

The commercial directorate of 1662

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As the trade grew, the merchants organized themselves. In 1662 Zurich established a commercial directorate (*Kaufmännisches Direktorium*), followed by Basel in 1680 and Schaffhausen in 1701.¹ The directorate was a body of merchants recognized by the authorities, which regulated competition, set standards of quality, issued wage tariffs for outworkers and, above all, organized the postal and courier services that connected Zurich with northern Italy, Lyon, Paris and Amsterdam.² The Italian Protestant families were represented from the start: a Pestalozzi was elected to the directorate in 1662.³ Daniel Orelli, whom the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* describes as a merchant and financier, served as director of the Zurich posts from 1687 to 1714.⁴

The directorate's control of the posts was economically significant. Commercial correspondence carried prices, orders, bills of exchange and information on harvests and political events. Whoever controlled the courier network had privileged access to information and could guarantee the regularity of communications on which the whole system of commercial credit depended. The Italian route over the Alpine passes, which the Locarnese knew from their own experience, was one of the most important lines of this network. It connected the Zurich silk merchants with their suppliers of raw silk in Bergamo, Milan and Verona and with the bankers of Milan, Genoa and Venice through whom payments were made.

Essentials. The Zurich silk industry was organized as a putting-out system. City merchants owned the raw material, rural families spun and wove at home for wages, while the merchants finished and exported the goods. The system rested on the city's legal monopoly of trade in raw materials and finished products and on the prohibition of rural workshops. The commercial directorate of 1662 regulated quality, wages and the postal services, and its members included the Italian Protestant families.

1 Products, markets and the expansion of the labour force

The Zurich silk houses produced yarns (floss silk, schappe and organzine), silk gauze, crêpe, taffeta and neckcloths. The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* describes Zurich as a redistribution centre that supplied its own artisans with silk imported raw from Spain and Italy and re-exported it as yarn to Basel, France, Austria, Germany and England.⁵ Around 1730 Heinrich Escher vom Glas introduced the weaving of silk crêpe in the Bologna manner, which was used for mourning clothes, and engaged craftsmen from Bologna to do so. He also built on the Sihl the first hydraulic mill capable of producing the fine and strong organzine yarn that the new fabric required.⁶

In the eighteenth century the competition of the cotton industry for labour forced the Zurich silk merchants to recruit workers in a wider area. Silk was carded and spun by hand or on water-powered mills in small rural family workshops from Ticino to Aargau, in the mountains of central Switzerland, in Lucerne and in Gersau.⁷ The reference to Ticino is notable. Two centuries after the exile, the commercial networks of Zurich reached back into the Italian-speaking bailiwicks from which the Locarnese had been expelled, so that Ticinese families earned wages from the silk houses of the city that had given refuge to the Protestants of Locarno.

2 Notes

1. Martin Illi and Hans Stadler, "Marchands", in DHS, version of 23 March 2016, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/016380/> (consulted 4 October 2026): "Zurich" established a commercial directorate in 1662, Basel in 1680 and Schaffhausen in 1701; Ulrich Pfister, "Protoindustrialisation", in DHS, version of 20 August 2013, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/013823/> (consulted 4 October 2026), also referring to Zurich in 1662. ↩
2. Keller, "Der Einfluss der Hugenotten" (above), on the directorate's tasks of regulation, wage tariffs and the postal services to northern Italy. Keller (consulted 5 October 2026) calls the postal system the field of the directorate's "fruchtbarste Tätigkeit", dates its decision to create a courier service "von Zürich nach Como und Bergamo" to 1661 and cites the timetables preserved among its papers for connections to Lyon (via Geneva), Paris and Amsterdam ("Zürich-Amsterdam brauchte 8½ Tage"). ↩
3. Wikipedia, "Pestalozzi family" (above). ↩

4. Lassner, "Orelli, Daniel" (above): "Marchand et financier", maître des postes 1687–1714. ↩
5. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above). ↩
6. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above): "S'aidant d'artisans débauchés à Bologne, Heinrich Escher (vom Glas) lança à partir de 1730 le tissage du crêpe de soie, dit de Bologne, destiné aux vêtements de deuil." ↩
7. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above): "du Tessin à l'Argovie, dans les montagnes de la Suisse centrale, à Lucerne (Falcini) et à Gersau (Küttel, Camenzind), on cardait et filait la soie, manuellement ou sur des moulins hydrauliques, dans de petits ateliers familiaux ruraux." ↩

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