

Noshaq in winter

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(Translation: Andrzej Kuś)

It was 29 December 1972 when we boarded the international train on Warsaw railway station with heavy hearts. We were very aware of the fact, that at this moment the expedition machine started to roll on an unrestrainable course—the realisation of the crazy idea of ascending a 7500-m peak for the first time in winter, the beginning of winter climbing expeditions in the highest mountain ranges, as had already happened in the Alps, the Caucasus and the Dolomites.

What were our chances? Would those be right who had given us cheerless prophecies and had frightened us with visions of heavy snowfalls and huge avalanches in the Hindu Kush?

Our challenge was Noshaq, a mountain well known to Polish mountaineers and for this reason chosen by us. We would not have to waste time looking for the route in an unknown area. All energy could be kept for fighting with winter difficulties: frost, storm winds and snow, and for the race with the short winter daylight.

We travelled by train together with three tonnes of our luggage via Moscow and Tashkent to Termez. The New Year of 1973 was solemnly greeted with Georgian champagne somewhere near Orenburg. Outside the compartment windows the vast fields of Kazakhstan were hidden under a blanket of snow in a temperature of -30°C .

In Tashkent I parted from my friends in the train and flew ahead to Kabul to secure permission for entering Wakhan. From the aeroplane I saw the Amu Daria in sunshine. It appeared unfrozen. Perhaps there would be no troubles when crossing the river by boat to the Afghan side. How strange seemed to me snow-covered Kabul with which I was familiar only in the tropical heat of summer! And finally I saw from close at hand the snowdrifts a few metres high on the Salang Pass, that I would be crossing on my route to Kundus, Here I should meet once again the rest of the team. What would the next days bring?

How can we reach Noshaq with our supplies in such conditions? For all that, when we crossed the Salang there was almost no snow in the valley on the N slopes of the Hindu Kush!

Apparently the first mountain ranges to the S collect the main falls from the humid air masses coming from over the Indian Ocean.

From Kundus where I met the expedition, we reached Qazi Deh village by hired truck and one jeep without any difficulty. From time to time the drivers were forced to make break-neck detours through the terraces of rice fields. In

one village at 2500 m the temperature was -20°C . We started now the long negotiations with our porters. Local highlanders were afraid of frost and snow in the mountains. They would not agree to go higher than the meadow Put Ghar (3400 m), which was only two days' march away. There they could find fuel and warm themselves by the fire at night.

On 20 January our caravan of 70 porters left for the Qazi Deh valley. A bivouac site was found at the mouth of the Mandaras valley. In the night the temperature fell to -30°C . Next day the porters—sleepy and cold—brought our loads slowly on to the vast meadow of Put Ghar and then turned back immediately. The six bravest of them were kept a further three days. Wearing our duvet-jackets they helped us to bring the equipment up to Camp 1 (4200 m) and then after giving encouraging cheers they too returned to their village. Everything remained . . . exactly on our shoulders.

Base Camp at Put Ghar was situated *c* 8 km below the usual summer Base Camp. Continuous transporting of loads to Camps 1 and 2 (4750 m) which we established at the foot of Noshag was a harassing nightmare that engaged half of our team and took a lot of energy. Gradually we became accustomed to the constant frost. During the day it was -25°C , at night -35°C . In those conditions the melting of snow for 2 pints of water took one hour and the short daylight left time only for carrying and cooking.

From time to time the expedition doctor gave us ointments against frost-bite. We always put on our faces a thick layer of cream before going out. On 27 January we established Camp 3 at 5500 m and on 4 February Camp 4 at 6200 m.

Next day the favourable weather broke down.

In the increasing storm wind we returned with Tadeusz Piotrowski back to Camp 3. Here we experienced a real hurricane. For three days we were holding down the tent with our weight, while the other empty one was torn away and thrown 700 m down on to the glacier.

Finally, dead-beat we escaped to Camp 2. We began to lose any hope of good weather. Some of us were ill at Base Camp. We were all depressed.

