

Schindler's Factory

With the door of the *Deutsche Enamelwaren Fabrique aub der Brunnlitz* safely bolted for the night Itzhak Stern sat intently pouring over the books. With the detail of an erudite Talmudic scholar concentrating upon the text Stern considered every detail of the ledgers before him. He could hardly believe that for more than four years he had been able to work with this German collaborator, Lothario, social butterfly, and petty criminal in keeping a factory running. But, more than just keeping a factory running, he had utilized every ounce of cunning and discipline in order to provide the opportunity for hundreds of condemned Jewish people to have a semi-protective niche in the Nazi world.

How many late nights had he spent? How many hours of intense concentration had been necessary in order for him to overcome Oskar Schindler's lack of business acumen? Stern knew that without him this "benevolent protector" would be in such dire straits that not only would all of the workers face certain "relocation" during the next *aktion*, but most likely that Schindler, himself, would be up on charges of treason for his complete incompetence.

Itzhak Stern knew the truth. He knew that Schindler only stood as a figurehead in the operation. His connections and Aryan presence were his

only assets, it was Stern himself who had the expertise to at least present a semblance of value to the war machine. Without his acumen the whole plot would have fallen to complete disarray and failure long before.

And so it was that as the winter of '44-'45 began to break in the eastern frontier, Stern sensed that if they could but hold on a bit longer, fool the authorities for just a bit more time, that the nightmare would be over. Already it was obvious that the weight of a two-front war had taking its toll on the resources of the Reich. The reinforcements sent from the "fatherland" were younger and younger every day. Mere lads from the heart of Germany were now being thrown to the slaughter and the Nazi leadership was depending more and more heavily upon the local authorities and *polizei* to do the work that might take men from the front, a front that was coming closer with each passing day.

"Perhaps only a matter of weeks," Stern thought to himself as he continued to pour over the endless piles of work orders and inventory sheets. "Perhaps this will all come to an end and I may return to my livelihood as a professor..." But, in reality, that dream had been almost completely beaten out of him a long time before. The 1933 Nuremberg Laws had nearly accomplished their purpose and a decade of propaganda, restriction, and public sentiment had nearly removed every vestige of hope that Itzhak Stern would ever be able to return to a life where he was a man and not the "infection" that those regulations were designed to quarantine.

The single light bulb glowed coldly as the manager sought to find ways for the factory to operate for one more week, one more day, with declining resources, limited materials, and the growing edginess of the guards who were responsible for "containing the vermin in this sector lest they infect the good people of the region". The large clock on the wall ticked ominously, as it had

every night, with a cadence that (if you allowed yourself in the lonely darkness) sounded like the approach of the Waffen SS on parade.

“215 liters of blue paint, 4,010 kilograms of lead, 5,118 liters of white paint...” It never did seem to balance and Herr Schindler was oblivious to the complexities of manipulating the resources so that tomorrow, if for only one more day, there would be the semblance of production that could fool the authorities and they would be allowed to serve as refuge, even *if* for only one more day. Stern despaired of getting more supplies. The trains had given up running on a timely schedule long before as the tracks were filled with young German boys heading east and cattle cars of “undesirables” heading west to places with names like Treblinka, Sachsenhausen, Majdanek, or Auschwitz-Birkenau (only 64 kilometers away).

Stern knew that it was rumored that Nazis ran their own factories there, death factories built solely to eradicate vermin, quickly, in mass numbers, and as models of Aryan efficiency.

Yes, Nazi efficiency. “It will be the death of us all,” the manager muttered to himself. And that is why it was all the more necessary for him to squeeze out just one more day of the semblance of production for he feared that at any moment Nazi efficiency would catch up to this dusty sanctuary. Stern knew that it was inevitable that the day would come when an accounting would be demanded for the number of bodies required for the labor in a factory that was so terribly inefficient.

