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## Attilio Tissi, 1900-1959

(Plates 83-85)

West of Agordo in the southern Dolomites is a secluded valley, enclosed to the south by Mt Agner (2872m) and to the north by a double peak with which it shares its name: the Pale di San Lucano (2409m). A narrow road ends at the head of the valley where a tributary of the river Cordevole (the *torrente* Tegnás) plunges down over rocks in a white arc of water. At this level the mountain slopes on either side are thick with trees, but on the valley floor there is grass ribboned with little streams where, in early May, the cowslips are fading and the lilies-of-the-valley coming into flower. It was from this valley in 1930 that a young local man called Attilio Tissi, with his friend Giovanni Andrich, embarked on a climbing career which would, in a short space of time, make him famous.

Tissi was born in 1900 in Vallada near Agordo where his father ran a sawmill powered by water. He was one of ten children and the family lived modestly. On leaving school, he studied engineering at the Technical Institute at Belluno, and then worked as a clerk in Romagna, first at a sulphur mine and afterwards at a marble quarry. His experience of the grim conditions under which miners and quarrymen worked at that time made him into a socialist for life.

The climb which started from the Valle di San Lucano took place almost by accident. The Agordo Alpine Club had decided to commemorate the imminent marriage of Marie José of the Belgians, whose family were lovers of the Dolomites, by giving her name to the as yet unnamed and unclimbed western peak of the Pale di San Lucano. But members of the Belluno Alpine Club were heard to remark that the men of Agordo were more inclined to sit around in cafés and baptise mountains than to climb them. With little time or money at their disposal, Tissi and Andrich, though surrounded by mountains, had reached the age of 30 without once having climbed one. Nevertheless, inexperienced as they were, the two friends decided to take up the Bellunese challenge and climb the peak.

They set off one weekend, quite casually, remembering to take with them a rope, which they hardly knew how to use, and a few pitons. There was no road along the valley then, and they had some way to walk. Maria José is not a particularly difficult or spectacular climb; but it is a long one, and the lower part is dense with low-growing pine which harbours adders and makes the going unpleasant. The bare rock, when they came to it, can only

have been a relief. Hammering in a piton or two, Tissi and Andrich climbed their first peak by the SE corner. It was not until 1972 that anyone made the climb again. Then a party of young men went up in winter. Afterwards they came to visit Signora Mariola Tissi, and presented her with a piton, weighing about two kilos, which they had recovered from the climb of forty years earlier.

The ascent of the Pale di San Lucano, so lightheartedly undertaken, turned out to be the beginning of something like a passion. Tissi, often with Andrich and always leading, went on to climb one peak after another. He found a new way (the *via Tissi*) up the east wall of Mt Agner. In 1931, intending to climb the Tofana de Rozes (3225m) by a known route (the *Stösser*), he strayed off route in poor light, and ended by blazing a demanding new trail of his own.

The same year, with Andrich and the climber Domenico Rudatis, he made a first ascent by the West Ridge of the Torre Trieste, a peak of 2458m guarding one of the southern branches of the Civetta range. The Trieste ascent (600m of climbing) takes seven to ten hours and has stretches of Grade 5+. It necessitates a 37-metre traverse near the start, and the negotiation of overhangs, cracks, dièdres and chimneys, often on loose rock. But it is the descent by the East Face which makes the Torre remarkable. This takes three to six hours, and is one of the most difficult descents in the Dolomites. The series of abseils involved demand complete accuracy.

In 1932 Attilio Tissi climbed the difficult NW wall of the Pan di Zuccherò (2070m). As well as slippery rock faces, falling stones and a dearth of footholds, it has a difficult overhang and an enclosed chimney. In none of his early climbing did Tissi receive guidance from anyone else. Years later, looking back at this period, he told his wife that he had felt a force, almost outside himself, which seemed to draw him upward.

By this time, Tissi and Andrich were already renowned for what is generally regarded as their greatest achievement: their ascent of the NW face of Mt Civetta (3220m), the highest point of the seven kilometre-long ridge, by the most direct route. This was not a first ascent. The route had been climbed in 1925 by Emil Solleder and Gustav Lettenbauer of Munich, and was the first Grade 6 ascent to be made in the Dolomites. According to rumour, someone had scornfully scrawled at the foot of the wall: *Das ist kein Brot für Italianer!* The German climbers had found it necessary to bivouac during the climb. The first Italians would stop only long enough to swallow some zabaglione, a restoring mixture of eggs, sugar, and Marsala wine. Tissi habitually avoided bivouacs.

