

The Pianist: The Extraordinary Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945 Study Guide

The Pianist: The Extraordinary Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945 by Władysław Szpilman

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Plot Summary

"The Pianist" by Wladyslaw Szpilman tells the true story of a Jewish pianist who lived in Warsaw, Poland during World War II. This is the story of his family and of his survival during the war as the Germans invaded his city.

Wladyslaw worked as a pianist in the heart of the Warsaw ghetto. Life was not easy for his family and they sold everything they possibly could, including his piano.

Nonetheless, he was happy he had work. The atmosphere at his job was very different from outside where the streets were filled with smuggling and death. The winter took its toll on the poverty-stricken people as a typhus epidemic broke out in the ghetto. Dead bodies lined the streets.

The residents in the city began to hear bombs in the distance, and they knew that war with Germany was inevitable. The German artillery showed up in the city, and soon conditions began to deteriorate. The Jews were given a list of rules and regulations, they were treated as outsiders, and the city was getting destroyed. There were harsh repercussions when rules are broken. The repercussions included beatings and death.

The Germans mocked the Jews and rounded them up for labor and then things got even worse. The Germans would run into buildings and begin killing people in a horrific manner. The Germans chose large groups of Jews for resettlement. Wladyslaw's family was selected, but he was separated from them as they were herded onto the train. Later, he discovered that they were sent to their death.

The physical labor Wladyslaw had to take part in was brutal. The workers had little food, and the food wasn't very nourishing. If the workers became weak and slowed down at work, they were beaten. At one point, Wladyslaw was worried about the oncoming winter because he knew with his hands got frostbite, he wouldn't be able to play the piano. He twisted his ankle and was no longer good for outdoor work so he got to work indoors and his hands were saved. There were more selections and rumors of a settlement in the ghetto, and Wladyslaw knew that he had to take drastic action. He escaped and went into hiding.

While he was in hiding, Wladyslaw had to contend with monotony, limited food, and health issues. He was extremely reliant on others for provisions, and the others didn't always come through. The Germans began to suffer numerous defeats, which offered hope. However, it was still far from peaceful in the city. A rebellion broke out. At one point, Wladyslaw's building was surrounded by Germans and set on fire. Still, he remained where he was.

And another point, was building was set on fire. Wladyslaw took a large quantity of pills to kill himself, but they didn't work. Instead, he woke up the next day in a smoldering building. Over the next few months, he fought starvation, frigid temperatures, and madness as he hid from the soldiers. At one point, a German officer found him, and the man ended out saving his life by bringing him food and helping him keep warm. He tried

to find the officer to help the officer after the war was over, but his efforts to find the man failed.



Chapters 1-5

Chapters 1-5 Summary and Analysis

"The Pianist" by Wladyslaw Szpilman tells the true story of a Jewish pianist who lived in Warsaw, Poland during World War II. This is the story of his family and of his survival during the war as the Germans invaded his city.

In Chapter 1, Wladyslaw began his wartime career as a pianist in the Café Nowoczesna. This was in the heart of the Warsaw ghetto. In November of 1940, the gates of the ghetto closed. By this time his family had sold everything they possibly could, including his piano. Even though life was tough, he was happy to have work.

Work for Wladyslaw began in the afternoon. As he walked to work, sometimes he avoided smugglers by going near the wall. The walls were not solid along the road. There were long openings through which water from the Aryan part of the road flowed to the Jewish side. Children used these small areas to transport goods for smuggling. It was a dangerous job, and the children often were caught and killed or beaten.

The café had a very different atmosphere from the outside. It was filled with gold jewelry and champagne. Nobody really paid attention to his piano playing. Wladyslaw soon got a new job at a café on Sienna Street with the Jewish intelligentsia came to hear him play. At this place, his music was appreciated, and he developed a good reputation.

Four months later, Wladyslaw began to work in another café in Lezno Street. This was the largest café in the ghetto and had wonderful performers. Wladyslaw would have loved everything about working there if he didn't have to face his walk home. The winter of 1941 to 1942 was a harsh winter in the ghetto. Everyone was poverty - stricken. Lice was everywhere, and a typhus epidemic broke out in the ghetto. People were dying everywhere, and there is no way to take care of the bodies. They would leave the dead bodies out in the street, and the author would have to pass by these bodies as he went to and from work.

In Chapter 2, by August 31, 1939, everyone in Warsaw knew that war with the Germans was inevitable. As the city prepared, a blackout was imposed on the city at night, and people sealed rooms they planned to use as gas shelters. It was different, but there was no sign of danger yet. Wladyslaw lived with his parents, his sisters, and his brother in Sliska Street. He worked as a pianist for Polish Radio. During the night and the last day of August, he woke to the sound of explosions. The sounds were far away, and he figured that they were military exercises. His mother opened his door around 8 o'clock and told him to get up because the war had begun.

As Wladyslaw walked to work, he noticed posters announcing that the Germans had attacked. People didn't seem scared. Instead, they were more curious. It took twice as long to get to work. He was halfway to work when sirens sounded, and the streets



emptied quickly. Work was chaotic, but the music broadcasts were still going on. By the time Wladyslaw went out for lunch, things appeared more normal. On September 3, the declaration of war by Great Britain and France became a reality. It was an emotional day that they realized that they were not facing the enemy alone.

