

## Summer in the Dolomites

HANS KRAUS

THE southern foothills of the Alps do not rise immediately to high glacier peaks. In the east, they form relatively low ranges, little higher than 3000 meters—the southern limestone Alps. The Italian part of these mountains is known as *Dolomiti*. Emerging from lovely green valleys with pine forests and meadows reaching high up, the Dolomites are jagged and fantastic spires, built of grey and yellow coral limestone. One of the best known villages in this area is Cortina. Only three hours from Venice, it is situated in the midst of some of the most famous Dolomite peaks. Cortina and, even more, Misurina (which lies a few hundred meters higher and consists of only a few houses) have long been centers for climbers and skiers.

The Dolomites were explored later than the higher glaciated mountains. Sepp Innerkofler, with Grohmann, pioneered the first Dolomite climbs at the end of the 19th century, scaling many peaks previously considered unclimbable. Sepp, whose name is still very much alive, was killed in the First World War and was buried at the foot of one of his beloved peaks, the Cima Grande di Lavaredo. Even the enemy paid tribute to him at his rites. My own memories of the Dolomites begin with my childhood when I listened breathlessly to my father's accounts of the climbs he had made with Sepp. The normal routes were then considered great adventures, and I eagerly took to reading all the literature on these mountains. On clear days I could see them from Trieste, where we lived at the time.

Years later, my trips took me to these crags where I found myself part of a group of enthusiastic rock climbers, with headquarters in Misurina. The steep faces and lofty spires of the Dolomites have a strong call that no one can resist once he has listened. The desire grows to be up there, to feel the height and the space. I had looked longingly at these high peaks as a child. Now I was determined to try to turn some of those dreams into reality. Emilio Comici, one of the first men to climb sixth-class climbs—*sesto gradi*—was the unquestioned leader of our group. He was a rare person—quiet and

somewhat melancholy. But on the rock he moved like a dancer, and only there was he completely happy.

Emilio, together with the Dimai brothers, had just accomplished the most incredible climb—that of the North Face of the Cima Grande di Lavaredo—550 meters of straight, mostly overhanging rock, 250 meters of which consist of continuous sixth-class climbing. When Emilio invited me to repeat the route with him, I accepted with pleasure and trepidation. I had often looked at that face, and always with awe.

So we started out. The extremely difficult part begins with a long piton traverse to the left, some 100 meters above the base. Emilio climbed most of that pitch free—hanging by pitons and little holds, not using the rope for pull at all. He put in very few karabiners, thus making it necessary for me to climb free, too. I found my way to a piton that he had used for a belay. As I removed the karabiner, I lost my grip on the piton, my only hold, and fell. For what seemed an endless time, I became a terrifying pendulum, swinging in space. Emilio held me with the help of some pitons. When I finally stopped moving, I found myself several feet away from the rock. It took much effort and time to swing back to the rock, anchor myself, and work my way back. This incident ended the attempt and the season. A second try had to be given up in a heavy snowfall.

This was to be my last climbing summer in Europe for many years. But I never forgot the North Face. That fall haunted me and made me want to return and try again. The summer of 1950 saw me back once more in Misurina. We were a group of six, planning to make a film on rock climbing in the Dolomites, a film intended to show some of the color and beauty of these mountains and some techniques of climbing. During this trip, Dick Hirschland succeeded in making an excellent 16-mm. film, starring his wife Bonnie as the superb rock climber she is. Full color brought out the contrast between the steep, aloof spires and the soft, gentle valleys—the beauty of the lonesome and unchangeable mountains and that of crowded, equally unchanging Venice. We made many climbs, among them a film tour up the Piccola di Lavaredo and an aerial traverse to the Guglia d'Amicis. It took all of us quite some time to become accustomed to the steepness and exposure which one encounters steadily in these parts. I was fortunate enough to climax my climbs with the Spigolo Giallo, a 300-meter climb of ideal exposure and considerable

difficulty. Although at the time I did not have the necessary physical fitness even to attempt the North Face of the Grande, my wish to climb it increased each time I saw this forbidding overhanging wall.

When we began contemplating another film trip to the Dolomites, to take place in the summer of 1951, I secretly put the North Face at the top of my list. Early that spring I started building toward good physical condition by gym work, running and regular weekend climbs in our home cliffs, the Shawangunks. At the end of July we boarded the plane for Europe. Dick and Bonnie Hirschland planned to go via Switzerland in order to add footage on skiing and ski mountaineering to our film. Unfortunately, these plans were upset by an appendix operation which Dick had to undergo in Lausanne. So it turned out that I spent all of the month of August alone in Misurina in our old headquarters, the Hotel Misurina.

