

# Holocaust Memorial Day 2021

## Theme vision



HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
DAY TRUST

## Be the light in the darkness

*'We will continue to do our bit for as long as we can, secure in the knowledge that others will continue to light a candle long after us.'*

Gena Turgel MBE, survivor of the Holocaust (1923-2018)

### Introduction

The theme for Holocaust Memorial Day (HMD) 2021 is **Be the light in the darkness**. It encourages everyone to reflect on the depths humanity can sink to, but also the ways individuals and communities resisted that darkness to 'be the light' before, during and after genocide.

**Be the light in the darkness** is an affirmation and a call to action for everyone marking HMD. This theme asks us to consider different kinds of 'darkness', for example, identity-based persecution, misinformation, denial of justice; and different ways of 'being the light', for example, resistance, acts of solidarity, rescue and illuminating mistruths.

Increasing levels of denial, division and misinformation in today's world mean we must remain vigilant against hatred and identity-based hostility. Rapid technological developments, a turbulent political climate, and world events beyond our control can leave us feeling helpless and insignificant. The utterly unprecedented times through which we are living currently are showing the very best of which humanity is capable but also - in some of the abuse and conspiracy theories being spread on social media - the much darker side of our world as well.

We can all stand in solidarity. We can choose to **be the light in the darkness** in a variety of ways and places – at home, in public, and online.



## Light

In darkness, even a small light stands out, although it needs to be nurtured to continue shining without faltering. One light alone is vulnerable, but many lights together are too strong to be extinguished. Together, they can dispel darkness completely. Light is not something we can easily keep to ourselves, and when we share it, others benefit.

Light can come from many different sources. Everyone has different talents and capabilities, but what is most important is the commitment we all make to do our best to stand up for those who are suffering, and to confront hate, fear, and prejudice whenever we encounter it.

## Darkness

Darkness is frightening for many, not least because it can hide danger and prevent us from knowing which way to go, or who to reach out to. Darkness can grow slowly – so slowly that it can be difficult to recognise when light disappears.

However, sometimes we are unaware we are in the darkness – if we are used to the darkness, a lack of knowledge, and ways to access knowledge, leave us blind. It is important that we help to light others' darkness, as well as our own. Others may deny that light exists, so we need to show that remaining in darkness is not the only option.

### 1 - Darkness draws in

Before every genocide, perpetrators divide society into those considered worthy of human treatment, and those who are not.

#### a) The darkness of distortion and hate

*'The first insult was "Zigeuner, Schweine Zigeuner" - Gypsy pigs. I remember these words and I'll die with them.'*

**Józef Sadowski, Roma survivor of Nazi Persecution**

In the lead up to genocide, distortions are deployed using propaganda and stereotyping to identify and victimise a specific group (or groups). These are followed by discrimination – often enshrined into law.

The Nazis encouraged people to fear Jewish people by stereotyping them as greedy, evil, and a threat to Germany. Anti-Jewish propaganda was spread in every medium: posters, films, books, radio broadcasts, newspapers, school materials and more, all played a part in putting across this message. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws stripped Jews of their citizenship, their right to vote and banned marriages to non-Jews to further isolate them from 'Aryan' Germans, who the Nazis considered to be the true German people.

The Nazis also used propaganda to demonise other groups. Disabled people were cruelly portrayed as burdens on society, with school textbooks containing maths problems asking children to calculate how much the state would save if it no longer had to care for the mentally ill. Homosexual men were portrayed as 'degenerates' who would have a weakening effect on German society.

Whilst minority groups were demonized, propaganda glorified Hitler and the idea of an 'Aryan race'. Vast public displays and rallies were filmed, helping to project the image the Nazis wanted.

In Rwanda, propaganda broadcast on radio stations and printed in newspapers sought to dehumanise the Tutsi minority. It called Tutsi people 'cockroaches' and 'snakes', encouraging Hutus to view them as less than human.

Even today in the UK, we are not immune to propaganda: the Gypsy Roma Traveller community is often subject to negative stereotyping, notably in the media.

