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SCHINDLER

Mietek Pemper

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Interview with Mietek Pemper

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q. Herr Pemper, I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about the relationship between Schindler and Itzhak Stern.

a. The relationship was certainly very close and full of trust. However, I can only describe it authoritatively for the period from October 1944 to the end of the war at the beginning of 1945. As far as the earlier period is concerned, I certainly heard about it from Stern but I was not, as it were, actually there. I know that Stern got to know Schindler as early as the end of 1939, just after the war broke out in fact, in connection with Stern's employment in a large textile company and I think he became a friend of Schindler's as a result... I would put it like this: while Schindler had other contacts for his professional activities, people such as bankers, his relationship to Stern - at least his relationship at that time - was on a quite different plane; it dealt with the saving of lives and the transfer of the factory from Krakow to Suddetenland - from where Schindler came. These were the difficult matters...and the relationship was characterised by the very great faith that Schindler had for Stern, and for Stern, on the other hand, the consideration was to do everything to save lives.

q. Near the beginning of the war, Schindler took Stern off and advised Stern that there was going to be an 'aktion' in the ghetto, didn't he? Do you know anything about that?

a. At this time we had yet come into contact. Close contacts between me and Stern dated from the time when forced labour began in the camp, in other words, therefore, from the start of 1944. I certainly knew Stern before this time, but it was not in any sense a close relationship that stemmed from my activities within the camp.

q. What kind of man, .. when he talked of Schindler, what kind of man did Stern say he was?

a. Stern was of the view that Schindler was a man capable of great passion, a basically respectable person, someone who could be influenced in a way which for us would be favourable and useful. He had hoped that he would be able to persuade Schindler firstly to constantly increase the number of Jewish workers, secondly that these people should if possible be taken out of the camp so that they would not experience the brutality of the SS. As things got worse he hoped that, through the relationship that Schindler had with the Armaments Inspectorate, it would be possible to arrange a transfer of the factory so as to save the people, because we knew that most of the people taken from Poshov were no longer alive nor could they have survived.

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2.

g. How do you account for the influence that Stern had with Schindler?

a. It was certainly the case that in the later period - at the end of 1944, as Schindler saw more and more clearly that the end of the war was going to come in a way that would be unfavourable for Germany - Stern's influence grew constantly. Schindler held confidential conversations with three of four people. I was not always there but I very often took part, and I saw that he really did have Schindler's trust and that Schindler hoped that Stern would do things right and that, through coordination and cooperation, it would be possible get all involved out from these difficulties in which we were all caught up. He also had the hope that after the war... um, yes, I can remember one conversation in which we all took part during a tour of inspection of the factory workshop - it was a really large hall, with a thousand people working in it - and he point towards the heavy machinery, the presses, the heavy presses, and said, "Well, what do you think? Could we make spoons, for example, which we'll need after the war from these presses?" Thus, he was in fact also thinking about the period after the war and had hoped that he would be able to save all of us, he and the factory, for the post-war period. There was certainly a motivation... It could be also that the relationship became continually closer and more positive...anyway, Stern's influence over Schindler was very great.

g. Could you tell me the story of when Schindler entertained people from the Armaments Inspectorate before they came to look at Plashov in 1943, eh, I think it was General Kruger...you know the story I mean?

a. Yes, I think that was...forgive me...I must put it this way, I fear that the matter appeared slightly differently after the war from the way in which it really happened. Kruger was the senior commander (Pezant), he was the 'Obergruppenführer' and senior police commander for the General-Government. There was a namesake of Schindler, a General Schindler, head of the Armaments Inspectorate. But the Armaments Inspectorate was not in Krakow. Instead it was somewhere around Warsaw, I think to the south of Warsaw. Given this similarity of names, many things were made possible, because most people assumed that they were not just namesakes but also related, and naturally no-one dared to ask General Schindler if he had a relative in Krakow who was in manufacturing who had the same name as he did, or if this was one of his nephews! As a result, there were certain clear advantages to be indirectly gained from this similarity of names. Whether and how General Schindler decided to transform the forced labour camp into a concentration camp at the end of 1943, it would now be very difficult to establish. However, it is certain that we did everything possible - there was a clear coincidence of interests between Góde and us - to ensure that this transformation should occur, because we knew, through information that we got, that the 'Lage' - the forced labour camp - in the General Government at Reinach was to be liquidated, destroyed. So we saw that our only chance lay in being converted into a concentration camp, for this would give us a certain security - a degree of security - at least partial

