



Passion and Politics: An Outline of the History of Polish Himalayanism

Pasja i polityka. Zarys dziejów
polskiego himalaizmu

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SLAVICA TERGESTINA
European Slavic Studies Journal

ISSN 1592-0291 (print) & 2283-5482 (online)

VOLUME 28 (2022/I), pp. 16-45
DOI 10.13137/2283-5482/33706

Polish Himalayan climbing took its first steps long before the first eight-thousand-metre peak was scaled. Later, when the climbing world set out to conquer the Himalaya, Poles were stuck in a difficult socialist reality. Thanks to a great passion for mountains, Polish mountaineers broke through the barrier of the Iron Curtain. In frantic competition with Western climbers and chasing their own dreams, they helped define Himalayan climbing for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The golden age of Polish Himalayanism left no successors, though; Polish Himalayan climbing was only reactivated after 2000. This article works with published source material to present the history of Polish activity in the highest mountains in the world, including the golden age of Polish Himalayanism and its influence on the current form of Polish activity in the Himalaya.

MOUNTAINEERING, POLISH
HIMALAYANISM, CONTEMPORARY
POLISH HISTORY, JERZY KUKUCZKA,
WOJCIECH KURTYKA

Polski himalaizm stawiał pierwsze kroki na długo przedtem, zanim zdobyto pierwszy ośmiotysięcznik. Później, gdy wspinaczkowy świat ruszył na podbój Himalajów, Polacy tkwili w trudnej socjalistycznej rzeczywistości. Dzięki ogromnej, pielęgnowanej od XIX stulecia pasji do gór, polscy taternicy przełamali barierę żelaznej kurtyny i rozpoczęli szaleńczą pogoń za własnymi marzeniami i osiągnięciami zachodnich himalaistów, stając się w XX wieku potęgą himalajską i wyznaczając na dwadzieścia następných lat kierunki rozwoju himalaizmu. „Złota epoka polskiego himalaizmu” minęła nie pozostawiając po sobie następców. Polski himalaizm zniknął, przestał się liczyć na arenie międzynarodowej. Jego reaktywacja nastąpiła na początku XXI wieku, kiedy „Lodowi Wojownicy” ponownie pobudzili go do działania.

ALPINIZM, POLSKI HIMALAIZM,
HISTORIA WSPÓŁCZESNA POLSKI,
JERZY KUKUCZKA, WOJCIECH KURTYKA

The Himalaya and Karakoram have kindled the imagination of mountaineers since late nineteenth century. Polish mountaineers are no exception in this regard. But the road from mere dreams to their realisation seemed unattainable for them, as they lacked not only experience, climbing skills, equipment and financial resources, but above all the existence of a state. There was also a need for someone who would make conquering the highest mountains their lifelong goal. All these barriers were overcome in the interwar period, after Poland regained its independence in 1918. Thanks to the determination of the mountaineering community, steadfastly inspired by Adam Karpiński, the first Polish expedition to the world's highest mountains was organised. Polish mountaineering activities began on 2 July 1939 with the ascent by a two-man team, composed of Jakub Bujak and Janusz Klarner, on the previously unclimbed summit of Nanda Devi East (7,434m). This was both an organisational and a sporting success: the Polish altitude record was established and would remain unbeaten for the next 30 years. But there was also a tragedy: Karpiński and Stefan Bernadzikiewicz died while attempting to summit Tirsuli (see Klarner).

This achievement was overshadowed by the Second World War and the difficult socio-political situation in Poland after its end. At that time, it seemed that the link with Himalayan climbing had been completely cut, particularly due to the fact that two Polish conquerors of Nanda Devi had disappeared in unknown circumstances.

After the Second World War, Polish mountaineering revived spontaneously, initially maintaining the model developed in the Second Polish Republic. Mountaineers active in the pre-war period started to appear in the Tatra Mountains, the High-Mountain Club resumed its activity, and trips to the Alps began. Plans were completely detached

from what was being prepared by the communist authorities. These quickly undertook an indoctrination campaign of the mountaineering circles, which numbered only several dozen people at the time.¹ Articles discussing the achievements and presuppositions of Soviet mountaineering appeared in specialist press. They emphasised the advantages of Soviet mountaineering as a school of bravery and patriotism, a tool for shaping the character of the devoted citizen, and a 'builder of communist society' (Radwańska-Paryska). In order to encourage those who contested the post-war political system to support communist initiatives, mountaineering management was left in the hands of the pre-war staff. In 1948, the activists of the Polish Mountaineering Club from the interwar Sanation period decided to popularise mountaineering in order to assure its further development, and so it was able to function in the new socio-political system. The Mountain Training Commission was established at the High-Mountain Club of the Polish Tourist Society. It organised courses for tourists, instructors, guides, mountain rescuers and mountaineers. This was not sufficient, however. All manifestations of social life behind the Iron Curtain were forced to emulate Soviet administrative, political, cultural and sports institutions. They were to be unconditionally obedient to the directives coming from the East. Most important were those directives whose goal was the isolation from the non-communist world, and even from other so-called people's democracies. Hence, Stalinism quickly showed its true colours: it confined Polish mountaineers to the Tatras, in practice restricting climbing to a single valley. It undertook to change the organisational structures of Polish mountaineering in order to eliminate the so-called bourgeois remnant, and adopt the Soviet model of mountaineering. This is how Jan Alfred Szczepański described the Soviet model in 1953:

1 Before the Second World War, the Polish climbing community consisted of about 200 active mountaineers.

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Paper presented at the briefing at GUKF on 19 October 1948, Central Office of Physical Culture, reference number 10, k. 30, Archive of New Files, Warsaw.

