

# A survivor of the Warsaw ghetto

## Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*

By Fred Mazelis  
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Roman Polanski's latest film, *The Pianist*, is a moving evocation of the Nazi Holocaust, depicted through the experience of a single survivor of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Polanski does not break new ground, but tackles the subject with intelligence and dignity. He has been largely successful in bringing to the screen the impressive memoir of Wladyslaw Szpilman, written in 1946 but almost unknown before its translation into English in 1999, just a year before the author's death. The film, just nominated for an Academy Award, has already received the top award at the Cannes Festival and from the National Society of Film Critics

Szpilman was an interesting figure, a talented pianist and composer who lived another 55 years after his miraculous survival in Nazi-occupied Poland, where millions of Jews were put to death.

During the 1930s Warsaw was, with the possible exception of New York City, perhaps the most "Jewish" urban center in the world. Anti-Semitism was a fact of daily life in Poland, but was less virulent in the big cities. Szpilman was born in Warsaw in 1911, into an assimilated family of musicians and intellectuals. In the early 1930s he studied piano with the famous Artur Schnabel and composition with Franz Schreker, a noted German composer of that period. By the time of the Nazi invasion and occupation of Poland in 1939, Szpilman was already well known as a pianist on the Polish Radio and as the composer of popular songs.

This active professional life came to an abrupt halt with the beginning of the war. The September 1 invasion of Poland was followed within three weeks by the Nazi entry into Warsaw. As the film shows, the Germans promise at first that Jews will be treated "fairly," but a series of anti-Semitic decrees, such as the regulation forbidding Jews from keeping more than 2,000 zlotys in currency, follow soon enough. The order that all Jews must wear yellow armbands, the mark of humiliation and oppression, strikes particularly sharply.

Szpilman's family, "loving and quarrelsome," as one critic has aptly put it, struggles to find its bearings and maintain its human dignity. Szpilman's father tries desperately to find some reason for optimism. The rest of the family members make no such effort, but neither do they succumb to despair. Father, mother and Szpilman's brother and two sisters are all briefly but affectingly depicted.

The film's greatest strength is its clear-eyed presentation of the step-by-step brutalization of Warsaw's Jews. With the building of the ghetto walls in late 1940, hundreds of thousands of people are uprooted and herded into conditions of incredible overcrowding, disease and despair. The screenplay, adapted from Szpilman's book by Ronald Harwood, vividly reproduces many scenes just as they are described in the memoir. The chronological sequence of events demonstrates how the Nazis' Final Solution developed as its victims watched with mounting horror. Only 200 of the Warsaw Jewish population of more than 400,000 survived.

Daily life continues, devoted largely to finding the food to survive and the psychological strength to endure. Tens of thousands succumb to

poverty, starvation and illness. The Nazi terror escalates daily. Children are shot in the street for imagined acts of disobedience. A squad of soldiers raids an apartment across the street, and Szpilman and his family watch in horror as the elderly head of the household, unable to stand when commanded to by the German officers, is picked up in his armchair and thrown out the window to his death.

The camera does not flinch in the face of these horrific scenes, but neither does it linger any longer than is necessary. There is nothing cheap, mawkish or sensational. It is all the more effective as a result.

Meanwhile, even under these conditions, the class divisions within the Ghetto remain. To assist his family, Szpilman reluctantly plays at a café catering to the more privileged sections of the Jewish population. Jewish police are recruited from the middle class and intelligentsia, Wladyslaw and his brother Henryk contemptuously rejecting this path.

After nearly two years in the Ghetto, deportation orders finally arrive for the Szpilman family—the parents and two of their children, Wladyslaw and Regina. Henryk and Halina have not yet been called, but they are unwilling to be separated from the family, and make their way to the Umschlagplatz, the huge plaza where the transports depart. Up to the end, arguments and discussions continue among the doomed as to whether they are being sent to their deaths or "merely" to forced labor. A woman shrieks hysterically: it turns out that, in an effort to help the family avoid detection as the Jews were rounded up for deportation, she had accidentally smothered her infant daughter to death. Despite this, the child's death rattle had given them away.

At the very last moment, as the Szpilman family walks to the rail cars where they will be packed for their journey to Treblinka, a Jewish policeman, perhaps seeking to atone for his miserable role, recognizes Szpilman, yells out to him, throws him to the ground and tells him to run away.

Thus begins the next stage of Szpilman's odyssey—his survival over the next two-and-a-half years. First he performs forced labor inside the Ghetto. Then he decides to escape, looking for a young woman musician he has met earlier. Hidden in an apartment just outside the Ghetto walls by members of the Polish Underground, he watches the hopeless but heroic Ghetto uprising in April 1943. Continuously on the run, he lives to witness the general Warsaw uprising more than a year later, in August 1944.

There is nothing tedious or artificial about this last half of the film. As a seemingly endless series of disasters and narrow escapes unfolds, Szpilman's survival is seen as not simply miraculous. Of course there had to be a large element of chance, but more than luck was involved. There was also, first of all, the persistent work of the anti-Nazi Underground; and there was Szpilman's determination as well—what he calls, in his memoir, his "lust for life."

In the climax to the story, in the weeks leading up to the end of the war, Szpilman is found in an abandoned building by a German officer who questions him, hears him play the piano, and helps him to survive,

bringing him some food and a blanket for warmth.

