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Gautier née Pictet, Hélène, 1888-1973 / Friends Meeting in Geneva (Switzerland)

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Hélène Gautier and the Geneva Quaker Group

Hélène Gautier-Pictet (1888-1973) came into contact with the Quakers in 1933 and became a member of the Geneva group in 1941. She played an important role during and after the Second World War, organising study groups and a French-speaking group. She is best known for her commitment to feminism.



The Gautiers counted among Geneva's leading families. Hélène's father was a journalist who founded the Geneva daily *La Suisse* in 1898 and was active in politics. Hélène's maternal grandfather was a protestant minister.

Influenced by her father's liberal ideas, Hélène was very independent-minded, rebelling against her environment and conformism from an early age.

In 1909, Hélène married Charles Gautier, a partner in the Pictet bank and son of Louis Gautier, a theologian and member of the ICRC committee. They had five children between 1910 and 1921.

She met the Geneva feminist Émilie Gourd, who was also from the Geneva bourgeoisie. In 1937, she founded the *Centre de liaison des associations féminines genevoises* (CLAFG), which she chaired until 1951.

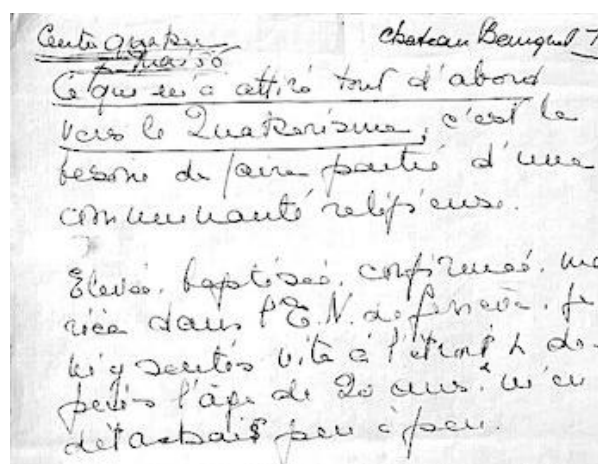
Spiritual itinerary

Hélène Gautier described her personal development during a meeting of the Quaker group in 1956. She begins with these words: "Brought up, baptised, confirmed and married in the National Church of Geneva, I soon felt cramped and from the age of 20 I gradually detached myself from it".

She became involved in concrete issues such as feminism and pacifism, but noted that "nothing solid or profound can be built if there isn't a spiritual element at its core".

In 1933, she became acquainted with the Quaker group. She particularly appreciated this "group of human beings who did not claim to know the whole truth, but who sought it", who spoke of their experiences "with overwhelming sincerity", who were "100% feminists" and whose pacifism (refusal to take part in war) dated back 300 years. They are also "essentially revolutionary", and support conscientious objectors.

Hélène Gautier is convinced that Quakerism is not a religion, but "a religious attitude that embraces the whole of life".



Quakerism and pacifism

Hélène could have learned about Quakerism as early as 1909 from her father-in-law, who supported a Quaker school in Lebanon, or as of 1913 from Professor Pierre Bovet, who was interested in Quakers, or 1920 from a sister-in-law who was related to the founder of the Geneva group. But she makes no mention of them, and dates her first contacts with the Geneva Quaker group to 1933.

It was with the intention of bringing up her children according to modern pedagogy that in 1913 she attended courses with Pierre Bovet at the Institut Rousseau, where she realised

that if she wanted to "sublimate the fighting instinct" in her children, she would have to start with herself. During the First World War, she read Romain Rolland's pacifist manifesto (*Au-dessus de la mêlée*), which made a deep impression on her. Rolland worked for the ICRC's Central Information Agency on Prisoners-of-War (*Agence centrale des prisonniers de guerre*), in which her father-in-law was involved. She was in contact with this humanitarian movement.

In 1934, Héléne attended the first Swiss Quaker Assembly in Berne, along with Héléne Monastier, Pierre Ceresole and Edmond Privat. She was attracted by the practical application of Christianity to pacifism.

After 1940, she realised that to be a pacifist, "our whole life must bear witness to our conviction (...) it is on ourselves that the first work must be done". "Tolerance has its limits, but the effort to understand others does not".

She felt she had to play a more positive role in "spiritual renewal", which is why in 1941 she applied for membership in the Society of Friends (Quakers). However, she listed all the things she lacked to be a "true Christian Quaker": no need to be "saved", no "fear of God", couldn't formulate a precise prayer, and the Bible "bored her prodigiously". She also saw limits to her pacifism, as Switzerland had to honour its commitment to defend its borders militarily. She was admitted to the Society, despite the reservations she had expressed.

When women's organisations were instructed to encourage voluntary enlistment in the *Service complémentaire féminin* (SCF), Héléne Gautier felt unable to take part in this military action. As president of the *Centre de liaison des associations féminines genevoises*, she was torn between her convictions and her desire to serve her country. CLAFG found a way to prevent her from having any contact with the army, but she suffered "from the total lack of understanding of her colleagues for this demonstration of conscientious objection".

Letters from 1967-1971 show how she supported a great-nephew who had made an act of conscientious objection by refusing to do his military service; he was consequently imprisoned, and she was grateful to see a member of her family "on a path that I have travelled quite alone until now". She wrote that he might encounter resistance in his family, because "our old bourgeoisie still too often considers that the country can only be defended by arms". She attended many objector trials.

Quaker commitments

Héléne Gautier reorganised the Group's French-language Quaker library back in 1935.

She became truly active in July 1940, following the departure of the Anglo-Saxons. She joined a committee of three women who took on the management of the activities of the Group, the International Quaker Centre and the Quaker Hostel. Héléne looked after the Group's finances for 20 years.

