

Topic 3

The Mind of the Bystander: Indifference and Apathy

*What hurts the victim most is not the cruelty of
the oppressor but the silence of the bystander.*

— Elie Wiesel

To watch as neighbors lost their rights, their homes, their freedoms, their lives; to stand behind closed doors and drawn curtains and ignore what was happening to friends in the streets beyond; to witness the torture of friends and neighbors and never raise a voice in opposition; to say, “I never knew”; this was the world of the bystander.

Raul Hilberg, an esteemed scholar of the Holocaust, in describing the bystander, wrote, “They were not ‘involved,’ not willing to hurt the victims and not wishing to be hurt by the perpetrators.” Holocaust survivor Primo Levi explained that most Germans didn’t know because they didn’t want to know:

In Hitler’s Germany, a particular code was widespread: those who knew did not talk; those who did not know did not ask questions; those who did ask questions received no answers. In this way the typical German citizen won and defended his ignorance which seemed to him sufficient justification of his adherence to Nazism.

The truth, however, was that most of the population *did* know; how could they not know? Millions of people don’t just disappear. How difficult, if not impossible, it would have been for the Nazis to murder millions if other millions had stood up and made their voices heard. Unfortunately, the general population did nothing; the victims had few allies, and the Nazis gained power and control.

How very different the outcome would have been if those who knew did talk, and those who did not know asked questions, and those who asked questions demanded answers.