



THE WIKO EXPERIENCE:
LEARNING WITH NIGHTINGALES,
ENJOYING THE LIBRARY
GALIT HASAN-ROKEM

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I already envy myself for January–July 2005! But the virtue of this envy is that it is effectively balanced by the sensation of an incredible privilege to have been there that I know I share with all my fellow Fellows. These first lines are written in the sensitive moments of

At the Wissenschaftskolleg, Galit Hasan-Rokem was a Fellow of the Federal Cultural Foundation.

liminality, having heard the last *Dienstagskolloquium*, in the midst of the preparations for our groundbreaking premiere as cabaret artists for the *Abschiedsfest*. One can feel in body and soul how the present turns into memory.

Unlike most others, I arrived in January to a dark and cold Grunewald. But the tasty welcome by Fellows, neighbours, friends Ruth and Yaron, and the incredible welcome by Monika Fogt and Gregor Pickert at the late night hour when I arrived soon transformed dark into light and cold into warmth. Already on the first evening I made sure that Herr Riedel knew who I was: the person who failed to open her door with the unusual keys and destroyed his free Friday evening.

I feel very lucky with regard to the group that was our own, the *Jahrgang* of 2004/05. Perhaps only Alois Hahn, resourceful as ever, will be able to tell us in retrospective how this year's vintage will have aged in the vat. The blend of the personal backgrounds as well as the research topics highlighted some possibilities, probably pushing aside some others. The dialogue with the scientists remained very much a matter of personal dialogue, where I am especially enriched by Barbara Hellriegel's sensitive and sharp mind; Henrik Brumm's intimate friendship with migrant birds; Francis Ratniek's total knowledge of being a bee; Hajo Grundmann's generous ability to share his expertise with non-scientists; Eberhard Fetz's ever open eyes and lens; and Kevin Foster's sporty approach to new points of view.

The unofficial *Schwerpunkt* of Middle Eastern cultures and societies bridged many initially unrelated projects, especially espoused by the stimulating context of the *Arbeitskreis Moderne und Islam's* seminars on Muslim and Jewish (and Christian) hermeneutics, coordinated by Angelika Neuwirth and Georges Khalil. Within this special context, the rewards included: the inspiration of the presence of Abdolkarim Soroush; Ziba Mir-Hosseini's depth and wisdom shining also through her fascinating films; Scheherazade Hassan's increasingly bountiful sharing with her diverse talents; Reuven Snir's poignant recaps of his particular point of view; Tom (or should we say W. J. T.?) Mitchell's visual and theoretical insights of his trip to Israel and Palestine; Yaron Ezrahi's learned statements; Ruth HaCohen's vibrant presentation and creative scholarship. Stefan Maul's and my own small study group on Babylonia (cuneiform and Talmud) made it possible to have an ongoing, for me constantly delightful and edifying dialogue on what is our common main point of interest in the Middle East – its ancient cultures. David Nirenberg lent his critical mind and lively communicative abilities to a number of discussions on our respective academic projects where, as in Talmudic discourse, agreement was never on our agenda. The gift of

sharing with him my poetry reading, as well as his being the first reader of most of the poems of my *Berlin Zyklus*, was a joy.

A cultural and political vision of the region and the world, privileging political rights, social justice and cultural inclusiveness, dominated our discourse on the Middle East. The moral dilemmas of violence acted by others belonging to some of our identity frameworks could have complicated the interpersonal communication. We had, however, enough time and intellectual resources to work through the complexities, which is one of the redeeming differences between the Wiko and “the real world”. Through our personal friendships we enhanced our understanding of the points of view of those who in reality would be separated from us by borders and other barriers, mental as well as political.

A concise but decisive effect for my work was encased in the group that we called “Experience *Menschen*”, where Maria Todorova, Jamie Monson, Ruth HaCohen and I shared too few but very intense meetings examining the dimensions and usability of the term “experience” in the interpretation of cultural texts and historical processes and events. Those discussions came to have specific meanings for my scholarly as well as my literary writing.

