



THE LEGACY OF

# SCHINDLER'S LIST

A BLOOMINGTON FAMILY WOULD NOT BE  
ALIVE TODAY BUT FOR THE COURAGE AND  
COMPASSION OF OSKAR SCHINDLER.



(back row, l-r) Matthew Goldin, Arthur Fagen, Edwin Berman, Lewis Fagen, (middle row, l-r) Samantha Goldin, Alicia Fagen Goldin, Paulette Berman Fagen, Matthew Houghton, Rebecca Fagen Houghton, Harriett Berman, Rena Schöenthal Fagen, Gabriela Fagen, and (front row) Evelyn Goldin at the Fagen-Houghton wedding at the IU Auditorium on July 1, 2012. Photo by Megan Lindsey Photography

BY LEE ANN SANDWEISS

**Director Steven Spielberg's Academy Award-winning film *Schindler's List* tells the true story of German industrialist Oskar Schindler,**

who risked his life to save 1,100 Jews from the Nazi death camps in World War II. Today, there are nearly 7,000 living descendants of Schindlerjuden (Schindler's Jews). Bloomington residents Arthur Fagen and his daughters, Gabriela Fagen and Rebecca Fagen Houghton, are among them.

Arthur's parents, Lewis and Rena Fagen, owe their lives to Schindler. Protected by him in his factories, they survived the war and its aftermath, came to America, raised a family, and are still alive today.

Arthur, 62, is a professor of orchestral conducting at the IU Jacobs School of Music. He and his wife, Paulette, 60, and two of their three daughters have lived in Bloomington since 2008. In his career as a conductor, Arthur worked for many years in Germany, and also in Krakow, Poland, the city where his mother and father were first persecuted by the Nazis.





Oskar Schindler at a garden party in his honor at Lewis and Rena (Schönthal) Fagen's home on Long Island, New York, in 1957. Fourth from left is Bella Schönthal, Arthur's grandmother; Schindler is next, then Rena, and Lewis kneeling. *Photo courtesy of Lewis Fagen*

#### Schindler, savior and friend

“My parents knew Schindler quite well and he visited us at our home on Long Island in 1957,” recounts Arthur. “I was very young, so I don’t remember that visit, but in 1972, when I got my first job as assistant conductor of the Frankfurt [Germany] Opera, I saw Schindler many times. He took me to lunch and once even found a doctor for me when I needed one. He wasn’t in very good shape by then. He lived in a rundown apartment building near the Frankfurt train station. If he had lived to see the book [*Schindler’s List*] and film come out, he would have died a wealthy man.”

Lewis Fagen, 88, has many memories of Oskar Schindler, who died in 1974 and is buried in Jerusalem. He remembers him as being very similar to how he is portrayed by actor Liam Neeson in the film—a larger-than-life, handsome man with lusty appetites, particularly for women and alcohol. To this day, though, Schindler’s motive for risking his own life to save those of his Jewish employees remains a mystery to Lewis.

“At the beginning, I think he just wanted to make money. But I also think that once he got to know his Jewish workers, he became attached to them, and it became his mission to save as many as he could,” says Lewis, who saw Schindler many times when visiting Arthur in Frankfurt. “He was an adventurer and a raconteur. Maybe the risk he took was his way of beating

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the Nazis. He never divulged his reasons to me. But it doesn’t matter why he did what he did. He saved us.”

#### The Nazis arrive

Before the war, Lewis (Ludwik) Feigenbaum (changed to Fagen in 1947) and his future wife, Rena Schönthal, were childhood friends and neighbors in Krakow, enjoying the comforts of upper-middle-class family life. Rena’s father, Aaron, was a successful importer of fruits and nuts, and Lewis’ father, Jakub, was a nationwide sales representative for Kaminski, a large Polish bicycle manufacturer. Young Lewis’ friends envied him because he got a new bike every year.

After Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, conditions in Krakow rapidly deteriorated, especially for the Jews. Lewis and Rena, both high school students at the time, could no longer attend school and for a few months studied at the homes of their teachers, until even that wasn’t possible.

“Jewish homes were invaded and searched and looted. People were beaten in the streets,” Lewis recalls. “Eventually, we had to move to the ghetto, which was surrounded by an eight-foot-high wall. Our family shared quarters with another family, six people to a room. We barely survived. There were as many as 32,000 people there. The ghetto was raided by the SS every few months, and people were transported to the death camps. When

the ghetto was liquidated, we were moved to Plaszów, a work camp near Krakow that became a concentration camp. The camp commandant [Amon Goeth, played by actor Ralph Fiennes in the movie] was a bloody murderer. He would kill people whenever he got the whim.”

