

NANGA PARBAT, 1938

BY FRITZ BECHTOLD ¹

AFTER the first unsuccessful attempt, the summit party consisting of Luft, Schmaderer, Zuck and myself, together with Ebermann, who was in charge of the short-wave transmitter, reached Camp 4 (6185 m.) between June 24 and 27.

In contrast to previous experience, the route from Camp 3 to Camp 4 proved a serious problem this year. The great ice barrier which divides the snow basin into two parts was much broken and seamed with impassable cliffs. In consequence we were forced against our will far to the right, towards the steep slope descending from the Rakiot Peak, where there is danger from avalanches. It was clear to us from the outset that some better approach must be found for the porters. However, snow fell throughout the night of the 27th/28th, burying our tents and destroying some tent-poles. We had our work cut out to free ourselves from the masses of snow. When the snow clouds parted for a moment, we caught a glimpse beyond the Rakiot nala and the Indus valley of those typical monsoon clouds which indicate a prolonged period of bad weather. During the next days our chief task was to safeguard ourselves against the snow and strengthen the camp. The morning hours were bitterly cold, and we had great difficulty in putting on our frozen boots. Meanwhile, we were cut off from the base, for it would have been foolhardy to break a trail to Camp 3, owing to avalanche danger. Moreover, our supplies of petrol were waning. Ebermann kept in constant touch with Srinagar, where the Junker plane Ju.52, supplied to us by the German Aero Club, was stationed. The pilot, Alexander Thoenes, informed us that on the first fine day he would drop loads at Camp 4.

We waited in the snow until the weather should release us. Our camp was about a furlong distant from the scene of the 1937 disaster.² As far as the eye could see, the great basin was buried in deep snow; there was not a sign of the huge ice avalanche which had overwhelmed our friends. Our present task, as was theirs last year, was to guard ourselves against the burden of snow. During these days, our thoughts dwelt often with our dead companions. Equipped as few others before them in the spirit of their great enterprise, and conscious of the grave risks which all must face who, venturing into the unknown, seek

¹ Our warmest thanks are due to Herr Bechtold, whose paper is here translated from the German; also to the Deutsche Himalaja-Stiftung, Munich, for permission to reproduce the letter from Camp 7, 1934. At our request, Herr Bechtold has omitted all details concerning the earlier part of the expedition which are given in *Der Bergsteiger*, October 1938.

