



WHEN BOOKS TURN INTO PEOPLE
AND THE OTHER WAY AROUND
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I have deliberately postponed the writing of this account of my work and my life at Wiko. Like a moving crystal, the memories about it take a different, almost phantasm-like color every time, but a never-fading one. I remember having read the reports of previous Fellows at bedtime hours in my first days at Wiko. Months full of splendor were ahead of me. They were. And they passed like a dream. It is hard to write about them, especially from back home, when one feels hung in between worlds, trying to elucidate a whirling mixture in a part of a world where things seem stagnant.

It was a treasure year, the passing of which I have almost minutely archived, keeping a systematic diary for the first time in my life. Fleeting conversations in my wonderful walks with Jim Hunt in Grunewald Forest, bohemian instants with friends near Schlesisches Tor after an exhibition closure, charming oriental flavors shared with Claudio Lomnitz

and his wife Elena Climent in the Tadjik teahouse in Mitte, after-Dienstagskolloquium ruminations, dinners, German classes, delicate and enriching friendships – all had to be recorded and preserved as in a herbarium of rare items.

One of the striking things for me as a junior researcher at Wiko was the conversion of books into people, the *deus ex machina* of meeting somebody whom I had previously read and had been inspired by. Some of these encounters would happen as the result of the research project itself (Lorraine Daston), some along the way, thanks to generous intermediaries (Ann Laura Stoler), or because of the institute's own agenda (the meeting with Carlo Ginzburg). People would lead to other people or, sometimes, unseen coordinates of affinities would bring me closer to authors whom I have devoured for my previous book. Recognizing Nathalie Heinich, the sociologist of literature, at one of the workshops at Max Planck made me aware of academic Berlin as a sort of all-encompassing academic cyberspace of one's sequential longings. And, speaking of unusual junctures and virtual worlds, talking with Siegfried Zielinski on one of Wiko's terraces on the occasion of a workshop on mirrors seemed like one of Alice's adventures. Unusual things would thus unfold as in a sort of magic based on contamination or similarity, as for example Mauricio Sotelo's colloquium on spectral music after attending, a day before, Peter Galison's lecture on time and cosmological holography. A "natural" deployment of nuances of a gnawing topic unfolded along embodiments of ideas into people and places and the other way around. Being fascinated with the relations between arts, history, and technology with regards to the archives, I couldn't have been in a better place. The artsy thrills of media studies reconfigured my project in an existential way, and former friendly relationships transformed into collaborative ones through the organization of a workshop in Bucharest on interdisciplinary approaches to Secret Police archives.

I was enchanted by the pulsatile role of Wiko within a vibrant Berlin, which acquired the profile of a sophisticated character for me, spatializing the theories of "variantology" into which I was happily plunging. Finally finding my place and my group at the Max Planck seminars on archives resonated with dialogues on informal archives with Alice Bellagamba or Claudio Lomnitz. While trying to understand the intricacies of Cold War exchanges, I couldn't have found a better interlocutor than in the person of my neighbor and bike companion, Gábor Demszky, initiator of the Hungarian Samizdat in the '80s. Struggling over questionnaires and composing a critical narrative on values measurement, I got help from Bénédicte Zimmermann. The casual encounter with the former Fellow Sara Danius enriched my readings about "visibility". The lunch with

Carlo Ginzburg set me on a more optimistic detective's path in my own searches; the title he suggested for my future book launched me on a Borgesian adventure within which previous problems turned into nodal points. Ideas did not acquire just a face, but also substance and coherence, by weaving together emotional, personal, and conceptual threads. At the end of the year that my friend Elena characterized as being a "luxury cruise", a reverse phenomenon would happen: now people that I met and liked were doing the things that I was expecting, like in a generative grammar of intellectual currents. I almost knew Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's books before reading them.

Occurrences like these are rare. I've never been in an institution and a city where desires would fall into molds so easily, and on many levels. Friends that I made during the German class remained close buddies throughout the year and, I strongly believe, even afterwards. For any strange book requested, there was the miracle library. For the articles that I wrote I have easily found publications, thanks to generous and professional eyes that took the patience to look over them. For inarticulate questions I have found articulated suggestions. For eccentric wishes I could easily immerse myself in Berlin's offers, ranging from the Kino Arsenal to the Institute for Cultural Inquiry. For musical experiments there was Hollis Taylor and her husband, Jon Rose, with their barbed wire singing over Australian and any other personal deserts. For melancholia there was my balcony and the Grunewald lakes. For joyful cultural comparisons and mental recreation there were the German classes with the wonderful Eva and all the other classmates, together with whom we took delight in being students and reading stories again. Learning German through decoding Berlin or – even – a few academic texts proved an inspiring interlocking experience.

There are, however, many things I regret. They are associated with a desire to do too much and with an anxiety about happiness, specific to a place of unusual ease and promises. I hope that the afterlife of the Wiko experience will bring them to fulfillment, thanks to the invisible strings that attach people.