US formally requests extradition of filmmaker Roman Polanski

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27 October 2009

The United States government has formally requested the extradition of Roman Polanski from Switzerland. The request came through the US embassy in Bern, the Swiss capital, on Thursday. Authorities in Zürich, where Polanski has been imprisoned for one month, will now hold a hearing to decide whether he should be returned to the US to face sentencing in Los Angeles. If they choose to turn Polanski over to American authorities, and there is every indication they will, the film director will have the right to appeal the decision to the highest court in Switzerland. This could take six months.

Attorneys representing Polanski in Washington, D.C., had been in talks with the US Justice Department in an effort to convince the government not to extradite their client, arguing that Polanski was never intended to serve a prison sentence. During the original court proceedings in 1977-1978, from which Polanski felt compelled to flee, it was recommended that he only be sentenced to probation.

The Obama administration, always eager to placate the right and frightened of coming under attack from the tabloid media, rejected the arguments of Polanski's attorneys and conceded to demands for the filmmaker's head by filing the extradition request.

While it has been widely reported in the press that Polanski was considering accepting extradition or voluntarily returning to US custody, his lead attorney in France, Herve Temime, told the Associated Press after news of the formal request was announced, "We continue to fight extradition, and for [Polanski] to be free."

In addition to the formal extradition request, last week also brought new revelations about the pursuit of Polanski in the run-up to his arrest September 26.

A series of e-mails uncovered by the Associated Press reveal that prosecutors in Los Angeles were closely monitoring Polanski's activities in late September while the director was in Austria for the opening of a musical based on one of his films.

Serious discussions took place as to whether Polanski should be taken into custody there. Los Angeles deputy district attorney Diana Carbajal had doubts about the cooperation of the local authorities, writing to her colleagues, "I don't have experience with any Austrian extraditions so I don't know how 'friendly' they would be to extradition on such a case."

Polanski was so closely watched—by whom?—that Carbajal knew when the director had checked out of his hotel in Austria on the morning of September 23, and that he would be heading to a film festival in Zürich, Switzerland, ahead of schedule. Carbajal wrote to colleagues asking if it would be more favorable to "maintain our position to extradite from Switzerland.'' She received confirmation, and Polanski was arrested upon his arrival in Zürich.

The Associated Press notes blandly: "It is unclear from the e-mails why Los Angeles officials were concerned about Austrian cooperation on a Polanski extradition request. There was no reference to Polanski's history as a Jewish Holocaust survivor whose mother died in Auschwitz, or the sensitivities about having him pursued in the land of Adolf Hitler's birth."

Again, it is extraordinary to note the lengths to which US authorities have gone to apprehend a 76-year-old filmmaker wanted on 30-year-old charges, charges that the victim in the case, no less, has asked be dropped. Meanwhile, war criminals and corporate looters walk the streets of Washington and New York without a care in the world.

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Authorities in the US only learned of Polanski's trip to Switzerland after being tipped off by the Swiss government. Swiss authorities alerted the US Office of International Affairs about Polanski's planned arrival to receive a lifetime achievement award at a Zürich film festival and asked if the US would seek to arrest him. Because Polanski has maintained a home in Gstaad, Switzerland, and come in and out of that country freely for years, many have pointed to the suspicious character of the Swiss government's intervention.

A further look into the context of the arrest reveals the timing of Polanski's capture was anything but arbitrary. The Swiss government has recently come under pressure from the US government to turn over wealthy American tax evaders who have hidden their assets in Swiss banks. Investigations into the Swiss banking giant UBS had begun and banking confidentiality laws were being challenged.

Polanski's scheduled appearance at the Zürich film festival was seized on by Swiss authorities as an opportunity to curry favor with the US government. The famous filmmaker and fugitive from justice was a high-profile offering, made in the hopes of taking the heat off Swiss financial institutions. For their part, American law enforcement officials were only too eager to finally be seen "getting their man."

The arrest and extradition of Roman Polanski is not a case of justice being served. The director has fallen prey to the maneuvers of the Swiss government and right-wing forces in the United States. While hearings will still be held in Switzerland to determine whether or not Polanski should be extradited, the correspondence uncovered by the Associated Press shows that the Swiss government has already assured prosecutors in the US that the filmmaker would be returned to them.

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