

In the White Track

Childhood and Adolescence Years

It was mainly my mother who led us to skiing – my first skiing steps occurred on the outskirts of Prague. We also used to ski in the forests near Davle at our weekend house. Later on our skiing base was a hut in the Giant Mountains¹, which belonged to Ministry of Finances, my father's workplace. My father was a good skier, but he didn't like company; we used to go there with mother and both my sisters for weekends and school vacations².

In my school days Saturday was a working day with working hours in the morning only. We used to set off for the mountains after the lunch, skis loaded on the roof of the coach³. We sang all the way. There was a stop at Jicin⁴; the square was crowded with buses and skiers.

We reached the hut in the night. There was a lot of work waiting for us – to bring water from a well, chop lumber, light the stove ... It was the "headmen" from the Ministry who organized the work. Tea was made in common in a large pan. At the light of dawn we used to set out for the ridge with skis on our shoulders. We had to beat a path in the snow until we reached the beaten track. There were sleighs passing there which supplied the chalets.

As we were setting off from the hut, my hands were freezing in the gloves – the blood returned gradually back as I warmed up walking uphill. When we reached the chalet *Dvoracky*⁵, situated at a gap, we had lunch (which was quite cheap there!) and then we practiced slalom and jumping on the slope there. There wasn't much time to stay – we had to turn back running downhill along an undulating track. Then we turned left at the crossroads and went downhill over sloped meadows to our hut. After a short refreshment, if time was left, we used practice slalom at a slope.

There were no lifts those times (except for top contestants). The skiers had to beat a slope stepping uphill aside. They went slowly uphill telling jokes; from time to time somebody let oneself down and the others criticized his/her style. There was less skiing those times, but there was much more fun.

During school vacations there were mostly families at the hut. There was an opportunity for whole-day ridgeway walks. We spent the long winter evenings playing chess, darts or other games (no TV!). We knew each other very well after many winter vacations spent together.

I used the traditional ash skis fitted with steel edges with the universal binding KANDAHAR which could be adjusted either for walking or for downhill skiing. A special background wax SKARE was applied on the running surface. About 1960 there was a novelty – HIKORY skis with the plastic sole-plate. I bought these skis with my first pay that I earned during summer holidays. Whoops! I was very tall and I chose the skis according to my length; when I came on the snow, I could hardly move! I was very thin in those times and the skis were too heavy. A good skier turned a beginner. This decided on my skiing career – I became a *cross-country skier*. My waiting for "growing up" to the HIKORY skis was fruitless; finally I bought a cheap pair of skis and I donated my precious skis to my friend.

¹ It was situated at Rokytnice nad Jizerou, in the Krkonoše (Giant Mountains)

² Winter school vacations (pololetní prázdniny) lasted for one week

³ originally one traveled on the body of a truck

⁴ Jičín, a town in the foothills of the Krkonoše

⁵ Dvoračky, a mountain hut under Lysá hora

At the technical college, skiing was included in the physical and military education. In the first year we had a skiing course in the *Jizerské Mountains*, near Liberec. It was rainy and I came home with the flu. During my studies at university, I went with my friends to *Svatý Petr* resort in the Giant Mountains. We mostly undertook cross-country trips. Once we turned back in the night and we ran a downhill course blindfold. Beside that, I regularly spent the week between Christmas Day and New Year at *Lucni Bouda*⁶, a chalet bellow *Snezka*⁷, the highest peak in the Giant Mountains. The trip was organized by an academic tourist club; one of the members was my sister Olga. One could get there only on foot; the climb took about 2 hours. The hut was relatively self-sufficient; they had their own hydro-electric plant and a bakery. The chalet was used by the Nazis during the war and they made it “bombenfest”.

We used to set off for whole-day ridgeway walks together with my sister Olga and my university colleague Jirka⁸. The ridge mostly coincides with the Czech-Polish border. In the 50's the hikers who lost their way and appeared on the Polish side were allegedly sent to the reconstruction of Warsaw⁹. Other days we practiced slalom on the nearby slopes or we climbed Snezka. We used to celebrate the New Year together with the teachers who used to come there for a skiing course. I recall the friendly, tolerant atmosphere at the chalet, perhaps nobody smoked there. The people who don't hesitate to take all they need on their back and climb 1,300 m high are somehow related.

In the morning, on 1st of January we used to set out with Jirka on skis downhill with the rucksack and the other pair of skis on shoulders. At 1pm at we stopped at a meadow over Pec¹⁰ to listen to New Year's address of the president.