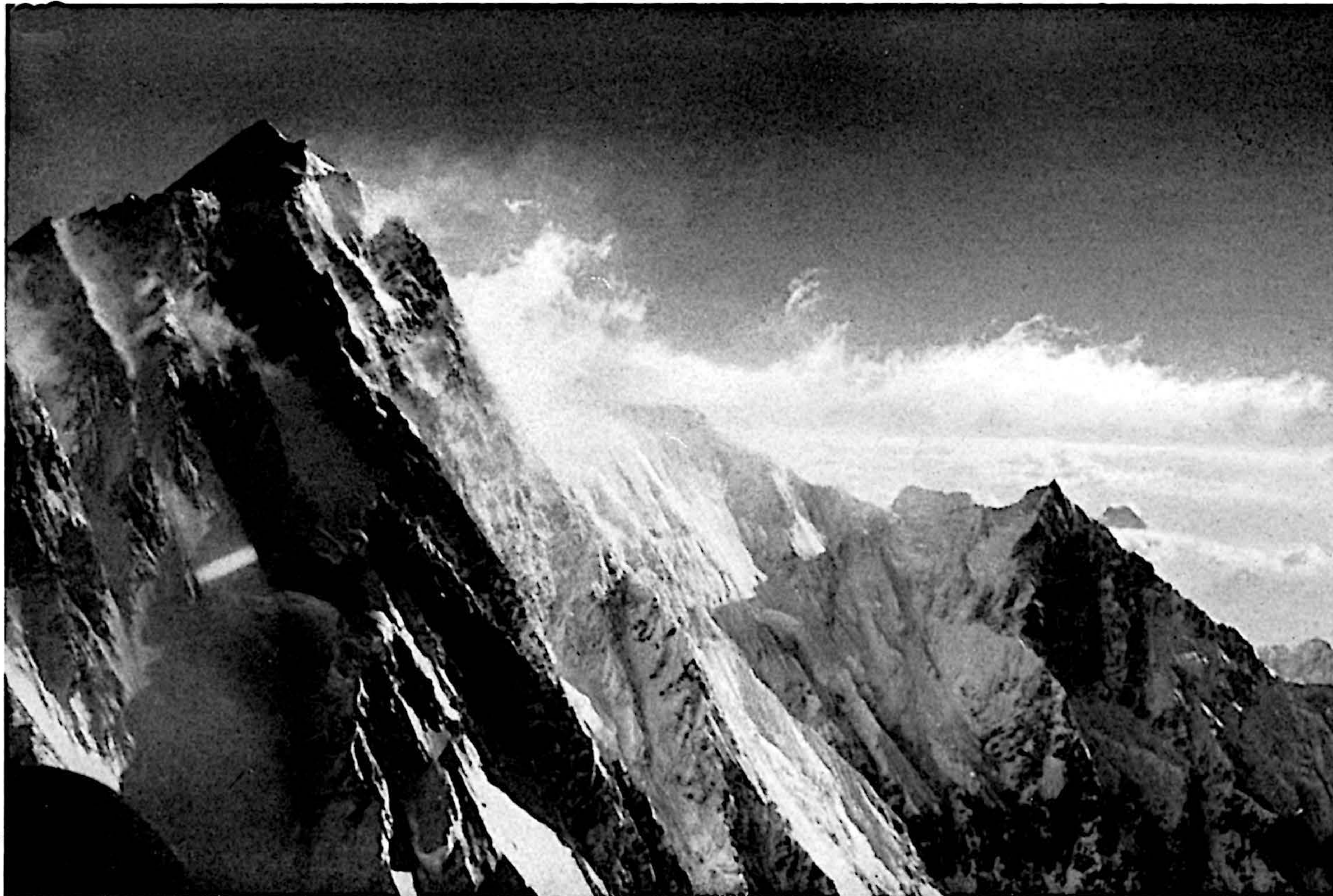
² *A. J.* 49. 210 sqq.



Photo, v. Chlingensberg.]

THE PEAKS OF THE UPPER BALTORO GLACIER, FROM THE SUMMIT OF THE S. CHONGRA PEAK.
The pyramid to the right is K₂.

[To face p. 70.]



Air photo, L'hoenes, 1938.]

THE SOUTHERN PRECIPICES OF NANGA PARBAT.
Rakiot Peak to right, Silbersattel in cloud, Camp 6 near lowest depression in ridge.

to enlarge the horizon of man's outlook, they seemed to be present with us and to communicate something of the selfsame spirit in our common labours.

The morning of July 2 was brilliantly fine. Towards 5 A.M. we heard the sound of the aeroplane and rushed out. As we opened the tent, the cold struck us like a sledge-hammer; the thermometer read -24° C. With our teeth chattering we stood gazing at the machine as it circled without apparent effort above the mountain. Owing to ice on the wings, it was difficult for Ebermann to establish communication with the plane. His hands were stiff and blue with cold, and his fingers had frostbite blisters. At length, to our great relief, we heard that men had been sighted in all the lower camps from which we had been cut off for several days. Soon the first loads were dropped, close to the camp: the long-awaited petrol, fresh meat, potatoes, carrots, beans, fresh apricots, and a pair of warm camp boots. Before we had finished conveying the ten loads through deep powder snow, it began to snow again and the mountain was wrapped in heavy cloud. There was high festival in our tents, one man dallying with a succulent apricot, another munching a juicy carrot, and the cauldrons bubbling meanwhile for the feast.

Late in the afternoon the weather cleared and when we settled down for the night we saw, to our surprise, Bauer, Chlingensperg, Ruths and Flight-Lieut. McKenna plodding upward through the deep snow of the basin. In their anxiety about the highest camp, they had undergone twelve hours' heavy work, but they arrived in the best of form. At once we spread out our new treasures before them and prepared another supper. Bauer had been working for three days at a new track to Camp 4, which circumvented the avalanche danger from the steep slope and led direct over the ice barrier. This involved negotiating an almost vertical ice wall of 50 ft. with ice-pitons and fixing a rope ladder. It was not so much a proper line of approach for porters as an emergency exit in the event of a crisis.

