

With the Soviets

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AS I relaxed into my first-class airline seat and sipped Mumm's champagne, I reflected that our Soviet exchange was off to a great start. Through no fault of our own, Henry Barber, George Lowe and I had missed our original flight to Moscow, and thus heavily-booked Swissair had been obliged to furnish us with first-class seats on the following flight! When it comes to over-indulgence, mountaineers can take it. Indeed, the flight was good training for events to come. The hospitality and warmth of our Soviet hosts even outdid that of Swissair.

At Moscow airport we were greeted by Vitali, who was to remain with us as an interpreter for the rest of our stay. His was an unenviable job, as climbers from two nations looked to him to be versed in everything from airline schedules to belaying. On that first evening in Moscow we joined up with Alex Bertulis, Craig Martinson and Mike Warburton, who had just returned from the Bolshoi Opera, and got down to a lively discussion about the forthcoming trip.

After a day of sightseeing in Moscow, we flew south to Samarkand, where we were met by Vladimir Shatayev and Slava Onischenko, both of whom had been in the United States the previous summer. A quick tour of this historic Asian city and some bouldering on the wall of our hotel preceded a trip by bus and truck to our first range of mountains, the Fansky Gory. These lie in the Alay Range, north of the Pamir, and are notable for weather similar to the Sierra Nevada—even though they rise to over 18,000 feet and have much more snow and ice. It was here that we met the twelve Soviet climbers who were to be with us for the entire trip. At the first meeting the atmosphere was cordial but tense. What did they expect of us? Would we have to prove ourselves? These and other questions crossed our minds. We thought the Soviets impressively earnest and fit as demons in their warm-up suits. Doubtless they were having similar thoughts. After all, we were representatives of our countries, and the Montreal Olympics were in full swing.

Throughout the trip we were based at one of three climbing base camps, making high camps for the actual climbs. The first, Camp Artuch, is a small camp in a delightful setting; its only drawbacks were the loss of the sauna to a fire the day before we arrived, and the extreme midday temperatures. Here, as elsewhere, we met many climbers outside the official exchange group; for example, the Georgian who ushered us into

his tent-cabin. He proudly showed us a copy of the USIA's *America* containing an article on Yosemite, pictures of Mark Spitz and Diana Ross adorned his wall, and he was avid for information about our country and mountains, and, as for that good Georgian wine. . . .

After the first few climbs, the shared bivouacs, and the nights around the campfire, our reservations disappeared; these guys were just like us! Of course, we all believed the theory that mountaineers from all countries share common interests, but somehow we could not help wondering whether the Soviets had ever heard the theory! Right from the start we emphasized to our hosts that we wanted to climb with them; we invariably climbed as a Soviet-American rope, or had two teams of two, one American, the other Soviet. Knowing half a dozen climbing calls, six words of each other's language, and with a lot of goodwill, we solved some complex situations.

With the fine weather and a tight schedule we managed several good climbs, including classics and a few new routes. Perhaps the most interesting ascent was an ice route pioneered by Lowe and me with Slava Onischenko and Mischa Ovchenikov, the north face of Pik Mirali, which the Soviets dedicated to the celebration of the United States' first 200 years. The Soviets have not yet really begun to explore steep ice, except with laborious artificial techniques, and so an abrupt couloir midway up the route was quite an experience for them!

After a memorable dinner party to celebrate Bertulis' birthday, we flew to Frunze and headed into the Tien Shan. Early the first morning we were surprised by cheerful music blaring out of the public address system; on going to investigate I saw some fifty people doing calisthenics. Yes, this was the climbing system I had heard about and would have been disappointed not to see. I would also have felt we had missed something if we had avoided all contact with officialdom, and here I was not let down. While photographing a bunch of melons in Frunze, a militia man quietly took me into custody. All turned out well, and our Soviet companions got a good chuckle out of the events; anytime I got out of line after the incident they pretended to handcuff me.

Our region of the Tien Shan was reminiscent of the Western Alps, and here the striking Corona and Korea Peak were the prime attractions. Warburton and Sergei Bershov climbed the north face of Korea at the same time as Lev Pavlechenko, Dainius Mokauskas, Bertulis and I were on a parallel route. A day later Barber made a solo ascent of a spectacular ice face on Korea, a feat emulated by Lowe on a nearby route. On the west pillar of Corona's west peak, meanwhile, Lowe and Martinson with Ovchenikov and Vatslav Ruzhebski had put up a two-day route on steep rock. Now, however, the weather became more unsettled and we retreated down to the valley. As activity stopped on the high peaks, we gathered in rooms and talked and sang into the early hours of the morn-

