

The Road to Siulá Chico

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ON OUR return to Munich in 1961 from our first Andean expedition, the desire to climb again in South America was not particularly great. While we were trying to ascend 20,555-foot Siulá Chico in the Cordillera Huayhuash, three of our comrades fell to their deaths: Manfred Jordan, Helmut Albrecht and Günther Wolf. Their fate was not the result of lack of skill or carelessness. A giant cornice, obscured by afternoon clouds, broke under their weight and plunged down, carrying them with it. After this accident, which happened close to me, I developed an aversion for these mountains and ridges with their gruesome cornices.

Several years went by, during which Siulá Chico was the goal of numerous expeditions. Spaniards, Germans, Austrians, Argentines and Japanese all failed, mostly on Siulá Grande* (20,853 feet), over whose summit the "easiest" route to the smaller Siulá leads. The years gradually dimmed my sad memories. Why should not the comrades of these dead friends be the ones to make the first ascent? What a fitting memorial! Once the idea was voiced, it was enthusiastically picked up by my old mountain companions. At the same time we received the support of our Section and of the German Alpine Club (*Deutscher Alpenverein*).

Months of preparation passed; then came the great day. Gottfried Lapp, Reinhold Obster, Rudl Marek, Peter Scholz and my wife Christa departed by steamer. A few weeks later I flew to join them in Lima.

Perched on cases and duffel bags in the back of a truck, we roared north for 120 miles along the coastal road, then turned inland through bleak desert, fertile valleys and lonely *puna* (grassy uplands) behind whose endless expanse rose the first snow-capped peaks. Towards evening we arrived at Chiquián, the last rather big town near our mountains. With four *arrieros* (donkey drivers) and twenty-two donkeys we were under way the very next morning. For three days we marched through this heavenly land, at first along deeply cut, fertile valleys and then over 16,000-foot passes and bleak, high plateaus.

*First ascent by Erwin Schneider and Arnold Awerzger, July 28, 1936.

We set up Base Camp beside a lonely lake, 13,575-foot Carhuacocha, half an hour from the foot of the mountains about which we had been dreaming for two years.

A week later our high camp stood at 18,000 feet in the col between Siulá Grande and Yerupajá, the highest and probably the wildest peak of the Cordillera Huayhuash. Scarcely a hundred yards from our tents rose the sharp north ridge, leading to the summit of Siulá Grande. It was still dark on June 20 when Peter Scholz, Reinhold Obster and I left our warm sleeping bags and trudged towards the ridge. (Gottfried Lapp had sprained his shoulder and could not be with us.) Without a word we approached the first rise under a star-lit sky. Soon a glimmer of light was showing in the east. By the time we had finally crossed a crumbling bergschrund after several attempts, day came upon us with giant strides. An icy, gusty wind blew against our faces. We eagerly awaited the sun, now understanding why the Incas so revered it.

The first thousand feet or so presented few difficulties. Moving simultaneously, we quickly gained altitude on the relatively broad ridge. Then came the first big cornice, hanging far out to the west like a gigantic mushroom. We avoided this horror by traversing onto the nearly vertical soft snow of the east face. A few yards later, the difficult conditions forced us back onto the crest, which though nearly horizontal, was crowned by huge cornices. We felt rather relieved when we reached a rock step, which, despite its difficulties, offered a certain degree of safety. Although the wind had dropped somewhat and the sun was high in the sky, it was still bitterly cold. Peter worked for two good hours on an overhanging snow slope that cut us off from the rocks. I could see his rucksack stand out against the blue sky; then it disappeared. Gradually the cold seeped through my clothing and I began to wonder if we would ever reach the summit. Finally Peter finished the pitch. I ascended to Reinhold and he joined Peter. When I had climbed the overhang, it was already dark. How time had flown, and what a great climber Peter had proved himself! He had climbed this frightful pitch with only two ice screws; he could not get more to hold in the rotten ice and snow. Though it was knife-sharp — this spot where we three were reunited after long hours — there was no help for it; we had to bivouac here.

We finally flattened the ridge top for some fifteen feet and made ourselves "at home" in down jackets and elephant feet. We lay close together and I had the feeling of sitting in a small airplane. All around us was space; my eyes had only the countless stars in the pitch-black heavens to focus on. After an endless night, at last the first rays of a cold

and dull sun struck us. With hardly a word we packed up, shivering from head to foot. We could eat breakfast on the summit of Siulá Grande.

