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*On the Necessity and Impossibility of Being a Jew**

by Jean Améry

Not seldom, when in conversation my partner draws me into a plural — that is, as soon as he includes my person in whatever connection and says to me: “We Jews . . .” — I feel a not exactly tormenting, but nonetheless deep-seated discomfort. I have long tried to get to the bottom of this disconcerting psychic state, and it has not been very easy for me. Can it be, is it thinkable that I, the former Auschwitz inmate, who truly has not lacked occasion to recognize what he is and what he must be, still did not want to be a Jew, as decades ago, when I wore white half socks and leather breeches and nervously eyed myself in the mirror, hoping it would show me an impressive German youth? Naturally not. The foolishness of my masquerading in Austrian dress — although it was, after all, part of my heritage — belongs to the distant past. It is all right with me that I was not a German youth and am not a German man. No matter how the disguise may have looked on me, it now lies in the attic. If today discomfort arises in me when a Jew takes it for granted, legitimately, that I am part of his community, then it is not because I don’t want to be a Jew, but only because I cannot be one. And yet must be one. And I do not merely submit to this necessity, but expressly claim it as part of my person. The necessity and impossibility of being a Jew, that is what causes me indistinct pain. It is with this necessity, this impossibility, this oppression, this inability that I must deal here, and in doing so I can only hope, without certainty, that my individual story is exemplary enough also to reach those who neither are nor have to be Jews.

First of all, concerning this impossibility. If being a Jew means sharing a religious creed with other Jews, participating in Jewish cultural and family tradition, cultivating a Jewish national ideal, then I find myself in a hopeless situation. I don’t believe in the God of Israel. I know very little about Jewish culture. I see myself as a boy at Christmas, plodding through a snow-covered village to midnight mass; I don’t see myself in a synagogue. I hear my mother appealing to Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when a minor household misfortune

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occurred; I hear no adjuration of the Lord in Hebrew. The picture of my father — whom I hardly knew, since he remained where his Kaiser had sent him and his fatherland deemed him to be in the safest care — did not show me a bearded Jewish sage, but rather a Tyrolean Imperial Rifleman in the uniform of the First World War. I was nineteen years old when I heard of the existence of a Yiddish language, although on the other hand I knew full well that my religiously and ethnically very mixed family was regarded by the neighbors as Jewish, and that no one in my home thought of denying or hiding what was unconcealable anyhow. I was a Jew, just as one of my schoolmates was the son of a bankrupt innkeeper: when the boy was alone the financial ruin of his family may have meant next to nothing to him; when he joined us others he retreated, as we did, into resentful embarrassment.

If being a Jew implies having a cultural heritage or religious ties, then I was not one and can never become one. Certainly, it could be argued that a heritage can be acquired, ties established, and that therefore to be a Jew could be a matter of voluntary decision. Who would possibly prevent me from learning the Hebrew language, from reading Jewish history and tales, and from participating — even without belief — in Jewish ritual, which is both religious and national? Well supplied with all the requisite knowledge of Jewish culture from the prophets to Martin Buber, I could emigrate to Israel and call myself Yochanan. I have the freedom to choose to be a Jew, and this freedom is my very personal and universally human privilege. That is what I am assured of.

But do I really have it? I don't believe so. Would Yochanan, the proud bearer of a new self-acquired identity, be made immune on the 24th of December by his supposedly thorough knowledge of chassidism against thoughts of a Christmas tree with gilded nuts? Would the upright Israeli, conversing fluently in Hebrew, be able so completely to obliterate the white-stockinged youth who once took such pains to speak a local dialect? In modern literature the switch of identity is quite a stimulating game, but in my case it is a challenge that one meets with no certainty of success, in one's human totality, without the chance of an interim solution, and would — it seems to me — be wholly predestined to fail. One can reestablish the link with a tradition that one has lost, but one cannot freely invent it for oneself, that is the problem. Since I was not a Jew, I am not one; and since I am not one, I won't be able to become one. A Yochanan on Mt. Carmel, haunted and spirited home by memories of Alpine valleys and folk rituals, would be even more inauthentic than was once the youth with his knee socks. To be who one is by becoming the person one should be and wants to be: for me this dialectical process of self-realization is obstructed. Because being Something, not as metaphysical essence, but as the simple summation of early experience, absolutely has priority. Everyone must be who he was in the first years of his life, even if later these were buried under. No one can become what he cannot find in his memories.

