

## THE POLISH MEET – JULY 1989

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How should this account start? Perhaps by introducing our leader, Peter-the-enigmatic-smile, and the members of his party, Chris-the-fore-and-aft-rucksacks, Fiona-the-sudden-husband...? No, perhaps not. But the very uncertainty goes with the uncertainty we all felt in approaching this new club venture. An expedition behind what at the time were still considerable shards of the iron curtain, to the domain of a régime in uncertain transition from an authoritarian past; what differences would that make? An expedition with a plan, once we arrived, closely organised by our hosts, the High Mountain Club of Rzeszów, with it seemed some concentration on climbing rather than walking; would those of us who go up hills without hardware find enough of our sort of ascent?

In the upshot there proved little to worry about on either score. The main visible signs of the political situation were the numbers of old election posters showing Lech Waleska with his arm round the shoulders of the local Solidarity candidate, and political graffiti on toilet doors instead of obscene ones. It clearly contributed, however, to our hosts' wish for a detailed plan, for they would plainly have been in trouble had we misbehaved, particularly by wandering across the border into Czechoslovakia, with whom relations were at that time strained. Also, as we found out, arrangements of all sorts took time to manoeuvre through the administrative system, and given the large numbers of people wanting to use a small mountain area (the Polish border with Czechoslovakia makes only a southward salient into the Tatras, and the whole Polish section forms no more than a broad strip across a 1:30,000 map sheet) arrangements are essential. On the other hand, the chances of the mountain, unrelated to politics, ensured that the careful plan couldn't in fact be followed, and the improvised rearrangements which our hosts had to spend much time in making left Peter, our main climbing member, underserved rather than the walkers.

But enough of generalities. The outward journey, thanks to Peter's efficient organisation, goes without hitch, and here is our party stacked in couchette berths on a trans-European train, passing phrase-books and cassettes to and fro, trying to acquire at least a few phrase of politeness in a language with spellings like *wchrzycz*. We reach Kraków, are greeted by our hosts waving little Rzeszów banners, and swept off to a "camping", i.e. camp-site, consisting in fact of a cluster of little A-frame chalets surrounding a central service block with a hotel part, a restaurant/coffee bar, and the plumbing. Too late by some way for a meal there, but the first appearance of what is to be a gastronomic leit-motif of the trip, a spread of open sandwiches rather elegantly created by our hosts, and tea Polish style (no milk, lots of sugar). From this beginning on our hosts took total responsibility for our costs, even to providing us with pocket money. On this basis, as a cultural exchange party, we were excused the normal requirement to change daily amounts of currency at the official rate, a great advantage since for

anything we did want to change the free market rate was many times better. Some embarrassment at accepting such largesse was assuaged by the realisation that we would be able to repay in kind on the return visit. It is very hard for Poles to acquire foreign currency.

Poles seem to be assiduous sightseers, and the first day was devoted to the sights of Kraków; the next we were to visit some nearby limestone outcrops offering short rock routes of all standards. But first we had to book our return couchettes, which it had proved impossible to do from Britain – even the outward bookings had only arrived, after much effort on Peter's part, on the very morning of our departure. To the office, then, of Orbis, the Polish tourist organisation, where a short queue led to information that five places were available in the Kraków office; the other two must be pursued to Warsaw or wherever. Information only; the actual doing of the deed was at the head of a long, long queue, estimated time three hours. Peter and Andrzej, the leader on the Polish side, had to wait, while the rest headed off for the limestone, with Fiona and Duncan to try to uphold the climbing honour of the club until Peter caught up. He never did. It was 6 p.m. before he reached the front of the queue (and triumphantly secured the seven places); meanwhile Fiona and Duncan did their best and succeeded in getting up a Grade 4 route (equivalent to V Diff), not greatly impressing Urszula, the main Rzeszów climber, who is said to lead up to Grade 7 (Hard VS?). For the walkers, just the stroll, admiring the limestone formations. The climbing is interestingly different from home granite; the footholds rounded and slippery, but lots of nicely undercut handholds where rain has dissolved tiny cavelets. Also there are firmly-lodged old pitons up the routes; chocks and nuts are not much used, it seems.

