Jean Améry
Cultural Exile, Homelessness
and Jewish Solidarity

Born in 1912 as Hans Mayer (Jean Améry), an assimilated Austrian Jew, was, according to his own account, forced to ‘inhabit’ his Jewishness when confronted with the impact of the Nuremberg Laws after the annexation of Austria to the German Reich in 1938. Améry’s home was the German cultural context, shaped by the intellectual environment of Vienna of the 1920s and 1930s. Fleeing Austria in 1938, Améry sought asylum in Antwerp and joined a political resistance movement. He was arrested and imprisoned first in Gurs, France, then in Breendonk, Belgium, where he was tortured. When it was discovered that he was Jewish, he was deported to Auschwitz from which a death march brought him to Bergen-Belsen. Liberated, Améry chose Belgium as his residence, making writing his profession. He committed suicide in 1978.

Améry first gained recognition in Germany when he began to write explicitly for a German audience in the mid-1960s. Having refused to travel to Germany and to write for German speakers since the end of the war, Améry followed the invitation of journalist and poet Helmut Heissenbüttel to write about his experiences of the Holocaust and to read the resulting essays to a German radio audience before publishing these as a book. From 1964 onwards, Améry wrote for an almost exclusively German (speaking) audience and undertook a number of lecturing tours through Germany and Austria.

Jean Améry, his pen name, is a direct translation of Hans Mayer, Jean being the French equivalent of Hans (short for Johannes) as well as a reference to his ‘intellectual mentor’ Jean-Paul Sartre, and Améry being a French-
sounding anagram of Mayer. Améry is best known for his autobiographical writings which provide an important commentary on the post-war West German political scene, although he also published fiction, yet never gained much acclaim for this work.

This essay aims to explore, firstly, how Améry located himself in the context of German–Jewish relations, and how he interpreted his attachment to German culture and to Jews. Secondly, I am interested in the implications of this self-definition for discussions of contemporary Jewish identity and current Jewish–non-Jewish relations in Germany. Much has been written on Améry and his relationship to German culture and to Judaism, and his name appears in many discussions of the Holocaust and post-war German–Jewish relations. As Jean-Michel Chaumont observed, Améry’s identity as Jew and German was based not only on the destruction of his self-understanding in Auschwitz, but equally on his desire to contribute to a ‘reconciliation’ between victimisers and victims of the Holocaust.¹ Given that this is the case, how can Améry’s thought speak to current encounters between Jews and non-Jews in Germany and contribute to the formulation of Jewish identities in this changing context?

Améry explored the effect of the Holocaust on his life, interrogating his identity as ‘German’ and ‘Jew’, as neither and yet forced to be both, particularly in his autobiographical collection of essays entitled *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*. German was the only language in which he felt ‘at home’, while at the same time he had been violently exiled from this cultural–linguistic context.

Améry expressed his Jewishness in negative terms, having encountered it as a personal reality only through his victimisation and brutalisation by other Germans, and being unable, before or after the Holocaust, to find a positive attachment to Judaism and Jewish culture. Améry felt trapped by his Jewishness which was forced on him by being a victim of the Holocaust. Yet, at the same time, he voluntarily adopted it as his self-definition and affirmed his Jewishness as an identification of solidarity with Jews all over the world and in particular with those in the State of Israel. Drawing on Existentialist philosophy to elaborate on his position, Améry seems to have fallen victim to one of Existentialism’s key concepts, ‘bad faith’, i.e. ‘coming