



THE ABC OF THE
WISSENSCHAFTSKOLLEG
HELEN WATANABE-O'KELLY

Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly was born in Cork, Ireland, in 1948. She took her B.A. in 1969 and her M.A. in 1971 at the National University of Ireland (University College Cork). She took her doctorate at the University of Basel in 1976 and then became a lecturer in German at the University of Reading in 1974. She moved to the University of Oxford in 1989, where she is a Faculty Lecturer in German and a Fellow of Exeter College. In 1999 she was awarded the title of Professor of German Literature at Oxford. Her books include *Europa Triumphans. Festivals and Festival Books of the Renaissance and Baroque* (with J. R. Mulryne and Margaret Shewring, 2004); *Court Culture in Dresden from Renaissance to Baroque* (2002); *Festivals and Ceremonies. A Bibliography of Works relating to Court, Civic and Religious Festivals in Europe 1500–1800* (with Anne Simon, 2000); *Spectaculum Europaeum (1580–1750)*; *Theatre and Spectacle in Europe* (with Pierre Béhar, 1999); *The Cambridge History of German Literature* (ed. by Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, 1997) and *Triumphal Shews. Tournaments at German-speaking Courts in their European Context 1560–1730* (1992). – Address: Exeter College, Oxford, OX1 3DP, United Kingdom.

It is the mix of very different elements that makes life at the Wissenschaftskolleg so rich. The only way I can convey an impression of this richness is in the form of an ABC which may help to convince the Doubting Reader of what it is the Wissenschaftskolleg is and does.

A: Arrival/Ankunft

Nothing compares to the thoughtfulness of the very first arrival: Every Fellow finds in his or her flat a card from the Rector with a gift of a bottle of wine, a pot of home-made jam, and an array of foodstuffs sufficient for a first breakfast or supper. As a colleague pointed out, the angel who did this shopping even thought to include some chocolate! You know immediately that you are welcome and that someone cares about your wellbeing. The anxious newcomer relaxes instantly and that, Doubting Reader, enables him or her to settle in more quickly and work more efficiently.

B: Books and Bibliothek

There are the fascinating *books* by colleagues in the same year-group, smiling at us out of the curved bookcases in the sitting room upstairs; there are the books being written during the year by those of the group who were already at that stage; there were the books that everyone else had read (or had pretended to have read) but you hadn't; but best of all there is the unlimited supply of books provided by Frau Bottomley and her staff in the *Bibliothek*. Only the librarians know the effort that goes into getting material from a dozen different libraries throughout the city and the number of personal contacts that have to be maintained to keep the system working smoothly.

C: Commitment and Community

By *commitment* I mean the commitment that the Fellows make to the Kolleg. You have never thought of this before, have you, Doubting Reader? But a very important factor is that forty Fellows commit themselves to taking ten months out of their very full and busy professional and personal lives and spending them in Berlin. In many cases Germany is a country they have never visited and whose language they do not understand, and they may even have had considerable reservations about the place before they came. In some cases Fellows leave behind husbands, wives and children for much of the year. In all cases they leave their home behind – a greater sacrifice the older one is. Fellows also commit themselves to engaging with disciplines which are not theirs, with methodologies that they do not understand and with theories that they may find problematic.

Fellows commit themselves in addition to giving up the scholar's hermit-like existence and forming a *community* – turning up to the various activities put on by other Fellows and devoting forty minutes or so at lunchtime to meeting as a group. For many dedicated non-lunchers this took a considerable readjustment.

D: Discussions/Diskussionen

These took the most varied form. There were the formal ones after the weekly colloquium, which I found less than satisfactory, since “questions to the speaker” is not for me the same as a discussion. This format is conditioned by the fact that the group is so large. But spontaneous discussion simply wasn't allowed in that formal context. Better discussions took place after evening lectures in small groups with everyone standing around holding a glass of wine and a pretzel. The most focused discussions seemed to happen among those informal groups of colleagues who got together off their own bat to read certain texts or work on a particular problem.

Wider discussions about politics or religion or social matters in an informal context were often unexpectedly illuminating.

E: Empfang

Open the door of the main building in the morning at any time of the year and be greeted by the joyful sight of Frau Klöhn's exuberant flower arrangements. Go into the Reception and see Frau Wendlandt's huge smile. We saw little sun for most of our ten months, whether winter or summer, but those two things reminded us that sun existed.

F: Fellows, Food and Freundschaft

What to say about the other *Fellows*? That they were learned and interested in ideas and scholarly matters goes without saying. That they were also politically aware and critical and went to a great deal of trouble to inform themselves about world affairs is not so universal. That they were warm-hearted and hospitable and did not take themselves too seriously (see under “Irony” and “Opera” below) was a gift from the gods.

