Pieniny – The Great Little Mountains

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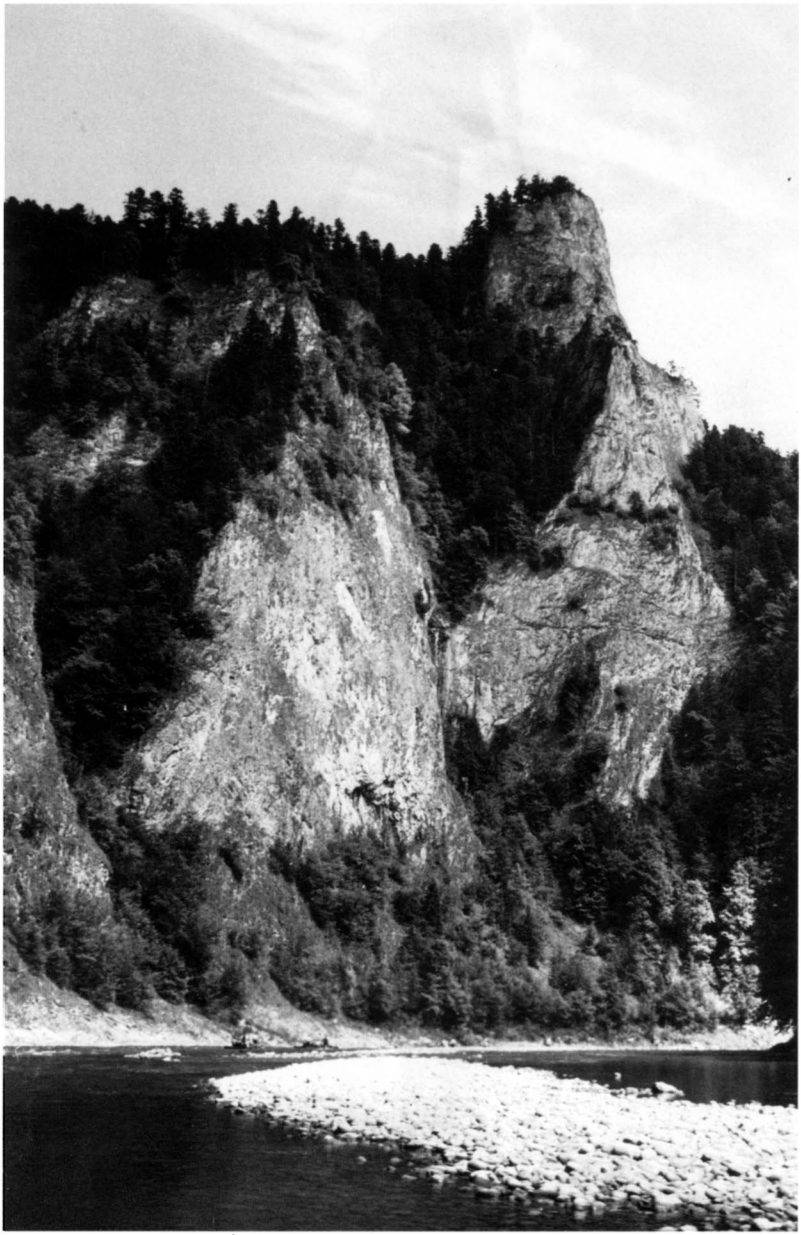
On the map of Poland, the Pieniny Mountains are over-shadowed by other mountains situated in the south of the country, along the Czechoslovakian border. However, the Pieninys with their pointed rocky hills provide a contrast to the landscape of the surrounding Flysch Beskidy Mountains. The landscape and natural beauty of the Pieninys have brought about their great popularity with tourists, especially ramblers, resulting in the establishment of the first Polish National Park there.

In general, the Pieniny Mountains cover the area between the Białka River in the west (its source is situated above the White Water Valley on the Slovak side of the Tatra Mountains), and the Rozdziele Pass in the east, where they border on the Beskid Sadecki Mountains. The western part of the Pieninys, which culminate on Żar (879m), is called Pieniny Spiskie, because the surrounding territory – with its interesting villages, architecture, costumes and customs of the people – is joined to the Spisz region (part of this area is situated on the Slovak side, too). This is where Dębno, the village with the famous St Michael's Church, is situated. This wooden church was built in the 15th century and its interior is covered with unusual and rare wall-paintings. No wonder Dębno church is a goal for most tourists who go to the Pieniny Mountains. The eastern part of the Pieninys, although being the highest, is called Małe Pieniny (Little Pieniny). It culminates on the Wysoka (1052m), at the foot of which are four conservation areas with short but beautiful gorges (the most famous is called Homole).

