The perception of Jerzy Kukuczka among the French alpine community through the press media (1979-1989)

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Summary
In order to understand the perception of Jerzy Kukuczka by the mountaineering community, this study focuses on the receptivity of his exploits in the French culture during his period of activity (1979-1989). As an emblematic actor of international alpinism during the 1980’s, J. Kukuczka contributed with the Polish climbers of the golden generation to establishing new standards of difficulty in the Himalayas. While his achievements remain internationally known, no study has looked at the way his expeditions have been portrayed in the media. It emerges that the image left by the character is that of an ice warrior resistant to pain. J. Kukuczka embodies the man of the people who, thanks to his willpower, managed to emancipate himself from his condition as a miner to reach the summits. The spectacle of his competition with Reinhold Messner contributed to his fame: his innovative itineraries underline a performative aim where the mountain becomes a place of sporting confrontation.

Key words: History; Alpinism; Himalayism; Jerzy Kukuczka; Press media; Performance.

Introduction
At the end of the Cold War, Poland saw the birth of a generation of world-class mountaineers. Among them, Jerzy Kukuczka made history for being the second climber to complete the “Crown of the Himalayas”, a challenge consisting of climbing the fourteen peaks over 8000 meters. This performance is even more impressive if we put this event in the historical context. J. Kukuczka lived in communist Poland where freedom was limited and made most of his climbs on new routes of great difficulty at a time when equipment was undergoing profound innovations.

From the late 1970s to the late 1980s, he contributed with others Polish alpinists to establish new standards in the Himalayas, characterized by winter ascents, the emergence of alpine style and technical performance. His mountaineering career — the discovery of the Tatras¹, the learning of high mountain in Hindukush² and his affirmation on the highest peaks — as well as his personal life — chimney painter in Katowice, Solidarność member — looks representative of an era marked by political changes and the visibility of Poland. His death at Lhotse in 1989 seems to mark the end of a period: the fall of communism and the end of the golden age in the Himalayas where the last great problems are solved.

Even if he was a national icon in Poland by the end of his career, J. Kukuczka went beyond the borders of his country as his presence in the French mountain magazines suggests. In order to understand the way J. Kukuczka was perceived by the mountaineering community (1979-1989), this study focuses on the receptivity of his exploits in the French culture. Hence, the objective will be to understand the image portrayed by the media and know if it participated in the evolution of the conceptions of sporting himalayism.

In the first part, we will explain the political, social and cultural context in which the action takes place. Indeed, the social environment influences the sport model and the associated representations. Secondly, we will focus on Polish himalayism and the figure of J. Kukuczka. The last part will present our results and the conclusions drawn from this work.

Historical context

1. The Polish context from 1919 to 1989

Located in the heart of Europe, Poland is a country with a complex history, at the crossroads of ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures. Its independence and its recognition are officialized by the treaty of

¹ The highest massif of the Carpathian chain located between Poland and Slovakia.
² Massif located in the western Himalayas between Afghanistan and Pakistan.
Versailles in 1919 which guarantees its autonomy, with the League of Nations ensuring the respect of this agreement. Poland was perceived as a strategic territory by the rival powers, at the junction of major foreign empires: the German and the Russian, while having access to the Baltic Sea. These geographical issues were exacerbated by the will of the Poles to display their own cultural identity, free from other territories: the Polish intelligentsia. Indeed, the Poles actively participated in the cultural renewal of the inter-war period, which symbolized a real race towards modernity. The combination of these factors, to which was added the revival of independence opposing the communists wanting to conquer Western Europe, caused multiple border tensions leading to conflicts such as the one with the Soviets in 1920. Poland’s territorial tensions were largely due to its geopolitical position, which impeded neighbouring countries’ hegemonic objectives. This is why, for example, the Germans and Russians signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact to protect each other while attacking Poland.

This historical detour on the construction of Poland at the beginning of the 20th century is necessary to understand the period we’re interested in (1979-1989) because it constitutes the legacy of this eventful construction. Indeed, for a long time subjected to foreign domination, Poland has always fought for its economic, political and social independence.

Reduced to a slave nation during World War II, Poland lost about 16% of its population between military and civilian casualties. These enormous damages made it one of the biggest losers of the war and caused its annexation to the Soviet communist bloc despite numerous internal resistances. A trick of fate — the Poles were in the camp of victorious countries but lost the peace. Totally absent from the post-war European construction process, Poland was also absent from social, cultural and scientific life because of communist repression and censorship. All of this contributed to the creation of a social consciousness formed in the anti-Russian atmosphere that resulted in a form of opposition culture rejecting the socialism of Brezhnev. In this process, Polish elite had a great importance. The Germans and Russians tried to eradicate them, which forced them to emigrate around the world, where they maintained this spirit of national identity throughout their publications.

This spirit of insubordination and the growing feeling of injustice participated in the swarming of revolts which were embodied in the Gdańsk shipyard strikes and then in the creation of Solidarność, the first trade union not affiliated with the communist regime which unified the majority of Poles. The decade of the 1980’s, marked by a strengthening of restrictions with the martial law promulgated by Jaruzelski in 1981, was characterized by many changes that marked the beginning of the end of communism.

