

Title: Reviews of 'Schindler's List'

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H O L O C A U S T

In this age of mass media, history lessons are increasingly taught on the silver screen. Schindler's List—sure to dominate the March 21 Academy Awards—has become many Americans' primary point of reference on the Holocaust. The following two essays explore the dynamic between Steven Spielberg's largely fictional epic and the historical events on which the film is based.

Schindler's List and the politics of remembrance

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By Richard Wolin

With the opening of the Holocaust museum last year in Washington, D.C. (an institution fashionably derided as a "Holocaust theme park" in European circles), and Steven Spielberg's powerful film *Schindler's List*, the Holocaust has once again become newsworthy.

It wasn't always so. At Nuremberg, Nazi higher-ups (all 22 of them) were brought to trial both for launching an "imperialist war of aggression" as well as the better known charge of "crimes against humanity." In neither indictment, however, did Hitler's genocidal assault against European Jews—which cost the lives of two-thirds of European Jewry and one-third of world Jewry—figure explicitly. And should one visit Auschwitz today, nowhere will one find reference to the fact that the primary, though in no way exclusive, targets of the Nazi extermination process were the European Jews.

More than any other event in the postwar era, it was probably the 1961 Eichmann trial in Jerusalem that focused world attention on Hitler's notorious *Endlösung*, or Final Solution to the Jewish question.

But of equal importance over the years have been a number of cultural events and spectacles that have stirred popular awareness concerning what was historically unprecedented about the Holocaust: that Hitler's Germany put into effect a plan to negate the existence of an entire people.

The annals of history are replete with brutal massacres and exterminations, often bordering on genocide. As a rule, however, most of these—from the Roman sack of Carthage to the Crusades to the more recent genocidal carnage of Stalin and Pol Pot—were at least tangentially related to strategic and political goals.

The Holocaust broke definitively with the terms of earlier human history. In the words of Trotsky biographer Isaac Deutscher, all of these earlier crimes possessed some "human logic." But it was precisely such logic that was absent from the Holocaust. The Jews posed absolutely no strategic or political threat to Hitler. Most German Jews were wholly assimilated and considered themselves to be more German than Jewish. Only in historical retrospect do we see how tragically mistaken they were in this conviction.

The attempted annihilation of Jews was unique insofar as they were chosen as victims primarily because of their "ideological" status as Jews. So foreign were these events to the common run of human experience that one can, with reason, assent to historian Nora Levin's contention that "Auschwitz was a foreign planet."

First among the cultural breakthroughs was the publication in the '50s of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Another milestone of sorts occurred with the 1978 television miniseries *Holocaust*. Regardless of its aesthetic qualities, which indeed were few, *Holocaust* had the merit of turning the unassimilable events of the Final Solution into a tidy, palatable narrative. It contained the standard (and standardized) elements of prime-time melodrama that had become familiar to a postwar generation for which TV had become the family hearth: protagonists with whom one could readily identify, an upbeat, pro-Zionist ending, and the necessary psychological reprieve of regular commercial breaks. But therein lay the rub: "Ah! At last we understand!"—all the better to trivialize and forget.

Schindler's List is certainly a far cry from *Holocaust*. Though not without its flaws, with any luck it will supplant the latter as a popular point of reference for our understanding of the Third Reich's boundless capacity for inhumanity. It contains two scenes that are destined to qualify as among the most disturbing in cinematic history: the brutal liquidation of the Cracow ghetto at the hands of sadistic SS men; and the wrenching "selection" episode at a nearby work camp, where Jews deemed unfit for labor were surveyed like cattle by Nazi medical personnel and then shipped off to a local death installation.

Throughout the narrative, Spielberg displays a consummate attention to historical detail. The random, everyday character of the violence perpetrated by the Nazis against Jews is fully captured, as is the chaos and harshness of ghetto life. The deaths we are shown, and there are many, are hard, graphic—in a word, "uncinematic."

At one point, where it appears that Schindler may no longer be able to protect his Jewish laborers from the Nazi predators, Schindler promises his beloved accountant, Itzhak Stern, that he will make sure that Stern receives "special treatment." In a marvelous touch, Stern slyly demurs: after all, "special treatment" (in German: *Sonderbehandlung*) was the official Nazi euphemism for the fate awaiting the Jews at the death camps.

