



MY BERLIN EXPERIENCE  
OR IS THERE ROOM FOR A MOLECULAR  
BIOLOGIST AT THE WIKO?  
URSZULA HIBNER

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I left Warsaw, my home city, at the age of 17 to study Biology at York University in the UK, where I completed my Ph.D. thesis. I then moved to Bruce Alberts' lab at the University of California in San Francisco to do a post-doc on the fidelity of DNA replication in an elegant model of a bacteriophage, a bacterial virus. Back in Paris, I joined the Pasteur Institute, where I studied several topics in the general field of molecular and cellular infectiology and immunology. There I also married, acquired French nationality (a major event at the time for someone trying to go through life with an Eastern European passport) and had two daughters. I moved to Montpellier in 1993 to join a newly opened Institute of Molecular Genetics, where I started my own group on molecular aspects of cancer, focusing on liver cancer and one of its major etiological agents: the hepatitis C virus. Although I have a purely research position, I currently run an international Masters programme on Cancer Biology at Montpellier University. From 2005 to 2012, I acted as Scientific Officer in charge of cancer research at the CNRS; currently, I serve on scientific boards of several institutions, including the University of Montpellier and the International Institute of Molecular and Cellular Biology in Warsaw. – Address: IGMM CNRS UMR 5535, 1919 route de Mende, 34293 Montpellier Cedex 5, France. E-mail: [ula.hibner@igmm.cnrs.fr](mailto:ula.hibner@igmm.cnrs.fr)

I am an experimental scientist. Worse: I am a molecular and cellular biologist: I look at cells, manipulate them and try to understand how simple laws make up the wonderful complexity of a living organism.

My lab is the centre of my life. I have never willingly abandoned it for longer than a month or so ever since I started my Ph.D. thesis, quite a while ago. This is why, when my

friend and colleague Mike Hochberg came into my office one day and started telling me about Wiko, it took me some time to understand what he was talking about and then I laughed. How could I envisage a crazy project like this? Wasn't it bad enough to have to deal with all the meetings, panels, committees, teaching, administration – all the obligations that prevent me from actually actively doing science? How could I possibly leave my lab for so long? And, most importantly, what could an experimental biologist gain from and contribute to such an institution?

Mike looked at me with what seemed like a mixture of amusement and pity. Well, I thought, it is easy for him, he is an evolutionary biologist and mainly deals with theories, he can go away without the risk that his whole lab collapses in his absence. I told him that I would think about it, which indeed I did. To my surprise, once I really gave the idea some thought, I realised that not only I could do it, but in fact it would be exactly what I need to get a new perspective on projects and ideas that we are trying to come to grips with in my team. How often do I get an opportunity to concentrate on issues that excite me most right now, rather than struggling with themes that the latest call from a granting agency happened to have funded? How often does one spend time with so interesting a group of people, who also have time and inclination to discuss, argue, chat and joke about so many different subjects?

A year was clearly not possible, nor could I arrange to get rid of all obligations. However, my three and a half months at Wiko turned out just right. And my lab survived as well, in fact did not do badly at all in my absence ...

My stay at Wiko was a pure delight. First the month of November, interrupted by a Jacques Monod conference, a prestigious meeting organised by Mike Hochberg on the subject of Cancer Evolution, the theme of our Focus Group. This was a short period, just long enough to make me realise what the Wissenschaftskolleg had to offer. Then April to mid-June, when I really settled into my life at Wiko. It takes time before the opportunities and pleasures of a new lifestyle can be fully explored, not worrying about the usual tasks, obligations and deadlines, not worrying about the telephone ringing all the time and people running into your office with ever so urgent problems ... Two and a half months was just enough time to make my stay a great experience.

I found I had time to catch up with old friends and make new ones, explore the amazing city of Berlin and in general bask in the luxury of comfortable living and the always exciting and often amusing exchanges with the Fellows.

But did I actually do any interesting work at the Wissenschaftskolleg? In fact, even such a relatively short stay allowed me to explore new avenues and deepen my understanding of important issues in cancer biology. As part of a personal project, I worked on topics related to stem cell biology and the theory that cancer stem cells are the driving force of any tumour. I read widely on the related subject of cancer dormancy, the process that makes cancer cells particularly resistant to treatment and that is responsible for many cases of relapse. While both of these topics were relevant to the theme of our focus group, my main theme of research was at the very centre of our common preoccupations. Taking the example of infection by the hepatitis C virus, which constitutes a major worldwide epidemic that affects 170 million people and is a high risk factor for liver cancer, I elaborated an analysis of common evolutionary interests of a virus and a cancer cell, explaining the association of many infections with tumorigenesis. Coming back to France, I wrote a review on the subject to be published in *Contemporary Oncology* and prepared a new course that I already taught in an international Ph.D. curriculum and will teach this fall at the Montpellier University.

This work was greatly facilitated by the time I spent in Berlin, although I would probably have managed to do it anyway. What would not have happened without Wiko is the new angle of approach that guides my thoughts, hypotheses and projects in my lab. I believe the numerous formal and informal discussions and exchanges with colleagues interested in evolutionary biology will have a lasting impact on my future work.

The Wiko experience was both great fun and profitable. Did I manage to contribute something as well? It is hard for me to say. I certainly tried to convey the excitement, the beauty and the promise of science for the understanding of ourselves and of the world that surrounds us.

I am very proud to have been a Wiko Fellow and deeply grateful to all the staff and Fellows who were part of this unique experience.