

# The Swiss colony in Milan: the representation of economic interests in a peculiar foreign community (1840-1945)

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## Abstract

Swiss were the largest foreign community settled in Italy during XIX and the first half of XX Century. After the end of military immigration (Swiss mercenaries existed in Italy until mid XIX Century), Milan became the most important Swiss colony in the country, due to traditional commercial relationship between Lombardy and neighboring Cantons and to the development of activities related to silk trading and to rising manufacturing businesses. Swiss silk entrepreneurs gathered around the Milanese Evangelic community beside German and French immigrants, whose shared social position as upper class and professional identity even more than religion. They acted as a social and economic elite inside the Swiss colony until XX Century when their traditional role decreased, and new institutions rose thanks to different factors: the transformation of Italian economy, new forms of investment of Swiss capitals, the reform of Swiss consular service and the birth of a stronger idea of Swiss nationality.

Paul Bairoch considers the more relevant to explain the success of the relatively small Switzerland the openness of its economy; comparing the width of Swiss export and foreign direct investment with the European average, the country ranks at the first places with some other dynamic small economies (Belgium, Sweden) during the last two Centuries [Bairoch, 1990]. On the other hand, other authors [Bergier, 1984, 176-182] stressed the relevance of internal factors, as the low cost of skilled workforce in a country where the

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geography imposed severe limitations to the agriculture development (forcing to find alternatives in migration or manufacturing).

Both of these group of elements — international position/relative backwardness of some areas — are useful to understand the motivations and the characteristic of Swiss immigration to Italy during XIX and XX Century (elements as the Swiss external trade or Swiss direct foreign investment will be touched only occasionally). Besides the evolution of the Swiss colony in Milan offer an insight into the transformation of the role of international migration both for Italy and Switzerland between XIX and XX Century.

## 1 Italo-Swiss economic relations: an overview

The contiguity — also taking in account the obstacle of the Alpes' barrier — traditionally favoured the relationship (economic and cultural) between Swiss Cantons and the Italian states, in any case is still difficult to estimate the weight of Italo-Swiss trade until the second half of XIX Century<sup>1</sup>.

In fact, the lack of suitable customs records limits the reliability of the reconstruction of Italo-Swiss trade during the mid-XIX Century [Veyrassat, 1990, 293 and ff.], but many sources confirm the importance of the commercial relationship between the two areas: Switzerland considered Italy mainly as a supplier of some goods needed for the alimentation or for its manufactures and, in a second place, as a market [Moioli, 1991, 393–395]. At the beginning of the Century, a significant share of Swiss export to Italy would be probably represented by agricultural-related goods (as cheese and cattle) while the main Italian export product — in fact a real staple product for the Northern Italy— was raw silk.

Statistical data collected since the last decades of the Century confirm the relevance of Italy as one of the main Swiss commercial partners (also as Switzerland's costal outlet) after the Italo-Swiss trade agreement of 1868 and the opening of the Gotthard rail tunnel (1882). From the Federal records of the eve of XX Century, is possible to recognize in the evolution of trade between the two country a strong continuity: Italy exported to Switzerland semimanufactured textiles (cotton yarn and raw silk), food (vine and fruits) and cattle and imported from the Confederation machinery and mechanical

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<sup>1</sup>Political circumstances in both countries worked together for it. It could be possible to take year 1848 as a gulf between early modern and modern institutional patterns for both States: in 1848 Swiss consolidate unity with a new Federal Constitution after the Sonderbund's war. During the same year, Italian states started a process of unification (Independence Wars), which brought, in 1861, to the creation of the Kingdom of Italy, under the Piedmont's dynasty Savoia

devices (among them, clocks), finished textiles and food (cheese). During the first half of the XX Century, Italy add some industrial goods to its export, but the traditional products (mainly food) remained at the highest ranks while in the Swiss export the importance of textiles fell steadily and grew the weight of machinery, chemical products and iron and steel products. In spite of the higher unit value of Swiss products imported, Italy constantly achieved a trade surplus toward Switzerland [Curti, 1949].

#### TABLE: IMPORT/EXPORT, CURTI

Lombardy was obviously the area more affected by the Italo-Swiss trade: the region borders on Cantons of Valais, Ticino (Italian speaking) and Grisons, communication was easier than with the other Italian neighbouring regions, thanks to traditional pass roads and, from the end of the Century onward, to new direct railways (through the Gotthard and the Simplon rail tunnels, this last opened in 1906). Since early modern age, Lombardy enjoyed the most advanced Italian agriculture, precociously market-oriented, and in its countryside flourish a scattered network of proto-industrial activities. Merchants from the main cities of the region coordinated a sophisticated putting-out system of work, mainly devoted — since the end of XVIII Century — to the production of cocoons or silk yarns, then exported to London, Lyon, German Rhine region and, of course, Switzerland [Moioli, 1993].

