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Autor: Barth, Karl

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1965 The Year of the Alps

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE MOUNTAINS

by KARL BARTH

An unusual jubilee celebration

On 26th July 1941, while war swirled through the rest of Europe, a group of aspiring mountain-climbers met for the first school session at Meiringen. Apparently the comradely spirit so typical for mountaineering groups was already much in evidence at the Institute; Arnold Glatthard, who had founded the unique institution and today is still its Director as well as financial and spiritual mentor, has kept a diary dating from those early days, in which the following cheerful bit of doggerel appears, penned by a young woman from Berne:

In Life we're often " on the ropes " —
And in more ways than one!
But roping-up in Glatthard's school
Is my idea of fun.

In the past twenty-five years, countless women from all over the world have followed this Bernese girl's example and have come again and again to be guided by Arnold Glatthard through the world of the high peaks. (The school has grown since its beginnings, now has six chief instructors and many assistants — all of them well-trained and experienced mountain guides.) In addition to the more aggressively athletic women who are in no respect inferior to their masculine counterparts in mountaineering prowess, there are others who, wisely recognizing their own shortcomings in either physical strength or in training and experience, confine themselves to less difficult climbs or simply to mountain hikes.

Famous personalities in the Rosenlaui Valley

The Rosenlaui Valley, on whose slopes and ridges the Institute of Mountaineering carries out its work, has seen the presence of many famous people. There have been those who learned to know the true face of the mountains for the first time there, and also those who have come to improve their abilities and learn the latest techniques of modern mountaineering.

Meiringen lies about 12 miles above Interlaken. At the time of the founding of Glatthard's Institute. Interlaken was Headquarters for General Henri Guisan, then Commander-in-Chief of the Swiss Army. The General convinced of the importance of keeping the populace in top physical condition, gave his wholehearted support to the new school from the beginning. For that reason, there were quite a few high-ranking Swiss officers among the students enrolled in the Institute's first Beginner's Course — and Glatthard still recalls with a smile the difficulties which some of those officers encountered in " getting off the ground ".

Among the more experienced climbers who have attended advanced courses at the Institute has been Sir John Hunt, leader of the successful British Himalaya Expedition of 1953 (which numbered Sherpa Tensing and Sir Edmund Hillary among its members). Perhaps the best known contemporary name of all among the many graduates of the Institute of Mountaineering is the U.S. Secretary of Defence, Robert McNamara, who has been to Meiringen twice with his two sons.

The Institute caters to the most diverse needs. Each year it offers no less than five distinct courses: a basic course in rock- and ice-techniques for beginners; an intermediate course for graduates of the beginners' group; special courses in the latest techniques for advanced students; assorted mountain and glacier tours, and a cross-country through the Bernese Oberland. Special programmes are arranged according to demand, such as the popular tour of the Bergell on the Swiss-Italian border, and a climbing expedition on Corsica.

Worth looking into

Meiringen does not partake of the glitter which surrounds many Swiss resort towns. This does not mean, however, that it leads a wallflower existence. The citizens of that community proudly point out that, unlike most inhabitants of the Bernese Oberland, who are descendants of allemannic tribes, they are descended from a tribe of Goths who came to the area over the Bruenig Pass from Lucerne. Italianate influences were later added to these origins, when Meiringen became the starting point for the great Alpine crossing over the Grimsel. And in the era of horse-drawn coaches the town was a regular stop on the route, where horses were changed and from which fresh teams drew the coaches on over the Grimsel Pass to Gletsch and Brig.

Thus the Meiringers are not accustomed to living a withdrawn life. With a rather condescending sidelong glance at their compatriots in better-known valleys of the Bernese Oberland, they lay claim to having discovered and conquered the surrounding mountains quite by themselves, without waiting for adventurous foreigners to come and do it for them. And history seems to confirm their claim.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the international mountaineering community feels itself so at home in Meiringen, is because of the town's very special atmosphere. At any rate, Meiringen does not blow its own horn a great deal. It waits for others to come and discover it — an experience which is well worth the effort.

This relatively modest attitude may account for the scarcity of stories and anecdotes revolving around the town. However, during a short visit I did happen to hear a delightful one: It seems that a climbing party had gone all the way up the Kingspitze, which is no mean mountaineering achievement. Among the party was the Director of the Indian School of Athletics at Darjeeling, a colonel in the Indian Army. The climb had been a hard one — the last part of the Kingspitze is a vertical wall 3,000 feet high — and despite his long years of climbing experience, the Indian colonel found that his feet were hurting severely when he reached the top. On the advice of a comrade he removed one of his heavy shoes. He then made a small inadvertent movement —and the shoe disappeared into the abyss. The sound of its striking the rocks 3,000 feet below came faintly to the ears of the party on their lofty perch. And to this day, the colonel counts himself fortunate to have been able to make the descent safely, with one foot wrapped heavily in elastic bandages, socks and miscellaneous pieces of wool. Perhaps this is part of the reason why a group of Indian climbers is sent to Meiringen each year to learn improvisation in the mountains!

[S.N.T.O.]