



The first four sparrows in April 2010 with teacher Sophie in our apartment. Zoe, Mia and Lisa during the Soccer World Cup 2014.

Eight years is a long time. From the end of elementary school to high school graduation. From the beginning of one's studies to the doctorate. Or just from the first child's entry into a kindergarten until the second child, born four years later, leaves the same. When such periods come to an end, an inner voice awakens, calling for a summary, a résumé; probably out of an inner need to make sense of such an important time, to integrate it into the life-structure and also to conclude it spiritually. Such retrospectives are also motivated by the uncertainty about the next chapter of one's life and thus turn into an outlook.

For us, everything began with the birth of our daughter Zoe on 25 May 2008 in the sublime Semmelweiss clinic in Vienna's 18th district at the edge of the beautiful Vienna Woods, the easternmost foothills of the Alps, where the Germanic world meets the Slavic and Magyar and countless places still tell the story of the widest extent of the Ottoman Empire in Christian Europe. The *Türkenschanzpark*, right on our doorstep, a beautiful park with huge sandy playgrounds and mighty chestnut trees more than a hundred years old, was a young family paradise surrounded by countless childcare facilities. As Zoe began to walk her first steps, we visited both public and private kindergartens, day care centers, self-organized groups of children, most located within a 10 minute walk from our condo.

We finally decided on a private kindergarten right at the north entrance of *Türkenschanzpark*, which convinced us because of its connection with a geriatric facility in the same building. When we went there the little dwarves were just for their weekly visit to the seniors and for me the agony of choice came to a quick end. All of the kindergartens we had seen had mostly bilingual care, high-quality wooden furniture, safe wooden toys, a private garden with playground. The idea to combine a kindergarten with a retirement home, however, we found awesome and very affordable for EUR 150 per month due to a government subsidy.

Zoe was barely a year old when she spent her first day without mom in the [Kindercompany Währing](#); and although she was very small, we knew her in good hands. Xue could calmly continue her studies at the nearby University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, from



where she could come to kindergarten in a few minutes in the case of an emergency, and I took my city scooter to work each day to earn a living in southern Vienna. On afternoons and weekends we pushed Zoe through the Türkenschanzpark in a 2nd-hand Bogaboo or went for a walk or hike in the Prater and the vineyards on the edge of the Vienna Woods.

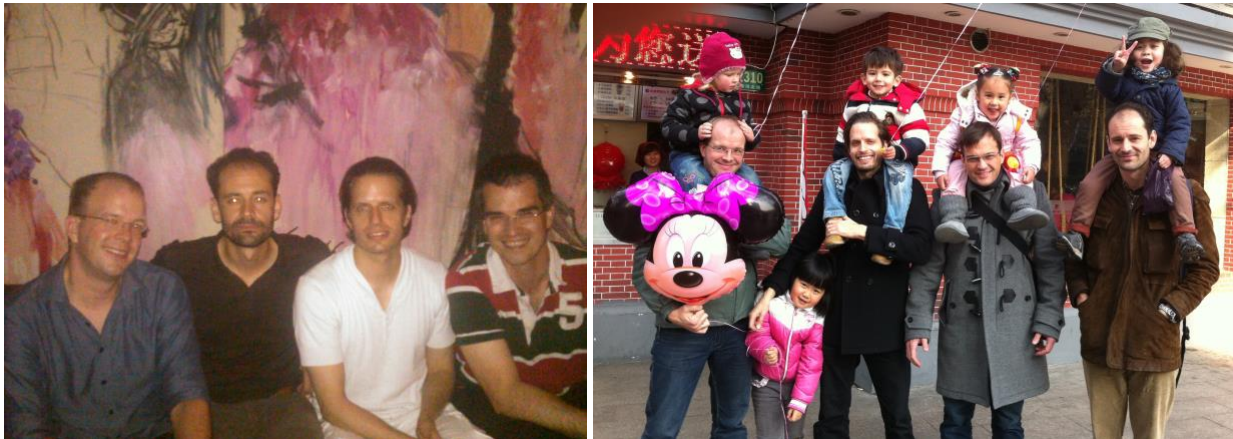
This familial harmony was to come to a quick end when, just six months later, it was somewhat surprising that I was offered a difficult to turn down job in Shanghai. I must confess that sometimes I wonder if I did not risk too much back then. In retrospect, Vienna is an idyll one can only dream of as a young family, especially when it comes to childcare; but you get what you want from life, and since our first stay in China in the early 2000s, I had nothing else in mind than to return to the Middle Kingdom.



