

'Schindler's List' author's talk captivates students



Thomas Keneally talks to students about his book "Schindler's List" as Rena Finder, a Schindler survivor, looks on. Staff photo/Janeris Marte

By DAVID A. SCHWARTZ
STAFF WRITER

"Schindler's List" author Thomas Keneally captivated an audience

of more than 120 students from the Claire and Emanuel G. Rosenblatt High School at the Donna Klein Jewish

Academy when he discussed his 30-year-old, award-winning book last week at the Cultural Arts Center in Mizner Park.

Keneally, 77, who lives in Sydney, Australia, was in Boca Raton for a presentation at the Festival of the Arts Boca.

"Schindler's List" is "an incredible story. I'll never again come across a story as remarkable, as contradictory, as illuminating as the Schindler's story," Keneally said.

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▼ KENEALLY

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“Oskar Schindler was an opportunist who wanted to be rich. He was delighted with cheap labor,” Keneally told the students. Schindler viewed saving the Jews as a symbiotic relationship with his accountant and his workers at his factory, Keneally said.

“Oskar was not an intellectual like many of the members of the [SS] Einsatzgruppen, the special execution squads. He could not play Mozart. He hadn’t read Emanuel Kant or any of the great German philosophers. Yet he turned out to be the rescuer,” Keneally said, adding that the concept fascinated him.

The writing of “Schin-

dler’s List” resulted from a chance encounter, he said. In 1980 Keneally walked into a Beverly Hills, Calif. luggage store owned by Schindler survivor Leopold Pfefferberg. “He began to tell me about his history,” Keneally said. Pfefferberg showed the author two filing cabinets filled with material on Schindler and the list of workers in Schindler’s factory.

With Pfefferberg’s help, Keneally found and interviewed many of the more than 1,000 people that Schindler saved and access archives like those at Yad Vashem. He wrote the book in less than two years.

“I’m always amazed how small Europe is; how much malice is packed into a small place,” Keneally told the

students. “You also got huge hatreds packed into a small place,” he said, mentioning 1,500 years of anti-Semitism.

There was “an irrational mass hysteria about Jews,” Keneally said. “Discrimination was richly and obscenely at work in the lives of your ancestors.”

Keneally said that mass hysteria fascinated him. He said he was raised as a Catholic but “not in the anti-Semitic tradition.” Australia, he added, refused to admit Jews at the beginning of World War II.

Keneally introduced Rena Finder, an 84-year-old Schindler survivor who lives part of the year in Delray Beach. “I hope when you look at Rena, you see the

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▼ KENEALLY

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little girl," he said. "It's very hard to grasp why Hitler thought this charming woman here was somehow a virus on European culture that had to be exterminated at the age of 10. At the age of 12, she became a worker in Schindler's factory in Krakow.

Finder remembered Amon Goeth, commandant of the Plaszow forced labor camp where she and her mother were held. She called him "a sadistic, vicious murderer with no mercy, no understanding, no feelings. How could a person take a baby and throw it against a wall?" she said.

In the early morning hours, Goeth would stand with a rifle on the balcony of his chateau and shoot people as they were coming or going to work, Finder said.

He made the prisoners stand for hours during evening roll call, especially in snow or rain, she said. There were public hangings and torture, Finder said. "You just never knew if the next person was you. My eyes never met his because I thought if I did, he would shoot me. He was the worst, inhuman person that I have ever met."

Schindler saved her and her mother, Finder said. "I always felt that all he needed was wings. He was our angel."

One of her great regrets, she said, was that Schindler died young and didn't meet Keneally.

If not for the book and movie, no one would ever have heard about Schindler, she said referring to the Academy Award-winning film which premiered in the U.S. in 1993 and was shown around the world.

Finder said the movie became a tool to teach about the Holocaust. "It will go on teaching when we are no longer alive," she said. "It teaches that everyone can make a difference."

"Each one of you," Finder told the students, "has the power to do something if you see injustice. You must remember in order to have a better world, you must get involved."

Emma Zafran, an 18-year-old senior from Parkland, said Keneally was amazing. "He was witty and funny." Zafran said she was anxious to hear "how a non-Jewish writer would be interested in something so foreign to him and his own life."

Keneally talked about the book "as if he had written it yesterday," said Trevor Hier, 16, a sophomore from Boca Raton.



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