

Wiesław Stanisławski

# ***In the circle of illusions***

*A sketch for a portrait of a mountaineer*



**This extraordinary story took place around 90 years ago. It is about a young man who decided to become a mountaineer. It is set in the Tatra Mountains, the highest in Poland. It is a tale of an extraordinary passion for climbing. Wiesław Stanisławski (1909–1933) was one of the most notable figures in Polish mountaineering during the interwar period.**

**Everything else took a back seat: family, studies and work. This is what makes this figure so fascinating to us. This text does not fully explain the complex process by which Wiesław Stanisławski became an exceptional mountaineer and a man of the mountains. It merely sketches his personality and extraordinary achievements. Where does the title come from? Stanisławski's text on the Tatra Mountains, widely regarded as his finest work, was titled *In the Circle of Illusions*. It dealt with the issue of death in the mountains. Our exhibition aims to „break” Stanisławski out of this circle of illusions and commemorate his life, achievements, and extraordinary approach to the Tatra Mountains.**

This story begins far from our highest mountains, in Lublin. Wiesław Jan Stanisławski was born there on 15 November 1909, the son of Władysław and Teresa, née Kołtunowska. His birth certificate, numbered 239, handwritten in calligraphic Russian Cyrillic, is held in the archives of one of Lublin's museums.

Stanisławski's childhood... We know of it from just a few photographs in the family archive, showing Wiesław and his sister with their parents. Wiesław's mother, Teresa, was a woman of exceptional beauty. The family archive contains a few photographs of his parents (in a frame, with edelweiss that Wiesław had gathered in the Tatra Mountains), photographs of the children (Wiesław and Alina), and finally a photograph of him in a student's cap, his graduation certificate, and several previously unknown portrait photographs. While these photographs only offer minimal insight into his childhood, adolescence and student years, as well as the environment from which he came, it is fortunate that we have them at all.

As part of his education, after school in Lublin, he moved to Warsaw and in 1921 began attending the Karol Ludwik Lorentz Grammar School. He was 12 years old at the time. He was reportedly an average student (he had to repeat Year 7), but he enjoyed studying Polish and showed great literary talent. It was there that he met his future climbing partners: Justyn Wojsznis and Bolesław Chwaściński. It was probably thanks to them that he became interested in the Tatra Mountains. This was undoubtedly a turning point in his young life. The Tatras became his number one

priority in life. He started out as a keen hiker before going on to become a master of rock climbing.

It is worth pausing for a moment here to take a look at the mountaineering community in Zakopane before Stanisławski arrived. Mountaineering had already reached a fairly high standard in those years – the route on Zamarła Turnia (1910 – difficulty grade 5). Several groups of mountaineers had emerged: the Sokołowski brothers, the Rzepecki brothers, Bronisław Czech, Wincenty Birkenmajer, and later Kazimierz Kupczyk and Stanisław Motyka. The second strong group consisted of climbers from Warsaw. This was a truly outstanding generation, eager to make their mark on the history of mountaineering in their own way and unwilling to look to the achievements of their predecessors. They also began to seek out new, more difficult walls and routes, yet something was missing—or perhaps someone—who could rally the climbing community behind them and set a clear, worthy goal for that generation. It seems that Wiesław Stanisławski was that person.

It took Stanisławski three years to become a fully-fledged mountaineer. This was between 1925 and 1927. His journey began with his first encounter with the Tatra Mountains, followed by roping up with a partner, climbing the rocks, and choosing a route. The process culminated in Stanisławski becoming one of the finest mountaineers of his generation and impressively conquering the Tatra Mountains' greatest cliffs.

He was a source of inspiration and a role model to many mountaineers. His critical views on the achievements of others earned him a few enemies within the climbing community. A visionary when it came to new possibilities in rock climbing, he wrote about the Tatra Mountains. In the 1929 issue of „Taternik”, he proposed a new difficulty scale for rock routes in the Tatra Mountains.

