




SEARCHING FOR SCHINDLER

THOMAS KENEALLY

A K N O P F  B O O K

Searching for Schindler

a memoir

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Contents

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Author's Note*](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Photo Insert One](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Photo Insert Two](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[*A Note About the Author*](#)

[*Also by Thomas Keneally*](#)

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In memory of Leopold Page, 2001,

and to the continued health of Ludmila (Misia) Page

Author's Note

The author would like to thank Steven Spielberg for permission to use production stills taken on the set of *Schindler's List*, and Mrs. Misia Page for commenting on and correcting the manuscript.

T.K.

The Santa Ana winds blow down into the Los Angeles Basin from the north and northeast. They are torrents of air, starved for water in the deserts of Nevada and California. Racing to the sea over the Sierras, picking up heat, dust and spores as they fall, they flow through passes and canyons down into the basin of that great desert city, bringing with them a sense of displacement and filling the air with a strange, malign electricity.

It was late October of 1980, and for me the wind had a curiosity value, a little like an anecdotal or useful experience of a slight earth tremor. The heat and bearing of the wind swept me along Wilshire Boulevard as I went out to shop, looking for a modestly priced briefcase in Beverly Hills, unsure that such things were sold in a zone where such banal things were sold. Passing exorbitant Rodeo Drive on my left, one block from the hotel, I saw, stretching away south, a street that seemed to have normal shops, and family cars bearing the scuffs of suburban use. Malls had not yet subsumed the business of such centers as this, and people seemed to be busily parking and seeking out plain, useful human wares.

I had plenty of time to shop. My plane was not leaving for Sydney until the following night. In those days Australia was not a glamor destination, and only a few brave American space travelers joined us natives on the bi-or triweekly planes to the far southwest of the Pacific and my vast native continent, which many Americans still confused with Austria, and whose chief claim to international renown was the lambasting Germaine Greer gave its patriarchy in *The Female Eunuch*.

I had not gone far along the normal-looking street, South Beverly Drive, when opposite the Hamburger Haven I encountered a store named the Handbag Studio. Its goods looked out at me through the glass, out past banners which declared the Handbag Studio's Fall Sale. On these placards kid skin, cowhide, pigskin, snakeskin and crocodile were mentioned, but above all, discount percentages.

I hesitated, always a nervous shopper. But the shopkeeper soon appeared beside me, having stepped out from within. He had a stocky Slavic look and resembled the great character actor Theodore Bickell—a touch of Tartar in the cheeks, a barrel chest, powerful arms, a wrestler's neck. He wore a white shirt, a conservative tie and a good jacket with an Eagle Scout pin nested in its lapel. There was a glitter of fraternal amusement in his eyes. Even then, I believe I perceived that he had dealt in markets beyond my knowing.

He said, "So it's a hundred and five degrees out here and you don't want to come into my air conditioned store. Do you think I'll eat you?"

"I was just looking for a briefcase," I said defensively.

"I have the best, young man. Hong Kong and Italy. The best!"

With these assurances, I let myself be led into the store, which—as he had promised—was cool.

“I have a good case,” I told him earnestly.

My wife and daughters had given it to me. But one of its hinges had gone, and the other hinge was tearing too. The storekeeper respected my sentimental attachment to the old one, but pointed out that such harm was unlikely to befall what he was offering me. “You just can’t put everything in them. Truck? They’re not a truck, you know!” And his wide-set Tartar eyes glimmered.

He introduced me to his salesman, a man named Sol. They both had the same sort of Eastern European whimsy, but you could see at once Sol’s was of the melancholy rather than the exuberant strain.

As we chatted, the proprietor said, “I must compliment you, sir, on your beautiful British accent.”

“Not British,” I told him, with an automatic Fenian twitch imbued in me by Irish grandparents. “Australian.”

It was true and even fascinating that the Americans, largely ignorant of the bad odor in which our accent was held by the British, unconditionally liked our nearly vowelless English.

“So then,” he asked me, “how did a gentleman like you bust your hinge?”

I explained that I’d been at a film festival in Sorrento in Italy.

The Sorrento gig arose from the revival of the Australian film industry in the early-to-mid 1970s with directors such as Peter Weir, Bruce Beresford, Gillian Armstrong and Fred Schepisi. Since 1972 I had been associated, as friend and dabbler in film, with Schepisi, then a young Melbourne director and had even “acted” in Schepisi’s first film, *The Devil’s Playground*, a far-above-average tale of Catholic childhood and, of course, emergent sexuality colliding with absolutist Catholic doctrine. By that northern autumn, Fred Schepisi had also made a novel of mine, *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, into a film. The book and film concerned an Aboriginal who in 1900 proceeded on an anti-white rampage in an Australia within whose Constitution, then in its final draft, all reference to the rights of Aboriginals was omitted. I’d played a small part in that film as well, and since Fred Schepisi himself could not go to Sorrento for its biennial film festival, which was devoted that year to Australian cinema, I was invited to go as his stand-in.

They accommodated us in resort hotels along the Mediterranean coast, a festival load of people who had already established themselves and would go on to great renown—Bruce Beresford, the director; Barry Humphries, alias Dame Edna Everage; Judy Davis; Sam Neill; Bryan Brown; Ray Lawrence. We were still, both as a film industry and as a nation, unaccustomed to serious attention in northern European cultural centers, and enjoyed being the plat du jour.

The Italian press treated each film with a heady seriousness, and the showings left time for dining on sumptuous Neapolitan cuisine. But the Italians also gave us a massive amount of bumf on the industry. This load of serious documents was certainly not the sort of thing one would instantly throw away, unless one has grown worldly and weary of conferences. Indeed, I think the pages still exist in

storage box somewhere, a brown archive box unlikely to be opened by me in this life, and irrelevant the next. ~~The desire to fit in all the Italian material had busted the briefcase, one of its two hinges the back coming away.~~

I told all this to the proprietor, who introduced himself as Leopold Page. I had not long been calling him Mr. Page when he told me he somewhat regretted the name. It had been foisted on him at Ellis Island in 1947, where he said they had scared him by telling him Americans couldn't pronounce his Polish name, but that if he wanted to change it later, it would cost him \$500. He quickly invited me to call him Leopold; and then somehow, in a short time, I took to using the diminutive, Poldek. His true family name from Kraków, that beautiful Galician city, was Pfefferberg—pepper mountain. I would later come to think it a name that suited his exorbitant energy, his feisty goodwill.

