It’s a disgrace to us all!...We’re letting them take us to our death like sheep to the slaughter! If we attacked the Germans, half a million of us, we could break out of the ghetto, or at least die honorably, not as a stain on the face of history!

(The “Dentist” from The Pianist, page 101)

Władysław Szpilman’s memoir, The Pianist, may be the only personal account of the Holocaust to dare place into the mind of the reader what is the single most disturbing question regarding the events of the Holocaust. It dares beg the question that assumes the Jews of Europe could have somehow defended themselves had they merely allied themselves into a single force. Szpilman’s father, “rather embarrassed” responds to the “Dentist” with the pathetically insistent belief in the goodness of humanity: “How can you be absolutely certain they’re sending us to our death?” (101). In other words, his humble wish that evil will not come to them all answers the question: there is no need to fight back because it cannot be possible that millions of people are being rounded up for extermination. Disbelief, then, reigns over the instinct of survival in the face of danger. Father Szpilman explains his reasoning further, relying on simple evidentiary fact:
“We’re not heroes! We’re perfectly ordinary people, which is why we prefer to risk hoping for that ten percent chance of living” (102). The question is ultimately a moot one. It presumes that the victims are somehow to blame for their plight, a moral and intellectual fallacy. Claude Lanzmann, whose 1985 9-hour documentary epic Shoah remains the standard-bearer of Holocaust cinema, staunchly refuses to broach the question of why at all. Though Shoah is conventionally classified as a documentary film, Lanzmann considers it to fall outside of that genre, as, unlike most historical documentaries, the film does not feature reenactments or historical photos; instead it consists of interviews with people who were involved in various ways in the Holocaust and visits to different places they discuss. Nothing is formally arranged in the editing, there are no “actors” and the filming is amateurish, avoiding with few exceptions the graces of cinematography. Unlike Roman Polanski’s film The Pianist or Spielberg’s more famous Shindler’s List, Lanzmann’s Shoah is not a chronological or factual record of the Holocaust. Lanzmann’s approach is to eschew cinematic technique, primarily narrative, and rely exclusively on interviews of survivors, those who killed, and bystanders in a kind of mosaic that begins slowly to make sense of something utterly without sense. At one point, he interviews a railway engineer who drove the trains to Treblinka and asks if he could hear what went on in the carriages behind his locomotive. Obviously he could. "The screams from the cars closest to the locomotives could be heard" explains the engineer. "Can one get used to that?" asks Lanzmann. "No," says the engineer, recalling that the Germans plied him and other workers with vodka so that they could do the job (Hansen). Ordinary people in extraordinary times? This seems to be the recurring theme in each film, though any such grouping runs the risk of superficiality.
This lengthy introduction is designed to place the film *The Pianist*, within the parameters of films having to do with the Holocaust. Though not made in Hollywood, *The Pianist* falls into the category of Hollywood-style films, in that it observes the cinematic characteristics of classic filmmaking: chronological narrative, attention to character development, and seamless editing and camera technique. Whereas Lanzmann refuses to permit the events of the Holocaust to be represented via cinema, believing that to do so borders on sacrilege, and Spielberg employs virtually all of the techniques of the master cinematic dramatist to the extreme in order to produce a highly emotional—some would say sentimental—explication of events, Polanski’s film falls somewhere between these extremes. By maintaining absolute allegiance to Szpilman’s text, Polanski refuses to enhance the memoirist’s clear-headed and surprisingly objective reportage. The result is a moving account of an individual’s survival against a massive force—virtually cosmic—without resorting to sentimentality.

The film *The Pianist* may be about the politics of identity, particularly as exposed in the fire of survival. As one writer has put it:

> We are not subjected to any soppy montages of the Szpilman family lighting candles, reading from the Torah, wearing yarmulkes, or any other external representation of Judaism [all references to *Schindler’s List*]. In its place, we get the mournful wail of a Klezmer clarinet on the soundtrack and other suggestions that music and art are the Szpilmans' true religious affiliations; being Jewish is just their cultural heritage. Wladyslaw plays the piano; his father worries that stuffing hidden money in his violin will
prevent him from playing it; his brother brings *The Merchant of Venice*
along as one of his last Earthly possessions. (Tsiolkas)

In other words, though the memoir and the film have to do with a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust, both texts have little if anything to do with notions of “Jewishness,” whatever they may be. On the surface, this factor identifies the Szpilman family as fully assimilated, secular Jews and thus, ostensibly, free from persecution; more important is the significant observation that the playing-down of and virtual absence of images associated with Judaism in both the memoir and the film compel the reader/viewer to concentrate on a human, not a “Jew,” the latter a specter too often somehow dissociated with the human race. The result is a dismissal of any suggestion that the visual or religious associations with Jews and Judaism may be employed as justification for the atrocities perpetrated upon them.

