

DENIS URUBKO

## Makalu: the First Winter Ascent and Cho Oyu: the Southeast Face



The author on the summit of Makalu.

### Makalu: the Unclimbed in Winter

It was in the autumn of 2008 when I got a phone call from Simone Moro, my longtime friend in Italy. It happened at the office of car-insurance company, and girls there seemed to be attracted to my talk, probably understanding nothing...

—During this winter?—Into the tropics?—Incredible job. —With pleasure, I will join it!

I knew Simone for ten years. We climbed many difficult and interesting mountains together, and we both were able to see strong motivations for real aims. Every expedition with Simone had been a strong adventure, following his hot-chilly character. Our project for the winter 2008/2009 was to attempt Makalu 8,463m—the fifth highest mountain of the earth.

After highest mountains had been conquered in normal conditions, climbers did first steps into the wilderness to attempt with sportive attitude. In 1970 the British expedition discovered the golden age of technical route on 8,000m peaks on the South Face of Annapurna. Alpine style climb was begun in 1975

by Messner and Habeler on Hidden Peak. Mt. Everest was climbed for the first time in winter in 1980 by the Polish expedition. Makalu also had to be the aim of winter climbing... but still remained unclimbed. More than dozen expeditions attempted Makalu in winter since then though everyone was forced to retreat by horrible hurricane winds of the Himalayas.

Mt. Everest was followed by other six giants. The golden age of winter mountaineering was brought about by strong Polish climbers. Only their sportsmen were able to cross against winter conditions in the Himalayas. Can you amaze? Only ten people were able to reach 8,000m summits in winter. But it was added by another, Simone Moro on Shisha Pangma in 2005. He happened to emerge as the first “non-Polish” guy who climbed 8,000m summit in winter.

## Into the Mountain

We flew in to the Barun Glacier, the foot of Makalu and established base camp at 5,650m on the moraine on 20 January 2009. Simone and I went up immediately to 6,100m and 6,800m through icefalls using good weather conditions. There was our camp 1. It was a real adventure to feel that only two people in the huge mountain slopes. Next days we fixed some ropes on rock and ice to make it safe and easier and reached 7,350m below Malalu La, then descended to the base camp for rest.

After a week of the patience, we became two iron-springs. We were ready for jump. At once storm above Makalu became a little bit less, and mountain was not so "singing" under the wind rush. We went up immediately when we felt better for humidity. Acclimatization was not enough for us, but difficulty is necessary try to use any possibilities in winter. Second chance can't be happened.

In four hours arriving to camp on 6,800m, we rushed to 7,600m next day. The slopes there were unknown in winter. The highest attempt in previous years had only reached 7,450m. Conditions of the route were completely different comparing with spring season. Rocks covered by the snow and ice were as smooth as mirrors. We set our tiny tent on a slippery platform. It was beneath the upper icefall. Simone and I became frozen in one moment. Temperature felt as if we were in the space.

During all night we felt freezing fingers and toes by pain. Who is able to amaze how to be alive in the horrible conditions? It can be understood. When we woke up in the frozen tent, our sleeping bags were covered with thin ice. It was the climbing of full dispower. A simple breath became as a torture, the heart was about to explode by incredible voltage of efforts. It became necessary to cross all rings of hell for the beginning of final route—summit push. The mountain was huge in size.



Climbing in blizzard toward Makalu La.



Descending on Makalu.

Alarm woke up us at 3 am on 9 February and we left the tent at 6 am. The daytime is too short in winter, and long distance is remaining. We needed to come back before sunset. Wind was really strong. I lost orientation in the cold winds shaking as a jellyfish. Sometimes we fell down by wind, pressing, hiding on rocks. At once broken snow cornice fell down from the upper ridge.

We jumped out despite thin air. Every of these details were able to make emergency. Risk rose too much. Despite of everything we both had no ideas about possibility to turn back. The way was only one direction—up, to the summit.

Honestly, I wasn't sure for success until the last meters of the horrible way. Storm estimated 100 km/h and temperature was almost minus 40 degree. You may understand my happiness by these reasons. I put up tired hand with ice axe onto Makalu's summit. It was 13:53 local time. Almost thirty years of driving back any attempt, the mountain was finally climbed in winter.

Shaking by winds, cold and emotions, we hugged, breaking breath. We understood that the sportive style of winter climbing was embodied. It was difficult to see something around by strong winds and freeze, as our eyes became pieces of ice. It was a real battle—like a test for our friendship. I'll be not able to understand myself probably, explain actions as an art. But that moment of victory—I kept it forever as a big desire that I realized.

