

# REPRESENTING SCHINDLER: THE STORY OF A STORY

RECOMMENDED FOR SENIOR SECONDARY STUDENTS

## GOAL

Oskar Schindler's character, as well as his motivations for his act of rescue, has been the subject of much commentary. A member of the Nazi party, Schindler exploited cheap Jewish labour, cultivated business contacts at lavish dinner parties that he attended with beautiful women friends, and benefited from lucrative German army contracts. Yet he succeeded in rescuing more than 1,000 Jews and is designated as a "Righteous Among the Nations" – non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust – by the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial in Israel.

This activity encourages students to consider how historical understanding is constructed from various, often conflicting, accounts of the past. By interacting with a range of source materials that account for Schindler's motivations for saving Jews, students will not only learn from different perspectives about Schindler's motivations, but also of the potential and limitation of each interpretation.

## IDENTIFYING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

As a class, discuss the difference between a primary and secondary source.

Classify the following sources as either primary or secondary sources:

- |                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| » autobiography            | » historical novel |
| » biography                | » memoir           |
| » diary                    | » news article     |
| » documentary film footage | » novel            |
| » eyewitness testimony     | » photograph       |
| » historical film          | » poem             |
| » history book             |                    |

Rank the genres above in order of "reliability" and defend your decisions.



Schindler, named Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem, stands next to the carob tree that commemorates his heroic actions.

## ANALYZING SCHINDLER SOURCE MATERIALS

As a class, discuss:

- » What do you know about Schindler? What is your opinion of him? What are the sources of your knowledge and judgements?
- » Schindler is often called an “unlikely hero”, a phrase often associated with his character. What do you think this phrase means?

Students work in small groups with one of the sources from Schindler Source Materials: Student Readings (p. 22-24). Note: a clip from Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* may be used in the place of the document sheet devoted to the film.

Record answers to the following:

- » Is it a primary or secondary source?      » What does the source suggest was Schindler’s motivation for rescuing Jews?
- » Who is the author of the excerpt?              » What evidence is used to support this?
- » When was it produced?                      »

Present your findings to your classmates and discuss the variety of interpretations for Schindler’s motivations.

Work together as a class to rank them in order of reliability. If there is debate about the ranking, discuss the reasons for the areas of disagreement.

## SCHINDLER IN FILM: STUDENT DEBATE

Films such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* have sparked discussion about how the Holocaust is represented in popular culture. View the film – or a portion of the film – as a class and stage a debate in which groups argue one the following points:

- Group 1: The film makes historical errors and misrepresents the Holocaust.
- Group 2: The film plays an important role in bringing the Holocaust to a wider audience.

## SCHINDLER SOURCE MATERIALS: STUDENT READING

### I. JOURNALISM:

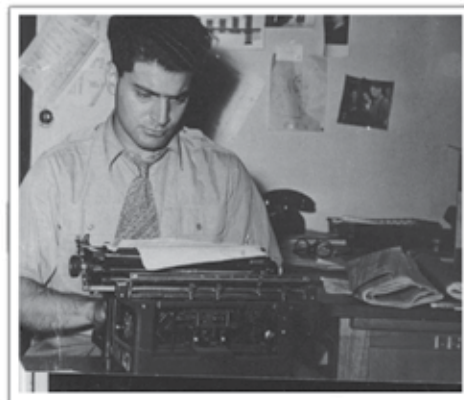
HERBERT STEINHOUSE, "THE REAL OSKAR SCHINDLER", 1949

The first telling of the Schindler story was a 1949 article by Canadian journalist Herbert Steinhouse. After hearing tales of the "good German" from Schindler survivors when stationed in Munich after the war, Steinhouse conducted extensive interviews with Schindler Jews, as well as with Schindler and his wartime accountant Itzhak Stern. Steinhouse could not find a publication interested in printing his article. His story was largely unread until it was published in 1994 by the Canadian magazine *Saturday Night*.

*The baffling question that remains is what actually made Oskar Schindler tick. It is doubtful whether any of the Schindlerjuden [Schindler Jews] have yet discovered the real answer. One of them guesses that he was motivated largely by guilt, since it seems a safe assumption that, in order to have earned himself a factory in Poland and the trust of the Nazis, he must have been a member--perhaps an important one--of the Sudeten German Party, Czechoslovakia's pre-war fascist movement.*

*The only possible conclusion seems that Oskar Schindler's exceptional deeds stemmed from just that elementary sense of decency and humanity that our sophisticated age seldom sincerely believes in. A repentant opportunist saw the light and rebelled against the sadism and vile criminality all around him. The inference may be disappointingly simple, especially for all amateur psychoanalysts who would prefer the deeper and more mysterious motive that may, it is true, still lie unprobed and unappreciated. But an hour with Oskar Schindler encourages belief in the simple answer.*

- "The Real Oskar Schindler," Herbert Steinhouse. *Saturday Night Magazine*, April 1994.



