

Aimée and disobedience

by Carla Demierre

The exhibition could be named after and dedicated to this courageous and inspiring woman, with such a beautiful name ending in “ée.”

Renée Levi

Two large blue loops are painted on the wall of the Villa du Parc. Two e's following each other in cursive script. Letters that recall the artist's first name (Renée) and the title of her exhibition (Aimée). A signature and a dedication. That is how I discovered Aimée Stitelmann. The coda of her beautiful name painted as a beacon, indicating a direction to follow. *To find out the story behind Aimée, follow the blue line!* Without hesitation, I set off along this line in search of more information.

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Aimée Stitelmann was born on January 1, 1925, in Paris, into a Jewish family. Her father was of Russian and Polish origin, and became a naturalized Swiss citizen in 1910. None of the documents I read mentioned her mother. In 1940, the Stitelmans were forced to leave Paris when the Germans occupied the city. They moved to Geneva after a brief stay in Lyon, during which Aimée got in touch with a network that helped refugees cross the Swiss border. She wanted to do something. At first, she was given minor assignments to test her reliability and to see if she was strong enough. After all, she was only seventeen. It seems Aimée successfully proved her determination, as she began helping asylum seekers across the border soon after. She also had to obtain the money and passports needed to forge identification documents. Most of the people she helped across the border were children whose parents had been deported. Gy, Thônex, Soral and the Eaux-Vives train station were the main border crossings. The operation was repeated *several dozen times*. Luck was on her side. In most cases, Aimée managed to smuggle refugees to Switzerland without being arrested.

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The canton of Geneva offers more than 100 kilometers of theoretically accessible border, based on the geography of the area. But from the beginning of the war, the border was closed and heavily guarded on both sides. Barricades of barbed wire and frieze horses were erected. Armed soldiers patrolled the border. To cross, you needed a permit or the right passport. The border became impassable, disrupting the daily life of the population which, until then, passed freely from one territory to the other.

Throughout the war, civilian and military refugees from all over Europe sought asylum in Switzerland. Just over 20,000 people, many of them Jewish, were turned back at the border or after entering the country illegally¹. Some of them would try their luck again across the Jura or the Savoy border, in Geneva, on the shores of Lake Geneva and in the Valais canton², with the help of smugglers.

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They used passageways such as a river, a forest, a road, a meadow, a café, a railway or a house located right on the border. I try to picture the situation. Aimée takes charge of a group arriving in Annemasse by train. Children of German, Belgian, Polish, Russian or stateless nationality. If you ask them, it's a summer camp. A little before lunchtime, the "monitor" takes the group for a walk to pick mistletoe for Christmas decorations. The mistletoe trees (poplars, rowan trees, willows, apple trees, etc.) are on the edge of the field bordering the wood, along the barbed-wire fence that marks the border. The group hides from a patrol of Swiss soldiers whose rounds Aimee knows precisely. The children try to make themselves small behind the trees, paralyzed by the fear of being discovered. The Swiss soldiers' uniforms closely resemble those of the Wehrmacht. Sometimes, the men guarding the border also happen to speak Swiss-German. In fact, the army has designed a phonetic conversation guide for them, to facilitate communication with people trying to cross the border illegally. A thin, mimeographed booklet that provides soldiers with the linguistic basics they need to arrest a suspect and take them to the station.

*Halt polis frontier !
Halt u sch'tir !
O le mä !
Turne wu !
O post !
O moädre muwma sch'tir !*

¹ This estimate by the Bergier commission's experts is based on studies carried out in the Federal Archives. For more details, see *Switzerland, National Socialism and the Second World War*, Final report of the Bergier Commission (ICE), Chapter 3 "Refugees and Swiss policy on refugees" <https://www.uek.ch/en/> More recently, works such as Ruth Fivaz-Silbermann's thesis have shed light on the number and fate of Jews who sought refuge in Switzerland. "La fuite en Suisse : migrations, stratégies, fuite, accueil, refoulement et destin des réfugiés juifs venus de France durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale", UNIGE doctoral thesis, 2017, No. L.884

² This geographical area alone recorded 10,000 passages between 1942 and 1944.

*An awa marsch !
Droat !
Gosch !³*

But this time, the group is not discovered. Bodies slowly relax, muscles loosen, breathing begins again. They wait a few more minutes, as a precaution, before the moment finally arrives to cross. One child keeps watch while the “monitor” helps the others one by one under the barbed-wire fence. After a while, the whole group is on the other side.

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I came across a photo of a man posing in front of a wall covered with barbed wire. He is leaning on the wall, arms outstretched, and posing, all smiles, with his back against the climbing ivy. The man sent this photo to a friend on the other side of the border. At the bottom of the picture, he wrote *Hello through the barbed wire...* It takes a great deal of courage and cunning to organize illegal crossings. But friendship, levity and humor are also useful.

