



# More to Oskar Schindler than a Hollywood blockbuster

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After World War II, Oskar Schindler was supported financially by the Jews he had saved. This was just one of the facts about Schindler that Dr Edyta Gawron shared at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre in Parktown, Johannesburg, recently.

Schindler's action in saving thousands of Jews during the Holocaust came to the world's attention through the Steven Spielberg-directed Hollywood film *Schindler's List* in 1993. However, according to Gawron, Assistant Professor in Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, there is much more to Schindler's story.

For starters, he was not German, strictly speaking. His family was German, but he was born in the Austro-Hungarian town of Zwittau, which would later become part of the former Czechoslovakia. Also, there never was a definitive "Schindler's list".

Schindler was buried in Jerusalem, as per the request in his will.

by supporting him, they would buy their safety," Gawron said.

Schindler decided that to ensure that the business survived during the war, the factory needed to expand beyond pots and pans. So, it began to produce metal boxes for the army, as well as bullet shells. This was why Schindler later began "hiring" children. Schindler would tell Nazi officials it was because he needed their small fingers to finish the shells.

Soon, month on month, Schindler was expanding his work force. "He realised that by hiring more Jewish workers, the cost of production would lower." Also the Krakow ghetto, just a few hundred metres from the factory, was a convenient source of workers.

Yet, at some point, the economic motivation for the hiring of Jews became humanitarian. "In time, he knew [his Jewish workers] better and better. It would be too much to say he became friends with them, but he was certainly showing a lot of support and sympathy."

This sense kept growing stronger. In time, "he was hiring not only people who were productive, but he



Oskar Schindler's factory in Brunnitz

by one out of the camp and brought back to him.

It was also during this move, from late August into September of 1944, that one of the most complete lists of the Jewish workers employed by Schindler was published. It appeared, in seven parts, in the Hebrew newspaper *Davar* being produced in the then Palestinian protectorate.

It is likely that Schindler himself was responsible for smuggling the list out. By then, he was working as a secret messenger collaborating with those offering Jewish assistance in Poland and Hungary.

In his time in Brunnitz, the depth of Schindler's compassion really came to light. At one point, he rescued a group of prisoners who had been left to freeze to death on a train track at a nearby station. By the time they were rescued, 17 had already died. Somehow, Schindler managed to get them buried in a Christian cemetery – but with

Jewish rites performed by one of his workers who was a rabbi.

Shortly before liberation, Schindler fled, realising that he would be in danger on a number of fronts. "When he was saying goodbye to the workers... he made sure that each of them received something from storage. He distributed all the wealth in the factory so that everybody from his factory had something to start a new life with."

By the time the war ended, it was estimated that Schindler had made it possible for about 1 200 Jews to survive the war – about one sixth of the surviving Jewish population in Krakow.

For many, the story of Schindler ends here. Yet, some of the most touching resonances of his actions occurred in the aftermath of the war.

"He remained in touch with most of his workers. He called them 'meine Juden' [my Jews], and they

kept calling him 'lieben direktor', [dear director]."

Gawron was on the core team responsible for designing the museum in Schindler's factory in Krakow. She said that interest in Schindler continues unabated. The museum has the capacity for about 1 000 visitors a day, but it usually reaches its limit by midday.

She acknowledges that the question why Schindler choose to save the Jews is complex, although there certainly was an emotional element in it for a man who loved parties, but lacked any real close friendships.

"Working on the museum in Schindler's factory, we spent hours in his office. It was a surreal and metaphysical time, wondering what he was thinking when he was sitting at the desk, making decisions allowing Jewish workers to come from the ghetto."

"We didn't find the answer, but we are certainly grateful," she mused.



Oskar Schindler's funeral in Jerusalem

As many as 10 000 Jews owe their lives directly to Schindler's humanitarian actions.

As a young man, Schindler had one ambition, "to be rich", said Gawron. Yet, his forays into business were mostly failures.

At the age of 21, he left his home town to seek further fortune. The result? A wife, a job as a lower-level German spy, but no business boom.

When World War II broke out, Schindler was already in Krakow. At that time, he was "ideologically committed" to the Nazi Party, and was convinced that the war would be his conduit to commercial success.

Little did he know, the war would not make him, it would transform him.

After Krakow was occupied by German forces, Schindler "realised there were a lot of businesses being taken over by the new administration. He knew that there would be the need for a German person to take over... and he was one of them".

A few months later, he became the owner of an enamelware factory, mostly making pots and pans. The business, owned by three Jewish men, had previously gone bankrupt due to a lack of funds.

Schindler convinced some local Jewish men to invest in the company. "Probably, he convinced them that by giving him money, that

was very often helping the families of staff to find shelter... including children, the disabled, and the elderly".

By 1942, the ghetto in Krakow experienced two mass deportations to the death camps. By then, Schindler knew that his factory was not just a business, it was a barrier between life and death.

Schindler had to innovate constantly against the barrage of Nazi officialdom. At one point, he managed to convince them to allow him to turn his factory into a sub-camp of the labour camp in the area. Later, he moved the factory to Brunnitz in the Sudetenland to ensure further stability.

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It was during this relocation that 300 of his female workers were mistakenly taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He had them taken one

## GPS technology puts geography on the map

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visiting, and which sites in the country were the most popular." The study found that visitors were, in fact, making shorter visits. "They used to come for 40 days on average. Today [they come] for less than eight days. People come for less time, and spend most of their time in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem," he says.

Shoval has also worked with groups such as the Birthright and Taglit tour programmes, tracking more than 4 000 individual tour groups over a period of four years. "We could give these companies a holistic picture of what tourist groups were doing in Israel, and they could develop strategies to help visitors make the most of their visit." Birthright can choose from 1 000 sites in Israel when structuring a tour, and using Shoval's findings, could plan the ideal trip for future visitors.

So precise is the tracking technology employed for this task, Shoval not only managed to find out which cities were the most popular, but even which attractions, and which features within those attractions were visited more than others. He says: "We can look at the Har Herzl cemetery, and see that Hannah Senesh and Yoni Netanyahu's graves are amongst the most visited, and that more time was spent at one grave than at others by tour guides. We could use this information to help organisations like Taglit improve the quality of tours, and address any issues it may identify."

But even this can be enhanced. Branching out

even further, Shoval paired tracking technology with psychological data, determining what emotions people experienced when they visited certain locations. "We used surveys to ask people at first, but we know that people can lie," he says. "So, we partnered with the university's psychology department and fitted participants with sensors to measure their emotional arousal in an objective way. We can monitor electrodermal activity, and know what their bodies feel when they visit certain places."

This technology enabled him and his team to plot an arousal map to illustrate which sites excited people most. Based on their findings, it became clear that people experience the highest amount of arousal not at the Western Wall itself, but at its entrance. He explains: "From the entrance to the Kotel, people can see the Kotel for the first time, and that's when they feel most excited. Although they told us afterwards that being at the Kotel was the most exciting, we know that this is not true. This is the first study of its kind in the world."

Shoval says the field of geography is not what people think it is, and its potential is beyond promising. He concludes: "Things are happening really fast, and the impact of this type of research will only grow. We have a lot of data, and can contribute to so many different fields with our findings. As a geographer, I look at this data, and feel we've only just begun."

