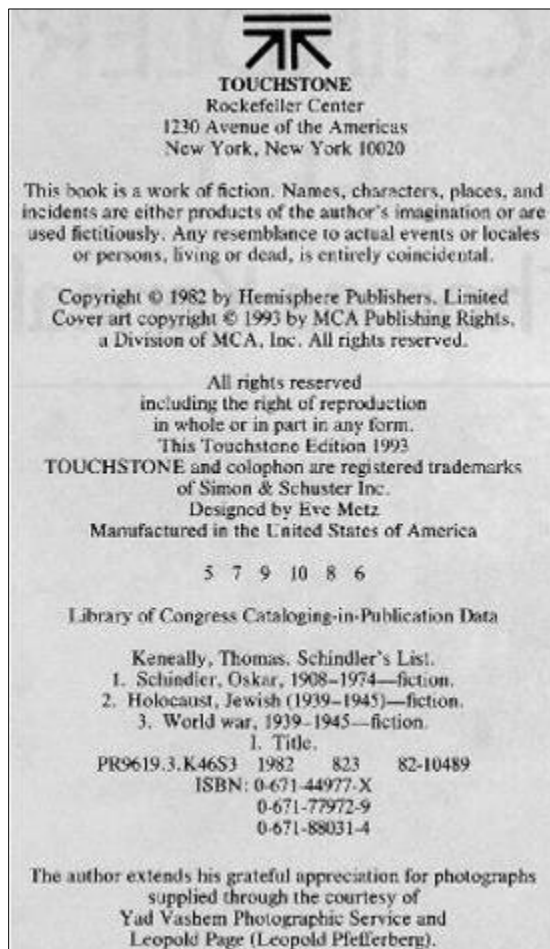


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## 'Schindler's List' – A Review

by: Greg Raven

*"Schindler's List."* Based on the novel by Thomas Keneally. Screenplay by Steven Zaillian. Director of Photography, Janusz Kaminski. Music by John Williams. Produced by Steven Spielberg, Gerald R. Molen and Branko Lustig. Directed by Steven Spielberg. Universal Pictures. An Amblin Entertainment production. MPAA rating "R." Running time: 185 minutes.



**'This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental,' Schindler's List.**

Even before its release, reports in the media called "Schindler's List" a shoo-in for any number of awards. Later, after a pre-release screening of this latest Steven Spielberg movie, holocaust survivors (some of whom claimed to have been on the list to which the movie's title refers) proclaimed that the film exactly depicted how things had been nearly 50 years ago in Eastern Europe.

In the months since its release in December 1993, "Schindler's List" has indeed garnered many awards, and hundreds — if not

thousands — of others have joined in citing this film as being so true to life that anyone could learn from watching. Here, we are told, is the final answer to those who "deny the Holocaust."

Once its veneer of political-correctness is stripped away, however, "Schindler's List" can be seen for what it is — a failure both as a movie and as a record of a historical event. What is surprising is the extent to which it fails.

Director/producer Spielberg worked on "Schindler's List" for ten years, starting soon after finishing "E.T.: The Extraterrestrial" in 1983. Spielberg learned about the Holocaust from his grandparents, who, according to Spielberg, "constantly spoke about the Holocaust" even though they were not affected by it personally. He now says, "I've been preparing for this film my whole life," although he alternately claims to have discovered his Jewishness during the making of the film.

While Spielberg has made a few films that did not catch the public's imagination ("1941," "Color Purple," "Empire of the Sun," "Hook"), he still rates as one of the most successful directors of all times: "Jurassic Park," "E.T.," "Jaws," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind," "Raiders of the Last Ark" (another film with Nazi bad guys), the "Back to the Future" trilogy, and "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?". His films have out-grossed even those of his contemporary, George Lucas. If any director could make a film about the Holocaust and manage to combine realism and popular appeal, it should have been Spielberg. Spielberg, who also put his own money into its production, is a filmmaker at the top of his form, dealing with a topic near to his heart. Rather than telling a story with universal meaning, however, Spielberg has instead made what can only be called a "Jewish" film; that is, a film by Jews, about Jews, and for Jews to use against non-Jews.

