



**ROCK 'N' ROLL  
ON THE WALL**

*Silvo Karo*

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## Foreword

*Rolando Garibotti*

“Only now, sitting safely at home, 16,000 km away from Patagonia, can I bring myself to think of the crazy situation we were in that January day, as we neared the top of the South Face of Cerro Torre, on rotten ropes and with wild animal wind tearing at us. Those desperate moments when the question to be or not to be was being answered only by our desire to survive....” So starts Silvo Karo’s Mountain Magazine article about his and Janez Jeglič’s ascent of the mighty South Face of Cerro Torre, in now distant 1988, one of the hardest bigwalls anywhere, still unrepeated.

Silvo was born in 1960, in a small farm town not far from Ljubljana. The second of four children, he was in the fields from a very early age. While his father was away working, his mother tended the fields and the kids helped from the moment they could walk. He credits his later success as a climber to this upbringing. “A hard worker will always make a good climber,” he explains.

In Slovenia, mountaineering is part of the national fabric. Climbing Triglav, the queen of the Julian Alps, is almost a mandatory rite of passage to citizenship. Silvo started scrambling at an early age and soon found himself going on outings and taking courses with the local alpine club.

Meeting Franček Knez was a crucial step in Silvo’s development as a climber. Franček was slightly older and had a drive and vision that were unmatched at the time. He proved to be an instrumental influence, both on Silvo and on the rest of the Slovene mountaineering scene. Soon Janez Jeglič was also part of the group, and the three of them would go on to

have a very productive 10-year partnership, for which they were dubbed “The Three Musketeers.”

In 1982, a climbing exchange to the USA opened their horizons as to what was possible and gave them a better understanding of their abilities. Sometime later, Janez and Silvo drove to nearby Trieste, Italy, to buy climbing shoes. Before they left the shop, the sales assistant gave them a poster of Cerro Fitz Roy, in Patagonia. Although they were in their early 20s and lacked any experience in the greater ranges, they decided then and there that they should climb that spectacular peak. Franček was soon on board, and a few months later the trio established their first major new route in Patagonia.

Having found their Eldorado, trips to Patagonia ensued on a yearly basis. These produced some of the hardest routes in the area: the first ascent of the east face of Cerro Torre, a new route on Torre Egger’s south-east face, and the cherry atop the cake, the South Face of Cerro Torre. The latter was a three-month marathon involving a whopping 17 trips to the base of the wall, and as many attempts. After the ascent, as they walked into basecamp, Silvo recalled, “It slowly began to sink in that our great crazy desire was fulfilled: we had climbed the South Face... No modesty could conceal my delight, as Jim Bridwell, that most experienced of Patagonian pioneers, judged that we had climbed the most difficult route in Patagonia!”

In the 1990s Silvo’s approach to the greater ranges shifted, as he decided to forego the fixed ropes they had previously relied upon. This new approach yielded what might well be Silvo and Janez’s career defining climb of the west face of Bhagirathi III in 1990, a massive and difficult face, at altitude, climbed in alpine style over six days.

In the mid 1990s several speed ascents in Yosemite with Aischan Rupp, a talented young Swiss climber, made Silvo realize the possibility of approaching bigwalls even lighter, with little more than a day pack. This mindset – the repeated changes of thinking, his adaptation to the times – was one of Silvo’s biggest strengths. He did not remain static; he evolved and adapted as the sport changed and the goal posts moved.

It was through Aischan that I first met Silvo, and I still remember vividly our first encounter. Silvo was in his prime, 70kg of motivation and decisiveness, little talk and all action. Over the ensuing few years we managed to share a rope a good number of times, in Yosemite, Patagonia,

and elsewhere. Climbing with him felt like cheating. Condensed in one man were all of the skills one could possibly need in the mountains, from a rope-gun to lead the hardest pitch, to an army of sherpas to porter heavy packs, to an entire rescue team if something was to happen. He had the energy of a train engine, and there was something distinctively reassuring about the way he pounded pitons – the rock would ask for forgiveness. No matter the conditions, when faced with an objective he cared about, his determination was unwavering. Not always did we agree, but here was an honest, no-nonsense man, one for whom I always have had enormous respect.

The years passed and Silvo continued adapting and changing. His last serious climbing trip to Patagonia was in 2005 when, at the dawn of the age of weather forecasting, with Andrej Grmovšek, he climbed two beautiful lines in the new “sunny Patagonia”. At last, he no longer had to climb through storms. The man had endured enough bad weather. Perhaps it was only fitting that it was finally time to retire.

The climbs of the 1980s Slovene generation became the stuff of legend and inspired climbers the world over. Silvo, Janez and Franček left an indelible mark on the sport. In his book “Deep Play”, English climber and writer Paul Pritchard recounts a colorful anecdote from Steve Gerberding. Steve is the unheralded sensei of bigwall climbing, the first to climb Yosemite’s El Capitan one hundred times, doing so by some of its hardest routes. One day Steve was shopping in a crowded Yosemite deli when he saw Silvo queueing up with a bag of bagels. Steve couldn’t believe his eyes, fell to his knees, prostrating himself at Silvo’s feet and began shouting “We are not worthy, we are not worthy.”

