

CHO OYU CONTRADICTIONS

Escaping harsh realities on a single-push new route in the Himalaya.

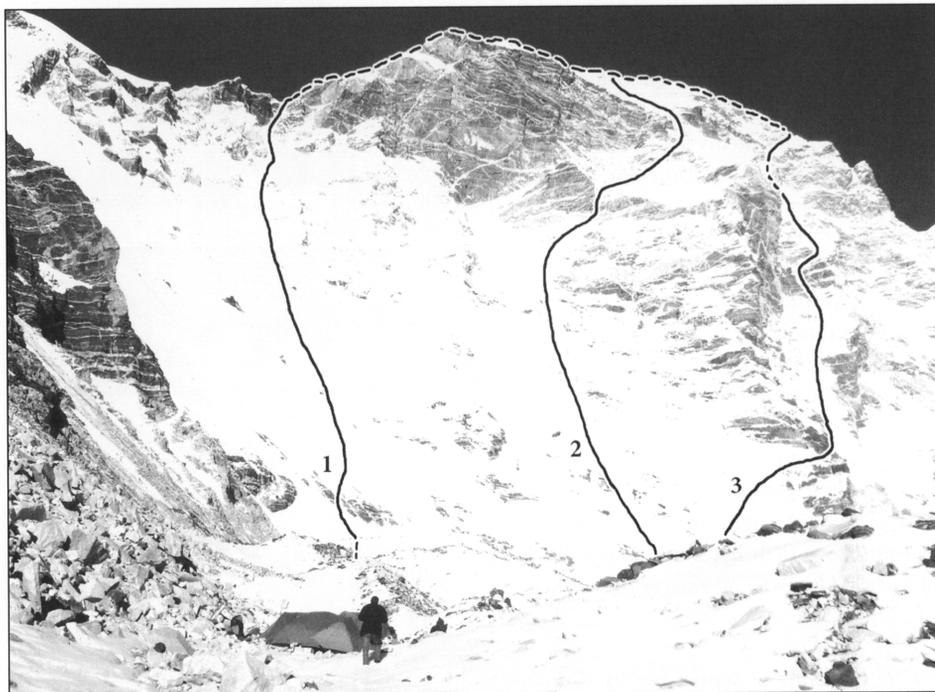
PAVLE KOZJEK



Chinese soldiers guard their young Tibetan captives at Cho Oyu base camp. *Pavle Kozjek*

I first climbed in the Himalaya more than 20 years ago. In the early 1980s I was a member of large expeditions organized by the Slovenian Mountaineering Association. These opened some hard new routes in classic Himalayan style, using fixed ropes. Now it may seem old-fashioned, but at the time these expeditions were probably the best way to get experience for the following years, when my Himalayan climbing went the other way: alpine style.

From 1986 to 1989 I climbed alpine style on Gasherbrum II, on Dhaulagiri in winter, and on a new route on the south face of Shishapangma, with Andrej Stremfelj. The northeast ridge of Everest without oxygen was another good test for my high-altitude limits. But the Peruvian Andes were the place where I really sharpened my favorite style: to simply climb to the top,



The southwest face of Cho Oyu (8,188m), the sixth-highest mountain in the world. 1. Kozjek, 2006. The route joins the west ridge (Polish Route, 1986) above the southwest face. 2. Yamanoi, 1994. 3. Kurtyka-Loretan-Troillet, 1990. All three routes on the southwest face were established in alpine style. Kozjek's line, the shortest, is the first new route on an 8,000-meter peak to be established solo in a single-day push. *Pavle Kozjek*

as fast as possible, taking only the most essential and lightest equipment. My new routes on Huascarán, Chacaraju, Chopicalqui, and Siula Grande confirmed that this style worked on serious mountains. If one could do this in the Andes, shouldn't it be possible in the highest mountain range as well?

I chose the southwest face of Cho Oyu as the place for this challenge. My idea was to climb alpine style, without bivouacs, in a single push, directly from the base of the two-kilometer-high wall to the top.



