Devil of the Dolomites

The Ground-Breaking Climbs of Tita Piaz

Giovanni Battista "Tita" Piaz (1879–1948) is one of the most fascinating climbers of the early 20th century, and it is surprising there is so little literature in English on his extraordinary climbing career. Piaz explored new realms of speed climbing, soloing, guiding, and rescue work. In the first decade of the 20th century, he was part of a growing cadre of technical climbers who set new standards on long climbs in the Eastern Alps, for which the envisioning of an inobvious line was a key skill, along with technical rope and piton skills.

Recently, I've been researching Piaz's and other early climbers' contributions to the evolution of mountaineering tools and techniques. This work has been facilitated by online access to the journals of various international alpine clubs, as well as out-of-print books, including Piaz's own memoir, Mezzo Secolo D'Alpinismo ("Half a Century of Alpinism," 1947). Among Piaz's more than 50 first ascents of wild spires and steep walls, his 1908 ascent of the west wall of the Totenkirchl in the Austrian province of Tyrol stands out as a model for future big-wall ascents. In this article, we will examine Piaz's innovative use of climbing technology, and how his experience and expertise led him to one of the truly ground-breaking climbs of the early 20th century.

EARLY DAYS

Tita Piaz was born in 1879 in the hamlet of Pera di Fassa, below the Vajolet Towers and the Rosengarten (Catinaccio) massif in the heart of the Dolomites. During the majority of his climbing career, this area (now part of northern Italy) was in Austria-Hungary, where many of the big rock climbing breakthroughs in the early 1900s took place. In the Western Alps, centered on the Mont Blanc massif, cutting- edge climbers were also exploring steep rock routes, but tended to shun mechanical aids, instead preferring to fix short ropes on the most difficult sections. But in the Eastern Alps, the Dolo- mites and Tyrol, more climbers were experimenting with new tools and techniques. The use of pitons remained controversial, but with notable exceptions, the relevant question for leading climbers wasn't whether to use them but how to use them in a sporting way.

The new techniques were making it possible to climb some of the largest expanses of vertical rock in the Alps with increased safety. After a breakthrough ascent of the 300-meter Campanile Basso spire in 1899 by two young Austrians, made possible by pitons, the new century was kicked off by the first ascent of the 650-meter south wall of the Marmolada in 1901. English climber Beatrice Tomasson organized the first ascent with guides Bortolo Zagonel and Michele Bettega, and their route was a prize: a clear next step in big-wall climbing due to its size, altitude, and prominent location in the mountain landscape.

Piaz was drawn to the cliffs and spires above his home and started soloing short climbs as a young child. The Catinaccio, the major landmark peak above his village, and the Vajolet Towers, a set of dramatic spires of dolomitic limestone, both were natural targets, and as a teenager he began climbing some of the easier summits and spires. In 1897, Piaz and two friends, equipped with plenty of grappa but no rope, made their way up the Catinaccio. The following year, Piaz joined up with a local friend, Antonio Schrott, for one of his first roped climbs, the western Vajolet Tower (Torre Delago), first climbed in 1894. At the time, it was considered one of the hardest climbs in the Alps, and only a few of the best guides and climbers had dared repeat it. The only thing Piaz knew of the route was that there was a difficult smooth chimney that required good technique—of which he knew

nothing. Piaz writes about squirming up the chimney like a snake, at his limit, only making it thanks to his gymnastic abilities and grit: “Arriving at the summit with the last breath that remained in my body, I screamed to the universe, ‘The world belongs to the brave!’ ”

Later, in response to doubts from an established guide that Piaz could have climbed Torre Delago, Piaz boasted that he could and would climb a prominent and fearsome unclimbed line on the Rosengarten. Piaz aspired to be a professional guide and recalls in his book that he searched for an unclimbed tower that could carry his name after the first ascent—“Piazturm!” (Piaz Tower)—so that clients would rush from all corners of the world for the “honor of attaching themselves to my rope.” He posted a bold notice at the Vajolet Hut: “First climb of the North Pillar of Rosengarten; difficulties not much higher than Torre Stabeler” and advertised a fee for guiding the new route—even though he hadn’t yet climbed it.

