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Schindler's Ark

Thomas Keneally

Published by Sceptre

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PROLOGUE *Autumn 1943*

In Poland's deepest autumn, a tall young man in an expensive overcoat, double-breasted dinner jacket beneath it and – in the lapel of the dinner jacket – a large ornamental gold-on-black enamel swastika, emerged from a fashionable apartment block in Straszewskiego Street on the edge of the ancient centre of Cracow, and saw his chauffeur waiting with fuming breath by the open door of an enormous and, even in this blackened world, lustrous Adler limousine.

"Watch the pavement, Herr Schindler," said the chauffeur. "It's icy like a widow's heart."

In observing this small winter scene, we are on safe ground. The tall young man would to the end of his days wear double-breasted suits, would, being something of an engineer, always be gratified by large dazzling vehicles, would, though a German and at this point in history a German of some influence, always be the sort of man with whom a Polish chauffeur could safely crack a lame, comradely joke.

But it will not be possible to see the whole story under such easy character headings. For this is the story of the pragmatic triumph of good over evil, a triumph in eminently measurable, statistical, unsubtle terms. When you work from the other end of the beast, when you chronicle the predictable and measurable success evil generally achieves, it is easy to be wise, wry, piercing, to avoid bathos. It is easy to show the inevitability by which evil acquires all of what you could call the *real estate* of the story, even though good might finish up with a few imponderables like dignity and self-knowledge. Fatal human malice is the staple of narrators, original sin the mother-fluid of historians. But it is a risky enterprise to have to write of virtue.

In fact *virtue* is such a dangerous word that we have to rush

to explain; Herr Oskar Schindler, chancing his glimmering shoes on the icy pavement in this old and elegant quarter of Cracow, was not a virtuous young man in the customary sense. In this city he kept house with his German mistress and maintained a long affair with his Polish secretary. His wife Emilie chose to live most of the time at home in Moravia, though she sometimes came to Poland to visit him. There's this to be said for him, that to all his women he was a well-mannered and generous lover. But under the normal interpretation of *virtue* that's no excuse.

Likewise he was a drinker. Some of the time he drank for the pure glow of it, at other times with associates, bureaucrats, SS men for more palpable results. Like few others, he was capable of staying canny while drinking, of keeping his head. That again, though, under the narrow interpretation of morality, has never been an excuse for carousing. And although Herr Schindler's merit is well documented, it is a feature of his ambiguity that he worked within or, at least, on the strength of, a corrupt and savage scheme; one which filled Europe with camps of varying but consistent inhumanity and created a submerged, unspoken-of nation of prisoners. The best thing, therefore, may be to begin with a tentative instance of Herr Schindler's strange virtue and of the places and associates to which it brought him.

At the end of Straszewskiego Street, the car moved beneath the black bulk of Wawel Castle, from which the National Socialist Party's darling lawyer Hans Frank ruled the Government General of Poland. As from the palace of any evil giant, no light showed. Neither Herr Schindler nor the driver glanced up at the ramparts as the car turned south-east towards the river. At the Podgórze Bridge, the guards, placed above the freezing Vistula to prevent the transit of partisans and other curfew-breakers between Podgórze and Cracow, were used to the vehicle, to Herr Schindler's face, to the Passierschein presented by the chauffeur. Herr Schindler passed this check-point frequently, travelling either from his factory (where he also had an apartment) to the city on business, or else from his Straszewskiego Street apartment to his works in the suburb of Zablocie. They were used to seeing him after dark, too, attired formally or semi-formally, passing one way or another to a dinner, a

party, a bedroom; perhaps, as was the case tonight, on his way ten kilometres out of town to the forced labour camp at Plaszów, to dine there with SS Hauptsturmführer Amon Goeth, that highly placed sensualist. Herr Schindler had a reputation for being generous with gifts of drink at Christmas, and so the car was permitted to pass over into the suburb of Podgórze without much delay.

It is certain that by this stage of his history, in spite of his liking for good food and wine, Herr Schindler approached tonight's dinner at Commandant Goeth's more with loathing than with anticipation. There had in fact never been a time when to sit and drink with Amon had not been a repellent business. Yet the revulsion Herr Schindler felt was of a piquant kind, an ancient exultant sense of abomination such as, in a medieval painting, the just show for the damned. An emotion, that is, which stung Oskar rather than unmanned him.

