

Interview: Director László Nemes, Actor Géza Röhrig of 'Son of Saul'

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- [Academy Award](#) [2]
- [Adolf Hitler](#) [3]
- [Auschwitz](#) [4]
- [Best Foreign Language Film](#) [5]
- [Clara Royer](#) [6]
- [Géza Röhrig](#) [7]
- [Golden Globe](#) [8]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [9]
- [Holocaust](#) [10]
- [Interview](#) [11]
- [László Nemes](#) [12]
- [Nazis](#) [13]
- [Oscar](#) [14]
- [Patrick McDonald](#) [15]
- [Son of Saul](#) [16]
- [Sonderkommando](#) [17]
- [Sony Pictures Classics](#) [18]
- [World War II](#) [19]

CHICAGO – The Holocaust, and its horrors, will forever inspire cinematic interpretation, even as the World War II era fades in memory. One of the latest films about the subject is “Son of Saul,” which just won the Golden Globe for Best Foreign Language film. It was directed by László Nemes, and features Géza Röhrig as Saul.

The film centers on the so-called “Sonderkommandos,” the group of Jewish prisoners in concentration camps that were forced to work disposing the exterminated corpses of their fellow prisoners, and subsequently they were the “bearer of secrets” regarding those killings. In this story, the character of Saul Ausländer was part of that crew, and in his gruesome work believes he sees his son as one of the victims.

He journeys through the rest of the story running aimlessly, looking to bury the boy’s corpse in a traditional Jewish ritual, while staying clear of his captors. Director László Nemes chose a filmmaking technique that focuses the camera and the point-of-view on Saul exclusively, and uses a different screen aspect ratio – square instead of widescreen – while the genocide keeps going on around him.



Director László Nemes and Géza Röhrig on the Set of 'Son of Saul'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic

“Son of Saul” is the 38-year-old director’s feature film debut, and it has also been nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the upcoming 88th Academy Awards. He chose an untested actor for the key role of Saul, Géza Röhrig, who is a poet and Kindergarden teacher based in New York City. HollywoodChicago.com spoke to both of them during a promotional tour for the film last month.

HollywoodChicago.com: László, the themes and horror of the Holocaust has been explored in over 100 films over the years. What was it about your idea and your perspective that drove you toward the task of adding your point of view to that long list?

László Nemes: It is the individual's experience, something that I think has never been focused on in the previous films, within the process of the Holocaust. The so-called genre of those films are designed to keep the viewer at a distance, and gives the illusion that the viewer knows more than what is in the story, which gives them an escape.

The previous films are never about the nature of the conditions or the suffering, it becomes remote and 'safe.' I really wanted to take the viewer to the 'here and now' regarding the exterminations, and communicate directly in a visceral way. The art of cinema can communicate that way, and that's why I wanted to do it that way.

HollywoodChicago.com: Géza, this is your first acting job in over 25 years. What made you the right choice to portray this difficult story?

Géza Röhrig: I read the script and was floored, I thought this film offered something that none of those numerous and previous Holocaust films had offered. This is not a certain subject matter that would be watered down or treated lightly. It's dark, and the center of Saul's experience was around the gas chambers and crematoriums, which was somehow the blind spot in many of the previous film works – previously it had seemed taboo.

I also understand that it's a movie depiction you don't want to screw up. When I finished the script, that delicate line of the real experience and the restraint of showing too much was there, and we wanted the viewer to perceive it rather than concretely show it. So I became passionately part of that conversation, and I'm glad I got an opportunity to perform the role.

HollywoodChicago.com: László, this brought the element of the 'Sonderkommando' to light. What did you want the audience to understand about the survival instincts of this class of prisoners?

Nemes: When I began research, I read the writings of the Sonderkommandos. They are not well known, but these prisoners wrote from the middle of hell from Auschwitz, to let the world know what happened. The texts were buried beneath the ground and found after the liberation of the concentration camps.

This was a direct way to be transported into the middle of the extermination, and I wanted to find a way, using cinema, to go right into it. These prisoners were the guides to the hell – and despite all the perceptions that were constructed about them after the war – they were bottom line heroic figures. They were the only people who wrote about the events, took photographs and eventually led the only armed rebellion in the camps.



The Title Character: Géza Röhrig in 'Son of Saul'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic

HollywoodChicago.com: Géza, this is probably one of the most challenging film performances I've ever seen. What was your best go-to technique to stay in the moment with the machine of the camera constantly in your face?

