

Heroes in Literature and In the Real World

Philip Zimbardo, Ph.D.

(conceived of this Humanities course as an extension of concepts in the Heroic Imagination Project)

By: Rose Zimbardo, Ph.D. (created initial set of examples of Heroes in Literature)

Edited by Katharine Beck (added recent real-world heroes)

Oskar Schindler

What makes Oskar a hero: He saved countless Jewish lives by means of his ingenious subterfuges.



Oskar's personality: Oskar Schindler was the most unlikely man to become a hero. Yet a hero he undoubtedly was, saving countless lives by means of his ingenious subterfuges. As the author of his story, Thomas Keneally, says at the outset "this is the story of the pragmatic triumph of





good over evil, a triumph in eminently measureable, statistical, unsubtle terms.” Schindler was the quintessential slick salesman, the capitalist operator whose only goal was success. For example, at his beloved mother’s funeral, “Oskar was wearing the Hakenkreuz (swastika) emblem of the Sudeten German Party...something [that many] young Czech Germans were wearing that season.” He had neither any affiliation with this Nazi organization nor any desire to be a member of the group. Oskar was apolitical, but “Oskar was a salesman. All things being equal, when you went into a German company as a manager wearing the badge, you got the order.” (38) He hid his feelings beneath a charming veneer.

Though he hated SS Hauptsturmführer Amon Goeth, the sadistic commander of a forced labor camp, he dined with him regularly, and showered him with gifts of liquor and expensive trinkets. He did so to promote his booming business, Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik. He despised Franz Bosch, manager of various workshops, legal and illegal inside Plaszow. He loathed the two police chiefs of the city, but “their cooperation...was essential to the existence of his own peculiar plant in Zablocie, and so he regularly sent them gifts.” He kicked at the German Trust Agency in Cracow, the agency that simply seized the businesses and even the houses of Jews and gave them to Germans. But he resented the Trust not because they were cruel exploiters of the Jews, but because, he said, “I am a capitalist by temperament, and I don’t like being regulated.”

But underneath this slick, artificial exterior beat a heart that was full of pity and compassion. Keneally gives us the first evidence of this in the Prologue. Schindler was attending a dinner party given by the labor camp commander, the insanely sadistic Amon Goeth. Schindler hated not only his host, but also his fellow guests, Bosch, and the police chiefs, Sherner and Czurda. Brought in to entertain the guests were prostitutes procured by Amon Goeth. After dinner the swinish men mounted the stairs, each with his female companion to private rooms above where they could be sexually serviced. Schindler had observed during dinner that the Jewish slave housekeeper, who served the dinner was covered with bruises and that Amon continued to verbally abuse and denigrate her. As the men mounted the stairs, Amon boasting that his sexual power was even greater than that of the prodigious Schindler, Schindler, who had excused himself from their entertainments, went down to the basement kitchen to speak with the maid. Her name was Helen Hirsch, but Amon out of laziness called her Lena. The girl was terrified at the entrance of one of the dinner guests; she stammered that she was only setting food out for the dogs. Schindler assured her that he was not checking up on her. Her approached her and put his arm around her. He could feel her body tense as he touched her cheek with his lips. “He murmured, ‘It’s not that sort of kiss. I’m kissing you out of pity, if you must know’. She couldn’t avoid weeping...Schindler kissed her hard now in the middle of her forehead...She saw that he had begun to weep too. “That kiss is something I bring you from...” He waved his hand,



indicating some honest men out in the dark, sleeping in tiered bunks, or hiding in forests, people for whom—by absorbing punishment from Hauptsturmführer Goeth—she was in part a buffer.”

That remarkable pity and compassion would grow and grow until it led Schindler to risk imprisonment in a concentration camp, indeed, to risk his own life to save the lives of people he did not even know, oppressed Jews enslaved in labor camps and scheduled to be sent to their deaths in Auschwitz. Since Steven Spielberg’s excellent movie version of Keneally’s book was released, the world knows, as the people he saved know, that Oskar Schindler was indeed a hero. The movie ends with a real scene of the remaining survivors of “Schindler’s Jews” laying flowers on his grave.



Summary of Schindler’s List: Oskar Schindler began his career as a salesman, working for his father selling farm equipment. He was a remarkably good salesman, gregarious and full of life. However, his father went bankrupt because his farm equipment was powered by steam and therefore became obsolete when the new electrically powered equipment replaced them. But Oskar was such a good salesman and had made so many contacts everywhere that he was able to get selling jobs without any difficulty and, even in the midst of the Great Depression, he thrived as a sales manager of Moravian Electro-technic Company. Oskar was a German Czech; that is a German of a family that had lived in Czechoslovakia for generations. (It was these Germans



living in the Sudetenland that provided the Nazis with an excuse for invading—to free an oppressed minority people, they claimed). Purely for business reasons, Schindler joined Konrad Henlein’s Sudeten German Party, and, to the great distress of his wife, Emilie, and his father, wore the party badge, a swastika. One evening in 1939 he attended a party where he met Eberhard, who worked for the Foreign Section of German Intelligence. Since Oskar had many accounts across the border in Poland, as well as in Galacia and Upper Silesia, Eberhard asked him whether he was willing to supply military intelligence from that region. German Intelligence could make use, he was told, of his observations of industrial and military installations. Oskar agreed.

