About the Person

Oskar Schindler was born on April 28, 1908, in Zwittau (now Svitavy) in Moravia, then part of Austria-Hungary and now in the Czech Republic. He came from a Catholic Sudeten German family; his father owned a factory that manufactured agricultural machinery. Before the war, Schindler joined the NSDAP and worked for the German military intelligence service, the “Abwehr.” In 1939, he took over the formerly Jewish enamelware factory Emalia in Kraków-Zabłocie, Poland, and later also produced ammunition for the Wehrmacht. Advised by the Jewish accountant Itzhak Stern, he hired more and more Jews from the Krakow ghetto. When the ghetto was liquidated in 1943, the workers were sent to the Plaszow forced-labor camp. Schindler bribed the camp commander, had the factory grounds recognized as a satellite camp, and thus protected the Jews there from deportation and arbitrary executions. In the fall of 1944, Plaszow was to be evacuated. Schindler managed to have the operation relocated to Brünnlitz (Brněnec) in Moravia as an ammunition factory. Several lists of “war-essential” workers—which later became known as “Schindler’s List” and were largely compiled by the Jewish concentration camp prisoner Mietek Pemper—contained around 1,100 names. Among them were 300 women. They had initially been deported to the Auschwitz concentration camp. Schindler bribed officials there as well and made repeated appeals until the 300 women were also brought to Brünnlitz. By the end of the war in May 1945, nearly all of his protégés—known as “Schindler’s Jews”—had survived.

In 1949, Oskar Schindler emigrated to Argentina with his wife Emilie, but then returned to Germany alone and destitute in 1957 and died on October 9, 1974, in Hildesheim. He was buried on Mount Zion in Jerusalem. In 1993, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem honored him as one of the “Righteous Among the Nations.” That same year, Steven Spielberg’s film “Schindler’s List” brought his story to the attention of the world. With the help of AI, FokusIsrael.ch spoke with Oskar Schindler about his life.

By Sacha Wigdorovits[i]

Mr. Schindler, you were a member of the NSDAP and worked for the “Abwehr,” the German military intelligence service. So you were a Nazi. Why did you save Jews?

Oskar Schindler: Yes, I was in the party and with the Abwehr. That opened doors. But then I saw the horror unfolding—stars, ghettos, blatant sadism. People were behaving like pigs. I knew my workers. If you know people, you have to treat them

like human beings. I hated the brutality. My conscience wouldn’t let me stand by and watch. I had no choice.

What did Adolf Hitler mean to you: Was he your idol?

Oskar Schindler: He was never my idol. I was a businessman, not a believer. I used the Party and the Abwehr because they were useful. But I hated the madness of that system and wanted to thwart it as much as I could. There was nothing like hero worship involved.

Did your wife Emilie persuade you to help the Jews?

Oskar Schindler: I made the decision; Emilie supported it. In Brünnlitz, she procured food and medicine—often using her own jewelry—and cared for the sick. Without her, many would not have survived the winter. The fact that I didn’t speak up enough about that later was one of my mistakes.

Who else helped you with your rescue efforts?

Oskar Schindler: Itzhak Stern, my accountant, and Mietek Pemper. In addition, German and Polish employees, black-market contacts, and officials whom I bribed. The list wasn’t written solely by me, and the rescue operation was the work of an entire network; I paid for it.

Amon Göth, the commander of the Plaszow camp from which you rescued the Jews, was considered extremely brutal. How were you able to convince him—did you bribe him?

Oskar Schindler: Yes, with liquor, gifts, money, and flattery. I sat at his table so that my people wouldn’t die on his property. It wasn’t friendship. It was the price I had to pay to secure the Emalia camp and, later, the transfer to Brünnlitz.

Was there a moment when you became afraid—for yourself and for your wife?

Oskar Schindler: The Gestapo arrested me three times on charges of corruption and providing unauthorized assistance. They released me because the arms industry still needed me and because I knew the right people. In Brünnlitz, we lived in the camp. I was afraid, yes. But giving up was out of the question.

Did you stay in touch with the Jews you saved later on?

Oskar Schindler: Until the day I died. They sent me money, brought me to Israel, and called me “Righteous Among the Nations.” In 1963, I was honored at Yad Vashem. I’m buried on Mount Zion because that’s what they wanted. They were my friends. I would do it all over again.

You emigrated to Argentina after the war. Many Nazis went into hiding there. But you didn’t have to do that. Why did you go to Argentina anyway?

Oskar Schindler: Not to go into hiding. I had a reputation as someone who helped others. In 1949, with the help of grants from the Joint (the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee—Ed.), Emilie and I went to Argentina and tried to set up a nutria farm. That failed. I drank. In 1957, I returned to Germany alone. Emilie stayed in Argentina.

When you returned to Germany afterward, you were once again destitute. Didn’t anyone help you back then?

Oskar Schindler: Yes, my “Schindler’s Jews” and Jewish aid organizations. I had spent over a million dollars on camps, bribes, and food. The German government reimbursed me only a portion of that. Without the help of those I saved, I would have been completely ruined.

Have you ever regretted spending your entire fortune on your rescue operation?

Oskar Schindler: Never the money. I always said: The people I saved are my friends. I would do it all over again, because I hate cruelty. My only regret is that there were too few of them. There should have been more names on the list.

You witnessed the atrocities against the Jews firsthand: Did you feel ashamed at the time for having been a member of the NSDAP and for having supported the Hitler regime as a Wehrmacht officer?

Oskar Schindler: Yes. I later called myself “the conscience of those who knew something and did nothing.” Membership in the party opened the door for me. I then used that same door to work against the system. But the shame remains, because I went along with it for too long.

Looking back today: Is there anything you would do differently?

Oskar Schindler: Yes. Save more people, start sooner. Thank Emilie more. Drink

less, see fewer other women. I wouldn’t do the rescue operation itself any differently.

Note: This conversation with Oskar Schindler is based on his 1964 interview in Frankfurt, subsequent conversations with Moshe Bejski and survivors, as well as reports from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem. In our series “Conversations with Legends,” we speak with deceased figures from the worlds of politics, religion, science, and culture who were significant to Judaism and Israel. Our goal is to use AI to bring them and their ideas closer to today’s audience. Interviews published so far include:

Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism

Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president

David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister

Golda Meir, Israel’s only female prime minister to date

Anwar Sadat, the Egyptian president who traveled to Jerusalem in 1977 to make peace with Israel

Moses, who led the Jewish people out of slavery in Egypt and into freedom

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries

Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis

Albert Einstein, the founder of the theory of relativity

Robert Oppenheimer, the “Father of the Atomic Bomb”

Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood icon and inventor

Estée Lauder, the entrepreneur and founder of a global corporation

Milton Friedman, Nobel laureate in economics

Levi Strauss, the inventor of jeans

Elie Wiesel, writer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Primo Levi, the Italian chemist and writer

Theodor Adorno, the German philosopher and sociologist

Martin Buber, philosopher, scholar of religion, and writer.

Hannah Arendt, journalist and controversial thinker

Carl Lutz, the Swiss diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews

Paul Grüninger, the St. Gallen police commander who was dismissed and convicted for helping persecuted Jews

Raoul Wallenberg, the young Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews in Budapest and was then abducted and killed by the Russians

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