
SON OF SAUL
A FILM BY LASZLO NEMES
LADKOON FILMGROUP PRESENTS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL FILM FUND AND THE CLAIRE'S CONFERENCE A FILM BY LÁSZLÓ NEMES "SON OF SAUL" (SAUL FIA)
WITH GÉZA RÖHRIG LEVENTE MOLNÁR URS RECHN TODD CHARMONT SANDOR ZSÖTER AMITAI KEDAR UWE LAUER CHRISTIAN HARTING JERZY WALCZAK
MARCIN CZARNIK LEVENTE ÖRDÖG ATTILA FRITZ SCREENPLAY BY CLARA ROYER & LÁSZLÓ NEMES FILM EDITOR MATTHIEU TAPONIER SOUND DESIGNER TAMÁS ZÁNYI MUSIC LÁSZLÓ MELIS
PRODUCTION DESIGNER LÁSZLÓ RAJK CINEMATOGRAPHY MÁTYÁS ERDÉLY PRODUCERS: GÁBOR SIPOS & GÁBOR RAJNA INTERNATIONAL SALES FILMS DISTRIBUTION
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RENDEZ VOUS
VIVIANA ANDRIANI, AURÉLIE DARD
2 RUE TURGOT 75009 PARIS
PH.: +33 1 42 66 36 35

IN CANNES: +33 (0) 6 80 16 81 39
VIVIANA@RV-PRESS.COM

INTERNATIONAL SALES
FILMS DISTRIBUTION
36 RUE DU LOUVRE
75001 PARIS - FRANCE
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SON OF SAUL

A FILM BY LÁSZLÓ NEMES

LAOKOON FILMGROUP PRESENT WITH THE SUPPORT OF
THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL FILM FUND AND THE CLAIMS CONFERENCE

(SAUL FIA)

HUNGARY / 2015 / 107 MIN / 35MM

SYNOPSIS

October 1944, Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Saul Ausländer is a Hungarian member of the Sonderkommando, the group of Jewish prisoners isolated from the camp and forced to assist the Nazis in the machinery of large-scale extermination.

While working in one of the crematoriums, Saul discovers the corpse of a boy he takes for his son.

As the Sonderkommando plans a rebellion, Saul decides to carry out an impossible task: save the child's body from the flames, find a rabbi to recite the mourner's Kaddish and offer the boy a proper burial.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

SON OF SAUL is an ambitious film carried out in an economical manner, plunging its viewer directly into the heart of a concentration camp. Our aim was to take an entirely different path from the usual approach of historical dramas, their gigantic scope and multi-point of view narration. This film does not tell the story of the Holocaust, but the simple story of one man caught in a dreadful situation, in a limited framework of space and time. Two days in the life of a man forced to lose his humanity and who finds moral survival in the salvaging of a dead body. We follow the main character throughout the film, reveal only his immediate surroundings, and create an organic filmic space of reduced proportions closer to human perception. The use of shallow focus photography, the constant presence of off screen elements in the narration of extended takes, the limited visual and factual information the main character and the viewer can have access to – these were the foundations of our visual and narrative strategy. Depicting an accurate world as truthful to history as possible, the events and places of the horror are shown in fragment, leaving room for the imagination of the viewer. Thus, the Inferno we journey through cannot be entirely assessed by the eyes of the viewers, only partially reconstructed in their minds. The multi-languages dialogue in this Babel of nations participates in conveying the organic, continuous feeling of human perception caught in the midst of inhumanity.

In such a dark story, I also believe there is a great deal of hope: in a total loss of morality, value and religion, a man who starts listening only to a faint voice within him to carry out a seemingly vain and useless deed finds morality and survival inside.



INTERVIEW WITH LÁSZLÓ NEMES

Born in Hungary in 1977, László Nemes spent his adolescence and young adulthood in Paris, having in 1989 followed his mother who started a new life in the French capital. His parents, a stage director and a professor, were opponents of the communist regime. László Nemes grew up between two countries and two cultures, choosing to first study in Paris (Paris Institute of Political Studies, then cinema at the Sorbonne, University of Paris 3) before leaving for Budapest, in 2003 at the age of 26, to learn the ropes of filmmaking. He thus became Béla Tarr's assistant on the Prologue segment of the collaborative film Visions of Europe and on The Man from London. He then directed three short films, notably With a Little Patience, which was chosen for the 2007 Venice International Film Festival. Béla Tarr taught him: "To focus on details, to understand a scene's significance, the fact that everything is a consistent and rigorous process from your choice of collaborators all the way to the film shoot." Surrounded by a small, loyal and close-knit team, László Nemes has spent the last five years bringing this project to fruition. In 2011, he worked on the project as an artist in residence at the Cinefondation Résidence du Festival.

