

## Plaza de Mulas, an ideal place

The first thing was, of course, to set up tents, after agreeing with Link about the correct site to choose. But Link couldn't give us his attention because he was busy with something else. He was walking to the end of the platform where, on a higher ground level, we realized there was a metal flagstick. He took off his backpack and brought out from it a large Argentine flag that he hoisted. At first, his mysterious movements intrigued us, but then we felt inspired by Link's fervor, and finally, moved by the harmonious waving of our national emblem, stood facing it, with our heads uncovered, in a spontaneous homage; the Argentineans to the country of their birth and the foreigners to the country that had offered them its hospitality.

We proceeded next to unpack our baggage containing tents, sleeping bags, and other necessary objects. However, before setting up tents we had to carry out a thorough cleaning operation. It was evident that the previous expeditions hadn't given much importance to hygiene. In fact, most expeditions were only passing through Plaza de Mulas, treating it as a necessary step along the way to the summit, without any regard for it. Link's expeditions, on the other hand, had always been successful precisely because he did not consider this place a necessary evil but rather as an ideal spot to acclimatize physically and morally, so important when aiming at a higher altitude ascension. This meant an agreeable stay of several days with certain comforts which, if not equal to those of a hotel, could be a bridge between the comfort we were used to

and the total lack of any during Andean ascensions. And something more. In Link's opinion, indeed justified, Plaza de Mulas could turn into a holiday resort, accessible to people in general, without great risks or submitting to the rigors of a mountaineer's life. This natural beauty spot could be accessible to anybody who wished to enjoy it without being a mountain climber or renouncing a certain comfort, even if primitive.

Therefore, it was necessary to clean the site, or at least the places where we chose to set up our tents. There was garbage here, food remains over there, and piles of tins and stones further away. In the kitchen, as we named a small closed space between three rocks, sheltered from the wind so that a fire could be lit, we found the leftovers of a Chilean expedition that had climbed Aconcagua two weeks ago. These consisted of a dozen eggs, not so fresh by now and a nice looking pound cake that had hardened to stone. In a cardboard box we found a razor blade, a pair of sun-glasses, and other simple objects that Link gave to the muleteers to share among them. Pastén took the eggs also and, before we realized, he had made a fire in the kitchen, a pot of water was boiling and he introduced the eggs into it. We were surprised to watch how he submerged his own fingers and even his whole hand into the boiling water.

“Doesn't it burn you?” We asked.

“No, and you neither. Try it.”

I dipped the tip of my finger in the water, slightly incredulous, and drew it away quickly expecting to feel a burning sensation, but I didn't feel anything. I dipped, more courageously, two fingers into the liquid but, although it was very hot, I didn't get the sensation I expected, seeing the bubbles and movement typical of boiling water.

We had already studied something about this in physics and learnt during other ascensions, but some things never cease to surprise us each time we come upon them unexpectedly. At that altitude, water boils at 75° and higher up at 68°.

First we swept and cleaned the ground for four tents: one for Link and his wife; it was a historic tent, with an inscription that read: Plaza de Mulas 1936, 1938, 1940, 1942. It represented briefly the history of Link's ascensions to Aconcagua. Another tent, small and well made belonged to the newly wed couple, Grimm-Tiraboschi, on their honeymoon. My tent was large and dismountable, we set it up as the "bachelor's dormitory", which for the moment were Schiller, Zechner and I. The fourth was Zechner's; it was set up in front of the kitchen to serve as dining room.

We worked quickly to warm up and have the tents ready. When we finished, I went into the kitchen and was surprised to see Pastén taking the eggs out of the water. I remembered that the half hour that had gone by since they began to boil represented only about 3 to 4 minutes, so that the eggs were just soft boiled! A word of advice to those who cook by the book: please remember to multiply by ten the minutes needed for cooking.

We ate a light supper and lay down, as night had fallen and we were tired. Our sleeping bags were really needed here, more than the previous nights. We only removed our shoes keeping the rest of our clothes on, and snuggled in our sleeping bags up to our necks. This took some effort because at that altitude with the lack of oxygen and low pressure, moving, walking or even breathing becomes difficult. None of us felt any discomfort that first day because, having reached that point after walking for three days, we

had become slowly acclimatized. On the contrary, if you climb that same distance on mule back and in only one day, you will suffer severe physical discomfort and low spirits.

Finally, once in my tent and wrapped in my sleeping bag, an agreeable atmosphere keeping my body heat, I sent up a grateful thought to the unknown inventor of this artifact, the bag, which at times seems of more vital importance than the invention of, say, the steam engine. This was one of those times.

The morning dawned with a bright sunshine, like every morning up to now. At first, it seemed a rare coincidence until we realized it followed a fixed routine: in the morning, sunshine and around four o'clock in the afternoon, clouds, wind and snow. Eventually we found out the reason for this. The morning sun caused intense evaporation in the glaciers and the snow-covered fields; this vapor accumulated in the atmosphere during the day; in the afternoon, when the clouds were saturated, it snowed. Actually, the amount of vapor accumulated is small, so that it only snowed for a couple of hours. This was sufficient to refresh the ground and render the atmosphere dry and crystalline, enabling the rays of the sun to pierce the atmosphere and reach the earth, in order to repeat the process of the previous day.

Naturally, this is only a rough draft because the entire day may go by without a cloud in the sky, while, very often, stormy weather with wind and snow may rage for several days, due to the winds blowing from the Pacific Ocean.

Some of the members of the group were not feeling well that day, and continued to be indisposed for the fol-

lowing two or three days. Swollen, bad tempered faces with small, barely visible eyes could be seen around the camping site. Several were absent at lunchtime, and if anyone ventured to take food to their tents, where they spent the day lying down, they were not well received.

Professor Schiller was the champion sleeper. At any time or place, in his tent, in the kitchen or on the floor, he was able to fall into the deepest sleep. Others, on the contrary, despaired of not being able to sleep at all. During the day, it was possible to bear the lack of oxygen. At night, however, inside the sleeping bag, within a tightly closed up tent, hours went by before falling asleep. Breathing became deep and troublesome. From time to time one heard painful sounds of suffocation, as if coming from a steam engine. I, myself, felt more than once as if my turtleneck sweater was suffocating me. On one of those occasions, I tore at my collar violently with the desperate gesture of someone who was drowning.

Luckily, this occurred during the first days; later one acclimatized and felt perfectly at home.

Those who felt well, from the first day, were able to enjoy the beautiful panorama surrounding them. Towards the south lay Horcones Valley, with the peaks of Sin Nombre, Los Dedos and Bonete. To the west the peak of Cathedral, and 200 metres from the camping site we could see a white strip with a thousand peaks, which we were told was the Horcones Glacier; an astonishing sight for those who saw it for the first time. To the north stood Mount Cuerno, with the form of a cone, mostly covered by a layer of snow and ice estimated to be, in places, about thirty to forty metres thick. This mount was one of the most picturesque and attractive, although not the most envied by Andean

climbers. The only one to be envied is Aconcagua itself, which stood toward the east, fifty metres away from our site, rising almost vertically. It is questionable whether the summit can be seen from where we were or not. Link said that it was impossible to see it, and that the only peaks visible were those just below it. Professor Schiller's opinion was that the summit should be seen from Plaza de Mulas, but couldn't be sure which of the visible peaks was the real one. Pastén, however, pointed with his finger to a certain rock and said:

“That is the summit.”

And this turned out to be true. The people who spend their life in the mountain have an incredible intuition.

If one is hardworking, there is very little time to spend contemplating the view. There is so much to do on a camping site! We had to keep in mind that Link wanted to “urbanize” Plaza de Mulas and we had to help him in this project. There were certain elementary problems to solve; and besides these, there were the esthetic and “comfort” aspects to consider. Once, talking about how magnificent the place was, Link said:

“I would build a hotel right here.”

This was not a mere phrase for him. In these few words he expressed the dreams of his life: to own a hotel at the foot of Aconcagua and serve as guide to those wishing to climb it.

But, there was a long way to go before carrying out this dream. At present, we were kept busy with the immediate problems at hand. One of the most urgent needs was water. A stream ran a few steps away from the site; although it hardly ever dried up, it had the bad habit of freezing. The layer of ice was sometimes so thick that it

reached the soil, leaving only a thin trickle of water. At other times, when the water flowed freely, it dragged sand and was colored red. In order to remedy this, we dug three holes of about 60 cm deep in the middle of the stream. The water remained in the holes, with the earth falling to the bottom, leaving the water clean. When the surface froze and we had to break the ice, we always found a “deposit” of water to fill several cauldrons.