Many activities took place during the war, meetings for worship were attended by 10 to 20 people, public meetings and lectures dealt with spirituality and Quakerism. Between 1940 and 1942, four new members, including Héléne Gautier, joined the half-dozen Quakers who had remained in Geneva. For five years, however, the Group held almost no business meetings, and its operations remained very informal.

Héléne was clerk in 1945-1946 and 1947-1948, delegate to London Yearly Meeting in 1947, "elder" in 1948 and again in 1960-1969, delegate to French Yearly Meeting in 1951 and 1961, present at most Swiss Quaker meetings from 1952 to 1967 (often as delegate of the Geneva Group), member of the "overseers" in 1957-1960, the Group's representative on the International Centre Committee in 1958, member of the Nominations Committee in 1959, 1962 and 1964, clerk or co-organizer of Quarterly Meetings (in French-speaking Switzerland) from 1960 to 1967. She last attended a business meeting in December 1967.

Hélène found new premises when the Group and the Centre had to move out of the Château Banquet in 1957. She was involved in a committee looking for new premises in 1965 and became a member of the committee of the Foundation set up for this purpose.

In her various roles, Hélène Gautier signed a large number of reports from 1940 onwards.

The library of the Geneva Quaker Group now contains 17 books that belonged to Hélène Gautier, published between 1853 and 1969. Five books are dedicated, four of them by their authors. Hélène was involved in translating and adapting the *Practices (Règles et usages* for the Swiss Assembly) and the *Advices and Queries*.

French-speaking group

After the departure of the Anglo-Saxons in 1940, all activities were conducted in French. The internationals gradually returned and were once again in the majority by 1949. Hélène Gautier initiated three types of activity to support French-speaking Quakerism in Geneva and French-speaking Switzerland: retreats, meetings and worship.

Between 1941 and 1961, she organised four study weeks and two retreats, all residential and French-speaking.

A French-language group was mentioned as early as 1951, and took part in the first Swiss Friends meetings in French-speaking Switzerland. From 1954, the French-language Quaker group brought together a dozen participants every month. These meetings took place from 1959 until 1964 with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (*Mouvement de la Réconciliation*), in the form of talks attended by around thirty people.

From 1960 to 1962 at least, at the suggestion of Hélène Gautier, services were held twice a month with around ten French-speaking members and sympathisers. This practice of "separate worship" was the subject of lengthy discussions at business meetings.

Hélène Gautier was involved in translating, publishing and distributing works in French, and in ensuring that French-language Quaker documentation was available on loan.

Welcome

The Gautier family home in Chêne-Bougeries and Hélène's small house in Chardonne above Vevey, were often lent out for meetings, rest or leisure, or for special occasions such as farewell parties.

Testimonials on Hélène Gautier

Robert Leach mentions Hélène Gautier several times in his history of the Geneva Group (1963): she was "perhaps the most influential of the Swiss friends of Friends Group (...) no other Swiss member has played such an intense role in the Meeting since its founding, nor has assumed greater responsibility for the Group."

Duncan Wood says of Hélène that she made great efforts to learn English, "without becoming a notable example of bilingualism". She always complained that she couldn't follow the Americans, but said she understood "English English". For Duncan, it was extraordinary that someone from the city's most aristocratic families could become a member of the Society of Friends in this way. He mentioned her commitment to women's suffrage. In one way, Hélène Gautier remained an aristocrat: Quakers in Switzerland had developed the habit of using the pronoun "tu" in French and "Du" in German (Quakers traditionally used *thee* as part of their testimony of



Hélène at the *Bessonnette* in 1968

equality), and she did not like this practice, which in her family was only used for close relations.

On the tenth anniversary of H el ene's death, Violette Ansermoz recalled: "Good health (although she suffered from rheumatism), boundless energy, a spontaneity that was sometimes disarming, unfailing moral courage, a sharp intelligence and an astonishing practical sense made her a remarkable person who is remembered with gratitude by all those who had the privilege of getting close to her." "H el ene fought valiantly to prevent the gulf from deepening, especially the linguistic one, (which) tended to separate international circles from the people of Geneva."

For Erica and Michael Royston, H el ene "guided the group with a firm hand through the transitional years 1940-1960."

H el ene died on 14 December 1973 in a Vaud hospital, having had to leave her home in Ch ene-Bougeries with her husband. A memorial meeting was held on 2 February 1974 at the Quaker house in Le Mervelet, attended by around 75 people.

Michel M egard, July 2023

H el ene Gautier's main texts on Quakerism

- 1941 Application for membership, letter to the Religious Society of Friends, 8 January 1941 (in French) (transcription 2023 by F. Gautier, 3 p.)
- 1956 « *Ce qui m'a attir e tout d'abord vers le quakerisme* » (*What first drew me to Quakerism*), handwritten notes for a public talk at the Quaker Centre, 7 May 1956 (16 p.)
- 1964 « *Mon pacifisme quaker* » (*My Quaker pacifism*), introduction to a conversation at the Quaker Centre on 27 May 1964 (transcription 2023 by F. Gautier, 6 p.)

Sources des illustrations

- H el ene Gautier's portrait: *Fondation des archives de la famille Pictet* (Pictet family archives)
- H el ene Gautier's handwritten notes: « *Ce qui m'a attir e (...)* », 1956 (Archives SYM)
- H el ene Gautier sitting : Album given to Berthe Cand, 1968 (Archives SYM)

This text is translated from the French.

A longer version, in French, contains a full list of sources (16 pages).