



WIKO: A CROSSROAD FOR INTELLECTUAL
INTERESTS
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It may come across as somewhat banal to say this, but I would say that the Wissenschaftskolleg was beyond doubt the best intellectual environment that I’ve ever had the pleasure to be in. For me the unique opportunity offered by the Wiko comes from being immersed in an environment where scholars from a diversity of fields can commingle for six to ten months. In my previous academic institutions, chances to interact with scholars from the

humanities and social sciences were practically nonexistent; thus, the Wiko offered a wholly new experience for me – an opportunity to be my full intellectual self.

While I have always appreciated my interactions with colleagues at my previous institutions, a large part of our discussions were limited to biology or science in general. As such, I haven't really engaged many of my colleagues in discussing interests outside of biology, such as poetry, mythology and folklore, art, and foreign languages and cultures. The Wiko offered the first intellectual environment where I could have discussions about poetry, Greek mythology, medieval bestiaries, music theory, cinema, drama, ancient Tibet, German literature, psychology, and human rights, in addition to the discussions about biology. With this connectivity (aided by the Wiko dinners ...) and access to scholars from other disciplines, I found myself suddenly in an environment where I could discuss all my intellectual interests and learn about new topics I had never really seriously considered prior to coming to the Wiko. So, I not only had the chance to explore all my existing non-science interests, but also to explore completely new topics. I should also add that even among the biologists I found myself encountering research topics well outside the concerns of my given field, such as the origin of biological organization, developmental trends and networks, and convergence in neural anatomy and cognitive ability.

However, I was selected as a Fellow not (primarily) for my interest in the humanities, but for my work in biology. In this regard, my time at the Wiko was also highly productive, as I was able to complete and submit two manuscripts and make considerable progress in completing a third (which now has a completed draft). Likewise, the Wiko provided an exceptional base from which to continue and start research projects at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin. At the museum, I continued working with collections to study mammalian limb anatomy to compare how whole limb and bone anatomical traits have co-evolved over time. Toward the end of my tenure at the Wiko, I learned that I had a DFG postdoctoral grant funded to continue my work at the Museum für Naturkunde. While of course I do not know for certain, I do have a strong suspicion that my admission to the Wiko only helped to improve the panel's rating of my grant proposal. Through my time at the Wiko, I was also able to integrate myself into the museum's academic community, prior to starting my postdoctoral project.

The other area in which I greatly benefited from my time at the Wiko was my interest in writing poetry. While not my original intent, I eventually mustered up enough courage to ask some of the literature scholars to look at my work, and they were generous enough to devote more than ample time to go over my writings. I got highly constructive and

encouraging feedback (with suggestions about different dimensions to add to my writing), and I had my first poetry reading to an audience of other Fellows, who gave me a thoroughly positive reception. Likewise, through my time in Berlin and through connections to the Wiko, I have also gotten an introduction to the English-language literary scene in Berlin.

It would be hard for me to make any critical points, but I will raise one very minor one that I know some of the other Fellows raised in conversation with me. Having lunch together at midday four days a week does create something of a disruption in the daily routines of some Fellows. In light of this, it might be a good idea for one day a week to replace the lunch with an afternoon tea or snack a bit later in the day that all Fellows should attend. To be fair, I'm sure even with such a change, there will still be some Fellows who cite this as an inconvenience.

From intellectual, professional, and artistic points of view, my time at the Wiko was extraordinary. The last thing I would like to say though is that, concerning more "practical" issues in my life – moving from Jena, finding a post-Wiko job, and finding and settling into a new apartment, the staff of the Wiko was both incredibly helpful and unbelievably patient. From the endlessly sought advice of Vera Schulze-Seeger on matters of apartment problems to the advice of Thorsten Wilhemy on finding a new position after my tenure at the Wiko ended, I truly appreciate the concern to make life at the Wiko as stress-free as possible. Throughout my stay, I had the sense that the staff of the Wiko was not leaving me to completely fend for myself. I should also mention that my time in the German classes offered by the Wiko immensely improved my German, both spoken and written, in spite of my having lived in Germany for the three previous years.

In short, I think being a Fellow at the Wissenschaftskolleg was the most incredible intellectual experience in my life, and one that I will always remember fondly from multiple perspectives.