

*Schindler's List: The Book and the Film*

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History is learned not only from textbooks, but from the surrounding culture. Books and films contribute to our perceptions of the past, as do other aspects of both elite culture and popular culture. For example, "Gone with the Wind" both the book and the film, have done much to shape American ideas of the Old South and the Civil War.<sup>1</sup> But as Guido Knopp and Siegfried Quandt point out,<sup>2</sup> historical films, though often criticized by academics, are too rarely subjected to systematic analysis.<sup>3</sup>

Recently a book and a film have come along which can be useful for the classroom, both at the secondary level and in higher education, "Schindler's List." The purpose of this essay is to assess these two versions of a very compelling piece of history, one of which became exceedingly well known in the United States during 1994, and will doubtless continue to be available and to shape historical perceptions of the Holocaust in many parts of the world for many years to come.

Picture this: Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist, and Itzhak Stern, a Jewish prisoner and Schindler's accountant, sit alone in a sparsely furnished room in late 1944. They wrack their brains to write up the list of Jewish laborers who will be transferred from a deadly Nazi concentration camp to the relative safety of Schindler's factory in Moravia. As the night wears on both men come up with the names of the workers who have been employed by Schindler, along with members of their families. But the pressure is on--only so many names may be on the list, and there is so little time.

Or, picture this: A similar setting, but with Oskar Schindler is Raimund Tisch, an Austrian Catholic civilian and a manager for another local factory.<sup>4</sup> Like Schindler, Tisch is sympathetic toward the plight of the Jewish prisoners, and he has been systematically photographing the horrors of the concentration camp for future reference.<sup>5</sup> When they finish drafting the list, it goes to a Jewish prisoner who works as a clerk in the concentration camp office, Marcel Goldberg. He types up the final copy, but as he does so he asks for bribes to get a few favored additional prisoners onto the list.

The first picture is from the film by Steven Spielberg, the second from the book by Thomas Keneally. As we will see, though the two versions of "Schindler's List" tell a very similar story, they diverge significantly at certain points. The director and the author have each brought their own creative genius to the story of Oskar Schindler, a story both incredible and true. No doubt a three hour film cannot carry through the detail and complexity of a 398 page book, and it should not be expected to do so.

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1 See Robert E. May's analysis, "Gone With the Wind as Southern History: A Reappraisal," *The Southern Quarterly*, Fall 1978, pp. 51-64.

2 *Geschichte im Fernsehen: Ein Handbuch* (Darmstadt, 1988).

3 See Richard A. Voeltz, "The Return of Martin Guerre, Teaching History in Images, History in Words," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, Fall 1993, pp. 68-72, and also Bullitt Lowry, "Novels of the Two World Wars," *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, Spring 1995, p. 30.

4 Thomas Keneally, *Schindler's List* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 291.

5 Keneally, p. 229-232.

It would be shallow and unfair to criticize a film for simplifying and dramatizing a story, just as it would be unfair to criticize a book for lacking the vividness of a film. But it is not unfair to compare the two works, one a non-fiction novel, the other a film based upon it. In fact, for the teacher and for the student of history who wants to get at the truth of the Holocaust, that comparison can yield some very useful results.

Let us first turn to Keneally's book. The book clearly classifies itself as a novel. There are no footnotes. There is no index or bibliography. Thomas Keneally, when he published the book, already had some fourteen books to his credit, all of them novels.

Yet, as Keneally states in his introduction to *Schindler's List*, the book is a novel based on facts, not a work of his own imagination. He carefully interviewed survivors who had known Schindler (but not Schindler himself, because the man died before Keneally began his research). He unearthed documents, from the private collections of Schindler's friends and family, and from the archives at Yad Vashem, the Israeli memorial center for the Holocaust. He knew that old "war stories," told and retold in the intervening years, can sometimes grow with the telling, and so he brought a critical eye to his work, doing his best to sort myth from fact. But he also used his creative skills to reconstruct dialog and to set the scene in words which his readers could understand. Through the whole process he says he was determined to "avoid all fiction, since fiction would debase the record, and to distinguish between reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature."<sup>6</sup>

To Thomas Keneally, born and raised in Australia in a non-Jewish family, Schindler's escapades comprised a story just waiting to be told. To tell it right, he wanted to stick as closely to the truth of every detail as he could.

