

Caribbean Crusaders and the Harlem Renaissance

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URBANA AND CHICAGO

The crew was very kind to us. The food was ordinary, but good. What did we know? We ate it. The ship stopped at every island, or so it seemed—Trinidad, Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, St. Croix and St. Thomas, which were Danish ports of call at the time. All the saints! The trip took fourteen days. When we finally arrived in New York we did not go to Ellis Island but right in to a dock where my mother's sister, husband, and daughter and maybe some others met us. We took the subway uptown." Later she talks about Langston Hughes. "It all started when he stepped on my foot. We were in some production down in the basement of a building, probably the auditorium of the 135th Street Library, and he came around from the side and stepped on my foot. He was just Langston. He was older than I; we were both still young. It was much later that he was Langston Hughes, the poet. We became good friends." She explains that they spent six months together in Moscow and also once traveled on the same ship from Europe to New York.

All her companions at Wittenberg Verpleeghuis in March 1997 have a story to tell from their long lives, but at ninety-two, Hermina Dumont Huiswoud¹ may have one of the more unique yet untold stories to reveal. The raconteur of yesterday can only recount bits and pieces of her life as she realizes that her memory is fading. She explains, "I have been assigned to be here the rest of my life. I try not to rock the boat; one goes along to survive."

Other sources must be tapped to discover why this nursing home resident and her husband, Otto Eduard Huiswoud, traveled so far from the Caribbean to Amsterdam via New York, Moscow, and Paris, for the rebel in Wittenberg has now been silenced.

1. The Caribbean Comes to Harlem

The long trip from British Guiana (now Guyana) to New York undertaken by Hermina Alicia Dumont with her mother in 1919 was typical of many residents of the Caribbean who chose to leave their homeland for a better life in the North. For centuries the peoples of Africa had been dragged to the West, but the beginning of the twentieth century marked a change not only in direction but in determination. History has stressed the idea that the original mass transatlantic shift in population from Africa was associated with the slave trade conducted by European powers. But the nuances of the African Diaspora have not always been equally clear. It is easy to forget how fate held different futures for the thousands of Africans widely distributed in the seventeenth century around the Atlantic rim in every port a European ship could reach, from Canada to Argentina. The practice of slavery in parts of the Caribbean and the United States during the eighteenth century was particularly harsh. After 1800 states within the United States established discriminatory legal barriers that codified the "peculiar institution" and prevented African absorption into the population of European settlers. The concentration of Africans and the restrictions placed upon their movements by chattel slavery greatly intensified the number and subjugated condition of African Americans and African Caribbeans in the United States and the Caribbean.

Escape to northern states and Canada from the slaveholding South was the main avenue of African American movement during the early part of the nineteenth century. Emancipation created the critical opportunity for change because it theoretically carried the right of mobility, but it could only be taken advantage of in limited ways. The implementation of Black Codes, "Jim Crow," and other forms of discrimination continued to impoverish and restrict move-

ment of African Americans from the rural South to the industrializing North. Back-to-Africa movements and schemes for migration to Mexico had little impact on population shifts. Although some former slaves and free African Americans moved westward during the latter part of the century, the opportunities for African Americans to exercise the right to migrate within the United States were extremely limited. In the Caribbean, however, the Diaspora began to spread to Central America, especially to Panama during the building of the railroads and canal, and to England, Canada, and the northern United States. Despite colonial restrictions and the geographic isolation of the small Caribbean islands, African Caribbeans were more mobile than most African Americans. According to Winston James, African Caribbeans had already established by the end of the nineteenth century a complex web of institutions adapted to a continuous large-scale and long-distance migration from their homelands. These peripatetic people perceived the sea as an avenue of exploration and escape.¹

By the twentieth century two streams of migration marshaled momentum, and both had a historic impact on New York. During World War I, recruitment of workers for industry encouraged African Americans living in the South to seek work in the North. African Americans who served in the armed forces were far more mobile when they returned from Europe and also helped swell the population in cities like New York. The railroads set the pattern of movement from south to north. African Americans residing in the eastern states such as North Carolina found their way to the terminal in New York; those farther west in states such as Kentucky and Alabama ended up in Chicago. According to Charles S. Johnson, by 1925 the New York City population included 25,000 African Americans from Virginia, 20,000 from North and South Carolina, and 10,000 from Georgia.² The second significant migration was spurred by economic problems in the Caribbean and the development of shipping line routes that coincided with demands of the U.S. labor market. It has been estimated that during the teens, 45,000 African Caribbeans moved to the United States. Of the 102,000 who entered the United States between 1901 and 1924, when immigration was curtailed, the great majority were from the British Caribbean, and many of them settled in New York.³ Johnson estimates the diverse population mix of New York in the twenties to be one part native New Yorkers, three parts southerners, and one part Caribbean immigrants.⁴

Hermie Dumont was one of the thousands of immigrants traveling from distant tropical colonies under British rule. As the stream intensified a family member, friend, or friend of a friend was usually a contact who could provide newcomers an initial place to stay and suggestions for employment.

Hermie and her mother relied on Edith Tucker, Hermie's mother's sister who had earlier settled in the Bronx. But why had they left their native British Guiana? The decision to go north was not arrived at easily. Following the death of her husband, Hermie's mother had managed to earn money by sewing and operating a small hotel in New Amsterdam, but a fire changed their lives. Not only had flames and smoke caused the two of them to jump from a back second-story window into an adjacent stream and flee cross a series of back yards, the damage made it impossible to continue in business. Rumors circulated that the next-door neighbor had set a fire in his business to cover his losses, and the fire had spread to the small hotel. But proof of this was not easily established, and the loss was borne by the residents of the affected building.

The destruction of her possessions and business was the second serious loss for Alice Jannette Dumont. The first had been the death of her husband, Hermann R. C. V. Dumont, who had a fatal accident on July 17, 1908, while prospecting far away in Guatemala. Hermie had been born October 8, 1905, and named Hermina for her father and Alicia for her mother. It is not clear when "Hermina" became "Hermie," but it probably was an early transition. She preferred the shortened form and used Hermie throughout her adulthood, except on official documents. A son, born a year earlier, had died in infancy, and Hermie was the apple of her parents' eyes. Even though she was not quite three years old when news was received of her father's death, she always remembered the father she was never really to know. As a forest ranger and gold prospector he was away for long periods and would bring back samples of plants and fruits that he planted around the house. He always brought some special gift for her when he returned. She remembers climbing on his lap, affixing her little body to his tall, handsome frame, and becoming his shadow whenever he was home.

