

Chestnut-roasters, confectioners and café-keepers

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The Val di Blenio developed a different specialization. Its men went to Milan and other cities of northern Italy as chestnut-roasters (*caldarrostai* or *marronnai*), selling roasted chestnuts from street stalls in winter, and worked abroad as cooks, chocolate-makers and café-owners. Until the nineteenth century they went mainly to Italy, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries above all to France, England and other parts of Switzerland.¹ From this seasonal trade some moved into confectionery, the sale of ices in summer, the chocolate trade and the running of cafés. The move from the street to the shop was a move from wage labour to small capital. It required savings for a lease, stock and equipment, and it opened a path to the ownership of businesses in foreign cities.

The best-known example is Carlo Gatti (1817–1878), who came from the Val di Blenio and went to London in the 1840s. He began by selling chestnuts and waffles, then built up a business in confectionery, ice cream and the import of natural ice from Norway, which was stored in large ice wells near the Regent's Canal.² His family later owned restaurants and music halls in London. Similar careers led men from Blenio and the Leventina into the café and restaurant trades of Paris, Lyon and London in the nineteenth century. The chocolate factory at Dangio in the Val di Blenio, which operated under the name Cima Norma until 1968, was founded in 1903 by the Cima brothers, who had returned from Nice and belonged to a family with this background of emigration. In 1962 it employed 330 workers.³

1 Porters, glaziers, pedlars and servants

Other valleys supplied porters, glaziers, knife-grinders, pedlars and servants. Seasonal emigration from the northern valleys consisted largely of such humble occupations, among them chimney-sweeps, stove-fitters, carters, porters, cooks and chocolatemakers. The choice of trade varied

from valley to valley and often from village to village, so that each community tended to hold a niche of its own in the cities where it worked.⁴ The niche was defended by the same means as in the building trades. Older men brought younger relatives, fellow villagers shared lodgings, and access to customers was passed on within the group. In several cities these communities also formed confraternities or mutual aid societies, which provided a funeral, relief in illness and a meeting place.

The earnings from these trades were small, but they were regular and they were paid in cash. A boy sweeping chimneys might bring home, after a winter in Milan, a sum sufficient to buy grain for the family for several months. A chestnut-roaster who became the owner of a café could, over a lifetime, accumulate capital sufficient to buy land or build a house in the village. In aggregate, and for the poorer valleys of the Sopraceneri, these flows were probably more important than the more spectacular fortunes of the architects of Rome and St Petersburg.

2 Notes

1. Sonia Fiorini, "Blenio (Bezirk)", *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* (HLS), version of 8 March 2017, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/008541/>. ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Carlo Gatti", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlo_Gatti (used as a last resort), which also states that Gatti's ice warehouse now houses the London Canal Museum. ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Cima Norma", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cima_Norma (used as a last resort); Fiorini, "Blenio (Bezirk)" (cited above), which places the factory in the commune of Torre and gives the workforce of 1962 and the closure in 1968. ↩
4. Piero Bianconi, "La nostra emigrazione", *Scuola ticinese* no. 7, https://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/Rivista_scuola_ticinese/ST_n.7/ST_7_10_Bianconi_nostra_emigrazione.pdf (seasonal emigration of chimney-sweeps, stove-fitters, carters, porters, cooks and chocolate-makers, with trades varying "da valle a valle, spesso da villaggio a villaggio"); for the Alpine comparison, Laurence Fontaine, *Histoire du colportage en Europe (XVe–XIXe siècle)* (Paris 1993). ↩

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