

THE EARLY SWISS PIONEERS OF THE ALPS.

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(Continued from Vol. xxxiii. p. 366.)

FATHER PLACIDUS A SPESCHA (1752–1833).

WE can now do ample justice to this remarkable precursor of modern Alpine exploration and investigation, as his biography has recently been written and most of his literary work published by three of his fellow-countrymen.¹ While referring my readers who may desire further details to this work and to the review of it published in this JOURNAL,² I shall endeavour to portray the man and his deeds as far as his mountaineering career is concerned.

Placidus Spescha (as he spells his name) was born on December 9, 1752, at Truns, and was the son of well-to-do peasants. His parents gave him a liberal education, first at Coire, whence he followed his tutor, the bishop's chaplain, in 1770 to Mals and Tartsch in the Vintschgau. In 1772 he returned to become a pupil in the monastery of Disentis. In 1774 we find him a novice and soon afterwards a conventual in the same house of Benedictines. In 1776 he was sent with other monks of Disentis to Einsiedeln, where he derived much profit in his theological studies from the excellent teachers there, and even more in those of history and natural science. He returned to Disentis in 1780, and the same year was appointed chaplain to the hospital of St. John, on the Lucmanier Pass. Here he began at once the memorable work of his life, climbing, travelling, mapping, collecting plants and minerals, noting facts and observations in natural history, drawing mountain prospects and outline sketches. In a few years he attained a wide reputation as a capable naturalist and mountaineer. Among his correspondents and visitors at the Monastery of Disentis, at which Spescha was librarian

¹ *Pater Placidus a Spescha, sein Leben und seine Schriften*, herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Friedrich Pieth, Chur, und Prof. Dr. P. Karl Hager, Disentis, mit einem Anhang von P. Maurus Carnot, Disentis. Bern, 1913.

² *A.J.* xxviii. 346–7.

and bursar, we find such well-known men as Pol, Meiners, Ebel, Wyttenbach, and Dalberg. And, as we shall see, he frequently acted as guide to the foreigners who came to climb the mountains in the neighbourhood of Disentis. This useful and pleasant life met with sad interruption during the Revolution and the alternate invasions by French and Austrian troops in 1798 and 1799. Spescha saw his monastery sacked and burnt, his collections of manuscripts, maps and books either damaged or destroyed, while he was seized and sent to Innsbruck as a hostage. He remained there from September 6, 1799, to February 2, 1801, whiling away his exile by continuing his studies in the Academy of Innsbruck, travelling in the neighbourhood of that picturesque city, climbing the Patscherkofel and the Roskopf, visiting the mines of Schwaz and Hall, describing these travels in the most lively manner, and composing the first manual for mountaineers of which we know since the publication of Josias Simler's classical chapters. After his return to Disentis, Spescha's career presents a series of trials and tribulations, which were due not only to the unjust persecutions on the part of his religious colleagues, but also to his somewhat irascible and irritating temperament. We cannot enter into these details here, but it will suffice to say that he subsequently held livings, chaplaincies or curacies in Romein, Somvix, Vals, Pleiv, Caverdiras (near Disentis), Selva, Tschamut (narrowly escaping death in the great avalanche which nearly destroyed the latter hamlet on December 31, 1809), and Sedrun, but never remaining long in the same place and frequently scandalizing his spiritual authorities or his pious flock by strolling away from his ecclesiastical duties to make a new ascent or even a long Alpine tour, which on one occasion led him as far as the Aar glacier. Indeed, this second period of his Alpine career, extending from 1801 to 1817, was nearly as fruitful in climbs and literary work as the first. In 1817 he abandoned his peregrinations for the somewhat sedentary post of chaplain at Truns, where he died on August 14, 1833, at the great age of 81 years. Even during the last two decades of his life, when a sort of confinement in the custody of a colleague who had acted very badly towards him in 1799 much limited his activities, Spescha did not abandon his Alpine explorations. His last climb was an attempt to reach the summit of the Piz Rusein on September 1, 1824, when his companions, the chamois-hunters Placidus Curschallas of Truns and Augustin Bisquolm of Disentis, alone attained the summit, Spescha and his servant, Carli Cagenard, having halted

