



THE YEAR OF LIVING DIFFERENTLY
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The Wiko year was the year of doing things I don't usually do. I rode a bicycle. I spent a lot of time talking to people. I went to many concerts, plays and operas. I discussed colloquium papers on evolutionary biology and echolocation in bats. But the main thing I did that was unusual was to write a great deal about myself.

This started with my Wiko colloquium paper, which was on subjectivity and how historians handle it. True to the title, "Getting Personal", it was a highly subjective discussion, almost all about myself. I am a historian who in the past took a strong stand in favor of objectivity (this was the banner of my group of Sovietological "revisionists" in the

1970s, who objected to the politicized nature of the field and favored empirical, archive-based work against ideology-driven scholarship). But now I had two projects in which I could not possibly claim to be objective: a book on the experiences of my late husband, Michael Danos (Misha), when he was a DP (displaced person) in occupied Germany after the Second World War, and a memoir of my own childhood in Australia, growing up as the daughter of a radical father during the 1950s. So the question was: How would I handle the subjective element? In the case of the Misha book, which I was writing like any historian on the basis of documents (correspondence between him and his mother in the 1940s, diaries, etc.), should I put myself in, even though I didn't meet him until 1989, 40 years after the events described? Was my personal knowledge of him an asset (which is what I intuitively believed, as long as I didn't examine the question intellectually) or a disadvantage? Did the fact that I was avowedly non-objective mean that this book, unlike my others, was *not* a search for truth?

I gave my colloquium paper in the autumn, and these questions generated an interesting discussion with some of my fellow Fellows that continued throughout my stay at Wiko. By the spring, however, I had a new, though related, set of concerns. After working mainly on the Misha project in the first months (including very productive sessions deciphering the letters, handwritten in German, with Eva von Kügelgen), I had switched to working mainly on my memoirs, trying to get a more or less finished version ready by my publisher's July 1 deadline. I already had a draft, carefully crafted to avoid too much self-revelation, but now (under Wiko influence?) I put most of the self-censored stuff back in. The manuscript was much improved by helpful criticism from a number of Wiko Fellows, particularly Catherine Robson, who, from a literary scholar's perspective, tried to cure me of my historian's habit of trying to get the facts right ("Why spoil a good story?").

Writing the memoirs made me think more about what it means to be a historian than I had done for years. No doubt I had, in the past, theoretically absorbed the idea that what we remember about our lives are the stories we are used to telling ourselves and others, but researching the memoirs really drove the message home to me. My schoolmates don't remember what I remember about school, and in some cases even firmly contradict it; I don't remember what they remember and suspect them of looking at the past through rose-colored glasses. The same with my brother, also a historian, who seems to think that it's only *my* memory of the family that is fallible. I observed the collective construction of memory, as former schoolmates collaborated to refute my version; and the transmission of

false memory, as in the case where I managed to implant my memory of a friend singing “Moon River” at a particular place and time – which turned out to be three years before the song was written, as I found out from Wikipedia.

If memory and oral history turned out to be shaky guides to the past, it was scarcely better with documents. Reading the documents that survive from my childhood and youth, or exist in the public domain, I discovered that events that I consider of crucial importance are sometimes completely absent, while my letter files give an oddly skewed impression of who my close friends were at various phases of life. In other words, if someone other than me were to write my life, using all the available resources except those in my head, they would, in my opinion, get it wrong. That is a sobering thought for a historian.

Towards the end of the Wiko year, I revised the colloquium paper for publication in a volume edited by Alf Lüdtke called *Unsettling History*, a good title for what had been happening to me. I hesitated between two alternative conclusions. One (the original conclusion of my colloquium paper) ended with a retreat from subjectivity: *enough of the personal, let's get back to writing history*. The other, written in the spring for Ute Frevert's “History of Emotions” group, took the other tack on subjectivity, more or less embracing it. In the final version, I was back in the skeptical mode, “buttoning on my skin” again, as the Australian poet A. D. Hope put it in his 1944 poem “Return from the Freudian Islands”.

