

SCHINDLER'S LIST

Directed by Steven Spielberg
Produced by Steven Spielberg, Gerald R. Molen, and Branko Lustig
Distributed by Universal Pictures
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What was a small country like Denmark or The Netherlands to do, facing the Nazi juggernaut of 1940? Could it fight with indignant rage, knowing the loss of life would be catastrophic and the chance of victory slim? What about national honor? What about allies in the field counting on a robust defense to delay the blitzkrieg and allow for a chance of counterattack elsewhere? Were these countries stoically accepting German conquest as an unfortunate interlude? Did they know they would eventually be liberated, and their intent was to let some other country do the fighting (and dying)?

And what of Spain and Switzerland, countries that offered Germany a pittance of assistance, threatened complications, and otherwise bluffed their way through the war, surviving unscathed? Did they merely do what was necessary?

Are we to look out for ourselves, hoping to survive? Should we accept reality and make the best of things?

Similarly for the Jews, choices were limited.

A Jew could fight (like in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising of 1943), knowing there was little chance for success; he could acquiesce, hoping to survive the war by doing what he was told and not standing out; or he could give in, accepting privileged duties (like ghetto police officer) or heartrending duties (like an extermination-camp cleanup squad *sonderkommando*), and risk being branded a collaborator.

Or he could give up, thinking of the punishment fellow Jews would otherwise receive as retribution for a fruitless protest, perhaps wanting to die with dignity, perhaps feeling like life was no longer worth the effort.

And many had little chance to choose, not knowing what lay ahead until it was too late. The ruse continued all the way down the line. Even the gas chambers were labeled 'Delousing.'

In *Schindler's List* almost every character compromises, doing what he doesn't want to do; or not doing as he is supposed to do, either by the measure of God's law or man's. The most prominent compromiser is Oskar Schindler. He uses the war as a springboard for his outsized ambitions. With shameless charm, he exploits the hopeless position of Jewish financiers, clings to government contracts like a calf on a teat, and judiciously employs a liberal mixture of threat and graft to become the archetypal war profiteer. Impressed by the intelligence and quiet dignity of his Jewish accountant Itzhak Stern, Schindler's conscience is troubled, and he uses his position to encourage sadistic SS officer Amon Goth to be merciful (so he'll "pardon" those displeasing him rather than shooting them), and makes tentative efforts to lead by example (kissing the Jewish woman who brings him the birthday cake and showering boxcars of

sweltering deportees with water). But these gestures are just speed bumps on the road to Jewish annihilation.

Ostensibly making excuses for Goth, Schindler opines that war "brings out the worst in people, never the good—always the bad." He's really making excuses for himself. He'll leave his memories, take his steamer trunks of cash, and be gone. Blind hate will soon destroy Germany, and Schindler is determined to save himself.

The Old Testament book of Esther tells a similar true story. Esther was renowned as one of Asia's most beautiful women. She told no one that she was a Jew. She was brought into King Ahasuerus's harem at a time when the Hebrew nation was exiled from the Promised Land. She didn't kill herself rather than become his sex-slave, and she didn't kill the king in his (presumed) post-coital slumbers. No, she beat six other beauties in overnight tryouts, won the king's love, and became queen to the most powerful man in the world. If she found her position demeaning she kept it to herself.

One of the royal counselors, Haman, hates the Jews and, deceiving the king, convinces him to acquiesce to their destruction. Esther's adopted father, Mordecai, tells Esther that perhaps she became queen "for such a time as this." She daringly proposes that the king host a banquet, risking her life in the process, and cannily invites the pompous Haman. She exposes his plotting at the banquet, and the king hangs him on gallows Haman erected to execute Mordecai, whom, his highness is reminded, once uncovered a plot to assassinate the king. Then the Jews are given, by royal decree, the authority to fall upon their enemies. They kill over 75,000!

(Curiously enough, Esther is the only book in the Bible that makes no mention of God, just like *Schindler's List*.)

On the verge of leaving, Schindler circuitously suggests, again, the possibility of sharing a drink with Stern, and his accountant/confidant relents. Schindler is flummoxed. Perhaps something more than distance will separate them. Did Stern agree because he knows he will soon be dead? (The pair have been discussing the difficulty of protecting Stern any further as the chaotic Reich finally collapses in a convulsive fit of self-murder.)

Chastened, perhaps, thinking that Stern may be giving him too much credit to agree to share a drink, perhaps realizing how much he loves this man whom he cannot bring himself to call a friend (either because of the Aryan-Jewish divide or because he knows he is not worthy of Stern's company), Oskar Schindler is finally broken.

He will give everything to save everyone he can.

He stays, using the excuse of needing workers for his new munitions factory to hire the services of over 1000 Jews, saving them from the fires of Auschwitz. Refusing to produce usable armaments, he burns through his entire fortune in a matter of months.

The irony is that if Schindler was not an ingratiating Nazi playboy who made millions of Reichsmarks using slave labor then he couldn't have saved anybody.

Not all things work out for good. For six million Jews there was nothing good about the Holocaust. Yet if there had been no Holocaust there would be no modern State of Israel.

Stern encourages Schindler with these words, perhaps the most important in the film: "The list is an absolute good. The list is life. All around its margins lies the gulf." To Schindler

war meant pain, privation, and senseless death (along with guaranteed profits). He had convinced himself he wouldn't have to worry about being the exception to the rule, since there *was* no exception; a total disaster is just that—total. But because he was willing to open his eyes and refuse to look away, by force of will he made one of the darkest chapters in history a little brighter. There *was* a way to salvage something decent before it was irreparably lost.

It's never too late to do the right thing.

Schindler's List is a reminder that sometimes mercy prevails, that in a broken world of chaos, compromise, and blind hate unwitting saviors walk among us, preserved for their appointed time. And until that day, when we finally know what is expected of us, we just have to do the best we can, praying that our courage will not fail us, that our consciences will not accuse us, and that God will forgive.