



PRESS KIT

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Press material will be available from February 2018 under:
www.thewaldheimwaltz.com

FESTIVAL:

Berlin International Film Festival (February 15th – 25th 2018) – Forum Section

WALDHEIMS WALZER

THE WALDHEIM WALTZ EIN FILM VON
RUTH BECKERMANN

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THE WALDHEIM WALTZ by Ruth Beckermann

A 2018, 93 Min., DCP, German/ English/ French

LOGLINE:

Lies. Truth. Alternative Facts. The film analyses the uncovering of former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim's wartime past by the World Jewish Congress. Created from archive material **THE WALDHEIM WALTZ** shows the successful use of anti-Semitism and populist propaganda.

SYNOPSIS:

THE WALDHEIM WALTZ is a film about truth and lies or "alternative facts". About individual and collective consciousness.

"Waldheim no, Waldheim no" shouts a crowd in the center of Vienna in 1986. Ruth Beckermann was one of the activists trying to prevent the election of Kurt Waldheim and documented the political events with her camera. More than 30 years later she goes back into her own archive and additionally uses international TV-material to analyse this turning point in Austrian political culture.

The film shows the tangled web that former UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim became ensnared in by concealing two years of his wartime biography. It shows the swift succession of new allegations by the World Jewish Congress against him, the denial by the Austrian political class, the outbreak of anti-Semitism and patriotism, which finally led to his election.

Austria was highly successful in practising the deception on itself and the world that it had been the first victim of the Nazis. Despite the fact that a whole generation knew the truth, this image of innocence was serially reproduced in official speeches, books and Heimatfilms. This film shows how deeper-lying levels of consciousness slowly carve out a path to the surface.

Narrated by Ruth Beckermann, **THE WALDHEIM WALTZ** sets the Waldheim affair in a bigger international political context, yet 30 years on, it is dauntingly timely.

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CREDITS

SCRIPT WRITER AND DIRECTOR

Ruth Beckermann

MONTAGE

Dieter Pichler

FILM EDITING

Kurt Hennrich

CONCEPTUAL COOPERATION

Sebastian Brameshuber

COORDINATION POST PRODUCTION

Rebecca Hirneise

EDITING CONSULTING

Johannes Hammel

SOUND

Manuel Grandpierre, Rudi Pototschnig

SOUND MIX

Bernhard Maisch

TITLE DESIGN

Thomas Gabriel

ANIMATION

David Pedro-Suarez

RESEARCH

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DRAMATURGY CONSULTING

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Dr. Claus Hofmann

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Tremens-Film Tonstudio

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Hanne Lassl

PRODUCER

Ruth Beckermann

DISTRIBUTION AUSTRIA

Filmladen Filmverleih

FUNDING



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PROTAGONISTS

Josef Aichholzer
Edgar Bronfman
Josef Broukal
John Bunzl
Hubertus Czernin
Barrie Dunsmore
Michaela Englert
Hajo Funke
Michael Graff
Robert Herzstein
Chaim Herzog
Robert Hochner
Georg Hoffmann-Ostenhof
Rosa Jochmann
Kuno Knöbl
Helmut Kohl
Anton Kolendic
Gabriel Lansky
Tom Lantos
Silvio Lehmann

Erhard Löcker
Raimund Löw
Alois Mock
Rudolf Nagiller
Hugo Portisch
Doron Rabinovici
Patricia Schroeder
Israel Singer
Fred Sinowatz
Stephen Solarz
Elan Steinberg
Paul Steiner
Jacques Stroumsa
Peter Turrini
Kurt Waldheim
Elisabeth Waldheim
Gerhard Waldheim
Herbert Warnstorff
Friedrich Wiebe

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RUTH BECKERMANN



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Ruth Beckermann was born in Vienna where she also spent her childhood. After her studies in journalism and history of art in Vienna, Tel Aviv and New York, she took her degree as Dr.phil in 1977 at the University of Vienna. She since contributed as a journalist to several Austrian and Swiss magazines.

In 1978 she (co-)founded the distribution company filmladen in which she was active for seven years. In this period Ruth Beckermann started to make films and to write books. Since 1985 she works as a writer and filmmaker.

Her film THE DREAMED ONES was selected at many international festivals and won several awards. Beckermanns current project **THE WALDHEIM WALTZ** will be presented in 2018.

www.ruthbeckermann.com

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FILMOGRAFY

THE DREAMED ONES, 2016, 89 min, DCP, Color, Feature Film

THE MISSING IMAGE, 2015, multi-channel video installation from Albertinaplatz in Vienna

