ON "SCHINDLER'S LIST"

For those of us who are movie fans, I feel it is safe to say that we have all experienced that moment when a movie has truly touched us. Perhaps an ending scene appealed to our senses and emotions leaving us with a feeling of awe and inspiration. Maybe we found ourselves able to identify with a certain character or storyline. Possibly a particular event tapped a nerve sending chills down our spine, making our hairs stand on end. For whatever reason, we were given that opportunity to share in the emotions and passions of the characters – regardless of whether the movie is fact or fiction. In a sense, we ourselves, as movie watchers, have given a certain degree of realism to a movie. A sequence of events may never have really occurred in a fictional movie; however, they exist in our collective experience – in our hearts and in our minds. A movie based on truth may not, necessarily, be based on the truth of our own personal lives but we, nevertheless, experience a story of a character as if it were our own. Sometimes, though, a certain number of us may find that a movie does portray a truth, which has a direct and profound impact on our own lives. “Schindler’s List”, directed by Steven Spielberg, is one such movie in which I share a direct connection. Even though many people my age, especially other guys, may find the movie boring because they are unable to identify with the issues it presents, I find the movie interesting since it is relevant to my family history. One reason I find the movie interesting and others may not is because my mother, being born part Jewish and living in Germany during World War II, could have fallen victim to the horrors of the holocaust as portrayed in the movie. Another reason I find the movie interesting and others may not is because I can compare my Great Aunt to the main character in the movie, Oscar Schindler.

Throughout my childhood, I was exposed to a great deal of family history and culture, which, in part, has shaped me into the person I am today. I remember growing up as a small child hearing whole conversations in German. My mother and her brother and sister would often speak their native tongue when they did not want me to know what was being talked about. I was able, however, to pick up a few words and phrases but was not exposed to the language enough as for it to become a second language. This desire to be able to understand what they were saying influenced me to take German in high school for four years. The fact that my family was from Germany and that I still have family living there offered my classes a topic of discussion. I also remember hearing the stories of what life was like for my mother, aunt, and uncle in Germany.
during World War II. Everything from the horrors of the gas chambers to the bombings of Berlin was often discussed. My aunt and uncle often remarked on how my Great Aunt saved so many Jews. After over hearing such stories I would often ask questions – sometimes I would get answers and other times I would not. Once I got a little older, they told me everything I wanted to know. Some of it came as a surprise but still many other things I had figured out on my own through exposure to media, which talked about the holocaust and the war. Undoubtedly, such exposure to this sort of legacy had affects on my perceptions of the world. I felt unique in that I had this past which none of my friends could share in. In American culture, ones ties to their own ancestry are often lost because it is often so many generations ago that one’s family had another home on distant soil. These close connection which have developed over the years and later intensified because of the death of my mother, are what fueled my desire to write this paper on the movie “Schindler’s List”.

The movie is a true story and takes place in Poland and Czechoslovakia during World War II. Oscar Schindler was an ethnic German born in Zwittau in Sudentland, which was an ethnically German portion of Czechoslovakia. Schindler’s family was one of the richest in Zwittau, but as a result of the economic depression of the 1930’s, his family firm became bankrupt. Schindler joined the Nazi Party to better his chances at economic survival. When the war broke out and Germany invaded Poland and Czechoslovakia, Schindler saw this as a great opportunity to make a fortune. He left his wife, Emilie, and moved to Krakow, where he took over a Jewish family’s apartment. This put him in the position of being able to capitalize on the misfortune of the Jews who had been forbidden from conducting businesses of their own. He managed to coax a handful of Jewish investors into funding a new business owned by Schindler – converting an old enameled-goods factory into production of pots and pans for the war effort. The factory would employ Jews since they were the cheapest source of labor at the time. With the help of his trusty Jewish accountant, Itzhak Stern, Schindler’s factory prospered and made a fortune off the backs of its Jewish workforce.