Wladyslaw Szpilman’s memoir, written after his experiences in Poland during the war, begins with a forward by his son Andrzej and tells us that after an initial publication in 1945, the book was prevented for various reasons from being published, suggesting that some things regarding the treatment of Jews and the record of their stories haven’t changed. There is still resistance. At the time of its re-publication, The *New York Times* wrote:

*The Pianist, Wladyslaw Szpilman’s remarkable memoir of his survival in Warsaw between the years 1939 and 1945, is a significant contribution to the literature of remembrance, a document of lasting historical and human value. Unforgivably overlooked since its publication (in Polish) in 1946 and translated into English just now for the first time, the book is a relative*
rarity: an account of the Holocaust written in the immediate aftermath of the experience itself. It has all the rawness and specificity of horrors painfully and uncomprehendingly withstood and afterward just as uncomprehendingly—but necessarily—recorded. Writing this book would seem to have been a further act of survival by a man who performed more of them in six years than most human beings do in a lifetime. At the center of this book is one of the largest hows in all of human inquiry: how one people set about systematically and relentlessly annihilating another. It is a how that Szpilman tells with clarity, intelligence, candor, courage. It is the how that must be told again and again and again. There are many ways to read a book about the Holocaust, and one of them, surely, inevitably, is to try to answer the unanswerable: What makes one man endure when so many others succumb? We can only learn from those who testify; the others of course are mute. From Szpilman's testimony we learn this: It is an ineffable and wholly unpredictable mixture of fate, determination, accident, instinct. To know Wladyslaw Szpilman is, in the most hopeless of contexts, to know a modicum of hope. (Michael Frank, “No Why Here” L.A. Times Sunday Book Review, December 5, 1999).

For the reporter, Szpilman’s memoir responds to the how, not the why, perhaps all that a single person can truly perceive. The title of Frank’s article is inspired by a Primo Levi story in which a concentration camp guard says "There is no why here," retold in Shoah. Lanzmann, as already mentioned, believes that asking the question is an obscenity and has even shouted down Holocaust survivors at screenings of Shoah who dared to bring up
their own experiences in the death camps (Rink). The point is made to again establish the controversy regarding re-telling, re-enacting, or re-presenting the Holocaust at all. Recently, a visitor to Madame Tussauds' new branch in Berlin tore the head off an Adolf Hitler wax figure in what appeared to be a symbolic protest. There are those who would prefer not to be reminded in any way. By merely writing his memoir, Szpilman illustrated a rare courage.

Franco-Polish director Roman Polanski won the Cannes film festival's coveted Palme d'Or award for *The Pianist* in 2002. The film stars Adrien Brody as the brilliant Polish pianist who manages to escape the Warsaw ghetto. As a boy in Poland, Polanski himself survived the Krakow ghetto but lost his mother at a Nazi concentration camp in Poland. It was the first time that Polanski, director of such classics as *Chinatown* and *Rosemary's Baby* has taken the top prize at the world's most famous film festival. "I am honored and moved to receive this prestigious prize for a film which represents Poland," said Polanski, who was born in France to Jewish parents but later returned to Poland. A man whose fame has been inexorably linked to the violent murder of his wife, Sharon Tate, and to charges of statutory rape in the USA, Roman Polanski's greatest works have all been imbued with the pervasiveness of violence and fear. At age 73, Polanski was in Israel to accept the Life Achievement Award of the 23rd Jerusalem Film festival. An old friend of festival founder and director Lia van Leer, Polanski is no stranger to press conferences and answered reporters' questions affably and often with self-deprecating humor. Although Polanski would face arrest if he returned to the US, his surprise Oscar win for best director for 2002's *The Pianist* proved he is no longer an outcast in Hollywood. Fearing arrest, Polanski skipped the Los Angeles ceremony in which he
received the award. He visited Israel in 2002 to celebrate the release of The Pianist there, and said that that visit was such a "moving experience" he couldn't imagine anything this time that could compare to it (J. Post).

According to commentator Christos Tsiolkas,

It is possible that one of Polanski's greatest gifts as a filmmaker has been to convincingly investigate evil on screen. He is one of the great directors of horror, but the power of his films comes from essaying evil as psychological and as existing in the everyday. The coven of witches and warlocks in Rosemary's Baby (1968) are banal, middle-class and unexotic. In Chinatown (1974), evil exists within the very economic foundations of the birth of Los Angeles and it exists in the nature of family itself. ("The Atheist's Shoah: Roman Polanski's The Pianist")

Tsiolkas recognizes the concerns many have with so-called Holocaust films. He remarks that “it is important to investigate the nature of this reluctance, for it is echoed in many people's responses to hearing about the film. As a friend said, cruelly but also aptly, ‘Not another train-into-Auschwitz-movie.’ I think this response touches on the fraught legacy of the Holocaust, not historically, but as a continuing theme in popular culture and art.”

