



THE WONDER DAYS IN BERLIN VIKRAM SAMPATH

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It was my first-ever visit to Germany and I reached Berlin with all my scepticism in tow! It was in the late afternoon of Friday, October 1, 2010, when I first stepped into the Wissenschaftskolleg. This place was to be home for the next three months and the uncertainty of what lay ahead was palpably exciting! All new Fellows were given the most courteous of welcomes by the Reception staff, and Vera Schulze-Seeger became my first

friend in Berlin. In the three months that I stayed there, I often wondered how the staff of Wiko and Vera in particular managed to remain so cheerful. Or was it a camouflage, I asked myself. I was to stay at the main building of Wiko and Vera led me to my sparklingly clean room – W4, explaining everything from how to use the kitchen to how to operate the strange keys to that room and the rest. In no time, the IT staff was in my room and I was connected to the World Wide Web. A long journey from India and change of time zones had exhausted me totally. The friendliness of the staff had assuaged some of my fears and doubts and I was lulled to sleep in the security and comfort of my cosy room. I woke up late that evening expecting the same staff to be downstairs, with more smiles and more words of cheer. But to my dismay I realized that I was literally home alone in that huge European bungalow! It was Friday night and everyone had left for the weekend. Probably none of the other Fellows who were to stay in the main building had checked in. “Hello! Anyone there?” My desperate pleas were met with an echoed silence and the eerie stillness of the place was tantalizing, to say the least! “How am I going to stay in this place for THREE long months? Did I make a wrong choice?” – all kinds of questions and self-doubts plagued me for the next two days that I stayed there all alone. So frustrated did I get by Sunday morning at the absence of human beings around me that I simply ordered a cab using the neatly typed out sheets of “Self-help” that the staff had piled up on our desk and asked the driver to take me to any place where I could see people! I am not sure what the hapless driver thought of me, but he drove me straight to Potsdamer Platz and some swanky malls there. The weight of three months was still heavily weighing me down.

But all of this changed in just a matter of a few hours on the first Monday in Wiko. The occasion was our German class and in retrospect I can say with great conviction that whether or not the “Deutsch” classes helped me learn the language and its intricate grammar, it certainly helped me bond friendships for life! We were given a random test in which I was clueless and made some “smart” guesses. Needless to say that put me at the bottom of the pile and we were all marched away to the Beginner’s class. Ondrej Kotas, our friendly German “Lehrer” was there, fully prepared with meticulous sheets through which he thought he would drill this language into our heads. We were the most diverse bunch of students in that class – each more eccentric than the other, but nonetheless filled with oodles of optimism about mastering the language. Nancy Hunt even had dreams of being able to read the German records in the Archives at the end of this three-week intensive course! She probably would have succeeded too if she attended two classes regularly,

in a row! Robert and Jacqueline were the most diligent of the lot while Bruce had tears in his eyes from his supposed discomfort with the new language even before the classes began. Behrooz, Julie, Thatcher, Janice, Iruka, Andy, Mike and me – and we had as much of an ethnically and linguistically diverse class as possible. And what was most creditable was that from day one, Ondrej managed to communicate with us completely in German, seldom resorting to any English usage. Language teaching and learning couldn't have been more fun than the wonderful manner in which he had structured his classes – I wished my teachers back in school, where I learnt close to four Indian languages, had half the skills that this man had! German is a complicated language and its grammar has a mind of its own. In those three weeks of really intensive classes, I am not sure if we got what it takes to make even simple conversation. This was proved beyond doubt when at the end of it all, we were asked to interview the staff members and then recount the whole process, drawing a pen picture of our interviewee – mind you, all in German! And beyond “Lieblingsobst”, “Gemüse” and “woher kommen Sie and wie heißen Sie?”, we hardly managed to come up with anything supremely intelligent! But then learning a new language with a group of people who were equally ignorant of it was thrilling. The credit for all of this would go solely to Ondrej, who is possibly the finest language teacher I will ever meet all my life. We had our weekend guided tours of Berlin, as part of the German class, which gave valuable insights into the history and culture of this beautiful city. Ondrej came up with a novel idea of letting us out into the city to learn the language by speaking to the people on the streets. It was a disaster, though! Unforgettable would be our experience in the Kreuzberg market where we were divided into teams of 3–4 and were given a questionnaire with some clues, whose answers we had to get from passers-by and then finally meet at a café. While many gave up midway and sat cosily in the café, Iruka, Mike and I decided to leg it out! Atrocious questions and meaningless replies did help us get completely lost and we were the last group to get back to the café! But yet again, we gave it our best shot and that helped keep our conscience clean, if not the spoken German! Towards the end of the German classes, a bunch of enthusiasts got together on Tuesday evenings at the Villa Jaffé for our own self-motivated drill sessions to brush up our German. I must admit, we didn't get too far, but nonetheless, we gave it our very best try and that is all that matters.

