



CONNECTED HISTORIES: AL-ANDALUS
AND BERLIN
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1. Wissenschaftskolleg

The apartment handbook that waited for us on the shelf at Koenigsallee 20 included many evidently useful instructions, and a few enigmatic ones. Foremost among the latter was the one titled “lüften”, which the English translation made only slightly clearer. A couple of months later, when winter set in, along with the heating and condensation issues, we thought we understood this peculiar instruction. But it was only when we approached the end of our semester at Wiko that I grasped the profound meaning of “airing out”.

I came to Wiko after a few years in university administration, starved for research time. I was determined to make the most of the time given to me in what I had heard was a haven for scholars. My image of such a haven was similar to that of a cloister, where I could retreat to the library and read and write without distractions. I did read (a lot) and write (some), and the library, with its incredible staff, was indeed a haven, but the whole term was anything but a retreat. Leaving aside such significant matters as new friendships and the many cultural distractions offered and enjoyed, the seminars and conversations at Wiko worked like gusts of wind, “airing out” my research plan and making me rethink it drastically.

I had a plan that has been lingering in my computer to write an integrative history of philosophical thought in al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), which will bring together the input of Jews and Muslims (and also of Christians, to the extent that it was relevant). The circumstances in which thought in general, and philosophy in particular, developed in these communities are usually studied as separate questions: some contemporary scholars have attempted to present a coherent synthesis that includes in their mapping of Andalusian philosophy not only the Muslim, but also the Jewish and Christian philosophical output. And yet, most of these studies focus on one of the three communities and present the other two as background to, or as mere chapters in, the discussion of their main focus of interest. The purpose of the planned book was to offer an integrative approach to the history of Islamic philosophy in Spain.

My original plan was to arrange the book according to schools of thought and to present the material of each chapter around a couple of typical representatives of the school, a Jew and a Muslim. As long as I was discussing this plan with colleagues in my own field, focusing on schools made a lot of sense, as it corresponded to the received wisdom in the field. But none of my colleagues at Wiko was from my own field; they were usually not familiar with the names of either the schools or the thinkers, and they could thus bring a fresh approach to the discussion. They often asked unexpected questions about my work, and the way they approached their own work also challenged me to approach my work from new perspectives. From these conversations it became obvious that the neat arrangement I had planned was not only simple but also simplistic, as it ignored (and at the same time obliterated) the meandering, sometimes furtive ways in which ideas spread. On the one hand, it promised to zoom in on small excerpts of intellectual history, but failed to address broader issues of the history of ideas. On the other hand, a sharper picture of al-Andalus’s intellectual mosaics requires the assembly of small building blocks, smaller than individual thinkers treated as monolithic units.

As I ended my term at Wiko, it was thus clear that the new book plan would address more levels of the intellectual exchange in al-Andalus than I had been willing to contemplate before. One example among many is the absence in al-Andalus of the Mu'tazila, a school of dialectical theology that was prominent among Jews and Muslims in the Orient. In previous studies I had been able to show that by reading Jewish and Muslim sources together we can actually highlight this absence and offer an explanation for it. But my Wiko colleagues pushed further still, asking to know what in al-Andalus filled the role of the Mu'tazila in the Orient, and why. This forced me to bring Aristotelian and Neo-Platonist philosophy already into the discussion of the Mu'tazila. As I was doing so, the neat couples of a Jewish and a Muslim thinker broke up into different aspects of the thought of each one of these thinkers, exposing the complexity of al-Andalus's intellectual and religious puzzle.

2. Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin

This was not my first visit to Germany or Berlin; I had come here often before, but always for short visits. On each such visit I found myself assailed by too many thoughts and emotions, only part of which I could share with my German hosts. Short visits were therefore all I could handle.

In this regard, Grunewald did not bode well: the small number of *Stolpersteine* in this neighborhood does not reflect the hosts of ghosts that fill the streets, ghosts that seemed to accompany me from Wallotstraße to the Grunewald station and back. For the first two weeks, I found it hard to push the Kaddish (the Jewish mourning prayer) out of my head; I found it hard to breathe, let alone to think.

I expected of course to find Wiko sensitive to the past. What I did not expect was the extent of sharing of my emotions that I found at Wiko; not just "sensitivity" to the pains and emotions of others, but genuine sharing of the pains and emotions we carry, the agonized burden of the past and the anxious concerns for the future. It is this feeling of sharing that made it possible for me to breathe in Berlin. The mission of Wiko as an institute includes, in one way or another, confronting the past; but it is the individual people at Wiko who turn the institute's humanistic mission into a warm, personal, human experience.