

THE PIANIST

A ROMAN POLANSKI FILM

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Dear Educator:

Roman Polanski's **THE PIANIST** – awarded Best Picture honors (the Palme d'Or) at the 2002 Cannes International Film Festival and a Golden Globe nominee for Best Picture - Drama – offers you and your students an unprecedented opportunity to study the way in which art can give meaning and hope to people even in the bleakest of times.

THE PIANIST is based on the true story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, an acclaimed pianist and a Polish Jew, who survived the Holocaust in Warsaw through an extraordinary combination of faith, courage, luck, and the will to live. The film recreates Szpilman's experiences with meticulous historical accuracy, from the moment when his live radio performance was broken off by a Nazi air raid to his triumphant return to the airwaves and the concert stage at the war's end. Along the way we follow Szpilman and his family into the Warsaw Ghetto, and watch as he is plucked from the line that took the rest of his family to the Treblinka death camp. We see him risk death with other Jewish resistance fighters as they plan the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, then join him in the lonely hiding places where, for more than two years, with the help of non-Jewish protectors, he evaded capture while the city of Warsaw collapsed around him. And we witness his astonishing encounter with a Nazi officer who listened to the music Szpilman held within him and helped him survive the war's final days.

But **THE PIANIST** is not only the story of a Holocaust survivor. It is the testimony of a survivor as well. Roman Polanski also lived through the bombing of Warsaw and, when barely seven years old, escaped the Cracow Ghetto and deportation to the death camps by squeezing through a barbed-wire fence and hiding with a non-Jewish family. His childhood memories of those times, his emotional ties to those who did not survive them, are in this film as well, adding the impact of lived reality to the drama of Szpilman's remarkable story.

This free study guide, made possible by Focus Features, is designed to help you include **THE PIANIST** in your history, social studies, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and film studies classes. The guide includes four reproducible activity sheets that lead students step by step through the stages of Szpilman's story, raising questions that will provoke critical thinking about the choices he made and encourage an imaginative response to his soul-testing experiences. The activity sheets also provide students with a timeline charting key events of the Holocaust and World War II, and a list of resources for further study.

We encourage you to share this study guide with other teachers in your school. Though the materials are copyrighted, you have permission to reproduce all components of the guide for educational purposes.

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Sincerely,

Dr. Dominic Kinsley
Editor in Chief

THE PIANIST



T E A C H E R ' S G U I D E

Introduction

Based on the true story of a Holocaust survivor, *THE PIANIST* takes viewers back to those times of fear, hope, and suffering, when a community of nearly half a million Warsaw Jews was systematically destroyed until only about 20 remained. It is the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, an acclaimed pianist, who became one of those 20 through an extraordinary combination of faith, courage, endurance, and miraculous luck.

A Focus Features presentation, in association with Alain Sarde and Robert Benmussa, of a Roman Polanski film, *THE PIANIST* stars Adrien Brody as Wladyslaw Szpilman, Thomas Kretschmann as Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, the Nazi officer who finally sealed Szpilman's survival, Frank Finlay and Maureen Lipman as Szpilman's father and mother, Emilia Fox as Dorota, the non-Jewish woman who helped Szpilman survive outside the Ghetto, Ed Stoppard as Szpilman's brother Henryk, and Julia Rayner and Jessica Kate Meyer as his sisters Regina and Halina. Based on the memoir written by Wladyslaw Szpilman just after the end of World War II, with a screenplay by Ronald Harwood, *THE PIANIST* is directed by Roman Polanski and won Best Picture honors (Palme d'Or) at the 2002 Cannes International Film Festival and is a Golden Globe nominee for Best Picture - Drama.

Target Audience

This study guide is designed for high school and college classes in history, social studies, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, and film studies.

Program Objectives

- To enrich student viewing of *THE PIANIST* by providing background information on the Holocaust and the historical circumstances surrounding this true story.
- To explore the meaning of the Holocaust, both for those who lived through it, whether as victims or perpetrators, and those who live with its legacy today.
- To examine the moral choices faced by those caught up in the Holocaust and weigh our own efforts to cope with prejudice against their example.
- To bear witness to the lessons of the Holocaust through the experiences of a survivor who shared the horror and the hope of those who perished.

