

36 Triglav (This and next three photos: Hamish Brown)

The Julian Alps: Kugy's Kingdom

Hamish Brown

Somehow the literature of the Alps never made me long to actually go there. Scotland quite satisfied, thank you. However, when eventually I stood on Whymper's Matterhorn and looked around I realised equally surely that I had found another expansive horizon of adventure. It led to the literature. Two books have lasted right from the start as firm favourites: Janet Adam Smith's *Mountain Holidays* and Julius Kugy's *Alpine Pilgrimage.* The former took me to the Savoy and other uncrowded parts, the latter should have taken me to the Julians but somehow the years slipped past and it remained a dream.

Kugy was a great bear of a man: 18 stones of refined toughness. He was a lawyer but also able botanist, musician, writer and climber. He entered Switzerland by traversing Monte Rosa from Italy and for 30 years roamed the classic routes with the best of guides. He was an honorary member of the Alpine Club, known and respected by the great men of his day. Behind these big hills lay the Julians; not great, high mountains, lacking even any substantial glaciers, compressed into a forgotten corner of Europe (as far as the west was concerned), they were still Kugy's grand love about which he wrote with romantic enthusiasm. Some of his warnings are prophetically being fulfilled now. He himself wrote page after page of first ascents, new routes, long traverses.

The peaks when he found them were only known to local shepherds and poachers. Kugy picked the cream of these and trained them into guides. (Of the 'Kugyband' on Triglav he only claimed the first ascent 'without a chamois on my shoulders'.) Year after year his parties ranged the peaks so he had been up the best of them scores of times each, a physical output which is astounding – for few peaks rise from such deep valleys or are so well protected by rock barriers and jungle. The ascents were done largely from bivouacs: nights under the stars round a pine fire – 1500m above the lovely Trenta Valley perhaps. How well he describes it all. One can almost smell the wood smoke. Today's hectic scrummage would perhaps sadden him but he would still understand and encourage. Only on those who marked and pegged and wired his clean mountains does he pronounce hard words; a message that needs to be shouted today as much as ever.

My summer plans in 1975 suddenly went overboard, so with some hectic phone calls and writing I found myself on the way to the Julians – no work of planning – all laid on. The dream had grown legs and was running away with me. But could it match the dream, that book, published in Kugy's mellow age, the year I was born?

One cameo could answer. We had toiled and sweated over cols and summits to reach the Pogacnikov Hut in thick cloud all day. The hut was crowded and noisy: fog without and fug within, rain streaming down the windows outside, condensation streaming down the inside. But the *Merlot* was cheap. And the bustle was all mountains. The guardian, rotund and beaming, still had a climber's eye. His portrait (an oil painting with hill setting) hung on the wall. He had been conscripted into the German army, been with Rommel in the deserts and ended in a POW camp near Manchester. After a gargantuan supper we



37 Pogacnikov hut and Pihavec

38 Pogacnikov hut with Planja and Razor

went out to smell the weather. The miracle occurred. The clouds seemed to deflate – they simply sank down – and peak after peak rose, ethereal, in the glow of dusk. We looked straight down to the Trenta valley while, away in the W, the Dolomites limned the last light. The nearer, naked summits hemmed us round, ready, it felt, to tilt us down into the abyss. Pihavec, Stenar, Razor – old Kugy had certainly not failed me. We inherit, indeed, 'an incomparable tradition'.

I was astounded to find that nobody else in the party had heard of Kugy even allowing they were largely walkers of the ilk that must have all laid on. I need the spice of dreams and have the natural restfulness of a squirrel. Playing bridge is near desecration while the day lasts. Luckily there was another botanist, for the Julians are among the brightest and best of all for flowers, luckily there were other bird fanatics, luckily one other who would always go for 'one more peak'. Even in the first week of wet and cloud it was fun to tease a way to a summit with no view – heresy to many of the gang. It was all mountains, which is what counted. Double-headed Kanjavec looked far finer when it appeared later.

This was one of the few names which were the same on our maps and in Kugy's book. Austria and Italy and Slovenia have all fought and refought over these ranges. As in the Ortler or South Tirol you come on rusting coils of 'bad wire' as a local called it. Slovenia is now part of Yugoslavia which has enjoyed the longest spell of peace ever in the period since the War. Politics just did not exist in the hills and the border is by no means curtained off: both on the map and on the ground the paths are shown criss-crossing frontiers. The highest group is in Yugoslavia but several parts of the original area lie in Italy. Kugy was an Austrian, lived in Trieste, and died an Italian. He was loved by all: a sort of grand old man to whom old and young would turn on their way through Wolfsbach – or Valbruna as it now is. His Montasch is now Montasio, the Wischberg is Jorf Fuart, Subi Plaz is Skrlatica . . . Perhaps this is partly why westerners seldom go there. Who receives credit for climbing hills nobody can pronounce or remember – far less doing so in linguistic triplicate? Poland I'm sure suffers the same way. Poor credit-value too; for the aces with one eye on a TV contract or the commonality's puff at the local club slide show. Toughness is measured in pints and pitons; one wonders what has happened to the traditions.

