



WIKO'S KITCHEN,
A FELLOW'S PERSPECTIVE
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As an art collector and art history teacher, receiving an invitation from one of the most illustrious scientific research centres to spend a few months amongst the leading scientific minds felt like an unusual proposition. I didn't know what to expect or if I would fit into this esteemed group of scholars, thinkers, and practitioners. However, my time at Wiko turned out to hold some of the most cherished moments I have spent over the past few years.

Upon confirming my acceptance, I immediately reached out to former Fellow Mohammad Al Attar (2021/2022), the Syrian playwright, who not only shared a common

geographical background with me, both being Middle Easterners, but who also came from a humanities background. Mohammad assured me that the group would be welcoming and keen on learning from Fellows from other disciplines.

The Wissenschaftskolleg offered numerous amenities, such as a world-class library, comfortable accommodation, lectures by leading scholars, and opportunities to explore the great city of Berlin, and for that I am very grateful. However, I would like to use my essay, rather than to talk about myself, to talk about the staff in general and particularly the kitchen staff, with whom I interacted on a daily basis, having been the sole resident of the *Hauptgebäude* called Villa Linde, which also houses the dining hall.

At Wiko, as the Wissenschaftskolleg is fondly referred to by its residents, Fellows are expected to attend the daily lunch served promptly at 1 p.m. except on Thursdays, when a more elaborate and official dinner is served with one or several outside guests. Often the lunches would be accompanied by short speeches by the class representatives, in our case Oren Harman and Joyce Nyairo, welcoming or announcing the departure of a Fellow. I found these ceremonies to be quite touching.

I found, however, that some of the most interesting and memorable conversations I had were held during the quiet morning hours of the Wissenschaftskolleg breakfast. I felt privileged to be the only long-term resident of Villa Linde, having turned down the generous offer to move to a larger space in the Villa Walther, opting instead for the convenience of residing in the main building where lectures are held, administration is based, and meals are served.

Descending the staircase from my apartment, W1, into the dining hall at 7:59 a.m., one minute before the official start, I would always encounter Sylvia Genz, who would greet me with a big smile and a warm “Guten Morgen!” greeting as she was putting the finishing touches on the colourful breakfast buffet. The Wiko breakfast would be offered from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m., although no doubt early birds like me and fellow Fellow Maroš Pleška, who also resided at Villa Linde for some time, could take advantage of the freshest fruits and cheeses. The breakfast would typically include a plate of ham cold cuts, a cheese platter with Swiss Emmentaler, French Brie, creamy goat cheese, and mountain cheese, a jug of orange juice, a fruit selection, a fruit salad, and a bowl of yoghurt, plain or flavoured with fruit. In addition to that, there would be a selection of three or four homemade jams and marmalades with fruit pieces, as well as breads such as *Mohnbrötchen*, *Knäckebrot*, and *Mehrkornbrot*, freshly baked every morning. I was told that our year was unusual in that there was not a single Fellow who requested gluten-free options, unlike

the previous years, which one of the talented bakers told me was always an interesting challenge they looked forward to, to perfect freshly baked gluten-free bread.

Next to the bread would be butter at the perfect temperature, beside a jar of honey. Furthermore, Wiko breakfast buffet offered walnuts, cashews, almonds, and chia seeds, amongst other nuts. Two kinds of branded bottled water, sparkling and still, were always offered, although I always wished Wiko would offer filtered water as an option.

A memorable event ensued when the popular and overused coffee machine finally gave in and broke down for two or three weeks during my stay in the spring of 2023, causing panic amongst the caffeine-addicted Fellows, who had to settle for regular black coffee until Dunia Najjar, the much-loved Head of Restaurant, replaced it with a more dependable machine, to the collective joy of the Fellows.

In addition to the permanent kitchen staff members Karin Nitsche and Manuela Bouillardt, I have fond memories of speaking with part-time staff members such as Ibrahima Diop, a student at the Freie Universität Berlin whose father El Hadji Ibrahima Diop was a Wissenschaftskolleg Fellow in 2016/2017. He always greeted us with a smile, without fail.

Keeping an institution like the Wissenschaftskolleg running was certainly a team effort, overseen by the much-admired Rector Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, that included administration, housekeeping, and kitchen staff, many of whom worked behind the scenes to make our stay comfortable, productive, and memorable.

No doubt, while the Wissenschaftskolleg leads as an institution with its world-class thinkers and expansive facilities, it is the people there, including the kitchen staff, who ultimately touched me and made my time there one of the most memorable experiences in my life.