While we improved the camp next morning, Bauer and Schmaderer went up towards the steep slope leading to Camp 5, where lately several large wind-slab avalanches had come down. It was clear, however, that the slopes were as yet in no condition. Furthermore, there was again the long, narrow cloud-strip lying over the Karakoram, sure sign of bad weather on Nanga Parbat. Bauer decided accordingly to take the main body back to Base Camp, to avoid needless inroads into the valuable store of high-altitude provisions. A small group was detailed to bring stores deposited at Camp 3 up to Camp 4, and to examine snow conditions daily on the steep slope. Even this detachment, however, was withdrawn owing to bad weather, and by July 10 all members of the expedition were reunited in Base Camp. A few days earlier Ruths and Major Hadow had discovered on their descent an excellent route by the left branch of the ice barrier between Camps 3 and 4, thus ridding us of this anxiety for the next assault.

It was now full summer at Base Camp, with sheep and some

cows and a few hens brought up—a sight to stimulate our appetites. Luft took the opportunity, with Balke, our expedition doctor, to make a physiological examination of all members, and found that the long sojourn in the high camps had acclimatized us all excellently. Major Galbraith, Political Agent at Gilgit, and Major and Mrs. Atkinson, who had visited Base Camp on June 3, pampered us with incessant parcels of fruit. Major Cropper, commanding the Gilgit Scouts, placed two trained signallers with a heliograph at our disposal, so that we could keep in constant touch with Gilgit.

When the weather at last showed signs of improvement, we made ready with good heart for the third assault. On July 14 the first detachment went up to Camp 2, and on July 15 to Camp 4, which had been magnificently revictualled by a further dropping of loads by aeroplane on July 6. Next day Luft and I attacked the steep slope leading to Camp 5. The snow defied description. At every step we sank in knee-deep through the crust, and as the angle increased track-making became a torture and we gasped for breath at each step. At the lower lip of the huge bergschrund we traversed to the right, not without danger, and thus after unspeakable toil reached the lower edge of the smooth terrace. We had fixed as our goal that day the point where the sérac slope leads straight up to the gap below the Rakiot Peak. Finally we were reduced to counting the rope-lengths—8, 9, 10—until at last we arrived and sat down for a long rest on the big ice blocks. We returned in our tracks, feeling proud of our day's work. After the brilliant morning, snow had again begun to fall. We got back to Camp 4 fairly tired out, to find that the second party with Bauer had arrived.

On July 17 Bauer, Chlingensperg and Zuck set off with five Sherpa porters to occupy Camp 5. It was a bitterly cold morning, with large cloud-streamers over the Rakiot Peak and Silbersattel. The party made fairly quick progress so long as they were in our tracks of the day before. Meanwhile, Hadow and Ruths had come up with four porters to Camp 4. We watched the advance party and marvelled at their progress. Finally they reached the steep slope leading to the gap, where Bauer had prudently sited Camp 5 some 200 ft. below the ridge for shelter (6690 m.). Before long we saw Chlingensperg returning with all the porters. On the steep slope Nima slipped, and Chlingensperg was only able to hold him by a rapid leap on to the further side of the bergschrund. A clear evening followed an afternoon of drifting snow, and the mighty span of the Silbersattel rose as if chiselled in marble into the steely blue of the sky.

The next morning was fine. Luft and I set out with five porters to organize Camp 5 and to support the advance party in their assault on the ice slope of the Rakiot Peak. The tracks were for the most part obliterated, and it was heavy work. A hurricane was blowing on the ridge, sending clouds of snow dust across the icy wall. We found Bauer and Zuck hard at work in the raging wind building a large wall of snow, which gave splendid shelter to the camp, and it was a pleasant

surprise for them when we turned up, chilled to the marrow and powdered with snow, with our stout-hearted porters. Despite the storm, Bauer took the porters back that evening to Camp 4. The remainder of us went to rest in anticipation of a hard day's fight on the ice wall of the Rakiot Peak.

