



ESCAPE TO SHANGRI-LA
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This Week

Someone had dropped an ice cream cone in front of the *Eiscafé* at the west pole of Ku'damm. I had to stop. Judged by the semi-melted structure of what appeared to be mint or even pistachio-flavoured ice cream, I was fresh at the scene. The positioning of the waffle relative to the ice cream indicated that there had been a struggle. A desperate last rescue attempt, when things had already irreparably gone south. That ice cream, more so than the environment, had clearly meant a great deal to whoever had dropped it.

Perhaps it was the lingering taste of pistachio on the taste buds that had driven this seemingly irrational, hedonistic motor response. As quickly, this manoeuvre appeared to have been conflicted by reason, or shame, which evidently had led to the escape from the scene, as only two pigeons occupied the site. The birds were breaking the waffle using mechanical, unnatural head movements. Looking at their dull eyes, it seemed as if they were chained to this scene by some spell, rather than their own free will, which would have directed them elsewhere. Perhaps they were still going through their internal struggle of settling in to their adopted home made of concrete, steel spikes and hostile boots. By squinting, I could also spot some ants that were busy collecting the waffle shrapnel. Some of them were positioned at opposite ends of the waffle fragments. At first glance, this gave the impression that they were competing for the same piece. Yet, what at first glance appeared to be a struggle, somehow translated into directional motion – *they worked together for the common good.*

The End

“I’m not done yet!” – I was screaming (on mute of course, maintaining stoic composure). This silent storm of emotions was set off by one innocent peek at the calendar a week ago, which made me realize that it was going to be impossible to finish all the planned work, let alone my bucket list of regional cultural affairs. The discovery of Marzahn, Köpenick, Leipzig, Dresden, Weimar, Rügen and the North Coast, Prague, Krakow and other wondrous places would have to wait. The initial shock was followed by calming, low-pitched sounds stemming from organs that were playing in my head the prelude of what would be the funeral of my Wiko tenure. I realized that there will be no more stimulating colloquia, no more 10- to 15-minute questions after talks, no more delicious delights prepared by Dunia and her kitchen team, no more enlightening conversations in the dining room, no more skimming through the weekly edition of the *New Yorker* in the beautiful reading room of Weiße Villa, and no more skipping of the German classes – *because there will be none.* My time left in Wiko could almost be counted on one set of fingers, and there is no reset button. After the initial wave of melodramatic emotions had passed, I found myself postulating the aftermath and whether I had made the best of my time here.

Reflections

Before arriving at Wiko, I was hoping to finally have enough *time* to concentrate and focus on developing new ideas and concepts that I could test in the future. Based on my past experiences, finding proper time for creative thinking is something not to be taken for granted. I need to have the right surroundings and mindset to be creative. I am still working on perfecting the recipe for tapping into that headspace where innovation flows out naturally, but I can already conclude that I am dealing with *gastronomie française*. In my field, work is decidedly fragmented between meetings, seminars, teaching, writing proposals, stressing about the future, travelling and presenting and, of course, the actual heavy lifting in the laboratory (mainly consisting of back and forward movement of the right-hand thumb that controls the micropipette). And remember that all this comes from the mouth of a *foal* – a postdoc. As a soon-to-be-minted faculty member, the number of my responsibilities and tasks will increase substantially, and carving out *unfragmented time* for thinking will undoubtedly be an even more intractable task in the future. I had already accepted that for the upcoming years I would be cooking *beef Wellington*, at best. And then my path crossed with Wiko. This pearl hidden in Grunewald turned out to be the physical manifestation of the academic utopia that I had heard rumours about, but that I thought had gone extinct decades ago. A place serving its visitors the secret ingredient of creativity, *time*, on a silver platter. A place where it is actually possible to concentrate, invent, reflect and sharpen ideas in conjunction with the most amazing colleagues.

Indeed, the Fellows. The people at Wiko are what make it unique. A fresh donation of scholars and artists each year keeps Wiko fresh and evolving. The Fellows of the 2016/17 class (including the Permanent Fellows and Staff) are an extraordinary group of citizens who shared enthusiasm to learn and discuss and debate on at a broad topical scale. Yet, remarkably, the atmosphere remained harmonious and tolerant of all forms of life. Given the calibre of personalities and the spectrum of styles and flairs, I found this extraordinary. A true testament to both the Fellows' good will and the *equality* among Fellows guaranteed by the Wiko.

