

# 2 The first six generations

Tracing the family backwards in time brings us as far back as the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. At this point in time my ancestors were humble folk and probably remained so for the generations immediately after; in the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, however, a Gavazzi married into the Pellizzoni family, one of the most important families in the area.

## CANZO: THE SILK ROUTE

Canzo was situated on a famous «silk route», along which goods were moved from Milan and Lombardy to the North of Europe, across Lake Como and Chiavenna.

It was therefore natural that traders and merchants met frequently here, and that business initiatives found fertile ground.

The other trades in the town besides the manufacture and marketing of silk were the manufacture of wool and its by-products (in which sector Canzo was for a long time the leader in Lombardy), the production of charcoal, agriculture and sheep-farming, and, on a smaller scale, the extraction of iron from the mines belonging to the Missaglia family, gunsmiths to the Duke and lords of Canzo.

At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, Canzo was composed of 900 people divided into ninety families. In 1867 there were 2,083 and in 1985, 4,354. In 1590 a notary joined the community, an event that invariably led to the attraction of trade and the development of the surrounding boroughs, of which this legal expert is, in a certain sense, the regulator and overseer.

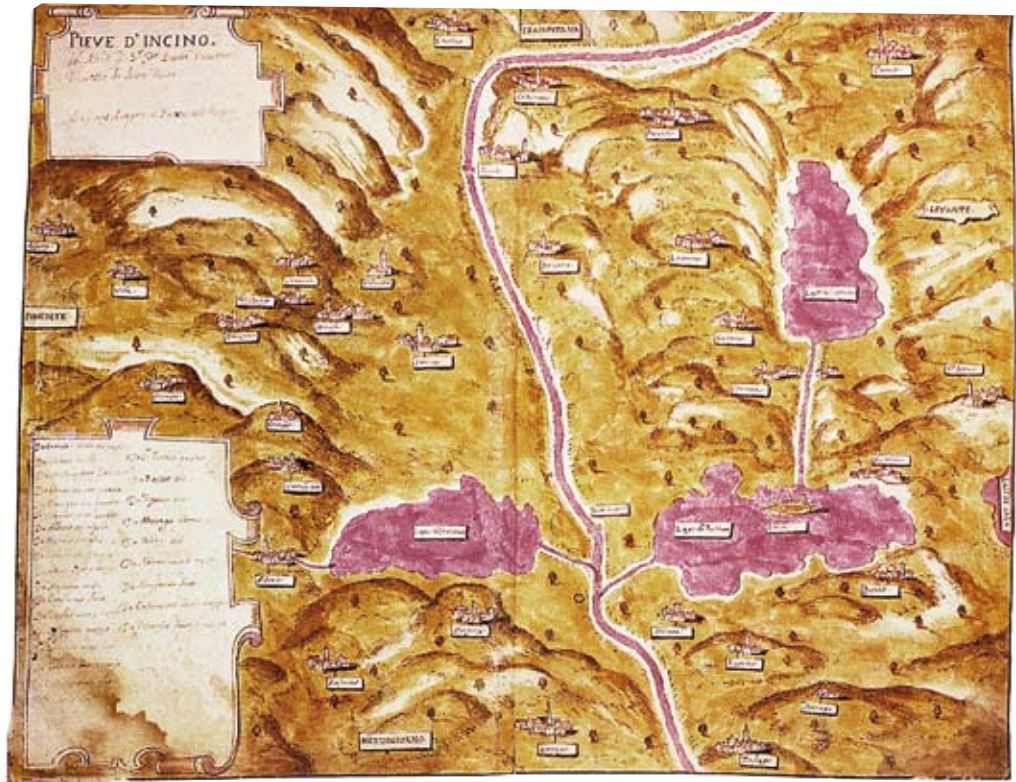
The town was divided into the three operating districts of San Donato, Sonvico and Casate, also known as Castello.