But most popular is the central part of the Pieninys, situated between Czorsztyn in the west, and Szczawnica-spa in the east. This mountain range is 10km long and 4km wide. Although the main goals for ramblers are Trzy Korony (the Three Crowns; 982m), the highest point in this area, the top of Sokolica (747m), as well as the sheer 'Sokola Perć' (the 'Falcon Trail'), it is worth noting that there are other attractions in these mountains. The Dunajec River, which runs from the Tatra Mountains, cuts through the Pieninys and carves a rocky canyon there. It is 9km long, but its beginning and end are only 2.4km apart, and the difference in level between the entrance and end of the canyon is about 60m. The bottom of the Dunajec valley, which is situated 420–500m above sea-level, is dominated by several hundred metres of high rocky walls – those of Trzy Korony, Czertez, Sokolica; the scenery there is similar to that of the high mountains.

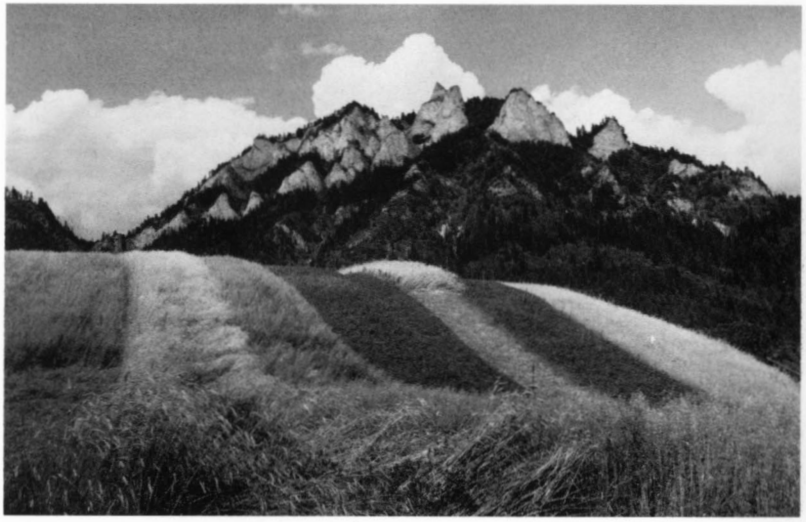
The Dunajec canyon is the result of the formation of mountains and river erosion. This process took place in the Miocene, Pliocene and glacial epochs. Above the canyon the conical hills, characteristic of the area, are covered with forests, hidden flower meadows and steep white cliffs. This unusual view can be observed and admired from the top of the hills, and from the tract of water in the canyon as well.



31. Sokolica (Sugar Head), from the Dunajec valley.



32. Dunajec canyon, from top of Sokolica (747m).



33. Trzy Korony (982m), from the S.

The beginning of tourism in the Pieniny Mountains – as remarks J Nyka, author of the best contemporary guidebook for this area – is connected with the creation of the Szczawnica-spa. J Dietl, balneologist and professor at the Jagellonian University, wrote in the middle of the 19th century that 'Szczawnica takes first place among other spas in Galicia' (at this time the part of Poland under Austrian rule). Nevertheless, the Pieniny Mountains were known earlier. The first scientists of the 18th century who wandered through the Carpathian Mountains were fascinated by the Pieninys as well. Balthasar Hacquet, a physician and naturalist born in France, explorer of the Alps and Carpathian Mountains, was one of them. He published a book entitled *Neueste physikalisch-politische Reisen in den Jahren 1788–1795 durch die Dacischen und Sarmatischen oder Nördlichen Karpaten*, which is not only a record of his geographical, geological and botanical studies, but also contains information for travellers and instructions for contemporary mountaineers. Perhaps it was this that influenced Z and W H Paryski, authors of the *Encyclopedia of the Tatra Mountains* (published in Poland in 1973), to consider this book to be the first manual of mountaineering.

At the beginning of the 19th century the first tourist trips through the Dunajec canyon were organized. L Zejszner, a Polish geologist and also professor at the Jagellonian University, became fascinated by the Pieniny (and Tatra) Mountains when he visited them in 1829 for the first time. 20 years later he wrote: 'In the morning, one starts from Sromowce, a village not far away from Czorsztyn, the flotilla consisting of 10–15 double boats. These boats have to be joined together, because they are made of hollowed-out spruce trunks and they capsize easily. The participants are preceded by a separate boat with musicians and a second boat with artillery which fires from mortars in places with an echo'.