There are some subtle but significant differences between the film and Szpilman's memoir. It is perhaps partly unavoidable that the screenplay, with its "real time" depiction of events, treats the story from a different vantage point than a memoir, even one written literally only months after the events portrayed.

Unfortunately, however, Polanski has made no serious attempt to bring any depth to the title character. The memoir shows a thinking human being, even under the most brutal conditions. The film has a subtle change in emphasis. Despite the capable acting performance by Adrien Brody, there is something misleadingly passive and empty about Szpilman on screen.

This is connected as well with a certain softening of some social and political elements in the memoir. The film shows Szpilman's contact with Jehuda Zyskind, for instance, who is described as a socialist oppositionist inside the Ghetto. Zyskind busies himself with illegal leaflets and organization. He is depicted as unrealistically "optimistic." This is only part of what Szpilman writes in his memoir, however. Speaking of Zyskind a few years after his death at the hands of the Nazis, he writes:

"When I think of him today, over the years of horror which divide me from the time when he was still alive and could spread his message, I admire his unyielding will.... I always came away from him feeling fortified and comforted. Not until I was home, lying in bed and going over the political news once more, did I conclude that his arguments were nonsense. But next morning I would visit him once again, and he would manage to persuade me I was wrong, and I left with an injection of optimism that lasted until evening and kept me going.... It was difficult for me to retain any hope once Zyskind had been murdered, and I had no one to explain everything properly to me! Only now do I know that I was wrong, and so were news reports of the day, while Zyskind was right. Unlikely as it seemed at the time, everything turned out as he had predicted."

Zyskind's foresight did not enable him to save himself or the other victims of the Holocaust, but he did grasp the desperate sickness of the capitalist system that had given birth to fascism. He knew the Nazis could never succeed in their stated aims, and in this he was unquestionably right. This precious insight of Szpilman's is completely missing from the film.

It is not the task of a memoir, especially one written under these circumstances, to provide an analysis of the rise of Hitler, of course, and that is not what Szpilman's memoir does. The nature of the battle against fascism, however, does find some expression, as the above insight demonstrates. The role of the Poles who assisted Szpilman is also presented in greater detail. And Wilm Hosenfeld, the Wehrmacht officer who is depicted in the film essentially as a demoralized soldier impressed with Szpilman's musical abilities, is shown in the memoir (including extracts of his diary) as someone with definite political views.

The film's weaknesses are undoubtedly related to Polanski's own worldview. The well-known filmmaker, whose career began with *Knife in the Water* 40 years ago (after which he left Poland) and went on to include *Rosemary's Baby*, *Chinatown* and some 20 other features, is, like his subject, a Polish Jew and Holocaust survivor. More than 20 years younger than Szpilman, Polanski was born in Paris but returned with his parents to Krakow in 1936, as a three-year-old child. His father survived the war, but his mother perished. Polanski himself found refuge with Catholic families in the Polish countryside.

There is no shortage of tragedy in Polanski's life, including the 1969 murder of his wife, the actress Sharon Tate, at the hands of the notorious Manson Family. Up until now, however, he has not chosen to deal with the shattering events of his childhood. As a filmmaker he has generally been known for a coolness and bleakness bordering on cynicism.

Polanski says he was moved by Szpilman's book, and there is no reason

to doubt him. "Szpilman was objective, not sentimental," he commented. "He showed Poles who were good and those who were wicked, Jews good and wicked, Germans good and wicked.... What is most important is that the book is very positive. After having read it, one is not depressed because it is full of hope. At the end we are convinced that human nature, despite everything, is good."

There is something to these remarks. Szpilman's account calls to mind two other memoirs of survivors—Primo Levi's *Survival at Auschwitz*, and Victor Klemperer's massive and astonishing diary of his life as a Jew in Dresden during the years of the Third Reich. All of these memoirs, including Szpilman's, though far from answering the big questions about the causes of the Holocaust, share one common quality—a humanity, a refusal to recoil in bitterness and despair, or to embrace any form of nationalism or chauvinism. To his credit, Polanski pays tribute to the many Poles who made this film possible, working as extras for the crowd scenes and in technical capacities as well.

Polanski has difficulty with the subject, however. He chooses, whether fully consciously or not, to emphasize one side of Szpilman's experiences—that of the man alone, the solitary survivor. There is something here of the artist who perseveres and retreats from the world, rather than engaging in it. Szpilman's memoir has more to say than that.

Szpilman's book was suppressed by the Polish Stalinist regime soon after its 1946 publication. Though it was far from political, the authorities could not tolerate anything that would encourage an honest discussion of historical questions. The presentation of a "good German," as well as the memoir's inevitable focus on the suffering of Poland's Jews, contradicted the nationalist policies pursued by the Stalinists.

The appearance of this book in 1999, followed today by its film version, is a reflection of enormous changes that have taken place in recent years. Historical questions that were long buried or distorted by the Cold War have risen to the surface. Szpilman's life encompasses not only the years described in the memoir, but his modest but nevertheless admirable career over the ensuing five decades, as the director of Polish Radio, a founding member of the Warsaw Piano Quintet, and a prolific songwriter as well as recitalist. Here is a very concrete example of the potential that was cut short by the Holocaust—not only the lives of 6 million Jews, but of the many millions of others who died in the struggle against fascism, and also in places such as Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To the extent this film deals truthfully with some bitter experiences of the past century, it can remind its audience to the human potential that continues to be extinguished today by war, poverty and dictatorship.

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