

Mount Everest

The First Winter Ascent

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Photographs 18 — 19

I was convinced of the possibility of climbing Everest in winter after our successful winter expedition to Lhotse in 1977. At first, however, this idea received a lot of opposition even from members of the Sports Committee of the Polish Alpine Association. Once, when we voted on organising a winter expedition to one of the peaks at 8000m, only two were for it. This was a long time before Wanda Rutkiewicz reached the top of Everest and the general opinion was that we should first organise a summer expedition in order to put our Polish climbers on the top of Everest. I was against this, arguing that the costs involved would be out of proportion to the sporting value of the achievement. Since Everest had been climbed via the normal routes in summer by nearly 100 climbers, one more such climb would have little importance to the mountaineering world.

In the meantime, Wanda Rutkiewicz solved our problem for us. She reached the top of Everest and was the first European woman to do so and hers was not a large, expensive expedition. From then on, the idea of a winter expedition gained more and more support among the members of the Alpine Association Committee. Finally everyone agreed that a winter attempt on Everest should be the next goal for the Polish national team. I was to be the leader.

This was in May 1977 and it may surprise many people to learn that it took such a long time from the original decision to undertake the expedition in 1977 to its actual conclusion in 1980. The main problem was obtaining permission for it. Usually you have to wait, on average, about four years for a permit because there are so many applications from people wanting to climb Everest. We had a further problem, and this was to apply for a permit to climb Everest in winter. The government of Nepal, till then, had not given any winter permits. So we had to make a special application, and in order to put our case more effectively I flew to Kathmandu in November 1977.

The Nepalese Mountaineering Association had suggested a joint expedition between themselves and one other country for the autumn of 1980. This meant that the country chosen would jump the long permit queue immediately. Unfortunately, Poland lost this opportunity of going on the joint expedition with the Nepalese, and the much wealthier Italians were chosen instead. I had applied for permission to climb Everest in the winter of 1979-80 or, as a second choice, the South Pillar in the spring of 1980. When handing in my application, I decided to strengthen our case by writing:

‘The beginning of winter expeditions to the Himalayas will open up new horizons for mountaineering. The highest peaks which have already been conquered in the pre-monsoon and post-monsoon seasons will be virgin peaks to winter expeditions

as has happened before in the Alps, the Caucasus and the Hindu Kush. Winter expeditions to the Himalayas are a natural historical consequence in the development of mountaineering progress.'

A race against time

In March 1979 a permit finally arrived but it was permission to climb the South Pillar of Everest in the spring of 1980! We were very disappointed but did not give up hope altogether for our winter expedition. But by the middle of September 1979 we had resigned ourselves to the possibility that our winter application had now been turned down. So we concentrated on making preparations for our spring expedition. Then, quite unexpectedly on 22 November, our permit to climb in winter arrived — but valid from 1 December! To consider organising an expedition at such short notice was sheer madness. On the other hand, how could we possibly waste this opportunity of creating mountaineering history by being the first to climb Everest in winter? I had to face one of the most difficult decisions in my life. The only way we could win this race against time was by flying all the equipment with the climbers on the same plane. Even then we would have to be at the foot of Everest, at the latest, by the end of December. That would leave us just two months for our attack on the mountain. To complicate matters further, we had not realised yet that the permit only allowed us one and a half months to attempt the climb!

The Polish Sports Committee (GKKF & S) understood our predicament perfectly and increased our allowance so that we could transport all our equipment by air. We immediately started to buy our food and to pack everything. Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of the members of the expedition and to the generous help from others who wished us well — mainly members of the Warsaw Alpine Club — we succeeded in getting everything ready on time. On 1 December about five tons of food and equipment were sent by air from Okecie airport in Warsaw to Nepal. All our equipment for our spring expedition was sent from Gdynie to Bombay by sea.

From previous expeditions I had made to Noshag and Lhotse, I remembered very well the high standards of character and skill winter climbing in the Himalaya demands. So, in order to choose the strongest teams possible, I, together with the Polish Mountaineering Association, drew up a list of about 40 of the best Polish mountaineers. We then sent them each a questionnaire asking them which expedition they would prefer to go on — the winter, the spring, or both. Then, on this basis, we chose the final composition of both teams.

