

A Noah of Our Days: Around Him Mythologies Arose

Elisa Morera de la Vall

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Abstract: From the pages of Thomas Keneally's best seller, *Schindler's Ark*, emerges the seductive figure of a modern hero of mythical proportions, the German Oskar Schindler who rescued over 1000 Jews from the hands of the Nazis and certain death. This Noah of our days sheltered his Jewish workers in an ark of salvation, his factory 'Emalia', and originated a legend further popularized by Steven Spielberg's film.

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The book of Genesis narrates the fabulous story of Noah who was chosen by God to save people and animals from the deluge that would drown all living things. Noah built an ark that stayed afloat and saved its occupants from extinction: "And they went in unto Noah into the ark ..." (Gen. 7, 15).

In his best seller, *Schindler's Ark*, Thomas Keneally narrates the fabulous story of a modern Noah, Oskar Schindler, who managed to save the lives of over 1000 Jews from the Auschwitz ovens by turning his factory, Emalia, into an ark of salvation.

The author was persuaded to write the book by one of the Schindlerjuden, or Schindler's Jews, who survived. Keneally acknowledges his debt in the dedication of his book: "To the memory of Oskar Schindler, and to Leopold Pfefferberg who by zeal and persistence caused this book to be written" (Keneally 2007, n.p.). It is then a story written 'in memoriam', in remembrance of a very uncommon person, a "German *bon vivant*, speculator, charmer, and sign of contradiction" (Keneally 2007, 13), in the author's own words. The character that gradually emerges from Keneally's pen shows the traits of a mythical hero, mainly because of "his salvage of a cross-section of a condemned race during those years now known by the generic name, Holocaust" (Keneally 2007, 13).

Should Keneally's narrative be considered memory, history or myth? The book is more than a transcription of Pfefferberg's memory. In the "Author's Note" Keneally states that it is an "account of Oskar's astonishing *history*" (Keneally 2007, 13) (my emphasis). He claims authenticity based on his sources that include interviews with fifty Schindler's survivors, a visit to the main locations of the story, documentary and information provided by a large number of people, a great many written testimonies supplied by friends and by the Yad Vashem – the Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, in Jerusalem –, plus a number of Oskar's papers and letters. Keneally, then,

has solid grounds to vouch for the historicity of his research. Yet, his account cannot be labelled as simply history.

The author testifies: "I have attempted to avoid all fiction (...) since fiction would debase the record, and to distinguish between reality and the myths which are likely to attach themselves to a man of Oskar's stature" (Keneally 2007, 13-14). He further clarifies his stance:

To use the texture and devices of a novel to tell a true story is a course which has been frequently followed in modern writing. It is the one I have chosen to follow here; both because the craft of the novelist is the only craft to which I can lay claim, and because the novel's techniques seem suited for a character of such ambiguity and magnitude as Oskar (Keneally 2007, 13).

The narrative strategies employed by Keneally have conferred on the book the appeal of a novel and are responsible, to a large degree, for its success, but, because of its ambiguity of genre, a controversy developed as a result of it winning the Booker Prize as a novel. Ken Gelder has written that *Schindler's Ark* "has been referred to by Keneally himself as 'faction', a journalistic type of fiction which draws heavily on facts, provides verifiable scenarios and generally covers an historical moment of crisis" (Gelder 1988, 503).

"So the story of Oskar Schindler is begun perilously..." (Keneally 2007, 32), the author writes in the first pages. It continued to be perilous all along. In saving his Jews Schindler put his life in serious jeopardy. His is a story of extraordinary deeds, almost magical tricks and tremendous risks as befit a mythical hero. Physically he was very attractive, described as having an "easy magnetic charm, exercised particularly over women, with whom he was unremittingly and improperly successful" (Keneally 2007, 21). Elsewhere in the book we read: "He looked sleekly handsome in the style of the film stars George Sanders and Curt Jurgens, to both of whom he would always be compared" (Keneally 2007, 233). On the other hand he "was not a virtuous young man in the customary sense" (Keneally 2007, 16). He was in fact a womanizer and a heavy drinker but, as if having the powers of a mythological semi-god, Oskar promised salvation and kept his promise.