So, the man who would become a hero and savior of Jews began by working for their enemy. Oskar Schindler decided that he was ready to go into business for himself and chose Cracow as the best location for establishing a factory he had in mind. Almost immediately after the fall of Cracow, Poland, even before the siege of Warsaw ended, the Nazi Secretary of State for the Economics Ministry established policies and edicts to be adopted in “Aryanizing” businesses in Cracow. Jewish businesses would be seized and leased or sold to German businessmen. Most Cracow Jews expected a rash of edicts that would cause some disruption in their lives, but that the situation would settle. They would survive by petitioning and buying off the authorities—as Jews had survived from the time of the Roman Empire. After all, they reasoned, the civil authorities needed Jews, especially in a nation where they were one in every eleven citizens. The edicts also forbid kosher preparation of meats, required all Jews to carry registration cards marked by a yellow stripe, and, most important for the Schindler story, commanded forced labor for Jews. Ironically enough, it was a Jew, Itzhak Stern, who was an accountant and general manager of a textile factory, from whom Schindler got the advice he needed. While visiting the company where Stern worked, Schindler murmured to the accountant that he would be grateful if Stern could tell him what he knew about some of the local businesses, because he knew that Stern had a vast acquaintance with Jews who worked for companies in every field. The ever-wary Stern thought that Schindler was testing him, a Jew, in asking his advice, so he told Schindler to speak to officials of the Trust Agency, the very agency in charge of seizing the money and property of Jews and handing them on to Germans. But Schindler said that the Trust were thieves as well as bureaucrats, and he did not like to be regulated.

A surprised Stern decided to trust the German capitalist. He told him of a business that was going bankrupt because, Stern knew, it had been badly managed. The Rekord manufactured enamelware and Schindler thought it was more in his line than any of the other companies he had listed as possibilities. Moreover, Schindler knew that such a plant, under the control now of the Armaments Inspectorate, would soon be in need of mess kits and field kitchenware. Schindler



also knew that the Inspectorate was headed by a Major General Julius Schindler, who was not at all a relative, but whose name he would use throughout his long rescue campaign to threaten any authority who tried to thwart his purposes. For instance, an armed soldier who was herding prisoners into cattle cars was so thoroughly intimidated by the name of General Schindler, Schindler's prime instrument for countering any obstacle to his will, that he allowed Schindler, calling out the name of one of the "Schindler's Jews" who was already imprisoned in front of every railroad car, to find the Jew and rescue him.



Schindler took over the Rekord works and renamed it Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik. Initially, there were only 45 employees involved in manufacturing a small output of kitchenware. However very soon Schindler received his first Army contracts, he had cultivated various Wehrmacht engineers who sat on the Main Armaments Board of General Schindler's Armaments Inspectorate. Employing methods, he would use all his life, Schindler wined then and dined them, showered them with gifts and bottles of cognac, Schindler charmed them into putting the right stamp on his bids and writing crucial letters of recommendation to General Schindler. Within a few months Schindler was employing 150 Jewish workers, but throughout the first year Itzhak Stern, whom Schindler had hired to be general manager of the plant, would call on Schindler to arrange employment for some young Jews, because a Jew

working for a company engaged in war work was relatively safe. Schindler's factory soon developed a small reputation as a haven.

In April of that first year of Deutsche Emailware Fabrik's existence, Governor General Frank had determined that Cracow would be judenfrei, free of Jews. Over the next six months, he said, Germans in Cracow would be able to breathe "good German air." He would permit only a remnant of 5,000 to 6,000 skilled Jewish workers to remain. By that Christmas Schindler's business was thriving, and in the new year his friends in the Armaments Inspectorate were urging Schindler to open a munitions division to manufacture anti tank shells. Schindler was not really interested in shells; he preferred pots and pans, which were much easier to make. He did not have to calibrate instruments for kitchenware; the work was nowhere near as exacting as it would be for arms. But because it was good politics, he established a munitions section. He installed a few immense Hilo machines for the precise tooling of shell casings. These Hilos gave the Schindler Works a hedge against the future; they provided the crucially important appearance of



an essential industry. Just after the Hilos were installed Schindler received hints from his SS contacts that there would be a ghetto for Jews established across the river. He told Stern about it, but Stern already knew. Like some Jews, Stern thought that a ghetto might be a good idea. “We’ll be inside, the enemy will be outside...No one will stone us in the streets, he thought.” The walls of the ghetto would be fixed—but not too long in the future, the walls would provide not shelter, but catastrophe. Some Jews thought that since repression would take a definite form now, it would allow people to plan their futures, however restricted.