In the beginning, the Gavazzis of our branches of the family lived in the district of Sonvico, and their houses can still be seen there today, clustered closely around the Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli villa.



Corte di Casale, a map taken from the 'Territorial Area of the Dukedom of Milan' (18th Century), Ambrosiana Library, Milan.

Pieve d'Incino: another map by Aragono Aragonio (1605) preserved in the Archives Library of the Milan Archiepiscopal Curia (Diocesan Historical Archives), sec. X, vol. 40.



In feudal times, Canzo was the centre of the so-called Court of Casale<sup>1</sup>. The initial lords and landowners of this feud were the Dal Verme counts, who later became related to the Gavazzis. These were followed in 1472 by the Negroni counts<sup>2</sup> from Ello, known as the Missaglia family, and finally, from 1677 onwards, the Marquises Crivelli.

Gavazzi «weavers» were already registered in the second half of the 1500s and in the 1600s, and by this time it is clear that they had attained good standing in Canzo, as there were more and more marriages with the oldest and most important families of the Como Lake triangle. Furthermore, although we have little information on the lives of these ancient Gavazzis, we do know that the funerals of some of them were officiated by numerous priests. When Lucia Gavazzi Morelli, who married Angelo Andrea Gavazzi in 1686, died 52 years later, in 1738, her funeral was presided over by 22 priests, an impressive indication of her influence and wealth.

<sup>1</sup> This also included the villages of Castelmarte, Proserpio, Caslino, Longone, Cassina Mariaga, Bindella, Morchiuso, Campolungo and Incasate.

In 1610, during the celebrations for the canonisation of St. Carlo Borromeo, we come across another indication of the acknowledged pre-eminence of Canzo over the surrounding villages. The Parish Church of Incino decided to decorate the tomb of its patron saint, the martyr Eufemia, with an ornate silver cross bearing an effigy of the saint. The head priest, delegated to perform the rite, chose as a sign of distinction to be accompanied by Don Giovanni Conti, who was in charge of the parish of Canzo and who was considered worthy by priest and parishioners to represent the parish churches of Incino.

<sup>2</sup> The Negroni family were famous gunsmiths and close friends of Ludovico il Moro, who later supplied weapons to the armies of half of Europe. If there is any truth in the saying that wealth begets wealth, we can say that a little must surely have rubbed off on the town of Canzo, and this would explain the area's prosperity in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, in contrast with the general economic stagnation that lasted for the whole of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century.

In the good old days of the Negroni family there was money for the erecting of churches, the decoration of altars and the courteous and dignified outward professions of one's faith. This prosperity was nevertheless to deteriorate, initially because of the general conditions at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and then more rapidly after the middle of the Baroque century. Almost 1,000 people lived in Canzo at this time (around one fifth of the present population).

Further evidence of this prosperity is represented by the substantial real estate and lands owned by the Gavazzi family.

The *State of the Souls* census carried out in Canzo in 1596 shows that in the town of Canzo alone, in that particular year, twelve weavers of silk and five wool merchants owned workshops<sup>3</sup>.

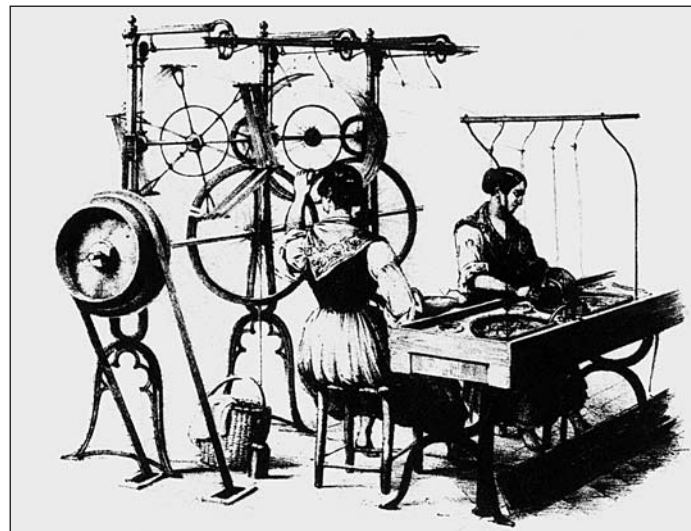
Of the silk weavers, three were members of the Gavazzi clan (Francesco, Giovanni and Zeno), and one (Agostino Besana) was the father-in-law of a Gavazzi.