Piaz first summited the pillar from the northeast (the eventual descent route), and then, while attempting the first ascent of the 300-meter north buttress, methodically climbed up to a roof crux and back down for further review. Theodor Christomannos, the secretary of the German and Austrian Alpine Club, witnessed one of these forays. Back at the hut, Christomannos put some coins in Piaz’s hand, and said, “Dear Piaz, buy yourself some decent climbing shoes and you’ll be able to do it.” Piaz’s subsequent solo first ascent of the route set a new standard for boldness and difficulty, with a 5.7 or 5.8 lieback around a roof—the route was one of the hardest free climbs in the Alps for some years. But it was not to be named Piazturm, as honor demanded “his” tower be named by a partner, not by himself. Instead, he named it Punta Emma, after the Vajolet hutkeeper’s assistant, Emma Della Giacoma, whom he first took up the easier route to the summit.

In alpine journals, Piaz had read about the Guglia di Brenta/Campanile Basso, farther west in the Dolomites; the striking photographs of the spire gave him the chills. Each successful ascent—amid many failed attempts—eclipsed all other climbing news, “even the south wall of Marmolada,” Piaz wrote. “Clearly this (climb) was more technically difficult and required greater courage, (so) I decided to try it too.”

Piaz and Franz Wenter from Tiers climbed Campanile Basso with the idea of testing its suitability for potential clients, and their “first Italian ascent” was celebrated widely. Piaz noted: “We reached the summit in a shorter time than all our predecessors,” finding the route, especially a key traverse, very acrobatic and more difficult than anything on his home Vajolet Towers.

CLIMBING PROWESS

Piaz’s ascent of Campanile Basso no doubt expanded his awareness of pitons and protection systems used by Austrian climbers, but also brought the realization that he was one of the fastest climbers in the Dolomites.

One of Piaz’s early speed climbing adventures was a day in 1898 when he climbed seven summits near his home in eight hours, earning him his nickname, “Devil of the Dolomites.” He started the day by soloing a new route, diagonaling up the huge east wall of Catinaccio. On the descent, he met Luigi Bernard, who was guiding two clients up the easier main ridge, and gave a lively description of the east face’s challenges, whereupon Bernard replied, “Tu sei un demonio!” (“You are a devil!”). Piaz then bounded away, ropeless and literally running down the steep ridge. His solo routes that day included a 20-minute ascent of Torre Delago and the first ascent of a “little tower next to it,” later christened Torre Piaz. Back at the rifugio, he wrote, “A German gentleman inspected me a long time with his glasses, then solemnly said, ‘So this is what a devil looks like.’ ”

Piaz climbed the 600-meter south wall of the Marmolada via the Tomasson Route—a climb he guided many times—in 3 hours and 28 minutes, with his report emphasizing, “By no means was this speed at the expense of security.” In 1906, he climbed all three of the main Vajolet Towers in a record 1 hour and 37 minutes.

In his book, Piaz writes joyfully of the days of clocking vertical kilometers, often solo, but also with friends. In 1908, Piaz, with Ka the Bro ske and Rudolf Schietzold as ropemates, climbed the first traverse of six Vajolet towers from north to south, including a "frightening descent of 100m" that required swinging to a narrow ledge halfway up an overhanging wall.

MASTER RIGGER

What's clear looking at Piaz's early climbing years and achievements was that he became a master rigger and anchor engineer in the first decade of the 20th century, a time of lighter and stronger steel pitons, as well as improved rope construction, enabling a whole new realm of alpinism. The classic routes were increasingly equipped with strategic piton anchors for quick rappels and security at belays, enabling faster, more efficient climbing, and, most importantly for Piaz, greater safety with guided clients and on his frequent climbs with inexperienced friends and family. Piaz also pushed the boundaries of rope work with his rappels and Tyrolean traverses.

His most famous rappel was from the Campanile di Val Montanaia, not far from Belluno in the Eastern Dolomites. The spire overhangs on three sides, and was first climbed in 1902 by the mostly vertical south wall—and always descended the same way. Climbers at the time generally agreed that the descent was an integral part of any climb, and was navi- gated by the same path as the ascent. As Piaz's friend and peer Paul Preuss wrote, the "ability of a climber on the descent must be a deciding factor in the choice of route." Only short rappels were considered acceptable.