Using the Program Components

- Provide photocopies of the enclosed classroom activity sheets to all students in your class. Share a photocopy of this teacher's guide and the activity sheets with other teachers in your school.
- The program's activities trace the stages of Wladyslaw Szpilman's story as told in *THE PIANIST* and should be presented in their numbered sequence.
- Plan to use the activities both as preparation for viewing the film and as a basis for discussion afterward. The activity sheets include timelines that will help students identify historical events that often occur with the immediacy of lived experience in the film, and help them place these events in the broader context of World War II. The activities can also help focus student attention on key episodes in the film and provide a set of reference points for follow-up reflection and discussion.
- High school teachers should be aware that, due to the intensity of the subject, *THE PIANIST* is rated R for violence and brief strong language, which means that viewers under age 17 should see it in the company of an adult.

A C T I V I T Y O N E

Facing Catastrophe

This activity introduces students to Roman Polanski's *THE PIANIST* and provides some basic background information on the Holocaust, including a timeline of the main events in Nazi Germany that foreshadowed persecution of the Jews in all territories that came under Nazi control. Review these facts, which should be familiar to most of your students, and that part of the timeline that covers events during the first two years of World War II (1939-40), pointing out how at every step the Nazi campaign for political domination included taking action against European Jews.

I. An Instinct for Survival

Part one of the activity focuses on Wladyslaw Szpilman (*lad-iz-law shpeel-mann*), exploring his character as portrayed in the film by contrasting his response to prejudice with those of his non-Jewish friend Dorota, and his brother Henryk. In general, students should discover that Szpilman, while not a man to withhold judgment, is inclined to value human relationships over absolute standards of right and wrong. His actions are guided by

respect for and devotion to others, and gauged to resolve the immediate crisis rather than make a point. For him, life goes on after what others might regard as a climactic scene, and he aims to preserve the fabric of life – the bonds that tie us to one another – against circumstances that could tear it apart. This more than anything, perhaps, makes him a survivor, for no matter how bleak the situation, he looks past it in hope for the future.

Suggested Answers

- a. When newly imposed restrictions against Jews threaten his lunch date with Dorota, Szpilman puts her feelings ahead of his own and tries to defuse the situation by treating the moral outrage as though it were no more than a social gaffe. In his view, they need not let the forces of prejudice set the rules for their relationship. Dorota, on the other hand, sees the situation in more absolute terms and her first reaction is to 'make a scene' – dramatize her moral outrage by challenging the restaurant's policy. Though obviously motivated by affection for Szpilman, her response to some degree pushes him aside in favor of what he stands for.
- b. When the Jewish policeman, Itzak Heller, offers Szpilman and his brother, Henryk, good paying jobs on the force, Szpilman tries to ignore the man's deeply offensive assumption that he is willing to collaborate with the Nazis for money and acknowledge instead Heller's genuinely good intentions, the spirit behind this gesture of friendship, by declining with an explanation that he already has a job, as though this prior obligation were the only thing standing in his way. Henryk, by contrast, treats Heller's offer as a personal insult and answers with insults of his own, turning the situation into a moral showdown.
- c. To save his brother, Szpilman is willing to sacrifice his own self-respect and beg Itzak Heller for help. He puts his faith in their personal relationship, reaching out to the man inside the hated uniform in hopes of prompting a reciprocal gesture. Henryk, by contrast, will not look beyond the uniform and deeply resents the fact that he now owes his life to a traitor. For him, this is a form of collaboration, and he would rather cut himself off from all personal relationships – take care of his own business – than risk such a moral compromise again.

II. Crisis Situations

Part two of the activity invites students to examine their own moral reflexes in light of Szpilman's example by discussing how they would respond to four prejudice-charged situations. Students might note that these situations correspond in some ways to those Szpilman faces in the film: coping with prejudice in a social setting, recognizing its presence in an otherwise

appealing opportunity, and responding when prejudice threatens physical harm. For some students, confrontation might seem the appropriate course of action in all these situations, and they would be right to argue that prejudice cannot be eliminated until it is exposed. But, as Szpilman's example may suggest, confrontation can also create a moral dead-end, leaving the situation itself unresolved and the individuals involved more sharply divided than before. In the end, students should realize that handling situations like these requires moral judgment, as well as moral conviction, and that examining such situations from several points of view is a way to improve moral judgment, not an exercise intended to set the moral course they should take.