Purists argue that the greatest examinations of the Holocaust have come from documentary and from non-fiction films, such as Lanzmann's Shoah (1985), Resnais' Night and Fog (1955) and Max Ophul's The Sorrow and the Pity (1971) and are the most important film works to deal with the calamities of World War II. To make “sense of the vast tragedy of the Holocaust requires a rigorous commitment to history, and that's not something we necessarily equate with great narrative filmmakers. It is, however, a
commitment that is shared by documentarians.” Tsiolkas, echoing numerous critics and academics, found fault with Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) because in attempting to create a masterwork out of the experience of the death camps, it ended up reducing European Jewish experience to archetypes of suffering and to negate, once again, the complexity of difference, to make the Jews again nothing but a number. The six million plus one list. That doesn't mean the film doesn't get to you, that it doesn't move an audience, but it reduces history to the battle of good versus evil and that isn't the story of European anti-Semitism nor is it the story of World War II. Attempting to make the Holocaust the master-narrative of human war and suffering gets us nowhere. As *Shoah* illustrates, it was the consequence of specific European histories and struggles, rooted in defined religious differences and hatreds, and emerging from individual national and cultural identities.

Nevertheless, Tsiolkas admits that “the best fictional films that have grappled with the Holocaust as a thematic have been the ones which frame their stories around particular individuals and communities.” Such critics argue that some “Holocaust Genre films”… “seem to dishonor the enormity of history by asking us to imagine heroes and villains, love stories and mortal combats,” the supposition being that such narrative techniques are too associated with fiction and thus risk disbelief. While it can be honestly argued that *Shindler’s List* is precisely a story framed “around individuals and communities”—it is Isaac Stern’s story, after all—Tsiolkas prefers *The Pianist* as a finer example of the individual experience. *The Pianist* manages to be historically faithful and definitive. It
presents an intimate portrait of Szpilman, and through his eyes we begin to slowly understand the magnitude of the violence occurring around him. Like the memoir, the film maintains a coolly detached view of the events in the Ghetto. In fairness to Szpilman, we should note that his memoir was written immediately following the horrific events and that he surely was suffering both physically and emotionally. His state certainly warranted a flat affect in his reportage. The growing fear is well documented, step by step, in such a way as to explain how resistance came too little too late. The majority of *The Pianist* is filmed within closed rooms, claustrophobic spaces in which Szpilman and his family need to hide. Even when outdoors in the Ghetto, we are aware of the walls and the regulations which dictate movement for the Warsaw Jews. The film begins just before the invasion of Poland by Germany and ends with the liberation of the country by the Soviet army. At first Szpilman's experiences are more humiliating than they are coercive or violent: the introduction of Nazi Race Laws, the requirement to sow the Star of David on his clothing. Then the Ghetto walls are built. And then, the trains arrive to take the Jews to the death camps in the East (Tsiolkas).

The film, like the novel, dramatizes the uncomfortable truths of human behavior at its worst, not so much of the Germans—that is taken as granted—but from the Jews trapped within their own neighborhoods. Initially, there is a period where class distinctions are maintained in the Ghetto, a developing black market economy, a vast difference in the extremes of suffering between that of the peasant and proletarian Jews and that of the richer members of the Ghetto. Szpilman becomes witness to increasingly terrible events. The Polish Jews maintain the conviction that they are individual, classed, and distinguishable by difference. In one of the film's many scenes that adheres directly
to the text’s chapter, entitled “The Umschlagplatz,” the inhabitants of the ghetto are rounded up in a square, waiting to board the death trains. The heat of the day is oppressive; the light burns too brightly. Hell is imagined. Polanski’s commitment to eschew sentiment or melodrama, as numerous critics recognize, his insistence in maintaining his “studied detachment, comes together and makes complete sense. We have seen people attempt to maintain a façade of pre-war normality in conditions of madness and cruelty, and then, finally, we arrive at a moment where we see them entering the calamity which is the Final Solution and they have their humanity–their pride, their vanities, their hopes–stripped from them” (Tsiolkas). The scene is banal compared to those staged by Spielberg. The crowd sits, sweltering in the heat, moaning and frightened, but with few exceptions, unexceptional. The effect on the viewer afforded perfect hindsight is to scream “Run! Why don’t you people run?” In one of many blithe and inexplicable acts of fate that conspire to save only him, Wladyslaw does run, having been pulled by a member of the Jewish Police from the crowd—which includes his family—just as they are being loaded into the cattle cars destined to death. Polanski breaks with Szpilman’s record, deciding that running would have drawn the attention of the Nazis. He alters the story by having the Jewish Police warn Szpilman “don’t run.” Polanski chose to make this change based on his own recollections from Krakow. Life imitates life, even in dramatization.

