



## WRITING AND RUNNING IN GRUNEWALD SHAMIL JEPPIE

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I started my Wiko experience in August in online German classes (including film evenings) with the ever-patient Eva von Kügelgen. As the late winter days of Cape Town dragged on, Vera Pfeffer sent flight possibilities with few options due to the pandemic, and only “repatriation” flights were leaving the country. I was *not returning* to a European country, so theoretically would not be allowed to take any of them. At one stage, I thought I would become a “Zoom Fellow,” as departure dates were set and flights booked, then the flights were cancelled. I became rather disheartened until Vera wrote, then called, confident that, even though it was short notice with a long layover, a Cape Town–Istanbul–Berlin flight with a 10-hour stopover at Istanbul Airport should work! It did. I arrived at

Villa Walther on a balmy mid-September afternoon to a warm welcome from Vera. After a short quarantine, I presented myself at Wallotstraße 19, and there were a few weeks of “socially distanced” lunches, Tuesday Colloquia in the seminar room, two Thursday dinners, and German classes in Villa Jaffé. However, soon it was “virtual” contact only and delivered lunches, with trips to Wallotstraße buildings only to collect books or mail, never without the appropriate mask. The lockdown was tightened in November and lasted through late May 2021; in between there were short periods of relaxation of the rules, but with Covid test results always necessary if one wanted to do anything beyond basic shopping. My nostrils had to just accept the intrusions if I wanted to see an exhibition or see and hear the Philharmonic live. However, June in Berlin with lots of long sunny days was wonderful, memorable. Then packing began and with it the nostalgia for the months past of quietly writing, engaging with new colleagues, and experiencing Berlin public space.

The lockdown conditions suited me in the beginning, because I could focus entirely on getting on with my writing, without trips to museums or visits to restaurants, for instance. With the excellent library services, I was able to immediately gather a good number of works that I could not consult before my arrival. I was able to keep many books in my apartment for the entirety of my stay; some multiple-volume works I would otherwise not have been able to check out of a library at all. In the first quarter, I finished papers that I had promised to editors and continued work on my book in between. By late November, a “book club,” an interdisciplinary group with an interest in writing well-researched works for a “general readership,” had been formed. This forced me to focus on writing draft chapters to pre-circulate to others in the group. At the outset, our proposals were subjected to rigorous criticism. I had to think carefully and write with more imagination about how to make 16<sup>th</sup>-century West African manuscript book history interesting to biologists, an astronomer, a Europeanist, and a legal scholar, amongst others. I benefitted hugely from the probing questions and stylistic suggestions from the group. I learned a great deal from their work, from their comments on my work, and from Daniel Schönplflug’s steering of the group and his insights on good writing and publishing matters. The approach to my project changed, for the better. I also found the responses to my work from the Early Modern history group most valuable. My ten months in Grunewald surrounded by a group of highly motivated scholars, including many historians, who were curious about my work and generous with their suggestions and criticism, made all the challenges of a long period of various kinds of isolation worthwhile. Leaving aside the genuine difficulties and challenges of social isolation during this time, I can only

dream of more of this kind of productive quiet, rigorous but generous engagement, and collegiality.

I was able to participate – as presenter or in the audience – in various seminars in Berlin, such as at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, the Freie Universität, and the *EUME* programme of the Forum Transregionale Studien (for which I thank Georges Khalil). Most of the new colleagues who attended my talks, and whose work I got to hear about, I could not meet in person, unfortunately.

If the restrictions of various intensities of lockdown and increasingly cold weather allowed or forced me to sit and work on my book, then my need to move was satisfied by the birth of what we called the *Wicked Wiko Runners Club* (with a self-appointed leadership and even a club T-shirt). I had an entry to the Berlin Marathon for September 2020 and was training according to a programme until cancellation of the event. Two days after my arrival, I started exploring on my own Grunewald, with its rich range of historic street names, and parts of the forest and adjacent areas, but not yet too far in. I was told on my first day that the forest is just up the road, but one needs to be aware of the wild boars! In late October, we had the running group that over the months explored the forest and lakes in ever-increasing distances with no boars in sight, only lots of dogs in places on a Sunday morning. The Sunday long runs were wonderful for exploring the area through Krumme Lanke to Schlachtensee and even part of the tough Havelhöhenweg; we would effortlessly cover up to a half-marathon (and some of us more) at times, and in the Spring we added a Tuesday late afternoon speedwork session at an excellent community sports facility nearby. The running club kept us healthy and inspired, and we often continued to chat about our work, with the biologists commenting on insects, bees, and birds that the rest of us would not have noticed otherwise. (Perhaps I was too focused on keeping the pace slow on Sundays and making sure we got the speedwork sessions right on the Tuesdays when I was present.) It was a fantastic way to do things in a group and discover the Grunewald forest, especially in a period when there were few alternatives for social interaction (at one stage even group runs were disallowed by the Covid *Beschränkungen/Einschränkungen* – words even native speakers had to get used to). Apart from the running, there was the possibility of swimming in the terrific lakes along the routes we took. In January, one wonders how a person could even touch such water (although there were always a few locals immersing themselves); in June, one wonders how could one not swim in such water! I could not get enough of the lakes, which are just a short bicycle ride away when one is not running around them.

Daniel – a strong runner, former triathlete, and committed member of the club – was appointed Life President of the *Wicked Wiko Runners Club*. So the club is assured of a future in Grunewald. Long-distance running, late afternoon jogs, or speed sessions and sunset forest walks cannot, however, exhaust all one's time when not writing and reading. They are often as solitary as writing and reading. I was happy to be included when various small gatherings were organized – often, but not only, in a quiet Villa Jaffé and within the limits of the changing and detailed Covid-19 *Beschränkungen* – to meet to watch movies and have long dinners together. I had to upgrade my elementary cooking and baking skills for these occasions. But with enough time, I was able to research, test, try, and produce consumable fare without subsequent complaints of suffering. Some of my neighbours in Villa Walther will know how many times I attempted to perfect a dish or dessert.

Of course, I cannot fathom what kind of experience I would have had under normal conditions, so I cannot really make any suggestions about what or how things could be different. The situation was beyond the limits of the leadership to change; and under the circumstances they tried everything to keep us engaged and satisfied. It was an exceptional year because of the pandemic and we had to collectively and individually decide how to make the best of an extraordinary situation. The discoveries and serendipitous encounters over many months of lunches, sitting in the lounge reading the newspapers, or simply walking together up Koenigsallee were minimal, yet this is what I imagined would be among the wonderful aspects of a year at Wiko. There are so many possibilities in a place like Wiko.

We were never able to be together as a family over the ten months because of travel restrictions, despite the best efforts of the team who got me here. I dearly missed Gigi, Mazin, and Haytham and their birthdays, I missed important birthdays and feast days together and hope conditions in the near future permit a Berlin visit. The Wiko staff members are exceptional in their commitment to fostering curiosity and rigour and to freeing Fellows from all sorts of burdens so that we can focus on our scholarly interests. I have to thank the leadership and administration for inviting me, then getting me to Berlin in extraordinary times, and making my stay so worthwhile and memorable despite everything: the Rector, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Daniel, Thorsten, Katharina, Petria, Vera, Nina, Maike, Sabine, Sophia, the great team of librarians (Stefan, Kirsten, Anja, Dominik et al.), the IT team, Eva for the German classes, Dunia and Daniela for feeding us, and Dennis and Daniela for caring for our living space.