When France declared war on Germany four hours later, Father joined the demonstration outside the British Embassy building. Unfortunately, their joy was short-lived. On September 7, they discovered that the Germans were advancing on Warsaw. People were leaving as quickly as they could. Wladyslaw made the decision to stay and help this family. A few hours later, the city looked completely different. The streets were full of rubbish, and the people left scurried around looking disheveled. The next evening, the first shell from the German artillery hit the timber yard across from Wladyslaw's house where he and his family lived on the third floor.

In Chapter 3, things got better over the next few days, and the city was declared a fortress. The German artillery stopped shelling the city, but the air raids from the enemy were stepped up. There weren't any warnings any longer. When the people saw puffs of white coming out of the anti-aircraft shells, they hurried to their shelters. The city was bombed regularly.

The morale in the city was high despite the bombings since the people no longer felt alone. They had ammunition, an army with commanders, and a purpose. The people volunteered to dig trenches around the city to help prevent the advancement of German tanks. After two days of digging, Wladyslaw heard that the radio station was broadcasting again. He went back to work as a pianist, playing as an accompanist and a soloist.

Conditions in the city began to deteriorate, and the German artillery began to attack Warsaw once again. Running low on provisions, the people in the city needed food for themselves as well as for the soldiers that were trapped inside the city. Wladyslaw's family moved in with some friends on Panska Street. They didn't want to stay in their third floor flat with all the bombing, and they didn't like the air raid shelters. Many people stayed in the friend's flat, and it was so crowded that they had to sleep on the floor.

Getting to work was increasingly difficult. People lived in fear of being called a spy and getting shot. September 23 was Wladyslaw's last day at work. He was giving Chopin recital as he played. Shells were exploding close to the broadcasting center when he was done playing, and he had to wait two hours before the shelling died down enough for him to get home. That day, Warsaw Radio went off the air. The second movement of Rachmaninov's Piano Concert in C minor was broadcasting when a German bomb destroyed the power station.

The city was being destroyed, and the bombings were intense. Wladyslaw didn't know how he survived since others were dying all around him. He saw the Germans come into the city, and a few days later, the German commandant issued proclamations stating that the Jews were guaranteed rights and that their lives would be secure.



In Chapter 4, Wladyslaw's family went back to the house on Sliska Street and found it unharmed. The losses weren't as bad as they had expected. They also discovered that more people survived than they had originally thought. At first, they thought that they were 100,000 people killed, but later they discovered that about 20,000 people died. Some of these people were friends of theirs. Even though they were sad about the dead, they were thrilled to be alive. They appreciated basic comforts in a whole new way. Father played his violin for hours on end and tried to block out bad news.

German race riots began to occur in Warsaw. At first, the people were just tormented with minor abuse such as slaps and kicking. In December 1939, the Germans executed the first hundred innocent citizens. This was a critical turning point. It erected a wall of hatred between the Poles and the Germans.

The Germans began to post decrees that offered the death penalty for infractions. The Jews began to lose their belongings and real estate. They hid whatever they could, but weren't too alarmed because they felt that the Germans would hand Warsaw over to Soviet Russia at any time. Many Jews didn't want to wait for this to happen, so they packed up and moved away. Wladyslaw chose to stay with his family in the city. One of his colleagues who had tried to leave came back a couple of days later without his belongings. The man had seen five half-naked Jewish men whipped by the border as they were strung up on trees by their hands. He had also witnessed the death of a doctor who had been held at gunpoint and forced to walk into the river—deeper and deeper—until he drowned.

In late autumn, the city suddenly and unexpectedly returned to life as usual. The Jews began to learn to live with their regulations and tried to avoid the Germans for the most part. Wladyslaw's father was different. He walked right up to the Germans and bowed to them. New issues were decreed, and there were rumors of the construction of a ghetto.

In Chapter 5, near the end of November, Wladyslaw his father, and his brother Henryk had been visiting another friend. They realized it was almost curfew time and hurriedly left the house. Policemen stopped them and asked if they were Jews. Wladyslaw realized that this was how he was going to die. His father dropped to his knees, weeping and sobbing while Henryk tried to get him to rise. Suddenly, the mood changed and Wladyslaw didn't feel threatened by death anymore. A policeman asked what they did for a living, and they said they were musicians. The policeman let them go time and said it was lucky for them that he was a musician, too. They ran away.

As they ran off, they could hear the policeman arguing behind them. The others were upset that the one policeman had let them go. In the second half of November, the Germans began barricading the side street. By December 5, Jews had to wear white armbands with the blue Star of David on them. The winter came in cruelly, and people died as a result of the low temperatures. Jewish deportees from the west were loaded into cattle trucks and sent away without any food or water. The Germans made things worse, announcing that Jews had to do two years of labor and concentration camps. They also had to become registered.

