

Multiply unheard and rendered invisible

On the intersectionality of Gerty
Landesberger alias Felice Wolmut
as an exiled woman in music

By Marie-Anne Kohl



Abstract

As both gender and exile music research deal with ruptures in biographies and the scatteredness of remaining sources, women musicians affected by escape and exile are often confronted with a double erasure from music history. An example is Felice Wolmut—singer, composer, music therapist and pedagogue—whose estate lies scattered across various archives and whose story and musical creations remain unpublished to this day. Her ego documents draw a fascinating image of an intellectual musician, born in the Vienna of the Fin de siècle, socialised in Red Vienna, who escaped Nazi Vienna and started a completely new life in exile in the USA. The sources offer insights into Wolmut's views on the artistic and political developments of the time and on the violent, patriarchal societies she was part of. Her autobiography, written in the late 1970s, reveals just as much about the 80-year-old narrating Wolmut as it does about the younger, narrated Wolmut. This article is based on a critical assessment of the sources, asking how they can help construct the historical figure 'Felice Wolmut', a woman and a musician whose voice has historiographically been (made) forgotten.

Keywords: Exile, Displacement, Gender-based violence, C20 Music Culture, Autobiographical Narration

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Felice Wolmut—also known by other names—was a singer, composer, accompanist, music therapist and pedagogue—born in the Vienna of the Fin de siècle into a wealthy family of Jewish converts, socialised impoverished in Red Vienna, who escaped Nazi Vienna and spent the second half of her life in US American exile. To this day, her name(s) and her achievements are virtually unknown.

This article suggests that this historiographical neglect is due to the intersectionality of her identity as a woman and an exile. It critically assesses the few scattered sources that provide information about her life in the light of exile and autobiographical writing. Who is the historical figure 'Felice Wolmut' whom these sources allow to (re-)construct? What can we learn from her accounts about her different contexts and times, especially in terms of living an artist identity as a woman in a patriarchal society, facing displacement, and re-considering one's own life experiences in the light of changes in history?

Exile music research has for a long time focused almost exclusively on the biographies of male composers (Stahrenberg 2024, p. 524). Perspectives on the work of women remained marginal, partly due to a perpetuated focus on discourses of genius, corresponding to a general bias in music historiography. Lisa Fischer (2016) remarks in her study of female composers in exile that even when women were co-producers of men's work, which happened often enough, the female part was frequently ignored and disappeared behind a male copyright (p. 7). By and large, "[the erasure of female creation] already happens during [a woman's] lifetime through spouses, teachers, critics, publishers, directors and, posthumously, through historiography." (Fischer, p. 11f., own translation)ⁱ Nils Grosch (2024) points out that exile music research, which started to take shape in the late 1970s, has only in recent decades started to look at other professional musicians besides composers, or at musicologists or "musical agency" in general (p. 59).

This is a timeframe corresponding to musicological gender research that has long shown that a long-denied acknowledgement of women's musical agency not only calls for the field of research to be expanded, but that this very field itself needs to be contoured differently through alternative perspectives. A general readjustment is required in what is considered historically relevant. In this broader view, elements like performance, patronage, space, and networks gain significance alongside composition and interpretation. Taking this point of view, it becomes very clear that, in music research, all musical activity must be embedded in a wider socio-cultural and political framework. Furthermore, as Philipp Ewell (2023) has emphasised in his analyses of the racism immanent to music theory, it is not enough to bring the figures into light that had structurally been disregarded and erased, more urgently it needs light to be shed on the very activities that let and continue to lead to marginalisation and erasure (3). This paper adopts this expanded framework to address the exclusions and biases shaping music history, questioning the ways in which certain figures and activities were (and continue to be) marginalised or erased. Particularly within exile music research, understanding ruptures in biographies and archives—often inflicted violently—reveals gaps that make it challenging to ask who and what remains absent but necessitates questions on how these erasures occurred and why they should never recur. Women affected by exile and migration often face an intersectional erasure, in which 'making disappear through omission', as Ilse Korotin (2005, p. 6) describes in the context of the remigration of female academics after the Second World War, remains only the surface of deeper historical neglect.

The archive of the Viennese Exilarte Centre for Banned Music, based at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, "operates as a centre for the reception [and] preservation of [musicians] who were branded as 'degenerate' during the years of the 'Third

Reich'" (Exilarte Center, 2025, Mission Statement of the Exilarte Center). It continually expands its "broad range of musical exile-material" (Exilarte Center, 2025, Estates) on the basis of various estates. It thus performs important work in terms of memory politics. Among these estates are only a few women. As previously elaborated, this circumstance is not so much surprising as it is paradigmatic. On the one hand, women's estates are less likely to have been collected,ⁱⁱ on the other hand, women's life circumstances of that era simply did not give them much of a chance to prosper as public and creative figures who were deemed memorable. Susanne Thomasberger (2016, p. 5) notes that even before the horrors of the Third Reich, it was not expected by women to declare creative expression a self-determined profession. Women were often denied the capacity for artistic creation. Thomasberger describes that an incipient change in society's perception of the image of women, which went hand in hand with the active struggle for women's rights and freely chosen self-definition, including a professional one, was brought to stagnancy by a radical anti-feminism under National Socialism. As she puts it, "Women's emancipation was defined as an expression of 'absolute degeneration'" (p. 5, own translation)ⁱⁱⁱ. These contexts are also relevant for Gerty Felice Wohlmuth. Under this name, the Exilarte Center holds an estate which consists of a handful of compositions (manuscripts and photocopies): a sonata for violin and piano in G minor and eight songs from 1917 signed Gerty Landesberger, among them "Der junge Dichter denkt an die Geliebte" ("The young poet thinks of his beloved") [Figure 1] and "Ich weiß nicht, was es ist ..." ("I don't know, what it is ...") [Figure 2].

