

1 *The Gavazzi family in the first documents from the 16th century*

The Gavazzi family appears all the way back in the first registry documents of Canzo, a village near the lake of Como, in a religious census called the *State of the Souls*, today conserved in the Archiepiscopal Archives of Milan.

NICKNAMES OF THE VARIOUS BRANCHES OF THE FAMILY IN THE 16TH CENTURY

The *State of the Souls* is actually a census, at times inaccurate but generally surprisingly reliable, compiled by parish priests for religious reasons but quite useful for other purposes as well. The documents listed the names, surnames, nicknames and ages of every head of family, wife, child and any relative or unrelated cohabitant living with the family. The profession of the head of family was also often recorded.

The Milan Archives include one census of Canzo from 1574, a second from 1578 and a third from 1596¹.

In these documents the Gavazzi family appears as extremely numerous, firmly rooted in the local community, divided into many family units and branches, very united and sporting a vast assortment of nicknames.

These nicknames were determined by the characteristics or defects of the head of the family or the progenitor of one of the many branches, and had, above all, the function of distinguishing the many descendants of this vast lineage and its individual families. All these facts suggest that the Gavazzi family had already been established in the area for a long time.

In such cases, nicknames can be extremely important. For example, the Verza family (registered as *Vèrsi* in the documents), coal merchants who at the time had not been long in Canzo, came from *Bagolino*, and their nickname was, naturally, *Bagolini* or *from Bagolino*, and so they were registered in the *State of the Souls* census, suggesting that, being new in the area, they were more easily identified as «*those from Bagolino*» than by their names and surnames. The Verza family, in fact, were able to finally discard their nickname in favour of their real surname only when, many years later, they became accepted as an integral part of the local population.

¹ The first is recorded in Volume XXIII, the second and third in Volume XI, a collection of miscellaneous material regarding the Parish Church of Incino.

The acts of the Canzo public notaries in the early 1500s contain many documents regarding the Gavazzi family, which suggest that the family had been well-known from the beginning, or at least for a very long time.

In the same way, from the first parish registers of the Church of Santo Stefano in Canzo (baptism and marriage registers whose initial entries date back to 1564–1565: the first death register has been lost and the following one begins in 1701) innumerable acts involving members of the various Gavazzi families stand out, proving that the surname Gavazzi was undoubtedly one of the most, if not the most, widespread among the citizens of Canzo of the 16th Century.

The very fact that the Gavazzis were quite numerous and often shared the same first names made it even more necessary to use a wide variety of distinguishing nicknames, the actual meaning of which was sometimes obscure.

Practically every member of the family had a nickname, which was almost always passed down to sons and grandsons as a type of «inheritance» – *il Calepino* (the Dictionary), *il Tona* (perhaps originating from the name Antonio), *il Crotino*, *il Gobbo* (the Hunchback), *il Dritto* (the Straightback), *il Custode* (the Caretaker), *il Martinolo* (perhaps originating from the name Martino), *il Torriano* (perhaps due to relations with the Torriani family of Asso), *il Cigolotta*, *il Cigolino* (both perhaps deriving from the word in dialect *cigolla* or *scigolla*, meaning onion, probably in relation to the farming activity of those bearing this name), *il Bernardina* (from the name Bernardino), *il Denis* (from Dionigi, or Dionis in dialect), *il Barnetto* (perhaps related in some way to the Barni family or the nearby town of Barni), *il Dottorello* (possibly because the owner of the name was either a wise man or a «know-it-all»), *lo Scachi*, *lo Scachino*, *il Rabosciano*, etc.

The nicknames that distinguished the members of the different branches studied in our family tree were, from the 16th to the 17th Century, *Cigolino*, *Bernardina*, *Denis* and *Rabosciano*. Towards the end of the 18th Century, however, this practice died out, and the Gavazzis of the branches we are concerned with are no longer referred to by nicknames in any of the registry documents.