In the spring, the allies were ready to attack Germany, and whole city was excited. They waited for the offensive to start as the Germans invaded Denmark. On May 20, they received the news that Paris fell. The Germans refocused their attention on the Jews, putting the ones left in the city to work even though they were physically exhausted and many had tuberculosis.



Chapters 6-10

Chapters 6-10 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 6, the author looked back at his memories of his time in the Warsaw ghetto between November of 1940 and July 1942. The time seemed to merge into one single image. The Germans hunted human game that they could use as workhorses, and went about it systematically. In 1941, Germany invaded Russia. There was hope that the Germans would lose. The Germans reduced the area of living space in the ghetto. The Jews felt like prisoners stuck in their small section.

The worst part of living in the ghetto was that they could see a "normal" world outside, but they couldn't participate in it. The author related to a time when he was a child and had to have his appendix removed. Even though he was completely spoiled the week before the operation, he couldn't truly enjoy the spoiling because he knew the operation was coming. The entire two years they lived in the ghetto, there was a similar fear.

Every morning, Wladyslaw took a long walk along Mila Street to the place where Jehuda Zyskind lived. The nightmare of his walk began after he left Chlodna street. This was the Aryan quarter of the city. The traffic had to be stopped as people across the street, and the Germans tried to prevent the Jews from crossing whenever possible. The guards would amuse themselves by forcing the Jews to sing and dance, humiliating them.

On the way home, he would stop and help Henryk carry books. Back at home, they would join the others for a midday meal prepared by their mother who tried to make things as normal as possible. The food was simple, but Wladyslaw was grateful for it. Many others didn't have any food and acted like animals as they tried to get food to eat.

In Chapter 7, in the early spring of 1942, the systematic human hunting in the ghetto stopped. Two years before that, people would have seen this as a reason to rejoice, but they were no longer deluded. They knew this meant that the Germans had something worse in store for them.

During the latter part of April, fear swept through the ghetto. One morning Father went out and came back in, pale and alarmed, saying that the Germans had gone into a building the previous night, gathered 70 men, and had shot them in the street. The Germans informed the people that they had been obliged to cleanse the city of "undesirable elements."

The Jewish police were assigned to round up men for a labor camp. They picked up Henryk, but Wladyslaw paid the price to get him out of the selection. This made his brother upset. Later, they learned that the thousand men that were rounded up in the ghetto had been taken to a camp in Treblinka so that the Germans could test out their crematorium furnace and their gas chambers.



The Germans invaded the homes of the Jews, killing people horrifically. Life for the Jews was extremely harsh. Wladyslaw remembered working in a café where two divas were competing for attention. A starving woman died outside, and one of the divas stumbled over the dead and slipped into hysteria. The other singer was warned about what happened, came over and made arrangements for the dead woman, earning admiration from those around her. The diva who went into hysterics never forgave the other for this act.

In Chapter 8, although things seemed to be getting worse, Wladyslaw tried to cling to his optimism. He and a comrade arranged a concert although others questioned whether they would be alive by the date of the concert. There were rumors of resettlement. On Wednesday at 11 o'clock, Wladyslaw went to the bridge over Clodna Street. A friend he hadn't seen in a while stopped him, telling him to go home at once because action was going to begin in an hour's time. He pointed out the fact that they were surrounded by Ukrainian soldiers.

Around noon, the troops began clearing out the homes of veterans and old people. The resettlement had begun. Men and women, babies and old people, were crammed into trucks and sent out. Wladyslaw's parents, brother, and sisters knew there was nothing they could do so they concentrated on keeping life as normal as possible. Wladyslaw was put to work for the Germans, and he moved items for them from morning to night. On August 16, 1942, Wladyslaw, Regina, and Father were sent to the barracks, and the building was surrounded. They, along with Mother, headed outside, and Wladyslaw was happy that at least his brother and sister were spared.

In Chapter 9, the Umschlagplatz was at the border of the ghetto. It was a compound surrounded by pathways, alleys, and dirty streets. It could hold up to 8,000 people. When Wladyslaw and his family arrived, the area was mostly empty. One corner of the compound held dead bodies. People stayed away from that area.

Regina, Father, Mother, and Wladyslaw sat down with their few belongings to wait for the train. Wladyslaw noticed for the first time how horrible his mother looked. She was completely worn out. New arrivals came in regularly. The family members recognized some of the people who came in and began to talk with them, but nobody was really in the mood for long conversations. The place became increasingly crowded.

Wladyslaw looked around and noticed that some of the people seemed very old, and he wondered how they were supposed to do heavy labor after they were relocated. He also noticed children who were desperate for a drop of water, but the Germans cut off the water supply.

A dentist they knew declared that the Germans were sending them off to their deaths. In the afternoon a new group of Jews came in, and the family members were horrified to discover that Henryk and Helina were part of this group. While the two were at work they learned that the rest of the family had been taken away so they volunteered to go along.



