

The Pestalozzi from Chiavenna

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A third group of immigrants came from the Italian-speaking valleys under the rule of the Three Leagues (Grisons), in particular from Chiavenna and the Valtellina, where Protestant communities lived under pressure from Milan and the Catholic Church. The Pestalozzi of Chiavenna and Gravedona came to Zurich around 1550 under Johann Anton Pestalozzi (1537–1604) and became citizens in 1567. They traded at first in linen, cotton goods, velvet and silk and had specialized in silk by 1579. For almost two centuries they were silk merchants. In 1662 a Pestalozzi was elected to the newly created commercial directorate, and in 1767 Hans Jakob Pestalozzi entered the Grand Council.¹ The family later produced the educational reformer Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a steel trading business that has existed for more than 250 years.

The Pestalozzi show that the "Locarnese" contribution to Zurich must be understood as part of a broader Italian Protestant migration. The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* names refugees from the Valtellina, from the Grisons and from the Reformed community of Locarno as the groups that gathered in Zurich in the sixteenth century.² They shared a language, a confession and commercial ties with Lombardy. Their families intermarried, as the example of Daniel Orelli, whose mother was a Pestalozzi, demonstrates. Together they formed an Italian-speaking commercial milieu within the German-speaking city, which persisted until the integration of the second and third generations into Zurich society.

1 The myth of the founding refugees

The family histories of the seventeenth century attributed the Zurich silk industry entirely to the Locarnese. Daniel Orelli's *Locarnesische Verfolgung 1555*, published in 1683, played a central role in this tradition. The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* states that the book reinforced the erroneous

idea that Protestant refugees had imported the silk industry to Zurich.³ The idea was attractive because it combined religious heroism with economic success and gave the descendants of the refugees a claim to recognition at a time when they were still struggling for full citizenship.

Common misconception. The Zurich silk industry is often said to have been founded by the Locarnese refugees of 1555. Modern research has corrected this picture. Silk weaving had existed in Zurich in the thirteenth century, and the industry of the late sixteenth century was built by native merchants such as the Werdmüller as much as by Italian immigrants. The *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz* notes that the Locarnese silk merchants, "sometimes received with reluctance", were soon overtaken by local merchants who used their experience in the cotton trade to create the great houses for silk and wool yarn, such as the *Florhof* and the *Seidenhof*.⁴ The myth goes back largely to Daniel Orelli's account of 1683.

Modern scholarship therefore assigns the Locarnese a more specific role. They brought market knowledge, commercial connections with Lombardy, some technical skills such as velvet weaving and, in Zanino's case, the first experiment in centralized production. Native capital, as in the case of the Werdmüller, and the expertise of other Italian exiles such as Turretini were equally important. The Zurich council's protectionist policy, which reserved manufacturing to the city and forbade rural workshops, shaped the structure of the industry more than any single group of immigrants.⁵ Walter Bodmer's study of the influence of refugee immigration on the Swiss economy between 1550 and 1700, published in 1946, laid the foundation for this more sober assessment by showing that reception policies were strongly determined by economic calculation and that many refugee enterprises failed.⁶

2 Velvet, taffeta and gauze

By the end of the sixteenth century the great entrepreneurs of Zurich, among them the Werdmüller, Muralt, Orelli and Pestalozzi, had begun to manufacture velvet, taffeta and silk gauze in addition to yarn. Zurich also served as a centre of redistribution for raw silk imported from Spain and Italy, which left the city again as yarn for Basel, France, Austria, Germany and England. After 1685 the city added the knitting of stockings on the frame and the weaving of more luxurious fabrics. The industry thus moved by stages from the preparation of yarn for distant markets towards finished cloth of increasing value, a development that the eighteenth-century crêpe weaving of the Escher family, discussed below, carried further.⁷

3 Notes

1. Wikipedia, "Pestalozzi family", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pestalozzi_family (consulted 4 October 2026). ↩
2. Tosato-Rigo, "Réfugiés protestants" (above). ↩
3. Martin Lassner, "Orelli, Daniel", in DHS, version of 26 October 2009, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/029400/> (consulted 4 October 2026): the book "renforce l'idée erronée selon laquelle des réfugiés protestants auraient importé l'industrie de la soie à Zurich". ↩
4. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above): "Parfois accueillis avec réticence, ces soyeux furent bientôt relayés par des marchands autochtones qui, grâce à leur expérience dans le coton, furent en mesure de créer des maisons vouées à la production de fils de soie et de laine, tels le Florhof et le Seidenhof." ↩
5. Keller, "Der Einfluss der Hugenotten" (above), on the city's prohibition of rural workshops. ↩
6. Walter Bodmer, *Der Einfluss der Refugianteneinwanderung von 1550–1700 auf die schweizerische Wirtschaft* (Zürich 1946), as characterized in Tosato-Rigo, "Réfugiés protestants" (above), section "Historiographie". ↩
7. Mottu-Weber, "Soierie" (above): "Les grands entrepreneurs du XVI^e siècle (Werdmüller, Muralt, Orelli, Pestalozzi) s'étaient aussi mis à fabriquer du velours, du taffetas et de la gaze de soie." The same article (consulted 5 October 2026) describes Zurich as a "centre de redistribution de soies importées brute d'Espagne et d'Italie, puis réexportées sous forme de filés à Bâle, en France, en Autriche, en Allemagne et en Angleterre", names the introduction after 1685 of "le tricotage de bas au métier et le tissage d'étoffes plus luxueuses" and states that Heinrich Escher, "S'aidant d'artisans débauchés à Bologne", launched "à partir de 1730 le tissage du crêpe de soie, dit de Bologne". See also Pfister, *Die Zürcher Fabriques* (above). ↩

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