

The Waldheim Waltz Directed by Ruth Beckermann | Documentary | 1h 33m

By **Bilge Ebiri**

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What does it take to make a nation reconsider its self-image? That’s the question lying at the heart of the Austrian documentarian Ruth Beckermann’s informative and unnerving “The Waldheim Waltz.” Using mostly contemporaneous material — TV reports and news conferences, as well as documentary video footage she shot herself — the filmmaker follows the controversial 1986 presidential campaign of the Austrian politician Kurt Waldheim, whose candidacy was plunged into chaos by new revelations regarding his Nazi past.

Waldheim had portrayed himself as an honest soldier who had been conscripted into the Wehrmacht during World War II and returned home in 1941 after getting wounded on the Eastern front. While rumors of further Nazi association had bubbled during his term as United Nations secretary general from 1972 to 1981, it wasn’t until Waldheim sought higher domestic office that more damning evidence emerged — particularly of his involvement in the 1942 massacre of Yugoslav partisans in Kozara and the 1943 deportation of Jews from Salonika, the historical name for Thessaloniki, Greece.

The candidate claimed he was the victim of an international conspiracy — by American politicians, the World Jewish Congress and others. As unsettling footage Beckermann herself shot at the time proves, many voters not only sided with him, but went even further, openly spouting anti-Semitic vitriol.

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