Hermie and her mother continued to live in New Amsterdam after the death of her father, but her childhood seemed catapulted into adulthood. Except for attendance at school she was always in the company of adults: her mother, grandmother, mother's sister, and a blind uncle who relied on her for assistance. She fetched things and assisted him in other ways, and she carried throughout her life a fear of blindness. She always hoped that loss of vision would never be her fate. By 1919 her grandmother had died and her aunt had gone to America. The abrupt change in Alice Dumont's economic situation following the fire forced her to consider moving to New York. Arrangements were made for Hermie and her mother to depart on the SS *Korona* from Georgetown on October 22, 1919.

To a fourteen-year-old girl, crossing the Caribbean Sea from island to is-

land and sailing the Atlantic Ocean was a fascinating adventure, and the anticipation of what she might find in New York escalated the excitement. For thirteen days she watched the scene gradually change from glorious green to drab gray as the ship steamed from the coast of South America to the coast of North America. Starting at the most distant port they traversed the length of the stream of migration. Each stop brought more travelers aboard seeking to change their lives by trading the sun-bathed tropics for cold, crowded cities. They landed in New York City on November 15.

New York was unlike any port the travelers had experienced along the way. Buildings that pierced the sky crowded out the pale sun, and the enormity of the city defied imagination. Long, narrow asphalt streets traversed the city in both directions for block after block. Trains rattled along noisily in dark tunnels underground. Hermie and her mother found some relief when they finally arrived at her aunt's two-story family house in the Bronx, which was unlike the tall and forbidding concrete structures they saw on disembarkation. The warm welcome did not last long, however, as Hermie began to perceive an irritation at their presence. The problem of color reared its ugly head—the aunt was lighter in complexion than Hermie's mother, and her second husband was white. According to Hermie, the poor lady twisted and squirmed trying to convince people that she, too, was white. It became apparent that she was not eager to share her home with her browner relatives, and they planned to find other quarters. Soon a stranger arrived to inquire about the school-age immigrant. The family had been remiss in not registering Hermie promptly for school according to the law, and she was enrolled in the business program at Theodore Roosevelt High School. Hermie enjoyed school and participated in the Accounting and Social Problems Clubs. She graduated in January 1923 from the three-year course and one year later from the four-year course. Hermie looked forward to applying her secretarial skills because she was determined to help supplement her mother's income.

Her mother was able to find work as a dressmaker and in time developed a private clientele. These relationships not only provided income but were a source of odd experiences for Hermie. She often told of one delivery she made for her mother:

There was a movie actress, Lorna Deck, who played hair-raising stunt parts [and who was] engaged to the then Vice President of Brazil, and she gave her trousseau sewing to my Mother. Whenever mother was finished with a batch she would send me with it to Miss Deck. Then on a certain hot Sunday in June mother sent me with a set of pyjamas made from airplane cloth for the lady's intended husband . . .

The movie actress lived very simply, occupying an apartment . . . with no elevator . . . A scorching sun beat down on my bare head so I hurried into the house and up to the top floor, five flights up. Exhausted, I pressed the doorbell, at the same time leaning on the door. To my surprise, the door went open almost simultaneously as I leaned on it. The opening was so abrupt that I fell into the arms of—Charlie Chaplin . . . When I was a girl, I wore my hair in curls. Charlie tugged at the two front curls, as one would milk a cow, exclaiming, "The milkman is here!"⁵

Hermie did not wait until graduation to start working. Not far from where she and her mother had relocated on 141st Street in Harlem, she found a position at an employment agency for twelve dollars a week during the summer months and on Saturdays when school was in session. The owner of the agency, Ioanthe Sidney, was well known in Harlem and catered to many of the new arrivees from the South and the Caribbean seeking jobs. She also hired Hermie occasionally to serve friends she entertained. While working in the office Hermie met a man engaged in real estate, and he offered her a job in his downtown office. The day after graduation on January 30, 1924, Hermie was ushered into a suite of offices on the corner of Broadway and Wall Street. It was not long before this first full-time job was to teach an unexpected lesson instead of launching her on a career in the financial district. To the naive employee the realization was slow in dawning that the African American employer was fronting for a white realty company engaged in shady deals. Hermie was having to sign documents as "secretary" of the firm. As the date approached for a tax department inspection of the manipulated books, Hermie realized it was best to resign. During this period she was also attending Hunter College and City College of the City of New York at night, and she decided not to seek another job immediately. When classes were over she obtained a part-time job through Sidney's employment agency "tidying up" a ten-room apartment on Central Park West.

Hermie really needed full-time employment. The only job that seemed available was in a dress factory. Before she was due to start work at the factory, however, she received word that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was seeking a clerical assistant, and she reported there instead. She was delighted with the job as Robert Bagnall's secretary, but after three weeks a complication developed. A friend of the executive secretary had a daughter in need of a job and Hermie was let go. Hermie's career became a series of jobs that utilized her organizational and secretarial skills and widened her experiences as well. She learned much from her association with Ms. Sidney, who treated her as a protégée. In time the

association was to lead to a marriage and a life that she could not then have foreseen. Harlem provided Hermie entry into a career of secretarial work; Harlem set her on a course that would reach far beyond British Guiana and New York.

Hermie considered Harlem a beautiful part of the city. In 1920 African Americans lived in a relatively small area, roughly three blocks wide by sixteen short blocks long, extending from 129th Street to 145th Street. The main arteries were all broad: Lenox Avenue, a continuation of Sixth Avenue north of Central Park, was an unpretentious street considered Harlem's Bowery because of its dirt and noise, "its buildings ill-used, and made shaky by the subway underneath."⁶ Noisy tracks on which elevated trains rattled overhead cast a deep shadow on Eighth Avenue, with its push carts and small, seedy shops. But Seventh Avenue was a glorious boulevard with trees planted down the center of the street and along the curbs of the wide sidewalks. Many of the attractive, well-constructed apartment houses were no higher than five stories, providing an opening to the sky. Several streets had magnificent churches and beautiful brownstone town homes that had been designed by outstanding architects such as Stanford White. Seventh Avenue became the Champs Elysees to stroll along on Sunday afternoons, the venue for spectacular parades, the Hyde Park for soapbox orators with burning political or religious messages—the heart of the community.

Families were still in the process of moving from less-desirable areas of the city such as the Tenderloin, where housing available to African Americans was scattered between 20th and 53rd Streets on the west side, and the San Juan Hill section between 60th and 64th Streets and Sixth and Ninth Avenues. Harlem had become available as a potential community for African Americans in 1903. An African American real estate agent, Philip Payton, was able to take advantage of an economic slump and convince the landlord of an empty house on 134th Street that he could supply African American tenants. In 1904 he founded the Afro-American Realty Company, which bought and leased houses, and he purchased a Victorian Gothic brownstone at 13 West 131st Street for his own family.⁷ Early settlers of the island of Manhattan had clustered at the southern tip, leaving the northern area as remote farmland for many decades. Gradually it changed from an autonomous village, Nieuw Haarlem, established in 1658 by Dutch farmers, to an area inhabited by wealthy homeowners who escaped the city heat during the sweltering summers. Some areas were also changed by Irish squatters who erected shantytowns when the farms became unprofitable during the mid-eighteen-hundreds. The pressure of the growing population in lower Manhattan ultimately led to the development of urban townhouses and "new law" tenements with elevators in the northern part

of the city. Access for lower- and middle-class working people was created by the extension of the subway system: the elevated train up Eighth Avenue during the 1880s and the subway up Lenox Avenue to 145th Street in 1904. The northern end of Manhattan was transformed into an African American domain after Payton established the beachhead on 134th Street. The expansion proceeded house by house and block by block on the heels of white flight. African American Harlem gradually adjusted its boundaries and became a center of cultural activity as well as a residential community.

