Austria's ambassador to the United Kingdom gives an honest account of her own family's Nazi links

Is Kurt Waldheim's death set to re-open old wounds?

BY DAVID ROWAN

THE FLAG was flying at half mast at 18 Belgrave Mews West last Friday. Kurt Waldheim, the former Wehrmacht lieutenant accused of involvement in Nazi war crimes, had died the previous day aged 88, and Austria's London embassy was paying its respects to the country's former president.

But unlike Waldheim's 1986 presidential campaign, which prompted intense debate about Austria's Nazi past, his death will not trigger a further burst of national self-examination, says Austria's ambassador, Dr Gabriele Matzner-Holzer. In an interview with the *JC*, Dr Matzner-Holzer explained how families across Austria — not least her own — had been confronting their own wartime history for decades.

"When the storm broke around Waldheim in the mid-1980s it was quite a shock to Austria," she said. "Many more people than before started to inquire, to read, to search into their families' histories, which increased public awareness on an important part of our history. It's not that it had never been discussed before — the knowledge was already available about Austrians' participation in the Holocaust and war crimes, with dozens of books and some films published before 1986. What the Waldheim affair did was bring this information to the wider public."

During Waldheim's bid for the presidency in 1986, the World Jewish Congress alleged that he had been a war-time officer attached to a German army command which sent around 50,000 Greek Jews to their deaths in Auschwitz. He was accused of involvement when a German army unit committed mass murder in Bosnia. He had also, it was claimed, approved a drop of antisemitic leaflets behind Russian lines, one of which stated: "Enough of the Jewish war, kill the Jews, come over."

Gabriele Matzner-Holzer

Photo: AP

Kurt Waldheim

Waldheim denied the allegations, and said he had played no role in Nazi atrocities. He had, he said, simply been doing his duty. But his claims were contradicted by witnesses and documentary evidence — proving, for instance, that even before the war, he had joined the Nazi Student Union and a cavalry unit of the Sturmabteilung (SA). The storm did not prevent him winning the presidency.

But long before the Waldheim affair, Austrians had been forced to confront their countrymen's role in the war, according to Dr Matzner-Holzer, born three months after the war ended in Europe.

"I remember growing up in Vienna after the war, seeing exhibitions, talking to people," she said. "All Nazi Party members were excluded from political life, about 140,000 of them faced criminal investigations, more than 100,000 were dismissed from public service, and more than 100,000 lost their jobs. About 40,000 Austrians were sentenced by the Austrian courts for crimes committed during the Nazi regime, and around 45 were sentenced to death. Most politicians of the immediate post-war period had been in concentration camps. So it's wrong to suggest that there was never any consideration of the Nazi past — there was, at that time, both a public debate and action intended to make the country come to terms with it."

The start of the Cold War put much of the public debate on hold — only for the Waldheim affair to reignite it.

Even as a child, she said, she knew of her own family's stance. Her mother's father, a painter, was a Nazi once commissioned by Goering; her own father, a doctor conscripted into the army, was held as a prisoner of war in Belgium.

But the family was deeply split over Nazism. "My father was never a Nazi, but he had to join a Nazi student organisation to get permission to study medicine as a way to escape military service. He kept delaying his exams so he wouldn't be drafted, but in the end they got him.

"And though my maternal grandfather was a Nazi, his oldest son, a judge, worked for the resistance. The regime caught him in late 1944, and to save him from execution, my grandfather used his [Nazi] contacts to get him a job as a judge in the German army. But my uncle refused to take it." So he was sent to the front, and was dead within 10 days.

Distant relatives also threatened to denounce her mother to the Gestapo in 1945 because Dr Matzner-Holzer's brother was dark-haired. "They said she must have had a Jewish boy with her, because he happened to be rather dark. She fled."

So did her parents know what was happening to the Jews? "They knew that something terrible was happening, yes," she said. "My mother always mourned Mimi, a schoolfriend she loved, who was taken away and never showed up again."

Today, Dr Matzner-Holzer promotes visits by Holocaust survivors to British schools, and supports Austria's "Gedenkdienst" volunteer programme to help with Holocaust education, based at the London Jewish Cultural Centre. She has never forgotten the moment when as an eight-year-old she asked her parents what "Jews" were.

"They told me the story of what had been done to other children, Jewish children, that they'd been thrown against the walls, shot, buried alive," she said. "I was deeply shocked. I felt great compassion."

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THE ATTORNEY-General, Lord Goldsmith, has requested information from the German Justice Minister about the suspicious death of 22-year-old student Jeremiah Duggan in Wiesbaden in 2003. It has never been investigated because German police deemed it suicide — a verdict rejected by a UK inquest.

BREAST CANCER

UK CHARITY Breakthrough Breast Cancer is to provide nearly £70,000 of funding to the Israeli Cancer Association (ICA), to support its involvement in the world's first international treatment trial for hereditary breast cancer. Around one in 44 Ashkenazi Jews may carry a faulty BRCA gene, compared with around one in 100 of non-Jews.

REFORM BLESSING

RABBI Mark Winer, the senior rabbi of West London Synagogue, blessed the same-sex union between Westminster City Council leader Sir Simon Milton and his fellow Jewish councillor Robert Davis at the Ritz Hotel in London on Sunday. The Reform synagogue's council 18 months ago approved its rabbis taking part in a service of blessing for same-sex couples following a civil partnership ceremony.

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