Beyond the purely political dimension, there were multiple repercussions, especially in the sporting sphere. The organization of mountaineering in Poland during this period can only be understood by analyzing the model that produced it. In this period of economic upheaval, behind the iron curtain a question persists: while Western Europe’s economies surged ahead, how was it that a near-bankrupt Warsaw Pact nation could afford this expensive sporting luxury?

### 2. The development of Polish mountain activities since the end of the XIXth century

By focusing on the social and cultural dynamics of physical activities, historians and sociologists have shown that the phenomenon of sport reveals political issues through the diffusion of norms, values, and symbols. In this sense, sport participates in the construction of identities and the development of a national feeling. Thanks to their power of identification, sports practices have become the instrument of a euphemistic war and of an informal diplomacy through the symbolic dimension. Loaded with divine metaphors and reflecting pure and disinterested effort, mountaineering has always mixed physical activity with a moral discourse on man through the development of a mountain ethics.

The European comparison of cultural models between France, Germany and Poland suggests that the alpine clubs played a central role in the identity construc-
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The Polish alpinism model: genesis and development during the communist period (1945-1989)

The practice of mountaineering in Poland was controlled by many rules, accentuated in 1974 with the merger of alpine clubs that created the Polish Mountaineering Association (P.Z.A.). Just after World War II, the authorities started to subject alpinism to politicization and militarization: theoretical and practical trainings were compulsory, permits were required, solo climbing was formally forbidden as contrary to the communist logic of collectivity. Consequently, mountaineering entered into tension with the politics of control which led to some political conflicts.

The singularity of the Polish alpinism model concluded that the Tatarniks constituted a dissident force: “based on a permanent double game between cooperation with institutions and the temptation of transgression”.

In this perspective, this vision is opposed to the classical thinking that associates sport and totalitarian regime as a harmonious whole where sport is a servile auxiliary of power.

Living with and living against the socialist regime testifies to the ambivalence of the relationship between the mountaineers and the government. Paradoxically, the system that restricted them at home offered them a ticket to freedom because their international successes glorified Poland. The constraints of the system lead to the emergence of a generation of climbers mastering the art of negotiation, bargaining and double talk: smuggling of materials because the zloty was inconvertible, climbs without a permit, etc.

Both sides took advantage of this situation: the Government’s propaganda machine exploited the climbers’ successes while they exploited the system to satisfy their passion. Very concretely, it was not possible to practice without a minimum of transgressions of the established rules. This explains the contradictory balance between the will of freedom and independence of the mountaineers, and the will of control of the state which delivered the authorizations.

As a result, it is easy to understand how the system itself, through the constraints it imposed on climbers, encouraged transgression, and invited concealment. It is in this intimate and conflicting relationship to politics that the identity of Polish climbers was constructed.


Absent from the main conquests of the Himalayas in the 1950s because they were confined to their mountains and lacked resources, the Poles arrived on the interna...

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21 We consider that the golden generation of mountaineers began to shine in 1978 with two symbolic events. It was due to achievements in the Himalayas — the first ascent of Mount Everest by the Polish Wanda Rutkiewicz — and changes in social and cultural life with the election of Karol Wojtyła as Pope. 1989 marked the end of this generation, notably because of the avalanche on Everest which took the lives of five renowned Polish mountaineers, the death of J. Kukuczka in the same year, and the change in political system with the end of communism.
3.1 Poland’s place in international alpinism: innovation and distinction

When they arrived in the Himalayas, the “classic” ascents were no longer enough to catch the attention of the public. In a logic of distinction and singularity, the Poles appeared as the masters of high-altitude walls and winter expeditions, which emphasized both a modernism and the ability of social groups to adapt to change. Those innovations, stimulated by a desire for distinction, contributed to the creation of new forms of practice that directly expressed expectation in terms of social factors.

The dominant paradigm in the Himalayas was establishing technical and moral rules through the development of a safety standard that promoted the expedition model. Like the evolution of science analyzed by T.S. Kuhn in 1962, the double mechanism of confinement in rules and transgression seemed to be the motor of the evolutions in the field of mountaineering. The Poles opened the way to a form of practice that was still marginal and in line with their culture, driven by the voluntarist slogan “Polak potrąfi” which means “Polish can do it.”

These developments took place in a context of deep political crisis and general economic stagnation in Poland in the late 1970s. This means that contrary to alpinists from outside the iron curtain, the Poles operated under the pressure of needing to succeed. “They were aware that if they did not take on the risk and challenge, the opportunity not just to climb a summit or mark out or repeat a route, but even to undertake expeditions to the mountains may never arise again.”