He led a wide-ranging discussion on the future of mountaineering, partnership and responsibility issues, rock climbing challenges, and the search for the „perfect route” – the *direttissima*. He undoubtedly possessed exceptional natural talent, which greatly accelerated his development and maturation in the world of mountaineering.

And how did it all begin? Stanisławski himself provides a precise answer to this question. His first day in the mountains fell on a Monday... „I have kept my mountaineering notes since 27 July 1925, that is, from the day I saw the mountains for the first time in my life, and from that day onwards I planned every trip, I organised it, and I led the departure and the expedition.”





„In my mountaineering, I attach the greatest importance to orientation, and it is with nothing else but orientation that I am most satisfied. It enables me, when entering an unknown cliff face, to always find my way straight to the summit” (*From the letters of Wiesław Stanisławski*, „Taternik”, November 1933, issues 5–6).

The years 1925–26 were a time of firsts for him. It must have been a wonderful time. A time of discovering the mountains and himself. His capabilities, but also his limitations...And he began his climbing journey by familiarising himself with the routes around Hala Gąsienicowa,

His first trip was his first—and fairly easy—climb up the north-east couloir of Świnica on 21 August 1926. This was his first experience of rock climbing and the beginning of his love of the mountains. It is worth noting that he was a very young man at the time. He was just 16 years old. Over the following years and seasons, his skills and abilities gradually improved, and the climbs he undertook became increasingly challenging. It was also a time for making mistakes. After all, he had every right to do so. On one occasion, he „got stuck” (reached a point where he could not continue the climb) with the renowned mountaineer Zbigniew Korosadowicz on the south face of Zamarła Turnia (a route rated 5). The mountaineers, unable to cope with the difficulties of the wall, were rescued by the selfless TOPR rescuers. This minor setback did not stop Wiesław from continuing his „assault” on the mountains. In the same season, he climbed Zamarła twice more, as if to prove to himself that he was ready to tackle the most difficult routes. He also demonstrated that his initial setback on the Zamarła route had simply been a slip-up.

His rock-climbing mentor at the time was Mieczysław Szczuka, a respected artist and mountaineer, known for several extreme ascents in the Tatra Mountains, who died on the south face of Zamarła Turnia (on 13 July 1927). Wiesław was deeply affected by the death of his mentor and friend, and withdrew for a time to the Roztoka mountain hut. As it turned out, Stanisławski would soon surpass his *cicerone* in the magnificence of his mountaineering achievements. His first major success in the Tatra Mountains was the ascent, in 1928, together with Justyn Wojsznis, of the west face of Kościelec (on 13 August 1928). This was via a new route, following in the footsteps of several previous unsuccessful attempts by other Zakopane

mountaineers. A year later, during an attempt to repeat the climb, the renowned mountaineer Mieczysław Świerż lost his life. This was a clear signal and a kind of symbol that the older generation of mountaineers should make way for the new...

In 1929, Stanisławski, together with the renowned skier Bronisław Czech and the young mountaineer Lida Skotnicówna, conquered the north face of Żabi Koń., which proved to be a landmark event in the history of mountaineering (a route rated 5+). He described the ascent as extremely difficult and harder than anything previously achieved by mountaineers in the Tatra Mountains.

But also the time it takes to come to terms with a death in the mountains...

Autumn 1929 was another pivotal moment for Wiesław. The sisters Lida and Marzena Skotnicówna lost their lives on Zamarła Turnia. As we know, Lida was probably Stanisławski's partner and the love of his life, as a letter from Paryski's collection seems to suggest. In it, Stanisławski wrote: „My little one is no longer alive, something I still cannot come to terms with to this day” (letter from W. Stanisławski to Witold H. Paryski, 12 October 1929). While it is not known what plans the young couple had, they often visited the Tatra Mountains together and climbed frequently. Lida was a young mountaineering enthusiast who enjoyed spending time in the Tatras. Her untimely death was a devastating blow to Wiesław. Afterwards, as the records indicate, he never became involved with another woman.