At the beginning, everything went well. But soon after we left Kathmandu and entered Tibet, health problems reduced our group by two members. On the Tibetan plateau, symptoms of pneumonia or pulmonary edema must be taken very seriously. So only six of us were left: the expedition leader Uroš Samec, young but already experienced leading expeditions to the Himalaya; the senior teammate Emil Tratnik, a member of the epic nine-day ascent of Dhaulagiri's south face in 1981; his son Aljaž, a promising alpinist of the younger generation; Marjan Kovac, my frequent climbing companion in the Andes; and Peter Poljanec from Tolmin, another promising young alpinist.

When we arrived at base camp, most of the other expeditions had already started their work on the mountain. At first it seemed as though there was no room left to pitch our tent.

When we finally found a small open space and began to unload our gear from the yaks, the guide from the neighboring camp shouted, “Move away from there—that place is reserved for my brother’s expedition!” A really nice welcome. We decided to stay, and our unpleasant neighbor eventually ignored us.

We acclimatized on the normal route, pitching a tent at Camp I at 6,300 meters and another at Camp II at 7,000 meters. Again there was hardly enough space. Many people were already using oxygen at 7,000; some of them had problems using crampons and ice axes. Some expeditions organized climbing courses in base camp to prepare their clients for the “adventure of their lives.” Was this still the Himalaya I knew? The answer came soon.

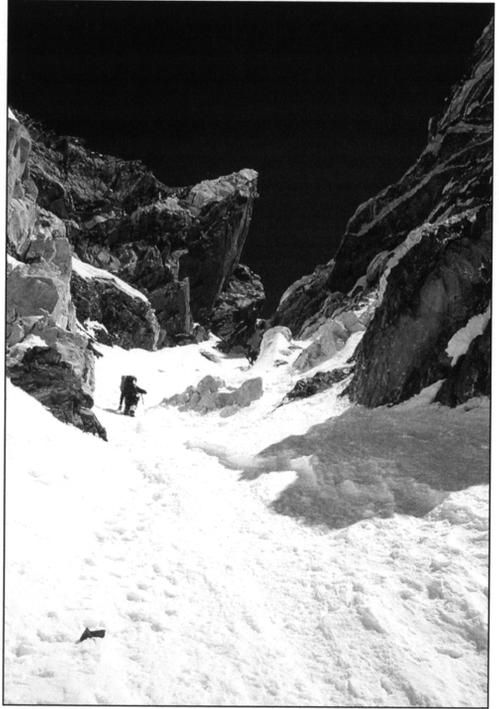


The morning of September 30 was just like other base camp mornings except that we were awoken by gunfire. The night before we had played cards late, and I had no real wish to get up. But the shooting continued. What could it be? Hunters? A military exercise? I couldn’t think of anything else. I quickly got out of the tent, and something immediately attracted my attention. A long, broken line of people moved across the glacier in the sharp morning light; from where I stood they looked like black dots in the glittering snow. It wouldn’t be unusual: A few days back we had noticed people crossing Nangpa La, a traditional route for traders and Tibetan refugees on their way to Nepal. But now the line was longer than we’d ever seen it.

I went back to the tent, but soon I was back out again. A group of armed Chinese soldiers walked among the tents. Then an officer appeared in a spotless uniform with a red epaulet, a golden star, and, surprisingly, cheap sneakers on his feet. Most of the soldiers were very young; they looked friendly and relaxed, without any sign of tension on their faces. Close to them stood a group of children in light jackets, carrying bags like they were on their way to school.

More soldiers came down the path. I took a few more pictures with my zoom lens from the open space between the tents. If nothing else, it was unusual to have such visitors in a base camp. I had a sense that the soldiers might not like to be caught on photos, but there was no real need to hide; the soldiers seemed too preoccupied with other business to care about us. They marched the children slowly toward a large tent under a Chinese flag in the center of the camp.

