

THE D.U.Æ.A.-V. IN THE CAUCASUS, 1936

BY RUDOLF SCHWARZGRUBER ¹*Translated*

ALTHOUGH four Austrian mountaineers had been at work in the Bezingi district in 1935—perhaps *because* of it—we chose once more this superb basin as our objective for 1936.

This time our party was composed of six members, all Austrians, W. Frauenberger, F. Krobath, F. Peringer, H. Raditschnig, F. Wolfgang and myself. Following our experiences of the previous year we stayed but a short time at the Missesskosh, whither we had arrived with 16 transport donkeys. We established our main camp further S. some 600 ft. lower than Mummery's Dykhtau bivouac, just about the spot whence Cockin made the first ascent of Shkara in 1888,² our tents being pitched at a height of about 10,200 ft. Just at the foot of Kelbashi, there where the W. branch of the Bezingi Glacier descends from the Zanner Pass, another tent was pitched at a similar altitude to the main camp. This tent served as base for the ascents of Tiktengen and Gestola.

Our main objective in the Bezingi was the traverse of the great ridge connecting DYKHTAU with KOSHTANTAU (see *A. J.* 48. illustration facing 110). This constitutes about the most important expedition for mountaineers in the entire Caucasus. The great corner-stones, Dykhtau 17,051 ft., and Koshtantau 16,880 ft., are granite rock pinnacles towering some 6500 ft. above the glaciers sweeping their bases. As the crow flies, the two summits are 5 miles distant from one another, and the traverse of this great ridge, unrivalled in the Alps, promised to be an expedition of the highest class. The differences of level in the ridge are very marked, the lowest point is situated just before Koshtantau—about 13,500 ft.

Our first task was to transport food to two depressions in the ridge ; we considered that two weeks would be required for the traverse. In spite of great efforts, continuous fresh snow and avalanche dangers hindered us to such an extent that the first week of our sojourn at the base of the great arête yielded no results whatever. While Peringer, Krobath, Wolfgang and I were thus toiling to no purpose, Frauenberger and Raditschnig met with some success on the Zanner Pass side. They climbed and traversed TIKTENGEN, first ascended by Longstaff and Rolleston in 1903.³ This peak, 15,267 ft., towers as a mighty

¹ To whom we are again greatly indebted.—*Editor*.

² *A. J.* 14. 93 *sqq.*, 197 *sqq.*

³ *A. J.* 21. 572 ; 22. 95 *sqq.*, with illustrations. The first ascent was made by the E. arête attained from the S.

stone sentinel on the Suanetian frontier. On July 14 they crossed the Zanner Pass and climbed by a rib of the S. face to the W. arête attained at a height of about 14,500 ft. They must have taken the route tried by Cockin, Newmarch, Solly and Woolley in 1893,⁴ and which had brought that party close under the top. In two days our members attained the summit, having to bivouac again on the descent over the E. arête.

On the arrival of our two friends after the traverse of Tiktengen, we determined to postpone the attempt on the great ridge and take as objective the opposite number of the Dykhtau-Koshtantau ridge—the crossing of the Bezingi Horseshoe. The traverse of the peaks from Shkara to the Zanner Pass has been accomplished once previously, in 1931, by three Austrians, Moldan, Poppinger and Schintlmeister.⁵ With the immense amount of snow lying on the mountains this traverse, consisting mostly of snow and ice, appeared far more feasible than the climb over the innumerable rock-pinnacles of the other ridge.

On July 20 we left our tents, all six of us, at 02.00. Taking the route of the first ascent, Cockin with Almer and Roth,⁶ and with the most perfect weather, we attained the highest peak of SHKARA, 17,038 ft. Snow conditions were, however, favourable only in the lower part. The corniced ridge leading towards the summit took so much time, that just as darkness came on we were compelled to bivouac in a bergschrund close under the summit. Ever since the previous year we had fought shy of heavy rucksacks, consequently our bivouacking kit now consisted of but a snow shovel and a *Zdarsky* sack for every two men.

