



THE PRINCE, THE JEWELER, THE MOGUL,
AND THE VIRUS
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I am an Israeli cultural historian of early modern Europe, with a particular interest in expanding the archive that historians work with to include works of art. I taught for many years in the UK and the US. A decade ago, I moved back to Israel, where I took a break from writing in 2014–2018 to serve as the Dean of Humanities at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Having been trained as a historian of Britain, I have written in the past about topics such as why did the British from the late eighteenth century begin to believe they lived in a society with a middle class (hint: the answer in my view is not because there suddenly was one); and about the history of the ways people think about categories of identity and about personal identity, trying to show that in the eighteenth century there was an “*ancien régime of identity*” utterly different from the modern one, which then disappeared. In recent years, I have written about an idiosyncratic Dutch-English painter, Edward Collier, who used peculiar trompe l’œil paintings of printed and handwritten documents to make an extraordinary critique of a radical media revolution of the late seventeenth century; and, with Jonathan Sheehan, about how Europeans from the late seventeenth century developed new ways of thinking about the origins of order in the world when they no longer relied on divine providence for every aspect of it, new ways that we described as “self-organizing thinking”. – Address: Faculty of Humanities, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel. E-mail: dror.wahrman@mail.huji.ac.il.

The sojourn at Wiko was my opportunity to pick up and complete a book project that I began before I became dean, an interpretation of an object in the great palace museum in Dresden (the *Grünes Gewölbe*). This object, one of the most extraordinary works of

decorative art in early modern Europe, called the *Thron des Großmoguls* (The Throne of the Great Mogul), is an elaborate multi-piece model of the court of the Indian mogul Aurangzeb during his birthday celebrations. The Saxon prince August the Strong purchased it around 1700 for an enormous sum. It is also one of the most *puzzling* objects in early modern Europe: why did the jeweler Johann Melchior Dinglinger invest an inordinate amount of time, effort, and skill in making this piece of his own accord, with his two brothers, over a period of eight years? Why does it have this unique form and content? Why did the Saxon prince, who at the time was in a major political and financial crisis, purchase this work? Why does it include dozens of miniature elements that seem unconnected to its overall theme? What can this artwork tell us about the political circumstances of the Holy Roman Empire c. 1700, or about the imperatives of the world of art at that point, or indeed about global trends during this period?

I spent my Wiko year writing a book that tries to answer these questions. Structurally, the book progresses in what is best described as a floral pattern, in the manner that a child draws a flower. At the center stands the *Thron des Großmoguls*. Each of the twelve fast-moving chapters begins at the center and traces, in petal after petal, a movement away from the model and then back again. Each detour unpacks one element of this complex object, keeping in mind the peculiarities of form and content, and takes the analysis into a different aspect of European or global history c. 1700, be it politics, ideas, literature, art, or culture – aspects that are embodied in the model, each in its own way. Each chapter picks certain elements from the model to look at closely: mirror, crown, throne, miniature, pyramid, script, and so on. Cumulatively these chapters offer an interpretation of the historical meanings inhering in this unique object (including the significance of its uniqueness itself).

Wiko was the ideal setting for this project. The year away from work with such fantastic conditions and care (not to mention the lakes) gave me the peace of mind to write intensively and quickly. The conversation with so many fellow Fellows and staff specializing in so many different fields gave me new angles I could not have come up with myself. The chance to improve my German (as an English historian, this was my first foray into German history), with the wonderful help of Eva and her team. And above all was the library. To write this book, I needed many hundreds of references from different types of sources, as well as to track down close to a hundred illustrations, many from different and hard-to-find sources. I cannot begin to describe the effort, dedication, and professional expertise that the library team put into finding all these sources, solving difficult riddles, and placing so many resources at my disposal.

Wiko is also close to Dresden, which was of course key to doing my research. The year's group also took advantage of this and had a Wiko Fellows and staff day tour to the *Grünes Gewölbe*, which, for me at least, preparing and guiding it, was a real highlight of the year. It also became something of a loaded event, because 36 hours after our thorough visit to the Saxon treasures the museum was broken into and some of the most expensive pieces of jewelry in its collection were stolen. We were among the last people to see them in place.

In our capacity as group speakers, Sharon Strauss and I organized a series of tours for Wiko Fellows, drawing on different Fellows' specialties in different ways. My partner, Roni Taharlev, is a painter, who used her time at Wiko to paint in our Villa Walther apartment with a Berlin influence and who even presented her work at Wiko. Together we led one of our year's tours, in the Gemäldegalerie, which is a must for lovers of European old masters.

Have I forgotten something? Ah yes, the coronavirus... we are of course the year that was interrupted by the pandemic. Roni and I were affected quite immediately because Roni's model, with whom she worked closely in our Wiko apartment no. 134, was found to be COVID-19 positive (this when Germany as a whole had only some 500 cases! Go figure...). So Roni and I were placed in quarantine, separately, and thereafter took one of the very last flights back to Israel, and thus ended our year abruptly in mid-March. And yet, my Wiko year did not end: the library team came back and continued to help me from a distance, and the first-ever Wiko Zoom colloquia were also memorable. We do regret the hasty departure and the lack of closure to what was truly an amazing year, otherwise perfect in every way.