

A Film About Truth: Schindler's List

by Erwin Leiser

No documentation and no feature film can ever show the full truth about Auschwitz, about the mass murder of the Jews. Nevertheless, Hollywood director Steven Spielberg had the courage to direct a film epic about the Holocaust. A true story, but not a documentary film. The central figure is Oskar Schindler, war profiteer and rescuer of 1,200 Jews.

SOMETHING the majority of right-wing extremist groups have in common is the fact that they describe all reports on the mass murder of the Jews in the Third Reich as atrocity propaganda. They claim that the Holocaust did not take place, and that there were no gas chambers in the concentration camps. Steven Spielberg's film about Oskar Schindler, who saved 1,200 Jews from deportation to the extermination camps, has to be judged against this background. The presence of the President of the Federal Republic at its German Premiere demonstrates just how important this film is considered to be for the "process of grieving" in Germany.

The fact that the hero of the film is "a good German" has not been availed of by German commentators as an alibi. Spielberg, an American Jew, is thought very highly of for daring in his film about the Holocaust to focus on a Sudeten German, whom he himself characterises as a "Naz and war profiteer".

One of the many merits of the film is that it presents the ambiguities in Schindler's personality without glossing over anything. Spielberg tells Schindler's story because it is the story of a transformation, a metamorphosis. This adventurer, who at the outbreak of the war went to Poland to earn a lot of money, achieving this goal with the help of cheap Jewish labour, turns into a humane man, who sacrifices his wealth to bribe the sadistic workcamp commander, and buys back all those Jews whose names he had managed to draw up on a list with the help of his Jewish bookkeeper Itzhak Stern.

Steven Spielberg



To quote Spielberg on the message behind the film: "It is not necessary to be an Oskar Schindler, or a saint, to save the world." Had there been more Germans like him, 6 million Jews need not have died. Schindler is an example of the fact that even in an inhuman epoch a person can remain human. The fact that the film "Schindler's List" concentrates on the rescue of the "Schindler Jews" makes the tragedy bearable. This does not mean, however, that Spielberg is trying to play down the atrociousness of the Holocaust.

No film, be it a feature film or a documentary, can show the truth about the cynical mass murder of the Jews. But "Schindler's List" proves that one thing is possible: to tell people about it" (Der Spiegel). Claude Lanzmann had consistently done without historical photographic or film material when making his film "Shoah". Spielberg is familiar with this film, of course, and with all the relevant documentary films. And in order to communicate an impression of the Holocaust to an international audience he reproduces scenes from Alain Resnais' "Night and Fog" and from my



"Whoever saves a life saves the world." This quotation from the Talmud is engraved on the ring which Schindler received from the Jews he saved. For Spielberg, Schindler is an example of someone who remains human in an inhuman time

"Schindler's List" was filmed with a hand camera. Some of the scenes in the film could have been unbearable to look at if Spielberg had not filmed the people from close-up and with great sensitivity. There is something surprisingly calm and tender even about the merciless scenes which he neither spares himself nor us. For Spielberg one important feature of the film is its topicality, at a time when there would again seem to be parallels. At the beginning of March 1994, the Emnid Institute published a survey commissioned by the American Jewish Committee showing that one fifth of the 1,400 Germans questioned had a negative attitude towards Jews. One third of them believed that a line should finally be drawn under the past. 22% would prefer to have no Jews living in their neighbourhood. Four years ago the figure was 14%. (59% said it made no difference to them if they had Jewish neighbours, 12% would welcome it).