And, what could you expect? Not only were raw materials nearly non-existent but the work force was far from skilled in the metal works. In a rash moment of senseless bravado Herr Schindler had drafted “workers” from rag tag groups of Jews as they stood near the very platform of deportation. “Does he ever

stop for a moment to think of how impossible it would be for me to run his factory with violinists and housewives and surgeons and bakers and rabbis and schoolgirls? No!", Stern thought. "What consequence is it to him if I fail? Nothing. He continues with his profiteering at the unvarying round of parties and meetings and dancing and romancing while I struggle to keep his dusty little enterprise afloat."

Itzhak Stern's bitterness was palpable as he continued to wrestle with the impossible inventory sheets as the clock approached midnight.

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"Excuse me Herr Schindler, but if you bring me any more 'skilled artisans' like Leopold and Herman Rosner your little ark will sink!", Stern spoke over the desk to his employer. "Just days ago you hired on the two carloads of refugees that the SS dumped here after their 14 day journey from Gollschau and not one of the ones that survived were fit for one day's labor. And now you bring these two men, neither of whom have ever had a callus on their hands in their lives."

"Nonsense, Itzhak, I am confident that you will be more than capable of finding a place for them as they truly are critical to our part in the war effort," Schindler replied, the cigar smoke curling up over his brandy. "We need these men!"

"For what?", Stern retorted, "the one plays the violin and the other the accordion. What good is their music on our factory floor? Neither of them has the mechanical ability to be an asset and the last thing we need is more bodies to keep looking busy while our production dwindles with every passing day!"

"Itzhak, my friend," the employer said in his charming, disarming, manipulative manner, "these men truly are critical to our efforts here for I've convinced that they not only are excellent entertainment for the parties of Plaszow, but Amon Goeth only released them from the camp into my care because he is under the illusion that these men are both skilled metalworkers and so, in spite of your frustration, we really do need them!"

Stern knew there would be no reasoning with Schindler once he set his mind on something. He adjusted the bands on his sleeve and turned to sit at his small desk again. He knew what would happen next, he would toil long into the night and his benefactor would call for Rechen to bring the car so that he might go to "transact business". He would stretch the numbers one more time and Schindler would take off to wine and dine the Nazis and locals. The senior manager of *Deutsche Enamelwaren Fabrique aub ter Brunnlitz* knew that he would be spending another long night alone with the dwindling list of resources and materials, and the growing list of Nazi orders for "skilled artisans" who could not fulfill them.

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On the evening of April 30, 1945 the Polish guards were increasingly fidgety as the sound of the war approached from the east. They felt as though Brunnlitz was being caught between the great paws of a beast. On the one hand they had the brutal demands of Mashlin, the local Waffen SS commandant and the threat of Amon Goeth, the camp butcher at Plaszow.

Goeth, had come to his post fresh from the liquidation of the Lublin ghetto. His brutality was notorious and his attitude toward Jews was seen in the broken parent and grandparent headstones that he had forced Jewish children

to desecrate as they paved a road to Plaszow. Not one of the Poles dared cross Amon Goeth.

On the other the authorities of Brunnlitz looked across the factory floor at more than 1,100 Jews who might sense freedom at any moment and who could know what these people would do in retaliation? To add to the strain, every easterly wind was bringing news of the approach of the Cossacks so another terrible threat was looming on the horizon.

Nervously the Polish guards stood on the catwalk above the factory floor, fingers on triggers, constantly looking around, expecting Russian soldiers to burst into the building at any moment. The machinery continued to whine its eerie warning for all who were within the factory. Every soul was on edge, nearly paralyzed with fear. Who could know what the next days, even hours, could bring?

Suddenly the whistle of the factory blew and the guards turned to see Oskar Schindler with his hand on the rope. It was not time to shut down and every eye in the room raced with terror as they saw the image of that man with his hand on the rope, calmly pulling it up and down.

The loud whine of the machinery slowly wound down as one after another the workers hit the kill-switches to the various pieces of equipment. When the floor of the factory was finally quiet Schindler climbed up on the loading dock and turned to the assembly, speaking, "I am sure you wonder why I have stopped you in your production. The reason is very simple, our efforts for the Nazi war machine have come to an end. Even this very moment the Russians are at the edge of our city and the resistance to their advance has nearly evaporated.