The storm subsided during the night. On the 19th Luft got to work early at the stove, where he took special care for the day's breakfast, while Zuck and I carefully arranged the ropes to be fixed on the ice wall, packing rock- and ice-pitons and the hammer into the rucksack. Then we set out. The slender Rakiot Peak rose above us cold, graceful, forbidding. Deep loose snow, not compacted with the lower layer, covered the ice wall. It was a magnificent day. The joy of battle at this height entered into us all. Busy as we were with our task, we looked round constantly with delight over the wide landscape spread out before us in crystal clearness, bounded by a chain of huge icy fortresses. Three of the mightiest mountain groups of the world—Hindu Kush, Pamir and Karakoram—are here ranged in one picture. The eye travels from Tirich Mir across Istor-o-nal to the great neighbouring peaks between Rakaposhi and Haramosh; and beyond, the giants of the Baltoro Glacier, Gasherbrum and Masherbrum, the Mustagh Tower, strangest of all mountain forms, and the colossal pyramid of K₂.

While we were setting a long traverse to the left, beneath a rock rib, we found hanging on the old rope of 1934 the body of poor brave Pinzo Nurbu, who failed to reach the safety of camp in the snow-storm of July 10, four years ago.³ His kindly features were still intact and his body unharmed despite all the storms which had swept over him meanwhile. It was a deeply affecting moment for us, but it was essential to keep this scene from the porters, whom Ruths had in the meantime brought to Camp 5. After securing half the wall and fixing a 90-m. rope, we returned to camp. Early next day Bauer and Rebitsch arrived with five porters, who were immediately sent down. Luft and Zuck climbed up the ice wall in order to pay the last honours to Pinzo Nurbu and bring down his body. As they lowered the body into a crevasse below the wall, a cloud of ice dust arose. They returned in silence from above.

Meanwhile, Bauer and Rebitsch were working at a traverse designed to lead up and down from Camp 5 beneath the buttress of the Rakiot Peak into the hollow below the snow ridge leading to the Silbersattel, this being the route followed by Willy Merkl in 1932.⁴ At first, after yesterday's exertions which now proved vain, we felt little enthusiasm for Bauer's new scheme; but eventually we realized that under this year's conditions his route had many advantages over the exposed Rakiot Peak.

On July 21, while Luft and Zuck had a well-earned off day, the rest of us were busy securing the most difficult part of the traverse with

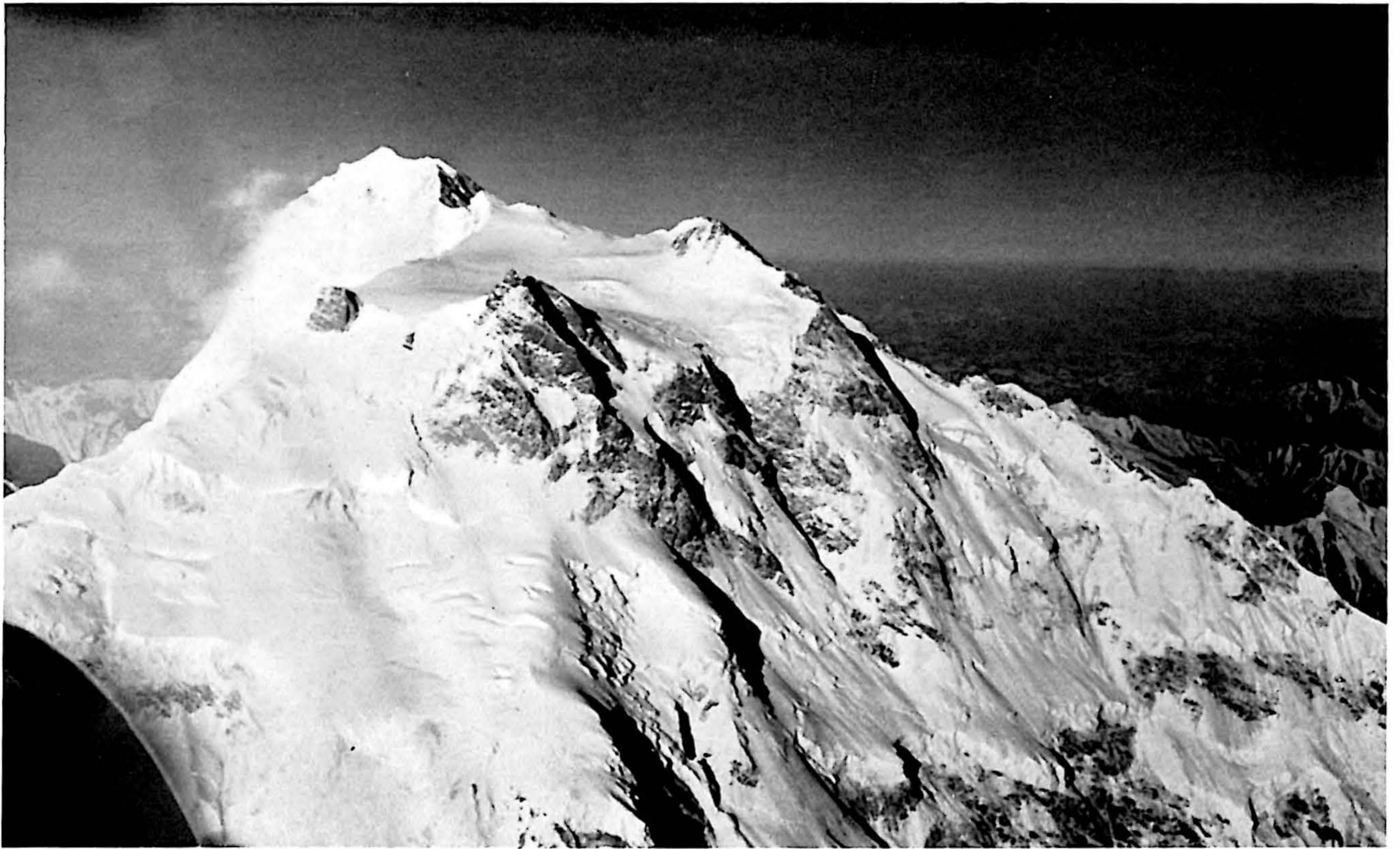
³ *A. J.* 46. 427. *Nanga Parbat Adventure*, 77-9.