The Beskydy and Slovakia

In August 1970 I joined TESLA Roznov Electronics Works seated at Roznov¹¹, a town situated in the very centre of the Walachian Mountains – the Beskydy. I worked in the Research & Development department. There was still the atmosphere of *Prague Spring* reverberating there but people were rather skeptical. The “leaders of counter-revolution” i.e. the people who played a key role in the democratization process and in the protests against the Soviet invasion (and didn't want to repent) had already been withdrawn¹². One worked there on double shifts and it was possible for me to switch the shift when necessary.

When there was a snowfall, I used to arrange matters together with my friend Jura Neradil and we set off for a trip around Roznov and we turned back going downhill from Radhost. The Beskydy and the Javorníky Mountains, which are situated along the Moravian-Slovak border offer inexhaustible opportunities for cross-country skiing. Unfortunately I was not able to make the most of them due to worsening situation in TESLA.

⁶ Luční bouda, a large mountain hut at near the source of the Labe (Elbe). During 2nd World War it was reconstructed by Nazis; allegedly it was made “bombenfest”

⁷ Sněžka (1603 m), the highest peak in Czech Republic

⁸ Jiří Šusterka

⁹ The Polish capital was totally destroyed during WWII.

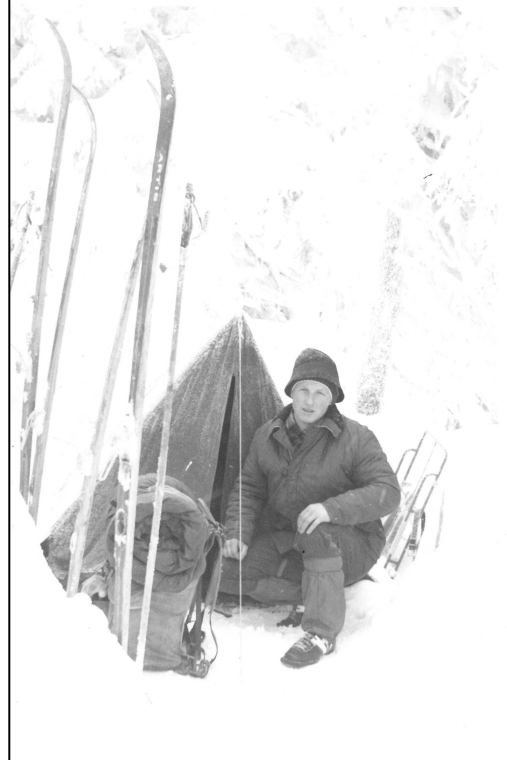
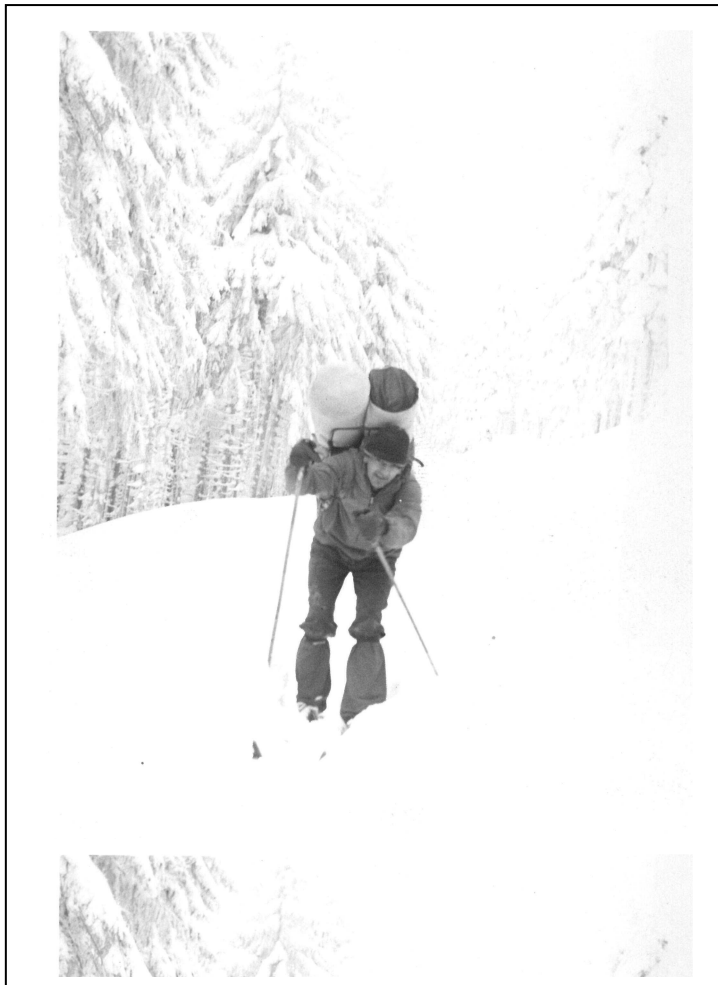
¹⁰ Pec pod Sněžkou, one of the skiing centers in Krkonoše

