



TWELVE REASONS I FAILED TO FINISH  
MY BOOK DURING MY WIKO STAY  
YURI SLEZKINE

---

Yuri Slezkine is Jane K. Sather Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. He graduated from Moscow State University in 1978 and received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin in 1989. His most recent book, *The Jewish Century* (2004), won the National Jewish Book Award; the Annual Book Prize of the American Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; and the Association of American Publishers Award for Best Scholarly Book in Religion. In 2008, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. – Address: Department of History, University of California at Berkeley, 3229 Dwinelle Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-2550, USA. E-mail: slezkine@berkeley.edu

## 12. Daily Lunches

The excellence of both the food and the conversation made it difficult to return to work before 2 p.m. Mint tea with dried mangoes helped reinvigorate flagging conversations without getting in the way of subsequent somnolence.

## 11. Ping-Pong Games

I did not play, but those who did barred the passageway between the dining room and the new building, slowing down my progress deskward and compelling me to watch Sonja slay her suitors, one at a time, over and over again.

## 10. Office Furniture

Let those who had couches in their offices speak for themselves. My cleverly articulated armchair offered a variety of reclining positions that helped translate unhurried post-prandial reflections into restorative naps of uncertain duration.

## 9. Monday Morning Melancholy

The July eviction-from-Paradise deadline aggravated this common condition by forcing one to wonder, at the beginning of each week, about the premature passing of the previous ones.

## 8. Tuesday Colloquia

I planned on skipping those that seemed too high-minded or natural-scientific, but ended up missing only one (because of a *force majeure* trip home). None of the speakers caused a scandal by publicly embarrassing themselves, but hope and curiosity kept bringing me back. The biology talks proved particularly instructive: re-educated in poststructuralist American academia, I had known that creationists were misguided and ill-intentioned, but no one had told me that humans were mammals subject to the demands and rewards of sexual selection.

## 7. Wednesday Salad Bars

The greater-than-average culinary variety and the ease with which one could maneuver one's way toward the liveliest table tended to minimize the advantages of a light schedule undisturbed by Tuesday Colloquia or Thursday Dinners.

## 6. Thursday Dinners

My particular favorite. The best parts were watching Lena's latest victim bang the gong; hoping to get a seat at the perfect table; playing with small children on the dining room steps; and drinking smuggled cognac out of a water glass as dinnertime clusters dispersed to form one unsteady circle. The more I drank, the more I smoked, and the more I drank and smoked, the more compelling and less coherent the front porch conversations became.

David Brown's greatest achievement would have been a sculpture representing Nina, Natasha, Ula, Eckart, and me smoking outside, with Laurenz standing a few feet away, fumbling for his cigars and promising more next Thursday.

#### 5. Friday Morning Pilates Classes

A tough, but effective remedy for hangover and an efficient way of strengthening one's "core muscles" while shortening one's workday. The pleasure of watching distinguished scholars and their spouses lying on their backs with their feet in the air diminishes over time and should not be regarded as the main reason for joining.

#### 4. Grunewald

On closer inspection, the area around the Wiko proved to be more than a ghostly resting place for gaudy villas and high-heeled old ladies with lap dogs. Some relief was provided by breathless nightingales, naked bathers, Russian gangsters, and Floh's herring with *Bratkartoffeln*, but nothing compares to the forest paths in all seasons. Villa Walther is halfway between the house on Nestorstraße where Nabokov wrote *The Gift* and the lake (not sure which one) where Godunov-Cherdyntsev's clothes were stolen. My favorite excuse for not working was a bike ride along the shore of Hundekehlesee, over to Grunewaldsee (the one with the *Hunde*), past the Hüttenweg-Koenigsallee intersection, down the straight fire trail to Krumme Lanke, on to Schlachtensee, and, after a glass of Hefeweizen at Fischerhütte and a penalty loop around the lake, back up Kronprinzessinnenweg toward the Rumänisches Kulturinstitut's welcome sign.

#### 3. Berlin

Not as cool as trendsetters would have one believe, but cool enough to seriously encroach on one's evenings and weekends. My own music tastes tend toward the puerile, so the Oper and the Philharmonie did not offer serious distractions, but all the parks, lakes, kabobs, beer gardens, and assorted acquaintances, old and new, made for later nights and less productive mornings. Frequent visits by friends who believe the trendsetters made late nights even later. Germany's performance in the month-long World Cup made sleepless nights a matter of gratitude and reciprocity.

## 2. Germany

Incomparably cooler than trendsetters would have one believe. This year's highlights included the Naumburg Cathedral, the Military History Museum in Dresden, and the whole of Thuringia, especially the falsely modest Mühlhausen, complete with the nearby Kyffhäuserdenkmal (a monument to both Friedrich Barbarossa and the late Kaiserreich) and the Bad Frankenhausen Panorama (a monument to both Thomas Müntzer and late socialism).

### 1. Wiko

I do not believe in giving credit where it is due and do not think that truth wins out in the end (or lies somewhere in the middle), but when it comes to laying waste to best-laid plans, nothing compares to the Wiko. They know that secret projects are more important than official ones, that conversations are more fruitful than articles, and that the only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it, if only for the pleasure of feeling guilty afterwards.