

My German Experience

By Ira Porter

The thought of going to Germany for two months was very exciting to me when I learned that I was selected as a Burns Fellow. It took some time to decide where I wanted to work, learn and live for two months. At first I came up with Munich, Berlin and Frankfurt, but after more consideration and consultation with a previous Burns fellow I chose Berlin. It did not disappoint.

First let me say that before I even landed in Berlin, before I sat in on my first morning meeting at Der Spiegel, or took my first U-Bahn train I was impressed with the class of 2008 fellows. Fierce is the best word to describe them. From the go-getter, soon to be mother who had pieced together a sustainable career as a freelance journalist and traveled the world in the pursuit of telling a good story, to the 10 German fellows who unbeknownst to me were serious caliber journalists at their home outlets and all multilingual, I at least thought my consciousness would be increased because of the company I was in. It was during orientation that I got over the fact that I was apart of a prestigious fellowship and saw that these journalists were serious with a wealth of knowledge about the world. Much awaited me on the other side of the Atlantic.

While in Berlin I worked at the English online edition of Der Spiegel, a very successful, very respected publication throughout Germany and Europe. Not being able to speak German fluently, this was the perfect fit for me. All of the staff members were expatriates from some other part of Europe or the United States. They all spoke English, from the time they discussed what they would translate and write about in the morning meetings, to all newsroom interaction. My editor gave me a few days to explore the city and move into my apartment before I started.

This magazine newsroom was much smaller than what I am used to, and so was the German site's newsroom. What was funny and delightfully surprising was that they provided the staff with free beverages everyday throughout the day, which is different from every American newsroom I have ever stepped foot in where there are vending machines on every floor. I was also surprised by the fact that there was a separate room next to a set of offices with a fuseball table where mostly my German colleagues took short breaks to play. I don't think I will ever see something like this in an American newsroom. And while I was prepared to chalk it up as Germans not taking themselves or journalism as serious, I could not have been more incorrect. At Spiegel they work. In our office at times they were so busy translating 10,000 word features that for hours the only sound I could hear was the clicking of keyboard keys. This again was a difference that I noticed because in the States I am used to editors and reporters screaming and cursing at each other from across the room.

I wasn't impressed with the lack of communication between the people in my office, but I realized that it was because what they were doing took time to get right. I would learn that over countless features that I back read after they were initially translated and we had to fix. I spoke about my consciousness being lifted because of the fellowship and my placement at Spiegel added the most to that, besides my interactions with German people and others from around the world. Through the serious political features were translated and published online I learned why Germans, and people in Europe see things differently

than American citizens. It was really piercing to my sense of self to see and consider viewpoints contrary to what I believe and have been taught to believe. This, I think, was illustrated first when the battle between Russia and Georgia broke out. It was my first time contributing to a story that they were writing instead of translating, and from reading reactions from European political leaders was eye-opening. Looking back I really liked that because it allowed me to analyze the situation and the various stances that European governments took on it. The most important thing reading up on it, and helping out with putting our coverage together was that I developed my own opinion on their response. Knowing how they thought on foreign policy issues would come in handy when I later would read about the bailout for the American economy and European Union business. Overall, I wish I would have been fluent in German, as I feel that I would have been able to help even that much more, but I still do feel this was the best placement for me and that my colleagues there helped me with stories, blogs and background information when it counted. Lastly, one big difference I noticed, but don't know if I can attribute to German media in general is the fact that at my placement there was not much reporting from the street level, which is what I am used to. It wasn't that bad stepping out of my comfort zone.

On a personal level I could not think of too many ways where Berlin could have been better. While I did miss my family, I made great strides in making friends. I met and spent time with Germans who completely floored me with their master of several languages and could not stop giggling at me as I slipped and stumbled over German words. But they indulged me and laughed with me. I needed that. Before I went to Berlin people told me that Germans were mean, but I found that to be untrue. I found most of them nice, with the exception of many of the waiters and waitresses I came across in customer service.

I participated in German Stammtisch and learned the importance of a stammtisch and met a wealth of expatriate friends that I think I am going to stay in touch with. I took advantage of historical sites all around the beautiful city and adapted to the culture, which included me purchasing a bike and using it as my main mode of transportation until it broke down. I took pride in strolling the streets in the early morning hours, learning new neighborhoods and impressing myself with places on my city map of where I had visited. The further I travelled from Mitte, the neighborhood where I lived, the more impressed I was with myself. In Berlin I felt free. I drank some of the best beer I have ever tasted with strangers, played football with ex pats, supported my fellow fellows at times and soaked up as much as I could. Even after all of that I still feel like there was so much that I did not see or do, but I am thankful that I will not regret doing anything. I am thankful that at the end of my trip I was able to say that I reached out and tried to learn from people, humbled myself in the process and enhanced my experience as a result. In short, this was a personal win for me. I left almost broke, because of the terrible dollar compared to the Euro, but it was worth it. This experience is one I hope I always remember. I hope I learn German one day and go back to greet some of my friends who helped me in a plethora of ways.