Follow-Up

1. Discuss the director's use of point of view in THE PIANIST, which enables us to see these events as personal experiences rather than as historical examples. How does this technique help us understand how people lived through what, from our perspective, seem hopeless times? How does it open our eyes to the human truth of events we might otherwise simply categorize as good or evil?
2. Have students report on life in the Warsaw Ghetto, where, despite the constant threat of starvation and disease, Jews managed to create a community and preserve many of their social traditions. Students might investigate, for example, the educational system developed for children in the Ghetto, the rich cultural life that included five theaters and weekly symphony concerts, the lively exchange of political views, or the importance of books in Ghetto life, whether they offered the diversions of popular fiction or the rewards of serious study.

A C T I V I T Y T W O

Resisting Hate

This activity explores the nature of resistance during the Holocaust, looking at episodes from THE PIANIST that are set against the background of two tragic turning-points in the history of the Warsaw Ghetto: the 1942 deportation of more than 300,000 Ghetto inhabitants to the death camp at

Treblinka, and the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Use the timeline to help students place these events in historical context, noting, for example, that the mass murder of Warsaw's Jews was but one part of a carefully orchestrated Nazi plan that included "research" into different means for genocide, construction of specially designed death camps, high-level bureaucratic planning, and coordination of transportation resources across Europe.

I. Passive Heroism

The activity starts with a question posed by a character in THE PIANIST that has troubled many historians of the Holocaust: Why didn't more Jews fight back? The first part of the activity examines explanations offered by two Holocaust victims, Emanuel Ringelblum, a chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto who was executed by the Nazis in 1944, and Elie Wiesel, a Nobel Prize winner who survived the death camp at Auschwitz. Both find heroism and strength in the Jews' non-violent response to their persecutors, reminding us that by not striking back they protected other members of the Jewish community from reprisals for their actions and preserved their own humanity in the midst of an inhuman situation. The activity asks students to look at three episodes from the Szpilman family's last hours together for evidence of this self-sacrificing, life-affirming form of resistance.

Suggested Answers

- a. Szpilman's siblings reject a Nazi offer to remain in the Ghetto and instead join their parents at the railyard from which they will be deported to Treblinka. Szpilman calls their choice "stupid" because, unlike them, he knows where the day's journey will end. But for his siblings, this was not a choice between life and death. They saw it as a choice between separation and sharing their family's fate, whatever it might be. By their actions, they resisted the Nazi pressure to put self-preservation above everything, putting their faith instead in the human values of family life, despite the self-sacrifice that required.
- b. When Szpilman's father gathers the family's last pennies to buy a piece of candy they can share, he effectively acknowledges that

they will not need money where they are going and exchanges their cash for something more valuable, a moment that reaffirms their pleasure in one another and the bonds that hold them together. Resisting the destructive forces that surround them, he stages a family ritual to celebrate what they have preserved – their love, their loyalty to one another, and their family identity.

- c. Szpilman's decision to accept Heller's spontaneous gift of life might seem to be a choice for self-preservation over family loyalty. But Szpilman knows at this point that his family is doomed and that his survival is the only way to preserve even a remnant of what their life together has stood for. Although his first and strongest impulse is to rejoin them, he recognizes finally that he must sacrifice those attachments and act instead to help them survive in him. By so doing, he resists the pressure to see this as a hopeless situation in which he must preserve his own sense of integrity at all costs and accepts the responsibility to preserve his family's hope for the future as a survivor.

II. Taking Action

The second part of this activity looks at the question of resistance from the other side, focusing on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in which Jewish fighters struck back at the Nazis and battled to the death against impossible odds. Students should recognize that by taking a stand these heroes served as inspiration for others and proved with their lives that the spirit of resistance could not be destroyed. At the same time, they might recognize Szpilman's decision to leave the Ghetto as another form of active resistance, since he too is striking back at the Nazis with his life, deliberately placing himself in jeopardy in defiance of their edicts and power. And like the Ghetto fighters, Szpilman also serves as an inspiration to others, reinforcing the spirit of resistance in the non-Jews who help him survive.

Follow-Up

1. Have students research the history of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and report on uprisings at other Ghettos, concentration camps, and even at some death camps. In



October 1943, for example, Jews staged an armed revolt at the Sobibor death camp, and in October 1944 Jews at Auschwitz succeeded in blowing up one of the death camp's crematoriums.

2. One of the seemingly bleakest memoirs of the Holocaust is Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Have students read this short book with a special eye for Wiesel's descriptions of the small acts of kindness that preserved humanity in the midst of inhumanity and kept his main character's hopes alive.

