

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE WALSER SETTLEMENT SOUTH OF MONTE ROSA

During the Middle Ages, throughout Europe, a major increase of population produced important migrations. The main reasons for this migratory flow were the need for new farming land and the desire to own a property. Broadening of civil rights allowed groups of peasants to free themselves from their feudal condition of serfs to enter a new condition of freedom and autonomy.

The Walsers are a German-speaking population that settled in the upper Valais region before the 10th century A.D. (hence, probably, their name).

Their migration must be framed in this new era of revived interest for agriculture and of freedom to decide and plan the best use of one's own land. Their colonization took place while other important political changes were making progress. On this side of the Alps, the people of the Sesia Valley were freeing themselves from the tyranny of the Earls of Biandrate and getting rid of their remaining feudal ties while, at the same time, the Lords of the nearby uplands encouraged the exploitation of the high pastures by awarding them to those hard-working newcomers, effectively the first people that succeeded in surviving on the mountain's resources only.

From their early settlements, the Walsers later moved towards the Italian side of the Alps, the Grisons, Lichtenstein, Vorarlberg and Tirol. After the high reaches of the valleys had been firmly occupied by the Walsers, the raids of the Anzasca Valley marauders stopped and continuous flock forays came to an end in the upper Grande and Gressoney Valleys.

The earliest Walsers settlements outside the Valais boundaries date to the 12th century and the colonies of Gressoney, Rimella, Rima, Alagna and Macugnaga were founded in those days. The occupation took place very gradually, almost stealthily, also due to the fact that, at first, the newcomers did not establish trading relationships with the local populations.

At the beginning, they kept receiving supplies of staple commodities from the Valais. Later, after having attained a certain degree of self-sufficiency, they started buying supplies and trading their own products at the local market.

Those shepherd communities were organised in isolated cottages scattered over the mountains. Forests were turned into pastures, land was tilled as high as possible, aqueducts were built to collect water at thaw, new tools and techniques were developed, shared and handed on from father to son. Both as individuals and as communities, the Walsers, obtained greater freedom and autonomy from this new, hard work-based type of economy. They also reached uncommon welfare levels if compared to other country people of their times, as they lived free of serfdom, taxes and duties. All this is mirrored

in the ancient so-called "Freie Walsers" ("Free Walsers") community statutes of the 14th Century.

The Walsers architecture is extraordinary. As for all forest areas of the world, the use of wood dominates over other building materials but, unlike elsewhere, Walsers houses are contoured by wide balconies which make them extremely elegant. The equilibrium of their forms and the originality of many technical solutions recalls the work of skilled builders rather than that of mountain farmers. Many Walsers, indeed, later left their communities of the Sesia Valley and migrated all over Europe to become famous architects, painters and wood carvers.

During the farm and home work breaks, Walsers women, on their side, produced very refined weaving and embroidering handicrafts, as shown by the beauty and richness of traditional dressing.

The Walsers language is one of the living testimonies of this civilization. It is an archaic form of German that, in its mountain isolation, almost everywhere resisted the influence of neighbouring dialects and escaped modern German evolution. The Walsers Museum of Alagna gives an opportunity to admire a great variety of traditional objects reflecting surprising forms of popular art. Each object has centuries of history behind and is a precious witness of the time which it was built in.

Bibliography

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L. Denattaris, *Case contadine nel Bielese montano e in Valsesia*, Ivrea, Prati e Verlucca, 1984
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Opening times

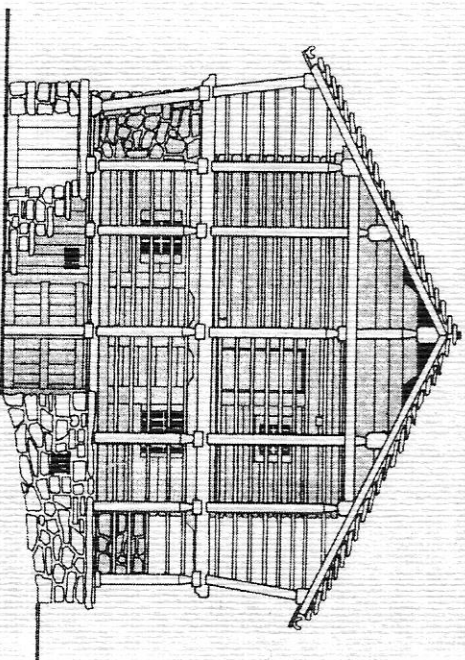
From September to June
Saturday, Sunday and holidays: 14.00 - 18.00
Summer
July, open daily: 14.00 - 18.00
August, open daily: 10.00 - 12.00 and 14.00 - 18.00

