

# The holocaust: the mass murders



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The Holocaust is undoubtedly one of the most horrifying events in history. The mass murder of more than eleven million people, six million of them Jews, has left its mark on history and should never be forgotten. The events and the history of the Holocaust are presented in two very different ways in the movie *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and in the movie *The Pianist*.

*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* is a historical drama film, which attempts to show the horrors of the concentration camps through the eyes of an eight-year-old German boy named Bruno and an eight-year old Jewish boy named Shmuel. *The Pianist* is a film based on Wladyslaw Szpilman's memoir of life during the time of the holocaust. Both attempt to show the atrocities committed by the Nazi Regime, but the attempts to do so are done in very different ways. I found it difficult to make many comparisons between the two movies, but one of the comparisons that can easily be made is the element of obscurity in each situation in the opening scenes. Szpilman is Jewish and is forced to sit around a radio with his family and wait for further instructions from the Nazi regime deciding his family's fate. Bruno on the other hand, the son of a Nazi officer, is forced to relocate from Berlin to the countryside with his family so that his father can help run one of the concentration camps. Though the each movie attempts to capture events that took place during the time of the Holocaust, many aspects of the movies are extremely different. I would argue that *The Pianist* is a much more educational representation of the Holocaust as compared to *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* which is more of a Hollywood movie with the setting of the Holocaust. Even though only one was supported by authentic historical events, both movies had a powerful impact on their viewers.

The Boy in the Striped Pajamas has repeatedly been called a children's film, and I would argue that it is significantly less graphic than The Pianist. The two main child characters are Bruno, the son of a Nazi party member, and Shmuel who is inside the concentration camp. These characters, because they are so young, represent innocence in such a dark time of history. I found the film to be more emotional than some of the others we have watched, but that is because I got to see a side of the Holocaust that I had not seen in other movies. One major criticism of this film, and its representation of historical events, is the friendship between Bruno and Shmuel's characters. It seems almost impossible that two boys would be able to form a friendship on either side of a barbed wire fence. In the movie, Shmuel is seen sitting on the ground by the fence unsupervised. In reality, the number of security guards in each camp was so high that it would have been impossible for Shmuel to have stayed by the fence all afternoon, or for him to get out of doing work, let alone form a friendship with a German boy. Shmuel, at the age of eight, would most likely have been sent to the gas chambers upon arrival to the camp. It is possible that when he arrived to the camp he was evaluated by one of the Nazis and thought to be a good worker, but this is highly unlikely. In my opinion, in order to watch this movie we are required to forget any knowledge that we have on the Holocaust and just immerse ourselves into the minds and lives of two innocent and naive main characters.

We find ourselves at the end of the movie feeling sorry for Bruno's family. This is the first Holocaust movie I have seen where we cannot help but feel sorry for the German family as well as the Jewish people. I wonder if this

ending was chosen for the movie so that the views are able to see that Bruno's father, although a Nazi, is capable of love. Why do we find ourselves feeling sorry for the murder of one boy but not the murder of the thousands of Jews who also died in the camp with Bruno that very same day?

Even though the movie is not historically accurate, I don't think it is supposed to be. The movie pulls on the heartstring of its audience because it is centered on the drastically different lives of two children, and you cannot help but feel bad for them. Bruno's character is portrayed as innocent and naive. He has no idea what the war really entails and, I believe his character is important because he represents the rest of the world during this time. Not many people, or countries, truly understood what was going on in the concentration camps, or how gruesome they were. Propaganda videos were sent out depicting the camps to be something completely different than they were. In the videos children were seen playing and there is an imaginary café? ©. Of course we know that this is not even close to how terrible life was in the camps.

Bruno is not the only ignorant character, his mother also was not aware of what was really going on inside the camps or farm as Bruno called it. Her husband had kept the secret of the gas chambers from her, which in turn caused her to lose all trust and respect for him. Again, we find ourselves feeling bad for Elsa, but what we don't think about is how much she did know. She was by no means innocent. The mass killings might have been kept from her, but she was well aware of the deportations to the labor camps, and how the prisoners were treated inhumanely. She knew this because she saw it first hand in her own house. She allowed a prisoner

names Pavel to work under her roof, and be treated unfairly. If she didn't like what she saw she could have spoken up to her husband about the situation. Her biggest fault was when she accepted and agreed with her husband when he told Bruno they are not real people (The Boy in the Striped Pajamas 2008).

