

The Muralt: from surgeons to silk manufacturers

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The Muralt entered trade later than the Orelli. Martino Muralto, doctor of law and former ducal *podestà*, had led the Reformed community of Locarno and emigrated in 1555 with his family. His son Johannes, a surgeon, founded the Zurich branch of the family, while another son, Hans Ludwig (1546–1606), trained as a surgeon, married Maria von Mülinen in 1567, obtained the citizenship of Bern in 1570 and founded the Bernese branch.¹ For two generations the Zurich Muralt were primarily physicians and surgeons. Their move into commerce came with Johannes Muralt (1577–1645), the grandson of the immigrant Giovanni Muralto.

According to the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, Johannes Muralt, like all the Locarnese refugees in Zurich, first traded mainly in textiles with Lombardy. He was the first of his family to turn to manufacturing, between 1606 and 1611, and founded the silk firm *Muralt an der Sihl*. He produced schappe (spun silk from waste) and floss silk in Zurich with Lombard workers and achieved commercial success together with his brother Johann Anton after 1636.² The firm became one of the leading silk houses of the city. Its history was reconstructed by the Zurich historian Hans Conrad Peyer in his monograph *Die Seidenfirma Muralt an der Sihl* (1966), which the *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* cites as its source on the firm.³

1 Trade, kinship and the Lombard connection

The commercial strategy of the Locarnese rested on their connection with Lombardy. In the 1920s Paul Keller summarized the older literature by naming a group of merchant families of Italian or Locarnese origin, among them the Orelli, Pestalozzi and Muralt, who maintained agents in Bergamo, Milan and Verona.⁴ These agents bought raw silk and silk yarn, arranged credit and payments, collected information on prices and harvests and sold Zurich goods in the Italian markets. They were often members of the

family or of allied families, which reduced the risk of fraud in an age when contracts across borders were difficult to enforce.

The Italian connection also had a legal dimension. The Locarnese were Protestant exiles from a territory that remained under the joint rule of the twelve cantons, including the Catholic cantons that had expelled them. Their commercial agents in Lombardy worked in the Spanish-ruled Duchy of Milan, where the Inquisition was active and where Protestants could not openly practise their faith. The trade therefore required discretion and reliable intermediaries on both sides of the confessional border.⁵ The capacity to maintain commercial relationships across confessional and political boundaries became one of the foundations of Zurich's later position as an intermediary between northern and southern Europe.

2 Notes

1. Bonjour, "Muralt, von" (above); Wikipedia, "Muralto family" (above), on Hans Ludwig and the Bernese branch. ↩
2. Lassner, "Muralt, Johannes" (above): "Comme tous les Locarnais réfugiés à Zurich, M. commença par faire surtout du commerce de textiles avec la Lombardie. Il fut le premier de sa famille à se lancer dans la fabrication (1606-1611) et fonda la soierie Muralt an der Sihl." ↩
3. Hans Conrad Peyer, *Die Seidenfirma Muralt an der Sihl* (Zürich 1966), the bibliography of Martin Lassner, "Muralt, Johannes", in DHS (Italian version), <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/029398/> (consulted 5 October 2026). ↩
4. Keller, "Der Einfluss der Hugonotten" (above), naming the Orelli, Gossweiler, Römer, Holtzhalb, Pestalozza and Muralto with representatives in Bergamo, Milan and Verona. ↩
5. Schulthess, *Die von Orelli* (above), and Peyer, *Die Seidenfirma Muralt an der Sihl* (above), on the Italian correspondents of the two families. ↩

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