

# Main German and Austrian climbers since 1930

**Anderl Heckmair**

(Translation: Audrey Salkeld)

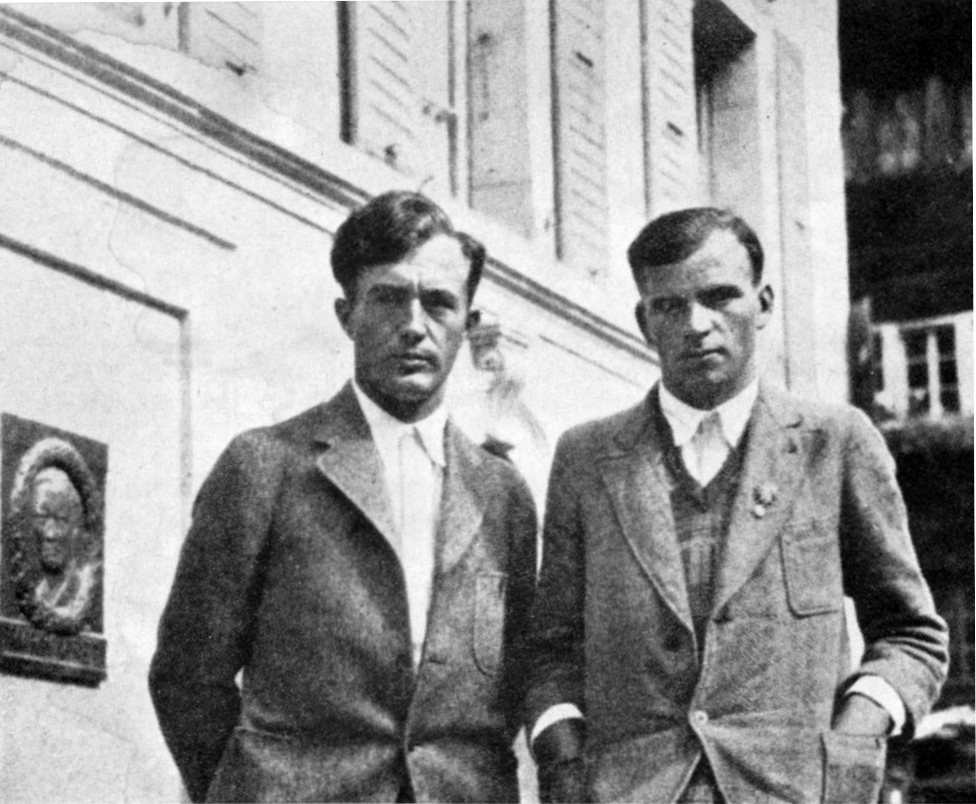
A complete and chronological assessment of all the noteworthy climbers since 1930 would hardly be appropriate, so necessarily subjective though this is I am confining myself to those whose efforts could be said to have given alpinism a new impulse.

In the first rank was Dr Wilo Welzenbach, active in the 30s, who applied extreme rock-climbing techniques to ice. He was a government architect from Munich and belonged to the *Academische Alpenverein* (A.A.V.M.). But he, too, was not without his predecessors; among them the Viennese climbers Guido Lammer and Alfred Horeschowsky, who undertook ice routes which were extremely difficult for the time.

A development of crucial significance in the approach to climbing, indeed a turning point, during the 30s, was the evaporation of the deep awe which had been felt for the massive, sheer faces and their difficulties, as the number of good rock and ice climbers increased. Although more mountaineers emerged from non-Alpine areas, particularly from the large towns, fears that the mountains would be degraded to mere climbing gymnasia or playgrounds in fact proved unfounded.

