On the peaks of the world. Part 2.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka talks with Anna Borecka, a lonely climber, hitchhiking across continents, implementing the project „200 Peaks of the World”.



Ice climbing in the Slovak Paradise, photo by Stanisław Proszak.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

Which countries you have so far visited, you remember the most?

Anna Borecka:

The countries where I had the biggest problems, i.e. Iran and China. On the first day in Tehran, I was robbed by a taxi driver. Then I witnessed street demonstrations. I had

to get through the chanting crowd and armed police cordon to reach the dormitory where I lived. It was even more difficult for me to cross the multi-million capital every day to get three visas to the post-Soviet countries. At one point, I was in a stalemate because I was stuck for good. So I started with the permission from Tajikistan, which was the last on my list. After having received a visa to neighboring Turkmenistan, I had to travel five hundred kilometers, changing the earlier planned route. In the meantime, I reached **Demawand** (5,610 m), the highest peak in Iran, so my efforts were rewarded.

There was martial law in West China, lots of armed police and soldiers in the streets, and purges in the Uyghur homes. One can not get along easily with officials in China. There was also a blockade of communication with the world, so I used to withdraw small amounts of money from an ATM to let my daughter know that I was alive.



On Demavand (5,610 m a.s.l.) with a group of Iranians, photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

Have you ever been in really dangerous situations?

It often happened. In Tajikistan, for example, I got lost in the mountains of Pamir. I entered the military base and officers intended to arrest me and lock me up in prison for half a year. I quickly took out the map and showed them where I came from by hitchhiking and I explained that I came to climb alone in the mountains. I had never before spoke Russian so well. (Laugh) Surprised, they even fed me and drove me to the nearest village.

On the Karakorum Highway, Chinese police stopped me and forbade me to continue hitchhiking. When I opposed them, one of them jerked and pushed me and the other one raised the rifle up at me. I calmed down. I showed them my passport with visa and … I continued hitchhiking.

Hitchhiking across the Kazakh steppe, I escaped being raped only by miracle, but now I will not speak about it. Whoever wishes, will read about it in the second volume of "Alpinistka na autostopie" (Hitchhiker and climber). In Kosovo, I was alone in the mountains, when I heard quite close the Kalashnikov shots. I heard the voices of a few men, but I did not see them, because fortunately there was fog. Suddenly, one of them screamed so terribly that I crouched down and quietly, running along ruts, I left the dangerous area.

In the Alps, Pamir and Karakorum, I jumped alone through glacial crevasses at 4,000-6,000 meters and fell into them a few times, but fortunately not too deep. I put the ice ax in front of me, I stretched out on it and crawled out to finally stand up. In different mountains, I had several accidents and injuries including serious knee injuries, torn muscles and ligaments in both legs. And in the Balkans, when I sprained my right hand and it immediately swelled up like a bubble, I was worried about how I would hitch. I first had to come back from the mountains during the storm, hand wash my clothing,

because everything was muddy, and pack a backpack. It was a torment, every move caused me pain, but after all I chose a lonely style of traveling. However, I never interrupted the trip, and I treated my injuries after returning home, even for half a year.

The previous summer, at Cape Verde, I climbed the rock and I tore a huge stone out of it. It hit my leg, but fortunately I did not fall off the wall. However, to this day I have a dimple in my thigh. Also, a taxi driver hit me, because he did not notice me when he tried to drive back. My spine ached a lot, but I had to put on a rucksack and go on, because I could not fight with a few angry Africans. However, I was so nervous that I hit the driver a few times on his head. These are just a few drastic situations that I experienced, but I definitely prefer to remember those positive ones.



Hitchhiking on Karakorum Highway, photo by Anna Borecka.

When you went alone to the mountains, did you happen to have some surprising encounters, unpredictable situations that you had to face?