Thus I am not permitted to be a Jew. But since all the same I must be one

and since this compulsion excludes the possibilities that might allow me to be something other than a Jew, can I not find myself at all? Must I acquiesce, without a past, as a shadow of the universal-abstract (which does not exist) and take refuge in the empty phrase that I am simply a human being? But patience, we haven't reached that point yet. Since the necessity exists — and how compelling it is! — perhaps the impossibility can be resolved. After all, one wants to live without hiding, as I did when I was in the underground, and without dissolving into the abstract. A human being? Certainly, who would not want to be one. But you are a human being only if you are a German, a Frenchman, a Christian, a member of whatever identifiable social group. I must be a Jew and will be one, with or without religion, within or outside a tradition, whether as Jean, Hans, or Yochanan. Why I must be one is what will be told here.

It didn't begin when schoolmates said to the boy: You're Jews anyway. Nor with the fight on the ramp of the university, during which, long before Hitler's ascent to power, a Nazi fist knocked out one of my teeth. Yes, we are Jews, and what of it? I answered my schoolmate. Today my tooth, tomorrow yours, and the devil take you, I thought to myself after the beating, and bore the gap proudly like an interesting duelling scar.

It didn't begin until 1935, when I was sitting over a newspaper in a Vienna coffeehouse and was studying the Nuremberg Laws, which had just been enacted across the border in Germany. I needed only to skim them and already I could perceive that they applied to me. Society, concretized in the National Socialist German state, which the world recognized absolutely as the legitimate representative of the German people, had just made me formally and beyond any question a Jew, or rather it had given a new dimension to what I had already known earlier, but which at the time was of no great consequence to me, namely, that I was a Jew.

What sort of new dimension? Not one that was immediately fathomable. After I had read the Nuremberg Laws I was no more Jewish than a half hour before. My features had not become more Mediterranean-Semitic, my frame of reference had not suddenly been filled by magic power with Hebrew allusions, the Christmas tree had not wondrously transformed itself into the seven-armed candelabra. If the sentence that society had passed on me had a tangible meaning, it could only be that henceforth I was a quarry of Death. Well, sooner or later it claims all of us. But the Jew — and I now was one by decree of law and society — was more firmly promised to death, already in the midst of life. His days were a period of false grace that could be revoked at any second. I do not believe that I am inadmissibly projecting Auschwitz and the Final Solution back to 1935 when I advance these thoughts today. Rather, I am certain that in that year, at that moment when I read the Laws, I did indeed already hear the death threat — better, the death sentence — and certainly no special sensitivity toward history was required for that. Had I not already heard a hundred times the appeal to fate — coupled with the call for Germany's awakening — that the Jew should perish? “Juda verrecke!” —

that was something completely different than the almost cheerful “L’aristocrate, à la lanterne!” Even if one did not consider or did not know that historically it linked up with countless pogroms of the past, it was not a revolutionary clamor, but rather the carefully considered demand of a people, compressed into a slogan, a war cry! Also in those same days I had once seen in a German magazine the photo of a Winter Relief event in a Rhenish town, and in the foreground, in front of the tree gleaming with electric lights, there was proudly displayed a banner with the text: “No one shall go hungry, no one shall freeze, but the Jew shall die like dogs.” And only three years later, on the day of Austria’s incorporation into the *Gross-deutsches Reich*, I heard Joseph Goebbels screaming on the radio that one really ought not to make such a fuss about the fact that in Vienna a few Jews were now committing suicide.

To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered, who only by chance was not yet where he properly belonged; and so it has remained, in many variations, in various degrees of intensity, until today. The death threat, which I felt for the first time with complete clarity while reading the Nuremberg Laws, included what is commonly referred to as the methodic “degradation” of the Jews by the Nazis. Formulated differently: the denial of human dignity sounded the death threat. Daily, for years on end, we could read and hear that we were lazy, evil, ugly, capably only of misdeed, clever only to the extent that we pulled one over on others. We were incapable of founding a state, but also by no means suited to assimilate with our host nations. By their very presence, our bodies — hairy, fat, and bowlegged — befouled public swimming pools, yes, even park benches. Our hideous faces, depraved and spoilt by protruding ears and hanging noses, were disgusting to our fellow men, fellow citizens of yesterday. We were not worthy of love and thus also not of life. Our sole right, our sole duty was to disappear from the face of the earth.

The degradation of the Jews was, I am convinced, identical with the death threat long before Auschwitz. In this regard Jean-Paul Sartre, already in 1946 in his book *Anti-Semite and Jew*, offered a few perceptions that are still valid today. There is no “Jewish Problem,” he said, only a problem of anti-Semitism; the anti-Semite forced the Jew into a situation in which he permitted his enemy to stamp him with a self-image. Both points appear to me to be unassailable. But in his short phenomenological sketch Sartre could not describe the total, crushing force of anti-Semitism, a force that had brought the Jew to that point, quite aside from the fact that the great author himself probably did not comprehend it in its entire overwhelming might. The Jew — and Sartre speaks here, without making a value judgment, of the “inauthentic” Jew, that is, the Jew who has fallen victim to the myth of the “universal man” — subjugates himself, in his flight from the Jewish fate, to the power of his oppressor. But one must say in his favor that in the years of the Third Reich the Jew stood with his back to the wall, and it too was hostile. There was no way out. Because it was not only radical Nazis, officially

certified by the party, who denied that we were worthy of being loved and thereby worthy of life. All of Germany — but what am I saying! — the whole word nodded its head in approval of the undertaking, even if here and there with a certain superficial regret.