### **Technique and Artistry**

"Schindler's List" claims to portray the story of German businessman Oskar Schindler (played by Liam Neeson). Schindler is less interested in why the war is being fought and who is winning than he is in the enormous profits to be made. To increase profits even further, he hires only Jews from the nearby Krakow ghetto, the cheapest labor available. Because of his lack of aptitude for the nuts-and-bolts of running a business, Schindler relies on a Jewish accountant, Itzhak Stern (played by Ben Kingsley, who also played the title role in HBO's "Murderers Among Us: The Simon Wiesenthal Story"). As time goes by, Schindler becomes protective of "his" Jews, so much so that when the order is given for the Jews to be deported to camps (which will mean the removal of his, he spends virtually every penny of his by-then tremendous fortune to save "his"

Jews from being sent to Auschwitz and elsewhere, even going to the extent of relocating his factory and bribing officials to retain possession of his Jews. In the end, Schindler has little left but his car and the clothes on his back. (He even gives his clothes to one of his workers before driving off to escape the advancing Red army.)

Spielberg peoples his story with Nazis who drink to excess, whore and womanize at every opportunity, offer and accept bribes as a natural part of life during wartime, follow orders without question, and cut every corner that will make their lives easier. The really bad Nazis — that is, those who give the orders rather than merely carry them out — are just as likely to kill a Jew as look at him. While it is normal for filmmakers to caricature individuals, and to portray peripheral groups in a monochromatic way, Spielberg presents all Nazis in a more perfunctory fashion than a biker gang in a B movie. Virtually the only time German is spoken in the film is when someone is barking orders. Schindler's character speaks only English (with a British accent).

A small break in this monotonous racial landscape comes during the clearing of the ghetto, when a German soldier sits at an abandoned piano, playing Mozart beautifully as his comrades seek out and slaughter Jews who hide to avoid relocation. The message is the same, though: no matter how cultured they may appear, non-Jews cannot be trusted.

The completely amoral mold in which Spielberg forms his Nazis gives rise to a scene in which Schindler, taking pity on the Jewish maid of Plaszow camp commandant Amon Goeth (the film's Evil Nazi), tells her that, in spite of her fears, she will not be killed because Goeth gets pleasure from her presence; the others are killed because they neither please nor displease him.

Spielberg's treatment of Nazis (and, by extension, Germans) is only marginally less masterful than his portrayal of other groups, notably the Jews. While Spielberg goes to great lengths to expose the audience to Jews — including flashing close-ups of Jewish faces on screen while calling out Jewish names — there are few clues as to what motivates anyone to do anything. Stern has a few anxious moments now and again, but usually he simply works at whatever task is at hand. In many ways the best-understood of Spielberg's characters is Goeth's Jewish housekeeper, Helen Hirsch. Even here, we come to know her predominantly through her fright, which seems to be her only emotion.

So flat are Spielberg's characterizations that even his protagonist, who it might be argued we are supposed to understand better than most others in the film, is never clearly delineated. As the film begins, Schindler gives every appearance of being an ardent Nazi who is never without his swastika party lapel pin, albeit one whose only motivation is to make suitcases full of money in the wartime economy. As the film progresses, his character undergoes a change of some kind for reasons that are never adequately explained, so that while his outward appearance and mannerisms remain much the same, he gradually comes first to view his Jews as more than interchangeable ciphers, and eventually as equals. Toward the end of the film Schindler goes so far as to admonish a rabbi for not beginning preparations for the Sabbath on a Friday evening, something his Jews have not been allowed to do since they left the ghetto.

At the end, Schindler's character is spending money to save Jews with a fanaticism at which we can only wonder. One is left thinking that this new behavior was part of Schindler's basic character, and would have taken place without any external influences. The Jews themselves do little or nothing to effect the change, just as they do next to nothing to save themselves. Thus, although the theme of the film is "Jews must be saved," the plot is "this Catholic (Schindler) saved some Jews from the olocaust." The subtext, then, is that the Jews themselves were helpless. In comparison, George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life" is a piker next to Oskar Schindler; Bailey learns nothing more than to appreciate and celebrate his own life, while Schindler gets to appreciate and celebrate *Jewish* life. To gild the lily, in the end Schindler torments himself by recalling how much more he could have done to save Jews.

