

Max J. Rosenthal 2015 Burns Fellowship report

Spiegel Online - Berlin

My placement for the 2015 Burns was in Berlin with Spiegel Online, the German-language website for *Der Spiegel*. While on the whole I had a fun time and was thankful for the chance to spend so much time in Germany, I did end up being slightly frustrated with my placement.

Work:

My time at Spiegel Online ended up being a little unsatisfying, but definitely not unpleasant. At a personal level, the people there were wonderful and welcoming colleagues. Florian Gathmann, a Burns alumnus, made sure to take me out to lunch a lot the first week, and the rest of the staff was all friendly and seemingly happy to have me there. Even though I was just a visitor, the office assistants were even great in helping me get Bundestag passes and anything else I needed. I sat in on the morning staff meetings every day for the first couple of weeks, and they were valuable in learning how German journalists view the news and also in understanding what issues were important in the public view.

But it was also clear that SPON, as Spiegel Online is known, wasn't really set up to have a fellow come in and contribute serious work to their team. The biggest issue was probably manpower: the SPON staff is small and editors are already busy with the daily workload. I did end up writing a commentary at the suggestion of Roland Nelles, the bureau chief, but it didn't get published because editors' time was short and the work needed to make my German into something publishable was significant. When I started the fellowship I had asked for everyone to tell me any place where I could help out or kind of get my feet wet, but that commentary ended up being the only time I got directions on where I could potentially help the staff or contribute to their coverage. SPON also tends to do mostly daily reporting and leave features for the print magazine, so the reporters tend to be busy with their own day-to-day stories and don't have a lot of time to pair up or help out with a visitor.

In the end, I didn't do any pieces for SPON and just ended up using it as a home base to report for *Mother Jones*, my home publication. We were in Germany just as the refugee crisis peaked, and I more or less made that my beat and ended up reporting on problems in Germany and even taking a week to go on assignment to Serbia and Croatia to see the migration route up close, which was by far the most rewarding professional part of the fellowship. In that way, Spiegel was an excellent: Roland was happy to let me use the office as a place to work and have a phone line, and I would never have gotten a full understanding of the politics of the crisis in Germany without being able to sit in on those morning meetings having SPON reporters to talk with whenever news broke. But I am definitely disappointed I didn't get to do more with the Spiegel newsroom itself, and I would probably recommend to future fellows who want to publish a lot that they go to English-language outlets where they'll be able to slot into the team more easily. For those who would want to go to SPON anyway, I think the keys to success would be having really outstanding German skills and being extremely proactive with pitching and story ideas since the learning curve is steep and there's not a lot of time for others to help you out.

One big note I would add for future fellows: make sure you have someone walk you through how ground rules for sources work in Germany. The expectations/rules of attribution from interviews are dramatically different there than they are in the US, and I had once case where a source later believed our conversation had been off the record because of that confusion. Having a local explain the process in Germany might save you a lot of headaches.

Language training:

I personally didn't find the language training particularly useful and would have preferred to either do it in the United States before leaving or skip it altogether. I have a fairly high level of German proficiency and the class I ended up in was definitely challenging, but since it's a general class and not one geared toward work or journalism, it felt like a lot of the vocab and lessons didn't necessarily help when it came time to start work. I felt like the best prep I got during those two weeks was simply reading the newspaper during breaks and trying to hash out the language on my own for stuff that would be useful to reporters. The two weeks did give us some breathing room to ease into the city and go on some of the Goethe Institut's cultural tours, but on the whole I would have rather had the two weeks to get to know my co-workers at Spiegel and try to get some work done. Only once you get to the office do you realize just how short six weeks there really is.

Outside of work:

With eight fellows all in Berlin, our group ended up spending a lot of time together, but I think that ended up as a positive. I felt that locals (who seem fairly rare in Berlin, anyway) were hard to get to know, and having a good group of other Burns fellows to rely on actually made us more willing to do and see things in the city. I would definitely tell future fellows to make every effort to meet and spend time with Germans, but I'd also say that making good friends in the group and pushing each other to make plans and explore the city is probably the most effective way to actually get to know Berlin. I ended up seeing soccer games, going to a classical concert, spending time at the lakes, going to Potsdam, and a bunch of other things I might otherwise not have done because I didn't have people to do them with. So, while I know the advice from Frank says to leave the other fellows and try to explore yourself, I'm thankful we had a good group that got along. Doing stuff and getting to know Berlin with them was probably the best part of the fellowship

The one thing I wish I *had* done was leave Berlin and explore the rest of Germany a bit. For people who end up in Berlin in the future, I'd recommend not getting overwhelmed by the size and activity of Berlin and trying to do it all. It's simply too big to try and tackle in just two months, and you shouldn't feel tethered to the city on weekends as I sometimes did. It was great to see German fellows traveling all over the US during their weekends, and I wish I'd done the same with more places in Germany like Hamburg or the Black Forest. Getting down to visit Munich was a really great reminder that Berlin is wildly different from the rest of Germany and we probably miss a lot in spending so much time there.

Published pieces:

“Forget Germany. Refugees in Croatia First Have to Figure Out Where the Hell They Are.”

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/09/confusion-refugee-trail>

“For Refugees Stranded at Croatian Choke Point, EU Agreement Brings Little Relief”

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/09/europes-indecision-traps-tens-thousands-refugees-croatia>

“Is the Refugee Crisis Fueling Europe's Right-Wing Parties?”

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/09/germanys-right-wing-parties-are-quiet-now-heres-how-they-could-grab-spotlight>

“Germany Closes Its Border With Austria, Hoping to Stop the Refugee Flow”

<http://www.motherjones.com/mojo/2015/09/germany-closing-its-borders>

“America Once Accepted 800,000 War Refugees. Is it Time to Do That Again?”

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/09/syria-refugees-europe-vietnam>

“How the Refugee Crisis Is Wreaking Havoc on the European Union”

<http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/08/how-migrant-crisis-wreaking-havoc-on-european-union>