Mountaineering plays an important role, as it is practiced by hundreds of thousands of people and enjoys the support of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Party notes that the great Kirov was a mountaineer, and appreciates the myriad social values of mountaineering and the contributions of mountaineers. Alpinism has its place in a community built by the revolutionary working class, and will become increasingly important. And is it not telling that the great leader of the Italian people and of the Communist Party of Italy, Palmiro Togliatti, avidly practices mountaineering, and that in the Soviet Union the Alpine Games are a serious social matter? Mountaineering has a tremendous scope for activity in Poland, and let us hope that soon Polish expeditions will set off for the great mountains of the Soviet Union, and later on for other mountains. (Szczepański: 27–28)

Polish mountaineering was to become an element of the system. First and foremost, a new, centralised organisational model of sport and physical culture was introduced in Poland, headed by the Central Office of Physical Culture, soon after renamed the Central Committee of Physical Culture. The objective was unambiguous: the psycho-physical reconstruction of the human being; the upbringing of a ‘politically-aware, creative, socially sophisticated, decisive type of a new citizen’.² In this spirit and following the guidelines formed in December 1948, Polish mountaineering was to be modernised; in other words, the absurd practices of Soviet mountaineering were to be transferred to Polish mountaineering. Apart from the aforementioned mass training courses, the Polish Tatra Society was merged with the Polish Sightseeing Society to form the Polish Tourist and Sightseeing Society (Polskie Towarzystwo Turystyczno-Krajoznawcze – PTTK), to which the High-Mountain Club was also incorporated in 1950 (see Żuławski). The large-scale

approach to training was maintained by way of organising the School of Mountain Tourism and Mountaineering at the PTTK High-Mountain Club in Zakopane. The School director was Witold Henryk Paryski, a pre-war mountaineer, mountaineering instructor, Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue Service rescuer, Tatra guide and editor of *Taternik*, the press organ of the Polish mountaineering movement. The activity of the School undoubtedly contributed to the increase of interest in mountaineering, but it also resulted in the loss of elitism and the organisational independence of the Polish mountaineering movement. Attempts by the PTTK to impose its authority and rules of operation on the Club led to a discord between the management boards of the two organisations with regard to the specific nature of alpinism and the methods employed in climbing activities. This conflict led to the liquidation of the High-Mountain Club and the establishment of the Mountaineering Section of the PTTK under the rule of people who held no authority in the Polish mountaineering community.

As a result, Polish mountaineering lost all organisational support, which limited climbing activities to the Tatras and made it impossible for Polish climbers to participate in the race for the highest peaks on Earth. The publication of *Taternik* also ceased. Similarly as in the Soviet Union, a classification system for mountaineers was introduced which was ‘a constituent part of the Unified Sports Classification in effect in the People’s Republic of Poland, covering all sports disciplines’ (Chwaściński 1956: 13). Climbers in the Tatras had to be verified within this system. This culturally alien system was opposed by Polish mountaineers, especially as special permits were required for authorisation to climb border peaks (see Sonelski: 50). The only legal way to climb in the southern, Czechoslovak part of the Tatras was by participating in Alpine Games, which were also organised in winter. Their purpose

was to propagate and popularise winter mountaineering, emphasise recent achievements, gain experience in long expeditions, assimilate and popularise Soviet mountaineering techniques, prepare Polish mountaineering assets for expeditions to foreign mountains, and propagate the ideas of the PTTK (see Anonymous).

The spreading Stalinist cult of personality, repression against the clergy, widespread axiological chaos and general social anomia led many young people to mountaineering as a kind of escape from everyday life. Although they were confined to the Polish part of the Tatras, they seized every opportunity to practice mountaineering. This included the above-mentioned Alpine Games, during which they were able to climb border peaks and other places which were otherwise closed off. The so-called friendship border between Poland and Czechoslovakia also became a challenge for Polish mountaineers in the Tatras. Disregarding bans, they crossed the border illegally and climbed on the Czechoslovak sides of the mountains. In order to survive in communist conditions, mountaineering had to deny its essence, at least officially. In reality, the Polish mountaineering community bypassed orders and bans imposed from above, escaping centrally dictated procedures in order to maintain its identity. Only occasionally, particularly in public discourse in the press, did it compromise (see Kacperczyk).

The idea of mass popularity of mountain sports and a break with elitism brought with it the need to change the socio-demographic composition of the mountaineering community, as it had to be enriched with representatives of the working class. This was not entirely successful and the Polish mountaineering community remained largely hermetic despite the attempts of the authorities to infiltrate the community. Polish mountaineers faced numerous accusations, including the charge that a considerable portion of them

did not find their proper place in contemporary Poland, as they did not sufficiently understand the rights and duties imposed on everyone by life in a country which is building socialism. Those Polish mountaineers are not able to work out new forms of mountaineering. They stick to the old forms and ideas. Simply put, they are stuck in the ideology of bourgeois mountaineering, and show no attempt to create their own Polish mountaineering ideology. [...] The ideological backwardness of individual mountaineers is the most important cause for the current [...] weakening of Polish mountaineering. This has resulted in a lack of understanding of certain needs, certain rights, certain duties. Some mountaineers [...] must come to understand the impropriety of their behaviour, analyse their mistakes, and learn to think. (Szczepański 25–26)

