An Unexpected Hero: Oskar Schindler, the Holocaust, and WWII 1939-1945

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“For this is the story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil, a triumph in eminently measurable, statistical, unsubtle terms.”

- Thomas Keneally, novelist

Between 1939 and 1945, Hitler and the Nazi’s strived to completely abolish the European Jewish population through the Final Solution. Today referred to as the Holocaust, was a tragic time of belief in racial inferiority and mass murder. In the midst of the brutality and genocide driven by the Nazis, a businessman named Oskar Schindler emerged. Although Schindler was no saint, his impact was ever great; he was a member of the Nazi party, his main interest was wealth and success, he was a womanizer and had a strong passion for booze. Despite this, something in him sparked, and he deviated from the path which everyone expected him to follow. He became an unexpected hero who triumphantly saved the lives of more than one thousand Jews through kindness, generosity, courage, and the creation of Schindler’s List.

In 1918, the Great War came to an end, although it did not result in complete peace. Germany suffered from political and economic instability and was outraged by the harsh terms enforced in the Versailles Treaty. Taking advantage of the destabilized Germany, Adolf Hitler seized the opportunity that the instability offered and worked his way to power. Entering the world of politics in 1919, he joined the minor German Workers’ Party in Münich which in 1920 was renamed the National-Sozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei. Through propaganda in the party newspaper, the Völkischer Beobachter, along with a charismatic and mesmerizing

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personality as well as dynamic leadership, he rapidly attracted a broad audience. His ideas of the inequalities among races, nations, and individuals were all used to justify the belief in the superiority of the Aryan race.

Hitler and the Nazis steadily gained electoral strength, and through constant promotion of improved conditions during the depression, soon became the second largest party in the country.\(^4\) Nazi Germany commenced in 1933 when the Nazi party rose to power under the rule of Adolf Hitler (See Appendix A). The Jewish population became a scapegoat for Germany’s rough conditions and from this point on, the Jewish population’s rights were gradually forfeited. The first real act of violence from the Nazis is known as Kristallnacht during which the Nazis demolished Jewish synagogues, schools and businesses, killing almost 100 Jews, but after Kristallnacht the conditions for German Jews grew increasingly worse.\(^5\) In 1935, additional anti-Jewish regulation was enforced by Germany. The Nuremberg Laws aimed to clarify the racial policy which the rest of the Nazi dogma was based. The purpose of these actions were to methodically exclude and remove all Jewish influence from the Aryan society and according to President and CEO of the Shoah Foundation, Dr. Michael Berenbaum, “the Nazis followed a very specific pattern which was to take the population that was defined as Jews, to isolate them, to stigmatise them, to confiscate their assets and to make it impossible for them to continue with a normal human life and to exploit their assets.”\(^6\)

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Looking to make money, businessman Oskar Schindler (See Appendix B), came to Poland from what today is the Czech Republic. From an early age, Schindler seemed to go his own way and had little respect for rules and regulation. He showed little form of loyalty to any country and seemed pragmatic with an easy time adjusting to new circumstances. Schindler was also reckless, drank too much and didn’t seem to worry much about life in general.\(^7\) These traits could perhaps explain how he could handle the situation the war put him in.

In early 1939 he joined the Nazi party.\(^8\) Before long, he connected with the local Gestapo bigwigs through common interests in women, money, and illegal alcohol (See Appendix C). It was through these connections that he, when occupied Poland was being torn apart by the brutality of the Holocaust, bought and established a factory in Kraków that would come to be known as the Emalia Factory (See Appendix D). The factory produced lacquered goods and ammunition for the German front and was run by the cheapest labor around: Jews. The scarce Jews who had any wealth left, invested in the Emalia Factory in return for the opportunity of being employed. He kept hiring more Jewish workers, stating their skills to be “essential”. Although his initial intentions for opening his factory and hiring Jews may have been to earn profit, Schindler’s factory became a place of safety. With a new desire, possibly out of guilt or the realization, to save lives, throughout the war Schindler operated at the heart of the system using bribery, black marketeering, and lies in order to protect his workers.

