



TIME SHELTER
GEORGI GOSPODINOV

Georgi Gospodinov (born in 1968 in Bulgaria) is a poet, writer, and playwright. His books have been translated into more than 25 languages. He became internationally known with his *Natural Novel* (1999). His second novel, *The Physics of Sorrow*, was the winner of the Central European Angelus Award (2019) and the Jan Michalski Prize (2016) and a finalist for the PEN America Translation Prize and the Brücke Berlin Preis. According to *The New Yorker*, “Georgi’s real quest in ‘The Physics of Sorrow’ is to find a way to live with sadness, to allow it to be a source of empathy and salutary hesitation...” In 2017–2018, Gospodinov was awarded the New York Public Library Fellowship at the Cullman Center. *Blind Vaysha*, a short animation (dir. Theo Ushev) based on Gospodinov’s short story, was an Academy Award nominee in 2017. Gospodinov is the author of 15 books of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, plays, several scripts for short feature films, and projects in the field of memory of the recent past, everyday life, and ideological traumas. He is affiliated with the Institute for Literature, BAS, Sofia, with a Ph.D. in literary history. His latest novel, *Time Shelter*, finished at Wiko, has just been published in Bulgaria. – Address: Mladost 1, Bl 129, Ent 1, Apt 4, Sofia 1750, Bulgaria. E-mail: g_gospodinov@yahoo.com.

We arrived from Sofia in the very beginning of August 2019. August is always the afternoon of the year, the Sunday of the world. In Grunewald it’s also always Sunday in a certain way. Yet, Berlin students started school on the fifth, and Raya, our daughter, was going to be in her first high school year here. It’s weird to be in Berlin in August. But we still had no idea how much weirder the coming 2020 would be.

We had one free month before the opening of Wiko's academic year. The endless afternoons of Grunewald and German lessons with the amazing Eva and Ludwig. I had come with enormous plans, as always happens: to finish and edit an almost-finished novel and to start a new one that I had been postponing for some time. A novel about the fears we and the century are made of, about the anxieties and dreads of several generations. Anyway, first I had to concentrate on finishing and editing the novel already in progress: a near-future dystopia about the loss of memory, personal and collective, and a character who sets up "clinics for the past". Also about a peculiar recurrence of time and a mix-up of times that would happen soon. Of course, I had checked the info about my colleagues and had planned to ask them some questions, especially those of them who dealt with neurology, brain sciences, or evolutionary biology.

The truth is that the very idea of being a writer in a community of biologists, neurologists, historians, economists, and law scholars was not discouraging for me at all. On the contrary, I found it one of the Wissenschaftskolleg's best ideas. Being a writer among scientists and scholars has at least two advantages. First, your occupation could always be an excuse for your asociality, absentmindedness, or other oddities. After all, the writer's myth is a good alibi giving you the right to be strange and immersed in your own world. In point of fact, I almost never needed that right. But the more important advantage (especially if you are a curious person, and writers should be such) is that you have almost the whole academic cavalry at hand, you just have to decide which table to pick up for lunch or dinner. And I am a good listener. Everything is interesting, everything could be useful when you write a novel. Besides, I have to admit that my childhood dream was to become a natural scientist. I even enrolled in a special biology class in high school and still consider myself a naïve naturalist. Anyway, I just want to say that this was the perfect community for me.

One of the first surprises was when Sharon, an ecologist and biologist, said she had read my *Natural Novel* and invited me to present her at her colloquium. I felt rather nervous. The naïvist games with biology in my writing would have to face real experts here. But in fact, it was wonderful to talk with them about the compound eye of the insects or whether bees had memory... Actually, we had a common topic: memory. We were able to talk about everything and feel how in the end (as I've always suspected) literature and science use one and the same instrument – the language – and have the same subjects – the human being and the world around us. Later, it was Sharon's idea to make an improvised book club and discuss my two novels. Some comments during that discussion were

among the most interesting I've heard, more inspiring than the words of many literary critics.

I will not forget my anxieties before my colloquium. All the people here were so experienced, juggling with PowerPoint, diagrams, etc. But what could be presented visually by a writer? It came to me that I could prepare a kind of time capsule and show different "objects" and lines in my writing that are connected also with natural science. I decided to involve more colleagues so that we could have more languages that were spoken around anyway. For example, a very short poem:

God is red
ripe and perfect
God is a tomato
it's not an offence
neither to God
nor to the tomato

Each of the invited colleagues read it in his or her native language. It worked great and led us to think how God was red in a different way in Spanish, in French, in German ("Gott ist rot" pointed directly to "Gott ist tot"), in Hungarian. As for Arabic, it was a completely different case: how to define Allah, how to name God and even compare Him to a tomato... we had a long correspondence with my translator and she was quite cautious. On the other hand, what would be the reaction of my Co-Fellow Felix, theologian and Jesuit priest? Wouldn't this sound like a blasphemy to him in spite of his impeccable sense of humor? He had to be absent at that time, which made it easier for me to decide on using that poem, but when I saw him in the colloquium room, I was thrilled. I didn't know you would be here, I joked, but now you have to swallow an unorthodox poem.

In fact, there were a few people coming from the field of literature. My great chance was friendship with Efraín. Already in early August, we discovered our passion for Borges. I showed him the tattered first Bulgarian edition of Borges that I always carried along with me wherever I travel. Efraín is one of the most knowledgeable and curious people I've ever met. And from the very first days, Borges was with us in Grunewald. The other big surprise connected with Efraín was the sudden visit of Mario Vargas Llosa at Wiko. 30 years later, he came to see the place where he was a Fellow once, too.

I will not forget our conversations with Wolf Lepenies, especially when I understood that he was close friend with another favorite writer of mine, Lars Gustafsson. In my eponymous collection I will keep also our conversations with David Stark and a wonderful

evening when he played the guitar and sang songs in various Balkan languages. I will also remember the talks with Thorsten Wilhelmy on the whole of world literature... They, as well as other Wiko colleagues, are mentioned in the acknowledgements at the end of my novel that came out during the lockdown.

The title of the novel is *Time Shelter*. That is what I would call Wiko if it were a novel.

P.S.

I haven't written anything here about the breakup of the year with the coming of the pandemic and the quarantine. This is another story, another novel. The saddest moment was when Sharon and Mark, after long considerations, decided to fly back to California. The US border was going to be closed soon, and they were catching literally the last plane. We gathered in the backyard of Villa Walther standing in circle, with a distance between us, trying to joke. In the middle of the circle was a pile of effervescent vitamin packs that Sharon was leaving to us. We couldn't hug to say goodbye. It was like a strange ritual, like a tribal scene with something apocalyptic about it. I felt how our goodbyes and gestures will never be the same anymore, nor our feeling for the future. And this also was part of this strange year. There's no way that I could forget you, said Barbara Stollberg at the farewell dinner. We were marked indeed, the Fellows of 2019/2020.