

Burns Fellowship Report
Catherine Cheney
November 2011

After hearing I was selected for the Arthur F. Burns Fellowship, my initial reaction - aside from excitement - was one of intimidation. I had never been to Germany. My knowledge of the language was limited. I had a strong interest in the country, and yet there was so much to learn.

Then I saw the names and careers of the other fellows, and realized I was the youngest of the group. Several fellows had lived in other countries. They had worked at places like CNN, the Wall Street Journal, and NPR. They had done other reporting fellowships taking them to newsrooms around the world. The intimidation remained.

Pushing my time at POLITICO until the very last minute, I said goodbye to my colleagues at 5 p.m. before hopping in a cab to meet the other fellows on time for the first day of orientation. Gathered in the hotel lobby, they wore suits and heels and nametags, and the room filled with *hello* and *nice to meet you* in English and *auf Deutsch*.

But that night, as we all gathered for dinner and toasts, a feeling of gratitude replaced this feeling of intimidation. I felt grateful to be selected, grateful to get to know 17 other impressive young journalists, and grateful to have eight weeks to explore a country I had long wanted to visit. Now as I look back, grateful as ever, I laugh at how intimidated I was. It makes me realize how much this fellowship helped me grow as a journalist and as a person.

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My time in Germany began with language classes at the Goethe Institute. There, in addition to practicing vocabulary and grammar, I learned my first of many lessons about Germany that seemed to require being there in order to understand.

Italians, Indians, Iranians were learning the language not only to add a line to their resume or to improve their travel experiences, but to prepare to move to Berlin, where they saw far more opportunity than in their home countries, and a far better future than the United States could provide.

Spending the first two weeks focusing on the language was a helpful foundation for the rest of my time in the country, and I would recommend it to any fellows who are not already fluent. While many insist that you can get around Berlin without knowing German, even a basic understanding of the language opens many doors that would otherwise remain closed for people who do not make an effort.

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My first day at Spiegel Online International was not quite what I expected, but as the weeks wore on and I adjusted to the newsroom, I learned how to get the most out of the experience.

The staff of five – two British journalists and three American journalists – had just moved offices across the city, away from the office where their colleagues at the magazine worked. I was given the

standard intern login and password for my computer, despite the program's insistence that we not let our peers call us *praktikants*. And the day was mostly quiet. The focus was on translating German content from the magazine into English content for the website.

In fact, over the course of the next six weeks, the staff was so busy translating that they did not have time to work on reporting projects they themselves hoped to pursue. So it felt like a lot to ask whenever I would submit a story idea for consideration or ask for edits on a piece.

Had I been given a list of available placements, I probably would have selected Spiegel Online International myself. But as I learned more about the day to day work of other fellows – writing perspective pieces on the things that surprised them, being encouraged to travel around the country for stories, and learning from the journalists around them in newsrooms that differed quite dramatically from their surroundings back home – I began to wish I had been placed at a newsroom that would provide a similar experience.

But I got a lot out of meeting the other members of the staff, and learned from them about life as American journalists based abroad. I enjoyed many lunches with the other editors, walking under the train tracks and over the river toward spots tucked into the alleys that I never would have found myself. It was also interesting seeing how the team worked to translate lengthy magazine stories for an online audience, and impressive watching how they were able to achieve an expansive global readership and an effective social media strategy even with such a small staff.

I ended up writing on several topics that interested me, focusing my reporting on defense and food issues:

End of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell': Gay US Soldiers Come Out in New Magazine:
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,787313,00.html>

Lack of Volunteers: End of Conscription Causes Headache for Charities:
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/0,1518,783444,00.html>

Battling the Couch Potatoes: Hungary Introduces 'Fat Tax':
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,783862,00.html>

Haute Cuisine: Taking the Pop-Up Restaurant to New Heights:
<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/0,1518,785286,00.html>

My favorite reporting experience was my trip to the city of Kaiserslautern in southwestern Germany, and I would recommend to all fellows that whether they are in Berlin or another city or town, they should try and tell at least one story from another part of the country.

My visit to Ramstein Air Base, where I met with the emergency aeromedical evacuation staff, visited the only USO exclusively for wounded warriors, and talked with sources including the base historian and the aerial port operations manager, served as a strong reminder of why I love reporting.

