

The Tailors of Tomaszow: A Memoir of Polish Jews

Rena Margulies Chernoff & Allan Chernoff
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Over the years, there have been various attempts to depict the scope and devastation of the Holocaust. These include the well-known project involving paper clips and more recently, the publication of the book *And Every Single One Was Someone*, in which the word “Jew” is repeated six million times.

The Tailors of Tomaszow, to my mind, succeeds much more effectively in describing the indescribable. In this book, Rena Margulies Chernoff, one of the youngest survivors of Auschwitz, and her son, Allan Chernoff, a veteran news reporter, virtually recreate the vanished Jewish community of Tomaszow, Poland. Relying on interviews with survivors, personal memories, and well-documented sources that include Nazi records at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Library, the authors paint a detailed portrait of the lives of the Jews of Tomaszow before, during and after the Holocaust.

Many of the Jews of Tomaszow were tailors, an often life-saving skill for those who were employed by the Nazis to create everything from men’s suits to uniforms. In one fascinating example, Rena Chernoff’s uncle Jozef, who was interned in a subcamp of Mauthausen, discovered that a suit that had been sewn for the commandant did not fit correctly. Jozef offered to fix it and was told that if he tried and was unsuccessful, he would be killed. He was staring at the commandant during roll call in an effort to figure out his measurements when he noticed that he himself was a similar build. By simply trying on the suit, he was able to fix it so that it fit correctly. This led to other tailoring jobs, whereupon Jozef insisted that he needed to work with some of his townspeople. In this way, he was also able to help some of his fellow Tomaszow tailors.

The enormity of the Holocaust is indeed hard to comprehend, and projects that attempt to depict it certainly have their place. The emotional power of this book, however, comes from the individual Jews who are brought to life in these pages. They were not just “Jews”; they were Jews like Rena Chernoff’s father, who went to extraordinary lengths to help others regardless of the danger involved. They were not just part of six million; they were members of close-knit families, torn apart from each other by the Nazis and their eager collaborators. By naming and describing the precious souls who were lost, the authors do a masterful job of conveying not just the scope of the Holocaust, but also what the losses meant to the Jewish people on a personal level. Appendices, bibliography, index, maps, notes, photographs. SRL

Testimony: The Legacy of Schindler’s List and the USC Shoah Foundation, A 20th Anniversary Commemoration

The Shoah Foundation
Steven Spielberg, intro.
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Honoring the twentieth anniversary of the film *Schindler’s List* and the inimitable project it germinated, the USC Shoah Foundation has produced *Testimony: The Legacy of the Schindler’s List and the USC Shoah Foundation*, a book of epinonymous testimony and testament to the lasting significance and influence of Steven Spielberg’s twin masterpiece. Accordingly, the volume is split evenly into two halves: “*Schindler’s List: The Making of the Film*” and “*Living Testimonies: The Legacy of the Shoah Foundation*”.

Part I introduces the determined Los Angeles leather goods salesman to whom the entire project is indebted, Leopold Page—formerly Poldek Pfefferberg, a *Schindlerjude*. Tenacious in his effort to make known the then-unrecognized hero to whom he owed his survival, Page offered the story of Oskar Schindler to every customer who might help bring it to Hollywood. Succeeding in capturing the interest of Australian novelist Thomas Keneally, Page arranged funds, contacts, and resources for his newfound partner to piece together the story of the *Schindlerjuden* (“Schindler’s Jews”) in Keneally’s 1982 “factitious” best-seller *Schindler’s Ark*.

Once Universal Studios acquired the rights to the book and approached Steven Spielberg with the project, Spielberg immediately recognized the potential of translating the documentary-style story telling of the novel to film. However, it took him another ten years

to commit to *Schindler’s List*, and he eventually lost the entire project to Martin Scorsese. *Testimony* suggests that this very hesitation—the film allowed Spielberg the maturation, vision, stamina, and personal wherewithal to create one of the best Holocaust films ever made, together with writer Steve Zolotor, production designer Allan Staroski, director of photography Janusz Kaminski, producer survivor Branko Lustig, and the rest of the entire, Academy-recognized crew and cast.

Just as Part I explores the realization of every element of *Schindler’s List*—screenplay, sets, lighting, cinematography, wardrobe, makeup, casting—the entire second half of *Testimony* delves into an in-depth, multi-perspective account of the creation and ongoing function of the Shoah Foundation. Begun on the plane ride home from filming *Schindler’s List*, the Foundation’s Visual History Archive of the Holocaust launched within a year and completed, fifty thousand testimonies later, within five. Many of the people involved in *Schindler’s List* threw themselves into Spielberg’s new project, inspired by their experience in making the film and encounters with the Holocaust survivors who had spontaneously shown up on the set to tell their stories. “There are 350,000 experts who just want to be useful for the remainder of their lives,” Spielberg implored upon receiving the Best Picture Academy Award for *Schindler’s List*, one month before the Shoah Foundation recorded its first survivor interview. “Please listen to the words and echoes and the ghosts—and please teach this in your schools.”

As *Testimony* pushes further and further into the evolution and technicalities of amassing the fifty-two thousand recorded interviews that now comprise the Shoah Project archive, its pages are increasingly interrupted by transcripts of the very testimonies crunched into the numbers and facts the book presents. These excerpts range from anecdotes about life before the war to the unimaginable experiences from within the Holocaust to descriptions of how these survivors have lived since. In this, the book demonstrates its keen balance: neither under-crediting Spielberg—his vision, his savvy, and his influence, (nor allowing his prominence to overshadow the efforts of his team—down to the film extras and phone line volunteers,) *Testimony* serves testament to the dedication of everyone involved in one of the most monumental archival initiatives of the modern age, from *Schindler’s List*’s producers to its crew to its cast, from the Shoah Foundation’s visionaries to the volunteer videographers capturing interviews on their personal recording equipment, from Steven Spielberg to the aging, determined, brave, and frightened witnesses to the Holocaust who came forward to tell him—and through him, the world—not just