By 5 o'clock in the evening, it was extremely hot, and the crowd was growing. A boy came by selling sweets. Father bought a single cream caramel and divided into six parts. That was the last meal the family had together. Around 6 o'clock, they heard the whistle of the locomotive. The people were loaded onto the train. They were about halfway down the train when Wladyslaw heard someone shout his name. He was grabbed by the collar and flung out of the police cordon. He called to his father, who turned and waved goodbye. Wladyslaw called his family, and a policeman asked him what he was doing there and told him to go on and save himself. At that point, Wladyslaw realized what was going to happen to everyone that was loaded onto the train. He turned and ran.

In Chapter 10, Wladyslaw felt the pain of loneliness long after the train had left. A Jewish policeman stopped him, and he realized that it was a relation of his. Wladek gave him a place to stay and helped him get enrolled in a column of workers that worked on demolishing the walls of the former large ghetto. This was the first time Wladyslaw had been outside the ghetto in two years.

The work was hard, but he desperately needed food. One afternoon, the guards split the group into two sections - the ones on the right and the ones on the left. Wladyslaw was in the group on the right. The ones on the left had to lie on the ground, face-down. At this point, the guard shot them. A week later, there was another selection. Wladyslaw had a chance to live again.



Chapters 11-15

Chapters 11-15 Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 11, Wladyslaw had to move once again. This time, he and the others had to share rooms with only essential elements. The first night there, he had a dream that his brother came up to him and told him, "We are dead now." The next day, during work, there was another selection.

Wladyslaw was informed that he was assigned to work on the building of the SS barracks in the Mokotow District. He was told that he would get better food and better living conditions there. In reality, things are much worse. Wladyslaw had to get up two hours earlier so that he could walk to work, and the work was physically brutal. If workers felt faint and stopped, they were beaten by whips with lead balls. He pleaded to be transferred and got his wish.

He worked at the SS commanders palace in Aleje Ujazdowskie. They worked with Polish artisans and German master masons so they weren't as conspicuous and could take breaks. The architect in charge of the building was a Jew. Wladyslaw was concerned about the oncoming winter since he didn't have warm clothes or gloves. He was concerned that if his hands became frostbitten he would never be able to play the piano again. One day, Wladyslaw stumbled at work and sprained his ankle. Since he was now useless at the building site, they assigned him to the stores. He was grateful because it was warmer in the stores than it was out of doors.

There were more rumors of a resettlement in a ghetto, even though there were only around 60,000 Jews left. Wladyslaw contacted some friends to see if they would be willing to hide him. They didn't want to take the risk of hiding a Jew. He made a mental decision not to give up hope. As the new year arrived, he and some others were walking down the street when they were stopped by two SS men who were very drunk. Wladyslaw thought one of them was going to shoot him, but instead he was told to join the others in singing something cheerful.

In Chapter 12, Roosevelt announced that the Germans would be defeated in 1943. They were beginning to be less successful on the front lines. Wladyslaw's work group became involved in some smuggling, and they were almost caught. Thanks to some good luck, they weren't. On January 14, the Germans began human-hunting once again.

One morning as Wladyslaw walked to work, the mood was particularly somber. He and the other workers saw a young boy killed because he forgot to take his hat off to a German policeman. There were shots behind them, and they worried about their own families and belongings. Wladyslaw was concerned because he left his fountain pen and his watch on the table in his room. They were all he owned, and he would need them if he escaped. Later, he and the other workers discovered that people in the



buildings protected themselves by pouring water over the steps so that the water would freeze and make it difficult for the Germans to go upstairs. Thanks to the Jewish resistance, the Germans only took away around 5,000 people during the five days instead of the 10,000 they had planned to take away.

After the cleansing of the ghetto concluded, the streets were filled with broken glass and slashed pillows as well as the bodies of murdered individuals. Wladyslaw discovered that his room had not been looted. He realized he had to take action soon, and he found some friends to take him in. He planned his escape. It was February 13.

In Chapter 13, Wladyslaw was now living in an artist's studio. It was large and comfortable. He could only stay there for a short time, and plans were made for him to move into the home of an engineer and his wife on the ground floor of the same building. That night, he played the piano for the first time in seven months. The same evening, they heard that there was going to be another people hunt throughout the city the next day. That turned out to be a false alarm. They found another place for Wladyslaw to stay. It was a bachelor flat on Pulawska Street. The place is so comfortable that Wladyslaw didn't sleep much the first night because he wanted to relish the comfort of the well-sprung couch.

Wladyslaw's friends discussed how Wladyslaw would be fed and how they would manage the census which was going to take place the next day. They determined that he would spend the entire day in the lavatory with the door locked from the inside. Lewicki brought food to Wladyslaw on a regular basis. He would visit twice a week, and during the time between his visits Wladyslaw read a great deal, and he learned to make some delicious dishes. He had to remain very quiet, and he could hear the neighbors next door. They had a piano, and he longed to play a piano himself.

The days passed, and Wladyslaw received visits from Lewicki and Mrs. Malczewska twice a week. He became depressed and made a decision to commit suicide rather than fall into German hands.

