

AUSTRIAN EXPEDITION TO THE PAMIRS, 1967

BY ERICH VANIS

(Translated by E. N. BOWMAN)

(Three illustrations: nos. 11-13)

FOR fifteen years the Pamirs had figured upon my list of unfulfilled climbing expeditions. The thought of exploring this vast central Asiatic mountain chain and of climbing a few peaks there, haunted me continually. However, faced with political reality, it remained but a dream. From 1952 onwards I had repeatedly tried to obtain permission to pay a visit to this Sino-Russian frontier area, through the Russian Embassy in Vienna, the Austrian Foreign Office and the Austrian-Soviet Association. All requests, however, were refused. The Caucasus was made available for Austrian climbers as from 1958, but the Pamirs still remained the secret and inviolable realm of my dreams.

Mountain expeditions in other parts of the world, such as the Tatra, Caucasus, Himalaya, East African mountains and the Alps, were planned and carried out but many a thought was given to red steppes and rivers and white snowy summits. At the age of thirty-nine one is slightly more composed than at twenty so that waiting becomes a little more bearable when one realises that everything will come in due course if only one has sufficient patience.

When, in March 1967, I eventually received permission for an Austrian Pamirs expedition, I took the news quite as a matter of course. During the winter the President of the Soviet Union, Mr. Podgorny, was in Vienna and a petition from Austrian climbers about the Pamirs was presented to him at a reception at the Hofburg in Vienna, and at last the seed sown over the years bore fruit.

This invitation from the Soviet Union came just at the right time. For political reasons, the Himalaya and Karakoram were barred to all expeditions as Nepal and Pakistan refused to allow any climbers into their respective countries. The Pamirs, therefore, made an excellent substitute.

From my own personal point of view, the invitation was not so welcome. I had just returned from Kenya and had already contemplated a trip to Kilimanjaro for my leave in 1967 and abruptly cancelled my participation in the Pamirs expedition, which had already been taken for

granted. This was due to consideration and judgment rather than to declining enthusiasm, for the conflicting claims of family, business and climbing are not always easy to reconcile.

Gradually the Pamirs expedition took shape. The main objective was to be Peak Lenin in the Trans-Alai range and in particular the still unclimbed East face of this mountain. A twelve-man team was suggested, made up from members of all the major Austrian alpine clubs (Ö.A.K.: Ö.A.V.: Ö.T.K.: T.V.N.). The President of the Republic of Austria became honorary president of the expedition. The duration of the undertaking was limited to six weeks. All this was extremely alluring, as my fellow club members did not fail to point out to me, but nevertheless I still kept to my decision of non-participation. When, however, Peter Lavicka, my friend and companion on the Bezingi Wall climb, accused me of uncomradely behaviour and talked of being 'left in the lurch' he contrived to get a 'perhaps' out of me. Peter had won, for if a woman sometimes says 'perhaps' when she means 'yes', that should go for climbing friends as well. I might however say that my wife, son and daughter only exhibited the most limited appreciation of such a code of honour.

There were many conferences with the Austrian-Soviet Union, which carried out in a very satisfactory manner the organisation of the trip, and financial transactions with the Russian authorities. The final selection of the climbing team was as follows: Dr. Fritz Grimmlinger, Richard Hoyer, Adolf Huber, Franz Huber, Karl Kosa, Dr. Klaus Kubiena (Expedition Doctor), Peter Lavicka, Franz Michlmayr, Hans Schönberger, Erich Vanis, Helmut Wagner, Rolf Walter, Erwin Weilguny, Adolf Weissensteiner. It was decided that Franz Huber and myself should be joint leaders of the expedition.

Preliminary arrangements made rapid progress, thanks to the full collaboration of all members of the party. By July 21, the scheduled date of departure, all the equipment was ready and packed into cases for air transport, the total weight amounting to 900 kg. The expenses of the expedition, totalling 350,000 Austrian Sch., were covered partly by personal contributions and partly by gifts from both private and official sources as well as considerable donations from various alpine clubs, such as the Ö.A.K., Ö.A.V. and others. Representatives of these clubs turned up at the Vienna-Schwechat airport to bid us farewell.