One of the film's central themes concerns the Nazis' phobic, ideological preoccupation with exterminating the Jews.

even when such policies conflicted with the attainment of more "rational" goals pertaining to the waging of war.

The Schindler Jews, as they were called, were spared for a time since they were engaged in productive labor essential to the German war effort. Yet their status as productive laborers was never a sufficient guarantee against the Nazis' genocidal zeal. For it was common practice for the SS to divert resources vital to the conduct of war to be used for annihilating the Jews. Thus, in 1944, when Germany's fortunes in the war had already declined precipitously, the Lodz ghetto was liquidated, despite the fact that Lodz was Poland's major industrial center and that its workforce consisted primarily of Jewish ghetto residents. As it became clear that the European war was unwinnable, the Nazis thought that they could at least triumph in their war against the Jews.

A magisterial achievement, *Schindler's List* still has its faults. Of all the stories one could tell about the Holocaust, why was Schindler's the one worth transforming into a three-and-a-half-hour epic? Schindler's tale, as rendered by novelist Thomas Keneally, is dramatic and compelling. Yet, upon reflection, one can't help but wonder about those elements of the Schindler profile that make Spielberg's film so ripe for success.

Could a partial answer be that the protagonist is a non-Jew; and that, more generally, his is a story that would have patent appeal to non-Jewish audiences? Is it because Schindler himself is a figure with whom a mass audience could readily identify, even sympathize?

With Schindler, are we not in fact presented with a genuine Christian martyr, a classical case of the "holy sinner"? Far from being a friend of the Jews, Schindler employs them, at least initially, because theirs is the cheapest labor to be found—even less expensive than that of the local Poles. He is a debauchee, a rake, with a marked appreciation for the fineries of life. A more unlikely suspect for selfless acts of heroism could hardly be found.

All the more glorious and unexpected, then, will be his final transfiguration as "savior" of the Jews. In the process of rescuing his workers—of literally purchasing their freedom from an eminently venal SS overlord—Schindler, we are told by faithful accountant Stern, has gone broke. In the movie's postscript, we learn that his postwar business ventures came to naught and that his marriage soon dissolved.

In stark contrast to Schindler, the film's Jewish characters are, as a rule, underdeveloped. The only exception is the

sidekick accountant Itzhak Stern, played by Ben Kingsley as a sort of Ashkenazi Sancho Panza. Stern displays all the foibles of the Jewish *Untermensch*: abject, circumspect, yet shrewd. We see the Jews as tragic victims and servile accommodators. But they are devoid of personality. They are the film's supernumeraries and huddled masses, waiting to be saved. It is not really their story that has been told. It is Oskar Schindler's.

Then there is the detestable and psychotic SS lieutenant Amon Goeth. Carbine in hand, he picks off Jews from his balcony window before breakfast with about as much conscience as a child killing flies. The word "sadistic" doesn't do justice to the depths of his psychopathological derangement.

Goeth is both attracted and repulsed by his Jewish housekeeper. In between savage beatings, he fantasizes about bringing her back to his native Vienna after the war. Schindler, the voice of reason even among Nazis, brings him back to his senses. Of course, all sexual contact between Germans and Jews had been forbidden by law. Goeth longs to taste the forbidden fruit, then hates himself for it. The housekeeper becomes the victim of his sublimated self-hatred.

But there is a danger in allowing a pathological figure like Goeth to personify the evils of Nazism. It suggests that all Nazis—or the ones we really have to worry about—suffered from personality disorders. At least, this is what we would like to think—insofar as it spares us the real burdens of contemplating how things

like Nazism and Auschwitz were possible.

To pathologize the Nazis and Nazism is to provide a balm for our innate human narcissism. If it's only the Amon Goeths of the world we need worry about, then our tasks of comprehension and prevention are relatively simple. The question of how you or I or our neighbor might have responded in a similar situation is never addressed.

But Goeth and his kind could not have successfully placed in motion the Final Solution without a vast amount of assistance. None of the evil perpetrated by the Nazis would have been possible without the support and cooperation, on a truly massive scale, of "ordinary men": bureaucrats, engineers, railway personnel, members of the German foreign office, *Wehrmacht* foot soldiers, repair crews, as well as men and women throughout Europe who either stood to profit from the Jews' so-called "disappearance," or who, more often, just did not care. As a historian once remarked, the road to Auschwitz was built with hate but



paved with indifference.

