Interview with Otto Hall conducted by Philip S. Foner, New York, October 15, 1967

I was born in Omaha, Nebraska on May 16, 1891. There were three of us. I was the oldest. There is a sister Eppa in between, and a brother, the youngest, who is known as Harry Haywood. Our parents were Haywood and Harriet Hall. My father was born in Martin, Tennessee; brought as a boy to Des Moines, Iowa; grew up there; and came to Omaha as a young man. There he went to work for the Cudahy Packing Co. as a porter and nightwatchman. A short time after, he met and married my mother, Harriet.

Her name was Harriet Thorpe Harvey, a young widow who was born in Howard County, Missouri; grew up in Moberly, Missouri; later went to St. Joseph, Missouri and then came to Omaha.

Neither of my parents had more than four or five years of "schooling" as it was called in those days. Father had to go to work at an early age and our mother was one of a large family of girls. It was customary among Afro-American families that some of the children would make sacrifices so that two or three of them could get some education and perhaps one or two could be sent away to some college.

My father was an avid reader and had accumulated a home library of more than three hundred books. He had many of the English classics of that period —complete works of Shakespeare, Bulwer-Lytton, Conan Doyle, Sir Walter Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, Mark Twain, Longfellow's poems, the Autobiography of Frederick Douglass, the Forty-four Lectures of Robert Ingersoll, and many others including the large family Bible.

I remember when I was very small, before I started to school that my father used to conduct after supper, on his night off, what was known as a family circle. He would read to us aloud from some of his books and the daily paper. I used to listen wishing that I could read and was determined to learn how. It was from these circles that we acquired our reading habits.

In 1913, the family moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, where my father's two younger brothers were living. I never joined the Socialist Party, but did vote for Thomas Van Lear, who became the first Socialist mayor of that city. I voted for him because he had an Afro-American campaign manager, Colonel John Dickerson whom I knew and respected. He was a fluent speaker and told us that if you elect this man there will be colored men in the City Hall and they won't be porters. Van Lear was elected mayor of that city in 1945.

During the summer evenings, I used to go down to the "skid row" at the foot of Hennepin Avenue, where the I.W.W., better known as the "Wobblies" used to hold large open-air meetings. There I met Bill Haywood, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Ben Fletcher, a well-known Afro-American I.W.W. leader, Joe Hillstrom, better known as Joe Hill. I soon joined them and got my "red" card. I made one harvest with a group of them, and when we got to that farm in North Dakota, the farmer did not want to hire me because of my color, they told him that they would not tolerate any discrimination of any worker because of his color or nationality and if he did not hire me, he would not harvest his crop. I was hired. I found out that they carried out their program of no discrimination not only in words but in action. I do not know how many Afro-Americans were in the organization but learned that there were quite a few members all the way to the Pacific Coast.

When I got back to Minneapolis I found that my family had moved to Chicago. I went there and later joined the army and was in France 14 months. I got back to Chicago in the spring of 1919, just a few months before the riots broke out.

We were all disgusted and very angry at the conditions we found at home, lynching and burning in the South, and even some places in the North. Many veterans were on the streets in those days discussing the situation and there were crowded street meetings. Among the speakers who impressed me most in those times was a young Afro-American chemist Bob Hardeon, and John Owens and his brother Gordon, Bill and Elizabeth Doty. Bob talked about Lenin and the Russian Revolution and quoted from a translation of some of Lenin's writings by a man named Louis B. Fraina. Bob was a