Röhrig: However I did that, I wouldn't call it a technique. There are operating techniques within machines, but I am a human being. I didn't figure out any secret formula that I can share – it's obviously is a very personal thing. I read about the prisoner's lives and functions, what they were doing and how they were doing it, and somehow at some point I was able to put all the pieces of this picture together. The camera

was very close, sometimes only 30 inches away, so I had to create a facial expression that was numbness. This paradoxical state was necessary to keep the viewer engaged with my face.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which was acting from the chest up, while being in constant motion, it seemed...

Nemes: Well, Géza has that something natural within him, and that was part of the reason we cast him. He understood it in a very intuitive way.

HollywoodChicago.com: László, What was different about the rehearsal process that allowed the actors and background players to get acclimated to what their assignment was around Saul, and inside the shot?

Nemes: We had to figure out the context of the Sonderkommandos, there were rules we had to understand in our research to first give our main character of Saul that context. Next we had to figure out how to put it in place. I did have an assistant director who instructed the background players, so everyone had instruction in each scene. For every shot, we started with the background, then we inserted the main action within it. There was a constant coming, going and creating within the foreground, and what was in the background.

HollywoodChicago.com: Géza, what was the one thought process about the character of Saul that you wanted to drive your performance on, and how did that thought take you through to the end?

Röhrig: The key for me was trying to understand why he wanted to bury this boy so obsessively. What was he was doing was quite maniacal, and that burying is his one goal. I had to understand the motivation of his thought process in that, so the key was in the fact that the boy initially survived the gas chamber, and beat the system.

The boy had to be murdered twice, and that is what triggered Saul's empathy, that long forgotten feeling. Despite all the suffering he had seen, this triggered a gratitude of feeling within. He felt an obligation to the boy, and that connected Saul for me back to himself.

HollywoodChicago.com: László, I know you've answered this question before, but what was your rationale in shooting the film in a box-shaped screen ratio, rather than the aspect of the modern widescreen?

Nemes: It didn't start out that way, it started as a normal widescreen shoot. As we were in pre-production, we found that the widescreen would have given too much emphasis to the background, the spectacle that Saul is moving through. Our objective was to create a portrait of Saul, so to narrow that focus it became apparent to leave less to the viewer's screen experience, and more to what they don't see, and to leave enough of a sense in what is going on.



The Scene is Set for Géza Röhrig in 'Son of Saul'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classic

HollywoodChicago.com: Géza, since you portrayed a Sonderkommando –the so-called 'bearer of secrets' – what burden of those secrets did you most understand in Saul's plight?

Röhrig: The Germans gave them that designation, the bearer of secrets, because they were the witnesses to the genocide. They testified to the world what happened, and how it happened. The idea of a secret is generally a cruel thing, psychologists advise people in general not to have secrets, because it is a frustrating experience.

In the case of the Sonderkommandos, they were separated and not allowed communication with others, so the secrets they possessed became like a cancer that grew inside them, and it attacked their psyche. That’s the part that I understood about Saul.

HollywoodChicago.com: Do you believe that the Holocaust remains the greatest inhumanity to man ever perpetuated, or have we surpassed that horror in the history since then, in the territorial elements of the continuing lust for power?

Röhrig: There is no rank, there is no gold medal for worst genocide. What pains me is that 70 years after the Holocaust happened, humankind has not learned as much as it should have. There has been horrible genocides since then, especially in the African nations. and it became some sort of a sport in history.

It would seem that what happened 70 years ago, in the heart of the European civilization, would have created a chance of it never happening again, and the human family could have made sure it corrected its ways. There might be different continents, and different targeted groups, but this sort of industrial, full-scale, en-masse killing – whether it be in Africa or the Mideast regions – it just keeps going on. The geopolitical leaders of our current world are utterly incapable of preventing this from happening.

Nemes: There are genocidal tendencies that are at the heart of the human potential, and I think if we don’t talk about it, we’re not preparing ourselves for a better future. We have seen and do see the type of evil that is within human civilization, and the Holocaust took place in European history during an advanced state of technology and form of civilization, only to become an event in that history that questioned what civilization actually means.

“Son of Saul” continues its limited release in Chicago on January 29th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Géza Röhrig, Levente Molnár, Urs Rechn and Todd Charmont. Written by László Nemes and Clara Royer. Directed by László Nemes. Rated “R”



[20]

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