

3 The two ancient branches of the family

The division of the Gavazzi property in Canzo led to the splitting up of the family into two major branches - the Gavazzis of Valmadrera (red line) and the Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli branch (yellow and orange line). In the second half of the 18th Century this latter branch (which was eventually to die out) moved to Milan, accruing wealth there through successful business ventures.

THE ANCIENT GAVAZZI HOMES IN CANZO

From the documents dating back to the 16th Century, it appears that the Gavazzis we are studying lived in a district of Canzo called *Contrada de Caxato*.

They were registered as living there as far back as 1574, when two families of our particular branch were listed along with the other inhabitants of this district in the *State of the Souls*



Map of Canzo, from the 17th Century documents of the Maria Theresa Land Register (National Archives of Como). The map shows the first Gavazzi home, today the property of the Balossi Restelli family (in yellow), cadastral map no. 1005, and the second Gavazzi home (in red), cadastral map no. 1062.

census of that year. These are the families of Magno Pietro Gavazzi (3rd gen.), known as *Pietro de Bernardina*, and his wife Stefanina de' Bianchini (with their children Caterina, Bernardino, Martino, Marcantonio and Maddalena) and of Elisabetta (Isabetta) Conti, widow of Battista Gavazzi, Magno Pietro's brother.

Only two of Elisabetta's four children are registered – Angela, 17 years old and Antonio Francesco, 10 years old. The two other children are missing from the register – Jacopo, who may have died in early childhood, and Giovanni Antonio, known as *Antonio de Bernardina*, who was probably not in Canzo at the time of the census.

The two families lived together, presumably in keeping with the traditions of the patriarchal system.

Four years later, in the 1578 *State of the Souls*, the two families are registered as living in the *Contrada de Sumbigo* district (today Sonvico), in the upper part of the village, where their houses still stand today.

In this census the family of Magno Pietro appears in its entirety, while the name of Elisabetta Conti, widow of Gavazzi, is missing. Whether she had died in the meantime or re-married is not known, but the fact remains that only her children, Angela and her brother Antonio Francesco (4th gen.) are registered. The other brother, Giovanni Antonio, is still not listed.

We can thus infer with some certainty that from 1578 onwards the Gavazzis lived continuously, for over three centuries, in the *Contrada di Sonvico*.

Antonio de Bernardina re-appears with his family in the 1596 *State of the Souls*, which lists him as living in the *Contrada di Sonvico*. He is now head of the family, living with his wife Margherita Besana and their first three daughters (they were later to have eight more children), having inherited, as the eldest son, the leadership of the clan from his uncle Magno Pietro, who had passed away in the meantime.

The two families still live together, or at least close by. Stefanina de' Bianchini, widow of Magno Pietro Gavazzi, and her family appear in the register, in fact, immediately following the family of Giovanni Antonio.

A sister-in-law of Stefanina, Elisabetta, the widow of her brother Francesco de' Bianchini (nicknamed *il Bianchinetto*), was also living with them, along with her three-year-old son, Giovanni. Having no one to look after them following the death of de' Bianchini, mother and child were taken into the Gavazzi clan, perhaps simply out of charity.

It is likely that the first Gavazzi home in the Contrada di Sonvico was built on the site of the present-day Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli villa. It is in this house that the third and fourth Gavazzi generations shown in the family tree are believed to have lived, along with their numerous respective relatives.

In 1660 or thereabouts, the two brothers, Francesco and Giovanni Pietro Gavazzi, 5th gen. (sons of Giovanni Antonio and Margherita Besana), both married, or perhaps re-married, given their ages.

The parish registers from the 17th Century are not extremely precise, inasmuch as they were

compiled chaotically and inadequately. The Gavazzis, moreover, were so numerous (not to mention the fact that there were often cases of three or more family members with the same name) that it is not always possible to follow the characters studied from birth to death. Furthermore, the two brothers did not marry in Canzo but in some unknown location, and their marriage certificates, which would provide accurate data, cannot be found.

For this reason, and given the age of the two brothers, we can assume that this was a second marriage for both of them. The first brother married a woman named Elisabetta, whose surname is not specified in the records (as was not uncommon in those days; in the official registers the wife's maiden name was frequently omitted) and the second married Caterina Manera, of unspecified birthplace but almost certainly a native of Vallassina, where this surname was common.

THE DIVISION OF PROPERTY AND THE FORMATION OF THE TWO FAMILY BEANCHES

Presumably, these two marriages were the cause of a decision to separate the two families into different homes, perhaps also following a «division of assets», a common practice in many families. This division led to the formation of two great branches of the Gavazzi family – that which was later to become the Gavazzi Spech-Balossi Restelli branch (yellow and orange line) and the other, the Valmadrera branch (red line), from which another branch would soon split off, that of Canzo-Milan, which we might call the «Modesto Gavazzi branch» (blue line).

Corresponding to the two main branches were two family seats. The descendants of Francesco continued to live in the first Gavazzi home (that is, the Gavazzi villa, later the Gavazzi Spech villa) without interruption until the end of the 18th Century, when they moved to Milan and kept the villa as a holiday residence. Today, their descendants still live in the house. The descendants of Giovanni Pietro instead moved to a smaller home, directly opposite the villa.

