



EVERYTHING HAS BEEN SAID BEFORE  
JAN PLAMPER

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1.

Everything about Wiko has been said before. That impression crystallizes the more year-book reports by past Fellows you read. There is, first, the structured unstructuredness of the place, which makes you go in directions you never intended to go. Directions that end up being more productive in the long run and that make you feel less guilty about the fact that you didn't get as far as you had planned with your main project over the short run of ten months. Then there is the multidisciplinary that forces everyone to explain themselves over meals to outsiders to their own fields. It ends up making even very tall scholars

two heads shorter. There are the meals that end up pushing scholars from vastly different fields to big meta-questions of why they do the things they do in the way they do them. There are the meals and the frequency of chance encounters with outside guests or with former and future Fellows. There are the meals – varied, light, modern, delicious. As little post-prandial regret as there is. There is the library, a privilege, I would maintain, only those who usually work with the unwashed masses of readers (and librarians) at *Stabi* can truly appreciate. No one brought up with a silver spoon at Widener, the Reg or the Bodleian will ever fathom just how lucky they are to have Sonja Grund and her team. There is the staff, unsurpassed in its intelligence, competence and structural normalcy that has become a luxury: it is perhaps the only staff in the controlled and benchmarked – for lack of a better term, neoliberal – academic world that doesn't seem chronically overworked. There is of course the fact that the year flies by and is over much too soon. And that many Fellows have tried chaining themselves to the radiator in their office to avoid the unavoidable – *alles hat ein Ende, nur ...* Everything about Wiko has been said before. Even that everything has been said before has been said before.

## 2.

Nothing has been said at all. Nothing has been said about my individual Wiko experience. For me, this year was, first, a year of sleeping at home. I hasten to explain that I commute between London, where I have been teaching since 2012, and Berlin-Charlottenburg, where I live with my family. As I rode my bicycle along Koenigsallee and then onto Wallotstraße where I descended on the slope, it was as if the city fell off me like some dead weight. Feeling the air brush up against my face on that initial slope on Wallotstraße meant entering into a new, lighter mindset – one about whose existence I had forgotten during two years of heavy teaching, commuting and my mother's protracted death from cancer. I spent long hours in my Wiko office on the top floor of Weiße Villa, a dream office with a balcony. I like to think I wasn't lazy (I keep repeating this to myself to feel better), but I certainly didn't get as far with my main project, a book-length history of fear among Russian soldiers in the First World War, a history of emotions, as I had planned. Why not? See section I above. Instead I wrote smaller texts for media outlets many mid-career historians like myself aspire to but find hard to get into: a book review of volume 1 of a Stalin biography in the *Times Literary Supplement* and one on a history of the Soviet Union in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. And smaller, entirely unanticipated pieces

that directly originated with Wiko: a *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* article on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the Germans' desire to be seen as victims, using a concept of transgenerational traumatic inheritance. This piece went back to a public talk arranged through the amazingly resourceful and proactive Katharina Wiedemann. I also did an interview for the *FAZ* with the art historian David Freedberg on his plans for the Warburg Institute in London – he was appointed as director while we were office neighbours in the Weiße Villa. Finally, a review for the *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte*. And I was TV-interviewed for almost an hour about the Stalin cult and the history of emotions by veteran documentary filmmaker (and Fassbinder comrade-in-arms) Alexander Kluge, an experience unlike any other – the polymath Kluge, whose face isn't shown and whose voice is heard off-camera, creates a tapestry of thinking-aloud, some of it wildly intelligent, some of it completely off the wall, and allows you to weave (or not weave) yourself into this tapestry. Rather than answering question after question, you get into a strange flow.

I also worked on my two secret projects, the secrecy of which was exposed – or so it felt – during week one when Thorsten Wilhelmy, paraphrasing Robert Musil's *Man Without Qualities* in his introduction to Wiko, said that the staff expected us to actually be more passionate about *Parallellaktionen* than the main project we had applied with. He also encouraged us (I like to think) to follow our passions. So I did, reading widely about the history of migration on the one hand and collecting blurbs, acknowledgments, author photographs in dustjackets, homepages by academics etc. For my first side project is a narrative history of post-1945 migration to Germany told through life stories of individuals and families who represent the major immigrant groups. It has a strong political bent, legitimizing an understanding of contemporary Germanness in which a particularist identity (e.g. a Turkish background) is welcome and can coexist with a universal civic identity of German nationhood, one that in Germany remains overly (for my taste) ethnonational (reducing e.g. German citizens of Turkish background to *Deutschtürken*, a word in which “German” is a mere adjectival prefix to the noun “Turk” – in the United States they would be “Turkish Americans”). Historical narratives are central in this consciousness-raising, *engagé* project. And they are sorely missing.

My second side project concerns little genres of scholarship, esp. humanities scholarship. Like Gérard Genette in his 1987 *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, I am interested in the edges of a book – the dedication, the footnote, the glue of the binding. Unlike Genette, a structuralist literary scholar, I am interested in the histories of these edges – when and

how did the first dedication expand to the length of a separate section of a book, the acknowledgment? I am also interested in issues of subjectivity and power. Take the acknowledgements of a book. They are a highly stylized and patently power-conscious genre – e.g. thanking “up” to colleagues more powerful than oneself. Or, consider a practice known as “the serpent’s kiss”, that is, *faux*-thanking one’s worst enemy so that he or she will not be considered as a reviewer since US scholarly journals, wary of “conflict of interest”, do not send out books for review to persons who appear in the acknowledgments. Yet acknowledgments are considered a site of unmediated, intimate subjectivity, so much so that they rarely get edited and that it often feels embarrassing to quote from them, even though they are just as much in the public domain as the rest of the book. Why is that?

Everything has been said before. Nothing has been said at all.