The First Winter Ascent of Cho Oyu (1984–1985)

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In the autumn of 1981, after I had been invited by the Canadians to undertake a lecture tour about the Polish expeditions to Everest, a collaboration began between the Polish Alpine Association and the Federation Québéçoise de la Montagne. Our first idea was to climb K2 in winter but, since the Pakistani Government refused permission for such a climb, our Canadian partners agreed to a change in our plans. We decided on a winter climb of Cho Oyu. In the spring of 1984 I went to Pakistan to submit application papers for a future attempt on K2, and I then went on to Nepal to obtain permission both for our own joint Polish-Canadian expedition to Cho Oyu the following winter and for the Polish Gliwice Club for their attempt on Dhaulagiri.

Cho Oyu, which lies 28km NW of Everest, has two official heights. The most popular among climbers is 8153m, but the Nepalese authorities maintain that it is 8201m. These differing heights place it as either the sixth or the eighth highest peak in the world.

The first photographic records of the peak were made by British climbers on the 1921 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition. The summit is fairly easy to reach from the west and six expeditions have successfully reached the top in summer. As a result, Cho Oyu has not been considered a particularly difficult mountain. Although the almost impossible SE precipice wall had been attempted by eight expeditions, only one, in 1978, had actually reached the top, and this via the route through the middle of the E wall.

Nobody before us had ever attempted to climb Cho Oyu in winter. You cannot really count the Italian-German expedition of 1982 as a true winter climb, since they had finished by 19 December.

The permit for our climb arrived on 6 September 1984 and, by the end of November, all our luggage had arrived safely in Nepal. These trouble-free preparations were only made possible by the co-operation between our two countries. In our contract the Canadians agreed to pay for everything that required foreign currency. They also undertook to supply ropes, a radio-telephone and solar batteries, 30% of the food and 50% of the medicines. We agreed to provide the remainder of the food and medicines, the tents for Base Camp, clothing for the Nepalese members, and down sleeping-bags for the Canadians. We also bore the total cost of transporting our equipment and supplies to Nepal – by ship from Canada to Poland, by lorry across Poland, by air to New Delhi and finally by Polish Jelcz vans to Kathmandu.

Our climbers were: Maciej Berbeka, Eugeniusz Chrobak, Krzysztof

Flaczynski (the expedition doctor), Miroslaw Gardzielewski, Zygmunt Andrzej Heinrich, Jerzy Kukuczka, Maciej Pawlikowski and Andrzej Zawada (leader). From Canada: Martin Berkman, André Frapier, Jacques Olek (deputy leader) and Yves Tessier (also a doctor). In Nepal we were joined by Chhetrapati Shrestha, our liaison officer, and a wonderful Base Camp team, hand-picked by Ang Tshering from the Asian Trekking Club, whom we all took to our hearts: Thukten Sherpa (Ang's brother and sirdar), Ang Dawa, Bal Bahadur 'Maila' and Mohit Syangbo Lama.

En route to our mountain

By 17 December we were all in Kathmandu. Jerzy Kukuczka made a surprise request. He asked me if he could go on two expeditions one after the other: first the one to Dhaulagiri and then ours to Cho Oyu. It was an interesting proposition – and the chance of a new mountaineering record: two 8000ers in winter in the same season!

At the same time, Jerzy's departure would weaken our team very considerably and would impose even harder work on the remaining members as they established a route for the 'master'. I called everyone together and, after a stormy discussion, I finally gave Kukuczka permission to attempt this feat, risky as it was for us all. The following day, Jerzy began his race to Dhaulagiri, where Adam Bilczewski's expedition from Gliwice in Poland had already set up Camp 2.

Our efforts to hire a charter flight to Lukla were without success. In the end, we had to hire a Puma – a very heavy military helicopter which is always available but at double the price (one flight cost $2000!). Fortunately Yves Tessier, our Canadian doctor, managed to negotiate a lower price. We spent Christmas Eve together at Lukla, in the same house and under the same Christmas tree as we had on our Everest expedition. Only Heinrich, Chrobak and Frapier had gone on ahead towards Base Camp with the first group of porters.

