

STRBSKE PLESO, SLOVAKIA

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THE HIGH TATRA IN 1938.

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IN July 1938, some ten weeks before the Munich settlement, I paid a brief visit to the Tatra Mountains in Czechoslovakia, and though I and the friends who were with me did but a little, very mild, mountaineering, it may be of interest to recall and record some of the happenings of those days when crisis followed crisis and when the very prospect of another Hitler speech set nearly the whole world trembling.

One of these recurrent crises developed during the latter half of May before the plans for the journey had been completed. This crisis, however, soon blew over and we continued with our arrangements, undeterred; nevertheless, many of our friends regarded us as lunatics about to leap into a volcano. The steamship "Prinses Juliana" sailed from Harwich at noon on Saturday, July 9, with our party aboard bound for Flushing, *en route* to Berlin. Of the long and tedious journey it will suffice to mention that the German frontier station of Bentheim was reached soon after 11.30 P.M. and that there two uniformed officials carefully inspected all our reading matter, which included the *Strand Magazine*, the *Wide World*, the *Windsor*, and some newspapers; they found nothing that was hurtful to the Nazi cause, but evidently were not quite satisfied because, as soon as we had left the compartment to visit the Currency Control they returned to have a further look and then finally decided that we and all our possessions were quite harmless.

The train drew into the Friedrichstrasse Station in Berlin shortly after 7 o'clock on Sunday morning. A taxi took us to the Hermes Hotel, a gloomy looking place reminiscent of Manchester, but conveniently near the railway station. Most of Sunday was spent in sightseeing, always an arduous and tiring pastime and one which was made no easier by lack of

sleep, by hot sunshine, and hard pavements. A short pause for strawberries and cream at a café in the Tiergarten gave us a restful interlude during the afternoon ; this was a bright and pleasant spot with tables set out among trees and flowers beside a lake. It had not, however, escaped the blight of Hitlerism ; on a placard near the entrance gate was written " Juden unerwünscht "—Jews not wanted—a sign of intolerance that left a nasty taste. Berlin was a grim, unfriendly place full of uniforms and swastika badges ; interesting, yes, but far from enjoyable. The next morning we caught the 6.45 A.M. train southwards to Breslau and travelled thence by connecting trains to Strba, which is the rail-head for Strbske Pleso, the best known of the High Tatra resorts and our chosen stopping-place for the next nine days.

The scenery along the railway was of little interest until the Czechoslovak frontier had been crossed, and by the time the finest scenery was available—along the upper reaches of the Vah Valley—it was almost too dark to see anything. There was certainly no shortage of food in the German dining-cars, though misunderstandings of language and customs brought some surprises. For breakfast in the Breslau train I ordered " zwei gekochte Eier " and expected two boiled eggs, instead of which the waiter brought me a glass tumbler containing a small quantity of yellow liquid, probably the contents of two eggs either raw or only very lightly " gekochte " ; I held my breath and let the whole lot slip down quickly and untasted—Ugh !

During meals the guard walked solemnly through the carriage, slightly raising his right arm after every six or seven paces and uttering a subdued " Heil Hitler ! " At Bohumin, the first station in Czechoslovakia, a *Hamburg Illustrated Weekly* belonging to one member of our party was confiscated by the Customs ; it contained, among other things, a series of photographs purporting to prove that dire economic distress was rampant in the Sudeten areas, a cartoon which represented Czechoslovakia as a troublesome porcupine, and an illustrated article on the Italian navy, which was described as the world's mightiest !

On arrival at Strba, at about 8.30 P.M., we found the bus



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for Strbske Pleso waiting outside the station, and some thirty minutes later the last lap of the journey had ended at the Mory Hotel.

Strbske Pleso, from which the Mory is a little more than half a mile distant, stands on the shore of a small lake surrounded by spruce forest, 4,300 feet above sea level, with the main mass of the High Tatra $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles away to the north; it is what the guide books call a "climatic resort" and is made up of two or three fair-sized modern hotels, some guest houses, and a few small shops.

