

Italian climbing between the wars

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(Translation: S. K. Armitstead)

It evolved all over the world at an incredible speed. At first it was essentially of an exploratory and scientific nature. It was the students of nature, and above all the geologists, who overcame the mystery and magic of the great mountains. In more recent times climbing has become primarily a sport: a recent conquest of civilisation.

It was born of the feelings of love of nature inspired by the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montaigne and other French writers. Its birthday was the ascent of Mont Blanc by the Swiss geologist de Saussure, who was the first to see the mountains through the admiring eyes of a poet, and the publication of his book *Travels in the Alps*.

In an age in which scientists, like Tyndall, were ashamed to confess that they climbed Mont Blanc for the pure pleasure of scaling it and took a barometer with them as an excuse, the English taught and spread the pleasures of climbing; the first explorers of our Alps were Englishmen.

Every summit was reached by the most easily accessible route; then in order to know the mountains better, they had to climb them by every face. Walls, buttresses and cracks yielded one by one. They sought the difficult, the even more difficult problems. They reached the sixth grade, then VI+; from pitons and karabiners to stirrups and bolts. All the great North faces, hitherto inviolate, were conquered. Then, as the Alps were no longer enough, they sought new virgin peaks in the Himalaya and the Andes. Here too man set his foot on almost all the great ones, like the eight thousanders. Mountaineering continues to evolve in men and in disciplines, from winter ascents to solitary ones and most direct routes, and also in gear and equipment. For the tourist too the mountains have become an irresistible attraction. Yet not very long ago they were shrouded in curtains of mystery, myth and suspicion. Little more than a generation has passed since the time when the women in the valleys, to frighten their children, showed them the mountaineers of those days, and described them as men who lived with witches among the highest peaks.

Before the Great War, the technique of free climbing reached its zenith and gave birth to a new concept, that of using the first devices which made it possible to enlarge the field of action, extend the limit of difficulty even further and increase safety. In 1908 the Austrian Eckenstein introduced the modern crampons and short ice-axe. Two years later the Tyrolean guide Fichtl produced the piton. Otto Herzog experimented with karabiners and the first felt-soled shoes were put on the market. In the same period the Austrian Paul Preuss, however, turned his back on artificial aids and amazed the climbing world with his solitary victories including the very fine East wall of the Campanile Basso di

Brenta. But artificial climbing, which immediately became a matter of controversy and open to subjective interpretation, gained the upper hand. It was the end of the era of Preuss, who boasted that he had never driven a piton into a rock, and impulsively climbed faces as soon as they appeared in his field of vision, going down unaided by the same routes by which he made his ascents. However, he fell in 1913 when only twenty-seven on the North buttress of the Mandlkogel, a victim of his own theories. Now the piton, the karabiner and the rope were no longer used merely for safety, but also as an aid to climbing, to replace a missing hold. The period of artificial aids opened a great new field of action to the more daring mountaineers, and one by one faces and buttresses were conquered which had previously been considered unattainable.

Immediately after the First World War it was the German climbers, driven by will-power and stubborn determination, who achieved greater feats than those previously accomplished. The great gymnasium of the Munich school, reared many masters of classical and modern climbing. How often, while looking through climbing literature, do we come across these names: Kaisergebirge, Wilder Kaiser, Fleischbank, Totenkirchl . . .

The Munich school was born, and Bavarian technique spread. Guided by the notable technique of the Munichers, a group of climbers arose in Italy who were to destroy the German predominance and overturn so many myths. Let us look more deeply into this period, which has an enormous importance for modern Italian climbing.

