



WRITING ABOUT STUDENT REVOLT  
IN ITS HEARTLAND  
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When I came to Wiko, I had one pre-eminent objective: to convert the massive primary data that I have collected over the years on the Ethiopian student movement into a book manuscript. Somewhat ambitiously, I was also entertaining a “secret” project of translating into Amharic (the main Ethiopian language) my earlier book about early twentieth-century intellectuals – *Pioneers of Change*. It did not take long, however, for this single-minded objective to be tempered by the many attractions – and distractions – of

Wiko and Berlin. In the end, though, having drafted about three-quarters of my projected manuscript, I go back with a sense of considerable accomplishment and immensely enriched by the rich academic and social life that I enjoyed throughout the year.

The pleasures of what, in correspondence with friends, I have come to call an Academic Paradise started with the evening of my arrival at the Villa Jaffé – the welcoming parcel that awaits every Fellow: the fruits, the eggs, the divine German bread, the gift-wrapped apricot marmalade, the yoghurt, the cheese, the chocolate, the wine, the juice, and above all the WATER. Even the one element that was missing in the spacious kitchen that I initially came to acquire – the vital pot to make Ethiopian espresso – was provided to me by Georges Khalil. That more or less set the tone for the solicitous care by the Wiko staff that was to be the most sustaining aspect of the fellowship. It would be capricious to single out individuals and units; everyone was so helpful and friendly. I will always recall in particular the cheerful disposition of our hard-working cleaning maid, Ellen Lehmann, and the library that made such a difference to my intellectual labours. Coming as I did from an impoverished academic environment, I would have been hard put to draft my introductory chapter, in particular, had it not been for the unlimited resources opened up for me by the Wiko library.

Somehow, before my coming, I had developed the notion that Grunewald, where Wiko was located, was way out on the outskirts of Berlin. Understandably, it did not take long before I realized that one could not think of a better location for an Institute of Advanced Study – partaking of the pleasures and solitude of Nature and only fifteen minutes away from the bustling city centre. As a city boy and a historian, and given the nature of my project, it was the city that almost inexorably attracted me more. Thus, to the surprise of not a few, I decided to buy a monthly bus ticket on the morrow of my arrival. That was what encouraged me to explore the other faces of Berlin within that same week by boarding our great companion, M19, and travelling to its terminus. The discovery of Kreuzberg and Bergmannstraße that day was to be my gate opener to the other faces of Berlin.

In the end, although I had not planned it, Berlin proved to be the best venue for writing the history of the student movement. It was here that, in 1967, German students sparked the worldwide student protests that came to their global climax in 1968. And it was a pleasant surprise for me to discover how much memories of those heady days are still alive, nay, in some ways celebrated. Rudi Dutschke, the impassioned leader of the German student movement, has been immortalized in a major avenue named after him

in Mitte district and in a small alley within the campus of Free University. I also had the chance to watch three documentaries related to that movement – the well-executed *Baader Meinhof Komplex* on DVD (with superb acting by Moritz Bleibtreu), the 2011 Berlin Festival documentary, *Wer wenn nicht wir*, tracing the prehistory of the Baader-Meinhof group, and the rather ponderous *Joschka und Herr Fischer*, a biographical documentary around the life and career of the leader of the Green Party, one of the by-products of the German student movement.

For the Ethiopian student movement, as well, Berlin, and particularly West Berlin, was the focal point for the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE), one of the two major external components of the movement, the other being its counterpart in North America (ESUNA). Because of the special privilege that Ethiopians enjoyed in the 1960s and 1970s to enter Germany without an entry visa, the country was a natural point of congregation. By virtue of its median location between Western and Eastern Europe, particularly in consideration of the large constituency that was represented by Ethiopian students in the Soviet Union, West Berlin became the venue for a number of the annual congresses. Particularly notable were the 11th in 1971, when the movement adopted the fateful resolution on the “national question”, and the 14th in 1971, when the movement split into the two factions that eliminated one another in the bloody struggle for hegemony that ensued in Ethiopia after the 1974 revolution.