22 It should be noted that the process of organisation of the mountaineering movement by Poles, despite the fact that Poland formally did not exist on the maps of the world (for 123 years Poland was under the partitions), started similarly to Western Europe in the 19th century. However, in the inter-war period Poles undertook intensive activities for the benefit of creating international mountaineering federations - on the initiative of the Polish Tatra Society an Association of Slavic Tourist Societies was established and international meetings of mountaineers took place, which resulted in establishing the International Union of Mountaineering Associations (UIAA).


This historical and cultural singularity, subject to social changes, explains this new voluntarism that can be summarized as “if not now, when?” The Poles’ commitment to the Himalayas, punctuated by numerous tragedies, generated new challenges in which the climbers participated. Winter ascents were a cultural specificity of Polish mountaineering. « Wiosna wasza, zima nasza » means “spring is yours, winter will be ours.”

These winter expeditions were largely popularized and organized by Andrzej Zawada, a pioneer and leader in this field. His knowledge of the political propaganda system and its organization, his network of contacts, as well as his previous winter ascents in the Tatra Mountains made him an undisputed leader.

3.2 Jerzy Kukuczka in that process

3.2.1 Achievements and characteristics

During the above-mentioned period, Poland had a golden generation of mountaineers consisting of Wójtiech Kurtynka, Wanda Rutkiewicz, Krzysztof Wielicki and many others. Jerzy, whose diminutive is “Jurek”, is certainly the most famous of this generation, especially because he became the second man after R. Messner to achieve the Himalayan crown. He realized it in the following manner: thirteen new routes on eight-thousanders, including one solo, five routes following Alpine style, four routes covered in winter. His way of climbing was part of the emergence of the Alpine style in Himalaya, in particular through “light and fast” expeditions. This meant reaching the summit in a single unbroken effort: without setting up railings, intermediate camps, equipment deposits and without the help of third parties or supplementary oxygen — except Everest. With W. Kurtynka as his rope partner at the beginning, he climbed Makalu, the Broad Peak traverse and Gasherbrum I and II in Alpine style. However, their ethics and the significance they associated with them, lead the team to split up, with Jurek usually partnering with Artur Hajzer, and Wojciech with Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet.
3.2.2 Jerzy Kukuczka in alpine and scientific literature

Where Jurek seems to stand out from the other climbers is in his pugnacity, self-sacrifice, and willpower, which seem to perfectly embody the art of suffering of which Kurtyka speaks31, an evocative expression of the Polish style that resulted from his singular identity construction.

His desire for adventure was expressed through the search for new routes, virgin itineraries, and high difficulty, in which he infused a sporting dimension materialized by his competition with R. Messner. In this perspective, J. Kukuczka seemed to embody a new dynamism in the practice of himalayism marking the transition between the period of the great firsts and the search for difficulty combined with sporting dimensions.

His courage and prowess propelled him to the top of the international mountaineering scene and his image spread beyond Poland. However, no scientific study has focused exclusively on the character, his career, and his period of activity. The only work partly dealing with the character is that of B. Mc Donald32, but is more of a fictionalized journalist’s story than a scientific publication. McDonald looked at the Polish reality and climbing environment through the prism of her own fascination. She also made a hagiography on Wojciech Kurtyka33 where passages mention Jurek.

The only publication that is from E. Roszkowska34 but this article seeks to highlight the trends and singularities of Polish model within the sphere of Soviet influence, and not focusing specifically on Jerzy. She explains the predisposition of Poles for mountaineering: love of freedom, independence, bravery, heroism, and the ability to devote oneself to an idea appeared to be most important, a kind of snobbery of sacrificing oneself in difficult situations and perseverance. From a Western point of view, we do not know what happened behind the Iron Curtain during this period, except for a few works of popularization on Soviet alpinists and the Abalakov brothers35 or Slovenian climbers36.

J. Kukuczka left several writings in mountaineering magazines and one autobiography37, out of stock in France and difficult to obtain, which has the particularity of never having been analyzed. The only work translated in France is an adaptation of his texts38 published shortly after his death. His tragic death on the south face of Lhotse has fed the myth39 built around the mountaineer and many writings have paid tribute to the alpinist. The construction of a memorial40, a virtual museum41 and the edition of his notebook during his last 8000m42 illustrate the will to perpetuate his memory and his legacy.

Through his image and his presence in mountaineering publications, we can ask ourselves what Jerzy Kukuczka has brought to mountaineering and what makes him unique. What can J. Kukuczka’s study finally tell us from a perspective that is not internal and that comes from another country with a very marked Alpine culture? It is this desire to clarify the perception of this famous Polish mountaineer that drives the present study.

Questioning, hypothesis and sources

The main objective is to study the perception of Jerzy Kukuczka during his activity as a himalayist (1979-1989) in France. We wish to question his contributions to the practice of mountaineering and to analyze the repercussions of his exploits on the level of receptivity. Did J. Kukuczka participate in the emergence of new standards in the Himalayas through his use of the alpine style? How is the competitive dimension that accompanies his achievements perceived at the time of his rivalry with R. Messner?