In snowy regions we bivouacked usually in bergschrunds which we revetted with ice blocks, otherwise we dug a snow-shelter surrounded with snow walls. On the second day we traversed Shkara to the lower, W., peak—5057 m., attained towards evening. The distance between the two peaks is but 1050 yards, but the extraordinary snow formations guarding the crest made the route long and difficult. Snow became bad early in the forenoon, but the lovely weather and the impressive view downwards and to the N. over the ice slopes plunging to the Bezingi Glacier, and to the S. over the green forests and flowery fields of Suanetia, caused no monotony. At nightfall we dug a hole just below the W. peak of Shkara, at *ca.* 5050 m.

On the morning of the third day we traversed that summit and descended easily at first towards the recess-like hollow separating Shkara from the E. peak of Janga. Towards midday the weather became bad all of a sudden. We traversed the rocky teeth, called *Rosszähne* by Poppinger, with snow already falling. The work was difficult owing to the wind and snow-flurries, and our hitherto quick progress was soon diminished. We encountered two more towers—which would count as mountains in the Eastern Alps—before attaining the Janga recess, a spot we failed, however, to reach on that day.

⁴ *A.J.* 16. 525; 17. 173 *sqq.*

⁵ *A.J.* 43. 400.

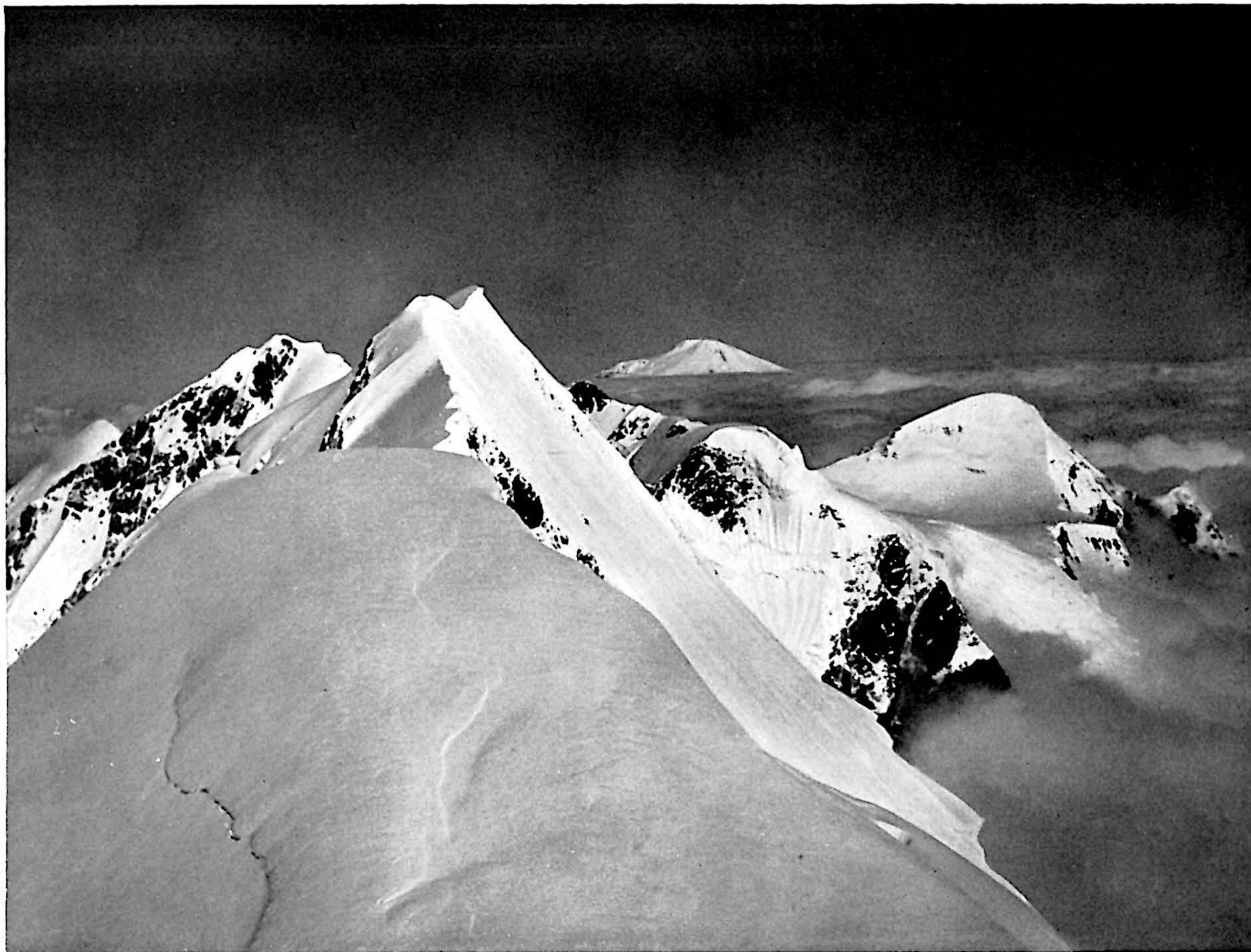
⁶ *A.J.* 16. 477 *sqq.*



Expedition photo.]

SHKARA SUMMIT AND W. PEAK, 1936, FROM THE N.

To face p. 80.



Photo, R. Schwarzgruber.]

JANGA, KATUINTAU, GESTOLA, ELBRUZ IN BACKGROUND, 1936.



Expedition photo.]

FIRST PEAK OF KRUMKHOLBASHI TOWARDS SHKARA AND JANGA, 1936.

