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OUR AACZ GREENLAND PIONEER

Compiling the Jahresbericht of the Academic Alpine Club of Zurich can be a thankless task. “We can’t publish the promised report,” fumed its editor two years before the First World War, “because H. Hoessli is too lazy to write it up and says we should just read the NZZ articles.”

Lazy or not, Hans Hössli MD did have a tale to tell. In the autumn of 1912, he and his companions had just returned to Switzerland after making what was only the second successful crossing of Greenland’s icecap.

As the expedition’s doctor, Hössli could be proud that everyone had come through safe and sound. They’d covered 640 kilometres in just 31 days, yet this was more than a sporting feat. “We can be satisfied with our scientific results,” wrote Alfred de Quervain, their leader, pointing to the trove of meteorological and topographical data they’d brought back.

Weather was, in fact, de Quervain’s profession. After studying natural sciences in Bern and Paris, he became adjunct-director in 1906 of what would later become MeteoSwiss. His first visit to Greenland in 1909 showed him that serious work remained to be done there. A better understanding of the island’s upper atmosphere would help to explain Europe’s weather systems. Besides, the icecap was still largely unexplored.

Indeed, nobody had succeeded in skiing right across Greenland since Fridtjof Nansen in 1888, although several explorers had managed to lose their lives or digits in forays

since. When de Quervain proposed a longer, more northerly traverse line than Nansen’s, experts warned that he was biting off more than he could chew.

Moreover, this privately financed venture would have to be light and fast, to avoid the need to overwinter in Greenland. This would mean starting from the more populated west coast, then navigating with exquisite precision to a pre-placed cache of supplies. This awaited them on the sparsely settled east coast, at a spot where the map could not be trusted. If they didn’t find the depot, nobody would ever hear of them again.

As a scholar and a risk-taker, de Quervain looked for like-minded companions. Besides Hössli, these were Karl Gaule, an ETH-trained engineer, and Roderich Fick, an architect. A supporting party mustered three additional scientists, who would stay on the west coast and make weather observations. One of these, Wilhelm Jost, a physicist-turned-glaciologist, was a member of the Academic Alpine Club of Bern.

For his part, Hössli was impeccably qualified. His father was a doctor in St Moritz who’d served many years as the president of the Swiss Alpine Club’s Bernina section. Having himself passed the state medical examinations in 1908, Hössli worked in Basel for Professor Fritz de Quervain, the meteorologist’s brother, and later pursued studies in surgical orthopaedics for a “Habilitation” in Zurich. Equally to the point, his CV featured an impressive roster of alpine climbs and first ascents. He’d accomplished

four new routes just in the summer of 1903, two with the hard-climbing railroad engineer Paul Schucan, a leading light of the AACZ – whose cigarillo-chomping portrait adorns the kitchen wall in our Fondei hut – and two more with Christian Klucker, the veteran guide from Val Fex.

As de Quervain said, “In Hössli, I appreciated above all, besides his skills as an alpinist, his medical and surgical knowledge, which turned out to be very helpful.” Yet that, as it turned out, was scarcely half of the doctor’s eventual contribution to their joint success.

To weld his crew together, de Quervain sent them to the Engadine in winter. Given their alpine experience, they took this shake-down trip in their stride. Kayaking was another matter: a practice session on Lake Zurich ended ignominiously after Gaule and Fick went swimming and had to be rescued.

This was not the only “x” in de Quervain’s plans. To get across Greenland during the short arctic summer, they’d need dogs to haul their sledges. Man-hauling them, as Nansen did (after his party had to prematurely eat their pony), would be too slow. But none of them knew how to drive dogs.

Breaking their steamer journey up Greenland’s west coast in late April 1912, the traverse party gave themselves barely a month to learn this difficult art. Instructed by David Ohlsen, a local Greenlander, they soon got to grips with the basics: “If the dog on the right side of the team doesn’t want to pull, don’t hit the one on the left.”

Alas, practice did not make perfect. Learning how to wield a whip like a Greenlander hurt them more than it did the hounds. They were appalled and intimidated by a dog pack’s everyday savagery. But then de Quervain had an extraordinary stroke of luck. His expedition doctor turned out to have an unusual talent for dog-handling.

By default, Hössli also became the specialist in patching up the sledge gear. This skill would prove crucial, as, once on the icecap, the dogs would chew up their harnesses and traces whenever they got the chance. The party ran out of spares half-way across the icecap; after that, their success, not to say their lives, depended on Hössli’s ability to improvise with whatever he had on hand.

We fast-forward to Midsummer’s Day, or thereabouts. A photo shows the traverse party established on the icecap, taking leave from the support group – the expedition doctor, a gentle smile on his face, as in most other photos of him, sits underneath the Swiss flag, flown from an ice-axe.

From then on, the four dog-sledders would be on their own. With the benefit of hindsight, de Quervain would appraise their chances as follows: “On the one hand, we took great risks. But on the other, we were so exact in devising and working out our preparations that perhaps some interesting but avoidable situations did not occur. Such would have been sensational and not to the credit of a serious undertaking.” At the time, though, he was asking himself what could possibly go wrong. The answer came the very next day,

when two of the sledges broke through thin ice into a glacier lake, complete with dogs and drivers. Only Hössli's team escaped this "summer-bath", thanks to some adroit dog-handling by its driver.

