



INCOMPARABLE
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I came to Wiko to write a book on comparison, but my experience there was, I must admit, incomparable.

Incomparable, but not unique. Wiko Yearbooks are filled with the same kinds of praise I would want to offer, too: above all for the incomparably professional, generous, patient, and kind Wiko staff and the comfortable, well-maintained spaces for work and

conversation. In our “real lives,” university budgets are in constant crisis; support staff always overworked; libraries struggling to keep up with the latest publications; maintenance invariably deferred; and hiring inevitably frozen. In contrast, Wiko seemed to be an oasis of infrastructural plenty, of competence, of a desire to foster intellectual pursuits of all sorts. That last point cannot be overstated: Wiko is incomparable as an institution committed to fostering academic freedom, even if that means providing a place for research that might be considered “controversial” elsewhere. In Germany, the existence of such a space does not go without saying, and that is increasingly true in other nations as well—including, especially, my own.

And, of course, Wiko is incomparable as a community. Who could have dreamed up a place like Villa Walther? With its new wing and its old wings, with its Greco-Roman reliefs, with the Kosovo Embassy, with its overgrown garden and lake views, with its multiple entrances—including our own, the well-hidden back entrance leading up many flights of stairs (no elevators here!) to our Wiko micro-community comprised of Yolanda and Nik (and later, Roni and Dror). Between the Villa Walther and the smaller apartments scattered across the buildings on Wallotstraße, we were, over the course of the year, forty-four Fellows, plenty of partners, just enough children. Of course, the Fellows cohort was amazing and talented and fun, but I think it’s worth mentioning that partners are the secret weapon of the Wiko magic. One of the most noteworthy aspects of Wiko is the commitment to treating partners as full members of the community, with equal access to research support, meals, and special events. The partners—many of whom were artists, writers, or scholars in their own right—enriched the community immeasurably. Similarly, the support we received as a family from Wiko staff made a daunting transatlantic move involving visas, schools, health insurance, and more as manageable as it could possibly be. And our fellow Fellows, partners, and families created a fantastic environment for our kids. Our boys—who turned ten during the year—will never forget the ping-pong, the dance parties, the garden antics, the concerts, the collective Champions League viewing, and, above all, the opportunity to mingle and converse with accomplished scholars and artists from around the world. “Whose Colloquium is this week?,” they’d ask, “and who’s doing the introduction?”

So, it was truly an incomparable year—one that, a couple of months later, almost seems like a dream. But even the magic of living in such a nurturing community could not block out the realities of a world that seemed to be sliding off the rails even as we sat in the beautiful Wiko garden with our after-lunch coffees. Events in Palestine and

Ukraine weighed heavily on many of us for the entire year. I sometimes found it difficult to face our Fellow-friends from those places as atrocities mounted. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, the Italian Auschwitz survivor Primo Levi spoke of the “shame of the world”—the fact that, despite the temptation to “turn [our] backs” to the crimes committed by others, “we were not able not to see.” Like the witnesses Levi discusses, many of us in our cohort—I believe—also felt that something “irrevocable” was happening around us: an “infinite enormity of pain.” Wiko, at least, provided a place we could process some of what was happening, however imperfectly. And then there were the US elections and their aftermath. Attacks on immigrants, attacks on universities, attacks on all the fundamental elements of democracy and the rule of law. I know it’s not a unique experience, but it was a dramatic and disturbing one to watch at a distance. Our return has been uncanny as well—the sun is still shining and I can see students walking to class outside my office window as I write these lines, but all is not well and it’s hard to imagine where things will be six months from now.

All of which brings me back to my project—to write a book on comparison. My focus is what I call “comparison controversies”—public disputes about contentious historical analogies, most of which involve the Holocaust or Nazism. The impetus for the project came from debates I was involved with in Germany in the early 2020s, some of which arose from the translation of my book *Multidirectional Memory*, a study of how remembrance of the Holocaust has intersected with the memory of colonialism and slavery. Those public debates involved especially the relation between the Holocaust and colonialism and antisemitism and racism, and the role played by Holocaust memory in the Israeli/Palestinian question. By the time I arrived at Wiko, however, the ground had shifted: the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023 and Israel’s subsequent war of destruction in Gaza brought Holocaust and National Socialist analogies and references to the fore in ways that were both familiar and particularly intense. All of a sudden, my work had a new center of gravity. “Comparison controversies” erupted almost immediately after October 7: for example, when the Israeli ambassador to the UN donned a yellow star and denounced Hamas as Nazis, or when the journalist Masha Gessen compared Gaza to a Nazi ghetto. I had plenty of material to work with as I arrived in Berlin, but the examples kept coming throughout the year. There were controversies involving a mural in the American Midwest, a Christmas market in Germany, and then—perhaps closest to home—at the Buchenwald memorial site, where a former Wiko Fellow (and occasional guest during our year), Omri Boehm, was disinvited from speaking at a commemorative event for

allegedly “relativizing” the Holocaust by comparing it to the Nakba (a completely false claim in my assessment). I immediately wrote up the case for my book—a story of how the Israeli embassy pressured the memorial site to cancel the Israeli philosopher Boehm’s lecture because of his promotion of “universal values” (!). Through a contact I’d met at a Wiko lunch I was able to place a short version of my discussion in the *London Review of Books* blog. Spurred by a plethora of relevant controversies unfolding around me—and comfortably situated in my beautiful, spacious office in the gorgeous Villa Jaffé—I was able to write much more of my book than I ever would have realistically dreamed possible. I’m now trying to build on that momentum to finish this all-too timely book as soon as I’m able.

Although it probably slowed me down a bit, I also took advantage of being in Berlin to give talks around Europe—a dozen or so in six countries and in all sorts of venues, from universities and museums to cultural centers and foundations. These engagements sometimes distracted me from my book, but also gave me the opportunity to present my new work in front of different kinds of audiences. It goes without saying—at least in our cohort—that my Wiko Colloquium was both friendly and productive. The same was true for all my other presentations, though on a couple of occasions colleagues in Germany expressed anxiety in advance about possible disruptions because of the sensitive nature of discussions about the Holocaust and about Israel/Palestine in Germany. And not completely without reason: after a somewhat informal presentation in Berlin about “comparison controversies,” a prominent journalist for a prominent conservative newspaper tried to turn my lecture into its own controversy by pitting me against an audience member who also happened to be a former Wiko Fellow! If nothing else, it was a reminder that comparison controversies are not likely to disappear any time soon.

Our year at Wiko was not our first extended stay in Berlin—we’ve been going regularly for around 20 years to our beloved Schöneberg. But this year was an entirely new experience, nonetheless. Situated in a neighborhood we had honestly never visited—but came to appreciate for its calm and beauty—the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin now feels like another home away from home. I can’t wait to return for a visit.