



THE SERENITY OF WIKO AND THE
TURBULENCES OF THE WORLD
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What is the most obvious literary analogy to the life of Fellows conducted in the serenity of the Wissenschaftskolleg environment and the relative seclusion of suburban Grunewald? The answer to this question is not very original and in fact was mentioned

several times in Fellows' discussions in the final stage of our year, when we tried to look back and catch a sense of our common experience. Like us, the people depicted in *The Magic Mountain* lived for a long time in a small community, sharing most of their time, engaging in serious (and less serious) dialogues and relationships. The apparently idyllic character of their life was, however, very illusory and questionable. Not only because they suffered from illnesses that they tried to cure in the alpine climate of Davos, being exposed to the Prospect of death that might turn out to be not so distant. The more relevant point is that the characters in Thomas Mann's novel engaged in extremely passionate disputes regarding politics, culture and morality. These were the same controversies that deeply split European nations on the eve of the cataclysm of the Great War. Settembrini and Naphta struggling for a grip over Hans Castorp's soul epitomized ardent ideological conflicts that were soon to tear down the whole continent.

It was pretty much the same at Wiko. We had our ongoing ideological disputes that broke out with great ardor after a few months, and perhaps unexpectedly to many Fellows, but persisted till the end of our stay in Grunewald. They focused on issues of gender, diversity, race, and equality within and outside of the Wiko establishment and were precipitated by the waves coming from the world at large – the “#MeToo” action of exposing sexual harassment by privileged people. This scrutiny in our case seemed to me rather artificial and misplaced, since, judging by my own experience and intuition, Wiko was a very open-minded place, friendly to diversity, even making this latter value one of the cornerstones of its selection process and everyday life. I respected, however, the intentions of those promoting this critical agenda. It is always beneficial for both people and institutions to question solutions that outwardly seem to be close to perfect. Nevertheless, in my case, much more important and dramatic were political and ideological tensions outside Wiko, which invaded its serenity and seclusion in probably far more direct ways than those experienced by Hans Castorp, Claudia Chauchat and other patients in the Davos sanatorium.

This serenity of Grunewald was to a great extent illusory. One could easily see traces of violent history near where we conducted our colloquia and quietly read innumerable books in our offices. Beside the stairs leading to Villa Jaffé, in the basement of which I had my office, every morning I stepped past *Stolpersteine* commemorating the Jewish owners of this house, who had fled the Nazis and died in Shanghai. There were more *Stolpersteine* on almost every street in this most affluent Berlin suburb. On my way on my bike to the Grunewald forest, I passed by *Gleis 17*, from which thousands of Berlin Jews were deported to Auschwitz and other camps. The last transport left this station just a few

weeks before the capitulation of Berlin in early May 1945. Not much farther – just 15 minutes on bike – one could find the Olympia Stadion, the gigantic remnant of Hitler’s *hybris*, built for the Olympic Games of 1936.

Exploring Berlin on a bike is a great idea. One could easily see how this city was destroyed during the war, thus paying a high price for its support for the Nazis. Many empty spaces, many new buildings inserted between pre-war structures. The longest trip I made was from Schönefeld through Köpenick, Schöneeweide, Neukölln, Kreuzberg, Schöneberg, Wilmersdorf and back to Grunewald. Sometimes these trips demonstrated how present times overlap the past. Riding my bike around Tempelhof Airport – another remnant of Nazi might in Berlin – I came across the temporary houses of refugees living on the former airfield.

These pressures and invasions of the outside world into the Grunewald refuge were, of course, much more manifold and direct than mere observations from bike trips throughout the city. All the time, I was torn between the work I wanted to carry out at Wiko (a comparative book about retributive justice after the collapse of various dictatorships in the 20th century), incessant discussions and interactions we had in our group and innumerable social and cultural activities provided by our hosts, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, continuous and alert following of the developments unfolding in my country. The latter were increasingly depressing. Dismantling the democratic state of law and Poland’s ties with Europe was a harsh experience, especially for people of my generation and background who had personal memories of living under the Communist dictatorship and, after 1989, of witnessing and participating in “miracles” of regaining independence, creating democracy and joining the European Union. For us, this was all the fulfillment of the ambitions and dreams of many generations in our country. Now it seemed to be not only endangered, but shattered step by step.

For me there was also an additional, personal level to these developments: my experience with the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, which turned out to be one of the major battlefields in this fundamental conflict ongoing in Poland, but to some extent reflecting similar tensions in many other countries, as well. I came to Wiko almost immediately after an extremely tense and dramatic time I had had in Poland. After the long struggle with the Law and Justice government, I succeeded in opening the Museum to the public. Two weeks later I was removed from my post as its director; my colleagues with whom I created the museum were also purged. In many ways, I needed an academic “rehab” and Wiko promised a lot in this respect. However, it soon turned out that for me

it was not the end of this story, and I continued to be deeply immersed in the Museum's controversy, despite living abroad and staying at Wiko. The issue continued to be an extremely heated public debate in Poland. It was a unique feeling to read in the news accusations by the Minister of Culture and even Jarosław Kaczyński, the real ruler of Poland, that creating this museum was an act of national betrayal, because allegedly it was from its outset created on the orders of Berlin (sometimes Brussels was added to this indictment). I had to give Polish and international media hundreds of interviews to counter these allegations and explain the real situation. This made the calmness of the Wiko life illusory for me from the very beginning and created the dual and to some extent paradoxical framework in which I lived all these months: on the one hand, trying to benefit from the intellectual, cultural and social richness that Wiko offered and to contribute to it within my capacities and, on the other hand, continuing to carry out my battles in the outside world. The latter meant not only dealing with the mass media, giving countless lectures and talks, but also facing a criminal prosecutor who interrogated me in Gdańsk and preparing legal suits (in the Polish courts and in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg) in defence of the integrity of the permanent exhibition of the Museum. The exhibition started to be changed according to the expectations of the Law and Justice government during the time I stayed in Berlin. The interest and support of the people at Wiko, both staff and Fellows, surpassed my expectations and immensely helped me deal with this situation. One of the nicest and most satisfactory moments for me was accompanying to Gdańsk a group of Fellows who wanted to visit the Museum.

Living in such a diverse community also brought about interesting and to some extent ambiguous feelings. I remember how I envied Fellows coming from stable and democratic (for how long?) countries for having their peaceful lives and being able to focus on their work and – only if they wanted – on contemplating fundamental intellectual and moral dilemmas of the academic community and of mankind. Sometimes it seemed like living in an ivory tower, but perhaps this should be the ideal of the life of intellectuals, instead of wasting time in battles that one cannot win. On the other hand, the presence of Fellows from less “fortunate” countries helped me see the Polish experience from the right perspective and to avoid inflating its drama. The fate of our Syrian and Turkish Co-Fellows who were not able to live in their countries and who faced the gravest consequences of the choices that they had made showed us all what real political persecution means and, for me in particular, how it is still different from the minor harassment I experienced from the Polish government.

Hans Castorp eventually had to leave Davos for the turbulent world. The last glimpse of him we got in the novel was in the trenches of the Great War. It is not entirely the same experience, but we also left our asylum in Grunewald and dispersed in all possible directions into an increasingly unstable world. The memory of Wiko would help us remember how life should look like if we could live in “the best of all possible worlds”. Unfortunately, such a world can be sustained only for ten months.