

# The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2023 is Ordinary People.



*Illustration from Irmina by Barbara Yelin*

## 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 (e.g., 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.

The 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.



**This 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.**

## Examples:

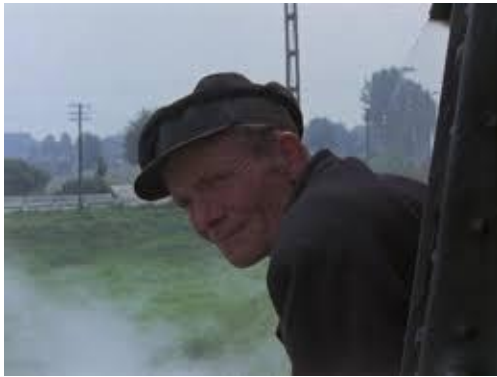
### Ordinary People: Railway workers during the Holocaust

*'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.

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.



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.

Marcel Hoffman was one of 24 French railway workers who helped save Jewish children from deportation in September 1942.



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

## 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.'*

After a few days a Tutsi neighbour, went to stay from his house. He was very ill but they killed him. After they buried him, there was a telephone call from a friend telling Jean Louis that his family was next.

About a week later, the genocide began. Women and children gathered inside the church and school, men and boys remained outside to protect them. Soon they were attacked but retaliated with stones. Soon, the mayor brought soldiers in and that was when the killing started. The soldiers fired into the crowd and threw grenades at them.

So many people were lost over two days. Jean Louis decided to hide but soon after they had to flee the country. The only escape they could see was to swim across Lake Kivu, which separates Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

There were twelve escapees in total, who stayed in the water all night but the following morning some grew weak and tired and started drowning one by one. After two nights and a day Jean Louis was close to death himself when he was rescued by a fisherman who took him home and fed him. He stayed with the fisherman for a few days before joining his uncle who was in the Congo, a refugee from 1959, and when the genocidal government was thrown out, he came back to Rwanda in 1995.

Jean Louis did finish secondary school in 1997 and then his uncle gave him a job in charge of a health centre where he stayed there for eight months. After that Jean Louis decided to leave the country because he did want to study after all and there was nowhere, he could continue to study so he decided to leave the country. In 1999 he came to the UK and has remained ever since.





## 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



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.'*



## 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 *Irmina* by Barbara Yelin shows:



## 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

The following are recommended by The Holocaust Memorial Trust:

- *Irmina* by Barbara Yelin
- *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