Conditions for Jews in the past year or so were a bewildering succession of decrees and confiscations that had made life precarious at best. For example, Juda Dresner, a business acquaintance of Schindler, “had lost his business to the Trust Agency [responsible for seizing Jewish property and giving it to Germans]. [He had lost] his car, his apartment. His bank account had been frozen. His children’s schools had been closed, or else they had been expelled from them. His family’s jewelry had been seized, and their radio. He and his family were forbidden entry to the center of Cracow, denied any travel by train. They could use only segregated trolley cars. His wife, and daughter, and sons were subject to intermittent roundups for snow shoveling or other compulsory labor. You never knew, when you were forced into the back of a truck, if the absence would be a short or long one, or what sort of trigger-happy madman might be supervising the work you would be forced to do.” (85)

One of Schindler’s German technicians said, “Won’t they be better off there [in the ghetto]? The Poles hate them, you know.” And, of course, he was right, Prime Minister Skladkowski, on the floor of the Parliament in Warsaw, said, “Economic war on the Jews? All right!” Some scholars believe that one reason that Hitler began World War II with the invasion of Poland was that he was quite aware that well-known Polish anti-Semitism would approve and bolster his program of extermination of the Jews. From March of that year, Oskar’s Jewish workers would not receive any wages but were meant to live entirely on their rations. Oscar already paid fees of 7.50 Reichsmarks a day for a skilled worker and 5 RM for unskilled men and all women, and also to the police chiefs. Now he would pay a fee to the SS Headquarters in Cracow. These fees were economically advantageous because they were cheaper than rates that operated on the open labor market. But Oskar found that his moral repugnance at the slave labor imposed on Jews far outweighed any economic advantage. Nevertheless, Stern and the head of the Jewish relief Office begged Schindler to employ more Jews, as many as he could fit in. They hoped to give the inhabitants of the ghetto economic value. Schindler expanded his work force in response, adding a nightshift. His workers were far better off than those employed in other factories because he served soup that was hearty and nourishing and plenty of bread. Moreover, his completely unheard-of custom of welcoming new workers indicates that Schindler was

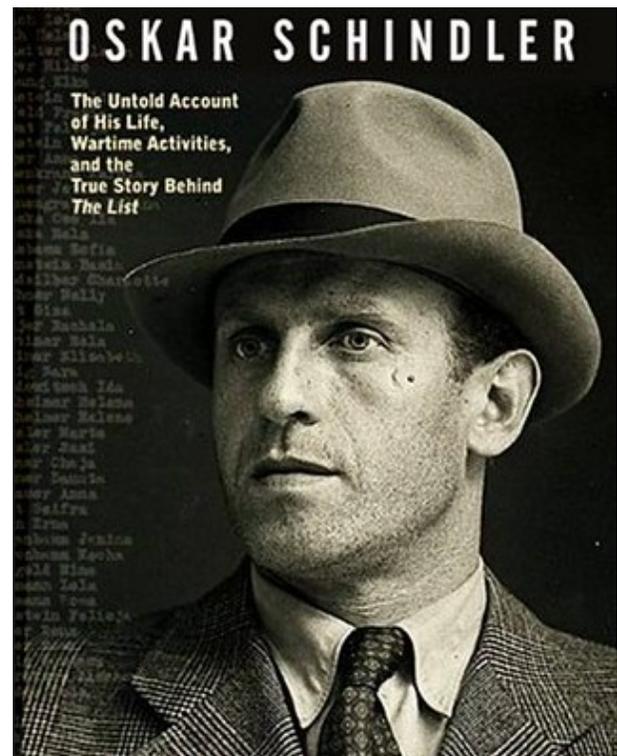


propaganda and prejudice-proof. “I wanted to welcome you,” he told them, you’re part of the expansion of this factory.... You’ll be safe working here. If you work here, then you’ll live through the war.” (91)

At the end of 1941 Schindler was arrested for the first time. The Gestapo seized his books, kept him overnight, but provided him with a hearty breakfast in the morning. But so valuable was Schindler to the war economy and so well connected with people in power, that his arrest was perfunctory. His second arrest, which occurred for a “crime” he committed on his birthday, April 28, 1942. Schindler celebrated his birthday by carrying on to the factory floor three bottles of cognac. Workers had handfuls of cigarettes given to them, and there was a birthday cake brought in. Jewish girls were embraced; Jewish men, even the sober Stern were shaken by the hand. And then, fatally, Schindler embraced and kissed a Jewish girl. Schindler was betrayed by one of his Polish workers for “racial impropriety. Two Gestapo officers came to his office and took him away. His account books might stand up to scrutiny, but he was now condemned of the much more serious crime of being a “Jew-kisser.”

He made a list of people the guards should call, accompanying it with a fat bribe. He gave them bottles of vodka that his secretary was allowed to bring him along with fresh clothing. He was kept in jail for 5 days. He was finally questioned by a man he knew from cocktail parties and lavish dinners, Rolf Czurda, who jokingly told him, “Oskar, Oskar, we give you those Jewish girls for five marks a day. You should kiss us not them.” It was Oskar’s contacts in the Abwehr and his usual declaration, “I am an essential war producer. You can get General Schindler to say so,” that got him off. But while he was in his cell, he found a small statement written on the wall near his bed, “My God, how they beat me.” Yet another signal to mark Oscar Schindler’s path to full enlightenment.

