

# Roy Meachum

## Symbols

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Part three

In the present furor, it is only Kurt Waldheim's status as a symbol that really matters. The validity of allegations that he may have been willingly involved in wartime crimes has long been lost in the fire-storm that surrounds his name.

As I pointed out in the first two parts of this column series, the man himself has given no evidence of principle in his life. On the public record, Kurt Waldheim is a prime example of the obsequious manipulator.

It is too late now for the American Jewish community to reconsider its judgement that awarded meaning to the meaningless man who presently sits on the meaningless Austrian presidential throne.

Before naming Waldheim as a latter-day Eichman, deserving of international condemnation, evidence should have been gathered and released to the world.

Certainly, the media would have played their role, as demonstrated by the continuing TV programming of Nazi specials: Anything connected with Hitler still holds great fascination for the public taste.

As it was, despite the protests, the Vatican lacked a reason rooted in substance to deny an audience to the man who symbolizes — that word again — Austria, which is not only a Catholic nation, but borders the Iron Curtain.

And the Polish pope believes in brandishing Christianity's symbol, the cross, at communism's symbol, a hammer-and-sickle, given any opportunity.

Fueling the American Jewish leaders' frustration in the current situation is their failure to win Vatican diplomatic recognition for Israel. And American voices dominate the current protests. It should be noted that the chief rabbi of Rome refused to associate himself and his congregation in the demonstrations against Waldheim when he called upon the pope.

On the other hand, as the world's oldest continuous bureaucracy, the Roman curia cannot be moved by the millions of Catholics who want to change the church's positions on birth control and marriage for their priests. Instead, any noisy criticism causes the curial mentality to retreat further behind its



entrenched opinions.

Indeed, it is very conceivable that Waldheim's papal audience was laid on by Vatican officials to symbolize (again the word) their defiance of pressure over Israel from Jews and their friends.

Furthermore, it must not be assumed that John Paul's remarkable strides toward conciliation with world Jewry has eradicated entirely from Catholicism the "Christ killers" slur, particularly among arch conservatives, the apparently reigning faction in today's curia.

All acceptances and arrangements could have been made and presented to the pope as accomplished fact, leaving John Paul to choose between repudiating the Vatican bureaucracy as well as the Austrian people, or taking heat from some Jewish leaders.

Threatening the pope, by demonstrations and with a boycott during his American visit this fall certainly seems contrary to long-range Jewish goals

with the Vatican, including recognition of Israel.

More insidiously, attacking the pope raises the hackles on various necks, not only Vatican bureaucrats.

New York's John Cardinal O'Connor has lamented a sharp rise in anti-semitic sentiment among Catholics who resented derogatory remarks against their church because of the Waldheim affair.

If the Austrian were another Eichman, or even the equal to Klaus Barbie, all this might make sense. However, in neither case would John Paul II have granted an audience, no matter the circumstances.

And that brings up the final irony to be pointed out in this series.

Until the current incident, no one has accused John Paul II of harboring pro-Nazi sentiments, even by indirection. In wartime Poland, this pope acquired first-hand knowledge of the crimes of Hitler and his henchmen. He helped shelter and protect Jews from their hunters, including anti-semitic Poles.

If anything, in his personal life and by his official acts, this pope repudiates Pius XII's "silence" toward Hitler's depravities.

For millions, Catholics and non-

Catholics, including Jews, Pope John Paul II has become the symbol (again) for the Roman church's newly enlightened approach on human rights.

Consideration of the Waldheim controversy began in these three columns with remembrance of the trial of Adolph Eichman during the summer (1961) I spent working at the biography of Jenny Grossinger at her Catskills' hotel.

There were no serious doubts about Eichman's guilt; he freely admitted his crimes. Given that confession by the chief mechanic of the Holocaust, there were still questions raised among Grossinger's entirely Jewish staff about whether Eichman should be sentenced to death.

In the ensuing years, it seems to me, American Jews have lost much of their diversity on public issues. Those who disagree with the leadership's position on any issue find themselves whiplashed by charges of "anti-semitism," which have produced a generally monolithic facade.

As in those discussions over the Eichman trial at Grossinger's, I have abstained from commenting on Waldheim because of the hope it would become another "family quarrel." It seemed to me Jewish voices should question the wisdom of assertions made in all Jews' names.

Since I've heard nothing but silence, then I must speak out, not for Jennie's sake, but because of lessons learned that summer from my spiritual mentor, the *Litvaker reb* who survived Eichman's death factories:

Letting a Waldheim become a cause for confrontation with the Vatican defies all reason; it spits on hopes for a better Jewish relationship with the Christian world, symbolized by the pope. Even in the short-range, it does not help to advance the Roman curia's diplomatic recognition of Israel.

In all this clashing of symbols — more than I have the space to detail — the only real winners are real anti-semites.

And that's the awful truth of the Waldheim affair, as I see it.