Admission charges

Children: free; Youth (6-14 yrs): reduced ticket
Adult: full ticket

Information, booking and guided tours: tel. (0339) 0163 922935
Resort information: Tourist Office Alta Valsesia
tel. (0339) 0163 922988 - fax (0339) 0163 91202

Visiting the MUSEO Walsers Alagna



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Alagna
VALSESIA

WALSERMUSEUM Frazione Pedemonte - "Z'Kantmud" Alagna Valsesia "Im Land" - 1205 m

The Walsër Museum is located in Pedemonte ("Z'Kantmud"), a tiny hamlet a few minutes from Alagna ("Im Land"). The Museum's collection is hosted by a house built in 1628. Thanks to the hard work of the local community people, the house has been diligently restored and brought back to its original appearance by removing all the additions accumulated over the centuries.

Walsër houses were built to several purposes and the same roof typically sheltered a home, a stable and a barn.

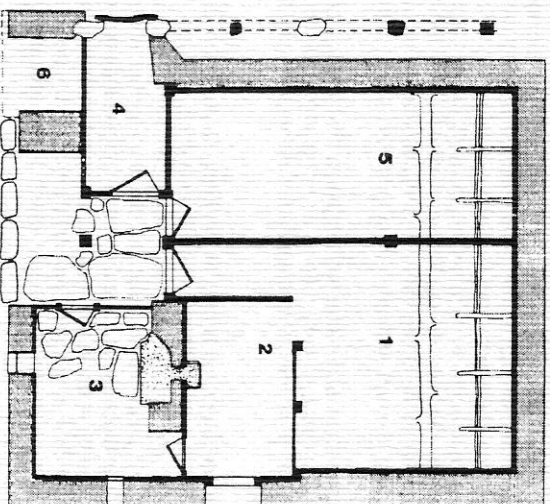
The Museum is a three-storey building made of a dry stone basement (as most local buildings of the same age) and an upper wooden construction ("Blockbau"), purposely made of different timber types. Walls are made of larch beams with moss seams to enhance thermal insulation and floors are made of fir planks without fittings, in order to ensure proper ventilation. The double-sloping roof is covered with thick local stone slabs ("Blatte"). Their remarkable weight is perfectly supported by thick larch beams. Roofs are provided with wooden gutters carved out of half-split larch trunks.

The basement partly extends below the ground level. It includes the stable ("Godu"), the living room ("Stand"), the kitchen ("Firhus"), the dairy room and the weaving and hemp spinning shop. The stable floor is covered with large stone slabs and has a central drain to collect the dung. The living room is adjacent to and directly connected with the stable. It has a plank floor, a flapping table and it is surrounded by benches. A small stone oven built in a wall and the cattle contributed to warm up this room and the upper floor. The kitchen is fully furnished and equipped with original tools.

At the first floor, right above the stable, one can see the main bed room. Original furniture on display

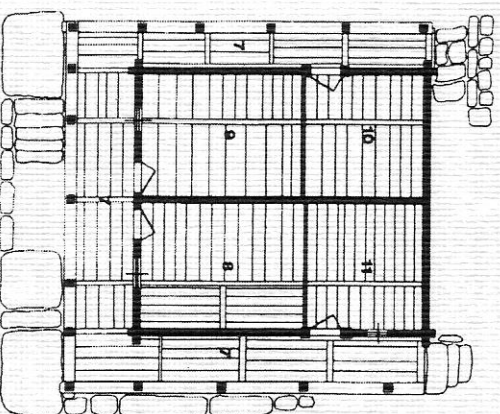
Stable floor (basement) plan

- 1 Stable - 2 Living room - 3 Dairy - 4 Kitchen -
5 Weaving and hemp spinning room - 6 Wood-store



Bedrooms floor plan

- 7 Balcony - 8 Main bedroom - 9 Handicrafts room -
10 Tools room - 11 Archive and library



includes an alcove, a built-in wardrobe, a trousseau chest and a cradle. The other rooms host collections of carpentry and joinery tools, handicrafts and a library.

The second floor the barn ("Stodal"), now hosts a collection of farming and carpentry tools. Within the barn, a smaller room ("Spicher"), with racks and shelves, was used for food and grain storage.

All around the barn, under the wide roof slopes, a wide balcony with high racks made of long horizontal poles was used to dry the late summer hay, rye and hemp harvests.

The balcony is furnished with benches, flapping tables and a joiner table which allowed it to be used by the family as a living and working space.

An external stone staircase set against the basement wall leads to the first floor balcony. From the latter, a wooden staircase leads to the attic.

Barn floor plan

- 12 Balcony - 13 Barn - 14 Food storeroom

