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OUR TOWNS

Giving Back Stature Stolen in Red Scare

By PETER APPLEBOME

Peekskill, N.Y.

It was long ago, the end of summer in 1949. She was 13. But for Joan Landzberg, the memories will never go away.

Not that Aug. 27, when a scheduled concert by the singer Paul Robeson was canceled after a terrifying attack by dozens of men swinging clubs and folding chairs, making bonfires out of sheet music. Not the night of Sept. 4, when she left the rescheduled concert lying flat on the bed of a pickup, other frightened children lying on top of her, as mobs threw bricks and rocks. These events became infamous as the Peekskill Riots.

It was long ago, so long that community and religious groups in town caused nary a stir when they put together plans for a concert to be held Friday, 60 years later. The impetus for the concert, which includes jazz greats like Randy Weston and Roy Haynes and others, was not to remember the riots (which people remind you didn't happen in Peekskill but nearby in the town of Cortlandt) but to celebrate Mr. Robeson's life.

Still, what those long-ago events mean today, what resonance the fears and angers of 1949 have for the fears and angers of 2009, well that's a subject as rich and complicated as the man who set the events in motion.

Mr. Robeson's story is out there, not forgotten but dimly remembered, particularly by the young. Born in 1898, the son of a slave who became a minister, he was the third black student admitted to Rutgers University. He became the dominant college football player of his time, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, was class valedictorian and earned a law degree from Columbia University.

He almost single-handedly legitimized black spirituals and folk music as an art form and

became perhaps the world's most famous concert singer as well as a renowned actor. His performance in "Othello," on Broadway in 1943, was one of the most celebrated of his time. He was befriended by Jawaharlal Nehru, Noel Coward, Sergei Eisenstein, Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Emma Goldman.

He became a pioneering and uncompromising human rights advocate. He spoke out against segregation decades before the civil rights movement began, and was a fierce opponent of colonialism when that was barely an issue.

He also became an enthusiastic, unflagging admirer of the Soviet Union, something he never renounced or backed away from, even in the face of Stalin's atrocities. He embraced socialism, not capitalism, as the future. He was blacklisted, had his passport revoked, and, in many ways, was written out of the history books. It was those ties, no doubt exacerbated by his race, that brought on the mobs and soon the cancellations of dozens of concerts elsewhere and the destruction of his career.

Advocates, like his biographer Martin Duberman, say his story and his place in American consciousness remain depressingly marginalized despite fitful efforts to revive his name. Mrs. Landzberg, a teacher and administrator, said the event on Friday is meant to remember Mr. Robeson, not the Sept. 4 riot, which left 140 people injured and came to symbolize the hysteria of the Red Scare.

"When I heard about this celebration, I thought this was an opportunity to reintroduce a really great man," she said. "I've sat in on classes where people are talking about the '30s and about civil rights and about Martin Luther King, and there's this gap, as if this man never existed. He's one of the giants of the civil rights movement, and no one knows."

FOR years in Peekskill, no one wanted to talk about the riots either. But there was a modest public observance on the 50th anniversary, and now there is this concert. Still, maybe the ugly part that surrounded Mr. Robeson's history here is as important to remember as his achievements and his flaws.

It was long ago. There's a black president, and what Mrs. Landzberg calls "the eruption of madness" 60 years ago is part of cold war history.

Still, there's something familiar in that torrent of anger, that sense of the nation's identity under insidious assault. "Has anyone noticed that these minorities who hate this country are now running it?" posted one reader on an online message board linked to a story about the concert. "Obama should come to this. One commie to honor another," posted a second.

Maybe it's just the aggrieved, distorted mirror of online racket. Maybe it's a good thing that people these days vent in town halls and on Web sites instead of with rocks and bricks. After all, it was long ago.

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