



MY WIKO BIKE DIARY  
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I have never been a sporty type, so the idea of biking the 30 km from Neukölln, where I live, to Wiko (and back) on a daily basis, would never have crossed my mind, if it weren't for the pandemic. The inauguration of my Wiko year thus became the onset of a journey that, as I calculated with terror, would take me across 6,000 km, or the distance from Berlin to Bishkek. Given the lockdowns, quarantines, Kita closures, and, eventually, my own surrender, however, I only got as far as Minsk.

The one thousand kilometres that I pedalled in these ten months are a good metaphor for this extraordinary year. First, because, as a female academic and a mom, I found my working time so drastically reduced by the lockdown measures that I accomplished just a fraction of what I had hoped for this year. Second, because this year at Wiko really brought me closer to Minsk. As the pro-democratic revolution broke out in Belarus in the fall of 2020, followed by the brutal clampdown on the protest movement, the country was on the minds of all of us at Wiko.

Hence, instead of a proud list of publications completed under the Wiko roof, here come some notes from the journey that was going to take me to Bishkek, but got me “only” to Minsk.

**September 4, 45<sup>th</sup> km:** Introduction of the Fellows. It takes me more than 75 minutes to go the distance that Google Map optimistically calculates as 45. I still get lost several times, with the straps of my laptop bag life-threateningly entangling into my wheels. There is a drizzle, so I arrive at the socially-distanced, face-masked, yet still quite glamorous introduction of the new Fellows with my shoes covered in mud way more than I would wish.

**September 17, 255<sup>th</sup> km:** The first Thursday Dinner. I make sure I have a whole set of clothes to change *and* extra shoes. Along with waterproof pants with fluorescent stripes and shoe extensions, I am now also a proud owner of an atrociously ugly bike bag, attachable to the rear frame. I think I never looked this German in my whole life. I have optimized my route and improved my pace. I get to Wiko in just under 55 minutes, taking a somewhat scenic route through the parks and cemeteries, avoiding the worst traffic. I arrive slightly out of breath, but I enjoy this dinner a lot. It is my first dinner out in half a year, and the conversation with Hakan Ceylan about religion and nationalism in Poland and Turkey becomes a highlight of the evening.

**October 9, 510<sup>th</sup> km:** A Zoom meeting with Belarusian academics about the situation in the country. Kaciaryna Kryvichanina, Irina Sukhy, and Uladzimir Valodzin report from Minsk on the ongoing protests in Belarus and the reprisals that have followed them. Seated in the stately Colloquium Room, peeking into the Minsk living rooms of our Belarusian colleagues, who daily have to fear detention, we feel both very fortunate and inadequate. The exchange leaves us deeply impressed and unsettled.

**November 17, 660<sup>th</sup> km:** *Habilitationsschrift* printed out and shipped to Hamburg. Hurray!

**November 30, 750<sup>th</sup> km:** Book proposal rejected. Back to square one.

**December 14, 840<sup>th</sup> km:** The Corona incidence in Berlin is rising, its numbers soaring to over 20,000 a day, and there is the first Covid case at Wiko. It is also getting cold. My thighs get numb on the bike, despite thermal underwear. Someone tells me a good method from the military is to insulate your legs with newspaper. I tried it out, and I have to say: *Forschung und Lehre* has never been put to a better use!

**December 18, 870<sup>th</sup> km:** We pack and ship Christmas parcels for the children of three laid-off academics in Minsk. Thanks to the generosity of the Wiko Fellows and staff, a huge box of sweets, toys, and clothes came together.

**February 18, 900<sup>th</sup> km:** Back to Wiko after a long break. After the common lunches were cancelled and winter surprised us with actual snow, I have been working from home. Now that the snow is finally gone, it's such a joy to hop on my bike again and ride to Grunewald. Our whole existence has moved online: colloquia, public talks, conferences, team meetings, the research itself. Our sense of community is reduced to a Zoom gallery view. Only the Wiko library is unstoppable. And even if we sneak in just for a moment, face mask and all, to collect our stash, it's such a pleasure to know that the analogue world is still out there.

**March 22, 990<sup>th</sup> km:** No more biking. I move to Grunewald for the remaining three months of my fellowship. Seeing the spring in Grunewald is such a joy. Second only to the pleasure of seeing other Wiko Fellows in 3-D, now as next-door neighbours. With most of the lockdown restrictions still in place, as the temperatures go milder, the outdoor life of Villa Walther is coming to life.

**April 5, 990<sup>th</sup> km (still):** One of the rare "Wiko moments" for me today. I never expected to work side by side with a biologist. And here we are, Marcelo Aizen and I, spending a few hours reconstructing and transcribing the testimony of a Jewish girl from Poland, Ita Frajdenberg, who, having survived in hiding, faces the hardships of post-war antisemitism and eventually leaves for Brazil. Without Marcelo's help, her powerfully moving

testimony in Portuguese would never be accessible to me. But best of all is just to be able to sit in my office with a colleague. Such a normal thing that is now a highlight.

**June 28, 990<sup>th</sup> km:** My final act at Wiko. As most Fellows are packing their suitcases, booking their PCR tests, and getting ready to fly home, I'm setting up my *Habilitations-kolloquium* Zoom. Equipped with an ultra-professional microphone that one could probably make a music record with (thank you, Frank!) and invaluable tips from Daniel Schönflug on how to survive this German academic ritual, at 2:36 p.m. I become a *Privatdozentin*. Now I can pack my suitcases, too.

**July 2:** Returning from my Wiko residence on my cargo-bike, I hit the 1,000<sup>th</sup> km of my journey. It has been an exceptionally hard year that brought us to the limits of our mental and physical resistance. It was difficult to come to terms with the reduced productivity and to accept the non-negotiable limitations: an oral history expedition to Belarus – scratched (possibly for years); archive trips to Poland – postponed until further notice. Workshops and conferences – cancelled, or squeezed into fatiguing Zooms, during which your child is crawling under your desk or crying in the background. Yet, even though our Wiko year was so much different from the ones before and, hopefully, those ahead, it was an immense privilege to be part of this institution in 2020/2021. With the unwavering support of the technical and academic staff, heroic (and uninterrupted!) library and language services, lunchboxes arriving at the doorstep in the darkest hours of lockdowns, and the immense solidarity and human kindness I received from my fellow Fellows, Wiko's green refuge in Grunewald was the best thing that has happened to me this year. And was worth biking to Bishkek for.