There was a price, however, for that growth. The movement from other areas of the city along with the pressure from newcomers arriving daily from the South and the Caribbean created an imbalance in the housing situation. The demand for housing always far exceeded the space available to African Americans. Discrimination and segregation played into rent gouging by owners as each apartment became available. In order to increase living quarters, apartments and brownstones were subdivided, rent parties were held to cover the high rent, and renting a room became a way of life for many residents. A constant game of musical chairs was played to get into houses as they were vacated by white residents. The Dumonts were typical of Harlem residents: starting in another part of the city, renting a room in Harlem, finding an apartment in which rooms might be rented to someone else, and watching for new openings with improved facilities.

Hermie's description of one such move portrays the tense aspiration of Harlem residents:

Every morning upon awaking, I would look up towards the hill that was separated from my dwelling in Harlem by a public park.

The houses on the hill were newer than those in my neighborhood. Although the house I was then occupying had been renovated . . . the former large apartments were converted into smaller units . . .

Every morning, especially on sunny days, I would vow that one day I would live in one of those houses on the hill. I suppose I was so preoccupied with the subject that one night I dreamt that I had moved there. The next morning, when I looked out of my window, I saw a large sign-board affixed to the top floor of an apartment complex with words large enough to read with the naked eye. It announced that apartments in that group of houses were offered to "respectable colored tenants."

Counting ourselves as respectable, but above all, feeling that we were entitled to live wherever we could afford to, we dressed hurriedly and almost ran up the hill to investigate. There, a black representative of the Jewish landlord showed us the only vacant apartment that was available. The number of rooms and the rental suited us, although we suspected that we were being charged more rent than the former occupant. Later on, we were proven correct in our

surmise. We were charged \$67 a month whereas white tenants paid only \$60 for the same accommodation.⁸

The population explosion required adjustments in living arrangements, but housing in Harlem was considered an improvement over the old tenements south of Harlem and the sharecropper shacks south of the Mason Dixon line. More importantly, the emerging community took on the spirit and excitement of a new age. Harlem became the crossroads of different cultures and the venue of new experiences. Ultimately this new movement required new characterizations: artists and activists considered themselves "New Negroes," and the literary and musical outpourings became known as the "Harlem Renaissance."

Even though Hermie was at the hub of activities at Ioanthe Sidney's employment office located on Seventh Avenue between 134th and 135th Streets, she heard nothing of a "Harlem Renaissance." Along with her friends or her mother she would stop in the evening as a crowd gathered on a corner in front of a soapbox or ladder to listen to orators. By far the most electric and best informed was Hubert Henry Harrison, who could lecture persuasively on any topic with clarity and logic. They made a special effort to catch his lectures. She also attended plays and programs at the YMCA on 135th Street, the YWCA on 137th Street, and the public library near Lenox Avenue on 135th Street. The plays and musicals at the Lafayette Theater, the blues and jazz heard on records or played at home from sheet music, and the books, paintings, and sculptures by African American writers and artists did not seem unusual or novel. It was simply part of the fun of growing up in Harlem. To Hermie the term "Renaissance" referred to the popular Renaissance Casino constructed on the corner of Seventh Avenue and 138th Street in 1923, where she and her friends spent many Sunday evenings watching basketball games that were often followed by a dance. One of the referees was an attractive "Dutchman" from Dutch Guiana (now Suriname), Chris Huiswoud. "Dutch," as he was called, was the first African American to be licensed as a referee from the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States and to serve as an official basketball referee for the Intercollegiate League. His presence on the court added to the excitement of the game.

In 1923 Hermie was to meet a different "Dutchman" who happened to be an older brother of Christopher Huiswoud. Otto Huiswoud was a frequent visitor to the employment agency. Following one of his visits Ms. Sydney remarked that he had recently been to the Soviet Union. Hermie found that interesting but she was not terribly impressed and did not inquire further about his trip. A second encounter occurred at one of Sydney's dinners, where

Hermie was decked in a maid's white cap and apron to help serve the guests. Otto's arrival an hour early provided time to talk. He continued to drop by the office, and she learned that his migration to New York had been quite atypical. He had not followed the usual migration pattern from Dutch Guiana: instead of island hopping as a passenger he had worked as a cabin boy on a freighter bound for the Netherlands.

Otto Eduard Gerardus Majella Huiswoud, born October 28, 1893, in Paramaribo, Dutch Guiana, was the fifth child of eight of Rudolf Francis Huiswoud and Jacqueline Henrietta Bernard (born November 18, 1858). Otto's father had been born a slave on August 30, 1852. After slavery was abolished in Dutch Guiana on July 1, 1863, he was apprenticed to a tailor at the age of eleven. He worked in that trade until his death in 1920. While Otto was still young his father apprenticed him to a cabinetmaker, where he learned inlay work in the afternoons. Upon completion of the school year, when he was thirteen years old, his father apprenticed him to a printer. Working in the trade for three years inspired a great interest in books, and the few he acquired were lent to his friends on a businesslike basis. Reading opened new vistas and he began to dream of travel to far lands. His oldest brother, Egbert, had already left home to serve in the Dutch colonial army in Indonesia.

Shortly after Otto's sixteenth birthday, in October 1909, a captain of a Dutch ship in port visited his father, and Otto became inspired to become a seaman. He was able to persuade his father to permit him to travel to Amsterdam. The captain agreed to take Otto to Amsterdam and see to it that he was entered in the seaman's school. Otto eagerly left his family in Paramaribo and set sail for what he thought would be Amsterdam. But the captain who was so mild-mannered and charming when he talked to Otto's father changed disposition as soon as the receding harbor disappeared. Rum turned him into a tyrant. He made Otto his cabin boy and cursed him incessantly despite the fact that during part of the rough voyage he had to rely on Otto, even to take the wheel once, because only the two of them escaped being seasick. More importantly, the ship proceeded to different ports depending on the cargo that was taken on and never seemed to turn in the direction of Holland. When they arrived in frigid New York on January 17, 1910, and still were not headed toward Otto's destination, he decided he had experienced enough training on that ship. He confided in two Surinamese young men who worked in the galley that he planned to leave the ship, and they decided to disembark with him. They skipped ship with what they were wearing and wandered around Brooklyn and lower Manhattan until it began to get dark. Since Otto had originated the plan to jump ship and had learned some English from an older sister who taught the language, it fell to him to seek a

haven. Unexpectedly, at the age of sixteen he was really on his own in a strange city whose Dutch-speaking settlers had disappeared eons ago, over three thousand miles from home where he knew not one soul.