## b) Emotional darkness

*'I will never understand how my parents must have felt when they made the decision to send the two of us away.'*

**Bernd Koschland MBE, Kindertransportee**

Before the outbreak of the World War Two, community groups and charities organised the *Kindertransport* (Children's Transport), alongside other rescue missions, leading to the evacuation of 10,000 Jewish children from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, to safety in Britain. Their parents sent them away to a foreign land, language and culture, in the hope they would be safe, knowing that in many cases, they would never see their children again.

The darkness leading to genocide, and of the genocide itself, creates not only fear for physical safety, but also deep emotional trauma. Fear, hopelessness, dread – all have a profound and long-lasting impact. In a society led by perpetrator regimes, those persecuted can lose trust in their government, local communities and even in friends and family members. Mental and physical health is often impacted by the cruelty and indifference targeted groups experience, and can damage the ability to build future relationships.

In Cambodia when the Khmer Rouge took power, children were separated from their parents, residents forced from their homes in the cities to the countryside, and religion abolished. This deliberately disrupted important connections for people and their homes, family and faith.

Today, faced with online misinformation and hostile 'alternative facts', we can often feel vulnerable and helpless. It is important that we remember to support those targeted by hostility, and strive to confront prejudice whenever, and wherever, we encounter it.

## 2 - Light during the darkness

Amid the darkness of genocide, there have always been those who oppose the regime, risking their own lives, homes and communities. Maintaining faith and culture during genocide defies the ambitions of regimes to eradicate entire groups and their culture.

### a) Resistance – a light in the darkness

*'We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!'*

**White Rose members writing to fellow German university students**

There are many ways to be the light in the darkness, and some people choose to resist – often at great risk to themselves. The White Rose movement in Nazi Germany, whose leaders were executed after their capture in 1943, distributed leaflets calling for resistance to the regime.

Chanukah, the Jewish festival of light, was celebrated in camps across Europe during the Holocaust despite the appalling conditions and limited means the Jewish people faced. People made menorahs from plywood and scrap metal, and candles from threads of camp blankets, observing their traditions even though they risked their lives in doing so.

In Cambodia, at just 15 years old, Ronnie Yimsut, with over 200 other escapees of mass killings in the Tonle Sap area, attacked a Khmer Rouge garrison. They were armed with just sticks, stones and a few knives, against the modern weaponry of the regime's soldiers. Despite heavy casualties in the initial attack, they fought for three days before fleeing to the Thai border.

### **b) Rescuers – extreme bravery in the darkness**

*'I chose Pascal because first of all, Pascal was a Hutu. But he would have been killed if they knew I was hiding in his house. So many people were killed when they were Hutu, because they were trying to hide Tutsis.'*

**Appolinaire Kageruka, survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda**

Despite the personal danger they faced, there are examples during every genocide of individuals and groups defying regimes to save those they could. Choices like these are a beacon of hope, and an inspiration for others to resist cruelty and evil.

Appolinaire Kageruka, a teacher, survived the Genocide in Rwanda because Pascal, the father of one of his students and a Hutu, agreed to hide him for several weeks. Pascal also helped Appolinaire escape when the *Interahamwe* came to search Pascal's house, just two days before the end of the genocide.

When the Nazis invaded Hungary in 1944, Vali Racz, a Catholic Hungarian singer and film star, chose to rescue five Jewish people, hiding them in her own home. She was arrested by the secret police in November 1944, and refused to give up their secret even after being interrogated for two weeks in harsh conditions.

### **c) Lighting the way with kindness**

*'Even though they were in the same army, they weren't all the same. If they were, my dad always said, we'd all be dead.'*

**Safet Vukalić, survivor of the Genocide in Bosnia**

Sometimes it is the smallest of choices and actions that provide light in dark places. Survivors emphasise that any kindness, when surrounded by suffering, indifference, and persecution, is powerful.

During the Genocide in Bosnia, Safet Vukalić took comfort from the people in his community who wanted to help – from the neighbour who refused to join the Bosnian Serb army, to the soldiers already in the army who brought him medication and food instead of torturing and killing like others did. In turn, his family also showed kindness and generosity to others, as his sister made long journeys every day to bring food to men imprisoned in concentration camps.