[To face p. 81.

Clouds and snow were so thick that at 15.00 we no longer knew our whereabouts or how we were to proceed. We dug another snow-trench, where, at nearly 15,000 ft., we spent a third night.

On the morning of the fourth day we obtained a little view to the S. through clouds, but a dark and stormy mass hanging over the Armenian highlands held out no good promise. Mists were, however, thinner than on the previous day, although snow continued to fall ceaselessly. We attained the Janga recess and climbed the E. peak of JANGA, 16,559 ft. Hardly had we descended a few feet on the W. side of that summit when the snow enveloped us altogether, and we found nothing better to do than build a bivouac in a bergschrund under the summit. Although the hour was but 13.00 we prepared to sleep out for the fourth time. That was a really bad night; our clothes were soaked from the snowfall of the previous day and moreover our fuel was exhausted.

Dawn came on the fifth day with 1 metre of fresh snow, which continued to fall. It was obvious that we must go down. As a return there was but the 'Merzbacher' route available which, luckily, Peringer and I had already taken in 1935. We had been barely a quarter of an hour *en route*, when literally in one moment the sun broke through the clouds and in perfect weather we descended the snow arête. On attaining the rock ridge it became obvious that fresh snow extended no lower than 15,000 ft.; accordingly we made a long and delightful halt, where the gorgeous surroundings quite reconciled us to having had to break off so early the traverse of the entire Bezingi Horseshoe. We attained our tent that evening with no further trouble.

