

# Demavend and Ararat, 1951

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As we drove down the dusty road from Tabriz to Tehran, Hermann Dietrich and I became more and more excited at the thought of the climbing which lay ahead. For months we had discussed with Les Rood plans for the ascents of Mt. Demavend, 18,605 feet, and Mt. Ararat, 16,916 feet, and now at last our dreams were about to be realized.

The two peaks, some 520 airline miles apart, are the highest in Iran and Turkey; Demavend is situated in the center of the Elburz range immediately south of the Caspian Sea, and Ararat stands by itself to the south of the Caucasus Mountains at the point where the Turkish, Iranian and Soviet borders meet. The strategic location of Ararat had made the securing of climbing permits doubly difficult, but we had laid the groundwork carefully, Hermann and I approaching the matter from Tabriz, where he was teaching in the Technical School and I was Vice Consul, and Les Rood doing what he could from the American Embassy in Tehran. We had informed officials of our intentions months in advance, had secured approvals, passes, letters of recommendations, visas, automobile permits, and so on and on. Now at last it was time to move. And move we did: we burned up the roads, heading first for the 18,605-foot Demavend.

Once arrived at Les' house in Tehran, we set to work checking our equipment and assembling the required food supplies. Our gear was of the most informal variety, being what warm clothing and camping equipment we had on hand: rucksacks, sleeping bags, canteens, food and extra socks and sweaters. The only technical items, my pitons, nylon rope, and ice-axe, would go along in the car, but only because we were not really sure what to expect from the great Demavend.

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The hazards of mountaineering in the Middle East are not confined to the mountains themselves, but extend most particularly to the information and advice one receives about any projected climb and its dangers. In the case of Demavend I had been told the most harrowing and conflicting stories imaginable and half expected that we would have to complete the last 2,000 feet on hands and knees, with our mouths masked against the choking sulphur fumes of the smoking summit. One colorful adviser urged that we insert garlic cloves in our nostrils to counteract the sulphur and enable us to enter the dreaded area and return alive. We tended to discount these stories, but they still lent a special atmosphere of mystery and excitement to our undertaking.

We took off at the appointed time, bucking along the rough dirt roads in our jeep and feeling the thrill of high adventure as we wound through the red and brown barren hills of the Elburz. After about three hours we reached the final pass and were confronted by the mountain, raising its massive, volcanic cone a good 12,000 feet above the floor of a broad valley. In the afternoon light, the smooth slopes of Demavend appeared very regular, suggesting no particular route to be preferred over another. The ridge to the west seemed slightly gentler but very long as it swept majestically upwards to the pale yellow sulphur cap at the peak. There was sulphur there, all right, and it remained to be seen how powerful the fumes would be in the rarefied atmosphere.

After a long look at Demavend's steep sides, we drove on down into the valley and across to a small village perched a couple of thousand feet up on the east slope of the mountain. At the villages Les contacted Ali, a guide he had arranged for, and we dickered over a horse to carry our duffle up to the high camp the next day. There was another group of hopeful climbers camped in a field outside the town, and we joined them, slinging down our gear and breaking out food and drink for supper. At the grand communal banquet that evening we were regaled with the most horrendous of the tales we had heard about Demavend. Sack time came early, for none of us was in condition and we wanted to build up what reservoir of strength we could

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before the onslaught. The night was starlit and still; the lights across the valley winked out one by one until only a couple of shepherds' fires remained; a goat bell tinkled restlessly in the distance, and I could hear Hermann grunting as he struggled to turn over in his sleeping bag.

The bustle began early the next morning, and there was a great, gray confusion of disheveled ghosts trying to assemble their gear and get breakfast. As time passed, the confusion increased, and it seemed hours before we located our pack horse, loaded up, and were on our way. The route spiraled up to the left toward the south side of the mountain, leading us through a rough, eroded area sparsely covered by thorn bushes and thistles. The day grew warm, and we took our time, stopping occasionally to stare across the valley at the barren brown hills or look up toward the ever-distant summit of Demavend. The yellow cone was not visible from the lower slopes, and as the angle steepened we saw less and less of the top part of the mountain. The climb to high camp at about 14,000 feet was uneventful, and our horse managed to make it all the way, although the poor beast had a rough time of the last two thousand feet of treadmill-loose scree.

