

On the first day the editorial meeting was in English. We talked about Ukraine and Gaza. I introduced myself to the team. Paul, my contact, took me upstairs to another meeting, where the content and layout of the next day's paper was discussed (in German). I met the top editor and got a brief tour of the areas where the staff of the foreign section works each day. This is the memorabilia case. This is the layout team. These are some nice action shots of wars and crises around the world.

On the second day the editorial meeting was in German. I couldn't participate at all. My German training was minimal. A sense of panic arose. What am I going to do? I spent awhile wanting to ask them to switch back to English, at least as long as I was in town. I decided against it. What right did I have to choose the language of their meeting?

And so for those of you reading this and thinking of applying, and for the selection committee looking at applicants, my first piece of advice is that knowing some German makes a huge difference. German speaking American and Canadian journalists, this fellowship is for you. Non German speakers, like me, the more you learn, the better and more valuable time you'll have. I missed out on a lot, not speaking German. Almost everyone, especially in cities, speaks English, so you can get around fine. But in the office and on reporting trips, knowing the language would make everything better.

I did the Burns fellowship after three years as a staff writer at the American Interest, where I wrote mostly about Asia and the Middle East. I was assigned to work at Süddeutsche Zeitung, the biggest newspaper in the country, in Munich, on the foreign desk. I was the only fellow in Munich.

It became clear almost immediately that there was going to be very little for me to do for the foreign desk. I couldn't write in German; I wasn't in Gaza. Later (too late) I found out I could have offered my services as an editor/proofreader of German articles that had been translated into English. Instead, I participated as best I could in the daily routine of the foreign section, wrote an article for Panorama, a different part of the paper, and worked on my own freelance projects, including a few articles for the AI.

I had a blast. Germany is a fantastic country; SZ is a great paper. The people I met inside and outside the office were friendly and fun. I wrote some good stories. I accomplished what I set out to do. Professionally, it was rewarding. Personally, it was a great couple months.

I'm most proud of the story I wrote for the Guardian. After a few years writing about politics and foreign affairs, I wanted instead to write about energy and the environment, and I wanted to focus on the country where I was, not some far off places I'd never been to. I got wind of a Greenpeace protest over some coal mines in the east, near Poland. I rented a car and drove up one weekend, found a place to stay for the first two nights and no real plan for what to do after the protest. I agonized over whether to spend the money on the car without knowing first whether the story would be published (and expenses covered). In the end I went for it.

Which brings me to my second piece of advice for future fellows: throw yourself into this and don't look back. It's the only way you'll get anything out of the experience. You can't go to Germany and sit in your apartment and go to the office and write a few stories and then go home; that's not the point. Get out, see the city, travel, do something unexpected. My story about the protest didn't end up getting interest from the Guardian. But on the way back in Munich, on a whim, I got off the highway near an area that seemed interesting, explored, talked to some people, stayed a few nights, and wrote a different story. That one got published and I even got paid well for it.

Being freelance during this fellowship is hard, as hard as being freelance at any other time. I spent a lot of time researching and pitching articles and waiting while editors took their time to get back to me. This is extremely time consuming and only occasionally bears fruit.

So, a third piece of advice: go into this with relationships with editors and publications that will publish your work with little or no chasing required on your end. This is especially important if you're freelance. I did a few things for my old magazine, no problem. But I also wanted to do new stuff. So I spent a lot of time following up with editors I did not have a previous relationship with. Here's an idea, I would say. How about this? Did you get my email last week? What do you think? Takes forever.

There was talk about changing the fellowship a little bit, maybe taking away the institutional affiliation. I would argue against this. Even though it was hard for me to make myself useful at SZ, going to the office, seeing people at lunch and for beers at night, and learning from them (including Burns alumni), was a vital part of my experience. I would suggest making it possible for the Americans and Canadians to continue learning German in a class or with a tutor throughout the fellowship, but I know there are budget considerations.

So for those of you reading this and thinking of applying, all I can say is do it. You'll find yourself with a great opportunity to get out in the world and grow professionally and have a great time doing it, and then you'll find yourself welcomed into a large community of some seriously good journalists around the world. For those of you who've been accepted and are thinking about where to go and what to do, Munich is wonderful. Everyone wants to go to Berlin (I did). Munich, though, should also be at the top of your list. It feels like a more German part of the country. The city itself is great. The Alps are right there. The lakes across Bavaria are gorgeous. The beer is amazing. And SZ is a terrific paper. If you can write in German, SZ is for you. If you can't, don't worry too much. Talk to the guys in Panorama, ask for help translating an article or two, offer your services as a fluent English speaker and with American sources or opinions.

To Frank, Emily, and everyone else at ICFJ, thanks for everything. There's really nothing that comes to my mind that you could have done but didn't; the whole program, from beginning to end, was rewarding and well-coordinated. I'll be pushing every young journalist I meet from now on toward the Burns.

And a final note to alumni who I came across in both the US and Germany, thanks. Your advice and conversation was hugely appreciated and valuable to me.

Stories I wrote:

For SZ: The Last of the Americans. No link.

<http://www.the-american-interest.com/blog/2014/08/02/for-most-germans-fighting-anti-semitism-seems-unimportant/>

<http://www.the-american-interest.com/blog/2014/08/05/germany-kills-arms-deal-with-russia/>

<http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/germanys-green-energy-revolution-going-black-11189>

<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/sep/10/lusatia-lignite-mining-germany-lake-district>