

Mount Saint Elias— Southwest Buttress

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In Memory of Miroslav Šmid

I FIRST SAW MOUNT SAINT ELIAS as I was ascending Mount Logan in 1991. The plan to climb this magnificent peak developed slowly. As the highest coastal mountain, it would have been intriguing to climb it, by fair means, directly from sea level from the edge of the ocean at Icy Bay. In the end, however, the route won out which the International Boundary Survey Party had pioneered in 1913 but not completed.

I also knew Paul Claus very well; he is the specialized glacier pilot for this region. This offered us the best solution to the transport problems with the long distances and difficult weather conditions.

I was closely bound to Miroslav Šmid, called “Mira,” by a fifteen-year-long friendship. We had ventured together in the Pamir, the Alps, the Himalaya and in his own Czech technically-difficult sandstone towers. He was to be our group’s guest of honor. At the beginning of May, we all met in Anchorage and began a giant birthday party, which continued three days later on the Nebesna Glacier. Mira’s birthday and mine were only three days apart and collectively we were 99 years old.

But the Nebesna Glacier does not flow off Saint Elias. Why were we there? I first informed Mira and my other friends when we were on the glacier. Paul Claus had simply set us off on the northeast side of Mount Blackburn so that we could acclimatize. Such spontaneous ideas are completely in keeping with Mira’s way of thinking. Enchanted, he pulled out of his pack a pitcher filled with fruit salad for our first “tent dinner.”

That first night in the tents, a raw wind reminded us that we were in Alaska and parties were over. We spent several days on the summit ridge of Rime Peak and quickly got used to life at 12,000 feet. The steep west ridge of Atna Peak fascinated us. Not having enough ice tools for all of us to climb together, we scaled the mountain in two goes. The first to set off were Mira, Reto Rüesch and Ueli Bula, each with two ice tools apiece, while the rest of us slept in. We watched from the tents as our friends got to the summit. We quickly got under way to meet them on the shoulder so that we too could climb the steep ridge. The others’ sparkling eyes told us that this climbing style was good. With fine weather and excellent ice, our second crew was soon on the summit and soon back

PLATE 7

Photo by Ruedi Homberger

ATNA PEAK (left) and RIME PEAK
(right). High Camp was on the col
between them. Ascents were by
skyline ridges.



PLATE 8

Photo by Miroslav Smid

**Bula and Rüesch on the West Ridge
of ATNA PEAK.**



where we had left our skis. In my group were Hanspeter Gredig, my son Urs and I. We were elated by our success and by the style of the climb.

Paul Claus was scheduled to pick us up in two days. Was there still time for Blackburn? Some thought so and others not.

Ueli, Hanspeter and I were the optimists and immediately skied down, over the pass and across to the foot of the northeast spur. The spur seemed to be a safe ski route. Avalanches poured off the séracs to the right and the left of the spur. We camped at 10,000 feet. The next day, we wound our way through all the crevassed areas, usually on skis, up to 14,750 feet. From there, it was easy on foot, but on very hard snow. We got to the 16,390-foot summit at five P.M. and climbed and skied back to camp at ten P.M. The following morning, we were back in camp just in time to board Claus' Cessna for his lodge in the Chitina valley. His family spoiled us with luxury, but we were ready the next morning to be set down on the Columbus Glacier northwest of Saint Elias.

Scarcely had the roar of the plane floated off into silence when the mountains disappeared into the clouds. In still gray weather the next day, Mira and Urs did a masterful job of reconnoitering a good route through the icefall. The rest of us played pack donkey. Soon all the necessary material was on the upper plateau and we were thrilled by our first glimpse of the hidden southwest face of Saint Elias. The view from this 13,500-foot plateau is fantastic. To the south, we saw the sea of clouds over the Gulf of Alaska. To the north the Bagley Icefields stretched out to infinity.

