



On Polish Himalayan Literature, Then and Now

Uwagi o polskiej literaturze
himalajskiej. Historia
i współczesność

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The history of Polish Himalaya-themed mountaineering literature can be said to lead from writings based in expedition logbooks to road narratives inspired by climbing. Its transformations are closely related to the history of Polish mountaineering. The article begins with a discussion of the two Polish-language accounts of a Himalayan expedition which were written in 1939. Subsequently, the analysis focuses on the first accounts which transcended the model of the expedition logbook, namely the post-war narratives of the Swiss expeditions to Dhaulagiri in which Poles took part. The key section of the article concentrates on Wojciech Kurtyka, a world-renowned pioneer of the alpine style in Himalayan climbing and an acknowledged journalist and writer who broke the paradigms of both non-fiction and fictional mountain literature. The article closes with the writings of Marek Raganowicz, whose texts introduce a new perspective to contemporary Polish mountaineering literature.

HISTORY OF ALPINISM, MOUNTAIN
JOURNALISM, MOUNTAINEERING
LITERATURE, HIMALAYA, KARAKORAM

Celem artykułu jest zarysowanie historii polskiej literatury himalajskiej w perspektywie jej ewolucyjnych przemian gatunkowych od klasycznego dziennika wyprawowego do inspirowanego wspinaczką opowiadania i powieści drogi. W artykule omówiono początki polskiej literatury himalajskiej sięgające czasów przedwojennych i okresu II wojny światowej oraz przedstawiono sylwetki dwóch jej prekursorów. Następnie zwrócono uwagę, na pierwsze przełamujące klasyczny model dziennika wyprawowego powojenne relacje ze szwajcarskich wypraw na Dhaulagiri z udziałem Polaków. Kluczowa część wywodu została skoncentrowana wokół fenomenu sportowego i pisarskiego jednego z najwybitniejszych polskich wspinaczy XX w. Wojciecha Kurtyki – twórcy założeń stylu alpejskiego w himalaizmie zdobywczo-sportowym i znakomitego publicysty oraz pisarza przełamującego utrwalone schematy w obrębie szeroko pojętej literatury górskiej zarówno typu *non-fiction*, jak i fikcjonalnej. W dalszym toku wywodu scharakteryzowano krótko twórczość współczesnego wybitnego wspinacza wielkościanowego Marka Raganowicza, który swoim pisarstwem do współczesnej polskiej literatury górskiej wprowadza zupełnie nową jakość.

HISTORIA ALPINIZMU, PUBLICYSTYKA
GÓRSKA, PIŚMIENNICTWO GÓRSKIE,
HIMALAJE, KARAKORUM

1 The expedition started in November 1933 and ended in May 1934 and was the first Polish expedition into exotic mountains. The Poles ascended, among others, Cerro Mercedario (6,720m) in the Central Andes.

The beginnings of Polish Himalaya-themed mountaineering literature date back to the inception of Polish Himalayan mountaineering in the period leading to the Second World War. The first successful Polish expedition to the Himalaya which ended with the ascent of the previously unclimbed Nanda Devi East (7,434m) in the Garhwal Himalaya took place in the spring and summer of 1939. The expedition was led by Adam Karpiński (pseudonym Akar), an outstanding Polish climber, pilot and aircraft constructor who had participated in an earlier historic expedition to the Andes.¹ Four Poles participated in the expedition: Karpiński, Stefan Bernadzikiewicz (pseudonym Sam), Jakub Bujak (pseudonym Kuba) and Janusz Klarner. Bujak and Klarner reached the summit on 2 July 1939, breaking the Polish altitude record in mountain climbing. The ascent was documented through a series of photographs taken on the top and a note placed in a can left 20 metres below among rocks protruding from the snow (see Kurczab et al.: 31). Unfortunately, the expedition turned out to be tragic for two of its members: Bernadzikiewicz and Karpiński died during their attempt to ascend another seven-thousander in an avalanche which submerged camp three. As the historians of the expedition put it:

After some rest, the expedition relocated to Glacier Milam and established base camp at the altitude of 4,250 metres on July 11. The next goal were the unclimbed peaks over the glacier's upper cirque, Hardeol (7,151m) and Tirsuli (7,074m). [...] During the attempt to ascend Tirsuli (7,074m) on the night of 18 to 19 July, Bernadzikiewicz and Karpiński died in an avalanche which buried camp three (6,150m). Their bodies were never found. (Ibid.: 32)

The pre-war Polish expedition to the Himalaya was not only crowned with the ascent of Nanda Devi East by two of its members, but also

paved the way for the first Polish literary accounts of high-mountain exploration. The first one was authored by Klarner and completed after his return to Poland, in the oppressive atmosphere of the German occupation of Warsaw; the book marks the beginning of Polish Himalayan mountaineering literature. So far, three editions of the book have been released: the first, incomplete one came out after the war, in 1948, under the title *W śniegach Himalajów* (In the Snows of the Himalaya), with preliminary accounts of the expedition having appeared already in 1941–42 in the conspiratorial Polish mountain periodical *Taternik*; the second edition was entitled *Nanda Devi* and published in 1956 after Klarner went missing;² the latest edition of this historical account by one of the first Polish Himalayan mountaineers was published in 2011 (see Klarner 2011 for this edition).

