

BEYOND HELP

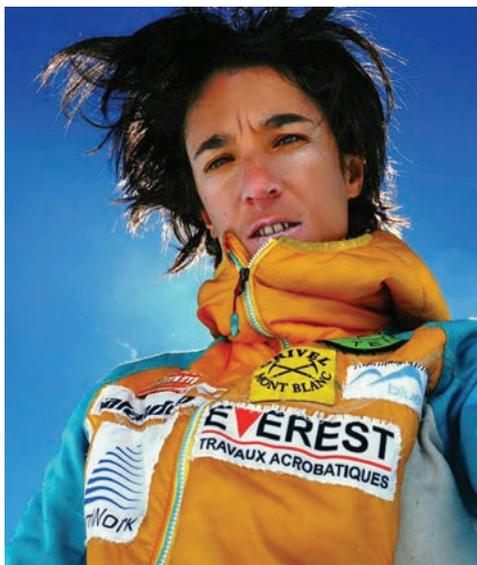
Stranded high on Nanga Parbat after an extremely rare winter ascent, Elisabeth Revol and Tomek Mackiewicz were beyond help. Even if a rescue team could be found, time would almost certainly run out before they could reach the stranded climbers. Even if the rescuers did get there in time, the question remained: How would they get two incapacitated climbers off an 8,000-meter peak in winter?

By Michael Levy



The last photo of Tomek Mackiewicz, on January 24, 2018, a day before completing the second-ever winter ascent of Nanga Parbat (8,126 meters).

Darkness enveloped Elisabeth Revol. Her headlamp battery had died hours earlier, and she could navigate only by reflected light from the stars and the waxing moon, nearly full, on the snow before her. This was her third consecutive night without a tent or sleeping bag above 6,000 meters in the winterscape of Nanga Parbat, at 8,126 meters the ninth-highest mountain in the world. The wind chill was a cutting minus 80 degrees Fahrenheit, and at 50 miles per hour the gusts could blow a person backwards.



Elisabeth Revol, in 2017, on Manaslu (8,163 meters), in Nepal.

Revol's left foot was a frozen block as she stumbled downhill, occasionally plunging through the icy crust into sugary snow. She couldn't feel her fingers, and her thin pair of gloves were stiff with ice. Her only gear was a daisy chain, a carabiner and trekking poles.

It was 1:40 a.m. on January 28, 2018. At 6,565 meters, Revol was utterly alone. Hers was the only expedition to attempt the mountain last winter, and she had had to leave her incapacitated partner, Tomek Mackiewicz, at 7,280 meters. In its storied 65-year climbing history since the first ascent, Nanga Parbat had been attempted over 30 times in winter, yet only one team, in 2016, had succeeded. Now Revol and Mackiewicz had repeated the feat, and by a new route. But at what cost?

A rescue effort coordinated by her friends and family back in Europe had gotten would-be rescuers to the base of the mountain, but she had learned via a satellite message in the early evening that they wouldn't be able to get to her. No one was coming that night.

"Immediately ... I realized that I needed to escape from this mountain myself," Revol says. She sent a message in French: "If there are fixed ropes, I'll keep going down." Then she turned off her InReach satellite device because there was only 3 percent battery left.

She says of the descent: "I was thinking about a lot of things. About the incoming storm for the 28th. My husband had sent me a message saying, 'Be in Base Camp on the 28th.' I was very afraid about the weather. So I knew I had to go down. Step by step. Stay focused. I told myself, *If you have to walk all the night, you walk all the night.* I was only concentrated on this.... But I was very afraid, very afraid."

And then suddenly, in the still of night, Revol saw a bobbing light, a white glow making its way toward her. *Were the hallucinations of the night before returning, or was this real?*

Revol started screaming.

Only Questions, Zero Answers

Long before she ever found herself in Pakistan in the winter of 2018 on Nanga Parbat, the western sentry of the Himalaya, Elisabeth Revol was already in a rarefied class of alpinists and a leading woman in the field.

