

Turning of the Tide?

Austria's second thoughts about Waldheim

The ghosts of the Nazi era continue to haunt Kurt Waldheim. Eighteen months ago Waldheim's fellow Austrians defiantly elected him president despite a storm of international controversy over his actions in the German Army during World War II. Now, Austrians themselves have begun to turn against Waldheim. His political adversaries are calling more loudly for his resignation, and even some of his staunchest supporters talk of face-saving scenarios for his departure from office. Above all, Austrians have grown weary of the struggle to restore Waldheim's reputation. "Even when you think you are fighting a just war, you have to acknowledge at a certain point that the war is lost," says Andreas Unterberger, foreign editor of the conservative daily *Die Presse*. "There isn't a chance to win the Waldheim war in the face of international public opinion."

A turning point in the "Waldheim war" could come early next year, when an international commission of historians is scheduled to present a report on his role as an intelligence officer in a German unit in the Balkans. Few Austrians expect the six-man commission (whose work is being funded by the Austrian government) to contradict Waldheim's assertions that he was not personally involved in war crimes. But damaging political evidence could turn up as the commission looks into the broader issue of how much he *knew* about atrocities—such as the deportation of Jews from Salonika—which he claims never to have heard about. "This is also a part of his behavior that will be carefully checked," Swiss historian Hans Rudolf Kurz, the commission's chairman, told NEWSWEEK. "It is not only a matter of what he did himself. It is a matter of his whole deportment."

Personal guilt? Waldheim is scheduled to appear before the commission next month, but he already may have chilled his reception. He and his supporters have made considerable efforts to narrow the scope of the inquiry. They insist that the commission's mandate is limited to the question of "personal guilt" and that nothing else matters. In attempting to de-

fend that position, Michael Graff, general secretary of the conservative People's Party, compounded Waldheim's problems by telling the French weekly *l'Express* last month: "So long as it is not proven that he strangled six Jews with his own hands, no problem." Graff's remark caused such indignation that he was compelled to resign his post. That embarrassment was followed by the resignation from office of another Waldheim supporter, Carl Hodl, the deputy mayor of Linz. Hodl had been under fire for having written a letter to World Jewish Congress president Edgar Bronfman last May, in which Hodl compared the WJC's campaign against Waldheim to the Jews' persecution of Jesus.

Until recently, Austrian Socialists have been cautious about attacking Waldheim for fear of creating a public backlash. Now, some of them are openly demanding his resignation. The Socialist Party's Vienna and Tyrol branches have both demanded that he step down. Adolf Czettel, the president of the *Arbeiterkammer*, an organization that technically represents all employees in Austria, declared recently that Waldheim "must ask himself if leaving the office of president is not the greatest service he can do for Austria." (Nazi hunter Beate Klarsfeld joined the anti-Waldheim crusade last week, staging a demonstration outside his Vienna offices in favor of his resignation). Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, a Socialist, is unlikely to demand Waldheim's resignation without the approval of the People's Party—the Socialist Party's partner in the ruling "grand coalition"—and so far the People's Party has supported Waldheim. According to one scenario discussed in the Austrian press, however, the Socialists might try to win over the People's Party by promising to back whatever candidate the conservatives chose to replace Waldheim.



© NEW YORK POST
Waldheim, 1943



MARTHA HERMANN—AP

Demanding the president resign: Klarsfeld in Vienna

Outside of Austria, Waldheim—a former secretary-general of the United Nations—has made little progress in his effort to restore his reputation. Since assuming office, he has paid official visits to the Vatican, as well as to Jordan and Pakistan. But no Western country has extended an invitation, and the U.S. Justice Department has placed him on its "watch list" of foreigners barred from the United States. As a consequence, more Austrians now appear willing to question how Waldheim—and the country as a whole—dealt with the Nazi era. "You feel that the psychological atmosphere has changed," says Leon Zelman, a leader of Vienna's small Jewish community. "Before there was no possibility of a discussion, only confrontation. Now, the discussion is starting."

'Fed up': Waldheim is far from ready to concede defeat. He has said that he will consider the findings of the historians group "not binding." And he insists that he will remain in office for the four remaining years of his presidency. "Under no circumstances," he declared recently, "will I yield to pressure." But Waldheim may overestimate his countrymen's patience. "My impression is that the people are fed up with this whole story," says *Die Presse's* Unterberger. That does not mean that all of Austria is clamoring for him to step down. But if the historians' commission comes out with a strongly negative verdict regarding his wartime conduct, the current sniping at Waldheim could become a deadly barrage.

ANGUS DEMING with
ANDREW NAGORSKI in Vienna