

Albert H. Friedlander

## A ‘Report to the Academy’



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A reader of Kafka would view this title with raised eyebrows. Yet it emerges from a suggestion by Wolf Lepenies that any Fellow’s report should commence with “Eigentlich...”, with the reverberations of the personal experience of every Fellow who discovered that one has chosen the high and not the low road after coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg. And I must confess that my stay here changed all my expectations completely; mine is a very personal commentary.

### I. Personal

I arrived during the last days of a glorious Indian Summer, and saw the surroundings in all their shimmering colours. I was aware of the traditions of the place. Gerschom Scholem had been the first Fellow, and I... here, Jewish tradition demands a “*I’havdi!*”. It indicates that such a comparison is absolutely forbidden. Nevertheless, I would point to a momentary ‘Indian Summer’ resurrection of that Wissenschaftskolleg tradition that wanted to invite those scholars who had been born in Berlin and who had

been forced out of the land. Torn threads were to be mended, a bridge between Berlin and its former scholars would be built. Scholem came here. There, the comparison ends. I was 11 when I left Berlin, and there is little evidence of my scholarship at that stage of my life. Still, I will return to this concept in due time.

When the first possibility of a limited stay as a Fellow emerged, I had to make some personal decisions. I had planned to retire from the Westminster Synagogue in spring of 1998, and then to devote myself to my work at the Leo Baeck College, where I had been the Rector for 10 years and now serve as Dean and Senior Lecturer. Instead, I retired from the synagogue in July 1997, and assured my successor that he had six months to win the congregation for himself; I would stay abroad. This plan succeeded better than I might have surmised: I have been totally replaced. And my abiding gratitude goes to the Wiko for this. I have always felt that one could be either a scholar or a rabbi; at best, one might be a 'scholarly rabbi'. The total break at the Wiko offered me the chance to move from one area to the other. And I rejoice in it.

We are all greedy. A full year would have been a complete paradise. Yet it would have been unwise to leave my Leo Baeck College at that stage; the links to it might have snapped as well. And if the stay at the Wiko was short, it concentrated my mind greatly (Johnson's comment about being hanged next morning having the same effect is another "*l'havdil!*"). The Wiko stresses the duties of an academic more than most places where I have served as a guest professor. The relaxed atmosphere is a marvellous deceit. Breakfast is a hurried affair, and even the luncheons deceive by being long and casual. But, on most such occasions, I have found myself receiving help from a scholar, and sometimes even giving it. Questions about remembered guilt led to long discussions of rabbinic teachings; and the old question of a symbiosis between Germans and Jews was viewed variously by my colleagues, in correspondence with their traditions. What is group identification? What are the rites de passage that lead us through death experiences to confirm us in our identity? My rabbinic dissertation on Heinrich Heine (!) enabled me to hold my own with Wolf Biermann, and to learn from him. Surprisingly, at the end of my semester, I found that Evelyn and I had close links with at least eight of the other Fellows. That is not bad, since there are also artificial barriers that one slowly recognizes. There was the French table; the Arabists table; and some scientists do have an amused intolerance for the philosophers and writers. It probably wears off during the year; I would have loved to see it. One lesson did emerge for me: the wives of the Fellows are often mistreated by those who shudder when they are placed next to a spouse at dinner, rather than with Sir Harrison Birtwhistle, whom they would have loved to instruct. Yet it is

the wives who so often supply the social cohesion and bring us together. When I consider how many of them hold degrees, have written books, and are perhaps more interesting than many of the Fellows, I wonder why they have not been used more in the Wiko's plans.