The real Schindler (large photo) and his film interpreter Liam Neeson. He was no saint, just someone who wanted to profit from the war, but who in the end bribed the SS with all his money to save people

When asked about the "revisionist" view of history which denies the Holocaust Spielberg said: "When someone from one of these right-wing extremist groups claims that eye-witness reports about Auschwitz are irrelevant as they have no bearing on the

truth, I replay that it is not the witnesses who are telling lies but that person, and that most other people know this." However, Spielberg has had to acknowledge just how little his American public learns about the Holocaust from history books. He wants to provide information, above all for the young, and he has already succeeded in making the Holocaust a topic of discussion



again wherever the film is shown. Frank Schirrmacher wrote in the "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung": "Spielberg demonstrates that art can have an enlightening effect and can exert an astonishing power, even at a time when our senses are being blunted by images." Schirrmacher believes that a film such as this one could only have been made in America, "perhaps because European artists have lost faith in films". But it is no mere chance that this is not a German-made film. No matter how Germans approach the theme of the Holocaust, they are always burdened by a demand which is not made of non-German authors or film directors: They have to "come to terms" with the past of their own people, get involved in an inner-German discussion. A German film director would just not have the distance which an artist requires so as to achieve clarity of vision. —Courtesy: Deutschland

The film director and author ERWIN LEISER was born in Berlin in 1923 and left Germany after the pogrom of November 1938. Leiser's first documentary film "Mein Kampf" was made in Sweden in 1960. He now lives in Zurich.

Love and Life

by G A Momin

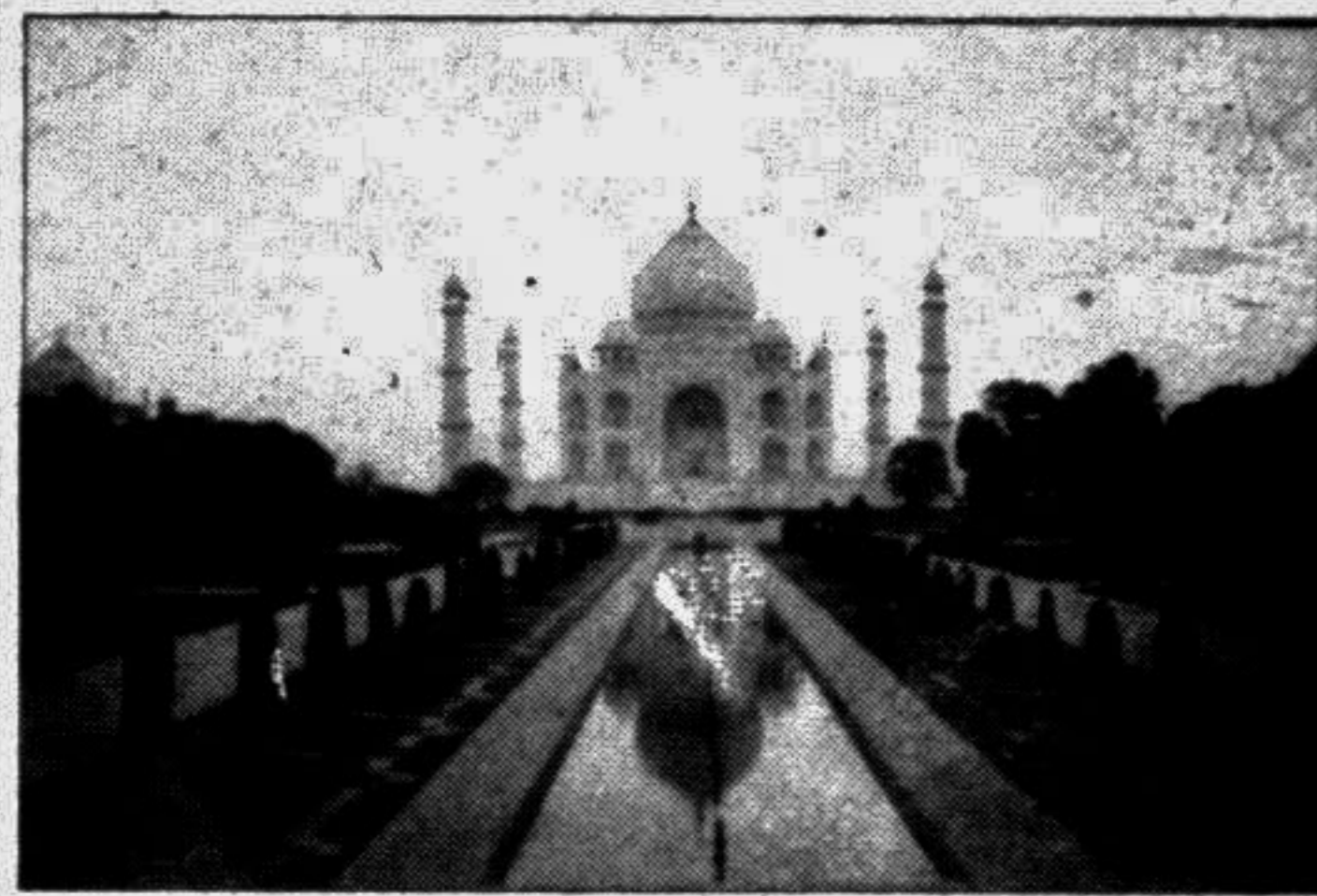
Looking out of window in the morning, I caught glimpses of a cluster of freshly blossomed lilies. All smiling in the soft light of the dawn.