The first concentration camps in Germany were established in early 1933. Later, once the war had broken out in 1939, the number of camps grew rapidly and expanded to the east. When


first established, the camps were to work as detention sites for captive political enemies with differing ideas, such as trade unionists and Social Democrats, but were soon joined by German and Austrian homosexuals, “Rhineland bastards”, and Gypsies. Although, the concentration camps became more than just detention sites; they became the key tool in the Nazis’ Final Solution, and a site where mass murder and the extinction of the Jewish population was the main intention.

When Czechoslovakia broke apart and became part of Hungary, Jews no longer had a law to protect them, and they lost their civil rights due to the alliance Hungarians had with the Nazis. Czechoslovakian born survivor, Irene Fogel Weiss, witnessed this first hand and shares how “Jewish children were thrown out of Hungarian school… We couldn’t ride the trains and we had to wear the yellow star.” Holocaust survivor Eva Lavi “remembers how her mother made her sit outside in below-zero weather, clutching a standing pipe, as Nazis searched her home in Poland. She remembers her father telling her to swallow a spoonful of cyanide… only to have her mother object at the last minute. She remembers seeing her twin cousins shot to death as they ran up a hill at labor camp.”

During the evacuations and deportations, the Jews had not entirely understood what was occurring. The information they had access to was extremely limited and very restricted; it wasn’t until later that they started to recognize forewarnings of what was to come. During the deportations (See Appendix E), Jews were lined up and ordered to empty their pockets. If a

single zloty was found, the owner was shot on the spot. The Jews were then transported in overcrowded cattle wagons (See Appendix F), without water or food, to various camps. “All of a sudden, we realized we’re someplace we’re not supposed to be,” explains the youngest of Schindler’s Jews, Celina Biniaz. “Auschwitz.”12 Upon arrival, the wagons were unloaded, and the Jews were separated into gender lines. All those of old age, along with women with children under the age of 1413, were sent to gas chambers specially constructed to serve as a tool for mass murder. Often the chambers would appear to be showers, but instead of water, gas would be pumped out in its place. Those considered to be healthy as well as children over the age of 14, on the other hand, were selected for work and spared, but the living conditions were horrific.14 The prisoners were first given showers and assigned beds. After being thoroughly cleaned and shaved, they received striped uniforms and were tattooed with personal identification numbers. From that point on, the Jews no longer had names, but numbers.15 They lived in barracks of wood or brick which they shared with more than 400 other prisoners. The bunks were uncomfortable, there was limited access to water, and a lack of food (See Appendix G). Malnutrition and disease were common causes of death, and the smallest mistakes or acts of dishonesty would result in severe punishment or execution.16

The atrocity of the Nazi’s Final Solution began escalating at a very fast pace. This led Oskar Schindler to heighten his protection of his Jewish workers, despite him having the full privileges of a Nazi, and being well aware of his gain from the Jews’ affliction.\textsuperscript{17} Schindler was deeply affected when seeing innocent people being deported to concentration camps and witnessing a German attack on the Jewish ghetto in Kraków in 1942. He went on to say “Beyond this day, no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system.”\textsuperscript{18} And so he did.

In 1943, Schindler’s workers were transferred from Kraków to what would soon become the Krakau-Plaszow concentration camp (See Appendix H). Although this move did not rid the workers of the harsh conditions of Plaszow, Schindler saw to it that his workers were taken care of and not further deported, justifying this with the argument that they were essential to the war effort. Those Jews living at Emalia were spared the systematic cruelty and homicide of Plaszow.\textsuperscript{19} Schindler successfully manipulated and tricked officials for three years by methods such as using cognac in order to have his workers appear less healthy than they actually were. The food provided for Schindler’s workers came out of his own pocket and medical supplies were stolen to aid them.\textsuperscript{20} Schindler warned his workers of upcoming actions in which the Gestapo would menace and shoot the Kraków Jews.\textsuperscript{21} “During the entire period in which we worked for Director Schindler he did everything possible to save the lives of the greatest possible number of Jews, in


\textsuperscript{19} “Oskar Schindler.” \textit{United States Holocaust Memorial Museum}, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/oskar-schindler.


spite of the tremendous difficulties; especially during a time when receiving Jewish workers caused great difficulties with the authorities.”