The winter expedition included the following climbers: Andrzej Zawada (the leader), Jozef Bakalarski (cameraman), Leszek Cichy, Krzysztof Cielecki, Ryszard Dmoch (deputy leader), Walenty Fiut, Ryszard Gajewski, Zygmunt Heinrich, Jan Holnicki-Szulc, Robert Janik (the doctor), Bogdan Jankowski, Stanislaw Jaworski (cameraman), Janusz Maczka, Aleksander Lwow, Kazimierz Olech, Maciej Pawlikowski, Marian Piekutowski, Ryszard Szafirski, Krzysztof Wielicki, Krzysztof Zurek, Bishow Nath Regmi (liaison officer), Pemba Norbu Sherpa, Ningma Tenzing, Pasang Norbu, Nawang Yenden.

From the moment the Polish M.A. decided to take advantage of both the winter and spring permits, the committee was constantly preoccupied with

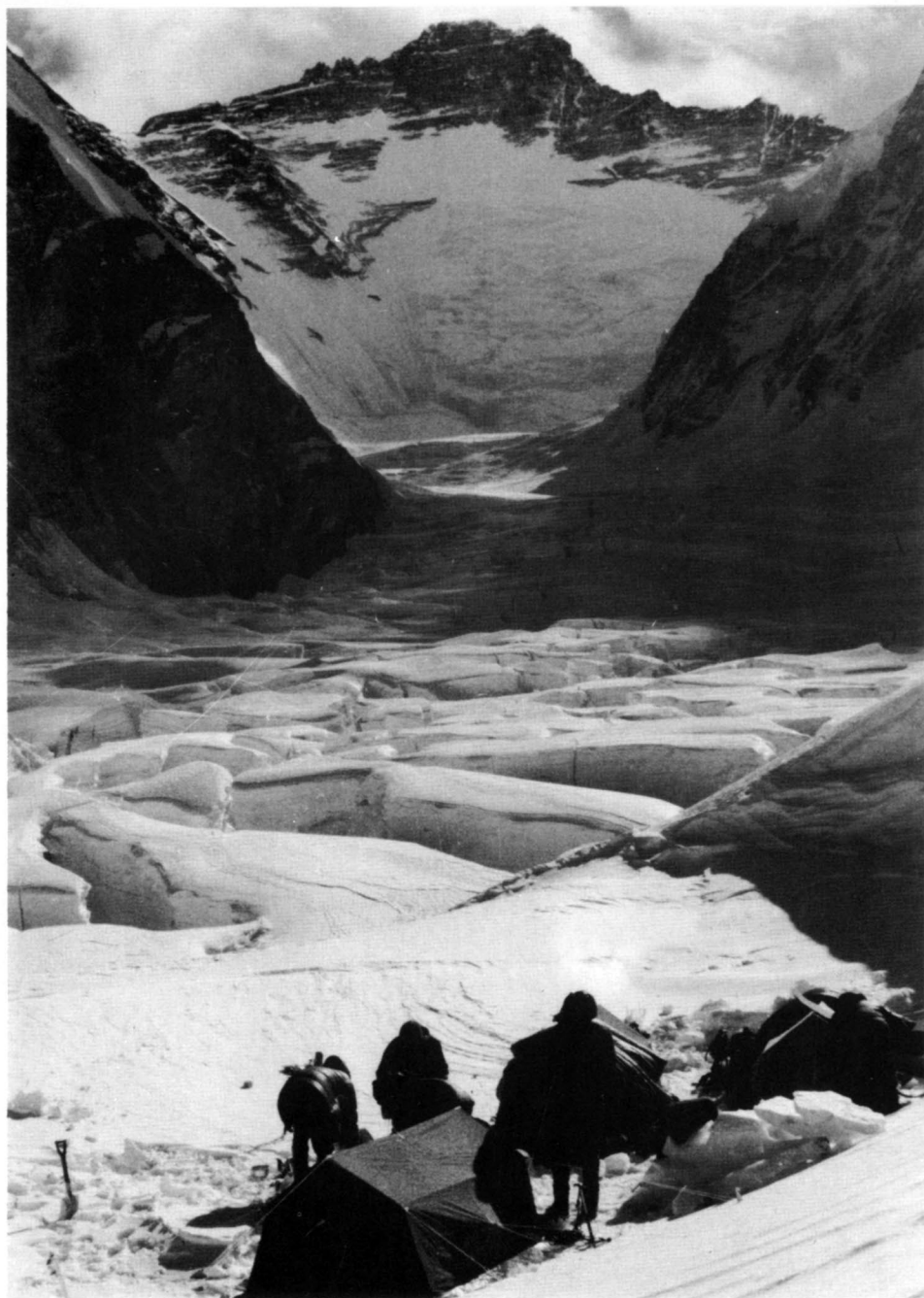


Photo: Andrzej Zawada

serious financial problems. It had to budget for all the personal equipment and the Sherpas, and we had to do with less of both than on previous expeditions. Thus it was that we could only afford to hire five Sherpas for the winter and four for the spring. The transport of the equipment between the camps became the responsibility of the climbers and for this reason, we value our achievement in conquering Everest even more, since we had to struggle up carrying our own equipment.

