Circumambulating Mount Kailas: Herbert Tichy's Secret Journey to Tibet in 1936

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Fig. 1 – Mount Kailas with prayer flags. ÖAW archive, T3-22253-KA59 (May/June 1936).

Herbert Tichy (1912-1987) was an Austrian Geologist, journalist, travel writer and photographer. He is famous for being the first climber of Cho Oyu (8,188 m, Tib. Jo bo g.yu, "Turquoise Lord") in 1954, but also travelled extensively in Asia, Africa and North America. After returning from his overland journey to India in 1933, he resumed his studies at the University of Vienna. One day, he came across a book by Sven Hedin in the university library. He opened it on a random page, saw an image of Mount Kailash for the first time, and was immediately determined to go there. He asked his professor for a Himalaya-related dissertation topic, made agreements with newspapers and magazines about articles that he should write, and obtained a vehicle from a motorcycle company (Tichy 2007: 1-2). Thus, he was able to spend the pe-

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riod from July 1935 to June 1936[1] in India, working on his dissertation, entitled "Die Schaarung von Muzaffarabad in Beziehung zum Gesamtbau des Pir Panjal",[2] and travelling to Afghanistan, Myanmar, and Tibet. In this paper, I am looking at the trip into Tibet, which followed the traditional Mount Kailas (Tib. Gangs dkar Ti se, Gangs ri chen po Ti se, Gangs Rin po che) pilgrimage route from the south. I am not only using Tichy's published writings but also photographs and letters from Tichy's bequest at the archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, henceforth ÖAW).

1. State of sources

Tichy's book *Zum heiligsten Berg der Welt*, which describes his entire year in India, was translated into at least four other languages.[3] Like other travel writers, Tichy faced the challenge to satisfy his readers, while at the same time sticking to the truth as much as possible.[4] My search for additional information from other sources in the ÖAW archive, which might add to the information given in the book, or put it into perspective, was partly successful, but two problems arose.

First, Herwig Frisch's statement that Tichy's apartment "was positive proof that after all, chaos is the most likely state of things" (Verein Menschenwege – Götterberge 2012: 8) also holds true for Tichy's photographs. It seems that most of the negatives of the photos of the Kailas journey are no longer extant. Tichy writes to his father that he developed the films at the place of the German photographer with whom he was staying at Shimla (Tichy 1936-06-17: 4), and that he was going to send all 700 Tibet negatives in two airmail letters from there (Tichy 1936-06-26: 1). One of them might not have reached its destination. Or else, these negatives made their way to Vienna but got lost at some point before or after Tichy's death. Even though contact prints – which may have been produced either in Shimla or in Vienna – are available and glued onto A4 pages, they are hardly ever in correct order, because

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1 Dates deduced from the letters to his father Hans Tichy (ÖAW archive T1-K30-M8).

2 English translation: "The shearing of Muzaffarabad in relation to the overall construction of the Pir Panjal".

3 https://search.worldcat.org/ lists English, Norwegian, Czech, and Spanish translations. For this paper, the new edition of the German original (Tichy 2007) was used. The first edition of the English translation is: Tichy, Herbert. 1938. *Tibetan Adventure. Travels Through Afghanistan India and Tibet.* London: Faber and Faber. Available at https://pahar.in/tibet-and-china/. It follows the German original closely.

4 On this issue, see for example Martels 1994: xvii-xviii.

Tichy cut up the strips into single pictures that subsequently got mixed up. He also did not pay attention to the order of the films. For instance, photographs of Lake Manasarovar[5] (Tib. mTsho Ma pham, mTsho Ma dros pa or Ma pang) are interspersed between those taken in the Mahākālī valley in India, and there are photographs of the Rungong area in between the Gurla Mandhata (Tib. gNas mo sna gnyis or sMan nag snyil) pictures. Therefore, the handwritten numbering of the pictures on the pages is not helpful, and there are many photographs the location of which could not be identified.