How did the idea for SON OF SAUL come to you?

When we were making A londoni férfi (The Man from London), in Bastia, the shoot was interrupted for a week and in a bookstore I found a book of eyewitness accounts published by the Shoah Memorial called Des Voix sous la cendre (Voices from beneath the Ashes), also known as "The scrolls of Auschwitz." It's a book of texts written by former Sonderkommando members from the extermination camps who had buried and hidden their written testimonies before the rebellion in 1944. The actual documents were found years later. They describe their daily tasks, how the work was organized, the rules by which the camp was run and Jews exterminated, as well as how they put together a certain form of resistance.

What was the Sonderkommando? What did its members do?

They were prisoners chosen by the SS to escort new transports of prisoners to the gas chamber buildings, to get them to undress, reassure them and lead them into the gas chambers. After, they would remove and burn the corpses all the while cleaning the space. And it all had to be accomplished very quickly because other prisoner convoys were already on the way. Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned like a factory producing and eliminating corpses on an industrial scale. In the summer of 1944, it was running at full capacity: historians estimate that several thousand Jews were assassinated there every day. During the course of their mission, the Sonderkommandos were given a relatively preferential treatment. They were allowed to take food found in the transports and, within the confines of their perimeter, have a relative freedom of movement. But the task they were assigned was grueling and they were regularly eliminated every three or four months by the SS in order to ensure that there were no witnesses to the extermination.

Was your family affected by the Shoah?

A part of my family was assassinated in Auschwitz. It was something we talked about every day. When I was little, I had the impression that "evil had been done." I imagined it like a black hole burrowed within us; something had broken, and my inability to grasp exactly what it was kept me isolated. I didn't understand for many years. Then, the time came for me to reconnect with that specific part of my family's history.

Why did you choose to use the Sonderkommando accounts?

I have always found movies about the camps frustrating. They attempt to build stories of survival and heroism, but in my mind they are in fact recreating a mythical conception of the past. The Sonderkommando accounts are on the contrary concrete, present and tangible. They precisely describe, in the here and now, the "normal" functioning of a death factory, with its organization, its rules, work cadences, shifts, hazards, and its maximum productivity. In fact, the SS used the word "Stück " ("parts") when speaking about corpses. Corpses were produced in that factory. These accounts allowed me to see it all through the eyes of the extermination camps' damned.

But how do you go about telling a story, a fictional story, from within the middle of a fully functioning extermination camp?

That was problematic, indeed. I didn't want to make a hero of anyone; I didn't want the survivor's point of view, nor did I want to show all or even too much of this death factory. I just wanted an angle that would be specific, pared down, and to tell a story as simple and archaic as possible. I chose the viewpoint of a man, Saul Ausländer, a Hungarian Jew, member of the Sonderkommando, and I strictly upheld this position: I show what he sees, no more and no less. Yet it isn't a "subjective stance," because we see him as a character and I didn't want to reduce the film to a purely visual approach. That would have been artificial. Aesthetics, any exercise in style or virtuosity needed to be avoided. Moreover, this man is the point of origin of a unique, obsessive and primitive story: he believes he has recognized his son among the gas chamber victims and is henceforth determined to save his body from the ovens, find a rabbi to say Kaddish and bury him. Everything he does is defined by this mission, which seems utterly pointless in the context of the hell on earth that is the extermination camp. The film concentrates on one point of view and one person's line of action, which allows the character to come across other points of view and other actions. The camp, however, is perceived through the prism of Saul's journey.

Much research and documentation must have gone into making this film, a veritable historian's approach...

My co-screenwriter, Clara Royer, and I learned together. We read other eyewitness accounts, from Shlomo Venezia and Filip Müller, but also that of Miklós Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish doctor who was assigned to the crematoriums. Then of course there was Claude Lanzmann's Shoah, in particular the Sonderkommando sequences, including the Abraham Bomba account, which remains a reference. Finally, we received the very helpful support of historians like Gideon Greif, Philippe Mesnard and Zoltán Vági.

Did you forbid yourself anything?

I didn't want to have to show the face of horror openly, or to recreate the atrocity by going into the gas chambers while people were dying. The film strictly follows Saul's movements. So we stop at the door of the gas chamber and enter only after the extermination in order to remove the bodies and wash away any traces of what occurred there in preparation for the next group. These missing images are those of death; images that can't be reconstructed, and shouldn't be touched or manipulated. Because it is important for me to stay with Saul's point of view, I only show what he sees; what he pays attention to. He's been working in the crematorium for four months: as a protective reflex, he no longer notices the horror, and so I relegated the horror to the background, blurred or off screen. Saul only sees the object of his quest; this provides the film with its visual rhythm.