on an elevated spot on the right bank of the Rusein Valley, probably between Culm Gietschen and Catscharauls, from which they watched the ascent and descent of their two companions. His last Alpine publication was an unsigned article in the *Intelligenz-Blatt*, of Coire, No. 48, dated November 30, 1824, and entitled 'Die Ersteigung des Piz Rusein.' In addition to this he also sent at the time a note about the expedition to Dr. J. Hegetschweiler, who had attempted the Tödi from the E. in 1822. Spescha's detailed records of the expedition are published in the original by Father Karl Hager, with an introduction and notes.³ There cannot be the slightest doubt that Curschallas and Bisquolm really reached Point 3623, the highest summit of the Tödi group. Spescha continued noting down facts and drawing maps of Alpine interest until 1830, when his trembling hand refused to hold pen or pencil.

In summing up the really marvellous Alpine work of Father Placidus, it will be better to divide it topographically rather than to arrange it in chronological order. I give below Spescha's original denominations as well as those now used officially, adding wherever possible the dates and the names of his companions and only such details as appear indispensable. For further information regarding his Alpine career, I must refer the reader to his biography, in which nearly all of his great climbs are described by himself.

(a) In the neighbourhood of the Lucmanier and the St. Gotthard :

1. Pozetta = Piz Cristallina, 3128 m., in the Medels valley, 1782.

2. Muraun, 2899 m., probably also in 1782 and again between 1812 and 1819.

3. Scopi, 3200 m., in 1782 with Johann Bagliel, 'einem erfahrenen Bergmann'; in 1790 alone; on July 30, 1814, with Baron Anton von Harthausen (near Darmstadt) in deep snow.

4. Serengia = Piz del Ufiern, 3017 m., in Val Nalps, with the servant Andreas Lei of the Zillertal in 1785. Spescha compared with a level the respective heights of the Finsteraarhorn and the Piz Rusein, and found that the former must be the higher. He also saw Mont Blanc.

5. Badus, 2931 m., in August 1785; again on September 3, 1810 (in three hours from Tschamut to the Lake of Toma, and two hours thence to the summit); and the last time

³ *Pater Placidus a Spescha, etc.*, pp. 360-7.

about 1812, with Father Fintan Bürchler of the monastery of Rheinau, whose principal aim was to see the source of the Rhine and who remained behind at the foot of the final summit, refusing Spescha's offer to carry him up on his shoulders!

6. In 1791 (probably) Spescha availed himself of the position he held as bursar of his monastery to recite a mass on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin (August 15) at Santa Maria on the Lucmanier. To go to that spot, distant only four hours from Disentis, he chose a roundabout route, which took him fourteen hours of actual walking. Accompanied by a hunter and a servant from the monastery, he left Disentis on August 14, at 2 A.M., went by Sedrun and Tschamut and through Val Maigels to the spot where the sources of the Rhine and the Reuss closely approach each other, thence by a saddle to the highest huts in the Sella valley, and back by Val Cadlimo to Santa Maria.

7. In 1810, on August 30, Spescha started from Selva at 8.30 A.M., with his servant Gion B. Candinas, on an exploring tour, and arrived at Airolo by Val Maigels and Val Canaria at 5 P.M. The next day he made an excursion into the Val Bedretto, in order to explore the passes leading to the Valais and Val Formazza. He returned to Airolo and recrossed on September 1 by the Sella valley and Pass to Val Maigels and Selva, arriving at the latter place at 10 P.M.

(b) In the Adula Alps :

8. Valrhein or Lentahorn = Rheinwaldhorn, 3398 m., in July 1789. Spescha alone reached the summit, his companions, Drs. Rengger of Berne, Ackermann of Mainz, and Domeyer of Hanover, and even the guide, a shepherd named Antonio, from the Zapportalp, remaining some distance behind.

9. Piz d'il Draus or Piz Ramosa = Piz Cavel, 2944 m., in Val Lugnez, in August 1799, about a week before his arrest. While on the summit he heard the gunfire of the Austrian and French troops in the Urseren valley.