About an hour later, the soldiers and the group of children, accompanied by some Tibetan adults, passed by my tent again. One soldier carried a Tibetan man on his back, but only for a short time; he soon dropped the man onto the ground, where he lay moaning. He’d obviously



Four of Kozjek’s teammates followed him up the route later the same day. The first pair is seen here entering the narrows that lead to the crux ice pitch. *Marjan Kovac*

been shot in the leg, but after he balanced himself with some ski poles he managed to continue walking. "So, they were shooting at people, not in the air," I realized, shuddering from the truth. Hiding behind our kitchen area, I tried to catch the rest of the scene with my video camera. The group disappeared. A feeling of tension spread across the camp, as if the air had grown heavy. People talked in stifled voices; most seemed to hide in their tents, trying to ignore what was going on. We turned our attention back to packing for the next day's early start.

Late in the afternoon, the camp seemed calm again. More people came out of their tents, talking as usual and preparing to go up the mountain. After lunch we sat for a while in our tent for a lazy game of cards, trying to while away the last hours of daylight before our ascent. Nobody talked except for a few words about the game. Our packs were ready, and time had slowed again, until the sudden words "... the body is there..." broke the peace. The voices were in front of our tent. What body? Where? How? I picked up my binoculars—and there was no doubt. A body lay on Nangpa La, clearly visible 500 or 600 meters from us. Emil started to curse the soldiers, as if the words could change something. Then he stopped and we stood in weary silence. Who could tell us more about what had happened? I found our Nepali cook, who briefed me in a quiet tone, as if he had known the news for a long time: The children I saw were part of a group of Tibetan refugees trying to escape from China; the soldiers shot two people, and a dead girl lay on the path, a bullet in her back.

"Can you repeat your statement?" I asked, pointing my video camera at him. He agreed, although he seemed to hesitate at first. Then he began to speak with carefully chosen words about a "dangerous place for Tibetans." I understood his reticence. He didn't want to jeopardize himself or his family, who probably all live on the money he earns from his expeditions.

My teammates and I slowly drank tea in our mess tent, waiting for night. We had nothing to say. What about tomorrow? No one asked the question. One by one we crept into our tents.



In the morning my first view was of Nangpa La. The body was still there: a single black dot on the pass. Why hadn't anyone moved it? Did the soldiers leave it as a warning, to remind witnesses that the same thing could happen to them? Or to demonstrate how little Tibetan lives were worth? I took a final photo, and then I removed the memory card from my camera and locked it into my personal gear barrel. For the climb, I would take a different memory chip; I didn't want to have climbing and killing together. It would be hard enough not to keep the image of the body in the back of my mind over the next few days.

But I didn't feel like giving up the climb. I felt as though I needed to continue, out of a kind of stubbornness and resistance. Would it be of any help if I were to pack up and go home? No. My teammates seemed to feel the same way. There was no discussion between us; they just packed their last things, looking determined to go. It seemed like they also needed to escape from that camp, to be alone with the mountain and have time to think about everything, away from the crowds.

We placed our new camp on the upper part of the glacier, about four hours away from Cho Oyu advanced base camp. From our warm sleeping bags we admired the golden colors that lit up the southwest face, which slowly became red, fading out to a cold blue, then black. The moon rose from behind the ridge of Nangpai Gosum, and again we had light. By morning, though, the moon would be gone and the night would be black. Through the down of the sleeping bag I imagined the bitter cold of ice underneath us.



On hard climbing days I usually wake up before the alarm goes off, and I was ready a few minutes before Marjan, Uroš, Emil, and Aljaž, who were all going to attempt the same face I would climb. Marjan and Emil hadn't decided yet which line they would take, while Uroš and Aljaž had chosen the Kurtyka-Triolet-Loretan route in the central part of the face. Only two routes breached the huge face, both climbed in great style by great climbers. How different from the crowds on the normal route on other side of the mountain. I wished good luck to my teammates, still packing the last pieces of their equipment, and set off alone.

The night was warm for the Himalaya, and soon I started to unzip my clothes; I even stuffed my down jacket into my pack. My wind jacket would be enough. If I wanted to make it to the top in a day, I needed to work like a marathon runner. And, as in the last few kilometers of a marathon, the final steps to an 8,000-meter summit are often the hardest.

