

A climber in a blue jacket and green pants stands on a snowy mountain peak, looking towards the camera. The background shows a vast, hazy mountain range under a blue sky with light clouds.

STORIES

FROM

THE EDGE

REINHOLD MESSNER

WORDS: HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON // PHOTOGRAPHY: MESSNER ARCHIVES

8,000 is an insignificant number for most. Yet utter it in the presence of mountaineers and watch as their eyes light up, for the 14 peaks that exceed this number can define a lifetime. Each summit reaches like a gnarled fin towards the stratosphere and beckons the adventurous forth; with each purposeful step they ascend into the death zone, where there is not enough oxygen to sustain life for long. To climb just one of these peaks is a feat of human endurance. To summit all of them crosses another boundary altogether. So, as I wait patiently on the phone for the first person to ascend all 14 peaks to answer, my mind is awash with both awe and intrigue. I hear a heavy South-Tyrolian accent down the line, and I snap back to reality. 'Hello, this is Reinhold Messner.'

Messner was raised in South Tyrol, a culturally and

politically disputed pocket of primarily German-speaking Italians in the heart of the Alps. 'I grew up in a big family of nine children in a small valley where the priest dictated what we had to do,' he tells me. 'Mountaineering was the possibility to be free. Mountaineering was my childhood.' His father, Josef, a keen hobbyist climber, first took Messner into the Alps as an infant. By the age of five, he had summited his first 3,000m peak. This natural aptitude was pushed further when his brother Günther, 20 months his junior, began climbing too. By their early teens, they were a formidable duo and soon surpassed their father. 'We did the big wall on the Kaiserspitze (3,095m), which he could not do all his years,' he chuckles even now, some 60 years later. 'We really thought we were climbers. We were so naive, but we had the instinct.' ▶▶

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This instinct led to 500 climbing tours in the Eastern Alps, including a host of free-solo ice climbs and more than 50 first ascents, some of which have never been repeated. ‘I did the most difficult rock climbing of the time. I did the most difficult ascents and the most difficult ice climbs,’ he says without arrogance. ‘My seventh sense, my instinct, grew by going naively into the mountains to climb big walls.’ In doing so, the brothers almost single-handedly defined a renaissance of the golden age of alpinism. By the age of 18, Messner was hungry to push his boundaries further. He met Peter Habeler, with whom he would later climb Everest, and became an apprentice in advanced alpinism. ‘Peter was the best at the time and taught me what I didn’t know,’ he says. ‘In ‘69, I went to South America, to the Cordillera Huayhuash, and from this period on I became a high-altitude specialist.’

Messner’s fateful first ascent of Nanga Parbat’s Rupal Face with Günther in the spring of 1970 has been well documented. Over the years, arguments surrounding egotism, deceit, and abandonment spread through both the climbing community and mainstream media. Yet two facts remain: it marked Messner’s first successful summit of an 8,000er, and it marked the death of his brother. ‘That moment changed my whole life and my whole approach to the mountains,’ he tells me. ‘The tension, the absolute tension, was whether we could survive or not. We tried to survive, and, in the end, I was lucky, and my brother was unlucky.’

His recollection of the time is prosaic and considered. And while this event could easily have changed both his attitude and ability – he lost seven toes to frostbite – it did not, and he continued to pursue adventure. ‘I knew I’d never be a good rock climber again, because without toes it’s much more difficult,’ he says with a chuckle, ‘so I

specialised in high-altitude climbing instead.’ In the years that followed, he ticked off a seemingly endless series of mountaineering firsts: Everest without supplementary oxygen, Everest solo, Nanga Parbat solo; Gasherbrum I, K2, Cho You, and Dhaulagiri all in alpine style – the list goes on.

