

Władysław Szpilman

(05.10.1911–06.07.2000)

composer, pianist and music arranger



Szpilman was born on December 5, 1911 in Sosnowiec. He was first taught piano by his mother, and then at the Chopin Academy of Music in Warsaw under the supervision of Józef Śmidowicz, where he also learned the principles of music theory and counterpoint under the supervision of Michał Biernacki. Between 1930–1933 he continued his studies on a scholarship at the Academy of Arts in Berlin with Artur Schnabel and Leonid Kreutzer in the field of piano and composition with Franz Schreker. After his return, in the years 1933–1935, he perfected his piano playing technique under the supervision of Aleksander Michałowski. He was a full-time pianist on Polish Radio from 1935 until the end of September 1939, when the broadcast was interrupted due to the bombing of the Warsaw power plant. Szpilman successfully resumed it six years later, after the end of hostilities.

In 1940 Szpilman was relocated to the ghetto established in Warsaw, where he

worked as a café pianist. During the 'Great Liquidation Action', his entire family – his parents Samuel and Edward, his sisters Halina and Regina, and his brother Henryk – were transported to the extermination camp in Treblinka. Szpilman almost shared their fate, but was saved from Umschlagplatz at the last moment by a Jewish policeman. A year later, he managed to get to the 'Aryan' side, where he was hiding with the help of his Polish friends and the Żegota organisation. After the Warsaw Uprising, he remained in the ruins of the house at 223 Niepodległości Avenue, where the captain of the Wehrmacht, Wilm Hosenfeld, found him and instead of giving him away, he began to provide him with food.

Szpilman's fate up to this point is well known to anyone who watched the Oscar-winning film directed by Roman Polański, entitled 'The Pianist'. His post-war musical activity was also notable, including the reactivation of ZAiK in 1956 or the organization of the International Song Festival in Sopot in the summer of 1961.

Władysław Szpilman died at the age of 88 on July 6, 2000. He was buried at the Powązki Military Cemetery.

translated by Adam Grossman

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