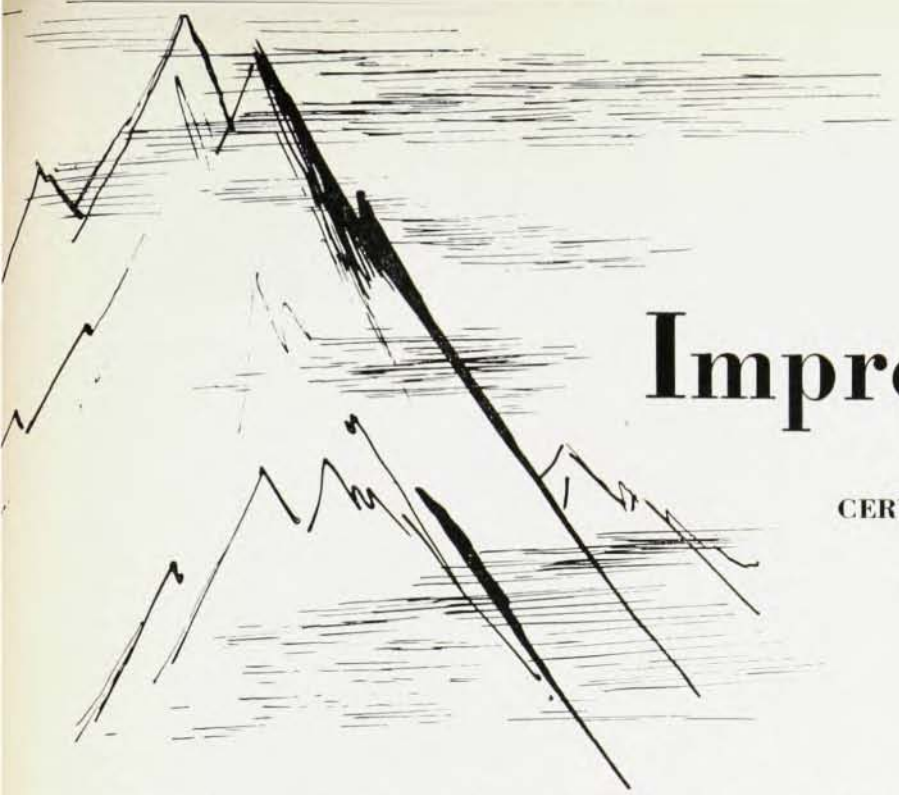

Impression...

CERVINIA, ITALY, July 1949

by Laura Fermi

High peaks are all around; covered with the everlasting snow that defies the heat of the summer. The Mont Blanc, far away to the west, extends in a long jagged line and looks almost slender in the distance. Close by, to the north, stands the Matterhorn, a massive tower, a huge chunk of rock, alluring and forbidding at the same time: a giant that called many adventurers to their death, the most enticing siren of the Alps.

Here is a wide field of snow. It stretches from peak to peak with a mild slope and stops suddenly in a ledge overlooking the valley below. It is like a broad meadow shining under the brilliant rays of the sun. At first glance it looks peaceful and gentle, soft and silent. In its details it is broken and twisted by the wind that sweeps between the peaks, that rushes from the gorges into the open, whirls around, lifts the snow in powdery clouds and bares the crust of ice under it. Tormented by the heat of the sunshine and the storms and the wind that together crack the ice in gaping crevasses, the snow field has become savage and perilous.

This spot should have been left untouched for the priest of some pantheistic religion. He should have come and dug a cave in the ice and drunk of the snow and covered his body with the skins of the bears. Here he should have worshipped his God and the Sun and the Moon and the Spirit of the mountains and the Soul of Nature.

But man has built a cablecar. And the car reaches the snow field, twelve thousand feet above sea level, and pours out tourists. So the field becomes aimlessly alive, spotted with colorful clothes, noisy with frivolous chatter. People rush around, shout their impressions to the wind, flirt, complain, find the snow field too wild for their tastes, and run inside the little hotel that provides heat and a warm meal, a minimum of comfort for a crowd that shuns hardships.

On the snow field, however, lives a small group of quite different people. They are, in a certain sense, the priests that one had expected to find in this place. They worship Nature and try to discover its deepest secrets. They live in a small hut near the hotel, a square wooden box covered with an aluminum roof, glowing in the sunshine, even more blinding than the bright snow. A door is on the front and over the door a sign: "Cosmic Rays Laboratory" and a little below: "No visitors allowed".

These priests do not seek for proselytes, their religion is for them alone; they are jealous of it and of their privacy. But in spite of the warning a group of six or seven tourists, in city clothes, looking somewhat out of place and uncertain, reaches the door, pushes it open, and enters shyly.

At once they see, seated at a desk in front of the entrance, the high priest, their friend. His head is bent over his work. All one can see is the brown mass of his hair, curled in a number of smooth waves that meet in the back in a little ridge. Soon the head is lifted. Two piercing eyes, from their deep seated sockets, turn to the group, in wonder at first, then in recognition. The eyes lose their piercing intensity, the furrow between them disappears all at once, the tight mouth relaxes and a warm welcoming smile lightens the earnest face. . . . "Oh, I am so glad . . .".