The High Tatra, or in Czech "Vysoke Tatry," are still so little known in Britain that a few facts and figures may not be amiss. They constitute the highest and most rugged portion of the great Carpathian mountain chain, and form part of the frontier between Czechoslovakia and Poland; they extend as a continuous, serrated, granite ridge roughly 12 miles in length measured as the crow flies, shattered and precipitous on both sides, and with many formidable branch ridges thrust out to north and south. There are no really easy passes over this mountain barrier, which at its lowest point is not much less than 7,000 feet above sea level, and at its highest—the Gerlach—8,737 feet.

The mountains rise steeply from the Liptov plain, which has itself an average height of 2,300 feet; the lower slopes are enveloped in spruce forest up to an altitude of approximately 4,700 feet, where the spruce gives way to an impenetrable entanglement of scrub-pine, which effectively prevents any straying from the beaten tracks. Above the tree line—that is above 6,000 feet or thereabouts—between the bare outstretched arms of the mountains, lie deep valleys carved out by primeval glaciers, studded with many small lakes and, in summer-time, carpeted with wild flowers; these high secluded valleys are indeed one of the great delights of the Tatra range.

The weather during the first three days of our stay at Strbske Pleso was disappointing and at times most depressing. On our first morning there the weather was dull, and most of us were content merely to potter about, but in the afternoon the sun came out and, thus encouraged, two of us walked up

to Popradske Pleso, a lake three miles away towards the mountains. For two miles the path to Popradske Pleso passes through tall spruce forest with an undergrowth of juniper and bilberry, but along the last mile the forest is more open and there are grand views of the surrounding heights.

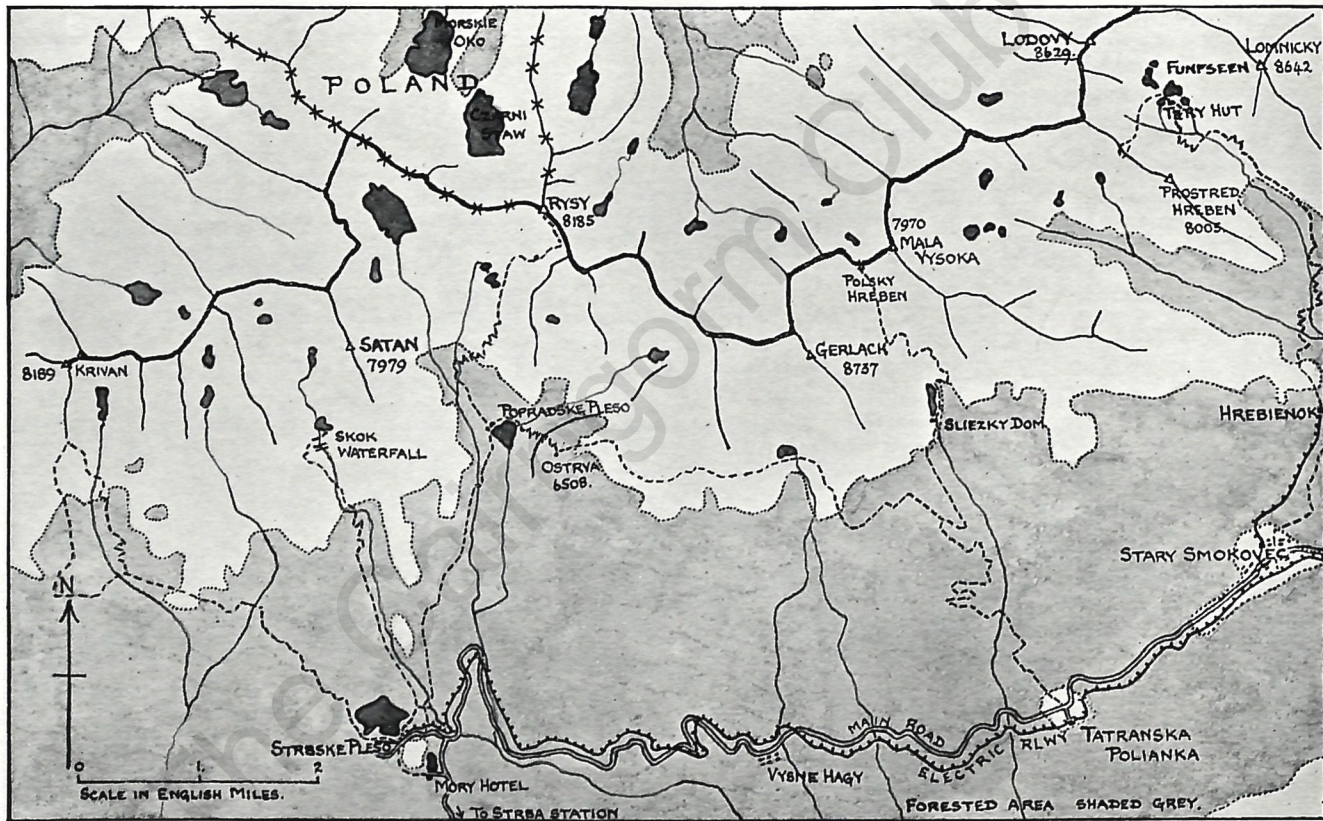
From Popradske Pleso a track leads up a very steep slope to a saddle called Ostrva (6,508 feet) from which there is an extensive view. We climbed up this track, an affair of countless zigzags, loose stones, and patches of slushy snow, and in the end our energy was unrewarded; a chilly wind was blowing across the col and the view was mostly obscured by clouds, so we returned to the lake and called at the near-by mountain hut for a drink. This hut, with many of the finest peaks of the Tatra close at hand, would make a much better base for climbers than Strbske Pleso; it is a large wooden building close to the lake shore with sleeping accommodation for 150 persons. To me it looked rather shabby and badly in need of minor repairs and a coat of fresh paint.