very dramatic speaker and could make his points clearly and simply and always drew a large crowd. I began to do a lot of reading. I read the Messenger magazine which was edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph. Even the Chicago Defender was militant in those days. It carried on its front page the caption: "If you must go down take 8 or 10 whites with you." When they got news of a black man killing some white man in self-defense this news was played up on its front page. And there was an even more militant Afro-American newspaper called the Chicago Whip. Shortly after I got back from France I joined the Garvey movement, better known as the U.N.I.A., and became a captain in the Black Legion. At this time I considered myself a left wing Garveyite. I was sympathetic to Garvey's appeal for a "Free Africa" but did not believe in the migration of Black Americans to Africa. I believed that we could help in the fight for a free Africa, by fighting for our rights here. I was also beginning to become disgusted with some of the things going on in the Garvey movement. Some elements were making a racket out of the organization. These elements were composed of lawyers without briefs and preachers without pulpits and other charlatans. Earlier at one of the street meetings Bill Doty gave me a copy of the Crusader Magazine published by Cyril Briggs and invited me to join the African Blood Brotherhood. This was before the riots started.

In that year, 1919, many so-called riots broke out in cities all over the country, North and South. This period has been referred to by some historians as "bloody 1919" and "the red summer" of that year. Twenty-six so-called race riots broke out. There was a new dimension in these riots. They were not all one-way massacres. Some were in fact wars. Afro-Americans fought back and some whites as well as colored were killed.

In Chicago, the spark that started the war there was the stoning to death of a young colored boy who was swimming at a beach in Lake Michigan. There was a so-called line dividing that part of the lake for colored and white. This boy was supposed to have been swimming on the wrong side of the line. In Chicago 15 whites and 25 Afro-Americans were killed. Besides these there were 11 policemen killed, 10 white and one Afro-American. These were not counted among the riot casualties. If one counts these among the casualties, it would be about even Steven among the riot dead. I will say that with this the Afro-American people of Chicago did not feel that they were defeated in the riots. This so-called riot differed in many ways from some of the recent riots. The black people did not tear up the black ghetto but checked any attempted invasion by whites. They formed a Hindenburg line and dared any white mobsters to cross it. It was bordered on the West by Wentworth Ave., on the East by Cottage Grove, on the South by 63rd St. and on the North by 22nd St. I was one of a group of veterans known as Guardians of that line.

The Afro-American press in Chicago, namely the Chicago Defender, edited by Robert S. Abbot, some weeks before the riot had been carrying on a campaign urging the black people to fight back and defend themselves against their white oppressors. This paper had a wide circulation in many sections of the South. Often it was brought to those people by Pullman porters and waiters running down there. It carried a caption in bold letters, "If you must go down, take eight or ten crackers with you."

When the riot began, the government forced Abbot to change that caption. Another militant paper was the Chicago Whip edited by Joe Bibb. It had mostly a local circulation and carried on a successful boycott campaign forcing the white merchants on the South side to hire Afro-Americans in their stores. I believe this was after the riots and was the first boycott effort of black people in any section of the country.

After the riot I went to work as a dining car waiter for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul that ran from Chicago to Seattle and Tacoma, Washington. I became active in the African Blood Brotherhood and after one of my trips to the Coast, Gordon Owens took me to a Party meeting on the Northwest side. There I met Jack Johnstone who, I learned, had led a group of Afro-American and white packinghouse workers through the stockyards district during the riot urging black and white solidarity. I joined the Party which was underground at the time, which to me was very romantic. After I came back from one of my trips I attended a bazaar given by some of the language federations for the Russian famine relief. I made a small contribution and promised to see what I could do to help the people of the Soviet Union who were suffering from the famine. There were some Afro-American sympathizers in Chicago who were a little better off than most of us, and who had helped us on numerous occasions. One of these was Roy Tibbs, who wielded quite an influence among some people there, and he raised some money which was sent to the relief headquarters. On my next trip to the

Coast I contacted some people out there and found out that they had already started to raise money for famine relief. Bob Hardin also spoke at some benefits for Russian relief and helped to raise money.

At one of the meetings I was elected as a delegate to the Bridgeman Convention, but I had to make my run to the Coast. Had I realized the significance of that convention I would have laid off my trip and attended.

