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2017 Burns Fellow at BILD in Berlin

It was after midnight in Berlin and I was between readbacks from my editors in New York when I snuck out of my apartment to keep a drinks date with a new friend, Isaac. It was late September and my time as an Arthur F. Burns Fellow was winding down, so I wouldn't, and couldn't, reschedule.

I walked up the road in Mitte and ducked into the unmarked doorway of the speakeasy Isaac chose, a small bar where phones were verboten (eek, editors!) and cocktails came with names of U.S. presidents. Isaac introduced me to another friend of his, visiting from London. How did you meet, the friend asked. Isaac spoke before I could. "Oh, at a Neonazi rally a month ago," he said plainly, then we looked at one another and realized how bizarre that sounded out of context.

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In the two months I spent in Germany as a Burns Fellow this summer, I was lucky and happy to find myself in many such unusual encounters. I applied to this program with two distinct goals: first, I wanted to try my hand at a new beat in a new country, in service of a long-held desire to become a foreign correspondent. And second, I wanted to grow as a person, expanding my horizons socially, geographically, culturally, and philosophically. When I packed my bags in New York-- my home for my entire life, without even a study abroad stint in college-- I made a promise to myself that I would say "yes" to as many invitations, new opportunities, and new friendships as I could, even when I was tired or juggling work assignments. I realized I'd become too comfortable in New York, and I wanted to understand more about myself and the world around me.

The Burns program could not have been a better fit for me, and I am deeply, incredibly grateful to report that I met and exceeded my goals for this summer. On the work front, I was posted to BILD's politics department, a match I was thrilled to receive because I wanted to do a complete 180-degree spin away from my usual beat as a broadsheet business reporter. Why not, right? There was no risk for failure. Right away, I felt jolted out of my comfort zone when I entered their newsroom in the Axel Springer building, not only because I spoke very little German (thanks completely to the Burns immersion course I completed a week before) but because the pace, style, and customs of their newsroom were so completely opposite of what I'm used to at the WSJ. Days began with half-hour news meetings to discuss the top stories of the day before and events and coverage for the day ahead. Unlike in New York, where much gets accomplished over email, I found there was a lot more face-to-face discussion of news and reporting. The two top editors, Tanit Koch and Julian Reichelt, were both immensely welcoming and encouraged me to jump into the top story of the summer, the *Bundestagswahlkampf*, the federal election.

Lucky for me, BILD had embarked on a summer-long reporting feature whereby the paper planned to send reporters to 65 cities around Germany to ask their views on what mattered to them ahead of the election. A BILD colleague-- who became my most valuable mentor and dear friend, Larissa Krueger-- gave me a list of the cities and said, pick which ones you want to go to and just go. This would form the cornerstone of my experience in Germany. Over the course of six weeks, I visited Wittenberg, Bonn, Wuersele, Cloppenburg, Eckernförde and Freiburg, crisscrossing the country by plane and Deutsche Bahn.

I met voters of all stripes and backgrounds, saw places many Americans rarely see when they visit Germany, developed friendships with BILD colleagues in regional bureaus, and most importantly, developed a complex, firsthand understanding of values and culture in Germany. Back in the U.S., my knowledge of the German election was simply that Chancellor Merkel was expected to win reelection, but there was a chance that the far-right Alternative for Germany party would enter the Bundestag for the first time. Through this extended reporting trip, I began to understand that while many Germans felt they had a good quality of life, they still felt critical of the government and crucial decisions by Ms. Merkel, most notably the introduction of nearly a million refugees in 2015 and her reversal on energy policy in 2011. I became fascinated by the existential crisis of the SPD, which after years in the establishment was struggling to define itself as an opponent to CDU. I could go on.

