

I. The Genevan Heritage

1761-1780

He was born at Geneva, the city of Calvin, on January 29, 1761, and nine days later he was carried to the neighborhood church of St. Germain to be baptized Abraham Alphonse Albert Gallatin.¹ In time, he abandoned the first two of his alliterative Christian names and quitted the haunts of his forefathers; but he bore the heritage they represented to the end of his long life.

The family into which he was born was ancient and proud. There is still in existence a document dated 1258 which mentions a Gallatin by name: a receipt signed by the Abbess of Bellacomba for "quindecim libras Viennenses" presented to her convent by "Dominus Fulcherius Gallatini, Miles."² Other carefully preserved records establish the fact that the Gallatins lived as minor noblemen in Savoy, some thirty-five miles south of Geneva, close by the Rhone, from the fourteenth century. One member of the family, Jean Gallatini, was seigneur of Granges and many other manors, an equerry of the Duke of Savoy, and the father of another Jean Gallatini, who was appointed an apostolic judge in 1522.

For noblemen who owned lands in the neighborhood there were distinct legal and economic advantages in being a citizen of Geneva. To gain them, the younger Gallatini became a citizen of the city in 1510 and maintained a residence on rue Saint Leger in the Old Town. During the next two centuries five Gallatins served as first syndics—chief magistrates of the little republic. Others became clerics and professors at the local college; others went abroad, to France and the German states, to make distinguished careers as physicians and soldiers.³

By the middle of the eighteenth century four branches of the Gallatin family were at Geneva. One was headed by Abraham Gallatin, who had a lovely estate on the hilly west shore of Lake Geneva. This property was not the fruit of his own labors, although he prospered as a dealer in timepieces, but of his marriage in 1732 to Louise-Susanne Vaudenet, daughter of a Geneva banker. Mme. Gallatin-Vaudenet, as she was known, was a woman of high spirit and intelligence; she bore Abraham three children—a son and two daughters.

The son Jean, born the year following the marriage, eventually became his father's partner in the family business. In 1755 Jean married Sophie Albertine Rolaz du Rosey from the town of Rolle, a few miles up the lake. Jean and Sophie had two children: Susanne, born in 1756, and Albert—who was to bring the family international renown—born five years later when his parents were living at 7 rue des Granges.

Albert's memory of his own immediate family was faint. Jean Gallatin died in the summer of 1765, when Albert was only four. Mme. Gallatin-Rolaz, whom her son recalled as possessing "talent and great energy," then became a dealer in watches in her own name; but she died in April, 1770, when he was nine. In 1777 his sister died; but the loss was less poignant, as she had been under treatment at Montpellier, the French medical center, for a nervous affliction since infancy, and he remembered seeing her only once after the death of their father.

Arrangements had been made for young Albert long before his mother's death. To allow herself freedom to attend to her business, Mme. Gallatin-Rolaz had arranged with Catherine Pictet, a distant relative of Jean Gallatin and her own most intimate friend, to act as the boy's guardian. Mlle. Pictet had reached middle age without acquiring a husband; she had ample means and more than ample love to lavish upon a foster son. On January 8, 1766, just before his fifth birthday, Albert went to live with her in her apartment on the Grand Rue; and from that day forward he was, in effect, her child.

Mlle. Pictet reared Albert with a frugality characteristically Genevan. He lived under her roof and was privately tutored until he was twelve years old, during which time her expenditures for him, according to the records she conscientiously kept, never exceeded eighty dollars a year. In January, 1773, he entered the College of Geneva, probably boarding with a master, and in August, 1775, in his fifteenth year, he matriculated at the Academy of Geneva. His expenses during these school days averaged slightly more than \$200 a year, a sizable portion of which was met by the Bourse Gallatin, a trust that had been set up by one François Gallatin at the close of the seventeenth century for the aid and relief of members of the family.⁴ Although Albert was an orphan, the tradition of the Gallatin family hovered over him and provided for him all the days of his youth.

