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### Human Dignity in the Holocaust

Steven Spielberg is an American Jew who directed the movie *Schindler's List* in order to honor and remember victims of the Holocaust and to educate people about the Holocaust. In an interview with *Social Education*, he stated "My primary purpose in making *Schindler's List* was for education. The Holocaust has been treated as just a footnote in so many textbooks or not mentioned at all. Millions knew little if anything about it. Others tried to deny it happened at all," (Feinberg and Totten). Spielberg wants to educate others on the Holocaust so that history does not repeat itself in dehumanizing another group of people. Yet he did not choose just any survivor narrative, he chose to focus on a German, Catholic businessman who was part of the Nazi party who helped save the lives of over 1,100 Jews. This complex man is Oskar Schindler. The movie focuses on Schindler and other specific characters experiencing the Holocaust. There is a focus on the characters and their individuality that the Nazis tried to strip from them but could never truly take away. *Schindler's List* gives back this individuality that the Nazis during the Holocaust tried to strip away. *Schindler's List* is a message to the world to value the humanity of the individual in light of the Holocaust.

Oskar Schindler is an individual who is morally ambiguous, and the viewer can see his gradual change in perspective on the Jewish people during different moments throughout the film. At the beginning of the film, Schindler is a businessman who moves to Poland in order to make a profit off of the war efforts. He enrolls the help of Itzhak Stern, a smart Jewish

businessman, to help him with actually running the company as he has no idea how to run a business, just how to work people. In the beginning, it is really Stern who tries to help the Jewish people escape the camps by trying to get as many people under the title of “essential worker” for Germany through Schindler’s business. When a one-armed man comes to thank Mr. Schindler for giving him a job, he is suddenly faced with the fact that Stern has been hiring people merely to try and save them and he scolds Stern and tells him that basically he does not care who is working in his factory as long as he does not know about it. He wants to have plausible deniability, but it is more than just potentially getting in trouble with the law. He wants to remain detached from his workers. He does not want to see these Jewish workers as individuals, he wants to be like regular businessmen who use their labor force to make money and then forget about them. He tells Stern at the beginning that he wants to hire Jewish workers because they are a cheaper labor force. He is solely running this business to make money.

Yet throughout the narrative, Schindler comes into contact with more individual Jewish people, but it is not until the liquidation of the ghetto that the change becomes evident. In the horrific depiction of the liquidating of the ghetto, Schindler is out for a ride with one of his mistresses and stops upon the top of the hill and he sees the destruction with his own eyes. He can no longer remain ignorant to the fact that the Jewish people are individuals. This is also made clear to the viewer with the little girl in the red coat. The whole movie is in black and white except this one little girl; her coat is scarlet red. Schindler sees this girl running in the streets trying to hide from the Nazis. The viewer gets to see that she does hide for a while, and the viewer starts to think that maybe this little girl is a symbol of hope. Incorrect. Later at the concentration camp they are forced to burn the bodies of the Jewish people who were killed in the liquidation of the ghetto. Schindler is there to do business with Amon Göth, the head of the

camp, and is there to see these corpses being burned and he sees the body of the little girl with the red coat. For the viewer and for Schindler this is a sign that all hope is lost. If this sweet little girl was not spared, then why would his workers be spared? This individual death affects his mentality and he realizes that he must try even harder to help his workers.

One individual Schindler helps who is not his worker is Helen. Schindler helps Helen recognize her humanity in a place where she is told that she has none. Even Amon sees her humanity and is torn between believing the lies he helped create that the Jewish people are akin to rats and that she is a woman. He tells her that she is a good cook and a well-trained servant and if she needs a reference after the war that he will gladly give her one even though he is in denial as he knows that his orders are to kill all the Jews. He basically says that he knows that “you’re not a person in the strictest sense of the word” and yet he still cares for her and will not admit because that would make him in love with a person who he believes is not fully a person. The Nazis show indifference to the individual in their dehumanizing of the Jewish people. This is exemplified in the story Helen tells Schindler in their conversation where she watched Amon Göth shoot a woman “not because she was fatter or skinnier” or “slower or faster than anybody else”. He shot her just because she was Jewish. Compare this to Schindler’s reaction to Helen, who comforts and reassures her and sees her in her humanity. Schindler talks Helen through Amon’s mentality for why Amon will not kill her. Schindler lives in the Nazi society and understands men like Amon. He talks to her as an equal, unlike in her “conversation” with Amon where she does not speak one word out of fear for her life. In this way, Spielberg is directing the audience’s attention to both how much Schindler has changed and to the fact that there should be more of a focus on treating people as equals and as individuals.

The viewer starts to see how much Schindler really cares for his workers. They start to become more than workers. He was so concerned about making money off of the war in the beginning of the film, but the audience sees this change the most in his relationship with Itzhak Stern. At first Stern is hired to run the business and Schindler does not particularly care what he does as long as the business is making money and he does not get in trouble with the Nazis like with the one-armed man. When Stern and the rest of the workers are put into the camp, Schindler starts to see how terrible their living condition is and how he has to get involved. Before he did not care that they were living in the ghetto, he did not care to ask them about their personal lives. It may be that Schindler came first to the camp to work with Stern, but it soon became that Schindler came to see Stern because he cared about him and his well-being. This friendship shines in a scene where the camp is being liquidated and everyone will be sent to Auschwitz. Stern, who has refused to drink with Schindler the whole movie finally says that he will have one drink with him as he knows that being sent to Auschwitz will result in his death. Schindler recognizes this seriousness in Stern and so he knows that in order to save his friend he must do more than just have the officer “put in a good recommendation” for him. He must do more than idly stand by or pull strings behind the scenes. He must actively play a role in order to save these people who he now understands as individuals.

Near the end of the movie, there is a very emotionally charged scene when Schindler is packing up to flee from the Allies and the Russians. He breaks down and weeps claiming that he could have done more, that he “could have saved one more”. He understands now that the individual is worth so much more than anything else, more than his car, more than his money, more than any material thing. He is racked with guilt that he did not do more when he had the means to save more people. Schindler speaks for most of the world who were bystanders and did

nothing to stop this injustice. America and American Jews like Spielberg's ancestors would also be crushed by this guilt. If they had just done more to try and get the American government to help their family members in Europe. If they could have saved just one more, it could have made a difference. This is the ultimate message that is portrayed in this film. One more person could have been in the epilogue scene with the real survivors of the Holocaust who survived because of Schindler's list. The viewer may not feel the guilt to the extent that Schindler is feeling in that moment, but they do feel this guilt of not having helped a person in need. It is a call to action. It is a call to remember to treat every person as a human being with dignity and respect.

*Schindler's List* is a film with a message: treat everyone with respect and as an equal so that nothing like the Holocaust ever happens again. It is very important to Spielberg that people learn from the Holocaust to see others as individuals. If viewers remember the victims of the Holocaust through *Schindler's List*, then they can learn to value the individual through remembering the awfulness of the dehumanization of the Jewish people.

Works Cited

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