

Guild membership and the political career

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Political rights in Zurich were exercised through the guilds. A citizen who wished to sit in the Grand Council had to be elected by his guild, whose representatives also formed the core of the Small Council. Merchant families typically joined the *Saffran* or, as the example of Hans Conrad von Orelli shows, another guild in which they found a seat. Hans Conrad von Orelli (1714–1785) represented the Tanners' guild in the Grand Council from 1754, served as *Landvogt* (bailiff) of Wädenswil from 1760 to 1766 and of the Neuamt from 1775 to 1777, and sat in the Small Council from 1767 to 1784.¹ Hans Heinrich von Orelli became one of the two mayors of Zurich in 1778 and held the office until 1785, the highest position the city could confer.²

A political career in the old Zurich was also a source of income. The bailiwicks of the Zurich territory, such as Kyburg, Grüningen, Wädenswil or the Neuamt, were administered by members of the councils who received a share of fines, fees and dues during their term. Johann Jakob Leu, the founder of the bank discussed below, served as *Landvogt* of Kyburg from 1736 to 1742 before he became treasurer and mayor.³ The integration of the Locarnese into the political class therefore gave them access to a second economic sphere besides trade: the administration of the subject territories, which in Zurich as in the transalpine bailiwicks described in Chapter A.II combined public authority with private profit.

1 The return to Locarno

The Locarnese families never entirely severed their link with their town of origin. The Muralt were admitted to the Corporation of Nobles of Locarno (*Corporazione dei Nobili di Locarno*) in 1674, and the Orelli in 1681. Both corporations had their origins in the medieval *capitanei* of Locarno, the vassals of the bishop of Como whose privileges are described in Chapter A.I.⁴ In the twentieth century both families regained the citizenship of the

town their ancestors had been forced to leave: the Orelli in 1936 and the Muralt in 1939.⁵ These acts had no economic significance. They show, however, that the families regarded their Locarnese origin as part of their identity across nearly four centuries, and that the town in turn was willing to reclaim descendants of those it had expelled.

From 1784 the Orelli used the particle "von" to mark their noble descent from the Locarnese *capitanei*, and the Muralt adopted it around 1807.⁶ In the egalitarian republic of Zurich, the particle was a social claim without legal effect. It distinguished the old Locarnese families from the newer merchant dynasties of the eighteenth century and expressed a sense of lineage that had sustained them through the long period of limited citizenship.

Common misconception. It is often assumed that the Locarnese refugees were welcomed in Zurich as full citizens and quickly entered the city's elite. The sources show the opposite. Asylum was granted at once, but citizenship came individually and late, and full political rights later still. The Orelli were refused full citizenship three times before 1679, the year in which a member of the family first held political office in Zurich. The ascent of the Locarnese was the result of more than a century of commercial success, intermarriage and patience.

2 Intermarriage as integration

Intermarriage accelerated integration where law held it back. Within the first generation the Locarnese families married among themselves. Johann Melchior Aloys Orelli, born in Locarno in 1543, married Virginia, a daughter of Martino Muralto, the jurist who had led the Reformed community of Locarno into exile.⁷ Johannes Muralt (1577–1645), the first of his family to manufacture silk, was the son of Franz Muralt and Catharina von Orelli, and he married Elisabeth Thoma, the daughter of the velvet weaver Cornelius Thoma, another member of the Locarnese colony.⁸ These marriages concentrated capital and commercial knowledge within the group during the decades when its members were still excluded from full citizenship.

From the late seventeenth century the marriages extended to the leading Zurich families. Caspar Muralt married in 1651 a daughter of Hans Rudolf Wolf. Daniel Orelli, whose mother was Anna Magdalena Pestalozzi, married first Elisabeth Werdmüller and then Catharina Ulrich. Hans Conrad von Orelli (1714–1785) was the son of Hans Caspar von Orelli and Susanna Escher vom Glas.⁹ The Werdmüller, the Escher and the Pestalozzi were among the great silk families of the city. By the eighteenth century

the descendants of the Locarnese had become part of a dense network of kinship and capital in which commercial partnerships, guild membership and political office overlapped.

3 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Hans Conrad von Orelli (1714)", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Conrad_von_Orelli_\(1714\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hans_Conrad_von_Orelli_(1714)) (consulted 4 October 2026), relying on Schulthess (1941). ↩
2. Wikipedia, "Orelli family" (above): Hans Heinrich von Orelli, mayor of Zurich 1778–1785. ↩
3. Marianne Zelger-Vogt, "Leu, Johann Jacob", in Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), version of 25 November 2008, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/015795/> (consulted 4 October 2026): bailli of Kyburg 1736–1742, treasurer 1749, mayor 1759. The older account by Georg von Wyß, "Leu, Hans Jacob", in Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie 18 (1883), 467–469, https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/ADB:Leu,_Johann_Jakob (consulted 4 October 2026), dates the appointment to Kyburg to 1735. ↩
4. Wikipedia, "Muralto family" (above): admission to the Corporation of Nobles of Locarno in 1674; Wikipedia, "Orelli family" (above): reception in 1681. On the capitanei of Locarno see Chapter A.I and Bonjour, "Muralt, von" (above). ↩
5. Wikipedia, "Orelli family" (above): Locarno citizenship regained in 1936; Wikipedia, "Muralto family" (above): in 1939. ↩
6. Wikipedia, "Orelli family" (above): "von" from 1784; Wikipedia, "Muralto family" (above): around 1807. ↩
7. Wikipedia, "Johann Melchior Aloys von Orelli" (above): born in Locarno in 1543, died in Zurich on 31 October 1623, married Virginia von Muralt, daughter of Martino Muralto. ↩
8. Wikipedia, "Johannes Muralt (1577)", [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Muralt_\(1577\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Muralt_(1577)) (consulted 4 October 2026), relying on Hans Conrad Peyer, Die Seidenfirma Muralt an der Sihl (Zürich 1966). ↩

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9. Wikipedia, "Muralto family" (above), on Caspar Muralt; Wikipedia, "Daniel Orelli" (above); Wikipedia, "Hans Conrad von Orelli (1714)" (above). ↩

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