One must remember: when after World War II streams of refugees poured out of the various communist-ruled lands into the West, the countries of the proclaimed free world outdid one another in their willingness to grant asylum and aid, although among all the emigrants there was only a handful whose lives would have been directly threatened in their homeland. But even when it long since should have been clear to any discerning person what awaited us in the German Reich, no one wanted to have us. Thus, it necessarily had to reach the point where the Jews, whether authentic or not, whether secure in the illusion of a God and a national hope, or assimilated, found within themselves no powers of resistance when their enemy burned the image from Streicher's *Stürmer* into their skin. It should be noted that this weakness had only little to do with the classical Jewish self-hatred of those German Jews of the time before the outbreak of Nazism who were not only willing but craving to assimilate. The self-haters had believed that they were unable to be what they so much wanted to be: Germans, and therefore they rejected themselves. They had not wanted to accept their existence as non-Germans, but no one had forced them to reject themselves as Jews. When, on the other hand, between 1933 and 1945 precisely the brightest and most upright Jewish minds, authentic or inauthentic, capitulated to Streicher, that was a wholly different act of resignation, no longer moral, but rather social and philosophic in nature. This, so they must have told themselves, is how the world sees us, as lazy, ugly, useless, and evil; in view of such universal agreement what sense does it still make to object and say that we *are* not that way! The surrender of the Jews to the *Stürmer* image of themselves was nothing other than the acknowledgment of a social reality. To oppose it with a self-evaluation based on other standards at times had to appear ridiculous or mad.

In order to discuss it, however, one must have experienced it. When I think about the social reality of the wall of rejection that arose before us everywhere, my stay in Auschwitz-Monowitz comes to mind. In the camp itself, but also among the so-called free workers at the worksite, there was a strict ethnic hierarchy, imposed by the Nazis on all of us. A German from the Reich was regarded more highly than a German from an Eastern country. A Flemish Belgian was worth more than a Walloon. A Ukrainian from occupied Poland ranked higher than his Polish compatriot. A forced laborer from Eastern Europe was more poorly regarded than an Italian. Far down on the bottom rungs of the ladder were the concentration camp inmates, and among them, in turn, the Jew had the lowest rank. There was not a single non-Jewish professional criminal, no matter how degenerate he may have been, who did not stand high above us. The Poles, whether they were genuine freedom fighters who had been thrown into the camp after the ill-fated Warsaw insurrection, or merely small-time pickpockets, despised us unanimously. So

did half-illiterate White Russian workers. But also Frenchmen. I still hear a free French worker conversing with a Jewish-French concentration camp inmate: "I'm French," the inmate said. "Français, toi? Mais, tu es juif, mon ami," his countryman retorted objectively and without hostility; for in a mixture of fear and indifference he had absorbed the teachings of Europe's German masters. I repeat: the world approved of the place to which the Germans had assigned us, the small world of the camp and the wide world outside, which but rarely, in individual heroic instances, arose in protest when we were taken at night from our homes in Vienna or Berlin, in Amsterdam, Paris, or Brussels.

The degradation proceedings directed against us Jews, which began with the proclamation of the Nuremberg Laws and as a direct result led all the way to Treblinka, met on our, on my side with an equivalent proceeding aimed at the reattainment of dignity. For me, until today, this case is not closed. Let my endeavor to gain clarity concerning its stages and its preliminary result be recorded here, and permit me to request of the reader that he accompany me awhile along this path. It is short, but difficult to tread, and full of obstacles and traps. For what, after all, actually is the nature of the dignity that was first denied me in 1935, officially withheld from me until 1945, and that perhaps even today one does not want to grant me, and that I must therefore attain through my own effort? What is dignity, really?

One can try to answer by inverting the above-formulated identification of degradation and death threat. If I was correct that the deprivation of dignity was nothing other than the potential deprivation of life, then dignity would have to be the right to live. If it was also correct when I said that the granting and depriving of dignity are acts of social agreement, sentences against which there is no appeal on the grounds of one's "self-understanding," so that it would be senseless to argue against the social body that deprives us of our dignity with the claim that we do indeed "feel" worthy — if all of this were valid, then every effort to regain our dignity would have been of no value, and it would still be so today. Degradation, that is, living under the threat of death, would be an inescapable fate. But luckily, things are not entirely the way this logic claims. It is certainly true that dignity can be bestowed only by society, whether it be the dignity of some office, a professional or, very generally speaking, civil dignity, and the merely individual, subjective claim ("I am a human being and as such I have my dignity, no matter what you may do or say!") is an empty academic game, or madness. Still, the degraded person, threatened with death, is able — and here we break through the logic of the final sentencing — to convince society of his dignity by taking his fate upon himself and at the same time rising in revolt against it.