Oskar had arrived in Cracow in 1939 as a war profiteer, meaning to make a fortune in the recently conquered city, little suspecting that his ambitions would soon change dramatically. As he looked around, trying to find a profitable business, he met Itzhak Stern, a brilliant Jewish accountant and philosopher, well versed in religion, who would eventually become Schindler's right hand. At the end of their initial conversation Stern dropped the famous Talmudic verse which would be so relevant in Oskar's history: "He who saves a single life, saves the world entire" (Keneally 2007, 399). Stern was later convinced that with those words "he had dropped the right stone in the well, that the crucial dictum had been deposited" (Keneally 2007, 53) in the ears of someone who was becoming increasingly unsympathetic to the Nazi regime.

The reasons why Oskar risked his life and lost his considerable fortune, to save as many Jews as he could, have been amply debated and left unresolved. Survivors are baffled. "I don't know why he did it" (Keneally 2007, 305) is the usual comment. There must

have been in him, indeed, “a capacity to be outraged by human savagery, to react to it and not be overwhelmed” (Keneally 2007, 305).

Another question is: when did he determine to act the way he did? The inability to find satisfactory answers has added to the mythology that envelops the character. Oskar himself would lay a special weight on the day when he witnessed the massacre of thousands in the ghetto: “‘Beyond this day,’ he would claim, ‘no thinking person could fail to see what would happen. I was now resolved to do everything in my power to defeat the system’” (Keneally 2007, 147). By mid 1940, when the number of Schindler’s workers was only 150, already “his factory had a minor reputation as a haven” (Keneally 2007, 79). The numbers would soon grow and Oskar would attain the status of a mythical creature that infused into his workers the confidence that with him they would survive.

Oskar’s gallant deeds are beyond count. While he learnt the bitter taste of arrest and the real possibility of being transported himself, he went on with his self-imposed mission. By way of example: he rescued, in the nick of time, some of his workers from a train that was taking them to their death, he saved people from imminent execution, he provided water to a trainload of Jews left to die of heat and thirst inside the wagons, he passed information to the Zionist rescue organization, he acquired some waste land and built huts for his workers to give them his personal protection, and he made his factory more plausible by adding a ‘patriotic’, if highly inefficient, ammunition section.

Some of his deeds were viewed by the Nazi officials whom he cultivated and bribed, as eccentricities. “They thought of him as a good enough fellow who’d been stricken with a form of Jew-love as with a virus” (Keneally 2007, 213). Had they guessed Oskar’s real stance, he would not have survived. On the other hand, and no wonder, “(among prisoners who knew there was (...) competition to get into Emalia” (Keneally 2007, 219), Oskar’s factory.

In the summer of 1943 “a host of incidents occurred that augmented Schindler’s mythology, the almost religious supposition among many prisoners (...) that Oskar was a provider of outrageous salvation” (Keneally 2007, 234). Actually, if prisoners’ lives were maintained it was, on many occasions, “by a series of stunts so rapid that they were nearly magical” (Keneally 2007, 369). Not surprisingly:

Emalia people would call the Schindler camp a paradise. Since they were widely scattered, it cannot have been a description they decided on after the fact. The term must have had some currency while they were in Emalia (...). What it inspired in its people was a sense of almost surreal deliverance, something preposterous which they didn’t want to look at too closely for fear it would evaporate (Keneally 2007, 222).

Oskar’s legendary deeds continued until the war was over. Towards its end, he performed an incredible feat when he managed to liberate 300 female workers who had been sent to Auschwitz. Nobody had come out alive from there, but those women were finally rescued at great expense and risk. The procedure is still not clear. Unable to produce evidence, Keneally twice reiterates this formula: “According to the Schindler mythology...”(Keneally 2007, 345, 346). What transpires of this mythology is that

Oskar almost certainly sent a willing girl loaded with drink, food and diamonds to make a deal and get Oskar's 300 women back. When she failed to return after a couple of days, Schindler went there in person and had the women released. Upon their arrival Oskar was standing at the entrance of his factory to assure them: "You have nothing more to worry about. You're with me now" (Keneally 2007, 358). As one of them recollected: "it was an instant of the most basic and devout gratitude and quite unutterable" (Keneally 2007, 357-58). Another one would add years later. "He was our father, he was our mother, he was our only faith. He never let us down" (Keneally 2007, 358).

While Oskar was engaged in saving the lives of his Jews, Titsch, a photographer, was busy taking the most stunning photos of the ghetto, the prisoners, their executions. He was a decent fellow who was obtaining valuable, incriminating data yet, as Keneally observes, he "was never the sort of man concerning whom mythologies arose. Oskar was" (Keneally 2007, 251). The author expands:

For the thing about a myth is not whether it is true or not, nor whether it *should* be true, but that it is somehow truer than truth itself. (...) Oskar had become a minor god of deliverance, double faced – in the Greek manner – as any small god, endowed with all the human vices, many-handed, subtly powerful, capable of bringing gratuitous but secure salvation (Keneally 2007, 251-52).