The other party halted at the 12,000 foot camp, so we had our choice of the shallow depressions scraped out of the dirt around the exposed southwest ridge. Picking our way gingerly among the teetering dry walls erected by goatherds to provide some shelter from the wind, we found a fairly level space big enough for three of us, overlooking the long, rocky slope on which goats were now grazing because the forage lower down had been dried up by the summer sun.

Supper was unimpressive and quickly dispatched as we sat hunched in our ski jackets, watching the changing colors of sunset play on the peaks around Demavend. The Elburz range to the south seemed to be on a level with us, and its buttressing ribs stood out dramatically in the sunlight against the dark of bleak gulleys between them. We noted that at about 14,000 feet the atmosphere, which was dust laden and brown, suddenly became crystal clear. The line of demarcation was so sharp that it accentuated the unclean appearance of the lower air and made

us appreciate all the more the bracing, if somewhat thin air we had to breathe.

The cold descended on us quickly that night, and it would be difficult to say how much of the time was spent in genuine sleep. Two inescapable rocks seemed bent on punching in my lower ribs, and I remember half emerging from my sleeping bag a couple of times to put on another shirt and two more sweaters. My luminous wrist watch was consulted repeatedly, and at length I had the satisfaction of seeing the hands point to one o'clock. Up, in a shaking, chattering, subdued bustle, we were at once lacing our boots, chewing on hardboiled eggs and cheese, packing our rucksacks for the climb, and looking out into the dark, frigid night.

Fortunately, the wind was quiet from one o'clock to two, and we were well on our way, following the guide up a completely invisible mountain-side, before the gale caught us. We were immediately pierced through and through by the breath-taking cold. Gloves which had been removed were hastily pulled on, and every button was buttoned and zipper zipped. Still we froze. I don't know how cold it actually was, but the streams we crossed were frozen. The intake of cold air in our lungs seemed to shrivel them, and for the first time I began to notice the thinness of the air.

Ali was slugging on ahead, picking his way by the light of a candle flickering in a transparent shelter; I was more up-to-date with my shiny flashlight, but the thing soon dimmed and went out. From then on the night was very dark. The stars shone brightly enough, but they were of precious little help to me on the mountain.

The ridge we were climbing became steeper and more jumbled, and although it never became technically very difficult, we had to hold on with care and watch our balance in the buffeting darkness. The rough lava formations cut our shins and gloved hands, but at least they afforded ample holds.

By four o'clock we were in the neighborhood of 16,000 feet, and it began to be apparent that Ali was having stomach trouble. His stops became more frequent and longer as we progressed, and by the greyness of approaching day I could just make out his

shape as he huddled miserably behind one stone or another, seeking shelter from the arctic wind. Ali's slower pace was at first welcome in the thinning air, but soon we became chilled to the bone and urged him on so as to restore our circulation. His dinner of the night before was making him wobbly and dispirited, however, and from then on we did the leading and Ali brought up the rear. In the growing light, it was a simple matter to pick out the route, for it could lead only upward. We pushed on, driving to the limit just to keep warm. The sunrise was welcome as providing at least moral support.

Imperceptibly, the tearing wind became less frigid, and soon we were climbing under ideal conditions. About a thousand feet below the summit my stomach began to feel uneasy, but nothing worse developed, and with the yellow goal so close ahead, there was plenty of incentive to keep moving. About 200 feet below the top the slope eased, and we came to the rim of the sulphur cap. In the fresh, cold air there was no trace of sulphur fumes, and we slowly climbed on up through the soft yellow stuff, our boots sinking in a couple of inches at every step. The altitude was telling on all of us, and those last two hundred feet were long ones. We passed a plume of sulphur smoke on the way, but it was easily avoided, and at last at eight-thirty we reached the summit.

