Cerro Torre's South Face

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ONLY NOW, sitting safely at home, 10,000 miles from Patagonia, can I think how crazy it was on January 20 when, in hurricane winds and with rotten ropes, we climbed the south face of Cerro Torre. Only a desire to survive and a desire to succeed drove us on.

My partner, Janez Jeglič, with whom I have climbed for five years, and I were in Patagonia for the fourth time. We had taken part in three Yugoslav expeditions to that part of the world: in 1983 the east face of Fitz Roy, in 1985/6 the east face of Cerro Torre and in 1986 the southeast face of Torre Egger and the north face of El Mocho. We know each other well and trust each other. This mutual trust was essential in this most difficult climb of all. By the end of this expedition, possibly we had a little bit of physical strength left, but psychologically we were exhausted.

The idea of climbing this imposing wall first occurred to me in late 1985 when we climbed Cerro Torre by the hazardous east face. Compared with the south face of Cerro Torre, the great walls of Europe—the Eiger, the Grandes Jorasses or the Matterhorn—seem nearly flat. It offers no obvious route. My friends thought it impossible to climb it. Janez and I didn't agree. We examined the face more carefully in 1986 when with Francek Knez we climbed the southeast face of Torre Egger. At that time, the face got its first visitors, who gave up after the first 200 meters of mixed climbing, well below the face's overhangs. Whom could we get to join us on this cold rock, so exposed to avalanches and falling rock? Flying home, we two decided to try it alone.

Preparation time was short. In two months I was off to the Himalaya, to Lhotse Shar. Once home, serious preparations began. Fund raising was particularly difficult. Those familiar with Patagonia's notorious weather, were pessimistic about a single pair on a difficult route. Our decision to make a film upset them even more; additional weight on the face would be the straw that broke the camel's back.

Only six days after our departure from Ljubljana's Brnik Airport in October 25, 1987, we were at the Laguna Torre Base Camp. For a few days we carried gear to the wall. A hundred meters below the start of the route, we dug a snow-cave bivouac. On November 5 and 6, we climbed the first 200 meters of mixed terrain, where falling rock and ice kept cutting our ropes. We found

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Photo by Silvo Karo

South Face of CERRO TORRE.

terribly frayed old ropes, mostly deep in the ice. Especially dangerous were the morning hours when the sun struck the wall for three or four hours. After this the wall was cold, in shade, icy, but not dead. Crashing ice and rock echoed. We decided to climb this section before sunrise.

Bad weather forced us back to Base Camp, but early on November 14, we were back at the top of our fixed ropes and started up the splintered, crumbling crack, full of loose rock. Again the weather turned bad.

Not until November 20 could we return. We had to dig the ropes out of the lower section from under snow and ice. In many places they were ruined. A pitch of A3 followed. The next day we climbed the most difficult and dangerous part, a crumbling, overhanging slab which disintegrated as we ascended. We graded the difficulties as A3 and A4. Above, the face was a complete overhang. Technical difficulties could be overcome only with rurps, copperheads, knife-blades and Friends.

Bad weather trapped us in Base Camp for more time. Not until December 5 could we plow to the wall through deep snow. Where under all this snow was our bivouac with all our equipment? Not only was the snowfall heavy; tons of additional snow piled up, swept off the upper slopes. Our search began at three P.M. in heavily drifting snow. Soaking wet, we quit at eleven o'clock and with scarcely sufficient bivouac equipment we shivered through the night. We kept digging the entire morning, but not until noon, after 14 hours of hard work in an area 65 by 30 feet and 15 feet deep, did we locate the entrance to the bivouac. The cave was 20 feet under the snow. Luckily, we had two shovels. It was still snowing heavily.

When, on December 7, we started up the face in spite of the bad weather, we had another unpleasant surprise. The fixed rope on the first technical pitches were gone, torn off by the weight of the new snow. Since most of our technical equipment was further up the face, we had to climb this segment with practically no proper protection. We had previously graded the climb VI, A2, but this time it was much more difficult.

The next day we succeeded in reaching the gray rock step. For the first time, we could rest on a ledge. Bad weather drove us back on the next rope-length. We descended in a wild storm and the day after returned to Base Camp.

We were not back again until December 19. Late in the afternoon we reached the huge red roof. From there the only way seemed to be a great crack. Alas! The rock was very bad and called for demanding aid. The beginning of the crack was almost too wide for placing protection. We were 500 meters up the increasingly overhanging face. Late in the evening we rappelled to the bivouac, but sunrise found us already high on the fixed ropes. To get to the top of them, we had to jümar at least three hours. In fine weather, we rushed as fast as possible. One must use every moment of good weather in Patagonia. Before we rappelled off in the evening, another three difficult pitches were behind us. The rock was getting better.

