



RECTANGLES AND LEAVES
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ONE: The most central form of our daily life at Wiko was a rectangle. Beige in color, and measuring about 45 × 30 cm, it was stacked one on top of the other in the beginning of the food dispensary line at the dining room. The rectangular form, that we held on average almost 150 times during our Wiko year, was the form on which our hopes and dreams for conversation and exchange were amassed every lunch. Food was only secondary to our rectangles. This led to a daily exercise of organizing our beige companions on the dining

table. And after a while came to our resolution that the rectangles should be placed diagonally, leaning against the dining room wall. It made our dining experience partly a game of polygons. Rectangles lying around were indicative for a good lunch, a good conversation, and a good exchange of ideas.

TWO: The other rectangles in Wallotstraße were, of course, the books. And after playing with polygons in the dining room, we picked up our books at the library. For me, this was the best library in the world. Books ordered by 7 a.m. arrived before lunchtime from all over Berlin and beyond. Rectangles. Before I could imagine a book I wanted to read, it was already there. Books and food trays were the source of thinking in my *Wikojahr*.

THREE: While Wallotstraße was all about rectangles, our residence in Villa Walther, with its Adolph Menzel-like ornaments of decay, as well as the roads leading to the Grunewald forest, were all about leaves. Oval, truncate, elliptical, lancolate, or linear. Green, brown, grey, or yellow. Hanging from the trees or soaking wet on the path. The multiplicity of leaves was in dialectic opposition to the rectangular world of Wiko. Our hopes and dreams were different here. Aspiring to be anti-industrial but able to be, maybe, only anti-academic. Between rectangles and leaves, my year was shaped.

FOUR: In June before coming to Wiko, I became German. Through entangled family history, and by uncovering certificates we inherited in an old suitcase from my grandmother, I obtained German citizenship, or in German legal terms: I was restored. I had no idea what immense impact this new identity would have on me. No longer a foreigner enjoying the wealth of resources German academia has to offer, whether at the Max Planck Institutes or here at Wiko, but rather taking identity, in which I am now a new member of a group.

FIVE: I came to Wiko wanting to complete a book on the Venetian and Genoese presence in the Black Sea during the Middle Ages. It is now near completion, and I grapple with last footnotes. My perspective on the project has changed completely while in Berlin. In February, before coming to Wiko, Russia has invaded Ukraine. Writing on the Black Sea and especially on the Crimea from New York City was not so hard even during the time of war. From a distance one does not feel the suffering. But in Grunewald, and at Wiko, the war was real and present. My colleagues at Wiko were Ukrainians and Russians, some

were scholar refugees and some scholars in exile. Some were forced away from their homes, some chose to exclude themselves. And the streets of Grunewald were dotted with cars bearing Ukrainian license plates, which were obviously driven in haste, hoping to exchange the bloodshed for the serenity of western Berlin. My book project then became something else. The heftiness of contemporary politics had to be weighed into the historical account. Erich Auerbach noted how his book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* was written in Istanbul, in exile, and if it had been written at home, in Berlin, it would have been a different book. Along these lines, my book project, written in New York City, was written in exile from the Black Sea, with critical distance, but without the real understanding of what it means to write about the Sea. I was now surrounded by newly made friends inflected by the horrors of war, and understood better what it meant to write about the Black Sea. Academics always aspire for critical distance; here my view has changed.

SIX: Running in the Grunewald forest is something I never imagined could have been such an experience. Nature, your feet, and yourself. Altogether. Occasionally I had my Wiko-friend André Schneider passing me by on his mountain bike, but otherwise I was on my own in nature. Daniel Schönflug was the leader of our Wiko running team. Through his instructive ways, I learned how to run, and through his immense knowledge, I learned so much about the forest. Now back jogging on the asphalt of crowded Central Park, running is just not the same.

SEVEN: Grunewald forest has a cemetery in its center, where Nico, lead singer of the Velvet Underground, my childhood heroine, is buried. Undoubtedly laid down in her *shiny boots of leather*, it is strange to think of that thick voice of hers, cigarette and whiskey engulfed, buried in such serenity. Like in an eternal *kogel mogel* of the morning after.

EIGHT: At Wiko I also published my first book in German. It centers on the colonization and conversion of the Slavs in northeastern Germany in the 11th century. Part of the argument of the book is that the colonization and conversion projects were part of a process of industrialization and deforestation. Running in the Grunewald forest, the indigent lands of the Polabian Slavs, with the sights of the Havel and the Spree, I am reminded of that short verse by Franz Kafka: "*If one were only an Indian*, instantly alert, and on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, kept on quivering jerkily over the quivering

ground, until one shed one's spurs, for there needed no spurs, threw away the reins, for there needed no reins, and hardly saw that the land before one was smoothly shorn heath when horse's neck and head would be already gone."¹ The feeling of belonging, writing on Slavs not from my New York City exile, but from home. Becoming one with the place, that freedom of belonging, made my first book in German different. *If one were only a Polabian Slav.*

NINE: In 1933, my grandparents were fired from their jobs by the Nazi regime. They lived near Wiko, at Droysenstr. 13, Charlottenburg. I used to cycle there on the way to the *Wochenmarkt* on Karl-August-Platz. From Droysenstraße, my grandparents moved to Trieste, and eventually to Palestine and the U.S.A. I wondered how my life would have looked like, if they stayed, survived, and lived, and if all of that did not happen, and I could have gone and visit them on the weekends in their home in Droysenstraße, having some *Schokoladentorte mit Schlagsahne*. *If one were only a Berliner.*

TEN: Rectangles and leaves have shaped my Wiko year. Or just the longing for a sense of belonging.

1 Franz Kafka, "The Wish to Be a Red Indian," in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, translated by Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1946), 148.