I have already mentioned some of them, so now I will describe a funny episode for a change. In Andorra I came down from the mountains in the evening, although it would be wiser to camp somewhere in the forest. I could not catch a car for a long time. Finally, a bearded man stopped, but he spoke only Spanish. I tried to explain to him that I reach different peaks in

Europe, and he smiled and invited me to the car. This way I traveled to Asturias, in the north of Spain where I discovered the mountains of the Picos de Europa, whose existence I did not know before. What could I do? I went to those mountains as well. It turned out that this bearded man, looking like Santa Claus, was a pensioner and lived in a motorhome. For four years he lived on the road, he visited the countries of Western Europe, although he did not know foreign languages. He would come home every three months for medical treatment, because for years he was seriously ill. And then he moved into the world again, saying that the trips were the best medicine for him, and the views from the window of a car were like the most beautiful television. He did not want to reveal his identity, so I called him Incognito.

Hm, when it comes to a surprising meeting, it reminded me of a story. In Iceland, I went alone to the highest peak **Hvannadalshnúkur** (2,110 m). The mountain is small, but it is located on the treacherous, large Vatnajökull glacier. There, the weather changes every now and then, Arctic conditions often prevail. The crevasses are covered with snow and it is easy to get lost in the blizzard. No one goes there alone, without a rope and GPS … except me.

In my second approach towards the summit, the crystals of snow hit my face, I suddenly felt the blow of icy air, and then came

thick fog. The visibility fell to zero and the sky turned black. I thought I had a problem with my sight, and I was scared, but the feeling of darkness quickly recurred during the day. At that moment, I did not see anything, not even the traces of shoes on the snow that previously led me. Suddenly, I heard a strange male voice, muffled and dull, like coming from under the glacier: „Turn back!". I stopped, listening. I took two steps and again I heard: „Turn back!". I stopped, took off my glasses, no one was around. However, I did not have to look around because I felt that this voice did not come from outside or from inside me. It was the voice from beyond the grave. With my seventh sense which had previously warned me several times I saw a man in his forties. He had gray, curly, short hair. He was a short, of medium-sized body, and was wearing a thick, gray wool sweater with long, bright bristles. I still remember that figure and the voice I have never heard before. That made me wonder, so I started to walk in circles, looking for footprints on the snow in order to go back. However, the wind blew them away. Luckily, after a few minutes, it cleared a little, and I saw a crevasse covered with snow in place where I wanted to go. My path should go straight up, but I listened to the voice of intuition and turned back.



Jökulsárlón – tourist attraction on hitchhiking in Iceland, photo by Anna Borecka.

I hitchhiked the whole of Iceland, visiting some beautiful places. After a week, I returned to Hvannadalshnúkur. I only got to the top approaching it third time, but even then I had a strange experience. It was quite warm a day, so the conditions were much better. I stopped at the glacier, took a sip of thermos tea and heard a clear, resounding voice behind me: „Don't go there!". I looked surprised, but I did not see anybody. After a moment, the same voice repeated the warning from a distance in front of me, and again there was no one there. I recognized the voice as the voice of my guide from Ararat whom I met in 2008. It clearly was the Kurda's voice speaking broken English and with a foreign accent in the rhythm of „ta ta ta". „Don't go

there!”. It surprised me a little and even made me laugh. This time I did not listen, I went further, jumped through a few crevasses, and right before the top dome I dropped my right leg into the ice crack, all the way to the thigh. I quickly pulled it out using the ice ax and breathed a sigh of relief. As a reward for bravery I made a few photos from the top of the mountain when fog broke for a moment.

In short, the first warning voice could had come from the so-called collective memory. That’s what my friend said in Poland, giving me the goose bumps. However, I do not know how the Kurdish guide could speak to me. He probably does not even know where Iceland is. The boy had only several classes of elementary school. First, he grazed sheep on the slopes of Ararat, and when he was twenty years old, he started as the guide for tourists and alpinists. (Laugh) Yes, a person is never alone, even when convinced he/she is. Sometimes in the mountains we experience the third or even fourth degree encounters. (Smile)

You wrote, among others, the book entitled “Alpinistka na autostopie” (Hitchhiker and climber). Is hitchhiking a better chance to meet people, witness their daily lives, customs and dreams?