They were novices still (for it was only the summer of 1930) when the two friends climbed the great Solleder route. They left the Vazzoler refuge (1725m) at 1.30am on Sunday 31 August, and began climbing at 4.30am. Today the foot of the NW face of Mt Civetta can be reached in 40 minutes from the Rifugio Tissi at 2262m. The wall is 1000m high, the climbing distance 1300m; it includes 160m of Grade 6, and 300m of Grade 5. The



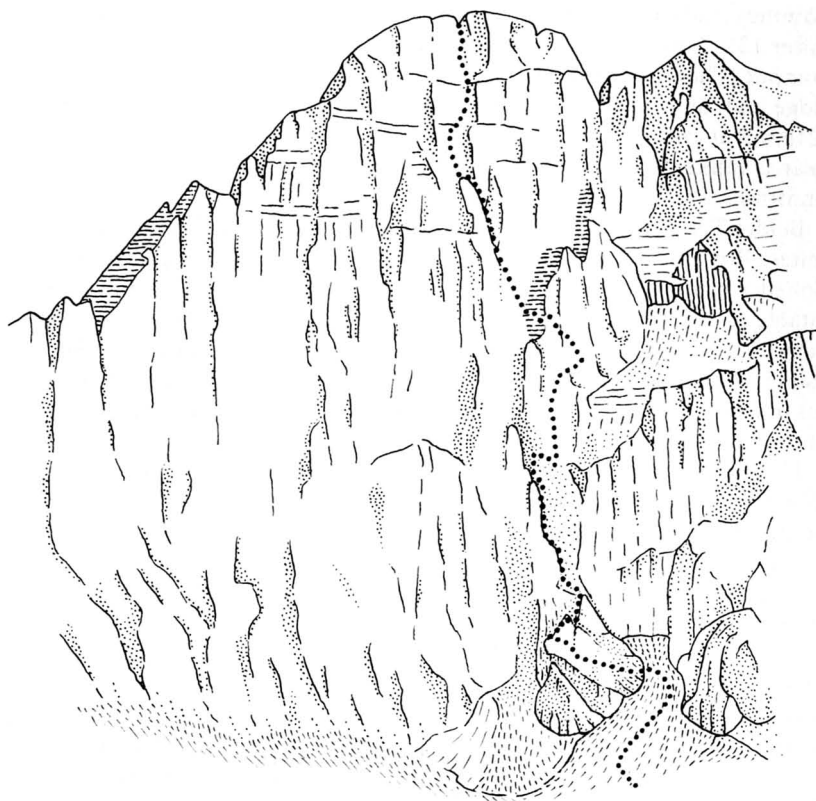
83. Attilio Tissi, 1900-1959. In the background the Torre Trieste, 2458m, which he climbed by the *diretissima* route in 1931. (p213)



84. Attilio Tissi with his wife Mariola on the summit of the W spur of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo, 22 August 1959, shortly before the fatal accident. (p213)



85. The N face of Monte Civetta, 3220m, in the Dolomites, showing the Rifugio Tissi (circled). (p213)



Monte Civetta, 3220m: Solleder route

first difficult stretch is an 18m crack which starts on the horizontal but curves to vertical, opening to a chimney closed by a roof but continuing above the roof (Grade 6). Higher up, the chimney becomes a waterfall, known as The Cascade, and must be avoided by a detour to the right.

As Tissi and Andrich climbed, it happened that they were observed from below by the alpinists Hans Steger and Paula Wiesinger, who watched as Andrich made a false move and nearly fell (having cramp in one hand) before managing to get a piton into the rock. As both moved upward in what seemed an impetuous rush, the watchers stood aghast, expecting the unknown madmen to fall at their feet at any moment.

After The Cascade, the Solleder route has a string of obstacles in store, including a wet crack, some chimneys with loose surfaces, a slanting ledge where stonefall is a hazard, and a black dripping cave from which a traverse must be made round a vertical wall. More chimneys follow, more cracks, and gullies with overhangs necessitating yet more traverses. The last

chimney leads to a ledge, another gully, and a final steep climb to the crest. After 13½ hours of continuous climbing, Tissi and Andrich reached the summit. They descended by a conventional route on the east side of the ridge and, after losing their way in darkness, arrived at the Coldai refuge (2135m) at midnight. Today this climb can be done in ten hours. Modern gear is lighter, and during the 65 intervening years the rock faces have, unfortunately, grown a plentiful crop of pitons.

Before Tissi's climbs, foreign alpinists had been to the fore in the Dolomites. But Tissi and Andrich, in climbing the huge soaring face of the Solleder route, showed a bravura and *disinvoltura* (a word roughly translatable as 'nonchalance') which captured Italian imaginations. After their achievement, no foreigner could reasonably question the daring or skill of Italian climbers. The route would henceforth be associated with Tissi and his friend, and the refuge eventually built in his memory would be situated almost at its foot.

The climbs made by Tissi in the early 1930s were accomplished with a minimum of technical aids. He climbed swiftly, elegantly, and without hesitation, making little use of ropes except for the safety of others. On skis he was notably stiff, but on the rock face he appeared to move as easily as a bird. By 1933 he was acknowledged to be the greatest exponent of free climbing that Italy had yet produced.