The purpose is to question whether J. Kukuczka can be considered as the promoter of innovations in the world of mountaineering, and if his actions had social repercussions, resulting in new practical forms. Indeed, innovations can often go undetected or seem somewhat revolutionary, especially in their initial phase of emergence. Nevertheless, they profoundly change ways of doing and being which are also supported by a community involved in the process of transformation of reality.

We suppose that J. Kukuczka is an emblematic climber of the period, embodying the Polish model. His career and his exploits seem to be characteristic of a model marked by the dialectic of transgression and conformity linked to the historical communist context. We think that he embodied an innovative conception of the mountain during the 14*8000 competition and brought a sporting dimension to himalayism. Nowadays, one may learn about Jerzy Kukuczka’s style exclusively from contemporaneous source materials issued from France. That’s why the sources used are French magazines published since 1980, completed with inter-

38 J. Kukuczka, (1990). De la mine aux sommets, Denoël, translator: M. Fromenty-Bilczewska, [From the mine to the summit].
40 Located in his hometown in Silesia region.
41 https://jerzykukuczka.com/en/home-page/
views45 of alpinists from this period as well as Jerzy’s wife. By studying the socio-political context of that time, one can understand, without mythologizing, the trajectory and singularity of Jerzy Kukuczka on alpinism.

Results and discussion

The place given to Jerzy Kukuczka in French magazines varied during his period of activity. The few articles published entirely about him are enlightening to understand the image conveyed in the specialized mountain press. Although the French mountaineering community was not totally homogeneous due to the debates about the development of a competitive spirit, and the growing commercialization of mountaineering, the analysis of the publications in which J. Kukuczka appeared allows us to consider the perception of the character in the most influential newspapers read by the community44.

1. From an unknown to a promising alpinist: first successes (1980-1985)

The very first mention of Jerzy Kukuczka in the French Alpine Club’s magazine dates back to 1980 when his success on Lhotse with A. Z. Heinrich was reported45. This ascent appears in the Himalayan chronicles: the description is sober and does not sensationalize. We learn which route was taken, what material was used, and how much time was needed for the undertaking. Only the term “exploit” is praised in this short and punchy announcement.

In general, it is interesting to look at the requirements for inclusion in the chronicle section. This section of the Alpine Club magazine, which appears at the very end of the magazines, values the ascents that meet certain criteria: ascents of virgin summits, new itineraries or original variants, ascents in alpine technique, the help of high-altitude porters, the use of oxygen for breathing, the economy of classic means, remarkable rapid ascents.

The ascent of high-altitude peaks in the Himalayas is considered as a world class performance that can provide interesting information about the organization of the camps, the route taken as well as an idea of the necessary schedules. In this perspective, the editor adds that “innovative performances must be exemplary in their demonstration, especially with regard to economy of means and remarkable time”46. Consequently, this section of the magazine is an element of novelty whose purpose is both utilitarian and informative. These are purely descriptive articles that we call purist, and in which Kukuczka later appeared many times. Indeed, his first great Himalayan successes such as the linking of the Gasherbrum or the crossing of Broad Peak with W. Kurtyka were described as “a great achievement for the Polish ropeway”47 and their use of alpine technique was unanimously praised.

All his Himalayan ascents were reported in the same way until his ascent of Cho Oyu, where for the first time he was described as “a serious competitor for R. Messner, the Polish climber was already on the summit of Dhaulagiri on the 21st of January”48.

Although this announcement was discreet, it began the competition between the two climbers to complete the Himalayan crown: a challenge invented by R. Messner to climb the fourteen peaks over 8000m present on Earth. At the end of the winter of 1985, J. Kukuczka had just reached his eighth 8000m thanks to a winter sequence that had never been seen before, while R. Messner collected ten summits. The performance is even more surprising when one considers that it took Messner fifteen years to reach this stage, whereas Kukuczka took only six years to catch up with his rival.

Shortly afterwards, a first article explained in more detail the conditions of the winter ascents and showed the mechanics of the conquest of Dhaulagiri. This article depicted the central elements of the Polish expedition with the risks of avalanche, the cold and the precarious equipment. The subtitle “a summit for a few toes”, and the frostbite that caused the loss of A. Czok’s extremities, highlight the self-sacrifice of the mountaineers, who “are already thinking about the next mountain”49.

Finally, the years from 1979 to 1985 marked the beginning of J. Kukuczka’s Himalayan activity. The magazine of the French Alpine Club timidly published those successes in the chronicle section which relayed the best performances. Reputed to be “severe but fair”50, the chronicles are historically faithful to certain moral values traditionally linked to mountaineering, such as the refusal of mechanical means of approach or the solidarity of mountaineers. These chronicles appeared in the 1950s under the impetus of L. Devies and paid attention to the evolution of the way of practicing and were not limited to a simple memory: they spread an image of pure and clean mountaineering rich in certain moral val-

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43 In order to have a deeper understanding on the character, we led interviews with Janusz Majer, Krzysztof Wielicki, Wojciech Kurtyka and his wife Celina Kukuczka.