“Now you,” Schindler turned to the anxious guards who stood on the catwalk, “you must decide if your efforts also come to an end here. You have how many rounds each in your rifles? Twenty? And there are sixteen of you. Let me plead with you from simple logic,” the factory director leaned forward and said distinctly, “You may have some insane desire to fulfill your ‘duty’ by executing these workers lest they escape. Sheer numbers tell you that this would be suicide.” Schindler suddenly turned and walked to the west side of the platform nearest to where Szlamowicz, the chief of the Polish squadron, stood directly above him. Looking clearly at the only man that Schindler feared would seek to “go out in a blaze of glory” he concluded. “16 rifles? 20 rounds each? That would leave nearly 800 souls to tear you limb from limb.” At that moment Oskar Schindler thought he saw Szlamowicz flinch, “It would appear to me, my good men, that retreat, at this point, would be the better part of valor.”

The guards looked at each other and then over toward Szlamowicz. For a long moment the leader’s eyes raced across the floor, at his men, and down at Schindler. Sweat developed quickly on his brow as he considered his options. He felt like a very trapped animal. Suddenly, Szlamowicz hung his rifle on his shoulder and, without a word to his men, turned to leave. It didn’t take long at all before every one of the Polish guards had fled the building leaving only Oskar Schindler and his charges alone, unwatched, unguarded.

Schindler turned again to his workers and said, “I do not know what any of you plan now. I certainly will not be turning on the machinery again and I have no factory anymore. Several weeks ago I liquidated all of my assets for I knew that each of us would face very uncertain times in the next few weeks and months. I have no certainty as to what will befall any of us so I have considered your labor for me and I wish to express my appreciation. You each have given me purpose, and for that I am indebted. I wish to give you

a token of my gratitude in the hopes that it will serve you well as you come out from this long nightmare.

“There is one man who is most deserving of our gratitude. While you slept your fitful sleep each night this one man was most responsible for keeping you alive. I could not have run this factory without him and I’ve always known that. To you, Itzhak Stern, I wish to give you this severance personally.”

Schindler approached the little manager and handed him an envelope. He then shook his hand and said something that only a few could hear who were standing very nearby. As he whispered he placed his hands on the little associate’s shoulders and then turned to address the rest of the workers.

“The rest of you will receive your pay as you leave. I have left envelopes for each of you in the office and I’ll ask my faithful associate to distribute them to you. But, before you do this I am sure you will wish to hear the official announcement from London of the surrender of the German High Command. I doubt that many of you will understand Mr. Churchill’s English, but you will be able to tell your children and your grandchildren that you heard the news of this day with your own ears.”

Just as Schindler turned to hit a switch that would turn on the factory’s speakers for all who hear Churchill’s pronouncement he stopped. With his hand on the volume switch he turned and then quickly said in closing, almost as an afterthought, “I wish you the best and I thank you for what you have done for me.”

With those final words he mounted the stairs that led up to the catwalk, quietly slipped into the shadows, and disappeared through an open door at the west end of the building leaving the factory workers to stand in silence as they listened to a foreign speech that seemed too good to be true.

When Churchill's final words died out Stern looked at the workers and announced, "If you will but give me a moment I will go to the office and then we will provide you with your envelopes." He pressed through the crowd, weaving through the silent machinery. When he came to the steps leading to the office he marched deliberately up them and entered the enclave where he had spent so many tortuous hours, desperately trying to keep the factory open and all of these people alive.

For a moment Stern sat down, out of habit, into his old chair at his desk and tried to sort through the thoughts and emotions racing around inside of him. He absentmindedly twisted the envelope in his hands and then decided to open it. Inside was a handwritten note in Shindler's characteristic messy scrawl,

Herr Stern,

You, above all other workers in this factory, have been faithful. Your long hours of service kept this operation going long enough for us all to live to see this day.