I took the train across the country with a set of questions I hoped to ask, answered those questions as well as questions I did not even know to ask until I got there, and rode the train back feeling energized by the experience and eager to tell the story. It reminded me of what really drew me to

journalism in the first place: the ability to pursue curiosity, to uncover untold stories, and to help people have their voices heard.

My reporting from Ramstein turned into two pieces for POLITICO, my home news outlet. I was glad to get some voices from overseas in a publication that is largely focused on the beltway:

Major advances in war trauma care:

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/65246.html>

Consensus scarce on future of overseas bases:

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1011/66658.html>

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But another tip for future fellows would be to enjoy some experiences without your notebook in hand: not every experience needs to be packaged into a story. Sometimes taking off your reporter cap is necessary in order to get the most out of your new surroundings.

Take Oktoberfest. I considered telling that story from several different angles, but with each pitch I thought of, I saw many examples with the same take. So instead, I went just to enjoy, and I'm so glad I did.

I drove to Munich with a fellow Burns fellow, her boyfriend, and his brother. It was my first time on the Autobahn, and I saw parts of the country I never would have on the train. I stayed in a Munich apartment with three other Burns fellows, after meeting them at a small shop where I paid more than I expected for a handmade dirndl, telling myself it would just be a good excuse to find more occasions when I could wear it! I tried the famous roasted half chicken, ate the best pretzel of my life, and had two glass steins of beer, swaying and stomping on the benches to the oompa band, arm in arm with my Burns friends and our new German friends.

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In all of my travels, I have never been somewhere where I was so constantly surprised.

Expecting to tire of sausage and potatoes, I discovered the variety within German cuisine, and now miss the schnitzel, the bread, and the beer, as well as some of the best Lebanese food, Thai food, and Italian food I have ever had the pleasure of tasting. During my month in Mitte, I lived above an Indian restaurant, and during my month in Kreuzberg, I lived down the street from a string of Turkish restaurants. At the markets, on the trains, and along the streets, what surprised me most about Berlin was just how diverse the city is, drawing a wide range of cultures, ages, and interests.

And I have never been somewhere where the present is so interconnected with the past, and in this case, with a past that most would rather forget. That makes for an interesting dynamic in issues ranging from education to immigration to foreign policy. And for a reporter, it makes for endless and interesting story possibilities.

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I returned to America with a greater appreciation of the complexity of Germany, the choices and challenges the country faces, as well as the importance of the German-American relationship moving forward.

I wrote a blog for the Huffington Post that captures the way my experience affected my perspective on the transatlantic relationship:

The German-American Relationship: In the Name of What?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/catherine-cheney/german-american-relationship_b_983692.html

Over the course of my eight weeks in Berlin, countless headlines and conversations have centered on a question I first encountered a couple days before my arrival: "In the name of what does the transatlantic relationship proceed into the 21st century?"

Jackson Janes, Executive Director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, posed the question. He was discussing transatlantic relations with nine American journalists and nine German journalists gathered in Washington, D.C. before we headed to separate newsrooms on either side of the Atlantic.

At the time, I approached the question from the perspective of someone who had spent the past year working inside the beltway. I put stars around the words in my notebook, and added a few notes of my own: *When it comes to the transatlantic relationship, and particularly the relationship between Berlin and Washington, what is in it for America?* I wrote. Never having set foot in Germany, I added a few possible and very American responses: *in the name of global security?* and *in the name of burden sharing?*

But after spending two months in Berlin, reading the local papers, and traveling and talking to people throughout the country, I have also begun to look at this question from the German point of view. In the name of what will Germany carry on its relationship with the United States? How will Berlin address, or perhaps ignore, increasingly complex global problems and increasingly high expectations?

As I tell everyone I talk to about my experience in Germany, this fellowship more than fulfilled its goal in my case. I developed a deep fascination with the country during my eight weeks there, feeling sad to leave and now eager to return. And I know that Germany will always hold a special place in my heart and my reporting.

I can't thank Frank, Emily, and the other staff and trustees behind this fellowship enough for giving me this opportunity. I will work to give back in the years to come by serving as a resource for fellows and continuing to write about Germany and its relationship with America. So for any fellows who might read this down the line, don't hesitate to reach out: catherine.cheney@gmail.com

Thank you!

Catherine Cheney, Arthur F. Burns Fellow 2011