

Mathias Zdarsky, the Pioneer of Alpine Skiing

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SOME months ago the message arrived that Mathias Zdarsky passed away on June 20, 1940, aged 85 years, in Sanct Poelten near Vienna. There is no doubt that he belongs to the great personalities of his time. If nowadays skiing has become a sport of universal interest, then certainly it is due in large part to the merit of this singularly energetic man.

There are many discoveries of fundamental importance for which we are unable to name the inventors. For example, we do not know who invented the axe, the wheel, or the chair. However, without those inventions no modern technics, no comfort could be possible, yet deserving inventors themselves are completely forgotten.

Today there are many thousand men and women in the United States and Canada who every winter enjoy the delights of skiing, without knowing whom they have to thank for such an incomparable pleasure.

It is well known, of course, that the Scandinavian nations in the dawn of history knew the use of the ski, but they employed them just for hunting or as a means of transportation. Fridtjof Nansen, the famous explorer of the Arctic, made use of them on his memorable crossing of Greenland, as described in his book, *In Night and Ice*.

At that time there lived on his country estate high up in the Traisen Valley near Lilienfeld in Austria a very peculiar man called Mathias Zdarsky. He was a teacher and an artist. As the Board of Education did not show any appreciation for his progressive methods of physical education, he early retired to his voluntary hermitage in order to live exclusively and undisturbed for his own taste. During the winters of the '90s, with their abundance of snow, he had considerable difficulties when climbing up and down the steep slopes where his house was situated.

In those times he read Nansen's book and bethought himself of adapting the long Norwegian ski to the precipitous declivities of the

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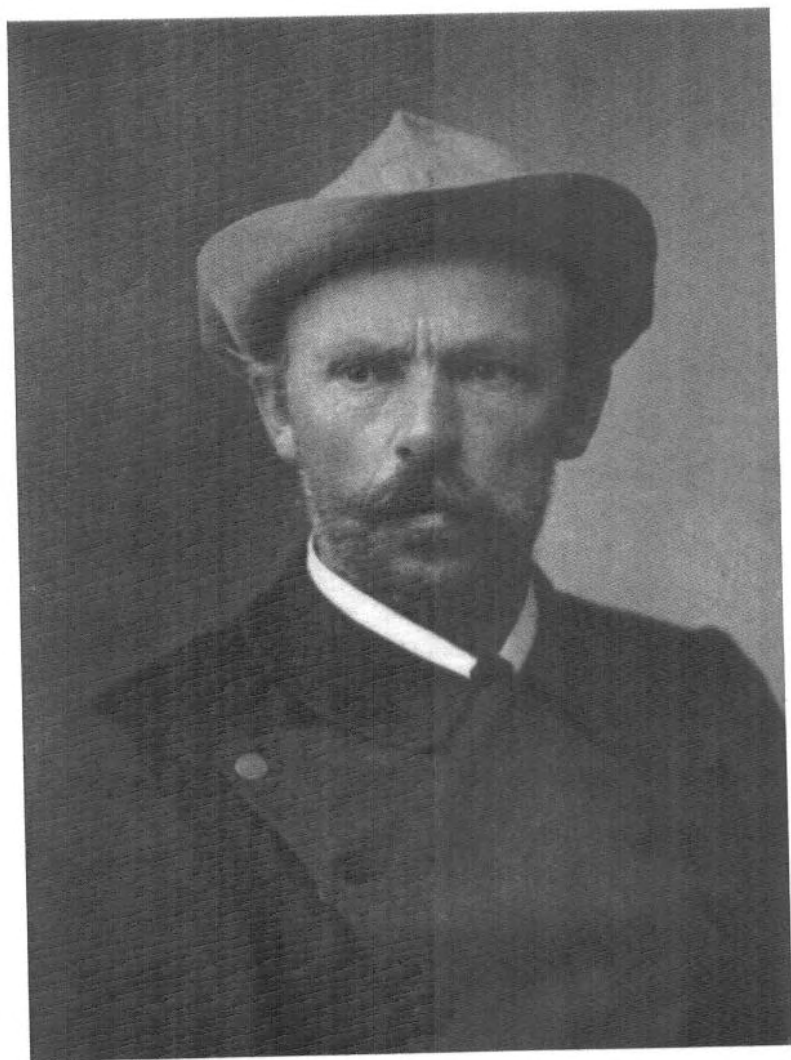
Austrian Alps. Very soon he recognized the unfitness of the weak binding made of bamboo, but it took him a long time and he needed more than 200 models before his well-known metal binding was finished. Constructed strictly on physical laws, he laid out his *Alpine (Lilienfeld) Ski Technique* which was printed in 1896 and followed by 13 reprints.