But our attention was also drawn to the blank ice that would make our ascent more difficult. Our route had already been climbed twice: in 1978 by Japanese and in 1979 by an American party, both with fixed-rope technique. We hoped to do a variation without fixed lines. We had a total of six ice tools which we had to divide up in some fashion. I would gladly have given mine to Mira, but he forced his axe onto me with the words, "Old friend, you first! Then we'll see."

I organized our ascent with my son Urs and Reto Rüesch. We planned to set Camp I at about 14,100 feet above the first steep step, somewhat to the right in the face. From there, we would make a rapid summit attempt with little gear. The weather was gray and windy, hardly inviting. We got to our tiny niche, which we called the "Eagle's Nest," using all our tricks.

The weather improved somewhat, but we seemed infinitesimal in this enormous mountain world. Still at night, we front-pointed upward, each with two ice tools, each of us concentrating and with good rhythm. Each step upward had to be such that we could later come down the same way. To meet any situation, we had a rope, but we didn't use it; it would take much too much time to belay. I had learned that style from Mira. He was a master at overcoming psychological barriers and personal weaknesses. He took pleasure in what we were doing, sitting down there in the tent with our other friends, with two rest days forced on him. This limit of equipment, only one ice tool per person, fitted his philosophy. To make a great climb with a minimum of gear was a great challenge. To break the bonds of our over-civilized world and to trust to one's