My drafting of one chapter after another of my forthcoming book was punctuated by intense interaction with the members of the Ethiopian community, some of whom had been active participants of the movement in the early 1970s. That, as it turned out, we had found ourselves on opposing camps then did not impede smooth and cordial collective recollection. I took these interactions, which usually took place in the evenings with liberal dosage of wine and Ethiopian cuisine, as a sort of supplementary field research! They included visits to and, with my steadfast companion Yilma by my side, photographing of the venues of those two congresses – a youth hostel on Kluckstraße (1971) and an annex to the historic Olympic Stadium (1974). These contacts also helped in accessing the private collections of some of the veterans of the movement, which were augmented by dispatches from outside Germany by protagonists with whom I had managed to establish contact. I reciprocated by helping to usher in a lecture series on Ethiopian history, which I inaugurated with a talk on “The Adwa Victory and the Question of Ethiopia’s Access to the Sea”.

Life at Wiko has had so many facets that it would be difficult to do justice to them in such a short report. But the two institutions that stand out clearly are the Tuesday Colloquium and the Thursday Dinner. As the principal commitment that Fellows had entered into, each Fellow came fully and elaborately prepared for his presentation. My early feeling that two hours was perhaps too long for a seminar presentation and discussion was soon dispelled as time had to be budgeted to curtail the eager participation. As interesting as the presentations were the introductions. I do not know about earlier introductions, but this year's became mini-presentations in their own right, some of them with visual aids that even the principal presentations lacked. It is only fitting, therefore, that one of the events organized for the farewell party (*Abschiedsfest*) was a celebration of what had developed into a remarkable institution. I enjoyed and learned a lot from most of the presentations, particularly from those in evolutionary biology that I had initially dreaded. I believe my own presentation has helped many of the Fellows to appreciate the momentous significance of the student movement in recent Ethiopian history – significance that surpassed that of the more amply documented and hence more widely known ones of the West.

And then there was the Thursday dinner, which could be described as an informal equivalent of the Colloquium. There was an ongoing debate, probably not new, on the wisdom of the weekday lunch arrangement, some Fellows expressing a preference for dinner to avoid breaking their working rhythm. As lunch has always been my main meal, I personally had no problem with the arrangement. There could only be consensus on the Thursday dinner, when Fellows eagerly met again after some eighteen hours of separation. The informal exchanges that attended the dinner and the liberal supply of wine will remain one of the most enduring memories of Wiko.

My wife, Mesenbet, and daughter, Tsion, who visited me for two weeks in late April and early May, were able to savour the delights of the Thursday dinner twice. My son, Kaleb, who came over from Lyon during the Christmas holiday, was denied the culinary delights of Wiko. My brother, Tesfaye, who came over for a short visit and had to leave on a Thursday, had to be content with the sumptuous Wednesday buffet lunch instead. That was as far as my immediate family was concerned. But what Wiko gave me this year was yet another family, consisting not only of Fellows but also of their partners and the Wiko staff. Nothing expressed this closeness more starkly than the dread with which almost all anticipated the eventual and inevitable separation and the many tearful farewells that

attended it. This creation of a new layer of friendships and hopefully enduring academic relationships will remain one of the distinctive features of life at Wiko.

And, then, there was the winter! For someone like me coming from sub-Saharan Africa, it was bound to be a challenge. But the winter of 2010/11 exceeded all my expectations – with mountains of snow throughout December and the better part of January. I have even been telling people jocularly that I would include it in my future CV! Hence, the advent of spring was all the more welcome. The experience was particularly overwhelming in the resplendent Grunewald environment. So much so that I composed the following poem celebrating it and added it to the otherwise light-hearted recital prepared by the advanced German class for the *Abschiedsfest*. It is with that poem that I conclude my brief report, curious offspring of my long, if intermittent, engagement with the language of Goethe.

### *Frühling in Grunewald*

Ein Erlebnis ist Frühling  
Nach der Dunkelheit des Winter  
Dem frierend Schnee und dem glatten Boden  
Statt niedrig ist man heiter

Frühling ist ein Farbcocktail  
Das das blendend Weiss ersetzt  
Blühend Bäume und blühend Gärten  
Früh aufwachen und spät zu Bett

Im Frühling kommen alle draussen  
Winterschlafen sie nicht mehr  
Das Leben zu geniessen;  
Und nun entdeckt der Einsame  
Seine schwarze Genossen

Frühling ist ein Lebensanfang  
Für ein hübsches Vöglein  
Von Muttervogel genährt  
Mit Fleissigkeit nicht klein

Als Mutter hin und her kehrt  
Ein weissroter Vogel kommt  
Seine böse Absicht  
In seinem Glanz verschleiert

Weil der bezauberte Zuschauer  
Verwirrt und betäubt guckt  
Mit tödlicher Schnelligkeit  
Den Lebensanfänger schluckt