While the first baptism and marriage registers essential for the reconstruction of the family hardly ever record the professions of the individuals in question, the *State of the Souls* registers are sometimes a little more generous with details.

Those of 1574 and 1578 allow us to identify a large part of the many Gavazzi families of Canzo, beginning with those who preferred to use the surname together with the nickname, rather than the nickname alone, as was often the case in the smaller provincial towns. It should be remembered, in fact, that in the first decades after the mid-1500s the use of the surname was not yet conventional or automatic.

FROM THE «STATE OF THE SOULS» CENSUS OF 1578

Eight Gavazzi families are recorded as preferring the official use of the surname – the families of Francesco Gavazzi and his wife Isabella Giudici; Giovanni Gavazzi and his wife Elisabetta; another Giovanni and his wife Caterina; Giovanni Pietro Gavazzi and his son Zeno; another Giovanni Pietro Gavazzi and his wife Elena; Jacomazzo Gavazzi and his wife Tommasina; Giovanni Giacomo Gavazzi and his sisters Cecilia and Polissena; and Francesco Gavazzi and his wife Marta.

In the same document, meanwhile, at least as many Gavazzi families, if not more, are registered with their nickname rather than their surname, totalling around twenty families, all boasting numerous offspring and all part of one great family, with the same origin in the same distant progenitor, who came from some unknown place.

From Canzo the Gavazzis branched off into other areas of Brianza; however, as numerous as they were for three whole centuries (from the 16th to the 18th Century), their numbers were to diminish sharply in the first half of the 19th century and disappear completely from the town in the last years of the same century.

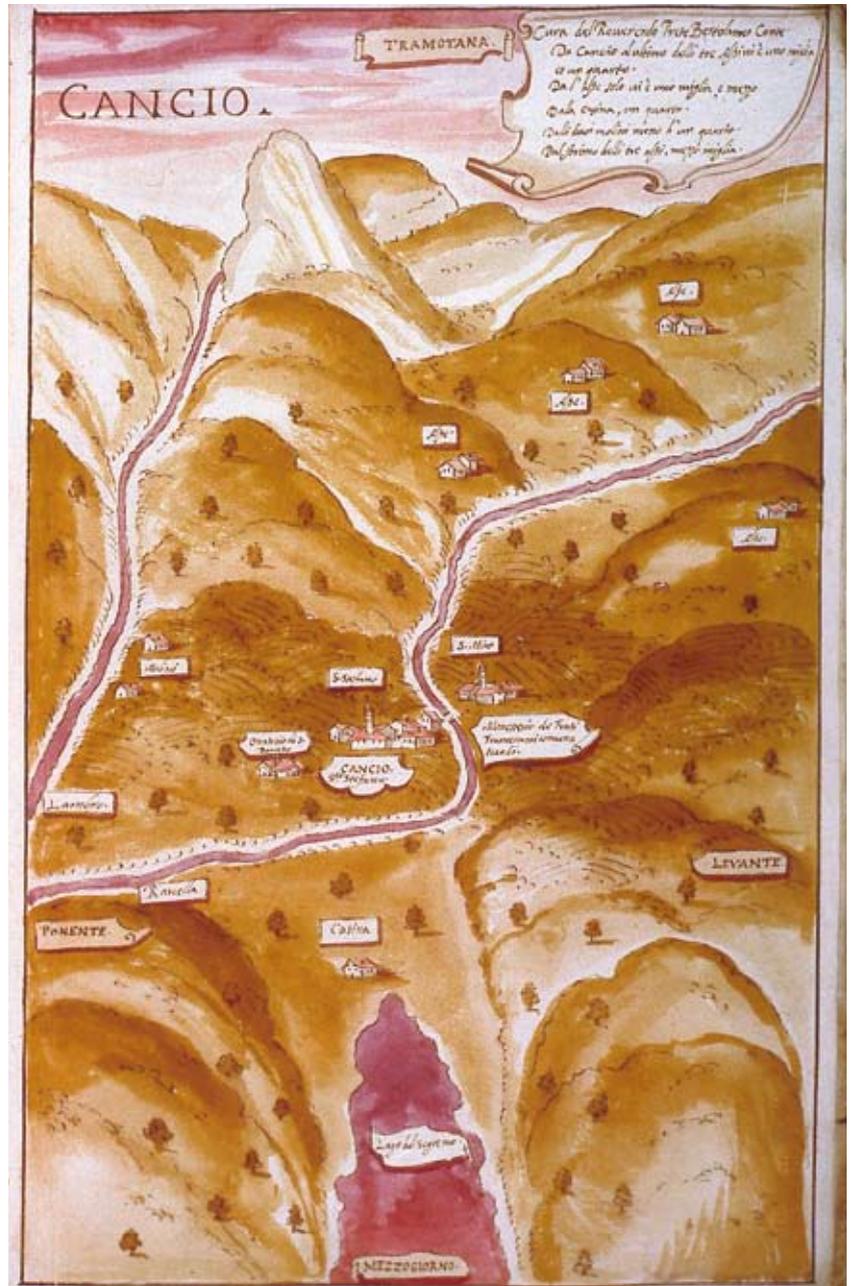
FROM THE «STATE OF THE SOULS» CENSUS OF 1596