What caused the Schindler character to change so extensively and so quickly? In the absence of other information from Spielberg, one is left to contemplate the possibility that Schindler has gone mad, risking everything (including his life) to save people he barely seems to acknowledge for much of the film.

Spielberg's portrayals of German atrocities against Jews are as unvarying as his characterizations. For Spielberg, Germans are people who shoot Jews. Nazi soldiers line up Jews seven deep so that one rifle bullet will kill them all at once (when the bullet kills "only" the first five, two more pistol bullets are used to dispatch the last in line), then when clearing the ghetto, Nazi soldiers spray bullets around as if they cost nothing. Goeth shoots Jews with his scoped rifle if they move too slowly around his Plaszow camp, or at close range with a pistol to the head. At some level, Spielberg must

have realized that all this shooting was too much to be believed, so for “comic relief” he includes a scene in which a Jew is hauled out of a building to be shot. His executioner, Goeth, who seems perfectly capable with weapons in other scenes in the film, cannot get his pistol to fire and seems befuddled as to how it operates. While his two assistants gawk at the pistol as if they had never handled a real one before, Goeth switches to his backup pistol, which also misfires. This brief interlude thus serves as the film’s miracle, as well.

Nearly half of the movie was filmed with hand-held cameras, to heighten the sense that “Schindler’s List” is *cinema verite*. Likewise, virtually the entire film is in black and white, which lends it a “documentary” quality. It is also an effective device for presenting the story; the film starts in color, then, as the lot of the Jews deteriorates, the colors disappear, not to reappear until the end of the movie when we see that Jews have survived their ordeal.

It might be said that for a high-budget director such as Spielberg to use black and white was a gutsy move, except for the fact that once seemingly committed to the black-and-white screen, Spielberg loses his nerve, apparently losing his faith in the audience, and part-way through the film resorts to colorizing the overcoat of a young girl as the camera follows her lonely journey through the Krakow ghetto during its evacuation. Later, we see the same colorized coat on the girl’s small corpse, being carried away. For Spielberg to utilize such a trick in attempting to steer the audience’s emotions betrays both an insecurity about his subject, and a cynicism about how audiences will react to it.

Spielberg also shows his lack of faith in the audience by including gratuitous nudity. Lots of it. There are enough bare, young female breasts decorating German boudoirs to satisfy most modern moviegoers. Spielberg leaves nothing to chance, however, and in what otherwise could have been one of the films most gripping scenes, has the camera linger voyeuristically on Helen Hirsch, as she pulls off her blouse in the undressing room before entering the shower at irkenau. In addition, there is a large “selection” scene at the Plaszow concentration camp at which dozens of men and women run around naked. In spite of the film’s R rating, Spielberg is pushing to have high school students view it.

## **Portraying History**

Hollywood is not known for its accurate depictions of historical events. "Schindler's List" is no exception. Only someone with a twisted worldview or some sort of mental disability would expect a Hollywood production to be faithful to events as they occurred. Thus, we do not expect Spielberg to deal with questions such as whether or not Schindler was working as a Zionist agent. (Mark Weber will deal with this in a forthcoming issue.) Likewise, we do not expect Spielberg to introduce any ambiguities into his examination of Schindler's character by dwelling on his postwar behavior, including the shabby way he treated his wife. Avoiding issues such as these make it easier to tell the story, but they do nothing to enhance the film's historical accuracy.

"Schindler's List" the movie is based on Thomas Keneally's book of the same name, which is clearly presented as a work of fiction, and indexed by the Library of Congress as such. From this novel, writer Steven Zaillian created the screenplay from which Spielberg shot the movie — which we are now told is virtually a documentary of what actually happened. To its credit, Universal Pictures goes no farther than advertising the film as "based on a true story."

This is correct, up to a point. There really was an Oskar Schindler who was married to a woman named Emilie. There was also an Amon Goeth, a factory by the name of *Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik*, and a camp by the name of Plaszow. Most everything else is made up, or altered to fit the needs of the story. One good example is that whereas the film's Schindler is penniless at the end of the war, in reality he had piles of money when he went into hiding.