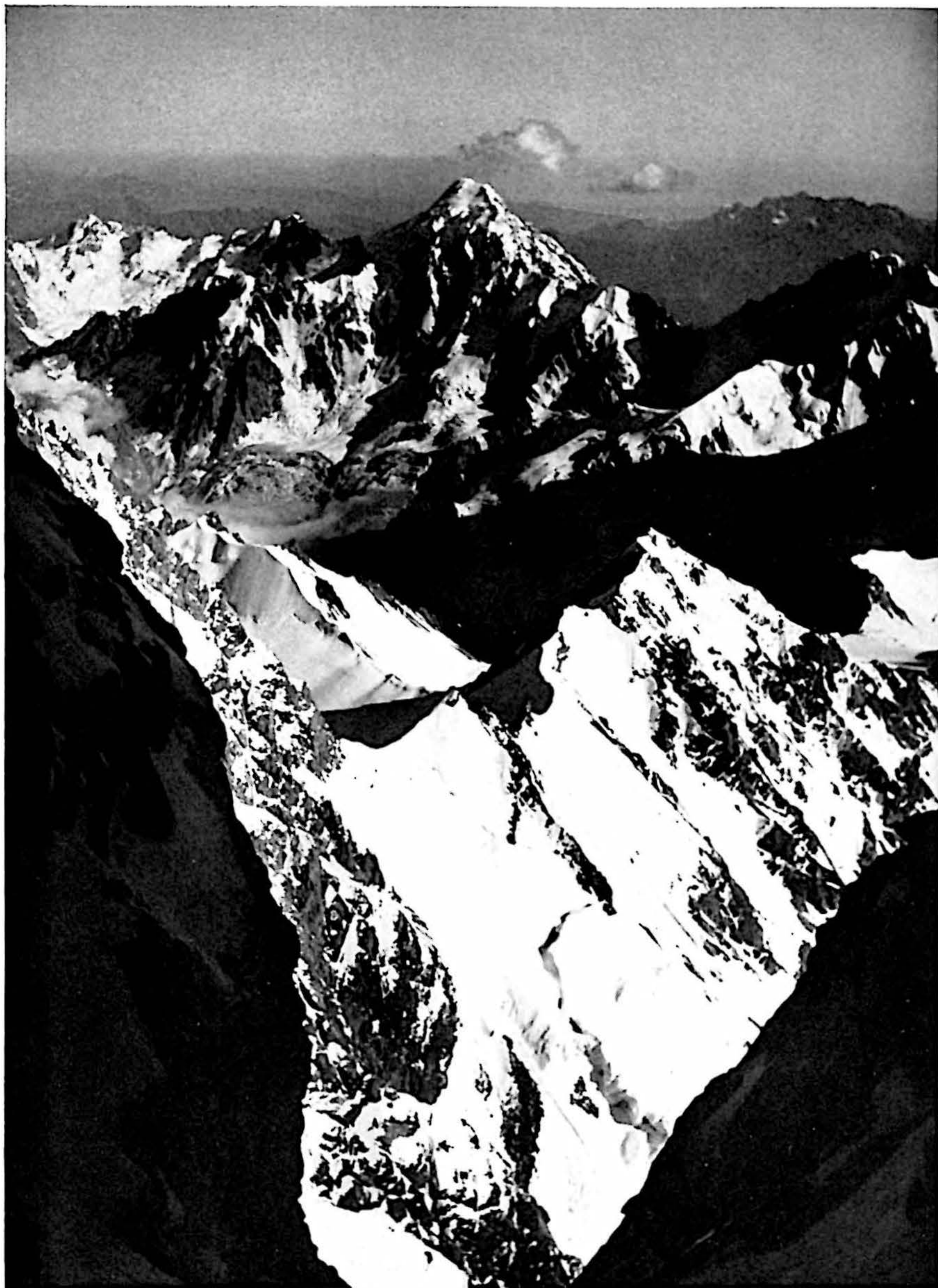
The pleasant recollection of the traverse of Shkara increased our eagerness, and at once we set about our next undertaking; Wolfgang and I were to start for the Gestola camp, while the other four were simultaneously to try the great ridge for as great a distance as their powers and provisions, carried in rucksacks, could hold out. Our ardour was, however, again put to a hard test. It rained ceaselessly from July 27-31, practically confining us to our tents and, when at last day broke clear on August 1, the mountains were covered far down with a white snowy mantle. The warm sun soon melted the fresh snow, and we stared with astonishment at immense avalanches thundering over the walls of the Horseshoe.

We left camp at 16.00 on August 2 to attempt GESTOLA *via* the N. face; this face can be seen from Bezingi and still better from Missesskosh. A great ice and rock wall, some 5500 ft. in height, cuts off the glen to the S., while the summit is the most shapely of all the Horseshoe. The face bears N.E., consequently obtaining the first of the morning sun, while it is shaded in the early afternoon. The lower portion to nearly 13,000 ft. is not very steep, but is composed of ice-falls and a chaos of avalanche débris. Every single couloir is polished throughout by the stones and ice splinters falling from the upper face—this is the most hazardous portion of the route. The central zone is composed of a steep ice and névé slope furrowed by immense