#### d) Shining light into the darkness

*'We knew from day one what was going on. But those stories were not being told. It wasn't lack of the stories, it was the failure to tell those stories, that ultimately led to the greatest tragedy of all.'*

**Mukesh Kapila, former UN coordinator in Darfur**

Mukesh Kapila was the United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Sudan between 2003 and 2004 where he spoke out to reveal the truth of the Genocide in Darfur. Whilst this in itself didn't stop genocide taking place, Mukesh's actions did lead to the formal indictment of Omar al-Bashir, the President of Sudan at that time. Al-Bashir was charged with Crimes Against Humanity and War Crimes by the International Criminal Court (ICC), and further charges of genocide were added in 2010. One person can make a difference by speaking out, instead of standing by.

In 2019, Abubacarr Tambadou, The Gambia's Justice Minister, led his country to lodge a case against Myanmar with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) about the treatment of the Rohingya. The ICJ ruled in February 2020 that the Rohingya in Myanmar remained 'at serious risk of genocide', and ordered Myanmar to 'take all measures within its power' to prevent genocidal acts.

However, even when there is clear evidence of atrocities occurring, governments and the international community do not always take the action they should. Legal processes designed to hold perpetrators to account can take many decades – if they are pursued at all.

### 3 - Darkness today

#### a) The darkness of denial and distortions of genocide

*'Unfortunately, we live in a time when untruths have a lot of power and Holocaust denial is the archetypal central lie. It's like the lie all the other lies fan out from.'*

**David Baddiel, interview with the Jewish Chronicle, February 2020**

Denial is one of the common features of every genocide. Often those responsible for genocide will restrict access to physical locations and evidence, and seek to obscure their intentions and genocidal activity.

Today, denial of the Genocide in Bosnia is prevalent across Bosnian society. The current Mayor of Srebrenica, Mladen Grujic, denies that the murder of Bosniak men and boys was genocide, and perpetrators have been lauded. In 2016, university halls in Pale, near Sarajevo, were officially named after Radovan Karadžić, just days before he was found guilty on charges of genocide and war crimes. In 2019, Bosnia's current Serbian president, Milorad Dodik, called the genocide a 'fabricated myth'.

Historical revisionism is another, more subtle, form of denial of historical facts. In some cases, a 'rewriting of history' has been introduced by governments, often through the legal system. In 2018 Poland's government introduced a new law that punished, with fines or up to three years in prison, anyone who said Poland bore any responsibility for Nazi crimes during the Holocaust. Although the prison sentence clause was revoked after international outcry, the law itself was still passed.

## b) Identity based prejudice and hostility today

*'When I was growing up, I was spat on, and people used to pull off my hijab. That's one reason why I spoke up on the Tube. I'm a mother, and I'm also a practicing Muslim, and as a practicing Muslim, you have to speak up to injustice.'*

**Asma Shuweikh, speaking about why she defended a Jewish family from antisemitic abuse in 2019**

Prejudice and hostility against people based on their identity continues to hurt people and communities here in the UK.

The number of hate crimes recorded by police in England and Wales rose by ten percent in the year October 2018 to October 2019, and for the seventh successive year since 2012.

The highest rises were in crimes against disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and those of different races. The Community Security Trust recorded its highest ever number of antisemitic incidents in 2019, and Tell MAMA's report on the impact of the 2019 Christchurch mosque shootings showed a sustained rise in anti-Muslim incidents in the UK recorded by them and police forces. It is everyone's responsibility to tackle the attitudes and actions which harm others, for a safer, better future.

Identity-based hostility also continues to mar societies around the world. The continuing injustices and atrocities faced by groups such as the Rohingya in Myanmar, and Uighur Muslims in China, require world leaders to take action.

## 4 - Being the light in the darkness today

### a) Shining light through testimony

*'I had to bear witness even if I did it anonymously. Was I the only one? I wanted to find out, track down other witnesses, for someone who shouts alone is easily suspect. And that suspicion hurts.'*

**Pierre Seel, gay survivor of Nazi Persecution**

Survivors' testimonies have shed light on the Holocaust, Nazi Persecution and more recent genocides, even though they have been painful for many survivors to share. The effects of advancing age and ill health on Holocaust survivors make their witness testimony increasingly difficult to convey in person, yet many continue to educate others.

