Chapter 6

Critiquing Holocaust Education

If the 1978 NBC Holocaust miniseries helped spark mainstream interest in the event, then 1993—the year in which Stephen Spielberg’s Schindler’s List and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) opened to critical acclaim—represented the culmination of this interest. During the years leading up to 1993 there was a steady rise in educational interest in the Holocaust across the country. This was accompanied by a proliferation of Holocaust educational material. By 1993, Holocaust education was so established that the national Museum did not feel the need to create an “official” Holocaust curriculum. Instead, under the leadership of William Parsons and Samuel Totten, the USHMM issued a set of teaching guidelines meant to direct teachers in the selection and refinement of existing curricula. Many of these guidelines were critical in nature, indirectly attacking the quality and effectiveness of many of the units covered in this study. The guidelines suggested that Holocaust education, as a movement, had moved beyond justification and implementation to all-out critique. The continued rise in interest about teaching the event was underscored by the educational campaign launched in coordination with the screening of Schindler’s List.

Schindler’s List

Over 120 million Americans viewed Spielberg’s academy-award-winning film, which related the story of profiteer-turned-rescuer Oskar Schindler, played by Liam Neeson. Based on a true story, the film depicted how Schindler exploited the Nazi’s rise to power by using flattery and bribes to
win military contracts. Over the course of the film he befriends a Jewish accountant and financier Itzhak Stern, played by Ben Kingsley, to help run the factory, which Schindler staffs with unpaid Jews from the Krakow ghetto. After all of Krakow’s Jews are assigned to the Plaszow Forced Labor Camp, overseen by the ruthless Commandant Amon Goeth, played by the Ralph Fiennes, Schindler arranges to continue using Polish Jews in his plant. When he sees what happens to many of his employees in the camp, he develops a conscience and realizes that his factory is the only thing preventing his staff from being shipped to the death camps. Schindler then demands more workers and using his entire personal fortune bribes Nazi leaders to keep Jews on his employee lists and out of the camps. In this manner, Schindler ultimately saves 1,100 Jews.

While not as historically comprehensive as the NBC miniseries, Spielberg’s film included graphic images of concentration camps, gas chambers, Jewish transports, ghetto liquidation, and numerous examples of Nazi cruelty and indifference. Most film critics offered high praise for the artistry of the directing and sensitivity shown toward the subject matter. Some critics were concerned that the director of E.T. and J urassic Park was going to present the Holocaust as a suspense-filled, special-effects extravaganza. They were pleasantly surprised to find the film to be an immensely moving masterpiece. In fact, they specifically praised Spielberg’s ability to reign in his dramatic tendencies, and lauded his range of impressive new techniques. Predictably, however, academics expressed a host of problems with the film.

For certain scholars, the emphasis on the heroism and righteousness of Schindler obscured the fact that the majority of the Germans were either perpetrators or bystanders; Schindler’s story was the exception, not the rule. Others objected to the fact that the film had few major Jewish characters. The Jewish victims were depicted namelessly from the German point of view. A more significant critique was that the film relied on Hollywood conventions such as melodrama, emotionally manipulative music, and, worse of all, a happy ending. Critics called the act of placing a redemptive ending on the event—whether it be the founding of Israel or the moral conversion of Oskar Schindler—the “Americanization” of the Holocaust. Such an accusation would also be hurled inappropriately at certain Holocaust curricula that focused too heavily on the universal aspects of the event or devoted too much time to rescuers and heroic acts. Finally, particularist critics objected to the entire idea of using a film to represent the Holocaust in any accurate sense. Such a task was not only impossible, but also morally wrong. The thought of Spielberg and his staff pouring over the choice of the correct wardrobe and makeup to “capture” the reality of death was offensive. “What on earth did they think they were