By pathologizing Nazi crimes, we spare ourselves the distasteful thought that, were it not for the avid participation of people very much like ourselves, the whole enterprise would have foundered early on. By isolating it as an event that occurred seemingly in a different galaxy, by considering the camps as some kind of inverted Disneyland, we set up a barrier between the evil of yesteryear and that still present among us.

In Jerusalem they have a saying: "There's no business like Shoah business." This suggests that we must constantly second-guess ourselves lest the Holocaust become fashionable, lest it be turned into kitsch. In shifting to present-day Jerusalem at the end of his film and showing us the real "Schindler Jews," Steven Spielberg has done us a service by pointedly reminding us that there is a difference between art and real life. Will such reminders, though, be sufficient? In seeing *Schindler's List* are we moved by the cinematography, by the actors, by its epic visual qualities? Or is it for the actual victims of the Holocaust that we shed our tears?

What precisely does *Schindler's List* help us to remember? Will it simply be recalled as an Academy Award-winning motion picture and as one of the 10 top-grossing films of 1994? Now that Hollywood has paid homage to the greatest crime of the modern era, can it return in good conscience to its normal "blockbuster" mode?

These are more than idle questions. Ours is an era that has a special difficulty in distinguishing appearances from reality. Our comprehension of the past is less and less shaped by the complexities of the written word and the intimacy of human dialogue. Increasingly, our understanding of history is transmitted via the fleeting imagery of mass media. Whether we like it or not, these media have become primary vehicles of socialization. They dictate the way we see the world.

None of these remarks are meant as a specific criticism of *Schindler's List*. They pertain more to the informational structure of late capitalist society, which applies to the production and reception of virtually all films. More specifically, they imply that we can't allow such media to educate us; and that, at best, films such as *Schindler's List* can only be part of a more general process of individual and collective coming to terms with the past.

A key historical irony here is that the Third Reich was one of the most aesthetically self-conscious regimes the world has known. It is common knowledge that Hitler himself was a failed artist. An inveterate admirer of Wagner, he at some level envisioned the Third Reich as a gigantic Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a "total work of art." From *Triumph of the Will* to *Jud Suss* to the weekly newsreel footage, regime operatives knew well how to bend cinematic art to their purposes. Goebbels' entire ministry of propaganda would be inconceivable apart from its expert demagogic employment of mass media such as radio and film.

In fact, as the war ground to its conclusion in 1945, Goebbels, in order to boost sagging morale, made the fol-

lowing telltale appeal couched in revealing, cinematic terms: "Gentlemen, in a hundred years still another color film will portray the terrible days we are undergoing now. Do you want to play a role in that film which will let you live again in a hundred years? Every one of you has to choose the person he wishes to be in a hundred years. I can assure you that it will be a tremendous film, exciting and beautiful, and worth holding steady for."

Let us make sure that we in no way become the heirs to this prototypical Nazi confusion between art and life, an ever-present temptation in our society. Richard Wollin, a professor of European history at Rice University, is the author of *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption and The Terms of Cultural Criticism*.

Schindler's choice

By H.R. Shapiro

Schindler's List is now bringing awareness of the Holocaust to millions of Americans. But is it really a film about the meaning of that horror or simply a story within it, one that obscures as much as it reveals?

Steven Spielberg, hopefully unawares, has made a film that does not tell the story of the vast majority of Jews, but only of a small elite who were part of the Nazi apparatus. Spielberg's Jews are an important and integral arm of the Holocaust. They represent the *Judenrate*, or the Nazi-formed Jewish Councils.

The Nazis formed the *Judenrate* to implement Nazi policy in the Jewish community and, more importantly, to divide and conquer the Jews and to crush any resistance to the Nazis. The Jews who worked with Schindler were all leaders of the *Judenrate*.

Schindler may well have been a "righteous person," as were numerous other Germans, and he did save some 1,000 Jews from the Plaszow-Cracow camp. But Schindler was a figure within the Nazi apparatus and a part of the actual Jewish Holocaust.

Hannah Arendt, in her great study of the Jewish Holocaust, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, informs us: "Wherever Jews lived, there were recognized Jewish leaders, and this leadership, almost without exception, cooperated in one way or another, for one reason or another, with the Nazis. The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between 4 and 6.5 million people."

