

At the Summit Meeting

In an unusual exercise in East-West diplomacy, 23 citizens of the Soviet Union and the United States, plus one from Switzerland, met in the Caucasus. Their goal: negotiation of Mt. Elbrus, Europe's highest peak.

WE ARE TRYING TO STAY ON THE TRAIL, avoid puddles and rocks, admire the scenery, and find the word "different" in a pocket dictionary—all at the same time. Olga and I squint at the tiny Cyrillic letters in midstride, our heads nearly knocking together. Finally we find "different," but I also find that what I really want to say is "different from," not at all the same construction in Russian. We fall into silence, belying each other with a squeeze of the hand.

THE ROPE IS TENSE AND ALIVE IN MY HANDS, the sun hot on my back. I brace my feet, give more tension, fix my eyes on Sasha. I can feel by the way he moves at the end of the rope that he is in trouble. He needs to move out on the face, to trust a small foothold and reach high with his right hand, but he has never climbed before. I am watching him closely and am not surprised when he falls. I catch him.

THAT EVENING SOMEONE STIRS A POT OF SOUP, while others slice bread and cheese and pry open meat tins with knives. Someone else goes to look for whoever carried the cabbages. We carry huge bags of cabbages into the mountains, as well as boxes of potatoes, tomatoes, and apples; glass jars of peas and marmalade; unsliced loaves of brown bread and lumps of butter wrapped in white paper. At first some of us protested carrying the weighty foods, but we are stronger now and used to the load on our backs. And we have grown fond of our plain bread and butter, our boiled potatoes, our *shi* and our *kasha*. We tell Zhenya she makes the best *kasha* in the world. "I have been making it for 20 years, it ought to be good," she says with a shrug, but she is pleased.

We eat standing up, talking in little clusters, discussing tomorrow's pass. The ragged edge of the mountains at the end of the valley slices into the darkening sky. Dinner chores are done, and Zhenya picks up an untunable guitar and somehow draws music from it, bewitching us with ballad after ballad. After singing some American folk songs, we teach the Soviets a few Native American chants and rounds. They immediately respond to the rhythms and harmonies. The lack of words puts us on an equal footing, and we can at last sing together at full voice. Firelight on our faces binds us together into a single clan gathered around the hearth.

At times I feel I am dreaming, that this cannot be quite real. Either our journey is a dream, or the enmity between our countries is a dream; it does not seem possible that reality could contain both. We are constantly aware of our national identities: I am playing Hacky Sack with a *Russian*. She is slicing cabbage with an *American*. Simple thoughts with the force of tremendous revelation.

Indeed, we are here because of a dream that passed from one person to another. An American woman named Cynthia Lazaroff organized the first Soviet-American wilderness expedition in 1985, bringing ten American teenagers to these same mountains to hike with ten of their Soviet contemporaries. A young Soviet physician named Boris Donnikov who accompanied that group was inspired by the camaraderie among the teenagers and envisioned a similar trip involving doctors. Donnikov talked his idea over with Ken Mack, a youthful leader of the expedition and the son of John Mack, a member of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW).

That fall the senior Mack contacted Harvard medical student David Kreger, who took on the organization of the trek. Dr. Evgeny Chazov, a prominent Soviet cardiologist and then co-president of IPPNW, agreed to help facilitate the trip and suggested a symbolic focus: carrying to the summit of Mt. Elbrus—at 18,481 feet the highest peak in Europe—a "message to the world" signed by himself and by Bernard Lown, IPPNW's American co-president. In July 1986, after a flurry of telexes and paperwork, thirteen Americans, one Swiss, and ten Sovi-

ets assembled in the Caucasus for a three-week expedition.

Although everyone except one other American and me is a doctor or medical student, the main thing we have in common is our love of the mountains. It is this, more than the shared medical backgrounds, that unifies the group.

The sheer walls of language and culture are daunting at times, however. During meals at the base-camp hotel, we stare at each other across long, well-set tables and glasses of sugary hot tea. Without the language of forget-me-nots and talus slopes, we have no trail for our words. It is hard and sometimes awkward. We flounder, we force our way through tangles of words, we laugh somewhat desperately at half-understood jokes. The tremendous feelings cross in a smile or an offering of food. But we never linger over our hotel meals. Back outside, in the sunshine and mountains, we breathe a huge sigh of relief; we can communicate again.