Yes, of course, often strangers invite me to their homes. We talk

about their worldviews, everyday worries, but they rarely talk about their great dreams. They usually live here and now. I have the opportunity to get to know their everyday life. I know they enjoy the visits of an unexpected guest. I write about it in both volumes of “Alpinistka na autostopie”, describing people from Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Because of numerous meetings I gained knowledge about various countries and their inhabitants. I also have the opportunity to reach places that tourists do not know, e.g. I spent the night in a Kyrgyz yurt and got to know everyday life in the mountains of a big Muslim family.



Return to Pamir Highway after the overnight stay with hospitable Kyrgyz family, photo by Anna Borecka.

When it comes to hitchhiking, I have the opportunity to see different drivers' behavior towards a female hitchhiker. Poles, Czechs and Slovaks like to complain about their fate, but countrymen will treat me with stuffed cabbage or *bigos* from a jar. Swiss only need information where I am from. The Icelanders will take me out of the way into the worst of turmoil. Finns have a gesture – with a golf coach as driver, I rode a sporty BMW worth 200,000 euros. With a nice Finnish couple, I traveled for two days to their home, where they invited me for an exquisite dinner and overnight stay. Inhabitants of the

Balkans see comrades in Poles, so with every driver you have to drink at least one cup of coffee in a bar. Austrian men treat me like air, but Austrian women will always take me to the shopping center, although it is not on my way. Italians and Spaniards do not take hitchhikers, but if one of them stops the car, he already offers a long road. Traveling with Frenchman, Turk or Chinese, I can sometimes sit behind the wheel as a driver of a car or a pick-up. On the Pamir Highway, I drove a truck which belonged to a Kyrgyz. I drove it to Ak Baital (4,655 m), the highest pass on the road. With the inhabitants of the Azores I visited the island of Pico, and on Cape Verde I hitchhiked to the inhabited caldera, although noone rides there for free.

You say that all over the world there are people like us. In what respect are they the same?

So far I visited 63 countries on five continents and met people from many other countries. So I dare to say that people everywhere are similar because they have similar problems and dreams, and they only differ because of their place of birth. The place very much determines their lives, but in fact they are the same as us. Man is good by nature, because he comes into the world pure, innocent and trusting. Unfortunately, he later socializes. However, each of us strives to do the same: to ensure well being and safe life for oneself and the family. We need to cope with problems, set goals and realize our dreams as much as

possible. I found out about it on hitchhiking, in mountain villages, in urban areas. Initially, some people were distrustful of me and others tried to play tricks on me. However, when I started talking to them and they found out that I was a normal person, they would become kind and helpful or they would leave me alone. It gives me faith in people. Each of us has some advantages and disadvantages, and creates different relationships with people, but in the majority, we are all normal, positive persons. And someone who emanates negative energy, he usually has problems that he cannot cope with by himself. Therefore, we should either help him if we feel strong enough, or we should steer clear of him. During the journey, I program myself positively, so usually I meet people with whom I can connect, even engage in normal, hearty conversation.



Dinner in a Tajik village, but in the house of Kirgiz, photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

Have you ever said that jumping through the ice crevasses in Pamir you met your family in Canada? How do you mean by that?

This is obviously a figure of speech, but I like the vision of a big jump over two continents and an ocean. The story is extraordinary. In 2009, I wanted to climb the Avicenna Peak (7,134 m a.s.l.) in the Pamirs. On the glacier, about 5,000 meters above sea level, I found such ice crevasses that I could not jump over. However, risking a lot, I overcame these gaping abysses

