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Arthur F. Burns Fellowship

2015 Class

I overpacked for Berlin. Of the half dozen ties I brought, I wore only one of them precisely one time, and the occasion—seeing a student orchestra perform Tchaikovsky at the Konzerthaus, courtesy free tickets provided by the Goethe Institut—had nothing to do with work. And even among that crowd of classical enthusiasts I was remarkably overdressed.

I wasn't in Washington, D.C., anymore.

This is perhaps the most trivial example of the myriad ways that working in Germany for two months as an Arthur F. Burns fellow proved to endlessly dish up the unexpected. But it also showed that no amount of preparation would prepare me for the experience of being a foreign correspondent in Europe's largest economy. (Except learning more German. That probably would have been useful.)

I went to Berlin planning to cover the ongoing political and cultural fallout of the Edward Snowden revelations in a country that often lionizes the fugitive leaker, a place where a growing community of anti-surveillance ex-pats have sought refuge in recent years. Having plans in place for to pursue those kind of stories was immensely important, especially in my first few weeks with my host publication.

But then a crush of seismic, globally relevant news emanated from Berlin, and I found myself covering huge stories I never imagined I'd be writing about. From a continental refugee crisis that saw Chancellor Angela Merkel surprise even the most cynical political observers to a Volkswagen emissions scandal that shook the world's confidence in Germany's most recognizable brand, I had a front-row seat to history-changing news. What's more, both editors in the U.S. and in Berlin were eager to let me cover the big stories, despite my lack of fluency in the issues.

Part of that trust was undoubtedly due to my placement with Handelsblatt Global, located just off the Ankanischer Platz S-bahn stop. Given my non-existent Deutsch skills, it made sense to be hosted in an English-language newsroom, which offered a blend of American, British, and German journalists.

While I was a bit disappointed to not really have an opportunity to work on German in the office, the size and orientation of the newsroom unquestionably helped me journalistically achieve a lot. Every colleague was extraordinarily willing to offer up a useful source or two, talk about the political dynamics of the Bundestag, or trade tips during lunches in the canteen on what to do and see in and around Berlin.

Some advice:

- 1) **Remember that every placement is different.** No two newsrooms are alike, and no two Burns fellowship experiences will be perfectly simpatico, either. Some fellows are likely to find themselves placed with host outlets where everything seems to be working smoothly, while others are going to have a more difficult time. Some host editors may be unsure how to use a fellow, while others may be eager to let the free help dive right in. It is important to not compare your experience to that of other fellows (especially if you're in Berlin with a handful of others) and to be flexible given the conditions.
- 2) **German is hard to learn, but try anyway.** If you're placed in an English-speaking newsroom, which was the case for several fellows in our class, it can be easy to neglect picking up much Deutsch. This is especially true in Berlin, where nearly every barista, bartender and random pedestrian will speak semi-fluent English and be programmed to converse with you in your mother tongue at the slightest hint of a foreign accent. Language skills might not be necessary in the newsroom or in your reporting, but learning just a bit will deepen your fellowship experience and make you much more marketable if you want to find a job and stay in Germany. To that end, take the language classes seriously and do a few lessons of Duolingo every day.
- 3) **Connect with Burns alums in your city.** This may seem like the most cliché, recycled piece of advice, and you're going to hear it ad nauseam leading up to the start of the program and during orientation week. But what the organizers say is true: Burns alums are extraordinary people who are extraordinarily helpful. One alum I grabbed coffee with upon arrival put me in touch with sources, explained what it was like to move permanently to Germany as a freelancer after the program ended, and provided tips if I was interested in doing the same. Another alum sublet her apartment to me during my stay, while another gave a group of us a tremendous walking tour of Berlin and introduced us to some of the city's cooler establishments. One of my biggest regrets is not taking time to connect with even more Burns alumni, because each and every one of them proved so fantastic and accommodating.
- 4) **Take a risk.** One of the best things about the Burns fellowship is the flexibility and time it will provide you to produce something different. The Burns story I am by far most proud of writing is a 3,500-word profile of Wikileaks collaborator Jacob Appelbaum. Back in the states I have long wanted to write the long, magazine-style feature but never found the time or opportunity. But being away from my "day job" allowed me to sit back and spend weeks on a story.
- 5) **Plan ahead.** Germany is a place where planning is basically essential for survival. The uber-green country shuns dryers, making laundry a hours-long affair that you need to plot your week around. Many shops and stores close down on Sundays, so grocery shopping for the week ahead might be relegated to Saturday. At work, it will be useful to plan some of the long and short-term goals for your fellowship within the first couple of weeks on the job. Let your editor know what those goals are and he or she will likely want to help you attain them. And hurry up, because it turns out that nine weeks goes by incredibly fast.

