

INDIVIDUAL REPORT

by Felicia Schwartz

My two months (or actually a bit less than two months as I had to return home a bit early to cover the U.N. General Assembly) in Berlin went by way too quickly. Overall I appreciated the experience to live in a new city, see how a German newspaper works and travel around Europe.

The orientation program was excellent. While it felt a little stuffy spending so many hours in a basement conference room, the best part was getting to know the German fellows and trading story ideas. I cover U.S. foreign policy in DC and had a great time comparing thoughts about Russia and Guantanamo Bay with some of the Germans who had expertise and interest in these areas.

The time spent at Airlie was also a real treat and a great way to forge connections that lasted beyond the fellowship. I hit it off with a fellow who went to the WSJ San Francisco office, who was kind enough to offer me her bike for my time in Berlin. It was also a rare chance to unplug and relax when the daily rhythm of working at a daily newspaper has been so demanding.

I also enjoyed the two-week language program and found it was a good way to adjust to life in Berlin and get to know my surroundings. I learned my way around my neighborhood (Mitte), picked up some useful phrases and had interesting exchanges with our language teachers about life in Germany. We knocked off some of the typical cultural site-seeing through the lessons, including trips to the Berlin wall memorial and to museums in Potsdam. I'd say the two weeks of German really isn't enough to get you close to speaking the language but at least gives you a guide to attempt to read signs and newspapers.

I had picked Tagesspiegel on the advice of former fellows because they focus on the city of Berlin and also don't give daily or really any assignments to those visiting. I wouldn't recommend selecting the newsroom if you don't have firm plans about what stories you intend to do while you're in Germany. I wrote a story for them about the U.S. elections that they said they would publish but never did, which was disappointing. But overall I was very lucky to make the acquaintance of several friendly colleagues and former Burns fellows there who generously took me to lunch and offered to help me with stories.

The fellowship went a bit differently than I expected because I ended up covering my beat from Germany rather than pursuing a few enterprise stories. I generally travel with the U.S. Secretary of State for my beat in DC for The Wall Street Journal, and during the time I was in Berlin he was shuttling back and forth to Geneva for talks on the Syria conflict. Turns out it's pretty easy to get to Geneva from Berlin and that's what I did twice, which took a considerable chunk out of the six weeks I had to report stories (I was only planning to stay for eight weeks and language lessons took up the first two).

I did do a fun piece about Trump's comments about Merkel during the election for the WSJ. The Wall Street Journal's offices are in the same building where the German government holds press briefings. Unlike the U.S., where each cabinet agency has their own briefings, all of the German spokespeople brief together.

I didn't go to the briefing but staked out the foreign policy spokeswoman for comment after. It was cool to have a direct comparison to how my beat works at home to how it goes in Germany.

I also did several things that didn't turn into stories but did give me excellent perspective for my normal coverage. With Trump rising in the U.S., I was curious about right-wing movements in Germany. I went to an Alternative For Germany meeting in Spandau and spoke with several of the party officials to understand their views and how they thought about Trump. Even though the meeting was in German, the spokesman very kindly translated for me at the end and it was easy to walk around and speak with people.

I also spent a day at Tempelhof with several Syrian refugees. This was important to me because I have been covering the U.S. diplomatic effort to broker a ceasefire and haven't really had a chance in my reporting in the U.S. to meet the people affected by the conflict.

For me, the best part of the experience was making new friends in Germany and experiencing life in Berlin. I saw amazing art exhibits, tried new cafes and restaurants and spent time getting to know German grad students and Wall Street Journal reporters in the Berlin bureau. ■