

IN THE TATRA MOUNTAINS

BY JAN MOSTOWSKI

IN THE most northern part of the Carpathian chain a lofty, rocky island rises. Here are the Tatra mountains—the highest massif between the Alps and the Caucasus. There are no glaciers in these mountains but the peaks rising above the everlasting snows resemble those of the Alps. The average height of the main range is about 2,370 m. above sea level, and the highest summit is Gerlach (2,663 m.). This mountain realm of almost three hundred peaks, crags and cliffs, whose shapes recall the lofty peaks of the Savoy Alps, is divided between two neighbouring states, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Climbers came here in the middle of the nineteenth century, and then commenced a period similar to that in the history of the conquest of other mountain ranges. The ridges yielded first, and later the faces and pillars were also climbed. Finally, what was done in summer was repeated in winter.

A mountaineer will not find any unconquered peaks in the Tatra today; only the remaining secondary problems, or perhaps some few unnoticed winter first ascents are left. It is always possible to squeeze in among the existing routes still one more route, but such a climb would be without any logical mountaineering meaning.

One must look upon the Tatra today as a training ground for the most difficult climbs in the Alps and for expeditions to the highest mountains. The Tatra present a broad variety of climbs varying from the easiest to the most severe in summer, which are even harder in winter when the faces are covered by deep snow and the temperature falls far below freezing point. The Tatra rock is less rotten than that of the Alps and falling stones occur very rarely. There are no glaciers but one can sometimes meet in winter huge icicles hanging from the steps in chimneys; they are made of that glassy ice which does not yield easily to the ice-axe, and are always a problem for a climber. After snowy winters the snow sometimes remains during the whole summer, lingering in deep gullies and cirques. Even the easy parts of the mountains become a menacing problem to the climber when the weather breaks down. The heavy snowfalls in winter cause avalanches.

The height of the faces in the Tatra varies from about 300–600 m. There are, however, some faces which are outstanding by reason of their size and difficulty.