partial security for a few people who might thus be able to survive the war, or at least be able to exist for a longer period than they would in other camps. This was also in part related to the fact that we had information through Stern, from Stern once again came the necessary information and I had even seen certain documents which stated that if any Jews at all were to be left alive in the General Government, this could only be because they were working as armaments workers. This probably was linked to the activities of Speer, the Armaments Minister, for his overriding concern was to use all available labour power. His contact point, so-to-speak, in Administrative Group D - the Economic Head Office, (Administrative Group D was the central control point for all the concentration camps within the Reich) was Standartenführer Maurer. Maurer was the head of Amtsgruppe (Administrative Group) D2, labour mobilisation, and he had once again sent a round robin to all concentration camps, emphasising how important it was to preserve the labour force and so on. At the end of 1943, several memoranda and tabulations were prepared to show the capacity of our camp, both real and potential, what we could do for armaments. We drew up this tables mainly at night, I wrote some of them myself. I must also say that some of them were so drafted that we appeared to have four or five times the capacity than we really had. Stern put the figures together from the different departments - we had several different workshops. It is certain that Göth passed these figures on, although I do not know whether Schindler helped him. I suppose he did. And then, on 10th January 1944, not on 1st January as is often said, on 10th January 1944, the camp was transformed into a concentration camp. It sounds a little paradoxical if I say that the period during which it was a forced labour camp was so bad that from the start of the concentration camp period there was an improvement in the conditions in the camp, but it is true. During the forced labour camp period in 1943, everything was arbitrary, when people could be shot practically without any reason having to be given...

q. .. just stop you for a second, we've run out of film...

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q. Tell me about Amon Göth, what kind of man he was, and tell me the story about the dictation.

a. Uh um. Göth was a Viennese, the son of a publisher who ran Amon Franz Göth & Sohne. It is was a publisher of technical and military texts. The son was Amon Leopold Göth, Amon Leopold Göth, who was born in December 1913, I think. He came to Krakow from Lublin where he had had terrible experiences. He was a very atypical camp commander, compared with those we knew before and afterwards. He was an unrestrained, self-reliant and self-educated man. He had had an inadequate higher education - I think he had had two or three semesters of agronomy...

q. You don't have to worry about his background so much; just tell me about your own experience with him...

a. Yes. I was... from 18th March 1943 until Göth's imprisonment in September 1944, I was his stenographer and had to spend several hours with him daily. In the initial period I had some dreadful experiences, there were also incidents of torture. There were certainly some very extreme situations. For example I can remember in the early period, when the office was still in a wooden barracks/hut, there were some rifles hanging on the wall and, during some dictation, he spotted some old people through the window who were supposed to trim the paths clearly not working but just standing around. He simply took a rifle, took aim and shot a man - through the window - then he hung the rifle up and asked me where we had stopped in the dictation. In the widest sense that was merely a personal reflection, because on the same day, for example, when several people were shot, he could dictate a letter to his father immediately afterwards, asking about his father's cold, then asked after an old bookseller and so on.. ow he was.. in short, just like a completely normal person. On the other hand, I was amazed - I was then just twenty three years old - because what he did could never be considered normal. These two personal experiences occurred on the same day at the same time, virtually, and they were an awful spiritual burden for me. I was not able to understand this problem, or rather these two personal experiences, correctly or to evaluate them. That would have been a task for a neurologist or a psychiatrist. I lacked the background to handle their implications.

