
WALDEMAR SOROKA

Annapurna North-West Ridge

Translated from the Polish by Ingeborga Doubrawa-Cochlin

(Plate 1)

In the 1996 post-monsoon season (15 August to 31 October) an expedition from the Polish *Trojmiasto* Mountaineering Club arrived in the Central Himalaya. The objective of the expedition was the main summit of Annapurna (8091m). During the three years spent in preparation, the heaviest burden fell on the shoulders of Krzysztof Tarasewicz and Waldemar Soroka, the two members who first thought of the idea of climbing this 8000-metre peak.

The thirteen members of the expedition left Poland on 15 August 1996. After completing the formalities and buying in extra food and equipment, we left Pokhara on 22 August, with 10 porters, for the North Sanctuary. The effects of the monsoon persisted and during the whole trek we were plagued by incessant rain and leeches. We spent the final four days trekking along isolated paths and building improvised rope bridges across treacherous rivers, before reaching Base Camp on 3 September.

On 5 and 6 September Jan Szulc and Andrzej Zieleniewski flew in by helicopter with three tons of food and equipment. Helicopter transport is very popular in Nepal and often cheaper than hiring traditional porters. In our case, the use of a helicopter was absolutely essential, given the harshness of the terrain and the fact that our porters were terrified at the prospect of returning over difficult river crossings without our help. So they decided to give up part of their wages in order to return by helicopter.

We had planned to attempt Annapurna from the north by the Dutch route of 1977, but after consulting Józef Nyka we decided to try to establish a new route on the North-West Ridge. Previously only two routes to the main summit from the north had been established – the Dutch route and the French route. The North Face of Annapurna is not visible from Base Camp, so we postponed our decision about which route to choose until we had established Camp 2 under the 2½km-long Wall of Annapurna at 2500m.

The choice of route to Camp 1 was decided by Marciniak/Terzeul and Soroka/Tarasewicz on 7 September. These two pairs maintained their respective partnerships throughout the expedition. One day later Kochanczyk, Marciniak, Soroka, Tarasewicz, Terzeul and Tonsing established Camp 1 at 5100m. Kochanczyk descended to Base Camp and the remaining five climbers set up Camp 2 at 5700m on the following day.

After spending the night there, they returned to Base Camp. 300 metres of rope were fixed between Camps 1 and 2 on the same route as that followed by the first conquerors of the mountain in 1950.

The most active participant in setting up the camps was Slawa Terzeul. In July 1996 he had climbed Gasherbrum II and was therefore better acclimatised than the rest of us. On the day that Camp 2 was set up, Kochanczyk and Turowiecki came up to Camp 1 and, the next day, deposited a load on the route to Camp 2. Between 9 and 12 September loads were brought up to the camps, but unfortunately very heavy snow made it impossible to go higher.

From the moment that we set up Base Camp we had been plagued by various illnesses. As a result, both Urbanowicz and Litwin were prevented from climbing until nearly the end of September. Later, Szulc, Sicinski and Kochanczyk were unable to climb for the same reason.

After watching avalanches thundering down the Wall several times a day, we came to the conclusion that, in those conditions, attempting either the Dutch or French routes was out of the question. We were fully aware now that our team of climbers was not as strong as we had thought. Nevertheless, we decided to attack the North Ridge.

On 16 September Marciniak, Tarasewicz and Terzeul tried to reach Cauliflower Ridge (the name chosen by the French in 1950). At about 10am, at Camp 2, I spotted an avalanche on the upper part of the North Wall which, after a short time, expanded to an immense size. The whole four-kilometre width of the Wall seemed to disintegrate and disappear downwards. After snatching a few photos I rushed to take shelter in my tent, fearing that I had little chance of surviving the onslaught. Luckily the tent was protected by a very high snowy ridge protruding from the Wall. Another empty tent next to mine was completely destroyed. During the next few minutes the hurricane-force winds continued to rage. Then suddenly they stopped and everything went quiet.

I started to dig myself out from under the snow and spoke to Marciniak on the radio. He was relieved to hear from me. Having seen the avalanche from above, they had all feared I would be dead. Marciniak, Tarasewicz and Terzeul planned to set up Camp 3, using over 250m of fixed ropes. But it snowed heavily all night and we were afraid of another avalanche. So Soroka and Tarasewicz went down to Base Camp, while Marciniak and Terzeul, in spite of the dangers, continued towards Camp 3. On the way, just above Camp 2, another avalanche broke loose above them, but they managed to jump for cover into a crevasse. The same avalanche hit Soroka and Tarasewicz as they descended to Base Camp, but they too managed to escape from it.

