



THE MIND OF THE BEE, AND THE MIND
OF THE WIKO SCHOLAR
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I have been told that Wiko staff is a little tired of these reports’ repetitive “thank you” notes – and so, always the rebel, I shall begin with a big “Thank you, my luvvies!” You have been wonderful beyond words, and I wish my arms were long enough to hug you all collectively!

Coming to Berlin, for me, was a bit like coming home. The town had fascinated me since I was a teenager – I grew up in a rather unexciting town in North Germany (called Celle) and the many gaily two-coloured “DDR” (GDR) stamps in my old passport reveal

that I hitchhiked to West Berlin on an about monthly basis throughout my entire final school year in the early '80s. In those days, while formally capitalist, West Berlin was an island in East Germany and was kept on a financial drip by the West. The result was that it was probably the only anarchist paradise that ever existed on Earth. No one who didn't want to work, did. The conservative senate deemed itself even less bound by any law than did the squatters in Kreuzberg. At least the latter did something useful – saving a whole district that was earmarked for demolition by the senate. Meanwhile, the Berlin government was tightly interwoven with the criminal underworld, most notably a notorious pimp and mafioso by the name of Otto Schwanz (not a pseudonym) who had bribed several of his party pals in the CDU to wave through dodgy property deals. However, the only person who went to prison was Schwanz himself – the CDU dignitaries were even allowed to keep the bribes. And all the while the money kept right on flowing from West Germany.

It was a pleasant surprise to see that, 30 years later, the direction of the funding stream hadn't changed. In most countries, the capital city is *the* economic motor. Germany is probably the only European country where the GDP would go *up*, if you removed the capital. And it shows – unlike Paris or London, the pace is very, *very* relaxed. There isn't much of a rush hour (either on the roads or the rails) simply because there isn't much of a rush anywhere, ever. And 1.5 generations later, the cannabinoid vendors still stand under the same trees in Hasenheide Park, ensuring a steady supply of mental relaxants to the town, should anyone be at risk of overheating in their professional ambitions. *Ich bin ein Berliner*. (Dear reader, you may have realised that part of this essay is written with my tongue firmly lodged in my cheek. In what follows, I will largely refrain from naming any individual Wiko friends, because I fear that seeing their names in this piece might embarrass them. You know who you are ...)

I found that the Wiko environment, and Berlin at large, made it wonderfully easy to regress into a state of late teenagerhood (with the corresponding freedom of the mind). I have not partied this much since I was ... wait, no, I have never partied this much, period. The Fellows, between giving TV interviews one day and collecting international awards the next, certainly engaged in heavy-duty liver exercise, often several times a week. And of course it all served the good purpose of fuelling the brain! What a privilege to have nocturnal discussions with such a wonderful bunch of intellectual heavyweights about Marxism, consciousness, the origins of dragons and polyamory, until daybreak. And of course a good scholar interfaces theory with empiricism, and so heroic group expeditions

to some of Berlin's most notoriously debauched nightclubs had to be undertaken for research purposes. When the going gets tough, the tough get going.

Berlin has a lot of cultural offerings, and, being an ignoramus myself, I was happy to take other Fellows' sensible guidance as to the refined cultural delights one might savour. So one night I found myself at a concert by the Finnish heavy metal outfit "Ensiferum". I'll spare myself the expletives in describing the music, but there was a mosh pit, and life's a mosh pit and a mosh pit is life, so I thought I might as well get some exercise and jump in. This was a different weight class compared to what I'm used to, and so I found myself battling with 100kg bodybuilding worshipers of Thor and Satan. At the end, when there was the usual affectionate shoulder-patting and hugging, a rather large man with a fully tattooed skull and what looked like a transcranial piercing took my head in both hands, looked at me closely and said, not without admiration: "But, man, you're really old!"

When one is old, one tends to look backward more than forward, and so I connected with my past, and Berlin's past, on multiple levels. Within days of arriving at the Wiko, I had an interesting encounter in a local pub in Grunewald. I sat next to an older gentleman, who turned out to have lived in Berlin-Neukölln in his youth, as had I. Back then, this wasn't the finest part of town, so we had something to talk about. Eventually it turned out that he was Klaus-Rüdiger Landowsky – who had been the head of the Berlin CDU during the 1980s scandals. I tried to extract some insider information about the dealings of Otto Schwanz, but the old politician, though inebriated, was sly and guarded. He sensed that I was from the other end of the political spectrum, and didn't reveal much. Interestingly, my Russian friends at Wiko commented that this encounter was evidence of a functioning democracy. In Russia, they said, you would never find yourself drinking beer with a political figure of that calibre – they would frequent different establishments and in any case be surrounded by a swarm of bodyguards.

Through the overwhelming majority of scholars from the humanities, I was also able to reconnect with interests that had been buried since high school. I actually took humanities subjects almost exclusively in the final years of school (before becoming a scientist at uni), and so it was a fantastic experience to bounce around ideas with so many luminaries in sociology, psychology, history etc. But, guys guys guys, repeat after me: "Thou shalt not read an oral presentation word for word from a script." Three times. And then never do it again. There are many reasons. One is that we can all read twice as fast as anyone can comprehend the same text read out aloud – so if you've already written your piece, send it around to your audience and save them a valuable half hour. Another reason is that if you

read a speech, you're presenting yourself as someone who lacks the courage and memory to deliver a live performance. But most importantly, the whole point of an oral presentation is that it is interactive. You perform, you watch your audience, you tailor your pace, you improvise with the vibe you're getting from them. That is the crucial element of any live performance. If you miss that interactive element – well – you're pleasuring yourself. Now I don't want to be arrogant about a little “Ménage à moi” now and then. It's fine, if you find yourself at a loose end. But it's a little awkward to *watch* someone do it, unsolicited and in public for one hour. Really, it should be a private matter. Thank you.