Having been insistent to get me into his shop, Poldek seemed more curious about me than interested in a sale. This was scarcely an act. It would prove to be the way he was. "Do you know some friends of mine?" Poldek asked me. He mentioned various Eastern European names from Sydney and Melbourne. No, I hadn't had the honor of meeting these people, I said. "They're Jewish friends of mine," he explained. "From Kraków and other places." I explained that the Jewish community in Sydney, though substantial, was not as numerous as in Melbourne.

As we talked, Poldek showed me a simple, lock-up, shining black briefcase, with nicely patterned calfskin. It was spacious and had many compartments. I said I'd take it. I was grateful that the shopping had been uncomplicated and unexpectedly pleasant, and in between chatting, the deal-making had probably taken no more than two or three minutes.

I gave Poldek my credit card, and he put Sol on the phone to call the numbers through to the credit card company.

As minutes passed without the card being accepted, Sol kept making doleful faces at us. Poldek turned to him, "Well, keep trying, Sol!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying. They won't talk."

"Give me the phone!"

"You want the phone when no one's on the line?"

"What do you mean 'no one'?"

"I mean they went away to check the card. I mean there's nobody on the line," said Sol, rejecting my assistance. So Poldek turned to me again and, showing he knew the map of the world, asked me how come I was in California on my way back from Italy to Australia.

I had a book out in the United States, I told him. Viking Press. The publishers had asked me, while I was at least in the Northern Hemisphere, to come over from Italy to the States to do a short book tour. Poldek asked me the name of the book. *Confederates*, I told him, and he said, "My God! Sol, is that not the same book I just read a review in *Newsweek*?"

“How should I know what you read?” asked dyspeptic Sol.

I might have doubted Poldek’s claim to have seen reviews, except that there *had* been a review in *Newsweek*. With the false modesty of the astonished author, I confirmed that it was so. “And now, sir, what is your name again?”

I told him.

“Sol, Sol,” he called to his hapless assistant, parked on the phone. “This guy’s a good guy. Cut ten dollars off that!”

Sol grimaced beneath his mustache, and made a *Don’t blame me!* sort of gesture with the hand not holding the phone.

Poldek confided to me merrily, “Poor Sol. He’s had a rough life.”

I was by now such a cherished fellow in the eyes of Mr. Leopold Page that he called his son Freddy to come over from the wholesale warehouse and meet me. Turning up a few minutes later, Freddy proved to be a muscular American boy, impeccably dressed for business. He was highly courteous, however, and softly spoken, and at one stage, as Sol continued his labors with MasterCard, muttered a few items of business to his father.

“Oh, what does he think?” rumbled Poldek to his son, obviously referring to some client. “If he thinks he can get them for that crazy price, tell him to try Borsa Bella himself. To think I started the son-of-bitch off with a special discount! Now he wants my right arm thrown in.”

“Okay, Pop,” murmured Freddy. “Pop, it’s okay. I’ll talk to him.” It was clear that Freddy had a less pyrotechnic temperament than his father.

Leopold Page turned back to me. “But what am I thinking? You haven’t met my beautiful wife, Misia.”

The way he uttered the word *beautiful* was full of luscious and emphatic diphthongs. *Bee-our-t-e-ful*, with the accent on the *ourt*.

At the phone, Sol gave another doleful shrug. “They say they’ve got to call Australia. There’s been all this Australian credit card fraud, they say.”

“Give me the phone, give me the phone,” insisted Poldek in his jowly basso. “You shouldn’t say that sort of thing in front of a gentleman.”

Sol handed the receiver to him with a gesture that said, *Go ahead, big shot!*

“Hello,” said Poldek Page/Pfefferberg. “What is your name? Barbara. Barbara, darling, you sound like a beautiful woman. I know you have your job. But this man in my store is a gentleman all the way from Australia! Do you want to kill my business, Barbara? I know you don’t. But do I need to put up a sign saying, *Australians, Keep Away!*? Yes, I know you’re doing your best, but my customer has a

appointment to go to. Can you help him along? He's a writer and his schedule's tight. Don't do this to him, Barbara, darling. Make it quick is what I beg. I'll put you back to Sol now, darling. This is Sol."

He handed the phone back to a mournfully gratified Sol. He then moved to me with his hands spread placatingly. "It is a crazy world, Mr. Thomas." He pronounced my name *Tow-mass*.

"So," he said reflectively. "A writer. What a wonderful thing! I was a teacher before the war. A professor in the *gymnasium*! But a writer! Do you know Mr. Irving Stone? Irving Stone came to the store once. We have a good reputation around Beverly Hills."

As Freddy the son stood by, awaiting any aphorism I chose to utter, Poldek took me aside, toward the curtain which led into the store's back room. At the curtain, he still talked.

"Here's what I wanted to pointed out..." he said in a usage he had made his own. "I know a wonderful story. It is not a story for Jews but for everyone. A story of humanity man to man. I tell a the writers I get through here. Sitcom guys. Reporters for the *Los Angeles Times*. I get famous producers or their wives. Did you know Howard Koch? Howard Koch wrote *Casablanca*. A really nice guy. You see, everyone needs a handbag, everyone needs an attaché case. So I tell everyone I know the greatest story of humanity man to man. Some listen—an article there, a news item here. A beautiful young man I know, executive producer of *Simon and Simon* at Paramount...he does what he can. But it's a story for you, Thomas. It's a story for you, I swear."

Every writer hears that exhortation. People without any idea of how long a book takes to write pad on the tale of an amusing uncle or aunt, along with the strange addendum: I could write it if I had nothing else to do. The suggestion is sometimes made tentatively, sometimes with the sincere expectation that the writer will answer, *Wow!* That he will drop to his knees and embrace this jewel as a story. That it will take him a few weeks' leisure to produce the finished manuscript. Issues such as Who will have creative control? Who will get the chief credit on the title page? What will be the royalty share? Are the children of the eccentric aunt likely to sue? What share of subsidiary rights will the author get?—all these issues and more have not occurred to the generous soul who says, "It's a story for you, I swear."