The Julians are a peculiar mixture of the ultimate in waymarking and of wilderness untouched. This is partly due to the nature of the vertical limestone terrain. If no help was given the walker would not manage at all on high, so, to let people in, wires and pegs now festoon the most unlikely ridges and summits. This was done long ago – Kugy complained about it. I found it less intrusive than expected. There was nothing as foul as the painted path the NTS has leading to Ben Lawers. The paths made for speedy travel between huts, saved the toil of dropping to valley level too often, and you only needed to leave the beaten way for the landscape to assume a wild virginity seldom met in the Alps these days. The huts were busy in August but everyone bedded early and was up and away early. As many of the huts were perched 1500m above the valley nobody was there who had not worked for it.

Few ranges rise so abruptly: from pastured valleys, through the stained-glass glitter of beech forests, up endless zig-zags with crag and pine, to the



39 The N flank of Prisojnic

bare desert of vertical white stone. Triglav (2863m) is the highest, a gathering of narrow ridges and a N face which would be impressive anywhere. An easy way has been wired up it and the summit was all too like Piccadilly. There must be a fairly high fall-off rate judging by the plaques on the route. Several high huts serve Triglav; the Pogacnikov provides a high base for a whole circle of peaks and at the Vrsic col a road and huts give the highest non-pedestrian entry. In some areas long walking-in, bivy huts or bivies are still needed. There must be ample scope still for new routes.

Our party was there for walking and scrambling. It was an excellent way of seeing the dream country for a first time. The set-up is the familiar Alpine one in fact. Food and services were good. The weather is normally good. Last summer while England pleaded for rain, Europe was plunged into storms and the Julians received the tail end of these. Nevertheless 17 summits in 2 weeks was the bag. It was only in the end the storm really arrived. It found us out on a limb. Having been on Triglav in the morning the traverse of Cmir was providing afternoon entertainment: an airy ridge with only one set of slabs and a double chimney pegged. We raced the storm and lost, just. Nobody signed the summit book. The container was singing! The storm rolled over us, flash-banging vigorously and giving another reason for disliking pegs of iron. Back at the hut, soaked to the skin, we had to patiently wait for the last, slow man to come in. He had the dormitory key.

That was the last day. The first week we had gone in from Bled and Bohinj: lakes of tourist-brochure blue. We had worked round, hut to hut, to enter the main hills by the Valley of the Seven Lakes. Rain, rain, and the rebellious forced us down to the Trenta Valley. We stayed in the Zlatarog in Na Longu, walked up to the gem of a baroque church, visited the Alpine garden (started

by de Chesne, Kugy's companion and still tended by the son of a Kugy guide) and on to the Kugy statue, a large bronze of the big man gazing up to Jalovec at the head of the Trenta. We then walked down to the shops and the local museum. It was one of the best of days as Alpine valley days so often are. The next day we returned to the heights.

A bus took us to the Vrsic pass and another fine hut, from which we traversed peak after peak to Triglav, before descending the undeveloped Kot valley to Mojstrana and Dovje, where Herman Rogan's closed our stay with baths – and dinner on the balcony. Herman, a cripple, ran the bar from his bed. A previous gang had the interest of a police raid. Perhaps there was a *slivovic* still under the bed. This local plum brandy is a drink I would chiefly recommend to my enemies.

Above the Vrsic col is Prisojnik, a mountain which shares, with Tafonata in Corsica, the fame of having a great hole through it. Our best day took us down through this for hours of tortuous wending down several thousand feet of N face. We met chamois, and watched butterfly-bright wallcreepers for relief from the overbearing verticality. The summit ridge was Cuillin-like, if you could imagine the TD Gap and the Tooth wired up. A whole area of spires and towers round Skrlatica has been left with no paths, wires, huts or any development beyond several bivouac huts. It took Kugy several attempts before he climbed this peak, last to fall of the big Julians. This dolomitic-fastness is one of the few unspoilt areas of Europe. Kugy would notice little change.

There is a dearth of literature on the region in English. There is a German guidebook, and many local ones. Descriptions of it, and Kugy, are given in 2 chapters of H. E. G. Tyndale's *Mountain Paths* (Eyre & Spottiswoode 1948). Farrar reviewed Kugy in *AJ 46*, 428 and Tyndale wrote an obituary in *AJ 54*, 293. A Victorian ascent of Triglav is given in *AJ 4*, 345.

Round Triglav once lay the magic gardens of the Rojenice, the good fairies. Zlatorog, the sacred white chamois with the golden horns kept watch over the gardens. It was death to any who shot at him, but despite warnings, Janez, the Trentana, did so to gain the golden horns and find the treasure of the mountains. Zlatorog recovered under the magic healing of the red roses of Triglav, which sprang from his sprinkled blood, but the hunter fell to his death. Zlatorog, in pain and rage, uprooted and destroyed the garden which is why, today, there is only a barren boulder sea round Triglav, and which is why it pays to go carefully among those heights. Who knows when Zlatorog might confront the hardy mountaineer? It is a chance worth taking.

El Gran Trono Blanco

Isabelle Agresti

(Translation: H. Pursey)

In California, just S of the frontier between Mexico and the USA, there is a wild mountainous region which extends over 200km from the Pacific to the Sea of Cortez, known as the Sierra Juarez. On the E slopes of this range there are some fine granite faces, especially on the Gran Trono Blanco where they reach