In addition, since the half of the XIX Century, Lombardy begun a path of industrialization (focused , at first, on cotton industry), which, subsequently, offered to Switzerland a market for some of its exports. Lombardy economic development also offered the opportunity to export to Italy capitals and, most important for the topic of this paper, entrepreneurial and technical skills which contributed to industrial transformation of the region.

## 2 From mercenaries to entrepreneurs

It is very difficult to estimate precisely the Swiss presence in Italy before XX Century, in any case, proxies and scattered data allowed a reliable reconstruction of the main evolution of the Swiss colonies in Italy on the long run.

During the first half of the XIX Century the strongest Swiss presence in the Italian states (more than 20,000 peoples, the most significant foreign colony in the peninsula) had to be explained by the persistence of the mercenary service, a profession which many inhabitants of the poorest Cantons embraced since the Early Modern age. The trade of “gold for blood” sur-

vived mostly in the more backward Italian States — State of the Church and Kingdom of the Two Sicilies — which did not achieved to built a strong national army based on conscription: in the mid-XIX Century, the Pope enlisted around 4,400 Swiss mercenary and the Bourbons of Naples 7,500<sup>2</sup>. Eventually, military service abroad was definitely banned by the Federal constitution in 1859, and the Swiss presence in Italy fell around 10,000 peoples during the last decades of the Century.

The end of military migration changed — obviously — the professional composition of the community and radically transform the ranking among the Swiss colonies in Italy, bringing to the light the evolution that some of them had envisaged in the previous decades.

Due to the large Swiss garrison (4 battalions), Naples was traditionally the main Italian Swiss settlement. During the first half of the XIX Century, Swiss played a relevant role not only in the military organization, but also in the politics and in the economy of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies: in fact, many Swiss trading companies set branches in Naples and in Sicily, and some Swiss merchants, many from Geneva, Basel or Zurich, operated also as bankers and had significant business opportunity — and political influence — managing the debt of the Kingdom [Zichichi, 1988]. The most significant case was probably Federico Roberto Meuricoffre, who arrives in Naples from Frauenfeld (Thurgau) in 1762 he started one of the most important trading company of the South of Italy and gained a pivotal role in the public finance both of the Bourbons' and of Murat's kingdom.

Since de beginning of XIX Century, entrepreneurs followed the merchants, like Giangiacomo Egg, from Zurich, who started in 1813 a cotton mill — the first of the Kingdom — near Naples (in Piedimonte d'Alife). Other Swiss cotton manufacturers settled their activities in Naples or Sicily during the following decades, to exploit the small supply of cotton locally grown, the very low cost of handwork, and, most of all, the severe protective regime of the Kingdom, which guarantee to the Swiss entrepreneurs a complete monopoly over the Southern Italy's market<sup>3</sup>. Piedmont seized the Two Sicilies and created the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, the new State adopted a free-market policy and the Southern cotton mills lose their competitive advantage against the foreign competitors and the factories in the Northern Italy (some of them owned by Swiss entrepreneurs too, see next chapter).

The end of institutions typical of the *ancien regime*, mercenary service and mercantilist protectionism, reveled the growth of the main Northern

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<sup>2</sup>About Swiss mercenary in Italy in Early Modern age, see [Gatani, 1987]

<sup>3</sup>Other information about Swiss entrepreneurs in the Kingdom of Two Sicilies are in [Caglioti, 1997]

Italy's colonies, Genoa, Turin and Milan<sup>4</sup>. The role of Genoa was related to the importance of the harbour of the city: commercial relationship between Switzerland and the maritime city dated back to XVI Century, and during XVIII and XIX the Swiss community was more complex and better integrated than its Naples' equivalent. In 1799 Genoa became the first Italian city to host a Swiss consular representative and the members of the colony were engaged in a wide range of professional activities, with a significant presence in the trading, shipping, banking and maritime insuring business which were typical of the city [Bosshart-Pflugger, 2000].

The presence of Swiss merchants and bankers in Turin depended on the traditional relationship between the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardina and the neighboring Cantons. In addition, during the first half of XIX century, some Swiss entrepreneurs set their activities (mainly in textile industry) in minor cities outside the capital and a large number of Ticinenses migrate in Piedmont during the 1850s — many of them expelled from Milan state after 1848's riots (see next chapter)<sup>5</sup>.