But I had never heard the words come from the lips of a soul so vivid, so picaresquely Eastern European, so endowed with baritone and basso subtleties of voice and inflection, so engorged with life, as Leopold Page/Pfefferberg.

He waited for me to put up resistance, but I did not yet.

He said, "I was saved, and my wife was saved, by a Nazi. I was a Jew imprisoned with Jews. So a Nazi saves me and, more important, saves Misia, my young wife. So although he's a Nazi, to me he is Jesus Christ. Not that he was a saint. He was all-drinking, all-black-marketeering, all-screwing, okay. But he got Misia out of Auschwitz, so to me he is God."

Freddy was listening to this with a minor nod. It was the family story, as central as a book of the Pentateuch.

"Come back into the repair shop, I'll show you."

~~Poldek led me through the curtained door. Freddy followed. We came into a spacious room with an open office at the rear. The light in the room behind the store area was factory-dim. A slim, well-dressed woman in advanced middle age was working at a repair table running lengthwise along the room, covered with expensive handbags with broken clasps or hinges, and with pliers and receipt books.~~

“Misia, darling!” Poldek boomed.

The woman looked up with a faint, even timid frown, like a wife used to having her husband's extravagant enthusiasms imposed on her. Poldek introduced me to her. A beautiful guy, he said I was. I was a writer and he'd been telling me about Schindler. This was the first time I heard that name.

“Oh,” she smiled. “Oskar. Oskar was a god. But Oskar was *Oskar* as well.”

She gave the sort of smile I would get used to from people who had been under Oskar Schindler's control in one or other of his two Second World War camps. The smile of those somewhat baffled by the phenomenon.

“Tell him, Misia!”

“Schindler was a big guy, beautiful suits, the best,” she said. “He was very tall and women loved him. Poldek and I were in his camp.”

“But your husband tells me you were also in Auschwitz?” I asked.

She admitted it with a dolorous nod. “Oh, dear sir, I was. It was an accident. They sent our train the wrong way. When one of the girls reached up to the window of the cattle truck to break off ice, she saw the sun was in the wrong place for us to be going south to Schindler's camp. We were going west to *Oświęcim*. Auschwitz. It broke our hearts!”

Freddy, the good son, said, “But Oskar got you out, Ma.”

Poldek said, “Oskar sent this *bee-our-tee-ful* *Volksdeutsch* secretary off as a bribe to the SS.”

“Poldek,” Misia chided. “That's just what some people say...”

“Darling Misia, Pemper told me!”

“Well, somehow...I don't know...he got us out.”

Just the same, one could tell she had her ideas about it.

“The best journey of my life,” she said. “Out of Auschwitz. Half of us with scarlet fever or typhus. And we turned up at Brinnlitz at dawn, a freezing day, and we see Oskar standing in the courtyard of the factory in a little hat...a...Poldek, help me.”

“In one of those Tyrolean hats, you know, with the feather on the side.”

“Yes, a Tyrolean hat. There were SS all about, but we had eyes just for him. He was beautiful. And he told us there was soup.”

“Otherwise,” said Freddy, “I wouldn’t be here, would I, Ma?”

“Exactly right, Freddy darlink.”

Misia had, like her husband and many Polish-Jewish characters, the tendency to put a *k* on the end of darling. Who was I to talk? My Irish granny, Katie Keneally, had been unable to pronounce a *th* and spoke of *t’roat* (throat) and *cat’edrals*. As for Australians, as a friend would say, our five vowels were *i, i, i, i* and *u*. So Mrs. Misia Page’s verbal mannerism had no low-humor effect on me, emerging as it did from the mouth of a woman who had seen the great necro-manufactory of Auschwitz.

Poldek said, “And I wouldn’t have had my darling Misia. She is so cute this lady. Too clever for me. She was meant to be a surgeon.”

“I’m a surgeon on handbags now,” she reasoned. “And I love it here. Beverly Hills people—some are huffy, you know—but mostly so nice. Excuse me, sir, a second.” She moved to Poldek and muttered a few words to him, about problems with a Mrs. Gerschler’s handbag and how Poldek might have to replace the whole thing.

“She’s got other handbags,” Poldek rumbled.

“No, Poldek,” Misia said softly. “The poor woman has to take the bag she wants to take. She’s been a customer twenty years.”

“I suffered every one of them, ai! Si Gerschler...such a nice guy married to that shiksa. Tell her I’m trying to get a replacement one out of the manufacturers. It’s on the way.”

“Poldek, how can she wear it to the Century City Plaza tonight if it’s in a boat somewhere?” asked small-boned Misia, descending into her own guttural range. “I called Mason’s wholesale. They have one in stock. They’re sending it over to us.”

“Misia, darling, that’s so expensive and a big write-down.”

“We don’t have a choice, Poldek.”

Misia turned to me and said, “Forgive me. Business, you see.” But now it had obviously been settled in the well-practiced way they had.

“Come and see, Thomas, if I may call you,” Poldek boomed. “Come and see what I have here.”

He led me toward two filing cabinets that stood by the desk at the back of the storeroom, and as I went he settled at top voice with Misia and Freddy the issue of a Bel Air woman’s handbag and who would deliver it. Poldek was brought to a pause by the crisis and stopped walking. He sounded

bearishly reasonable. “Misia, I have the gentleman here. He’s a very famous writer. In *Newsweek* I saw his review. If you can call Mason’s and get them to deliver it straight to—”

“Poldek, they only deliver retail. You know that. Where’s Sol?”

“Sol’s on the phone with some MasterCard nebbish. Besides, he’s a lousy driver.”

“I’ll get it there, Pop,” said Freddy. “On the way home.”

“Could you, Freddy darling? You see, Misia, what a fine boy we made?” And Poldek parted his lips and made a kissing noise, first toward Freddy and then toward his wife.