The German classes and the boat ride in the very first week helped forge and cement friendships among the Fellows. The manner in which Wiko helps relationships to grow on you slowly and not rush through anything was commendable. Within just a week and

after that bad start of feeling marooned in a haunted house, I began to feel that I had been here and known these people for ages now.

The end of the German class ushered in another vital ritual in the calendar of Wiko – the Tuesday colloquia. These were possibly the best part of my Berlin sojourn, as it just takes an hour of a lecture and a following hour of intense discussion to get the gist of possibly hundreds of books on the subject! And to hear it all, straight from the experts on the subjects, is another plus. Admittedly, not all the talks were interesting to me nor did all of them make too much sense. In time-honoured tradition, the humanities scholars were outshone by the biologists who managed to reach out to the lowest common denominator (read: me!) more effortlessly than the former, with no assumptions of prior knowledge of their hallowed disciplines. The colloquia gave rise to different genres in themselves – of the speakers, of the introducers and the audience. There were those who sat and spoke, some who stood with a lectern in front, almost like a church sermon, a few read out their speeches monotonously while others were extemporaneous and brilliant, some made fancy PowerPoint presentations while others let us all imagine what they were trying to convey. The diversity of topics apart, the diverse methods of presentation and what works well for a particular subject would make an interesting case study in itself. While Newton might have found the answer to why the apple fell, the answer to why the biologists fare better at Wiko colloquia and why most of the humanities scholars speak to their audiences from the ethereal confines of heaven would perhaps never be clear. The irritating aspect though was that the introducer's speech would sometimes exceed the main speaker's and eat into valuable time. There were occasions when the Fellow introducing the speaker of the day would happily forget that it was someone else he had to speak about and merrily harangue us in a lengthy monologue about his own work in and contributions to the subject of the day, even as the dumbfounded speaker would grin sheepishly, with his or her eyes beseeching for mercy!

The questions and answers that followed were more intense and engaging. It was bewildering for me to notice how there were some people who always managed to have some question about everything! Here too, the specialized genre that this became had variants. There were some who explained to the speaker what the topic was and thereby showed off their own expertise, a few others mumbled confused queries and tried to trap the speaker, some others refuted all that was said. But by and large, unlike previous years I am told, our colloquia's Q&A sessions remained largely civil and orderly. No one went into fistfights about any topic or its interpretations by the speaker. The discussions would

spill over into lunch, too, and I noticed that a couple of Fellows made it a point to sit at the same table as the speaker so that the session could continue and the poor person could be deprived of the meal!

Speaking of lunches and dinners – these were undoubtedly the high point of Wiko. The discussions at the table were always intense and on such a varied list of topics that I could possibly write a book just on these! Some discussions were animated; some a lot of fun, a few others were heated up by an intense argument – but when all is said and done these were important occasions to reconnect with everyone in the batch every day. Lunches would end up being so sumptuous and filling that it would necessitate a couple of cups of coffee post-lunch to stay awake and get back to work! A word about Wiko’s coffee machines, too – they all had a mind of their own too and in the first few weeks it was a familiar sight to see a group of Fellows crowding around these machines trying to figure out which button to press! Some of us loved to address them in the feminine gender, given their extreme sensitivity and unpredictable behaviour! They were also valuable aids in our learning German, as most of us remained totally clueless as to what was brewing!

What really amazed me was the personal care that the kitchen staff always gave to each one of us, to our eating quirks and preferences. I, for instance, always had my friend in the kitchen staff, Katharzyna, who would pander to the special food needs of my vegetarian diet. She was almost always supremely concerned that I might suffer from protein malnutrition and hence gave me extra helpings of all the possible delicacies that I could eat – much to the amusement of other Fellows! I am sure my colleagues in the batch would agree that we have seldom had this kind of personalized pampering ever – not since the times our mothers forced things down our throats!

