I Choose Exile (1951)
by Richard Wright

I am a native born American Negro. The first 38 years of my life were spent exclusively on the soil of my native land. But, at the moment of this writing, I live in voluntary exile in France and I like it. There is nothing in the life of America that I miss or yearn for. Barring war or catastrophe, I intend to remain in exile. I shall, of course, keep my American citizenship, my American passport; but I prefer to live out my days among a civilized people.

Why have I decided to live beyond the shores of my native land? It is because I love freedom, and I tell you frankly that there is more freedom in one square block of Paris than there is in the entire United States of America! These words of mind are not designed to provoke dissatisfaction in other whites or Negroes with America; I am not trying to persuade other Negroes to live abroad. My decision is predicated upon this simple fact: I need freedom. Yes, some people need more freedom than others, and I am one of them. Unless I feel free to let my instincts range, free to come and go as I please, free to probe and examine my environment, I languish, I wither, I die. In short, freedom, to me, is equated to concrete reality, to life; it is not something abstract, something to be won or hoped for; it is life itself, each day, each hour, each moment….

Most Frenchmen I've met feel as I do about this; they love their personal and civil freedom. Yet, I've heard but few Frenchmen speak of freedom during the five years I've lived in Paris. People are not prone to speak of that which they already have. It was only in America where so much freedom is lacking that one hears long and impassioned arguments about freedom… It is like listening to a starving man tell of his need for food.

So well do I know white and black Americans that I can almost predict their reactions to my attitude. There are those who will immediately say, "Oh, yes; he is a Negro and he feels better in France where there is no racial segregation." But I hasten to declare that any such interpretations of my motives are wrong and shallow. True, it was in part the desire to escape the racial pressure of the United States that decided me to flee my native land, but it was not racial reasons alone that decided me to remain. What was it then?

During the years of my life in America I felt that in time my country would settle down to humane living with a code of civilized values. But my sojourn in France made me realize that I had deceived myself. I know now that America has no such future, that it is inescapably different from Europe and that no conceivable stretch of historical time will make it like Europe. Indeed, time will only emphasize the differences between the two value systems which are moving in completely opposed directions. My temperament made me elect to choose the side containing the deepest elements of humanity - France and Europe. On the continent the individual is placed at the top of a carefully graded scale of values, and most all decisions and actions are based upon those values which are taught rigidly in the schools, reflected in the church, and depicted in art and

literature. In the United States, despite its idealistic origins, the desire for materialistic power dominates all. Utilitarian motives claim, to the exclusion of all else, the hearts and minds of its citizens.

My life in America had been spent fighting for the rights of the Negro people and I knew that that fight was, morally and legally, a correct one; that it was supported by our democratic traditions and our Constitution. Yet, deep down, during all those years, I felt that there was something organically wrong with a nation that could so cynically violate its laws in meting out cruelties upon a helpless minority. America's barbaric treatment of the Negro is not one-half so bad or inhuman as the destructive war which she wages against the concept of the free person, against the Rights of Man, and against herself!

But enough of generalizations; let me glance back and describe the last personal event which resolved me to leave America.

In New York, in the winter of 1946, I was seized by a longing for the countryside, for rolling landscapes. I was, as they say, "fed up" with city living, though city living certainly offers the American Negro his best possible haven for race prejudice, casting him into a vast anonymity which drapes about him a somewhat negative cloak of protection. Now, when and American Negro starts yearning for a landscape, it wisely behooves him to be careful to choose the right one, for most American landscapes have been robbed, for him, or their beauty and innocence by the fact that almost every lynching in America has taken place in such a setting. To go South, then, was unthinkable. The West Coast had never appealed to me, being too fruity and nutty. New England! That was it! Had not the dauntless abolitionists risen in that transcendentalistic atmosphere? And had not Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau sprung from that stubborn but free soil? I was decided.

I discussed this all-too-normal desire to buy a home in New England with two well-bred and cultured white friends of mine who lived in Hanover, New Hampshire. They urged me to stay in their home and use it as a base from which to scout for a piece of property. I was grateful for their hospitality and I accepted.

Wintry New Hampshire greeted me magnificently. A heavy, gleaming snow carpeted the plunging hills. The eye could see for miles through the sharp, pure, bracing air. A deep quiet hung in the tranquil valleys. Proud pines pointed skywards. Here was what I wanted.

Two days of searching brought me a "dream" houses, located in Connecticut just across the New Hampshire state line. The house was empty, sturdy, wooden, roomy, and ready for occupancy, and was half a mile from the nearest neighbor. The mere look of that house, as the salesmen say, "sold" me. The price was six thousand dollars. I'd buy it, cash.

I looked up the real estate agent and found him to be a seemingly friendly man. I told him what I wanted. His eyes became shifty. He smiled and scratched his chin.

"All right," he said. "I'll communicate with the owner and let you know."

"Why is that necessary?" I asked, sensing an air of unquiet in him.

"Oh, it's simply routine," he assured me.

"When will you let me know?" I asked. I told myself that I must not leap to premature conclusions.

"In a couple of days," he said. "I'll 'phone you."