Szpilman is not at all heroic as a character and Brody resists the attempts to make him a conventional hero, perfectly in keeping with the text’s verisimilitude and fearless commitment to presenting the victims of the Holocaust as ordinary people. According to Tsiolkas, “part of the film's power resides in watching Szpilman lose his bourgeois
mannerisms as the years of the war drag on … he is reduced to an animal state, surviving as best he can from being caught by the Germans. From the shaved, immaculate [sic] dressed dandy we see at the beginning of the movie, he becomes a bedraggled, emaciated ghost, hiding in an abandoned, bombed building, nursing a can of gherkins close to him.” In fact, the viewer cannot help but imagine Szpilman as rat-like. He is compelled in his starving state to eat crumbs of rotting bread dusted in rodent droppings. There is little honor in his survival. Nothing grand. This is what must be done in the face of evil. The only victory possible is mere survival. At best, Szpilman can proclaim, “You didn’t get me.” Movie tragedy is vainglorious; real tragedy rarely is.

As in *Shindler’s List*, the survival of Wladyslaw Szpilman ultimately hinges on irony: he is saved in the last weeks of the war by Wilm Hosenfeld, a Nazi Captain. The text contains excerpts of his diary and may explain the book’s rediscovery.

One clue may lie in the story of the good Wehrmacht officer who, late in Szpilman's ordeal, discovers him hiding in Warsaw and, instead of killing him, brings him an eiderdown quilt and a supply of food. This man, Wilm Hosenfeld, kept a diary in which he castigated the Nazi regime; he died in a prisoner of war camp in Stalingrad, where he was tortured because Soviet officers thought his claim to have saved a Jew particularly offensive. In bidding Hosenfeld farewell at a point when it was clear that the Germans had lost the war, an emaciated, weakened Szpilman with great humanity and great generosity told him, "If anything happens to you, if I can help you then in any way, remember my name: Szpilman, Polish Radio." Szpilman tried to find Hosenfeld immediately after the war and
failed; later, between Szpilman and Rosenfeld's family there developed a friendship. Parts of Hosenfeld's diary came to Szpilman's hands and are excerpted here. "The Pianist," recently published in Germany, was a bestseller there. If there is a connection between the rediscovery of "The Pianist" and its depiction of a "good" German, it is an interesting and possibly troubling story, but it is a story about publishing and memory and the effects of time on both; it is not a story about writing, and it does not in any way call into question the merits of Szpilman's memoir. This memoir itself does not have an ounce of rehabilitation in it; it burn with examination: one man's urgent examination of an experience that devastated and transformed his life.

In the film's pivotal scene, the Nazi Officer catches him, and Szpilman tells him that he is a pianist. The Officer knows that the war is near its end. He asks Szpilman to play him some music. The handsome Aryan, his uniform perfectly fitting, is contrasted with the almost animal state to which suffering has reduced Szpilman. It is as if Hitler's racist vision has been realized in this contrast. Critics conclude that it is Szpilman's ability to play music that moves the Officer. Hosenfeld’s diary suggests something much greater: humanity. Hosenfeld saved many during the war. Tsiolkas argues that

In refusing to make survival a matter of morality and ethics, but instead a matter of accident, Polanski refutes the rhetoric of Good and of Evil. There are no scenes of Jewish celebration or religion in The Pianist. Instead, being Jewish is another accident of birth, an accident that sealed the horrific fate of millions of Europeans. Polanski, himself a Polish Jew
and a survivor of the Warsaw [Krakow, actually] Ghetto, has made a great narrative war film about a subject many of us thought untranslatable. But his vision of Hell is that of an atheist. There is no God in *The Pianist*, not a hint of Him. This Hell is completely man-made.

But the numerous seemingly random events which lead to Szpilman’s survival are the acts of humans, all determined to do what good they can in the most trying of times in modern history. Neither Szpilman nor Polanski may see God in these acts, but humanity is clearly present.

One important scene from the book is not included in the film. Hiding out in a building that catches fire from German artillery, Szpilman decides to take his own life rather than be captured by the Nazis. He swallows sleeping pills and falls asleep. The reader knows that the writer must have survived, but the sadness that the memoirist, after all this, has finally given up, is unsettling. But he has not taken enough pills. He wakes up the next morning. Miraculously, the building still stands, though there are corpses smoldering on the stairs to escape. Equally miraculously, he finds that his first emotion is not "disappointment that I had failed to die, but joy to find myself alive. A boundless, animal lust for life at any price” (161). If this moment does not point to God, what then does?
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