Waiting day after day at Kathmandu airport for parts of our baggage to arrive from Warsaw made us very nervous. By the middle of December we were losing precious time. We had planned to set up Base Camp by 31 December and if we wanted the expedition to be successful, we could not afford to lose more than one of the three months granted us on our permit. Finally, on 20 December, the last of our baggage arrived in Nepal. Considering it had been sent by air it was very late, but at least nothing was lost. We were now able to start our ascent of Everest.

From 15 December groups of our mountaineers had been flying on ahead to Lukla so that there would be no further delays when we were finally ready. These flights, together with the cost of porters and customs duties, ate up most of our allowance. We spent that Christmas divided between Kathmandu and Namche Bazaar. The situation was very similar at the New Year with our long caravan stretched from Thangboche to Base Camp on the Khumbu glacier. The first tent was pitched at Base Camp on New Year's Eve 1979. Five of our climbers — Heinrich, Fiut, Olech, Piekutowski and Szafirski — spent the night at Base Camp in the newly-erected tents. By 4 January 1980 all our team and equipment were there.

Base Camp was set up in the knowledge that it would have to be used by Polish climbers for the best part of six months, so we made a special effort to make it comfortable by flattening the ground for our tents. At one stage there were 18 of them. We also built two wide terraces for a kitchen and a dining area with access up rocky steps. Our storage areas were covered with parachutes. In the corner of one of these storage areas we built a very comfortable bathroom — our pride and joy — which was visited by all passing trekkers. The plastic bath brought from Poland did not last very long, thanks to the frost, but it was replaced with an enormous aluminium basin bought in Kathmandu. There was never any shortage of hot water since the fire burnt constantly in the kitchen melting blocks of ice. One of the many experiences gained during our winter expedition to Lhotse was the importance to tired climbers of having a good bath at Base Camp to restore their energy, both physical and mental.

Two enormous radio aerials (20m each) dominated Base Camp. They were made of aluminium, and Bogdan Jankowski was responsible for them. He was also responsible for the communications system which, according to Mr Sharma from the Ministry of Tourism in Nepal, was the best in the history of Himalayan climbing. There were three long-distance transmitters, eight radio-telephones and tape recorders for recording the communications between the camps, a petrol-driven high voltage generator, dynamos and batteries.

All our communication equipment worked excellently during our two long expeditions. Daily bulletins on the progress of our climb were sent to the outside world, and our countrymen were able to follow our daily struggle with Everest in

winter. I often wondered about the poor reputation of Polish engineering when I saw long lines of foreign mountaineers from other expeditions queuing up to use our radio equipment which was in operation throughout the spring.

The Western Cwm

Anyone who has climbed at least once through the gigantic cascade of ice which is the Khumbu Icefall, furrowed with crevasses and full of jagged pinnacles, will never forget the experience. It is both fascinating and frightening. It is where so many people have died, but the only way of climbing Everest from the south is through this steep river of ice squeezed between Nuptse and the W ridge of Everest.

The Icefall poses a serious problem for every expedition, and we were all very worried about it, particularly Heinrich. As a member of the Silesian expedition to Lhotse, he had gained valuable experience in crossing it. He soon convinced us all that the safest way up was first along the left-hand side and then to finish on the right-hand side, very high up under an overhanging ice wall which protruded from the slopes of Nuptse. Several times on the way up we had to use ladders, to climb steep cliffs, and to span deep crevasses. We used all our ropes in negotiating the Icefall. Since we had come by air we were limited in the amount we could bring, and lost a lot of them when the ice broke away and collapsed. Whenever we were climbing the Icefall, we were all tense with apprehension, particularly at the noise of ice suddenly collapsing under our feet or, somewhere nearby, a huge pinnacle of ice breaking loose and plunging down below us. But looking back, the Icefall was not too hazardous for us. We did not experience any really nasty moments apart from a few falls into crevasses which all finished without any serious injury.