THOSE WHO GO THOSE WHO STAY, 2013, 75 min, HDV/DCP, Color

JACKSON/MARKER 4AM, 2012, 3.35 min, HDcam, Color

AMERICAN PASSAGES, 2011, 120 min, DV/35mm, Color

MOZART ENIGMA, 2006, 1 min, DV/35mm, Color

ZORROS BAR MIZWA, 2006, 90 min, DV/35mm, Color

HOMEMAD(E), 2001, 85 min, DV/35mm, Color

A FLEETING PASSAGE TO THE ORIENT, 1999, 82 min

EAST OF WAR, 1996, 117 min

TOWARDS JERUSALEM, 1991, 87 min

PAPER BRIDGE, 1987, 95 min, Color and Black/White

RETURN TO VIENNA, 1984, 95 min, Color and Black/White

THE STEEL HAMMER OUT THERE ON THE GRASS, 1981, 40 min, Color

SUDDENLY, A STREIK, 1978, 24 min, Color

ARENA SQUATTED, 1977, 78 min, Black/White

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

When I looked at the material I shot 30 years ago, I was shocked. Had I really forgotten how easily emotions can be stirred up against others and used by populist politicians? In **THE WALDHEIM WALTZ** I attempt to analyse what was going on back then, things which seem all too familiar in our present day of Trump, Kurz & Strache and other masters of alternative facts and populism.

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INTERVIEW WITH RUTH BECKERMANN

Interview by Karin Schiefer / December 2017

Kurt Waldheim's lapse of memory concerning his Nazi past was the beginning of a process which saw the Austrian narrative – that the country was the first victim of National Socialism – eventually eroded. His campaign for the 1986 presidential election polarised the country. Ruth Beckermann, an activist at the time, has now edited Austrian and international archive material for **THE WALDHEIM WALTZ** to create a film which, from a distance of 30 years, revisits the conflicts in collective and individual memory and traces the roots of the current situation in this historical context.

In 1986 Kurt Waldheim is elected President of Austria. In 2000 the first Black/Blue coalition (between the conservative Austrian People's Party and the right-wing Freedom Party of Austria) rules the country. We meet for this interview two days after the Kurz/Strache government is sworn in – 17 years after the first Black/Blue coalition. It seems as though Austria's political landscape goes in cycles, shifting in a right-wing direction about every 15 years. To what extent do you regard the Waldheim affair as symptomatic of the political landscape in Austria, and is that why you wanted to raise the subject again?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I actually started research for this film before *Die Geträumten* (The Dreamed Ones), and then I put the project on hold. I was prompted to return to the subject when I looked at some footage I had shot myself in 1986, and people who were not even born at the time encouraged me to make a film. No matter how absurd it sounds, the political landscape of Austria is still dominated by National Socialism. The Waldheim affair and the Hofer/Strache phenomenon are two sides of the same coin. The scandal surrounding Waldheim was an attempt to come to terms with the past at last, in some halfway honest manner, and dismantle the victim lie: the claim that Austria merely a victim during the Nazi era. Finally Austrian involvement in National Socialism was examined from a different perspective. What Hofer and Strache are doing today is actually the opposite: they are employing elements from Nazi ideology in order to shape the future. And to conceal what they're doing, they adopt an aura of innocence. That's the worst thing about the current situation.

THE WALDHEIM WALTZ establishes a link to your film *East of War* from the year 1996, where you observe the reactions of visitors to an exhibition entitled *Vernichtungskrieg* (War of Extermination) which documented atrocities committed by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. What you observed collectively 10 years after the Waldheim affair you have now placed under the microscope in association with the individual Kurt Waldheim, as a symbolic figure. Is this your way of approaching one of the crucial questions which dominates your filmmaking: how do we human beings construct our memories?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I think memories constantly become reconstructed. That applies to our individual memories, depending on the priorities we impose in the present. And collective, national stories are constantly being modified and rewritten, depending on the requirements of the present. In that sense it wasn't just interesting for me to see my own material after a period of 30 years; it was also fascinating to re-examine my own memories and take a look at myself overall, in the international context of the material that was filmed at the time about the Waldheim affair. Individual memories can also be deceptive.

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The sequence where Gerhard Waldheim attempts to defend his father in a hearing and is reduced to silence by the arguments of the person opposite him is among the strongest moments of the film. Do you regard this moment as symbolic of the division that emerged in post-war Austria between the war generation and subsequent generations, which permitted a new perspective on the past for the first time?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Gerhard Waldheim is a son who exposed himself to an incredible extent by defending his father. After all, the division we're talking about also runs within the generation of the sons; there were people of that generation who were hugely critical of their fathers, precisely because of the Waldheim affair. The footage of that hearing is absolutely fascinating. It was never broadcast, but it has been preserved uncut, in the original length; that alone makes it a curiosity, and of course it's the heart of the film. Due to the dramatic setting of a hearing, both sides are represented in the same room. From my perspective today I see the Waldheim affair as a conflict of generations which demonstrates how differently sons behave towards fathers. On the one hand Gerhard Waldheim was quite offensive in his defence of his father, while on the other hand the staff of the Jewish World Congress are the same generation as him, and they're also sons. In some cases sons of fathers who arrived in the USA as refugees from Europe, or of families who felt guilty because they didn't do enough to rescue their brothers and sisters. On both sides there was a process of coming to terms with the Nazi past. In *THE WALDHEIM WALTZ* it's also about teasing out the completely different agenda pursued by the Americans. They were concerned with Waldheim's career as General Secretary of the United Nations; they wanted to smear the UN as a humanitarian institution and its policies in the 1970s, while in Austria it was all about the victim lie.