## Introduction

It never crossed my mind to write a book, as I've never even been much of a reader. I also didn't take up alpinism in order to write about it, I had no idea how long I'd keep at it. After the first years of exploring the mountains, I gained some experience, and there were always more objectives than there was time. Then I suddenly realized that I'd already spent four decades in the mountains and the stack of memories and photos had grown considerably, plus everybody around me was becoming increasingly curious. "So, when are you going to write something?" My answer was always the same: "I'm not much of a writer and whenever I've tried to write, I've always been incredibly slow." And besides, what would I write about? The spiritual aspects of alpinism had already been thoroughly explored by various philosophers and other learned men and women, we already had many beautiful books about people's experiences in the mountains, and I'm a practical person who prefers doing things to writing about them. Should I write about sunrises and sunsets in innumerable shades of gold, the morning dew on the approach hike to the wall, the evening mists, the tranquility of the mountains, the gentle flowers...? Nah, I couldn't manage more than half a page of this stuff. Should I go into precise, heroic details about climbing? How I was barely hanging on, but still somehow managed to grab a piton from my harness and started pounding it into a crack, before dropping the damn thing and noticing I had a 10-meter runout, which overwhelmed me with fear and forced me to climb the section without any protection? This wouldn't work either, it's way too dramatic. What, then, is the recipe for a book about alpinism? I had no idea. So I decided to describe our way of life and include things not necessarily related to

climbing. After all, our environment and society have profoundly influenced us and made us who we are. Growing up in the turbulent Balkans was a completely different experience to living in a stable country where the currency and political system never change. My generation lived through three states and several currencies, and we had to go to war to gain independence. On many of our trips, especially to Western countries, we were often scolded as being uncivilized, rude, bad-mannered and blunt, but we didn't let such remarks bother us too much.

If my guardian angel could speak, he'd probably say: "Come on, stop, don't you think you've had enough?" His tired wings and beaten body are clear signs that I've given him a rough time. He's lost many feathers in Patagonian storms, but remained a loyal companion. My body's also changed in the last forty years; it's been worked by heavy backpacks, exertion, danger, altitude, cold bivouacs, snow caves, storms. Did I have to go through all this?

Why did I do this? It was simply because I was shown a path that led me to the mountains. I followed it, despite not knowing how long and steep it would be. Which was probably for the best, since otherwise I'd have stopped and turned around way sooner. Now that I'm returning to the valley with an empty backpack and a calm stride I'm bringing back plenty of memories, and some of them are described on the following pages.