and reached the next camp, followed the Russian mountaineer. Unfortunately, due to a three-day hurricane and very low temperature, around -50 degrees Celsius, I decided no to attack the peak. In fact, a few Russian daredevils did not manage to get a seven-thousander, and one of them suffered amputation of several toes. When I was withdrawing from **Razdielnaya Peak** (6,148 m), I helped a Polish climber who had frostbitten fingers, to pack the backpack. Then he invited me to the "Rally of Tatra climbers in the seventies", (Tatra climbers – łojanci, in the Polish mountain jargon it means climbers who explored the Tatra Mountains). In the mountain refuge of „Morskie Oko", I got to know the living legends of Polish climbers, as they said about themselves. I noticed with surprise that these are wary people with a sense of humor, wiggling on the dance floor in a dance rhythm. There, I met another climber who invited me to Canada in 2014. Then I was seriously ill, so I accepted this invitation as a salvation. To get out of the disease, I had to find a specific goal, and in Canada I have never been before. So I wrote a message on Facebook to my three cousins, born in the country of the maple leaf, that I will be in their area, so I could visit them for a cup of coffee. Joe wrote to me first, that he would invite me to his son's wedding. At that time, Adam was going to marry Amanda, a beautiful Indian-girl. Then I had the opportunity to meet the whole family. Well, I flew to Canada! I also arranged for a meeting with my friends from Ottawa, whom I met on my way to **Aconcagua** (6,960 m) in 2003. Summing up,

standing in front of a big crevasse in the Pamirs, I did not retreat, but I overcame my own fear and jumped to the other side. Thanks to this, I met Polish climbers who led me to my family in Canada.



On the glacier in Pamir, about 4,500 m a.s.l., photo by Anna Borecka.

What did you learn from the mountains and travels?

I learnt how to be humble in the mountains, small and big, and how to behave in different situations. I also learnt respect for

people who are culturally different, the ability to talk with almost every human being, overcome my own barriers, and discover the beauty of the world in small things. I call it the simplicity of bread. Sometimes a smile or greeting by an unknown person in a foreign country means more than meeting a large group of friends. I've learnt that the world is beautiful and people are good and very similar to us. For me, it does not matter what someone owns, but what a person is as a human being. During my expeditions, I meet poor but beautiful people who reveal joy and peace. I try to learn from them, although with varying results.

What do you expect from life?

Health and happiness for a close family and friends. Also, I would like to make everybody live better and more interesting lives. For myself, I want to implement the project „200 Peaks of the World" and to have „m & m's". It's not about colorful chocolate balls, but about „man & money". I need kind people all over the world helping me to achieve the mountain goals. In exchange I will write about them in my books and talk about presentations. I would also like to earn my living from my passions, not to hitch around the world and not to stay in a claustrophobic tent, somewhere in a remote area – but to sleep in a bed, in a hostel or even better in a jeep or a motorhome. Then I will continue the project faster and will take interested

people on the trip. My mountain project is no longer a passion, but an imperative in life! This is a professional goal for the next ten years or until the stocks of countries and mountains are exhausted. And then I will write only bestsellers. (Laugh)

The first part of the interview:

https://www.cultureave.com/on-the-peaks-of-the-world-part-1/

Books by Anna Borecka:

„Alpinizm – życie na haju”, (Mountaineering – life on high), the book published by the author, Wrocław, Poland 2006;

„Alpinistka na autostopie. Tom 1. Przez Karpaty na Ararat”, (Hitchhiker and climber. Volume 1. Through the Carpathians to Ararat), Publisher: Bernardinum, Pelplin, Poland 2015;

„Alpinistka na autostopie. Tom 2. Z Polski do Chin”, (Hitchhiker and climber. Volume 2. From Poland to China), Publisher: Bernardinum, Pelplin, Poland 2016.

*„Śpiew lodowca” (*Glacier song), book in progress, planned edition in Polish and English, in 2019.

Translated by: Anna Borecka, Ryszard Sawicki.

On the peaks of the world. Part 1.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka talks with Anna Borecka, a lonely climber, the hitchhiker traveling across continents and the author of the pioneering project „200 Peaks of the World”.



Poster for the project, photo and study by Anna Borecka.

Joanna Sokołowska-Gwizdka:

You are the author of the project „200 Peaks of the World". So far, you've already reached 50 summits. What is this project about?

