

SHIT BUCKET CAMPAIGNS AND NESTBESCHMUTZER

The Waldheim Affair in Austria

Iris Hermann

On June 8, 1986, in the second round of elections, Kurt Waldheim was elected President of Austria. Up to that point, he could look back on a great diplomatic career: For ten years, he had held the important office of General Secretary of the United Nations and he had previously served as Foreign Minister of Austria. But after his election, nothing in Austria remained the same. His election, his person, and his conduct caused a political firestorm that changed the foundations of the Republic of Austria. The point was less the public exposure of a Nazi perpetrator than how the nation chose to remember Nazi crimes, and the kinds of obligations and responsibilities that arose from these crimes for individuals.

Waldheim was not accused of being a war criminal. Even the World Jewish Congress, which performed a thorough investigation and would not have hesitated to charge him, did not accuse him of specific crimes; he was never indicted or convicted of concrete wrongdoing. What aroused animosity was the way in which he “doctored” his career, hid his actual whereabouts during the last years of the war, and lied about his proximity to the executed war criminal General Löhr in Yugoslavia. He must have had knowledge of mass murders, even if he did not personally participate. Instead, he claimed lapses in memory, denied his membership in the Storm Troopers, and spun ever more fantastic tales, which failed to explain anything. Doron Rabinovici, a writer, historian, and member of the Republican Club, which was founded during the Waldheim Affair as the public voice of the opposition, said this about Kurt

Waldheim: “How he had dealt with his past between 1945 until then was pathetic and unacceptable. He embodied everything we fought against. Waldheim’s lies were important not because they were personal character flaws, but because they revealed the broader political strategy. We knew our Waldheimers. They relied on antisemitism as a dog whistle. Fiery yellow placards went up all over Vienna announcing in blazing red script: ‘We Austrians will elect the man *we* want’. Such slogans targeted Jews, although it was by no means only Jewish officials who wondered how it was possible that an intelligence officer serving in the Saloniki region could claim ignorance about the deportations leaving Greece.”¹

I have chosen this affair for this essay on “impurity and guilt” because both sides, Waldheim opponents and Waldheim supporters, confronted each in the semantic field of filth (German: *Dreck*, which is closely associated with “shit”) deploying this terminology in ever more creative ways to attack opponents. I will use two examples from different media: first, Robert Schindel’s grand Viennese novel, *Der Kalte*, which is often read as an account of the Waldheim Affair.² There is the figure of Johann Wais, who shares many features with Waldheim. And there is an abundance of references to filth, particularly in their Viennese manifestation. More on that later.

The second example is the Austrian documentary film, *Waldheim's Waltz*, by Ruth Beckermann, which was shown at the Berlin Film Festival and nominated as the Austrian entry for the Oscar.³ It contains many original recordings from Waldheim’s electoral campaign, the charges of the World Jewish Congress, as well as footage from the political campaign launched by Waldheim opponents, whose numbers kept growing and whose arguments gained traction.

First, I will use these examples to show how denunciation, accusation, criticism, and defense make use of the semantic field of filth and thereby construct an entire lattice of meaning that will be analyzed here. In a second step, the concept of guilt will be unfolded within this frame of reference. Guilt is here a particularly complex phenomenon, since Waldheim was never legally charged with a criminal offense but incurred guilt in the moral realm that required significant explanation and effort at description. Methodologically, it must be pointed out that my sources are fictional works of art rather than primary sources. The primary source material has been thoroughly examined by linguist Ruth Wodak

who deserves credit for analyzing the media reports about the Waldheim affair in various print formats. Her work shows that it was Waldheim himself who first used the terminology of dirt. For instance, the *Neues Volksblatt*, the official newspaper of the conservative Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), which supported Waldheim's nomination, reported on March 24, 1986:

