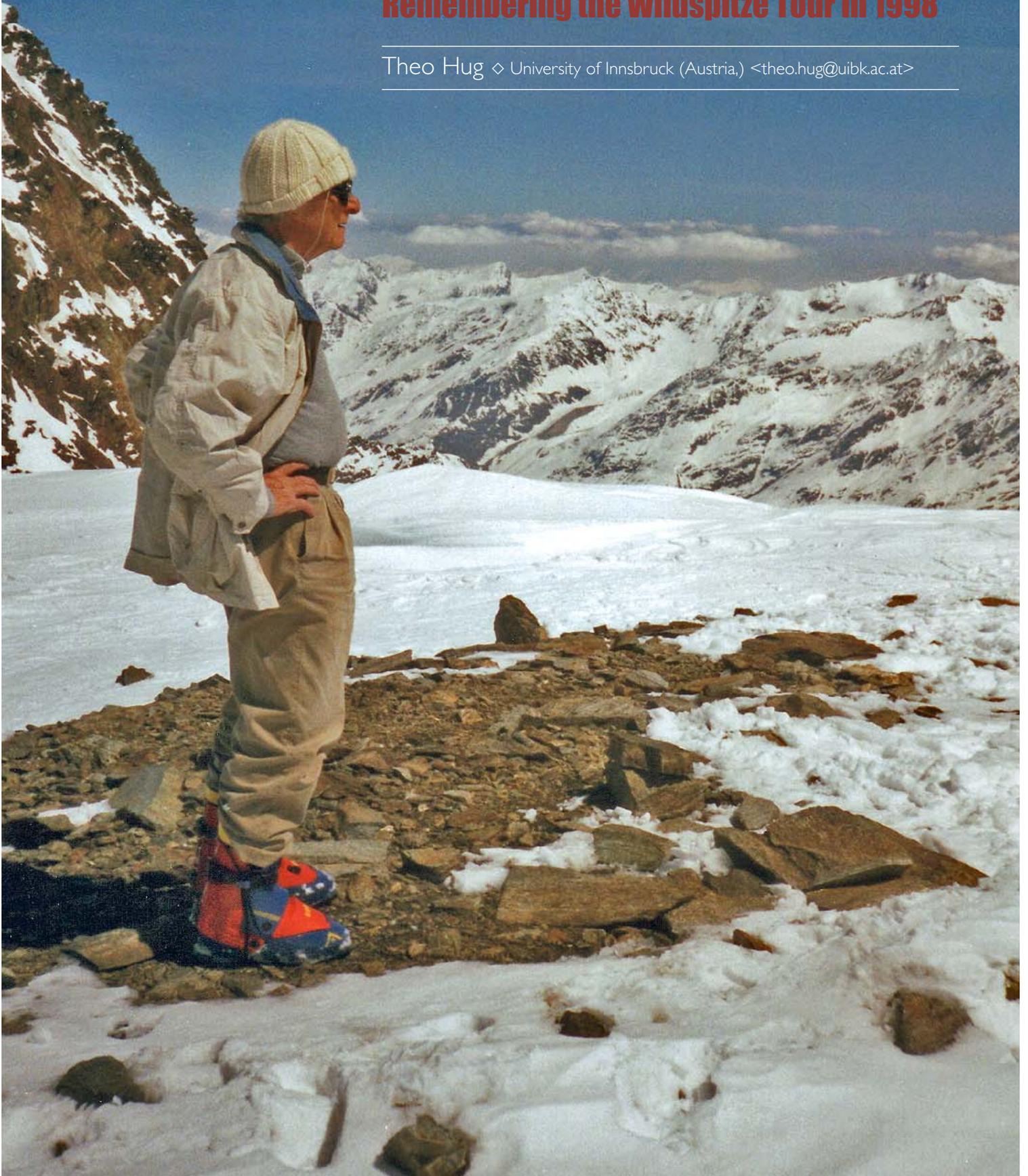


Viability and Crusty Snow

Between the World of Skiing and Academia Remembering the Wildspitze Tour in 1998

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When Ranulph Glanville and Alexander Riegler asked for proposals for contributions for this festschrift, they distinguished between two types of contribution: academic papers and “more personal items including biography, reminiscence and anecdote.”¹ If they had invited me ten years ago, the answer would have been rather easy. I probably would have proposed a chapter on some philosophical or didactical aspects of Ernst’s theory of knowledge. But now, after the experiences we have had together, the decision is not so easy anymore.

