



## DA KOMMT SO EINIGES ZUSAMMEN SONJA MEJCHER-ATASSI

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Sonja Mejcher-Atassi is Associate Professor of Arabic and Comparative Literature at the American University of Beirut. She completed her D.Phil. at the University of Oxford (2005) and her M.A. at the Free University of Berlin (2000). Her research areas range from modern and contemporary literature and art in the Arab world to book culture/art, museum and collecting practices, writers' libraries, cultural/intellectual history, memory studies and aesthetics and politics. Her publications include *Rafa Nasiri: Artist Books* (ed. with May Muzaffar, 2016); *Reading Across Modern Arabic Literature and Art* (2012); *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (ed. with John Pedro Schwartz, 2012); *Writing: a 'Tool for Change': 'Abd al-Rahman Munif Remembered* (ed.), special issue of *The MIT EJMES* (7, 2007); and *Geschichten über Geschichten: Erinnerung im Romanwerk von Elias Khoury* (2001). She has published numerous book chapters and articles in refereed journals, e.g. in *Art History*, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, *Journal of World Literature* and *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. She is currently working on a biography of the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and an edited volume on the Syrian playwright and public intellectual Saadallah Wannous. – Address: Department of English, American University of Beirut, P.O. Box 11-0236, Riad Solh, 11072020 Beirut, Lebanon. E-mail: sm78@aub.edu.lb.

The year at the Wissenschaftskolleg went by way too fast, time literally just flew by. When we were asked to write our reports recording our memories, I felt that this was an impossible task since I had not yet registered in my mind the year at the Wissenschaftskolleg as part of my memories but felt still very much in the midst of it, and I hope to

carry this feeling – and the research mode it invigorated – with me into the next year, the year after, and the year after ... I am grateful beyond words to have had the chance at this point in my life and career to spend a year at the Wiko. My year at the Wiko was an extremely rich and productive year at three interrelated levels, the professional, the social and the personal.

At the professional level, I was able to finish a number of articles, advance my book project and launch new projects. I arrived at the Wiko in need of catching my breath, after three admin-intensive years as chairperson of the Department of English at the American University in Beirut (AUB). I first finished a research article on the private library of the Syrian playwright and public intellectual Saadallah Wannous (1940–96), which I had helped to get to the AUB. I gained much insight from the Marbach Weimar Wolfenbüttel Research Association for this article thanks to Sonja Asal, who generously invited me to join her on a visit to Weimar. There I met with Reinhard Laube and Stefan Höppner, who kindly showed me the Herzogin Anna Amalia Library and Goethe's private library. At the same time, I worked on a co-edited volume on Wannous with my AUB colleague Robert Myers, who visited me for this purpose at the Wiko. I also finished the translation from Arabic into English of "Writer and Exile", an essay by the acclaimed Arab novelist 'Abd al-Rahman Munif, which has gained new relevance with the tragic fate of millions of Syrians who have been reduced to refugees in the wake of the 2011 revolution-turned-war. The essay relates nicely to other writings on exile, in particular to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's "The Palestinian Exile as Writer" and Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile". I advanced my book project on Jabra, a biography in fragments, as I might say also in reference to Ina Hartwig's biography of Ingeborg Bachmann, which she worked on during her year at the Wiko in 2015/16 and which I read with great interest. It engages with a number of questions I have struggled with for a long time, which have to do with archives, the conditions of collecting practices in what we today refer to as the Global South, in societies marked by colonial legacies, political conflicts and wars. How do we write literary histories and biographies, when we do not have access to literary estates, when there are no literary archives or when such collections have been destroyed? Jabra's house, containing his private library and papers, paintings and collections of modern Iraqi art and classical music records, was destroyed in bomb attacks targeted at foreign embassies in Baghdad in 2010. Jabra's house happened to be adjacent to the Egyptian embassy and the attack was carried out from his driveway. What some brushed aside as collateral damage was considered Jabra's second death by critics in the Arab world. My visits to archives, from the Academy

of Arts in Berlin to the University of Cambridge, disclosed unexpected finds about Jabra – about his friendship with the German-Jewish writer Wolfgang Hildesheimer in Palestine before the *naḳba* and about his time as a student of English literature at Cambridge. A second book, focused on some of these finds, is in the making. There are other research projects that have advanced and multiplied, things mentioned here or there zoomed in and elaborated further, books coming out of books as stories evolve out of stories, the Wiko and its fantastical library figuring as a “marvelous story [and research] machine”, as Tzvetan Todorov described the *Arabian Nights*.