The repulsive witch hunt against independent presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim is getting dirtier and dirtier. First his political opponents Blecha and Ischer have charged him with "Memberships during the Nazi Period" on the basis of archival records, and now the Jewish World Congress has struck over the weekend with the news that Waldheim was wanted as a suspect for "participation in murder." Waldheim responded: "a new high point in the dirt campaign."⁴

"Dirt campaign," "shit bucket campaign," or sometimes just abbreviated as "the campaign" expressed clearly what Waldheim thought of the criticism he received for his inexplicable memory lapses, which excluded significant segments of his life, particularly the years before 1945. To him, this was merely an attack on his integrity, an unjustified blow below the belt aimed at harming him politically and obstructing his election. The novel *Der Kalte* takes up this interpretation and discusses its implications for the figure of Johann Wais:

How could one smear this UN-VIP so that the muck spurts? Now I will have to suffer through the beautified life memories, presumably prepared by his press officer Novacek. In America, a dozen people would have performed background checks. But here, people believe every folk tale that is dished out.⁵

The fictional speaker of this text is an employee of the SPÖ chancellor, who deliberately seeks to find dirt in order to smear the candidate Waldheim, but in reality it was neither the Social Democratic Party nor the Communist Party that accused Waldheim. They remained passive throughout this affair and were not its instigators, as Viennese journalist Georg Tidl, who examined the history of the Waldheim affair, has concluded.⁶ In the novel, *Der Kalte*, it is the alter ego of Simon Wiesenthal, by the name of David Lebensart, who blames the Social Democrats for

exaggerating the gaps in the biography of Waldheim, saying: “The Social Democrats are fishing for filth everywhere.”⁷ Later, there are references to Dr. Wais’ obsessive concerns with “soiling,” while trying to maintain his “pure conscience” and his sense of humor.⁸ Robert Schindel rewrites the history of the Waldheim Affairs. While Waldheim remained in office for the full six years of his presidential appointment, the figure of Johann Wais resigns and concedes to the demands of the opposition.

Cleansings

While political opponents are often smeared in political campaigns, Waldheim was a particularly fitting target. He had spent his previous life as a high-ranking intelligence officer in the Wehrmacht in very close proximity to “cleansing campaigns.” In the novel, Schindel attributes the following internal monologue to Waldheim, which I will quote at length:

I still do not understand why this campaign is heating up despite my frequent explanations. Now they are pestering me about the battles in the Koraza region [in Bosnia-Herzegovina]. Of course, I cannot remember everything all of the time. Foolishly, I claimed that I had never been there. Now Novacek discovered that, indeed, I was there when the cleansings began. So what? I was not involved, or else I would have remembered. I was always happy that I did not participate in interrogations, although I reported their results. Well, sometimes I had to be present, especially with the Susić people, a most dangerous gang of partisans. Of course, we did not use delicate methods, after all it was war, and the cruelty of partisans was legendary. One had to be merciless, fighting them. I viewed them as enemies back then, because that is what they were, and we were *their* enemies, basta. Good Lord, I have never been a weakling, but I never participated in retaliation killings. Others volunteered and enjoyed it, even some of my good friends, who are not facing any charges. My General Löhr, however, paid for it with his life, they decapitated him—or maybe they shot him. Why am I thinking about this? Johann Wais turned around, went to his desk, and looked at the telephone. Captain Plume was responsible for the deportation of prisoners during the Kozara operation. I had to help him, he was my superior, but I only signed the

papers. I never even looked into the faces of any of these individuals—or did I? And even if I looked at some of them? They were immediately sent off to Semlin [at the outskirts of Belgrade] to be housed there as prisoners of war. Some of the partisans were obviously civilians, that is always the case for partisan fighters, hence the accusation that we killed civilians... people are clueless, but keep spitting at me.⁹

There are not many metaphors of cleanness/uncleanness in this fictional stream of consciousness, but they appear at crucial moments: For instance, Wais [whose name resonates with *weiss*, meaning “white”) uses the term “cleansings,” which refer more accurately to “ethnic cleansings.” They are considered war crimes, and Wais would be considered a war criminal, if he admitted his participation. But Wais avoids this, as he articulates his surprise over the continuation of the attacks despite his soothing explanations. The president elect of the Republic of Austria is no longer invited by Western governments, and the United States has put him on a watch list. The author uses venomous words, which are intensely physical, such as the word “*angeifern*,” which evokes images of attack dogs straining against their leashes, their spittle spraying from aggressive barking. Wais feels “spat at.”