The walk-in to the SE wall of Cho Oyu is both short and most enjoyable. The first part was along a track familiar to us from previous expeditions to Lhotse and Everest. In Namche Bazar there are many small hotels and little restaurants full of climbers from all over the world. The only depressing note in these idyllic surroundings was the sight of a stream of French mountaineers returning from their Everest expedition with severe frostbite. When we reached Machermia it began to snow. The whole valley, which until now had been so green, was suddenly completely white. We suffered many heavy snowfalls during our expedition and on several occasions we had to dig our tents out of deep snow. The severity of the winter that year surprised us.

Our Base Camp at 5200m was in Gyazumpa Valley, on a hillock under a moraine. Heinrich had chosen a site near water and well protected from the wind, but unfortunately with no view at all of our wall. On 30 December we set up our tents and by 2 January 1985 the whole team, except for Kukuczka, was together.

The wall three kilometres high

The real mountain action started on 4 January, when Berbeka and Pawlikowski established Camp 1 on the Lungsampa Glacier. From this point, there was a breath-taking view towards Cho Oyu. The vastness and steepness of the SE wall had an almost hypnotic effect on us and we felt a surge of excitement mixed with fear as we listened to the continuous roar of avalanches and saw the overhanging barrier of seracs glittering with ice. The whole route of our ascent from Base Camp to the summit – 2800m of piled-up ice and rock – was clearly visible before us. I was beginning to understand why this precipice wall was considered impossible to climb: it was a fiendishly dangerous undertaking. Having now seen it for ourselves, we began to speak with great respect of the Yugoslav climbers who were the first to tackle the precipice. Our only chance of a safe climb of the upper parts of the face was to ascend the pillar of ice and rock which separated the S face from the E face and which was not clearly visible from where we stood. On the lower part of the wall, the main problem was a sheer rocky precipice stretching from the base to about 1200m and scarred with deep clefts and crevices. One possible way of crossing this rocky wall, with its many gullies, was up the right-hand side – the same route the Yugoslavs had taken.

The approach from Camp 1 to the base of the wall required great technical climbing skill because it passed through a constantly moving glacier which stretched down from a vast plateau under the eastern wall. Every few days, some of the enormous overhanging seracs broke off and tumbled down around our fixed ropes, so that to pass under those 'ducks' and 'ships', as we called them in hushed whispers, required strong nerves.

Confronted with such difficulties, I now felt compelled to divide our team into two groups. The first group reluctantly carried equipment from Base Camp to Camp 1, while the second group, consisting of six climbers, started to climb the wall. It may surprise many people to read that we only had six people to climb a wall of this magnitude in winter. In fact, we were very lucky that nobody fell sick, otherwise we would have had no chance of victory.

We had been counting on using the fixed ropes left by the Yugoslav team, but we were disappointed. Most of their ropes had been destroyed by falling rocks and very few were left hanging. The weather conditions were also very difficult. The frequent snowstorms were creating enormous problems and we were constantly hampered by avalanches. The average temperature in Base Camp dropped to −25°C and the maximum in the shade never reached 0°C. The heaviest frost we recorded was −33°C, in Base Camp on the night of 15 February, while Heinrich and Kukuczka were bivouacking at 7700m.

On 10 January, Berbeka and Pawlikowski went up as first team. The problem was to cross a very deep crevasse skirting the base of the wall. First they abseiled down, then picked their way delicately over huge blocks of ice before reaching the wall itself. They were then able to establish our first fixed ropes on a vertical section of terrain before returning to Base Camp. As we listened to their report, it was immediately obvious that we were undertaking a climb of immense difficulty.

Camp 2 was established at 5700m by Gardzielewski and Zawada. A tent was put up on a sort of platform under an overhanging rock, well protected from avalanches and falling stones. The tent was a good old-fashioned cotton 'Turnia 2' to which we happily returned later on from higher camps, after uncomfortable bivouacs in super-light nylon tents covered in snow and ice!

The third team, Chrobak and Heinrich, pushed further on up the wall and abseiled down to Camp 2 for the night. At one point they ran out of rope and had to descend to Camp 1, returning the same day to Camp 2. Everyone was working to his utmost yet, as we looked through the binoculars at our progress, we were almost tempted to abandon the whole venture, so small was the distance we had covered in comparison with the enormity of the wall.