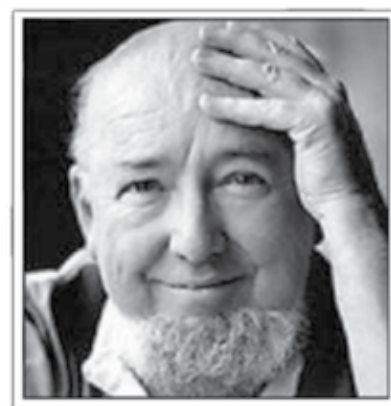
### 2. FICTION:

THOMAS KENEALLY, SCHINDLER'S LIST, 1982

Writer Thomas Keneally was inspired to narrate the Schindler story after meeting Schindler survivor Leopold Pfefferberg in 1980. He read the documents and the testimonies, consulted Schindler's wartime associates, postwar friends, and Jews rescued by Schindler. Although the book was based on extensive research, the author decided to call it a novel because of the imagined or recreated dialogue that he felt was necessary to the narrative.

*Schindler was troubled by the lack of German shame, no one could find refuge anymore behind the idea of German culture, nor behind those pronouncements uttered by leaders to exempt anonymous men from stepping behind their gardens, from looking out their office windows at the realities on the sidewalk.*

- *Schindler's List*, Thomas Keneally. Simon & Schuster, 1982.



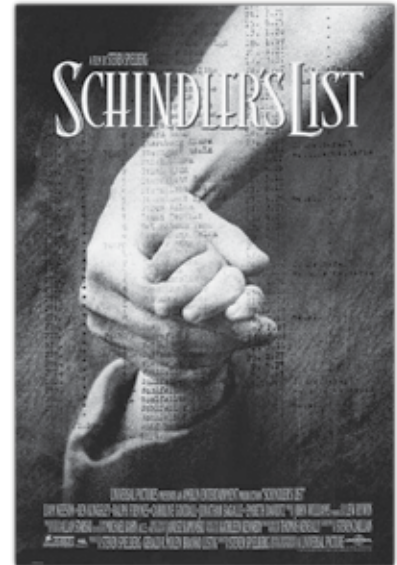
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### 3. FILM:

STEVEN SPIELBERG, SCHINDLER'S LIST, 1993

Thomas Keneally's novel served as the basis for Steven Spielberg's Oscar-winning film, *Schindler's List*. Spielberg created scenes for dramatic effect and identified a critical point where Schindler turned from Nazi war profiteer to single-minded rescuer: the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto in March 1943. Spielberg depicted Schindler, on horseback, viewing the brutality from a hill overlooking the ghetto. This is the scene in which Spielberg has viewers focus on the girl in the red coat, which serves as a metaphor for Schindler's individualization of Jewish victims. Several of the film's other dramatic scenes – Schindler's visit to Auschwitz to secure the release of 300 women diverted to the camp, for instance – never occurred yet have become integral to popular perceptions of Schindler.

Both Keneally and Spielberg, working with the genres of historical novel and film respectively, created scenes for dramatic effect and suggested that a turning point – the liquidation of the Kraków ghetto in 1943 – was responsible for Schindler's transformation from profiteer to rescuer.



EXTERIOR HILLTOP CLEARING - DAWN.

*The galloping horses break through to a clearing high on a hill. The riders pull in the reins and the hoofs rip at the earth. Schindler smiles at the view, the beauty of it with the sun just coming up. From here, all of Kraków can be seen in striking relief.*

INTERIOR APARTMENT BUILDINGS - DAWN.

*Families are routed from their apartments by Nazi officers. An appeal to be allowed to pack is answered with a rifle butt; an unannounced move to a desk drawer is countered with a shot.*

EXT. STREETS, GHETTO - DAWN.

*Spilling out of the buildings, they're herded into lines without regard to family consideration; some other unfathomable system is at work here. The wailing protests of a woman to join her husband's line are abruptly cut off by a short burst of gunfire.*

EXT. HILLTOP - DAWN.

*From here, the action down below seems staged, unreal; the rifle bursts no louder than caps. Dismounting, Schindler moves closer to the edge of the hill, curious. His attention is drawn to a small distant figure, all in red, at the rear of one of the many columns.*

EXT. STREET - DAWN.

