



MY COMPLETE YEAR IN BERLIN  
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I came to the Wissenschaftskolleg to finish a book on the history of breast cancer in American society. Mostly I wanted freedom from my usual work responsibilities in order to reorganize my arguments and prose and write the last few chapters. Having at least a fantasy of what life at the Wissenschaftskolleg might be like, I expected by the end of the year to be singing praises about the gift of time and the stimulation of a new place and colleagues.

But I simply did not imagine just how helpful and kind everyone would be and how much difference this would make for the quality of my work and home life.

While still in Philadelphia, Martin Garstecki had become an almost daily presence in our preparations to move my family and two cats to Berlin. I suffered a mild case of withdrawal when it became clear that many others would also tend to our needs once we had arrived. Monika Fogt made our move into Villa Walther stress-free. Joachim Nettelbeck and Yehuda Elkana early on suggested potential collaborators in Berlin and later connected me with visitors and the informal but important web of Wiko fellow travelers. Katharina Wiedemann arranged for me to be the subject of an article for the first issue of the Wiko publication, *Köpfe und Ideen*, which was a valuable lesson in communicating the implications of my research to the general public. Gregor Pickert and Roman Riebow and the rest of the computer staff kept me wired and wireless, and solved numerous technical problems. Gesine Bottemley and the rest of the library staff chased down medical and history books from all over Europe.

I often worried that Daniela Wendlandt might want to hide when she saw me pass by the reception each morning because so often I needed help with a German bill or some practical fix for a family problem. In the middle of the winter, the restaurant staff palpably improved my daughter's happiness by agreeing that the restaurant could be the site of her best friend's month-long internship. They took Caroline into the kitchen and taught her how to prepare and present innovative, good food at the same moment for 40+ demanding people while seeming to enjoy it all. Most every day was brightened by short and sometimes longer conversations with Katarzyna Speder. She valiantly tried to expand my capacity for German conversation.

By trial and error with its first 1000 Fellows, Wiko seemingly perfected the structural elements to nurture intellectual collegiality and collaboration in the instant community that forms each October. But there is also serendipity (and some strategy) in the chemistry among Fellows. First, there was the seeming accident that there were two physician Fellows, Paul Kleihues and Dietrich Niethammer, who were also working on cancer-related issues. Paul was interested in improving access to, and the quality of, information about cancer's causes and treatments for the general public. I remain more skeptical than Paul about what we really know, but our differences helped me think about how to make the public more cautious consumers of medical information. Dietrich has had a long and distinguished career as a researcher and clinician for children with cancer. We immediately recognized in each other kindred spirits. Dietrich kindly agreed to take part in a London

conference I had already organized about chronic disease and was quickly initiated into medical history, Anglo-Saxon style. Another physician, Giuseppe Testa, was only at the Wissenschaftskolleg for the first part of the year, but we had many productive discussions about our joint interest in bringing perspectives and findings from history of science and science studies to the workings of medical education, clinical practice, and basic and applied research. He was a favorite visitor for the rest of my family and inspired my daughter to even more daring hats and outfits.

By the middle of the year, our German-Hungarian-Israeli-American contingent on the top floor of Villa Walther realized we had a special community with many layers of interest and links. Rivka Feldhay and I not only shared a world of history of science, but also long-distance care for and worry about our parents in their 90s. Mordechai Kremnitzer shared a sensibility that might have had something to do with our common Eastern Galician ancestry. Judit Frigyesi and Ben not only provided background music and their gentle karma, but food and a shared passion for exploring Berlin. Dietrich and Dietlinde Niethammer more or less adopted our family, taking us on trips and concerts, always there to help solve a problem, offer us a late night drink or dessert, or go for a bike ride and swim. Dietrich even solved my need to feel like a doctor, by kindly having a gallstone attack and asking me to come over and help (all turned out well).

A highlight of this past year was the Wiko Passover Seder. The idea happened by chance and misunderstanding. Mordechai and I talked about a Seder for our families and guests and realized that we needed to either create a hole between our apartments or find a bigger space. Over lunch I asked Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus whom I might ask about using a larger Wiko room. "You ask me," he replied. A few moments later Christine von Arnim, Christine Klöhn, and Katarzyna Speder were discussing with us a Seder for the entire Wiko community. Carla Hesse, Irad Kimhi, Judit and Ben and many others chipped in with ideas, and volunteered for tasks. The library staff rounded up a dozen or so different Haggadahs from Berlin libraries. Christine Klöhn made exploratory visits to a kosher grocery. She was accommodating but there was no convincing Christine that gefilte fish was not necessary. Although I worried that a large Seder with many uninitiated guests would be awkward, it worked out well. Some highlights were the Four Questions in four languages, Judit's and Ben's singing, and a beautiful lied sung by Ingolf Dalferth's wife. None of this could have happened without the hard work of the restaurant staff and Fellows Services. For an evening at least, I felt we had re-consecrated a bit of Berlin and connected Jewish past and present without obscuring or forgetting the Nazi past.

In the fall, the Wissenschaftskolleg had an unusual guest for an evening talk – former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami. Some Fellows wondered about the wisdom and ethics of this invitation, given recent statements from Khatami’s successor about wiping the state of Israel off the map. Abdolkarim Soroush organized a discussion before Khatami’s visit about the current political scene in Iran, the question of anti-Semitism there, and other issues. Khatami’s talk, in which he argued that secularism was an alien concept in Islamic tradition and should not be used as a term of reference in Iran-West political discourse, was politely received. I was a bit shocked when my 16-year-old daughter raised her hand for what turned out to be the last question. She questioned just how foreign secular ideas were to Islamic societies and political structures, citing some examples from the history of Pakistan and elsewhere. Khatami took Sara’s question seriously and engaged in a thoughtful give and take.