In sharp contrast to The Boy in the Striped Pajamas, The Pianist, is much more autobiographical. We learned that the film's director, Roman Polanski, is a Holocaust survivor himself, which probably helped contribute to the movie's historical accuracy. Very early on in the movie we see how brutal the living conditions and treatment are in the Warsaw ghetto. One of the hardest scenes is when we see the ghetto wall being built up and just on the other side of the wall the non-Jews are at the markets buying food and living a normal life. Inside the walls of the ghetto we see famine, and cramped, and inhumane living conditions. Most movies we have seen, and testimonies we have read, have been from the inside the concentration camp fences. The Pianist was able to give us understanding of what life was like in the Ghettos before the Jews were sent off to the camps. I consider this movie to be an accurate display of a time during the Holocaust that is not always discussed. We are able to see Szpilman and the Jews living a somewhat normal life in the opening scene of the film. Then we watch and follow along with them as they begin to understand their fate; from the scene where the family is gathered around listening to the radio and are told they will be relocated to the ghettos, to the scene where they are put into the cattle carts on the way to the actual concentration camps.

I found Szpilman's character to be interesting, he was not a hero by any means or an outsider, he was a survivor and we were able to follow his memoir and see how much luck played a part in his survival. This I found to be a very similar theme to most of the testimonies we read. If you survived, you survived because of luck. However, I did find myself attached to Szpilman's character which made the film even more difficult to watch. It was hard to watch the dehumanization that played out during the film, of him and his family.

We also were able to get a sense of how historically authentic *The Pianist* is because of how the film plays out in perfect chronological order. We are shown dates at the bottom of the screen to better understand at what time frame during the war the scene took place. Szpilman never had a flashback scene and we mostly see what he sees through his own eyes. We are also shown that not every Jew was perfect. For example, Itzak was a Jewish policeman who was very brutal with fellow Jews when he did not need to be. This was the reality in the ghettos, and from what we have read in previous testimonies, in the concentration camps as well. We saw fighting, stealing, and the smuggling of food. Children would even crawl through the gutters to smuggle food into the ghetto. There was a scene of a little boy stuck between the ghetto and the other side of the wall and he was brutally beaten to death over a small portion of food he had stolen. It was the scenes like this one that really gave viewers like myself a better understanding of what the circumstances were really like in Warsaw. Another particularly gruesome scene was when Szpilman and his family witnessed, from their kitchen window, Nazis march into a Jewish home, make the entire family stand, and

when a man in a wheelchair did not stand they tossed him over the balcony to his death. Scenes like this one showed the audience just how horrible living in the ghetto really was. Another particularly horrific scene took place while Szpilman and his family waited in the courtyard to be deported. A woman near them was screaming, Why did I do it? Why did I do it? (The Pianist). The family learned that the poor mother had smothered her own child out of fear that the Nazis would have heard its cries and killed it. The unimaginable crime of a mother killing her own child does not seem true, but the sad reality was it happened all the time.

It is nearly impossible to compare the film *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* to the film *The Pianist* however, both films explore the context of family during the Holocaust. I found myself thinking, while watching *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* for the first time, that the film was over exaggerated by Hollywood, and that it would not fulfill the expectations of someone who is as fascinated with the history of the Holocaust as I am. After watching the film twice more I have a different understanding and appreciation for the film. While not historically accurate, it still gets the viewers thinking about the Holocaust and it does leave a lasting impression on us. During my first time watching *The Pianist* I had a much different opinion than I do now. I originally thought the film was maybe too historically accurate, if that is even possible. I found myself shielding my eyes from the graphic scenes and stopping the film every once in a while. Now, I realize and can appreciate how important it is to see a film like this one. Together, both films are part of a large genre of Holocaust representations that speaks to its twentieth century viewers and gives us a purpose, as viewers. It is important that viewers see both of these

films in order to ensure that a horrific genocide, like the Holocaust, never happens again. Holocaust survivors unfortunately will not live forever, so it is up to movies like *The Pianist* and *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas* and testimonies, like the ones we have read, to tell their stories.