Our struggle to set up Camp 3

Chrobak and Heinrich had reached a cliff over which seracs, protruding from the pillar above, were suspended. We had planned to go this way on the next stage of our climb. This cliff turned out to be the most difficult part of the whole wall. Now the progress of the two climbers was halted when Heinrich was hit on the leg by a falling stone. He was very upset but, as a result of this accident, he later partnered Kukuczka on the second attack on the summit. Meanwhile, Berbeka and Pawlikowski went into action. They spent two days fixing ropes up the cliff, abseiling to Camp 2 for the night. Slowly, inch by inch, the wall of Cho Oyu was surrendering.

On top of everything else, the frequent snowstorms followed by avalanches were slowing down our climbing. At this stage, we changed the teams over. Chrobak and Gardzielewski changed places with Berbeka and Pawlikowski. They spent the next day pulling ropes out from under the snow. The following day, while carrying heavy equipment for Camp 3, they reached an icefall just above the cliff. It was getting late and we wondered if they would find a place for Camp 3 or turn back to Camp 2. Then we saw that they had put up a tent. After a while we spoke over the radio-telephone and they told us that they were in good spirits and would try to establish Camp 3 the following day. However, their attempt failed. After a whole day's climbing they reached the edge of the pillar, where steep icy gullies halted their progress. They had to spend one more bivouac in a hurriedly-erected tent, Gardzielewski had frost-bitten hands and they had run out of ropes and pitons. The next day they returned to Base Camp. Then, once again, the two Maciejs went into action. In a climb requiring great finesse, they succeeded in crossing the ice gullies, using Grivel crampons and the front teeth of their ice-axes. They finally reached the pillar but it was not until the following day that they were able to set up Camp 3 at 6700m. It had taken us almost a month to reach Camp 3 from Base Camp. We had climbed only one-third of the wall – but it had been the most difficult part. We felt a little surge of optimism!

The organ-pipes of ice

Stretching above Camp 3 was an ice-wall 500m high, with shapes like great

organ-pipes formed on its surface. Somewhere in its upper reaches we had to try to establish Camp 4. The next team, Heinrich and Zawada, brought all the necessary equipment for Camp 4 to the lower part of the organ. As we made the ascent up the fixed ropes we admired the job our colleagues had done. We deposited the equipment next to the main crevasse under the organ-pipes at 7000m, after eight continuous days of action. We returned to Base Camp very tired. Over the radio we learned with relief that Czok and Kukuczka had reached the top of Dhaulagiri. We now hoped that Kukuczka would arrive in time to join our expedition before our permit expired.

In the meantime, two teams – Chrobak and Gardzielewski, Berbeka and Pawlikowski – were very active high up on the wall. Both teams had left Base Camp three days apart hoping to reach the summit. Chrobak and Gardzielewski set up a bivouac next to the crevasse under the organ and the following day they began to climb the steep ice-pipes. For the night, they abseiled down to the crevasse. In the morning they decided to abandon the bivouac and started to climb, taking the heavy equipment with them. We watched their progress very carefully through binoculars. The tension mounted. Fortunately the weather was perfect with no trace of wind. All day they climbed continuously up the wall but we could see that they would not reach the seracs, where they were to set up Camp 4, before nightfall. Everyone was on edge. But when dawn broke we looked up and saw that they had miraculously found a crevasse and had been able to put up a bivouac on a very uncomfortable and almost vertical ledge. That day their progress was slow since the terrain was very steep and difficult. They finally reached the seracs and set up Camp 4 at 7200m. It was 8 February and the day Kukuczka arrived at Base Camp.

Berbeka and Pawlikowski waited one day at Camp 3. The following morning Chrobak and Gardzielewski decided to go down. They were tired and had no ropes left. Common sense had prevailed. They returned to Camp 2, very depressed, and their place at Camp 4 was taken by Berbeka and Pawlikowski, who also took up more ropes. On the same day – 10 February – Heinrich and Kukuczka left Base Camp. Berbeka and Pawlikowski were fixing ropes on the pillar above Camp 4 all day. They spent the night at Camp 4, while Heinrich and Kukuczka were at Camp 2.

