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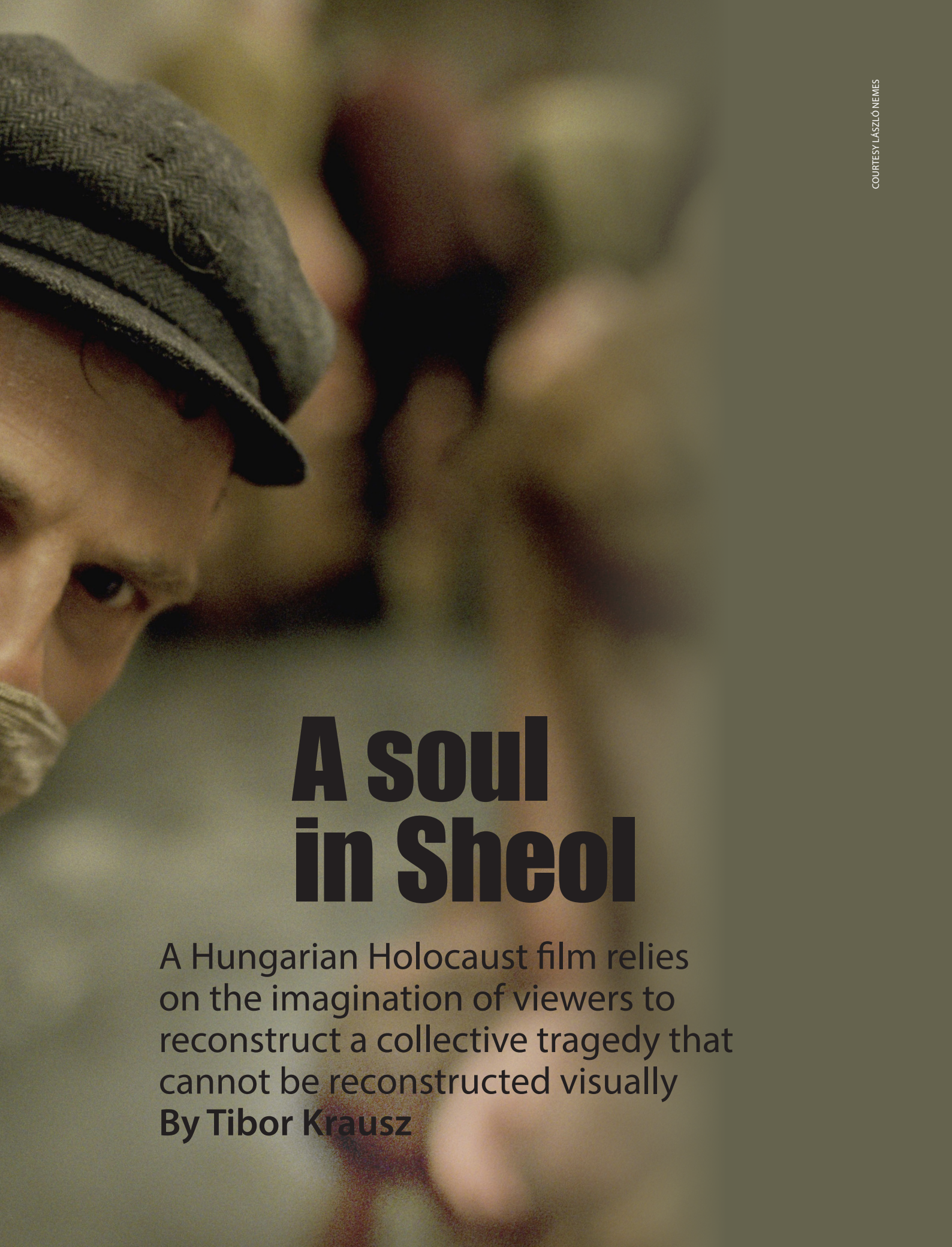
Géza Röhrig plays Saul Ausländer, a member of a Jewish Sonderkommando in Auschwitz, in the movie 'Son of Saul'



COURTESY LÁSZLÓ NEMES

A soul in Sheol

A Hungarian Holocaust film relies on the imagination of viewers to reconstruct a collective tragedy that cannot be reconstructed visually

By Tibor Krausz

One long summer night, Eszter Molnár found herself reenacting a forced march, with scores of other Hungarian Jews, through a chilly stretch of forest cloaked in baleful penumbra. Wearing the tatty rags of dispossessed Hungarian Jews during World War II, the young actress from Budapest, who felt bedraggled and weary, was herded along by dour Nazi guards barking orders and pushing the Jews. Now and again, shots rang out and people fell helplessly to the ground in the jostle and hubbub.

