



EVOLVING AT WIKO
ALEXANDROS PITTIS

Alexandros Pittis is an evolutionary biologist. He uses comparative genomics and computational analysis to understand how evolution has shaped cells and complexity. His interests range from the origins of eukaryotes – a main transition for cellular life on earth – to the roots of the nervous system and the molecular evolution of complex behavior. He studied Biology at the University of Athens in Greece before moving to the University of Pompeu Fabra and the Centre for Genomic Regulation (CRG) in Barcelona for his post-graduate steps. He earned his Ph.D. in CRG under the supervision of Dr. Toni Gabaldón. After seven months at the Museum of Natural History in New York working in the group of Dr. Eunsoo Kim, he moved on as an EMBO Long-Term Fellow with Prof. Patrick Keeling at the Biodiversity Research Centre of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. At the beginning of 2020, he continued at the Berlin Institute for Advanced Study (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin – Wiko) as a six-month Fellow at the College for Life Sciences (“gain time to think” program). E-mail: alexandros.pittis@gmail.com.

I started as a six-month Fellow of the College for Life Sciences at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin on a transition, moving back to Europe after three-and-a-half years in North America. Transitioning in my career stages, transitioning in my research lines. When I was first introduced to Wiko by a previous Fellow (thanks Jeremy) while still in Vancouver, I thought it could be a good opportunity to explore new topics and “gain time to think”, as the program’s name was what I thought was exactly what I needed at the time. Wiko seemed like the ideal place for me to attempt to enter the brain research world from my perspective, through microbial genetic and evolutionary lenses. To reflect also on my

future steps, establish new collaborations, and develop new ideas that I needed to keep myself stimulated towards a more independent position in academia. All these are more or less the things that happened during my stay, or seem to be happening.

I chose to start at Wiko in the second half of the year – in January – when the appointment of many of my Co-Fellows at the College was coming to an end. Before I really got to know them better, they were getting ready for their departure, which basically meant that after the first two months I was the only Fellow of the College left at Wiko. I should say that the academic setting at Wiko was strikingly different from all my previous environments and probably from the vast majority of academic environments that any biologist could find himself in. I do not remember attending a two-hour talk (colloquium) before – the second hour dedicated to questions and discussion, usually on topics largely unfamiliar to me. And I never before attended on a daily basis social lunches, not to mention lunches at which – especially as it seemed to me during the first period – most people at the table were senior academics not working on anything even remotely similar to my things, nor had I a good level of understanding of their academic background. Needless to say, both colloquia and lunches were sometimes intimidating experiences at first. And there were moments when I felt out of place academically or “lonely” in terms of my personal concerns, the majority of the Fellows holding senior professorships in prestigious universities, mostly in social sciences. The truth is, it did not take me long to realize that almost all these people were genuinely interested in supporting each other and sharing their experience in a tight-community manner. But also that I was part of a community of creative people, intellectually adaptable and flexible in interests and knowledge far beyond the standard.

My main objective was to start working on the molecular roots of the nervous system, learn more about the topic, develop ideas, and interact or collaborate with researchers in my new field. I started working together with a very good team consisting of researchers based in Heidelberg and Madrid, taking advantage of the huge independence that Wiko was providing me, which I was hoping to formalize further by organizing a meeting in Berlin with the gratefully appreciated support of Wiko and the Otto and Martha Fischbeck Foundation, which never finally happened physically. By the time my initial surprise and all my internal pressure to have an answer to the question “What comes next for you?” were taking a productive and creative turn, the COVID outbreak struck, with everything that followed. I am so glad that the first intuitive thought to repatriate, probably the first thought of everybody living abroad before thinking twice, was rapidly reconsidered. For

many reasons, I consider myself very lucky to have spent the first shocking corona period till the end of June in the Villa Walther, at Wiko, in Grunewald, in Berlin. And now, looking back, I would dare say that, strangely, there were many good moments also, interesting and emotional, creative and productive, with intense transformations on all fronts.

There are not enough words to thank the staff at Wiko with no single exception for its – unprecedented for me and I believe most others – support and understanding during the whole period and especially during the lockdown. And their kindness, and their professionalism and competence, their presence. During a storm, it is easier to feel the real essence of people. I would also like to thank the amazing community of my Co-Fellows for all the good paradigms they offered generously, for the lessons and inspiration, the friendship, for sharing the experience together. A few months later, I am still digesting the effect my Wiko experience had on me. I am already certain that my time in Berlin moved me forward in the direction I was hoping for without knowing it, professionally and personally.