

Swiss Himalayan expedition : Swiss Himalayan pioneers

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Swiss Himalayan pioneers Fifty years ago, the third Swiss expedition to Mount Everest notched up the second and third conquest of the world's highest peak. It also managed the first ascent of Lhotse, the highest "eight-thousander" as yet unscaled. Alain Wey looks back at one of the most successful expeditions in the history of Himalayan mountaineering. By Alain Wey.

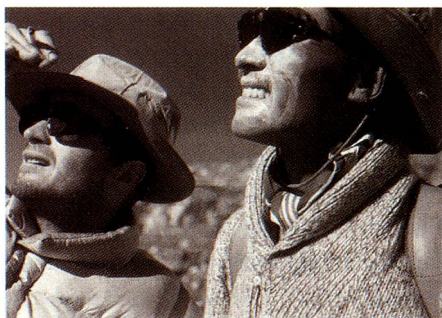
At 8,850 meters above sea level, the blue sky begins to darken. To this day, towering Everest remains a source of yearning, almost as if it embodied an unattainable dream. Before the glitzy conquest of space, it was the ascent of the world's tallest mountains that drove adventurers and researchers to new heights in the first half of the 20th century.

There was even a kind of "competition" among the kings of the mountaineering nations. And yet it was Edmund Hillary, a beekeeper from New Zealand of extraor-

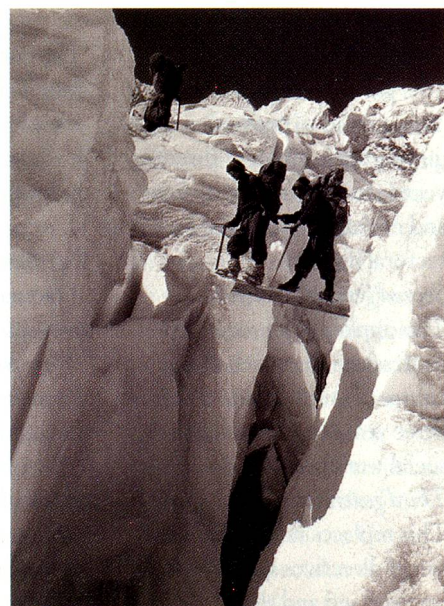
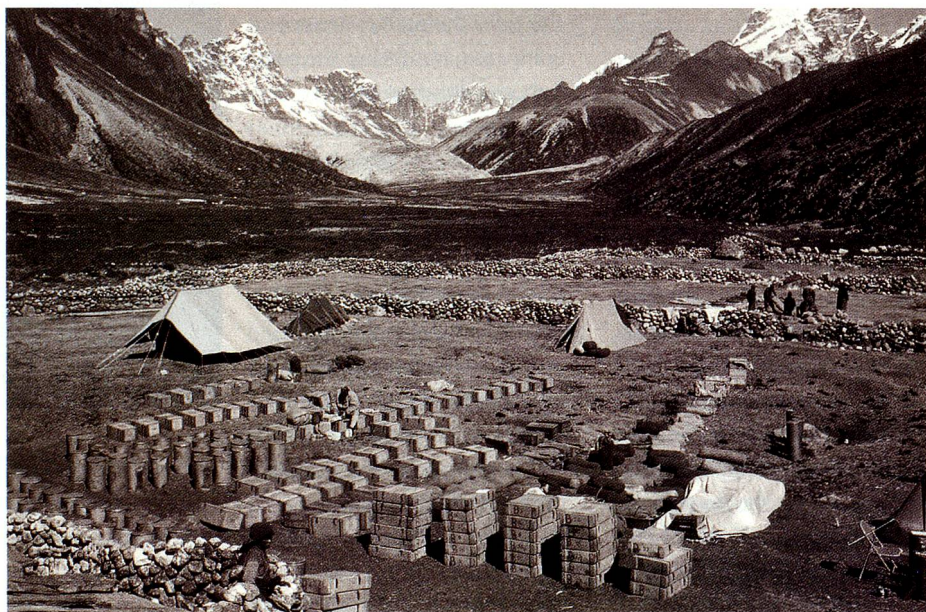
dinary strength, who with his sherpa Tenzing Norgay became the first to reach the top of the highest mountain in the world in 1953. The names Hillary and Tenzing went down in the history books, and Britain basked in the knowledge that one of its antipodean settlers had got there first. However, it should not be forgotten that two expeditions from Geneva had been forced to turn back just 250 meters from the mythical peak in 1952. The Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research (SSAR) had

been trying to put together a new Himalayan expedition ever since.

After much negotiation between 1953 and 1956, the Swiss Everest Expedition was formed. This experienced group of mountaineers consisted of ten outstanding Swiss alpinists under the leadership of Albert Eggler, an honorary member of the Swiss Alpine Club and at the time the club's central president. The homogenous team comprising, amongst other things, a geographer, glaciologist, meteorologist, doctor, and chemist,



The pictures are taken from the book "Everest - Lhotse, Schweizer am Everest 1952 und 1956", which documents the Swiss conquest of Everest in 1956 from Base Camp (upper right) to the summit (top right). The picture above shows Sherpa Tenzin on the right, with the Swiss team on the summit. On the right is the cashbox from which the sherpas' daily fees were paid in cash.



underwent military mountaineering training in the summer of 1955, followed by courses on avalanches and explosives in January 1956, to prepare them thoroughly for any eventuality their forthcoming mission might hold in store.

