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Sergio Haro
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Through the Ruins of What Once Was

Thunder roars all around. Black clouds veil a dying sun. Yet, the storm is not falling from above but raging from below. The thunder is the cracking of gunfire and the clouds, smoke rising from the rubble of what once was. With the roar of a lion, planes, looking like angels in the heavens, drop death upon a city. The buildings that were homes are now corpses, stripped of their flesh and left gaping. With the earth erupting in hatred, Wladyslaw Szpilman sits upright and continues to play Chopin's *Nocturne in C sharp minor*. The bombs rain unrelentingly. Everyone runs, except for Szpilman, who is still behind the ivory keys, until a bomb falls upon his office and rips a hole through the walls. Now Szpilman picks up his hat and walks away from his passion. Not disturbed by the blood dripping from his forehead, he calmly smiles as he exits the building.

This moment was the first encounter Wladyslaw Szpilman had with the Second World War. It was just the beginning of a terrible tragedy that unfolded for Szpilman. The movie *The Pianist* is a depiction of this tragedy. At its very core, the movie is a tale of survival. As the German forces systematically eliminated his home, his possessions, even his family, Wladyslaw Szpilman had a force inside of him that kept him going. The Pianist follows Szpilman's journey, showing his love for the music pulling him through the horror of times. And it was this love that kept him going for the near half decade he spent living hell.

Through a Window

Back to Poland, 1939: a small boy roamed around the *Umschlagplatz*, an assembly area for the Jews before they were loaded onto cattle cars toward certain death. He was all alone, his mother murdered, his father taken away. The stench of death caught his throat. Finally, he made it through the sea of people packed into this *Umschlagplatz*. Between him and his life, there stood a German soldier. Courageously, the boy approached the soldier and asked if he could go home to fetch a loaf of bread. The soldier looked down upon this child and nodded. The only thing this soldier told Roman Polanski was “Don’t run.” (“Story of Survival”)

Sixty years later, Roman Polanski was finally able to recreate those terrible memories that haunted him and show the world an un-softened portrayal of what happened back then. He found it too difficult to tell his own story; the memories cut too deeply into his heart for him to relive them exactly. “For years [Polanski] searched for someone else’s [story] to adapt” (Thomas). A decade earlier he was offered the position to direct “Schindler’s List,” “but turned down the offer to direct it because it was set in Krakow” (Thomas).

There is quite a difference between this movie and previous movies about World War II. For one, the movie is very quiet. For a large portion of the movie, Szpilman is alone in the world. On occasion someone drops by to deliver food but for the most part dialogue is nonexistent. The larger difference between this and others is Szpilman is not a hero nor does he exhibit characteristics of heroism. He is not a soldier fighting for his country; he is not a rebel who joins the Resistance and fights from the inside, he is not a

business man who gives up all he has to save the lives of as many people as he can. Szpilman is a pianist and to that his heart belongs. He is just a spectator of the war attempting not to get caught in violence.

The movie keeps a tone similar to that of the memoirs on which the movie is based. Iwo Zaluski, a writer for A Contemporary Review, felt the book was told “without bitterness or judgment, with only a wry sadness and pity for the frailties of human nature.” This is an excellent depiction of the movie itself. The Germans were not the only ones depicted as evil and cruel. No one is free from the grasp of evil deeds. The Jewish policemen readily and enthusiastically gather their people, beating them senselessly and sending them to certain doom. The rich Jews who populate the café in which Szpilman plays seem to have no idea of the suffering that is occurring. The Poles who were supposed to take care of Szpilman fall to greed as well. In one of the flats Szpilman was hiding in, a technician for the radio station was assigned to Szpilman. This technician went around collecting money to provide Szpilman with food but instead kept the money for himself and allowed Szpilman to become terribly ill.

However, Szpilman does not judge these people. He does not voice any sentiment toward them. It is more as if Szpilman is in shock and does not know how to react. He is just in awe at humanity and what it is capable of. This attitude is carried on within the movie as Polanski does not focus on any of the violence or cruelty but shows it on various occasions as an ordinary occurrence perpetrated by all.

The book has “a straightforward style that smacks of diary rather than autobiography,” comments Zaluski. The movie translates this style perfectly onto the screen. Many of the important events Szpilman watches through a window, his version of

the movie screen. Through his window, he watches as a German unit storms a building in the Ghetto and toss a paraplegic out of a window because he did not stand for the German officer. Through his window, he watches through his window the uprising of the Jews in Warsaw, and its termination. Later on, he again watches the uprising of the Poles and their eventual capture and extermination.