## Youth

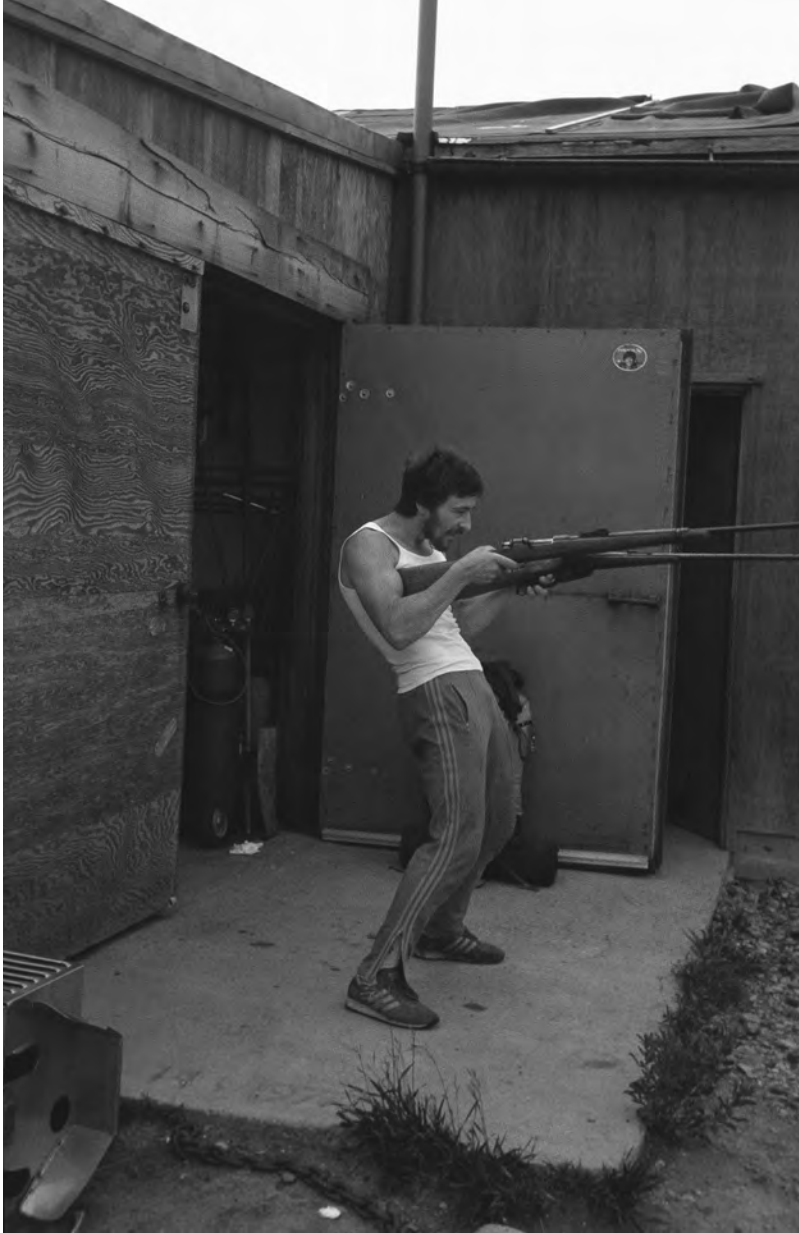


In front of my family house in 1976. Left to right, back row: brother Maks, father Maks, mother Helena, aunt Štefka, and me. Front row: brother Ciril, sister Anica and cousins Vida, Brigita, Erika, Marta, and Nada. © *Silvo Karo collection*

## CHAPTER ONE

### Zalokar farm

Not far from the Gothic church of St. Nicholas above the village of Brdo pri Ihanu lies the Zalokar farm, where I grew up. My grandfather on my mother's side, Peter Kokalj, was born there in 1901; he married Terezija Grčar and had nine children, including my mother. In those days, women gave birth at home and my grandparents lost two of their twin daughters soon after they'd been born. Two of my grandfather's brothers went to the USA in 1923, and the family suffered more losses during World War II. Uncle Jacob didn't join the partisans, and when they attacked the anti-communist home guard near our home in 1944, the home guard shot him at his house for allegedly telling the partisans about their location. Later, when the gunman found out that he'd killed an innocent 19-year-old boy, he took his own life. The whole family, including my mother, was moved to the village of Goričane, and the Zalokar farmhouse was pillaged and destroyed. But even though the war was coming to an end, this was just the beginning. Another uncle, named Peter, was part of the partisan army. The Germans caught him in September 1944. He was imprisoned in Begunje for a short while before being sent to Mauthausen, one of the worst concentration camps of the Second World War. He died in March 1945, shortly before the Allies liberated the camp. My grandfather Peter was taken hostage and shot by the Germans on Christmas Day 1944 in the village of Črna pri Stranjah, above the town of Kamnik, and Uncle Tone moved to Canada in 1963. The Zalokar farm



The Colorado trip was full of exciting adventures straight out of the Wild West.  
© *Silvo Karo collection*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Wild West

The planes landing and taking off at the Brnik Airport always flew quite low above our village of Brdo. As a child I often waved at them, thinking that the passengers could see me in our meadows and fields through the small windows. It never crossed my mind that someday I might be flying up there through the clouds. The only toy I remember from my childhood is a small plane that I found in the attic of our house, and I always listened to stories about my aunt and uncle coming to visit us from America in such a thing.

On June 4, 1982, I was nervously waiting at Brnik Airport for our flight to Denver. Johan, Roman Cerar (aka Cibi), and Janko Humar were my companions for the trip after we'd all seen an ad in a newspaper inviting four to six climbers to a climbing exchange in Colorado. We didn't have much time to prepare, and most of our training took place on rocky bridges and the walls of old houses. Nowadays you can see climbers everywhere, but back then this wasn't the case. We often heard snide remarks: "Is that the guy who climbs?" "Yeah, he's a real nutcase." I remember a time when I was climbing on the wall of the church while two elderly ladies were slowly making their way up the stairs to the evening mass. They were grumbling about the kids being so ill-behaved: "Why can't he use the stairs?" The looks they gave me would make you think that I was doing something terribly wrong.

This was a proper expedition, and Johan and I had to buy some extra gear, as we barely had any beforehand. Money was always tight and our



Chamonix, a paradise for alpinists. Celebrating our Mont Blanc climb. Left to right: Janko Kos, Ciril Homar, and Slavc Šikonja with some Serbian climbers. © *Silvo Karo*



Enjoying a rest at the Albert Premier Hut overlooking Aiguille du Chardonnet, the next day's objective for Janko and me. © *Janko Kos*



With the traverse of Aiguille du Chardonnet cancelled, Janko and I climbed Aiguille du Tour the next day and fooled around on the glacier along the way. © *Janko Kos*



*Via Couzy on Cima Ovest.*  
© Janez Jeglič



Franček on the winter ascent of *Šlosarska*, which was in great condition. Triglav North Face.  
© Silvo Karo