The other great teacher here is recognized by all. It is Berlin itself. Here, I return to the 11-year-old boy who was branded by experiences that have not yet been excised from the mind. I came to Grünau, where my father had founded a rowing club in the twenties, the "Undine". Evelyn discovered a Watersport Museum in Grünau, and we visited it. It possessed membership books of the club, with signatures of my uncle, who died in Auschwitz, and pages dictated by my father. Then, the director took me to the club building itself, 50 meters away, and I re-experienced old horrors. I looked up at the 3rd floor window where my mother and sister sat on the sill, waiting to throw themselves to the ground once the mob who had invaded the club broke the door of their room. I saw the axe again that had slammed, again and again, through the door where I, my brother, and my father were hiding. Our bodies were barely wounded by the blows and kicks; but the examination by the police, later on, left mental scars. That, too, was Berlin. But I walked by the Nollendorfplatz, where our house had stood; the (once) Adolf Hitler Platz, where our school had been burned to the ground. And then I thought of the great happiness I had also found in this city, of friends who survived, of Christians who helped us on the night of the 9th of November. And I promised a BBC TV team that I *would* return with them and walk through a Berlin I still find in my affection. This, too, will be reflected in the work that I am doing and which I have already done at the Wiko this term. Much of my planned work dealt with the writings of Leo Baeck; Berlin was his city. I walked past the building where he taught, the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums; the synagogue in the Pestalozzistraße where he preached; the Fasanstraße Temple, which I saw burned that November night and where he had worked; and I felt closer to Leo Baeck, my teacher, than ever before. I realized that I *had* to work in Berlin; and it would have been impossible without the Wissenschaftskolleg.

## II. The Work

I had come to the Wiko with a special project: editing Baeck's most important book *Das Wesen des Judentums* for the *Werkausgabe* I had undertaken for the Gütersloher Verlag. It should comprise seven volumes. I and Bertold Klappert of the Kirchliche Hochschule in Wuppertal had edited the first volume, *Dieses Volk*, much of which Baeck had written in the concen-

tration camp/ghetto Theresienstadt. Earlier, I had translated it into English, but the German book had long been out of print. *Dieses Volk* was relatively easy; *Das Wesen des Judentum* is proving fiendishly difficult. The book first appeared in 1905, after Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums* had presented a false picture of Judaism. Baeck's book, like Harnack's, is still in print; but *Wesen...* has gone through six editions, added more than 40 pages, and has become a different book. My colleague Klappert will re-open the debate with Harnack. I will be comparing each edition and try to show how the changes grow out of the intellectual environment of Baeck's time, and how the full tragedy of Jewish life in Germany is reflected in this man and in his works. Baeck was not only the greatest Jewish religious teacher of that time; he was also the leader of the Jewish community, who had elected him to confront the National Socialists. Baeck's life and writings are totally linked, and I cannot come to terms with the text if I do not deal with Baeck in Berlin and in the confrontations that shaped him and his writings.

The complete text should be handed in before March, 1998. At this point, I have probably done two-thirds of this task, and I hope to finish on time; we want to show the book at the Frankfurt Book Fair. The Wiko routine has kept me on course; but there were some interruptions. For the first 3 days, the printer would not work – not because Mr. Lindenberg was less than perfect, but because I am the last Luddite. So I turned to pen and ink, and wrote a small children's book, *The Cats of Jerusalem*. Various publishers are bidding for it, and it should be out next autumn (does that qualify for "the Fellows' shelf"?) And, in the limited time, other writings somehow emerged. At the last moment, *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* asked me to write a "Leo Baeck" article for them; and that is in galley proofs now for the 4th edition coming in autumn. Other articles written here will appear in scholarly journals (varying from "Circumcision as Initiation" to "Die Karfreitags-Liturgie", "Diaspora in den Weltreligionen" and "Post-Auschwitz Theology"). These were also written here. Most important, the 11-year-old boy has come into his own. At this moment, touched by all the memories of Berlin, I am on page 140 of a spiritual odyssey, an autobiography which Duckworth Press in London has tentatively approved. No one can tell how such a text will develop, but it would not have begun without the Wiko and Berlin. I will keep you informed! One final "*l'havdil*", for Wolf Lepenies: A song keeps running through my mind:

Ich hab ein schönes Vogelhaus, es ist nicht weit von hier,  
Die Vögel flattern ein und aus und haben frei Quartier.  
Drum lad ich Sie ganz höflich ein, Herr Akademiker,  
Doch auch mein werter Gast zu sein, doch auch mein werter Gast  
zu sein...

But the Wiko does not feature in the *Fledermaus*, Wolf Lepenies is no jailer, and I have just become an academician again, in a semester which has changed my life by giving it new patterns. And I am grateful to Wolf Lepenies, Barbara Sanders, Gesine Bottomley, Gudrun Rein, Christine von Arnim, Hans Georg Lindenberg and Gerhard Riedel, and a staff at the Wiko who are our equal in numbers, and certainly our superiors in kindness and wisdom.