Schindel’s novel uses the Waldheim Affair and interweaves it with several other postwar stories, for instance, the story of Edmund Fraul, a camp survivor and veteran of the Spanish Civil War who fought on the side of the International Brigades and is still a tireless champion of the cause of justice. But trauma has extinguished his emotions, which he rarely expresses in his personal life, if he feels their presence at all. In the novel, Edmund Fraul is about seventy years of age and experiences another turning point in his life. He begins a conversation with Wilhelm Rosinger, who was a guard in Auschwitz and responsible for the murder of at least seven children in the concentration camp. He was punished after the war, served time in prison, and has since been released. Strangely bound together as victim and perpetrator, in what sociologists have called “negative symbiosis,” Fraul insists that they share stories about Auschwitz. As they recount stories and swap experiences, it becomes clear that they have Auschwitz in common. A catharsis is happening, which releases both: Rosinger feels deep repentance and confesses his

guilt to Fraul. Fraul mourns for the dead Rosinger and experiences long-buried feelings rise to the surface in long spasms of weeping. The novel oversimplifies this catharsis, which happens too quickly, is too conciliatory, and lacks depth. But it is noteworthy that this segment of the novel makes no references to impurity or purification. There is no reference to washing away any guilt, as the semantic field of uncleanness is absent. The theme reappears in a different section of the novel, where a survivor of the Shoah describes her side of the “cleansings,” which plunged her life into filth and darkness. This woman from Bukovina recounts:

“I was fourteen years old when the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, and my home town of Czernowitz [now western Ukraine] came under the control of the Romanian fascists. We lived in Kobilanska Street; my parents ran a press that put out books about art. I went to the gymnasium [high school]. As Jews, we were forced to move to a ghetto and later deported to Transnistria. I am the only member of my family who survived. There was nothing there except filth and starving people, corpses, diseases, stench—Transnistria, that was hell.”¹⁰

The Nestbeschmutzer and the dung heap

The term *Nestbeschmutzer* was pervasive and used as a blanket term to refer to any opponent of Waldheim as a way to insult and defame them, by Waldheim as well as by others. It became so commonplace that critics reclaimed the term and used it as a battle cry to unify the opposition. For instance, the previously mentioned “Republican Club,” which became active in the political struggle, published a book called “The Art of Nest-fouling.”¹¹ Schindel’s novel *Der Kalte* retells the scandal that attended the opening performance of Thomas Bernhard’s theater play “Heldenplatz” in Vienna in 1988. Heldenplatz is the name of the square in front of the Hofburg Palace, where Hitler announced the *Anschluss* [annexation] of Austria to Germany before an enormous crowd on March 15, 1938. The well-known writer Thomas Bernhard was commissioned by the politically controversial German theater director Claus Peymann to write a theater play to mark the one-hundred-year anniversary of the Austrian National Theater in Vienna, the Burgtheater in 1988. The play was kept strictly secret before its first performance. But a journalist had been tipped off and

published some excerpts from the theater text, which caused public outrage. The Austrian public resented the impending “defamation of Austria” and the “nest-fouling” that would be performed on stage in Bernhard’s “manure piece” [*Sudelstück*]. In protest, on the day of the premier, a truck of manure was unloaded in front of the main entrance of the Burgtheater on Heldenplatz. As Schindel retells the scene in his novel:

Around four p.m. a large truck appeared before the Burgtheater. It parked illegally before the entrance of the theater. Two men in overalls climbed out of the cab, walked to the back of the truck, opened the cargo area, jumped up and began to use pitchforks to dump piles of manure, straw drenched with cow urine and dung. A policeman began to approach the scene, eyed the two men. The driver, a strong, fat fellow with a shaved head, stood in front of the hood and gazed calmly at the cop, who stopped, scratched his neck, and retreated. People began to gather around the growing dung heap and expressed their appreciation and sympathy. One person shouted “Cover the Burgtheater in shit.” Some people laughed, and more people gathered. Finally, both men climbed down from the truck, each lifted a bucket from the cargo area and dumped its contents on the dung heap. The viewers standing closest to the pile pulled back. Before the men drove away—the license plate was smeared with filth and hence illegible—they threw leaflets into the crowd, with the printed message “THROW THE BASTARD SCHÖNN OUT OF AUSTRIA.”¹²

The figure of theater director Peymann is renamed Schönn in Schindel’s novel, but otherwise it follows the historical events closely. The words of Johann Wais come true in reverse fashion: The critical theater performance is covered in shit, as the metaphorical shit bucket hit the venerable Burgtheater. Of course, this attempt to disturb or block the premiere of the theater play failed spectacularly, as Thomas Bernhard’s play *Heldenplatz* only gained publicity and notoriety.

The Waldheim Waltz

Ruth Beckerman uses original footage from Waldheim’s candidacy in Vienna for her documentary film that was released in 2018. She was also an original member of The Republican Club around Doron Rabinovici,

and she had been opposed to Waldheim's presidency and been active in the struggle to change Austria's culture of denial and forgetfulness. Beckermann dramatically assembles visual material that in many respects complements Schindler's fictional account of the Waldheim Affair. Most striking is a scene toward the end of the film, in which Waldheim prepares to deliver his first speech as President of the Republic of Austria. He is waiting to go live before the cameras, which are already rolling: The makeup artist wipes and powders his face several times, a garishly uniformed cleaning lady vacuums and cleans all of the surfaces around him, an assistant brushes fluff off his dark suit. These silent cleanup operations speak volumes. Waldheim is preoccupied, the film suggests, with the correct fit of his suit and the perfect facial mask that will hide his flaws and failings as he faces the nation. The film captures a cultural moment of intense battles over moral impurity and the overwhelming desire for cleanliness, correctness, and blamelessness.

Clean hands, white vests, and skeletons in the closet

In the field of Austrian literature, the Waldheim affair served as pivot that dislodged the Austrian legend as the first victim of Nazi Germany, which was first voiced by the Allied victors. Austria, however, was not invaded and subjugated by hostile German forces. Austrians followed Hitler into war gladly and volunteered in droves for service in the SS. Waldheim was a member of the SA and had done much more than his mere duty as a "decent" soldier. When he began to lie about his biography and cover up his actual career path during the war years, groups of activists demanded more truth and accountability in Austrian politics. There was some disagreement over the precise role of Waldheim in this cultural transformation. Some, like Robert Menasses, claimed that Waldheim was a mere speck in the morass of Austrian politics: "Every Austrian," he said, "believes that Austria is a double victim, first at the hands of the National Socialists, and then again at the hands of the anti-fascists. But in reality, Austria is only the victim of Austrian fascism, of the Dollfuss regime [Engelbert Dollfuss, conservative Austrian Federal Chancellor, 1932-1934, who was assassinated] and its disciples and descendants. That is the only real situation of victimization in Austria. Waldheim, by contrast, is something like the dirt under my fingernail, if we measure him against the real problems of Austria."¹³ Others, like Schindel and

