

Worksheet 1: Background Information

World War II and the Nazis

Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, after losing World War I. The treaty required Germany to pay large sums of compensation, to give up territory, and to limit its military forces. When Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Germans were still struggling with the economy and the weakening of the country. Hitler was the leader of the National Socialist Party (Nazi Party), which supported authoritarian and nationalist government based on racist ideology. Nazis



believed that “Aryan” (white) Germans were a superior race, and they especially hated Jews. The Nazi racist ideology led to racist laws. Hitler gained popularity partly because many Germans wanted someone to blame for their hardships, and Hitler exploited the ideas of racial superiority that were already present in European society.

Hitler rejected democracy, established a totalitarian dictatorship, and began a massive effort to re-arm Germany. On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland as part of the plan to gain more power in Europe. The invasion led Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany, marking the beginning of World War II. After the invasion, the Nazis’ armed Schutzstaffel (SS) organization occupied Warsaw.

In World War II, the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) fought against the Allies (Great Britain, the Soviet Union/USSR, the United States of America, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, South Africa and Yugoslavia).

The Nazis aimed to exterminate all Jews, and also targeted Romani (also known as Gypsies), ethnic Polish people, homosexuals, Communists, the disabled, and other political and religious opponents. The total number of people killed by the Nazis’ genocide is estimated between 11 million and 17 million people. This mass murder is often called the Holocaust.

Before World War II began, the Nazis created a system of persecution in Germany. The Nuremberg Laws, introduced in 1935, took away citizenship from Jews, and prohibited marriage between Jews and other Germans. Churches and government offices provided records showing who was Jewish; German companies fired Jewish workers; universities did not admit Jews and fired Jewish academics; and the Finance Ministry confiscated

Jewish property. In 1938, the Nazis moved from using legal repression to using violence, and eventually genocide, against Jewish people.

Jews were forced to live in ghettos in Poland and many countries of Eastern Europe, as part of the plan to remove Jews from society. Groups of Jews were then transported from the ghettos to the concentration camps. Families were separated, and people were beaten, tortured, starved and killed. The different concentration camps included forced-labor camps, death camps, and transit camps. Some of these camps offered no chance of survival, while in others the detainees had at least a small chance of survival.

Germany invaded many countries in Europe. Meanwhile, Japan invaded the European and American colonies in Asia, including Vietnam, Burma, the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia), the Philippines, part of India, and Malaysia, as well as Manchuria, Inner Mongolia, and large parts of China. Over 70 million people were killed in World War II, which ended with victory for the Allies in 1945.

Useful Vocabulary:

Allies: the group of countries that fought against Germany in World War II.

anti-Semitic: prejudiced against Jewish people.

Aryan: according to the Nazis, a person of Caucasian (white) race and *not* Jewish.

authoritarian: requiring strict obedience to the authority of the government.

Axis: the alliance of Germany, Italy, Japan and other countries during World War II.

concentration camp: a place where large groups of people, often persecuted minorities, are kept as prisoners in unsafe conditions. The prisoners are often executed and/or sent to do forced labor.

ghetto: a part of a city where a minority group must live separately. During World War II, Jews and other minorities were forced to live in ghettos.

Holocaust: another word to describe the German Nazis' mass murder of Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and other minority groups during the years 1941 to 1945.

ideology: a system of ideas that can create political theories.

inferior: lower in status; worse.

insurgent: someone who rebels against a certain authority.

nationalist: a person who **puts the interests of their** country before other countries.

occupy: to take control of a place by military force.

persecution: treating people badly because of their race, their politics, or their religion.

propaganda: information used to promote a certain political cause. The information may be false or it may cause people to have false ideas.

racist: someone who believes that certain races are better than other races.

Romani/Gypsies: a group of travelling people who speak Romany language and live mostly in Europe, North Africa, and North America.

SS (Schutzstaffel): the Nazi special police force.

superior: higher in status; better.

treaty: an agreement made between countries.