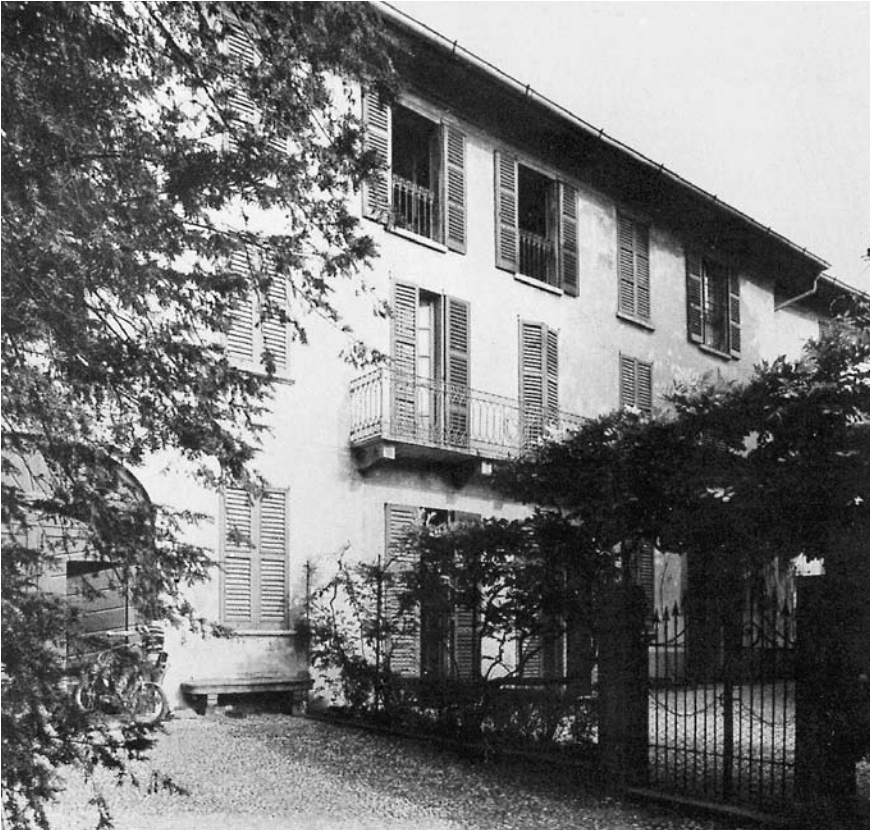
THE GAVAZZI-BALOSSI RESTELLI VILLA

The various changes of ownership

After the death of Giovanni Pietro the house was occupied by his two sons, Carlo Antonio and Andrea (6th gen.) and after a separation of assets, by Carlo Antonio alone. Afterwards, the house was inherited by his sons, Carlo Francesco and Filippo, and

The 18th Century rear courtyard of the Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli Villa in Canzo.





Front view of the
Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli
Villa in Canzo.

remained their joint property until the death of Carlo Francesco in Chiavenna. The house then became the property, still undivided, of his son, Pietro Antonio (a small child at the time) and his uncle and guardian Filippo. And this is how the house is registered in the documents of the Teresian land register.

From this register onward, the transfers of ownership regarding this house are recorded accurately – in 1759 Filippo Gavazzi (7th gen.) and his nephew Pietro Antonio (8th gen.) agreed to an official division of assets. Pietro Antonio, who was soon to move to Melzo, and from there to Ospedaletto Lodigiano, eventually settling in Valmadrera, was bought out and the house became the sole property of his uncle Filippo. At his death on January 2, 1763, Filippo left the house to his only son, Miro (1746-1815), 8th gen., who was to officially enter into possession with a decree on May 3, 1763, re-

confirmed by an additional decree on September 12, 1773.

After the death of Miro Gavazzi, in May 1815, the Gavazzi house was passed down to his children and heirs Costantino (1790-1857), Giuseppe (1784-1840), Bianca (1780-1838), Giuseppa (1782-?) and Caterina (1796-1834) and his nephew Primo (1807-?), who officially entered into joint possession by petition no. 20 on August 19, 1815.

In 1824 Giuseppe Gavazzi (9th gen.) bought the shares of the property from his brothers and sisters and his cousin and became the sole owner (petition no. 2089/129 of January 8, 1824). When he died in 1840, the house was inherited by his children, Tiziano (1824-?), Claudina (1832-?) and Erminia (1829-?), 10th gen., who were to enter into full possession only upon their coming of age, with a decree dated December 6, 1856.

Lastly, on April 8, 1857, Tiziano, Claudina and Erminia Gavazzi, who by this time had settled in Gavardo, sold the family house to a distant relative, Giovanni Battista Gavazzi, 10th gen. (yellow line). After his death, in 1864, the house, along with many other possessions, was left to his son, Giovanni Gavazzi Spech.

Through the daughter of this latter, Emilia, who married a Balossi, the house later became the property of the Balossi Restelli family.

The architecture of the villa

The Gavazzi (later Balossi Restelli) villa of Canzo stands amidst the sumptuous buildings that grace the old part of town¹. It is the easternmost house, towards the mountains, placed

almost as if to mark the end of the group of buildings, being at right-angles with the forked road – it acts, therefore, as a perspective backdrop to the road itself, though only partly, at least in the architectural design, with a precise and conscious deliberation.

The original building was erected in the 15th Century, but today the house is basically 18th Century, with some additions made in the early 19th Century.

It consists of a linear three-floor block, extremely sober and austere, yet with a certain axial composition that vaguely follows the layout typical of the Brianza tradition.

Inserted conspicuously in the wrought iron railings of the centre balcony is the letter «G». The central halls and rooms retain an «Empire» style – the ceilings are decorated with geometrical shapes, frescoes and stuccoes, believed to date back to around 1820; the furniture is of excellent quality and fits perfectly with the style of these main halls.

The Gavazzis who lived in this house earned the gratitude of the townspeople in 1843, when they donated a public hospital to the community. A commemorative stone plaque in one of its walls records the event.

THE GAVAZZI BRANCH OF CANZO - THE YELLOW AND ORANGE LINE

The origins

The yellow and orange line originates with Francesco Gavazzi, nicknamed *de Denis*, born in Canzo in 1604, the elder brother of Giovanni Pietro, or Pietro, nicknamed *Pedro de Denis*, born in Canzo in 1619, whom we will consider the progenitor of the red line, that of the great industrialists and bankers. As regards the first members of the family, those most far-removed in time, there is only sporadic mention of them and a few references in the registers.

The professions of tax-collector - Giovanni Battista I (1688-1763) and Carlo Francesco (1723-1775)

Probably silk craftsmen like their cousins before them, these Gavazzis also passed over to the bureaucratic ranks. The documents show that for a long time the Gavazzis of the two branches competed with each other for the role and office of Canzo Town Hall tax collector. This title, in fact, would guarantee them a certain social position that was in some ways more privileged with respect to the other families of Canzo, gaining them respect and bringing them closer to local power. This is a clear indication of the family's ambitious desire to «climb the social ladder». The yellow and orange line begins to reach a certain level of prosperity with Giovanni Battista I (7th gen.), who, as we have seen, was a tax collector in Canzo.

The first consequences of this new social leap were the marriage choices of certain members

¹ From *Tre giorni di pellegrinazione nel Piano d'Erba e nei paesi circumvicini* by Giulio Ferrario in Castelmarte (Giuseppe Crespi, Milan, 1840); page 44 of the account writes: «I walked thoughtfully along behind my faithful companion, and after bringing me to see the beautiful church and several noteworthy villas, including those belonging to the families of Gavazzi, Bettali, Ambrosioni, Meda and Minoja ...».

of the family. His son, Carlo Francesco (b. in Canzo on 15.6.1723, d. in Canzo on 9.5.1775), who himself worked as a tax collector for the Canzo Town Hall from 1760 onwards, married Caterina Gorio (b. in Visino on 1732, d. in Canzo on 16.1.1817), in Visino di Valbrona on April 15, 1755. She was a member of a family of expert wool merchants who later passed over quite successfully to the silk trade; this family boasted among its relatives a remarkable number of prelates. Caterina was the daughter of Francesco Gorio, wool merchant and spinning mill owner, and of Maria Gorio.

