



LEBENS-ANSICHTEN DES KATERS HUXLEY
NEBST FRAGMENTARISCHER BIOGRAPHIE
DES FELLOWS MICHAEL GORDIN IN
ZUFÄLLIGEN MAKULATURBLÄTTERN
(WITH APOLOGIES TO E. T. A. HOFFMANN)
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I, Huxley, am not the most extraordinary cat. Like every cat, I am literate and bilingual – all cats know German; the only question is what their other language is – although the vast majority do not put paw to keyboard, preferring instead the elegant charm of quill on parchment. I live in a delightful villa with lots of windows that Human 1 and Human 2 moved me into with my sister Wilber (the less said about her the better), and I spend most of my days sleeping, eating, thinking about eating, thinking about sleeping, and watching birds and the occasional squirrel flitting around the trees surrounding our domicile. This is fine as far as it goes, but I do have a hankering to compose my autobiography. The problem is that neither Human 1 nor Human 2 left any paper sitting around for me to use. This past week, however, Human 2 has been writing a report about his year at someplace called “the Wissenschaftskolleg” – or maybe the place is named

“Wiko”, since he talks about that place too – and in an unguarded moment he left a stack of this ostensible report lying about. I’d prefer to have my own pristine paper, but I remain unfamiliar with the M19 and thus cannot obtain my own. The backs of these pages are the canvas upon which I will paint my saga, since the Wi-Fi connection here is quite reliable and the printers well supplied with toner. Or, rather, I’ll use the fronts of the papers; Human 2’s jottings should now rightly be described as the “backs”. I have not bothered to keep them in any sort of order, as you really don’t need to read them. Stick to the fronts.

I will begin, as countless other writers have taught us one should, at the beginning. The beginning was extremely loud.

people say about the library at Wiko is true. Aside from the pleasantness of the main room as a workspace, the holdings are fascinating and idiosyncratic (in the best sense). I used the actual Wiko library to probe through classic novels. The library kindly purchased a Czech-English dictionary for their permanent collection and then allowed me to keep it in my office on long-term loan. (They reasoned, Who else would need it? As it happened, the Prague network traced by Einstein was so German-centric that – aside from isolated forays into specific secondary literature – the dictionary was less useful than I had anticipated.) Used bookstores played their part as well. Following a stray recommendation by Thorsten Wilhelmy that I might want to read the novels of the Prague-born author Leo Perutz, his yellow-bound volumes became an obsession and a leitmotif of my Grunewald year.

But the real treasure at Wiko isn’t the library: it’s the librarians. I will gladly concede that my requests weren’t always predictable or easy to obtain, but time and again the librarians went well beyond the call of duty (or reason) in attempting to locate whatever I had asked for. There’s Soviet historiography easily obtainable from former GDR collections; then the massive German- and English-language Einstein literature, available in Berlin in copious quantities; then the archival documents from Prague, Graz, and Jerusalem that the library team managed to track down. Often I would show up in the office in the morning and submit some requests. Or I would submit them in the middle of the night, on the weekend – I submitted a lot of requests. Many days I would return from lunch and encounter the happy e-mail announcing that books were waiting for me in the Weiße Villa, books I had only become aware of hours earlier. They were waiting for me, but not half as much as I was waiting for them. As with many Fellows, I

leave the Grunewald with more PDFs than I had imagined existed, let alone were obtainable with a smile.

The White Villa contains its own set of mysteries, naturally, and I specifically recall one

I only in retrospect came to realize that the noise was temporary, but my goodness there was a lot of it! Back in the Ancestral Home, Human 1 and Human 2 tricked us with tasty food pellets, seized our necks using Vulcan death grips, attached vests and leashes to us, and confined us in prison-boxes – well, tricked *me*; my sister is beyond gullible and would have fallen for it without the added subterfuge. Then, we moved a bunch of times. First we moved to a bumpy small room that smelled a lot like petrol. Then we moved to a noisy, cavernous place with beeping and announcements and lots of people lugging around lots of wheeled prisons. (Most of these seemed to contain clothing, a bizarre affectation of humans; a rare few held similarly imprisoned cats or absurd non-cat entities.) Then we moved to a bumpy noisy tubular apartment, which experienced bizarre and unexplained pressure changes. I really did not care for this new residence and voiced my concerns quite forcefully. Then, we moved to another bumpy petrol home. I don't think that lasted long, but I am not sure as I fell asleep and lost track of time. Finally, we ended up here. I believed this to be the final move, as the Humans seemed relieved to arrive at this residence.

