

JERUSALEM LETTER / VIEWPOINTS

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

VP:77 19 Elul 5748 / 1 September 1988

KURT WALDHEIM: AUSTRIA'S DREAM CANDIDATE

Andrea Salomon interviews Avi Becker

An Accidental Beginning / The Fight to Access the UN Archives / Waldheim's Documented Record / Waldheim Confronts the Media / Austria's Dream Candidate / The Lessons of the Waldheim Affair

An Accidental Beginning

Avi Becker describes it as "the biggest diplomatic deception of the century." The Executive Director of the World Jewish Congress in Israel is referring to the Kurt Waldheim affair -- an investigation which revealed the ugly truth about the man who for ten years was responsible for global human rights, and about an international community that chose to ignore the truth.

It has been two-and-a-half years since World Jewish Congress President Edgar Bronfman authorized WJC Secretary-General Israel Singer and Executive Director Elan Steinberg to undertake the original investigation -- what was originally expected to be a small-scale inquiry into Kurt Waldheim's past. Since then, it has been proven that, at a minimum, Kurt Waldheim has repeatedly and deliberately lied about his where-

abouts and activities during World War II. For forty years, the ex-Secretary General of the United Nations concealed from the world that he was the third highest-ranking special missions officer in Army Group E of Hitler's High Command. However even more incredulous is that after four decades of deception, the investigation into his past was set off by a strange coincidence.

"In the winter of 1986, a plaque was scheduled to be dedicated at the Austrian air force academy in memory of General Alexander Loehr who was the commander of the Wehrmacht in the Balkans during the Second World War," Becker explained. "There was a debate in the Austrian press whether it was proper to dedicate a memorial to a general who was convicted and hung for committing Nazi war crimes. A short

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor
21 Arlozorov St. Jerusalem, 92181, Israel; Tel. 02-639281. © Copyright. All rights reserved. ISSN:0334-4096

The opinions expressed by the authors of Viewpoints do not necessarily reflect those of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

time later," he continued, "an historian wrote a letter to Profile Magazine pointing out that Waldheim, who was then running for president, was a staff officer at Loehr's headquarters. This letter was then brought to the attention of the New York headquarters of the World Jewish Congress." Bronfman decided it was worthwhile to clarify the matter, since it was raising suspicion about a major international figure.

An investigator went to the National Archives in Washington to verify the facts in Waldheim's autobiography The Challenge of Peace. "To our major shock," Becker recalls, "Waldheim had written that he was wounded in 1941 in the eastern front, discharged from army service in 1942 and then returned to Vienna to study law. Yet the archives showed that he served with the forces of Nazi Germany in the Balkans from 1942 to 1944 (a fact which he now admits). The researcher also stumbled across a reference noting that a file on Waldheim had been deposited at United Nations headquarters in New York by the UN War Crimes Commission in 1948."

The Fight to Access the UN Archives

It took one-and-a-half years before the WJC, with the help of Israel's UN representative Benjamin Netanyahu, received access to the UN archives. The archives were compiled in 1947-48 by the United Nations Commission on War Crimes. It is significant to note that on March 6, 1986, the World Jewish Congress disclosed that in 1980 the U.S. Justice Department had requested access to the records of the War Crimes Commission. High level UN Secretariat staff consented, but in the end the request was turned down after it was brought to the attention of then-UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim.

Becker feels that in addition to gaining access to the UN archives, the WJC's 18-month effort succeeded in revealing what he describes as an "international conspiracy of silence." For forty years the United Nations has stored in its basement some 40,000 files on individuals suspected of committing war crimes, and for forty years no action was taken against them.

Becker offers two reasons: after the war, the Allies entered into their own Cold War and dissolved the War Crimes Commission, leaving undone approximately 36,000 potential prosecutions, one of them being that of Waldheim. Second, in the superpower race for high technology, both the United States and the Soviet Union began recruiting Europe's top scientists, a significant number of whom were known ex-Nazis. "As a result, throughout the '50s and '60s there was a conspiracy of silence about the hundreds of Nazis that were roaming freely around the Western countries," Becker concluded.

Waldheim's Documented Record

Although Waldheim's German army personnel file was apparently destroyed during the war, and the majority of those witnesses who testified against Waldheim before the Yugoslav War Crimes Commission forty years ago have since died, the existing records and documents on Waldheim are shocking. In "Kurt Waldheim's Hidden Past: An Interim Report to the President of the World Jewish Congress," Waldheim's criminal record is summed up as follows:

In 1947, the Yugoslav War Crimes Commission issued a formal written decision finding him (Waldheim) responsible for multiple acts of murder, including specified reprisal killings of civilians and executions of hostages in Nazi-occupied Yugoslavia. In 1948, the United Nations War Crimes Commission reviewed the evidence...and assigned Waldheim its most serious suspect rating -- the "A" classification reserved for those suspects against whom a prima facie case of complicity in Nazi war crimes had been proven and who should be brought to trial immediately. Later in 1948, the U.S. Army placed Waldheim's name on its own wanted list, the Central Registry of War Criminals and Security Suspects.

To date, the most incriminating and irrefutable evidence is to be found in the documents bearing Waldheim's signature. According to the Interim Report, "Waldheim's 'W' initial has been found on several documents which indicate intimate

knowledge not only of enemy movements but also of the atrocities perpetrated by Wehrmacht units subordinate to Army Group E." (Army Group E had dominion over nearly all the Balkans.) Waldheim had responsibility for prisoner interrogation, testing personnel for political reliability, and "special tasks," which was a euphemism often used for operations such as assassinations, kidnapping and deportation. One report, dated December 19, 1943, and stamped/initialled "received by 03 'W,'" quotes the complaints of a Greek leader in Athens:

...a few villages of Epirus have been completely wiped out as the result of executions. The village of Kommana, near Arta, which had about 1,000 inhabitants, was the victim of a terrible decimation. Seven hundred fifty inhabitants of this village were shot by German soldiers...The said villages were completely set afire, but the number of villages set afire in the General Government of Epirus exceeds 100....