As the Americans learn more Russian, and the Soviets remember long-ago English lessons, we begin moving, with the help of translators and sketchbooks, toward conversations about politics, lifestyles, and ideas. Together we admire woolly lousewort, asters, pink smartweed, harebells, rhododendron, and dozens of other wildflowers we cannot name. We glissade down snow couloirs, slipping and self-arresting. We gather wild strawberries and mushrooms, throw Frisbees and snowballs.

One day we stand before a group of a hundred fresh-faced, sunburnt young Soviet climbers at a mountaineering camp and talk, through a translator, about why we have come. After the meeting the climbers shyly gather around us, their smiles and body language speaking volumes. Then someone plugs an American rock tape into a loudspeaker. "When I saw the Americans and Soviets dancing together," Lyosha says later, "when I saw us holding hands, smiling, crying, singing, it seemed so impossible to me, so unimaginable, and

yet here it was happening before my eyes. And I had a vision of our children also dancing together and laughing, also holding hands, and no one thinking it strange or impossible."

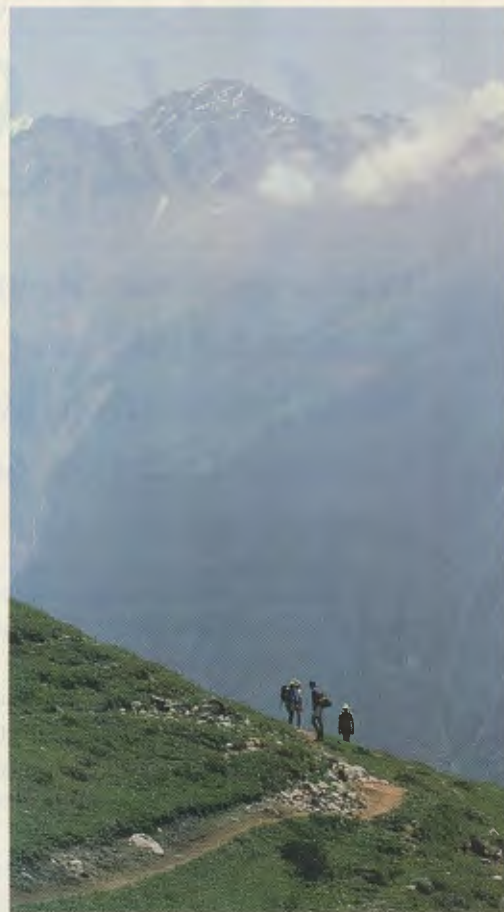
On the long walk back to our tents, Boris Donnikov keeps repeating: "This is why you are here."

In order to cross the glaciers and gain Betcho Pass before the snow softens, we plan to leave camp at 5 a.m. But not everyone gets up in time, and before camp chores are finished, Slava Onischenko, an Everest veteran and head guide, sets off with about two thirds of the group. The others are left behind to clean pots and pack stoves. A 20-minute gap materializes between the lead group and the second group. The climb is steep and slippery. When the first group stops to rest, the second group almost catches up, only to see the first group sling on their packs and take off.

It seems to members of the second group that the first doesn't want them to catch up, and they slog on, resentment building with every step. No one wants to be pegged as a member of the "slow group," and those in the rear feel unfairly treated. A distinct and unwelcome whiff of competition is in the air. An American walking between the groups falls while crossing a stream because no one is nearby to help him.

As soon as they gain the pass, five members of the first group bound down the snow and offer to carry the packs of those still climbing. But tensions are already so high that this is interpreted as a further rubbing in of their "strength" compared to the others' "weakness." We are reunited at the pass, but eight people are sullen and angry.

The American leader calls a meeting, explaining that it is extremely important for group morale that we stick together. The Soviet leader defends his actions as simply an attempt to get as many people up the pass as possible before the snow softens. Members of the first group admit that there has been some competition but dismiss it as natural and inevita-



Climbers take a breather during a day hike from the Baksan Valley.



Undaunted by cold, turbulent waters, a few members of the group roll up their trousers and build a bridge of human hands across the Nakra River.



Their expedition almost over, the climbing diplomats gather for a group portrait at Priutt Hut on Mt. Elbrus.



A Soviet and two Americans share a song one morning at camp. Music filled an important niche during the expedition, often communicating emotions more successfully than conversation could.



"May all people learn to care for this beautiful planet with a love that is faithful and constant. May there be future generations to discover these words and know their meaning." Evgeny Chazov (left) places the message of hope into the capsule that will be buried at the summit of Elbrus. At right, the climbers approach their goal.



At day's end the Soviets and Americans confront each other in a new type of superpower gamesmanship: Hacky Sack.



ble. The American leader says that's precisely the point: We're here to prove that cooperation is a stronger force than competition, to demonstrate a different way of climbing a mountain.