Characters in *The Pianist*



Mother, Regina, Wladek, Henryk, Father, and Halina

Wladyslaw (Wladek) Szpilman: A talented Jewish classical pianist living in Warsaw, Poland. He is 28 years old at the beginning of the movie.

Henryk Szpilman: Wladek's brother (age 24).

Regina Szpilman: Wladek's sister, a lawyer (age 26).

Halina Szpilman: Wladek's youngest sister (age 22).

Mother and Father Szpilman: The parents of Wladek, Henryk, Regina and Halina.



Dorota: A woman who Wladek meets at the radio station in the beginning of the movie. Later in the movie, Dorota and her husband Michal help Wladek hide.

Yitzchak Heller: A friend of the family who became a Jewish policeman when the Nazis occupied Warsaw.

Michal: Dorota's husband. Michal also helps Wladek hide.

Benek: The owner of the restaurant where Wladek was hired to play piano.

Majorek: Wladek's friend who was organising resistance against the Nazis.

Janina: Wladek's friend who helps him go into hiding.



Wilhelm Hosenfeld: The German army captain who allows Wladek to stay in hiding and brings him food.

Andrzej: Janina's husband. Andrzej also helps Wladek go into hiding.

Antek Szalas: A friend of Dorota and Michal who is supposed to take care of Wladek while he is in hiding.

Worksheet 2: While You Watch

2.1: Germany Invades Poland 00.00 – 17.14

Exercise A: Complete the following sentences with words from the box.

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|---------------|----------------|--------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| <i>Warsaw</i> | <i>Jewish</i> | <i>Nazi</i> | <i>Jewish District</i> | <i>radio station</i> | |
| <i>war</i> | <i>Germans</i> | <i>limit</i> | <i>star</i> | <i>gutter</i> | <i>Dorota</i> |

1. Wladek is playing the piano at a _____ when bombs begin to explode outside.
2. When Wladek is running down the stairs to escape the building, he meets _____.
3. Wladek's family (the Szpilman family) is packing suitcases to leave _____ because the government has moved to another city and the _____ are occupying Warsaw.
4. On the radio, the family hears that Great Britain has declared _____ against _____ Germany.
5. They read in the newspaper that there is a _____ on how much money _____ families are allowed to keep at home.
6. The family also reads in the newspaper that all Jews will be required to wear an armband with a blue _____.
7. A German officer yells at the father, "You are forbidden to walk on the pavement. Walk in the _____!"
8. The Nazis announce that all Jews in Warsaw must move to a "_____."

Exercise B: Answer the questions below.

1. Why did Dorota come to the radio station?
2. Why did Great Britain declare war on Nazi Germany?
3. Why do the Germans require the Jews to wear armbands?
4. Why does Henryk get angry at the man who wants to buy the piano?
5. From the Szpilman family's new apartment, they see men building a wall. What is the wall for?

2.2: Life in the Warsaw Ghetto 17.15 – 37.21

Exercise A: True or false? If false, write the correct sentence.

1. Henryk is selling potatoes at the market to earn money.
2. German soldiers forced Jews to dance when they were waiting at an intersection.
3. Yitzchack Heller tries to recruit Wladek and Henryk to become Nazi soldiers.
4. Jehuda and Majorek print an underground newspaper.
5. Wladek pays money to Yitzchak to release Henryk from detention.
6. Henryk is very happy that Wladek helped him leave prison.

Exercise B: Read the quotes and discuss the questions in groups or as a class.

1. "It's nothing to do with you. It's me they wanted, not you. Why do you interfere in other people's business?"
 - a. Who did Henryk say this to?
 - b. Why is Henryk angry after being released from detention?
 - c. Why was Henryk released from detention?

2. "Don't be clever with me, Henryk. I've come here as a friend. They're bringing Jews in from all over the country. Soon there'll be half a million people in the ghetto. We need more Jewish police..."
 - a. Who said this?
 - b. What is the advantage of joining the Jewish police?
 - c. Why do the brothers refuse to join?

2.3: From the Ghetto to the Camps 37.22 – 58:18

Exercise A: Complete the following sentences with words from the box.