Was their behaviour really improper? The Polish mountaineering community had emerged from the intelligentsia. They were representatives of former landed gentry, nobility, petty bourgeoisie, as well the Home Army (Armia Krajowa). The Home Army in particular was disrespected and discriminated against by the authorities. Despite being limited to climbing in the Tatras during the first half of the 1950s, and only able to follow reports from the Himalaya, Polish mountaineers dreamed of the highest mountains. The desire to fight for the world's highest peaks was bolstered by books such as *Walka o szczyt świata* (Fight for the Top of the World) and *Człowiek zdobywa Himalaje* (Man Conquers the Himalaya) by Jan Kazimierz Dorawski; *Nanda Devi* by Janusz Klarnier; and *Człowiek Everestu*, the Polish translation of *Man of Everest*, which is Tenzing Norgay's account of his ascent of Everest. The community aspired towards a systematic improvement of climbing skills, particularly in winter mountaineering in the Tatras, which was seen as preparation for the Himalaya. After the October thaw in 1956 and

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In 1958, Jerzy Hajdukiewicz participated in a Swiss expedition to Dhaulagiri which, however, did not reach the summit. This was followed by a Polish-Swiss expedition to Dhaulagiri in 1960; Max Eiselin withdrew from the project under pressure from sponsors, but invited Hajdukiewicz and Adam Skoczylas to participate.

the introduction of the short-lived Polish road to socialism, mountaineering was separated from tourism. The Mountaineering Club was reactivated under its pre-war name as an independent organisation responsible directly to the Main Committee of Physical Culture and Tourism (see Chwaściński 1974). The borders were also opened, allowing Polish mountaineers to return to Alpine peaks in 1957. However, Poles missed out on the golden age of Himalayan mountaineering, the exploration of the world's highest mountains in the 1950s and '60s.

Climbs in the Mont Blanc region and in the Bernese Highlands contributed to paving the way to the Himalaya. They allowed Polish mountaineers to establish contact with world alpinism and, as a consequence, to go to the Himalaya in 1958 and 1960.³ Although Kurt Diemberger, the Austrian conqueror of Dhaulagiri, emphasised that reaching the summit was also a 'Polish mountaineering success' (Kurczab), the Poles had a different view. They began to look for chances to organise a Polish expedition. Unfortunately, by the early 1960s hopes for democratisation in Poland were dashed. The so-called minor stabilisation programme was implemented in isolation from so-called rotting capitalism, bringing stagnation and a general atmosphere of malaise. The lack of prospects for a better life, and the Party's omnipotent control over all aspects of life, pushed Poles to find ways to survive. They learned to function in a split reality: one was coarse and difficult and the other was filled with the lies of propaganda and socialist celebrations. These daunting perspectives caused many intelligent and sensitive people to give into their passions completely – to escape to the mountains, to climb. The Tatra mountain hostel in Morskie Oko became a second home for them and the centre of their climbing lives. The mutual fuelling of passion, dreams of conquering legendary Alpine routes, competitiveness within the community, and the desire to gain recognition in the

eyes of mountaineering authorities and later in the eyes of western alpinists mobilised them to train hard and form a tight community. This was not only an escape from the apathy of everyday life, but also an opportunity for the best mountaineers to obtain passports from the authorities, leave the Eastern bloc, or even travel to far away countries (see Sonelski: 52).

Ways were also found to organise Polish expeditions to high mountains. The first chosen destination was the Afghan Hindu Kush, a veritable terra incognita in the mountaineering world at the time. The proximity of the border with the Soviet Union made the organisation of expeditions politically and financially straightforward. Poles paid in zloties to travel to the Soviet-Afghan border (see Pleskot: 353), and the field for exploration was wide open. The first Polish Hindu Kush expedition took place in 1960. From that point until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Hindu Kush was the main area of high-mountain activity for Polish mountaineers. It was the staging ground for Polish Himalayanism and an opportunity to catch up to Western Europe in terms of high-altitude mountaineering. For this reason, in the annals of the Polish exploration of the highest mountains, Andrzej Paczkowski considered the 1960s the period of Polish Hindu Kush Himalayanism (see Kłosowicz).

In 1966, Jerzy Warteresiewicz published an article entitled 'Himalaje z nami czy bez nas' (The Himalaya, with or without Us). He presented a new programme of mountaineering expansion and called for the rapid undertaking of the exploration of the highest mountains (see Warteresiewicz: 80). The answer was an unequivocal 'with us'. In 1969, a Polish reconnaissance expedition set off to Karakoram, led by Ryszard Szafirski. Andrzej Zawada was supposed to be the leader, but the authorities had refused him a passport because they suspected

4 Maciej Kozłowski was a historian, opposition activist in communist Poland and later a diplomat. In 1966, he took part in the fourth Polish expedition to Hindu Kush, where, together with Jerzy Potocki and the Belgian Jean Bourgeois, they made the first ascent of Sad Istragh (5,859m) and the second Polish (and fourth overall) ascent of Noshag (7,492m). In 1968, Kozłowski climbed with Marek Głogoczowski and Andrzej Paulo in Norway, reaching the Brudgommen east pillar in the Trolltindan massif, for a historical first.