Moving legs with big difficulties we were able to descend to a tiny tent in almost darkness. Everything around us was shaking and howling under the hurricane strikes. Getting into the tent was a lot of condensate. Many of our things became frozen and wet. Spending extremely cold night, without eating, almost vomiting two cups of water, we understood miraculously becoming morning.

Was it necessary to carry out our feet from this space of high altitude—wild and harsh to human. Because we only are insects on the earth's palm. But when I looked back the Malalu's top, I understood that nothing is impossible. We can do everything that we wish. We need to follow our aims and use the quantity of freedom that fortune gives us.

We worked a lot, as in trainings before, as in time of expedition. Probably we were lucky, but in any case it took from our small team much efforts and concentration for result. Since years of attempts the fortune gave one decision only for Simone and me—winter choice.

## **Cho Oyu: the Last 8,000m of the Quest for 14**

I have been climbing difficult routes together with Boris Dedeshko for these two years. He is keen on mountaineering and taken up with the results. Besides technical training, he has also a high altitude experiences such as Kahan Tengri, Makalu and Pik Vosmi Alpinistok (Eight Alpinists Peak). We have become friends. So, it happened that in the beginning of April 2009, only two months after the success of Makalu, we were in Nepal, thinking how to competently use sponsors' money for the planned apotheosis.

First we got acclimatized in Khumbu region, trekking on easy scree slopes up to 5,800m. Meanwhile Mingma, my companion in several Himalayan expeditions, came to Gokyo gorge to install base camp. When Boris and I arrived at the foot of Cho Oyu 8,201m on 15 April, having trekked a lot via the passes, everything was ready for the expedition. As we didn't want to touch our route on the Southeast Face before the ascent, we went to the slopes of Ngozumba Kang to acclimatize. There we dodged in the icefalls and reached as high as 7,100m in five days. We bivouacked and then

descended. This pattern had been worked through long ago.

One and a half weeks later, on 6 May, after being ill and having rest, exploring the approach to the Southwest Face of Cho Oyu, we left base camp to push our main objective. We had food for five days ascent and one day descent. We were planning to descent the 1978 Austrian route on the East Face.

We brought only a half of our tent on the route—an inner tent with two of four poles. After camping at the foot of the mountain at 5,300m we started in the night. The bottom of the route was 5,600m, and we climbed with belay to 5,800m. Generally, we had to choose and estimate the line very strictly. There were several icefalls above, and if something falls it would hit us. Fresh afternoon snow didn't hold up and producing spindrifts. During the day and night on the lower rock section avalanche and stones were flowing down in a few meters distance from us.

We worked with two 9mm ropes. After some easy rocks the bastion began. Sometimes it was possible by using climbing shoes. But frequently we had to wear crampons, we also dodged in ice couloirs a lot. That day we could only climb to the overhanging zone at 6,100m, where we made a bivouac. We spent the night half-sitting in the tent. Next day we resumed climbing in the foggy dawn. The overhang lasted for about 80m and forced us much aid climbing. Beyond the edge it was a series of ice slabs and gullies, and we reached 6,600m in the snowfall. We made a bivouac there, at the foot of the ice sickle, under the shelter of serac.

The morning on 9 May was marvelous. We reached about 6,900m via the series of ice ridges when the bad weather came from the west. I'd like to mention that the condition of the season was differed from the usual one in Himalayan spring. Instead of every afternoon snowfalls with rare short storms for 2-3 days, clear weather lasted 4-5 days then a cyclone came for the same time period. That day we reached 7,100m. It's better not to remember how I climbed the horrible snow areas. We squeezed our tent under a small bergschrund. In the night strong avalanche flew over us several times, and we knew them by the boom and vibration under our sleeping mattresses.

The weather didn't improve next morning. We climbed the ramp under the shelter of bergschrund, which slanted up and right and offered us good holds of rocks. We followed it till 7,300m then traversed to the right under the serac barrier. We were lucky that fresh snow didn't hold up on such slopes. The snow covered rocks and ice was rammed and enabled us to climb more or less easily rather than technical and physical work. Though once a half meter avalanche started under my feet and bowled down Boris who was belaying. We had to work at full scale when bypassing overhanging ice walls. Sometimes the snow was waist-deep, but ice walls were useful for belay. We reached 7,600m by twilight and again dug under a small bergschrund.

## **Summit in the Darkness**

By then it was time to change our tactics and the route. Considering difficult snow conditions, descent along the Austrian route wasn't possible. Though the route we planned was absolutely independent and led to the dangerous couloir to the left, we decided to veer off to the right and follow the Polish 1985 route on the Southeast Ridge, and to descent along our ascent route.

