

# M U T T E R I S T O C K

Sunday, August 31, 1997 was probably the best day of the year, comparable to August 16 of last year, when we had climbed Dom. The weather forecast for the weekend was good, and I had planned a trip to the mountains some time ago. However, I was unable to leave at the lovely time of 5:45 a.m. (as I should have) since we got home late the night before after a birthday party near Winterthur. So, I decided not to drive too far; the Wägital South of Lachen at the upper Lake Zurich looked like a good place to go. It had rained the night before, such that the air was crystal clear, with no clouds whatsoever. However, the meadows along the road were soaking wet.

Among the mountainous areas near Zürich the Wägital is the closest one still offering a variety of interesting hikes and climbs. The valley in fact marks the onset of the Northern Alps, the area where the strata of rock start to be seriously disturbed. The largest village in the valley, Innerthal, can be reached from Lake Zurich in less than 30 minutes on a convenient road. Higher up in the valley there is an old dammed lake (at 910 meters above sea level) that fits well into the landscape, with scattered farm buildings around it. The valley is surrounded by a couple of peaks in the range of 2000 meters, such as Aubrig, Fluebrig, Chöpfenberg, Brünnelistock, Zindelspitz, all of which I had climbed several times. The most famous peak, Bockmattli, is known to rock climbers for its beautiful North face consisting of exactly vertical limestone strata.

I was not up to doing something like that, but the tallest peak of the valley, Mutteristock, 2294 meters above sea level, is a prominent mountain that can be seen from many directions, as it is shining like silver due to the bare limestone at its slopes. This was my mountain!

I drove up to the back end of the lake and easily found the trailhead next to a farmhouse at the roadside. I began hiking at 10:55, a little bit above the lakeshore. It was still cold, just right for walking uphill. The rugged trail first crossed a damp meadow, then climbed through a steep forest in a few switchbacks. After an hour I arrived at a fairly large pasture surrounded by an electric fence. On the pasture the trail was barely visible, and later I lost it altogether. I headed towards a barn, and later continued uphill in the most likely direction, crossing meadows, swamps, and rugged slopes, and after 20 minutes I was back on the trail that now was even marked by the familiar red and white signs painted on the rocks.

The trail followed due South along the foot of a steep rocky face, thus bypassing the most ambitious ascent routes. After a few more switchbacks I reached the next pasture with several dozens of cattle, clearly audible due to the large bells they were wearing. As on the lower pasture, I lost the trail, but found it again shortly afterwards. I decided to stop briefly for some fruit and tea from my thermos. In the

meantime, after I had climbed for nearly two hours, the temperature had risen to a comfortable level.

I left the place at 1 p.m., and a little later I noticed that somebody was following me at a distance. On a plateau further up I lost the trail signs for the third time (I think the trail maintenance group definitely needs to do something here). This was annoying since the terrain began to become uneasy due to the rugged limestone features, and I was afraid to lose too much time. Fortunately, I found the trail again by proceeding towards the saddle straight above.

The terrain began to show more and more of the characteristic features of chemically eroded limestone: edges sharp as knives, cracks and holes, in general an extremely rugged surface. The person followed me at a constant distance. After half an hour I reached the saddle; I was surprised to find a rescue sledge in a metal case, ready for being used in emergencies at times with more snow. Shortly above the saddle I entered the most rugged area I had been in so far. It was barren limestone with altitude differences as high as a house, holes, precipitous cracks, and a jumble of sharp edges of every scale between an inch and several yards. Of course, there was no longer anything like a trail; however, a line of markings painted onto the rocks roughly outlined the route to the top, leaving the details up to the hiker. I negotiated upwards, carefully positioning my boots at every step. I reached the top at 14:45, taking a total of 3 3/4 hours for the 1400 m climb.

Fifteen minutes later the other lone climber appeared below in the rubble of limestone, and shortly afterwards she reached the top as well. She had nearly caught up with me while I had my tea stop, and later, I had seemingly pulled her up from a distance. How old I was? - Well, 59, probably more than twice her age. - Yes, she was 26. She is living in the town below, is just about to join the Swiss Alpine Club SAC and, like me, she sometimes enjoys doing solo trips.

The view from the top on this extraordinarily clear day was spectacular. Being close to the majestic massive of the Glärnisch, we of course had a gorgeous view of the Glarus Alps and of the peaks of central Switzerland. Even more exciting, however, was the view in the opposite direction. With the naked eye I could clearly see 12 lakes (Wägitalersee, Sihlsee, Hüttensee, Zürichsee, Greifensee, Pfäffikersee, Obersee, Bodensee, Untersee, Walensee, Klöntalersee, Vierwaldstättersee). With the binoculars I was able to count houses in Zürich and on the Northern (German) shore of Lake Constance, at a distance of 70 km. This probably would not be very special in dry Colorado air, but in our country a clear view like this is very rare.

We signed the register together with two more persons that had come up in the meantime. It was warm enough to sit without sweaters or windbreakers, and we allowed ourselves the luxury of staying on top for 1 1/2 hours. As a comparison, on Matterhorn my guide wanted to descend after a quarter of an hour; with a lot of wheeling-dealing I got 35 minutes altogether. Well, all beautiful things must come to an end. The two solo hikers decided to join their efforts in order to get down

safely. This was a good thing: in the barren area it was not easy to keep the direction. The markings were less clearly visible from above, in particular if you were off the track already. I would not like to be caught in fog up there. One time we got a little too far to the right, heading towards a rather unpleasant descent in not only rugged but also steep terrain. We quickly corrected the error; Petra was very good at moving in the rubble of knives (she is definitely ready for the SAC).

The descent turned out to be very long; we wondered how we ever could have done all this uphill. We again stopped briefly at the upper pasture and were able to watch a farmer milking the cows. We drank the last drop of our tea instead. In this narrow valley the sun is setting early. For us sunset occurred when we crossed the lower pasture. This time I knew exactly which way to go. We reached the road still at daylight, but we were pretty tired. I quickly drove Petra to her car which was parked half a kilometer away.

We parted, and I drove to the next restaurant to call back home. On this occasion, a distressed father of two small kids asked me to drive him up a mountain road to recover his car. Of course I did this, thinking of the many times in the past and in the future I would need similar help. The rest of the drive home was quick and uneventful. Thank you, Saint Peter, for the perfect weather, and thank you, Petra, for following me all the way to the top.

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