The never-to-be-forgotten story of his introduction to New York was unknown to Hermie until many years later. She recounted it, however, as Otto must have told it:

Otto had no travel documents, only a birth certificate and a letter of recommendation from his parish priest. None of the boys had any money between them and only tropical clothing. Nevertheless, when they got shore leave, Otto and the others headed over the Williamsburg Bridge for Manhattan arriving at the Bowery, almost frozen and covered by snow. Soon, night was enclosing and just when they were losing hope, a black man was approaching from the opposite direction. Accosting the man, Otto, in his best schoolbook English asked him if he could recommend some lodgings for the three of them. It turned out that the man lived over one of the many saloons the Bowery was rich in. He invited them to ascend with him, introduced them to his Irish wife and little son . . . Upstairs they were ushered into what normally was the parlor, but it had been converted into a bedroom with two beds, washstand, two chairs and a potbellied, unlighted heating stove. Soon they were called to the kitchen where a steaming meal of Mulligan stew was served after the landlord had returned from the saloon below with a bucket of foamy beer. Dinner eaten, he proceeded to question the boys—Otto acting as spokesman—about their intentions to look for work. Learning that Otto had learned two trades, one being printing, he said that Otto should be ready to leave with him the next morning. In the loft building where the man worked as janitor, there was a small printing shop run by a German-Jewish owner. He said he felt he could place Otto there and that he had a trump card for he had done many a favor for the printer and this was a good time to ask for some repayment. Next morning . . . [Otto] left with his host, dressed in the man's heavy sweater, muffler and cap.

The slippery snow-covered streets took up his attention as they rode uptown to 22nd Street near Madison Square. After negotiation, Otto was taken on for a day's trial. His boss spoke to him in German, hearing his name was Otto, then in Yiddish and then in broken English. . . . The first day's work so pleased his employer that he was taken on permanently. Less than 24 hours after arrival, Otto had been drawn into the American labor market. His benefactor told him he knew hardship for he had come up from the south where he knew only agriculture [*sic*] work and had to make it in the industrial north.

Otto worked for the printer for approximately three years but modern print methods and machines soon pushed Otto's boss who was operating on a shoe-string out of business with the consequent unemployment for Otto. He remained with the Brown family as star boarder and was considered part of that family.⁹

The awe that struck Otto when the ship glided by the Statue of Liberty, the towers of Manhattan, and the Brooklyn Bridge to enter a Brooklyn pier was soon diminished by the squalid sights of the Bowery where the boys came to rest. Entering one of the older sections of south Manhattan was not to encounter a city of beauty. Ernest H. Gruening has described how the lack of space in New York City constricted the soul: "Throughout their childhood and through their lives millions are denied horizontal vision. Their outlook is eternally on stone or brick walls. Even the sky is circumscribed, shrouded in dust, its vault gouged by great cornices. There is limitation not only for the eye, but for every sense. Nowhere has constriction been carried further. In the poorest sections the population reaches a density not approached elsewhere on earth."¹⁰

The concrete environment, so dismal and stifling compared to Paramaribo, was a minor concern for Otto on that January morning. It did not take long before the more crushing reality struck, revealing the dichotomy between a cosmopolitan city that boasted of welcoming immigrants from all over the world and the practice of severe discrimination against people of color. Gruening credits the Dutch with establishing a tolerant city that was a refuge for exiles from other colonies, with some eighteen languages spoken in New Amsterdam in 1650. He claims that "the most inherently American doctrines of religious toleration, or personal freedom are our Netherlandish, our New Amsterdam, our Manhattan heritage."¹¹ While Otto had been most fortunate in coming across a kind person who befriended him and was able to introduce him to someone in the trade in which he had been trained, he soon learned that the Dutch tradition of tolerance did not extend to the Dutch of African descent. Finding work and a place to live were severely restricted for people of color. He was barred from becoming an accredited printer because the union did not accept African Americans in the trade. When he lost his job in the printing house he was forced to work in a variety of menial temporary jobs. He and his younger brother, Christopher, who had joined him in 1912, tried a job at the Algonquin Hotel as "gravy cooks" even though they knew nothing about cooking. Otto also tried serving as assistant cook at a boardinghouse for male European immigrant workers in Tarrytown, New York. He worked as a waiter, dishwasher, janitor, house painter, and elevator operator. He even shipped out as a seaman on the British ship *Newcastle*, but his service was terminated when World War I erupted in 1914. Years later he worked with his friend, Wilfred A. Domingo, who established a tropical produce business.

Otto had brought to New York the Caribbean culture that was to be part of him all his life, but metropolitan forces were to transform the lad who

envisioned becoming a seaman to a man who would become a revolutionary. He sought to improve his English by reading newspapers and listening to orators at lunchtime in Madison Square Park at Madison Avenue and 23rd Street or Union Square at 14th Street. He confirmed that not only was there lack of opportunity and justice for African Americans, there were bestial attacks upon them in the South. The specter of lynching was unthinkable and appalling. The problems facing American society were laid bare, and all manner of solutions were offered by soapbox orators near his first workplace with the printer. The speaker that fascinated him the most was distinctive in many ways: broad in his knowledge of history, articulate and clear in his analysis of colonialism, firm in his conviction that socialism could solve the evils visited upon workers by their employers, and passionate in his denunciation of the unjust laws and treatment accorded the African American. Strikingly, he was of brown complexion—a learned man also from the Caribbean. At the time Otto came across Hubert Henry Harrison the soapbox orator was imbued with the solution that socialism offered to combat inequality and injustice. Otto's introduction to socialist politics began with the election campaigns with which Harrison was involved. Not only was Harrison engaged in spreading propaganda in support of the Socialist Party of America he had joined in 1909, he was carefully studying Marxism, economics, science, anthropology, and history—particularly African and African American history—and developing his own philosophical argument. He was exploring the relationship between the African American worker's plight in the United States and the positions of the Socialist Party that had been virtually silent on the issue, constructing his thesis that would appear in several publications. Otto followed his line of reasoning carefully and sought to learn more about this informed, logical orator.

