



Polish actor Piotr Witkowski poses during the premiere of his movie "Mistrz" (Master) based on the book by daughter of Pietrzykowski - Eleonora Szafran, Warsaw.



Director Maciej Barczewski (left) and Eleonora Szafran (right) - daughter of Auschwitz boxer Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski and author of his biography are seen speaking with press during the premiere of the movie "Mistrz" (Master) based on the book, Warsaw.



Eleonora Szafran - daughter of Auschwitz boxer Tadeusz "Teddy" Pietrzykowski holds her book about her father during an AFP interview.

'Champion of Auschwitz': The boxer who brought hope



In this Handout picture taken in Warsaw before the World War II and released by Eleonora Szafran, Auschwitz boxer Tadeusz 'Teddy' Pietrzykowski poses in his sports' gear.

Polish boxer Tadeusz Pietrzykowski was known for his ability to dodge blows. Still, the odds were against him when he fought his first bout at the Nazi German death camp Auschwitz. Severely emaciated, Prisoner Number 77 was up against a much heavier German inmate—a "kapo" who oversaw other prisoners.

"From around me I got warnings and gestures that I was crazy: 'He'll kill you, destroy you,'" he said in his official account for the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum after the war. "But there was no time to think... There was bread to be won. I was hungry, my friends were hungry," said Pietrzykowski, the pre-war Champion of Warsaw in the bantamweight class. His courage paid off. With a successful left jab to the face, the 23-year-old Pietrzykowski drew blood from the kapo, Walter Duening.

The loser chose not to seek revenge for his loss and instead rewarded the boxer nicknamed Teddy with a loaf and some meat. Pietrzykowski went on to fight dozens of matches at Auschwitz, winning all but one or two, thereby scoring special privileges that ensured his and others' survival. Little known even in Poland, Teddy's story has inspired a movie, "The Champion of Auschwitz," which recently

had its premiere at home and will hit theatres abroad later this year.

Sports at Auschwitz

"It's an incredible story since very few people know there was boxing at Auschwitz, that there were sporting events," said Piotr Witkowski, the actor who plays Duening in the film. Witkowski told AFP that the boxer was a danger for the Germans "because he became the inmates' hope that it was possible to win against the system, to win against the evil Nazis". Pietrzykowski, who was Catholic, was sent to Auschwitz in June 1940 as a political prisoner after being caught trying to reach France to join the Polish army that was forming there. He was put on the first mass transport to the death camp.

Nearly a year into his internment, he was offered the chance to fight Duening. The Germans had grown tired of only sparring each other for fun and were looking for other opponents. "There was cheering from both Poles and the German prisoners. It was an interesting event, something new at Auschwitz. So this bout set off matches between inmates of different nationalities," said Renata Koszyk, curator of a new exhibition on sports at Auschwitz, which runs until March at the museum on the site of the former camp.

"Generally though, sports weren't a widespread phenomenon at Auschwitz. Most inmates were so exhausted from daily work that they couldn't afford to expend extra effort and sometimes didn't even have the strength to walk over to watch," she told AFP. Those who did catch the boxing matches included Nazi SS officers, who even placed bets on the winner.

'Bravery, benevolence'

In exchange for providing entertainment, Pietrzykowski received various perks. Not only was he able to secure an easier work assignment and added calories for himself, he also shared whatever extra food he received, according to testimonials from fellow inmates. The leeway he enjoyed as a star boxer at the camp enabled him to procure medication for others, pass information and fulfill other assignments for the resistance movement.

"My father lived, fought, and demonstrated this bravery and benevolence for his fellow inmates... and was helped in return too," his daughter Eleonora Szafran told AFP. When Pietrzykowski was lying sick with typhus at the camp hospital, word spread that the SS officers were planning to select patients to send to the gas chambers. To save the boxer's life,

his friends smuggled him out and hid him.

Szafran's book "Mistrz" ("Champion") has just been published featuring Pietrzykowski's wartime memories—among them, his assassination attempt against the camp's commandant and horrifying scenes he witnessed of Nazi brutality. A million Jews died at Auschwitz-Birkenau, along with tens of thousands of others including Catholic Poles, Roma and Soviet prisoners of war, between 1940 and 1945.

'Do the right thing'

Pietrzykowski survived both Auschwitz and a couple of other concentration camps—and tried to restart his boxing career after the war but was foiled by illness. He went on to become a beloved school gym teacher, pursuing his lifelong passion for painting on the side, and died in 1991 in his seventies.

The actor who portrayed him, Piotr Glowacki, said he hoped moviegoers would be inspired to "have the courage to follow Teddy's example and do the right thing." "To defend those who are segregated because of their race, nationality, sexual orientation, views... To side with the oppressed," he said. — AFP

'Last Night in Soho' brings MeToo to 1960s London

Romantic notions about Swinging Sixties London were slashed to pieces at the Venice Film Festival Saturday with the premiere of "Last Night in Soho". It is a very different role for Anya Taylor-Joy, the breakout star from last year's Netflix hit "The Queen's Gambit", who finds herself doused in gallons of blood in the new psychological horror. But at its heart, the movie has a serious point to make about our rose-tinted views of the past, director Edgar Wright told journalists in Venice.