In the comfortable home of my host I sat for four days in front of a blazing log fire and waited to hear from the real estate agent. My frequent 'phone calls merely elicited a polite:

"I've no word yet, Mr. Wright."

Finally, I became certain in my own mind as to what was happening. The dreadful issue of "race" was hovering somewhere over those beautiful, snow-clad hills of New Hampshire. At last I asked my host to see the agent and when he returned to the house I saw at once a hurt, stunned look in his brooding eyes. I knew the truth before he spoke. A curious, sensitive scene followed, a scene which has haunted American history for 300 years: A white man wrestling with his conscience because he has to tell a Negro something which he knows will cause him pain. My host was trying to spare my feelings and the agony in him made me try to spare his feelings! I tried to assure him that this was a "normal thing" in the life of an American Negro and that he should not be too upset about it. The "truth" turned out to be that the white owner did not want to sell his house to a Negro….

I sat the next day in a New York-bound train and felt rather than thought. What was there to think about? A feeling welled up in me, springing from the depths of my life. I'd had enough of this. To hell with it. I would get out of it. I'd go to France at once. I'd try living a spell away from this racial nightmare. I'd leave the land of my birth, my home, my friends, everything. I'd leave the culture that had shaped me. I'd try something different.

I arrived at my New York apartment and announced to my wife:

"This is the first of April. We are leaving America on the first of May. Take the child out of school. Put the furniture in storage. Buy tickets for Paris. We're through here."

She was stunned, but she agreed. To leave in America in 1946 was not easy. My application for a passport was rejected by the Department of State on the grounds that the conditions in post-war Europe were so bad that the government feared that United States citizens would become stranded abroad. I assured the government that I had enough money to care for my needs, but the answer was still no. I was packed, ready to leave, but no passport was forthcoming. I discovered, in consulting lawyer, that, as an American citizen, I had no legal right to a passport, that a passport could be given or withheld at the discretion of the government, in this case the government was personified by a distant woman named Miss Shipley whom I'd never seen.

I was determined not to give up. I appealed for help to French friends of mine in New York and they in turn appealed to the French Government. From Paris, Gertrude Stein, with whom I was in close contact, wrote that she would do her utmost. On the 15th of April, 1946, the French Government responded graciously, giving me an official invitation to visit France. I've done it, I said. I air-mailed the invitation to the Passport Division of the Department of State in Washington and waited for a reply. None came. I 'phoned them by long distance and was dismayed to learn that the invitation "had been lost."

I was angry. I appealed again to the French Government for a duplicate invitation! They sent it. Again I 'phoned Washington long distance and told them that I was flying down with another invitation and that I wanted my passport. A suave voice tried to dissuade me from coming to Washington, but I insisted that I'd be there in person.

I began to pull every political string in sight. Through the good offices of a famous American doctor I got a pipe-line into the set of Evalyn Walsh McLean, a set which was rumored to be sympathetic to fascism. I did not give a damn about their political sympathies; I wanted my passport and I was ready to accept help from the devil himself. I was told to see a "certain man" in Washington. I saw him and told him to "put in the fix." He did. I got my passport an hour later.

I was not sorry when my ship sailed past the Statue of Liberty!

Irony of ironies! When I descended from the boat-train in Paris in May, 1946, not only was Gertrude Stein on hand to greet me, but the United States Embassy had sent is public relations man with two sleek cars to aid me. I found that abroad the United States Government finds it convenient to admit that even Negroes are Americans! (Read between the lines!)

A swarm of French newsmen crowded about me, asking a thousand questions about the American Negro. I answered their questions and answered them straight. As these men pumped me I became aware of the smooth flow of a ritual of politeness that imbued me with a sense of social confidence. I was already beginning to feel the mellow influence of a deeply humane culture.

My first week in Paris taught me that the fight I had made back home for Negro rights was right, but somehow futile. The deep contrast between French and American racial attitudes demonstrated that it was barbarousness that incited such militant racism in white Americans. In discussing this matter with André Gide, he told me:

"The more uncivilized a white man, the more he fears and hates all those people who differ from him. With us in France, the different, the variant is prized; our curiosity to know other people is the hallmark of our civilized state. In America it is precisely the variant, the different who is hounded down by mobs and killed. The American is a terribly socially insecure man who feels threatened by the mere existence of men different from himself."

I was eager to find out how did these Frenchmen "get that way." I soon realized that the impartiality with which Frenchmen viewed people with dark skins had nothing whatsoever to do with their

love of these dark people themselves. It was the love and respect which Frenchmen held toward their own history, culture, and achievements that braced the French to a stance of fairness in racial matters. What restrained a Frenchman from humiliating a Negro was not sentimental idealism, but a deep reverence for French dignity and worth.

One of the most gifted and remarkable men I've met in Paris is Jean-Paul Sartre, playwright, novelist, and philosophical spokesman for atheistic existentialism. Sartre is a free man who feels it his duty, and not on moral or metaphysical grounds, to take a stand against anti-Semitism, against racism, against imperialism. Sartre is not the member of any political party and it cannot be maintained that his motives are dictated by selfish interests. In talking with Sartre I was made to understand that a French writer considers it a vital part of his growth as an artist and a human being to shed infantile prejudices. Albert Camus, Jean Cocteau, Simone de Beauvoir, and a host of other French writers share the same position to defend the dignity of man.