Next day the plan called for a move to a tented camp in the High Tatra. This central section is granite, Alpine in style, with lower, more rounded limestone sections to east and west. It has bears, some of whom have realised that where there are humans there is easy food. One campsite, colonised by a mother and cubs, had been closed, producing heavy pressure on the others, and no places to be had. So the first emergency change of plan; places were found in a quite different campsite, at the foot of the Western Tatras, as a base for some walking there. We installed ourselves in steadily deteriorating weather, hoped the tents wouldn't blow down in the night, and woke to steady rain and a general disposition to postpone the day. But two of our hosts were active, walked in to a refuge some way up into the hills, in the Chochołowska valley, and succeeded by this personal visit in negotiating places for us there, so still in intermittent rain we packed in. Here was where it became clear that Chris had adapted the maxim of the immortal Sam Small, and "said he'd best put on two rucksacks, he'd never get gear into one". One before and one behind, but he got on as well as any.

These refuges, set up and owned by the Tatra Society, were to be our homes for the central part of the visit. This one, uniquely, had public road access to a car-park part way up the valley, and a negotiable road, though not open to cars, for the rest of the way. Those who don't care to walk can get towed in on what is

at other times a haycart, behind a tractor, or old-style behind horses, or old-style with jam on in the form of four bored local fiddlers playing away on the cart-tail. Or for the opulent camera-bedangled tourist at a smart trot in a personally hired droshki. But most walk, and they are many. The accommodation is youth-hostel style: quite comfortable double-bunked dormitories, some provision for self-cooking or meals to be bought from the kitchen. Particularly if late down from the hill, though, one never knew what would be left; we got used to meals of unpredictable content, sometimes in unexpected order, partly for that reason but partly just because Polish practice is different. There was always plenty; our hosts had carried in various cans and jars to boost what the kitchen could supply. Try a breakfast starting with a sweetened milk soup like a thin rice pudding, followed by open sandwiches with a mixture of sardine, raw onion, and a soft cheese very like crowdie. There is no alcohol. Poles have a reputation as hard drinkers, but there is a serious problem of alcoholism which they are trying to overcome, and our trip was almost wholly teetotal, with one notable exception which we will come to.

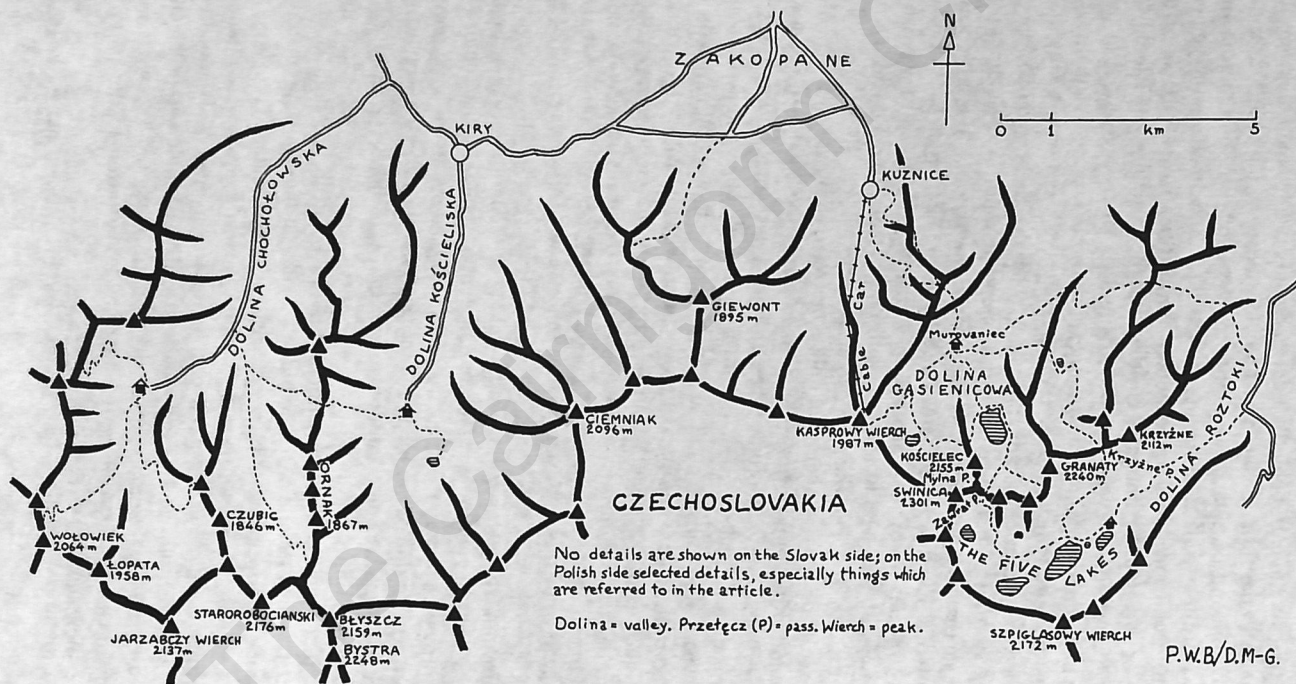
The hills here are in shape not unlike our own, rising to a few scramble bits on the main ridge, which dips up and down across the 2000 metre contour, and forms the Polish-Slovak border. Pines grow as forest trees on the lower slopes, becoming dwarf higher and finally prostrate at their upper limit of about 1600 metres. The whole Polish Tatra is a National Park, and walking is strictly limited to marked trails, with some even of these closed when necessary for regeneration, or to protect wildlife. Much labour has gone into the engineering of the trails, which in places amount to continuous stairways of heavy rock slabs, though in others the dwarf pine has encroached and made the passage a little awkward. We had three days in these Western Tatras, and some of the party walked high on each of them.