Since I had to look for partners right there, I decided to climb with either Valerio Quinz or Gino Soldà, both guides, and old personal friends as well. I have rarely climbed with guides and rather dislike being second on the rope. But these men were the best climbers in the area, and we knew each other well enough to agree that I would get a chance to lead occasionally.

I made several trips with Valerio, a very young man and an excellent climber, with whose father I had climbed many years before. The previous year Valerio had been with me on the Spigolo Giallo. We started with a few easier and shorter climbs such as routes on the Piccolo Popena, Guglia Giuliana, and then advanced to sixes such as the Spigolo Mazzorana in the Cadin delle Bisa, and the Emilio route up the Giuliana. In between, I made some solo climbs, among them the Cadin di San Lucano, the main peak of the Cadini—a completely deserted group rarely visited by climbers. All day long I did not see a single soul. Then, after I had spent a long time alone on the summit, the clouds grew dense and closed in, forcing me to leave.

One of the toughest climbs, though short, was a new route up the Guglietta, a little spire in the Piccolo Popena. The key pitch—one rope-length—is a constant succession of overhangs calling for strength as well as technique.

Finally Dick and Bonnie arrived for a few days and we climbed the Torre Grande of the Cinque Torri while Dick took films. This route had been pioneered by the Dimais and Miriam O'Brien Under-

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NORTH FACE, CIMA GRANDE DI LAVAREDO

*Photo, G. Ghedina, Cortina*

hill. We enjoyed it thoroughly, in spite of some rock fall which caught us just as I was leading up the last difficult pitch. This route will always remain a good, enjoyable trip and a credit to the men and the women who pioneered it.

At this time, Valerio was taken quite ill and had to give up the Nord. Time was running out, so it was fortunate that Gino Soldà was free and more than ready to go along with me. We took one more training tour up the northeast ridge of the Ovest di Lavaredo. It happened that Gino and I picked the very day General Montgomery was inspecting maneuvers in this area. On the Forcella di Lavaredo we were greeted, much to our surprise, by a platoon of Alpini who presented arms. Only then did we notice some Italian brass who had arrived with us.

As we rushed towards the Ovest, we saw Alpini posted around and between the Cime. Gino gloomily muttered something about being shot at by mistake. I, myself, did not feel too happy about all this. All went well, however, until we reached the difficult part of this long climb. The Spigolo Ovest is approximately 600 meters high, rated as an upper fifth-class climb. But in its middle section there is a good sixth-class stretch requiring rope work, stirrups, etc. Just at this point, when we were separated by overhangs and could not see each other, hell broke loose. From all the peaks, corners, slopes and boulders, the Alpini let go with guns, machine guns, flares and tracers. The usually deserted and quiet hills shook with the blasts of sound, and the rocks under our hands trembled. Worst of all, we could no longer hear each other—which forced us to do rope work entirely by feel. Many unkind words were uttered, but they were drowned in the noise.

Then, as if by some prearranged signal, all at once everything became quiet just as we hit easy rock some half an hour or so later. After this trial by fire, we felt ready for the Nord. But now the weather gave out. As I walked up to Rifugio Longeres, where I planned to spend the night before the climb, heavy clouds came in and crept up the mountainsides.

The next day it looked so bad that Gino and I decided to wait. That morning, as a warm-up, we climbed a short 200-meter but beautiful corner of the Croda Passaporto, a nice new six, and "very handy near the hut," as Gino put it. We were back in time for lunch, and over a glass of Chianti Gino told me about his experiences as a

partisan. He had been in charge of an anti-Communist group which was attacked by everyone around—Germans, Fascists, and Communists of both Yugoslav and Italian origin. Gino's group had survived somehow in the mountains, but he has not been very fond of war since. Now he spends his time guiding (usually two trips a day in the summer), and manufacturing a new type of excellent rock-climbing boot in the winter. Gino, an ex-Olympic skier, is still one of the best in Italy. The long list of his first ascents in the Dolomites (mostly sixes) is an impressive one.

The weather having improved somewhat, we planned to start out the next day. At 3.00 A.M. it looked uncertain. Clouds rolled in from the valley of the Auronzo; the moon wore a halo; the air was warm. Nevertheless, we set out. As we headed towards the Forcella di Lavaredo, the clouds followed us, and when we turned west on the north side of the pass, the clouds crept down and joined cloud banks coming from other valleys.

We scrambled up the first easy 50 meters of the climb, then roped up. We used one nylon and one hemp rope, a combination which we found very helpful in telling them apart. We had six stirrups with us and 30 karabiners. Since there are many pitons in the rock, we had taken along only a dozen for each of us. Now the weather looked slightly better, but still very uncertain. I gave up hope of leading part of the climb. If we were to do it at all, great speed was essential, and Gino had been through here before. Besides, he is by far the superior climber. So he led off.