The trips on rafts through the Dunajec canyon from Sromowce (from Kąty, to be precise) to Szczawnica have been until now the main tourist attraction of the Pieninys. To be sure, the artillery boat doesn't accompany tourists today, but they can listen to music at the time of embarkment: sometimes it is the Highlanders band, sometimes gypsy music. The rafts are guided by a specially trained rafter, born in the Pieniny villages, usually dressed in folk regional costume.

The rocky hills of the Pieninys, made of limestone from the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods (they are built over the less resistant sandstones, slates and marls), have never been of interest to mountaineers. These mountains have been visited for many years by travellers, later by ramblers with rucksacks and guests from spas in Szczawnica and Krościenko. They walk to the ruins of the Pieniny Castle and to the top of Trzy Korony; from these places the panoramic view of all the Tatra Mountains can be admired. Grim as well as romantic, the Pieninys were much more accessible than the high mountains of the Tatras, which were wild and impenetrable.

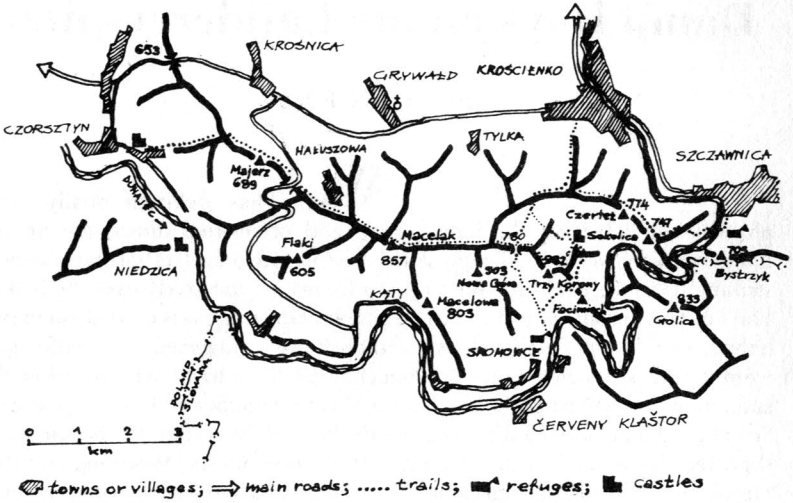
The Pieniny Mountains create a small but distinct geobotanical area. About 110 species of vascular plants occur there, several endemic plants among them. We can observe an astounding number and variety of insects, especially butterflies – about 1500 species. In the Pieniny forests beech- and fir-trees grow



34. Rafts in the Dunajec canyon.



35. View E from Pieniny Castle. Beskidy Mountains in background.



Pieniny Mountains – central part

as do yews. Pine-trees can usually be seen on the tops of hills. Hanging off the white rocks and tossed by wind, they are a very good subject for photographers.

The rich flora found on the limestone rocks, and the beautiful landscapes, influenced the decision to create a national park there. In 1921 the first reservation was founded, not far from Czorsztyn Castle. Since 1929 land in the Pieninys has been bought up from private owners, and in 1932 the Pieniny National Park was formally opened. Its area now covers 2231 hectares. On the Slovak side of the Dunajec River, near Cerveny Klastor, the Slovak Nature Reserve was also organized between the wars (the Slovak protected areas consist of about 2125 hectares today). Thus in the Pieniny Mountains – the first in Europe and the second in the world – a national park bordering on two countries was created.

The idea of building a dam on the Dunajec River in the Pieniny Mountains was first conceived between the wars. This project is now under construction. An artificial lake should stop the consequences of the dangerous floods caused by the Dunajec waters, and will be situated in the western part of the Pieninys. The dam will be constructed near Niedzica Castle and the artificial lake will stretch to Dębno village. This lake will naturally change the scenery of this part of the Pieninys, and these plans often upset ecologists and tourists. Within a few years, the reflections of the Niedzica and Czorsztyn Castles, the dark green forests and white rocks, will glance back from the sheet of water, as from a mirror. But a lot of tourists are worried that when this happens something elusive will have disappeared from the atmosphere and landscape of these mountains.

The Pieninys give the impression of high mountains, but they are not high. Nevertheless, this miniature mountain range has become known as one of the nicest places in Europe.