

## Fête Dardel 2013

**T**wo learned historians gave us an insight on different members of our family: Jehan Dardel, the one this gathering relates to, born in 1470, as well as Daniel Dardel (19<sup>th</sup>) and many others who held various posts in the Principality. Their interventions can be briefly summarized as follows:

Professor Rémy Scheurer (MP) first spoke about the linguistic origins of the name Dardel itself in this land of Neuchâtel, where it appeared in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. In local idiom, it was often pronounced differently, i.e. *Dardeij*, or rather *Dardai* (é) instead of Dardel. (Like others, such as *Boré*, for Borel, or *Sogué*, for Soguel) The word could be derived from different sources – Swiss lexicons do not give definitive answers. But, if I may add myself, the most commonly accepted version in French dictionaries on patronyms being an evolution of the old French word for arrow (*dard*) – in other words a military connotation.

Rémy Scheurer went on to recall the coming in the lakeside region of Jehan (archaic form of Jean) Dardel, a man whose social condition allowed him to move about freely. He was called in from the upper part of Neuchâtel to the lakeshore, to take over the mills of Saint Blaise, which catered to a large portion of the East of the principality. His dues to the governor, the taxes paid on his economic activity if you will, were counted in kind, in times when the economy was not yet very monetized. The main due from the mills was composed of 4.5 tons of wheat, a full one fifth of the overall taxes perceived in the county. Through the concession he had obtained from the ruling lord, Jean benefited from a monopoly on all the wheat produced in the *châtellenie de Thielle*, as the Eastern county was called, as well as on the means of production and the sources of energy derived from the Ruau, the little river that flows through Saint Blaise. Jean also bought land and developed a wood and sawmills industry. As such, he proved himself to be a remarkable entrepreneur and industrialist in his time, and was acknowledged as such when he was granted burgher rights in 1522 in the town of Neuchâtel – a recognition which did not go without saying in a time of very rigid hierarchical social strata and compartmented society.

Dr Jean-Pierre Jelmini went on to describe the general power structure of Neuchâtel in the old regime days, and highlighted the role played in this environment by a number of members of the family. In doing so, he explained the meaning of the functions, titles held and different professions of many a Dardel. A large number of them were law men, as judges and assistant judges or justices. Mr Jelmini went on to describe the different orders of burghers of various districts of Neuchâtel and the capital town itself, as many Dardels were governors of the one or the other county, mayors or members of various ruling Councils. The military were both militia men, who held other jobs but also went up the ranks in military duties, as well as some professional officers. Others were part of the ecclesial order and held posts in the church hierarchy. Mention should have been made under this heading of David

Dardel (George Alexander's father), who at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the dean of the "venerable class", i.e. the highest spiritual leader of the Principality – at a time, *nota bene*, when the church counted more in the power structure than in modern times.

Not all Dardels were referred to in these listings which meant to dwell on the functions, rather than the biography of the individuals. Special mention was however made of Daniel Dardel, the last old regime governor of the county or fiefdom of Thielle, who held various noteworthy positions and went on to become the President of the Grand Council (parliament) of the new canton after the revolution of 1848.

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But I would now like to add my own views, not on the one or the other forefather who deserves mention – and whose trace can readily be found in the remarkable genealogical study which Jean-Paul Dardel left us before his untimely parting. I'd rather dwell on what you, our Swedish cousins, might hold from the Swiss side of your family – what you may have heard and what you might have inferred from some anecdotes and hearsay.

As you know, among the various places of origin of our family, Saint Blaise holds a very special place. "Blaise" often reminds me of another Blaise: Modesty Blaise, the well known British comic strip character. Why so? Because modesty, assuredly, has become a dominant feature of the Dardels. Indeed, throughout my life and my family contacts, the stories and anecdotes that were told were often rather subdued and modest, certainly so when I compare them to what I have heard from members of other families who had an urge to say something about their roots.

I suppose this lackluster depiction of our origins has something to do with Protestantism and with the large number of Ministers of the faith that our family has produced. But a protestant attitude and the spirit of Reformation do not account for all of it. After all, if that were so, modesty would be characteristic of a good portion of Northern Europe, which I don't perceive to be generally the case.

I do believe that it actually also has something to do with our Swiss spirit, our Swissdom, as it were. Indeed, the Swiss like to be understated. They revel in explanations about themselves that refer to smallness. Demographic references in this country are always off the mark: it took crossing the 8 million mark for the Swiss to accept thinking that their country held more than six or seven million – even when the official figure was 7'950'000... That is the same for the size of our cities, always referred to by taking into account the single central commune and not the urban area. Hence the reference to less than 400'000 inhabitants for Zurich, even though the metropolitan area counts more than 1,2 million. When viewing the rest of the world, we Swiss also always have a territorial reference in mind, and are impressed with the size of other countries. Of course, deep down inside, the Swiss are very proud of their

country and its socio-political model and its achievements. But outwardly, they keep understating it.

