

# Reviews

## The Mountains of Serbia : Travels Through Inland Yugoslavia

by Anne Kindersley, John Murray, 1976, 286 pp., £6.95.

In rural Serbia today the life of many peasants is still punctuated by the feasts of the Orthodox Church, as it has been for centuries. The monasteries and churches which the Serbian kings erected to commemorate their lives and piety are still standing. And since the frescoes which cover the walls of the greatest of these are a major part of Yugoslavia's artistic heritage, the buildings are preserved and expertly cared for by the State, but remain the property of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and centres of local religious life.

Mrs. Kindersley lived in Belgrade for three years with her diplomat husband during the middle '60s and visited not only the great monuments but small, half-forgotten, sometimes abandoned churches hidden in the mountains. Even today, when the better-known among them can be visited by hardy tourists, this took determination and stamina. She chose church festivals for her visits and saw the Breughel-like jollifications, and the gathering of gypsies who took over the first day of the three-day Feast of the Dormition at Gračanica. She learnt the language and made friends with the monks and nuns, in particular with two or three abbesses whose style of life was medieval, with all the hard work and bustle, the enterprise and sometimes even, in that peasant land, the study and learning. One abbess wrote to "Tito and Jovanka", as she might have to the King and Queen, when her abbey needed repairs and received the help she asked for. In the Vojvodina, which was a part of Hungary until 1918, Mrs. Kindersley drove around one of the dioceses with the bishop's chaplain, and saw how a vigorous and determined bishop had started catechism classes in every parish, a rarity in Orthodox regions of Yugoslavia.

Mrs. Kindersley observes precisely and with affection but above all with tact, and sketches in enough historical background to place what she

describes in its proper context. She listened and asked questions but was never intrusive, and she accepted the boundless Serbian hospitality in the spirit in which it was offered. The book is furnished with a detailed map and index and would make an excellent companion to a more conventional guide-book. What a pity it costs so much.

STELLA ALEXANDER

## An Early Soviet Saint - The Life of Father Zachariah

Anonymous. Translated by Jane Ellis.

Mowbrays (Keston Books No. 6), 1976, 111 pp., £4.25.

In the West, people are only now realizing how the tradition of Russian spirituality is not only continuing but flourishing, in spite of Soviet rule. Books of great spiritual depth are being circulated in typed or manuscript form, and *An Early Soviet Saint* is a translation of one such piece of *samizdat*. Although this book is the biography of a modern Orthodox monk and spiritual guide (*starets*), it evokes the medieval world of fantastic miracles and deep devotion, of spiritual insight and authority. While it is not concerned with any explicit political comment, the reader is made aware of the inherent conflict between the way of life of this holy man and Soviet ideology. This conflict is dramatically enacted when the NKVD come to arrest Fr. Zachariah, who is gravely ill by this time. Fr. Zachariah draws a circle around his room and says that anyone who crosses the line shall die. The secret police neither cross the line nor arrest him.

This biography, written by one of his spiritual daughters, is concerned above all with the monk's growth in holiness, his knowledge of God, and teaching on prayer. He is sometimes called Zosima, a name which links him in the reader's mind with the *starets* of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fr. Zachariah's parents were peasants, and even as a child he was a fervent believer and graced by visions of the Mother of God. With great difficulty he obtained his father's permission to enter a monastery and once clothed as a novice he was abused and harassed by the other monks because of the intensity of his zeal. He became an elder and confessor who exercised powerfully the gift of spiritual discernment. Fr. Zachariah was able to see deeply into the hearts of men and women; he could see their past and future, and he gave them the spiritual counsel and guidance for which they craved. In sharp contrast to religious leaders in the West, he speaks with extraordinary authority and powerful direction.

His teaching is grounded in the Russian spiritual tradition of St. Seraphim and Macarius of Optina: "Learn, my children, learn from St. Sergius and St. Seraphim, learn from them constant prayer and humble, Orthodox love to God and to your neighbour". Fr. Zachariah knows that the power of God can defeat all evil and he teaches that quality of insight