non-violent solution to the problem, .. there could be no other solution within the frame of things today. This is a very important contribution. Nobody could think of a violent solution unless Negroes, unless somebody wanted to ask somebody to be destroyed.... that would be absurd.

On the other hand, within that framework, I think that the Negro people have to be extremely militant, and demand a little more than they are demanding today, and to do a little more. To do other things as well as pray...let me put it... as well as pray.

HW: Do you think there's been a change in the attitude of the Negro churches towards militant, political and economic actions Mr. Robeson?

PR: I think there has, because it's history you know. Take Frederick Douglass. I belong to the AME Zion Church [African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church] . There's one in this area. And Douglass was a part of that church. Harriet Tubman (who formed the underground railroad, who was called the Moses of our people -- they say 'Go Down Moses' when she came into the South to free the slaves) And we have a tradition of tremendous consistent 'speaking out' for our rights. Like the whole Civil Rights struggle. I mean by militant: letting (I think) people know that you want to be free like anybody else.

And I think the churches (however a lot of the responsibilities still rests upon our churches-because that's where so many of our people, you know, go) they have tremendous influence too.

HW: Mr. Robeson, do you think your artistry as a singer and actor have suffered because of your involvement in political action, or profited?

PR: I feel that they have profited. They've only suffered by the fact that because of my political views, which I certainly did not expect in a democracy, that I've been prevented from exercising my craft. However, I've kept singing all through the years. You may be able to test it pretty soon. I just made a recording the other day for Vanguard [record label], which they felt was superior to any records I have ever made (my voice is still in fine shape ...) And as far as Othello, I've worked on it, I feel -- I've just been invited to play at Stratford-on-Avon, the Shakespeare memorial theater in England. And in the play Pericles, to play a part of Gower. And I would certainly do Othello at some point in London. And I feel I

would give a better performance...

I feel that in every -- and I've got other things here which we won't be able to get to -- in my music, comparing the folk music of the world, I would say that my interest in my art has deepened just no end in the last years. And I've become interested in the music of Bartok, of Mussorgsky, many folk themes -- the unity of the folk music of the world, which has sprung from my political conviction that all people should be unified. I have seen it expressed in their music, and I do a program in which of all the songs of all the peoples in the world suggesting that we are all one human family. It always comes to that.

So I feel that basically--that it has deepened ... On the other hand, I have never separated my work as an artist from my work as a human being. I've always put it even more strongly, that to me, my art is always a weapon. It's got to be good art. Othello was a weapon in racial relations. Or at least showing that we can do some things too. I played football. My father explained to me: that if a fellow hit me, I couldn't hit him back, because they'd say

we were "bad" and "savage". So I had to stand and be knocked all around. I had to do well in my studies. So I've never been able to *divorce* one thing from the other. And luckily, I don't sing the kind of songs that you hear and you hit the high B flat, and the high this and the high that. I sing songs that express very much the emotions of different peoples, like the Welsh, the Scots, the Negro, the Chinese, Russians, and so forth.

EKT: What is the present state of play on this passport business? You were talking about your British invitations. How are you going to get there?

PR: Well, luckily I think at this point, the basic case is before the Supreme Court, it's the case of Rockwell-Kent, contending that the (which all the cases revolve around) that when the State Department put in its administrative necessities that one signed a non-Communist affidavit whether or not he is, was or so forth...that this is a violation of Constitutional rights. It wasn't just -- any American now has to sign this particular proposal. And this is before the Supreme Court. And in its present

temper, it seems to me that the Court might easily decide.

EKT: And this is what you refused to do. You refused to sign such a document?

PR: Oh yes completely refused. This is a complete ... "Did you murder your wife yesterday or the day before?" Are you a Republican? Are you a Democrat? This is ... My political opinions are my own business you know. This is a complete.. And I say we have the background of the reversal in the Smith Act cases, all over this country. So somebody was framed, I would say. So it shows that all of it, to my mind, is a complete hoax from somewhere.

EKT: In-other-words, you're hoping that on the basis of some of the current court decisions that you may get your passport in time to ..

PR: What's more, I have been invited to sing on April 6th in a national television broadcast. Maybe I can get special permission to go. I mean .. and because of my

background in England, there is almost a national, almost *demand* from England, or request, that I be allowed to come in April, and even before the Summer. And also, I take some optimistic point of view from the fact that where no passports are needed (after restricting me for many years, even in that area, this had to be lifted because the courts would certainly I think have ruled that this was completely illegal). Once I was stopped from going to Hawaii, from Puerto Rico, which are parts of the United States. So I can now go anywhere in this hemisphere...

EKT: You're not dangerous as long as you stick to the Western hemisphere?

PR: I'm just saying that if the Court is looking at this, how can the State Department argue that if I leave the country, this is extremely dangerous -- that you .. got up in court the fellow .. and if I left there was going to be a catastrophe, and what would happen the next morning .. get on the plane. But I could now be in Brazil. I can be in the West Indies. I can be in Canada. I can be anywhere in this hemisphere. Why can't I be in London? It doesn't

make any sense to me. So I'm optimistic that I may get my passport.