Second, even though the letters Herbert Tichy wrote to his father Hans Tichy are in proper order, they consist mainly of practical matters such as whether articles sent to newspapers and magazines in Europe had reached their destination, and efforts to calm down his worried father. For instance, he tells him:

> Many Europeans have been there [i.e., in Tibet], [e. g.] a British couple three years ago. He is fifty, she is almost forty. I met them here [in Solan]. The journey is neither very exhausting nor dangerous. (Tichy 1936-03-09: 1)[6]

Nevertheless, the letters give some insights into the time it took the travel party to reach certain places, their thoughts and feelings, and questions that bothered them. Tichy was using a portable typewriter, but from Dehra Dun onwards, he switched from typed letters to handwritten ones. The first typed letter after returning from Tibet is from Shimla.

2. Travel route

There are several routes to and from Mount Kailas, which have been used by pilgrims and other travellers. The first route is from the East, i.e. via Sikkim or Bhutan and then along the Brahmaputra valley. The second is from the West, i.e. via Kashmir and Ladakh. The third is from the south. From India, it is the most direct one, using Lipulekh pass or one of several other passes to cross the Himalaya (Snelling 1983: 45). The route to the east was taken in 1918 by the US citizen Edwin Gilbert Schary for his return journey; he had come to Tibet in search for the "Mahatmas of Tibet" popularized by the Theosophical movement (Snelling 1983: 161-71). The route from the West was for instance taken

[5] Tichy uses the spelling "Mansarovar" throughout his books.

[6] The couple in question were probably Hugh Ruttledge and his wife, who was the first Western woman to circumambulate Mount Kailas. See Snelling 1983: 113-20.

by the Jesuit missionaries Ippolito Desideri and Manoel Freyre in 1714/1715 (Bargiacchi 2008: 16-25, Snelling 1983: 53). Finally, the route from the south is the one taken by Tichy.

It is impossible to determine when exactly the travel party reached certain places on their journey. For instance, in a letter Tichy claims that it took them eighteen days to reach the Tibetan frontier (Tichy 1936-06-17: 1). In this case, given that they left Almora on April 22nd, they should have crossed Lipulekh pass on May 9th. However, he also states that they were in Gunj, i.e., ahead of the frontier, on Whit Sunday (Tichy 2007: 131), which fell on May 31st in 1936. Afterwards, having reached Tibet, they started the ascent to Gurla Mandhata on May 16th! To make matters even more complicated, the dates Snelling (1983: 120-32) gives are entirely different. They might not be based on information obtained from Tichy, but on his conversations with Chatter Kapur, whom he met in London on several occasions (Snelling 1983: 132-33).

Therefore, the following table includes both the dates given by Tichy and those given by Snelling.

Place	**Date (Tichy)**	**Date (Snelling)**
Almora	April 22nd	May 4th
Berinag		
Askot		
Garbyang	At least four days, in order to wait for Nan Singh to arrive	May 20th – May 23rd
Gunj	Several days, including May 31st	
Syonchun		May 25th
Lipulekh		May 26th?
Taklakot		
Rungong	May 16th	
Gurla Mandhata	May 17th to 21st	
Thokar		
Barkha		
Dortschen		June 2nd
Dolma La		
Dortschen		June 4th
Khyunglung	ca. June 1st	
Kingri Bingri Pass		
Almora	June 16th	

Obviously, the dates given by Snelling (or Chatter Kapur via Snelling?) are more reliable, as they are in chronological order.

