

The Chisone and Germanasca valleys lived on industrialisation for a century and a half. The valley then depopulated and the factories either shut down or were strongly downsized. Nowadays 20000 people live in the valley.

A few notes on industrial activities

Copper mines

In 1863 the most important copper deposit (seam) in the area, placed at 2775 metres of altitude, was given in concession to Pietro Giani.

The official name was 'Mines of Vallon Cros and Glacieres'. It is from that moment that we can talk of an industrial exploitation of the deposits, undertaken by Giani and his business associate Guilmin. Interrupted, the exploitation of the deposit began anew in 1887, with modest success, by the inheritor of Guilmin, who had to sell the mines to an Italian-French company in 1890. The company name was 'Compagnia Ramie Zolfi di Pinerolo'.

In 1899 the mines changed owner again and started to belong to Italian Mining Society. Work on the mine reached its peak at the beginning of the twentieth century: 150 full time miners worked there. The winter of 1904 was very snowy and in April, after days of intense snow falling, the 120 miners who were in the barracks under the Beth hill, isolated and fearing for their lives, started marching towards the beginning of the valley on the morning of the 19th of April. Two avalanches, which fell from the two opposite slopes, swept away men, barracks, avalanche shelters and mine installations. 81 workers died, most of all very young. Work on the mines began again amid many difficulties and came to an end in 1914.

Graphite mines

The first known use of the graphite mines in the Cozie Alps dates back to the mid XIX century. Research is authorised in the valley in the towns of Inverso Piasca, Pramollo and San Germano Chisone. In 1890 concessions are given in the area of Dormigliosi to Vincon Davide and to the Brayda company in the area of Timoncella, both areas belonging to the municipality of San Germano Chisone. After this several graphite mines are opened in the towns of Roure, Pomaretto, Inverso Piasca, Villar, Pramollo and San Germano. Almost all mines were then bought by the 'Società Talco e Graphite Val Chisone' company. The peak of production, consisting of 8000 tons, was reached in the 1920-1930 decade. 200 workers, miners and personnel in charge of the mills, worked there. The mines have been progressively abandoned until 1983, when the mine of Ida-Brutta Comba in San Germano, the most important in the valley, was closed.

Talc mines.

Talc, under the French name of 'craie de Briançon', Briançon being the name of the French town which exported it, was known since the mid XVIII century all over Europe as a stone for tailors. The talc used to arrive in Briançon from the Chisone and Germanasca valleys, carried on the back by mules. The talc was known in the valleys as 'peiro douco' (sweet stone) and used to be extracted in open pit mining by the locals. We can talk about a proper industrial extraction from the end of the XIX century, when Italian and English investors gave the first strong impulse to extraction of the mineral. Subsequently other companies, notably the 'Ditta Eredi' belonging to Giuseppe Torn,

the 'Società Internazionale de Talc de Luzenac (French company) and the 'Società Talco e Grafite Val Chisone' (which belonged to Prever and Villa) joined the activity.

The company last mentioned absorbed all other companies in the twenties, centralising all the process under one efficient body. The talc has been extracted in the towns of Prali, Salza di Pinerolo, Perrero, Roure, Fenestrelle, Usseaux and Pragelato. The first trade union begins its activities after 1945.

The decades of 1950 and 1960 witnessed long struggles. 600 miners work in the company. From 1967 onwards the extraction takes mainly place in the mines of Crosetto and Gianna, in the towns of Salza and Prali. The annual production is of 4000 tons. From 2000 the only mine that still works is the one in Rodoretto (Pomeirè). Today the mine employs 43 workers, half of them Polish. The multinational wants to sell all the talc sector. The most important deposit (seam) in the Chisone valley was the Roussa one, which was in the town of Roure,

placed at a height of 1400-1500 metres.

The pit was divided in 4 allotments; 300 miners worked there for the few decades before the First World War, with a yearly extraction of 7000-8000 tons of precious (fine) talc. The 'Talco e Grafite Val Chisone' company bought the installations in the twenties and abandoned the pit in 1963.

The Cotton mill of San Germano.

1862 sees the construction of the cotton mill in the Villa fraction of San Germano. The mill belonged to Paolo Mazzonis, Baron of Pralafra. The plot was chosen because the mill could have exploited the Risaglieto canal, which once was used for the town mill. Production began in 1863, under the direction of Vittorio Widemann and under the administration of Camillo Simondetti. The installation, equipped with the most modern machines consisted of 13000 spindles and was moved by a hydraulic turbine moved by the waters of the canal. It gave work to 200 workers. The textile and weaving manufacture [factory], expanded to reach 20000 spindles by the end of the XIX century. 800 were the employees.

