

Synopsis

“Don’t thank me for your survival, thank your valiant Stern and Pemper, who stared death in the face constantly.” Oskar Schindler in a speech to his released Jewish workers in May 1945. Steven Spielberg’s Oscar-winning film Schindler’s List popularized the true story of a German businessman who manipulated his Nazi connections and spent his personal fortune to save some 1,200 Jewish prisoners from certain death during the Holocaust. But few know that those lists were made possible by a secret strategy designed by a young Polish Jew at the Płaszów concentration camp. Mietek Pemper’s compelling and moving memoir tells the true story of how Schindler’s list really came to pass. Pemper was born in 1920 into a lively and cultivated Jewish family for whom everything changed in 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland. Evicted from their home, they were forced into the Krakow ghetto and, later, into the nearby camp of Płaszów where Pemper’s knowledge of the German language was put to use by the sadistic camp commandant Amon Goth. Forced to work as Goth’s personal stenographer from March 1943 to September 1944 “an exceptional job for a Jewish prisoner” Pemper soon realized that he could use his position as the commandant’s private secretary to familiarize himself with the inner workings of the Nazi bureaucracy and exploit the system to his fellow detainees’ advantage. Once he gained access to classified documents, Pemper was able to pass on secret information for Schindler to compile his famous lists. After the war, Pemper was the key witness of the prosecution in the 1946 trial against Goth and several other SS officers. The Road to Rescue stands as a historically authentic testimony of one man’s unparalleled courage, wit, defiance, and bittersweet victory over the Nazi regime.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Mietek Pemper's "Road to Rescue" is not a typical Holocaust memoir. There are few details about Pemper's day to day life in the ghetto and later the camp. I didn't learn about what he ate or where he showered or his relationship with the others in his barracks. Instead it is the calm, unemotional accounting of his work as the clerk and stenographer to camp head, Amon Goth. The tone of the book itself is part of the story, for through it the reader is able to picture the type of man who could work with Goth for over 500 days without either being shot by Goth or having a complete breakdown from the pressure. In addition to reflecting Pemper's character, the tone of the book is also a calculated attempt to provide Holocaust deniers a foothold to begin picking at the accuracy of the book. In the preface he writes that "Even the tiniest details must be correct, for any imprecision threatens the credibility of the entire narrative. I am strictly opposed to exaggeration. In this book, I confine myself to telling the truth. I prefer to write a couple of words too few than one word too many." This tension between story and truth also defines his relationship with the juggernaut of "Schindler's List". Writing his book 15 years after Steven Spielberg's movie was released, Pemper struggles to tell his story and take credit for his part in the saving of hundreds of lives, without appearing to be a latecomer looking for some of the fame. Between his extensive footnotes, documents from Schindler's suitcase which wasn't found until 1999 (after "Schindler's List" was released), and testimony at the war crime trials of many Nazi's including Amon Goth, Pemper succeeds in this, I think. In addition, Pemper is very careful not to tarnish Schindler's memory.

In this book Mietek Pemper recounts his memories concerning the Plaszow concentration camp and the creation of the list that saved over a thousand Jews towards the end of the Holocaust. Pemper had access to a great deal of information because he had a background in typing and clerical work, and was thus given the task of personal stenographer to camp director Amon Goth. He gained read (and typed) classified documents and was familiar with the inner workings of the camp and the larger picture than the majority of the other detainees. Pemper was constantly aware that a mistake, slip, or simple mood change near the notoriously cruel Goth (who killed prisoners with guns, bricks, whips, or by setting his dogs on them) could result in his death, or that of his family members. Quote: "After Goth had shot or tortured someone to death, he had the names and camp numbers of that person's entire family looked up in the camp files, so that he could kill them as well. On one such occasion, he remarked, 'I don't want anyone to be dissatisfied in my camp.'" The Road to Rescue

contains some very interesting information, however it does tend towards dryness. The author is careful not to lump all Germans together, and is careful to give his blame to those he feels most deserve it - those who made choices to be cruel, sadistic, horrific, and who forced others to behave the same way. He does, however, note that the circumstances caused "average" people to act cruelly, sadistically, horrifically. He includes excerpts from school books taught to children around the time, which describe Jews as a different species without thought, incapable of feeling pain.

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