



THE JEWISH FASCINATION WITH ISLAM
AND MY FASCINATION WITH BERLIN
SUSANNAH HESCHEL

Susannah Heschel is the Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies at Dartmouth College, with appointments in the Jewish Studies Program, the Department of Religion, and the Women's and Gender Studies Program. Her primary research interests concern the history of Jewish-Christian relations in Germany during the 19th and 20th centuries, the history of biblical scholarship, and the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. She has also written on feminist theology. She is the author of *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (1998; translated as *Der jüdische Jesus und das Christentum*. 2001) and *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (2008). – Address: Department of Religion, Dartmouth College, 6036 Thornton Hall, Hanover, NH 03755-3592, USA.

E-mail: susannah.heschel@dartmouth.edu

When God created the Garden of Eden, surely the blueprint was the *Wissenschaftskolleg*.

A year at the Wiko is not only a year off from teaching and other academic responsibilities, nor is it simply a peaceful year to pursue research and writing (the seminars and lectures and concerts are too frequent and too tempting, and the Fellows are kept quite busy just keeping up with the Wiko program); it is rather a year of transformation, a transformation of mind and spirit. To be surrounded by brilliant colleagues pursuing fascinating research topics is tremendously stimulating, but what makes the Wiko unique is the gracious and generous staff. Being in their presence every day is a balm for the heart and soul: to enter the building each morning and receive a big smile from Vera Schulze-Seeger, that is paradise; to be with the gracious Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, the sophisticated Luca Giuliani, the witty Joachim Nettelbeck!

The Wiko felt like magic the day I arrived. It was a very hot Friday in late August, and I had traveled for nearly 20 hours with my two young daughters. We sat down, exhausted, for our first Shabbat dinner in our new lodgings, together with an old Berlin friend from my student days, and I opened the magnificent bottle of Saint-Émilion that was left as a gift from the Rektor. What a great wine! Magically, all the exhaustion disappeared, replaced by sheer bliss. It was a taste of what was to come – a daily exaltation that lasted all year.

For me, however, the Wiko has been even more than an extraordinary place: it has been a year that has changed my relationship to Germany and allowed me to reclaim important parts of my family heritage. As the daughter of a scholar refugee from Hitler's Europe, I grew up in two worlds. Physically, we lived on the Upper West Side of New York City. Emotionally and intellectually, we were living in pre-war Germany.

I grew up surrounded by the German-Jewish refugee scholars who were my parents' friends, hearing stories of the academic life of Berlin during the 1920s and 30s, when my father and his friends had been students, and my dream was to have been there with them. My father came to Berlin in 1927 from Warsaw, where he grew up as Jewish nobility, scion to a long line of famous rabbis, and remained in Germany until he was deported in 1938. Since my childhood, I loved to imagine myself as my father's fellow student in Berlin, joining him in his classes and at those evening events, wondering what my life would have been like had my father not been exiled. He would have remained in Germany, had Hitler not come to power, and, I imagined, become a professor at a Berlin university, and I would have grown up in Berlin, receiving the traditional German-Jewish *Bildung* I used to hear about from my parents' friends. After the war, my father would never return to Germany, and it became a forbidden place for me for a long time.

Trepidation: a year in Berlin seemed a violation of my family's history. Although I have spent time in Germany over the past decades, as a student learning German, then giving lectures, doing research in archives, and as the Buber Visiting Professor at the University of Frankfurt, coming to the Wiko was my first and lengthiest experience of academic life in Berlin. The scholars who peopled my childhood are now gone, but they remained vivid as I walked in the neighborhoods where they had lived and studied, and my emotions were intense: longing to return to those early years, rage that Germans had become Nazis. The corner of Erdener Straße and Wallotstraße was precisely the spot where German Jews were gathered and then marched to the Grunewald train station, for deportation to places of murder. Years ago, when I was a student, I met Fritz Teppich, a

journalist who had tried for years to place a memorial plaque at the Grunewald station, but failed when neighborhood residents protested. Change has come: now there is a major memorial in place and an annual commemoration service, when the train tracks are covered with white roses left by present-day Berliners.

My scholarship was also ready for a change. I had written a book on Abraham Geiger's efforts to overcome Christian theological anti-Judaism in the 19th century and another about pro-Nazi German Protestants who argued that Jesus was an "Aryan" who sought the destruction of Jews and Judaism (a goal they thought would be finally achieved by Hitler). Now, at last, I was now working on a positive topic: the modern Jewish fascination with Islam. From the 1830s to the 1930s, I discovered, German Jews shaped the field of Islamic Studies and modern Jewish thinkers and historians spoke of Islam in highly positive terms as a religion very similar to Judaism, sharing its strict monotheism, rejection of anthropomorphism, and emphasis on ethical law. This was not only a different kind of "orientalism", it also offers a new way of thinking about modern Judaism: not a Christianization, as is commonly held, but a more complex phenomenon. With trips to archives and the chance to locate obscure publications, thanks to the extraordinary Wiko library staff, my research uncovered vast and unexpected material and became a daily source of joy.

What I discovered at the Wiko that was an unexpected delight is that conversations I had not heard since childhood were alive and flourishing. The German Jews whom I had heard speaking of their teachers turned up in Wiko conversations. Long forgotten in America, I heard once again the names of Eugen Mittwoch, Ismar Elbogen, Guido Kisch, Max Dessoir, Lion Feuchtwanger, Martin Schreiner, Paul Kahle, and so many others.

