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Arthur F. Burns Fellowship Report
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Fellowship Placement: RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland

The Arthur F. Burns Fellowship was an incredible opportunity that I would recommend to anyone. I came into the program with two goals: (1) I wanted to do deeper and more ambitious work — enterprise, investigations and features — than is usually possible at my job on The Times breaking news desk, and (2) I wanted to see if I enjoyed working in Europe because I have long aspired to work as a correspondent there. I am glad to report that I achieved both goals with the support of the Fellowship program, colleagues at The Times Berlin Bureau and my host media, the capital bureau of RedaktionsNetzwerk Deutschland.

The program began with a week of orientation in Washington, D.C., alongside Burns Fellows from Germany that then transitioned into two weeks of intensive German language study at the German Language School in Prenzlauer Berg. I had not anticipated spending five hours a day studying German, but it was highly rewarding. I have always loved foreign languages, but this was the first new one I had been exposed to since I was in college. The teachers were charismatic, thorough and ambitious — we worked one textbook in two weeks — and studying German eased my transition to a new country and enriched my research and reporting experience. It also provided a setting for the North American fellows to get to know each other better.

My host media organization was the capital bureau of RND and my colleagues there were friendly and helpful, sharing contacts when I asked for them and providing me with invaluable assistance in finding an apartment near Gleisdreieck Park on the Kreuzberg-Schöneberg border. In return, I assisted them with an online video feature explaining the impeachment process in the United States and also shared some best practices used by Times reporters for tracking data analytics and building an audience. But RND understood the structure of the Burns program and gave me the space I needed to pursue my goals. At our first meeting, the capital bureau chief, Gordon Repinski, said to me, “I’ll tell you what my editor in San Diego told me what I did a Burns Fellowship ten years ago: I am not paying you, so you should use this time to do what you want and to pursue your own goals.” Gordon told me that he had enjoyed the opportunity to surf when he was in San Diego, a thrill I mostly matched by making frequent use of Berlin’s excellent and highly functional public transportation!

I spent much of my time as a Burns Fellow reporting enterprise and feature stories for The Times. During my time in Berlin, the news cycle was dominated by two stories that had nothing to do with Germany: the Ukraine scandal that led to the impeachment of President Trump and the daily dramas surrounding Brexit and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson. That dynamic created an unexpected learning opportunity for me: in addition to learning about Germany, I also improved my skill in attracting the attention of editors while I was in a faraway country far from the heart of the news cycle. With so much international news unfolding on the turf of The Times Europe editors, it was sometimes difficult to get approval for story ideas or to get feedback on how to shape or frame a story. But NYT Berlin Bureau Chief Katrin Bennhold was a great

source of guidance: her advice was to use the fellowship as an opportunity to spread my wings and focus on longer-term stories that would make an impact with readers but also make fewer short-term demands of the editors.

This strategy was key to my success as a Burns Fellow. By the end of my fellowship, I had filed or completed the reporting for eight stories, which is twice the combined output of the last two Burns Fellows from The Times. In retrospect, my story choices were heavily influenced by my interest in history and how it shapes the present day. They ran the gamut from quirky dailies like the tale of two gay penguins who adopted an egg at the Berlin Zoo to an investigation into the sometimes-dangerous conditions in which German museums store artifacts taken from Africa, Asia and elsewhere during the colonial period. I also wrote a deep dive on the German Catholic Church's response to the sex abuse crisis; reported on the untold story of Black slaves in pre-unification Germany; and traveled to The Netherlands for a piece on the debate over whether the City of Amsterdam should apologize for its role in slavery. I also wrote a "Germany Dispatch" on Berlin's role in L.G.B.T. history and am contributing an obituary to The Times Overlooked project, which provides obituaries for historical figures who did not originally receive them, for Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, who historians believe may have been the first person to "come out" of the closet in 1867.

Because of the continuing glut of International news and the relative dearth of editors, most of these enterprise and feature stories have not yet been published by The Times. The stories that have been published so far are listed below:

1. [Gay Penguins, and Their Hope for a Baby, Have Enchanted Berlin; Aug. 14, 2019](#)
2. [German Theme Park Shuts Swastika-Shaped Ride; Aug. 21, 2019](#)
3. [Are African Artifacts Safer in Europe? Museum Conditions Revive Debate; Sept. 4, 2019](#)

The following stories have yet to be published. At present, I am not able to say when the editors will decide to publish them.

1. A feature on Folsom Europe, a week-long B.D.S.M. street fair, and what it tells us about Berlin's modern-day sexual culture and its role in L.G.B.T. history. In the 20th century, the city was a hotbed of gay life and activism until the rise of the Nazis. It did not return to its former L.G.B.T. glory until West Berlin emerged as a counter-culture Mecca during the Cold War.
2. A deep dive into the German Catholic Church's response to the sex abuse crisis: a years-long review of church teaching on sexual morality, women priests and priestly celibacy. Liberal Catholics are thrilled but the Vatican is worried, and conservatives are sounding alarm bells about a schism within the global church. This story also highlights the vast wealth that the German church has used to buy global influence, thanks to \$6.5 billion a year it receives in a tithe collected by the German federal government.

3. A deep dive on the debate over whether the City of Amsterdam should issue a formal apology for slavery. The debate highlights the city's unusually direct role in slavery and colonialism: for more than a century it was a direct co-owner of the South American colony of Suriname, where slave labor generated enormous wealth that was used to build the most well-known buildings and tourist sites in the Dutch capital. I traveled outside of Germany for this story.
4. A deep dive into the little-known history of enslaved black children who worked in the homes of German aristocrats, including the first kings of Prussia, before the unification of Germany. They worked mostly as court entertainers until they reached adulthood, when they were typically sent to the armed forces. This story is also a look at the scholars and activists who are unearthing evidence of these young people's existence, which has been overlooked or erased in most histories of Germany.
5. An obituary on Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German lawyer and pamphleteer who historians say was the first person to "come out" of the closet in the modern sense in 1867. His writings argued for the existence of a homosexual identity that helped foster a nascent gay community in Germany and provided a new vocabulary for activists and intellectuals in other countries, including Great Britain. This story will run as part of The Times Overlooked series.

Looking back over my time as a Burns Fellow, I am both grateful for the opportunity to live and work in Germany and pleased that my output matched my ambitions. I am sure I speak for many of the fellows when I say the time flew past — by the time I felt properly acquainted with Germany and its journalism landscape it was time to pack my bags and leave. I would love to return to Germany someday and I suspect it will now be a bigger part of my life than it would have if I had never been awarded a Burns Fellowship.

On a professional level, the Burns Fellowship has reinforced my desire to someday work as a foreign correspondent in Europe and, in the meantime, to report and write deeper stories from the United States. And on a personal level, as a history buff I was delighted to receive a fellowship placement in Berlin. New York City is sometimes called "the capital of the 20th century," but that is a title to which Berlin could arguably also make a claim.