This document, meanwhile, also indicates the professions of the heads of the numerous Gavazzi families of Canzo, and shows a greater number of family units registered directly under the surname rather than the nickname.

This document, which follows the first one by a mere twenty years, proves that the surname was gradually assuming a legitimate and definitive predominance.

There were thus eighteen official Gavazzi families registered by name, surname (sometimes also nickname) and profession:

- the family of Francesco Gavazzi, silk-weaver, and his wife Giustina;
- that of Paolina Gavazzi, a poor widow;
- that of Francesco Gavazzi, known as *il Dottorello*, a farmer, and his wife Ortensia;
- that of Battista Gavazzi, policeman, and his wife Armellina;
- that of Francesco Gavazzi, coal merchant², and his wife Lucrezia of Fraggi;



Canzo in a map from the beginning of the 17th Century, drawn by cartographer Aragono Aragonio and preserved in the Archives of the Milan Archiepiscopal Curia.

- that of Bernardino Gavazzi, farmer, and his wife Elisabetta;
- that of Giovanni Gavazzi, silk-weaver, and his daughter Agata;
- that of Giovanni Antonio Gavazzi, silk-weaver, and his wife Valentina;
- that of Giacomo Gavazzi, known as *il Dritto* (*Straight-back*), coal merchant, and his wife Caterina;
- that of Gabriele Gavazzi, known as *Biello*, coal merchant, and his wife Caterina Cassina;
- that of Giacomo Gavazzi, known as *il Gobbo* (*Hunchback*), coal merchant, and his wife Caterina;
- that of Pietro Gavazzi, known as *il Crotino*, coal merchant, and his wife Margherita Conti;
- that of Agata Gavazzi, widow, and her sons, coal merchants;
- that of Zeno Gavazzi, silk-weaver, and his wife Antonia Pellizzoni;
- that of Pietro Gavazzi, builder, and his wife Margherita;
- that of Bernardino Gavazzi, coal merchant, and his wife Caterina;
- that of Dionisio Gavazzi, coal merchant, and his wife Margherita;
- that of Giovanni Gavazzi, known as *il Tona*, wool-carder, and his wife Caterina.

Eighteen families may seem a lot, but the list was not even complete. Other Gavazzi families, in fact, were still registered by nickname, including the original family to which our family tree dates back, registered simply under the nickname of *Bernardina*, along with those of other close relatives, registered with the alternative nickname of *Cigolotta*.

For our particular branch of the Gavazzi family, the surname only appears in the relative documents from the 4th generation onwards.

² Canzo was the area where the coal-merchant's trade was most widespread.