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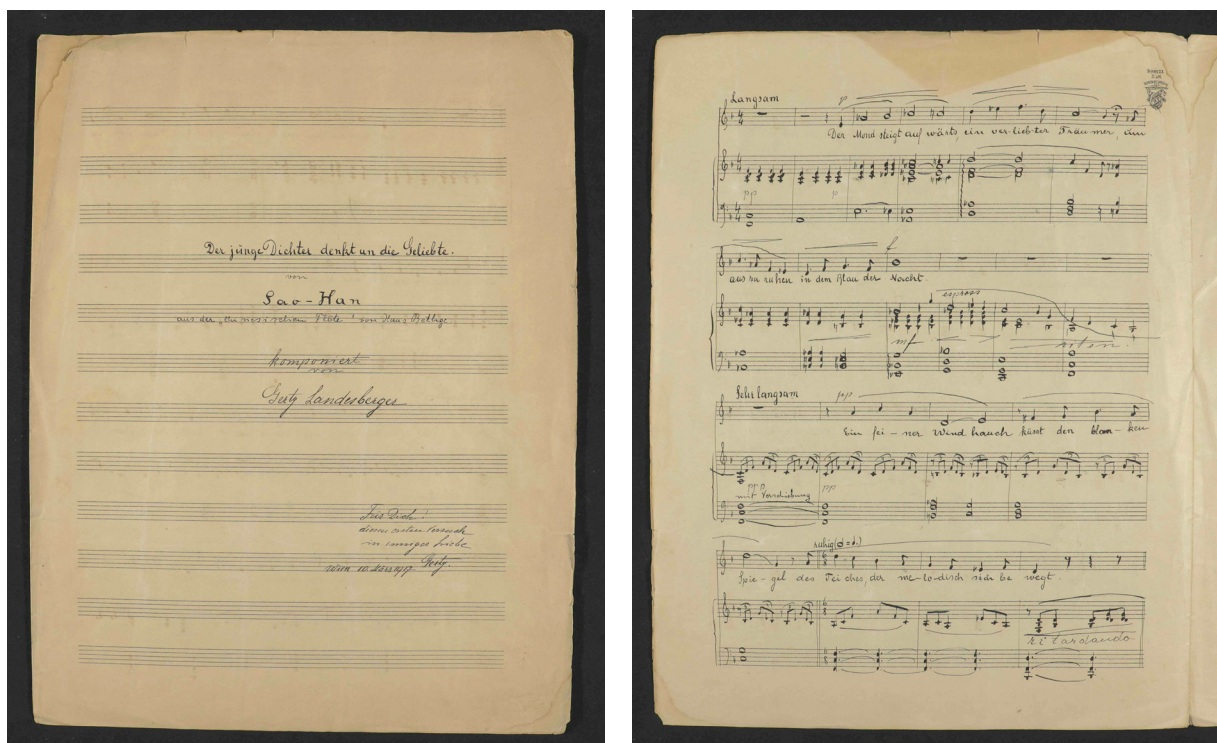


Figure 1. Gerty Landesberger, “Der junge Dichter denkt an die Geliebte” [sheet music], 1917, title page and first page of score, Exilarte Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmuth“.

For me, as a music historian, it was the first time I had come across a composer by that name.

At the outset, I didn’t know how to contextualise these compositions. Thanks to the Biographical Dictionary of Persecuted Musicians 1933-1945 (Maurer Zenck et al., since 2005) and the online Austrian Music Encyclopedia (Kornberger, 2023), which identifies Felice Wolmut as a singer, a singing teacher, a music therapist, and a translator (note: not as a composer!), I was able to gather further information, including, most importantly, the names this person had assumed throughout her life.^{iv} She was born “Gertrud Natalia Stefania Felicia Landesberger” in Vienna on January 14th, 1897—later to include “von Antburg” after her father was ennobled by Emperor Franz Joseph in 1916—although she was known by the name Gerty Landesberger. Upon her first marriage in 1920 to the author

Emil Alphons Rheinhardt (which ended in 1924), she became “Gerty Rheinhardt”. From 1929, when she started her career as an opera singer, she called herself “Gerty Stoerk”^v using her mother’s maiden name. From around 1933, she assumed the stage name “Felice (von) Antburg”, adapted to “Mme Felice d’Antbourg” for her appearances in Luxembourg in the 1930s. She maintained this pseudonym after her emigration to the USA in 1938. Upon her second marriage to the opera director Hans Wohlmuth in 1935, she became known as “Felice Wohlmuth”, which later became anglicised to Wolmut, a name she kept until her death in Portland, USA, on August 17th, 1989.^{vi}

Beyond this quite detailed information, there is hardly any literature published on Felice Wolmut. In a diploma thesis submitted at the University of Music

and Performing Arts Vienna (mdw), music therapy student Mira Hüser (2021) focuses on Wolmut’s career as a pioneering music therapist in the USA, where in the 1960s (and now in her 60s) she gained two BAs, one in sociology and one in psychology. She worked in this field until 1980, aged 83. Parts of Hüser’s thesis are published in an article in a music therapist journal (2024). Further, there is half an article on Wolmut as a music therapist in a self-published book by US-American music therapist Ted Ficken from 2020. Beyond that, there are, as far as my research goes so far, only a few mentions of Wolmut in other publications, such as her first husband Rheinhardt’s published diaries (2013) covering the years 1943-45, the published diaries of the author Arthur Schnitzler (as of January 20, 2025) covering the years 1879-1931, or in Veigl & Fink (2012) a collection of names of persecuted and expelled

Austrian cabaret artists (which, however, incorrectly ascribes her profession as “Disease”). Historiographically, Wolmut has been forgotten. Any documents that can reveal more about this fascinating figure of the 20th century remain in the depths of the archives.

Hüser’s thesis is based on the most important source, a typewritten and manually corrected unpublished autobiography of Wolmut, which is held by the Documentation Centre of Austrian Resistance (DÖW) in Vienna. In addition to Wolmut’s autobiography, the DÖW collection includes poems written by her and by her first husband Rheinhardt, as well as a short biography of him, written by Wolmut, and Rheinhardt’s “Tagebuch aus den Jahren 1943/44. Geschrieben in den Gefängnissen der Gestapo in Menton, Nizza und Les Baumettes (Marseille)” (“Diary from the years 1943/44: written in the Gestapo prisons in Menton, Nice and Les Baumettes (Marseille)”), which was given to the DÖW by Wolmut, edited and published in 2002 by Martin Krist (Krist & Rheinhardt, 2003) ^{vii}. The collection holds a few short stories written by Wolmut, several photographs and a great many letters, mainly between Wolmut and Rheinhardt from the 1930s and early 1940s, as well as letters between Wolmut and representatives of DÖW (Selma Steinmetz, Herbert Steiner), dated between 1976 and 1987. There are further sources, such as letters from Wolmut to Erich Korngold, as well as a book Wolmut wrote about the composer Luise Reichhardt held by the Austrian National Library, and Wolmut’s diaries, which are held by the University of Vienna.^{viii} There is also an obituary written by Wolmut’s daughter-in-law, Betty (Elisabeth) Wolmut, in 1989, which is reprinted in Hüser’s thesis (Betty Wolmut in Hüser, 2021, pp. 34–41).^{ix} Until now, I have been unable to find any further compositions than those held at Exilarte Center, although Wolmut must have composed around 70 songs (Betty Wolmut in Hüser, 2021, pp. 37f.; Kornberger, 2023).