Likewise, his cousin-rival Filippo Gavazzi (b. in Canzo on 1692, d. in Canzo on 1763) (7th gen.) married Beatrice Verza, a member of the family that was to become the richest and most powerful of all the local silk-dealing families. Filippo, fourth cousin of Carlo Francesco, was a tax collector for the Canzo Town Hall from 1743 to 1758. Immediately before, that is, the office passed over to Carlo Francesco.

A return to commerce - The son of Carlo Francesco

With the beginning of a more prosperous period after the slump that had forced them to seek economic refuge in civil service, the Gavazzis returned to their original profession and their businesses. Canzo and poverty-stricken Brianza were not likely to offer much to an ambitious family or guarantee the attaining of their much sought-after prosperity.

In the Teresian land registers these Gavazzis appear, as the other relatives (a branch which later was to settle in Valmadrera) as modest landowners. From the Teresian period onwards, however, the Gavazzis, and later the Gavazzi Spechs, gradually went on to become perhaps the largest landowners in Canzo, purchasing the property, lands and houses which once belonged to the local aristocracy, who had either lost power or moved to the city (e.g. the nobles of Tentorio, counts of Meda etc.)².

Aerial view of Canzo and the Gavazzi complex, in the centre of which the first family home was built in the 1500s.



² Property of Giovanni Battista Gavazzi (1688-1763), son of the late Carlo Maria, in the borough of Canzo, registered in the documents released immediately after the Teresian land assessments, according to which the property appears already enlarged with the purchase of new lands: cadastral map no. 1005 house (the present-day Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli villa); cadastral maps no. 77, 80, 83/2, 199, 307/2, 326, 949: ploughland; cadastral map no. 486, 557, 624: terraced; cadastral map no. 628/2: tree stumps; cadastral maps no. 891, 905, 906, 907, 908, 909, 910, 910/1, 910/2, 914, 915, 917/2, 957/2, 957/4: grassland; cadastral map no. 912/2: zerbo; cadastral map no. 913: eroded ground surface.



Aerial view detail of the ancient Gavazzi home, inhabited since the days of Giovanni Pietro Gavazzi (approx. 1660).

These Gavazzis moved to Milan in the second half of the 1700s, alternating between the Milan residence, the Canzo home and the villa of San Pietro all'Olmo in Cornaredo, which was situated near the family silk mill.

Beginning in 1838, the members of this branch lived in Milan, in the house in Via Montenapoleone, the construction of which was commissioned by Giovanni Battista Gavazzi, 10th gen. (for practical reasons, we shall call him Giovanni Battista III, so as not to confuse him with his uncle of the same name, who shall be referred to as Giovanni Battista II). The house was then inherited by his son, the same Giovanni Gavazzi Spech (11th gen.), and thus became, through marriage, the property of the Balossi Restelli family. All the possessions of this branch of the family were passed down to the Balossi Restelli family.

Four of the sons of Carlo Francesco (in all he had 15 children, including one who became a priest), Giovanni Battista II, Benedetto, Giovanni Maria and Venanzio (9th gen.), made their descendants' fortune by dedicating themselves to commerce, but most of all by transferring their businesses elsewhere, with great foresight.

The main income of this branch of the family, for the entire second half of the 1700s, came from the sale of costume jewellery, for which the brothers became successful merchants and street traders in France (the documents of the Milan State Archives, regarding the property registered in the Teresian Land Registers which belonged to citizens emigrated abroad, clearly reads: «Giovanni Battista and brothers, sons of the late Carlo Francesco, travel around France selling costume jewellery»). With their newly-acquired wealth the Gavazzis returned to Milan, where they extended their work to include the more profitable sale of trinkets and



Portrait of Benedetto Gavazzi (1769-1833) (approx. 1833)
Oils on canvas,
49.5 x 39 cm
Private collection.



Portrait of Teresa Gavazzi Vegezzi (1797-1858), daughter of Benedetto Gavazzi (1769-1833)
Pencil, pastels and ceruse on paper, 23 x 16 cm
Private collection.

fancy goods³. They founded a prosperous company, associated with a large shop.

In memory of the years spent as emigrants, for many decades the Gavazzi brothers kept a branch office in Paris, run personally by a member of the family.

Goods from the Gavazzi warehouses in Milan were sold in the Paris branch, comprised largely of all they had managed to buy up in Lombardy.

As time went on, the trade in costume jewellery and fancy goods was handled mainly by Giovanni Battista II and Benedetto (9th gen.), with their sons and grandsons.

For Benedetto, business was always booming. It appears, however, that Giovanni Battista II, who as the firstborn had initially been the head of the company and had worked for a long time in Paris with his brother Venanzio, did not have much success, and perhaps also suffered a nervous breakdown following some unwise speculations, which brought hardship and «poverty» to his family. His sons, in fact, were reduced to becoming simple executives in the companies owned by their richer cousins.

Venanzio busied himself exclusively and fairly successfully with the family business in France.

Giovanni Maria extended his own business to also include the silk trade, which in those years was the most profitable, obtaining remarkable results. On page 339 of the *Interprete Milanese*, a financial-tourist guide distributed in Milan in 1823, there is an advertisement for the Gavazzi Brothers company, described specifically as a company experienced in the sale of fine and ordinary fancy goods, with the brothers described as «tradesmen and merchants», with the following explanation: «The Gavazzi brothers, tradesmen of fine fancy goods, costume jewellery and jewels, under the «Coperto dei Figini», at the sign of the Globe, with house in Paris under the same company»⁴.

³ If items like costume jewellery and notions seem odd or curious, we refer the reader to the historical memoirs of Prevoost Carlo Mazza di Asso, entitled *Memorie storiche sopra la religione, stato civile e politico a varie epoche della Vallassina*, written in 1796 and published in 1984 by the Asso library. In this work he writes that the inhabitants of the villages around Canzo «sell the fruits of their labour in distant countries ... exercising the trades of Haberdasher, Jeweller, Enameller, etc.» (p. 228), which would clearly imply that the Gavazzis had tapped sectors of the market that were traditionally considered tried and true sources of profit.

