



BERLIN WITH CHILDREN  
MARIA MAVROUDI

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Maria Mavroudi was born in Thessaloniki, Greece and studied Philology at the University of her native city before earning a Ph.D. in Byzantine studies at Harvard. Her scholarly work began by focusing on a tenth-century Byzantine book on dream interpretation that had been widely received in Latin and the European vernaculars and counted as *the* Christian dreambook of the Middle Ages. While generally viewed as a Byzantine invention partly based on the second-century manual of Artemidorus, she showed that it was a Christian adaptation of Arabic Islamic material and one among a larger group of texts originally written in Arabic or Persian and received into Greek between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries. During the next two decades, she worked on identifying the place of these translations within Byzantine literary culture and its reception in “East” and “West” during the medieval and early modern period. This begs reconsidering the position of the ancient Greek classics within the Byzantine, Arabic, and Latin intellectual traditions, as well as the supposed marginality of Byzantium within a broader medieval intellectual universe. Her work was recognized with a MacArthur Fellowship in 2002. Mavroudi is Professor of Byzantine History and Classics at the University of California, Berkeley. – Address: Department of History, University of California, Berkeley, 3229 Dwinelle Hall, Berkeley, CA 94720-2550, USA. E-mail: [mavroudi@berkeley.edu](mailto:mavroudi@berkeley.edu).

Planning the Wiko year as it lay ahead in the future, and experiencing it when it came to pass, were dominated by a single thought articulated in two ways: how do I best use the privilege and freedom of this year (glass half full); and how do I work best around my constraints (glass half empty). The constraints were three: the yearning to finish a book

begun long ago; the obligation to send off a series of half-done articles already promised to colleagues and friends; the need to work on a schedule dictated by the existence of a four-year-old who would have to begin attending day care without knowing German and cope with her father's frequent absences to the US.

The book progressed, six articles were finished, four conference papers were presented. Banal but true, only a fraction of this would have been possible without the time, resources, and intellectual company afforded by Wiko. Yet, if I were asked which single word would best describe the entire year's overarching sentiment, it would not be satisfaction on account of this headway, but gratitude for the riches, both literal and metaphorical, extended by the Wiko staff and the other Fellows. Gratitude generates a desire to give back, and therefore a need to identify something useful or desirable as an appropriate gift. What could I offer that Wiko may want? A recurring theme in discussions with Luca Giuliani, Thorsten Wilhelm, and Daniel Schönflug came to mind: the effort for gender balance in the selection of Fellows, complicated by the fact that, when invited, more women than men declined, mostly out of family considerations. Consistently with this pattern, around the time of the Rector's solicitation for a final report, I received a phone call from a colleague in the US. She had just received an invitation from Wiko and hesitated to accept it, partly out of concern for the rest of her family. Since she knew that I, like her, had a husband and young child, she wanted to know what I had done with them during my Wiko year, and what my day-to-day experience had been like. Did a family sabbatical year in Berlin create more practical problems than it solved, which then affected one's ability to be productive? Most women in academia readily discuss such issues in a private environment of trust but hesitate to do so publicly, fearing (sometimes with good reason) that this may affect their image as professionals. I reckoned that a candid answer to this question addressed a recurring need at Wiko and therefore that including it in sufficient detail in my publicly accessible report would be the best gift within my power.

The day-to-day practicalities: It is easy to bring children to Wiko because its unimaginably competent staff sincerely cares about the wellbeing of your family. They will recommend optimal day cares and schools and will secure your children's enrollment. The pre-school is literally five minutes on foot from where you will live and work. At the beginning, the children will go through adjustments that feel rough (new language, new curriculum, new friends). By November or December at the very latest everything will have fallen into place. Based on the testimony of Fellows from several years ago, if the children are old enough they will thank you for widening their horizons and congratulate

themselves for carrying off the experience. This feeling of achievement (for both parents and children) lasts a lifetime. In addition, you will receive the gift of a weekly date with your companion: every Thursday evening, Wiko secures a team of wonderful and dedicated babysitters for the children, who eat and play in a spacious attic full of toys, games, and books. Children fondly anticipate this “Wiko party” during the rest of the week. While it is taking place, adults have dinner and uninterrupted (!!!) conversation in the building across the street. Bringing a car or buying a used one locally is advisable (this statement comes from a Californian and may be construed as very un-German but, to state the obvious, a car gives you freedom and saves precious time and energy spent on grocery shopping or errands related to your children’s school). Habits and tricks you developed at home to prolong the working day (e.g. waking up between four and six in the morning to have a quiet time before anyone else wakes up, or letting your pre-school children watch hours of video so you can meet a deadline) continue to apply in Berlin – but this is no different than what you are already experiencing at home. Tip: allow video exclusively in German (or whichever language your child is trying to learn). It does miracles for language progress and eases the guilt of abandoning your offspring in front of a screen because you can think of it as a productive activity.

The weekends: as is well known, whether in Berlin or at home, it is not possible to get much writing done. But in Berlin the possibilities for new adventures while you are not working or even as you are trying to work multiply. You can bring your children to the zoo and try to read a book while they are watching the animals (I have seen another Fellow do this with success, but much depends on the age and disposition of your children). Or you can give up on concrete tasks and allow your spirit to grow as you are enjoying the things you like with your children. We came from young California to old Berlin with a four-year-old fond of fairy tales. She found the abundance of architecture and art older than the twentieth century new and delightful. The Pergamon Museum with its statues was the castle of Sleeping Beauty. The flights of stairs that lead from Sanssouci park to the palace was the very site where Cinderella lost her slipper. The commemoration of Luise of Mecklenburg in Schloss Charlottenburg made an impression, so we added her compelling story to our repertoire of fairy tales: a kind and beautiful princess orphaned at a young age married her loving prince and became the mother of several children and a magnanimous and courageous queen. While pregnant, she traveled to meet the conquering monster Napoleon and secure better treatment for her beloved country. She died young, leaving behind an inconsolable family and people – what a plot!