After about half an hour I found myself under some rock overhangs. My memory of the wall obviously was not perfect, and I probably had turned left from the moraine too soon. The moon was gone, and my headlamp could only cast its light so far. Then a wide snow slope directed me upward. The way was open, and I felt safe under the veil of night. Nobody could see how tiny I was compared to the mighty walls and ridges of the mountain.

I don't know how much time passed before I looked back. I felt that I was moving fast, that I already was high on the face. Four lights appeared behind me, two moving to the right and two following me. So, Emil and Marjan had decided to come the same way. In a way I expected that, and I was glad for the distant company. My crampons scraped upon the icy slope. I breathed the fresh, icy air and felt enfolded in the mysteries of the mountain, far away from the weaknesses of ordinary life.

A few hours later, Nangpai Gosum, a mountain on the southern horizon, glowed metallic blue, then orange, then white. Another sunny day was breaking, just like I needed. When the angle of the snow eased, I dug a small platform to stand upon. I'd been drinking a lot; I was confident that the more than three liters in my thermos bottles would be enough to get me up the mountain and back to one of the camps on the normal route. It was time for another energy gel. I got fed up with the various bars a long time ago. I couldn't forget the one, just below the summit of Everest, that felt like it was getting fatter and fatter in my mouth—I needed about half an hour to finish it. This time all I brought with me, besides my clothing, were my thermoses, six gels, spare gloves, a bivy sack, and a camera. Lightness was the key if I wanted to be really fast.



Looking up, I still could not see the exit from the face. I could only hope to find a way up to the west ridge. From our tent below the face, this section had always been in shadow, but we surmised it was steep. Now the wide, icy slope turned into a narrow gully with overhanging walls on both sides. Something like an icefall shimmered at the top of the gully. The closer I got the more sheer it became: vertical ice at 7,200 meters. It wasn't very long, some 10 meters, but I worried there might be powder snow near the top-out, with no placements for my tools.

To the right the rock seemed more reliable. But the gully below me was really steep. "If I fell..." No, in the Himalaya you don't fall. You freeze to death, you get pulmonary edema, you get hit by an avalanche. On Cho Oyu, you might even get shot. But you don't fall.

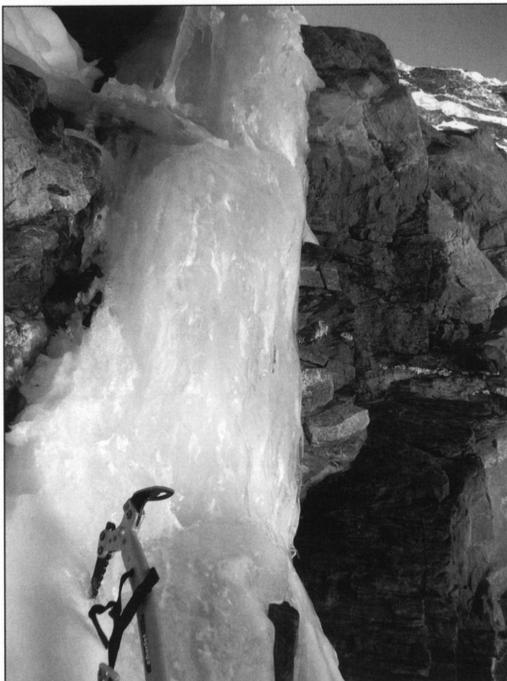
I looked for holds in the rock, polished by many avalanches. I can focus completely on

a single detail when it's really necessary. A tiny edge, a hold for one tooth of a crampon. Step by step I moved up, forgetting the thin air, the strained sound of my breathing, everything outside the moment. Here and there I torqued my axe in thin cracks, but mostly I felt for holds with my bare fingers. It had to have been colder than -20° Celsius, but I felt like my fingers were hot. Carefully I followed frozen granite flakes back toward the left. My front points grated against the rock, but I'm used to that noise. Three more meters, two...and then I was out of rock. The ice hose was beneath me. Once more the route above was open.

