DHAULAGIRI, 1959

By FRITZ MORAVEC

(*Translated by Hugh Merrick*)

[The expedition to Dhaulagiri last year, recounted below by Ing. Fritz Moravec, was sponsored by the Österreichische Himalaya-Gesellschaft.

The party consisted of:

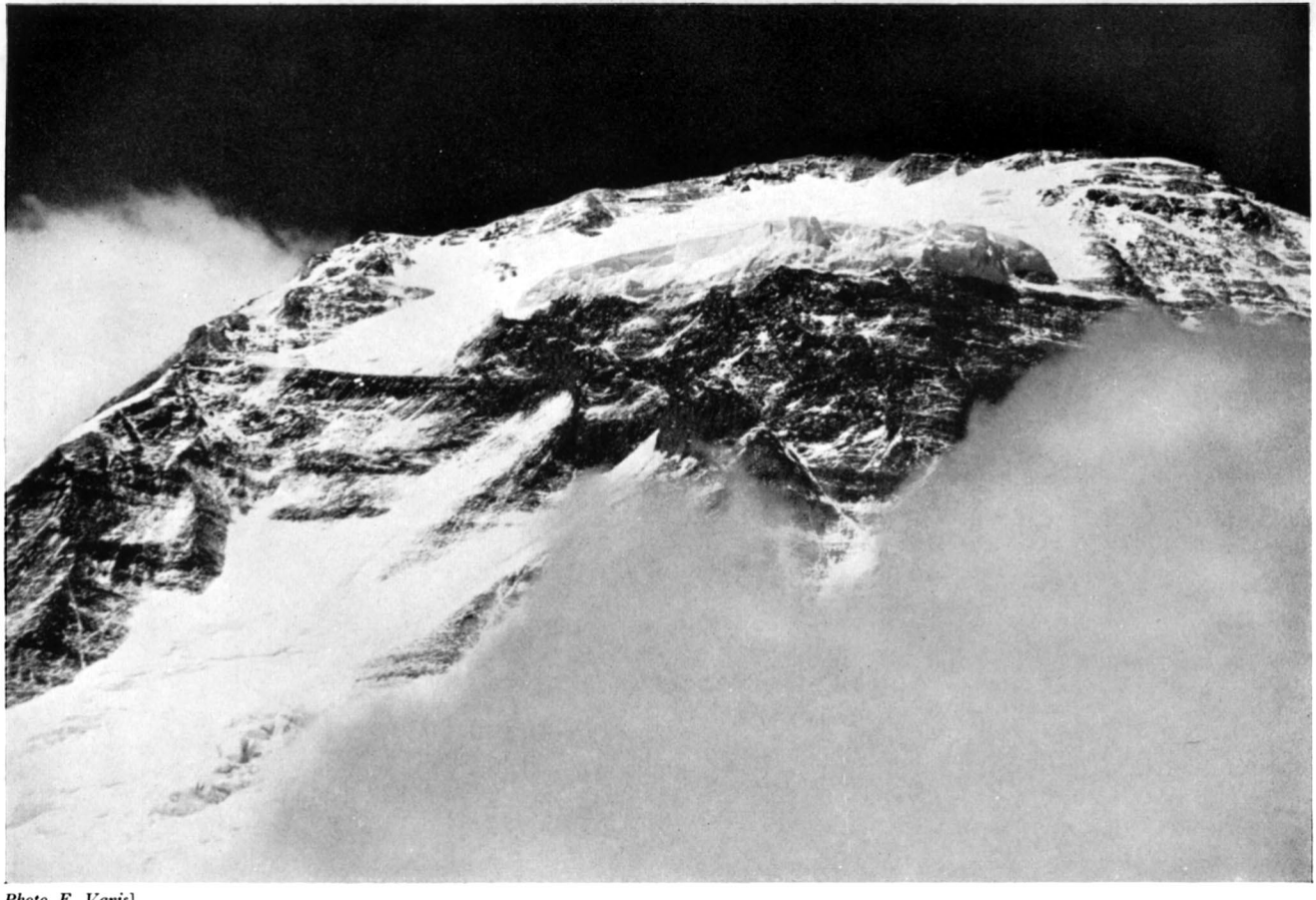
Ing. Fritz Moravec (leader)	Hans Ratay
Othmar Kucera	Heinrich Roiss
Stefan Pauer	Dr. Wilfried Wehrle
Karl Prein	Erich Vanis

