



LABOUR IN GRUNEWALD
MAHUA SARKAR

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I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg in late August 2013 as a EURIAS Fellow with a few good intentions. First, and most importantly, I wanted to work on my on-going project on transnational contract work and circular migration involving “low-skilled” Bangladeshi

men. Second, I intended to begin work on two new projects that had been on my mind for some time now: on gestational surrogacy as a rapidly globalizing industry and the challenges it poses to the understanding of motherhood as the constituent other of paid work; and a study of intellectuals from the Indian subcontinent who spent decades working in the USSR as translators for Soviet publishing houses that specialised in the production of books in foreign languages. Third, I hoped to finish two papers based on my earlier work on inter-communal relationships in late colonial Bengal, with a particular focus on the experience of Muslim women, on the one hand, and the vexed relationship between history and memory, on the other. And finally, beyond all these academic projects, I hoped to learn about and from the work of my Co-Fellows coming from multifarious disciplinary backgrounds and academic contexts, further my elementary knowledge of German, enjoy the fantastic cultural life Berlin has to offer, reconnect with old friends – I had lived in Berlin before – and hopefully make a few new ones.

This was of course a rather ambitious agenda for a single academic year and I was appropriately sceptical. Looking back on this year that is slowly coming to an end, I am therefore amazed at just how many of these goals I was able to realize – undoubtedly thanks largely to the astounding institutional support that the Wissenschaftskolleg extends to its Fellows.

Where should I begin? The Fellow Services department – especially Corina Pertschi – was extremely helpful even before I arrived, making it easy to settle seamlessly into a routine. Eva von Kügelgen and her team of German instructors were tireless in their effort to help us “master” the language – sometimes against all hope! The IT team was formidably efficient. The staff members at the library were simply amazing; without their prompt and relentless assistance it would have been impossible to work simultaneously on multiple projects. The maintenance team at the Villa Walther was always at hand to address the myriad problems one expects in an old building. What is more, Florin Lobischer had imaginative solutions that transformed a spare room into a perfectly equipped study. At the *Empfang*, Vera Schulze-Seeger had solutions for every question I could dream up throughout the year. And in the restaurant Lena Mauer and her team were always cheerful and accommodating.

Intellectually, the sheer breadth of foci at the Wiko seemed a little bewildering at first. But over the course of the year, through the Tuesday Colloquia, but also rather more importantly over the many lunches and dinners, I learnt to appreciate the insights that arose from this meeting of scholars from widely disparate disciplinary backgrounds and

with very different substantive interests. The useful conversations I had with historians Cheikh Anta Babou and Yuri Slezkine – with whom I share interests in writing histories of difference and of life under Socialism, respectively – deserve special mention here. But there were others – Michele Loporcaro, Elena Arriero, Michael Hochberg, Simon Teuscher, Pippa Skotnes, Jocelyn Benoist, Hari Sridhar, Emmanuel Didier, Kasia Bieszczad, Ted Porter, Tamás Miklós, Shariar Mondanipour and William Mulligan to name a few – whose camaraderie made this stay at the Wiko both intellectually stimulating and socially pleasant.

This year in Berlin was also extremely useful in deepening my existing connections with other institutions, colleagues and friends in the city and beyond. The close and continuing intellectual engagements and friendship with Andreas Eckert, Jürgen Kocka and other scholars at re:work (*Arbeit und Lebenslauf in globalgeschichtlicher Perspektive*) at Humboldt University – an important locus for research on global labour history – were particularly significant for me in this regard. Another important source of sustenance was the Werkstatt der Kulturen in Neukölln – where Philippa Ebéné organizes superb world music concerts, exhibitions for a host of occasions including Black History Month and lectures by renowned public intellectuals such as Paul Gilroy, Gareth Young and Hakim Adi. It was a pleasure to visit this alternate intellectual/cultural universe, and I found myself heading for it on many occasions – sometimes with friends from the Wissenschaftskolleg and re:work.

Being in Berlin and the Wiko facilitated the forging of new connections as well: for instance with the Karl Polányi Centre for Global Social Studies at the Corvinus University Budapest and the Max-Planck-Institut für Bildungsforschung. And finally, the EURIAS conference hosted by the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies brought me in contact with a wide group of scholars from many other institutes for advanced studies in Europe.

Beyond work and professional activities, there was Berlin itself – a city I love – with its numerous musical venues, museums, exhibitions, movie theatres and events. I must confess that at first I really missed the bustle of Kreuzberg and Mitte. But as the months passed, I slowly came to appreciate the quiet sense of retreat on offer amidst the lakes and greenery of Grunewald. The discovery of Little Asia on Kantstraße, nearby, and the Bejte in Schöneberg – which József Böröcz, my partner, and I frequented with Wiko friends and colleagues – did much to facilitate this process of adjustment.

In sum then, this was indeed an extraordinary year that afforded invaluable time away from the busy-ness and routines of academic life in the US, space for reflection and intellectual growth and a remarkably conducive environment for work, marked by a mixture of solitude and camaraderie. And I want to thank the Wissenschaftskolleg, especially Rector Luca Giuliani, Thorsten Wilhelmy, Katharina Biegger and Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, as well as the EURIAS for making this year both possible and memorable.