You make reference in the film to nature and also to "laws of nature" like the concept of the family. What role does the idea of nature play in *THE WALDHEIM WALTZ*?

RUTH BECKERMANN: In the conservative value system that Waldheim advocates, the family is considered natural – but only in the traditional form of husband, wife and child. People get married and stay together until death. That is a "law of nature". Of course, I also make reference to the Heimat film (the patriotic "homeland film" with a rural setting and sentimental story) and, in addition to that, to Austria's tactic – which functioned wonderfully for a while – of conflating its claim of innocence and its natural beauty. Depicting nature as something innocent is a lie. But this has been done again and again on a sort of mythological level, in order to distort history and present nature as a pure, original force. Austrian films like *Sissi* practice this technique: the film was made during the post-war period, and it fabricated an earlier past epoch (of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) by featuring very young actors, implying that there was nothing between that past and the present of the film – by skipping the Nazi period entirely. A brilliant tactic. Of course, you do get evil in Heimat films, but – entirely in keeping with Nazi ideology – it comes from the modern-day, from the city, and it is contrasted with innocent nature in the form of the countryside, the family, folk costumes, farming communities and tradition. All this is reflected in the atmosphere created for Waldheim's election campaign: brass bands, the whole family coming forward to support him, the Christian values he places such emphasis on.

Where did your extensive archive research begin, and in which medium?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I started to view material at ORF (Austrian state TV) on a very broad basis, meaning everything from 1986 to the 1988 Historical Commission. But the archive contains virtually nothing except the material that was broadcast. Remembering is always connected with forgetting, and it's very illuminating to see exactly what was broadcast. In that sense *THE WALDHEIM WALTZ* is also a statement about media history. The most interesting aspect of the archive research is that you can work in a very analytical way – in fact, you have to

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– and that means rearranging the pieces of the puzzle. You end up in a kind of double position in that you're looking at something from the past, but you set yourself the task of re-editing it so it's relevant to the present.

Alongside your ORF research you also started looking beyond the borders of Austria. What was your approach there?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I did further research in Great Britain, the USA, Israel and France in order to place the Austrian material in a critical context. Incidentally, several documentary films were broadcast on ORF in 2016 to mark the 30th anniversary of the Waldheim affair, but oddly enough they were only from a national perspective, even though that had become critical. For me, one of the most fascinating aspects of THE WALDHEIM WALTZ was to present the events in an international context and to see how differently various media had reported the affair.

Since you didn't film any new footage at all for THE WALDHEIM WALTZ but instead created a film purely from existing material, the montage process with Dieter Pichler must have been different than in previous projects.

RUTH BECKERMANN: In the summer of 2016 we sat down to look at about 150 hours of ORF material chosen by me and Sebastian Brameshuber. On top of that there was material accessed via the Internet. Actually, I often went into the archives myself, partly to get over the chill of the Internet. I wanted to develop a feeling for the archive. Archive material is very cold, and viewing material that you haven't shot yourself is a completely different working process. For a long time I was fixed on the concept of dealing with a much longer period. It was only when we actually sat down to do the editing that I re-evaluated that concept and decided we would concentrate on the months of the election campaign. Since we are dealing with the chronology of the short period from March to June 1986, the film becomes very fast paced. The chronology is interrupted by associative excursions to various periods and different cases, in order to present the character of Kurt Waldheim and the affair itself in a larger context.

At the beginning of the film we see images that you yourself filmed in 1986 as an activist during the Waldheim affair. To what extent did those images prompt in you a process of reflecting on your own filmmaking?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I come from a period when shooting a film was still something extraordinary. Filming is quite special for me, connected with an approach and a mood. I've never been able to integrate a camera into my life permanently. That's why I film quite rarely. Then the material comes to have a special value for me. My perspective and my focus haven't really changed, and I was pleased to see that – especially because it took me a very long time to take my own visual work seriously. I didn't really present my own images until *Those who go* (2014). At that time I simply filmed spontaneously. From the present perspective I'm very proud of my extended pan from the demonstrators shouting "Waldheim, no!", with me spending a very long time on them, to the man calling out "Waldheim, yes!". I only regret that I didn't capture more material during my period as an activist.

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In the beginning of the film you refer to your role at that time as being "half demonstrating and half documenting". Is that a premise that still dominates your work?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I'm somebody who gets good ideas from the emotions that arise while I'm working, much more than at a desk. I think both are necessary, but I very much like action to be involved. I don't want to observe a demo in a long shot from the sidewalk; I want to be right in the middle of it, close to the people and the faces. And especially in the light of Fake News I regard this film as a manifestation of the fact that documentaries like this – which don't promote themselves with stars or spectacular images – have an import function, so they have to be shown in cinemas to give people a place where they can come together and discuss what's going on these days. I regard it as very important to present the past in such a way that we are forced to think today of Charlottesville, Donald Trump, Hungary or the current Austrian government.