



A CHARMED LIFE
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My stay at Wiko has been the beginning of a new, strange and astonishing life. Indeed, immediately before my arrival at Wiko I retired from the University of Trieste, where I had taught Medieval History for 37 years. So, my period in Berlin began under the wondrous star of an entirely new experience: the end of the past, the beginning of an adventure in a green forest among unknown people, none of them speaking my language, neither the

Italian one nor the medieval one. Scared as ever, Marina and I arrived in this fabulous country (Berlin: we never were here before) and discovered that the gentle ethereal spirits dominating and controlling this unknown country (Vera and Vera, Corina, Daniela and Daniel {*il faut dire que Daniel a été un vrai ami, il comprend tout, les lubies des fellows et leur dépaysement; entre les esprits puissants qui gèrent cet îlot enchanté il est probablement le plus expert en arts magiques*}, Dunia, Thorsten, Angelika, Nina: tremendous names for us poor Latin creatures coming from the village) magnanimously offered to us a splendid apartment in a huge villa similar to a fairy castle and at the same time to the palace of Dr. Frankenstein. Apartment, furniture and loggia, everything was so Bauhaus/Imperial style, so perfect that at the beginning we did not dare to touch tables and chairs and beds.

Then the discovery of the Library (the Weiße Villa! Books appearing on your table from nothing and nowhere), of my bureau in the Neubau (a real “room”), and of the Restaurant with its so eccentric and extraordinary Japanese/Lebanese/German/Vegetarian/Italian/French cuisine. Everything was so new and charmingly strange that we (the Italian couple) had and have a lot of things to comment and discuss.

During the ten months of my stay at Wiko, in the Restaurant, in the large or small Seminar Room every Tuesday, but also on some evenings and Thursdays, I have encountered “the Fellows”. These are the elected ones who (like me: incredible, I am among them, among these super-clever, extra distinguished and outstanding intellectuals coming from the magic worlds of international culture; me, who one of my students described as “an outstanding outcast”) live and work inside of this charmed space.

All in all, it turned out that it was not so easy: as Thorsten said at the beginning of our stay, it was like the encounter between very different species coming from different galaxies.

But, to tell the truth, these differences were not as standardized as Thorsten had described them: some (it is almost obvious on our planet Earth) were more different than others, and some were more normal and suitable, that is to say less divergent. Some among the Fellows (luckily, a minority) were speaking languages (Italian, Japanese, French, Korean, Wolof, German, Spanish, Portuguese, for example) obviously and extremely far from the language spoken by true humans: English. That implied that these weird beings whose English was not deeply rooted in their own brain (actually “their English was *not* very good”) had some difficulties to communicate the intimate and secret meaning of their own precious thinking; at the same time, however, their semi-dumbness and their efforts to poorly express themselves conferred to the entire group of Fellows something special and bewitched.

After some days, after some luncheons and conversations, after having been recognized as an Italian guy and an extremely medieval individual (accustomed to the marvels of Italy, monuments and parmigiana, Michelangelo and risotto: hi, Giacomo, how are you?), I began to distinguish among “the Fellows” and to see some specificities. At this point and during the year I found some friends or virtual friends in the group (should I confess) of those who firmly belonged to the minority of non-English speakers: Ibrahim, Lena, Adrian, Graciela, Esther, Alberto, Jihwan, Itomi, Gianna, Frederic, Hetty, Guy, Sarah, Daniel, Benedicte. On the whole, a nice ghetto, and I firmly love ghettos.

People composing the magical group called “the staff” (the ethereal spirits) were, more than friends, protecting and consequently ambiguously, powerful, superior beings.

Some English-speaking Fellows (I then discovered) were not uniquely English-speakers (and English-thinking) and so, step by step, I experimented and appreciated their own weirdness and I got used to seeing them not as dangerous and aggressive or ice-cold and disdainful geniuses, but as warm human creatures, friends perhaps, actually friends: Mary, Jonas, Molly (the witch princess), Tine, Barbara (she thinks incredibly well in a lot of languages, so that she speaks a lot of languages, or vice versa), Carey (oh, multilingual lord so fond of Portofino, how you are kind and sweet!) and my beloved Claire (to tell the truth she speaks only Irish, but she is so gentle and imaginative, and she makes so fine portraits and she looks like an uncanny and perhaps dangerous fairy: I love her).

Eva and the German hours were a world of their own, a world of rationality and peace: Eva is so patient and gentle and with her I felt almost normal and comfortable. *Danke vielmals*, Eva, and thanks a million.

My ten months at Wiko have been very productive, so terribly productive that I can't really believe that they actually have not been twelve. I did some seminars in France and participated in a discussion on writing premodern economic history in a weird monastery near Würzburg, and made a presentation at Wiko, with many slides (my Wiko's friends and comrades appreciated very much colors and animations I used for slides); I wrote also a small book on Jews in medieval Italy. Wiko's library and librarians (Sonja, Anja and Stefan have without doubt some telekinetic powers and can evoke books and documents from the dark vortex of nothing, from the beyond and other worlds) made possible my job, and without them everything I did during my stay in Berlin would have been impossible. And I began the project for another book, provisionally entitled “Like water and blood” on economic metaphors between the Middle Ages and Capitalism. Nonsense,

probably, but it was so nice to think about it during the German winter and unstable spring and rainy summer.

Two words on interdisciplinary work and Wiko's philosophy. Interdisciplinarity is very fruitful, I agree; however, honestly, it is very difficult to achieve it when a "community of scholars" is objectively shaped by differently empowered people. Difference and inequalities and hierarchies (*il faut l'admettre, aussi si on est merveilleusement postmodernes*) exist and even if every effort to eliminate these differences was made by everyone, and above all by the magicians and sorceresses governing Wiko's enchanted isle, crude reality imposes/imposed its tyranny. (Oh, generous Fellows, I appreciated so much your kind effort to speak with me, even if I needed a lot of time to utter one phrase). What does difference mean in this case? Firstly, as said, different capacity in (fluently!) speaking the human language (English); secondly, diversity in approaching research fields, depending on the belonging to different scientific areas of the world, that is to say to scientific worlds having more or less money and at the same time divergent perceptions of what research means (of what the political/epistemological sense of making research is).

Yet I'm enormously happy to have been here, to have experimented with this charmed life, to have tried to perform interdisciplinarity and dialogue and to become a social animal. Thank you all for this challenge: I feel better now than before (I only hope it goes on); I can now come back to my wonderful country knowing that I actually was part of this extraordinary utopia. And we need Utopia, as you dear comrades and outstanding scholars perfectly know.