*labour camp Wladek piano Father certificate of employment
bribe Henryk policemen death camp*

1. Majorek helps Wladek get a _____ for his father.
2. A German officer comes to the warehouse where the Szpilman family is working and takes away _____ and Halina.
3. The father believes that they are all waiting to go to a _____, but Dr. Ehrlich thinks they are being sent to a _____.
4. _____ buys a piece of caramel and divides it into 6 pieces to share with the family.
5. The crowd of Jews is pushed onto the train by German SS soldiers and Jewish _____.
6. Yitzchak Heller pulls _____ from the crowd of Jews to save him from boarding the train.
7. Wladek hides with Benek in the restaurant where he used to perform on the _____.
8. They are able to hide safely for a few days because Benek has given the policemen a _____.

Exercise B: Answer the questions below.

1. Why does Wladek want everyone in his family to have a certificate of employment?
2. Why does the father buy a piece of caramel from the boy, even though they are very expensive?
3. When Wladek is working outside the ghetto, he sees Janina, an old friend. Why does he not go speak to her?
4. How does Benek die?

Exercise C: Discuss the following questions in groups or as a class.

1. Why does Wladek say to Halina that he wishes he knew her better?
2. When Yitzchak Heller pulls Wladek away from the train, why doesn't Wladek immediately run?

2.4: Wladek's Escape 58.19 – 1.23.38

Exercise A: True or false? If false, write the correct sentence.

1. Henryk comes to work at the construction site where Wladek is working.
2. Majorek tells Wladek that the Germans will begin the "final resettlement."
3. An SS officer beats Wladek for dropping a set of bricks.
4. Wladek asks Majorek to send a message to his family.
5. Wladek is safe after he escapes from the ghetto and the construction site.
6. While Wladek is hiding in a flat, he watches Jews in the ghetto start an uprising against the German SS soldiers.

Exercise B: Match the quote with the person who said it.

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| <i>SS Lieutenant</i> <i>Majorek</i> <i>Janina</i> <i>Wladek</i> <i>Andrzej</i> |
|--|

1. "They're exterminating us. Won't take them long. We're sixty thousand left, out of half a million. Mostly young people. And this time we're going to fight."
2. "I have a favour to ask. I want to get out of here."
3. "You lie to me again and I'll shoot you personally."
4. "We're going to have to keep moving you. The Germans are hunting people down indiscriminately now. Jews, non-Jews, anybody, everybody."
5. "Wladek, stop that. It's over now. Just be proud it happened. My God, did they put up a fight."

Exercise C: Answer the questions below.

1. What do they mean by saying "the final resettlement"?
2. Why is Wladek scared to open the bags of food for the German officer?
3. What is inside the packages that Wladek and Majorek throw over the wall of the ghetto?
4. Why does Wladek have to hide when he is staying with Polish friends?
5. What happens on April 19th, 1943?
6. Why does Janina say that the Jews who fought in the uprising "died with dignity"?

2.5: Wladek in Hiding 1.23.39 – 1.54.02

Exercise A: Complete the following sentences with words from the box.

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|--|
| <i>Dorota Wladek Polish police Allies Janina</i> |
|--|

1. Wladek must leave the flat because the Germans have arrested _____ and her husband.
2. A neighbor knocks loudly on the door of Wladek's flat and yells, "Open up or we'll call the _____!"
3. When Wladek goes to the emergency address, _____ opens the door.
4. Wladek receives news that the _____ are bombing Germany.
5. Antek Szalas was collecting money to buy food for _____, but he kept the money for himself and did not bring any food.
6. The Warsaw Uprising begins on August 1st, 1944 when the _____ resistance begins to fight the German soldiers.

Exercise B: Answer the following questions.

1. Why does Wladek get very weak and sick? Why didn't Antek bring food every day?
2. Why do some people think that the war will end soon?
3. Why are Dorota and her husband going to stay with her mother?
4. Who is fighting against who in the Warsaw Uprising?
5. Why does Wladek have to leave the flat he is staying in?

