



## MY ENCOUNTER WITH WIKO'S GENIUS TCHAVDAR MARINOV

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When I received an invitation from the Wissenschaftskolleg, I was rather surprised – like other Fellows, as I later discovered. Indeed, encouraged by a prominent colleague, I had sent a research project proposal optimistically targeting a 10-month fellowship, but I was sure it was going to be one of those futile applications. Wiko is a widely known institution in the academic circles I have been part of throughout my career, but it is considered a difficult place to get into: a high-profile Institute for Advanced Study, traditionally

attracting the “cream” of the humanities and social sciences. This seemed obviously not a place for somebody dealing with the history of a rather provincial and obscure context (just ask yourselves what you imagine when you hear the term “Balkans”). Expecting to be selected for a Wiko fellowship with such a parochial area – next to researchers dealing with globally important topics in the natural and social sciences, prospective Nobel Prize winners, internationally famous writers and poets – seemed to be far from realistic.

Yet, at a certain point in 2022, it was already about time that I pack my luggage for one academic year in Berlin, in a place where, at the first moment, I felt I didn’t belong. My defeatist mood changed nevertheless rather quickly. This adaptation was largely due to the perfect organization of every single step and question related to my fellowship, which contrasted quite a lot with the somewhat chaotic conditions in institutions I am used to: from the email exchange preceding my arrival covering *inter alia* questions such as the school enrolment of my daughter or travelling to Germany with a cat, through the warm reception by Vera who had patiently waited for us in Villa Walther for a rather long moment, to the meticulous initiation into the life at the institute, the organization of both entertaining and beneficial classes in German, the extremely efficient IT services, the interesting architectural tours of Berlin, the babysitting services... It is difficult not to miss later some of the – almost royal – privileges one enjoyed as a Wiko Fellow. Every aspect of my stay was so carefully and professionally prepared by an amazing staff that was always, without exception, not simply and superficially friendly but cordial and ready to help. Apart from Vera, I must not forget to mention Maike, Andrea, Nina, Katharina, Eva, Corina, Petria, Francisco. And, of course, Dunia and the formidable kitchen staff with their great meals on every weekday and the excellent wine on Thursday dinners!

But Wiko is no doubt much more than a professionally organized institution that is efficient “in a German way.” What really made me feel at home, despite my initial reserve, was the welcoming and open-minded academic spirit – or indeed, genius – of the Wissenschaftskolleg. Representing the complete negation of intellectual parochialism, Wiko is a place that sees no geographical contexts as “provincial.” Indeed, it is a place that inevitably “de-provincializes” contexts and topics that may otherwise seem isolated one from the other. At discussions following the Tuesday Colloquia and other events (Thursday Colloquia, Berliner Abend, lectures, readings), Wiko finds ways to encourage an unexpectedly fruitful dialogue between geographically distant places (such as the Balkans and Nigeria, Transcarpathian Ruthenia and India), different historical eras (ancient China and contemporary Kenya, for instance), and even between entire scholarly fields

and scientific disciplines. In the latter case, this was made possible in particular through the Three Cultures Forum series where researchers coming from the life sciences, social sciences, and humanities were able to discover and debate themes of common academic interest – or, on the contrary, to identify false resemblances and pitfalls such as anthropomorphism in biology or notions like “intuition.”

But, most of all, this dialogue is made possible thanks to the informal communication between Fellows – and here come maybe my dearest memories from my year of fellowship. Prior to it, I would have never thought that I would find so interesting and thought-provoking a conversation with, let’s say, specialists in evolutionary genetics or in interspecies mutualism in botany and zoology: I wouldn’t dare underestimate such fields of study – on the contrary, they seem so divinely serious compared to my research and so far away from it! People praising – so often in a futile way – inter- and cross-disciplinarity have a lot to learn from Wiko. In any case, communication with Co-Fellows is an intellectually crucial aspect and an inestimable benefit of one’s life in Wiko – not only because it widens intellectual horizons, but also as it inevitably reveals one’s limitations. I remember how ashamed I was when I suddenly realized that a Co-Fellow from India knew so much about the historical and political context of my home country, while I was trying to imagine in vain in which Indian state Bangalore is situated.

