Modern European History

Unit 9 – WWII

Background Information for *Schindler’s List*

The film *Schindler's List*, by Stephen Spielberg, is based on the "docu-novel" by Thomas Keneally, an Australian novelist. In the author's note at the beginning of the book, Keneally recalled the day in 1980 when he visited a luggage store in Beverly Hills, California.

The owner of the store, Leopold Page, was a Schindlerjuden, that is, a Jew saved by Oskar Schindler in a world far removed from the blue skies of southern California. In the former world, Leopold Page answered to the name of Poldek Pfefferberg.

"It was beneath Pfefferberg's shelves of imported Italian leather goods that I first heard of Oskar Schindler," Keneally remembered. For thirty years, Pfefferberg had tried to interest every writer who entered his shop with the story of Oskar Schindler. Until Keneally, nobody was interested. Indeed, until the 1980's the Holocaust interested few people in the United States, least of all in Hollywood.

Keneally published his book, Schindler's List, in 1982. Twelve years later, when the film Schindler's List made its remarkable debut, Pfefferberg told an interviewer, "A single person, a human being, can change the world."

To research the story of Oskar Schindler, Keneally interviewed fifty Schindlerjuden in seven nations. He read the documents and the testimonies at Yad Vashem in Israel (and elsewhere), consulted Schindler's postwar friends as well as his wartime associates "who can still be reached," and visited Poland, the setting of the Nazi genocide and of Schindler's efforts.

In his "Author's Note," Keneally writes, "It has sometimes been necessary to make reasonable constructs of conversations of which Oskar and others have left only the briefest record. But most exchanges and conversations, and all events, are based on the detailed recollections of the Schindlerjuden, of Schindler himself, and of other witnesses to Oskar's acts of outrageous rescue."

Keneally also offers thanks to those who "gave interviews and generously contributed information through letters and documents." The first person Keneally lists is "Frau Emilie Schindler," Schindler's wife. In the book, however, the role of Emilie Schindler and her influence upon her husband in the rescue of Jews are touched upon only lightly. She appears to have been quoted one time not from an interview Keneally conducted with her but from a 1973 West German documentary on her husband. The story of Emilie Schindler remains largely untold.

With unconcealed bitterness after the film opened, she said, "The Jews he saved, me he abandoned."

Pfefferberg, who accompanied Keneally on the trip to Poland, was the author's guiding spirit. The book is dedicated both to Pfefferberg and to Schindler. Keneally also acknowledges the help of two other Schindlerjuden: Mosche Bejski and Mieczyslaw Pemper.

During the war, Bejski had been an expert forger of German documents, a skill of inestimable value. He later became an Israeli supreme court justice and (to turn a full circle) is today the director of the special commission of Righteous Gentiles at Yad Vashem.

**Schindler: Before WWII**

Oskar Schindler was born on April 28, 1908, in Zwittau, an industrial city in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was baptized in the Catholic church. Today the city of Schindler's birth is Zvitava in the province of Moravia of the Czech Republic.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the Schindler family emigrated to Zwittau from Vienna, the capital of the Austrian (Habsburg) Empire. The region, heavily populated by Germans, became known as the Sudetenland, after the nearby Sudeten Mountains.

Schindler's father, Hans, was the owner of a factory which produced farm machinery, and Oskar and his sister, Elfriede, were raised in privileged circumstances, a fact of considerable importance.

The typical young man in the regimented Austro-Hungarian Empire had to follow societal rules if he expected to land a job after his schooling. But Oskar Schindler was not typical. He was guaranteed a position with the family business--whether or not he co mplied with societal rules. This economic security gave Schindler patrician self-assurance and, perhaps, a willingness to flaunt the rules he believed did not apply to him. In a word, Schindler's privileged upbringing allowed him to be different.

Schindler's mother, Louisa, who he adored, was a deeply religious women, forever "redolent of incense" from her frequent visits to the Catholic church. His father, Hans, preferred sipping cognac in the local coffee house to attending services at the Catholic church, a preference he bequeathed to his son, who spoke little of God. The extent of the elder Schindler's political involvement seems to have been lighting a candle each year to honor the birth of the Austro-Hungarian Kaiser (or Emperor) Franz Josef , beloved by the Jews of his empire.

As Austrians living amidst a subject people (the Czechs), the Schindler family ranked high among the social and economic elite of Zwittau. Schindler's early life was pleasant, at least from the material point of view. His father gave him an extravagant birthday gift; a powerful motorcycle. The teenage Schindler entered several racing contests. He was adventuresome, reckless, and a daredevil. A tall young man with charm and good looks, he was a womanizer of the first order, even after he married Emilie Schindler in 1927.

Emilie was educated in a Catholic convent, and, like Schindler's mother, she was deeply religious. She and Schindler met in 1927 when he made a sales trip to her father's farm. At the time Schindler was selling electric motors for the family business.

It is not surprising that Schindler took a fancy to Emilie. Her early photographs show a beautiful woman. Her widowed father, a "gentleman farmer" and a man of wealth, disapproved of his daughter's marriage to Oskar Schindler, knowing well his reputatio n. Schindler's father also opposed the marriage, believing his son too young and the betrothal too sudden.

After a six week courtship, the two were married. At a young age, Schindler was long accustomed to getting what he wanted. Emilie's father refused to give Schindler the traditional dowry, a bitter point with the son-in-law. The marriage became rocky aft er a short while, as Schindler resumed his drinking and womanizing.

Oskar Schindler and Emilie did not have children, but Schindler had two children outside of the marriage.