Food, as every successful restaurateur knows, is actually about something else: love and care, creating a soothing and pleasing ambience, enabling social interaction to take place,

integrating strangers into a warm and happy group. In these endeavours Frau Klöhn, Frau Speder and the chefs were expert. The wellbeing of the Fellows had a lot to do with their tireless and sensitive work.

Freundschaft. “Why bother to mention this?” you say, Doubting Reader. “Isn’t this a purely private matter, whether one Fellow made friends with another or not?” My answer is that I am not talking about what is often called “friendship” across the Atlantic, but rather of the German concept of “Freundschaft”. This is something deeper, a serious relationship that lasts for life. And any serious relationship creates a synergy, based not only on personal chemistry but also on respect for the other’s intellectual ability. Friendship means discussion without competition, enabling both parties to learn from each other.

G: German and German Lessons

One English Fellow bravely gave his Colloquium in German, otherwise we invariably spoke English for the benefit of the non-German Fellows. Many of the latter and their partners went to German classes, which were universally pronounced to be excellent, the only comment being the funereal bias of the content. One learner commented that, by the end of the first month, he knew the German for death, killing, graveyard, corpse, burial, tomb, funeral and illness, which in no way diminished his or anyone’s affection and admiration for the teacher.

H: Hard Work and Hektik

You may not believe this, Doubting Reader, but the life of most Fellows during their year in Berlin is characterized by extreme industry and hectic activity. No one gets away from e-mail any more, but even apart from that, each of us spent portions of our time writing appraisals for chairs and references for students, reviewing research proposals, drafting research evaluation criteria, writing lectures to be given all over the world, giving our opinion on a whole number of matters to do with the organization of research and scholarship.

I: Irony

One colleague said that the most remarkable feature of his time at the Kolleg was that, in contrast to his working environment back home, conversations and interactions were laced

with irony. Irony means double vision, always seeing things from (at least) two perspectives and then laughing at the disparity between them. This refreshing double vision characterized the permanent staff members too. The laughter that resulted, always kindly and unifying laughter, rang out at all times and in all situations throughout the year.

J: Jogging

I can't speak about this activity from personal experience. Suffice it to say that jogging or running united colleagues of very different personalities as well as Fellows and staff. There were enough runners for the Kolleg to field no less than three teams in the Berlin Staffellauf (Relay Race). Fifteen people ran in three groups called respectively "Think Tank", "Brain Wave" and "Master Mind". These were the hateful people who did not put on weight during the year.

K: Kolloquium

Some colleagues showed us slides, others used the magic of PowerPoint graphics, another gave us the odour of a bee to smell, one sang, one used a Magic Marker on the board to remind us of how it used to be done, one made a model of the Greek picture of the sky, one played Arabic music, some used handouts, some just talked. The content, in the vast majority of cases, was interesting, stimulating, well-explained and thought-provoking.

L: Learning

Learning happened all the time outside the colloquia too. Some people learned how to scan and edit pictures and how to do PowerPoint. Others learned sophisticated video-editing. Others learned English and German, yet others complicated forms of Yoga. We learned about music (see below), Muslim women's rights, Swedish poetry, how to make exotic jewellery, how to work the Berlin transport system, how a German school or Kindergarten functions, how to separate our garbage in the famous "Mülltrennung". We learned that we had to read Luhmann and Judith Butler, or alternatively go back to Kant, nay, Aristotle. And, of course, that the Babylonians were always the first.

M: Music

We were fortunate enough to have Stefan Litwin, pianist and composer, with us fulltime until Christmas. He taught us so much about music in his “Gesprächskonzerte” and recitals, came back to read Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus* with us and then provided invaluable help with our end-of-year show in July. We also had the energizing presence of Jörg Widmann, clarinetist and composer, in the second half of the year, and of Janice Misurell Mitchell, flautist and performance artist as well. True performers and music lovers all.

N: Nightlife

No, I do not mean night-clubs, Doubting Reader. I mean the performances at the three opera houses and at the many theatres, the concerts and recitals, the cinemas and satirical comedy shows – all that a culturally aware and exciting city has to offer. The Kolleg is itself a provider of cultural nightlife too, so one often didn’t get into town because there was so much going on at the Kolleg.

O: “Opera”

This is the term now universally given to our end-of-year show for the staff (“Beauty and the Bees, or Das Märchen vom Grunen Walde”) in which all the Fellows still in residence (36 people!) took part, dressing up and poking fun at themselves and their academic pursuits. The term began as a purely ironic designation, since, while music welded the various scenes together and three Fellows sang, an opera in the real sense is the last thing this crazy work could be called. But the name has stuck. Apparently this show was unique in the history of the Kolleg.

