

THE TATRAS IN SEPTEMBER, 1965

By SIR JOHN HUNT

(Three illustrations: nos. 12-14)

IT all started in Spartak Camp in the West Caucasus in 1958, when our party met a delightful group of climbers from Czechoslovakia. We saw some of them again in Prague on our way home and received a pressing invitation to come back and climb with them in their own Tatra mountains. I had kept up a correspondence with one Vilem Heckel, a brilliant photographer; and a brightly coloured scarf, with the legend HIGH TATRAS splashed across it, a gift from one of the girls in the party, had been a constant reminder of that invitation.

Since the Caucasus expedition, I had found enormous satisfaction in the experience of adding groups of young people to climbing parties on fairly ambitious journeys: to North-east Greenland, and through the Pindus mountains. The Tatras seemed to be a very suitable area for another such experience, offering a variety of mountain activities which would cater for differing interests and which would be suitable for a mixed party of both sexes, within a wide bracket of age.

Although the idea had been put in my mind by the Czechs, it happened that the journey was mainly planned with Polish mountaineers. During a lecture tour for the British Council in 1964 I had the chance to discuss the matter, both with members of the Polish Mountaineering Club and on the political level. My wife and I spent thirty-six hours in the mountains, during which we did a climb and walked through part of this beautiful and impressive little range. The die was cast and a programme was drawn up for a visit in September, 1965. One of the most pleasing features of this project was the fact that, through the good offices of the British Council, it was worked out in every main essential between the Poles, the Czechs and ourselves. The whole journey lasted five weeks, of which only two were spent in the mountains, and I will confine myself to this, as being most likely to interest readers of the *Alpine Journal*. First, a word about the mountains themselves and the people who live there.

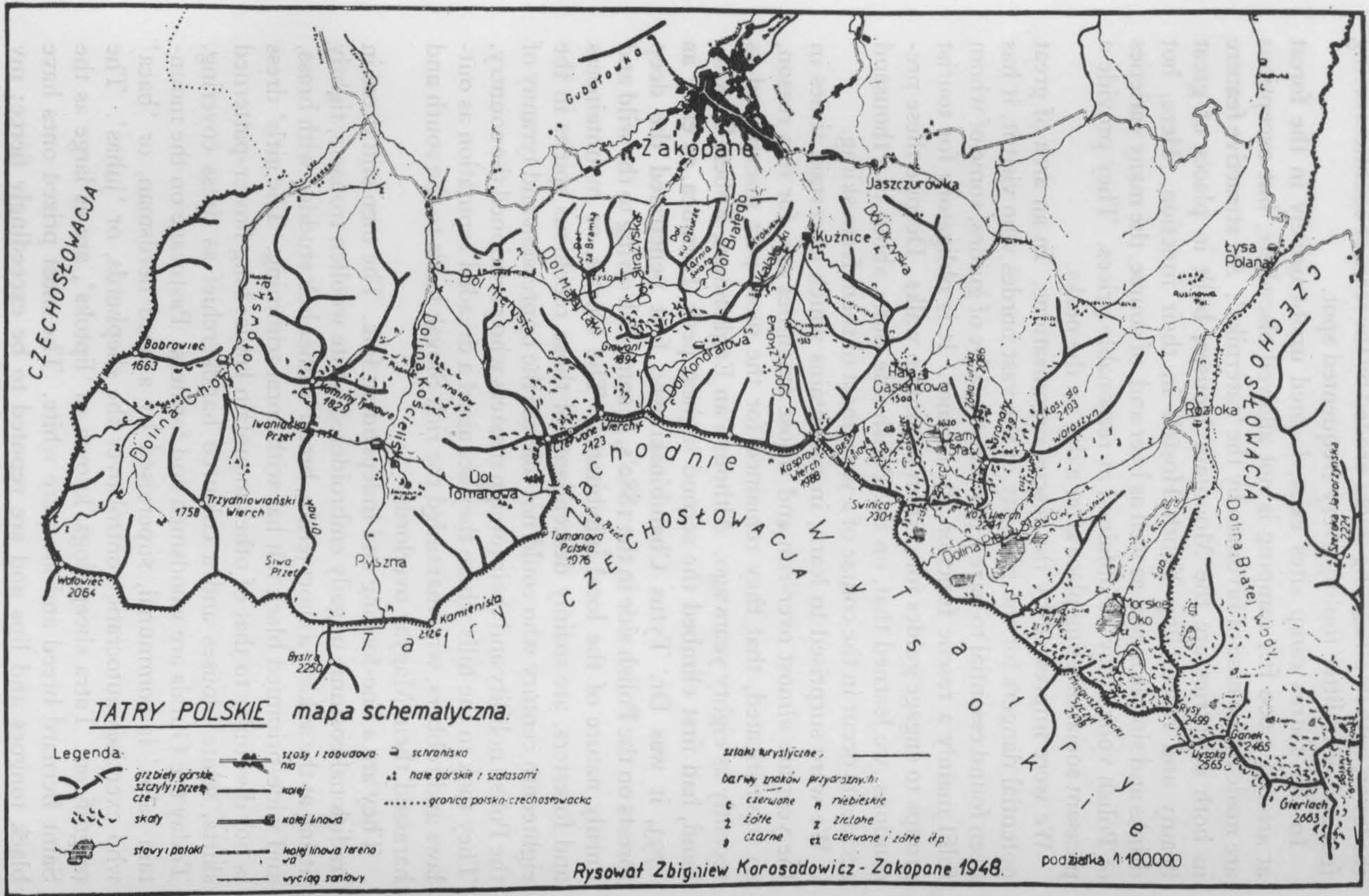
The Tatras form only a small part—some thirty miles in length—of the Carpathian chain, stretching from the eastern frontier of Germany in a great crescent towards the Black Sea. They are the only rugged and mountainous section of this otherwise rounded and forest-clad range and they form part of the frontier between Poland and Czechoslovakia. The basic structure is limestone, which predominates at the western end of the mountain group, but granite obtrudes strikingly in the centre and