In the summer of 1941 Schindler heard rumors that “procedures in the ghetto” were intensifying. Half the ghetto residents had been given blue stickers on their identity passes, but the others were not. Schindler warned Stern and he also set up dormitories in the offices upstairs in the munitions





section, so that people on the night shift would not have to go back to the ghetto. On June 3, Schindler's office manager, Abraham Bankier, did not appear for work. He was told that Bankier and a dozen other of Schindler's Jewish workers had been taken to the railroad depot—for transportation to another labor camp they were told. Schindler immediately drove to the station, where he saw people being loaded into cattle cars. He had read an SS bulletin inviting bids for the construction of crematoria in a camp near Lublin. When he got to the station, he saw a young SS officer with an enormous list—pages of names—which designated the directions of each of the Jews to a different cattle car. Schindler went from car to car calling Bankier's name in a loud voice. When he was stopped by the SS officer and asked for his pass. He was told by the young officer that the list was inviolable. Then Schindler using his usual ploy, "I have a munitions section under the special protection of General Schindler, my namesake. Not only would [your] comrades on the Russian front be affected by the disruption of production, but the office of the Armaments Inspectorate would demand explanations as well." At first the young officer was not impressed, but when Schindler asked his name and wrote it down in his notebook, saying that he intended to appeal directly to General Schindler, the officer became frightened. And when Schindler threatened, "you'll be in southern Russia in a week," he relented. The door of the cattle car holding Schindler's workers was unlocked and they jumped down. Schindler thanked the young officer, who said "Sir, it makes no difference to us, you understand. We don't care whether it's this dozen or that.... It's the inconvenience to the list, that's all."

The final enormity for Schindler was the destruction of the ghetto. Schindler and one of his favorite mistresses were out horseback riding on a ridge above the ghetto. The scene below was worse than anything in Dante's *Inferno*. Families were routed out of their apartments, separated into two lines. One line was of able-bodied men; the other consisted mostly of women, children and the old. The two riders noticed particularly a little girl in a red coat who was being herded along in the second line. When the little girl stopped and turned to watch a woman who was shot in the neck before her eyes; a boy slid down on the wall whimpering, and an SS jack boot was jammed down on his head to hold it still while the SS man shot him. SS teams with dogs worked the streets, rampaging through the apartments. "And running before the dogs, the men, women, and children who had hidden in attics or closets, who had evaded the first wave of the search, were jolted out onto the sidewalk, yelling and gasping in terror of the Doberman pinschers dog-beasts. Those who emerged were shot where they stood, flying out over the gutters from the impact of bullets was their gushing blood into the drains.

Schindler slipped from his horse and fell to his knees, the urge to vomit barely suppressed. The lack of shame of the SS soldiers was the worst aspect of what he had seen. Because they had no



shame it was clear that they had official sanction for their acts. Because they could walk through the lines of people they were herding, covered in blood and assuring them that the camp to which they were going was a labor camp, it was clear that they were fulfilling the orders of their leader. Schindler returned to his office and shut himself in; the news was too horrible to share with his workers. “Cracow’s favorite party guest, Zablocie’s big spender [in his outward appearance was, behind his façade]—an implacable judge.

Oskar always put special significance on this day. “Beyond this day,” he would say, “no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system.” (133) To that end, Schindler



bought a large plot of land adjoining his factory from an old German couple. He told Amon that he intended to make his now enlarged factory a sub-camp of Plaszow. Amon said he would agree to the proposal as long as it met with the approval of the SS generals. A full-scale appointment was made with General Scherner. Neither Amon nor the general believed Schindler’s reasoning: “I want my workers on the premises so that their labor can be more fully exploited.” (194) They guessed that Schindler was pushing some new crazy plan in which expense was no object. However, if the free-spending Schindler wanted to fit the whole bill for a new camp, they would profit. The more laborers rented from them, the greater their profit, and so the plan was approved. They guessed that although Schindler was a good fellow bon vivant, he had been stricken with a form of “Jew-love” virus.

The beginning of knowledge of what had happened to the people was brought back by a young pharmacist, Bachner, who had somehow managed to escape and who had taken the almost insane recourse of going back to the Cracow ghetto to tell his story. All the Cracow people had been taken East to the camp of Belzec. When the trains arrived at the station, the people were driven out by Ukrainians with clubs. [NB well anybody who would believe that the Ukrainian people



were good guys]. The people were made to undress and tie their shoes together with strings. Spectacles and rings were removed. Naked, they were led to have their heads shaved. Finally, they were led to “Baths and Inhalation rooms” which had the star of David in copper on their roofs. They were told that there they would be disinfected. In the bunkers they were gassed, and afterward, squads were sent in to disentangle the piles of corpses to be taken away for burial. 3000 killings a day occurred! Crematoria were under construction by a German company from Hamburg, who installed similar structures for the camp at Sobibor designed to make disposal of the corpses more efficient.