Of the wool merchants' shops, three were owned by Gavazzis (Giovanni, his brother Jacobino, and Cristoforo, a relative), all of them bearing the same nickname, *il Tona*, showing that they belonged to the same branch of the family.

We can safely say, then, that the Gavazzi family had from the beginning worked in silk and manufacturing.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Canzo weavers used hand looms, with a few helpers who were usually members of the family – home and shop were one, in fact. The wool merchants shared a similar lifestyle. Even as far back as this period, however, a small group of labourers trained in the processing of silk was already being formed, as well as the custom (later to become typical of the area) of seeking an apprenticeship in the silk and wool workshops – two things that were to favour the subsequent founding of the silk mills.

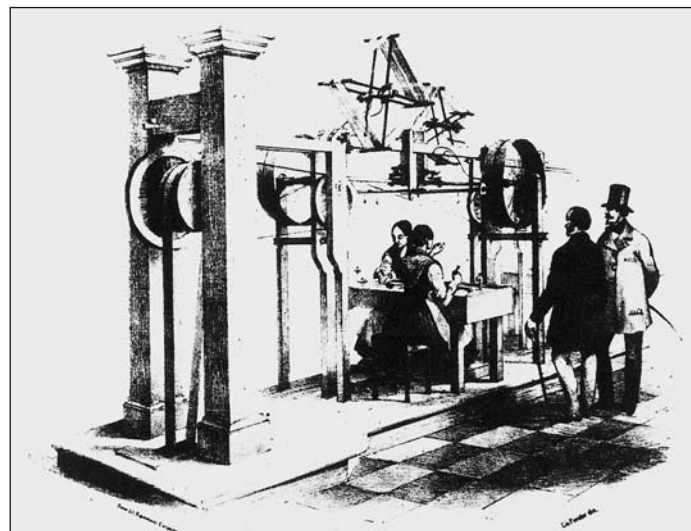
In this period, the trades of my



Valuable 19th Century prints depicting the extraction phases of silk processing (A. Bertarelli Public Prints Collection, Milan).

<sup>3</sup> This period witnessed the formation of a perfect organisation in Canzo, where the sculpting of the town's physiognomy was in progress. Within its solid walls were all manner of craftsmen plying their trade, and there were two notaries, six noblemen, the weavers mentioned earlier, over fifty farmers and numerous coal merchants. There were also tailors, basket-weavers, smiths with the best apprentices, a postman, a butcher's shop, an innkeeper (only one), builders, grooms, goatherds, a local policeman, three shoemakers, a violin player, a carpenter and an entire array of workers who pitched in where needed to help the town as it went about its neatly ordered and lucrative business.

Almost 1,000 people lived in Canzo at this time (around one fifth of the present population).



direct ancestors are unknown, but we do know that, in many cases, the fathers of the wives of Gavazzis were weavers or silk mill owners. It is certain that Miro Gavazzi (8<sup>th</sup> gen.), born in 1746, owned a silk mill in Canzo.

The silk mill in these days was already an «industry». It was a combination of work and wealth, with machinery and equipment, and involved «organised labour», specially built factories and commerce. It represented, we may say, the embryo from which the large industrial concerns would soon to develop.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the first important textile industry was set up in Valmadrera, and the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century was characterised by expansion, new initiatives, inventions and patents, which gave a tremendous boost to the family business.

