

Piz Badile for the over-seventies

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Paul Nigg, who led me up the Bianco ridge to the Bernina two years ago, promised me, on a ski-tour last winter, to take me up some climb in the Bregaglia in the summer. All I had done there was a traverse of Monte Rosso from the Forno hut and an ascent of the easy South-ridge of the Casnil. I had heard a lot about the Badile, its tremendous North-east face and the one and a half grades easier North ridge; I knew if the ridge was not just child's play for our young tigers of today, it was certainly not more than a good day's work for them, really not worth talking about it. However, for a mid-septuagenarian the aspect was different. The length of the ridge is 1250 m and its vertical height from the start of the climb to the summit is over 800 m, with practically no way off it. No wonder that I asked Paul this August, only with some slight trepidation, if he would take me up the 'Badile Kante'. Paul had difficulty in hiding his reaction; it seemed obvious that he was well aware of the heavy responsibilities he was asked to accept. An additional difficulty was that the weather, which had been perfect for many weeks, showed signs of breaking; the forecast mentioned some approaching lows and danger of thunderstorms. Still, after a few minutes of hesitation, Paul agreed and fixed the ascent from Bondo to the Sasc Furà hut for Wednesday, 11 August.

On the 10th Paul sent me a message, postponing the start to the hut until the 12th, thus letting history repeat itself. It meant that I would have to climb Badile on the ominous thirteenth, exactly two years after our Bianco tour—and this time even on a Friday. In the night of the 11th we had torrential rain in Pontresina and Paul had to abandon his plan to climb Monte Disgrazia that day. When it cleared up in the morning, two very experienced Swiss climbers advised me not to go, because they both thought that this bit of blue sky would not last very long. But at lunch time Paul telephoned from Bondo that I was to come. When I drove that afternoon through that little village, carefully trying to avoid touching either side of the hundreds-of-years-old houses in those tiny, narrow streets, I found not only Paul waiting at the village fountain but also his brother Hans. He had come from Chur, because he had long wanted to climb Badile and, besides, he would carry part of my things to make it possible for me to climb without a rucksack. How genuine the first reason was, I shall never know; the second one was surely very convenient to me and, looking back, I wonder if I could have done it without Hans's help.

Hans drove his car up the dirt track for a long way, saving us at least an hour of walking; in spite of a 'no passage' sign we found about forty cars parked higher up at the wayside. I saw later that the owners of these cars were mostly very young, very serious climbers, who often, in spite of long hair and sometimes strange attire, carried out successfully guideless climbs of a very high standard. With all these negative reports about the young people in the towns

nowadays I find it gratifying and a very hopeful sign for the future, that the number of such young climbers has increased tenfold during the last few years; and they are just to be found in these remote and untouched valleys like the Bondasca valley. Soon after leaving the car we found the path narrowing, and walking about a 100 ft above the river Bondasca on our right we could see ahead the Sciora group of peaks, and across the river the huge granite peaks of the Bondasca group, 1500 m above us with their steep ridges and North faces. The contrast between these giant rock peaks and the green woods of high pine-trees around us is very impressive, leaving a lasting memory of the gentle floor of the Bondasca valley surrounded by these rugged rocks, only divided by the Bondasca glacier into the Bondasca and the Sciora groups. A few minutes later, at the Alp Laret, 1368 m, the path ahead leads to the Sciora hut and we have to leave it, to cross the bridge for the path to the Sasc Furä hut (1904 m). The path gets very narrow and steep now, but the high and densely standing pines give us good protection against the heat of the sun and in about two and a half hours we reach the hut. It has a fantastic position, still in the midst of green vegetation, but the high trees stop a little below. The Badile ridge, in a straight line above the hut, offers a very deceiving picture by its very nearness. Rather foreshortened, it does not disclose its actual length nor its height.

The guardian was a young doctor, preferring to live up here rather than start his profession down in the plains. He organised food and sleeping places very efficiently, supported by his wife. Even the waking times of the various parties were fixed at intervals to avoid overcrowding at the breakfast table in the morning.