The following day, Molnár stood on the edge of a newly dug mass grave with a funeral pyre blazing furiously behind it. Her executioners suddenly tore at her clothes, stripping her almost naked, before they shoved her into the pit. She landed safely and unharmed on mattresses, but her "execution" shook her up just the same.

The filming last summer of "Saul fia" ("Son of Saul"), a Hungarian Holocaust drama that took the Cannes Film Festival by storm in May where it debuted to enthusiastic critical acclaim ("astonishing," "outstanding," "brilliant," "truly remarkable," "striking work of art") was all scripted, stage-managed make-believe. Yet Molnár, who has a small part in it, found it a poignantly harrowing experience.

"I began to feel a sense of guilt and shame as if I had done something wrong," Molnár, who is of Jewish origins, tells *The Jerusalem Report* about the mental state in which she found herself during filming when the extras were kept in the dark about how scenes would unfold to elicit more spontaneous reactions from them. "I was in a daze for days afterwards and could not stop thinking about the shoot," she adds. "I can't imagine what [the real victims of the Holocaust] must have felt in similar situations."

What some of them must have felt is a question that lies at the heart of "Son of Saul," a low-budget movie which won several awards at Cannes, including the Grand Prize and the International Federation of Film Critics' Fipresci Award. The movie's plot unfolds over a day and a half in the life of Saul Ausländer, played by newcomer Géza Röhrig. Ausländer, a Hungarian Jew from the town of Ungvár (today Uzhhorod in Ukraine), works as a member of the Jewish Sonderkommando unit in Auschwitz, in the fall of 1944, as the extermination of Hungarian Jewry gathers pace. His tasks involve disposing of bodies from the gas chambers and piling them into the crematoria ovens.

His face invariably shown in close-up during long, lingering takes that let us witness Auschwitz through his eyes, Ausländer navigates his way through his personal purgatory of grief and quiet desperation within his hellish milieu. Everywhere he turns he sees death. Most of the gruesome images remain confined to the screen's blurred peripheries: murderous brutality has become such an integral part of his mental and physical landscape that he barely even takes notice of it.

THE HOLOCAUST WASN'T ABOUT SURVIVAL; IT WAS ABOUT THE EXTERMINATION OF EUROPEAN JEWS

The movie has no music, and Auschwitz's infernal reality becomes amplified through often jarring and disembodied sounds – barked orders, plaintive laments, the sudden rat-tat-tat of machine guns – in an eerie acoustic echo chamber of all-pervasive gloom.

"We tried to be restrained in showing the realities of Auschwitz without stylistic gimmicks," says László Nemes, the drama's 38-year-old Jewish-Hungarian director who makes his feature-film debut with "Son of Saul" after five years of work on it. "We thought that less was more and that the right way was not to rely so much on [graphic] imagery but on the imagination of viewers to reconstruct something that cannot be reconstructed visually."

Those awful realities of Auschwitz, though, are there up front.

Plunging viewers right into the heart of the Nazis' machinery of death, the movie begins with a group of fearful new arrivals at a gas chamber, where they are stripped naked and shepherded inside with the door clanging ominously shut behind them. Ausländer and his Sonderkommando colleagues lean against the door to keep it securely closed while the dying claw at it from inside.

Popular films about the Holocaust, such as "Schindler's List" and "The Pianist," have invariably been crafted with the dramatic arch of action adventures and disaster movies – they're cathartic tales of survival against the odds with soulful and plucky Jews emerging victorious over their tormentors by staying alive through tenacity and sheer luck. This isn't such a movie.

"Most Holocaust movies offer comforting certainties and we did not want to go down that path," Nemes explains in an interview with The Report. "The Holocaust wasn't about survival; it was about the extermination of European Jews."

Nemes, who co-wrote the film's screenplay, portrays the death camp's Jewish laborers as spectral wraiths with hollow cheeks and haggard, pallid features. They communicate in hoarse whispers, exchange furtive glances, and hide behind their impassivity lest a raised voice or alert gaze attract the attention of a guard and trigger lethal retribution. Meticulously dehumanized and sadistically brutalized by their German captors, they appear almost feral.

"I wanted to recreate the visceral experience of what it was like in Auschwitz to a non-Jewish audience who may not be familiar with the Shoah," explains Nemes, several members of whose family, who came from Ungvár like his protagonist, died in Auschwitz. "I wanted to explore the inner survival of a Jewish inmate in an environment where there is nothing but death," he says. "The main character has a voice inside that can't be crushed even when there's only darkness and death all around him."

