



SALTED ALMONDS
AND *GEDANKENBRÜCKE* –
A LETTER FROM BERLIN
OLIVIA JUDSON

Olivia Judson is an evolutionary biologist and writer based at Imperial College London. She received her BSc from Stanford University and her doctorate from Oxford University. Her book, *Dr Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation: the Definitive Guide to the Evolutionary Biology of Sex*, has been translated into more than 15 languages and was also made into a TV show. She has contributed articles to a number of newspapers and magazines, including *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, and *The Atlantic*, and between 2008 and 2010 she wrote a weekly online column for *The New York Times*. She is currently writing her next book. – Address: 63 Clarendon Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02140, USA.
E-mail: o.judson@imperial.ac.uk

I recently received an e-mail from a friend who's been invited to be a Fellow at Wiko. He asked if I thought he should go and wanted to hear about my experience. This is what I said:

Dear —,

If you've been invited to Wiko, and it's feasible for you to take the time away – go. Wiko is an amazing place, and Berlin is a fascinating city. I loved it. I accomplished none of the goals I had set for myself – in particular, I had hoped to leave with a book manuscript, and I did not – but it was an expansive time. Literally: I'm sure I'm taller now than I was when I arrived.

As you know, however, my time in Berlin was darkened by my father's unexpected illness and death. Nothing could ease the anguish of that; yet I consider myself lucky to

have been on this sabbatical when it happened. I was able to take several weeks to be with my father while he was ill, and the Fellows and staff at Wiko were tremendously supportive. Within hours of my father's death, the Fellows sent a gorgeous bunch of flowers, and I was touched by how much I felt part of a big family – in the best sense – when I returned to Berlin.

Also, the city and Wiko provided a kind of emotional link – *eine Gedankenbrücke*, perhaps – to my father. He first came to Berlin in 1948, during the airlift – *die Luftbrücke* – that broke the Soviet siege of the city. His father was working as an economist for the Allied government; my father was 17, and had just finished university. I grew up with stories of that time – of how he had paid for a tailored suit with a carton of cigarettes, played chess by candlelight, and learned to drive on the Avus, a stretch of road built as a racetrack, but which is now (and I think was then) part of a highway that leads out of the city to the west. Hearing about it all created a romance in my mind about Berlin that offset the constant barrage of movies about Nazis. And by a strange symmetry, when I was seventeen and just starting university, my father returned to Berlin as a Fellow at Wiko, and I came to Berlin for the summer. This was the summer of 1988: a year before the Wall came down.

I was fascinated by the Wall. I often went into East Berlin, crossing on foot at Friedrichstraße station. Once I found myself in a place called Treptower Park, gazing in astonishment at an enormous Soviet war memorial showing a soldier twelve meters tall, holding a child while stepping on a broken swastika. (It's still astonishing. Moving, too. I recommend going in winter, when the bareness of the trees and the chill of the air makes the place suitably austere.) On another, less well-judged occasion, a friend and I went to a remote part of West Berlin, and attempted to steal a sign that said, "You are leaving the British sector." We failed. In retrospect, it was a stupid thing to have tried; but we were young, foolish, and lucky, and the worst that happened is that we had a long, slow journey home on a series of night buses. (We also had to endure a lecture from my father. We had taken a blanket with us: in case of success, we were going to wrap the sign in the blanket. But when we reappeared at five in the morning, my father misinterpreted the purpose of the blanket, and we didn't dare tell him the real reason we had it, because we knew he wouldn't approve.)

Back then, the centre of gravity of the western part of the city was much closer to Wiko than it is today. But I hadn't realised just how much the city had changed. I arrived in October, exhausted – two years of writing my columns for *The New York Times* had

taken more out of me than I'd realized – and disoriented. Also, I think my tastes are different now. Whatever the case, Wiko's official housing, an apartment block out in the exclusive Grunewald district, didn't suit me. Although the place is beautiful – lakes, trees, swans – it is very quiet. The nearest cafe is a 15-minute walk, and most of the clientele have recently celebrated their 300th birthdays. Which isn't a problem in and of itself, but you might not describe the place as urban. And I like urban living. So my first couple of weeks were given over to an apartment hunt – which was a crash course in Berlin geography and inhabitants. I met, for example, a dissolute journalist with a beautiful apartment in the central district of Mitte who considered a mattress on the floor to be ample furnishing for a lodger; the apartment stank of cigarettes. When I asked if he smoked he said, "I quit two days ago." Then he added, "To relax, I'm having a beer." This was at 11 in the morning. I didn't take the room.

Instead, I took a beautiful and spacious apartment in the district of Schöneberg. It was close enough to Wiko that I could get there in 20 minutes, yet I was in a lively and charming neighbourhood, full of tiny shops, cafes, bars, and restaurants. One nearby shop sold only apples (and apple-related products such as Calvados), and I was just around the corner from Double Eye – serving the best coffee in the worst cafe in Berlin. (The problem with the cafe is that there is nowhere to sit: you have to stand at the counter, drink your coffee, and go. But the coffee is delicious ...) Another highlight: a pleasant and unpretentious bar called Maigold – though owing to a misreading the first time I went, I always called it Marigold – home of a lethal mojito and the scene of a number of happy evenings.