The silk industry, in turn, stimulated other branches of the textile industry (wool and cotton) and, consequently, the mechanical sector.

All those who have studied the history of silk in Vallassina and Upper Brianza agree that the original local silk craftsman, though he may not have been especially prosperous, was certainly the harbinger of a rosy future.

At the same pace, the cultivation of mulberry trees and the raising of silkworms followed the progress of silk manufacture.

As well as the silk industry in Canzo there was also the manufacture of twill, a thin, light-weight material woven together with combed wool and made according to the specifications of the Anglo-Dutch. Small factories sprang up for the manufacture of this cloth, which could be either ordinary or extra-fine; it is even said, in fact, that a scarlet version was ordered from Canzo for the prelates and cardinals of far-off Rome. Canzo was known for its twill fabrics throughout Lombardy<sup>4</sup>.

## THE FIRST GAVAZZIS AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE FAMILY

There isn't much information regarding the trades of the first Gavazzis of our particular branch of the family.

The professions of the first two Gavazzis which concern us, referred to in the family tree as Bernardino I and his son Bernardino II, who lived in Canzo from the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century to the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, are completely unknown.

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<sup>4</sup> Midway through the 1700s silk began to grow in popularity, and the associated processes soon became the district's principal sources of income: "there are still five weavers that produce the cloth known as *sai di Canzo*, but these use the old techniques: high quality and there used to be a great deal of it produced, too, but nowadays the wool looms aren't in demand anymore, because everyone is dealing in silk ..." De La Tour, inspector of the Austrian government, from his report on his visit, in 1769, to survey production in the realm's Lombard and Venetian dominions.

With the subsequent establishment of the factory system, during the course of the 1800s, industrial workers in Canzo were employed almost exclusively in silk processing. Towards the middle of the century, there were 10 steam-powered silk mills with a total of 492 burners and 14 fire-driven silk mills with 268 burners, 15 winders and 26 spinning machines, some water-powered and some steam-powered. The town's largest silk businesses were owned by the Verza brothers and the Sormani family, who together employed 30% of the workers in the sector. This high degree of concentration was achieved thanks to the advanced integration of the processes of drawing and throwing practiced in these two important firms.

We know that Pietro Gavazzi, the brother of Bernardino II, who lived in Canzo in around 1530, was a builder, and that his sons Bernardino and Dionigi were, like many others in the town, coal merchants. Bernardino II and Pietro had a nephew, Giovanni (3<sup>rd</sup> gen.), a son of their brother's (name unknown), who was a silk weaver and married a certain Agata Gavazzi, perhaps a relative, the daughter of a wool merchant named Cristoforo Gavazzi. This Giovanni, known (like all his relatives) as *Cigolotta* and born in 1558, was the first Gavazzi in the history of the family of whom it can be said with certainty that he worked in the silk trade.

Battista (3<sup>rd</sup> gen.) (born around 1520 and died before 1574), the son of Bernardino II, was the first Gavazzi to take at least a latent interest in the world of silk. There is no sure and documented evidence, in fact, to show that from the end of the 1500s to the mid-1700s any of the members of the family played a major role in the local silk trades.

It would appear that the Gavazzi family spent these centuries engaged, so to speak, in a curious and persistent state of alert, remaining «on the sidelines» of the silk world while observing it with careful attention, ready to reap the benefits where possible.

Giovanni Antonio (b. 1554, 4<sup>th</sup> gen.), the son of Battista, was officially registered as a farmer, as his father and his uncles Pietro and Ambrogio (brothers of his father) had been before him. Undoubtedly, like almost all the local farmers, he also engaged in the cultivation of mulberry trees and silkworms. His wife Margherita, however, was the daughter of a documented silk weaver, Agostino Besana di Canzo. This marriage may have been the key to the social climb that elevated the Gavazzi family from the level of farmers to that of silk weavers. It is possible, in fact, that one or more of the sons of the Gavazzi-Besana marriage went to work in their grandfather's workshop, becoming weavers in their turn. The official trade of Giovanni Pietro Gavazzi, 5<sup>th</sup> gen. (1619-1706), son of Giovanni Antonio (4<sup>th</sup> gen.), and of Margherita Besana, is unknown.

