



## **What Did Oskar Schindler View from the Hill? Righteous among the Nations: Oskar Schindler as a Study Case Lesson Plan**

This is the last project Zita was working on, one of many she was involved with at the International School.

**Time Frame:** One Lesson Period

### **Objectives**

Students will:

- learn about the unique efforts and actions of the Righteous among the Nations to help Jews during the Holocaust.
- analyze the motivations of Oskar Schindler to help Jews survive.
- identify the process of change that Schindler underwent from being a Nazi businessman to a rescuer of Jews.

### **Procedure**

#### **Part 1**

Begin the lesson by asking students who is a Righteous among the Nations in their opinion or whether they have heard about what these people did. Explain to students the following basic definition of Righteous among the Nations as defined by Yad Vashem:

Righteous among the Nations are non-Jews who had risked their lives during the Holocaust to save Jews in countries that had been under Nazi rule or had collaborated with the German regime.

This lesson focuses on one of the Righteous among the Nations named Oskar Schindler. Divide class into 5-6 groups, giving each group three documents about Oskar Schindler and his actions during the Holocaust. Ask each group to assume the role of a committee of judges, requesting that they discuss whether Schindler, on the basis of the historical documents in hand, is entitled to receive the title of Righteous among the Nations. Each group is asked to arrive at an unanimous decision.

Note to the Teacher: Two of the documents are testimonies given by Jews describing Schindler's behavior upon his arrival to Krakow, Poland, and the third document is a letter written Jews upon liberation for Schindler in case the Allied army would accuse him of being a Nazi and arrest him.

Inform students that Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, in Israel, has a committee of historians and jurists that thoroughly review every case, based on written testimonies and



other relevant documentation. After studying each case, they reach a conclusion of whether or not this person should be recognized as a Righteous among the Nations.

Organize a whole class discussion based on the presentations of each committee's conclusion. On chart paper have two columns one entitled PRO and the other CON. Record the considerations of the students. Together with the students, try to identify some common criteria that they have found during their work in groups.

Teachers may wish to guide the students, pointing out some of the following information based on the criteria as outlined by Yad Vashem:

- An attempt that included the active involvement of the rescuer to save a Jew regardless of whether these attempt(s) ended in success or failure
- Acknowledged mortal risk for the rescuer during the endeavor - during the Nazi regime, the warnings clearly stated that whoever extended a hand to assist the Jews placed not only their own life at risk but also the lives of their loved ones
- Humanitarian motives as the primary incentive - the rescuer must not have received material compensation as a condition of their actions
- The rescuer is a non-Jew

For the Teacher: If time allows, consider holding a short discussion about the above criteria. Clearly, these guidelines are not clear-cut and that various interpretations may be made. For example, some diplomats such as Raoul Wallenberg, helped save thousands of Jews from death. As diplomats they had diplomatic immunity and did not risk their lives per-se. In addition, in a few cases some Righteous eventually married the person they saved. For more information, [click here](#).

### **Part 2: Excerpts from the Film Schindler's List**

It is important to note that this Hollywood movie is not a historical document but rather an artistic feature film based on the interpretation of a historical event by the director, Steven Spielberg.

Together with the students, analyze the different documents they have received from the Schindler case. How can such different testimonies describe the same person? In an effort to grapple with this question, view the scene in which Oskar Schindler is riding on a horse with his mistress. From this hill, he sees the evacuation of the Krakow Ghetto. Until that point, the film is in black-and-white, however, in this scene he suddenly sees a girl wearing a red coat. Schindler sees a human being in front of him, and his perspective has changed.

Ask students what they understand from this scene. On the blackboard, write the verb: TO SEE. Elaborate with the students the following:

- Schindler saw an individual
- Schindler saw one person in a mass of human beings



- What is the value of seeing another human being in his/her despair and is it enough just to “see” that person?
- How did Schindler translate what he saw into action?

In another scene, Schindler meets the commander of the Plaszow concentration camp, Amon Goeth. During this conversation, he bargains the lives of the Jewish workers from his factory. Schindler pays Goeth a large sum of money, and Goeth is pleased. Schindler manages to make Goeth believe that he is only interested in keeping his workers for financial gain.