Wolmut’s autobiography is the only document that gives us sufficiently detailed information about her life and her perspective on the societies and cultures that she was a part of. As Siglinde Bolbecher (2005) points out in an article on female perspectives

on exile, it is the autobiographies of women that are especially valuable in this regard as they often provide a fuller account of the unspectacular and the everyday (p. 3). Autobiographies as sources of history, however, are to be handled with caution. As Melanie Unseld (2014) has pointed out, an artist’s self-representation must not be misunderstood as historical reality or biographical truth, but rather as a remembering re-creation (pp. 439, 441f).^x

Wolmut’s autobiography, running into several hundreds of pages,xi has, on the one hand, a strictly chronological structure—at some point, she goes so far as to frame her memoirs as exact transcriptions of the diaries that she had started to write as a nine-year-old girl. On the other hand, it features scatteredness and volatility. There are frequent verbatim repetitions, many anticipations and retrospections that disintegrate the chronology, and very often there are commentaries that make Wolmut visible not only as subject matter but as narrator.^{xii} This observation resonates with Unseld’s (2014, p. 300) tracing of a paradoxical simultaneousness in narration: non-coherent representations of individual biographies following the experience of the Second World War and the Shoaxiii alongside an adherence to coherent narrative structures and heroic, male biographical models of the 19th century. Unseld understands this as a homogenising re-action responding to this form of distress (ibid.), which is something that echoes Horst Weber’s (2008) observations of autobiographical writing among exiles: as a way to process the exile situation, an attempt to restore an “intact personality” (p. 10).

Wolmut’s autobiography is a fascinating document in regard to a (gendered) culture of remembrance and to the (gendered) question of historical relevance, especially when contextualised with the existing correspondence. My theory is that she had a very clear agenda of writing herself into music history, which I will substantiate by means of several statements and documents. For instance, Wolmut started contact with DÖW in 1976 by sending them material of her late ex-husband Rheinhardt, who died at the Dachau concentration camp as a Viennese

member of the French Resistance. Soon, she also offered the DÖW material on her late second husband Hans Wolmut, who, as a Jew, had to escape Nazi Austria. In 1978, Wolmut started asking DÖW representatives for support to find a publisher for her own autobiography, bit by bit, then also sending her own poems and memoirs, as well as letters. Looking at the short biography that she wrote about Rheinhardt,^{xiv} it is conspicuous that this narration is primarily about herself. Obviously, however, her attempt to be remembered as part of the 20th century music history failed. Has she simply been overlooked due to an intersectional negation of her historical relevance?

Keeping in mind the constructed-ness of (auto)biographical narration, I will now turn to Wolmut’s own narration of her fascinating life. I do not try to reconstruct a coherent narration. My intention is rather to share some spotlights on this narrated life, with a focus on Wolmut’s musical self, her gendered self, and her exiled self. These insights will, hopefully, show her as an outstanding intellectual, musical, independent, hard-working woman of the 20th century who played an active part in the cultural and societal transformation of traditional female roles of her time. A summarising overview of her life is provided by a letter from 1978, in which she tries to win a publisher for her autobiography:

These are my memoirs from my early childhood in Vienna to the present day, my successes and failures as a female musician at the beginning of the century up to my present age of 82, where I am a respected musician and music therapist here. [...] The friendship with the great authors of Austria, my studies with Schoenberg may interest your audience; so too may the youthful conflicts of being brought up strictly Catholic, unaware before adolescence of my Jewish ancestry [...] All this may be of interest to Austrian and German readers. – The following 40 years in America, first enchanted, then disappointed, but always learning, may interest you as a true testimony of a soul ‘torn apart’ but united by music. (d’Antbourg Wolmut, n. d., own translation.)^{xv}

“Obviously, however, her attempt to be remembered as part of the 20th century music history failed”

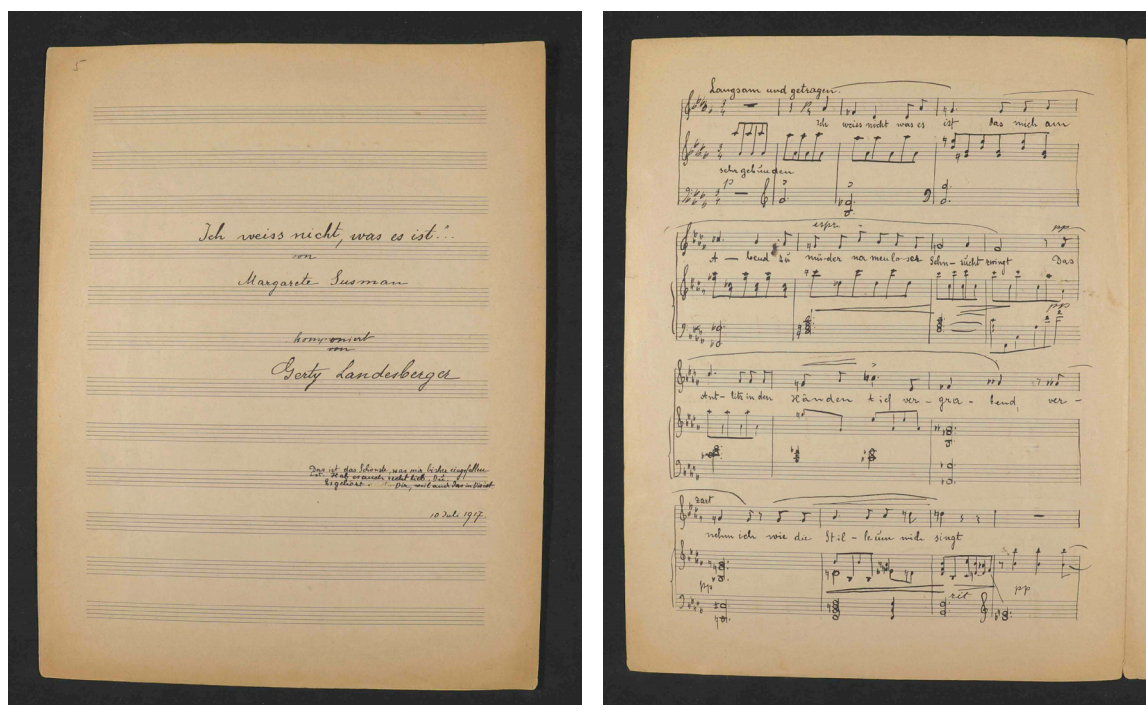


Figure 2. Gerty Landesberger, "Ich weiss nicht, was es ist ..." [sheet music], 1917, title page and first page of score, Exilarte Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmut“.

