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ROUNDAABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

André Roch, one of the handful of men who last month fought and almost conquered the highest peak in the world, is on his way back to Switzerland with the rest of the Swiss Expedition to Everest.

With interest fanned by the sketchy reports that have yet come through, all Switzerland is eager to hear the full story of the gamble that nearly succeeded. And no-one is more impatient for Roch's personal story of the historic climb than the ten men and two women who make up the staff of the famed Snow and Avalanche Research Institute at Davos.

For it is there, in a simple stone-and-wood building perched near the peak of the 8,730-foot Weissfluhjoch, that Roch spends all his working hours. As the Institute's top expert on avalanches, he is the man who has done much to make the Swiss Alps danger-free for winter sportsmen. Last month on the unpredictable slopes of Everest his knowledge, the result of 34 adventurous years as a mountaineer, ensured a safe passage for the intrepid band of climbers.

What kind of man is Roch? To find out I visited him in his workshop cut out of the living mountainside shortly before he left for the Himalayas. There I discovered a man whose quiet sincerity is typical of the true Alpinist—someone who would never boast of his achievements, although he has plenty to boast about.

It was only by chance that he mentioned he had climbed Mont Blanc by 20 different routes—two more than were discovered by Englishman Graham Browne, editor of the *Alpine Journal*—and he would still like to find at least one more route.

Is 20 different ways to the top of the great French mountain a record? I asked.

"I suppose it is", he replied. "But you should not talk about records. I simply look on it as a lot of fun."

Roch is 45 now, and started climbing when he was eleven, with his father as guide. Since then he has climbed in many parts of the world. He has been four times to the Himalayas and four times to the United States: Alaska has seen him, and so have the mountains of Greenland.

But I should not be surprised if this year marks the end of his globe-trotting. He will be well content to spend the rest of his active life among the mountains of his homeland.

Next winter Roch should again be hard at work

studying snow reports as they arrive at the Institute from 30 key points throughout Switzerland. They will tell all the details about weather, snow temperature, depth of new snow and total height of the different falls. They will also list the number of avalanches observed, what kind they were, their height and their estimated danger.

From all this he will be able to work out the forecasts that are so valuable, not only to climbers and skiers, but also to the railways and postal administration and officials in charge of the public services.

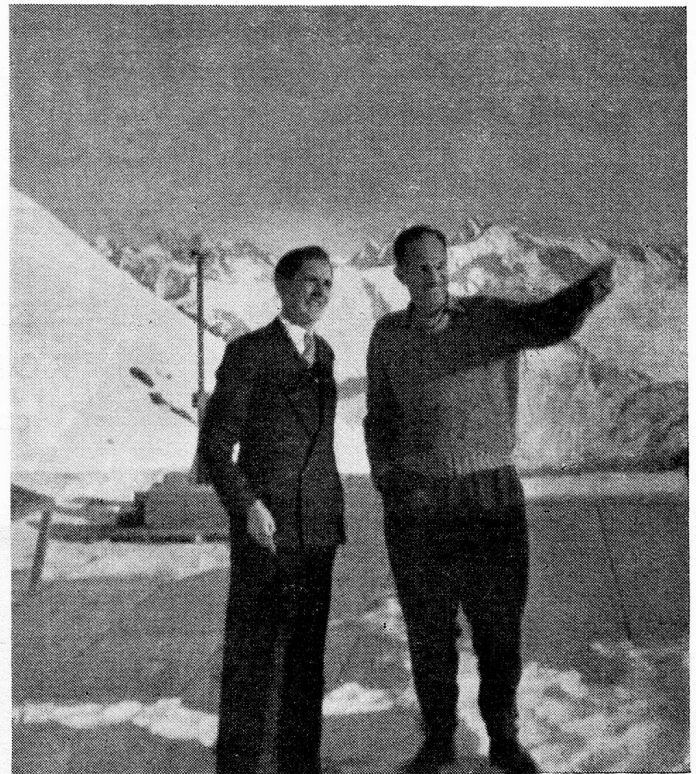
When I arrived at the Institute André Roch broke off an experiment he was carrying out on the plasticity of snow to take me round the building.

First we visited a room with a temperature of three degrees Centigrade where all the mechanical experiments were carried out. In another room the temperature was down to 15 degrees C., and he showed me a wind tunnel for trying out hoar frost tests.

But it was the third room that intrigued me most. We ignored a notice on the door which warned "No Entrance" and plunged into a rarefield atmosphere that sent the thermometer down to 40 degrees below.

"The men who work here have to wear suits filled with swansdown", said Roch, who was wisely sporting a thick brown sweater. With chattering teeth I said I could well understand their choice.

The room was nothing more than a giant refrigerator. Benches round the walls were piled with an amazing collection of snow—each piece bearing an identity tag which told when and where it had been collected. Some of them were more than two winters old, and one had been sent to Switzerland all the way from Greenland.



A photograph of the mountaintop interview. On the roof of the Avalanche Institute above Davos climber André Roch (right) tells Derek Meakin about some of the high peaks that can be seen from the Weissfluhjoch.

André Roch told me the history of this unique showroom and of the way in which the exhibits helped in his researches with the enthusiasm of a born scientist. But he is more than that. He has a working knowledge of modern physics, can talk shop with any engineer, and knows all there is to know about meteorology.

He is also a painter, and his colleagues say this hobby is invaluable when it comes to finding a new route up a mountain. For his method is to sit in a comfortable spot and paint the mountain in all its wonderful detail, and by the time the picture is finished he can lead the way almost by heart.

Of all the experienced climbers in the Everest expedition only Roch and René Ditter have had any previous knowledge of the Himalayas. Roch's first visit there was with an international expedition in 1934 which was led by a climber named Dyhrenfurth, a German who had taken Swiss nationality.

Strangely enough this same name was in the news only a few weeks ago, for it was a certain Dr. Günter Dyhrenfurt who announced to a startled press conference in Munich that the Russians themselves were planning a large-scale attack on Everest. Thousands of Russians, he said, were in training in the Caucasus, although only 150 would be chosen to make the actual assault. Their route to the summit would be over the north face, an approach that has denied the West since the Chinese occupied Tibet.

Since the Doctor made his statement there has been another surprise—the Swiss, according to latest reports, are to make another attempt on Everest in the

autumn, a time of the year when climatic conditions leave much to be desired. One of the new worries for Roch and his companions will now be how to avoid the unending chain of frightening ice avalanches that are loosened by the slightly warmer weather that follows the monsoon.

Everyone will wish them well, and it will be cheering news indeed to hear that they have finally succeeded in planting the red-and-yellow flag of Geneva on the highest peak in the world. But is it worth braving the infinitely greater hazards of an autumn climb just for the sake of forestalling a battalion of Russians?

* * *

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