In August 1892 a fire destroyed irreparably the manufacture. Mazzonis got rid of the factory and the plots, selling them for 152000 liras to Widemann and Simondetti, who were willing to rebuild and reopen the activity. The two business associates began the reconstruction and the mill was reopened in 1894, reaching in short time 150 workers. In 1903 Simondetti, the lesser shareholder, withdrew his shares and Widemann remained the only boss. When this happened the workers numbered 300, worked 12 hours shifts, often also in festive days.

At the end of the fifties the working force began to shrink, attracted by the higher wages paid by the Riv factory. In 1966 Widemann died in a car accident and from then on the crisis, both because of succession problems and errors in the conduction, worsened. In 1977 the mill was bought by the American Forsyth & C and by the 16th of March 1978 officially went bankrupt. On the 16th of October 1979 the equipment belonging to the manufacture was auctioned and bought for 1590 millions of liras by Fin-Tor s.p.a.

Fin-Tor began production linked to the car sector, employing roughly 12 workers. The company also sold part of the unused equipment of artisans. Part of the places destined for production have been used without a recovery plan though, while the majority of buildings has been left abandoned, decaying progressively.

Silk Mill of Perosa Argentina.

The appearance of industrial activity in the Chisone valley dates back to 1835-37, when the Bolmida barons, brothers entrepreneurs hailing from the province of Alessandria, decided to establish a factory devoted to silk manufacturing in Perosa Argentina. Four blocks were built: the spinners, the filature, the mechanic weaving and the workshop.

In 1870 Benedetto Berthelot, belonging to the Chancel family, moved to Perosa because of family disputes and opened a plant for the manufacturing of silk waste, using state of the art advanced technical criteria with the machines once developed by the Bolmida. The product obtained competed so well with the one produced by the Bolmida that, in a few years time, they were forced to give up production. This happened in 1880 and silk disappeared from the old plant of via Re Umberto, but it kept on being produced by the plant belonging to Berthelot in via Chiampo. Ten years later Berthelot, who since 1870 had been taking enormous advantage thanks to the innovative production techniques employed, suffered a severe commercial crisis. He was forced to sell the company in 1883. The plant was bought by the Gutermann family, silk producers for sewing and embroidery from Gutach (Germany). The Gutermann bought it because they were lacking the workshops for retting and combing silk waste.

With the buying of the Perosa plant Gutermann now owned the entire productive cycle. With their advent the production picked up again. The beginning of the twentieth century saw an increase in the number of employees. If at the beginning the workers were 140 by 1908 691 people worked there.

The best period was in the thirties, when 1200 worked there. The Second World War determined a heavy crisis due to the difficulty of gaining access to the raw material sold in the far east markets. The crisis was over by

1947. The advent of synthetic textile, which began in the fifties, again put the company in a precarious state, made more serious by the fact that machinery and technologies were not updated. The workers were not given new skills and competencies. A possible solution was believed to be the production of mixed textiles (silk wool and silk synthetic), but this didn't stop redundancy payments for a good percentage of the workers. The company was sold in 1976 to Cascami. Named 'Filseta Val Chisone S. P. A (with 420 workers) the factory operated till the closing of filature in 1983 and the combing in 1986. From 1986 till 2000 the only plant that still worked was the retin (Silk Waste).

Cotton Mill of Perosa Argentina.

The installations for silk manufacturing left abandoned by the Bolmida were bought in 1883 by a Swiss family, the Jenny, with, as business associates, Ganzoni, an industrialist from Turin and they were used till a new filature plant was built in the area fronting the old plant. The old plant was first used as storage and then as a dwelling. The new plant consisted of 20000 spindles, employed 25 workers and its productivity was very close to the most equipped cotton mills of Western Europe.

Suddenly, at the end of 1947, the Abegg decided to get rid of the plant and the Cotton Mill of Valle di Susa S.P.A was sold to Giulio Riva. When Giulio died (1959) his son Felice took over. Felice was not up to the task and, in five years, brought the entire company to bankruptcy.

Massive strikes in 1960-1961. The government, given the fact that 8000 workers were potentially involved in the crash, of which almost a thousand in the Perosa plant, managed to establish a consortium, the E.T.I which took over in 1966. After that the company changed hands again and went to belong to Montefibre. The Perosa plant though was sold to the Legnano Manufacture, company which belonged to the Roncoroni group and was named 'Perosa Manufacture'.

Now the manufacture is called Newcoat and employs roughly 190 workers. After years of redundancy pay the plant requested the sacking of 60 women workers.

The presence of unionisation is very weak. In 2009 begins a rotation of redundancy pay without advance on one's salary.

The Riv of Villar Perosa.

The Agnelli family moved to Villar Perosa in the mid XIX century, buying the XVIII century villa which belonged to the Turinetti of Priero. On the 13th of August 1866 Giovanni Agnelli, who went on to become the most important creator of modern Italian industry, was born.

Giovanni Agnelli established FIA in 1899. Agnelli finds a business associate in the person of Roberto Incerti, a mechanic and bicycle maker who was the owner of the small family companies in Turin and Villar Perosa. They begin the production of ball bearings designed by Roberto Incerti. Production starts first in a small plant of 23 workers in Turin, then they decide to expand.