W 1930 r., podczas przejścia wschodniej ściany Mnicha, Stanisławski jako pierwszy zastosował w Tatrach technikę hakową, stając w pętłach zawieszonych na hakach. Technikę tę nazwano stosowaniem sztucznych ułatwień. Była to jednak prawdziwa rewolucja – znana już w Alpach, lecz dotąd niewykorzystywana w Tatrach.

In 1930, Stanisławski became the first person in the Tatra Mountains to use the hook technique while climbing the east face of Mnich, standing in slings suspended from hooks. This technique was referred to as the use of artificial aids. However, it was a genuine revolution. It was already known in the Alps, but had not yet been used in the Tatra Mountains.

Wiesław, on the other hand, began to forge his own path. He stopped following in others' footsteps or repeating their routes entirely, aiming instead to create his own original trails in the Tatra Mountains. Damian Granowski writes about this:

„At one point, Stanisławski decided that he would not follow in the footsteps of other authors, but would blaze his own trail. He chose the right moment, as the exploration of the Tatra walls was just beginning. Many of them had not yet been climbed, and offered – as it later turned out – difficulties of

grades IV and V, which was achievable (with the equipment and skills of the time) for the leading climbers” (Damian Granowski, *50 Tatra Classics: A Climbing Guide for Beginner Mountaineers and Advanced Hikers*, Nowy Targ – Katowice, 2024, p. 439).

Stanisławski – undeterred by these critical remarks and controversies – did not slow down in his conquest of the Tatra peaks. He continued to conquer one difficult face and crag after another. However, he was not immune to mistakes during his mountain expeditions. He was entitled to make them, but one of his climbs ended tragically – with the death of his partner. This happened to Wiesław only once. In the same year, 1930, during a winter climb of Żabi Szczyt Wyżni, his partner – Zbigniew Gieysztor – died of exhaustion. Left to fend for himself by his companions in the mountains, whilst descending into the valleys, he no longer had the strength to return to the mountain hut and remained in the mountains... he was found dead by a stream. Almost all the blame for Gieysztor's death in the mountains was placed on Stanisławski. This did not, however, dampen his enthusiasm for exploring the Tatra Mountains. Between 1929 and 1932, he conquered the Tatra Mountains' greatest cliffs. The list of his achievements is impressive and includes, amongst others: the north face of Mały Kieźmarski Szczyt (1932, conquered in a two-day climb; he described it in the text *Above the Greatest Abyss of the Tatras*), the north face of Wołowa Turnia (two innovative routes), the north-east face of Żabi Wyżni Szczyt, the west face of Żółty Szczyt, the faces of the Jaworowe peaks, Wielki Jaworowy Szczyt and Mały Jaworowy Szczyt (three routes), the north face of Zwornik Lodowy, the left pillar of the north-east face of Rumanowy, a new route on the north face of Mały Jaworowy Szczyt, and many others. He also achieved great feats in winter, including ascents of: Zadni Gerlach via the north-west face (1930, with A. Kenar and A. Stanecki), and via the Śnieżna Valley to the Wyżnia Ice Pass (1930, with H. Mogilnicki). No other mountaineer had such a list of successes to his name during that period. Success followed success. Stanisławski became the talk of the mountaineering community. Above all, among the mountaineers of the time, he became the undisputed leader of his generation. It should be added that he would not have achieved so many significant successes had it not been for his rope partnerships with excellent climbers, whom we mention in the same breath: these included the aforementioned Bolesław Chwaściński, Henryk Mogilnicki, Justyn Wojsznis, Paweł Vogel, Aleksander Stanecki, Tadeusz Pawłowski, Wawrzyniec Żuławski and many others. He also climbed easier routes with women. He did not have a regular climbing partner; he teamed up with numerous mountaineers, taking advantage of the fact that they were in the Tatra Mountains at the same time as him. In 1933, he completed many routes with his last climbing partner – Witold Wojnar.



