

## WEEKEND

## Dignity from a punch to the jaw

It took Austrian-born essayist Jean Améry 20 years until he was able to write about the torture he underwent at the hands of the Gestapo. Today, 40 years after his suicide, his insight is still relevant

## Michal Aharony

*"Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained."*

— Jean Améry, "Torture" (1966)

Can a trauma caused by torture be overcome? Can human dignity that has been revoked be regained? These are among the questions that Jean Améry, an intellectual and Holocaust survivor whose philosophical writing lucidly depicts the world of many Holocaust survivors, tried to answer. The conclusions he drew from his own personal experiences remain relevant today, during an era when many countries, including some democracies, continue to torture detainees in interrogation rooms.

Améry, who committed suicide 40 years ago, was born Hans Mayer, on October 31, 1912. He was the only child of a Catholic mother and an Austrian father, an assimilated Jew who was killed in World War I. He began studying philosophy and literature at university, in Vienna, and worked in odd jobs — as a porter, a messenger and bar pianist.

In the 1930s, fulfilling an old dream, Améry (who changed his name following World War II) began to dedicate himself to literary writing, which was his life-long passion, and was also involved in publishing a journal. In 1937, he married Regine Berger, a young Jewish woman of Eastern European origin. The two fled to Belgium a year later, following Germany's annexation of Austria.

In 1940, Améry was arrested by the Belgians as an alien German and deported to southern France, where he was incarcerated in various camps, including Gurs. He escaped in 1941 and returned to Belgium, where he joined the resistance movement. Arrested again in 1943, while caught distributing anti-Nazi propaganda, he was sent this time to the prison camp at Breendonk, where he underwent brutal torture by the Gestapo. He was then deported to Monowitz (a subcamp of Auschwitz), where he spent about a year. Subsequently he was evacuated to Buchenwald and afterward to Bergen-Belsen, from which he was liberated in 1945 by the British.

## Loss of trust

After the war, Améry returned to Brussels, where he spent the rest of his life. It was there that he found out that while he was in Auschwitz, his wife had died of a heart ailment. For 20 years he earned a living by means of journalistic and other writing, mostly for Swiss publications. During those two decades, he published nothing about his past and also refused to publish for German audiences or even to visit Germany. He would later call this period "20 years of silence." It was not until 1964, during the period of the second Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt — involving 22 mid- and lower-echelon German war criminals — that Améry wrote the first of the five essays in the book that gained him fame, entitled in English, "At the Mind's Limits" (Indiana University Press, translated by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld).

Above all, "At the Mind's Limits" is the personal confession and testimony of a victim, of an Auschwitz survivor who reflects on his past from the perspective of many years. It consists of

"contemplations by a survivor of Auschwitz and its realities," in the words of the book's subtitle.

According to Dr. Roy Ben-Shai, who teaches philosophy at Sarah Lawrence College in New York and has studied Améry's works, what is exceptional about Améry's work is his integration of philosophical and literary writing and personal testimony.

"There is added value to a philosophical examination of traditional values and concepts in light of personal experience in a limit situation, such as incarceration in a concentration camp," Ben-Shai observes. "Améry uses his experience as a victim to check and revise philosophical values and ideas, hence his importance not only as a Holocaust survivor writing testimony but also as a philosopher."

Améry did not strive to offer an objective analysis that would explain the Nazi regime. In fact, as he maintains in "At the Mind's Limits," the Nazi regime as such did not especially interest him. "I can do no more than give testimony," he wrote. His interest lay in the victims of the Third Reich. The book, as he explains in the preface, is a phenomenological description of the existence of the victim. Central to that existence was the Nazi regime's striving to deprive the victims

At Auschwitz, Améry succeeded, for a moment, in regaining his human dignity by rebelling against the existing order, in which Jewish inmates were on the lowest rung of the camp's hierarchy.

of their human dignity. "Dignity" is not a self-evident term, and Améry's understanding of the concept changed during the writing of the book.

