

READING GROUP GUIDE

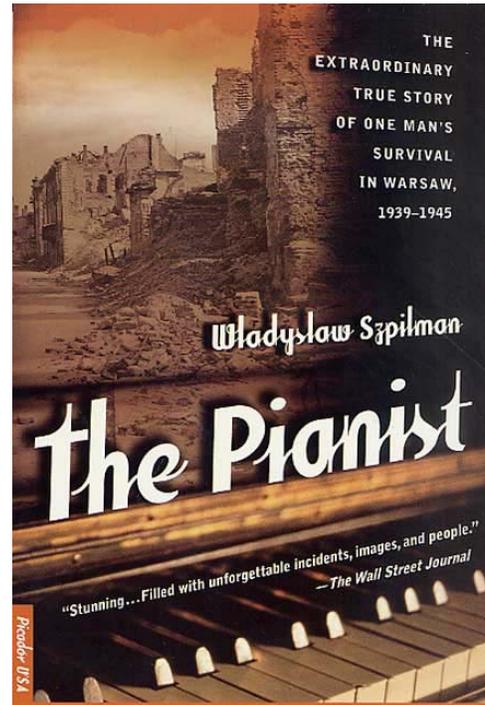
The Pianist

A Novel

by Wladyslaw Szpilman

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Pianist* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Pianist*.

About the Book

Named one of the Best Books of 1999 by the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Pianist* is also 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.

On September 23, 1939, Wladyslaw Szpilman played Chopin's Nocturne in C-sharp minor live on the radio as shells exploded outside—so loudly that he couldn't hear his piano. It was the last live music broadcast from Warsaw: That day, a German bomb hit the station, and Polish Radio went off the air.

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.

About the Author

Wladyslaw Szpilman was born in 1911. He studied the piano at the Warsaw Conservatory and at the Academy of Arts in Berlin. From 1945 to 1963, he was Director of Music at Polish Radio, and he also pursued a career as a concert pianist and composer for many years. He lives in Warsaw.

Discussion Questions

1. What do we learn about the narrator of *The Pianist* in the book's opening chapter? Who is he? Where does he live? What does he do for a living? Who are his loved ones? Also, discuss the narrator's tone or attitude, given his use of phrases like “the most wonderful of all gas chambers” and other such remarks.
2. “Two lives began to go on side by side,” Szpilman writes near the conclusion of Chapter 4, discussing what it was like to be in Warsaw just after the Germans took the city. What were these two lives? What exactly did each life involve? And who were the people leading them? Comment on the dual character that Szpilman ascribes to his hometown, both in this chapter and throughout *The Pianist*.
3. “I laid my head on the piano and--for the first time in this war--I burst into tears.” What specific event causes Szpilman to react in this way? Why does it affect him so? Explain.
4. Much of this memoir finds Szpilman pent-up, stuck in a cage, or held in some other sort of cell: an empty flat, a forgotten attic, etc. In Chapter 6, for example, he writes: “The reality of the ghetto was all the worse just because it had the appearance of freedom. You could walk out into the street and maintain the illusion of being in a perfectly normal city.” What did reading *The Pianist* show or tell you about the psychology of confinement--about the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional costs of imprisonment?
5. Chapter 8 of the book is entitled “An Anthill Under Threat.” Explicate and explain this metaphor. Who or what is Szpilman describing with this image?
6. Look again at the brief conversation Szpilman's father has at the *Umschlagplatz* with a local dentist and a businessman. What crucial question do they discuss here--and how does each of them view this question? And who did you, as a reader, agree with on this score? Defend your own viewpoint with references from the book itself or with other historical and/or textual references.

7. Around Christmas of 1945, after months of more or less solitary confinement, after years of staying completely hidden, Szpilman briefly imagines himself as Robinson Crusoe. How does he specifically compare and contrast himself with Defoe's archetypal loner? What other literary figures, if any, would you cite as reflections of Wladyslaw Szpilman?

8. Discuss in some detail the role of music in *The Pianist*. How might music itself be understood as a character in this story? What does music *do* in this memoir? How does influence or otherwise alter the course of Szpilman's book--and, indeed, the course of his life?

9. Interestingly, *The Pianist* gives us two back-to-back impressions of the German Captain Wilm Hosenfeld. The first, of course, appears within Szpilman's narrative, where Hosenfeld (although we do not know his name at the time) effectively saves our hero's life. The second impression comes in the form of Hosenfeld's diaries. Draw on both impressions to create a full description (or at least a fleshed-out, 3-D summation) of this person. Discuss whatever links or connections you can establish between Hosenfeld's journal entries and his actions toward Szpilman.

10. In his Epilogue, Wolf Biermann points out that *The Pianist* "was first published in Poland in 1946 under the title of one of its chapters, *Death of a City*." Which title, in your view, is the more fitting or appropriate one? Explain.

11. Finally, compare and contrast the memoir version of *The Pianist* with the film version. In what ways did these two works strike you as similar? In what ways did they affect you differently? (Or, if you have not seen Polanski's film, compare and contrast Szpilman's memoir with other books, plays, or films that you have read or seen concerning the Holocaust.)

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