

A GUIDE TO Schindler's List

Thomas Keneally

"He who saves a single life saves the world entire."

THE NOVEL AT A GLANCE

Schindler's List (1982) tells the true story "of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil" by an unlikely German hero of the Holocaust.

Setting: German-occupied Poland and Czechoslovakia during World War II.

Protagonist: Oskar Schindler, a German factory owner who, through cunning and courage, ends up saving several thousand Jews from almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis.

Antagonist: Amon Goeth, the sadistic commandant of a forced labor camp outside Cracow, Poland.

Conflicts: Schindler has an **external conflict** with the Nazi regime, and specifically with Goeth, as he attempts to save Jewish lives; Schindler also has an **internal conflict** about how much he must play along with the system.

Resolution: Schindler saves the lives of the 1,100 Jews he is allowed to take with him to Czechoslovakia (plus several thousand others); after the war he is revered as a hero of the Holocaust.

Themes: He who saves a single life saves the entire world. In dark times we must rely on flawed heroes. War brings out some of the best and some of the worst human impulses.

Of Special Note: In his preface, Thomas Keneally asserts that he has used "the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story," and has attempted to "avoid all fiction." He refers to the book as a "documentary novel." It is based on archival records, interviews with fifty *Schindlerjuden* (Jews rescued by Schindler), and information supplied by Schindler's wartime associates and postwar friends. While some speech is made up, it is always based on a reasonable estimate of what was actually said.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Though *Schindler's List* includes many horrible and emotionally wrenching episodes of Nazi cruelty and violence, Keneally handles them in a restrained, understated manner. Moreover, the book ends on an uplifting

note of salvation rather than despair. Students may be more thrown by Keneally's use of foreign words, some defined, others fairly clear from context. There is a helpful appendix that lists SS (Nazi special police) ranks and their army equivalents.

BACKGROUND

The Holocaust or Shoah. From January 1933 until May 1945, the Nazis engaged in a systematic program of persecution and, later, mass extermination of the Jews of Europe. This period of genocide has come to be known as the Holocaust ("destruction by fire"), or Shoah, its Hebrew name. At first Jews were stripped of their citizenship, civil rights, and property. Then they were brutally rounded up and herded into ghettos—overcrowded, compulsory Jewish quarters, located in undesirable parts of cities. Finally, as the ghetto populations were liquidated through violent police actions (*Aktionen*, singular *Aktion*), the surviving Jews were sent to slave labor camps or extermination camps that used poison gas to murder thousands of people a day. The Nazis' systematic plan to exterminate all European Jews, officially sanctioned in January 1942, was known as the Final Solution. During the Holocaust, the Nazis murdered some six million Jews—more than two thirds of Europe's prewar Jewish population. The term *Holocaust* usually refers only to the Nazis' mass murder of the Jews; however, it should be noted that the Nazis also murdered five to eight million other people they deemed "inferior"—Gypsies, gays, the handicapped, and political opponents. For more information on the Holocaust, see Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews*; Omer Bartov, *Murder in Our Midst: The Holocaust, Industrial Killing, and Representation*; and Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Oskar Schindler, an ethnic German businessman from Czechoslovakia; a drinker, adulterer, war profiteer, and greaser of palms who cunningly turns his factory into a refuge for Jews under the guise of providing essential services for the Nazi war machine.

Amon Goeth, a sadistic, corrupt, hedonistic Austrian SS officer.

Helen (Lena) Hirsch, Goeth's Jewish maid, whom he regularly beats and terrorizes.

Emilie Schindler, Oskar's well-bred, religious wife; she stays in Moravia while he's in Cracow, tolerates his numerous infidelities, and later joins him at his factory in Brinnlitz, where she nurses the sick.

Itzhak Stern, a scholarly Jewish accountant who advises Schindler to buy the factory and is instrumental in Schindler's evolution into a rescuer of Jews.

Abraham Bankier, Jewish office manager of Schindler's factory, who puts Schindler in touch with Jewish investors and whom Schindler dramatically rescues from a cattle car bound for a death camp.

The Rosners, musician brothers Leo and Henry; Henry's wife, Mancie; and their son, Olek, who eventually survives Auschwitz.