A 38-year-old secondary-school physical-education teacher from Saou, a town of under 1,000 people in southeastern France, Revol doesn't necessarily look like the stereotypical high-mountain climber with an unkempt mane and steely gaze. Her hazel eyes glow from within a narrow face framed by cropped, dark-brown wavy hair. And while the image of a mountaineer is often that of an immovable redwood, Revol seems more a spindly aspen. But her slight 5-foot-1-inch frame belies her fortitude in the alpine.

She got her start tromping around in crampons at just 4 years old on a small glacier near her parents' house, but spent most of her youth focused on gymnastics, competing for the French National Team from 1992 to 1997. Revol started climbing in earnest at university, through a hiking club, and soon forsook everything else. She progressed from rock to technical peaks in the Alps. "At that time I did a lot of mountaineering on my own," she says—something that prepared her for future solitary pursuits. In 2008, she made solo ascents of Gasherbrum I (8,080 meters), Gasherbrum II (8,035 meters) and Broad Peak (8,047 meters), all without supplemental oxygen.

Her climbing career was derailed, however, by an expedition to Annapurna (8,091 meters) in 2009. She and the Czech climber Martin Minarík reached the east summit on April 19 via the *Bonington Route*. In a report that she later posted on Minarík's website, Revol wrote of the joy she felt on top, but also that she had been "worried about Martin."

Minarík started exhibiting signs of high-altitude cerebral edema (HACE) on the descent. By the 21st he was barely shambling along, and Revol would stop to wait for him in half-hour intervals. One time she waited to no avail. "I waited half an hour for Martin, then an hour," Revol wrote. "I called him, no answer; but there was so much wind that he probably couldn't hear me. I was worried and decided to backtrack to meet up with him. I went back up to the point where I last left him. No one." After frantically looking for Minarík, Revol descended the next day to sound the alarm. A multi-day search turned up nothing.

Traumatized, Revol took a four-year sabbatical from climbing. "I only had



LEFT: Krzysztof Wielicki, the leader of a 13-person Polish expedition to K2 in winter 2018. He helped organize the rescue on Nanga Parbat. RIGHT: K2 team members Denis Urubko and Adam Bielecki (lower) climbed to get to Revol.

questions and zero answers,” she says. “For me it wasn’t possible to know what happened on that ridge and what was the story with Martin and where he was. That question destroyed me.” She gradually began climbing again in the Alps, and when the question no longer burned behind her eyelids, she returned to the big mountains. In 2012-2013, she first attempted Nanga Parbat in winter, with Daniele Nardi, a bronzed, five-o-clock-shadow-sporting Italian with summits of K2 (8,611 meters), Everest (8,848 meters) and Shishapangma (8,027 meters), among others, to his name. Revol and Nardi reached just 6,000 meters that winter.

In late 2014, Revol intended to return with Nardi, but he withdrew 15 days before their planned departure due to what Revol calls personal family issues. Partnerless, Revol reached out to the 43-year-old Tomek Mackiewicz, a Polish alpinist she had never met, but who was already in Pakistan and had tried the mountain four times before. Revol knew that he intended to try Nanga solo that year, but thought they could combine forces for the approach.

When she met him in his hotel room in Chilas, Pakistan, he took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, smiled and introduced himself. The normally taciturn Mackiewicz seemed at ease with Revol.

“We started talking and trading Nanga stories. It was just fluid,” she says.

They shared the goal of forging a new route in pure alpine style, so decided to rope up together. That season, they tried an unfinished route opened up to 7,500 meters by Reinhold Messner and three others in 2000. Mackiewicz and Revol reached 7,800 meters, achingly close to the summit.

In 2015-2016, encouraged by their previous effort, Revol and Mackiewicz teamed up again. Throughout the winter, they occupied the same camps and palled around with three

other teams also vying for a winter ascent of Nanga: one made up of the Italians Simone Moro and Tamara Lunger, one comprised of the Spaniard Alex Txikon and the Pakistani Ali Sadpara, and one led by the Polish climber Adam Bielecki. Revol and Bielecki became friendly and spitballed possibilities for joint climbing projects.