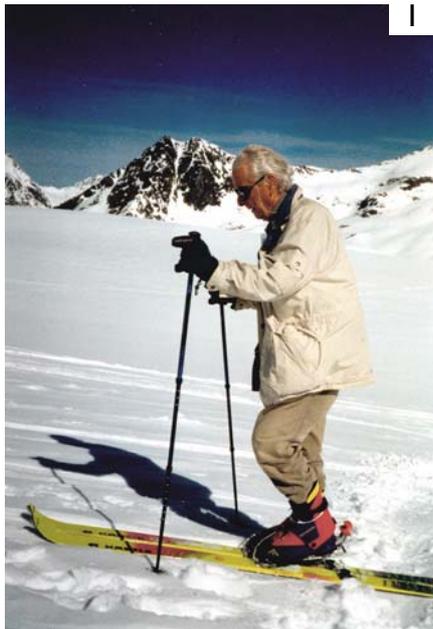
Of course, one might say that the editors were aware of Ernst’s distinction between rational theory and scientific reasoning on the one hand and the worlds of mysticism and mystic wisdom on the other (Glaserfeld 1997): all a contributor has to do is to decide whether he or she is bringing forward rational arguments or telling stories about cooking, music, love, mountaineering, skiing, etc. So, what’s the problem?

Well, there is no problem, but there is the difficulty in allowing for personal items when focussing on academic interests and in allowing for rational aspects when focussing on personal items for someone who has had the chance to get to know Ernst personally. At least for me the search for apposite words in English is not easy in view of the successful interplay between his philosophical ideas, his handling of everyday problems of life and his ability to cope with difficult situations. But let’s give it a try and look back at one of the most striking experiences we have had together.²

It was in an academic context that I met Ernst for the first time. He was invited to our Institute of Education in Innsbruck where he gave a seminar and an evening lecture on

“Konstruktivismus statt Erkenntnistheorie” in May 1997 (see Glaserfeld 1998). After the seminar we had some time for relaxed discussions and I realized that Ernst was also interested in skiing and mountaineering. Since all turned out very well, we decided to plan for another seminar.

When Ernst came to Innsbruck again in spring 1998 we had a little bit more time since there were two seminar parts to complete. One evening Ernst told us of his skiing



1



2

experiences in Australia and especially those in Tyrol. We realized that skiing was an important part of his life and that he was able to give us lots of details about tours and high peaks in the Tyrolean Alps. After a while, I proposed going for a skiing tour after the seminar, which ended on Friday (8 May 1998).

“Mr. Glaserfeld,” I said, “would you like to go on a skiing tour on Saturday?”

“That’d be nice,” he said, “but my physical condition is not too good and I haven’t been skiing a lot recently.”

“Well, you know – there are many options,” I made another effort, “and we could even ascend the Wildspitze.”

That was too much for the moment. He muttered something between “crazy” and “kidding” and I thought that I had gone too far, not least because, the Ötztaler Wildspitze

is the highest summit in Tyrol (3772 m). We considered a visit to one of the ski-regions, where on weekends hundreds of people normally spend the day on the slopes and in the huts and restaurants around the slopes.

But the topic was not done. Next day he pulled me aside and asked:

“You didn’t mean what you proposed yesterday in earnest, did you?”

“Of course, I meant it as a serious proposal – not in fun!” I answered.

And I explained that the “Pitzexpress”,³ a funicular and lifts would bring us above 3000 meters, where we would have to go down 150 meters at first where we would then have to put the skins on our skis. From there it is less than two hours to the summit on an alpine, but not too difficult, route across the glacier.

“Well, in that case we could try it,” he said, and we decided to do so.

After collecting the equipment needed, we – Andrea

Haller, Eva Hiptmair, Thomas Himmelfreundpointner and I – started the tour together with Ernst early in the morning on 9 May 1998.

Ernst walked the way up as if he had been touring all winter (see Figure 1). It was a beautiful day and we had no difficulties in reaching the ski-depot (see Figures 2–4 and cover photo). We were all deeply impressed by the scenery and we were proud that Ernst had made it.

During the break he told us of his experiences on former tours in the areas we could see. Needless to say, he knew many more summits than all of us together did.

After a fine rest period we buckled up our backpacks and started on our way down (see Figure 5). Ernst enjoyed skiing down with wide verves (see Figure 6), sometimes mak-



3

A lot of remarkable details and notions came up when we discussed the Wildspitze experience. I can recall most vividly Ernst's answer when I stated that the fact that he coped with the challenges of the tour in such a bodacious way could be taken as an example of viability.