As I stood on the west ridge, the view of the normal route and Camp II unfolded. A distant crowd of colorful tents snapped me out of my feeling of solitude and the otherworldly quiet of the mountain. It was another 900 meters to the summit. I took one step and sunk knee-deep into the snow. I searched in vain for solid footing. Only a bit of the last storm's powder had been scoured away. A breakable crust lay on the steeper sections; each time the angle of the slope kicked back, the drifts became deeper. My progress slowed to a crawl. Minutes were slipping into hours. For the first time since starting the climb, I thought I might not make it. At about 7,800 meters, the original west ridge route joins the normal route (the northwest ridge), but the easy ground before this junction was buried beneath an abyss of snow.

One more gel, another thermos emptied. During a break I dreamed about green meadows, warm limestone, a sunset, friends, wine on the beach. Stop! No time for dreaming. Again I pushed through the heavy snow, above the elevation of Camp III. A few more steps and I would reach the normal route. I could already see a climber descending, clinging to a fixed rope. I couldn't see his face beneath the oxygen mask and goggles. He moved down like a robot as he tried to avoid a steeper rocky section. Two Sherpas accompanying him glanced about nervously; they must have been anxious that he was so slow. They should have enough time to make it down, I thought as I watched. I hoped I had enough time, too—I was still going up. Here and there I met more descending climbers, looking exhausted, with hidden faces. No gazes met my own. I'd never experienced a scene like this on a Himalayan mountain. My solitary climb by headlamp that morning seemed to belong to a different mountain, a different realm.

It was already late afternoon when the steep slope rolled back onto the summit plateau. On the hard snow I felt stronger again, but the top was nowhere in sight. At last a small flag



Kozjek planted a tool at the base of the short crux passage but opted to climb 5.6 rock to the right of the ice. *Pavle Kozjek*

appeared; a red oxygen bottle was stuck in the snow. A climber was standing nearby. An icy wind blew from Tibet, and when I took off my gloves for a moment, my fingers went numb. Only the red and golden colors of the evening were warm. A cold battery in my camera produced the last photo of the day.

After a few minutes on top I headed down. Great feelings of joy would come later. Or maybe not at all. The more mountains I climb, the less I know. But this is the world where I feel complete.



After two days we were all back in advanced base camp. Aljaž, Emil, Marjan, and Uroš all spent the night in camps on the normal route and reached the summit a day later; all four of them, it turned out, had followed my line on the face. Uroš and Aljaž had encountered bad conditions on the Kurtyka-Triolet-Loretan and traversed back to our new route. All four had climbed the ice hose I avoided; the exit was not as bad as I had thought it would be.

Many expeditions had already left, and some of the rest were packing. In the next two days we did the same. When I got home I sent my photos of the Nangpa La incident to the media, and I was surprised to discover that nobody else had done that. So many people must have seen that drama....

SUMMARY

AREA: Mahalangur Himal, Tibet

ASCENT: New route on the southwest face of 8,188-meter Cho Oyu (Slovenian Route, V 50°-60°, 1,100 meters plus 900 meters of the 1986 Polish Route). Pavle Kozjek climbed the route solo in a single push of 14.5 hours from advanced base camp on October 2, 2006. Four of Kozjek's teammates followed him up the same route on October 2 and reached the summit the next day, after camping on the normal route (northwest ridge).

EDITOR'S NOTE: Approximately 75 Tibetans attempted to enter Nepal via Nangpa La on September 30, 2006. One woman, Kelsang Namtso, 17, was shot and killed by Chinese soldiers; a 23-year-old man was badly wounded and may have died later. About 40 Tibetans successfully crossed the border; the remaining survivors were detained. The Chinese news agency reported the soldiers acted in self-defense.

Portions of this story previously appeared in *Alpinist* magazine and are reprinted with permission.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Pavle Kozjek, 47, lives in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and works at Statistics Slovenia. He has climbed new routes on Cerro Torre and Shishapangma, as well as a number of hard new routes in Peru, mostly solo and in a single push.



Pavle Kozjek