"I don't know if the person who is beaten by the police loses human dignity," he writes in the essay entitled "Torture," adding, "Yet I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call 'trust in the world.'"

Different people, writes Améry, are likely to understand the notion of human dignity differently. One person will feel he has lost his dignity when he is prevented from taking a daily bath; another when he is forced to speak to an official in a language other than his native tongue; and a third will feel that his human dignity has been violated if he is not able to have relations with a partner of the same sex.

According to Améry, human dignity is an essential ethical value that the Nazi project sought to eradicate. Its negation is manifested first and foremost by the threat of death, which he himself felt for the first time with complete clarity in 1935, when the Nuremberg Laws took effect in Germany. The ultimate denial of human dignity is the knowledge that your life, as a persecuted person, is constantly at risk. Améry, who was not raised as a Jew, only discovered his Jewishness following the anti-Semitic incidents he was subjected to. Twenty years later, he draws a straight line between the Nuremberg Laws and the Final Solu-

tion, but the humiliation of the Jews, according to Améry, began long before Auschwitz. For him, the loss of human dignity was expressed in his expulsion from his community, his culture and his state, and the experience of being homeless. After enduring arbitrary detentions, severe torture and, finally, for a year, life in Auschwitz, Améry grasped that one needs a homeland — precisely so that he will not be in need of one. A homeland, he explains, confers security, protection and belonging, the same familiarity that is conferred by use of one's mother tongue.

One of Améry's central arguments is that in order to be human beings we need the consent and recognition of society: Being a human being entails being a member of a particular nation, a member of an "identifiable social group," as he writes. The Jews, however, had become a foreign element in their own country, and their faces and figures had become hideous loathsome and repugnant to those around them. "We were not worthy of love and thus also not of life," he adds in an essay called "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew."

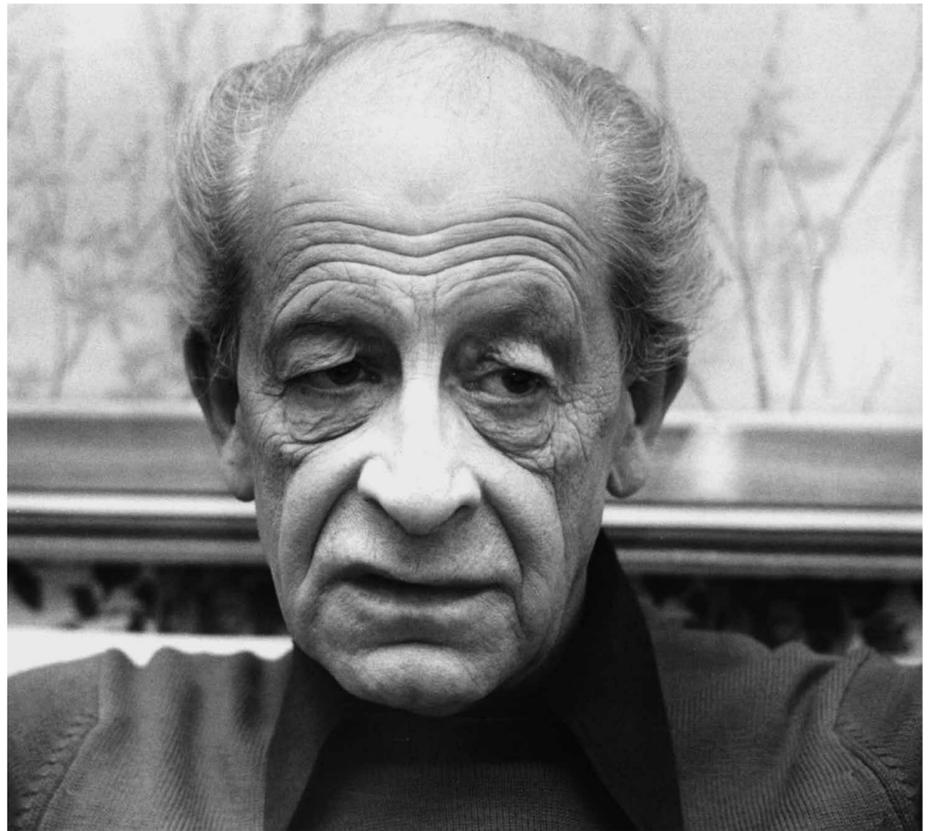
The meaning of human dignity can be gleaned by inverting the identification formulated by Améry: If the deprivation of human dignity is the deprivation of life (that is, the threat of death), then human dignity is the right to life. One's dignity can be bestowed only by society. At the same time, Améry believes that a person who has been deprived of his human dignity and who faces the danger of death, "can convince society of his dignity by taking his fate upon himself and at the same time rising in revolt against it."