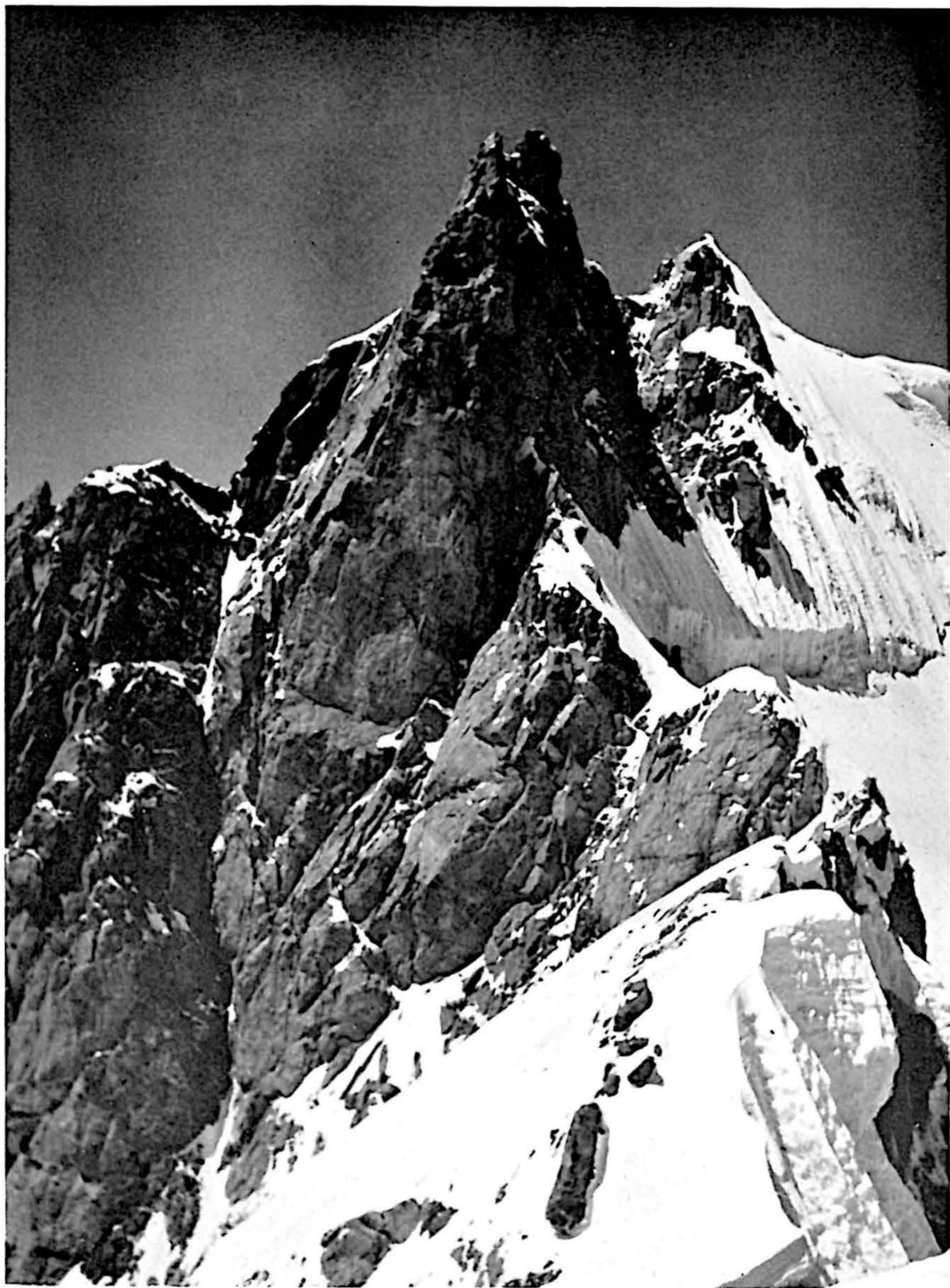
Photo, R. Schwarzgruber.]

LEFT TO RIGHT : MISHIRGITAU, E. AND W. PEAKS ; DYKHTAU, E. PEAK AND SUMMIT.
TAKEN FROM FOOT OF N. ARÊTE OF KOSHTANTAU, 1936.



Photo, F. Peringer.]

AILAMA FROM GAP BETWEEN SUMMIT AND E. PEAK OF DYKHTAU, 1936.



Photo, F. Peringer.]

DYKHTAU, SUMMIT AND E. PEAK, 1936.

crevasses and ending in a rock rampart of 1000-1200 ft. The upper portion of the face consists of a 1300-ft. ice slope leading to the summit.