The *Judenrate* were simulated state governments. Each had its own instruments of terror, the *Ornugsdienst* and *Zivilabteilung* (Nazi-Jewish and Secret Police), ministries of housing, food and welfare, etc., as well as the power to tax their communities and provide slave labor, at no charge, to the Nazi war machine. These Nazi-Jewish councils divided

privileged Jews from non-privileged. This policy was accepted by the Jewish elite in Germany and was extended after September 1939 to Poland and other occupied areas, so that even before the June 1941 Nazi attack on the USSR, Eastern Europe's Jews were atomized and isolated.

The function of the *Judenrate* was to contain and register all Jews in the old and newly formed ghettos. The obvious objective was to save the "better Jews" (themselves, to begin with) by selecting others among their own people to be sent to their deaths. "To a Jew, this role of the Jewish leaders in the destruction of their own people is undoubtedly the darkest chapter of the whole dark story," Arendt concluded.

Isaiah Trunk, in *Judenrat*, writes that "for ghetto inmates the Jewish Councils were the visible organs of oppression. ... Small wonder that all the pent-up hatred for the relatively remote Nazi enemy was aimed at the one visible adversary, the hated Councils."

News of the genocide of the summer of 1941 reached Warsaw almost overnight, and the great majority of Jews by the end of that year. The *Judenrate*, however, through secrecy and lies, convinced the Jewish masses that reports of horrors to the east were only rumors, and that Jews were merely being "resettled." With potential opposition thus neutralized, the Nazis were able to deport and exterminate most of the Warsaw Jews. By contrast, those who had some connection to the *Judenrate* and their associates, especially the privileged and the wealthy, survived the war.

The *Judenrate* leaders, writes historian L. Yahil, "perceived Jewish resistance as a threat to the existence of the ghetto or as a personal threat." Thus the Jewish communities at large lost the organizational means and spirit to defend themselves. This is what enabled the Nazis to blindside and murder most of the Jews in eastern Poland, the Baltic states and in the occupied USSR. M. Tenenbaum-Tamaroff, a young resistance leader who participated in revolts in Warsaw and other cities to the north, led a 1943 revolt in Bialystok to free the Jews who were on their way to the trains. The young Jews who were trying to effect the escape of the people of the city were thwarted by the *Judenrate* and lost their lives in battle with the Nazis.

"In Germany today," wrote Arendt in 1963, "[the] notion of 'prominent' Jews has not yet been forgotten. While the veterans and other privileged Jewish groups are no longer mentioned, the fate of 'famous' Jews is still deplored at the expense of all others. There are more than a few people, especially among the cultural elite, who still publicly regret the fact that Germany sent Einstein packing, without realizing it was a much greater crime to kill little Hans Cohn from around the corner, even though he was no genius."

Schindler's importance in history, ironically, is that his

good works demonstrate the utter Nazification of the *Judenrate*. From Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's List*, as well as from Malvina Grad's autobiography, *The Krakow Ghetto and the Plaszow Camp Remembered*, one learns that virtually every principal character in the book and the film was a member of or associated with the Cracow *Judenrat*, or with the Nazis per se.

None of this is clear in the film. Schindler, no doubt for mere convenience, joined the Nazi Party in 1938 and became an agent of the *Abwehr* (counterintelligence service) in Cracow before the war in 1939. He returned to Cracow



after Germany had invaded Poland, still an *Abwehr* agent, to dodge the draft and to make his fortune with Jewish slave-labor.

One of Schindler's contacts, Dr. R. Kastner, in Hungary (a member of the *Judenrat* in Pest, and an agent of the Jewish Agency in Palestine) also saved some Jews—saved exactly 1,684, including his relatives and friends, according to Arendt. Kastner's privileged Jews survived through deals with Eichmann and the Zionist Jewish Agency, while almost 500,000 unsuspecting Jews in Hungary were exterminated.

Kastner was later tried in Israel for selecting who should and who should not survive. Zionist courts, of course, whitewashed Kastner—that is, the *Judenrate*—but, according to an Israeli army officer, Israeli agents assassinated him, no doubt to remove him from history.

Schindler's List is a film in which Schindler is portrayed as larger than life, while the Jewish people are rendered invisible. Why does Spielberg celebrate Schindler, a CEO not unlike Herman Wouk's Captain Queeg in *The Caine Mutiny*? Spielberg may really believe that it is not the good man who will save the world but the good CEO (the good despot), in Hollywood or elsewhere, who, although he holds the people in slavery, does so for their salvation.

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