Like his first ascent, Tissi's last famous one had a connection with the Belgian royal family. The future King Leopold, always a keen alpinist, was anxious to take part in a challenging climb under Tissi's leadership. A tower under the Civetta ridge near its SW end, which until then had remained unclimbed and unnamed, was duly chosen, and the royal party set out on 2 September 1933. It consisted of Andrich, Domenico Rudatis, Leopold of Belgium and his friend Baron Carlo Franchetti. The tower itself (standing at 2252m) is only 120m high, and takes two hours to scale. But a previous attempt had failed because of the overhang which entirely surrounds it quite near the base. In free climbing, negotiating this obstacle is very hard, involving a Grade 6 traverse round the corners of the tower. It was this passage that made the climb an interesting one. Rudatis watched as Tissi negotiated this pitch, moving fast and rhythmically, without pauses or sudden movements. This was art, he thought, rather than technique.

After this passage, a higher band of overhangs is bypassed by a semi-hand traverse to the right, after which the West Ridge leads without difficulty to the summit. The descent, though comparatively easy, was striking, with a 40-metre abseil from the hem of an overhang to the top of a smaller tower (the Bocia), followed by a second drop to the gravel-bed between the two towers. To commemorate the occasion the tower was named *Il Campanile di Brabante*.

Later that year, Tissi broke two vertebrae in a motor-cycle accident, and although he recovered enough to continue climbing, he was forced to do so less ambitiously. In 1936 he married, and afterwards usually climbed with

his young wife Mariola who was then a novice. According to her account, he was too taciturn to be much of a teacher. Yet he had the gift of inspiring great confidence in anyone who climbed with him.

With the Second World War, mountain climbing for sport came to a halt. In the Province of Belluno there was such antagonism to the Fascist regime that the German forces moved in and ruled the area as though it was enemy territory. Partisan resistance grew and Tissi, already known for anti-fascist views, was drawn into it. 'I cannot *not* take part', he told his wife. His main task was to help organise the distribution of weapons dropped from British planes. Still ostensibly occupied with engineering, he had some pretext for driving in the mountains, and sometimes the boot of his small Fiat was stuffed with guns and ammunition.

At his house in Belluno the Committee for Liberation met although, when he became a wanted man, he could not risk being at home for more than one night at a time. In spite of this precaution, the SS eventually caught up with him. He had prepared a hiding place in a wood pile in the cellar, and when the knock at the door came he rushed down – only to discover that he had forgotten the cellar key! He was found soon enough in a heap of hay outside the back door.

For the rest of that night Mariola Tissi sat up, and listened. When she did not hear the dreaded burst of gunfire, she felt she had some grounds for hope of her husband's survival (such arrests not infrequently ended with the prisoner being shot). But although they certainly intended to kill Attilio Tissi, they first tried to extract information from him.

Tissi remained in SS headquarters for a month, from 7 November to 6 December 1944. After torture, fearing that he might not have the strength of will to maintain his silence, he attempted suicide by cutting his wrists. But on 6 December a group of Italians whom he did not recognise burst into his cell and ordered him out. Assuming that these were his executioners at last, he resisted them until they put a pistol to his head. Once outside, they were able to convince him that they were partisans. A member of the Italian Police, no longer sympathetic to what was going on, had made a present of wine for the Feast of St Nicholas to the SS guards, who were for now more interested in disposing of it than in watching their prisoner. The same policeman had supplied keys. Tissi was weakened by his ordeal, and his shoes had been taken from him. But the partisans got him across the shallow, icy river Piave, to a safe house in the mountains where he was fed five eggs a day to restore his strength. The partisans also gave him a revolver and six bullets: five for the SS if they caught him again, and the sixth for himself. Until the end of the war he slept with the revolver under his pillow; Signora Tissi has it still. The Police have granted her a special licence to keep it.

On 2 May 1945, Belluno's Liberation Day, Attilio Tissi was elected President of the Province. Later he became a socialist senator, and for five years he lived in Rome. But a sense of duty, not inclination, had made him

a politician, and he did not stand for election a second time. He returned to the Dolomites to build bridges, tunnels and dams, and to climb mountains with his wife at weekends. But, as he told her, the mysterious force which had inspired him in his youth during the 1930s was no longer there.

On 22 August 1959 they went with a friend to climb the Torre Lavaredo, an outcrop at the western end of the Tre Cime di Lavaredo, near Cortina. The ascent offers no particular challenge and the Tissi had never bothered to climb it before. Their friend brought his camera along, and on the summit took their photograph, quite a rare occurrence, as Tissi was never much interested in photos. As they made their descent, with Tissi as anchorman, the other two heard a fall of stones. Mariola Tissi braced herself automatically to take the rope's weight, but Tissi had fallen only a short distance, dashing his head against the rock. Three hours later, while the rescue team was taking him to Cortina, he died without regaining consciousness.

Mariola Tissi believes that a very small ledge, useful as a toehold, had unexpectedly crumbled. Her reason for thinking so is that when, not long afterwards, she climbed the Torre again, she found that the convenient ledge had vanished.

Attilio Tissi, the socialist who named peaks for the royal house of Brabant, now has a street in Belluno, a climbing route, a *via ferrata* on Civetta's east side and a refuge on its west side, all of which bear his name. The climb undertaken by his wife on the unlucky Lavaredo Tower was a more personal act of commemoration. It could hardly have been better chosen for a man who found much fulfilment, but also death, among the rock faces of his native Dolomites.