



## LESSON PLAN: Bystanders

### INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, students consider the connotations behind the word “bystander” and think about the responsibility one faces as a bystander. They examine examples of bystander behavior and consider how such behavior may lead to or even constitute complicity. Students are confronted with the fact that inaction by bystanders played a significant role in enabling the Holocaust to happen<sup>1</sup>.

**1** As an entire class or in small groups, students create a concept map on chart paper to explore the term bystander and expand on their preconceived notions of what a bystander is. The terms complicity, responsibility, and guilt are then added to the concept map and students consider how those words connect to bystanders<sup>2</sup>.

**2** Students are introduced to **Barbara Fischman Traub (bio)** and **Ibolya Grossman Clip 30+31 (bio)**. As they watch their testimonies, students take notes on the handout, **Testimony Reflections**<sup>3</sup>, found in “About this Unit”. Next, the class discusses the following questions: What is justice, including who is justice for: the dead, the survivors, society?

- Why does Barbara describe her past interactions with the neighbors (playing with the children, sharing meals, how they used to treat her parents at their shop)?
- Based on their actions, the neighbors knew exactly what was happening. Describe what the neighbors did and what they witnessed happening.
- Discuss how the neighbors acted as bystanders. Are they complicit in the fate of Barbara, Ibolya, and their families? What responsibility do they bear? Why do you think they acted the way they did?
- Refer to the concept map students created. What characteristics on the map did Barbara’s neighbors display? Why do you think they acted the way they did?
- Consider Barbara’s words, “The shame was theirs.” What does she mean by this?

**3** Students read the **Excerpts from Ponary** handout as a whole group and annotate the diary entries to understand the events that are described. As a reflective activity, students discuss the following questions or journal their responses:

- Why would a bystander or witness to such atrocities feel the need to record what they were witnessing?
- Why is it important to know that Kazimierz Sakowicz knew the risks of keeping a diary?
- Thinking back to your definition of a bystander, should Kazimierz be labeled as such? If not, what would be a good term to describe his choices and actions?

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more about those who rejected the role of bystander and chose to help Jews, go to our unit on *Rescuers and Non-Jewish Resistance*.

<sup>2</sup> Remind students that Nazism pervaded every aspect of life in Germany, and later occupied Europe. Refer to earlier lessons in Unit 2: *Antisemitism and Unit 3: Nazi Germany on the rise of the Nazis, the Hitler Youth, and education in Nazi Germany* to consider how much (or how little) choice one might have felt he/she had.

<sup>3</sup> It is often beneficial for students to watch each clip twice, completing the **Testimony Reflections** handout during the second viewing.

- Historians and philosophers believe that a person who witnesses an event has a moral responsibility just because he/she is a witness. Did Sackowicz have a moral responsibility here to keep the diary? Does this responsibility outweigh the danger to his life?
- Where is Sackowicz on the concept map?

**4** In small groups, students review, discuss, and complete the **Photographic Case Study Graphic Organizer** about the **Bystanders in Photos** handout. Students thoroughly analyze each photograph, one photo at a time. When finished, each photo is projected, students review their completed graphic organizers, and discuss the following questions<sup>4</sup>:

- What were the roles of bystanders in these photos?
- What might make a person go from merely being a bystander to becoming an active perpetrator of a crime? What might make them go from merely being a bystander to becoming an active rescuer? If they do become active, describe what actions they could take.
- What might make a person leave a situation where they are a bystander? Is that a meaningful act of defiance? What purpose does it have?
- Can a bystander be a collaborator or a perpetrator just by virtue of standing by passively and not taking action?

**5** Students watch the testimony of **Dennis Urstein (bio)** [start clip at 42 seconds to 1:24]. The following quote is posted. Students analyze the quote and discuss whether they agree with Dennis' opinion:  
 "It is a matter of indifference who actually committed this crime. Psychology's only concerned to know who desired it emotionally and who welcomed it when it was done. And for that reason, all of the human family is equally guilty."

**6** As a summative task, students discuss the following questions:

- a. Consider the concepts of bystander, complicity, responsibility, and guilt from the first activity in this unit. Have their perspectives changed?
- b. Do you believe that the actions and inactions of bystanders might have affected, contributed, and potentially encouraged perpetrators during the Holocaust? How and why?
- c. What does it mean for "all of the human family is equally guilty?" How does this inform your understanding of the Holocaust as a total societal collapse?

**ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 90 - 120 MINUTES**

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<sup>4</sup> Inform students that photographs during the Holocaust were taken by various people for a multitude of reasons. Some were taken by victims and bystanders to document the horrors, others were taken by perpetrators as trophies or to include in reports to demonstrate they had completed a certain directive.