The immigration in Italy of Swiss businessmen, entrepreneur or skilled workers during the first half of the XIX Century could not be explained by a general scheme: in some cases the local conditions could offer better opportunity than Switzerland (e.g. lower handwork price, but other factors could be more expensive...), the new industries could take some advantage exploiting the scattered pattern of customs and tariffs among the Italian states or the entrepreneurs could control in a better way their business from offices set near the production/market.

In any case, it seems correct to define these investments as «quite random» and «work of individual adventurers or families» [Wavre, 1988, cited from 86]. The Swiss entrepreneurs settled in Italy during the first half of the XIX Century acted as a spin-off of the traditional commercial relationships between the countries. Neither Swiss industry was so advanced to need a multinational diversification yet, nor Italy had already developed a significant need for foreign capitals for its industrialization (Swiss capitals were direct mostly to France, and then to Britain and Germany). In fact, the Swiss émigrés often started businesses in direct competition against the entrepreneurs who operated in the motherland, exporting to Italy.

#### TABLE: SWISS IN ITALY 1881-1951 (CENSUS)

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<sup>4</sup>For an overview about the Swiss colonies in Italy until 1850, see [Bonnant et al., 1972, 21–42]

<sup>5</sup>The case of the Büchi family, whose two branches operated in cotton industry in Piedmont and Naples, is documented in [Büchi, 1991]

### 3 Swiss in Milan

As previously mentioned, Lombardy and its capital city, Milan, was one of the most important commercial partner for Swiss Cantons. In addition, in Lombardy — part of the Austro-Hungarian empire until 1859 — it does not exist a “military distortion” of the composition of the colony, like in the Southern Italy. As a consequence, the Swiss community settled in the city was a good reflexion of the different economic relationships which linked Italy and Switzerland (whose a significant share involved the region).

At mid-XIX Century a large share of the community — probably the majority — came from the neighboring Cantons, Grisons and, mostly, Ticino. Many of these immigrants left their country pushed by the lack of economic opportunity which the traditional Alpine economy offered before the revolution brought by mountain tourism at the end of the Century.

The immigrants who came to Milan from the Protestant southern valleys of Grisons worked mostly in the cafés and in the confectioner’s shops of the city or owned groceries and liquor shops. They remained a quite separated ethnic community inside the city, due to the linguistic and religious differences.

The lack of strong natural barrier between Lombardy and Ticino (and shared language and religion) allowed a traditional flow of seasonal immigrants from the poorest valleys of the Canton to Milan’s region. Ticineses find employment in Lombardy as pedlars (selling from cheese to coal, from cattle to chestnuts), masons, waiters, chimneysweeps, confectioners... It is interesting to notice that different valleys developed different specializations: for instance, Swiss chocolatiers employed in Lombardy came mostly from Blenio Valley, masons and stonecutters from Mendrisio, and so on. In some cases, successful activities of immigrants from Ticino evolved into a permanent settlement in Milan, and toward a higher level of stability and profitability (with the ownership of a caffè, confectioner’s shop, hotel, trading or manufacturing business...)[Bonnant et al., 1972, 23–24].

The easy integration of Ticinese immigrants in the Lombardy society brought many of them to actively participate to the 1848 uprising of the city of Milan against the Austro-Hungarian domination (many Swiss in the motherland, not only in Ticino, sympathized with the Italian independence movement). The result — after Austro-Hungarian army seized back the city — was an embargo against Ticino and the ban (1853–1855) of around 6,200 Ticineses (keeping in account temporary immigrant too) from Lombardy (probably around 2,000 from Milan)[Martinola, 1970].

Another small component of the Swiss immigration in Lombardy came, during XVIII Century and at the beginning of XIX, from French speaking

Cantons (Vaud, Geneva, Neuchâtel) and from East-Northern German speaking Cantons (mainly Zurich). The economic relevance of this immigration is not proportional to its numeric weight as many of the Swiss who settled in Milan from these Cantons were involved in silk/textiles trading or banking (the borders between the two activities were blurred) and quickly became part of Milan's wealthiest elite. In the 1850s and 1860s' documents is often possible to recognize names of Swiss families among the most prominent Milanese families (in cultural circles, charities, as owners of boxes in Teatro alla Scala...).

