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Berlin Film Review: ‘The Waldheim Waltz’

Given the current whitewashing of national culpability in Nazi collaborations, “The Waldheim Waltz” has a sense of urgency as it revisits Kurt Waldheim’s cover-up.

By [Jay Weissberg](#)



CREDIT: COURTESY OF BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL

Director: Ruth Beckermann

With: Narration: Ruth Beckermann. (German, French, English dialogue)

1 hour 34 minutes

Official Site: <http://thewaldheimwaltz.com/en/>

With Austria currently the only West European nation since World War II governed by the far right, it’s time (heck, it’s long past time) that someone of [Ruth Beckermann](#)’s intelligence made a film investigating the country’s odious collective whitewashing of its Nazi-era past. In her incisive documentary “[The Waldheim Waltz](#),” the director treats former U.N. Secretary General Kurt Waldheim as a poster boy of the phenomenon. Using only footage from the 1970s and ’80s, some of which she shot herself while protesting Waldheim’s successful bid for the Austrian presidency, Beckermann methodically reveals the timeline of revelations detailing her subject’s Nazi affiliations, and how notwithstanding the evidence, a majority of the electorate in 1986 still voted him into office.

If it sounds like a dry history lesson, think again. Thanks to her smart narration — clear, impassioned but never polemical — and the astute way she allows exceptional footage to play out to its full extent, “The Waldheim Waltz” has a sense of urgency made more pressing given political developments not just in Austria but Poland and Hungary as well. Documentary festivals will be the next step, but given how U.S. players led to Waldheim’s exposure, a Stateside release of some sort seems in the cards.

While Secretary General between 1972 and 1982, Waldheim was “the man who the world trusts,” whose broad smile and expressive hands made people watching feel like he was embracing their causes. There were a few at the time quietly questioning his record during World War 2, but Waldheim stuck to the story that he was drafted into the Nazi army like tens of thousands of other Austrians, was wounded in 1941, and sat out the rest of the War focusing on his studies. Only when he declared his candidacy for president in 1985 did investigative journalist Hubertus Czernin begin digging into the records, where he discovered that Waldheim’s claims didn’t hold water.

When Czernin’s article came out, Waldheim labeled it a smear campaign, taking refuge in the popular argument that Austria was the first victim of Nazi aggression. Like most politicians after the War, he coddled voters with talk of the hard-won ethical and moral rebuilding of Austria following its liberation, ignoring the fact that so many Austrians, still smarting from the country’s humiliating diminishment after the first World War, welcomed the Anschluss. But the case against Waldheim really picked up steam in March 1986, when the World Jewish Congress in New York gave a press conference presenting documents together with a now infamous photo of the former head of the UN in Nazi uniform in 1943.

The WJC’s evidence was devastating, and it kept on coming, effectively proving that Waldheim was involved in murderous anti-partisan activities and throwing ridicule on his claim that he wasn’t aware of the 60,000 Jews from Thessaloniki deported to extermination camps. The candidate and his party hit back, denying any culpability in the Nazi war machine, using veiled anti-Semitic language in their appeal to true Austrians and their historic assertion of collective victimhood. Some even suggested it was a Jewish plot to get back at the ex-Secretary General for welcoming Yasser Arafat at the UN. Resorting to the standard line from all crackpots on the right, including one currently in the White House, Waldheim declared he was the most slandered candidate in his nation’s history.

Beckermann (“The Dreamed Ones”) counts down the days leading to the election, ticking off each one as new revelations come to light. Most devastating is footage from a highly unusual U.S. Congressional hearing looking into the allegations, during which Rep. Tom Lantos questions Waldheim’s New York-based son Gerhard, refusing to tolerate any obfuscation or unsupportable denials. Less skilled directors would have edited the sequence down, but in the style of the best legal dramas, Beckermann lets it all play out to devastating effectiveness. Earlier in her narration, she addresses the dilemma of all activist filmmakers who wonder when to pick up the protest banner instead of the movie camera; with great satisfaction to all, she manages both.

About the only thing missing from “The Waldheim Waltz” is a brief discussion of Waldheim’s legacy at the UN apart from Arafat’s presence in the chamber; otherwise, she picks apart the man and the machine that supported him, and along the way inculcates the Austrian delusion of victimhood. The only real misstep occurs at the very start, when she ascribes to Abraham Lincoln the famed quote “You can fool all the people some of the time....” Someone should have told her that it’s highly unlikely Lincoln was the source.

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Reviewed at Berlin Film Festival (Forum), Feb. 15, 2018. Running time: 94 MIN. (Original title: “Waldheims Walzer”)

PRODUCTION: (Documentary — Austria) A Filmladen Filmverleih release of a Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion production. (International sales: WIDE House, Paris.) Producer: Ruth Beckermann.

CREW: Director, writer: Ruth Beckermann. Camera (b&w/color). Editors: Dieter Pichler, Kurt Hennrich.

WITH: Narration: Ruth Beckermann. (German, French, English dialogue)

1

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