



PARALLEL LIFE  
MICHAL KRAVEL-TOVI

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Michal Kravel-Tovi is an associate professor of socio-cultural anthropology at Tel Aviv University. She works at the intersection of political anthropology, anthropology of religion, and Jewish Studies. Her previous projects focused on messianism and failed prophecy among Chabad Hasidism and on state-run Jewish conversion in Israel. Her book, *When the State Winks: The Performance of Jewish Conversion in Israel*, received a Clifford Geertz Honorary mention from the American Anthropological Association as well as a Jordan Schnitzer Book Award from the Association of Jewish Studies. She has published her work extensively in top journals including *American Ethnologist*, *American Anthropologist*, *Current Anthropology*, and *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Michal is currently working on two projects: one, the project on which she worked throughout her fellowship at Wiko, is titled “Accounting of the Soul: Quantification and the Crisis of Jewish Life in the US” and focuses on the role of quantification, in regard to socio-demographic knowledge of the population in particular, in imagining and making American Jewry a small ethno-religious, post-Holocaust minority group. The second, called “Speaking of the Unspeakable: Sexual Violence on the Haredi Agenda,” is an ethnographic project concerned with an emerging “Haredi MeToo movement” among ultra-Orthodox communities in Israel. – Address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University, P.O. Box 39040, Tel Aviv, 6997801, Israel. E-mail: [mkravel@tauex.tau.ac.il](mailto:mkravel@tauex.tau.ac.il).

In October 2020 – deep into the second or third COVID wave, a time when even walking to the nearby supermarket meant breaking lockdown regulations – I received an email from a Francisco Martínez Casas, clearly located more than 500 meters away from me. With the

intriguing title “Institute for Advanced Study Berlin: your nomination as a Fellow,” the email informed me that I had been nominated to take up a yearlong fellowship at the institute and invited me to formally apply for a place. I confess that for a moment I thought it was a strange variant of an academic spam – “Dear X, you are invited to submit your paper to Y journal, etc.” If I had followed my initial instincts, I would have deleted the email. Fortunately, curiosity won through. Francisco didn’t disclose who had nominated me (information that I’m still trying to glean); instead, he promised a stimulating environment for developing an ongoing project and detailed the underlying principles of the Wiko fellowship. On reaching the concluding part of the email, where he outlined the selection process, the penny dropped. Somehow, something that appeared to be too good to be true was very genuine indeed. An online search informed me that “the Wissenschaftskolleg offers a maximum of intellectual freedom, and the Fellows return the favor by making the very best of it for themselves.” Even without being able to fully grasp the opportunities offered by this remarkable proposition, and without the certainty that these promises could actually be delivered, I began to outline a proposal that had been on my mind for some considerable time. My research project on American Jewry, which had awaited me for too long, could perhaps now be actualized; I would be able to give it the sustained and uninterrupted attention that a project of this scope warranted.

And now it is June 2024, and I am composing this report at the end of the fellowship. Over the course of this year, I learned that Wiko’s reiterated ambition to nourish ideas and inspirational interactions of ideas was more than mere rhetoric. Tuesday and Thursday Colloquia, and even sometimes casual conversations over lunch or during a walk in the woods with other Fellows, served to prove these words. Half-packed boxes around are a reminder that we have come to the end of our Wiko experience. That said, I don’t really need the boxes as a reminder. Whenever I spend time in the Wiko main buildings with my Wiko friends, I simply feel it. The change of seasons, the last dancing party with its very special vibe, the anticipation of the farewell party, small talk with my admired and beloved cohort of Fellows, some of whom will be leaving soon, the reckoning that this could be the “almost last walk” in the Grunewald forest, the half-smiling jokes between us about soon being “thrown out of heaven.” And, of course, our envy of the next cohort of Fellows, knowing as we do what awaits them.

During the introductory session in mid-September 2023, I recall Barbara, Daniel, and Iris speaking about what they called “the Wiko magic.” While it was already present in the

air even then, it didn't yet have the texture of concreteness and familiarity that it was to acquire, via faces, names, memories, moments. The Wiko magic, just like everything that had preceded it, turned out to be a real thing. But, it should be noted, this magic did not emerge from nowhere. The magic is made, co-produced by the many people who work hard to envision, shape, and retain it in daily life, right down to the very smallest details. It makes itself evident in matters as small as the warm and welcoming smile at the reception, and in Dunia's care for each and every one of us, seeing us all and forgetting nothing about our dietary sensibilities and needs. The labor of so many of Wiko's permanent team: the "preparing your stay" people (I was lucky to have Andrea with me all the way through, but I know that all her colleagues are equally charming!), Permanent Fellows, the academic leadership, the librarians, the media and public relations team, the IT people, the chef de cuisine and restaurant and kitchen staff, the housefather and -mother of Villa Walther. The labor of all these good people is invested in forging reality from an abstract and ostensibly unattainable notion of "magic." The evidence of this labor can be seen everywhere. And the effort, collegiality, kindness, support, and friendship of my fellow Fellows, the temporary residents at Wiko, made all the difference in the world. I will state the obvious. Wiko is more than the institution and its grand legacies and impressive resources. It is more than the beautiful campus, the dreamy terrace, the serenity of Grunewald, and the other material comforts and beauties embedded in its place-making. Wiko is about the people, always about the people.