Klarner's account of the expedition to the Garhwal Himalaya, and the ascent of the previously unclimbed seven-thousander, alludes structurally and compositionally to the travel journal, a genre which was popular in the nineteenth century. Apart from some literary value, its merit lies primarily in its documentary character. For instance, Klarner's book depicts the circumstances of the deaths of Bernadzikiewicz and Karpiński on Tirsuli. Klarner does not refrain from expressing emotions in key moments of a narrative which overall strives to present facts objectively. The concluding expressive excerpts of the journal are a testimony to the traumatic experience of the deaths of two fellow climbers:

The awareness of our friends' deaths continues to elude us. The conversations we had yesterday and the daring plans we made seem too real for us to accept the fact that they are gone. We still cling to the hope – improbable at the moment – that the avalanche might have descended

² The exact date of Klarner's death is unknown. He left home on 17 September 1949 and went missing, probably falling victim to the communist regime.

today before noon, when the camp was empty. Above the release we notice a dark spot – it may be a cargo sack. A sharp contour is visible on the snow above. Maybe it's the top of the tent. We leave our cargo below the ice wall. [...]

A huge crack 20 metres wide crosses the dome we are on in the direction below the assumed location of the camp. Kuba and the Sherpas maintain it wasn't there before. We are approaching it. At the other rim of the crack we see a boot buried deep in the snow. This inanimate object is a final proof. It happened. Akar and Siam are dead. We feel cold inside. We feel spasms in our throats. (Cited in Kurczab et al.: 32–33)

Jakub Bujak likewise wrote a journal during this first Polish expedition to the Himalaya. His extraordinary literary account of the historic expedition, a valuable supplement to Klarner's well-known text, was published as a whole only several years ago, in 2015, thanks to the efforts of Bujak's daughter, Magdalena Bujak-Lenczowska (see Bujak-Lenczowska). Both Klarner's account and Bujak's journal constitute historical artefacts marking the beginnings of the Polish non-fictional Himalayan literature as part of a broader strand of expedition literature (see Kolbuszewski 2020). In his article on the history of Polish mountaineering literature, Jacek Kolbuszewski argues that for the first generations of alpine climbers

expedition to the high mountains, the Andes, the Himalaya, the Caucasus Mountains, even the Alps, tended to be a unique, one-time event which played an enormous role in their lives, not only as regards the mountains but in general. [...] As an extraordinary event which happens once in a lifetime, such an expedition typically resulted in a book:

an account of the expedition, formally an heir to the traditions of nineteenth-century travel literature. (Kolbuszewski 1993: 387–88)

In the early post-war period, between 1947 and 1955 (with Stalin's death in 1953 as a vital historical caesura generating a wave of political transformations), Polish mountaineers found it increasingly difficult to leave the country and hence concentrated their efforts on the exploration of the Tatra Mountains. As a result, winter mountaineering in the Tatras flourished, forming the foundation for the later development of winter Alpine and Himalayan mountaineering, which was to become a Polish specialty in the years to come. As an attempt to break free of the impasse, Alpine Games were organised in March 1954, described by Ryszard Wiktor Schramm in the following way:

1954 brings some relaxation in the confined and uncomfortable situation of Polish mountaineering and a slight possibility of further development. In the second half of March, great manoeuvres of the leading climbers in the Tatras are organised to show their organisational, technical and tactical competence in the organisation of multi-day expeditions in the difficult conditions of high mountains. This event, called the First Polish Alpiniaada, brought together 47 climbers from all over the country. (Schramm: 20)

At that time, such activities – modelled on Soviet mountaineering – were the only substitute for high-altitude climbing available to Poles. More opportunities came in the wake of the political breakthrough of October 1956,³ when Polish climbers started to explore the Alps and had their first climbing successes there. Having marked their presence in the Alps, they started to consider extending their activity to the

3 Polish October 1956, termed also the October thaw or Gomułka's thaw, was a period of the liberalisation of the political system which set a limit to the communist terror in Poland. Since 1957, however, there was a slow retreat from the reforms of October 1956.

highest mountains. In 1966, Jerzy Warteresiewicz sketched the program of expanding Polish expeditions, indicating peaks in the Karakoram which were worthy of ascent, such as Kunyang Chhish (7,852m), which was ultimately ascended in 1971 by an expedition directed by Andrzej Zawada (see Warteresiewicz). The collective volume *Ostatni atak na Kunyang Chhish* (Final Approach to Kunyang Chhish) was a literary fruit of this undertaking (see Paczkowski et al.). The book constituted a detailed chronicle of the expedition, including descriptions of the preparation and the journey, and followed the classical model of expedition narrative.