The morning was actually no morning at all, because we were woken at 2am, to get away at 2.45am. The weather did not seem too bad, except that it was a bit too warm for this time of the year at 1900 m. The bit of moonlight was enough and we did not need torches. A few other parties moved faster than we did. Paul chose a very slow pace to preserve my strength for the climbing. Soon the stars got dimmer and the sky a little lighter in the east and after two hours we reached the ridge, which now, of course, seemed to rise in an endless sequence of steep and steeper pitches into the blue sky. The lowest bit is bypassed by crossing a snowfield on the right, above it the rock ridge proper starts. The sun was now shining on it and we saw a few of the ropes already in action. But the action of the climbers seemed to be amazingly slow; often it looked as if they were in fact stationary. The reason for this was that exposure and difficulty combined force one to climb practically in a British style and not in an Alpine one. It is rare that all three members of a rope can climb together. Very often the leader has not only to belay himself, he also uses karabiners in pitons for himself. The second, on reaching the piton, removes the rope ahead of him and clips the rope of the third man behind him into the karabiner. I figure that this manoeuvre has to be repeated about thirty times during the whole climb. Paul checked every piton very carefully; if he found one faulty he would knock it out, and throw it away if it was bent; otherwise he would keep it. One particularly loose one had obviously been used for abseiling; frightening the thought that two or three lives could only have been saved by luck in the face of such carelessness.

Right from the start I saw I had to get used to a technique not really known to me. I was used to looking out for stances and handholds; here for both hands and feet, friction climbing was often more important. Already in Bondo I had shown Paul my two pairs of boots, one heavy with a steel sole between vibram and leather, the other pair much lighter with a rather elastic sole, too much so for my liking. But Paul at once chose the lighter boot which in his opinion would adapt itself better to the rock surface of the slabs and thus increase the friction. He could not say enough about this wonderful characteristic feature of the Bregaglia rock: the roughness, which gives a good hold for the sole of the boot as well as for the fingers, though I should think that the skin of the fingers may suffer if one continues to climb in the Bregaglia for some time. And gloves are out, they would destroy the fine feeling needed to judge if the friction will be good enough to hold.

In his book *Bergell* Paul does not say much about the details of the climb. All he says is: 'The description is very simple: with one exception, about half way up, where one has to traverse to the right to get round a vertical pitch, one has all the time to follow the actual ridge. Many many slabs; a *délicatesse* for good climbers, the hesitant will lose an awful lot of time.'

The first greater difficulty is the Zürcher slab. Alfred Zürcher climbed the ridge first with W. Risch in 1923; many A.C. members may remember him as the honorary A.C. Vice-President and representative of Switzerland in the centenary year of 1957. The grading of the climb is IV with two pitches graded IV+, though I had often the impression that it was more than just 'very diff'. Every climber knows that even if the grade of the climb is the same as another known one in the Lake District, which one remembers as not too bad at all, the altitude, the exposure and the very length of an Alpine climb make all the difference in the world. On this ridge the views across the magnificent North-east face get more and more fearful the higher one rises. We had particular luck with the weather: the sun was not shining all the time; in the morning we had a sea of clouds below us and now light clouds started right and left of us, sometimes revealing and then again covering the views into the depths. I wished I could have had a cine-camera to record this beautiful play of clouds.

Soon it was our turn to climb the Zürcher slab and the game became serious. It is in such moments that Paul reveals himself as a psychologist, no university could produce a better one. 'Well, Walter, just look what I am going to do. You simply put your hands quite flat on the rock, like this. This rock the best in the world! Look at this friction! How easily you can now reach that stance over there! You rest there a moment, repeat the manoeuvre and you are up in no time at all!'