44 A synthetic timeline showing the major media phases is presented in Appendix 1.


49 M. Fromenty-Bilczewska, (1985). « Un monde qui m’était inconnu », La Montagne et Alpinisme, n° 142, pp. 46-47, p. 47. ["A world that was unknown to me"]

ues. The fact that J. Kukuczka was mentioned in them underlines the conformity with this dominant paradigm which seeks to value innovations.

The 1985 season also seemed to be a turning point, with the first elements of a rivalry with R. Messner beginning to emerge, as this is the period in which the gap between the two was the smallest51. The three successes of J. Kukuczka during the year, including two winter routes, began to attract media attention. “It was then that I became aware that I was being treated as Messner’s rival (...) I was told that I had a chance to catch him (...) this idea made its way and I got tired of training a little unconsciously.”52

2. J. Kukuczka or the incarnation of “great alpinism” coupled with a competitive spirit (1985-1989)

2.1 A metaphorical trajectory: from the mine to the summit

In 1985, the French media began to talk more about the character of J. Kukuczka. It was not only the mountain-eering feats that sparked interest, but also the man behind them, his life and his character. His trajectory was presented as an initiatory journey in which Jurek confronted physical and moral trials that made him mature. First the Tatras, then the Dolomites, the Alps, Alaska, the Hindukush and finally the Himalayas. From the Marmolata d’Ombretta to the Grandes Jorasses via the McKinley, “all these stages were necessary to test his resistance, to accumulate experience”53. This cumulative character makes his Himalayan exploits a natural end in a trajectory marked by stages that he has successfully completed.

An introspection in the private life of the character allows to give an account of the context in which he lived: that of the communist Poland in full economic stagnation. The formula used “For lack of money he managed... What does it matter!”54 underlines the resourcefulness that Polish mountaineers had developed to finance their expeditions. If the Western climbers managed to go to the Himalayas easily with advanced equipment and a strong currency, it was not the case for the Poles. Indeed, the dictatorship considerably reduced freedoms and the issuance of passports was a delicate exercise, and the zlotys was an inconvertible and totally devalued currency. Some climbers built themselves part of their equipment, and the issuance of passports was a delicate exercise, Indeed, the dictatorship considerably reduced freedoms and a strong currency, it was not the case for the Poles.

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mines of Katowice to the Himalayas, the adventure of a lifetime, a beautiful fairy tale is in a Zola setting. Unlike Messner, he didn’t own a perched castle and didn’t raise the drawbridge between himself and the others. Nor did he seek to be the prophet of things mountaineering. His passion was simple and direct. In his conquest of the “14” he never gave in to the easy way. The great classic mountaineering, the panache!”

Jurek is thus a metaphor for the social elevator and meritocracy: through his efforts and self-sacrifice, he managed to leave the mine to reach the summits. The introspection in his past seems to widen his aura of a mountaineer to that of an ideal man who believed in his dreams.

2.2 The construction of a rivalry: the Messner VS Kukuczka competition

Before explaining the competitive relationship with R. Messner, it is necessary to make a point about the competitive past of J. Kukuczka. Indeed, it is not the media that created the need for competition in Jurek, it seems more that it was a disposition that the media pressure activated.

His former climbing partners also emphasize the central place of competition in his commitment in alpinism: “for him, it was very important to have some competition in high mountains”60. Coming from a sportsman father who practiced skiing in competition, J. Kukuczka testified to a strong appetite for sports practices from school onwards, which led him to practice boxing and weightlifting during his childhood. The relationship to pain, effort and training may have contributed to the development of his mental strength. References to boxing are also numerous in his autobiography where mountaineering is likened to a fight: “Unsteady on my legs, not unlike a boxer who had not quite come round yet after a fight of fifteen murderous rounds, I staggered through the camp”61.

His sporting conception of the mountain, in which he sought to surpass himself physically, was one of the reasons for his separation from his first climbing partner W. Kurtyka: “But I had a taste — which he himself did not have — for sporting rivalry”62. If W. Kurtyka can be considered as a romantic philosopher looking for aesthetics, J. Kukuczka was animated by a will to go to the end of his limits, whether they were physical or mental. These elements seem to explain his way of approaching the mountains “in a sporting way, not mystically”63 in which the place of physical performance supplanted the aesthetic dimensions of nature or the romantic considerations of adventure.

The fact that the European media heard about an informal competition between two climbers to achieve a historic “First” obviously boosted J. Kukuczka — but did not create his desire to achieve the Himalayan crown. All the French press articles mentioning his name systematically presented him as Messner’s challenger, and their comparison helped create a buzz.

This is even more so the case for a practice like mountaineering where neophytes do not realize what is being accomplished: “Only journalistic rhetoric, at the very heart of the process of sacralization and construction of myths in mass culture, sows doubt and grows the athlete”64.