Piaz broke the norm. In July 1906, after leading the seventh ascent of the Campanile di Val Montanaia, he rigged a 38-meter free-hanging rappel on the overhanging north side. There were no harnesses or belay devices at the time—he abseiled with the "Kletterschluss" method, with the rope wrapped around a leg and clamped by the feet for braking, which required exceptional core strength. This long rappel involved swinging onto a tiny exposed ledge, where Piaz rigged another 20-meter rappel to the ground. It was an outrageous maneuver—at the time, most people climbed with only 30-meter ropes. Compared with reversing the ascent route, Piaz's innovative descent took a fraction of the time normally required to get down, and after this descent, the self-imposed ethic of always descending the same line as the ascent soon faded away.

The same month as the famous rappel, Piaz rigged the longest Tyrolean traverse in the Dolomites. A few years prior, in 1902, Antonio Dimai had "put the rock-climbing world upside down with an act of unparalleled recklessness with a kind of rope bridge to the Torre del Diavolo [in the Cristallo range near Cortina d'Ampezzo]. The details of the strange climb were not well known,nor were they very well understood," Piaz wrote, adding, it "pushed me turbulently to hunt for something similar to Dimai's witchcraft. I was looking for an inconceivable problem."

Piaz's search for a suitable challenge was rewarded: "As we walked towards the buttresses of the Cristallo, capricious luck smiled on my path in the form of a Dolomite apparition—a spire so untimely, slender, elegant and daring as to seem more than a needle."

Piaz set off for this spire, which he would soon christen the Guglia [spire] de Amicis, "equipped with an arsenal of cordage of all lengths and thicknesses, ropes, lanyards, and strings of 2–10mm thickness. Also, a good amount of perforated lead balls, about the size of a chicken egg. Curious equipment indeed!" For hours, Piaz tossed lead balls attached to a light cord toward the spire, 20 meters away, until at last one passed the right spot on the summit and down to an accomplice below. After pulling a full-strength rope across the gap and fixing it at the base of the tower, Piaz "passed like a monkey on the barely perceptible air bridge, fearfully suspended over the abyss."

This maneuver required expert rigging skills and successful countering of the high forces a tight Tyrolean traverse puts on its anchors. It is still one of the most famous Tyroleans in the world, though it garnered the inevitable criticism at the time. Piaz was having fun innovating new ways of climbing, and he wasn't much bothered by other's opinions.

The following year, Piaz returned to this spire with Ugo de Amicis, the son of the political author Edmondo de Amicis, for whom Piaz had named the spire. The two prepared and crossed the Tyrolean, and on the top of the spire, after pulling over their equipment in a pack, they pulled their ropes, too, committing to an uncharted rappel descent. Only a climber like Piaz would have staked such a bet on anchoring technology at the time; he rigged three steep rappels and their anchors to reach the ground. In contrast to relatively safe descents down previously climbed ground, descending into the unknown eventually became a key strategy for climbers in the Alps and beyond.

Piaz's climbing endeavors were often controversial, and his wild rappels and Tyroleans were dismissed by one influential writer as "contrived (and) outrageous rope maneuvers, gymnastic exercises that do not belong in the mountains." Some also considered his piton use as excessive, and later in life he admitted to sometimes overdoing it—"to tame a huge wall by means of complete equipment from a blacksmith's shop," as Paul Preuss put it. By all accounts, however, Piaz was himself a purist in terms as climbing as free as possible and using pitons only for anchors and protection, not for "hook by hook" progress up the wall. He dismissed excessive use of aid pitons as "devoid of modesty and dignity."

GUIDING

Piaz initially worked outside the official guiding system, risking censure in the guiding community. He eventually took the guide's course in Bolzano and became a sought-after Fu hrer ("leader"), with many epic stories of hard guided climbs in his autobiography and in journals. The famous guide Guido Rey wrote in 1914 of Piaz's adventurous spirit: "Not satisfied with having ascended the Towers of Vajolet three hundred times, in sunshine or in rain, he wished to attempt them by night under the stars; therefore he persuaded an American lady to join him, and soon, in the heart of a beautiful summer night, his lantern could be seen shining, a newly created star, on the topmost pinnacle."

Mountain guides at the time referred to the "sack of flour" technique ("Mehlsacktechnik") for assisting clients with the rope—essentially early friction-braking techniques that eventually evolved into standard belay methods. If the terrain was too steep for a client to downclimb, guides generally lowered them with the rope tied around their waist. For such adventures, secure anchors were essential. Piaz described a client accidentally becoming untied at the crux of the Winkler Route on the Vajolet Towers. "In a flash I fixed the rope to a nail (piton)," Piaz wrote. "I slipped down and found him...barely holding onto the problematic hold with his head dangling in the void.... To tie someone up in such a situation, you would need at least three hands, and I from my birth had only two. Yet I tied him up which still remains a mystery to me."

