

# Holocaust survivor recounts being on Schindler's list

By Lisa R. Rhodes April 26, 2012



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FORT GEORGE G. MEADE, Md. (April 26, 2012) -- Halina Silber is alive today because Oskar Schindler dared to defy Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime during the Holocaust.

Silber was one of more than 1,200 Jews who worked at Schindler's factories during World War II and escaped death in Auschwitz, Germany's largest concentration camp.

The 83-year-old Pikesville resident recalled her experiences in a speech to about 400 people on April 19 during the installation's annual commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day and Days of Remembrance.

The 90-minute event, sponsored by the 704th Military Intelligence Brigade and the Equal Opportunity Office, was held at McGill Training Center and featured a Holocaust remembrance exhibit and catered kosher lunch.

For this year's Days of Remembrance observance, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., selected the theme "Choosing To Act: Stories of Rescue" to honor the actions of rescuers during the Holocaust.

In her welcoming remarks, Col. Karen H. Gibson, commander of the 704th MI Brigade, cited examples of rescuers during the Holocaust.

They "adopted Jewish children and claimed them as their own; people hid strangers under their floors; some helped smuggle families out of the country," Gibson said. "Most of these rescuers regret that they could not do more, that they could not save more people. These are fascinating stories of courage of ordinary people who acted in extraordinary ways."

During her speech, Silber shared how she became No. 16 on Schindler's list.

Schindler, a German-Catholic industrialist and member of the Nazi Party, operated three work factories in and near Krakow, Poland, during the German occupation.

He employed Jewish workers, but did not subject them to the cruelty of many of the other forced labor and concentration camps.

In 1944, when Schindler's Emaila factory in Krakow closed, one of his assistants created a list of the factory's 1,200 Jewish workers, which became known as "Schindler's List." Schindler also saved the lives of those on this list by transferring them to safety from Auschwitz to another one of his factories in Czechoslovakia.

Silber recounted that in 1942, it was rumored that the Jews in Slomniki, Poland, a small town the Germans designated for Jews, were going to be eliminated.

Silber's mother knew that escaping was her 12-year-old daughter's only hope. She told Silber to flee Slomniki and hitchhike to Krakow to volunteer at Krakow-Plaszow, a forced-labor camp where her older brother Mates and older sister Helen were working.

Following her mother's instructions, Silber removed her yellow Jewish armband, which the Germans required for identification, and boarded a truck to leave town.

When she looked behind, Silber saw her mother waving goodbye.

"Little did I know I would never see her again," Silber said.

Silber arrived at Krakow-Plaszow and, following her mother's instructions again, said she was three years older and wanted to work. But a German SS officer told her she would have to spend the night in jail because she had no identification papers. The next day, Silber was approved to work at the camp. Not long after, another German SS officer told Silber that she was selected to work at the Emalia factory.

There she and Schindler's other workers made pots and pans. Silber said she had never heard of Schindler, but when he offered her a job to work in his office at the factory, she was struck by his kindness.

"It was unusual to be treated in a kind manner," Silber said. "He protected us from every harm from beginning to end."

Silber recalled that when Amon Goeth, commandant of the Plaszow forced labor camp who was known for his cruelty, visited the factory for an inspection, Schindler saved the life of a Jewish worker whom Goeth ordered to be shot.

"There will be no shooting in my camp," Silber recalled Schindler saying. "I will take care of him myself."

Silber worked at Emalia from 1943 to 1944. She said she later learned that Schindler traded pots and pans at the factory to feed the workers.

After Emalia was closed, Silber was No. 16 on Schindler's list of Jewish workers at a new ammunition factory in Czechoslovakia.

"It was amazing that I was one of the few lucky ones to be on Schindler's list," Silber said. "His kindness gave us hope.... And above all, he gave us our dignity."

On the way to the new factory, the workers were detained for several weeks at Auschwitz.

"I saw endless rows of barbed wire," Silber recalled. "I could smell the stench of burning flesh."

Silber said when she and the other workers were stripped of their clothing and taken to the showers, they did not know whether they would survive. Millions of Jews were gassed in the showers at the concentration camps.

But Silber and the others did survive -- they were showered and given rags to wear.

During the weeks at Auschwitz, Silber said Schindler's workers were treated like the other inmates.

But one day, a German SS officer called the names of the workers on Schindler's list. They boarded a train and were taken to the ammunition factory in November 1944.

Silber said although the workers did not have the skills to produce the ammunition, Schindler used his diplomacy and bribed the Germans with

expensive gifts to look the other way.

On May 8, 1945, Russian soldiers came to the factory and told the workers that the war was over and they were free. Silber later joined her brother and sister in Krakow. In 1951, they immigrated to the United States.

"To us, Schindler was an angel," Silber said. "[He was] a single individual who had the courage and dared to make a difference. ... He was just a decent man who could not ignore human injustice."

In 1993, filmmaker Steven Spielberg directed the movie "Schindler's List," which won seven Academy Awards including best picture and best director.

After the program, Garrison Commander Col. Edward C. Rothstein read "Birdsong," an anonymous poem from "I Never Saw a Butterfly," a collection of art and poetry by Jewish children who lived in the Theresienstadt concentration camp in Czechoslovakia.

Rothstein said that Silber's story "reminds us of the importance of action in the face of apathy."

Gibson then presented Silber with a plaque of appreciation. Members of the audience later shook Silber's hand and posed for photographs with her.

"I was so happy to hear her personal story to remember what happened in the past," said Cynthia Lenard, a labor and delivery nurse at Howard County General Hospital in Columbia. "We have to prevent this from happening again."

Sgt. 1st Class Nicole Reed of the 742nd MI Battalion said she was moved by Silber's story.

"It just simply amazes me that someone who went through something so young had the courage to make it through to the end and managed to make a successful life," Reed said.

Staff Sgt. Karlton Berry of the 704th MI Brigade said the presentation inspired him to learn more about Schindler and the people he saved.

"Her speech gave me more insight into what was happening," Berry said. "I haven't watched the movie, but I think I'm going to."

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