The first step must be the unqualified recognition that the verdict of the social group is a given reality. When I read the Nuremberg Laws in 1935 and realized not only that they applied to me but also that they were the expression, concentrated in legal-textual form, of the verdict "Death to the Jews!" which already earlier had been pronounced by German society, I

could have taken intellectual flight, turned on the defense mechanisms, and thereby have lost my case for rehabilitation. Then I would have told myself: well, well, so this is the will of the National Socialist state, of the German *pays légal*; but it has nothing to do with the real Germany, the *pays réel*, which has not thought whatever of ostracizing me. Or I could have argued that it was only Germany, a land unfortunately sinking into a bloody madness, that was so absurdly stamping me as subhuman (in the literal sense of the word), whereas to my good fortune the great wide world outside, in which there are Englishmen, Frenchmen, Americans, and Russians, is immune to the collective paranoia scourging Germany. Or finally, even if I had abandoned the illusion both of a German *pays réel* and of a world immune against the German mental disorder, I could have comforted myself with the thought: no matter what they say about me, it isn't true. I am true only as I see and understand myself deep within; I am what I am for myself and in myself, and nothing else.

I am not saying that now and then I did not succumb to such temptation. I can only testify that finally I learned to resist it and that already at that time, in 1935, I vaguely felt the necessity to convince the world of my dignity, the world that by no means indignantly and unanimously broke off all relations with the Third Reich. I understood, even if unclearly, that while I had to accept the verdict as such, I could force the world to revise it. I accepted the judgment of the world, with the decision to overcome it through revolt.

Revolt, well, of course, that is another one of those high-sounding words. It could lead the reader to believe that I was a hero or that I falsely want to present myself as one. I certainly was no hero. When the little grey Volkswagen with the POL license plate crossed my path, first in Vienna, then in Brussels, I was so afraid that I couldn't breathe. When the Kapo drew back his arm to strike me, I didn't stand firm like a cliff, but ducked. And still, I tried to initiate proceedings to regain my dignity, and beyond physical survival that provided me with just the slightest chance to survive the nightmare morally also. There is not much that I can present in my favor, but let it be noted anyhow. I took it upon myself to be a Jew, even though there would have been possibilities for a compromise settlement. I joined a resistance movement whose prospects for success were very dim. Also, I finally relearned what I and my kind often had forgotten and what was more crucial than the moral power to resist: to hit back.

Before me I see the prisoners foreman Juszek, a Polish professional criminal of horrifying vigor. In Auschwitz he once hit me in the face because of a trifle; that is how he was used to dealing with all the Jews under his command. At this moment — I felt it with piercing clarity — it was up to me to go a step further in my prolonged appeals case against society. In open revolt I struck Juszek in the face in turn. My human dignity lay in this punch to his jaw — and that it was in the end I, the physically much weaker man, who succumbed and was woefully thrashed, meant nothing to me. Painfully beaten, I was satisfied with myself. But not, as one might think, for reasons of

courage and honor, but only because I had grasped well that there are situations in life in which our body is our entire self and our entire fate. 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. What I later read in Frantz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*, in a theoretical analysis of the behavior of colonized peoples, I anticipated back then when I gave concrete social form to my dignity by punching a human face. To be a Jew meant the acceptance of the death sentence imposed by the world as a world verdict. To flee before it by withdrawing into one's self would have been nothing but a disgrace, whereas acceptance was simultaneously the physical revolt against it. I became a person not by subjectively appealing to my abstract humanity but by discovering myself within the given social reality as a rebelling Jew and by realizing myself as one.

The proceedings, I said, went on and still go on. At present, I have neither won nor lost the case. After the collapse of the National Socialist Reich there was a brief global hour in which I was able to believe that from the bottom up everything was transformed. For a short time in those days I was able to foster the illusion that my dignity was totally restored, through my own, no matter how modest, activity in the resistance movement, through the heroic uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, but above all through the contempt that the world showed toward those who had stripped me of my dignity. I could believe that the deprivation of dignity that we had experienced had been a historical error, an aberration, a collective sickness of the world, from which the latter had recovered at the moment when in Reims German generals signed the declaration of surrender in the presence of Eisenhower. Soon I learned worse. In Poland and in the Ukraine, while they were still discovering Jewish mass graves, there were anti-Semitic disturbances. In France the ever sickly petty bourgeoisie had allowed itself to be infected by the occupiers. When survivors and refugees returned and demanded their old dwellings, it happened that simple housewives, in a peculiar mixture of satisfaction and chagrin, said: "Tiens, ils reviennent, on ne les a tout de même pas tués." Even in countries that previously had hardly known any anti-Semitism, as in Holland, there suddenly existed as a relic of the German propaganda a "Jewish Problem," though scarcely any more Jews. England barred its Mandate of Palestine to those Jews who had escaped from the camps and jails and who tried to immigrate. In a very short time I was forced to recognize that little had changed, that I was still the man condemned to be murdered in due time, even though the potential executioner now cautiously restrained himself or, at best, even loudly protested his disapproval of what had happened.