In the seven years of its existence the Österreichische Himalaya-Gesellschaft has been responsible for three other expeditions to the Himalaya and Karakoram; the first was the unsuccessful expedition to Saipal in 1954, brought to a premature close by the death from pneumonia of Karl Reiss. Then followed two outstanding successes; in 1956 the first ascent of Gasherbrum II, and in 1958 the first ascent of Haramosh. The account of the Haramosh expedition was told in this Journal by the late Heinrich Roiss (*A.J.* 64. 12.).]

Will Dhaulagiri be climbed in 1960? The question is not only exercising climbers, but everyone who is interested in Alpine events. The assault on this mighty peak has indeed a special interest, for Dhaulagiri, at 26,811 ft., is the highest unclimbed peak in the world, and for Western climbers the last possible 'Eight-thousander', since the rather lower Gosainthan (26,291 ft.), lying as it does entirely in Tibetan territory, is at present 'out of bounds'.

As long ago as the middle of the eighteenth century, Josef Tieffenthaler, a Jesuit father, whose missionary work had brought him to northern India, drew attention to the Dhaula-Himal. For a long time Dhaulagiri's huge pyramid was thought to be the world's highest mountain.

Measurements taken in 1848 revealed that Kangchenjunga was nearly 1,400 ft. higher than Dhaulagiri and four years later computers of the Survey of India established the supremacy of Peak XV, later known as Mount Everest. Dhaulagiri sank into obscurity for a long time; in any case no foreigner could approach it, for Nepal was forbidden ground.



Photo, E. Vanis]

DHAULAGIRI, UPPER PART OF THE NORTH-EAST RIDGE.

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The history of the assault on Dhaulagiri really begins on a clear autumn morning, that of October 18, 1949, when Prof. Arnold Heim returned from his first Himalayan flight with the first photographs of the mountain. These were to be a valuable aid to the strong French party which went out to attempt Dhaulagiri in the following spring, but failed to find a possible route in spite of thorough reconnaissance work. In the words of that splendid climber, Lionel Terray[1]: 'The North Ridge (meaning the North-east Ridge, for there is no North Ridge on Dhaulagiri)! No one will ever get up it—it's bare ice and the angle is so steep that hand-holds would have to be cut! Dhaulagiri will never be climbed. I wouldn't go up there at any price.'

His judgment was certainly a weighty factor in the Expedition's decision to turn their attention to near-by Annapurna, separated from the Dhaulagiri massif only by the valley of the Kali Gandaki. Their luck held and they succeeded in climbing the first 'Eight-thousander' ever to be climbed, an event which brought a decisive turn in the annals of the Himalaya.

It was the Swiss Expedition of 1953 (Akademischer Alpenklub Zürich) which first discovered the western approach through the gorges of the Mayangdi Khola, and also reconnoitred the route up the North face by way of the 'Pear'. This route was followed by all the subsequent expeditions: Argentines in 1954, German-Swiss in 1955, Argentines again in 1956 and the Swiss in 1958.

