DR. JULIUS KUGY

BY PAUL KALTENEGGER[1]

(Translated by Hugh Merrick)

THE pioneers who went out from the British Isles to the Alps in the second half of the nineteenth century can rightly be regarded as typical products of the Victorian age. That grand old Austrian, Julius Kugy, just as clearly evinced the characteristics of a man of culture during the Emperor Franz Josef's day.

Kugy could speak no English and never saw the white cliffs of Dover. Yet every summer for more than a normal life's span he met English climbers, grew to know them intimately and learned, as he frequently declared, to admire and value the Englishman's reticence and reserve, qualities so much akin to his own nature and incomparable sense of tradition.

His encounters among the hills resulted in many cordial acquaintanceships and also in closer ties of friendship, as particularly in his relationship with J. P. Farrar, whom he called his very dear friend and who accorded Kugy's *Aus dem Leben eines Bergsteigers* perhaps the finest notice a mountaineering book has ever had, when he reviewed it in the *Alpine Journal*; and again with H. E. G. Tyndale, who through his masterly translation laid at least a part of Kugy's writings open to English-speaking climbers, and whose memoir in *A.J.* 54. 293 so completely revealed Kugy's personality that it is almost impossible to add a relevant brush-stroke to the picture he then painted.

I was lucky enough to come to know Kugy very early on and to have been with him a great deal during the last twenty years of his life. So I should like to say a few words which spring from my personal memories of him.

I knew of Kugy by hearsay long before the first World War. He had already achieved legendary stature in the Julian Alps at the time when, shortly after the turn of the century, mountain-loving relatives led me on my first tentative and very modest activities in the group. The fame of his achievements had been noised abroad by his favourite guides, the Komacs, the Pesamoscas, the Oitzingers, who accompanied him on his climbs, from hamlet to hamlet, from house to house among those ranges. In the Kronau region, in the Trenta, in the high Friulian valleys and in

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that part of the Julians which at that time was still Carinthian, there was hardly a mountain villager who did not know the name of Kugy.

During four sombre years the mountains retreated into a remote distance; even when the war was over, other essentials raised an insuperable foreground barrier. We were all busy shaping a new existence out of the ruins of bygone days. The Julian Alps stood forgotten. Julius Kugy too was far from mind.

The Graben is one of the most elegant streets in the heart of Vienna. There, in the jewellers' displays, ladies can see the most valuable of precious stones; the well-dressed man can find everything he needs for his appearances in the great world of fashion. And a young law student with covetous eyes and a slender purse moved past the bookshops, denying himself the many treasures there arrayed. Till, one day, he stopped as though spell-bound before one of their windows; for, lording it over everything else, there in the middle, stood a splendid volume, Dr. Julius Kugy's *Aus dem Leben eines Bergsteigers*. The jacket was resplendent with a glorious picture of Triglav. It was easy enough to walk in and buy the book, but I should have to dig deep into my resources. It was Christmastide; and, in the end, I persuaded myself that for once in one's life one could be allowed to give oneself a Christmas present. Then I went home and read, and read and read.

In the Western Alps I could not keep up with Kugy; but in the Julians there was hardly a mountain or a path of which he wrote that I did not know and had not visited. And I knew everyone Kugy had met among those mountains, at least all those who were still alive when I was a young man. I wrote a long, effusive, enthusiastic letter to Kugy. A few days later I received his friendly letter of thanks. During the next few months we exchanged a round dozen of letters; and in the early summer I made my first pilgrimage to Wolfsbach, now Valbruna, where Kugy had already established his headquarters in the Oitzinger home. I saw the big frame of a kindly, elderly man; two amiable, wise eyes looked at me through rimless glasses; his head was a little older, a little greyer than in the frontispiece to his book. His topic of conversation was mountains—naturally first and foremost the Julians. It is an inexhaustible subject. Although I have visited Kugy dozens of times, exchanged hundreds of letters with him, over a period of nearly twenty years, I still have the feeling that there is much I have missed, that I did not cover the whole ground. There must have been so much more to discuss, to record. And how I have reproached myself, in retrospect, for neglecting to take notes, in broad terms, of all this wise old man said. Clearly, I missed the chance of becoming the great man's Boswell.