I understood reality. But should this perhaps have occasioned me to come to grips with the problem of anti-Semitism? Not at all. Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Question, as historical, socially determined conceptual phenomena,

were not and are not any concern of mine. They are entirely a matter for the anti-Semites, their disgrace or their sickness. The anti-Semites have something to overcome, not I. I would play into their unclean hands if I began investigating what share religious, economic, or other factors have in the persecution of the Jews. If I were to engage in such investigations I would only be falling for the intellectual dupery of so-called historical objectivity, according to which the murdered are as guilty as the murderers, if not even more guilty. A wound was inflicted on me. I must disinfect and bind it, not contemplate why the ruffian raised his club, and, through the inferred "That's Why," in the end partly absolve him.

It was not the anti-Semites who concerned me, it was only with my own existence that I had to cope. That was hard enough. Certain possibilities, which had emerged for me in the war years, no longer existed. From 1945 to 1947 I could not very well sew on a yellow star without appearing foolish or eccentric to myself. There also was no longer any opportunity to punch the enemy in his face, for he was not so easy to recognize anymore. The reattainment of dignity, just as urgent as in the previous years of war and National Socialism, but now — in a climate of deceptive peace — infinitely more difficult, remained a compulsion and desire. Except that I had to recognize even more clearly than in the days when physical revolt was at least possible that I was confronted with necessity and impossibility.

At this point I must stop for a moment and separate myself from all those Jews who do not speak from the realm of my own experience. In his book *La condition réflexive de l'homme juif* the French philosopher Robert Misrahi said: "The Nazi Holocaust is henceforth the absolute and radical reference point for the existence of every Jew." That is not to be doubted, yet I am convinced that not every Jew is capable of thinking out this relationship. Only those who have lived through a fate like mine, and no one else, can refer their lives to the years 1933–45. By no means do I say this with pride. It would be ridiculous enough to boast of something that one did not do but only underwent. Rather it is with a certain shame that I assert my sad privilege and suggest that while the Holocaust is truly the existential reference point for all Jews, only we, the sacrificed, are able to spiritually relive the catastrophic event as it was or fully picture it as it could be again. Let others not be prevented from empathizing. Let them contemplate a fate that yesterday could have been and tomorrow can be theirs. Their intellectual efforts will meet with our respect, but it will be a sceptical one, and in conversation with them we will soon grow silent and say to ourselves: go ahead, good people, trouble your heads as much as you want; you still sound like a blind man talking about color.

The parentheses are now closed. I am once again alone with myself and a few good comrades. I find myself in the postwar years, which no longer permit any of us to react with violence to something that refused to reveal itself clearly to us. Again I see myself confronted with necessity and impossibility.

That this impossibility does not apply to all is obvious. Among the Jews of

this time, whether they be workers in Kiev, storekeepers in Brooklyn, or farmers in Negev, there are enough men and women for whom being a Jew was and always remained a positive fact. They speak Yiddish or Hebrew. They celebrate the sabbath. They explicate the Talmud or stand at attention as young soldiers under the blue-and-white banner with the Star of David. Whether religiously or nationally or merely in personal reverence before the picture of their grandfather with his sidelocks, they are *Jews* as members of a community. One could briefly digress perhaps and, together with the sociologist Georges Friedmann, ask the secondary question of whether their progeny will still be Jews and whether the end of the Jewish people may not be imminent in that Mediterranean country where the Israeli is already displacing the Jew, as well as in the Diaspora, where perhaps the total assimilation of the Jews — not so much to their host peoples, who for their part are losing their national character, but to the larger unity of the technical-industrial world — could take place.

I'll not pursue this question further. The existence or the disappearance of the Jewish people as an ethnic-religious community does not excite me. In my deliberation I am unable to consider Jews who are Jews because they are sheltered by tradition. I can speak solely for myself — and, even if with caution, for contemporaries, probably numbering into the millions, whose being Jewish burst upon them with elemental force, and who must stand this test without God, without history, without messianic-national hope. For them, for me, being a Jew means feeling the tragedy of yesterday as an inner oppression. 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, including the religious and nationally minded Jews, who do not regard me as one of their own, I say: I am a Jew, then I mean by that those realities and possibilities that are summed up in the Auschwitz number.

