

lovely pastel gowns, launched into a bravura performance of a number distantly related to "The Flight of the Bumble Bee," and when perfect strangers greeted each other with warm handshakes after singing "We Shall Overcome." As the afternoon wore on, though, the feeling grew on us that only the children's hearts were fully in what they were doing. Dispiritedness, a sense of flagging purpose, often seemed to be hanging in the cathedral's chummy air, and it was hard to believe completely that this was, as Rabbi Michael Gelber put it in the benediction, "a day of celebration, not regret, a day of hope, not of fear."

We realized that this pall had actually begun to descend on us after Saturday's concert, as we made our way out of the church and into the cold, wet night. It had a little to do with thinking about how bad things were in black and Hispanic neighborhoods so near the cathedral, how many drug deals were taking place in the streets during the rousing gospel numbers we had just heard, how many people would be sleeping out in the rain. But, we finally understood near the end of Rabbi Gelber's prayer, it had most to do with something that had happened *inside* the cathedral at the end of the concert. As the audience started to file out, another speech by Dr. King, about a personal crisis during the Montgomery bus boycott, was resounding through the

church: "Something said to me, You can't call on Daddy now, he's up in Atlanta a hundred and seventy-five miles away. You can't even call on Mama now. You've got to call on that something . . . your Daddy used to tell you about, that power that can make a way out of no way." It was electrifying, and it stopped everyone in his tracks. Then we all turned around, as if to try to see the speaker whose voice was filling the vast space with such passion and authority and to pay him courteous attention. But, of course, no one was there.

## Irradiation

A FEW years ago, some friends of ours went into the Russian Turkish Baths, on Tenth Street between First Avenue and Avenue A, and emerged with cheeks that looked fresh-scrubbed for about a week. We went

this month to get a new skin for the Bush years.

The baths occupy a townhouse-size building diagonally across from a Pentecostal church. We saw as soon as we climbed the steps that this was one of those places that are *echt* New York and not quite America. A sign in the foyer instructed anyone who had special dietary requirements or a desire for a "platza"—a massage with oak-leaf brooms—to speak to Boris or Dave. Over our right shoulder as we picked up our locker key hung a sign in Cyrillic letters. The man who gave us our key and put our wallet in a strong-box was engaged in conversation in Yiddish with another patron. The menu on the kitchen counter offered chicken Georgian, borscht, sturgeon, and lox.

Behind the kitchen was an area of closely packed bunk beds. On the upper decks lay men in robes and trunks, dead to the world. We found our locker, along a wall. A few doors down, two men were discussing "The Lower Depths" as if it had premiered yesterday. We followed signs (in Roman letters) to the lower depths where the baths were: two of them—a Turkish room and a Russian room, which was labelled, rather disconcertingly, "Radiant Heat." There was also a tiny, greenish pool, a sauna, and several massage rooms. We tried the Turkish room first—a tiled steam bath with two

wooden benches, six gray radiators along the walls, and a cold shower. The benches at first touch felt too hot to sit on. But standing up felt hotter. We sat. Someone opened the door and shouted something. "What did he



say?" we asked a fellow-steamer. "He said we could make it hotter if we wanted to," the man answered. We noted this fact but did not act on it, and decided to try the sauna across the hall.

This was, if anything, hotter. We had by this time worked out a rule of thumb. We would stand in one place until everyone had left. Who was there when we entered, so we'd strike newcomers as an old hand. Occasionally, we heard a phone ringing beyond the sauna door. How anyone could have an intelligent conversation there was beyond us.

Steamed and baked, we sank into a plastic chair at poolside. We had reached a state in which it takes an effort not to keel slowly over. If we dived into the pool, we were convinced, we would sink like a stone. We counted from one to a hundred and noticed that the counting went much more slowly than we would have expected. It was time, we decided, for radiant heat.

The Russian room had the most primitive quality—it had the feeling of an ur-bath. Did the hero with a thousand faces, we wondered, ever take a *shvitz*? The walls were of stone, as rough as an excavation. A man with long, curling earlocks lay on a wooden bench while two friends thrashed him with what looked like feather dusters—oak-leaf brooms. Other irradiated men sat on benches. From time to time, one would hoist a plastic bucket from under a cold-water tap and empty it over his head. The hairs in our arils felt as if they were burning.

We went back to the plastic chair and did another count to a hundred. Then we decided that since three hundred million Russians couldn't be wrong we would pour a bucket over ourself. It was like eating ice cream in Hell.

We finished with a massage, during which the masseur's radio was tuned to a program of music by the Strauss family, and then we drank a glass of fresh-squeezed orange juice at the kitchen counter upstairs. We felt like a molted garter snake.

## Scarves Everywhere

IF we were headed for a desert island and could take only one Hermes scarf with us, which would it be? This is the question we asked ourself