Ausländer goes about his grisly business – scrubbing the walls of gas chambers, stacking bodies for the incinerators, shoveling human ashes into a river – with the stoic resignation of someone who knows that any moment he could be next. He's living on borrowed time and his survival boils down to another day of soul-crushing toil.

The instantly damned – Jews destined for the gas chambers – flit in and out of Ausländer's peripheral vision, disappearing from his view just as fast as they appear, on their way to the gas chambers. Shorn of their humanity, they become mere statistics even before we see the last of them. Ausländer will see them again – as emancipated corpses ready for cremation with no one there to mourn their passing.

Then Ausländer spots a young boy among the dead inside a gas chamber. The child, who may be his son or a boy he adopts posthumously as his son (we never learn), is taken to an operating room for an autopsy by a

BERNADETT SZABO / REUTERS

'Son of Saul' director László Nemes (left) together with lead actor Géza Röhrig during a news conference in Budapest, May 28, at which they said they want as many Hungarians as possible to see the award-winning film in a country that has been plagued by anti-Semitism and xenophobia

doctor who is likely based on Miklós Nyiszli, a Hungarian Jewish physician interned in Auschwitz who performed autopsies for the camp's sadistic "Angel of Death" Dr. Josef Mengele and wrote of his experiences in his postwar memoirs "Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Accounts."

Roused from his personal trauma, Ausländer sets out on a perilous, single-minded quest to give the boy a proper funeral in secret. As he does so, he stumbles upon the plot of a planned rebellion among his fellow Sonderkommandos, which he risks accidentally compromising.

THE LATTER subplot's broad outlines are based on actual events at Auschwitz, where on October 7, 1944, Sonderkommandos set upon SS guards, killing three, in a bid to destroy the gas chambers during a short, abortive uprising. The Sonderkommandos, whose rebellion also served as the inspiration for the 2001 Holocaust drama "The Grey Zone," lived in relative luxury among Jewish inmates with access to extra food they were allowed to retrieve from corpses. During their shifts at the gas chambers and the crematoria, many of them came face to face with their murdered loved ones.

For "an insider's view" of their life in the death camp, Nemes immersed himself in the secret diaries of some of the Sonderkommandos who had buried their memoirs and eyewitness accounts for posterity in the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, where the documents were later unearthed. "They were better fed and comparatively privileged among inmates," Nemes says. "But they knew that in the end they would be murdered just like anyone else. They were in the innermost pit of hell."

His protagonist is no gung-ho rebel but he does resist in his own way. By seeking to lay the boy properly to rest, Ausländer rejects the Nazis' diktat that Jewish life has no value and Jews do not deserve even a modicum of dignity in either life or death. "Auschwitz is a vast subject so we wanted to boil the camp down to a single human being's experiences of it," Nemes notes. "He pays no attention to the horror around him because he's switched off. He's focused solely on his quest to bury this one child" – a symbolic stand-in for the 100,000 Hungarian Jewish children who perished in Auschwitz.

Ausländer is an ordinary Jew in an extraordinary situation. He's complicit in the Germans' crimes insofar as he knows what terrible fate awaits the unknowing victims queuing sheepishly outside gas chambers while guards coax them on with promises of a nice shower, yet he keeps silent.

Then again, what difference would it make if he did warn them? He knows he's powerless against the armed Germans who execute their master plan of ruthless extermination with lulling subterfuge, industrial efficiency and mocking derision. Ausländer robs the dead of their gold teeth and jewelry so he can exchange them for food and favors among the inmates. He's a tragic character, a forlorn figure with his spirit crushed.

Röhrig, 48, an observant Hungarian Jew who studied at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary and lived in Jerusalem, plays Ausländer with almost autistic detachment and subdued intensity in equal parts, offering us glimpses of an inner turmoil beneath seeming resignation. When asked his name by the doctor who agrees to let him have a moment alone with the dead boy in the operating room, Ausländer recites it thoughtfully and hesitantly with a fleeting sideways glance that can be a sign of either shame or defiance, or both simultaneously.

Such studied ambiguities are intentional. "Generally, actors can show a whole spectrum of emotions, but my challenge in the role was to show a [traumatized] person in a very reduced state of mind because of his extraordinary circumstances," explains Röhrig, a poet and writer with curly black

hair and a bushy beard, who makes his screen debut in "Son of Saul" and has received critical accolades for his performance. "The only way to stay sane in those kinds of circumstances was to cease to be a [fully functioning] human being and to become detached from your emotions."