On 10 February the wind ceased enough to decide us on a final attack. We set out from Camp 2; however, the wind and frost still made some difficulties in the climbing. On 12 February we established Camp 5 at an altitude of 6700 m. We just about managed to set up a small tent and, being rather depressed, hid inside it. The strength of the wind made further climbing impossible. The reading of our mercury thermometer was below -40°C . The following night was sleepless. Suddenly about 4am the wind stopped flapping the tent. I went outside. It had become completely calm and I saw splendid stars over my head. The moon was full. This seemed to be a unique chance for the summit. We decided not to waste time in making a higher camp on a large plateau (7100 m) but instead to attack the summit from Camp 5. Some hours were needed for warming up our boots over the butane stove and we started at 11am. We took with us only the radio-telephone, cameras, rope, some pitons and food. We



1 *Looking SW from the plateau of Noshaq towards Asp-e-Safed* This and next photo: A. Zawada

knew, that, if we did have the energy, we would reach the summit about midnight, because it was still 800 m higher. After three hours we came to a snow plateau, where usually in summer Camp 3 is set up. We rested. Tadeusz lit the stove to melt snow and make tea. Meanwhile I was taking pictures of the splendid panorama of Hindu Kush peaks. The sky was clear over us. Then suddenly my heart almost stopped its rhythm. Just below our feet, near the rock on which we were reposing a blackish human hand was jutting from the snow! The wind had uncovered the body of a Bulgarian climber, one of the five that were lost in the tragic expedition to Noshaq in summer 1971. We were shocked. How difficult it is to overcome fright in such a short while! We covered the relics with snow. In the meantime the sun had set, but we continued traversing the ice-fields. The frost was terrible; however, fortunately, it was windless. The moon lit up the route and torches were not necessary. We entered a steep gully leading to the summit ridge, which we reached at 9pm. A wonderful view of Tirich Mir, bathed in the pale moonlight, appeared before our eyes. A light but piercing wind was blowing on the ridge. It seemed to us that the main summit was just ahead, so we passed the cheerful message by radio-telephone to our friends that we would be on the peak in a few minutes. What a disappointment! It turned out that we were still short of the middle summit and that the main summit was 1.5 km ahead, behind the moderately sloping ridge.

We swore at this large mountain, fighting with the temptation to retreat down to the windless side. And I cannot explain now why, for this difference of 50 m



2 *W from Noshaq towards Koh-i-Bandaka*

height between the middle and main summit, we still decided on three more hours of lethargic floundering, our faces lashed by the icy wind. Finally we were at the highest point near to the small cairn—approximately 11.30pm.

I put the rocks in shape of the words 'Winter 73', bound the flag to the ice-axe and Tadeusz and I embraced one another thankfully. It was dreadfully cold, presumably at least -50°C . Before the descent we contacted the Base and other camps to give them brief news of our success.

When I was winding the aerial on to the radio-telephone I took off my gloves for a while and I felt immediately that my fingers were getting blisters as if by scalding.

We went down quickly but carefully, having still in mind the tragedy of the Bulgarians. About 4.30am we were finally inside the tent of Camp 5, after seventeen hours of continuous action.

Our socks inside our boots were covered with ice; both big toes of Tadeusz were frost-bitten. But nothing could reduce the great joy and happiness that we felt at this moment. We had conquered for the first time in winter a peak of almost 7500 m.

SUMMARY Polish Expedition to the Hindu Kush 'Winter 1973', sponsored by the Polish High Mountain Club. Members: Andrzej Zawada (leader), Mirosław Budny, Benon Czechowski, Ryszard Dmoch, Marek Fijałkowski, Wojciech Jedliński, Jan Koisar (doctor), Jacek Mierzejewski, Tadeusz Piotrowski, Władysław Woźniak. First winter ascent of Noshaq (7492 m) by the normal route of the w spur. The summit was reached on 13 February 1973 about 11.30pm by Tadeusz Piotrowski and Andrzej Zawada.