



ON MEMORY AND LAUGHTER
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My project at the Wissenschaftskolleg addressed memory practices related to service in the Yugoslav People's Army. To a great extent, narratives in which memories of military service circulate in the post-Yugoslav space are humorous stories that are still able to trigger a lot of laughing. Laughter is also an ever-present companion of people in this part of Europe, which is the region of my academic interest. Very often it appears as a reaction to the absurdity of the post-socialist reality, as an answer to helplessness and an act of resistance to the humiliation that many people feel in their everyday experiences.

Memory and laughter are two words that I would certainly use to describe my Wiko year as well. Of course, I do not imply that a year at Wiko is in any way comparable to a year in the Yugoslav army. While the Yugoslav army soldiers were obsessed with the pas-

sage of time and could not wait for a year of their service to be over (and would have a small calendar to cross out passed days as a necessary accessory), obsession with time was also strongly present among members of our Wiko group, but with the opposite predicament. As early as the first signs of winter touched trees and lakes in Grunewald, a panic emerged among the Fellows: We were all feeling that time flies fast, much too fast and that our Fellow year would be over much sooner than we would like. Already then, if not earlier, I was aware of the specific relationship between this year as an experience and a memory of it. Usually, we think about memories and remembering as something related to the past. To become memories, and to be thought of as memories, events and experiences should be over. There are, however, rare and priceless experiences upon which we reflect as memories even before they become the past. My stay at Wiko was one of these experiences. Very often during this year I was reminded of another experience of this kind. During student protests against Slobodan Milošević in Belgrade that lasted for several months in Winter 1996/97, once I saw a girl with a banner stating: "Right now I am making nice memories." Indeed, most of us who spent many freezing days and nights on the streets felt at that time that we were participating in something that would become one of the most important experiences of our lives and that each moment of those cold days would be an invaluable memory.

The same awareness accompanied me during my year in Grunewald – maybe for the first time since that winter in Serbia. That was a year in which the present was linked to memory. It could not have been so unless a lot of joy, positive energy, and humor characterized almost every moment of that present.

At a certain point of my stay at Wiko, roughly at the same time when the anxiety about time flying too fast was increasing, I noticed a change in social interactions at our daily meals. Conversations remained interesting and intellectually highly stimulating, but became less performative and more deeply joyful, a sign of which was loud laughter. I do not remember any other long period of time when I laughed so often and so intensely. My English, nurtured almost exclusively for academic purposes, also became a language in which I can laugh.

A lot of laughing by no means implies that humor was the only connecting tissue among the Fellows. So much laughter, and such a sonorous and contagious laughter, would not be possible among people who do not have much to share. Laughter accompanied very serious talks on research matters, plans for common projects. Very personal, unique, and touching histories were told between waves of laughter. A lot of grief,

concern, and sorrow were also shared between these waves. It is easy to share sadness and concern with those with whom one can laugh. People who know how to laugh together can also easily share the most serious things.

The very ability to laugh with someone is not to be underestimated, either. It provided us with a sense of solidarity and gave our discussions a subtle tinge of subversion; it seasoned them with much-needed witty criticism and irony.

Proportional to the great presence and intensity of laughter and humor during the Wiko year were the sadness and overwhelming emotions during its last month, when we were saying goodbye to each other. This period of a long goodbye started with some sudden and unexpected tears that interrupted the laughter during meals, to continue with a series of warm and sad partings. As the rainy and cold July advanced, there was less and less room for laughter. It was time for the memory of the present in which we lived for almost a year to become what memory usually is – memory of the past.

I am writing this report at the foot of the magnificent Table Mountain in Cape Town, where I was brought by another invaluable Wiko encounter. Several months after leaving Berlin and from this dramatically beautiful and distant place, the year at Wiko appears as a most precious experience that makes the world small and transforms its map into a mosaic of spots that bear the promise of Fellows' reunions. Thinking of these future encounters brings much joy and excitement. At the same time, the memory of a year in Grunewald looks to me like a closed box that is rather painful to open, because it reminds me of the impossibility of recreating our laughing community ever again. Awareness of that impossibility is even more painful, because since I left Berlin I constantly and strongly miss my Wiko friends. But – what would life be without laughter, and what would memories be without a grain of pain?