He gathered his friends and pupils within the Alpen-Skiverein, which he founded in 1900, and trained in numerous courses many thousands of skilled ski-runners. I was fortunate not only to attend in 1910 one of the classes he held personally, but to gain the friendship of this extraordinary man. The thoroughness he used when teaching the "white art" could not be imitated. He educated his disciples to intensive study of nature, to logical habits of life and to evasion of Alpine dangers.

Zdarsky himself was a tall, strong and healthy man. He never drank or smoked, he was a practiced gymnast, an expert swimmer. His mind and his body were balanced in a wonderful harmony. He felt happy if he could let others share in his experiences. Disinterested in money-making he never took any fee for his exertions; he lodged and treated his pupils in his self-constructed country house, sometimes for weeks.

Frequently he guided his parties on ski tours of most difficult degrees in different parts of the Alps. He arranged ski courses in the Sudeten and Carpathians, too. Finally he taught as a tutor in the Austrian-Hungarian army and received an imperial decoration for his success. In spite of being over 60 at the outbreak of the Great War, Zdarsky did not hesitate a moment to put his rich experiences to the benefit of the army as an Alpine expert. On February 28th, 1916, while doing rescue work at the Italian front, he was caught by a huge avalanche and completely covered. He suffered many fractures and thanks only to his bodily power of resistance and his iron will he remained alive.

Zdarsky's successes were not confined to skiing only. During the three decades of our friendship I had many opportunities to admire him as a great philosopher. His general erudition was amazing. He was an artist, engineer, architect, physician, biologist and domestic scientist. But what made him even more worthy of love was his infinite kind-heartedness and his inexhaustible, caustic humor. When ascending the mountains, he taught me to observe the apparently most unimportant things, strictly to prevent



MATHIAS ZDARSKY AT THE AGE OF FIFTY-TWO (1908)

me from mischief. He compared nature in its greatness as well as in its smallness. Macrocosmos—microcosmos! Had Zdarsky had no other achievement than the invention of the Zdarsky tent, he would well deserve lasting memorial. This sack, though extremely simple, has saved many lives.

Mountaineering was my hobby from my early childhood. The favorable situation of the city of Vienna, the short distance from the Styrian, Carinthian, Tyrolese, Bavarian, Italian and Swiss Alps gave me a welcome opportunity to climb in summer and to ski in winter. That is not difficult, because most of the valleys are accessible by train or automobile; many well-kept trails lead to the sheltering huts and all the distances are shorter than in the United States or Canada. Therefore, I could spend several weeks of each year in the mountains. As in winter there is plenty of snow in the Austrian Alps, I was privileged to learn skiing rather thoroughly; so what is called here a "sitzmark," now occurs very rarely. We used to race downhill with high speed, and the steeper the slope the more we enjoyed it. The most beautiful ski-tours are over the snowfields of the large glaciers, because there are no obstacles, but it requires a good deal of experience to avoid the dangerous crevasses. Skiing in Austria has developed into a highly popular sport. Especially at the holidays, Christmas and Easter, the cities are abandoned.

During the World War I had many opportunities to make use of ski at the Russian and Italian fronts. This was an important task, for in the mountain regions the summits and passes had to be watched carefully all through the year, to be guarded from surprises. That could only be done by ski-runners, for infantrymen would sink too deep into the snow. However, one must not think that ski-runners in groups may be used as fighting troops. Perhaps this was possible in some flat regions of Finland. High up in the mountains they can be used successfully only as patrols or connecting links.