east. These are the High Tatras with a dramatic skyline of jagged peaks and pinnacles. The result is a rich variety of scenery and choice of activity. In the west there are the strong contrasts of emerald green alp and dark forest and white rock, there are many flowers of many species; it is grand walking country over broad uplands. The limestone abounds in caves, not yet fully explored, and there is much scope still for new climbing routes. In winter, this is the ski-touring terrain *par excellence*.

In the higher granite country further east there is a distinct resemblance to Skye, albeit on a bigger scale: many of the summits exceed 8,000 ft. and the highest, Gerlach (formerly Stalin), is 8,730 ft. The main difference is in the foothills and foreground, where alpine pastures lead up to the forest, which skirts the range to a height of about 4,000 ft. Numerous lakes lie cradled between the buttresses supporting the frontier ridge; some of these are very deep (Czerny Staw beneath Rysy is 270 ft.). The rock climbing, on granite which is mostly sound, is magnificent. Routes have been developed in great variety and detail, and now include some which are 2,000 ft. in length and whose difficulties are of the highest order. The new guide books look good but have not yet been translated from Polish or Czech, although we were given useful notes in German and a few of the pre-war German editions still exist.

This, too, is the area of 'piste' and competition skiing, where two F.I.S. meetings and one Winter Olympic Games have been held, at Zakopane, the tourist centre on the Polish side. A *téléférique* carries skiers, as well as summer tourists, up to the frontier ridge at Kasprowy Wierch (6,500 ft.) from Poland, and Lomnica (8,642 ft.) from Slovakia.

On both sides of the frontier the Tatras are preserved as a National Park, in which chamois are numerous and a few bears, lynx and the occasional golden eagle still survive. With more authoritarian forms of government than we enjoy, the Czechs and Poles have succeeded to a commendable degree in coping with the millions of tourists in winter and summer, without spoiling the natural amenities. Clearly colour-marked footpaths, particularly on the Polish side, are splendidly constructed and maintained, but are not too numerous; experienced mountain walkers would say that they are too good. Chains, iron hand-and footholds and ladders enable even the inept to reach some of the summits and negotiate parts of the ridges in safety. It is obligatory to stay on the paths, unless you are a bona fide 'taternik' (or member of the Polish Mountaineering Club); alert Park wardens see to it that you do so. Watching large groups of plainsmen, some of them elderly and many inappropriately dressed, moving about in these mountains, I felt that both the paths and the rules appertaining to them were—with the aforesaid exceptions—correct. It was inevitable to draw comparisons with our own Snowdonia National Park which were unfavourable to



SKETCH-MAP OF THE POLISH HIGH TATRAS

the latter, with its straggling tracks eroded by the scars of countless erring feet and with litter fouling every frequented spot.

In the Tatras camp sites exist, located unobtrusively in the forest at around 3,000 ft.; camping is not allowed elsewhere, but exceptions are made in the case of bivouacs by the 'taterniks'. An attractive feature in both countries are the Mountain Houses, built in places of great beauty and resembling Youth Hostels in their function. Here, hot drinks and simple meals, as well as beer and, of course, the many varieties of Polish vodka may be obtained at reasonable prices. They provide a pleasant social meeting place after a day on the peaks.

We were impressed by the rescue organisations. In an area of great potential dangers for the majority of the vast hordes who visit it, it has been found essential to have a permanent cadre of guides, some of whom fulfil mainly a rescue function in summer. It is obligatory for tourist groups to engage guides for certain mountain walks. Despite these precautions, we learned that, on the Polish side alone, about two thousand accidents occur in the course of a year, most of them from skiing.