Undoubtedly, Warteresiewicz construed his program of the exploration of the Himalaya and the Karakoram on the basis of the Himalayan experiences of two other Poles – Jerzy Hajdukiewicz and Adam Skoczylas – who had participated in the Swiss expeditions to Dhaulagiri (8,167m) in 1958 and 1960. In light of this, the history of post-war Polish Himalayan literature is also – or perhaps primarily – linked to their activity and exploration of the Himalaya as part of the Swiss expeditions with international teams. Hajdukiewicz was the first to take part in such an expedition: he participated in Werner Stäuble’s fifth attempt to ascend Dhaulagiri in 1958. The expedition was not successful, yet Hajdukiewicz wrote an account of it in a book entitled *Himal Cu-Cu-Ra: Dhaulagiri 1958*. In a preface to the book, Jan Kazimierz Dorawski claims that despite the expedition’s lack of success and the fact that only one Pole took part in it, it had a tremendous influence on the development of Polish mountaineering. In his review of the book, Kolbuszewski refers to Dorawski’s assessment, adding that ‘Hajdukiewicz’s book was released at the moment when Polish alpinism set off to conquer the mountains of the world for the second time, and because of that it needed [...] to be popularised’. Hajdukiewicz’s book fulfils this task,

according to Kolbuszewski, ‘even if it is not very well written: it has too many stylistic flaws, too much pompousness, too much pathos in descriptions’ (Kolbuszewski 1961).

Another Swiss expedition to Dhaulagiri with Polish participants was organised two years later, in 1960. Initially, it was supposed to be a joint Polish–Swiss undertaking, but ultimately this turned to be impossible for political reasons. The expedition had an international character, and the two Poles who participated in it – Hajdukiewicz and Skoczylas – did so as individuals and not representatives of the state. Skoczylas’s book *Biała Góra* (White Mountain), first published in 1965, is an expedition account written on the basis of the author’s journal, but thanks to its refined form and literary narration it transcends the conventional model of expedition account. In his preface to the book, Janusz Kurczab comments on the Poles’ participation and the significance of the expedition:

Ultimately, the expedition was carried out under Swiss auspices, but it was of an international character. Apart from the six Swiss members, the team comprised two Poles, one Austrian, one German, one American, and a few Nepalese Sherpas. [...] The expedition was successful. Eight climbers of four nationalities reached the summit, however, neither of the Poles did so. Still, apart from their many experiences, the Poles also benefited from the expedition in a different way: both Adam Skoczylas and Jerzy Hajdukiewicz wrote books about it, and Biała Góra was favourably received by Polish mountaineers and literary critics alike. It was emphasised that, due to its literary merit, the book stands out among others of its type, many of which were published in the 1960s. While the documentary character of the book was not ignored, its strictly literary value was also noted. The fact that the account of the

expedition is carried out on two levels was particularly commended. On the one hand, the book chronicles subsequent attempts to ascend the peak. On the other, it contains an important parallel story of the author's own experiences as he was involved in another crucial albeit less conspicuous aspect of the expedition. (Kurczab: 6-7)

In light of this, Kolbuszewski wrote that 'the effectiveness of the book's mood is enhanced by its containment in the two layers, as a result of which *Biała Góra* – a story of human victory – should ultimately be defined as [...] a story of one's own failure' (Kolbuszewski 1966: 77).

When he published his book, Skoczylas was already the author of a short story entitled 'Stefano przyjdziemy jutro' (Stefano We Shall Come Tomorrow); the story narrates a rescue mission on the north face of Eiger in which he himself had participated in 1957. It was published in 1958 in the collective volume *Burza nad Alpami* (Storm Over the Alps); in 1962, it was included in Skoczylas's well-known collection of short stories, *Cztery dni słońca* (Four Days of Sun). In the wake of Skoczylas's premature death due to terminal illness, another book on Dhaulagiri was released in 1966, entitled *Tam gdzie góry sięgają nieba* (Where the Mountains Reach the Sky). In light of the popularity and acclaim of Skoczylas's Alpine and Himalayan prose, one can suggest that his mountain fiction played a similar role in Poland as Maurice Herzog's memorable *Annapurna* (1951) did in Western Europe, while Skoczylas's collection of short stories is sometimes compared to Victor Saunders's famous 1990 book, *Elusive Summits* (see Witt).