Technique and equipment developed further, making easier what had until then been considered the most difficult undertakings and, at the same time, bringing into the field of possibility others which had previously been thought out of the question. At the same time, progress in mountaineering achievement went ahead rapidly. For example, at their first attempt, Toni and Franz Schmid from Munich, succeeded in 1931 in conquering the Matterhorn North wall. Toni was 20, about five years younger than his brother Franz, and very fit. He had also made a name for himself ski-ing, particularly ski-jumping; but it was in their passion for climbing that they achieved their greatest satisfaction. Now the barriers were down, and even the biggest, most inhospitable faces found their attempters and conquerors. A special struggle burned around those 'last problems', the big icy walls of the Alps—the *Grandes Jorasses* and the North wall of the Eiger.

Looking back, one might gain the impression that the climbers concerned had come afresh to climbing in attempting such faces. But this is not true; each individual was the product of a circle of climbers who had first conceived the method for this climb. Climbers from Munich and the Tyrol met in the *Wilder Kaiser*, the *Wetterstein* and *Karwendel* mountains and soon the well-known, difficult faces—which had been first climbed in the 20s by Hans Dülfer, Otto Herzog, Hans Fichtl, Fritz Wiessner and others—came into vogue. Names like Leo Rittler, Hans Brehm, Rudolf Haringer, Rudolf Peters, Martin Maier,



29 *Franz and Toni Schmid* Taken shortly after their first ascent of the North face of the Matterhorn, 1931. Photo: W. Bellows. Reprinted from *A. J.* 70. [3]. There is a photo of them on the climb in *A. J.* 44. 69

Hans Ertl (all from Munich) were not only known for the climbs made in their local mountains, but also gained repute for their exploits in the Western Alps and the mountains outside Europe. Up till then, climbing—even extreme climbing—had been mainly restricted to those who could afford the ‘Sport’. The Munich climbers were different. They came from poorer circles and it sufficed only to have bread, sausage and an apple in their rucksack, even for the hardest routes. Lack of money for travel was overcome by the bicycle. Leo Rittler, for example, came from a very poor background, but he still managed to spend all his free time in the mountains. And in those early days of the 30s, many people had more than enough free time. In Germany there was mass unemployment. Instead of waiting for unemployment benefit, these men went into the mountains, earned enough for the basic essentials in the huts by cutting wood, and undertook such extremely difficult routes in the surrounding mountains that they soon belonged to the ranks of the finest alpinists. Leo Rittler distinguished himself by climbing great Dolomite faces. But in 1931 he and Hans Brehm met their fate on the North Wall of the Grandes Jorasses.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Brendl, a man with a touch of bravado, succeeded in climbing the South ridge of the Aiguille Noire, which had already been fruitlessly attempted by Welzenbach. Hans Brehm, the black sheep of his family, and Hans Ertl whose

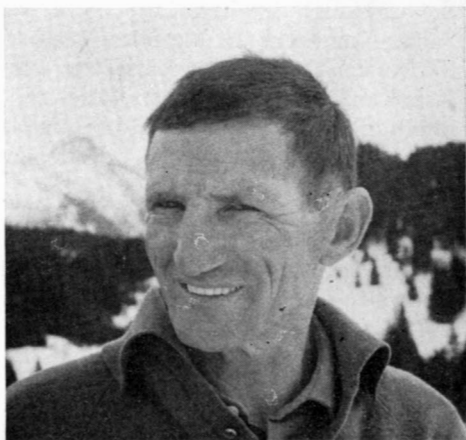
<sup>1</sup> See *A. J.* 43. 406.

eloquence in writing and speech brought him fame all over the world, together mastered the Königsspitze North wall.