Now, let us turn to the film. In the theater, or on the video tape, we see a creation of a gifted film director, intended to portray the realities of the Holocaust. "It will be," Steven Spielberg told the press in 1992, "the most authentic film I have made so far." Keneally himself wrote a first draft of the screenplay. The screenplay as it appeared was by Steven Zaillian. Spielberg was the director, and it was co-produced by himself, Gerald R. Molen, and Branko Lustig, the latter a concentration camp survivor. Well known artists besides Spielberg, including actors Liam Neeson and Ben Kingsley, and musicians John Williams and Itzhak Perlman contributed their talents to what we see and hear.

The film is not a documentary. Parts of it were photographed at their original locations in Poland, for example at Schindler's actual factory in Cracow and at the infamous camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. The film is in black and white, and certain scenes were photographed with hand-held cameras, as if they had been taken in the midst of the brutal chaos of the events themselves. Every scene in the story of Schindler and his list was skillfully staged for the movie. Nevertheless, its purpose was not merely to tell a fabulous story, but to portray important truths about the Holocaust.

To Stephen Spielberg, a Jewish American, "Schindler's List" was an adventure story just waiting to be brought to life on the screen. But it was more than just another

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6 Keneally, p. 10

adventure, like the Indiana Jones tales, because it reflected true historical events, and because it implied vital historical lessons.

### COMPARATIVE SCENES

Without going through the film scene by scene, or the book chapter by chapter, let us look at half a dozen examples to show both some differences and similarities between the two works.

1. Itzhak Stern, the Jewish accountant played by Ben Kingsley in the film, also had a major role in the book. But, perhaps to concentrate the minds of the viewers and to heighten the drama of the events, Spielberg and his writers combined several figures from the book (and from the historical events) into this single person. Keneally describes several men with whom Schindler worked in the five and a half years which formed the heart of the story. Stern was probably the most important. But there was also Abraham Bankier, another Jewish businessman with excellent contacts to possible investors in the Jewish community, and the office manager of the factory which Schindler took over.<sup>7</sup> Keneally recounts that it was Bankier who arranged deals with these men, often in the apartments of the Jews themselves, not Stern, who is shown in the film arranging a meeting in Schindler's car. Bankier became the manager of Schindler's enamelware factory, and he was the one Schindler rescued from deportation in the railroad cattle cars when Bankier was caught by the SS without his proper work permit, rather than Stern.<sup>8</sup>

In the character "Stern" in Spielberg's film is also something of another person, Mietek Pemper, a young man who was a student of accounting, could take dictation in either Polish or German, and had a photographic memory. As a clerk in the SS office at the Plaszow concentration camp, Pemper had access to some secret information. That made him especially vulnerable to the Commandant's unpredictable brutality, but he was able to pass along important information to Schindler at important points in the story.

And it was the German-Austrian civilian manager of another concentration camp factory, Raimund Tisch, who sat adding names to Schindler's list far into the night on that fateful occasion shown in the film, not Itzhak Stern, as we have seen. Keneally is very careful about telling the story of the writing of the list. The list really does exist. "A copy can be seen today in the archives of the Yad Vashem" in Israel, wrote Keneally, "but the circumstances encourage legends." Many of the survivors whose names were on the list had versions of the events to explain about how their names got there, but of course the story of the exact circumstances must have originated with Schindler himself. And, wrote Keneally, Schindler was "a man with a taste for embellishing a story."<sup>9</sup> The typing, according to Keneally, was done by a Jewish prisoner clerk, Marcel Goldberg. Goldberg had once been active in the Zionist youth, but, as Keneally describes him, opportunistically joined the puppet Jewish police in the Cracow ghetto, collaborated as a clerk in the concentration camp office, and took bribes of diamonds to cross off some names and add others to the list. As "Lord of the Lists," as Keneally calls him, Goldberg put his own name on the list, survived the war, and left for Brazil soon after liberation.<sup>10</sup> In the film Marcel Goldberg appears, but only briefly, playing a relatively minor role.

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7 Keneally, p. 68.

8 Keneally, p. 124.

9 Keneally, pp. 290-291.

10 Keneally, pp. 297, 383.

At Schindler's relocated factory in Brinnlitz, in what had been Czechoslovakia, the original Itzhak Stern played a very important role, just as he did in the film. And in the post-war world Stern was prominent among the survivors who helped to tell Schindler's story.