The general purport of the farewell speeches was that all fourteen members of the team should return home safe and sound and with a resounding success to their credit. It may be said right now that not only were these wishes completely fulfilled but what is more the expedition, quite apart from accomplishing what they set out to do, had a considerable number of further successes.

The Aeroflot aircraft took off punctually at noon: before us lay six

long weeks full of climbing activity and alpine adventure. We reached Moscow three hours after leaving Vienna and the next few days were entirely taken up with sight-seeing and waiting for another plane. We set off on our seven-hour flight to Central Asia on the night of July 24, our destination being the town of Osch in the Soviet Republic of Kirgizia. The last stage of our journey began the same day: heading south by lorry for 250 km. along the Trans-Pamirs road. We crossed passes of up to nearly 4000 m. such as the Pereval Taldik and traversed raging torrents such as the Kysyl, the Red river.

At last, on the afternoon of July 26, we were able to set up Base Camp. We were now about 70 km. from the Chinese border at latitude 73° E. on the north-south axis of Bombay-Rawalpindi-Omsk and at longitude 39° N. on the east-west axis Ankara-Peking. Base Camp was situated on a broad steppe-like meadow covered with edelweiss, on the south side of the Alai Valley. Some small lakes promised cold bathing, as we were at a height of about 3700 m. Immediately behind us towered the north face of Peak Lenin, there were also a number of enticing-looking smaller summits, all with wonderful ice-clad north faces.

We had not been able to discover much about this particular area, as both German expeditions led by Willi Rickmer-Rickmers in 1913 and 1928, had operated over a larger area and did not penetrate this lateral valley. Apart from these there had only been one other expedition to the Pamirs from the west, an English party led by Sir John Hunt in 1962,¹ which did not approach the north side of Peak Lenin but climbed the Peak of Communism (7495 m.), the former Peak Stalin/Garmo, lying to the south-west. We thus had to rely on Russian mountain literature, which did not tell us much. For example, we had not seen a reliable photo of Peak Lenin and nothing at all of the East face of that mountain. There was nothing whatever in these reports about the outlying summits to the north and even when we met the élite of the Russian climbing fraternity, including the pioneers of 1930–1950, at the very foot of the peak, they were totally unable to give us any information about heights, first ascents or known routes. The reason for this is that Russian climbers were mesmerised by the magical figure of the 7000 m. of Peak Lenin and had paid no attention to anything else in the area. During this summer for instance, apart from our own expedition, there was a mass meeting of climbers from all over the Soviet Union as well as groups from East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Italy. All these climbers, including many of European reputation, were bent on ascending only the two standard routes on the mountain, namely by the Lipkin rocks and the North-east arête, and up the Rasdelnaja route and the North-west ridge. If only this élite had applied themselves to the exploration of the Trans-Alai

¹ *A.J.* 68. 90 and 243.

range, who knows what they might have accomplished. But the Russian leaders of this mass mountaineering effort were only interested in putting a larger number of climbers on the summit of Peak Lenin this year than last.

Our plan consisted in attacking the mountain in three stages of acclimatisation, the first of which was intended to reach about 5000 m. The party was split into four climbing groups with the simultaneous aim of acclimatisation and affording a view of the northern satellite peaks of the mountain. During this period three summits of about 4750 m. were climbed. Huber and Michlmayr climbed a mountain west of Base Camp to the right of the Azik-Tasch Valley, which we christened the 'Right-hand Guardian of the Valley' (*rechter Talwächter*), while Dr. Kubiena, Dr. Grimmlinger, our interpreter Walodia and I, climbed its opposite number (the 'Left-hand Guardian') to the east of the valley and the most northerly of the peaks adjacent to the Kirgizian steppes. These names were only provisionally bestowed, as it seemed more sensible than forever referring to 'unnamed summits'.

The ice-covered North face of the 'Left Guardian' had already attracted my attention during the ride-in on the lorry and we were able to carry out its first ascent as well as the first descent of the North-east ridge. The mountain had already been climbed once from the south-west.