J. Kukuczka and R. Messner embodied two diametrically opposed facets and fed the sports drama. On the one hand, there was R. Messner, an Italian living in a free country, in a castle with all the means at his disposal, having climbed his first 8000m nine years before his rival, and climbing the summits mostly by normal routes. On the other hand, there was J. Kukuczka, a Pole, prisoner of the communist bloc, working in the mine and painting chimneys to finance his expeditions, climbing the summits through the first difficult routes with precarious equipment, and who, despite the decade that separated them, began to catch up with his rival. R. Messner came close to the professional sportsman with multiple resources sometimes bordering on megalomania, while J. Kukuczka embodied a classic and modest hero who aroused empathy. This is a perfect example of sports mythology where the spectacle is created by an imbalance at the start that makes the competition even more beautiful. The verbatims of the published interviews underline this aspect: “I am entangled in a competition that Messner “invented”. Not to mention the fact that he started this race earlier, yet he still needs to have the same weapons”65.

The imbalance of means attracted the public, who saw in it a struggle for honor, a possible victory in defeat. If we place it in the historical context, there is here a magnificent metaphor of David against Goliath, which at the end of the Cold War could symbolize the victory of the capitalist countries over the Eastern bloc despite a fierce resistance. Especially during the 1980s, there was a wave of support for the emancipation movement led by Solidarność in Poland, which undoubtedly allowed Kukuczka to benefit from a rather immediate and “intuitive” sympathy on the part of the French alpine circles.

The comparison was accentuated by the alpine chronicles that counted the number of summits over 8000m for each new achievement: “This is the thirteenth summit over 8000m for Jerzy Kukuczka, who is easily rec-

60 Interview conducted by the author with Janusz Majer in Kraków/Poland on June 2, 2021.
63 This was also confirmed by Jerzy Kukuczka’s wife Celina Kukuczka in an interview conducted by the author in Istebna/Poland on June 16, 2021.
ognized as the best Himalayan climber of all generations”66. This column ended with a question: will Benoît Chamoux follow in the footsteps of J. Kukuczka and R. Messner, who are now considered to be the two references in Himalayan climbing?

This new visibility linked to his success on the crown of the Himalayas, even came as a surprise to him: “suddenly I’m discovered. But I’ve been climbing for 20 years and always in the same way. Why me and not the others? If I have succeeded in climbing the 14 summits, it is not by chance; it did not fall from the sky (...) It seems that western climbers climb for fun but at the slightest unexpected effort... they get the bell out”67. His scathing answer reflects the opposition between the Poles and the Western climbers: the Poles clung to the mountain at all costs, while the others, used to the comfort of the mountains and an easy life, would turn back.

Thus, the media began to take an interest in Jurek’s character from the moment the gap between the two climbers was the narrowest. Beyond the simple stake materialized by the challenge of who would be the first to finish the Himalayan crown, the media put forward two personalities with antagonistic trajectories making the authenticity of this confrontation.

This is even more the case when one knows that Messner’s first success was Nanga Parbat in 1970, the site of Kukuczka’s first Himalayan failure in 1977, and that Messner’s last success was Lhotse in 1986, where Jurek lost his life in 1989. All the elements are gathered to touch the public’s sensitivity, even those foreign to mountaineering because “every hero draws his mobilizing power from the perils he incurs and his greatness from the excessiveness of the situation”68.

But for J. Kukuczka, aware of his delay, finishing first in this challenge was not his primary motivation according to his words. His purpose was to make history in committed itineraries, he “feel[ed] the mountains and an easy life, would turn back.

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ter the other, realizing the first technical ascents at high altitude like the south face of K2, winter ascents, undertaking successive winter ascents at Dhaulagiri and Cho-Oyu, setting up bivouacs at more than 8000 meters sometimes without a tent, etc. J. Kukuczka was above all a way of climbing the mountain, it was a trademark that marks the mountaineering community by its audacity: “His achievement is not so much to have completed the 14 eight-miles of the Himalayan crown in eight years, as to have imposed a style to conquer the Himalayas (always by new routes or first winter climbs)”70. A desire to distinguish himself in order to make his own mark on the history of himagery. An element that translated into constant risk-taking in committed itineraries, he “who like(d) big bets”71.

He was one of the precursors of an alpine style type27 in the Himalayas during his ascents with W. Kurnyka, a style that until then was considered unreasonable at high altitude due to the harshness of the weather parameters. The media recurrently used the terms “First”, “adventure”, “limit”, and drew the portrait of an innovator who believed in himself and who gave himself the means to do so.

The extreme nature of his climbs, in which many of his partners died, gave him the image of a “charging bull”72 with excessive willpower. He himself described his climbing style as a hybrid in search of permanent efficiency: “My only rule is to climb in an efficient style, that is to say, to reach the summit quickly, skilfully, spurtingly”73. K. Wielicki stated that “he could follow any type of climbing”74 that was solo, in a small team or in a large expedition, which made Jurek a complete mountaineer who adapted to the conditions of ascent.

On the other hand, his unwavering determination remains associated with the cultural model of Polish mountaineering in the French imagination, as highlighted by the expression “Polish morals and Western materials”76. The use of the coordinating conjunction “and” sets the terms in opposition as if they were two different worlds.