We were so tired that we barely slept. Could we continue the next day? Would the weather hold? As if by curse, it did hold. It took time to warm our

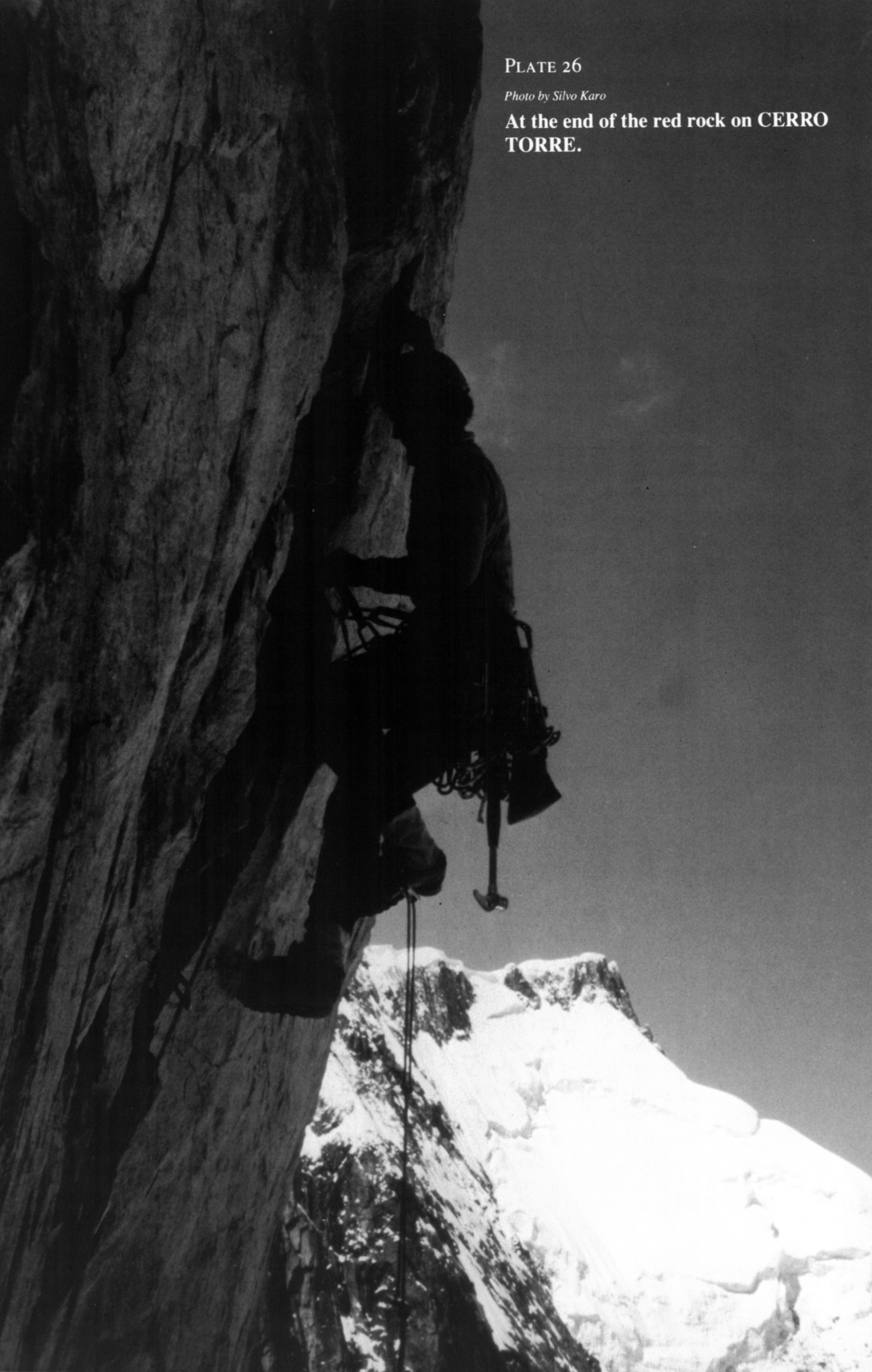

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Photo by Silvo Karo

At the end of the red rock on CERRO TORRE.

limbs. With acrobatic moves, swinging far out from the overhang, we continued slowly up the ropes. Hanging in the stirrups cut blood circulation and we both got frostnipped. Even so, by nine A.M. we were nearly 700 meters up. The red rock was already behind us and the rock was better. We were approaching the big roofs, obviously the crux. We climbed two more pitches, but then had no more rope. We had even fixed our climbing rope. Exhausted, we were nearly happy to interrupt the climb. One who doesn't know Patagonia can hardly understand. Every day we got up before four A.M., spent a number of hours reaching the high point and then had a lot of new, very difficult, risky climbing. For days we had been hanging on the overhanging wall with heavy packs. We had numerous small falls when pitons pulled, nuts popped or a Friend slipped.