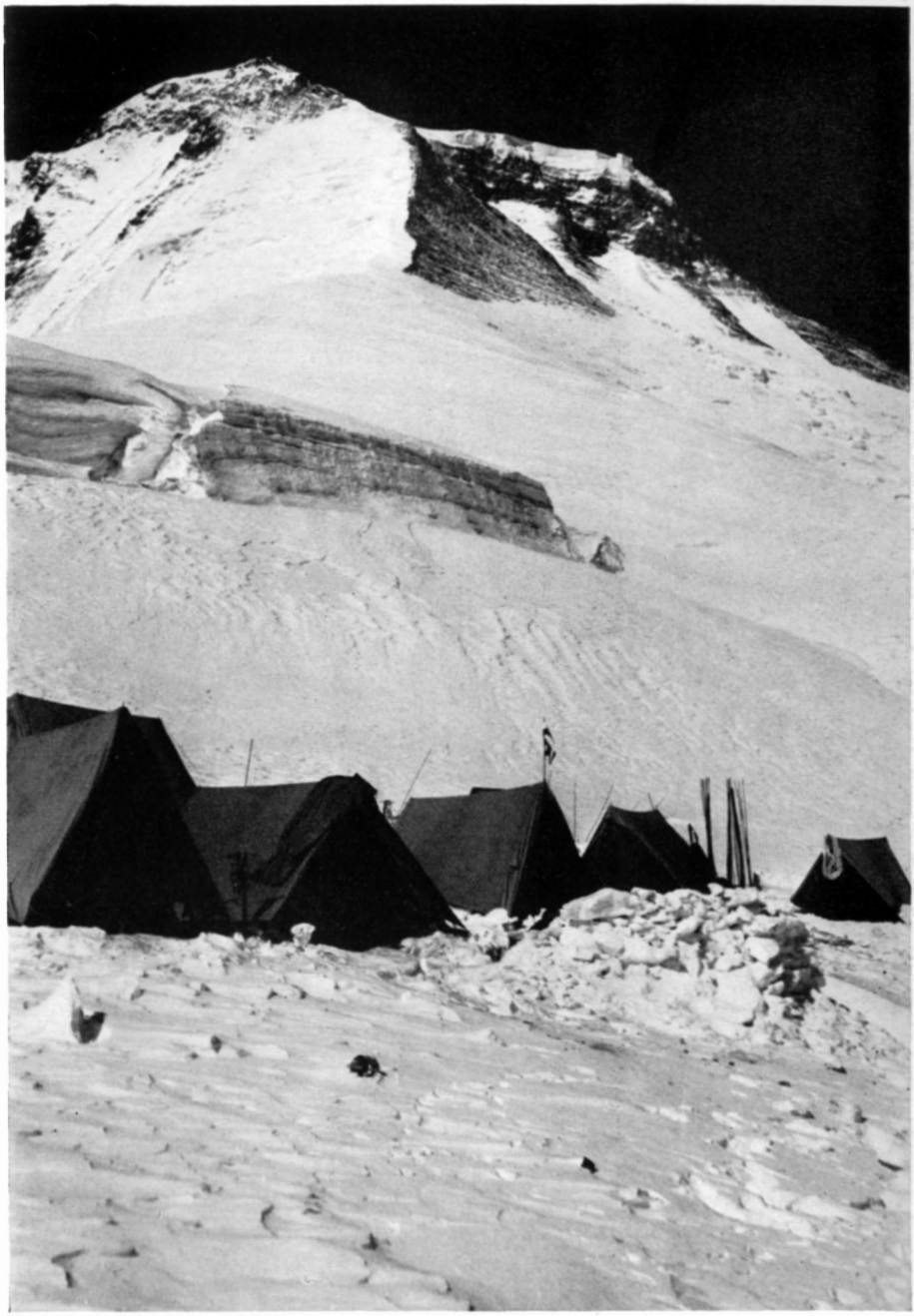
It was Detlef Hecker and Max Eiselin, two members of the 1958 Swiss Expedition, who advised us to test the possibilities of the North-east ridge, irrespective of the unfavourable opinions of the French and the views expressed by the leader of the Swiss reconnaissance, Ing. Lauterburg, and by Dr. Pfisterer, who held that the difficulties of the ridge were comparable with those of the 'Pear'. Both climbers had reached the North-east Col on the 1953 reconnaissance and had had a good look at the ridge.