During my early visits he was careful not to reveal himself too freely. Later, he gained confidence, allowing me to share his thoughts and enlisting me at times as his collaborator. As we conversed together, he

came out of his shell to a degree not usually permitted by his natural reserve.

And then, besides the mountains there was music—yet another limitless source of conversation for two men devoted to that lovely art. Here, as in mountain matters, he was strictly conservative, preferring the classical composers and the old Italians; he was little interested in following the developments which marked the beginning of the twentieth century. When he spoke of the family home in Trieste, of his extensive education and of the great business which he took over on the premature death of his father, the theme was work—the third of the three great signs under which his long life had unfolded: work, music, and mountains.

Kugy was a good old Austrian. In 1918 his world, too, had collapsed; he could not reconcile himself with the new one. But he accepted the event with resignation and was grateful to his Italian masters because they did not demand of him any deviation from, or any embarrassing reorientation of, his convictions, or the renunciation of his old loyalties. But it was a bitter blow for him to see his old home of Trieste recede from the status of the leading trade-centre of a great empire to that of an Italian provincial city.

There might be a tendency today to belittle the performances on which Kugy's fame as a climber rests. Indeed it would not be altogether surprising if the compiler of a modern French climbing guide failed to grade any single climb of Kugy's as technically higher than 'Moderate'. But that, surely, is not the point. In this era of supersonic flight it would be quite as right, or rather as wrong, to write in derogatory terms of Blériot's epoch-making 'hop' across the Channel.

Perhaps Kugy, even in his best years, was never outstanding from a purely technical angle, although he was certainly a first class amateur; never a burden to his guides, but content to concede the lead to his professional companions on difficult rock pitches, or when it came to route-finding in an ice-fall. If he decided against a new ascent, which others wished to attempt, it was always because he felt there were too many external hazards, or because it was not the kind of route which appealed to him, never because he feared technical difficulties. Consequently, the modern Dolomite climbs failed to attract him, as also did the Chamonix aiguilles; he preferred the Verte, as a mountain, to the Dru. However, as I have said elsewhere, he regretted not having made the first ascent of Triglav's North face; and the great Brenva routes opened up by Graham Brown would have been much to his taste, in the company of a guide like Joseph Croux at the height of his powers.

Kugy was not vain; but he had a clear perception of his own worth and knew well enough how to answer criticism born of envy. Even in the elevated style of his writings, his line of thought remained simple and intelligible. He went out of his way to avoid philosophical discussions of

the grounds for mountaineering; the key to his very existence was love of everything beautiful, of mountains, of nature herself, and intense pleasure in all the good things that life has to offer.

It was inevitable that, in communing with him, one respected this grand old man and never transgressed the barriers which it was natural to preserve in the face of someone so much older than oneself. He was such a master of every facet of human life that he, from his side, knew with infinite tact how to bridge every difference in age, every social distinction; so that converse with him went its way sincerely, straight from the heart and free from all constraint.

Within the framework wherein lay his life, a framework he never attempted to exceed, he attained the highest goal to which a human being can aspire. His farewell to snow and ice and to the great peaks, in his book, and the last thoughts with which he takes leave of the reader rank among the loveliest passages ever written in truly lovely language by a gifted poet.

I saw Kugy for the last time just before the second war when, on a return journey from the south, I was his guest at his home in the Via San Anastasio. We little thought that this was to be our very last meeting. Shortly afterwards we were irretrievably separated by the irresistible forces unleashed about us. We continued to write letters, till one day came the news of his accident, his illness and, not long afterwards, of his death.[2]

Twenty years have gone by since then. The number of those who knew him personally grows fewer and fewer. Yet his book will keep his memory alive when the last of his friends has followed him to his rest.

> 'He who has lived to merit approbation
> From all the best of his own time and day
> Lived not alone in his own generation;
> He lives for aye.'

[2] February 5, 1944.