

READING – Test 01

His Father, 'The Pianist'

"The Pianist," Roman Polanski's portrayal of a Polish Jew's survival during the Nazi occupation, has stunned Hollywood executives with its unexpected success. In May 2002, it reeled in Europe's top award, the Palme d'Or in Cannes. And now it's up for seven Academy Awards, including best picture, best director and best actor for Adrien Brody, for his portrayal of Wladyslaw Szpilman, the pianist in Warsaw. Szpilman's family may be most surprised by the film's success. Szpilman died in 2000 as Polanski searched for an actor to play him. And his eldest son, Christopher, 51, suspects that the unbearable possibility of reliving his past may have had something to do with his father's unexpected death. A longtime resident of Japan and a scholar of Japanese modern history, Christopher Szpilman recently talked to NEWSWEEK's Kay Itoi in southern Japan about memory, history, and the family he never knew. **Excerpts:**

1.

Very strange. You see, the book, entitled "The Pianist" and which the movie is based on, was published in 1946, but my father never talked about his war experiences. I was born six years after the war. I discovered the book in the attic when I was 12 or 13. It was a real shock to learn what my father went through and what happened to my grandparents from reading it. I suspect my father wrote the book to put all his unbearable memories into it, get them out of his head and never to return to it. After that, he started concentrating on his work, again, to suppress these unpleasant ideas. Even after I read the book, it was very difficult to broach the subject. He'd have just turned it into a joke. He had a strange way of turning any serious conversation into a joke to avoid it.

2.

His position on that was very ambivalent. He was pleased but the renewed attention was very painful. By that time he was 87, with less strength to suppress the memories. He was pained by the idea that he survived but not anyone else.

3.

Yes, he did. Polanski came and talked to him. The first negotiation took place in late 1999. My father passed away in July 2000. He had been in excellent health but he was gone very suddenly. I can't help feeling that the success of the book and this film talk had something to do with that.

4.

Of course, he was. He really respected Polanski. But he was also scared. He'd have had to see the film, and it's difficult to imagine he'd be able to sit through and have to bear 2 hours of the memories of his own experiences on the screen.

5.

I had feared I'd end up being disappointed. I wasn't. Everything rang true. Brody doesn't really resemble my father, and yet he was incredibly convincing. In one scene he opened this thing and plates came out and there was lots of noise. That's the sort of thing my father would do. And the film gave me the image of the family, which I hadn't had before.

6.

Being the son of a household name is a problem. I just wanted to be myself. So I decided to go away when I was 18. I worked for a while in London and collected enough money to come to Japan in 1976.

7.

They are struggling, and it's complicated because Japan's neighbors use the question of war responsibility for their own political agenda. For almost 60 years, Japan has not committed any act of aggression and has had a very passive foreign policy. I cannot see that Japan is a threat to peace in this region. Having said that, it's a pity that Japanese have not come to terms with their past. It's partly due to the unwillingness of the Japanese government to take a clear position one way or the other. The government and the bureaucracy just hope that problems will disappear if they wait long enough.

8.

The film is very optimistic in the end. It gives this great hope for basic goodness of the human character. We don't necessarily have the adversity that my father did, but we all have our own problems and we must never give up on hope.

9.

I haven't been invited.