Our spring-board was Pokhara, to which point most of our $4\frac{1}{2}$ tons of baggage had been flown straight from Bombay. There we met Pasang Dawa Lama and the twelve Sherpas. There, too, we negotiated the enrolment of the necessary 177 lowland porters. We marched by the usual Western route, through Beni, Muri and the Mayangdi-Khola, and reached the site for our Base Camp, to the north of Dhaulagiri, on April 3 after sixteen days. There, by the Mayangdi-Khola glacier, we pitched our tents at 14,764 ft.

I kept on thinking of what the Swiss had urged: 'Have a good look at the North-east Ridge before pushing camps up the North Face.'

Only six days after arriving, E. Vanis, Pasang Dawa Lama and I,

[1] Maurice Herzog, *Annapurna*, p. 93.



Photo, E. Vanis]

DHAULAGIRI, NORTH-EAST RIDGE SEEN FROM CAMP II AT 5,700 M.

with four Sherpas went out to reconnoitre in the direction of the North-east Col, the huge saddle where Dhaulagiri's slopes and ridges join those of Tukucha Peak. On the way we passed below a rock rib some 3,000 ft. high, which, on account of the strong resemblance, we christened ' the Eiger '. After negotiating this decidedly dangerous passage, menaced by falling stones and avalanches, we got a footing on the arm of the Mayangdi-Khola glacier which falls from the North-east Col and pitched a camp at 17,060 ft. Next day we traversed across to Tukucha Peak, so as to study the North-east ridge end on.

Our comparison of the 'Pear' route on the North face and that along the ridge added up to the following assessment:

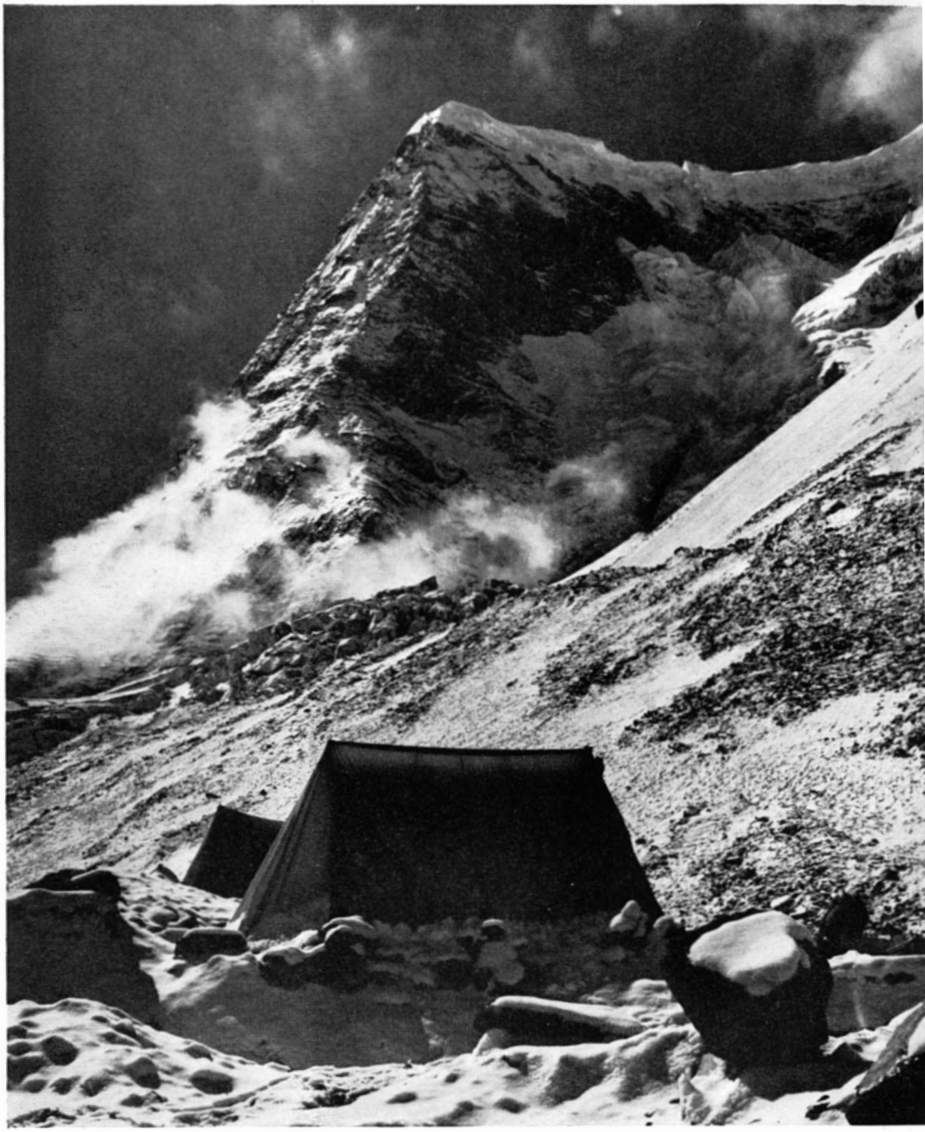
The ' Pear ' consists of outward-sloping slabs, which are extremely dangerous to move on after fresh falls of snow, on account of avalanches. True to tradition, the Dhaulagiri weather provided snow-falls almost every afternoon. The continuation above the ' Pear ' is increasingly difficult, and there is no suitable site for a Camp V ; though in 1954 the Argentinians had used explosives to provide a platform in the rock. In 1958 the Swiss had propped their tents on wobbly aluminium struts.