## Essence of Nazism

In his essay "On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew," Améry recalls a day in Auschwitz when he was beaten for no apparent reason by a Polish kapo. Even though the kapo was much stronger than him, Améry felt at that moment that he had to fight back. In an act of open revolt, he hit the man in the face. "My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw," writes Améry. He was thrashed in return, but that did not matter to him: Despite the pain, he felt a sense of satisfaction, not because he was brave or because he had erased the insult, but because he understood that "there are situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate."

Améry continues, "I was my body and nothing else: in hunger, in the blow that I suffered, in the blow that I dealt. My body, debilitated and crusted with filth, was my calamity. My body, when it tensed to strike, was my physical and metaphysical dignity. In situations like mine, physical violence is the sole means for restoring a disjointed personality. In the punch, I was myself — for myself and for my opponent."

The first time Améry's humanity was reduced to his body alone occurred in a Gestapo interrogation room in Belgium, and afterward again in Auschwitz, where he was exposed to cold, hunger and beatings. Nevertheless, it was precisely at this moment that he was able to restore to himself — through his body and the blow he delivered in his turn — his lost human dignity. His way to rebel against the death sentence conferred upon him as a Jew, and to regain his human dignity, he writes, was "not by subjectively appealing to my abstract humanity but by discovering myself within the given



Améry. Two decades after the war's end, he still felt he was being tortured. "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured," he wrote. AP

social reality as a rebelling Jew and by realizing myself as one."

Indeed, his essay "Torture" is one of the most shattering in "At the Mind's Limits." Torture, in Améry's perception, constituted the very essence of the Nazi regime; it is "the most horrible event a person can retain within himself." On one occasion, Améry's arms were tied behind his back and he was hung by his hands from a chain attached to the ceiling; in short order, his shoulders were dislocated. That was one method used in the Gestapo cellars and in the punishment blocks of the concentration camps. Twenty-two years after he was brutalized, he still saw himself as being tortured. "Whoever was tortured, stays tortured. Torture is ineradicably burned into him, even when no clinically objective traces can be detected," he wrote.

Améry presents a very analytical picture of torture, but it stems from his very personal experience," says Dr. Rachel Stroumsa, director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel. "Even though it's been more than 50 years since the essay was written, I don't know of any other work that penetrates the essence of torture so precisely and sharply. And especially in light of the insight that torture is not only a matter of physical pain, but that it breaks and crushes fundamentally and irreparably a person's trust in himself and in the framework of our life. This is the insight that the first slap — though from the outside it doesn't look to us like the worst thing — causes irreparable damage. There is no enlightened torture."

Torture, Stroumsa points out, is still in use in many countries, even if they do not acknowledge it. Eritrea, China and Syria are among the countries that practice torture. Turkey and Mexico also make systematic and institutional use of torture, as did Georgia until two years ago. Also democratic countries like the United States have used torture, as has been revealed in the testimony

of prisoners being held in the Guantanamo Bay detention facility. In Israel, she says, while there is no massive use of torture, "it is systematically employed, with consent and authority, in security interrogations. The personnel of the defense establishment receive complete and absolute immunity."

Palestinians are the main victims of the torture used by the Shin Bet security service, but Jews who have been interrogated in connection with security offenses have also complained that they have been subjected to torture.

