



## WIKO AS WORK/PLACE SONIA E. SULTAN

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### I. Workplace

Before arriving, I knew very little about the Wiko, except that it was an unusual institution in welcoming natural scientists as well as scholars in the humanities. I arrived expecting to find a staid group of academics, primarily older, Northern European men,

whom I would join for meals likely characterized by small talk and long pauses. To equip myself for these encounters, I bought a conservative but reasonably stylish suit. I will get an awful lot of work done, I reasoned, and perhaps the lunches and so on will not be so bad.

Of course, I could not have been more wrong. I found here simply the most interesting and diverse group of men and women I could have imagined. Our interactions were an unfailing source not just of intellectual excitement, but of delight. Through the Colloquia and the luxuriously drawn-out lunches and Thursday dinners, we came to know each other's areas of expertise and scholarly idiosyncrasies, until we formed a symbiosis that must have been equal parts serendipity and skilled Wiko planning. Thanks to the extraordinarily generous policy of fully including Fellow families in the life of the Kolleg, our community was enriched by the many partners (including my own, artist Kendall Baker), who added their interests and accomplishments to the mix, and by an assortment of children (including our 12-year-old daughter Jasmine). We argued and laughed in a babel of tongues, including my toddler-level Deutsch and some heavily accented English. We threw dinner parties; we gave each other advice about writing, and travel, and parenting; we offered and received encouragement and consolation; we danced to 80s pop music. We became, for that brief time, a family. The incomparable year flew by.

## II. Work

As an evolutionary biologist, I came to the Wiko to work on a scientific book, meant to synthesize recent findings about genetics and the role of the environment in individual development. Within the first few weeks, I faced the task of explaining this project, and the experiments in my lab that inspired it, in my Wiko colloquium talk. How could I make the biology compelling to my non-scientist peers, to scholars of history and political philosophy and art, to members of a brilliant string quartet? It certainly could not be a question of simplifying for this dauntingly sophisticated audience. I decided to present my research in terms of the broader questions it raises, questions that would be considered too "big" for a purely scientific investigation: Where is the boundary between the organism and its environment? What kind of information is inherited? What is it that evolves?

With the door opened to these fundamental questions, the book project took on a more conceptually adventurous shape, and one that extended beyond the safe confines of my discipline. If adaptation arises not as a fixed product of natural selection, but as a

dynamic interaction between the individual organism and its environment, how can we study evolution, and how can we understand it as a process? Two distinct (and distinctive) aspects of Wiko life made possible this deepening of my investigation. First was the luxurious opportunity for extended solitary work in quiet and privacy – with every need met by excellent library and IT teams, and with all of the problematic details of life sorted out by the indomitable support staff. The second key aspect of Wiko life was the stimulation afforded by the famous “interruptions” to this solitude: the Colloquia, evening talks, concerts, lunches, dinners, and hallway conversations that provided a daily influx of new and absolutely unfamiliar ways of looking at the world. Those interruptions were – in this company – luxury of an even rarer and more precious sort.

The combination of time to think and new ways of thinking has changed me more than I ever expected. And as it happens, I did get a lot done (despite the loss of nearly two months for family reasons, a situation which was met by compassion and flexibility). I researched and organized most of the book and wrote about half of it. I revised and published three papers co-authored by members of my lab group, and we have submitted three new articles. I also led a collaborative team in writing a hypothesis paper on epigenetics for a special feature in the journal *Evolution*. In May, I was deeply honored to present an evening seminar on “Nature and Nurture” during the meeting of the Wissenschaftskolleg board and to be introduced by Raine Daston, Director of the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and a Wiko Permanent Fellow. It was a wonderful challenge (and a great pleasure) to set my ideas in a broader history-of-biology frame through discussions with this erudite and insightful scholar.

The year’s experiences have confirmed my goal to keep reworking the way we think about organisms in relation to their environments. I now aim to do so in a broader context, in part through interactions with scholars who bring historical and philosophical perspectives to bear on genetics, development, and evolution. I look forward to cultivating such connections in my post-Wiko scholarly life. This resolution takes me (very happily) full circle, to the undergraduate studies that first inspired me to ask questions about ways of understanding the natural world.

### III. Place

Berlin was never very high on my list of world cities. I was reluctant to take on the dark history, to think about the branches of my family that had been annihilated in the war, to

confront whatever I would feel here in the shadow of that madness. The experiences that awaited those taken away in windowless train cars do not bear thinking about. But here, one must think of them. One drinks a beer at the pleasant “Floh” in two impossible-to-connect worlds, where the Hänsel-and-Gretel charm of the Grunewald S-Bahn station exists alongside Gleis 17.

During the initial weeks in our flat, in the old section of the Villa Walther, I had a repeated dream. There was some kind of presence, a sense of dread. Were these nightmares, I wondered, or was the villa actually haunted by the presence of the lost? So, I thought of them. I walked along leafy streets past the Grunewald mansions and stopped to read the stumbling blocks. I had long conversations with new German friends, and was astonished to find how they embraced a consciousness of past evil to create good. I came to appreciate and admire the way this history is kept alive and honored here, and to wish that my own country could lay its misdeeds on the table in a similar way. I saw my grandfather’s surname on a plaque to a dead actress and on the name of a Berlin shop, and I felt a connection to this place. I found a way to have a beer at the “Floh”, to breathe in the presence of both worlds. And that freed me to completely enjoy this welcoming, polymorphic, creative, and genuinely wonderful city.