

THOMAS MERTON & STEVEN SPIELBERG: SOME PARALLELS

by **Patrick J. McDonald**

What do Thomas Merton and Steven Spielberg have in common? At first glance, one might say very little. But I had cause to reflect on the similarities between the two not long ago, at least in my own mind. I spent the evening with several friends as we watched Spielberg's most recent movie, *Schindler's List*, then discussed the significance of the movie with them over soup and sandwiches.

The movie itself marks a major shift for Spielberg. He became famous for highly entertaining megahits like *Always*, *The Color Purple*, *The Empire of the Sun*, the Indiana Jones series, and the top grossing film of all time, *Jurassic Park*. His hits have never been known for their probing and insightful character development, but this is also their attraction. Spielberg's heroes are larger than life and very entertaining. They are presented to us for enjoyment, not to confront us with the dark questions of life.

However, *Schindler's List* breaks Spielberg out of a narrow entertainment mode and places him among the more reflective filmmakers. *Schindler's List* develops the character of Oskar Schindler, a Catholic, living in Krakow, Poland, during the Nazi occupation of 1939-1944. Schindler is an unlikely hero, given the fact that he is a member of the Nazi Party, close to the Gestapo. His connections with the Nazi party allowed him to make an enormous amount of money through manufacturing war supplies for the German occupation armies. His Krakow enamel ware factory employed cheap labor from the Jewish ghetto and later interment camps associated with the "Jewish problem." He eventually saved 1,100 Jews from extermination.

In an interview in *Life* (December, 1993), Spielberg related that the making of this movie became a "labor of love." Haunted by the specter of Auschwitz and troubled by his own Jewishness, the movie prompted him to come of age. He also is firmly convinced that a holocaust can happen again. The stark reality, the development of the character of Oskar Schindler, and the documentary-like, black and white images of suppression and violence left my friends and me in a gloomy, but reflective mood.

As our discussion flowed effortlessly that evening, we focused on two significant questions, "How could this nightmare ever have happened?" and "Could this ever happen again?" Spielberg's film does not address these questions directly. That is not his intent. It is simply to tell the story in beautifully artistic terms and let the viewer address his/her own questions.

For an answer to my questions, I found myself turning not to Spielberg, but to Thomas Merton. Embedded in the large body of peace writings is a little known essay entitled "Auschwitz: A Family Camp." The name of the essay is taken from the 1963 testimony of one of the SS guards at Auschwitz. The SS guards were on trial in Frankfurt for crimes against

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humanity during the Nazi regime. This guard assured the Court that “No one wanted to escape from Auschwitz because it was, after all, a family camp.” As he spoke, he pointed out to the judges and courtroom spectators the locations on the Auschwitz camp diagram where the SS provided sandboxes and playground equipment for the children.

Merton scrupulously read the 450 pages of testimony from the twenty month trial, searching like Spielberg for an explanation of what happened. Like Spielberg, Merton describes the era graphically, recreating through the printed word a terrible image of life behind barbed wire and electric fence. Merton writes of the testimony taken from a former prisoner at Auschwitz:

The children were playing ball and waiting unsuspectingly . . . A woman guard came, and clapped her hands and called out: “All right now, let’s stop. Now we all take showers.” And then they ran down the steps into the room in which they undressed. And the guard took the little girl in her arm and carried her down. And the child pointed to the eagle emblem on the cap of the SS woman and asked: “What kind of birdie is that?” And that was the last I saw or heard of the child.

Spielberg and Merton differ primarily in their artistic expression, not in their passion for the truth. They share a capacity to recreate nightmarish images of extreme violence and profound human suffering. Merton, however, directly addresses the same questions my friends and I asked ourselves that night, “How could this happen?”

Merton states that the irony of Auschwitz is that the entire operation was masterminded and overseen not so much by madmen as by “ordinary respectable people” in an extraordinary situation. They did their jobs with prosaic efficiency and without question. They were products of a society at least as respectable and as civilized as London or New York. They had all received an education, some of them higher education. They had all been brought up in Christian middle class homes. They lived and interacted with respectable people both before and during the Hitler era. From the Court testimony it is clear that they were believers in the Nazi cause, but with varying degrees of remorse, some twenty years later. Some asked for leniency from the court because they had merely done their jobs as good policemen. It was precisely because they were so ordinary, Merton contends, that they did their jobs so well.

Secondly, Auschwitz worked well because people wanted it to work. They put the best of their energies into making it work. The visible and often gleeful conduct of the psychopathic guards is repulsive to anyone human, but what is clear is that the massive bureaucratic officialdom which orchestrated the entire nightmare was smooth, polite and determined to make the “cleansing” process work. The argument that the camp guards “had no choice” or that they “were forced” to comply with orders does not hold up to scrutiny. Almost all of the guards committed gratuitous and arbitrary acts of cruelty. There is no doubt that some of them tortured and killed because they enjoyed it. Some were actually punished by the SS for their violations of camp rules. Two circumstances kept them involved in their grim tasks: 1) Auschwitz was safe, safer than duty at the front; so they remained and performed their jobs; and 2) there were extra privileges for camp duty: rations, smokes, liquor—and that was attractive.

What about the question that haunts Spielberg and Merton: “Could it ever happen again?” Both of them answer in the affirmative. Merton contends that the roots of violence and oppression lie just beneath the surface of human beings. He singles out one governing principle which lay beneath the horrors in Poland and which can be activated at any time in human history: If anyone belonging to class X or nation Y or race Z is regarded as subhuman and worthless, having no right to exist, then “the rest will follow without difficulty.”

Such camps can be set up tomorrow anywhere and made to work with the greatest efficiency, because there is no dearth of people who would be glad to do the job, provided it is sanctioned by authority. They will be glad because they will instinctively welcome and submit to an ideology which enables them to be violent and destructive without guilt. They are happy with a belief which turns them loose against their fellow man to destroy him cruelly and without compunction, as long as he belongs to a different race, or believes in a different set of semi-meaningless political slogans.

Spielberg's film and Merton's essay confront us with what is demonic in the human situation. Both believed that keeping the memory of the holocaust alive reminds us of how seductive the structures of violence can be, and how easily we delude ourselves by thinking it can never happen again