Regardless of whether "Schindler's List" is fact or fiction, there are a number of scenes that cannot be explained, and indeed, Spielberg makes little effort to do so. During the relocation of the Jews to the Krakow ghetto, for example, Spielberg introduces a bag of gold-inlaid teeth into the area where the luggage and belongings are being sorted. How and why this collection found its way to the heart of the city is a mystery unless we are to believe that one of the Jews had it in his luggage, but that is clearly not what Spielberg intended to imply. Later, at the Plaszow camp, Spielberg shows a pile of burning corpses so large that a conveyor belt is required to add new bodies to the top, the implication being that bodies burn like cord wood, which of course they do not. Also at Plaszow, a team of German doctors, their white coats accessorized with stethoscopes, conduct a "selection" to see who is healthy enough to live and who is to die, only they are so incompetent that they did not know to keep the healthy inmates

and “select” the unhealthy. After such scenes, Spielberg demolishes any remaining pretensions he had to technical accuracy by depicting a crematory chimney at uschwitz spewing smoke and flame, which crematories are specially constructed *not* to do.

Spielberg also blurs the line between fact and fiction by referring to factual matters in a fictional way. For example, he has Stern use the phrase “special treatment” as if it could only mean “death,” even though Schindler has previously used the word in a completely benign context. Lice and typhus are also mentioned as if they were minor inconveniences, and not the life-threatening scourge they are.

### **Spielberg the Revisionist**

On the three-hour-long canvas on which Spielberg presents what is being called the latest in a string of “ultimate” answers to the “deniers,” the larger story of an overall policy to exterminate Europe’s Jews is relegated no more than a few moments toward the end of the film, almost as an afterthought. In “Schindler’s List,” a irkenau shower room turns out to be a shower room after all, and not the gas chamber it is rumored to be in an earlier scene in the women’s barracks (in the movie, Birkenau is referred to as Auschwitz). Director Spielberg, who can make spaceships, aliens, and dinosaurs seem real and even lifelike, not only fails to show us a credible Nazi gas chamber, he seems to suggest that the wartime rumors of gas chambers were just that — rumors.

Spielberg presents his version of the extermination of Europe’s Jews obliquely in the closing minutes of the film through two transparent contrivances. The first is an impassioned but uncharacteristic speech by Schindler to his workers, in which he alludes to the fact that many of their friends and family have been killed. (This scene comes after the scene in which Schindler seems unaware of the ominous “secret” meaning of the term, “special treatment.”) The second is a question by Stern, put to the lone Soviet soldier who “liberates” the factory in Czechoslovakia where Schindler’s Jews have been working: out of nowhere, Stern asks the Soviet officer if there are any Jews left in Poland. There is no explanation as to why he would ask such a question, but the implication is that the only way a Polish Jew could have survived was if he had been one of Schindler’s Jews. More to the point, the audience is expected not to question why Spielberg had to employ these awkward expositions to deal with a subject that is claimed to be the most documented event in history.

At the same time, Spielberg avoids repeating other common olocaust claims: Germans do not use babies for target practice or throw them out of windows for fun, people are not forced to stand for hours naked in freezing weather, people are not tortured, there are no medical experiments, and no one throws himself on the electrified fencing to commit suicide.

“Schindler’s List” also contains several surprising scenes: Jews are shown before the war as being prosperous, so much so that Schindler, a man who prides himself on being accustomed to the better things in life, is impressed at the finery he inherits by taking over the apartment of a Jewish family after they are relocated to the ghetto; in the Plaszow camp, men and women routinely commingle, and the inmates conduct a Jewish wedding one night after work; Jews are shown cooperating at virtually every level in the process of oppressing their own people; young Jewish men engage in black-market activities (in a Catholic church!); and in the ghetto and the camp, Jews unaccountably have hundreds of previously prepared hiding places when soldiers come to round them up.

### **Best ‘Holocaust’ film ever?**

It is clear that “Schindler’s List” has won its acclaim not because of its artistry but because of its politically-correct content and message. Spielberg has used the publicity surrounding it to set himself up as a kind of guardian of the Holocaust story. Events have shown, however, that the more light is thrown on the Holocaust story, the more people will ask questions about it — questions that neither Spielberg nor this film can answer.

From the inside cover of Schindler’s List:

“This book is a work of fiction.