Polish participation in the Swiss expeditions was significant both as an experience of exploring high mountains and as a factor in the evolution of Polish expedition literature, yet it did not exert substantial influence on the history of Polish mountaineering. The breakthrough

occurred in 1975 with the first winter ascent of Noshaq in the Hindu Kush mountains (7,492m) by a Polish team. As Katarzyna Kastrau stresses, it was the first winter ascent in the world: 'In this way, the Poles defied the claim made by Edmund Hillary that no form of life can survive in winter above the altitude of 7,000 metres. Subsequently, bigger expeditions were organised in the Karakoram and the Himalaya. The ensuing world-wide success was the winter ascent of 8,000 metres.' (Kastrau: 426) In 1975, the Poles ascended Broad Peak Middle (8,011m), Gasherbrum III (7,952m) and Gasherbrum II (8,035m). In subsequent years, Wojciech Kurtyka initiated a new type of climbing in small teams and setting advanced camps. The apex of Polish high-mountain achievements at that time was Wanda Rutkiewicz's ascent of Everest (8,848m) on 16 October 1978 as the first European woman and the third woman in the world.

In the mid-1970s, the period preceding the so-called golden age of Polish Himalayan mountaineering, Kurtyka started making a name for himself on account of his innovative style of climbing; one of his most interesting youthful achievements was the first winter ascent of Trollveggen's northern wall (the Trall Wall) in the Norwegian mountains. Forming part of a small team, together with Marek Kęsicki, Ryszard Kowalewski and Tadeusz Piotrowski, he ascended the wall between 7 and 19 March 1974, following the French Route (6+, A4, 1,100m). In the '70s, Kurtyka also participated in two spectacular Polish expeditions to the Himalaya and the Karakoram led by Andrzej Zawada: to Lhotse and K2 (see McDonald: 71). On 18 May 1980, together with Alex MacIntyre, René Ghilina and Ludwik Wilczyński, he managed the first winter ascent of the east face of Dhaulagiri (8,167m). The list of his astonishing achievements is long. It should be noted here that Kurtyka is the first Pole to be awarded the Career Piolet d'Or in 2016 for his

overall achievements in the exploration of high mountains; Krzysztof Wielicki is the other Pole to have received this prestigious award.

The 1980s, the so-called golden age of Polish Himalayan mountaineering, witnessed a series of Polish successes in the Himalaya and the Karakoram. The most distinguished mountaineers included Kurtyka, Wielicki, Jerzy Kukuczka, Leszek Cichy and Andrzej Czok. They were all pioneers of winter expeditions, while Kurtyka was ahead of his time also with his engagement in and promotion of Himalayan climbing in small, two- or three-person teams in the alpine style. Kurtyka's biographer Bernadette McDonald writes that '[t]he Lhotse and K2 expeditions made it clear to Voytek that alpine-style climbing was a higher form of alpinism, not only from an athletic perspective, but also in human terms. With an alpine-style approach, Voytek knew he could choose his partners with care and, as a result, the experience on the mountain would be much more intimate' (McDonald: 74).

Kurtyka made the annals of world Himalayan climbing a number of times, including in the week from 13 to 20 July 1985, when he climbed the 2.5-kilometre long western wall of Gasherbrum IV (The Shining Wall) in a two-member Austrian-Polish team. British, Japanese and American teams had earlier attempted the ascent. Even though Kurtyka and his climbing partner Robert Schauer did not reach the summit, their feat was considered a model of alpine-style mountaineering in the Himalaya. The prestigious *Climbing* magazine promoted it as the greatest mountaineering achievement of the twentieth century (see Kastrau: 426-27). Swiss climber Erhard Loretan, Kurtyka's partner on Trango Tower in 1988, said in turn that, '[w]hen he descended from Gasherbrum IV, Voytek had become a living legend', the status, according to Loretan, 'that mortals reserve for those who have cheated death' (cited in McDonald: 180).

Apart from climbing, mountain and mountaineering journalism and literature was for Kurtyka another important form of expression of himself and his view of climbing, which for him was always a thoughtful dialogue between humans and nature. During his long climbing career, Kurtyka published numerous articles and climbing accounts, both in specialist mountain periodicals (*Alpinist*, *American Alpine Journal*, *Der Bergsteiger*, *Bularz*, *Góry*, *Optymista*, *Taterniczek*, *Taternik*, etc.) and in regular press. His writings drew the readers' attention not only on account of his original perception of and commentary on alpinist achievements but also due to their language and literary merit. Kurtyka may have inherited his literary talent from his father, a well-known Polish writer using the penname Henryk Worcell.

In 1985, Kurtyka published his account of climbing the western wall of Gasherbrum IV. Apart from a meticulous description of the dangers which a climber faces on the wall as well as the drastic change of weather conditions during the final stage of ascent which precluded the two climbers' attempt to summit, he at the same time strongly emphasised the alpine style in which he and Schauer managed the climb. He wrote:

We did the ascent in the purest alpine-style after an acclimatization climb to 7100 meters on the north ridge, where we left a food cache. Dramatic circumstances in the last stages of the ascent, after we had completed climbing the face proper, prevented our reaching the exact summit. Appalling weather and conditions on the face delayed us and dangerously prolonged the ascent, making us suffer from hunger and thirst. On July 20, after emerging exhausted from the wall onto the summit ridge, we abandoned the apparently easy horizontal traverse to the summit and immediately started the abseils down the north ridge.

