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Offering to help Szpilman leave Warsaw, Hosenfeld at first did not realize he was talking with a Jewish man. He asked the refugee what he did for a living. Learning he was a pianist, the “tall, elegant German officer” led the unkempt, unwashed man to an out-of-tune piano in a room without window panes:

When I placed my fingers on the keyboard they shook...my fingers were stiff and covered with a thick layer of dirt...I played Chopin's Nocturne in C sharp minor...When I had finished, the silence seemed even gloomier and more eerie than before. (The Pianist, pages 177-178.)

When Hosenfeld realized the pianist was a Jew who could not leave the city, he searched, and found, a safe hiding place in the loft above the building's attic. Three days later the former teacher returned with food.

Although the German fortress commando unit did move into the building, no other soldier ever found Szpilman's refuge.

The officer came to see the pianist for the last time on December 12, 1944:

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, since the Soviet offensive was expected any day now. (The Pianist, page 181.)

Szpilman wanted to thank Hosenfeld, but he had nothing to give that the officer would take. Instead, he gave him a name:

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. (The Pianist, Page 181.)

Later, when he needed help, Hosenfeld remembered the name. But it did him little good with his Soviet captors.

After the Red Army liberated Warsaw, Wilm was captured and taken to Minsk (now the capital of Belarus), where he remained until 1949. Two years after the war, in 1947, he suffered a stroke and was paralyzed, for a time, on his right side.

While in POW infirmaries, he made a good recovery and was able to write. He sent 100 postcards home (the link takes you to one he sent to his wife) and did not lose hope that he would return to his wife and five children. He had, after all, committed no crimes and, in fact, had rescued both Jews and Poles.

But Soviet officials did not believe a German Wehrmacht officer helped anyone, so Hosenfeld was processed through the system and was sentenced to death.

Transported south to Stalingrad (now called Volgograd), he suffered more strokes and was incapable of writing more postcards to his family. They, however, remembered what their husband and father once said:

No matter where we are in the world, we seven should look for the seven stars of the Great Bear constellation. [In other words, the seven stars of the "Big Dipper."] That way, even though we are apart, we will be connected.

In 1950, Wilm was able to object to his condemnation, but that proved unsuccessful. While Stalin was still alive, the fate of German POWs was handled by a fixed routine.

This man, however, was no ordinary German POW as his amazing diary reveals.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/WILM-HOSENFELD-Pianist-The>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/WILM-HOSENFELD-Pianist-The>

Media Stream

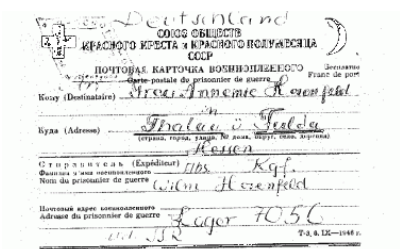


Wilm Hosenfeld Photo

Image of Wilm Hosenfeld, courtesy Detlev Hosenfeld (Wilm's son).

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Hosenfeld Post Card

Image of postcard, from Wilm Hosenfeld to his wife, provided by Detlev Hosenfeld (Wilm's son).

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