Revol and Mackiewicz failed again that year, while Moro, Txikon and Sadpara succeeded, plucking the first winter ascent of Nanga Parbat right out from under the others’ noses. With Nanga climbed, Revol turned her attention to other pursuits. In the summer of

“The cold was terrible. If Tomek couldn’t see anything, how would we get down? What could we do?”

2017 she attempted Makalu (8,485 meters), Lhotse (8,516 meters) and Everest, all solo, ultimately summiting Lhotse and coming up just shy on Makalu.

The history of climbing 8,000ers in winter would have suggested that Revol and Mackiewicz would leave Nanga Parbat alone after Moro et al’s ascent. But Nanga still held its allure, particularly for Mackiewicz. It “fascinated him in a mystical way,” Anna Solska, Mackiewicz’s second wife, says. So in the winter of 2017-2018, Mackiewicz, then 43, and Revol, then 37, returned again to try Messner’s still-unfinished route from 2000. It was Mackiewicz’s seventh attempt on the mountain, Revol’s fourth.



“I Can’t See You”

Mackiewicz and Revol spent New Year’s 2018 acclimatizing. On January 2, they reached 6,600 meters and then returned to base camp to recuperate before a good-faith summit bid.

There they waited for almost three weeks, jet-stream winds of 50 miles per hour shrieking outside. Finally, a weather window presented itself. On January 19 they left base camp, and over the next five days pushed upward to 6,900 meters. On the 24th they traversed on to the Bazin Plateau and stopped at an altitude of 7,350 meters.

“We arrived completely in the fog with a little bit of snow,” Revol remembers. “We couldn’t see anything. We went down inside the first crevasse we found to make a camp.”

She and Mackiewicz spent the night in the folds of the mountain before brushing the

PAWEŁ WRONA, MATEUSZ SKWARCZEK / AGENCJA GAZETA, JAKUB OCIEPA / AGENCJA GAZETA



Bielecki (right) climbing on the Black Pyramid, a section of the Abruzzi Spur on K2, in winter 2018.

sleep from their eyes at 5:00 a.m. on the 25th. They set off around 7:30 a.m. Mackiewicz had suffered frostbite on his 2015 expedition to Nanga Parbat and had been having trouble with his foot this year. He had taken to putting a layer of aluminum foil directly on his feet, followed by wool socks, followed by a plastic bag, and finally his double boots. The process made him slower this morning.

At 8,036 meters, Revol checked her InReach—it was 5:15 p.m. “I saw that the sun started going down,” she remembers. “Lots of cloud cover—covering the whole Mazeno Ridge, the Diamir Glacier, everything. No wind. The couloir was a little bit orange. It was very strange, but so quiet, so nice.”

When Mackiewicz arrived—he had been lagging 100 meters behind—they discussed their options. Mackiewicz was not wearing glacier glasses or goggles, and he squinted in the ethereal light. It was late to keep going. But they were so close. They pushed on, their morale buoyed by the opalescent clouds.

When Revol saw the red flag demarcating the summit, she staggered up the last stretch in the face of powerful winds blowing from the other side and waited for Mackiewicz.

It was around 6:15 p.m. when he finally plodded up. His first words to Revol were, “Eli, I can’t see you.” He had either become snowblind or hypoxic—his blood no longer

delivering enough oxygen for normal bodily function. Revol had a proleptic moment of terror: “Like electricity in my legs,” she says. “They went numb. Immediately it felt like a very dangerous moment—very late, in winter. The cold was terrible. If Tomek couldn’t see anything, how would we get down? What could we do?” It was an eerie *déjà vu* of her experience with Minarik on Annapurna a decade before. Despite her panic, Revol told Mackiewicz not to worry. To take her shoulder. That she’d lead him down.

Revol soon sent a typo-riddled message to her husband, Jean-Christophe Revol, and Anna Solska, via her InReach: “Tomek need rescu soon frosbite and he didnt see nothing pleas manage something with ali [Revol’s Pakistani agent] sonner as you can heli.”

Among Rivers and Mountains

Tomek Mackiewicz reached the upper echelons of Himalayan climbing via a less conventional path than most of his peers, escaping drug-riddled teenage years to find a sense of belonging in the mountains.