During the ten-mile descent, everyone makes an extra effort to stay together. But exhaustion amplifies the bruised feelings, and dinner that night is eaten in language-based groups. Almost everyone feels tired, cranky, victimized, and misunderstood. Yet also in the air is a fervent desire to put things right. Gradually the hurt feelings are smoothed over with hugs, cups of hot tea, explanations, or songs.

Two days later we are staring at a river in dismay. The bridge has been washed away in the spring melt. "Cuckoo-grinya," says Slava, raising his palms with a faint smile. (Roughly translated, *cuckoo-grinya* means "well, that's that, Charley.") Reluctantly, we take off our boots and socks, roll up our pants, loosen the straps on our backpacks, and eye the river that stands between us and four more miles of climbing to the 13,500-foot Dongus-Orun Pass. The river is wide, unruly, waist-deep in places, and icy. *Cuckoo-grinya*, indeed.

While most of us linger on the bank, gathering our nerve, a few doff their packs and plunge in, hopping from rock to rock in the swift waters. They then join hands, balancing on submerged rocks and logs, forming a living bridge for the rest of us. One by one, as we inch into the deepest channel, we reach for Slava's hand while he holds on to Yura, and Yura holds on to Jeff, and Jeff wedges himself onto the bank. Encouragement in both languages is shouted above the river's roar; cheers and applause erupt as each person splashes safely to land. We put on dry socks in high spirits. The way to the pass is clear.

We are now ready for Elbrus.

On a cloudless day we reach the hut at 13,800 feet on the slopes of



Elbrus, where a television crew, newspaper reporters, and Dr. Chazov are waiting to hold a press conference with us. We are giddy and confident and pay little attention to the wind that starts blowing at sundown.

But by 2 a.m. the wind has gathered strength, and an ominous lenticular cloud hangs over the mountain. Beginning an ascent is out of the question. Instead, we spend the day playing cards, talking, and writing in our journals. As the storm becomes a blizzard, we have plenty of time to contemplate the possibility that the weather may prevent us from taking a single step further. I think about what this trip has meant, and what, if anything, failing to climb Elbrus would change.

The following midnight the storm breaks and the wind dies. At 2 a.m. we dress, put on our crampons, and move into the silver landscape outside the hut. Elbrus smolders under the full moon. The enormity and absurdity of our mission stares me in the face. We must be crazy to think we can climb that thing. We should be back by our campfires, asleep in our beds, heading for home, anywhere but here on the slopes of a mammoth and mocking mountain.

But the full moon is reassuringly bright. The main ridge of the Caucasus is half-buried in a shimmering mist, leaving the highest peaks silhouetted by the moon. If it's crazy to be here, it's crazier still to give up after all we have gone through, after all the energy and love we have expended. Slava takes his place at the head of the line, and we begin to

walk. There are no huzzahs or pistol shots, no cheering crowds. We simply begin to walk.

Hours later, after the moon has set and the sun begins touching the peaks, we are still climbing. At rests we feed each other pieces of chocolate and gather close to protect each other from the wind. Our water and sunscreen freeze in their bottles. Our boots sink into the deep

fresh snow, our ice axes and crampons clang against the volcanic rock.

It could be hours later, or minutes. I look up and see Volodya waiting for me a few steps ahead. "Galya, we will go together," he says firmly, taking my hand. "Only 20 steps to go." His steps are faster than mine; we take nine or ten and are both gasping for breath. Our fingers cling together through layers of mittens. "Only 15 steps to go." The mountain is now strangely flatter. Volodya tugs on my hand insistently. "Only ten steps." I lose my balance for a moment and feel his hand clench as I stumble. He brings me back to my feet. "Only . . . five . . . steps." Only a little more. And then the mountain falls away on all sides.

"In the nuclear age, the nations of the world are all climbers on a mountain, depending for their survival on the rope of tolerance. The bonds of friendship forged in the wilderness are threads spanning the chasm between countries long separated by fear and ignorance." The words will be translated and reprinted in *Pravda* and a half-dozen other Soviet newspapers. They will be reported in American newspapers and magazines as well as broadcast on radio and television.

But as we bury our message in the snow, raise each other's arms high, and shout each other's names, all that matters is that the words are true. ■

GALE WARNER, a writer living in Gloucester, Mass., co-authored *Citizen Diplomats: Pathfinders in Soviet-American Relations* (Continuum Books, 1987) with Michael Shuman.