Back in Zablocie, in the backyard of the Emalia company, Oskar Schindler was building a second barracks for his Jewish workers. In the Autumn of 1942, an Austrian dentist named Sedlacek arrived in Schindler’s office. He pretended he was on business, but he was in fact a carrier for a Zionist rescue organization. Someone, probably Itzhak Stern, had sent Schindler’s name to the Zionist headquarters in Instabul. He was declared “a righteous person,” more precisely, in all of Europe one of few the “righteous” Goyim. Sedlacek carried money from the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. What Sedlacec wanted to know, without any financial coloring of the story, was what Schindler thought about the war against the Jews in Poland. Schindler hesitated to speak, and the dentist took that as the sign of coming refusal, but what Schindler said was, “There is one problem, Herr Sedlacek, It’s this. What they are doing to people in this country is beyond belief.” (148) Not only was the story Schindler told him startling in moral terms, but one had to believe that in the midst of a desperate war, the Nazis would devote thousands of men, the crucial resources of railroads, an enormous footage of cargo space, and techniques of engineering needed for research and development, arsenals of weapons and ammunition, all to an extermination plan which had no military or economic meaning but was merely deadly psychological warfare.

Then Sedlacek made an astonishing proposal: would Schindler go to Budapest with him to tell his story. Schindler said that seemed unnecessary since Sedlacek could simply write a report, but Sedlacek said no. There had been individual stories, but no comprehensive picture, such as Schindler could give. So, in defiance of the common sense that warned him he was risking his life and everything he had, Schindler went to Budapest. Oscar told the representatives of the Jewish Rescue mission that all over Poland the ghettos were being wound down. The population of the Warsaw ghetto, for example, was reduced by four fifths. Some of the people who were not killed outright were sent to labor camps, but many, if not most, were sent to what the SS called vernichtungslager, i.e., extermination camps. The extermination camps, like Auschwitz, used people as laborers for a little while for a time, but their ultimate purpose was death—and its by-products, the recycling of the clothes, remaining jewelry, the hair and the teeth of human





beings, of their prisoners. It is said that “Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely.” The case of Amon Goeth pushes the formula further. His absolute power over prisoners in the labor camp, Plaszow, from whom Schindler rented his laborers, was not corrupted by his absolute power. He was deranged! He shot his shoeshine boy for faulty work; he hanged his fifteen-year-old orderly from the ringbolts in his office because a flea had been found on one of his dogs; he executed his servant for lending his carriage and horse to one of his business associates without first asking his permission. And, of course, for sexual excitement he beat his maid, Lena. This was the man whom Schindler hated but whom he was forced to bribe and to flatter if he were to save more Jewish lives.

In January 1944 Plaszow labor camp was designated a concentration camp and put under the central authority of General Oswald Pohl’s SS Main Economic and Administrative Office in Berlin. Now Oscar, if he wanted favors, would not only have to bribe and flatter Amon and the two police chiefs, but also manipulate officials in the great bureaucracy of the central Administration. Here he approached a man whom he had met at parties and he sensed in Lange a man of some honor who, like Schindler himself, expressed resistance to the regime. He had been appalled at the factory camps of Poland and the I. G. Farben works in Buna, where SS foremen made prisoners unload cement on the run and where corpses of the starved and broken workers were thrown into ditches. In Berlin he had a letter from Lange, which he presented to the personnel officer with whom he was dealing. The letter confirmed that “Herr Schindler, with his mess kits and 45mm antitank guns, is considered by this Inspectorate to be a major contributor to the struggle for national survival. He has built up a staff of skilled specialists, and nothing should be done to disrupt the work they perform under the Herr Director Schindler’s supervision.” Now that Plaszow was a concentration camp under the supervision of the central authority, the prisoners were safer from Amon. The chiefs in Berlin did not permit summary execution. The days when a potato peeler could be instantly shot for peeling too slowly were over. The prisoners could be destroyed now only by due process. There had to be a hearing and the record had to be sent to Berlin in triplicate. If a commandant killed essential workers then Pohl’s department would be hit by compensation claims, and if the loss of skilled labor arose from the action of a sadistic, trigger happy SS commandant like Amon, the claim would be greater.

The Emailia camp had no resident commandant to terrorize them. Except for inspection by senior SS men, the prisoners who worked there rarely even saw their guards. Though the SS set the limits on the life the people lead, Oskar set the tone. There were no dogs. There were no beatings. The soup and bread were much more plentiful than in Plaskow. Though the shifts were long—Schindler was, after all a businessman—no shift was arduous. They felt that their labor



was contributing to their survival. If Oskar depended on Amon for prison food, his now 900 internees would have been given about three quarters of a kilo of bread a week and soup every third day. On the other hand, Oskar was spending 50,000 zlotys a month on black market food for his camp kitchen. Some weeks he had to find more than three thousand round loaves. But with a briefcase full of Reichsmarks and a carry-all of bottles of vodka, he was able to persuade the German supervisors in the big bakeries to accommodate him.