How did you film it?

The cinematographer, Mátyás Erdély, the production designer, László Rajk and I decided well before the shoot that we would stick to a sort of dogma: "the film cannot look beautiful," "the film cannot look appealing," "we cannot make a horror film," "staying with Saul means not going beyond his own field of vision, hearing, and presence," "the camera is his companion, it stays with him throughout this hell."

We also wanted to use traditional 35mm film and photochemical processing at every stage. It was the only way to maintain a certain instability in the images, and thus be able to film this world organically. The challenge was to strike an emotional chord in the audience – something that digital doesn't allow for.

All of this implied a lighting technique that was diffused, industrial and as simple as possible. It also required filming with the same lens, a 40mm, a restricted aspect ratio, and not something like scope which widens one's field of vision. We had to always remain at the character's eye level and stay with him.

Saul wears a jacket with a big red cross on the back...

Yes, it's a target. The SS used it to make it easier to shoot men who tried to escape. For us, it was a visual target for the camera.

Did you have any other films in mind?

Idi i smotri (Come and see) by Elem Klimov (1985) was a great source of inspiration for me. The movie follows a boy in 1943 on the Eastern front and stays with him in an organic manner through his hellish adventures. But Klimov allowed himself far more baroque things than we did.



In the movie's first scene, everything is a blur and then a face suddenly appears - it is Saul's.
He appears out of nowhere. My first short film, With a Little Patience, starts like that as well. The audience, who sees him spring up, understands immediately that he's the one they'll be following throughout the film. We did a lot of work with the actors on their body language. Camp rules, and what is required for survival impose very specific body movements: to always look down, never look a SS in the eye; to walk taking small, regular, but swift steps; take off your hat to salute and don't talk or, if you must, answer clearly, in German.

We quickly understand that there are several contradictory dynamics at play in the camp: submission to the SS, solidarity among Sonderkommando members, but also tension, rivalry, and the organization of a resistance.
Naturally, several standpoints exist within this horror, ranging from renouncement to resistance. And there are several ways to resist. In the film, we witness an attempted rebellion, which in fact took place in 1944, the only armed revolt in the history of Auschwitz. As for Saul, he chooses another form of revolt, which may seem irrelevant in this context. In following his personal quest, Saul is led to navigate between these different behaviors: recovering the boy's body takes him to the autopsy rooms where he finds the doctors and anatomists. Looking for a rabbi brings him to come across other Sonderkommando groups and convoys of Jews headed for death. Circulating through the camp eventually leads him to take the same path as the resistance members. He sees all of this in snatches, and the audience too must try and understand by piecing together the fragments. No one has all the elements in hand; everyone has fragments with which they attempt to construct their vision of the whole.

At some point, Saul comes across members of the resistance who are trying to photograph the extermination process.
Something that was strictly forbidden by the SS, of course. In Birkenau, the Polish resistance was able to get one or a few cameras to the Sonderkommando in order to document the extermination. At unbelievably great risk, they were able to take a photograph just before the doors to a gas chamber were closed and then immediately afterwards: naked women approaching the shot; then their piled-up corpses, which were taken outside and burned right there on the ground.

And the four photographs shown during the Mémoire des camps [Memoir of the camps] exhibition, in 2001, four "images despite it all"? (A reference to the book by the art historian and philosopher Georges-Didi Huberman.)
These four photographs deeply affected me. They attest to the extermination, they constitute evidence, and ask essential questions. What should be done with an image? What can it represent? What viewpoint should we have when faced with death and barbarity? We integrated this moment into the heart of the film, as it corresponds to a segment of Saul's journey through the camp when suddenly, just for a moment, he participates in the construction of our view of the extermination. And also, because of the representation of the image within itself, we are, at that point and only then, questioning the very status of representation.

Sound plays an important role in the film.
The sound designer, Tamás Zányi, who has worked on all my films, and I decided to work on a sound that was very simple, raw and yet quite complex and multidimensional. One has to be aware of the very particular sound atmosphere of these hellish factories. The multiplicity of tasks being accomplished, shouted orders, screams, and many languages were all intermingling: the German of the SS, the multiple languages spoken by the prisoners, among which was Yiddish, and those spoken by the victims who came from all over Europe. Sound can superimpose over the image, at times even taking its place, because some images are missing and rightfully so. I would compare it to diverse and sometimes contradictory layers of sound. And all this sound material needed to remain raw. It was important not to re-produce it or polish it.

Who is the person who plays Saul?
Géza Röhrig isn't an actor, but a Hungarian writer and poet who lives in New York. I met him several years ago. He came to mind for the role probably because he is someone who is in constant motion, his facial features and his body are always changing. It is impossible to tell his age, for he is at once old and young, but also handsome and ugly; ordinary and remarkable, deep and impassive, quick-witted and slow. He moves, is given to fidgeting, but also knows how to keep silent and still.