In the black leather interior of the Adler as it raced along the tramtracks in what was until recently the Jewish ghetto, Herr Schindler chain smoked, as ever. But it was composed chain smoking. There was never tension in the hands; he was stylish. His manner implied that he knew where the next cigarette was coming from and the next bottle of cognac. Only he could have told us whether he had to succour himself from a flask as he passed by the mute, black village of Prokocim and saw, on the railway line to Lwów, a string of stalled cattle wagons, which might hold infantry or prisoners or even – though the odds on this were long – cattle.

Out in the countryside, perhaps ten kilometres from the centre of town, the Adler turned right at a street named – by an irony – Jerozolimska. This night of sharp frosty outlines, Herr Schindler saw beneath the hill first a ruined synagogue, and then the bare shapes of what passed these days as the city of Jerusalem, Forced Labour Camp Plaszów, barrack town of twenty thousand unquiet Jews, Polacks and Gypsies. The Ukrainian and Waffen SS men on the gate greeted Herr Schindler courteously, for he was known at least as well here as on the Podgórze Bridge.

When level with the Administration Block, the Adler moved

on to a prison road paved with Jewish gravestones. The camp site had been till two years before a Jewish cemetery. Commandant Amon Goeth, who claimed to be a poet, had used in the construction of his camp whatever metaphors were to hand. This metaphor of shattered gravestones ran the length of the camp, splitting it in two, but did not extend eastwards to the villa occupied by Commandant Goeth himself.

On the right, past the guard barracks, stood a former Jewish mortuary building. It seemed to declare that here all death was natural and by attrition, that all the dead were laid out. In fact the place was now used as the commandant's stables. Though Herr Schindler was used to the sight, it is possible that he still reacted with an ironic little cough. Admittedly if you reacted to every little irony of the new Europe you took it into you, it became part of your luggage. But Herr Schindler possessed an immense capacity for carrying that sort of secret drollery.

A prisoner called Poldek Pfefferberg was also on his way to the commandant's villa that evening. Lisiek, the commandant's nineteen-year-old orderly, had come to Pfefferberg's barracks with passes signed by an SS NCO. The youngster's problem was that the commandant's bath had a stubborn ring around it, and Lisiek feared that he would be beaten up for it when Commandant Goeth came to take his morning bath. Pfefferberg, who had been Lisiek's teacher in high school in Podgórze, worked in the camp garage and had access to solvents. So, in company with Lisiek, he went to the garage and fetched a long stick with a swab on the end and a can of solvent. To approach the commandant's villa was always a dubious business, but involved the chance that you would be given food by Helen Hirsch, Goeth's misused Jewish maid, a generous girl who had also been a student of Pfefferberg's.

When Herr Schindler's Adler was still a hundred metres from Goeth's villa, it set the dogs barking, the Great Dane, the Wolfhound, and all the others the commandant kept in the kennels beyond the house. The villa itself, a square building with an attic, had a balcony along the upper floor. All around the walls was a terraced patio with a balustrade. Amon Goeth liked sitting out of doors in the summer. Since he'd come here, he'd put on

weight. Next summer he'd make a fat sun-worshipper. But in this particular version of Jerusalem he'd be safe from mockery.

An SS Unterscharführer with white gloves had been put on the door tonight. Saluting, the sergeant admitted Herr Schindler to the house. In the hallway the Ukrainian orderly, Ivan, took Herr Schindler's coat and homberg. Schindler patted the breast pocket of his suit to be sure he had the gift for his host, a gold plated cigarette case, black market. Amon was doing so well on the side, especially out of confiscated jewellery, that he would be offended by anything less than the best gold plate. Yet even the best gold plate was to Amon nothing but a pleasant token.

At the double doors giving on to the dining room, the Rosner brothers were playing, Henry on violin, Leo on accordion. On Hauptsturmführer Goeth's command they had taken off the tattered clothing of the camp paint shop where they worked in the daytime and adopted the evening suits they kept in their barracks for such events. Oskar Schindler knew that although the commandant admired their music the Rosners never played at ease in the villa. They had seen too much of Amon. They knew he was erratic and given to *ex tempore* executions. They played studiously and hoped that their music would not suddenly give offence.

At Goeth's table that night there would be seven men. Apart from Schindler himself, the guests included Oberführer* Julian Scherner, head of the SS for the Cracow region, and Obersturmbannführer Rolf Czurda, the lieutenant colonel who was chief of the Cracow branch of the SD, the late Reinhard Heydrich's security service. They were the guests of highest honour, for this camp was run by their authority. They were some ten years older than Goeth, and SS police chief Scherner looked definitely middle-aged with his glasses and bald head and slight obesity. Even so, in view of his protégé's profligate living habits, the age difference between himself and Amon didn't seem so great.

