



IN SEARCH OF A TURK ... AND OTHER
THINGS IN BERLIN
MARIA TODOROVA

Maria Todorova is Professor of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A graduate of the University of Sofia (Ph.D., 1977), she taught at Sofia University, and has held Visiting Professorships at the University of Graz, Austria (1996), and Harvard University (1999). From 1992 till 2001 she was professor at the University of Florida. She was on the editorial boards of *The Slavic Review* and *The American Historical Review*, as well as on several other journals, and has served on the boards of the AAASS, SSRC and IREX. Major Publications include: *Balkan Family Structure and the European Pattern: Demographic Developments in Ottoman Bulgaria* (1993); *Imagining the Balkans* (1997); *Balkan Identities* (2004). – Address: Department of History, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 309 Gregory Hall, 810 S Wright Str., Urbana, IL 61801, USA.

In our last week at Wiko, a co-Fellow asked me: “Did you manage to do everything you liked?” My answer: “No, but everything I did, I liked.”

On the second day after my arrival in Berlin last September, a friend and colleague from New York came to stay with me for a couple of intensive brainstorming days so that we could shape a research project. In the evening, we took the S-Bahn to Kreuzberg for a taste of the old Ottoman cuisine. Although both of us were now “American”, we came from regions of the former empire: she from Jordan, I from Bulgaria, and we shared an appreciation of our common culinary legacy. Between the two of us, we also shared quite a number of the languages of the empire, in addition to former and present imperial languages. Coming out of the Kottbusser Tor station, the first language we heard was Arabic, and my friend immediately recognized the Iraqi dialect. The person on the street whom

we asked (in Turkish) to recommend a nice place to dine, happened to be a Kurd. Approaching the recommended place, we passed by a Circassian wedding and my friend, who is an anthropologist of the Caucasus, could not miss this opportunity for improvised fieldwork. We spotted another “Turkish”-looking passer-by and asked him for directions. His Turkish was rather clumsy, and it turned out he was a Bulgarian Turk, totally enthused to be able to exercise his real “mother” tongue. We finally settled in a restaurant he highly recommended, and the waitress, a hearty young woman, complemented us on our Turkish. Hers was rather stumbling; as it turned out she was an Azeri who had recently married a Turk and resettled in Berlin. Upon asking her whether she spoke Russian, her face lit up and she told me this is what she was missing immensely and also that, while being a Muslim, she was a devotee of the Virgin Mary. As privileged guests of the establishment, we received complementary dessert – *ashure* – and the rest of the evening was spent in a passionate dispute over whether the *ashure* is an Armenian or Persian dish. We still haven’t solved this problem of utmost scholarly significance, but we came out with

Lesson 1: You can get away without meeting a Turk in Berlin (or in any case, in Kreuzberg) and without uttering a word of German or English.

The next lesson came very quickly, once the regular Wiko year began. For all our multi-ethnic/gender/race/class/generation/whatever presence, we all had one thing in common: we all spoke English. While I could sympathize with the justified unease over the exclusive hegemony of English (especially given that many of us wanted to hear more of the Goethe/Heine/Brecht language during this Schiller year), I could not really feel deprived by the fact that – oh, horror! – the language of Racine (and of my son-in-law) was underrepresented. After all, watching the power struggle between the “great” languages of Europe produced chuckles among the few(er) of us who could, at best, launch lunch dialogues in their ethnic native tongues (Swedish, Persian, Hebrew, Arabic, Romanian), and at worst, merely internal monologues (in Hungarian, Bulgarian, or this really rare tongue, Chinese). In any case, we quickly learned

Lesson 2: You can get away without a word of German in Berlin (or at least in Grunewald and its capital, the Wissenschaftskolleg).

And then came the amazing musical evenings at the Berliner Philharmonie, and the Staatsoper, and the Komische and Deutsche Oper, and the chamber orchestras at the Haus, and our two personal maestros: Litwin and Widmann. Is it at all possible to choose between Simon Rattle's Stravinsky and Daniel Barenboim's Beethoven or Wagner, Claudio Abbado's Mahler (with Renée Fleming) and Seiji Ozawa's Shostakovich, or Pappano's Bartók? And the amazing voices in *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* or the incredible staging of *Dido and Aeneas* or *Ariadne auf Naxos*? Of course not, but the next lesson was obvious:

Lesson 3: You can get away (and quite splendidly) without any words in Berlin.

Now, I realize that this is supposed to be a report on work, i. e., words about words, so here is my alibi for affording to do all of the above (and many more) nice things in Berlin. I came here to work on two projects: one, to complete a book-length manuscript, called *Bones of Contention: The Making and Meaning of Vasil Levski as National Hero*; the other, to launch a big international comparative project on *Remembering Communism*. Both goals were (almost) achieved. My book is at the stage of final touches, and the project is in the hands of final judges. In the meantime, a couple of articles came out, another two were accepted for publication, and I prepared a second edition of my out-of-print historical demography book. I also gave lectures at different institutions in Germany (Freie Universität, the universities of München, Bochum, Leipzig, Köln, and at the Einstein Forum), in Vienna, Bucharest, and Constanța, and even in my native Sofia, where I was awarded the *doctor honoris causa* from my alma mater.

I am looking back at the preceding paragraph, and it sounds quite impressive. Isn't it amazing how the written word succeeds in giving a dignified imprimatur on just about anything?

I am looking back on the preceding year, and it sounds fabulous. Isn't it depressing how the written word nearly always fails to render the sensation of marvel?