"No," he disagreed vehemently, "If one manages to go up just one time, it is no example of viability!"

Well, unfortunately, in this case we did not have the chance to test the criterion of replication.



4

The same argument applies to interaction with snow conditions. One of the most difficult types of snow for skiers to deal with is called "Bruchharsch" (crusty snow). If one is able to ski down a hill covered with crusty snow just one time without falling down, according to Ernst's understanding, this does not count as an example of viability.

On the other hand, if one can handle crusty snow effectively and repeatedly, there are chances that one can deal with difficult situations and be successful in other areas, too. One year after our Wildspitze experience, Ernst gave an example of such a "transfer of competency."

One day, a wheel of the small tractor he uses to transport wood got into a hidden hole and the tractor toppled over and began to burn. Ernst jumped off the tractor as it leaned over and tried to stop the fire immediately. Since the wind spread the fire more quickly than he could put it out, he had to call the fire brigade, which extinguished it quickly.

He took the experience as a proof that one has to be lucky in order to have really instructive experiences.

"Of course," he wrote in an email, "one can say that 'there are no fools like old fools.' But I say that one has to be familiar with crusty snow in order to jump off a toppling tractor at the right moment!"

In my view, these examples illustrate that we need both well-proven procedures and acquaintanceship with obstacles and special challenges when we are feeling our way through interspaces and searching for scopes of action (cf. Glasersfeld 1996, p. 28). Along with that, successful ways of combining rational efforts and the "worlds of mysticism" are needed, if we want to enable viability.

ing fun of my "bouncing style." From time to time we took short breaks because some of us got tired (see Figure 7). Obviously, not all of us made use of the "secret weapon"⁴ properly enough.

When we reached the prepared skiing slopes again we realized that we had to hurry up in order to catch the last "Pitzexpress" which would bring us down to the parking lot. While the others took the normal way down to the lift Ernst and I decided to take a short cut. The "short cut" turned out to be a long way round leading us into a very steep mogul piste.

Partway, Ernst overturned heavily and skittered down almost the rest of the scarp. That was the moment when I cursed my idea of the Wildspitze tour and was afraid that we would need a helicopter. But Ernst made an astonished remark on his downfall and started strapping his skis again. He said something like "Jetzt habe ich aber einen Stern geschlagen!"⁵

After overcoming some other hurdles we all arrived back home happily and had pizzas and some drinks.

Next day, when most of us had sore muscles, Ernst asked who was willing to join him for skiing (sic!). He and Andrea spent the day on the Pitztaler slopes while Eva, Thomas and I needed time out for relaxation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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If humanity is to find a viable equilibrium for survival on this planet, both scientists and mystics will have to acknowledge that although the rational coordination of actual experience and the wisdom gleaned from poetic metaphors are incommensurate, they need not be incompatible. The most urgent task seems to be to develop a way of thinking and living that gives proper due to both." (Glasersfeld 1997, p. 7)

In his writings and even more in his way of living, Ernst shows how this can be done. And when it comes to the point where bridging the gap seems impossible or a hurdle cannot be overcome, there is a word that might help keep the future open: *pazienza*. Naturally and culturally, this refers to another language and another story which may be told on another occasion.



5



6

Notes

1. The title of this contribution is an attempt to translate the title of video portrait "Viabilität und Bruchharsch" (Hug 2000).
2. Needless to say, the descriptions in this short essay depict selected parts of my version of the story. The "Construction of Memory" (Kumar, Hug & Rusch 2006) is a complex issue and there are other options for focussing, foregrounding and versioning our Wildspitze tour together with Ernst.
3. Retrieved from <http://www.pitztaler-gletscher.at/> on 28 August 2006.
4. Of course, I cannot show all pictures and give away all secrets here. But at this point, I think it fair to give the Kwizda-Secret away. Ernst got to know it on the occasion of the Wildspitze-tour, and he is not the only one using this wonderful restitutional fluid. Retrieved from <http://www.kwizda.at/otc/> on 28 August 2006).
5. I do not have a clue as to how this can be translated aptly. Of course, I know some of the examples Ernst referred to in his seminars when explaining different uses of the word "hit." But I cannot think of something like "hitting a star" – and "Well, that was a hard fall!" is not a spot-on translation at all.

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