On April 21st, 1936, three people met in Almora: Tichy himself; Kitar, an experienced Sherpa from Darjeeling; and Chatter Kapur, an Indian law student at the University of Lahore, whom Tichy had already

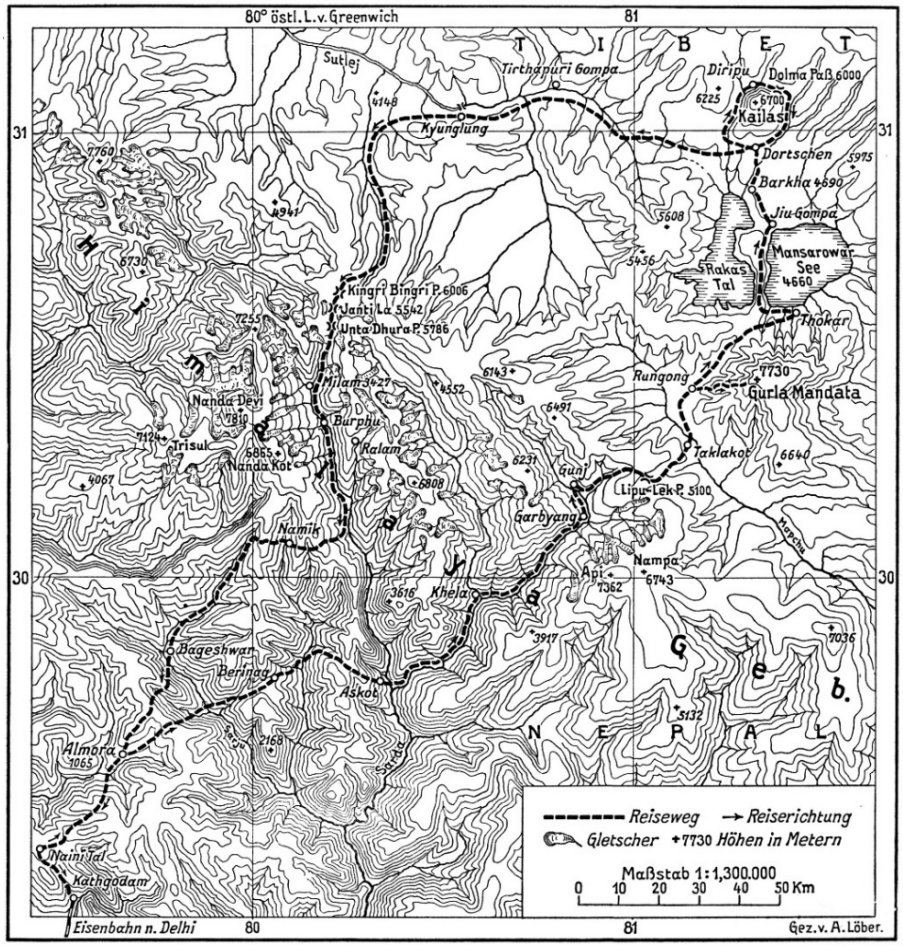


Fig. 2 - Map of the journey to Tibet (Tichy 2007: 226-27, courtesy of Edition Sonnenaufgang, Vienna).

met on his previous journey to India in 1933. They hired two porters, who would return after some days and be replaced by new ones; they repeated this procedure several times. On their way to the Tibetan border, they encountered Nan Singh, who would serve as their guide and interpreter. After entering Tibet, they replaced the porters with a horse owner and his two animals (Tichy 2007: 111-37).

In Almora, they also met three Swiss: two geologists and a mountaineer. They had an Inner Line permit and wanted to go to the Tibetan

border. Tichy did not reveal his plans. However, much later it turned out that they also had not revealed theirs: just like Tichy and his companions, they had gone far beyond the border. Because of the Swiss party's Inner Line permit, all the village superintendents en route were informed about their arrival and were eagerly awaiting them. This permitted Tichy, who had left a few days ahead of the Swiss, to go entirely unnoticed (Tichy 1976: 17-18).

They passed Berinag and Askot. From there, they descended into the Mahākālī valley on the border to Nepal. Tichy describes their daily routines as follows:

> We usually start at 4 a.m., around noon we cook bread and rice somewhere, and at 3 p.m. we already reach our goal. The evening is for reflection, cooking, and rest. (Tichy 1936-04-27: 1)

According to Snelling's dates, they crossed the border twenty-two days after their departure.



