



## The Waldheim Waltz

By NORA LEE MANDEL October 24, 2018



Kurt Waldheim in *The Waldheim Waltz* (Ruth Beckermann Film Production)

★ How does a president who lies about his past, distorts his country's history into victimhood, promotes nationalism, and inflames anti-Semitism win an election? This occurred in Austria, from April to June 1986. Composed almost completely of archival footage from more than 30 years ago, *The Waldheim Waltz* is of riveting contemporary political relevance.

For filmmaker Ruth Beckermann, this documentary was a very personal undertaking. As she narrates sardonically, national politics played out in front of her borrowed, newfangled video camera when she was in a demonstration against the campaign of Kurt Waldheim for the Austrian presidency in May 1986. She captures the arguments in the street as demonstrators are accosted. The police take away the protestors' signs, while her friends yell, "This is a democracy with freedom of opinion!" and chant, "Waldheim, No!" An old man retorts, "Waldheim, Yes!"

As she says “long before smartphones,” her black-and-white footage is the only documentation of these demonstrations, because the monopoly Austrian state broadcaster was instead covering the cheering crowds at Waldheim’s rallies for the Austrian People’s Party, with his repeated call for Austrians to go back to “values that reflect our Christian world view.” Beckermann was reminded of the crucifixes on her classroom walls, where her schoolmates said she killed Christ because she’s a Jew.

“The man the world trusts” was Waldheim’s campaign theme, because he had capped his career in the Foreign Ministry, which began in 1947, by completing a decade’s service as secretary-general of the United Nations. The rest of the archival footage is from American, British, and French media, some of which was not broadcast. She muses how his honesty was never questioned.

On March 3 1986, two months before the election, the Austrian magazine *Profil* revealed his military record that had been in the files all along. It contradicted claims in his autobiography of the war years spent in a hospital and law school. Instead, the forms revealed that from 1938, when Nazi Germany annexed Austria, Waldheim had been a member of the National Socialist German Students’ League and then the National Socialist Mounted Corps, the equestrian unit of the SA, the stormtroopers’ military training unit. Waldheim’s love of horse riding is showcased in footage that was widely shown—however, he had left out where he learned to ride. One party leader claimed not to care whether Waldheim was part of the SA: “We acknowledge only his horse was.”

But three weeks later, the World Jewish Congress held a press conference at the UN to reveal a historian’s findings in the archives about Waldheim’s military service, circa 1942–1945. Professor Robert Herzstein provided the evidence that Waldheim was an intelligence aide to General Alexander Löhr, one of the highest serving Austrians later executed for war crimes, and Waldheim had served at his side in Yugoslavia, where atrocities were committed against partisans and civilians, and in Thessaloniki (then called Salonika), where the entire Jewish population was rounded up onto trains to Auschwitz. (Herzstein later published his research in *Waldheim: The Missing Years*.) Waldheim’s continued denials shifted when the archives produced a photograph of him with the general there.

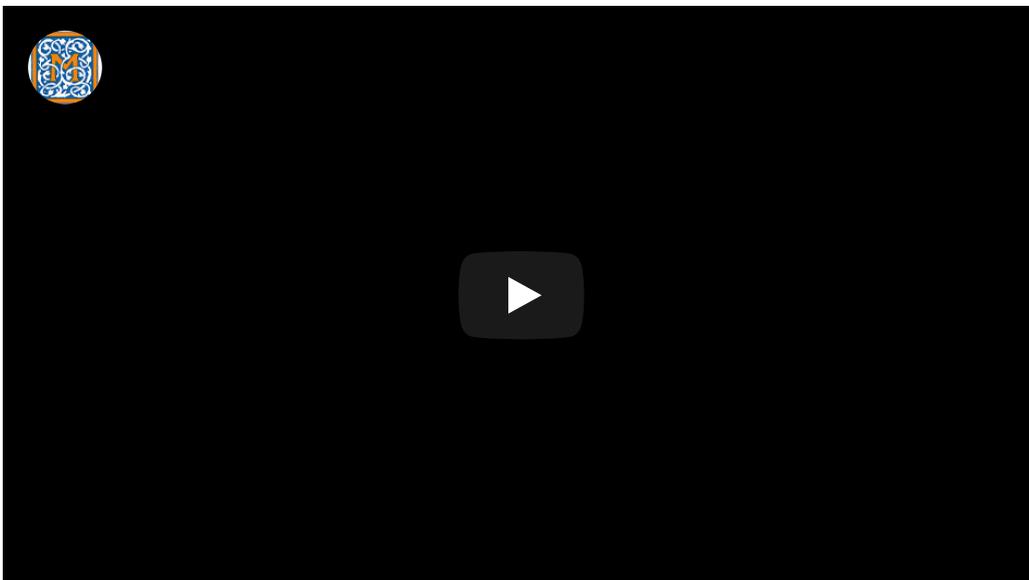
How did the public not know this for the many decades Waldheim was a national and international politician? Waldheim ignored his past just as they did by firmly repeating the collective myth that Austria was the Nazis’ first victim and ignoring Austrians’ complicity. Beckermann punctures their psychology of amnesia by comparing Waldheim’s body language and moral excuses in Austrian television coverage to his much tougher interviews with American and British reporters (and his increasing nastiness towards Jewish organizations). He didn’t just smoothly lie to the public. When his son Gerhard, a banker in the United States, testifies in the U.S. Congress to defend him, his insistent repetition of his father’s lies is

heartbreaking, especially as eviscerated by Thomas Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor to serve in the House of Representatives.

Beckermann's old videos reveal sympathy for Waldheim growing through the countdown to the runoff election, even as she puts down her camera to protest. But she notes this controversy helped change attitudes, along with the release of Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985), and, just months earlier, the furor over President Ronald Reagan's visit to the German military cemetery in Bitburg to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II. Beckermann effectively raises disquieting questions about a country's memories and moral responsibility as right-wing parties again rise in Austria, again fanning anti-Semitism and nationalism.

*The Waldheim Waltz* is Austria's official selection for the 2019 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, and the first of her 12 feature films, after a decades-long career, to gain release in the United States. Hopefully, this insightful, involving documentary will also bring her earlier films on her and others' struggles with Austrian and Jewish identity to U.S. audiences.

Written, Produced, and Directed by Ruth Beckermann  
Released by Menemsha Films  
English, German and French with English subtitles  
Austria. 93 min. Not rated



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