Walter, Wagner, Schönberger and Weissensteiner had designs on 'Needle Peak' (*Spitzer Gipfel*), lying somewhat south of the 'Left Guardian'. The main problem in climbing these two peaks was the crossing of the Azik-Tasch river. The Pamirs are notorious for precarious river crossings and here we had to deal with all the water flowing from the north side of Peak Lenin. It is only possible to cross in the very early morning when the water level is about half a metre lower than normal. Roped together it is a veritable fight for life in the raging waist-deep water full of rushing blocks of ice. 'Waldi', the interpreter was bowled over by the torrent and had to be dragged over to the further bank by rope, where he arrived gasping for breath and half frozen. On a similar occasion Rolf Walter went down with a slight attack of pneumonia. The prompt arrival of a Russian military helicopter, which had been requested by radio, assured his rapid removal to hospital in Duschambe. He was back with us in a few days time and ten days after his illness he was able to climb the 5120 m. Peak Juchina (formerly Peak CDSA) with interpreter Walodia.

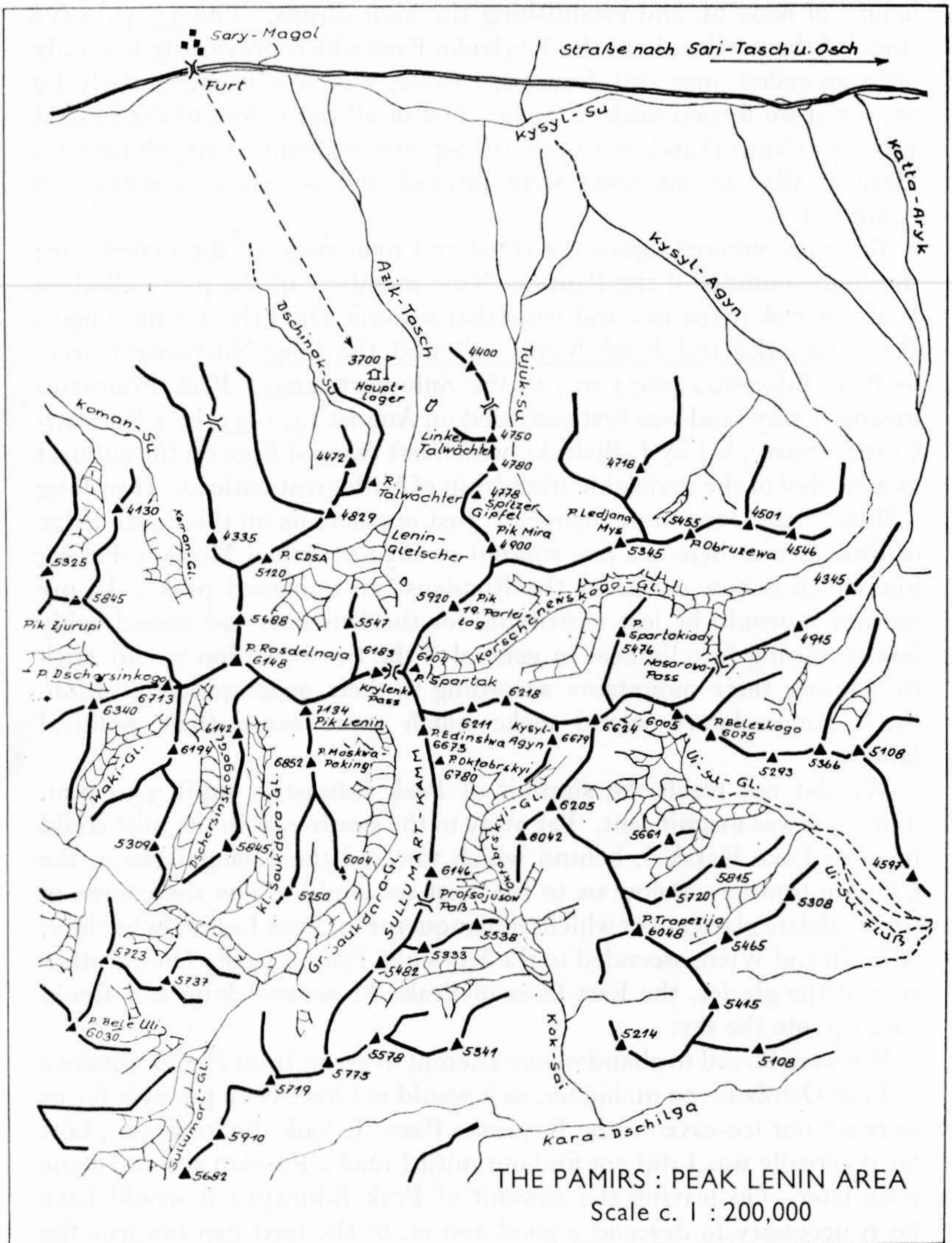
Finally, the fourth party, consisting of Lawicka, Kosa, Hoyer and Weilguny, reconnoitred the north side of the Krylenko Pass, during the first period of acclimatisation. They ascended to about 5200 m. and thus established the feasibility of this route. This was the end of the first stage of acclimatisation, the second stage was aimed at reaching a

