



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

By Wladyslaw Szpilman

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Named one of the Best Books of 1999 by the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Pianist* is now a major motion picture directed by Roman Polanski and starring Adrien Brody (*Son of Sam*). *The Pianist* won the Cannes Film Festival's most prestigious prize—the Palme d'Or.

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Though he lost his entire family, Szpilman survived in hiding. In the end, his life was saved by a German officer who heard him play the same Chopin Nocturne on a piano found among the rubble. Written immediately after the war and suppressed for decades, *The Pianist* is a stunning testament to human endurance and the redemptive power of fellow feeling.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Written immediately after the end of World War II, this morally complex Holocaust memoir is notable for its exact depiction of the grim details of life in Warsaw under the Nazi occupation. "Things you hardly noticed before took on enormous significance: a comfortable, solid armchair, the soothing look of a white-tiled stove," writes Wladyslaw Szpilman, a pianist for Polish radio when the Germans invaded. His mother's insistence on laying the table with clean linen for their midday meal, even as conditions for Jews worsened daily, makes palpable the Holocaust's abstract horror. Arbitrarily removed from the transport that took his family to certain death, Szpilman does not deny the "animal fear" that led him to seize this chance for escape, nor does he cheapen his emotions by belaboring them. Yet his cool prose contains plenty of biting rage, mostly buried in scathing asides (a Jewish doctor spared consignment to "the most wonderful of all gas chambers," for example). Szpilman found compassion in unlikely people, including a German officer who brought food and warm clothing to his hiding place during the war's last days. Extracts from the officer's wartime diary (added to this new edition), with their expressions of outrage at his fellow soldiers' behavior, remind us to be wary of general condemnation of any group. --*Wendy Smith*

#### From Publishers Weekly

Originally published in Poland in 1945 but then suppressed by the Communist authorities, this memoir of survival in the Warsaw Ghetto joins the ranks of Holocaust memoirs notable as much for their literary value as for their historical significance. Szpilman, a Jewish classical pianist, played the last live music broadcast from Warsaw before Polish Radio went off the air in September 1939 because of the German invasion. In a tone that is at once dispassionate and immediate, Szpilman relates the horrors of life inside the ghetto. But his book is distinguished by the dazzling clarity he brings to the banalities of ghetto life, especially the eerie normalcy of some social relations amid catastrophic upheaval. He shows how Jewish residents of the Polish capital adjusted to life under the occupation: "The armbands branding us as Jews did not bother us, because we were all wearing them, and after some time living in the ghetto I realized that I had become thoroughly used to them." Using a reporter's powers of description, Szpilman, who is still alive at the age of 88, records the chilling conversations that took place as Jews waited to be transported to their deaths. "We're not heroes!" he recalls his father saying. "We're perfectly ordinary people, which is why we prefer to risk hoping for that 10 per cent chance of living." In a twist that exemplifies how this book will make readers look again at a history they thought they knew, he details how a German captain saved his life. Employing language that has more in common with the understatement of Primo Levi than with the moral urgency of Elie Wiesel, Szpilman is a remarkably lucid observer and chronicler of how, while his family perished, he survived thanks to a combination of resourcefulness and chance. (Sept.)

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#### From Library Journal

Szpilman's memoir of life in the Warsaw ghetto is remarkable not only for the heroism of its protagonists but for the author's lack of bitterness, even optimism, in recounting the events. Written and published in a short run in Poland soon after the war, this first translation maintains a freshness of experience lacking in many later, more ruminative Holocaust memoirs.

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#### **Juana Houck:**

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