Röhrig rejects the view that the Sonderkommandos, who were routinely maligned by survivors, shared some responsibility for the murders by assisting the

Nazis. "They were 100 percent victims," Röhrig insisted at a televised press conference in Cannes in response to a Belgian reporter who posited that members of Sonderkommando units were "part victims, part hangmen" and, therefore, one of them was a morally ambiguous choice as a sympathetic protagonist.

"They did not spill blood or were involved in any sort of killing," Röhrig stressed, speaking softly in fluent English but growing visibly agitated by the question. "In every case, they were inducted upon arrival under the threat of death. They had no control over their destiny. They were as victimized as any other inmates in Auschwitz," he said. "To call the Sonderkommandos murderers is [to do them a grave injustice]."

Ausländer is a fictional character, but he inhabits a meticulously recreated Jewish world that still clings to life, barely just, while being eliminated by the Nazis before our very eyes. In the movie's cacophony of Central and Eastern European languages – spoken by actors from eight different countries, including Israel – Yiddish takes pride of place. And not just some generic textbook Yiddish. Rather, it's the *mamaloshen* as it was before and during the war with its rich tapestry of accents and regional dialects.

"We weighed every word we used in the short and terse dialogues and we tailored the kind of Yiddish that characters speak to their unique biographies – where they came from, whether they were educated, whether they spoke Yiddish as their mother tongue or as a second language," explains Mendy Cahan, an Israeli Yiddishist who worked as language coach on the film and plays a Sonderkommando in it. "The actors [most of whom spoke no Yiddish at all] had to learn to speak this language in their dialogues as if they were born with it."

With the fastidious rigueur of "Pygmalion's" professor of phonetics, Cahan listened to spools of archival audiotapes with the postwar testimonies of Yiddish-speaking survivors to get all the words, tones and accents just right. "Yiddish changed drastically through the Holocaust," he tells The Report. Cahan, who runs Yung YiDiSH, a Tel Aviv-based Yiddish cultural revivalist project, grew up in Antwerp speaking the language before making aliya.

"EASTERN-EUROPEAN Jews created a whole new dialect in the ghettos and camps to deal with their new reality," he says. "They knew the Germans could easily understand them so they invented an almost code language, a linguistic *gematria* of sorts. They also had to invent new words. What do you call a cake made from potato peels and woodchips?"

Cahan isn't bothered that all those linguistic subtleties, however scrupulously recreated, will be completely lost on the vast majority of the film's viewers. "Only a tiny part of the audience will pick up on the various Yiddish dialects we used in the film, yes," acknowledges Cahan, whose Hungarian-born father was a survivor of the Buchenwald concentration camp. "But we meant this film to be a memorial to the Jewish victims and you don't cheat with a monument. Every brick of it needs to be firmly in place."

"Son of Saul," to which Sony Pictures Classics has just bought the rights for global distribution, also seeks to serve as a cultural mnemonic in Hungary, where the downplaying or outright denial of the Holocaust is common, and further afield.

"The wound from the Holocaust is still open," Nemes insists. "Many Europeans may prefer to forget this collective suicide of their civilization, but I don't think we can close this chapter. Just look at the resurgence of fascism," Nemes adds, referring to Jobbik, a fervently nationalistic and openly anti-Semitic political movement that enjoys considerable popular support in Hungary.

Following the success of "Son of Saul" in Cannes, Jobbik's deputy chairman Előd Novák wasted no time denouncing the Hungarian National Film Fund for having provided most of the funding for the film. "Once Jobbik takes charge of the government, we will put an end to the Holocaust industry in the area of filmmaking as well," he huffed May 24. A day later a Hungarian man accosted the Israeli consul in Budapest, calling him a "dirty Jew." "It's a shame Hitler didn't finish the job," the man reportedly ranted at the diplomat. "If I had a rifle, I'd shoot you."

"Anti-Semitism is in the air," Nemes observes. "You experience it frequently. Jews in Hungary still have cause to be afraid."

ANTI-ZIONISM JUST MEANS THAT PEOPLE ALWAYS FIND NEW WAYS TO HATE JEWS. I'M WORRIED ABOUT THE FUTURE OF EUROPE AND OF ISRAEL

And not only in Hungary. Virulent and increasingly violent anti-Jewish animus is becoming widespread again across Europe, often concealed as "anti-Zionism." The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, which seeks to isolate the Jewish state politically, economically and culturally, is gaining momentum. Jews and Israelis are regularly decried, in an obscene inversion of history, as latter-day Nazis who are perpetrating a new Holocaust against Palestinians.

"Anti-Zionism just means that people always find new ways to hate Jews," Nemes notes. "And it works. It's very disturbing. I'm worried about the future of Europe and of Israel." ■