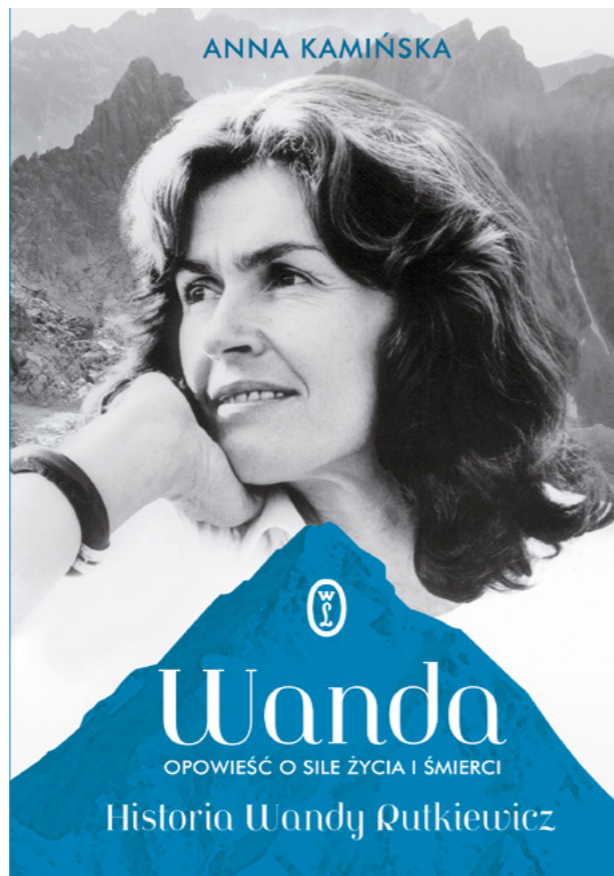


# Wanda, A Tale of Life and Death: The Story of Wanda Rutkiewicz

The story of the first woman  
to ascend K2



**A BESTSELLER**

**W**anda tells the story of the *grande dame* of Polish Himalayan climbing – Wanda Rutkiewicz (1943-1992), the first woman to reach the summit of K2, and the third to climb Mount Everest. Yet this is more a book about a person than a climber, about an intriguing woman who attracted crowds of admirers and stoked fierce emotions, ahead of her time, both as a Himalaist and as a woman. Her life and achievements have often been described. Nonetheless, Anna Kamińska's book assembles and illuminates a great deal, such as why Wanda abandoned her promising career as an athlete. Some entirely new themes emerge, such as the tragic deaths of her father and brother. When we read about her childhood, we learn the source of her inflated ambition. The everyday reality in socialist Poland is illustrated in the fragments where Wanda takes several-month-long vacations from work to join expeditions. One important chapter covers the conquering of Everest (the first Polish attempt); it makes for a stand-

alone story, full of brilliant anecdotes describing Wanda Rutkiewicz's greatest accomplishment. Kamińska describes earlier expeditions more succinctly, though there, too, she uncovers new facts. The author gained access to every living soul who had tales to tell about Wanda, and she managed to breach the mistrust of the mountaineering community. The book contains this statement about Wanda: "She was focused on her goals, but equivocal in her close relationships." Anna Kamińska's book takes the reader into the heart of this equivocality. It is worth noting, however, that at no time does the author strip the protagonist of her intimacy. This book is valuable for those who know little about climbing as well as for those who are quite knowledgeable. This is part of what has made the book a bestseller in Poland.

Andrzej Mirek, translated by Soren Gauger

**I**n 1989, when Wanda decides to climb all the eight-thousanders, as she claimed in her submission to the IMM, Kangchenjunga was the first point in the "Caravan of Dreams" program she crafted in 1990 for conquering the Crowns of the Himalayas.

"I call my plan the 'Caravan of Dreams' because I am trying to make something that seems pure fantasy come true," she says. "I'll be hiking from valley to valley, through the various peaks, just as the caravans once did."

She realizes this is her last chance to conquer all the peaks. "I haven't got time, are you fucking aware how old I am?!", she explains to Andrzej Paczkowski.

In 1989, she is forty-six years old. She plans to conquer the Crown of the Himalayas in 1991, taking the eight eight-thousanders she had not yet climbed in the course of a single year.

In a letter she sent to her sponsors in late 1990, she writes: "My project encompasses eight major stages. Each requires enormous amounts of skill, courage, and enough endurance for the whole business; that is the greatest challenge." She also stressed: "To this day, no woman has been up to this challenge; I'll be the first. (...)"

The "Caravan" is a ground-breaking program never before accomplished in the history of Himalaism. Wanda seeks to conquer all the remaining peaks of the Crown of the Himalayas in such a short time, she says, to avoid the difficulty of acclimatization. For every time she set off on one or two expeditions in the course of a year, she fell ill on the march back to base; upon returning from the mountains she became weaker, her body unable to readjust. (...)

In 1990, Reinhold Messner had conquered the Crown of the Himalayas, followed by the late Jerzy Kukuczka. (...) "I will not be the third, coming after Messner and Kukuczka. I will be the first to try something new," she tells reporter Barbara Rusowicz. "The whole point is to attempt to use constant acclimatization. That is something no one has ever done, man or woman."

In Poland, many Himalaists just shake their heads in disbelief upon hearing of the "Caravan to Dreams."

"At the height of her career, Wanda painted herself into a corner," says Aleksander Lwow. "She came up with a program to conquer eight eight-thousanders in a single year. Doing five in one year was not feasible, Wanda was almost fifty years old. My colleagues and I knew from the very beginning that she had no chance of pulling it off."

"The program and the idea were good, but Wanda wanted to do it too quickly," Krzysztof Wielicki now comments. "One year was getting carried away. It would have been possible if she had gone about it differently. (...) All of us in the community knew that it could end badly." (...)

In a letter fishing for sponsors in 1990, Wanda foresaw how her community would react to her project. "Without a doubt, some people will suppose I'm only after danger and thrills," she warned. "But this is a mistake, and only I know the risks involved. If I were not convinced that I could do it, I would not be making the attempt. (...) I would not be putting myself in a situation that would be tough to survive, but the mountains are an inextricable part of my life."

Excerpt translated by Soren Gauger



*Wanda. Opowieść o sile życia i śmierci. Historia Wandy Rutkiewicz [Wanda, A Tale of Life and Death: The Story of Wanda Rutkiewicz]*

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