q. Tell me about the relationship between Schindler and Göth and here I would like you to talk about what you saw yourself about how these two men were.

a. Conversations between Schindler and Göth took place almost always when I was not there, I was only there for a few, probably short, discussions. I could imagine that they got on well, they came from a commercial background. I have mentioned that Göth was the son of a publisher and, even from the camp, was worrying about the company's publishing activities after the war. As I realised later on, Schindler very quickly firmed up the contact with Göth; gifts were involved, diamonds and so on, and I noted that Schindler had an unbelievable ability to make contact with people; it was very easy and always successful and swift for him to establish contact with people. He very rapidly made Göth into his friend.

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5.

q. (That was the story of bribes and so on, wasn't it? Yes. Good.)

q. Could you tell me...remember you told me how, at Brinitz, you discussed with Stern Oskar's personality and how Oskar and Göth were very similar.

a. Yes, of course. We had a very small circle, it could only have been Stern and his brother, Dr. Stern who now lives in Israel. We wondered with whom we were involved, on whom our lives depended. In this connection we speculated, an idle speculation, what would happen if these two men could be exchanged; could Schindler be made out of Göth and Göth out of Schindler! I felt that one could certainly make Schindler out of Göth. However we all agreed and prayed to God we were right that you could never make Göth out of Schindler. We felt that Schindler might be capable of doing anything but we could not believe that he could shoot somebody, that he could handle people in the way that Göth did.

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q. Herr Pemper, could you come right behind me, you wanted to say a little more about what you were saying before, about Oskar and Göth.

a. Oskar...Schindler and Göth. It is difficult for me because, although they certainly had frequent conversations and often invited each other, Göth in the evenings, for example, I was not there. I could only learn indirectly through Stern that Schindler, through his efforts, had got a little further with Göth and that there were good prospects that still more people would be available for Schindler and that, a little later on, the factory could be transferred to Suddetenland, the region from which Schindler himself came. However, I cannot say much more about the relationship between Schindler and Göth. As I said, I was rarely there when the two of them met. However, the relationship was certainly very close. Let me give you an example; when Göth was imprisoned in September 1945...

q. If you could just stop for a second...

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q. Herr Pemper, you were telling me, you wanted to tell me about the suitcases.

(Can you take us back?)

Take 37/2

q. Herr Pemper, if you look at me and if you want to tell me about the suitcases...

a. Yes...Göth was imprisoned in Vienna in September 1944 and in mid-October we went to Brunlitz and Göth had a large number of large suitcases sent or taken along to his friend Schindler in Brunlitz in the wagons that took the factory and we wondered how a man or a small family could have so many suitcases. It looked rather as if a maharajah of an Indian state wanted to move! The suitcases were all in Brunlitz and Schindler was also there after his short holiday or I don't know what...he had just been released from prison and had come to Brunlitz. He had a short conversation with me and wanted to know from me what the examining magistrate had tried to find out. Yes...and he also talked to his friend about it - further evidence of the close relationship that had survived between Schindler and Göth, which leads me to comment that one cannot, one must note put these two men in the same boat. Schindler was fundamentally a decent person, always ready to help, a very orderly and law-abiding man - something that could never be said of Göth. Their relationship was one built around a particular purpose, or rather, it was a relationship that Schindler clearly created in our interest, so as to make it easier to save us.

q. O.K. That must be about two minutes, wasn't it Mary?

q(2) That was about two minutes.

q. Very quickly, tell me the difference between Madritsch and Schindler.

a. I only knew of Madritsch indirectly. I know that many people employed by Madritsch were understood...that...I saw Madritsch several times talking to Göth and, as a result, also wrote several letters to him...For a long time, Madritsch was an idol for the people who worked for him. What he was then blamed for, or rather, the reason why those who worked for him suffered such great disappointment was that they realised that he had done too little to be able to undertake an operation like the one that Schindler carried out so successfully.

q. Good, did you finish that?

