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2016 Arthur F. Burns fellow

Freelance reporter in Ottawa, placed at Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger in Cologne, Germany

I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a fellow, and I feel I achieved my main goal of getting a sense of both how Germans feel about their place in the world, and what makes them tick. That being said, my host organization went through a lot of disruptive changes this year, and I'm not sure whether I would recommend it to future fellows.

Settling in

I was the first fellow the Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger has hosted, after sending Tobias Peter to the Philadelphia Inquirer in 2012. This is the main city newspaper of Cologne, a city with an earned reputation for being friendly and open-minded. I was thrilled not to be in Berlin, as I wanted to improve my German and spend time with locals.

I aimed to report on Germany's approach to radicalization, from pre-criminal diversion programs by government and civil society, to police frankly naming neo-Nazi and radical Islamist groups and explaining their symbols to the public. North Rhine-Westphalia is likely the best state in Germany to learn about these issues.

I lived with the newsroom secretary, who offered a cheap room in her heritage-designated terraced house after seeing my email to the newsroom. I feel extremely lucky to have met her, as she patiently helped me practice German, explained some of the newsroom characters and was always encouraging and interested in my work. We swapped recipes, hung out with her neighbours and family, and harassed her cats. We became quite close friends, with us using the term "ersatzmutter" towards the end.

A few colleagues invited me for dinner at their houses, and one took me to their family cottage in the Mosel valley for a weekend. I felt thoroughly spoiled by the generosity of my housemate and my colleagues.

Language tutoring

My one-on-one language training at Inlingua was mixed. My first week involved a very engaged teacher who quickly got a sense of the hodgepodge of grammar and vocabulary I'd taught myself mostly through audio courses. We focused on key skills and newsroom introductions. Unfortunately, the second week was led by a teacher who focused on teaching a linear understanding of the textbook. While we did explore relevant topics, two-thirds of each class would be dedicated to things I didn't find useful, like navigating a shopping mall or describing my breakfast.

I did enjoy having two weeks to get settled and have a sense of the city, and to adjust to the time change.

Living outside Berlin and getting to know my housemate's family and friends gave me ample opportunities to practice my German. Towards the end of my time, I could speak enough German to explain my reporting topics, my thoughts on current events and how things work in Canada (albeit with terrible grammar and a healthy sprinkling of English words). On my second-last week, I conducted two interviews entirely in German, because I was already familiar with the topic and the interviewee's English skills were less than my German. That was a bizarre but nice feeling.

Work term

On my first day, I was warmly welcomed by the newsroom. I was seated at the Politics desk, which consists of 10 senior editors who assign, edit and layout the first section of the newspaper.

My supervisor, a senior editor, was very kind but seemed to have great difficulty expressing himself in English. We discussed mutual goals, and he referred me to which beat reporters/editors could help me understand the topics I was exploring. I suggested writing occasional columns, which he agreed to.

In practice, this was a drawn-out system: I used Google Translate to convey my column pitches in simple German. My supervisor would ignore my requests to provide a written answer, and instead told me in German how to proceed (I would then have to ask a colleague what my supervisor had said). I would write the column in English, and they would find someone to translate it into German.

I was referred to as "Praktikant" and pushed back a fair amount to being called an intern, as instructed by our co-ordinator, Dr. Frank-Dieter Freiling. I noticed my colleagues took a lot more interest in my capabilities after the second week, when I wrote a column about a radicalized Canadian whom I'd interviewed after he was killed in a shootout with police. Prior to this, most assumed I was fresh out of journalism school. (Such programs run much longer in Germany.)

For the first half of the term, I went to the morning editorial meeting, which I found unintelligible at first. After getting access to the Intranet system, I was able to look up the main themes and put them through Google Translate. Through this, and by practicing German, I was able to understand about a third of the meetings by the end of my term. It was interesting to observe how the editors debated each main theme's priority, graphics and reporting resources.

Between when the newspaper agreed to take me on in April and my arrival in August, the company underwent restructuring. This continued throughout the summer, with us having three catered get-togethers to announce reassigned jobs, a new editor-in-chief and some buyouts. Because of the changing roles, and the vacation schedule, employees regularly

shuffled between the Politics desk and other sections/floors — including my supervisor — which was disorienting.

By the fourth of 10 weeks, I stopped introducing myself to people at the desk, because it felt like a waste of time. I regret this in hindsight — there were people I got to know towards the end of my term whom I could have met sooner, and it's obvious that one only builds contacts by putting oneself forward.

However, I also didn't feel a need to put down roots in the newsroom, as I was starting to get good traction in pursuing sources outside the office. With some help from the beat reporters, I found myself accompanying a non-profit into refugee shelters, visiting trade and immigration activists, and doing some shoe-leather reporting in the Turkish and Moroccan quarters.

I also gradually stopped communicating with my supervisor, who had changed his own roles. At one point, I left for five days on an assignment and didn't tell him. Earlier that month, he did a week-long marathon without notifying me. I found a lot more support from another colleague who was more proficient in English and had a less senior role.

On my last day, my supervisor said he knew the newspaper was going through disruption, but had never anticipated such intense change. Colleagues readily admit the newsroom is overworked, and I came across this problem multiple times.