height of 6000 m. and establishing the high camps. The 35–40° névé slope of the north side of the Krylenko Pass which previously had only been ascended once and descended twice, was now used regularly by us. Up it we ferried loads of 20 kg., first of all to the foot of the pass at 4400 m. (Camp 1) and then up to the top in one gigantic carry of 1400 m. Here at 5820 m. six tents were pitched and an ice-cavern dug out (Camp 2).

We now entered upon the third and final stage of the expedition: the high summits of the Pamirs. Nine members of the party climbed Peak Spartak (6104 m.) and from that summit Dr. Fritz Grimmlinger, Peter Lawicka and Erich Vanis followed the long North-west arête to Peak Edunstwa (6673 m.) in the Sulumart range. Peak Edunstwa means 'Unity' and was first ascended on August 14, 1955, by a Russian-Chinese party, led by J. Bjelezki, which left two red flags on the summit as a symbol of the inviolable friendship of both great nations. How long will this name remain unchanged? Just opposite us on the South ridge of Peak Lenin there is a fine summit of 6852 m. called Moscow-Peking but which is now called by the Russians 'an unnamed peak'. In my opinion it would be less mortifying for the Russians and considerably less confusing for climbers in general if the Soviet Union would stick to naming their mountains according to their geographical position. Such nomenclature would make much more sense than political labels.

We did not reach the summit of Peak Edunstwa until 3.30 p.m. The view was magnificent. Far away to the south-east in the mist could be seen Lake Karakul, behind which towered the Kashgar chain, the Chinese frontier. Below us to the west we could follow the course of the Saukdara glacier over which the conquerors of Peak Lenin, Schneider, Allwein and Wien, ascended to the Krylenko Pass in 1928. On the other side of the glacier, the East faces of Peaks Moscow-Peking and Lenin shot up into the sky.

We were forced to abandon our attempt to go on from Peak Edunstwa to Peak October, 100 m. higher, as it would not have been possible for us to reach our ice-cave on the Krylenko Pass. It looked a long way; how far it actually was I did not find out until I read a Russian account some time later. On leaving the summit of Peak Edunstwa it would have been necessary to descend a good 200 m. to the next gap towards the south and then climb up another 300 m. to Peak October. On the first ascent in 1955, a whole day was devoted to this task. We had no regrets at giving up this peak, as our principal object was a reconnaissance of the East face of Peak Lenin which was achieved by the ascent of Peak Edunstwa. In spite of the intense cold and lateness of the hour we stayed forty minutes on top in order to take photographs. Owing to the length of time involved in operating the camera and changing films, I got



frozen fingers; no permanent damage was done but the skin came off and made them look like sausages which had stayed too long in boiling water. They started to heal overnight but as I put on my boots again next morning, they began to bleed a little.

We started down again at 4.10 p.m., racing the approaching night but we got off the mountain before darkness finally overtook us. I felt

more fit today than I usually did 2000 m. lower down. On the descent we often deviated from our line of ascent, but invariably found the line of least resistance, avoiding gendarmes on the ridge wherever possible. We had a tricky time climbing up 'Cornice Crag' (*Wächtengipfel*), an unnamed pinnacle of 6360 m., which was quite a mountain in its own right. I forced my way along a knee-deep groove, followed by a silent Peter and a cursing Fritz. Two difficult pitches here obliged us to rope up for the first time that day. We got off the mountain just as dusk was falling and went on far into the night finally reaching our friendly ice-cave at 9.15 p.m., where Hans Schönberger was waiting for us with four litres of hot steaming tea.