After viewing this scene, ask students once again what have they seen. On the blackboard write down the verbs: TO DECIDE and TO ACT

Analyze with the students the following points in connection to what they saw in the film clip:

- After seeing the evacuation of the Krakow Jews, Schindler becomes an active, involved rescuer
- Schindler's interest and motivations change dramatically, and the money he received through the exploitation of Jews became used to save Jewish lives
- Schindler tries to convince another factory owner, Medrich, to act in a similar manner. Medrich refuses because he believes that the risk is too great. Despite the high risk, Schindler decides to act and therefore his actions become extraordinary.
- Schindler is portrayed as a normal human being as opposed to an angel. Throughout the film, we notice his conduct in various situations, including his affairs with women. Righteous people were not necessarily the most “righteous” people in their daily lives.

### **Concluding Discussion Question:**

- In your opinion, what are the messages that Righteous people pass on to us?

Note to the Teacher: It is important to note that we do not know why one individual is ready to take risks whereas another one will not. In addition, the lessons that the Righteous teach us are not necessarily those of virtue or justice, but rather shed light on the complexity of human beings and their actions depending on various circumstances and situations.

The question of a message for future generations is often raised when dealing with the Holocaust. The deeds of the Righteous serve as a model of human courage and the virtue of humankind. As educators and as people we realize that most people are bystanders - and not rescuers who risk their own lives to save others. We want to encourage students to be more sensitive and empathetic, understanding that the silent majority also has a responsibility for the misfortune of its suffering minority. Students are not expected to immediately dedicate their lives to altruistic causes, but rather to begin with personal introspection.



## Testimonies

### **Natan Werzel's testimony**

*"In 1939, before the war, I bought some machines from an enamel factory at an auction. Schindler came to my factory like a robber, without any official appointment, and announced that as long as I run the business well, I would not be harmed. High-ranking German officers used to come to Schindler to buy and sell. I worked there for roughly a year or a year and a half. Schindler's attitude towards me and towards the other Jews was generally good. One day he told me: 'In Russia they line you up at the wall if you know too much.' I knew all sorts of things about him. At the end of 1941 he paid discharged me. In the summer of 1942 he sent for me. He explained that he was under police investigation, that it was forbidden for Germans to buy businesses from Jews. He demanded that I sign forged documents indicating that I had sold my machines to a Pole before the war. I refused. He offered a bribe, and still I refused. He went to another room. Half an hour later, some SS men turned up in black uniforms and started beating me. Schindler himself was also beating and cursing me. I just lay there, and then I lost consciousness. After I woke up Schindler said to me: 'Will you sign now, you cheat?' I said I would. That night I had to go see a doctor. When I returned to my village, a clerk from the Ministry of Foreign Currencies in Cracow suddenly arrested me. He found Jewelry in my house, and took it. Then he said: 'you can get this back from Schindler!' This means that Schindler had told on me."*

Source: The Oscar Schindler file, Department of Righteous among the Nations, Yad Vashem

### **Julius Wiener's testimony to the Committee 10/10/1956**

(The Wiener family used to own a wholesale shop for enamel.)

*"On 15/10/1939 Oskar Schindler broke into our shop in a manner reminiscent of gangsters. He put his hand on the cashier, locked the doors, and then announced that as of that moment he will be taking over the running of the business. He attacked my father very rudely, spouting insults at him. He also threatened him with a gun, and when my wife tried to interfere, he shouted at her: "shut up you Jewish pig! Now you will get to know me and Hitler!" He demanded that my father kiss Hitler's portrait. He forced us to sign some papers handing over ownership of the business. He didn't let my father come to the shop but I had to continue working there, for a living." (Mr. Wiener says that two months after this incident, Schindler accused him of cheating. The accusation was over the measurement of enamel. Schindler had arranged a similar false cheating issue in another factory of his. He threw Mr. Wiener out of the shop and ordered him not to return. The next day Mr. Wiener did return and tried to speak with Schindler.) "Around noon, some SS men came into the factory. They wore uniforms. Schindler pointed at me and told one of them: 'Give him a quick haircut!' The five SS men took me to the back room, locked the door and brutally began to beat and punch me all over my body. After a while I fell on the floor, wounded and bleeding, and then lost consciousness. After a while, when I woke up, I saw my assailants pouring water on me. The hooligan who had received the orders from Schindler, grabbed me, sat me down on a chair and said to me: 'You lousy Jew, if you dare to*



