

Alone in the mountains

Everybody knows, and it's perfectly true, that you should not go into mountains by yourself. Mainly because of safety reasons. Although these days, when everyone carries a mobile phone, lonely hike is no longer very 'lonely'. If necessary, you can call for help or let your loved ones know where you are. Unfortunately, in the past century there was no such options. Because of that, every solo trip was a risk. To make things clear: this kind of outing not only risked harm, but there was also a chance that the trip would be the last in your life. Because the mountains are an uncontrollable force. And, to be clear, there is absolutely nothing that can truly protect us from that force. When we are in the mountains, we are at the mercy of fate. Of course, if we are well prepared, have some experience, and use common sense, we can survive situations that at first seem hopeless. What I have just written is true and most people would probably agree with it. However, young people see the world differently, especially something as "simple" as a hike in the middle of Europe. They think: How could I possibly get lost here? What could happen to me? On top of that, they are confident in their physical strength, but they lack necessary experience, because how could they have gained it yet? Even though I now know that going alone into the mountains is unwise, when I was young I did it often. In fact, I sometimes set off at night, in the rain, or during a raging snowstorm. Back then, I didn't think about the consequences. I didn't think about my family worrying because they hadn't heard from me for days. I would leave home for several days at a time, and no one knew where I was until I returned, and only then did they know I was safe. Looking back, I realize that such behavior was, to put it mildly, irresponsible, if not downright foolish. But at the time, it seemed completely normal to me. Of course, the first sudden changes in weather took me by surprise. Yet I never turned back. Over time, I grew used to winter conditions, to the deepening snow and the biting frost. Since I hiked very often, sometimes as many as three hundred days a year, I had the chance to adapt to all sorts of weather. The mountains' rapidly changing skies taught me how to dress properly and to pack items that at first seemed unnecessary. It must have looked comical, everything stuffed into a huge backpack with a tall chimney-like extension rising above my head. The pack often weighed more than eighty kilograms. But for a young, strong man, that was nothing. If needed, I could even run for hours with such a burden, no matter how rocky the trail was or that the rain turned it into a muddy torrent. Fortunately, back then, good mountain boots were built to last; made of thick leather, lined with felt or sheepskin. They were heavy, several kilograms each, but solid. You could wade through a stream for hundreds of meters and still have dry feet afterward. I must admit, I often did just that, especially in winter. When exhaustion set in, I would look for a stream and follow its course downhill. In our mountains, the valleys always sooner or later led to some human settlement. And sometimes, when the snow lay meters deep, walking down a streambed was the only way to reach civilization quickly. Of

course, you had to wear proper gaiters to keep the water out. I was lucky — I knew an old tailor who still remembered how to sew the special mountain garments. He made me many useful things, including gaiters. It was he who suggested sewing me harem pants – trousers that went below the knee. One pair he made with laces, another with buttons, and a third with a little zipper. I'm speaking here of the closures at the bottom of the legs. This pre-war design turned out to be surprisingly practical. When the weather was warm, you could easily uncover your legs to cool off; when it rained, you could quickly fasten the gaiters attached with hooks and protect your legs from water or from scratches while pushing through dense brush. In winter, you simply wore long wool socks underneath — and your feet stayed both warm and dry. But you had to remember: mountain boots required two pairs of socks — one short, one long. No one does that anymore. Furthermore, back then, we used mountain hiking boots – which were very hard to obtain – for skiing. And so, they had to be extremely durable — and compatible with crampons, too. Some might be surprised by that: crampons, in our mountains? But yes — there were places where, to avoid sinking waist-deep into the snow, we used skis; yet to keep from sliding off an icy slope into an abyss, we strapped on crampons as well. It might have looked ridiculous, but it worked — especially when we were hiking as a group but only had one or two pairs of skis to share among us. The arrangement was such that several people stood in front and behind one wearing the skis. But since everyone had large backpacks, only one person could go in the front and one behind. That's how it was done back then. It was safe and allowed for relatively fast movement. Today, we don't have the massive snowfalls of the 1970s. Back then, during winter hikes, often only the tops of fir trees were visible. So it's no wonder that if someone fell off the skis, it was serious business. Not only did they vanish from sight in the snow, but often they fell into a hollow beneath the snow and into a stream flowing there. In such cases, we had great difficulty rescuing them, sometimes needing ropes because the snow was too deep. I should add that a few hundred meters, which we would ski in one or two hours, on foot would take us up to thirteen hours. It was a tremendous effort for us. Because of the time required to cover a planned route, we often didn't reach our destination before dusk, having to walk many hours at night. Snow made it bright, but we knew we couldn't stop, or we might not survive. So, exhausted, we pressed on, ignoring the passage of time and our remaining strength. It was essential to reach a hut quickly to make tea, as only hot drink could get us back on our feet. And one could not afford to give up. Anyone who did would have been lost forever. That's why, at times, we resorted to force. A person refusing to continue, after persuasion failed, might be nudged or lightly beaten with a stick or ski poles. This was the only effective way to compel them to continue. Of course, once at the destination, no one held grudges, they were grateful for the help. They knew that without such firmness, nothing would have saved them. Sometimes, they joked that less knotted stick could have been used – but that's a minor detail. Sometimes, solo hike was so