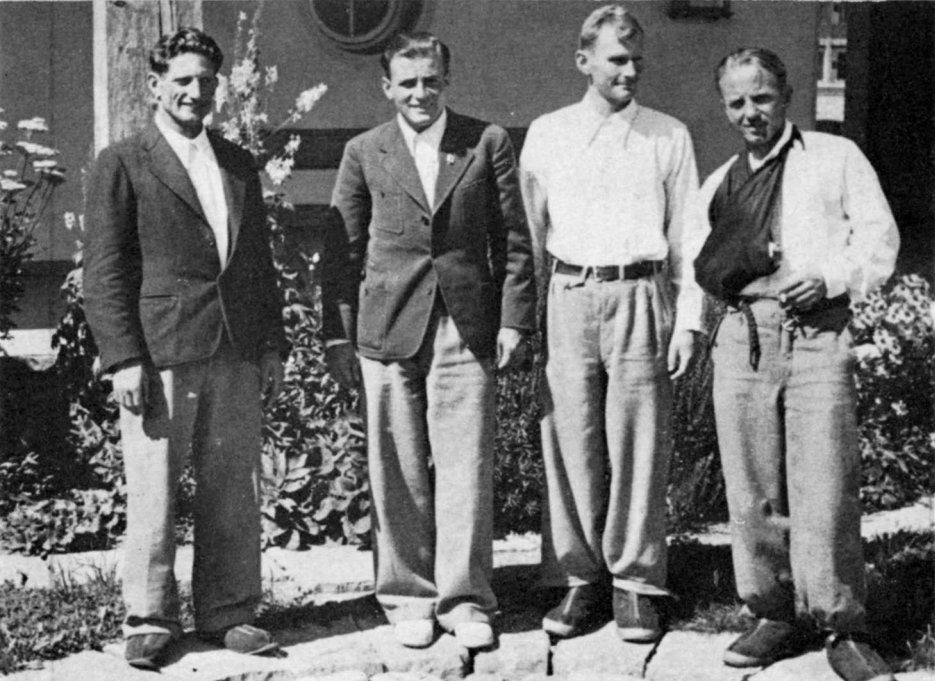
At the same time, in 1931, I too came into contact with ice for the first time, with the Traunstein climber, Gustl Kröner, on the Grandes Jorasses. Kröner had studied at the Munich Art Academy and painted mountains with the eyes of both climber and artist, much in the same style as Compton. He was a 'Bohemian', with long side-whiskers and always ready with a joke. The year before he had made the third ascent of the Sentinelle Rouge and had had the opportunity of seeing the Jorasses.

In the lean years of the First World War, I grew up in an orphanage, and after my apprenticeship as a gardener, won a scholarship to the Horticultural College. This gave me a lot of time and opportunity to visit the mountains.

30 *The author: Anderl Heckmair, senior*



Because of a certain aptitude for gymnastics, I didn't find it difficult to join the ranks of the top climbers of that time. In turn I climbed the most difficult rock walls of the northern limestone Alps and the Dolomites. I had no experience of ice, however, and, being young, was presumptuous enough to attempt, very early on, an ice-wall of the nature of the Grandes Jorasses. Fortunately, as a result of a rapid change in the weather, we were turned away whilst still on the lower stages of the climb. By contrast, we were lucky to complete the Chamois North wall in a single afternoon. Two years later Gustl Kröner was killed by a stonefall on the North face of the Matterhorn. With him at the time was Walter Stösser, who was renowned for his competence on rock and ice.



31 *The successful Eiger team: Heckmair, Ludwig Vörg, Fritz Kasperek, Heinrich Harrer*

Stösser himself perished in 1935 on the Morgenhorn in the Bernese Oberland. Paidar—known as the Big Silent Man—together with Ludwig Schmaderer, the Munich climber of mercurial temperament, were among the most extreme Kaiser and Dolomite climbers. They surprised every one with their difficult routes in the Western Alps and became famous for their attempts on Nanga Parbat and their climbs in the Sikkim Himalaya.

Parallel to this development in mountaineering, a rescue service was built up for mountaineers in need. It was called the *Bergwacht* and owes its beginning to Ludwig Gramminger from Munich, himself a top-flight mountaineer and still active today. At the same time a parallel service has been developed in Austria, under the inspiration of Wastl Mariner of Innsbruck. Like Gramminger, he is an active mountaineer and devotes immense effort to furthering mountain rescue interests.