The rope was not just useful to his clients: In addition to performing the longest rappels, Piaz experienced one of the longest leader falls (that was survived) on the ropes and gear of the time. While guiding the south wall of the Marmolada in 1907, "At one point I flew and fell perpendicularly into the void for about ten meters, until a strong tightening of the rope around the ribs told me that my life would continue as before." Despite the successful action of his "life-saving partner," Piaz subsequently had nightmares about the fall and its potential consequences for himself and his client, and swore he would never again fall while climbing.

It had become clear that Piaz's mastery of anchor techniques and rope work were not just stunts. With his extensive experience of rigging ropes for Tyrolean traverses and rappels, and his understanding of the complex terrain of the Alpine limestone, he was ready to lead a breakthrough climb.

THE TOTENKIRCHL

The Totenkirchl is a striking stone monolith in the Kaiser Mountains, about a hundred kilometers south of Munich. Totenkirchl translates to "Church of the Dead," and from a distance it is an imposing feature on the landscape. The steep west face of Totenkirchl was for many years "the last great

problem" of the Eastern Alps, and several top climbers had made forays up the wall in search of a climbable route.

This area was considered the domain of the German-speaking "Munich School" climbers, and climbers from South Tyrol (today's Italy) rarely visited. Piaz was an exception. In October of 1908, Piaz began an epic 300-kilometer motorcycle trip from his home to Kufstein, traveling one of the first of the new roadways connecting the Tyrol regions, and with one of the first factory-produced touring motorbikes. He motored up to North Tyrol with Franz Schroffenegger, a Tiers mountain guide of repute, and in Kufstein they joined their North Tyrol teammates, a meeting of the tribes. Josef Klammer was an experienced alpinist and founder of the first mountain rescue team from Kufstein, and Rudolf Schietzold from Munich had made a committing abseil of the Totenkirchl's west wall from its second terrace the year before. This top-down inspection, according to Piaz, provided only limited information for the route they eventually followed; Schietzold initially had reported the face was "impossible" and warned against any attempt.

Soon the team began their 16-kilometer trek from Kufstein to the small community of Hinter-
ba renbad, where the Totenkirchl dominates the view. Piaz wrote, "At a glance I was surprised the (west wall of the Totenkirchl) had not yet been won, and I did not even have a flash of doubt that the attempt would not be in vain." Exploring the wall with binoculars, he immediately saw the precise line: "Do you see the little wall on the right, with a crack barely noticeable on the left? Well, I tell you we will pass by there, and I promise, if we do not, then I will become a barefoot friar." Sure enough, the line that Piaz envisioned from below turned out to be the climbable line of weakness.

They launched their ascent in mid-October. The line they followed starts out steeply, right off the ground, then meanders up ledge systems to the Parete Piaz (in German, the "Piazwandl"), a difficult 5.7/5.8 pitch about 200 meters off the ground, requiring good crack and laybacking skills. (Although there is debate about when layback techniques were developed—and by whom—this climbing skill is still called "Piaz-Tecnik" or "Piazen" in some European climbing areas.) Halfway up the wall, Piaz had envisioned a crucial 30-meter leftward traverse across a smooth wall to reach a chimney system. This pitch, which Schietzold led, was described as a long traverse up and left, then falling sharply downwards [with a "wall hook," or piton, to direct the rope] left into the chimney." Though Piaz himself preferred to focus more on the free climb- ing difficulty of the Parete Piaz in his recounting of the Totenkirchl ascent, this was the first tension traverse planned and executed as the key to a big-wall climb. Once they had regrouped in the chimney, the four men quickly reached the ridgeline atop the face.

Despite the first ascensionists' warning that "repetitions are not recommended for this route" due to its difficulty and danger, the west wall of the Totenkirchl quickly became a sought-after climb, with more than 30 ascents in the following five years. (The route is described today as having 16 or 17 pitches.) The key traverse was later free climbed without rope tension—as early as 1911, when Paul Preuss soloed the route, though it's unclear if Preuss used the rope he carried—but many still depended on tension for the traverse into the 1970s. Piaz and his companions had broken both technical and psychological barriers, and other difficult routes were soon established using ever-more complex rope and piton systems, including Hans Du lfer's more direct route up the west face of the Totenkirchl, climbed five years later in 1913.

