

The Agony and Ecstasy of

Skiing

Everything from dramatic
ski rescues to Jewish
soldiers on skis fighting
together *with* Nazis

- Aryeh Cohen

Does feeling frightened and potentially losing control to the point of breaking a few bones sound like fun? If you are into skiing, it does.

There about 200 million people worldwide who go out of their way for the exhilaration of sliding down a mountainside of snow. But skiing is not just for sport. Originally, it was a common mode of transport, particularly in snowy and mountainous regions. The postal service employed skiers at one point. And wars have been won thanks to soldiers on skis – including some Jewish soldiers in WWII (who fought on the side of the Nazis!). Today, one of the most fascinating and beneficial uses of skiing is to rescue others.

Here, then, is the exhilarating, painful, surprising world of skiing in all its glory.

After lying buried alive for over three hours under a mountain of snow, unable to flex a finger, Alex White began to feel that his end was approaching. His life was beginning to ebb away. He thought of his family and of his friend who must be lying in a similar predicament nearby. It took supreme effort, but he managed to fight off the panic rising inside him. If he couldn't prevent death anyway, he might as well die accepting his fate.

It was March 2, 2013. White and his friend, Joe Philpott, had set out on a leisure trip across the Rocky Mountains at the Cameron Pass in northern Colorado. White was a 24-year-old law student at the University of Colorado. Philpott was a poet and artist who had spent the past seven years jumping from airplanes above wildfires in Boise, Idaho, as a smoke jumper (for more about smoke jumpers see *Zman* 33 – *Tishrei* 5773). The two pals were both professional skiers and were enjoying every minute of their excursion.

White skied in front, blazing a trail through the freshly fallen snow for Philpott, who was following closely behind. After two hours White reached a valley between the mountain peaks. They found a patch of trees and a flat expanse spread out before them. White decided to rest while waiting for Philpott to catch up with him. He removed his skis, took a sip of water and got ready for the next leg of their trip.

After a while, White looked up and scanned the distance for a glimpse of his friend. Eventually, he noticed Philpott speeding toward him. After a moment, White put his skis back on and prepared to continue.

Suddenly, there was a shout. It was Philpott with a look of terror on his face. White looked up just in time to see a thick wall of snow plunging toward them.

Philpott's maneuvers had probably shaken a mass of fresh snow, triggering an avalanche. Tons of snow were now tumbling down

the mountainside with incredible force.

White's desperate attempt to flee was stopped short when he became entangled in his pile of equipment. At the last second he managed to grab and don his Avalung, a type of oxygen mask that allows the wearer to continue breathing from an oxygen tank in the backpack in case he is buried by snow.

The incredible mountain of snow that slid down the mountainside did not produce much noise. Even as it landed in the valley and buried White beneath it, there was hardly anything but the wind to be heard. White fought to "swim" through the snow, trying to keep his hands above his head. This proved impossible, however. He was quickly lost in a wall of blinding white snow that dragged him along several hundred feet until it ground to a halt.

White was trapped beneath the snow. His foot injured, throbbing with pain. There was nothing he could do to free himself.



Historical stone etching of a soldier armed with bow and arrow on skis.



An ancient Roman mosaic showing a man on a ski.

History of Skiing

Skiing in one form or another has been practiced for millennia. In fact, historians believe that skis were invented before the first wheel! Ancient paintings on stones in China and other locales show figures using skis to glide over the snow. Chinese archaeologists have dated these drawing to 5,000 years ago. Skiing is recorded in ancient Chinese scripts dating back 2,225 years.

Archaeologists in Norway have also found stone etchings depicting human figures on skis. In Russia, they have even found an original ski that survived from ancient times. Similar ancient wooden skis have been found in Sweden and Norway. The word *ski* is actually from Nordic, an ancient Germanic language that was used in Scandinavia. The original meaning of the word *ski* was "a stick" because the earliest skis were made from pieces of wood.

There is debate among historians exactly where skiing was first invented. They generally agree, however, that the first humans to use skis on the snowy slopes probably did so in search of animals to hunt and eat. The hunters hid among the mountain peaks and scanned the scene below. When they noticed an animal in the distance, they sped down the slope, their skis giving them a tremendous advantage over their prey. They could trap an animal before it realized that it had been spotted.

To this day there are still remote locations where men continue to use skis to hunt animals. A reporter recently visited Aukoram in the Altai Mountains of western China where Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Siberia meet. There he found a local tribe that uses the same design of skis used by their ancestors to hunt elks in these mountains for thousands of years. They must trap these animals to feed themselves during the frigid winters when the temperature drops to -40°F.

This is the Tuvan tribe of Aukoram, which employs the same method for making skis that, it is believed, was developed in their region 4,000 years ago. They used pieces of wood cut from red spruce trees.



An avalanche under way.



The Tuvan of western China have used the same method of producing skis for thousands of years.



Tuvans use skis to creep up on animals they are hunting and then lasso them.



Ancient drawings have been found in China and elsewhere depicting men on skis.