Winter ascent of the *JLA* route on the north face of *Šite*. © Janez Jeglič



Johan dry tooling on the *JLA* route on the north face of *Šite*. © Silvo Karo



Johan on the second day on the west face of Bhagirathi III. © Silvo Karo

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Bhagirathi III

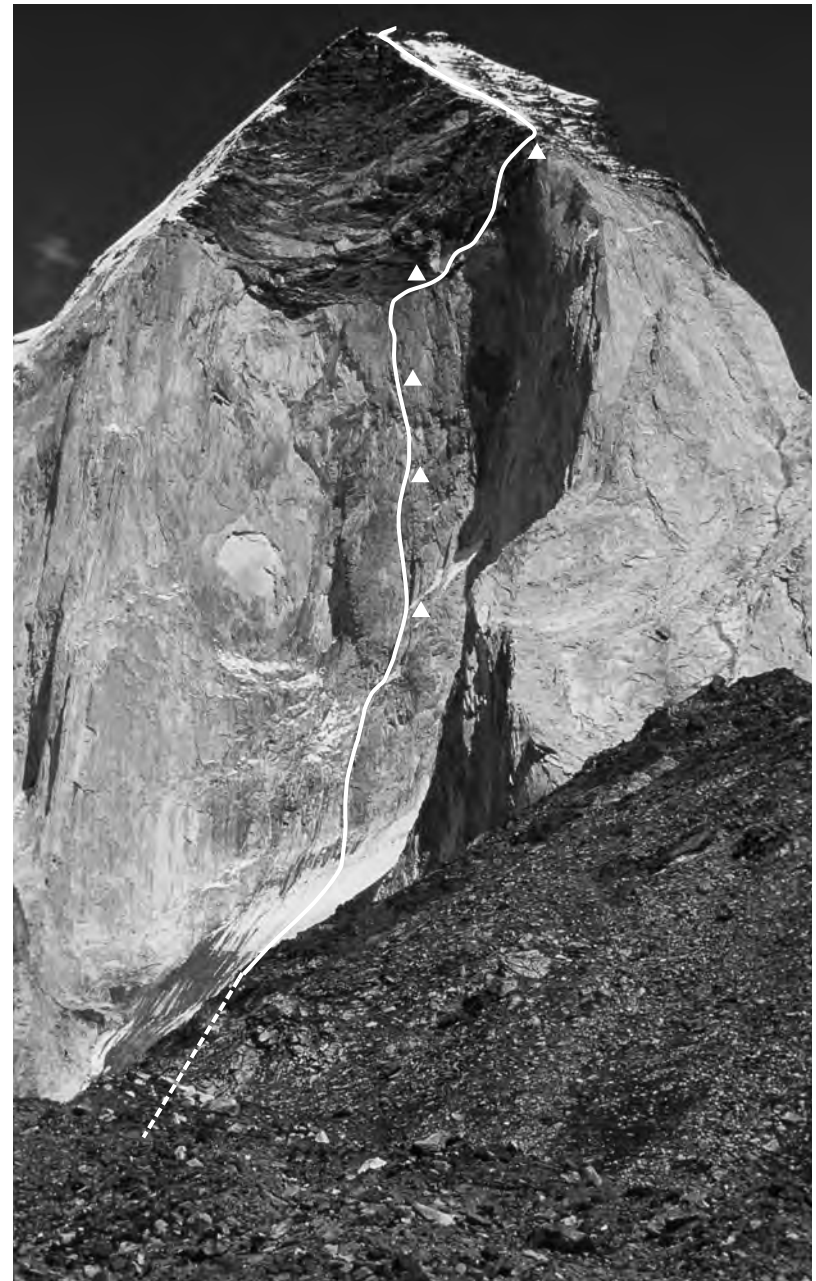
It was 1990 and Johan and I had spent the last ten years in the mountains, on sport-climbing crags, and on expeditions, plus the countless silos, chimneys, power towers, and other high structures where we earned some extra money. We came up with the idea to climb the west face of Bhagirathi III in India that fall and then go straight to Nepal and join the Alpe-Adria expedition of climbers from Slovenia and Trieste that would attempt to traverse Mt. Everest (from Western Cwm to the West Ridge and up the Hornbein Couloir to the summit, followed by a descent down the South Col). Two great objectives that got us motivated to train as hard as possible.

Before he started climbing, Johan was a cyclist and he later persuaded me to get a road bike as well. Although I preferred running, we started to ride our bikes together as part of our training and we often cycled up to Črnivec, a 900-meter-high pass at the foothills of the Kamnik Alps. From Domžale it was a perfect afternoon training stint. To track our progress we always started our stopwatches at the turn-off for Kamniška Bistrica (in Stahovica) and we soon realized that we should aim for a time under thirty minutes. The first fifteen kilometers from Domžale were flat and perfect for warming up, but in Stahovica it was time to go full throttle. There was a restaurant called *Pri Jurčku* at about half way and we had to reach it in fifteen minutes to have any chance of getting to the top of the pass in time. I had an old bike that had cage pedals instead of a clip-in system and I didn't wear cycling shoes, opting instead for an old pair of