I truly enjoyed the discourse I had with people from other fields. I would like to thank everyone who showed interest in my work. The many thoughtful questions and comments I received helped me reflect on some aspects of my work in a new light. I could also draw much inspiration from other Fellows. Exposure to influences from the humanities, social sciences and arts allowed me to get acquainted with different ways of presenting,

debating and formulating questions. I found this refreshing. It is easy to become a prisoner of certain habits. Exposure to a new culture of discourse has encouraged me to try to implement some novel aspects in my repertoire. I can only hope that this exchange was mutually beneficial. I was especially intrigued to learn about the way the artists among us find their inspiration and creativity. Especially as a photography and cinematography enthusiast, I was fascinated to learn how Frédéric and Shaheen operate to tell stories by capturing moments of time on film.

Work

The six-month period at Wiko served as an important stepping-stone in my career. I came to Berlin in January as a postdoc with an uncertain future, and now in July I will leave to start the next chapter as an Assistant Professor. After being in motion for so many years (which I have truly enjoyed), this next step represents a flickering light at the end of the tunnel signalling that there might be an end to being an academic nomad. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful it was to have dedicated time to prepare for the interviews and reflect on the developments of the job search with the other Fellows. I would especially like to thank Carey for his continuing interest and support in this matter. After the decision was made, I could use my time here to start taking away from the immediate pile of tasks that come with a starting faculty position, including recruitment of the first students and writing grants. Besides piercing through the critical phases of the job search and preparing for the new position, I also managed to finish the revisions of one research paper [1] and write a small review [2] during my tenure at Wiko. Eventually, I also managed to aggregate sufficient periods of time to bring forward my actual Wiko project. Indeed, it matured to the point that I am currently drafting a proposal, which hopefully will fund its transition from hypotheses to experimental testing. Now reflecting back, it is evident that many things advanced substantially during this six-month period, but I still have a hard time convincing myself that I made the best use of my time here. Knowing myself, I can attribute this feeling, at least partially, to the imprinted experiences of growing up in an entrepreneur family in which (despite its secularity) the Protestant work ethic was gospel.

Although there were some days that I never stepped outside the Wiko headquarters (I lived in the Neubau), every once in a while I also managed to break through the fenced gardens of Grunewald and escape *East of Eden*. Over the past 18 years, Berlin has been a

place I have returned to over and over again. I always felt comfortable here. The tolerant, nonconformist atmosphere with a vivid presence of polarizing history makes this place unique. The city is constantly changing and has undergone a substantive transformation since my first visit in spring of 1999. Whether this change has been for the better or worse remains arguable. The things in Berlin that felt fresh and rebellious ten years ago now feel stale. For this city, the bar is set high. Despite the evident change, enormous size, constant commotion and influx of passionate people ensure that there are always new things to be discovered. My pleasant discoveries over the past months included the lakes and pine tree forests of Grunewald, the traditional market Rogacki in Charlottenburg that serves fresh fish dishes, the chill Caribbean/African-flavoured beach bar Yaam close to Ostbahnhof and the delicious Iskender dish at Hasir Kreuzberg. But there is nothing that can top my old favourite and arguably the best bar in town – pound-for-pound – Café Royal in Friedrichshain (note: this statement comes irrespective of any family ties to this location).

Kudos

It is for all of these and many other reasons that I think Wiko is special. On Wallotstraße lies a fountain of knowledge and culture. And an excellent shoe polish machine.

The chance to spend time at this marvellous place has left me with the utmost feeling of gratitude. Gratefulness for meeting so many wonderful people and for gaining first-hand evidence of the existence of academic *Shangri-La*, which a year ago I believed was nothing but a myth.

I want to sincerely thank all the Fellows and Staff for making me feel warmly welcomed despite joining the Institute halfway through the season. I would especially like to thank Ulrike for her great efforts in making me feel that I was not the only College for Life Sciences Fellow after March, when all others had gone. And if someone who considers applying for the College for Life Sciences is reading this, my advice is simple: *Apply!* You will not regret it. After being marinated and picking up new flavours for six months in Wiko, I feel ready to return to the barbeque.

References

- [1] Saarikangas, J., Caudron, F., Prasad, R., Moreno, D. F., Aldea, M. and Barral, Y. (2017). “ER compartmentalization confines protein aggregation to the aging lineage during asymmetric cell division.” *Current Biology* 27: 773–783.
- [2] Saarikangas, J., and Caudron, F. (2017). “Spatial regulation of coalesced protein assemblies: lessons from yeast to diseases.” *Prion* 11: 162–173.



Co-operation among Fellows.