

The Pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman

About the Author

Wladyslaw Szpilman was born in 1911 in Sosnowiec in Poland. He studied the piano and composition as a young man in Warsaw and Berlin. On 1 April 1935 he joined Polish Radio, where he worked as a pianist performing classical and jazz music, until the German invasion of Poland reached Warsaw in autumn 1939 and Polish Radio was forced off the air.

Szpilman and his family were forced to move to the Warsaw Ghetto where he continued to play piano in cafes and bars. Szpilman survived with the help of friends and a German captain, Wilm Hosenfeld. His family was murdered at Treblinka. After the War Szpilman returned to Polish Radio and his music career and died in Warsaw in July 2000 at the age of 88.

About the Book

Wladyslaw Szpilman wrote his memoir of his time in the Warsaw Ghetto shortly after the end of the War. He published the book, *Śmierć Miasta* (Death of a City) in Poland, but it was suppressed by the country's Communist authorities, who disagreed with its perspective on the war. The largest problems for the authorities were the grey areas that Szpilman described: not all Germans were bad and, worst of all, not all of the oppressed were good.

The memoir was not reprinted for fifty years, when in 1998 it was published by Szpilman's son **Andrzej**, in German as *Das wunderbare Überleben* (The Fantastic Survival) and then in English as *The Pianist*.

The memoir was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film directed by Roman Polanski in 2002.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. the title of this memoir is *The Pianist* – do you think Wladyslaw identifies himself primarily as a Jew or as a musician? Does this change over the period of the War?

2. many of the phrases Wladyslaw uses emphasise a loss of humanity ie 'The war had turned his heart to stone'. Are people condemned to lose their humanity in wartime? Has this been the case for everyone Wladyslaw encounters?
3. was the loss of Warsaw's dignity as a city the final defeat as Wladyslaw claims?
4. how important was the continuation of musical programming on Polish Radio? Was Wladyslaw really more help to the city playing at the station than digging trenches?
5. what is your impression of those Jews whose businesses flourished under Nazirule (eg tram proprietors Kon and Heller)? Do we gain insight into Wladyslaw's views?
6. why did Wladyslaw's mother insist on a formal meal-time for her family? Was this a way to cope or a lack of understanding of the situation?
7. 'you could have said, perhaps, that they had caught the Gestapo spirit'. Wladyslaw is more scathing of those Jews who joined the police force than of the Germans. How do you view their motivation – a means of survival or an example of how people can easily be caught up in a prevailing mood?
8. are you surprised that Wladyslaw offers his help to the German officer Wilm Hosenfeld?
9. Wilm Hosenfeld asks 'You wonder why the Jews don't defend themselves'. Why doesn't he ask why German officers such as himself stand up to their superiors?
10. so you think Hosenfeld deserves recognition by Yad Vashem as asserted by Wolf Bierman?

You can use HMDT resources to find out more about life in the ghettos

<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/ghettos-deportation/>, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/dates-to-remember/the-start-of-the-warsaw-ghetto-uprising> and Janusz Korczak, an inspirational teacher who lived in the Warsaw Ghetto
<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/education/janusz-korczak>.