Meanwhile new names emerged, such as Rudolf Haringer and Martin Maier, who have already been mentioned, and especially Rudolf Peters, a fine young climber who, despite an unimpressive first appearance, led climbs of unbelievable difficulty and steepness. It was he, who with Martin Maier in 1935, finally conquered the Grandes Jorasses North wall,<sup>2</sup> a year after his previous companion, Haringer, was fatally injured under tragic circumstances on the same face.

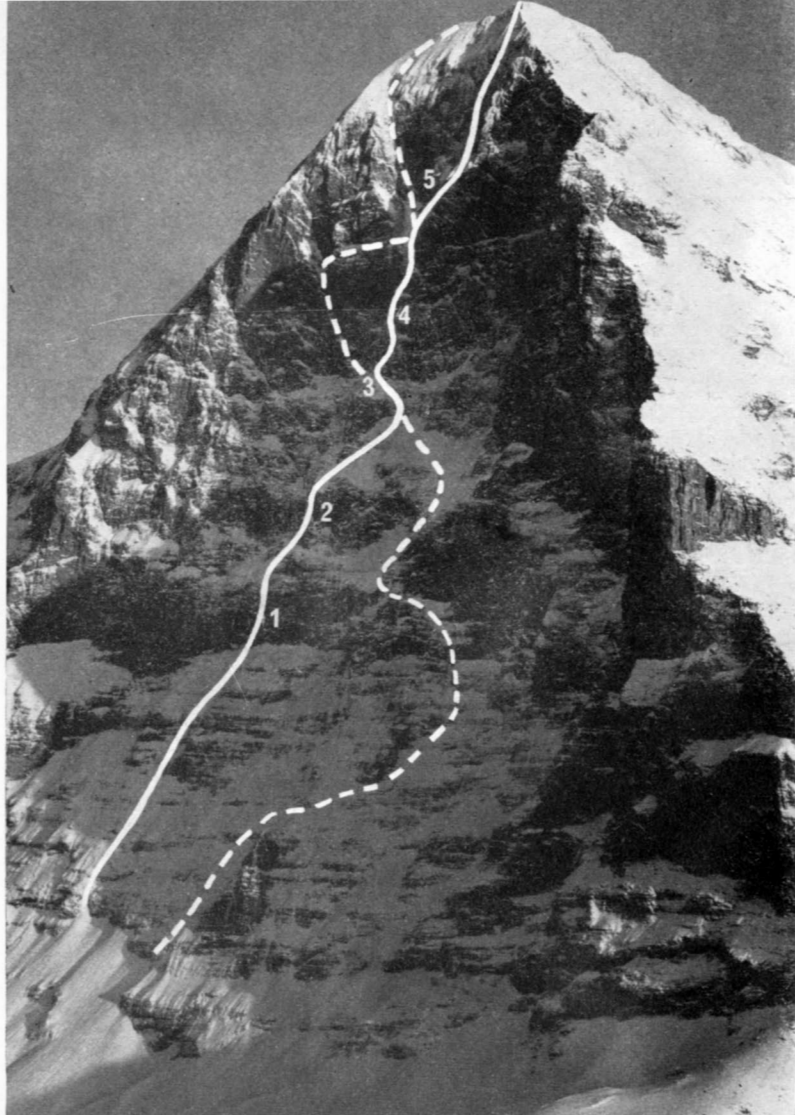
It was in 1935, too, that the struggle for the Eiger Nordwand began, and again it was between men who had previously only climbed in their home mountains. Max Sedlmayer and Karl Mehringer were the first to seek out the one North

<sup>2</sup> *A.J.* 46. 73.

face which was universally considered to be unclimbable, and they paid for it with their lives. But the battle had commenced. It kindled afresh the following year when three different parties moved in, one of which retired when a member was lost in a fatal accident on a training climb. There remained Toni Kurz and Anderl Hinterstoisser from Berchtesgaden/Bad Reichenhall, and Rainer and Angerer from Innsbruck. It has been questioned whether their experience matched such an enterprise. Certainly they had the technical knowledge and the necessary strength. So they made fantastic progress on the face and it was only on the fourth day, with their return route cut off, that they lost their lives in a bad storm.