For example, I built up some contacts in the local Moroccan community, for part of a feature-length story about the implications of Cologne's New Years Eve sexual assaults. Police had raided the small Moroccan district multiple times after the event, retrieving stolen phones and illegal immigrants. Months later, a local group was organizing a street party to build ties between German and Moroccans.

A day prior, a senior editor at the local paper approved an article about the Saturday event, but this somehow got lost in the system. Over the weekend, a desk reporter instead filed a brief story by phoning the organizers. I asked twice if the editor wanted a longer story, but never got a response.

That being said, some of the Politics team were extremely helpful. My highlight was going for lunch in the cafeteria together — especially when I learned who speaks English and who eats slowly. I improved my story angles, came across new feature ideas and learned so much from these chats. I had fond memories of my colleagues: the reporter who had tracked how Colombian coal ends up being processed in Germany, the middle-aged mom who had covered Turkish integration issues for decades, and the secretary from Leipzig who left East Germany right before the communist regime collapsed.

In brief, I think the newspaper simply did not have the capacity to accommodate a fellow, because of ongoing upheaval and strained resources. When I bounced this theory off a handful of colleagues, none were optimistic the next year would be better.

I personally wish I could have been more productive. I learned a lot about radicalization which will help me in my future reporting, but I wasn't able to execute a clear story. This is a sensitive topic anywhere, but the language barrier was more of a problem than I'd anticipated, and the attacks the week prior to our arrival (in Munich, Würzburg, Reutlingen and Ansbach). My own sponsoring outlets underwent changes between when I applied and when I arrived in Germany, but I was able to freelance elsewhere. To be fair, I should have spent more time before leaving for Germany to line up sources and interviews, as we had been instructed to do. However, I anticipate returning to Germany for future stories now that I have a solid base of contacts, language and cultural knowledge.

Alumni

In terms of alumni, Tobias Peter still worked for the paper, but out of Berlin. He made a friendly phone call on my first week, and helped me immensely in wrangling contacts for a story I was pursuing. We'd planned to meet, but I had to cancel.

I'd met Anne Raith of Deutschlandfunk prior to my fellowship term, and she was a constant support and sounding board for my ideas and observations. In my last weeks, I reached out to her colleague Moritz Küpper, as we were both looking at the implications of the New Years Eve attacks, and he was chalk full of suggestions. We'd aimed to collaborate on a story, but the sources didn't work out.

Advice

The pre-departure booklet and orientation sessions give ample advice. A lot of it is worthwhile, such as setting expectations with your boss before you arrive, emailing the whole newsroom and pushing your language tutor to help you introduce yourself comfortably in German. The alumni network is a huge asset, professionally and perhaps even in terms of finding housing.

I strongly recommend fellows consider Cologne for their placement, or perhaps Bonn, because both have a good mix of Germans who can understand English but are happy to let a foreigner practice their German. The national trends that show up in foreign stories can be seen first-hand in this part of the country, where there isn't an overwhelming amount of stringers and reporting bureaux. I'm not sure which outlets would best accommodate this, but I think it's a fascinating, friendly corner of the country to soak up sources and stories.

I recommend fellows consider the German Rail Pass, which is available for all non-EU citizens. You can buy a number of days of unlimited travel within a month, which was helpful for organizing interviews across the country. It was great to hop on a last-minute high-speed train to hang out in Berlin, but it was also a lifesaver to speed down to Freiburg for a day for an interview that was tricky to schedule.

I also really enjoyed my time with the German fellows. I regret we weren't able to meet, but I plan to be back soon. They were all super sharp and interested in the world, with some deadpan humour to boot. They also helped me and other fellows in our reporting.

Published pieces

August 9, 2016

Waschbären vor dem Aussterben In Köln geliebt, in Kanada eine echte Plage

www.ksta.de/koeln/waschbaeren-vor-dem-aussterben-in-koeln-geliebt--in-kanada-eine-echte-plage-24530792

August 16, 2016

Ein Tod, der ratlos macht: Am vergangenen Donnerstag wurde der kanadische IS-Anhänger Aaron Driver getötet

(print only)

September 14, 2016

Frau in Burka ließ Regierung wanken: Islamistischer Terror und Kopftuchdebatte in Kanada

(print only)

September 19, 2016

Financial Post: CETA gains support of key German party, despite environmental protests

<http://business.financialpost.com/news/economy/ceta-gains-support-of-key-german-party-despite-environmental-protests>

October 5, 2016

Deutschland soll Klartext reden: Auf dem Podium diskutierten Volker Beck, Lale Akgün und Tiemo Güzelmansur über die Rolle von Ditib

(print only)

October 12, 2016

The Globe and Mail: As Germany moves to right wrongs of anti-gay policies, Canada lacks plan

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/as-germany-moves-forward-canada-lacks-plan/article32336799/>

November 10, 2016

„Gebt mir eine Chance, ich werde alles tun“ PORTRÄT: Fadi Sarmini ist vor einem Jahr aus Syrien geflohen – Zwischen Flüchtlingsheim und Käsespätzle

(print only)

Still pending:

- a report on a building bridges amid tense Turkish-German relations, for an American publication

- a long feature on the implications of Cologne's New Years Eve sexual assaults, for a Canadian outlet