In June, Lewicki showed up unexpectedly looking terrible. He wanted Wladyslaw to come with him so they could get away. But Wladyslaw felt as if he didn't have the strength to try, and his friend left without him. Wladyslaw felt like a caged animal waiting for the Gestapo to arrive. He knew he wouldn't let them get a hold of him alive, and he thought about his suicide. His friend had told him to jump off the balcony, but he decided it would be better to hang himself. Wladyslaw made a noose and had it ready, but the Gestapo did not come. They stayed away for several days.

At 11 o'clock on Friday morning, they entered his building. He put the chair to the bookshelf and prepared his noose then went to the door to listen. After half an hour, all was quiet, and when he looked out the window, Wladyslaw noticed that the SS trucks and driven away.

In Chapter 14, a week after the Gestapo left, Wladyslaw began to calm down. He was now faced with a new problem as his food supplies dwindled. He knew he would have



to either die of starvation or risk going out to buy a loaf of bread. He lived on that bread for 10 days. On July 29, a stranger let himself into the apartment. He was Lewicki's brother and had come to tell him that food would arrive the next day.

A radio technician named Szalas was an underground activist and was assigned to take care of but Wladyslaw on a permanent basis. Even though others considered him trustworthy, he wasn't very good caretaker. He showed up every 10 days with a tiny amount of food saying that he couldn't get money for more. Wladyslaw gave him some of the few possessions that he had left, and the man would always say that the items were stolen. He didn't seem to care about Wladyslaw's health even when the man was extremely weakened and jaundiced.

Mrs. Malczewska came by unexpectedly, and Wladyslaw learned that Szalas had been collecting a large quantity of money to help take care of Wladyslaw. He told everyone that he visited Wladyslaw almost daily and that he didn't need anything. Mrs. Malczewska had to leave, but before she left Warsaw she gave Wladyslaw food supplies and promised more reliable care.

On August 12, someone banged on the door, demanding to talk with him. Wladyslaw had to run for his life. He tried to call some friends to take him in, and an engineer and his wife let him sleep in their empty flat until his former radio colleague Zbigniew Jaworska arrived. Wladyslaw cleaned up and had a wonderful meal with the family. He planned to leave, but Jaworska and his mother, Mrs. Bobrownicka urged him to stay with them. He couldn't find a place to stay until Helen Lewicka, Mrs. Jaworska's sister-in-law stepped in to help. Wladyslaw was moved to a large flat in Aleja Niepodleglosci. This was his last hiding place before the destruction of Warsaw. It was right across the street from a large, unfinished hospital building.

Things would have felt better if he wasn't having problems with his health. His liver was giving him a great deal of trouble. In early December, he had an attack that was so severe they had to call in a doctor. Helena stepped in and nursed him until he recovered. As 1944 began, Wladyslaw did everything he could to live a normal life. The Germans were beginning to suffer numerous defeats. On June 6, 1944, Helena brought the news that the Americans and British landed in Normandy. As the Germans evacuated Warsaw, Wladyslaw was filled with hope. On August 1, Helena came in, wanting to take him down to the cellar because a rebellion was going to begin. Wladyslaw decided to stay where he was.

In Chapter 15, Wladyslaw couldn't believe that a rebellion was going to begin in a few minutes. Everything seemed very peaceful when he looked out the window. Some young men got off the tram and fired some shots. The rebellion had begun. Wladyslaw was locked in his apartment. At night, he fell asleep. When he woke up the next day, he looked at on an empty street. As the sun rose, he could hear the sound of rifle fire and heavy artillery. Around noon, a friend brought him food and news. They talked about escape, but he was too weak to go anywhere far.



Wladyslaw was once again on his own, and his provisions were running out. On August 11, as he listened at the door, he heard that they were Ukrainians in the building. On August 12, he learned that the building was surrounded by Germans. When he looked out the window, he saw a tank pointing at his floor in the building. It went off, and his building was on fire. He locked himself in the room and prepared to kill himself by taking large quantities of sleeping tablets and drinking some opium. These were left over from his liver illness.

Instead of taking the pills, he followed his instincts and climbed a ladder to the attic and pushed the ladder away. Germans came into the room then left. He came back down, and he could hear the sounds of fire in the hallway. As he began to feel dizzy from the first effects of carbon monoxide poisoning, he decided to take the sleeping tablets. He had planned to take the opium as well, but the tablets work instantly and he fell asleep without having a chance to drink the opium.



Chapter 16 - Epilogue

Chapter 16 - Epilogue Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 16, the pills didn't kill him, and Wladyslaw woke up at seven o'clock the next morning feeling nauseous. He discovered that he was happy to be alive and realized he had to get out of the smoldering building. Crawling over debris and corpses, he slowly and carefully made his way across the street. Wladyslaw thought he would find food and water in the old hospital, but the only water he found was in buckets covered with a film and filled with dead flies. He drank it anyway, and he ate some dusty, moldy crusts that were covered with mouse droppings. He stayed for 15 days before deciding to go back across the street to his building, which had burned out by this point.

He hid in the ruins of a flat on the third floor until he was filled with a sense of foreboding. Wladyslaw moved up to the attic, and that same day Ukrainians entered the building looking for loot in the flats. On September 18, aircraft flew over the city sending down parachutes of supplies for the rebels. On October 5, rebel detachments began to move out of the city. The civilian population of the city moved away in small groups for another eight days. The last people left on October 14, and Wladyslaw was alone.