As the brutality of the Nazis accelerated and despite Schindler’s greedy nature, Schindler became a hero to the Jews in his factory. The movie does a very good job of showing how the heroism of Oscar Schindler saved over a thousand Jews while vividly depicting the horrors of the holocaust. Thanks to his political reliability and charismatic personality, Schindler managed to convince top
SS and German army officials to move more and more Jews into his factory. In this way, he managed to save many intellectuals, artists, and families of his Jewish workers from the gas chamber. Through careful bribes, he was able to persuade Amon Goeth, the commander of the Plaszow work camp, to set up a little camp for his Jewish workers near the factory. This allowed more food and medicine to be smuggled into the factory. When the front lines were being pushed west and the factory was in danger of being destroyed, sending all his workers to the death camps, Schindler spent a fortune in bribing Goeth once again to relocate over 1,000 of his workers to a new factory in his hometown in Czechoslovakia. This final act of heroism is where the movie gets its title. Schindler paid per name for names of his workers to go on a list – the names of this list were the lucky ones who were to be transported to the new factory and spared the fate of being gassed.

The screenplay of the movie is based on a novel titled “Schindler’s Ark”, written by Thomas Keneally. The movie was produced in 1993. The screenplay was written by Steven Zallian and the movie was directed by Steven Spielberg. Notable cast members include Liam Neeson who played Oscar Schindler, Ben Kingsley starred as Itzhak Stern, Ralph Fiennes was the notoriously evil Amon Goeth, and Caroline Goodall appeared as Schindler’s wife Emilie. The movie has achieved worldwide acclaim for excellence and has won many awards. Out of 12 nominations, “Schindler’s List” has won seven academy awards in 1993 for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Art Decoration/Set Decoration, Best Cinematography, Best Film Editing, and Best Original Score. In 1994, it was awarded three Golden Globe Awards for Best Film in the drama category, Best Director, and Best Screenplay. The movie also received similar awards from the New York and Los Angeles Film Critics Association, the British Academy Awards, and the MTV Awards.

One reason I find the movie interesting and others may not is because my mother, being born part Jewish and living in Germany during World War II, could have fallen victim to the horrors of the holocaust as portrayed in the movie. My mother was born in Berlin, Germany in 1943 – two years before the war ended. She was born a half Jew which would be enough be considered in danger by the German government. My mother had an older brother and sister. My grandmother spent these years during the war hiding herself and my mother and aunt and uncle from the dangers of the Nazi Regime. She was forced to move around from place to place so that the German government was unable to locate her family. She was fortunate enough to have friends that could conjure up
false documents making it easier to avoid the Gestapo. However, she always had to stay on her toes because one wrong move could have sent her and her children to a work camp or the gas chambers. It is quite probable that since my mother was a very small child at the time, that if captured, she would have been sent to one of these death camps and gassed. About a year after my mother was born, my grandmother sent all three children to opposite corners of neutral Switzerland in hopes of sparing her children from the worst. In 1945, the war ended and my grandmother and her children could come out of hiding now protected by the allied forces. My mother avoided much of the terror and suffering experienced by so many others less fortunate Jews during this time. However, there always existed that very plausible chance that she may have not been so lucky. For obvious reasons, this would have ultimately affected me because had she been killed as a small child I would not be around today writing this paper.

The holocaust, as depicted in “Schindler’s List”, reminds me of the horrors my mother and other family members escaped. At the beginning of the movie, all of the Jews in Krakow and surrounding areas of German occupied Poland are forcefully evacuated. German officers escort the residents out of their homes, and all of their belongings are confiscated. The Jews are forced to travel; on foot with as many personal items that they can carry, to a newly established Jewish district which is only comprised of 16 square blocks. The Jews in this “ghetto” are forced to crowd into homes where 12 or more shared a room. The Jews are now forced to conduct day-to-day life under the watchful eye of German guards in this new walled city. To make matters worse, after the Platzow work camp is built, the “ghetto” is liquidated. This is when the full magnitude and horror in which the Jews face is introduced. German soldiers march into the district, going from house to house, forcing Jews to leave. Many of the small children and elderly, who are considered of no use to the labor camp, are shot and killed. The soldiers go into the hospital killing all of the sick as well. The healthy Jews are boarded up on trains and sent to Platzow. The violence is witnessed by Schindler and his wife, Emilie, atop a hill overlooking the town. A little girl wearing a red dress catches Schindler’s attention. Though the movie is in black and white, the red is shown to draw attention to this poor little figure. The image of the little girl scurrying down the blood filled streets in terror haunts Schindler. At this point in the movie, Schindler vows to do everything in his power to defy the Nazi Regime. Heightened brutality is illustrated during a semi annual physical at the Platzow camp. Doctors are sent in to separate the healthy from the sick. All of the inhabitants of the camp are forced to disrobe and run around nude in a circular tract as a test
of endurance. Those ones that cannot keep up or appear fatigued are boarded up on trains to be sent to the gas chambers. Also, physicals are conducted on those who withstood the test to monitor blood pressure and heart rate. Those who were out of shape were also put on trains. All of the small children were taken away since they were regarded as a useless as a supply of labor. A mass burning of the bodies that were gassed is later shown, embodying the sickening terror which was the holocaust. The little girl in red is shown again but this time as one of the dead bodies to be thrown into the fire.