You will find much to explore: as well as having world-class museums, evidence of the city's dark history is everywhere. There is, for example, a gigantic Nazi-era bunker just around the corner from my flat (it couldn't easily be blown up – it was built to withstand bombs – so after the war, an apartment building was just put on top). At least one of the U-Bahn stations is – still – a fully furnished nuclear bunker, able to house more than 3,500 people for two weeks. And of course there are any number of memorials and monuments, from the tall, grey stones that commemorate the murdered Jews of Europe, to the empty library in Bebelplatz that commemorates the books burned by Goebbels and his thugs. But somehow, what brought the city's history home to me most strongly was a street corner near Wiko. It's a blind corner, and to cross there on foot is obviously dangerous, so I had been casually referring to it as "the death-trap corner". Until, while reading a history of Berlin in the 1920s, I discovered that it really was a death-trap corner:

it was the very corner where Walter Rathenau, the Foreign Minister of the Weimar government, was assassinated in 1922. According to the book, this precipitated the German hyperinflation ... and all that followed.

One of the oddest features of Berlin is that the city has around one million fewer inhabitants today than it did in the 1930s. This has some interesting consequences. For one, it means there is lots of property for rent, and rents are low. As a result, businesses that could never survive in a city like London do a roaring trade (exhibit A: the shop selling only apples). For the same reason, the city is full of funky dance studios, theatres and galleries. One night, for example, I went to a dance performance in an old safe factory.

The city also feels strangely empty. You can go to the main paintings museum, the Gemäldegalerie, on a Sunday afternoon, and be the only person looking at a Vermeer; even the biggest thoroughfares are often deserted. On walking through town, several visitors asked, "Where is everybody?" to which I replied – "This is everybody."

This emptiness, combined with the big open streets, the parks, lakes and forests, the river and the large but low buildings, gives the city an immense feeling of space and possibility. This contributed to the sense of expansiveness that I experienced. But there were other ingredients, too.

The first was my flatmate, a guy called Ben Mason. He's a student of German and Philosophy at Oxford; he was in Berlin on a year abroad as a Fellow of the Studienkolleg. This is a sister programme to the Wissenschaftskolleg; it brings around 30 students from all over Europe to Berlin each year, for a year. I met Ben when I spoke at a Studienkolleg event soon after I arrived in Berlin; some time later, he needed a place to stay, and moved into my spare room. We got on well – much laughter, and the eating of salted almonds from a local market – but more than that, he turned out to be a great interlocutor. He was kind enough to spend a lot of time discussing the projects I was working on, and his questions and comments really helped me expand my ideas.

Then, of course, there was the Wissenschaftskolleg itself. The chance to spend a year without deadlines, where the magicians – I mean, the librarians – can produce any book you want within a few hours of your asking for it, where all red tape is taken care of by someone else, and you are surrounded by interesting people to talk to – it was like a dream. I read widely – more widely than I have for years – and had a chance to think deeply and intensively without distraction.

Despite these freedoms, however, life at Wiko is quite structured. There's lunch with the other Fellows every day except Thursdays, when there's dinner instead; and every

Tuesday morning, there's a colloquium given by one of the Fellows. (Each Fellow has to give one.) Be warned: the colloquia are two hours – an hour of seminar and an hour of discussion, very Germanic!

At first, I found all this a bit onerous; I'm used to having a quick sandwich for lunch, not sitting down to a midday meal that lasts at least an hour. And regardless of how interesting the colloquium – and some of them were great – I get fidgety around the 60-minute mark. But as the year went on, I started to realize there's a kind of genius to the way the place is set up. One of the difficulties, I think, about being an adult is that you rarely have a chance to spend lots of time with new people – and without spending time together, it's hard to forge new friendships. Wiko brings together people from a wide range of backgrounds, ages and nationalities and obliges them to spend time together. For me, it worked well. As well as being exposed to new ideas, I left with friendships that I think – hope! – will last the rest of my life.

(Not all the socializing was earnest discussion. Shortly after I arrived in Berlin I met a Pilates teacher; after discovering that a number of other Fellows were also interested in Pilates, I hired her to come to Wiko – where, to my delight, she ended up teaching three classes a week. The group had a marvellous esprit de corps, and we bonded while floating our legs to tabletop and learning to roll like a ball ...)

An account of life at Wiko would not be complete without mentioning the staff. As anyone who has been there will tell you, the staff are incredibly kind and helpful. I have particular respect for the kitchen staff, who have to deal with all manner of different diet preferences and requirements, and somehow manage to remain cheerful and smiling.

When I came back to Berlin after my father's death, I was speaking to one of the Fellows about the problem of mourning in a secular society, and how we lack proper rituals. She suggested that I invent my own rituals, and as part of it, visit places in Berlin that had been important to my father.

Which is why, shortly before I left the city, I found myself at Tempelhof Airport, where the planes landed during the airlift. It ceased being an airport in 2008; today it is an enormous park. The day I went it was windy and full of people flying kites. But I fell into a kind of reverie, and imagined my father as a young man, flying in over the bombed-out apartment buildings around the Tiergarten and landing here, about to start one of the most memorable years of his life.