After my dream of making the first ascent of the Grandes Jorasses was thwarted by Peters and Maier, I too turned my attention to the still virgin Eiger Nordwand. With wisdom earned by my attempt on the Grandes Jorasses, I first studied the attempts of my rivals, and acquired the knowledge which in 1938—together with Ludwig Vörg, Fritz Kasperek and Heinrich Harrer—showed good results. My partner, Ludwig Vörg was the ideal companion, unusually good-natured, friendly and self-effacing. He fell in 1941 on the first day of the Russian campaign. Although we started off in competition with the two Austrians, Fritz Kasperek and Heinrich Harrer, who had started a day ahead of us, we joined forces when we met them at the Second Ice-field. Kasperek, a Viennese with the typical Viennese outlook, was in good humour throughout the climb. He was killed in 1954 in Peru on Salcantay when a cornice collapsed. Harrer, a man of almost unbelievable physical strength, was the sheet anchor of the party, who uncomplainingly, as last man removed all the pegs and bore the heaviest load. The readiness to help on both sides soon made us friends and banished all thoughts of rivalry. On the descent it benefited us all that Harrer and Kasperek already knew the route over the West flank to Scheidegg. Of us four, Harrer had the most unusual future. He was interned in 1939 in India, fled in 1943 with his comrade Aufschnaiter to Tibet, and was for seven years the guest of the Dalai Lama. He has written several books of his experiences, one of which became a best-seller. During his stay in Asia he collected many items depicting Tibetan art and culture, and these he gave to a museum in Graz. For his unique authority on the subject, he was awarded a professorship.

In 1937, the year before our climb, I had spent six weeks with Theo Löscher from Munich, the friend of Leo Rittler, at the foot of the Eigerwand studying each pitch of the climb. We realised that we were not merely dealing with difficult rock, but also with a true ice-wall. We would need to equip ourselves not only morally but also with specialised equipment. Previous events had indicated that we must expect complications, and must overcome and live through them. We reckoned to allow eight days for the climb, which in the



32 *The Eiger Nordwand* The broken line indicates the original route, 1938, the continuous line the direct one, 1966. 1 First Band; 2 Second Band; 3 Flat-iron; 4 Pillar; 5 The Fly. Photo: Chris Bonington. Reprinted from *A.J.* 71. [60]

event took only three. With the Eiger climbed a climax was reached, but this didn't remain for long a closing point in Alpine development.

One of the most extraordinary, if not unique, mountaineering achievements was Fritz Wiessner's performance on K2 in 1939. Trained on Saxony sandstone, he was in the 20s leading the most extreme Alpine routes, particularly in the Wilder Kaiser and the Dolomites—for example the Fleischbank South-east face, the Furchetta North face, and Monte Pelmo North face. The crux of his mountaineering career was this attempt on K2, which, through no fault of his



own, but rather of his companions, foundered only 200 m below the summit. Without exaggeration you could say that Wiessner was the psychological victor of K2.

Of necessity, because of the Second World War, there was a pause in Alpine activity. The years afterwards presaged a new era with new names. It is not possible to omit all mention of climbers of other nationalities, for ten days after our Eiger conquest, the Italian Riccardo Cassin and his companions succeeded in climbing the Walker spur of the Grandes Jorasses. In 1947 it was the French rope of Lionel Terray and Louis Lachenal who made the second ascent of the Eigerwand. Lachenal, with Maurice Herzog, later became famous as the first to conquer an 8000 m peak in the Himalaya, Annapurna.

I must not omit mention of Hias Rebitsch from Innsbruck, who in 1937 after a 100-hour attempt on the Eiger-Nordwand, was the first to return alive, and after the war became the leader of various expeditions to the Himalaya and South America, where in the Andes he made some valuable historical discoveries. So that in the end he progressed from a climber to a scientific investigator.