One of the other salient characteristics of the portrait painted of him is his relationship to intuition. It seems that J. Kukuczka evolved in high altitude as if it were his second home, a mountaineer who seemed guided not by reason but by intuition, who “feel[ed] the mountain” to use the expression used in the articles. A form of total symbiosis, where for him the “Mountains means to me a constant dialogue with myself”77. However, this as-

72 Or more precisely the semi-alpine style.
75 Interview conducted by the author with Krzysztof Wielicki in Rądekowice/Poland on June 9, 2021.
pect was nuanced by his former rope-mate W. Kurtyka who described his disconnection with reason and his lack of receptivity to the dangers of the mountain: “He was unresponsive, neither to danger, nor to any other circumstances like weather. He was just totally blind, following his decision.”78 It’s all a matter of point of view and mountain conceptions, but J. Kukuczka felt in total symbiosis with the environment.

Thus, for all these reasons, the media apprehended him as a high-class mountaineer achieving feat after feat by pushing back what was then considered as the limits of the possible. A man whose exploits counted as much as his atypical career and who could not be compared to anyone. Jean Afanassieff later said that “he was one of the last adventurers who went to the end of his dreams”79 underlining the fusion between his personal trajectory and his mountaineering achievements.

3. Legacy and traces left in the community after his death (since 1989)

3.1 The end of an era

While attempting to solve “the last problem of the Himalayas”, Jerzy Kukuczka fell 3,000 meters on the south face of Lhotse. His death occurred in 1989, the same year as the fall of the Berlin Wall, and symbolically marked the end of an era in mountaineering: the golden decade of himalayism. Numerous routes on the highest summits of the Earth were indeed climbed by new itineraries, in winter, and very fast.

This period marked the end of Polish hegemony in the Himalayas: “Today, Polish mountaineering is less present: it is simply that a large part of its protagonists died. Wróż, Chrobak, Czok, Heinrich, Kukuczka, Piotrowski, and others have disappeared”80. Among the names mentioned above, only J. Kukuczka was known beyond the borders of his country. The announcement of his death appears in the Groupe de Haute Montagne (G.H.M.) yearbook where he is regularly cited to situate the level of difficulty of a route. He was also mentioned many times in the Ad memoriam sections, such as the death of K. Herrligkoffer, as if to place a milestone to situate lesser-known actors in the mountain environment.

The articles about Poland or the Tatras usually made a reference to the character: it is not W. Kurtyka or K. Wielicki who are quoted, but systematically J. Kukuczka: “The life of this giant of the mountains was of an authenticity that far exceeds the Stakhanovist approach of summit and media collectors”81. His name came up on occasions, especially when E. Loretan became the third man to finish the Himalayan crown and that success was achieved in a competitive context with

A joint tribute was paid to them in the magazine of the French Alpine Club where these two men, like Icarus flying too close to the sun, were consumed by their passion: “playing too much Russian roulette, you end up finding the ball”82. Their posthumous biographies were published at the same time83.

Contextually, those deaths occurred in a conjuncture when climbing activities experienced the first official sport competitions in western Europe84. This began of the process of olympization, crowned for the Olympic games in Tokyo, making the editors of the French Alpine Club’s magazine fear for the end of the “breath of adventure”. By this, they were referring to a form of ethical mountaineering that J. Kukuczka embodied to perfection through his innovative performances. He was also cited as the developer of a “philosophy of endurance to pain” allowing to discover “enjoyment (...) while preserving certain “values”, a certain deprivation, an economy of means in accordance with the adventure sought”84.

Kukuczka’s death, coupled with contemporary societal tendencies to take the easy way out, raised fears of the end of a certain Alpine tradition considered legitimate for educating youth.

3.2 A diffuse legacy: is there still a J. Kukuczka spirit?

J. Kukuczka has provided a standard of comparison with which to measure performance. He made it possible to turn the unknown into something known and new achievements are sometimes referred to his routes: his name is regularly cited to situate the level of difficulty of a route. He was also mentioned many times in the Ad memoriam sections, such as the death of K. Herrligkoffer, as if to place a milestone to situate lesser-known actors in the mountain environment.

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78 Interview conducted by the author with Wojciech Kurtyka in Kraków-Modliniecza/Poland on July 7, 2021.
84 In the USSR the first competition in climbing was held in 1947 in Dombay, in time format called “speed climbing”. At the end of the 1980s, the French Federation under the impulse of Paul Brasset, lead a movement to convince the UIAA to officially recognize the competitive Sport Climbing circuit.
B. Chamoux, recalling the Kukuczka/Messner rivalry. The interest aroused by this rivalry was undoubtedly exacerbated by the participation of several Frenchmen in the 8000m race, such as B. Chamoux and P. Béghin, who lost their lives. As the interest of the French public was stimulated by the French alpinists’ exploits, the public opinion was thus also indirectly attracted to the stories and figures of their foreign opponents explaining the attraction for Kukuczka’s figure.

