



CESARE MAESTRI, 1929 – 2021

Cesare Maestri was born in Trento, Italy, in 1929, where as a child he began to climb the walls of buildings and electrical poles—more than a few of these ascents resulted in falls, scratches, and hospital visits. During World War II, the young Maestri joined partisans fighting the Germans. After the war, Cesare's father sent him to Rome to study the history of art, but after two years, unsatisfied, he returned to Trento. It was then that Cesare began to climb, as a way to escape the daily societal stresses in the aftermath of the war.

According to many sources, he climbed about 3,500 routes in his life, a third of them solo. The Dolomites were his stage: In 1950, at the age of 21, he burst onto the scene by soloing Via Preuss at Campanile Basso. His first solo ascents of the Solda-Conforto Route (650m, 5.9 A2) on the Marmolada and the Guides' Route on the Crozzon di Brenta was, both in 1953, were world renowned. In the style of Paul Preuss, he descended many routes without ropes, down-soloing them after he free soloed to the top; he down-soloed routes up to UIAA VI (about 5.10-) on Crozzon di Brenta and Sass Maor. He made a solo winter ascent of the southwest ridge of the Matterhorn. The list goes on.

Maestri also mastered aid climbing and started inventing new gear suitable for hard climbs in the Dolomites, including aid ladders with metal steps, special pitons, and lighter ropes. He used any means necessary—including bolts—to establish new direttissimas. On the one hand he loved Preuss' pure style, but on the other he embraced extreme aid climbing. He loved the "persona" ascribed to him and gave dramatic accounts of his climbs, and for the general public he became known as the "Spider of the Dolomites"—a volcanic, contradictory but also very human character.

Maestri's many accomplishments were overshadowed by the controversies around his two climbs on Cerro Torre in Patagonia. In 1959, he claimed he had climbed to the summit via the east and north faces with Toni Egger and that, while descending, Egger was wiped out by an avalanche. Doubts soon arose, and Maestri issued a whirlwind of ferocious polemics against the growing chorus of detractors. He returned to Cerro Torre in 1970, this time on the southeast ridge, where he placed hundreds bolts using a heavy gas-powered compressor—which he left hanging on the wall—and descended from just below the summit mushroom.

For the rest of his life, Maestri refused to explain more about his 1959 Cerro Torre climb, which is not accepted by today's climbing community. Tragically, the Cerro Torre controversy entangled Maestri like a spider caught in his own web. But his many critics sometimes went too far, exaggerating his transgressions and crossing the boundaries of common sense and respect. In my personal journey of reading and learning about this complex character, the following passage, from Maestri's book *Two-thousand Meters of Our Life*, is how I shall remember him, as it captures both his divisiveness and passion:

I have always been an advocate of the principle according to which every mountaineer should be free to go to the mountains as he pleases: day or night, with pegs or without, to find God or deny him, for comfort or despair. By doing so we would have as many forms of mountaineering as there are people who go to the mountains, and no single form would preclude or lessen any of the others.

— Federico Bernardi

Images



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