He opened the two filing cabinets, selecting documents—a piece on Oskar Schindler from the *Los Angeles Examiner*, copies of postwar speeches by former Jewish prisoners made in Oskar Schindler’s honor, carbon copies of letters in German, and documents partly yellowed, old enough for the staples in them to have rusted somewhat even in Southern California’s desert climate. There was a notice of Schindler’s death in 1974, and the reburial of his body a month later in Jerusalem. There were also black and white photographs of scenes from a prison camp. I would discover they had been taken by one Raimund Titsch, a World War I veteran with a limp, the brave Austrian manager of a factory in the terrible camp of Plaszów, southeast of the city of Kraków, from which Schindler drew the laborers for his kinder small camp within the city.

As Poldek extracted documentation from this drawer and then another, opening and shutting them with gusto, he went on commentating: “This guy Oskar Schindler was a big master-race sort of guy. Tall and smooth and his suits...the cloth! He drank cognac like water. And I remember, when I met him the first time, he was wearing a huge black and red *Hakenkreuz*, you know, the Nazi pin.”

He riffled through a folder full of photographs and pulled one out, and there was his younger self, very snappy in his four-cornered Polish officer’s cap, a stocky boy in a lieutenant’s uniform, wearing the same confident, half-smiling face that he now directed at me.

“You see, there! I was Phys Ed Professor Magister at the Kościuszko Gymnasium in Podgórze. The girls loved me. I got wounded on the San River and my Catholic orderly saved my life and carried me to a field hospital. I never forget. I send his family food parcels. Then, after Hitler gave half of Poland to Stalin, we officers had to decide to go east or west. I decided not to go east, even though I was Jewish. If I had, I would have been shot by the Russians with all the other poor guys in Katyn Forest.”

Back in Kraków as a prisoner, Poldek had used a German-issued document, which originally had been intended to enable him to visit his soldiers in a military hospital further east, to bamboozle a barely literate German guard. So he slipped out of the railway waiting-room yard and caught a train and went home to his mother. “And here’s this big German guy, handsome, and he’s discussing with her that she’ll decorate his apartment at Straszewskiego Street. That’s how I first met this Oskar Schindler.”

By now, Sol had appeared in the doorway of the repair room.

“They came through. The card turns out okay.”

“Thanks God,” said Poldek. “Now, would you like the briefcase wrapped, sir?”

“No,” I said. “I’ll carry it with me.”

Leopold turned to his patient son. “Stay with the store a while, Freddy. I’m taking Mr. Thomas to make some photostatic copies.”

“Where will you get photocopies this time of day on a Saturday, Pop?”

“The Glendale Savings. They owe me.”

“Wow!” said Freddy, shaking his head.

I said good-bye to Misia Page/Pfefferberg, and we reemerged into the store. On Poldek’s instructions, I left my briefcase there for the time being. I could carry the copies we got made back to the hotel in it. I said good-bye to Sol and Freddy.

We crossed the road and made for the Glendale Savings Bank on the corner of Wilshire. Arriving there at a brisk pace, we queued a time in front of the Enquiries and Transactions counter of the busy Saturday noon bank. At last we reached the counter and a young man attended to us. He called my friend “Mr. Page,” confirming that Poldek was indeed well-known at this branch. Poldek handed over his considerable wad of papers. “I need photostatic copies of these, please.”

The young man’s eyes looked blank. “Mr. Page, you can see it’s a very, very busy time.”

Leopold did what he would always do when thwarted. He stepped back and raised his hands in a gesture invoking forces greater than this mere transaction.

“So I have lunch with the president every second Tuesday, and you don’t have time to give me a few lousy photostatic copies? Is this what you want me to tell your boss? This is an important gentleman.” He pointed to me. I had begun the morning as a furtive shopper and was now the center of the gaze of many customers. “He is a famous writer from Australia.” Was there such a thing? I looked around in discomfort. “He is here for only one day and a half. So we’ll wait.” It was clear to the young man that the copies needed, under the pressure of history, to be done *now*.

Cowed by Leopold’s portentousness, he said it might take a little time. As I watched the clerk pass on the problem to two women even younger and more flustered than himself, Poldek stepped aside with me to await the copies, and filled me in on more of his history.

Misia had been deported from Lodz in 1939 with her mother, Dr. Maria Lewinson, founder of one of the first institutes of medical cosmetology in Poland. Misia herself had earlier been a medical student in Vienna, and had seen the Führer’s triumphal entry into Vienna, and came home to Poland when war began.

“She saw the son-of-bitch, and then he ruined her life. This is how I come to meet a beautiful girl like Misia. And smart. I mean, we were from a good family, my sister and me. But my God, Misia’s parents had brains you wouldn’t believe. The Nazis deported her mother to Belzec death camp in 1944

and we never saw her again. Why? She had a brain and she was a Jew!

He had longed for Misia, he said, but another Jewish ghetto dweller and former officer had a prior interest, and an officer and a gentleman did not try to court a comrade's girl. But the other man relinquished her and Poldek set out to the Lewinsons' little room in the ghetto to persuade her mother who considered him a braggart. It took many hours of relentless talk. And then her mother was shipped away and never seen again, and Misia married him.

I asked how he had come to America. After Schindler's factory camp had been liberated by a Russian officer riding a donkey, he and Misia came west into a displaced persons' camp, and he worked for the United Nations Rehabilitation and Repatriation Agency. He had a uniform given him by an American officer, and indeed one could imagine some officer surveying the lines of edgy, fearful former prisoners and seeing something undefeated in Poldek, and putting him into uniform.

Misia and Poldek, having survived and given Schindler the credit for that survival, came to the United States in 1947 and rented a tiny room on Long Island which they shared with other survivors. Poldek saw another Polish refugee repairing handbags in a little temporary store on the pavement. He got talking to the man, and watched him at work, and went home to tell Misia they were now in the handbag business. They did well enough in New York to move out to California in the 1950s, to start importing and to own a few outlets, like the one I had wandered into. That was it. Poldek moved like a man who believed luck was on his side.

The young bank clerk had returned to the counter with the photocopies. He waved to Poldek that they were ready. "I'll pay for these," I offered.

