



## Let's read and reflect:

Every human being deserves to be free, and to live with dignity. These are universal human rights, but in the world we live in, millions of people are denied these basic rights.

Wladyslaw Szpilman, a pianist and composer, was a Polish Jew. He was forced to live in the ghetto, a dismal place meant for Jews alone, during the Second World War (WW II). Most of the Jews were then sent to 'concentration camps' where they were tortured, and then to 'gas chambers' where they were killed en masse. Let's read the story of Szpilman's desperate struggle to stay alive during the war.

## In the Attic

- Wladyslaw Szpilman

I **slumped** on the chair by the **larder** door. It was some time before I stammered, with difficulty, "Do what you like to me. I'm not moving from here."

"I've no intention of doing anything to you!" the officer said.

Then he asked me, "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a pianist."

He looked at me more closely. Then his glance fell on the door to the other room. An idea seemed to have struck him.



"Come with me, will you?"

We went into the next room where a piano stood by the wall. The officer pointed to the instrument.

"Play something!"

### While we read

- What was the officer's attitude to Szpilman?
- Why do you think the officer asked Szpilman to play the piano?

### My words

### My questions

I looked enquiringly at him and did not move. He obviously sensed my fears, since he added reassuringly, "It's all right, you can play. If anyone comes, you can hide in the larder and I'll say it was me trying the instrument out."

When I placed my fingers on the keyboard they shook. I hadn't practised for two and half years, my fingers were stiff and covered with a thick layer of dirt, and I had not cut my nails for some weeks. I played Chopin's Nocturne in C sharp minor. When I finished, the silence seemed gloomy and eerie. I heard a shot down below outside the building – a harsh, loud German noise.

The officer looked at me in silence. After a while he sighed, and muttered, "All the same, you shouldn't stay here. I'll take you out of the city, to a village. You'll be safer there."

I shook my head. "I can't leave this place," I said firmly. Only now did he seem to understand my real reason for hiding among the ruins.

"You're Jewish?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Yes, well," he murmured, "in that case I see you really can't leave. Where are you hiding?"

"In the attic."

He inspected the attic and discovered something I had not yet noticed: a **loft** made of boards directly above the entrance to the attic. The officer said he thought I should hide in this loft. He asked if I had anything to eat.

"No," I said.

"Well, never mind" he added hastily, "I'll bring you some food."

Only now did I venture a question of my own. "Are you German?"

He almost shouted his answer in agitation, as if my question had been an insult. "Yes, I am! And ashamed of it, after everything that's been happening." Abruptly, he shook hands with me and left.

#### While we read

- c. Why was Szpilman hesitant to play the piano?
- d. How does the officer help Szpilman?
- e. What was the officer ashamed of?

#### My words

#### My questions

Three days passed before he reappeared. It was evening and pitch dark when I heard a whisper under my loft.

“Hello, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here,” I replied.

Soon afterwards, something heavy landed beside me. Through the paper, I felt several loaves and something soft, which later turned out to be jam wrapped in greaseproof paper.

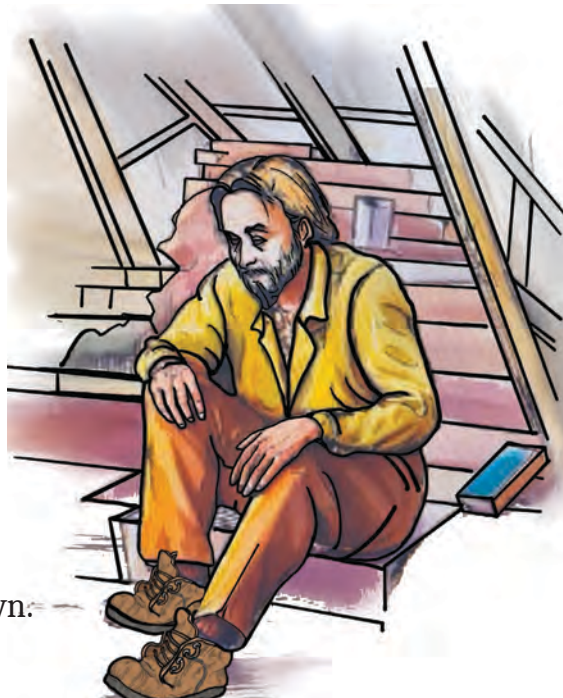
I quickly put the package to one side and called, “Wait a moment!”