The oldest of the company was Herr Franz Bosch, a veteran of the first war, manager of various workshops, legal and illegal,

* An SS rank, higher than colonel, lower than brigadier, for which there is no army equivalent.

inside Plaszów. He was also an 'economic adviser' to Julian Scherner and had business interests in the city.

Oskar despised Bosch and the two police chiefs, Scherner and Czurda. However, their cooperation was essential to the existence of his own peculiar plant in Zablocie, and so he regularly sent them gifts. The only guests with whom Oskar shared any fellow feeling were Julius Madritsch, owner of the Madritsch uniform factory inside this camp of Plaszów, and Madritsch's manager, Raimund Titsch. Madritsch was a year or so younger than Oskar and Goeth. He was an enterprising but humane man, and if asked to justify the existence of his profitable factory inside the camp, would have argued that it kept nearly four thousand prisoners employed and therefore safe from the death mills. Raimund Titsch, a man in his early forties, slight and private and likely to leave the party early, ran the Madritsch works on a daily basis, smuggled in truckloads of food for his prisoners (an enterprise which could have earned him a fatal stay in Montelupich prison, the SS jail, or else Auschwitz) and agreed with Madritsch.

Such was the regular bag of dinner companions at Herr Commandant Goeth's villa.

The four women guests, their hair formally done up and their gowns expensive, were younger than any of the men. They were better-class whores, German and Polish, from Cracow. Some of them were regular dinner guests here. Their number permitted a range of gentlemanly choice for the two senior officers. Goeth's German mistress, Majola, generally stayed at her apartment in the city during these feasts. She looked on Goeth's dinners as exclusively male and therefore offensive to her sensibilities.

There is no doubt that in their way the police chiefs and the commandant liked Oskar. There was, however, something odd about him. They might have been willing to write it off in part to his origins. He was Sudeten German, Arkansas to their Manhattan, Liverpool to their Cambridge. There were signs that he wasn't *right thinking*, though he paid well, was a good source of scarce commodities, could hold his drink and had a slow and sometimes rowdy sense of humour. He was the sort

of man you smiled and nodded at across the room, but it was not necessary or even wise to jump up and make a fuss of him.

It is most likely that the SS men noticed Oskar Schindler's entrance because of a frisson among the four girls. Those who knew Oskar in those years speak of his easy magnetic charm, exercised particularly over women, with whom he was unremittingly and improperly successful. The two police chiefs, Czurda and Scherner, now probably paid attention to Herr Schindler as a means of keeping the attention of the women. Goeth also came forward to take his hand. The commandant was as tall as Schindler, and the impression that he was abnormally fat for a man in his early thirties was aided by this height, an athletic height on to which the obesity seemed unnaturally grafted. The face seemed scarcely flawed at all, except that there was a vinous light in the eyes. The commandant drank indecent quantities of the local brandy.

He was not, however, as far gone as Herr Bosch, Plaszów's and the SS's economic wizard. Herr Bosch was purple nosed; the oxygen which by rights belonged to the veins of his face had for years gone to feed the sharp blue flame of all that liquor. Schindler, nodding to the man, knew that tonight Bosch would, as always, put in an order for goods.

"A welcome to our industrialist," intoned Goeth, and then he made a formal introduction to the girls around the room. The Rosner brothers would have played through this, Henry's eyes wandering only between his strings and the emptiest corner of the room, Leo smiling down at his accordion keys. And from it all arising the notes which Strauss put on paper for the titillation of gentlefolk.

Herr Schindler was now introduced to the women. He felt some small pity for these Cracow working girls, since he knew that later, when the slap and tickle began, the slap might leave welts and the tickle gouge the flesh. But for the present Hauptsturmführer Amon Goeth, a mad satrap when drunk, was an exemplary Viennese gentleman.

