



BERLIN FOREVER
ULRICH KELLER

It will not be easy to give a plausible account of an incredibly enriching and transforming year free of teaching and committee work at Wissenschaftskolleg, but the advice to begin with a few basic career data provides some structure to the endeavor. Born in 1944, I began to study art history in 1963 and obtained my Ph.D. in 1969 with a monograph on Baroque equestrian monuments, published with Schlüter's "Great Elector" in the courtyard of Charlottenburg Palace serving as the cover illustration. I continued specializing in Renaissance/Baroque art, first as Assistant Professor at the University of Louisville, Ky., then as Assistant Director of Art Historical Institute, Florence. At Louisville, which has a great photo collection, and in several US art museums, which paid much more attention to modern technical media than was then the case in Europe, I developed an interest in photographic history, which translated in 1977 into a curatorial position at George Eastman House, the Western world's most important repository of historical camera images. Five years later, this again translated into a Professorship for Photographic History at the University of California, Santa Barbara, which I still hold at present. In an of course only marginally meaningful attempt to subsume my research career under one label, I might say that I have mostly been interested in "political iconography", to borrow a rather recent catch-word. – Address: Department of History of Arts and Architecture, University of California Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara, CA, 93106, USA.

The research project I pursued at Wiko certainly fits the bill, being dedicated to tracing the shift in American politics from abstract, programmatic speech/text to personalized visual performance caused by the rise of the illustrated press since the 1850s, long before the

advent of television, which is invariably named as the sole culprit for any such changes (preliminary title: “Masking the Presidency: The illustrated papers and the transformation of American politics 1850–1950”). The shift was instrumental in moving the center of power from Congress to an increasingly “imperial” presidency, masking programmatic goals, depoliticizing democracy, and introducing new forms of controlling the electorate, while also opening up new approaches toward integrating the geographically, ethnically, and politically quite heterogeneous country. Around 1800 the US presidency was a legalistic and literary construct without any visual component to speak of, in fact with a strict prohibition against any “political”, let alone electoral speeches and appearances. Without an iota of change in the US constitution warranting it, the picture press was a leading, though not the only factor that caused the complete erosion of this prohibition by 1900.

My research at Wiko largely evolved within this general outline formulated at the beginning; several sub-themes emerged or receded, however, prompting a new chapter organization and major changes in the course of argumentation. To name just a few changes: The discussion following the presentation of my project at Wiko made it clear that the role of the cartoons, which filled late-19th-century illustrated newspapers in great quantities and large sizes, needed to be clarified vis-à-vis the pictorial reportage material. Two separate chapters now undertake to compare and contrast the respective roles of the two pictorial genres. It seems that the tropical growth of press cartoons in the late 19th century was largely the result of the inability of early picture reportage to convey more than dry descriptions of *given* events organized without consideration of pictorial press needs. Only when a number of technical developments, mainly the advent of the halftone and thus of photography on the *printed page*, ushered in the period of *staged* news events for the benefit of the camera, did reportage acquire the ability to transport ideological messages far beyond the range of factual description. Precisely at this point cartoons lost their dominant position and began to play the marginal role still known to us today.

Profiting from some very recent and very interesting research in German literary history, another chapter will put in sharper focus the prefigurative and prescriptive function of press imagery. Instead of just passively mirroring the political process, this imagery ceaselessly generated visual metaphors of a power and persuasiveness that called for translation into and proved to be a major factor in the shaping of political practice: metaphors not only reflect, but also generate reality. I became aware of further parallel and inspiring lines of research when I was invited to serve as a reviewer for a “Sonderforschungsbereich” established several years ago at the Freie Universität under the title “Kulturen des Performati-

ven". Everything I have thus far written on my subject could easily be rephrased within the methodological framework and language of Performance research, though whether that is what I really want to do remains to be seen.

