

Holocaust Memorial Day 2023

Theme vision



HOLOCAUST
MEMORIAL
DAY TRUST

Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Ordinary People

'What is abnormal is that I am normal. That I survived the Holocaust and went on to love beautiful girls, to talk, to write, to have toast and tea and live my life - that is what is abnormal.'

Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Holocaust

Introduction

Genocide is facilitated by ordinary people. **Ordinary people** turn a blind eye, believe propaganda, join murderous regimes. And those who are persecuted, oppressed and murdered in genocide aren't persecuted because of crimes they've committed – they are persecuted simply because they are **ordinary people** who belong to a particular group (eg, Roma, Jewish community, Tutsi).

Ordinary people were involved in all aspects of the Holocaust, Nazi persecution of other groups, and in the genocides that took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. **Ordinary people** were perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers, witnesses - and **ordinary people** were victims.

In every genocide, those targeted faced limited choices – 'choiceless choices' (Lawrence Langer) but in every genocide the perpetrators have choices, **ordinary people** have choices. Sometimes, these choices were limited too, sometimes they had to make life-threatening decisions. And **ordinary people** were the ones who made brave decisions to rescue, to hide or stand up. But **ordinary people** also made decisions to ignore what was going on around them, to be bystanders, to allow the genocide to continue.

There are also extraordinary people in every genocide, remarkable and unusual people, who went to extreme lengths to help, to rescue, to save, and in every genocide there were extraordinary people, who went to extreme depths to cause harm, to persecute, to murder.

Our theme this year, though, highlights the **ordinary people** who let genocide happen, the **ordinary people** who actively perpetrated genocide, and the ordinary people who were persecuted.

Our theme will also prompt us to consider how **ordinary people**, such as ourselves, can perhaps play a bigger part than we might imagine in challenging prejudice today.



Image: illustration
from *Irmina* by
Barbara Yelin
Credit: SelfMadeHero
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In order to explore the theme of **Ordinary people**, we will look at some specific categories (perpetrators, bystanders, rescuers). It is important to note that people do not always fall neatly into one of these categories, and that within categories, within sectors, jobs and responsibilities there were a range of responses to what was going on around them, as the example of railway workers in the Holocaust shows:

EXAMPLE

Ordinary People: Railway workers during the Holocaust

'And as a five year old, I could stand at the edge of the clearing where the trains were being loaded. People like sardines in those wooden trucks. And the people loading them in – they were railway men, they didn't look terribly different from the railway men who check my tickets these days – they looked like ordinary people.'

Dr Martin Stern MBE, Holocaust survivor
[Read more about Dr Martin Stern MBE here](#)

These railway workers, who looked so ordinary, were indeed **ordinary people** from all across Nazi-occupied Europe, working as train drivers, conductors, signal men. Some of these **ordinary people** were perpetrators, driving Jewish people to concentration camps; some were rescuers, hiding Jews.

Henryk Gawkowski was a conductor who gave testimony to Claude Lanzmann for his film, *Shoah*. Henryk estimated that he transported approximately 18,000 Jews to Treblinka extermination camp. It is estimated that 800,000 people were murdered at Treblinka. Henryk said that he drank vodka all the time because it was the only way to make his job bearable. [Read more about Henryk Gawkowski here.](#)

Two hundred Lithuanian railway workers murdered more than 60 Jewish men on a farm in August 1941, shooting them into a pit that had been dug by Russian prisoners of war. The railway workers deliberately placed large motors near the pit so that the noise of the shooting wouldn't be heard by other Jews who were being kept in a nearby barn (from testimony by Abe Lison). [Read Abe Lison's testimony at yadvashem.org.](#)

Léon Bronchart was a French railway worker who was made a Righteous Amongst the Nations for helping his Jewish neighbours, hiding a Jew and for refusing to drive a train containing political prisoners. [Read more about Léon Bronchart here.](#)

Marcel Hoffman was one of 24 French railway workers who helped save Jewish children from deportation in September 1942. [Read more about Marcel Hoffman here.](#)

These railway workers show the spectrum of experiences that ordinary people had in genocide.



A member of the German SS supervises the boarding of Jews onto trains during a deportation action in the Krakow ghetto.

© United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Archiwum Dokumentacji Mechanicznej

Perpetrators as ordinary people

Perpetrators were **ordinary people**, in positions of power, who took advantage of a set of circumstances, or who created a set of circumstances, that allowed them to abuse their power and discriminate, persecute and murder people.

Many studies have also explored how some perpetrators were **ordinary people** not in positions of power. Watching the trial of Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt coined the phrase 'the banality of evil' meaning that evil acts are not necessarily perpetrated by evil people, rather they are the result of **ordinary people** obeying orders.

Ordinary people were policemen involved in rounding up victims, secretaries typing the records of genocide, dentists and doctors carrying out selections, ordinary people were neighbours wielding machetes in Rwanda, school teachers turned concentration camp guards in Bosnia.

