THE FIRST ASCENT OF MOMHIL SAR

(*Steierische Karakorum Expedition*, 1964)

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(*Translated by Hugh Merrick*)

(*Four illustrations: nos. 18–21*)

We were a group of five friends who had been climbing together in the Alps for years—Hanns Schell, our leader, Horst Schindlbacher, whose nickname was Wik, Rolf Widerhofer, Leo Schlömmer and myself. We all knew each other's strong and weak points pretty well, a basic prerequisite for the success of our undertaking.

Our objective was Momhil Sar (24,090 ft.) in the Hispar Muztagh of the Karakorum. One great advantage was that the approach march is short and the financial requirements consequently low. It is possible to reach Base Camp in four days from Nagar, where the jeep road ends. We had also formed the impression from photographs that our mountain might be difficult but relatively free from danger. We intended to climb it by its East ridge. Noyce led a British expedition to this area in 1960 and had succeeded in climbing Trivor (25,370 ft.), Momhil Sar's loftier neighbour. Before his tragic death he had given us not only valuable data and advice, but also a good picture of our mountain.

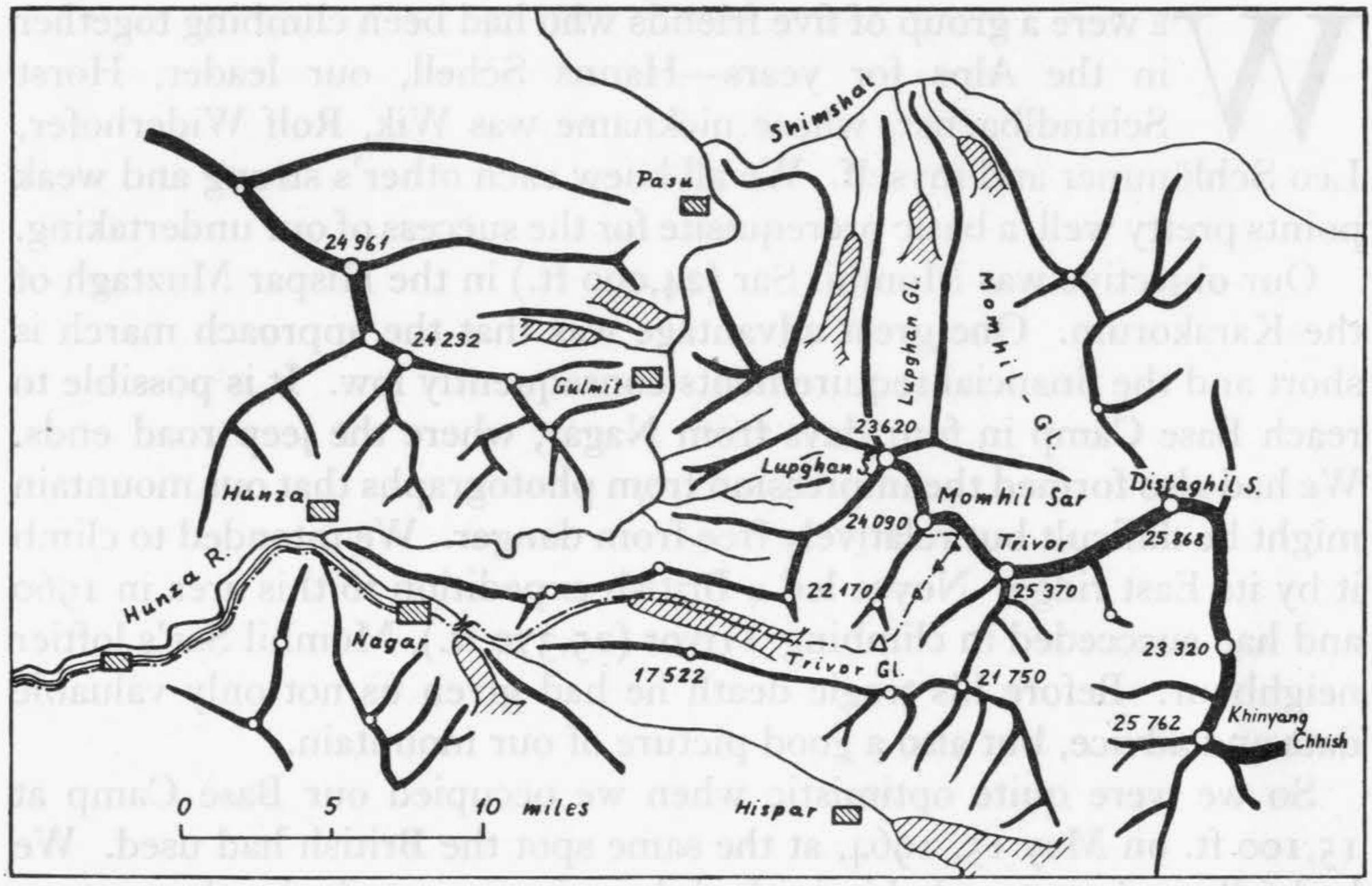
So we were quite optimistic when we occupied our Base Camp at 15,100 ft. on May 15, 1964, at the same spot the British had used. We had fallen a long way behind schedule owing to a strike by the porters. Noyce, incidentally, wrote of a meadow gay with flowers, but at this season of the year we found at least six feet of snow covering the place.

