

Reviews

The Flame in the Darkness

by Victor Sparre, Grosvenor Books, 1979, 135 pp., £4.50.

Victor Sparre is a distinguished Norwegian artist who has made the cause of the Soviet dissidents his own. When Solzhenitsyn asked him what made him "such a persistent fighter for the freedom of my country?", he answered, "Because I believe that the rebirth of faith will come from those who have suffered most." He has been to Russia and visited some of the leading dissidents in their homes, he has worked unremittingly for their interests and has befriended many of them in exile.

He gained their confidence quickly, because he has a natural sympathy with them. So they opened their hearts to him as Russians will when they trust you. The result is that in this book he gives a picture of them as living people which is not like anything else that I have read. Not all of them are Christians but most of them are, and they have come to a depth of faith which reflects a depth of suffering. Victor Sparre's Christianity is of the MRA brand, which is not congenial to all Christians. Indeed, I am not happy with some aspects of it myself. But in this context that makes very little difference.

Sparre is charitable to all men but he quotes some bitter words of Sakharov against Zhores and Roy Medvedev. "There is probably no one we 'otherwise-thinking' have done more to help . . . but see what they do when others suffer! They turn around and tell the West to keep silent. Let me make it quite plain: without the active support of western opinion we – he threw his hand round the room – would all be in prison. Without the western press no one outside would know that we exist."

Sparre was sometimes able to tell them new things about their own country. At one meeting where Galich, Maximov and other Christians were present, no one had heard of Aida Skripnikova, who was condemned to three years in a concentration camp for giving away hand-written pamphlets about Jesus in Leningrad. He told them.

JOHN LAWRENCE