

The Choice of Being an Exploiter: A Study of Oskar Schindler's Character

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Abstract

The world in the first part of the 20th century had witnessed two World Wars. On parallel to the World War II, from 1933 till the end of the War, a dark event that puts the whole mankind especially the German Nazis to shame took place — The Holocaust. It was the time when a massive genocide of the people of a particular race took place in several extermination camps in German-occupied European Countries.

At that juncture, Oskar Schindler stands as a befitting example of a 'True Human Being.' Being a German Industrialist, a member of the Nazi Party, and a man with "Great Contacts with the Most Influential People", he had all the powers to exploit the Jews who were working in the labour camps. But he did not choose to be on the side of Exploiters, instead he throughout 'the time', stood for the protection of the lives of the Jews who were working in his *Fabryka Emalia* (Enamel Factory). He saved the lives of around 1100 Jews and became one among those few 'righteous' people who stood for safeguarding the lives of Jewish people at the point in history.

The current paper, with a brief background to the events that lead to the Holocaust, analyses the character of Oskar Schindler as it was presented in the novel *Schindler's List*. It also has taken some of the testimonies of the *Schindlerjuden* (Schindler's Jews), which were recorded by USC Shoah Foundation and Documentaries of Martin Kent on Oskar Schindler into consideration. This study on the character of Schindler tries to see him as a person who stood for his fellow human beings, who were subjugated to exploitation, by utilising almost all the powers he had had.

Keywords – Holocaust, Oskar Schindler, Ethical Values, Morality, Humanity

"The purpose of life...is to be useful, to be honourable. It is to be compassionate. It is to matter, to have it make some difference that you lived." - **Leo Rosten**

(Rosten 55)

The novel *Schindler's Ark* is penned by an Australian Writer Thomas Keneally in the year 1982 after he met, Leopold Pfefferberg, one of the Schindlerjuden, in 1980. Its American publication is titled *Schindler's List*. It is a biographical novel. It has won the Booker Prize in 1982 and the Los Angeles Times Book Award for Fiction in 1983. It is a novel that made many people in this world realize how a businessman who was, all the time, behind fortunes, changed his path towards standing up for his fellow human beings. This novel is written based on the true incidents that happened during World War II in German-occupied Poland. The whole story revolves around a German Nazi Member and a renowned industrialist of the time, Herr Oskar Schindler. It is the story of a man who had witnessed enormous evil perpetrated by his own people but stood firm on the side of humanity with his courage.

The novel is the basis for Stephen Spielberg's movie "Schindler's List", which was released in 1993. This movie has won several awards including seven Academy Awards. It has received huge collections. Spielberg, the director of the movie, has not even accepted any salary for making it. Even he has used the profits made by the film to found the "USC Shoah Foundation" a year after the film was released. One of the prime aims of the foundation is to preserve and present the lost history of not only the victims of the Holocaust but also of those who are affected by several other Genocides around the Globe. This movie has been included in the curriculum of several educational institutions since 2018, as a part of 25 years of its release.

Before studying the character of Schindler, it is important to make a quick recall of how the Jewish people were exploited and extirpated during World War II.

After a decade and a half after the end of World War I, Hitler took oath as the chancellor of the German republic, on 30th January 1933. The Nazi party that came into power had Anti-Semitism (hostility towards Jews) as one of its key ideologies. They wanted to create the hegemony of an "Aryan"/"Nordic" Master Race over the "sub-humans" whom they called the *Untermenschen* like Jews and Slavs. As a part of its "Final Solution to the Jewish Question", Nazi Germany started the Shoah, which is familiar to the world as the Holocaust.

Just within a week from the formation of Nazi Hegemony in Germany, the attacks on Jews began. On 11th March 1933, the violence started with the attack of stormtroopers on the Jewish-owned retail stores. Later, on the 26th of March, Hitler officially called for a boycott of all Jewish businesses.

On 15th September 1935, 'Nuremberg Law' – a Reich Law of Citizenship and Law for the Protection of 'German Blood and Honour' was passed at a Nazi Party rally in Nuremberg. This enabled only the persons of 'Pure German blood' to be the citizens. This law considered marriage and extramarital relations between Jews and Germans as *Rassenschande* (racial contamination). The Jewish Community Organisations lost their recognition as legal entities by the government. Jewish properties were confiscated. Jewish doctors were prohibited from treating Aryan patients whereas Jewish lawyers from practising law in Germany. The Synagogues were demolished.