The year 1931 was a world of difference for Wiesław compared to 1930. By this time, Stanisławski had become much more measured in his activities in the Tatra Mountains. Why? The reason was simple. His main rival, Wincenty Birkenmajer, had left for the Alps with the High Mountain Club expedition. Stanisławski remained in the country and in the Tatras on his own. That is to say, without his main rival. It must be clearly stated that the rivalry and sporting competition with Birkenmajer did not always work out well for Stanisławski. One can see a sense of haste in some of his actions, in which he sought to match, and indeed surpass, Birkenmajer's achievements. Sometimes he failed. An analysis of his climbing routes in the aforementioned year of 1930 clearly shows that, under competitive pressure, he led several of them in a manner that was no longer as logical and spectacular as he had previously accustomed us to, but rather in haste and without a clear plan. It is safe to say that these were misguided and poor routes. As a typical Scorpio, he was seemingly made for competition and success-oriented action, but success was not always his lot. Anyway, that is probably natural and normal. On more than one occasion, Birkenmajer proved himself to be a better mountaineer than him. He was an excellent writer and his piece, „The Glass Mountain”, which describes the ascent of Łomnica via the legendary route, is considered to be one of the finest examples of mountaineering literature. I think this only deepened Stanisławski's frustration and irritation.

The publication of Birkenmajer's text in „Taternik”, while his own were not, certainly did little to improve Wiesław's mood. This was especially the case given that the rivalry in 1930 clearly favoured „Birka”. He spent almost the entire summer in the Tatras, climbing and hiking through the mountains for around 90 days. From valley to valley. From hut to hut. It was an incredible time for Birkenmajer, the highlight of which was completing a new route on the west face of Łomnica with Kazimierz Kupczyk. Birkenmajer triumphed that season. Wiesław was unable to stay in the mountains for as long, but he still achieved very good results, completing 24 routes. Nevertheless, „Birka's” excellent year irritated Wiesław somewhat. In the 1931 season, he no longer had to compete with anyone, so he returned to his own climbing style. His partners were: Antoni Zalewski, Henryk Mogilnicki, Paweł Vogel, Jan Staszal, Marek Żuławski, and one woman: J. Chorzewska.

The most notable new routes were completed on the Gankowa Gallery (grade V+) and in the beautiful Czarna Jaworowa Valley, on Pośrednia Śnieżna Turnia, Przełęcz Ścienki and Kołowy Szczyt. He also visited Świnica, Wołowa Turnia, and several other locations. Despite Birkenmajer's absence, Stanisławski clashed with another mountaineer, Jan Dorawski, in the press. As these examples show, prioritising his own „ego” in this instance did him no favours.

Then came the year 1933. It was a year of further plans, climbs, and important writings. Wiesław Stanisławski entered it as a great mountaineer, leader of his generation, climbing specialist and visionary. This was the image held dear by the climbers and friends close to him. However, some in the climbing community already felt a certain „cool detachment” towards him, due to events that had unfolded in the pages of „Taternik” between 1929 and 1931. I think all of this was too much for one young man to bear. Some might say it was too much, but I don't think I'm exaggerating when I say that this period was one of the best in his climbing career. Wiesław had become more mature in his approach to mountaineering, paying closer attention to belaying. Perhaps, after all the media skirmishes, he had developed a certain detachment from his activities.

The Tatras themselves were the best remedy for what befell him upon his return from the mountains. He still loved them with all his heart and felt most at home there. Admittedly, he was only 23 years old, but he had achieved mastery in mountaineering and was constantly striving to improve. The 1932 season served him well. However, writing about maturity when the main character of this story is only 22 might be an exaggeration.

The years 1928–1933 were five magnificent seasons for Wiesław Stanisławski, during which he underwent a transformation of sorts. Initially, he was just one of several good climbers of his generation. Over time, however, he developed the skills to tackle the Tatra Mountains' most challenging rock routes – both in terms of climbing technique and mental approach, free from fear of the greatest dangers.