⁴ *A. J.* 44. 198, with illustration.

long wooden poles and ropes for the use of porters. At the beginning of the steep slopes which fall abruptly to the glacier basin by Camp 3, Bauer and I drove a long pole, not without considerable labour, into the hard snow, and there fixed the first rope. Meanwhile, Rebitsch and Ruths cut a row of steps in the next stretch of bare ice, which was then secured with ice-pitons. Gradually we drew near to the critical rock spur. Here the ice was dangerously brittle, and when Rebitsch was endeavouring to fix a piton a large piece of ice broke away. He slipped and was only able to check his fall by a despairing effort. Ruths would certainly have been unable to hold him. After this incident they attained the hollow and worked up laboriously through deep snow towards the ridge. In the meantime Bauer and I were improving the difficult traverse, fixing stout ropes throughout and enlarging the steps. It was a glorious afternoon, with beautiful fleece-like cumulus clouds drifting across the sky. We were glad to see Rebitsch and Ruths reach the saddle in the snow ridge, where Camp 6 stood in 1934. Late that evening they returned tired out to Camp 5, after an amazing feat. Everyone was in excellent spirits at the thought of occupying Camp 6 next day.

Nine days after leaving Base Camp for the third assault, all the occupants of Camp 5, with the exception of yesterday's advance party, went up to Camp 6. The four porters whom Schmaderer had brought up the day before crossed the dangerous points without the least delay. The day was again fine, with clear distant views. We were approaching the snow ridge with its baroque towers and cornices, that ridge which held so many memories for us German mountaineers. As we stepped on to the saddle, I was again held spell-bound with the incomparable view of the S.E. buttresses, falling 17,000 ft. from the summit to the Rupal nala, in the clouds of noon. While we were taking photographs, Bauer and Zuck went up the snow ridge towards the *Mohrenkopf*.⁵ Zuck returned quickly with his two porters. 'There are two dead men lying by the rock up there,' he said. He immediately took all four porters back a short distance and pitched a temporary Camp 6 a little below the ridge, out of sight. Luft and I went up to join Bauer. In the shelter of the slender rocky point two corpses were lying side by side, with a rubber mattress between them. We stood for a while with bared head, silent before the sombre majesty of death. Only gradually, as we began to clear the bodies from the snow, did we realize that here lay Willy Merkl, friend of my youth, and his porter Gaylay, who had remained with him till death came. We found neither rucksack nor rope. A steel frame was leaning against the rock, such as was used by the Everest porters, which the Himalayan Club had kindly put at our disposal in 1934. Beside it was an ice-axe marked 'W.M.' Angtsering's account was correct: of the manifold equipment which they had taken up to the Silbersattel, nothing remained but one porter's blanket and a rubber mattress. In Merkl's coat-