On our table at dinner this evening was a vase filled with wild flowers and with them a card bearing the inscription, "Greetings from Czechoslovakian children, Peter, Johnny, and Tania." Each evening after dinner the three children, who could all speak a little English, used to come over to our table for a chat before being sent off to bed.

Plump little Johnny, aged ten, was always bubbling over with conversation, but his mother fidgeted nervously and looked terribly anxious whenever he made some especially virulent remark about Hitler—"that terrible man." Obviously the shadow of the Gestapo was already falling across their country.

The next day, despite threatening weather, we set out to walk up the Mlynica valley to the Skok waterfall and lake, and perhaps farther. There is an easy way-marked track all the way to the lake which, incidentally, is little more than a small pool, lying in a broad stony corrie above a high rock terrace over which the Mlynica stream cascades.

When we reached the lake the surrounding mountains were completely shrouded in heavy rain clouds, and it was not worth our while to go farther. A species of monk's-hood



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(*aconitum*) was in flower beside some of the streamlets near the lake. This was an unexpected discovery. In the Alps it prefers far richer soils and has a special fondness for the vicinity of cow-sheds.

Meanwhile the weather went from bad to worse. Thursday morning was dismal, a heavy drizzle was falling and the whole countryside was wrapped in thick mist; indoors everything that one touched felt damp and clammy. After an early lunch I walked down through the dripping rain-soaked forest to Strba Station and from there along the high road to the village, but as both Strba and a neighbouring village were visited again a few days later in perfect weather, no more need be said at the moment and we will return to the hills without more ado.

In the late afternoon the sky and the mountain tops appeared above the mist, so, hopefully and after much studying of maps, an early start in the morning for Stary Smokovec and the Tery Hut was decided upon. In the morning the sun was shining brightly and it continued to shine throughout the day. Mrs H, a lady from Bucharest, joined us on this trip; it was a sign of the times that she—a Jewess—had first sounded one of the lady members of our party as to whether the presence of one of her race might be embarrassing!

