



Goldenstein Castle in Elsbethen, Austria, is home to the abbey. A religious order of sisters moved in nearly 150 years ago.

The Parable of 3 Nuns And an Escape Plot

Returning Home After an Unhappy Move

By CHRISTOPHER F. SCHUETZE and JIM TANKERSLEY

ELSBETHEN, Austria — The three surviving sisters of the Austrian chapter of the Canonesses of St. Augustine never cared much for their new retirement home. The rooms were small. They missed their old garden. For the first time in 60 years, they were asked to eat regularly with men.

Less than five miles away lay their former home, an abbey in a castle built in the Middle Ages. Nearby is a cemetery, and on a wall there are engraved the names of the sisters who had lived, prayed, taught and died at the abbey since their order moved in nearly 150 years ago. The surviving sisters — Sister Rita, Sister Regina and Sister Bernadette, who use only their religious names — were meant to be the final three on the list. This was where they wanted to be.

And so at a gathering of former students who loved them, a plan was hatched to free the nuns.

“From the very beginning,” Sister Bernadette said in an interview, “I wanted to go home.”

Much is in dispute about the sisters’ story, which has ballooned

Christopher F. Schuetze reported from Elsbethen, Austria, and Jim Tankersley from Berlin. Johannes Gress contributed reporting from Reichersberg, Austria.

into a social media sensation. Were they forced to move from their old convent? Was it unsafe? When they broke back into their former home — which they did — did they also break the law?

This much is certain: The flight of the nuns is a story about the difficulties of aging. For people, of course, but also for institutions.

The Roman Catholic Church is a cultural force in Austria, but it is losing nuns. Its count of nunneries fell to 102 in 2024, from 120 in 2010. In 2010, there were 4,200 nuns in Austria. Last year, there were 2,417.

Sister Bernadette is now 88. There were 35 nuns when she joined the abbey at Goldenstein Castle in Elsbethen, just outside Salzburg, in 1955. The nuns lived together in one part of the building on the grounds and taught school in another. Over time their numbers dwindled. For nearly 20 years, it has just been Sisters Bernadette; Rita, now 81; and Regina, now 86.

In 2022, a new manager took over their convent: Markus Grasl, an abbot whom, coincidentally, they knew when he was a teenager. Citing a church rule that orders must have at least six living members, the abbot said nearly two years ago that the nuns had to move. One day their cars disappeared.

The abbot referred questions to his spokesman, who said the nuns



From left, Sister Bernadette, Sister Rita and Sister Regina. The nuns decided they were unhappy at a retirement center and hatched a plan to move back into the abbey they had lived in for decades.

agreed to move out. The nuns dispute this.

No one disputes their misery in the new environment, a retirement home run by the church in a nearby town that also houses retired male clergy members. Sister Rita cried when she arrived. In Sister Regina’s small room at the home, visitors found she didn’t get up from bed. She seemed to have lost the will to live.

Last October, a group of the nuns’ former students met for a class reunion. They discussed their teachers’ desire to return to the abbey. The only thing to do, they decided, was to break the nuns’ out.

“They were just unhappy,” said Christina Wirtenberger, 65, a former student.

There was a vow of silence over the plan. Sister Regina and Sister Rita each broke it. Apparently nobody noticed or cared.

On Sept. 4 at 2 p.m., the escape began. Ms. Wirtenberger appeared in

front of the senior center in a black Opel sedan. She was trailed by a white moving truck and a flock of reporters, tipped off by the former students. The press attention, Ms. Wirtenberger hoped, would pressure the abbot into acceptance.

The small caravan drove about

The last of their order fell in a dispute with the church they serve.

15 minutes to the old abbey. It was vacant. The power was shut off, and so was the water to the showers. The sisters’ helpers had arranged for a locksmith to let them in. The nuns walked up four flights of stairs to their old rooms. The electric stairlift they had been using to complete their twice-daily prayers had vanished.

Officials at the senior home reported the nuns to the police as missing. Two officers were dispatched to the abbey. One happened to be a former student. She hugged the nuns. The nuns denied breaking in, and so the police left.

Two weeks later, the dark and musty corridors of the nunnery were abuzz with improvements arranged by a network of about 200 supporters who had joined a WhatsApp group set up by Ms. Wirtenberger. Lights were back on. New refrigerators were running. Security cameras had been installed in the stairwell.

The story has been covered by the BBC and CNN, among others. A reporter from the Süddeutsche Zeitung, a German newspaper, set up an inflatable mattress, preparing to spend the night.

Supporters bring food for the nuns and help clean their new old home. Someone set up an Instagram account to post clips of the nuns back in the abbey. It was rapidly gaining followers, topping



Top, Christina Wirtenberger, one of the nuns’ former students, assisted in the plan to return them to their abbey. Above, the chapel of the abbey.

42,000 on Saturday.

On a recent visit, the women set their lunch table together, unfolding a white tablecloth with a choreographed precision that suggested years of repetition.

Sister Regina, who once taught math and calligraphy and is now the most frail of the three, dozed off during the visit. Sister Bernadette, a former home economics teacher, seemed to have mellowed from the days when former students recalled her as a sometimes terrifying disciplinarian.

The nuns said they enjoyed the new attention but mostly wanted to return to normal life in their old home.

Sitting at an antique wooden table at the top floor of the abbey, Sister Rita said she particularly hoped to tame the overgrown greenhouse in the garden. She also hoped to reconcile with the abbot.

“I still like him,” she said. The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment. The abbot’s spokesman, Harald Schiffel, said church officials felt helpless amid the media blitz. They were mostly baffled, he said, as to why the women had left what he characterized as a good life in their retirement home and returned to an abbey that he said was structurally precarious and a health hazard.