Likewise, the professions of Carlo Antonio Gavazzi (1657-1708) and his brother Andrea (1661-1727), 6<sup>th</sup> gen., sons of the above-mentioned Giovanni Pietro, are not mentioned in the registers. Curiously, however, both Carlo Antonio and Andrea married the daughters of silk-weavers or, more precisely, a weaver and the owner of a silk mill. Andrea even married a member of the Morelli family, whose brother owned a spinning mill in Caslino, one of the first to be built in Upper Brianza, before silk had begun to dominate local industry.

It is known that in the past there was a tendency to marry within the same sphere of work, partly for the sake of creating alliances that could prove useful from both a financial and business point of view. It would not be strange, therefore, to suppose that Carlo Antonio and Andrea Gavazzi had married the daughters of two silk craftsmen because they were of the same trade and the sons of silk weavers.

At this point, it would also appear a natural consequence that, having opted for the merchant's trade (to compensate for the crisis of the local silk workshops caused by Spanish mismanagement), Carlo Francesco Gavazzi, 7<sup>th</sup> gen. (1688-1733), son of the above-mentioned Carlo Antonio, chose to deal in silk, a material he presumably was very familiar with, and

*The novel «Ghita of Carrobbio», by Giovanni Biffi*

*Tradition has it that one day, towards the end of 1563, a certain member of the Gavazzi clan, together with other young men of Canzo, helped Ghitta of Carrobbio, the betrothed bride of Captain Soncino, progenitor of the Stampa family of Soncino, to escape from the prison of Marquis Don Alfonso Carpani.*

*Ghita was imprisoned in the tower of the castle of Galliano (Eupilio), owned by the Carpani family and today part of the villa du Chêne de Vère (the tower still stands).*

*This Gavazzi, who was later to die in a skirmish caused by these events, is said to have been the forefather of the family.*

*If this were true, it must have been Battista Gavazzi, son of Bernardino II, the third male member of the family in chronological order (see family tree). However, Battista was still alive in 1568, when his last son Jacopo was born, while according to legend he supposedly died in 1563, a full five years before.*

*Giovanni Biffi, a Milanese writer from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, who himself was extremely fond of the Plain of Erba (his family, which today are the owners of a famous chain of pastry shops in Milan bearing the same name, had villas in Eupilio and Morchiuso and his wife, Irene Boselli, was one of the owners of the San Salvatore monastery, above Erba), pieced together the story of the beautiful Ghita (Margherita Sebregondi) and turned it into a novel*

to do so right in Chiavenna, which happened to lie along the road on which Lombard yarn was transported to the markets of Northern Europe.

Another fact which takes on a special meaning is that Filippo Gavazzi (1692-1763), 7<sup>th</sup> gen., the younger brother of Carlo Francesco, although deciding to leave the silk trade in favour of a bureaucratic post (he eventually became the Canzo tax collector), remained in any case on the outskirts of the silk trade by marrying Beatrice Verza, the daughter and sister of established silk merchants destined to play one of the most important roles in the local silk industry.

With the Gavazzi-Verza marriage, the Gavazzi family plunged into the midst of the silk trade. Miro (8<sup>th</sup> gen.), the son of Filippo and Beatrice Verza, was sent to learn the trade in his maternal uncle's silk mill in Canzo, and after some years also became a silk mill owner in Canzo. True to form, he married the daughter of a silk mill owner, and became the progenitor of a family of silk mill owners.

