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My Life: Eiger North Face, Grandes Jorasses and other Adventures

Anderl Heckmair, Reinhold Messner, Tim Carruthers

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In 1938 Anderl Heckmair made the first ascent of the North Face of the Eiger, a monumental climb that cemented his place in history. In My Life he tells the story of how he turned from a fragile child wrapped, ‘quite literally, in cotton bindings,’ into one of the most important mountaineers in the world. Leaving school in 1920, Heckmair dedicated himself to climbing, becoming a full-time ‘mountain vagabond’. Penniless, he lived in Alpine huts and cycled from climb to climb, even riding from Germany to the High Atlas mountains of Morocco. He rapidly developed as a mountaineer, making an ascent of the Walker Spur in awful weather, and a solo ascent of the Matterhorn in walking shoes, a feat that nobody believed. But his crowning achievement, climbed in full media glare, would always be his Eiger ascent. Events did not always run smoothly – arrested after a quarrel with a farmer, he escaped through a window (‘never imprison mountain climbers in towers’). When arrested again, his ice axes mistaken for deadly weapons while he slept on a park bench, Heckmair chose to stay put, preferring the cell bunk to his bench. At times, the book ventures into darker territory. As one of the great German climbers of the 1930s, Heckmair inevitably attracted the attention of the Nazi party, he found his Eiger triumph twisted to suit their ends, and he himself seated next to Hitler at a party. But at its heart My Life is a celebration of adventure. Told in joyful, engaging and relaxed style, it is as full of life and passion for the mountains as Anderl Heckmair himself.

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