When he traveled to Pakistan in 2017, Tomek “Czapkins” Mackiewicz had been living as an expat in the Irish countryside, where he worked as a panel-beater—someone who repairs and restores car bodies. Between his ginger beard and reddish-blond hair sprouting

out from beneath caps that were “always worn, bent,” he looked like a “wild man,” says Anna Solska with a smile. “Not very elegant.”

Mackiewicz grew up in the village of Działoszyn, south-central Poland, and spent his youth along the meandering Warta River and in the forests of the Swietokrzyskie Mountains. With just 6,000 people in town, he had a quiet childhood. His family moved to the city of Czestochowa when he was a teenager. “Moving to the city was very bad for him,” Solska says. “He felt unhappy and lonely in an industrial environment, deprived of contact with nature and his beloved Warta.”

At 18, he began abusing drugs and developed a heroin problem. Mackiewicz’s sister eventually pointed him toward help, and the young Pole spent two years in a rehab program in Mazury, Poland. Like his childhood home, the flatlands of Mazury were full of natural beauty, dotted with large, amoeba-shaped blue lakes.

Mackiewicz never relapsed. He went on to marry his first wife, Joanna, with whom he had two children, Maxymilian—now 11—and Antonina, now 8. Maxymilian was born a twin, but his brother died at birth, in 2008. In 2009 Mackiewicz carried his dead son’s remains to the top of Khan Tengri (7,010 meters) and scattered the ashes. “He suffered a lot after the death of his son,” Solska says.



The west side of Nanga Parbat, 8,126 meters. The yellow line is the new route done by Tomek Mackiewicz and Elisabeth Revol. Much of the route, represented by the dotted line, is on the opposite side of the ridge, on the northwest face, and not visible in this photo. The red line is the *Kinshofer Route*, the path of her descent. 1) Revol bivied here at 6,800 meters on her descent. 2) Mackiewicz, snowblind, was left here at 7,280 meters. 3) Revol downclimbed to this point where she was met by Bielecki and Urubko, who had speed climbed with nearly no gear. After a short bivvy, they then lowered Revol down the route's steepest sections.

Mackiewicz later divorced and married Solska, with whom he had another daughter, Zoja, now 6, in their adopted home of Ireland. But the scars of the past stayed with him. It was in this context that Mackiewicz discovered climbing. After a troubled first half of his 20s, a failed marriage and the death of a child, Mackiewicz found purpose in the mountains.

Though Mackiewicz never graduated from school, he was an adept autodidact. Solska says, "He was a sailor, and he learned without ever taking a course. ... Never needed any authority... I mean he just watched, and followed his unbelievable creative instinct. ... The same was [true] in his climbing"—something that made him an *enfant terrible* in the Polish mountaineering world.

When Mackiewicz decided to try Nanga Parbat in winter the first time, in 2010, he had little more than an ascent of Canada's highest peak, Mount Logan, as a credential. Most young Polish climbers with Himalayan aspirations pay homage to a historical convention of earning their stripes in the smaller ranges.

In a 2016 article published in the Polish *Kontynenty* magazine, Piotr Tomza described Mackiewicz and his partner Marek Klonowski's approach: "They had no list of achievements that could prove their experience. Instead, they had—and that's no metaphor—a punk-like approach to exploration."

Mackiewicz and Klonowski's first season on Nanga Parbat was a learning experience, and they wound up woefully short of the summit. After two more attempts in the ensuing years, Mackiewicz teamed up with Revol and reached 7,800 meters in the 2014-2015 season. Though on the surface an odd pair—one petite, one hulking—they were a good match. Like him, Revol struggled—the loss of Minarík on Annapurna in 2009 still haunted her. Nanga Parbat was therapy for them both.

Nanga became an obsession for Mackiewicz: The mountain had power, drawing him back each time the days grew short. Of what became his annual Himalayan pilgrimage, Solska says, "Going to work from 8:00 to 5:00 and making money—all his life he hated money. ... I think [Nanga Parbat] was a kind of escape. From his troubles, and from anyone

who could hurt him. He felt there, in the mountains, really free and happy."