The route up the North-east ridge leads mainly over steep ice, in which a route can be prepared and made safe even if the weather is not too good. And, because it is possible to keep, for the most part, to the crest of the ridge, the dangers of an avalanche are practically non-existent.

Since it looked as if the technical difficulties ended at about 23,620 ft., we decided on the ridge route. Pasang, whose third Dhaulagiri expedition this was, agreed that the ascent by the North-east ridge was far less dangerous and weeks shorter.

So the reconnaissance was converted without further delay into an assault. We made our rest camp at 17,060 ft. into Camp I, Othmar Kucera and Karl Prein being responsible for making and marking a trail up to it from Base Camp, and equipping it as a support-camp. And while the Sherpas were making their daily carries, the route was simultaneously pushed forward above it. By April 14 Hans Ratay and Heinrich Roiss had settled on a site for Camp II (18,700 ft.) just below the North-east Col. This support-camp in fact became our advanced assault camp. There was continual movement here, the less experienced Sherpas bringing the loads up from Base, while the more tried high-camp veterans ferried the equipment and provisions on to the higher camp.

Our photographer, Stefan Pauer, and our doctor, Wilfried Wehrle, both joined in the mountaineering work whenever necessary. It was this pair which established Camp III at 20,178 ft. on April 21. On the 24th Karl Prein announced over the UKW-walkie-talkie: ' The first tent of Camp IV is up, at 21,325 ft. ; the camp is just below the point where the ridge steepens appreciably.'



Photo, H. Ratay]

DHAULAGIRI, THE SPUR NICK-NAMED 'THE EIGER'.

Three days later Camp IV was ready for occupation. Climbers and Sherpas alike were in high spirits and our success in establishing four high camps within a fortnight had induced a most optimistic mood. We now reckoned on launching the first well-prepared attack on the summit at the beginning of May.

While we were heavily engaged in the business of mounting the assault, fate dealt us a heavy blow. On April 29, not far from Camp II, our team-mate Heinrich Roiss fell into a deep crevasse and was killed. We brought his body down to the Mayangdi-Khola glacier as the last service we could render our friend and laid him to rest in Himalayan earth on a moraine-hillock of the Dhaula-Himal, in full sight of Dhaulagiri.

Oppressed as we were by our friend's death, we decided to go on with the assault on the mountain, as a duty he had bequeathed to us.

When, after four and six days respectively, we reached Camps III and IV again, we found the unoccupied tents completely drifted up with snow. Some of the fabric was torn and stays were broken. They were utterly useless, and the only answer was to dig caves in the snow, very exacting work at over 20,000 ft.