Ultimately, Wiko is an experiment. For those of us trained to think and communicate within disciplinary rubrics, Wiko is an experiment in finding the productive words and means with which we can transgress these boundaries and extend ourselves beyond our comfort zones. It is an experiment in the sense that its *raison d'être* is to create an immersive environment in which Fellows are also neighbors, embedded in an academic schedule with an intense and supportive rhythm. In a way, Wiko resembles an extended retreat. It is an experiment in the sense that it puts a group of about 45 people together without being able to predict the nature of the chemistry that will unfold between them. One can argue that chemistry is, in itself, a form of magic. Wiko is an experiment in the sense that it inhabits and enables a parallel world: parallel to the demands and routines of everyday academia in our respective institutions, parallel to our lives elsewhere, and parallel to the "real" Berlin. I think and hope that many of my cohort of Fellows, as well as Wiko's staff, will conclude that in this case at least, the experiment worked, perhaps even excelled.

This praise cannot do justice to my gratitude to and appreciation of Wiko. But neither can this praise do justice to my unavoidably complex and challenging experience of the

Wiko magic. Three weeks after my arrival, I woke up on a Saturday morning to find a sequence of increasingly breathless messages from my mother. It was October 7. Her first few messages updated me on a series of security alarms and interventions in the immediate vicinity (“another boom”; “and now another one”; “and another one”; “fifth”; “sixth”; “seventh”) of her hometown, a suburb of Tel Aviv, and in my hometown of Modi’in. Succeeding messages provided what little information there was at this early stage of terrorists invading *kibbutzim* in Southern Israel, drawing on rumors and disjointed updates on social media about hostages, injured, victims. I would give everything to go back to the small number of victims reported in these initial updates, before the catastrophe unfolded in its full and awful scale. My mother’s last message was concise and familiar: “Bibi, go home!”

I didn’t know where to put myself that day, and I still do not. The struggle is ongoing. I was born in Kibbutz Gevim, a kibbutz located 3 or 4 kilometers from the border with the Gaza Strip. In a miraculous way, Hamas terrorists failed to invade Gevim. My partner and two sons were in Israel. My older son, undertaking his compulsory military service in the north of the country, was called up to his base immediately. Yoel, my partner, and Shauli, my younger son, managed to secure a flight to Prague and spent the first two weeks of the war with me at Wiko. Since October 7 I have flown to Israel eight times, to spend whatever time I could with my family. Because I was out of the country, I could not join the impressive civil mobilization that sprang up immediately after the murderous invasion and attack – a civic undertaking that both proved and provided hope, strength, and the gratification inherent in solidaristic activity. Being away meant that aside from a few sporadic opportunities, I could not participate in the unfolding wave of demonstrations across the country, urging the government to bring the hostages back home and demanding immediate elections. Being away did not take away the pain and the constant worry. Throughout the year, as the horrifying moment of that Saturday morning turned into a reality unbearable and progressively escalating for nine months and still ongoing, the unbridgeable distance between the utopia of Wiko and the hellish, dystopian situation back home and in my mind became chronically painful. The experiment of inhabiting parallel worlds proved too taxing at times.

In one additional important sense, the experiment proved itself to be a success. Specifically: comparing the serenity of Wiko with the turmoil and agitation in so many academic settings across the globe, or with the violent dynamics erupting in research universities in the UK, the US, and Germany, giving expression to dormant hostilities and

shaping new bifurcations and new vocabularies, it is clear that Wiko remained a safe haven in the most literal and meaningful sense. It was safe to talk, to share sentiments, to disagree, to remain silent, and to cry together. I have no doubt that in our cohort, as well as among other staff members, people subscribe to many different positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israeli military policies, the future of Gaza, and the politics of BDS. Some of these positions, unsurprisingly, differ from mine. But these gaps did not interfere with the overarching orientation of Wiko as a safe space. Friends and colleagues in Israel often asked me about the repercussions of October 7 on the political ambience at Wiko; each time, sharing my benevolent experiences, I was amazed by my – by our – good fortune in being able to keep the disorder at arm’s length. I very much appreciated and was moved by the gesture of a “moment of silence,” initiated by Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, at the first Tuesday Colloquium after October 7; likewise, the opportunity to put into words my emerging insights about October 7 during a public event alongside Omri Boehm and Sonja Zekri. Following my presentation at the public event (which explored some of the tropes emerging in vernacular Hebrew), I co-edited, together with two Israeli colleagues, a special issue on how Israelis speak vernacular Hebrew after October 7 (“Speaking after October 7,” *Israel Studies in Language and Society* 19 (2024)).

At the moment, it is hard to cling on to hope, to see an end to this vicious war, the fall of the terrorist Hamas and Hezbollah regimes in Gaza and Southern Lebanon, or the collapse of the far-right, corrupt, dysfunctional, and abusive Israeli government of the moment. But I will try to take back home with me my faith in the good: a faith integral to the magic created and felt at Wiko.