

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for Schindler's List by Thomas Keneally

## Book Information

Thomas Keneally, Schindler's List  
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A German businessman tries to save his Jewish employees from the Nazi Holocaust.

**Award:** Booker Prize/Honor Book

**Topics:** Adventure, Rescue/Save; Classics, Classics (All); History, Holocaust; People, Jewish; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Recommended Reading, ALA Outstanding Books for College Bound; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Wars, World War II

## Main Characters

- Adam Garde a Jewish engineer and prisoner at Emalia
- Amon Goeth a zealous commandant of a concentration camp at Plaszow
- Emilie Schindler Oskar's wife, who remains married throughout Oskar's affairs and assists with the camp in Moravia
- Ingrid Schindler's German mistress; she is set up as manager of a hardware store
- Itzhak Stern a Jewish accountant and trusted friend of Schindler
- Julius Madritsch a German businessman sympathetic to the Jewish plight; he runs a factory with Jewish labor and is a friend of Schindler
- Leopold Pfefferberg a young Jewish professor; Schindler's contact for the black market
- Mietek Pemper a young Jewish typist for Goeth, who has a photographic memory
- Oskar Schindler an Austrian industrialist and self-proclaimed business tycoon who, working within the system, attempts to save Jewish prisoners during the Holocaust

Victoria Klonowska Schindler's secretary and girlfriend, who is essential in obtaining his release after arrests by the SS guards

## Vocabulary

- crematoria** furnaces used to reduce dead bodies to ashes
- expiate** to put an end to or make amends for
- pogroms** an organized massacre of a minority group
- truncheon** a club, similar to a police officer's billy club

## Synopsis

Growing up an Austrian Catholic in Zwittau, Czechoslovakia, Oskar Schindler's career in the family business and his penchant for motorcycles are cut short by his early marriage to Emilie, a humble girl from Zwittau. Oskar enters into military service, discovering he abhors military life, then returns home, discovering he is disillusioned with marriage. In 1935, when the farm business goes bankrupt, Oskar's father abandons Mrs. Schindler, causing Oskar to openly denounce his father, though Oskar has treated Emilie the same.

After his mother's death, Oskar becomes a traveling sales manager, sporting the symbol of the new Sudeten German Party. As the National Socialists take control of Moravia, Oskar is appalled at the signs of tyranny by Hitler. At a meeting in the autumn of 1939, Oskar agrees to gather military intelligence for the *Abwehr* during his business travels, allowing him to avoid military service. When Schindler meets Itzhak Stern, a Jewish accountant, Stern instinctively feels that Schindler has sanctuary potential. Schindler, impressed with Stern's contacts in Cracow, asks for Stern's advice on his acquisition of a metal-pressing plant. Their philosophies about religion surface, with Stern telling him that "he who saves the life of one man saves the entire world." Stern contends this changed Oskar's life.

That same autumn, Leopold Pfefferberg, thinking Schindler is Gestapo, nearly kills him as he visits the Pfefferberg apartment. When Schindler offers

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Leopold an extravagant amount of money to procure silk shirts for him, Pfefferberg becomes Schindler's regular connection to the black market. In December, Schindler's covert warning to Stern of the Germans *Aktion* against the Jews, seals their life-long friendship. In 1937, Schindler becomes worried when he learns that Himmler's Madagascar Plan is scrapped due to the development of a disinfectant chemical compound called Zyklon B.

Oskar develops working relationships with high-level German officers through gifts of liquor, women, and money. With the help of his office manager, Abraham Bankier, they enlist wealthy Jews willing to invest money in exchange for the portable wealth. Schindler devises a plan to enlarge his enamelware factory and hires skilled Jewish laborers so their skill will ensure their safety. In early 1940, Oskar renames his factory the Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik and gets his first Army contracts. By 1941, his friends in the Armaments Inspectorate talk Schindler into opening a munitions division, giving his factory the appearance of an essential industry. As Bankier begs Oskar to employ more Jewish workers, Oskar surprises those he has employed by promising they will live to see the end of the war. When Germany invades Russia, Schindler realizes it will be a long war, with a more systematic pursuit of a racially pure empire.

Oskar's first arrest occurs at the end of 1941. Klonowska, his secretary, procures his release through Oskar's network of German officials. His second arrest occurs in 1942 for kissing a Jewish girl. Though this detainment is longer than the first, Klonowska again works his release. At this point all skilled Jews must carry a card with a *Blauschein*, or blue sticker, signifying they are useful members of society. Pfefferberg accepts Oskar's offer of employment since teachers are not considered useful. When some of Schindler's employees, including Bankier, are put on cattle cars bound for Lublin labor camp, Schindler uses his influence to gain their release. He resolves to defeat the system after seeing a small Jewish child witness a street execution.

Shortly afterward, an Austrian dentist named Sedlacek, working for a Zionist rescue organization, visits Schindler in Cracow. At his request, Schindler visits this organization in Budapest and explains the realities in Poland. Upon returning to Cracow, Schindler learns all Jews are being forced into labor camps. Schindler provides Amon Goeth, the vile commandant of Plaszow, enough payoffs to allow Schindler to keep his factory as a labor camp. Prisoners attempt to bribe their way to Emalia, Oskar's new humane labor camp factory near Plaszow.

