

1 The Beginnings: Falmenta, the Cannobino Valley, and Emigration

Perched high on a steep hillside, in a narrow and verdant valley, present-day Falmenta could easily appear in a destination poster advertising the attractions of the beautiful alpine region in which it is located. The narrow but paved and well-maintained road that winds its way along the valley, following the course of the Cannobino mountain stream, begins near the shore of Lago Maggiore (the “major” lake) at Cannobio. Here, and all around the lake, the beauty of the scenery, the mildness of the climate, the centuries of human activity and culture, have created a sophisticated living environment that attracts tourists and visitors from Switzerland – only half an hour’s distance by car – and Germany and beyond. From Cannobio the Cannobino Valley extends west towards Falmenta, located on its steep hillside at the point where the Cannobino forks and from where its main branch flows from the north past other settlements like Spocchia, Orasso, and Gurro, each in turn on their perch on the side of the valley, each with their own roots in a distant rural culture that is now mainly preserved in local museums, tourist itineraries, and scholarly books.

Falmenta itself, currently home to about two hundred inhabitants, shows in its built fabric the result of skilful and dedicated restoration recently carried out and meticulously maintained. Its houses, many of which are still roofed with large and heavy stone slabs, are clustered together as if they were holding each other up. Its streets – no more than narrow, stone-paved passageways – only occasionally open up to reveal a glimpse of the valley below or allow space for a piazza, as in front of Falmenta’s parish church of Saint Lawrence, from where the view of the valley and surrounding villages can be enjoyed. The stone steps that lead up and down to the various levels contribute to the