Poldek said, "Are you mad, Thomas? I give this bank all my good business." He accepted the copies from the young man and took his hand for a brief, passionate clasp, as if they had both been into battle together. He waved to the fraught female juniors who were catching their breath further back in the office. "Young ladies! (Aren't they beautiful Beverly Hills girls, Thomas?) Thank you, darlings."

I went back to my cool hotel room with the pile of photocopied papers in my new briefcase. I switched the television to that day's Notre Dame game—I don't remember who they were playing, but I did know vaguely that my grandfather's brother, a great-uncle who settled in Brooklyn, had a son named Patrick Keneally who had gone to Notre Dame on a football scholarship, and this was enough to imbue my viewing with a tinge of partisanship.

With the sound low, I began reading the papers Poldek had given me. It was instantly engrossing material. There was a speech that one of Oskar Schindler's Jewish accountants, Itzhak Stern, made in Tel Aviv in 1963, about his experience working with, as well as for, this Nazi who had been a factory owner. There were a number of other such speeches translated into English from Schindler survivors living all over Europe and the United States. Then there was a series of affidavit-like testimonies from a range of former prisoners, Poldek and Misia among them.

For those who do not know the tale of Schindler, it is briefly stated thus. A young, hulking, geni-

but not quite respectable ethnic German came to Kraków in 1939 from his native Sudetenland, a part of northern Czechoslovakia where many other ethnic Germans lived. He looked around for business opportunities in Kraków and acquired a factory which he named Deutsche Email-Fabrik (DEF), German Enamel Factory. Its nickname among the prisoners who would work there would be Emalia.

As well as sincerely desiring wealth, Schindler was an agent of Abwehr, German military intelligence, an arrangement which saved him from conscription. At DEF he manufactured both for the war effort and for the black market, and developed a symbiotic relationship with his Jews. But to acquire labor, he had to deal with the commandant of the chief labor camp of the area, Plaszów. This is, he bought his labor, at a cheap price, from the SS.

Plaszów concentration camp, on the northern edge of Kraków, was run by the SS man Amon Göeth. Amon was a man very like Oskar, it seemed; of like age, a drinker, a womanizer. In different circumstances, they might have seemed the same sort of man—unsatisfactory husbands, shiftless businessmen. The resemblance stopped there, however, for Amon was a killer who pot-shot Plaszów prisoners with a sniper rifle from his balcony. Where Amon was a figure of terror in the dreams of all the people whose memoirs I read that Saturday afternoon, Oskar was the improbable savior. His motives were hard to define, and there were ambiguities to be teased out. But his prisoners didn't care. And neither did I.

Then when the Russian advance of 1944 led to the closure of Plaszów and DEF, Oskar went to the trouble of founding another camp, near his hometown in Moravia, in northeastern Czechoslovakia where his own black-marketeering and the morally ambiguous deliverance of Jewish prisoners continued.

And so I came across the typewritten list of workers for Schindler's camp in Moravia, Zwangsarbeitslager Brinnlitz—that is, Forced Labor Camp Brinnlitz, which was theoretically under the control of a mother camp, the infamous Gross-Rosen. Searching through the list, I came upon the names of Poldek and Misia Pfefferberg. Misia, prisoner 195 on the list, was recorded as having been born in 1920 and was marked down as a *Metallarbeiterin*, a metalworker, though she had never worked with metal until then. Leopold Pfefferberg, another "Ju. Po."—Polish Jew—was number 17 and a *Schweisser*—welder. He had not used a welding iron until then, but was confident he could learn. This document, seen by the television glow, representing an acre of safety in the midst of the huge square mileage of horror that was the Holocaust, would achieve an international renown through Schindler's list. The list was life, I would one day write and actor Ben Kingsley would say, and around it lay the pit.

I found as well a translation of Schindler's speech, taken down by two of his secretaries, made on the last day of the war, addressed to prisoners and to the SS garrison of the camp at Brinnlitz. The sentiments expressed by the tall Herr Direktor of the camp in this speech were extraordinary, with Schindler telling his former laborers that they would now inherit the shattered world, and at the same time pleading with the SS guards who had been ordered to exterminate the camp to depart in honor and not with blood on their hands. Poldek would tell me that while Schindler gave this finely balanced speech, the hairs were standing up on people's necks. Schindler was playing poker against the SS garrison of his factory-camp, and all the prisoners knew it. But it had worked. The SS drifted away

and left the factory and compound of Brinnlitz, and fled west toward the Americans in Austria.

From these documents concerning Herr Oskar Schindler, I gathered he was a ruined hedonist Catholic. As a former seminarian, and a struggling Catholic myself, I had some time for fellows like Oskar, and little for the over-formal, over-legalistic mediators of Christ who too often asserted that they stood for the real thing. Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz, had been a good practicing Catholic by legalistic standards and made a lengthy confession before his death. Oskar did not. But Höss was a devourer of souls and bodies, and Oskar, the reportedly lecherous bad husband, was the deliverer. Oskar showed that virtue emerged where it would, and the sort of churchy observance that bishops called for was not a guarantee of genuine humanity in a person. Catholic legalism on matters of sexuality evoked sexual neuroses in some men. In others, it produced a dancing-on-the-lip-of-heaven exuberance. Schindler was obviously of the latter type, if one can believe the testimonies of all the prisoners who had known him.

Among the testimonies which Poldek had given me, one woman prisoner uttered a sentiment I would later hear from many of his women prisoners. “He was so good-looking and so well-dressed and he looked you in the eye, and I think if he had asked me for favors, I could not resist. But why should he ask for favors from me, who weighed forty-five kilos, when he was surrounded by beautiful German and Polish girls in the pink of health?”

Some people have always been troubled by Oskar’s ambiguity. To me it was from the start the whole point of the tale. Paradox is beloved of novelists. The despised savior, the humane whore, the selfish man suddenly munificent, the wise fool, and the cowardly hero. Most writers spend their lives writing about unexpected malice in the supposedly virtuous, and unexpected virtue in the supposedly sinful. On top of that, the times in which Oskar operated were morally inverted, and so was language. Plain terms—*health action*, *special treatment*, *final solution*, *Aryanization*, *resettlement*, *blood protection*—often meant the opposite of what they implied.