The Dresners, Genia, the girl in red that Schindler watches during the June 1942 *Aktion*; her cousin Danka; Danka's parents; and another cousin, Janek, accused of sabotaging one of Schindler's machines.

The Horowitzes, Dolek and Regina; their children, Nusia and Richard, another Auschwitz survivor.

PLOT

The plot is structured like a tapestry, with subplots about dozens of *Schindlerjuden* woven into the main narrative about Schindler.

Prologue. The **exposition** opens the narrative *in medias res* in Nazi-occupied Poland during the autumn of 1943. Oskar Schindler, the owner of a booming factory that uses Jewish slave labor, attends a dinner party hosted by Amon Goeth, the sadistic commandant of a labor camp outside Cracow. Schindler is an unlikely **hero**: a war profiteer who charms, bribes, and cons high-ranking Nazis. Yet when he slips into the kitchen to comfort Goeth's Jewish maid, Helen Hirsch, we learn that he is also deeply engaged in the business of saving Jewish lives—at great risk to his own.

Chapter 1. A **flashback** reveals that Schindler was born in 1908 in Moravia, an Austrian province later annexed to Czechoslovakia. A German-speaking Roman Catholic, Schindler marries Emilie in 1928 but is soon cheating on her. In 1935 he becomes a traveling sales manager and begins wearing a swastika. Though upset when German troops enter Moravia in March 1939, he agrees to work as a Nazi intelligence agent.

Chapter 2. In October 1939, having arrived in Cracow after the German invasion, Schindler becomes friends with Itzhak Stern, a Jewish accountant whom he consults about buying a factory. When Schindler complains that life has become nearly worthless, Stern's reply reveals the novel's main **theme**: "He who saves the life of one man saves the entire world."

Chapter 3. Schindler befriends another Cracow Jew,

Poldek Pfefferberg, a former teacher and officer in the defeated Polish army, who becomes one of Schindler's key black-market connections.

Chapter 4. In December the SS stage their first *Aktion* in the Jewish quarter, smashing apartments, forcing Jews to spit on the Torah (a sacred scroll containing the first five books of the Bible), and then shooting them and burning the synagogue.

Chapter 5. Schindler throws a party for some of his friends—influential but disaffected officials.

Chapter 6. Abraham Bankier, the Jewish manager of Schindler's new enamelware factory, puts Schindler in touch with Jewish investors. Because only a few thousand skilled Jewish workers will be allowed to remain in Cracow, Stern appeals to Schindler to hire Jews. Soon his factory has a reputation as a haven.

Chapter 7. The president of the *Judenrat*, the Jewish Council, is sentenced to jail for trying to bribe officials to let more Jews stay in Cracow.

Chapter 8. Schindler sets up a munitions section to give his factory the appearance of essential industry. The government establishes a Jewish ghetto. Workers will be allowed out to attend jobs but they won't receive wages. Schindler hires more Jews and promises his new workers that they'll be safe.

Chapter 9. Schindler visits his family in Moravia and reconciles with his father, whom he had renounced after his parents separated.

Chapter 10. Pfefferberg joins the Jewish ghetto police—the OD. When it becomes an organization of collaborators and extortionists, a doctor helps him fake a back ailment so he can escape the force.

Chapter 11. Schindler is arrested because of black-market dealings but is quickly released through the intervention of influential friends.

Chapter 12. Accused of kissing a Jewish girl at his birthday party, Schindler is arrested again and released after several days in exchange for a bribe.

Chapter 13. The police begin arresting Jews who don't have the sticker issued to those doing "essential work."

Chapter 14. In June Schindler rescues Bankier and some other workers who have been rounded up and placed in cattle cars. This episode reveals one of Schindler's key **character** traits. Rather than being overwhelmed by the sheer numbers on the train, he concentrates on rescuing the people he knows.

Chapter 15. While horseback riding, Schindler witnesses a brutal ghetto *Aktion*. He notices a little girl dressed in red—Genia Dresner—who turns to watch the SS shoot a woman and child. This event marks the novel's **turning point**: Schindler now resolves to do everything in his power to defeat the system.

Chapter 16. Danka Dresner and her mother manage to

survive the *Aktion* by hiding, but 7,000 others are sent to the Belzec extermination camp and gassed.