In front of these holes we put up three signs with the following inscriptions: “Drinking water”, “Water for the mules”, “Water for washing”. There was no problem with the “drinking” and “washing”, but the mules often made mistakes.

The question of putting up the signs was not only an ornament and a means of orientation; it was really an expression of Link’s love of order that motivated placing many other signposts all over the site and along the way from Puente del Inca up to the highest base camp.

As I already mentioned, the place was in very bad hygienic conditions. We started cleaning up the site and its surroundings by putting all the rubbish into a large bin that we carried to a spot outside the camp limits. Professor Schiller insisted on doing most of the job, specially clearing up the garbage around the kitchen, not even letting the rest of us help him.

“I demand to be named official garbage collector.” He announced jovially. To which I answered in the same spirit:

“I propose nominating *Papá* Schiller as Garbage Collector *honoris causa*.”

This motion was accepted unanimously.

Meanwhile, Zechner and Grimm took over the kitch-

en improvements by raising the walls to a height of two metres. They worked as masons and the rest, including the wives, acted as assistants. We carried stones from as far as thirty metres, bringing them by hand or shouldering them like the builders of the pyramids in time of the pharaohs.

Professor Schiller and I marked the camp site boundaries with a line of stones that surrounded it and the paths leading to the entrance, the flagstick, the toilets. Link built two stone pillars at the entrance of the site with a welcome inscription. When the job was finished, he asked me:

“You, Sekelj, who are a landscape artist, what do you think about painting all these stones in white?”

I thought it would be a great waste of energy and said so:

“And anyway, where are we getting the lime and the paintbrush?”

But he had everything ready, so I couldn't refuse to carry out his wish. Link had a way of motivating his companions' initiative. He did this without giving orders, but rather looking for the weak spot or inclination of each person. In this way, he had found a “landscape artist” to whiten his stones!

Near the camp Grimm dug a hole, two metres deep, for the rubbish, which took him half a day of hard work; with this he solved another esthetic and hygienic problem.

On a nearby hill, the Christian Cross of Peace had been planted by the Andean Club expedition named “Cón-dores de los Andes” in 1942: it was broken in its lower extremity, with a piece missing. Between Link and I, we brought it down and repaired it. Then we set it up again in its original place. While we were busy with this, Zechner

and Grimm built a winding path that led up to the cross.

As to the edibles, no expedition up to now had ever been so well provided as ours. Two whole hams, “salam-i”, and all types of sausages and meats hung from the wall of our larder, which was the entrance to the kitchen. All imaginable kinds of preserves could be found on the improvised shelves made of two boxes: vegetables, fruit, olives, tomato juice, tins of condensed milk, jars of instant coffee, flour and eggs. Underneath the shelves, there was a large enough space for a number of bottles containing whiskey, “hesperidina”, wine, brandy, beer and many other things. All this helped to keep us warm in days of intense cold. The fresh fruit was kept in boxes in the dining room tent, as well as the bags holding potatoes, onions and other fresh vegetables; other boxes held all kinds of biscuits, crackers and bread. This is not a complete inventory of our larder, but only a list of the articles that come to my memory at this moment.

At first, Zechner was the chief cook, and was very good at it. Later, when she got over her first days indisposition, Mrs. Link took over and fed us in a masterly way. Of course, she always had assistants, and some of them had their own specialties, which they were eager to try out on the other members of the group. Zechner prepared meat in different ways; I was in charge of the omelettes and pancakes, while Lita chopped onions. What the ladies had full monopoly of was the washing up, none of the gentlemen showed the slightest eagerness to share in this particular job.

