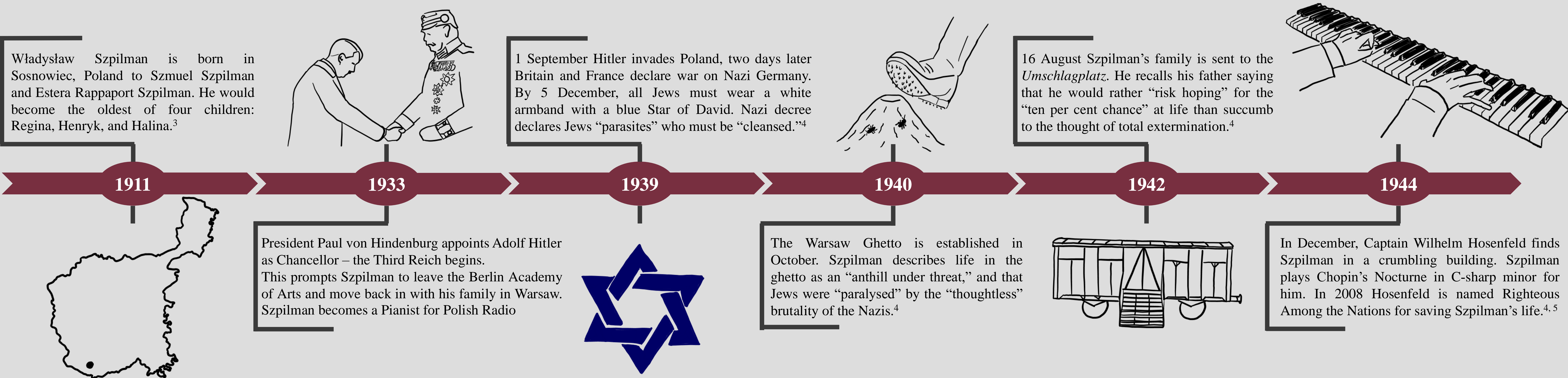
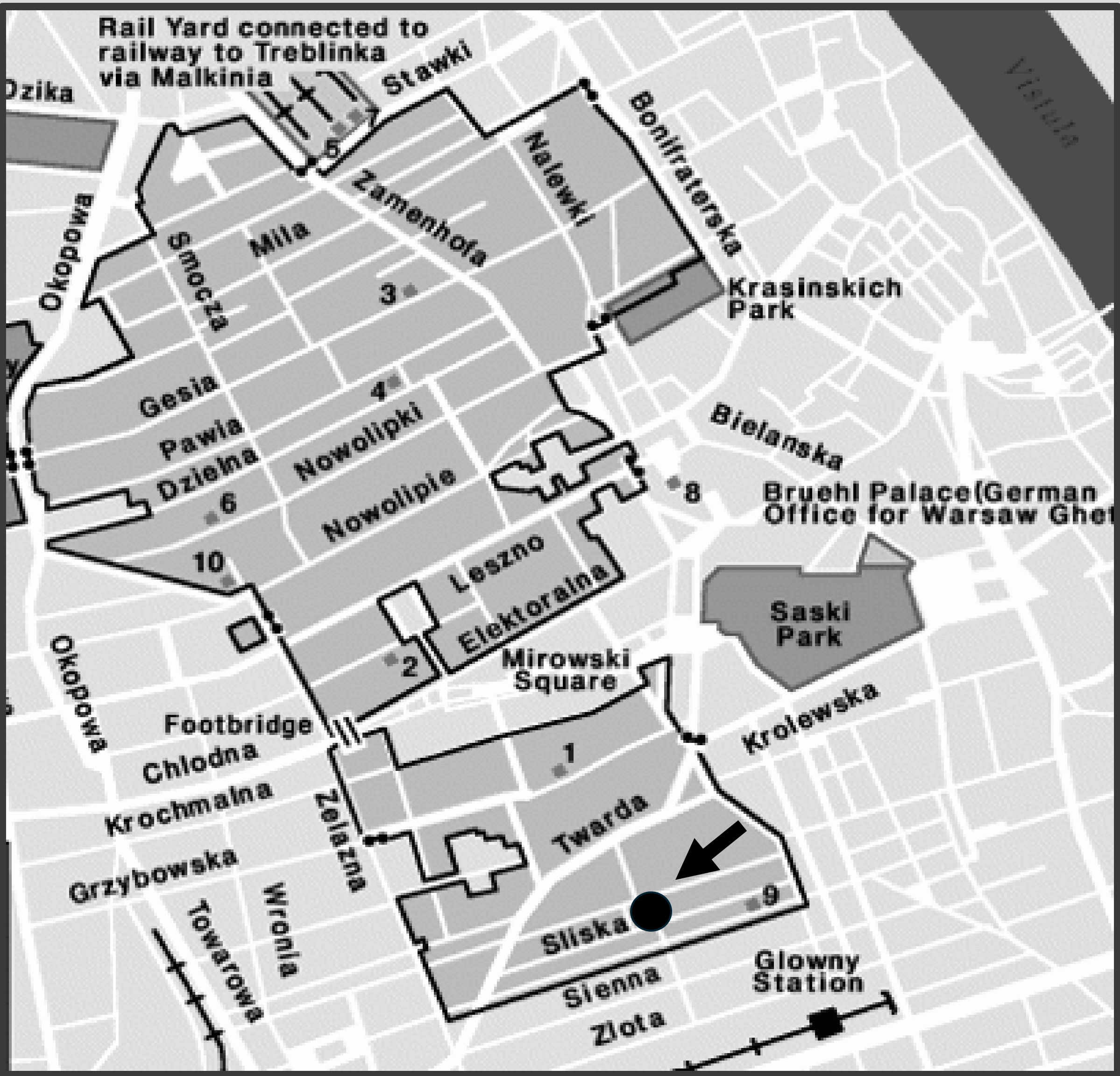


