

Burns Fellowship 2011 Report

By Anton Troianovski

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I spent August and September as a Burns fellow in Berlin. My placement was at Der Tagesspiegel. I also spent a lot of time writing for my home publication, The Wall Street Journal. The fellowship was a wonderful experience. It was important to me personally because it was the most time I'd spent in Germany after living in Heidelberg from age four to age eight. That was 1990 to 1994, and I had never been to Berlin. Professionally, it was my longest break from daily beat reporting since I joined the Journal as an intern the week after graduating from college in June 2008. At first this sudden lack of responsibility was a hard thing to get used to; after I found some stories to work on it became really fun; and now that I'm back to my job covering telecommunications from New York I've realized that those two months of having to work a lot harder than usual to find things that will get into the paper helped me refocus my approach to reporting.

Tagesspiegel was a welcoming and an interesting place. My seat in the middle of the newsroom among the politics editors gave me a detailed view into how the paper was put together. There were more meetings than I was used to--the daily meetings the Journal newsroom is organized around rarely involve reporters. The politics section had a 9:30 meeting with reporters and editors planning out the stories for the day; then there was an 11 a.m. general news meeting mainly for editors but that reporters sometimes also attended; and another section meeting around noon to go over what was said in the general meeting. The paper's staff felt small for the breadth of what it sought to cover--U.S. politics to hunger in Africa to the cleanliness of Berlin parks. But it was very collegial, each day punctuated by lunch in the cafeteria on the ground floor where a hot, tasty meal was served for four or five euros. My once-fluent German came back pretty quickly and we had interesting conversations over lunch about the state of German journalism. (Generally, German newspapers were not so much in crisis mode as American ones.) Most people in the newsroom seemed to be in their 30s and 40s. I became friends with a politics editor who was about my age. Tagesspiegel has several past Burns fellows and there's definitely a lot of opportunity for Burns fellows to get published, probably even if for those who don't speak German, because Tagesspiegel editors are likely to be very interested in Burns fellows writing about what's going on back in the U.S.

The paper seemed to emphasize topical pieces with a viewpoint over straight news reporting. My first day, the opinion-page editor asked me to write a piece for him about the U.S. debt-ceiling debate. I said I couldn't write an opinion piece but would be glad to try a news analysis. I wrote it in English, the editor translated it, and it ran my second day, with my picture, which helped people in the newsroom know who I was. I volunteered to the Berlin editor to help out in coverage of the local election; he didn't seem that interested but said I should write a first-person piece about what it was like to be a Russian-American living in Berlin. My second week, the opinion page asked me to write an analysis of the Internet's impact on American politics. That seemed to be interesting and I agreed. But for the most part in my first couple weeks I was itching to get out of the office to report about Germany rather than to be writing about the U.S.

That's why, after the first two weeks, I started splitting my time between the Tagesspiegel office and the Journal's Berlin bureau. I focused on working on stories about Germany for the Journal. The Journal's Berlin reporters were spending most of their time on the euro crisis, meaning I could write about pretty much whatever I wanted but had to work hard to find something of interest to the editors back in New York that wasn't euro-related. I sought to write "a-heds," the quirky stories that run on the bottom of Page One every day. My first such story came from a lunchtime conversation at Tagesspiegel about the strangeness of the local public broadcaster having turned the upcoming wedding of the great-great-grandson of the last Kaiser into a German version of a royal wedding. (A live, three-hour telecast had been scheduled.) I toured the wedding grounds in Potsdam with one of the broadcast's commentators and talked to locals who planned to watch the ceremony on TV. The story ran the day before the wedding. My second a-hed was about a controversy in German competitive facial-hair circles over whether competitors should be allowed to have their beards styled by others. The idea came from a conversation with a member of the Berlin Beard Club whom I happened to talk to for an unrelated story. I spent three days in a rented Chevy on the Autobahn in south Germany (wishing I knew how to drive a stick-shift), finding the various protagonists in the debate and interviewing and filming them. This turned out to be one of the most memorable journalistic experiences I've had.

I tried to see as much of Germany as I could, though Berlin was such a nice place to be that I often missed it when I was traveling. I found a sublet while still in New York on wg-gesucht.de and lived in Friedrichshain with a Korean art-history student. I rarely cooked -- the German, Thai, Vietnamese, Russian and Turkish food in the area was delicious and cheap. Compared to New York and to other European capitals Berlin felt both remarkably energetic and relaxed. It was a really fun place to be, with a very open community of writers and artists from around the world. I hope to go back for longer sometime.

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Tagesspiegel:

Der beschädigte Präsident, August 4

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/meinung/der-beschaedigte-praesident/4461944.html>

Der virtuelle Dritte, Sept. 13

<http://www.tagesspiegel.de/medien/der-virtuelle-dritte/4545088.html>

Wall Street Journal:

Fare Dodgers Take to Mobile, August 19

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903596904576516583359181462.html>

No Titles, No Subjects, No Problem: Germans Join Royal Wedding Craze, August 26

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904787404576530392758604496.html>

The Return of the Stylus, September 2

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903895904576544560006959194.html>

Germans Face Off in Hairy Debate over Whiskers Do's and Don'ts

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903703604576586852504514140.html>

I filmed and narrated a video report that ran alongside the beard story online:

<http://online.wsj.com/video/beard-versus-beard/89E0D8AF-05A1-41E8-95D3-8300E17990A5.html>