We started our attack on the 7134 m. Peak Lenin on August 12. The mountain was in fact climbed by thirteen members of the party, for the most part by the North-east arête. Owing to illness, Hans Schönberger, one of the strongest members of the party, was unable to take part.

The main object of the expedition was the first ascent of the East face of Peak Lenin. This virgin wall was recommended to us by the well known Moscow mountaineer, Wladimir Kiesel, who gave some very fine lectures last year in Austria. Seen from the opposite side of the valley, it resembled the Brenva face of Mont Blanc and constituted the greatest still unsolved problem of Peak Lenin. This face was finally conquered on August 12-14 by an Austrian rope, consisting of Richard Hoyer, Karl Kosa and Erwin Weilguny, by way of a prominent ice rib, 1800 m. high, which has now been named the 'Austrian Spur'. It was originally intended that this party should only make a reconnaissance to the foot of the wall complementary with the other reconnaissance to Peak Edunstwa. A decision would then be made as to whether the wall should be attempted at all, and if so, who should take part. However, during the morning of August 12 when we had already traversed the ridge of the Sulumart range, Richard Hoyer had another talk with Franz Huber my co-leader and finally decided to forge ahead with Kosa and Weilguny. This they did with complete success and we heartily congratulated them. As it turned out this was the last chance they had, for shortly afterwards a storm broke, which heralded the onset of the autumn season.

We were a bit late for the East face and for various reasons I deemed it wiser to refrain from following up the first party with a second rope in two days time, so we had to find another objective. Adolf Huber, Franz Michlmayr and Adi Weissensteiner traversed Peak Lenin from Krylenko Pass in the north-east over Peak Rasdelnaja (6148 m.) and two other 5000 m. summits, one of which was possibly unclimbed. For some little time I had been obsessed by the North face of Peak Lenin. This ice-clad face, over 2000 m. in height, was first climbed in 1958 by a party from the Russian Sporting Club Spartak, led by Professor Kiesel. Our



Expedition photo]

PIK LENIN NORTH FACE AND NORTH-EAST RIDGE FALLING TO THE KRYLENKO PASS.
(SEE *p.* 31).

(No. 11)



VIEW FROM THE NORTH-EAST RIDGE OF PIK LENIN TO THE UPPER PART OF THE NORTH WALL.

(No. 12)

