The Waltz of Waldheim poses the question whether a fascist threat suppressed and unexamined on a national scale has ever really been defeated.

In The Waltz of Waldheim, which had its world premiere at the Berlinale, Austrian-Jewish documentarian Ruth Beckermann probes her country’s unhealthy relationship with its past as manifested in the scandal that arose around former UN Secretary-General and presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim in 1985. Though he had been a prominent politician and diplomat for decades, his wartime service in a Wehrmacht unit from 1942 to 1945, responsible for the killings of partisans in Yugoslavia and deportation of Jews from Greece, only then came to light. Accusations of an intentional cover-up circulated, while protesters insisted they did not want to be led by a “memory lapse” – referring to the collective war memories – of the political leadership. Steadfastly denying any wrongdoing, Waldheim won the presidency anyway, aided by a nationalist backlash. More than thirty years on from the Waldheim Affair, as the far right surges in popularity in Austria again, The Waltz of Waldheim threatens suppressed but unexamined on a national scale has ever really been defeated.

That the Axis Powers lost World War II is clear. More contentious has been determining the exact degree of moral complicity in the Nazi regime’s atrocities of each of the millions of citizens who had registered as party members. A marked difference in attitude than Germany in reconciling this shameful period. Preferring instead to proclaim innocence as Hitler’s first victims rather than accepting collective guilt.

«Whether silent presence without resistance amounts to complicity is of course...»
Beckermann, whose parents were Holocaust survivors, has often explored stories of loss, fragmented reconstruction of memory in work grappling with the dark legacy of wartime Europe. Her prior feature summoned up the powerful emotions of faltering love between key German-language poets and lovers (whose father was a card-carrying Nazi) and Paul Celan (whose Jewish parents died in an internment camp). Waldheim, in its belief in the inescapability of the past, revisits similar terrain. However, in its concern with evidentially bearing witness to facts, it is less poetically experimental than The Dreamed Ones and more closely aligned in form with the 1996 documentary East of War. Beckermann made the documentary during a controversial series of German exhibitions that challenged the prevailing myth of the “Clean Wehrmacht” – the lie that they were innocent of Nazi crimes. She interviewed former soldiers in front of the exhibits, who spoke of what they had experienced beyond “normal” war.

Silence as acceptance

As well as bearing witness, The Waltz of Waldheim touches on thorny quandaries about the nature of Archival pictures of the persecution and deportation of Thessaloniki Jews clearly trouble Beckermann, the photographer who took them without intervening and was subsequently praised for them. The notion of atrocities and actively resisting the wrongdoing in the moment are mutually exclusive has long troubled war reporters and their critics. Beckermann casts doubt through her own self-consciously musing narration on cinema’s activism.

Whether silent presence without resistance amounts to complicity is of course key to any judgement of Waldheim. If we accept an international tribunal’s finding that there was no conclusive evidence of active war crime participation. He claimed to have been just an interpreter and a clerk; a desk-bound type who did not know of the horrors ordered by superiors to whom he bore no special allegiance.
This, despite his serving as personal aide to convicted war criminal Alexander Löhr, and despite a large settlement having disappeared in deportations from Thessaloniki’s port right under his nose. Even this admitted only after photographs and other evidence gathered by the World Jewish Congress proved he had initially falsely asserted that after being drafted, his military career had quickly ended in 1942 the Russian front. The absurdity of his denials were to such a scale that it had even been claimed that mounted corps, only his horse had been a member of the organisation.

The committee appointed to investigate his wartime activities did find Waldheim guilty of lying about I of war crimes, prompting international isolation throughout his presidency. For his part, Waldheim tried asserting an equivalency between Holocaust victims and Austrian army lives lost, claiming everyone could in «those hard times».
While Beckermann keeps to a clear chronology limited to the months of his 1986 presidential bid, there aplenty in footage of Waldheim with his family as they ardently assist him in promoting his supposed sheds light on the wider context of a society with a dangerous antipathy to plurality. Indeed, one phrase tells us everything we need to know about how deep-rooted anti-Semitic prejudice may be: «He isn’t the devil – he’s Catholic.» Perhaps the strongest sequence of all is Waldheim’s adult son, Gerhard, attempting to defend his father’s reputation to the tribunal by repeating his same non-credible excuses; flimsy assertions easily pulled apart by his questioner. Waldheim’s lack of remorse or genuine self-reflection is clearly a model for his son – and as the timing of Beckermann’s film would suggest, for the generation of right-wing politicians with large ambitions and conveniently short memories that have ri /ihc-hide-content]