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Film Review: The Waldheim Waltz

A timely and engagingly personal reminder of recent European history.

By Stephen Dalton ([Http://www.filmjournal.com/taxonomy/term/293](http://www.filmjournal.com/taxonomy/term/293)) Oct 17, 2018



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In 1986, former United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim launched his election bid to become President of Austria just as a wave of shocking revelations broke about his Nazi military exploits during World War II. Protestors gathered on the streets of Vienna trying to derail this debonair, religiously devout, politically conservative candidate. They mostly came up against a brick wall of denial against Austrian

complicity in Nazi war crimes. One of these young activists was future film director Ruth Beckermann, who chronicled the anti-Waldheim campaign in shaky monochrome on an early portable video camera.

Revisiting these contentious events more than 30 years later, *The Waldheim Waltz* resonates strongly in our current era of right-wing populist leaders, from Donald Trump in the U.S. to Heinz-Christian Strache and Sebastian Kurz in Austria, plus many other nations. Thanks to its timely theme and engaging personal angle, this prize-winning Berlinale entry could translate festival buzz into art-house theatrical interest.

Beckermann opens *Waldheim Waltz* with Abraham Lincoln's immortal maxim about how you can fool all of the people some of time, and some of the people all of the time. In fact, the Lincoln attribution has been widely discredited, which could either be a clumsy oversight by the director or a wry meta-commentary on a film rooted in fake news and alternative facts.

Besides a few flashbacks to Waldheim's decade at the UN, from 1972 to 1981, Beckermann keeps her focus almost entirely within the day-to-day chronology of his 1986 domestic election bid. The majority of material she uses is culled from second-hand newsreel and TV footage, with intermittent clips of self-shot video and stills from inside the homegrown protest group. The director herself provides a deadpan voiceover commentary, pinpointing how the Waldheim affair destroyed "Austria's grand delusion of having been the first victims of the Nazis."

Waldheim's official biography as an "honest soldier" conscripted by the occupying German military to fight on the Eastern Front was already well known when he worked at the UN. But these devastating new revelations, mostly exposed by the World Jewish Congress in New York, proved that he had lied about his later wartime record, when he was a senior officer working suspiciously close to massacres of Yugoslav partisans and mass deportations of Greek Jews. Fighting back against the allegations, Waldheim made a series of squirming half-denials, claiming to be the victim of a smear campaign. Meanwhile, his supporters mobilized the charged language of anti-Semitic conspiracy: "You belong in the ground," one proudly says to Beckermann and her camera, "you Jewish swine."

Waldheim Waltz is chiefly a film about national collective amnesia. Unlike Germany, Austria quietly dropped investigations into its former senior Nazis and never paid compensation to their victims. This helps explain why, in the face of worldwide scandal and criticism, Waldheim still won the presidency in 1986. However, his reputation was fatally damaged and his political career finished. In 1987, after a State Department investigation concluded he had been closely involved in Nazi war crimes, he was barred from travel to the U.S.

Some broader historical context might have given *The Waldheim Waltz* more dramatic weight. It later transpired that the CIA had long been aware of Waldheim's full wartime record, for example, while subsequent memoirs muddied the waters with allegations of KGB blackmail threats and Mossad revenge plots. But Beckermann ignores these disputed claims, keeping her narrative firmly trained on Austrian national complicity. For all its narrow focus, this is a pleasingly personal breakdown of a fascinating episode in recent European history, tightly composed and crisply edited, with an appealing undertow of dry humor and some cautionary lessons for modern voters.--**The Hollywood Reporter**
(<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/>)

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