The Germans made Jews look different in all the ways possible. The Jewish men and women were ordered to add "Israel" and "Sarah" to their names. The passports of Jews were marked with the letter "J" for *Jude* (the German word for Jew). Jews were forced to wear a Hand band with the Yellow Star of David.

From 1936 the Nazis conducted *Pogroms* (the organized massacre of Jews). Thousands of Jews were inhumanly exterminated in several such pogroms that were conducted throughout the German-occupied territories. Things took a greater turn when 15,000 Polish-born Jews were deported to Poland from Germany on 28th October 1938. A Polish Jew student named Herschel Gryszpan opened fire at Ernst vom Rath, a third secretary in the German embassy in Paris, who died two days later. Thus resulting in the outbreak of 'Kristallnacht' or the Night of Broken Glass – this was otherwise called the November Pogroms. On the 9th and 10th of November, Goebbels instigated pogroms in Germany and Austria. In one night 267 synagogues were destroyed, 7,500 stores were looted and 30,000 Jews were sent to Concentration camps. On the total, 91 Jews were killed just on that one night.

On 30th January 1939 in a Reichstag speech, Hitler threatened the Jewish Race to exterminate if a world war gets broken once again. Jewish children were prohibited from attending German schools. The gold and other valuable belongings of Jews were confiscated. Forced labour was imposed on Jews in Germany first, which got spread to the other German-occupied lands later on. Jews were evicted by German Landlords. An order was passed on eliminating the Jews from German Economic Life altogether.

These actions did not confine to the land of Germany. They gradually got spread to Poland too. On 1st September 1939, Germany invaded Poland after which Two million Jews came under Nazi rule; over one lakh Jews served in the Polish army fighting the Germans. Soon, Jews were seized for forced labour, and Jewish property was confiscated. Jews were ordered to wear the 'Yellow Star'. Jewish businesses were marked with yellow stars. Synagogue services were outlawed and several synagogues were destroyed even in Poland. The Jews of Poland were moved to Ghettos. When Warsaw got surrendered to Germany, the Jews were attacked in the streets; they were seized for forced labour and were removed from food lines. Jewish schools were closed. It did not end with Jews,

Nazis murdered thousands of mental patients in Reich-incorporated Poland as part of its so-called euthanasia (the mercy killing) program. Nazis even used gas vans to murder mental patients and even women and children.

The Jews aged 14 to 60 were forced to serve two years of forced labour. The Jews that refused deportation to camps were put to death. Some Jews were shot in the ghettos, some others were gassed at the Extermination camps and some of them were dead due to hunger. Some were used as guinea pigs for several medical experiments. Some had no idea why they were being killed and when they would be killed. They lived in fear throughout that period of Final Solution.

During the Holocaust, several kinds of camps were established in German-occupied lands. In the novel, the writer refers to such camps several times as they act as the settings in the novel.

Concentration camps were first among them. Their main purpose was to concentrate and imprison the Jews without any judicial trial. These camps were not only meant for Jews but also for Communists, Socialists, Gypsies and homosexuals. The First Concentration Camp at Dachau which was established on 20th March 1933 was initially filled with the German Communists and the Socialists. The physical conditions of these camps were completely unhygienic, which resulted in the death of most inmates throughout Germany and German-occupied countries. Mass detention of Jews to ghettos started in 1933 and after Kristallnacht, there was a humongous rise in the number of detainees. Some of them were forced to do hard physical labour. In some camps, they were forced to work until death.

The second type was the Extermination Camps. In German-occupied Poland, six such camps were established. "Lawyers and historians collaborated in ascertaining that in the extermination camps on Polish territory nearly 3 million Jews were murdered: 1,52,000 in Chelmno (from 1941–1943), 60,000–80,000 in Majdanek. 6,00,000 in Belzec (between 1942 and 1943), 2,50,000 in Sobibor (from 1941 to 1943), 9,00,000 in Treblinka (in just one year 42-43) 1 million i.e., 10,00,000 in Auschwitz-Birkenau alone (from January 1942 to November 1944)." (Laqueur 142) Auschwitz-Birkenau was exclusively made to burn 4,756 corpses in 24 hours. And not just for the Jews but also they acted as the death centres to German Communists, Gypsies and Soviet war prisoners.