The voice in the dark sounded impatient. “What is it? Hurry up. The guards saw me come in here, and I mustn’t stay long. Just hang on a few more weeks—the war will be over by spring at the latest.”

The voice fell silent, I did not know if the officer was still there, or if he had gone. But suddenly he spoke again, “You must **hang on**, do you hear?”

His voice sounded harsh, almost as if he were giving an order, convincing me of his unyielding belief that the war would end well for us. Only then did I hear the quiet sound of the attic door closing.

Monotonous, hopeless weeks passed by. I heard less and less **artillery** fire. There were days when not a single shot broke the silence. Soldiers went up and down the stairs, often bringing large packages up to the attic and fetching others down.



#### While we read

- f. “Just hang on a few more weeks—the war will be over by spring at the latest.” What is surprising about this statement?
- g. What does the conversation between the officer and Szpilman reveal about the bond between them?
- h. Why was there less artillery fire after a few weeks?

#### My words

#### My questions

But my hiding place was well chosen; no one ever thought of searching the loft.

On 12 December, the officer came for the last time. He brought me a larger supply of bread than before and a warm **eidern**. He told me he was leaving Warsaw with his **detachment**, and I must on no account lose heart.

“But how will I survive the street fighting?” I asked anxiously.

“If you and I have survived this **inferno** for over five years,” he replied, “it’s obviously God’s will for us to live.”

We had already said goodbye, and he was about to go, when an idea came to me at the last moment. I had long been racking my brains for some way of showing him my gratitude.

“Listen!” I took his hand and began speaking urgently. “I never told you my name—you didn’t ask me, but I want you to remember it. Who knows what may happen?”

You have a long way to go home. If I survive, I’ll certainly be working for Polish Radio again. I was there before the war. If anything happens to you, if I can help you then in any way, remember my name: Szpilman, Polish Radio.” He smiled his usual smile, half shy and **embarrassed**, but I felt I had given him pleasure with my **naïve** wish to help him.

The first hard frosts came in the middle of December. Christmas came, and then the New Year 1945: the sixth Christmas and New Year celebrations of the war, and the worst I had known. I lay in the dark, listening to the stormy wind. I heard the squeaking and rustling of rats and mice running back and forth in the attic.

In my mind, I went over every Christmas before and during the war. At first, I had a home, parents, two sisters and a brother. Then we had no home of our own any more, but we were together. Later I was alone, but surrounded by other people. And now I was lonelier, I supposed, than

#### While we read

- i. Why does Szpilman say that his hiding place was well chosen?
- j. What do you think of Szpilman’s advice to the German officer?
- k. What sounds did Szpilman hear from the attic?

#### My words

#### My questions

anyone else in the world. I had to be alone, entirely alone, if I wanted to live.

On 14 January unusual noises in the building and the street outside woke me. Soldiers ran up and down the stairs, and I heard agitated, nervous voices. Early in the morning of 15 January, the sound of artillery from the previously silent front was heard. The ground and the walls of the building shook under the constant dull thunder. Three hours later the heavy artillery fire died down again, but I was as nervous as ever. I did not sleep at all that night. The street fighting would begin at any moment, and I could be killed.

The night passed peacefully. Around one o'clock I heard the remaining Germans leaving the building. Silence fell. I could not even hear the steps of the guards outside the building.

Not until the early hours of the next day was the silence broken by a loud and **resonant** noise, the last sound I had expected. Radio loudspeakers set up somewhere nearby were broadcasting announcements in Polish of the defeat of Germany and the liberation of Warsaw.

The Germans had withdrawn without a fight. As soon as it began to get light, I prepared feverishly for my first venture out. My officer had left me a German military overcoat to keep me from freezing. I had already put it on when I suddenly heard the rhythmic footsteps of guards out in the road again. Had the Soviet and Polish troops withdrawn, then?

I sank on my mattress, utterly dejected, and lay there until something new came to my ears: the voices of women and children. At all costs, I had to get information.



#### While we read

- l. Why does Szpilman say that he had to be alone if he wanted to live?
- m. What were the radio announcements about?
- n. How does Szpilman survive the freezing cold?
- o. What information did Szpilman hope to gather?

#### My words

#### My questions



I ran downstairs, put my head out of the front door and looked out. It was a grey misty morning. To my left, not far away, stood a woman soldier in a uniform that was difficult to identify at this distance. A woman with a bundle on her back was approaching from my right. When she came closer I ventured to speak to her:

"Hello. Excuse me..." I called in a muted voice, beckoning her over.