A C T I V I T Y T H R E E

Life in Hiding

This activity focuses on Szpilman's experience during the last years of the Holocaust, when he lived in hiding with the protection of non-Jews active in the Polish resistance. Use the timeline to help students place this chapter of Szpilman's story in historical context, and point out how, when the military struggle turned against them, the Nazis still kept up their assault on European Jews, finding ways to continue the killing even as they were forced to retreat.

I. The Search for Meaning

Part one of this activity invites students to enter imaginatively into the world of isolation and fear that was Szpilman's existence during his years in hiding to learn where he might have found the will to survive. Admittedly, this is the most mysterious part of Szpilman's story, for we cannot really even imagine what it means to wait day after day in fear of discovery or starvation and still live out every day in hope that the wait will end. Yet by dramatizing this experience, *THE PIANIST* offers a glimpse into the mystery and a starting point for exploring its significance.

Suggested Answers

- a. In addition to bewilderment, Szpilman may feel the workings of providence in his reunion with Dorota and find reason to hope that all the episodes of his past life are leading, however unpredictably, toward a future.
- b. The piano also represents a connection to Szpilman's past and an opportunity to reaffirm the meaning his life had then, though he cannot fully realize that meaning by actually playing the piano now.
- c. Again, we can imagine that Szpilman sees Dorota as an agent of providence when she rescues him from starvation, and as a precursor of his own survival when she tells him that she is escaping Warsaw for a safe haven in the country.
- d. Witnessing the defeat of the Warsaw resistance fighters likely reminds

Szpilman of the earlier failure of the Ghetto uprising and makes his survival seem more precarious than ever. Yet at the same time he must see their dead bodies in the street as a grim admonition that, as a survivor, he too must fight on.

- e. Szpilman's escape to the abandoned hospital involves a series of near fatal encounters with Nazi troops, the most gruesome of which is his feigning death among the corpses on the street to avoid a Nazi patrol. We might imagine that, in reflection, he saw this rising from the dead as another sign that he would survive.

II. The Courage to Care

This part of the activity focuses briefly on the role non-Jews played in helping survivors like Szpilman emerge from the Holocaust. After providing students with some background on the honor roll of these "Righteous Among the Nations" kept at Yad Vashem in Israel, the activity asks students to imagine a similar story of rescue in our times, not one, perhaps, that involves risk of death for the rescuer, but one that illustrates how a single individual can make a life-preserving difference by having the courage to care.

Follow-Up

1. Students can further explore life in hiding by reading or re-reading the diary of Anne Frank, who survived more than two years with her family in an Amsterdam hiding place before an informant revealed them to the Gestapo. "In spite of everything," she wrote, "I still believe that people are really good at heart," leaving a testimony to the instinct for meaning that sustains human life.
2. Have students visit the Yad Vashem web site to learn more about the "Righteous Among the Nations," many of whom are profiled there. Students might also research the individuals behind some of the most famous rescue efforts mounted during the Holocaust: Raoul Wallenberg in Hungary, Varian Fry in France, Chiune Sugihara in Lithuania, and Oskar Schindler in Poland.

A C T I V I T Y F O U R

Survivors

This final activity focuses on the climax of *THE PIANIST*, when Szpilman's survival depends on his musical talent and the music of Chopin, which stir the human nature of the Nazi officer who finally discovers him. Use the list of books and web sites included on this activity sheet to encourage students to learn more about the Holocaust and its historic significance.

I. Reflection

This part of the activity asks students to reflect on the relationship between Szpilman and Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, the Nazi officer who chooses to let him live. Students may not at first recognize that there is a relationship between these two men, seeing the episode only as another lucky break in Szpilman's charmed life. But Szpilman is not the only one who benefits from this encounter, for by trusting Hosenfeld he gives him not only an opportunity for moral action but also the respect his uniform has long denied him, breaking the Nazi stereotype to let Hosenfeld live as a free man. In this sense, both Szpilman and Hosenfeld stand as survivors at this moment, Szpilman a survivor of hate's power to destroy others, Hosenfeld a survivor of hate's power to destroy the soul.

II. Remembrance

This part of the activity reminds students that *THE PIANIST* is not only the story of a Holocaust survivor but also a story told by a Holocaust survivor, Roman Polanski, who escaped the Cracow Ghetto as a boy and lived through the war in hiding with a non-Jewish family. The activity sheet includes a note from Polanski explaining what his personal experiences contributed to the film and why he chose Szpilman's story to bring those experiences to life. Students are invited to write their own note or journal entry in response to Polanski after they have viewed *THE PIANIST*, telling how the film affected them and describing the episodes that revealed for them the deepest lessons of this dark time in human history.