Gradually emerging from among the other mountaineers, he became a leading figure in the community. In the early 1930s, specialist literature began referring to the „Stanisławski era”.

He mainly published his mountaineering articles in „Taternik”, „Stadion” and „Przegląd Sportowy”. No one had ever amassed such an impressive collection of ascents of the great Tatra walls in such a short time before. This set a new standard in mountaineering that was quickly recognised by both the older generation and Wiesław's peers.

What about his private life? Unfortunately, we know very little about it. He lived in Warsaw permanently. He began his studies there. He graduated in 1933 and was due to start work. While away from the Tatra Mountains, he analysed and designed new routes, read specialist literature and developed his skills, acquiring new expertise in the process. He also tried to reduce the number of days he spent away from the mountains as much as possible, studying Polish and foreign mountaineering literature and carefully collecting equipment (or borrowing it from the High Mountain Club). He lived for the Tatras and through the Tatras. When one of his

mountaineering friends decided to climb less frequently, Stanisławski reportedly asked him: *Don't you love the Tatras above all else?*

The scale and scope of this exploration is evident from the fact that the list of Stanisławski's major Tatra expeditions, published in „Taternik” in 1933, includes 106 ascents (89 in summer and 17 in winter). This topographically arranged list includes all new routes and main variants. However, this is not the full extent of Stanisławski's mountaineering achievements. Repeat ascents of lesser significance are not included. Nevertheless, it is an impressive body of work and a true testament to Stanisławski's achievements and legacy in the Tatra Mountains. A similar list of his routes can be found in Witold H. Paryski's mountaineering guide. Contemporary authors such as Władysław Cywiński, Damian Granowski, Jan Kiełkowski and Jakub Radziejowski have also written about Stanisławski.

What was Wiesław's vision of the mountains? Looking at the mighty face of Mała Śnieżna Turnia, which rises over 500 metres high, provides some insight into Stanisławski's climbing style. What was it like? For him, the most important thing was the style of the ascent. Ideally, it should be a new, extremely difficult route – a long, multi-pitch route that was aesthetically pleasing in its own way and sometimes led through overhangs. He liked formations such as chimneys and gullies.



He often climbed instinctively, and let us not forget that accurate maps of some parts of the Tatras did not yet exist at that time. Sometimes, though rarely, he preferred to spend the night on the rock face, as on the north face of Mały Kieźmarski. More often, however, he preferred to sleep in a mountain hut. There, he would write down his climbing notes (he also sometimes did this in a notebook during breaks from climbing). As his mountaineering skills developed, so did his professionalism and mountain experience. But so did his caution. He always secured himself carefully. He firmly hammered in pitons, checked them and strove to be professional in the mountaineering world. He took exceptional care to do so and wrote about it. He only fell from the rope once, whilst climbing Kościelec. Wojsznis writes about this.

Witold H. Paryski's collection offers interesting insights into his history. The „Wiesław Stanisławski” file contains many treasures. I browse through them with curiosity. There are several letters from Stanisławski to Paryski containing detailed and expert descriptions of routes. For example, there is correspondence following the ascent of Żabi Koń and a description of Kapałkowa Grań, as well as excerpts from debates with other authors and letters from Wiesław requesting equipment on loan for expeditions (he was not wealthy, as was typical for a student). There is also the manuscript of „In the circle of illusions” which is devoted to death in the mountains, and many more. There are also several commemorative articles from the press written after Stanisławski's death. It's wonderful that this material has survived. Thanks to the Paryskis.