But I doubted I could write a book on this. I was not a Jew. I was a kind of European, but from the rim of the earth. *Après nous les penguins*, I sometimes said in bastard French and as a joke. My father had served in the Middle East in World War II and had sent back Nazi memorabilia—Afrika Korps *Feldwebel* stripes, Very pistols marked with the swastika, a Luger holster similarly stamped—just like the ones the Nazis wore in the Saturday afternoon pictures in the Vogue Cinema in Homebush, Australia.

I remembered, too, the Saturday evening when Aunt Annie minded my little brother, and my mother and I went to the show at the Vogue—at the time, this was the most sophisticated activity possible according to my horizons. It was May 1945, my father was still away and, as far as we knew, about to be shipped to some location in the Pacific’s ongoing war. And there on the screen was the newsreel footage of Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, liberated by the horrified Allies. There were the corpses thin and rigid as planks, stacked like so much timber. I could remember the combined shock of the women of that western suburb of war-remote Sydney. The question that hung in the air was: How could anyone have gone to such extremes?

All this was the barest of qualifications to write the book. But then the wonderful aspect of the material, which I saw at once, was that Oskar and his Jews reduced the Holocaust to a

understandable, almost personal scale. He had been there, in Kraków and then in Brinnlitz, for every stage of the process—for the confiscation of Jewish property and business, for the creation and liquidation of the ghettos, and the building of labor camps, *Arbeitslager*, to contain labor forces. The *Vernichtungslager*, the destruction camps, had cast their shadow over him and, for a time, subsumed three hundred of his women. It was apparent at once that if one looked at the Holocaust using Oskar as a lens, one got an idea of the whole machinery at work on an intimate scale and, of course, of how the machinery made its impact on people with names and faces. A terrible thing to say—but one was not defeated by sheer numbers.

I would find out very soon the reason Leopold Pfefferberg possessed these documents, and many others as well. As he had told me, I had not been the only customer to the Handbag Studio to be fraternally ambushed. In the early 1960s, when Oskar was still alive, the wife of a well-known and controversial movie producer named Martin Gosch had brought her handbag into Leopold's store for repair. No doubt with much loving pouting of lips and praise of Mrs. Gosch's beauty, and with the handbag as hostage, Poldek had insisted that she set up an appointment for him with her husband. For a while Mrs. Gosch found this eminently refusable, but Poldek's powers of perseverance and undentable charm wore her down. Poldek told me that when Martin Gosch invited him to MGM Studios for an interview, the producer had at first chided him for being so importunate with his wife.

"You must forgive me," said Poldek, "but I am bringing you the greatest story of humanity man has ever known."

Martin Gosch had recently tried to make a film about Lucky Luciano, the mobster, but the Mafia had put pressure on the project, and the research was ultimately transmuted into a bestseller, *The Last Testament of Lucky Luciano*, which would be published in 1974. Gosch had also improbably produced *Abbott and Costello in Hollywood* (1945), and had been a Broadway producer in the 1940s. Hearing now the Schindler tale from the lips of a prisoner, Poldek, Gosch was enthused and got together a team including the screenwriter Leopold had mentioned earlier, Howard Koch, famous for his involvement in the screenplay of *Casablanca* and for having been on the black list of presumed communists during the McCarthy era. In a long life, he would write some twenty-five feature films which would be produced, as well as his ultimately unproduced screenplay of Schindler. His best-known credits included *Sergeant York*, *Rhapsody in Blue*, *The Greengage Summer*, *The War Lover*, *The Fox*, and the telemovie of Orson Welles's famous broadcast about Martian invasion, *The Night that Panicked America*.

Gosch and Koch began to interview Schindler survivors around the Los Angeles area. Both of them also wanted to meet Oskar, who at the time was living in Frankfurt, largely broke except for contributions from his former prisoners. I would later see in Poldek's storeroom archives a photograph of Gosch, Koch, Poldek and big, bearlike Oskar, sitting around a table, conferring. Oskar's small Frankfurt cement works, funded by the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish charity based in New York, had just gone bankrupt in the severe winter of 1962–63, so the idea of film rights must have seemed like rescue. Gosch, Koch and MGM decided that they should ultimately take Poldek and Oskar to meet and gather research from Schindler survivors in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Poldek became de facto archivist for all that was gathered, for every testimony and every document he could corral. For example, the photographs of Plaszów taken by Raimund Titsch, manager of the

Madritsch uniform factory inside that horrible camp, were bought by Poldek, in his job of acquiring an archive, in Vienna. The brave Titsch, even eighteen years after the war, was still very nervous of repercussions should it be learned he had kept a secret photo archive. Then Schindler himself supplied documents for Leopold's filing cabinets. More documents were ultimately collected in Israel the year, 1963, when Oskar went back to see many of his former prisoners for the first time since the war.

In Israel, he was given an astounding reception. Itzhak Stern made a speech in which he detailed his intimately perceived version of Oskar's heroism. Hundreds of Oskar survivors gave their testimony to Yad Vashem, the Memorial and Library of the Holocaust located in Jerusalem, and he was asked to plant his own cedar tree among those dedicated to the small number of rescuers in the Avenue of the Righteous outside Yad Vashem. Among the documents was a picture of Schindler, bulky in a suit, planting his tree. And there were other rewards. A Romanian restaurant near the Tel Aviv waterfront laid on free food and Martell brandy for Oskar.

Poldek had acquired all the associated speeches, official and extemporaneous, given by former prisoners during Oskar's Israeli travels. All the 1963 ceremonies, and the pictures taken by survivors and by Oskar, themselves added to Poldek's ultimate archive, the one I was encountering seventeen years later in his repair shop.

Eventually MGM bought the rights to Oskar's story for \$50,000. In the reasonable hope of prolonging Oskar's life, or imposing a saner shape on it, Martin Gosch had written to Schindler, "I hope the fact that you have taken an apartment in Frankfurt does not mean that you are carrying on with too many women. (One is enough! Remember, dear friend, we are no longer as young as we used to be!)"

