



THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN
OF WIKO
JAROSŁAW KUISZ AND
KAROLINA WIGURA

Jarosław Kuisz, a Polish scholar and activist, was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1976. He studied Law and Philosophy at the University of Warsaw and Sciences Po in Paris. His academic interests include the international history of law, the philosophy of law, and legal propaganda during communism. He has written several books, among them *Charakter prawny porozumień sierpniowych 1980–1981* (The Legal Character of the August Agreements of 1980–1981), *Koniec pokoleń podległości: Młodzi Polacy, liberalizm i przyszłość państwa* (The End of the Occupation Generations: Young Poles, Liberalism, and The Future of The State), and most recently *Propaganda bezprawia: O “popularyzowaniu prawa” w pierwszych latach Polski Ludowej* (The Propaganda of Lawlessness: About “Popularizing Law” in the First Years of the People’s Republic of Poland). He has held visiting fellowships at the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna; St. Antony’s College, Oxford; and Columbia College Chicago.

The Polish scholar and activist Karolina Wigura was born in Warsaw, Poland in 1980. She studied Sociology, Philosophy, and Political Science at the University of Warsaw and the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich. Her academic interests include the political philosophy of the 20th century, the ethics of memory, and the history of ideas about emotions. She has written several books, among them *Wina narodów. Przebaczenie jako strategia prowadzenia polityki* (The Guilt of Nations: Forgiveness as a Political Strategy), which was awarded the Józef Tischner Prize in 2012, and *Wynalazek Nowoczesnego Serca. Filozoficzne źródła współczesnego myślenia o emocjach* (The Invention of the Modern Heart: Philosophical Sources of Contemporary Thinking About Emotions), which was nominated for the Tadeusz Kotarbiński Prize in 2020. She has held visiting fellowships at

the Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna; St. Antony's College, Oxford; and the Central European University, Budapest.

Since 2009, Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura have created and edited *Kultura Liberalna* (Liberal Culture), a centrist, liberal media organization that publishes an influential weekly online journal featuring articles, commentary, and debate. *Kultura Liberalna* also publishes books, organizes international events, and develops partnerships with other media outlets and intellectual networks around the globe. Also, from 2016 to 2018, Karolina Wigura and Jarosław Kuisz co-directed the Polish Programme at St. Antony's College, Oxford. They publish widely apart from that in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *the Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, etc. Recently, Karolina Wigura and Jarosław Kuisz co-edited *The End of the Liberal Mind: Poland's New Politics*. – Address: *Kultura Liberalna* Foundation, ul. Chmielna 15/9, Warsaw 00-021, Poland.

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We arrived at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* with a disturbing experience of our country changing into an illiberal democracy and hoped to find some peace. The experience, we believed, provided a lot of information not only for our fellow Poles. In 2015, Poland became a laboratory of populism. We believed its experience offers valuable lessons for others who are also struggling with the global illiberal wave.

All liberal democracies are alike; every illiberal democracy is illiberal in its own way. This riff adapting the opening line of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* is meant to underscore a truth that should perhaps be obvious: Illiberal populists are not as similar to one another as their liberal opponents seem to imagine. Viewed up close, these politicians differ in their governing styles, their political strength, and, last but not least, in their agendas. In Berlin, we wanted to focus on both the macro- and the micro-picture of illiberal populism. Observing the unfolding of illiberal populism in our country has been particularly painful for us in the past few years and we needed some space to look at it from a distance.

Our friends, whom we informed about our stay at *Wiko* ahead of time, replied with congratulations, always adding the adjective “wonderful” to the name of the *Kolleg*. Soon, we realized how right they were. Our expectations were quickly surpassed. *Wiko* is the ideal to which other similar institutions may aspire, but they never quite reach it. To realize our task, we needed, first of all, lots of books. This is what *Wiko* provides in a unique style. In similar places, it is the fellows who search for literature, and the library

that provides the chosen titles. At Wiko, the Bibliothek performs extensive research on literature that might be interesting for a Fellow and brings it immediately to him or her.

What we also urgently needed were interlocutors with whom we could exchange our ideas, aiming at proving our argumentation and looking for its weak points. This was provided to us, and more. During the Dienstagskolloquium, which is a regular seminar for all Fellows, we presented our work and received insightful questions; we also listened to the presentations of others, which enabled us to broaden our knowledge of nearly all subjects that could have been thought about, from the history of music and the meaning of borders to the importance for the global climate of sea salmon's migration from one hemisphere to another. Wiko also takes care of all its visiting and Permanent Fellows, as well as its team, to have the chance to regularly meet and chat: this role was played for us by the daily lunches and Thursday dinners. Finally, exchanges were provided also in German. We had the pleasure to take part in the German lessons organized by the forgiving and patient Eva von Kügelgen. She helped us not only to polish our Polish German, but also to delve deeply into discussions about the Nobel Prize for Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke awarded in 2019 and to make friendships that lasted for our stay at Wiko and beyond.

In the beautiful book by Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, tuberculosis patients come to the sanatorium in Davos to revive their damaged health in its special atmosphere. Outside, Europe is torn by revolutionary changes and war, but the Davos sanatorium remains the same forever, inviting people to rest and conduct philosophical discussions. The experience of the Wissenschaftskolleg was somehow similar for us. For several months of our stay, it was an island in the rapidly changing, emotional political landscape of Europe, and for us – a source of rest from watching the changes that are inevitably taking place in our country. This stay resulted in some written work. Publishing our essay “Reclaiming Politics of Emotions” in the *Journal of Democracy* and our book *The End of the Liberal Mind* would never be possible without the peaceful, yet intensive stay at Wiko. Some pieces in *The Guardian* and *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* followed, also conceptualized and written in the exceptional atmosphere of the Kolleg. We had the pleasure to regularly present our work also in other Berlin- and Europe- based institutions and conferences, like the WZB and the Athens Democracy Forum.

Yet, Wiko's unusual commitment to the Fellows' wellbeing did not end by helping us perform research on illiberalism. We also lacked advice about how to preserve our organization, *Kultura Liberalna*, in times of the antipluralistic politics of Poland's government.

We were fortunate to discuss this with the wonderful Rector of Wiko, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, as well as with Daniel Schönplflug and Thorsten Wilhelmy. Another person who greatly helped us solve the puzzle of running a liberal organization in the midst of an illiberal revolution was one of the Permanent Fellows, Wolf Lepenies.

Last but not least, we are extremely grateful to those members of the Wiko staff who simply made our everyday stay pleasant and simply possible, although we came with small children and with some extraordinary diet requirements. How to begin to thank them: Andrea, Nina, Vera, Katharina, Petria, Sophia, Dunia, and all those who organized the school, the kindergarten, the babysitters, the meals – and everything that makes Wiko such a beautiful and remarkable experience. Thank you, dear team at Wiko and dear friends, for the months spent together in good discussions, good company, and a remarkable atmosphere. It is good to have in mind at all times that wherever we are and whatever happens – the Magic Mountain of Wiko is still there.