Remembering Historical Tragedy and Healing Through Film: The Life and Memory of Władysław Szpilman

Allyson Anderson¹ and Dr. Jonathan Grant²
Florida State University, ¹Department of International Affairs, ²Department of History



The Warsaw Ghetto



Warsaw Ghetto Map (c. 1942). Included in *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow* as supplemental material.⁷ Szpilman’s family lived on Sliska Street, approximated above with a dot and an arrow. The General Government instated a *Judenrat*, or Jewish Council, to head the ghetto’s administration. The council was usually made up of prominent figures in the Jewish community. Adam Czerniakow was the Head of the Warsaw *Judenrat*. On July 23, 1942, Czerniakow died by suicide. He could not bear the thought of facilitating the deportation of his community.

Synthesizing History, Literature, and Film

Research Question: How can the individual story of Władysław Szpilman contribute to a more nuanced understanding of collective memory in the context of the Warsaw Ghetto?

Framework: This project is an “inverted” approach to historical research. Typically, history is presented in the form of important statistics, legal documents, international agreements, or reports, with personal anecdotes presented as supplemental material. Here, the personal story is the primary source material, which is then supplemented by statistics, legal documents, international agreements, and reports.

Limitations: The field is often met with criticism that it is overly subjective and stands at odds with unbiased historical records. However, bias can humanize historical accounts when used judiciously. Accounts based on memory should be paired with an unbiased counterpart, and an acknowledgement of the ramifications of bias.

Source Material: The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945 by Władysław Szpilman and *The Pianist* (2002), directed by Roman Polanski.

Methodology: This study includes historical, literary, and film analyses which cover themes of freedom, survival, hope, and passion, as these themes are the essence of Szpilman’s mindset before, during, and after the war. The literary analysis focuses on the *content* of Szpilman’s story including how Szpilman, tells his story. The film analysis examines how film enhances the story and makes it more *accessible* to the public.

Findings: Combining literature with film effectively and visually demonstrates that people are more than a number. There were over 375,000 Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, and each *one* had a valuable life which should not be reduced to such an intangible number.⁶ Roman Polanski’s film elicits an empathetic response from viewers via color, music, camera angles, and framing to humanize Szpilman and his family, friends, colleagues, and peers. Interestingly, while the same themes exist in print and on film, they must be represented differently. Notably, hope is represented as a mindset in the memoir, given that this media allows for the expression of inner thoughts. Though in the film, hope is better represented as *resilience* and is demonstrated through actions. Polanski ultimately poses the question (via Henryk): **Is hope realistic or does it encourage disappointment?** For Szpilman, hope came in the form of pushing through painful and demoralizing situations and wholeheartedly believing that he would live and play the piano again. For Henryk, taking a realistic mindset and not succumbing to the Nazis’ attempts to dehumanize him were his form of hope and resistance. Regardless of the means, optimistic and realistic hope are both strong forms of mental resistance which ensured both brothers of their dignity.

Władysław Szpilman



³ Szpilman, Andrzej. “The Pianist - Władysław Szpilman.” Accessed January 23, 2025, <http://www.szpilman.net/>
⁴ Szpilman, Władysław. *The Pianist: The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival in Warsaw, 1939-1945*. Translated by Bell, A. New York: Picador, 2000.
⁵ “Hosenfeld Wilhelm,” Yad Vashem, 2008, <https://collections.yadvashem.org/en/righteous/4015318>
⁶ “Warsaw Ghetto,” Yad Vashem, Accessed February 18, 2025, <https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html>
Czerniakow, Adam. *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*. Translated by Staron, S. and the staff of Yad Vashem. New York: Stein and Day, 1979.

Bibliography:

What it costs me they do not see... I am trying not to let the smile leave my face
- Adam Czerniakow, July 19, 1942