Eventually Camp 3 was established on 18 September. One day later Marciniak and Terzeul set up fixed ropes on the ice peak (called by us 'Alpamayo') 120m high and 70° steep. On 20 September Tarasewicz and Soroka climbed from Base Camp to Camp 2 without stopping. During the following days Szulc, Kochanczyk, Tarasewicz and Soroka tried to place

fixed ropes on the Cauliflower Ridge, but overhanging snow of the consistency of sugar made the work impossible. We tried to dig down to the ice, but after probing to a depth of about two metres without success, we decided to give up.

Between 1 and 4 October the weather deteriorated still further and it started snowing heavily. While trying to find a way under 'Alpamayo', Sicinski, Soroka, Tarasewicz and Tonsing were caught in another avalanche and fell about 100m. Fortunately, apart from suffering minor injuries and losing some equipment, no serious damage was done.

Meanwhile, an expedition from Belgium had arrived at Base Camp on 21 September. They attempted, without success, first the Dutch and then the French routes and finally the North-West Ridge route that we ourselves were following. All their attempts were unsuccessful. One of the Belgians, Pascal Debrouwer, joined our team and, together with Marciniak, Soroka, Tarasewicz and Terzeul, remained at Camp 3 in a struggle against the weather. At Camp 2, Turowiecki had become dangerously ill and had decided to go down to Base Camp to avoid the avalanches. After that, Camp 2 was completely buried under snow and only faint traces of it were visible. Altogether over two metres of fresh snow fell at that time.

We found out later from Elizabeth Hawley, Reuter's correspondent in Kathmandu, that the huge amounts of snow had forced over 70% of all expeditions that year to withdraw from the Nepal Himalaya. At one point Terzeul, realising how small were our chances of reaching the summit, brought all his gear down to Base Camp and decided to leave the expedition. But after a heated discussion he changed his mind and finally agreed to join those who were in favour of continuing the assault on the mountain.

The long Cauliflower Ridge, stretching over 600m, was at last conquered on 11 October by Marciniak and Terzeul. The next day Camp 4 was established at 6500m. Just above that point the ridge became a very steep ice-rock pillar, so after three days of rope-fixing, Marciniak, Terzeul and Soroka (for part of the time) finally established Camp 5 at 7100m. While this was going on, Tarasewicz had climbed up from Base Camp to Camp 3 in one day. Then, along with Sicinski, Soroka and Turowiecki, he climbed to Camp 5 on 15 October. Turowiecki then went back to Camp 4 while Marciniak and Terzeul fixed ropes on the route to the rocky bastion. On 17 October Marciniak and Terzeul were trying to find a passage through the barrier, while Sicinski, Soroka and Tarasewicz fixed 150m of rope above Camp 5. Then Sicinski returned to Camp 4.

During those last few days, the wind was gusting strongly, sometimes at hurricane force, and the temperature dropped to below -25°C . We were very worried about our tents which were already torn. Tarasewicz and Soroka had mild frostbite on their toes. Szulc climbed to Camp 5. On 19 October Marciniak conquered the 100m-high rock barrier which was about grade 6 in difficulty. Tarasewicz climbed to 7400m but Soroka had to return owing to frostbite.