Once I generously overcame my justified resentment at this coerced and inexplicable treatment, I could see why they were pleased. It is spacious. There is light. (Birds and squirrels I already mentioned, but later one saw swans, and also mini-swans. A swan is a kind of water vehicle that looks like a bird.) The place is immaculate, and had lots of areas to sit and do the thing that the Humans call “work” – mostly reading and typing and talking about ideas, which seems a lot more fun than my understanding of the usual usage of the English term. And there are lots of people around: coming up and down the stairs, laughing and chatting beyond the door into the Infinite Beyond, sometimes coming in and chatting and eating with the Humans substances that are not as aromatic as tasty food pellets. Initially it seemed, in short, like a vacation, but it has become a vacation with a regular structure, as I would learn.

unexpected conversations. That was the realization that slowly settled in during the first few months: that Wiko was designed to put you in the way of discussions and encounters you wouldn't have planned on. Of course, not every conversation produced a new perspective on a puzzle that had tormented me in the confines of my Neubau office, but an amazing proportion did. Those tended to come in two variants. The first set were the random exchanges that come from being in close proximity to lots of intelligent people – this aspect of Wiko is deliberate and surprisingly effective. The second set were consequences of the Tuesday colloquia, which often sparked the most animated and unusual lunchtime discussions immediately afterward.

I came to Wiko seeking those kinds of conversations, even if their specific content was unexpected. What I hadn't anticipated was my extensive academic travel around Germany. A few months before I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had published a history of the dynamics of language choice in the natural sciences, beginning with Latin and ending with English. Most of the book, though, covered the way in which Russian and especially German functioned and then declined as vehicles of scientific communication. As a result of this, I found myself in Essen, Mannheim, Hannover, Greifswald, Frankfurt, Gießen, Leipzig, and across town in Berlin, speaking to German academics from a variety of disciplines about language choice and use. All this happened, to my surprise and delight, in German. (The language courses sponsored by Wiko were a true gem.) Both in and out of Berlin, the year became – pleasantly – much more German than former Fellows had led me to anticipate.

The German-centric quality extended into politics, of course, especially after the rise of

Some events in life are predictable. Human 2 is usually not home for the midday food-consumption activity. He has to go to Wiko for that, which is confusing, since apparently my apartment (benevolently shared with my sister and the Humans) is also Wiko, and he surely isn't leaving the apartment to come to the apartment. Then again, logic has never been his strong suit. Sometimes both Humans leave, and some other person (called "a Fellow") comes by and provides the all-important daily food tribute to me (and as an afterthought also to my sister). The Humans regularly take such trips within a place called Europe, which surrounds our building. It sounds nice.

The most important regularity – and I mention it only as a warning to all future cats who might move here – is that once a week a person comes and unleashes tremendous ruckus and violence in order to render the apartment “clean”. Like clockwork, she is. Other people come and go keeping the building (for the Humans mentioned that this apartment was indeed stacked among a bunch of other ones, with identical furniture arranged in slightly different configurations) functioning. That is the surprising thing: not that things go wrong, because that is the nature of entropy, but that these malfunctions at “Wiko” are so quickly put back in the normal order of things. Cats, with their exquisite command of the German language, appreciate order.

And that is why I never plan to move again. I’m certain I’m going to be here at this Wiko forever, enjoying the life to which I have become accustomed.

begin at the beginning, with the research project that brought me to the Wissenschaftskolleg. I arrived with an idea and a resolution. The idea was to explore the three semesters that Albert Einstein spent at the German University in Prague, from April 1911 to the summer of 1912. Considering that Einstein was not only the most famous scientist of the modern era but also the best-documented, it surprised me that this specific moment – his first full professorship, sandwiched between the enormous success of his development of the special theory of relativity and of early quantum theory, and the world fame he would reach in 1919 as a consequence of his gravitational theory, known as general relativity – was almost universally treated in the scholarship as little more than an “intermezzo” during the “Swiss period” before his 1914 move to Berlin. Then again, one reason why some topics don’t show up in the literature is that they are not, in the end, terribly interesting. I had, however, a series of tantalizing leads that suggested otherwise, stories drawn from the overlap of Albert Einstein and the city of Prague in that year: the long-term ramifications of the split of the university along linguistic lines in 1882; the emergent community of Jewish Germanophone literary figures, such as Max Brod (Franz Kafka did not yet register during Einstein’s Bohemian moment); the rise of Prague Zionism; debates over the philosophy of science among disciples of Franz Brentano, logical positivists, and dialectical materialists; and so on. When I came to Wiko, I had the starting points of several stories, but no idea whether they would cohere as a book or instead become a series of related, but ultimately separate, articles.

That's where the resolution came in: I would not write anything during my year in Berlin. My colleagues and friends thought I would not be able to adhere to this constraint, but – aside from a few book reviews – I did. This proved to be the best part of the year, intellectually speaking. I read, broke for lunch with the Fellows, and read some more. And the more I read,