Anna Borecka:

My goal is to reach the highest peaks in all countries in the world. This is a pioneering project, because nobody has done it

yet. However, there are several more mountains than 200. In Colombia, there are two peaks of similar height: Cristóbal Colón and Simón Bolivar (5,775 m). It is not known which one is a little higher, so I have to climb both. However, in some African countries there are even three peaks to reach, because there are no accurate measurements, and different tribes believe that their area has the highest peak. I reached 50 peaks, mostly hitchhiking alone. I have been implementing the project for five years and in that period of time I ascended the 31 highest mountains. Some of them I have reached in teams and in different years. In total, I have in my collection such peaks as: **Ararat** (5,137 m), **Demavand** (5,610 m), **Elbrus** (5,642 m), **Aconcagua** (6,960 m) and all the highest peaks or points in European countries, except for Belarus. Recently, I added to that set **Jabal Tubkal** (4,167 m) in Morocco or **Pico do Fogo** (2,829 m) on Cape Verde. On the one hand, it's a lot, and on the other hand, it's a quarter of the project. However, I am an optimist. Since half a year ago, I left my job in a company in order to professionally pursue my mountain dreams – and now I am promoting a project – I think that soon someone will join me. And together, we can do more. Thanks to my publications and presentations, I already have followers in Poland and other countries, who transform their popular „Crown of Europe" into the „Crown of the Globe". I am happy that I inspire others to get to know the world and fulfill their dreams at a high level. (Laugh)

However, the majority of enthusiasts of my idea prefer standards. Usually they organize quick and expensive trips to a particular mountain. I travel cheaply, but slowly, because I hitchhike and in several weeks I reach a few peaks in neighboring countries. Once the implementation of such a global project was a godly wish, and now it is a matter of experience, determination and finances. I'm good in the first two areas, but in the third, I still have to learn a lot. I have done many things voluntarily or for a small fee: presentations, articles, books. Now I dream of a long expedition for 3, 6 or 12 months to carry out the third stage of the project the **32 Peaks in America**. Theoretically, I am already prepared, and physically probably too, because I train one and a half hour a day. I just need to make a big jump to find myself on the other side of the Atlantic.

Then, I will quickly and safely reach more volcanoes, hills hidden in the jungle or climb to impressive six-thousanders. I need a partner for some climbing, because the lonely climbing brings to much fear. So, I am approaching the next brake through in my life, but with the eyes of my imagination I can see only a mountain path towards the summit. I believe that someone will help me, someone who finds his role in the project „200 Peaks of the World".



Collecting information before the expedition, photo by Michael Evers.

How do you prepare for expeditions?

Before the expedition to China, I spent as much as four months on preparations, and I spent three months on the way. It was my second lonely expedition and so far the longest. Now, I have a rule that every thing must be multifunctional, because otherwise that object doesn't go with me for expedition. As the form of punishment it stays home, sits in a corner and waits for my return. Then I check again what I should take and what I should leave. Before leaving, I organize *casting*: I weigh, measure and choose the thing that is the lightest. In order to minimilize the load, I even cut off labels from the

clothing. Instead of trekking shoes, I take running shoes. I pack much lighter, but thinner sleeping bag, than I should had brought with me. As to climbing equipment, I only take the necessary minimum: two carabiners, three tapes, one ice screw, crampons and ice ax. Otherwise, I take only affirmation and hope for a happy return. And of course, I get angry at myself when I do not have something in the mountains that I need, and when I'm soaking wet on the road or I'm freezing in the tent. I pack so meticulously in the minimalist manner, and I still have 20 kilos in my backpack.

I get information about the route and the mountains from the Internet, sometimes I also ask friends. I receive maps from my friend's at „Księgarnia Podróżnika" (Traveler's Bookshop). My daughter, Kalinka, finds cheap airline tickets to the island-states, and Kuba, my son-in-law, helps me with photography. An artist-traveler sometimes gives me good advice. Occasionally, someone else helps me to take care of different issues.

How do you care about health and beauty when traveling?

I take with me a mini towel and mini cosmetics, so it's difficult to talk about taking care of beauty. After descending from the mountains, my pictures could scare children. Seriously! There is no mention of makeup in the mountains, but before returning to civilization, I must at least „make an eye" so not to frighten

adults.

