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Home Media: Freelancer, Palm Desert, CA

Guest Media: Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, Essen

Milan Gagnon will be making his second trip of 2009 to Das Ruhrgebiet, the formerly industrial and newly cultural region in northwestern Germany where he spent most of January on a McCloy Fellowship from the American Council on Germany.

Before taking a Master of Arts in cultural journalism in Columbia University's newish midca-

reer program, he worked at the *Prague Post*, *Post Register* in Idaho Falls, and the *San Francisco Examiner*. Since getting his latest degree, he has served as a fellow for the Poetry Foundation in Chicago as well as for the ACG. He keeps a suitcase by the door in his hometown of Palm Desert, California.

Report by Milan Gagnon

If a tour of the Ruhrgebiet back in January for the American Council on Germany's McCloy Fellowship hadn't succeeded in making me a visiting *Lokalpatriot*, my two months plus there this summer completed my conversion. I was greeted warmly by my colleagues at the Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung and the readers of my cleverly named—though certainly not by me—column, “Ein Amerikaner in Essen”. That the weather was also warm this time around and the length of my stay was tripled certainly helped, of course.

First, I had to get there. I freak out about meeting people I fear might do this business better than I. So, naturally, when I saw the list of fellows with whom I would spend a week in Washington eating, drinking, discussing, and, in one case, sharing a room, I felt underqualified. This group was not only an honor to be affiliated with, but, well, really cool to eat, drink, discuss, and, in one case, share a room with. They put me at ease from that first dinner, even if I coughed and mumbled through my introduction speech. Likewise, I took a lot from the speakers and events planned for that week in Washington, though I might have gotten a bit more from it all had there been at least one person to comment on cultural policy differences between the United States and Germany. And then, Airlie, and, well, wow. And then we dispersed.

You don't kiss the ground when you get back to Dortmund—at least I never would—but, if you're me, you sort of want to, especially when you leave the train station, cut through the park, and hit Münsterstraße. There, and especially so in the summer, the streets are filled with the sounds of several languages, one of them German, of course, if often heavily accented. Dortmund's Nordstadt is a haven for junkies, recently arrived immigrants and generations-old immigrant-descended families, and artists looking for cheaper rents than those that the Ruhrgebiet already offers. Dortmund's Nordstadt is a place I've called my short-term home twice now, and I wouldn't mind doing it again someday.

Doing my fellowship so far from my fellow fellows meant I also got to do my language training one-on-one, four hours a day, and in Düsseldorf, which is about an hour by train from Dortmund, and so perfect for catching up on one's studying on the ride. I'd taken an A1.1 German course in Chicago the summer before and spoken the language as much as I could back in January. So, on the first day, when my instructor suggested that we go through the alphabet, I initially protested, but, when we got to the letter Q,

I realized that a short refresher wouldn't hurt. I did get the instructor to customize the course a bit for me, though, and so was able to gear my learning toward grammar: I can pick up vocabulary from newspapers, but the conditional tense, for example, is something I have to be taught.

I left the course with an A2 certificate, but I still introduced myself to my colleagues at WAZ in English. (I freak out when people speak my language better than I do theirs.) Still, in my first week, I wrote installment No. 1 of "Ein Amerikaner in Essen" in German, though it did require a lot of touching up. As I wrote earlier, the WAZ folks welcomed me warmly, and I think in part it was because a U.S. journalist asking to spend a couple of months in the Ruhrgebiet was rather a novelty to them.

After I'd introduced myself that first day, an editor gave me an orientation speech. The newspaper had cut one-third of its jobs, and everyone has had to begin uploading his or her own work to the website, so folks are always busy and some aren't in the best of moods. Except for a big room for interns and freelancers on the third floor of one of the main editorial buildings in the WAZ compound, which takes up the better part of a street, many editors and writers sit in individual offices. And, at a certain point in the day, many close their doors, leaving one to wonder whether now is the best time to discuss a story idea. I'm used to going out to lunch or getting a beer with my co-workers from time to time, but that didn't really appear to happen at WAZ, where things moved briskly—no doubt due to the added workload everyone was carrying—and cordial relationships seemed to start and stop at the front door.

Nobody was unhelpful: someone nearby always gladly clarified an idiomatic expression I'd get in an email, and the editors would go through my stories line by line with me to help put my German into, well, German. Still, I occasionally felt lost and somewhat worthless and wondered if I was giving the newspaper what it had hoped for from its visitor from abroad. At a later point in my stay, a former Burns fellow—one of only two currently based in the Ruhrgebiet, it appears—suggested that I might have had more interaction with my colleagues if I'd requested a posting in the online section, where the staff sit in an open room, have a Kicker table, and work more closely and collaboratively.

I found visiting other departments did help. I pitched the online culture editor a story idea so awesome that the website had already done the exact same thing, for example, (though, to my credit, the link is easier found through Google than the www.derwest-

en.de website). I spent a few hours at the Dortmund office and, just in that short span, got an interview with someone from the City Hall culture department, which had, unlike its counterpart offices in other municipalities, ignored my repeated requests to speak back in January. The main WAZ culture desk has decided to run two of my stories, though neither has appeared yet—"Um es auf eine poetische Weise zu sagen," the editor wrote me as I prepared this report, "Ihr Text ist zeitlos schön!"—and all it took was my pushing for contacts rather than awaiting intermediaries.

In the absence of much official business to handle—save for my weekly column, my already-run (and obligatory) Hurricane Katrina anniversary-themed story, and the articles to come—I created my own daily schedule. I'd send a pitch or so, try to get an interview or so, and then go off to meet with someone I had chatted with in January or just learned of or visit a cultural site that I didn't have time for on my first trip.

I'd chosen the Ruhrgebiet to explore postindustrial economies recovering from financial and environmental ruin through culture. The Ruhrgebiet awaits its European Capital of Culture year in 2010. One finds obvious parallels to the American Rust Belt and former shipping hubs, but I couldn't find a U.S. editor to give me an inch, still can't. It struck me as wrong that Germany's second-largest newspaper by circulation had more interest in what I saw, even if I wrote clumsily in a tongue foreign to me, than U.S. editors seem to have in big ideas during what ought to be a transitional era.

Over all, the experience greatly inspired me, despite my frustration with not being able to publish yet. Acquaintances from January became friends this trip, and, with the luxury of time, I was able to meet even more people responsible for aiding the Ruhrgebiet's conversion—not easy for me: I have a master's in arts journalism, and I freak out when I meet someone more cultured than I—or simply benefitting from it. Would I do it again? I don't know, can I? How about again and again?