On 5 January, seven members of the team left Base Camp in order to tackle the lower parts of the Icefall and on 7 January Wielicki and Heinrich reached the Western Cwm but they returned to spend the night in a bivouac on the Icefall. Fiut, Maczka, Szafirski and Zurek joined them from Base Camp, and all six set up Camp 1 at 6050m at the entrance to the Western Cwm under the slopes of Nuptse. The following day, 9 January, the same climbers, joined by Lwow and Piekutowski, set up Camp 2 at 6500m, much deeper into the Western Cwm below the SW wall of Everest. Our speed was excellent and our spirits were high, but for this kind of swift progress the weather plays an important role. During those few days the wind was not very strong but this did not last for very long. The day after setting up Camp 2 very severe winds completely destroyed one of the tents in Camp 1.

Our progress now slowed down, but nevertheless the equipment was steadily being carried up the mountain. We were helped in this by our five Sherpas. The Western Cwm was covered with ice and firm. The fierce winds had removed all the snow, leaving bare the crevasses; but we all knew very well how treacherous this vast, flat, icy surface was. Between Camps 1 and 2 we climbed roped together. One of our climbers, Lwow, was soon to be convinced of the expediency of such a precaution — he fell into a crevasse 15m deep when the snow collapsed beneath him. His fall was halted with great difficulty by his partner Maczka with his rope.

On 15 January Camp 3 was erected on the wall of Lhotse at 7150m by the



Everest S summit seen from the South Col

Photo: Andrzej Zawada

group from Zakopane, Gajewski, Pawlikowski and Zurek — a special ambition of theirs. Everyone was delighted with our progress — only eleven days of climbing and already three camps established. Then, over the radio we received the team's first impressions of the conditions further ahead: the wall of Lhotse was one large ice mountain! There was no pack snow in which it is so easy to hack out steps. The huge bergschrund below the ice wall which drops down from the Geneva spur was now virtually impossible to climb. Now we would have to go up the right-hand side between the seracs. On this route there are two overhanging barriers of ice and we would have to use fixed ropes. Our elation at having set up Camp 3 so swiftly now turned to depression.

From Camp 3 to the saddle of the South Col was a distance of 850 m. Just 850 m! But at this height and in those wintry conditions, to climb these 850 m was only just about in the realms of human possibility. We lost nearly one month trying to climb them, and during the many attempts half our team was out of action.

The first attempt was undertaken by Cichy, Heinrich, Holnicki and Wielicki on 23 January. They made a very brave attempt to climb this section, using fixed ropes which had been left by other expeditions in the autumn and by fixing new ones themselves. Wielicki reached the highest point, but even he, after depositing some gear, had to return to Camp 3. Two days later another attempt was made by Zurek and Pawlikowski, but hurricane-force winds made climbing impossible. During their retreat, Zurek was blown over by the wind and fell about 20 m to the nearest piton. Although he was very badly bruised, he managed to reach Camp 3 unaided, and then, with the help of colleagues, he made his way to Base Camp. On his way down he twice fell into crevasses. Unfortunately, his injuries did not allow him to take any further part in the expedition and he had to go back to Poland.

All the time the bitter, raging winds made any movement arduous. Even getting to Camp 3 was now a major problem. Several times Dmoch, Heinrich and Olech started out but, even with their great determination, they were unable to win the battle against the icy hurricanes. Week after nervous week went by. Then on 10 February we tried once more; but once again the weather defeated the indefatigable Heinrich, and his partner, Lwow, returned with frostbite in his hands. More and more people were now unable to take part in the climbs above Camp 3, and our doctor Robert Janik had more and more work to do in Base Camp attending to the sick and injured.

During this phase of the expedition — the first 10 days of February — only four members of the team were able to survive in these appalling conditions and to adjust to the high altitudes. They were Cichy, Fiut, Heinrich and Wielicki, and my plans and my hopes were very much bound up with them. Which of them would break the psychological barrier and reach the South Col? I was convinced it was only a psychological barrier preventing us from reaching it. If a person could climb to Camp 3 at 7150 m twice, three and even four times, he could also climb to 8000 m, without any doubt. In my mind, I was nervously arranging the right combination of strengths and weaknesses to create the ideal partnership for the final assault on Everest. However, it turned out to be unnecessary, because at the critical moment the climbers with necessary exceptional qualities of mental and physical endurance were there. But before we could make the final assault, we still had to reach the South Col.

