



WIKO DAYS: VIGNETTES
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1.

A month or so into our stay at Villa Walther, pressure started to build. “But why,” people kept asking, “why don’t you have a bicycle?” “Why indeed?” I asked myself. “I do need one, or at least I would like to have one; it would make many things easier. What’s worse, I am one of the few people here who doesn’t have a bicycle, I keep stating my intention to get one, but not following through. It’s becoming embarrassing.” But day after day, I continued to live without a bicycle. At one point I even began imagining puzzled, perhaps slightly judgmental exchanges behind my back, like “there goes I., on foot once again,” and so on. Then, one day, M. came to my door and told me he had made me a bicycle out of the spare parts that were lying around unused, perhaps accumulating through the years

from abandoned or broken Wiko bicycles. This unassuming act of generosity moved me with gratitude and wonder. M. managed to put together a means of transportation from a pile of inert objects; and there I went, riding a kind of archeological artefact, stratified with fragments of past Wiko lives, to the nearest Edeka supermarket and beyond.

2.

While taking individual German lessons from our beloved teacher E., I often had to struggle to say even approximately what I wanted to express. But one particularly foggy morning, there was a word I could not remember in any of the languages I knew. Not even in my native language, or my near-native one. After a long pause filled with inarticulate sounds, I confessed this fact to E. To which she smiled brightly and said, in German, something to the effect of: “Ah, but this is a wonderful sign!” At the time, I attributed this reaction in part to E.’s characteristic mixture of kindness and optimism and in part to her esoteric insight into language pedagogy. But later, I started to feel that there really was something wonderful about one’s intended meaning falling through the cracks between languages, to the place, I imagined, where all the different languages meet – at the point of meaning’s inarticulacy.

3.

Inarticulate meaning is pure sociality, pure relation before all content. The linguist Roman Jakobson called this the “phatic” function of language, a marker of sheer contact, like the person picking up the phone and saying, “Hello,” to indicate: someone is there, someone is listening. One thing that struck me at Wiko was the volume of the phatic, an overall atmosphere of trusting cultivation of each other’s company. This brought out a lot of silliness and a lot of earnestness, a combination in fact, in which the two components reinforced each other. So that one day, even A., whose reputation as “the most ironic person at Wiko 21” was established by a vote (which, I must say, fell far short of a quorum and consisted mainly of his friends), even A., whose penchant for conspiracy theories emerged thereafter and seemed to square awkwardly with his ostensible skills as an ironist – even A., in short, confessed that in no other intellectual setting had he felt so known, accepted, and appreciated simply for who he was. Speaking of conspiracy theories, it makes me wonder: was our food spiked with endorphins?

4.

And speaking of food, how do I describe the solicitude with which D. and the kitchen staff treated our various dietary restrictions? Mine in particular were a real pain. What's worse, I couldn't properly explain them. I asked for non-dairy options, pointing to my intolerance of lactose. But beyond that, on top of properly physiological reasons, I had deep-seated aversions going back, surely, to some early childhood trauma. The best I could do was to tell my table-mates, when they asked, that I had an aversion for things "white and mushy." Though I have learned that German cuisine has plenty of room for non-dairy but nevertheless white-and-mushy foods, I have no doubt that D. would understand and accommodate all my "illegitimate" requests with the same generosity and grace with which she met my medically justifiable ones. One day, I kept telling myself, I will make sure to tell D. what it is really that I try to avoid, and why it is that some of the food presented to me as "lactose-free" nevertheless remained almost untouched. But I never did. So, D., if you are reading this, please forgive me.

5.

For many of us at Wiko, life tended to condense into art, interactions often became improvised performances. What Schiller had called the "instinct of play" manifested itself in full force. A trip to Prague produced a collectively designed Golem. A group of Fellows, cultivating an interest in ghosts, read the entirety of Macbeth aloud together. Allusions and foreshadowings multiplied, situations began to rhyme, accented speech generated puns, and persons coalesced into characters. And one day, one such character walked into his apartment in Villa Walther only to be faced by fifteen or so of his Fellows, wearing the masks of a German philosopher, with whom the character was supposed to have been obsessed. The fifteen-headed philosopher proclaimed: Happy Birthday!

6.

Dishes and cutlery, shot glasses and cups, institutional history, memory, and myth, theater tickets, manuscripts, food, animals, and children – all circulated freely among households, were found and lost, received and returned, assimilated and misplaced. One day, A. (not the ironist) volunteered to be a "guest bedtime storyteller" for O., a twelve-year-old whose father, outdoing Scheherazade, had managed to spin the same tale for over five years. A. received a rough summary of the epic's previous events and went to work weaving her episode into the fabric of the whole. Once O. was asleep, A. left a white feather on

his desk, an element of the story, magically appearing to different people in different colors. Many fellow Villa Walther dwellers were let in on the secret, and pretended to see the feather differently – to the delight of the thoroughly undeceived O. In this way, the economy of the gift took precedence; threads of reciprocity proliferated, embracing ever-wider circles of Fellows and staff, extending indefinitely into the future, and requiring a special arithmetic of thoughtfulness for which no axioms are given in advance and no definitive solutions are possible. I, for one, feel that I have remained on the debtor side of the equation.

7.

All this was a matter of privilege, and I mean privilege here in the negative sense of the word. In the sense that much of the world around us – the social as well as the natural world – was badly off. And this for systemic, in large part, humanly created and humanly correctable reasons. (Russia's war in Ukraine, unleashed midway through our stay at Wiko, exacerbated this condition many-fold.) Many of us had been protected from the immediate consequences of it all even before coming to Wiko. Moving to Grunewald did not increase our exposure, enabling instead the forms of nurturing sociality that should be – but decidedly aren't – available to all. One day at lunch, N. said to me that Cassandra is the emblematic figure of our time. Her voice was perhaps more muted than it should have been, for me in my Wiko retreat.