The pre-dinner conversation was unexceptional. There was talk of the war, and while SD chief Czurda took it upon himself

to assure a tall German girl that the Crimea was securely held, SS chief Scherner informed one of the other women that a boy he knew from Hamburg days, a decent chap, an Oberscharführer in the SS, had had his legs blown off when the partisans bombed a restaurant in Czestochowa. Schindler talked factory talk with Madritsch and his manager Titsch. There was a genuine friendship between these three entrepreneurs. Herr Schindler knew that little Titsch procured illegal quantities of black-market bread for the prisoners of the Madritsch uniform factory, and that much of the money for the purpose was put up by Madritsch. This was the merest humanity; since the profits in Poland were large enough, in Herr Schindler's opinion, to satisfy the most inveterate capitalist and justify some illegal outlay on extra bread. In Herr Schindler's case itself the contracts of the Rustungsinspektion, the Armaments Inspectorate – a body that solicited bids and awarded contracts for the manufacture of every commodity the German forces needed – had been so rich that he had exceeded his desire to be successful in the eyes of his father. Unhappily, Madritsch and Titsch and he, Oskar Schindler, were the only ones he knew who regularly spent money on black-market bread.

Towards the time when Goeth would call them to the dinner table, Herr Bosch approached Schindler, took him by the elbow and led him over by the door where the musicians played, as if he expected the Rosners' impeccable melodies to cover the conversation.

"Business good, I see," said Bosch.

Schindler smiled at the man. "You *see* that, do you, Herr Bosch?"

"I do," said Bosch. And of course Bosch would have read the official bulletins of the Main Armaments Board, announcing contracts awarded – on the basis of successful bids – to the Schindler factory.

"I was wondering," said Bosch inclining his head, "if in view of the present boom, founded, after all, on our general successes on a series of fronts . . . I was wondering if you might feel like a generous gesture. Nothing big. Just a gesture."

"Of course," said Schindler. He felt the nausea that goes with

being used, and at the same time a sensation close to joy. The office of police chief Scherner had twice used its influence to get Oskar Schindler out of jail. They were willing now to build up the obligation of having to do it again.

"My aunt in Bremen's been bombed out, poor old dear," said Bosch. "Everything! The marriage bed. The sideboards, all her Meissen and crockery. I wondered could you spare some kitchenware for her. And perhaps a pot or two – those big tureen things turned out at DEF."

Deutsche Emailwaren Fabrik, the German Enamel Works, was the name of Herr Schindler's booming business. Germans called it DEF for short, but the Poles and the Jews had a different sort of shorthand, calling it Emalia.

Herr Schindler said, "I think that can be managed. Do you want the goods consigned direct to her or through you?"

Bosch did not even smile. "Through me, Oskar. I'd like to enclose a little card."

"Of course."

"So it's settled. We'll say half a gross of everything – soup bowls, plates, coffee mugs. And half a dozen of those stew pots."

Herr Schindler, raising his jaw, laughed frankly. There was also some weariness in the laugh. But when he spoke he sounded complaisant. As indeed he was. He was always reckless with gifts. It was simply that Bosch regularly seemed to suffer from bombed-out kinsfolk.

Oskar murmured, "Does your aunt run an orphanage?"

Bosch looked him in the eye again, nothing furtive about this drunk. "She's an old woman with no resources. She can barter what she doesn't need."

"I'll tell my secretary to see to it."

"That Polish girl?" said Bosch. "The looker?"

"The looker," Schindler agreed.

Bosch tried to whistle, but the tension of his lips had been destroyed by the overproof brandy which was his tipple, and the sound emerged as a low raspberry. "Your wife," he said, man to man, "must be a saint."

"She is," Herr Schindler admitted with disquiet. Bosch was

welcome to his kitchenware, but he didn't want him talking about his wife.

"Tell me," said Bosch. "How do you keep her off your back? She must know . . . Yet you seem to be able to control her very well."

All the humour left Schindler's face now. Anyone could have seen frank distaste there. But the small, potent growl which arose from him was not unlike his normal voice.

"I never talk about intimacies like that," he said.

Bosch rushed in. "Forgive me. I didn't . . ." He went on incoherently begging pardon. Herr Oskar Schindler did not like sodden Herr Bosch enough to explain to him at this advanced night of his life that it wasn't a matter of controlling anyone, that the Schindler marital disaster was instead a case of an ascetic temperament, Frau Emilie Schindler's, and a hedonistic temperament, Herr Oskar Schindler's, willingly and against good advice binding themselves together. But Oskar's anger at Herr Bosch was more profound than even he would have admitted. Emilie was very like his late mother, Frau Louisa Schindler, whom Herr Schindler senior had left in 1935. So Oskar had a visceral feeling that in explaining away the Emilie-Oskar marriage, Bosch was also demeaning the marriage of the senior Schindlers.

