



TIME TO (RE)THINK  
MILICA NIKOLIĆ

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Although the time at Wiko defies easy categorization, I draw parallels to the various stages of human development. The journey unfolds from infancy, marked by a sense of

novelty and wonder; transitioning to childhood – characterized by the formation of close and profound connections; progressing to adolescence – a period of curiosity and substantial growth; to young adulthood – a busy season of accumulating memories; and, finally, to late adulthood – when contemplation and a touch of nostalgia arise.

1.

It has been precisely two years since I first came across the call for the “Gain time to think” fellowship of the College for Life Sciences at Wiko, Berlin. The promise of providing early career researchers an opportunity to take a break from the lab, offering them time to develop and write their own projects and to immerse in an intellectually and culturally diverse environment sounded like an academic reverie.

As a mother of two young children, I could not help but fret over the feasibility of moving to Berlin for a couple of months. Yet, when I reached out to Jana, the Academic Coordinator of the College for Life Sciences (little did I foresee the multitude of emails and live conversations that would follow), she reassured me that it is possible to arrange for Fellows with families to join. With excitement, I ran to my partner: “What do you think about moving to Berlin for a couple of months?” and I applied for the fellowship. Roughly six months later, Jana returned with exciting news – and we were bound for Berlin, psyched up for this adventure.

2.

I was both nervous and excited to arrive in Grunewald. The contrast to bustling, crowded Amsterdam was noticeable. I was struck by the tranquil serenity of the neighborhood. Villa Walther with its surrounding was nothing short of enchanting.

Vera’s warm welcome made us feel at home right away. I went on to explore Wiko’s buildings. Arriving at the Villa Jaffé where my office was to be, I found myself immersed in its beauty. “Milica,” an unfamiliar voice called out, “Hello, I recognized you from a photo.” It was Eva, the German teacher. I was taken aback by her attentiveness. This gesture set the tone: every Wiko staff member welcomed us with kindness, consideration, and openness.

3.

The days swiftly passed after our settling in. People who were complete strangers mere weeks before now felt like dear and familiar friends. The sense of a community started to build up quickly. We all had something in common: being displaced from our regular

lives, and gathering daily for lunch conversations that could spiral into the most intriguing discussions quickly built a growing sense of togetherness. The atmosphere was one of comfort and familiarity, yet also of freshness, inspiration, and revelation.

While I managed to work on my planned project, I dedicated substantial time to introspection, ruminating not only on my research, but also on academia more generally and my role within it. I pondered the ways researchers engage in science and with other fellow academics. I marveled at the unexpected connections between seemingly disparate topics and my own area of study. I believe I was not the only one. The environment at Wiko is crafted for contemplation – the absence of deadlines and the freedom to think fostered an atmosphere of open reflection and discussion.

Attending and giving the Tuesday Colloquium made me realize the vast differences in definitions, concepts, and methodologies across different fields. Emotion – my area of research – it seemed, could take on myriad meanings depending on whom you ask. And so could any other construct. Within our own field, we often take our definitions and our methodologies for granted, without questioning them fundamentally. As a psychologist, I was aware that my approach would be different from those of other disciplines, but the extent of the discrepancies was revelatory. I recall some of our impromptu discussions about the concept of “evidence” or “truth” at a few of our regular lunch gatherings that sparked major disagreements at the table. This opportunity to question everything, no matter how seemingly mundane, I came to cherish the most about Wiko.

Another distinct aspect of being at Wiko is the opportunity to engage with academics, both from within and outside of Berlin and discuss research, fostering new collaborations and establishing lasting connections. This unique networking opportunity is especially valuable for early career researchers, like me, as it provides a chance, perhaps for the first time, to gain a perspective on one’s research program from a diverse group of senior faculty. Among others of them, I had the pleasure of meeting Ute Frevert. Her openness, curiosity, and kindness set a guiding example of how I should aspire to treat emerging young scholars in the future.

4.

Memories of my time at Wiko abound. The warm welcome from the receptionists at Wiko’s main building; neighborly after-work moments with Martin and his family; Dunia’s kindness while carefully packing numerous take-away lunches; Jana’s compassion and understanding; the warm support of Vera who arranged our stay; memorable

Thursday dinners made possible by Dunia and her team, including kind Ibrahima; the wisdom shared in speeches by past and present Wiko Rectors; discussing early-career researcher challenges with my dear Co-Fellows of the College for Life Sciences, especially Rose, Danai, and Camilo; and interesting, inspiring conversations with many Co-Fellows, including (but not limited to) Daven, Oren, Michael, Judie, Martin, Max, Thomas, Tchavdar, and others. Getting many recommendations, from must-read books to must-try cake recipes, including the best ever chocolate cake recipe from Rose, my officemate; a spacious office with a beautiful view on the top floor of the Villa Jaffé; the rhythmic crack of the wooden floor when I climbed the stairs to reach the office; the beautiful garden turning red and yellow as the autumn approached behind our home in Villa Walther; the top floor of the White Villa, where our kids' laughter echoed at celebrations and Thursday dinners; the enchanting walk to the S-Bahn station; and, maybe most memorable, Tuesday Colloquia that always offered an intriguing and fresh way to look at the world.

5.

As I reflect on these memories, I am once again reminded how exceptional this time at Wiko was. The true depth of its warmth and familiarity struck me during my return to Wiko for the farewell party, six months after my fellowship ended. As I stepped off at the Grunewald S-Bahn station and walked again that well-trodden path to Wiko's main building, nostalgia swelled within me, mixed with a profound appreciation for the privilege of experiencing such a chapter in my life. The sight of familiar faces reminded me of how lucky I was to intersect paths with these people.

6.

For some, the fellowship serves as a respite from regular demands of teaching, meetings, and administrative duties, providing time to dive into new areas of research. Others see it as an opportunity to make new connections and draw inspiration from fellow scholars. Some seize this time to crystalize their ideas and projects, while others engage in profound reevaluation of their place within academia. In my case, it encompassed all of the above. It was a truly remarkable, special, and transformative chapter of my life.