Poldek would later claim he made a paternalistic decision to give \$20,000 from Oskar's film deal to Mrs. Emilie Schindler, whom Oskar had left and who was living on limited funds in Buenos Aires, and to send it to her—I have no reason to believe he was lying—and that he gave the remaining \$30,000 to Oskar. Poldek and the Gosches flew to Paris from Los Angeles, Oskar flew from Frankfurt, and the three all met in the Hotel George V.

Poldek's version of what happened then was credible only if one had met Poldek and had at least heard tales of Schindler. Here, in 1963, when \$30,000 could support even a halfway frugal middle-class family for six years, a sane, single man might have taken the weekend to decide what to do with such a windfall. And, unlike Glendale Savings, the Paris banks closed at midday anyway, and Poldek did not meet up with Oskar till the afternoon. Poldek and his former Herr Direktor/captor, Oskar Schindler, began to track down the names of bank managers. They found one in Clichy. They turned up at the poor man's door as he was preparing for his weekend. They asked him to reopen his bank and cash their check. Of course, his immediate response was no. According to Poldek, they were so persuasive that the man left his suburban home and came into central Paris, and did as they asked. And then Poldek, the former prisoner-cum-welder, and Schindler, the former Herr Direktor of Zwangsarbeitslager Brinnlitz, went swinging down the Champs, Schindler in an inflammatory, transformed monetary condition.

He paused before a *chocolatier's* store, where there was an enormous heart-shaped box of chocolates in the window. This was, clearly, not a box for sale—it was the *chocolatier's* trademark.

But Schindler, with characteristic exuberance, could not see the distinction. “I would like to get this for dear Mrs. Gosch,” he said.

Even for Poldek, this was too much. “You don’t have to, Oskar. This is a box for display. You don’t have to get this for anyone. It was enough what you did in 1944.”

But Schindler entered the shop and, to the bemusement of its employees, demanded the enormous heart-shaped box in the window. He paid for it, and took it back to Mrs. Gosch in her hotel. Mrs. Gosch did not know what to do with this avalanche of chocolates. But since Oskar was delighted with the gift, so must she appear to be.

The haul of documents Leopold had put together for MGM were what preoccupied and fascinated me that Saturday afternoon in Beverly Hills. For the film had never been made by MGM, and the tale was thus still unknown to the wider world. I had not, as some readers would later kindly see it, fought my way to the center of a maze to emerge with one of the essential tales of an awful century. I had stumbled upon it. I had not grasped it. It had grasped me.

About five o’clock, Poldek called to invite me out with Misia and himself, and with Schindler’s lawyer Irving Glovin, for dinner that night. I agreed, a little nervously, like someone who was being moved too fast. I told him the material was fascinating but gave him the reasons I couldn’t write it. Even as I spoke there was a secret recklessness in me which was open to attempting the thing, for my quite reasonable timidity sat cheek by jowl with my excitement at the challenge and richness of the tale. I had already drawn up a plan of how the book could be achieved. I had just recently been talking to a commissioning senior editor at Simon & Schuster, Nan Talese, who had expressed a desire to publish something by me. I thought that I could approach her, perhaps. It would require a considerable amount to pay for a research journey, for the events of the story had occurred in Poland and the survivors lived in Germany, Austria, the United States, Australia, Argentina and Israel.

Poldek collected me at about 6:30 p.m. in his elegant two-door Cadillac. He was the sort of patriot who always bought American if he could. We were going to dine at a French restaurant in Brentwood.

Unlike Poldek, Glovin proved to have a solemn juridical air, but his wife, Jeannie, a former showbiz singer and dancer, bubbled with a goodwill characteristic of stage people. Glovin had become Schindler’s lawyer because he was Poldek’s, but unlike Leopold, as the dinner proceeded, with fault-finding French waiters from Central America fussing over Jeannie, who loved it, and Misia, who didn’t, Glovin emerged as a determined guardian of the Schindler shrine. There was no doubt he had known and revered Schindler. But while Poldek’s Schindler seemed a man in the round, and thus credible, Glovin’s seemed a more two-dimensional creature, and Glovin became uneasy with talk about what he loved: Schindler’s ambiguity and rascality—the black-marketeering of the produce from his first camp in Poland, his womanizing, the heroic-scale black-marketeering that maintained the operation of the camp at Brinnlitz. He was taken, above all, by Oskar’s altruism, and thought it the dominant and

only worthwhile aspect of the Schindler story, in the sense that if we could somehow distill what moved Oskar to behave with such goodwill, if we could find the formula for it, we might be able to inoculate the entire human race. Even though he had not been one of Schindler's prisoners, it at once became apparent that he considered himself one of the few legal owners of the story.

Thus it was obvious, as we ate the good food and sipped the good wine, that some financial arrangement would need to be made, some consideration given by me for rights. Because of a strange impetuosity in my temperament, this made me more determined to write the tale, not less. The issue seemed too huge, the story too fascinating, to argue about money. We were discussing the history of the Holocaust, the most fantastical massacre of history, when death was reduced by technology to a manufactured item. I knew that between them, Glovin and Poldek had started the Schindler Foundation, to promote universal tolerance in Oskar's name and to endow a chair and fund research studies into altruism. Whatever its merits, it was a good-faith enterprise. I believed that then and believe it now.

Poldek picked up the bill with cries of, "When we come to Sydney, *then* you can pay!" But for all his assumption that he could claim legal ownership of a story which was in the public arena, Glovin would also prove generous socially.

Already, after less than one day's acquaintance, it was apparent that Leopold had invested much of himself, and his time and cash, promoting Oskar's name and, during Oskar's life, his wellbeing. Yet with Glovin I was convinced that if I told him what was obvious—that he might not be in a position to claim ownership of all aspects of Oskar's life—he would take legal action to defend his position, and I would dissuade Poldek from cooperation. As far as I was concerned, Poldek was entitled to some of the royalties, which I am now even more than then convinced he deserved. After all, he knew where all the contacts were. I was less willing to make a similar arrangement with Glovin, but knew that fighting him legally would be difficult and dispiriting. I was a writer. I did books, not lawsuits.