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q. Herr Pemper. I'd like you to give me some details about the 'Gesundheitsaktion' (Health Operation) on 7th May 1944. If you can remember to keep your answer quite short ...if possible, so give me some of the facts, some of the reasons and what happened.

a. Yes.

q. ...and if you look at me...

a. The so-called 'Gesundheitsappell' (Health Parade) on Sunday 7th May 1944, together with the 'aktion' (operation) that followed one week later on 14th May 1944, in which 1500 people were sent to Auschwitz for 'special treatment', is one of the darkest chapters in the history of the camp. It was linked to something not known to most people; Eichmann's operation in Hungary. Eichmann, at this time, has forced several hundred thousand Jews out of Hungary and Auschwitz was not ready to take in so many people at one time.

For this reason, Amtsgruppe D (Administrative Group D) asked all concentration camp commanders under its control by telex how many people they could take. Göth replied that he could take several thousand people if he were allowed to send elements that were unfit for work to Auschwitz for 'special treatment'. As a result, he got several telexes signed by Maurer granting permission. This was the background, or rather the initial events leading up to the 7th May. I learnt about it by reading some secret documents and was only able to tell a few friends, such as Dr. Stern, the brother of Yitzak Stern, for example. I could not do anything more.

In the operation itself, men and women were paraded separately and naked before the medical commission so that their fitness for work could be judged. In reality this meant that 1,500 people were to be selected out for Auschwitz - the old, the sick from the sickbay and even children. The scene was repeated time and again on the parade ground. The scenes were heart-rending. I cannot recall exactly any more exactly what they played over the loudspeakers - some sort of children's songs and so on...

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9.

Some weeks later, Göth got back the striped clothing which the people sent to Auschwitz had worn, after they had undergone 'special treatment', because he wanted to use to to cloth the so-called 'outside commandos' - in order to make sure that these people could not escape because they would be wearing striped clothes. During Amon Göth's trial in Krakow in summer 1946, I described all these details. The only reaction from Göth was to ask how I had could have known these things, but he did not dispute the accuracy of what I said. All the information about how many people were sent to Auschwitz and when, and the breakdown between men and women was telexed, not by me, but by an SS man. Nor was the request for the return of the clothing passed on by me. but by an SS man. I was able to read all about it later, somewhat illegally, from the secret documents.

q. Very good. Do you know any examples of Schindler having saved lives by intervening with Göth, of people inside Plashow.

a. There were stories about such cases, something was said about such cases. However, I cannot give names and so forth. I do know though, that he intervened. I think there were also some people who were taken off the wagons which were part of a transport somewhere or other. There were several transports from Plashow to Sutthof, close to Danzig, to Auschwitz, to Grossrosen as early as the start of 1944, right up to the time when the camp was transferred. In such cases, Schindler sometimes intervened successfully because of his relationship to Göth.

q. Why did Schindler do that kind of thing?

a. As I said before, Schindler was a fundamentally decent person and, as he explained it to me after the war, he could not square it with his conscience that people should be so treated, individuals whom he saw as people. He had grown up in a medium-sized town in Suddetenland where there were many Jews who were also German. The Nazi propaganda - that Jews were not people - did not seem to have had any effect or success on him. He was convinced that he was dealing with real people and that that was the most important thing. After all, we were unfortunate enough to have the example of many others before us, particularly amongst the SS, where we were considered essentially somehow as non-people... not even as animals, onjects with which they could do as they would.