In Chapter 17, during the day, people would come and visit the ruins looking for loot. It began to get cold by the beginning of November. Wladyslaw did everything he could to prevent himself from going mad in his isolation. The first snow fell on November 15, and he had a hard time dealing with the cold. He saw his reflection one day, and it startled him. Realizing he needed to clean up, Wladyslaw went out to look for water. He also wanted some porridge and went downstairs to get some. There were Germans across the street, but they didn't notice him. Later, he went back down to the kitchen, and he ran into a German soldier. Wladyslaw offered him some liquor, and the man left.

He knew the soldier would come back and he did along with some other soldiers. Wladyslaw climbed out from the attic floor to the top of the steeply-sloped roof. The soldiers didn't find him, but he was so shaken by the encounter that he decided to stay on the roof during the day. Some Germans on the hospital roof across the street saw him and began firing their weapons at him. Wladyslaw ran out and hurried down the street.

He found a new place and moved into the attic. He saw a working party and asked if they were Poles. As he talked with them, he noticed that something was wrong. When he left, he didn't go straight back to his house. Instead, he went to another place until the group was out of sight. After they were gone, he went back to his attic and looked out the window. The man he had been talking to came back with policemen, and they searched the Villa he had initially gone to. Two days later, Wladyslaw went searching for food and was startled when a German officer spoke to him, asking what he was doing there.



In Chapter 18, the officer asked him what he did for a living, and he told the man he was a pianist. The officer led him to a piano in the next room and told him to play something. He played Chopin's Nocturne in C Sharp Minor.

The German wanted to take Wladyslaw away, but he told him he couldn't leave. When the soldier realized he was Jewish, he asked to see his hiding spot. The officer told Wladyslaw that he would bring him some food. When he came back, he not only brought food, but he also brought news. He continued coming until December 12 when he brought the news that he had to leave Warsaw. Wladyslaw told the soldier his name and said that he would help in any way he could after the war. On January 14, there were unusual noises around, and on the 15th, Wladyslaw could hear artillery. In the early hours of the next morning, the silence was broken as radio loudspeakers broadcast announcements at the defeat of Germany and the liberation of Warsaw.

The officer left Wladyslaw a German military overcoat so he wouldn't freeze. He threw the coat on and went outside where he was almost shot by others who thought he was a German. He shouted out to them that he was Polish, and looking at him, the others believed him. Two weeks later, he walked through the streets of Warsaw without fear for the first time in almost six years.

Postscript - Two weeks later, Wladyslaw learned that one of his former Polish Radio colleagues had passed by a camp for German prisoners. There were a group of officers there, and he yelled at them, blaming them for taking away his violin. One of the men asked him if he knew Wladyslaw, and he told the colleague that he had helped Wladyslaw, but the friend didn't believe the officer. He asked for the man's name, but didn't hear his response. Wladyslaw did everything he could to find the man, but his efforts were futile.

The Extracts From the Diary of Wilm Hosenfeld shows journal entries from the viewpoint of a German officer who did not fully support the German cause.

In the Epilogue, Wolf Bierman, one of Germany's best-known songwriters, essayists and poets, wrote about the connection between Wladyslaw and Hosenfeld. Hosenfeld was the German officer who saved Wladyslaw. The section also tells what Wladyslaw did in the years after the war.



Characters

Wladyslaw Szpilman

Wladyslaw Szpilman was a man who lived in Warsaw, Poland in 1939. He was a pianist by trade and worked for the Polish Radio. He was also a Jew. During World War II, the Germans invaded his city and separated the Jews from the others. Wladyslaw and his family were forced to move from their home and work horrible jobs in order to survive. Wladyslaw was separated from his family as they boarded a train. The train took his family away, and later Wladyslaw learned that it had taken them to their death, but he survived. He spent the last several years of the war in hiding, struggling to survive. Some people helped him while others betrayed him. He fought starvation, illness and loneliness. Finally, he was discovered by a German officer. Instead of killing him, the officer helped him and Wladyslaw was still alive when Warsaw was liberated. After the war he went back to playing the piano professionally.

Wilm Hosenfeld

This man didn't show up till nearly the end of the book, but he was the reason that Wladyslaw survived. He was a German officer with a kind heart. During the war, Hosenfeld kept a journal that highlighted his thoughts on the war. He did not appreciate what was going on. He thought of himself as a coward for not standing up to fight against the crimes that were committed by his own people.

In his own way, he did standup and help the Jews. When he found Wladyslaw in hiding, he went out of his way to bring the man food and to help him stay warm. After the war, Wladyslaw learned about other Jews Hosenfeld had helped during his time as a German officer. Wladyslaw did everything he could to find Hosenfeld after the war, but he didn't know his name. It wasn't until many years later that Wladyslaw learned who his savior truly was and how the man had helped others. Hosenfeld died before Wladyslaw could ever meet up with him again.

Father

This man was a musician who tried to escape the harsh news of the war by playing his violin.

