

Oskar Schindler, Problematic Legacies, Imperfect Heroes, and the Immutable Good

Yesterday I watched *Schindler's List* for the first time.

Why didn't anyone tell me? This is one of the greatest historical drama movies I could hope for. I've not seen anything made before or since that does as well as *Schindler's List* to capture the sick unreality of the time of the Holocaust.

And Schindler – what a lovable rogue. He's like a real life Han Solo, who slowly comes around to the moral good. He plays the villains like fiddles. Seeing someone like him reminded me of the opportunity every person has to do what's right. In his situation, he certainly did. It was a good thing that this movie was made, and it was a good thing that history vindicated this part of his story.

Problematic Legacies

I look up Schindler's life, though, I don't see just that picture of the hero. Even the film acknowledges this. The heroism and transformation (to appearances at least) don't seem to last for Schindler. He moved to Argentina after the war and failed at a couple of businesses. Then he abandoned his wife without explanation, returned to Germany, and spent much of the rest of his life existing on the charity of Jewish organizations.

This was a sad and disappointing discovery. You know the feeling: when you discover that your heroes live poorly when they're not in the public eye, or that someone who was once so great has fallen so far from the heights.

Everything within us wants to condemn someone like that. And everything within us feels betrayed that the hero and rescuer Oskar Schindler would seemingly rise so far only to fall so far.

What do we do with this?

Imperfect Heroes

I don't think the answer is to toss aside Oskar Schindler and move on looking for another perfect hero. I don't think it's to think less of Oskar Schindler, in the big picture.

Schindler is just one reminder of a reality we all face: while we have ideals, we never meet them perfectly at all times. That's why they're ideals. If they were easy to reach or easy to keep, they wouldn't be the things that call us higher.

If we were to find some legacy or some person that **did** seem perfect, woe unto us. That legacy or that person would become our idol. Instead of seeking fulfillment and goodness from the process and the actions of heroism, we would seek that lifeblood of human-ness from another human. That's rather what movies like *Schindler's List* let us do, for a few hours. It's not all bad, but just imagine if heroism could never leave the screen, and all your cravings for meaning could be met vicariously through a movie character.

It's a good thing that no heroes please us fully.

The Immutable Good

There's still a lingering depression when we consider that heroes like Schindler can backslide, or make stupid decisions, or make cruel ones (like abandoning a spouse) after having done something great and good.

There has to be an antidote to that despair. Or what is the point of doing good in the world if it can be so easily lost?

We often tend to think of good in the context of a wider story. We want to know how many good actions a man committed in his life so we can know whether he was a "good" man. On one level, this makes a lot of sense. "The good life" certainly consists of every action up to death.

But it's not just "the good life" that is good.

We can celebrate the "good action". We celebrate the "good man", too - at least, the man as he was in that moment: the "good 27 year-old," or the "good pre-1958 Oskar Schindler." Why? Because the good is the good. Even when it does not always stay with the same host or the same life, it still echoes in the world.

Schindler may have failed to figure out his relationships or his financial life. In the end, he would not have met Aristotle's strict definition of "the good life." Still, his good was not wiped out because of his mistakes. It lived on not just in him but in every person to whom he gave a chance at life. In those moments he fought an evil regime and saved innocent people, he was the best thing a human being could be. And those moments will never cease to be a part of the flow of time, regardless of our opinions of Schindler's place in the rest of it.

"Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an entire world. And whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

- Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5; Yerushalmi Talmud 4:9, Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 37a.