Until recently, I thought that the best cosmetics for a woman are mountain sun and wind. However, recently I changed my mind, because in fact it is a real SPA, which includes: solarium, sauna, facelift and massage – all in one. Often there are even water jets or cryotherapy – I have already frozen fingers and toes several times. In the Peruvian sun, I had a second-degree face burn, so my skin completely, but gradually peel off. At first, I looked like a peeled orange, but after sometime, I had a smooth face. In order to avoid the scars on my face, I protected myself with „Dermosan" – an ointment, which I received from my friend in the group. I was again lucky, although in the mountains you can find better cosmetics than in a theater wardrobe. Well, you get better make-up than the artists in horror movies. As the standard, it includes a face burnt by the sun-rays, swollen and with slight frostbite, lips shedding blood, damaged and torn hair. After a long trip, the process of returning to normal takes a few days. But the water in the mountains is wonderful, crispy and healthy, excluding glacier water. In Europe, the best water can be found in Iceland and Sweden, at least this is what the Scandinavian people say.



High-altitude selfie – Razdielnaya Peak (6,148 m a.s.l.), photo by Anna Borecka.

When did you discover your climbing passion?

Shortly after giving birth to my child. Seriously! But I will start from the beginning. My adventure with the mountains began when I was 12 years old. In the Beskids, in southern Poland, I was delighted with the beautiful view and said that I always wanted to walk in the mountains.

I ascended the first Tatras paths immediately after passing the final high school exams. In the third week of pregnancy, I

reached **Żabi Wyżni Peak** (2,259 m) in Slovakia, and soon afterwards my daughter received the Tatra name. At that time, I was traveling in the Tatra Mountains with my husband and my sister. We were regular frequenters of the abandoned mountain hut in Rusinowa Polana, and there was a beautiful tree of viburnum (in Polish Kalina). This is how the idea of the name for our Kalinka was born. And then we raised the bar for the family. While climbing the rocks, Krystyna met her future husband, Robert, so we climbed in female and male teams.

When I became mother, my sister came to visit me and said she would enroll in a climbing course. I said, that I would also like to do it, but I was already a wife and mother. I was not yet 22 years old, but it seemed to me that many things come too late. However, my sister said that in life you always had to go forward, and I followed her advice.

In autumn, I attended a theoretical part of the course, and in the spring we had a practical course together in the Sokole Mountains, near Jelenia Góra. My daughter was nine months old, when I started to climb. It was an unusual way, because I was embalmed like a mummy. As a „Polish Nursing Mother" I could not deal with excess milk, but Krystyna found a way to do it. Then she was a nurse, so every day before climbing, she bandaged my torso. And so I passed the exam. I immediately caught the climbing bug. I were on a high doze of

adrenaline. Sometimes I was scared, but also I was glad to overcome technical difficulties. At that time I weighed 53 kilograms, so I was curious to learn how to move vertically. I had only 62 centimeters at the waist, so the mountain climber sewing a climbing harness said he never had such a slim client.

Do you remember your first expedition?

First, there were climbing trips to the Sokole Mountains, then to the Tatras and the Alps, on weekends or holidays. We climbed with belaying, on climbing routes with difficulty of 3 or 4 degree. On the first climbing expedition I went to the Caucasus in 2003. In fact it was quite big, commercial group. In 26 days we climbed to a rock peak measuring 3,900 m, then to **Uilpata** (4,644 m), and yet we reached the top of **Czeget Karabaszi** (3,753 m), **Kurmutau** (4,045 m) and both peaks of **Elbrus** (5,642 m and 5,621 m). There was some climbing under the guidance of a professional instructor from Belarus, and a bit of trekking to not too difficult, but high top domes.

