

Pointe Hélène

Eugeniusz Chrobak

(Translation: S. Kawa)

After conquering Pointe Hélène I was repeatedly asked the question, 'Do you consider this route to be the most difficult of the various faces which you have scaled for the first time?'. In fact the conquest of this route had an effect on Alpine experts, which, to me, was quite unexpected. The opinions that were expressed about the high class of the achievement, 'bombshell of the season' for example, were very nice, but relentlessly they brought back memories of our ascent of a new route on the Grand Pilier d'Angle of Mont Blanc, during which the physical effort, the danger, the tactical methods of solving the problem and the sum total of experiences far exceeded all the difficulties inherent in this, the best climb of this season. Nonetheless, I must say that the solution of the wall of Pointe Hélène for the first time from the north via the Glacier de Leschaux was an achievement which could be the envy of alpinists in the various countries surrounding the Alps.

Undoubtedly, this was my longest ice climb. First the glacier inclined at 45°, then rocks at an angle of 80° glazed with ice, and at the top of the wall a steep icy slope, altogether 900 m, a harsh test of ability to climb on ice. However, where is the sense of all this professional jargon when what really counts in mountain climbing is the actual experience?

Let us then turn to the events which took place in the middle of July 1970. By the side of the Chalet du Gums under the spreading fir trees there is a table knocked together from old planks and two benches, and above this a stretched-out sheet of *Igielit*—the whole named Château Wawel by the French. Jurek lit a candle, distributed the remaining pieces of Polish ham and then announced that the planning was about to commence. 'We must share out the provisions and decide who, where and when. Would you please put forward your proposals.' Seven pairs of eyes are visible in the candle glow. All waiting. 'Wojtek and I', I began, 'are intending to climb, as part of our training, Pointe Marguerite of the Grandes Jorasses. Initially by Desmaison's route, maybe a different approach', and after a moment's silence—'or we will attack Pointe Hélène if the conditions permit.' Nobody speaks. They are intently moving their jaws, finishing off the ham. Jurek appears to accept our plan; he has, however, some reservations. 'After our return we will see what happens. First something to start things off, then proper plans can be made. Are two of you going?' I push the empty plate away and turn to everyone, 'Which one of you will come with us?'. For such a simple decision the silence is somewhat lengthy. It appears that it will be necessary to ask someone, but no, Jacek announces with typical English phlegm, 'Well, I can go with you'. I was glad for I knew that I could rely on him. After that the discussion spread its wings and glided unhindered across the Alps. The next day, at the E.N.S.A. library (National School of Alpinism and Skiing) in Chamonix we searched for the description

of the route to Pointe Marguerite. We then returned to Taconna. Bathed in sunshine on the dewy meadow, we selected tinned food from a pile of provisions that we had brought over from Poland. By the side of the provisions lie the drills, ice-axes and ice-screws. Jacek is fetching handfuls of pegs for the rock climbing. We are making preparations to leave. Finally 19.07 is the magic hour. Wojtek with a sack sticking out above his head and an ice-pick in his hand looks ready for anything. Jacek and myself are not dressed so colourfully, but we do not lack confidence. Wojtek, in broken English, is chatting with a quite good looking American girl. We are a bit jealous. She looks very attractive. The train approaches. We mingle with the crowd. The girl shouts something and waves her hand. We board the train with our rucksacks and the train starts off in the direction of Montenvers. On the mountain there is still a crowd of tourists, but a bit lower down, after descending the break-neck ladders, the sea of ice is spread before us.

Sun glasses, a dab of cream on the nose and a thick layer on the forehead, then a four-hour trudge. At last the sweltering metal-box-like shelter of Leschaux greets us with its emptiness. Soup, fruit juice with water and yet still more soup and fruit juice with water. Later we take our belongings and leave the shelter. The cost of lodgings is too steep for our pockets. Night time—if you can call this time of the day night—we spend in an almost recumbent position tied to pitons. It is still tourist terrain, although it is at quite a high altitude.