For this I wish to give you the enclosed reward and my undying gratitude.

Most sincerely,

O. Schindler

As the manager peered into the envelope he counted three tattered 5,000 Zloty notes. Due to the inflation of the war it was no longer a fortune, but

Stern realized that it was more money than he had held in years and would, at least, give him the potential of a start at a new life.

Suddenly there was a knock at the door and Itzhak turned to see Helena Hirsch standing at the threshold. Schindler had actually “won” the girl from Amon Goeth at a drunken card game and she had, at times, assisted with various duties around the factory office. “Excuse me, sir,” the young lady shyly interrupted his thoughts, “the workers don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, yes,” he responded, “Thank you.” He looked around the office and saw a dusty cardboard box on Herr Schindler’s desk. He could see envelopes that looked very much like his sticking out of the top so he said, “Have the foreman, Szyjac Eisenholz, line the worker’s up at the west doorway and we will hand them each their envelope as they leave.”

“Yes, sir,” the girl spoke and turned away, back to the factory floor.

Stern rose from his old seat and went to pick up the box. It was heavy with envelopes and Itzhak was surprised to find that each and every envelope had a name on it. Hundreds and hundreds of envelopes and Stern could hardly believe that a seasoned carouser and bon vivant like Schindler had taken the time to individually label and alphabetize them. But Stern was then struck with a new thought, “Of course,” he speculated, “this would be necessary if you give different rewards to different workers.” Surely there had to be some equity in the reward given to those who had worked longer and carried greater responsibilities in the operation.

For a moment curiosity got the best of him and he began to sort through the envelopes. He quickly found an envelope for “Szyjac Eisenholz”, the floor manager. Stern deftly opened the corner of the envelope and saw that this

one also contained three 5,000 zloty notes. Then he saw Helena's and it also contained the same amount. He continued to skip through the names, wondering if any of them would stick out to him when he came across two envelopes near the back of the stack. "Rosner, Leopold", "Rosner, Herman".

"Surely," Stern thought, "these two cabaret entertainers will not receive the same as those who have worked in this dank place for months and months. Even Schindler would not be so squanderous as to give much of anything to two men who had not hardly even touched one piece that came off the assembly line. No, not a man who had perfected his negotiations with the crooks of the region and the black market. There's no way even he would be that wasteful."

Stern lifted the corner of Leopold's envelope and then quickly tore open Herman's. Suddenly a sense of resentment and frustration swelled over the manager's soul. At that moment he felt that all of his hours and ulcers had been for naught. Why should he have poured so much of his soul into this operation for years only to have the same reward as two pub entertainers?

The manager's simmering was interrupted by a familiar voice at the rear doorway of the office. He could smell the overpowering cologne and looked up to see the familiar silhouette of Oskar Schindler, leaning upon the door frame. "You are surprised, Herr Stern?"

"Of course! I have saved you from yourself dozens of times. It was I who kept this whole operation afloat while you were out cavorting at all hours of the day and night." The rage of the manager exploded, "Exactly who do you think was the one person who made this who charade of a factory continue? Was it some violin player? Was it his accordion playing brother who doesn't even know where the switch is to turn a piece of equipment on or off? No!",

he raged. "It was me. I am the one to whom you owe so much and this is the gratitude that I get?"

"Itzhak, my good man, I do not deny what you say but you do have two things that these men will never have," Schindler spoke softly.

"And what, Herr Director, might that be?", the manager queried.

"You have my undying gratitude and the knowledge that today nearly 1,200 people live because of your efforts. Those are things that the brothers Rosner will never have." Schindler then came near the desk, put his hand on Stern's shoulder and concluded, "Besides, if these are my resources then do I not have the perfect right to be as squanderous and generous with them as I choose? Is this not my decision to make?"

Take that thine is, and go thy way:

I will give unto this last, even as unto thee.

Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own?

Is thine eye evil, because I am good?

- Matthew 20:14,15