

The pianist and the plight of the jews



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Thousands of the stories about the German Nazi's war atrocities during World War II have followed their Jewish victims into their makeshift mass graves to be silenced for eternity. For every Auschwitz that is recorded in the History books, there are hundreds of unknown and untold stories of the horrors performed on unsuspecting and undeserving victims, whose voices were erased from ever pointing blame or ever being heard.

For a lucky few, even though the word lucky might be challenged, they averted death at the hands of the Nazis. These few went on to be living documents of the senseless and brutal nature of the treatment of Jews in German occupied territory during World War II. In the movie *The Pianist*, one such victim's story is told, Wladyslaw Szpilman, a well-known Polish composer of the time, lived to write about his experiences in the Warsaw ghetto and the persecution of the Jews at the violent hands of the Nazi Germans.

Director Roman Polanski, a Jewish ghetto camp survivor himself, takes Szpilman's tragic story and displays it on the screen in a way that shows the desperate and helpless plight of the Jews against the tyrannical and unwavering brutal hands of the Nazi soldiers. Facts and statistics are static and void of emotion. Numbers point to the finality of an event, the outcome, and if too much time is spent on the sheer numbers of an action, the story and emotion can be lost in the translation. While the numbers of the atrocities of the Nazi Holocaust are staggering, six million Jews killed.

The numbers can fog the particulars. Polanski seeks to make it personal; he sits the viewer at the kitchen table of the Szpilman family apartment and

introduces them to an affluent Jewish family in Warsaw, Poland, struggling to decide rather to hide their valuables in the flower pot or the table leg. The fear on their faces and 2 uncertainty of their future hanging in the balance. The absurdity of the rules imposed on the Jews in order to dehumanize them is demonstrated over and over again, from not letting Jews walk on the sidewalk, to the rounding-up and resettlement of the Jews into the ghetto district.

The unimaginable brutality of the Gestapo is portrayed in horrific detail by Polanski, from their random killing lines, to the way the Nazis would make the starving and suffering Jews dance as they goaded and teased with pleasure. As Holocaust survivor Alexander Kimel explained it, “ The Jews were declared an open prey for the German soldiers and civilians. Jews were beaten, humiliated, sometimes killed for the amusement of the perpetrators. Sometimes the victim was killed outright; sometimes he was only abused and subjected to the cat and mouse play- his life being at stake.

The heavy burden upon the Jews was not the fact that they were going to die, but the constant psychological stress of the horrors waiting around every corner. As Chaim Kaplan etched in his diary in January 1942, “ Perhaps it is good to die. Anticipating death is worse than death itself, since death brings release from consciousness, and an end to one’s suffering. ” What this movie does for the viewer is to humanize the masses behind the Nazi Holocaust, even down to the way Polanski filmed it and gave it that old time feel.

While it depicts just one man's struggle for survival, it was a story that was played out hundreds of thousands of times across German occupied land in World War II. While the story is told in our textbook and the facts are in black and white on the pages, the enormity of the figures, one hundred thousand killed here, one hundred thousand killed there, seems to be grayed into a blurred reality of snapshots of starved and mutilated bodies stacked in mass graves.

It was not just the sheer numbers of people killed by the Nazis, but the horrendous and inhumane way that they psychologically tormented the Jewish people. This film should be viewed by anyone interested in History or anyone just interested in the human spirit. In terms of benefits for Global Civilization class, I feel it should definitely be viewed; it will imprint in the viewer's head, not the six million Jews that were slaughtered, but instead the six million fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters sensuously killed by the Germans.