

A quarter-century since the release of Steven Spielberg's film

The achievement of *Schindler's List*

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Steven Spielberg's Schindler's List opened in movie theaters 25 years ago. It went on to win Best Picture, along with six other honors, at the Academy Awards in March 1994.

The film, in a restored version, is being re-released this week and shown in selected theaters in the US. We are posting below the review that was published in the International Workers Bulletin, a forerunner of the World Socialist Web Site, on January 10, 1994.

In a recent interview with NBC News, Spielberg expressed his deep concern about the current rise not only of anti-Semitism, but of "xenophobia" and "racism." He suggested that "this may be the most important time to re-release this film, possibly now is even a more important time to re-release Schindler's List than 1993, 1994, when it was initially released. I think there's more at stake today than even back then."

"When collective hate organizes and gets industrialized, then genocide follows," the director said. "We have to take it more seriously today than I think we have had to take it in a generation."

Schindler's List is not a great film, but it is, in many ways, an extraordinary one. And it is one of the very few that deserves a wide audience.

Steven Spielberg's film follows the activities of Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson), a Sudeten German industrialist and Nazi party member, who travels to Krakow in southern Poland in the wake of the German army's blitzkrieg. His aim? To make a load of money as a military contractor. He wines, dines and charms German army officers. On the basis of what the spectator first sees, what is Schindler? An operator, a black marketeer, a bon vivant, a womanizer.

He takes advantage of the persecuted Jews, now herded into the ghetto, and obtains an apartment, investment capital, a factory, a manager, a work force. When he tells his wife Emilie (Caroline Goodall) that something has been missing from all his previous ventures, most of which have been failures, she suggests that perhaps the missing ingredient has been luck. No, he says, gloatingly and with genuine menace, "War."

Schindler is like many others of a certain social species. He is not an anti-Semite or an ideologue. He sees the situation in Poland as the opportunity to get his. In the depiction of Schindler's single-minded pursuit of wealth, at the expense of the rest of humanity, the film is remarkably effective. But, after all, as an observer of (if not, let's say, one who belonged to) a certain social milieu in the 1980s, Spielberg knows something about selfishness and greed.

In one telling scene, Schindler is obliged to break off a tryst with one of his girlfriends to come down to the railroad station and rescue his plant manager and accountant—the actual brains of the

operation—Itzhak Stern (Ben Kingsley), who has been mistakenly placed aboard a transport train headed for a concentration camp. Schindler is indignant. "What if I had gotten here five minutes later?" he demands of Stern. "Then where would I be?"

The Nazi murder of the European Jews, although it had quite definite material causes, is an event, in its sheer irrationality and horror, which almost defies artistic recreation. It is to Spielberg's credit that he has staged the liquidation of the ghetto and the functioning of the Plaszow Forced Labor Camp in a genuinely convincing manner. His tendency to overstate or sentimentalize is very largely, although not entirely, held in check.

Certain images stand out. During the murderous assault on the ghetto in March 1943, as the flash and roar of automatic weapons is visible and audible in the background, an SS officer calmly plays a piece on a piano in a ransacked apartment. Two other officers appear in the doorway. One asks, is that Bach? No, no, the other says, as he takes a brief break from machine-gunning Jews to enjoy the music, it's Mozart.

In one of the most powerful and telling sequences of the film, a Jewish woman loudly warns the Nazi authorities that the foundation of a building they are erecting in the labor camp is defective and needs to be repaired. Asked about her qualifications to make such a criticism, she replies proudly that she is a university graduate and an engineer. The Nazi camp commander, Anion Goeth (Ralph Fiennes), responds, "An educated Jew. Like Karl Marx himself," and orders her shot on the spot. Then he instructs his subordinates, with a sardonic smile, to tear down the building and reconstruct it, just as she'd said.

A group of children, knowing that they are about to be sent off to a death camp, hide themselves. One young boy looks in all the hiding places he knows of; each is occupied. Finally, in desperation, he lets himself down through one of the holes in the latrine. He stands chest-deep in excrement. Several children are already standing there. Get out, one girl says angrily, there's no room for you here, this is our place.

The film effectively depicts the banal, bureaucratic efficiency of the Nazi functionaries. Before every horror, tables and chairs are set up, clipboards arranged, names called. When asked to retrieve some of Schindler's women workers, who have been mistakenly sent to Auschwitz, a high-ranking German officer objects primarily on the grounds of the paperwork that it will involve.

Schindler's List also exposes honestly and conscientiously the economic and commercial side of the Nazi operations in Poland and Eastern Europe. Business continues, perhaps flourishes, as the Holocaust gains momentum. Competitive bidding takes place, contracts are signed. Mass murder, it is clear, offered spectacular

returns on investments. The film reveals that the German industrialist had a privileged position within the Nazi universe. We see army and SS officers kowtowing to the likes of Schindler, doing his bidding. It shows quite clearly that the social stratification of “normal” bourgeois society continued to operate and was accentuated by Hitler’s rule.