She stared at me, dropped her bundle and took to her heels with a shriek of, "A German!" Immediately the guard turned, saw me, aimed and fired her machine pistol. The bullets hit the wall, and without thinking, I rushed up the stairs and took refuge in the attic.

Looking out of my little window a few minutes later, I saw that the whole building was surrounded. I heard soldiers calling to each other and then the sound of shots and exploding hand grenades. This time my situation was absurd. I was going to be shot by Polish soldiers in liberated Warsaw, on the very verge of freedom. Feverishly, I began to wonder how I could make them realize that I was Polish before they despatched me to the next world as a German in hiding.

I began coming down the stairs, shouting as loud as I could, "Don't shoot! I'm Polish!"

Very soon I heard swift footsteps climbing the stairs. The figure of a young officer in Polish uniform, with the eagle on his cap, came into view. He pointed a pistol at me and shouted, "Hands up!"

I repeated my cry of, "Don't shoot! I'm Polish!" The **lieutenant** went red with fury. "Then why in God's name don't you come down?" he roared. "And what are you doing in the German coat?"

Only when the soldiers had taken a closer look at me and reviewed the situation did they really believe I wasn't German. Then they decided to take me

#### While we read

- p. Why does the woman cry out when she sees Szpilman?
- q. What is the absurd situation Szpilman found himself in?

#### My words

#### My questions

#### Lieutenant

[left - en - ant]

How do you pronounce the following?

- Colonel
- General
- Sergeant
- Commander
- Captain

to their headquarters so that I could wash and have a meal.

After two weeks, well cared for by the military, I walked through the streets of Warsaw without fear, a free man, for the first time in almost six years.

I looked over to the north of the city, where the **ghetto** had been, where half a million Jews had been murdered—there was nothing left of it. Tomorrow I must begin a new life, with nothing but death behind me.

I went on my way.



(Adapted from *The Pianist*)

*Wilm Hosenfeld, the soldier who saved Wladyslaw Szpilman, also saved many other individuals. He was captured by the Red Army towards the end of the war. He could not contact Szpilman, and died in a Soviet prison in 1952.*

## About the Author

**Władysław Szpilman** [pronounced: Vwa'diswaf 'Spilman] (1911 –2000) was a Polish pianist and classical composer. His memoir *The Pianist* was published in 1946. The book was adapted into a film by Roman Polanski in 2002. Szpilman composed over 500 works, including piano pieces, songs, and film scores.



### Let's rewind:

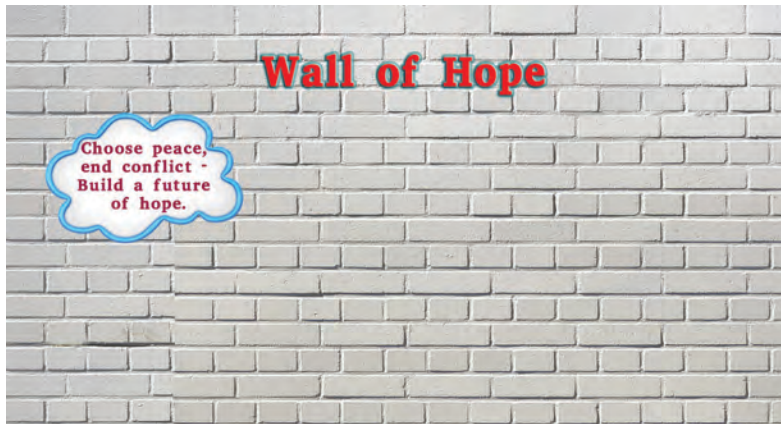
1. Why does the German officer help Szpilman and save his life?
2. How does Szpilman maintain hope in extreme hardship and danger?
3. Why was Szpilman afraid of being killed by Polish soldiers, his own countrymen?
4. How do luck, chance and human kindness help Szpilman to survive?
5. Was it risky for the German officer to help Szpilman? Why?
6. Why is Szpilman's memoir classified as 'survivor testimony'? How, in your opinion, does 'survivor testimony' enrich history and literature, and enhance our understanding of the world?
7. In the entry to this passage, you would have come across the expression 'en masse.' What do you think it means, in the context?
8. Does the expression 'en masse' remind you of a similar phrase you came across in class 9 ?
9. How are these expressions different from other commonly used phrases in English?



### Let's recall and recreate:

1. We have seen how Szpilman gains the strength to carry on in spite of the horrors of the Second World War. Millions of people all over the world suffer the terrors of war and other conflicts even today.