Without having had any contact with him, it is very difficult to paint a true picture of this man. Without knowing his voice, tastes or manner, and relying solely on fragments of memories held by his friends from the Tatra ridges, Stanisławski fades from view, despite his great achievements. There is a little here and a little there, but the gaps in the archives concerning him are enormous. Our only sources are a dozen or so photographs and articles from „Taternik”, a few letters from Witold H. Paryski's collection, and route descriptions. Surprisingly little remains of him. His detailed mountaineering notes, photographs and texts were lost in the turmoil of history. He never started a family, and most of the material was probably lost in his Warsaw apartment during the 1944 uprising. Or perhaps even earlier. However, it cannot be ruled out that these materials have survived and are waiting to be discovered (W. Szatkowski, *The Brilliant Outsider...*).





However, let us attempt to sketch a portrait of this figure. In the well-known photograph taken by Henryk Mogilnicki on 30 June 1932 at Jaworowy Róg, we see a young man. He has a slender, elongated face, a rather prominent nose and dark hair combed to one side. He is slender and is gazing into the distance as he touches a granite block with his left hand. This figure exudes self-confidence. Stanisławski has a rope tied around his waist (which was the belaying technique used at the time). He is wearing a jumper, a shirt, „pumpki” trousers, which were fashionable at the time, and patterned socks. That is all the photograph shows.

So, what does the literary record reveal about him? Stanisławski was the sort of go-getter with an iron grip (as Justyn Wojsznis writes). In company, he was rather taciturn. Reserved. Yet open with his friends. He had many of them. In their company, all the virtues of his character came to the fore. Loyalty in friendship. Courage, consistency, strength, vigour and professionalism in action. Well-conceived ambition, a certain stubbornness, but also, at the other end of the spectrum, a sensitivity to the beauty of nature and to people. He writes: „... I have been walking in the Tatras for so long now... and I have done things of every level of difficulty... yet even the simplest Tatra trail never ceases to interest me”. Stanisławski is a man of humour and wit, keen to play bridge at the mountain hut and an excellent companion for an evening chat with friends.

Wiktor Ostrowski wrote:

„In the mountaineering world, as in everyday life, he was such a remarkable individual that it was impossible to pass him by without noticing. He had his enemies, but he also had many close friends. We loved him, which is why we miss him so terribly now...”

So, was Wiesław an exceptional figure of his generation? The answer is undoubtedly yes. He was also very focused on the Tatra Mountains, climbing and conquering their walls. This was the most important part of his activities during his time in Zakopane. Despite his talent for finding routes, „Stanisławski's routes” are not always beautiful or logical. Sometimes his eye failed to pick up on the details of the rock that determine whether a route is a *masterpiece*. However, we still believe that he had every right to do so, as he was very young. He particularly enjoyed climbing the great walls in the Czarna Jaworowa Valley and the upper section of the Śnieżna Valley. Wiesław's second favourite area was the upper part of the Biała Woda Valley and the cliffs of Gank, Rumanowy and Żłobisty. However, he came to know the entire Tatra Mountains and became an expert on them. The second leader of that generation was Wincenty Birkenmajer, also known as „Birku”, who was older than

Wiesław. Unfortunately, Stanisławski's team's unsportsmanlike behaviour towards Birkenmajer during the ascent of the west face of Łomnica caused these two climbing visionaries' paths to diverge sharply. This was followed by a period of mutual criticism and perhaps even animosity. This is a point worth elaborating on.

According to the literature, despite his young age, Wiesław Stanisławski was a man with firmly established views on life. For him, life was all about the Tatra Mountains. He had many enemies as well as friends and was not afraid to tell them what he thought of them straight to their faces (or write about it, as can be seen when he criticised several participants of the 1931 Polish expedition to the Alps in „Taternik” and other periodicals, particularly Z. Korosadowicz and K. Narkiewicz-Jodko). Stanisławski's criticism was probably also caused by the fact that he did not go on the Alps expedition. For financial reasons. This must have been a slap in the face for the great climber. He also criticised mountaineers who tackled short routes in the Tatras while avoiding major challenges. He had a strong sense of self-worth. This led to minor and major conflicts. Sometimes, one gets the impression that he took certain conflicts and situations too far in the vehemence of his views. Perhaps he regretted it later...