When I arrived at Wiko, I was under the illusion that all I would do was to work on my book about the mind of the bee. (Yes, I am *that* good at fooling myself.) I had kind of forgotten that I have a large team of young scientists in London and that all the normal activities (Ph.D. panel meetings, writing manuscripts and grant applications etc.) continue as normal. Keeping my London lab going over this distance was a challenge, especially with four new Ph.D. students, but they coped admirably. I flew back to London on a monthly basis, and so to pay the fares I had to accept *all* invitations to gigs in the British Isles (destinations were the Unis of Cambridge, St. Andrews, Reading, York, Cork, Newcastle and Sussex, and some international ones added in for fun, in Toulouse and Montreal). A highlight for me was giving a talk in my hometown Celle – I hadn't known there even was an institution to give scientific presentations at, but it turned out there is a rather sleepy government research centre for domestic animal welfare research, and they kindly invited me. As I rode into town, the streets were deserted and, from behind curtains, there were pointing fingers and hushed whispers from the townspeople (“It's him! It's the guy who used to ...” etc.). With mum and my first girlfriend in the audience, the talk was a special experience.

The book that I had intended to complete is, meanwhile, about 60 % ready. Oh, well. When we started at Wiko, a member of the permanent staff told us that there are a few recognisable phases that the Fellows undergo each year. The last phase is “when they realise that they'll fail at finishing the book during their stay”. Knowing in advance that this phase was coming was helpful – it allowed us to let go a bit in the final weeks, even more than we would otherwise have done.

One of the most remarkable aspects of being at Wiko is the time it provides to read, and the library services that support our hunger for the written word. They'll find you anything, I mean *anything*, even from centuries back, in a day or two. And so I learned many a wonderful wisdom, for example from Charles Butler (1609) on how to win the

love of bees: “If thou wilt have the favour of thy bees, that they sting thee not, thou must avoid such things as offend them: thou must not be unchaste or uncleanly; for impurity and sluttiness (themselves being most chaste and neat) they utterly abhor; thou must not come among them smelling of sweat, or having a stinking breath, caused either through eating of leeks, onions, garlik, and the like, or by any other means, the noisomeness whereof is corrected by a cup of beer; thou must not be given to surfeiting or drunkenness; thou must not come puffing or blowing unto them, neither hastily stir among them, nor resolutely defend thyself when they seem to threaten thee; but softly moving thy hand before thy face, gently put them by; and lastly, thou must be no stranger unto them. In a word, thou must be chaste, cleanly, sweet, sober, quiet, and familiar; so will they love thee.” In other words, no hope for me.

Beyond exploring the past, there is also a present-day world that was very much brought to our attention by the Fellows’ diverse backgrounds and the experiences they shared with us inside the rather well-cushioned paradise. One weekend we visited the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, Poland with several Wiko friends. We had the special privilege that our Co-Fellow Paweł Machcewicz, who built the museum from scratch and who was its former director and curator, took us there from Berlin. Over nearly a decade, Paweł had worked tirelessly to build this unique museum and its exhibits, trying to present a fair account of the events of the war and the suffering it spread across nations. In 2015, Poland’s new right-wing, nationalist government took over and tried everything to stop the museum from being completed. Their allegation was/is that the museum was not sufficiently pro-Polish and therefore unpatriotic. For two years, Paweł fought against impossible odds and lawsuits for the museum to finally open its doors early in 2017. Weeks after the museum’s inauguration, Paweł was sacked from his position as director. The government has since begun to censor and replace the museum’s exhibits. One of the new items on display was a cheesy video in the style of a computer war game, presenting the view that the Polish army was never beaten. The new rulers seem oblivious to the idea that the very nationalism they promote is of exactly the same brand that generated the disasters of the first half of the 20th century, portrayed so devastatingly in Paweł’s museum. Similar despots now appear on the rise in multiple countries globally, and it does make a difference if the person next to you is affected by them, rather than you just finding out through the news.

The daily encounter with the very real troubles around the globe prompts the question of what we, as intellectual leaders, can do for the world. Following the good example of several other Wiko Fellows, I’ve become a vegetarian (an endeavour made easy by the

remarkable cooking skills of the chefs at the institution). The arguments are pretty overwhelming (Google them; or if you respond more to image material, look for e.g. “chicken battery farming” videos on YouTube). Following our own research on the psychology of bees, I have also begun campaigning for the conservation of bees from the perspective that they need to be understood as sentient beings, individuals with unique memories and expectations, a rich perceptual and emotional world. Will such research and campaigning actually make a difference? Some words (that I discovered while at Wiko) from Nobel Laureate and bee researcher extraordinaire Karl von Frisch: “I was often downcast and depressed for weeks, if the work didn’t progress according to my wishes, and I was convinced of my incompetence. For years, I always thought during every investigation that it would be the last one for which I might have some ideas. I never quite got over this opinion. At the beginning of my career, I was doubtful whether I would ever have sensible subjects for my students, should any approach me. And if something emerged from these works, it would be useless anyway.” His mother, Marie von Frisch, twisted it in as only a mother can (quotation from a personal letter): “My dear Karly, only stupid people never have doubts about themselves ... Mrs Richter tells me that the other day... you were riding a sledge like the best of them, even though it was your first time. So, if everything else fails, there is one talent you have.” My problem is that I’m no good at riding a sledge either, though my one unquestionable accomplishment here at Wiko is that at the age of 55, I finally learned to touch-type (albeit at a slightly slower speed than with the 4-finger system I used before).