The lowest and dangerous part of the face was ascended at the utmost speed and without step-cutting, the sides of the bergschrunds, high as houses, alone causing trouble. These, however, could always be climbed by crevices in the ice. We bivouacked in the highest schrund in brilliant moonlight at 22.00. On the second day we cut up the ice slope and attained the rocks at their eastern extremity. These latter were splendidly firm, recalling scrambles in the Zillertal; we climbed all the rocky zone and by evening were on the summit ice slope. Here, however, a sudden snowstorm compelled us to bivouac in an uncomfortable place on a rocky boss, where we were forced to lash ourselves to pitons to avoid the danger of falling. On the third day the sun shone once more and after $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours' step-cutting we attained the summit, 15,932 ft., in perfect, windstill weather. We bivouacked again before attaining Ljalver, descending to our tent on the fourth day.

A day later we packed up our tent and, heavily laden, rejoined the others in the main camp. We were very interested to know whether they had succeeded in accomplishing a part of the ridge. They ran over to us from a long way off and we soon heard the great tidings: the steepest and most difficult part had been accomplished. In a six days' engagement the four had traversed the ridge as far as the depression before Krumkholbashi.⁷

They had started at 02.00 on August 2 from the main camp and climbed DYKHTAU by the S.W. arête, Mummery's route,⁸ with a variation low down, attaining a height of about 5140 m. only on this day. On August 3 at 08.00 they attained the summit, 17,051 ft., returned to the bivouac, descended the gully separating the two tops and attained by a steep, snowy ledge a notch in the S. arête of Dykhtau, E. peak. Wearing *Kletterschuhe*, they climbed the very difficult rocks of that peak's S. slope, attaining its hitherto untrodden summit, ca. 16,900 ft. In snow-flurries they descended by the same route and spent the night in the gap between the summit and E. peak. On the third day they roped down and across its N. slope, thus turning the E. peak, and attained the crest of the ridge beyond. This was followed for the whole day over numerous great towers and at 19.00 they bivouacked for the third time in a steep névé of the S. slope, ca. 4700 m. On August 5 the last pinnacle before Mishirgitau, W. peak, was climbed, and from the depression beyond, the summit of MISHIRGITAU, 16,408 ft., over partly very difficult rocks covered with ice and snow. This was the second ascent of the peak, the first having been accomplished by Saladin and his companions.⁹ The party found the Swiss cairn. They continued along the summit ridge, roping down over the E. face into the *Mishirgischarte*, where they bivouacked for the

⁷ A. J. 48., illustration facing 110.

⁸ *Ibid.*, illustration, 113, 114; *My Climbs*, pp. 258 sqq.

⁹ A. J. 46. 408; 47. 115-16.

fourth time. On August 6 they attained over good snow the E. peak of Mishirgitau, 16,384 ft., first climbed by Woolley in 1889.¹⁰ This peak, like the summit, was climbed also for the second time. Hence progress was at first rapid over the easy slopes of the E. arête until they came to the great step plunging downwards before Krumkholbashi. This step, some 1500 ft. deep, accomplished by difficult rock and ice work on its E. slope, took an entire day and in the evening of the fifth day they bivouacked in the lowest depression between Mishirgitau, E. peak, and Krumkholbashi. On August 7 want of provisions and bad weather necessitated a descent of the *ca.* 1200-ft. S. slope of the depression to the Krumkhol Glacier. The upper Bezingi Glacier was attained *via* a pass N. of the Dykhnyaus Glacier, the main camp being reached at 22.00 of the sixth day. This ridge-traverse, with the exception of Mummery's route up the S.W. arête of Dykhtau and of the W. arête of Mishirgitau, lay over entirely untrodden ground.

Two days were now employed in convoying provisions from Missesskosh to the camp. On August 10 four of us left the camp in order to continue the traverse of the ridge from the spot already reached, Frauenberger, Peringer and Raditschnig, with myself taking Krobath's place. On August 11 we climbed up the W. arête—a splendid scramble, first snow, then over pinnacles—to the summit of KRUMKHOLBASHI, 4676 m., of which we made the second ascent.¹¹ Following the N.E. arête over snow and rocks we came to the notch between that summit and Koshtantau. Darkness overtook us some 300 ft. distant from the notch and we bivouacked in light rain and for the second time in the rocks of the S. slope. On the next day in better weather we descended into the notch, turned on to the W. slope of the prominent corner-stone where abuts the ridge plunging from Koshtantau. In $5\frac{1}{2}$ hours from the notch we attained over difficult, deeply snow-covered rocks the said corner-stone, *ca.* 4700 m., first ascent. A blizzard struck us at this spot. The descent from the corner-stone to the depression whence springs the W. arête of Koshtantau was accomplished in thick cloud, causing much labour in the otherwise splendid scramble over the numerous towers. We bivouacked again in a snowy recess some 300 ft. below the summit. During the night of August 12–13 it snowed hard and blew such a gale that we were covered entirely by a thick snow sheet. Nevertheless the weather very quickly cleared on the following morning and, in 50 minutes from our fresh start, we arrived on the summit of KOSHTANTAU, 16,880 ft. The entire terrain from Mishirgitau, E. peak, and Krumkholbashi to the summit of Koshtantau was virgin, and not till we began the descent over the N. arête¹² were we on known ground.