5 This was initiated by two achievements in 1970: the ascent of the south face of Annapurna by Donald Whillans and Dougal Haston, and the ascent of the massive southern Rupal face by Günther and Reinhold Messner.

him of smuggling publications of the Paris-based Literary Institute through the Tatras (see Ziółkowski: 60). After an ongoing investigation, the so-called Trial of the Tatra mountaineers began. Zawada was not charged, but several young climbers were accused and sentenced (including Maciej Kozłowski).⁴ They were regarded as students of diversionary craft, and they were accused of collecting, compiling and passing on to an enemy centre, namely the Literary Institute in Paris, materials and information which defamed the nation, the system and the authorities of the People's Republic of Poland (this included documents from the Polish political crisis of 1968). Despite terrible weather conditions, the expedition was a success. The climbers ascended the Northern Malubiting and a previously unknown pass, which was named Polan La (Polish Pass). Ghulam Rasulow, the leader of the Pakistani porters, assessed the Poles as follows: 'They didn't have much money, their equipment and food weren't the best either, but they were tough and stubborn, and that was what determined their success.' (Szafirski: 107)

This important success for the Poles meant nothing in terms of the history of Himalayan climbing, which was just becoming a sport.⁵ But Polish Himalayan climbers were not deterred. They acted against all odds, including a political situation at home which had not really changed since the 1960s. They believed it was possible to escape from politics and create a separate space in which one could live and seek self-fulfilment. The mountains, climbing and the climbing environment which existed in those years were just such a space, a kind of asylum: '[M]aintaining pre-war traditions, it created its own, separate subculture, community lifestyle, folklore and even language. It gathered people who were unconventional and sometimes extraordinary, and paid a lot of attention to maintaining and emphasising the culture-forming role of mountains and climbing.' (Kolbuszewski: 93)

The Polish climbing community of the 1970s and '80s was still elitist and this did not change with the arrival of mountaineers who had finished their education at the vocational or secondary school level (see Zdebski: 228–34). It still consisted mainly of people belonging to the intelligentsia, brought up and educated in the spirit of traditional ideals and values by pre-war professors. They cared about Polish identity and tried to distance themselves from the decisions of state authorities, sometimes organising climbing activities in the pre-war, Western European spirit. For young Polish mountaineers, in the light of the sad reality of Sovietisation or simple poverty, everything pre-war, everything originating in an independent Poland, had the flavour of a better life. It was part of the European aspirations passed on by previous generations, and it ran counter to the patterns of real socialism (see Wilczyński).

The hermetic state of the Polish alpine community was reinforced by the fact that the status of a member of the High-Mountain Club could only be obtained by having previous mountaineering experience and by being vouched for by two members (as so-called sponsors). The decision to accept or reject a candidate was taken by the Club's Board. Membership in the Club was a form of ennoblement, a social advancement for those who treated mountains and climbing as a field of free, unrestricted activity. Climbing was a life in itself for them, a form of counterculture, something which gave them a common identity. The spiritual centre of Polish mountaineering was the headquarters of individual clubs, the aforementioned mountain hostel and mountaineering camp at Morskie Oko Lake. Participants of trips to the Alps, Caucasus and Hindu Kush gave lectures there, offering living proof that the Himalaya were open to Poles. The strength of this impulse was confirmed by Himalayan mountaineer Ludwik Wilczyński, who

wrote the following: ‘the atmosphere is boiling, one can feel how the energy of generations of climbers, suppressed for decades, has been transformed into a great Himalayan inspiration’ (Wilczyński). Polish mountaineers found a way to function within the socialist system: manoeuvring between obedience, collaboration and their own conscience. There is no doubt that the state security services kept a close watch on the mountaineering community and made attempts to secure their cooperation. There were many opportunities to do so, for instance, when mountaineers applied for passports. In the People’s Republic of Poland, a passport was issued for a specific trip after which it had to be immediately returned to the police. Polish mountaineers, unlike those from the other countries of the Eastern Bloc, openly refused to accept top-down, political control of mountain climbing. Even when they participated in expeditions organised in the Caucasus or in Pamir, they carried out their own climbing plans and broke away from the interference of the Soviet Party management of the camp. A trip to the Tatras, the Alps or other mountain ranges, although organised centrally by the Polish Mountaineering Association, did not have a political chaperone in the way that Soviet or Czechoslovak climbing expeditions had. For the latter expeditions, a political person not only decided the goals of their mountaineering activity, but also controlled the climbers’ actions, forbidding contacts with other climbers.

When Edward Gierek came to power in 1970, Poland opened up to the world somewhat. It was also noted that mountaineers had brought fame to Poland and were recognisable abroad. When in 1971 the Poles made the first ascent of Kunyang Chhish (the highest previously unclimbed mountain range in the world at that time), the new state authorities decorated them with gold medals for outstanding sporting achievements and gave them the annual Minister of Foreign Affairs award

for spreading the name of Poland in the world. Organised in 1974, the expedition to Lhotse resonated particularly strongly in wider Polish society. Although the summit was not reached, it was the first time in the history of mountaineering that an altitude of 8,000 metres was reached in winter: Andrzej Heinrich and Zawada had reached 8,250 metres. The death of the well-known filmmaker Stanisław Latałło caused by inhuman weather conditions was regarded as a national tragedy in Poland.⁶

In 1974, mountaineering came under the umbrella of the Polish Mountaineering Association, to which all mountaineering organisations were now subordinated.⁷ New rules for financing sports were also introduced and overseen by the Main Committee of Physical Culture and Tourism (see Nyka: 9). The Polish Mountaineering Association was therefore a unique sports federation. Its authorities were recruited from outside Party circles and elected democratically, whereas the presidents of other Polish sports associations arrived inside briefcases, that is, they were imposed top-down by the Polish United Workers' Party. The top-down method of selecting the authorities of mountaineering organisations was in force in all the countries of so-called people's democracy. Attempts to introduce this rule were made in Polish mountaineering to tame an environment full of people who were rebellious in their thoughts and actions. These attempts failed: Paczkowski, a man with independent political views and oppositional leanings, and an underground activist during martial law times, was elected president.

