



THREE MONTHS AND TWO MOURNINGS
IN WIKO
BARBARA ENGELKING

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The art of losing isn't hard to master;
so many things seem filled with the intent
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"

I arrived in Berlin on the 16th of September 2023, 10 days after my mom's funeral. Before she died, she had been in the hospital for 2 months – most of the time already without consciousness, increasingly distant. My sisters' and my daily visits, with no way to contact her, made us depressed and increasingly despairing. I wondered where Mom was staying – her soul, her consciousness, which had already left her body. During her stay in the hospital, it turned out that my father had lung cancer. After my mother's funeral, I managed to go with him 10 times for radiation – the prognosis was favorable.

When I arrived in Berlin, I was in the early stages of mourning for my mother and full of anxiety about my father's health, as well as guilt that I had left him with my sisters – that it would fall on them to take care of him, while I had something of a vacation.

After all, staying in Berlin is basically a vacation – the perfect vacation for work. The Wissenschaftskolleg creates dreamlike conditions for effective work and wonderful rest. Everything is conducive to this – the space around the building, the charming neighborhood that encourages walking, the very topography of the building. Its past was particularly interesting for me. And then there is the library. The speed at which you can get an ordered article or a book – sometimes even on the same or following day – is impressive. Not to mention the importance of the exceptional kitchen and the friendliness of the entire staff – from the management to the cleaning ladies. Along with me, a very interesting and diverse team of Fellows gathered at the Wissenschaftskolleg. I wish I had been able to engage more in interacting with everyone there.

So the conditions were ideal, but... my thoughts were in Warsaw with my family and my emotions were sadness, anxiety, and mourning. In October, I went home twice for a few days, because, first, there were important parliamentary elections, which perfectly improved my mood, spirit, and general outlook. Second, unfortunately it turned out that my dad's cancer had metastasized to the brain. So I decided to interrupt my stay in Berlin and returned to Warsaw on the 15th of November, for his 88th birthday, which was the following day. I spent the afternoon and evening with Dad, and brought him the "Berlin wurst" he asked for. He remembered their taste from his childhood. He died at night.

With a sense of complete shock and disbelief, we organized another funeral (less than 3 months after Mom's funeral). In mid-January I returned to Berlin – I still had a month left of my planned 3-month stay. It was an important time for me, although I cannot say that I managed to work effectively.

I have read quite a few articles and source texts, and have planned the structure of the book I am working on. It will be a book about Jews hiding in German-occupied Warsaw

in 1939–1945, and I am keen to break the prevailing stereotypes that Jews were passive when hiding and that the Poles helping them were noble and active. In reality, Jews were active, courageous, enterprising, helping others in hiding, creating self-help networks, including families, friends, acquaintances. “Zegota,” an aid organization affiliated with the Polish Underground State, was a federation of Polish and Jewish aid networks; the underground couriers, distributing the money sent for this purpose from the Polish authorities in London, came mostly from worldwide Jewish organizations; and the couriers themselves were most often themselves Jews in hiding. My goal is to describe Jewish efficiency, determination, and self-reliance in saving themselves and others. Writing itself, however, requires energy and clarity of mind, which I did not have at the time. My thoughts were occupied by my parents – conversations with them, longing for them.

We used to come to Dad with all matters of intellectual work – from school essays, to writing master theses and plans for upcoming books. Our children also came to him with similar problems. He was a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Warsaw. When retired, he took up translating French literature, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nerval. He knew everything about 19th-century Paris.

Mom, also an academic teacher in mathematics, was excellent at explaining math – to us, to our friends, then to our children. She was also great at maintaining relationships with her closer and distant family with lots of acquaintances and friends. She always knew what was going on with whom and was an indispensable information center. From the 1970s on and later during martial law, she supported the democratic opposition in Poland, and we followed her example. Mom taught us civil courage, Dad taught us not to take ourselves too seriously.

They were with me during the long walks and bus rides around Berlin (ah, that wonderful bus M19!) when visiting museums, parks, fairs. All of these places instilled in me a sense of awe and admiration for the city’s culture and legacy. My stay in Berlin was not what I had planned and expected, but the city and the Wissenschaftskolleg provided a much needed comfort and distraction. It allowed me to recuperate and get back to work.