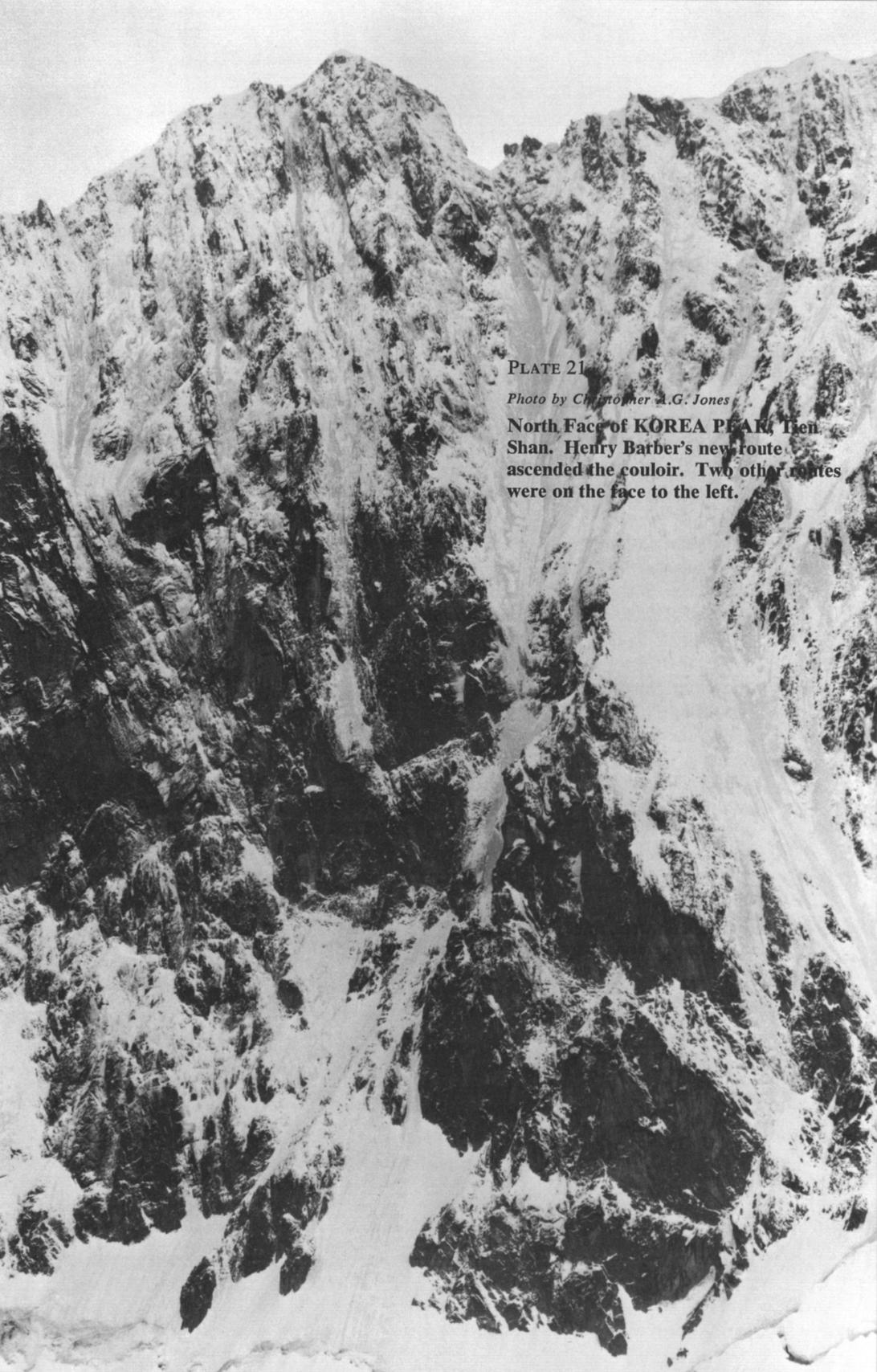


PLATE 21

Photo by Christopher A.G. Jones

North Face of KOREA PEAK, Tien Shan. Henry Barber's new route ascended the couloir. Two other routes were on the face to the left.

ing. Particularly haunting was a song about the bitter fighting in the Caucasus during World War II; about the Soviet and German climbers, former comrades, who now faced each other in combat. For me, the most memorable part of our visit was not the climbing, good though it was, but the warmth and friendship, the closeness of our communion with the Soviets on occasions such as this.

The original plan was for us to visit another area in the Tien Shan, but in the end we went to the western Caucasus. After a brief stop in the well-known resort of Dombay we travelled to Camp Uzonkol and yet another magnificent reception; caviar and cognac, champagne and a dozen toasts to our countries, our sport and our companionship. Here for the first time we climbed on superb granite, with four ropes climbing the classic Stepanov Route on Dolar Peak. Again, though, unsettled weather curtailed our plans, and this, coupled with the long approaches that had marked the trip, served to turn attention to nearby rock peaks. The visit was winding down to a grand farewell dinner when we became alarmed over the lateness of Valentin Grekovich and Warburton; they had been out a long time on a difficult new route on the north face of Dolar. Search parties set out and learned that Mike had fallen near the summit of Dolar. Within a day of our getting the news, he was back in base, thanks to a well-organized rescue, and next day was in a Moscow hospital. The prognosis was complete recovery from a concussion and contusions.

Apart from the unfortunate final climb the exchange visit was a great success. We had several discussions about a Soviet return visit in 1977, and are determined that this most worthwhile program be continued. All of us feel that we have several good friends in Russia; friends whom we would like to see in our country and others of the world's mountains. Perhaps our parting from Vatslav Ruzhebski sums up the experience. He had to leave for Leningrad early, and hiked up a short way with us toward our final climb. "You know," he said, "I never imagined Americans were so like us; I had learned to think in stereotypes. Now I consider you my friends, my good friends."

Summary:

The combined Soviet-American team were together in the Alay Range, the Tien Shan and the Caucasus. More than thirty routes were climbed, of which ten were first ascents.