Mother

This woman helped her family by cooking for them and trying to keep things as stable as possible.



Henryk

This was the author's brother. They didn't really understand each other and didn't interact much.

Regina

This character was the author's sister. She was a lawyer.

Halina

This character was the author's sister. She taught music lessons to help the family.

Jehuda Zyskind

The author visited this man in the ghetto. He always managed to give him a new perspective on the political situation.

Wladek

This was a distant relative who helped the author find a home and a job after his family went off on the locomotive.

Lewicki

This character was a friend to Wladyslaw. He brought him food twice a week while Wladyslaw was in hiding.

Mrs. Malczewska

This character brought food to Wladyslaw while he was in hiding. She had to go away, but came back unexpectedly and found Wladyslaw starving and seriously neglected.

Szalas

This character was a radio technician who was supposed to take care of Wladyslaw, but neglected him instead. He collected money from others and said he was visiting Wladyslaw regularly when, in fact, he barely visited Wladyslaw and gave him hardly any food.



Zbigniew Jaworska

This character was a former radio colleague who helped Wladyslaw find a place to hide.

Helen Lewicka

This character helped take care of Wladyslaw when he was in hiding. She helped nurse him back to decent health after his gall bladder inflammation.



Objects/Places

Cafe Nowoczesna

This is where the author worked as a pianist at the beginning of the war. It was in the heart of the Warsaw ghetto.

Lice

The poverty-stricken people in the ghetto were stricken with this insect and this also carried typhus.

Piano

This is what Wladyslaw used to make a living. He worked in cafés and for the radio.

Violin

This is what Wladyslaw's father played. It helped him escape the harshness of the war.

Sliska Street

This is where Wladyslaw lived before the war began.

Polish Radio

This is what Wladyslaw worked for as the war began.

Power Station

This was hit by a bomb and the station Wladyslaw worked for went off the air.

Clodna Street

This was an area next to the Aryan quarters. The guards tormented Jews here by humiliating them on a regular basis.



Treblinka

Those selected for the labor force were taken here so the Germans could test the crematorium furnace and the gas chambers.

The Umschlagplatz

This was at the border of the ghetto. It was a compound surrounded by pathways, alleys, and dirty streets that could hold up to 8,000 people.

SS Barracks

This is where Wladyslaw had to do heavy labor. They were beaten with whips with lead balls if they were too slow.

SS Commanders Palace

Wladyslaw worked with artisans here. The job was better than his previous job, but he worried about the winter weather.

Stores

Wladyslaw was assigned to work here after injuring his ankle. He was happy that he didn't have to contend with frostbite while working here.

Chopin's Nocturne in C Sharp Minor

This is the piano piece Wladyslaw played for the German officer who helped him.



Themes

A Passion For Music

Wladyslaw was a pianist and his music was very important to him. He came from a family of musicians and they supported themselves in the early part of the war by teaching music lessons. Wladyslaw, himself, played the piano in cafés and worked for the Polish Radio. He kept this job until they could no longer go on air after their station was bombed.

Wladyslaw's father played the violin and he used it as a tool for escaping the harsh realities of war. When he heard about the horrible things happening, he would acknowledge the news and go back to his music. One time Wladyslaw was questioned by a German. He was asked what he did for a living, and he answered that he was a musician. Wladyslaw thought he was going to get killed. Instead, the man let him go and told him to be grateful for the fact that he appreciated music.

One of Wladyslaw's greatest concerns was how he could keep his hands and fingers safe through the harsh labor he had to partake in at the hands of the Germans. When he had little clothing to keep warm in the winter, he worried about getting frostbite and never playing the piano again. When Wladyslaw spent a long period of time in isolation, he kept his mind sharp by mentally going over his compositions and other music. This helped him after the war when he began playing again.

A Love of Family

Wladyslaw had a unique relationship with the members of his family. He didn't really seem to know his siblings all that well, even though they shared a living space. His sister Halina taught music to help the family during the war. His sister Regina was a lawyer, and his brother Henryk sold books during the war. Wladyslaw didn't really identify with him or understand him very much. Still, there was an obvious family bond, which is shown by the way the family gathered together for meals, spent time talking with each other, and stuck together.

Wladyslaw had several opportunities to leave his family and save his life, but he chose to stay with them. When he, his parents, and a sister were chosen for the selection, the one thing that made him happy with the fact that two of his siblings were not chosen, and they would survive.

Sadly, his siblings also seemed to have a sense of family bonding. When they heard that the rest of the family have been chosen for selection, they volunteered to go along as well. As they waited for the train, Wladyslaw noticed for the first time how horrible his mother looked. Before that, he hasn't noticed the toll the war had taken on her. He was separated from his family at the last minute, and later he learned that they were taken to their deaths. It was very difficult for him to deal with.



After his immediate family left on the train, Wladyslaw was alone. He ran into the relative that the family haven't really cared for before. In spite of this, the relative took Wladyslaw in, and helped him find shelter and a job.

Escaping Death

A major theme in this book is escaping death. Wladyslaw did this on numerous occasions. On two occasions he made a conscious choice to die at home rather than risk escape and die elsewhere. This was one reason he chose to stay in the city with his family when he could have left to find a safe place outside the city. He and his family survived.