Unfortunately the main ridge-walk, taking in the border peaks of Lopata and Wolowiec, was in conditions all too reminiscent of such things at home. This was the day on which some of us, heading as Munro-baggers do for a top only a little way off the main line of the ridge, found ourselves pursued by a worried Andrzej because the top was some hundred yards into Czechoslovak territory, where border guard at times patrolled.

On other days one group climbed Starorobociański, the highest top of the Western Tatras in Poland or on the border; another group Giewont, the prominent peak above Zakopane, on which expedition, it seems, the Scottish practice of always carrying compasses proved its worth when there was some doubt which way to turn on a ridge. There was a major lower-level walk too, involving crossing a pass at almost 1500m to the next valley, with the aim in the end of an ascent of Ciemniak. The plan proved overambitious, but the Kościeliska valley is a beautiful one, and reaching it was some consolation to the party for not attaining their summit.

On the first of the three days Andrzej and his younger namesake had left us, as it emerged to try again to arrange a stay in the High Tatra, and this time with

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success, so we packed down, moved the cars some kilometres, and packed in again, a much steeper walk this time, to the Murowaniec refuge in Gasienicowa Valley, close to the originally intended camp. All such moves demonstrated just how much can be got into the ubiquitous Polski Fiat; they also allowed time for a restaurant meal and some tourist sights – museums, churches (of which Poland has many), and once a pleasant if unexpected stop to paddle and skip stones in a river. This time the result was to postpone the pack-in to the cooler early evening, which was welcome, but also raised some nervousness, for in principle booked beds are not kept after 6 p.m. We needn't have worried, though, Andrzej had succeeded in making contact by telephone (which can be a feat), and ensured that our places were held. It was as well he did, for though the policy is evidently that no benighted climber is actually turned away, that night every patch of flat corridor-space was filled with sleeping-bags. Here our party was unexpectedly increased, for who should we find waiting for us but Fiona's husband, Henry. With a few days spare because of some business change, he had flown over and, armed with our intended plan and despite the fact that we were not following it, had succeeded in tracking us down. His tale deserves a small article to itself; it included arriving late by taxi at what he hoped from the map would be the hut but proved to be the road-head below the pack-in trail, packing in in the dark to the camp where we should still have been (but never were), and there bivouacking until morning allowed him to start to search for where we might actually be.

We spent three days here too. On the first Peter was at last to get his climb, with Tomasz, who had replaced Ula (Urszula) as our hosts' lead climber, while the rest of the party took a high and rough ridge with superb views over the whole Tatra. Was to, but the weather took a hand; rain set in and made neither climbing nor the intended ridge advisable. Still, Peter and Tomasz, lowering their sights, put in a high walk, and the intending walkers made a fine trip over a high saddle, the Krzyzne Przetęcz, where the rain relented to give views almost as good as had been hoped across to the highest tops of the Tatra, all in Slovakia, with cloud washing and rolling among them. The party divided for the return, some over another high saddle, the Zawrat Przetęcz, with steep rock sections protected by fixed chains, while others preferred a lower and less precipitous route back to the Murowaniec Hut. Our hosts gallantly offered to accompany them, but it was a small Scottish party of Janet, Eilidh and Fiona, with Henry as escort, who set off, and have supplied the account that follows.

