

The escapades of a grand old man

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1977)**

Heft 1736

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692488>

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snow and ice. Everybody stops here for a breather, and to take some refreshments and drinks.

As we rose, some of the climbers found the breathing more difficult and had to make a short halt at intervals. The older I get, the less that seems to worry me. Soon we passed the spot where two climbers were killed last year by falling séracs of ice. At 8.30 a.m., I planted my feet firmly on the platform outside the observatory. The weather was well nigh perfect, visibility enormous, with the sky virtually cloudless everywhere. The view was overpowering, and defies description; in the west, the great Mont Blanc dominating all, more to the South-West, the great mountains of the Dauphiné, while south of Turin, the Monte Viso was plainly visible. Nothing but mountains with enormous masses of snow everywhere!

I took a good number of photos (transparencies) representing good material for my illustrated talks in Palma de Mallorca during the coming winter.

After refreshments, we started traversing the snow ridge leading to the well-known Zumsteinspitze, 4,561 m. Fairly easy going, except for the last 100 metres, when the ridge gets steeper and narrower. The last 20 metres, normally bare rock, were covered with snow and sometimes underlying ice. Crampons, which I did not have on this occasion, would have been of advantage.

On our descent to the Gnifetti hut,

we conquered two other "Viertausender", the Ludwigshöhe and Parrotspitze, but had to by-pass the Balmenhorn, as the snow was very soft by now, and impeded progress. Anyhow, I had already taken numerous photos of the statue of Christ some years earlier.

My return to the hut caused a little stir. My guide spoke about my excellent performance, especially at 74, but the tourists present would not believe that I was so old; some mentioned that if you are of such an age, you are either grey or bald, and you do not have a big mop of dark-brown hair.

A VETERAN

I had a rather different experience in 1946, when I became the proud bearer of a veteran's badge of the Swiss Alpine Club, after 25 years' membership. In those days, many younger members of the Alpine Club, pointing to my veteran's badge, commiserated with me, saying that now that I was getting old, I would no doubt leave the more difficult climbs and go in for small excursions.

We enjoyed our 52 days' stay in Macugnaga very much. Most of its inhabitants, owners of hotels, bars and restaurants, or sports shops, guides, etc., are of Swiss origin, Valsers, having emigrated to Italy several hundred years ago. Most of them still speak the Swiss dialect, and have kept to many Swiss customs.

In 1976 and this year, we had to

switch over to the other hotel in Borca di Macugnaga, which is both cheap and excellent. The previous hotel, Passo del Turlo, was no longer regarded as safe against fire by the Italian authorities. Its owners gave up, as it would have been too costly to rebuild.

THE SMUGGLING "TRADE"

Each summer, one is reminded that in the past, and even today, smuggling is quite an industry in this area. One former smuggler, interviewed by an Italian newspaper, stated that he had spent more nights on alpine passes to smuggle than in bed. During the last war, Italian smugglers took over the passes to Switzerland, cycles and rice, while in return they brought back cigarettes and certain foodstuffs. On the Mondelli pass, about 3,000 m high, each August a ceremony is held here, assisted by Priests, in honour of smugglers who have perished in snow and ice or avalanches. A small monument in their honour was erected on this pass some years ago, and this summer a cross was added. The officiating priests point out, however, that they do not condone smuggling, but that they are naturally sorry for those who lost their lives. Over the same pass, British prisoners in Italy during the last war, or particularly R.A.F. men who had to parachute down in Italy, were taken to Switzerland, thus regaining their liberty.

So ended a memorable holiday, and I am already planning for the next.

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