We immediately set about building our camp, with practically no assistance from the porters. Indeed, the Nagars proved so unreliable that we were only able to retain one high altitude porter and then we were unable to employ him to the full because we were using skis. At first the weather did not seem too bad, but we soon noticed that mist generally came down at about midday, and this was mostly followed by snowfalls, so that we were continually forced to break fresh trails and without our skis this hard labour would have worn us out completely. Moreover, these half-days of fine weather were interspersed with periods of bad weather which confined us to our tents all day long.

So it was not till June 9 that we were able to push forward from Camp 2 (19,357 ft.), up to which point we had managed to use skis, although in the ice-falls below and above Camp 1 we often had to carry them. Above Camp 2 there was a steep snow-slope leading up to the saddle on which

Noyce had sited his Camp 3; this was intersected by a great lateral crevasse. We wanted to put our Camp 3 on this same saddle, from which Noyce had turned to the right to follow the long ridge joining it to Trivor. Our way would lie in the other direction, up Momhil Sar's East ridge, which rises fairly abruptly from the saddle to the summit.

We were able to use skis beyond Camp 2 to about 20,350 ft., but after that we found ourselves faced with extremely strenuous trail-breaking. True, the big crevasse had a weak point in its defences, where the opposing ice-wall was only eight or ten feet higher, but the bridge crossing it



was very unsafe. As the lightest of the party, I managed to crawl across it, and we were able to ease the difficulties with a fixed rope and a couple of ice-screws. We eventually mastered the steep slope above the crevasse and reached the saddle. Because of the strong wind we pitched camp some 150 ft. below it, on a small platform which we scooped out of the slope with shovels. A prolonged spell of bad weather then drove us down to Camp 1 again. As soon as it was over we went up once more, very heavily laden, to Camp 3 (21,325 ft.), only to be overtaken during the afternoon by the inevitable clouds and snow showers.

The next morning, however, was glorious and by far the clearest yet. The wind was blowing from the north, a good weather signal, and we were very hopeful. We hurried up to the saddle. To the east, beyond the Momhil glacier, still in darkness, the mighty summits of Distaghil Sar and Trivor were ablaze with the first morning light. Wik and Leo were already pushing on towards the sharp East ridge of Momhil Sar, our mountain. It was a wonderful moment.

Photo: H. Schindlbacher

UNNAMED PEAK ABOVE THE MOMHIL SAR BASE CAMP.

(No. 18)

Photo: H. Schindlbacher]

MOMHIL SAR (7,342 M.): SOUTH-EAST FACE.