From the top of the Mieguszowiecki Peak (2,438 m.) in the Polish

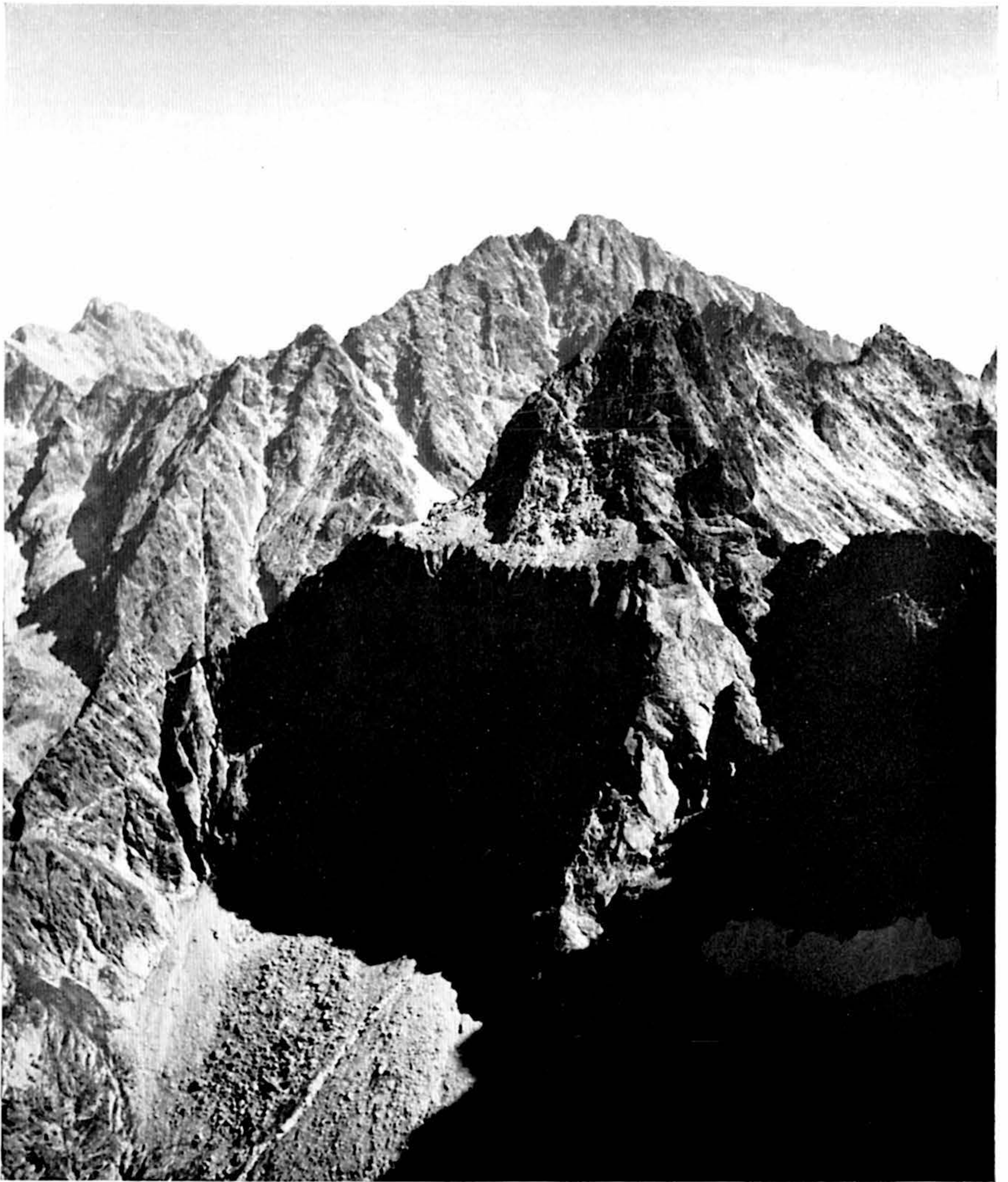


Photo: Janusz Vogel]

MALY GANEK, 2425 M. AND THE GALERIA GANKOWA. IN THE BACKGROUND IS GERLACH, 2663 M., THE HIGHEST PEAK IN THE TATRA.