On 11 February Berbeka and Pawlikowski abandoned Camp 4. They decided to do this although they were aware what this would mean for Heinrich and Kukuczka: there was nobody to carry the equipment up to Camp 5 – but the ropes were more important. Berbeka and Pawlikowski continued slowly up the mountain and established Camp 5 at 7500m. They were in good shape and hoped to make an attempt on the summit the following day. (We informed the Ministry at Kathmandu about this.) On the same day, Heinrich and Kukuczka, after a nine-hour climb, reached Camp 3.

We reach the top – any higher is impossible!

On 12 February the weather was beautiful. We could hear the gale-force winds raging on the ridges of Cho Oyu – but otherwise the weather was perfect. After breakfast we all made our way to the moraine; everyone wanted to look

through the binoculars to see what was happening. The tension was as great as in an Olympic stadium before a big race. Chrobak was filming, Jacques was rather nervously dictating into his tape-recorder, while Dawa and Maila served hot tea from thermos flasks. High up on the mountain we could see two little dots moving forward on the ice-fields. They were just below the summit. Suddenly one figure disappeared into the backdrop of the dark blue sky; then, after a few minutes, the second figure also disappeared. I looked at my watch – it was 2.20pm. Quickly I seized the radio-telephone. Surely they must say something at any moment! Then suddenly, against the deafening roar of the wind, I heard a hoarse voice shouting 'Hello, can you hear me?' 'Are you on the summit?' I screamed. 'I don't know, I don't know,' came the voice back. 'All I know is there is nowhere higher to go!' What happiness we all experienced at that moment! What a great achievement it was! To reach the top of Cho Oyu by this perilous route – and in winter! Two records had been broken and, in addition, two private ones as well. For Maciej Pawlikowski it was his first 8000m climb and a second 8000er in winter for Maciej Berbeka.

On the summit, they were unable to stand upright because of the howling gale; so, lying on their stomachs, they tied the team flags to an ice-axe, took some pictures, and then descended to Camp 5 which they reached by about 6pm.

But things were not finished yet. We were in for another great achievement and another broken record! After spending two nights at Camp 3, Heinrich and Kukuczka started to climb to Camp 4, a 900m vertical climb, on 13 February. At about midday they passed the summit team on their way down. They were very tired and climbed slowly to adjust to the altitude. At one point Heinrich fell and hung freely, suspended on a rope, until with great difficulty he jumared up the rope. Night came and they were forced to bivouac. They discovered next morning that they were only about 60m from the tents at Camp 5. After reaching Camp 5 they rested for the remainder of the day. The following morning they set off at 7.30am. Heinrich felt he was not properly acclimatized, since he had never before climbed beyond 7000m. He moved very slowly forward towards the summit. A fog began to surround them and visibility was getting worse. Finally, they reached the summit at 5.30pm and stood next to the markers left by Berbeka and Pawlikowski. It was 15 February – the day our permit expired!

Kukuczka started to film and took a few pictures and then made a quick retreat. But nightfall caught them a long way from their camp. For a few hours they continued to descend in the dark until suddenly Kukuczka slipped and fell about five metres down a serac. Heinrich abseiled down to him and they decided to wait until morning. They were at 7700m.

When they reached Camp 5 they were so exhausted that they spent the following night there. The next day they forced themselves on and, after abseiling down vertical walls of ice countless times, Heinrich was growing very weak. Only their tremendous experience, their discipline and their mutual support saw these two outstanding climbers safely through their descent down that perilous wall. They spent one more night at Camp 3 and one night at Camp 2. At last, four days after reaching the summit of Cho Oyu, they dragged

themselves wearily into Base Camp late at night. Kukuczka had succeeded in climbing two different 8000m peaks in the same winter! This made him the second person to have climbed all the 8000m peaks.

One final thought. If someone were to ask me which were the most enjoyable moments to remember in the whole expedition, I would answer without hesitation: the wonderful comradeship at Base Camp and on the wall, and on Christmas Eve round our table.