Between 1925 and 1930, a profound revolution shook the foundations of traditional mountaineering concepts. It was a wind from across the Alps. The level reached by Preuss, Dülfer, Piaz and Dibona seemed to mark the final limit that could not be surpassed. Already the greater achievements of these pioneers constituted a peak which very few Italian climbers were capable of reaching. Now new names and highly trained teams were arriving from Munich. New techniques were tried out on the limestone faces of the Wetterstein and the Kaisergebirge. Pitons and karabiners, double ropes, pendulum traverses, these are the technical instruments of intrepid men driven on by an almost aggressive spirit of conquest, animated by a heroically superhuman concept of climbing, embodied in a spiritual movement in action in the German-speaking countries.

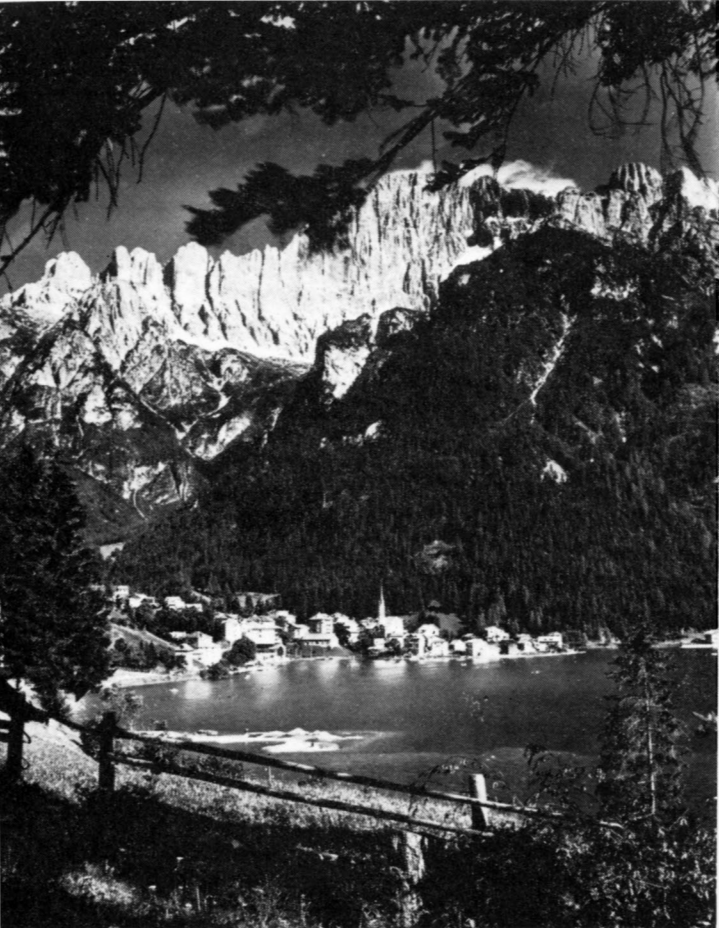
Meanwhile in Italy Simon and Rossi had already conquered the North wall of the Pelmo in the Dolomites. The limit of extreme difficulty had been reached. It was finally surpassed by a young guide, Emil Solleder, on the Furchetta, the Sass Maor and the enormous North-west face of the Civetta, the wall of walls, appearing on the Pordoi road like a mythical wall, superior to any he had dreamed of or imagined. On it he carried out his magnificent *direttissima* with Lettenbauer, crowning the scale of difficulties with the perfect example of the extremely difficult, the sixth grade.

The superiority of German-speaking rock climbers seemed so clear and indisputable that many people were by now convinced that Italian climbing was irremediably condemned to a state of humiliating inferiority, and on our own



57 *Monte Pelmo and Selva di Cadore.* Photo: R. W. Clark

home ground at that. The new concepts of climbing echo through the pages of Prati, of Rudatis and of Berti, and sounded like a spur to our youth, but still Italian climbers were regarded askance, and a foreigner took the liberty of leaving in a cleft of the Solleder route on the Civetta the ironic words: 'this is not food for Italians'. However, in those very years a new generation of Italian climbers was growing up, which soon was to reach and surpass foreign standards; the Dimai brothers, Micheluzzi, Comici, Videsott and others after them.