On 2 March 1956, the team arrived at the Nepalese border, where it was joined by a lama and 22 sherpas. After a six-week hike, they pitched their base camp at an altitude of 5,370 meters on April 7. In all, eight camps were set up on the way to the summit: Camp I at 5,800 meters, Camp II at 6,110 meters, Camp III at 6,400 meters, Camp IV at 6,800 meters, Camp V at 7,400 meters, Camp VI at 7,986 meters, and Camp VII at 8,400 meters.

After spending a freezing night at minus 25 degrees Celsius at Camp V, Ernst Reiss and

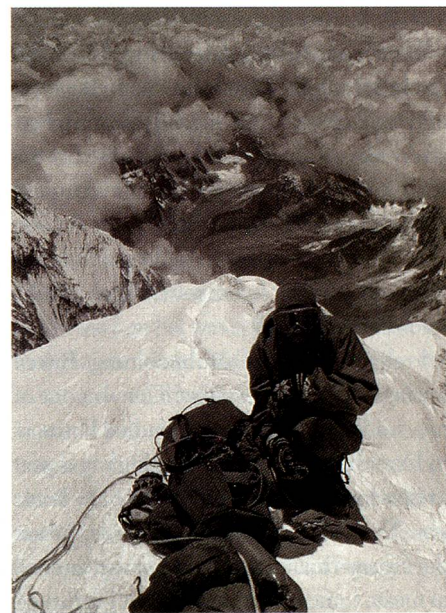
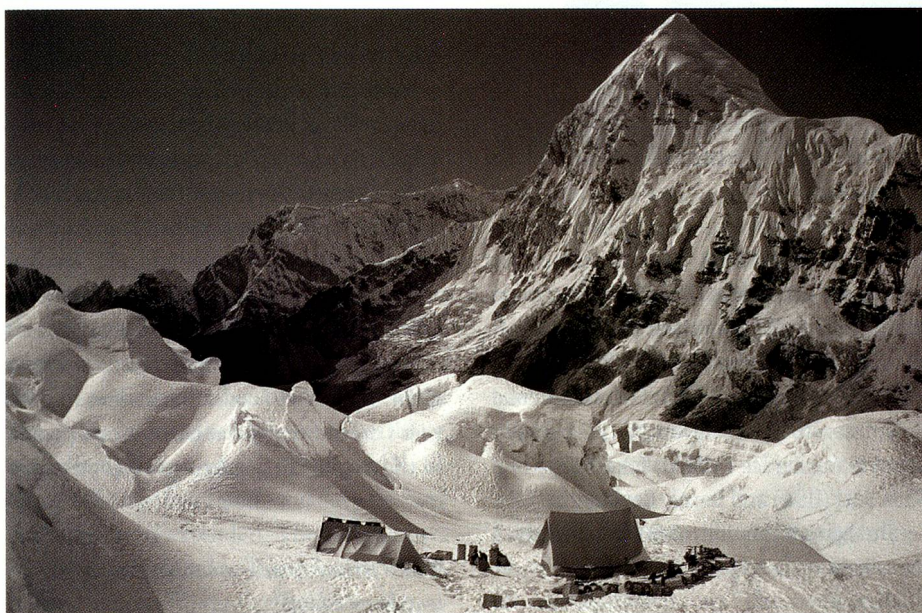
Fritz Luchsinger reached the summit of Lhotse (8,501 meters) on May 18th. The Lhotse ascent was a double premiere: It was also the first time Swiss mountaineers had successfully scaled an "eight-thousander".

On May 23, a group of climbers led by Ernst Schmied (the brother-in-law of Hansruedi von Gunten) and Jürg Marmet, left Camp VII and trudged indefatigably towards the top of Everest. At around 2 p.m., Man conquered the highest peak on the planet for the second time. Back at Camp VII, they met the second group of Dölf Reist and Hansruedi von Gunten (at 28, the youngest member of the expedition), who spent the night there while the other team returned to Camp VI.

The following day, May 24, it was the turn of Reist and von Gunten to reach the summit,

where they remained for almost two hours enjoying the magnificent view that Everest grants in clear weather. All the members of the team arrived back at base camp on May 29. An incredible adventure had come to an end. Apart from a few medical problems at the start of their voyage, the expedition was extremely fortunate, benefiting from unusually favourable weather conditions. The 1956 expedition brought Swiss alpinism worldwide renown. And as a result of their exploits, the team helped to make mountaineering popular around the globe!

The anniversary book: Everest – Lhotse, Schweizer am Everest 1952 und 1956, by Oswald Oelz, published by AS Verlag, www.as-verlag.ch



THE EXPEDITION IN FIGURES

- Budget: CHF 295,000 (the actual cost was CHF 360,000)
- The scientific equipment and emergency materials weighed 10 tonnes and were transported to base camp from the Nepalese border by 350 male and female porters. The exhibition at the Swiss Alpine Museum in Berne provides a comprehensive insight into the equipment of the time.
- Before the start of the 1956 Swiss expedition, only seven of the 14 independent mountains over 8,000 meters had been conquered. Nine days before the Swiss reached the top of Lhotse, a different expedition successfully climbed another eight-thousander: Manaslu.

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