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As important to Albert Gallatin as the heritage of his family during his formative years was the city of his birth. For in the eighteenth cen-

tury Geneva was unique among the cities of the world.⁵ Superbly situated in the heart of the Alps, it was a walled town of narrow streets and high old buildings clustered on a hill overlooking the spot where the river Rhone flowed from the southern end of Lake Geneva. It was an ancient city, proud of its history and traditions reaching back long before Roman times. Since Geneva expelled its prince-bishop during the Protestant Reformation more than two centuries earlier, the city had been a sovereign republic, although it was surrounded by the covetous monarchies of France, Germany, and Italy. Thanks to its enterprising merchants and the extraordinary skill of its watchmakers, it was one of the most prosperous towns in Europe.

This republican island in the European sea of monarchy was no democracy. Of its population of 25,000, only one-twelfth—the male “citizens”—enjoyed the right of attending the meetings at the cathedral of St. Pierre that elected the magistrates and other chief officials. But even this degree of democracy was illusory: administrative and judicial functions were actually exercised by two councils tightly controlled and passed on like an inheritance by an oligarchy of perhaps a dozen families, aristocrats of French and Italian extraction, who dwelt in the great ancient houses that ringed the cathedral and the city hall. Among these the Gallatins stood high.

Few cities have been so molded by a single man as Geneva was by John Calvin, whose stern and dictatorial influence was omnipresent for twenty-five years in the middle of the sixteenth century. Foremost among his gifts to Geneva was its peculiar moral climate. After Albert Gallatin had left the city and had had a chance to compare its people with those of other towns, he told a friend: “During the sixteenth and the greater part of the seventeenth century, the Genevese were the counterpart of the Puritans of Old and the Pilgrims of New England.” The theocracy Calvin established in Geneva controlled the lives and the social relations of the citizens. Thus they adhered to “the same doctrines, the same simplicity in the external forms of worship, the same austerity of morals and severity of manners, the same attention to schools and seminaries of learning, the same virtues and the same defects—exclusiveness and intolerance, banning all those who differed on any part of the established creed”—as the Calvinists of Great Britain and America.

By the time Gallatin was growing up, this Puritanism had relaxed somewhat, but it still lingered. Visitors from France were wont to complain that life in Geneva was “severe” and “dull.” Still in effect were laws which prohibited the wearing of jewelry, gold, and silver, limited the cost of funerals, and required all citizens to travel afoot in the streets. Carriages were permitted only in the open country.

One curious law which made an indelible impression upon the youthful Gallatin concerned the discharge of debts: the children of any bankrupt were barred from public office as long as the father's debts were not satisfied. Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* called this regulation "admirable" because "it has this effect: it creates confidence in the merchants, in the magistrates, and in the city itself. The credit of the individual still has all the weight of the public credit." ⁶

The spirit of frugality and plain living likewise tinctured the intellectual life of Geneva. Gallatin later recalled having been surrounded from his earliest days by "a most favorable influence . . . not light, frivolous, or insipid, but generally serious and instructive," from which he "derived more benefit" than from formal education. "A far greater number of well educated and informed men were found in that small spot than in almost every other town of Europe which was not the metropolis of an extensive country." ⁷

A cosmopolitan air stirred through the narrow, crooked streets of the old city. From Germany and other lands to the north came numbers of nobles and princes to complete their educations; from England came many young lords and gentlemen; from America such prominent South Carolinians as William Smith and Henry Laurens, such well connected Pennsylvanians as the Penn brothers, the grandson of Benjamin Franklin, and the sons of Robert Morris. Most of these foreign gentlemen studied with the private tutors and attended the riding and jousting academies for which Geneva had become celebrated.

