



A YEAR SPENT IN “WIKOSTAN”:  
UNFORGETTABLE MEMORIES  
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We as a family arrived in Berlin on August 15, 2011. As we entered the large villa where we would spend the next eleven months of our lives, we came across another family of new arrivals. These were Claire Messud and James Wood and their two lovely kids walking their dogs. None of our bags had made it with us. We were standing on the gravel with little care packages (tiny toothpastes and undersized undergarments that the airline people had handed out to us). James gave us comfort by relating his own story of missing bags with British Airways, the airline we had taken from the US. The children mingled and we all left with the promise to meet again. As we walked away with our strange-looking round keys in hand, I whispered to Syema, my wife, “That was Claire Messud, she is a famous author ...”

Prior to coming to the Wiko I had read and reread the names of the Fellows who would spend the year with me. All seemed, like Claire, so much more accomplished and famous. The idea that one would have to eat meals every day with people of such high intellectual stature made me wonder what these encounters would be like. I wondered, “Will I be condemned to saying something smart every three minutes or otherwise be considered a much lower species on the evolutionary ladder?” The year turned out to be just the opposite. I looked forward to our lunches, not only to discover what was on the menu ... sometimes a real surprise ... but also for the conversation, the greetings and the laughter, always the laughter. Even if we were sitting at separate tables one would hop over for dessert to another one and join the conversation there and have coffee with yet another set of colleagues. If we became too engrossed in discussing the latest opera performance and its unorthodox interpretation while working through our lamb curry and couscous, we could always move our chair to the other table where Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi was telling yet another of his hilarious anecdotes, bringing smiles and laughter from the entire table.

Such small meetings, like the one our family had with Claire and James and the ones shared around lunch and Thursday dinner tables, soon became friendships that I suspect will last all of us a lifetime. For my family and me, it was the best of times (to quote Dickens, but just partly). Wiko was the gracious host that provided us with a comfortable apartment, the boys went to JFK (thanks to Andrea), and I had a spacious office to work on my book. What else could a middle-aged academic want from life?

Berlin itself was a discovery. I had been to Germany before, but had flown in and out of airports on my way to this conference or that. I had not lived in the country and understood the rhythms of its towns or the character of its social life. Wiko made it possible for us to feel at home in Berlin and explore the city and the country. Grunewald itself was a discovery; walking to Kaiser’s at the S-Bahn station and then in other parts of the area gave us a sense of its late nineteenth-century grandeur, yet also made us very aware of the horrors of the post-Weimar years. The plaques on the Platform 17 at the S-Bahn in Grunewald brought alive a much more tragic dimension of the city’s past, which of course we had admired for its early nineteenth-century architecture in the areas surrounding Unter den Linden in the Mitte district. These layers of history were interwoven in many ways in our day-to-day life, whether in the *Stolpersteine* in front of Villa Jaffé or in the history of the main building itself.

Once on a cold January morning we also took our sons to the main Berlin cemetery in the eastern part of the city, where we and thousands of others honoured Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the communist leaders who were brutally murdered by the right-wing nationalist Free Corps in January 1919. In contrast to the calm and prosperity of present-day Berlin, the visit brought to life how, between the years 1919–23, there were more than 350 political murders and several popular insurrections in Germany. The murder of the moderate politician and Foreign Minister, Walter Rathenau, in June 1922 was of course one of the most serious of such events.

Remembering the Berlin uprising that led to Luxemburg and Liebknecht's death and revisiting Rathenau's murder (every day we passed the memorial commemorating the exact spot where he was killed) as bookends for the violence that encompassed Germany in the early twentieth century made me also think about Pakistan and my own work on the communist movement there. It reminded me of how contemporary Pakistan (at the risk of historical oversimplification) was somewhat like Weimar Germany, a volatile society in which various social and political forces are vying for power. Pakistan today has an elected government that is engulfed in problems of suicide bombings and remains a "reluctant" participant in the US-led global "war on terror" in the northwest of the country. It is facing high unemployment rates, an acute energy crisis, rampant inflation and a nationalist insurgency in Balochistan. The government, itself tainted by scandals of corruption and inept governance, is, of course, always mindful of an army that continues to wait patiently to see it falter. I am of course not sure whether the analogy holds, but for me to be working on Pakistan while sitting in Berlin made the history of those early Weimar days more palpable. These thoughts remained with me when I started to complete the manuscript for which I was awarded the fellowship.

I remain grateful that the *Wissenschaftskolleg* provided me with the space and support to finish a draft of a book-length manuscript during the course of my year of residence. My writing revisited Pakistan's founding moment, in which the ideological stress was on Muslim nationalism that would unify the Muslims of South Asia under the symbol of the emergent state. Yet in the text I argue that, from its very inception in 1947, the diversity of people's lives and particularistic cultural experiences remained in perpetual tension with this order. The mistrust shown by the new Pakistani state, wrapped as it was in the ideology of Muslim nationalism, toward the diverse aspirations of its own people led it to impose a meta-narrative of an undivided nation on the populace. A reaction to this political process was the gradual cracking of the ideological edifice of a moral

community. For example, by the mid-1950s regional and nationalistic claims by Pakistan's diverse ethnic groups severely tested the promise of the Muslim nationalism that led to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. Foremost among these was the voice of its Bengali citizens, who as the largest demographic part claimed their economic and linguistic rights from the overtly centralizing state in Karachi, fourteen hundred miles away from Dhaka. Within this context, I argue in the text that such histories are often deleted from nationalist master narratives that induce selective national amnesia because these events fit awkwardly into neatly woven patterns. Hence, in Pakistani historiography, in which the major preoccupation remains the narrative surrounding the creation of Pakistan, many aspects of national life are given scant attention. One major arena of national amnesia that my project addresses is the absence of any serious work on the nascent Communist Party of Pakistan's (CPP) relationship with the populace and the state. In my research I critically engage with the history of Pakistan's early years, paying special attention to the CPP during its brief period of legal existence after Pakistan gained its independence. In pursuing this task the book concentrates on documenting the history of the working class movement while also focusing on cultural processes to offer a perspective beyond the official retelling of Pakistan's history, which periodically omits how the new country struggled to find the ideological and cultural basis for its creation and existence.