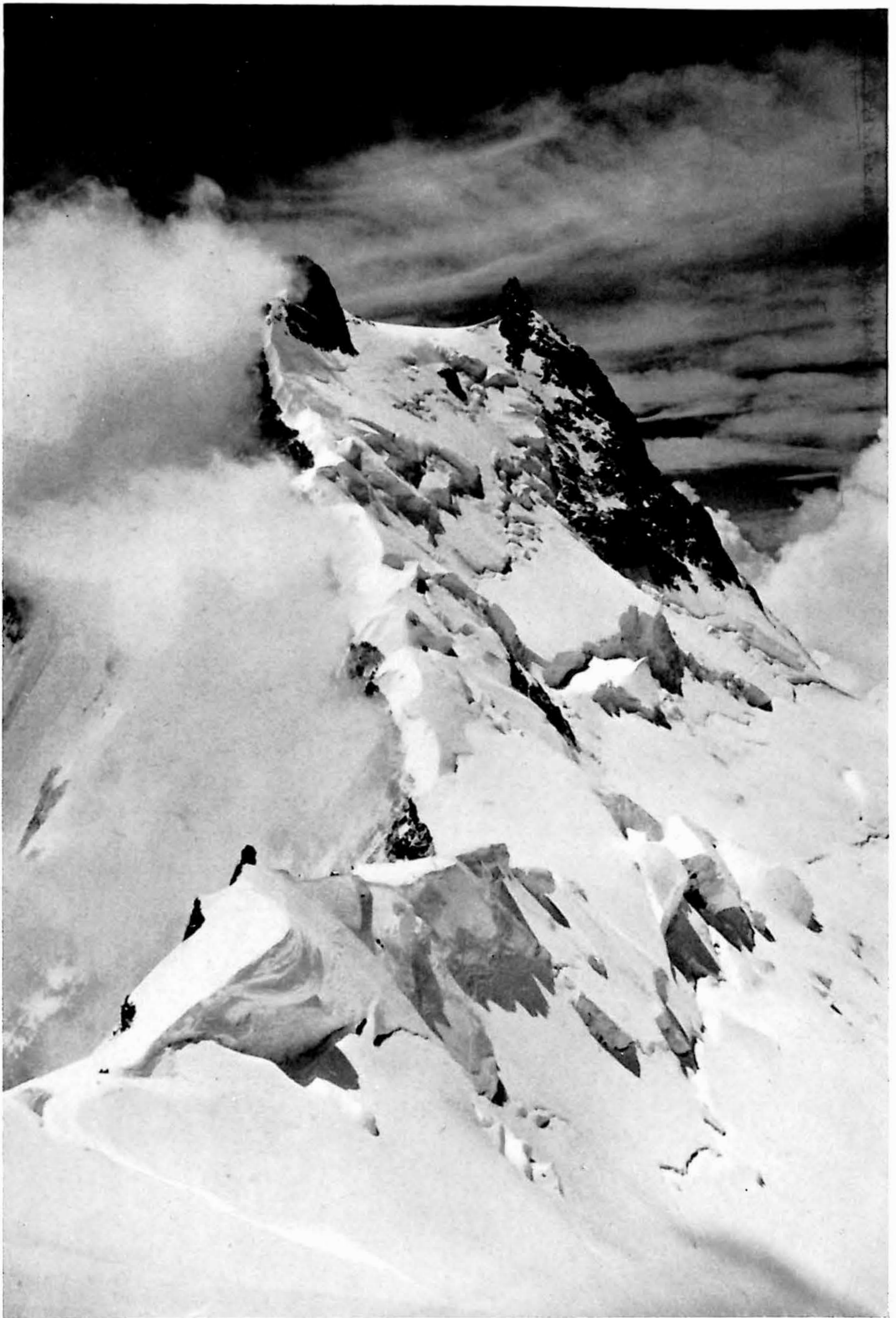
⁵ An island of rock on the ridge, the only rock passed between the Rakiot Peak and the Silbersattel.



