



A MEETING OF MINDS (AND DISTANCING
OF BODIES) IN THE GREEN FOREST
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We arrived at Wiko in early August 2019 so that our six-and-a-half-year-old daughter could start first grade in a nearby Berlin school, full of trepidation about how this new chapter in her life and the adjustment to the new language would work out. I too had a distinct sense of “starting school” and meeting other students for the first time, as the Wiko German course put many of us Fellows aspiring to improve our language skills into a classroom and prompted us to start introducing ourselves, often in rudimentary German,

intensifying the sense of both excitement about learning and inadequacy in communication. During those early days of the German course, before the academic year officially started, I had a conversation that gave me the preview of my Wiko experience. Over lunch I tried to explain to an evolutionary biologist colleague the reasons for the growing Sunni-Shii polarization in the sixteenth-century Ottoman-Safavid context, which he, having worked on the ecology of communication, including mimicry, territorial signals, and displays of aggression between species, understood perfectly and followed with eminently pertinent questions. This was going to be a very different communicational environment, I thought to myself, one that would definitely pull me out of my disciplinary cocoon...

Indeed, as I write this at the end of our Wiko stay, the overall feeling is one of exceptional spiritual and intellectual enrichment that inevitably entailed both ups and downs, and not only because we entered the pandemic-induced lockdown at the end of March 2020. The shock to my system started with the onset of the academic year and the daily lunches with Fellows and staff. The intensity of the conversations meant that I largely had no idea what kind of food I ingested between roughly September and November. Some people are natural conversationalists, while others do not thrive in such settings, and it took me a couple of months to adjust and manage to get back to productive work after a hearty meal and intense conversation.

At the same time, the intensity and frequency of conversation was a blessing: I had come to Wiko with a plan to work together with my colleague Derin Terzioğlu on two co-edited volumes and potentially a co-written monograph ensuing from the project we had been working on for the past five years. We had never before had a chance to spend extended time in the same place and have regular discussions that would allow us to understand how we want to shape these volumes, as well as our own concluding studies within the framework of the project. Daily walks in Grunewald and post-lunch coffees at Wiko, often together with other colleagues who shared our interest in the nature of early modern confessional identities and the categories of religion and confession in general, allowed us to explain both to ourselves and to others what it was that we were doing and wanted to do, both together and individually. It helped greatly that our cohort had a number of Fellows, partners, and staff interested in Islam, religious politics, and early modernity, and I already miss conversations with all of them.

Productive discussions were not limited to Wiko Fellows, partners, and staff, and I profited immensely from conversations with various colleagues in Berlin (and beyond) affiliated with other local academic institutions and institutes. During the first semester,

I also gave talks at the Freie Universität in Berlin and Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. As a result of all these interactions and the help of the wonderful Wiko library staff, who obtained all the necessary secondary literature, I was able to complete an extended essay that was intended as the introduction to one of the edited volumes we were preparing but in fact represented a conceptual framework for and evaluation of the entire project (“Entangled Confessionalizations? Historiographical Considerations on the Politics of Piety, Empire and Community Building in Early Modern Eurasia”). I was now able to envision how I would write my own monograph, while Derin and I finished one edited volume (*Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750*, Brill, 2020) and brought the second one close to submission. Nor was I the only productive member of my family – like many Fellow partners, my husband was able to work in peace and finish his own book manuscript, while our daughter had a great experience starting first grade in a bilingual school and eventually started to speak, read, and write German. (The support of the Preparing Your Stay team at Wiko was essential in this respect, as they guided us both to an excellent school and a wonderful German-speaking babysitter.)

Hand in hand with the increasingly sharper focus on my own work went the progressive expansion of horizons through both daily casual conversations and regular Tuesday Colloquia, when we had a chance to listen to each other and on a couple of occasions also introduce another Fellow in a few words that provided the opportunity to delve deeper into their work. The Tuesday Colloquia took us on wild intellectual field trips during which we were invited to ponder the universe from the perspective of a fruit fly, discuss whether bees have dreams, think about individual rights and autonomy in the era of digitalization, or consider the importance of poor oocyte quality for female infertility, to name just a few among many fascinating topics. One of the highlights of the fall semester was also the actual field trip to Dresden’s Grünes Gewölbe, guided by fellow historian Dror Wahrman, two days before the epic robbery of the museum’s collection! A number of us also persisted with German classes, thanks in no small measure to Eva von Kügelgen and her team’s great enthusiasm for teaching and tailoring the classes to our needs.

And then, in March, everything was suddenly brought to a standstill... The seminars, lunch conversations, classy Thursdays dinners, and socializing altogether had to stop as the lockdown set in. Wiko’s main building became eerily empty, while Fellows withdrew into their apartments and offices and onto Zoom. Those with kids suddenly found themselves having to supervise schoolwork in addition to trying to continue their own research and writing, whereby the courtyard of the Villa Walther became an indispensable and

safe outlet for kids' energies and the main "theater of operations" for their endless mischievous adventures. But we were not left to our own devices: the Wiko leadership, helmed by Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger and Thorsten Wilhelmy, and the home-bound staff all made sure that we were well-informed and safe; Daniel Schönpflug made sure that we stayed connected and familiarized ourselves with the intricacies of Zoom; while Dunia Najjar and the restaurant team retooled to deliver lunches to Villa Walther.

As the spring progressed, we came to grasp the full importance of being in Grunewald, next to one of Berlin's most extensive wooded areas – while people in other parts of the city struggled to keep physical distance in the neighborhood parks, we could take daily walks, bike rides, and jogs in the woods. These walks, as well as meetings on the deck in the courtyard of Villa Walther, while observing due physical distance, became the new setting for continuing interrupted conversations and catching up with colleagues. They also became crucial for the spirit of the cohort, especially as a number of Fellows had to leave Berlin early on in the lockdown and it looked like there might not be much of a Wiko experience to be had this year. However, while from both scholarly and personal angles, on both Zoom and in various green spaces around Grunewald, we collectively pondered the meaning of the epidemic for the world and each of us individually, we developed a feeling of closeness and camaraderie that I rarely felt with a group of people that I had known for such a short time. We were suspended in time together in the middle of the Green Forest, often feeling guilty about the contrast between the worldwide horror we saw in the news and the surreal beauty of our immediate surroundings, wondering how we would return to our respective homes and what we would encounter there.

The ten months we spent at Wiko felt much longer than that, packing a dense cluster of experiences, intellectual insights, and emotions that will take a while to process against the background of COVID and the (hopefully soon) post-COVID world. But whenever I find myself in a need of inspiration in the future, my thoughts will likely instinctively go to the invigorating walks and conversations in the Green Forest.