58 *Civetta.*
Photo: M.
Wright

These men had been trained step by step; inspired with a great love and passion for the mountains, free from all glorification and above any tiresome competitive spirit, they became celebrities, celebrated that is to say in the restricted world of the specialists. Mountaineers were still modest then, and the victorious climbers returning to the refuge did not find hordes of photographers and reporters awaiting them. Such was the situation in the years before 1930, and in that year Attilio Tissi and Giovanni Andrich from Belluno made their splendid conquests on the nearby Civetta. The Torre Venezia and the Torre Trieste, their first victories, gave them an exact measure of their own capabilities. Emilio Comici from Trentino was also involved in this first phase which saw the opening up by Italians of numerous grade six routes. To Emilio Comici in particular we owe a profound study of technique, the development of progress in artificial climbing, and the first idea of a systematic setting out of the theory of climbing. Meanwhile Tissi and Andrich set out on the way to the ultimate in difficulty and long distance, on which it was considered madness for an Italian team to venture: the 'Solleder' on the Civetta. Anybody looking through the pages of the book in the Vazzoler refuge, a precious document in which are inscribed the finest names of the last forty years of world climbing, will find a brief note: '31 August 1930—Civetta—North-west wall—Solleder route—



59 *Tre Cime di Lavaredo*. Photo: Italian State Tourist Dept.

Lettenbauer—Set out at 1.30 from Vazzoler—assault at 4.30—Arrived at summit at 18.00—Descent by normal route in 1 hour—missed the path in the dark near the Schenal del Bec—at Coldai refuge at 20.00—a really daring and extremely difficult ascent—1st Italian ascent and 1st ascent without bivouac.’ It is all there, those lines simply showing that, thanks to Attilio Tissi’s team, the inferiority complex of Italian mountaineering had been dissolved for ever and the way to new, incredible victories opened up through his work and that of his companions and the other great climbers already mentioned.

What makes this and the successive undertakings of Tissi even more dazzling is the purity of spirit, still common in climbing at that time, with love of the mountains as its only impetus, the absence of polemic or exhibitionist motives, (even though the ‘food which was not for Italians’ must have tasted very indigestible at that time to the author of the famous inscription) and above all simplicity.

Having given just prominence to the figure of Attilio Tissi, I will emphasise that if it is true that Emil Solleder gave an authoritative opening to the era of the sixth grade by conquering the North-west wall of the Civetta, for the Italians Emilio Comici emerged as the originator of native sixth-graders and the great master of artificial climbing.

Among the most formidable achievements of those years I will quote the South buttress of the Marmolada, forced by Micheluzzi, a new route on the North-west Civetta opened by Comici, and an undertaking which really shook the mountaineering world, that of the Dimai brothers and Comici who in 1933 conquered the North wall of the Cima Grande di Lavaredo after repeated attempts and reconnaissances. This was the first Dolomite climb in which systematic recourse was had to pitons as an aid to progress. The first 250 m of the face were scaled almost entirely by artificial means.

Let us think what the appearance of the fantastic wall of the North face of the Cima Grande must have been in the years preceding its conquest; with its (for those days) absurd overhangs, it was the very prototype of the impossible, and nobody dared set foot on it. Nevertheless climbers like Tissi, Steger, Stösser, and Aschenbrenner had paused under it, and some of them had even carried out attempts.

It was at this time that Emilio Comici, in company with Mary Varale, arrived at Lecco and sharpened the claws of the Lecco climbers who, already potentially strong, learned from the *maestro* the technique and the secret of facing up to the most compelling difficulties and conquering them. It was an exhilarating period: in a few years a large number of harder routes were traced and ever more difficult itineraries forced. The German ascendancy over the Dolomites had at last been overcome.

In the Western Alps the Germans gained a further success with the first ascent of the North wall of the Grandes Jorasses, repeated barely two days later by our great climbers Giusti Gervasutti and Renato Chabod, held back by misfortune in their attempt to be the first.