⁴ The registers of the Milan Chamber of Commerce Archives («Registers of the notification of companies in Milan and the Province of Milan», Reel A 124) say that the Gavazzi Brothers company was dissolved shortly afterwards, and that on July 7, 1828, with notification no. 3964, Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi, heir to Gian Maria, declared the founding of a new company, the «Giovanni Battista Gavazzi & Co», which was destined to break up in 1834 – this new company also had its premises at no. 4072, Coperto dei Figini, the same address as the old company. It should perhaps be explained here that the «Coperto dei Figini» was a place in the old center of Milan that could be said to have been almost legendary, which was later to disappear in the great demolitions carried out in order to create the modern-day Piazza Duomo. In 1855 Ignazio Cantù, in his study entitled *Milano nel tempo antico, di mezzo e moderno* («Milan in ancient, medieval and modern times») gives a description of this place, writing that once the square of the Duomo «was one single body with the market where fish was sold, but was later separated by the arcade erected by Pietro Figini in 1489 for the wedding of Gian Galeazzo Visconti with Isabelle of France. The Gothic architecture of this long arcade was later demolished and the terracotta ornaments decorating the upper windows disappeared under the modern trowel. This was the only surviving arcade of the sixty which Milan boasted in the past.» It was under this Figini arcade, then, that the Gavazzi Company had its office.

In the same archives of the Chamber of Commerce there is an announcement of the creation of a new company by Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi, with notification no. 2342 of July 30, 1857, exclusively dedicated to the silk trade and called «Giovanni Battista Gavazzi, trader in silk» – the new legal offices of the company were in his own residence in Via Montenapoleone.

This company was liquidated in 1858, with notification no. 127 of January 22, re-established under a new name and finally dissolved, with notification no. 2471, in 1888, one year after the death of the son of Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi, Giovanni Gavazzi Spech.

The marriage between cousins Giovanni Battista III and Emilia

The greatest prosperity, however, was attained only by the two brothers Benedetto and Giovanni Maria (9th gen.) and reached its peak later on with the marriage of Giovanni Battista III (10th gen.), the heir of Giovanni Maria, to his cousin Emilia, daughter and heiress of Benedetto, and also of her uncle Venanzio who, after a division of the family property, had become the sole beneficiary of the wealth generated by the French business.

This marriage, arranged in the interests of the relatives, was intended to keep the wealth of the two richest branches of the Gavazzi family concentrated, including the bride's substantial dowry and the income from the company.

The marriage of the two cousins was somewhat less than idyllic from a sentimental standpoint. In fact, rumor has it that the bride, having married against her will, found consolation



Portrait of Emilia Gavazzi
Spech (1812-1885)
(approx. 1833)
Pencil, pastels and
ceruse on paper,
23 x 16 cm
Private collection.



View of the various parts and sides of the Tentorio complex, originally belonging to the noble family of Tentorio and Gavazzi property since the 1800s.

The complex, which today is the seat of the Canzo Town Council, was the country residence of Benedetto Stefano Gavazzi, and was subsequently given as a dowry by his daughter Emilia to her husband-cousin Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi.





The Gavazzi House in Via Montenapoleone, Milan, the work of architect Celeste Chierichetti.

in a long and solid love affair with a Milanese nobleman of Austrian-Hungarian origin, Francesco De Spech, to whom she was later wed in her second marriage. It is from this union that Giovanni was born (though he is actually recorded as being the son of her cousin and first husband, Gavazzi).

Nevertheless, from a financial point of view, the union of the two cousins proved to be extremely advantageous, and one of the immediate consequences of this «marriage» of capital was the construction of the large Gavazzi home in Via Montenapoleone, where the Gavazzi-Gavazzi couple went to live and which became the symbol *par excellence* of the concrete and stable wealth attained by the family, cemented now by the financial union of its most well-to-do branches.

The House in via Montenapoleone

In Milan, at number 23 of Via Montenapoleone, stands «Palazzo Gavazzi», which Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi (1796-1864) had built around 1838, and today is the property of heirs and descendants of the Gavazzis, the Balossi Restelli family.

With the construction of this elegant building, Giovanni Battista, a native of Canzo, crowned the success of his own family, which had long been considered one of the great

bourgeois families of Milan, as it had once been in the days of the Lombardy-Veneto State.

The project for the house was assigned to Celeste Chierichetti, a very fashionable architect of the period⁵.

The building rates a mention in all the guidebooks for its sober and dignified elegance, and as a typical example of Neo-classical civil architecture from the Restoration period, a typical upper middle-class family seat of bygone days.

Special praise is reserved for the layout of the building, which disguises and minimises the obliqueness of the somewhat limited space between the streets of Montenapoleone and Bigli. Two entrances on the streets in front and behind ensured convenient carriage traffic in the days when the horse was the principal means of transportation and a source of status in an elegant and demanding social life.

⁵ The many works designed by this architect include the tomb of the Viscounts of Modrone in Cassago, the Bozzotti-Cramer villa of Tassera d'Alserio and the Tarsis building.

The façade is on three levels, each of which reflect an order: Doric for the ground floor with its semi-columns, Corinthian for the second floor with its fluted pilasters, and hermae of female figures on the third floor.

On the second floor there is a series of rooms with furniture from the same period as the building and pictorial decorations with romantic themes, especially in the figures of the compositions painted on the vaulted ceilings.

The «Palazzo» is also known for its stuccoes, its original furniture and its valuable paintings⁶. The Gavazzi building is often mentioned in books on Milan, in part because Carlo Cattaneo lived there. Preserved in the Milan Museum of the Risorgimento is the 1843 lease with which Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi, rented a wing of the family home to Cattaneo, his close friend. On the façade of the building there are two plaques – the one on the left bears an inscription stating that from 1840 to 1848 the house was inhabited by «Carlo Cattaneo, while he prepared with civil learning the triumph of the free orders» while the one on the right, mounted on the 36th Anniversary of the Five Days' Battle of Milan, pays tribute to the «venerated townsman».

The villa of San Pietro all'Olmo

Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi had also inherited from his father Giovanni Maria the silk mills of San Pietro all'Olmo in Cornaredo, which Cantù, in his book *Milano e la sua provincia*, rates among the most important mills in the province of Milan in the decade 1850-1860⁷.

In the same location of San Pietro all'Olmo a charming villa was bought, facing the square in the centre of the village. The late 18th Century building presents a remarkably large façade on the side facing the street, while the back is U-shaped, facing inwards and closed by a gate which opens on the large park, still in perfect condition.

Opening onto the courtyard on the ground floor is a central triple veranda which covers the entrance; on the west side stands a small *belvedere* tower, while on the east side is an asymmetrical wing, possibly of later construction, which opens onto the «English» garden and which extends the main part of the building. A small corner balcony overlooks the park.