Let's create a 'Wall of Hope' display, featuring pictures, quotes and suggestions to help the world end war for all time.



2. Read the following excerpt from the memoir.

On 12 December, the officer came for the last time. He brought me a larger supply of bread than before and a warm eiderdown. He told me he was leaving Warsaw with his detachment, and I must on no account lose heart.

"But how will I survive the street fighting?" I asked anxiously.

"If you and I have survived this inferno for over five years," he replied, "it's obviously God's will for us to live."

We had already said goodbye, and he was about to go, when an idea came to me at the last moment.

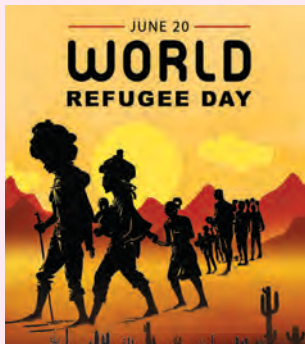
"Listen!" I took his hand and began speaking urgently. "I never told you my name—you didn't ask me, but I want you to remember it. Who knows what may happen? You have a long way to go home. If I survive, I'll certainly be working for Polish Radio again. I was there before the war. If anything happens to you, if I can help you then in any way, remember my name: Szpilman, Polish Radio."

He smiled his usual smile, half shy and embarrassed, but I felt I had given him pleasure with my naive wish to help him.

After surviving the war, Szpilman is back at Polish Radio again. Imagine you are a podcaster and Szpilman agrees to do a podcast episode with you. Taking cues from the excerpt, prepare the **script of a radio podcast**.



3. 'In the Attic' highlights the human experience of displacement and survival in times of war and persecution. Read this post which appeared on social media on the occasion of World Refugee Day.



The global refugee crisis is one of humanity's most pressing issues with millions displaced due to conflict, persecution, and natural disasters. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), over 80 million people have been displaced worldwide in recent years, with nearly 26 million refugees seeking safety outside their country of origin. Refugees have to face an uncertain future and are usually denied basic necessities such as food, shelter and healthcare. In this context, concerns regarding the policies of various countries and the distribution of humanitarian aid are among the world's most pressing issues today.

Let's now prepare a **write-up** on the problems faced by refugees of war in the present time.

4. Pick out words/phrases from the extract that reveal the character of the pianist and the German officer.

The pianist	Feelings /emotions	German officer	Feelings/emotions
• I sat groaning and gazing dully...	• pain, sadness, fear, etc.	• I've no intention of doing anything to you!	• reassuring, compassionate, pacifying
• I can't leave this place.	• fear of death	• He asked if I had anything to eat.	• kind, helpful
• .....	• .....	• .....	• .....
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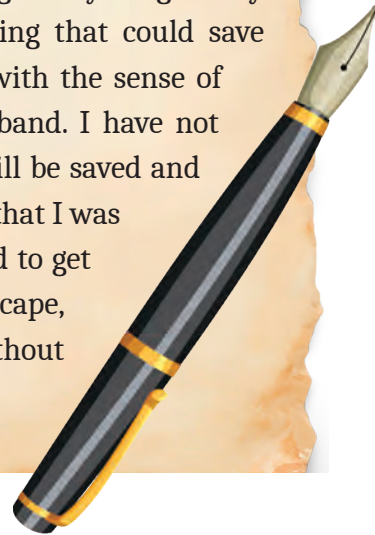
Now let's prepare **character sketches** of Szpilman and the German officer, highlighting their bond of trust and loyalty.

5. Read this excerpt from a letter by E. Moshe, who died in the Warsaw ghetto, to his daughter Ola.

Wednesday (April 1943)

My darling!

I am holding fast. What will be afterwards – God only knows. Whatever happens – don't be sorry. I am no more worthy than so many brothers and sisters. Either way, I hope to get to a safe haven. I only think about and worry for your fate. You, my darling Ola, on your shoulders rest the responsibility to take care of your mother and sisters. I tried to be brave and arrange everything calmly and wisely. That was the only thing that could save you. Of course, I am writing this with the sense of responsibility of a father and husband. I have not for one moment lost hope that I will be saved and return to you. It is very bad for me that I was left penniless. It makes it very hard to get food. And if you have a chance to escape, remember it is impossible without money....



Note the impact of war on Moshe's family. Displacement, separation and emotional trauma are the inevitable consequences of war for most families.

Shall we conduct a **poster exhibition** as part of an anti-war campaign to raise awareness about the devastating effects of war and the importance of promoting peace?