The mountain seemed to be ruled by an unfriendly spirit which opposed the germ of every effort and even of every intention. Surprisingly, it ceased to harass our faltering minds when we abandoned the last meters to the summit. However, we got off the face alive; the climb was perfect and very instructive of all possible traps and hazards of alpine-style climbing in the high mountains. (Kurtyka 1986: 1-2)

In further sections of the account, not devoid of literary charm, Kurtyka depicts the experience of hallucinations and other uncomfortable sensations resulting from the prolonged state of hunger, cold and sleep deprivation. He also expresses his dissatisfaction with the failure to reach the summit and the need to start the descent earlier than planned; at the same time he admits that ‘it was the most beautiful and mysterious climb’ he has ever done (ibid.: 5).

This achievement on The Shining Wall is considered a paragon of alpine-style mountaineering; an unquestionable sporting feat, it proved simultaneously to be a liminal experience for the climbers which left its indelible mark on their psyche. In this context, McDonald cites Slovenian alpinist Andrej Štremfelj’s comment on Kurtyka and Schauer’s achievement:

A consistent characteristic of daring alpine-style ascents is an intense psychological pressure that exhausts the climber completely. After such an ascent, climbers are often not capable of performing an ascent of that difficulty again for several years, or perhaps ever. The most beautiful example of such a daring ascent is that of Robert Schauer and Voytek Kurtyka on the west face of Gasherbrum IV in 1985. This jewel among alpine-style ascents was carried out ahead of its time [...]. To contemporary climbers, such a demanding ascent represents an obstacle rather

| *than encouragement, as there is little chance of anybody exceeding it.*
 | (Cited in McDonald: 179)

Another important literary account of Kurtyka's high-mountain activity – transcending in a way the form and style of this type of narratives – is his description of climbing Trango Tower (6,239m) in a form of a short story released in 1990 as a book entitled *Trango Tower* (see Kurtyka 1990). It was published in Warsaw by the publishing house TEXT, interestingly without the ISBN number. The text pertains to the second, successful climb executed in 1988 with Loretan. One may add here that the first and only edition of *Trango Tower* has the status of a rare book and is practically impossible to find in Poland.

The narrative begins in Kathmandu in a small cafe where the author – reminiscing about the unsuccessful attempt at ascending Trango Tower in 1986 with Japanese climbers – meets two Swiss climbers, Loretan and Jean Troillet. Loretan was returning from an unsuccessful approach to the Cho Oyu wall, which ended with a tragic death of his climber partner, while Troillet came to Kathmandu to offer him mental support. From the start, Kurtyka and the two Swiss men share a similar anti-commercial attitude to climbing and a proclivity for alpine-style mountaineering (see Kurtyka 1990: 3). Influenced by his colleagues' accounts of high-mountain experiences and adventures as well as by litres of Tibetan beer consumed together, Kurtyka concludes: 'In the dark it is impossible to distinguish between man and mountain. What a strange path? Where does it lead to? For a moment it eerily seemed to me that we do not climb because the mountains exists – as old Mallory claimed at one point – but, on the contrary, because the mountains constantly elude us and we cannot reach or touch them. But doesn't it really amount to the same thing? I felt I had drunk too much Tongba.' (Ibid.)

Kurtyka's narration permanently oscillates between seriousness and grotesque; the author avoids excessive pathos by donning a mask of irony, which he uses also while presenting philosophical aspects of climbing and high-altitude climbing. He resorts to irony even when he touches upon issues such as death in the mountains. Referring to the members of the Japanese expedition to K2 who found the body of the Polish climber Dobrosława Miodowicz-Wolf, Kurtyka writes: 'It is amazing how gently death comes at high altitudes. The moment of falling asleep – which I have also felt coming – is cosy and warm, while returning to life – strength permitting – is a misery. Alpinism is really an art of suffering.' (Ibid.: 6) He questions the idea of climbing articulated by the then already famous Jerzy Kukuczka: 'Jurek had a completely different attitude to alpinism. He openly claimed that alpinism is a sport and thus a space for competition. On my part, I just hated competitiveness in the mountains.' (Ibid.: 7)

In the subsequent parts of the story, Kurtyka briefly describes his two-year period of preparation for the Trango Tower expedition in which he finally participated together with Loretan, whom he had met earlier in Kathmandu, and the struggle to obtain a permit for a two-person team, as local Pakistani authorities required at least a four-person team. The key passages of the story, devoted to the climb up The Trango Tower itself, contain a quite traditional, albeit colourful description of the rocky ascent and camping on rock ledges. The text contains suggestive and psychologically convincing depictions of emotions and sensations during Kurtyka's two falls off the wall during the ascent:

The day when we reached the Great Corner was of particular significance to me. On this day, for the first time in my life, after 21 years of climbing, I fell off the wall while climbing high mountains. To make

matters worse, it happened not once, but twice. Until then, I had taken silent pride in the fact, but it was also a source of embarrassment, especially when I asked Todd Skinner a few months later how many falls the classic climb of Salathe Wall took them. Todd whistled and replied: 'Ho, ho, maybe 150!'