This splendid villa has been preserved completely intact.

In the western part of the village, in the square before a romantic little church, stands a low, linear building which was once the home of the Balossi family, also related to the Gavazzis.

The large door opens onto a passageway leading under a veranda. At the back of the house is a small garden, which separated the manor house from the rustic courtyards.

Today this building is used as a vicarage and is in generally poor condition.



Behind the herb-seller in this charming drawing can be seen the *Coperto dei Figini*, situated in front of the Duomo of Milan: it was here that the Gavazzi office did a thriving commercial business (A. Bertarelli Public Prints Collection, Milan).

⁶ In Volume X, page 739 of *Storia di Milano*, published by Fondazione Treccani, the Gavazzis are mentioned among the leading figures of Milan, famous for their pronounced preference for the old painters from the Luini circle, to the disadvantage of such modern painters as Cerano, Procaccini and Morazzone.

⁷ The Statistics of the Silk Industry in Lombardy in the year 1847, published in the *Atti della Società d'Incoraggiamento d'Arti e Mestieri* for the year 1851 (pages 38-55), identifies two silk mills belonging to Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi in San Pietro all'Olmo: the first with 109 burners and 109 reels, steam-operated, and the second with 20 burners and 20 reels, not steam-operated.

The wealth of Giovanni Battista III – The Countess Samoyloff

The Gavazzis of Canzo appear to have been fully aware of their position as very wealthy members of the merchant class, and were extremely proud of their standing.

Not infrequently, someone would show an interest in buying one of their numerous pieces of property in Canzo, but when their administrators were asked if some agreement might be possible, the answer was invariably «The Gavazzis don't sell: they buy!!!».

This phrase became a kind of family motto, although later, with the changing times, the devaluations, wars and social-economic transformations, even for the proud Gavazzi family the time eventually came when they were forced to forego their principles and sell a great deal of their property. In the book *Contrade milanesi: il Borgonuovo*⁸, we read that in 1836 Giovanni Battista III met Countess Julia Samoyloff born Pahlen⁹, who was the spark of Milanese high society from 1825 to 1855. She «received as a loan from Giovanni Battista

⁸ Published by Fondazione Treccani, Milan, 1945.

⁹ For around twenty years during the Restoration period, from 1828 to 1848, the society news of Milan was continually spiced by the extravagances of the eccentric, romantic and passionate Russian noblewoman.

Of an aristocratic family originating in the Baltic Principalities, the countess was born in Russia in 1803, the daughter of Peter Ludwig Alexsevic von der Pahlen, a powerful statesman in the courts of Emperors Paul II and Alexander I.

She grew up in the Court of St. Petersburg together with the royal princes and received an excellent education, leaning, among other things, to speak and write in five languages. Ever since she was a young girl, however, she was known for her passionate nature and, above all, for her beauty, thanks to which, according to some biographers, she became the lover of Czar Nicolas I. Countess Julia was given in marriage to Count Samoyloff, a colonel of the imperial army who, however, died shortly thereafter, leaving her a very young and extremely rich widow.

At the death of her husband, Countess Samoyloff, now independent, restless and little inclined to bow to the control and interference of her family and imperial society, left to travel around Europe, finally settling in Milan, a city she immediately fell in love with and which was to become the backdrop for her eccentricities, her extravagant whims, her good-natured megalomania and her regal generosity.

Actually, the choice of Milan was not completely casual. Her maternal grandmother, the noblewoman Caterina Skavronsky neé d'Engelhardt, after the death of her husband, had re-married with Milanese count Giulio Renato Litta Visconti Arese, ambassador of the Order of Malta in Russia. When Litta died, Countess Samoyloff was remembered generously in his will, receiving a life annuity based on the Milanese incomes of the Litta family.

The countess made her debut in Milanese society at a masked ball given by Magyar count Joseph Batthiany on the evening of January 30, 1828 in honour of the Milanese aristocracy. At the height of her splendour, she arrived dressed as a Russian peasant, wearing a hat with a veil that trailed down to the ground and a red dress with white sleeves. She was strikingly beautiful, with a generous figure which was, in time, to become voluptuous; she had thick, black, curly hair and large green eyes with a gentle, dreamy expression, while the features of her face, which was already strongly characterised by its well-defined contours, were emphasised by the heavy make-up that the countess was obsessed with. She made an immediate impact on the imagination of the Milanese, becoming what today would be called a sex symbol; worshipped by the men and criticised by the women. She was a continual object of conversation and gossip.

It was, in fact, impossible not to notice Countess Samoyloff Pahlen, as whenever she appeared in public it was like the arrival of a queen, with all her grand luxury – splendid carriages, magnificent horses of a Caucasian race that had never before been seen in Milan, and a great show of plush clothing, livery, servants and footmen. The great painter Hayez immediately painted her portrait, and the countess Clara Maffei welcomed her into her salon, thus securing her Milanese status. When, however, her sympathies towards Austria became clear, the Maffei salon closed its doors to her forever.

Countess Samoyloff, in spite of her discerning and sensitive nature, could never understand the reasons for the Milanese people's desire for freedom, their need for liberation from Vienna. They, in turn, vilified her, saying that it was not for ideology that she was an *austriacante* but because she could not resist the appeal of the uniform worn by the Austrian officers that swarmed Milan.

Upon her arrival in Milan, Countess Samoyloff settled in Via Borgonuovo, the *Contrada di Sciori*, as the district was commonly known, in a house that had belonged to the former Counts of Bigli and which was later destroyed by bombs during the second world war. Today, besides the facade facing the street, all that remains of the original building is the grand staircase.

Excluded from the Maffei household, the countess began to host a counter-salon in her own home, under the sign of the double eagle, where she entertained all the most important men of Lombardy-Veneto who were loyal to the emperor and all those who, like her, had been banned from the patriotic salons, for whatever reason. The balls that were held in her home astonished the Milanese and vexed the nobility. Carlo Dossi mentions one of these incredible events in no. 3848 of his *Note Azzurre*:



The Countess Samoyloff

Gavazzi, son of Giovanni Maria, proprietor, with domicile in Milan, Contrada del Monte no. 1263A, the sizeable sum of 340,000 Austrian lire «cash down in silver coins of the correct weight according to the rate of current monetary edicts» at an interest rate of 5 per cent, putting up as security her houses, furniture and jewellery, which are placed in the care of her administrator, Giovanni Bordini». This is followed by a long list of jewellery!

