

Kurt Waldheim, former U.N. secretary-general, dies

VATICAN CITY – Kurt Waldheim, former U.N. secretary-general and president of Austria, died June 14 at the age of 88.

The longtime diplomat, who died of heart failure in his home in Vienna, Austria, had been a controversial figure for his World War II role as an officer in the German army, and Vatican interaction with him in the late 1980s and early 1990s sparked criticism from Jewish groups.

An Austrian government study conducted by a panel of international historians investigated Waldheim's role during the war and, in 1988, it concluded there was no proof he committed war crimes. However, it said Waldheim knew of Nazi atrocities and did nothing to stop them.

Before evidence of Waldheim's military activities was published widely in the 1980s, he had served as secretary-general of the United Nations for two terms, from 1972 to 1981. He then taught diplomacy as a visiting professor at Jesuit-run Georgetown University in Washington for two years before returning to Austria.

A global scandal erupted in 1986 while Waldheim was running for president of Austria, a mostly ceremonial post. Evidence emerged that he had not fully disclosed his activities during World War II – specifically that he had served with a Nazi unit involved in war crimes in the Balkans.

Despite the controversy and criticism by international Jewish groups, he was elected and served a full term as president of the country, 1986-1992.

In 1987, the U.S. Justice Department barred him from visiting as a private citizen because of his war record, and many other Western countries boycotted the leader.

During Waldheim's term as Austrian president, Pope John Paul II was the only Western leader to officially meet him as a head of state. The 1987 meeting at the Vatican was the Austrian's first foreign state visit after being elected president, and

it sparked an outpouring of criticism from Israel and Jewish organizations.

During a 1988 pastoral visit to Austria, Pope John Paul met with Austrian government officials, including Waldheim, as part of protocol requirements. During the pope's visit, Waldheim declared that Nazi extermination policies were "a shameful period of our century."

In 1994, Waldheim was made a papal knight for his service as secretary-general of the United Nations. Israel, which just months before had signed an accord establishing diplomatic relations with the Vatican, expressed shock at the move.

The Vatican diplomat who presented Waldheim with the papal award said the Austrian's U.N. leadership was marked by "the safeguarding of human rights, aid for refugees, and solidarity with the numerous problems of humanity in the Third World."

Born into a Catholic family in a small village near Vienna in 1918, Waldheim studied law and diplomacy at a university in Vienna.

After Hitler's military forces invaded and annexed Austria in 1938, Waldheim became part of a Nazi student group and later a member of a Nazi paramilitary group called the brownshirts. Years later, he told journalists he had joined the groups to protect himself and his family; his father had been jailed and lost his job because of his anti-Nazi stance.

Waldheim was drafted to serve the German forces on the eastern front and was wounded in 1941. For years he said that his injury ended his military career. However, after his recovery he continued to serve with the German forces in the Balkans.