#### Schindler and his list

Schindler, an ethnic German born in what today is the Czech Republic, was a Nazi party member who had worked in German intelligence. Shortly after the Nazis invaded Poland, he used his connections to take over a Jewish-owned enamelware factory outside of Krakow. Schindler named the factory Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik (DEF) and replaced the factory’s paid Polish workers with forced Jewish labor to produce cookware and, later, munitions for the German army.

#### Rena on the list

Rena’s father, Aaron, and her brother, Paul, had passports and left Poland for Italy before the Nazis arrived, thinking that Rena and her mother would soon be able to follow. (Father and son would later go on to North Africa and eventually to the United States.) But Rena and her mother were in Krakow when the Nazis invaded. The original Jewish owner of DEF was a distant relative of Rena’s family and saw to it that they got jobs at DEF and were added to Schindler’s list.

Between 1939 and the end of the war, Schindler spent all of his own money trying to save as many Jews as possible by listing them as skilled factory workers, even though some—elderly, handicapped, and children—were clearly not. In 1944, as the Nazis accelerated the extermination of Jews, he opened another forced labor camp/factory in Brünnlitz, Czechoslovakia, where he planned to send 1,100 Jewish workers on his list. But later that year, 300 of Schindler’s female workers who were supposed to go Brünnlitz were mistakenly taken by cattle car to Auschwitz—Rena and her mother, Bella, among them.

Rena and Lewis Fagen at a celebration for the film’s DVD release with actors Ralph Fiennes (left), who played the sadistic camp commander Amon Goeth in the movie, and Sir Ben Kingsley (second from right), who played Schindler’s accountant, Itzhak Stern. *Photo courtesy of Lewis Fagen*



(l-r) Paulette and Arthur Fagen with their daughters, Rebecca and Gabriela. *Photo by Shannon Zahnle*

## The Fagen Family of Bloomington

Arthur Fagen and his wife Paulette, with daughters Rebecca and Gabriela, moved to Bloomington in August 2008 from Hewlett, New York, so Arthur could begin his appointment as professor of music (orchestral conducting) at the IU Jacobs School of Music. The family had recently spent five years living in Germany, where Arthur served as the music director of the Dortmund Philharmonic Orchestra and the Dortmund Opera.

The Fagens quickly embraced their new life in Bloomington. “We enjoy the ease of living, cultural offerings, and slow food movement with local produce so readily available,” says Paulette. “Arthur rides his bike, hikes with Rebecca and her husband, Matt, and in the warmer months, he swims every clear day in Lake Monroe.”

Since moving to Bloomington, Paulette, a former opera singer who also holds a law degree, has had an opportunity to pursue her dual passions of writing and quilting. She is involved with Women Writing for (a) Change of Bloomington and serves on the board of the Bloomington Quilters’ Guild. She has also become an ardent fan of IU basketball.

Rebecca, 29, who received a masters of public affairs from IU’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs in 2011, currently works as project coordinator for the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project at IU. She married Matthew Houghton, a manager of Lennie’s Restaurant, at the IU Auditorium in July 2012.

Gabriela, 18, is a senior at Bloomington High School South (BHSS). Selected as a 2012 *Herald-Times* Arts Star, she has participated in Sounds of South and Theatre South at BHSS, Youth Theatre, Monroe County Civic Theater, and the University Children’s Choir.

The eldest Fagen daughter, Alicia, 34, and her husband, Matthew Goldin, are attorneys living in the Boston area. They have two daughters, Evelyn, 6, and Samantha, 3—the newest generation of Schindler survivor offspring.



“At first we didn’t realize where we were, but when we saw the chimneys and smoke, we knew,” says Rena, 87, who turned 19 at Auschwitz. “My mother was pulled into a line by Doctor [Josef] Mengele, who conducted medical experiments on prisoners, but somehow she worked her way back into my group. Our hair was cut and shaved, and when we were sent to the showers there was a rumor that gas, not water, would come out. I kept thinking, “This cannot be the end.’ I never lost hope.”

Schindler arrived at Auschwitz three and half weeks later and, using bribes, rescued the women. This is the only recorded case in the history of Auschwitz in which so many inmates were allowed to leave at one time while the gas chambers were in operation.

#### Lewis on the list

Lewis, his parents, and his sister, Janina (“Janka”), were not originally on Schindler’s list but were added to it because their boss at the factory where they worked, making uniforms for the German army, knew Schindler.

Remembers Lewis, “Our boss asked Schindler to save his employees. Forty names were added to his list, including ours. My sister, Janka, was still alive when we went to the Brünnlitz factory.”

