

Paul Robeson's Meeting with Itzik Fefer, June 1949

Grover Furr

In 1981 Paul Robeson's son, Paul Robeson Jr, claimed that his father had told him privately that in June 1949 he, Paul Sr, learned about the persecution of some prominent Jews in the Soviet Union, but had never publicly revealed this fact and had asked his son to promise not to reveal it during his, Paul Sr's, lifetime. In later years Paul Jr repeatedly confirmed this story. In the present article I check this story against the evidence that is now available. I conclude that Paul Jr's story is untrue.

Paul Robeson Sr died on January 23, 1976. Herbert Marshall, a longtime associate of Robeson's, published an obituary in the Spring 1976 issue of the *Bulletin for Soviet and East European Studies* (Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL). In it Marshall said that in June 1949 Paul Sr had met with Soviet Jewish writer Itzik Fefer, an old friend of his. Marshall claimed that Fefer had "pretend[ed] everything was normal" and that Paul Sr only learned about the executions of Fefer and the other leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFK) sometime after Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" became known in the West in 1956.

In the Fall 1976 issue of the same bulletin Paul Jr responded angrily to Marshall's obituary. Without mentioning the Robeson-Fefer meeting specifically, Paul Jr wrote:

Your description of events that supposedly occurred during two of my father's post-war visits to the U.S.S.R. are wholly false according to my father's personal recounting of these visits to me. Many published statements prove that your hearsay stories are pure fiction.

In reply to Paul Jr's short letter Marshall revealed that he had heard about Paul Sr's meeting with Fefer from the daughter of Solomon Mikhoels, who published it in an Israeli Russian-language magazine in 1976. There the matter stood for five years.

In the November 1981 issue of *Jewish Currents* Paul Jr changed his story completely. Here is a full transcript of what he wrote:

One afternoon [during his June 1949 trip to the Soviet Union] Feffer came to visit Paul. He was unaccompanied and looked very well. They greeted each

other warmly and launched into animated conversation in Russian. But Paul quickly noticed that Feffer's comments were at variance with his gestures.

Continuing a "normal" conversation, Paul responded to this "body language," and with the aid of a few handwritten words and phrases (which Paul later destroyed) Feffer "told" him a terrible story in this surreptitious way.

The room was bugged. Mikhoels had been murdered the year before on Stalin's personal order. Feffer was in serious trouble, and many of the most outstanding Jewish cultural figures had already been arrested. They would come for the rest of them soon. There was little hope for any of them, including Feffer (here Feffer drew his finger across his throat) ...

When Feffer rose to leave, he and Paul embraced like brothers, both of them had tears in their eyes, because they knew that they were probably seeing each other for the last time. (5)

In the Communist Party USA newspaper *Daily World* of December 24, 1981, Lloyd Brown, long a close associate of Paul Sr's and for a time his designated biographer, published a reply to Paul Jr's claims in the article cited above. Brown pointed out that Paul Jr's story about Paul Sr's meeting with Fefer is uncorroborated. Moreover, Paul Jr did not relate this story until 1981, 32 years after the meeting.

Brown correctly pointed out that Paul Sr's meeting with Fefer and concert could not have been in Leningrad, as Paul Jr had claimed. Therefore, Paul Jr's account is provably defective in this detail and by implication is unreliable in other details as well. Brown contended that Paul Sr was too principled a person to have remained silent concerning the allegation that Stalin had ordered Mikhoels' murder and Fefer's story about his and other Jewish leaders being arrested and in danger of being killed.

In the February 1982 issue of *Jewish Currents* Lloyd Brown published a second letter in which he again contended that Paul Jr's story as related in the November 1981 issue was false. Here is the essential part of his letter:

What corroboration was presented to give credence to the story you published, which as you sure knew, gravely impugned the honor of one of the greatest Americans of our era? *Not a word*. Nothing but the unsupported

account of what *one* person was allegedly told by another person now deceased.

The fact that hearsay testimony is given by a subject's relative does not make it more reliable. Indeed, as you must know, the fact of relationship involved subjective factors that can render that kind of hearsay evidence doubly suspect. Yet without making the slightest effort to verify Paul Jr's incredible slander of his father, your magazine and the *Morning Freiheit* assured your readers that his was an 'authentic' account. (25)

Here are the relevant parts of Paul Jr's response in the same issue:

The main thrust of Lloyd Brown's letter to *Jewish Currents* and of his *Daily World* article is the claim that the story my father told me of his 1949 meeting with Feffer is "wholly false" and "pure fiction." The basis for his claim is that in 1976, soon after my father's death, I wrote an emotional reply to a self-serving obituary written by Herbert Marshall in the anti-Soviet *Bulletin of the Center for Soviet and East European Studies*, No. 17, Spring, 1976.

Among many half-truths, distortions, and false statements in Marshall's article was the following essentially true statement: "... When he (Paul) came back after the war to Moscow ... he insisted on meeting Itzik Feffer ... They brought Feffer to Paul's suit in the hotel, where the two chatted together for a couple of hours. Feffer behaved apparently quite normally and left, embracing Paul in the Russian manner."

Lloyd Brown correctly quotes from my reply to Marshall on April 29, 1976, three months after my father's death: "Your description of events that supposedly occurred during two of Paul Robeson's post-war visits to the USSR are wholly false according to my father's personal recounting of these visits to me. Many published statements prove that your hearsay stories are pure fiction."

Paul Jr continued:

At that time, I certainly did cover up the story of Paul's 1949 meeting with Feffer. When my father recounted it to me he made me promise that I would not make it public while he was alive, because he had promised himself he would never publicly criticize the USSR. In the period immediately after my

father's death I still felt bound by my promise to him. But when I made my address August 12, 1981, more than five years later, at a Memorial for the Martyred Soviet Yiddish writers under the auspices of the progressive Jewish movement, I felt free to reveal the truth. Both my father and I have kept our promises.

Paul Jr cited the "compelling reasons" for his father's covering up his meeting with Fefer. First, he did not want to criticize the Soviet Union because of the overwhelming danger of U.S. imperialism.

Paul Jr stated the second reason as follows:

... Paul [Sr] knew very well that if he hinted in any way at what Feffer had conveyed to him he would probably be signing Feffer's death warrant.

Paul Jr continued by quoting his father's claim in an interview in the August 1949, issue of *Soviet Russia Today* that he had met many Jewish people in his recent visit and "heard no word about" antisemitism in the Soviet Union. Paul Jr concludes by noting that Brown was no longer Paul Sr's "designated biographer."

Morris Schappes' Comment

In the same issue Morris U. Schappes, editor of *Jewish Currents*, followed Paul Jr's article with a response of his own in which he declared that Paul Jr

has definitively refuted Brown's attempt to assassinate the integrity of the son for now relating what Paul Robeson himself felt he could not declare during his own lifetime but told to his son without enjoining him never to reveal this truth. (28)

Schappes cited no evidence in support of this statement. Nor could he do so. There were no witnesses to the purported conversation between Robeson Sr and his son, and Robeson Sr himself was dead.

All Schappes, or anyone, could have honestly done was to accept Paul Jr's claim; reject it; or adopt the only correct position: to state truthfully that *we do not know* what Paul Sr told Paul Jr about his meeting with Fefer, or indeed whether Paul Sr told Paul Jr anything at all about it.

Judging from the rest of his article it appears that Schappes made this claim in order to focus attention on the antisemitism *in the USSR of 1981*. Schappes explicitly states that Khrushchev's 1956 "Secret Speech" had caused him to change his mind about the Soviet Union and blame "Stalinism." Thanks largely to the evidence provided by the flood of documents from former Soviet archives since the end of the Soviet Union we know today that Khrushchev's accusations against Stalin are false.

The present study concludes that Lloyd Brown was correct. Paul Sr could not have told his son what Paul Jr claimed.

The Evidence

Paul Jr makes two fact-claims that can be checked: that Fefer told Paul Sr that Solomon Mikhoels had been "murdered ... on Stalin's personal order;" and that Fefer and other "outstanding Jewish cultural figures" had been arrested and "there was little hope for any of them, including Feffer (here Feffer drew his finger across his throat)." These statements cannot be true.

The Rumor that Stalin Ordered Solomon Mikhoels' Murder

We know that Stalin did not have Mikhoels murdered. The documents purporting to prove he did are falsifications. Mikhoels and his companion, Vladimir Golubov, were killed in a hit-and-run accident in Minsk, Byelorussian SSR, during the night of January 12, 1948. Soviet authorities conducted a thorough investigation but the culprits were never identified.¹

Svetlana Allilueva, 1967

The rumor that Stalin had Mikhoels killed comes from two sources published in the late 1960s. The first source is *Only One Year*, the second volume of the memoirs of Stalin's daughter Svetlana Allilueva.

Joseph Stalin's only daughter emigrated from the USSR to the West in 1966. In her first book of memoirs, *Twenty Letters To A Friend* (1967), she wrote:

¹ For full discussion see Grover Furr and Vladimir L. Bobrov, *Stalin Exonerated. Fact-Checking the Death of Solomon Mikhoels* Kettering, OH: Erythrós Press & Media, LLC, 2023. Sources not footnoted in the present article are identified in the book.

A new wave of arrests got under way at the end of 1948 ... Lozovsky was arrested, and Mikhoels was killed. (196)

A footnote to this passage (p. 245) states that Mikhoels “died in mysterious circumstances” in 1948. But Allilueva’s chronology is confused here. There was no clear connection among the events she cites, for Mikhoels was killed on January 12-13, 1948, not at the end of the year while Lozovsky was arrested on January 26, 1949, more than a year later.²

The most important thing for us to note about this statement is this: In 1967, when this book was published, Allilueva had no knowledge of her father having had Mikhoels killed.

Svetlana Allilueva, 1969

Two years later Allilueva published a second volume of memoirs, *Only One Year*. Here she tells a very different story:

One day, in father’s dacha, during one of my rare meetings with him, I entered his room when he was speaking to someone on the telephone. Something was being reported to him and he was listening. Then, as a summary of the conversation, he said, “Well, it’s an automobile accident.” I remember so well the way he said it: not a question but an answer, an assertion. He wasn’t asking; he was suggesting: “an automobile accident.” When he got through, he greeted me; and a little later he said: “Mikhoels was killed in an automobile accident.” (154)

The earlier reference makes it clear that in 1967 Allilueva did not yet “know” that Mikhoels had been murdered at all, much less that it was her father who had murdered him. It is not possible that Stalin’s daughter had simply forgotten to mention this detail in her earlier account. Nor can people who hear only one side of a phone conversation tell whether a person making a statement is instructing someone else or repeating a fact just heard from the other party.

Allilueva’s second volume was written after she had moved to the United States, where she was befriended by Soviet exiles and other persons with strongly anti-communist views, some of whom she thanks in her book. It may have been they who convinced her to put a different construction on whatever it was she had heard her father say in 1948.

² https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Лозовский,_Соломон_Абрамович

Despite its obvious lack of validity as evidence, some writers still cite Allilueva's story from *Only One Year* while failing to mention her earlier version. It is the first appearance in print of the story that Joseph Stalin ordered the death of Solomon Mikhoels.

It is useful to keep Allilueva's two mutually contradictory accounts in mind for another reason. They should remind us of the great limitations of "first-hand" accounts of any historical event – much less of "second-hand" accounts, or those at an even greater remove. First-hand or eye-witness accounts are *imaginative reconstructions* of events, not some kind of objective "record." They should never be taken as more than that.³

Assuming it is genuine, Paul Jr's story of Itzik Fefer's words to Paul Sr is a *third-hand* account – Fefer to Paul Sr to Paul Jr to us. But whether first-, second-, or third hand, there is plenty of time for misremembering and *re-creation*, years after the event – assuming that the event actually occurred at all.

Allilueva's account is also useful as a touchstone of historiographical honesty. Any historian who cites her second version without revealing how it contradicts the first version and discussing the problems this raises, is thereby deliberately deceiving his or her readers.⁴

Joshua Rubenstein

A 2001 book from the Yale "Annals of Communism" series, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: The Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee*, edited by Joshua Rubenstein and Vladimir Naumov, contains an eight-page section entitled "Anti-Semitism and the Murder of Solomon Mikhoels." In the course of his commentary Rubenstein makes the following remark:

Stalin's daughter overheard her father on the telephone when he received word of Mikhoels' death and recalls him approving the official story that it was the result of an automobile accident. (39)

³ This is widely recognized, so there is no excuse for historians who rely on such "evidence." See, for example, John N. Kotre, *White gloves: how we create ourselves through memory*. New York, 1995; Elizabeth Loftus, *Eyewitness Testimony*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996.

⁴ As we demonstrate in *Stalin Exonerated*. Gennadii Kostyrchenko, the most important historian of the "Mikhoels murder," does exactly this.

But this is *not* what Allilueva wrote. She wrote that Stalin

was not asking; he was suggesting “an automobile accident.”

Rubenstein must have realized what we noted above: that this was impossible. Stalin could not be “approving” something that had already occurred. So Rubenstein “rewrote” (i.e. falsified) Allilueva’s statement to suit what he *wants* Allilueva to have written.

Moreover, Rubenstein’s rewrite is just as false as Allilueva’s account, for Rubenstein takes it for granted that Stalin was “approving” instead of simply repeating what he had been told over the phone. But Rubenstein’s fabrication misses the mark. No one could conclude from these words that Stalin had had Mikhoels murdered.

Rubenstein’s book attempts to show that Stalin was fiercely antisemitic. The Mikhoels’ murder is a key part of his argument. He does not inform his readers that Allilueva had said something different in her earlier book. Nor does he inform his readers that in an interview held on November 16, 1984, Allilueva repudiated her memoirs.⁵

Nikita Khrushchev, 1970

We do not know precisely when Khrushchev wrote his account of Mikhoels’ death, when he completed the version of his memoirs that was smuggled to the West, or even what the final version composed by Khrushchev is or was. Since the earliest English edition was published in 1970, we can assume that Khrushchev, who had been forced into retirement in October 1964, completed it in 1968 or 1969.

In the English translation published in 1970, the passage about Mikhoels’ death reads as follows:

More typical was the cruel punishment of Mikhoels, the greatest actor of the Yiddish theater, a man of culture. They killed him like beasts. They killed him secretly. Then his murderers were rewarded and their victim was buried with honors. The mind reels at the thought! It was announced that Mikhoels had fallen in front of a truck. Actually, he was thrown in front of a truck.

⁵ “Vstrecha s zhurnalistami” (“Meeting with journalists”). *Pravda*, November 17, 1984.

This was done very cleverly and efficiently. **And who did it? Stalin did it, or at least it was done on his instructions.** ⁶

However, Khrushchev's memoirs have been changed. For example, the four-volume Russian edition of 1999 alters the sentence in boldface above to the following:

Люди Берии и Абакумова по поручению Сталина.

Beria's and Abakumov's people on Stalin's order.

This sentence is lacking in previous editions. Therefore, Khrushchev's memoirs have been changed. This fact deprives them of any value as a historical source, quite apart from the question of Khrushchev's credibility generally, for as we now know, Khrushchev lied frequently about Stalin and others whom he disliked.

Here he is lying about Lavrentii Beria, who in 1948 was not connected to the MGB (Ministry of State Security), of which Viktor Abakumov was head (minister). Khrushchev had been the ringleader in the murder of Beria in 1953. After that he slandered Beria's memory at every opportunity.

By 1970 Allilueva's and Khrushchev's memoirs were available in English and claimed that Stalin had ordered Mikhoels' murder. *Before* 1969, however, no one had made this claim. In 1963, on the fifteenth anniversary of Mikhoels' death on January 13, 1948, an article in a Soviet newspaper blamed only Beria, not Stalin. Ilya Erenburg, the leading Soviet Jewish intellectual of his day and a friend of Mikhoels,' repeated this story in the final book of his memoirs, published in 1967.⁷

Rumor

No sooner had Mikhoels and his friend Golubov been killed than a rumor began to circulate among the Jewish population of Moscow that they had been murdered by the state.

⁶ *Khrushchev Remembers*. Introduction and commentary by Edward Crankshaw. Translated and edited by Strobe Talbott. Boston: Little, Brown 1970, 261-2. In the Bantam paperback edition of 1971 the same text is on pages 277-8.

⁷ Article: *Sovetskaia Litva*, January 13, 1963; Erenburg: *Liudi, gody, zhizn'* (1967), Chapter 15 of the final volume. See *Stalin Exonerated* for quotations and full details.

At Mikhoels' funeral Polina Zhemchuzhina, wife of Vyacheslav Molotov and a former government minister, made a remark to another person that she believed Mikhoels' death was not an accident, but murder. The following passages are from a report to Stalin about Zhemchuzhina, dated December 27, 1948:

During face-to-face confrontations with Zhemchuzhina, it was also established that, being at the coffin of Mikhoels in the Jewish theater, in a conversation with Zuskin, she said that Mikhoels had been killed. Zuskin, at a confrontation, said the following about his conversation with Zhemchuzhina:

In the evening, January 13, 1948, I stood at the coffin and accepted wreaths from all the organizations and at that time I saw Polina Semyonovna, greeted her and she expressed her sadness over the death of Mikhoels. During the conversation, Polina Semyonovna asks: "So do you think what happened here was an accident or a murder?" I said: "Based on the fact that we received a message from Comrade Iovchuk, Mikhoels died as a result of an automobile accident. He was found at 7 o'clock in the morning on a street, not far from the hotel." And Polina Semyonovna objected and said: "Things are not as smooth as they are trying to present them. This is murder" ... From the conversation with Zhemchuzhina, and, in particular, her statement that Mikhoels was killed, I concluded that Mikhoels' death was the result of a premeditated murder.

That such a conversation really took place with Zhemchuzhina is also confirmed by Fefer's statement at the fac-to-face confrontation, to whom Zuskin informed about his conversation with Zhemchuzhina that day:

The first thing she said to me," Zuskin said, was "what a bastard that Khrapchenko is, he couldn't send another person to Minsk instead of Mikhoels." Then, after a pause, Zhemchuzhina shook her head and said, "This is not an accidental death, this was not an accident. He was murdered." I asked Zuskin: 'Who killed him?' 'She didn't say who,' Zuskin replied. Well, apparently, he was killed on purpose. At the same time, he [Zuskin] said the following phrase: 'They either beheaded him or his head was removed.' Zhemchuzhina is of the same opinion, Zuskin concluded. I again asked who was accused in this case. Zuskin replied that from a conversation with Zhemchuzhina, he had the opinion that she meant Soviet organs.

This behavior of Zhemchuzhina gave hostile people reason to confirm the provocative rumors they spread that Mikhoels was deliberately killed.⁸

There is no evidence that Zhemchuzhina got this vague allegation from her husband or any other official source. Evidently, she was repeating rumors that had already begun to circulate among Jewish nationalists with whom she was friendly.

In 1952 V.L. Zuskin, a close friend of Mikhoels' who was present when his body arrived in Moscow, testified about Mikhoels' death. Zuskin was a defendant at the trial of the members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, a partial transcript of which was published in the mid-90s in Russian and later in English.

When Zbarsky came to the funeral, he told me that Mikhoels's death had definitely been the result of an automobile accident, and he explained to me that one arm was broken and then there was that bruise on his cheek. This had happened as a result of one car crashing into another, and both of them had gone flying off to the side, so they had died as a result of the impact. And then he told me that he had died painlessly. If he had received immediate assistance, maybe something could have been done, but he had frozen to death because he lay for several hours in the snow.⁹

Paul Sr met with Itzik Fefer in Moscow in 1949. At that time there was not even a rumor that Stalin had ordered Mikhoels to be killed. But by 1981, when Paul Jr first recorded his version of what Fefer had told his father, there were two such accounts in print: Allilueva's (1969) and Khrushchev's (1970).

On the evidence we must conclude that in 1981 Paul Jr confused what he had read and heard since 1969-1970 about the allegation that Stalin had ordered Mikhoels' murder with whatever it was his father had told him years before. However, we must always keep in mind the possibility that Paul Sr never told Paul Jr anything and Paul Jr fabricated the whole story.

What Did Itzik Feffer Tell Paul Sr?

By the time of his meeting with Robeson, Itzik Fefer had been under arrest and in prison for about six months. Fefer was arrested on December 24, 1948. Robeson left the USSR on June 15, 1949.

⁸ *Lubianka. Stalin i NKVD-NKGB-GUKR "Smersh". 1939 – mart 1946.* Moscow: MDF, 2006, 241-2.

⁹ Rubenstein and Naumov 397.

In Chapter 17 of his biography of Robeson, Martin Duberman discusses Paul Jr's story. According to Duberman's account, whatever Feffer "told" Robeson in 1949 about the arrests of leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist League (JAFC) was communicated by "gestures and a few written notes" that were not preserved.

Feffer supposedly told Robeson that "Mikhoels ... had been murdered the year before on Stalin's personal order." As we have seen, this is impossible. In 1949 no one knew this story even as a rumor.

In addition, Feffer supposedly communicated somehow to Robeson that the leaders of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had been arrested. But this is unlikely because *he, Feffer, was the reason the JAFC leaders had been arrested.*

Here is the account from the introduction to the highly abbreviated transcript of the trial of the JAFC leaders in 1952:

Как свидетельствуют материалы первого допроса Фефера, а это отверждает также и следователь МГБ, который допрашивал его, **Фефер дал очень большие показания, якобы изобличающие националистическую, шпионскую деятельность многих своих коллег по Еврейскому антифашистскому комитету. И формально, и по существу его показания дали основание МГБ для их ареста.**¹⁰

As evidenced by the materials of the first interrogation of Feffer, and this is also confirmed by the MGB investigator who interrogated him, **Feffer gave very extensive testimony, allegedly exposing the nationalist, espionage activities of many of his colleagues in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. Both formally and in essence, his testimony gave the MGB grounds for their arrest.**

An English version of this abbreviated trial transcript is in Rubenstein and Naumov, *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*. There is no passage in this book identical to the one in the Russian version above. But there are passages that are equally critical of Feffer.

Peretz Markish expected to accompany Mikhoels (in New York, the writer Sholem Asch wanted to invite David Bergelson), but **the regime decided to**

¹⁰ *Nepravedniy sud. Poslednii stalinskii rasstrel*. Moscow: "Nauka", 1994, Introduction, p. 4.

dispatch Fefer instead, knowing it could count on him to watch over Mikhoels and make regular reports to a Soviet “handler.”²³ (14)¹¹

... the presidium [of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee] was peppered with informers -- at least Itzik Fefer, Solomon Bregman, and Grigory Kheifets (a former security agent) were all reporting to the authorities and presidium minutes were examined by the Central Committee. (36)

Itzik Fefer's arrest on December 24, 1948, marked a crucial stage in the case. **By that time, he was already cooperating with the investigation. (42)**

A day or two before his arrest, Fefer was seen with no less a figure than Viktor Abakumov in Mikhoels's former office at the State Jewish Theater. **They spent several hours going through files and papers, presumably looking for documents that would compromise Mikhoels and the work of the JAC. (43)**

Only one defendant, Itzik Fefer, immediately cooperated with the investigation, detailing a host of baseless accusations against the JAC, and helping to embroider an ugly and elaborate quilt of lies and fabrications that would hold the indictment together in 1952. As a result of his betrayal, more than one hundred people were arrested, many of whom were also executed or perished in camps. (52)

Apparently Fefer was distrusted by at least some of his colleagues:

Peretz Markish learned of Fefer's arrest within days. “This son of a bitch will not go to his grave alone,” Markish predicted.¹¹³ (43)¹²

Fefer's Accusations

According to Rubenstein-Naumov, Fefer was not tortured:

A rumor is attached to this incident: that Fefer had been tortured, his fingernails torn out, leaving him with bandaged hands that he at first

¹¹ Note 23 is to the following source: “B. Z. Goldberg, *The Jewish Problem in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1961), p. 144.”

¹² Note 113 reads “Marlen Korallov, interview with author, Moscow, 1997.”

attempted to conceal only to display as a silent, horrifying signal. There is no truth to this. **Fefer was not physically mistreated in prison, at least according to Vladimir Naumov, who has had access to the case files.** (49)

Even if Fefer were threatened, could he have been willing to accuse his longtime friends and colleagues of a capital crime -- espionage for the United States? Or is it possible that Fefer genuinely believed that some of the information the JAFC delegates had shared with some Americans really did constitute espionage? We do not know.

Paul Jr's story loses its emotional and political impact once we realize that *it was Fefer's own testimony* that had "put the noose around the necks" of his friends, colleagues, and co-defendants – and ultimately himself. It is hard to imagine that Fefer could have told Paul Sr that the JAFC leadership were innocent victims of a frameup by Soviet authorities when it was he himself that brought about their arrests.

Paul Jr's Differing Versions

Paul Jr related a number of times the story of his father's telling him about his meeting with Itzik Fefer. But he did not tell it the same way every time. We have the texts of a few of his retellings. We also possess references to others in books by authors who interviewed him. However, these authors did not publish Paul Jr's exact words. Here we will refer only to versions that Paul Jr himself related.

* In his November 1981 *Jewish Currents* account Paul Jr said that his father had met Fefer in Leningrad and then sang the Warsaw Ghetto song in concert there. In fact, both events took place in Moscow, as Lloyd Brown pointed out in his *Daily World* article. Paul Jr agreed that Brown was correct.

* In a 1998 Russian language interview Paul Jr said that his father "had torn the notes into pieces and burned them in an ashtray and in the bathroom."¹³ He did not give this detail in his account in *Jewish Currents* of November 1981, or in any other version.

* In one of four interviews with author Dick Russell in 1996 and 1997 Paul Jr claims that Fefer said to his father "I am recovering from a bout with pneumonia,

¹³ "Ego zvali Robson. Dokumental'niy fil'm Nikolaia Milovidova." 1998 interview at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=elQ5CG-XkZw> at minute 15:51.

that's why I am pale." But in his 1981 *Jewish Currents* article Paul Jr claimed that his father told him Fefer "looked very well."

* In his own 2010 book Paul Jr claimed that Fefer wrote a note asking for a "Letter from you, [Frédéric Joliot-] Curie and [Howard] Fast to Stalin via our Embassy." But Paul Jr did not mention this significant detail in any other account. In 1981 he had written only this:

I believe Paul [Sr] later made several private appeals on behalf of Feffer and his comrades. (27)

In 1981 Paul Jr did not *know* of any "private appeals" – he only "believed" some had been made. In 2010 he claimed to *know* that his father and two famous communist intellectuals had appealed to Stalin.

Other details mark Paul Jr's accounts as fabrications.

* According to Paul Jr Fefer told Robeson that Stalin had ordered Mikhoels' murder – and Robeson had no reaction!

This is impossible. Robeson was a great admirer of Stalin. His paeon to Stalin, "To You Beloved Comrade", portrays the recently deceased Soviet leader as a world historical figure, a giant benefactor of mankind.¹⁴

Robeson's hero suddenly revealed as a cynical murderer of one of Paul Sr's good friends? If Fefer had actually told him this Robeson would have had some reaction – shock, disbelief, anger – something! Yet according to Paul Jr Robeson simply continued the discussion.

* According to Paul Jr his father did not protest at what Fefer had told him:

... Paul knew very well that if he hinted in any way at what Feffer had conveyed to him he would probably be signing Feffer's death warrant." (*Jewish Currents* 11/81 p. 27)

Robeson knew that any overt action he took would simply result in a

¹⁴ Text at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/biographies/1953/04/x01.htm>

denial by Soviet authorities—and would also seal Feffer's fate. (Dick Russell, *Black Geniuses. Inspirational Portraits of America's Black Leaders*, Chapter 8.)

Что делать? Кричать на улице – это безумно. Потом большой шум, сразу убьют Фефера и других.

What to do? Shout out in public – that would be crazy. Then there would be a great noise and they would immediately kill Fefer and the others. (Russian language interview of Paul Jr on YouTube, 1998)

This too is incredible. Even if Fefer did tell Robeson what Paul Jr alleged, there is no way that Robeson could have thought a protest from him would endanger the lives of Fefer and the others. In 1949 Robeson did not have any grounds to believe that Stalin ever acted in this way.

In his November 1981 *Jewish Currents* article Paul Jr wrote:

When Feffer rose to leave, he and Paul embraced like brothers, both of them had tears in their eyes, because they knew that they were probably seeing each other for the last time.

Also incredible. In 1949 Robeson had no basis to think this. And had he believed it, he surely would have protested.

But after Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" attacking Stalin was made public in June 1956; after the XXII Party Congress of the CPSU in October 1961, much of which was devoted to sharp attacks and accusations against Stalin; and especially after the flood of Khrushchev-sponsored books and articles published after the XXII Congress – only then was it widely assumed that Stalin had regularly ordered people killed.

According to the evidence we have today, the only person Stalin ever ordered to be killed was Leon Trotsky. Pavel Sudoplatov, at the time deputy director of the Foreign Department of the NKVD, wrote in his memoirs that in 1939-40 Stalin ordered Leon Trotsky's assassination in order to cripple anti-Soviet actions by the Trotskyist movement when war came.¹⁵ Even today there are no other examples of

¹⁵ Pavel Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks*. New York: Little, Brown, 1994. Chapter 4: "The Assassination of Trotsky."

Stalin's ordering anyone to be killed. We can be sure that in 1949 Robeson did not know of any.

Robeson could not have made such an assumption in 1949. *But Paul Jr could have made such an assumption in 1981*, when the campaign to accuse Stalin of every kind of atrocity had been raging for 20 years.

Paul Jr's Inventions

* In 1981 Paul Jr claimed:

And yes, Stalin personally, over a period of many years, was responsible for many anti-Semitic policies and acts. (*Jewish Currents* November 1981, p. 6)

This too is false. For decades anticommunist researchers have been looking hard for evidence of Stalin's antisemitism and have not been able to find evidence of it. As a result, some of them have taken to forgery and fabrication in order to prop up their view of Stalin as an antisemite.

In his 1981 article Paul Jr refers to "[T]he murder of the 24 Soviet Jewish cultural leaders 29 years ago [i.e., in 1952 – GF]. This is false. The reality is bad enough: on August 12, 1952, 13 members of the JAFC were executed for espionage. Where did the number 24 come from? Paul Jr does not say and clearly did not try to verify it.

These executions were not an example of "Stalin's antisemitism" or even of Soviet government antisemitism. At least one of the MGB investigators, Mikhail Riumin, was indeed an antisemite. On June 25, 1953, Lavrentii Beria, head of the combined MVD-MGB, sent a report about this to the Presidium (the new name for the Politburo as of October 1952).¹⁶ Riumin's interrogations and confession were published in 2021. He was tried, convicted, and received the death penalty.¹⁷ In 1955 the executed members of the JAFC were posthumously declared innocent.¹⁸

Stalin Was Not Antisemitic

¹⁶ *Lavrentii Beriia. 1953. Stenogramma iul'skogo Plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty.* Moscow: MDF, 1999, 66-68.

¹⁷ *Politbiuro i delo Riumina. Sbornik dokumentov.* Ed. O.B. Mozokhin. Moscow: Fon "Svaz' Epokh," Izdatel'skii tsentr "Voevoda", 2021, 159-189, esp. 187-189.

¹⁸ Text of rehabilitation by Central Committee December 12, 1955. At <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/68522>

Why ‘Mal’tsev’, and then ‘Rovinskii’ in parentheses? What’s going on here? How long is this going to continue? ... Why is this being done? We already spoke about this last year, forbidding double last names in works presented for the [Stalin] prize. Why write a double last name? If a person has chosen a literary pseudonym – that’s his right. We’re not speaking of anything other than elementary decency. A person has the right to write under a pseudonym he has chosen for himself. But, obviously, somebody wants to emphasize that this person has a double name, to emphasize that he is a Jew. Why emphasize that? Why do that? Why spread anti-Semitism? Who benefits from that? We must write down a person with the surname that the person himself has chosen. A person wishes to have a pseudonym; he himself feels that this is natural for him. So why pull him, drag him back?

- Konstantin Simonov. *Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniya* [“In the eyes of a person of my generation”], Moscow: Novosti, 1988, p. 216.

And suddenly during this discussion of the prizes Stalin turned towards the members of the Politburo and said:

- Antisemites have turned up in our Central Committee. It is a disgrace!

- *Thus It Was. Tikhon Khrennikov about His Times and Himself*. Moscow: “Muzyka” 1994, p. 179.

Stalin’s anti-Semitism, about which one can read in almost all his biographies, was not religious, nor ethnic, nor cultural. It was political, and appeared in the form of anti-Zionism, and not of “Judeophobia.”

- Zhores Medvedev, *Stalin i Evreiskaia Problema* [“Stalin and the Jewish Problem”]. Novyi Analiz (2003), p. 92.

Stalin was not directly involved in the case of the JAFC leaders, although as head of state he was surely informed about it and trusted the results of the investigation and trial. At the December 1, 1952, meeting of the Presidium, as quoted by Vyacheslav Malyshev, Minister of the shipbuilding ministry, Stalin said

Every Jewish nationalist is an agent of American intelligence. Jewish nationalists consider that their nation was saved by the USA (there one can become rich, a bourgeois, etc.)¹⁹

Timothy Snyder misquotes this as “every Jew is a nationalist and an agent of American intelligence.”²⁰

According to Malyshev, at the same meeting Stalin also said that there were problems with the MGB.

[There must be] oversight on the part of the Central Committee over the MGB. Laziness and corruption have sunk deeply into the MGB.

The prosecution of Mikhail Riumin soon followed, though Stalin died on March 5, 1953, before Riumin’s arrest, trial, and execution.

Conclusion: Paul Jr’s story cannot be true.

The only way a private conversation such as the alleged conversation between Paul Sr and Paul Jr, can have any value as historical evidence is if its contents are written down immediately afterwards and all future references to it taken directly from this contemporary written record. If Paul Jr had done this he would have told the same story, without variations, every time.

But Paul Jr did not do this. Not only did he not write down immediately afterward a record of what his father had told him -- he *never* wrote down a record of how he remembered this event. Had he done so his retellings would agree with each other. Instead, he continued to elaborate the story, adding details absent from previous versions.

What’s more, Paul Jr did not tell the story even once until after the sea-change in attitudes towards the figure of Joseph Stalin that began with Khrushchev’s 1956 speech. During the next fifty years it would swell into an avalanche of reckless and undocumented accusations.

¹⁹ “Proidet desiatok let, i eti vstrechi ne vosstanovish’ uzhe v pamiati.” *Istochnik* 5 (1997), 140-141.

²⁰ Anticommunist blogger Sergey Romanov has a web page exposing this lie. See <http://holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2006/04/correction-corner-1-every-jew-is.html> When Snyder repeated this lie during his talk at Kean University of New Jersey on April 17, 2012, I called from the floor: “That’s not true!” Snyder’s reply was “Yeah, sure!”

Fefer could not have informed Paul Sr that Mikhoels had been murdered “by Stalin’s order” because this false version of Mikhoels’ death was not even hinted at until the late 1960s, and not provided with spurious evidence until the 1990s. The fact that the first part of Paul Jr’s story -- the allegation that Fefer told Paul Sr that Mikhoels and Golubov had been murdered “at Stalin’s order” – cannot be true, strongly suggests that the second part is false as well.

Paul Jr allegedly heard the “Fefer” story shortly after his father’s return from the USSR in 1949 but did not tell it until 1981, thirty-two years later. In 1981 the false story that Mikhoels had been murdered at Stalin’s order was widely known.

But the fact that Fefer was responsible for the arrests of and charges against his colleagues in the JAFK was *not* known until it was published in 1994. Paul Jr’s 1981 story, therefore, is consistent with his fabricating, deliberately or unconsciously, a story containing elements *as they were known in 1981 but not in 1949*.

* * * * *

Herbert Marshall’s account of the Robeson-Fefer meeting is as close to the truth as we can get:

They brought Pfeffer to Paul’s suite in the Hotel, where the two chatted together for a couple of hours. Pfeffer behaved apparently quite normally and left, embracing Paul in the Russian manner.²¹

Memory is a creative process, not a “photograph” of an event “as it really happened.” It is possible that Paul Jr himself came to believe his own story. We should not be so credulous today.

- September 2023

²¹ Marshall, “Obituary : Paul Robeson (1898-1976).” *Bulletin for Soviet and East European Studies*. Spring 1976 (unpaginated).