¹¹ Rožnov pod Radhoštěm; the mountain Radhošť (1129 m) used to be a holy place of pagans. There is a chapel and a statue of pagan's god Radegast

¹² Compare “Handful of Reminiscences at www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

Nevertheless there was a hiking club at TESLA which organized excursions to *Chopok* in Low Tatra; there was a skiing resort with ideal conditions for downhill skiing. Once we arranged a carnival in masks, there with various competitions – one-ski slalom, downhill skiing with a girl in hands, etc. A colleague who was disguised as a prostitute was interrogated at the police station.

In January 1974 I took part in winter camping, which was organized by the CKD Praha Tourist Club. I went there together with Jura. It took place at Cervenohorske sedlo in the Jeseniky Mountains¹³. To get there we had to go about 10 km on skis loaded with a tent, sleeping bags and other necessities. There was a strong wind on the ridge. One moment I lost balance and found myself in a snowdrift. It was already getting dark when we reached the campsite. We couldn't even have a look at tents and igloos made by other participants. Although I was totally exhausted, Jura brought a shovel and made me dig a pit for our tent. A piece of chocolate gave me new power. We had dinner in the hut sitting both on a single chair. In the evening there was a chat with an alpinist who climbed *Nanga Parbat* – one of the highest peaks in the Himalaya, which had long resisted all attempts of climbing. After we crept into our tent, we cooked tea holding the cooker in our hands. I slept in a light nylon sleeping bag lined with a blanket. I was looking for the optimum position all night, cold was penetrating from various sides. Still I came through that in one piece. After that experience I had an alpinist sleeping bag sewn, but I haven't camped on the snow again.



Obr.4. On the way to Cevenohorske sedlo

Obr.5. Winter camping, Jura Neradil at the tent, January 1974

¹³ Červenohorské sedlo v Jeseníkách, north Moravia

In November 1978 I joined The Slovak Academy of Science, and started to work at its detached department at Piestany¹⁴. The department was closely related to TESLA Piešťany, a branch factory of TESLA Rožnov. There were about 20 young research workers who bustled about rich social and sports activities. There used to be a party every quarter to celebrate all the birthdays that had happened meanwhile. After work we played football, volleyball and organized a running competition “between bridges”. There also was a tourist club at TESLA. I was however missing a gymnastic club like “*Sokol*”¹⁵, which I attended at Rožnov.

Piestany is situated in the lowlands around the Váh, but there are three highlands or rather mountain ranges within reach: *Povazsky Inovec*, *Malé Karpaty*, and *Javorniky*¹⁶. There are several ruined castles around there; once I visited a friend of mine and he showed me that they could see three castles from their window! There was even a skiing resort at Piestany with a lift; as the skiing season was short, they had become the pioneers in *grass skiing*. The hills around Piestany resembled the Beskydy in Moravia but there was no tradition of cross-country skiing there.

I became involved in football and volleyball competitions and was getting on quite well. However in one football match I stepped into a hole and I hurt my recently operated knee. Since then I have been excluded from most of my sport activities. I was losing form and put on weight. Moreover, in 1980 I was enrolled in the new-established license division at TESLA Piestany and I devoted much time to this prestigious work. Nevertheless I consolidated my powers gradually and I took part in two interesting undertakings – the *White Track* cross-country skiing competition¹⁷ (in January 1983), and an attempt of *Crossing the Povazsky Inovec* on skis.

Before the traditional White Track Competition I trained a little – I spent a week before New Year with my friends in the mountains. For the competition I went together with two of my colleagues¹⁸. The historical mining town Kremnica greeted us – signboards inviting the participants into numerous tearooms and restaurants.

