
The Adversity and Endurance of the European Jews in The Pianist, a Historical Drama Film by Roman Polanski

Adversity and Endurance of the European Jews in The Pianist

In their first attempt to assert their superiority, the Nazis, after occupying Poland, ordered the Jewish people to wear Star of David badges on their clothing at all times to indicate their identities in public. The purpose was to highlight the Jews' inferiority to the Aryan race, while also assisting German citizens in singling out insubordinate Jews. Failure to bear the badge on clothing would result in severe repercussions, the most common being execution, if the Nazis should find out. Władysław Szpilman's family is mostly opposed to wearing the Star of David, especially Szpilman's dissident brother Henryk, who refuses to bow down and give in to the Nazis in any manner. However, Władysław is more circumspect in his actions because he acknowledges the consequences of rejecting the Nazis' mandates. Another imperious attempt by the Nazis to subdue the Jewish population of Poland was confining them in the Warsaw Ghetto. Although the Warsaw Ghetto was one of the largest ghettos in Nazi Germany during the war, its population density was alarmingly high. The Germans were indifferent to the Jews' suffering in the ghetto, and, as depicted in the film, they added insult to injury by brutally assailing some of the denizens (like the young boy near the wall whose beating and subsequent death were witnessed by Władysław). The final attempt by the Nazis to control the Jews was sending them to concentration camps. The Jews were not allowed to keep any personal possessions on the trains to the camps, and anyone questioning the reasoning would be shot dead. Just like in the ghettos, the Jews were confined in extremely compact spaces in the waiting area for the train. Then finally, at the concentration camps (and later extermination camps), the Jews were worked and starved to death, or they were sent to "showers," where the Jews were killed by noxious gas (Zyklon B). Although these conditions at the camps were not depicted wholly in the film, it can be presumed that Szpilman's family endured these horrendous conditions.

The Nazis put Jews like Itzhak Heller in a high position in the ghetto because there is such an enormous proportion of Jews to Nazis in Warsaw. Since there were a few hundred thousand Jews in the ghetto, the Nazis would not be able to keep order themselves. Productivity was necessary to keep the ghetto relatively stable. Therefore, they ordered Jews of their choosing to run the diurnal operations of the ghetto, including the packaging of food, construction, and security. Throughout the film, there are scenes in which the Jews do not aggressively react to the Nazis' misdeeds. When the Jews were waiting in a line to enter the Warsaw Ghetto, the Nazi officers tantalized a few Jews by commanding them to dance. It was starkly awkward for the Jews, but they did not retaliate because the Nazis would simply execute them and other Jews to make an example. When Szpilman was working in the Warsaw Ghetto, the Nazis would randomly select a handful of Jews to execute. The Jews in the execution line did not object at all because they realized it would be futile to resist. The Nazis were armed and dangerous, while they were essentially defenseless. The Jews likely felt that resistance would be fruitless unless they collaborated in masses, as they later did in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Until then, the Jews would remain dispirited because the Nazis exerted seemingly inexorable authority over them.