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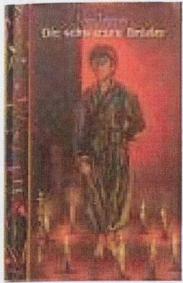
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Die Schwarzen Brüder

By Lisa Tetzner



This is the very sad story of poor farming boys from Tessin. The book is loosely based on fact: In the mid 1840s, a barge, which was heavily overloaded, sank in the Lago Maggiore, and forty boys drowned. The remaining boys made it to Milan, where they were sold to chimney sweeps. They had to work for a whole season, after which they were free to go home, but many died of ill treatment, malnutrition, pneumonia and tuberculosis. Most of them had very poor parents desperate for the extra bit of money and relieved to have one mouth less to feed. Some were orphans or came from dysfunctional families. The Tessin boys found solace in their gang. They called themselves Die Schwarzen Brüder, the Black Brothers.

Die Schwarzen Brüder is a book about friendship, and there is also a bit of a children's love story in it – a riveting mix. I used to tell the story to my students when they were about twelve in the last lesson of the week. They loved it – and their mothers, too. And we all cried at times and rejoiced when we eventually reached the happy end. I think all my students went on a pilgrimage to Sonogno, the last village in the Valle Verzasca, where Giorgio came from.

The author Lisa Tetzner came to Switzerland during the 1930s. She and her husband Kurt Held, who also wrote children's books, were political refugees. They remained in Switzerland for the rest of their lives and gifted their house in Carona to Switzerland, in grateful recognition for asylum. The house belongs to the foundation Pro Helvetia, and Swiss artists can apply to live and work there for a few months.

I thought the practice of sending poor boys to Milan was a matter of the 19th century. But then, in 2005, a friend sent me a newspaper clipping from the "Tessiner Zeitung" about a reunion of chimney-sweeps, and there was a photo of a man called Giacomo Ferando, one of the (few!) lucky chimney sweeps who survived the ordeal of climbing up inside the chimneys and scraping the soot off the chimney walls. Giacomo Ferando was born in 1927 and worked as a chimney-sweep at the age of seven - so all of a sudden it wasn't such a distant past anymore.

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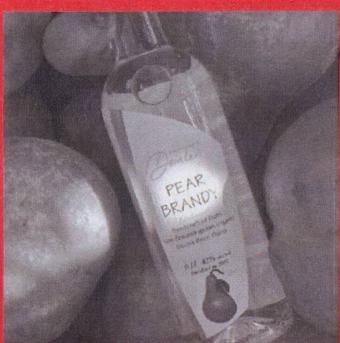


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