Follow-Up

1. Have students listen to the piece Szpilman plays for Hosenfeld in the film, Chopin's *Ballad No. 1 in G Minor (Op. 23)*, and try to describe what the music says about the will to survive. Chopin wrote the piece at a time (1836) when Poland was struggling for independence, and some early listeners heard in it a call to continue that struggle. To our ears, it may speak of a more general impulse to prevail against adversity and keep hope alive to the end.
2. Invite students to compare *THE PIANIST* with other films that tell a story about the Holocaust (e.g., *Sophie's Choice* [1982] directed by Alan J. Pakula, *Au Revoir Les Enfants* [1988] directed by Louis Malle, *Schindler's List* [1993] directed by Steven Spielberg). Explore, for example, how these films treat the heroes and villains of each story, how they shape and select events to produce a dynamic plot, as well as themes they have in common.

THE PIANIST

Facing Catastrophe

THE HOLOCAUST

1933

Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party comes to power in Germany. The Nazis declare a national boycott of Jewish businesses on April 1 and expel Jews from all official posts and cultural enterprises (music, film, journalism, etc.).

1935

Nuremberg Laws deprive Jews of German citizenship and forbid marriage or any sexual relations between Jews and non-Jews.

1938

Kristallnacht (Nov 9): Nazi-organized night of anti-Jewish riots. In the following months, Nazis close Jewish newspapers, expel Jewish children from public schools, ban Jews from museums, parks, and theaters, and transfer Jewish property to non-Jewish owners.

1939

Aug – Nazis sign a non-aggression pact with Soviet Russia.

Sept 1 – Nazi and Soviet invasion of Poland marks the beginning of World War II.

Sept 21 – Nazis draft a step-by-step plan for the destruction of Polish Jews.

Nov – Nazis concentrate Jews from towns across Poland in the large cities.

Dec – Polish Jews ordered to wear a Star of David, prohibited use of public transportation, parks, and sidewalks, and required to provide two years of forced labor.

1940

Apr – Nazis invade Denmark and Norway.

May – Nazis invade Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France.

Aug – Nazis attack Great Britain.

Oct – Warsaw's Jews forced into a Ghetto, eventually walled in with bricks, which houses nearly 500,000 in an area of approximately 200 city blocks. Hunger, disease, and Nazi raids begin killing thousands each week.

Roman Polanski's **THE PIANIST** is the story of Wladyslaw Szpilman, an acclaimed pianist and a Polish Jew, who lived through the Holocaust in Warsaw, where a population of close to 500,000 Jews was all but eliminated, leaving only about 20 survivors.

The Holocaust is the term now used to describe Nazi Germany's systematic campaign to destroy the Jews of Europe – an official policy, enacted into law and carried out by civil and military authorities, that began with persecution and ended in the extermination of 6 million men, women, and children. The Holocaust's victims came from almost every European nation, but the killing was concentrated in Poland, which was home to more than one-third of Europe's Jews before the war. By the war's end, 90 percent of Polish Jews – some 3 million people – had been destroyed by a combination of hunger, disease, enslavement, terror, and mass murder.

The timelines provided on these activity sheets will help you track the events of the Holocaust dramatized in **THE PIANIST**. The film itself, however, focuses on the experience of living through those incomprehensible times — the fear, hope, horror, and confusion that marked Szpilman's days during his five-year struggle to survive. Through **THE PIANIST**, we can share this experience, and discover the lessons it holds for us today.

I. An Instinct for Survival

How did Szpilman survive? From the first moments of **THE PIANIST**, when he attempts to keep playing for Warsaw's radio listeners in the midst of a Nazi air raid, we see that Szpilman has an unusual capacity to withstand the shock of catastrophe. And in the months that follow, as catastrophes mount and Warsaw's Jews are eventually confined in a walled Ghetto, this survivor's instinct repeatedly sets him apart. Use the episodes described here to explore Szpilman's reactions to the destructive forces gathering around him by comparing his behavior in these situations with that of his sympathetic non-Jewish friend Dorota on the one hand, and his cynical brother Henryk on the other. What guides Szpilman's response in these moments of crisis?

a. When Szpilman finds that Jews are forbidden in the restaurant where he planned to take Dorota for a date, he apologizes for the inconvenience. She denounces the Nazis' anti-Jewish laws and suggests that they confront the restaurant manager.

b. When the Jewish policeman, Itzak Heller, offers Szpilman and his brother jobs with the police force so they can afford to feed their family, Henryk mocks and reviles him, while Szpilman answers that he already has a job playing piano at a cafe in the Ghetto.

c. When Szpilman learns that his brother has been taken for deportation to a forced labor camp, he begs Itzak Heller for help, but when Henryk learns what he has done, he accuses Szpilman of groveling to the hated Nazi collaborator and warns him not to interfere in other people's business.