Bösselmanns with Lisa 2010 and Christian as Nikolaus in the first Sparrownest apartment in 2011

So I started my new job in Shanghai in September 2009 and spent my free time during the first three months looking for a place to stay for the family and a kindergarten for Zoe, while she continued to live in Vienna with her mama. I quickly realized that Shanghai was not the least comparable to Vienna in terms of childcare. Absurdly expensive private kindergartens, which were mostly located in hard-to-reach suburbs, stood in stark contrast to cheap but poorly equipped public kindergarten's in downtown, which reminded me of Oliver Twist like conditions.

Therefore, in November 2009, I made the decision to set up my own children's group, which was both affordable and centrally located, and published an advertisement on several expat platforms. In reply to one of them a certain Christian Bösselmann from Hamburg got in touch, and so we started our journey together in the [Sparrow's Nest](#). With Christian and Beata, Xue and I have today a close friendship that arose out of a problem, a pain point as it is called today in social entrepreneurship, with which both families were confronted at the same time and to which they found a solution together. Our solution was never ideal or even perfect, but it was an approach to our ideas and a significant improvement over the status quo.



The fathers of the first four sparrows 2010: Christian Bösselmann, Knut Wimberger, Thomas Seifert, Willi Vett. The first SN Parent Board: Thomas Seifert (Finance), Christoph Daniel Jia (HR), Christian Bösselmann, Knut Wimberger.

The Sparrow's Nest is now officially in its ninth year of operation and with our departure in June 2018, the last generation of the founding generation left a dynamic community. This is a good point, just like anyone else, to pause and reflect on what these eight years have meant to us. What did we learn from this intense non-profit experience? Would we do it again? Or otherwise? What remains in the flow of time when the children grow up and the kindergarten age is forgotten?

Today, few people are aware of the efforts required in particular during the foundation phase of the sparrow's nest. Week-long search for housing, contract negotiations, renovation, the administrative settlement of a neighboring dispute, loud arguments with police, education and trade authorities, where we were reported by our neighbors, and the risk of financial investments. Many are aware of the challenges of running the Sparrow's Nest in its present form: repeated difficulties in obtaining visas for the teaching staff, constant navigation in a gray area and, as a result, staff uncertainty about their own jobs, repeated flare-ups of intercultural disputes between Chinese and German-speaking parents, and the ongoing problem of winning parents over for many volunteer assignments.

The Sparrow's Nest is now since about five years in current size with 24 day care places and four full-time equivalent teachers. The tasks in a non-profit institution change in their growth as well as in the life cycle of a company. The start-up phase brings with it different challenges than the consolidation phase. Non-profit organizations, however, always have to deal with two fundamentally different factors in contrast to for-profit companies. On the one hand, in the case of the parents, the contributions of the participants can't be clearly quantified and rewarded accordingly. There is no regular working time, which is compensated with an industry standard salary. On the other hand, the beneficiaries of a





non-profit institution, in the case of the Sparrow's Nest, both the children and the parents, are not treated as customers or employees of the company. This automatically creates tensions between those who get involved and those who consume more exclusively. This is an attempt to explain comprehensibly the altruistic approach of getting involved.



Yaya and Lisa 2012 in Dongfang Park. Teachers Maren, Li Qian and Feng with the children 2012.