Already in this pitch, one can detect a fine sense of dramaturgy. It is telling that of all the names she could have dropped here—and there were many—she picked Arnold Schoenbergxvi – writing this in the 1970s, she surely knew well about his cultural capital as a composer and as a teacher. It is quite entertaining to read about her acquaintance with the maestro from her manuscript:

The best thing that happened to me in 1917 was that I started to compose. [...] While reading [Bethge's Chinese poetry translations], a melody awoke in me that could not be suppressed, and hesitantly, I wrote down my first song – and dedicated it—how else – to my sister Lili. It was a tremendous emotional experience for me; I had never learnt harmony or counterpoint, and I could hardly believe that it began to compose—in me, this 'It' to which one has so little mental access. I wrote more; the melodies were beautiful, the harmonies good; but I didn't know how to write a proper accompaniment.

I was sent to Arnold Schoenberg to learn (Wolmut, n. d., 3/19, own translation.)^{xvii}

It is notable, this quite romanticised narration of the genius ("It") that overcomes her. She strikes a similar tone repeatedly at other points of her memoirs, for example, when she describes her first writing of poetry as something that just hit her. These narratives are obviously inspired by male heroic narrations of genius.^{xviii} And since her memoir had been pinned down retrospectively by Wolmut decades after the recounted experience, her mentioning of a powerful "It" (in original German: "Es") might also want to suggest a psychoanalytical reading of her state of creativity, as Sigmund Freud had published his seminal concept of the psychodynamics of the id, ego and super-ego "The Ego and the Id" (German: "Das Ich und das Es") only a few years later, in 1922.

Wolmut's encounter with Schoenberg continues:

I have little and no joyful memories of this time. He must have been very poor back then to take on a very young girl who knew nothing about the craft as a student. I remember

him at his not-very-big desk, cold and reasoned, just like he was at the piano. He taught me the theory of harmony from his own book, which was quite conservative; there were no parallel fifths and octaves in my exercises. 'First, you have to do it according to the rules; only then can you give them up' or something similar, he said. I [...] brought him my few songs for correction. One began, 'I don't know what it is...' (a poem by Margarete Susman, whom I came to know and admire years later). 'I don't know what it is either', said Schoenberg. 'What's wrong with it?' I asked fearfully. 'You haven't repeated a single melisma but go from one to the other,' he replied. 'That's nothing. Saying something once is nothing. You have to repeat it at least once.' (I kept that in mind for later.) (Wolmut, n. d., 3/19, own translation)^{xix}

Their teacher-student relationship^{xx} ended after only a year. Wolmut adds somewhat pointedly: "But I went [...] to all the concerts that performed his works – each performed twice in the same concert – for a better understanding." (Wolmut, n. d., 3/20, own translation)^{xxi}

The two songs mentioned—the one dedicated to her sister Lili and the one based on the poem by Susman, “I don’t know, what it is...”—are amongst the compositions held by the Exilarte Center. (See Figures 1 and 2). And now I know how to contextualise them. Obviously, they were Wolmut’s very first steps in composition—but not her last. In 1919, Rheinhardt had arranged a concert for me of my own compositions in a small, newly opened reading room with a podium. A young singer first sang four of my early songs, then Aranyi and I played my recently completed violin sonata, and afterwards, Hofmannsthal’s ‘Terzinen’ with obbligato were sung, and Rheinhardt’s ‘Oh Mensch, ich habe Sehnsucht nach dir’ with obbligato, accompanied by me. Tout Vienne was there; there had not been a composition concert by a woman in Vienna in living memory, and all the critics came [...] After the concert, even the old opera composer Bittner [...]xxii came over; he took my hand, squeezed it and said: ‘A bit of Debussy is still haunting you; but stick to it, little lady [kleines Fräulein], composing is your way already’ (Wolmut, n. d., 3/46, own translation) xxiii

Obviously, women composers were still regarded as unfamiliar to the public at the time. However, this paragraph also reveals that although she was extremely well connected in Vienna’s art and music scene, Wolmut lacked a network with other female composers in Vienna, such as Johanna Müller-Hermann, Mathilde Kralik (von Meyrswalden) or Vilma (von) Webenau. Nor was she part of the relevant feminist circles, such as the “Club of Viennese Women Musicians”. Certainly, her claiming to be the only female composer in Vienna who showed her work publicly, thus staging herself as a sensation, can also be read as a marketing strategy. The mere talent for a career as a composer would probably have been there, based on the following statement in her memoirs from around 1920: A really wonderful friend [...] was Alfred

Einstein [...]; he was a music historian, edited a new edition of the Riemann Musiklexikon at the time [...] He had listened to my compositions, found them interesting and talented, and when I told him about the unfinished trio, he said [...] that if I wrote the last missing movement, he would give me a whole paragraph in the Riemann. [...] And he gave me] the commission to publish Louise Reichardt’s songs and to write her biography [...]xxiv This work made me happy; I was so glad to have something to do with music—because, as I had anticipated, I had stopped composing when I got married. [...]xxv Utis didn’t push me towards music because he needed me as a secretary. (Wolmut, n. d., 4/11, own translation) xxvi

The Riemann paragraph never came to be, nor did the career as a composer.xxvi Wolmut understands this non-fulfilment throughout her autobiography as a gendered problem. Despite this unrealised career as a composer, she manages to tell a rather coherent development of herself as a musician.xxviii That starts classically with her education: a rather violent upbringing in a wealthy, intellectual yet cold bourgeois household, including physical disciplining at the piano, not untypical for bourgeois girls in the 19th century (see Ballstaedt & Widmaier, 1989):

“Tanti’ started to teach us piano; every wrong note was rewarded with a slap on the knuckles with a ruler. [...] Many, many years later [...] I asked her why she had beaten me so much. ‘Otherwise, you wouldn’t have become the good person you are now,’ she replied. What a way to awaken compassion and love for others. (Wolmut, n. d., p. 18, own translation)xxix

Already at an early age, Gerty Landesberger became a versed and demanded répétiteur, adept at sight-reading and improvising. Throughout her life, she was an extremely diligent, well-read, intellectual musician, constantly reading, transcribing, translating, reading more, improvising, and writ-

ing, plus extensive musical practice as a performer and teacher into her 90s. xxxi She owed her extensive education and much of her artistic skills to her high-class status, which provided her with the necessary time and financial resources. Top performance was taken for granted, without praise or recognition, in her father’s strict household, with whom she and her sister grew up after his divorce from their mother. However, the excellent education of the Landesberger’s daughters was, as was still customary for bourgeoisie women at the time, only accessory or a way out as plan B, as an abasing comment of the father on her younger sister reveals: “The newborn daughter [...] was a disappointment for Papa; he thought she was so ugly that he predicted her only a future as a Doctor of Philosophy.” xxxii The lack of affection, attention and appreciation of her achievements, the rather outright demeaning emotional abuse she experienced while growing up, made Gerty Landesberger suicidal at the age of 12. (Wolmut, n. d., 29) The cruel reality of the ubiquitous presence of gender-based violence runs through the first half of her autobiography as an omnipresent companion to all her struggles and achievements. When, at a young age, it turned out she could neither be a composer nor a conductor—because she could not become a boy (Wolmut, n. d., 31A)—Wolmut became an opera singer, gave her debut as Konstanze in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s “Die Entführung aus dem Serail” at the theatre in Osnabrück in 1929 (see Figure 3) followed by many prominent parts and engagements in Essen, in Luxembourg, as a freelancer in Berlin, where she also performed as an improvising jazz singer, and later in Hans Wolmut’s young opera company in Vienna, until finally, at the age of around 37:

At last, I had the feeling that I was up to every part that came my way [...] [I] had become a good, singing actress, I could [...] be myself in many forms. What an indescribably happy feeling it was to be at one with myself! (Wolmut, n. d., 7/46)xxxiii



Figure 3. Gerty Stoerk as Konstanze [Photograph], 1929, DÖW, Photo archive, DÖW-photo 08933-001

Parallel to that coherent narrative of becoming a professional musician, which extends over roughly seven chapters, goes a coherent story of her sexual development, which is, next to her musical development, the most important issue in the first half of her autobiography. Her many affairs became a recurrent theme in her writing, as did how she turned from an innocent girl to a mature woman in the time between her two marriages. Hans Wolmut's marriage proposal, initially, came as an imposition: "I feared having to see a man again day in day out in all situations; I feared having to give up my beloved loneliness, no, my beloved being alone, in which I did whatever I wanted" (Wolmut, n. d., 8/10, own translation). Up to that point, she had led the life of a rather modern woman of the 1920s and 30s, sexually and financially independent. xxxiv In this way, she also embodied the incipient transitions in traditional female roles of the time, as earlier indicated in a quote from Thomasberger. Throughout her text, Wolmut proves to be quite sensitive about gender issues, with repeated critical remarks towards the stark patriarchal society of her parental generation or disgusted observations in her own circles about how men could do things that were impossible for women. What I find very striking are her open reports of gender-based and sexual violence. The several rapes and sexual assaults which she survived in the 1920s and 30s, but also their contextualisation and the casualness in her writing, paint a disturbing picture of a culture of normalisation of sexual violence against women. I am afraid that this issue is, to date, mostly neglected in music historiography, although the impact it has on women—their freedom to move safely in private and in professional contexts, to thrive—is massive. Thus, these contexts of Wolmut's biography deserve a more detailed analysis in future studies. Wolmut penned her autobiography in the 1970s, during Second-wave feminism which focused on women's right to their own bodies. I think Wolmut's openness about her own sexuality and about sexual violence, as well as her gender-critical observations, also reflect the time of the origin of this text. It is likely that this also made her reevaluate her experiences.

In stark contrast to her lived independence in the 1920s and 30s and to her aforementioned announcement at the age of about 37 that she only now felt prepared for her artistic future, comes the following quote about her decision to marry Hans Wolmut:

I started this marriage with the safe knowledge that I would be helping a musical genius to become a man.

I had to relinquish my own further growth—which I thought had reached its peak—and devote myself completely to what God had planned for me—to turn a highly gifted boy into a mature man and to help him through the difficulties of his future life. I had to learn to put aside my own intellectual needs and my needs for true friendship or to make more of myself in order to help him reach his goal of manhood. (Wolmut, n. d., 8/11, own translation) xxxvi

This is a surprising announcement of subordination! The quote occurs in the manuscript at a point where she started more frequently to reflect on what was happening politically. Thus, narratively, I also perceive this quote as in anticipation of forthcoming radical changes, with several decades between the experiences and their record in this autobiography, a retrospective attempt of self-assurance of agency, that such an imminent radical rupture in her life, including the end of a promising career, came as a self-determined decision.

In the eighth chapter of the manuscript, there are first mentions of Nazi presence in Germany and of fascists during Wolmut's time in Italy in the late 1920s. In the early 1930s, during her time in Essen, she became aware of the involvement of industrialists with the national socialists and—astonished and shocked—heard for the first time about preparations for a potential war. She was living in Berlin during the Reichstag fire in 1933, which she writes about extensively, especially with respect to the effects on the Jewish population and the first refugee movements, which affected her entire maternal family living in Berlin as well as her lover at the time, Hardy Baer. Returning to Vienna in the same year, she was acutely aware of the many German and Austrian refugees, especially in her own métier. She repeatedly emphasises how early

and clearly she foresaw the catastrophe that was coming, too, for Austria, how she knew as early as 1935 that the threat was very real and growing, and that Hans and she had no future there, with her husband being Jewish. In 1937, when she became pregnant, she began to actively prepare their escape so that she had all their papers ready by February 1938, one month prior to the Anschluss. They were still in Vienna at the time, and she writes about the events, the terror and the riots, the many suicides of Jews, including those in her own circles, and the mass exodus. She then writes about their own escape, about the many farewells, and how they had to leave Hans' sick mother behind, knowing very well they would never see her again. She reflects on her doubts and fears for the future. She also writes about the things they had to leave behind, such as the manuscript of her translation of a novel by her friend, the anti-fascist Italian author Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, in fear that it might be considered a subversive script, or her mother's "beautiful Blüthner grand piano with the warm tone" (8/30, own translation) —noting she never owned a grand piano again in her life.^{xxxviii} She describes their journey to Switzerland, the terrifying moments at the border, how they reached France, and the ship that would eventually bring them to America. The following sentences—describing the moments after they had moved into their ship's cabin—stand paradigmatically for her resilience, her absolute will to survive, and her refusal to look back:

We saw our part of the world vanish in the port's smoke and steam. [...] Then I took up my new life with what I thought was necessary: I went to the ship's library and borrowed a history of the United States. (Wolmut, n. d., 8/33/4, own translation)^{xxxix}

Beyond being a simple narrative device, this passage truly marks the end of an old era in Wolmut's life and the beginning of a new one. In her autobiography, she only looks back very sporadically, as if she had finished with her past once and for all. The letters she exchanged in the following years between 1938 and 1942 with her ex-husband Rheinhardt speak a different language. It is an intensive, detailed, highly politicised exchange in which both their growing concern, disgust

and despair (about Austria, France, Europe, and also about the beginnings of the Shoah) are openly expressed.

Having corresponded in German, their shared mother tongue, all their lives, they at some point turn to writing in English: "I really cant [sic] imagine how one can write in german [sic] now. [...] But when I open a dictionary and see german [sic] gothic print, I literally [sic] get seasick, so pretentious it looks" (Wolmut, March 6th, 1942). Wolmut's letters also manifest her anguish and reveal how many details of Nazi crimes were already known in the USA in 1942:

I should be so happy, but I cant [sic]; every piece of bread becomes ashes in my mouth when I think of Europe. And after having seen the pictures, smuggled out, of the starving children, not starving, starved to death in Poland, bundles of poor bones, I sometimes think I must go mad. Then I look at my little child, my only one, and fear grips my heart, that he must suffer that too, starvation, or bombing, being crippled—why not he, if so many, millions had this fate—and I simply get lost with hate and terror. (Wolmut, March 6th, 1942)

Her final letter to Rheinhardt from 1942 remained unanswered; their correspondence ended roughly at the time when he was detained in France in 1943. He was killed in Dachau in 1945. Wolmut learned about his death in the same year.

