

# Schindler in Sidney

...It's About Making a Difference



Photo courtesy of Leopold Page Photographic Collection / USHMM Photo Archives.

*Oskar Schindler (center) at a party with German officials and other friends.*

Sidney, Montana, is one of those low-key and sensible Eastern Montana farm towns where no one is a stranger and residents ascribe to the adage, "It takes a village to raise a child." Young people are taught that each person is important...and that it is possible—indeed, very likely—that anyone can make a significant, positive difference in the world at large.

It should come as no surprise, then, that from August 25 through September 23, 2006, the MonDak Heritage Center, the 18,000 square foot museum located in the heart of this Richland County community of 5,000, will host *Schindler*, a traveling exhibition organized and circulated by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. *Schindler* compellingly relates through photographs how the actions of one person, German-Catholic industrialist Oskar Schindler, made a significant positive difference in the lives of more than 1,000 Polish Jews during World War II.

Oskar Schindler's story begins with his birth April 28, 1908, in Zwittau, a small industrial city in the German-speaking area of Moravia. Young Schindler and his sister Elfriede attended school and played with the two sons of their next-door neighbor, a rabbi.

In 1928, after a brief courtship, Schindler married, but the romance quickly soured, and he and his wife Emilie spent many of their childless married years apart from each other. In 1935, world depression forced the Schindlers' farm-machinery plant into bankruptcy, but



Photo courtesy of Leopold Page Photographic Collection / USHMM Photo Archives.

*Oskar Schindler (seated) with Leopold Pfefferberg, who was saved by Schindler.*

Schindler eventually began working as sales manager for Moravian Electrotechnic. After Germany annexed Zwickau with the Czech Sudetenland in October 1938, Schindler joined the Nazi Party. He also served as an agent for German military intelligence and used his business trips to Poland to gather information on industrial and military installations. After Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, Schindler seized the opportunity the war offered speculators and profiteers and followed the occupying German forces to Krakow. Schindler took over a failing enamelware business by secretly raising the capital from a number of local Jewish businessmen, and subsequently amassed a small fortune. In late summer 1944, as the Soviet army advanced toward Krakow, the German High Command ordered Schindler to disband the enamelware business. Most of his workers were taken back to the Plaszow forced labor camp, and many were deported to other camps in the west. In October 1944 Schindler was allowed to relocate his factory, now a munitions plant, to Brünnlitz, near



Photo courtesy of Leopold Page Photographic Collection / USHMM Photo Archives.

*Oskar Schindler at a dinner party in Krakow with an SS officer. At parties like this., Schindler made contact with various SS and German officials, which often led to tips about impending deportations that enabled him to save his laborers.*

his hometown. Through negotiations and bribes from his war profits, Schindler persuaded German military and SS officials to allow him to take Jewish workers from Plaszow. He prepared a list—"Schindler's list"—of more than 1,000 names, which he submitted to the Plaszow authorities. In the camp, prisoners tried with pleas and bribes to get their names added to the official typed orders. In October 1944, about 800 men left Plaszow for Brunnlitz via the Gross-Rosen concentration camp. A week later, a transport of 300 women was mistakenly shunted to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. After Schindler intervened to obtain their release, the women also arrived at Brunnlitz. Brunnlitz was a bogus armaments factory, for it produced few properly calibrated shells or rocket casings, a deliberate act of sabotage on Schindler's part.

Schindler also rescued about 100 Jewish men and women from the Golezów concentration camp who lay trapped and partly frozen in sealed train cars stranded near Brunnlitz. Schindler's wife, Emilie, having rejoined her husband at his new factory, devoted herself to nursing some of these prisoners back to life. Those who died were buried with Jewish rites.

At the end of the war, the Schindlers prepared to escape to the west. Before Schindler left, accompanied by a protective escort of Jewish survivors and disguised as a Jewish prisoner, he was presented with a gift: a gold ring inscribed with the Talmudic verse, "Whoever saves a single life saves the world entire. "Schindler's Jews," as they became known, were grateful, even more so after they learned how exceptional their rescue had been. Many attested to Schindler's humane treatment, undertaken at personal risk, in providing the best food and medical care available and making possible Jewish religious observances. In 1962, the Israeli Holocaust Remembrance Authority, Yad Vashem, named Schindler "Righteous Among the Nations."

In his final years, the impoverished Schindler lived in a modest apartment in Frankfurt, Germany. He was supported by a small pension and funds from some of his survivor friends. In October 1974, Schindler died at the age of 66. He was buried in the Catholic cemetery of Jerusalem, as he had wished. Many of "Schindler's Jews" and their children were present.

In a 1964 interview outside his Frankfurt apartment, Schindler explained why he had assisted Jews in Krakow:

"The persecution of Jews in the General Government in Polish territory gradually worsened in its cruelty. In 1939 and 1940 they were forced to wear the Star of David and were herded together and confined in ghettos. In 1941 and 1942 this unadulterated sadism was fully revealed. And then a thinking man, who had overcome his inner cowardice, simply had to help. There was no other choice."

Many of the photographs in this exhibition come from the Leopold Pfefferberg-Page Collection. Pfefferberg was one of those rescued by Schindler. While in Plaszow, Pfefferberg witnessed Austrian Raimund Titsch taking photos in the camp. Nearly 20 years later, Pfefferberg found Titsch, bought the negatives, which had been buried in park in Vienna, to Yad Vashem. In 1993 Pfefferberg donated the prints to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The photos on these rolls provided the inspiration for many of the scenes in Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*. They powerfully tell a story that is too important to forget.

*Schindler's* message that any person, however flawed, has the power to change history for the better will remind those fortunate enough to attend the Schindler exhibit at the MonDak Heritage Center in Sidney this summer that a successful life is truly about making a positive difference. **POP**



Photo courtesy of Leopold Page Photographic Collection / USHMM Photo Archives.

*Oskar Schindler poses next to the tree he planted on the Avenue of the Righteous Among the Nations at Yad Vashem.*

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