The top of Demavend is an irregular place, sculptured out of lava and sulphur. A narrow passage cut on the south side of the mountain, just ten feet below the peak, afforded good shelter, and we basked happily in the sun and ate a second breakfast. Once we had attained the high altitude, I didn't notice it much and walked about the top with ease and much exhilaration. To the north of the peak the rock fell away sharply into a fair-sized crater in the bottom of which there was a frozen pond some two hundred feet across. The view out from the mountain seemed to stretch into infinity on every hand, but there was actually little to be seen down through the sea of dust-laden air lying below us at 14,000 feet.

After a long, garrulous visit on the summit, we loaded up and started down once more, flying through the grainy sulphur like slaloming skiers. The descent was quick, facilitated by glissad-

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ing in a long snowfield to the west of the ridge we had climbed. By eleven we were at the 14,000-foot camp again, ready to assemble our gear and pack out.

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That evening, when we drove up to Les Rood's house in Tehran, his wife met him with the news that they had received transfer orders and were to proceed immediately to Malta. Regretfully, Hermann and I made preparations to move on to Turkey alone.

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Our dusty road took us through Tabriz, where we reprovisioned and picked up Pierce Bahnsen, one of the Consulate clerks, as a passenger. From there we drove northwest through Khoi and Maku into Turkey. A half mile beyond the border post of Bazargan a turn in the road brought us face to face with Mt. Ararat, and I almost drove off the road in my excitement. 'What a mountain!! She may be small compared to Demavend,' I thought, 'but Oh, My!'

The rugged bulk of Ararat, towering to a height of 16,916 feet out of the plan of Dov Bayazit, was a thrilling and awesome sight. On its higher reaches vast, glistening snowfields swept steeply upward for over three thousand feet; a hanging glacier was perched on its south face. Massive rock buttresses lent a note of power and violence to the mountain, and cold, black rivers of lava wound their way from it onto the plain like the tentacles of some gigantic octopus. Here was a mountain with character and variety to match its size! The challenge of the peak filled us with quick, suffocating eagerness.

We hurried on to Dov Bayazit to make the necessary arrangements with local officials, for my leave was almost ended, and time was precious. We found the local Sub-Prefect to be friendly but unenthusiastic about our climb. He warned that Ararat was very dangerous, but after much argument he finally relented and granted us permission to proceed the following day. We were overjoyed.

Morning found us gathered outside the Sub-Prefect's house, studying possible routes up to the south face or along the east

ridge. The day was one of the most sparkling beauty, and we were wild to be under way, but once again it was easier said than done. Even with the help of the Sub-Prefect, it took the best part of an hour to hire a driver and two oxen (!) to carry our provisions and climbing equipment. At long last we drove our jeep from Dov Bayazit to a point just south of the mountain where we were to meet the oxen. They were late, and we had lunch.

The two beasts arrived about one-thirty, were loaded up, and we took off across a two-mile flat of volcanic ash and thence into the foothills of Ararat. The going was easy, and we had plenty of time to gaze at the mountain's great rock shoulders, its majestic snowfields, its glacier, and the tangle of ridges fanning out from its sides. The best route seemed to lead up the south ridge facing us, although the east ridge offered the advantage of a better view of Lesser Ararat. The latter was a symmetrical red-gray cone which rose east of Ararat to an altitude of about 14,000 feet. Our inspection of the mountain was brought to a close by the gathering darkness, and it was night by the time we reached the Kurdish shepherd camp at about 11,000 feet, where we were to sleep. Our arrival caused great excitement, and we were at once surrounded by an admiring, chattering crowd which did not leave us until long after we had eaten and crawled into our sleeping bags.

The three of us were up at four the next morning, dressed, ate breakfast, loaded up for the climb, and attempted to set off. But our way was blocked by one of the armed guards of the camp, who made it clear that we were not to leave. We remonstrated; two more guards came over to support the first. It was apparent that the nomads did not want us to climb their mountain, but we were not to be put off now and raised a terrible hullabaloo. Our arguments, in broken Turkish and Persian, and the nomad consultations continued as the east grew bright and the sun rose.