Harrison was ten years older than Otto, having been born in the rural area of Estate Concordia in St. Croix on April 27, 1883. He reported that his parents, William Adolphus Harrison and Cecilia Elizabeth Haines, from Barbados, were "well off as West Indian families go." But his friend, J. A. Rogers, viewing Harrison's life forty-four years later, put it differently. With a touch reminiscent of Countee Cullen's marveling at making a poet black and bidding him sing, Rogers wrote that poverty was Harrison's life-long enemy: "Destiny sent him into this world very poor. And as if this were not enough, she gave him a critical mind, a candid tongue, a family to support; a passion for knowledge; on top of all that, a black skin, and sent him to America." Rogers considered this combination "a most formidable string of handicaps."¹² Rogers was keenly aware that Harrison had been a star pupil in the various schools he attended in the Virgin Islands and had an insatiable thirst

for knowledge. But the loss of his father in 1898 followed by confiscation of the family property by the Danish crown and the death of his mother in January 1899 dealt him a cruel blow. As an orphan thrust into poverty he was forced to interrupt his education and support himself.

On September 15, 1900, Harrison sailed from St. Croix to New York and joined his older sister, Mary, who worked as a domestic and lived at 220 West 62nd Street in the San Juan Hill area. He worked a series of jobs as an elevator operator, bellhop, messenger, and even as a stock clerk in a Japanese fan company, but managed to attend night school despite sometimes working two nights a week in addition to full time in the day. He won an award for oratory for which he was acclaimed a "genius" in a major daily newspaper, uniquely achieved grades of 100 percent, and graduated from DeWitt Clinton High School. His high achievement in a civil service examination resulted in an appointment on July 1, 1907, as clerk in the United States Post Office at six hundred dollars per year. Working in the post office was well above the usual jobs available to African Americans, and Harrison could now consider marriage. On April 17, 1909, he married Irene Louise Horton. In time their family grew to five children.

Harrison had not been content solely to support himself and complete high school. When he arrived in the United States at the age of seventeen, ten years ahead of Otto, he too had been struck by the emasculating prejudice so rampant in his new country. With no opportunity to attend college, he instituted his self-instructed "university" in order to better understand conditions in the wider world as well as in the United States. He was organized, methodical, and disciplined. He delved into a wide-ranging in-depth study of various fields. He established a *modus operandi* that he followed throughout his life. Night after night he read, taking notes, organizing files, maintaining annotated scrapbooks of newspaper clippings, practically devouring books by taking out sections to be marked, commented on, and remembered. The painstaking organization was preparation—he never used notes during his speeches. He honed his oratorical skills at two lyceums conducted at neighborhood African American churches on 53rd Street, St. Benedict the Moor Roman Catholic Church and St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church, where debates were held regularly. He also began writing letters to editors of newspapers, then moved on to writing reviews of books and articles that appeared in leading socialist and other publications. Along the way he embraced socialism.¹³

It should not be forgotten that the period when Harrison entered the New York scene was a devastating one for African Americans—the nadir of the backlash following Reconstruction. By 1900 Jim Crow laws had been insti-

tuted and lynching was an accepted practice in the South; economic and social injustice prevailed throughout the land. A militant response was beginning to simmer, and parallel conditions in the broader community were seeking redress. Portia James has focused on some of the issues facing workers in the early 1900s that would attract young militants like Harrison to the Socialist Party: "New York City was very turbulent then; and labor unrest in the form of militant strikes swept the immigrant communities on the East side of the city. The socialist party was particularly visible, having sustained a long period of activity among the immigrant textile workers there. In 1909 thousands of textile workers went on strike; in 1910 sixty thousand cloakmakers went out and as a result won a collective bargaining agreement. The militancy and subsequent victories of these workers, primarily Jewish immigrant women, must have made a lasting impact on the city's Black community."¹⁴

Harrison, no armchair socialist, was in the fray. The price was his job. His pursuit of socialism and his outspoken lectures and writings on various aspects of economics and society, including attacks on certain African American leaders, resulted in Booker T. Washington exerting pressure to have him dismissed from the post office. On September 23, 1911, after four years' service with a good work record, he was out of a job and forced to rely on speaking and teaching to feed his family. He was convinced that the Socialist Party needed to correct its position that race problems would be solved by addressing the class issue and should direct propaganda to African Americans, who represented a large segment of the working class. He was keen on developing a program to be implemented among residents of the emerging African American community in Harlem.

Shortly after Harrison's dismissal from the post office, Samuel M. Roman-sky, an officer of Branch 5, to which Harrison belonged, wrote on behalf of the branch to Julius Gerber, executive secretary of Local New York, proposing that Comrade Harrison be made "a paid speaker and organizer for Local New York for special work in negro districts." Philip Foner marks Roman-sky's recommendation as the first time special attention to the "Negro Question" and a special campaign among African Americans had been called for by a branch since the formation of the Socialist Party in 1901. On October 18, 1911, the local's executive committee engaged Harrison, and he threw himself into the election campaign. The socialist vote among African American voters was increased and the committee announced plans on November 28 for a new branch in Harlem. Harrison enthusiastically worked on plans for a "Colored Socialist Club" and a series of lectures on African American history.¹⁵

Harrison had not confined his expositions to the soapbox. One of his major essays appeared in the *Call* on November 28, 1911, as "The Negro and

Socialism" and in the *International Socialist Review* in July 1912 as "Socialism and the Negro." Harrison's thesis employed a deliberate and logical development, appealing to reason rather than to sympathy. The opening described the economic status of the ten million African Americans as "a group that is more essentially proletarian than any other American group" and linked the fact that they were brought here as chattels to their continuous and fixed low social status. He continued, "Inasmuch, then, as the Negro was at one period the most thoroughly exploited of the American proletariat, he was the most thoroughly despised. That group which exploited and despised him, being the most powerful section of the ruling class, was able to diffuse its own necessary contempt of the Negro first among all other classes of Americans . . . Race prejudice, then, is the fruit of economic subjection and a fixed inferior economic status . . . The Negro problem is essentially an economic problem with its roots in slavery past and present."¹⁶

Harrison went on to point out that special socialist propaganda was preached to Poles, Slovaks, Finns, Hungarians, and Lithuanians, while African Americans were left to become a great menace utilized as scabs by the capitalists. He considered the time ripe for socialists—indeed, it was their duty—to take a stand against the disfranchisement of the Negro, which violated the provisions of the Constitution, and suggested that the Socialist Party would "not be guilty of proposing anything worse than asking the government to enforce its own 'law and order.'" He asked, "If the Negroes, or any other section of the working class in America, is to be deprived of the ballot, how can they participate with us in the class struggle? How can we pretend to be a political party if we fail to see the significance of this fact?" His questions boldly challenged the party to face its reluctance to deal with the racist attitudes that prevailed within it: "Southernism or Socialism—which? Is it to be the white half of the working class against the black half, or all the working class? Can we hope to triumph over capitalism with one-half of the working class against us?"¹⁷