We stayed overnight in a dormitory and after breakfast we went to the starting place, which was on a plain above the town. There was an optimum temperature – minus 5 °C, so it was no problem to choose the proper wax. There were about 10,000 participants; my starting number was about 7000 (somebody had left it for me). After the start I tried to keep pace with the others, but I was able to do it for a few kilometers only. I was very excited and my heartbeat was like a bell. I stepped outside the track¹⁹ and watched the rolling crowd. Soon I spotted my friend Martin²⁰ among the competitors. He was taking it cautious, long strides. I tailed him, gradually calming down, and soon I got my second wind. In the meantime, however I found myself at the tail of the competition, among weaker skiers. I gradually started to overtake them, mainly on the downhill slopes. In the final part of the track, there was a checkpoint; the stragglers were sent to the goal by bus. I succeeded to meet the limit while one of my mates, who had been misled and didn't try enough, was taken in the bus. On the last ascent there was a partisan-bonfire and an accordionist was playing there. A group of girls, standing along the track, stimulated the competitors by slapping them over the buttocks.

¹⁴ Piešťany, west Slovakia, “town of sand” with a thermal resort

¹⁵ SOKOL is the traditional Czech gymnastic club

¹⁶ Povazský Inovec, Malé Karpaty, Javorníky (see above)

¹⁷ Biela stopa Slovenského národného povstania; the track was 55 km long, with the goal at Banská Bystrica, the centre of the Slovak Revolt in 1944

¹⁸ They were Dušan Korytár and Rado Slávka, research workers of the Slovak Academy of Sciences

¹⁹ There were about 10 parallel pre-arranged tracks

²⁰ Martin Kedro, my university colleague; he worked in Bratislava

There was however treachery at the end: the competition was shortened by 10 km due to lack of snow and the goal was at Tajov. We had to wait for buses that transported us to the scheduled goal in Banska Bystrica. After the last downhill stretch we were covered with hoarfrost and looked like snowmen; at the goal the hoarfrost suddenly melted and we were wet through. The competitors were morose and protested, but one couldn't help. It took about an hour before I reached my clothes which I had taken off at the start line²¹. There were showers there but the water was cold. I didn't even take the refreshment. The competition made me ill; I lay in bed for two weeks. It was a great mental encouragement for me – but it permanently marked my health.

Crossing the Povazsky Inovec was another adventurous undertaking. It had originally been planned for two or three days, but only one stage came to fruition. There were about 20 participants with no leader. We started at a railway station at the foot of the hills. It rained and when we reached the chalet "On Inovec" we were wet through²². It took us one hour to dry out. In the meantime a half of us resigned and decided to turn back. I joined the 11 gallant men and women who set off to go on. As we were climbing to Inovec, the weather changed several times: it was raining at first, then it began to snow and the snow was sticking on the running surface. As we were reaching the ridge, it was raining again and the snow was covered with an ice skin. The only way of braking on the slope was to fall down onto the snow. A young lady who ran before me acted very bravely – she threw herself onto the snow eight times on the 50 meters of slope. What a blessing that I took the plastic raincoat with me – the top of my body was kept dry. When we were approaching our goal – the hut "Below Bezovec", it was already getting dark²³. It was a mild evening. My shoes were full of water, but I had reserve pair of socks, so I could keep my feet warm. When it became quite dark, we pulled off the skis and continued walking, led by Anka²⁴, who intimately knew the terrain there. It was about 11 pm, when we finally reached the hut. There was a lady on duty who was awaiting us with tea.

When we got up in the morning, two men appeared at the hut. They were Laco, the chairman of the club and our mate Eugen²⁵, who probably stood on skis for the first time. We went together to the bus stop; nobody felt like another adventure like this one.

The Invisible Hand

In 1991 I became a teacher. An inspiring profession, I had to however give up many pleasures, including skiing in the mountains. My teacher's salary only covered the basic needs. It was only once in a year, on the St. Nicholas, when we used to spend two days with our "Track 15"²⁶ at a mountain hut at Rokytnice. This way I could visit again, after many years, the familiar places. The landscape had changed a little – some parts of the forests disappeared due to air pollution. Some of the mountain huts were closed. When I visited one well-known chalet on the ridge, it was full of cigarette smoke – there were students on holiday. All right then - the invisible hand of the market has worked hard. I keep a pair of skis at my home at Sloup now. If there is enough snow (which is very rare), I set off for a trip over the neighboring fields and forests.

²¹ These clothes were transported to the goal and guarded by soldiers

²² Inovec (1042 m) is the highest peak in the range; the mountain hut is called "Chata na Inovci"

²³ Bezovec (743 m), a skiing resort; Chata pod Bezovcom (*Hut below Bezovec*)

²⁴ Anna Hašuková

²⁵ Laco Beleščák and Eugen Okénka, confer „Handful of Reminiscences“ at www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

²⁶ A detachment of the Academic Hiking Club (TAK)



Měchenice, January 2010