challenging that it stayed in our memory. I remember when we arranged to meet for New Year's Eve at 'Smogorniak.' Because I had to stay at work longer, I started my journey late and had to go alone. Everyone else had set off well in advance. Unfortunately, halfway there, a snowstorm began. At first, it didn't bother me, but later, as the wind strengthened, I began to worry whether I had enough strength to reach the hut. Turning back was no longer an option; I had gone too far. The difficult conditions made progress increasingly hard. Time seemed to pass faster and faster. I realized I wouldn't arrive before midnight, but reaching the hut at all became the priority. When I reached a stream in front of the hut, I was very happy. I slid down the snow and started climbing the other bank. Unfortunately, the falling snow was so powdery that kept sliding back into the stream. I tied my skis together to make makeshift ladder, but it was still not enough; I was a few meters short of my goal. For a moment, I considered retreating, but soon realized it was impossible. I saw a faint light flickering in a window, so I shouted at the top of my lungs. The storm was louder. The wind howled so fiercely that no one could have heard me. I began to get scared, especially after falling into the stream several times, starting to get cold. It was clear I couldn't survive the night like that. Luckily, someone in the cabin had gone outside for a bathroom break and, out of laziness, went behind the cabin instead of the toilet that was located a little further away. I'd never screamed as loud as I did back then. I screamed so loudly that my friend finally heard me. Surprised, he approached and, when he saw my situation, ran back to the cabin. He forgot all about why he came there in the first place. Almost everyone came out to help. It was not easy; the storm almost knocked them over, and they couldn't get too close to the ravine without risking falling in. Finally, they tied ropes they had together and threw them to me from a distance. I managed to grab hold of them and, through our combined effort, was pulled to safety. I quickly got hot tea, changed into dry clothes, and wrapped myself in blankets near the stove. I had never imagined how comforting the heat from a stove could be. I was so cold that I could literally feel myself thawing. Gradually, after the initial terror, we started joking about the situation. The friend who first noticed me eventually remembered why he had gone outside, and ran quickly to finish his task.

On other occasion, we agreed to meet at the 'Morgana' hut, confident everything would go so smoothly. As it turned out, nothing went as planned. Even though it was May and the weather was generally good, everything went wrong. I was several hours late because of a final high school exam. I reached Karpacz on the last bus, when it was completely dark. To make matters worse, unexpected snowfall began just as I got off. In a short time, it piled up enough to make continuing the hike difficult. Yet, thinking of everyone waiting for me, I realized I had to keep moving. The reason was the distribution of supplies. Some items were with me, others with the group. Because the distribution had been careless, using some equipment became impossible. For instance, one side had cooking stoves, while other carried fuel. I pressed on, often off the path, pushing through

snowdrifts. The worst part was when I reached border the snow-covered dwarf pine grove. It was exhausting. Seeing the hut brought relief, but I didn't notice that no lights were visible. When I finally reached it, no one was there. Initially, I didn't know what to do. I thought maybe they were lost, but the snowfall began only in the evening, and they had set out in the morning. It was impossible for them not to have arrived before the weather turned. I decided not to worry about them but focus on not freezing to death. I had no fire, it was freezing, and I was soaked. I went through my backpack, changed clothes, and paced around, sometimes going into the attic to warm up slightly, sometimes stepping outside to walk around and watch for anyone approaching. Somehow, I survived until morning. The weather stabilized, and I could return home. Later, I learned the others had changed their plan and stayed at a different hut.. When they later saw what was happening, they regretted their decision, but it was too late and too dangerous to try and reach 'Morgana'. They stayed overnight in 'Samogorniak', where they were safe. Everything ended well, but such behavior is very risky. Firstly, commitments should be kept; secondly, in the mountains, failing to do so can be life-threatening. If a less experienced hiker had been in my place, the outcome could have been very different.

