

International protests against arrest of film director Roman Polanski

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Expressions of shock and anger are mounting internationally over the arrest Saturday night of Oscar-winning film director Roman Polanski. The 76-year-old director of such films as *Rosemary's Baby*, *Chinatown* and the 2002 film *The Pianist*, for which Polanski received an Academy Award, was seized by Swiss police at the airport in Zurich, where he had flown to accept a lifetime achievement award at the Zurich film festival. Swiss authorities acted at the behest of the US Justice Department.

The film festival organizers expressed “great consternation and shock” over Polanski’s detention. The Swiss Association of Directors called it a “grotesque judicial farce and a monstrous cultural scandal.” The Swiss Association of Film Directors and Script Writers called the move “a slap in the face for the entire cultural community in Switzerland.”

“I think this is awful and totally unjust,” French Culture Minister Frederic Mitterrand told reporters. “Just as there is an America which is generous and which we like,” he added, “so there is an America which is frightening, and that is the America which has just revealed its face.”

Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski announced that he was considering requesting clemency for Polanski from US President Barack Obama. French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said he had asked his Swiss counterpart to ensure that Polanski’s rights are fully respected and that a “favorable solution” is rapidly found.

Calls for the release of Polanski have been combined with anger towards the US government and disgust over the Swiss government’s compliance with US demands.

Swiss officials have not said where Polanski is being

held. They announced that he was in “provisional detention” pending his extradition to the United States. Polanski’s lawyer said Sunday that he would contest the US extradition request.

The US is demanding Polanski’s extradition on the basis of a 31-year-old arrest warrant. The warrant was issued in 1978 after Polanski fled the US to escape a likely prison sentence in connection with a sexual encounter with a 13-year-old girl.

Polanski denied knowing that the girl was underage, but pled guilty to “unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor” as part of a plea bargain. He fled the country prior to his sentencing for fear that the judge would renege on the terms of the plea bargain and sentence him to a long prison term. A French citizen, he has lived in the intervening years in France, married and raised two children.

The Los Angeles County district attorney’s office, with the support of the US Justice Department, has continued to hound Polanski, forcing him to avoid countries, such as Britain, with strong extradition treaties with the US. In 2005, the US issued an international arrest warrant for Polanski, which is evidently the legal basis for the action carried out by the Swiss government.

Over the past year, Polanski’s lawyers have sought to have the case against him dismissed based on charges of prosecutorial and judicial misconduct in his 1978 trial. A 2008 documentary, *Roman Polanski: Wanted and Desired*, included an interview with a Los Angeles prosecutor who said he had coached the trial judge in relation to Polanski’s sentencing. Early this year, a US judge acknowledged that there was “substantial” evidence of official misconduct in the case, but said he would make a ruling only if Polanski returned to the US and appeared in court.

The same month, Samantha Geimer, the woman whom Polanski allegedly assaulted in 1977, now 44 years old, married and a mother of three, filed to have the charges against Polanski dismissed, saying that decades of publicity as well as the prosecutor's focus on lurid details continued to traumatize her and her family. She has publicly forgiven the director and urged that the US government's vendetta against him be halted.

The arrest of Polanski is all the more bizarre and arbitrary given that he has frequently traveled to Switzerland and has a home in the country. A spokesperson for the Los Angeles County district attorney's office said that the office had learned that Polanski would be flying to Zurich and sent a provisional arrest warrant to the Obama administration Justice Department, which presented it to Swiss authorities.

Polanski's arrest is the latest episode in a life that has been dogged by tragedy. Born in France of Polish Jewish ancestry, he moved with his family to Krakow in 1936. He and his family were forced into the Krakow Ghetto after Nazi Germany occupied Poland. He saw his mother and father deported to Nazi death camps. His mother died in Auschwitz and his father survived the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp. He escaped the Krakow Ghetto in 1943 and survived the war with the help of Polish Catholic families.

His personal experiences were powerfully reflected in *The Pianist*, which portrays the harrowing struggle of a Polish-Jewish concert pianist to survive the Nazi Holocaust.

In 1969, his pregnant wife, the actress Sharon Tate, was brutally murdered by members of Charles Manson's "family," who broke into the Polanski's rented home in the Hollywood Hills. Polanski was in London at the time.

These tragic personal circumstances have in no way lessened the remorselessness with which American authorities have pursued the film director.

Since fleeing the US, Polanski has resided in France, while frequently visiting Poland, Germany and other countries where he felt he would not be subject to extradition to the US. He has continued to make films, including a film entitled *The Ghost* which he shot last spring in Babelsberg, Germany, near where he filmed *The Pianist*.

According to the New York Times, the film is "a thriller about a ghostwriter whose life is put in jeopardy after he uncovers secrets while completing the memoirs of a former British prime minister." Polanski's arrest could block release of the film.

Robert Harris, a British novelist who has been working with Polanski over the past several years, writing two screenplays, expressed outrage over the director's arrest. "I am shocked," he said in a statement, "that any man of 76, whether distinguished or not, should have been treated in such a fashion." He added, "It's hard not to believe that this heavy-handed action must be in some way politically motivated."



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