*Small red shoes against a forest of gleaming black boots. A Nazi officer occasionally corrects the little girl's drift, nudging her gently back in line with the barrel of his rifle. A volley of shots echoes from up the street.*

EXT. HILLTOP - DAWN.

*Schindler watches as the girl slowly wanders away unnoticed by the SS. Against the gray of the buildings and street she's like a moving red target.*

EXT. STREET - DAWN.

*A truck thundering down the street obscures her for a moment. Then she's moving past a pile of bodies, old people executed in the street.*

EXT. HILLTOP - DAWN.

*Schindler watches: she's so conspicuous, yet she keeps moving - past crowds, past dogs, past trucks - as though she were invisible.*

EXT. STREET - DAWN.

*Patients in white gowns, and doctors and nurses in white, are herded out the doors of a convalescent hospital. The small figure in red moves past them. Shots explode behind her.*

EXT. HILLTOP - DAWN.

*Short bursts of light flash throughout the ghetto like stars. Schindler, fixated on the figure in red, loses sight of her as she turns a corner.*

INT. APARTMENT BUILDING - DAWN.

*She climbs the stairs. The building is empty. She steps inside an apartment and moves through it. It's been ransacked. As she crawls under the bed, the scene drains of colour. The gunfire outside sounds like firecrackers.*

Screenplay by Steven Zaillian  
Based on the novel by Thomas Keneally  
Directed by Steven Spielberg

#### 4. MEMOIR:

EMILY SCHINDLER, *WHERE LIGHT AND SHADOW MEET*, 1997

In response to the heroic portrait of her late husband popularized by Spielberg's film, Schindler's estranged wife Emilie Schindler – herself honoured as Righteous Among the Nations – wrote a memoir in which she takes an active role in the story of rescue. According to Emilie, Schindler's Jewish associates played a significant role in spurring Schindler to action.

*"Look Emilie," he [Oskar Schindler] answered sadly, "the situation is becoming even more unbearable. Göth has decided to close the Plaszów camp and send all the prisoners, including our workers, to Auschwitz. I've talked to him several times, but I haven't been able to change his mind, no matter how hard I tried. The important thing is finding a way to move our people to some other place in order to go on working. I've been offered a munitions factory in Brünnlitz, which seems to be an ideal place. But I don't know what else to do to persuade him to authorize the transfer. I have offered him diamonds, jewellery, money, vodka, cigarettes, caviar...I just can't think of anything else. Another problem that worries me is the list of people we are to submit to him. I don't really know the men, their families; I barely know the names of the few who come to our office when something is needed. But I have no idea about the others...I have spoken to the people who have sold me the factory. One of the Jews will arrange to draw up a list of the workers we shall take to Brünnlitz. All this really worries and depresses me, I am not used to not being in charge of things.*

- *Where Light and Shadow Meet*, Emilie Schindler. W.W. Norton & Co, 1996.

#### 5. HISTORY:

DAVID M. CROWE, *OSKAR SCHINDLER: THE UNTOLD ACCOUNT OF HIS LIFE, WARTIME ACTIVITIES, AND THE TRUE STORY BEHIND THE LIST*, 2004

Historian David M. Crowe has examined documentary evidence associated with the story in order to separate fact from fiction. Crowe finds no single turning point that made Schindler a rescuer, but suggests a number of explanations – economic self-interest, strong personal ties with Jews, as well as a streak of non-conformity – for his altruism. Crowe argues that Schindler was able to rescue Jews not in spite of his flaws, but rather because of them. It was Schindler's misdeeds, as a German intelligence agent, as profiteer, and as a Nazi comfortable in the sinister world of the SS, that placed him in a position to facilitate his act of rescue.

*[One of Schindler's protected Jews] Itzhak Stern's comments about the impact of the closing of the ghetto on Oskar were probably another source for the mythical story. According to Stern, the murder of the children in the ghetto's kinderheim (children's home) during the brutal closing of the Kraków ghetto on March 13-14th, 1943, prompted Oskar's firm commitment to do everything he could to save as many Jews as possible. Stern said that this was the crucial incident that unsettled Schindler's mind. Schindler had changed overnight and was never the same again. Though Oskar would undoubtedly be shocked by the murder of the kinderheim children, other evidence suggests that he had already chosen his path sometime before the tragedy. The kinderheim horror simply made him more determined to save as many Jews as he could.*

- *Oskar Schindler The Untold Account of His Life, Wartime Activities, and the True Story Behind The List*, David M. Crowe. Westview Press, 2004.



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