

Burns Fellowship: Final Report
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Host media: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Frankfurt

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“I think this is a very bad idea.”

From his swollen, authoritative nose and fancy cufflinks, I gathered that I was sitting before the editor-in-chief. The conversation to that point had gone something like this:

“Sprechst du Deutsch?”

“Ich spreche nur ein bisschen Deutsch.”

“(Unintelligible.)”

“You lost me.”

I crossed my arms in front of me. He folded his on the desk. The first fifteen minutes of my placement in the local section of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*—Germany’s most serious, and German-language-only, newspaper—were far more awkward than I’d expected. My editor/handler would be on his August vacation for another week, and my two other contacts were just leaving for theirs. As I was introduced to various people throughout the newsroom, I could understand only bits and pieces of the conversations, but always the disclaimer that I spoke no German. This was met with the same confused expression, which said, well what the hell is he doing here? It seemed a very reasonable question.

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The journey started a few weeks earlier on Interstate 77 near Charlotte. Everything I hadn’t sold was packed into the duffel bags and plastic buckets beneath a web of rope and bungee cords in the bed of my truck, or crammed into every last space of the back seat, or spilling into my lap from the passenger side. I’d left my job and ended my lease, parted ways with my girlfriend and given her my dog. As I picked up speed the mattress strapped to the roof caught the headwind, and the front curved up like a sail as the line tied to the door handle snapped taut beside me.

I hunched nervously over the wheel, alone and newly independent in the cramped cab, keeping the speedometer at fifty-five as I headed due North for New York and my childhood home through the night.

Freelance writer may mean freelance writer for some freelance writers, but in my case the title was an obvious euphemism for unemployed. As I rose to introduce myself at the Burns welcome dinner a week after leaving my life in Charlotte, shifting uncomfortably in my new brown suit, I thought back to that afternoon’s arrival in D.C. I’d found a set of suitcases already open in my hotel room and flipped through the program booklet to find

out about their owner—an all-around serious German professional with a masters from Harvard, a law degree, and pro bono work in freaking Afghanistan. My bio mentioned a college newspaper gig and being captain of the club rugby team.

I'd gotten the feeling that my former boss thought me at least slightly insane for leaving my first, and quite stable, real journalism job in such dark times. My cubicle was right across from his office, and during my lame-duck period I watched him filter through the hundreds of resumes that poured in to fill my spot, occasionally calling out the names of the unusually big fish who came calling in their desperation. This brought to mind something Hunter S. Thompson once mourned, that a case of the wanderlust was the kiss of death for the modern American.

But therein lies my pitch for the Burns. It provides a legitimate outlet for the healthy desire to escape the cubicle, for at least a little while. It can make vagabond drifter into an attractive headline on a young writer's resume. On mine, August—December 2008 will say something like "Arthur F. Burns Fellow through the International Center for Journalists" and describe working at Germany's preeminent newspaper and following up on some freelance stories afterward, and I write this while drifting between hostel dorms usually marked by the unfortunate scent of Axe Body Spray, my possessions stuffed into the bag on my back.

It also patches together some rungs on the overseas journalist ladder, which has been hacked to pieces by the crappy state of things. Between cram sessions of Rosetta Stone levels one and two, I spent my summer evenings getting in touch with Burns alumni with important jobs at important publications who would have otherwise marked my emails as spam, feeling like an obsessive fan who finally managed to sneak into the clubhouse. Instead of having me thrown out, they gave me advice, some of which is worth passing on.

"Start cramming as much vocab into your brain as possible ASAP (forget about grammar, it's too late now)!"

"Get some projects going before you come over, because August is very slow here and by the time things pick up in September you'll be almost done with the Burns."

"I made the mistake of taking too long to figure out that well-crafted pitches on the country's integration issues, German foreign policy or even terrorism (I arrived right before the 9/11 attacks) often ended up in the trash of whatever hack deputy foreign editor handled my emails."

"The apartment you are trying to rent is in the red-light district. Not the best deal in my opinion."

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My encounter with the editor-in-chief had been on a Friday. Afterward, an ally informed me that I should stand up and introduce myself after Monday's staff meeting. I spent the

weekend writing a speech with the vocab I'd crammed, checking the grammar with a friend from the German side of the fellowship, and memorizing it. I began with "Ich mag Baseball und Cheeseburger, und ich fahre ein SUV" and rambled on for about five minutes, interrupted by an occasional chorus of knocks on the large oval table, which was either a way to applaud or say, enough, have a seat. When I finished, we learned that there were two other new faces at the meeting. Each stood up, said his name and where he was from, and sat back down.

Making the painful public effort in German broke the ice. The harder part was getting into the paper. Nobody had assignments for the guy who could only speak coherently after two days of memorization, nor was it sure to be worth their time to translate if I did come up with something. I'd made one contact in Frankfurt before the fellowship started—an American who founded a local Obama group. That led to my first four articles. A pastor I met at an Obama meeting helped me find my fifth and sixth. On the freelance front, I did get rejected by plenty of foreign editors, so instead I looked local—and within the Burns network—to *Spiegel's* English edition, which has brought me to my current smelly hostel in Naples, where I have been spending my time with the city's Gypsy population.

Gypsies seem a fitting place to end. My Burns pitch was to work at a Turkish-language newspaper as a sort of spy, finding out whether it sowed dissent in Germany's ethnic-Turkish population. Mario Scherhauser, our esteemed program director, called and made me promise not to try anything like that as a precondition for being accepted to the fellowship. Most of my articles have instead gravitated to a more natural theme—being lost and without a true home in a foreign place, elements of the vagabond. Displaced Americans organize for Obama in Europe, illegal immigrants look for a doctor, ethnic-Turkish Germans struggle to be included in mainstream society, people who thought they were American learn they're actually German as they're being deported from prison.

One day a social worker detailed the many problems those deportees face. They're dropped suddenly into a foreign culture they hardly understand. They don't know the language. It's difficult to work. They get lost all the time and are always late. They end up in a homeless shelter in the city's sleaziest slum, down the street from the apartment I almost rented. It was the best story I wrote.