I am grateful to many people at the Wiko who have helped me to advance these projects in various ways, in particular to Daniel Schönflug and to my Co-Fellows Anna Kathrin Bleuler, Pascale Cancik, Manu Goswami, Kris Manjapra and James Simpson, and to the tireless library team, Anja Brockmann, Stefan Gellner, Kirsten Graupner und Thomas Reimer. I also thank the Focus Group “Family History and Social Change in West Africa”, Carola Lentz, Isidore Lobnibe and Stanislas Meda Bemile, for having invited me to their work-in-progress discussions and welcomed me into their extended family.

At the social level, the Wiko brought together a diverse group of scholars along with a few musicians and writers whose presence was invaluable, as it brought academia in touch, if not in tune, with art and activism. I am grateful to Andreas Staier and Vladimir Tarnopolski for having opened my eyes and ears to their music. I greatly enjoyed and learned a lot from the Wiko’s concert talks, film screenings, evening lectures and the colloquia of different disciplinary orientations, spanning the humanities and the social and natural sciences. The Wiko’s location in Berlin Grunewald greatly facilitates both concentration (research) and distraction (sociability). The various seminar, reading and dining rooms, office and recreational spaces, terraces and gardens of the Wiko’s historical villas generously provide formal and informal meeting grounds, but also reading and writing retreats. The city is not far and bursts with cultural activities, but far enough to forget its hustle and bustle. A word about languages: German and English dominated the discussions at the Wiko, but I also heard other languages – among them Arabic, Chinese, French, Hebrew, Hindi, Italian, Russian, Turkish and Ukrainian – and would love to see this multilingual setting flourish even more as it promises to bring to the table different academic traditions as well as diverse political and personal experiences. Another word about my office: I loved my office! Walking over from Villa Walther in the Koenigsallee in the morning, I usually made a stop at the White Villa to pick up my books in the library, then another to grab a latte macchiato in the main building, where a bouquet of flowers,

one more fabulous than the other, welcomes the Wiko's staff, Fellows and visitors. I then continued along Wallotstraße to the beautiful Villa Jaffé, where two *Stolpersteine* greeted me daily in the names of the former homeowners, Emmy and Georg Braun. They had fled Berlin to Shanghai in 1940, where Georg died a year later and Emmy died in the ghetto in Shanghai in 1943. Their tragic lives reminded me daily of political realities here and there, past and present, and their global interconnectedness. Entering my office with its high ceilings, beautiful window and the large desk, I was met with a sense of serenity that invited me to sit down and work. I still feel I could enter the office now and find my books and papers where I had left them the day before.

At the personal level, the year at the Wiko allowed me to make new friends and to meet current and former Fellows and the amazing, always friendly and helpful staff of the Wiko. It also enabled me to reconnect with friends and colleagues in Berlin, including some from Lebanon and Syria who have found a new home temporarily or permanently in Germany. I arrived at the Wiko with my family, my husband Mohammad Ali Atassi and our two children, Nouri and Karim. Ali showed his documentaries at the Wiko at Daniel Schönflug's kind invitation, but had to travel back to Beirut often. Our boys spent an exciting year at the Lycée Français and the École Voltaire in Berlin – they now know all of the M19 bus stops from Erdener Straße to Nollendorfplatz by heart – and with their Wiko family. The Fellows' children came together on Thursday evenings, thanks to the childcare organized by Andrea Bergmann with some of the nicest and coolest young people in Berlin, Joey, Katie, Chiara and David, when the Fellows met for dinner at Dunja Najjar's hospitable gong.

To conclude, after a year at the Wiko, I feel enriched at all levels, professionally, socially and personally. I hope to retain the research mode invigorated for many years to come and to share my Wiko experience at best I can.