Early in the existence of the sub-camp, senior officers from the parent camp Ploszow, visited to ensure that the slave laborers were stimulated to radical energy—Amon among them. Amon spotted a prisoner named Lamus pushing a wheelbarrow too slowly in his judgment. Amon ordered his bodyguard, Grun, to execute Lamus. So Grun made the arrest and the inspectors moved on. Oskar came rushing from his office shouting “You can’t do that here. I won’t get work out of my people if you start shooting. I have a high priority war contract” ...etc.--his usual argument. Grun asked, “What’s in it for me?” and Oskar replied, “Would vodka do?” It would, so Grun yelled “Disappear” to the trembling Lamus. Another time, when Oskar was away on a business trip, two workers cracked a metal press. A factory spy denounced them, and they were taken away to Plaszow, their hanging announced at the next morning’s roll call. Oskar returned two days later and found news of the sentence on his desk. He drove quickly to Goeth’s office and, though no one really knows the details of the transaction, struck a deal with Goeth. At the hour determined for their execution the two workers, who were brothers, returned to Emailia in Oskar’s luxurious limousine. “Oskar had become a minor god of deliverance, double-faced-in the Greek manner—as any small god; endowed with all the human vices; many-handed; subtly powerful; capable of bringing gratuitous but secure salvation.” (232)

At some point in any discussion of Schindler, the surviving friends of the Herr Direktor will blink and shake their heads and begin the almost mathematical business of finding the sum of his motives.... It can be said that Oskar was a gambler, was a sentimentalist who loved the transparency, the simplicity of doing good; and that beneath the hearty sensuality lay a capacity to be outraged by



human savagery, to react to it and not be overwhelmed.
But none of this, jotted down, added up, explains the
doggedness with which in the autumn of 1944, he
prepared a final haven for the graduates of Emailia. (281)



In September of that year, with the Russian army moving closer to Poland, he visited Madritch, the only other humane German factory owner, who manufactured uniforms. Madritch's plant would be disbanded and his workers would vanish into a death camp. Schindler proposed that he and Madritch adopt a combined approach that would get four thousand of the Jews out and relocate them to something with safety. Madritch was attracted by the idea but couldn't yet give his consent. Without Madritch's agreement Oscar took to the road once again. He went to Berlin and bought dinner for his old friend, Colonel Erich Lange, whom he knew was full of moral disgust at the actions of the SS. Lange could guarantee contracts and make recommendations to the Evacuation Board and the German officials in Moravia. Schindler's plan was to relocate his factory to Moravia and devote it only to the manufacture of shell casings. This was, of course, a pretense. Schindler no longer wanted to manufacture anything; he wanted to get his people to safety. The only way he could prevent their being taken to Auschwitz was to make a list of their names and described their occupation as skilled metal workers. Lange sent Schindler to a chief executive in the Main Evacuation Board, General Sussmuth, and, using his tried-and-true technique of arguing that his workers were crucially important to the security of the country, Schindler attempted to win Sussmuth to his cause. The wily Sussmuth rather openly suggested that he and the rest of the Board were terribly short of liquor, ham, cigars, cloth, coffee, etc. Although liquor cost 80 RM a bottle (and the gentlemen of the Board would require at least a dozen bottles each; although Havana cigars were insanely priced and coffee was like gold, Schindler bought all of them in quantity and included them in a hamper which he sent to the members of the Board.

Then Schindler traveled once more to Sussmuth in the market city of Troppau to meet with Sussmuth. He carried a pocketful of diamonds with him this time, but curiously enough he did



not need them; Sussmuth said that he himself had proposed that a series of small Jewish work camps be established in small towns in Moravia. He suggested that in the village of Brinnlitz there was an abandoned textile factory that might suit Schindler's purposes. In the midst of Schindler's negotiations Amon Goeth was arrested, not for sadistic cruelty and murder, but for embezzlement. A jealous junior officer had informed on him. Helen Hirsch, the bruised and beaten maid, whom Amon had called Lena, was interrogated, suspected of collaborating with Amon. His Jewish secretary, who had a photographic memory and could warn Schindler about directives aimed at the prisoners received from the high command, was also interrogated. He said that Herr Commandant never discussed his business affairs with him. Both were believed—for once, being oppressed Jews served them to advantage—and released. A week after Oskar spoke to Sussmuth the gentlemen of the Berlin Armaments Board instructed the Governor of Moravia that Oskar's armaments company was to be allocated the annex of the spinning mill in Brinnlitz. The Party heads in Moravia fiercely resisted. They said that Jewish prisoners would imperil the health of Moravian Germans, that they carried spotted fever. They said that Schindler's small armaments, of dubious value to the war effort, would attract Allied bombers. They wrote and wrote, and protested and protested, but Schindler spent and spent, haggling at staggering prices for what the Department of Economy officials desired. Oskar later estimated that he spent 100,000RM—nearly \$40,000—to grease the transfer to Brinnlitz. His Jewish survivors said, "No. more!" But it would have to be more.