(No. 19)

Everything went well at first, but as soon as the rock pitches began, the work became difficult and exhausting; for we soon came to cornices of loose, powdery snow many feet high, straddling the sharp ridge. It was impossible to turn them on either side, and it took us an hour to battle our way up the next sixty feet or so. Every foot of it had to be cleared of snow, and we had to admit that there was no future in it. By this time it was eleven o'clock, the wind had backed to the south and mists began to close us in. Snow was falling as we climbed down, deeply disappointed, to Camp 3; but we had definitely established that in present conditions the ridge would require several days' hard work.

Hanns, Rolf, and I went down to Base on the following day to fetch up equipment for safeguarding the route and supplies. Wik and Leo decided to stay at Camp 3 to await better weather and prepare the ridge. Our swift descent on skis restored our spirits and after a day's rest at Base we started up again, carrying heavy loads. At Camp 1 we met Wik and Leo, who had just come down. They had met nothing but mist and snow up above and were quite ready for a rest day at Base Camp. The weather having improved, Hanns, Rolf, and I climbed on to Camp 3, only to meet a further disappointment, for it snowed heavily the next two days. We dug the tents out of masses of snow again and again; but we had to give in at last and climb down through mist and a blizzard. The other two had come up again to Camp 2 and were astonished when we arrived down there in such weather. There was very little food at Camp 2, so we three pushed on down to Camp 1, where we had our first proper meal for a long time.

We were awakened at 2 a.m. by moonlight. I looked out and there was not a cloud in the sky; so I woke my two companions and we climbed up to Camp 2 in the dark. Wik and Leo were already breakfasting, and together we climbed on to Camp 3. It was the fifth time we had had to break a new trail up that steep slope, and we found the tents completely snowed under and two of the tent poles snapped. On top of everything, it started to snow again at midday. Obviously, in the existing weather and snow conditions the ridge was out of the question. The only alternative was to try the steep ramp which cuts up the South face of the mountain. This starts about 300 ft. below the saddle and leads up to the left to a small hanging glacier bedded in below the summit. We thought the final summit-wall above it might go if we tackled it by a steep snow couloir in its left-hand sector. Gloomily, we decided to give this route a try, for it was somewhat chancy and not absolutely free from the menace of avalanches; but fortunately the heaviest had already come down.

Our second attempt on the summit was only a partial success. We traversed up that ramp, on which trail-breaking was a horrible grind. In spite of all our hopes mists closed in on us even before the crevassed zone separating the ramp from the hanging glacier, so that we could not find