If Schindler's youth had been one of privileges, the privileges did not include a warm and loving relationship between his parents. In 1935, the Schindler factory went bankrupt due to the worldwide depression triggered by Wall Street's collapse in 1929. Just as economic disaster struck the family business, Schindler's father abandoned his wife. Schindler's mother died not long after his father left home.

The family business in ruins, Schindler became a salesman for another machinery company, a job that took him to nearby Poland. Though raised in privileged circumstances, young Oskar had made little of his life. He was known as a delightful personality, but not a serious person. The thought of work made him tired. He slept late, had a roving eye for beautiful women, and could not decline a drink.

**WORLD WAR I**

The First World War (1914-1918) dealt a crippling blow to the privileged status of the Schindler family in Zwittau. At the end of the war, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, and several newly independent nations emerged, including Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Old ethnic hatreds intensified. The Schindler family, and the other Germans in the new Czechoslovakia, became a minority group within the nation dominated by the Czechs. It was a stunning reversal of fortune. Oskar Schindler was ten years old.

The German minority in Czechoslovakia was accorded limited cultural and political rights by the Prague government, but resentment towards the new Czechoslovak state was always present. It could not have been otherwise. The lord does not become a subject with grace and equanimity. The best jobs in government now went to the Czechs as formerly the best jobs had gone to the Germans. The hard feelings between the two people intensified following the world depression in 1929 and Hitler's seizure of power in neighboring Germany in 1933.

**THE RISE OF HITLER**

Many Sudeten Germans became ardent Nazis because of their resentment towards the Czechs, whom they viewed as an inferior people, a notch above the Poles, two notches above the Jews. Living so close to the German Reich yet not a part of it, these Sudeten Germans, in compensation, often became more nationalistic than the average German.

Out of this dissatisfaction and bitterness emerged the Sudeten German Party under Konrad Henlein, himself a Sudeten German. Henlein, later one of the most brutal Nazis, was a disciple of Hitler and took his orders directly from the Fuehrer's chancellery i n Berlin. Oskar Schindler, who at the time was working as a salesman in the Sudetenland, joined the Sudeten German Party. His finely tailored suits now sported a Henlein badge in the lapel.

The author Keneally suggests that Schindler joined the Henlein party less for political reasons than for reasons of personal advancement. After all, very few Sudeten Germans did not join, or at least support, Henlein's party. "All things being equal," Keneally writes, "when you went in to see a German company manager wearing the (Henlein) badge, you got the order."

The reader of Keneally's book might be led to believe that Schindler was interested not so much in politics as he was in profit; that he was an opportunist of the first order. However close to the mark, the argument too easily dismisses the very genuine appeal Hitler exerted upon the Sudeten Germans, Schindler included.

There was a great deal about Hitler's program that resonated in the soul of the Sudeten German. Hitler promised to restore the Reich to its former glory. He pledged to end unemployment and usher in a new era of economic prosperity and security. He vowed t o destroy the communists. And he offered a scapegoat for Germany's problems: The Jews. It was a rare Sudeten German who did not respond to Hitler's message.

Schindler's wife, Emilie, was one of them. She despised the Nazis from the start. According to Keneally, she believed "simply that the man (Hitler) would be punished for making himself God." Schindler's father also despised the Nazis, but because he sensed that they would lose the war Hitler intended to launch. His silent dissent was more practical than moral.

**THE MUNICH CONFERENCE**

On September 30, 1938, Hitler signed the Munich Pact with representatives of England and France, which forced Czechoslovakia to cede the German populated Sudetenland to Nazi Germany. The two Western democracies, which had been allies of democratic Czechoslovakia, sought to "appease" Hitler's ambitions by abandoning the Central European nation. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain described this as "peace in our time, peace with honor." Ultimately, appeasement failed, and the term "Munich" has come to symbolize betrayal.

When the German army occupied the Sudetenland, the local German populace greeted it rapturously. The Czechs and the Jews of the region, however, were less enthusiastic. Almost immediately they were expelled and their property confiscated. The Nazi Aktion was conducted with characteristic brutality, and Schindler, according to Keneally, was repulsed by the Nazis' behavior.

But moral indignation did not interfere with opportunity. After all, he quickly joined the Nazi Party and began wearing the Nazi swastika on his lapel. In the late autumn of 1938, Schindler joined the Abwehr (German military intelligence). Schindler was an ideal operative, a bon-vivant who could strike up a conversation with anyone, preferably in a bar. He traveled frequently to Poland on business and returned with information about Poland's military preparedness. It is noteworthy that Schindler's Abwehr membership excused him from active military service.

**SEPTEMBER 1, 1939**

In the early morning hours of September 1, 1939, the Second World War began with the German attack on Poland. The Poles, valiant but disorganized, their army utterly antiquated, were quickly overwhelmed by the German tactics of "blitzkreig" or "lightning war." This new type of warfare involved close coordination between the German tanks (panzers) and the air force (Luftwaffe). The effect was devastating in Poland, as it would be a year later in France and two years later on the steppes of Russia.

On September 6, 1939, German armored forces captured the southern Polish city of Krakow, the ancient seat of Polish kings. Shortly thereafter the Nazis established in Krakow their government for Nazi-occupied Poland, known as the General-Government. Hans Frank, Hitler's longtime lawyer, became Reichsfuehrer of the General-Government and immediately issued a decree for the "voluntary departure" of all but the "economically indispensable" Jews. He could not abide the thought of Germans breathing the same air as Jews.

In the wake of the German army, Oskar Schindler arrived in Krakow. A Sudeten-German businessman, a member of the Nazi Party, and a failure in life, Schindler was determined to reverse his fortunes in Nazi-occupied Poland. He was thirty-one years old.