

LOOSE SCREE

Issue No 108

March 2019



THE ROSENLAUI VALLEY NEAR MEIRINGHEN

JULIUS KUGY'S WORK, MUSIC AND MOUNTAINS

Ian Elliott

Julius Kugy (1858-1944) is best known for exploring the Julian Alps from his home in Trieste, described in his eloquent book "Alpine Pilgrimage". In those days the Julian Alps were in Austria-Hungary and Trieste was its only great seaport. The developing railways facilitated access to the mountains.

His translator from the German H.E.G. Tyndale's own charming book "Mountain Paths" (1949) includes his experiences with Kugy. To add something to these accounts in English, I have been reading Kugy's *Arbeit, Musik, Berge – Ein Leben* to fill in the background to his deep love of the mountains. I skipped whole chapters on his cat, dog, ape and marmots.

Julius had an elder brother Paul and four younger sisters. His earliest memories of the family home in Trieste featured the garden, an orchard, their piano and glimpses of the sea. His father came from Carinthia and was a merchant in the golden age of Trieste – before increasing competition from Hamburg for central European markets. They were "Old Austrians" patriotic but not chauvinists and the defeat by Prussia in 1866 was a blow for his father.

Kugy's mother was the daughter of a Slovenian poet. She was strong, temperamental and warm-hearted, while his father was placid and wise. He spoke Italian through his mother until his father started him on German and in 1868 he joined the Trieste German Gymnasium (grammar school). He was big and strong, a fighter and near the top of the class.

Kugy's musical education was stimulated through the Schiller Club, a cultural association of 2000 Trieste German speakers, and he heard nearly all the great violinists of his time. He was musically inclined to singing and choral works and also tried the organ.

After leaving school in 1876 he had a year of business experience before going to Vienna for a law degree. He took full advantage of the musical scene but was struggling with the law, fed-up of regimentation, homesick and doubtful of business. Duty to his father prevailed in the end. He became a doctor of law in 1882 and practised in Italian in Trieste.

Botanical excursions had led to his interest in mountains and in 1875 he climbed Triglav "quite difficult in those days". In Vienna he longed for the mountains, poring over maps, scouring Alpine journals and devouring Whymper's "immortal Scrambles". Mountains became an even stronger pull than music, and more enduring.

Kugy pioneered new routes in the Julian Alps with the help of local men, a "romantic time" – see *Alpine Pilgrimage*. He thought the area was best explored

in the spirit of those from the foot of the mountains, such as hunters. In 1881 he made the first ascent of the west flank of Triglav, the Kugyweg. He admired Purtscheller, and his friends the brothers Zsigmondy were another influence.

Kugy preferred to climb with guides “without being a Mehisack” (flour bag). “The mountains should be approached above all with a laugh on our lips. We go to the mountains to live there, not to die. On that enormous stage there is room for acrobatics and for shocking tragedies. Thrills may even be close to tragedy, laughter next to weeping and misery”.

“Alpinism to-day (1930’s) takes very bold new forms, not traditional” – finer feelings are lost as the technical becomes an end in itself, a backward step. A climber should be honest, careful and modest. Far greater goals are set in life than in the mountains. Death in the mountains does not always mean a heroic end, rather very often great stupidity.

Kugy got more involved in his father’s business and took in hand the musical activities of the Schiller Club. He often accompanied well-known singers and ran the choir, a lot of effort as Trieste was not a music centre but a working city. He would make the long journey to Vienna for concert series under Hans Richter and spent eight unforgettable days in Venice (not far) for Wagner’s Ring cycle.

He was often asked why he never married and was becoming an old bachelor, and answered glibly that no woman would have him. This was “half joking and half coquettishness” – many a woman would willingly have had him. “May God bless each of them. Let us wish there is still much of this life ahead and it will be a long time before I lie and sleep in the still cold earth”.

On his father’s death Kugy and his brother Paul became heads of the firm, and found it hard work. They were wholesalers with veteran workers, importing and trading in coffee, cigars, tropical fruits, natural oils and the like. There was storage, an arcade for buyers, machinery for processing coffee, and offices for meeting agents. Ships came up the Grand Canal and Trieste was a free port with no tax on goods in transit. He became competent at his work and overcame difficult trading conditions in 1886.

Kugy had thought of gaining experience abroad such as Singapore but soon realised he could not live without mountains. He continued climbing in the convenient Julian Alps, then the Dolomites (1883-85) and several seasons in the Western Alps. In Zermatt he was very taken with the scenes of famous guides and members of the Alpine Club. On rainy days in Zermatt he might hire a piano.

Kugy was in his prime, free and strong, the mountains open to him. He loved the West Julians around Wolfsbach (Valbruna), forever searching out original approaches on his favourite Montasch and Wischberg, Montasio and Jof Fuart.

His musical life continued to develop. He paid for an organ to be built in an Armenian church with the right to use it for life, and became known for introducing Bach organ music to Trieste. He played three hours a day for 14 years.

Later Kugy was inspired by Palestrina's music. He started a small church choir and sang as tenor and leader. Performing Palestrina and other ancient masses his expanded Palestrina Choir took a special place in the musical life of Trieste. For a performance in Gorizia he left Trieste with 200 people by train at 5.20 a.m! His Palestrina era lasted eleven to twelve years.

