



Oskar Schindler: Biography

Oskar Schindler was born on April 28, 1908 at Zittau/Moravia. His middle-class Catholic family belonged to the German-speaking community in the Sudetenland... Like most of the German-speaking youths of the Sudetenland, he subscribed to Konrad Henlein's Sudeten German Party and, after the German annexation of the Sudetenland in 1938, became a formal member of the Nazi party.

Shortly after the outbreak of war in September 1939, Schindler showed up in occupied Cracow. The ancient city, home to some 60,000 Jews and seat of the German occupation administration, the Generalgouvernement, proved highly attractive to

German entrepreneurs, hoping to capitalize on the misfortunes of the subjugated country. In October 1939, Schindler took over a run-down enamelware factory in Cracow that had previously belonged to a Jew. As a result of some deftly executed, underhanded maneuvers – in which he acted upon the shrewd commercial advice of a Polish-Jewish accountant, Isaak Stern – he began to build himself a fortune. A hedonist and gambler by nature, Schindler soon adopted a profligate lifestyle, carousing into the small hours of the night, hobnobbing with high-ranking SS-officers, and philandering with beautiful Polish women. At the same time, what set him apart from other war-profiteers, was his humane treatment of his workers, especially the Jews.

Schindler never developed any ideologically motivated resistance against the Nazi regime. However, his growing revulsion and horror at the senseless brutality of the Nazi persecution of the helpless Jewish population wrought a curious transformation in the unprincipled opportunist. Gradually, the egoistic goal of lining his pockets with money took second place to the all-consuming desire of rescuing as many of his Jews as he could from the clutches of the Nazi executioners. In the long run, in his efforts to bring his Jewish workers safely through the war, he was not only prepared to squander all his money but also to put his own life on the line.

Schindler's most effective tool in this privately conceived rescue campaign was the privileged status his plant enjoyed as a "business essential to the war effort" as accorded him by the Military Armaments Inspectorate in occupied Poland. This not only qualified him to obtain lucrative military contracts, but also enabled him to draw on Jewish workers who were under the jurisdiction of the SS. When his Jewish employees were threatened with deportation to Auschwitz by the SS he could claim exemptions for them, arguing that their removal would seriously hamper his efforts to keep up production essential to the war effort. He did not balk at falsifying the records, listing

children, housewives, and lawyers as expert mechanics and metalworkers, and, in general, covering up as much as he could for unqualified or temporarily incapacitated workers.

The Gestapo arrested him several times and interrogated him on charges of irregularities and of favoring Jews. In late 1944, Schindler had managed to obtain official authorization to continue production in a factory that he and his wife had set up in Brännlitz (Brnenec), in their native Sudetenland. The entire work force from Zablocie – to which were furtively added many new names from the Plaszow camp – was supposed to move to the new factory site. However, instead of being brought to Brännlitz, the 800 men – among them 700 Jews – and the 300 women on Schindler's list were diverted to Gross-Rosen and to Auschwitz, respectively. When he learned what had happened, Schindler at first managed to secure the release of the men from the Gross-Rosen camp. He then proceeded to send his personal German secretary to Auschwitz to negotiate the release of the women. The latter managed to obtain the release of the Jewish women by promising to pay the Gestapo. This is the only recorded case in the history of the extermination camp that such a large group of people was allowed to leave alive while the gas chambers were still in operation.

In the final days of the war Schindler managed to smuggle himself back into Germany, into Allied-controlled territory. The wartime industrial tycoon was by now penniless. Jewish relief organizations and groups of survivors supported him modestly over the years, helping finance his (in the long run, unsuccessful) emigration to South America. When Schindler visited Israel in 1961, the first of 17 visits, he was treated to an overwhelming welcome from 220 enthusiastic survivors. He continued to live partly in Israel and partly in Germany. After his death in Hildesheim, Germany, in October 1974, the mournful survivors brought the remains of their noble rescuer to Israel to be laid to eternal rest in the Protestant Cemetery of Jerusalem.

Source: Yad Vashem, The Righteous Among the Nations
<http://db.yadvashem.org/righteous/family.html?language=en&itemId=4017377>