In the two decades that have passed since my liberation I have gradually come to realize that it does not matter whether an existence can be positively defined. Sartre had already said once that a Jew is a person who is regarded by others as a Jew, and later Max Frisch dramatically portrayed this in *Andorra*. This view does not need to be corrected, but perhaps one may amplify it. For even if the others do not decide that I am a Jew, as they did with the poor devil in *Andorra*, who would have liked to become a carpenter and whom they permitted only to be a merchant, I am still a Jew by the mere fact that the world around me does not expressly designate me as a non-Jew. To be something can mean that one is *not* something else. As a Non-non-Jew, I am a Jew; I must be one and must want to be one. I must accept this and affirm it in my daily existence, whether — showing my colors — I butt into a conversation when stupid things are said about Jews at the greengrocery, whether I address an unknown audience on the radio, or whether I write for a magazine.

But since being a Jew not only means that I bear within me a catastrophe that occurred yesterday and cannot be ruled out for tomorrow, it is — beyond

being a duty — also *fear*. 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 if this is not my entire existence. Then I feel approximately as I did back then when I got a taste of the first blow from a policeman's fist. Every day anew I lose my trust in the world. The Jew without positive determinants, the Catastrophe Jew, as we will unhesitatingly call him, must get along without trust in the world. My neighbor greets me in a friendly fashion, *Bonjour, Monsieur*; I doff my hat, *Bonjour, Madame*. But Madame and Monsieur are separated by interstellar distances; for yesterday a Madame looked away when they led off a Monsieur, and through the barred windows of the departing car a Monsieur viewed a Madame as if she were a stone angel from a bright and stern heaven, which is forever closed for the Jew. I read an official announcement in which "la population" is called upon to do something or other, told that the trash cans are to be put out on time or that the flag is to be displayed on a national holiday. *La population*. Still another one of those unearthly realms that I can enter as little as I can Kafka's castle; for yesterday "la population" had great fear of hiding me, and whether tomorrow it would have more courage if I knocked at the door, unfortunately is not certain.

Twenty years have passed since the Holocaust. Glorious years for such as us. Nobel prize winners in abundance. There were French presidents named René Mayer and Pierre Mendès-France; an American UN delegate by the name of Goldberg practices a most dignified anticommunist American patriotism. I don't trust this peace. Declarations of human rights, democratic constitutions, the free world and the free press, nothing can again lull me into the slumber of security from which I awoke in 1935. As a Jew I go through life like a sick man with one of those ailments that cause no great hardships but are certain to end fatally. He didn't always suffer from that sickness. When he attempts, like Peer Gynt, to peel his self out of the onion, he doesn't discover the malady. His first walk to school, his first love, his first verses had nothing to do with it. But now he is a sick man, first and foremost and more deeply than he is a tailor, a bookkeeper, or a poet. Thus, I too am precisely what I am not, because I did not exist until I became it, above all else: a Jew. Death, from which the sick man will be unable to escape, is what threatens me. *Bonjour, Madame, Bonjour, Monsieur*, they greet each other. But she cannot and will not relieve her sick neighbor of his mortal illness at the cost of suffering to death from it herself. And so they remain strangers to one another.

Without trust in the world I face my surroundings as a Jew who is alien and alone, and all that I can manage is to get along within my foreignness. I must accept being foreign as an essential element of my personality, insist upon it as if upon an inalienable possession. Still and each day anew I find myself alone. I was unable to force yesterday's murderers and tomorrow's potential aggressors to recognize the moral truth of their crimes, because the world, in its totality, did not help me to do it. Thus I am alone, as I was when they tortured me. Those around me do not appear to me as antihumans, as did my

former torturers; they are my cohumans, not affected by me and the danger prowling at my side. I pass them with a greeting and without hostility. I cannot rely on them, only on a Jewish identity that is without positive determinants, my burden and my support.

Where there is a common bond between me and the world, whose still unrevoked death sentence I acknowledge as a social reality, it dissolves in polemics. You don't want to listen? Listen anyhow. You don't want to know to where your indifference can again lead you and me at any time? I'll tell you. What happened is no concern of yours because you didn't know, or were too young, or not even born yet? You should have seen, and your youth gives you no special privilege, and break with your father.