Meanwhile, in September 1939, German-occupied Poland became the centre for all the 6 extermination camps and many other forced labour camps. "Forced labor was an integral part of the war economy of the Third Reich." (Laqueur 210) Among the three largest national groups of forced labour, Poland stood second with 1.7 million citizens after the Soviet with 2.8 million citizens working as forced labour. It was during this period; Oskar Schindler stepped into Poland as it seemed the best land to make fortunes and to make a luxurious living for a lifetime.

When it comes to the character of Oskar Schindler, he is a man who enters a room as a stranger, but by the time he walks out, he makes camaraderie with almost all the people in that room. He makes himself the centre of attraction wherever he goes. And he uses that brimming charm towards the beginning of the novel to get himself established as an Industrialist in German-occupied Poland. He comes as a no one to Krakow, a city on the Vistula River, in the lesser Poland region. But, by the time he leaves the place, he becomes one of the well-known and one among those few influential personalities of the city. He is the man, who used his charm to make fortunes, and used the same wealth towards the end of the novel to save the lives of around 1100 human beings, whose lives were at stake at that point of time in history.

Though born in Zwittau, a small industrial city in Czechoslovak Republic, Oskar considered himself a German. His family was Catholic. His mother Frau Schindler practiced completely what she believed. But, Oskar, just like his father, never cared. Frau Schindler's relation with Oskar's father, Herr Hans Schindler was a strained one. Not only his marriage but after a point, Hans Schindler could not make his business sustain. Oskar hated his father for leaving his mother, forgetting the fact that, he too hated his wife Emily, whom he married at a very early age after just three-months of courtship.

When he came to see his dead mother for one last time, he was wearing a *Hakenkreuz*, the emblem of Nazi party. His family members did not recognise it much "as it was something that young Chez-Germans were wearing that season." (Keneally 38) At that time, he was working as a Sales Man in the office of a German Manager who wore a badge. He too received orders, like any other worker in that office, to wear a badge.

Young Oskar never paid any heed to Race, blood, and soil. 'Money' was the only thing that mattered to him. According to Elinor J. Brecher, the author of "Schindler's Legacy", "He got involved in the Nazi Party because it was good for business. He wanted to make a lot of money and he did make a lot of money." (Oskar Schindler – Part 1 08:20-08:27)

Elinor J. Brecher, also says that, "He didn't go into the Second World War thinking I'm gonna save Jews and be a hero. He went into it thinking, I'm gonna make a lot of money and be set for life." (Oskar Schindler – Part 2 00:30-00:40) On September 6, 1939, the city of Krakow was occupied by the Germans. Soon after the occupation, Schindler entered the city, which became a land of fortunes for him, for the next five years. He saw Krakow, "with its railroad junction with modest industries, would be a boomtown of the new regime. He wasn't going to be a salesman anymore. Now he was going to be a tycoon." (Keneally 31) He saw Krakow as a city full of opportunities.

When one observes the character of Oskar Schindler in his early days at Krakow, he would never appear as the one who goes to an extent where he puts his life at stake to save someone. It even makes it harder for someone who saw him in those days, to think, that he could stand against the system and could get imprisoned three times. During those days, "He wanted to be rich. He wanted sexual gratification. They were his ambitions. He had the ambitions not of philosopher but of a hedonist." (Oskar Schindler – Part 1 06:26-06:44) says Keneally in an interview.

In March, when the Jews were forcibly moved to ghettos, Schindler was moving into their vacant residences. Then he witnessed Nazis evicting Jews from their apartments and herding them into ghettos. Soon, the seized Jewish workers who were declared as forced labour. As a Nazi, Schindler had the full privilege and he could even benefit from the Jews tragedy. Being a German Businessman with a great number of contacts with highly influential people of Nazi Germany, Oskar Schindler had many options to ill-treat his Jewish labour force. But, he decided not to do that. He identified this Jews as his fellow human beings. He had a choice there, to 'selekt' only the strong and healthy Jews who were 'Essential Workers'. But, he did not 'selekt' them. Instead, with the help of two Jewish clerks Itzsak Stern and Bankier he identified as many Jews as possible and gave them employment in his factory irrespective of their ability to work.

