

Eulogy for Ueli Steck († 30. April 2017)

by Röbi Bösch, Kathmandu 2.5.2017

For weeks I have been planning to photographically document Ueli's Everest-Lhotse Project in the Himalayas. We discussed every aspect and thought it through. We knew that anything unforeseeable could happen anytime. In my mind I went through all the possibilities: Would I arrive on time? Wouldn't the Khumbu Icefall be too dangerous for me, just for some pictures? How long would I have to stay at 6500m? Which route would Ueli follow? What if he climbs the Hornbein Couloir and doesn't reappear at the intended time? What would I do? I know this couloir – in 1990 we wanted to climb this route – it is situated on the invisible northern face. I knew that this photographic venture was hazardous.

However, there was one reason I decided to do it, despite all unpredictability: Ueli

Everything we did together during the last twenty years somehow turned out to be good. I also realized that he would be very pleased to have me with him. "Then we make together the Nuptse", he said.

As I landed at Kathmandu airport on this 30th April, I wasn't aware that exactly at the same time something dreadful was happening at 7800 m altitude, on Nuptse, the mountain next to the Everest. Amid the unutterably chaos in front of the airport, Dendi Sherpa was waiting for me. He didn't smile, only one sentence, softly spoken: "I have very bad news. Ueli is dead."

Silence, incomprehension and hope. Yes hope, as I was told that another mountaineer was on his way to Nuptse that morning. Maybe a mistake. But later I talked to Maurizio, the helicopter pilot who conducted the rescue mission. There was no mistake, only sad certainty.

One of the most outstanding alpinists is dead. He not only pushed himself to the limits, but also pushed alpinism to its limits. Ueli Steck embarked on projects that most climbers wouldn't dare to think about. He wasn't a daredevil, but step by step he pushed forward to other dimensions.

I met Ueli Steck in 1997 on the occasion of a photo shooting on ice climbing. I wouldn't have guessed that meeting him then would lead to a lifelong friendship. Neither would I have guessed that one day, this young mountaineer, with his unique style, would set new dimensions in high altitude mountain climbing. At that time he was an ambitious and passionate young climber who practiced mountaineering in all variations: he was rock climber, opened fastidious new routes in rocks and ice. As a solo climber he also tried out the most difficult routes. Ueli was very dedicated, a quality that combined with his ability as climber and his mental strength would make him an outstanding mountaineer.

He climbed up to be a professional mountaineer, but he also found a way to deal with the media. He firmly pursued mountaineering, but he also wanted to be present in the media. Professional mountaineering without sponsoring and media doesn't work.

He also got to feel the dark side of publicity, to be a renowned person. While some admired his achievements, others reacted with lack of understanding, outrage even. Ueli Steck was a sensitive man and animosities didn't just bounce off on him. Especially the media reactions to the violent altercations with a group of local Sherpas at the Everest in 2013 weighed heavily on him. He wasn't known for being loud.

During his career Ueli Steck encountered many difficult moments. He was involved in accidents more than once— such as trying to rescue Inaki Ochoa or during the tragic avalanche disaster on Shisha Pangma. By no means did he provoke accidents. Someone like Ueli Steck who climbs the highest mountains as intensively as he did is prone to tragic accidents. It is statistics. High altitude mountaineering is the most dangerous variant of alpinism.

The Swiss machine, the speed mountaineer, the record alpinist: Ueli Steck got used to those characteristics and perhaps he was even flattered. Speed climbing, especially in the Eiger North Face, made him famous. It is difficult to assess the achievements of an alpinist, especially for non-alpinists. Records, however, make the news, even if it is absurd to measure alpinism to seconds. And Ueli was well aware of that.

“Speed” wasn't the factor which made Ueli such an outstanding alpinist. Speediness was a key element to his great successes in the Himalayas. The combination of brilliant technique on difficult terrain, mental strength and extraordinary fitness lead to the outstanding efficiency with which he conducted all the tours. He pushed the limits without going too far. After his extraordinary solo climb through the 2500 m high Annapurna South Face, he told me that he wouldn't do it again. He said that he had pushed too far. He was aware of the limits of his actions. This was also the case with his last endeavor, the Everest-Lhotse Project. He was fully aware of the risks and he did everything possible to minimize them: he was thoroughly preparing for over one year. He didn't make it. During acclimatization the unfathomable happened.

He lived for the mountains. His wife Nicole was his anchor in his intense and unsteady life. He was lucky that she shared his passion and fascination for mountaineering. They climbed mountains together all over the world – in the Himalayas, in Patagonia, Peru and at home of course – for one of her birthdays he offered her an ascent to the Eiger North Face

For me Ueli was primarily a friend with whom I could experience a lot. At the beginning of our acquaintance we made some - partly wild – photo shootings and later we often went together for climbing or mountaineering. Ueli was a restrained

and modest man - he always was a reliable partner who never thought only of himself. During all those years we developed a fantastic collaboration: as photographer und mountaineer. We didn't discuss much; we were efficient and both knew about the commitment and professionalism of the other. And that's how we planned the "Everest-Lhotse Project".

This was meant to be our last project. I will miss him immensely. "Hey, we should do something together", I won't hear those words anymore.