Having plodded up the steep road from Smokovec to the Sport Hotel at Hrebienok, we made a brief stop there for drinks and continued through thick forest into the Mala Studena Dolina—the Small Studena Valley. “Studena,” I believe, means “cold,” but on this occasion the valley was so far from being cold that every garment that could decently be discarded was soon stowed into our rucksacks. Until, at last, the track emerged from the forest into open country, little could be seen of either the valley itself or of the magnificent crags that enclose it, the latter culminating in the Prostrad Hreben (8,005 feet) on the west side, and the Lomnický (8,642 feet) on the east. After leaving the forest the track, for a mile or so, remains almost level, running through tussocks of heath and bilberry with, here and there along the valley near the stream, clusters of slender, sweet-scented

anemones and yellow auriculas ; it then ascends steeply to the Tery Hut, which stands on the rim of a high corrie overlooking the Studena valley and the Liptov plain beyond. Near the hut are five little lakes—the Fünfseen—which were now frozen over. After lunching at the hut, four of us, including Mrs H, scrambled up to the ridge forming the west wall of the corrie and perched ourselves on a rock pinnacle some 1,400 feet above the Fünfseen and slightly under 8,000 feet above sea level, with a fearsome overhang immediately below us. It was too cold to sit up there for long, for, although it was midsummer, the mountain peaks around us were all gleaming white with freshly fallen snow and looking magnificent against a background of blue sky and billowing white clouds. In the evening, back at Smokovec, a real bank-holiday-like crowd was massed on the station platform, and when the Strbske Pleso train arrived everyone made a simultaneous plunge for it and somehow struggled aboard. Then, after a few moments' pause for breath, fully half the passengers—all those bound for Tatranska Lomnica, for instance—suddenly realised that they were in the wrong train, and forthwith proceeded to fight their way off again !

The next expedition was to the Krivan (8,189 feet), the westernmost of the High Tatra peaks. The weather was perfect. Following a late start we made rapid progress along an easy path plainly way-marked in red. Unfortunately our faith remained blindly fixed in red way-marks until it became quite obvious from the lie of the land that we were astray, and then, too late, the map was produced and carefully studied. Comparison with a map acquired locally showed that the way-marks indicated on my map, an excellent one of German origin, were out of date ! To regain the correct track we should have had to retrace our steps for nearly a mile, and rather than do this it seemed better to try a short cut straight up an outlying spur of the Krivan, the top of which was within easy reach. A pair of hobby falcons were circling round this hill-top, playing together in the air ; watching them made us forget about way-marks and all other annoyances. Once on top it was soon apparent that the short



ANEMONE (*narcissiflora* L.), HIGH TATRA

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cut was going to be a long one. The spur along which the direct route to the Krivan now lay, was liberally coated with stones and boulders partially submerged in grass and had once, in addition to these, been covered with scrub-pine—*pinus montana*, or its equally vile variety *pinus mughus*—but this had been burnt and only the dried and bleached branches remained to form an appalling entanglement which nearly defeated us. The struggle through the pine-scrub wasted so much time that we had to turn back when still a thousand feet short of the Krivan summit.