September 5 – fourth day on the wall. It took a lot of time before we managed to untangle the ropes that had gotten completely wet on the first day and now froze up each and every night. After the first ten meters, the wall became covered in ice and the falling snowflakes reached us once again. A very long pitch brought us to a small rocky terrace. We were under the black headwall that we'd studied from the ground without finding a logical line of weakness. Now, at its very base, we could see that the triangular wall was composed of rock that resembled crumbling coal more than anything else. I pounded a few pitons into the disintegrating mess, but all of them together probably couldn't hold a fall. We traversed a snowy ledge leading to the right. It wasn't difficult, but it was dangerous because there wasn't anything solid to hold on to. The traverse brought us to a comfortable ledge where we could finally sit down and relax a little for the first time in four days. We didn't even have to hold the stove in our hands while cooking! Pure bliss.

There was quite some daylight left, but the spot was too comfortable not to take advantage of it. The terrain above didn't look promising and it seemed that we'd have to traverse way out to the right because the wall above was black, overhanging, and with icicles everywhere. Two ravens suddenly appeared out of nowhere. We joked that they probably had to walk because of the crap visibility. They strolled back and forth along the snowy ledge, no doubt hoping to get some food from us.

We knew that the next day would require a lot of aid climbing along the edge between the black and the orange rock and wanted to get as much rest as possible. Despite the comfort of the ledge, we put up our portaledge, which provided some welcome warmth. We knew that Mojca down at base camp was worried about us, but could do nothing about it. There were two options that we discussed: abseiling down the Scottish Pillar without going to the summit (Johan's preferred option), or going to the top and descending down the back side (my favorite of the two). Both descents would go down terrain we didn't know, but the second option would be technically way more straightforward. The Scottish Pillar wouldn't be any safer in terms of avalanche danger, plus it would require a whole lot of gear to rig all the rappels. None of the options was safe in the conditions that we had, whichever way we looked at it.



West face of Bhagirathi III, route outline. © Silvo Karo



We'd expected better conditions, since November in the southern hemisphere should be similar to May in Slovenia, but it was full-on winter. All the cracks, chimneys, and corners were choked with snow. Franček burrowing up the first pitch of *Hudičeva zajeda* (*Devil's Dihedral*).  
© Silvo Karo



Johan and me on the descent from the base of Fitz Roy, where we'd dug a snow cave that served as the base for our attempts. Lake Sucia is in the background. © Franček Knez



Jumaring and abseiling in such bad weather was terrifying, since the sheath of the rope got damaged fairly quickly and we had to make countless knots on the damaged parts of the rope. Johan descending in sub-optimal conditions. © Silvo Karo




Sometimes we'd start climbing while the wall was still full of ice and our progress was slower as a result. Johan pounding pitons on the seventeen pitch of *Psycho Vertical*. © Franček Knez



On the evening of December 7 we found ourselves beneath the snow mushroom, which was bigger than we'd thought it would be. It took us forever to climb it, even though we were almost at the top. © Silvo Karo



Franček Knez on the central part of *Psycho Vertical*. © Janez Jeglič



The first route Aischan and I climbed together was *Salathé Wall*. We'd decided to climb it in two blocks and we switched leads on El Cap Spire.  
© Aischan Rupp

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### A European in Yosemite

After I'd been to Yosemite with Bridwell in 1989, I knew I'd be coming back to the valley where rock climbing history had been made. We had plenty of big walls in the Julian and Kamnik-Savinja Alps, plus the Dolomites and the Central Alps weren't that far away, but none of those walls were as big and steep as El Capitan. The first forward-thinking Slovenian climbers visited the place as early as 1973. I did some research on Europeans climbing in Yosemite, and only the Swiss had been there before just one year earlier, an indication that Slovenians were eager to get to grips with granite as soon as possible. At that time some of the routes on El Cap were already celebrating their tenth anniversaries. Nejc Zaplotnik, Janez Gradišar, Dušan Srečnik, Janez Lončar, Miha Smolej, and Janez Dovžan were the first Slovenians to climb El Cap (the routes they did were *Salathé Wall* and *Triple Direct*).

It'd been almost ten years since I'd first gotten acquainted with granite in 1982 in Colorado, and the lessons I'd learned on that trip had served me well later on. I'd climbed many big granite faces in Patagonia and elsewhere, but now it was time for an update. It was time to go to Yosemite if I didn't want to get left behind. I was also into difficult aid climbing and speed ascents, which I did quite a lot, both up and down routes in the Julian Alps. The way we'd climbed in Patagonia in the eighties didn't appeal to me anymore, and it was next to impossible to find appealing objectives knowing that such a style could get us up practically anything. After 1990 Johan's and my concept and understanding of alpinism started drifting

late Jose Pereyra from Venezuela, with whom I'd climbed in Yosemite in 1997. We climbed a nice new route on its 300-meter wall with difficulties up to 6c+, and easily traversed further along the ridge before making a final short rappel to reach the col. After climbing for eleven hours, we took a little break to drink and reorganize our rack of gear. We ran into some friends who were getting ready to bivy in a snow cave and invited us to join them, but we were determined to climb without bivying.



