



Roman Laba, 1944–2022

Clearly, Providence was in force in July 1967 at the south face of Denali as four climbers in their early 20s stood at the base scrutinizing a sequence of ascending buttresses, black and menacing, that finished 5,000 feet higher on the summit plateau. Three of them had considerable alpine experience. The fourth, Roman Laba, was a weekender at New York's Shawangunk cliffs whose experience may have included a 200-foot snow gully on New Hampshire's Mt. Washington.

Nonetheless, they all acquitted themselves well, tackling a route that for risk and technical difficulty far outclassed the Cassin Ridge, climbed in 1961 by half a dozen seasoned Italians. Over 27 days, the four climbers endured -20°F temperatures, 70 mph winds, and scores of avalanches. Their South Face Direct would remain the hardest on Denali for a decade or more.

The following year Roman tried the Supercanaleta on Cerro Chaltén (Fitz Roy) with John Hudson, getting almost to the top before being stormed off. Subsequently they made the first ascent of the west ridge of Huayna Potosí (19,996') in Bolivia's Cordillera Real. After this, the pair went north, bent on a new line on Huascarán. While camped on a glacier at the base, the very accomplished Hudson went for a stroll and died in a crevasse fall. In France, Roman teamed up with Polish ace Andrzej Mroz on half a dozen failed attempts at winter ascents in the Alps. In 1974, he and I climbed two new routes in the Real, the northwest ridge of Huayna Potosí and the south face of Illimani (21,201').

Roman and I returned to the altiplano the following year, spent a night in Puno, and then caught a ride south along Lake Titicaca toward La Paz in an open truck. Here, Roman had one of his finest hours. Our fellow passengers were a gaggle of Quechua peasant damsels and a group of uniformed soldiers on furlough for the weekend, who soon ragged and teased the girls, encircling and pressing closer and fingering their clothes. As the males' circle tightened around the prettiest, she bent down, took off her flat-soled shoe and, yelling, flailed ineffectually at the ragger-in-chief's (RIC) chest. He twisted the shoe out of her grasp, raised his hand, and came down hard on her head. Thwack! She let out a piercing yell.

Roman, who'd been curled up in a far corner with a terrible headache, jumped to his feet, strode to the front, pushed his way into the melee, and went toe to toe with RIC. He yelled first in Latin (showing the effects of altitude) then in Spanish. "What kind of a man are you? Do all the brave soldiers of the Peruvian army molest defenseless women? Why not pick on someone your own size? Me!" He pointed to his chest and took up a boxing stance.

Certain he'd provoked a fight, I began unleashing ice axes from our packs. Facing Roman, the RIC was puzzled at the crazy, fist-waving gringo. Whereupon a girlish giggling broke the tension, then laughter swept through all. RIC returned the shoe, and Roman scuttled back to me. "Did you not realize there were nine of them? They might have beaten the hell out of us?" I asked. "No," he said, nonchalantly but smiling broadly. "I never counted them."

It would be the last smile for many a day. That night, in the shoreline village of Copacabana, he came down with serious altitude sickness. Next morning, there being no taxis available, I rented a 22-seat bus, laid him prostrate and mute in the center aisle, and four hours later we pulled up at the emergency room of a downtown La Paz hospital—he was within a couple of hours of dying.

In 1980, Roman had the Zelig-like experience of finding himself caught in a pivotal moment of history. On the hunt for a Ph.D. topic, he happened to visit the Lenin Shipyards in Gdansk, Poland, at the very moment workers were organizing an unprecedented revolt that would, in the end, help topple the communist state. For the two best years of his life, he was the clandestine scholar archivist of the Solidarity trade union. The adventure came to an abrupt end when he was picked up by the secret police, jailed and interrogated as a spy, then booted out of Poland, a story told in a 5,000-word profile in the *New Yorker* (December 20, 1982). His book, *The Roots of Solidarity* (Princeton, 1991), made quite a stir when he showed how the spark and nurturance of the revolt came from the workers, not the intellectuals.

Roman, who died of a brain tumor last December, was born under circumstances with an uncanny resonance to current events. On November 20, 1944, in Germany, his mother gave birth while in flight to the West—less fearful of the dangers of wartime Nazi Germany than of what the advancing Red Army would do to her village in Ukraine. He came to the U.S. as a child after the war.

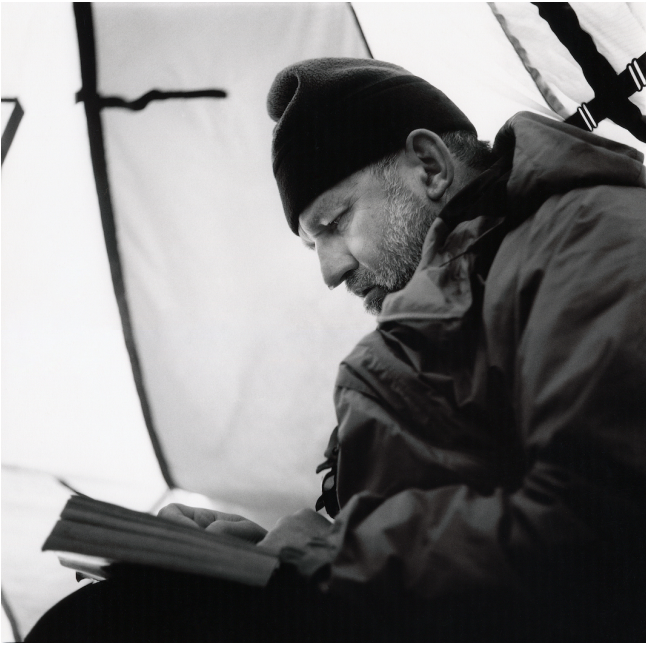
Roman earned his Ph.D. in political science in 1989 and had research gigs at Harvard, the Hoover Institution, and U.C. Santa Clara. A nasty tenure fight at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey disillusioned him with academia and led to an unhappy period in his life.

Later, Roman developed a second career, teaching at a community college in Albany, New York, and leading scores of exigent hikes for a devoted clientele from the Adirondack Mountain Club. He was their Pied Piper in the Julian Alps, Bernina, Dolomites, Corsica, Maritime Alps, and Pyrenees, the latter of which he'd traversed the length on both sides of the frontier. They, like most who knew him, will remember his amazing stamina, intellectual brilliance, generosity, and gift for friendship.

About a year ago, he emailed me about that incident with the soldiers on the shore of Lake Titicaca: "I'm taken with the way everything fits into a literary trope. I was Don Quixote for a day, and you, John, Sancho Panza, the voice of realism, aware this would end with us bleeding and broken and thrown out of that truck," he wrote. He further reflected that his life had not been an altogether happy one. That day, however, was different. "It's a relief that I can recount this incident with pleasure and satisfaction. I was Don Quixote for one day. And it was great."

— **John Thackray**

Images



Roman Laba during a ski tour in the Sierra Nevada in 1999, reading Rousseau (in French).

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