During 1943, Schindler spends exorbitant amounts of money bribing officials to keep both Goeth's camp and his factory open, though neither are economically sound. In January of 1944, as Plaszow and Emalia revert to concentration camps, Oskar tells the personnel office that he is interested in permanence of his skilled work force. As his birthday nears, Oskar realizes through the BBC that the Germans are losing. He sees the crematorias working overtime. Visiting Plaszow, Oskar tells Stern that he will get him out alive. Oskar openly shows his sensitivity for the Jews when he and Goeth visit railway cattle cars filled with prisoners bound for Mauthausen. Schindler, bribing Goeth with a new saddle, is allowed to spray water on the roofs of the cars to cool them.

Later, after hearing of an attempt on Hitler's life, Schindler and Adam Garde, his Jewish engineer, sit up all night, hoping it is successful. Hours later, they learn they will have to wait longer for freedom. Garde notices that Schindler talks in terms of "our freedom" rather than the Jews' freedom. When Oskar learns that Plaszow and Emalia are to be disbanded, he negotiates the necessary agreements from officials to move his essential operation and all employees to the new camp outside of Brinnlitz, Czechoslovakia.

In autumn of 1944, he forms a list of Jewish prisoners. Everyone realizes that Schindler's list means life. Oskar frantically travels to authorities, appeasing those in Austria worried about having prisoners within their borders. The Jewish men are

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loaded first for the trip to Gross-Rosen, another concentration camp, where after a stay of three days, a second train carries them on the last leg of their journey to "paradise." The men help build Schindler's camp using an existing factory shell at Brinnlitz while awaiting the arrival of the women. However, the women have been taken to Auschwitz where, even though they are Schindlerwomen, they fear gassing or medical experimentation.

Meanwhile at Brinnlitz, Schindler is again arrested, and Klonowska rallies his old friends once again to secure his release. After more bribery from Schindler, the women finally arrive. Since Zwittau is near Brinnlitz, Emilie joins Oskar in their new apartment at the factory. Though not an ideal couple, Emilie shares Oskar's sympathies for the Jewish prisoners and assists in the infirmary.

In 1945, Oskar is amused by a munitions reports stating the inferiority of his shells since he does everything possible to assure their failure. Oskar senses the war is ending. Feeling that the Germans may try to eliminate all prisoners, he builds up an arsenal for the prisoners' use. Still trying to save as many lives as possible, Oskar works with Sussmuth during the final months, arranging for 3000 more women to leave Auschwitz for textile mills in Moravia. At the same time, Oskar arranges for any SS officers capable of carrying out final orders from Hitler to be transferred to other factories.

On May 8, Oskar addresses the camp for the final time. Schindler informs everyone that the war is over, and he expects the prisoners to behave civilly towards the Germans. He and Emilie, dressed in prison attire, leave Brinnlitz by car carrying a Hebrew letter but little else. Oskar reports to American authorities, his mission accomplished.

Years later, after a business in Argentina goes bankrupt, Oskar tours Israel. During his final years of life, he works for the German Friends of Hebrew University in West Germany, with his final request for burial in Jerusalem granted.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

When Clara wants to commit suicide, the woman tells her, "Kill yourself and you'll never find out how the plot ends." Why is this called a powerful answer to someone intending suicide?

*Suicide may stop an immediate painful situation, but it does not solve any problem or enable the person to see how the situation will be resolved. What a suicidal person is asking for is an answer, but in death, the person still does not have the answer.*

### Literary Analysis

Oskar's father, Hans, suffered no fundamental distress adapting to different European cultures or nationalities. How might this attitude have influenced Oskar?

*Oskar is much like his father in that he does not have the strong sense of being German or that Germans are superior to other ethnic groups. Feeling this way enables him to accept the Jewish people for their skills and expertise rather than seeing them as a liability toward Germany. His lack of deep national pride also helps him see through the propaganda of the SS and judge ideas on merit.*

### Inferential Comprehension

When Oskar meets his father after many years, he realizes they are very similar. What comparisons can be made between Oskar's early life and his father's?

*Besides the mannerisms which Oskar notes at Zwittau, both men have marriages which are not built on mutual love and trust. Oskar hates his father for leaving his mother, but realizes that he has, in fact, done something quite similar to Emilie. Another comparison is that both are businessmen running successful companies.*

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## Constructing Meaning

Could something like the Holocaust happen today?  
Why or why not?

*Student answers may vary. Some may bring up the ethnic cleansing in Europe today and point out it is happening on a smaller scale. Others may note that due to world-wide communications, countries know of atrocities quicker than during the early 1940's and will assist in preventing such tragedies.*

## Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Amon Goeth is likened to Caligula. Have students research Caligula and write a short essay showing how Goeth might consider himself "Amon the Good" in the image of Caligula the Good.

**Comparing and Contrasting** The horror of concentration camps and debasement of human life is sometimes surreal for the reader. View the movie *Schindler's List*. In groups, have students compare the movie and the book and make a chart with main points, including which medium is better suited for a true understanding of this subject matter.

**Recognizing Feelings** The prisoners in many of the camps are fed barely enough to stay alive. Hunger is a fact of life. Have students check out what the meals were like in a typical camp and prepare a similar allotment of food for one or two days. Ask for volunteers to eat only the prescribed meals for the experiment and report their feelings to the class. Discuss how the extra food given by Schindler at his factories would make him seem like a hero.

**Responding to Literature** Research the Holocaust on the Internet or check your area to see if there is a relative of someone who endured the Holocaust. Invite them to talk to the class. Non-Jewish sympathizers were also dealt with harshly. Read *The Hiding Place* by Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch woman whose family befriended Jews during the war.