In 1922 the Party came out from underground and the former language federations formed language branches and united with other Communist groups and formed the Workers (Communist) Party. And on the South Side, the English branch was formed. The nuclei of this branch were members of the African Blood Brotherhood. Many Afro-Americans were recruited in this branch and so it grew. We participated in community activities and at one time our branch had more than 75 members. Nearly all of them were Afro-Americans. At that time there was a continued factional fight in the rest of the Party and both factions sent representatives into our branch to try to influence the membership to support a given faction. The Ruthenberg faction sent Bob Minor as their representative and the Foster faction sent Bill Dunne. They carried the factional squabble into our branch, each accusing the other of being prejudiced against Afro-Americans. At some of our meetings Minor and Dunne quarreled and almost engaged in fist fights. In a short time our membership dropped from over 75 to about 25 or 30, most of those remaining being the original members of the African Blood Brotherhood. We felt that we were being used as a factional football, but we stuck it out. I was more influenced by the Ruthenberg group, and most of us were sympathetic to that group but were not hard-boiled factionalists. We ran into many instances of prejudice among some members of the Party, some of them flagrant. Each faction accused the other in these incidents. We had faith in Lenin and the Russian comrades and had heard that they sharply criticized some of our leading comrades who had gone over there, for insufficient work among the black people in this country and felt that if we could get over there, we could straighten out the situation in our Party. When we heard that they wanted a group of Afro-American students to go over there to school, we were glad and knew that the Russian comrades would help us straighten out the situation in our Party and were patient. They had asked originally for 10 Afro-American students; we were able to get 5 together. They were Oliver Golden and his wife, the one colored woman in the group and who died over there; Harold Bailey, known as Harold Williams, from Jamaica; Awoona Bahkole, an African from the Gold Coast, and myself. When we found out we were actually going, I got together with some of our comrades in our branch and we prepared a sort of dossier listing many actions of discrimination we encountered in the Party as the main cause of the loss of some of the Afro-American comrades in our branch. We had a long list and we made several typewritten copies, some of which I carried over there. I was put in charge of the group. We arrived in Moscow in 1925, in the spring, and were sent to the Eastern University, better known as the Communist University of the Toilers of the East, named for Stalin. We were the original “five.” Later on in that same year, in mid-winter, Maude White, a comrade from Ohio, was sent there. To my surprise, my brother Haywood, better known as Harry Haywood, came there also. Later on, Roy Mahoney, an active Afro-American comrade from East Liverpool, Ohio, and another colored girl from Chicago, whose name I can’t remember, whom I had seen at some of our street meetings, came. The next year, William Patterson arrived. We learned that he, a lawyer, had been involved in the fight for Sacco and Vanzetti, a case which had been the “cause celebre” in almost every part of America and Europe.

When we five got to Moscow we were sent immediately to the Eastern University and found quarters there. This University was sponsored by and named for Comrade Stalin. We had hardly been there a week when he sent for us. We were taken to the Kremlin in a car sent by Stalin. Karl Radek, who knew enough English, served as an interpreter and was present at the interview. We drank tea and talked informally for several hours. Stalin said that since the Negro people represented the most oppressed section of the working class, therefore the American Party should have more of them than whites. Why weren’t there more in the American Party. I said that prejudice and discrimination within the Party were largely responsible for the shortage of Afro-American members. I told him about the South Side English Branch which had been formed in 1922 and with about 75 “Negro” members, most of whom had drifted away because of the patronizing attitude of some of the white members. Comrade Stalin then said the whole approach of the American comrades is wrong. You are a national minority with some of the characteristics of a nation. He asked us to prepare a memorandum on the “Negro question” and promised to provide us with relevant publications and books.

After we five students had been at school for a year we were transferred to the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik). As such, we participated in the Party struggle against Trotskyism. The struggle was against the theory of "permanent revolution" projected by the group led by Trotsky and the idea of building "socialism in one country" by the majority of the Party, led by Comrade Stalin. Our school was located in the Party District known as the Krasny Preshminsky which was one of the largest working-class districts in Moscow. In this struggle, we attended many meetings and heard speeches and there were speeches by representatives of both groups and there was full discussion at these meetings at the school and the district meetings.

