

Final report
Burns Fellowship

by
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Placement at AFP Berlin

Accept your limitations, but do what you need to overcome them at the same time. That's the main lesson I learned from my two-months stay in Germany, an incredible opportunity that was – as most international experiences are – both exhilarating and frustrating at times. But mostly exhilarating.

Despite my lack of proficiency in German, I think I was able to make the most of my weeks in Berlin and in the parts of the country I visited. This didn't come without a few adjustments and the acceptance of some lost battles.

The objective of this report is to give the Burns Fellowship organization and future fellows an idea of what worked and what didn't work during my time in Germany (and just before). At the end is a list of my production.

1. Preparation

a. Orientation week

The orientation week in Washington D.C. and Airlie was a great occasion to meet the other fellows and learn a lot about transatlantic issues. The logistical side of things was being runned smoothly, without any hiccups.

It was very useful to be able to socialize with the German fellows : our conversations made me much more prepared to my stay in Germany. I was able to learn from them the unwritten rules of journalism in Germany, to get ideas of topics to write on and get recommendations of things to do/see in Germany.

Regarding that week, my only criticism is that most of the speakers were knowledgeable about US politics, US journalism and US military issues, whereas I felt I needed more information and context about Germany. This was even truer in the context of the German fellows being very aware of American politics and North American fellows being much less knowledgeable about their destination. I think this was an opinion many shared.

b. German language classes

I very much enjoyed the German class, mainly because of our very competent and interesting teachers. Their experience was visible and their patience with us was infinite. On the other hand, I think the learning program that was set up didn't meet our needs as beginners. The classes were focused on grammar and sentence building, whereas I think we

needed to start with basic vocabulary and useful phrases. Our teachers seemed also unconvinced by the learning program they were told to teach.

Some of the days were too long. I think we would have benefited in having two weeks of half-day classes instead of one week of full-day classes.

2. Work

a. Placement

I asked to be placed at Agence France-Presse (AFP) because I was hoping to have one less language barrier to cross (I work in a French-language newspaper in Montreal) and because it's a news outlet with a great reputation around the globe. I enjoyed my placement there and I am very grateful to the AFP for having me. In the end, though, my very limited proficiency in German proved to cancel most of the advantage our common language (French) provided.

During the spring and the summer, I exchanged a few emails with the director of the Berlin bureau of AFP and had a phone conversation with him. He was very welcoming and helping – even with general questions regarding my stay in Germany. I recommend to future fellows to have such a direct exchange with their boss-to-be. The Burns Fellowship also provided me with the name and contact info of a recent alumni working in the same office. This reporter contacted me before my arrival in Berlin and offered me help to settle in the city, which was very nice.

During the week of the German-language class, I used one of my lunch break (a bit more, a must confess) to make a first quick visit to the AFP bureau. The idea was mostly to get a sense of the office before going for a full day. It was on this day that I met with the deputy bureau chief, the one that would really oversee my day-to-day work at the AFP. Even though I made myself clear in our previous phone conversation, I think this was the moment they both realized that my level of German would be a problem.

My stay at the Berlin bureau of the AFP started on August 21 at their request, one week after the others and two weeks after the end of German class.

There, I mostly worked on two different fronts: a) in terms of original reporting, two medium-term pieces regarding the German elections and one sport story b) translations of stories from German to French.

On the first front, I co-wrote a story regarding the German-Turk vote and wrote an explainer story regarding the Leitkultur debate (is there a German culture of reference newcomers should follow?). In the two cases, I think I found ways to overcome my language problem: I found English-speaking German-Turks to talk to in Berlin and contacted English-speaking (or English-writing in one case) experts regarding Leitkultur. But I don't think the pieces were as good as I would have been able to write at home : in the first case, the opinions

stayed on a very superficial level because of the difficult communication. Also, the very distant deadlines were a problem for me: I didn't know if they were waiting for me to turn in my pieces before they would give me another one or if I should keep waiting after interviews. In insight, I should have communicated better with them.

