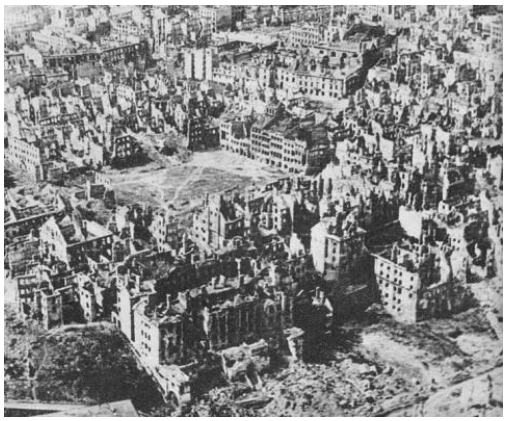
ALONE IN WARSAW



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Life, within the utterly decimated city of Warsaw, would have been impossibly difficult for anyone who had survived the devastating German attacks (from the air and on the ground). This image depicts Warsaw as it appeared in January of 1945. This now-out-of-copyright photo is attributed to M.Å□wierczyÅ□ski and is online via Wikimedia Commons.

Before Germany invaded Poland, more than a million people lived in Warsaw. When the city was liberated in January of 1945 - just four months after the Nazis crushed the city during the Warsaw Uprising - only 153,000 starving citizens had survived. Wladyslaw Szpilman was one of them.

The pianist, whose hands would once more provide his livelihood if he survived the war, was always at risk. Sometimes he used his hands to cling to a roof, trying to avoid the streams of German bullets. Sometimes the people who helped him stay alive could not safely deliver meager supplies. And he was always completely alone:

> *I was alone: alone not just in a single building or even a single part of a city, but alone in a whole city that only two months ago had had a population of a million and a half and was one of the richer cities of Europe.* (*The Pianist*, page 167.)

As Warsaw began its final winter as a German-occupied city, Szpilman had a rare chance to see himself in a makeshift mirror:

> *At first I could not believe that the dreadful sight I saw was really myself: my hair had not been cut for months, and I was unshaven and unwashed. The hair on my head was thickly matted, my face was almost covered with a growth of dark beard, quite heavy by now, and where the beard did not cover it my skin was almost black. My eyelids were reddened, and I had a crusted rash on my forehead.* (*The Pianist*, page 169.)

When German soldiers finally discovered his hiding place, Wladyslaw was forced to look elsewhere again. He thought he had found a safe spot in an unfamiliar building. Intently searching for food, he was shocked to hear a German voice:

> *What are you doing here? Don't you know the staff of the Warsaw fortress commando unit is moving into this building any time now?* (*The Pianist*, page 176.)

Szpilman had come face to face with a German Wehrmacht officer named Wilm Hosenfeld! But this was a German soldier who had helped other Jews. This was a former teacher who had grown ashamed of what his country was doing.

Wladyslaw had met the man who would save his life.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ALONE-IN-WARSAW-Pianist-The

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/ALONE-IN-WARSAW-Pianist-The

Media Stream

Eastern Europe After the German-Soviet Pact: 1939-1940

Map image online, courtesy U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.
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Wilm Hosenfeld - 1944

Image provided by Detlev Hosenfeld, one of Wilm Hosenfeld's sons.
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Warsaw Uprising

Clip from BBC's "Timewatch" - Season 24, Episode 9 - entitled "Battle for Warsaw," online via BBC's Worldwide Channel at YouTube. Copyright, BBC, all rights reserved. Clip provided as fair use for educational purposes and to acquaint new viewers with the series. For more freely available past episodes of "Timewatch," see Open University's listing.
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Warsaw Uprising - Poles Abandoned

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