The man was still rushing out apologies. This grape-faced speculator, a hand in every till in Cracow, was now in a sweating fright at the chance of losing six dozen sets of kitchenware.

The guests were summoned to the table. Onion soup was carried in and served by the maid. While the guests supped and chatted, the Rosner brothers continued to play, moving in closer to the diners, but not so close as to impede the movements of the maid or of Ivan and Petr, Goeth's two Ukrainian orderlies. Herr Schindler, sitting between the tall girl whom Scherner had appropriated and a sweet-faced, small-boned Pole who spoke German, saw that both girls watched this maid. She wore the traditional domestic uniform, black dress and white apron. She bore no Jewish star on her arm, no stripe of yellow paint on her back, yet she was Jewish just the same. What drew the attention of the other women was the condition of her face. There was

bruising along the line of the jaw, and you would have thought that Goeth had too much shame to display a servant in that condition in front of the guests from Cracow. Both the women and Herr Schindler could see, as well as the injury to her face, a more alarming purple, not always covered by her collar, at the junction where her thin neck joined her shoulder.

Not only did Amon Goeth neglect to leave the girl unexplained in the background, but he turned his chair towards her, gesturing at her with a hand, displaying her to the assembled company. Herr Schindler had not been at this house for six weeks now, but his informants told him the relationship between Goeth and the girl had developed this way. When with friends he used her as a conversational device. He only hid her away when senior officers from beyond the Cracow region were visiting.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he called, mimicking the tones of a fake-drunken master of cabaret, "may I introduce Lena? After five months she is now doing well in cuisine and deportment."

"I can see from her face," said the tall girl, Scherner's, "that she's had a collision with the kitchen furniture."

"And the bitch can have another," said Goeth with a genial liquid gurgle. "Yes. Another. Couldn't you, Lena?"

"He's hard on women," the SS chief boasted, winking at his tall consort. Scherner's intention might not have been unkind, since he did not refer to *Jewish* women but to women in general. It was when Goeth was reminded of Lena's Jewishness that she took more punishment, either publicly, in front of dinner guests, or later, when the commandant's friends had gone home. Scherner, being Goeth's superior, could have ordered the commandant to stop beating the girl. But that would have been bad form, would have soured the friendly parties at Amon's villa. Scherner came here not as a superior, but as a friend, an associate, a carouser, a savourer of women. Amon was a strange fellow, but no one could turn on parties the way he could.

Next there was herring in sauce, then pork knuckles, superbly cooked and garnished by Lena. They were drinking a heavy Hungarian red wine with the meat; the Rosner brothers moved in with torrid Hungarian music, and the air in the dining room thickened, all the officers removing their uniform jackets. There

was more gossip about war contracts. Madritsch, the uniform manufacturer, was asked about his Tarnow factory. Was it doing as well with Armaments Inspectorate contracts as was his factory inside Plaszów? Madritsch referred to Titsch, his lean, ascetic manager. Goeth seemed suddenly preoccupied, like a man who has remembered in the middle of dinner some urgent business detail he should have cleared up that afternoon and which now calls out to him from the darkness of his office.

The girls from Cracow were bored, the small-boned Pole, glossy-lipped, perhaps twenty, likely eighteen, placing a hand on Herr Schindler's right sleeve. "You're not a soldier?" she murmured. "You'd look very chic in uniform." Everyone began to chuckle, Madritsch too. He'd spent a while in uniform in 1940 until released because his managerial talents were so essential to the war effort. But Herr Schindler was so influential that he had never been threatened with the Wehrmacht. Madritsch laughed knowingly.

"Did you hear that?" Oberführer Scherner asked the table at large. "The little lady's got a picture of our industrialist as a soldier. Private Schindler, eh? Eating out of one of his own mess kits with a blanket round his shoulders. Over in Karkov."

In view of Herr Schindler's well-tailored elegance it *did* make a strange picture, and Schindler himself laughed at it.

"Happened to . . ." said Bosch, trying to snap his fingers, "happened to, what's his name up in Warsaw?"

"Toebbens," said Goeth, reviving without warning. "Happened to Toebbens. Almost."

The SD chief Czurda said, "Oh yes. Close thing for Toebbens." Toebbens was a Warsaw industrialist. Bigger than Schindler, bigger than Madritsch. Quite a success. "Heini," said Czurda (Heini being Himmler), "went to Warsaw and told the armaments man up there, Get the fucking Jews out of Toebbens's factory and put Toebbens in the army *and* . . . and send him to the front. I mean, the *front*! And then Heini told my associate up there, he said, Go over his books with a microscope!"