10. Piz Valölia = Piz Aul, 3124 m., in Val Lugnez, with the shepherd Lorenz Peder Smet from Alp Surrhein, on August 18, 1801. He remained three hours on the top, drawing a panorama, on which he names the 'Briemontres' (?), Monte Rosa, Mont Blanc, Finsteraarhorn, Schreckhorn, Rusein, Tödi, Urlaun, Güverhorn, and Valrhein.

11. Derlun = Piz Scherboden, 3124 m., first in 1801 with Domenico Casanova, the tenant of the Alp Scherboden, and his young son. The latter trembled so much that they were obliged to retreat before the goal was quite reached; and

again with better men in 1808, when he succeeded in making a complete ascent.

12. Piz Terri, also called Terri de Canal or Puncion de Gūda, 3151 m., in 1801 or 1802. His companion, a young lad, refused to follow him on the last bit between the trigonometrical signal of to-day and the higher point, and turned aside, so as not to see Spescha pass a deep cleft in the arête and clamber up the final tower. Doubts have been expressed as to this ascent and as to Spescha's route (see 'Climbers' Guide to the Adula Alps,' pp. 73-74), but a careful examination of Spescha's original records by W. Derichsweiler in the *S.A.C.J.*, xlvii. pp. 141-147, has finally settled the matter in his favour.

13. Guver = Güferhorn, 3393 m., with the chamois-hunter Jörg Anton Schmidt in 1806. Spescha acknowledges the boldness of his guide.

14. Surcombras, also called Damilhorn, Piz Raschuna or Piz Tamil = Weissenstein, 2949 m., in the Savien valley, about 1807.

15. In order to facilitate the construction of a carriage road over the Greina Pass, Spescha undertook to explore and describe four routes through that district, one from Vrin in Val Lugnez by the Disruet Pass, a second from Campo Chirone by the valleys of Luzzone and Monterascio, a third from Campo by Val Ursära and Valle Camadra-Gaglianera, a fourth from Surrhein in the Surselva valley through the 'Tenigerthal' or Val Somvix. The last of these expeditions was made in 1820, from August 7 to 13. On this occasion he was benighted, and forced to bivouac at a height of 2414 m., on the grass near the snow. He was then sixty-eight years of age!

(c) Near the Oberalp and in the Tödi district :

16. Piz Aul = Piz Ault, 3033 m., in the Tavetsch valley. Spescha ascended this mountain three times : first alone some time before 1770, a second time with Herr Karl Witte, from Saxony, in July 1792, and again before 1799 with another monk, when the bad condition of the snow forced them to retreat before the summit was quite attained.

17. Piz Cötschen = Piz Tgetschen or Oberalpstock, 3330 m. Spescha made the first ascent of this peak in August 1792 with a young servant of the monastery, Joseph Sennonner, of Gröden in the Tyrol. They employed 'alpenstocks' and 'fusseisen' and a rope, and gained the summit from Alp Run (one hour and a half above Disentis) in about eight hours. With his level he ascertained that the Oberalpstock was higher than the Titlis. During the descent they started an avalanche

and were nearly swept away by it. Spescha repeated this ascent twice; on August 11, 1812, with the pastor Joseph Hitz and a goatherd from Sedrun, and three days later with a boy of twelve years from the Alp Strim, without a rope, but accompanied by Spescha's little dog, which tried in vain to save a stick the boy had dropped in a crevasse.

18. Denter Glatschärs or 'höchster Gipfel auf dem Grisपालten' = Piz Giuf, 3058 m. Spescha attempted this peak on September 12, 1804, with Hans Jacob Caduf of Ruäras, in Val Tavetsch, and ascended it in 1812.

19. In order to discover the sources of the Rhine, the Reuss and the Aar, Spescha made in 1811 a mountain tour of six days. Starting from Selva on July 29, he crossed the Oberalp, the Furka and the Grimsel, followed the Unteraar Glacier as far as the 'Abschwung,' visited the Handeck Falls, accompanied by the innkeeper Jacob Leuthold of Hasle im Grund, crossed the Susten Pass, where about 270 workmen were busy tracing the new road (abandoned in 1822), visited the Goeschenen and Kehlen Alps (to the foot of the Kehlen Glacier), and recrossed the Oberalp to his temporary home at Selva.

