

## **Arthur F. Burns Fellowship 2014, Final Report - Tomas Urbina, CBC radio producer and freelance journalist**

### **Orientation**

In terms of the "fellowship" aspect of the program, the one-week orientation is essential. Gathered in Washington D.C., you have the opportunity to bond with your fellows over several days of seminars, shared meals and evenings out. You get to know each other personally and professionally and start forming important friendships.

The preparatory seminars are very interesting and are important in the sense that they keep you intellectually active and in the questioning mode that might soften when you find out you're going to Germany for two months. The ICFJ did their best to bring on topical, interesting speakers who knew what they were talking about and could engage with our questions, some better than others.

In the context of major revelations of US spying in Germany, we had great speakers on US-German relations, but also experts on Russia, as the Ukraine crisis raged. We also heard from distinguished reporters and editors on the US and German sides that talked about trends in the media and the media cultures of each country. It was an excellent base and big-picture look at issues in each country as well as those that affect the Transatlantic relationship.

The week ended with two incredible nights in Airlie, Virginia on an amazing retreat estate. Fun, socializing, swimming, skeet shooting, biking, frisbee, sunbathing and delicious meals reached a climax here. Four bikes/riders reached the pool.

### **Language training**

The two weeks of intensive German language course at the Goethe Institute were invaluable. I learned a ton and felt much better about handling life in Germany after the course. We had an excellent and very personable instructor who, in addition to delivering a great classroom experience, took us on some excellent excursions that helped us get a sense of the history and culture of Germany.

We took a day trip to Potsdam and visited the Sans Souci palace and massive park/grounds as well as the city centre with a very interesting (if at times long-winded) tour guide. We also took a tour of Hohen Schönhofen, the former Stasi prison in northeast Berlin. Being in language classes for the first two weeks of the fellowship didn't mean that we weren't working. I think most of the fellows, me included, were working on stories or research from the get-go. It was also good, during this time, to meet my editor in person and talk about how we saw the fellowship playing out and what each of us wanted to get out of it.

### **Placement**

I was placed at The Local Germany ([www.thelocal.de](http://www.thelocal.de)) in Berlin. It was a host organization that I had researched myself and pushed for in the placement process. I'm glad I did. The Local is an English-language news website that produces German news and features (their tagline is "Germany's News in

English"). They're part of a larger network of "The Locals" across several Western European countries (France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden). Their audience is a mix of English-speaking expatriates in Germany and readers in the US, UK and around the world. English-speaking news and current affairs journalists often get German stories The Local Germany.

It's the first time that The Local Germany has been part of the fellowship and as an English publication it has certain advantages over German-language publications. First off, you get to write in English. With most German placements, if your work gets published it will first be translated to German.

Based on the experience of the 2014 fellows, most German publications want you to write about topics that have some connection to North America (the US or Canada). On the surface, being from North America makes you the expert, whereas on German topics your lack of experience in the country puts you at a disadvantage compared to your German journalist colleagues. While this isn't necessarily true, that's often how your time at a German publication will play out. So, in a sense, this can make it more difficult for you to pitch stories to your host publication or broadcaster (but don't take my word for it, check out the other reports!).

At The Local, I was able to pitch my own stories and pursue them, granted my editor found them interesting enough. I was able to do a mix of features and news, both that I pitched and that were assigned to me by my editor. My editor was very open to different ideas, including adding audio clips to news stories (my background is as a radio producer). They also re-tweeted several of my Berlin news-related tweets and were open to me managing the The Local Germany's Twitter account, though I didn't end up having time to do this. The most important thing was maintaining open communication about my work, my travel plans, my schedule and what they were expecting from me.

The Local Germany is staffed by a small team in a small office. There is one editor, one full-time reporter and for half the month, one freelancer. For most of my placement, there was also an intern. As such a small group, you get to know your colleagues well. Decision-making and production is also streamlined because getting something approved, edited or reviewed is as easy as talking to the person across the room. That makes The Local very quick at getting on stories and getting them up online. The Local produces 10 stories per day, including the biggest German news of the day, stories from around the country and a strange or quirky story or two.

Most of the news stories are translated from German wire copy (either DPA or AFP) with The Local staff making calls and sending emails to get original comment from sources. The Local also produces some original features, though not very often because the small team is pumping out news stories. They also produce regular weekly items like The Local List, German of the Week, Job Talk, Expat Dispatches and Opinion.

My German language skills were limited peaking at an advanced beginner level, which meant that I could not do the same type of work my colleagues did. That also meant that I could do my own stories, but I was still able to contribute in the office to other people's stories with ideas, suggestions, contacts, research, etc. I was also able to do a couple of "news of the day" stories despite my limited language skills because my sources were able to speak English.