«1832. Grand party at the home of Countess Pahlen Samoyloff, from 9 in the evening to 5 in the morning. 1000 guests. On the following day the apartments were open to people of all ranks. Three cheers for such a courteous, liberal, dear young lady!».

The countess was patroness to artists and painters, whom she always welcomed at her salons, and whom she sponsored generously. For example, she gave a donation of two thousand francs to the poet Giovanni Prati, who dedicated two books of poems to her. Giulia loved dogs, and owned a veritable pack made up of numerous different breeds, valuable and otherwise. There was much talk about the funeral that she arranged in honour of one little dog that was particularly dear to her, which was accompanied to its grave in the garden by a great unruly procession of family dogs of all breeds and sizes, held on leashes by friends «to render the funeral more solemn»; the friends, in turn, had also been asked to bring their own dogs.

In the house in Via Borgonuovo the countess, besides the dogs, kept her own little zoo, including parrots, canaries, monkeys, squirrels and other animals. For the carnival held on the Thursday before Lent she would organise a cat masquerade, with the animals parading in a procession amidst showers of *confetti*. The countess practically worshipped her own body and each morning, to keep her skin soft and silky, she bathed in a bath of liquid cream. It is said that her servants sold the used cream to Cova, the pastry cook, for a considerable sum. It was then used to make ice-cream that was enormously popular with the countess's more fanatic admirers (of whom there were many). The latter, while relishing the ice-cream, could almost imagine being admitted into her much sought-after boudoir. Once, Giulia treated herself to a «cruise» on Lake Como. In typically understated fashion, she hired a great barge used for freight, had it lined with rich furs and filled with cushions, bolts of silk, furniture and jewels and spent three days touring the lake. After the King of Rome, Napoleon's only son, died unexpectedly in 1832, the Napoleonic legend briefly re-surfaced throughout Europe.

The countess, who was an incurable romantic, could not remain insensitive to the allure of the exile of St. Helena, even though he had been the greatest enemy of her Russian homeland and also of Austria and her adopted homeland. Carried away by the «legendary frenzy», she asked one of her artist *protégés*, the painter Demin, to decorate the ceiling of one of the halls in her house with frescoes portraying the triumphs of Napoleon, for which she paid a very generous sum. In a short time the news spread through Milan and the countess was summoned before the head of the Austrian police, who lectured her at length on how such unpatriotic paintings were not suitable for a subject of the Austrian emperor and the king of Lombardy-Veneto. The countess then returned home and reluctantly ordered the prompt construction of a false ceiling to cover the offending frescoes. Although she believed herself to be a true authority on music, it appears that Giulia Samoyloff actually understood nothing about the subject; indeed, in her great musical enthusiasm she frequently and hopelessly fell in love with singers and musicians whose flaws or qualities she was unable to judge. Once she fell for an obscure baritone named Pery, who sang (badly, it seems) in the provincial venues, and married him, thus catapulting him from the uncertainties of a lacklustre profession to the luxuries of a princely life. The foolishness of this marriage cost the intrepid lady the excommunication of the Czar, who declared that she could never again set foot in the court. The Emperor, meanwhile, advised of her extravagant spending, also issued an injunction which, by imperial request, was officially published in the newspaper *Gazzetta di Milano*.

An enormous scandal followed the marriage and the injunction. Despite herself, the Countess was obliged to change her habits and moderate her lifestyle. She still had the Litta bequest – an Italian inheritance over which, fortunately for her, the Czar had no jurisdiction. However, in such a situation it is likely that Countess Samoyloff, with her income from Russia cut off, frequently found herself short of money, and when this happened she would seek loans. So it was, in fact, that the wealthy Giovanni Battista Gavazzi became one of her financiers. After the death of her second husband (who, like the first, died after a short time) the Countess, seeking the Czar's forgiveness, married again, this time with a nobleman. Had the union held up, she would, perhaps, have been forgiven, but almost immediately she separated from her new husband and recklessly returned to her preferred «musical loves». Once again she fell desperately in love, this time with the famous composer Giovanni Pacini, former lover of Paolina Borghese, Napoleon's sister. The countess, twice widowed by now, didn't seem to bring much luck to her men. Her relationship with Pacini was frowned upon by the music lovers of Milanese society who, indignant that the maestro was consorting with an *austriacante*, began to boo his operas, wherever they were performed.

Countess Samoyloff also had affairs with other men, a number of whom were reduced to rags in the desperate and hopeless attempt to bankroll her extravagance. Many Milanese simply believed she was crazy – a belief they would voice by simply saying, «She's Russian!!!». One of her biographers, Venturini, offers a rather unflattering portrait, defining her «part great lady, part adventuress and part pitiful woman». In the city, whatever she did or said made news. Some laughed at her eccentricities, some worshipped her beauty, others detested her for her political convictions, while still others were full of praise for her goodness, generosity and charitable nature. Indeed, while she was incredibly eccentric and frivolous, the countess was also *extremely* generous towards the poor and needy, and the parish priest of the very central Church of San Fedele knew that he could always rely on her for support in any kind of charitable initiative. No beggar ever left her doorstep empty-handed, and since her generosity was legendary, many took advantage of her by fabricating dire needs that she would help them overcome.

The Marietti Bank of Milan, where the Countess had an account, at one point found itself at the brink of bankruptcy: the good Countess mercifully intervened and kept it from ruin. She often organised charity events, and, well aware that she was an

Giovanni Battista (who, along with the rest of his family, was recorded as being an *austriacante*¹⁰, unlike the Gavazzis of the other branches), besides investing his wealth in the construction of the house in Via Montenapoleone, the Hospital of Canzo and other initiatives, as we have seen, was in a position to afford loans to this beautiful and charming countess, also an *austriacante* (at whose sophisticated salons he was frequently a guest), supplying her with abundant cash, which she used mainly to finance the grand parties held in her house in Via Borgonuovo and her active social life. Mysterious, charming, reactionary and frivolous, the countess was the star of Milanese society in the 1820s and '30s. She was the beloved granddaughter-in-law of Giulio Renato Litta, and a great fan and admirer of composers and tenors. She had also, in the past, been the lover of Czar Nicolas I.

The surname Spech

The addition of the surname of Spech to that of Gavazzi came about as follows. Giovanni Gavazzi (11th gen.) was adopted by his stepfather Francesco De Spech, the second husband of his mother Emilia Gavazzi, who in actual fact, as we have already seen, appears to have been his true father, as Emilia is commonly believed to have had a love affair with De Spech even during her first marriage¹¹.