Using ropes and anchors to move laterally across vertical rock eventually became known as the "Seilquergang" (the "rope traverse" technique), and in 1929, Karl Prusik referenced it as one of "six basic techniques" that should be taught to every climber. In the coming decades, the technique was used on other breakthrough climbs, including the first ascent of the north face of the Matterhorn in 1931 and of course the Hinterstoisser Traverse on the Eiger in 1936.

Perhaps a more important legacy than the rope traverse was the envisioning of a such a complex route through hostile, seemingly impassable terrain. After the Totenkirchl ascent, other big Alpine walls were eyed in a new way. No longer was a continuous line of obviously climbable rock needed.

By connecting distant cracks and other features with rope swings and other tactics, the impossible was made visible.

The Totenkirchl route in 1908 was one of Piaz's most influential climbs, but by no means were his contributions over. Along with his involvement in local theater, military and civic service, and with his family, he continued to establish cutting-edge ascents and optimize climbing tools and techniques throughout his long and adventurous career. He ran the Vajolet Hut and later built the nearby Preuss Hut, named in honor of Paul Preuss, who died in a soloing accident in 1913. Though he was good friends with Preuss and greatly respected the famous climbing purist, Piaz was a key counterpoint to Preuss' strong opinions in the famous "Piton Disputes," published in the German-Austrian alpine journals in 1911-12.

Piaz was a bold and brash climber who loved the limelight (though the boastful language in his writing often was tongue-in-cheek). His routes were held in high esteem among climbers in the Eastern Alps, and he was known to be generous with information about his climbs and techniques. Riccardo Cassin wrote of meeting Piaz in the Catinaccio group in the early 1930s and having "an immediate rapport." Said Cassin: "I grew to admire his limitless love of the mountains, his youthful spirit and his modesty about his own routes, his innovations in climbing techniques."

In 1947, the 50th anniversary of his first big climb on Catinaccio, Piaz's memoir was published and quickly sold out the first printing. He died a year later, at age 68, in a bicycling accident in Pera di Fassa. His legacy of exploration and innovation would long outlive him.

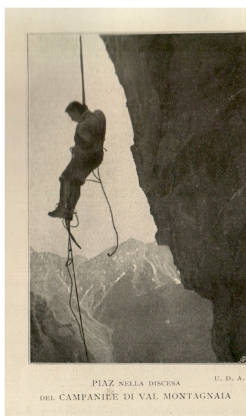
About the Author: John Middendorf has been interested in the engineering aspects of rock climbing equipment since he started climbing in 1974. Well-known for his big-wall tent designs, he personally tested his gear on some of the wildest walls of the world. His ongoing research and writing on the historical evolution of big-wall tools and techniques can be seen at bigwallgear.com.

Notes: Roy McClenahan provided invaluable assistance with the editing of this article. The historical photos reproduced here were scanned from several older works, including the Piaz autobiography *Mezzo secolo d'alpinismo* (1947), Guido Rey's *Alpinismo Acrobatico* (originally published in 1914), and *Meine Berge* by Luis Trenker (first published in 1931). Other images were shared by Alfredo Paluselli, author of *Il Diavolo generoso: La storia di Tita Piaz* (2018).

Images

The Totenkirchl team, posing after the climb. Franz Schroffenegger (sitting left) and Tita Piaz (center); Rudolf Schieitzold and Josef Klammer standing. When Klammer gave a lecture on the ascent in Munich, Piaz was “dragged to the podium...to expose the smallest details of the heroic enterprise: The world had to know how many times we yawned or felt the need to pee!”

Tita Piaz and his motorbike, on which he rode north to climb the Totenkirchl.



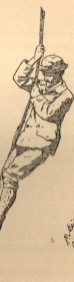
PIAZ NELLA DISCESA DEL CAMPANILE DI VAL MONTAGNAIA — U. D. A.

al collo la superba, e, afferrata la corda con piedi e mani, strascinandosi sospeso sulla profonda valle, giunge sulla guglia e le dà un nome: il nome onorato di Edmondo De Amicis. Egli ha compiuto in quel giorno una delle più belle follìe dell'alpinismo.

