

OSKAR SCHINDLER

Adapted from the *Schindler's List* Study Guide, from *Facing History and Ourselves*

The film Schindler's List focuses on the years of the Holocaust—a time when millions of Jews and other men, women, and children were murdered solely because of their ancestry. It is one of the darkest chapters in human history. Yet an appalling number of people, young and old, know little if anything about it. Even today the world has not yet learned the lesson of those terrible years. There are far too many places where hate, intolerance, and genocide still exist. Thus Schindler's List is not just a “Jewish story” or a “German story”—it is a human story. And its subject matter applies to every generation. Schindler's List is simply about racial hatred—which is the state of mind that attacks not what makes us people but what makes us different from each other. It is my hope that Schindler's List will awaken and sustain an awareness of such evil and inspire this generation and future generations to seek an end to racial hatred.

— Steven Spielberg, Amblin Entertainment, Inc.

People were suspicious of the stories they heard of a Nazi war profiteer who rescued Jews. Oskar Schindler came to Krakow, Poland, from his native German town of Zwittau. Unlike most of the carpetbaggers, he took over a factory that had lain idle and in bankruptcy for many years. In the winter of 1939–40, he began operations with four thousand square meters of floor space and a hundred workers, of whom seven were

Jewish.

Production started with a rush, for Schindler was a shrewd and tireless worker. During the first year the labor force expanded to three hundred, including 150 Jews. By the end of 1942, the factory had grown to 45,000 square meters and employed almost eight hundred men and women. The Jewish workers, of whom there were now 370, all came from the Krakow ghetto. “To avoid life at the camps, it had become a tremendous advantage,” says Itzhak Stern, Schindler’s Jewish bookkeeper, “to be able to leave the ghetto in the daytime and work in a German factory.”

Word spread among Krakow’s Jews that Schindler’s factory was the place to work. Schindler helped his Jewish employees by falsifying the factory records. He recorded old people as being twenty years younger and listed children as adults. Lawyers, doctors, and engineers were registered as metalworkers, mechanics, and draftsmen—all trades considered essential to war production.

From behind his high bookkeeper’s table, Stern could see through the glass door of Schindler’s private office. “Almost every day, from morning until evening, officials and other visitors came to the factory and made me nervous. Schindler used to keep pouring them vodka and joking with them. When they left he would ask me in, close the door, and then quietly tell me whatever they had come for. He used to tell them that he knew how to get work out of these Jews and that he wanted more brought in. That was how we managed to get in the families and relatives all the time and save them from deportation.”

Then, on March 13, 1943, came the orders to close the Krakow

ghetto. All Jews were moved to the forced-labor camp of Plaszow, outside the city. Conditions there, even for the graduates of the terrible Krakow ghetto, were shocking. The prisoners suffered horribly and either died by the hundreds in camp or were moved to Auschwitz.

Stern, along with Schindler's other workers, had also been moved to Plaszow from the ghetto, but like some 25,000 other inmates who inhabited the camp and had jobs on the outside, they continued spending their days in the factory. When he fell gravely ill one day, Stern sent word to Schindler pleading for help. Schindler came at once, bringing essential medicine, and continued his visits until Stern recovered. But what he had seen in Plaszow had chilled him. Nor did he like the turn things had taken in the factory.

Increasingly helpless before the frenetic Jew-haters and Jew-destroyers, Schindler found that he could no longer joke easily with the German officials who came on inspections. The double game he was playing was becoming more difficult. Troubling incidents happened more often.

The increasing frequency of unpleasant incidents in the factory and the evil his eyes had seen at the Plaszow camp probably moved Schindler into a more active role. In the spring of 1943 he began the all-out conspiring, string-pulling, bribery, and shrewd outguessing of Nazi officialdom that ultimately saved so many lives. At this point the real legend begins. For the next two years, Oskar Schindler's constant obsession was to save the greatest possible number of Jews from the Auschwitz gas chambers, only sixty kilometers from Krakow.

Plaszow seemed doomed. Other labor camps in Poland had already

been shut down and their inhabitants liquidated. At the prompting of Stern and the others in the “inner office” circle, one evening Schindler managed to convince one of his drinking companions, General Schindler—no relative—that Plaszow’s camp workshops would be ideally suited for serious war production. The general fell in with the idea and ordered the necessary materials, wood and metal, for the camp. As a result, Plaszow was officially transformed into a war-essential “concentration camp.” And though conditions hardly improved, it came off the list of labor camps that were then being eliminated, inhabitants and all.

But by the spring of 1944, the Germans were retreating from the Eastern Front in earnest. They ordered Plaszow and all its sub-camps to be emptied. Schindler and his workers had no illusions about what a move to another concentration camp implied. The time had come for Oskar Schindler to play his trump card, and he was ready.

He went to work on all his drinking companions, and on his connections in military and industrial circles in Krakow and Warsaw. He bribed, cajoled, and pleaded, working desperately against time, fighting for what everyone assured him was a lost cause. He persisted until someone, somewhere in the hierarchy, perhaps impatient to end the seemingly trifling business, finally gave him the authorization to move a force of seven hundred men and three hundred women from the Plaszow camp into a factory at Brennece, in his native Czechoslovakia. Most of the other 25,000 men, women, and children at Plaszow were sent to Auschwitz, where they found the same end that several million other Jews had already met. But out of the vast calamity, and through the stubborn efforts of one man, a thousand half-starved, sick, and almost

broken Jews were given a reprieve.

The *Schindlerjuden* by now depended on Schindler. His compassion and sacrifice were unstinting. He spent every bit of money still left in his possession and traded his wife's jewelry as well, for food, clothing, and medicine, and for schnapps with which to bribe the many SS investigators. He furnished a secret hospital with stolen and black-market medical equipment and made a three-hundred-mile trip himself carrying two enormous flasks filled with Polish vodka and bringing them back full of medicine. His wife, Emilie, cooked and cared for the sick and earned her own reputation and gratitude.

Just about the time the Nazi empire was crashing down, someone called Schindler from the railway station late one evening, asking whether he cared to accept delivery of two railway cars full of near-frozen Jews. The train had left Auschwitz ten days earlier, carrying almost a hundred sick men in cars frozen shut at five degrees Fahrenheit until some factory would take them. When informed of the condition of the prisoners, no factory manager would. Until Schindler.

The train was awesome to behold. Ice had formed on the locks, and the cars had to be opened with axes and acetylene torches. Inside, the miserable relics of human beings were stretched out, frozen stiff, so that each had to be unloaded like a carcass of frozen beef. Thirteen were unmistakably dead, but the others still breathed.

Throughout that night and for many days and nights following, Oskar and Emilie Schindler and a number of the factory men worked to revive the frozen and starved bodies in one large room of the factory that they emptied for the purpose. Three more men died, but with care, warmth,

milk, and medicine, the others gradually rallied. All this had been achieved surreptitiously, with the factory guards as usual receiving bribes to dissuade them from informing the SS commandant.

Such was life at Brenneke until the Russians arrived on May 9 and ended the nightmare. One early morning shortly after that, Schindler, Emilie, and several of their closest (Jewish) friends discreetly disappeared, not to be heard from until they turned up, months later, deep in Austria's U.S. Zone.

To receive a Schindler's List Study Guide, call **Facing History and Ourselves** at 617-232-1595, or visit its Web site, www.facing.org.

Steven Spielberg created **Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation** to videotape and archive interviews with Holocaust survivors all over the world. For more information, visit its Web site, www.VHF.org.