II. Crisis Situations

Few of us ever confront prejudice as vicious as that which fueled the Holocaust, but we can find ourselves in situations that challenge our belief in social equality and seem to require a response. Consider the situations described below. Discuss in class how you would respond to each situation and what impact you think your actions might have. Then imagine how a person with Szpilman's temperament might respond to each situation and how the situation might play out.

- a.** At a party, one of your friends is jeered for being gay.
- b.** You are invited to join a prestigious fraternity that has never admitted an Asian-American student.
- c.** You see a Hispanic friend arguing with a group of African-American students who say she is sitting at *their* table in the lunchroom.
- d.** While you're watching news from the Middle East, you hear a friend say that the world would be a safer place if all Muslims were eliminated.



THE PIANIST

ACTIVITY TWO Resisting Hate

THE HOLOCAUST

1941

June – Nazis break non-aggression pact and invade Soviet Russia. Killing squads, called *Einsatzgruppen*, follow the advance, executing Jews in all areas that come under Nazi control. By the end of October, 250,000 have been murdered.

Oct – Nazis construct death camps in Poland at Auschwitz, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Majdanek, and Treblinka for the mass execution of Jews, Gypsies, and other “undesirables.”

Dec – Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor draws U.S. into the war.

1942

Jan – Wannsee Conference launches the Nazi’s “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” – a secret plan to systematically exterminate all European Jews. Nazis begin transporting Jews from all occupied territories to the death camps in Poland.

July – Warsaw’s Jews are transported by cattle car to the Treblinka death camp. By September more than 300,000 are gassed. Only those considered still fit for forced labor or able to find a safe hiding place avoid extermination.

1943

Apr – Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins when Nazis arrive to deport the Jews still living there. Jewish fighters hold out against shelling and fire bombs until late May, when all but a handful are finally captured and executed. In September, the Ghetto is demolished. Similar uprising occur in other Polish Ghettos and even in some death camps, but all such armed resistance is quickly crushed and followed by severe reprisals.

In Roman Polanski’s *THE PIANIST*, when the Nazis begin emptying the Warsaw Ghetto, herding Jews to the Umschlagplatz railyard for deportation to the death camp at Treblinka, one of the old men speaking with Szpilman’s father asks:

Why don’t we attack the Nazis? There’s half a million of us here, we could break out of the Ghetto. At least we could die honorably, not as a stain on the face of history.

Coming nearly three years after the Nazis had seized control of Warsaw, and on the brink of annihilation, the old man’s question may seem too late, but in fact it is a question that still haunts historians of the Holocaust today. Why didn’t more Jews fight back? Why did so many seemingly comply with every Nazi demand, even marching dutifully to their own destruction?

I. Passive Heroism

One answer to these questions comes from the Warsaw Ghetto itself, in the writings of Emanuel Ringelblum, who chronicled events there until he was himself executed in 1944:

In no place did Jews resist the slaughter. They went passively to death...so that the remnants of the people would be left to live, because every Jew knew that lifting a hand against a German would endanger his brothers from a different town or maybe from a different country...Not to act, not to lift a hand against Germans, has...become the quiet, passive heroism of the common Jew.

Another, related answer is provided by Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Auschwitz death camp. “In those times,” he has said, “one climbed to the summit of humanity simply by remaining human.” Resisting hate, resisting the impulse to attack, was to resist the inhuman forces of the Holocaust itself and preserve the bonds of human nature – hope and compassion – that unified the Jewish community.

Consider in this light the actions of Szpilman and his family on that terrible day when they were herded to the railyard for deportation to Treblinka. To what extent could each of the episodes described here be regarded as an act of resistance?

a. Szpilman’s siblings, who had been selected to remain in the Ghetto, rejoin the family, saying they could not bear to be separated, a decision Szpilman calls “stupid.”

b. Szpilman’s father collects the family’s last pennies to buy a piece of candy, which he carefully divides into six pieces so they all can have a share.

c. On his way to the rail car, Szpilman is pulled out of line by the Jewish policeman, Itzak Heller, who tells him, “I’ve saved your life! Go!” With one last anguished look back at his family, Szpilman reluctantly slips away.