During three years, Schindler managed to manipulate the SS, he was also arrested by officials three times, although they were unsuccessful in charging him.

After the transfer of the Emalia Jews to Plaszow in 1943, Schindler relocated his business to Brünnlitz and created what is recognized today as Schindler’s List. The list started off as nothing more than a lineup of workers’ names who were to work in Schindler’s new factory. Emalia became perceived as a safe haven from the Nazi atrocities. Holocaust survivor and, significantly, Schindler Jew Leon Leyson said that “anybody who was related to us in Poland had died at the hands of the Nazis and we were the only ones that survived and the reason we survived is because we ended up on Schindler’s List.”

In the midst of the atrocity and cruelty of the Nazi’s Final Solution, Oskar Schindler and his Emalia factory showed a glimpse of humanity. This humanity, his acts of kindness, and pure generosity, gave hope and life to over a thousand Jews. In his speech, delivered upon the proclamation of the German surrender, Schindler said that “the difficulties of protecting Jewish laborers often seemed insurmountable”, but all the same, Schindler “tried and risked everything to acquire additional food” and was “putting everything on the line to protect [them]”.

22 Signed by Stern, Isaak. Addressed to Office in Krakow, Dr. Hilfstein, Chaim Salpeter. 8 May 1945, Brünnlitz.
Schindler’s disregard for authority, his lifelong experience of adapting to new situations, and going his own way, may have also enabled him to do what others could not or did not do. Schindler proved that if one takes action and responds when one sees hatred and antisemitism, one *can* win and *can* triumph over evil. French dramatist Romain Rolland said, “A hero is a man who does what he can.” And this is exactly what Oskar Schindler did. He never surrendered but continued to fight and give everything he had for what he believed. He repeatedly showed unfailing courage in a time when everything felt hopeless. "... I just couldn't stand by and see people destroyed” he said. “I did what I could, what I had to do, what my conscience told me I must do.”

He, an ordinary businessman, showed true acts of heroism.

By 1945, an estimate of six million Jews had been murdered under the hands of the Nazis. Tragically enough, anti-semitism outlived the Nazi’s defeat and the liberation of concentration camps. Seeking safety, survivors faced anti-semitism in regional areas of central and eastern Europe, but eventually settling in displaced persons camps with thousands of other survivors. Scarred from the four year tragedy and terror, in an attempt to rebuild their lives, they started to form communities and create a culture. With a scarce amount of food, clothing, medicine, and other necessities, they did everything they could to normalize their lives and build a future.

“The Holocaust is not about the number 6 million. It’s about the individuals, the names, the people - it’s about their stories.”

Halina Silber, one of Schindler’s many survivors, stated

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that “To us, Schindler was an angel. [He was] a single individual who had the courage and dared to make a difference. ... He was just a decent man who could not ignore human injustice.”  

The Holocaust isn’t such a distant atrocity. Schindler Jew survivors, alongside others who outlived the Nazi’s brutality, live among us. They have their stories to tell, and are doing so in hopes of creating awareness and understanding amongst us in order to prevent history from repeating itself.

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“Oskar Schindler Timeline.” Timetoast, www.timetoast.com/timelines/oskar-schindler-752e8a9d-6be9-4e7b-bea3-1f172ed1eff5. This image portrays Hitler after gaining power.
This is a portrait of Oskar Schindler.
Appendix C


This photograph depicts Oskar Schindler entertaining Nazi Officials.
“Oskar Schindler Timeline.” *Timetoast*,
www.timetoast.com/timelines/oskar-schindler-752e8a9d-6be9-4e7b-bea3-1f172ed1eff5.
This photograph is of Schindler and his newly opened Emalia factory in Kraków.
Appendix E


This image shows Jews being rounded up and forced out of their homes.

This image shows the cattle wagons used to transport the Jews and other victims to various campsites.

*All That's Interesting*, All That's Interesting, 9 May 2018,

allthatsinteresting.com/holocaust-photos#45.

This image shows the crowded and uncomfortable living spaces in the camps and consequences of lack of food and malnutrition.
This map shows the location of Schindler’s factory in relation to the Plaszow Concentration camp and the Kraków Ghetto.