The South Col

On 11 February Cichy, Fiut, Holnicki and Wielicki set out. Each one climbed individually at his own pace. A large sheet of solid, glassy ice made the climb very exacting. They reached the Yellow Rocks and climbed towards the Geneva Spur. From this point upwards there was the beginning of an exposed traverse in the rocks, slanting to the left of the ridge. Just about in the middle of this, Holnicki retreated. The other three reached the South Col at 4pm. There was a fierce whirlwind raging then and Cichy, who had helped to carry up some of the equipment, quickly withdrew to Camp 3. Fiut and Wielicki tried unsuccessfully to erect a rather complicated American tent in these ferocious conditions, but gave up eventually and took shelter in a small, one-pole bivouac tent. It saved their lives, but they had no chance to rest since they had to struggle all night to hold their small tent down in the savage storm. The oxygen they used all night long revived their strength and warmed their bodies but they were not even able to make tea. Inside the tent the thermometer showed -40°C ! Our earlier plan of placing the tent in a snow hole was unrealistic.

The constant winds driving through the saddle of the South Col had blown away all the snow, laying bare one gigantic rubbish tip containing multicoloured bottles of oxygen, butane canisters, and various assorted things, all discarded by previous expeditions. All night long we were in radio contact with the two climbers on the South Col. The appalling conditions they were in terrified all of us below. There was a great deal of discussion going on between Camps, and when Cichy suggested to the two climbers on the South Col to go on and try to conquer Everest there were howls of protest. The whole success of the expedition was at a critical stage. If it was almost impossible to survive one night on the South Col, how could we even consider attempting the next 850m? There was no choice but to retreat.

In the morning of 13 February, the two men returned from the South Col to Camp 3. Wielicki was complaining of frostbite in his feet, and he decided to go down to Camp 2. Fiut almost flew down directly to Base Camp, so quickly did he reach it.

I was now convinced that the future of the expedition was out of my hands. How powerless is any leader at moments like these? How convenient it is when an expedition breaks down in these circumstances to blame the weather conditions? If I wanted to save the expedition there was only one thing to do, and that was to attempt the climb myself. My partner Szafirski agreed with me that this was the best way to get us out of the impasse. I was very worried as to how well I would be able to climb 1500m in one attempt. I was in Camp 3 for the first time, yet I had to climb immediately to the South Col. We were climbing with oxygen, the weather was exceptionally mild, but despite this the climb took us the whole day. Just before sunset I reached the vast saddle of the South Col, just behind Szafirski. The dome of the summit of Everest was burning with an incredible purple glow. After removing our oxygen masks we were barely able to recognise one another, so bloated and livid coloured were our distorted faces. Our movements in this thin atmosphere reminded us of scenes from the landing on the moon. We began to erect the *Omnipotent* tent to establish Camp 4. We succeeded, with great difficulty, to bend only two of the fibre-glass supports, but they were sufficient to

form the barrel-like shape of the tent. Only when we had gone inside did we appreciate the advantages of this new type of tent. We lit two butane heaters and immediately it became very warm inside. It was made of *Gore-Tex*, which provided good ventilation with maximum comfort. After placing ourselves comfortably in our sleeping bags we had every confidence in this tent which, according to the American manufacturers, could withstand winds of up to 150 miles per hour. In a very happy and relaxed mood we asked our colleagues in Base Camp to put on some lively music for us.

Every evening we discussed our plans for the next day. That evening Cichy and Wielicki informed me that they would like to return to Camp 3 in order to attempt an assault on the summit. This was a pleasant surprise for me, particularly since Wielicki had suffered serious frostbite in his toes and had not really had very much rest after climbing to the South Col. At the same time Heinrich informed us that he was going to climb from Camp 3 to Camp 4.

The following morning Szafirski started to climb up, taking with him an extra oxygen bottle to leave as a reserve for the final assault team. He reached 8100m and left both bottles there. I was unable to climb with him since I had not acclimatised well enough. Instead, I started to check the pressure in the oxygen bottles which had been discarded all over the South Col, and found six with a pressure higher than 230. After midday, Heinrich and Pasang reached Camp 4. They had climbed without any oxygen and were in excellent shape. We convinced Heinrich that he should go for the summit the following morning, provided the weather conditions were satisfactory. We left them our oxygen masks, and at about 4pm, started to go down.