II. Taking Action

Warsaw was also the site of the most effective attempt by Jews to strike back at the forces of the Holocaust, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in which a few hundred Jewish fighters, armed mainly with pistols and homemade grenades, defended the Ghetto against Nazi tanks and artillery for nearly a month.

In *THE PIANIST*, Szpilman takes an active part in smuggling arms for this planned uprising, but he does not take part in the fighting itself. Instead, having glimpsed an old acquaintance on one of his work assignments outside the Ghetto, he sought shelter with non-Jewish friends and escaped into hiding. When the uprising occurs, Szpilman can only watch from his hiding place as the Nazis shell the Ghetto to rubble and execute his former comrades. “I should have stayed there and fought with them,” Szpilman says, but then, considering the outcome, asks, “What good did it do?”

How would you answer this question? What is the good of armed resistance if it ends in failure? Share your opinions in a class discussion, then compare the good you see in the uprising with the good Szpilman achieved through his escape. To what extent could his decision to leave the Ghetto be regarded as an act of resistance too?





Life in Hiding

THE HOLOCAUST

1944

Jan – Soviets force a Nazi retreat at Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and begin advancing on Nazi territory.

May – Nazi’s begin deporting Hungarian Jews to Poland’s death camps, the last national group slated for destruction.

June – D-Day invasion at Normandy; U.S. and British forces prepare to advance on Nazi territory.

July – Soviet troops liberate Majdanek death camp.

Aug – Warsaw Uprising: Polish fighters, Jewish and non-Jewish, hoping for support from nearby Soviet troops, fail to drive Nazis from Warsaw when the Soviets hold their positions.

1945

Jan – Soviets occupy Warsaw, where it is estimated that only 20 Jews still survive.

Jan – Forced to retreat from Poland, Nazis organize death marches to evacuate Jews still held in death and work camps.

Apr – Adolf Hitler commits suicide after issuing a final directive: “Above all I charge the leaders of the nation...to merciless opposition to the universal poisoner of all peoples, international Jewry.”

May – Germany surrenders.

Aug – U.S. drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Sept – Japan surrenders.

Though cut off from his old life when he entered the Warsaw Ghetto, Szpilman was still surrounded by his family, and even when he lost them, he found comrades in the resistance. Once he escapes the Ghetto, however, Szpilman is almost totally alone. To survive now he must somehow endure the fear and suffering on his own.

I. The Search for Meaning

During his more than two years in hiding, Szpilman passes the days waiting for one of his protectors to bring him food, careful not to make any noise that would betray his presence. When a protector is late in coming, he starves rather than risk going out into the street. What did Szpilman think about over those long months of isolation? What gave purpose to his existence and sustained his will to survive?

To explore these questions, imagine that Szpilman kept a diary during his life in hiding. For each of the episodes described below, write a diary entry that reflects what you think Szpilman felt at the time and what meaning the episode may have held in his life.

a. Forced to flee his first hiding place, Szpilman goes to the emergency address he was given and finds Dorota, the non-Jewish woman with whom he once hoped to develop a relationship, now married to a member of the anti-Nazi underground. She and her husband agree to find him a new hiding place.

b. Drawn to the piano in his new hiding place, Szpilman sits and moves his fingers above the keyboard so as not to make a sound.

c. Placed in the care of an irresponsible protector, Szpilman almost starves to death, but he is rescued when Dorota and her husband come to say good-bye on their way to a safe haven in the country.

d. From his window, Szpilman watches as Polish resistance fighters launch their attack against the Nazis, forcing them to retreat, then sees the Nazis regroup and retake the neighborhood, gunning down the resistance fighters and leaving their bodies in the street.

e. When the Nazis shell his hiding place, Szpilman barely escapes to a nearby abandoned hospital by hiding among the dead bodies still strewn on the street.

II. The Courage to Care

Like Szpilman, many Jews were rescued from the Holocaust by the efforts of non-Jews willing to risk their own lives in order to save another. These individuals are now honored as the “Righteous Among the Nations” at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance center in Israel, where the names of 19,141 rescuers have been inscribed – a reminder that, whatever the odds, one person can always make a difference.