Toebbens, however, was a darling of the Armaments Inspectorate, which had favoured him with war contracts and which in

return he had favoured with gifts. The Armaments Inspectorate's protests had succeeded in saving Toebbens, Scherner told the table solemnly, and then leaned out across his plate to wink broadly at Schindler. "Never happen in Cracow, Oskar. We all love you too much."

All at once, perhaps to indicate the warmth the whole table felt for Herr Schindler the industrialist, Amon Goeth climbed to his feet and sang a wordless tune in unison with the main theme from *Madam Butterfly* on which the dapper brothers Rosner were working as industriously as any artisan in any threatened factory in any threatened ghetto.

By now Pfefferberg and Lisiek the orderly were upstairs in Goeth's bathroom, scrubbing away at the heavy bath ring with a swab of solvent. They could hear the Rosners' music and the bursts of laughter and conversation. It was coffee time down there, and the bruised girl Lena had brought the tray in to the dinner guests and retreated unmolested back to the kitchen.

Madritsch and Titsch drank their coffee quickly and excused themselves. Schindler prepared to do the same. The little Polish girl had put a hand on his shirt sleeve, but this was the wrong house for him. Anything was permitted at the Goethhaus, but Oskar found that his inside knowledge of the limits of SS behaviour in Poland threw sickening light on every word you spoke here, every glass you drank, let alone over any proposed sexual exchange. Even if you took a girl upstairs, you could not forget that Bosch and Scherner and Goeth were your brothers in joy, were – on the stairs or in a bathroom or bedroom – going through the same movements. Herr Schindler, no monk, would rather be a monk than have a woman at *chez* Goeth.

He spoke across the girl to Scherner, talking about war news, Polish bandits, the likelihood of a bad winter. Letting the girl know that Scherner was a brother and that he would never take a girl from a brother. Saying good night, though, he kissed her on the hand. He saw that Goeth, in his shirt sleeves, was disappearing out of the dining-room door, making for the stairwell supported by one of the girls who had flanked him at dinner. Oskar excused himself and caught up with the comman-

dant. He reached out and laid a hand on Goeth's shoulder. The eyes the commandant turned on him struggled to focus. "Oh," said Goeth in a liquid way. "Going, Oskar?"

"I have to be home," said Oskar. At home was Ingrid, his German mistress.

"You're a bloody stallion," said Goeth.

"Not in your class," said Schindler.

"No, you're right. I'm a frigging Olympian. We're going, where're we going . . . ?" He turned his head to the girl but answered the question himself. "We're going to the kitchen to see that Lena's clearing away properly."

"No," said the girl, laughing. "We aren't doing that."

She steered him to the stairs. It was decent of her, the sisterhood in operation, to protect the thin, wounded girl in the kitchen.

Herr Oskar Schindler watched the uneven animal, the hulking officer, the slight, supporting girl, struggling crookedly up the staircase. Goeth looked like a man who would have to sleep at least till lunchtime, but Oskar knew the commandant's amazing constitution and the clock that ran in him. By 3 a.m. Goeth might even decide to rise and write a letter to his father in Vienna. By seven, after only an hour's sleep, he'd be on the balcony, infantry rifle in hand, ready to shoot any dilatory prisoners.

When the girl and Goeth reached the first landing, Schindler sidled down the hallway towards the back of the house.

Pfefferberg and Lisiek heard the commandant, earlier than they had expected him, entering the bedroom and mumbling at the girl he'd brought upstairs. In silence they picked up the swab and the solvent can, crept through into the bedroom and tried to slide out by a side door. Still standing and able to see them on their line of escape, Goeth blanched and recoiled at the sight of the cleaning stick, suspecting that the two men might be assassins. When Lisiek stepped forward, however, and began a tremulous report, the commandant understood that they were merely prisoners.

"Herr Commandant," said Lisiek, panting with justified fear, "I wish to report that there has been a ring around your bath . . ."

"Oh," said Amon. "So you called in an expert?" He beckoned to the boy. "Come here, darling."