Non gli basta di essere salito le trecento volte, col sole o colla pioggia, alle torri di Vajolet;

sujet de la cheville, j'ajoute encore que huit jours auparavant, deux guides du pays et un touriste s'en étaient servis dans un sentiment de sécurité parfaite et que deux jours auparavant deux Anglais y avait passé sans incident. Mon compagnon et moi l'avions éprouvée au moyen d'une bonne secousse et avions la conviction qu'elle tenait bien.

La descente à la corde. — On passe la corde dans l'anneau (voir figure 14) en nouant ensemble les deux extrémités. Il est très dangereux de se tenir seulement avec les mains, à cause de la facilité de glissement. Pour une courte descente, il suffit de *freiner avec les pieds*. On entoure le bas de la jambe depuis l'extérieur, on fait passer la corde sous la semelle et on se sert de l'autre pied pour freiner sur la corde. Il faut descendre les mains, l'une après l'autre et non se laisser glisser. Prendre garde de ne pas lâcher les pieds avant d'être arrivé sur le sol.



La descente à la corde. (Rappel de corde)

Figure 15
Descente à la corde avec frein au moyen du pied

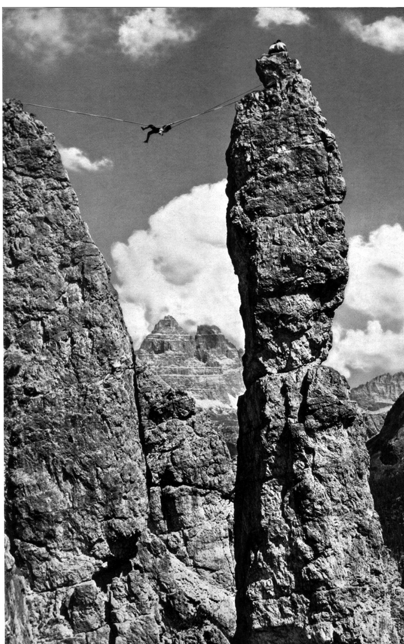
Figure 16
Façon de retenir avec les pieds

Cas 107. — Totenkirchl, 22 septembre 1907, Jahrbuch, S. A. C., XLIII, 359.

On the left: Piaz making his rappel descent from the Campanile di Val Montanaia, secured only by the friction of the ropes around a lower leg and his feet—a bold technique even without the difficulties of managing a stiff, tangled rope. On the right: an illustration of this forgotten technique.

“Casa naterna.” Tita Piaz’s first wife and family outside the home where he was born and raised in Pera di Fassa in the Dolomites.

Piaz with his second wife and a son.



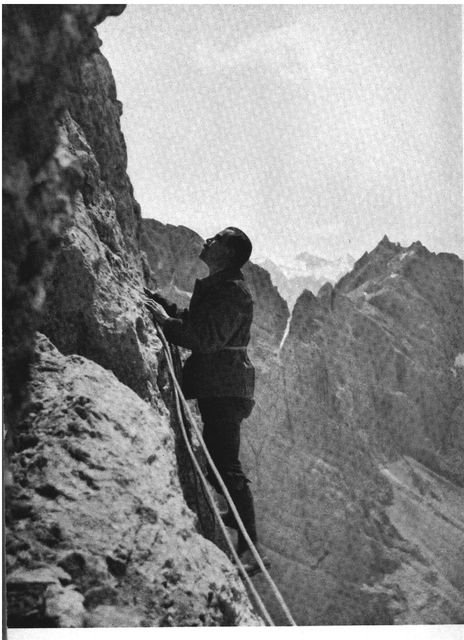
The famous Guglia de Amicis traverse, first done in 1906. (The date and participants in this photo

cannot be verified, but the photo was used in Piaz's autobiography.) Piaz had set out in search of "an inconceivable problem" to attempt, and the result was the longest Tyrolean traverse of the day.

High in the Rosengarten (Catinaccio) group are the Vajolet Hut, where Piaz worked (white building, likely rebuilt since Piaz's day), and the Preuss Hut (brown building in front of the Vajolet), which he built and named for his friend and rival Paul Preuss. Punta Emma is the rock buttress at left.

The first route up the west face of the Totenkirchl gained about 450 meters, with 600 meters of climbing. The crucial leftward traverse is seen at about two-thirds height.

Tita Piaz.



Piaz’s ability to move rapidly over technical terrain was legendary. He once climbed the 600-meter south face of the Marmolada in 3 hours 28 minutes.

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