Air photo, Thoenes, 1938.]

SILBERSATTEL, UPPER PLATEAU, AND SUMMIT OF NANGA PARBAT, FROM THE E.

[To face p. 74.]



Photo, L. Schmaderer]

SNOW RIDGE LEADING TO SILBERSATTEL, NANGA PARBAT.
The black rock in foreground is the Mohrenkopf, beside which the bodies of
Willy Merkl and Gaylay were found.

against the rocks from the storm, and had succumbed to cold and exhaustion. Everything pointed to the fact that Merkl had died before Gaylay. We collected Gaylay's amulet (such as most porters wear round their necks) in order to restore it to his relatives, and laid the bodies as well as we could within view of the great goal in search of which they met their death. For Willy Merkl we could give no proper burial. His memory lies graven in our hearts, and the heritage of his spirit lives with those that come after. Then, descending in silence to the camp, Bauer and I took the five Sherpas down to Camp 5, while Luft and Zuck remained above.

Early on the 23rd Rebitsch, Ruths and Schmaderer with four porters went up to the ridge, while Luft and Zuck transferred the tent past the Mohrenkopf to the lowest gap beneath the Silbersattel and explored the route beyond. Even on the exposed ridge the snow lay deep, and both climbers went in up to their knees in breaking the trail. The aeroplane detachment at Srinagar was ready to start any day for dropping loads on the big plateau beyond the Silbersattel. A piece of red parachute-silk was to be the signal at Camp 6 that the leading party was in a position to advance; whereupon Ebermann at Camp 4 was to order up the plane and the second party was to advance from Camp 5. We waited in vain for the signal, this day and the two following days. Huge cloud-columns hovered over the peak, with thick swathes of mist surging over the ridge from the Rupal side. Hadow and McKenna came up early with one porter to Camp 5. They had done splendid supporting work. Owing to illness, the porter question was critical, and both of them had themselves carried loads of 35 lb.

On July 24 Rebitsch and Ruths went up the ridge from Camp 6. The previous day's tracks were obliterated, and it cost them much time. During the day the storm increased; blue sky was visible only above the Silbersattel, to urge them to further efforts. With great exertion they reached the point where Camp 7 stood in 1934, but heavy masses of cornice and snow towers formed by the wind covered this memorable ground. From Camp 5 we could see the two men appearing now and then through the swirling mists racing over the ridge, and it was a marvel to us how they could withstand the weather so long. About 700 ft. below the Silbersattel they decided to turn back. This proved eventually to be the highest point reached in this year's monsoon conditions.

The advance party now abandoned any attempt to reach the Silbersattel in one day from Camp 6 and decided to establish an intermediate camp, as in 1934. On the 25th Schmaderer and Zuck went ahead to break the trail; Luft, Rebitsch and Ruths divided the loads with Pinzok, the sole porter, and followed in the tracks. However, towards midday the gale sprang up again. Zuck was suffering severely from a painful high altitude cough, which grew worse as he went forward. As the two leading men reached the so-called *Zuckerhut* they found themselves suddenly in the midst of a big thunderstorm with painful electrical discharges. Schmaderer tore off his hat and snow-glasses;

he felt as if someone were passing a lighted cigarette across his eyes, and Zuck received a heavy blow on the back of his head. There was nothing for it but to turn back. Meanwhile, Chlingensperg and Hadow had come up to Camp 5 with three porters. Chlingensperg and I went down with the porters to Camp 4, while Hadow took my place at Camp 5.

During the night the storm howled round the tents. Next day Zuck conducted the sick Pasang down from Camp 6. He had a difficult task in getting the sick man over the obliterated track by the ropes, which he had first to clear. Hadow and his porters hurried to his aid, and the two men reached Camp 5 in a state of exhaustion.