Slovene Sit-Start, Cerro Torre © Silvo Karo

By five p.m. we were on the first pitch of the SE ridge (*Compressor Route*). We moved quickly on the first wet pitches but afterward the conditions quickly deteriorated. There was more and more snow, verglas, and ice and we had to climb in crampons. At sunset, we climbed the bolt traverse and continued through the night which slowed us down considerably. Although we had headlamps it was nothing like climbing during the day. We had some route finding problems, and the person belaying would often get very cold as it was getting chillier and windier by the minute. The wind picked up even more as we got to the Ice Towers, making communication all but impossible. The first light of day greeted us at the base of the headwall but it would still be a while before the sun would be able to warm us. We could turn off our headlamps at the top of the first pitch of the headwall, and at ten a.m. we stood beneath the summit mushroom, which was completely different than it had been nineteen years ago when we'd simply walked up to the summit. This time we had to climb these final twenty meters further north. At 10:30 a.m. we stood on the summit of Cerro Torre, satisfied as hell. We named the long line the *Slovene sit-start* to Cerro Torre and climbed the *Compressor Route* to the summit. It's 1,700 meters high and more than 3,000 meters long; we climbed it in twenty-eight hours. We enjoyed the view for a few minutes before starting to rappel in beautiful and increasingly warm weather. Through falling ice and dripping water we made it to the Col de la Paciencia by afternoon and immediately continued to descend. Lower down the snow was wet and slushy and everything, including all the seracs, was extremely unstable due to the intense heat. The bergschrund was the worst, and it was pretty hard to get across it. At the snowfield lower down, we sank up to our waists but knew we'd make it to Noruegos camp, even if we'd have to crawl on all fours. We eventually got there at seven p.m. after a 36-hour roundtrip. We ate and drank and collapsed into our sleeping bags.

With the arrival of weather forecasts, Patagonia became a different place. It was awesome to climb with the sure knowledge that the weather would hold, and I often wonder what it'd be like if we had that sort of thing in the eighties when we were in our prime. On the other hand, I miss the romantic old days when the Patagonian beauties were much shyer and would often reject us, forcing us to come back and try harder. Patagonia had lost its virginity to the weather forecast, and it became much more accessible, even to bad lovers.



After climbing the icefield, we were slowed down by difficult mixed climbing. After each pitch, we had to haul up our bag, which snagged on everything in its path. © *Silvo Karo*



In the late morning hours of the sixth day of our climb, Johan and I finally reached the top of Bhagirathi III. For a brief second, the wind drove the clouds away and we were able to scope out the line of our descent. We caught a glimpse of the Vasuki Glacier way below, giving us a rough indication of where to go. © *Silvo Karo collection*



On the fourth day on the wall, we came across a relatively comfortable ledge, allowing us to sit down for the first time in four days. Despite this luxury, we still pitched our portable home, which provided some welcome protection from the elements.  
© *Janez Jeglič*

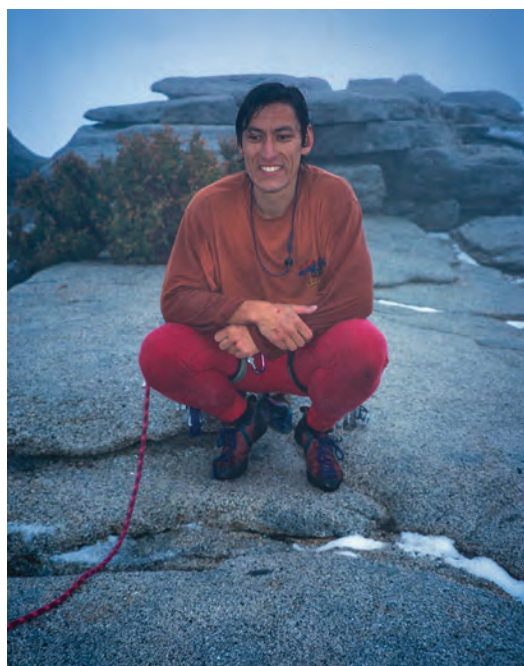


Johan and I left the Nan Dan Ban basecamp and headed for Bhagirathi III on September 1 and returned in the evening hours of September 7. The following day we headed down for Gangotri. Behind us is the scene of our seven-day adventure covered with loads of new snow.  
© *Silvo Karo collection*