By noon the next day, I was back in Base Camp to borrow climbing rope from friends. They were surprised when I loaded myself with rope and immediately headed up. By nine P.M., I was back with Janez, miserably tired. It was hardly the way to celebrate my birthday. Luckily, the next day we didn't have to climb. Bad weather forced us back to Base Camp. But not for long!

On December 26, we were at the top of the fixed ropes by mid-morning. The next hundred meters were particularly difficult. At nine P.M. we had reached a comfortable ledge under the overhang but there we were greeted by hurricane winds. In rapidly deteriorating weather, we rappelled ten pitches to a safer shelf and spent the night there without much bivouac gear. A storm during the night blew away our plans to reach the summit the next day and we retreated to Base Camp again in the morning.

Our many tries to get back up failed until January 20. After a bivouac under El Mocho, we set out at two A.M. and climbed to shelter in a crevasse under the face. We had to make a difficult decision. Should we continue? The weather was desperate. We practically had to decide to go on. Our visas for Argentina were about to expire and so were our plane tickets.

At noon we were already only 100 meters under the overhang, the last place from which we could return. If we went on, we could get back to the valley only by going up onto the southeast ridge. It isn't easy to describe how it feels to hang at the mercy of the winds on rotten ropes 20 meters away from the face and 800 meters above the ground. At one P.M., we reached the upper edge of the overhang. The weather was terrible, a true hurricane. We couldn't see more than five meters ahead in the dense fog. In the storm we couldn't even hear each other. Janez, who was leading, fell about ten meters but by chance stuck in an ice crack. I heard about the accident only when I reached him. The wind was so strong that it tore ice blocks off the wall from higher up. The rope was frayed in three places and so we had to shorten it. When I tried to film, the camera turned into a ball of ice. All our equipment iced up too. Desperately cold, we couldn't take the chance to put on more clothing; the wind would have torn it out of our hands before we could put it on.

Time went by as we searched for the upper snowfield. We tried a little lower but ended in the overhanging rocks. The only solution was to climb straight up. We were much relieved when we hit the ice, though it was rock hard. Now we

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Photo by Silvo Karo

Vertical climbing on CERRO TORRE's South Face

at least knew about where we were. We slowly crossed the glassy 60° to 75° surface. Janez had full ice-climbing equipment, but I was moving with a single ice axe. Like two flies glued to glass, we crept toward the right. Ice chunks plunged from above and shattered in thousands of pieces. As I carefully climbed toward Janez, who was belaying me on two ice screws, a strong gust of wind tore me off the wall. Instinctively, I tried a self-arrest, but in vain. As I hurtled downward, I wondered if Janez could hold me or if the battered rope would break. When I crashed into the rocks, I felt a jerk around my middle. I had stopped after falling 30 meters, only a short distance from the abyss.

Late that evening, we finally made it to the southeast ridge. Everything was iced. How could we get down? First we planned to descend the east face, which in 1985/6 we had gotten to know so well, but this was impossible. The rope was too short. Maestri's route on the southeast ridge, unknown to us, was the only solution, even if we had to downclimb all the way because most of the pitons and rappel points were under the ice.

The descent was a fight to survive. In wild winds, snowstorm and cold, we rappelled as often as we could on our 50-meter damaged rope. On January 21 at two A.M. we had completed the descent and found shelter in a nearly totally covered snow cave.

With first light we started for Base Camp. We reached it by ten o'clock and only congratulations and the excitement of our friends made us realize that we had succeeded on the face. Even though we had not been able to continue up the Maestri route to the summit, we had climbed the south face. We knew it was the most difficult climb we had ever done. We were even more delighted with the judgment of connaisseur Jim Bridwell, who declared that we had climbed the most difficult route yet done in Patagonia.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Patagonia, Argentina

NEW ROUTE: Cerro Torre, 3128 meters, 10,263 feet, South Face to its junction with the Maestri route reached on January 20, 1988 (Janez Jeglič, Silvo Karo).