Another reason I find the movie interesting and others may not is because I can compare my Great Aunt to Oscar Schindler. My Great Aunt and her husband were living in Holland when Germany invaded the country. They were captured and put in a concentration camp since they were both Jewish as well. In the camp, they were subjected to many forms of abuse but, fortunately, they managed to escape through some bargaining with high-powered friends. Shortly after their release, they joined the Dutch resistance and worked for the Underground Railroad, which was involved in the work of saving Jews. The Underground Railroad was a system of tunnels much like those, which were in place in this country used to help runaway slaves. My Aunt Adeline and her husband worked in tunnels guiding Jews out of camps and occupied cities throughout Holland. They smuggled thousands of Jews to safety and gave them temporary new identities. Their work was dangerous and costly – they always risked being caught. Besides the Underground Railroad, they also worked in issuing fake passports and entry visas to the U.S. and figuring out ways to deliver these prized documents to the Jews not yet captured by the Gestapo.

I take great pride in the works of these family members and this is why I greatly appreciate the message of hope and heroism present in “Schindler’s List”. The movie shows many instances in which Oscar Schindler saved his Jews. When a train of his workers is routed to the Auschwitz death camp, Schindler goes to great lengths to prevent the death of the women and children aboard. In an attempt to convince the officers that those getting off the train are essential to his factory he says, “What are you doing? These are mine. These are my workers. They should be on my train. They’re skilled munitions workers…essential girls. Their fingers polish the insides of shell metal casings. How else am I to polish the inside of a 45 millimeter shell casing?” His attempt is successful when they allow the workers to leave the camp – the first and last time a train of Jews has ever left the Auschwitz camp. Even Schindler’s accountant, Stern, was shocked when he first learned of the list of Jews he was saving from the death camps by moving them to a new
factory. Stern questions Schindler in amazement, “You’re buying them? You’re paying him for each of his names?” Stern later comments, “This list is an absolute good. The list is life. All around the margins lies the gulf.” This last statement shows the true magnitude of Schindler’s heroism regarding those very important sheets of paper. One of the last scenes of the movie depicts Schindler addressing all of his 1,200 Jewish workers. With the defeat of Nazi Germany, Schindler explains to them that he must leave because he is still a member of the Nazi party and will be hunted down. In a heightened state of emotion, Schindler cries out in regret for not doing more to save Jews. He says, “I could have got more…I could have got more...If I’d made more money...I threw away so much money, you have no idea. This car. Why did I keep this car? Ten people, right there.” Stern responds to Schindler by saying: “There are eleven hundred people who are alive because of you. Look at them. There will be generations because of what you did.” In a final act of symbolism, Schindler rips the swastika pin from his shirt and says, “This pin, two people. This is gold. He would have given me at least one more person. For this I could have gotten one more person and I didn’t!”

The very first time I watched “Schindler’s List”, I was deeply touched by the story and realized the significance of the holocaust, however, failed to really appreciate its relevance to my family. With the recent death of my mother, I have discovered a newfound interest in my family’s history. A desire to know more about my roots and where I came from has surfaced in an attempt to honor my mother by not forgetting about her and her life story. I view this paper as somewhat of a tribute to the legacy of my family in Europe. It serves as a window into the life of some people I hold very dear to my heart. Though my mother is no longer alive, it is my sincerest wish that she is somehow able to look down upon my work. “Schindler’s List” is a story that had to be told. Even if one has absolutely no connection to the events, which transpired in this movie, everyone needs to know what happened. The telling of the holocaust is necessary in order to preserve the common good of humanity in ensuring such a terrible thing is never allowed to occur again.

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