



WIKO RECOLLECTIONS
USSAMA MAKDISI

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My year in Berlin feels almost impossibly elusive.

For those of you who have not experienced car culture USA, it is very hard indeed to explain the contrast of emotions and senses that have overwhelmed me since my return.

Wiko was about working and wonderful colleagues and the most brilliant staff with whom I have had the pleasure of interacting, from the extraordinary German teacher in Ursula Kohler, to the superb library staff headed by Sonja Grund, to the ever-charming and helpful reception staff of Vera Schulze-Seeger and Funda Erdogan, to the kitchen staff directed by Lena Mauer, and to Andrea Bergmann and her colleagues who started it all. There are many other names that I should include here – just about every person associated with Wiko seemed genuinely happy to be and work there. That is not something that can be said of most institutions.

The courtesy, frankness, and even, if this is the correct term, modesty of the seemingly omniscient formally academic staff was also extraordinary, especially the Rector Luca Giuliani, Secretary Thorsten Wilhelmy (with whom I also enjoyed some memorable football viewing experiences, even if one of them included Bayern defeating Arsenal), and the indefatigable Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus.

But for me, as I think back on this year, Wiko was also about experiencing, taking in, and walking in an extraordinary city – about being free from a car, and the myriad dependencies that it creates, and seeing our children Sinan and Nur grow over a year by taking buses alone (the M19 especially and the X10 to JFKS), and in Sinan’s case, also S-Bahns and U-Bahns on his own. And bicycling through the gorgeous Tiergarten and invariably to one or the other excellent espresso shops in Mitte or Kreuzberg that are all quite a distance away from Grunewald. And then, of course, there were the train rides across Germany.

The relative remoteness of Villa Walther, compounded by the fact that Andrii, Olesia, Elora, and I inhabited the two apartments set away from all the rest (perhaps Hubertus’ aleatory procedure may be one way to think about allocating apartments in the years ahead), the getting kids up and ready to catch a bus in the dark of winter, and the sheer length of winter were minor (for me, at least) issues. I liked the snow, and I loved watching the city go by in winter colors sitting at the top of the M19.

The academic side of things was delightful, of course. I would say it was almost predictably so. The Tuesday colloquia were stimulating affairs. My colleagues were a remarkably congenial group. I finished two-thirds of a draft of a book. My participation in the EUME program run by the excellent Georges Khalil was also rewarding. The last month of talks were especially intense. If anything, they reinforced the strong sense that was with me throughout my year that my Wiko experience was but a wonderful punctuation in my and my family’s life: how often, as I get older, will I be afforded such an opportunity to make so many new friends in such a protected and tranquil environment?

Some I know, or at least have good reason to believe, that Elora and I will see again; others I am not sure when or how, but the memories of the warmth and courtesy and affability I will carry with me and be delighted, I am sure, to suddenly remember and smile when I least expect it.

A truly spectacular place. As fortunate as we were to experience the Wiko for a year, and through it Berlin, Berlin too is fortunate to have Wiko.