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An English aviator crashes on the outskirts of Annecy. He is taken to a farm in Saint-Cergues, where a farmer organizes crossings into Switzerland. The aviator must cross the border at nightfall. As it is raining, the soldiers on patrol took shelter in the customs post. The farm is only a few hundred meters from the border. The airman and the farmer crawl out from behind the house. About fifty meters from the barbed wire, they hide in the sunflowers. The Englishman has a pair of pliers, but the farmer expressly asks him not to cut the wires. There is a spot in the fence where the lower wires are a little slack and the ground has been dug up by his dog’s multiple passages. The aviator crawls up to the barbed wire, and just as he lifts the wire, a great flash illuminates the sky. He is just a few meters from the fortified house where the soldiers are playing cards, but fortunately the shutters are closed. The passage is muddy from the rain. Once on the other side, he buries the wire in the grass so that it looks undisturbed. Passages often have names. This one is called the “dog hole.”

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Between 1939 and 1945, Switzerland took in 296,000 legal refugees for varying lengths of time. In the absence of friends or relatives to take them in, they were sent to triage camps, sanitary quarantine camps, work camps and training

³ These are phonetic transcriptions of French sentences which translate as follows: “Halt, border police! Halt or I shoot! Hands up! Turn around! To the station! If you move, I shoot! Forward! Right! Left!”

camps for unaccompanied minors. Switzerland's asylum policy was excessively restrictive, and the reception of these people was marked by mistrust. According to the Bergier Commission's 2002 report⁴, "a large number of people whose lives were threatened were unnecessarily turned away; others were welcomed, but their human dignity was not always respected. [...] Yet the authorities knew what would happen to the victims. They also knew that a more flexible and generous attitude would not have had unbearable consequences, either for the sovereignty of the country, or for the standard of living, however precarious, of its inhabitants. It is in this sense that we must maintain the perhaps provocative, yet true statement: the policies of our authorities contributed to the realization of the most atrocious Nazi objective, the Holocaust."

When this report was made public, I was twenty-two years old and school had taught me this story, largely omitting Switzerland's involvement. What had we been told to give us the impression that none of this had taken place in the territory we inhabited? Following the blue line, discovering Aimée's life bit by bit, I am surprised and embarrassed by the extent of my ignorance. And then I read *Les années silencieuses* by Yvette Z'Graggen. She wrote this text in the early 1980s, after seeing Markus Imhoff's film *The Boat Is Full*. The title refers to a speech by Mr. von Steiger, head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police in 1942, in which he compares Switzerland to "a lifeboat already heavily loaded and with limited space." Since then, the expression has been used regularly by representatives of the Swiss far right. I have also heard the phrase uttered at family dinners, sending shivers of disgust down my spine. At the time, I had no idea that these words constituted a veritable national haunting, the return of a ghost from the past. When she saw this film, Yvette Z'Graggen fell out of her chair. "If I had wanted to, could I have been informed of what was happening to the Jews? Could I have realized that Switzerland was turning people away, sending them to their deaths?" At the age of twenty, all she could think about was falling in love, cycling across the country and trying to write, but was that enough to blind her to that point? Her ignorance seemed so shocking and implausible that she set out to investigate. "Shouldn't we have broken the silence while there was still time?" The friends she talked to about her project asked her if there weren't more important subjects. How many wars and armed conflicts have broken out since the end of the Second World War?

⁴ In December 1996, the Federal Assembly (Parliament) unanimously decided to appoint a Committee of Experts to examine, from a historical and legal perspective, Switzerland's asylum policy during the Second World War, its economic relations with the various actors in the war (particularly Germany), and the question of the restitution of assets deposited in Switzerland to their rightful beneficiaries. The Commission's report was published in March 2002. <https://www.uek.ch/en/>

For her part, Yvette Z'Graggen was convinced that knowing this history could protect us from the blindness of the past and help us understand the present. She believed that not only did we need to hear this story, we needed to hear it again and again, as a reminder.

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Searching for images of Aimée and traces of her voice, I came across an archive from Swiss Television, which broadcast in February 1999 a series of programs dedicated to the Righteous of the Second World War. The program, entitled “Zig Zag Café”, was presented by journalist Jean-Philippe Rapp, and at the twenty-eighth minute I discovered the moving face of Aimée Stitelmann. A square of slightly curly white hair. A pistachio-colored cardigan on a blue T-shirt. Around her neck, she wore a necklace of malachite pearls of various sizes, the largest arranged in an arc above her chest. Her lips were highlighted with a touch of pink lipstick and she wore gold-rimmed glasses. She had just turned seventy-four. She looked sweet, cheerful, tenacious and intelligent. She was not afraid to go on television and speak out. She was ready. In front of her were several sheets of paper covered with notes. She had had to tell this story many times during her life, but she was willing to do it once again, well aware of the importance of bearing witness.