Whether Spielberg is conscious of it or not, his film poses this question: if you strip away all restrictions on capitalist enterprise, if you reduce people to nothing but producers of surplus value, what do you have? Fascism—German, American or of any national variety you like.

At the center of the film, of course, lies Schindler’s transformation. From an employer of slave labor and presumably a more or less loyal Nazi, Schindler becomes the defender and savior of his Jewish employees. Spielberg has him observe the liquidation of the ghetto from atop a hill while on horseback. The sight evidently horrifies him. He thinks about things and decides his life should take a different course.

Schindler maneuvers to maintain his factory when the Jews are sent to the Plaszow camp, and furthermore, obtains permission to set up his own “subcamp,” moving the Jewish workers onto its premises. Later, when the labor camp is about to be shut down and all of its prisoners shipped off to Auschwitz, Schindler manages to set up another factory in Czechoslovakia and purchases the reprieve of each of his workers out of his profits.

The relation between the individual and the historical moment is a problem to which the film returns a number of times. Schindler’s activities in the beginning of the film are not particularly extraordinary. His are normal business practices. It is the historical context which brings out their underlying monstrosity and, for that, matter, the underlying inhumanity of social relations within capitalist society.

The point is returned to a number of times. In a conversation with Stern about the hateful Goeth, Schindler says, in effect, war brings out the worst in people; there are probably many good sides to the man. In reality, the opposite is true. War has brought out Goeth’s “best,” i.e., most essential, side. Fascist rule has given free rein to the psychotic, twisted personality produced by bourgeois society.

Arguments can be mounted against various aspects of the last third of the film. One might ask: Is Spielberg truly suggesting that we should depend on such figures (an opportunist, an unscrupulous operator, an employer of slave labor!) to save humanity from barbarism? Does he really think his film will inoculate the populations of Europe and North America against fascist ideology?

There is no question that the latter sequences suffer the most from the artistic and intellectual baggage Spielberg brings to the film. One can almost feel the inevitably uplifting conclusion sucking events and characters, helpless to resist, toward itself. There is too much of an appeal to the heart, and the softest areas of the heart. As the film nears the end, psychological truth increasingly takes second place to the need to make Schindler a spokesman for Spielberg’s central theme: It is not the wealth you accumulate that counts, but your relations with society and your fellow human beings.

Clearly, Spielberg is addressing this to members of the social elite with which he is most familiar. He is asking: what counts in all this? We have accumulated vast material wealth, but we have done nothing in the interests of humanity.

Although he perhaps fails artistically to convince, it would be wrong to scoff at Spielberg’s theme. Whatever his motives—Spielberg’s comparison of Schindler to entertainment moguls such as the late

Steve Ross and Michael Ovitz has been well publicized, as has his support for US intervention in Bosnia—the notions are not insignificant.

The discrediting of selfishness and egoism—the conception that one should think about life and people from the point of view of something other than their cash value—is essential to the creation of a very different social climate. The film, unwittingly perhaps, amounts to a condemnation of the subjective, greed-driven character of business operations, which generally finds its most cynical expression in the “entertainment industry.”

Moreover, the very question of an individual transforming himself dramatically, finding in himself qualities which he had never before given any indication of possessing, transcending all sorts of limitations, is of considerable significance. We have entered into a period in which large numbers of people, entire social classes, will undergo such transformations.

In its own way, without minimizing the film’s significant weaknesses in the least, the making of *Schindler’s List* itself provides a small-scale glimpse into this sort of historical process. Who would have thought Spielberg could produce anything resembling a serious historical work? From the mindless inanity of *Jurassic Park* to indelible images of the Holocaust in the course of one year!

(And anyone who thinks there was no intellectual leap involved there is making a serious error...)

Schindler’s List, considered alongside a number of other films, theater pieces, art exhibits, is an indication that there is the beginning of a change in the cultural atmosphere.

The resurgence of fascism in Europe, civil war in the former Yugoslavia, the unrelenting growth of poverty in all the advanced countries, the general decay of society which flies in the face of the promised post-Cold War world of peace and prosperity—all this is having its impact. There is undoubtedly a growing sense among artists and intellectuals that something is terribly wrong with society and that the nature and historical roots of the deep-going ills have to be examined. The initial resulting work should not be approached uncritically; the unresolved social and artistic questions are innumerable.

Nonetheless, a film like *Schindler’s List* is a hopeful sign, whatever Spielberg’s personal trajectory, and should be treated accordingly.



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