



ÜBERRASCHUNGEN DAVID NIRENBERG

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Accounts of time spent in Berlin are a venerable genre. Witold Gombrowicz, Christopher Isherwood, W. E. B DuBois: these and many other notables have contributed to it. For me, however, a children's book provides the more appropriate model. "Euch kann ich's ja ruhig sagen: Die Sache [mit Berlin] kam mir selber unerwartet." Thus (with a slight alteration) begins Erich Kästner's account of the young Emil's trip from the provinces to visit his grandmother. Many a Wiko Fellow could say the same: an unexpected invitation gives birth to a year full of surprises.

Some of these surprises are simply those of life in a large and unfamiliar city. We might, again like our hero Emil, get off the train at the wrong stop, gaze awe-struck at the traffic

of streetcars and double-decker buses, get on transport with the wrong kind of ticket (or with no ticket at all), and quickly gain the confidence that comes from doing. Fellows from the United States may even discover, like Emil, a new freedom: freedom of movement, a sovereignty long-since surrendered in our land to the car.

Other surprises come from the particular marvels, the particular history, of Berlin itself. Around every corner there lurks, just waiting to be encountered, the dizzying enantodromia of victory and defeat that is built into the city and its monuments. Every walk discovers traces of giants: halls where Humboldt or Einstein lectured, homes of Walter Benjamin or Isadora Duncan, the bridge from which Rosa Luxemburg's murdered body was thrown into the Landwehrkanal. There are shrines for pilgrims of every devotion: tombs of Fichte, Hegel, Kleist, or Brecht; buildings by Schinkel or Gropius. Even the S-Bahn shocks us, as we run through the brick tunnel chill of Grunewald Train Station, with a memorial to the Jews who by the tens of thousands passed through with heavier tread in 1941–42.

The Wissenschaftskolleg itself is also full of surprises. Where else, except perhaps in a short story by Borges, can one find a library service capable of clutching any book, from ancient Babylon to contemporary Buenos Aires, within its encyclopedic grasp? When else, except perhaps at Pentecost, are adults given the gift of tongues, as so many Fellows and partners are in the Intensive German Course? What other restaurant could cater so effortlessly to the dietary needs of such a diverse clientele? More than a surprise, the staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg, the staff that makes all of this possible, is a marvel.

But perhaps the most unexpected surprise at the Wissenschaftskolleg (if one surprise can be more unexpected than another) is the fellowship. I do not mean by this the friendships and sympathies that develop over the course of a year of living together, though these are certainly a source of present and future joy. I mean rather the miracle (what else can one call it?) that creates the possibility of communication where before there was none. Like children at a United Nations kindergarten, Fellows arrive at Wallotstraße without a common language, natural or professional. Like children, they have in common only a strong desire to play together, a thirst for communication. The creation of intellectual fellowship in such a context requires learning to speak anew, this time without many of the familiar shorthands our disciplines have developed to protect us from having to dwell upon some of the most basic assumptions of our practice. The desire to comprehend our neighbors and to be comprehended by them forced some of us to strip away years of accreted professional varnish, to explain ourselves and our work in fresh terms. In the process we came to see aspects of our projects as if for the first time, with new curiosity and wonder. I do not know

if this is what is usually meant by the vague (and vaguely threatening) taxonomic term “interdisciplinary”, but I do know that it was a great, and unanticipated, gift.

The force of that gift itself determined the direction of the work I did at the Wissenschaftskolleg. It encouraged me to work less on the most focused and contained versions of the questions that interest me (the cultures of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in medieval Spain), and more on their broadest formulations. *Einen Satz verstehen, heißt, eine Sprache verstehen*. My project this year was to learn a language, the “language of Judaism”.

I mean by this not a language *of* Jews, but *about* them. Though Jews sometimes spoke this language in their own peculiar dialect, it was adopted more often, and after the first century A.D. more influentially, by non-Jews, and it is upon the latter that I focused. Nor was it really a language, but rather a vocabulary of words and concepts about Judaism that became useful for thinking and talking about certain distinctions developed in order to make sense of the world: distinctions, for example, between what seems to be and what really is, between appearance and truth, word and meaning, flesh and spirit, man and God, slavery and freedom, tyrant and sovereign.

This vocabulary of Judaism played a negligible role in ancient thought about these distinctions, but an important one in the vast project of translating that thought, first into Christianity, then into Islam, and later into the more secular terms of Enlightenment and Modernity. It became central to many understandings of the nature of the world and of the language we use to represent that world. Why and how did this vocabulary become so central? What work did (and does) it do? And how was it transformed by the many contexts, from Ancient Egypt to the present day, in which it was deployed?

These are the questions I was allowed, and allowed myself, to ask during my year here. It is typical of this charmed place that no matter what form these questions took, whether about Muhammad’s early revelations or Kant’s Anthropology, Hellenistic Skepticism or Systems Theory, there always appeared before me at precisely the right moment a helpful guide, willing interlocutor, or generous critic. Sometimes these were Fellows, sometimes colleagues from the vast institutional watershed that nourishes Berlin’s intellectual well-springs, sometimes even strangers met at children’s parties. But always these encounters came as a delightful surprise, a comforting confirmation that despite all barriers of language, political commitment, or professional specialty, communication is possible, at least at the Wissenschaftskolleg.