Rabinovici, give more credit to the culture shock unleashed by the Waldheim Affair, which jolted a younger generation into critical confrontation with Austrian history. I agree that the Waldheim affair produced more than a little irritating dirt stuck under one's fingernail and compelled a shift toward greater nuance in guilt discussions that took note of the "real" victims of National Socialism. These victims suffered not only at the hands of major perpetrators and the regime's mass murderers but also because mere "bystanders" and complicit enablers failed to intervene. Now, everybody wanted to forget what they had done. Waldheim became the paradigm for the desperate and pathetic desire to forget. Even if he did not actively kill another human being, he was certainly morally complicit as an officer in a regime that committed atrocities. This debate over responsibility, accountability, and guilt became unstoppable after Waldheim, no matter how strong the threats of libel and denunciation, the smear campaigns, and manure piles were.

It is important to note the moment in which metaphors of filth are invoked, and when they remain irrelevant and impotent. As soon as guilt has been confessed, when regret has been expressed and forgiveness requested or granted, guilt no longer appears as impurity; there is no need to wash it off, and one cannot befoul or tarnish such as person (Viennese: "*anpatzen*"). The imaginary of filth is virulent only as long as guilt remains hidden and denied. Metaphors of filth signal the presence of remainders that refuse to vanish and that cannot be forced to disappear. While it has traditionally been the political left that was tarnished as filthy and dirty, in the postwar debate over the moral and political legacy of National Socialism, both camps used the imagery of filth in creative and concrete ways. In the case of the manure pile on *Heldenplatz*, Austria's largest newspaper, the *Kronen Zeitung*, spoke of self-sullying to indicate that those who dared to ask critical questions about the "brown" Nazi past were the cause of pollution. For the newspaper, the problem originated with the *Nestbeschmutzer* and those who presumed to criticize Austria. Still, the actions of a few courageous activists succeeded in changing the culture of remembrance in Austria, which required confronting sometimes painful memories.

Recently, the sudden appearance of the so-called Strache-videos, which exposed shady dealings between an extreme right-wing Austrian politician and a Russian oligarch, the semantic field of filth, swung back

into operation in full force. The public release of these secret videos recorded in a villa in Ibiza was called part of a dirt campaign, and they forced the resignation of Austrian vice president Heinz-Christian Strache, followed by the collapse of Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's entire administration. While the right-wing, populist Freedom Party of Austria vigorously protested the release of these videos as mud-slinging, it had of course been their leader's willingness to sell access and privilege to a Russian oligarch (who turned out to be an actor) that tainted the party's reputations. Dirt flies in multiple directions, and in politics, it is not always obvious where it will stick.

Notes

1. Doron Rabinovici, "Aktion und Artikulation, Das Bestehen des Republikanischen Clubs," in Brigitte Lehmann, Doron Rabinovici, Sibylle Summer (eds.) *Von der Kunst der Nestbeschmutzung – Dokumente gegen Ressentiment and Rassismus seit 1986* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2008).
2. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2013).
3. Ruth Beckermann, *The Waldheim Waltz*, (Austria, 2018, 93 minutes) (<http://www.thewaldheimwaltz.com/en/>) [accessed July 17, 2019]
4. Ruth Wodak, et. al. (eds.), *Wir sind alle unschuldige Täter!: Diskurshistorische Studien zum Nachkriegsantisemitismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 59–120.
5. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte*, 130.
6. Georg Tidl, *Waldheim—wie es wirklich war. Geschichte einer Recherche* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2015).
7. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte*, 147.
8. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte*, 210.
9. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte*, 509–510.
10. Robert Schindel, *Der Kalte*, 289.
11. Brigitte Lehmann, Doron Rabinovici, Sibylle Summe (eds.), *Von der Kunst der Nestbeschmutzung – Dokumente gegen Ressentiment and Rassismus seit 1986* (Vienna, 2008).
12. Robert Schindel, *der Kalte*, 624-625.
13. Matthias Beilein, *86 und die Folgen: Robert Schindel, Robert Menasses und Doron Rabinovici im literarischen Feld Österreichs* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2008), 297–325.