The highly professional library team headed by Gesine Bottomley tried and very often succeeded in making the seemingly impossible feasible, both with regard to my eternal Jews and to the additional project addressing birth in antiquity that I roamed into. The special care Frau Klöhn and Frau Speder and the others in the kitchen showed to everyone’s special needs was heart-warming and life-giving. Christian Schmitz not only provided the best technical assistance I have ever been privileged to have, but also added his literary sensitivity and vast knowledge of culture to our meandering through data bases for illustrating my *Wandering Jews*. Without a number of highly professional and knowledgeable persons who reside in the second floor of the *Hauptgebäude* and in the Villa Jaffé – it would all be impossible. And without the music embodied in Stefan Litwin and Jörg Widmann it would have been less wonderful.

Apropos music: The nightingales of the month of May were not only a surprising experience but also a thrust into inspiration. My risking the dive from scholarship into poetry sometime around the nightingale period I owe at least partly to Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus’ encouragement and the tasteful preparations for the poetry reading to Christine von Arnim.

Among the “concrete” results of my stay at the Wiko, I count three articles that were sent for publishing, one that needs some more editing and polishing and a revised outline and beginnings of chapters for a book.

A word about the *Dienstagskolloquium*, and I unabashedly mean my own. Having arrived relatively late, I was the last of the Fellows to present my research to the group. My main project for the period at Wiko was defined in general terms as a reconsideration of my earlier notion of the Wandering Jew motif and image as a creation of Christian Europeans to project their own elements of instability and dislocation onto another group so as to substantiate their self-perception as indigenous and stable. My revision moved from my earlier 16th-century focus of the creation of the Ahasver legend back to biblical and rabbinical Hebrew and Jewish texts to point to the agency of the Jews themselves in creating the idea of the Wandering Jew. On the other hand, I also brought in the discourse of wandering Jews in the self-understanding of Western modernity, as well as the seeming collapse and vigorous rebirth of this image in the context of Zionist ideology and contemporary Israeli culture. The wide scope of the revision, as well as the deep principle of uncertainty it entails, left many doors open for the discussants to enter. The discussion, gracefully moderated by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, turned out radically transforming for my project thanks to the critical remarks of Lydia Liu, Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly, Richard Tapper and Maria Todorova; the kind contestations of Gábor Betegh, Horst Bredekamp, Stefan Maul and Jamie Monson; Nancy Fraser’s theoretical acumen; Eli Zaretsky’s sensitive search; and Alois Hahn’s and Wolfgang Seibel’s methodical empathy; as well as the stimulating participation of Permanent Fellow Andrei Pleșu and the wise remarks of distinguished guest Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt. Although the experience of the discussion was initially somewhat disquieting, it turned out in the longer run to be a major transformative moment in the research.

I want to conclude by quoting two of the *Berlin Zyklus* poems, the first and the last.

In the heart of Berlin

Dr. Jürgen Schmidt, in stylish moccasins and very tight jeans,
looks at the black screen and points to a small, pitiful creature, attempting,
without much success, to fill the gap by quickly expanding and contracting,
and he says, in English ringing with German:

Here, the left side is thicker than it should be, about a centimeter.

I try to imagine (in my heart?) the torso of the headless, plucked pigeon,
that moves my blood to necessary places and sometimes beyond,
to understand how its thickened, muscular layers protect me

from the great loves embedded in flesh and blood
from the pain torn out of the depths of kidneys and womb
from the memories that gather in the brain at night
from the dreams seized by my sleeping eyes

or from Berlin.

Translated from the Hebrew by Lisa Katz

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I pack very, very slowly
one book at a time
the Talmud of Jerusalem, of Babylonia,
Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah,
and Lamentations Rabbah, very many lamentations.
My suitcase becomes a memorial site
for those who were not allowed to pack their holy books,
those who were forced to pack very fast
without planning beforehand,
without a weather forecast,
without the time to sip some white wine
to drive away melancholia before departure
from Grunewald.

Translated from the Hebrew by Galit Hasan-Rokem and Lisa Katz