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# Son of Saul - A haunting portrayal of hope in the Holocaust

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Award-winning Hungarian film *Son of Saul* – directed by László Nemes and co-written by Nemes and Clara Royer – was recently screened at Charles University's Faculty of Arts. *Son of Saul* premiered at the 68<sup>th</sup> Cannes Film Festival in 2015 – where it won the Grand Prix – and went on to scoop many other prestigious awards, including Best Foreign Language Film at the 73<sup>rd</sup> Golden Globe Awards and the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Language Film for the year 2015. The screening at Charles University was followed by a debate led by Jindřiška Bláhová, which involved discussions between co-screenwriter Clara Royer, film critic Jan Kolář and members of the audience – including many students from the Faculty of Arts and various other departments within the university.

*Son of Saul* is set during the Second World War and tells the story of Saul Ausländer (Géza Röhrig), a Hungarian prisoner working in Auschwitz, the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp. As a member of the Sonderkommando, Saul is forced to work in horrendous circumstances on a daily basis – his job is to burn the bodies of the dead after they have been gassed to death in the chambers. One day, however, Saul discovers the body of a young boy who is still breathing, which means he survived the horror of the gas chamber. Saul tries to save the young boy by getting him medical assistance but watches in horror as the helpless boy is suffocated to death by the doctor. Because he feels responsible for the young boy, Saul takes him as his son and fights to protect him by striving to find a rabbi that can help give the boy a proper Jewish burial like he deserves.

During the debate, screenwriter Clara Royer explained that the director, László Nemes, had wanted to write something about the war for a while but could not decide what story he wanted to tell. However, in 2005, at the time of the commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, a book based on three manuscripts found in the ground after the war was published. This book captured the voices from Auschwitz and, finally, the idea for *Son of Saul* was born – an amalgamation of various events which were historically documented, including the stories of people who were forced to burn the bodies of their own family. Essentially, Saul is a fictitious character, constructed to portray true events from Auschwitz.

Film critic Jan Kolář admitted he had mixed feelings about the film, as there were aspects that he liked and did not like about it. He said he thought the technical aspects of the film were perfect – such as the sound editing and the cinematography, which were equally impressive – and that overall this was a clever, sophisticated movie. However, Kolář also voiced his main criticisms and thus, the debate officially began. First, Kolář pointed out the film only captured the perpetrators and the people forced to assist, meaning that there was no story revolving around any survivors. Second, the depiction of genocide was a misrepresentation of how it was believed to have actually happened in the Second World War, because if people went into the gas chambers to be killed then they did not come back out alive. Lastly, because of the way that the camera mainly focuses on the face of Saul throughout the story, you are unable to see the wider picture; therefore it does not give an accurate representation of the scale of the Holocaust. Kolář summed up his arguments by reiterating that he thought the movie was great on the whole, and though he found these problems with it they did not in any way distract from the main story itself.

The debate host, Jindřiška Bláhová, offered her view that it must be extremely difficult to even begin contemplating how to capture the Holocaust because of the sheer scale of it. Whether depicted as a whole or as an individual story, as is the case in *Son of Saul*, Bláhová implied the portrayal of the Holocaust must be a challenge either way, as the events which occurred must make it seem completely unimaginable to people who did not actually experience it. Incidentally, even whilst watching *Son of Saul* and knowing that many of the gruesome scenes in it are based on real events, it is still difficult to believe such events actually happened, merely because it is so tragic and it is a challenge to fully comprehend such evil occurring on a mass scale.

Royer agreed and in response to critic Kolář, explains it is impossible to show every story from the Holocaust, so the most effective way to capture the evil of Auschwitz was to focus on telling Saul's tragic story as this would then act as a window through which we can see the rest of the trauma that occurred in Auschwitz. From the opening shot, the camera is focused on Saul and as his personal story evolves within the bigger picture, we can still see all the awful events he has to deal with unfolding in the background. Thus, this film does not in any way avoid the fact that this is the Holocaust, instead, the continuous action in the background constantly reminds us of the horrors which occurred. Saul's story depicts his desperation to do something right amongst all the immoral acts taking place – an act of humanity which brings a glimmer of hope in an otherwise treacherous world.

Additionally, the tragic scenes throughout this film are impossible to ignore because they are extremely powerful in their execution. The sheer extent of the mistreatment is conveyed by the explicit dehumanisation of the people who are mercilessly killed and discarded. Thousands of naked victims are herded into the gas chambers like animals facing their fate at a slaughterhouse – or merely shot to death when the gas chambers are too busy to accommodate them – and then their lifeless bodies are dragged along the dirty floor by their feet, with their arms sprawled out behind them. The ultimate insult is the fact that the soldiers refer to the dead bodies as 'pieces', which emphasises their disrespect for the victims as they are treated like objects and not humans.

Incidentally, *Son of Saul* approaches the Holocaust within a new generation and Royer admits this is significant for two reasons. First, she believes that nowadays, the Holocaust tends to live hidden away in museums and it needs to be brought back into the open so that future generations can continue learning about it. Second, she believes people need to address the past and attempt to deal with it before they can continue living their lives. This film essentially acts as a means of doing this. However, though the pain and trauma can possibly be addressed, the memory of the Holocaust and the lessons learned from it must live on as a reminder to us all.

One audience member said she felt overwhelmed after watching *Son of Saul* at the screening and admits it has greatly affected her views on the Holocaust. Also, whilst she understands Royer's theory that it is difficult to capture every victim's story in one movie, she says it would be amazing if Royer could make 6 million movies as brilliant as *Son of Saul* – to represent everybody's individual tales of suffering or survival, because all victims deserve their story to be told. Though the audience realises this would be an impossible feat, everyone is silent in agreement as there are so many untold stories of victims that deserve to be heard.

Overall, *Son of Saul* is a successful and historically accurate depiction of the Holocaust as seen through one man's eyes – a film which is stylistically and creatively executed to convey the horrors of Auschwitz whilst simultaneously offering a glimmer of hope amongst all the tragedy. Though it is at times hard to watch, it has been constructed in a manner which is incredibly powerful and thus evokes a reaction. Royer explains that your senses are constantly under attack – so there is no escape – and you are affected by it. She suggests that what matters in the end is what you take away from the experience; what you do about it, how you behave – and if you choose to change. As students and members of the public left the debate at Charles University's Faculty of Arts, this is the haunting final thought that stayed with each and every one of them.

#### Photo

**Anna Kindness** is a 3rd year English and Film student from Edinburgh, Scotland, who is studying for one semester at Charles University in Prague. Anna has a variety of interests, including arts and culture, adventure, travel, the great outdoors and writing. The decision to write for iForum was an easy one to make, as it is an excellent opportunity to develop both writing and editing skills within a work environment, whilst simultaneously getting to meet like-minded people.