According to Stroumsa, "even though more than 1,100 complaints of torture have been filed against the Shin Bet since 2001, not one indictment has been handed down, and to date only one criminal investigation has been launched."

## 'Catastrophe Jew'

Although Améry's message is universal, his Jewishness is evident on every page of "At the Mind's Limits." Like that of many European Jews who grew up in assimilated or mixed families, his Jewishness was based on his experience of being persecuted during the Holocaust. His Jewish identity, he admits, was imposed on him by an elemental force. That identity is defined by a negation: "Every day anew I lose my trust in the world. The Jew without positive determinants, the Catastrophe Jew... must get along without trust in the world." For him, his identity as a Jew manifests as infinite existential fear. "[B]eing a Jew," he writes, "not only means that I bear within me a catastrophe that occurred yesterday and cannot be ruled out for tomorrow" — in other words, it follows that to be a Jew is to know fear.

Two decades after the end of World War II, Améry writes about the number tattooed on his arm, "On my left forearm I bear the Auschwitz number; it reads more briefly than the Pentateuch or the Talmud and yet provides more thorough

information. It is also more binding than basic formulas of Jewish existence. If to myself and the world... I say: I am a Jew, then I mean by that those realities and possibilities that are summed up in the Auschwitz number... Every morning when I get up I can read the Auschwitz number on my forearm, something that touches the deepest and most closely intertwined roots of my existence; indeed I am not even sure that this is not my entire existence."

During his incarceration in Auschwitz, Améry succeeded, even if only for a moment, in regaining his human dignity by rebelling against the existing order, in which Jewish inmates were on the lowest rung of the camp's hierarchy. A year before his suicide, he still defined himself as a rebel, but his revolt could not heal the pain. He wrote this in 1976, in the preface to a new edition of "At the Mind's Limits": "I rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. Nothing has healed, and what was already on the point of healing in 1964 is bursting open again as an infected wound."

Like Tadeusz Borowski and Paul Celan before him, and like Primo Levi after him, Jean Améry, too, could not bear the burden of the past. He lost his homeland and remained lost; his trust in the world decimated, he was fated to live within his alienation. Despite his attempts to overcome the defeat — through confession and by bearing testimony — he remained a defeated person. In 1978, two years after publishing the book "On Suicide," in which he wrote about the act of suicide as a choice that expressed one's free will, he put an end to his life.

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Webcam in a baby's nursery. Would my infant daughter somehow internalize the fact that someone was always watching her? Shutterstock.com

## Do we really want to be a 'surveillance nation'?

Or, why I refused to install a baby monitor in my daughter's bedroom

## Alex Gekker

Only a few days elapsed between publication, earlier this fall, of the names of the top executives of the monitoring and intelligence firms Black Cube and NSO on TheMarker's list of Israel's 100 most influential people, and a report in Haaretz about a tender issued by the National Insurance Institute for a system to collect information via the web about recipients of NII allowances.

On the one hand, there is the attempt of a government agency — whose purpose is to ensure the public's welfare and protection — to maintain incessant surveillance of citizens, and on the other,

the extolling of representatives of the industry that makes such surveillance possible: covert monitoring contractors who provide espionage services to all manner of people, from banking tycoon Nochi Dankner to Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein. This paper's recent comprehensive investigative report about Israel's extensive spyware industry and its exports ("Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide," Oct. 19), only heightens the oppressive feeling one is left with.

Israel is happy to adopt surveillance as a way of life. Of course, it's not the only country that does so, and it's also not the country with the most intensive surveillance (the United States and Britain do no less in this category). But Israeli surveillance comes with a

particular aftertaste. When we talk about the "startup nation," it's easy to forget how closely intertwined the technologies being developed here are with the security-intelligence establishment. "Graduate of 8200" — referring to the vaunted Israeli army intelligence unit — is a term that accompanies many employees in local high-tech. But the implication is not only of an "army programmer"; it's of an "army programmer involved in creating systems for the mining of personal information in incomprehensible quantities." We should pause to consider how far this view of the world — according to which personal information is simply "out there" and

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