At this point I must admit, however, that I did not concentrate as exclusively on my declared research topic as I had originally planned and as Wiko probably had a right to expect. Staying focused on an American subject in the German capital simply required more tenacity than I was able to muster, and in the end I felt it would have been as heroic as stupid to ignore the urban environment around me with its embarrassment of cultural and historical riches. Among other things, Berlin was a kind of homecoming for me, back to Germany generally, which I left in 1970, and back to Berlin specifically, where I spent a year of study in 1966/67 at the Freie Universität. What I encountered was an entirely new and different Berlin, however, in which I felt initially reduced to something like a tourist from a very faraway country who tries and fails to find his way around with a guidebook in hand. Among the many personal impressions and discoveries, I will single out just one because it changed my research agenda. Whenever I walked to Wiko, I passed the monument marking the spot where Walter Rathenau was assassinated in 1922; and whenever I took the S-Bahn I passed Gleis 17, marked by bronze slabs listing the transports that carried Berlin's Jews to the extermination camps – and the closer one gets to the center of the city, the denser the historical buildings, markers, and reminiscences become. This was not so 40 years ago when I was a student in Berlin. The buildings were there, of course, but few of the monuments and little mental context. The culture of memory, or the obsession with it, as some have called it, is of a more recent date. In California I had largely missed it, but in Berlin it was engulfing, prompting me to recapitulate in a hurry the 36 years of German history I had missed since emigrating, together with the 12 catastrophic years woven more and more visibly into it. Tomasz Kizny's investigation of the photographic legacy of the Gulag system and the Great Terror in the Soviet Union provided an additional incentive, and so I started to frequent Berlin's Stadtbibliothek and the nearby library of the German Historical Museum in Schlüter's Armory, opposite the void once occupied by the Hohenzollern City Palace.

The numerous illustrated papers of the 1930s housed there constitute an abundant but little used visual record of the Nazi period. Thousands of images culled from these papers with a digital camera have become the basis on which I am now able to pursue various questions, such as the direct connections and structural affinities or differences between the German and American methods of organizing political publicity in the 1930s, or the degree

to which messages diverging from or even articulating opposition to the official party line could be inserted into a national press discourse which only *seemed* to be completely dominated by rigorous “Gleichschaltung”. In the last 30 years, several excellent studies have been devoted to National Socialist picture propaganda, usually under titles referring to the “aesthetics” or “fascination” of violence, but they suffer from the assumption that Nazi propaganda was a monolithic and all-powerful affair uniformly manifested in *every* contemporary picture product, an assumption that posthumously aggrandized the myths surrounding Goebbels, rather than deconstructing them. In an essay titled “Der Tag von Potsdam”, slated to appear in the January issue of *Fotogeschichte*, I argue that, in parallel photo reportages, published in various German illustrated papers about the same official Nazi event, a surprisingly broad spectrum of messages and opinions can be traced – if one becomes sensitive to the nuances and covert signals permeating what in literary history has been dubbed “Sklavensprache” or “verdeckte Schreibweise”.

The new research agenda informs my teaching as well. I am currently offering an undergraduate seminar on violence and memory in the two world wars, to be followed by a graduate seminar on closely related topics. And so the vivid and enriching *Erlebnis* of Berlin is beginning to embark on the long march through institutional routines.

In conclusion let me offer a few comments on some of Wiko’s most interesting institutional features, of which the library services deserve particular praise. When I arrived I was prepared to battle all kinds of problems that I imagined to be unavoidable due to the absence of a full-fledged library at Wiko. But the ingenious system under which Wiko Fellows are provided in a matter hours with any book they can think of from any Berlin library turns Wallotstraße into a kind of Cockaigne where books grow into your mouth while you sleep. I never knew how much time I wasted in my previous life hunting for books. Now I am back to my previous life and must do with the University of California library system, which is respectably stocked with 13 million volumes – but what a hassle until I have a single one on my desk.

Wiko should also be complimented on the way the Fellows’ spouses and families are integrated into its daily life. In this respect I or rather we had less than satisfactory experiences in previous fellowship years. Wiko understands, though, that only a happy Fellow is a productive Fellow. We miss the family evenings, we miss the beautiful park-view apartment, and we miss the little boat that a hurricane deposited for free on the shore of Villa Walther.

For my wife and myself the “Gesprächskonzerte” and other musical performances were definitely the most moving and memorable features of Wiko’s rich cultural life, and we cannot sufficiently express our gratitude for the great care and expense invested in the organization of these events. Historically, the visual arts seem to have received rather short shrift, though, comparatively speaking, which is rather regrettable in the eyes of an art historian, of course. Especially following the recent “Iconic Turn” in the Humanities it is difficult to understand why art should play only such a marginal role at Wiko. We hope that the very impressive and successful Kizny exhibit can be taken for a signal that this is going to change in the future.