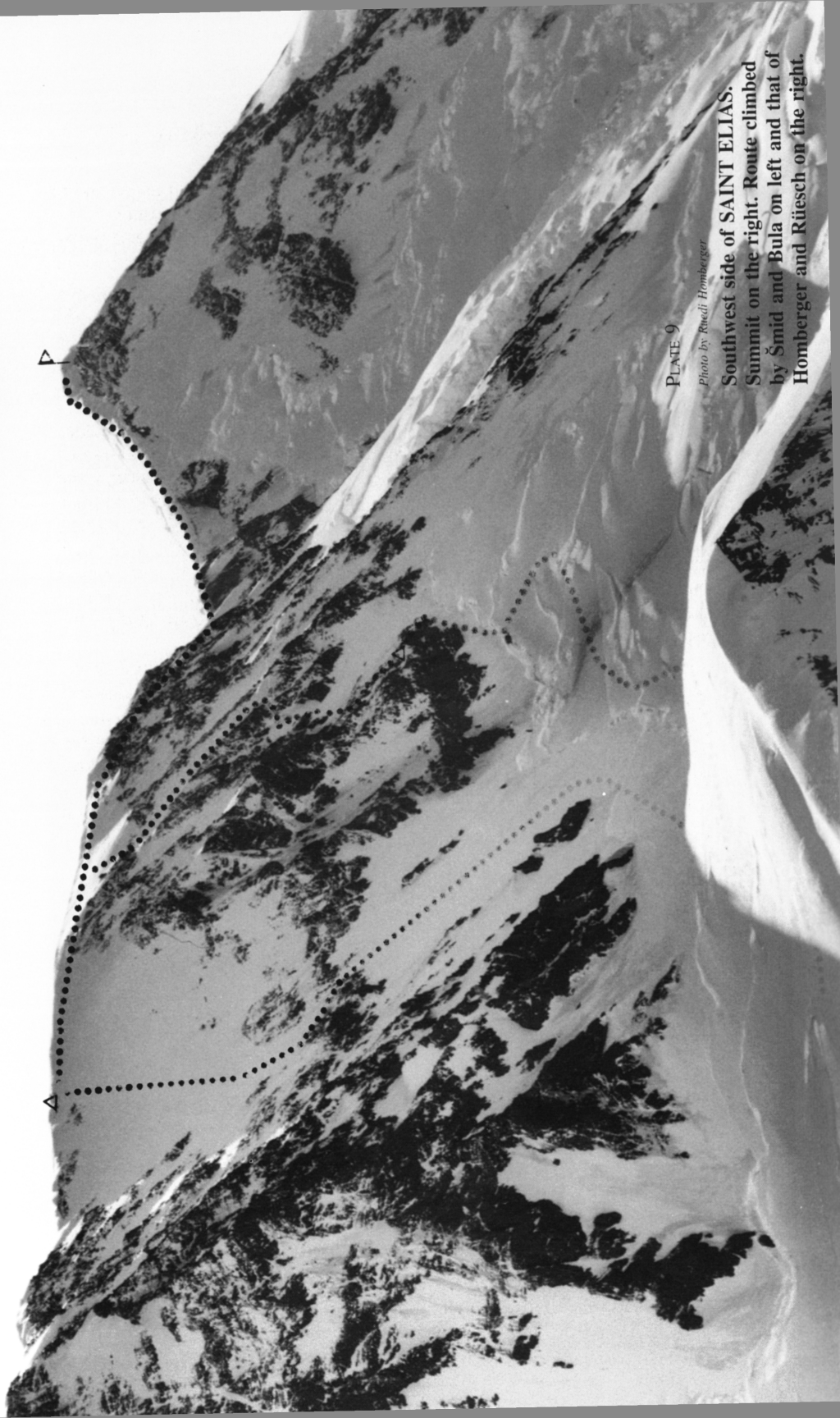


PLATE 9

Photo by Ruedi Homberger

Southwest side of SAINT ELIAS.

Summit on the right. Route climbed by Šmid and Bula on left and that of Homberger and Rüesch on the right.



own abilities was a major goal for him. And also to shove us ahead and to suppress any personal egotism was the true proof of his comradeship.

This situation gave us enormous strength. We jubilantly shook hands on the summit of Mount Saint Elias at eleven A.M. on May 25. The view into the depths, 18,000 feet below us, at the Tyndall Glacier and Icy Bay was overwhelming, but a rising block of clouds counseled a rapid descent. That same evening, we were back down, ready to hand over our valuable ice tools. Our friends were almost more pleased with our summit success than we. Mira embraced us so hard that we could hardly breathe.

The next day, Ueli Bula and Mira set off. Their tactics were different. They climbed the face in a direct line to the left of our route to the top of the shoulder. There, at 16,400 feet, they set up their bivouac tent, hoping to get to the summit and back more rapidly. Wind and cloud made their night on the shoulder a true test, but on May 27 they reached the summit at six A.M. in biting cold weather.

Hale and hearty, we were all back in camp and had only to ski down to the Columbus Glacier. After a nine-day adventure on Saint Elias, we were flown back to the green of Alaskan spring. We were certainly one of the happiest mountaineering parties in all Alaska. We had carried out our whole project, thanks to excellent weather, good tactics and all the best of comradeship. We were already forging plans for next year.

Most of us had to return to Switzerland. Mira stayed on in Alaska. In June, he climbed Hunter, Denali and Foraker. He wrote me about his enchantment with his climbs and happy times. In August, he traveled to the Yosemite in California. Belaying himself, he was soloing the Old Chimney Route on the Lost Arrow. For some reason which remains unclear, he fell to his death one pitch below the Notch. We could hardly believe the tragic news. A marvelous climber and companion was no more. But his philosophy, his thoughts about genuine alpinism and his style will live on.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Wrangell and Saint Elias Mountains, Alaska.

ASCENTS: Rime Peak, 3883 meters, 12,741 feet, East Ridge, May 14, 1993 (whole party).

Atna Peak, 4225 meters, 13,860 feet, West Ridge, May 16, 1993 (whole party).

Mount Blackburn, 4995 meters, 16,390 feet, Northeast Spur, May 17-18, 1993 (R. Homberger, Bula, Gredig).

Mount Saint Elias, 5488 meters, 18,008 feet, Southwest Face (on the right), May 24-25, 1993 (R. and U. Homberger, Rüesch); Southwest Face (center directly to shoulder), May 26-27, 1993 (Šmid, Bula).

PERSONNEL: Miroslav Šmid, *Czech*; Ueli Bula, Urs Homberger, Ruedi Homberger, Reto Rüesch, *Swiss*; Hanspeter Gredig, *Belgian*.