One name shines to a remarkable degree. It is that of Hermann Buhl from Innsbruck, who made his second home in Ramsau near Berchtesgaden. Even during the war, one heard tales of this young climber who with incredible élan was climbing unbelievable faces. After the war he made a solo ascent of the North-east face of the Badile and climbed the Watzmann East face in winter. He was an obvious choice for inclusion in the first German post-war expedition to Nanga Parbat, which was initiated and led by Dr Karl Herrligkoffer. With incredible tenacity and endurance Buhl reached the summit alone. There was surely no other climber with a more restlessly fanatical urge to scale mountains than he; he was killed finally on Chogolisa in the Karakoram.

Hardly was the Second World War over before Dr Karl Herrligkoffer turned his thoughts to the Himalaya. He was the step-brother of Willi Merkl, who with his companion Wilo Welzenbach, died on Nanga Parbat in 1934. In memory of his brother, Dr Herrligkoffer called this first German post-war expedition, the Willi Merkl Memorial Expedition. Against much criticism and despite many difficulties, with bitter tenacity he organised this expedition, which by virtue of Buhl's supreme solo achievement, has its place in mountaineering history.

A companion of Hermann Buhl for many years was Kuno Rainer from Innsbruck, now living in Kitzbühel. He shall be recorded here as a representative



of all those mountaineers who live solely for the mountains. Although he too had the ability to master the most difficult routes, he was naturally outshone by Buhl's remarkable feat on Nanga Parbat; quite without rancour, he was content to act in support, concentrating on organising food and equipment, and the retreat. Together with Buhl, Kuno Rainer had in 1950 mastered the Walker spur on the Grandes Jorasses and finally traversed the whole Jorasses ridge to the Col des Grandes Jorasses. He is still the trainer of the Austrian trainee guides, and there is no one better qualified for this.

Naturally enough, women do not figure to any large extent, but there are of course exceptions. At the beginning of the 30s Paula Wiesinger from Bolzano caused quite a stir when with her companion, and later her husband, Hans Steger she climbed some very difficult Dolomite faces, including several first ascents, some of which she led. A number of other competent lady alpinists followed, mainly from Switzerland, Italy, France and Austria, and more recently, also from Yugoslavia. The German girl to cause a climbing sensation was Daisy Voog, who, led by Werner Bittner, became the first woman to master the Eigerwand.



35 *Hans and Paula (née Wiesinger) Steger*

In the 50s, climbing took another new turn. New enthusiasm burned with the further developments of equipment and technique. The use of *étriers* and pegs made overhangs possible, that had not been considered before. Among the



36 *Lothar Brandler* Photo: Toni Hiebeler



37 *Jörg Lehne* Photo: Toni Hiebeler



38 *Siegfried Löw*



39 *Reiner Kauschke*

German achievements at this time was the *Grosse Zinne direttissima* by Dietrich Hasse, Lothar Brandler, Joerg Lehne and Siegfried Löw. Soon afterwards climbing took another step forward, and a *superdirettissima* called the *Sachsenweg* was accomplished. The leader, Peter Siegert, was assisted in this feat by his civilian trade—placing lightning conductors—and was quite at home on smooth concrete walls, dangling from dizzily high pitons. He brought the same technique to rock; without a thought for the natural structure he worked straight up a face in a direct vertical line. His companions on the *Grosse Zinne* were Gerd Uhner and Reiner Kauschke. They had a cache of extra supplies and gear at the foot of the face and were able from each bivouac to haul up reinforcements by rope. Climbers from other nations were quick to follow; Swiss and French routes went up next, making rich use of all available equipment. The older generation of climbers was slow to accept these new developments, in the same way that pitons were an anathema to our predecessors, but were a foregone conclusion for us. How can one stop the young using the latest equipment which will open up new routes for them? Only by the use of such technical aids was it possible to approach the *Eigerwand* in winter and to climb it. The first winter ascent was made by Toni Hiebeler in company with Toni Kinshofer, Anderl Mannhardt and Walter Almberger, still by the classical route. This led in February 1966 to an attempt on the direct route by climbers of the 'new school'. Two parties began the climb as rivals and