Kugy felt that music and mountains had something poetic and romantic in common. He enjoyed the music of the mountains like the zither and yodelling. He had Bach or Palestrina in his thoughts at some special moments in the mountains.

Alpine literature had an influence on Kugy's first tours but there was little available in those days, especially on the Julian Alps which seemed very new. In 1880-1899 he kept everything in German on the Julian Alps. He praised "The Dolomites" by Gilbert and Churchill for the best description of the Julian Alps, and its humour compared to the modern ich (ego). As always he respected tradition.

He went in for direct ascents from the valleys and named scores of new routes in the Julians. He liked hidden ways along rocky terraces, and they studied the behaviour of chamois. Passes and challenging ridges were also sought out. He enjoyed winter climbing before there were skis. His 114kg would sink into the snow and later he used snowshoes. He learned of crampons "too late" from Oskar Eckenstein himself.

Kugy's last first ascent was the north tower of the Montasch (Montasio) in 1909-1910. He holidayed nine times in the Dauphiné and in another life would wish to know the area as well as the Julian Alps.

Kugy began to suffer from changing business conditions when his climbing and musical interests were at their peak. They were not a cheap house but gave a proper service and buyers trusted them. More competition and specialisation, the needs of buyers in Alpine lands and beyond such as Hungary, meant more travel. They needed more capital and bank credit, always avoiding speculation.

Paul Kugy ran administration and finance while Julius handled all aspects of trading, and they had thirty employees. He visited the exchanges daily, and even signing correspondence in the evening took two hours. There was no time for the organ.

Paul lost half his capital on private speculation and as Julius wrote "A merchant without strong funding is accident prone. The house stood or fell on me". It was deeply upsetting and began to undermine his strength. He suffered a nervous illness and sought peace in mountains and nature, travelling out with

a friend on Saturday nights. It took over a year to recover. "Had I not every reason to bless the mountains?"

Their home was emptying, their sisters happily married; their mother died and Paul was deranged. Then came war in 1914 and "overnight the sea was lost to us". Some trade was routed through Italy, Switzerland and northern ports, but credit was drying up.

Then Italy entered the war in May 1915. Kugy handed over the business to their chief buyer and volunteered at the age of 57 for the West Julian front (against Italy). He served from 29 June 1915 to 2 July 1918 (another story). Kugy was proud of returning all his "fine small team of climbers" to their mothers after they encountered deadly avalanches on the Wischberg in October 1915.

"I only did my duty. I am now an Italian citizen, living quietly and at peace in Italy which became my second fatherland. The old Austria which we loved has sunk for ever".

Kugy thanked the war for his *Bergbuch* (mountain book) which friends had long asked him to write, when he was too occupied with business. Near Christmas 1916 he began writing without a plan at his war quarters in Tarvis (Tarvisio).

Kugy came out of the war at 60 a very tired man. Their business house was moribund, with two staff and an empty shop, and he lost hope. He leaned on his sisters and consulted a world-famous psychiatrist in Vienna. After almost two years this treatment and the struggle for his *Bergbuch* revived him. Publishers were going under but finally Rudolf Rother in Munich brought out *Aus dem Leben eines Bergsteigers* in 1925 – our Alpine Pilgrimage. "People have told me it is worth something".

Kugy sold the family house in Trieste, now a harbour useless without a hinterland. The possibility of familiar work had gone. Looking back, he felt it was right to quit, and he still loved Trieste.

He had written his *Bergbuch* as a memoir for friends and family, and publication brought letters from readers pleased to find he was alive, and news from people encountered long ago. He only wrote what the mountains spoke, he said to any critics. In this later account he updated at length the busier climbing scene in the Julians, starting with Triglav "holy mountain of the Slovenes", and pointing out some unsolved problems.

Kugy spent the hot summer months in Vaibruna staying in the family home of Anton Oitzinger (1860 -1928), a favourite guide – whose story he wrote in "Son of the Mountains" (English edition 1938). He could enjoy views across the meadows of his old stamping grounds on the Montasch and Wischberg, and took an interest in visiting climbers – with his imposing

build and sociability he must have been an engaging companion. He started and finished this account of his life there.

Kugy had moved to a small place in Trieste. He played the organ no more but spent two hours a day at the piano, picking up Schubert again. He frequented musical homes and joined in Purcell madrigals. He seldom went to concerts now the conductors acted as virtuosos. "I want no Eroica where the conductor is in charge with his acrobatics". Unsurprisingly Kugy was wary of the gramophone and the latest radio "epidemic".

He took daily walks to his three surviving sisters, each living on a height. Young friends continued exploring the Julian Alps and reporting back.

Above all, Kugy wanted to be an apostle for the Julian Alps. He gave about two hundred lectures abroad, especially in German cities. He was popular in Yugoslavia and received a big welcome in Ljubljana.

"Now I think I have related all worth telling of my work, music and from the mountains of my life" Kugy wrote. The hardest times were working but the harder the work, the more glorious were music and the mountains.



Kugy's Carabiner on the approach to Triglav

Biblioteca

Julius Kugy



Ian Elliott in Valbruna, August 2013