Conversely, those who knew him well spoke highly of Stanisławski. Similar positive assessments of his character can be found in the writings of Chwaściński, Vogel, Żuławski, Wojsznis, Kenar and Ostrowski, published in „Taternik” and other sources. However, Birkenmajer, Dorawski and some mountaineers from the so-called older generation openly criticised him. There is no balance in this, though. The vast majority of Wiesław's assessments are positive.

He was not wealthy and for his mountaineering expeditions to the Tatra Mountain he would often borrow mountaineering equipment such as skis, crampons, an ice axe, a tent and a camping stove, as well as a jacket, from PTT (from Paryski, there is evidence of this in their correspondence). Correspondence relating to this has survived.

The mountains were his element.

They brought out his mountaineering instinct — that of a great conqueror — which is difficult to define precisely. There, he gave free rein to his superb technique, his ability to choose the right route on the rock, and his composure and courage. As Bolesław Chwaściński

writes: „But the passion remained the same. The same tenacity and perseverance, heedless of any obstacles in pursuit of his goal”. He kept systematic mountaineering notes. He honed his technique and read foreign-language literature. From 1930 onwards, he solved dozens of mountaineering challenges in the Tatras every year. As he told his friends, he wanted to „conquer” the Tatras' „gems” one by one. As a man of flesh and blood, he sought true values in the mountains. Friendship in his short life. The intensity of experience. Ultimately, he loved life. The years 1931–33 were a period in which he made use of his exceptional skills, completing many valuable and first ascents. He continued to set the tone in a community full of excellent climbers. It was not easy.

Stanisławski was also a young man of above-average intelligence. His mountaineering writings, for instance, bear witness to this. There are quite a few of them. In fact, it is impossible to find any of his publications that are merely average or substandard. They are expert, well thought out, insightful and superbly written, full of profound thoughts and surprising — in short, fascinating. Moreover, they were penned in fine Polish. And he wrote them when he was just twenty years old. His climbing notes are full of details which, in Wiesław's view, were intended to help his successors. However, sometimes his descriptions of climbs were almost too detailed, and some claim that they are illegible or unclear.

Holding the manuscript of „In the Circle of Illusions” (from the Witold Henryk and Zofia Paryski collection) in my hands, I was astonished to notice that it required almost no corrections. Stanisławski had written a text that required no revisions. In one go. In grey pencil. Mastery! The main theme of the text was death in the mountains, a subject with which Stanisławski was familiar. He wanted to defy death through the maturity he had attained, his technique, and his cool calculation. That speaks for itself. Some of his statements are simply remarkable. For example, he said that „a carabiner clipped into a rucksack in Zakopane makes a different sound than a carabiner clipped to a belt beneath an unconquered route”. There are many more such golden thoughts from Wiesław. „Tossed about by the gale, drunk with happiness” during a winter ascent of Zadni Gerlach, for example (W. Szatkowski, *The Brilliant Outsider*).

They say that a true passion for the mountains knows no bounds.

Stanisławski was a man of the Mountains. They were his greatest love and passion. He sacrificed everything for them. Everything in his life was subordinated to them. He wrote that, when climbing in the Tatras, he touched the essence and heart of his life. In his youth, he set out summer and winter alike to tackle the most formidable cliffs of the Tatra Mountains. The most difficult, and mostly unconquered, of them all. He was a brilliant climber. By the standards of the time, he was an extreme one, whose achievements surpassed those of the climbing generation of his era. Despite his rather primitive equipment — forged pitons, hemp ropes and crampons with blunt teeth — and the absence of down sleeping bags, he was able to tackle the greatest Tatra walls without hesitation. The period of his greatest successes (1929–1933) was aptly named the „Stanisławski era”.