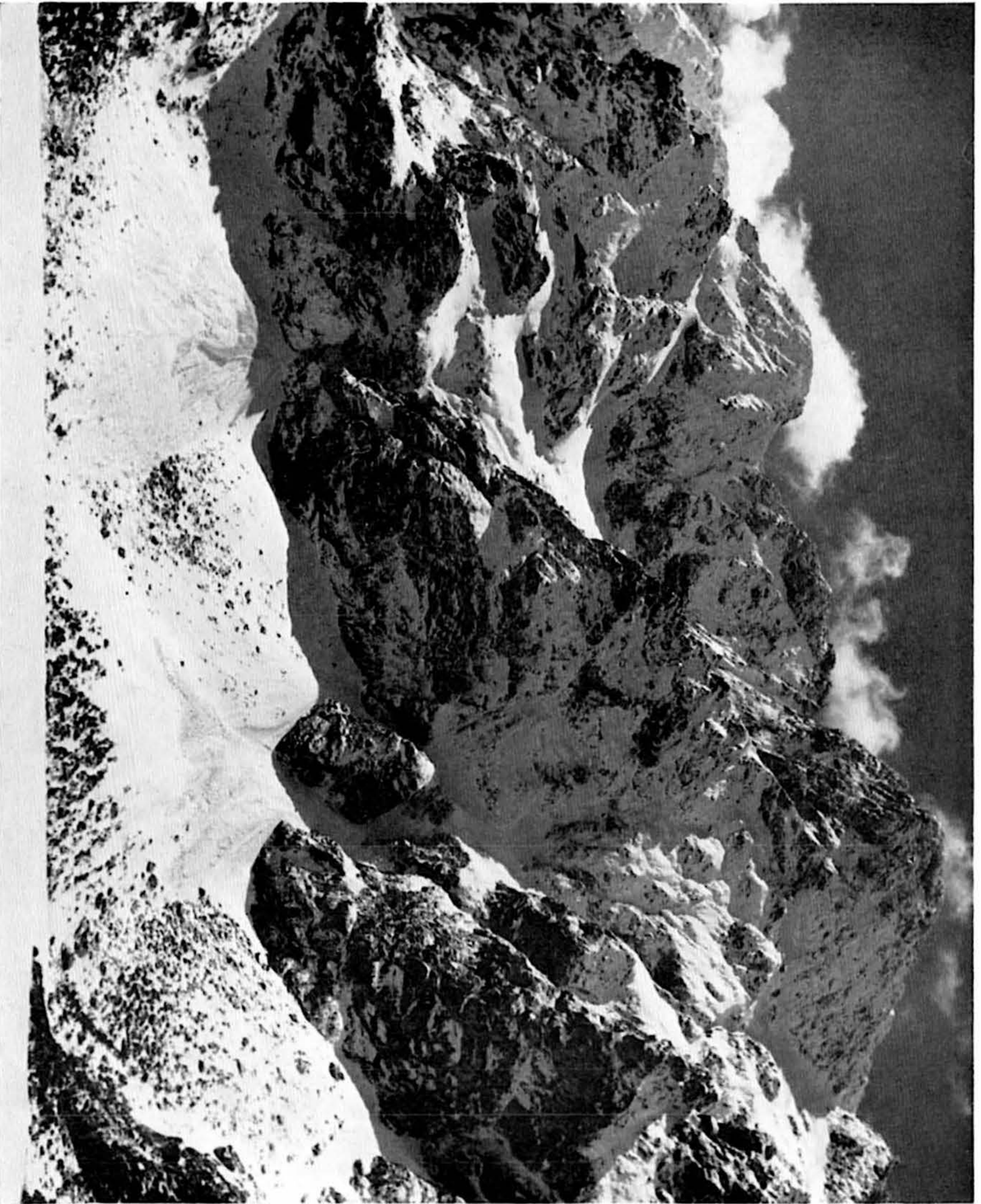


Photo: Halina Vogel

THE MIECUSZOWIECKI PEAKS ABOVE THE MORSKIE OKO LAKE

Tatra a mighty pillar about 880 m. high falls abruptly towards the north-east. This pillar is of great difficulty, grade V according to the Welzenbach standard, and it takes, even in summer, about seven hours to climb. In 1955 the first winter ascent was made by two mountaineers who, starting from a refuge about one-and-a-half kilometres distant, took four days to complete the climb.

Not far from this peak a subsidiary ridge on the North face of Mieguszowiecki nad Czarnym Peak (2,404 m.) peters out at a small pinnacle which is called Kazalnica, i.e. the Pulpit. Its extraordinarily steep North-east face forms a 600 m. high precipice which owing to its steepness and size and difficulty had become an object of the utmost interest to mountaineers. The general lack of problems intensified this interest. The middle of the face had been climbed with artificial aids in 1942, and in 1955 the problem of the left side of the face was solved. The conquerors scrambled up a completely holdless pitch, a few metres high, boring holes and using expansion bolts for the first time in the Tatra. Both routes have already been repeated several times in winter.

Last summer another problem on the Pulpit was solved. It was the rib on this face. The climb was preceded by some lengthy preparations and handlines were fixed on the lower parts of the rib.

The assault on the Pulpit still continues; the overhanging cliffs are tempting. Huge eaves jutting out from the face indicate difficulties equal to those of the Dolomites, but all the existing routes are very close to each other and any new one, squeezed in among the old ones, cannot be of any mountaineering value.

Galeria Gankowa, like the Pulpit, is not a peak but only a terrace on the North face of Maly Ganek (2,425 m.). The face of this terrace soars above the screes of the Czeska valley with an extremely steep 300 m. high precipice. Eight routes lead up the face today. One of them is Severe only and the remainder are Very and Extremely Severe (V and VI). In the middle of the precipice a prominent chimney is seen. The first ascent by this chimney took place in 1944. It was done with artificial aids. The route was extremely severe and at that time it was ranked as the hardest climb in the whole of the Tatra. It was not repeated for ten years. Nowadays it is climbed in winter but is still numbered among the most difficult ascents despite the steady rise of the standard of difficulty.

There is another face in the Tatra, besides the North face of the Pulpit, on which expansion bolts were used and this is the East face of Mnich (Monk). Through the middle of the face runs the so-called 'Variant R'. Steep, smooth slabs rise up at the beginning of this route. The conquerors put some bolts there. Above the slabs, huge overhangs jut out which can be climbed only with artificial aids; standing in an



Photo: Halina Vogel]

THE 900 M. HIGH NORTHFACE OF Maly KIEZMARSKI PEAK, 2524 M., SEEN FROM THE KIEZMARSKA VALLEY



Photo: Halina Vogel]

THE EAST FACE OF MNICH, 2068 M.

étrier the climber drives in pitons one after the other into a crack rising vertically over his head.

There are many other faces, besides those mentioned, which set a serious problem for the climber, especially in winter. The almost 900 m. high North face of Maly Kiezmarski Peak (2,524 m.) with its extremely severe route through the Stanislawski chimney, or the North-west face of Lemnica (2,634 m.), with its Hockey route, is a climb of the utmost severity. The name of this route is derived from a huge slab in the face with the edge shaped like a hockey-stick. There is also the 550 m. high West face of Mala Sniezna Crag (2,160 m.). The middle part of this face has been climbed, but eleven years elapsed before the ascent was repeated. The North faces of Jaworowy (2,424 m.) and Maly Jaworowy (2,386 m.) are also of the greatest interest for a mountaineer.

But besides many big and severe faces the Tatra mountains are a place where one can take rest, and relax after the difficulties of the higher mountains. There are hundreds of easier routes where climbs during fine weather give full satisfaction. This feeling of satisfaction is particularly intense when one returns from the big snow and ice mountains after climbing there the extremely severe Alpine faces. It is so pleasant then to be again among the sun-warmed Tatra rocks. That is why we always return with such pleasure to the Tatra.