



MY YEAR AT WIKO
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I wrote a book during my year at Wiko. Its title is *The Revolution According to Judas*, and it is a primary document-based historical anthropology of exile, cooperation, betrayal, and revolution.

My time at Wiko was everywhere marked by daily immersion in this work, and my thoughts on the book are now suffused with the humid beauty of the fall, with acorns cracking underfoot on our daily trudges from the Villa Walther to the Wallotstraße. When summer finally came, my book received the imprimatur of a pair of swans, whose five chicks nested on the island that sits right behind the Villa Walther. The white and grey swanlings swim in single file, with the father at the back of the line and the mother at its head (or maybe it is the other way around, I could never tell).

The swan was the preferred symbol of effortless grace for Spanish America’s *modernista* poets, several of whom were favorite writers of my own anarchist exiles – Rubén Darío,

Manuel Othón, José Martí ... The anarchists' own *poesía de combate* was, in some respects at least, a politicized emulsion of that exalted aesthetic.

Alongside the Mexican Revolution, there came also a revolt against these *Belle Epoque* poets, with Enrique González Martínez's poem, *Tuércela el cuello al cisne* ("Wring the Swan's Neck"), fired as its opening volley.

I must say that I had no desire to follow González Martínez's instructions. Berlin is such a maze that I could not turn away from reflection and poetic creation to destructive revolt. The path of Romanticism and the Bildungsroman, which I learned more about from Jeremy Adler, seemed to derive unexpected powers from the stillness of the lake, the oaks and chestnut flowers (that I had never seen before), and the great red beech in front of the Weiße Villa. That path then crossed with that of the *modernistas*, with their keen sense of beauty, an emotion that, for them, vibrated with Paris rather than with Berlin (sausage and potatoes never was the preferred food of the swan). But whatever the *modernistas* might have thought, I had those swans, right there, before my eyes. In the incredible, interminable darkness of the Berlin winter, I kept hoping that they would take off their feathers, transform, and rescue me from the despair of my book, but they never did.

The third, almost equally inescapable Berlin path was the way of violence. My anarchists were staunch defenders of dignity. They were also lovers of beauty. "Man has wronged the Beautiful," Ricardo Flores Magón wrote from his prison in Kansas, "Being the most intelligent animal, the one most favored by Nature, Man has lived in moral and material filth." For Ricardo, violence was a natural phenomenon, like a red dawn, beautiful because it announced the imminent arrival of human freedom and the return to the natural life of cooperation that had been betrayed by humanity's three great enemies: Capital, Authority, and the Clergy.

But in Berlin, scarring, or "after-violence", is everywhere. Sometimes it caresses you in the form of the melancholic kindness of those who have suffered violence; at other times, it is simply an unbearable oppression or tear. It took me three months to muster the courage to walk up the steps of Gleis 17 at Grunewald station, though its cold air often pierced me as I walked down that S-Bahn tunnel.

The anarchists' ideal of the red dawn is challenged daily by Berlin's rusty ochre – the dried blood of World War I, the blood of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the blood of the Jews, the blood of Stalinism and communism. It is all there, and it makes peace something to defend and preserve, an undeniable value. It asks, pleads, for resistance

to find a different way, and for the responsibility of nurturing a vibrant public life, supported by basic social rights.

Berlin was the epicenter of so much violence that many seemingly remote and disparate biographies can trace connections back to it. The place, somehow, is known, even by those who don't suspect it.

This was very much my own case. My grandparents, father, and uncle packed their bags and left Germany a few months after Hitler's election. My grandfather was a lawyer, and so had a sense of at least some of what might be coming. My father never taught us German – he did not wish to ask us to expend our efforts cultivating that particular field. There were other languages, and other places.

But, on my arrival to Germany, I found that the relationship between language and culture, a connection that is so central to my own field of Anthropology, is one that I still understood very little. I spoke no German, but I had eaten soft-boiled eggs and toast for breakfast in my childhood. I spoke no German, but my grandmother, who was a singer, loved Mahler. I spoke no German, but I shared Nietzsche's love of Italy, and his rejection of "Germanic heaviness", even before knowing Germany (or Italy).

I can't say that these discoveries tempted me to dissolve myself into some sort of Germanic primal soup, or to identify particularly with a Herderian Germanic community either. In my case, at least, the fracture runs too deep. During my year at Wiko, I went to Cologne, the city where my father was born, and I was a perfect stranger there. But still, there was at least some rush of feeling, a blush that, again, found no language.

The image of the sun (though not the sun itself) warmed me at least a little during the long Wiko winter, thanks to the daily progress of my wife's painting. Elena worked tirelessly this year. She got a commission for a narrative mural on books, reading, and writing for a new library and museum of the book, housed in a historical 18th-century building in Mexico City. As I labored on section after section of my book, I saw forms and colors appear at a surprising rate: a rendition of the Alexandria library, the cell in Genoa where Marco Polo dictated the story of his travels, the deciphering of Maya hieroglyphs, the life of Louis Braille ... "If it's Tuesday, this must be Mesopotamia." – That was me, catching a fleeting glimpse of Elena at her easel, while taking a break from my writing.

The final thing that I want to reflect upon has to do with the very German theme of community, and its relationship to cultivation.

When I arrived at Wiko, I had no special desire to meet anyone. I have the privilege of living in New York and in Mexico and the good fortune of having friends, relations,

colleagues, contacts, and stimulation in those places. I was not eager to make new acquaintances. In fact, I sometimes resented going to lunches and being social at Wiko.

Of course, this reaction demonstrated, better than anything else, the luxury that Wiko was affording me – the care taken over our living conditions, the respect and preservation of my time, the efficiency, warmth, and courtesy of Wiko’s genuinely remarkable staff. If my only complaint was that I was fed one delicious and nutritious meal every day, then I was indeed in an ideal world!

Even so, at first I was a bit of a clam when it came to “community”. However, I found there was a soft, penetrating effect of the quotidian at Wiko. By dint of living close to people, to the routine comings and goings to the Tuesday colloquium, and to those sometimes mildly dreaded lunches, I began to make truly close friendships, which are dearer to me still because they were unsought, unexpected, and entirely free. By the time the year came to a close, I realized that I had developed real feelings – warmth, concern, and solidarity – for my community. I was heartsick during my final weeks at Wiko.

And, on the summery day of our last, golden, Thursday dinner, I finished a draft of my book.