During Albert Gallatin's boyhood, the city played host to one of the most renowned men of letters. In 1754, François Marie Arouet, known to the world as Voltaire, had taken refuge at Geneva. He was fresh from a quarrel with his patron, Frederick of Prussia, and Louis XV had denied him the hospitality of Paris. By shrewdly lending and investing his money, Voltaire was able to afford two estates in the neighborhood, a house and garden at Pregny, close by the estate of Albert's grandparents, and a château at Ferney, three miles outside of Geneva, just across the border in France. Here he was able to live like a great lord, entertaining royalty and persons of wit and learning from all over Europe, maintaining a private theater for the performance of plays of his own writing. Albert's grandmother, Mme. Gallatin-Vaudenet, visited Voltaire frequently and exchanged witty letters on such matters of mutual interest as the grapes and figs they were raising. During a scarcity of wheat in 1771, her husband Abraham Gallatin, in his role of custodian of the Geneva granary, assigned a quota of flour and corn to Voltaire for the sustenance of his colony. And Albert's mother, young and pretty, at-

tracted the old man's roving eye. It is probable that young Albert saw him on occasion; certainly he was ever conscious of him as part of his own heritage.⁸

3

When, at the age of twelve, Albert Gallatin departed Mlle. Pictet's home to become a boarding student at the College of Geneva, he was touched for the first time by another of John Calvin's legacies to the city of Geneva. Calvin's system of public education was so unusual, and its influence on young Albert so transcendent, that it deserves more than passing description.⁹

As Gallatin himself observed years later, "Whatever may have been his defects and erroneous views, Calvin had at all events the learning of his age; and however objectionable some of his religious doctrines, he was a sincere and zealous friend of knowledge and of its wide diffusion amongst the people." In order to diffuse knowledge widely, the reformer had made it possible for the sons of all Genevese citizens to obtain an education from the A B C's through professional studies virtually free of cost. Through his influence, the city in 1559 had taken over an old Latin and logic school and new-modeled its organization so that it consisted of two departments: "the College," training boys from six to fifteen years of age; and "the Academy," offering a general classical education to youths aged fifteen to nineteen and professional training in either the divinity or the law for young men between nineteen and twenty-three.

In 1773 Gallatin left Mlle. Pictet's roof to enter the next to the highest form of the College. That institution, which with the Academy still occupied the ancient quadrangle of grey stone buildings near the heights of the Old Town, had changed astonishingly little since Calvin's time. Educationally, it was in a period of sharp decline. The rigid discipline and religious doctrines imposed by Calvin had been dropped, but the curriculum was substantially unchanged. Only classical languages and literature were taught—"Latin thoroughly," as Gallatin put it, "Greek much neglected." Each form had a single instructor. As there were a hundred students in the average class, they received little individual attention, unless solicitous parents or friends provided it. Looking back in his later years, Gallatin was inclined to believe that this regimen was a good one. It put the students into the habit of studying on their own. Moreover, although the curriculum was narrow and although Latin was useless in itself and was soon forgotten by those who did not pursue their education

farther, Gallatin was convinced that the classics, properly taught without use of translations or explanatory annotations, were “most admirably calculated” to develop the intellectual faculties of youths and provided the students with that discipline in using their own minds “without which talents, even of a high order, become useless.”

At the College, the majority of the students were, like Gallatin, the offspring of propertied families of the city, for virtually all sons of mechanics—“even the watchmakers so numerous in Geneva and noted for their superior intelligence and knowledge”—dropped out at the age of thirteen or fourteen. In the Academy, the youth was even more gilded.

Of fifty-odd schoolmates in the higher department, only one achieved distinction in later life: Etienne Dumont, after a career as a cleric, became secretary to Jeremy Bentham and translated his works into French. Another student, several classes ahead of Gallatin, was François D’Ivernois, who became a political writer and diplomat of reputation in the service of Switzerland and Great Britain.

Family and social position played their part also in the appointment of professors at the Academy, but at least two of Gallatin’s teachers were men of distinction. Horace-Bénédict de Saussure, who taught philosophy, was an eminent physician, mathematician, botanist, and a pioneer in geology and meteorology—above all, a practical scholar. Even as he lectured his eyes were turned toward Mont Blanc, whose summit, a decade later, he was among the first to reach; he was a pioneer in scientific mountaineering. Louis Bertrand, who taught mathematics, had been educated at Berlin and had a wide reputation; it was he who promoted the founding of an observatory at Geneva.

