

A TRUE STORY

The film *The Pianist* is based on Wladislaw Szpilman's autobiography describing his experiences in Warsaw during the Second World War. Looking back to the work that you carried out on the role of feature films and the interpretation of history, we now need to add another element to the mix. How useful is someone's autobiography to our understanding of historical events?

Firstly, read the review of the book printed on page 2.

When you have done this try to answer the following questions:

1. How does the reviewer describe the atmosphere of Szpilman's autobiography?
2. Is the atmosphere of the film similar to this?
3. From the events described in the review, how faithful do you think the film director Roman Polanski has been to the book?
4. What impression of the Holocaust does the book seem to give?
5. What does the reviewer think are the positive aspects of the book?
6. Judging from the comments made by the reviewer, what do you think attracted Roman Polanski to the story? It is worth remembering that Polanski was himself confined in a ghetto during the Second World War.



**EXCERPT FROM A REVIEW OF SZPILMAN'S
BOOK THE PIANIST**

MICHAEL FRANK, Los Angeles Times, 16 January 2000

THE PIANIST

The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945

By Wladyslaw Szpilman. Translated from the Polish by Anthea Bell

Picador, USA - 240 pp., \$23

It has all the rawness and specificity of horrors painfully and uncomprehendingly withstood and afterward just as uncomprehendingly - but necessarily - recorded. Writing this book would seem to have been a further act of survival by a man who performed more of them in six years than most human beings do in a lifetime.

Szpilman regards everyone with the same sharp unsentimental eye. Jews are good and not so good ('A scoundrel will still be a scoundrel,' as Biermann points out, 'behind barbed wire'). Germans are ninety-nine per cent horrific, but one individual emerges as the opposite. Friends turn into traitors; strangers offer a lifesaving kindness. To borrow from Primo Levi: There is no why here.

There is only how. To conscientious observers of the last century - and millennium - at the centre of this book is one of the largest hows in all of human inquiry: how one people set about systematically and relentlessly annihilating another? It is a how that Szpilman tells with clarity, intelligence, candor and courage.

Six decades ago, he was a beginning pianist, also living in Warsaw, in an apartment on Sliska Street with his parents, his two sisters and his brother. After the Nazis invaded Poland, their street was swallowed up in the newly created ghetto, where half a million Polish Jews were confined in a neighbourhood that previously accommodated a hundred thousand. As the war advanced, their psychological and actual space was increasingly constricted as the Nazis implemented what Szpilman calls their 'system of exerting pressure by gradual stages'. One fact occupied Szpilman's family's minds "every hour and every minute": They were shut in. Prison, he says~ would have been better; prison at least did not torment you with 'reminders of the free life you have lost'.

Szpilman renders the early war years in inexorable, visceral, day-to-day bleakness. The mundane and the macabre alternate, as though in some senseless dream. For a time he continues to play the piano in a fashionable cafe. (Later he will sort clothes, dig trenches, work as a mason, smuggle ammunition to fighters in the ghetto's uprising.) There are parallel lives in the ghetto as elsewhere: people of means reside among people with none, but lice do not discriminate. Nor, eventually, do vermin, typhus, hunger, filth. Or danger. Or corpses, which



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appear on streets good and bad, wrapped in paper or decomposing or stacked up like logs. During a random purge, he sees a man in the apartment opposite thrown out of a window. The man is still sitting in his armchair; only in mid air does his body separate from the cushion. Then he falls to his death.

Soon the 'resettlement' comes, with its horrific selections, its train cars smelling of chlorine, its sudden eerie stillness. There is a miracle. As Szpilman was about to board the train with his parents and siblings, a police officer - Jewish, a former friend plucks him from the crowd and sets him free. He calls to Papa, who waves goodbye, 'as if I were setting out into life and he was already greeting me from beyond the grave'. He flings himself against the policeman's shoulders, tries to rejoin them. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' roars the policeman. 'Go on, save yourself.'

And he does. 'Torn irrevocably from everything that had made up my life until now,' Szpilman makes up a different sort of life for himself. A life that becomes about survival and nothing more.

There are many ways to read a book about the Holocaust, and one of them, surely, inevitably, is to try to answer the unanswerable. What makes one man adyre when so many others succumb? We can only learn from those who testify; the others, of course, are mute. From Szpilman's testimony we learn this: It is an ineffable and wholly unpredictable mixture of fate, determination, accident, instinct. Szpilman's instincts, his intuitions and inklings are strong; several times he comes to a fork in the road and, following a hunch, makes the right choice. Also he thinks clearly: he knows where to find crusts of bread, and how to shake them free of mouse droppings. He figures out how to thaw frozen water he puts a bowl on his stomach, covers it with a blanket, waits. He is disciplined: Through the long, lonely hours he keeps his watch wound and his calendar current.