I think I'm supposed to talk a little about regrets or missteps here, but overall the sheer exhilaration of the fellowship twinned with the non-stop professional development made the Arthur F. Burns program a fantastic and truly unforgettable experience. I now have more interest than ever before in pursuing foreign correspondence full-time, and more importantly I now actually believe that I might be able to succeed in doing it. Also, the other fellows on the program are some of the most remarkable journalists and people I have met, and I sincerely hope to stay in touch with all of them—American, Canadian and German—throughout my career.

I do wish I had spent more time getting to know random, everyday Berliners. As Frank had warned, it was easy to limit social time in Berlin to hanging out with other fellows and Burns alums. I also should have found a weekly language class to keep up the learning after the two weeks of intensive training at Goethe Institut ended, but I never got around to it. And though I loved living alone in a perfectly located but still somehow affordable one-bedroom apartment in Friedrichshain (thanks, Burns alum Rachel Stern!), I wonder how my two months would have been different had I roomed in a house with a handful of Germans.

I also wish I had paid more attention to the migrant crisis early on. Editors back in the U.S. seemed to have little appetite in stories about how an influx of millions of refugees was literally changing the face of Europe until viral photos of a dead migrant boy forced the world to not look away. One of the harder aspects of the fellowship will be convincing your editors back home that what you want to write about in Germany is relevant to a U.S. audience, so story framing will take on added importance.

But regrets are few and far between, and vastly overshadowed by the gratitude and early onset nostalgia for the Burns fellowship.

NATIONAL JOURNAL

Germany Charges Own Spy With Treason for Sharing Secrets with CIA, Russia -- Aug. 20
<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/22340/germany-charges-own-spy-with-treason-sharing-secrets-with-cia-russia>

Google Sternly Rebukes Europe's Antitrust Charges -- Aug. 27
<http://www.nationaljournal.com/tech/2015/08/27/google-sternly-rebukes-europes-antitrust-charges>

Paper Says German Spies Got Access to NSA Internet Surveillance Tool -- Aug. 27

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/51370/paper-says-german-spies-got-access-nsa-internet-surveillance-tool>

Can Google Convince Europe It Isn't Evil? Aug. 28

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/53323/can-google-convince-europe-isnt-evil?>

U.S. and Europe Forge Data-Protection Deal for Terrorism Cases -- Sept. 8

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/59684/u-s-europe-forge-data-protection-deal-terrorism-cases>

Is Germany Building the Next NSA? -- Sept. 8

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/58111/is-germany-building-next-nsa?>

Mass Surveillance As Art -- Sept. 18

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73311/mass-surveillance-art>

European Lawmakers Scold U.S. for Levying Charges of Digital Protectionism -- Sept. 22

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73620/european-lawmakers-scold-u-s-levying-charges-digital-protectionism>

European Court Opinion Threatens NSA Spying Overseas -- Sept. 23

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73696/european-court-opinion-threatens-nsa-spying-overseas?mref=landing-big>

Volkswagen Scandal Offers Role Reversal for U.S. and Germany in Pollution Fight -- Sept. 23

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/73726/volkswagen-scandal-offers-role-reversal-u-s-germany-pollution-fight>

Jim Messina's Latest Project: Defeat Angela Merkel -- Oct. 1

<http://www.nationaljournal.com/s/74224/jim-messinas-latest-project-defeat-angela-merkel>

HANDELSBLATT GLOBAL

(note: most National Journal stories listed above also ran in Handelsblatt Global, with minimal tweaks and additions)

Static on the Line -- Aug. 19

<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/244/ressort/politics/article/static-on-the-line>

Trying to Sculpt a New Life in Berlin -- Sept. 26

<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/271/ressort/european-lifestyles/article/sculpting-a-new-life-in-berlin>

Learning from Germany to Rebuild Syria -- Sept. 26

<https://global.handelsblatt.com/edition/271/ressort/european-lifestyles/article/learning-from-germany-to-rebuild-syria>