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I must also add, however, that there were even SS personnel who behaved in a most decent way. I can remember someone from Hamburg, or a certain Elseser from Mulhausen whom I even looked up after the war because I felt that I might be able to help him, who treated really in such a humane, sympathetic way that I wondered how on earth such people could be found in the camp. It was no particular feat to live in the country as a civilian and say, "I am no Nazi", but, as an SS man, in a concentration camp, to treat Jews as beings worthy of respect - that was exceptional; it certainly was not typical. One must therefore place the courage of such people that much higher - and there were indeed such people.

q. There were many Suddetentdeutsche who were brought up with Jews. There were many people who treated Jews humanely - Germans...

a. Unfortunately...

q. ...but Schindler did more than that, why?

a. I feel that several factors must have played a part. He grew up in a respectable family and in a clearly Christian atmosphere, a positive Christian tradition. Another factor which must clearly have played a part was the fact that he had Jewish friends, school friends. We always hoped that this contribution would always protect him from the indoctrination of Nazi propaganda.

q. Could you tell me the story...on April 28th 1945, a telegramme came to Brunnlitz, if you remember, from the next factory along the line about the production, the quality of production. Could you tell me that story?

a. As you know, armaments production in Germany was dispersed so that, after a bombing raid not every thing would be lost. As a result, certain processes were carried out and then the goods were transferred from one factory to the next factory along the line. In our case, we had two main products, as it were, that were intended for armaments production. One was a seal box and the other a grenade casing, or something similar. Just before the end of the war, just around the time when Schindler had his birthday, a telegramme came saying that the goods which we had sent on to the next factory were unusable, according to the results of control inspection, series number so-and-so, because of defects in them. //

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11.

Now, that was two, three or perhaps four weeks before the end of the war and I well recall Schindler's reaction. We who were there were terrified by it, for it really amazed us. He just said that, in reality, it was a nice birthday present for him! We were more than amazed - naturally only two or three people knew about it. There was Stern and me and perhaps one or two others, since we realised that if it became common knowledge and reached the ears of those who should not know, Schindler would perhaps have ended up wearing the same striped clothes that we did!

I also remember that, shortly before the end of the war, a high functionary from the Armaments Ministry visited us to discuss future plans and the fulfilment of past plans with Schindler. Schindler, to my amazement, told me to be ready to attend the meeting as stenographer. When I asked him why, he said that he was a little worried that, if his German staff were there, they would realise that the figures being bandied about were completely unachievable. In fact, he did everything he could for as long as possible to save us all.

q. Good.

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q. You want to tell me something...go on...
(.....)...about Schindler, you wanted to
say more about that.

a. Yes, well, we certainly discussed things
within our little circle - Yitzak Stern and
his brother Nathan Stern. Amongst ourselves
we speculated about the personalities of
Göth and Schindler and whether they were
interchangeable. On the basis of different
sources of information, not least from me,
about Göth's activities as an employer and so
on, we were convinced that Göth could have,
if only he had wanted to have been, Schindler.
We were equally convinced, however, that
Schindler could never have been Göth, because
he could never have treated people in the
same way as Göth did.

q. Good, fine. Do you remember any
correspondence going to the office of Göth
which...no, forget that. How would you
describe Schindler's attitude to Jews?

a. That is a ... the answer to that must
be very complicated. Schindler had...as I have
already said, Schindler was convinced that
Jews really were human beings. To believe that
was already a lot. He really pitied all of
us, particularly the women that he saw in this
situation, where they had to work and so on,
and he wanted to do all he could for us. He also
actually did achieve an awful lot. One can
certainly say that, without him, very many of
the thousand who did survive would not have
done so, and when you think how few survived
in other camps, you really have to say that
he was the true saviour of these thousand
people.

On the other hand, one really has to say that in
terms of the differences between Jews and
non-Jews in Europe, at least in Central Europe,
various elements have combined, over a period
of hundreds of years; different layers have
been placed one on top of the other and, from
the Middle Ages on, with the Crusades and the
attitude of the Church to the Jews, well, all
this could not have had no effect on the attitude
of people to Jews. Somehow, we were sometimes
aware that Schindler, even though he might not
have wanted to or was not even aware of what
he did, talked about us rather like a medieval
colonial master might have done somewhere in
America, under the Spaniards...as proprietor
of his own people!

