FINDING HOME IN BERLIN

IAN JOHNSON

Ian Johnson is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author, teacher, and researcher. He has been engaged with China for the past thirty-five years, writing on the country's search for faith and values, as well as its efforts to control dissent and history. He is a regular contributor to *The New York Review of Books* and *The New Yorker* and regularly speaks in the media or to public audiences about China. He is the founder of the China Unofficial Archives (www.minjian-danganguan.org), an online repository of hundreds of samizdat magazines, books, and underground films. – E-mail: iandjohnson@gmail.com.

When I first came to Berlin it was 1987 and I stayed for only a week, but it was enough to convince me that this was my true home. Turning points in life are usually contrived, but this one was real enough.

It was the early spring, and I was exiting the Wittenbergplatz U-Bahn station. I walked up the stairs, stopped, and stared. In front of me was one of the world's great war memorials, the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. This was pre-Internet and pre-digital photography, and so I don't think I'd seen images of it before, which contributed to my sense of shock. The main spire was cut in half as if by a mighty bolt of lightning. Turrets were sheared off. The copper roof was blackened. This was before the new hotels were built around the Zoo, and so the monstrous structure stood bleakly against the sky, a wound that would not heal.

Then I looked to my left. Across the street was the grand KaDeWe department store, but almost blocking my view was a tubular steel frame holding rectangular black metal plates with names stenciled in gold: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Treblinka, Theresienstadt… I couldn't read the German above it (which simply said "Places of Terror That We Should

Never Forget") but the message was clear. I didn't know the history of the memorial—how it had been put up in 1967 as part of a flowering of West German civil society and memory culture—but the names were enough. And the cheek: sorry to bother you on your way to shop but read these names. Carry on now.

My hometown was Montréal, but I'd been forced to leave it when I was 15 because my father was transferred to Florida. In the decade since then, I'd struggled to find a home. Looking at the church and the memorial, it suddenly hit me: this would be my home.

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That's not exactly how it turned out. I lived in Berlin from 1988 to 1992 and then again from 2001 to 2008, meaning I was away for large chunks of time. Work always took me back to China, but I always felt most at home in Berlin and experienced some of its grandest moments, especially the fall of the Wall. So, when the opportunity presented itself to apply for a Wiko fellowship, I jumped at the chance. Before arriving here, I had once again been living a nomadic existence. I had resided for a dozen years in China until 2020, when I was expelled as part of worsening ties between it and the West.[1] My wife Chi Yin, our son Lucas, and I bounced from London to Singapore to New York, all the while trying to find a place where we could live and focus on our work as freelancers—she as an artist, me as a nonfiction writer. The call to be a Wiko Fellow was like a message from heaven to return.

And so, we did. At first, I thought that it would be old hat to return to Berlin but that wasn't the case. My last experience living here full-time had been nearly twenty years ago, when the city was, in the words of a former mayor, "poor but sexy." Now it was just poor. The first phrase that Chi Yin learned was "Zug fällt aus" (train cancelled), a result of years of national neglect of infrastructure, but also Berlin's population growth. Soon after we arrived, the city government announced it was radically curtailing the culture budget, slashing for example the small indie cinemas (for example, Sinema Transtopia) that had made the city sexy.

We were also living in a different part of town, leafy Grunewald, instead of the city center. That has its drawbacks, but I soon discovered the joy of living next to a forest with

1 See my reflections of the trauma of this: "Kicked Out of China, and Other Real-Life Costs of a Geopolitical Meltdown," Opinion, *The New York Times*, July 16, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/16/opinion/sunday/china-us-cold-war.html.

a lake within view of our balcony. More importantly, the quiet forced me to think about my goals here.

One was to run the China Unofficial Archives, the only digital archive of independent Chinese thought (see: www.minjian-danganguan.org). Able to focus on this project for significant amounts of time, I secured several large grants, allowing us to launch a newsletter, add staff, and expand our holdings. This wasn't part of my formal Wiko project. But the Wissenschaftskolleg inspired me to think of archives in different ways and how to document an erased past.