As for the Southern Italy, this movement was not a "mass migration" as the one from the Alps' valleys, but started from single enterprises or families which settled in Italy a branch — or the whole — of businesses that they already run in the motherland. Differently than in the Two Sicilies, Swiss, entrepreneurial immigration in Lombardy was precociously well integrated in the local economy but, at the same time, pursued, on some extents, a "voluntary separation", which straightened the social-economic network of relationship inside this part of the community.

In fact the most relevant mid-XIX Century foreign entrepreneurial community in Milan had very peculiar characteristics: Swiss were largely the majority of the community, but this had not a national connotation as it embraced also French and German families. In fact, also if the modern Confederation existed since 1848, it was still difficult to find yet a "Swiss national" connotation which overwhelm the cantonal identities. Besides, the majority of the Swiss colony of Milan — immigrants from Ticino or Grisons — were not part of the network. The main unifying element which is possible to recognize for all the member of this community is Reformed religion, hence they are usually identified as an "Evangelic elite" (also if it was composed by Lutheran, Calvinist and Zwinglian believers)<sup>6</sup>. In 1850 the leading families of the community achieve the authorization from the Austro-Hungarian authorities to practice publicly their faith and creating officially a religious community (the temple was built in 1864) which included around 300-400 persons.

#### TABLE: EVANGELIC COMMUNITY, MAIN CONTRIBUTORS

In fact belonging to the Reformed Church was an element which marked a

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<sup>6</sup>The more exhaustive study on the Evangelic Milanese community is [Martignone, 2001], main source for the present synthesis. I had to simplify a very complex topic, for instance I could not take in account the Evangelic community in Bergamo (another important industrial city near Milan), which was composed mainly by cotton manufacturers and had strong bonds with the Protestant families settled in Milan. See [Martignone, 1996]

distinction from the rest of Milanese upper class and straightened the ties of families that at the same time were bonded by kinship and shared businesses, but is really difficult to recognise a strong religious identity. It is significant, for example, that the International School of Protestant Families — set in 1860 as another institution which strengthen the cohesion of the community — had scarce or null religious elements in its programs. Even more significant is that the many Lombardy Protestants which did not belong to the entrepreneurial elite attended cult in another temple in Saronno — a small town some kilometres north from Milan — and that the Milanese elite promoted the creation of a German school, for the sons of the working-class families.

In conclusion, the real unifying element of the Evangelic elite result to be the professional activity, as silk traders, bankers or, in some cases, as financiers or owners of some of the first industrial attempts in textile or machine-building.

Some important bankers from Geneva settled in Milan during the Austro-Hungarian domination, as Amy Raymond (who worked in Milan from 1835 to 1857) or Charles Brot (in Italy from 1847–1885), but, even if they were members a complex international network and of the Milan's Evangelic elite, did not originate an “entrepreneurial dynasty” and their activities remained related to the management of the Milanese — and then Italian — public debt [Moioli, 2007].

The most significant group was composed by families which were involved both in commercial (silk or other textiles) and in related financial activities. Some exponents of this group were active in Milan since the end of XVIII Century, as Vonwiller family (from St. Gallen Canton), but their number increased between 1840–1850 due to a new wave of immigration which brought to Milan, for instance, Erminio Vogel, who was partner of the Vogel and Schulthess silk trading company in Zurich, and settled its own business in Milan in 1852.

Other Swiss entrepreneurs started businesses in manufacturing, as Giovanni Schlegel, who run an important machinery factory near Milan in 1850 or Giulio Richard (who traded and produced pottery since 1842). In many cases the banker-traders also invested in industrial activities since the half of the Century (silk production or cotton manufacturing), but their fixed assets remained less significant that the capitals they used in their commercial or financial activities, even if they owned some of the larger manufacturing plans of the region (e.g. some of the main silk yarn throwing and twisting factories of Lombardy, Alessandro Andrae & C. in Como).

A second generation of the Milanese Evangelic elite run the family businesses during the 1870-1880 decades. As their predecessors, they maintained

strong relationship with the European context, but, more than the first generation of immigrant, they relayed on the network of relationship inside the Milanese community. Is significant, for example, that many of the Evangelic entrepreneurs who operated in Milan before the creation of the Italian Kingdom found their wife in the motherland, while their sons married the daughters of other members of the Milanese community. This habit thickened the network, putting some families (Vonwiller, Mylius — German — and Keller) to a key position in it.

A significant exemple of the efficiency of the network of trust and relations among the community and between the Milanese communities and other Swiss/Protestant colonies is the participation to the “bank-boom” which involved Northern Italy during 1870-1880. For instance, Credito Milanese, created in 1872 had in its board Erminio Vogel and Ulrich Geisser (the more important Swiss banker in Turin), while Banca di Torino had in its board Geisser, Brot and Oscar Vonwiller...[Dotti, 1962, 985][Polsi, 1993]

The banks created in this period, which had as subscribers private bankers and the Milanese aristocracy, were a direct spin-off of the growth of the commercial activities of the region (their main aims were bank rediscount and trade of commercial papers). On the other hand, their contribution to the first development of a widespread process of industrialization, which involved Lombardy from this period, was minimum.

In fact, at the end of XIX Century, the fortune of traditional private banking and silk producing-trading as the leading forces of the Milanese economy was fading. In the last decades of the Century also Italy entered in a Second Industrial Revolution wave, developing new capital intensive industries (electricity, steel works, machine-building, chemical) which, progressively took the place of the traditional labour intensive or trading related businesses.

The needs for capitals of the new industries overwhelmed the economic capacity of private bankers (also if powered by the belonging to the Evangelic network); besides, new industries had less need for personal trust and informal relationships than the traditional silk/banking activities, were the Evangelic entrepreneurs had their more significant competitive advantage.

In addition, new form for the transfert of financial resources was developing. Since the direct investment of Swiss companies in Italy increased, and the process busted from the last decade of XIX (also if the main recipients of Swiss capitals remained France and Germany). Swiss investments were attracted partially by traditional industries, but more significant was the presence of producers of new durable goods and even more important was the contribution to the development of Italian hydro-electricity industry[Segreto, 1991]. By 1913, Swiss investments in Italy were distributed in 126,800 milliards of CHF in the electricity industry, 19,600 in hotels and

building and 4,900 in silk [Wavre, 1988, 100].

Swiss investors were also massively involved into the creation of the new universal banks set in Milan in 1894-1895 (Banca Commerciale Italiana and Credito Italiano). The two institutes, which followed the German *Grossbank* model, became the backbone of the Italian industrial system, as collector of capitals from the domestic market and from abroad.

Finally, the evolution of the Italian society and economy brought to the country a new wave of Swiss immigration. Some of the new immigrants were entrepreneurs, active in rather traditional industries, as cotton manufacturing, who found in Lombardy (mostly in Bergamo area) more opportunities than in the overcrowded Swiss market [Romano, 1992, 380 and ff.]. Other Swiss immigrant started machinery-building or chemical business, eager to take advantage to the industrial development of Italy, exploiting the more advanced competences that Swiss industry had gathered in the new industries typical of XX Century.

In this context (new industries not trusted-based, foreign direct investment, new immigration) the traditional competitive advantage of the Evangelic community was reducing itself. In fact, the leading elite of the community smoothly adapt itself to the new environment. Some families left their manufacturing and trading business and evolved into pure financial operators. Other took actively part to the transformation which was engaging the Milanese (and Italian) economy. For instance, both Luigi Vogel and Max Mayer, both sons of prominent bankers-silk traders of the previous generation, left the traditional family business and invest their capitals into the new chemical industry. Vonwiller's bank merged in Credito Italiano and Alberto Vonwiller, Oscar's son, became vice president of the new powerful universal bank from 1895 to 1904 [Martignone, 2001, 194 and ff.].

These success stories involved single entrepreneurs of families, but the centrality of the Reformed community was broken and the old world dominated by the pair silk and bank was definitively over.

The evolution of the Swiss consulate and other Swiss institution in Milan is the more interesting point of view to summarize the topics previously presented and to try to understand the transformation of the Swiss community during the first half of the XX Century.

## 4 The consulate of Milan

Switzerland begun to organize a centralized diplomatic service under the French influence, during the Helvetic Republic (1798-1815): under the French-controlled regime, the Republic set three permanent diplomatic missions (Paris

and Milan in 1798, Vienna in 1802) and seven consulates (Bordeaux in 1798, Marseille, Nantes, Genoa in 1799, Trieste in 1802, Livorno in 1809, and Naples in 1812)<sup>7</sup>. The Milan mission was suppressed in 1815 (when the city was rejoined to the Austro-Hungarian empire) and reborn as a consulate in 1816 (was general consulate until 1835)[Altermatt, 1990, 15 and ff.].

The powers, competences and prerogatives of the Swiss consuls before 1848 were not clearly defined. The office was an honorary appointment, usually awarded to the more representative member of each colony and the delegations had little or no budget. This was a consequence of the 1815's Federal Pact, that undermined the central administration and gave back to the Cantons many powers, so the "Swiss" diplomats<sup>8</sup> abroad were usually little more than a drive belt between Cantons and local authorities.

In 1836 the banker Amy Reymond took the place of baron Marcacci as consul of Milan (Marcacci was general consul). From his correspondence it seems that custom problems between Milan and the neighboring Cantons and heritage matters of Swiss citizens took up the main part of the consul's duties<sup>9</sup>.

After the unsuccessful risings of 1848, Reymond was busy to protect Swiss citizens — mostly Ticinenses — against the Austro-Hungarian reprisals: the insurgents were subject to an extraordinary tax and at risk of arrest. The commitment of the Swiss consul rose the suspicion of the Austro-Hungarian authorities, which invited the diplomat to limit his interference in the city's government. In 1852 the very survival of the consulate in Milan was uncertain and, to keep operate in Milan, the Swiss officer had to put its commercial function before its political-diplomatic attributions, adopting the title of simple "commercial agent" until 1858<sup>10</sup>.

In fact, the Austro-Hungarian behaviour towards the Swiss community was ambiguous — or better, it is difficult to say that just one Swiss community existed —: in the same years when Milan's authorities expelled Ticinese immigrants, many of them working class or middle class, Protestant Swiss, members of the Milanese upper class, were allowed to freely practice their

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<sup>7</sup>Rome's consulate followed in 1818 and Messina in 1840. Genoa was responsible for all the Sardinia-Piedmont kingdom (the old maritime republic was merged with the kingdom of house Savoy in 1815).

<sup>8</sup>A consul is technically a civil servant and not a diplomat, but the difference between diplomatic and consular service was recognized by the Swiss administration only during the XX Century.

<sup>9</sup>Schweizerischen Bundesarchivs (BAR), Beispiel E2200.212 (Mailand), Akzession 1, bd. 67, dossier Lettere del Governatorato di Lombardia 1833-35. Contratti, atti di vendita, liquidazioni di eredità, Carte diverse di particolari. Reymond's federal appointment is in BAR, E2200.212, 1, bd. 68, 1936

<sup>10</sup>BAR, E2200.212, 1, bd. 14; BAR, E2, C321.10.21 (Mailand), dossier 1353

religion.

The evolution of the consul's competences was anyhow a consequence both of the Milanese situation and of the improvement of the Federal commitment to improve the efficiency of consulate to protect the interests of Swiss citizens abroad (the duties of the honorary diplomats were defined in 1840 and then in 1851 and 1875)[Fleury, 2002, 18—19].

The duty of the consul involved the gathering of economic information, useful both for the local Swiss community and for the entrepreneurs settled in the motherland, and this function was improved during the second half of XIX Century. In December 1843 Milan's consul had received indications about how to compile a yearly commercial report and, during the following years, the economic part of his *Jahresberichte* became more and more detailed<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to the requirements of the Federal administration, Milan's consul operated as an information broker between Milan and Switzerland for the advantage of private businesses. As a prominent member of the community was appointed consul, it is normal that the consulate easily became part of the relationship network that the Evangelic elite group was tightening during the second half of XIX Century.

During 1860–70s, the correspondence of Reymond's successor, Giovanni Gaspare Schennis (a silk trader who operated in Milan since 1850s) recorded many request of information about customers, suppliers or creditor both in Italy and in Switzerland and documented the role of the consulate as recruitment office of Swiss personnel for the Milanese Swiss-owned enterprises<sup>12</sup>.

The identification between consulate and Evangelic economic elite became even more clear when Oscar Vonwiller took the office (1871), after the death of Schennis. Neither Reymond nor Schennis, even if wealthy members of the Evangelic community, enjoyed in it a so pivotal position as Vonwiller family. During Oscar Vonwiller consulate (1870–1888) the economic function of the Swiss representative in Milan was stressed even more, as is documented by the extensive annual reports produced under his the office<sup>13</sup>.

The problems that the consulate of Milan experienced after the death of Oscar Vonwiller (1888) are a significant clue about how, at the end of XIX Century, the elite-based appointment was less adequate to the needs of both the local community and of the Swiss interests.