The De Spechs came from an aristocratic Hungarian family, which had followed the Austrians of Maria Teresa and Giuseppe II to Milan. Here they took on roles of considerable significance at the Court (living permanently, moreover, in the Royal Palace, as nobles in the close service of the family of the Viceroy) and received not little recognition for their loyalty to the government of the Kingdom of Lombardy and Veneto and to the Habsburgs. Having become Milanese, the De Spech family remained in Milan even after the fall of the Austrians, joining in kinship with families of the aristocracy and middle class of Lombardy.

attraction for the Milanese, whether for good or for bad, would go on stage in the various town theatres, devoting the funds raised at these performances to a wide variety of charitable causes.

As she was used to spending enormous amounts of money on balls, parties, dinners and charities, the countess often found herself with very little cash on hand; yet, if any sought her help at these times she would willingly lavish all her remaining money on as many as asked her. Magnanimous as a queen, Countess Samoyloff was extremely courteous both with the rich and the poor – and her numerous servants took advantage of her kindness by artfully robbing her.

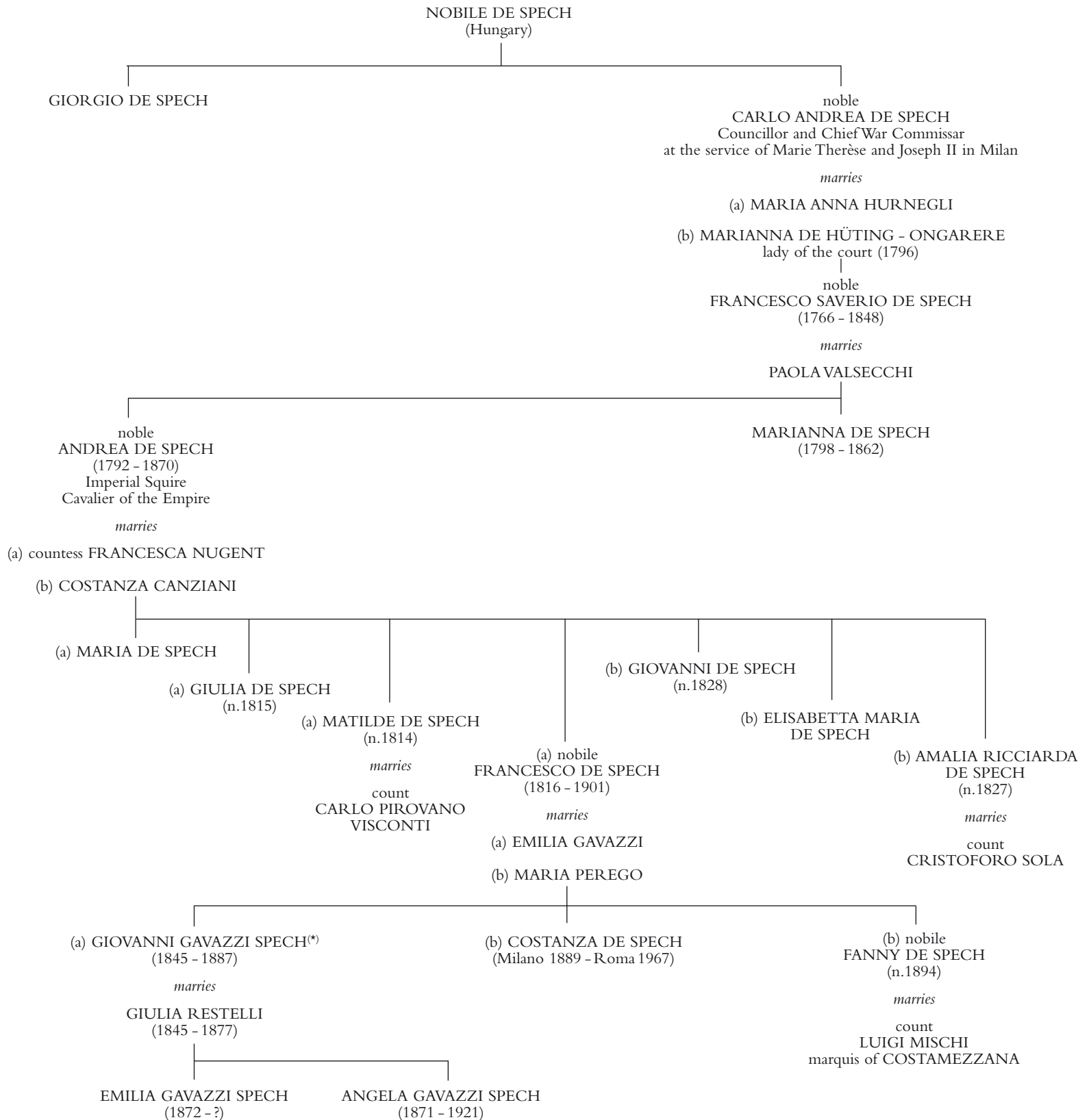
Being herself childless, the countess had adopted two girls, a daughter of maestro Pacini and a sister-in-law of her deceased baritone husband. When, in 1848, Milan was laid waste by the tempest of the Five Days' Revolt, all the Countess' Austrian protectors fled Lombardy, leaving her to fend for herself. As her loyalty to Imperial Austria was common knowledge, it became too dangerous to remain, and so she took up bag and baggage and moved to Paris, where the name of Pahlen was well-known and she would have a chance to start a new life. In fact, her brother, Count Peter von der Pahlen, had lived in Paris from 1835 to 1841 as the Russian ambassador. The Countess lived for another three decades in the French capital, drifting, unhappy and restless as ever, between Biarritz, Evian, Nice and the Côte d'Azur. One night, in her Paris home, Giulia Samoyloff, now a lonely and disconsolate old woman, was suddenly taken ill. She was alone in her room at the time, with no company but one of her beloved dogs which, sensing the danger she was in, ran to seek help. Sleeping in the next room was one of the many friends who benefited from the Countess' generosity. This man, as a token of his gratitude, now kept her company, unwilling to leave her in the hands of the servants. He rushed to help her, but it was too late.

Giulia Samoyloff Pahlen died in 1875, at the age of seventy-two. Although under the weight of the years her former beauty had long since faded, the passionate countess never resigned herself to giving up love. Her inheritance was shared, in fact, between her adopted daughters and her last companion, a doctor from Toulon.

¹⁰ Supporter of the Austrian government in Italy

¹¹ Francesco De Spech (born in Milan on July 8, 1816) was President of the Infant School of Milan and founder of the Infant School of Baggio. He died after a long and productive life on April 4, 1901.