A wise man might have backed away from the idea of writing the book. I could generally find a viable excuse to avoid writing books I did not want to write anyhow, and that strategy had failed me only once—when Sir William Collins, chairman of the Collins publishing company, persuaded me to write a book to go with a miniseries of which one of the writers was the prolific, restless and brilliant Anthony Burgess. I did the job dutifully, but hated it earnestly. Ironically, it got better reviews than some of my more passionately wrought works.

But if I found a story that besotted me and made me rave to others about its details, and feel the profound determinism about the need to tell it to other humans, that impulse which is part of the writer's temperament or, some would say, neurosis, then I could be reckless and philosophic about rights and royalties.

In October 1980 when I met Leopold, I had been a writer for some seventeen years or so. I had been a late entrant in life's hectic traffic, having spent six years in a Sydney seminary studying to be a priest. Having left after what I now realize was a crack-up, I was a lost soul teaching high school in Sydney's eastern suburbs, living with my parents in Homebush, and writing during breaks from school. I was also studying law too, and would always be something of a lawyer manqué, and as if to compensate for my ineptitude and shyness with women, I coached rugby.

In a room I shared with my brother, a medical student, I had written my first book during the summer school holidays of 1962–63. It was a time when Australians still felt a certain post-colonial sense of cultural unworthiness and yearning. The arts didn't seem to belong much to us. I knew no writers. If there were any, why would they hang around Homebush? Unknown to me, a number of our heroic writers, including Dal Stivens and Morris West, were at the time establishing the Australian Society of Authors, but that was a poorly reported event.

We Australians didn't think of ourselves as viable practitioners of writing, for the arts were something which happened elsewhere, in western Europe. Nearly all the literature I had read came from elsewhere, from landscapes foreign to me, from seasons which were the reverse of seasons in Australia. The term "Australian literature" would—if uttered in London by a comedian like Barry Humphries/Dame Edna—draw fits of hilarity from a British audience, and would be considered amusing even in Australia, like the idea of a dog riding a bicycle. However, I finished my summer novel in April 1963. These things can be done while holding down a job if a person is desperate enough, and I was desperate to find a place in the world I had once renounced to enter the seminary and was now anxious to re-find.

I got the name of a publisher's office in London from the copyright page of a book, bundled up the manuscript as typed for me by a young woman who lived on the corner of our block in Loftus Crescent, Homebush, and posted it off. Ten weeks later I was called out of teaching a class to take a message from my mother. A telegram had arrived in Homebush from London with the startling news that the publisher wanted to publish me. He (in those days publishers were always *he*), Sir Cedric Flower of Cassell's, was willing to give me £150 sterling.

In my post-colonial naivety, this was like the finger of the deity emerging from clouds and yelling "You!" My more urbane British contemporaries would not have seen their own experience of getting published by a trade publisher quite in the same terms—they came from cultivated backgrounds where people did them the favor of telling them that it was impossible to make a living as a writer. Beneath the great dome of the Commonwealth of Australia's then apathy toward writing, I had no one to save me from myself, and I clung to the idea that I would write and survive. This novel was to be my deck chair from the *Titanic*, and I never doubted that, clinging to it, I would be washed to unimaginable places.

So the “profession” of the novel (£150 and all) was my deliverance from a clumsy start in life. The first contract would give me the confidence to reenter the normal, squalling, striving, aspiring world. Among other manifestations of liberation, I would take out and ultimately propose marriage to a splendid and exceptionally beautiful nurse from the Sydney suburb of Leichhardt, who generously considered that my intention to become a full-time novelist made perfect sense. Her name was Judith Martin, and I met her when she was nursing my mother in Lewisham Hospital after surgery. It astonished me that she harbored a preference for me over the doctors and bookmakers who generally took her out. She later said my pattern was superior.

We were married in 1965, and in our small house in West Ryde, between Sydney and Parramatta, I began to keep writer’s hours, eight to one, two to five, and struggled with the reality that in a suburban house at eight on a weekday morning, writing could seem stupendously difficult, like making a model of Buckingham Palace out of playing cards. I was fortunate that, because of my parents’ influence, I was—in the term smart people would ultimately adopt—“task-driven.” Now that I was a novelist, I could not face the ignominy of failing to produce novels.

There were a number of factors which enforced discipline on me. One was that the Australian federal government gave me four thousand dollars, then a living wage, as a literary grant for 1966. Coming from a background where men and women viewed industriousness as a prime marker of the good existence, I saw that money as coming from taxpayers in hard-pressed homes, and believed a sacred trust had been imposed upon me. It demanded that I consider my new experiment in life as a profession, a daily commitment from me. I must confess I have always tended to have an industrious approach to writing. I knew that if I was to survive I would need to be published as widely as I could manage—a pittance from England, a pittance from America, a pittance from Australia, all adding up to a living.

By 1980, when I met Poldek, I was in mid-career. Some of the early bloom had gone off my reputation at least in the eyes of Australian commentators. By the time I went into Poldek’s store, I had two adolescent daughters, Margaret and Jane, and I lived with them and my wife in a house above a beach north of Sydney. I had had the ill grace to forget I had still been fortunate beyond belief—fortunate in the early generosity and openness of readers and, as any writer will tell you, fortunate in survival. I suffered the self-absorbed and symptomatic discontent and restlessness of the writer, which were no doubt more wearing on my family than on me. But we were happy and we had come through. And I had a tale before you which you believed, with whatever degree of self-delusion, that the world needed to hear, was a splendid, euphoric, ever-renewing experience.

By the time I walked into Poldek’s store I had, through being published in the United Kingdom and the United States, something of what was called “a cult following,” and of course, ambition stirred. I was burned and I selfishly yearned for more. Only as an older writer would I ask, “Who, what god, what destiny, ever guaranteed that someone who came from Homebush on the earth’s left buttock would grow up to write something people tolerated reading?” I considered the arrival of Schindler’s tale to be part of the sequence of that good fortune. And since I tried to write more or less a book a year, I was now gripped by the yearly euphoria that people who did more useful, routine, albeit more profitable, jobs never had the chance to feel. However, by the light of a gritty, glaring dawn the morning after I bought my briefcase from Poldek, doubt struck me. How could I consider myself qualified for this subject matter?

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