Fig. 3 – View from Lipulekh Pass. ÖAW archive, T3-21958-KA59 (May/June 1936).

When they proceeded into Tibet, Tichy's first plan was to climb Gurla Mandhata (7,730 m),[7] but it was not successful: even though he and Kitar reached an altitude of about 7,200 m, they had to return because of heavy snowfall. It was impossible to give it another try, because the

[7] For Tom Longstaff's previous unsuccessful effort to reach the summit, see Snelling 1983: 93.

local population had seen them on their ascent carrying ice axes, which convinced them that they were looking for gold on the mountain (Tichy 1936-06-17: 2).



Fig. 4 - View of Kyithang or Kyirang (Tib. sKyid thang/rang), main town of Purang, and Gungphur (Tib. dGung phur) Cave Monastery. ÖAW archive, T3-21989-KA59 (May/June 1936).

They continued their journey north, and in the next morning, they got their first glance of Lake Manasarovar and Mount Kailas. On the same evening, they reached Thokar (more commonly known as Trugo, Tib. Khrus sgo), a monastery on the shore of the lake. They spent the following day there, making offerings to the monastery and taking a ritual bath in the lake (Tichy 2007: 158-59).

Tichy describes his impressions as follows:

> The grandeur, infinity and solitude of space there [in Tibet] made the strongest impression on me. The days in Tibet were not always easy or beautiful, but the surroundings gifted me with atmospheres, one moment of which is really worth years of normal life (Tichy 1936-06-16: 2).



Fig. 5 – Ascent to Gurla Mandhata, Camp 4. ÖAW archive, T3-22088-KA59 (May/June 1936).



Fig. 6 – Yaks at the shore of Lake Manasarovar. ÖAW archive, T3-22154-KA59 (May/June 1936).

In stormy and cold weather, they continued north between the Western shore of Lake Manasarovar and the Eastern shore of its counterpart, Lake Rakas (Tib. La ngag mTsho).



Fig. 7 – Storm over Lake Rakas, Mount Kailas in the background. ÖAW archive, T3-06629-B (May/June 1936).



Fig. 8 – Nomads, Lake Manasarovar (ÖAW archive, T3-22227-KA59) (May/June 1936).



Fig. 9 – Mani wall (ÖAW archive, T3-22127-KA59) (May/June 1936).



Fig. 10 – Pilgrims circumambulating Mount Kailas by prostrating. ÖAW archive, T3-22240-KA59 (May/June 1936).

Finally, they reached Dortschen (Tib. Dar chen), the starting point of the 40-km-long circuit around Mount Kailas. Tichy (2007: 170) was impressed by those pilgrims who do not circumambulate the mountain walking, but prostrating.



Fig. 11 – Drölma La. ÖAW archive, T3-22297-KA59 (May/June 1936).

They stayed overnight at Dhiripu (Tib. 'Bri ra phug) Monastery, and reached Drölma La (sGrol ma la, 6.000 m), the highest point of the circuit, on the next day.

In the evening, they were back at Dortschen, and ready to start their return journey to India (Tichy 2007: 180-81). They did not go back to Lipulekh Pass but turned west. The exact route is unclear: Tichy (2017: 184) states that they did not go as far west as Tirthapuri (Tib. Pre ta pu ri, Skt. Pretapurī)[8] monastery. Instead, they turned south before reaching it and took a route via Kyunglung (Tib. Khyung lung) and other villages. However, according to the map (see page 3), they passed through or near both Tirthapuri and Kyunglung before turning south.



Fig. 12 – Camp on the plain, with a last view of Mount Kailas. ÖAW archive, T3-22360-KA59 (May/June 1936).

It took them around seven days to get from the plain to the foot of the mountains, where they would have to cross three passes: Kingri Bingri-, Janti- and Unta Dhura Pass. Then, difficulties arose because it turned out that Nan Singh did not have the slightest idea about the route to India, and they were running out of food. Finally, some Tibetans volunteered to show them the way (Tichy 2007: 184-85).

