

Heisenberg's sofa

Not many people go, or, these days, are sent to Siberia. Professor Berry went there on a scientific visit. This is his report.

Novosibirsk is in Southern Siberia, at the same latitude as Newcastle and close to the centre of Asia. It is seven hours' flying time and seven time zones from here. The journey is awkward because it is necessary to change in Moscow between two airports on opposite sides of the city. The inconvenience was more than compensated for by the company of Andrei, one of my hosts, who come 1,500 miles from Novosibirsk to meet me, and Yuri, a scientist from Moscow who made the opposite journey to spend the week listening to my lectures.

When we finally arrived, it was minus 23° Centigrade—far colder than it has been here, and below the zero of Fahrenheit, but not too cold by Siberian standards. At such temperatures one's beard hairs prickle, and I wonder whether the cause is increased rigidity or a coating of ice. The snow is dry and powdery, and blows between the bleak apartments in whirling 'snow devils' that dramatise the air's turbulence. On some days the snowflakes are the classic hexagonal needles which we do not often see here; on others they are prismatic, with facets that glitter in the sun.

I had been invited by the Siberian branch of the Soviet Academy of Science for a heavy programme of lectures and discussions in the 'science city' of Akademgorodok, about 20 miles from Novosibirsk. This work was a success, after an initial battle in which I successfully resisted an attempt to introduce intolerable friction into my lectures by having them translated sentence by sentence (they eventually agreed that English English is much easier to understand than American English, even though most scientists there are more familiar with the latter). Much of the research is of world-class, in spite of harassment by the 1980s dogma, still dismally familiar here, about research needing to be made 'self-supporting' or even 'profitable', through industrial sponsorship. It seems that their in-

dustrialists are no more interested in supporting fundamental research than ours are. One difference from here, which I hope Senate House caterers will note, is that the coffee served during committee meetings is laced with brandy. The institutes are distributed in a forest of buildings which are handsome outside but (like our Physics Department here) drab and old-fashioned inside. In one office, I was invited to sit on a tattered and uncomfortable ancient hard leather sofa, which, it was claimed, had been 'liberated' from Heisenberg's office in Germany by Russian troops at the end of the war. A large number of molecules have thus been transferred from Heisenberg's trousers to mine.

Everything I had read about the meagre stocks of food in the shops was true. However, Novosibirsk is relatively well supplied, and in the shops I saw at least milk, bread, a little meat and fish, and enormous jars of pickles and jams. But I heard about a food shop near Moscow University which contained nothing at all. In spite of this and other difficulties, the flame of hospitality burns very bright. I was invited every day to people's homes, and feasted on *pelmeny* (small pastries stuffed with meat), some of the best potato salads I have ever tasted, several sorts of forest mushrooms, exotic tarragon-flavoured lemonade from Georgia, and of course vodka. I was disappointed not to meet Andrei's little children, but was told that they had been dispatched to granny, 'because we know that in England children are seen and not heard' (evidently they decided to play safe and not let them be seen either). Partly through fear of crime, many people have big dogs in their small flats. Once I was welcomed by a 'friendly puppy', well disguised as 100 pounds of solid Rottweiler.

There is an upsurge in religion of all sorts, from Greek Orthodox Christianity to UFOlogy. Even after 70 years of official atheism, all the buildings my hosts (who are not religious) were proud to show me were churches, mostly recently reopened. Incredulity met my suggestion that one day they will show

visitors round Stalin's vast dams and power stations, as happens now with the monuments of our own heroic industrial age. The churches were elaborately decorated, smelt heavily of incense, and were occupied mainly by old women, who frequently kissed the floor, door and walls. My friend Boris compared the services favourably with a Protestant one he had attended in America, 'which reminded me of a Soviet trade union meeting'.

On the last day, Andrei and I went fishing on the ice, escorted by my other host Sergei, who is proud to declare himself a hunter. We drove along the road towards Mongolia and turned right onto Lake Ob. The ice is a metre thick, and perfectly clear apart from diaphanous cracks and occasional bubbles of air. I was surprised by frequent echoing bangs and rumbles, mighty borborygms as the lake digested the stresses in its ice. Driving is safe but requires a special technique, in which the two available

dimensions are fully exploited in the search for a route where the blown snow is neither too thin (because the ice is too slippery), nor too thick (because you get stuck and have to push, as we did several times). To find the fish you must drill a hole. This is about six inches wide, and made (quite easily, as I found) with an enormous left-handed drill. To Sergei's chagrin, we failed to catch any fish.

In the popular image, Soviet bureaucracy is inflexible, graceless and inefficient, and I am sure that there is truth in that. But my own experience (no doubt reflecting the privileges accorded to an 'English specialist') was pleasantly different. Everybody was helpful and smiling, even passport controllers, customs officials, air hostesses, and (after some persuasion) restaurant staff. So there is hope that after the lifting of the Iron Curtain we are now seeing the opening of the *nyet* curtains. *Michael Berry is a Professor in the Department of Physics.*

LETTERS

Cont from p. 6

she claimed. She also claims, without foundation, that AUT representatives have failed to attend Joint Union meetings. With the exception of two Special Meetings called at short notice, the AUT has attended all Joint Union meetings and its record in this is equal to that of any other union. Although academic staff are not directly affected by the Pension Fund decisions, the AUT has discussed its implications at the Joint Negotiating Committee on 13 March.

The Bristol AUT would certainly agree with Dr Henderson that morale amongst all staff has plummeted. Unfortunately low morale does not encourage organised protest. All AUT members have the right to propose motions to General Meetings and can convey their opinions to the AUT Committee at any time. My statement to *The Independent* was based on the fact that, to date, there have been no suggestions from the membership

that the Vice-Chancellor should resign. If tempers are simmering among Dr Henderson and others who are eligible to be members of the AUT, they have a forum in which they can put their discontent to productive use.

Yours faithfully,
Kate Lyon,
President, Bristol AUT.

SHOME MYTH TAKE?

From Mr E. A. Gretton
Sir,

The Students' Union pays just under £40,000 each year to affiliate to the National Union of Students. Last term our NUS Secretary wrote three letters to the NUS and telephoned on four occasions. He told me that he received no reply whatsoever. Given the deficit, should we not withhold such unnecessary spending? And can we be sure that the NUS really exists? Is it a myth? Yours faithfully,
Edward Gretton,
Chairman, University Conservative Association.