As the certainty of Germany's defeat grew, the Nazis hurriedly tried to obliterate all proof of their past atrocities and to liquidate all remaining Jews. Schindler's Jews thought they were doomed, but then a rumour began to spread around: "Oskar had spoken of buying them back (...). You could almost hear him saying it, that level certainty, the paternal rumble of the throat" (Keneally 2007, 300). Dolek Horowitz was sure: "Oskar would make a list of people and extricate them. Oskar's list, in the mind of some, was already more than a mere tabulation. It was a *List* (Keneally 2007, 300)" (emphasis in the original). The list became a myth and a myth, although ultimately based on facts, like history, can surpass history. It did in this case.

Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin in their well-known book *The Empire Writes Back*, discuss the distinction between literacy and orality, history and myth, and comment on the ideas of Jan Mohammed which imply that the tendency in oral societies is "to generate 'mythic' rather than 'historical' accounts of the world" (Ashcroft 1989, 82). This is what happened with Schindler's list. The ghetto Jews had no access to the Press, and news spread by way of mouth. They were actually living in an oral society, the right milieu for myths, fables and legends. They also needed to believe the unbelievable, only this time the unbelievable turned out to be true. More than 1000 names were included – as many as possible – in the frenetic composition of Schindler's list.

There is (...) a haziness suitable to a legend about the precise chronology of Oskar's list. The haziness doesn't attach to the existence of the list – a copy can be seen today in the archives of Yad Vashem (...) But the circumstances encourage legends. (Keneally 2007, 314).

The list tantalized the Schindlerjuden for it meant they would live.

When the war ended, Oskar's role ended. "The peace would never exalt him as had the war" (Keneally 2007, 421). He lived in poverty the rest of his life but, while he was ignored or despised in Germany, he found a family in his Schindlerjuden who showed their gratitude in many ways. His heroic deeds were recognized by Israel that paid him an official tribute with a plaque in Tel Aviv, a tree in the Avenue of the Righteous leading to the Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem, and with the formal declaration that he was 'Righteous Among the Nations'.

When Schindler died, 9 Oct 74, he got his wish granted and was buried in the Catholic cemetery of Jerusalem. His body, followed by his friends, was carried "through the crammed streets of the old city of Jerusalem" (Keneally 2007, 429).

Lévi-Strauss has written, in his *Histoire de Lynx*, that myths are endless. He compares them to an unfinished chess game (Lévi-Strauss, 1992, 23-24). In the "Foreword" of the Spanish edition of this book Manuel Delgado speaks of the unending net that myths have been waving ever since thought appeared over the earth (Delgado 1992, 18). The fables, legends and myths that arose around Oskar Schindler began to be woven while he was still engaged in his work of salvation. Once started, they are not likely to disappear. Keneally made Schindler, and the myths attached to him, known to many people, among them to film-maker Steven Spielberg. Spielberg's film, probably seen or at least heard of, by practically every person in this planet, has popularized Oskar's mythology all over the world. Its title, *Schindler's List*, speaks more directly of the gist of the Schindler's legend, though the title of the novel is richer in biblical suggestions of miraculous survivals.

Oskar's story is already part of the unending net of myths in which, as Delgado says, we move, part of the endless chess game mentioned by Lévi-Strauss, and it can be expected that it will continue to be so, particularly if future generations follow the current trend of reading little, and losing interest in old films. The fabulous deeds of Oskar Schindler will be transmitted orally. Even now, for millions of people, Oskar has become a legendary figure. Asked about him most people would not be accurate about his deeds. Yet, all over the world, he would be considered a myth of our days. Very truthfully Keneally closes his narrative with these words. "When he died he was mourned in every continent" (Keneally 2007, 429).

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Elisa Morera de la Vall, PhD, former Associate Lecturer in the English Department at the Universitat de Barcelona. Currently Public Relations Officer of the Australian Studies Centre (UB).

Main research area: Jewish Writing. Doctoral thesis on Jewish Writers in Australia. At present she is doing research on the recognition granted by Israel to those Gentiles who helped Jews survive the Nazi persecution. She has recently visited the Yad Vahsem Museum to gather information on the subject.

She has presented papers in conferences at home and abroad and has had articles and papers published in various journals besides being co-editor of the publications of the Australian Studies Centre. She has also contributed a chapter to the book *Anglophone Jewish Literature* (Routledge 2007).