

The Locarno refugees of 1555 and the birth of the silk industry — overview and summary

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On 3 March 1555 a column of men, women and children left Locarno, the small market town at the northern end of Lake Maggiore, and turned their backs on houses, vineyards, family tombs and a lordship that their ancestors had helped to govern for three centuries. They were the members of the town's Reformed congregation who had refused to return to the Catholic faith after the Swiss Confederates, their sovereign lords, had given them the choice between abjuration and exile. A little more than two months later the first of them reached Zurich. Among the names in that group were Muralto, Orelli, Duno, Zanino and Appiani, names which, in their Germanised forms of Muralt and Orelli, still appear today on the boards of Zurich foundations, in the membership rolls of the guilds and among the partners and directors of the city's financial institutions.¹

The episode occupies a special place in the self-understanding of the city. Zurich tells it as the story of how a small, guild-governed and outwardly austere Reformed republic acquired, through an act of confessional solidarity, a group of merchant families who opened its markets to Italy and taught it the organisation of textile production. These families laid the first stones of the silk industry which, three hundred years later, would make Zurich one of the two great silk centres of Europe. The narrative has a strong moral appeal. It links the Reformation of Zwingli and Bullinger (see Chapters B.I to B.III) to the commercial rise of the city and seems to show that openness to persecuted strangers repaid itself in prosperity. Historians have long recognised that the reality was more complicated. The Locarnesi were received with charity and treated with suspicion, given refuge and denied citizenship. They introduced new techniques, only to be blocked by the guilds from exploiting them. Several of the first entrepreneurs among them ended in poverty, while Zurich-born merchants reaped the harvest they had sown.²

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For a book on Zurich as a financial centre the Locarno refugees matter for three reasons. First, they are the earliest well-documented case in which Zurich absorbed foreign commercial capital and know-how on a significant scale. The terms on which it did so (grudging, conditional, filtered through the guilds, yet in the end generous to those families who persisted) set a pattern that recurs in later centuries, up to the modern debates on the admission of foreign banks and professionals. Secondly, the families that arrived in 1555 and their associates became, over the following two centuries, the core of a merchant patriciate whose firms moved from the silk trade into the discounting of bills and the management of other people's money. From Aloisio Orelli's shop of 1557, the line to the private bank "Orelli im Thalhof", absorbed only in 1973, runs unbroken. Thirdly, the Locarnesi offer a natural point of comparison with the far larger Italian and French Refuge in Geneva, which the companion volume treats in detail. Such a comparison throws light on the different institutional cultures of the two Reformed cities.³

The chapter proceeds chronologically and thematically. It begins with Locarno as a common lordship of the Confederation and with the growth and suppression of its Protestant community (I). It then follows the exiles over the Alps and into Zurich, where they formed an Italian-speaking church under Bernardino Ochino (II). A third section looks at the families and at the legal and political terms of their integration (III). The fourth and fifth sections turn to economics: the trade links with Italy, the enterprises of Evangelista Zanino and the Werdmüller brothers, the silk Verlag and its products, and the conflicts with the guilds that shaped the long road towards merchant banking (IV and V). A sixth section compares the Locarnesi with the Geneva Refuge and asks what they reveal about refugee capital (VI), after which a seventh looks briefly forward to the silk capital of the nineteenth century and to the families in present-day Zurich (VII).

1 Notes

1. Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz (HLS), Italian edition, Rosanna Janke and Rodolfo Huber, "Locarno (comune)", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/002108/2022-12-20/>. The HLS records that on 3 March 1555 more than one hundred Locarnesi left the town for Zurich.
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2. HLS, Italian edition, Liliane Mottu-Weber, "Seta", version of 16 September 2020, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/013965/>. Mottu-Weber notes that the Locarnese silk workers were initially received

with hesitation and were soon replaced by native merchants who built the great enterprises of the Florhof and the Seidenhof. ↩

3. Martha von Castelberg Stiftung, “Familie von Orelli”, <https://www.mvc-stiftung.ch/leben/umfeld/familie-von-orelli/>. The foundation’s family history describes the evolution of the firm “Pestalozzi im Thalhof” from silk trading into private banking and its continuation as “Orelli im Thalhof” from 1891 until its acquisition by Bank A. Sarasin & Cie. in 1973. ↩

2 Conclusion

The expulsion of the Reformed from Locarno in 1555 was a product of the constitutional structure of the Old Confederation. As a common lordship ruled by twelve cantons with a Catholic majority, Locarno could not follow Zurich into the Reformation, and after the Diets of 1554 its Protestant minority had to choose between abjuration and exile. Around one to two hundred persons chose exile. They crossed the San Bernardino in the spring of 1555 and found in Zurich a city that received them as co-religionists, gave them a church and a famous pastor in Bernardino Ochino, and then, within a few years, restricted them to the import trade, dissolved their congregation and refused them citizenship.

The economic achievement of the refugees must be measured against these constraints. Men such as Aloisio Orelli, Lorenzo Pebbia and the partners of the Ronco company opened new trade routes to Bergamo and Venice, kept goods moving through the confessional embargoes of Milan and Venice and introduced partnership forms that Zurich law had until then prohibited. Evangelista Zanino created the first large textile enterprise of German-speaking Switzerland, combining silk throwing, velvet weaving, dyeing and the Verlag system, and was ruined by lack of capital, speculation and the hostility of the authorities. The Werdmüller brothers, in partnership with the Locarnese Dunus and the Lucchese Turrettini, turned his ideas into the Seidenhof and a floret silk enterprise of European significance.

The refugee families themselves needed a century and more to reach full civic equality. Once they had it, they became part of the merchant patriciate that governed Zurich until 1798 and whose trading houses developed into private banks. The line from Aloisio Orelli’s shop to the Thalhof bank, from Giovanni Muralto’s surgery to Hans Conrad von Muralt’s role in the founding of the Bank in Zürich, is one of the threads that connect the Reformation city to the modern financial centre. The Locarnese episode also shows features of Zurich’s approach to foreign capital that have proved

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lasting: openness in principle, caution in practice, admission on proof of usefulness, and a readiness to integrate those who stay the course. Compared with Geneva, whose Refuge was many times larger and transformed the city within a generation, Zurich absorbed its refugees slowly and on its own terms, in the long run turning their skills into an industry and a financial culture of its own.

3 In five sentences

1. In 1555 the Reformed community of Locarno, a common lordship of twelve cantons with a Catholic majority, was forced by the Diet of Baden to choose between abjuration and exile, and between one and two hundred of its members crossed the San Bernardino to Zurich.
2. Zurich received them as co-religionists and gave them an Italian church under Bernardino Ochino until 1563, but restricted them to the import trade, excluded them from the guilds and granted citizenship only exceptionally, to the Muralt in 1566, the Zanino in 1567 and the Orelli fully only in 1679.
3. The refugees opened new trade routes to Bergamo, Venice and Lyon, introduced partnership forms and the organisation of production under the Verlag system, and in Evangelista Zanino produced the first large textile entrepreneur of German-speaking Switzerland.
4. Zurich merchants, above all the Werdmüller brothers in partnership with Dunus and Turrettini, took over and expanded the refugees' techniques in the Seidenhof and the floret silk trade, laying the foundation of an industry that made Zurich one of the leading silk centres of the world in the nineteenth century.
5. The descendants of the Locarnesi, together with allied families such as the Pestalozzi, rose into the merchant patriciate and moved from silk into private banking, printing and public finance, leaving a legacy that runs from the Thalhof bank and Orell Füssli to the Bank in Zürich and the civic memory of the city today.

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