Ice Warriors

There would not have been even a prayer of a rescue of Revol and Mackiewicz on Nanga Parbat had it not been for a concurrent expedition on K2. On January 9, when Revol and Mackiewicz were holed up in base camp, a juggernaut of a Polish team arrived at K2—the last of the 8,000ers still unclimbed in winter, the last great problem of the Himalaya. The 67-year-old Krzysztof Wielicki—the most famous of the Polish Ice Warriors who had monopolized winter ascents of 8,000-meter peaks in the 1980s—was at the helm of an all-star team, a new generation of Ice Warriors. The brightest of the young bunch was Adam Bielecki.

A boyish 35, Bielecki looks the part of a warrior. At times he sports a shaved head except for a bundle of dreadlocks that evokes a samurai's topknot. Bielecki and Janusz Gołab made the first winter ascent of Gasherbrum, in 2012; did the first winter ascent of Broad Peak, in 2013; and attempted a first winter



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Bielecki (left) and Piotr Tomala arrive at Nanga Parbat. / Revol being lowered in the Kinshofer Couloir on January 28. / Bielecki and Revol prepare to rappel the Kinshofer Wall. / Revol warms her frostbitten fingers with a hot drink during a sleepless night with her rescuers.



ascent of Nanga Parbat in 2016. On Broad Peak, two of Bielecki's three partners disappeared descending from the summit, and a Polish Mountaineering Commission criticized him for perceived negligence. Bielecki refuted the accusations, and other climbers, such as Wielecki, considered them unfounded.

The wild card of the K2 expedition was Denis Urubko—a grizzled, Soviet-born, naturalized Polish citizen. At 44 years old, he was the only climber on the team more accomplished than Bielecki. Urubko had summited all 14 8,000ers at least once without supplemental oxygen and attained two winter first ascents of 8,000ers: Makalu with Simone Moro in 2009, and Gasherbrum II in 2011, with Moro and Cory Richards. In an interview with ExplorersWeb about his former partner, Moro said that Urubko “has a Russian military mentality” and no fear.

The K2 expedition toiled away for the first three-and-a-half weeks of January. In between rotations on the mountain in teams of two, they would stay in their Wi-Fi-equipped base camp, where they could surf the net and interact with the outside world through email and WhatsApp. Then they learned of trouble brewing on Nanga Parbat.

“At one point it became clearly visible that something was wrong,” Adam Bielecki says, “and it was pretty obvious that if anybody could help them, it was only our team.”

An Old Woman and a Shoe

Jean-Christophe, Revol's husband, relayed her initial SOS message to two of his wife's friends—Ludovic Giambiasi, a climbing partner; and Masha Gordon, a climber and founder of Grit&Rock, a climbing non-profit that had funded one of Revol's trips. While the wheels started turning on a rescue operation a continent away, Revol and Mackiewicz continued their labored progress down rocky,

mixed terrain and steep snow.

Revol says, “I had to check every time where he put his feet with the crampons—on what, the position, his balance. ... I didn't feel the cold. I was worried about being very strong for trying to reach Camp 4. But it was very hard. I don't know how we survived that night. For Tomek it was harder. I could move and warm my body a little, but Tomek, he was completely exhausted.”

“At one point it became clearly visible that something was wrong,” Adam Bielecki says, “and it was pretty obvious that if anybody could help them, it was only our team.”

Revol decided to give Mackiewicz a dexamethasone injection to treat symptoms of HACE. Unfortunately, she forgot about the strong layer of Gore-Tex that existed beneath his down suit. When she pushed the plunger on the syringe, the needle broke. “Oh my god,” she muttered in horror. Instead, she gave him slow-acting dexamethasone pills and her extra pair of gloves.

After another few hours Mackiewicz said he could go no farther. At 7,280 meters Revol found a narrow crevasse with a ramp leading into it. Mackiewicz now had blood on his lips, a sign of worsening hypoxia. They went in and huddled together, without bivy gear, into the morning of the 26th.

When the sun rose, Revol tried to find their high camp, at around 7,380 meters, where they had left sleeping bags, a tent, more fuel

and food two nights earlier. But the Bazin Plateau looked much different in piercing daylight than it had in foggy darkness. She spent two hours checking crevasses—“all empty, all the same.”

