



A PLACE CALLED “WIKO”
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The Wissenschaftskolleg is a well-known institution in narrow circles. Scholars often learn about Wiko from former Fellows or from the many public events and conferences held at the Kolleg long before they apply and step into the building on Wallotstraße 19 as Fellows. Similarly, I learned about Wiko during my fellowship at another Institute for Advanced Study – the New Europe College in Bucharest, which was created in the early 1990s in the image of Wiko to support scholarship in post-communist countries. It would not be long after my arrival in Grunewald that I would find out that the image of Wiko I had fell drastically short of the near-legendary aura it has in Berlin, stretching from idealization (“a scholars’ paradise”) to almost a caricature (the socially isolated “ivory tower” in a rich suburb of Berlin). Until then, Wiko was an enigma. While waiting for my trip to Berlin, I wanted to know more than Wiko’s web page had to offer. My first questions were answered by a recent Wiko alumna who happened to be my Co-Fellow at

Vienna's Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in the summer of 2022. Her stories about the campus near the lake in Grunewald, the colloquia, and the collective lunches shaped my anticipations. Another colleague described the Institute simply as "a place to read and think." After a temporary teaching position, and while I was still grappling with the devastating reality of Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, this sounded like a soothing, welcome promise.

I arrived at Wiko to work on an entirely new project on water management and irrigation in post-World War II Ukraine. As Ukrainian water infrastructure was being either appropriated or ruined by the Russian army, I was interested in the ideas behind its construction. I was about to investigate the new social and environmental landscapes that came into being with the modern irrigation in the Ukrainian South, as well as the political significance of major water routes, such as the North Crimean Canal. I planned to start this project as soon as I was done with my monograph on seasonal workers in the late Soviet Union, which would round up eight years of work. That part seemed easy.

Or so thought the person who had never written a monograph. Soon enough, my clear plans were to undergo major revisions. Their reassessment was preceded by a conference at Princeton University entitled "Industrious Nations: Reconsidering Nationality and Economy in the Soviet Union," which took place in late October and where I presented a paper on the historical trajectory and variations of seasonal labor in the USSR from the 1950s to the 1980s. The discussion by and the feedback from the colleagues at the workshop were as challenging as they were inspiring, so much so that I decided to reconsider the analytic angle of my monograph. In addition to telling the story of seasonal migration as a strategy for survival and economic adaptation to socialism in rural Western Ukraine, I thought it was worth looking into the historical development of flexible labor and the institutionalization of flexible labor markets in the late Soviet Union. This shift required taking a closer look into the legislation on contract-based labor and comparing payment systems in the agrarian sector in order to single out the specificities of seasonal workers' employment vis-à-vis regular collective and state farmers. The amusing outcome of this investigation was the realization that, contrary to many scholars' and my own long-standing conviction, the role of informality in the relations between seasonal workers and their employers had been exaggerated. Informal negotiations and connections were certainly important to create an incentive and mitigate risks. At the same time, the contracts were regulated by law, albeit loosely, and the majority of employers did try not to overstep these rules (too much). I made this point in a paper that I presented at the conference

“Insecurity in the Age of Labour Formalisation: Informal Work in Europe, ca. 1870–1970” at the University of Bern. The less amusing outcome was that I would have to rewrite some chapters and add new ones.

The next round of revisions came after my Tuesday Colloquium presentation in January. I talked about the methodological challenges of historical research into a rather marginal social issue, such as seasonal migration, connected to the dearth and bureaucratic uniformity of archival sources. During the discussion, a colleague pointed out that microhistory might be a helpful tool. Most of my archival sources were regional in scope, which partly shaped the scale of the research, but since the majority of my interlocutors were from one village, a microhistorical approach could add a valuable dimension to the analysis and better illustrate the stark contrast in village livelihoods between the 1950s and 1970s. After a moment of doubt, mostly of a pragmatic nature, I succumbed to curiosity. I accepted (yet another) methodological turn and made plans to take a look at the regional archives in Transcarpathia (for the hundredth time) during my next trip to Ukraine, planned for September. I also arranged follow-up interviews via Zoom with those few contacts who could still share details about their daily lives under late Soviet socialism.

My interest in the economic anthropology of the Soviet countryside and women’s involvement in seasonal work informed the paper that I wrote during my stay at Wiko for an edited volume on labor and working-class history in the late Soviet Union. I presented another paper, on non-standard employment in the USSR, at Regensburg’s Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies.

Many would agree that Wiko is first and foremost a place for writing. Novels, academic articles, and books are written here year after year. As the responsibilities of teaching and administration are removed, scholars get a precious opportunity to fully dedicate their time to developing their ideas and writing. At least that’s the idea. Published texts are the measurement of academic productivity, of progress made, of having gotten the job done. Unpublished texts do not enter this record. They are invisible and therefore irrelevant. As a junior scholar without a permanent position, I had to spend more time than I had wished writing texts not intended for publication, but merely for securing another academic post. During my stay at Wiko, I felt as if I was living in two overlapping timelines – the here and now of research, events, and discussions and an imagined academic future, which can only be actualized if a sufficient number of unpublishable texts are duly submitted by respective deadlines. Thanks to one such text, I will continue writing my

book at Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena. I still envision Soviet Ukrainian irrigation and its long-term environmental trace as my future research project. But for now it exists only in invisible texts. Thanks to Anja Brockmann, I have a long bibliography on water and irrigation in Ukraine in German. And thanks to Eva von Kügelgen's pedagogy, I can even read some of it.