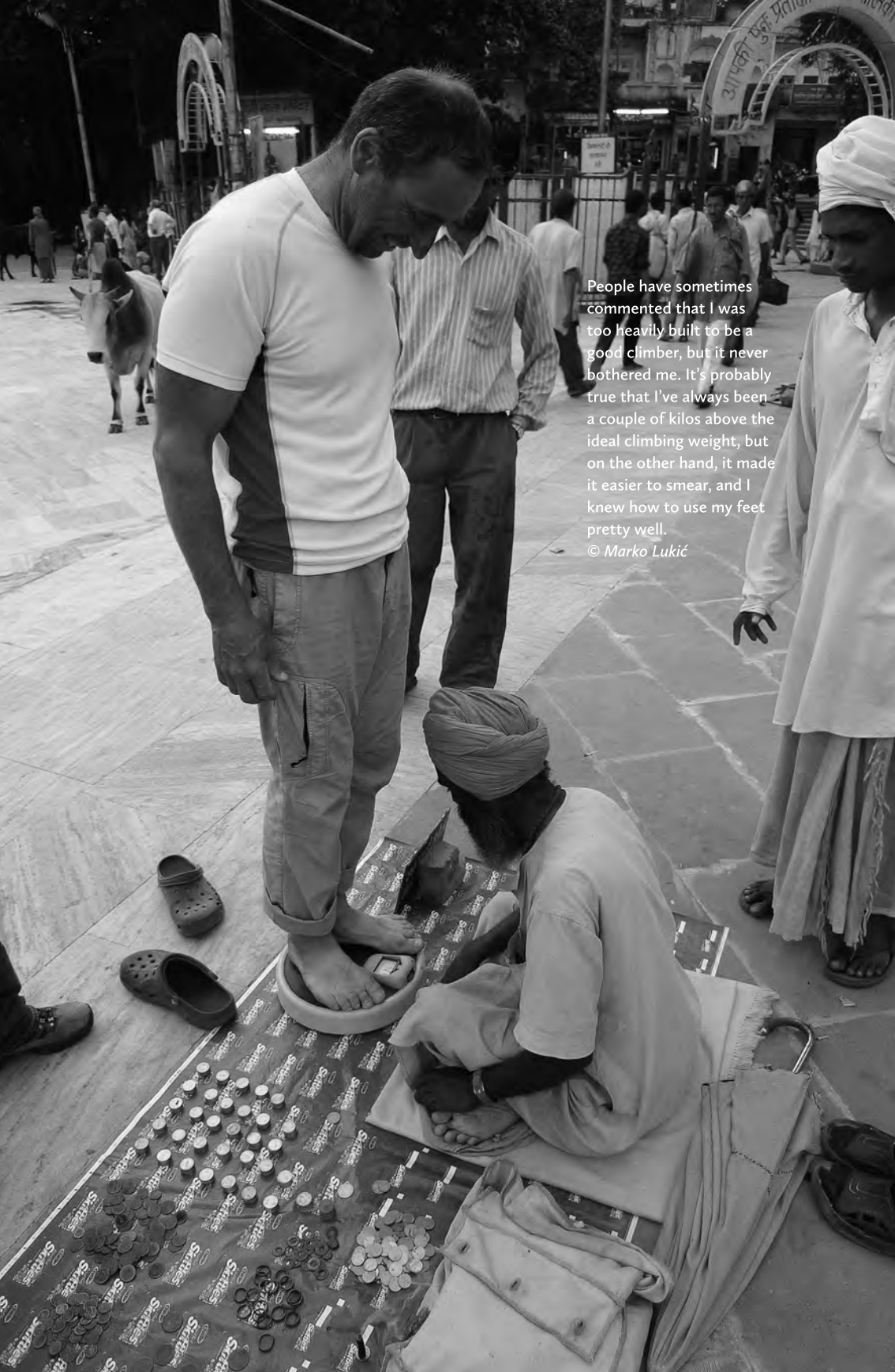


On the top of El Capitan after six days on the *Wyoming Sheep Ranch*. Marko Prezelj and I made the fifth repeat of the route. © Marko Prezelj

Aischan Rupp on the top of Half Dome after setting a new speed record on the *Direct North West Face*. We were proud to beat the locals and bring some European competition to the Yosemite scene. © Silvo Karo



Our tactics on Half Dome were different than on El Capitan: we switched leads every five pitches. Aischan confidently and quickly dispatched the first bloc and we were soon climbing the imposing *Crescent Crack*. © Silvo Karo



People have sometimes commented that I was too heavily built to be a good climber, but it never bothered me. It's probably true that I've always been a couple of kilos above the ideal climbing weight, but on the other hand, it made it easier to smear, and I knew how to use my feet pretty well.