We have never kept record of the number of hours which we invested in the Sparrow's Nest, but they are substantial. Xue spent a good portion of her second pregnancy overseeing the renovations in the current apartment and was in charge of food procurement for quite about two years. Christian spent hours planning the apartment and instructing the workers how to do the installation and repairs. So many other parents like Thomas, CD, Tao, Juan, Judith, Jonas, Andrea, Jörn and Monika have mostly sacrificed their free time next to a busy professional life to keep this little institution alive and sound. An attempt to describe the support of helping hand must fail. One can only wonder that, despite repeated bottlenecks and dead ends, a fragile facility such as the Sparrow's Nest could be operated so long and so far; and you have to thank those who made it possible and continue to do so.

In retrospect, it is really only necessary to ask why one spends his time without getting a monetary remuneration, as we are used to in the capitalist system. What is it that motivates us to contribute? My original motivation to initiate a children's group was, as already stated, a pain point: no affordable and centrally located early childcare facility in Shanghai. The Sparrow's Nest continues to serve this purpose, although CNY 3800 is difficult to explain as non-profit, at least for European standards. I still remember that in 2010 we targeted a monthly contribution of CNY 2000, but above all the costs for the teachers and the rent of the apartment have greatly increased over the years.

Other unplanned benefits came quickly, such as being integrated into a loose German-speaking community, which felt good in the anonymity of the big city of Shanghai. Talking to other parents of a similar age and life situation, including weekend picnicking at the zoo



or going for a walk in Zhongshan Park, chatting about about common parenting challenges can't really be quantified with money. The many hikes we have made with part of the Sparrow's Nest tribe in Zhejiang will always be a precious memory both for us and for our children. And who knows, maybe some of our children will stay in contact over the years, forming lifelong friendships because of this first few years together.



Selena and Wiola with the Hedgehog Group 2016. Zoe, Philip, Lynn and Lisa in Berlin 2017.

Every hour invested in the here and now without any expectation of payment is invested by an invisible hand in a mysterious bank at high interest rates. At least that's my impression and probably the most important lesson learned from the Sparrow's Nest project. Our visit to the Bösselmans in Hamburg this week, where they returned in 2015, confirmed this once again. Moreover, my work as a kindergarten board member has taught me a lot about myself and how to deal with others. It is strange, but in my perception, we don't wear masks in a non-profit environment, where we share the same mission without much discussion, while we are always on the alert in a for profit workplace, trying not negatively attract other people's attention. In that sense, working in the Sparrow's Nest has sharpened my intra- and interpersonal intelligence more than my wage labor has ever done. Working with parents for the well-being of all children has a different quality than working with co-workers to achieve sales goals for products that may not support one hundred percent.

Nobody knows how long this little kindergarten will last, but it is certainly worthwhile to embark on this adventure and invest one's time in this bank with high interest rates. Our children are a chance to go beyond us and experience what Abraham Maslow described as the human desire for transcendence: to realize oneself by helping others. Our children are an indirect door to this transcendence, for we are committed to them to actually satisfy another human need, that of belonging and love.





Hiking in Zhejiang 2016 with families Pihs, Merian, Christ, Skubin.

The human being is first and foremost a social being, who rarely lives alone or wants to live alone. We all have this need to be part of a community. Forming a partnership and starting a family is one of the most basic ways to satisfy this need. Caring for one's own children, giving them good care and upbringing, a logical outlet of this need. It is therefore not an altruistic motivation, but rather a selfish one, when we engage in parenting initiatives for our children. However, once we have passed through this door of our own flesh and blood, we can learn that any commitment to the next, even an action in their own interest. Altruism and selfishness thus become recognizable as two sides of the same coin and one understands why it makes sense to work for others.

In this respect, at least Xue and I can answer the above questions clearly yes. We would get involved again in the Sparrow's Nest and we are grateful for all the experiences we have gained during these eight years, both the sweet and the bitter one's.



Families Bösselmann and Wimberger 2018. With Christian Bösselmann in September 2018 in front of the Elbphilharmonie, Hamburg.