The first eight-thousander conquered by Poles was the previously unclimbed Broad Peak Middle (8,016m). It was a success that came with tragedy: during the descent, three mountaineers lost their lives. In 1975, the first Polish women's Himalayan expedition was organised, whose participants, Halina Krüger-Syrokomska and Anna Okopińska,

6 Stanisław Latałło was a film director and actor. He joined the expedition to film it for Polish television. The expedition unfolded in very difficult weather conditions: an icy, hurricane-force wind, snow storm and temperatures dropping to -46 degrees Celsius. On 17 December 1974, after waiting for the weather to break for two days in Camp III, Latałło, Piotrowski and Surdel opted to descend to Camp II while the storm continued. They descended separately without being tied together with a rope. Surdel reached Camp II, Piotrowski turned back to Camp III after an hour, whereas Latałło died at the fixed ropes between Camps II and III.

7 Beside the High-Mountain Club, there existed numerous academic organisations associated with the Federation of Alpine Academic Clubs, as well as the Polish Mountain Club, which was affiliated with the Central Alliance of Trade Unions.

8 Together with Sherpa Jangbu, Japanese climbers Mieko Mori, Naoko Nakaseko and Masako Uchida reached the top of an eight-thousander earlier, in 1973, when they scaled Manaslu. Everest was reached in May 1975 by Junko Tabei (from the south-east) and a Tibetan named Phantog (from the north).

9 Among the achievements were the first climbs of Kangchenjunga Central and Southern, Peak 29, Ngadi Chuli, Yazghil Dome South, Distaghil Sar East, Masherbrum South-West, Meru North and Arjuna.

10 The most important ones include the southern pillar of Everest (1980), the Zakopiański route on the south face of Annapurna (1981), a new solo route on the western face of Makalu (1981), the middle of the south-western face of Yalung Kang (1984), the south-eastern pillar of Nanga Parbat (1985) and the famous Magic Line and Polish Route on K2.

11 In the fall of 1979, eight members of the Silesian expedition reached the summit of Lhotse, including the duo Andrzej Czok and Jerzy Kukuczka. They did this without supplemental oxygen, →

ascended Gasherbrum II (8,035m), equalling the Polish altitude record and establishing a new European women's altitude record.⁸

Regular, that is, annual Polish activity in the Himalaya and Karakoram began in 1978. Soon, Poles set a path for world Himalayan climbing for almost twenty years to come. Organised by both the Polish Mountaineering Association and the climbing (club) community, the aims of national (central) expeditions were the exploration of the highest unclimbed peaks⁹ and the discovery of new routes on their unclimbed ridges and faces.¹⁰ Polish expeditions were traditional, with large numbers of participants, and subordinated to the command of expedition leaders.

The most famous expedition leader was Zawada. His visionary spirit, stubbornness and ability to approach each situation in a flexible way allowed him to effectively mobilise each participant. He was good in establishing contacts and flexible in making decisions. The speed with which he acted inspired the community and attracted novices. Polish mountaineers appointed to national expeditions constituted the country's elite and were prepared to operate in extremely difficult conditions, in any terrain and with weak belaying. They were able to meet challenges posed by the highest mountains, even during the winter. There were some 4,000 climbers in Poland, which was not insignificant. The number of expeditions is also noteworthy: in the period from 1978 to 1989, more than 40 expeditions to eight-thousanders were organised, but also more than 40 to lower peaks. 75% of those were successful: 24 new routes were established, seven winter ascents were made (see Roszkowska: 1640). The Poles very quickly made up for lost time and narrowed the distance separating them from the world elite. They climbed without the help of high-altitude porters and bottled oxygen,¹¹ often solo and breaking time records; Krzysztof Wielicki

in particular was influential with his seventeen-hour climb of Broad Peak, which sparked a trend of fast climbing in the Himalaya, later continued mainly by climbers from the West (from Erhard Loretan to Ueli Steck).

In 1978, Wanda Rutkiewicz became globally recognised as the first Pole, the first woman in Europe and the third woman in the world to climb Everest. She did it on the same day that the Pole Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope. This coincidence led to an unexpected propaganda effort centred on Rutkiewicz. She found herself in the headlines of newspapers, on the radio and television, because Polish authorities took great care to publicise her Himalayan success. They wanted to divert attention away from the election of the Polish Pope. Perhaps this event caused Rutkiewicz to start concerning herself with self-promotion. In fact, she was the first person in Poland to promote herself and her mountaineering achievements. As a result, climbs which were more important than hers often went unnoticed, which in turn caused a lot of trouble for her. Yet she was ambitious, determined and unpredictable, and thanks to her, Polish women's Himalayan climbing developed,¹² and her main project, called the Caravan of Dreams, was well ahead of its time, although ultimately unrealistic (see Reinisch). Had it not been for her motivation, strength and commitment, Polish women's Himalayan climbing would probably never have advanced. After misunderstandings resulting from her intransigence and ambition, but also from the fact that she actually organised these expeditions, she decided to act independently and become the first female mountaineer to climb all 14 eight-thousanders and thus win the Crown of the Himalaya. Although she did not manage to complete the Caravan of Dreams, she became an icon of Polish and world Himalayan mountaineering and an inspiration for female climbers everywhere (see Gugglberger).

→ becoming, with Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, among the first Himalayan mountaineers to climb 8,000'ers "by fair means". Soon, the climbing of the highest peaks in the world without the aid of supplemental oxygen came to dominate Polish expeditions. The foundation of this concept, apart from the ability to acclimatise, was economic considerations.

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She found Halina Krüger-Syrokomska, Anna Czerwińska, Krystyna Palmowska, Dobrosława Miodowicz-Wolf and other great female climbers to demonstrate that women can operate in the mountains as effectively as men.

