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2017 Arthur Burns Fellowship Report

Placement: Tageszeitung, Taz am Wochenende – Berlin

The Burns Fellowship was such a gift – an incredible, challenging, and rewarding two months exploring a country and getting to know a talented group of young journalists. I wasn't sure what to expect, but the whole experience couldn't have been better, and I came out of it a better and more confident journalist than when I started.

Placement

My placement for the fellowship was with Taz am Wochenende, the weekend edition of die Tageszeitung (more commonly known as die Taz), an alternative, leftist newspaper based in Berlin. It was a great placement for me, and I would recommend it to anyone who is looking for both flexibility and the opportunity to contribute a lot to a German publication.

Taz is not as well-known as other major German news outlets like die Welt or der Spiegel. It's smaller and super crunchy – people would walk around the office barefoot. But people who work at Taz do it because they really believe in what they are doing. Taz is essentially a non-profit, and it's very left-leaning; if I were to place them on the German political spectrum, they would align somewhere between the Green Party and die Linke. Because they have fewer resources and rather less prestige, it's far easier to get pieces placed in the paper. They always need content. There are tons of opportunities for local Berlin reporting especially. And the editors I worked with were incredibly kind and generous.

My supervisors at Taz also gave me tons of flexibility. I had a lot of independent reporting projects that kept me out of the office much of the time, and they had no problem with that. It was a perfect set-up for me.

Reporting

This was the best part of the fellowship, of course. I loved the experience of being a foreign correspondent. I felt like the entire country was my canvas and I could paint whatever I wanted.

And it was a great time to be in Germany. The federal elections were on September 24, right around the end of the fellowship, so editors back home were interested in all kinds of Germany stories. And I'm an international politics reporter so it was like being in a candy shop. I got to write tons of election-related pieces and in the days right around the election, I got more TV and radio requests than I knew what to do with. I ended up going on Al Jazeera twice and Deutsche Welle and a New Zealand radio show.

I learned so much about Germany and Europe during my two months in Berlin. I absolutely did not understand parliamentary democracy before the fellowship, and now I can literally talk about it for half an hour on live TV. That has already come in handy. A few days after I got back to the US, my editor asked me to write a profile of the new Austrian chancellor ahead of the Austrian elections. And as their political landscape is very similar to Germany's, it was easy for me.

Reporting took me around Berlin, of course, but also to Hamburg, Bad Belzig, and Cottbus, a small town near the border with Poland. One of my favorite pieces was the dispatch I filed after going to a Nazi march in Spandau on the outskirts of Berlin. It was crazy seeing hundreds of actual Nazis, and fascinating to see how German laws restrict their speech and behavior. This was just days after the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, so in addition to the dispatch I filed for my home magazine, I also wrote an opinion piece for Taz about the American perspective on Charlottesville.

I also did a lot of reporting about the far left in Germany, especially Antifa. They've only recently made in onto the American radar, but Antifa has been around in Germany in one form or another since the 1940s. I went to an actual Antifa training camp in Cottbus; I camped with them by the river and attended training sessions on how to protect yourself from tear gas and how to avoid arrest during a demonstration. It was some of the most interesting and worthwhile reporting I've ever done. It will be part of a longform feature that isn't yet published.

Language Training

I came in with intermediate-level German – enough to read a newspaper (slowly) and understand a lot of normal conversation, but not quite enough to really be a full member of a German newsroom. For me, the language training at the Goethe Institute was mostly a waste of time, unfortunately. That has a lot to do with the fact that I was placed in a class that was far below my level, and they did not allow me to move to a higher level. Those two weeks would have been much better spent sitting quietly in a coffee shop with a newspaper and a dictionary, expanding my vocabulary so that I would be more effective in a newsroom setting. Instead, I was stuck in a room for 5 hours a day practicing how to say “I wash my hands” and other basic grammar drills.

The best thing about the Goethe Institute was the afternoon activities and tours. I went on a German-language tour that introduced the history of Berlin's criminal underground – prostitution, smuggling, etc. It was amazing, and I learned really interesting and useful vocabulary. I also went on their German-language bike tour of the Berlin Wall. We rode for three hours nearly the full length of where the wall once stood, and the tour guide was a former East Berliner who explained both historical points as well as his own experiences. It was amazing. And I did a German-language tour of the Bundestag – a perfect crash-course in political vocabulary less than 2 months before the federal elections.

