

A French Underground Railroad, Moving African Migrants

By [ADAM NOSSITER](#) OCT. 4, 2016



Migrants crossed a road near a Red Cross camp outside Ventimiglia, the last Italian city before the French border. The authorities have put about 800 migrant men in the camp. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

BREIL-SUR-ROYA, France — On a recent sunny Sunday, about a dozen young men, women and children sat around a wooden table belonging to Cédric Herrou, a 37-year-old farmer, laughing about who would cook that night. It could have been any family-like gathering in the pastoral setting high in the French Alps, just above the border with [Italy](#). But it was not.

A local hero to some, a scofflaw to others, Mr. Herrou, who was arrested in August, had helped his guests — all migrants from Africa — to cross the border into [France](#) illegally. He planned to sneak them to a train station so they could continue their journey. Some might stay in France, but most wanted to get to Britain or Germany.

Early the next morning, cool and foggy in the mountains, Mr. Herrou and some volunteers in his underground railroad traded tips on which Riviera train station would be best to slip through.

Antibes? Cannes? “Have you ever seen the cops at that one?” he asked an assistant. “There are cops at all the tollgates,” another piped up. Still, they had to try.

“O.K., we go,” Mr. Herrou said finally. Off they went.

For all the ways Europe has tried to keep migrants out — whether intercepting them at sea, tightening asylum rules or suspending its system of open borders — [they keep coming](#). The frontier between Italy and France, where the police now intermittently patrol key tollgates and train stations, demonstrates in many ways how those policies keep failing.



Cedric Herrou, a 37-year-old farmer, estimated that he had helped more than 200 African migrants enter France illegally from Italy. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

Despite a rancorous debate over migration as presidential elections approach next year, France has not settled on a policy: Should it keep the migrants who trickle across the border from Italy, expel them, deal with them humanely or treat them harshly?

The ambiguity of that muddled response is playing out in the unlikely setting of one of the world’s most glittering playgrounds for the rich, the Riviera, and in its craggy Alpine hinterland.

Just miles below Mr. Herrou’s self-styled safe haven, citizen collaborators tip off the French police, who have rounded up thousands of migrants over the last year.

Young African men, some little more than boys, are routinely pulled off trains, in scenes with ugly echoes of the French persecution of Jews during World War II.

On the other hand, people like Mr. Herrou, who has become the de facto leader of a low-key network of citizen smugglers, are countering police efforts in a quasi-clandestine resistance, angered by what they see as the French government’s inhumane response to the crisis.



Migrants at Mr. Herrou's property in the French Alps. He has become the de facto leader of a low-key network of citizen smugglers, angered by what they see as the French government's inhumane response to the crisis. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

“They are rounding up blacks in the train stations,” Mr. Herrou said in an interview, sitting on the remains of a packing crate in his mountain refuge. “They are taking children, and they are sending them back.”

“Either I close my eyes, or I don't,” he said. “These are people with no papers at all. That means they have no protection. I don't see how we can be inert.”

Flouting the law, Mr. Herrou, who lives in an old olive grower's shack, makes regular swoops down the winding mountain road, across the unmanned border to [Ventimiglia](#), the last Italian city before France. There, the authorities have herded some 800 migrant men into a Red Cross camp in a bleak no man's land by the railroad tracks outside town.

Women, children and families are kept at Ventimiglia's starkly modernist church of Sant'Antonio da Padova, in the shadow of a highway overpass.

To fetch them, Mr. Herrou often uses the same dilapidated sky-blue van from which he delivers eggs, laid by his flock of cacophonous chickens, to the sinuous streets of the valley's medieval villages.



A guest at Mr. Herrou's place, where migrants feel a rare sense of security. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

He takes the migrants to his property, where he has set up two small campers at the back so they can sleep and hide among the silvery olive trees of the Roya Valley. They wander his property with a rare sense of security.

Mr. Herrou estimates that he has helped more than 200 migrants this way. His accomplices in the loose network he informally leads have helped dozens more, sometimes picking up migrants as they straggle up the steep mountain railroad tracks from Italy to France, flattening themselves against the walls of the dark tunnels as the trains pass.

Heaps of clothing and discarded flip-flops testify to their transient presence in these forbidding spots. They have no maps or guides, can speak no European language and often wander inadvertently back across the border into Italy.

On this day, after hugs for Mr. Herrou's Sudanese translator, who stayed behind, Mr. Herrou's group of 14 trudged down the mountain for the next leg of their journey.