On the back of this sheet, describe a present-day situation, real or imaginary, where you could be the one person who makes a real difference in someone’s life. It might be a situation that involves having the courage to resist peer pressure and respect someone victimized by stereotyping. Or it could be a situation that requires only the courage to reach out to someone whom most people treat as a non-person or simply ignore. Turn your situation into a story or news report in which you, or someone like you, shows the courage to care.



THE PIANIST

ACTIVITY FOUR Survivors

HOLOCAUST READINGS

Roselle Chartock and Jack Spencer, eds., *Can It Happen Again? Chronicles of the Holocaust* (1995).

Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1975).

Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide Victims – and Survivors – of the Holocaust* (1982).

Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1952).

Viktor Frankel, *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959).

Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (1985).

Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (1985).

Emanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (1958).

Wladyslaw Szpilman, *The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945* (2000).

Elie Wiesel, *Night* (1960).

HOLOCAUST WEB SITES

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum
www.ushmm.org

Facing History and Ourselves
www.facing.org

Simon Wiesenthal Center
www.wiesenthal.com

Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority
www.yadvashem.org

Szpilman's incredible story comes to an end when he is discovered in his final hiding place by a Nazi officer, Captain Wilm Hosenfeld, who is scouting the abandoned house as a site for his headquarters. Unlike every other Nazi Szpilman has encountered, Hosenfeld does not shout out demands. "Who are you?" he asks, "What's your work?" When Szpilman finally answers that he is a pianist, Hosenfeld leads him to a piano in a nearby room and asks him to play.

Though near starvation, dressed in rags, and more than two years out of practice, Szpilman sits at the piano and performs Chopin's Ballad No. 1 in G Minor (Op. 23), a work by Poland's most revered composer that listeners have long interpreted as an expression of Poland's unrelenting quest for freedom. The performance transforms Szpilman, who regains the posture and poise of a great musician as he plays, and transforms him in Hosenfeld's eyes. Although he recognizes Szpilman as a Jew, Hosenfeld allows him to continue hiding in the house and even brings him food.

I. Reflection

What do you imagine Hosenfeld saw in Szpilman that caused him to defy official Nazi policy and show sympathy for the desperate man before him? Even more difficult to imagine, what could Szpilman have seen in Hosenfeld that would allow him to trust his life to a representative of the forces that had sought to destroy him for more than five years? Discuss this episode in class, exploring the part music plays in bringing these two one-time enemies together as survivors of the worst that hate can do, both to those who feel it and to those who suffer its effects.



A Note from Roman Polanski

I always knew that one day I would make a film about this painful chapter in Polish history, but I did not want it to be based on my own life.



II. Remembrance

This scene reminds us that THE PIANIST is itself the work of a great artist who, like Wladyslaw Szpilman, survived the Holocaust in Poland. Roman Polanski was barely seven years old when the Nazis invaded his homeland. Like Szpilman, he lived through the bombing of Warsaw, then went to the Cracow Ghetto, where he escaped the death camps by squeezing through a barbed-wire fence and hiding through the war years with a non-Jewish family.

Polanski has drawn on his own childhood memories of those terrible times, as well as historical archives, to present an authentic picture of the Holocaust in THE PIANIST – not a documentary but a work of art that brings past experience back to life.

Read the note from Roman Polanski reprinted here, and after you have seen the film, use the back of this sheet to write a note or journal entry telling him what you gained by looking through this window into an unimaginable experience. What moments brought insight into the human significance of the Holocaust? What episodes helped bring you into the community of those who carry the responsibility to never forget?

*As soon as I read the first chapter of Wladyslaw Szpilman's memoirs, I instantly knew that *The Pianist* would be the subject of my next film. I knew how to tell it. It was the story I was seeking: in spite of the horror, it is a positive account, full of hope.*

I survived the bombing of Warsaw and the Cracow Ghetto, and I wanted to recreate those childhood visions. It was also important for me to stick as close to the truth as possible and avoid Hollywood-style make-believe. I have never done, and don't intend to do, anything autobiographical, but in making THE PIANIST I could use the experiences I went through.

In addition to my own recollections, I could rely on the authenticity of Szpilman's account. He wrote it just after the war – perhaps that's why the story is so strong, so genuine, and so fresh. He describes the reality of this period with surprising – almost cool and scientific – objectivity. There are decent Poles and evil Poles in his book, decent and evil Jews, decent and evil Germans.

THE PIANIST is a testimony to the power of music, the will to live, and the courage to stand against evil.