Lisiek edged forward and was struck so savagely that he went sprawling, skidding halfway under the bed. Amon again uttered his invitation, as if it might amuse the girl to see him speaking endearments to prisoners. Young Lisiek rose and tottered towards the commandant again, to receive another assault. As the boy picked himself up the second time, Pfefferberg, an experienced prisoner, prepared himself for anything – that they'd be marched down to the garden and shot by Ivan. Instead the commandant simply raged at them to leave, which they did at once.

When Pfefferberg heard a few days later that Lisiek was dead, shot by Amon, he presumed it was over the bathroom incident. In fact it was for a different matter altogether – Lisiek had harnessed a horse and buggy for Herr Bosch without first asking the commandant's permission.

In the kitchen of the villa, the maid, Helen Hirsch (Goeth called her Lena out of laziness she would always say) looked up to see one of the dinner guests in the doorway. She put down the dish of meat scraps she'd been holding and stood to attention with a jerky suddenness. "*Herr* . . ." She looked at his dinner jacket and sought the word for him. "Herr Direktor, I was just putting aside the leftovers for the Herr Commandant's dogs."

"Please, please," said Herr Schindler. "You don't have to report to me, Fräulein Hirsch."

He moved around the table. He did not seem to be stalking her, but she feared his intentions. Even though Amon enjoyed beating her, her Jewishness always saved her from overt sexual attack. But there were Germans who were not as fastidious on racial matters as Amon.

This one's tone of voice, however, was that of ordinary social exchange. It was a tone to which she was not accustomed, even from the SS officers and NCOs who came to the kitchen to complain about Amon.

"Don't you know me?" he asked, just like a man, a soccer star or actor, whose sense of his own celebrity has been hurt by a stranger's failure to recognise him. "I'm Schindler."

She bowed her head. "Herr Direktor," she said. "Of course, I've heard . . . And you've been here before. I remember . . ."

He put his arm around her. He could surely feel the clenching of her body as he touched her cheek with his lips.

He murmured, "It's not that sort of kiss. I'm kissing you out of pity, if you want to know."

She couldn't avoid starting to weep. Herr Direktor Schindler bussed her hard now in the middle of the forehead, in the manner of Polish farewells at railway stations, a resounding Eastern European smack of the lips. She saw that he had begun to weep too. "That kiss is something I bring you from . . ." He waved his hand, indicating some honest tribe of men out in the dark, sleeping in tiered bunks or hiding in forests, people for whom by absorbing punishment from Hauptsturmführer Goeth she was in part a buffer.

Herr Schindler released her and reached into the side pocket of his jacket, bringing out a large confectionery bar. In its substance it too seemed pre-war.

"Keep that somewhere," he advised her.

"I get extra food here," she told him, as if it were a matter of pride that he wouldn't presume she was starving. Food, in fact, was the least of her worries. She knew she would not survive Amon's house, but it wouldn't be for lack of food.

"If you don't want to eat it, trade it," Herr Schindler told her. "Or why not build yourself up?" He stood back and surveyed her. "Itzhak Stern told me about you."

"Herr Schindler," murmured the girl. She put her head down and wept neatly, economically, for a few seconds. "Herr Schindler, he likes to beat me in front of *those* women. On my first day here, he beat me because I threw out the bones from dinner. He came down to the basement at midnight and asked me where they were. For his dogs, you understand. That was the first beating . . . I said to him . . . I don't know why I said it, I'd never say it now . . . Why are you beating me? He said, The reason I'm beating you now is you asked me why I'm beating you."

She shook her head and shrugged, as if reproving herself for talking so much. She didn't want to say any more, she couldn't

convey the history of her punishments, her repeated experience of the Hauptsturmführer's knuckles.

Herr Schindler bent his head to her and became even more confidential. "Your circumstances are appalling, Helen," he told her.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "I've accepted it."

"Accepted it?"

"One day he'll shoot me."

Schindler shook his head and she thought it was too glib an encouragement to her to hope. Suddenly, the good cloth and the cosseted flesh of Herr Schindler were a provocation. "For God's sake, Herr Schindler, I see things. We were up on the roof on Monday, chipping off the ice, me and young Lisiek. And we saw the Herr Commandant come out of the front door and down the steps by the patio, right below us. And, there on the steps, he drew his gun and shot a woman who was passing. A woman carrying a bundle. Through the throat. Just a woman on her way somewhere. You know. She didn't seem fatter or thinner or slower or faster than anyone else. I couldn't guess what she'd done. The more you see of the Herr Commandant, the more you see that there's no set of rules you can keep to. You can't say to yourself, If I keep these rules, I'll be safe . . ."