We were surprised to learn, in mountains which at certain times in the year are almost over-run and whose amenities are, for this reason, so sophisticated, that they remained for the most part unexplored as recently as eighty years ago. Although an Englishman, Robert Townshend, had first climbed the second highest peak, Lomnica, as early as 1793, it was Dr. Tytus Chalubinski who first penetrated the deep forests on the Polish side in the 1880's, at some risk owing to the wild and unruly nature of the local inhabitants. The Gurals, or mountaineers and foresters, are mainly descendants of those rebellious spirits in the eighteenth century who could not tolerate the oppression and tyranny of the Polish nobility and their foreign masters who partitioned the country. They took to the hills where they acquired a dreaded reputation as outlaws and robbers, who marauded the rich Slovak lands to the south and harassed their Magyar overlords.

They are a fine-looking and independent folk. The men still dress in traditional costume of gaily embroidered white woollen trousers, tightly fitting at the ankles; a short jerkin, broad leather belt studded with brass, and wide-brimmed black felt hat with coral trimming. The girls' dress is not dissimilar to that of other mountain lands: long flower-patterned skirts, white blouses and a coloured handkerchief as dress covering. Today the Gurals are woodsmen and farmers. Pasturage on the mountain 'alps' is communal, supervised by a head herdsman, or 'baca' who exercises autocratic control over the shepherds, or 'juhas'. The magnificent Tatra sheep-dogs, known as 'liptoks', are as large as the Saint Bernard breed and are pure white. The most prized ones have black tongues and lips and are reputed to be exceedingly fierce; my friend Jan Szczepanski, who translated 'The Ascent of Everest' into



Photo: A. Gregory]

SLOVAK HIGH TATRAS: RYSY (2,503 M.) FROM THE WEST RIDGE OF VYSOKA (2,565 M.).

(No. 12)



Photo: M. Lichý]

SLOVAK HIGH TATRAS: IN THE MIDDLE DISTANCE (CENTRE) VYSOKA AND DRACI STIT (DRAGON PEAK).

(No. 13)



Photo: A. Gregory]

POLISH HIGH TATRAS: MNICH (THE MONK), 2,068 M., EAST FACE. THE ROCK IS GRANITE.

(No. 14)

Polish, told me that he took some 'liptoks' on an expedition to Spitsbergen, where they regrettably collaborated with polar bears.

The Gurals are also great story tellers, singers and dancers who have, through these means, preserved the history of their turbulent ancestors. Twice we attended a Gural dance, around a huge blaze of logs in the forest at night. We watched and listened entranced as groups of men and women in their attractive costumes sang and enacted stories of robber raids, village squabbles and love dramas. They are a cheerful and generous people with a keen, Sherpa-like sense of humour; but fierce-tempered and quick on the draw. We were told that after a wedding feast, when the vodka had flowed freely, fights break out and hospitals for miles around are filled with wedding guests.

Gural arts and crafts are also preserved. Wood-carving predominates, especially in the quaint old wooden churches which are a feature of the northern foothills, or 'Podhale'. Painting on glass, rug-making and pottery also make attractive gifts from the region. A few craftsmen still beat out silver ornaments from pre-war coinage.

Our party, thirty-eight strong, arrived in the Slovak Tatras on September 1 and were met, as arranged, by a group of climbers appointed by the Association *Tchécho-Slovaque de Tourisme*. With their help we were also to meet and befriend many more Czechs and Slovaks and walk and climb with them during the four days we spent in their country, based on a camp in the forest below the Mountain House of Popradske Pleso. Only two of these days were fine but, divided into mixed groups of both nationalities and sexes, some of us managed to do some good climbs in that area: on the South faces of Volova, Ganek and Zabi Kon ('Frog on Horseback'). Two of the groups enjoyed a six-hour traverse of a splendid summit, Vysoka, which is one of the most rewarding of all the climbs we did. Our stay was all too short, especially from a climber's point of view; for most of the High Tatras lie in Slovakia. We bade a sad farewell to our many new-made friends and passed through the frontier at Lysa Polana into Poland on September 6, to spend the next ten days with a group of Polish 'taterniks'.

Again we divided into groups, camping at different sites along the range and carrying out a 'general post' every three days; this enabled us all to see the whole of the Polish Tatras and to sample a variety of activities: caving, climbing, ridge walking and helping the farmers with the harvest. The weather continued to be atrociously bad; in fact, we had only two more fine days, and a great deal of rain and some snow-fall. But despite these handicaps some climbs were done, although not in the highest category of difficulty. Outstandingly good routes included: the traverse of the Mengusoviescki peaks and Cubrina (J. I. Disley and my wife); the South face of Zamaria Turnia (grade V) (H. G. Nicol and R. J. Orgill); a route on the West face of Koscielec

'IV-V' (Andrejz Kus and myself); and a new climb, grade V, with an 'A' pitch) in the West Tatras (R. Prager and Kus).

The end of this part of our programme in Poland came on September 16, with a perversely dazzling autumn day. We returned regretfully from our mountain camps to Zakopane, to continue our journey in the plains. Some of us have firmly resolved to go back to this beautiful and challenging little range, and to meet again the delightful friends we found there.