In her autobiography, Wolmut hardly looks back, instead focusing completely on her new life in the USA.^{xi} And in this new life, she also seems to have kept her past to herself. Remigration never seemed to have been an issue for her.

Decades later,^{xli} however, in 1978, now aged 81, she wrote in a letter to Selma Steinmetz at the DÖW: "I wished I could return to Vienna, but almost all of my friends have died; I would be a foreigner there, and above all, an old woman" (Wolmut, August 12th, 1978, own translation). And again, only one month later, now quite ur-

gently trying to find a publisher for her autobiography:^{xlii}

Please write to me soon and advise me. I might as well live in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, not in the USA, not in Austria—I don't belong anywhere.

And since I am going to die soon, I would like to see it described in black and white. (Wolmut, September 13th, 1978, own translation)^{xliii}

So, there it is, towards the end of her life, her letters reveal the confession of a lack of belonging—very typical for exile existence—standing in contrast to a rather coherent narrative in her autobiography, like a desire to create wholeness through writing, almost like an attempt to find closure.

Landesberger-von Antburg-Rheinhardt-Stoerk-Wolmut saw her own life in the bigger picture. Rightfully, I might add, she realised that her life had something to contribute to the general body of music history of the 20th century, and she tried actively to write herself into it. This didn't happen. But I think her case can tell us a few things about a biased culture of remembering. Introduced to us through her autobiography and further sources which frame, relativise or confirm that narration, the historical figure Felice Wolmut starts to take shape as an outstanding, rather independent woman, musician and intellectual. This article focuses more on the first half of her life up to her flight into exile, in which Wolmut's sharp observations and insight of her contemporary cultural, social and political contexts not only reveal details of her artistic environment, but also offer new and specific perspectives on the patriarchal, sexist and violent structures of her time. As reflected in this paper, confronted with historical autobiographies historiographers are though not necessarily asking for a 'truth' in the writings, but rather for the writer's self-presentations and ways of remembering and communicating. Wolmut's chosen thematic focal points—education, art, personal sensitivities and emotions,

gender issues including gender-based violence—are therefore significant, as are her omissions, such as an in-depth examination of her exile situation or only the mentioning of Austrofascism, both of which do not occur. These speak volumes about her self-perception and attitude, and say a lot about the significance of the temporal context of the 1970s in which she wrote down the recollections of her life. As shown in this paper, the time of her writing and thus re-remembering falls at a time when, on the one hand, Second-wave feminism is in full swing, and on the other hand music-related exile research is only just beginning to take shape—albeit with a focus on male composers and well-known personalities, so that Wolmut, as a woman with a rather incoherent artistic vita (substantially due to gender and exile), hardly had a chance to attract the attention she deserved, despite the generally awakening interest in the stories and achievements of women. However, it is obvious that the attitude of 70s feminism influenced her own mind set in terms of reconsidering her own life experiences as a younger woman in the light of changes in history, and thus the way and content of her writing. This makes her autobiography a fascinating document for today's readers. Especially her explicit recounts of an abusive patriarchal environment—today's terminology coined the term rape culture—are of great relevance for current discourses in light of the #me-too movement and call for further in-depth studies of this aspect in relation to the everyday and professional life of female musicians. Hence, a third historical period is tackled in this article and related to the other two (the decades of Wolmut's narrated life and the time of writing it down): the current time frame of the 2020s, in which topics such as intersectionality, exile and migration, and gender-based violence are met with growing interest also in musicological research. They do inform this article's outline of questioning.



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Exilarte Center, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmuth“

Gerty Landesberger, „Ich weiß nicht, was es ist ...“ [sheet music], 1917

Exilarte Center, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmuth“

Figures

Figure 1

Gerty Landesberger, „Der junge Dichter denkt an die Geliebte“ [sheet music], 1917, title page and first page of score, Exilarte Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmuth“

Figure 2

Gerty Landesberger, „Ich weiß nicht, was es ist ...“ [sheet music], 1917, title page and first page of score, Exilarte Center, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Archive, Estate „Gerty Felice Wohlmuth“

Figure 3

Gerty Stoerk as Konstanze [Photograph], 1929, DÖW, Photo archive, DÖW-photo 08933-001

i Original quote in German: “[Die Auslöschung weiblichen Schaffens] geschieht bereits zu Lebzeiten durch Ehepartner, Lehrer, Kritiker, Verlage, Intendanten und posthum durch die Historiographie.” (Fischer, 2016, p. 11f.)

ii Gerold Gruber, founder and head of Exilarte Center, who is regularly in contact with descendants of artists who had been persecuted by the Nazi regime, noted in a personal conversation that even relatives often act almost indifferently concerning the residues of their female ancestors.

iii Original quote in German: “Frauenemanzipation wurde als Ausdruck ‚absoluter Entartung‘ definiert[.]” (Thomasberger, 2016, p. 5)

iv Following information is drawn from these above mentioned sources, unless mentioned otherwise.

v Wolmut's use of this name is, for the time being, only documented in her autobiography. However, I was able to find evidence of that name (although misspelled “Stoerck”) in the German Stage Yearbook of 1931 (Genossenschaft Deutscher Bühnen-Angehöriger, 1931, p. 402), and also the photograph of her debut as Konstanze holds that name (see Figure 3, DÖW-photo 08933-001)

vi In this article, I use the name and spelling Felice Wolmut, unless I need to emphasise something specific or I directly refer to sources which use a different name or spelling.

vii Krist's edition is based on the typescript that he found at DÖW. In the same year, the original manuscripts of Rheinhardt's diaries were detected, as Krist himself points out in his epilogue to the edition. (Krist, 2003) In parts, the typescript differs considerably from the manuscripts (Schwarz, 2013), which were then edited and published in 2013 (Rheinhardt).

viii So far, I have not been able to check the diaries.

ix This list of sources is by no means complete, but is intended to provide a rough overview. For further currently known sources, please consult (Kornberger, 2023).

x However, Unsel (2014, p. 298) also understands the inclusion of individual stories, for example in the form of autobiographies, as an integral part of history, especially in a complex, historically difficult time like that of National Socialism.

xi The typescript is divided into 17 chapters. Pagination starts anew with each chapter, chapter 2-17 are also numbered. I will quote true to the typescript as follows: 32 meaning page 32 in chapter 1; 2/17 meaning page 17 in chapter 2 etc.