The Wissenschaftskolleg is a place of meetings, too. To my mind, Wiko is primarily about sociability, induced by the soft structure of daily meals, Tuesday and Thursday Colloquia, Three Culture Forums, and more singular academic and cultural events. Wiko's grid of connections, which has been sprawling since the early 1980s, includes scholars, writers, and musicians from all over the world. Even though Wiko is a small and rather young institution, its history is already packed with remarkable names. Once they are gone, they are always welcome to visit again. And they do. Meetings seem easy at Wiko, as easy as they are sometimes utterly unexpected. Like that time when I sat at a regular Wiko dinner and suddenly saw one of my former professors from the European University Institute entering the Wiko dining hall as easily as if it were the EUI cafeteria some ten years ago. Or that time when I came for an ordinary Wiko lunch and came across Sofia Dyak, the director of the Lviv Center for Urban History, whom I last saw in Vienna in 2019. Or that other time, when we went to a concert at the Berliner Philharmonie, only to discover shortly after that one of the featured composers, Toshio Hosokawa, was not only a former Fellow of Wiko, but was staying at the Kolleg during his trip to Berlin (and again, the Wiko cafeteria was a meeting place!). In a similar lucky accident, I met Andrii Portnov, a historian of and from Ukraine and a former Wiko Fellow who now teaches at the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt (Oder). Andrii invited me there to give a talk at the Osteuropa/Ukrainian Studies Colloquium, where I had the chance to have a stimulating exchange with bright and curious students.

The core social circle was, of course, our Wiko cohort. By carefully preparing the mixture of experts, Wiko delivers an intellectual compound that is unique every year. Depending on one's disposition, exposure to such intellectual and social vistas can have a tremendous potential for both learning and introspection. Not only the formal colloquia, but every lunch and dinner is a productive collision of ideas. These ideas sometimes kept me preoccupied long after, and I found myself researching names, events, and places online. It was a privilege to learn from people from diverse corners of academia, ranging from biochemistry to the history of China, and who come from such a variety of national and cultural backgrounds. My most memorable discoveries were, perhaps, related to the

altruistic behavior of rats and to debt and indebtedness in South Africa, where people use their welfare benefits as collateral when they borrow money from private persons.

I benefited even more from discussions with colleagues whose interests were closer to my own. Insa Nolte and I returned many times to the subject of oral history. I had helpful conversations about financial redistribution and informality with Deborah James and about monetarization with Antonin Pottier. Maximilian Benz, Thomas Kaufmann, Martin Saar, and Kateryna Mishchenko were frequent partners in discussing Ukrainian and German politics and culture. Ittai Weinryb knew about the best exhibitions in Berlin, Paris, and, frankly, everywhere. I thoroughly enjoyed Karin Leonhard's talk on *sottobosco* painting, a mysterious 17th-century genre that explored the cycle of creation and decay through the depiction (and study) of such close-to-earth lifeforms as plants, reptiles, and insects. The talk provided an elegant conclusion to the nature/culture debate – this year's paradigmatic undercurrent – which tended to reemerge in the colloquium hall and at the lunch table.

In the dark background of this sheltered academic existence was the tragic war in Ukraine, the deadly earthquake in Turkey, and political reforms in France and Israel that were met with wide protests. In the early weeks of introductions and first encounters, I found myself answering many questions about Ukraine's politics, history, issues of language, and the reasons for Russia's invasion, as well as sympathetic inquiries about my family back in Kyiv. Wiko itself hosted a number of discussions related to the war in Ukraine and specifically on the long-term impact on the lives of scholars, beyond the material destruction of universities. The topics of academic refugeism, the preservation of institutions, and the prospects for academic freedom were discussed in the broader context of dictatorships in Russia, Belarus, and Turkey. In such dark times, hope is scarce. This is why it was especially reassuring to witness that Wiko, together with a number of other institutions, decided to take action and contribute to academic resilience in Ukraine by establishing the Ukraine Institute for Advanced Study in Kyiv. The very first Ukrainian IAS will open its doors, despite the ongoing war, to those scholars who stayed.

At our farewell party, in her farewell talk, Wiko Rector Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger half-jokingly asked us to refrain from saying "thank you" (too much). And yet it is hard to abide by this request, not only because of the exceptional conditions for work, a famous feature of Wiko, but also because of the friendly and welcoming atmosphere of the Kolleg. It is rare for everyone to know you by name from the moment you arrive. Vera Pfeffer and the housing team made my relocation to Berlin smooth and worryless. Daniel Schönpflug

and Katharina Wiedemann eased everyone's immersion into the Wiko life with their relaxed attitude, humor, and supportive advice. Maïke Schaper was always there to answer my questions about what, how, and where in Berlin. Michael Dominik Hagel and the amazing library team found and delivered books in a matter of days and sometimes hours. To all of them I am forever grateful. It is they who steer this ship called "Wiko" with apparent ease and make it a place to read, think, write, change plans, meet, debate, and create.