Then there was the rest of Germany and Europe to discover or rediscover. During the very cold months in Berlin we decided to spend as many weekends away as possible. As a rule, to protect work time, we would leave on Friday evening or Saturday morning, back by Sunday night, but longer trips were also possible during school and Wiko holidays. In unexpected ways, these trips worked less as a distraction and more as an avenue through which to gain scholarly insight: I am a Byzantinist. Like other fields organized within Western academia, Byzantine Studies as a modern discipline were born in Germany towards the end of the nineteenth century. They were conceived as ancillary to the study of Graeco-Roman antiquity and the Latin Middle Ages, which were deemed more directly ancestral to the modern Western world. As a result, the methodologies, concepts, and evaluations prevalent in Byzantine Studies in the late nineteenth and most of the twentieth century were heavily influenced by European political, social, and intellectual trends of the same time. Traveling around Germany and Europe and witnessing the imprint of these trends in urban planning, architecture, museums, and other sites of public memory was eye-opening.

Much clicked together during visits to a series of famous medieval castles with important afterlives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Mother of All was, of course, Wartburg Castle, a site closely associated with several important events and figures in German cultural and political life from the twelfth into the twentieth century. Today's visitor encounters it in the form it took after its extensive reconstruction from the 1830s to the 1880s. This means that it reflects nineteenth-century attitudes towards the Middle Ages and their instrumental role in weaving together romantic nationalism. Similar trends are visible in two famous Bavarian castles, Hohenschwangau (renovations of which began around the same time as at Wartburg) and Neuschwanstein (which used the other two as an explicit source of inspiration). Germany's academic pre-eminence in the late nineteenth century meant that its cultural peripheries absorbed many of its attitudes towards national patrimony. Accordingly, in the early twentieth century, the Wawel complex in Krakow and the Prague castle were reinvented in ways that clearly remind the visitor of the earlier German examples.

For much of the nineteenth and twentieth century, my native Greece also came under the cultural and academic influence of Germany, although the staging of Byzantium (the Greek Middle Ages) and its architectural remains as modern national patrimony took a decisively different turn there. This begged reflecting about why. An obvious answer is the primacy conceded to the ancient Greek past under the influence of German and

European neoclassicism, but that barely begins to address the topic. Perhaps the most lasting influence of nineteenth-century European medievalism on the study of Byzantium was the artificial split of Byzantine literature into “classicizing” (evaluated as a pale imitation of the far superior ancient Greek literature) and “vernacular” (presumably the beginning of a modern Greek literature). A more recent trend in scholarship is to view literature written in Greek during the Byzantine period as a united whole regardless of its stylistic register, which also has implications about where to place the beginnings of a “modern Greek” literature (“nowhere” would be my response, but this is a tale for another time). This new trend in Byzantine Studies corresponds to no longer imagining vernacular Greek as an equivalent to Middle High and Early New High German, in the development of which Wartburg is central as the site of the Sängerkrieg and Martin Luther’s translation of the Bible. Inadvertently, serially visiting medieval European castles lubricated thoughts pertinent to what I was writing during the same time, such as the choice of stylistic register in Byzantine technical literature and in Byzantine translations from Arabic into Greek.

Another gift of Berlin (whether with or without children) is the accessibility of high-quality musical events – unimaginable, in terms of frequency and low cost, compared with the standards of the San Francisco Bay Area, where we live. Between Berlin’s three opera stages, it became possible to attend more than forty performances, many together with our four-year-old (yes, there are plenty of “family” performances in Berlin!). Inevitably, not all productions were good, but even the bad ones were interesting. Moreover, it was possible to catch works that are not frequently performed, some in imaginative and resourceful renderings.

A special joy was attending two different productions of the Magic Flute with our daughter. Later in the spring, during an evening ride on the bus from Ku’damm to Grunewald, sitting at the front row of the upper deck, she felt like addressing a song to the group of teenagers at the back. Understandably, she chose the Queen of the Night’s famous aria. Given the vocal acrobatics involved, she kept missing notes, but one of the teen-aged girls at the back kept helping her out on crucial moments. Their joint singing was sweet and funny beyond description. “Only on a German bus! Nowhere else!” I kept thinking. After the laugh and disbelief at what I had just witnessed were over, the historian in me instantly recognized that the economic, political, social, and intellectual conditions that made such a musical encounter possible were the very same ones that led to the existence of the Wissenschaftskolleg and my own presence there. Public support for the

arts and highly specialized academic research in the humanities are the product of an optimistic post-war mentality that has inevitably shifted as the decades have passed. One would like to think that its future in Germany is secure. It certainly appears jeopardized in the US, where its roots were never as deep as in Germany or elsewhere in Europe to begin with. It would be inane to take it for granted.

PS: I hope I can be forgiven for not summarizing my research during this cherished Berlin year. I gathered that readers genuinely interested in it will find their way to the publications, all of which recognize Wiko's contribution to their existence in the first footnote. For those who would like a peek nonetheless, I recommend a video of my Wiko public lecture, "Byzantine and Modern Homer" ([www.wiko-berlin.de/wikothek/lectures-on-film](http://www.wiko-berlin.de/wikothek/lectures-on-film)). It summarizes more than three years of work, happily brought to conclusion at around the time that the talk was given. It was wonderful to be given a venue that secured a broad and distinguished Berlin audience in order to share what I love!