Ashamed, I thought what a mediocre climber I must be. Still, these two trivial three- or four-metre falls were very painful, resulting in a badly bruised elbow, strained thumb, and completely skinless knuckles. Writhing in pain, I clung to the wall. Far below I saw a cloud shadow pass over the Dunge Glacier [...] I heard Erhard's muffled voice from the roof – Voy, are you alright? Acute pain subsided slowly, but my feeling of despair increased. The Great Corner rose to the sky like the cornice of a daunting building. In the face of this pain and fear, assurances of bravery made in the lowlands seemed very feeble. (Ibid.: 16)

This passage, stylised as a personal testimony, testifies to Kurtyka's need to express extreme emotions but also to his careful self-analysis which leads to a redefinition of his perception of his own physical and psychological condition from the lowlands. An important aspect of falling off the wall and the related experience of fear and physical pain is the sense of a brotherhood connecting climbing partners, accentuated also in Kurtyka's journalistic pieces. This is well illustrated by a passage on Loretan's support at this difficult moment, which is devoid of any trace of irony:

To my joy, a mysterious smudge turned out to be the beginning of a crack hidden in a rock bend which soon led me to the Great Corner. In the evening, already there, when I unexpectedly fell off the wall again

in an easy spot, we decided we were done. We quickly rappelled to the Great Ledge to the comfort of the bivy sack. I sat down in a cosy corner and placed my injured fingers on my knees. Erhard caringly put the headphones on my ears and played me some Dire Straits. Gradually I forgot about my pulsating and swollen fingers. (Ibid.: 17)

The experience of brotherhood described here on the basis of Kurtyka's own experiences constitutes an antithesis of sorts to his frequent critical charges against climbers who empathy, which he wrote about in his famous essay, 'The Art of Suffering':

Only a few appreciated the psychological costs, yet it is true that inner strength is sometimes mirrored by an outward callousness. Physical dangers and the distress of partners may be blotted out. Hard work and suppressed fear, when combined with competitive determination, tend to narrow the field of vision. I am sadly convinced that egocentricity and a kind of inner deafness are common personality blemishes in our climbing community, more so than many care to admit. [...]

This attitude is not an inevitable consequence of Himalayan climbing. Choice of partner in the Himalaya is increasingly important to the successful lightweight group. If there is a strong bond, stronger than just companionship, an individual is less likely to miss possible fatal signs of distress in a partner. (Kurtyka 1988: 32-33)

The culmination of the ascent of Trango Tower itself is presented by Kurtyka in a very dynamic way:

On the fourth day of our climb to the summit, after the last pendulum I reached the Hidden Corner, which turned out to be the last technically challenging part and one of the few in which we had to use pitons. Normally, good cracks enabled us to use almost exclusively stoppers and cams. The Hidden Corner led us underneath the water-sodden Wet Plate. The next day was July 13. Erhard quickly managed the Wet Plate and we wondered which route to choose one last time. Ultimately, we chose a cracked chimney which went diagonally to the right and was clogged with great snowy mushrooms. We called it Mushroom Chimney. An easier snow-ice ridge was visible above the chimney and we decided to leave most of our climbing gear behind. All of a sudden, a final 20-metre vertical rock fault rose before us. Erhard thought for a long time before he decided to climb it with only three pitons. Around 3pm he happily shouted to me – I'm on the top! After two years of mishaps, it was a particularly happy moment for us. Deep down I asked myself – what changed really, where does the change lie? And I thought of my failures with pride and nostalgia. Perhaps I have discovered how to draw strength from failure? (Kurtyka 1990: 21)