On February 23, 1912, the committee abandoned the project for the Colored Socialist Club. Objections to a segregated branch had been raised by W. E. B. Du Bois and other African American leaders. Du Bois's concerns went beyond the implications of a segregated branch. His own experience with the Socialist Party had led him to conclude that "there is a kind of fatalistic attitude on the part of certain transcendental Socialists, which often assumes that the whole battle of Socialism is coming by a kind of evolution in which active individual effort on their part is hardly necessary."¹⁸ In a 1913 article he charged that "No recent convention of Socialists has dared to face fairly the Negro problem and make a straightforward declaration that they regard Negroes as men in the same sense that other persons are." He raised questions similar to

Harrison's: "Can the problem of any group of 10,000,000 be properly considered as 'aside' from any program of Socialism? Can the objects of Socialism be achieved so long as the Negro is neglected? Can any great human problem 'wait'? . . . what is anti-Negro socialism doing but handing to its enemies the powerful weapon of 4,500,000 men who will find it not simply to their interest, but a sacred duty, to underbid the labor market, vote against labor legislation, and fight to keep their fellow laborers down?" Du Bois doubted that the average modern socialist could grasp the extent of the hatred against African Americans in the South, "which violently opposes any program of any kind of reform that recognizes the Negro as a man." To Du Bois the "Negro Problem" was "the great test of the American Socialist." He concluded by asking if the socialists paid the price the South demanded, "will the result be Socialism?"¹⁹

The objection raised by Du Bois and others to a Colored Socialist Club was not the only reason the socialists had second thoughts about the project. Harrison had committed two sins. More and more he was voicing support for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), which had shown strong support for the inclusion of African American workers in their organization. Perhaps most damaging was his espousal of sabotage as a tool available to workers engaged in union activities. The New York Socialist leadership strongly opposed the use of sabotage, but Harrison sided with Bill Haywood of the IWW on this issue and lost favor with the more conservative New York party leaders. As Harrison persisted in his increasingly radical positions, party leadership attempted to rein him in. The struggle became nastier in 1913 when he signed the "Resolution of Protest" attacking the removal of Haywood from the national executive committee of the Socialist Party and assumed an active role along with Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn in the silk workers' strike in Paterson, New Jersey. Ironically, the leadership of the Socialist Party responded like Booker T. Washington to silence Harrison's pronouncements. The executive committee of Local New York put the final touch on the relationship when they notified him on May 18, 1914, that he was suspended—but Harrison had already gone his way. While he continued to pursue and promote socialism he persisted in developing his own philosophy and program. By the time of his death in 1927 he had become one of the most prolific African American writers on socialism. His biographer, Jeffrey Babcock Perry, has identified approximately seven hundred writings, including printed articles and book reviews in socialist and other publications, in the *Negro World*, which he edited in 1920, and in local newspapers.²⁰ Winston James has characterized it succinctly: "American socialism did not keep faith with Hubert Harrison, Harrison kept faith with socialism."²¹

While it is not known exactly when Otto Huiswoud became acquainted with Harrison it is clear that contact was established while Harrison was stumping on behalf of the Socialist Party. Huiswoud discovered Harrison in the same manner as Richard B. Moore, who used his lunch hour to listen to the orators in Madison Square Park. In time they would also encounter Harrison's writings. To Huiswoud and Moore in those early years Harrison was the model militant. Harrison was not the first or only African American espousing socialism, but at the time there was no informed, logical, articulate, courageous voice like his. Describing himself as a "Radical Internationalist," he inspired in his young listeners an appreciation of socialism as the rational, scientific alternative to the unfair and unjust system of capitalism and colonialism. They took him seriously—they bought and borrowed books, studied independently and later together, practiced their debating skills, and in time mounted the mighty soapbox themselves. Harrison became one of Huiswoud's and Moore's earliest mentors and played a key role in introducing them to socialist ideas.

Years later, Moore, while recognizing that Harrison was a prolific writer, stated that Harrison's major influence stemmed from his street orations during the lunch hour on Wall Street or Madison Square Park and especially in the evenings, first at West 96th Street off Broadway and later on Lenox Avenue. "His ability to make complex subjects clear and simple, and the power of his logic and presentation gained him a hearing in some very difficult situations."²² Moore described Harrison as "a pioneer in nonconformist thought" and gave some insight into his demeanor on the soapbox: "Of dark hue and medium height . . . Harrison was not prepossessing but quite impressive. His sparse hair covered his head lightly and his high forehead seemed to make his head taller and add to his stature. His keen black eyes could almost transfix an opponent; when they opened slightly and his lips pulled up somewhat, then a withering blast was on its way. Although generally amiable and never pompous, he bore a reserved but pleasant mien, always bearing himself with conscious dignity."²³

Huiswoud found other mentors not far from his workplace. At first he was attracted to the courses on English and speaking offered at the Rand School of Social Science located near Union Square on East 19th Street at that time. It was a unique educational institution founded in 1906 on a model that was developed in Europe and was quite successful in Brussels at the turn of the century. The focus, however, was not on English for immigrants; the school specialized in courses on "socialist theory, economics, economic history, American history, and literature" taught by leaders of the socialist movement, distinguished academicians, and trade union leaders.²⁴ In this milieu he was

to meet Sen Katayama, a Japanese revolutionary in exile, and S. J. Rutgers, a Dutch engineer who was promoting the Socialist Propaganda League.

Huiswoud formed a close relationship with Katayama (1860–1933), who began his long, arduous journey to Moscow with the name Sugataro on December 7, 1860, in Hadeki, a rural village in Japan. During his childhood in the Yabuki family he felt lonely and rejected as the second son born to parents who were disappointed that he was not a girl. He felt keenly the loss of his father due to a family dispute when he was three or four years old. Despite the poverty experienced following his father's departure his mother managed to arrange education for him in the Buddhist temple schools. He assumed the name Sen Katayama at the age of nineteen when he was legally adopted by a friend of the family.²⁵ Against extreme odds he sought education and the ascent out of poverty in 1881 in Tokyo as an apprentice and assistant in a printing establishment. He became associated with a group studying Christian socialism that was concerned with the conditions of the workers during that period of Japanese industrialization. On November 26, 1884, at the age of 24, he set out for the United States, arriving in San Francisco with sixty cents. He worked at any job he could find, struggled to learn English, and between 1888 and 1895 attended Maryville College in Tennessee, Grinnell College in Iowa, Andover Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, and Yale School of Divinity. Over the next two decades his vision of socialism would evolve from being closely associated with Christianity to more revolutionary ideas associated with the Left.