P: Partners

Many Fellows come to the Kolleg with their *partners* and these partners contribute hugely to the life of the year-group. This “buy one, get one free” policy gave us a composer, a political scientist, an anthropologist, someone who taught Fellows and staff both English and rock-climbing, a historian, several teachers, a sociologist, a librarian, a Chinese novelist, a psychiatrist, a classical archaeologist and many more. Some of the partners were indistin-

guishable from the Fellows, taking part in all the discussions, introducing speakers at the colloquia and giving colloquia themselves.

Poetry was another element in our year. Lars Gustaffson, novelist and poet, writes in Swedish. Abdolkarim Soroush not only introduced us to the poetry of Rumi but writes poetry in Persian, while Galit Hasan-Rokem writes in Hebrew.

Q: Questions

Questions after colloquia – what former Fellow does not remember them? They were sometimes pointed and apt, only occasionally of the “Come now, surely you don’t believe that ...” kind, but they could also be rambling and unclear. Much of this was due to their having to be composed so often in the foreign language of English. Owing to the rigid system of having to put your name down on a list of questioners which was already full in the first few minutes, most colleagues learned to raise their hand to get their name down first and then thought of the question afterwards. Hand gestures tended to increase, the more the speaker was fighting to find the thought that eluded him (or her). Yes, I stand guilty as charged.

R: Reading

Happy, fruitful hours spent sitting on my little sofa in my room in the Neubau, reading and reading. This was the most precious thing the Kolleg gave me, the time to read. What more can be said of this most productive activity.

S: Staff of the Kolleg

What a group! The people at the helm of an organization are the key to its success, because they in turn pick the right colleagues, instruct and guide them properly. So it is at the Kolleg. I will not embarrass the staff by singing their praises individually but will just make two points: The first is that Herr Nettelbeck and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus have a keen eye for standards. We don’t always meet these standards, but they know when we don’t. This grasp of what matters is not universally present among those who guide similar institutions. It is an inestimable quality. And, the second point: Many people remarked that our

year was characterized by strong and charismatic women. So is the Kolleg. You know who I mean, don't you?

T: Technical Backup and Table Tennis

The *technical backup* simply must find a place in any account of the Kolleg. The computer department were universally helpful and friendly, while the work of the outstanding Christian Schmitz fell into two equally important halves: The technical know-how he imparted to Fellows preparing a lecture or a concert or a film showing and the psychotherapy he practised at the same time, calming the nervous and imparting confidence.

Epic were the battles fought over the *table-tennis table* in the tunnel between the main house and the Neubau. My own exercise came from dodging the balls as I made my way back after lunch to my room.

U: United Nations

We were. In spite of wars, world events and various geo-political divides.

V: Variety

These are the extracurricular events of one busy week: It looked like this:

Friday: Danced to Rock around the Clock at a Fellow's birthday party.

Saturday: Saw Elfriede Jelinek's new play at the Berliner Ensemble.

Sunday: Invited for Swedish herring and Aquavit by a Swedish Fellow.

Monday: Saw *Nathan der Weise* at the Deutsches Theater.

Tuesday: Saw (for the second time) our colleague Ziba Mir-Hosseini's prize-winning film *Divorce Iranian Style* at the Kolleg, followed by discussion.

Wednesday: Drove with another Fellow to the farthest reaches of suburban Potsdam to the so-called Fraenger Salon to hear a fascinating lecture by Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus accompanied by historic recordings of poetry readings.

Thursday: A lecture entitled: "Can animals think?", the Berlin relay race in which so many Fellows and staff took part and a grand garden party at the Grunewald residence of the British Ambassador to celebrate the Queen's birthday at which we drank champagne and ate strawberries to the music of the band of the Tank Regiment.

W: Work and Wine

I began a wholly new project at the Kolleg and then decided to make it something much bigger and more exciting than what I had envisaged. My ten months gave me the chance to stake out the new territory, see its (vast) extent and clear at least some of the ground. Four papers I wrote during the year helped me to move the project on. It has a long way to go but its final shape will owe a lot to the Fellows of 04/05 and to the Kolleg experience.

What better thing to do after a hard day chained to the computer than to drink a glass of *wine*? Alois Hahn, multi-lingual, well-read and an expert on the wines of the Mosel-Saar-Ruwer region, organised a wine-tasting which was one of the highlights of the year.

Y: Young Fellows

Our youngest impressed us all with his intelligence, charm, open-mindedness and patience with us oldies. He is off to Harvard now. We are not surprised. But we had other young Fellows who were here for a shorter period and who enriched our existence, sometimes questioning things we had by now begun to do automatically.

Z: Zeit

In one way there was a lot of this valuable commodity, yet in another way the days rushed by. Wiko-Zeit seems to melt. Alas.

X: The Wiko X-Factor

So all of this adds up to the Wiko X-Factor, that indefinable something that wakes people up, jolts them out of their narrow professional path and changes how they think. This almost ex-Fellow is going to do her utmost to hang on to what she has learned and become a better scholar in consequence.