



WIKO COMMUNITY ECOLOGY  
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Wiko found me at a transitional moment. The deadline for the short-term College for Life Sciences fellowships came in November, in the midst of faculty application season. I applied with no idea where I would be by the fall: starting as an assistant professor or gearing up for my third consecutive year on the job market. Happily, it ended up being the former, with the three months at Wiko bridging between my postdoctoral research and my new faculty position. I knew that I was one of the fortunate ones who had secured a wonderful job in an extremely competitive market. Although I felt (and still feel) lucky, I was also burned out.

Postdoctoral research in the sciences generally proceeds in two stages. In stage one, the first year or two, you are wrapping up publications from your PhD while also trying to

find your footing. It is a challenging transition from being the most experienced and senior person in a research group and the expert in your research, to feeling at sea again in a new lab, new institution, and often new subject area. If you are lucky, perhaps before the next stage ramps up there is a small window to relax, focus, and enjoy learning new things and doing research.

Just as things begin to settle, you enter stage two. You start to feel the uncertainty of the future looming, with the pressure to put together a competitive package for the academic job market. The job search itself is a full-time job, which takes you away from your research, the very thing that will eventually land you a job, supposedly. I spent two years honing my application and interview skills into razor sharp talons, ready to swoop in and snatch up the academic job of my dreams. Or perhaps I have this backwards, and I was plumping myself up into a more delectable, tempting little morsel for the birds of prey circling overhead?

All in all, I applied for 66 academic positions spanning 10 countries and 4 continents. I was long-listed 9 times, went to 3 multi-day on-site interviews, and in the end received 1 offer, which I accepted after 4 months of negotiations. I finally signed my offer letter a few days before arriving at Wiko.

I share this here in the spirit of the “CV of failures” created by Professor Johannes Haushofer from Princeton: Degree programs I did not get into, Research funding I did not get, and Paper rejections from academic journals. To find these statistics now, I had to open my job application tracker spreadsheet, the sight of which still fills me with a visceral sense of dread and stress. These ghosts haunt us all. This is an especially apt reminder in a place like Wiko, full of academic superstars who make everything look effortless.

Suffice it to say that I arrived at Wiko tired. My goals were modest: hear some interesting talks, finish a manuscript, and write my first grant. All these boxes were ticked. I also planned to travel a bit and enjoy Berlin—which I did, although the gravitational pull of sleepy Grunewald proved to be strong. I did not plan to collaborate with other Fellows or use the library, needing nothing except my laptop and my beautiful and perfectly appointed office (which has set an unattainable standard for both me and my wife Lisa for every space we will ever work in again). Mostly, I wanted some space to breathe and the freedom to think and learn about things that would not necessarily add a line to my CV.

More interesting were the things I did not expect. My apartment was in Villa Jaffé, an impressive house with high ceilings and big windows. Every day I passed two brass

stumbling stones outside, commemorating the Jewish owners who died in Shanghai exile during the Holocaust. I had no plans to do any family roots research, but living in Berlin, especially in that grand house with the stumbling stones outside, made me think about my grandfather. Hugo Münsterberg (nephew to the prominent psychologist of that name) was born in Berlin in 1916 to a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. This story has a happy ending: Hugo escaped to the US in October 1935, with his family following soon after. He was also an academic, an art historian, who went on to have a long and productive career at SUNY New Paltz in upstate New York. I gave this information to Wiko librarian Kirsten Graupner, who tracked down records and, to my family's astonishment, even found the beautiful house that he had lived in, just a short distance away. It gave me a much more vivid picture of my grandfather's childhood in Berlin, the city he loved.

My time at Wiko also opened unexpected directions in my research. My work in the lab at first felt distant from all the exotic and interesting topics discussed in the Colloquia and at the lunch table. In general, the mention of my research can be a bit of a conversation killer, often eliciting something along the lines of "I hated chemistry in high school." I had hoped to somehow find new insights into my work through my time at Wiko, but it was hard at first to see how it would happen. The History and Philosophy of Science reading group helped start to bridge that gap. A ragtag assortment of historians, philosophers, and scientists, the group met weekly to discuss our research or papers we were thinking about. I could not always attend, but when I did it was always thought-provoking.

I signed up for a Colloquium slot in late November, giving me ample time to brood. Every week, I would leave the Colloquium thinking how in the world I could translate my excitement about my work to the other Fellows. I study the vast and diverse chemistry produced by microbial communities in the human body and the environment. Although microbial life is all around us, it can feel as distant and foreign as outer space. That is one of the things I love about my research: it is the closest I can get to exploring new worlds. In the end, I created an elaborate metaphor on Wiko community ecology, drawing parallels between academic structures and productivity to microbial taxonomy and function. Once more, the library proved indispensable, with Dominik Hagel providing data on the fields and publications of Wiko Fellows throughout the years. The talk was well-received, and I had a lot of fun doing it—what more could one hope for?

After only three months, I was on my way, onto a vacation before starting my new lab in Toronto. Wiko quickly felt like a distant dream. What stands out in my memory the most is the warmth and openness of my fellow Fellows—I say sincerely that you have

inspired me to become a better academic and human. I also think of the wonderful staff at Wiko and your tireless efforts to make our lives in Berlin effortless. I smuggled out a small piece of my Wiko experience and the History and Philosophy of Science group, through a project with Cheryl, Kärin, and Jutta on categorizing microbial chemicals. We have recently submitted a manuscript (thus contributing to the productivity metrics for 2025's Wiko community) and a grant application to continue the project. Of course, we made sure to budget for a writing retreat at Wiko, to hopefully recreate some of the magic of our time together there.