Just out of my office in the afternoon. I was accosted by an old man with grey hair and bushy eyes. From the sling hanging across his shoulder he picked up a pack of cheap writing pens that he was vending. I bought one, not needed at the moment though. He gave me the look of a mariner in the high seas and broke in shy smiles that mutely said: "Thank you, thank you indeed."

It got nearly dark when my vehicle stopped at a cross-road facing a red light signal. A tiny girl in frayed clothes came running to me whining softly "Sir a couple of garlands for one taka only for one taka only sir..." The girl went on. I bought a couple of them. And the girl stepped back offering me a gift of serene smiles

In the evening you stood beside me under the open starry sky your smiles intoxicating the air all around rivalling the queently moon raining down shiny smiles from above.

In silence I invited all the smiles of the day who all came rushing in, and encircled me hand in hand, dancing and singing wildly and wistfully to them I asked softly "What number are you dancing?" They stopped for a while and re-joined the medley replaying 'call it life, might as well call it love and life'.



The Tajmahal

by Golam Nabi

An Edifice imposing. Built by a spouse candid, Stands stolid To tell a tale of royal love fervid. A tomb — an epitome of tears — Relives the love of a spouse royal For his consort regal. The epitaph in marble Stands as a cenotaph of spleen door regal. A monument built with toils and tears. Spanning years To commemorate love connubial On our earth ephemeral! The fount wells up tears for the crushed and the smother'd The wind breathes all breath anguish'd — a requiem for the dead anonymous. The emperor built it with intention innocuous.

Love Reborn

by Nazma Yeasmeen Haque

HE went to not so far off a country for a surgery that was long overdue. She accompanied him urged by her inner self although moaning over the fact that she hardly remembers occasions when they travelled together for real holidays. Nevertheless, the thought of being by his side in times of need kindled her emotions. A mixed feeling brought about by uncertainty in more than one way in her mind throughout the journey and at the hospital.

While recuperating but still required to be in weekly care of the doctor for quite some time, they lodged themselves in a hotel. Having known the reason for staying in the hotel, they were allocated a room in a quiet corner of special floor, special because it contained almost all the amenities of the hotel including a swimming pool with its adjoining areas set beautifully in a marvellous surrounding. Imagine rows of fir trees in a rectangular shape swaying in fresh air on the sixth floor of a building! It was serene and exceptionally refreshing. It seemed as if nature was very generous in pouring out gifts from its inexhaustible store. Gazing at the clear, bluish water of the pool alone was so soothing. Nature was close to them, they were closer to one another. They felt warmth in the closeness of companionship that was almost forgotten, if not lost altogether. At least, it was overshadowed by the daily chores, duties and responsibilities that turned life into a sort of mechanical existence. Priority of life was confused and therefore, displaced so much so that living style was taken for granted. Far too many trees enveloped life not noticing the wood, the life itself.