So, what drove this obsession? ‘Curiosity is part of it,’ he says. ‘You’re not addicted to it – you don’t get sick if you cannot do it, but you also know you can get better spiritual and psychological experiences by doing it.’ Perhaps this goes some way to explain just why he continued to push the boundaries of human endeavour; was it a spiritual and psychological battle with his antagonist, death, and the mountains as their amphitheatre? But I also wonder whether mountaineering offered a way in which to connect with his lost brother, as if each ascent became a spiritual journey to bring life into the shadowlands and closer to Günther. As he writes in *The Naked Mountain*, a first-hand account of his ascent of Nanga Parbat, ‘for it was there that I experienced, quite clearly, how Life and Death first occurred... [it] remains in my memory as the story of my own death and at one and the same time the impossible story of my survival.’

Mountains have always held spiritual significance, and, for Messner, they are intertwined with what it means to be human. ‘You become part of nature,’ he says, ‘and nature is the dictating power. When we go [to the mountains], we know without intellectual discussions; our instinct dictates what we have to do, like human beings 10,000 years ago.’ Mountains offer the opportunity to reconnect with our primal being, with the raw, unrefined time when merely existing was an adventure, and this is cardinal to Messner’s philosophy today. ‘Adventure means to survive,’ he tells me. ‘It is the art of surviving.’

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Of all pursuits, mountaineering is the pinnacle of this art form, for it teeters on the edge of possibility. He explains that over the past 250 years, half of the leading climbers in the world have died in the mountains, and he's quick to add that it is not only the best who survive. He recounts the names of the late Hansjörg Auer, David Lama, Jess Roskelley, and Ueli Steck. 'For these many, many losses, there is no positive to defend our activity,' he says. 'I would never tell young people to follow me... [but] the biggest value of the mountains is to be there on your own, in your own responsibility, like adventurers thousands of years ago.'

If survival is the art form, then surely Messner is the maestro. In fear of repeating himself on the canvas of mountaineering, he turned his attention to a series of world-first overland adventures: the first longitudinal crossing of Greenland, the first crossing of Antarctica by foot, and the crossing of the Gobi and Taklamakan deserts. It's ironic, then, that a broken heel bone sustained when attempting to climb over a wall in one of his two castles signalled the end of this creative expression.

Our conversation flows into debate, and I come to learn first-hand of Messner's famously conspicuous attitude towards climbing, mountains, and those who go to them. In 1971, at the age of 26, he first expounded his opinions in *The Murder of the Impossible*, a forthright essay on the progression of climbing. 'Who has polluted the pure spring of mountaineering?' he wrote. Today, he remains as moved. 'Most climbers book their ascent of Mont Blanc or Everest,' he says. 'It is now tourism because a tourist goes to a place where there's an infrastructure and where he can enjoy his holidays.' I laugh, but I also appreciate just what impact his unfaltering thoughts have had – and what he continues to do for the mountains. He spent five years as MEP representing South Tyrol and the Italian Green Party, where he championed environmental policies. He's written countless books, produced numerous documentary and feature films, and his six Messner Mountain Museums aim to educate people on the history, culture, and ever-morphing nature of mountains. 'Nature is the rule giving dimension to life,' he says. 'Wilderness is getting less and less, and I feel a responsibility.' At 76 years old, his next expedition has nothing to do with pushing boundaries, but instead aims to bring a lifetime of knowledge to communities around the world in the hope of eliciting intrigue and change through storytelling. In evidence of this, and before our call ends, he regales me with his greatest memory from the mountains: the summit hour on K2 with Michael Dascher in 1979.

After a gruelling ascent through treacherously deep snow, Messner and Dascher reached the summit much later in the day than they had hoped. 'As we approached the last 200m, we both thought that there would be no time to reach the summit,' he says, 'but we just made it.' As they did, the last of the clouds dispersed and they sat on the peak to gaze over the limitless horizon east across China and west across Pakistan. Dusk light flooded the Karakoram Range. The Savage Mountain cast a lone shadow into the basin below. Atop the shadow, Messner saw himself – a minute silhouette over 20km away. 'It was the feeling of sitting on top of the world,' he remembers fondly. 'And it was the only time I ever had this feeling.'

Photos courtesy of the Messner Archive
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