However, I have always been uphill in my life. Five days before this expedition, I had to call an ambulance. I stopped seeing, my heart was pounding and I was afraid that I would faint. I had anaphylactic shock because the antibiotic I was taking was probably rarely recommended by doctors. The ambulance doctor wanted to take me to the hospital, but I said

that I had a paid holiday and I was leaving soon. I have not admitted that for almost a month I would carry 30 kg luggage in the Caucasus. Then I struggled to pack, and when I put on my backpack, I fell under his weight. Well, it worked after the third approach. In order to regain my strength, I slept during the two days of traveling by train. In North Ossetia, we slept in the old castle and there I had another attack, luckily weaker. Then one of the participants of the trip helped me, a former commando who knew the rules of first aid. In the mountains, I still felt weak and ready to faint, just before the avalanche hit us. However, I did not admit what was happening to me. I was surprised by the reaction of some people, because this avalanche was not so big. I was more afraid that I would reach my limit because of a wrong antibiotic than of small snow-ice nuggets.

Then there were other group expeditions: to the **Aconcagua** peak in Argentina (6,960 m), to **Pisco** (5,752 m) in Peru. There was also a climbing trip for seven four-thousanders in Monte Rosa massif, in Italy. Thanks to this, I gained experience needed for the implementation of lonely expeditions. I traveled through the Carpathians to Ararat, hitchhiked to China and climbed to over 6,000 meters, hitchhiked to the mountains in almost all European countries, and more recently even in Africa.



On the western peak of Elbrus (5,642 m a.s.l.), photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

Once you climbed in a team, now alone. Did something happen that you decided on such courageous, independent expeditions?

From 2001 to 2006, I climbed in a male group, but in different, often incidental teams. Then I climbed to such peaks as **Triglav** (2,863 m), **Mont Blanc** (4,810 m), **Grossglockner** (3,798 m) and the mountains mentioned above. I also climbed the icefall of the Slovak Paradise and the Austrian Maltatal. It was a new element and a fascination with nature: 20 degrees below zero, frozen waterfall and incredible

silence. Armed with ice axes and crampons and a little more equipment, I again climbed verticalily up. First, I learnt top rope climbing and then ice climbing in two- or three-member teams. The guys would not let me lead because they had 10-15 years of ice climbing experience and I was a “fresh-woman”. So, I solo climbed a few times, without belaying on small icefalls. Well, once or twice they let me lead climbing route.

In the summer of 2006, there was a breakthrough because I made an appointment online for climbing in the Sokole Mountains, with someone I did not know. And then I made a climbing route on which Darek, my husband died. Of course, I did not say anything about it to my new colleague. He learnt a little more about me, when we met about half a year later and I handed him my first book entitled „Mountaineering – life on high”. Here I described not only funny stories connected with team climbing and conquering the mountains until 2006, but also Darek’s accident, my trauma and the antidote which after many years proved to be mountains again.

In 2007, I decided that I would not climb anymore. However, in 2008, my friend died in the mountains, and his wife asked me to take care of the rescue operation and bring the body to Poland. Then I experienced another trauma, and when I recovered from it, paradoxically, I decided to organize a lonely expedition. I thought then, that at least no one else would die on it.



Climbing in the icefall of the Slovak Paradise, photo from the collection of Anna Borecka.

You speak about death in the mountains. When I was watching the documentary of Paweł Wysoczański „Jurek" about the mountaineer Jerzy Kukuczka, it filled me with emotions, from admiration to regret. I asked myself why alpinists get married, why do they expose their loved ones to life in eternal fear? You lost your husband in the mountains in 1992. I can not imagine the trauma that you had to go through, staying alone with your two-year-old daughter. And yet … again you reach the peaks.

Unfortunately, every climber exposes his loved ones to great stress, me too… and I consider it as selfish. However, by organizing lonely expeditions, I choose mountains within my physical capabilities, in connection with my gained experience and with climbing difficulties. In my project „200 Peaks of the World", there are many tourist mountains, but those which I have to fight, are simply more respectable. These are the ones I like the most.