I traveled quite a lot for work including to small villages in Schleswig-Holstein in Germany's northwest, Hamburg, Bremen, Frankfurt and Leipzig. I highly recommend this as a way to get to know the country and the people and cultures of its different regions.

In all scenarios in the office and out, knowing as much German as possible is the biggest leg up you can give yourself. It will help you understand what's going on and help you communicate with your peers and your interviewees and everyone in between. Things went best for me when I, at minimum, introduced myself and said who I was working for in German, before asking if the person spoke English.

The disadvantages of working at The Local were that I was not exposed to German newsroom and that I didn't have the same resources a large news organization would have, including different departments and different platforms (online, TV/video, radio/audio). Also, The Local is not as well-known as most German media, including ones that produce English material (i.e. Deutsche Welle, Spiegel International). However, Deutsche Welle's online team is based in Bonn and Spiegel International is in the process of shutting down its production and I was grateful both to be based in Berlin and to work at an outlet that is growing.

My home organization is the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), where I have worked for the last three years as a "casual" employee, which means I don't have a contract or a permanent position, but for the most part working full time. It also means that any work I did for the CBC during the fellowship was paid on a per-piece and freelance basis. That factor, combined with how busy I was with my work for The Local, meant that I did not keep to the 50/50 guideline in terms of producing work for the host and home organizations. I produced much more for The Local and only a couple of pieces for the CBC.

Next year, The Local Germany will have a new editor because the current editor Tom Bristow is ending his time there soon. I only hope the next fellow will have such a supportive and collaborative editor.

Lastly, the Burns Alumni Network was an invaluable resource, both personally and professionally. It was a pleasure to meet and spend time with former fellows in Berlin and Munich and learn from their experiences as well as discuss current projects.

Through the directory I was also able to contact former fellows, which led directly to freelance opportunities and expanding my freelancing network. The Burns alumni are an excellent resource and a friendly bunch.

### **Practical stuff**

Pretty much anywhere you get placed in Germany, I would highly recommend getting a bike as soon as possible. Having a bike will make it easy and pleasant to get around and will help you get to know the city much better than if you only use public transit. It'll also save you money and make you feel real good. Of course, you'll still be using public transit for all kinds of situations because it's so dang practical. In Berlin, there are shops all over the place that sell used bikes. You can also get a used bike at flea markets, the most popular of which is the Mauerpark Flohmarkt, on every Sunday from 9-6pm (and don't miss the Bear Pit Karaoke in the park).

In Berlin (and likely in other cities), buying a bundle of public transit tickets (4 in Berlin) instead of individual tickets will save you cash. Unless it's your last couple of days in the city, you'll always need another ticket at some point.

WG-Gesucht ([www.wg-gesucht.de](http://www.wg-gesucht.de)) is a great source of online ads for apartments or shared accommodation. You will have to send a lot of messages because you might not always get a response, given that you're coming from North America and they can't meet you in person or have you check out the place before renting to you. It's also a good idea to canvas the German fellows about whether they have connections that have a room or apartment available. Sometimes a former fellow will contact the ICFJ/IJP and let them know they have a place available, but don't count on that. Your year's Facebook group and the Burns alumni Facebook group might help you in your search.

Again, learn as much German as possible before you go. Take a class, get a tutor, read a book, listen to a CD or use an app (e.g. Duolingo). It will make everything better and easier and you'll feel like a boss.

If you want to receive mail in Germany, take a piece of paper or masking tape and put your name on your mailbox and your apartment buzzer, otherwise you won't receive any mail or packages there. That's how the postal service works in Germany.

For travel around Germany, getting a BahnCard is a good bet. It's essentially a discount card you purchase that gets you either 25% or 50% off the normal price of a train trip, depending on which version of the card you buy. In the 2014 fellowship period (summer), Deutsche Bahn offered a 4-month trial Bahncard so the card cost less than the full-year version. Remember that you need to inform Deutsche Bahn that you don't want the card to renew automatically after the expiration date. In my last week in Germany I discovered coach bus travel. It is much cheaper than the train and offers free wifi (though it didn't work on the trip I took). The drawback to bus travel is it takes longer than the train, which often has more direct routes and travels at high speeds on inter-city routes (150-250 km/h).

As an example, a bus from Berlin to Leipzig cost me 7 euros (7!!), but took 2 hours. With the Bahncard 50, the train would have cost 23 euros and would have taken 1 hour. So, depending on how much time you have, schedules and how much you want to spend, the bus can be an interesting option.

