



WIKOLEAKS
GILLIAN BENTLEY

Gillian Bentley is a Professor of Biological Anthropology at Durham University in the UK. She obtained her undergraduate degree at the University of London and her M.A. and Ph.D. (1987) at the University of Chicago. She has been a postdoctoral researcher at Harvard University and Pennsylvania State University and a Royal Society University Research Fellow at Cambridge University and University College London. Her degrees are in Archaeology of the Ancient Near East, but she became more interested in human biology and particularly human reproductive ecology, which resulted in her retraining in this field through her postdocs. She has conducted fieldwork in Central Africa examining the effects of seasonal nutritional stress on reproductive hormone levels among a group of slash-and-burn horticulturalists in the Ituri Forest. Since 2001, she has been studying the effects of environmental change during childhood on reproductive function across the life course among migrant Bangladeshis in the UK. She publishes papers on her work in a range of anthropological, biological and clinical journals. – Address: Wolfson Research Institute for Health and Wellbeing, Durham University, Queen’s Campus, Thornaby, Stockton on Tees TS17 5BA, United Kingdom. E-mail: g.r.bentley@durham.ac.uk

I arrived at Wiko and the Villa Walther on a late summer’s day, having driven nine very long hours from the ferry port at Ijmuiden (Amsterdam), accompanied by a plaintive teenage daughter (who most definitely did not want to come to Berlin), a heavily laden car containing possessions adequate for ten and a half months, two stressed-out rabbits, an old, dying hamster (now buried in the garden at the Villa Walther), and a bucketful of live fish (all part of the negotiations to come to Berlin with said daughter). My first

exhausted thought: “I can’t believe we’re here!” was reinforced over the next few weeks by the many pleasant reminders of the extended welcome we would receive at Wiko – from the thoughtful food package in the kitchen that provided our first meal, to the designation of an apartment with chicken wire already around the balcony railings to accommodate the rabbits and prevent any potential bunny (or maybe even daughter) suicides from the fourth floor, to the ever-ready helpful advice from Vera and Funda in reception, the computer-ready, peaceful office that was to provide sanctuary during my stay and the excellent meals that provided constant sustenance. These and many other things are some of the memories that will endure of how much Wiko does to make its Fellows and families feel at home and valued.

Reflecting on the ten-plus months spent here, life at Wiko reminds me somewhat of what it was like being a graduate student in the US and living in an international dorm. True, our accommodations are singularly more up-market than those typical of graduate students, and many of us have children living with us at home, but the same sense of camaraderie and of communal life exists, from the sharing of food to the unlikely intellectual chats through chance encounters in the laundry room or over the garbage bins early in the morning. The same sense of time that characterizes graduate school is also pervasive (at least in the beginning). And, as I reflect on this, I can contemplate what I have gained from this extraordinary and privileged ten months at Wiko. I have had time to write, time to read, time to explore ideas and time to *think*. The value of the latter cannot be overestimated, as the current pressures of being an academic in the UK, by definition, almost preclude thinking time. Add to that the duties of a single mother and time is short indeed! I am going to try to carry with me some of these re-acquired, luxury tools and try to recreate a sense of time and space when I go back home, if at all possible!

Let me not forget the cultural aspects of life in an institution that is lucky enough to be in Berlin. First, I came to Germany unable even to count up to ten in Deutsch, but can happily say that I now have a working command of the German language thanks to our exceptional teachers, Ursula and Eva. I can never thank them enough for opening the door into a whole new language world, and I’m determined to find a course back home when I return so I can continue this journey. Second, of course, there is Berlin’s rich and complicated history that I have been at pains to explore in an attempt to understand that “banality of evil” that characterized the mid-twentieth century in Germany. I’m not sure how close I am to understanding, but I can say that I have learned a great deal more about this period of time through the various historical places I have visited and the books I

have read this year. Then there are the amazing museums that do things on a scale that boggles the mind (think *Pergamon* for starters), the art galleries, the music venues, the lovely Christmas Markets in December ... there is just one thing I have not done all year in Berlin (with some justification). I've resisted the infamous Berlin Currywurst!

On the academic side, my project at Wiko has been to write papers from a rich dataset that colleagues and I have accumulated from a study of Bangladeshi immigrants to the UK. We have been examining various aspects of their reproductive function and assessing how development in different environments in early life affects levels of hormones, rates of ovulation and patterns of reproductive ageing. We have been able to show that Bangladeshi women who grow up in the UK have very different reproductive profiles from their counterparts who grow up in Bangladesh: the former have an earlier puberty, higher levels of reproductive hormones, higher rates of ovulation and a later age at menopause. The environmental factors that contribute to this changing physiology are a lower exposure to infectious diseases in the UK and a better healthcare system. Our findings argue for the importance of nurture rather than nature during critical childhood years.

In terms of productivity, I've managed to complete 2.5 papers in the time that I have spent in Wiko, which is about 1.5 less than I had hoped. But I also carry with me the numerous other things that I have learned from my new colleagues and friends about music, classics, poetry, history, law and many other areas of life. Like other Fellows who have written before me, the 0.5 of a paper I began is something that I hadn't contemplated before sitting down to read and think in my wonderful Wiko office. It explores further the social and health implications of changes in stages of life history timing that appear to be affecting humans in many contemporary societies.

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I procrastinated about finishing this piece up until the last minute (we leave the day after tomorrow) in an effort to deny the inevitable. To finish the piece (Wiko requested that we hand it in prior to departure) is to acknowledge that our time is over, and who wants to acknowledge the end of something that we'd all like to hang on to! So to resist further procrastination, I came down to the Wannsee (which reminds me of Windermere in the English Lake District, and all on the doorstep of Berlin) to escape from packing and boxes, and to reflect some more in its beautiful and peaceful setting about the past ten months. My daughter, enriched and happy from her Berlin experience and also sad to leave, sent

me the following extract in a text Skype that was taken from J. M. Barrie: “Never say goodbye, because saying goodbye means going away and going away means forgetting” (Peter Pan). And, although not scholarly in nature, the quote seems extraordinarily apt for a place like Wiko, where most of us would like to stay forever if we could, and we will certainly never “forget”. We have been reminded by Wiko staff that “once a Fellow, always a Fellow”, so perhaps it is not really goodbye but more “auf Wiedersehen”.

But, sitting here by the Wannsee, contemplating the fabulous vista and enjoying the July sun, I’ve made up my mind. There’s a kiosk opposite, and ... yes, I’m going to do it, I’m definitely going to do it, and do it now! I’m going to walk over, use my newly acquired Deutsch ... I will order and eat my first (and possibly last) ever Currywurst before I leave ...



Die “Raider” Maus – attacking the remains of the Currywurst at the Wannsee (this really happened once I put down the left-overs)! I guess Berlin Mäuse like the local cuisine.