20. For his Alpine book, intended to be dedicated to Dr. Ebel, of Zurich, and to contain a record of his three ascents of the Oberalpstock, a description of the Kärschelen or Maderanerthal and an account of a visit to Einsiedeln, Spescha crossed the Krüzli Pass from Sedrun to Bristen, Amsteg and Altdorf (eight to nine hours' actual walking) on October 5, 1812. And on the following day he went by Flüelen, Brunnen, Schwyz, Steinen and Rothenthurm to Einsiedeln. After a stay of two days at the monastery, where he was well received by his old patrons and fellow-pupils, he went by the Hacken to Schwyz. Thence he returned with two poor students by Brunnen, Amsteg, Bristen and the Krüzli Pass in two days to Sedrun. Stormy weather and snow failed to hinder them or to spoil their good-humour.

The book (of which the preface and the dedication to Dr. Ebel was written) never appeared. We can be glad to see its contents now published by Pieth and Hager, as well as the 'Karte oder Handriss des Kärschelenthals,' which gives us a good idea of Spescha's somewhat schematic but accurate map-drawing.

Another result of this and several previous trips was the 'Carte spéciale et pétrographique du Mont St. Gotthard et de ses environs,' lithographed by M. F. Boehm and published by J. J. Waibel in Bâle before 1820. It is good work, although

financially disappointing, while the author complained of the indifferent lithographic execution.

21. Stocgron = Stockgron, 3418 m. Spescha made the first ascent of this peak (the fourth in height of the Tödi group) in 1782, a second ascent about August 6, 1788, with the sexagenarian Christian Mathiu Huonder, of Monpé-Tavetsch, and a shepherd from Alp Cavrein. They approached the mountain in a roundabout way by Val Acletta, Lac Serein, Bruni Glacier and Cavrein, to Val Rusein, and ascended the peak by cutting steps 'across a steep glacier to a glen coming down from between the Porphyr and the Stocgron and turning west after they had gained the arête.' They returned the same way to the Rusein huts and Disentis, where a few days afterwards Spescha presented Meiners with a bit of pyrites 'from the top of the Tödiberg.' Spescha attempted the Stockgron a third time about 1790 with the shepherd of Alp Rusein, but a hailstorm forced them to retreat when they were on the glacier south of the summit.

22. Môt de Robi = Kistenstöckli, 2748 m. After the storm had passed they abandoned the ascent of the Stockgron, and turning to the east crossed the glacier and some wild glens to the Gliemsglacier. Here they put on the rope and mounted to the Gliemslücke, where the shepherd remained behind, frightened by the view of the Ponteglias Glacier. Spescha continued alone. He crossed with considerable risk from concealed crevasses the Ponteglias Glacier to the Frisallücke, and descended by the Frisal Glacier to the hut in the Val Frisal. Here he was kindly received by the 'Rinderhirt,' who was greatly astonished to see a traveller arriving through such a wilderness. In his company Spescha, the next day, ascended the Kistenstöckli direct from Val Frisal (by the Cordas apparently) and regained Disentis by Alp Robi and Brigels. He confesses that the last bit of the way home was very tiring from thirst and fatigue.

23. Piz Urlaun, 3374 m. On his first attempt, about 1790, from Val Gliems, Spescha reached only a 'Vorstufe' of the mountain. On August 25, 1793, he gained the top, while his companions, Baron Johann Lucius de Salis and two teachers of his seminary at Haldenstein, Karl Witte and Glaubitz, remained behind, the former at the snout of the Ponteglias Glacier, the latter on the arête an hour and a half below the summit. A third attempt on August 19, 1822, failed miserably in consequence of the indiscipline and incapacity of his party, which consisted of an unnamed magistrate (probably

from Coire), Joseph de Manga, the manager of the mine at Ponteglias, an artist from Altenstadt, Joseph Nielaus Gächter, and six servants, porters and guides. They were well equipped with plenty of clothes and food, and even carried a ladder with them, with which to cross the crevasses. They intended also to make mathematical observations with some instrument made by Gächter from indications supplied by Spescha. But all was in vain, as they reached only a spot half-way between the Gliemslücke and the top in twelve hours from Truns. The descent to the house at the mine of Ponteglias took five hours.