The important element here is that by working on the text at Wiko it has become a different piece of writing than what it would have been. The Tuesday seminars (with Hannah Ginsborg's insightful first questions or Thomas Pavel's delightfully humorous yet serious interventions) and their discussions were a major inspiration for new thought and also for critically evaluating my own established ideas about the book and its various dimensions. My colleagues were generous and always forthcoming with ideas and suggestions about my work. Frederick Cooper's early-on reading of a chapter of mine (we were both standing for the M-19 bus at Halensee on a very cold December evening and decided to share our work with each other) was an act of intellectual generosity that I can never forget. Similarly Thomas Pavel and Karl Schlögel gave me important references from the Soviet literary debates of the 1930s and 1940s that I have judiciously incorporated into my chapters, expanding their scope and in the process also changing the thrust of the argument. Julie Livingston not only has become a dear friend (as others have), but also read my chapters in draft form and commented on the book prospectus that I was preparing for the press, for which I remain indebted to her. For my Tuesday presentation, Behrooz introduced me with a sense of comradeship, intellectual commitment and a

sense of humour that is unique to him. I could name all my colleagues who in many ways either influenced my work, made me think in new and innovative ways, opened up my mind to fresh ideas or heard me out when I needed to share something half-baked. I cannot thank each and every one enough.

As I progressed in my writing I also felt confident in starting to contemplate my future research plans. Luca Giuliani, the Rector, kindly allowed me to host the Pakistani architect and urban planner, Arif Hasan, in March 2011. Arif Hasan and I have been discussing the prospects of working together on a cultural history of Karachi, the city where both of us grew up. This follows from my on-going parallel research interest in urban form and social life. What was amazing and important was that Sonja Grund and her colleagues in the library made it possible for me to have access to archival material on the subject that would have otherwise required me to travel in one case to Greece and in another to the United Kingdom.

The library at Wissenschaftskolleg is an amazing space. How things are made available to the Fellows speaks of the dedication, hard work and ingenuity of the staff members. Kirsten Graupner's perseverance in getting me papers from the Greek architect Doxiadis' office library in Athens was something unimaginable. Doxiadis was the planner for the new parts of Karachi during the early 1960s, and his documents are crucial to understanding the development of the city in that period. I could not have had access to them unless Kirsten had arranged for them to be shipped to Berlin. I am sure each and every Fellow who has been to the Institute has her own story regarding the library and the wonders that it can accomplish.

In addition to the normal workings of the Wissenschaftskolleg, its support of the Europe in the Middle East – Middle East in Europe (EUME) program is important to mention. Especially in this year when the "Arab Spring" opened up the possibility of thinking anew the future of the entire Middle East region, having a number of young bright scholars who worked on the region was an important addition to the scholarly discussions during the year. Of course Elias Khoury's presence as a Fellow and the organizing of public forums where he spoke enhanced the level of public debate on the Middle East and the question of Arab-Israeli politics to a level that showed farsightedness and intellectual courage on the part of Wiko's leadership – for which they deserve to be commended.

One can only thank the leadership and staff of the Wissenschaftskolleg for making the year such a special one. Whether the visit arranged by Eva von Kügelgen to the Brecht

Museum, with the unforgettable episode of Elias Khoury's attraction to the writer's chair, or the Rector's organizing of the visit to the Humboldt House, where François Lissarrague shared his immense knowledge to help us understand Greek Antiquity, we were always in the realm of discovery and of acquiring new knowledge.

Finally, the day-to-day life at Wiko had its own predictable rhythms and pleasures. Walking into the building in the morning and saying hello to Vera Schulze-Seeger, who was always smiling and willing to help, going down to the dining hall for that best of all breakfasts or simply a coffee where again one greeted the ever-gracious Katarzyna Speder, sometimes taking a detour and going up the stairs to say hi to friends like Katharina Biegger (who was my first contact to Wiko, and I am still indebted to her for bringing me to Berlin), Francisco Martinez-Casas or Katharina Wiedemann. Whether in the main building, the Fellow Services (with Andrea Bergmann, Corina Pertschi, and Nina Kitsos), or in the IT department (Wiebke Güse, Petra Sonnenberg, Roman Riebow and others) or Dennis Grimm with his mild manners, always willing to help, it was evident that the entire place and its staff were present to assist the Fellows.

As I mentioned above, the friendships that we created will last our lifetime. I write this from Austin and in the past few weeks since we have returned many of us have written and spoken to each other about the loss of the everyday companionship, the community that we had created and how we miss each other. This sense of loss is indeed sad, yet meaningful. The nostalgic aspect aside, it is true that we will never be able to recreate the year that we spent together in Berlin. But the memories do remain. What I recall most are the moments of shared laughter, of happiness. For a year we were happy in Berlin, and the Wissenschaftskolleg made it possible.