The Interim Report includes scores of similar reports either personally submitted or received by Waldheim which indicate intimate knowledge of enemy movements as well as atrocities perpetrated by Wehrmacht units subordinate to Army Group E.

Waldheim Confronts the Media

When confronted by the media or the WJC about these records, Waldheim has lied about everything from his membership in the above-mentioned Nazi organizations to the nature of his pre-war and wartime activities. He has contradicted himself dozens of times, and has only admitted to something when the fact is totally irrefutable. For example, on March 7, 1986, Waldheim sent a telex to Edgar Bronfman in which he states, "I was not a member of the SA or any other organization of the Nazi regime." Yet documents housed in the Austrian Government archives disclose his membership in the SA Reiterstandarte which is the cavalry regiment of the Nazi stormtroopers also known as the "Brown-shirts," the Nazi student union (NS-Studentenbund), and the Nazi cavalry corps

(NS-Reiterkorps). One month later Waldheim admitted to Reuters that "I had a lot of trouble finishing my studies. So I said to myself, 'I can participate, and that would keep me there without being attacked'....And so I participated."

The question remains, then, how did the United States, the Soviet Union, and the Yugoslav government, all of which had official documents on Waldheim's role in the Second World War, not only keep quiet but approve his appointment as Secretary General of the UN, an organization which was established as an anti-Axis, anti-Nazi organization? And, moreover, to what extent, if any, did they use the information to exert political pressure on the United Nations Secretary General?

Austria's Dream Candidate

Many years have passed since these events and the questions posed above, as well as many others, will most likely never be satisfactorily answered. However the latest element of the "Waldheim Affair" is that 54 percent of the Austrian people voted for Waldheim and his program for "Moral Renewal" during the Austrian presidential campaign.

Becker believes that Waldheim's successful rise in politics is simply the culmination of events which began with the Moscow Declaration of 1943, where Austria was classified as the first victim of Nazism. Considering that 99.7 percent of Austrian voters approved the Anschluss referendum fifty years ago, and that Austria had proportionately more members of the Nazi party than Germany, Austria was not a victim but an accomplice, says Becker. Statistics compiled by Simon Weisenthal reveal that Austrians constituted only 8.5 percent of the greater German population, yet they provided three-fourths of the commanders of the extermination camps and committed a minimum of 50 percent of all war crimes.

During the Waldheim affair, Austrian psychiatrist Erwin Ringel explained that Waldheim really was a "dream candidate" in the 1986 presidential election, since he represented Austria's unwillingness to

honestly confront its relationship with Hitler's occupation. Becker believes that if there had been an official de-Nazification program in Austria, then the Austrian people would never have been presented with a Waldheim candidacy. Despite the controversy surrounding Waldheim, his party has never asked him to step down. Moreover, when a competing candidate tried to use the WJC investigation against Waldheim, he quickly stopped because it was having a negative effect on his own campaign, Becker explained.

None of this is surprising, he continued, "considering that Austria's most widely-read daily newspaper, the Kronen Zeitung, which reaches 40 percent of the population, maintains an openly anti-Semitic editorial policy. According to the editor of the Jewish monthly in Austria, Karl Feifer, "no single day passes without an anti-Semitic declaration in Austria." After Waldheim's successful presidential campaign, 7 percent of the population admitted outright anti-Semitic feelings, and 74 percent claimed they enjoyed a higher standard of living under Hitler than today.

The 50th anniversary of the Anschluss could have been a good occasion for Austrians to conduct a thorough soul-searching of their country's Nazi past as well as a direct confrontation with the findings of the international commission of historians on President Waldheim's Nazi war record. But the Austrians missed this opportunity and Becker feels that the Austrian Parliament's decision to grant between \$200 and \$400 to each war victim represents a further cynical insult and desecration of the memory of the Holocaust victims. In his televised address, Waldheim did not say anything about his own Nazi record and did not react to the findings of the historians' commission.

The Lessons of the Waldheim Affair

Although the law enforcement authorities of the Austrian government have refused to investigate the charges of Waldheim's complicity in Nazi war crimes, the World Jewish Congress has scored a

major achievement in that the international community has politically isolated Waldheim. The only officials who have met with Waldheim are Pope John Paul II, King Hussein of Jordan, and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia. The U.S. Justice Department has put Waldheim on its "Watch List" which bars his entry as a private citizen into the United States.

"The Waldheim affair did more for educating international public opinion on the essence of Nazi crimes and for refuting the campaign of the Holocaust denial than many other works of historians," says Becker. "Precisely because Waldheim was not an Eichmann or Mengele, but rather an opportunistic ambitious officer who fulfilled his duties...and precisely because of his subsequent career...[in the] number one UN post and election to the Austrian presidency, the world could again realize that rank-and-file Nazis were educated and intelligent persons who could act and behave like the worst beasts, without conscience....Without them Nazi Germany could not perpetuate its large-scale crimes against humanity," he said.

As of August 1988, Waldheim still claims that he has not intentionally misrepresented anything, and he still rejects the majority of the accusations made against him. Yet during the past two-and-a-half years, Waldheim has never come forth with an official document refuting the records which he so adamantly denies, nor explained why in fact he lied to begin with. However during his presidential campaign, Waldheim did offer the public some interesting insight into how he views his service in Hitler's army, as well as why more than half of the Austrian population voted for him: "I basically did nothing more than what 100,000 Austrians did during the War. I was a respectable soldier."

* * *

Andrea Salomon is Projects Coordinator of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs.