

EMMA HARRIS--She Was There When

Submitted by Theodore Poston

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Emma Harris

The Soviet Congress had just ratified the Brest-Litovsk treaty. Peace had been made with Germany, but civil war and famine were raging on a hundred fronts. Vladimir Ilyitch Lenin, harried Communist leader, was exhorting the Moscow workers in a gigantic Red Square demonstration.

Standing on Skull Place, the ancient chopping block before St. Basil's Cathedral where scores of earlier revolutionists had lost their heads, Lenin was explaining the meaning of the Bolshevik cause when he spied a smiling, middle-aged Negro woman in the forefront of the huge gathering. Extending his right hand in a characteristic gesture, he spoke directly to her:

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"The ideal of Communism" he said, "is to open the road for all the downtrodden races of the world. For you, comrade, especially, as we regard your race the most downtrodden in the world. We want you to feel when you come to Russia that you are a human being. The Red Army is ready to give its life at any time for all downtrodden races."

Her neighbors hoisted Emma Harris to their shoulders and bore her triumphantly through the cheering throng, passing within a few yards of the spot where, years later, the massive tomb of Lenin was to become a Mecca for thousands of revolutionary converts.

The former Brooklyn choir leader, then a woman of forty-five years, was no stranger to Russia that chill March morning in 1918. As one of the "Louisiana Amazon Guards, a vaudeville troupe of seven Negro women, she had arrived in Moscow in 1904 following a successful three year tour of Europe. She was not to leave Russia again until 1933.

During her uninterrupted sojourn of twenty-nine years there, Emma Harris participated in or witnessed most of the important developments in Twentieth Century Russia--the disastrous war with Japan, the short-lived revolution of 1905, the anti-government demonstrations of 1912, the World War, the February and October revolutions of 1917, the famine and civil war, and the first Five Year Plans.

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(The "Louisiana Amazons," stellar attraction at the fashionable Aquarium Theatre in St. Petersburg, gave one of the first benefits for the nobles and officers who led the original ill-fated regiments from that city towards the Japanese front. The troupe also joined in the rounds of "forced and incessant gaiety" with which St. Petersburg covered its heartbreak in the loss of the war.

A few months later, while attending a party in the apartment of William Caton, a popular American jockey, Emma Harris and Virginia Shephard, another member of the troupe, watched the priest, Gapon, lead a mass demonstration on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Later they watched Cossacks armed with weighted thongs rout three groups of demonstrators which vainly sought to cross a bridge and join the Winter Palace crowd.

When the theatres closed after the outbreak of the 1905 revolution, the "Louisiana Amazons" disbanded, and three of its members, Emma Harris, Fannie Smith and Corretta Alfred, fled to Moscow where they continued their work at Aumont's the popular French theatre there where the troupe had first opened early in 1904.

Emma Harris began an extended concert tour in Siberia a few months later; Fannie Smith returned to America, and Corretta

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Alefred married a Russian theatre director whom she later bore two children. As Mme. Corretta Arle-Titz she became one of the Soviet Union's most distinguished sopranos.

In 1911, while touring the Caucasus, Emma Harris married her concert manager, Alexander Ivanovitch Mizikin, a former Russian film director. Two years later they established residence in Kharkov and purchased a chain of theatres which Mizikin managed while she continued her concert tours.

When Mizikin was drafted at the outbreak of the World War, Emma Harris liquidated her holdings in Kharkov and purchased a fifteen room house in Moscow. Later she turned this into the American Pension and housed most of the American Red Cross officials who came to Moscow. Walter Duranty, special correspondent for the New York Times stayed in Emma Harris' pension for a short time before she furnished his first apartment in Moscow.

Soon after the overthrow of the Tsarist government, Emma Harris joined the Red Cross staff as a nurse and continued in this work until the Red Square meeting with Lenin. After this, however, she joined wholeheartedly with the forces of the Soviets and became "the first colored woman worker in the U. S. S. R."

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During the next ten years, she served as an interpreter and taught English to Soviet officials. She also assisted her husband who was then a director for the Soyuz Film Company. While there she wrote, directed and enacted the principal role in a revolutionary film which was hailed by the critics as an "outstanding achievement," "a milestone in Soviet drama," but which Emma Harris herself later admitted was "pretty terrible."

In 1929 she divorced Mizikin and entered one of the silk factories as a worker. Later she became forewoman. She then toured the country as a speaker for MOPR (the Soviet branch of the International Labor Defense) and on two occasions sat on the presidium with Lenin's sister.

Because of her wide acquaintance with Americans in Moscow, she was then made a saleslady in Torgsin, the foreign currency stores. The Americans, still remembering the American Pension days, referred to Emma Harris as "Mammy," a term bitterly resented by American Negro Communists who came to Russia later.

When it was learned however that Emma Harris could speak German, French, Polish, ^{and} Russian ~~and English~~ (all acquired during her stay in Russia) the government made her an official interpreter for Stanco, the trust which controls the import of foreign machinery.

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In September, 1933, Emma Harris, still an active woman despite her sixty-three years, returned to the United States for the first time in thirty-two years.

"I have no living relatives," she informed reporters, "but I have scores of friends who have kept in touch with me through all these years. I felt I could not die without seeing them once more."

Four years later, she regretted her return.

"Lenin was right," she said, "There is work for me in the Soviet Union as a human being. I don't relish the idea of dying here--a maid or a home relief client."