¹⁰ *A. J.* 18. 292 *sqq.*

¹¹ The corner-stone and Krumkholbashi are shown clearly in illustration *A. J.* 48. facing 112 (to left Krumkholbashi, the corner-stone in the middle and then Koshtantau).

¹² First ascended in 1929 by Herren Willy Merkl, F. Bechtold and W. Raechl. *A. J.* 42. 102–3; 46. 223.

The *descent* over the snowy N. arête was, in comparison with the ascent of the W. arête, not difficult. Two rock splinters delayed us a bit, but then followed easy progress to the two towers closing ingress from the Mishirgi Glacier. The first was turned to the W., the second to the E., and we then continued first on the crest and then along its W. slope to the Mishirgi Glacier. After a long halt we bivouacked with darkness approaching on the upper, true right lateral moraine of the glacier. On August 14 in perfect weather we descended the indescribably torn Mishirgi Glacier, having to rope down in one place. The left lateral moraine was attained at 14.00 only, leading downwards over beautiful alps. At 18.00 we halted near the Mishirgikosh, attaining the pastures of Missesskosh an hour later. The great ridge-traverse was thus really accomplished. The 'times,' six and five days respectively, are proofs of its severity, but unquestionably the fresh snow on the first part greatly prolonged the operation.

While we had been thus engaged, Krobath and Wolfgang had not remained idle in camp. Two Germans from Stuttgart, Herren Schäffer and Schweizer, coming from the Dykhsu region had arrived over the Dykhniaus Pass at Bezingi and, with these two, our friends started off to tackle the last great 'face' problem of the Horseshoe. In the illustration, *A. J.* 48. 113, this problem is very evident. From the ridge skyline rise three distinct points: to the left is the E. peak of Janga, in the middle that mountain's summit (diagonally to the left and below lies the buttress climbed by us in 1935),¹³ and to the right the round, glacier-crowned summit of Katuintau, 16,296 ft. The Bezingi face of this latter consists of a great wall of nearly 6000 ft. This precipitous face forms a poorly defined edge, steeper throughout than the rest of the Horseshoe; owing to the many hanging glaciers threatening the said edge, it is quite remarkably dangerous.

On August 11 at 01.00 the party of four left the main camp, crossed the Bezingi Glacier to the base of the hanging glacier under Katuintau's supporting buttress, 2960 m. *aneroid*, and scrambled up the slopes to the rocks constituting the buttress or edge. Having attained the crest of the buttress, the party found themselves in the realms of ice and stonefalls, to which the edge is particularly exposed. They mounted the said edge during the entire day and at nightfall bivouacked in a little rock recess at 4550 m., just under the summit's hanging glacier. A stone avalanche surprised them during the night, damaging one of the party. On August 12 bad weather delayed them till 12.00, when a start was made and the ice slope above the bivouac climbed. After 4 hours' labour they turned to the right, some 150 ft. below the summit, and took refuge as quickly as possible from the storm in a crevasse. While we on Koshtantau were enjoying our descent of the N. arête in perfect weather, our friends remained weatherbound in their bivouac. Not till August 14 did they attain the summit of KATUINTAU; they then turned on to the W. slope of the hogsback connecting with ADISHTAU and climbed that peak, *ca.* 16,000 ft., by the rocks of the N. arête.

¹³ *A. J.* 48. 111-12.