Troubled as we were over Roiss's death, lowered morale prevented our recapturing our earlier pace and drive. A patch of bad weather which now set in matched our mood of depression.

The ice ridge above Camp IV had to be assured with fixed ropes, to allow the high altitude Sherpas to push on up the mountain. All the climbers in turn took a hand in preparing the route to our intended Camp V.

After a fortnight of hard work we had still not reached 23,000 ft. We were constantly driven back to our caves by the gale which tore across the ridge, or by repeated snowstorms. Continuous periods of snow-fall had heaped masses of fresh snow on the ice of the ridge. During the night of May 19–20 a wind-slab broke away and submerged the cave which was our Camp IV. Ratay and the Sherpas Gyaltzen, Pemba Phutar and Pemba Gyaltzen were inside at the time. They would have been asphyxiated had there not been, by a lucky chance, a small crevasse running through the cave ; they owed their lives to the air it allowed them. As it was, it took them three hours to scrape a way out into the open.

We had intended to go for the summit between the 1st and 10th of May. Owing to the tragedy of Roiss and the subsequent foul weather, we were now a long way behind our time-table. A noticeable lack of high-camp provisions and fuel (benzine) was making itself felt. And now, too, we had to reckon daily with the onset of the Monsoon. I therefore made it known that we could only mount one assault on the summit. Every man of the party would put in everything he knew



Photo, E. Vanis]

DHAULAGIRI, CLIMBING BETWEEN CAMPS III AND IV, TUKUCHA PEAK BEHIND.

towards that end and then go straight down to Base Camp. Whoever was then in the best physical condition would make the summit assault.

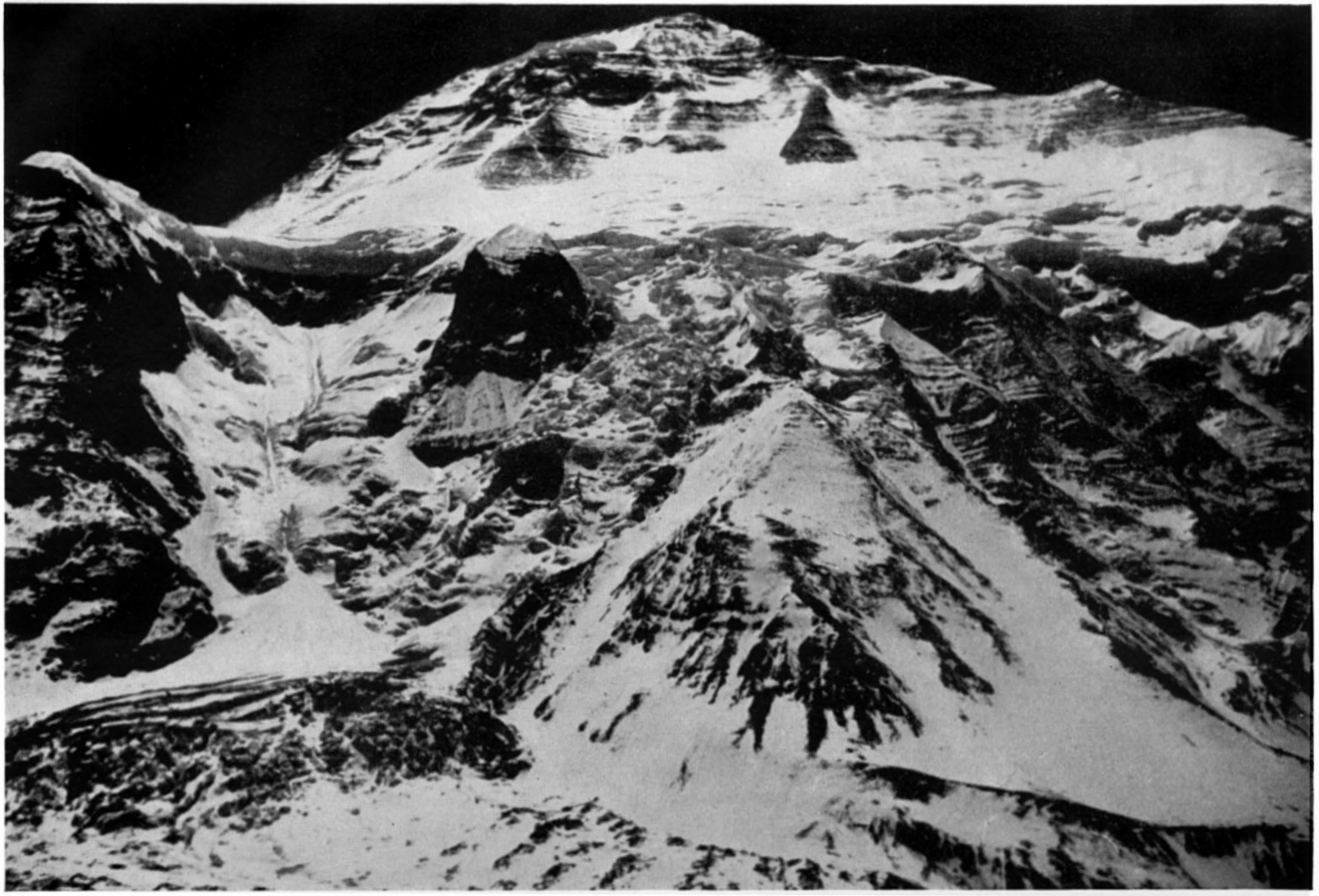
On May 21 Hans Ratay with Pemba Phutar and Pemba Gyaltzen got up to *c.* 23,000 ft., climbing along the ridge to a small rock platform where they left the tents and equipment intended for Camp V. Pasang Dawa Lama and two other Sherpas reached the spot next day, set up the tents and immediately began to make safe the route ahead, up the rock step barring the way, turning the ice slope on rock on the northern side. On May 23 Karl Prein joined the summit-party and on the following day climbed with them over the rock step and established a tent which was our Camp VI, back on the crest of the ridge, in a very exposed place. This was the last high camp, and from it Karl Prein and Pasang Dawa Lama were to make their attempt on the summit. The two Sherpas with them, Pasang and Gyaltzen, climbed down again to Camp V.

