



THE BEST FEBRUARY OF MY LIFE
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Being a professor is the best of all jobs. We can do what we like to do and pursue our own substantive interests at work. We are quite free in how we structure our days and spend our time without being squeezed into a rigorous schedule like most other employees. We have a say in shaping the research orientation of our institutes, and we take part in selecting new colleagues. We earn well, we have high job security. And we have regular sabbaticals.

But we still like to complain: about university bureaucracy, about department fights, about search-committee battles over the best candidates, about dumber colleagues having

more resources. About too much “shit work” and too little time for research and writing. About heavy teaching loads and too many students who are unwilling to read and unable to write. About the incompatibility of having a family and being a researcher, and about having to live in places we often didn’t choose. About feeling stressed out all the time and about sabbaticals at home being as inefficient as vacations on one’s own balcony. About the bad cafeteria food and offices that are either too small, too hot, or too cold.

And then you get an invitation to a place like Wiko. Without bureaucracy, without teaching, without battles over research orientations and future colleagues, in a (part of a) city where you have theaters and forests, museums and lakes, and Ethiopian and Austrian restaurants within biking distance. In a wonderful building with flower bouquets, a garden with lounge chairs for reading, with cold drinks and hot coffee available at all times, and with rooms for visitors if you choose to have any. You can go to work every morning into a well-kept office – or only leave your apartment to attend a tasty, healthy, freshly prepared three-course lunch. Your only obligation is to listen weekly to excellent and well-prepared talks in the Wiko colloquium and to deliver one yourself. You are offered an apartment in an old villa with a lake view (or at least glimpse). You frequently receive emails with invitations for movies, opera visits, city tours, and dives into Berlin’s dynamic food scene. “You” is you and about 40 other Fellows, a group large enough to find like-minded friends unless you are a sociopath. What happens when all that bothers you is suddenly gone?

Most importantly, it gives you time to read and write, to overthink your own work routines, to make friends for life, to enjoy the city. These aspects are mentioned in most Yearbook entries. Reading is made easy, not only because there is time for it. Various newspapers are available, and so are publications by other and former Fellows. In my imagination (which is most likely close to reality), someone jumps on a bike to fetch your book at the moment you hit the send button in the Wiko library’s order form. Writing is easy because, by definition, we all can theoretically do it but are too often kept from it. Because we have to leave our desks for various meetings, because we have to fix this computer issue first, because we have to prepare food for our families. At Wiko, all this is taken care of. Overthinking your own work routine is another big topic among many Fellows I talked to: after I return home, I will no longer have appointments in the morning, will say “no” more often, will go running before work (sorry to assure you three weeks after being back: forget it). Making friends is easy because of the sheer number of witty and friendly colleagues, the changing seating order during meals, the encouragement of sociability by

weekly offers of pre-dinner champagne on a hungry stomach (served with style and grace by Martin) that would make even hermits talkative and narcissists curious about others. Not to mention that most Fellows' social networks are far away and even the closest couples and families and the most wholehearted singles crave company after a while.

And for these very reasons, paradise can sometimes be stressful. You are robbed of the illusion that you would write so much more if you only had the time. You have to admit to yourself that new distractions show up on the horizon as soon as old ones are taken care of. Especially when you live in Berlin. I felt about the city almost like I feel usually about my work: missing too many events and just never doing enough.

In terms of the social dynamics in paradise, the sociologist in me was fascinated by the question of how people behave when they are together only temporarily and have absolutely no reason to fight – because there is no competition for scarce resources, no struggle for future local status. With the considerate and experienced Wiko staff sensibly and successfully preventing the loudest from getting the most attention and making sure that all Fellows are similarly visible – in evening talks, in Three Cultures Forums, in special events, in features in *Köpfe und Ideen*. Competition at Wiko is limited to the small things: the biggest piece of cake at the buffet, the first comments during the colloquia, and “why do they have a salad spinner in their apartment and we don't?” And in fact: people are NICE under these circumstances, they are curious, genuinely interested in each other's work, always open-minded and mostly modest, and tremendously helpful and supportive. Throughout the year I received comments on papers from people I didn't know a few months ago, presents and food for my daughter who had to spend five weeks in the Charité hospital, help with her catching up in chemistry and French, flowers to cheer us up, and any offers for help and company we could think of.

Nevertheless, around Christmas the rumor made the round that something would happen in February: people will grow tired of being nice all the time and conflicts will pop up. This, fortunately, didn't turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy... However, just as you realize that you still don't write for eight hours a day when you theoretically can, you realize that people neither can, nor want – or even have – to be nice all the time and to anyone. The honeymoon is over (another common metaphor in many Yearbook entries) and people know with whom they want to spend their future, i.e., the rest of the Wiko year with.

And of course, you realize that even among Wiko Fellows, there is inequality in the degree of privilege. The wonderful Ukrainian Fellows with their admirable sense of

relevance and focus, despite worries about friends, families, and the future in Ukraine, made me feel ashamed about complaints about university administrations and cafeteria food. Likewise, the Fellows from Africa who would knowingly smile when Fellows from the Global North struggled with their visa issues. The brilliant Junior Fellows reminded us of what professors theoretically know: how privileged and lucky we are while others return to insecure career paths and prospects.

In the end, the most common feelings were humility – and gratefulness. I guess this is why Barbara gently reminded us in her talk at the good-bye party about the please-no-statements-of-thankfulness-policy at Wiko (I was faster!). For a grownup, it is a tremendous privilege to encounter the social thrill of a school trip and the intellectual excitement of a first-year student who hears about so many topics for the very first time in her life. But unlike students, we could be at a well-equipped institution with years of dedication and experience in catering to the needs and dreams of academics on leave.

Forget about the policy: thanks go out to the most competent, open-minded, and friendly academic and administrative staff you can think of! And even though not all Fellows were equally successful in avoiding Zoom meetings and staying out of department struggles throughout their stay – many of us sense that next time we will have that much time for research, for new friendships, and for delusions about rethinking our work routines will be after retirement.