23 *The wall of Grandes Jorasses.* Photo: E. Chrobak



We do not sleep a great deal. At 23.00hrs we get up. Upon reaching the glacier we use the torches, but as we edge our way along to where the snow and ice reflect the moonlight the torches are no longer necessary.

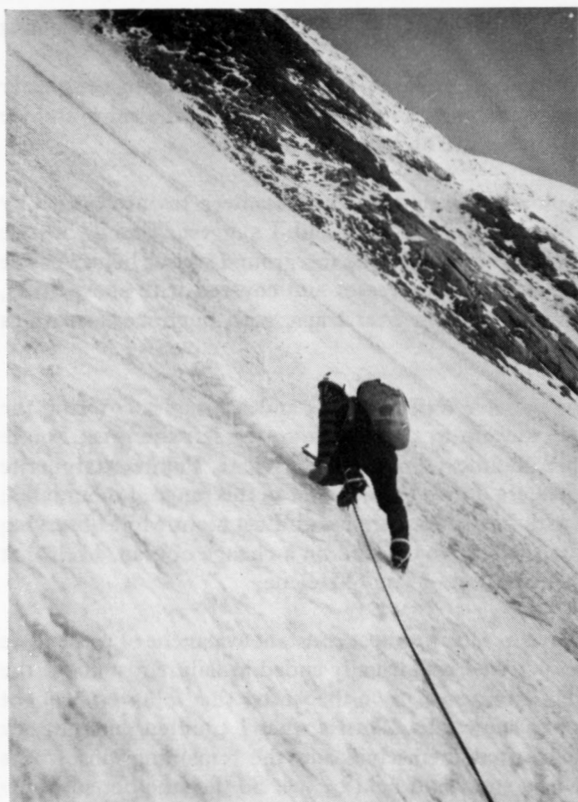
During the monotonous slow climb upwards we pass deep ravines caused by mountain streams. We stop for a quick rest and I suggest, 'Should we tie ourselves together, one never knows?'. In the foreground we see before us the towering, torn glacier, riddled with crevasses and covered with snow drifts, resembling grotesque bridges or giant bear traps, with huge ice formations looking like stricken cities.

In the background is the massive wall of the Grandes Jorasses covering the horizon and reaching half way up to the sky, from the left the great Pointe Walker, Pointe Whympier, Pointe Croz, Pointe Hélène, Pointe Marguerite and Pointe Young. Our eyes are drawn to one point in this range of mountains; the small Pointe Hélène with its unconquered wall. Last night while observing the Jorasses wall from the shelter, we decided on a change of plan. I felt that the time had come for the conquest of Pointe Hélène.

Last year its North wall gave rise to an almost constant avalanche of rocks. The attempts to scale the unconquered wall usually ended in failure just above the first crevasse. After the hot summer of 1969 the winter that followed brought in its wake unusually heavy snow falls. This is what I counted on; the rock avalanches must have exhausted themselves and the remaining loose rocks would have been covered by snow and held by ice. So that the hot sunshine should not spoil the good winter's work, we must hurry. What the guides of Chamonix described as very bad conditions for climbing, we welcomed as a hope of success. The French Press later referred to the formulation of our tactical plan as an 'engineering feat'.

And so not Pointe Marguerite, but Pointe Hélène! Having our sights in that direction we felt emotion swelling in our breasts. We roped ourselves together and I went in the lead. Soon afterwards the dawn broke and we crossed the first crevasse. I felt under me soft shifting snow. Above my head there was a white expanse giving way to a stretch of green and then the blackness of rock. As I took my first steps on the smooth ice I knew that the race with the sun had begun. Who will reach the rocks first? I or the sun's rays. If it is I, then the game is partially won, if it is the sun then our chances are diminished.