This is Karl Prein's account of the final struggle for Dhaulagiri:

'The night was bitterly cold in the tent, and we simply couldn't sleep. Towards morning, when I eventually dozed off, Pasang Dawa Lama woke me with the news that it was 4 a.m. and time to get ready. We breakfasted on a brew of Tsampa (roasted barley-meal) and hot tea. The sky overhead was clear and blue. The Nilgiri peaks and the Annapurna massif seemed close enough to touch. Only the wind was terrible; we had to brace ourselves against it, fight our way into it. We went so slowly that we didn't even suffer from a shortage of oxygen; and there were no technical difficulties to be overcome. It was just the utter inhumanity of the wind. After four hours of climbing, which was sheer driving ourselves beyond our own limits all the time, we were at about 25,600 ft. Neither of us wanted to admit that his toes had lost all sensation and his fingers were numb. It was Pasang who said: "Perhaps there will be less wind tomorrow?" The words were the signal for a retreat.

'When we got back to our tent we were horrified to find that the gale had ripped open a side panel, and tried to effect emergency repairs with string. The second night up there was worse than the first, and colder. The temperature was the same as in the open and the wind kept on blowing snow in on us.

'At daylight we tried to battle our way up again. It was May 26. The sky was cloudy today and the gale whipped the clouds across the mountain with tremendous velocity, then we and everything around us were engulfed in them again. The wind was far worse than before. Radio All-India announced that the wind-speed was from 70 to 100 m.p.h. at 23,000 ft. We did not even get as far as the point reached on the previous day, but turned and sought our emergency shelter. We wondered whether the tent would still be there. It was, but the rent had grown much larger. As we lay in it, wrapped in our sleeping-



Photo, H. Ratay]

THE 12-KILOMETRE-WIDE NORTH FACE OF DHAULAGIRI.