Chapter 17. Schindler agrees to go to Budapest to tell a Zionist rescue organization what he knows about the war against Jews in Poland.

Chapter 18. In Budapest Schindler reports that most of those taken from the ghettos are being sent to extermination camps and that a vast labor camp is being built at Plaszów, outside Cracow.

Chapter 19. Goeth takes command of the Plaszów camp, still under construction. Hoping to convince Schindler and two other factory owners to move their operations there, he takes them on a tour. Schindler is sickened by what he sees.

Chapter 20. Schindler is allowed to keep his factory outside the camp. **Characterized** as Schindler's **foil**, his "dark brother," Goeth is exhilarated on the morning of the *Aktion* that liquidates the ghetto. At a Jewish hospital, two doctors and a nurse give their patients cyanide in an act of mercy killing.

Chapter 21. During the *Aktion*, Pfefferberg witnesses an atrocity and narrowly avoids being shot.

Chapter 22. Goeth begins a morning ritual of shooting prisoners at random from his balcony. Schindler convinces the SS to let him build a subcamp in his own factory yard.

Chapter 23. Schindler's camp is a "paradise" compared with Plaszów, and he bribes Goeth to allow the transfer of certain prisoners there, including Regina Horowitz, her children, and Rabbi Menasha Levartov.

Chapter 24. The "Schindler mythology" grows as he spends a fortune on black-market food, prevents several executions, and tries to tempt Goeth to moderate his brutality. (In a passage that typifies the narrative's frequently **ironic tone**, Schindler is **characterized** as a "man of transactions," who believes you can "drink with the devil and adjust the balance of evil over a snifter of cognac.") Stern leads two Zionist agents on a tour of Plaszów's horrors.

Chapter 25. Schindler spends his own money on various measures to save Jews and continues to pass smuggled Zionist money to his Jewish contacts.

Chapter 26. One "legend" in the "Schindler mythology" is that he prevented Plaszów from being shut down—and thus saved its prisoners from the death camps—by sabotaging an inspection that would have revealed the camp's dubious value to the war effort. The romance and secret marriage of prisoners Josef Bau and Rebecca Tannenbaum occurs against the grotesque backdrop of camp life.

Chapter 27. Facing the Russian advance, the Nazis want to destroy all evidence of their crimes; so prisoners must exhume and burn thousands of bodies.

Chapter 28. Goeth is authorized to liquidate Plaszów's "unproductive element" to accommodate new prisoners. While loudspeakers blare waltzes and ballads, naked prisoners are forced to run back and forth in front of doctors. Goeth's "Health Action" sends 1,400 adults and 268 children to the Auschwitz extermination camp.

Chapter 29. Schindler hears the prisoners inside a line of cattle cars begging for water. Bemused by Schindler's antics, Goeth lets him hose down the cars and pass in buckets of water.

Chapter 30. Because of the Russian advance, Plaszów—and Emalia—are to be closed. The men will be sent to a quarry camp, the women to Auschwitz. Schindler decides to move his factory and workers to Czechoslovakia. Goeth agrees that if Schindler obtains approval, he'll allow a list of prisoners to be drawn up—an expensive list. Schindler wins Helen Hirsch for his list in a blackjack game with Goeth: "God and Satan playing cards for human souls."

Chapter 31. Goeth is arrested on charges of embezzlement. Schindler bribes officials to relocate his factory to Brinnlitz, Moravia. He draws up an initial list that includes all his Emalia prisoners plus any other names he can remember. Marcel Goldberg, the camp's personnel clerk, takes bribes to add others.

Chapter 32. In "a scene from a cautionary engraving of Judgment Day" (one of the book's many biblical **images**), the prisoners are divided into two lines: Schindler's 1,100 people and everyone else, many doomed to death in extermination camps. The men endure a terrifying train ride and await the arrival of the women one week later.

Chapter 33. In the novel's **climax**, the women are taken to Auschwitz, where they are kept for several weeks, in constant danger of being gassed. Finally, Schindler is able to rescue them through bribery. However, before they're released, the children of Brinnlitz, with their fathers, are shipped to Auschwitz to be used in medical experiments. In a scene of brutal **irony**, Manci Rosner and Regina Horowitz—just as they are entering the train for Brinnlitz—see their sons, Olek and Richard, waving at them from across the rail yard. At Brinnlitz, Schindler's wife, Emilie, now living with him, nurses the sick and dying.