For two years at the Academy, Gallatin and his schoolmates followed a course of study known as “belles-lettres”: two hours of lectures each day on the classical languages, by a single instructor, supplemented by occasional lectures on history by an honorary professor. For the following two years, they studied “philosophy”—which meant more of the classical languages (but no literature), plus algebra, geometry, and a little natural science. All lectures except those on mathematics were in Latin, maintaining the students’ habit of speaking the classical tongue fluently, but, as Gallatin put it, “without any eloquence.” The style of instruction was somewhat like that in an American one-room schoolhouse. During the two years in “belles-lettres,” Gallatin and his fellows heard the same series of lectures twice in successive years; and this was true of “philosophy” also. The great disadvantage of the arrangement, Gallatin thought in later years, was that the instructor had to keep his lectures on a relatively elementary level, so that he could be understood by the younger stu-

dents. There were, however, advantages in the teaching of mathematics. The elements of algebra and geometry, being given twice to each student, "were better inculcated than perhaps anywhere else," Gallatin believed. The higher forms of mathematics, like calculus, were slighted; but this was no great loss, because "calculus is wanted only by a few. . . . In this way, useful and necessary elementary knowledge was better inculcated and more extensively diffused."

At the close of the school year each student received a public oral examination, conducted in Latin. When it was completed the rector of the Academy addressed the student, expressing the school's "approbation, animadversions, and advice, as his case deserved." No grades were given, and most students were promoted to the next higher class, whatever their performance. Gallatin found the examinations severe but fair; and he noted that most American colleges had the same system of promotion.

In May, 1779, at nineteen, Albert Gallatin completed his fourth year at the Academy and faced the problem of choosing and making a career.

4

It was not easy in 1779 for a young man of Geneva to make a career. The very strength of the city-state—its sturdy independence, its proud self-reliance, its small population and modest resources—created the greatest difficulty for young Genevans. Through the centuries thousands of them, including many members of the Gallatin family, had emigrated to neighboring states, where they prospered. Very much to the point are the two most distinguished Genevans of Albert's own century.

Four decades before Albert Gallatin was born, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, son of a watchmaker, left Geneva for France, where he won international acclaim and notoriety as a philosopher, a musical composer, and a revolutionary theorist in education. The "heresy" in his writing led ultimately to condemnation by the French ecclesiastical authorities. For years he had proudly styled himself a "Citizen of Geneva," but when he sought refuge in the republic, the government, frightened by his criticism of political as well as religious authoritarianism, denied him haven. During the years that Gallatin was at school, Rousseau lived in exile at the Swiss village of Motiers-Travers and waged a sometimes witty and often petty feud with Voltaire and his followers that split the society of Geneva. The oligarchy, of whom Gallatin's own family was of course a part, sided with Voltaire, while the disenfranchised lower classes and the franchised but politically impotent middle class found Rousseau a rallying point in

their centuries-old struggle for a stronger voice in the government of the city. Gallatin and his schoolmates read his writings and were fascinated by the romantic notions they held out.¹⁰

Gallatin's own latent ambitions and capacities made him resemble more closely another native of Geneva, three decades his senior, who was making a distinguished record abroad. About the time Albert became a student at the Academy, Louis XVI of France appointed Jacques Necker director-general of finances. The measures Necker introduced were the essence of Genevan commercial morality: financial reforms that included a more equitable system of taxation; a plan for funding the national debt; a comprehensive reckoning of public finances, through a report called "Le Compte Rendu." Necker's insistence that the government of France live within its budget, even if that necessitated retrenchments within many spheres, provoked stout opposition from vested interests, and he was dismissed and recalled several times before the outbreak of the French Revolution ended his attempts to patch up the ailing economy.

The more Albert Gallatin considered his own situation, the more convinced he became that going abroad was the only solution to the problem of his future. What were the alternatives? ¹¹ The Geneva Academy offered training for only two professions: the church, and the bar. But he was too fond of independent speculation, and too humanistic in spirit, ever to consider becoming a clergyman; the law had its attractions, but litigation in Geneva offered poor prospects for a living.