Once again I must ask myself the question that I already raised fleetingly in my essay "Resentments": am I perhaps mentally ill and am I not suffering from an incurable ailment, from hysteria? The question is merely rhetorical. I have long since provided myself with a fully conclusive answer. I know that what oppresses me is no neurosis, but rather precisely reflected reality. Those were no hysteric hallucinations when I heard the Germans call for the Jews to "die like a dog!" and, in passing, heard how people said that there really must be something suspicious about the Jews, because otherwise they would hardly be treated so severely. "They were being arrested, so they must have done something," said a proper social-democratic worker's wife in Vienna. "How horrible, what they are doing with the Jews, *mais enfin* . . .," speculated a humane and patriotic-minded man in Brussels. I am thus forced to conclude that I am not deranged and was not deranged, but rather that the neurosis is on the part of the historical occurrence. The others are the madmen, and I am left standing around helplessly among them, a fully sane person who joined a tour through a psychiatric clinic and suddenly lost sight of the doctors and orderlies. But since the sentence passed on me by the madmen can, after all, be carried out at any moment, it is totally binding, and my own mental lucidity is entirely irrelevant.

These reflections are nearing their end. Now that I have explained how I manage in this world, it is time to testify how I relate to my kinsmen, the Jews. But are they really related to me after all? Whatever an ethnologist may determine — for example, that my external appearance presents one or another Jewish characteristic — may be relevant if I land in a screaming mob that is hounding Jews. It loses all significance when I am alone or among Jews. Do I have a Jewish nose? That could become a calamity if a pogrom breaks out again. But that does not align me with a single other Jewish nose anywhere. The Jewish appearance that I may or may not have — I don't know if I do — is a matter for the others and becomes my concern only in the objective relationship they establish toward me. If I were to look like I had stepped out of Johann von Leer's book *Juden sehen euch an* it would have no subjective reality for me; it would, to be sure, establish a community of fate, but no positive community between me and my fellow Jews. Thus there remains only the intellectual — more correctly, the consciously perceived — relationship of Jews, Judaism, and myself.

That is a nonrelationship I have already stated at the outset. With Jews as Jews I share practically nothing: no language, no cultural tradition, no childhood memories. In the Austrian region of Vorarlberg there was an innkeeper and butcher of whom I was told that he spoke fluent Hebrew. He was my great-grandfather. I never saw him and it must be nearly a hundred years since he died. Before the Holocaust my interest in Jewish things and Jews was so slight that with the best of intentions I could not say today which of my acquaintances at that time was a Jew and which was not. However I might try to find in Jewish history my own past, in Jewish culture my own heritage, in Jewish folklore my personal recollections, the result would be nil. The environment in which I had lived in the years when one acquires one's self was not Jewish, and that cannot be reversed. But the fruitlessness of the search for my Jewish self by no means stands as a barrier between me and my solidarity with every threatened Jew in this world.

I read in the paper that in Moscow they discovered an illegally operating bakery for unleavened Jewish Passover bread and arrested the bakers. As a means of nourishment the ritual *matzoth* of the Jews interests me somewhat less than rye crisps. Nevertheless, the action of the Soviet authorities fills me with uneasiness, indeed with indignation. Some American country club, so I hear, does not accept Jews as members. Not for the world would I wish to belong to this obviously dismal middle-class association, but the cause of the Jews who demand permission to join becomes mine. That some Arab statesman calls for Israel to be wiped off the map cuts me to the quick, even though I have never visited the state of Israel and do not feel the slightest inclination to live there. My solidarity with every Jew whose freedom, equal rights, or perhaps even physical existence is threatened is *also*, but *not only*, a reaction to anti-Semitism, which, according to Sartre, is not an opinion but the predisposition and readiness to commit the crime of genocide. This solidarity is part of my person and a weapon in the battle to regain my dignity. Without being a Jew in the sense of a positive identification, it is not until I am a Jew in the recognition and acknowledgment of the world verdict on the Jews and not until I finally participate in the historical appeals process that I may speak of freedom.

Solidarity in the face of threat is all that links me with my Jewish contemporaries, the believers as well as the nonbelievers, the national-minded as well as those ready to assimilate. For them that is perhaps little or nothing at all. For me and my continued existence it means much, more probably than my appreciation of Proust's books or my affection for the stories of Schnitzler or my joy in seeing the Flemish landscape. Without Proust and Schnitzler and the wind-bent poplars at the North Sea I would be poorer than I am, but I would still be human. Without the feeling of belonging to the threatened I would be a self-surrendering fugitive from reality.

I say reality, with emphasis, because in the end that is what matters to me. Anti-Semitism, which made a Jew of me, may be a form of madness; that is not what is in question here. Whether it is a madness or not, it is in any event a historical and social fact. I was, after all, really in Auschwitz and not in

Himmler's imagination. And anti-Semitism is still a reality; only someone with complete social and historical blindness could deny it. It is a reality in its core countries, Austria and Germany, where Nazi war criminals either are not convicted or receive ridiculously mild prison sentences, of which for the most part they serve hardly a third. It is a reality in England and the United States, where one tolerates the Jews, but would not be unhappy to be rid of them. It is a reality, and with what dire consequences, in the spiritual global domain of the Catholic Church. The complexity and confusion of the Vatican Council's consultations on the so-called Declaration on the Jews were, despite the honorable effort of so many a prelate, grievously shameful.