Villar is chosen as the site for the big plant. They start in 1907 with 6250 square metres, 180 workers, an electric plant and 20000 pieces produced per year.

At the end of the First World War the company constitutes itself as an anonymous society 'Officine di Villar Perosa'. The president is Giovanni's son Edoardo, the company employs 1152 workers and 117 clerks in 1920, three electric plants and the area covered by the factory is 18800 square metres.

The plant in Villar is not big enough to meet market demands. Other plants are opened in Turin in 1925. Workers now are 4400 with a production of 4 million ball bearings per year. Plants are also opened in Massa (1939), reaching a yearly production of 20 millions ball bearings.

This ongoing growth is halted by the second World War. Villar is not spared by the aerial bombing of the Allies. The damage to the factory, and to Villar, is massive and production is relocated to Cimena in a tunnel which protects it from the bombings. The offices and the archive are relocated to Pinerolo.

In March 1943 strikes take place against the war and for food. Once the war ends reconstruction takes place with urgency in order to start production as soon as possible. Meanwhile Giovanni Agnelli senior, the founder of the company, dies on the 16th of December 1945.

Other plants are built and opened in Cassino (1959), Pinerolo (1960, then sold to Euroball at the end of the century), Airasca (1963). These plants absorb gradually the production which was taking place in the Turin plant

till its closing down 1972. A plant is opened also in Bari (1973). In 1965 the Agnelli family sells its quota of majority shares (78,5%) to the Swedish Kullager Fabriken (SKF) which, in January 1979, becomes the only owner by buying the remaining shares (22,5%).

The workers of the Riv of Villar Perosa have always been organised and unionised, even despite the presence of a strong company union, Fali.

The plant has been recently hived off and now it is called OMVP. Job mobility has started.

Numbers of SKF workers employed (up to 31-01-2007): Villar OVMP plant 632; Villar TBU72 Villar Avio Precisi 484. The Skf plant externalises work to various small workshops.

In 2007 there are still present in the valley 2000 job places in the industry sector, which is 25% of total job places in the valley (counting all the sectors: agriculture, tourism, public and private services, construction, craft work).

Data: 1952 Ferdinando Data, coming from the Canavese area, ex Riv worker, opens in Pinasca a workshop of mechanical accuracy. In 1970 this becomes a factory.

Its successor is his son Giancarlo. The factory has got 43 employees. They boast that they never faced economical crises and they never had to resort to redundancy pay.

There is not a union presence in the factory.

Sachs Boge---- Stabilus

Established on the area of the ex Fiat plant of Villar Perosa (which produced car joints), Boge produces shock absorbers and elevators for cars. It started with 80 employees in 1985, raised to 360 workers in 1989. In 1991 Boge was incorporated by Sachs and restructuring began. Nowadays 200 workers work there, but some of the personnel will be sacked due to a decrease in production. In 1994 Sachs established Stabilus (which produces gas springs) in another warehouse with roughly 100 workers.

Martin

The beginnings of activity for Martin & CO as a company in the car sector dates back to 1933, when the Martin brothers established a mechanical plant for the production of technical steel items [articles] and subsequently of steel balls and micro balls destined to a wide range of applications.

Martin company was born in Pinerolo, moved then to Turin for expansion. It was relocated to Porte in 1943, due to war events. Martin & Co is owned today by the brothers Pier, Enrico e Gianni Martin. It has specialised in the production of high precision spheres [balls] in all sorts of material in the diameter ranging from a minimum of 0,20 millimetres to a maximum of 152,40 mm. During the nineties Martin & Co has gradually moved production in the new plant of Perosa Argentina. It has sacked 9 workers because of Chinese competition.

Maiera

From 1968 there's a plant for marble processing. The marble is extracted in Prali. 0 workers. The it becomes Tecnomaiera in 1976, with 100 workers, plus in satellite workshops. It imports marble and treats it with resins. It became Taltos in 1996 (Sitindustrie), 30 workers. The marble cave in Prali has been sold in 1976 to Catella-Torino.

BPG radio communications.

Pinasca. It gives work to 20 young people experts in radio and television broadcasting. The number of workers will be doubled soon.

Old people's homes.

In San Germano there's, since 1894, the 'Asilo dei vecchi'. Now renovated it employs 50 workers, plus 30 coming from external companies. The guests are around a hundred.

In Pinasca there's the 'Cottolengo'. 80 guests. 15 nuns work there, helped by 40 volunteers and 16 people who earn a salary.

In Perosa, in the building of the ex Istituto Salesiano (closed in 1973), there is, starting from 1976, the 'Centro Aperto per anziani', with 28 employees and 64 guests

Other

Consorzio Pracatinat- Educational and eco-aware center, with three stars hotel. around 60 employees, of which a half coming from cooperatives and contract work.