I felt the lack of oxygen very much. Szafirski was in front of me — he was in a hurry to get down. After sunset, darkness came very quickly as usual. I was on a narrow ledge just before Yellow Rocks without fixed rope, and I could not find the piton with the next fixed rope. Szafirski had already descended through the rock band, and he told me afterwards that he had no strength left to climb up again to guide me to the proper spot. I switched on my torch, but I still could not find the place. I had to save the batteries which were running out in the very severe frost. I decided to traverse out onto the icy wall, hoping to reach the fixed ropes. With great difficulty I managed to chip out two tiny footholds in the ice. I stood on them tentatively with only the front spikes of my crampons. Below me there was a sheer drop of 1000m of the huge icy slab which ended in the open crevasse. If I only had one piton and one small-loop! But finally commonsense prevailed and I made my way back to the rocks, taking great care. The only thing left to do was to wait for the dawn. I cut out a small platform in the ice and built a small wall of ice blocks on the windward side. I took out all the clothes I had in my rucksack and put them on. Trembling with cold, I began the long wait. I was at 7600m and it seemed as if the unusually bright stars were just above my head. Suddenly, down below, I saw lights moving in the vicinity of Camp 3. I shone my torch in their direction to let them know where I was. It was Cichy and Wielicki. At great personal risk they were climbing up to come to my rescue. At about 2am that night they reached me. They gave me some hot soup and rubbed me until I felt warm again. In the morning, I was in Camp 3 again.

The most beautiful day of my life

The permission for this expedition was valid from 1 December till the end of February. The Ministry, however, had asked me to agree verbally with the Head of the Mountaineering Department that attempts to reach the summit would not continue after 15 February when we should start to raze our camps and withdraw to Base Camp. Since I wanted to hold to my gentleman's agreement with the Ministry I asked them if they would release us from these restrictions; but by 14 February I had still received no reply. On 15 February we sat by our radio telephones and waited with great anxiety for news from Heinrich on the South Col. If the reply from the Ministry was to be in the negative then his attempt on the summit of Everest was our last chance. Climbing without oxygen, Heinrich and Pasang managed to reach 8350m before returning. Meanwhile, the Ministry kept us waiting right up until the last moment, for it was 5pm before they informed us that they had granted us two further days of climbing — our last two days! Now everything depended on the weather and strong nerves and on the morning of 16 February I said goodbye to Cichy and Wielicki as they left for the South Col.

They climbed with oxygen and reached the South Col after five hours whilst I made my own way down to Camp 2 where Cielicki, Heinrich and Pawlikowski were. The rest of the expedition was at Base Camp. During the evening we kept looking at the sky to see if the weather was going to change. During the night we listened to the winds howling on the ridges above; but in the Western Cwm it was quite calm. The two climbers on the South Col told us they were in very good shape. They read the temperature outside their tent — it was -42°C .

On the morning of 17 February they reported to us over the radio at 6.30am that they were about to start their climb to the summit, each taking one bottle of oxygen. From that moment on, it was impossible to sit still. The tension was unbearable. Hope and despair followed on one another at each passing moment. As the hours passed and there was still no word over the radio telephone, our anxiety was overwhelming. As a safety precaution Cielicki and Pawlikowski climbed up to Camp 3. Then, finally at 2.25pm the voice of Leszek Cichy resounded over the radio: 'Guess where we are!' Then he said, 'If it wasn't for Everest, we would never have dreamt of climbing here!'

We were out of our minds with happiness — totally spontaneous and unrestrained. It was the most wonderful moment of our lives. But then we had to concern ourselves with their safe return from the summit. Wielicki had frostbite in his toes, and they were both exhausted, since their oxygen had run out on the South Summit. We spent another very tense night, when Cichy reported his arrival at Camp 4 but did not say Wielicki was with him; but everything turned out happily for us, and on 19 February the whole team sat down to a celebration supper at Base Camp. We were the first to conquer Everest in winter! Yes, each one of us had the right to feel the victor, including the absent Krzysztof Zurek, because each of us contributed to the overall success and shared the common ideal, which was the basis of the ultimate victory.

Mountains only take on any meaning when man is present among them. Then he experiences the feelings of victories and defeats, and takes with him something

of these experiences when he returns to the valley. Already, our winter expedition of 1980 was behind us.

