

Reminiscences - Che and Robeson

by Janet Jagan

I visited Cuba in 1960, the second year of the overthrow of the dictator General Batista. I was then Minister of Labour, Health and Housing and was invited in that capacity, along with other persons of the hemisphere to celebrate May Day.

I remember meeting one of Mexico's major artists, Mr Siqueros, a leading writer from Chile, a prominent South American trade unionist including Vincente Toledano, and many others. It was a heady atmosphere, celebrating the triumph of the Cuban people led by Fidel Castro and Che Gueverra over the brutal dictatorship of Batista.

I met many Cubans, including my counterpart, the woman Minister of Housing. I was taken to the mountains where the Revolution began and where the tenacity of the Cuban leadership and its militant adherents held out so bravely and successfully.

There was a massive May Day rally held in Havana with some million people present. However, the most outstanding event of that period remains indelibly in my memory - my visit to Che Gueverra. He was, then, if I remember correctly, the head of the nation's finance. He was dressed in western attire, not the military fatigues in which we are so accustomed to seeing him portrayed. My impression was that he was a bit uncomfortable in his job, and dress, but that was a subtle feeling of mine. He was obviously intent on doing his job in the best manner to advance his adopted country.

While his face is firmly planted in my memory, I cannot recall a word of our conversation. Be that as it may, it was a friendly meeting and on parting he presented me with a beautiful carving, which I later gave to my son.

The other part of my visit to Cuba has its own light humour. I am an avid fan of the Chilean writer Isabelle Allende, niece of the assassinated President of Chile, Salvador Allende. One day last year, after reading one of her most excellent books, I decided to write to her and share a little joke about her uncle. I took the chance of addressing the letter to her publisher. She replied nicely, even sending me her latest book on Chile.

What I told her was an incident that took place during my visit to Cuba. The President of Cuba, Mr Dorticas (not then Fidel Castro) invited all "political and intellectuals of America" (I still have the invitation), to a luncheon at Rio Cristal restaurant. Protocol was very much in vogue and we all were seated in accordance with our status. I found myself at the bottom of the table next to a most affable man. We chatted a lot throughout the lunch. His name was Salvador Allende.

I remarked to his niece, that of all those distinguished persons present, only Allende and I became presidents of our countries!

While Che Gueverra remains embedded in my memory, and I can recall how dreadful I felt when the news reached us of his terrible death, there is another great man who stands out in my memory as someone whose tragic life was so outstanding. He is Paul Robeson. Only two weeks ago I was talking to an Indiana University student and his name came up as a great American hero.

I met Paul Robeson sometime in the 40's if I remember correctly. My husband had been in correspondence with him and asked me to look him up when I went to the USA to visit my parents. I had a telephone number and called. I spoke to Robeson, introduced myself and he said to me: "Now, you just get into a taxi, give them my address and come out right away," which I did. I was greeted at the door by this giant of a man and introduced to his wife Eslanda. He was going through a most difficult time in his life. This great singer and actor was restricted by the US government from leaving the US on any tour. He was banned from singing in public, Hollywood wouldn't touch him with a 10ft. pole in fear of government reprisals and the only place they could not prevent his presence was in the nation's churches. His career as a singer was virtually destroyed by the malicious acts of the US government. All this was the price he was paying for his radical politics. Robeson will go down in history as not only the greatest of American singers, but the leader who took all the blows and persecution in the struggle for Black equality and rights in the USA in that period.

I might note that when I visited his home in New York, I saw the splendid bust of Robeson done by the renowned sculptor Jacob Epstein.

My friendship, which lasted decades, then began with his wife Eslanda, who helped keep the family financially alive by working as a journalist at the United Nations. We began a correspondence that only ended at the end of her life. She was a lovely woman and a staunch supporter of her husband.

I remember visiting her, I think in the 60's, in London where she was living, following the final lifting of the ban on Robeson's travel. He had a powerful reception from the British working class at a rally. However, Paul Robeson suffered his greatest sorrow when he finally went on tour. His voice was no longer that of the great Robeson. The years had taken their toll. He suffered a severe case of depression and was in a small hospital. Eslanda took me there and asked me to try to cheer him up, to remind him how beloved he was, etc.

When I saw Paul Robeson after all those years, I was shocked. He had lost considerable weight and was fragile - not the robust, handsome, vigorous man of yester years. Eslanda cared for him and saw him through many crises.

After his death - oh yes! He had to die first! - then the media et al remembered him, praised him and made him an American icon. He has now taken his place among American heroes - but what a hard, sad life he had! But he bore it courageously, never recanted on his ideals. Recordings of his magnificent voice are heard from time to time. There has never been any singer to match that magnificent voice!