

Hilary Putnam

Recollections of Berlin



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My semester at the Wissenschaftskolleg was marvelous! I am sure I have made myself a complete bore trying to describe it to friends in the course of the last few months, but the fact is that since my first trip abroad as an adult (the Guggenheim Fellowship which took me to Oxford and the Sorbonne back in 1960-61), no leave has been as enjoyable, as personally rewarding in terms of intellectually stimulating contacts and warm friendships, or as productive (especially considering that I was only able to take advantage of the opportunity for four months) as

my stay at the Kolleg. Under the first heading — how enjoyable the stay was: first of all, the care and feeding of the Fellows is "out of this world". I try to explain to friends here in the States that my formal "responsibilities", apart from the weekly colloquium, were "to eat five wonderful meals with the other Fellows", and already they begin to look at me with disbelief. The apartment in the Villa Walther was beautiful (- between two lakes, imagine!), and the wonderful fall foliage pressed against my very window panes. Whenever there was a problem with the computer, or with sending text by e-mail, or anything technical of that kind, it was expertly attended to.

In addition, I had the opportunity to discover a kind of German city I had never been in before. Even though I have spent months in each of three other German or Austrian cities — Frankfurt, Munich and Vienna — I had never been in a German or German-speaking city where the cultural life was as intense or at as high a level. As a "theater city" alone, Berlin is, in my opinion, far ahead of New York. And the experience of the contrasts as well as the similarities between the former East and West was mind-stretching. I am deeply impressed by the way in which Germany is dealing with the immense problems of reunification. Of course, as a Jew, I had some anxieties about spending months in a city where so many of my coreligionists were murdered, but in the event, although some things in Berlin inevitably evoke memories of the Nazi past, I was profoundly reassured as to the depth of the democratic commitments of the new Germany.

Under the heading of intellectually stimulating and personally rewarding contacts I could mention so many of the Fellows that they would not fit in this document. (And not only the Fellows — my conversations, several times a week, with Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus were as valuable as any I had. And of course my old friend Yehuda Elkana was there at least the first month, and I wished I could have had more than the two conversations I did succeed in having with Wolf Lepenies.) I do have to say that it was particularly valuable that my close friend and former student Arnold Davidson and his wife Diane Brentari were there: Arnold understands the way my mind works, and when I have a half-formed idea, nothing is more helpful than to try it out on him. Conversations with Diane were also valuable, especially as one of the topics I continue to think about is the foundations of linguistic theory and the relations between linguistic theory and theories of the nature of the mind, and she is an outstanding linguist. But I also enjoyed learning about topics very far from the ones I normally think about — intercommunal conflicts in India, for example, from Sudhir Kakar, or Chinese mathematics from Kanine Chemla, or medieval religiosity from

Caroline Bynum, or music from Carolyn Abbate, or painting from Hans Belting, or too many topics to mention from Nicholas Boyle and Aziz Al-Azmeh. I have always felt that minding everyone else's business is a philosopher's business!

Last but not least, how productive my stay was! In four months I finished four papers on Realism/Pragmatism (two have been already published, namely "Pragmatism and Verificationism", also published in German, and under the title "Pragmatism" in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*; a discussion review of Roger Penrose's new book, *Shadows of the Mind* which appeared first in the *New York Times*, and then in a slightly expanded form in the *Bulletin of the American Mathematical Society*); and the other two will appear in, respectively, a volume of talks on Pragmatism and the forthcoming *Cambridge Companion to William James*. But even more important from my own point of view was a project on which I did not write a single page, but which I discussed incessantly with Arnold Davidson and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus: a new interpretation of the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. Since my return to Boston, I have been turning the thoughts that I tried out in those discussions into texts — three different articles have already resulted. I would have found my stay in Berlin rewarding in terms of the opportunity to think and work alone; but given the warmth of the companionship and the intrinsic interest of the work the other Fellows were doing, and the wonderful cultural opportunities — this was a time I shall always remember!