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Jewish Film Festival's unflinching looks at Austria's past, Kurt Waldheim

By Jessica Zack

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Austrian filmmaker Ruth Beckermann picked up a magnetic-tape video camera for the very first time in May 1986 as a young protester and budding documentarian on the streets of Vienna. Angry crowds were gathering in St. Stephen's Square to oppose the candidacy of former U.N. Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim in the final days of his presidential campaign.

As presented in Beckermann's gripping documentary "The Waldheim Waltz," which has its U.S. premiere at the upcoming San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the debonair conservative diplomat, who campaigned on "Christian family values," had been accused a year before by an investigative journalist of being complicit in Nazi war crimes, including being a senior German army officer in Greece in 1942 when 56,000 Jews were infamously deported to concentration camps from Thessaloniki.

Waldheim had conspicuously omitted the years 1942-44 from his '85 autobiography, claiming he'd been wounded as an "honest soldier" and then sat out the war finishing his studies.

Even as his alibi wore thin under the World Jewish Congress' investigative scrutiny (including the discovery of a 1943 photo of Waldheim in Nazi uniform), supporters of the former U.N. head shrugged off the accusations, while those in opposition took to the streets shouting "Waldheim no!"

More Information

The 38th San Francisco Jewish Film Festival takes place Thursday, July 19, through Aug. 5, in venues in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Albany, Oakland and San Rafael. www.sfjff.org

"Suddenly I was right in the middle when Austria's grand delusion of having been the first victim of the Nazis began to crumble," says Beckermann ("Those Who Go, Those Who Stay") in voice-over.

Her film methodically charts the chronology, week by week, of what would become known as the Waldheim affair. The disgraced candidate won the Austrian presidency with 54 percent of the vote and served the next six years as head of state, even as he was discredited by Western nations and put on the U.S. watch list (the first head of state barred from entering the country).

"I never thought of using the (1986) footage again," Beckermann said by phone from Vienna. "In fact, it was lost until I found a few VHS cassettes in my library a few years ago."

She showed them to her son and his friends, all in their 20s and 30s. "This younger generation, they were shocked. They started asking questions about the period, about Waldheim and also Nixon, about politicians who lie. They said, 'You have to do a film about this.'"

Their enthusiasm sent Beckermann into the archives of the Austrian Broadcasting Corp., as well as the BBC and American television networks. She located dramatic clips of the controversy surro

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Waldheim's contested rise — most powerfully, the U.S. congressional testimony of his son, banker Gerald Waldheim, being questioned by the late Rep. Tom Lantos, D-San Mateo, a Holocaust survivor.

“Waldheim” is one of three films in this year's festival that tackle, with surprising contemporary resonance, the problematic subject of Austria's troubled past and the country's complicated postwar reckoning with its own history.

The courtroom drama “Murer — Anatomy of a Trial,” directed by Austrian Christian Frosch, dramatizes the 1963 Graz trial — and shocking acquittal — of the sadistic ex-S.S. officer Franz Murer, known as the Butcher of Vilnius. The recently restored satirical 1924 silent film “The City Without Jews,” presented with the San Francisco Silent Film Festival, has been digitally restored after being rediscovered in a Paris flea market in 2016.

Set in the mythical republic of Utopia, “where the economy is crumbling and Jews are scapegoated for the nation's problems and expelled, it's a very prescient film, conceived as a dystopian response to the anti-Semitism gathering force in Austria more than a decade before the war,” said Lexi Leban, the festival's executive director.

“These three films are from disparate periods in history, yet are alarmingly timely,” said Leban. “Contrary to Germany, that really went through a truth and reconciliation process on the issue of accountability (for the Holocaust), Austria did not. These films all ask the question: What happens in a society when you don't come to terms with history? They join a national conversation already under way about the whitewashing of history and even Holocaust denial in some sectors.”

Frosch, by phone, described making “Murer” as “a small act of justice in itself, whereas in life justice was not possible.”

Frosch discovered Murer's story in the Jewish Museum in Vilnius. Once called the Jerusalem of the North, with a Jewish population of 80,000, Vilnius had fewer than 600 Jewish survivors after the war. Murer, former head of the Vilnius ghetto, was implicated in the 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann, tried for his crimes in the Soviet Union, yet released and retried back in Austria, only to be acquitted and set free to live out his days on his farm in the Austrian state of Styria.

By telling Murer's story largely through the emotionally wrenching testimonies of his victims' relatives during the sensational 10-day trial, “Murer” exposes how political machinations can play a role in deceiving the public about even the most morally corrupt public figures — a theme very much in sync, said both Frosch and Beckermann, with the current geopolitical world.

“Politicians tell us to believe discredited garbage in the name of patriotism,” said Beckermann. “Anti-Semitism used to be the scapegoat. Today I think it's racism and xenophobia and Islamophobia.”

The contemporary resonance of the 32-year-old events documented in her film, said Beckermann, “is a very good thing for the film, but of course it's a bad thing for the world.”

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