My major disappointment has been my limited progress in German, a disappointment magnified by the hard work of my two outstanding teachers, Nadja Fügert and Eva von Kügelgen. Nadja managed to introduce us to the complexities of German reunification and other aspects of recent German history. She is an extraordinarily gifted teacher and generous individual. Eva enlivened classes with her passion for linguistics and the complexities of translation.

My wife Jane’s adjustment from busy psychiatrist to sabbatical leave was made incomparably smoother and her life richer by the small and large opportunities for socializing, learning, and intellectual stimulation at the Wissenschaftskolleg. Marie Genevieve Salais became Jane’s pottery teacher, leaving us with our most tangible physical reminders of our year here. My son Daniel took full advantage of life in Berlin, representing Argentina in a “Model UN” attended by 700 students from all over Europe. Being in the middle of Europe made a big difference to his intellectual development. Along with the son of the Kazakhstan ambassador, he helped create, edit, and write commentary for an alternative political magazine (an interview with Jean-Louis Fabiani about the Paris “troubles” was one feature). Sara took a longer time to love Berlin. She would have preferred funkier Kreuzberg to the villas and lakes of Grunewald, but life in this dynamic yet easy-going city slowly eroded her skepticism. It also must be said that adapting to a new country was not always easy, and there were periods when each of us felt lonely and adrift. An uncle whom I loved died in November. For a time, Berlin was simply the wrong place for me to be living and working.

Having sent the draft of my book, *Unnatural History: Breast Cancer, Risk, and American Society*, to the publisher just prior to my departure, I accomplished my main scholarly goal for the year. This book explores the change over the last two centuries from isolated, private fears to immense individual and collective risk of breast cancer. Its chapters switch back and forth between case studies of particular patients and their families and doctors and overviews of developments in medical and lay thought and practice. The case studies, which begin in early 19th-century Philadelphia, give texture to the felt experience of women with breast cancer and what they and their doctors believed about the disease. The overview chapters more systematically examine the continuities and changes in the definition, meaning, and response to breast cancer in different eras.

The book (I hope) has an edge. It emphasizes the largely social processes through which breast cancer and cancer risk has entered the bodies and concerns of so many women. Today, one in eight American women will get the diagnosis in their lifetime. Yet I do not believe that changed biological conditions have significantly contributed to the emergence of these frighteningly high odds. Instead, we have had repeated, self-reinforcing cycles of public health and clinical interventions, mass behavior change, new patterns of disease diagnosis, transformed perception of the impact of medical interventions, leading to more behavior change, and so on. There has also been a historical trend in which we have shifted many aspects of the older breast cancer experience and decision making to the way we currently experience and respond to breast cancer risk. This has contributed to some disturbing trends, such as paralyzing fear of cancer, overselling the effectiveness of prevention and treatment, iatrogenic harm, and market exploitation of cancer fears.

I also found some time, less than I had hoped, to push along a separate project, on the history of the variety of ways we come to recognize or discover health risks, make them visible within different scientific and lay communities, and create demand for some kind of intervention. My plan has been to collect and analyze a lot of the secondary social science and public health literature on health risks and carry out a few new historical case studies. The goal is to write some convincing, policy-relevant essays about the troubling new world of health risks I believe we have entered. I have drafted two such essays while at the Wissenschaftskolleg and another before I left the US last summer. All of this work has been motivated by a nightmarish vision of massive health risk screening and risk reducing pills. The work has a decidedly American focus, as we are already bombarded in the US by direct-to-consumer advertising of prescription drugs, the bulk of which are aimed at either common symptoms or risk reduction. Risk reduction is especially appealing to big Pharma,

much more so than the treatment of disease. Any particular disease affects only a minority of the population, and often requires interventions for only a limited time because the disease is self-limiting, the treatment works, or the patient dies. Pills to reduce risk, on the other hand, might have the entire population as the potential market. People may need to take risk-reducing pills for an entire lifetime.

Being at Wiko has been immensely important for both these projects as well as for the advancement of my career. Just a few concrete examples beyond the obvious contribution of the time, space, and research support. In the weeks after my Tuesday Colloquium, Fellows and staff appeared in my office to clarify a point (despite my best efforts, including writing SLOW DOWN on my written notes for the talk, my Brooklyn-accented English was hard to follow), to contest something, but also to share something from their scholarship or personal experience that related to my presentation. Through the Wissenschaftskolleg network, I connected with German medical anthropologists working on disease prevention and have drawn up plans for joint comparative projects and conferences with them. Most important was what I took away from the scholarship and point of view of my diverse fellow Fellows. To just skim the surface, there turned out to be provocative parallels between my own work on the self-fulfilling character of epidemiological definitions and practices in cancer with Robert Salais' work on unemployment definitions and statistics in modern Europe or the way the working group on secularism helped me understand and articulate the way spiritual values and religious practices that were part of the experience of cancer in the 19th century were displaced (in Charles Taylor's sense) onto expectations about the efficacy of medical treatment.

With the heat of summer and preparations to leave, my time in Berlin comes full cycle. It has been a very complete year, so much so that I am acutely missing the feeling of expectation, of having in front of me freedom, time, and new experiences.