2. There were several exciting events in the book which were never mentioned in the film. One example must suffice. Through a Viennese dentist, Dr. Sedcelak, Schindler was put in contact with a secret Jewish organization in Hungary. At the time, 1942, Hungary was officially an ally of Nazi Germany, but controlled its own internal affairs, and the dictatorship was lax enough to make such organizations possible. In December 1942 Schindler was smuggled over the border into Hungary in a freight car carrying Nazi newspapers, and he met with several underground leaders in Budapest including Dr. Rezo Kastner. Jews in Hungary had heard terrible rumors about the fate of their co-religionists in Poland. Schindler, as a German and a member of the Nazi Party, was able to confirm these rumors in lurid detail. In addition to providing crucial information, Schindler agreed to act as conduit for secret relief money which originated with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. A few days later he was smuggled back into Poland in another freight car.<sup>11</sup>

This episode in Schindler's life, with its melodramatic risks, was unmentioned in the film. It can be argued, of course, that there simply was not time to show everything in one film. But this incident might at least have been mentioned, because it throws important light on Oskar Schindler the man. It was one thing to provide extra food and help his workers avoid SS beatings. In fact many German bosses did that from time to time. It was quite another to put himself at risk by smuggling himself into Hungary to confer with the Jewish underground, particularly after he had been arrested once already, and he knew that the Gestapo would have loved to catch him in the act of anything which could be considered treasonous activity.

3. Keneally's book is forthright in describing the humiliations and brutalities which the Nazis imposed upon the Jews. Spielberg's film portrays some of these incidents, but often they are understated or not shown at all. Let us note two examples.

Early in the German occupation, a squad of SS men moved against the fourteenth-century Old Synagogue in Cracow. The SS men pulled the Torah scrolls from the Ark and threw them on the synagogue floor, forcing Jews to file past and spit upon the holy scripture. Then they shot the Jews and burned the synagogue.<sup>12</sup> This act of desecration, arson, and murder, was not portrayed in the film. Indeed, the religious aspects of Nazi policies and Jewish reactions was dealt with very gingerly by Spielberg, when he dealt with them at all.

A second example was the death of the engineer Krautwirt. At the Plaszow concentration camp, on the edge of Cracow, prisoners were often lined up and forced to watch acts of punishment and executions, presumably to intimidate them into working harder at their assigned jobs. In one particularly graphic passage of his book, Keneally described the hangings of Krautwirt and a boy named Haubenstock. The boy was hanged first, but he was too light for the rope to do its work, so the camp commandant, Amon Goeth, killed him with a pistol shot. When Krautwirt saw the horror of the boy's execution, he took a razor blade from his pocket and

11 Keneally, pp. 145-158.

12 Keneally, pp. 60-61.

slashed his wrists.<sup>13</sup> Though the man was rapidly bleeding to death, Goeth ordered the hanging to proceed. Blood gushing from both wrists, covering his executioners, he was hanged before the camp assembly.

Branko Lustig, co-producer of the film with Stephen Spielberg, has said that he was quite prepared to use more brutal violence in the film. As a survivor himself, and as producer of other films on World War II themes, he did not believe graphic violence was out of place. But Spielberg declined, wishing to leave the worst to the imagination of the audience. He did not want too much "Indiana Jones," and consciously understated the brutality.

4. In terms of personal morality, Oskar Schindler was no saint. He regularly cheated on his wife, enjoying the intimate company of many women. This fact was treated very openly by both Keneally and Spielberg. The bedroom scene in the film, which immediately preceded the incident in which Schindler rescued his Jewish manager from deportation, has enough graphic sex to earn an "adults only" rating for the film, irrespective of all the rest of the nudity and violence imposed upon the victims of the Holocaust. That scene did not appear in Keneally's book.

But another scene occurs late in the book, in which Keneally portrays Schindler skinny dipping in an improvised hot tub at his factory. A Jewish worker who had noticed Schindler described the scene to Keneally. "Oskar floated, naked and enormous. A blond SS girl . . . her naked breasts buoyant at the surface, shared the water with him. . . the girl was delicious."<sup>14</sup> One or another additional sex scenes are not that important to Spielberg's film, of course, but the point of this one was that it came late in the war, after (according to Spielberg's film) Schindler had reconciled with his wife and pledged his absolute loyalty. The record, as shown by Keneally, was really something else. And, indeed, we know that Schindler continued to practice marital infidelity after World War II, eventually leaving his wife altogether.

5. Amon Goeth, commandant of the Plaszow concentration camp and the SS officer Schindler dealt with most regularly, is portrayed by both Keneally and Spielberg as a corrupt and pathological killer. What does not come through in the film, however, is that the Nazi administration itself was on Goeth's trail and eventually removed him from office and arrested him for dereliction of duty. It was not the arbitrary murders, Keneally pointed out, which got Goeth into trouble with the SS hierarchy. He could cover that with excuses about maintaining discipline. It was his personal and financial corruption, much of which involved Schindler.