The first difficult rope-length filled me with great fear. My fall of many years ago was as fresh in my memory as though it had been yesterday. When my turn came and I was working my way through the traverse, I had to force myself to go on. As a result, I climbed this pitch much faster than necessary and soon found myself at the belay point—a ledge big enough to stand on with both feet and a good piton for belay. The clouds had now dispersed, and the sky was blue—what we could see of it, with the tremendous face above us obscuring the firmament. We decided to go on. Gino mastered the difficulties with consummate skill. Never did he have to rearrange ropes or karabiners. It was hardly necessary for us to speak.

The North Face rises at a constant 90-degree angle, or even steeper. Rope belays or stirrups are necessary at every pitch. Holds and ledges are at a minimum. Resting at the third belay place, I

looked down again. The exposure was complete. The face extended to all sides, giving us a sense of the magnitude of this rock wall.

The next rope-length had a delicate free traverse. Then difficult overhangs continued. Now I felt for the first time that my fingers were less strong than at the start. A last great effort brought us to the bivouac place. Here the first party had spent the night. Here most parties still have to bivouac. Thanks to Gino, we had reached it in five hours—just in time, it turned out, because now the fog came rolling in and soon closed around us.

From here on the way is easier, and with the tension relieved, we both felt tired. Our short rest on the bivouac place, just long enough to have some sugar and chocolate, served to point out how good a longer rest would be. But we worked our way up. The rock became harder again—quite hard. We made a little detour, the Aschenbrenner Variation, which is more difficult than the normal way. Then, in order to return to the route, we traversed to the left. That was a mistake. Now we had to make a new variation, unnecessarily coming into still harder rock.

Finally, Gino yelled to me that he was back on the “normale.” I followed over the difficult traverse and then saw the ropes leading straight up over rock which seemed utterly unclimbable. But by this time I had regained my strength and felt that where Gino could go first, I should at least be able to follow. I struggled up the steep rock, using the few minute protuberances. When I eventually appeared on his ledge straight from below, Gino looked as surprised as though I had come by helicopter. He himself had traversed and found an easy way up, little dreaming that I would attempt that crazy shortcut.

We had a good laugh. Reaching the summit, a little later on, we shook hands, both very very tired, but happy and full of satisfaction. Rest was sweet after eight hours of hard climbing. There was no view, but after all we both knew the view so well. Gino had been here innumerable times, over all the different hard and easy routes. I, too, had been here often—years ago with Emilio and Conte dal Torso over the “Stoesser” and many other times. I had been up here with Ken Prestrud and Lou Warner over the east ridge the previous year. Then there had been the trip with Bonnie and Valerio when we had arrived for a shivering, brief stay after making a new

“direttissima” through the South Face. That was the time we were caught in a violent thunderstorm and beaten by hail.

The thought came to me that 50 years ago Sepp and my father had been here, and had probably felt just as thrilled over their climb up the “normale” as we did today after the Nord. The Nord still rates among the few top routes. The mountain had not changed. There were the same pitons in the same places as so many years ago, and the same rocks standing so much longer than the pitons. It was a great comfort to find that something had remained completely untouched by time.

We walked down the “normale” slowly and leisurely. As we were approaching the road to the Rifugio Longeres, a man called to us from below, asking where we had been. We called back: “On the Grande.” “Via normale?” he shouted, and then he and the girl with him burst into laughter. I recognized them as my brother and his wife. It was a pleasant surprise. They had just happened to arrive from New York, and on learning that I was in the North Face they had driven up to meet me.

In the Rifugio there was much handshaking, especially with Mazzorana, who runs the hut. He is an old friend who had also climbed with Emilio and still ranks among the best. Then we left for Misurina where we stayed up very late celebrating. The next day we returned to the Rifugio and walked to the Cima where my brother took innumerable pictures. The North Face looked good today—not less awe-inspiring, but somehow less grim.

Before leaving the following morning, I walked up the Popena alone very early to say farewell to all the peaks and to the quiet lake of Misurina. The Tre Cime were resplendent in the early sun. Then we were off on a quick drive to Venice, where my brother left. There I spent two luxurious days on the Lido, lying in the sun, eating good food, visiting in Venice, and walking through all the old narrow streets. I listened to the band on the Piazza San Marco, and was again awed by the cathedral.

Then I was on my way to Trieste, and from there home to New York via Paris where I boarded the plane. The very next week end saw me with my usual companions back in our old Shawangunks. In spite of all I had just left behind, these home cliffs were still beautiful and inviting. They continue to open new ways for us; they enable us to remain accustomed to rock and heights, and to

keep prepared for future climbs. We all look forward to many more of these climbs for many reasons: because they have helped to shape and enrich our lives; because they keep us young; because they make us forget our sorrows and increase our capacity for happiness; because the reason why we climb is the same as the reason why we sing, walk, dance, and even live.