The movie is filmed in a similar approach to Szpilman's window watching. The movie does not gloss over the images with effects or radically different angles. It tries to show the audience exactly what Szpilman sees. Often, Szpilman is placed on the edge of the frame, giving the viewer the sense that he is standing next to Szpilman watching the events unfold.

The Pianist is a different type of movie. Although the movie follows one man's tragedy, it differs in that the man is not the focus. As noted, the camera moves beside Szpilman not behind. This is done to provide a collective view on the hell. All other movies focus on an individual story, an individual triumph. The Pianist does not look at just one aspect of World War II. Instead, it focuses on life as a whole. Polanski's vision was to provide the world with a collective view on the war ("A Story of Survival"). Szpilman represents every individual of the war. His music is the manifestation of the collective will. This is what Polanski sought to depict. He wanted to tell a story that represented all the people who suffered, including himself. To focus on an individual would overlook the whole.

Wladyslaw Szpilman is a grain of sand in the hourglass of World War II. The grain is an infinitesimally small part of the whole; yet without that grain, a hole will perpetrate through the hourglass until the collapse of Time. However, unlike many other

stories, his is without definite focus. No one act, not one mission defines those years of his life. His music was his light, leading him from the darkness toward survival. That is what makes his story so compelling, so powerful.

In the Shadows

Strangely, for a movie about a pianist, music is not given a place front and center on the stage. Instead it is hidden in the shadows, lurking. In small snippets, the audience glimpses Szpilman at the piano. The movie begins with Szpilman playing Chopin for the radio station as described earlier. With the war erupting around him, Szpilman stands tall and is not afraid to continue playing. He plays to share his joy with those few left listening and he consoles them as tragedy transpires with the beauty of his music. This passion is what gives him the courage to continue playing. As the movie progresses we see very little of the piano. Polanski keeps the focus off the piano thus building the anticipation for the climatic scene that will be discussed later.

Before that scene, in perhaps the only moment of this type that is shown on screen, Szpilman sits at home composing at the piano. While the rest of his family is busy packing and gathering their possessions, Szpilman hits a handful of notes and once he finds the perfect combination he writes the notes down in a book. However, this moment is short lived. In the other room he hears his mother scream and cry as she discovers all their money is gone. In the following scene, Szpilman unselfishly sells the piano to help out his family even though his brother and sister are infuriated at the pitiful amount the buyer has offered. As important as the piano is to Szpilman, his family receives priority. However, Szpilman's talent had no true need for such a piano.

Cut transiently into the movie are shots of Szpilman playing the “air piano.” Much like kids today pretend to be rock stars by striking the chords of their imaginary guitars, Szpilman’s hands are shown moving around in the air playing a great imaginary piece. Although the movie never directly mentions it, these moments were Szpilman’s composition of *Concertino for Piano and Orchestra* (Szpilman). Virtually, Szpilman composes a moving piece and keeps it in memory throughout the war.

Szpilman is also able to continue playing at a café where he acquires a job, until the Germans begin liquidating the ghetto. Once Szpilman is all alone, the piano becomes a ghost in the film. It lingers and hides behind walls and shadows, teasing Szpilman with its closeness.

Looking out the window of the first flat he hides in, he can see the ghetto walls, except this time he is finally on the outside. In his first days at this flat, all he hears is a couple next door arguing incessantly. When the couple reconciles, a piano begins pouring its heart, much to the satisfaction of Szpilman. His hand touches the wall attempting to feel the vibrations of the strings. He closes his eyes, and for once everything is all right. All the horror and suffering goes away and in those few moments Szpilman remembers why he seeks to live.

In another flat later on, a piano sits taunting Szpilman. “Try to keep quiet,” is the last thing he is told by those helping him before they lock him inside. However, immediately after, Szpilman removes the cover of the piano revealing the yellow, aging keys. He sits down and raises his hands to begin but he reminds himself of the danger of doing so. Any noise could bring the German. In the background, the audience hears a symphony starting. The music pauses and Szpilman throws out caution and begins

playing. The camera pulls out revealing Szpilman's entire body perpetrating this beauty that is rising from the piano. After so long, all the energy stored up is released and Szpilman is free to display his passion once again. After this burst of passion, Szpilman must once more return to silence to try to survive.

A Midnight Sonata

As the movie moves into its final act, Polanski shifts the pacing of the movie. The beginning was tight and quick, causing a claustrophobic feeling mirroring the atmosphere of the ghetto. However, in the last few scenes, the camera pulls out becoming a distant spectator. This adds to the loneliness felt by Szpilman. In this act, the audience views one of the most jaw dropping images of the movies as Szpilman climbs over a wall. This is where the camera begins retreating. The further the camera goes, the more destruction is shown. When the camera reaches its end, Szpilman is dot on the screen and the audience sees the ruins of what once was.