In fact, this conclusion had been foreshadowed by a decision I made rather casually sometime in March. I had been thinking earlier that my next big historical project would probably be a sociocultural history of the Soviet Union in the 1960s. Sociocultural is a familiar genre for me; what would have been new in this case is that the late 1960s is “where I came in”, in other words, the time when I became a direct observer of Soviet history, even in a modest way a participant (I spent a year and a half in Moscow as a British exchange student researching my dissertation). With this topic, I would have become a source for my own history, just as I was for my memoirs, and would thus have had ample scope to explore the subjective/objective issue in a concrete historical context. I wrote a few exploratory papers during the Wiko year and decided it wouldn't work: I just couldn't get interested. And on top of that, I have Ph.D. students working in this area, and the message that seemed to be coming up from the subconscious was: *Let them do it*.

So, rather unexpectedly, I jumped in a completely different direction: Soviet political history of the 1930s, specifically, a study of Stalin and the “team” he put together in the

late 1920s, which (contrary to popular assumption) largely survived and even outlasted him, providing the core of the “collective leadership” that took over after his death. It’s a surprising topic for me, although I did a lot of the archival work back in the 1990s when the archives of Stalin and other Politburo members first became accessible. I have never written pure political history, with the exception of one article on bureaucratic politics under Stalin back in the 1980s. In the middle of my Wiko year, however, I had to write something on politics because those were the ground rules for a *Festschrift* for my friend T. H. Rigby, a distinguished Australian political scientist and Soviet expert. So I used my archives to write a politics piece, and found it fun to do. Perhaps when the dust settles a bit – historians don’t like drawing conclusions about things that are too recent – I will have a better sense of why it was so much fun, but as it’s a topic in which I have no personal stake or connection, it presumably functioned as an antithesis of subjectivity. It was entertaining and absorbing to put the pieces together to make a pattern, the way I usually do: a relief not having to think about myself.

So that’s almost it for the unexpected things that happened during the Wiko year. But a few postscripts are in order. In June, we had a little *Historikertag*, involving just the Wiko Fellows who are historians, in which we talked about our work and methodological problems. Dipesh Chakrabarty talked about correspondence between two Indian historians from the early to mid 20th century: too early to be professionals, they nevertheless (or in consequence?) felt a passionate *vocation* as historians. That’s a word you don’t often hear from professional academic historians, so I asked the others if they had become historians because they felt a vocation. Nobody had: Everyone had stories about how they started out intending to be physicists or Broadway stars and somehow fell into history, having accidentally discovered that the historical mode of thinking and understanding the world suited them.

It’s the same story for me: I was going to be a violinist until the age of 16, and for that I *did* have a sense of vocation, so becoming a historian always carried a slight feeling of vocation denied. When I took up the violin again forty years later, there was a sense of being back where I belonged (though I would undoubtedly have been bored stiff by a lifetime of orchestral playing). I brought the instrument with me to Berlin, but it took me a while to find people to play chamber music with. Then Christine von Arnim found me two people, a cellist and a violinist, and I was off – launched into an ever-expanding circle of Berlin (and Münster, Köln, Hamburg, Hannover) amateur and professional string players. After a while, we started playing quartets, quintets, even sextets in our common

room on the second floor of Villa Jaffé. (As we were a friendly group in Villa Jaffé, my neighbors – Jim Mallet, Christoph König and Andrea Büchler – never complained, and neither did Bruno Olshausen, even when I accidentally blocked the door to his *Arbeitszimmer* when he was still working in it one evening.) I record this because it may be the only time Villa Jaffé's *Obergeschoss* has been treated as a chamber music venue.

Finally, it was the year of *Du*. In English, we don't have the distinction between a familiar and formal 2nd person, but it exists in Russian, which is the language I often work in; and in Russian, because of my age, status, and gender, almost everyone calls me the equivalent of *Sie*, even people who are quite close friends. At Wiko, *Du* is the universal form of address among Fellows. It's the same in chamber music in Germany. The convention is that, however *großbürgerlich* and formal the other players may be in normal life, it's *Du* from the second time you play together. As with the Wiko Fellows community, this has the immediate effect of making you feel that you are among friends, even when the people are still relative strangers. I even started to use *Du* with some of the German professorial colleagues in my field whom I particularly like. If it's wrong, after all, they can always put it down to my being an American (though that's actually wrong, too – but why spoil a good story?)