

# 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.

**R**oman 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.

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**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.

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**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.

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### 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 uprisings 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.”

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**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.

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**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.

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### 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.

**T**hough 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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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**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.

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## 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](http://www.ushmm.org)

Facing History and Ourselves  
[www.facing.org](http://www.facing.org)

Simon Wiesenthal Center  
[www.wiesenthal.com](http://www.wiesenthal.com)

Yad Vashem: The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority  
[www.yadvashem.org](http://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.*