That attitude is in fact questionable, because this constant understatement does not do justice to the fact that this so-called small country is the 19<sup>th</sup> world economy (11<sup>th</sup> a generation ago, before the BRICs and a couple of other large emerging countries finally bypassed us), the 4<sup>th</sup> EU commercial partner and its 2<sup>d</sup> overall economic partner. It is a global financial powerhouse, yet its banking sector accounts for only less than 6% of its GDP, or even 4% depending on what you count in. It is a big league world investor; it consistently ranks first or among the best in science, research and innovation. It is indeed regularly in the top tier of world rankings in different parameters, not only per capita, but in absolute terms.

Well, I would venture to say that in a similar fashion, Dardel family lore has rather constantly underlined the modesty of our origins – speaking of a simple miller whose life, it seems, starts in a little village in 1513, or of the great difference in social standing between Georges-Alexandre and countess Hedwige Lewenhaupt. And the tales are many, which tell of the simplicity of the one or the other member of the family.

Yet I believe that more should also be said about a more consistent standing of this family of ours.

The first mention of a Dardel and his son in Neuchâtel dates back to the year 1300. His statute as a “free man” establishes him in a higher social position, in an upper layer from which nobility co-opted its own. If in later centuries, the term “free men” depicted other forms of statute, in the 13<sup>th</sup> and early 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the term was not ambivalent. As such, the probability that this Dardel was linked to the powerful family related to the counts of Geneva, barons first mentioned in 1119 (“Girard de Nangy and his brother, Wilhelm Dardel”) a little over 100 km away from here, where the ruins of a medieval fortress, la Bâtie Dardel, are still to be seen, is not to be altogether discarded. François Dardel, who sits among us, has abundantly researched the subject and I refer you to the corresponding genealogical chart on the wall. Certainly, through the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century, the family standing seems to have gone down – but then again not as much as is made of it. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Jean Dardel was not a farmer or a simple miller grinding some poor wheat on his own. As Rémy Scheurer recalled, he was much rather an industrialist with real standing.

Thereafter, different paths were taken by his many descendants. And it is certainly true that none made it to the glorious top. Nevertheless, many did succeed in what they undertook and maintained a respectable standing in the principality. As of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the family pertained to the ruling class. There was a military company to our name, however briefly. In the early seventeen hundreds, the family member that sat in the government Council was deemed influential enough by the emissaries of the King of Prussia to be one of the few who was to be mellowed and

cajoled with large sums of money to ascertain that the Neuchâtelois patricians would choose King Frederick the Great, instead of the French and Dutch contenders for the throne of the Principality. As we have seen, many Dardels were law men, many were known figures in various sectors throughout the generations.

This to say that the first Swiss Dardel you all relate to, good cousins from Sweden, was not the lowly adventurer that some have liked to depict him to be. And he was not only made a nobleman because he managed to marry countess Lewenhaupt. Of course, he was by no means of her high standing – and then again, few were. But he had already been brought up as a patrician. His mother was born and raised in a fine château, as a heiress to a prominent noble family. His father, David the Dean of the church, who lived in the handsomest house on the main square in front of the church of Saint Blaise, was a man of relative means and high standing. George Alexander's education and ways enabled him immediate entry in the higher circles of European society as he travelled through Northern Europe, before he encountered Swedish nobility and the court of king Gustav (IV) Adolph.

Allow me a last example of what I dub not Modesty Blaise, but (Saint) Blaise Modesty: you know that Georges Alexandre and Hedwiges' eldest son Louis Frederic became a rather famous figure in Sweden, as Fritz von Dardel. His brother Louis Alexandre remained in Switzerland, where he married a renowned bankers' daughter, whose grand-uncle was Napoleons' main banker. Louis Alexandre thus inherited a bank and a large fortune. He did not work for a living, but was a member and a founder of different institutions in Neuchâtel and the Valais. A very respected patrician of his time indeed. I have myself rediscovered that forefather through some painstaking research. As the British would say, he was a landlord, a gentleman farmer. But many, in these parts, have taken to remembering the farmer, instead of the gentleman. And having discovered how prominent a figure he was, I could only smile when I read recently, in a little entry to his name in a gigantic genealogical study undertaken by Dominique Barbey, a remarkable genealogist, inspired in parts by interviews with family members, the following lines: *He was called in Sweden by the title of "Superintendant", and although commander of the Order or Wasa, he was in Saint Blaise a simple wine maker devoid of affectation.* (Ah, the art of understatement!)

All of this to set the record straight, dear Swedish cousins. And thus prevent you from perhaps falling a little too irretrievably in the Swiss modesty trap. You see, we will all remain understated, in these parts: that is inscribed in our genes. And what I tell you in English, I would probably not dare say in French to some of my Swiss cousins! But as you ponder over your Swiss roots, you need not be overly taken by the fictitious halo of modest mediocrity and self depreciation that tends to linger on.

***Jean-Jacques de Dardel***

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