Passing quiet moments and talking softly, they came as close as they were ages ago. If felt new feelings that seemed to have faded away did not ac-



One can assume that probably Dr Hilali had in mind to minority communities living in the newly-created state of Pakistan when he wrote the essay. Preceding and following the partition of India, millions of people lost their lives, home and country as a result of the terrible communal riots which swept across the sub-continent. Naturally, the minority communities in Pakistan were subjected to an agonizing sense of uncertainty. One of the purposes which prompted Dr Hilali to write this long essay was, perhaps, to remained both the rulers and Muslim citizens of how the Prophet (peace be upon him) and caliphs handled the question of non-Muslim communities during their rule. He quoted profusely from the holy Quran and the sayings of our Prophet (peace be upon him) and the caliphs how the non-Muslims should be treated. Dr Hilali quoted from the holy Quran: "Those who believe and those who are Jews and the Sabians and the Christians who ever believes in God and the Last Day and does good works — they shall have no fear nor shall they grieve" (v: 69).

Following the holy Quran the Prophet (peace be upon him) set examples as to how the non-Muslims should be

mind and his instinctive love for man. Owing to short space I shall discuss briefly another long essay of Dr Hilali titled "Islamic Attitude towards Non-Muslims" published in 1952.

Most of the essays included in these two volumes, speak of Dr Hilali's remarkably liberated

Golam Maksud Hilali

Continued from page 10 with the same ease, objectivity and generosity of mind. On occasions, a man like Dr Hilali who was brought up in a conservative milieu, and who was steeped in religious lore, showed surprisingly a modernist attitude to life. Take, for example, his biography of the Turkish lady Halida Hanum, who was, among the Muslims, a pioneer of feminist movement. Dr Hilali wrote with great enthusiasm and sympathy about Halida Hanum's multifarious activities, her role in the war against the Khelafat and the Greeks, led by Kamal Pasha, her contributions to the emancipation of women and the advancement of education and other worthy social causes.

This biography which was published in 1933 was written in Bengali, obviously with the intention of popularizing among the contemporary Muslim men and women the heroic deeds and sacrifices of Halida Hanum and to inspire them to follow in her footsteps.

Dr Hilali's next work which deserves attention is his book on Alberuni. In the treatment of the life and work of this great scholar and traveller, Dr Hilali was really in his elements. Alberuni's quest for knowledge, his interest in alien cultures and languages and his restless travelling — all these go to the making of Dr Hilali's intellectual hero. He emphasized in his book these qualities of Alberuni. According

to Dr Hilali, Alberuni is the Aristotle of the East. He was a man of extraordinary genius and had an insatiable thirst for knowledge. His encyclopaedic knowledge covered the areas of Mathematics, Astronomy, Anthropology, Philosophy, Eschatology, History, Geography, Natural Sciences, Zoology, Botany, Geology, Medicine and many other branches of esoteric knowledge. He mastered the various branches of Greek learning and made them known in the Muslim world. He visited India and wrote his world famous *Kitab-ul-Hind* which presents to us a detailed account of the sub-continent. It is said that no other traveller prior to Alberuni left us such an elaborate account of India. While in India, Alberuni learnt Sanskrit and acquired knowledge of

Hindu philosophy, mathematics and astronomy. Dr Hilali says that Alberuni was truly the intellectual link of the Muslim world between Greece on the one hand and India on the other. Needless to say that Alberuni would receive such warm homage from Dr Hilali. For, contact among human civilizations, their interminglings and the impact of one upon another show unmistakably that despite fundamental differences, all men belong to one species i.e. mankind. Behind Dr Hilali's many-branched scholarship and intellectual interests, lies his one single subject of study. It is man, manifest in his endless exploration into the mysteries of the universe.

Save Part of Our Heritage

Continued from page 10 preserve this as a national historic site. I understand, there is a Department of Archeology under the Ministry of Culture. Please preserve our past! The lack of knowledge of

some of the people in the Department of Archeology is alarming. I asked one of the attendant from the Department of Archeology at the 'Rajbari'. "How old is this building?" He replied, "The

brickwork shows the construction belongs to two different times. But we are not aware how old are these." I was stunned at his reply. I thought it would be useless to tell him about Radioactive Carbon dat-

ing. The facilities are available in Bangladesh. We just have to use them. We have to save this part of our heritage! The writer is Associate Professor, Independent University Dhaka