The ridge reared straight up above the bivouac spot. Stiffly I clambered on. Thirty feet higher, I began to feel dizzy, but stuck my nose onto the colossal icicles which hung from the cornice edge and continued traversing. How often we had carried out that maneuver since the morning before! Then the difficulties suddenly ended. A gentle, broad ridge, probably frightfully corniced, led to the summit of Siulá Grande. Well below the ridge crest, we climbed to just under the summit and then staggered straight up to the highest point. We did not embrace or sing songs of heroism but merely shook hands. Cold and hunger drove us to a less windy spot.

After a modest breakfast, we descended westwards towards the approximately 19,700-foot col between the Siulá peaks. It took us more than two hours to climb down the steep slopes, which at times reached 60°. Ahead lay Siulá Chico's east ridge, heavily corniced to the north and flanked left and right with sheer rock cliffs. Without a word of dissent, my companions left the leading to me — they knew what this summit meant to me. As if we were walking in our sleep, rope-length followed rope-length: steep, rotten rock, giant cornices along whose probable fracture crack we balanced carefully, and then suddenly a huge gap where the rocks lay exposed. We had reached the spot where our friends had been hurled to their deaths in 1961; the break was unmistakable. How close they had been to victory! The ridge was impossible. Without further thought, I stepped onto the south face: rotten blue ice covered by loose powder snow, a narrow, fragile ridge, then the last few feet. I stood still; this was no place to climb in a gust. I wanted to savor these moments fully. Only four or five steps remained, but nothingness was under each step. Then we were there! Unbounded joy! We had done it! How great, how wide, how beautiful is our world!

After a second bivouac on the summit of Siulá Grande, we turned the next morning to a 3500-foot ice couloir in the southern part of the great east face. For nearly twelve hours we descended the often 55° ice, rope-length by rope-length. We got back to our high camp in blackest night, exhausted but immeasurably happy.

With the ascent of Siulá Chico we had reached the expedition's goal. Light-heartedly we could now look to other peaks. In the south of the Cordillera Huayhuash rose the glorious pinnacle of Jurau (18,616 feet), first climbed by our companions in 1961 via the north ridge. As if drawn by a ruler, the east ridge rises ever steeper towards the summit. That would be our next objective.

We left camp at Quesillococha much too late in the day, accompanied this time by my wife Christa and Gottfried Lapp. That would be their first 5000er. The noonday sun found us doing particularly delicate ice-climbing. As steep as a knife-edge, the snow ridge was cupped with *nieves penitentes*, which collapsed when stepped on. We had greatly underestimated the ridge. At five o'clock, an hour before sundown, we finally reached the top. The descent of the north ridge by full moon was the most impressive experience of the whole expedition. We crept in dark shadows far below broad cornices, clambered over dimly lit ice towers, jumped down small drop-offs and finally reached the Jurau Glacier, still far from camp. Towards midnight we stumbled over the rock desert at the end of the glacier and came out on the hard, dry *puna*. Upon reaching the tents a short time later, we were too happy to sleep. In the moonlight we sat, looking up at Jurau, and planned further climbs.

We forged plans for Jirishanca Chico, where my wife accompanied me a few days later up the northeast spur; for Ninashanca, also by the northeast ridge, which we climbed with our oldest member, Rudl Marek; for an unnamed peak east of the Siulás, of which Lapp and Obster were to make the second ascent. The breeze lightly stroked the long clumps of grass, bringing the fragrant odor of moss from the nearby lake, and reminded us that day was not far away. With the feeling that there could be nothing ugly or evil in this beautiful land, we crept into our sleeping bags, relieved of all sad memories.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Cordillera Huayhuash, Peru.

ASCENTS: Siulá Grande, 20,853 feet, June 21, 1966 (Obster, Scholz, M. Sturm) — fourth ascent.

Siulá Chico, 20,555 feet, June 21, 1966 (Obster, Scholz, M. Sturm) — first ascent.

Jurau, 18,616 feet, June 29, 1966 (Lapp, Obster, Scholz, C. and M. Sturm) — second ascent of mountain; first ascent of east ridge.

Jirishanca Chico, 17,937 feet, July 4, 1966 (Lapp, Obster, Scholz, M. and C. Sturm) — sixth ascent.

Ninashanca, 18,495 feet, July 9, 1966 (Lapp, Marek, Obster, Scholz, M. Sturm) — third ascent.

Unnamed peak east of the Siulás (called "Nevado Bavaria" by the first ascent party of Werner Lindauer and Helmut Salger in 1964), c. 18,700 feet, July 12, 1966 (Lapp, Obster) — second ascent.

PERSONNEL: Manfred Sturm, *leader*; Frau Christa Sturm, Gottfried Lapp, Rudolf Marek, Reinhold Obster, Peter Scholz.