Surely there was not enough time in Spielberg's film to explore this aspect of the Nazi administration. But students of the Third Reich will do well to remember that many Nazis were "honest fanatics," who loyally carried out the letter of Nazi law, and who were greatly offended at the personal self-indulgence of a man like Goeth. Moreover, the fact that Goeth had been arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo also put Schindler at additional risk. Confessions forced from Goeth about their dealings could have meant arrest and even execution for Schindler himself. Eventually, Goeth was released by the SS, but not restored to office. After World War II, as shown in the film, Goeth was returned to Poland for trial and execution.

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13 Keneally, p. 217.

14 Keneally, p. 335.

6. Spielberg's film shows the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution reacting non-violently even in the most extreme circumstances. Their opposition to the Nazis, when it existed, was always a matter of clever evasion of Nazi wrath rather than militancy. None of the Jews in the film were ever armed, and none ever struck out against their oppressors, even in hopeless acts of desperation. This portrayal brings up one of the most hotly disputed issues surrounding the Holocaust, namely the degree to which Jews did or did not go meekly "like sheep to the slaughter."

Keneally's book shows another side of that issue. In the book, Jews occasionally carried guns. Our first view of Poldek Pfefferberg, one of the Jewish heroes of the book and the film, had him armed with a pearl-handled twenty-two caliber pistol, which he was ready to use on Oskar Schindler himself before Pfefferberg got to know him.

Cracow never had a violent Jewish uprising like the dramatic Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943. But Keneally mentions that the Jewish underground did take vengeance against the oppressing Germans with guerrilla tactics, including a bombing at a restaurant reserved for SS men, killing seven of them.

After relocating his factory back to the Czech mountains, Schindler started acquiring small arms for a few trusted Jewish prisoners at his plant. The SS guards were always kept at a distance from the Jewish workers, but there was a real chance that the SS would follow higher orders and liquidate all Jews they could get their hands on at the end of the war. Pfefferberg and a number of others in the factory were given small arms by Schindler to guard against such an occurrence. As a matter of fact, as shown in the film, the SS chose to leave the camp quietly at the end of the war, and no violent clash ever occurred. But it is important, in order to get a full picture of the role of the Jews in their own salvation, to know that there were those on Schindler's list who were armed and prepared to fight if the occasion were right, and to know that Schindler knew of that operation and supported it.

#### HIGHEST DRAMA

Finally, let us look at two of the most dramatic and memorable incidents in the film, one of which closely follows the book while the other does not.

The film itself is shot in black and white, but on certain occasions color is introduced to make a special point. Midway through the story, in June of 1942, when the SS was unleashing its wrath to clear the Cracow ghetto of the Jews, we see a little girl who seemed to epitomize the dreadful condition of the victims. Modern technology permitted Spielberg to show her wearing a bright red coat, while the rest of the awful action proceeded in black and white. On that particular day, Schindler was taking his exercise by horseback riding in a park on a bluff overlooking the ghetto. He saw the little girl in red and he finally realized fully that, as a German and a member of the Nazi party, he was part of a system which was going far beyond historical forms of oppression and exploitation, to genocide.

Both Keneally and Spielberg tell the same story about the girl in red, a story which was based on Schindler's own recounting of the situation in subsequent years. Each form, in the book and in the film, has certain unique aspects, but in each case the meaning is clear. Schindler was quite willing to enrich himself through war profits based on slave labor. But with the little girl in red he realized the full enormity of the Nazi "final solution." The innocent little girl clarified the issue, and Schindler's life changed. The profiteer became the secret rescuer. From that day forward, he

claimed, "no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system."<sup>15</sup>

The final scene at Schindler's factory takes place after the German surrender had been announced. Schindler, the Factory Director, was about to become a fugitive, fleeing westward before the advancing Soviet armies, hoping to save life and limb by surrendering to the Americans or by finding a haven in neutral Switzerland. Just before he was to leave, a committee of Jews from the factory presented him with a letter describing his actions and a gold ring, especially made for him by craftsmen in the camp with gold volunteered from a prisoner's dental bridgework. On the ring was inscribed a Talmudic verse, "He who saves a single life saves the world entire." According to Keneally, "Oskar became very solemn" when he received the ring and placed it on his finger.<sup>16</sup> His departure from the camp was delayed because someone had cut the wiring under the hood of his Mercedes, adding drama to the situation, but he soon had it repaired and he and a small entourage were on their way.