At first, however, I began to doubt if Berlin really was the right place to work on China. Chi Yin and I are both focused on Asia. She is from Singapore, worked for a decade as a correspondent and freelance photojournalist in China, and now makes art about memory and Southeast Asia's colonial and post-colonial past. As for myself, except for a few years in the 2000s when I wrote about Germany, I concentrate on China. Coming to Berlin made sense on many levels, but our part of the world isn't a center of German intellectual life. As the Wiko Rector, Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, told me, Chinese Studies in Germany are an "Orchideenfach"—literally an "orchid discipline," meaning a niche field of study.

That is not exactly right, at least not anymore, but it is true that China is still marginal to how Germany thinks of the world and the past. Life in Germany still, eighty years on, focuses on the events that created those two memorials that struck me so strongly back in 1987—the war and the Holocaust. For many, especially the older people who run the country's cultural establishments, this means that memory culture is almost always equated with Holocaust memory culture. Other traumas are secondary or tertiary.

It seemed that Wiko might also be like this. Many Fellows were studying topics related to the Holocaust, or its aftereffects, including the Palestinian trauma. In early September, I began to wonder if I indeed weren't just another orchid. Was this the right place to bring back to life China's erased past?

And yet with time, my doubts subsided. I had incredibly fruitful conversations with Fellows such as Michael Rothberg, whose classic work *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* showed how the Holocaust, as uniquely horrible as it was, has a broader meaning that we can use to understand other conflicts.[2]

2 *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

With Leyla Dakhli I discussed ways of archiving Syria's dictatorship, and with two Palestinian Fellows, Bashir Bashir from the Open University of Israel Ra'anana and Sherene Seikaly from the University of California Santa Barbara, I thought hard about the ways that transgenerational traumas afflict populations.

More practically, next door to my office was the Forum Transregionale Studien, which was founded with the help of Wiko and is still going strong. I joined a workshop to learn how people were trying to archive various crises in the Middle East. I was able to discuss technical problems with the center's staff.

Even more crucial was the enthusiasm of Michael Dominik Hagel, the head of Wiko's library services. He put me in touch with the Staatsbibliothek's East Asia department. After several useful meetings, its director agreed to archive our digital archive—meaning that one day, if our funding disappears, our modest contribution to China's memory culture will be preserved as part of the Stabi's holdings—amazing!

I haven't yet mentioned my main project, which is an academic study of Chinese pilgrimage associations and how they use rituals as a form of resistance against an all-powerful state. Finally able to find some quiet, I unpacked twenty cartons of books and oral histories that I had collected in China. I used the library to read up on theory of ritual and memory, and toward the very end of my stay I began to, yes, write.

Beyond Wiko, I began to see that Berlin and Germany had more to offer than I had thought. If Germany is still obsessed with its own past, it is less so than when I first came here in the 1980s and even when I was here in the 2000s. The German way of understanding the war is still overwhelming. This has led to a broader cancel culture, which we felt even at Wiko. Michael Rothberg and Bashir Bashir had events called off or were openly criticized for venturing ideas that were not lockstep with the mainstream view of how to deal with an increasingly undemocratic Israeli state.

Despite these depressing experiences, it was possible to see a less provincial Germany emerging. Chi Yin and I were struck by the growth of China's diaspora in Berlin. Traditionally the city has not had large-scale immigration from China and so it has no Chinatown. But nowadays there is an independent Chinese film festival, a thriving independent cultural center in Prenzlauer Berg, a foundation established by Chinese philanthropists that supports beleaguered Chinese filmmakers and authors, and a magazine by young members of the diaspora. None of this existed five years ago, let alone when I was last in Berlin.

And so, when confronted with the decision of where to go to settle down and raise our five-year-old, we knew the answer. We didn't need to return home; we were already home.