

Evangelista Zanino and the first manufactory

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The most ambitious of the Locarnese entrepreneurs was Evangelista Zanino. Born around 1530 in Locarno, he became a citizen of Zurich in 1567 and died in the city in 1603. Like other refugees, he began in the import and export trade between Zurich and northern Italy. The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* describes him as the only one among the Locarnese who, despite the restrictions imposed by the guilds, moved from trade to production. He began weaving satin in 1558 and producing *Mailänder Barchent* (Milanese fustian, French *basin de Milan*), a cotton-linen fabric, in 1565.¹ Zanino was a member of the Saffron guild. With a loan from the Zurich council he established his own dye works and employed workers from northern Italy for the production of fustian.

Zanino's enterprise was, according to the same source, the first large industrial enterprise in German-speaking Switzerland. It combined a centralized manufactory with outwork in the homes of spinners and weavers, the system later known as *Verlagssystem*. The venture failed, however, for lack of capital and as a result of speculation.² Zanino's failure is as instructive as the success of the Orelli. It shows that the technical knowledge of the Locarnese and the willingness of the council to provide credit were not sufficient to sustain a manufactory against the combined risks of a narrow capital base, volatile markets and the hostility of the guilds. The successful families of the next generations learnt from such failures. They relied on outwork, kept fixed investment small and built up capital over decades before they invested in larger establishments.

Essentials. The Locarnese merchants of the first generation lived from trade with Lombardy. Aloisio Orelli sold everyday goods from 1557 and silk fabrics and velvet from 1558. His sons dealt in woollen and cotton textiles on a large scale. Evangelista Zanino was the only Locarnese who moved into manufacturing, with satin weaving from 1558 and Milanese fustian from 1565, financed in part by a loan from the city council. His

manufactory, the first large industrial enterprise in German-speaking Switzerland, failed for lack of capital.

1 Velvet weavers and silk workers

The Locarnese colony also included craftsmen who brought specific technical skills. Cornelius Thoma, whose daughter Elisabeth married the silk manufacturer Johannes Muralt, was a velvet weaver.³ The weaving of velvet required special looms, skilled workers and a knowledge of the cutting of the pile that was not available in Zurich before 1555. The council's policy of directing the newcomers towards new trades favoured such crafts, since they did not compete with established guild masters. Other names from the colony survived in Germanized form. The Pebbia family, for instance, became the Bebie, and the Duno, represented by the physician and natural philosopher Taddeo Duno, belonged to the intellectual leadership of the group.⁴

Taddeo Duno (1523–1613), from a noble family of Ascona, had taken part in the theological dispute of Locarno with Giovanni Beccaria on 5 August 1549. In Zurich he practised medicine for more than half a century and published *De respiratione contra Galenum* (1588) and *Epistolae medicinales* (1592), in which he related the incidence of diseases to meteorological observations.⁵ His career is a reminder that the Locarnese community was not composed of merchants alone. Physicians, jurists and notaries, who had formed the professional elite of Locarno, brought to Zurich a level of learning and an acquaintance with Italian legal and medical culture that strengthened the city's intellectual ties with the south.

2 Notes

1. Martin Lassner, "Zanino, Evangelista", in DHS, version of 21 May 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/028581/> (consulted 4 October 2026): "Il fut le seul parmi eux qui, malgré les limites imposées par les corporations, passa du commerce à la production, avec le tissage du satin (1558) et la fabrication du basin de Milan (1565)." The article relies on Ulrich Pfister, *Die Zürcher Fabriken. Protoindustrielles Wachstum vom 16. zum 18. Jahrhundert* (Zürich 1992), especially 39–40. ↩
2. Lassner, "Zanino" (above): "Première grande entreprise industrielle de Suisse alémanique, son établissement combinait manufacture centralisée et travail à domicile (Verlagssystem), mais se solda par un échec à cause du manque de capitaux et de la spéculation." ↩

3. Martin Lassner, "Muralt, Johannes", in DHS, version of 2 September 2010, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/029398/> (consulted 4 October 2026): married Elisabeth Thoma, "fille de Cornelius, tisserand en velours". ↩
4. Swiss National Museum, blog, "The Protestants of Locarno" (February 2024), <https://blog.nationalmuseum.ch/en/2024/02/the-protestants-of-locarno/> (consulted 4 October 2026), naming among the exiled families the Pebbia (later Bebie) and the Duno, and referring to seventeenth-century panel paintings with the coats of arms of the families. ↩
5. Crivelli, "Duno, Taddeo" (above). ↩

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