

The Battle for Khinyang Chhish

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The Karakoram was an object of Polish interest even long before the war. In 1939 the expedition of Adam Karpinski, which made the first ascent of Nanda Devi East (7434 m), was planned to be the preliminary step in the preparation of a major expedition to K2. Unfortunately, this could not be carried out. The idea of the Polish Himalaya Karakoram Expedition 1971 originated from early spring 1966. The fabulous photographs of this high mountain range presented to us by Alfred Gregory were a sort of strong inspiration and called our attention to the mighty peak over the Hispar glacier, the 7852-m high Khinyang Chhish.

In 1969 the Polish Mountaineering Club managed to get the Pakistan Government's permission for another region of the Karakoram, and sent a small reconnaissance party that climbed Malubiting North (6843 m). The experience and observations of this first Polish expedition to the Karakoram helped greatly in the preparation of a strong, national expedition scheduled for 1971. In March 1971 our alternative applications for Gasherbrum III or Khinyang Chhish—both so far unclimbed summits—were positively answered from Islamabad with agreement on Khinyang. This choice, when reported by the leader to the members of the thirteen-man team, caused some embarrassment. 'Khinyang Chhish is an imposing mountain and it will not be easy', wrote Dr Karl Stauffer, a member of the British-Pakistani Forces Karakoram Expedition 1962, and we all were quite aware of difficulties and hazards we would have to encounter there. The mountain had in the past repulsed two expeditions: the British-Pakistani of Major Mills in 1962¹ and the Japanese of Prof. H. Shiraki in 1965, and had claimed three lives. The route of ascent of those expeditions ran along the South ridge, and our intention was to avoid, if possible, this dangerous, very long, climb.

The expedition consisted of Andrzej Maria Zawada, 43, leader; Krzysztof Cielecki, 36; Eugeniusz Chrobak, 32; Jan Franczuk, 27; Andrzej Galinski, 34, cameraman; Andrzej Heinrich, 34; Bogdan Jankowski, 33; Andrzej Kus, 31; Jerzy Michalski, 40; Jacek Poreba, 32; Jan Stryczynski, 40, doctor; Ryszard Szafirski, 34; and Stanislaw Zierhoffer, 46, vice-leader. By mid-May 1971, after a thorough preparation, the party were ready to leave for Pakistan.

Among the equipment was Polish-made oxygen gear, taken along for medical reasons, and special high-altitude boots, which proved to be most efficient. The expedition travelled to Pakistan divided into three groups. J. Michalski, together with three other members, drove overland, starting on 16 May, in a Star A 29 truck with all equipment, to Islamabad; the leader and I arrived there earlier by air on 31 May, and the rest of the team (also by air) on 8 June, which

¹ *A.Ż.* 68 100 et seq., with map and illustrations.

coincided with the arrival of the truck. This 'group travel' proved to be a good idea, and we were able to arrange in the capital everything that was necessary for the quick progress of the expedition. We were ready, together with our liaison officer Captain Mohammad Rashid, to set out for the mountains on 10 June.

The aerial link to Gilgit was very crowded at that time, and we decided on vehicle transport via Swat and the Indus valley road, as did the Czechoslovak expedition to Nanga Parbat. Two robust Bedfords with brave Pushtoo drivers brought us to Gilgit via the impressive but dangerous mountain road, in three days of continuous motoring in heat and dust. In Gilgit further arrangements had to be made about jeeps, and this enabled us to join up with Richard, the last member of our expedition, who had travelled by air after becoming a happy father a few hours before leaving Poland. We spent seven days in the shade of the P.W.D. rest-house in Gilgit, meeting here, accidentally, Trevor Braham. This led to some useful evening discussions about the Karakoram and our mountain.

We set off for Nagar on the morning of 20 June in eleven jeeps, but the narrow road that we were permitted to use was in very bad condition and we were compelled to stay overnight in a beautifully situated rest-house between the green fields of Minapin village. This travel through the Hunza valley provides fine distant views of snowy Rakaposhi and the abrupt Batura group that develop an increasing desire for high mountains after a wearisome journey through the arid areas.

In Nagar our expedition was solemnly welcomed by the Mir, Brigadier Shaukat Ali Khan, with the assistance of the 'court-orchestra', the wild music of which created an exotic atmosphere. While organising the caravan here, we played a volleyball match against Nagar, winning 2-1. It should be admitted that we were usually the winning party in competitions with the Nagar porters, which, as reported by previous expeditions, did not add to our popularity. We also lost a lot of our equipment during the return journey through the Hispar villages, but nearly all was regained thanks to our scrupulous supervision and the Mir's helpful co-operation in the name of the law.

The 160-porter caravan moved from Nagar up the Hispar valley on 24 June, and on successive days split into four groups, due to lack of porters and troubles connected with overpacking of our loads; the latter apparently exceeding the 48-lb 'hilly track' carrying standard. Moving with the first 82-porter group, I observed how inconvenient the track along the Hispar river gorge was, even for alpinists, but the porters overcame it with great natural ability, cutting steps in scree slopes with their own stone axes.

There was still a problem of discovering a feasible approach to Khinyang Chhish, and we sent a five-man reconnaissance party two days in advance. The leader, Sawada, and Franczuk went on the west side of the mountain on the Khiang glacier, while Szafirski and Heinrich penetrated the Pumarikish glacier, another tributary of the 56-km Hispar glacier. Jankowski stayed at Bitanmal, keeping in touch with both reconnaissance groups and the caravan.