During Holocaust, one of the most affected were the Jewish children. Approximately 1.5 million out of 6 million Jews that were murdered during this period, were children. At such a difficult time, Schindler included unskilled children in his working labour. Towards the end of the novel, one could find the way he protects hundreds of children by telling the Nazi men that he needs them to enter into the tiny spaces among the machines so as to clean them. As only the essential labour force were left with life, he proclaims them as the 'Essential Labour' of his enamel factory. Thus, he plays a major role in protecting the lives of all those innocent Jewish children too.

In the fall of 1943, the Płaszów Labour camp was established. Amon Goéth was appointed as the Commandant of the Krakow – Płaszów Camp. From their external appearance to their urge to make a fortune, from the way they drink to the way they treat their wives Schindler and Goéth shared many qualities. But, they were to the two edges of a ladder when it comes to their ethical behaviour. Goéth strongly believed, after killing Jews mercilessly, "he was being awarded the inevitable exaltation that follows an act of political, racial and moral justice." (Keneally 168) While Goéth dreamed of a day where the whole Jewish race gets extinct, "the future young would ask with wonder about days like this." (Keneally 175), Schindler dreamt of the day when all human beings live in harmony.

It is believed and sometimes even clearly seen that, after he witnessed the first action at Krakow ghetto, from Krakusa Street, Schindler became a completely different person. The bloodshed that he had witnessed had made a great impact on his approach towards the ongoing activities around him. After this event, Schindler made a firm decision — "Beyond this day, no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system." (Keneally 133) From then on he took each and every step very carefully. By being in the system, he tried to defeat it as he found what went wrong with it. And as a part of it, he even got imprisoned three times. He even, several times, warned his Jews of upcoming 'aktionen', thus protecting their lives.

When he met Goeth for the first time, he got a chance to see the works going on at Płaszów labour camp. The pace of work of male prisoners and women labourers seemed to him as if they were willing to accept life at the labour camp and soon after, by looking at their conditions near the working site at Płaszów labour camp, "Oskar felt the

same surge of nausea, the same prickling of the blood he had experienced on the hill above Krakusa street.” (Keneally 166)

Schindler was a true manipulator. He made everyone, especially Goéth believe that it was very difficult for him to transfer the “sophisticated machinery” of Emalia to Płaszów labour camp unlike Madritsch’s “series of Sewing machines.”(Keneally 171) Though Beckmann, another industrialist, was firing all the Jews of his factory instead of moving his factory to Płaszów, Oskar defends his act of not firing his Jewish workers saying he couldn’t fire them as “he had hundreds more skilled Jewish workers than Beckmann did.” (Keneally 171) By giving all such logic, he made Goéth say “...there’d be no interference in the management of the enamel factory.” (Keneally 172)

At one point it was so confusing to Goéth to decide whether Oskar is feeling more careful towards his jews or what. This could be observed in different instances. When they had their first meeting at Scherner’s office, after Goéth’s arrival at Płaszów, for Goéth, “It was very hard to judge by these separate decisions which one of the two felt more paternal towards his jews – Madritsch, who wanted to be inside Płaszów with them, or Schindler, who wanted to have his with him at Emalia.” (Keneally 165)

Even his treatment towards his workers was very much different from the other German Industrialists. He was kind. He was generous. He was humane. Liam Leyson, a Schindler’s survivor, who was just 11 years old when he was working at Emalia, in his testimony says – “We worked on this factory floor he would come down and visit. He slowly walks through and stops at different places and talks to people. And he would always addresses by our names you know, he remember, practically remember everybody by name.” (Holocaust Survivor Leon Leyson Testimony02:03:46-02:04:04)

“He was a pretty decent type of human being in the first place and he once seeing me there, he would stop and talk. He’d stop and talk to my father and periodically who would, occasionally he would leave half-a-pack of cigarettes by accident on his work station and at one point, at one time he stopped at my father’s work station put his arm around him on his shoulders, said don’t worry everything is going to be okay, am sure he didn’t know that it was going to be okay but it was sort of the humankind of thing to do to speak. No Nazi would ever do a thing like that ... The following day I would find out that he ordered a special extra ration of soup for me something like that.” (Holocaust Survivor Leon Leyson Testimony 02:04:24-02:05:16) Adding to this story of him, Leon Leyson, one of the Schindlerjuden says, “am sure everyone on Schindler’s company had a personal story like this to tell where Schindler acted in a human fashion rather than in a Nazi fashion.” (Holocaust Survivor Leon Leyson Testimony02:05:34-02:05:45)