Having crossed the three mountain passes, they reached Milam. From there, it took them another ten days to return to Almora (Tichy 1936-06-17: 3).

[8] On other spelling variants, see Venturi 2019: 415.

3. The disguise

As Tichy did not have an Inner Line permit, let alone a visa that would have allowed him to cross the Tibetan border, he needed to take measures that prevented him from being recognized as a European. The first rehearsal of his transformation into an Indian pilgrim took place in Lyallpur (today: Faisalabad/Pakistan), Chatter Kapur's hometown.



Fig. 13 - Tichy as an Indian pilgrim in Lyallpur, India. ÖAW archive, T3-17190-Neg (May/June 1936).

This basic outfit was adapted to the climate in Tibet: a fur coat and probably also felt boots[9] were added. Moreover, Tichy grew a beard that hid part of his face (Tichy 1936-04-27: 2), darkened his complexion by not washing his face (Tichy 1936-06-17: 3), and dyed his hair black (Tichy 2007: 115). An issue that could not be resolved were his blue eyes.

[9] So far, I have not come across any photographic evidence, but it is hard to imagine that Tichy was in sandals during the entire journey. He could also have worn his climbing boots, but they might have attracted attention.



Fig. 14 - Tichy as an Indian pilgrim on his way to Tibet. ÖAW archive, T3-21940-KA59 (May/June 1936).

Tichy claims that he was wearing this outfit throughout the entire journey, starting five days after they left Almora, and that the second porters they hired already got to know him as an Indian (Tichy 2007: 115-16). However, there are photographs that tell a different story:



Fig. 15 - Tichy and Kitar in front of the pilgrim's hostel in Garbyang.[10] *ÖAW archive, T3-21911-KA59 (May/June 1936)*

It is hard to imagine how a very tall person with a bare white torso and bare white legs would pass as an Indian. There are several other photos of Tichy without disguise, for which it is unclear whether they were

[10] Tichy includes this picture in *Das Buch vom verlorenen Sohn* ("The Book of the Prodigal Son"), a photo album that he gave his father for Christmas (ÖAW archive, T1-K29-M10). In the caption, he states that it was taken in Garbyang.

taken inside or outside of Tibet. Another open question is whether the "Indian pilgrim" Tichy took the ritual bath in Lake Manasarovar (Tichy 2007: 159) dressed or undressed.

Even though optical disguise was important for Tichy, it was not sufficient. He could also have been recognized as a European because of his broken Hindustani, therefore he also had to disguise his language. To this end, he pretended to be mentally handicapped, so that people would not be interested in engaging in a conversation with him (Tichy 1936-06-17: 1). His travel companions supported him by treating him badly, making him work very hard etc. (Tichy 2007: 171-72). On one occasion, the Gorpon (Tib. *sgar dpon*) Sahib, one of two governors in charge of Ngari (Tib. mNga' ris) province,[11] insisted on conversing with him. When Tichy was unable to understand the Hindustani translation by Nan Singh, he decided to speak German rather than Hindustani, and Nan Singh was quick-witted enough to "translate" the language of which he did not even understand a single word into Tibetan (Tichy 2007: 179-80).

4. Taking risks

Before entering Tibet, Tichy met an elderly man who kept talking about having encountered Henry Savage Landor, who had entered Tibet in 1897 in disguise. He described the injuries Landor's Tibetan torturers had inflicted upon him in great detail and kept on warning Tichy and his companions about the dangers of a journey to Tibet. It seems probable that this elderly man had realized that Tichy was not an Indian pilgrim – he obviously saw the risk that Tichy might suffer the same fate as Landor (Tichy 2007: 127-28; for critical remarks on Landor, see Snelling 1983: 72-79).