© Marko Lukić

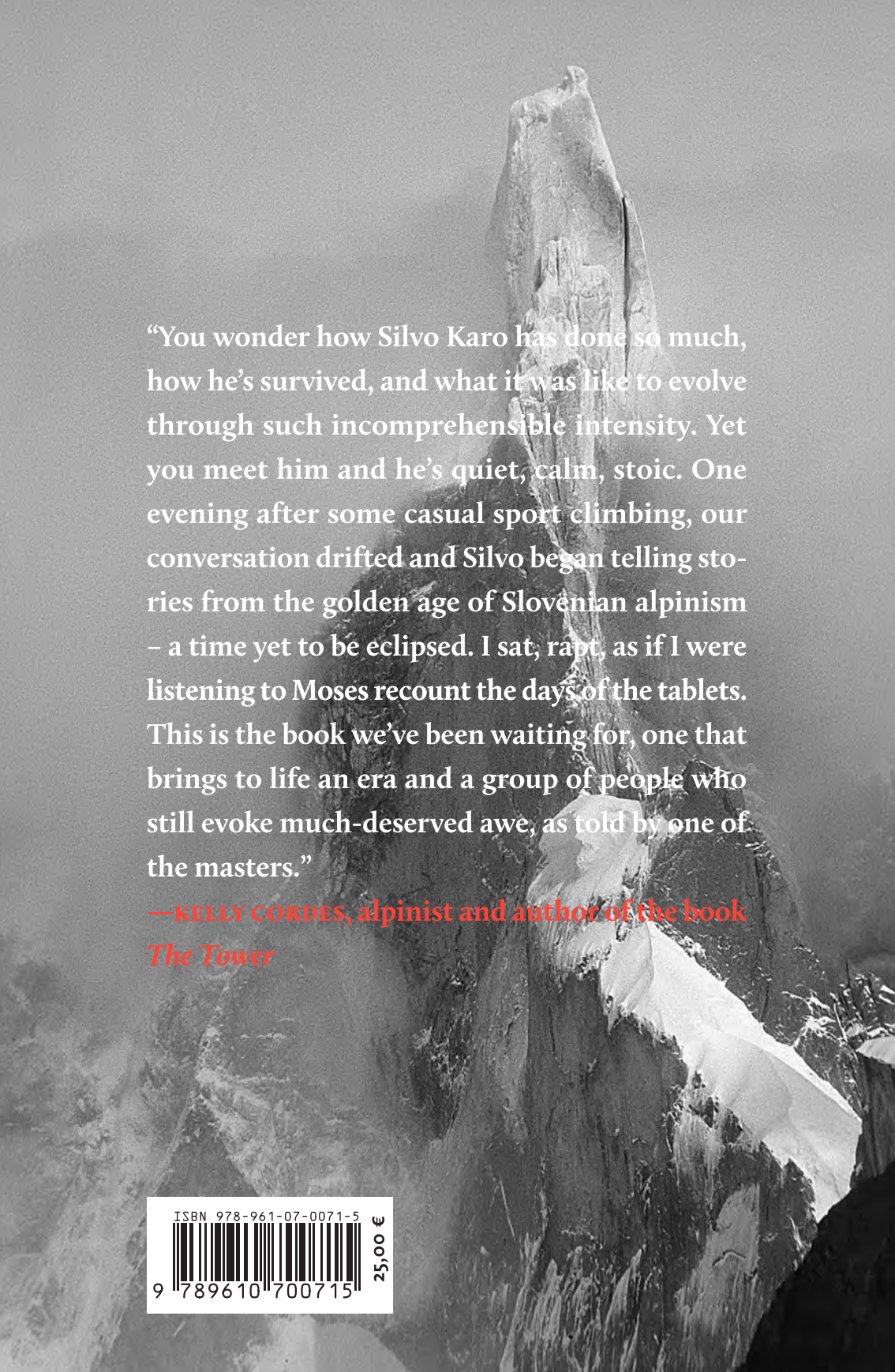
## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

### Descent

In 2009 I returned to the Indian Himalaya, where Johan and I had a memorable adventure climbing Bhagirathi III nearly twenty years earlier. This time, Marko Lukić, Andrej Grmovšek, and I made an overly ambitious attempt on the towering Shark's Fin of Meru Central. We shivered through a frigid, sitting bivy, and on our difficult retreat my guardian angel came to my side once again. I was the oldest of our team, at forty-eight. When we were safely down, finally I knew. It was time to step away from the big mountains.

Somebody once asked me why it seemed that I never made any progress – not in the mountains, but in life in general. I didn't really know what she meant. But under communist Yugoslavia, receiving formal recognition from the state indicated that you were somebody important, who did important things. Although I was never burdened by this thought, for some of us raised under such a system, the mindset can be hard to shake. Politics extended into everything, including mountaineering. Commercialism can be the same, and I think you have to be careful of the distractions that can come from too much recognition and decoration.

I couldn't give her a good answer. In that manner of "progress," I had little to show. Only stacks of old slides, lower back pain, and aching knees. What else could we expect after all those cold and wet bivies, the heavy backpacks, climbing for hours without any water, and going until complete exhaustion, again and again. And for what? For those unforgettable



“You wonder how Silvo Karo has done so much, how he’s survived, and what it was like to evolve through such incomprehensible intensity. Yet you meet him and he’s quiet, calm, stoic. One evening after some casual sport climbing, our conversation drifted and Silvo began telling stories from the golden age of Slovenian alpinism – a time yet to be eclipsed. I sat, rapt, as if I were listening to Moses recount the days of the tablets. This is the book we’ve been waiting for, one that brings to life an era and a group of people who still evoke much-deserved awe, as told by one of the masters.”

—**KELLY CORDES, alpinist and author of the book *The Tower***

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