She received a message from Ludovic Giambiasi that a helicopter rescue was possible, but at their altitude it could only handle the additional weight of one person. He suggested she leave Mackiewicz, so she could be rescued lower. Revol refused, the thought of leaving a second partner to the whims of the winds on an 8,000-meter peak too terrible to entertain. But Giambiasi persisted, and Revol's husband stressed the ominous weather forecast two days out.

Revol explained the situation to Mackiewicz: She'd have to leave him to save him. He replied simply, “O.K.” While detached, he had moments of lucidity, and Revol remembers him saying, “It's very high, 7,200 meters. Too high for a helicopter.” She goes on, haltingly: “Tomek wasn't convinced [rescue] would be possible ... but I wanted to think that it was.”

She opted to descend via the *Kinshofer Route*, on the Diamir Face. She had seen it often from base camp, and had gleaned info from Adam Bielecki two years earlier. She knew the first 1,000 meters below her were largely devoid of crevasses.

At 1:00 p.m. on the 26th, eight days after leaving base camp, she started down. Alone.



UPPER: Bielecki and Revol make their way down the lower section of the Kinshofer Route.
LOWER: Urubko, Revol and Bielecki after the rescue.

In a few hours she was at 6,800 meters. There she learned some bad news from Giambiasi—Askari Aviation, the helicopter operator, was now demanding a \$50,000 cash deposit before flying. She'd be stuck out for at least another night. She remembers, "For me, this was a terrible moment. ... I left Tomek alone, and I was going down to save him. For a second, I thought, *O.K., I have to go back up to join him.* But I knew it was too high."

That evening, for the third time in as many nights, Revol found a narrow, echoing crevasse to shelter in, a nave from which to offer up her prayers for Mackiewicz. She tried to make a backrest out of her trekking poles and, without a sleeping bag or tent, to think of anything but the cold. She drifted off into a sleep filled with nightmares masquerading as dreams. A wrinkled, stooped old woman came to her. "I'll bring something for you, some warm tea, if you give me your shoes," the woman said. So Revol took off her left shoe and gave it to the old woman.

She awoke in the morning, at first disoriented by the half-light in the crevasse. Then reality rushed back. "I thought, *Fuck! What happened?* I took off my socks and realized

that my foot was like wood. It was white." After gathering her wits, Revol powered up her InReach and at 7:59 a.m. sent another message: "Me sui gele le pied cte nuit fo ke je rentre o plu tot"—*Got my foot frostbitten last night, I need to go back down ASAP.*

The Hardest Moment of All

Back at K2 on the evening of the 26th, crowded around the table in the mess tent, the Polish expedition members gave their attention to their leader, Krzysztof Wielicki. *Who would take part in a rescue?* Wielicki asked them. Every single man volunteered.

Urubko was still on his way down from a stint up on the mountain with Janusz Gołab, but had already expressed his willingness after hearing chatter on the radio of a potential rescue operation. "I ran down to the base camp," he says. "I understood that my help might be needed."

Wielicki selected a four-man team: Urubko, Bielecki, Piotr Tomala and Jarosław Botor. If all went according to plan, the next morning they would helicopter over, locate Revol around 6,800 meters, retrieve her with a rope, and then do the same for Mackiewicz.

Things did not go according to plan.

At 7:00 a.m. on January 27, the rescuers roused themselves from a restless sleep, scarfed down a breakfast of oatmeal, eggs, *chapati* and coffee, and kitted up for the chopper ride. They waited in the mess tent in full rescue regalia—jumpsuits, harnesses and helmets—for over five hours. In an effort to lighten the mood, Bielecki played some reggae music through his battery-powered speakers.

"That was the hardest moment of the whole rescue for me," Bielecki remembers, a hint of disbelief in his voice. "All that time waiting. I didn't know whether we'd fly or not. It was pretty obvious to us that if we don't fly today, we don't have much to fly for, because the next

night would probably be fatal for both."

