

Valeriya Safronova, Final Report
Placement: Süddeutsche Zeitung in Munich

I was originally trepidatious about being the only fellow in Munich while everyone else got to have a grand old time in one of my favorite cities in the world (Berlin, duh). But it turned out that being alone forced me to make friends with locals and gave me a push into experiencing German culture without a safety net.

What I loved about Munich was that it was exactly as some of the local fellows described to me beforehand: a huge village. During the course of my stay, I lived in several different neighborhoods that spanned a pretty wide range, especially in terms of their hip factor. One thing I learned while trying to find housing in Munich is that it is harder than finding an apartment in New York.

In the end, a German fellow (thank you, Fumi!) connected me to a coworker who had a place available for four weeks. My boyfriend's roommate linked me up with her mom, who had a spare room for three weeks. And I spent the last two weeks bouncing among two Airbnbs and the apartment of a new friend.

Though dragging an enormous suitcase across various sidewalks is invariably annoying, I looked on the bright side of my changing addresses: I got to experience five different neighborhoods "like a local." First, there was my amazing Glockenbach apartment, which had a huge deck and was placed in possibly the most ideal spot in the city, near a swimming spot in the Isar, a pizzeria, a 21-hour deli, a subway entrance and a million cute restaurants and bars. It also happened to be a 12-minute walk from the school where I took German lessons every morning for two weeks.

German lessons, by the way, were one of my favorite parts of the entire fellowship. I love learning languages and I haven't had much of an opportunity to spend my time taking classes since college. Pro tip: If you can, study some German before you arrive (I opened Duolingo every time I wanted to open Instagram). I was able to progress from A1 to A2 in two weeks while in Munich because of I entered a fairly intense, fast-paced course with some knowledge. I actually wanted to keep learning German after the two weeks were up, so I paid a couple hundred to keep going twice a week in the evenings. It definitely helped me with communication, especially outside of the center. The other great aspect of the classes was that it was a little easier to make friends there than in the office.

From Glockenbach, I moved to Milbertshofen. It was much quieter than Glockenbach and a bit of a hike to work. I took advantage of the distance to get some exercise in: I used the MVG app to rent bikes going to and from the office. By the way, something I learned about the shared bikes: People like to hide them in courtyards (yep. Very rude!). Beware of a bike whose GPS places it anywhere behind a building. You'll probably never find it.

The neighborhood where my office was situated is known for being “far” from the center. Far in Munich means 15 to 20 minutes on the S-bahn. There was plenty of complaining about the distance from my coworkers, but a benefit to the location is that everybody takes an hour-long break during lunch, followed by coffee. This translated to me having different lunch buddies from around the office basically every single day for six weeks.

Because my German is far, far, far from good enough for me to write articles, my editors at Sueddeutsche Zeitung had to translate anything I wrote. I knew this was a bit of a drag, so I wanted to contribute to the newspaper in other ways. Luckily, a lot of people there wanted me for something other than my writing skills. SZ is currently in the middle of a slow transformation from entirely print-focused to digitally agile. Though it of course has a robust online presence and plenty of experimental, visually striking projects on the site, there is still a lot more it could do to be digitally adept.

Some examples: the website and the print paper are two different companies. Working for the website is less prestigious. A lot of people don’t want to share bylines. Most publishing schedules revolve around print. Print sometimes demands exclusives. Different editors make decisions for the digital and print versions.

The people in the building who are fighting for change sought me out as a representative of the New York Times. I have worked at NYT for more than five years, and for a significant chunk of that time, I worked as a producer/social media manager in Styles, and later as an editor for the experimental, millennial-friendly app (NYT Now, R.I.P.). As such, I have been involved with many of the audience development and digital strategy conversations at NYT over the years.

I shared as much about my experiences as I could. I spoke with members of the digital transition team, the podcast team, the video team, the social media team, the audience development team, and even had a meeting about strategy with Wolfgang Krach, one of the editors of the paper who is most interested in a digital transition.

I told them about the effects of the Innovation Report that NYT published several years ago, about our publishing and editing structures, about our CMS, about our comments-moderation team, about our social media strategies, and about some of our failed experiments. I don’t want to oversell NYT — there is still loads of work for the company to do. But I could tell that in some ways NYT’s approach to the internet was ahead of SZ’s, and I tried to give as much of an insider’s view of that approach as I could.

Reporting in Germany was stimulating, challenging, sometimes frustrating (but when isn’t it?) and an incredibly valuable experience. I wanted to do the fellowship because I want to work as a foreign correspondent in the future, and I was curious to get a taste of that life. Well, consider my appetite very whetted.

I was researching four stories for NYT while in Munich: One about sexism in the language and how trans and non-binary people are changing it; one about Okwui Enwezor, the former director of Haus der Kunst, who left amid a flurry of unanswered questions; one about cool spots to hang out in Munich; and one about Russian-speaking Germans. NYT can move slowly with big stories and I spent most of my time reporting these rather than rushing to pump them out. I had the chance to finish two stories fully, one is on its way, and the last was research for an investigation that our bureau chief in Germany is working on.

I reached out to some of the local fellows from past years for help finding a translator, and one of them recommended a friend. I worked with her several times. Otherwise, I got by with English, though I do have to say that a number of people didn't respond to my interview requests and I wondered whether that was because I wrote to them in English.

I quickly learned that it is common in Germany for sources to review quotes before publication, something I had to keep telling people went against NYT's ethics code. Most people (barring one) were fine with the process once I explained it.

I took advantage of being at SZ and asked reporters/editors for tips on where to find information and how to reach out to certain people. Everyone at SZ was extremely friendly and welcoming. I think the desk I landed on — Panorama — was amazing. My coworkers were lovely and as it turned out, Panorama is the first section at SZ to merge its digital and print operations. It was inspiring to be among people who are so excited about the future of journalism.

Final thought: Traveling around Munich is amazing and convenient! I spent some time trying to pick the perfect town in the Alps to visit and eventually realized that I could close my eyes and point at any random town on a map of Bavaria and land on something both adorably quaint and naturally astounding.

The town I took a trip to was Ruhpolding and it was near the most beautiful trio of lakes. One was so clean you can literally drink from it. When a friend came to visit, we spent one day by Neuschwanstein (if you go, make a reservation!), and another near Rosen Insel, and I was completely taken by the castle, the lakes, the history, the mountains and the local wine. Berlin is an easy four-hour train ride away. Sadly, I only made the trip once (and stupidly, I flew). Book your train in advance if you can because the prices do go up.

Stories:

Süddeutsche Zeitung:

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/leben/debatte-um-sexuelle-gewalt-wie-der-fall-argento-die-me-too-bewegung-veraendert-1.4120339>

<https://gfx.sueddeutsche.de/apps/e532355/www/index.html>

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/debatte-um-asia-argento-heuchlerisch-und-inakzeptabel-1.4098631>

One more in print about natural wine

NYT:

How a Scientology Scandal and Financial Struggles Led to a Museum Director's Exit
(link not live yet)

Two stories in queue:

One about cool spots in Munich for the travel section

One about sexism in the German language

Story in research mode:

Investigation into Russian-speaking Germans