But perhaps my most challenging and illuminating interview was with two women in Freiburg, immigrants from Spain who settled in Germany for a better life for their respective children, thanks in part to better social welfare in Deutschland. Esther Mayor, one of the women, said bluntly that she didn't welcome Muslims from Arab or African countries to Europe because "they don't fit in our society." I went back over this point with her several times, but she was clear. It was the most striking example of baldly xenophobic rhetoric I encountered during my time. While I was happy to earn several bylines at BILD, the capstone of my reporting there was two columns about these trips, explaining in fuller detail my takeaways on the election. (They were not only my first stabs at political writing, but commentary.)

The work experience kept me challenged, invigorated, and hungry to try political reporting abroad, a "next step" I'm currently exploring with editors at the Journal. Furthermore, I did feel renewed and enriched as a person, and as an American, during my time in Germany. I became more fully aware of the forces of capitalism and race and how they shape American values. For example, the Charlottesville demonstrations took place during my time away, and watching such a charged exchange take place from afar-- explaining it to German colleagues, reading about it through the lens of German media-- gave me a wide berth to more fully appreciate how complex and painful American racial tensions are. To analyze this I attended the aforementioned Neo-Nazi rally in Spandau-- where I met Isaac, a fellow reporter-- as a journalist looking to observe the persistence of nationalism in Berlin. I made it a point to visit several WWII museums in the city, and took a solo trip to the former extermination camp at Treblinka in Poland, to immerse myself in German history and perspective on events that shaped our last century. What I found was an immense depth of sorrow and ownership of evils committed by Germans

during the war, a phenomenon that stood in contrast to the re-litigation of merits the American civil war going on back home. Moreover, I (and many Germans, it seems) learned that even Germany's relative self-awareness of its history isn't an inoculation against racism and nationalistic views, as evidenced by the election of the AfD into the Bundestag this fall. I realize I've only just tapped the surface of these issues, but I walk away from Germany with at least a better and deeper understanding than I would have just reading about it from the U.S.

Ultimately, I have to give thanks to the little exchanges and observations I gained along the way. When you don't speak German and work in a German newsroom, you become quickly grateful for every colleague who takes time, even a millisecond, to explain things to you in English. Daily, hourly such exchanges made me a more grateful, hopefully less selfish person, resolved to take more time to ask others about themselves and pay forward the generosity afforded to me. Because of my own poor planning, I packed mostly clothes fit for the sweltering New York summer and quickly found myself in chilly Berlin in need of sweaters and long pants. (Note to future fellows: it gets downright wintry really quickly!) Even this mistake helped me confront my own ignorance to the ways in which consumption guided my way of life. With limited time in Germany and not exactly unlimited funding (I'm a print journalist, after all), I had to balance the actual need for warm clothes with my budget for travel and new experiences. The result was I became more invested (literally and metaphysically) in things and memories that would last.

Thank you to the Burns program, to Frank, Lori, and Emily especially at ICFJ, and to Nikolaus Blome, Christian Stenzel, Larissa Krueger and Viktoria Brauner at BILD for their particular hospitality. To future fellows, I have some pieces of advice: be clear about what your expectations are for yourself and try to exceed them. Not every day will be easy, but examine why you feel challenged and try to do as much as you can in Germany that you can't do in the U.S. Be generous with your time, say "yes" as much as possible, and I really recommend reading James Baldwin's *Another Country* while you are abroad. Just trust me on the last one.

Vielen Dank!

CLIPS

For BILD:

<http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bild-international/opinion-german-election-53325910.bild.html>

<http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bild-international/a-new-yorkers-take-on-the-german-election-53249690.bild.html>

<http://www.bild.de/bild-plus/politik/ausland/donald-trump/interview-kelly-52833936.view=conversionToLogin.bild.html>

<http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bild-international/advice-from-usain-bolt-speed-up-jamaica-53362892.bild.html>

<http://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/donald-trump/scaramuccis-erstes-interview-52832820.bild.html>

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<http://www.bild.de/politik/inland/bundestagswahl2017/persischer-mystiker-und-martin-schulz-53095082.bild.html>

For WSJ:

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-german-race-that-is-expected-to-go-down-to-the-wire-1505999675>