Our district voted overwhelmingly in favor of the majority group headed by Comrade Stalin. We were delegates to the Seventh Plenum which made the final decisions. This was an important part of our studies at our school. I considered it a great honor to become a member of the world's greatest revolutionary party. One of the great moments was to attend this plenum where Trotsky and his cohorts were decisively defeated by the majority of the delegates. Trotsky was a brilliant orator. He did not trust an interpreter and translated himself into German, French, and English, bitterly attacking Comrade Stalin. He said that Comrade Lenin had referred to Comrade Stalin as rude. Comrade Stalin answered by saying, "Yes, I am rude but Comrade Lenin also said I was honest and trustworthy." Comrade Stalin impressed me as being calm through these proceedings letting him talk without interruption, sitting back smoking his pipe and listening to this tirade. Trotsky also attacked Pepper, referring to him as the international muddler of two continents. We learned that the building of socialism in one country was the idea originated by Comrade Lenin and that he had quarrled with Trotsky and others on the theory of "permanent revolution" and referred to that idea as adventurism. His slogan was "electrication."

Early in 1928, a sub-committee on "the Negro question" was formed in the Anglo-American Department of the Comintern to prepare a resolution and other material. In August the Congress itself, a 32-member "Negro Commission was formed to make the final recommendation. This commission included seven Americans—five Afro-Americans: James Ford, Harry Haywood, Oliver Golden, Harold Williams and myself. The two white Americans were Lovestone and Bitelman. Among the others were: Nasanov, representing the Young Communist International, Bunting of South Africa, Andrew Rothstein of England. The chairman was Comrade Kuusinen, Finnish Comintern official, and others.

It was into this commission that we brought the case history of chauvinist acts in the Party that had been prepared before we left Chicago. Sen Katayama, a Japanese comrade, who while in exile in America, graduated from Howard University during the early part of the present century and was a member of the Communist International, said that while he considered the American Negroes as a subject nation, citing the riots of 1919 in positive terms, he also declared the Negro people to be "the best potential revolutionary factor in the American Communist Movement."

James Ford and I were the only Afro-American delegates that spoke at the Congress sessions. Haywood did not speak at these sessions but worked with Nasanov in the commission. Comrade Ford and I both spoke twice.

The first time Ford spoke he said "that the few Negro comrades we have left in the Party have been making a fight for years against the Party's underestimation of Negro work" For this, many were persecuted and driven out of the Party. Now we bring it before a Comintern Congress. He concluded with the prediction that the next revolutionary wave will come from the "Negro" workers and the exploited workers and peasants of the countries in which "Negro" workers live. A couple of days later I spoke and said: "When Negroes join the Party they remain 'Negroes' within the Party. This is understandable. The chauvinism in the Party has made this so. There is more chauvinism in the American Party, in both factions, than in any other Party in the Comintern. This chauvinism led to a neglect of Negro work equally by both factions because it kept them from seeing the potentially revolutionary possibilities of the Negro toilers as the most exploited element in America." (This is from Inprecor VIII August 8, 1928, p. 1812. I am identified as Jones).

Ford spoke the following day: "There is considerable discussion going on in the Negro Commission regarding the slogan for a republic of the Negro people of America. I am against it because a Negro nationalist movement would have the effect of arresting the revolutionary class movement of the Negro masses and further widening. . . . "

I spoke a day later. I noted “the existence of sharp class distinctions within the Negro community which tend to prevent a development of any national characteristics as such.” The historical development of the American Negro has tended to create in him the desire to be considered a part of the American nation. “I feel most of all that the discussion which had suddenly begun to occupy the Negro Commission was somewhat Utopian. There is no objection in our Party to the principle of a Soviet Republic for Negroes, but what measures are we going to take to alleviate their present condition in America? I feel that the Party’s task is still to organize people on the basis of their everyday needs, for the revolution.”