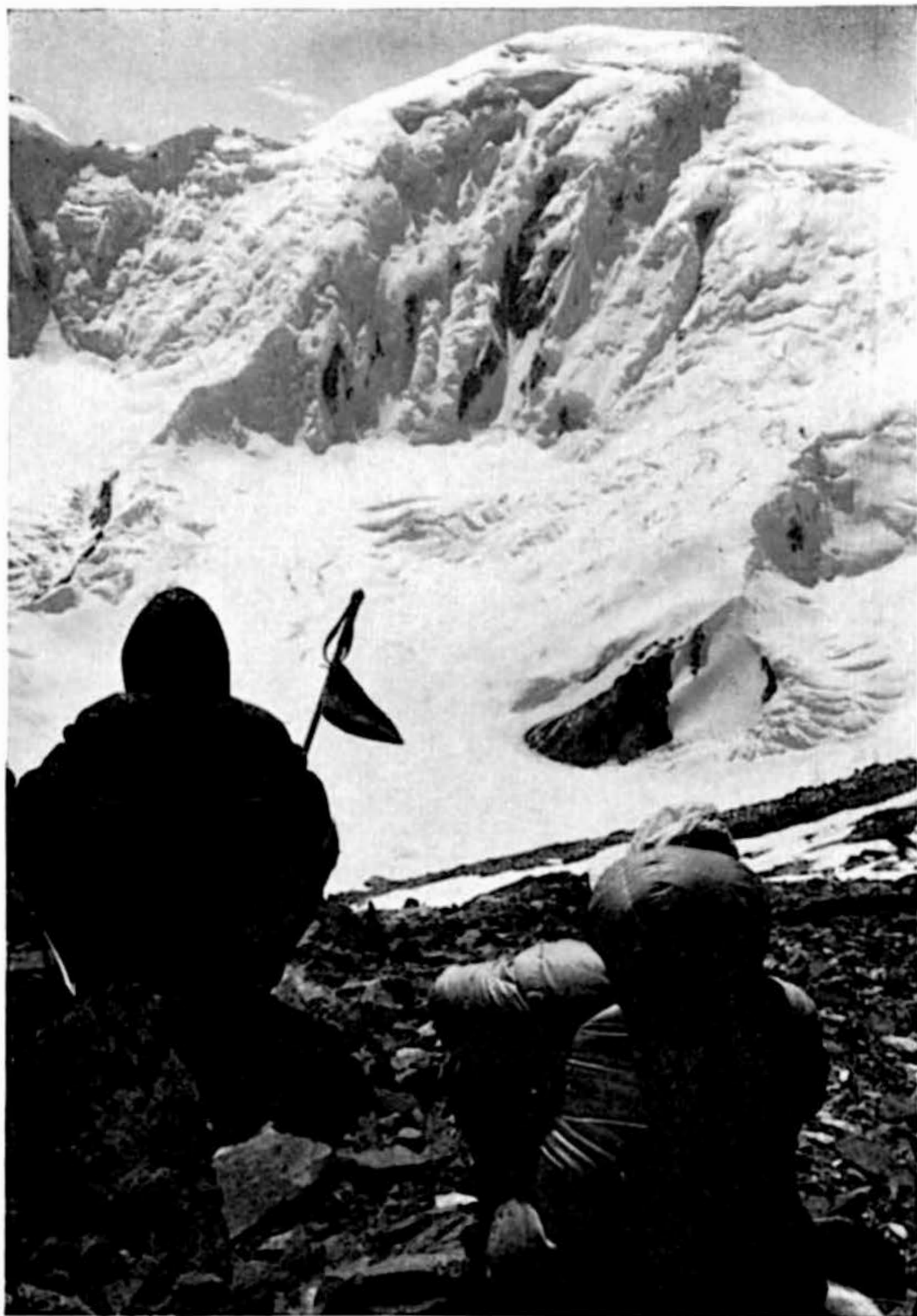
Expedition photo]

starting point, the Krylenko Pass, was unsuitable as a base to climb the face throughout its entire length. Suppose we descended it instead? This would be the second passage of the face and its first descent. It would also allow us to form a relief party for the East face team.

On August 14 we ascended the North-east ridge to Camp 3 at 6800 m. To our surprise the victorious East face party arrived during the evening on their way down from the summit. We were thus relieved from having to wait for them or affording them assistance had they needed it. Next day, the 15th, Hoyer and Kosa, together with Dr. Grimmlinger who had climbed the mountain the day before, descended to Camp 2 on the pass. Lavicka and I went on to the summit which we reached in two hours. Apart from an enormous Russian flag and a signal halyard flying the flags of all nation in the vicinity, there was a miscellaneous clutter consisting of the following objects: two busts of Lenin and a 70 cm. high stainless steel pyramid with inscriptions commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the October Revolution. There was also a box for the summit book designed by Vitali Abalakow, who made the second ascent of the mountain.

Owing to the onset of bad weather and mist, we did not stay long on top and climbed down about 150 m. to where we had left our pack-frames. We had been wearing crampons all day and after exchanging ski sticks for ice axes, roped up. We then started down the North face by a steep snow couloir. The surface conditions were very variable. The best we encountered was hard compressed snow, but for the most part powdery wind-driven snow, into which we broke knee-deep, was the order of the day. Other variations were laminated firn (*Blätterfirn*) and verglas. We climbed down and down, changing the lead from time to time. Five rope lengths constituted about 100 m. but what was 100 m. on this colossal wall! In the mist it seemed even larger than it actually was. A few weak sunbeams broke through the mist from time to time. Every now and again we were slowed down by bands of séracs, which from below were hardly perceptible, and had to wait for a break in the clouds before we could go on. Before we set off for Peak Lenin we had made a sketch of the wall with its séracs and crevasses and this now served us in good stead, enabling us to find a way round all the difficulties.