In the very first month there was a reception for the Fellows where we announced what we had contemplated working on during our stay at Wiko. That session led to another surprise. Everyone came up with two projects – one titled “Official” and the other “Secret” – though I don’t know how they would continue to remain a secret when announced in public this way! I had just one official project and tried to remain loyally wedded to it all through, since I was unfortunate enough to be in Wiko for just three months. I had planned to study the early gramophone recordings of Indian music. Though most of the recordings were made in the early decades of the 20th century in Indian cities like Calcutta, Madras or Bombay, they were manufactured in Hanover and other places in Germany. Hence I was sure that the Sound Archives in Europe would

have a valuable repository of these early recordings. I had laid out an elaborate project plan since it involved visiting several archives and meeting people. I must acknowledge the invaluable help from people like Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus and Katharina Biegger in helping me connect with several people in different cities of Europe for this. In the limited time that I had, I made multiple visits to several archives – the Berlin Phonogrammarchiv, the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the British Library in London and the EMI Archive in London. Each of these was an enriching and very rewarding experience and planning them sitting in India would have been close to impossible. I must put on record my deepest appreciation for the efforts made by Andrea Bergmann and Corina Pertschi in getting me these multiple visas and residence permits to facilitate easy travel. Of course since it was the time of the year when the weather played truant and the snowfall grounded flights and brought airports to a halt, I had quite a few harrowing experiences when it came to travel back and forth from Berlin – including a terribly stressful 12-hour haul at Paris. But then the positive outcomes of these travels far outweighed the logistical difficulties.

The ready help that I got from many of these archives too was an eye-opener – things are a lot tougher for a researcher in India! People like Lars Christian Koch and Susanne Ziegler (Berlin), Christian Liebl (Vienna), Joanna and Jackie Bishop (EMI London) and Leena Mitford (British Library, London) are people to whom I owe so much, given the amount of material they helped me gather on my subject of research in such a short time. The Berlin Phonogrammarchiv was of course a place I frequented more often, as it was feasible to do so. During these visits to the Archive, I managed to hear several hundred 78-rpm recordings of Indian artists and laypeople that the recording companies had made. Dr. Ziegler would book a research room for me to be able to sit down and listen to these records, make notes and also peruse those heavy catalogues.

The outcomes of these travels were many. Of course I did get a lot of substantial material for a book I have been thinking of writing on the early women performers of this gramophone era. But there were other takeaways that I hadn't dreamt of when I started off. Reinhart mentioned to me a fascinating archive in Berlin called the Lautarchiv which houses the voices of laypeople, especially the prisoners of war of the First World War. He even organized a guided tour of the Archive and it was chilling to hear the voices of several Indian prisoners – voices that were more than 100 years old but etched permanently on the shellac. Along with this, hearing several Indian icons and leaders like Tagore was an added plus.

This visit to the Lautarchiv and to several other archives across Europe set me thinking deeply about how my country refuses to view the aural as a treasure that is worthy of preservation and documentation. A museum is always assumed to be one that houses visual artifacts and objects and the human voice is seldom given the importance that it richly deserves, in India. I sent a couple of proposals from Berlin to the Government of India and the Culture Ministry, which I had been dealing with for a while, on the urgent need to have a National Sound Archive for India that fills this gap. I also narrated to them my experience in Europe and how we, in India, could benefit immensely from this collaboration. Like most governments, they gave me a patient and enthusiastic hearing. It is a different matter that inertia in regard to anything tangible let them procrastinate for months thereafter, making me more impatient. Upon my return from Berlin I finally decided to set up this Archive as a private trust after receiving a very generous corporate grant, and in the next year or so I hope to have this fully operational. But the seeds of this were certainly sown in Wiko and in Berlin; and if the first-ever Sound Archive of India does take shape, it will have only Wiko to thank! I utilized my time in Berlin also to create a structure for this proposed Archive, considering what all it would combine along with the aural treasures and how it would disseminate this information even while maintaining essential checks and balances. Most of the archivists in the various phonogram archives I travelled to during this time have promised me their support and collaboration when I get this going. That is a huge reassurance!