In contrast to the previous day, the morning of the 27th promised better weather, but not nearly good enough for an assault on the summit. Bauer therefore laid out the red parachute, the appointed signal for the ridge party to return. The vile weather of the next few days and the cloud-streamers which lay all day over the peak proved the wisdom of the decision, which cannot have been congenial to Bauer.

The same morning Zuck returned to Camp 4 with the order that the whole party should retire with the porters to Base Camp, to gather new strength for a final assault. We divided up the task of setting the various camps in order. It was not until noon, far too late in view of the warm weather and the broken glacier, that we could get away. It was the worst passage of a glacier that I have ever experienced. We went in up to the thighs in soft snow, and in the worse portions of the maze of crevasses we had to go on all fours. Finally, at 6 P.M., wet through, we left Camp 2. An indescribable air of depression lay over the peak. Clouds swept over the glacier. Far below us the Fairy Meadow shone a dull green, unearthly in the fading twilight. After eight weeks of struggle we were going down from the mountain in failure. Night overtook us on the big moraine. We had taken off the rope, and everyone took his own way stumbling over the rough boulders. A light shone in my face outside the tents. Nursang, the sirdar, pressed me by the hand in greeting. I stepped quietly into the mess-tent, where Balke was sitting in front of his lamp. The others arrived slowly, one by one. After a gloomy meal we hurried into our sleeping-bags and slept off our fatigue and depression.

As soon as fine weather returned, we set off for the fourth time for the upper camps, on July 30 and August 1. But this assault lacked the necessary determination for tackling such a great mountain. The porters were ready as ever for the venture, but they were exhausted by the long arduous work at the high camps, and we knew that at least two Sherpas were needed for the final assault. Our own party also, though they would not admit it, lacked their old spirit. The leading party reached Camp 4 on July 30, and again occupied Camp 5 on August 3. It was under heavy snow, and the ropes on the Rakiot Peak traverse were buried deep beneath fresh snow. The weather was again unpromising for the final assault and fresh falls of snow quickly effaced the tracks. It was bitterly cold in the high camps, so cold that Chling-

ensperg, who was to support Camp 5 with two porters on August 4, had to turn back without completing his task owing to the threat of frost-bitten feet. With bad weather in prospect and bad snow conditions, it was clear that the time available before the last boat, which was due to leave Karachi on August 26, would not have sufficed for reaching the summit. It was with a heavy heart that we cleared all the camps and descended heavily laden to Base Camp on August 5 and 6. In fact, we had little cause to regret our departure, for a few days later a fearful storm broke, and storm-clouds lay over Nanga Parbat as in the fateful days of 1934.

It was a load off all our minds when every climber and porter were safely out of danger. We could then examine more calmly than in previous years how we might have managed things better. It is obvious that on so high a mountain, the weather must be a decisive factor ; and here I was perhaps mistaken in constantly prophesying a fine spell of ten days to a fortnight on the basis of my own experience. This assumption was wrong. We should have realized that from the outset we should have to contend with deep snow and bad weather. Furthermore, after the disasters of 1934 and 1937, our party could not approach the task with the old freedom of spirit. Public opinion, both among mountaineers and porters, would not have been able to bear up against a further disaster on Nanga Parbat, and under these circumstances Bauer could not have undertaken the responsibility of trying to rush the summit. It is a long and dangerous journey up to Camp 6, $8\frac{1}{2}$ km. in distance and only for short stretches free from the threat of avalanches. The passage of the exposed ridge to the summit means another 6 km. In our opinion, such an attempt in bad weather is unjustifiable.

After demolishing Base Camp, we divided forces. Luft and Zuck followed Mummery's footsteps into the Diamirai valley and examined the steep, rocky slopes which lead abruptly to the summit. Bauer, Hadow and I rode through the heat of the Indus valley to Gilgit for a farewell visit, while the others made for Srinagar by the Muthat pass and the Astor route. On our return to India and Kashmir we were again surrounded by the help and friendship which united our party with British officials and British mountaineers. It was a great joy to us that the Viceroy invited leading officials to see the film illustrating the struggle and the fate of the German 1937 Nanga Parbat party, which we had brought with us.

Finally we had the strange experience of flying over Nanga Parbat. We shot past the Rakiot Peak, scene of many struggles ; far below our camps were still visible, and at length we saw the Silbersattel and the summit plateau beneath us.