

I was a bit apprehensive as I entered the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*'s Berlin bureau for the first time. The building is an old one, with the hallowed paper's name etched in stone above the huge metal doors. (It stands out from its glittering environs in the Mitte area of the former East -- particularly the upscale shopping center across the street that calls itself "Upper East Side Berlin.") The ancient elevator groaned as I pulled the door shut, and slowly, very slowly, hauled me up to the fourth floor, home to the *Feuilleton* of the *Sonntagszeitung*, where I'd be working for the next seven weeks. I had plenty of time to ponder the newsroom I was about to step into: It would be a bustling one, I was sure, and very Teutonic, very businesslike.

And then the elevator stopped, and I pushed open the door, and I saw just how wrong I'd been. Art lined the walls of the pastel-green hallway. There was no newsroom per se; each reporter and editor had his own spacious office. Silence reigned.

The *Feuilleton*, I later discovered, was something of an exception to the rule. In most Berlin newsrooms, there *were* occasional periods of stress, and the editors *didn't* stroll through the halls, pensively smoking cigarettes and remarking on the beautiful thoughts they'd just had. I had landed in an anomaly, but of course it took me a while to realize that, given how much of an anomaly I myself was.

I was an American in a German newsroom. I was a political journalist who'd parachuted into an arts and culture section. I was a web editor, a 24-hour-news-cycle guy, in a world where the internet hardly mattered and each story received a good week of work. I came from no-nonsense Washington and found myself in leisurely editorial meetings where the inverted pyramid was mocked as a symptom of American ADHD and highbrow architecture reviews were routinely given top billing.

But I was also in Berlin, which just happens to be the coolest city on the planet. And so, for my first few weeks, as I tried to make sense of what I could possibly contribute to so alien -- and so esteemed -- a publication, I gave myself to the city. I availed myself of the laid-back, comfortably furnished, dirt-cheap, never-crowded cafes and bars that lined every block of my *Kiez* in Kreuzberg. I made new friends, spoke hardly a word of English, and almost forgot that there were four other Burnsies in Berlin. (Besides, they were mostly up in Prenzlauer Berg, which seemed *far* too yuppie for my newfound gritty Kreuzberg sensibilities.)

Of course, there were also times of frustration. I'd come to Berlin thinking that I couldn't waste a single minute of a single day; there was so much to do, and so little time. But inevitably when one travels alone, there are occasional periods of loneliness and boredom. These weren't frequent, but they did serve to motivate me to throw myself more fully into my work as a journalist -- which was, after all, why I was in Berlin in the first place.

The problem was that my role at the *Feuilleton* was fairly awkward. I'd hoped to be able to write a little commentary, a little web stuff, and some on-the-ground reporting, but my editor wasn't interested in any of that. He wanted stories that a German reporter couldn't

write, an American's perspective on elements of German society (but not the wide-eyed "things are so different here" type of story so often seen in B-grade travel publications). It took a while to figure out what those could possibly be. My first week at the FAS was spent trying to wrap my mind around this very foreign newsroom. My second and third weeks involved a few pitches, a few story drafts, and ultimately my first piece, which was published in my fourth week at the paper -- meaning that all of a sudden, I was most of the way done with my fellowship.

But things really picked up at the end. I had given myself a goal of two stories in the *Feuilleton* (sounds modest, I know, but it's a weekly section, the equivalent of the *New York Times* Week in Review, except snootier) and two freelance pieces for American publications. I ultimately met my goals, though three of those four stories (one for the FAS, one for *Foreign Policy*, and one for *Slate*) came in my final two weeks.

Advice for future Burnsies? Get a head start -- write some stories early in your fellowship, before it's almost over. Advice for how to do that? No idea. It really does take some time to get acclimatized, and to get enough of a handle on German culture and journalism and news to make yourself useful. I suppose it might be worthwhile to pitch a few stories early, even if they're unlikely to be much good, just to force yourself to get in the swing of things. I wish I had the magic formula. I don't.

A few words of wisdom I *do* have for Burnsies-to-be:

1. German journalism ain't American journalism.

The pre-program orientation in DC was wonderful and helpful and festive and all that (Thanks, Frank. Thanks, Mario.), but it didn't cover a lot in the way of journalistic differences between the two countries. These differences are big, and can be fairly shocking to people accustomed to the American style. To wit: In Germany, when you write up a Q&A, the interviewee has the right to change his responses, or even to retract the entire interview. It's worth picking the brains of the German fellows at the orientation to get a sense of these things before you find yourself confounded, or worse, in Germany.

2. The Burns alumni are a fantastic resource.

They're also fantastic people. Frank and Mario will tell you this at the orientation, *and you should listen*. In your first week in Germany, try to get a beer with as many recent fellows as you can. They will connect you to sources. They will suggest story topics. They will tell you about other great fellowship opportunities. They will let you crash on their girlfriend's couch in Leipzig. Buy them beer/food. Show them gratitude. They are wonderful.

3. Language classes are dangerous.

OK, not really -- but you should be aware of what you're sacrificing when you sign away two weeks of your fellowship to language classes. Unless your German is near-fluent

when you arrive, it's certainly worthwhile to take a class. But most likely, you'll still have the morning or afternoon free on days when you have class. Take advantage of this time. Meet your editor(s). Brainstorm story ideas. Talk to Burns alums and other expats who might have good ideas and contacts for you.

#### 4. No placement is perfect.

More likely than not, after your first week on the job, you'll think you were placed at the wrong publication. This is natural. You're in a foreign country, covering the news in an unfamiliar city. Obviously it won't be a perfect fit. But make the most of it. Don't be shy about pressing your editors for ways you can contribute. (You, of course, need to come up with the ideas; don't expect your editors to do that for you.) Remind them frequently of your goals, and your *need* to get another story published before you meet the other Burnsies for the end-of-program meetup weekend. But if you determine that there's not a ton you can do for your host publication, start pitching like mad to some English-language publications. You don't want to come away from your fellowship empty-handed.

#### 5. Enjoy it.

This goes without saying, but unless you have some really awesome job that I don't want to hear about because I'll only get jealous, it's not every day that you have the opportunity to spend two months working in a foreign country. Don't put so much pressure on yourself to get stories published that you can't enjoy your stay in a really magical country. It's not a vacation, but it shouldn't be all business, either. Just as you don't want to return home without clips, you don't want to return home without stories to tell. Misbehave a little. It's worth it.