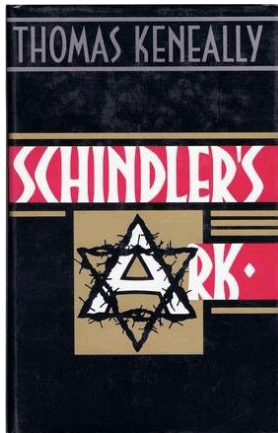


Schindler's Ark – Thomas Keneally



“Schindler’s Ark” by Thomas Keneally follows the story of Oskar Schindler, a German industrialist who settles in Cracow towards the beginning of the war to take over a factory. Although Schindler is a member of the Nazi party, there are many Jews employed in his factory, and he feels no hatred towards them. In fact he has become disillusioned with the regime due to its violent acts. Therefore, when the Jews in Cracow start to be persecuted and put into the forced labour camp Plaszow, Schindler tries to keep them safe.

As Schindler is disgusted by conditions in the camp he decides to file a request to open up his own forced labour camp around his factory. He is successful, mainly due to the fact that he gave out many bribes to local officials, and agreed to pay for all the expenses of the camp. The SS officials in charge of checking up on the labour camp are won over with gifts of alcohol and good food, rarities in war times. Emalia (Schindler’s camp) becomes famous among the Jews in Plaszow. It is spoken of as if it was paradise, illustrating how horrific any alternative was. The Jews are well fed, and no longer had to fear executions, but despite all this Emalia was still a forced labour camp, and the Jews were still prisoners with very limited freedom.

After some time Schindler receives news that Plaszow and Emalia are to be closed, due to the war situation. The men would be sent to Gröss-Rosen, and the women to Auschwitz. Schindler knows they will most likely be killed in these camps and requests to move his factory to Moravia, in a safer area. The request is granted, again through numerous bribes, and Schindler makes a list of about 1,200 Jews he declares as “vital skilled workers” for his factory. This list becomes famous among the Jews in Plaszow who all try to get on it. They see it, quite rightly, as a matter of life and death.

What is perhaps most surprising to the reader is that Oskar Schindler acts in broad daylight. He openly shows his affection for the Jews and yet his camp stays safe. He is arrested three times, and yet is always able to pull strings to get released. It seems that as long as you were able to pay enough bribes to the officials and had enough connections, you could do almost anything you wanted in the Third Reich, at least at a local level. With his booming profits and numerous drinking companions Schindler was therefore in the best position possible to help the Jews.

The men on Schindler’s list arrive at the new camp with few problems, however the women are stuck in Auschwitz for months. Schindler manages to get them out, and brings them to safety. It is a great feat that Schindler managed to keep the camp going until the end of the war as production had fallen to an almost negligible level. Schindler no longer cared about profits and the Jews were in no real condition to do hard work. Inspectors were bribed with gifts, machines were tampered with to appear as if they were working well, and Schindler even pretended shells he had bought from another company were produced in his camp.

“Schindler’s Ark” paints a cruel picture of the Third Reich. Keneally recounts many individual stories, which in my opinion make the horrors seem worse. It is easier to relate to a single person, and in “Schindler’s Ark” there are many such individuals to relate to. By mentioning the stories of so many prisoners Keneally also helps convey how Schindler felt about them. Although he did not often show it, he saw his workers as family, and spent most of his time with them, even many years after the war.

They saw him as a saviour, and were proud to call themselves "Schindlerjuden". That in itself is evidence of how badly the Jews had been treated in the Third Reich, how rare people like Oskar Schindler were.

The most striking character in the book, apart from Oskar Schindler, is Amon Goeth, the commandant at Plaszow. He treated the Jews in his camp terribly, going out onto his balcony to shoot a random Jew every day. He punished them for the slightest of reasons, such as for hiding a potato in their huts. As a punishment every single person from those barracks was flogged in front of all the other prisoners at roll call. Later in the book, when the prisoners recall their experiences, they say Goeth still haunted their dreams. Poldek Pfefferberg, one of the prisoners says: "When you saw Goeth, you saw death." This is further illustrated by an event even later on, when another prisoner, Mila Pfefferberg, was introduced to the actor playing Goeth in Spielberg's film adaption of the book. She began to shake uncontrollably as she was reminded of the real Amon Goeth. Although she knew Goeth was long dead, she still felt such fear, illustrating how deeply Goeth's actions had affected the prisoners.

One of the things that I found most shocking was that often it was children who were killed first, as they were not seen as useful in terms of production. In fact the SS even went looking for hidden children in the barracks. Another thing which shocked me was how openly the Nazis went about the murders of the Jews, as they did not try to hide executions from the other prisoners. As one of the prisoners says in the book, this shows that the Nazis did not fear witnesses, that they knew the Jews would all be killed before they had a chance to testify.

Keneally also points out the gross hypocrisies existing in the Third Reich. For example, he explains how some SS officers befriended certain prisoners, risking their reputation and possibly their life to see that this prisoner was better off than others. What made that one prisoner different? How could a person justify saving one life, when thousands of others of his kind were being mass murdered? This hypocrisy can also be seen in the fact that the high-ranking officials in Berlin prosecuted Amon Goeth for randomly shooting prisoners, but had no problem relocating them all to Auschwitz, where most would be executed at the hands of men just like Amon Goeth.

It is lucky that the officials were so corruptible, as otherwise a thousand more Jews would have been killed. In this way Oskar was able to keep them safe until the end of the war. As a result he was seen as a hero in Israel and welcomed warmly there. In Germany however, some people still threw stones at him, calling him a Jew-kisser, and shouting that he too should have been burned with the Jews. It is saddening that even years after the Nazi regime had fallen; Hitler's propaganda was still so effective.