When it comes to Darek's accident… Darek was 25 years old when he died, and I was 24 years old. My daughter was two years old and she covered me with a diaper while I cried curled up as ball. For many years I felt guilty that we went to climb in a team of four, and we returned in a team of three, that the child lost her father, that I live… Thanks to my mother I got up because she told me I should live for my daughter. It was only after fourteen years that I was completely out of trauma, just when I climbed the rocky road on which Darek died. I wrote about it in the book because it was my personal catharsis. I'm still emotionally connected with my daughter to this day. Sometimes we even change roles when she's like mother to me, but more often we are friends.

What is it about lonely expeditions that they attract you so much?

I have several reasons for organizing lonely expeditions, such as freedom, curiosity about the world and people, and a notorious lack of money. That's the truth: on the one hand, I am the organizer, leader and participant, so I do everything as I want, considering the scarcity of funds. On the other hand, I'm happy to learn about new countries and interesting people, and that I manage difficult conditions during hitchhiking or in the mountains. I also discovered new skills that I had no idea about. It is a rapid decision-making in dangerous situations, in contacts with people and in the fight against the elements. It is a total concentration during solo climbing in a foreign area. Also, I go through mental training before and during the trip: I keep repeating like a mantra that I only meet good people. Finally, it is the use of intuition. There are also beautiful meetings with people, with kindred spirits, who immediately seem familiar to me. There are fabulous landscapes, there is time for photography and reverie. It is this independence that appeals to me. Besides, no one buzzes over my ear, telling about his problems at the time when he should concentrate on the trail or the beauty of the surrounding world. The mountains are also a great place to purify the psyche from mundane matters and the body – from urban smog. Yes, some mountain trips should be prescribed to people. (Laugh) And I can write these recipes.

There are also unusual encounters with nature. Once, when I set

up a tent by the lake, in the Sierra Nevada mountains, in Spain, at an altitude of 3,000 meters – the Spanish ibex came to me. She jumped on a large boulder and looked down at me. I was cooking soup on a tourist stove. This wild goat saw me, yet stood on a rock with an outstretched neck, inhaling scents. I carefully reached for the camera, but she was faster. It’s a pity, because she would have a beautiful portrait from a distance of two meters, as a profile picture on the Facebook. (Laugh)



In the Sierra Nevada mountains, a mountain goat came to me, photo by Anna Borecka.

Are mountains a kind of addiction for you?

In the mountains, I feel like at home. Many people are afraid of wild nature, the elements, hardships. They avoid inconveniences and dangerous situations. When I go to the mountains, I laugh from ear to ear. This is my paradise on Earth, because the mountains are holy. Only there, a man can see how small he is and that he is only a part of nature. Then everything seems more simple. You see the distance from many things in life. In the mountains, it comes to my mind, that I do not have to do anything, so I can do everything. I can finally accomplish my dreams.

There are also moments of horror, when I ask God to send to me at least one person. This is strange, but sometimes it is easier to climb the icy ridge, when someone is next to you. Even when he is a stranger and climbing alone. Although, I had an amazing experience on my way to Mont Blanc, during a snowstorm. This was my second meeting with this mountain because my main goal was to climb the **Mont Blanc de Courmayer** (4,748 m), the highest peak of Italy. It was quite steep, cold and slippery, and I was alone. In addition to the difficulties, I only had mini crampons with six teeth instead of ten. My hands were freezing to the ice ax and trekking pole, the crampon blades hardly caught ice and I was scared. For a moment there was a strange silence which fell upon me. I thought then it did not

matter what was about to happen, because I had already left my mark there. Even if I fell from the ridge, I already belonged to that mountain just as it belonged to me. It was so obvious that I calmed down and moved on.

Are mountains addictive? I do not know. For me it is a call. At some point some mountain begins to follow me, so I have to go to them and say hello; get to know each other and have my own opinion about it. With the rest, I think with reciprocity. (Laugh) And seriously speaking, mountains are a good school of life, a science of freedom in extreme conditions.



Sunrise on the way to Mont Blanc (4,810 m a.s.l.), photo by Anna Borecka.

The continuation of the conversation with Anna Borecka, about the countries traveled around, people met, adventures in the mountains, life goals and learning received from the mountains – will be released on …

Translated by: Anna Borecka, Ryszard Sawicki