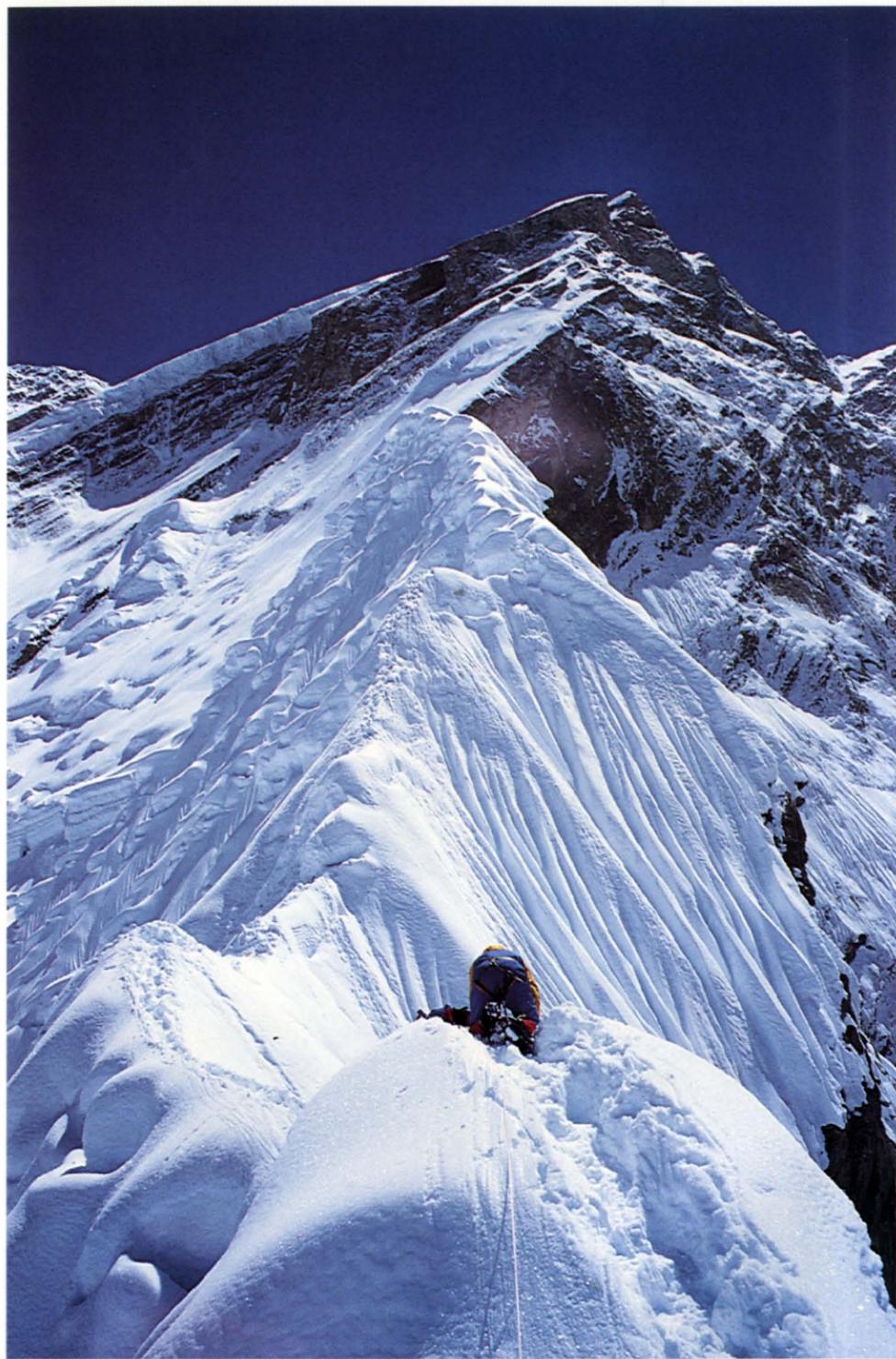
On 20 October, in spite of hurricane-force winds, Marciniak and Terzeul started to attack the summit. They left at 7am and by 10 o'clock had reached the rock barrier. The rocky slabs, in a tile-like formation, were covered in snow and with slopes of between 30° and 40°, were difficult to negotiate. Finally, at 3pm they were standing on the summit of Annapurna.

They spoke with Base Camp, took several pictures and posed with the flag celebrating the 1000th anniversary of Gdansk. Slawa Terzeul filmed the event. After leaving the summit, they descended to Camp 5 and at about 9pm the weather started to deteriorate. So Soroka and Tarasewicz called off their planned second attempt on the summit via the North-West Ridge. During the night one of our tents had been torn apart. The following morning at about 6am we started our descent in hurricane-force winds. Marciniak, Soroka and Tarasewicz reached Base Camp at 10pm that evening. Terzeul stayed at Camp 2. Below Camp 1 Marciniak sustained an injury to his right knee which was to make it impossible for him to leave Base Camp with the caravan.

On 22 October, Tonsing left Base Camp in order to organise a helicopter air lift for Marciniak. The same day the rest of the team descended to Base Camp. But the weather continued to deteriorate. After a 16-metre snowfall, the route back to Lete was practically cut off and our provisions of food and fuel were nearly finished. The weather made it impossible for any helicopter to fly in.

Eventually, on 18 October at 4pm, all the members of the expedition arrived safely back in Pokhara. At the subsequent press conference, Elizabeth Hawley described our achievement – a new route on the North-West Ridge of Annapurna – as the best climb in the Nepal Himalaya in 1996.

Summary: Between 15 August and 31 October 1996 a Polish team attempted the French and Dutch routes on Annapurna. 13 climbers took part: Michal Kochanczyk, Wojciech Litwin, Andrzej Marciniak, Waldemar Sicinski, Waldemar Soroka (the leader), Jan Szulc, Krzysztof Tarasewicz (deputy leader and principal organiser), Wladyslaw Terzeul (from Ukraine), Antony Tonsing (USA), Jan Turowiecki, Miroslaw Urbanowicz, Andrzej Zieleniewski (doctor) and Andrzej Grotha (radio-telegrapher, who had to return to Poland owing to illness). In addition, between 30 September and 13 October, there was also a film crew from Polish TV on the mountain. Subsequently, in seriously bad weather, Andrzej Marciniak and Wladyslaw Terzeul reached the summit via the North-West Ridge at 3.30pm on 20 October. They celebrated the 1000th anniversary of Gdansk by taking pictures with the Polish flag. The following pair, Soroka and Tarasewicz, abandoned their attempt owing to deteriorating weather.



1. Annapurna North-West Ridge: the beginning of Cauliflower Ridge. (*Waldemar Soroka*) (p89)