Finally, you will probably need a cell phone in Germany. I was lucky in the sense that I had just got a new smartphone in Canada before I left for Germany. I had my old smartphone unlocked and got a German sim card when I got to Berlin and got on a monthly plan that gave me unlimited calling and text and 1GB of data for 25-30 euros. I was with Ay Yildiz which uses the E-plus network. Though it was good enough, I would advise against this provider. I've heard good things about Deutsche Telekom and Vodafone.

## **Enjoying Germany**

There is so much to see, explore and experience in Germany that it will be hard to resist the temptation to do it all the time. Then again, living in the country, no matter what city you're in, will let you do that naturally. I'm guilty of not having set foot in even one of Berlin's excellent museums, but I don't at all feel that I missed out on the culture and life of the city or the country. Travel as much as you can, get in

the water when it's still warm, enjoy the beer gardens, the clubs, the fun bars, the extremely affordable restaurants, the parks, the rivers and canals, the squares, the bridges, the open air parties, historic sites, the people and everything in between.

My girlfriend and I lived in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighbourhood (Gneisenaustasse / Mehringdamm area) which, according to what I've been told, has changed a lot in the last several years. It is more posh and gentrified than it used to be when there was a larger immigrant community and consequently rents have gone up, but we were lucky to find something extremely affordable that was quite central with good transit access and lots of places to eat and useful amenities nearby. It's a great district to live in, in terms of accessing the rest of the city as well, but for the most part, all the districts around central Berlin are great to live in and offer lots of transit options.

I've made friends through the fellowship that I believe I will keep for life. We spent a lot of time together in different work and social situations and got to learn about and explore Berlin and Germany together. Though I was one of the fellows posted in Berlin, I think the fellows in Munich and Nuremberg had equally rewarding experiences.

### **My work**

Here's a list of the articles, both features and news, I produced for The Local, for my home organization (CBC) and for Deutsche Welle as a freelancer, from most recent to oldest. For my original features, I also took the photos used in the articles:

#### **'I know the Wall through the history of my family'**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20141110/i-know-the-wall-through-the-history-of-my-family>

#### **German village internet (radio version of an earlier article I wrote):**

<https://soundcloud.com/twtw-cbc-ca/rural-internet-by-tomas-urbina>

#### **Returning home to Leipzig (radio version of an earlier article I wrote):**

<http://www.dw.de/returning-home-to-leipzig/av-18029845>

#### **Storied music publisher celebrates Leipzig return (travelled to Leipzig for this):**

<http://www.dw.de/storied-music-publisher-celebrates-leipzig-return/a-18011574>

#### **Hostage horror in Yemen, hostage hope in Somalia (contributed research and reporting about the Michael Scott Moore kidnapping):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140923/abducted-german-family-are-dead-yemen>

#### **Germany's first Iraq arms delivery is ready (I contributed the audio item in the middle of the article, a montage of Germans' opinions on their country sending weapons to Kurdish forces):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140918/germany-prepares-first-iraq-arms-delivery-isis-kurds>

<https://soundcloud.com/the-local-germany/germans-sound-off-on-sending-weapons-to-iraq-to-battle-isis>

**Village expands its self-built broadband network (travelled to Schleswig-Holstein for this):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140910/german-village-expands-its-own-broadband-network>

**In defense of Uber: three reasons it beats taxis (an op-ed piece I pitched and edited):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140909/why-i-like-using-uber-taxi-app-germany>

**Europe's biggest tech show debuts in Berlin:**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140905/europes-biggest-tech-show-debuts-in-berlin-ifa>

**Germany's brain drain is Europe's gain:**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140829/germany-brain-drain-europes-gain>

**Berlin struggles to sell former Goebbels villa:**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140828/berlin-struggles-to-sell-former-goebbels-villa-nazi>

**Germany sends burgers and sausages to Kurds (contributed reporting from Minister Steinmeier's speech at the German ambassadors' conference):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140825/german-military>

**Dying town centres seek the miracle cure (traveled to Delmenhorst, near Bremen, for this):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140820/dying-town-centres-seek-a-miracle-cure>

**Berlin bans Uber app, taxis rejoice:**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140814/berlin-bans-uber-app-taxis-rejoice>

**"I saw them building the Wall step by step" (adapted from audio interviews I did along the Berlin Wall memorial trail and turned into an article):**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140813/i-saw-them-building-the-wall-step-by-step>

**Berlin seniors battle Swedish property giant:**

<http://www.thelocal.de/20140812/berlin-seniors-clash-swedish-property-giant-akelius>

**Upcoming:**

1) Article and radio piece on the popularity of audio books in Germany (audio books are more popular

than e-books in Germany)