On the way back—on the correct track this time—we met a cheery gentleman who spoke to us in Czech and tried hard to impart some interesting piece of information; he illustrated his remarks by drawing squiggles on the ground with his walking-stick, while we smiled and did our best to look intelligent. The general opinion was that he'd seen a snake! On Sunday morning at 4.20 A.M., after a breakfast of chocolate and oranges, we set out to climb the Rysy (8,185 feet), a mountain six miles away on the Polish frontier. As far as Popradske Pleso, which is roughly half-way between Strbske Pleso and the Rysy, the route to be followed was the same as that traversed by two of us the previous Tuesday afternoon. When we started the moon was shining above the dark forest in a cloudless sky, but within an hour the first shafts of sunlight were glinting on the mountain tops. At this early hour, when night is past and day has hardly yet begun, birds and animals are more confiding, and creatures which in the day-time hide themselves among the trees or skulk in the undergrowth come fearlessly into the open. In the forest we saw several fallow-deer, one of which was lying asleep in the undergrowth, and also a chamois climbing sure-footedly over rocks high above the trees; in the more open parts of the forest coal-tits, crested-tits, and willow-tits were darting to and fro among the trees, and nut-crackers—birds, slightly smaller than jackdaws, with dark-brown speckled plumage and long pointed beaks—hopped unconcernedly across the path ahead of us.

Yesterday someone at the hotel had seen a bear, so we all scanned the hill-sides most carefully, hoping that we might

also be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of one, but to-day none was to be seen.

Popradske Pleso was reached at 5.45 A.M., and by this time many people were walking along the track towards the Rysy; young lads and girls in shorts and heavy boots, gentlemen dressed as though they were walking to their offices in the city, and middle-aged women carrying umbrellas; few of those in the last two categories got very far up the mountain-side. The real climb began about a mile beyond Popradske Pleso where the track veered to the right and ascended steeply over rough stony ground to a little lake—the Zabié Pleso (6,300 feet). Among crags near the lake I found a small alpine plant—*Lloydia serotina*—which occurs in Great Britain only on the cliffs of the Devil's Kitchen in Snowdonia. By 7.30 A.M. we were in the refuge hut below the Vaha Pass, drinking weak tea flavoured with sugar and lemon. This hut has bunks for forty persons, and some of the occupants were just getting up when we arrived. While in the hut it was mentioned in general conversation that we were from Manchester and one Czech football enthusiast at once remarked, "Ah, yes, I know, Manchester City go down and Manchester United go up!"

The remainder of the climb was almost equally divided between a snowfield extending from the hut to the Vaha Pass—the col between the Rysy and the Velka Vysoka—and broken crags from there to the summit. We spent more than an hour on the summit enjoying the superb view and indulging in an orgy of photography.

By 10 o'clock heavy clouds were beginning to blow up from the east, and forty minutes later the blue sky had vanished and rain was falling in torrents. We hurried down to the shelter of the Popradske Pleso hut and stayed there for lunch. In the afternoon the weather improved and we meandered slowly back to the Mory Hotel. To my astonishment the head-waiter at the hotel asked me if any of us would like to have breakfast; half-past five in the afternoon is a strange hour for this meal, but as none of us had breakfasted in the morning we were still entitled to do so and seized the opportunity with gusto. During the evening a violent



VIEW FROM RYSY, CARPATHIANS

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thunder-storm broke over Strbske Pleso; the hotel was struck by lightning and, as a result, the main fuse was blown and all the electric lights temporarily extinguished. On Monday the weather was unsettled and, apart from a visit to Stary Smokovec and Hrebienok and to the waterfalls near by, very little was accomplished.

Tuesday was our last day out on the hills. The plan agreed upon was to go by taxi to Tatranska Polianka and to walk from there by way of the Sliezky Dom hut to the Polsky Hreben, and then climb the Mala Vysoka if the weather permitted. The taxi, ordered for 4.0 A.M., turned up three-quarters of an hour later, after we had almost given up hope of its arrival. I sat in front with the driver and suffered in silence what I thought a most terrifying performance; I had forgotten that the rule of the road in Czechoslovakia is (or was until March 15, 1939) the same as in Britain and imagined that the driver was taking all the hair-pin bends on the wrong side!

From Tatranska Polianka an uphill trudge of four miles brought us to the Sliezky Dom—pronounced something like Shlishky Doom—and it is a further two miles from there to the Polsky Hreben (7,243 feet). The latter is not a mountain peak but the pass between the Mala Vysoka (7,970 feet) on the east and the chain of heights to the west which curve southwards and culminate in the Gerlach (8,737 feet), the highest summit in the Tatra.