Moreover, on several occasions, Tichy could not hold back and acted in a way that would almost have given him away. For instance, at Dhiripu monastery, when then sun set and some monks were prostrating in the direction of Mount Kailas, he gave up his usual precaution when taking photos – he usually had his camera hidden inside his coat. But this time, in search of the perfect perspective, he lay down on the ground with the camera visibly in his hands. He was seen by the Gorpon Sahib, who was also staying there, called into his presence, and ordered to take off his turban and his glasses. Together with Chatter and Nan Singh, he was able to persuade the eminent master that he was just using his binoculars, which he claimed to have received as a gift from an Englishman (Tichy 2007: 170-76).

[11] See Petech 1973: 13. Tichy refers to him as "the ruler of Western Tibet".

He repeated the same mistake already on the next day, when taking photos of prostrating pilgrims. Nan Singh tried to stop him, and when he failed, he just pulled Tichy away from the scene (Tichy 2007: 178).

5. Aftermath

After his return to Europe, Tichy wrote *Zum heiligsten Berg der Welt*. As the idea to travel to Tibet was mainly inspired by Sven Hedin's book, Tichy wrote to him and asked him to contribute a foreword to his book. Initially, Hedin was enthusiastic about Tichy's request, but after he received the proofs, he wondered how Tichy managed to go unnoticed on the journey and questioned his honesty. He contacted Eugen Oberhummer, a professor of Geography at the University of Vienna, who in turn asked Tichy to come to his office with photographs and diaries of the journey. Oberhummer was convinced by what he saw and reported back to Hedin accordingly (Tichy 1976: 47). Hedin's foreword tremendously increased Tichy's reputation in academic circles and beyond. Much later, in 1952, he finally managed to visit Hedin in Stockholm, and they spent half a day together, sharing their memories of travels in Asia. A few months later, Hedin passed away (Tichy 1976: 58-60).

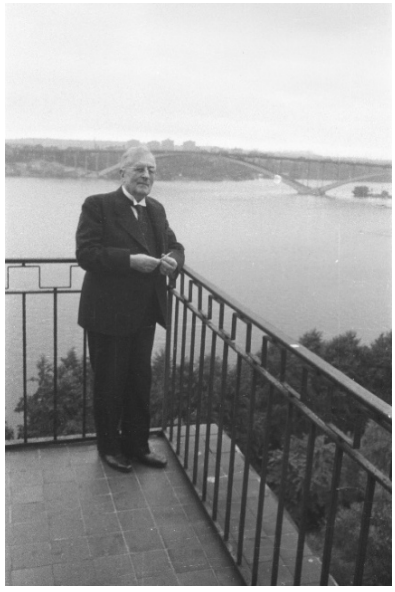


Fig. 16 – Sven Hedin on his balcony in Stockholm. ÖAW archive, T3-31137-Neg (1952).

6. Fact and fiction

A comparison between the description of precarious situations in Tichy's book and in the letters to his father reveals substantial discrepancies. For instance, this is what Tichy tells his father about being caught taking photos by the Gorpon Sahib:

> On the pilgrimage around the mountain, we met the ruler of Western Tibet, he had a long conversation with me (via the interpreter). He was delighted to meet young pilgrims like us. For a few hours, I was on pins and needles, but everything turned out all right. I presented him with a piece of soap, and he gave me some flour from Lhasa in return (Tichy 1936-06-17: 2).

Given the various incidents described above, the accuracy of the following statement in another letter is also doubtful:

> Nobody ever entertained even the slightest suspicion that I am not an Indian pilgrim (Tichy 1936-06-16: 3).

Returning to the travel writer's tension between satisfying the readers' curiosity vs. telling the truth, which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper: It might be the case that whatever Tichy wrote in his book is true, but in order to avoid increasing his father's worries, he downplayed his adventures in his letters to him. However, it might just as well be vice versa: that he told his father what really happened to him but was afraid that this was not sufficient to fascinate the readers of his book.

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