We were never sure just what their objection was, but finally, after four hours of wrangling, we were allowed to depart in an easterly direction. An escort was sent along to see that we did not turn in toward the south face of the mountain, so we were

obliged to make the long detour around to the east ridge, crossing countless gullies, lava streams, and fields of jumbled black blocks as we slogged our way along. We soon outdistanced our escort, but by that time we were below the hanging glacier, and there was nothing for it but to push on around. The traverse to the east ridge took two precious hours and gained us but little altitude; it was gruelling work, and finally Pierce, who had done no climbing before, could go no further. He stopped to rest a bit and then returned slowly to the nomad camp to wait for us.

It was ten o'clock when Hermann and I finally turned our faces toward the summit of Ararat and began the real climb, starting up the east ridge from somewhere in the neighborhood of 12,000 feet. It was late, maddeningly late, but that could not be helped, and we were grateful to be on the mountain at all. The day was perfect, and the brilliant sunshine presented us with scores of breath-taking views of the south face of Ararat. We climbed steadily on the volcanic stone and moved up the ridge at a good pace.

About 1,200 feet higher we came into snow, which the hot sun had turned to slush. There was no apparent way of by-passing it, so in we plunged, slipping and sliding and wishing that we were on solid rock once more. Near the occasional outcroppings of rock the snow was swept away entirely by swift rivulets of its own water. The earth and stones of the outcroppings were oozing with water, too, and not solid enough to stand on, so we were forced to continue the uphill battle on the snow. Progress was slow and exhausting; the snow slope continued on and on, all the heat of the sun converging on us from the great white reflector. Hermann and I pushed on, striving for altitude and working hard to keep our footing. Each step, carefully kicked in, was apt to collapse in front, in back, or on one side, breaking our pace and losing us precious time.

As we mounted in a steady zig-zag up the great snowy east side of Ararat, the air became noticeably thinner and colder, and we rejoiced to feel the snow harden under our boots. Finally, we stood well above the top of Lesser Ararat and were approaching the shoulder of Ararat proper at about 16,000 feet.

By three-thirty, despite the fact that the sun was still well up

in the sky, the cold had so increased that it seemed the chill of night was on the mountain. At the same time, a piercing wind struck us and rocked us about on our feet. The change in wind and temperature took place with phenomenal quickness as we entered the shoulder snowfields leading northwest to the mountain summit. The frigid upper reaches of Ararat had a wild, rugged look. Great boulders projected from the snow all around us, teetering on the verge of a meteoric plunge down the slope. To the left the head of the cracked and broken glacier wall was just visible, the thin strip of snow across its top leading westward toward ridges and buttresses which rose almost 6,000 feet above our camp. Our route was plain enough and even gave promise of becoming less steep in time. We climbed on, watching the final peak of Ararat move nearer, grow larger and more distinct.

It came to be four o'clock and then four-thirty as we continued our progress upward through the boulder-strewn snowfield. The angle of the snow had not declined as much as we had hoped at the shoulder, but this at least allowed us to gain altitude and approach the summit more quickly. It loomed before us, tantalizingly close, and yet we seemed to move toward it at a snail's pace. The sun's outline became blurred behind a white haze of fine snow torn from the mountain and hurled across its peak by the east wind. Fortunately, this wind was at our backs, but still it reached into our muscles and lungs. The sun had no warmth to offer as it shone palely through the snow-filled air, and I began to recognize the threat which the cold held for us. Our bodies no longer generated the heat that they had as we had worked our way up the mountain, and we were chilled through if we stopped to rest more than a minute at a time.

The temperature fell further. It was five o'clock. The awareness which had been growing in our minds and which we had been trying to stifle would no longer be suppressed. We were verging on the point of no return.

There was no doubt that sufficient daylight remained to proceed to and reach the summit, which now lay directly ahead and some 150 feet above us, but this would leave us no time for the descent. We had to get ourselves off of three thousand feet of

snow and ice before dark, for a bivouac on or near the summit of the mountain was out of the question, and the nearest descent route was apt to be tricky, as it lay over the west end of the glacier and down onto the snow beyond it. To traverse that untried route at night would be inviting trouble.