24. Piz Tschenclinas or Piz l'Avat = Piz Gliems, 2913 m., in July 1803. Spescha undertook the journey from Somvix to Val Gliems in order to shoot game for the Bishop of Coire, who was expected for Confirmation. For some unknown reason Spescha changed his plans, and on arriving at the foot of the mountain he laid aside his gun and ascended to the summit of the 'abbot's cap' (the Romouch meaning of l'Avat). He had a fine view, but during the descent he strained his knee, in consequence of a too rapid glissade. Perhaps this was the penalty for the unchristian pride that filled the poor old monk's soul when he looked down onto an Abbot's head!

25. Rusein or Crap Glaruna = Piz Rusein, 3623 m. In his own reckoning, Father Placidus attempted this peak, the highest in the Bündler Oberland, no less than six times, counting his ascents of the Stockgron and Urlaun as preparatory excursions for it. On August 19, 1824, with a well-trying mountaineer, Paul Benedict Spescha of Truns, and the landscape painter Johann Baptist Isenring of Toggenburg (1794-1860), who joined the party for sketching purposes, Spescha set out to try the Piz Rusein in earnest. They went by Val Barcuns and Val Rusein to Val Gliems, where they passed the night in the shepherd's hut. The next morning they mounted the Gliems Glacier, but the incapacity and cowardice of Isenring frustrated all efforts of the two Speschas. They failed to reach even the Gliemspforte. A second expedition with Isenring to the Val Rusein to explore a direct access to the Piz from there met with no better result. More fortunate and more plucky were Speschas' companions on September 1, 1824, as we have seen. Their itinerary is not quite certain. From the hut at Rusein Sura, 2092 m., where they separated from Spescha and Cagenard, they 'mounted near the foot of the glacier on the west by the middle of the rocks of the mountain in a northerly

direction, and then turned to the west in order to reach the snow slope on the other side, which they traversed to the north-west to gain the highest summit.' This seems to indicate that the two hunters passed close to the Bleisasverdas Glacier (not named, but marked on the Swiss map) by the rocks of the S.W. face of the Piz Rusein, gained its south arête by the so-called Ruseinlücke north of the Piz Mellen, went over the highest snow slopes of the Biferten Glacier to the depression between the Tödi and the Rusein, and reached the summit from the S. or S.E. They were on the summit at 11 A.M., remained there only thirty minutes, and were back at Rusein sura at 4 P.M. Here Spescha, who had watched their ascent from the opposite slopes and, with the aid of a telescope, had seen the traces left by the climbers in *descending* from the snow cone, met them again and carefully noted the details of their ascent.

Thus ended Father Spescha's honourable Alpine career of forty-two years.⁴

SOME SCRAMBLES ON THE MONS LACTARIUS.

By J. L. TOD-MERCER.

THIS is the name given by the ancients to the west-running spur of the Campanian Apennines between Cava dei Tirreni and the tip of the Sorrentine Peninsula, of which it forms the backbone. The range is still known as the Monti Lattari. To the visitor accustomed to the rich verdure of our British hills the implication of opulence may sound a trifle ironical applied to the barren rocky fastnesses in the western portion of the chain here dealt with. It may be that in Roman times there was less rock and more grass; but, even now, such pasture as exists—patchy though it be—is still sufficient, with the terraced meadows lower down, to place this district among the dairying centres of South Italy, and make it one of the chief sources of supply of the excellent cream cheeses, called *mozzarella*, so deservedly popular in the Neapolitan provinces.

The range reaches its maximum elevation (4780 feet) in the nucleus of rock peaks called Monte S. Angelo a Tre Pizzi on the

⁴ See also Mr. Freshfield's 'Placidus a Spescha and Early Mountaineering in the Bündner Oberland,' *A.J.* x. 289 *seq.*