



EXPANDING HORIZONS SHERMIN DE SILVA

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I couldn't believe my good fortune when I learned I had been awarded the opportunity to spend six months in one of my favorite European capitals, with an eclectic mix of fellow academics no less! As a field biologist, I do not often have the opportunity to interact with those outside my specialty, let alone my discipline or beyond the sciences. Having been a philosophy major as well a biology undergraduate, I did miss my interactions with the humanities. But even so I could not have appreciated the broadening of perspective that these few months at Wiko would represent and the friendships that would result.

The fall of 2014 was characterized by the theme of novelty. Everything was new – my surroundings, the people, the routine. The first striking surprise was how much each of the disciplinary tribes had its own culture – a shared world view, to some extent, and a basis for communication. Crossing the threshold of our own preconceptions to be able to genuinely understand the perspective of someone studying literature, history, or law and being challenged to explain oneself in turn was something I savored. Every time such a conversation took off over lunch or dinner, I emerged exhilarated with what felt like a hundred new ideas (or at least, one or two good ones). I also began to truly appreciate how much of our world views are shaped by experiences other than those familiar to me as scientific fact. While biologists took certain facts for granted, they were by no means common ground. For instance, how risky was it for women to have children? The medical statistics might say one thing, our evolutionary history another, with our beliefs in addition no doubt shaped by national culture, law, and perhaps even literary fiction.

Another of the boundaries I was surprised to be able to cross at Wiko was age. I had not realized that I tended to spend most of my time among others in my own age cohort – a natural consequence of the academic hierarchy. One of the things I came to really treasure about the Wissenschaftskolleg was the feeling that one could speak freely with anyone about anything, and yes, challenge anyone about anything, irrespective of expertise or seniority. Likewise, I valued the opportunity to learn from my more experienced colleagues about their own personal and professional paths – the challenges already overcome, and the ones they foresaw. These resulted from repeated encounters with individuals I would not ordinarily ever have had the opportunity to meet, due to both the disciplinary and the age-based restrictions on professional social engagement we informally live with in our regular lives. It felt as though I was slowly connecting dots in my understanding – networks spanning continents, decades, and subjects.

The fall dissolved into the traditional festivities of German winter. The grayness of the sky was compensated by the holiday lights and markets. I recalled my first time in Germany, also at Christmas time, fourteen years ago. In that time the city had already changed so much, all the time growing stronger and more vibrant.

The new year, however, was heralded by some major global tragedies. First came the attack on Charlie Hebdo. As we all tried to understand what it signified for the French people and geopolitics at large, I was grateful to be among such a diverse group. Was the issue primarily one of free speech, or social and economic inequity? What did this event reveal about the relationship between media, politics, and society as well as the implicit

rules governing journalism within nations? How did each individual's own national history – or histories in cases like mine, being of dual nationality – and identity shape our interpretation of and reaction to the events? And then what of the other massacres going on in Africa, which seemed to be receiving far less media attention? The conversations that ensued were deeply personal, always sensitive, and sometimes difficult. Our views on faith, politics, national identity, and justice were all shot through with strong emotion. Many attended the rallies of solidarity held in Berlin alongside the rest of the world, though we did not share identical views. It was perhaps one of the deepest moments of learning in my life.

My time in Berlin was not spent only among the intellectuals of Wiko. There were dear friends of the family in the city. These moments and conversations, too, were added to my little collection of treasured memories. Here is where I could understand what everyday German life was like and what concerns preoccupied those outside the rarefied air of the ivory tower. There was the city itself and its own history to be explored – whether on a rambling walk with a posse of ladies from the Institute or playing host to visitors who had never been there before.

I discovered that Berlin is a city thirsty for culture – not only have I never lived in a place so bursting with distractions to satisfy every possible taste, I have never seen events *sold out* so quickly! Berliners seem to welcome all manner of arts with gleeful abandon, be they timeless classics or outlandish new experiments. As I am not one who is fond of crowds, I especially relished the small evening concerts we were treated to within the walls of the Institute itself. There is something especially moving about music being played with conviction in such an intimate setting.

Within the Institute, little clusters of common interest had emerged. Several of the biologists met on a semi-regular basis to discuss our ventures into science communication. Wiko seemed a fitting place for such a topic, given the number of its Fellows who had written books – indeed, the library services were close to miraculous! A small group also convened around the topic of women in science – informally, the Women In Science Tea. Though it was perhaps more aptly Women in Science Dessert, given the predilections of some of its members for delicious sweet treats. We gradually discovered, though, that our concerns were not restricted to those within the sciences – they were relevant throughout academia, and quite likely all professions. For me, an observer of behavior, it was particularly intriguing to observe the gender dynamics during colloquia and workshops as much as to listen to the content itself.

The staff of the Wiko were all absolutely brilliant in their roles, down to the housekeepers. It was as if a small battalion of genies were overseeing our every wish. Had there been lamps to rub, the effect could not have been more complete. I spilled crumbs on my table one day, and a small place mat mysteriously appeared the next. I suspected a fairy named Ellen. Vera and the lovely ladies at the reception somehow managed to efficiently dispatch solutions for every possible question and scenario put before them. The IT staff were always on hand to drop in and attend to any technical glitch, including rescuing ailing personal laptops. Dunia and her supreme kitchen staff carefully accommodated with good humor every conceivable permutation of dietary restriction imaginable. The administrative staff surely went above and beyond what was required to ensure that all of the formal requirements for entering, living in, and exiting Germany were met as painlessly as possible. Corina Pertschi was especially an angel in helping with visa and insurance concerns, in particular during some emergency travel I had to make. And of course, there was our fearless leader in the College for Life Sciences, Giovanni Frazzetto, who is the person responsible for initially persuading me (though I needed little persuasion) to accept the fellowship.