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bags, we suddenly saw the heads of the Sherpas Gyaltzen and Pasang, who were supposed to be in support at Camp V. They reported that on the previous day, while they were on the way down, a fall of stone had buried their tent and everything in it; they had been unable to recover anything. They had spent the night bivouacking in the open and had now climbed up to us in search of shelter and warm clothes.

'So, for this third night, we were a foursome, jammed close together, in our poor shelter.

'On the morning of the 27th Pasang Dawa and I made one more effort. We didn't get far because it began to snow hard again. The flurry was the harbinger of the Monsoon. There was nothing for it but to climb down.

'We all tied onto one rope. Slowly we moved down the mountain, belaying one another all the way down, finding the handrail of fixed rope a wonderful comfort. It was a bitter fight against Nature's unbridled forces.

'But now we are safely back with you, and nothing more can happen to us.'

Othmar Kucera and I lay in the cave which was Camp IV. Our job was to climb up and support our friends of the assault-party, if they had not returned in three days. The third day was running out; if our team-mates did not come in by evening, we would be off in the morning to look for them.

It was about 2 p.m. I had the little UKW-set outside the cave to tune in for the hourly communication. I thought I caught a glimpse of four figures moving through the blizzard. I tried to pierce the pother of driven snow, straining my eyes, but I could see nothing more, and decided it had been a trick of strained nerves, a hallucination; however, to make absolutely certain I called Othmar to come and watch with me. After a little while we both saw our team-mates simultaneously. Yes, there they were, they were coming down, and there were four of them!

We shouted, but they could not hear us; the storm swallowed up my words as they left my mouth. We were longing for our friends to be safely back with us, but they moved down far too slowly to satisfy our anxiety. Finally they were here; they looked terrible—exhausted, shrunken together, emaciated. . . .

Pasang Dawa mumbled: 'Very bad, very bad, it was unpossible.' Karl Prein had to fight to stammer the words out of his dried-up larynx. 'Don't be cross,' he muttered. 'We didn't get to the top. The first day, we could see the way clear ahead of us—not more than five or six hours—but the gale almost swept us off the ridge, and we couldn't bear the cold.'

I said: ' The main thing is, you are all safe. Come into the cave and get some shelter from the wind.'

We had warmed up the last of our tinned meat and got hot drinks ready against their return; but they could eat nothing and only wanted to drink. After a short rest they moved on down towards Camp II and a little later, having struck Camp IV, we followed them.

The bad weather lasted three days. Three feet of new snow fell at Camp II, putting a brake on all climbing activities. Even the descent to Base Camp over the deep snow which only lay on the surface of the crevassed glacier became a serious proposition. So dangerous had this sector become that the Sherpas refused to bring the equipment down and the greater part of it had to be left at the North-east Col.

So ended the seventh attempt on Dhaulagiri. We had done no better than our predecessors. The mountain had repulsed us with its strongest weapons, avalanches, falling stones, blizzards and gales. But even if our party was denied the good fortune to have reached the summit, our reconnaissance and the preparation of the North-east ridge have at least shown the way, and a definitely safe way at that, to our successors. And just as we climbed on the shoulders of those who came before us, so we are glad to make all our discoveries and experiences available to others who may follow us. For in Himalayan climbing, as in the world of Science, everybody contributes his stone to the cairn of ultimate achievement.

This year yet another Swiss expedition is due to make an attempt on the peak; in 1961 a British party is due to try its luck. Climbers recognise no constraining bounds of nationalism, no narrowness of mind. We wish our successors better luck than we had, and complete success. We are certainly not going to quarrel with our fate, because we did not tread the summit of Dhaulagiri.

But on our homeward way, as we looked back at our peak over the birch-wood cross that marks Heini Roiss's grave, we knew that for us Dhaulagiri was no longer the ' Great White Mountain ' of the Himalaya, but Dhaulagiri the pitiless peak—for it had robbed us of our friend and comrade.