



THREE MONTHS AT WIKO
MAXIM OSIPOV

Maxim Osipov (b. 1963) is a Russian writer and cardiologist. In the early 1990s, he was a research fellow at the University of California, San Francisco before returning to Moscow, where he continued to practice medicine and founded a publishing house that specialized in medical, musical, and theological texts. In 2005, while working at a local hospital in Tarusa, a small town ninety miles from Moscow, Osipov established a charitable foundation to ensure the hospital's survival. Since 2007, he has published short stories, novellas, essays, and plays and has won a number of literary prizes for his fiction. He has published six collections of prose, and his plays have been staged all across Russia. Osipov's writings have been translated into more than a dozen languages. He lived in Tarusa up until February 2022, when he moved to Germany. – Address: Geleitsstr. 16, 60599 Frankfurt am Main, Germany. E-mail: drmaximosipov@gmail.com.

The main thing is that I do not want to be
suspected of ingratitude. That is worse than liberalism.

— A. S. Pushkin to his wife, July 14, 1834

Harmony, social grace – these are things you yearn for when you've fled the country where you were born, grew up, raised your children, lived to see your grandchildren born, and began to grow old, when you've left behind your home and your friends, your profession in medicine, and the graves of your parents, when you don't exactly feel you've done well for yourself. "Are you okay?" ask solicitous strangers. You want to respond like the gangster hero from one of Tarantino's films: "No, I'm pretty fucking far from okay."

But instead you give the customary answer: Everything is fine, perfectly in accordance with your age and social status. In truth, for a Russian émigré author pushing sixty, the situation is rather bleak. And then a letter arrives – from Wiko (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin), an organization you know virtually nothing about: Come, you'll like it here.

The first touching detail: “We found a room with a balcony for you and your pipe,” writes a Wiko employee. In the modern Western world, life is difficult for a smoker (though it is easier, of course, for a smoking writer than for a smoking doctor). Not too shabby: instead of a lecture on the dangers of tobacco, a balcony.

On the train to Berlin, there are many refugees from Ukraine, almost exclusively women and children. They speak neither English nor German and are grateful for any help or accommodation: a compartment with children's toys, restrooms, Internet connection. “Are you from Ukraine or...” – a pause – “...or have you lived here for a while?” They don't wish to pronounce the name of your country – the aggressor, a terrorist state, which is the cause of their endless suffering. I've been in Germany for less than two weeks, but I already know that I will probably have to listen to pronouncements about good and bad Russians for the rest of my days and that the coming months and years will require, first and foremost, humility, a quality I do not possess in abundance. It is in this condition that I arrive in Berlin – a newly minted émigré with an overburdened conscience.

But as soon as I approach the main building of Wiko – where, it turns out, my next-door neighbor will be the composer Valentin Silvestrov – I find myself in a place saturated with numerous cultural and historical associations and connections. For instance, Walter Rathenau, a politician I'd read about in Sebastian Haffner's memoirs of life in the Third Reich, was killed just a few dozen meters from where I stand. And I immediately think of a title for the Tarusa-Yerevan-Berlin travelogue I will write: “Cold, Ashamed, Relieved.” Three words: *frostig, beschämt, befreit*. So ends *Defying Hitler*, a book we Russians read with enthusiasm last year, foreseeing (no great prophetic gift necessary) the rise of fascism in our country.

On my first day in Berlin, I get to know Silvestrov (something I could only have dreamt of before) and present him with discs by the Eliot Quartet (in which my daughter and son-in-law play), then listen all evening from behind the wall as he plays them at maximum volume – more than once! Also that day, I speak to Barbara, the Rector of Wiko: “You're like those anti-fascist Germans who ended up outside Germany with a German passport in their hands. They too were seen as citizens of a hostile country.” So says Barbara, and my anxiety about having to explain the same thing to everyone, over

and over again, completely vanishes. The company of intelligent people actually presupposes social grace, as does genuine rather than affected aristocracy. Of course, I am unable to assess the professional credentials and accomplishments of most of my fellow residents – biologists, physicists, sociologists, and others – but judging by their broad-mindedness and by their positions in the scientific hierarchies of their nations, this is an important segment of the real elite (knowledge is not democratic, but elitist).

No conflict, no competition, the presumption that one's interlocutor is smart enough to speak to – and no persistent reminders that "we're all one family." As a doctor, albeit a former one, I especially appreciate mental health in those around me. A Guatemalan author, a Brazilian painter, a South African photographer, a Taiwanese law professor, an English historian, an American biologist, a Spanish biophysicist – a far from complete list of those whom I was lucky enough to befriend over the course of three months. And even the acute need to speak in one's native tongue, which every émigré likely feels from time to time, was fully satisfied by two brilliant literary scholars, one from St. Petersburg, the other from New York, and both named Ilya. "Forty eccentrics" is how the former Rector of Wiko described the Wiko Fellows. He surely exaggerated the share of eccentrics, but in the end, temperament isn't the main thing. "The point isn't optimism or pessimism, but in the fact that ninety-nine out of a hundred people are completely witless" – Chekhov's statement certainly doesn't apply to the residents of Wiko. While we are told that everything in the broader world is relative, here the primary values, in particular knowledge and beauty, are never called into question.

The house I lived in was built in 1904. It has seen many inhabitants, including the Luftwaffe Radar Office and the British Officers' Club, with a casino. It features wide oak staircases, a spacious library, and a conference room with a grand piano. I lived on the very top floor, in a room of perhaps fifty square meters, with extremely high ceilings. Because of the heat, I left the balcony door open at night, and so was awakened early each morning, almost at dawn, by birdsong. I would make myself coffee and sit on the balcony with my pipe. From there I could see quite far, in both directions: old two- and three-storey houses, well-groomed gardens, trimmed lawns. Seventy-seven years have passed since the end of World War Two, and with them at least two generations of Germans. If Russia's rulers would at least once allow several generations of its citizens to live in peace, without artificial disasters like the one now unfolding, then, one imagines, something similar might arise in our country... On the other hand, I loved my garden in Tarusa, but could never determine whether I loved it because it was mine or because I had at last become

sensitive to nature. Here, in Wiko, I found out that I could like not only my own, but also someone else's lilac.

On Saturdays and Sundays, the house is almost empty. The two or three people who stay for the weekend feel like mice who've crawled out of the cracks to wander through deserted rooms. The best day at Wiko, of course, is Thursday – the day of the communal dinner, of wine and conversations that often continue long past midnight. The image of paradise – not only biblical, but also ancient – is a friendly feast, and this, I feel, needs no explanation.

My new comrades began to mourn their impending departure from Wiko in April, when I had just arrived. After all, they had already been here a whole year. I feel the sadness of parting in earnest only now – a sadness mixed with gratitude, and with the desire to see those I love come to Wiko.

Unlike a story or even an essay, life – the one commonly called *real* – has no plot. We introduce a plot into our own biography (and into those of other people as well), come up with explanations for one or another twist (most frequently, a punishment for this or that sin). Some events, including important ones, seem to come as rewards. What did I do to deserve the reward of these three months? Nothing, of course. They were a pure, unadulterated, undeserved joy. “We are extended fellow-feeling,” wrote Fyodor Tyutchev, “like the Lord lavishes His grace” – that is, as if by chance, or rather, unpredictably. I was freezing (“cold, ashamed, relieved”), and Wiko warmed me up. It's as simple as that. The best thing you can do for someone who's freezing is to warm him up. Three months seems such a short time, but how wonderful it is that I had these months in my life. And I will have them forever.

Translated from Russian by Boris Dralyuk