And that is the point at which "Schindler's List" began. He delivered a preliminary list and delivered it to the Administration Building. There were more than a thousand names on it—the names of all the prisoners in the backyard prison camp of Emailia, as well as many more, including that of Helen Hirsch and her little sister, whom Schindler had, so long ago, in Amon's basement kitchen, promised to help. Although Madritsch had still not agreed to join with Schindler, Titsch, his prisoner-secretary typed in the names of about seventy of Madritsch's workers, whose names Titsch had committed to memory. Finally, Schindler put his hand on Titsch's wrist saying that the officials would balk at the list because they were way beyond the limit allowed, 1101. The list was vulnerable through the personnel clerk,





Marcel Goldberg. The new Commandant, who was there to wind down the plant, could not have cared less whose name was on the list as long as the numerical limits were kept. Goldberg had the power to tinker along the edges. But fortunately, Goldberg was bribable. “Do you have any diamonds,” Goldberg would ask. Of course, most prisoners did not. “For this list it takes diamonds, Goldberg would insist.

The camp authorities in the chaos of these last days would sign off on any list as long as it didn’t too drastically exceed the 1101 names that Schindler had been granted. The men on Schindler’s list entrained on October 15. Each prisoner had been given 300 gm of bread to last the journey and a single bucket of water. The trip took 3 days under unbearably crowded conditions. When the doors were unlocked, the men jumped down and an NCO ordered them to strip and shouted them into a delousing center. The camp, like Emailia, had been equipped at Oskar’s expense. And the unique aspect of this is that Oskar, coming to greet the men in a jaunty Tyrolean hat had no serious industrial intention at all. “...Brinnlitz maintained its prisoners’ lives by a series of stunts so rapid that they were nearly magical. To tell the strict truth though, Brinnlitz, both as a prison and as a manufacturing enterprise, was itself, of its nature and in a literal sense, the one sustained, dazzling, integral confidence trick.” (340)

By a terrifying mishap, however, the women on Schindler’s list, whom Oskar had assured the men would arrive after scarcely more delay than there had been with the men, after a short trip from Plaszow found that they had arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau. For the first eight days of their stay in Auschwitz were in great danger of being gassed. They went through frequent mass medical inspections in both October and November. Some of them had been separated in the first days and sent to the huts reserved for the terminally ill. The men clustered around Schindler on the factory floor, asking him again and again where the women were. “I’m getting them out,” Schindler growled. He did not go into explanation of how it would be done. In Auschwitz, Rudolf Hoss ruled as founder, builder, presiding genius. He never murdered any prisoner by his own hand, as Amon Goeth did. He saw himself instead as a technician, a champion of Zyklon B, the hydrogen cyanide pellets that gave off fumes when exposed to air. The blue pellets were inserted into the roofs of and walls of the “bathhouses,” where prisoners were told they were going only to be disinfected. In 1943, Auschwitz was more than a camp; it was a phenomenon.

In 1944 Hoss presided over the entire camp. According to Schindler mythology, it was Hoss himself with whom Schindler wrestled for release of his 300 women. But he also had to deal with Sturmbannführer Friz Hartjen, commandant of Auschwitz II, a suburb of women in the



great “city” of Auschwitz-Berkenau. Schindler called one of his secretaries and told her he would give her a ring that held an enormous diamond if she would pack a suitcase with the best food and liquor in Schindler’s kitchen, and go to Auschwitz to the Commandant, whom he knew could be swayed by a pretty woman. When she did not return within two days Schindler himself went to settle the matter. Once there he was given an offer--“These women aren’t worth much as labor anymore. Why not forget these three hundred and we’ll supply you with another 300 out of our endless herd?” And Schindler responded with his same old line, saying that these women were irreplaceable skilled munitions workers, trained by him over a period of years. They have skills that could not be quickly replaced. When the Commandant cynically asked, “Are you telling me that the nine-year-old and eleven-year-old girls on your list are skilled munitions workers?” The ever-resourceful Schindler said that of course they were. They polish forty-five-millimeter shells. They were selected for their long fingers, which can reach the interior of a shell as no adults can. Not only did Schindler obtain the release of the 300 women, but in the winter of 1944-45, with the help of Sussmuth, he contrived to get a further 3,000 women out of Auschwitz.

In the harsh winter of that year a large group of prisoner-workers from the Goleszow quarry were being transported to labor camps in Moravia. They were shunted to the gates of various camps, whose commandants refused to take them on the grounds that they lacked industrial value. After more than ten days without food or water they were abandoned in a rail yard at Zwittau. A friend of Oskar’s heard the cries and scratching of the poor men trapped in a cattle car and abandoned. He called Oskar to help. When the car arrived at Brinnlitz the doors of the cars were frozen with ice; once the ice was scraped off and the doors opened, they revealed a pyramid of frozen corpses. Liepold, the SS commander of Brinnlitz wanted to burn the corpses, but Oskar, knowing the Jewish prohibition against cremation, and being himself a Catholic, whose church also forbade cremation forbid Liepold from burning them. Instead, he bought a plot in a Catholic cemetery where they were buried. Oskar Schindler established a Jewish cemetery in the Catholic parish of Deutsch-Bielau, a nearby village. He was a most remarkable man. Emilie, his wife, who had finally come to live with him in Brinnlitz, was almost as remarkable. She nursed sick prisoners, fed the old and helpless with porridge she had made in her own kitchen, and was, in short, an angel of compassion.