Another takeaway for me came by way of my own colloquium at Wiko. Unfortunate Fellows like me who were short-term were allotted a Thursday evening, instead of the hallowed Tuesday morning session. And thus on a Thursday in November I decided to present my work so far and some of the interim findings to my colleagues there. I had worked hard on this for a few weeks, as I was also aware that Indian music and culture would be alien to several people in Wiko. Those weeks of preparation for the colloquium, the actual talk itself and the Q&A that followed helped open several windows of my mind. Up to this time, I had always written to and spoken to audiences that were at least vaguely familiar with what I was dealing with. But talking about it to a group of extremely intelligent people who however were not familiar with the subject was such a challenge. Simplification without dumbing things down was paramount. The talk and the session thereafter was intellectually so stimulating that it may have changed forever the way I will write on these topics. Along with this, my long discussions with my neighbour Reinhard Strohm, who shared my passions in music, were an eye-opener, as they

helped open a new world of Western classical music and opera to me. And the osmosis worked the other way too, I guess, so that we were referencing the other's classical music system from our own frames, yet learning and appreciating the diversity that existed in another equally great form. Consequently, every time I have got down to write something on music, I have begun to ensure that I am making myself clear to everybody, not necessarily just people who are scholars in the subject or simply familiar with it. And I owe this clarity of thought and the opportunity to restructure it to Wiko alone.

In the course of my short stint there, I realized, much to my joy, that like the other Fellows, I too had discovered some "Secret projects"! In fact this should come as no surprise. The solitude, the peace and the chance that Wiko gives for introspection would propel any thinking mind into action. Those long, quiet walks in the Grunewald woods all by myself were a god-sent opportunity to implement a much-required deceleration in my life, my thoughts; to sit back, think and introspect. There were topics and subjects that I did not quite know I was interested in, and during these days of contemplation they seemed to interest me. But irrespective of what the topic was, the Library staff was always there to help and support. I was stunned beyond belief when books on topics ranging as far and wide from my original interest in gramophone recordings to the history of the revolutionaries of the Indian freedom struggle and the vexing problem of the Kashmiri Pandits, which had caught my fancy, would land so promptly within a matter of days of requesting them! The same desire in India would have meant such a lot of legwork and heartache. But for these "magicians" in the Library, nothing was difficult!

But it was not as if the stint at Wiko was all work and no play. The camaraderie extended beyond the realms of the projects. Kamran was the perennial host who loved to invite people home for lunches and dinners (where I would invariably end up as the official entertainment provider with my singing!) – not to forget his generous help in procuring for me Indian spices and masalas from the Turkish market and other places in Berlin. Alas, if only Indians and Pakistanis showed such character back home, the troubled Kashmir dispute would have become a thing of the past! In fact Kamran and Anne played such a vital role as representatives of the Fellows in ensuring that the batch remained a cohesive unit and we congregated on several occasions to celebrate this friendship. I was particularly moved when Kamran came up with such a brilliant idea to celebrate the Indian festival of lights, Diwali. The festival is one of the biggest in India and celebrated with great fanfare across the country. I had been feeling so melancholic and homesick on the day of Diwali because the thought of being away from all the lights,

fireworks and sweets back home was gnawing. But all this evanesced when during the Thursday dinner all the children presented sweets and candles to the Fellows and Kamran gave an elaborate speech on the mythological significance of the festival – something which probably even I had forgotten!

The three months at Berlin were a tad short to explore the beautiful historic city. But I guess I managed to do most of it and my partners in crime were people like Behrooz, Iruka, Kamran, Bahru and Tanja. Among us, we managed to see most of Berlin. The city during Christmas and the glorious snow was something ethereal and otherworldly!

Leaving Wiko was a nightmare – much more than the shock the first day gave. Three months slipped by so quickly and before I realized it “all my bags were packed, I was ready to go” and it was time to say goodbye. I was reminded of Richard Bach, who had said, “Don’t be dismayed at goodbyes, a farewell is necessary before you can meet again and meeting again, after moments or lifetimes, is certain for those who are friends.” The memories of the good time spent there, the quality work I managed to accomplish and the affection of the Fellows and staff compelled me to make another trip, just in time for the batch’s farewell. It was wonderful to relive all the memories of a time well spent. I was amazed to see people getting so emotional while bidding a farewell. In a short while we had all become almost like family and the fact that we wouldn’t be able to stop by during lunches and dinners and check out on what the other person was doing was quite unnerving. But the friendships forged at Wiko have been so deep as to last a lifetime for sure. Personally, Wiko has given me so much that I even find it difficult to articulate it and put it down in words. A home miles away from home that respects and facilitates intellectual activity would be any researcher’s dream and Wiko is just that and much more. Thank you Wiko for everything that you have done for me and I can’t but help fantasize about a time when I could return as a long-term Fellow!