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Schindler talked sometimes about his Jews; yes even after the war, when he came to Israel, after the initial welcome, he referred to seeing, "all my Jews once again"! I do not know what factors play a role in this and I do not want to say that there was something derogatory about it, but the relationship was not completely equal. Yet it was not Schindler's fault, one cannot blame him for it. Rather, it shows the factors that have existed in Europe for hundreds of years... I wish that someone could write a book on the subject to show the cultural background of the Jews, with all the Nobel prize winners and so on...just to show that they are not a people to be reckoned with lightly. This factor must have played a small role, at least. But that should not be taken to mean that Schindler's merit in saving Jews should somehow be smeared. Just the opposite. When you realise that, in this case, the Jews were not seen as a people of little consequence, you have to put an even higher value on the fact that someone did so much for these thousand, more or less, of people.

q. Looking back on it now, after about forty years, what do you think about Schindler, what he did then?

a. On purely humane grounds, I would have been happy if Schindler, after the war, had used a part of that persistence, that energy and capacity for action that he had shown during the war. I am sure that, after the war, he would have had great personal success if he had. Unhappily, this was denied him, just as success had been denied him before the war. His wife suggested, some years ago in an interview in Argentina, that his success during the war was partly due to those around him and that this was no longer possible after the war....Yes, I think there were a constellation of factors that made it all possible. It was a gift from God that we found Oscar Schindler but, yes, there is also a feeling of regret that, after the war, it was not possible for him to do something which would have satisfied him. Everything was done to bring it about, but I do not think that more specific comments on this are really appropriate here. We really did do a lot, but everything somehow went haywire - as they say.

q. What would have happened to you if Schindler had not...if you had not got onto Schindler's list?

a. Well, I think that if I had not been on the list and if I had not gone to Brunnlitz, my chances of survival would have been very slim. Of those who went with me to Grossrosen in the middle of October, only a few survived. I do not know whether the physical conditions for survival existed in other camps. In view of that, in fact, I belong to those whom Brunlitz - Schindler - saved.

q. What was the relationship between Schindler and the SS commandant at Brunnlitz and can you tell me, though quite short, about how Leipold and Schindler got on and how you had to be in the middle.

a. There was only a so-called 'camp leader' in Brunnlitz. He was an 'Untersturmführer' a lieutenant, Untersturmführer Leipold. The commander of the camp was Sturmbannführer Hasebr Hasebruck in Grossrosen. Brunnlitz was one of the very many satellite camps or work camps attached to Grossrosen. The relationship was not good. Leipold already knew me from Plashow where he had been adjutant to Göth and had been made into a contact man between the factory and the SS office. Schindler, just before the end of the war, when there was a real danger that we would all be executed and an order to this effect had actually been issued from Grossrosen... Schindler was able to arrange for Leipold to volunteer for the Front. During a feast, a reception, Leipold got drunk and volunteered for the Front. The reason for this was that Leipold was in the position of being able to carry out the order and that his representative there, a minor underofficer called Motzek, was in no position whatsoever to be able to do the same. That is actually what turned out to be the case. Everything that Schindler did at this time was so carefully thought out that his success seemed like a real miracle.

q. I think you mentioned this in your last answer, but, if you could just give it to me again in shorter form. How did Schindler dispose of the problem of Leipold?

a. Yes. He organised a feast and during it they had a series of patriotic speeches in which everybody expressed their views about how terrible conditions were at the Front - or, at least, that is what we learned afterwards because we were not there. The initial reaction to all this was that, strictly speaking, everybody should volunteer for the Front and this Leipold was persuaded that he should be one of

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the first to go. And so the problem was resolved - it was an ideal solution! Certainly, it had been partly planned in advance. It was Schindler's hope that he would be able to make the plan work and that is, in fact, what happened. Those of us who knew, and they were very few.....