The tourists relax, too, feeling they are welcome. They are certain now that the "No visitors" sign was not meant for them. The work inside the hut becomes disrupted and stops for a while. Five or six men come to meet the visitors. They are young and sturdy and earnest. They seem

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Laura Fermi writes that one is correct in assuming that her interest in physics is secondary and comes from being a wife; she definitely disliked physics in school. Born in Rome, Italy, she married Enrico Fermi in 1928. They have two children, a girl of 19 and a boy of 14. The Fermis came to the United States in January, 1939.

happy for the diversion and the chance of breaking their severe life of work. A conducted tour is organized.

Behind the front desks is the laboratory, crowded with apparatus, wires, boxes. Very little room is left to move around and now that the tourists are inside it is almost impossible to circulate. Too bad that the "one way" American traffic sign has not been introduced here!

In turning to move, one of the visitors upsets a box of gadgets. They all roll to the floor and spread around, but there is almost no room to bend and pick them up. The kind young people don't seem to mind, and the tour goes on: a black tent, in a corner, separates the private domain of a special group from the main laboratory. It is the tiniest kingdom on earth but it gives great pride to its rulers.

Both inside the black tent and in the main laboratory great experiments were achieved: experiments with cosmic rays that come free from Heaven and are therefore the only material that the group can afford to use for their researches, experiments that are spoken of in highly praising terms in all scientific milieus, even in countries where the expense factor is of little weight. The apparatus here look crude and primitive: they lack the polished appearance of those ordered from commercial firms. Their parts have been laboriously made by the young people and proudly put together. They speak of infinite faith, of failure, and of ultimate success.

The women in the group of visitors are interested in the housekeeping accommodations, and they are introduced into the living quarters: a small cubicle with two double decker bunks and a rolled up cot; five only of the workers can sleep in. The other ones must go at night to the little hotel. (In September, 1949, shortly after this visit, a second hut was added to the one described and the living quarters were moved there.)

There are four drawers under the window and one is for the high priest. He opens it: tidily arranged are his belongings, a pair of ski-runners, ski wax, sun glasses, a wool muffler, some underwear, a couple of shirts. On top of it all a sign: "Please return what you borrow".

In a small, narrow hall are the cooking facilities: two hot plates. Close by is a cold water faucet over a tiny basin; it can hardly be called a sink. A window sill is their pantry and their refrigerator. Their provisions, butter and cheese, tea, spaghetti, and sugar, overlook the snow. They seem to speak even more austere words than the drawer did. The conducted tour has not stopped in front of the provisions, nothing is said about the food because this is part of the group's intimate life and is not meant for strangers' eyes.

The group steps out now in the wind and the sunshine. The wind blows in the high priest's unkempt hair as he turns around and points out the various peaks, the Matterhorn, the Mont Blanc, and the valley below. The wind plays tricks in his hair, makes it stand up all around his skull. And the sun's rays, falling straight over it, give it the golden appearance of a saint's halo in a primitive painting. But the background is more grandiose.

Institute doings

The Institute has received with much regret the resignation of David A. Katcher as editor of *Physics Today*. His creative ability has established a character and prestige for this journal which has won for it an enthusiastic following. The Institute has worked out arrangements for the continued editorial management of *Physics Today* which will be set forth fully in the November issue. It will not be easy to maintain the standards set by Editor Katcher but we have every intention of doing so. Mr. Katcher's connection with the Institute has not been severed, and may not be entirely. There are other ways he can be an asset to physics. In any case he is free to follow his own ambitions and he has our heartiest good wishes.

The growing size and activity of the Societies maintaining a "physics family relationship" through the Institute is impressively revealed by the list on the inside back cover of the last issue of *Physics Today*. The five Member Societies of the Institute not only have their national organization but three of them have also regional organizations. The Physical Society has nine regional divisions, the Optical Society has five, and the Association of Physics Teachers has eleven.

There are also two Affiliated Societies of national scope and five of localized interest. The listing leaves out of account the Associate Members of the Institute of which there are, at this writing, about 700.

In 1950, certain of the Member Societies of the Institute took advantage of the Institute's group subscription offer for *Physics Today*. Under this plan the Optical Society, the Acoustical Society, the Society of Rheology, and, for three months, the American Association of Physics Teachers, bought subscriptions for all of their members at a price half that available to Members individually. This offer was made principally to build up interest in *Physics Today* and to give the magazine more general circulation among physicists. It was also in the nature of an endorsement and an income guarantee by the societies concerned.

It is believed that *Physics Today* has now been well introduced and that it should now be a matter of individual choice whether or not to receive the magazine. Consequently no group subscriptions will be offered by the Institute to the Member Societies in 1951.

It has been decided to establish a lower subscription rate for Members of the Institute (i.e. all members of the Member Societies) than for others. The schedule for 1951 will be: $3.50 for Members of the Institute, $4.00 for Associate Members of the Institute (Dues), and for Non-Members.

HENRY A. BARTON