Schindler took her hand and wrung it for emphasis. "Listen, my dear Fräulein Helen Hirsch, for all that, it's still better than Majdanek or Auschwitz. If you can keep your health . . ."

She said, "I thought it would be easy to keep my health in the commandant's kitchen. When I was sent here, from the camp kitchen, the other girls were jealous."

A pitiful smile spread on her lips.

Schindler raised his voice now. He was like a man enunciating a principle of physics. "He won't kill you, because he enjoys you too much, my dear Helen. He enjoys you so much he won't even let you wear the Star. He doesn't want anyone to know it's a Jew he's enjoying. He shot the woman from the steps because she meant nothing to him; she was one of a series, she neither offended nor pleased him. You understand that. But you . . . it's not decent, Helen. But it's life."

Someone else had said that to her. Untersturmführer Leo

John, a second lieutenant, the commandant's deputy. John had said, "He won't kill you till the end, Lena, because he gets too much of a kick out of you." But coming from John it hadn't had the same effect. Herr Schindler had just condemned her to a painful survival.

He seemed to understand that she was stunned. He murmured encouragement. He'd see her again. He'd try to get her out. Out? she asked. Out of the villa, he explained, into my factory. Surely you have heard of my factory. I have an enamelware factory.

"Oh yes," she said like a slum child speaking of the Riviera. "Schindler's Emalia. I've heard of it."

"Keep your health," he repeated. He seemed to know it would be the key. He seemed to draw on a knowledge of future intentions – Himmler's, Frank's – when he said it.

"All right," she conceded.

She turned her back on him and went to a dresser, levering it forward from the wall, an exercise of strength which in such a diminished girl amazed Herr Schindler. She removed a brick from the section of wall the dresser had previously covered. She brought out a wad of money, occupation zloty.

"I have a sister in the camp kitchen," she said. "She's younger than me. I want you to spend this buying her back if ever she's put on the cattle wagons. I believe you often find out about these things beforehand."

"I'll make it my business," Schindler told her, but with ease, not like a solemn promise. "How much is it?"

"Four thousand zloty."

He took it negligently, her nest egg, and shoved it in a side pocket. It was still safer with him than in a niche behind Amon Goeth's dresser.

So the story of Oskar Schindler is begun perilously, with Gothic Nazis, with SS hedonism, with the thin and brutalised girl, and with a figure of the imagination somehow as popular as the golden-hearted whore: the good German.

On the one hand, Oskar has made it his business to know the full face of the system, the rabid face behind the veil of bureau-

cratic decency. He knows, that is, earlier than most would dare know it, what Sonderbehandlung means, that though it says *Special Treatment* it means pyramids of cyanosed corpses in Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and in that complex west of Cracow known to the Poles as Oświecim–Brzezinka but which will be known to the West by its German name, Auschwitz–Birkenau.

On the other hand he is a businessman, a dealer by temperament, and he does not openly spit in the system's eye. He has already reduced the pyramids and, though he does not know how this year and the next they will grow in size and number and overtop the Matterhorn, he knows the mountain is coming. Though he cannot predict what bureaucratic shifts will occur in its construction, he still presumes there will always be room and need for Jewish labour. Therefore, during his charitable visit to Helen Hirsch, he insists, "Keep your health." He is sure, and out in the darkened Arbeitslager of Plaszów wakeful Jews stir and promise themselves that no régime, the tide set against it, can afford to do away with a plentiful source of free labour. It's the ones who break down, spit blood, fall to dysentery who are put on the Auschwitz transports. Herr Schindler himself has heard prisoners, out on the Appellplatz – parade ground – of Plaszów labour camp, murmur, "At least I still have my health," in a tone which in normal life only the aged use.

So, this winter night, it is both early days and late days for Herr Schindler's practical engagement in the salvage of certain human lives. He is in deep, he has broken Reich laws to an extent that would earn him a multiplicity of hangings, beheadings, consignments to the draughty huts of Auschwitz or Grõss-Rosen. But he does not know yet how much it will really cost. Though he has spent a fortune already, he does not know the extent of payments still to be made.

Not to stretch belief so early, the story begins with a quotidian act of kindness, a kiss, a soft voice, a sugared bar. Helen Hirsch would never see her four thousand zloty again – not in a form in which they could be counted and held in the hand. But to this day she considers it a matter of small importance that Oskar was so inexact with sums of money.