Life in Berlin

Berlin is now one of my favorite cities in the world. It is affordable and endlessly beautiful (I simply cannot understand Germans who say it is ugly). And there is a strong alternative/socialist strain in Berlin

culture, meaning that a suspicion of consumerism and capitalism tinges a lot of local life. Berlin is what Brooklyn thinks it is.

I got a German sim card through Vodafone, and ended up paying about 50 Euros per month – a pretty good deal for all the data I could use. I lived in Wedding (or as I call it, Little Istanbul), and since that isn't really within biking distance of the other main areas of Berlin, I didn't buy a bike but got a monthly U-bahn pass instead, and zipped around the city on Berlin's wonderfully quick and reliable public transportation system. I went running pretty regularly in Tiergarten and along the Spree River, and I also joined a gym. There are a lot of fitness options in Berlin – tons of yoga, gyms, CrossFit-type fitness clubs, so it's easy to stay in shape even while eating all the doner kebab you can get your hands on.

My biggest regret was the terrible packing I did! Berlin is COLD and CASUAL, and I packed for a place that was warm and formal. My summer office dresses from Ann Klein and Loft were completely useless and out of place. I never once wore a pair of heels (nobody does). And I had to buy a sweater and a jacket because I was so cold all the time. It's easy to forget how far north Berlin is. It's practically Scandinavia.

Most of the fellows this year were in Berlin. It was great to have people to hang out with, and we freely shared tips and helped each other out, but I also feel satisfied that we didn't do that too much. I also spent a lot of time with Germans, which helped me learn more about German culture and aspects of life in Berlin that I would never have known otherwise.

Overall, the fellowship experience was something I'm sure I will treasure for the rest of my life, and I'm grateful to Frank and everyone else who helped make it possible.

TV Appearances:

Al Jazeera English

AJ Inside Story

The AfD, Merkel, and the election results

September 25, 2017

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2017/09/resurgence-germany-170925201653476.html>

Al Jazeera English

AJ Inside Story

Angela Merkel and the German elections

September 12, 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ra45nkTlMS4&index=4&list=PLHnmvUDC-1T5ZDI9bopzgZDsHChLR6sPR&t=184s>

Deutsche Welle

The Day with Brent Goff

Right-wing extremism in Germany and the United States

August 22, 2016

<https://share.ard-zdf-box.de/s/J7ndeQsTr7BF3A4>

Articles:

The Washington Post

“Germany’s Far Right Will Soon Join Parliament, and Parliament Is Angry”

The Washington Post, September 16, 2017.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/09/16/germanys-far-right-will-soon-join-parliament-and-parliament-is-angry/?utm_term=.05250ea528d7

“Germany’s Far Right is About to Be Stronger Than Ever”

The Washington Post, September 15, 2017

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/09/15/germanys-far-right-party-is-about-to-be-stronger-than-ever/?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.7ccb0966bf9f

Foreign Policy

“Voters Shatter Germany’s Centrist Politics”

Foreign Policy, September 25, 2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/25/voters-shatter-germanys-centrist-politics-merkel-afd-schutz-cdu-dsp-jamaica/>

“Lyndon LaRouche is Running a Pro-China Party in Germany”

Foreign Policy, September 18, 2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/18/lyndon-larouche-is-running-a-pro-china-party-in-germany/>

“In Upcoming Elections, Will Germany’s Turks Obey Erdogan?”

Foreign Policy, September 11, 2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/11/in-upcoming-elections-will-germanys-turks-obey-erdogan-turkey-merkel/>

“What Happens When You Ban Nazi Symbols at a Nazi March?”

Foreign Policy, August 21, 2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/21/what-happens-when-you-ban-nazi-symbols-at-a-nazi-march/>

“Berliners Gather at Brandenburg Gate to Denounce Charlottesville Nazis”

Foreign Policy, August 16, 2017

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/16/berliners-gather-at-brandenburg-gate-to-denounce-charlottesville-nazis/>

“Meet the First Millennial to Run a Western Country”

Foreign Policy, October 11, 2017

(technically about Austria, but this article wouldn't have been possible without the reporting and contacts from Germany)

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/11/meet-the-first-millennial-to-run-a-western-country/>

Die Tageszeitung

“Deutschland, du hast es besser”

Taz, September 23, 2017

<https://www.taz.de/!5446735/>

“America’s Original Sin”

Tageszeitung

<http://www.taz.de/!5435212/>

ChinaFile

“The German Edition of Falun Gong’s ‘Epoch Times’ Aligns with the Far Right”

ChinaFile, Sept. 23, 2017

<http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/media/german-edition-of-falun-gongs-epoch-times-aligns-far-right>