

Susanna Orelli and social enterprise

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One of the most original contributions of the family came from a woman who had married into it. Susanna Rinderknecht (1845–1939), born in Oberstrass near Zurich, married the mathematics professor Johannes Orelli in 1881 and was widowed in 1885. In 1894 she and fifteen other women founded an association to combat alcoholism by establishing alcohol-free restaurants, whose operations she directed from 1896 to 1919. The University of Zurich awarded her an honorary doctorate in medicine for her contributions to public health and the economy. She was the first woman to appear on a Swiss postage stamp, in 1945, and the association survives as the ZFV-Unternehmungen, a cooperative catering and hotel group which in 2019 ran 161 establishments with 2,771 employees.¹

Susanna Orelli's enterprise was a social business *avant la lettre*. It combined a charitable purpose with commercial methods, financed itself from its own revenues and reinvested its surpluses. In this respect it continued a tradition of the Reformed merchant families of Zurich, which had always connected commercial success with religious and civic obligations. The Locarnese had brought this combination with them in 1555, when their common fund supported the poorer members of the exile community. Three centuries later it took the form of a modern enterprise.

1 A family of the Zurich establishment

By the nineteenth century the Orelli and the Muralt had become part of the Zurich establishment, distinguishable from other patrician families only by their Italian names and their memory of the exile. They held offices in the city and canton, sat in the federal institutions, taught at the university, edited newspapers and books and managed banks. Their integration was complete in the sense that their Locarnese origin no longer limited their opportunities. It was incomplete in the sense that they continued to cultivate it, as the admission to the Corporation of Nobles of Locarno in

the seventeenth century and the restoration of Locarnese citizenship in the twentieth century show. The dual identity of the families, Zurich patricians with Locarnese roots, anticipates a pattern familiar to modern practitioners: the wealthy family with roots in one country, residence in another and assets in several, whose sense of belonging does not coincide with any single jurisdiction.

2 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Susanna Orelli-Rinderknecht", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susanna_Orelli-Rinderknecht (consulted 4 October 2026). Wikipedia (German), "ZFV-Unternehmungen", <https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/ZFV-Unternehmungen> (consulted 5 October 2026; used as a last resort): cooperative catering group based in Zurich, founded on 27 September 1894; hotels under the Sorell brand, restaurants, staff and university canteens; 161 establishments, 2,771 employees and a turnover of CHF 285.3 million in 2019. ↩

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