

Mountain supreme -yet conquered

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MOUNTAIN SUPREME — YET CONQUERED

by W. Stettbacher

It has now become almost an unwritten law that my wife and I should spend the summer months each year in Switzerland. An extended stay, from the middle of May to early August, has a decided advantage; in a bad summer like in 1965, or in uncertain weather as in 1966, excursions to the Alps or other beauty spots can always be deferred until the arrival of a period of fine weather. Our brief holiday in the Engadine, around Zuoz, in Zermatt and Gornergrat, or in Lugano/Monte Generoso, were favoured by good if not brilliant weather. Daily trips to places such as the Rigi, Säntis, Stanserhorn, Hohen Kasten, Lake of Constance and others were also highly enjoyable.

Shortly before joining my guide for my usual climbing expedition, I took my wife to the top of the Säntis, using the cablelift from the Schwägalp. On our return train journey from Gossau to Zurich, we travelled with a charming middle-aged couple. The two had just completed a week's walking tour from the Hohen Kasten to the Säntis. He introduced himself as Jakob Stricker, an S.B.B. official in Zurich. When I told them of my plans, how I intended to climb the Taeschhorn and others, Mrs. Stricker enquired if my wife was not afraid while I was away on such a dangerous mission.

My surprise and shock can be imagined, when only a week later, I heard from Press and Radio that this Mr. Stricker had fallen to his death near the Domjoch, at an altitude of about 4,200 m.

Looking back, I must say that I also felt a little uneasy over this, and as subsequent events turned out, I had every reason to be, for only ten days later, within less than half-a-mile from this accident, a few hundred feet below the summit of the Taeschhorn, my guide and I were also in trouble.

I joined my guide from Verbier at Martigny, on a Sunday late in July. In uncertain weather like last summer, it is advisable to decide at the last moment in which area one should do the climbing. Although the forecast for the next day or two was fairly good, we ruled out the Chamonix districts, as the Mont Blanc faces the full fury of the depressions coming from the Atlantic, so frequent last summer. We therefore chose the Zermatt valley, with one of the best weather records in the whole of Switzerland.

We motored up the Rhone valley in my guide's "Volkswagen", and at Visp we branched off into the Zermatt valley. St. Niklaus was our objective, as, in any case, private cars are barred from going any further. Our intention was to climb the Brunegghorn, about 3,800 metres high, which is reached via the Topali hut.

Some ten years ago, my guide took part in an expedition to the Himalayas. As is usual, the expedition was accompanied by a doctor, Dr. Lochmatter, the son of one of the most famous guides of all times, Franz Lochmatter, who is now the local doctor. It was only natural that my guide would wish to call on him first to talk about old times. My guide's next step was to find out whether the guardian of the Topali hut was in residence up there, or whether he was in his nearby home. The Topali hut has few visitors, as the way up to it is long and arduous, and such huts do not have any permanent guardians. They are in residence only when they know that a sufficient number of tourists have gone, or are going to the hut. The

hut-keeper happened to be in, but did not deem it worth while to come up with us. As far as he knew, only two climbers accompanied by a local guide had gone up to the hut earlier in the day. This meant that we had to obtain from local shops provisions sufficient to last for the evening and the next day.

On Dr. Lochmatter's suggestion, we did not follow the normal route, but made our way up a steep and dry river bed, which meant a considerable saving of time. The climb to the Topali hut is steep, strenuous and lengthy, but we were amply rewarded by the magnificent panorama which gradually unfolded before our eyes. I am happy to have taken a number of photographs which give some idea of this. We reached the hut towards 7 p.m.; it is in a commanding position. Readers, particularly those who take a lift when going up to the first or second floor, will appreciate the effort involved when climbing from St. Niklaus, about 1,100m. high, to 2,670 metres.

Inside the hut, we only met the party mentioned earlier by the guardian; the three had just finished a meal, and like ourselves, intended to climb the Brunegghorn the next morning. The Brunegghorn's final pyramid consists of a beautiful dome of ice and snow, and is known to be a photographer's paradise.

We set off at around 3 o'clock the next morning, in fairly good if uncertain weather. The ascent, which is neither very difficult nor dangerous, normally takes around four hours, so that in the event of bad weather, there should be little difficulty in getting back safely. About half-way, sinister and dark clouds appeared over the Mischabel group, on the other side of the Zermatt valley, a sure sign of an impending change. For a while, the white dome of the Brunegghorn continued to glitter in the sun, but the weather gradually worsened to our dismay, with the Brunegghorn being hidden by clouds.

During the last stages of the climb, a member of the other party had an attack of mountain sickness, and was forced to stay behind. His wife managed to reach the summit at about the same time as ourselves. Our arrival coincided with thick mist, and it became obvious that there was no point in waiting for improvement in the weather.

We reached the Topali hut without incident, although light snow began to fall, turning lower down into rain.

(To be continued)

AN UNUSUALLY INTERESTING LECTURE

All Swiss and their Friends invited

We should like to draw readers' attention to an unusually interesting lecture to be held on Thursday, 9th March, at the Swiss Hostel for Girls, 9/11 Belsize Grove, Hampstead, N.W.3. The London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique have secured Oberstdivisionär Dr. iur. Karl Brunner. He will speak in German on "Schweizerische Neutralität und Landesverteidigung". He is a Lecturer at Zurich University and author of the well-known book "Schweizerische Heereskunde". Col. Brunner has just had published a most important new book "Die Landesverteidigung der Schweiz" (Huber Verlag). It is a reference book on "Switzerland's spiritual, military, and economic defence, its civil defence and obligations based on the international rules of neutrality and war".