

ASTONISHING THE MUSCOVITES

By Emanucl Litvinoff

Sally Belfrage's *A Room in Moscow* (Deutsch, 15s) can safely be described as the best report on Moscow to come from the pen of a 21-year-old. But that would be the understatement of the month. It is a unique, outrageous, lively, and intelligent account of a winter in Moscow spent among a group of Muscovite bohemians. Miss Belfrage turned up at the Moscow Youth Festival, flew on to China with forty-two young Americans who were gleefully defying the State Department, returned to Moscow six months later, and, with irresistible naïveté, broke through webs of red tape to land a job as an English translator with the Foreign Publishing House. She stayed for three months and must clearly have astonished and charmed the Russians with her youth, her ignorance of their conventions, her bright curiosity, and the sheer intoxication of her campus high spirits.

It goes without saying, therefore, that her book is entertaining; it also provides an excellent insight into the ideas and emotions of the educated Soviet young. She met wayward sons of rich bureaucrats addicted to American jazz, American gadgets, and stylish clothes; she became a close friend of a young Leningrad poet who wrote unapproved and unpublished verses of insufficient Socialist realism, and of Boris, the painter, secretly devoted to abstract art and "Peter's babies"—a collection of freakish foetuses pickled and preserved in bottles at the order of Peter the Great; she talked with sad Jews who told sad Jewish jokes about Russian anti-Semitism and confided their interest in Israel in discreet undertones, and played an English girl in a Soviet film studio that sounds as crazy as Hollywood. One friend, Petya, a real hooligan and proud of it, took her to the home of an acquaintance of his father's and introduced her as a member of the "English Communist party." They had a pleasant bourgeois tea party with a "jolly old

Santa Claus of a man" and his smiling family and were shown snapshots of a tour the family had made of Kazakhstan some years before. But the "Santa Claus" had been one of Beria's chief lieutenants, and the trip to Kazakhstan, which he embarked on with his wife and son, was not a holiday at all: its purpose had been to select a suitable site for a concentration camp. At parties there were jazz, vodka, and lots of fun, but strangers were eyed askance on the suspicion that they were spies. And outside there was the sombre procession of the wintry city, the overcrowded buses, the queues filing into the Mausoleum swathed in scarves against the intense cold. "Snow Moscow Ho Ho," Sally Belfrage sang with damp but determined cheerfulness.

Moscow must have seemed much more drab when she left.

Miss May (Hodder and Stoughton, 15s) is an account by Jerrard Tickell of the dreadful experiences of Baroness Eugen Miske, an Englishwoman who married an Hungarian diplomatist and subsequently spent nine years in Soviet prison camps. It is told, with recourse to unnecessary fictional devices, by an author who specialises in heroic narrative and, it seems to me, is somewhat diminished thereby. As Mr George Mikes says, the story is a memorable thriller, and one supposes that many people will read it as such. It is to be hoped, however, that the suffering and fortitude of this gallant, humane woman will serve to remind people that hers is not a singular melodrama but is a harsh reality for a multitude of captives in Soviet prison settlements.