The winter exploration of the Himalaya was the prime discipline for Poles, which they initiated by conquering Everest in 1980 (Wielicki and Leszek Cichy). So far, they have made 11 winter ascents of eight-thousanders (10 of them as the very first climbers). The manner in which Kukuczka and Heinrich climbed the south-eastern cliff of Cho Oyu in 1985, with four open-air bivouacs, was considered epic. In 1988, Voytek Kurtyka described the Polish version of Himalayan mountaineering, in particular the winter activity, as the art of suffering; this embodied typical Polish characteristics: a love of freedom, the independence of spirit, bravery, heroism, the ability to submit to a cause without reserve, a kind of snobbery in exposing and sacrificing oneself, and perseverance and patience in difficult situations (see Kurtyka 1988). Without these qualities there would be no golden age of Polish Himalayan climbing. Although Kurtyka treated climbing as an art form rather than a sport discipline, he was Poland's greatest advocate of the alpine style and sport climbing in the highest mountains. 'It became clear to me', he wrote in 1993, 'that alpine-style is a higher form of the mountaineering art, not only in its sporting aspect, but also in human terms, because though it you can experience the mountain world more intimately and deeply. Eliminating accidental partnerships makes for closer bonds.' (Kurtyka 1994: 202) While Kurtyka, the recipient of the Career Piolet d'Or in 2016, was and still is highly respected in the Western mountaineering community, his concept struggled to break through in communist Poland. It did not fit a system which promoted collectivism. This is why large expeditions which took months to reach the summit were more readily financed than small expeditions whose members climbed quickly and efficiently. Despite these obstacles, Polish climbers had completed several routes in alpine style by 1989, including the Shining Wall, that

is, the western wall of Gasherbrum IV (Kurtyka and Austrian climber Robert Schauer in 1985), which was recognised by *Climbing* magazine as the greatest and boldest route marked out in the Himalaya in the twentieth century.

The sporting aspect of Polish Himalayan climbing has been mostly associated with Jerzy Kukuczka, the most recognisable Polish Himalayan climber. Kukuczka's competitive approach to mountaineering is reflected not only in his achievements, which include 13 new routes on eight-thousanders, including one climbed solo, five in the alpine style and four in winter, but most of all in his highly mediatised race with Reinhold Messner for the Crown of the Himalaya. For him, Himalayan climbing was above all a sport, which is also what drew him to it. Perhaps this is why he accepted the silver medal of the Olympic Order, which he was awarded in 1988 at the Winter Olympics in Calgary (see Kukuczka 2015: 128).

As noted by Arthur Malé, 'the Poles opened the way to a practice that remained marginal and, in keeping with their culture, guided by the voluntarist slogan "a Pole can do it"' (Malé: 30). Unlike their colleagues from the other side of the Iron Curtain, Polish climbers felt the pressure to succeed and take extreme risks because they knew that they may not be given a second chance. This mobilised them even when their partner had died. They climbed for him, so that his participation in the expedition would not be in vain. They were aware of the real costs of participating in an expedition. No doubt economics was an important incentive to operate at the limit; this was a doubly complicated problem, as it was necessary to collect non-convertible zloties as well as so-called hard currency, the legal purchase and the export of which were limited (see Kalinowska). But above all, it was a question of mentality: the sacrifices and onerous obstacles with

uncertain results (struggling with the passport office, waiting for a visa, etc.), which they had to overcome to get on the list of expedition members.

The success of Polish Himalayan climbing in those years was a result of a combination of climbers' particular approach to life, their climbing activities and the political situation in the country. The aspiration for freedom, stubbornness, courage, solidarity, steadfastness, bravery – these were the character features which enabled them to achieve seemingly impossible things. These climbers did not appear from nothing and did not result from poverty or a feeling of inferiority in relation to mountaineers from the West, as Bernadette McDonald suggests (see McDonald); instead, they were conditioned by the cultural situation. It is noteworthy that the golden age of Polish Himalayan mountaineering came during difficult socio-political times. The crisis of 1980 and the imposition of martial law on 13 December 1981 restricted political freedoms and made it difficult to move about the country, let alone travel abroad. Many members of mountaineering clubs were arrested for sympathising with or being active in the opposition. Poland began to descend into chaos: inflation was rising and the Soviet Union imposed economic sanctions which caused a radical decline in living standards. This was compounded by Poland's international isolation and the economic collapse caused by being cut off from Western credit. The geopolitical position of Poland was such that, in their desire to preserve their national identity, Poles had to prove everywhere – including the mountains – that Poland was not a Soviet republic (Poland was effectively under Soviet control until 1989). Why were they predisposed to do so? Here is Kurtyka's answer:

Centuries of suffering and danger have bred an appreciation for such qualities as fortitude and tenacity, have taught Poles to cope in desperate circumstances. Wars and continual political chaos have forged an individualism, an inclination towards insubordination, an irreverence for norms and regulations. Having their broad steppes over-run by Turks and Tartars fostered a sense of adventure and a fascination with space. (Kurtyka 1994: 198)

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It was very difficult to buy anything at the time, as the shelves were largely empty. Meanwhile, government warehouses were full of all kinds of delicacies.

