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Spazzacamini



In the 19th and well into the 20th century, desperately poor families in the Ticino hired out their young sons as chimney sweeps, for little more than pocket money. These little boys became the Spazzacamini: "living brooms", condemned to sweep the chimneys of Northern Italian cities. It is a tragic story that continues to be told in the media, fiction and film to this day.

Most Spazzacamini (Italian, chimney sweeper boys) were between 8-12 years of age when they were sent off to Italy. In the Valle Verzasca, they took an ancient path - the Sentiero - down to the Lago Maggiore, from where they continued by boat. How difficult it must have been for the parents to let their young sons go on this long journey, never knowing whether they would come home again. Spazzacamini! This is what these boys had to shout from the chimney tops to their Padroni (masters) at the bottom, to prove they had made it up the dark, dangerous and sooty passages. It was dangerous work. The chimneys were often hot and there was the ever present risk of getting stuck or falling. Many Spazzacamini did not survive.

The Padroni treated the boys harshly. Spazzacamini often had to beg for food and sleep in unheated hovels, suffering from cold, homesickness and respiratory illnesses.

Memories of a real Spazzacamino

Although the Ticino government banned boys under 14 years of age in 1873 from becoming Spazzacamini, the practice still continued. Gottardo Cavalli from the village of Intragna left in 1915 to work as a Spazzacamino in Mortara, south of Milan. Gottardo's memories paint a lucid picture of his experiences.

He left the Ticino when he was eight

years old. Gottardo looked forward to the adventure but was to suffer from nightmares about suffocating in a chimney for the rest of his life. He recalled the difficult life and physical suffering as a Spazzacamino, crawling into chimneys, the boilers of steam engines, as well as into smoke stacks.

He remembered being desperately cold and hungry, poorly dressed and constantly needing to beg for pieces of bread. Sleeping in stables at night time, he kept warm lying close to other Spazzacamini, covered with the three or four sacks used to transport soot.

For his work, Gottardo wore a barracan (a heavy, black overcoat) without pockets tucked inside the trousers so that when the belt was tightened, it could not pull up when coming down the chimney. A linen hood protected his head from soot. He carried the iron rasp in one hand and the broom in the other, while working himself up the chimney with elbows and knees, 10 to 20 centimetres at a time.

On Christmas and New Year's Day, custom dictated that he sat at the dining table of a rich client, his blackened face believed to bring good luck for the New Year. However, at no time was his hardship and unhappiness acknowledged by anyone.

Telling the story

The famous children's book "Die Schwarzen Brüder: (the black brothers)" was first published in two volumes in 1940/1941 under the name of Lisa Tetzner, who had carried out the research into the lives of the Spazzacamini. In fact it was her husband Kurt Kläber (also known as Kurt Held) who wrote the book, but could not publish it under his name as a Jewish refugee. The book

tells the story of Giorgio, a little boy from Sonogno in the Verzasca Valley who becomes a Spazzacamino. The book became very popular and inspired a film, a television serial, a musical and a radio play. A new film has only recently been created in 2013 by Director Xavier Koller.

The story of the Spazzacamini has also been researched and documented again in greater detail in 2010 by Elisabeth Wenger, once a "slave child" (Verdingkind) herself. She managed to meet many Spazzacamini and their descendants in the process of her research. Thus, the Spazzacamini and their harsh lives have not been forgotten. Today, trampers walk the Sentiero down the Verzasca Valley in the footsteps of the Spazzacamini, following the course of the emerald Verzasca River. The history of Spazzacamini is also documented in the Museo Sonogno at the top of the Valle Verzasca.

By Susie Wood

Further Reading

Elisabeth Wenger: Als lebender Besen im Kamin: Einer vergessenen Vergangenheit auf der Spur. Books on demand, 2010.[4]

Lisa Tetzner and Kurt Kläber: Die Schwarzen Brüder. Erlebnisse und Abenteuer eines kleinen Tessiners. First published in 1940/1941, Sauerländer, Aarau/Mannheim 2010, ISBN 978-3-7941-8104-9.

Lisa Tetzner and Hannes Binder (illustrations): Die Schwarzen Brüder – Roman in Bildern. Patmos Verlagshaus, Düsseldorf 2002, ISBN 978-3-7941-4900-1.

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<http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/a-man-recalls-working-as-child-chimney-sweep/6768524>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spazzacamini>