40 *Toni Kinshofer*



41 *Anderl Mamhard*

during its course became united. Of the Germans, Peter Haag was the initiator; the first on top were Joerg Lehne and Günther Strobl; but the honour must also be shared by Karl Golikow and Rudolf Rosenzopf, Siegi Hupfauer, Roland Votteler and Günther Schnaidt. They joined forces with the Britons Dougal Haston and Don Whillans and the American, John Harlin.<sup>3</sup>

I don't intend to go into the story of the Eiger climb here, but would make the comment that this expedition-style team-work, using all available aids, was able to give Alpine climbing another push forward.

There is, too, another quite opposite form of climbing exhibited by specially proficient climbers who prefer to gain their satisfaction by climbing alone. Cesare Maestri and Walter Bonatti (Italians) are universally known as solo climbers, disregarding of danger, and they have their emulators. Michel Darbellay (Swiss) even climbed the Eigerwand solo, and in August 1968 Alexandro Gogna actually climbed the Walker spur by himself.

In July 1968, making use of all the technical aids, three German climbers mastered the great overhang, the Roof, on the North face of the West Zinne. They had not previously been heard of outside their small circle of climbers—the brothers Walter and Erich Rudolph and Eric Bauer from Kempten in the Allgäu. The struggle took nine days and they only bivouacked twice on the wall. They have proved that nothing is now so difficult as to be technically impossible.

The ranks of 'famous' climbers can never be closed. But what does fame mean to climbing? The true climber seeks his fulfilment in the limitations set to him personally by the forces of Nature. Whether this fulfilment is found in walking amongst mountains or in conquering extreme routes, it is all the same in the end. With luck, climbing will never become a competitive 'Sport', nor appear in the Olympic Games, although already two Olympic Gold Medals have been bestowed to climbers—one in 1932 to the brothers Schmid for their first ascent of the Matterhorn North face and another in 1936 to Günther Oskar Dyhrenfurth for his success in his great Himalayan undertakings.

<sup>3</sup> See *A.J.* 71. 256 for description.

However, the expenditure which today inevitably accompanies such serious endeavours has still to be found. What remains to the poor climber but to publicise his intentions loudly and then cash in on advance payments and honoraria for promised stories later; this is about the only way he can put his plans into practice. Some great climbers, whose idealism is beyond question, can even make a career out of it. Even in earlier days, well-known climbers like Luis Trenker and Hans Ertl, film actor and producer, were able to turn their mountaineering craft into hard cash. After the war German climbers became well-known through films and television, especially Martin Schliessler and Lothar Brandler. Austrian climbers who have earned prestige and fame through their writing include the Viennese Karl Lukan, Kurt Maix and especially Prof Herbert Tichy. Others, of course, are Gaston Rébuffat and Walter Bonatti. The countless climbers who with lectures, articles and books, make known their exploits, thereby making money, are by virtue of their efforts more than justified in doing so.

But, of course, the whole interpretation of mountaineering should not be reversed; climbing is, and remains, a very egocentric and personal activity. There are many things that are expected of a climber: diffidence and humility before the elemental forces, readiness to help and comradeship for his fellows, tolerance for the achievements of others and, above all, no over-valuation of his own deeds and successes. But Youth doesn't always have much time for such ethical ideals; it storms forward, looking for and finding new problems. The development of newer, more specialised equipment will keep pace, and after the Alps have been worked out and improved modes of transport have further reduced distances, the future 'Playground' for alpinists will be the mountain regions outside Europe. Climbers have already begun combing the already-climbed 8000-m peaks for new routes. So, in the same way as the thirty-day struggle for the Eigerwand *direttissima* evolved new techniques, so will other problems which today appear insoluble, one day themselves be overcome.