

## Transcript: Apartment E

A spoken text about living and working in Apartment E at Villa Waldberta, or, an attempt to open the studio of a writer.

Written by Isabelle Sully for Offene Ateliers Starnberg, July 31–August 1, 2021.

Psssstttttttt. Psssstttttttt. Can you hear me? Come closer. I'm down here in the basement kitchen, whispering from below for the lives already given to work. Or, at least, this was a kitchen once. Its remaining features give that away. A large sink, a stovepipe, the remnants of a dumbwaiter to carry food between floors. Did you know that's what the food lifts customary to large houses are called? I didn't, until I began writing this text. Dumbwaiter or lazy waiter, *Speiseaufzug* in German; a name of ironic proportions, given that the request to remain invisible is itself a labourous task.

This dumbwaiter, let's call her Maria—after Maria Hutterer, the housekeeper from 1950 to 1966, after Maria Brandl, the housemaid from the same time, after Maria Wenzel, who could be Maria Wenzel nee Hutterer or who could also be not this Maria at all. This dumbwaiter travels up from the basement kitchen—which now stands as a holding zone for artworks past, those which once adorned the walls of the villa and which now, as time tends to do to us, sit here tired and retired. It travels up to the current kitchen, where another housekeeper, a Maria of sorts, is currently preparing a meal. Perhaps this means the new kitchen used to be the old dining room, or perhaps there were two kitchens; a kitchen for cooking and kitchen for preparing, one sitting perfectly atop the other in a neat hierarchy of culinary labour.

From here it goes up a floor further, to the beginnings of Apartment E—one of many apartments that make up the house as we know it now. This first floor of Apartment E now operates as a kitchen, but betrayed by the dumbwaiter Maria, this room was clearly once a place to dine. The end of the line of culinary labour and the end of the line of rope that raises food from floor to floor; a pulley of elevatory proportions ensuring that one stays in their place. Now, also retired, Maria dumbwaiter is a diagram at best. In its pull towards elevation it tells us how the space was organised and how staff and residents fell into line accordingly. The elevation of some over others; an architecture of human relations.

There is also an internal staircase that connects the levels too. Someone told me that a ghost now lives in there, an urban legend part and parcel of a building that carries so many histories in its architectural bones. To the right a former SS training camp, to the left an adjoining property with no separating fence. But spanning three floors, you climb the staircase from the new kitchen up to the old dining room and right into the bulging belly of Apartment E. The staircase tells me that the second floor of Apartment E was once the living quarters of the housemaids, who descended the stairs to the kitchen and who then returned to sleep, the impoliteness of their labour concealed by a secret passage of banal proportions. And here we were thinking that working from home, or living at work, is a new phenomenon.

I now sit and write in Apartment E, its current manifestation a studio for art. Or in this case a writing room with a lake view. It's an interesting passage of history that has unfolded within the walls of the villa, one that, if you look closely enough, carries within it a history of publishing. Read between the lines and you will find Bernhard Wilhelm Schuler, a deeply Catholic man with a 'talent for writing,' so the history book tells us. In 1901 Bernhard Wilhelm Schuler bought the plot of land where you now stand for 30,000 marks. And in 1902, when it neared completion, he had a mural of another Maria, the Virgin Maria herself, painted on its lake-facing

exterior in an act of devotion. The first Maria to grace the villa, and upon whose arrival so began the history of publishing—a history of which, you could say, I am now a part.

You see, Bernhard Schuler was an unfulfilled banker—a symptom, I presume, to which many bankers are prone—and so he busied himself with a love of literature. Working under the pseudonym ‘Alberto,’ he edited and annotated an original text of Dante’s, later publishing German translations of the work to much acclaim. And just like the saints he worshiped, he was anointed as a ‘protector and patron of education for the people’ and a ‘knight of the Italian crown.’ And upon the passing of his brother in 1914, again mimicking his religious service, he devoted himself entirely to writing.

Then came Albertus Willem Sijthoff, who painted over Maria the First with his own crest. And just like that the Virgin Maria was replaced by a sea eagle, replaced by a sea eagle in 1903, before the area became home to the architecture of the Nationalist Socialist Party, before the elite training camps and the military hospitals, before Dacchau’s sibling, the Konzentrationlager of Feldafing, before people were displaced.

Albertus Willem Sijthoff came from the Netherlands off the back of his reputation as a successful publisher from Feldafing. I too came here from the Netherlands, or from Australia via the Netherlands, perhaps I should say. I too came here from the Netherlands off the back of my work as a publisher, but unlike Albertus Willem Sijthoff, I don’t have a wife who sat in the villa and wrote, who wrote a kind of literature that is not known under the name of Waldemar von Hoff. But while Waldine Sijthoff could sit with the Virgin Maria, with Maria Brandl, Maria Wenzel nee Hutterer or Maria Wenzel and Maria Hutterer proper, in that her work was lost or at least not wholly visible, at least her name is carried on still to this day, in part, as when naming the villa, and as in marriage, Albertus and Waldine Sijthoff became one: ceremoniously wedding their two Christian names to arrive at Waldberta.

Albertus Willem Sijthoff had the white-tailed sea eagle painted on the lake-facing side of the house as it was the heraldic figure of his publishing company, another inscription, literally, of the history of publishing at Villa Waldberta. This eagle, who is still perched there to this day, was encircled by the Old Flemish motto of the Sijthoff publishing house, ‘Altyt Waek Saem’: ‘vigilance at all times’, a saying which carries A for Albertus, W for Willem and S for Sijthoff, and which therefore ensures that unlike Waldine, his literature was known.

After him came Hugo Schmeil, chairman of the board to Krause und Baumann until 1921, a paper factory in Dresden specialising in the production of premium quality paper, like that from which calendars are made and on which time is measured. Then came his sons, another line of sorts, this time of ancestry and inheritance: they too inherited the love for paper, with one becoming the director of the factory in Dresden and another becoming the general director of Leykam-Josefsthal AG in Vienna—a company also busy with the production of paper and the turning of ink into print.

And as for the final owner of the house, before it was handed over to the state, well Bertha Koempel, also known as the old lady, the one who ‘possessed a resolute personality,’ ‘who liked to set the tone,’ whose ‘instructions had to be carried out to the letter,’ was a poet of sorts. She first wrote her testament, which carried in it her wish for the property to be used for community purposes on the occasion of her death. Then in 1954 she penned another, and a year later in 1955, a recitation of a poem of hers solidified her bequest:

Benefactor from far away  
I appear here in your circle

Where I know my work, long devised,  
To be understood and secure.

And now I sit here in Apartment E, amidst the community purposes, writing as a woman as I was invited to do. And now that I am asked to open my studio, I wonder how it is possible to do so, given that the house itself is under lock and key and given that the open studio of a writer looks much like the labour of Maria Brandl, Maria Wenzel nee Hutterer or Maria Wenzel and Maria Hutterer proper, in the sense that when you look at a presentation suspended in the pause of a room there is not much sign of production. But my thoughts travel down the internal staircase—the passage between me and the many Marias—and leak out here to you now in the forecourt, sound bleeding out an open window as a way to let you in to a practice of writing that is inside, living alongside a history of publishing and the lives already given to work.