Public life? As a member of the aristocracy, Gallatin could in the end have found an office in the service of the republic. But during his youth the partially enfranchised artisans and small tradesmen and the completely disenfranchised laborers conducted a ceaseless and sometimes bloody struggle for greater participation in the government of Geneva; this the patricians had thus far resisted, with help from the French government. In a vague way Gallatin sympathized with the underdog. Perhaps the aristocrats could be enlightened so that they would give the lower classes a fairer chance. It seemed to him better to avoid the whole subject of politics than to strain his ties with his family and his class.

Trade? His grandfather's mercantile business had begun to ail and held small attraction; and he shied away from an uncle's offer to make a place for him in his business, fearing that this would render him too subject to the favor of relations and doom him to "an honest mediocrity."

The other professions traditionally open to aristocrats would have required him to go abroad, at least temporarily. Medicine? He would have to go to Montpellier or Edinburgh or Paris for training; and, anyway, he had no desire to be a physician. The army? A friend of his grand-

mother, Mme. Gallatin-Vaudenet, was the Landgrave Frederick II of Hesse-Cassel, whose troops were at the moment in the service of the British king fighting to suppress the insurrection of the colonists in North America. The Landgrave was willing to commission him as a lieutenant-colonel, she told him. Other Gallatins had served foreign princes as soldiers in the past, and she urged him to accept. Albert replied that "he would never serve a tyrant"—a bit of insolence that prompted the old lady to give him a stinging cuff on the ear.

For almost a year Albert avoided a definite decision. He returned to Mlle. Pictet's household in April, 1778, even before he had completed his fourth year at the Academy. Once his studies were completed, he began tutoring her young nephew Isaac Pictet. Among the subjects in which he drilled his young charge was the smattering of English he had picked up at the Academy. It was an easy-going life, one that allowed him to read widely and dream grandly without coming face to face with realities.

Yet as time passed, "daily dependence" upon others—especially his guardian, Mlle. Pictet—made Albert morbidly unhappy. She was strict and Calvinistic, possessive and encompassing. Proud and shy and not a little romantic, he searched for an escape, a chance to pursue adventure; and he discovered that two old schoolmates at the Academy, Henri Serre and Jean Badollet, shared his feelings. Serre in particular was enchanted by Rousseau's picture of a New World peopled by "noble savages." The pulses of all three quickened as they read of the fight that the British colonists in North America were waging for independence from a tyrannical monarch. When they got together early in 1780, shortly after Albert's nineteenth birthday, the talk turned increasingly to the possibility of flight to the hopeful land across the Atlantic. They were not certain what they would do when they reached America. Perhaps they should head for Penn's city of Philadelphia, of which they had heard as the seat of the independence movement. Perhaps they would trade with the natives. Perhaps they would till the soil. The possibilities were many and bright, if vague.

But the affairs of the Badollet family were such that Jean could not leave at once. Very well, Gallatin and Serre decided, they would go ahead and he could follow later. The two romantics counted their assets and discovered that between them they had 166 $\frac{2}{3}$ louis d'or in cash, practically all belonging to Gallatin. This should see them through.

On the 1st of April, the day tradition has dedicated to fools, Gallatin and Serre quit Geneva.¹² They had breathed no word to a soul, lest their families take steps to stop them. Within a month they traversed France

to the Atlantic port of Nantes, where they turned over sixty precious louis to Captain Loring of the American vessel *Katty*, for passage to Boston.

Then for week upon week the *Katty* lay becalmed in port. To break the monotony they expended some of their slender capital on the purchase of tea, in the hope of selling it at a profit upon their arrival in America, improving their fortunes. It was irritating to have to wait for favorable winds, exasperating to have the first mate charge them what they were certain was an excessive sum for freight on the tea. To relieve his indignation, Albert wrote several letters to friends and relatives in Geneva, revealing where he and Serre were and what they planned to do.

Finally, after nearly four weeks, the elusive breeze came. The *Katty* passed the town of Lorient on May 27, 1780, and headed west across the Atlantic. Between them the adventurers had about \$400 in cash, some packages of tea, and two headfuls of dreams with which to meet the uncertainties of the New World.