The weather turned better during the night. All the same it was very cold and scary. We ventured to leave the tent at about 4 am and climbed diagonally to the right and upwards, belaying by rocks and ice denudations. We had several quickdraws, a set of nuts and friends, six ice screws. Again we were lucky that there were strong avalanche of fresh snow the day before and made slopes firmer. But sometimes on

the traverse of branches of the couloir we had to move in waist-deep snow.

At 9 am we turned and climbed the ridge to the left of the couloir, then via two easy rock pitches we emerged onto the Southeast Ridge at about 7,950m. Here I decided to leave my pack in the snow to mark the point of descent. The way lay via a series of snow cornices among the wide areas of soft snow. We belayed mainly by ice hammers, sometimes ice screws buried in the snow. We pushed forward rather slowly and got tired therefore our belay was not always reliable. The weather was foul—light breeze, boring snowfall and tight fog. We orientated on a distinctive rock tower left of the route. It could only be discerned.

We saw rocks and seracs of the plateau edges to the right. Under the abrupt section in the last gully, where it was a real avalanche danger, we once decided to return. Therewith, the darkness came. But obstinacy and malice won. We continued. The snow drifted by west wind accumulated on the eastern slopes. It was waist-deep and became knee-deep only the final section of the ridge. It was about 200m from the summit plateau. It was 8:10 pm when we reached the plateau. The ridge broadened, the slope bent and the plateau to the direction of Tibet appeared. We made photos and started to descend. Our way was seen well by the ploughed tracks. And there was my pack at 7,950m point. We descended without any problem and regained our tent at nearly 00:30 am.

Early start was prevented by the heavy snowfall in the next morning. We had to wait. But the avalanche began to bury our tent and to push it out of the shelter. Once or twice we were completely buried. It was 8 am when we saw Mt. Everest and Lhotse in the break of clouds to the east. We decided to force our way down, though the bad weather was returning. Again the fresh snow began to fall down, and we had time to cross quickly the most dangerous section under the serac barrier. Only once when I was rappelling, a piece of ice or stone flew out from Boris and badly hurt my head.

The night was spent in a small cave under the bergschrund. The snowfall continued. Avalanche was everywhere. Something was collapsing and crashing, at times flying over the bergschrund and pouring our tent with dust. We had only tea left, as well as 100g of dried horse meat.

The story was repeated next morning. At about 8 am the sun appeared for half an hour and we ventured to continue descent. We rappelled with 25m of double rope. Boris who rappelled first was twice hit by the avalanche and dangled like a fish on a hook. It was good that our ice screws were placed in a reliable ice and stood the load. By 5 pm we descended to 6,600m. Suddenly the weather turned crystal clear and everything changed like a fairy tale. Mt. Everest appeared in the distance and it became very cold.

Next morning, it was warm for the first time after five cold days. We descended along the ice walls via overhangs. On the rocks, we also had to swing on the rope to get to the face. By the darkness we descended to the glacier and made another bivouac after getting a bit lost. Next day on 14 May we were falling into snowed up holes in the moraine, dodging among the pools of water, and couldn't slake our thirst. We were in the base camp after six hours of descent. It was lucky that our cooks, who had been told to go to the valley after our absence for ten days, withstood it eleven days. And our base camp was still there.

We organized a caravan next morning and went back. The Nepalese villagers arranged a real holiday for us in Gokyo and entertained us, questioned, tried to bear up ... It was a joy that we could hardly perceive—as we were too tired. I was able to embrace my thigh with my fingers—it was the second time in my life. Boris and I lost almost 10kg of weight each.



The Southeast Face of Cho Oyu with the route marked.



Overhanging wall on Cho Oyu.



The author on his 14th summit, Cho Oyu.

### Summary of Statistics:

Nepal, Khumbu Himal, Makalu (8,463m), the first winter ascent of the mountain, 7-10 February 2009, Denis Urubko and Simone Moro.

Cho Oyu (8,201m), the first ascent of the Southeast Face in alpine style, 6-15 May 2009, Denis Urubko and Boris Dedeshko. Urubko completed his quest for 8,000m x 14.

### Denis Urublo and his 14 8,000m Peaks

*May 2000; Mt. Everest, May 2001; Lhotse, August 2001; Gasherbrums 1 and 2, May 2002; Kangchenjunga, October 2002; Shisha Pangma, June 2003; Nanga Parbat, July 2003; Broad Peak, May 2004; Annapurna, July 2005; Broad Peak by SW Face in alpine style, May 2006; Manaslu by NE Face direct in alpine style, May 2007; Dhaulagiri, October 2007; K2 by N Ridge, May 2008; Makalu, February 2009; Makalu in winter and May 2009; Cho Oyu by SE Face in alpine style. All without oxygen. (Ed.)*