His geese cackled loudly. Some of the migrants were laughing. It was just one more passage for them, and not the most difficult one. Most had already made the perilous crossing of the Mediterranean, then struggled up the length of the Italian peninsula.



Police officers at the railway station in Menton, France, routinely pull young African men off trains and send them back across the border to Italy. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

At the bottom of the hill below Mr. Herrou's place, the migrants hid behind his van as cars sped by on the highway, fearing that a passing motorist might report them to the police. Then they set off on a mad highway dash down the mountain and across the Riviera, ducking their heads each time they passed the police on the road.

Mr. Herrou made an intermediate stop at the house of a fellow smuggler, Hubert Jourdan, who works out of a tiny office behind the train station in Nice.

"Lots of people have become mobilized. And lots of people call the police," Mr. Jourdan said, describing the divisions among the local population. "It is an astonishing atmosphere."

One of the migrants, a girl, became ill, and paramedics were called. Mr. Herrou eventually decided that 14 were too many to put on a train at once. So he shaved the group to nine, and left.

Later, the five who remained behind, all women, were arrested and sent back to Italy after the paramedics turned them in.



Migrants were rounded up at the train station in Menton. It is a task that French police officers say they don't like. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

For those who left with Mr. Herrou, it would take all day to find a train station they could slip through to continue the journey north.

At Cannes, railway workers called the police. Finally, in the next administrative region over, the Var, the conductor agreed to look the other way, allowing three migrants to board at a time, as the trains went through.

“We negotiated with the conductor,” Mr. Herrou said. “There’s a kind of laissez-faire,” he explained later. “One day it is yes, the next day no.”

“I don’t have a global solution,” he said at another point. “But the state is not managing this properly. I think it’s my duty. And I don’t think it’s normal that children have to go through this.”

But what he does is not without risk. Dozens of smugglers have been arrested in the region for profiting from the traffic. Mr. Herrou does not profit, but on Aug. 13 the French police arrested him nonetheless.



Migrants assisted by Mr. Herrou's network trudged down a mountain as they continued their journey. Many of the refugees are trying to reach Britain or Germany. Credit Pierre Terdjman for The New York Times

They followed him back to his mountain retreat, pointed guns at his head and at those of the Eritrean migrants he had just picked up, and jailed him. The migrants were hustled back to Italy.

After 48 hours, the prosecutor in Nice decided not to pursue charges, having concluded that Mr. Herrou was acting for humanitarian reasons, his lawyer said.

In another demonstration of France's jumbled approach to migrants, the police know exactly where Mr. Herrou is and what he is doing. Yet they mostly leave him alone.

In Breil-sur-Roya, an old French-Italian village of ocher houses in the valley by a quiet lake, Mr. Herrou is something of a celebrity. At the Friday night local council meeting, townspeople clapped him on the back, greeting him warmly. That afternoon he had shared a beer with the town's Socialist mayor in the main square.

"Yes, of course, we know," the mayor, André Ipert, said in an interview. "Yes, of course, he is outside the law. This happens in France."

That very day, three Sudanese migrants had straggled into Breil's tiny town hall. The mayor did not turn them over to the police.

Others agreed with the assessment, and have done the same.

“We think we are doing what we should do, as citizens,” said Françoise Cotta, a well-known Paris lawyer who lives part time in Breil. She is part of the smugglers’ network. “Down there I am a citizen, and what I do is illegal,” she said. “And I help them.”

In fact, the migrants’ odds are vastly improved if they have the good fortune to stumble on Mr. Herrou and his allies.

In the town of Menton, a scene plays out daily that is a counterpoint to all of the efforts of Mr. Herrou, whose farm is just 20 miles away.

It went like this on a recent Sunday evening: The 6:16 from Ventimiglia glided into the tidy suburban station of Menton-Garavan, the first on the French side of the border.

Immediately, French riot police officers took up positions on the platform. They boarded the little suburban train and found what they were looking for: three African teenagers trying to sneak into France from Italy.

The ragged boys were ordered off, marched down the platform and commanded to empty their battered backpacks, while smartly dressed passengers averted their gazes. Soon the return train to Italy arrived, and the boys were put on it.

The officers say they don’t like rounding up the migrants and pulling them off trains. “These are just minors, totally helpless,” one said, grimacing.

Many train conductors don’t like it, either, but neither do they protest. “There are women and children,” the conductor, watching the operation, muttered. “It’s horrible.”