But the people – this was the great delight of my year at the Wiko. So many colleagues I discovered in Berlin! Every day I met someone interesting! They came to join me for lunch or coffee or breakfast, and we had long and wonderful talks. Jewish Studies is flourishing in Germany, with remarkable scholars pursuing all sorts of fascinating research, and a new Jewish Studies program opened during the spring, a consortium of four universities. It was those many conversations that formed the backbone of my year and gave me the sense of being at home in Berlin.

Yes, I did write, and even if my book is not yet completed, it is conceptualized, organized, with a chunk of each chapter now in draft form. The opportunity at the Wiko to explain my topic on several occasions over the course of the year to colleagues from a vast range of fields helped me think through my arguments. I am grateful to friendships

forged, but also for the brief encounters over breakfast or lunch with some of the visitors and former Fellows and for the time with the Wiko staff.

The EUME program, run by the extraordinary Georges Khalil, was a highlight for me. Here I found a group of remarkable post-doctoral Fellows from around the world working on topics related to the Middle East and Islam. Their presentations at EUME seminars and conferences were a glimpse into a marvelous future: fabulous new areas of research and wonderfully original ways of thinking. The chance to spend time with the remarkable Angelika Neuwirth was the great treasure. The most important, interesting, innovative Qur'an scholar, she is also an admirer of the work of those German Jews I am studying, and listening to her analyze texts was revelatory.

Our group of Fellows was not at all like my colleagues at Dartmouth, where critical theory dominates the humanities. I heard nothing at the Wiko about queer temporality or feminist theory, but much about Wagner and Thomas Mann and classical works of literary scholarship. I loved our small Rilke reading group, which soon expanded to include Kafka's writings as well. Christa and Wolfgang Eßbach were with us for too short a time; I wish I could talk to them every day. Having Jeremy Adler at the Wiko opened my eyes to wonderful books – his own, on Goethe, and those by Dorothee Mücke and Elinor Shaffer, in particular. Hoda Barakat brought vivacity and immense charm, and I loved participating in the reading of her play, together with our wonderful music scholar, Hollis Taylor. Sepp Gumbrecht arrived and the air became electric up on the second floor of the Neubau, thanks to his energy and enthusiasm. Listening to Alfred Brendel play his piano in the neighboring apartment through my bedroom wall: this is heaven.

All of us were amazed to meet a scholar from Korea who specializes in Polish history, Jie-Hyun Lim, and I was all the more excited to discover that his comparative analyses of the politics of catastrophe memory included Israel – certainly no one in Jewish Studies can imagine comparing Israel and Korea – and his insights were wonderful. Hearing Philip Kitcher introduce a Fellow at the Tuesday colloquium was also a highlight – his enthusiasm and bounteous praise were matched by a big smile and his bright, shining eyes that remain a vivid memory. What I miss most, though, is hearing Mark Viney laugh at lunch and dinner!

Having the opportunity to spend months with Israel Yuval, a scholar whose work I have admired for years and whom I knew slightly but whose writings I cite constantly, was one of the greatest gifts anyone in my field could ever imagine. Our collaboration

with Clemens Leonhard in creating a Passover Seder was also memorable: imagine the privilege of having a Seder with two of the world's greatest experts on that liturgy!

Those of us with a partner and children loved the integration of our families in the life of the Wiko. The monthly Thursday dinners, with babysitters watching the children, were a huge treat. For my two daughters, ages 10 and 12, Berlin was a chance to learn some German and explore Europe. The amazing BVG made it possible for them to travel around the city by themselves, and out they went, to Alexanderplatz, Potsdamer Platz, Dahlem, and Mitte – exploring, meeting friends, going to movies. Such freedom is utterly impossible in the backward cities of America, where mothers and fathers are not parents, but chauffeurs.

But what should Jewish parents do when their daughter reaches the crucial age of 13 in Berlin? We initially thought we would postpone Gittel's Bat Mitzvah until we returned to the US – how could we hold such a celebration in the land of the Nazis? But the Wiko quickly changed our mood: celebrating our daughter's Bat Mitzvah was not a betrayal of the family history, but a reclamation of it. At Shabbat morning services in the one synagogue in Berlin that permits women's equal participation in the service, the glorious Oranienburger Straße synagogue in Mitte, our daughter chanted from the Torah, chanted the prophetic texts, led part of the service, and delivered three sermons – in Hebrew, English, and German. Our Wiko friends as well as friends from Germany, Israel, and the United States attended (warned by me in advance to arrive late and bring a book – the synagogue service lasts three very long hours!) and celebrated with us that sunny, very cold morning, and then danced with us to the music of a klezmer band at the Wiko that evening, possibly the first klezmer evening at the Wiko or even in Grunewald!

Ultimately, the Wiko transformed my experience of Berlin: the year became an opportunity to have my own taste of the German intellectual life that I had heard about in my childhood. I kept thinking about my parents' friends and how they would have experienced a year's fellowship at the Wiko, and decided that this was, indeed, precisely what those German Jewish scholars had tasted, remembered, and kept vivid, even in their exile. My research project was a resurrection of an important moment in German-Jewish history, tragically interrupted. Thanks largely to the vitality and generosity I experienced at the Wiko, my work came to feel not like a eulogy for a dead era of Jewish history, but a revivification of an extraordinary, precious chapter in German as well as Jewish intellectual creativity.

Yes, my year in paradise has come to an end. But I don't feel I have been expelled. Rather, as a rabbinic text states, it is not the rabbis, studying Torah, who are in paradise; it is paradise that is in the rabbis. Though I have departed Berlin, the Wiko is alive and flourishing within me.