



FROM JERUSALEM TO BERLIN – AND BACK

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It would be misleading and reductive to evaluate and summarize one’s year as a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg in terms of productivity. Indeed, the Kolleg provides the privileged Fellows with the extraordinary conditions to advance their research and the staff creates the atmosphere as if there is nothing more important than your work. It is a shame not to take advantage of the unique opportunity.

Yet what made the experience of the year at Wiko so intense and shaking is of course the interaction with different people and through them the encounter with different prob-

lems, fields of knowledge, and creativity. It is not only that I have been enriched and stimulated by so many colleagues and made so many new friends; it is the new perspectives that have been opened and the need to rethink your attitudes toward central problems. It is also the feeling that you belong to a project beyond yourself, a feeling that by accepting the privileges, you also take a responsibility and participate in a continuous attempt to find new directions, to open new critical approaches, and to establish new dialogues.

I can't mention the names of all those, Fellows, staff, guests and others, who influenced and stimulated me during this year, out of fear of failing to give all the credits, as well as out of fear of being too sentimental. I took with me so many friends, so many treasures, so many good memories.

I used the year of the fellowship to advance two different projects, and in each of them I was able to gain much and realize the opportunities provided by the Kolleg: The first project was an English version of a book on 16th-century Catholic censorship of Hebrew books, which was evidently improved by the help of the library team, the kind of help that extended far beyond merely finding rare books. The friendship of other Fellows associated with related fields was a unique opportunity to examine some of my ideas.

The second project that occupied me during the year was a book entitled "Exile and Binationalism", a critique of several aspects of Zionist historical consciousness. Working on this topic in Berlin, at the Wissenschaftskolleg, gave my study yet another dimension. My critique of Zionism was inspired by two prominent German Jewish intellectuals, two Berliners who were associated with Wiko. The one, Gershom Scholem, was *der Erste Fellow* of the Kolleg. The other, his friend Walter Benjamin, whose association is indirect but still significant: his parents lived on the same street in which most of us lived, Delbrückstraße, where he himself stayed for a while. Both of them reflect one aspect that I felt in the Kolleg, the notion of responsibility.

I felt particularly privileged to dedicate my lecture at the Kolleg to Scholem, in the same place where he gave his last lecture, shortly before his death, 22 years earlier: "Die Stellung der Kabbala in der europäischen Geistesgeschichte", that was published in the first volume of the Wissenschaftskolleg Jahrbuch (1981/82), dedicated to his memory. Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, one of the most important Jewish intellectuals of the twentieth century, immigrated *From Berlin to Jerusalem* (the title of his autobiography), and spent the last months of his life again in Berlin, in the Wissenschaftskolleg.

Scholem had an important role in shaping my own intellectual direction, and my attitude towards him is complex. His approach is a main target of my critique of Zionism, but

he also provides us with the most stimulating insights. Scholem can be considered one of those who participated in the construction of the Zionist myth and at the same time as one of its critics. Therefore, to a certain extent, criticizing him means following some of his own ideas. Moreover I find his earlier political texts, his support of a bi-national arrangement, still relevant for the present, although in a very different reality.

To talk about him at the Kolleg was thus an opportunity to realize the notion of continuity involved in the critical act, particularly when trying to propose alternative directions and visions.

In my critique of Scholem, I followed Benjamin's theses on the history of philosophy (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*), arguing that this famous text receives another dimension when applied to Zionist historical consciousness and particularly the Zionist attitude of Scholem. It is not Benjamin against Scholem – since both of them shaped their approaches to history simultaneously, in a process of intensive dialogue expressed in their correspondence.

Reading Benjamin's theses once again in Berlin, particularly in Grunewald, gave them yet another dimension. For me, it was a kind of a guide that integrated many aspects of the experience of Berlin: thinking of the past as well as of the present:

[Thesis n. 8] The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism. One reason why Fascism has a chance is that in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.

The tradition of the oppressed teaches *us*, writes Benjamin in 1940, shortly before he put an end to his life, but who are “we”? Generally, us, those who live after the catastrophe. At least in one sense, he speaks to us directly, to the temporal residents of wealthy Grunewald, of *Villa Walter*, at the corner of Delbrückstraße. It is this “us” that embodies for me the notion of responsibility, which is part of being a Fellow in the Kolleg, part of the mul-

tifaceted experience of wonderful Berlin, with all the memories and associations it carries with it.

The text was written before the Holocaust, but it gains another dimension after the extermination of European Jewry, within the delicate and complicated discussion of the exceptionality of the genocide of the Jews. It should not be read simplistically as an argument against the uniqueness of the Holocaust. One cannot ignore it when we read it at the corner of Erdenerstraße, where Jews were taken from buses and tracks and walked toward the Grunewald Bahn, from where they were transported. However, Benjamin's texts warn against different uses of this notion of "exceptionality", the way it suppresses the "tradition of the oppressed". From this perspective, it is the rule. It is for us in Grunewald, Delbrückstraße, Erdenerstraße, to remember it.

The insistence on exceptionality finally reproduces the same values that made the catastrophe possible, preserves the view of the Holocaust as an accident in the history of progress, preserves the exceptionality of Germany. It can be seen in the unfortunate decision to erect in Berlin a monument dedicated exclusively to the Jewish victims; this follows paradoxically the same logic of separation between victims.

For me and Ronit, Benjamin's notion of remembrance (*Gedenken*) was a guide in the exciting experience in Berlin, its pasts and presents, in our thoughts of Berlin and Jerusalem. I found this notion reflected in many dimensions of the Kolleg, and it manifests it's the Kolleg's complex mission: on the one hand, a European institution whose aim is certainly to contribute to the culture of Europe, based on a sense of responsibility toward the past, but which at the same time addresses questions of the present, implicitly carrying Benjamin's will in the attempt to integrate different discussions concerning the history and culture of the West together with the initiation of a continuous critical debate.

We came to Berlin from Jerusalem, and we have already returned to Jerusalem, to a country in a permanent state of emergency – in which we Israelis *also* experience in the last years a state of emergency, following terror attacks that turned to be a prominent aspect of Palestinian resistance to occupation. It is in this state that Benjamin's thesis receives its meaning, reminding us that from the Palestinian point of view, the state of emergency is not the exception but the rule. This is for me the main link between Berlin and Jerusalem.

In Berlin and from Berlin, all these reflections receive a new dimension and wider perspective. I was privileged to be a member of the working group "Jewish Islamic Hermeneutics", to learn and think together with stimulating people I had never met before, to try

to find together alternative approaches both to the current dominant anti-Islamic sentiments and to fundamentalism.

All these notions, belonging to the European tradition and at the same time its critique could find their expression in Stefan Litwin's concerts – from his exceptional interpretation of Schubert, to his own piece entitled “September 11”, based on the last speech of Allende, September 11, 1973. Stephan's series of lectures and concerts were no doubt the focus of the various interactions and experiences of the year.