Lower down beneath the North wall the ice was strewn with rocks. We knew where the rocks came from and when they fell. The striking of the rock with our ice-picks must be kept to the minimum, the steps that are cut, few. The sharp spikes on our boots scarcely penetrate the hard surface. Calves are bursting with the strain. My partners are standing on hewn out steps 80 m below, resting. Then the echoing cry: 'Come on up.' The rope passes through the ice hooks, they are climbing up on the ropes simultaneously. The race goes on. The first rays of sunshine are already glistening above us. There are still about 50 m to go to the rocks. The dreams of breakfast appear and then vanish like a mirage. We are now on the rocks, but still there is no place to rest. Wojtek takes the



24 *The ice slopes of
Pointe Hélène. Photo:
J. Poreba*

lead; he is now on the rock, but finds it almost unclimbable. Somehow he manages to move on the vertical ice and granite. He accomplishes one pull up and then another and Jacek takes the lead. We share the work and nobody tries to shirk their share of the dangers. The 80 m led by Jacek were fraught with great difficulties. The time passed and heavy black clouds gathered above us. In turn: 'Can we come up?', 'Come up now', coincided with the beginning of the storm. Wojtek was perched immediately above me in a narrow gap with ice-covered walls, when the heavens opened and we were enveloped in an avalanche of hail-stones. The storm unleashed rocks and debris which poured over us. Wojtek tried to climb up on the ropes. He gained some ground and lost it. He went up again a few feet but in vain. The shouts and curses were drowned by the thunder and the roar of the unabating storm. Sporadically the lightning lit up the rocks. I held my collar tightly round my neck. It was no use. The melting snow trickled down my back, chilling my spine.

I lowered my ironmongery on a rope to hang a few feet below me; no good inviting the marauding lightning to strike. I held my rucksack over my head and waited. Wojtek in the lead, struggled against these odds but was near to defeat. It could be that my seemingly calm remark, that our problems may soon be solved by the next avalanche which will knock us off our perch or the brief rest that we had, gave him the impetus to forge ahead. The efforts to find a suitable place to rest ended in failure. Jacek, 10 m above us, spent the night in a

crouching position. This was the height of luxury which could have well been envied. Wojtek and I spent the night standing on small ledges tied to our pitons. Jacek puts the Zdarsky cape over his head while we don our quilted jackets, and now we are ready to spend the night and rest we hope! This night proved to be the worst in my life.

The storm persisted and in the blinding snow it was difficult to look up to communicate with the leader. The lashing wind drove the snow, seeking out every opening to get at our skins. Jacek tried to lower us some hot tea that he somehow managed to brew. His efforts were in vain.

I am almost sure that I slept, for the night seemed to pass quickly. At the break of day, however, while waiting for the storm to abate, the minutes seemed endless. I felt tired. At first light, while rearranging my position, I lost my footing and fell a few feet, ending up suspended in mid-air by my safety harness. A bit shaken I climbed back to my original position. Tired by the restless night and the cold we experienced moments of fear, elation, helplessness.

The leader suddenly lost his footing and fell. His weight ripped out the first piton, the next piton held him 20 m lower down. Another takes the lead. The spot from which the leading man fell is reached again. You can see a piece of ice stripped from the rock, the crack that did not hold the piton. The same movements as before except the false one. Another 300 m to climb. More effort; tiredness permeates through the body. At long last, the summit. Around us emptiness, in the distance jagged peaks. The storm had passed, the sky was clear. The game was ours; against the storm, the sun, against ourselves.

Back in Château Wawel we found none of our friends. The message they left behind read: 'We are climbing Innominate. Back in four days. Jurek.' What? In four days? Oh, but the fourth day is today. We await their return and pass the hours by catching up on our lost eating time.

SUMMARY Pointe Hélène of Grandes Jorasses, first ascent of the North wall above the Glacier de Leschaux, 24-25 July 1970 by Eugeniusz Chrobak, Jacek Poreba and Wojtek Wroz.