But, he allowed, “it’s clear that it’s not easy to leave a place where you’ve lived for decades.”

Mr. Schiffel said church officials had not spoken with the nuns. They had no immediate plans to do so.

SOUTH KOREA DISPATCH

Daring U.S. Move to Free Korean City Fortifies a Bond 75 Years Later

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member” festivities embody the gratefulness many South Koreans still feel toward the Americans. But the alliance has been roiled in recent months as the Trump administration outraged South Korea by imposing heavy tariffs on its exports and by arresting hundreds of its citizens who were building a factory in Ellabell, Ga.

This is not the first time that some South Koreans are questioning the dynamics of the relationship with Washington. Some progressives no longer see it as a savior but as a bully. They have demanded the removal of the MacArthur statue, which was built in 1957 with citizens’ donations, once setting a fire on the pedestal.

But like in years past, Incheon pressed ahead with its annual celebration, reaffirming its singular place in South Korea’s modern history and its ties with the United States.

“Without the Incheon landing, South Korea as we know it would not have existed,” Mayor Yoo Jeong Bok said in an interview. “It reminds us that when we keep the alliance strong, we can keep South Korea free and defend the free world.”

On Sept. 15, 1950, Allied transport ships strung out down the Incheon channel as far as the eye could see. American Marines clambered down cargo nets into flat-bottomed landing craft, as warships pounded the beaches with shells to soften the enemy defense. Allied planes zoomed over, bombing and strafing the sea walls.

Today, Incheon’s bustling port exemplifies the contrast between the globalized South and the isolated North of the Korean Peninsula.



JUN MICHAEL PARK FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Cruise ships ply the waters along with commercial vessels shipping out South Korean exports like Kia cars and bringing in oil and natural gas to fuel its economy, one of Asia’s largest. Tall port silos and derricks loom over what used to be the sea walls U.S. Marines had to scale. Wolmido — an Incheon islet that American warplanes napalmed before the landing, not only scorching North Korean pillboxes but also killing villagers — now hosts an amusement park where children scream on roller coasters.

To the south, mud flats have been replaced with piers stacked with shipping containers, and the Songdo free economic zone, which is home to outposts of American universities, a thriving

biotech industry and gleaming skyscrapers housing United Nations offices. Incheon is now among South Korea’s fastest growing cities. It has overtaken Busan, another port city, in terms of economic output and is second only to Seoul.

In Incheon, young couples and students used to take wedding and school album photos in front of the MacArthur statue. There were even shamans who adopted the dead American general as a deity and performed rituals around his statue, said You Dong-hyun, the former director of the Incheon Metropolitan City Museum. Those shamans are long gone but on a recent sultry evening, an old man circled the statue, chanting Buddhist verses, while others walked their dogs in

the park.

“There is respect for General MacArthur and American troops sacrificed during the landing,” said Lee Sang-suk, 60. “Their image as the national savior is especially strong among old generations here.”

Yong Suck Shin, a retired journalist, was 9 when he watched American Marines handing out chocolates to children after liberating Incheon. This year, he helped organize an exhibition about Marguerite Higgins, an American war correspondent who scaled a sea wall with the Marines to report the landing.

“I am so proud of the landing that when I traveled abroad, I used to carry a photo of the MacArthur statue so I could



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General MacArthur’s military maneuver is commemorated at the Memorial Hall for Incheon Landing Operation in the city.

explain where I came from,” Mr. Shin said.

For centuries Korea was known as the hermit kingdom. It opened up for trade only in the late 1800s, when Incheon was a cluster of muddy fishing huts. Japan, China and the United States all established trade posts in Incheon because of its proximity to Seoul.

American missionaries also arrived through Incheon, bringing Western medicine and education with them. Today, roughly 30 percent of all South Koreans identify as Christian. Korea’s first railway, highway and telegram lines all started from Incheon. Its first baseball and soccer games were held in Incheon. The old port area now attracts tourists with museums, alleys with turn-of-the-century themes and with its Chinatown, the birthplace of a national noodle dish called jajangmyeon.

“Modern civilization arrived in Korea through Incheon,” said Vice Mayor Hwang Hyejin. Postwar Incheon attracted migrants seeking jobs unloading flour and other American aid shipments or at factories that

were springing up around the city. But it has always been overshadowed by its bigger neighbor, Seoul. Incheon was the gateway to Seoul and everything seemed to pass through it, not anchoring down.

That began changing in the early 2000s with the opening of Incheon International Airport, one of the world’s largest, and the Songdo free economic zone, both on reclaimed land.

At the ceremony on Monday, Gen. Xavier T. Brunson, the top U.S. military officer in South Korea, said, “The Republic of Korea that we see today — strong, prosperous and democratic — stands as living proof of what can be accomplished when allies and partners join together.”

But this narrative is harder to accept for younger generations, who unlike their grandparents have not experienced war. The Trump administration has made it even trickier.

This year’s ceremonies came “at a bad time because people feel humiliated by the Georgia episode,” said Mr. You, the former museum director. “Some people were so angered by it that they say South Korea should align itself with China, although I don’t think they are serious when they say so.”

To Kim Young-rak, 49, the Incheon landing has become more relevant than ever. He cited North Korea’s expanding nuclear threat and the deepening rivalry between the United States and China.

“The Americans crossed the Pacific 75 years ago to help push back Communists barreling down the Korean Peninsula,” said Mr. Kim, who watched the annual parade with his wife and son. “South Korea and the United States must band together again to deter North Korea and China.”