Family Tree of the noble De Spech family



(*) Adopted, or, according to other sources, born out of wedlock

A Gavazzi nobleman: Giovanni Gavazzi Spech (1845-1887)

Giovanni Gavazzi Spech, whom we have mentioned above, achieved a certain notoriety as a writer, and today his publications, which were numerous, can be found in almost all Milanese libraries, some of them revealing a decidedly journalistic spirit, rather unusual for the times in which he lived.

The following is a list of his works:

1. *A Sua maestà la Regina d'Italia. Versi*¹²
2. *Sonetti alla Regina d'Italia*¹³
3. *Il Conte Cristoforo Sola. Commemorazione*¹⁴
4. *È in casa? (Le visite di John)*¹⁵
5. *Emilio Zola. Edmondo De Goncourt. Alfonso Daudent. Ottavio Feuillet. Alessandro Dumas*¹⁶
6. *Industria della carta e arti grafiche*¹⁷
7. *Sulla libertà di stampa. Pensieri*¹⁸
8. *Esposizione nazionale Milano 1881. Relazioni dei giurati pubblicate a cura del Comitato Esecutivo Industria della carta ed arti grafiche – relatore generale dott. Giovanni Gavazzi-Spech*¹⁹

Preserved in the Trivulziana Library, in the family property files under the name of Gavazzi, are newspaper clippings which include notes in pen by an anonymous person who took it upon himself to gather together genealogical and other material regarding important Milanese families, for a publication which, unfortunately, was never published. These clippings reveal certain curious facts about Giovanni Gavazzi Spech.

We read, for example, that it was commonly believed in Milan that Gavazzi Spech had committed suicide (by first poisoning and then strangling himself?) (Giovanni died in 1887 at the age of 41).

This suicide is said to have taken place following the discovery of irregularities in the administration of the Congregation of Charity, of which Gavazzi was director. Giovanni Gavazzi Spech, however, was extremely rich and it seems strange that he would embezzle funds destined for Milanese charity; the accusation, in fact, was publicly proven unfounded by Count Giorgio Giulini, president of the Congregation of Charity.

The presumed suicide caused a sensation, as Gavazzi-Spech had been a very public figure in Milan, a member of the «Club dell'Unione», and had relatives of important social standing

¹² Milan, 1879 (Ambrosiana Library, S.O. Sup. 882).

¹³ Milan, Dumolard, 1879 (Ambrosiana Library S.L.X.III 84).

¹⁴ Milan, Dumolard, 1874 (Library of the Museum of the Risorgimento, Bert. M.964 Trivulziana Library, Arch. F.189).

¹⁵ Rome, Sommaruga, 1884. The publication gathers together a series of articles on interviews that Gavazzi-Spech personally had with prominent figures of the Milanese cultural and political world of the 1880s – Arrigo Boito, Paolo Ferrari, Cesare Cantù, Giuseppe Grandi, Giovanni Stoppani, Giovanni Schiapparelli, Tullio Massarani, Andrea Verga, Almicare Ponchielli, Antonio Stoppani, Felice Cavallotti, Eleuterio Pagliano, Edoardo Porro, Franco Faccio, Giuseppe Colombo, Giovanni Verga, Stefano Jacini, Giulio Ricordi, Giulio Carcano, Graziano Ascoli, Gerolamo Induno, Tito Vignoli and Filippo Filippi.

¹⁶ Milan, Civelli, 1887 (City Council Library, L.VAR 4272).

¹⁷ Milan, 1883 (Ambrosiana Library IV HIE CCVIII 5).

¹⁸ Milan, Dumolard, 1881 (City Council Library, J 4325).

¹⁹ Milan, Hoepli, 1883 (Braidense Library, Congr. Esp. 136/8).

– his step-father was brother-in-law to Count Cristoforo Sola and Count Carlo Pirovano Visconti, and his wife was the daughter of Senator Francesco Restelli and grand-daughter of Senator Giuseppe Robecchi. From the hand-written notes it emerges that Gavazzi Spech was not in very good health, and that he spoke very quietly and slowly – for these two reasons he was commonly known as «Mr. Agony».

The «gossip columnist» and commentator of the articles supplemented the cuttings with a hand-written family tree of the Gavazzi Spech family, the first part of which, however, is incorrect (the writer himself adds, in brackets, several question marks). Giovanni Gavazzi Spech, who is registered as the son of Giovanni Battista III Gavazzi and Emilia Gavazzi, according to this anonymous commentator, was in actual fact the natural son of his mother's second husband, the nobleman Francesco De Spech, who had later adopted him.

Through this adoption, as we saw earlier, he received his surname and noble title, recognised by King Umberto I. The surname of Gavazzi Spech was passed on also to Emilia and Angela, the daughters of Giovanni and his wife Giulia Restelli.

Later, however, the name of De Spech inexplicably disappears from the Gavazzi surname, after the mysterious death of Giovanni in 1887. Might this have been due to the excessive prudishness of the family who wanted to put an end to the gossip of the Milanese? It is impossible to say. The fact remains that, while all the documents up to the year 1887 refer to Gavazzi-Spech, in the periods following there is absolutely no mention of the latter name. The surname of Spech does not even appear on the tomb of the man who bore the name throughout his lifetime²⁰.

The extinction of the branch

This strain of the Gavazzi family, and all its various branches, was, however, doomed to extinction – the four brothers of the 9th generation, Giovanni Battista II, Venanzio, Benedetto and Giovanni Maria, were not to leave any descendants.

The line of Giovanni Battista II, in fact, came to an end with the death of his two childless sons; Venanzio did not re-marry and had no descendants; Benedetto had no sons, and the only nephew of Giovanni Maria, Giovanni Gavazzi Spech, had only two daughters, Angela and Emilia, with his wife Giulia Restelli.

This latter, who married a Balossi, received permission to pass on her surname to her children in order to at least save the Gavazzi name. Thus the surname of Balossi-Gavazzi was born, later to be superseded, however, by the addition of the surname Restelli, in order to continue the memory of the line beginning with the grandmother Giulia Restelli, daughter of Senator Francesco Restelli²¹.

²⁰ Emilia Gavazzi, her son Giovanni and his wife Giulia and daughters Angela and Emilia, are all buried in the Gavazzi-Balossi Restelli chapel at the cemetery of Cornaredo-San Pietro all'Olmo.

²¹ The Restelli family had a large house in Via Spiga no. 40, in Milan and owned, among many other things, the plant nursery and fruit and vegetable company named Podere Restelli in Olgiate Olona, official suppliers to the Royal House of Savoy.

Restelli Family Tree