Pietro Antonio Gavazzi (8<sup>th</sup> gen.), after being orphaned by the death of his father Carlo Francesco, silk merchant in Chiavenna, was raised in Canzo by his uncle Filippo and studied with his cousin Miro at the Verza family school, as we will see in his biography. Yet after long years of training as a civil servant, he finally opted for a profession in the world of silk, a decision that was to bring him great success.

named for its heroine, «Ghita of Carrobbio».

The story is set in a region extending from 16<sup>th</sup>-Century Milan to Upper Brianza, where the aristocrat Carpani had his castle. It involves, in the unfolding of the plot (a mixture of fact and fiction) places like Erba, Canzo and Eupilio, all locations where the author himself had lived and found his inspiration for this historical tale, similar in some ways to Alessandro Manzoni's famous «Promessi Sposi» («The Betrothed»).

Biffi began by publishing his historical novel in short installments in the Milanese newspaper «La Politica del Popolo» (1863). Later, thanks to its great success, the book was re-published in one volume (recently re-printed).

In the novel, the Gavazzi in question plays a marginal role, going simply by the name of «Gavazzo», with no reference to his first name. He is presented as a mercenary, part bully, part hero, who fights alongside his fellow soldiers of fortune, all natives of Canzo and all members of families which, through the centuries, had established themselves and secured a place in the local history and economy, with names like Scannagatta, Sormani, Ponti and, above all, Pellizzoni.

This group had fought in France under the command of Anguissola, a famous soldier of fortune, who is said to have praised the courage of his men from Canzo with the following words – «One hundred hearts of such fibre, and victory will never be far!»

In Biffi's novel, Gavazzo dies of wounds in his belly and thigh during the siege of the castle of Galliano.

All these facts seem to coincide with a consistency that the various branches of the Gavazzi family were able to maintain and nurture throughout the centuries – a consistency that was rooted in a remarkable faith in the handicraft trade, and later in the silk industry. For this was the traditional family profession, which even during centuries of crisis managed to remain firmly entwined, from one generation to the next, with the thread of the silk trade, without allowing room for other choices provoked by chance or by temporary circumstances

## THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND RECOVERY

Looking back, therefore, we can say that since its inception in the 1500s, Canzo's silk trade produced gratifying results. However, the initial success enjoyed by the first local silk and wool craftsmen, including certain Gavazzis of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, was threatened first by French and then by Spanish rule. The notorious mismanagement of the latter brought bleak times to all kinds of artisans and craftsmen, leading to a prolonged slump which unfortunately lasted for over a century and a half.

Increasingly heavy and incumbent taxes, as well as punitive laws and decrees, paralysed all forms of trade and plunged the region into poverty.

The craftsmen of Canzo immediately felt the consequences and paid the price; workshops closed down and many impoverished weavers were forced to seek out (both locally and in other regions) more profitable activities.

A great number of these even left the country, giving rise to a remarkable emigration phenomenon which scattered the inhabitants of Canzo and Vallassina throughout Europe<sup>5</sup>.

The Gavazzis, who did not possess silk mills but owned almost certainly no more than simple weaving workshops, were also forced to seek other sources of income outside the silk trade (which, however, as we have already seen, they never completely lost sight of).

With the end of Spanish rule and the arrival of the Austrians conditions began to improve, at first slowly, then at an accelerating pace, until the local craftsmen were restored to a level of relative prosperity. At the beginning of Austrian rule, however (in 1706), the situation in Canzo was the following: of the entire ancient and prosperous trade, there remained only one wool mill in operation, belonging to the Castelletti family, while the tiny factories that once manufactured twill and *linsey-woolsey* were completely in ruins.

In a report of 1714 the Vicar of Provvisione wrote that the Canzo wool, which at one time competed heavily with Milanese products, «no longer enjoys such trade, and the women spin, when they can, mainly for the merchants of Bergamo, as this business has likewise been reduced to poor profit. It is to be supposed that there are no others in Canzo, besides Mr. Andrea Castelletti, who make even very few pieces of twill and with little profit, as there are no regular customers»<sup>6</sup>.

