



The story

The last mass naturalization took place 150 years ago in Cavaione

July 12, 1875 was a historic day for the village of Cavaione in the municipality of Brusio GR in the southern Graubünden valley of Poschiavo. The then 108 inhabitants became Swiss, after years as stateless persons. 150 years later, the population is celebrating this event.



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The story of Antonio Plozza is incredible. The man was born in 1850 and never left Cavaione, the village clinging to the mountain on the western side of Poschiavo. And yet he changed nationality four times in his life: first Austrian, then subject of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which later became the Kingdom of Italy. He finally received Swiss citizenship in 1875.

His story is one of many that are told in the exhibition of the Val Poschiavo Historical Society in the former school building in Cavaione. Photos and historical documents commemorate the 150 years since the naturalization of the people of Cavaione.

Cavaione and the European borders

Cavaione is the last municipality to join the Swiss Confederation. Over the centuries, it has witnessed the dynamics of European borders. From 1512, when the State of the Three Leagues annexed Valtellina, to the Convention of Piattamala in 1863, when the borders between two new nation states, Italy and Switzerland, were definitively established.

"The history of Cavaione reminds us that the state as we know it today, with its borders, is a modern invention that emerged in the second half of the 19th century," explains Sacha Zala, Professor of History at the University of Bern and a native of Campascio in Brusio.

Previously, the area was characterized by a superimposition of different types of borders, areas of sovereignty, multiple sovereigns, rights of use and private property. "With the modern bureaucratic state, the need arose to have total control over all borders, be they territorial, religious, political or economic," continues the historian.

The stateless

The Cavionese lived in complete independence for centuries. Until their naturalization in 1875, they could be described as stateless citizens. And they took advantage of this situation. The ambiguity of their status allowed them to sometimes evade state control, for example during military service.

"When school started in the 19th century, the Cavionese also understood that they could no longer live in absolute independence," explains Zala. In order to benefit from state services, they had to clarify which state they belonged to.

However, the municipality of Brusio was not prepared to bear the costs of integrating the poorest of the poor. A federal decree was issued to enact an aid law and the decisive step was taken: the naturalization of the 108 Cavionese.

"In the end, they were simply happy that they finally had an authority that gave them what they wanted," explains Zala. The feeling of belonging to a state was of secondary importance.

The descendants

Of course, there are no longer any witnesses from that time. But among the remaining eight inhabitants of Cavaione are the direct descendants of those families who became Swiss 150 years ago.

Piera Plozza is one of them. "I'm like a robin," says the slim, small woman, alluding to the sedentary songbird, as she rakes the hay in a meadow. She was born in Cavaione, grew up there and never left.

"It's nice to be Swiss, but I've always loved Italy because I've always worked with Italians," recalls the 70-year-old, who worked in a knitting factory and later at a fruit and vegetable distribution company in Campascio.

Cavaione is located directly opposite the Valtellina and the Orobie mountains. Claudio Plozza sees this view every day from his house, where the post office used to be. His father Ezio Plozza collected letters and parcels from Campascio three times a week and brought them to Cavaione on a donkey.

"As there was no road, he had to walk," says the 84-year-old. It wasn't until 1965 that the winding road was asphalted. With better connections, people became more mobile and Cavaione began to empty out.

The last boy

Today's eight inhabitants include Franco Balsarini, the last boy born in Cavaione, in 1963, and also the last municipal councillor of this fraction. Together with a group of helpers, he is preparing the celebrations, which will take place in front of the school, which has been closed since 1971.

"With the celebration, we want to show people that Cavaione exists and that it is worth visiting once in a lifetime," says Balsarini, who is jokingly referred to as the mayor of Cavaione.

This title was bestowed on him by Luca Plozza, President of the Cavaione Foundation. The foundation's main aim is to preserve the landscape and its terraces. Unlike Piera, Claudio and Franco, Luca Plozza lives in the Mesolcina. "Anyone who has roots in Cavaione always comes back here. I can't get away from it. It's so beautiful and unique," he says.