



MY *WUNDERJAHR* (OR RATHER HALF OF IT)
IN GRUNEWALD
Yael A. STERNHELL

Yael Sternhell is a Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) of History and American Studies at Tel Aviv University, specializing in the history of the Civil War era and its long aftermath. She received her Ph.D. from Princeton in 2008, after which she returned to her native Israel for her post-doctoral work and joined the faculty at Tel Aviv in 2011. Her first book, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* came out with Harvard University Press in 2012 and attempts to rethink the history of the Civil War from the perspective of movement rather than violence. Her second project, as she explains below, is a study of the paperwork left behind in the wake of the Civil War and how its management as archival records shaped what we know, or think we know, about the conflict. In between, she has published essays on the history and historiography of slave emancipation, wartime rumors, and the antiwar turn in Civil War scholarship. Her work has won awards from the Southern Historical Association and the Organization of American Historians, as well as two grants from the Israel Science Foundation. In her spare time, she serves as Vice President of the New Israel Fund, the country's leading human rights and social justice organization, and tries to maintain hope that a just and lasting peace in Israel/Palestine is possible. – Address: Department of English and American Studies, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, 69978, Israel. E-mail: yaelst@tauex.tau.ac.il.

My fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg had been in the works for several years, but as it was finally approaching, it became unclear if I would be able to take advantage of the invitation. I found out that I was newly pregnant with my second child less than six months before we were supposed to leave for Berlin. Roughly at the same time, Covid-19

arrived both in Israel and in Germany, upending life like no event in recent memory. A few months later, my beloved father passed away unexpectedly, leaving our closely knit family stunned and heartbroken. Everything, it seemed, was conspiring against the idea of my going to Berlin. And yet I decided to stick with the plan. In my mind, it was as if my ability to maintain a scholarly career amidst life's challenges depended on whether I could make it to Grunewald, infant and toddler in tow, in the midst of a pandemic.

And so I did. Berlin was covered in heavy snow when we arrived in early February, and for the first few days we did not even realize that the Villa Walther was situated between two lakes. Yet after a short quarantine, we found it surprisingly easy to get into a new routine. We had the good and rare fortune of having excellent childcare for both girls even during the height of the pandemic, which allowed for a reasonable stretch of work every day. There were few if any distractions. The city remained mostly under lockdown. There was no shopping, or sightseeing, or traveling. The Wiko itself was somewhat of a ghost town, with many Fellows staying put in their apartments and others leaving their offices only to get a lunch tray. Academic activity took place entirely online.

Amidst this eerie quiet, I was thriving. Somehow, the monasticism of the Covid winter instigated a burst of intellectual creativity the likes of which I have not experienced since my time as a graduate student. Tuning out the news and social media, I found myself totally immersed in my research, my mind working constantly, generating ideas even as I was nursing, or doing laundry, or putting my daughters to sleep. And boy was I in need of such focus! My year at the Wiko was supposed to have been spent finishing a book I had been working on for nearly a decade. Tentatively entitled "War on Record: The Archive and the Making of Civil War History," it is a study of the paperwork generated by both armies fighting in the American Civil War and their afterlives as archival holdings in the hands of the Federal government. It is based on meticulous research in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and on an engagement with the rich theoretical context made available by the field of archival studies. I had amassed an unholy amount of material on the management of these records and on their shifting and complicated roles in the aftermath of the Civil War and spent years, along with several research assistants, transcribing, sorting, and making sense of what can best be defined as the archive of the archive, the body of records generated by bureaucrats as they handled millions upon millions of pieces of paper. I had written three chapters but saved the most challenging part of the work for my time in Grunewald, hoping that the reputation of the Wiko as a place where work actually gets done was justified.

And it was. But how, exactly? I suspect it was a combination of the majesty of the Grunewald scenery, the unique quietude of those winter months (and winter lasted until June that year), and the sense of being transported away from my day-to-day life in Israel, where family always seems to come first, to a different realm, where I was considered and functioned as a historian above all else. Over Zoom and gradually increasingly in person, I enjoyed a series of fruitful and sometimes transformative encounters with Fellows, both Permanent and visiting: Angela Creager, Alex Bevilacqua, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, Luca Giuliani, and above all, Lorraine Daston, whose work on Big Humanities and the sciences of the archives had captured my imagination long before I came to Berlin. The library team located not only every book I needed, but also discovered incredible sources from the 19th century that had eluded my own searches. Finally, but no less critically, the Wiko staff created working conditions that allowed me to... well, actually *work*. That is not always a small feat. Even those of us who are fortunate to share their lives with supportive and feminist partners, and I certainly count myself as one, are often simply underwater with tasks and errands. The Wiko staff is incomparable in its commitment to helping scholars find a way around this reality. By taking on the heavy lifting of dealing with immigration, childcare, and taxes, but also providing advice and assistance in scheduling a doctor's appointment, finding a cleaning person, and completing other time-consuming and distracting chores, Andrea Bergmann, Vera Pfeffer, Maïke Schaper, Nina Kitsos, and their colleagues free up hours and offer a rare peace of mind for overburdened scholars juggling too many balls.

As the days and weeks went by, the unwieldy mass of sources that was to serve as the basis for the second part of my book began to sort itself out into distinct chapters, and gaps in my understanding of the material, which used to seem dauntingly large, began to close. A project ten years in the making finally took the recognizable shape of a book. Even if I had half the hours I needed every day, and half the year I was supposed to spend at the Wiko, I was able to do exactly what I had come there for. Shortly before I left, I told Barbara that she should consider allotting a regular spot for a new mother, as she might benefit the most from the infrastructure and environment that enable a mid-career scholar to stay in the game. While many academic institutions talk the talk of gender equality, few actually implement policies that can make this lofty goal real. The Wiko is small and wealthy and can no doubt provide resources that starved public universities like my own academic home cannot. But it does offer, in my experience, a way forward for academia more broadly. Too often the conversation on gender revolves around women in

positions of leadership or about hidden bias in the hiring and tenure processes. These are crucial issues, which must be dealt with effectively. But the Wiko has found a way to tackle a different and equally pressing problem: the mid-career bottleneck that slows down and can easily derail women's scholarly endeavors. For me, the extraordinarily warm welcome by Barbara and Raine, who also shared stories about their own families, along with the dedication and competence of the staff, made for something truly unique: an institution that acknowledges and attempts to reconcile the competing forces in many women's lives: the desire for motherhood, on the one hand, and intellectual ambition, on the other. The Wiko has helped me regain my footing at a crucial moment in my career without sacrificing the well-being of my children, and I am, and forever will be, deeply grateful for the time I spent there and for all it has given me.