This character and your film endeavor to contrast a death ceremony and the death factory, rites and machinery, prayer and noise. When there is no longer any hope, from the deepest part of this hell, Saul's inner voice says to him: you must survive in order to accomplish an act that bears meaning, a human, age-old, sacred meaning; a meaningful act that is at the very origin of the community of mankind and religions: paying respect to the body of the dead.

Interview by Antoine de Baecque

László Nemes was born in 1977 in Budapest, Hungary. After studying History, International Relations and Screenwriting in Paris, he started working as an assistant director in France and Hungary on short and feature films. For two years, he worked as Béla Tarr's assistant and subsequently studied film directing in New York.
SON OF SAUL is his first feature.



LÁSZLÓ NEMES

FILMOGRAPHY

2007 **WITH A LITTLE PATIENCE** ***(short film)***
64th Venice International Film Festival, Official Selection 2007
European Film Awards nominated film

2008 **THE COUNTERPART** ***(short film)***
Premiered at the Gijon International Film Festival

2010 **THE GENTLEMAN TAKES HIS LEAVE** ***(short film)***

GÉZA RÖHRIG (SAUL)

Born in Budapest, 1967. Kicked out of high school at 16 for anticommunist activity, he founded an underground punk band, Huckrebelly, which always played under different names to keep the police from stopping their concerts. In ‘87 he moved to Kraków to study Polish Literature at the Jagiellonian University. In ‘89 he started studying directing at the Hungarian University of Drama and Film, and played the lead role in two Hungarian movies (ARMELLE by András Sólyom in 1988 and ESZMÉLET by József Madaras in 1989). In the early 90s he lived in Jerusalem, then spent two years studying at a hasidic yeshiva in Brooklyn. Soon after, he published his first book of poems.

He has lived in New York since 2000. He graduated from the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York and started to teach.

Röhrig has published seven volumes of poetry and one short story collection. He’s currently working on his first novel.

He plays the lead role of SON OF SAUL by László Nemes, in competition at Cannes Film Festival 2015.

CLARA ROYER

(CO-SCREENWRITER)

Clara Royer was born in Paris in 1981. She graduated from the French ‘École normale supérieure’ and has been working on her thesis on Central European Jewish writers (like Imre Kertész). She resided in Budapest from 2007 to 2010, as well as London, Bratislava, and Warsaw. Lecturer at the University of Paris Sorbonne where she taught history and central European literature until 2014, she is currently living in Prague. Her first novel, ‘Csillag’ was published in France in 2011 and in Hungary in 2013. She has been working as a screenwriter since 2008 on full length feature screenplays by László Nemes.

MÁTYÁS ERDÉLY

(DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY)

Mátyás Erdély, born in 1976, is a cinematographer from Budapest, Hungary. He has graduated from the Hungarian University of Drama and Film in Budapest in Cinematography before completing the Master’s Program at the American Film Institute Conservatory in Los Angeles, California. His feature work has been screened at festivals around the world with four films in Cannes in the last few years (including Delta - Main Competition, Tender Son - Main Competition, Miss Bala - Un Certain Regard).

CAST

Saul Ausländer	**GÉZA RÖHRIG**
Ábrahám	**LEVENTE MOLNÁR**
Oberkapo Biederman	**URS RECHN**
Bearded man	**TODD CHARMONT**
Doctor	**SÁNDOR ZSOTÉR**
Feigenbaum	**MARCIN CZARNIK**
Sonderkommando Rabbi	**JERZY WALCZAK**
SS Voss	**UWE LAUER**
SS Busch	**CHRISTIAN HARTING**
Mietek	**KAMIL DOBROWLSKI**
Hirsch	**AMITAI KEDAR**
Katz	**ISTVÁN PION**
Ella	**JULI JAKAB**
Vassili	**LEVENTE ORBÁN**

CREW

Director	**LÁSZLÓ NEMES**
Screenwriters	**LÁSZLÓ NEMES**
	CLARA ROYER
Cinematography	**MÁTYÁS ERDÉLY**
Production Design	**LÁSZLÓ RAJK**
Editing	**MATTHIEU TAPONIER**
Music	**LÁSZLÓ MELIS**
Casting Director	**ÉVA ZABEZSINSZKIJ**
Dialogue Coach *(Yiddish)*	**MENDY CAHAN**
Sound	**TAMÁS ZÁNYI**
Producers	**GÁBOR SIPOS**
	GÁBOR RAJNA
Production	**LAOKOON FILMGROUP**
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and the	**CLAIMS CONFERENCE**
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