



ALL OF THE ABOVE
MARK R. COHEN

Mark R. Cohen was born in 1943 in Boston, Massachusetts. He was educated at Brandeis University (B.A.), Columbia University (M.A.) and the Jewish Theological Seminary (M.H.L., Rabbi, Ph.D.). Since 1973 he has been on the faculty of the Department of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. His research field is the history of the Jews in the medieval Islamic world. His publications include, in addition to numerous articles, the following books: *Jewish Self-Government in Medieval Egypt 1126*. Princeton University Press, 1980. *Jewish Life in Medieval Egypt 641–1382*. Translated into Arabic. Tel Aviv University and The Jewish-Arab Institute at Beit Berl, 1987. *The Autobiography of a Seventeenth-Century Venetian Rabbi: Leon Modena's "Life of Judah"*. Princeton University Press, 1988. *Jews Among Arabs: Contacts and Boundaries*, with Abraham L. Udovitch. Darwin Press, 1989. *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages*. Princeton University Press, 1994. *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, with Peter Schäfer. E. J. Brill, 1998. *The Majlis: Interreligious Encounters in Medieval Islam*, with Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, Sasson Somekh, and Sidney H. Griffith. Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1999. – Address: Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University, 110 Jones Hall, Princeton, NJ 08544-1008, USA.

What was so special about this year? Shall I say it was that I finished the two books I came here to work on? Was it the wonderful community of scholars and their families, whose friendship I will take away with me? Should I point to the gracious and friendly staff of the Kolleg, not least, the fantastic librarians and their faithful service, “the jewel in the crown”, as our colleague Abdul Sheriff so aptly put it? Is it my memorable sixtieth birthday

dinner, surrounded by Wiko colleagues, other German friends, and my family? Should I mention Christine von Arnim, whose support (and that of the Kolleg) made it possible for me to bring the filmmaker Samir to Wiko to screen and discuss his fascinating documentary, “Forget Baghdad?” Shall I pay tribute to my wonderful language teachers? What about my friendships in the Berlin Jewish community? And what about my participation in Wiko’s Arbeitskreis Moderne und Islam and the inspiration I received at Wiko leading to ties with other institutions in Europe?

It is of course “all of the above” and more. I came to Wiko with two partially-finished books, both of them concerning poverty and charity in the Jewish community of medieval Egypt. I had completed virtually all of the research beforehand, transcribing and interpreting hundreds of letters, legal documents, wills, alms lists, and donor lists from the Cairo Geniza into my computer – indexed, with the information retrievable by search engine. So this was primarily a writing year, and I was able to bring the writing to a conclusion. My colleagues – none of whom were familiar with my field – reacted positively to my work, and I was tickled that the Hebrew word “geniza” (it means burial place for discarded Jewish writings) floated around the Kolleg for the entire year, as my documents and the detective work necessary to interpret them seemed to have caught people’s imagination (everyone likes a detective story). Also, my work in general, touching importantly on Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages, had more than a little relevance this year, when Jewish-Arab relations in the Middle East had sunk to such a low and tragic ebb and discussions around the lunch or dinner table often revolved around my special interests. I had the opportunity, too, to share my research with others outside Wiko – at the FU and at the Humboldt – and those occasions contributed to my work. While finishing the books I managed also to complete several articles, including one that appeared in German translation in the catalogue for an exhibition in Aachen about Christian-Jewish-Muslim relations in the Middle Ages.

As I departed, I left behind an article called “Jews and Muslims and the Myth of the Interfaith Utopia” that would appear in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* after I left (it appeared in October), as well as proposals for future collaboration with European colleagues and institutions (including Permanent Wiko Fellow Yehuda Elkana’s Central European University in Budapest) on projects related to my field.

Language. I arrived six weeks early for the intensive German course and continued studying German during the year. Eva and Marita and Doreen helped me leap forward from a passive, reading-knowledge of the language to a solid, functional, speaking ability.

I even, finally, developed a rudimentary facility to speak another language I knew only passively – French – thanks to the excellent teacher I found through Wiko’s connections. I don’t know how I will keep from losing my (out-Twaining Twain) *Ganzzielbesseralsvor-ausgehendesprochenesprachfähigkeit* in German in coming years, but I now read what I need to read much faster, and that improved skill will stick.

Happy is the unaccompanied Fellow who has a “zu Besuch”, Wiko’s official category for spouses and partners who commute in and out. Together, Sharon and I explored and came to love this city and the friends we made in it together. Alas, she could not be here for the grand finale, the Wiko Fellows’ Farewell Party for staff in July, but she was here to hostess my sixtieth. Having my two grown children visit for the party (Hanan from the States and Tamar from Israel) was also a real treat. They loved Wiko and Berlin too. We were all surprised to hear that Germans sing the American “happy birthday” song!

I did not know much about Jewish life in Berlin before I came. I had been told I would find mainly Russian Jews, recent immigrants benefiting from the German government’s liberal immigration policy, who have little knowledge of Judaism or Jewish culture. To my surprise, I found much more. Jews, German Jews, indeed, young German Jews (as well as American Jewish expatriates working in Germany for years) are here. They are small in numbers, but large in enthusiasm, building a new Jewish life in Berlin, including synagogue life. I joined the recently constituted egalitarian congregation meeting in the historic Neue Synagoge in Oranienburger Straße in East Berlin and lectured to other Jewish groups. These optimistic pockets of organized Jewish life in Berlin will continue to grow and prosper.

Another surprise was AKMI, Wiko’s Arbeitskreis Moderne und Islam, the brainchild of former Rektor Wolf Lepenies and colleagues in Berlin. I learned much from participating in its seminar on “Jewish and Islamic Hermeneutics as Cultural Critique”, where I met Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars grappling with common issues of text and meaning. Their enterprise is symbolically reminiscent of the interfaith intellectual gatherings of Muslims, Jews, and Christians in medieval Baghdad (poignantly, during the year of the American and British war against Iraq). The many hours of intense conversation I had with AKMI director Georges Khalil about Israel and Palestine, about Jews and Arabs, and about the role European, American, Israeli, and Arab intellectuals can play in setting the stage for post-conflict peace-building in the Middle East will not fade from my consciousness.

Wiko is more than a ten-month “paradise” for scholarly work. It is a community that nurtures and endures. One leaves with a feeling of gratitude for this community as well as of connection that will last a long time, whenever and wherever one meets Wiko colleagues from all over the globe.