Although we were making good progress, the descent was taking much too long for our liking and in order to hurry things up we decided to climb down together without belaying. However, a small episode made us watch our step for a further 200 m. A snow step broke under Peter's crampon, causing him to lose his balance, but as I had got him on a shoulder belay, no harm was done. Our chief concern was that the slope might avalanche, but this proved to be unfounded and the slight slipping that did occur was countered by mutual belaying. At last, about 4 p.m., the slope eased off to about 40°; nothing could stop us now and



Expedition photo]

VIEW FROM PIK EDUNSTWA, 6673 M., TO THE EAST WALL OF PIK LENIN, 7134, M., WITH THE "AUSTRIAN SPUR".

(No. 13)

facing outwards we descended, both moving together. Gradually we emerged from the mist and suddenly realised that we were no longer suffering from the cold but heat and hunger. This was soon rectified by taking off our warm down anoraks and eating a little chocolate. Peter wanted to go to the right and I to the left, so we compromised and went straight down the middle, emerging on to the Lenin glacier down which ran a broad well-trodden track made by the Russian mass-mountaineering effort. The descent of the North face was completed; it had proved easier than we had expected.

We staggered downwards, pausing for about half an hour about 7 p.m. at the Russians' tents, and arrived at our depot camp at 4250 m. at 9 p.m. We were greeted by Dr. Klaus Kubiena, who, as arranged, had been watching the face all afternoon and had actually seen us at 1.15 p.m. through a gap in the clouds. Both Adolfs and Michlmayr were also there, having arrived about mid-day after their successful four-day traverse of Peak Lenin.

By the evening of August 16, a week earlier than expected, everybody was down in the valley and all high camps had been evacuated. It was not until we were all down in the valley that it transpired that the expedition had another unpremeditated success to its credit. Rolf Walter, who a fortnight before had gone down with pneumonia, had recovered sufficiently to make an ascent of Peak Lenin from the Krylenko Pass and back in only ten hours. This was a repeat performance of the first ascent of the mountain in 1928 by Erwin Schneider of Tirol and the Germans Karl Wien and Eugen Allwein. The first ascent had always been questioned by the Russians, since no record of the ascent had been left on the summit, and the more so as it was not thought possible to ascend and descend the peak in one day without a bivouac. Rolf Walter had intended to sleep at Camp 3 on the way down but found that he had so much time in hand that he went on down to Camp 2 on the pass. This performance resulted in a spate of Russian press and radio interviews and the Austro-German first ascent of 1928 became news. The last doubts were set at rest and as recognition of the first ascent of Peak Lenin in 1928, the Russian mountaineering association gave us the official 'Peak Lenin Badge' to hand to Erwin Schneider. This is given to anybody who has climbed the mountain.

The weather which had remained fair throughout the climb now broke up bringing snow right down into the valley. This put an end to any further exploration and we stayed for a few days in Base Camp which we shared with the Russians and representatives of the other eastern European groups. The accommodation and the supply of fresh meat, fruit and vegetables were a revelation, compared to Himalayan expeditions where one has to provide everything for oneself. We made many friends during our short communal life together with the eastern

mountaineers, without being restricted in any way, which the close proximity of the rigid organisation of the Russians had rather led us to expect. We travelled homewards with these foreign climbers and this time the 250 km. journey took a day longer than on the way in. We were received as guests in far too many of the hemispherical felt tents of the Kirgizian nomadic shepherds. It was a veritable victory march through oceans of roast mutton, fruit and kumis, fermented horses' milk. The high spot was, undoubtedly, a gymkhana put on in our honour in which hundreds of nomads took part, many of whom had come from far away. It was a view of another world and the thunder of the hooves made one think of the hordes of Genghis Khan charging over the steppes. It was a world still wild and primitive, which will probably die out with this generation.

The expedition arrived in Osch on August 21, 1967 and reached Vienna on the 27th, a week earlier than planned.