

close quarters and which he says was certainly intended to kill, not just wound – placed in the crown of the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. The book recalls the events of the shooting and his subsequent treatment and recovery. Pope John Paul says, ‘It was all a testimony to divine grace . . . Agca knew how to shoot, and he certainly shot to kill. Yet it was as if someone was guiding and deflecting that bullet.’ He writes that Agca, a professional assassin, was perplexed by the fact of his intended victim’s survival and this had led him to want to know what the secret of Fatima was. He was apparently insistent to know what the prophecy had said. The Pope felt that it awakened in him a sense of religion: ‘Ali Agca had probably sensed that over and above his own power, over and above the power of shooting and killing, there was a higher power. He began to look for it.’

In many ways, this episode in the Pope’s life, and his reactions to it, exemplify his stance throughout the text of this book and the text of his life: he experienced and survived evil; rejected its basis and understood its limits; explored redemption as a victory and asserted his belief in a higher power.

The book stimulated me to challenge my own stereotype of the papacy of John Paul II and whilst I strongly disagreed with some of his assertions, I found much in the book to absorb and reflect on. It failed in its attempt to be ‘conversational’ (except in the section on the attempted assassination), but nonetheless was a worthwhile and interesting book.

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DINING WITH SIBERIANS

The other side of Russia: a slice of life in Siberia and the Russian Far East. Sharon Hudgins, 2003. Texas: A & M University Press; ISBN 1585442372. £25.95, cloth.

Tom and Sharon Hudgins are a Texan academic couple who have taught and administered the overseas programmes of the University of Maryland University College in Spain, Germany, Greece, Korea, Japan, Siberia and the newly opened southern littoral of the Russian Far East (*Primorskiy Krai*). Resourceful, adaptable, eager, relaxed and friendly, they cheerfully survived the discomfort and squalor of life in Vladivostok and Irkutsk in 1993 and 1994. Take Christmas, for example. Presented with a naked evergreen tree (in Russia, as elsewhere, a legacy of nineteenth-century German influence), they faced the fact that ‘Russia was not the kind of country where you could just drive down to the local Wal-Mart and buy a tree stand.’ Foraging in the wasteland of mud and filth outside their

Vladivostok apartment building, Tom finds a discarded, nickel-plated electric samovar which he cunningly converts with his tool kit, wedging the tree into place with crushed beer cans before helping to cover it with home-made decorations. On Boxing Day, their tiny apartment fills with guests bearing contributions to lunch, who eat, drink and socialize so successfully that the party lasts until 10 at night.

Sharon Hudgins's book is full of such achievements. When, as so often, the electricity fails in their newly built apartment, they dine on cold food and Hungarian wine by candlelight. They fashion lavatory seats out of waste paper, and cooking foil out of the wrappers of imported chocolate bars. Inventive and accomplished entertainers, they try out all manner of exotic dishes on their guests (admitting defeat only with Tex-Mex chilli and tortillas), and introduce culturally impoverished Russians to their own Easter *paskha* and *kulich*. The quantities of vodka cocktails and champagne that they consumed in Vladivostok may have helped to counteract the allnight thumping, yelling and rap music in the apartment overhead. They learn to process their own salmon caviar, and explore the city's food markets with the help of a friendly, expert shopper and cook. Things become tougher when, based in Irkutsk, they visit a family of Buryats and are given sour-milk spirits, newly slaughtered raw sheep's liver and an undercooked sheep's stomach overflowing with blood and milk. Yet politeness wins over squeamishness, and they are soon off to another gag-inducing peasant feast.

Although full of fascinating domestic detail (including lists of the Chinese, American and South-East Asian goods that were becoming available in the free markets of the formerly closed capital of the Russian Far East), this book may disappoint serious students hoping for a textbook account of the post-perestroika economic and social scene. Reports of conversations with educated Russians suggest a certain defensive reserve or paradoxical mixture of viewpoints – as in the couple from Irkutsk who defended Stalin as a strong, efficient leader, but thought that all land in Russia should belong to a benignly disinterested version of the pre-Revolutionary aristocracy.

Too much analysis, however, would detract from the vivid impressionism of this book. We become aware of the pervasive presence of the Vladivostok *Mafiya*; of university students who cheat as a matter of course; of old people marginalized by society; of the feral children who dance round the apartment blocks at night, making bonfires of scattered rubbish. The chapter which describes the 'high-rise village' of new apartment blocks, with the instant squalor of their public areas and cramped cosiness of their apartments behind locked steel doors, is more enthralling by far than the earlier sections of the book which dwell on the discomforts of public transport. Like the Siberian landscape, this account has

longueurs but extraordinary beauties, and repays an intelligent and persistent read. It will also leave the reader impressed by the understated efficiency, self-control and mutual support with which the Hudginses present themselves to us, and the world at large, at all times.

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