The global scale and interdisciplinary character of Wiko may also have limitations. Yet, in any case, one cannot emphasize enough how faithful Wiko is to its true vocation: free research, intellectual freedom, high academic standards. Here, I cannot bypass one of the greatest privileges of being in Wiko: its amazing library staff and services. People of Eastern Europe know well what I mean: trying to be an internationally competitive academic in countries where university libraries are often understaffed and poorly supplied with books and (even more often) with academic periodicals is by no means obvious. It is often unthinkable to have free access to thousands of titles you would otherwise search for to no avail (or should order at a high price) and to be able to simply order them in the easiest possible way, without formalities. And that an unbelievably efficient staff, working literally “for you,” would take care of the rest and you can even receive publications from remote libraries the same day... In some cases, the extent of the staff’s care can make you lose your detective skills. Another moment when I felt shame was after ordering a somewhat “exotic” publication – a Serbian interwar periodical (by the way, in Cyrillic script) – just to receive the quick answer from the librarian, “It would be difficult to order a physical copy, but you can find all issues digitized by the National Library of Serbia at

the following web address...” I hadn’t even bothered to check if by chance it was accessible online before ordering it...

Despite sticking to non-negotiable academic values, Wiko’s genius is not a mentor in the bad sense. Having trust in the academic merits and qualities of its Fellows and in its own high reputation, the cosy institute in Grunewald is far from the overall tension and overambitious competitiveness of university institutions. It is a place where communication between the leadership, the staff, and the Fellows is relaxed, where academic manners necessarily include a well-intentioned subtlety, a refined intellectual kindness, and a smart sense of humour. Let me reveal the masterminds behind this formidable combination: Barbara, Iris, and Daniel, and of course, the Permanent Fellows. The presence of these academics throughout the academic year, the possibility to discuss with them a variety of topics – scholarly, but also political, social, etc. – and even to ask them for their help was an honour for us. I guess this is how a true academic community is being built – far from the usually feudalized structure of traditional university and research institutions.

Faithful to this subtle and open-minded manner of communication, in the beginning of our year of fellowship, Barbara admitted we were also free to fail in our individual research projects. Frankly speaking, I feared this was going to be my case: therefore, initially, I was trying to ponder the weight of the literal sense in Barbara’s words. Like some other Fellows, I had arrived in Berlin with a rather enthusiastic project without being sure it was based on a clearly feasible plan. My intention was to write a short monograph exploring the analytical potential but also the limitations of the concept of “national indifference” in the context of modern and contemporary Balkan history. While it geographically focused on the Balkan area, the more general ambition of my project was to contribute to the ongoing debates on temporality and social diffusion of nationalism in modern Europe. By crediting “national indifference” an explanatory value, my project tackled self-identifications and external categorizations within modern and contemporary Balkan societies that are often obscured by national historians. It surveyed the practical choices and reasons of (non-)élite populations, but it also addressed epistemological problems related to their study. My idea was to employ a critical appraisal of the concept of “national indifference,” both in past uses and nowadays, to shed light on questions such as the temporal scales of the spread of nationhood, the social logics of loyalty and pragmatism, and the relationship between identity and interest. A far too ambitious endeavour.

A year later, it seems my project is to a large extent completed and its outcome will hopefully be published soon. Like some of my colleagues, I also had to dedicate part of my

time to projects “inherited” from the years prior to my Wiko fellowship. Thanks to the generous resources and staff of the Wiko library, I was able to consult and collect much-needed sources and secondary literature on topics such as the Balkan art histories during the first half of the twentieth century. As a matter of fact, it would have been much more difficult to find relevant titles in the Balkans where the communication and exchange between different countries’ academic institutions is not always particularly good and developed. Normally, I would have needed to look for accommodation in Belgrade, Skopje, and Thessaloniki or Athens to do the research which was made possible by a simple online search in the Wikoscope...

Frankly speaking, I tried to limit other academic participations to the minimum during my year of fellowship, so that I was able to concentrate on my individual research. This is nevertheless difficult in a leading intellectual centre like Berlin. Invitations to take part in a seminar, a colloquium, a conference, or a workshop started popping up in my email inbox even already before my arrival. Meeting “local” colleagues – in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany – was surely one of the great advantages of being at Wiko. Apart from official conference venues in Berlin or Hamburg, it was funny to meet German colleagues working on the Balkans, for instance in the “Sarajevo Inn” – the Bosnian restaurant with an unmistakable *Gastarbeiter* ambiance right behind the railway station of the otherwise posh Grunewald. A peculiar blend of serious and professional spirit and an informal and democratic openness is omnipresent in Berlin – and in Wiko in particular.

It is hard for me to find words to express my gratitude to Wiko’s genius for making possible this unusual year of my life. At least I hope I managed to keep part of its forces with me: it is this inspiring sense of academic community that marked my life in Berlin. It is maybe not much, but I believe it is enough.