It is in these ruins where the most beautiful and touching scene of the movie occurs. Szpilman is shown going from house to house in search of something to eat. When he does find a can, he hears a German group entering the building. Szpilman quickly hides in the attic. After the group leaves, Szpilman searches for a tool to help him open the can. In this struggle, he drops the can and it slowly rolls to a stop underneath a black boot, shining in the moonlight. The tension rises. The German officer stands over Szpilman interrogating him. Szpilman, thinking his life is over, stands silently until the officer asks him what he does. Szpilman replies, "I was....I am a pianist." The officer's looks up ordering Szpilman to follow him into a room.

The moonlight seeps through the window. The narrow rays seek only to illuminate the keys of an old piano. The rest of the room lives in shadows including Szpilman and the German officer. “Play something,” commands the officer. Szpilman sits. His hand rise and fall upon the keys, sending a shivering note through the air. He pauses gathering strength before his fingers shake off the frost and move diligently and quickly, never missing a note. The officer stands in awe. He sits down and takes in the harmonious sound emanating from the closed wooden cabinet. Szpilman plays as he has never done before. His passion and vigor seep out of the film and reach out to all those watching.

Tone, atmosphere, and the actor’s portrayal are crucial to this scene. Roman Polanski knew that if the scene was not perfect in every sense the audience would not feel the power and beauty of the piano. Thus the scene was tried a multitude of time before every step the actors took, every syllable pronounced was perfect. The scene was so powerful that even when filming several women in the crew began crying through the scene. (“A Story of Survival”)

After watching the events that transpired, we ask ourselves how he could survive, not just physically but emotionally and mentally as well. Szpilman had all of his possessions taken from him. He was forced to sell his piano to feed his family. He lived with death all around him. His family was taken from him and if not for a piece of luck he would have been alongside them. For a few years he spent the days locked into an apartment or room without the freedom to roam outside those doors. For a few years he lived in silence with not another second human soul to speak to. Those last few years were probably the worst of all. Even while he was a slave to the Germans he was not

alone. He had many around him that shared his pain. Earlier still, he lived a miserable life but his family was there to hold him and support him. But those last few years were spent a prisoner in solitary confinement. Yet, for one reason alone he was able to sustain himself mentally. For one reason alone, he woke up every morning and continued to watch the world seeking for signs of the end. That reason was his music.

Wladyslaw Szpilman's life parallels that of Roman Polanski. In the city of Krakow, Polanski was six years old when the Germans invaded. Like Szpilman, Polanski's family was taken from him. According to the Encyclopedia of World Biography Supplements, "His mother died at Auschwitz, but his father survived at a different camp." As described earlier, Polanski managed to escape the train docks where he would meet certain Death. "Polanski made it through World War II by hiding with Catholic peasant families" (Polanski, Roman). Another location where he hid was inside the movie theaters of Krakow ("A Story of Survival"). It was here that Polanski's love for movies emerged. With nothing else in the world, little Roman would go to the movies to escape the horrible life that surrounded him. Like Szpilman, Polanski's love allowed him to rise above the world that was falling apart below him. It was this "high" that gave both the strength to persevere.

After the war Polanski was reunited with his father. However, his father had remarried and begun a new family. Following repeated hostilities, Roman Polanski, at the age of fourteen, left his home and enrolled himself into an art school (Polanski). Again, similar to Szpilman, once the war was over their lives as they were before had vanished. They both were forced to begin life anew. It is this opportunity that both took to truly pursue what they loved the most.

When there was nothing left to live for and hope was nothing but a fool's dream, Wladyslaw Szpilman repeatedly beat Death at its own game. Countless times did he face inevitable demise, and on each occasion he survived. Through it all, through all the horror, the cruelty, and the grasp of Death, Szpilman never lost his soul. He might not have had hope, but he had a will to live. He had a will to continue playing the piano. For many of the others who perished in those darkened times, the Germans were successful in removing every ounce of life within them. Szpilman lost all he had from his home, to his family, and his entire city. However, nothing the German's could do could separate Wladyslaw from the thing he loved most. Even if it was not physically there, Wladyslaw persevered and was still able to compose a beautiful piece. For Wladyslaw Szpilman, music saved him from the darkest time in human history. He was not a hero; he was not a leader; he was a pianist.

The Pianist displays the drama that surrounded Szpilman's life. It was also a chance for Roman Polanski to finally rid his mind of the similar experiences he had. The film begins with Szpilman doing what he loved most. Two hours and many years of Szpilman's life later the film returns to the radio station at which he worked to as Szpilman finishes the piece that was interrupted so terribly at the beginning. Through those two hours we see the power of music on people as it pulls Szpilman through the ruins.

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