Finally, at 1:30 p.m., two Airbus H125 military helicopters arrived. High winds and impending nightfall prevented the helicopters from flying to 6,800 meters as hoped. At 4:50 p.m., just before sunset, the pilots deposited all four rescuers below Nanga Parbat's Camp 1, at approximately 4,850 meters. According to the team leader, Botor, "Plan B was simple: Denis Urubko and Adam Bielecki start to climb." The rescue mission had ballooned into a historic undertaking: the two Poles would have to swing and kick their way up 2,000 meters of the *Kinshofer Route*, described by Roger Mear in the 1992 *American Alpine Journal* as offering "ice as steep as the roof of a church."

"If There Are Fixed Ropes ..."

Revol spent the 27th waiting for the thumping blades of a helicopter. She left the crevasse and sunned herself in the gentle morning. But looming beyond the sun was the portent of incoming bad weather. Her husband's words echoed in her head: "Be in Base Camp on the 28th"—the next day.

As afternoon came and went, Revol elected to take matters into her own hands. She knew the rescuers were not coming that night. She started walking down in the darkness.

Plan B

"When we landed, it was obvious that the only thing we could do was just start climbing, climb through the night," Bielecki says. Urubko started up the mountain just 20 minutes after landing, and Bielecki followed 20 minutes behind. Tomala and Botor would remain at Camp 1 and relay messages along the intercontinental chain.

Each man carried a two-way radio. All they took were spare mittens, sleeping pads, one bivy sack, one stove, one gas canister, a meal of dehydrated food, and a first-aid kit. Hanging off their harnesses were six ice screws, several carabiners and a belay device and jumar for each. Binding them together would be one 50-meter half rope. They also took 50 meters of five-millimeter prussik cord. The only non-essential item they took was a bottle of oxygen for the stranded climbers.

As he entered the notorious Kinshofer Couloir, Bielecki had a moment of doubt. Two years before—the year that his team, Revol and Mackiewicz's team, and Moro's team were vying for Nanga's first winter ascent—he had found himself in the same place. On January 12, 2016, a day with middling visibility, Bielecki was hacking his way up the couloir's cloudy ice when the old, abandoned

fixed rope he was clipped into broke. Even with Daniele Nardi belaying him on a back-up rope, Bielecki fell 80 meters. Miraculously, he was unhurt.

"The doubt just lasted a second," Bielecki says. "I was like, *O.K., they're up there, and they need our help.* So I just started climbing."

Urubko led the way in the couloir and set a furious pace. As they simul-climbed, the men's calves burned from nonstop frontpointing. They jumped between raised runnels of firn plastered to the ice like candle wax. Bielecki paused a third of the way up to ditch the oxygen bottle; the extra weight was too much to keep up with Urubko.

They stopped for a short 15-minute break at around 5,900 meters, then turned their attention to the Kinshofer Wall—100 meters of vertical rock and ice and the crux of the route—directly above. Each clipped his lone jumar onto the best of the sun-bleached fixed ropes he could find, and half-juggled, half-climbed with an ice tool in one hand.

Cresting the wall not long after midnight, they estimated they were two-thirds of the way to Revol. They continued slogging. Botor and Tomala had radioed up with news that Revol was descending. No one knew precisely where she was—her GPS had died.

Around Camp 2, Urubko heard screaming ahead of him in the darkness. "Adam! Adam! I can hear her!" he yelled back to his partner.

Bielecki says, "I was sure it must be a mistake. The wind was too strong—how could Denis hear her over it?—and Elisabeth could not be so low." They were at 6,026 meters and had been climbing for over eight consecutive hours.

But a couple of minutes later Bielecki could see Revol in the white glow cast by Urubko's headlamp. He heard Urubko yell again, this time, "I have her, I have her!"

A Death Sentence

As the disembodied headlamp approached, Revol stopped dead. A voice emerged from the darkness: "Elizabeth"—a pause, as Urubko caught his breath in the snowflake-flecked blackness—"nice to see you." After sprinting up 1,200 vertical meters, the two Poles met Revol at about 1:50 a.m., January 28.