In the morning we took “mate”, chocolate, coffee with milk, or whatever the first one to get up decided to prepare. I say “in the morning”, although it was usually

about eleven when we breakfasted, because we got up as soon as the first rays of the sun illuminated our tent, which was at ten o'clock. The sun took so long because it rose precisely behind Aconcagua, which stood next to our site, rising in a practically vertical form. Before the sun reached us, the cold forced us to remain warmly in our sleeping bags. When the first rays of the sun shone over us, the tents began to warm up in a few minutes, producing an unbearable heat. We would jump out of bed and leave them quickly. The reader will probably ask: What did you do on stormy days? We simply stayed lying down. That is to say, at about noon we went like ghosts, towards the kitchen to look for some food or visit the other parts of the camp. Then, we returned to our tent, each with the booty that we had been able to recover under the thick layer of snow that usually covered the larder.

One day, Link went down to Puente del Inca to meet the other two members of the group who had not been able to join us yet: Engineer Alberto Kneidl and Mario Bertone, who was coming as delegate of the Ministry of Agriculture, sent by Engineer Alfredo G. Galmarini, Head of the Meteorological Department in order to carry out measurements and research in the region.

Link did not impose on us as leader of the group; he simply inspired us to work through his own example by choosing the most suitable job for each one to do. However, now that he was gone we felt a reaction against the chores that had kept us occupied the whole time. We were fully conscious that those chores had helped us to acclimatize at that altitude, but we didn't feel like doing anything. I remember that Link had asked me to stick the image of a

condor on the guest book left by R.A. Faltis in 1943, and I also remember that I never got round to doing it.

Next day, Zechner and I went for a walk towards the Horcones Glacier that we could see from the camp as a white strip, adorned by hundreds of peaks of icy towers called “ice penitents” to distinguish them from the “stony penitents”, which are needles of stone of a similar formation. We reached the dominion of ice very quickly, as it lay some 200 metres away from the campsite and easily accessible. In spite of the relatively small effort spent to reach this spot, a fairy tale landscape lay before our eyes. Innumerable glacial towers of a transparent blue or green rose to a height of twenty or thirty metres. Among them could be seen narrow valleys, natural stairways and sometimes flat, icy surfaces, showing that small frozen lagoons lay under them. It was very difficult to walk in the glacier, especially if one aspired at climbing the towers, or crossing the bridges that spanned two towers. One needed crampons and to know how to use the pickaxe. With each step, one risked slipping to the bottom of the glacier; if one stepped on a needle, it might break causing a two to three metres fall; sometimes, one found oneself on high, without knowing how one got there, unable to go either backwards or forwards. Then was the moment to hang on to the crampons and work some steps with the pickaxe, digging holes to place one’s feet and so continue scaling. Suddenly, the climber would be startled by the sound of a running stream, just an octave higher than a common stream. The sound was attractive and curiosity drew him to its source. He reached a spot where the sound was louder but not a drop of water was to be seen. He was in the presence of a sub glacier stream that ran all the length of that enormous

mass of ice. The water produced by the thaw of ice, collected and dripped constantly towards the bottom of the glacier, forming at its exit one of the streams that made up the River Horcones.

On entering deeper into the glacier, the “world of earth” was forgotten and one lived in an unreal world where the sudden appearance of a long- bearded dwarf carrying a lantern in his hand, or of a fairy flying down from a tower, waving a star- tipped magic wand, would not have been surprising. One was just imagining these things when one’s attention was drawn to a black hole behind a block of ice. One approached and the hole grew into the jaws of a glacial cavern. One entered, why shouldn’t one profit by this occasion of being transported to the sublime poetry of fairy tales? A soft bluish light filtered among the icy stalactites that formed columns like tree- trunks, of a subtle transparency. The walls seemed to emanate light and when a luminous ray struck them, small stars sparkled and stimulated an imagination all too ready to escape reality. Some of these caverns ended after taking only a few steps, while others were very deep; it was advisable not to continue in these before tying the end of a ball of string to the entrance, unwinding it as you went along, well armed with a powerful torch. Then, indeed, you perceived the wonders that beautiful Scheherazade forgot to mention in “The Thousand and One Nights”.

On leaving, it was necessary to replace the sun goggles; these were indispensable because the brightness of the sun on the ice could be blinding. Even with precautions, a walk in these glaciers was not without a certain danger. Very often, a chasm several metres deep opened at someone’s feet, which if taken unawares might swal-

low him forever. One could never be too careful. These excursions should always be carried out in groups. And each person should be tied to the next by a rope around the waist, the rope being separated by a length of two or three metres to allow a certain freedom of movement.