The narration in *Trango Tower* stands out in its genre due to its literariness and a kind of emotionalism which testifies to the author's artistic sensibility. Interestingly, McDonald argues that Kurtyka chose to climb Trango Tower – a souring granite spike north of Baltoro Glacier in the Karakoram – mostly for aesthetic reasons (see McDonald 195). The fact that his biographer points to the aesthetic criterion in Kurtyka's selection of expedition destination suggests his extraordinary individualism and unconventional approach to climbing. As a writer who understands mountains and mountaineering in terms of art, Kurtyka works with literary devices which enable a multi-faceted

expression of an individual's encounter with nature and the boundaries it establishes, be they somatic, sensual, psychic or extrasensory. It is noteworthy how Kurtyka names and chronicles vital topographical details: he gives key places individual names which he capitalises, such as the Fantastic Crevice, Mushroom Chimney and the Wet Plate. This seems to be a significant choice which underscores the exploratory and pioneering character of his climb. Establishing a new route is analogous to discovering new land. Additionally, naming is related to a need to familiarise the landscape which during the climb is temporarily transformed from an alien space into a quasi-domestic one. Another vital feature of Kurtyka's narration is a tendency to analyse his own emotions and sensations, particularly those of a transgressive nature. His final conclusion on drawing strength and experience from past failures brings to mind the philosophy of stoicism or even the anthropological conceptions of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Citadelle* (1948).

Kurtyka's 2013 book *Chiński Maharadża* (The Chinese Maharaja) constitutes the apex of his journalistic and literary activity as well as an attempt to freely express his transgressive individualistic approach to creativity (see Kurtyka 2013: 131). It would be difficult to categorise the text as Himalayan mountaineering prose as such. The blurb advertises the book as 'a psychological mountain thriller unlike anything you have read so far' (ibid.). Kurtyka himself claimed, however, that qualifying the book as a mountain thriller was merely a marketing choice, while the text itself is closer to the picaresque (see Stępień). The main motif of the book – still very popular among young Polish aficionados of alpinism – is rock climbing. The protagonist – the author's alter ego – is passionate about climbing; at a time when, in his own words, he has 'already completed a number of superb routes in the Himalaya' (Kurtyka 2013: 21), he establishes a new goal for himself, namely

climbing a spectacularly challenging rock in the vicinity of Krakow, on the climbing route known as the Chinese Maharaja. In this semi-autobiographical story, struggling with a rock climbing route is a form of obsession which symbolises another, superior form of obsession, namely the necessity to be creative. On the margins of a grotesque and sometimes ironic narrative about an experienced alpinist overwhelmed with problems of everyday life, Kurtyka formulates theses which are important for his own philosophy of climbing and which form the core of his individualistic programme:

My heart howled out of longing to be somewhere high in the mountains. The desire was so strong that the glass of wine froze in my hand. I listened in fascination to this inner hunger. What on earth was it? It was definitely more than mere sensual desire. It had nothing to do with bodily hunger. I felt it somewhere deeper. It contained a longing for complete freedom, a desire to be free of human limitations, a wish to taunt the fear of death. All of this is what drove me to the edge. [...]

Climbing is more than spatial ascent. It is essentially a difficult attempt to ascend above oneself. It is a reaching out towards freedom. (Ibid.: 25)

Over the years, Kurtyka's book became a source of inspiration for Polish climbers who sought new forms within mountaineering literature. Marek Raganowicz can be considered Kurtyka's successor both in terms of his climbing style and his desire to break the established paradigms and conventions in mountaineering writing. Raganowicz is an outstanding Polish alpinist and author of two mountaineering books in which he flirts with the genre of road novel. The first of these, the autobiographical book *Zapisany w kręgach* (Written in Circles),

received the Grand Prix Award in the competition for the best mountaineering book of the year at the Andrzej Zawada Mountain Festival in 2017. It was favourably reviewed by Kurtyka, who wrote the following in the form of a blurb: ‘It has been a long time since I read such refreshing literature. No other book has brought me so poignantly close to the complex and difficult truth of a climber’s fate. No other book has made me feel so pleasantly proud of belonging to this brave and disinterested tribe.’ (Raganowicz 2017)

Raganowicz’s multi-plot autobiographical narrative is composed of numerous vignettes about his studies, lovers, ways of earning a living, as well as the birth of his fascination with climbing and the mountains, including the Tatras, the Alps and the world’s highest mountains. The author also addresses the issue of choosing one’s own path in climbing, rejecting the model of expedition Himalayanism in the name of the alpine style and ultimately specialising in big-wall climbing. Reflecting on the development of his fascination with the mountains, Raganowicz offers insights which one would seek in vain in the writings of his predecessors. For instance, where Kurtyka saw an exciting metaphysical realm of freedom, Raganowicz sees a kind of trap. One of the most interesting and novel motifs in his prose is the search of ‘freedom from the mountains’, which the author finds in the act of writing:

Once I disagreed with Ania when she said that there was nothing else I was able to do except go to the mountains. Now I thought more and more often that she was right and that it was worthwhile opening myself up to new things, at least so that I could feel free from the mountains. I had an impression that the cult of climbing can be detrimental,

that sometimes one should try to rebel against it, to pick the apple just as Eve did, which is something a highlander mentioned on a bus. Eve opened wide the door leading from the paradise to the world of freedom, while I needed to feel that climbing is what I really chose to do out of my own will.