Galvanised by Comici's example, the Italian school made incredible progress in the Dolomites and was credited with all the new routes—Carlesso conquered the South face of the Torre Trieste, Alvisè Andrich forced the North-west face of the Punta Civetta, Soldà and Vinatzer traced two routes at the limit of possibility on the South side of the Marmolada, on the Punta Rocca and the Penia, Carlesso again overcame the North-west wall of the Torre di Valgrande. Other magnificent routes, scarcely inferior to those mentioned, were opened up by the same climbers and by Gilberti, Tissi, Videsott, Detassis and Castiglioni.

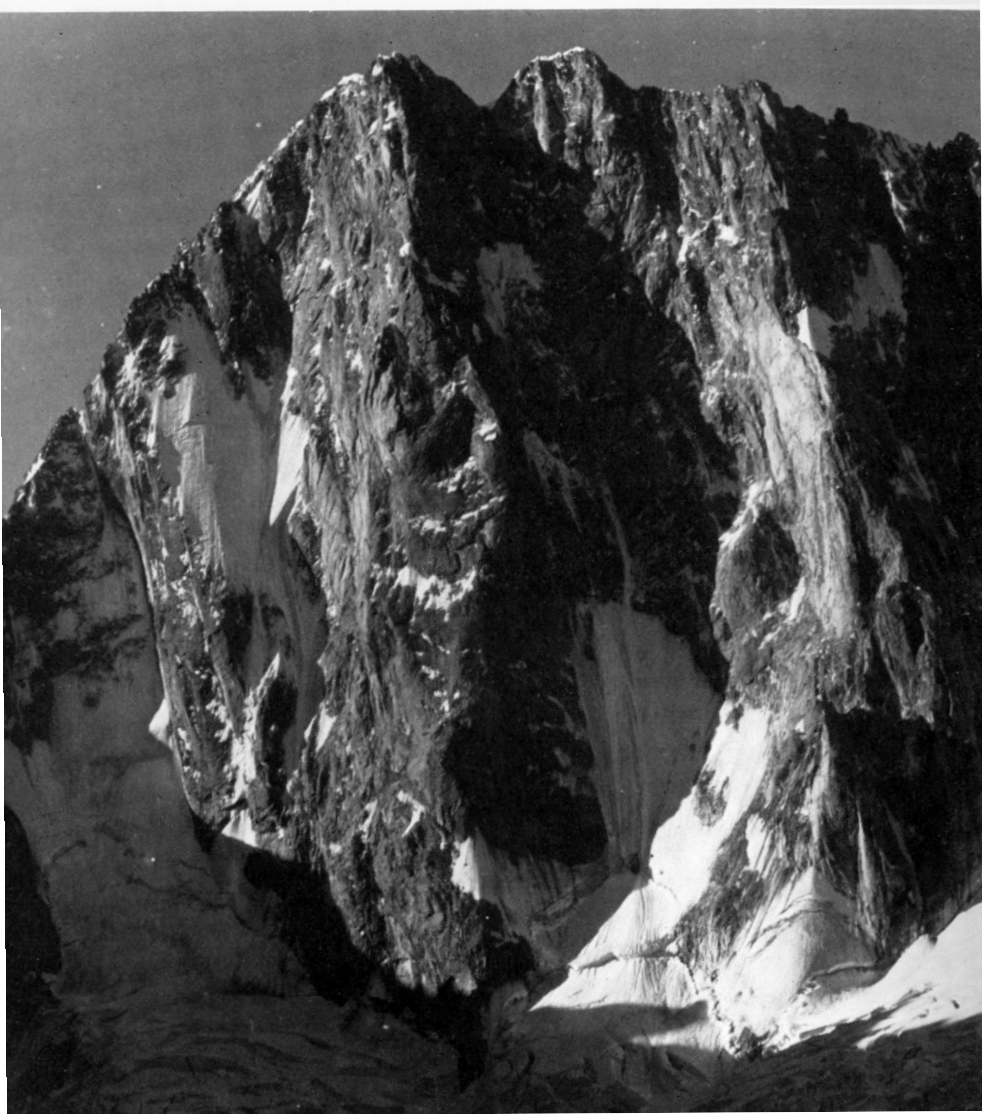
So they came to recording in letters of gold all the conquests of the climbers of Lecco, the fruit of Comici's sowing. In addition to my name, and forgive me if I speak in the first person, we can recall Ratti, Vitali, Esposito, Tizzoni, dell'Oro, Longoni, Giudici and others whose field of action and achievement lay in the Grigna, who moved on from this first sphere to those undertakings, the most daring so far, which had resisted the attacks of the best climbers of all Europe.