I also was surprisingly put in charge of an urgent football story (even though I know nothing about this sport) during my days at the AFP. It was nice to see that the bureau chief had enough confidence in my capacity to put me in charge of it.

On the second front, during my second and third week at the AFP, they started giving me short non-urgent pieces to translate from German to French. It was good to feel useful, because the original reporting left me with lots of time free.

Overall, the climate in the office was very positive. All of my colleagues were very welcoming and helping. I would recommend future fellows to be placed at the AFP, in French but also in English.

The big caveat of a placement in a news wire service is that there's not really any place to express your difference in your work: whereas newspapers can publish an opinion piece or a blog entry about the vision a Canadian/American fellow has of Germany, a news wire service cannot do that. I was mostly there doing the job of a normal employee, but less productive, without the ability to speak German and only a few days a week. I could see why the AFP would not see a great advantage in accommodating other non-German speaking fellow.

b. Correspondent work

The lightness of my workload at AFP made me able to put more hours in my different reporting projects for La Presse.

I was fortunate enough to have two weeks between the end of the German class and the beginning of my placement at AFP. I spent the first one writing emails, booking interviews, and pitching story ideas. On the second one, I travelled across the country to report two stories : a) a giant pre-electoral vox pop asking Germans about their vision of the upcoming elections and b) a Business story about the workforce shortage in medium-sized companies. This week was really interesting and allowed me to travel across Germany.

In the next weeks, I reported on different topics, most of them linked to the German elections. The period around Election Day was when about one half of my total production from Germany was published. In retrospect, I'm not sure putting so much effort into just that topic was a good idea.

I was also able to travel to Hamburg, to Wismar and to Meissen to cover different stories for La Presse. It was good to be able to work for section (Business and Arts in this instance) that I don't usually work in. It was very formative to deal with different editors and reporting culture that I'm used to.

3. Recommendations

a. To the Burns Fellowship organisation:

- a) The orientation week schedule should contain more talks about Germany
- b) The language class should be more realistic and focus on simple objectives instead of grammar

b. To future fellows:

- a) Communicate with your placement media as soon as possible and ask what kind of task they will give you.
- b) Try to find an entire week to be able to travel in Germany for reporting
- c) Learn as much as possible from German fellows during orientation week
- d) If your German isn't good, accept that you won't be able to be as good a journalist as you are at home.

Production

Published by AFP

Translations

- Tuerie de Munich : le fournisseur de l'arme s'excuse auprès des victimes
- Enlèvement à Berlin d'un ex-cadre vietnamien : un homme extradé
- Violences en marge du G20: première peine de prison à Hambourg
- Allemagne: un "citoyen du Reich" jugé pour le meurtre d'un policier
- Attaque du bus de Dortmund: vers un procès pour 28 tentatives de meurtres
- Allemagne: arrêt des poursuites contre un ex-infirmier d'Auschwitz

Original reporting

- [Quand le président turc Erdogan fait campagne pour les législatives allemandes](#)
- and in English : [Amid bitter feud, Erdogan weighs in on German election](#)
- [La même culture pour tous ? le débat fait controverse en Allemagne](#)
- and in English : [After migrant influx, voters ask: what makes a German?](#)
- [Retour des règlements de compte au "FC Hollywood"](#)

Published in La Presse

- [Allemagne: l'extrême-droite éclate au lendemain de son entrée au parlement](#)
- [Elbphilharmonie de Hambourg, deuxième maison de Kent Nagano](#)
- [La Presse en Allemagne: les populistes frappent aux portes du parlement](#)
- [Allemagne: l'extrême-droite gâche la victoire de Merkel](#)
- [Angela Merkel remporte un débat «ennuyeux»](#)
- [Merkel, bien en selle](#)
- [Au royaume de l'extrême-droite, l'électeur reste coi](#)
- [Les réfugiés ne sont pas le miracle espéré](#)
- To be publish : A piece about the lumber industry in Germany