In September, when the city was bombed, Wladyslaw wondered how he survived. An individual sitting next to him was killed. Another time, a policeman came up to him and he had to confess that he was a Jew. He was certain that his life was over, but he was saved when the policeman found out he was a musician.

At one point, Wladyslaw and his family were part of the selection that was supposed to board a train. At the last minute, someone yanked him back, and he was separated from his family. Later, he found out that his family had died, but he had been saved.

He survived several selections were people in the group opposite him were killed. While he was in hiding, he decided that he would rather commit suicide than fall into the hands of the Germans. He had a noose ready to go when some Germans came into his building. He never had to use it because they left unexpectedly.

On another occasion, he planned to overdose on strong sleeping pills if the Germans came for him. He was about to take them when he was guided by an instinct to change his plan. He hid instead and survived. When his building was on fire at a later point, Wladyslaw realized that it was truly how he was going to die. He planned to take the sleeping pills and some opium, but the pills worked quickly on his empty stomach, and he never had a chance to drink the opium before he fell asleep. When he woke up the next morning, he discovered he was alive in the smoldering building. Near the end of the war, Wladyslaw was discovered by a German officer. Instead of killing him, and the officer saved his life. Wladyslaw survived the war.

Style

Perspective

The original version of this book was written in 1945, immediately after World War II. The author of this book is Wladyslaw Szpilman. When he wrote the book, he never intended for it to become published. It was his way of dealing with his war experience so that he could free his mind and go on with his life. The forward of the book is written by his son who found the book on his father's library shelves when he was a young boy. The book is written from the first-person perspective, sharing the story of a young Jewish man who lost his family and barely survived the war himself when the Germans invaded his city and set out to eradicate the Jews.

Tone

The tone of this book is subjective and written by and about Wladyslaw Szpilman. Although it isn't a journal, it covers the daily life of a young Jewish man who played the piano for a living then had his world shattered by a German invasion during World War II. The book doesn't shie away from the atrocities the author witnessed, nor does it dwell on them. The book just states the facts as Wladyslaw saw them.

Structure

"The Pianist" by Wladyslaw Szpilman begins with a foreword written by the son of the author. He explains how the book came about and why it's so important in today's world. There are 18 chapters in the book. Each chapter is numbered and has a title that summarizes an important aspect of the chapter. The chapters run from approximately 10 pages in length to approximately 15 pages in length. After Chapter 20, there is a Postscript then a section with extracts from the diary of a German officer. The last section of the book contains an Epilogue, written by an acclaimed writer. In this section, he details the importance of the connection between Wladyslaw and the German officer. He also tells the reader what Wladyslaw did after the war.

Quotes

"The singers there included Maria Eisenstadt, who would have been a famous name to millions now for her wonderful voice if the Germans had not later murdered her" (Chapter 1, p. 16).

"When we insisted on staying, however, instinctive relief and satisfaction showed in her fine, expressive eyes: whatever happened, it was better to be together" (Chapter 2, p. 30).

"Compared to the time that followed, these were years of relative calm, but they changed our lives into an endless nightmare, since we felt with their entire being that something dreadful would happen at any moment—we were just not sure yet when danger threatened, and where it would come from" (Chapter 5, p. 64).

"We're not heroes! We're perfectly ordinary people, which is why we prefer to risk hoping for that 10% chance of living" (Chapter 9, p. 102).

"I put my coat on, took off the armband with the blue star for the first time in three years, and slipped out of the gate with them" (Chapter 12, p. 132).

"I had escaped death yet again, but it still lay in wait for me" (Chapter 14, p. 145).

"This time I had ended up in one of the two most German parts of Warsaw, right in the lions den, which may in fact have made it a better, safer place for me" (Chapter 14, p. 147).

"I expected to be captured and ill-treated, and shot or suffocated in the gas chamber. It had never occurred to me that I would burn alive" (Chapter 15, p. 158).

"I was alone: alone not just in a single building or even a single part of a city, but alone in a whole city that only two months ago had had a population of a million and a half and was one of the richer cities of Europe" Chapter 17, p. 167).

"So this time, for a change, I had to buy my life by playing the piano" (Chapter 18, p. 178).

"I had to be alone, entirely alone, if I wanted to live" (Chapter 18, p. 182).

"After two weeks, well cared for by the military, clean and rested, I walked through the streets of Warsaw without fear, a free man, for the first time in almost six years" (Chapter 18, p. 186).

"I play to Polish children who do not know how much human suffering and mortal fear once passed through their sunny schoolrooms" (Postscript, p. 189).

Topics for Discussion

What kind of life was Wladyslaw used to before the war?

Why did Wladyslaw keep changing his place of work?

How did the Jews feel about the Germans when they first came into the city of Warsaw?

How did the feelings the Jews had for the Germans change, and what caused this change?

Why didn't Henryk want to become part of the police?

The German officer said that it was obviously God's will for them to live. What did he mean by this?

What did Wladyslaw do to thank the German officer after the war?