xii In the 1950s, during a creative writing course in evening classes, she wrote down adventures from her life as short stories (Wolmut, n. d., 11/19), which she later incorporated one-to-one into her autobiography (Cf. enclosed manuscripts in DÖW EX 9761). This circumstance points to potential literary ambitions.

xiii Elsewhere, she describes that incoherence in (auto)biographical writing is often particularly a feature of women's (auto)biographies, while coherence is more of a phenomenon in the narratives of male (auto)biographies (Unsel, 2010).

xiv DÖW archive 11601a.

xv Original quote in German: “[Dies] sind meine Memoiren von frueher Kindheit in Wien an – bis zum heutigen Tag, meine Erfolge und Misserfolge als weiblicher Musiker im Anfang des Jahrhunderts bis zu meinem jetzigen Alter von 82, da ich ein hier angesehener [sic!] Musiker und Musik Therapeut bin. [...] Die Freundschaft mit den grossen Autoren Oesterreichs, mein Studium mit Schoenberg mag Ihr Publikum interessieren; ebenso aber auch die Jugendkonflikte, streng katholisch erzogen zu sein, ohne vor der Adoleszenz zu wissen, von meiner Abstammung von Juden; [...] – all dies mag die Oesterreicher und die Deutschen [sic!] Leser interessieren. Die darauf folgenden 40 Jahre in America [sic], erst hingerissen, dann enttauscht, aber immer lernend mag Sie als wahres Zeugnis einer, zerrissenen' aber durch Musik geeinten Seele interessieren.” (Wolmut, n. d.)

xvi It is also striking yet comprehensible that, although in her autobiography women play a more important role as reliable, loveable, supportive or even admirable figures than men, Wolmut refers exclusively to men in her promoting a publication of her autobiography: Besides the teacher Schoenberg, in this letter she mentions her father, her maternal grandfather and her first husband, all public figures of interest.

xvii Original quote in German: „Das Schoenste aber was mir in 1917 geschah, war das [sic] ich zu komponieren anfang. [...] Beim Lesen [in Bethge's Chinesischen Gedichtuebertragungen] wachte eine Melodie in mir auf, die nicht verdraengt werden konnte, und zagend schrieb ich mein erstes Lied nieder – und widmete es – wie denn anders' – meiner Schwester Lili. Es war ein ungeheures seelisches Ereignis fuer mich; ich hatte ja nie Harmonie noch Kontrapunkt gelernt, und ich konnte es kaum glauben, dass es – in mir – zu komponieren anfang, dies „Es“ zu dem man gedanklich so wenig Zugang hat. Ich schrieb noch mehrere andere; die Melodien [sic] waren schoen, die Harmonien gut, aber ich wusste nicht, wie eine richtige Begleitung zu schreiben. Ich wurde zu Arnold Schoenberg in die Lehre geschickt.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 3/19)

xix For the normative character of the heroic, male (auto)biographical model see Unsel, 2014.

Original quote in German: „Ich habe wenige und keine freudigen Erinnerungen an die Zeit. Er muss damals wohl sehr arm gewesen sein, dass er ein

ganz junges Maedchen, die nichts von dem Handwerk wusste, als Studentin annahm. Ich erinnere mich seiner an seinem nicht sehr grossen Schreibtisch, kuehl und sachlich, wie er auch am Klavier war. Er lehrte mich Harmonielehre aus seinem eigenen Buch das ganz konservativ war; es gab keine parallelen Quinten und Oktaven in meinen Aufgaben. „Erst muss man es nach den Regeln machen, dann erst kann man sie aufgeben.“ oder aehnlich drueckte er sich aus. Ich brachte ihm auch meine paar Lieder zur Korrektur. Eins begann, „Ich weiss nicht, was es ist...“ (ein Gedicht von Margarete Sussman [sic], die ich Jahre spaeter kennen und verehren lernte) „Ich weiss auch nicht was es ist“ sagte Schoenberg. „Was ist schlecht daran“ fragte ich angstvoll. „Sie haben kein einziges Melisma wiederholt, sondern gehen von einem zum andern“ erwiderte er. „Das ist Nichts. Einmal etwas sagen ist nichts. Man muss es zumindest einmal wiederholen.“ (Ich habe mir das fuer spaeter gemerkt.)“ (Wolmut, n. d., 3/20)

While her narration of her acquaintance to Schoenberg reads very convincingly, her status as a student of his is not yet substantiated by sources other than her autobiography and her own letters. Also in Elisabeth Kappel's (2019) recent study on Schoenberg's female students and her documentation of all his students—newly found, confirmed and questionable—, Felice Wolmut's (at the time Gerty Landesberger) name does not appear in the lists.

xix Original quote in German: „Doch ging ich [...] in alle Konzerte, die seine Sachen – zweimal hintereinander im selben Konzert – zum bessern Verstaendnis – auffuehrten.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 3/20)

xx While I was not able to find any of the critiques so far, there is evidence of the concert with Gerty Landesberger's compositions in Arbeiterzeitung, Vienna, November 14th, 1919, p. 7, and Der Neue Tag, Vienna, November 14th, 1919, p. 5.

xxi Original quote in German: „Rheinhardt hatte in einem kleinen, neu eroeffneten Lesesaal mit Podium ein Konzert fuer mich arrangiert – von meinen eigenen Kompositionen. Eine junge Saengerin sang erst vier meiner fruehen Lieder, dann spielten Aranyi und ich meine eben erst fertig gestellte Violinsonate, und nachher wurden die „Terzinen“ von Hofmannsthal mit obligato und Rheinhardts „Oh Mensch, ich habe Sehnsucht nach dir“ mit Obligato, von mir begleitet, gesungen. Tout Vienne war dort; es hatte seit Menschengedenken kein Kompositionskonzert eines weiblichen Wesens in Wien stattgefunden, und die ganze Kritik kam[...] Nach dem Konzert war sogar der alte Opernkomponist Bittner zu mir gekommen [...]; er nahm meine Hand, drueckte sie, und sagte: „A bisserl viel Debussy spukt da noch immer herum; aber bleiben's dabei, kleines Frauelein, Komponieren ist schon Ihr Weg.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 3/46)

xxiv A copy of the edition is held by the National Library of Austria music collection (Reichardt & Rheinhardt, 1922).

xxv Utis was one of Wolmut's nicknames for Rheinhardt.

