



A DOUBLE INSIDER
AND AN OUTSIDER RECALL
DIANA MISHKOVA

Diana Mishkova is a Professor of Modern and Contemporary Balkan History. Between 1988 and 2005, she taught at Sofia University. Since 2000, she has been the director of the Center for Advanced Study in Sofia. She has published extensively on comparative Balkan history, the history of nationalism, intellectual history, and the methodology of comparative and transnational historical research. She has authored and coordinated many international interdisciplinary projects in the field of comparative European studies. Among other books, she has written *Domestication of Freedom: Modernity-Legitimacy in Serbia and Romania in the Nineteenth Century* (Sofia: Paradigma, 2001 in Bulgarian); edited *We, the People: Politics of National Peculiarity in Southeastern Europe* (Budapest et al.: CEU Press, 2009); co-edited *Entangled Histories of the Balkans: Transfers of Political Ideologies and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); *“Regimes of Historicity” in Southeastern and Northern Europe, 1890–1945: Discourses of Identity and Temporality* (London et al.: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014); and *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History* (New York: Berghahn Books, to be published 2016). – Address: Director, Centre for Advanced Study Sofia, 7 Stefan Karadja Str. / vh. 3, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria. E-mail: mishkova@cas.bg

I should right away plead lack of innocence: I’ve known and kept close connection to Wiko for more than a decade and a half. During this time it has come to mean many things, and an increasing lot, to me. I first encountered the “Wiko phenomenon” in 1999 as an A. W. Mellon Fellow – an at that time unique programme that, on the wings of the post-1989 optimism, aspired to open tantalizing new horizons by bringing East European scholars in contact with their Western peers. The programme does not exist anymore, the

optimism that underpinned it has long since waned and the tantalizing horizons have shifted direction (1989 *must* have been a successful revolution!). Throughout all those years Wiko has continued – unfalteringly and tenaciously defying the dominant currents towards the marketization and commodification of research – to uphold its original scholarly ethos of cultivating and diffusing the culture of intellectual freedom and veneration for uncommodifiable creativity. More than that: a few years after having helped Andrei Pleșu, a far more prominent Wiko Fellow than me, establish an Institute for Advanced Study in Romania, it ventured into backing my own exertions to create a similar institute in Sofia. Since our founding success in 2000, my work, pursuits and dreams for the future have been fatefully linked with Wiko.

Thus my retrospective of the three months I spent in Wiko during the fall of 2014 is one of a double insider. The study of a given society performed by persons who have been socialized in it or adopted it as their own, anthropologists tell us, entails emotional attachment to and moral responsibility towards the object of study that often bring about the loss of impartiality. For once I was up to making the best of my partiality and indulging in my double-insider syndrome. It was a special and privileged experience precisely because it fused rather different perceptions: those of a catered-for Fellow, of an administrator who continues to learn what it means to cater for Fellows and of a workmate to many of those responsible for running the institute and helping its two sister institutions in Southeastern Europe to survive.

If I were asked to single out what I deemed to be the main features responsible for making Wiko such a haven for scholars, I would answer: the full safety and protection it provides (those with a happy childhood would know what I'm talking about) and its proverbially good library services. There are numerous other memorable extras – the conversations with Co-Fellows (often kicking off with a joke, then suddenly turning terribly serious, to be lightened again by a stroke of self-irony), the entertaining and rewarding German classes, the anticipation of the Dienstagsskolloquium, the cultural temptations of Berlin, the contemplative serenity of the Grunewald forests ... But even the first two would have been enough to make me feel very lucky and grateful.

This time I came to Wiko with a book project that I had been carrying in my pocket for nearly five years – one that wants to reflect, from a conceptual historical perspective, on the academic constructions of the Balkans/Southeastern Europe as a historical region, on the meanings successive generations of intellectuals assigned to this regional concept and on the cultural-historical (“civilizational”) self-identification and self-positioning

associated with it. Thus conceived, my topic has drifted away from the material-morphological understanding of space and borders towards concentration on the premises of their social production and the ideological underpinnings of this production and on the various forms of interpretation and representation that it embodies. The conceptual historical perspective on this subject helps me lay bare the inherent and historically contingent ambiguities of the regional terminology we've been unreflectively using as a matter of course. Rather than objectified units with clear-cut lines between insiders and outsiders, regions thus emerge as flexible and historically changing frameworks for interpreting certain phenomena. What my three-month sojourn in Villa Walther made possible was to develop an important transnational dimension of my research, namely the connections between local constructions of (in this case, the Balkan) space and the foreign schools of area studies, mainly in Germany, France and the US, after the Second World War.

I am not going to describe here the other benefits from my double-insider syndrome. On a certain level, comparing the Centre for Advanced Study in Sofia with the *Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin* is a depressing exercise. But on another, more judicious level, it is hugely energizing, for there is so much one can learn from the way Wiko heeds its mission! I am genuinely incapable of paying individual tribute to all those who make it happen, for Wiko is, to my mind, much more than the sum of its staff members. It is a very special place where human dignity is meticulously tended and is celebrated on a daily basis. And also one made up of unique individuals for whom I cherish deep affection and respect.

I wish to quote my twenty-year-old son, Christian – an “outsider” and thus the complete opposite of my position – who studies musicology in Sofia and who came with me to Berlin with the ambition to learn German (which he did, actually, over the course of one academic year). When I told him what I was writing, he asked if he could join with a few sentences. Here is what he wrote:

I find it hard to think of Wiko as an institution. Wiko is the definition of transparent homecoming-ness. Anyone who has had the chance to be welcomed would gradually feel the fine and gentle way in which the Wiko crew embraces you in a soft warm cape of comfort. All of this in service of good brains. Because in Wiko brains are subject to service – this is why it is. And one might be surprised to find out that Fellows also develop a quiet sense of service to each other – whether through thoughtful listening, or a nonbinding and casual chat, or through a concert, such as maestro (Sir) András Schiff's performance da camera.

Of course, an artistic soul feels safe from harm in a place like this. It can open its wings and jump directly onto the second floor of the M19 bus (itself so punctual and carefully paced it might as well be a part of Wiko) on its way towards neighbourhoods still unexplored. Or merge with the crowd, in places like Kreuzberg – at the Kreuz of many cultures and at the Kreuz of Cold War Berlin. Wherever it goes, sooner or later, this creature looks back west towards its warm nest in Grunewald.

This forest, and particularly the region of Villa Walther, is home to a lot of species every year, species that, migrating through life, take refuge here among the quiet coasts of Herthasee and Koenigssee. This is how one could describe the area. It is truly an existential place – not only because, while we were there, at least one child was born and breathed its first months of clean air next door. I would call it a refuge in our world of business. Because it's not only a busy world, it is a world of business and business is its fabric – including in Berlin. But Grunewald is a refuge not only because there's someone else who takes care of the "business" of delivering books in less than 24 hours and delivering meals (well, in the other Villa) every day at noon. No, what makes it a refuge is that, whatever my business is, it gets stripped of its anxiety and of its crude features and is accepted anew, this time as a personal task.