



AN ACADEMIC SIGH OF RELIEF ELÇİN AKTOPRAK

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The last five years have been difficult. In 2017, I was dismissed from my faculty, where I had studied and then worked for 15 years, for signing a peace declaration on the Kurdish question in Turkey. Along with many of my co-signers, we were academically punished for exercising our right to freedom of thought. This punishment was a threat to scholars in Turkey, because as academics we studied, wrote, and taught the issues that the government did not want us to touch, and as ordinary citizens we openly expressed our opinions on these issues. The government openly showed the public what can happen if you touch the undesirable areas.

Perhaps we faced one of the harshest sanctions violating academic freedom, but on the other hand, many of us fought tenaciously not to leave the academic world. Before coming to Wiko, I continued my academic studies, on the one hand, and on the other hand, I fought with my friends to build a different academic public sphere in civil society. The academy was no longer just the four walls of the university for me, but the long period of reading and writing necessary to live up to being an academic had now shortened considerably and the ordinary flow of life had turned into a rush.

Under these circumstances and in this state of mind, I was quite excited and a little anxious when I arrived in Berlin in August 2022 with my 10-year-old son. In recent years, we had experienced a lot of solidarity and support in international academic circles for the violations of academic freedom in Turkey, but we had also been exposed to some attitudes that saw us only as victims and not as equal colleagues. I was curious to see how things would be in Berlin.

Already at the orientation meetings, my fear dissipated. When Barbara and Daniel emphasized that Wiko required us to think and write freely, without the pressure of concrete results and with the possibility of pursuing new ideas, I was sure that I was in an “old-school academic environment,” which I firmly believe is the one that truly fosters skilled academic production. In contrast to the competitive academic environment that prevails all over the world, I experienced an atmosphere in which all Fellows were considered equal colleagues and the exchange of ideas about all aspects of life increased over lunches, dinners, coffee conversations, walks, and home visits. I was surprised and pleased that, after a long time, someone thought to provide me with the atmosphere I needed to work comfortably. It was very instructive to meet and share life with highly qualified but above all very human colleagues every day in the green tranquility of the Grunewald. Listening to a lecture on bees or insects, hearing the pages of a book in the voice of its author – it was wonderful to see how a multidisciplinary environment can be a source of nurturing inspiration.

We discussed the violations of academic freedom in Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, Hungary, and other parts of the world not as “victims,” but as academics, and my friends who come from similar backgrounds will understand how valuable that sentiment is. Because what happened to us did not make us valuable. How we deal with it, and how we have been positioned by others in dealing with it, can really turn a process of hurt into a constructive path. Wiko is one of the few realms that offers this possibility without losing the academic framework.

Looking back now, the first definition that comes to mind for the Wiko experience is this: I had an academic sigh of relief. I could think, read, and write in peace again, something that had long eluded me. The good old days suddenly became the present, and the first result of my book project, which had been floating around in my head for years, emerged as a book chapter these days.

At Wiko, I realized once again how much I miss a sincere academic environment. But more importantly, I faced myself and realized that academia is a part of me, which was hard to admit a year ago.

For that, I am very grateful.