He was always drawn to the magic of extremely challenging climbs. That was one side of his personality. He tackled the greatest walls of the Tatra Mountains, yet deep down he remained something of a romantic. This was another aspect of Wiesław Stanisławski's character. He was a sensitive man. He wrote: - *It's not that we've set a new sporting record. We don't climb for the record. We devoted so much effort and endured so much suffering for that one moment when, intoxicated by victory, we stood on the summit, which not so long ago had been nothing but a dream of ours* (from Wiesław Stanisławski's mountaineering memoirs, „Taternik”, 1933, p. 102). In writing a tribute to Stanisławski for „Taternik” in 1933, the well-known mountaineer and Stanisławski's partner, Wiktor Ostrowski, emphasised the uniqueness of this figure: *He was one of the youngest among us... He was barely 24 years old... He occupied a unique place; he was a kind of authority figure and a star of the first magnitude. Our memory of him will always be linked to the image of colossal energy and a truly exceptional reserve of vitality... He loved the mountains in sunny weather and in winter blizzards; he loved rough, hard granite and arduous work on ice; he loved the mad rush of ski descents and long evenings in mountain huts where he would entertain us with humorous and witty stories until late at night.*

This text asks a key question: who was the greatest conqueror of the Tatra cliffs, and what did they like most about the Tatras? I will attempt to answer these questions. He loved reaching the summit. He loved preparing for the expedition and unrolling the rope before the climb. He also enjoyed spending the night on the rock face, when he would lie amongst the rocks and be overcome by extraordinary thoughts about the mountains. He enjoyed writing on the rock face. While spending the night on the cliffs of Mały Kieżmarski Szczyt, he could see in his mind's eye



mountaineers climbing in the Dzika Valley amidst a crowd of onlookers. He believed that the rope was part of his body. He also believed that granite could feel; when rock struck rock, he would cover the wound with a bandage. He disliked rain, as he couldn't climb in the rain, and he disliked carrying heavy rucksacks. He liked to promote his achievements, but when faced with criticism, he gradually withdrew from the pages of „Taternik” and other periodicals. He enjoyed skiing down the Tatra Mountains' slopes at speed, as well as playing bridge with friends in a Tatra mountain hut.

I've looked through Witold Henryk Paryski's collection of mountain notes, letters and photographs. What stands out as the most important aspect? What shines through? It is Stanisławski's immense, unbridled passion for the mountains. It is a passion of an extraordinary scale. It shines like the purest diamond. It is simply extraordinary. It is also difficult to put into words. Those who have experienced something similar in their own lives will understand what I am writing about ...

He boldly tackled the biggest walls and conquered them.

Both in summer and in winter.

He died on 4 August 1933, aged 24, while attempting to climb the west face of Kościółek in the Batorywiecka Valley. His climbing partner, the young climber Witold Wojnar, also lost his life. According to Paryski, they died in unclear circumstances. Indeed, their deaths remain shrouded in mystery. He was buried in Warsaw. A plaque commemorating Stanisławski and Wojnar can be found at the Symbolic Cemetery of the Victims of the Tatras near Osterwa in the Mięguszowiecka Valley in the Slovak High Tatras. His death caused a lull in the mountaineering community that lasted two years.

He pioneered an era that was continued by other Polish climbers - Janusz Klarner, Adam Karpiński, Jakub Bujak and Stefan Bernadzikiewicz - including the ascent of Nanda Devi East in the Himalayas in 1939. They realised Stanisławski's vision of developing mountaineering in mountains higher than the Tatras. After all, Stanisławski had rightly foreseen that the future of mountaineering and Polish alpinism lay beyond the Tatra Mountains.

He dreamed of expeditions to the great, exotic mountains: the Alps and the Himalayas. Apparently, in conversations with friends, he would often picture himself climbing Mount Everest, Kangchenjunga, Nanga Parbat and other Himalayan giants.

**Text: Wojciech Szatkowski**

**The Dr Tytus Chałubiński Tatra Museum in Zakopane**

