

Eva Jablonka

On Good Memories and Group-Living Meerkats



Eva Jablonka was born in Poland in 1952 and immigrated to Israel in 1957. She studied for her B.Sc. at Birkbeck College, University of London and Ben Gurion University, Israel, and obtained an M.Sc. in microbiology from Ben Gurion University. Research for a Ph.D. in molecular genetics was carried out at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Post-doctoral studies in developmental biology and the philosophy of science followed. Since 1993, she has been a tenured Senior Lecturer in the Department of the History and Philosophy of Science, Tel-Aviv University, teaching evolutionary biology, genetics, the philosophy of biology, and the history of genetics. Major publications: *Epigenetic Inheritance and Evolution: the Lamarckian Dimension* 1995, OUP (with Marion Lamb); *The History of Heredity* 1994 (The Broadcasting University, TA); *Evolution 1994–1997* (A textbook in evolutionary biology for the Open University of Israel, Open University Press, Israel). Research interests: evolutionary biology, genetics, behavioural ecology, the history and philosophy of biology. – Address: The Cohn Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Ideas, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, 69978 Tel-Aviv, Israel.

As I sit here in my office in the Villa Jaffé trying to write this report, I look out of the window, beyond the blue screen of my computer, wondering how I can convey the complex and rich experiences that I have had here. New intellectual terrains opened up, new friendships blossomed. A red squirrel jumps through the green foliage of the oak tree just next to the window, the sun shines through the leaves, and my room is full of light and dancing shadows. The particular pile of papers on my desk today (on which a pair of binoculars lies) is devoted to the social behaviour of group-living Meerkats. I have been reading and thinking about these small, highly intelligent social mongooses who live in groups, share guarding and baby-sitting duties, mob predators together, and instruct their young

in the complex methods of foraging and of handling food. I am trying to find out how they organize their community, how groups differ from each other, what role learning – especially learning through the influence of other individuals – has on their lives and on the details of their social organization. In the dangerous desert environment in which they live, how do they transfer important information to their young? And how is the evolution of such societies affected by the transmission of socially learned information? The binoculars on the pile of Meerkat papers are ready to be used, to observe the short visits of the now familiar local great tit, hooded crow, blue jay; on the other side of the computer is another pile of papers and books – a book by Renata Salecl which looks at problems of freedom and human rights from the perspective of psychoanalysis, and is curiously related to my work on the role of language in human evolution; Ekkehart Schlicht's book *Custom in the Economy* where he analyzes the role of custom both in shaping economy and in being shaped by it. Its theme is so close to the problems and ideas I struggle with – the role of custom in the evolution of animal behaviour – that I jokingly said that the book I am writing (with Eytan Avital in Jerusalem) should be called *Custom in the Evolution*. There is also a paper on the use of evolutionary thinking for economics, which I recently discussed with Ekkehart. A book by Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, which Michael Maar lent to me, and which reflects my growing fascination with this great writer, (a topic of many discussions with Michael), is lying close by. A smell of coffee drifts into the office from the communal kitchen, and one of my friends, Eric or Aziz, will soon come, knock on the door and ask: Coffee, Eva? We may then sit on Eric's veranda and discuss life, science, and politics.

There is so much one can write about after 10 months. I came here with some misgivings and fears. For an Israeli, a Jew, a daughter of holocaust survivors, who lived through the trauma of this inevitably personal history and tried to make sense of it, life in Berlin was a somewhat dark riddle and challenge. How do the Germans deal with this dreadful, often very personal, past? Is the German guilt an excuse, an escape from responsibility? What does it mean, for a German, to belong to this first post-holocaust generation? Can I find a common language, a common future? And after these ten months I can say without hesitation: yes, I can. At the public level I am impressed with the serious attempt by German society to remember and take responsibility for the past, and with the attempts of many people to struggle against racism and build up a decent civil society. I regret, though, that the feeling of guilt often translates to uncritical acceptance of racist and nationalistic Israeli government policies that should be strongly renounced (and are, indeed, renounced by many Israelis!). I discussed these issues here, sincerely and openly, with German and

non-German friends during Thursday night dinners and on many other occasions. I was very glad when Azmi Bishara, an Israeli Palestinian MP who aspires for a secular and democratic Israeli state, was invited to give a lecture in the Kolleg, in which he expressed his position. Going beyond the political realm into the personal level – I encountered no problems at all. My German friends, like my Turkish or Indian friends here, are just this – friends. There is no hindrance to our mutual understanding and affection.

It is difficult to imagine a better working atmosphere and better working conditions than what we have had here. We were treated generously and indulgently by the staff of the Kolleg. We were free of any practical concerns – no cooking (except for fun), no teaching, no need to worry about a broken computer or even an electric bulb! We became friends and enjoyed each other's company, and friendship merged with scholarly discussion. There were happy evening meals and discussions with Tapan and Hashi, evenings over black tea with Huri, walks with Cornelia, films with Renata, peeling forty kilograms of potatoes with Rainer for a party, talks over breakfast with Eric, Aziz and Ekkehart. Almost every paper or book I wished for appeared in the library after a day or two. The library services here are the best I have ever encountered anywhere, and I am extremely grateful to the library staff. I could discuss problems that interested me, from molecular biology to sociology and literature, and show drafts of the chapters I have just written to colleagues whom I trusted to be critical and sincere, and get extremely important and useful comments. We established a discussion biology group (it consisted of biologists – Eric Warrant, Andreas Engel and myself, a physicist – Raphael Ritz, psychologists – Rainer Goebel and Claudia Goebel, and an economist – Ekkehart Schlicht). We met for lunches on Thursday, and discussed vision in insects, the binding problems in neurophysiology, *Gestalt* perception as studied with brain-imaging techniques, aggregation problems in economics, and the evolution of information systems. We also had great fun planning and preparing the Santa Lucia party in the Villa Jaffé in December. Photographic evidence shows Eric, dressed up as the beautiful northern Maiden, in a white robe, with candles in his blond hair, slowly descending down the steps of the second floor, while the rest of the biology group, wrapped in white sheets and funny hats, hangs behind, singing Christmas Carols (in Swedish!).

I am going to write about my work and scientific interests in another section of this *Jahrbuch*. However, I would like to say a few words about the important contribution my colleagues made to my work. My main project this year was to write and re-write several chapters in a book that I am producing in collaboration with Eytan Avital, a behavioural ecologist

from Israel. The book discusses animal traditions and social learning in animals, and examines their importance for the evolution of animal social behaviour. It has bearing on the sociobiological debate, since it is concerned with the genetic evolution of social behaviour, yet stresses the importance of tradition and social construction in shaping this evolution. The book's relevance to the social sciences and to the discourse that goes on in this domain became very much more central for me as a result of the discussions with my colleagues. It became clear to me that, in order to cross the disciplinary divide between the social and the biological sciences, it is necessary to re-define concepts from both biology and social sciences and to construct new disciplinary boundaries. My reading of my colleagues' books and papers on psychology, economics, political theory, and cultural history all reinforced this feeling. An interdisciplinary discussion on property highlighted the differences in methodology and language between social and biological sciences, but the fact that we could talk to each other and understand each other was very encouraging.

It was a very good and important year for me. It has made a difference, and has given me a more definite sense of direction. I am grateful to the Kolleg for opening up these possibilities, for its great hospitality and generosity.