In a more general way, Jurek will have marked several generations of climbers, especially those who started climbing in the 1980s when he was at the height of his glory. The generational reading thus makes it possible to see the influence that certain climbers have had when they are cited as a reference model: “My idols will remain those of my beginnings, and the Jerzy Kukuczka’s will continue to animate my dreams” and let us foresee the impact that J. Kukuczka had on a whole generation of mountaineers.

Recently, the release of the documentary dedicated to the mountaineer aroused enthusiasm “more than a year after its release, I still had requests for Kukuczka”90. However, it should be emphasized that this attraction remains a neophyte affair, which also refers to the low accessibility of the Polish exploits. Audiences have the impression that they are discovering for the first time the great mountaineering stars of the time, which echoes the relationship between supply and demand, as the supply of Polish mountaineering and Himalayan climbing in the 1980s is very limited. Kukuczka’s other feature, L’homme des 8000m, was released for the first time on the big screen in 201791, nearly eleven years after its initial release.

3.3 The image left in the French media: stereotypes against a background of truths

For the tenth anniversary of his death, an article was devoted to him, allowing us to analyze specifically the image left by the character. It emerges that the story, although based on true facts, plays on humorous dimensions by taking up the stereotypes built around the Polish mountaineers. “What is a Pole? Little or no competition and no success with their competitors, too happy when they saved themselves a hospital bed on their return and a few ex-cruciatingly painful planning strokes on feet turned into coal blocks”92 or “Kukuczka was a good smoker and could drink as much as a Silesian miner after a marital dispute”93 (see photo below published in this article on page 31).

The characteristic features of Polish mountaineering, turned into stereotypes, resurface during the publication of B. McDonald’s book dedicated to them. Their incredible energy is praised, described as “energy of despair” in which a parallel is drawn with the French himalayists: “If on the French side we put our failures into perspective by drinking good bottles of wine at the base camp and tasting a freeze-dried blanquette de veau, it is not the same on the Polish side. Under the tent, swept by winds at -40 de-

Figure 2. At the Shishapangma base camp with a bottle of whiskey

Beyond these humorous aspects, J. Kukuczka is portrayed as “a hard worker who NEVER gives up” and the use of capital letters emphasizes this specific character trait. The story is told in an epic tone, where communist Poland seems to belong to another world, the one where the cost of an expedition is calculated in the number of chimneys to be repainted. His adventures are similar to an exceptional story where Jurek has contributed to break the psychological barriers: “His stop on a ridge on the edge of a four thousand meters jump. Bivouac at night in the tatters of a survival blanket. Extreme temperatures. It’s Verkhoyansk at every gust: -50° and beyond”94. There is a magical aspect to his ascents, a relationship to luck that gives him a mystical aura. An ordinary man fulfilling his dreams and whose qualities as a mountaineer no one would have suspected behind his appearance: “Messner will have found only one master: Jerzy Kukuczka”95.

The perception of Jerzy Kukuczka among...
grees, we drink strong alcohol and we brood with the only way to get through: the dream of the next 8,000m”\textsuperscript{97}. This cultural opposition, embellished by clichés, seems however representative of the reality that was himalayism in the 1980s. The use of stereotypes thus feeds the imagination and the representations associated with J. Kukuczka and the Polish mountaineers of the time.

**Conclusion**

Consequently, it appears that J. Kukuczka has deeply marked the mountaineers of his time, but his fame remains on the scale of the mountaineering community. During his period of activity at the end of communism, Jerzy Kukuczka contributed to the new visibility of Poland in the field of sport. This was part of a more general dynamic carried by Pope John Paul II, the future president Lech Walesa or even the Nobel Prize for Literature Czeslaw Milosz, who made Poland exist on the international scene in those years.

J. Kukuczka leaves behind the image of “a force of nature (...) surely the strongest himalayist of all time”\textsuperscript{98} where many erroneous shortcuts are allowed today, such as the fact that he was the author of the first winter ascent of Everest. Nevertheless, his exploits still feed the imagination of those who are interested in the great Himalayan conquests. Even today, debates are still raging as testified the recent controversy published in the Polish daily newspaper\textsuperscript{99}, where Wojciech Kurtyka’s words on how climbing was carried out in the Himalayas during the golden generation caused controversy and divided the Polish mountaineering community.


Appendix 1: Schematization of the media phases regarding Jerzy Kukuczka’s achievements since 1979

Media coverage of the competition with Reinhold Messner

- Seen as the challenger of Messner and acceleration of the competition
  - Two winter ascents in one season (1985)
  - Technical south face of K2 (1986)
  - New route for each summit

First exploits with W. Kuracy, instigator of ambitious projects in Alpine style
- Solo in Makalu (1981)
- Crossing of Broad Peak (1984)

Appendix 1: Schematization of the media phases regarding Jerzy Kukuczka’s achievements since 1979

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Sources used: https://jerzykukuczka.com/pl/archive/26701/?category=all&taxonomies=audio,video,image,text,spatial&search_value=gasherbrum&recommended_value=0&order=title&n&k&scroll=1682.666259765625
Appendix 2: The 8000m race put into perspective

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