

FILLO

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The “White Gold Rush” in Darzo

1894. Exactly 120 years ago, the first white stones were dug out of the mountain at Darzo. A man from Brescia, in search of veins of iron ore, came upon the barite, a heavy, easily crumbled stone, which, at that time, was ground up and used for making dyes. Since then multiple uses have been found for this mineral. It was used as ballast for ships and submarines during the Second World War, as insulation around oil wells, as blocks shielding operating rooms and radiology equipment, and in making varnishes.

120 years ago, in this small Italian village a few kilometers from the Austro-Hungarian border, a gold rush began - not for Klondike type gold, but for the poorer 'white gold', that is, for barite. Many tried to dig here and there on the steep mountain slopes, but few were successful. Most of them invested money and hard work trying to exploit thin veins; some even erected cable cars, but most quit in a hurry. The small entrepreneurs were followed by larger enterprises which succeeded in digging deep furrows among the larches and firs, and for a while brought economic and social development to the community. The three largest companies were: Corna Pellegrini della Valcamonica, (the first to open and the last to shut down); Maffei della Valsassina, for many years the largest; and Cirna di Milano, the smallest mine, last to open and first to close.

Generations of the valley's people worked with the barium sulfate, some in the mines and others in the processing plants. The process was a simple one: excavating tunnels, extracting the material, transport by cable car to the processing plant, where the material was sorted and classified before being ground. The final step was transport by truck to the end user. Without a doubt, the hardest job was that of the miner, who spent the work week in the bowels of the mountain eating dust and always at risk of becoming the victim of an explosion. The hard work

and risk made the miners proud of their work - it wasn't just anyone who could do their job! When the cable car operator sent a load down from the mountain, there were girls and young men waiting to start the processing. These were young girls who were spared going to Milan as servants, and men who were able to remain at home, rather than emigrate to work in the mines of the United States or on the ranches of Argentina. If the men entered the factory before doing their military service, they were likely to remain until they reached pension age. Not so the girls! Once they married, they remained at home and assumed the role of mother, as was expected in that old-fashioned society.

The sun began to set on the barite industry in the 1960's and 70's, with the inevitable depletion of the small veins of the mineral. One by one, the plants shut down, with Corna Pellegrini surviving until 2009. Some smaller establishments continued to operate by importing quartz, feldspar and barite. But the white gold fever had died out.

Another era began. From the barite industry grew a web of artisans and craftsmen, which is now the backbone of the local economy. Mechanics, electricians, carpenters, and truck drivers started out in the industry, later establishing their own businesses by first serving the industry they had left. But in time, and thanks to their own determination and some help from credit cooperatives, they learned to stand on their own two feet and even to employ some of their ex-colleagues. Such is the legacy of the mining industry at Darzo. Lest this legacy be forgotten, an association, La Miniera, has undertaken to collect artifacts and to tell the story in videos, books, shows and murals. Their website is www.minieredarzo.it.

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House Mural from the Village of Darzo