As you went up along the glacier, several formations called “ice- tables” or “mushrooms” could be observed that consisted of a tower of ice, sometimes over four metres tall, crowned with a large stone like a hat, that looked like huge mushrooms. The story of these formations is interesting. During the winter, the snowfalls are heavy, sometimes the snow lies four to six metres deep; the wind loosens avalanches of stones which remain at certain places covered by the snow. When spring arrives, the rays of the sun melt the snow... as far as they can. The rocks brought by the avalanche remain on the top and throw their shadow on the snow, blocking the effect of the sun. While all around them, the level of the snow descends, until it disappears, in places under the shadow of the stony “hat” the snow remains intact, forming a column that sustains the “protecting” stone on the top. Many of these mushrooms can be found in the Horcones Glacier and its surroundings, of different sizes and curious shapes.

It is easy to reach Plaza de Mulas from Puente del Inca on horse- back; it takes about eight hours and is well worth the effort to enjoy the virginal beauty of Horcones Glacier.

One Saturday afternoon we had guests at the campsite. They were friends of ours who had promised to visit us in Puente del Inca. Father Pedro Gil Carrel, Dr. Antinucci and his wife. The sudden change of altitude and the eight- hour ride had completely exhausted them. After

spending a short while with us, hardly eating anything, they went to lie down in the tents to sleep. Father Gil, who slept in our tent, next to me, was able to sleep the second half of the night; the Antinucci couple, who occupied Mr. and Mrs. Link's tent, remained sleepless the whole night, with headaches, breathing problems and other mountain-sickness symptoms; not even the five aspirins they took between them were able to help. In my opinion, the problems that couples suffer are mainly due to sharing a double sleeping bag, which is what they were using. At this altitude, the difficulty to breathe is what affects the organism the most; the body tends to expand, to free itself from any fastening or any contact that may limit its movements; this problem does not exactly induce one to sleep easily, especially on a first night at Plaza de Mulas. I have noticed that any discomfort of one of the couple is felt by the other, even if they share a wider, double bag. So that I strongly warn against using "matrimonial" beds, which seem romantic, but haven't any real practical use.

Next day, they felt more tired than the day before. Dr. Antonucci, however, didn't want to miss the Horcones Glacier. He went alone and returned very satisfied. His wife was constantly praising the other two wives for their persistence in staying in a place where one couldn't even breathe properly.

"You're coming back with us, aren't you?" She asked Mrs. Link and Mrs., Grimm at a given moment, thinking that they were just waiting for the first opportunity to do so, and was extremely surprised by a negative answer followed by a benevolent smile.

It was easy to understand our guest's state of mind who, apart from the atmospheric difficulties, was suffering

from the lack of comfort that she usually enjoyed at any normal hotel. The mistake was that they had come for the day or at most to stay overnight, since they left at noon. On the contrary, one should not visit Plaza de Mulas for less than a week, because acclimation takes about two to three days, and it takes about three or four more days to appreciate the surroundings.

As to Father Gil, he was getting ready to say mass for it was Sunday. This mass would be the highest celebrated in the country. I mention this because although Father Kastelic had celebrated mass at Plaza de Mulas in 1940, this had taken place at the entrance of the campsite, while the present celebration was taking place on a hill, thirty metres higher.

After mass, Father Gil took some photographs and went down to the kitchen for a chat with us all. On the whole, of the three visitors he was the fittest and, before leaving, expressed his wish to remain with us, although he felt himself under the obligation to go back with his other companions.

We had lunch and our guests got ready for their eight-hour ride down to Puente del Inca. We said goodbye and watched them from a hilltop for a long while, until they disappeared from sight as they entered the Horcones Valley.

Our visitors left us the Saturday newspapers from Mendoza. It was probably the first time that a daily newspaper arrived on the same day it was published. We all started reading them eagerly. But none of us finished a single article. It's a fact that in those heights, surrounded by those majestic, white-covered peaks, the daily occurrences of the world seem very insignificant and very far.

A newspaper, in the midst of that sublime natural setting, seemed almost a sacrilege or, at least a worthless object; if one discounted the value it might have as a means to light a fire or wrap something in.