



THE STRANGELY INTIMATE WIKO
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My stay at Wiko was shorter than the usual ten months, as I had a three months scholarship from Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. At first I thought that three months would be more than enough for what I had planned to do during my fellowship: to write a couple of chapters on a book that was a bit overdue at the publisher and to do some library research for another project – on the imagining of space(s) in social sciences at the beginning of the 20th century in Central Europe. What happened in the end was quite different from what I had planned in advance.

The location of Wiko, near the huge forest of Grunewald, dotted with small lakes, villas and parks, seemed at first to require anthropological skills for decoding and assimilating. I felt like an ethnographer engulfed in a different world, a different culture that was to be understood by doing what anthropologists rarely do: studying up. But the most impressive institution that, in my view, kept the Wiko tribe spinning and sparkling with new ideas was the library. It almost disrupted the project of finishing the book I was writing as I was too busy trying to follow the bibliographical trails of books, men, women and ideas that emerged from the texts I was able to get my hands on.

The mixture of natural scientists, social scientists, philosophers, historians etc. proved to be, in my experience, unexpectedly fruitful. It was quite beneficial to try to explain my project to – and to understand the projects of – scholars coming from fields of research that did not have a common specialized language, a common sociolect for what I was working on. The ethnographer's perspective became important for me, once more, as I fought with new concepts, new rationalities and new – and fertile – incongruities. To have frightfully sharp-minded physicists, evolutionary biologists or cyberneticians discuss and react to humanistic topics – and vice versa – usually gives way to huge misunderstandings. The misunderstandings were present but, nevertheless, in a strange Wikoean way, alternatives and fresh insights emerged exactly from these.

I took part in most of the seminars and workshops and got hooked to this especially alive – sometimes even glamorous, in an intellectual way – part of everyday life of the Wiko community. The chance to listen, talk to, and secretly or explicitly agree or disagree with remarkable intellectual figures – Fellows or guests of Fellows – revealed some of the ways Wiko was able to make strangeness familiar – and the other way around. Apart from the Wiko-based conferences I became interested in the EUME (Europe in the Middle East, The Middle East in Europe) research program. The program assumed that understanding Europe and the Middle East depends on an inclusive and reflexive rethinking of modernity, with its foundational conceptual key components science, secularism and democracy. My research was particularly close to an enterprise that tries to dissociate modernity from dominant Western European paradigms; that includes its negations; and that dislodges modernity from its projected religious, racial or ethnic origins.

Every institution, especially if it brings together important and diverse parts of the lives of various individuals, develops an “underlife”. A life that permeates, subverts or enhances the “official” life of the institution. Wiko's underlife – of which I could only catch a short glimpse, as my arrival was in the last part of the institutional year – had in-

teresting contours, pathways, dead ends and apparent dead ends. Intellectual backgrounds and intellectual genealogies criss-crossed and were colored by various shades of charm, closeness, aloofness or unexpected friendship.

By the end of the three months I left with the impression that Wiko was a strange place. The book I was working on was eventually written in the dull post-Wiko months in Bucharest. While in Wiko, my baby was born back home, creating in my mind a most intimate link between me, him, Berlin, Wiko and Bucharest. Intimacy and strangeness is the mixture that represents for me what Wiko is all about.