*bother the manager (Schindler) again, if you dare to come either here or to his factory ever again, you will go to the place from which no one returns!' I did not come back. I understood that Schindler's goal was to learn from me how to run the business. The minute this goal was achieved, he threw me to the streets like a discarded object..."*

Source: The Oscar Schindler file, Department of Righteous among the Nations, Yad Vashem

**A letter written by Schindler's former workers**

(Signed: Isaak Stern, former employee Pal. Office in Krakow, Dr. Hilfstein, Chaim Salpeter, Former President of the Zionist Executive in Krakow for Galicia and Silesia)

*"Brothers!*

*We, the undersigned Jews from Krakow, inmates of Plaszow concentration camp, have, since 1942, worked in Director Schindler's business. Since Schindler took over management of the business, it was his exclusive goal to protect us from resettlement, which would have meant our ultimate liquidation. During the entire period in which we worked for Director Schindler he did everything possible to save the lives of the greatest possible number of Jews, in spite of the tremendous difficulties; especially during a time when receiving Jewish workers caused great difficulties with the authorities. Director Schindler took care of our sustenance, and as a result, during the whole period of our employment by him there was not a single case of unnatural death. All in all he employed more than 1,000 Jews in Krakow. As the Russian frontline approached and it became necessary to transfer us to a different concentration camp, Director Schindler relocated his business to Bruennlitz near Zwittau.*

*There were huge difficulties connected with the implementation of Director Schindler's business, and he took great pains to introduce this plan. The fact that he attained permission to create a camp, in which not only women and men, but also families could stay together, is unique within the territory of the Reich. Special mention must be given to the fact that our resettlement to Bruennlitz was carried out by way of a list of names, put together in Krakow and approved by the Central Administration of all concentration camps in Oranienburg (a unique case). After the men had been interned in Gross-Rosen concentration camp for no more than a couple of days and the women for 3 weeks in Auschwitz concentration camp, we may claim with assertiveness that with our arrival in Bruennlitz we owe our lives solely to the efforts of Director Schindler and his humane treatment of his workers. Director Schindler took care of the improvement of our living standards by providing us with extra food and clothing. No money was spared and his one and only goal was the humanistic ideal of saving our lives from inevitable death.*

*It is only thanks to the ceaseless efforts and interventions of Director Schindler with the authorities in question, that we stayed in Bruennlitz, in spite of the existing danger, as, with the approaching frontline we would all have been moved away by the leaders of the camp, which would have meant our ultimate end. This we declare today, on this day of the declaration of the end of the war, as we await our official liberation and the opportunity to return to our destroyed families and homes. Here we are, a gathering of 1100 people, 800 men and 300 women.*

*All Jewish workers, that were inmates in the Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz concentration camps respectively*



*declare wholeheartedly their gratitude towards Director Schindler, and we herewith state that it is exclusively due to his efforts, that we were permitted to witness this moment, the end of the war. Concerning Director Schindler's treatment of the Jews, one event that took place during our internment in Bruennlitz in January of this year which deserves special mention was coincidentally a transport of Jewish inmates, that had been evacuated from the Auschwitz concentration camp, Goleschow outpost, and ended up near us. This transport consisted exclusively of more than 100 sick people from a hospital which had been cleared during the liquidation of the camp. These people reached us frozen and almost unable to carry on living after having wandered for weeks. No other camp was willing to accept this transport and it was Director Schindler alone who personally took care of these people, while giving them shelter on his factory premises; even though there was not the slightest chance of them ever being employed. He gave considerable sums out of his own private funds, to enable their recovery as quick as possible. He organized medical aid and established a special hospital room for those people who were bedridden. It was only because of his personal care that it was possible to save 80 of these people from their inevitable death and to restore them to life. We sincerely plead with you to help Director Schindler in any way possible, and especially to enable him to establish a new life, because of all he did for us both in Krakow and in Bruennlitz he sacrificed his entire fortune.*

*Bruennlitz, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945."*

Translated from the original document in German

Source: The Oscar Schindler file, Department of Righteous among the Nations, Yad Vashem