HW: Mr. Robeson, if we may change directions, [yes, laughing] Could I however ask you some questions along another line for a moment. I have three small children of my own, and I'm very much interested in the problems of children with relation to these larger problems of a man standing up for certain things. Have your children moved around the world with you in the course of your travels?

PR: I just have one boy. Just one boy. And he, as you know, traveled around from the time he was about two, traveled with me everywhere, and lived in England, and went to school for a part of his youth in the Soviet Union, he speaks Russian very well. And he is now in this country, went to Cornell, and he has two beautiful grandchildren. And he is very happy. It was a mixed marriage, in one sense, he married a very wonderful Jewish girl, with a Rumanian Jewish background, and they're extremely happy, have two children.

PW: ... all the problems ..

PR: .. all the problems. And they are very happy and get along very well in Harlem where they live in the Negro community. They are both, may I say, to use a much abused term, " progressive" young Americans [laugh], and he's an electronics engineer, and a very fine acoustical engineer. We've done some work together. And she teaches in school, teaches children. Their two children are in school, so she teaches in a young children's school. And they're very happy.

And my wife is an accredited correspondent at the United Nations, and does a lot of work for different publications throughout the world. So we keep pretty busy. But I am very happy to get to the core, to be back at my singing, and to say that however I have talked this afternoon, that I have great faith. I wouldn't be here if I did not have great faith in our -- that somewhere we will realize the democratic potentials of our life, of our life, of our society. I deeply believe that. I fight for peace.

I feel we've got to live with many other kinds of systems and other beliefs in the world. We've been able to do it through many generations and centuries. That's no reason why we couldn't find peace and not destruction. And a little *faster* in understanding the problems of oppressed peoples wherever they may be. But I'm very happy to be back in the area to sing. In fact, I've come back here -- you know some of the Negro churches --at the Third Baptist in San Francisco, and I sang in Oakland, and I sang in Sacramento and Stockton and I've been back at my career for quite some time--mainly in the Negro churches.

PW: Has this been a change? I was not aware that you had been singing in the Negro churches up until recently?

PR: Well I wasn't able to sing anywhere else. I wasn't able to get the auditoriums. On the other hand, we have a great tradition in Negro life. All of us, Marion Anderson, [Hayes?], we all began in Negro churches. And my brother is pastor of a very large church in New York and

every Sunday afternoon you may go there and hear any of the top Negro artists in the whole concert field, anybody.

We always go back to the churches. And so it's been a very fine way to walk into a church of about 2,000 people, and say well Paul's here this morning and let's see how he sounds. [laugh] Comes out very well, why fight it.

But I've really begun and been practicing, and have come back into the swing of things in this area. And I want to say that I go so far as to say in this period -- some people have said no, but I have found the Pacific Coast, especially the Bay Area, vastly different. I found it very different in feeling from some other sections of the United States. Other people have felt this. Many outside people have come here to United Nations gatherings, feel that you are a little more non-hysterical. That you have a little evidently deeper belief in our democratic faith, and I have felt that. I have felt that so much so that I may even come out to sit around for quite a while out here.

EKT: Well we think it's a wonderful city [laugh]

PW: Where may we hear you sing in the near future?

PR: Well, you're going to give me I hope on Sunday afternoon, February 9th at the Oakland Auditorium Theater. It'll be very important, the first time I've had a public auditorium in the area for quite some time. It's sponsored by the Committee on Negro Life and honoring Negro History Week, which you know has been honored now for some time. And Mr. William Duncan Allen, a very gifted pianist, who is accompanying me, and who is Chairman of the Bach Festival in the Berkeley area, is playing some compositions of mainly Negro composers. It's an afternoon of music and poetry, I'm reciting some Shakespeare and some poetry from Negro poets. And singing as I say, music that ranges through all the folk music of the world and those composers like Bartok and Mussorgsky and Dvorjek who have used the folk idiom in their extended and more complex works.

EKT: It sounds as if it will be a delightful afternoon.

And we are very grateful to you for coming along to

KPFA.

PR: I'm grateful to you.

PW: Thank you Mr. Robeson.

END OF PROGRAM:

PAUL ROBESON: WORLD CITIZEN

NOTES:

1. Paul Robeson (1898-1976) -- African American singer, actor, political activist, civil rights champion, world citizen, Blacklisted during "McCarthy period".
2. *Here I Stand: The Story of My Life as I Tell It*. Paul Robeson's autobiography, first published in 1958 by Beacon Books.
3. Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) -- African American abolitionist, newspaper publisher, author, served as consul-general to the Republic of Haiti. Born into slavery in Maryland, escaped to freedom.
4. Search "Paul Robeson" in the Pacifica Radio Archives catalog for more audio recordings.

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NATIONAL
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