At the same time, they were characterised by a deep sense of solidarity in fighting for a common goal, in this case Polish Himalayanism. This was eminently illustrated by emotions expressed after the winter conquest of Everest: ‘My colleagues were crying: they wept tears of joy, although they were not the ones who had reached the summit. This is what every expedition member wants – they all experienced the joy of victory.’ (Wielicki 1997: 16) On the other hand, going to the mountains was an escape to (a different) life, to an environment which was the antithesis of the everyday variety of those times. It was free ‘from ideological opportunism or imposed pseudo-Marxist doctrines’, or indeed top-down authority. The mountains were ‘the backdrop against which one’s truest life was fulfilled and realised’ (Kolbuszewski: 93). Perhaps that is why many Polish mountaineers spent from five to six months a year in the mountains or on climbing walls, all the while being employed full-time or studying at university. The successes of Poles in the Himalaya would not have been possible had they not persevered, scrounged official permits and special food rations for expeditions,¹³ and taken advantage of the absurd socialist economy (see Sonelski: 58). They went on expeditions with government financial support, and during their periods in Poland demonstrated their dislike of the system in various ways: they printed and distributed leaflets

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Around 2000, Janusz Gołab, Jacek Fluder and Stanisław Piecuch made up a group of superb young alpinists that achieved difficult climbs in the Alps, the mountains of Norway, Alaska and Greenland.

of underground press, published banned books, and were active in the national leadership of Solidarity and in the Fighting Solidarity. Many of them were imprisoned for their activities, interred, or hid from the Security Services.

The flourishing of Polish Himalayan mountaineering came to an abrupt end in 1989. The boundary was set by two processes in particular: the intergenerational break caused by the deaths of Eugeniusz Chrobak, Mirosław Dąsał, Mirosław Gardzielewski, Andrzej Heinrich and Waclaw Otręba on Everest and the demise of Jerzy Kukuczka on Lhotse; and the change of the political and economic system. For Polish mountaineering, the political and economic change had a double impact: it meant, on the one hand, individual freedom and a passport in the drawer, which guaranteed the possibility of going wherever and whenever you wanted, and, on the other hand, an inflation which was difficult to control and a readily available yet expensive convertible currency. Unemployment was growing together with the reluctance of private business owners to hire workers who would go off to the mountains for months on end. The free market replaced socialist economics, central planning and central distribution. Moreover, securing sponsors in the new capitalist system proved more difficult than winning state grants had been in the previous period. Polish Himalayan climbers, returning to the path of normality in everyday life, had to concern themselves with their jobs and careers. Some of them started to make a living from mountaineering, others went into business and politics or returned to academic work. Polish Himalayan mountaineering virtually disappeared, even as a formula for its development was sought and a Wonder Team¹⁴ was active in alpine-type mountains. A generation gap resulting from the neglect of climbing activity in the Tatras and

the Alps was a regression that had to be reversed, and new objectives in the Himalaya had to be found.

The canonical status of the successes of the golden age, as well as the return of some of the survivors of that era to Himalayan climbing after many years, sparked new attempts to rebuild the significance of Poles in the highest mountains. In 2001, Wielicki produced a ‘winter manifesto’, ‘Manifest zimowy’, in which he called on Polish mountaineers to take up the fight and complete the Polish winter exploration of the Himalaya:

Let the moniker ‘Ice Warriors’, given to us by the English, become a permanent part of Himalayan history. [...] We have conquered half of it. Now it is your turn: the young, angry and ambitious. We needed eight years, so we give you as much. Is that not fair? That would be something, can you imagine? All the eight-thousanders climbed for the first time in winter, all by Poles. There is an opportunity here. It is a game worthy of the time, strength and resources it demands. It is time to reach a decision. This is the challenge for the Polish Mountaineering Association: how to create conditions and interest ‘the youth’ in such an idea? From my generation’s part, you can expect help, experience, even active participation. (Wielicki 2001: 5)

The call was taken up in 2005, with Piotr Morawski ascending Shishapangma (8,013m)¹⁵ in winter together with Simone Moro. In the years that followed, however, there was not a whisper of Polish winter exploits in the Himalaya. Therefore, on the initiative of Kukućzka’s climbing partner Artur Hajzer, the Polish Winter Himalayan Programme was established; after Hajzer’s death in 2013 it was named in his honour and continued until the winter ascent of K2 in 2021,

15 Additionally, Morawski’s summer achievements with Slovak climber Peter Hamer placed him among the very best Himalayan climbers. They summited Nanga Parbat in 2007, and Ama Dablam, Gasherbrum I and Gasherbrum II in 2008. Morawski died in 2009.

first under the leadership of Janusz Majer, then Piotr Tomala. The programme was aimed at climbers of the younger generation, who had to be trained in climbing at so-called unification camps and trips to various mountains, including the highest ones (see Hajzer). The long-awaited success came in March 2012. During an expedition led by Hajzer, Adam Bielecki and Janusz Gołąb ascended Gasherbrum I (8,068m), and a year later Bielecki, Artur Małek, Maciej Berbeka and Tomasz Kowalski ascended Broad Peak (8,047m), albeit at a tragic cost, as Berbeka and Kowalski died on the descent (see Czerwińska et al.) Women's Himalayan climbing was led by Ewa Panejko-Pankiewicz and Danuta Wach. Taking part in 2008 in a research conference entitled 'The State and Prospects of Women's Sport in Poland', together with Marta Lewandowska, they presented a paper entitled 'Women's Himalayanism - Rebuilding a Leading Position in World Himalayanism'. Riding the momentum, they created an outline of their project of Polish Women's Himalayanism, which was completed on 1 March 2009 at the Meeting of Mountaineers and Himalayanists in Rzędkowice. As part of the project, which was led by female Himalayan mountaineers with expedition experience from the 1980s and '90s, training trips were organised to the Tatras, the Alps, as well as the world's highest mountains. In 2011, a twenty-five-year long hiatus was overcome by the first women's Polish expedition to the six-thousanders surrounding the Sosbun Glacier in the Karakoram. Despite these attempts, women's Himalayan climbing in Poland is virtually non-existent. Individual female Himalayan climbers have not brought any novelty to Himalayanism. They follow so-called old paths and complain about the lack of interest in their activities in Poland. Perhaps this will change in the near future, as the Parliament of the Republic of Poland has declared 2022 as the year of Wanda Rutkiewicz.