Katayama returned to Japan in January 1896 and felt pressed to help organize trade unions. He established a socialist study club and the first successful labor newspaper there. In 1901 he and Shusui Kotoku founded the Japanese Social Democratic Party, and on December 29, 1903, he traveled to the United States to attend the national convention of the American Socialist Party in Chicago. His main destination, however, was the Sixth Congress of the Second International scheduled for August 1904 in Amsterdam, where he was warmly received as a representative of the Japanese Socialists. Katayama's biographer, Hyman Kublin, credits the Sixth Congress as the event that transfigured Sen "Joe" Katayama "by the socialists of the Occident into a solitary symbol of proletarian struggle against tyranny and oppression in remote Asia."²⁶ His return to Japan in 1904 was marked by heightened political agitation, including involvement in strikes in the iron industry, against the backdrop of war with Russia. The strikes led to surveillance and the internment of socialists by the Japanese government. In 1912 he was sentenced to prison for his political activities. Upon his release in 1914 he went into exile in the United States, where he became closely associated with the Left Wing

of the Socialist Party in New York and later organized a small group of Japanese socialists living there. He saw his role as an interpreter of the workers' struggle in Japan. He wrote *The Labor Movement in Japan* and many articles on Japan, including those appearing in the Rand School publication *American Labor Year Book* and in the *International Socialist Review*. Over the years his literary output was to exceed forty books and monographs and five hundred articles.²⁷

Sebald Justinus Rutgers (1879–1961) began his life on the opposite side of the world from Katayama, in Leiden, the Netherlands, on January 25, 1879. He came to New York City via China and Japan from Indonesia, which he left in March 1915 after working as a director and chief engineer for the Netherlands East Indies. He had joined the Dutch Social Democratic Workers' Party in 1899 but was expelled for his Left Wing agitation as expressed in their organ, *De Tribune*. He helped form the "Tribune Group," or the Social Democratic Party, in 1909, which later became the Communist Party in the Netherlands. While in Indonesia he had developed a concern for peoples under colonial rule and became a strong opponent of colonialism. Rutgers met Katayama at the Amsterdam Congress in 1904 and extended an invitation to Katayama in 1916, who was in San Francisco at that time, to join him in New York City and live with the Rutgers family in Brooklyn. During that stay, Rutgers introduced Katayama to Marxist leaders from Europe and the United States. Although Katayama was nineteen years Rutgers' senior, Hyman Kublin considers Rutgers to be Katayama's mentor because of the shift toward the Left following Katayama's experiences in New York.²⁸ It was in New York that the strong friendship and collaboration was forged between the two men from far distant points halfway around the globe.

While working in New York during World War I as a purchasing agent for the Deli Railway Company and the Netherlands-India Railway Company, Rutgers was also a key organizer and fundraiser for the Socialist Propaganda League, which was responsible for assisting in the establishment of a succession of radical newspapers: the *Internationalist*, the *New International*, and the *Revolutionary Age*.²⁹ He was very influential in promoting the concept of mass action. He recognized the lack of political influence of the working class in the United States and pointed out that "far more than one-third of the workers do not even have a vote: Negroes in the South, immigrants in the North, and men who must keep moving in pursuit of jobs."³⁰ He helped shape the leftist positions of American socialists who later established the Communist Party and served as a strong link between European and American socialists. Akito Yamanouchi has pointed out that his more than twenty articles in the *International Socialist Review* provided American readers

with news of European left-wing developments, and his approximately thirty reports in *De Tribune* provided Dutch socialists with important information on American problems and activities.³¹ His influence extended to Huiswoud not only because of his interest in colonial peoples but because both spoke Dutch and Rutgers could clarify Marxist ideas for the young student of socialism. Huiswoud's contact with Rutgers in New York ended in 1918. Rutgers left the United States when he realized he was under police surveillance for his socialist activities and because the companies for which he worked as an engineer were suspected of German connections. He decided he could no longer be productive in the United States and proceeded to Moscow via Japan, where he made contact with some of Katayama's socialist colleagues. He arrived in Moscow in time to attend the founding congress of the Comintern as a delegate representing the Dutch Social Democratic Party (Communist Party) and as an official spokesperson of the Socialist Propaganda League. He also delivered the Japanese socialist leaders' expression of sympathy with the Russian Revolution.³²

Within three years Katayama, feeling the heat of the Palmer Raids, also left the United States. He first attended the Second Congress of the Comintern, convened July 17, 1920, in Petrograd, and on his return in November stopped in New York with Louis C. Fraina (a.k.a. Lewis Corey), an American delegate and former editor of a series of leftist publications, "for a goodwill mission to U. S. Communist leaders to promote party unity."³³ In March 1921 he and Fraina went to Mexico City and joined Manuel Gomez (Charles Phillips), who was at the time functioning in the Mexican Communist Party, where they spent almost eight months working on a Comintern assignment to establish the organizing center of the Red International of Labor Unions for Latin America.³⁴ Katayama then proceeded to Moscow, arriving in December 1921 at the age of sixty-one.

It was not the Dutch engineer but the Japanese revolutionary with whom Huiswoud built a lasting friendship. Katayama could easily have seen himself in young Otto. The similarities in their introduction to American culture were striking: both were motivated to seek opportunities in a more cosmopolitan location than their birthplace could provide; both were thrust on the shores of the United States alone and penniless; both had to learn a new language; both were trained as printers but forced to work in temporary menial jobs to make ends meet; both had unexpectedly entered a culture steeped in race hatred and experienced discrimination; and both were challenged by an economic and social system that promoted oppression of workers, colonialism, and imperialism. Ultimately both were driven to seek ways in which the lives of the kinsmen they had left behind could be improved.

It was in New York that the young student of socialism from the distant Caribbean colony was privileged to learn about Marxism directly from three pioneers in the radical movement, none of whom had been born in the United States: Harrison, the "Father of Harlem Radicalism;" Katayama, the "Father of Japanese Socialism" and the "Father of Asian Communism"; and Rutgers, a founder of the Dutch Tribunists, which would become the core of the Dutch Communist Party. While Otto's personal contact with the three key socialists might have been limited, their influence was extended through their writings. They were theoreticians as well as organizers and all published articles in the *International Socialist Review*. The *Review* and other socialist journals did not have wide circulation in the African American community, but Otto was exposed to contemporary socialist literature during his association with the Rand School. This remarkable confluence of influences at a critical time left its mark on the young man who was to become the sole African American charter member of the Communist Party in the United States. New York was indeed a major crossroads of radical intellectual development. The paths of Huiswoud and Harrison would continue to meet in Harlem during the next decade; the paths of Huiswoud, Katayama, and Rutgers were all to cross in later years in Moscow. Interestingly, by 1922 all three had found their way to the emerging Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The mid-teens was a difficult period for the Huiswoud brothers. Problems associated with finding adequate work and the encouragement from his mentors convinced Huiswoud that he should pursue additional education. Hubert Harrison in particular stressed the value of education. In 1917 Huiswoud managed to attend the College of Agriculture at Cornell University, where he took courses related to farm crops and animals, farm management, and a basic course in chemistry. While he was at Cornell the Russian Revolution was in progress, and he followed the news of it along with socialist fellow students. It is a mystery how he selected Cornell University, located in upstate New York, instead of the City College of New York like other Caribbean immigrants and why he chose to study agriculture. A turning point emerged in the summer of 1918, when Huiswoud worked for the Fall River Line, which operated pleasure boats between Boston and Maine. Working conditions were extremely poor, and the African American crew had no redress because they were not served by the union. Huiswoud organized a grievance committee but the company was adamant that it would not consider any changes. When they were preparing to sail again from Boston, the home port, the men stood on the pier with folded arms and the passengers were forced to handle their own luggage. Huiswoud acted as spokesman for the crew and the negotiations resulted in more pay and improved working conditions, including better food. During

this time he had been grappling with the contradictions and seeking answers to questions about American society; he decided to take advantage of a scholarship offered by the Rand School in its new People's House at 7 East 15th Street in New York and did not return to Cornell for the fall semester. The negotiations with the Fall River Line had stimulated his interest in the trade union movement. At the age of twenty he now knew that Cornell could not prepare him for the work he wished to pursue.