The journalist — Now I would like to hand it over to Aimée Stitelmann.

Aimée — Yes...

The journalist — Take the microphone that's right there in front of you. You're going to tell us all about it.

Aimée — Yes... But first I would like to mention the climate at home. We lived in Paris. And as early as 1932–1933, we received refugees. When you're seven or eight years old, you're very sensitive to the atmosphere. And the atmosphere was anxious. When we would hear about Hitler, my mother would say, “It's bad, it's bad.” My father, who came from Russia, used to tell us about... what's it called... when they burn villages and things like that... he had lots of stories like that. So the atmosphere was heavy and anxious. We were not surprised. It felt like the big wave was coming.

The journalist — When did you take people across the border? Over the barbed wire. Or under it?

Aimée — Under it.

The journalist — Under it. Tell us about it. How did you do it?

Aimée — It's a drop in the bucket compared to... But that's how it is. Once, I saw a Hungarian lady saying goodbye to her seven-year-old daughter, and I'll never forget the look on her face. Because she knew she'd never see her daughter again. It was someone else who came to fetch this little girl. It was then, when I saw that look, that I decided to do something about it. I was going to school in

Geneva and I had to justify my absences... it was very complicated. But... I was a dual national and I was able to go back and forth so... that's it.

The journalist — How many people did you smuggle through the border, do you think?

Aimée — Look, we don't do these things with the idea of taking stock, so I don't remember if it was fifteen or twenty people. I passed through Gy, Thônex, Soral and especially the Eaux-Vives station. I also passed through Morgins. To give you an example. I'd never been to the mountains before, so it was a bistro owner who helped me. We didn't need to talk. He understood what I was up to and gave me some ski equipment.

The journalist — Wait. We're not going to be able to tell everything in detail... I would still like you to tell us the second part of your story. Because at the end of the war, you faced military justice and went to prison.

Aimée — I have to say it was a bit surprising that they were still applying the rules that were in effect during the war. The law being the law, they clung to it and applied it rigorously. I'd also like to remind you that in 1942, the federal authorities had issued orders... I quote: "those who have fled because of their race are not refugees" or "French Jews must also be turned back." So...

The journalist — Mrs. Stitelmann, one last word. Are you still politically involved today? Do you still have a slightly disobedient view of things?

Aimée — I never stopped. Because what the war really taught me was that...

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At seventeen, was Aimée aware of the risks she ran? In any case, she knew she was breaking the law. Of course, she could not know what would happen to Marianne Cohn and Mila Racine⁵, both members of the Resistance who organized the smuggling of Jewish children to Switzerland⁶. Aimée was not unaware of the violence of the world around her. Nor was she deterred by the risk of being sent to prison. She would not give up on this task as long as she had the opportunity. So she went for it. A single railroad line crosses the border, linking Annemasse to the small Eaux-Vives station in Geneva. This is the route she would take most often. Otherwise, she would pass through Gy, Thônex, Soral, Morgins... She had carefully studied the blind spots in the organization of the customs posts. She had been lucky, it always had gone well. Once in Switzerland, someone else would take over. Aimée couldn't remember exactly how many times she had done this, but what did it matter?

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⁵ <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/heimbergch/blog/200722/marianne-cohn-le-nom-dune-femme-valeureuse-que-vous-ne-trouverez-pas-geneve>

⁶ The first was murdered by the Gestapo in 1944 and the second died in deportation.