Bielecki says, "I almost cried. I was so relieved to see her in good shape." Revol was shocked to see any rescuers at all, let alone her old friend Adam Bielecki. His first question to her after hugs and teary smiles: "Can Tomek walk on his own?" Revol explained what Mackiewicz's condition had been when she left him 56 hours prior.

"It was like a death sentence," he says. "I knew that, even if we could climb another 1,400 meters—which was pretty unlikely—we wouldn't be able to do anything for him. We wouldn't be able to carry him down if he couldn't walk."

In a bivy sack, the French, Polish and Russian alpinists shivered in unison for several hours and arose still in darkness. Urubko and Bielecki melted snow for water and cooked their one package of Peronin—a high-protein, chocolate-flavored liquid meal. At the first sign of the sun rising, its rays gold-plating the Diamir Glacier to the west, the trio started down.

Bielecki had a second moment of doubt atop

"It was like a death sentence," he says. "I knew that, even if we could climb another 1,400 meters—which was pretty unlikely—we wouldn't be able to do anything for him. We wouldn't be able to carry him down if he couldn't walk."

the Kinshofer Wall. "I knew we'd have to lower [Revol] on a rope all the way down," he says. "It was difficult to imagine doing that when you couldn't take your big gloves off for more than 10 seconds." Bielecki rappelled on the team's single half-rope, and Urubko lowered Revol on the thin prusik cord. In the couloir, Urubko would downclimb the fixed ropes and put in an ice screw, at which point Bielecki would lower Revol to him.

When the trio finally reached Tomala and Botor, the choppers were waiting. At 1:30 p.m., the helicopters carried everyone to Skardu.

Nanga Dreams

The storm arrived as expected on the 28th, preventing further helicopter recons. Mackiewicz could not be saved.

Revol flew from Skardu to Islamabad, where she received medical attention for her frostbitten extremities. The four Polish rescuers accompanied her, spent a short time recuperating, and then transferred back to K2.

Reflecting on the rescue, both Bielecki and Urubko display a modest nonchalance. Urubko

says that with all rescues "the main goal is to reach the victim as fast as possible, to help with first aid, and to descend to a safe place. So there wasn't really anything particularly new in this rescue." Bielecki acknowledges that it was all "a bit surreal," but says, ultimately, the rescue felt like "an ordinary climb. ... We just went and did our job."

Solidarity from fellow climbers and good Samaritans the world over was astonishing. A GoFundMe campaign to cover the helicopter deposit raised over \$157,000 from more than 6,500 individual contributions in mere days. (The extra funds were later set up as a trust for Mackiewicz's children.)

Bielecki and Urubko briefly became media darlings. Their speed on the Kinshofer Couloir and Kinshofer Wall is unmatched in any season. If there were any critics left regarding Bielecki's motivations in the mountains, he quieted them. The K2 expedition finished without fanfare in early March—the second-highest mountain on earth still unclimbed in winter.

Revol, though in need of a rescue, turned in a flabbergasting performance. She became only the second woman to climb an 8,000er in winter. When Mackiewicz—80 kilograms—said he was blind and frostbitten at the summit, Revol—just 40 kilograms—managed to bring him down 900 meters. Masha Gordon says, "I have no doubt, 100 percent sure, that she would have been able to successfully get down had it not been for the tragedy with [Mackiewicz]."

One year after the ordeal, Revol, now 38, has recovered from her physical injuries but is still loathe to discuss them: "I don't want to talk about frostbite. It's personal. It's very rough, my way back." But there is a way back: she is biking and hiking and spending a lot of time outside. The emotional wounds run deeper though. She says, "This will color my life forever."

Once again, Revol has taken a hiatus from climbing. "I know that I will return to the mountains, but I don't know when," she says. "For me, winter expeditions are finished. But when you step foot in the Himalayas, it's an amazing world. I know probably I will need a lot of time after the drama on Nanga Parbat—maybe two, three, four years. I don't know. But I imagine I will go back. Right now I dream about these mountains."

The *Mackiewicz-Revol Route* is the first and only alpine-style line ever forged up an 8,000-meter peak in winter.

Michael Levy is associate editor at Rock and Ice.