Oskar’s thirty-seventh birthday was celebrated by himself and all the prisoners. One of the metal workers made him a small box to hold cufflinks in. Twelve-year-old Niusa Horowitz made a rehearsed speech in German in a small voice that he had to stoop to hear. The prisoners were issued three quarters of a kilo of bread each, which they ate and savored. But the day was not entirely festive. During the week a long telegram to Liepold from the higher command



instructed him about disposal of the population when the Russians drew near. There was to be a final selection. The aged and weak were to be immediately shot; the healthy were to be marched out in the direction of Maulthausen. Neither Oskar nor the prisoners knew about the telegram, but they were all aware of rumors that the Poles were digging mass graves in the woods outside of Brinlitz. Oskar's birthday speech was delivered on the factory floor to the assembled prisoners. He made two promises in the speech. First the great tyranny was coming to a close. He spoke (the speech was in German) of the SS men around the walls as if they too were imprisoned and longed for liberation. Many of them, he explained to the prisoner-workers had been conscripted from other units and without their consent put into the SS. Then he promised that he would stay in Brinnlitz until the end of hostilities was announced "And five minutes longer."



He expressed with strong intent that they should not go to graves in the woods. The speech enlivened them. Earlier in the year the prisoners had expected that Moravia would be taken by the Americans, but now they knew that it would be the Russians. The circle of prisoners closest to Schindler were composing a letter in Hebrew explaining what Oskar's record was. It might do some good if they could get Schindler to the American

forces, who not only had a large Jewish component, but also had field rabbis. On the night of May 7th, the BBC announcer on the small radio the prisoners had made for Schindler said that the war in Europe would end at midnight the following night, May 8, 1945.

It was established by the prisoners that Oscar would have to flee after midnight. A truly remarkable story is the love of Schindler's Jews for him. They had to give him a going away present and it had to be more valuable than the metal box. One of the prisoners, who had been with Schindler from the beginning, opened his mouth to show his gold bridgework. He said that without Schindler the gold bridgework and his teeth themselves would be in a heap in some SS warehouse. He had the bridgework dragged out by a fellow prison who had had a dental practice





in Cracow. Another man, Licht, melted the gold down and by noon of May 8th was engraving on the inner circle of a ring he made from it a Talmudic verse in Hebrew, “He who saves a single life saves the entire world.”

Oskar Schindler was a hero who saved an entire world. In Israel, he was valued by Yad Vashem, and commemorated as a “Righteous” man among Gentiles.

References

Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler's Ark* is a Booker Prize-winning historical fiction novel published in 1982 by Australian novelist Thomas Keneally. The United States edition of the book was titled *Schindler's List*; it was later reissued in Commonwealth countries under that name as well.

Steven Spielberg directed *Schindler's List*. *Schindler's List* is a 1993 American epic historical drama film directed and produced by Steven Spielberg and written by Steven Zaillian. With actors Liam Neeson, Ralph Fiennes, Ben Kingsley, Embeth Davidtz, and Caroline Goodall, set in German-occupied Poland during World War 2.

Postscript

Chiune Sugihara was a Japanese diplomat in 1939-1940. Sugihara was sent to Kaunas in Lithuania (because he was fluent in Russian) to open a Japanese consulate there and to simultaneously gather information about the Soviet Union. This was about the time when Hitler's persecution of the Jews had intensified, leaving them with scant destinations for escape. In addition, the Soviet secret police were also arresting Jews.

In the summer of 1940, when refugees came to him with bogus visas for Curacao and other Dutch possessions in America, Sugihara decided to facilitate their escape from war-torn Europe. In the absence of clear instructions from Tokyo, he granted 10-day visas for transit through Japan to hundreds of refugees who held Curacao destination visas. Before closing his consulate in the fall of 1940, Sugihara even gave visas to refugees who lacked all travel papers.

By the time Sugihara left Lithuania he had issued visas to 2,140 persons!

Shortly before his death, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority in Israel, declared Sugihara "[Righteous Among the Nations](#)" for his aid to the refugees





in Lithuania during World War II. Yad Vashem conferred the title in 1984, honoring the former Japanese consul with a ceremony in Jerusalem in January 1985.

Discussion Issues

1. How can we understand the extreme hatred of Jews by the Nazis?
2. What motives are engaged by individuals, such as Schindler or Sugihara, to risk their careers, and even lives, by acting to save people whom they did not know personally?
3. Outline some of the main tactics that Schindler used to save many Jews in various settings.
4. In what sense can we say that Schindler was a “hustler”?