I must say that solo trips are not only dangerous in the mountains. I once had a strange habit: I would pack a backpack, go to the train station, and see where the next train was heading. I would get on it and go, as old scouts might say, 'in search of adventure.' On one occasion, I took a train toward the Piła area. I got off in the middle of nowhere, around one o'clock at night. Apart from the station building, there were no other structures. Fortunately, it was relatively warm. However, the night was moonless – dark as... well, you know where. I looked at the map and saw a hiking trail. So I set off. After a while, probably to lift my spirits, I reached a cemetery. Unfortunately, that didn't improve my mood. I entered the forest, and after three or four hours of walking, I heard some howling. Everywhere was silent and dark. I had the impression it was wolves. I thought to myself, 'Silly, where would wolves be here?' but I wasn't entirely sure. I quickened my pace. Dawn was approaching. At that time, maps were not as detailed as they are today, so I wasn't sure of my location. Fortunately, I saw people – lumberjacks working in the forest. Thanks to them, I knew which way to go. I reached a town with a train station, got on the first train, and returned home. That's what happens when you go on a trip without proper preparation.

But there are also funny situations for solo hikers. But to avoid boring you I'll tell one that happened to me to. I decided to walk through the Wielkopolski National Park. I took the train, got off at a small station, and since a hiking trail passed nearby, I set off. The weather wasn't great; gloomy, gray, a little odd. Since the season was over, I walked alone, encountering no other hikers. Strangely, I kept seeing signs warning about rabid foxes. I walked all day, and since I had left home on a night train, I was a bit tired. When I saw a building with rooms for rent, I asked for a night's

stay. The lady was initially surprised to see a tourist at that time of year, but she agreed. She only mentioned that I would be a bit cold until the electric heater warmed up, as I would be the only guest. I didn't mind; the room was much warmer than outside. I took a shower, made myself tea, had a snack, and went to sleep. When I woke up, I saw dawn outside. I jumped to my feet immediately – I had many kilometers to cover, and the train wouldn't wait. I packed, turned everything off, and went to the owner to return the keys. Her eyes widened. 'You've rested already?' she asked. 'It will get dark soon, and walking at night isn't a good idea.' Then she laughed. I must have looked foolish. It turned out I had fallen asleep quickly, rested quickly, and woke up only moments later. What I had mistaken for dawn was actually dusk. I apologized and went back to sleep. This time, I woke at actual dawn, avoiding another awkward situation.

That's what it's like to hike alone. Although, sometimes, going in pairs isn't much better. To conclude my discussion on solo hiking, I'll share what happened to me many years ago in the Izery Mountains. I went on a night hike intending to reach the 'Walońska' hut by morning. When we entered the forest, it was already completely dark. Fortunately, after a while, the moon appeared. The flashlight batteries didn't last long, so we were happy. Besides, isn't it romantic to walk under a starry sky at night with a beautiful girl? We weren't in a hurry; it was a very warm night. Thousands of stars shone in the sky, and we often sat and admire them. Besides, we had to watch out for roots sticking out along the path. Everything was delightful – we were just beginning life. At one moment, when the moon hid and darkness fell, I noticed the girl ahead of me suddenly disappear. Then I heard a quiet splash. Without much thought, I reached forward and grabbed something. I pulled her toward me. When the moonlight returned, I was truly frightened. The girl had fallen into a peat pit. Who knows, she might have remained there forever were it not for my intuition? I had grabbed her jacket just in time, hearing the splash. We were both shocked. Fortunately, everything ended safely. Ania, for that was her name, became my wife, and since then, we have hiked together in the mountains. We are still together to this day.

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