Schindler's List

By Jay Carr
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Liam Neeson as Oskar Schindler looks over the shoulder of Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley). the brains of his rescue operation. Courtesy Library of Congress

Nothing in Steven Spielberg's previous work prepares us for "Schindler's List" or for its mythical central figure, an unlikely angel dancing on the rim of hell, snatching Jews from death. It's a stunning achievement, a film that recreates the Holocaust not as something abstract but as felt knowledge. Its impact is mostly visceral. This is pretty much the way it must have been, you tell yourself as you sit tensely watching German troops listen silently in the stairwell of a ransacked apartment for telltale noise of Jews in hiding or as a bored Nazi commandant with a beer gut sits on a balcony with a rifle, shooting Jews at random. Or even as you realize that an improvised road is paved with pieces of Jewish gravestones, that even in death the Nazis won't leave the Jews alone.

The usual terms of praise for a film must be jettisoned because "Schindler's List" goes beyond the usual boundaries of film. It's as much a stunning avoidance of pitfalls as it is a triumph of existential immediacy. There isn't an aesthetic choice in it that didn't amount to a moral choice for Spielberg as well, and he acquits himself magnificently, bringing his prodigious image-making gifts from the arena of a lonely childhood yearnings to the area of global history. After several compromised tries at making a serious film, he finally emerges here as a mature filmmaker doing justice to the most serious subject of the century.

"Schindler's List" , filmed in Poland at the invitation of the Polish government, a minister of which cited his country's need for closure, is informed by the fact that unlike Warsaw, which was mostly leveled, Krakow remained pretty much intact. Schindler's actual factory still stands, used today by a manufacturer of radio parts. This all-or-nothing project, steeped in atmospheric rightness provided by Krakow locales, required Spielberg to measure up to his intimidating subject ethically as well as technically, and he has. A triumphant merger of craft and commitment, "Schindler's List" reminds us that there's no substitute for a virtuosic image-maker taking on a subject close to his heart and soul.

Most of the right moves were made before Spielberg moved a single camera to Poland, starting with the decision to film in black and white, mostly at eye level, close-up, with a lot of handheld camerawork. Often, the handheld camera has tended to seem a jittery self-indulgence, but here it works, an analogue for the chaos and arbitrariness in which Europe's Jews were flung. The black-and-white textures aren't gritty, like the old newsreels they evoke. They're velvety, hard-edged, which at once reinforces the precision and detail that are twin strengths, promoting the only-yesterday urgency Spielberg means to capture, and does.

He's right to let the details – most transposed from Thomas Keneally's historical novel drawn from accounts of survivors – carry the film. To have punched the film up with histrionics would have ruined it, and Spielberg carefully avoids any italicizing that would seem redundant and puny, given the larger story. He's also right to leave the character of Oskar Schindler a bit of a mystery. Explaining him would have been fatal. Indeed, the film's only move that seems a misstep comes at the end, when Schindler momentarily expresses regret that he didn't save more than the 1,100 Jews he managed to shelter by a deft combination of bribery and manipulation. Ambiguity – apart from hewing closer to the truth – makes Schindler more dramatically interesting. We don't know what precisely turned him from an untroubled profiteer, getting rich off Jewish slave labor, to a savior, using his profits to buy the lives of Jews and to buy exorbitant black-market food to keep them alive.

In the film, as in the book, the turning point comes when he's seated on horseback alongside his mistress on a hill, watching as the Nazis march into the ghetto and slaugh-

ter the Jews they had just herded into it, they said, for safety. Spielberg takes a chance here, as the coat of a little girl who miraculously toddles away unobserved is highlighted in – symbolically – red. But it works, and the sight of Schindler looking on, yet apart, is an analogue for Spielberg's own aesthetic distancing. To heap drama, much less melodrama, on top of such intrinsically shattering events would have caused the film to self-destruct. Which is why Spielberg has, if anything, underplayed the dramatic events related in the book, some of which are too theatrical to be believed. For example, when Schindler plays blackjack with the Nazi for the life of a Jewish cook – an event that really occurred – we see only the setting up of the game and dealing of the cards before Spielberg wisely cuts away.

Liam Neeson was an inspired choice as Schindler. With his slightly predatory stoop, he moves with the confidence of a worldly bluffer, eyes glistening like a born gambler's, letting us know without a word that part of the appeal of his dangerous game lies in its high stakes. Although the film downplays the real Schindler's womanizing, Neeson is convincing as well when it comes to Schindler's hedonistic side. And while it might seem difficult to believe, there's humor as well in "Schindler's List," most stemming from Schindler's shrewdness at knowing how to get things done by pushing German bureaucratic buttons. He argues his right-hand man off a death-camp train not by making moral points but by questioning the correctness of the paperwork, a knack he later escalates to bring a train full of Jews out of Auschwitz on the grounds that he needs them for war production in his enamelware factory, which manufactures field-kitchen equipment.

Not that the Holocaust's larger horrors are in any way neglected. They're all the more chillingly brought home by entering our field of vision matter-of-factly. Jews saying that things could be worse and denying death-camp rumors; a truckload of children singing as they're being driven off to the ovens; Schindler himself reminding us what a relative thing mercy is as he hoses down a packed care of stifling prisoners as the German's laugh. As with Neeson, the others move beyond usual levels of acting, not just impersonating their characters, but seeming to embody them with total conviction and commitment. Chief among them are Ben Kingsley as the brains of Schindler's operation and – his piercing gaze never lets us forget – its conscience, and Ralph Fiennes as the nightmarish commandant, Amon Goeth.

The latter's absolute life-and-death power transformed him into a god of death, killing arbitrarily, capriciously, wantonly. Bloated on blood as well as beer, he's brutal and stupid and at times mesmerizingly eerie in his disconnection from inhibition, a riveting portrait of corruption. Would-be neo-Nazis, no so incidentally, will be forced to face up to the fact that, beneath those cool SS uniforms, the German war machine ran on lies, psychosis, thievery, and monstrous mediocrity. "Schindler's List" took a long time to gestate, but once it started happening, it came together with astonishing speed, purposefulness, and rightness. "Schindler's List" really got to me. It's haunting, potent, jolting images turn it into another kinetic – and inextinguishable – Holocaust museum.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

The late Jay Carr was a member of both the Film and Recording Preservation Boards. He was chief film critic at the Boston Globe *for 20 years and edited "The A List: The National Society of Film Critics' 100 Essential Films."*