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The Waldheim Scandal // When Austrians Stopped Calling Themselves Hitler's First Victims

New documentary provides rare look at months leading up to the presidential election of Kurt Waldheim, the former UN secretary-general who conveniently forgot his Nazi past

Judy Maltz | May 22, 2018 11:53 PM



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Kurt Waldheim being prepared for an interview in footage from "The Waldheim Waltz." Credit: Ruth Beckermann filmproduktion

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It was the spring of 1986, and many angry people had taken to the streets of Vienna. Some were outraged that a man accused of complicity in Nazi war crimes could become their next president. Others were incensed that anyone would dare try to stop him.

"Who rules the world – the Germans or the Jews?" a supporter of

“Maybe the Jews?” he taunted the counterdemonstrators and proceeded to answer his own question. “Damn right,” he said. “Still. Still.”

An elderly man trying to strike up a conversation with another Waldheim supporter in the crowd was ordered to shut up and called a “Jewish swine.”

Ruth Beckermann caught it all on camera.



Documentary filmmaker Ruth Beckermann. Credit: Ruth Beckermann filmproduktion

The Austrian-Jewish filmmaker had been an active member of the small but growing opposition to Waldheim back then, witnessing many ugly street scenes like these. In those days, she recounts, protesters didn’t walk around with video cameras, and so she was an oddity. But the demonstrations provided her with a great opportunity to gather footage for a documentary she was working on at the time about Jewish identity in the first generation after the Holocaust.

It never crossed her mind that this footage would ultimately serve as the basis for a film about a presidential campaign that would become a turning point in postwar Austrian history.

“I guess because I lived through it, the idea of making a movie didn’t interest me back then,” she told Haaretz this week in Tel Aviv.

About five years ago, Beckermann discovered the old black-and-white video footage stashed away in a box in her office. Having not looked at it for so many years, she found the contents shocking.

“All this shouting in the streets and all this anti-Semitism,” she says. “I cannot imagine this happening today. Maybe on social media, but definitely not in the main square of the city.”

Altogether, she had gathered about two hours of footage, and some of it was used in her film about postwar Jewish identity. It was mainly scenes of rallies and protests in the months leading up to Waldheim’s election (including some close-ups of the candidate himself), but also some behind-the-scenes footage of the opposition strategizing their moves. This group of anti-Waldheim activists included, as Beckermann puts it, “socialists, communists, Trotskyites, Jews – and anyone else who didn’t agree.”



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young people she knew – Austrians born after Waldheim's presidency who knew little about the era. She was surprised by their response.

"They may not be that familiar with Waldheim, but they are very familiar with populism and politicians who lie about their past – as well as the whole idea of 'us against the others,' which today applies more to migrants than to Jews," she says. "These young people were the ones who encouraged me to make the film."

They had good instincts.

"The Waldheim Waltz," which played this week at the DocAviv film festival in Tel Aviv, won the best original documentary award at this year's Berlin International Film Festival and is scheduled for wide release in Austria and Germany this fall.



Footage of Austria's then-presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim speaking at a rally, from "The Waldheim Waltz." Credit: Ruth Beckermann filmproduktion

The 90-minute film interweaves the video shot by Beckermann with other archival footage, creating a dramatic account of the buildup to the 1986 election – a brief period in history when the eyes of the world were focused on Austria.

It opens with footage from Waldheim's last campaign rally in May 1986, shot by Beckermann herself. In the voice-over, the filmmaker reflects on the scene playing out on screen from the perspective of more than 30 years. "Suddenly I was right in the middle of it all, when Austria's grand delusion of having been the first victim of the Nazis began to crumble," she says. "In the middle of it all – half as protester, half as documentarist."

Waldheim, a former Austrian foreign secretary, served as UN secretary-general for two terms from 1972 to 1981. He had long claimed he fought on the Russian front during World War II until he was injured in 1941 and was then retired from military duty.

Nazi youth organization

A few months before the presidential election, though, an Austrian news magazine published an exposé charging that Waldheim had lied about his past and had, in fact, served with German forces throughout the war and previously belonged to a Nazi youth organization. Further investigations initiated by other media outlets and the World Jewish Congress revealed even more incriminating



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intelligence officer for a German army unit in the Balkans that had brutally murdered Yugoslavian partisans and civilians, and organized the deportation of the Jewish community of Salonika.

Most Austrians were either not convinced or could care less.

Waldheim ultimately won the election in a second round of voting in June 1986 and served as Austria's president for the next six years. An international commission of historians appointed to investigate the allegations against him found no proof that he had personally engaged in war crimes, but ruled that he was indirectly complicit because he had to have known about the atrocities taking place around him and clearly did nothing to stop them. He was snubbed by most of the Western world during the years of his presidency.

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The documentary incorporates a BBC interview with Waldheim, in which he angrily bangs his fist on a table when questioned about the newly revealed evidence against him and demands that the journalist sitting across the table "be a little bit more objective" and take note that "there were casualties on both sides."