2.6: The Liberation of Poland 1.54.03 – end

Exercise A: True or false? If false, write the correct sentence.

1. When Wladek is hiding inside an abandoned house, he hears a piano playing.
2. A Russian army captain finds Wladek hiding in an abandoned house.
3. The captain tells Wladek that the Russians are on the other side of the river fighting the Germans.
4. The captain brings food to Wladek.
5. The German soldiers stay in Warsaw to wait for the Russian army.
6. Wladek is almost shot by Polish soldiers because they know he is a Jew.

Exercise B: Discuss the following questions in groups or as a class.

1. Why does the German captain bring Wladek food and allow him to continue hiding?
2. Why is Wladek sad that the German prisoners of war have been taken away?
3. What emotions do you think Wladek feels when he realizes that Poland is liberated?

Plot Summary

The Pianist begins in Warsaw, Poland in 1939, when Nazi Germany invades Poland, and World War II begins. Wladyslaw (Wladek) Szpilman, a talented Jewish pianist, is at the studio of Warsaw Radio as the fighting starts.

The Szpilman family hears on the radio that Great Britain has declared war on Nazi Germany, and that France is expected to do the same. But the Nazis' armed SS organization soon occupies Warsaw. The Nazis do not allow most Jews to work at their normal jobs, so the Szpilman family begins to sell some of their furniture and valuables to earn some money.

Szpilman spends time with Dorota, a cello player. The Nazis are becoming more oppressive. First Jews are required to wear armbands to identify themselves as Jewish. Then all Jews have to move to ghettos. On October 31, 1940, crowds of Jewish people walk through the streets of Warsaw carrying their possessions to these ghettos.

Life in the ghetto is difficult. Although Wladek manages to get a job playing piano at a restaurant, Henryk makes very little money selling books at the ghetto market area. Yitzchak Heller comes to their flat and tries to recruit Wladek and Henryk to join the Jewish police force in the ghetto. The brothers refuse to join, although this will make their family's life easier. Henryk is taken away by the Nazis, but Wladek persuades Yitzchak to release him.

On August 16, 1942, the Nazis start to transport Jewish people to a concentration camp in Treblinka. As the family are put onto the train, Yitzchak Heller grabs Wladek and pulls him out of the line, separating him from his family.

After hiding for a couple of days, Wladek begins doing heavy labor at a construction site. Majorek arrives to work at the site, and tells Wladek that the Germans plan to kill them all. Majorek says that an organized resistance is prepared to fight back, and Wladek offers to help. The workers smuggle weapons into the ghetto with their food.

Wladek asks Majorek to contact Janina and her husband to ask if they can help Wladek escape. After Wladek leaves the ghetto with the Polish workers, Janina and her husband Andrzej arrange for him to stay in a flat near the ghetto wall. Wladek cannot leave the flat, so Janina brings him food. On April 19, 1943, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins and the Jews hold out for nearly a month.

Janina and Andrzej are arrested. Wladek knocks down a shelf of plates and the neighbours find out he is there, so he goes to the emergency address he was given when he moved to the flat. The address turns out to be the home of Dorota, who is now married and pregnant. The next day, Dorota's husband, Michal, brings Wladek to a flat opposite a hospital, in an area where only German people live.

Antek Szalas is supposed to take care of Wladek, but instead he raises money to feed Wladek but keeps it for himself. Wladek becomes very sick. Dorota and Mical find him and bring a doctor to cure him.

On August 1, 1944, the Polish resistance begins the Warsaw Uprising. Wladek must eventually escape from his flat when a blast hits the building. Most of the city is in ruins. A German army captain, Wilm Hosenfeld, finds Wladek hiding in a building one day. Hosenfeld helps Wladek by bringing him food.

As concentration camp prisoners are freed and returning home, they pass German prisoners of war. Hosenfeld runs to the fence and asks one of the men to find Wladek and ask him for help. When Wladek receives the message, he arrives at the site too late to save Hosenfeld; all the prisoners are gone. Wladek has returned to playing at Warsaw Radio, and the film ends as he performs on stage in Warsaw.