Up I go. It does not matter any more that the 'stance', pointed out by him, now just seems to be big enough to give support to a fly at the utmost. Paul said it will work—and it does. And his care for the tourist! He knows all about my nearly seventy-five years. 'Walter, you watch your pulse. You know it better than I do; if you need a stop, say so.' And never, never will he contradict, if I ask for a short pause after some sudden special effort. How we managed to overtake three other parties on this climb, remains a miracle to me. Only in one case I



17 *The face of Piz Badile from the North ridge.* Photo: W. Kirstein

noticed the cause: their leader had given in to the temptation of using one of those alluring ledges which lead sometimes sideways on to the face or to the other side of the ridge. One has to climb back to the crest of the ridge every time.

Nine hours after leaving the hut we were on the summit, which becomes visible only about twenty minutes before reaching it. It did not matter to us that by now clouds were covering the valleys: we had done it! Paul seemed as proud to have got me to the top as I was to be there. Whilst I was sitting with him on the summit slab, the cameras clicked right and left, because he just could not keep his mouth shut about my age.

The descent down the South ridge to the Italian Gianetti hut was very different. Loose stones everywhere, one had to be very careful; also, I was a bit tired by



18 *Piz Badile from the Sciara Hut.* Photo: P. Nigg

now. The clouds lifted again and the sharp crags, half covered by floating clouds, gave wonderful pictures. The ridge is only grade II+, but it is not always easy to find the way which sometimes does not follow the crest. About half way down we saw an iron cross monument; I am not quite sure if it is meant to remind one of the tragedy which followed Riccardo Cassin's first ascent of the North-east face of the Badile in 1937. Rébuffat tells the story how two young climbers from Como died there from sheer exhaustion, having completed the ascent of the face under very difficult conditions. In our case the rest of the clouds were disappearing and we could see the hut below a small glacier in the midst of peaceful meadows. Small as the glacier was, I managed to get drenched in crossing one of its streams. That did not prevent us from enjoying a very good dinner, as well as Asti Spumante, whilst a very gay Swiss Ticino party was singing Italian songs accompanied by a guitar player. Four young British climbers who had climbed the Badile face without guides, were also in the hut.

I thought that was *it*, and only a boring, long march down the valley to the car would be left for the next day. How mistaken I was! 'To climb Badile on the most beautiful rock route in the Alps is not enough, Walter. That was only to satisfy your vanity' said Paul. 'Tomorrow I show you the Bondasca valley from the top to the bottom; there you will have time to enjoy the views and see the beauty of the crags and the ice and the woods without much strain for you.'

Therefore, up again on the following morning, leaving the hut late, at 6am. In three hours of gentle walking across some meadows and scrambling up some easy slabs we were standing on the Passo di Bondo. Not far, but very steeply below us were the many huge crevasses of the Bondasca glacier and behind them the rugged peaks of the Sciora group. Not a cloud in the sky. The last bit down to the bergschrund was no scramble at all: it meant Paul lowering both of us down a vertical pitch on to a bridge in the crevasse, whence one could climb easily up to the level of the glacier. Paul slung his rope round a rock needle and abseiled into the bergschrund. Then we could slide down the glacier, the snow surface was in splendid condition for it. Three or four times we had to jump crevasses, once we found a rather airy bridge to cross, but the views into these huge, yawning crevasses compensated us for any difficulties. There was very little snow anywhere this year and Paul said that it would very soon become impossible to cross the Bondasca glacier this summer.

A short stop in the Sciora hut and a two hour walk down the rough path to the car completed our round tour. We had ample time to look at the Badile again. What a mountain, seen from this north side of the Bondasca valley! Twenty minutes driving down the dirt track again and we were in Bondo. Paul and his brother had to leave in a hurry, because Paul had to be in the Ortler area the same evening.

Only when I went into the little shop in Bondo to get something to drink, was I made aware that I was supposed to have created a precedent in Bondasca mountain history: the news had travelled faster than I and people came out of their houses and offered me drinks and did not even let me pay my telephone calls; all, because so far no man over seventy was supposed ever to have done this climb.

Well, that may be so or not; I do hope I may be able to see this lovely Bondasca valley again.