Fortunately, all could be retrieved. The sleeping bags stayed dry in their waterproof packing and – to the credit of this serious undertaking – de Quervain had arranged for the all-important supply of matches to be welded into tins and dispersed between the sledges. His chronometer, vital for navigation, did get waterlogged, but he managed to fix it.

As the expedition settled into a routine, their doctor took on the additional role of quartermaster. As de Quervain records: "An iron law, whose guardian was Hössli, assigned each one of us his daily ration, measured to the gram and the millimetre. With our cheese alone was he less pitiless. Making an exception to the rule, Hössli distributed it exponentially, calculated on the portion left over. Only on our arrival at the east coast depot – although I am getting ahead of myself here – did the asymptotic cheese curve, owing to our appetites, suddenly drop to zero."

The iron law also prescribed 40 grams per man per day of salted Danish butter and 125 grams of tinned milk. Trail food included chocolate, dried apples and plums. As on most polar expeditions of the day, the dietary mainstay was pemmican, a mixture of ground-up beef and fat that tasted like soap or, as others said, mixed-up sawdust and Vaseline.

Pemmican fuelled the twenty-nine dogs too. These soon came to recognise the genial doctor as their chief provider and advocate. When, every morning, he crawled out of the tent to relieve himself, the dogs used to salute him by rousing themselves from their beds of snow and raising their own hind legs in unison. Or so Roderich Fick later recalled.

Hössli may have contributed yet more to the team's success. As in any hard-driven enterprise, a head of interpersonal pressures built up. On de Quervain's birthday, Gaule led the way to the celebrations holding aloft an ice-axe and a dog-whip – the latter to symbolise their leader's management style.

As far as history relates, Hössli took no part in this demonstration. Just as he was best able to pacify the riotous dogs, so he may have used these eirenic skills to heal rifts between his human companions. The saintly Edward Wilson, likewise a doctor, had played a similar role in Captain Scott's ill-fated Terra Nova expedition, which was just then winding down in the Antarctic.

On July 18, Fick spotted a high mountain to the left of their track. This the expeditioners named for Professor F A Forel of Geneva, an eminent limnologist who had helped them to raise funds. There was no question of a closer inspection, of course. The first ascent of Mt Forel would await a later generation of academic alpinists from Zurich.

Three days later, they reached the eastern edge of the icecap. Hössli and Fick now looked after the camp – shooting some of the dogs and caching the meat in case of need – while de Quervain and Gaule went off in search of



A rest stop on the ice cap, Fick [left] and Hössli [right] (ETH Bildarchiv)



Expedition ship Fox (ETH Bildarchiv)

the supply depot. After a tense few days, they returned to report their success. For a time at least, Hössli could banish his ration book to a far corner of the tent.

It remained to manhandle the sledges down to the coast, and then to paddle southwards down the coast in the kayaks they'd picked up at the depot. On the last day of July, they met a trio of Eskimos, who helped them reach the nearest settlement.

On their way down Greenland's east coast, Hössli attended the inhabitants with medical care whenever asked, just as he had done on the inward journey up the west coast. The ministrations of their "Nakorsak" (doctor) helped to earn the party a special commendation from a local official: "This summer on June 9, 1912, members of the

expedition reached the inland ice sheet and the Greenlanders loved them, because they were like the Danes; we thank the Supreme Council of Switzerland for having sent us these brave men, and we thank the travellers for having been so good to the Greenlanders. For this, we have a high regard for the expedition. And I ask the Supreme Council to believe that we have treated the expedition well, although it was not Danish. Arsivik, August 16, 1912, Niels Magnusson".

Back in Switzerland, the expeditioners embarked on a busy programme of public lectures, illustrated with lantern slides. The income they raised from these engagements went to pay off the expedition's substantial debts. Probably for the same reason, de Quervain published his expedition book with admirable celerity.

Farewell to the support group at the start of the journey (ETH Bildarchiv)



Hössli too was prompt in writing up his observations. An article in the 1913 yearbook of the Swiss Ski Association deals with polar expeditions and their equipment. The Swiss Army, he suggested, might benefit from adopting the kamik, a soft Eskimo boot for snow work. In 1914, he came out with a scholarly article on the craniological measurements of Eskimo skulls, building on the ethnographical studies he'd made at remote settlements in East Greenland. The same year, he married Gertrud Haerle, also a doctor of medicine, and two children came along in the next few years.

His academical excursions did no harm to Hössli's professional career. In 1917, still in his early thirties, he was appointed medical director of the Universitätsklinik Balgrist in Zurich, a top orthopaedic hospital. Just eight

months later, the young doctor was dead, a victim of the 1918–19 influenza outbreak. His expedition companion Karl Gaule died during the tail-end of the same epidemic. Within a decade, de Quervain's traverse team had lost half its members.

A century later, amid our own pandemic, an exhibition at the Swiss National Museum in Zurich has revived the memory of de Quervain's achievements. As before, the doctor's contribution to the expedition's success remains understated. It probably doesn't help that the AACZ Jahresbericht's editor never did receive that personal expedition report. In its place, then, we offer this belated tribute to "H. Hoessli", our Greenland pioneer.

Martin Hood

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