Of the silk weavers in Canzo only the strongest and best protected managed to stay afloat. These amounted to no more than two families – the Pellizzonis, who remained wealthy throughout, and the Magreglios. These two families, moreover, in varying measures of power, had held a monopoly over the Canzo silk mills for the past thirty years.

From a list of the silk mills of the Dukedom of Milan in 1679<sup>7</sup> it emerges that there were sixteen mills in Canzo, fourteen of which were in operation. Six belonged to Francesco Pellizzoni; two to Giovanni Battista Pellizzoni; four to Carlo Pellizzoni, and four (two of which were inactive) to the brothers Orazio and Giovanni Pietro Magreglio.

There is no indication as to either the number of workers employed in the mills or the volume of production.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, however, the situation of the factories in Canzo was profoundly different from that in 1679 and 1714. Times had changed, and the reign of the silk-worm was about to begin. In the general climate of economic recovery, the Canzo craftsmen

<sup>5</sup> This is confirmed in the memoirs of Head Priest Carlo Mazza of Asso, entitled *Memorie storiche sopra la religione, stato civile e politico a varie epoche della Vallassina* («Historical recollections on religion, marital status and politics in various periods of Vallassina»), written in 1796 and published a few years ago by the Asso Library. The book also contains a long list of the emigrants from the different villages of Vallassina, complete with names and surnames, all destined to found fruitful economic businesses.

<sup>6</sup> The Milan State Archives, Commerce p.a., file I, Report July 25, 1714 by Nicolò Visconti.

<sup>7</sup> Preserved in Milan, Civic History Archives, *Fondo Materie* c. 875.



were concentrating almost exclusively on silk, while wool, which had in the past produced profitable results, tended to be neglected.

The Magreglio family had taken their looms to Longone, and the Pellizzonis had lost a great deal of their age-old power. Meanwhile, two other families who were destined for success appeared on the scene of the emerging silk industry – the Verza and Sormani families.

The situation, in detail, was as follows: one water-operated spinning mill belonged to Giovanni Sormani; one hand-operated mill to Antonio Francesco Sormani, and one water-operated mill to Carlo Verza. These were the three largest and most productive spinning mills. One hand-operated mill still belonged to the Pellizzoni family, another to the Barberinis and another to the Bettallis. The Castelletti family had converted their old wool mill into a hand-operated silk mill.

Not all of these factory owners ran their own mills personally – many of them simply owned the property, and were not involved in the running of the mill.

The Gavazzis never owned spinning mills in Canzo: they rented factories and operated them. The previously-mentioned Miro Gavazzi, together with his sons Costantino and Giuseppe and the widow of this latter, Carolina Pellizzoni (on behalf of the youngest son, Tiziano Gavazzi), owned a well-established company in Canzo, but were never owners of industrial plants.

Pier Ambrogio Curti, in his *Guida al lago di Como e al Piano d'Erba*, published in 1873, writes: «The twill that was manufactured in Canzo was famous; afterwards silk prevailed, and silk factories and spinning mills were owned by the Verza and Gavazzi families».

In Canzo, however, the Gavazzis played second fiddle to the Verza and Sormani families, who were the leading silk manufacturers and had achieved the status of *nouveau riches* by the 1700s.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Verza family were originally coal-merchants, and by making charcoal had always managed to stay afloat in times of economic crisis. They had acquired quite a large estate, profiting from the situation of the local nobility, who were gradually losing their incomes and were often forced to sell their lands. According to the Teresian land register of 1700, Carlo Giuseppe Verza was the owner of 190 poles of land, with houses and a silk mill, compared to only 17 poles owned by his own brother-in-law Filippo Gavazzi (1692-1763) who, moreover, shared the land with his nephew, Pietro Antonio (1729-1797). Fortified by their prosperity, the Verza family went on to enjoy additional success in the silk trade.