Chapter 34. Nineteen-year-old Janek Dresner is accused of sabotaging a munitions machine, but Schindler sabotages the hearing and saves his life.

Chapter 35. Schindler's factory, supposedly manufacturing armaments, in fact produces nothing, by design. First he claims "start-up difficulties" and then begins making defective shells. Meanwhile, Schindler buys weapons and arms his prisoners.

Chapter 36. Schindler rescues three thousand women from Auschwitz and an abandoned trainload of frozen prisoners. Released from prison because of diabetes,

Goeth visits Brinnlitz. Though powerless, he remains a nightmarish figure of death to the prisoners.

Chapter 37. When Germany surrenders, Schindler makes a speech to the prisoners and the SS guards, urging restraint on both sides. Afterward, the prisoners give him a gold ring engraved with the Talmudic verse Stern quoted to Schindler in 1939: “He who saves a single life saves the world entire.”

Chapter 38. Dressed in prisoner’s stripes, Schindler and Emilie flee, carrying with them a Hebrew letter attesting to their good deeds. Brinnlitz is liberated by a single Russian soldier. Both the Rosner and Horowitz families are reunited with their fathers and sons.

Epilogue. Based on the testimony of several prisoners, Goeth is hanged for war crimes. Schindler, **ironically**, fails at various business ventures but is officially declared a Righteous Person by Israel.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Comparing and Contrasting the Novel and the Film

In 1993, Steven Spielberg made an Oscar-winning film of the novel. After viewing the film, students could explore these issues:

- How faithful is the movie to the book? What are the major differences?
- Why did Spielberg make changes? How effective are they?
- Which treatment is better, novel or film?

2. Learning More About the Holocaust

Students might be inspired to read more memoirs and fiction about the Holocaust. The “Read On” section lists a few, but they might also consider works by Primo Levi, Aharon Appelfeld, Cynthia Ozick, and John Hersey. There are also several excellent film documentaries, such as Alain Renais’s *Night and Fog* (1955) and Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* (1985). Students might pick different books or films and then report back to the class or to small groups, noting how the book or film differs from *Schindler’s List*.

3. Analyzing Allusions and Images

Keneally includes a few allusions and many mythological and biblical images. Students might explore these:

- the allusion to the Book of Job in Chapter 16
- the allusion to *The Good Soldier Schweik*, by Jaroslav Hasek, in Chapter 26
- the allusions to Bacchus and Janus in Chapter 26
- the images of Schindler as a “desirer of souls”

MEET THE WRITER

Thomas Keneally (1935–) was born in New South Wales, Australia, and grew up in Sydney. After attending a Roman Catholic seminary, he decided not to become a priest but instead taught high school and college for many years. Considered one of Australia’s leading writers, Keneally is the author of more than twenty novels and several plays, many of them based on historical events. His works often explore religious and moral themes, particularly ethical dilemmas. Keneally first heard about Oskar Schindler when he went shopping at a Beverly Hills luggage store owned by Poldek Pfefferberg, who urged him to write the book. Keneally has taught at New York University and the University of California at Irvine, as well as at Australian universities.

READ ON

Elie Wiesel, *Night*. A gripping memoir by a Nobel Peace Prize–winning Holocaust survivor.

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. The diary of a Jewish girl who, along with her family, hid from the Nazis for two years in an attic in Amsterdam before dying in a Nazi concentration camp; made into a famous play and movie, *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale I: My Father Bleeds History* and *A Survivor’s Tale II: And Here My Troubles Began*. A noted two-part graphic novel—Jews shown as mice and the Nazis as cats—about an Auschwitz survivor’s Holocaust experiences and his troubled relationship with his son.

Elinor J. Brecher, *Schindler’s Legacy: True Stories of the List Survivors*. A photograph-filled book that tells more stories of Schindler survivors.

Mark Helprin, “Tamar.” The title character of this story, set in prewar London, symbolizes the innocent, vulnerable Jews of Europe.

John Hersey, *Hiroshima*. Famous reportage showing the effects of the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, on the lives of six survivors.

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