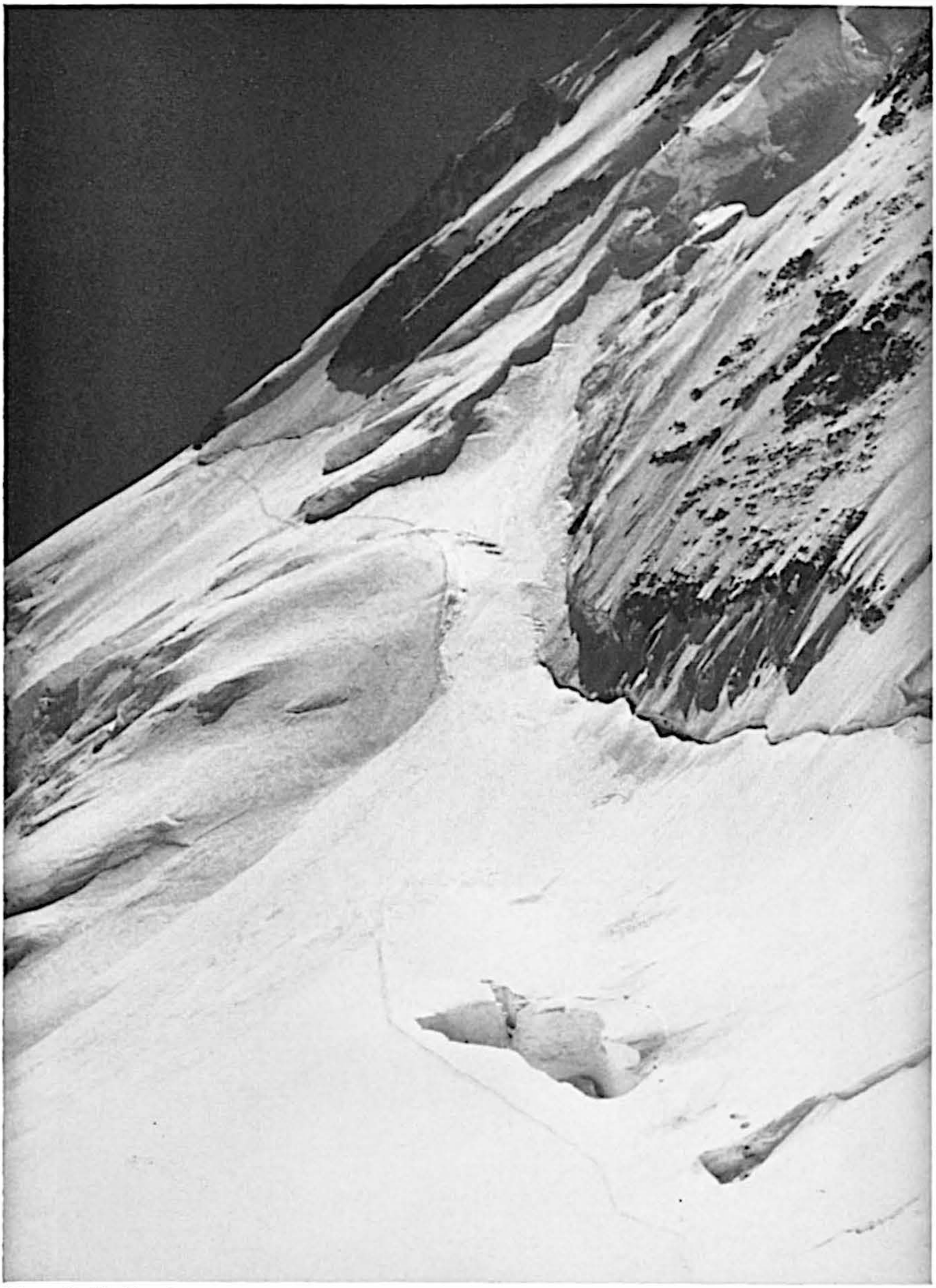


Photo: R. Pischinger]

VIEW OF THE LOWER PART OF THE RAMP FROM CAMP 3 (6,500 M.).

(No. 20)

a way through the maze of crevasses. It was only ten o'clock, but there was nothing for it but to turn back. All the same, we had established that the ramp could be climbed, even if it was going to be a long and strenuous route to the top. The bitterest pill was the invariable break-up of the weather at about midday. There was hardly any food left at Camp 3, but when the next day dawned fair—and for the first time remained so—we decided on another attempt.

That day we turned in at 5 p.m. and slept till nine in the evening. Then we got up, ate our scanty 'breakfast', and dressed carefully. It was just past midnight when we roped up in the moonlight. Wik and Leo were on one rope, Hanns, Rolf, and I on the other. The tracks we had made on the previous attempt helped us to some extent, though they were pretty well erased by the wind. We recognised each individual peak by the light of the moon—Trivor, Malubiting, Nanga Parbat and countless others. We beat out our track on the steep slope in silence, changing over the lead without exchanging a word. In spite of our all having taken Ronicol tablets as a protection against frost-bite, Leo and Hanns began to have trouble with their cold feet. It was still dark when we reached the point where we had to turn back the first time. The sun reached us while we were in the middle of the crevassed zone, so we called an immediate halt while Hanns and Leo massaged their feet.