Returning the same way, they chose as descent the 'Katuin' rib by which Woolley and Holder made the first ascent of Katuintau in 1888.¹⁴ However, having descended the hanging glacier, they did not take the snowy ridge and rocks lying to the left (descending), but continued their descent by the enormously steep and extremely dangerous avalanche shoots leading to the base glacier. From the terrace above they took but $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours to the Bezingi Glacier, attaining the main camp at 01.00 on August 15. The route *via* the Katuintau buttress is certainly the most difficult in all the Bezingi Horseshoe, as also by far the most dangerous.

With Katuintau and Koshtantau accomplished, our objectives in the Bezingi had been attained. Before returning to Naltshik we paid another visit to the highest peak of ELBRUZ, 18,470 ft., then leaving *via* Tiflis and the Black Sea for home.

The cost of the expedition was less than before, 1500 *schillings* per head as against 1800 in 1935. The lesser cost was owing chiefly to the former equipment being still serviceable and to the experience gained on the previous expedition.

(For maps see *A.ŷ.* 48. 108, 113.)

Besides Dr. Schwarzgruber's, no fewer than three German parties belonging to the Munich, Oberland and Suabian sections of the D.u.Æ.A.-V. were active in the Caucasus during 1936. A full account, together with details of the great Austrian exploits related above, appear in *Æ.A.Z.* October 1936.¹⁵

Of the German parties' successes the most striking appear to be the traverse of the entire BSHEDUKHTAU (4271 m.) ridge, July 18-21, by Herren L. Vörg and J. Thürstein, and SHELDIKHTAU (4320 m.) in the Ushba group by the N. face—a very difficult climb—by Herren L. Schmaderer and H. Paidar on July 21-24.

Especially noteworthy is the first ascent of USHBA, 15,409 ft., by the W. face, August 5-7, by Herren Schmaderer and Vörg. From a bivouac at the foot of the W. face, *ca.* 2750 m., the party started at 02.00 by brilliant moonlight. They mounted over iced débris and a very crevassed glacier recess some 500 m. wide towards a rocky buttress giving access to the depression between the N. and S. peaks. The buttress is flanked on both sides by immense ice precipices, all of which were climbed laboriously till footing could be obtained on the crest of the said buttress. The edge or its flank was then climbed for some 600 ft., some of the traverses being over very rotten rocks. Further progress led to a spot, 1600 ft. higher, where the buttress assumed vertical or worse dimensions. The party bivouacked here. On the following day they clambered up extremely difficult ice and rock for some 650 ft., bearing slightly to the left of the rib, until they could attain the top of the said rib. A sharp névé edge connects

¹⁴ *A.ŷ.* 14. 91, 187-9, under the name of 'Saddle Peak.'

¹⁵ This very interesting and well-illustrated number, devoted entirely to the Caucasus, pp. 214-60, is deserving of close study.

with the final ice slope of fringe-like formations. Progress at first somewhat easier, then excessively steep, the slope for some 600 ft. consisting of hard snow firmly adhering to ice. A small recess finally attained, whence over a bergschrund and more hard snow, they reached the saddle between the two peaks. Mounting the ridge of some 450 ft. they attained the N. peak,¹⁶ 4737 m., bivouacking some 60 ft. below. A slight thunderstorm during the night with some inches of fresh snow. The descent was effected on August 7 *via* the N. arête and the Sheldi Glacier to the tent.¹⁷

It is impossible to enumerate here the great number of ascents accomplished by these various parties in the Central and Western Caucasus. Full notes will be found in the said *Æ.A.Z.* as well as a list of Russian proletariat-climbs which include ascents of Shkara, Janga, Mishirgitau and Sheldikhtau. A guide-school is said to be functioning as well. Moreover the latest form of bolshevik propaganda appears to be achieved, not unskillfully, through mountain-appeal and the renaming of innocent peaks after prominent ruffians!¹⁸

¹⁶ The N. peak now appears to be accepted generally as the highest. Cf. *A. J.* 48. 117, footnote 12.

¹⁷ It is regrettable that the narrative of this and other splendid German ascents should be spoilt by so many superlatives and obvious exaggerations. Such descriptions, 'in which difficulties are emphasized by hair-raising comparisons, in which awful weather is nearly always present, in which the wall of rock is always overhanging while the personal equation is continually fighting death, stimulate one into opposition and criticism.'

¹⁸ Cf. U.S.S.R., *In Construction*, December 1936.