At the moment of the appointment of the new consul, a clear divergence

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<sup>11</sup>BAR, E2200.212, 1, bd.69; the first reports are in BAR, E2400 (Mailand), bd. 188, 1 (*Jahresberichte* 1848–1878)

<sup>12</sup>See documents in E2200, 1, bd. 78

<sup>13</sup>Original reports are in BAR, E2400 (Mailand), bd. 188, 1 (1848-1878) and 2 (1879–1887). The importance of this documentation had been underlined by [Moioli, 1991])

emerged inside the Swiss colony between the notables who supported Heinrich Cramer (silk trader, he had indirect kinship with Vonwiller and Mylius family) and a significant group of Swiss citizens — mainly from Ticino — who campaigned to appoint former deputy consul Edoardo Borrani as career consul. The contrast was probably strengthened by the differences between the majority of Italian-speaking Milanese Swiss and the Evangelic German-French speaking economic elite.

Cramer — who was honorary consul from 1888 to 1900 — demonstrated himself inadequate to the needs of consular duty in a more complex context than the one their predecessors had to cope with, and was forced to ask to the Federal authorities to send to Milan a career diplomat to manage the consulate as his deputy (first G. Graffina, then Francesco Bagutti)<sup>14</sup>.

After the death of Cramer, his deputy Bagutti asked to be promoted consul, again with the support of the part of the community outside of the Evangelic elite; during the debate on Cramer's succession inside the Milanese colony, are also documented interferences from Switzerland, where groups of industrialists tried to orient the choice toward candidates less prone to the local economic interests. In any case, the consulate remained firmly in the hand of the most prominent families of the colony until the 1930s, first with Melchiorre Noerbel (1900–1914, wool trader and banker, with relationship with Vonwiller and Gessner family), Alberto Vonwiller (1915–1922 Oscar's son) and Riccardo Rodolfo Hüni (1922–1934, textiles trader).

The end of honorary consulate (with Eduard Charles de Bavier, consul from 1934 to 1942) occurred when the traditional elite had lost since long time its economic and social centrality and it was a consequence of the debate about the representation of Swiss interest abroad which started in the last decades of XIX Century.

The lack of efficiency of the traditional honorary diplomacy to promote Swiss economic interests was becoming evident in the 1880s. While all the other European countries adopted protective barriers to defend their internal industries, Switzerland — that had the need for export as much as of import — saw its commercial deficit increasing.

In the 1880s debates, the pitfalls of traditional consulates were blamed as a relevant part of Swiss lack of competitiveness: the honorary consuls lacked of competence to effectively sustain the Swiss economy abroad and, besides, the habit to choose as consul notables from the local communities could create a clash between their private business interests and the national

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<sup>14</sup>In his reports, Graffina described the Milan's consulate to his Swiss superiors as a complete mess, due to the incompetence of the local personnel and to the pervasiveness of local private interests. See documents in BAR, C321.10.21, bd. 1353, dossier year 1888

interest[Moser, 1887, 6].

The dispute to go beyond a consular service based on the voluntary commitment of private expatriate became concrete around the Comtesse motion, a reform which intended to create a career consulate<sup>15</sup>. The proposal was definitely rejected by a 1894 referendum: many Swiss were concerned about the backwardness of the diplomatic service, but the large majority denied that well paid professionals were needed and argued that the Swiss commercial representative had to rely only on a certain rough honesty and simplicity (*Grünlichkeit*) to defend national interest[De Rabours, 1911, 11].

The topic of a reform of commercial representation abroad rose again in the political agenda since 1900, but the orientation shift definitely toward the career consulat only after the First World War.

## 5 Building a nationality

In the debate about the opportunity to delegate representation of national economic interests to members of the colonies settled abroad it is possible to recognize the shadow of the concern about a shared idea of Swiss nationality.

Swiss national identity posses some unique elements, for instance it is not possible to recognize it in the belonging to a common religion, language or ethnic group — as it is usual in “romantic” nationalism — but is indeed a rational creation, historically built by consensus. Besides, the identity is built bottom-up: it is the citizenship of a municipality which give the right of citizenship of a Canton, and is the belonging to a Canton which give the rights of citizen of the Federation<sup>16</sup>.

Taking in account this background, it is easy to understand why the identity of the colonies abroad was a tricky problem, which started to rise concerns when the national identity, founded since the 1848s Constitution and confirmed by the 1874’s revision, matured between XIX and XX Century.

Many elements contributed to change the liberal approach that Swiss authorities traditionally demonstrated towards the topic of emigration: among them the aggressive nationalism which was growing in the bordering countries during the last decade of XIX Century, and the awareness that Switzerland was becoming a destination for foreign immigrants loosing its position of net exporter of workforce [Arlettaz, 1986].