Jean Louis Mazimpaka, a survivor of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, recalls that *'when the killing started, to be honest, everyone was involved. Our neighbours, friends, but we didn't know the killings were to the extent of what happened.'*

[Read Jean Louis Mazimpaka's life story here.](#)

Persecuted people as ordinary people

'People may think that they have nothing to do with my story. But what happened to me, could happen to them - to people like yourself. It may sound too hard to believe but this doesn't happen to strangers who live far away. I'm just an ordinary person. These terrible things can happen to people like us.'

Kemal Pervanić, survivor, Bosnia

[Read Kemal Pervanić's life story here](#)

Victims of genocide were **ordinary people**. They simply had an aspect of their identity that the perpetrators did not like, and that made them targets for persecution. Sometimes, some members of the victim group did not even identify as a member of the victim group, but the rules were defined by perpetrators. Perpetrators could - and did - determine who would be persecuted based on whatever parameters they wanted, including perceived rather than actual aspects of someone's identity.

Survivors are often portrayed as extraordinary individuals. However, it is important to remember that they survived the most horrendous acts not necessarily because they were extraordinary, but often due to a mixture of luck, skill, circumstances, or the involvement of other people.

And after a genocide, survivors live ordinary lives, dealing with the same day-to-day challenges as the rest of the population. They are ordinary people in our communities: supermarket staff, doctors, parents, teachers.

While for some survivors talking about their experiences is too difficult, other survivors - of all genocides - have become extraordinary in their ability to recount their experiences, becoming speakers, educators, representatives and in some cases historians, to share their testimonies even when it causes them pain to do so. These survivors have recognised that other people would benefit from hearing their personal experience of what happens when **ordinary people** turn against other **ordinary people** because of who they are.

Rescuers as ordinary people

Rescuers are also often portrayed as extraordinary, or superhuman, with amazing bravery and skill. This may be true in some instances, but many rescuers describe themselves in very simple terms, highlighting the circumstances that enabled them to save others. Sometimes they were able to provide food to others who needed it, sometimes they hid people. **Ordinary people** who did **extraordinary** things, risking their lives, their livelihoods, their families to help others.

Sir Nicholas Winton, a young stockbroker, rescued 669 children from Czechoslovakia, bringing them to the UK thereby sparing them from the horrors of the Holocaust.

He said:

'Why are you making such a big deal out of it? I just helped a little, I was in the right place at the right time.'

[Read Sir Nicholas Winton's life story here.](#)



Sir Nicholas Winton, who rescued 669 children from Czechoslovakia during the Holocaust
© Matej Divizna / Getty

Ordinary people as bystanders

Most people living under a murderous regime don't take an active role in a genocide. They do not become perpetrators or rescuers. They let the genocide take place around them, and they take no action to contribute to it, yet neither do they take action to challenge it, prevent it or to stop it happening, as this image from the graphic novel *Irina* by Barbara Yelin shows:

March 1942.



Image credit: SelfMadeHero © Barbara Yelin

Whilst the theme for HMD 2023 focuses on **ordinary people**, this can be extended to include ordinary locations, or sites. Genocide is an act out of the ordinary that disturbs the natural order of things, hijacking ordinary places and their original purpose. During genocides, people turn these ordinary locations into sites that facilitate genocide. Schools, hospitals, old age homes, religious buildings, forests and fields have been used and misappropriated as holding camps, detention sites, and even as sites of murder throughout all genocides.

Similarly, ordinary objects take on new meanings, as they perhaps become evidence of genocide, or symbolic of an experience; suitcases representing children sent away by their parents to safety as part of the *Kindertransport*, Vali Racz's ordinary wardrobe becoming a hiding place ([learn about Vali's wardrobe here](#)). Explore some artefacts in our [Days to Remember resource](#).

Image: watch worn by many Bosnian men and boys murdered during the genocide in Bosnia. The watch features in our Days to Remember resource. Photography by Abi Carter.



Today

We are all **ordinary people** today who can be extraordinary in our actions. We can all make decisions to challenge prejudice, stand up to hatred, to speak out against identity-based persecution, to shop responsibly.

Ordinary people are also the ones who drive Holocaust Memorial Day, who lead on community commemorations, who support and encourage everyone around them to take part in remembrance and education projects.

Further Reading

As well as the links in this paper, the following are recommended:

- *Irmina* by Barbara Yelin ([available to purchase online](#))
- *Ordinary Men: Police Battalion 101* by Christopher Browning
- *Agency and the Holocaust: Essays in Honor of Debórah Dwork*, Thomas Kühne, and Mary Jane Rein, Mary Jane, eds. (2020)
- *Ordinary workers, Vichy and the Holocaust : French railwaymen and the Second World War* by Ludivine Broch



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Explore our website for resources on this theme, including life stories, resources on marking HMD, suggestions for further reading and links to sister organisations:

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