Reluctantly, we turned back, left the summit route, and began the passage over the top of the hanging glacier, just above the wall's face. The snow was hard and uneven there, extremely steep in places and interspersed with stretches of ice. For long distances we cut steps with the ice-axe and proceeded, a foot at a time, changing the lead frequently. There was perhaps an hour of daylight left when Hermann, who was leading at the time, suddenly broke through the snow and dropped into a crevasse. As he fell, he managed to catch himself with an elbow on either side, and I, straddling the hole, put a hand under each shoulder and helped him scramble out. We stood there for a moment, panting and wheezing with the exertion.

Handling the stiff climbing rope with stiffer fingers, we proceeded with utmost caution. The second time Hermann fell he was checked before he had got half way into the crevasse that blocked the way. Jumping across it, we continued to the end of the glacier, across the top of a swooping buttress and came upon the upper reaches of the long snow slope. It was almost seven o'clock and the sun had set, but in the gathering gloom we sped down the smooth snow, glissading part of the way and moving on the rope and axe where the going was more unsafe. The slope was sheltered on both sides, and for the first time the air about us was quiet. Gathering reserves we scarcely knew we had, we descended well over 2,000 feet in a half hour and neared the end of the snow.

It was now quite dark, and we were somewhere in the neighborhood of 14,000 feet. The air at this altitude was fortunately not so biting as it had been on top. We were below the glacier area and the snow was not so difficult to travel on if we proceeded slowly. Indeed it was a pity when we finally saw the last of it; from then on we moved in thick blackness, guided only by various lights in the valley, some of which we took to indicate the location of the camp a good deal to the west of our position.

The sky was clear, but the stars shed no useful light on the dark rocks over which we moved.

Traveling entirely by feel, we traversed buttress after buttress, couloir after couloir, moving slowly toward the west and that special ridge which should lead us to the camp. By eleven o'clock Hermann and I were exhausted, moving in a dream. We would ease ourselves down over boulders and across noisy but invisible streams until we could go no farther. Collapsing where we stood, we would hug the black rocks and lie there numbly. After about ten minutes, the cold would seep into us, tightening every muscle into uncontrollable shakes and forcing us to our feet and onward. The night was full of blind alleys, wrong turnings which brought us to precipices or difficult couloirs. We nosed our way around each obstacle like patient measuring worms, patient because there was nothing else to do.

At one o'clock we reached a cul-de-sac, for we found ourselves following down a ridge of loose rock which gradually slimmed to nothing, eaten away on both sides by converging torrents of water.

There was little chance of our making it back up the crumbling ridge, and it seemed impossible to cross the cascading waters: we were trapped in the gulley, teetering on the very brink of the westernmost stream and enveloped in its clammy spray. Driven on by the cold and wet, we resumed our nosing about, moving with extreme caution. The rushing foam shone with a pale whiteness, interspersed with black spots where there were rocks or emptiness. By testing these dark islands with the ice-axe, we found a precarious bridge across the torrent. The crossing was harrowing and unbelievable, like the last minute of a nightmare in which one slips and slithers in darkness at the brink of eternity, but it was finally completed, and we were safely on the far side.

The worst was now passed, for the ridge we descended became progressively less cold and less steep. We began to obtain real benefit from our frequent rest periods, and the departing numbness gave place to a great sense of peace and accomplishment. Already the memory of the agonizing night hours was fading before the priceless experiences and sights of the day before.

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At six-thirty in the morning we hiked into camp, feeling invincible in the first golden light of the sun.

### *Summary of Statistics*

**ASCENT:** Mt. Demavend, 18,605 ft., in the Elburz Mountains, Iran.

**ATTEMPTED:** Mt. Ararat, 16,916 ft.; height reached ca. 16,766 ft.

**PERSONNEL:** Oliver S. Crosby, leader; Hermann Dietrich and L. Rood on Mt. Demavend; Crosby and Dietrich on Mt. Ararat.