"It's dangerous to romanticize the past," he said. "As you get further away from a decade, you tend to concentrate on the good things. The Sixties become about the fashion or Carnaby Street and reduced to, like, Austin Powers fancy dress. But everything bad that's happening now was happening then." Wright made his name with comedies "Shaun of

the Dead" and "Hot Fuzz" that played with the clichés of horror and action films. His new film, playing out of competition in Venice, takes a more serious approach. It features a modern-day fashion student (played by Thomasin McKenzie) transported back in time to 1960s Soho in central London.

Initially intoxicated by the glamour of the time, things take a dark turn as she discovers the brutal misogyny suffered by her alter-ego (played by Taylor-Joy). As it evolves into a slasher picture, the film keeps up a steady stream of classic songs from the period, which Taylor-Joy said was a particular pleasure for her. "The first music that I really fell in love with was the music of the Sixties," she said at a press conference. "I tend to make playlists for my characters and for Sandy (her character) it was all the music I listened to when I was 16... It was a blast."

"Last Night in Soho" proved to be the last film for Diana Rigg, star of the iconic 1960s TV show "The Avengers", who died in September 2020. "It's desperately sad that I won't be able to have another gossipy brunch with Dame Diana Rigg. The only thing I can take away is how lucky I was to work with her," said Wright. "She had to finish her work on the movie—she was such a professional," he added. "We were told she needed to finish very urgently and we knew what that meant without asking." — AFP



(From left) British actor Michael Ajao, British director Edgar Wright, US-born Argentine-British actress Anya Taylor-Joy and British actor Matt Smith arrive for the screening of the film 'Last Night in Soho' presented out of competition during the 78th Venice Film Festival at Venice Lido. — AFP



(From left) Italian actress Teresa Saponangelo, actress Sofya Gershech, Italian actor Filippo Scotti, Italian actor Marlon Joubert, Italian actor Biagio Manna, Italian actor Toni Servillo, Italian actress Luisa Ranieri and Italian director Paolo Sorrentino arrive for the screening of the film 'E stata la mano di Dio' (The Hand of God) presented in competition during the 78th Venice Film Festival. — AFP

Sorrentino taps Naples boyhood in latest film at Venice

Turning 50 last year, Italian director Paolo Sorrentino found he was finally ready to put his heartbreaking story about growing up in 1980s Naples on film, in all its exuberance and anguish. "The Hand of God" is an autobiographical film that explores family, maturity, and a moment in time when the chaotic underdog city gained dignity and hope with the arrival of football legend Diego Maradona.

"At a certain point you take stock of the beautiful things that you've loved in your life," the director told journalists ahead of the film's premiere at the Venice Film Festival on Thursday. Renowned for his Oscar-winning "The Great Beauty" and Netflix hit "The Young Pope", Sorrentino

said he was partly provoked by a friend who accused him of avoiding personal films. "I realised there was a lot of love in my boyhood, even though one part was painful, and that all this could be told cinematographically," he said. If "The Great Beauty" was an ode to Rome, his latest is similarly a love letter to his home town.

"Naples in the '80s was like going on a safari on foot without the safety of a jeep," Sorrentino said. "It was very fun, very violent, very dangerous. It was like a jungle—you could meet a lion but you could also

meet beautiful birds." What every Neapolitan of that era remembers is the arrival of Argentine legend Maradona to play for the struggling local team. "For me as a boy, the most important thing that happened at that time was the fact that Maradona came to Naples," Sorrentino said.

The film's title refers to Maradona's infamous handball goal against England in the 1986 World Cup. It traces how the young Sorrentino, represented by alter-ego Fabietto (played by newcomer Filippo Scotti), was indirectly saved by the footballer, before he went on to pursue his dream of becoming a film-maker. "The message of the movie is that there is a future for everyone, regardless of the suffering and the pain you have experienced in life," he said. "I hope that young people can understand this because... they're more worried about the future than we were." — AFP



Italian director Paolo Sorrentino arrives for the screening of the film 'E stata la mano di Dio' (The Hand of God) presented in competition during the 78th Venice Film Festival. — AFP

VEHICLE CARRYING FAMED JAPANESE DIRECTOR TAKESHI KITANO ATTACKED WITH PICKAXE

A vehicle carrying acclaimed Japanese film director and actor Takeshi Kitano was attacked by a man with a pickaxe and a knife, media reports said. Kitano, 74, also a celebrated television comedian in Japan, was inside the vehicle on the premises of private network TBS in Tokyo when the attack took place late Saturday night, the station

reported. The attacker, a male in his 40s from the Chiba region east of Tokyo, cracked the windshield and beat other parts of the vehicle, TBS and other local media said.

Kitano, also known by his stage name Beat Takeshi, first drew acclaim for his raw depictions of the violent world of Japanese organized crime. He garnered internation-

al fame for his roles in gritty dystopian thriller "Battle Royale" as well as in the eponymous comedy game show "Takeshi's Castle". No one was injured in Saturday evening's attack, reports said, which national broadcaster NHK said took place after Kitano had finished filming a live news and entertainment show for TBS. Police arrested the man on the spot

and are interviewing him to determine his motive, NTV said. Tokyo Metropolitan Police declined to comment when reached by AFP yesterday. — AFP



Japanese director Takeshi Kitano