The full-time six-month Workers' Training Course he entered in November 1918 was designed to "train and equip the students for efficient service in the Socialist and Labor Movement, whether as regular officers or employees of the party, the unions, and related bodies, or as volunteer workers in their respective localities and organizations." The *Rand School News* reported that the 1918-19 class of twenty-seven students could "lay claim to the true spirit of Internationalism" and that "Otto E. Huiswoud claims the honor of being the Socialist representative from Dutch Guiana." In vast contrast to the program at Cornell, the curriculum included courses on socialism, economics, political science, the socioeconomic history of the United States, the history of the working class movement, American civics and politics, criminology, natural science, statistics, public speaking, and English. Students were assigned to directed field and office work. They were also expected to make regular use of the gymnasium "to avoid the ill effects likely to result from too sedentary a life."³⁵

Evidently Huiswoud had already joined the Socialist Party; activity in the Party was one of the criteria considered in awarding scholarships. The date he joined is unknown but Hermie has indicated that he became acquainted with the Socialists while working with the printer and that he followed the campaign of Eugene Debs in 1912. He entered the Rand program committed to socialist ideas, and he left in the spirit expressed in the valedictory address—determined to "help educate the workers of America so that their slogan, 'a fair day's wage for a fair day's work' [would] be replaced by the revolutionary slogan, 'abolition of the wages system.'" In September the *Alumni Notes* reported that he was doing a "great deal to aid in the emancipation of his race" and that he was connected with the *Messenger*.³⁶

All was not Marx and Engels, however, for Huiswoud; a romantic comradeship developed with another member of the class, Anna Leve, who was from Philadelphia. Following graduation she was reported to be working in the small towns of Pennsylvania, organizing the shirtmakers' union. She found her way back to New York and they lived together for several years, during which time they attended the meeting of the Left Wing faction when it split from the Socialist Party and established the Communist Party in 1919.

During that decade he, like many other African Americans, changed his residence from downtown to uptown. The other young men who had left the ship with Huiswoud went their ways, and only he continued to live with the family that had rescued them. He moved with the Brown family from the Bowery to West 53rd Street and by 1916 was established in Harlem.³⁷ Subsequently he roomed with the mothers of close friends Grace Campbell, Cyril Briggs, and Hermie Dumont. Within nine years, Huiswoud matured from an adolescent Caribbean immigrant wandering lower Manhattan in search of shelter to a socialist organizer poised to deliver the gospel of Marx in Harlem.

As the friendship with Hermie developed he introduced her to the small coterie of friends he had developed in Harlem. His closest friends were W. A. Domingo from Jamaica, Richard B. Moore from Barbados, and Cyril V. Briggs from St. Kitts-Nevis. He took her to forums and debates, including programs at the Harlem Community Church, where E. Ethelred Brown from Jamaica was the minister, as well as to basketball games and social gatherings. One gathering place they frequented was the home of Grace P. Campbell, as described by Hermie:

Grace Campbell, a very quiet-spoken lady was in her mid-forties, I think, when we became friends although she was twice my age . . .

I remember her with greying hair and jet-black beady eyes that glistened and twinkled as if she were perpetually enjoying something amusing. No wonder that her home was always full of visitors. She kept a permanent open house, offering food and shelter to whomever knocked on her door.

Saturday evenings, she received guests; blacks of various levels of education and political plumage, congregated in her living room to discuss burning issues affecting the Negro people specifically on matters of international import, particularly regarding the working class.

Men like Hubert Harrison, a walking encyclopedia, from the Virgin Islands, Rev. Ethelred Brown, a Socialist and Unitarian clergyman, J. A. Rogers, the writer of Jamaican origin and his country-man, the poet Claude McKay, Richard B. Moore, whose oratory charmed and convinced listeners. Dick had the capacity to speak as eloquently to an audience of two as two thousand. Otto was also a frequent visitor and when I became friendly with him, he took me along to those weekly sessions. It was one of the best periods in the history of Harlem.³⁸

It was impossible for Hermie to foresee how these social and cultural good times would merge with political activism. She could not imagine that the friendship developing with Otto Huiswoud and his associates would bring a life shaped largely by the political perspectives of the emerging American Left and the Soviet Union's Communist International (Comintern). The

struggle led by Huiswoud and his comrades for the equality of African Americans in the United States would be joined with the effort to end colonialism in the Caribbean and Africa and further entwined with producing a socialist state in Eastern Europe. Her life with Otto was to be played out on an international stage that would take them even farther from their homelands in the Guianas.

2. Uptown and Downtown

There was much about Otto Huiswoud that Hermie never knew. He was by nature quiet, modest, and reserved—referred to by some friends as “The Sphinx.” His demeanor was well suited for his chosen work. Hermie respected his reserve for two reasons: she too was a very private person and she accepted that the nature of his work was best not treated as public information. In fact, she learned not to ask certain questions. When they first met Otto was a known communist, but in 1923 that had little significance to a seventeen-year-old girl in Harlem. Knowledge of his involvement with the communist movement was confined to a few comrades in the Workers Party. Later she realized that it was only in New York that his conversion could have taken place. Radical thinking was by no means emerging only in one city; it was part of an international movement. But the radicalization of African Caribbeans in New York was forged by a particular combination of circumstances, and Huiswoud stands as a prime example of that metamorphosis. Life in Harlem seemed pregnant with promise, yet many Caribbean immigrants experienced disappointment, disillusionment, and dismay. Although answers to many questions about this metamorphosis will remain shrouded in mystery, it is important to probe some of the complex factors contributing to their adoption of a radical political perspective. To discover the route by which these émigrés turned despair into protest and propaganda it is necessary to examine the impact of the relationship between uptown and downtown upon their radicalization.

The Harlem that Hermie Dumont and Otto Huiswoud sought and with which they identified was not the enclave frequently presented in descriptions of the Harlem Renaissance. There were two Harlems: one of the day