During my years of activity in various writers' and artists' organizations in the United States, I've had the honor to meet most of the so-called great white American writers of my time, and I do not know of a single white American writer who has felt the humane compulsion to make a public declaration against racism, against anti-Semitism and against imperialism, and to weave such concepts into his work as a part of his artistic creed.

In due time I became tired of my cramped hotel room and decided to look for an apartment. Living space was as scarce in Paris as elsewhere. But, as an American Negro living in Paris, I had an advantage over Negroes living in the United States. There is no Black Belt in which a Negro must confine his domicile. Paris is racially a free city. I state here that as an American Negro I am a highly sensitized person in racial matters. During a period of three months I crossed and recrossed Paris in my car, entering hundreds of French homes to ask about apartments. And not once during my goings and comings did I so much as observe the lift of an eyelid at the color of my skin. There was no anger or surprise when a dark face stood framed in the doorway of a French home!

Luck was with me and finally I found the apartment of my choice. My prospective landlord, an aristocratic woman of some 80 years, invited me to tea. When tea was over, she gave me her answer. It was yes.

There is one anecdote that I can relate that will illustrate the basic attitudes of the average Frenchman to racial issues more graphically than a thousand pages of argument. One winter I was motoring from Zurich to Paris and just over the Swiss border I lost my way in a driving rain. I got out of my car and ran into a little country cafe and asked a young girl behind the counter the main road to Paris. The girl did not answer; she gaped at me in astonishment. I repeated my request for information about the highways, and then she gasped:

"Attendez!" (Wait.)

She ran out of the cafe through a back doorway. I was baffled, wondering if I had offended her in some way. But a moment later she returned with another girl, a year or two younger, seemingly

her sister. This newcomer gaped at me too, as though I'd been a man from Mars. She whirled and started calling:

"Maman! Maman!"

In another minute a big fat mama, wiping her hands on a dish towel, appeared in the back doorway, smiling, measuring me from my head to my feet. Again I asked for the road to Paris, but no one answered. Then the mother yelled, turning back toward the doorway:

"Vite! Vite, mon garcon!" (Quick, quick, my boy.)

Another minute passed, and then I could hardly credit my eyes, for there stood in the back doorway a tall brownskin Negro, wearing a stocking cap, sleepily rubbing his eyes. Meanwhile, the oldest girl ran to the Negro and put her arm fondly about his neck and beamed at me. The mother and the other daughter stared at me proudly.

"Regardez, monsieur," the fat French mother told me, pointing to the Negro.

"Hey, Daddy-O," the young Negro said, smiling.

"What in hell are you doing way out here?" I asked him.

"Me? Hell, I live here," he said, kissing the girl who held him.

"This is my wife," he explained. "Man, I checked outta that army and settled down here to do some living. You see, I gotta garage next door. I own this cafe too. I work nights in the garage; that's how come I was sleeping when you came." He shook his head with indulgent sadness. "Shucks, these people is crazy, man. Every time they see a spook, they go wild and wake me up… They so proud to have a spook in the family, they just wanted to show me off to you."

"Well, that's better than what happens back home, isn't it?" I asked.

"You sure can say that again," he said, lighting a cigarette.

I left behind me in the rain a smiling French peasant family doting on their colored boy!

To live in Paris is to allow one's sensibilities to be nourished by physical beauty. To me the most startling things in Paris are its trees which are to be found, not just in rich, residential areas, but in all sections of the city. A Parisian would find it criminal to make a Park Avenue and leave, say, Spanish Harlem to rot in dirt and garbage. Shaped to human ends, Paris is not terrifyingly "big"; there is a monumental grandeur in the uniform heights of its buildings. Two-story houses do not stand next to sixteen-story apartment hotels, an arrangement which gives so ragged an appearance even to New York City.

I love my adopted city. Its sunsets, its teeming boulevards, its slow and humane tempo of life have entered deeply into my heart. Yet, make no mistake, there is grim reality here. There is the danger of war and the Parisians have no illusions about it. But they refuse to become hysterical. From

somewhere out of their 2,000 year-old history, Frenchmen have found a way to take the grim along with the beautiful.

France is, above all, a land of refuge. Even when there is a shortage of food, Frenchmen will share their crusts of bread with strangers. yet, nowhere do you see so much gaiety as in Paris, nowhere can you hear so much spirited talk. Each contemporary event is tasted, chewed, digested. There is no first-rate French novelist specializing in creating unreal, romantic historical novels! The present is to be understood and they find it exciting enough. “The problems of philosophy,” says Jean-Paul Sartre, “are to be found in the streets.”

I have encountered among the French no social snobbery. The more individualistic a man is, the more acceptable he is. The spirit of the mob, whether intellectual, racial, or moral, is the very opposite of the spirit of French life. SOIT RAISONNABLE, (be reasonable) is their motto.

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