



PRECIOUS MEETINGS IN THE
GRUNEWALD COCOON
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My plan was to spend three months at Wiko beginning in April. Only when I arrived in the leafy neighborhood of Wiko did I realize that everyone was about to leave on vacation. I remained on my own in Wallotstraße 19, which served me as a ghost house. I was thinking at the time about my curious choice of an April start date as a behavior suitable for an April fool and also for having chosen, in the words of T. S. Eliot, "the cruelest month".

But then I discovered the advantage of being left alone at the very onset of a new project. I led a monkish existence in my high-ceilinged room, with total concentration. The topic I had planned to work on was manipulation, a vast, vague subject that made me worry whether in writing about it, I was in danger of writing about nothing in particular.

After Easter, my social life in Wiko picked up. It helped that I found, in Guy, Sarah, David, and Cheryl, the reassuring faces of old friends and acquaintances. It took me no time to discover the deep bond that had already been established among the “old veterans”, who were neither old nor veterans but merely members who started the year together. With the evolutionary biologist among them, I found common ground right away – watching football in the White Villa – whereas with the German crowd eating and drinking at Restaurant Floh I found different common ground: *Spargel*.

In the last month or so of my stay, Carlo Ginsburg and Luisa Ciammitti joined me as neighbors. From then on, there were no moments in which my world looked as if it were made of cheese. We had regular breakfasts and many joined meals, and I still cherish the memory of those precious meetings.

Two outside events nourished me during my stay: ten days of intense musical homage to an old friend, Alfred Brendel, himself a past Fellow of Wiko, which took place in the Konzerthaus Berlin; and then a few days in Moscow among free-spirited intellectuals, which gave me the impression of visiting Herzen’s circle. The succession of these two events forced me out of my Grunewald cocoon.

The Wiko weekly seminar covered a whole range of topics, some of which were utterly new to me, but were very well known to the speakers. I was struck by how elaborate the introductions to the speakers were, and even more, by how much good will was showered on the speakers by those commenting on their lectures. I wasn’t used to it. I was raised in an intellectual environment in which politeness was regarded as a way of blunting sharpness. I gradually learned to appreciate good manners in the discussion and the usefulness of being supportive to researchers, especially in the early stages of one’s research.

The staff at Wiko was astonishingly helpful, attentive, and invariably nice. I was wined and dined lavishly, and altogether Wiko supplied me with a glimpse of heaven.

I am approaching the age when it becomes too risky to buy green tomatoes, let alone plan to write a book. But I hope, probably hope against hope, to write a book on manipulation. I owe the Kolleg extreme gratitude for providing me with the ideal conditions under which to launch my project.

By manipulation I have in mind both micro-manipulation – manipulation in personal relations – and macro-manipulation – manipulation of a collective, i.e. political manipulation. My main concern is political manipulation, but I maintain that the way to understand what political manipulation consists of is through understanding what manipulation in interpersonal relations looks like. A great deal of moral and political thought has been dedicated to coercion as a serious infringement of human freedom. Not enough, I believe, has been written about manipulation and the way it detracts from human freedom. Indeed, it is the relation between manipulation and freedom that is at the center of thought. I believe that in the developed world of today the worry about manipulation should replace the centrality of the worry about physical coercion.

The issue I try to tackle is, first: What is manipulation? And, second: What, if at all, is wrong with manipulation? I am still plodding away at writing about the former, and in trying to elucidate what sets it apart from mere deception or the like.

While I encountered very little by way of manipulation in Wiko, I am now back in my “punished land”, where manipulation is the order of the day.