The path dropped down fairly steadily, till we hit a tarred road free of traffic; this was near the Czechoslovakian border, and the only regular motor traffic was the military, and the mountain rescue services (sadly in action that day). We walked along the road for some time, and then took a marked path, which lead up through the pine woods, past green meadows, and which our map indicated would lead to the Hut. The landscape was much more rounded than the high Tatra, and it was a pleasant area to explore, particularly appreciated by us now that the rain was, at worst, but an intermittent drizzle. We met few people, and as night descended (which it did fairly rapidly) a

degree of apprehension filled the party. Were we on the right path? Might we, in the poor light of our head-torch, miss our way? Our survival equipment was non-existent, our food supplies depleted. We struggled on, and it was reassuring, at last, to hear – faintly at first – the sound of a generator. To everyone's relief, we had arrived back – in time for a Mars bar, a quick debriefing from Peter, and so to bed.

Next day the cloud had descended, with drizzle, over the refuge, and though later it cleared somewhat this turned into virtually a rest-day, but an opportunity to hand over our gift of climbing equipment to our hosts, who promptly tried it out on the back wall of the refuge, falling off in turn on the protection of a belay with the Friend, the rope held on the sticht-plate.

That left only one mountain day to come. Would the weather be kind and let us finish on a high note? It was. Two ropes climbed Koscielec via the Mylna Przetęcz, a fairly easy line but quite long, exposed, and very enjoyable. The whole mountain resounded with the ringing of piton-hammers, according to the usual practice of climbing here, as other parties took steeper routes on both flanks of our ridge, but we think we have persuaded our hosts of the utility of Friends, if not perhaps of sticht-plates, viewed as allowing altogether too slow a management of the rope. This was granite climbing, not unlike the same in Scotland, though on the one hand there seemed to be more in the way of sharp, positive hand-holds, on the other a number of loose sections, in both cases perhaps because the granite is geologically much younger than ours. Meantime a walking party reports their day thus:

The non-climbing party, consisting of Fiona, Frances, Janet, Eilidh, Chris and Michał (as local guide) took the same route as the climbers initially and then followed a marked trail. To begin with the going was easy, then a steep snow-filled gully took us up to where chains and a fixed iron ladder led us on to the ridge. For those who could stand upright (which Eilidh failed to do) views down to the Roztoki valley and the five lakes gleaming in the sunlight were stunning. Eastwards the peaks of the Tatra continued, seemingly in unending ranks, into the far distance. Westwards we could pick out the climbing party, working its way now up the main south ridge of Kościelec. We made our way south, then west, along our ridge. Generally the path was clearly marked. In places the rock was polished smooth, for on a good day like this the path was crowded with Poles of all shapes and ages enjoying the challenge. Eventually we reached the broader shoulders of the ridge at the top of the ski complex, where we were to drop down to the hut. Here, as on our first day walking in the Tatra, we were on the Czech border, a fact brought to mind by the sudden appearance of Czech border guards from behind a boulder. Hill-walking with the risks of an international incident was a new experience!

The rest risked anti-climax. It would never have done not to have visited our hosts in their home town (which has nearby, lower, hills that we had no chance to see); it would never have done not to show us the sights. There were certain

rebellious thoughts about one more museum, but the final one was spectacular, a defensive castle at Łańcut changed over the centuries into a splendid palace, with some features, like the inlaid wood floors, as fine as could be found anywhere. We ended in the last owner's study, where following the museum's policy of having the rooms as far as might be as if still inhabited a "round of port" stood on the green baize table awaiting the "dining party" after their meal. Or so we supposed, but it was not so, for with the tour completed we were all called to take places at the table; the supposed coloured-water "port" proved to be generous portions of cherry vodka, a Polish speciality, in which we exchanged toasts and hopes for the return visit the following year. It was an unexpected and delightful conclusion, specially and enterprisingly arranged by our hosts.

There remained only our private goodbyes and exchanges of gifts with our particular hosts in Rzeszów, and a departure at four in the morning for the long trip home, enlivened – if that is the word – by having to climb blearily out of our couchettes next night while East German border guards searched under them for illegally departing citizens. They and we would have been equally surprised had we been told how soon that would become a thing of history.

*The home team*

Andrzej Kuś  
Andrzej Gajdek  
Barbara Czekańska  
Michał Chruściel  
Tomasz Kubin  
Urszula Madejczyk

*The visitors*

Peter Bellarby  
Chris Howard  
Duncan and Frances Macrae-Gibson  
Eilidh Scobbie  
Fiona Cameron  
Janet Armstrong