He learns one essential thing about himself. Hiding out in a building that catches fire, he decides to take his own life rather than be captured by the Nazis. He swallows sleeping pills and bids consciousness farewell. But he has not taken enough pills. He wakes up the next morning. Miraculously, the building still stands. Equally miraculously, he finds that his first emotion is not 'disappointment that I had failed to die, but joy to find myself alive. A boundless, animal lust for life at any price.'



ANOTHER VIEW

Having looked at the review of Szpilman's book, it is now worth looking at another way in which a person's life is portrayed – after their death in an obituary. Below is printed Szpilman's obituary from the Independent newspaper from 14 August 2000 (written only a few months after the book review on page 2).

Read the obituary and then answer the following questions:

1. What similarities are there between the moments in Szpilman's life which are mentioned in the obituary and those which are mentioned in the book review shown in the film.
2. How is Szpilman portrayed in his obituary?
3. What do you think is important about Szpilman's life that merits such a detailed obituary?
4. What impression of the Holocaust is given in the obituary? Compare this view with that in both the book review and also in the film.



OBITUARY OF WLADYSLAW SZPILMAN

By MARTIN ANDERSON, Independent, 14 August 2000

When the shells of the invading Nazis forced the closure of Polish Radio on 23 September 1939, the last live music heard was Wladyslaw Szpilman's performance of Chopin's C sharp minor Nocturne. When broadcasting was resumed in 1945, it was again Szpilman who initiated the transmissions, with the same Chopin Nocturne. What happened to Szpilman in the interim formed the stuff of one of the most harrowing of all accounts of Jewish life under the Nazis, in a book published last year as *The Pianist* that immediately climbed to the top of the international bestseller lists --- hardly surprisingly: it is a compelling, harrowing masterpiece.

Szpilman wrote *Death of a City* (the initial title of his memoir) in 1945 more or less as therapy --- to put his memories down on paper and thus somehow to externalise them. In doing so he revealed that he was a masterly writer: his text matches a sharp eye for detail and for human character with a complete absence of self-pity and of sanctimony.

For the first two years of the occupation Szpilman played in the bars and cafés that continued to open for business behind the walls of the ghetto, sealed off from the rest of Warsaw on 15 November 1940. Szpilman records life there with dignity and dispassion. He recalls watching the SS forcing a group of prisoners out of a building:

They switched on the headlights of their car, forced their prisoners to stand in the beam, started the engines and made the men run ahead of them in the white cone of light. We heard convulsive screaming from the windows of the building, and a volley of shots from the car. The men running ahead of it fell one by one, lifted into the air by the bullets, turning somersaults and describing a circle, as if the passage from life to death consisted of an extremely difficult and complicated leap.

Time and again, chance dictated that Szpilman escape death. The end seemed finally to have come when he and his family were ordered to turn up at the Umschlagsplatz where, skirting the rotting corpses around them, they were to be herded onto trains headed for the gas chambers. Szpilman's last memory of his family is movingly understated:

At one point a boy made his way through the crowd in our direction with a box of sweets on a string round his neck. He was selling them at ridiculous prices, although heaven knows what he was going to do with the money. Scraping together the last of our small change, we bought a single cream caramel. Father divided it into six parts with his penknife. That was our last meal together.

But as the Szpilmans were being crammed onto the train, one of the Jewish policemen grabbed Wladyslaw by the collar, yanked him out of the throng and refused to let him through to rejoin his family on the journey to death. Szpilman continued to avoid death's clutches,



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surviving against all odds, often half-starved and usually alone, hidden in obscure corners of bombed, burned or empty buildings, intermittently helped by Polish friends risking their own lives to bring him food or find him shelter: helping a Jew automatically brought a death sentence. The strangest twist in Szpilman's strange story came at its end: he was discovered by a German officer who, after Szpilman had given proof of his profession by playing that same C sharp minor Nocturne on an abandoned piano, hid him and brought him food and an eiderdown for warmth.

Not the least extraordinary aspect of Szpilman's book is the complete lack of the indignation and anger that anyone writing immediately after such years of hell might reasonably be expected to allow himself. Yet even the grim vignettes of pointless death that are studded through his text don't draw judgement --- perhaps because none was necessary:

TASK

1. Looking at these two sources, how useful are they for understanding what happened in the Warsaw Ghetto?
2. What do you discover about Szpilman from these two sources?
3. How do these sources compliment the film?
4. 'Based on a true story' – how do these words at the front of a film affect the ways in which you understand and respond to it?
5. How do you think that Roman Polanski's own experiences in a ghetto might have affected the ways in which he shot the film?

