



A quadruple wedding in the Workers' Club at Bratsa, Siberia; from Alan Sillitoe's "Road to Volgograd"

Unmasked questions

BY EMANUEL LITVINOFF

ROAD TO VOLGOGRAD, by Alan Sillitoe (W. H. Allen, 18s).

HAS anyone ever written a worthwhile book on the Soviet Union after a four-week stay? There is no shortage of the others. In the 1920s and 1930s they were a staple of the publishing industry and the market stalls specialising in remainders, encased in Intourist itineraries and statistics padded out with descriptions of the wonderful factory crèche, the simple, sincere, and honest kolkhoz chairman (if the traveller was pro) or with jokes about Russian plumbing and bureaucratic bumbling (if he was anti). Later, when Russia became the dark side of the moon, the enigma was seldom breached by more than clairvoyant probings. The Soviet Union being vast, complex, contradictory, and manifold, the best books have always come from professionals who have gone there to subject their scholarship to the test of direct experience, or from those eager gazers who stay within the boundaries of personal experience and resist the temptation to generalise.

Alan Sillitoe journeyed to Volgograd as guest of the Soviet Writers' Union for a month with something of a pilgrim's piety and secret misgivings. The result is uneasy: places and things are seen with an artist's eye and described in language crisp as fresh lettuce, but there is political moralising on a YCL level delivered with the rhetorical flatulence that platform-preaching inevitably engenders.

A VISIT to the Museum of the Revolution inspires the thought that "Das Kapital" has a direct pipeline into the soul of the ignorant drunken purblind worker who senses that life needn't be like this. . . . The worker is a condenser through which the electricity of Marxism jumps." Stalingrad-Volgograd, with its recollections of the famous battle, and Leningrad, of the siege, induce the paradoxical notion that the outer defences of these cities "begin at the Berlin Wall," which reminds me of a loyal friend of the German Democratic Republic at a Hampstead cocktail party who explained that the Wall was built not to keep people in, merely to stop them

smuggling currency across the border.

There are raptures over the absence of commercial advertising, but the slogans which insistently invade the citizen's privacy are greeted with at most a muted irony. The past is recalled in the heroic terms of October and the Second World War, but it is embarrassingly difficult to pester those nice young Intourist guides with awkward questions, or to mar the joviality of a literary dinner with probing discussions on Party control of intellectuals, on China, on Pasternak's imprisoned Ivinskaya or anti-Semitism, or the use of firing squads against speculators. If Mr Sillitoe had chosen to write an "unpolitical" book on his visit it would have been different, but ultimately he preaches the moral superiority of Soviet society and we cannot be expected to overlook the tactful silences which may have made him an ideal guest, but not an especially interesting witness.

YET he indicates, obliquely but clearly, that he knows the questions that should be asked. On arrival in the Soviet Union he telephoned Yevtushenko and continued to telephone him, or inquire after him, throughout his stay. The subject of Yevtushenko was one he did persist in discussing, but the Soviet poet was ill, out of town, unavailable—"the dog critics were after him." One of his early encounters was with Markov, one of the chief dog critics, although Mr Sillitoe seems unaware that the man with the "gentle Siberian-grey eyes, the patient eyes of a hunter looking across great spaces" had plastered Yevtushenko's reputation with Stalinist abuse for writing the poem "Babi Yar." A young man in a Leningrad street offered a currency transaction at twice the official rate. "It was a good proposition . . . but I didn't want to stop and do business, unwilling to get him pulled in—or shot."

There are other such comments, but they are uneasy asides, lingering like a faint smell of burning while the narrative passes on. Oddly enough, this could almost have been the book of a Soviet writer skilled in the strategy of the allusive remark, the art of nuance; a writer pitting his wits against the bureaucrats to protect his livelihood.