Three sisters arrive in Annemasse by train from Toulouse. Their tickets are in order, but not their papers, and they are not supposed to be here anyway. Stomachs in knots, sweaty palms, hearts beating a hundred miles an hour. The stratagem they came up with is stressful (how could they look relaxed and detached under the circumstances?) but it seemed the best thing to do. They moved into a compartment reserved for Wehrmacht soldiers, assuming it would not be controlled, and they were right. In Lyon, they boarded a carriage where half a dozen French gendarmes were sitting, again escaping control. Waiting for them on the platform at the Annemasse station is a girl who must be just a year or two older than them. Wide-legged pants over a white shirt with thin blue lines, and walking shoes on her feet. She sports a notched hairdo and funny little round sunglasses. She's to take them to Switzerland. On the platform, railway workers in blue overalls are preparing for the train's departure for Geneva. Aimée asks the sisters how the journey went, but doesn't really listen to the answer. She's focused on the men's movements on the platform. Without looking away, Aimée explains that they will have to climb into the last carriage and hide behind the crates. What is the train carrying today? Rice, soap, oil, cloth, buttons, coffee. Aimée has no idea. They are waiting for André's signal. They have to stay focused. That's the man who's fussing around the locomotive. In a moment, he is going to let out a big cloud of steam in which they'll be able to hide. This gives them a few seconds to climb into the wagon. Before the steam begins to dissipate. How will they get off the train at the Eaux-Vives station? They will not go that far, as the station is heavily guarded and the Swiss customs officers are zealous. Everything has been arranged with André. The train will slow down in the Grange-Canal tunnel and they'll get off there. They will have to be careful when jumping off, because the train slows down but *doesn't stop*. If they can put a scarf over their hair, that's better. They don't have to put on a sweater, either. Last time, Aimée came out of the tunnel black with smoke. She'd been so hot in the wagon that her clothes were soaked. So the rest of the journey will be on foot. Any questions?

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On May 12, 1945, Aimée received a letter from the Geneva Tribunal. *I hereby inform you that a criminal investigation has been opened against you for assisting a clandestine border crossing and attempting a clandestine border crossing, and that this investigation is now closed.* Like other citizens who broke the law out of a spirit of justice and solidarity, she had been convicted and would serve a few weeks in prison⁷. *The law being the law, they clung to it and applied it rigorously.* Years later, she still can't get over it.

⁷During her appearance on Zig Zag Café, Aimée Stitelmann answers Jean-Philippe Rapp's question: "The journalist — I'd like you to tell us the second part. The war ended in 1945, and then you had to face military justice. You even served three weeks in prison. Aimée — Two three-week terms. The journalist — Excuse me? Aimée — Two three-week terms. The Journalist — Two three-week terms because you acted that way." In

This activity as a smuggler marked the beginning of a politically active life. Because of her activism, Aimée was kept under surveillance by the federal police until the 1980s⁸. Her first police record dates back to 1941. Aimée had sent a humanitarian package to a Polish refugee interned in Switzerland. The package contained dried fruit. Her police file (3 or 4 kilos of paper) represents an *impressive inventory of solidarity*.

Aimée Stitelmann maintained strong political commitments throughout her life (Jeunesses Libres, Parti du Travail). She was active in movements for peace, against apartheid, for justice, against nuclear power, for freedom of expression, against xenophobia, for women's and children's rights, against capitalism, for justice and freedom⁹.

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I rewind a little bit. Aimée is speaking in a microphone wrapped in a chick-yellow cap. The journalist presses her to conclude, but she still has a few more things to say: "The war taught me that anti-Semitism is only one aspect of the stiffening towards a loss of freedom. For reasons of fate, Jews were especially targeted. But now it's the same situation when it comes to expelling Kosovars who are going to their deaths. It's the same situation. And..." Aimée insists, to make sure we understand: "We have a shared responsibility in political orientations. We still have the right to vote, so let's use it!" The journalist, who sees the clock ticking (Ah, I think I'm going to have to interrupt you) kindly cuts her off, but Aimée has one last message to get across: "Our freedoms wear out quickly, we need to use them often." The journalist, moved, thanks Aimée for her call to act and not blindly obey the rules. This advice seems to me to be concrete and full of wisdom, not to mention very useful today.

1999, a parliamentary initiative was proposed, calling for the rehabilitation of people who had saved refugees or fought against Nazism and fascism. Aimée was the first person to be rehabilitated in 2004.

⁸At the end of the 1980s, the population discovered that the Swiss federal authorities and cantonal police had been monitoring some 900,000 individuals and organizations, due to their political involvement (communists, Jura separatists, pacifist groups, feminists, anti-nuclear movements, etc.)

⁹Aimée Stitelmann was a member of *solidaritéS* (an anti-capitalist, feminist, ecosocialist movement). A special issue of the movement's bimonthly journal is dedicated to her. Issue no. 59 was published on January 3, 2005. It contains many interesting facts about her professional life and her multiple activities. After the war, Aimée met a man with whom she had a child. She lived in Israel for a while, before returning to Switzerland. She worked at a number of odd jobs while raising her daughter and attending evening college to obtain her diploma, her studies having been interrupted by the war. She became an elementary school teacher in the Eaux-Vives district, not far from the train station where she had smuggled these refugees in her teenage years. A politically involved teacher, Aimée was a follower of the Freinet pedagogy based on children's free expression. She worked for the integration of foreign children in the canton's public schools and helped create the "petite école" of the Centre de contact Suisses-Immigrés organization, defending the rights of children without legal status. Today, a high school bears her name.