This year's theme asks all of us to recognise that the responsibility for genocide education and prevention does not lie only with survivors. Their experiences hold lessons for all of us and it is vital that we listen to their experiences and become witnesses for them.

## **b) Confronting denial, distortion and misinformation**

*'We face an environment where facts are being discredited by those hawking conspiracies for hateful agendas, and where the internet and social media have drastically altered how we engage with the truth.'*

**Hope Not Hate, at the launch of their book  
*Rewriting History: Lying, Denying & revising the Holocaust, November 2018***

As distortions and denial increase, facing the extent and nature of the crimes committed to reveal the truth of genocide and genocidal regimes is more important than ever.

The intergovernmental International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) uses its government-led network to encourage member nations to take an honest look at their past, and to develop expert-led guidance for Holocaust education, commemoration and site preservation.

Denial, distortion and misinformation must be confronted by us all, and from all angles. Organisations working to confront far-right extremism and Holocaust and genocide denial are lights in the dark places of the internet where conspiracy theories, hatred and prejudice are promoted and spread. Hope not Hate's State of Hate 2020 report found traditional printed Holocaust denial in decline, but a growth in online forums for Holocaust denial.

As the world deals with the unprecedented challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, dangerous myths and hate-filled conspiracy theories are blaming and demonising people because of their identity. Spreading quickly on social media, it is crucial that we work together and speak out with the truth whenever we encounter lies and fake news.

## **c) Our responsibility to be the light**

*'Most people, whilst dimly aware that unfavourable things were happening to Jews in Germany, most people had not taken a lot of notice and I must say frankly that the same is true at the present time in parts of the world where dreadful things happen - most of us read the papers and then get on with our daily tasks, we don't spend all day thinking about it.'*

**Martin Kapel, Kindertransportee**

There are many ways that we can all bring light, and there are many forms of darkness that need to be dispelled.

For refugees, pursuing a light of hope to reach safety, leaving behind the life they knew, was, and is, a difficult, dangerous and sometimes deadly endeavour. If refugees reach safety, there are still significant challenges to overcome, including navigating asylum processes, learning a new language, finding work and a safe place to call home. There are many ways we can support and welcome those fleeing persecution, through local charities and refugee centres.

The persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and the ongoing treatment of Uighur Muslims in China, must not be left unchallenged. Using our voices to raise awareness of their treatment helps shine a light on situations around the world and helps hold those responsible to account.

Our lights are more powerful when we work together with others. This theme may inspire you to support charities and community groups working to tackle identity-based violence and denial – for example, you can show solidarity by joining as a member, support through financial donations, participate in campaigns, or volunteer to assist those in need.

## Looking forwards

As we look towards HMD 2021, the world is dealing with the global pandemic of Covid-19. It is a time of great change and uncertainty for us all. Many are experiencing anxiety with the separation from family and friends; and some are taking an authoritarian approach and condemn others' behaviour. As we have noted, there is a proliferation of conspiracy theories about the pandemic, with minority groups targeted in many instances.

Yet this is also a time when so many people are bringing light to their neighbours and communities. Within days, 750,000 people signed up to volunteer for the NHS. In every corner of the country, mutual aid community groups, charities and neighbourhoods have joined together to provide help to their neighbours and communities - a beacon of hope in dark times.

Holocaust Memorial Day enables us to remember – for a purpose. It gives us a responsibility to work for a safer, better, future for everyone. Everyone can step up and use their talents to tackle prejudice, discrimination and intolerance wherever we encounter them.

## Further resources

See [hmd.org.uk](https://www.hmd.org.uk) for resources on this theme including this year's life stories, resources on marking Holocaust Memorial Day, suggestions for further reading and for links to sister organisations.

Find out more...

Discover resources, activity ideas and background historical information on the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust website:  
[hmd.org.uk](https://www.hmd.org.uk)