I decided to focus on writing. (Raganowicz 2017: 189–90)

Raganowicz's critical approach to climbing as a kind of double-edged sword – a liberating activity which is also addictive and enslaving – is clearly an innovation, as it introduces a new quality to conventional and at times pompous mountaineering literature. Still, climbing is a constant source of inspiration, including literary inspiration, while both activities enable self-expression, albeit in their own distinctive ways. What is equally significant, Raganowicz strives to free his writings from the label of mountaineering literature. The best example of this is his latest novel, *Znikając. Opowieść drogi* (Disappearing: A Road Narrative), which breaks with the patterns of mountaineering literature to an even greater extent than its predecessor (see Raganowicz 2021). In this novel, autobiographical and fictional motifs are intertwined, and one can sense the author's inspiration both with American road novels and with the writings of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami. It will not be an exaggeration to say that it is not only a narrative of climbing but also a philosophical treatise on life, both in its physical and metaphysical dimensions.

To conclude, contemporary Polish mountaineering literature – including but not only expedition literature – is undergoing a period of intense development and exists in various generic forms. On the one hand, there are literary experiments such as the ones attempted

by Kurtyka and Raganowicz, while on the other hand classical genres are still popular, including biographies of famous climbers (often written by non-climbers), autobiographies (frequently produced in cooperation with ghost writers), as well as conventional expedition accounts. In the latter case, new forms of expression are sought only in such exceptional writings as those of Rafał Fronia, who participated in a failed winter expedition to K2 in 2017–2018. Fronia’s account of this expedition was produced during the expedition in the form of an online journal, which enabled him to engage in direct dialog with those who observed the progress of the expedition. The form, already known from the work of other European alpinists, had more supporters than opponents in Poland and ultimately resulted in the publication of Fronia’s book *Anatomia góry. Osiem tysięcy metrów ponad marzeniami* (The Anatomy of the Mountain: Eight Thousand Metres Above Dreams, 2018).

On the basis of the above analysis of both older and newer forms of Polish mountaineering literature it is difficult to determine the directions in which it is likely to evolve in the coming years and decades. It falls beyond doubt, however, that the most interesting writers who are at the same time acknowledged climbers, such as Skoczylas, Kurtyka and Raganowicz, have a bearing on the condition of this genre – and, by inference, of mountain sports – in contemporary Poland. What seems most important, due to their talent and creative imagination they gradually wrestle the niche of Himalayan mountaineering literature – and expedition literature in general – from the category of second-rate literature, sometimes even succeeding in transforming it into high-brow writing. ♡

Translated by Izabella Kimak

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Povzetek

Članek oriše zgodovino poljske himalajistične literature, pri tem pa se osredotoča na postopno umikanje žanra klasičnega dnevnika odprave pripovedi, izhajajoči iz romana ceste in navdihnjeni s piščevimi alpinističnimi doživetji. Več kot osemdesetletna zgodovina evolucije himalajistične literature je prikazana na ozadju zgodovine poljskega odpravarskega alpinizma. Članek se najprej posveti poljskima knjižnima opisoma uspešne poljske himalajske odprave iz leta 1939, ki sta ju prispevala Jakub Bujak in Janusz Klarnier. Nato se osredotoči na Jerzyja Hajdukiewicza in Adama Skoczylasa, poljska udeleženca švicarskih odprav na Daulagiri iz let 1958 in 1960, ki sta s svojima knjigama o teh odpravah presešla žanr dnevnika odprave. Osrednjo pozornost članek namenja športnim in literarnim dosežkom Wojciecha Kurtyke, ki je eden izmed najpomembnejših poljskih in svetovnih himalajskih alpinistov 20. stoletja. Kurtyka je bil ključen pri vpeljevanju alpskega sloga v plezanje v Himalaji in Karakorumu, velja pa tudi za vrhunskega potopisca, ki je v marsikaterem oziru posodobil alpinistično literaturo, in sicer tako nefikcijsko kakor fikcijsko. Na koncu se članek ustavi še pri dvojici sodobnih avtorjev, in sicer pri Mareku Raganowiczu, čigar spisi alpinistično literaturo približujejo romanu ceste, in Rafału Fronii, ki je izdal knjigo na podlagi interaktivnega spletnega dnevnika, ki ga je pisal med odpravo.

Tovrstna analiza tako starejših kakor sodobnejših form poljske odpravarske alpinistične literature sicer ne more nakazati prihodnje evolucije tega žanra. Lahko pa pokaže, da so nanj najbolj vplivale prav tiste osebnosti, ki nam lahko veljajo za najzanimivejše pisce in ki so bili nedvomno tudi vrhunski alpinisti; v tem pogledu ni mogoče zanikati vpliva Skoczylasa, Kurtyke ali Raganowicza. Ti in podobni pisci

so največ prispevali k približevanju alpinistične literature literarnemu kanonu, v središču katerega je tradicionalno sicer leposlovje.

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