In an Austrian television interview also used in the film, Waldheim insists he was "very moved" by the tragedy of the Jews during World War II, but reminds his interlocutor that there were also 6 million non-Jews killed in countries under Nazi rule and that the Austrians suffered too.

The contentious presidential race set off a wave of anti-Semitism in Austria, likely further fueled by the aggressive international campaign waged against Waldheim by the World Jewish Congress.

In a televised clip incorporated into the film, Waldheim makes clear he has little fondness for "the Mr. Singers or whatever their names are" trying to dig up information on him – a reference to Israel Singer, the former secretary-general of the WJC.



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A scene from "The Waldheim Waltz." Credit: Ruth Beckermann filmproduktion

Waldheim's supporters accused the international Jewish community of targeting the Austrian candidate because he had presided over the United Nations at a time when numerous anti-Israel measures had been adopted – most famously the “Zionism is a form of racism” resolution of 1975.

Among the film's most dramatic scenes is an exchange between the late Tom Lantos – a Democrat from California and the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the U.S. Congress – and Gerhard Waldheim, the candidate's son who was working as a banker in New York at the time.

The exchange took place during a special congressional hearing to investigate Waldheim's past and determine whether he should be barred entry from the United States. The archival footage depicts Lantos mercilessly grilling Waldheim Jr. about his father's World War II memory lapse. “It is not about whether he lied, but about the denial by the highest official in the UN of a central fact of a whole epoch in history,” said Lantos, his voice barely able to contain his emotions.

“My father wasn't a man of many words,” his son replied, hardly blinking an eye.

The film also captures Beckermann on the other side of the camera for a few seconds. In the countdown to the election, several Austrian officials held a televised briefing defending Waldheim. Beckermann was among seven protesters to infiltrate the live broadcast, carrying with them embarrassing signs raised above the heads of the speakers.

Beckermann was born in 1952 to Jewish parents who settled in Austria after the war. Her mother came from what was then British Mandatory Palestine and her father from the then-Soviet Union. She has more than 15 films to her credit. “The Waldheim Waltz” has already been sold to Channel 8, the Israeli cable station dedicated to broadcasting documentaries.

When she discovered the lost footage five years ago and began toying with the idea of making a film, the world was in a very



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says. "So even if there are parallels with what is happening today, it wasn't intended."

The timing may be good for the release of the film, she concedes, "but not so much for the world."



Judy Maltz

Haaretz Correspondent

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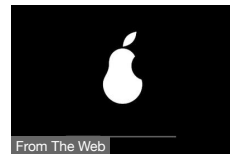
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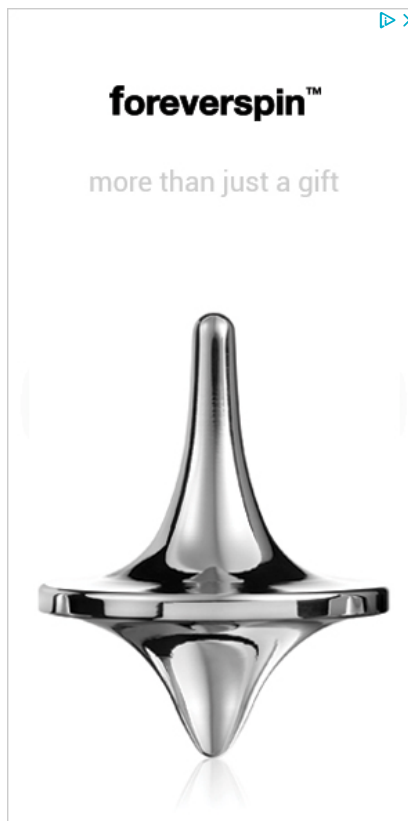
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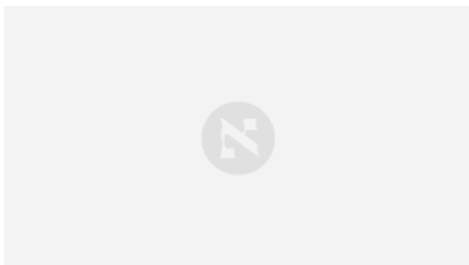
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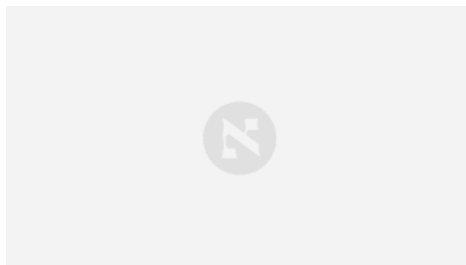
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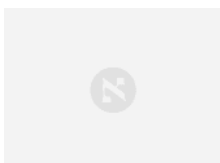
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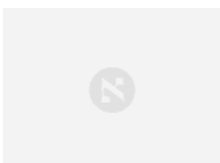
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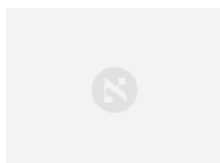
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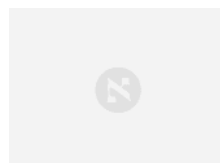
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