Since the first years of the XIX Century, Swiss communities around the world started different scattered cultural initiatives, to maintain alive the

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<sup>15</sup>See documents in BAR, E6, bd. 47, dossiers 268–270

<sup>16</sup>About the building of a national “myth” based on the natural characteristic of the country, see [Zimmer, 1998]

Swiss identity among the colonies: the Swiss Society of New York was created in 1832 with philanthropic and patriotic aims and by 1860 these Societies were 39 around the world. In this year the Federal administration recognized the functions of Swiss societies and they continued to multiply — always as separated entities — during the following decades (84 recognized in 1880, 142 in 1895) [Arlettaz, 1986, 18–19]. The Swiss Societies operated as charities for Swiss in trouble, as cultural and sport club and promoted Swiss schools in the host cities.

The Swiss Society of Milan born in 1883, and, also if the Evangelic notables took presidency or other distinguished offices during the years, it had not the elitism character of the Reformed Milanese community — already declining — but represented the whole social and linguistic composition of the Swiss colony of Lombardy. Progressively, the new Federal-backed institution substituted in some field the traditional network of relationship as in the case of the International Evangelic School, which became Swiss School during the first world war (as a consequence of the Italian animosity against Germans).

TABLE: PROFESSIONAL/CANTONAL COMPOSITION OF THE COLONY  
1884

At the beginning of XX Century this network of spontaneous and loosely connect institutions seemed not sufficient to people who promoted a strong idea of “Helvétisme” against the risk of a watering down of Swiss identity both in the motherland and in the colonies abroad.

This vision was the basis of Gonzague de Reynold, the Nouvelle Société Helvétique (NSH), an association create in 1914 to promote and defend the Swiss national character. About the communities abroad, NSH operated to tighten the bonds between the colonies and the motherland, promoting a better understanding of the foreign Swiss settlements inside the Confederation and improving the knowledge of Switzerland among the latest generations of emigrants [Arlettaz, 2002]<sup>17</sup>.

NSH grew quickly during the 1920s, creating branches abroad and a permanent Secretariat for Swiss Abroad (1919) which tried to operate as a coordination among all the expatriated communities. NSH developed a strong idea of the unity of a Forth Switzerland (beside German, French and Italian speaking Switzerland), meaning the whole Swiss diaspora, without regard to language, religion or social class<sup>18</sup>.

<sup>17</sup>Typical tools of the NSH were didactic books as [Weber, 1927], [Lätt, 1931], [Lätt, 1935]

<sup>18</sup>Since recognition of Romansch as forth national language in 1938, the diaspora was

In spite of the absence of the entire NSH ideology, it is significant that a new idea of identity was spreading among the Swiss in Milan in a period where the traditional equilibrium among groups inside the community was fading, both as a consequence of the diminished role of the Evangelic notables and thanks to new arrivals from Switzerland<sup>19</sup>.

Besides, the coming in power of Fascism raised new concerns for the Swiss colonies settled in Italy: during the 1920s Swiss were sometimes persecuted as foreigners by Fascist action squads, Milan's consulate had to contrast both the reversion of the "Italianity" of Ticino and, in the 1930s, the attempt of penetration of the Swiss National Front (Nazi inspired movement) inside the community<sup>20</sup>.

As a consequence, the community defined itself by contrast with the host society and stressed the lowest common denominators of Swiss identity rather than traditional religious or linguistic identities. This was a typical behaviour of the Swiss in Switzerland during the XX Century: usually colonies abroad did not replicate the strong diversification (and sometimes contrasts) of Swiss society in the motherland [Muller, 1966, 7-8].

After the Second World War Swiss remained the larger foreign community in the Milan area (almost 3,000 in Lombardy). During the first half of the XX century the colony did not present the character of a tight and complex network that was typical of its Evangelic part during the previous 50 years. The new belonging built around the consulate, Swiss Society and other Swiss recent associations or institutions (e.g. Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Italy, created in 1919) probably was less totalizing than the old kinship/business bonds, but surely more pervasive, as it comprehended the whole community.

During the years, a network looser and wider than the old Evangelic community probably had developed the strength which is typical of weak ties [Granovetter, 1973].

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called the Fifth Switzerland

<sup>19</sup>The list of Milanese members of NSH are in BAR, E2200.212 (Mailand), 2, bd. 1, dossier 1920, sub-dossier 1920.18.3

<sup>20</sup>See BAR, E2200.212 (Mailand), 2, bd. 2-3; BAR E2200.19, 23 (1935-40), bd 6 and 11

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