It may well be — but in view of the given circumstances one can by no means count on it — that in the Nazi death factories the final act was played in the vast historical drama of Jewish persecution. I believe that the dramaturgy of anti-Semitism continues to exist. A new mass extermination of Jews cannot be ruled out as a possibility. What would happen if in a war against the small land of Israel the Arab countries, today supported by arms shipments from East and West, were to gain a total victory? What would an America that had come under the sway of fascism mean not only for the Negroes but also for the Jews? What would the fate of the Jews have been in France, the European country with their greatest number, if at the beginning of this decade not de Gaulle had triumphed, but the OAS?

With some reluctance I read in the study of a very young Dutch Jew the following definition of the Jew: "A Jew can be described as someone who has more fear, mistrust, and vexation than his fellow citizens who were never persecuted." The apparently correct definition is rendered false by the absence of an indispensable extension, which would have to read: ". . . for with good reason he awaits a new catastrophe at any moment." The awareness of the last cataclysm and the legitimate fear of a new one is what it all amounts to. I, who bear both within me — and the latter with double weight, since it was only by chance that I escaped the former — am not "traumatized," but rather my spiritual and psychic condition corresponds completely to reality. The consciousness of my being a Holocaust Jew is not an ideology. It may be compared to the class consciousness that Marx tried to reveal to the proletarians of the nineteenth century. I experienced in my existence and exemplify through it a historical reality of my epoch, and since I experienced it more deeply than most other Jews, I can also shed more light on it. That is not to my credit and not because I am so wise, but only because of the chance of fate.

Everything could be borne more easily if my bond with other Jews were not limited to the solidarity of revolt, if the necessity did not constantly run up against the impossibility. I know it only too well: I was sitting next to a Jewish friend at a performance of Arnold Schönberg's "A Survivor From Warsaw" when, accompanied by the sounds of trumpets, the chorus intoned the word "Sch'ma Israel"; my friend turned as white as chalk and beads of perspiration appeared on his brow. My heart did not beat faster, yet I felt myself to be more

wanting than my comrade, whom the Jewish prayer, sung to the blasts of trumpets, had powerfully affected. To be a deeply stirred Jew, I thought to myself afterwards, is not possible for me, I can be a Jew only in fear and anger, when — in order to attain dignity — fear transforms itself into anger. “Hear, oh Israel” is not my concern. Only a “hear, oh world” wants angrily to break out from within me. The six-digit number on my forearm demands it. That is what the awareness of catastrophe, the dominant force of my existence, requires.

Often I have asked myself whether one can live humanly in the tension between fear and anger. Those who have followed these deliberations may well see their author as a monster, if not of vengeance, then at least of bitterness. There may be a trace of truth in such a judgment, but only a trace. Whoever attempts to be a Jew in my way and under the conditions imposed on me, whoever hopes, by clarifying his own Holocaust-determined existence, to draw together and shape within himself the reality of the so-called Jewish Question, is wholly void of naïveté. Honey-sweet humane pronouncements do not flow from his lips. He is not good at gestures of magnanimity. But this does not mean that fear and anger condemns him to be less righteous than his ethically inspired contemporaries are. He is able to have friends and he has them, even among members of just those nations who hung him forever on the torture hook between fear and anger. He can also read books and listen to music as do the uninjured, and with no less feeling than they. If moral questions are involved, he will probably prove to be more sensitive to injustice of every kind than his fellow man. He will certainly react more excitably to a photo of club-swinging South African policemen or American sheriffs who sick howling dogs on black civil rights protesters. Because it became hard for me to be a human being does not mean that I have become a monster.

In the end, nothing else differentiates me from the people among whom I pass my days than a vague, sometimes more, sometimes less perceptible restiveness. But it is a *social* unrest, not a metaphysical one. It is not Being that oppresses me, or Nothingness, or God, or the Absence of God, only society. For it and only it caused the disturbance in my existential balance, which I am trying to oppose with an upright gait. It and only it robbed me of my trust in the world. Metaphysical distress is a fashionable concern of the highest standing. Let it remain a matter for those who have always known who and what they are, why they are that way, and that they are permitted to remain so. I must leave it to them — and it is not for that reason that I feel needy in their presence.

In my incessant effort to explore the basic condition of being a victim, in conflict with the necessity to be a Jew and the impossibility of being one, I believe to have recognized that the most extreme expectations and demands directed at us are of a physical and social nature. That such knowledge has made me unfit for profound and lofty speculation, I know. It is my hope that it has better equipped me to recognize reality.

Translated by Sidney and Stella Rosenfeld