

Karl E. Meyer

Mastering the Great Game, at WIKO



Karl E. Meyer was born in Wisconsin in 1928. A graduate in History at the University of Wisconsin in 1951, he received a Master's degree in Public Affairs at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School in 1953 and a Ph.D. in Politics in 1956. From 1956-1971, he worked at *The Washington Post* as reporter, editorial writer and bureau chief in London and New York. Since 1979, he has been a member of the editorial board of the *The New York Times*, writing chiefly about foreign affairs. He was American correspondent of *The New Statesman* of London, 1962-1965, and television critic of *The Saturday Review*, 1974-1979. He has been McGraw Professor of Writing at Princeton, correspondent-in-residence at the Fletcher School at Tufts and visiting professor at Yale. His books include *The New America* (1961), *The Cuban Invasion* (with Tad Szulc, 1962), *Fulbright of Arkansas* (1963), *The Pleasures of Archaeology* (1971), *The Plundered Past* (1974) and *Pundits, Poets and Wits: An Omnibus of American Newspaper Columns* (1990). He makes his home in New York with his wife, Shareen Blair Brysac, a filmmaker and author. — Address: The New York Times, 229 West 43rd Street, New York, NY 10036, USA.

Ten months in Berlin passed with indecent speed, like the sports cars that whiz heedlessly down Koenigsallee. Life at the Kolleg possessed the special savour of good talk around dining tables that typically spanned several generations, four continents and as many academic disciplines. Typically, too, each week brought totally unexpected suggestions for reading and research, which the library staff, like the fairy *Heinzelmännchen*, seemed magically to extract from Berlin libraries.

For a writer, the Wissenschaftskolleg combines, as Shaw once remarked of marriage, maximum temptation and opportunity. My wife Shareen and I have embarked on a major book project, a history of the Great Game, or the old Anglo-Russian rivalry, written from a post-Cold War vantage. Beginning early in the 19th century, the British feared and believed that Czarist Russia was planning the conquest or subversion of British India. For upwards of a century, both empires competed for

mastery of Central Asia in a struggle that led to two British invasions of Afghanistan, a major war scare in the 1880's, and the penetration of Tibet by a British force in 1904. Not least, the conflict nurtured the geopolitical theories of Halford Mackinder, which through Karl Haushofer influenced Hitler, and which still later became a subtext of the Cold War, *i.e.*, the Western fear that mastery of the Eurasian Heartland would make Moscow master of the world.

We came to Berlin worrying that the books and documents we needed might not be available. In fact, 9 out of 10 of the requested books were located, in part because Berlin is a major collection center for material about Asia, in part because of a resourceful library staff. We were able to peruse rare books published in Delhi or Calcutta a century ago, and to examine old volumes of the Royal Geographical Society, in which Victorian explorers reported on the twisting course of the Oxus river, or on the Himalayan travels of native "Pundits," employed by the British Raj to explore closed kingdoms. A whole shelf of books resulted from fertile suggestions by Indian colleagues at the Kolleg, notably Ramachandra Guha. We are thus off to a strong start on a literary project that will take us to the old Chinese Silk Road this year, and to former Soviet Central Asia next year.

Time sped as well because Berlin itself was exceptionally interesting in a year marked by anniversary observances of Hitler's defeat and the final months of World War II in Europe. These produced a plethora of special exhibitions, television programs, newspaper articles, climaxing in the great commemorative ceremony in the Schauspielhaus on May 7, which I was able to attend. But Berlin also offers the political archaeologist a chance to see the remains of the German empire, republic and Third Reich, most memorably in walking tours in Pankow and Karlshorst in Eastern Berlin, once off-limits areas where one now can talk freely with *Ossis*. Still other Berlins emerged in architectural tours led by Vladimir Iapeta, tours of the Dahlem galleries led by Hans Belting, and an evening at the Tegel *Schloss*, redolent of the Prussian Enlightenment. All of this was of special benefit to my writing a score of editorial notebooks and editorials for *The Times*. Access to friends in the Berlin museum world as well as suggestions from colleagues were also helpful in preparing an article on the cultural spoils of World War II, which appeared in the July-August issue of *Archaeology*. My wife contributed a letter from Berlin to *The Nation*.

The Kolleg also has the air of a busy terminal; the weekly inflow of guests, the round of special conferences (one on Islam was particularly memorable) and evening lectures bring invariably interesting and sometimes odd fish into the common room. These encounters led to an

invitation to the John-F-Kennedy-Institute at the Free University, whose students and faculty heard me discuss U.S. press and foreign policy. A further bonus at the Kolleg was a periodic anthropology/history workshop, which prompted a heterodox paper from me about Eric Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*. Finally, thanks to the demise of the Wall, we are able to visit *Hansa* cities in Eastern Germany and to go *sans visas*, to Western Poland and the Czech Republic. Taken together with our time in reunified Berlin, we were thus privileged witnesses to the rebirth of *Mittleuropa*. In that spirit and looking ahead, we hope that more room can be found at the Kolleg dining tables for more scholars and writers from Eastern Germany.