## ‘At first we didn’t realize where we were, but when we saw the chimneys and smoke, we knew.’

For several years, Janka, who was 23 at the time of her death, had been in pain from an undiagnosed back ailment. “It could have been a slipped disc. I don’t believe it was cancer,” says Lewis. “Our parents planned to get her the best medical care possible once the war ended. But she was given a lethal injection by the camp doctor—a Jewish doctor. She was killed four weeks before the end of the war.”

Schindler made it possible for Lewis and his father to bury Janka on the Brünnlitz camp grounds, defying the Nazi order that all prisoner corpses be cremated; cremation is against Jewish law. After the war, Janka’s body was exhumed and interred in the New Jewish Cemetery in Prague, the same cemetery where Franz Kafka is buried.

#### Rena and Lewis in America

About 90 percent of Poland’s Jewish population of 3.3 million perished during the war. Lewis Fagen, like many Polish Jewish survivors who tried to return home after the Nazis’ defeat, discovered that anti-Semitism was still rampant

in his homeland. “When I tried to return to my family’s apartment in Krakow, I was surrounded by a mob that was shouting, ‘Kill the Jews,’” Lewis says. “I narrowly escaped and knew then that we had to leave Poland.”

Lewis and his parents, Jakub and Natalja, arrived in New York City in January 1947. Upon arrival, Lewis saw a man he knew from Krakow at the dock.

“I asked him, ‘Who is here from Krakow?’ and he said, ‘Rena is here,’” Lewis recalls. “He had her uncle’s phone number, and I called her.”

In December 1946, Rena and her mother had arrived in New York and were reunited with her father, whom they had not seen in six years. Once a successful international executive, he was now a cashier in a cafeteria. Her brother, Paul, who had joined Britain’s Royal Air Force during the war, emigrated to Canada and eventually made his way to New York.

Lewis and Rena saw each other only twice before he moved with his parents to Chicago at the invitation of an uncle who owned a

plumbing supply business there. His father, Jakub, who had once apprenticed to a jeweler in Krakow, started making jewelry and sizing rings at home with the help of his wife, Natalja. In 1948 the family returned to New York City and opened a shop on 5th Avenue. Lewis and Rena, their long-distance courtship behind them now, became engaged and were married in 1949. Arthur was born in New York in 1951; his brother, Lester, arrived three years later.

**“Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire.”** In this scene from the movie, *Schindler* (Liam Neeson), ready to flee at war’s end, is presented with a ring by his accountant Itzhak Stern (Sir Ben Kingsley). The ring, which Schindler received in real life, bears the above inscription in Hebrew. (Universal Studios)

Twenty years later, the senior Fagens have fond memories of Spielberg and their involvement with the film, which went on to win seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director.

“Steven Spielberg flew us first class to Jerusalem and put us up in the King David Hotel for a week while the epilogue was being filmed,” says Lewis, who also appears on the film’s 10th anniversary DVD, in a bonus documentary called *Voices from the List*, made



Arthur’s parents  
Rena and Lewis  
Fagen in Los Angeles  
with *Schindler’s  
List* director Steven  
Spielberg for the DVD  
release of the film in  
2004. Photo courtesy  
of Lewis Fagen

#### Spielberg and the movie

Rena and Lewis, who have been married for 63 years and now live in a retirement community in Delray Beach, Florida, were operating their own jewelry business in New York in 1981 when a friend of theirs, also a Schindler Jew, brought writer Thomas Keneally to interview them. Keneally was doing research for his prize-winning novel, *Schindler’s List*, from which the Oscar-winning screenplay for Spielberg’s film was adapted.

In 1993, Spielberg flew Rena and Lewis and three other American Schindlerjuden to Jerusalem for the filming of the moving epilogue of *Schindler’s List*. In the film’s final scene, Jews saved by Schindler and some of their descendants place stones on his tombstone in the Roman Catholic Franciscans’ cemetery on Mount Zion; the placing of stones on a grave is a Jewish tradition that displays gratitude for the deceased.

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by Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation. “He is an unbelievable human being—so modest even though he is so successful.”

In June 2009, Rena and Lewis Fagen celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary in Krakow with their children and grandchildren. At the time, Arthur was temporarily conducting the Krakow Philharmonic Orchestra. It was very poignant for the family as they visited the Plaszów work camp, the DEF factory (now an historic site), Auschwitz, and the old Jewish quarter, while listening to Lewis and Rena recount their memories.

“My parents feel that as realistic as the movie was, the reality was much harsher, almost unimaginable,” Arthur says. “I spent many years of my life in Germany, wondering, ‘How could this have happened here?’” ✨

To see the names of the Feigenbaum and Schönthal family members as they appear on Schindler’s list, go to [oskarschindler.com/list.htm](http://oskarschindler.com/list.htm).