In Anna Czerwińska's view, continuing down the road established by the Ice Warriors without any new ideas would squander the opportunities of the youngest generation.¹⁶ The situation in Polish Himalayanism has started to change in recent years, though. The activity of the Jerzy Kukuczka Polish Mountaineering Support Foundation, the Youth Group of the Polish Mountaineering Association and the Polish Himalayan Sports Project (previously advocated by Janusz Majer)¹⁷ seems to have contributed most to that change. In the words of Wadim Jabłoński, the objective of the Polish Himalayan Sports Project is 'to explore activities on peaks lower than 8,000 metres, conducted in the alpine style, sport ascents of the highest peaks, repetitions of difficult and rarely attacked routes in the "siege style", attempts at new routes, or repetitions of easier routes in the alpine style'. According to Jabłoński, '[t]he main idea guiding us, however, is to create strong teams which, after the programme ends, will want to independently set goals at the level of passages nominated for the Piolet d'Or' (Jabłoński).

Jabłoński, Adam Bielecki, Marcin Rutkowski and Jarosław Gawrysiak are responsible for the organisation of the programme, while the programme board consists of Piotr Pustelnik, Janusz Majer and Miłosz Jodłowski. The programme is intended to reach out to young, talented climbers. Some of them have already had some success in the Alps, Cordillera Blanca or the Karakoram, where they have established new routes on six-thousanders. In 2021, new routes were established on the western face of the previously unclimbed peak Trident (6,150m), difficulty M6, W14+, V (Maciej Kimel, Michał Czech and Jabłoński); the northern face of Gunj-e Sar (6,300m), difficulty A15 (Gołąb and Bielecki); and the face of Uli Biaho Gallery in the Trango Valley, difficulty A3, M7 (Marcin Tomaszewski and Damian Bielecki).

16 Conversation with Anna Czerwińska in Zakopane, 2 September 2018.

17 In 2013, as the head of the wide-ranging programme called The Polish Himalaya, and apart from supporting the projects of Polish Wintertime Mountaineering and The Crown of the Himalaya of Kinga Baranowska, Majer advocated the exploration of unclimbed peaks and the establishment of 'a sporting route to 7,000- and 8,000-metre peaks on the level where Polish teams could become candidates for the "Piolet d'Or", which is awarded for outstanding achievements in mountaineering' (Wroński).

Therefore, we can only hope that today's Polish Himalayan mountaineers, drawing on the experiences of the golden-age generation, will find sporting challenges in the high mountains and make a name for themselves in the world of Himalayan mountaineering. Hopefully, they will discover a world beyond that which Marek Pacukiewicz has called the school of vertical promotion (see Pacukiewicz: 98-114), and in this way learn to understand themselves and adopt values without which a feeling of inner emptiness might persist. Finally, it is crucial that their paths do not become mere strings of triumphs and tragedies. ♡

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Povzetek

Zgodovina poljskega himalajizma je – kakor poljska zgodovina nasploh – niz zmagoslavij in porazov, izhajajočih iz zapletenega spleta dogodkov, ki so pogosto protislovni. Spomladi 1939 je Himalajo obiskala prva poljska odprava, v okviru katere je naveza Jakuba Bujaka in Janusza Klarnerja opravila prvenstveni vzpon na vzhodni vrh gore Nanda Devi (7434m), kar je bil najtežji in šesti najvišji med tedaj osvojenimi vrhovi. Zaradi posledic druge svetovne vojne in sovjetizacije Poljske pa so se poljski alpinisti na najvišje gore sveta vrnili šele tedaj, ko je bilo vseh štirinajst osemtisočakov že osvojenih. Pot do Himalaje in Karakorum je Poljake v šestdesetih letih 20. stoletja vodila prek Hindukuša, ki je postal njihov poligon za pripravo na himalajske vzpone. V sedemdesetih letih pa so poljski alpinisti izkoristili politično liberalizacijo in se lotili dohitevanja razvoja himalajizma na Zahodu. Tega so kmalu celo presegli, saj so bili v letih 1978–1989 tvorci t. i. zlatega obdobja poljskega himalajizma, ki je v veliki meri določil svetovne smernice v naslednjih dveh desetletjih. Po letu 1989 sta niz nesreč vidnih poljskih plezalcev (Jerzy Kukuczka na Lotseju /8516m/, Eugeniusz Chrobak, Mirosław Daśal, Mirosław Gardzielewski, Andrzej Heinrich in Wacław Otręba na Mount Everestu /8848m/) in soočenje celotne alpinistične skupnosti z novim političnim in ekonomskim sistemom, ki himalajizma sicer ni več nadzoroval, a ga tudi ni več subvencioniral, povzročila zaton zlatega obdobja. Šele v prvih letih novega stoletja so se med preživelimi tvorci zlatega obdobja našli vidni posamezniki (zlasti Krzysztof Wielicki in Artur Hajzer), ki so z izkušnjami in celo s sodelovanjem pri vzponih spodbudili vrnitev poljskega himalajizma v svetovni vrh, tokrat predvsem v okviru zimskih vzponov na osemtisočake, v katerih so Poljaki v zlatem obdobju izrazito prednjačili.

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