I took the opportunity to look around a bit. Far below us, the Trivor glacier's lower reaches flowed down to the valley levels. Our tents at Camp 2 looked minute, and it was difficult to identify Camp 1 at all. Meanwhile Hanns and Leo had managed to get their circulation going again. We next overcame a nasty transverse crevasse to get a lodging on the floor of the hanging glacier, which turned out to be much steeper than it had looked from below. The snow couloir above it started at a still steeper angle. We could only hope that it could be climbed in the existing snow conditions. The sun rose swiftly and the cutting cold of night gave way to an unbelievably hot glare. Step by step we toiled up through the deep, clogging snow, without a breath of breeze to cool us, till we reached the couloir, where at least we found snow adhering to the ice, bless it. But it was hard labour! Wik had been breaking the trail on his own for some time now, for we were all too collapsed to help him. In the end, he had to be relieved, so I went on ahead. The couloir sloped at about 55° and presently the snow was no longer firm on the underlying ice. Having to exert the necessary extreme caution at least had the advantage of livening me up a bit.

It was about 3 p.m. when I finally climbed out onto the ridge. An icy gale from the north-west at once forced me to put on my pullover and fleece jacket. Then, while I was seeing my companions safely up on the rope, my eyes roved over the innumerable ranges lying crystal clear on this, only the second day to remain permanently fine since we came to the

Photo: H. Schell]

DESCENT OF THE SUMMIT RIDGE OF MOMHIL SAR. IN THE BACKGROUND RAKAPOSHI, 7,788 M. (RIGHT) AND DIRAN, 7,266 M. (CENTRE).

(No. 21)

mountain. Many magnificent peaks with famous names stood there before me—the Batura, Rakaposhi, Nanga Parbat, Malubiting, Trivor, Distaghil Sar, and the great Baltoro summits. At that moment their names were of no particular account; what impressed me were the enormous distances, the tremendous differentials in height, the huge glaciers crawling like serpents towards the brown, sun-scorched valleys between sheer ramparts of rock and ice. In one place there was even a glimpse of a green oasis smiling up from the Hunza valley through a gap in the hills. People lived down there, real, live people . . . my thoughts went winging out across the ranges that faded away in the western haze to my friends at home, to all those who had worked so hard to help us to realise our plans. How I wished they could have stood up here with us!

I looked back down the couloir. Hanns was just traversing out onto the ridge, step by measured step. Further down was Rolf, bent over his ice-axe; still further down Wik was bringing Leo up on the rope. And in that instant I knew true happiness.

We had all played our parts on this great experience. It had been brought to fruition at our desks, in our packing and organisation, through tough negotiations with the authorities and with porters, and finally by a dour struggle with a hostile and savage mountain-world.

The last little climb up the ridge was sheer joy. We felt fit and fresh again, even if the gale tried to blow the breath out of our bodies. We gained height rapidly over easy rock, above which a lovely, sharp snow-crest led to the summit. This was what we had hoped for, against all hope, from the outset; a clear day, and all of us together on the summit of a mighty peak. Wind and cold were forgotten, as we embraced and shook hands. Then we looked out again over a view that ranged from Nanga Parbat to the peaks of China, from the Baltoro to the Hindu Kush. We took pictures; and then we looked, and looked again.

When we started down at 5.30 p.m., after a whole hour on the summit, we still felt our time had been all too short. As we roped down through the couloir it was already in shadow and the cold was grim. Night caught us among the crevasses, and we were thankful that we had marked the route with pennants. And so we traversed down the ramp, till we met the rise to Camp 3. It seemed quite endless, now. And it was 11 p.m. before we were back at the tents.

It took just a day to get down to Base Camp on skis. Summer had come during our absence above; gone was the snow, and there were tiny flowers shooting from the brown earth. We sat at the crate which served as a table, and ate and ate; but our thoughts were still up on our mountain. It had robbed us of an unfulfilled wish, it is true; it had left us richer by a marvellous experience.