The owner of Madritsch uniform factory inside the Płaszów camp, Julius Madritsch, was a year or so younger than Oskar and Amon Goeth. “He was an enterprising but humane man, and if asked to justify the existence of his profitable factory inside the camp, would have argued that it kept nearly four thousand prisoners employed and therefore safe from the death mills.” (Keneally 18) Madritsch’s manager, Raimund Titsch, was a man in his early forties. He smuggled in truckloads of food for his prisoners. This could have earned him a fatal stay in Montelupich prison, the SS jail, or else in Auschwitz. Both these men too served the Jews to their level maximum. But they never went beyond like how Oskar Schindler did.

Oskar Schindler, an opportunist turned the righteous stands as a true representation of an Ethical self. The ability to identify his/her fellow person as a human being irrespective of their caste/colour/race/religion is something that adds divinity to a human being. Schindler was considered an ANGEL by most of the Schindler Jude. For them, he was their saviour. And his Emalia was heaven.

Empathy is the basis of humanity. He saved them not because he was at the beginning kind-hearted, good, noble, moral so on and so forth; but because on a very deep level he developed the human attachment to these people. Schindler regarded Jews not as alien others who could be easily stigmatized but as human beings who are like us, who breathe like us, who laugh like us, who cry like us, who grieve like us and the recognition of the other person as a human being and not as a stereotype which means, that he was capable of establishing human relations with them. Steven Spielberg in an interview speaks about Schindler and says, “there was something about him that he didn’t share with really very many people and that was he had empathy in a world at a time where empathy didn’t factor in, in terms of an industrialised genocide such as the holocaust was that here was a man who had a great deal of respect and understanding and empathy which he hid from his cohorts his collaborators his Nazi collaborators but he shared

it with his workers who were all of Schindler Jews.” (Steven Spielberg On The Legacy Of ‘Schindler’s List’ 11:48-12:40)

Doing good deeds may not always give good results. Though after knowing the risk, if we still decide to be good, that determines our ethical stand. The good deeds that a man does in fear of God cannot determine his/her ethical values. Though religion helps to maintain the moral conduct of human beings, at times, it even corrupts them. So, Ethical Values should be free from the Fear of God and fear of sin, to be precise. Schindler neither worried about god nor of his afterlife. This is a big operation he does it openly. He as a German citizen is violating their laws openly. He does it at great personal risk and great personal expense and finally with no expectation of reward. And that may be considered as being truly ethical.

And it is difficult, to call Schindler a modest person if one observes him before and after the wartime. He tends to be a different personality altogether. He was bankrupt. His marriage was failed. At that time, it were Schindler’s Jews, who came back and gave him monetary support till he died on 9th October 1974. Maybe it was this ambiguity that he always had in his character, which enabled him to survive through the period. It may be this culmination of good and evil in him which made him live through those dark days.

Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler’s List* says in an interview – “Oskar was able to drink with the devil to make deals with the devil, that’s because there was a lot of the devil in him as well. If Oskar hadn’t been that particular blend of Satya and Black Marketeer and drunk and saviour, he couldn’t have saved them. He had to be that particular blend of contradictions to be a saviour in a world where all values were upside down.” (Oskar Schindler – Part 5 00:32-01:07) – Dr. B & H of Ghetto hospital had no devil in them, thus were affected by the depression that was endemic in the ghetto. The mental agony that they had been through for being ethical persons, going against the principles that they believed in, was the most difficult thing for them to do. Having the power to buy people is another aspect that made Oskar survive the whole time. Unlike people like Bosko, the *Wachtmeister*, who though saved several inmates of Ghetto, turned a martyr later. But, Schindler, successfully passed through the time.

"Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching - even when doing the wrong thing is legal." Though this quote was wrongly attributed to Aldo Leopold, it is true in its sense. Oskar lived in a time when exploiting and killing Jews for no reason was absolutely legal and unquestionable. Still he followed what he felt was correct. He stood on the side of humanity instead of legality. His ethical behaviour could be clearly seen in the way he protects the Jews who owed nothing to him. In that process, he had even forgotten why he had moved to Krakow. As a member of Nazi party, he even had powers to exploit as many Jews as possible. But, he hadn't chosen to be an exploiter. Instead, he stood on the side of humanity and remained as an Ethical being.

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