***JOHN ELIGON BURNS FELLOWSHIP REPORT***

I had only been in Germany for three days and already I was hitching a ride. The annual conference for the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD) was set to take place, and as a black person who covers issues of race in the United States, I knew I had to go.

In fact, I had attended the conference 15 years earlier when I was studying abroad in Germany. Back then, I rode in a car with others who also were attending the convention. And one of my favorite modes of getting around the country at that time was a Website called Mitfahrzentrale. People offer seats in their cars and allow you ride with them for a small fee. A day before the convention, I took a shot in the dark and checked out the site (now called Blablacar) to see if anyone happened to be driving toward the obscure town, Helmarshausen, in Hessen on the day I needed to go.

Turns out, there was someone else from Stuttgart who was attending the convention and driving there. And so I hopped in a car with Owusu, a German whose father is from Ghana, and we made our way to the convention. Less than a week into my time in Germany, I already had a new friend and an adventure under my belt.

Most anyone who works in journalism as a reporter relishes in the adventure and the discovery. The best thing about our profession, in my opinion, is that we wake up and often have no idea where a given day will take us. That is especially true in the life of a foreign correspondent. That’s one of the primary reasons I jumped at the opportunity to participate in the Arthur F. Burns Fellowship -- to break a bit from my regular routine as a reporter and take in a new adventure.

The experience did not disappoint.

My time in Germany took me from a soul-cleansing retreat with black people in Germany to a nerve-racking Neo-Nazi event to remote Swabian towns that had all the charm you would expect in the old world. My reporting helped me to understand the complexity and diversity, challenges and bright spots of the country. Most importantly for me was that, at a time when the country was engaged in a massive debate over German identity, I learned that what it means to be German and where the country is headed were open questions with surprising dimensions.

That view of a complex Germany all started at the ISD convention.

I have been studying German for more than 20 years and people always ask me why I speak German, of all languages. If we’re being honest, people are especially curious about that because as a black man with dreadlocks, I do not look like the typical German speaker. But being at the convention was revelatory. I saw people who looked just like me and my friends. Yet when they talked to each other, it was not in the English that I’m used to. It was in German.

In many ways this helped affirm my decision to learn German, to having invested lots of my life to studying the history and culture of the country. Germany, I saw during my fellowship, was not the lily white country we know from history, mass media and popular culture. It was a place of people like me, of immigrants, of Jews, Christians and Muslims. There were people of color who were new to the country and still struggling to learn the language, adjust to the culture and help Germans learn who they were. There were others who knew no other country but Germany. And I had the good fortune of spending time with many of these people.

I was based at the Stuttgarter Zeitung/Stuttgarter Nachrichten for my fellowship. I sat on the politics desk. My colleagues were nothing but friendly, helpful, gracious and even inquisitive about my life and experiences as a New York Times reporter. But they were also pretty hands off, letting me do what I wanted. So I spent much of my time traveling the country and interviewing people of various backgrounds, mostly doing reporting for The Times.

I met with black activists in Berlin who were fighting to get Germany to take more responsibility for its colonial history and wrote a story about it. I spent time with refugees from Gambia in Rottenburg am Neckar, a town about 45 minutes south of Stuttgart, to understand how their transition in Germany was going. I wrote a piece for the Stuttgarter Zeitung on their experiences. I met with a refugee family from Afghanistan in their home in Rottenburg, with a Syrian refugee family in Stuttgart and with an Afro-German family in Berlin whose ancestors have been in the country since the 1800’s. Those interviews were all for a piece I am working on with my Times colleague on German identity.

I also met with Turkish people who have lived in the country most, if not all, of their lives, with a man from Gabon who moved to the country when he was five, with a German woman who never knew her black father and grew up in a completely white environment and another who grew up with her black father and white mother, yet still found herself struggling to figure out her identity.

It was interesting to see the shared experiences between people of African descent in Germany and those in the United States. Although black American culture is much older and more developed than black German culture (which does not really exist yet), there were similar struggles in both places. Interestingly enough, I also saw this shared experience among white supremacists. In Germany and the United States, white supremacists espouse very nationalistic views. Yet ironically, they tend to support their fellow white supremacists in other countries -- something that was abundantly clear to me when I met a man wearing a Confederate flag t-shirt at the Neonazi event. He told me that he was wearing the t-shirt to show his solidarity with the American South.

All these interviews about race and identity happened against the backdrop over a country struggling through debates over how to handle its refugee politics and the rise of a far right that flexed its terrifying muscles in an explosion on the streets of Chemnitz. It made for an interesting time to explore these issues in Germany as everyone was talking about the topics of identity and migration. These issues even came up in casual conversations with longtime German friends. So I felt like I was able to really get a broad sense of the pulse of the country. And it was quite revelatory to hear how even “middle-of-the-road” Germans -- folks who are not aligned with the far-right or the left wing -- had anxieties about migration and what it means for the identity of their country.

I did also get a chance to sneak away for a fun story. Namely, my colleague, Jada Yuan, who is The Times’s 52 Places traveler, just so happened to be on the German leg of her world tour. So I joined her on a roadtrip through Baden Württemberg and Hessen and got to co-write a travel story with her.

I was very happy with my decision to spend my fellowship in Stuttgart. Berlin is a great city, but I really felt there was a quaint charm in Stuttgart that helped me experience a more typical German existence. The city was big enough to have a lot going on, with a good, diverse mix of people, yet it was small enough to manage and get to know intimately.

I left my experience with a feeling that I am confident is shared by most Burns Fellows -- that the time was too short. There were stories that I had to leave on the table, and ones that I brought home with me to complete. By the time I was leaving Germany, it had felt like our orientation session had happened only a week earlier. I was just hitting my stride in terms of the mastering the language and building relationships when the fellowship ended.

Yet I returned to the United States newly enriched and with a fresh, reinvigorated perspective as a journalist.

MY WORK:

[Road trip through Germany](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/travel/west-germany-road-trip.html)

[Neonazi event](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/26/world/europe/germany-far-right-neo-nazi.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fjohn-eligon&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=2&pgtype=collection)

[Colonial Germany](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/11/world/europe/germany-colonial-history-africa-nazi.html?rref=collection%2Fbyline%2Fjohn-eligon&action=click&contentCollection=undefined&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=4&pgtype=collection)

Attached is Stuttgarter Zeitung article on refugee art event

Still to come: Stuttgarter Zeitung essay on Neonazi event and Stuttgarter Zeitung on Gambian refugees