The last portion of the ascent was steep and required care, but fixed ropes were in position along the most awkward places. Below this part, in the rocky valley between the Sliezky Dom and the crags, we saw two chamois standing at the top of a steep slope of old hard-frozen snow; we watched them skip and slither to the bottom of the slope, and then, after a short rest, quietly walk up some scree beside the snow, step on to the top of the snow-slope and recommence their little frolic; they were completely absorbed in this game, and seemed quite unaware of our presence.

There was thick mist on the Hreben, and having climbed a short distance up the Mala Vysoka I decided that mist and soft snow made further progress inadvisable. We returned

to the hut, where the party divided, some going down to Tatranska Polianka and returning by train to Strbske Pleso, and some walking back by way of Ostrva and Popradske Pleso.

The next morning I received news from home of Manchester and its rain ; rain that had washed out the third Test Match—England *v.* Australia—at Old Trafford, without a ball having been bowled ! This day, July 20, was our last at Strbske Pleso, and had been specially reserved for a visit to Strba and one or two other villages down on the plain.

The morning bus took us down to the station, and we walked the two miles from there to Strba village, keeping to field paths wherever possible. The approach to the village is marred by a monstrous Bata shoe advertisement and by a group of new red-brick houses built in the twentieth-century council-esque style which conflicts horribly with the traditional local architecture. Most of the houses are built of wood on a stone foundation, and roofed with dark wooden slats ; a few houses are of stone or brick washed over with white, grey, or pink-coloured plaster. Behind the houses stand wooden sheds used for storage purposes, or for housing cattle. Strba possesses also two churches, a few small shops, and a pub. At the latter we had lunch.

Vys Suňava, another village we visited, is one of those places where time stands still ; there it is always twenty-eight minutes past ten ; year in and year out the four clocks on the tower of the little white church show this time, because their figures and hands are merely paint. Until an elderly man, sauntering up the street, blew three or four resounding toots on a battered trumpet the place was almost deserted. At the trumpet-call, however, many cows instantly appeared from between the houses on either side of the street ; it was a milking-time signal !

The two miles of rough and dusty road between Strba and Vys Suňava crosses an open, rolling countryside with few fences and no hedges, and trees only near the villages. The gentle undulations of the land, the bright sunshine and the cloud shadows, the narrow bands of ripening corn—oats, rye,



ASPECTS OF STRBA, SLOVAKIA

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and barley, alternating with strips of bright green flax and dark green potato plants—gave a rich variation of light and colour to the landscape. Wild gladioli, corn cockles, daisies, corn-flowers, campanulas, and vetches were growing in the cornfields. To the north, behind Strba, the peaks of the Tatra were almost lost in haze. As there was no convenient bus we had to walk all the way back to Strbske Pleso.

Our stay in the High Tatra was now over.

After dinner we said good-bye to our Czech friends, caught a bus to Strba Station, and travelled overnight to Prague. The homeward journey was broken in Prague for one day and a night, and in Dresden for an afternoon. In both places the time available was devoted mainly to sightseeing, souvenir buying, and to sheltering from heavy thunder showers. The long journey from Dresden to England was tiring and tedious and unenlivened by any events of special interest, save for our discovery, while crossing Holland, of a new profession—that of bird-scarer. In one of the Dutch cherry orchards a man was to be seen perched upon a specially constructed platform at the top of a tree, busily wielding a long stick with a rag tied to the far end, and with it scaring away any birds that ventured to assail the ripening fruit!

We landed in England in the late afternoon of Saturday, July 23. So ended a holiday in which interest and enjoyment had been ours in abundance, and I, and the friends who accompanied me, look forward to the time when, in happier days and perhaps in the not too distant future, it may again be possible to visit Czechoslovakia and the High Tatra.