The first reports from the reconnaissance were not promising, and the South ridge seemed to be the only possibility, but at noon on 28 June optimistic news came from Pumarikish. From the left lateral moraine of the Pumarikish glacier Szafirski and Heinrich discovered that there was a chance to make a direct climb by the South face of the Ice Cake that would bring us directly on to the upper parts of the 8-mile long, difficult, ridge. This essential decision about the route of ascent was communicated to our caravan, and after coming to Budurumbun one hour above Bitanmal (the site of the British and Japanese Base Camps), we negotiated with the porters an additional day of employment. Some were ready to carry, others not, and in effect we were working few days at 'transfer-point', Budurumbun, shifting all loads up with forty porters only.

The Base Camp was finally established on 2 July at 4400 m, in a lovely meadow called Phishdandala. Translated from the Burushaski, the name means 'dust of a stone stream', and there was indeed the sound of stone avalanches thundering every day somewhere over Pumarikish. The Base was soon comfortably arranged, including electric lighting. Eight big living tents, together with a laboratory and a kitchen, were pitched, thus giving us full facilities during our stay on the mountain.

The climbing of the South face began on 7 July, after establishing an intermediary equipment store at 4900 m; this was necessary because the South face would not provide many possibilities for a safe camp. The direct climb to the snowy Ice Cake tower on the South ridge missed out many difficulties that the

8 *View east from Ice Cake Ridge with Kanjut Sar and the giants of the Karakoram beyond.* This and next photo: A. Kus



previous expeditions had had to face. Due to this, we did not employ any high-altitude porters.

Camp 1 was established very high at 5900 m on 9 July. The panorama from here was already quite Himalayan and complex. Just opposite were the treacherous cornices of the Snow Dome, where Major Mills and Captain Jones were lost in 1962. The weather, frequently bad, did not encourage the climbing of a snow and ice slope of 50° average inclination; however, we took our route as near to the protecting rocks as possible.

Camp 2 was established finally on 23 July at 6500 m on a safe platform under the very top of the Ice Cake. Thus the first problem of connection with the upper part of the South ridge was solved, and we were happy to have Camp 2 at the fine site of the Japanese Camp 6. The distance between Base and Camp 2 was tackled with over 900 m of fixed rope; this helped greatly in overcoming this laborious route, which was many times to be repeated by everybody during the course of the expedition. The time of day chosen for covering this route depended upon prevailing conditions, because there was still an Eiger-like danger of stone or sérac avalanches. It was mostly passed during late afternoon, or even by night.

The route onwards from Camp 2 along the Ice Cake ridge followed that of the Japanese party, the traces of which could be found at many places. An exposed horizontal ridge with cornices was made safe with 400 m of fixed ropes. After traversing a rock peak on the Pumarikish side, Camp 3 was established among séracs and crevasses in the real labyrinth of snow and ice under Triangle Peak at 6450 m. Here a tragic accident interrupted suddenly the lucky course of the expedition.

On 28 July as Chrobak, Stryczynski and Franczuk left Camp and proceeded up the mountain, a huge snow-bridge over an invisible crevasse broke suddenly. Jan Franczuk fell down and was buried by masses of snow and ice. His two partners, one of them a doctor, tried hard to save him, but when they found him after thirty minutes all that they could do was to confirm his death. This violent death of our youngest companion depressed the whole team. All the members came down to the Base Camp the same day. It was recognised that it would be impossible to transport the body down the mountain.

On a granite block near the Base Camp, the symbolic headstone for Jan Franczuk was hammered a few days after the accident. After deep reflection and discussion, the decision had been made to continue the climb in his honour. But the weather was still very bad and prevented an early resumption of the venture. On 6 August a simple cross and fresh flowers marked the tragic place in the vicinity of Camp 3. The establishment of Camp 4 at 7200 m below Tent Peak followed on 8 August. Four climbers—Zawada, Stryczynski, Heinrich and Szafirski—were then compelled by bad weather to stay there four days, and then had a very dangerous descent to Base. A new move up from Base was possible on 22 August. On 25 August Zawada, Stryczynski, Heinrich and Szafirski left Camp 4 determined on a hard summit attack. They went on the west side of Tent Peak ridge and traversed three snow-fields of the western



9 *Khinyang Chhish—summit area*

cwm of Khinyang Chhish. After a very technical pendule traverse of rock bands, excellently guided by Heinrich, they met a difficult (III) mixed ice and rock climb. The climbers stopped about 150 m below the main summit, where darkness compelled them to make a provisional bivouac without full duvet equipment. The night, though very frosty, was windless, but unfortunately Stryczynski got frost-bitten feet. The four Alpinists did not give up, and the next day (26 August) at 8am the virgin Khinyang Chhish was climbed, and the flags of Pakistan, Poland and the Polish Mountaineering Club, bound to an ice-axe, were flapping in the strong Himalayan wind.

This high peak became the new Polish national height record, and is the highest one climbed in the Karakoram in the last eleven years. Our four-man supporting team met the summiters above Camp 3 next day, appearing as ghosts from thick fog and snow. There were no more chances or ideas of repeating the ascent. The descent of all members of the expedition from the upper camps to the Base followed in very bad weather. On 7 September the expedition reached Nagar village, where we were solemnly welcomed by the Mir and the inhabitants. The return of the team to Islamabad from Gilgit followed by P.I.A. chartered plane on 12 September 1971. However, the rest of our luggage could not be expected till 20 September. After that the aerial (five men) and motor-car (seven men) groups left Pakistan, arriving in Warsaw by the end of September and middle of October respectively.

The battle with treacherous Khinyang Chhish was finally won, but could this not have been done without the sacrifices of three expeditions? May the other mountains be not so cruel for Alpinists.