The South buttress of the Torre Trieste fell, and the North of the Cima Ovest di Lavaredo. There were twenty-seven attempts before the successful outcome. Among the climbers who had tried to overcome the great overhang of

the North face were names like Demetz, Comici, Dimai and Carlesso, but all had turned back on reaching the traverse. Finally the writer and Ratti conquered the face with persistence and determination. Only a few days later Hintermeier and Meindl made the second ascent.

In the Central Alps the attractive North-east face of Piz Badile was a coveted goal for the best climbers of the time. Esposito, Ratti and myself, from Lecco, succeeded in defeating this gigantic wall of granite, narrowly escaping death, which, however, did not spare the two Como climbers Molteni and Valsecchi, whom we found on the face also making an attempt. Superhuman exertion and the state of the mountain, lashed by the snow blizzards and intense cold

60 *Walker Spur*. Photo: B. R. Goodfellow



brought by the hurricane, gained the upper hand over these two Como mountaineers, while we too were badly affected, almost to the limit of our endurance. This happened in July 1937.

Again in August 1938 our Lecco team, Esposito, Tizzoni and I, went to carry out another first ascent in the heart of the Mont Blanc group, even harder from a climbing point of view: the conquest of the North buttress of Pointe Walker on the Jorasses. We knew nothing of the face because we had only seen it in a photograph. We had the good fortune to succeed at the first attempt and managed to trace a classic itinerary, still noted today as an incomparable route for its continuous difficulties and the grandeur of its development, as well as for its setting.

Meanwhile, a little earlier, at the end of the month of July, an Austro-German team, Heckmair, Vorg, Kasperek and Harrer had overcome the most dangerous face of the Alps, the North wall of the Eiger, putting an end to the long and tragic cycle of attempts.

For the record I will say that I too had planned this ascent, but when I reached the foot of the mountain these climbers were already on the face, having made themselves the protagonists of this great undertaking. I console myself, still today, with the thought that this thwarted opportunity turned me towards the Pointe Walker.

Eiger and Walker: two different concepts, perhaps, but also two demonstrations of what man had built up with only a century and a half of experience. In 1939, the following year, still in the Mont Blanc group, two of my young pupils and companions, the formidable Ratti-Vitali team from Lecco, traced a *direttissima* on the West wall of the Aiguille Noire, a route which brought to Mont Blanc for the first time the atmosphere of the great achievements in the Dolomites. The Lecco team has distinguished itself in every terrain and sphere of action, from the Grigna to the Dolomites and the Central and Western Alps.

I want to underline that thirty years and more have passed since the last-mentioned achievements, even though I regard them as the peak of a whole concept and practice of mountaineering. Usually, when one wishes to point to the superiority of the climbers of thirty to forty years ago, one emphasises the difference in equipment between then and now: felt-soled shoes, étriers, few types of piton, hemp rope. These observations are certainly justified, but they do not go to the heart of the matter, which lies elsewhere. I believe that the most pertinent fact is rather that the climbers of those days decided to overcome the psychological difficulties, breaking through the barrier of fear with a great moral strength, with the awareness and conviction of being able to pass everywhere, even though the difficulties might seem enormous.