



GRUNEWALD ANZIX
GÁBOR EGRY

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Historians are notorious for digging up unexpected sources. Below are two from the future about the spring of 2025, followed by my own, short, impressionistic take on my stay.

Excerpts from the diary of a restaurant critic

This will be an irregular restaurant check, but two German history professors I met in Brussels sang praise of the restaurant of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Grunewald. In the basement of a bourgeois villa surrounded by huge trees and a well-tended garden, it is rather a canteen than a restaurant. Most days, people take a tray, cutlery, and a serviette and receive their meals over the counter. Occasionally they have seated lunches and dinners with table service. Simple, black tables, basket-chairs on a metal frame. Always three courses: salad, a main course, and dessert.

The place is busy; people talk and joke in the queue and at the table and greet the kitchen personnel as their friends. On the first occasion I visited, everybody complained about the food. I did not get it, as it was certainly not the most refined, but well over regular canteen standards. Next time, everyone was radiating, and they whispered: the cook is back!

The presence of the cook really makes a difference! The cuisine clearly takes inspiration from the Mediterranean, the Wednesday salad buffet (four varieties) often visibly from Yotam Ottolenghi. The menu shows a soft spot for rare and medium fried meats: lamb, veal, and beef, but German classics (sausage in various form with heavy sides) checker the experience. Seasonality is at its best here, and the spring menu is as colourful as a rococo still life or landscape: flowers in violet or yellow, green sprigs and courgette, black beluga lentils, orange sweet potatoes, yellow polenta, apricots, crispy white feta... Often it gives a German twist to the lighter dishes with the seasonal evolution of the sides and cream soups, based on more local ingredients, from carrots, beetroots, cabbage, and lentils to a long asparagus season and once even a vegetable tart with apricot as main dish.

The other meal the kitchen excels at is fish. It is fish at its best. If it is fried, it is always nicely crispy on the skin side, the flesh flaky and soft. In curry or with vegetables, it is never overcooked. And beware of the desserts, the crumbles, the infinite varieties of tiramisu and fruit mousse, the macarons, the sweet tarts...

Exceptional canteen food! I recommend it unreservedly for every gourmet academic.

Excerpts from the diary of a forester from the Grunewald natural reserve area

Today I had an unlikely encounter. I was walking along the Koenigsallee, in Berlin's Grunewald area. A place of large villas and even larger gardens, often parks, dotted in an area of lakes and forested patches of natural reservation areas (*Natur-* and *Grünschutzanlage*). The street is lined by fences, with a narrow patch of green behind, dividing the fence from the gardens proper with flowers, bushes, and occasionally garden gnomes. Suddenly, a fox, coming from the side of the road, crossed my path, walking in a calm rhythm. It slipped through the fence, climbed up on the narrow green until it could see me eye to eye, just to turn its head towards me. It lasted only a few moments, the gaze self-confident, not inquiring, just noting me and signalling on whose grounds I was walking, before it moved away calmly, deep into the garden.

[...]

I saw the fox again, in the morning, before the sun rose over the treeline, looking down from the window at the third floor. It moved along the lakeside, with the very same self-confidence and smugness.

[...]

This time the fox crossed the road closer to the building of the famous Wissenschaftskolleg; after reaching the other side, it looked back and measured the opposite sidewalk for a while, took a few steps towards the bus stop before again leaving the asphalt in the direction of the houses towards Bismarckallee. No hurry, no stress, no sign of fear of all the people moving and walking.

[...]

I still don't know whether the fox had anything to do with the decimation of the baby swans. The first time I spotted them, the swan family with its eight furry small babies was swimming from Hubertussee to Koenigssee, under the bridge on Koenigsallee. The babies in fours, the parents in the front and in the back. A family idyll.

A week later, when I spotted the family on the northern shore of Koenigssee there were still seven babies, playing in the water. One parent calmly swimming close by, the other one taking the guard's post on the shore. Cute and calm. People watching from the bench on the shore. Another week, another baby lost. The last time I saw the swans they led and pestered four of their offspring on the waters of Hubertussee. They were just as idyllic as on the first occasion, no air of tragedy hanging over.

My time at Wiko: distraction and focus

Before I came to Grunewald, I could not imagine that my report on my stay would start with the food and the nature. (And I could go on with hiking, the cityscape and how it reflects a palimpsest of social fabrics, and many more topics.) This certainly sounds like distraction, but these are just as essential to the Wiko experience as the Colloquia. As I did not have concrete plans of finishing something, these kinds of impressions were similar in importance to my intellectual engagement and cultural experience. The exceptional calm of Wiko and Grunewald, the absence of any feeling of pressure, stress, or distressing moments, the nights with only the sounds of the birds together with the unfolding spring with all of its flowers and smells and colours, ending with the thick and heavy smell of linden flowers—all these sensory experiences helped me to disengage psychologically from what is impossible not to be aware of.

How much did it help my academic work? Without a clear benchmark it is hard to give any assessment, but I feel I was actually able to focus my attention much better than anywhere else recently. I tried to make use of the library facilities and services, and I certainly found treasures that help in my research on Austro-Hungarian economic space and informal imperialism. And yet, some of these treasures, with arguments I also make about the tensions between political and informal imperialism and about the agency of local elites vis-à-vis the imperialists, also highlight how quickly historiography forgets. Wiko assisted me in bringing together a group of scholars for a workshop on the “New Economic History of Central and Eastern Europe?”, which brought so long and endless discussions of our work and what economic history is that we ran overtime, straining the patience of the Wiko staff assisting us. (I’m extremely grateful for their tolerance with us on a Friday evening.) Towards the end of my stay, I started to feel I’m somehow settled with all my project’s framing and theorizing and methodologizing, all pieces of my conceptual puzzle falling into place. Am I ready to start thinking about what economic history is, after all? That is at least a concrete result of my stay, isn’t it?

But the most inspiring are always the other members of the Wiko community. Getting a glimpse of how a composer thinks of their work, why an artist paints female bodies, how literary fiction swallows up historical facts. The colours of Natalia contrasted with the darkness of “her” hiding places. Thinking about what we lost with the elimination of ancient classics from school curricula when talking about how historians and the public just can’t accept that figures like the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm I were simply vile. Traveling back to my university years when hearing about Meister Eckhart and

Hildegard von Bingen and how their vernacular writings are probably even more important than their Latin ones. Listening to the audio recording of a Colloquium I could not attend. One chapter from a draft book manuscript on Auschwitz that in this strange and isolated form was more than a recitation. It truly sounded like an already published audio book, demonstrating how much storytelling is part of the story itself. All of them—just like many other experiences with my fellow Wiko Fellows—flabbergasting because they tell very convincingly something unconventional, and I feel they change my world—even if I just simply realize something that might be obvious for many others.

And finally, my German teacher. Our German teacher, Eva. Who ignited in me the desire to speak German, the most unexpected of all consequences of five months in Grunewald.