Spielberg's film tells something of a different story. When Schindler received the ring and was about to get into his car, the once elegant and powerful industrialist virtually collapsed in tears, lamenting that he should have done more. He was comforted by the Jews whom he has saved, Itzhak Stern chief among them. He then left the assembled factory workers late in the night, a humbled and broken man. This scene has been widely criticized for providing an unnecessarily melodramatic Hollywood ending for the film.

Branko Lustig, co-producer of the film, when asked about the scene, explained it as follows. The script, as written, called for several hundred actors, extras, and crew to be assembled for the closing scene. It was an unpleasant night, and everyone was cold and tired. Liam Neeson, spontaneously, developed the script by breaking down in tears. Watching the filming, a short distance away from Spielberg and Neeson, Branko Lustig was concerned about the apparently overly dramatic interpretation. He sent a message to Spielberg, asking him to reshoot the scene, this time with no tears. Spielberg declined, and thus we see on film the version which varied so clearly from the book.<sup>17</sup>

#### FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Whoever wants to know the truth about the Holocaust, will find much to offer in both Keneally's book and Spielberg's film. The truth of history, of course, is more than just the historical facts. The facts themselves are dependent on the sources from which they are derived and on the interpretations to which they contribute.

There are those who, for political purposes of their own, try to discredit the witnesses to the Holocaust by pointing out that there are inconsistencies among the versions of the various events which witnesses recall. There are also differences in the presentations of these witnesses' recollections, whether through a non-fiction novel or a film. Such differences add depth and texture to the realities of the historical record. They do not deny its ultimate truth. However many variations one might find in the picture of Oskar Schindler, it remains true that it was Nazi

<sup>15</sup> Keneally, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> Keneally, pp. 368, 372.

<sup>17</sup> Branko Lustig, interviewed before a live audience by Jeffrey Lyons, question by Gordon Mork, Indianapolis, 10/30/94.

policy to annihilate the Jews of Europe, and that this one German industrialist, though he wore the swastika in his lapel, used his wit and guile to save more than one thousand human beings from the "final solution to the Jewish problem."

A fully documented account of Oskar Schindler still remains to be written. A 1983 BBC documentary film by Jon Blair, based on interviews as well as Keneally's book, gives some important insights into the man and the events. A magazine article by Herbert Steinhouse, a Canadian journalist, was written in the late 1940's but was turned down by several publications at the time and was printed only in 1994, after the film made Schindler's name a household word.<sup>18</sup> *Schindler's Legacy*, a book by Elinor J. Brecher, an American journalist, adds additional details to the story, based on interviews with people who survived with Schindler, and now are living in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Further documentation exists for the historian who seeks it out in archives in four or five countries. Much of it was assembled in Israel at the Yad Vashem research institute when Schindler's story was authenticated for his inclusion on the list of recognized "righteous persons" who saved Jews during the Holocaust. But however much testimony and documentation survives, we will probably never be able to know the whole truth about what made Schindler do what he did.

For the teacher, the combination of the book and the film (which is widely available on TV tape) provide a wide variety of options for classroom use. If one has the time and resources, all students could be required to see the film and read the book so that they could see for themselves the similarities and differences described above. More practically, students might be shown the film and then assigned specific questions to pursue, using Keneally's book and the other resources mentioned above, which could be relatively easily acquired for a school library.

When the film/video as a whole cannot be shown, because of time constraints or because of objections to certain "adult" scenes, specific sections can be used in the classroom, and the teacher can present sections from Keneally's book as an alternative view.

It can be argued that, just as we desire that our students will be critical readers of primary and secondary sources, so too they should become "critical viewers" of filmed and video material. As we approach the next century, our society is becoming more and more visually oriented. The same critical thinking skills which, a century ago, were applied almost exclusively to the written word, must now be applied to visual sources as well.

Finally, the Schindler film/video/book provides extraordinary opportunities to discuss broader questions. What actually happened during the Holocaust? How can we know the facts? How can we know that it meant to real people? How can one differentiate among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders? What were the ethical and practical questions faced by people like Schindler? And how would we and our students confront those questions if we ever had to face them?

So many people in Oskar Schindler's circumstances simply shrugged their shoulders and said that there was nothing anyone could do to help the persecuted. But his life, whether as shown by Thomas Keneally or by Steven Spielberg, proved them wrong.

18 "The Real Oskar Schindler" in *Saturday Night*, April 1994, pp. 40-45.

19 (New York, Penguin/Plume, 1994).