xxvi Original quote in German: „Ein wirklich wundervoller Freund [...] war Alfred Einstein [...]; er war ein Musikhistoriker, gab damals eine Neuausgabe des Riemann Musiklexikons heraus [...] Er hatte sich meine Kompositionen vorspielen lassen, fand sie interessant und begabt, und da ich ihm von dem unvollendeten Trio erzaehte [sic], sagte er, [...] wenn ich den letzten fehlenden Satz schriebe, wuerde er mir einen ganzen Paragraphen im Riemann einraeumen. [...] Und er gab mir den Auftrag, die Lieder Louise Reichardt's herauszugeben, und ihre Biographie [...] zu schreiben. [...] – Diese Arbeit freute mich, ich war so froh, etwas mit Musik zu tun zu haben – denn wie ich vorausgeahnt hatte, mit der Ehe hatte mein Komponieren aufgehoeht. [...] Utis trieb mich nicht zur Musik, da er mich als Sekretaein brauchte.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 4/10f.)

xxvii For details on Alfred Einstein's own situation as a Jewish music writer in National Socialist Germany and later in exile, as well as on the music historiographical significance of his writings before and after his escape see Grosch (2018).

xxviii Accordingly, the Austrian Music Encyclopedia (Kornberger, 2023), in spite of listing many of Wolmut's professions and even also her song compositions, does not list “composer” as an occupation. However, at least for her early years, Wolmut emphasises how composing and becoming a professional composer had been her central desire – and she can identify rather clearly, why she failed: It were the patriarchal circumstances that prevented her from prospering. Also her later husband, Hans Wolmut, would not encourage her to continue composing. And Betty Wolmut wrote: „Felice was also a composer in her own right. [...] In her own words: ‘Realising that it was difficult for a woman in Europe to become a conductor or gain recognition as a composer, I turned to singing.’“ (Betty Wolmut in Hüters, 2021, pp. 37f.)

xxix Original quote in German: „Tanti“ begann uns Klavier zu unterrichten, jede falsche Note wurde mit einem Schlag auf die Knoechel mit einem Lineal be-
lohnt. [...] Viele Jahre spaeter [...] fragte ich sie warum sie mich soviel geschlagen habe. „Sonst waerst du nicht der gute Mensch geworden, der du jetzt bist“, antwortete sie mir. Was fuer ein Mittel, Mitgefuehl und Liebe fuer andre zu erwecken.“ (Wolmut, n. d., p. 18)

xxx In addition to her own recollections, the author Arthur Schnitzler repeatedly mentions her versed (private) performances in his diaries (see Schnitzler, as of January 20st, 2025).

xxxi Her daughter-in-law called Wolmut a “walking encyclopedia of the art, music and history of Austria for the first 40 years of [the 20th] century.” She laments that “when she died, a piece of history died with her.” (Betty Wolmut in Hüters, 2021, p. 36.)

xxxii Original quote in German: “Die neugeborene Tochter [...] war eine Enttauschung fuer Papa; er fand sie so haesslich, dass er ihr nur eine Zukunft als Dr. Phil. prophezeite.” (Wolmut, n. d., 27. Emphasis mine.)

xxxiii Original quote in German: “Endlich hatte ich das Gefuehl, jeder Partie gewachsen zu sein, die meines Weges kam[...] [Ich war eine gute, singende Schauspielerin geworden, ich konnte [...] in vielen Formen Ich selber sein. Was fuer ein unbeschreibliches glueckliches sich Finden, eins mit sich selbst zu sein!” (Wolmut, n. d., 7/46)

xxxiv Original quote in German: “Ich fuerchtete einen Mann wiederum tagaus tagein sehen zu muessen in allen Situationen; ich fuerchtete meine geliebte Einsamkeit, nein, mein geliebtes Alleinsein aufgeben zu muessen, in dem ich tat, was ich wollte[...]” (Wolmut, n. d., 8/10)

xxxv For a contextualised overview of the art scene and Second-wave feminism in the USA see e.g. Kohl (2015), especially chapter 1.3 on Performance Art as feminist awareness.

xxxvi Original quote in German: „Ich ging in diese Ehe mit dem sichern Wissen, dass ich einem musikalischen Genie helfen wuerde ein Mann zu werden. Ich hatte auf mein eignes weiteres Wachstum zu verzichten – das, wie ich dachte, auf seinem Hoehepunkt angelangt war, und mich ganz und voellig dem zu widmen, was Gott mit mir vorhatte – aus einem hochbegabten Knaben einen reifen Mann zu machen und ihm beizustehen in seinen kommenden Lebens-Schwierigkeiten. Ich musste lernen meine eigensten Beduerfnisse geistiger Art und nach wahrer Freundschaft hintanzustellen, oder mehr aus mir selbst zu machen, um ihm zu seinem Mannesziel zu helfen.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 8/11)

xxxvii Interestingly, she never mentions her own Jewish ancestry in the context of a potential persecution by the Nazis, which would alas have been an issue would they have remained in Europe. Obviously, this is due to the fact that she was brought up Catholic and, after turning away from her faith for some time, reaffirmed it at a later stage of her life. She never perceived herself as a Jew. As history has shown, her self-definition and self-perception would, however, in all probability not have played a crucial role for the Nazis.

xxxix Original quote in German: „schoene Blüthner Fluegel von meiner Mutter mit dem warmen Ton“ (Wolmut, n.d., 8/30)

xl Original quote in German: „Wir sahen unsern Weltteil im Rauch und Dampf des Hafens verschwinden. [...] Dann nahm ich mein neues Leben damit auf, dass ich tat, was ich fuer noetig hielt. Ich ging in die Schiffsbibliothek und borgte mir eine Geschichte der Vereinigten Staaten aus.“ (Wolmut, n. d., 8/33/4)

xi As Betty Wolmut wrote in her obituary:

“Some of you may not be aware that her first husband, the Austrian poet and artist Emile Alphonse Rheinhardt, died in Dachau in 1944, or that she and her second husband Hans (Peter's father) barely escaped with the clothes on their backs and Peter in her body, just after Hitler had invaded Vienna: and then it was only because the Nazi soldier in charge of stamping exit visas recognized them as the stage director and singer he had recently seen in an opera production.” (Betty Wolmut in Hüters, 2021, p. 35) [Betty Wolmut obviously remembers the year of Rheinhardts death incorrectly. The main sources date his death to 1945.]

This paragraph illustrates that Wolmut, after her emigration, hardly spoke about her past in Europe.

xli However, she returned to Europe, to Vienna especially, in the 1970s for (work) trips.

Original quote in German: „Ich wuenscht ich koennte nach Wien zurueck, aber fast alle Freunde sind gestorben; ich waer dort eine Fremde, und dazu eine alte Frau.“ (Wolmut, August 12th, 1978)

xlii Original quote in German: „Schreiben sie mir bitte bald, und raten Sie es. Ich sollte mitten im Atlantic Ocean wohnen, nicht in USA nicht in Oesterreich – ich gehoere nirgends hin. Und da ich bald sterben werde, moechte ich es eben schwarz auf weiss geschildert haben.“ (Wolmut, September 13th, 1978)