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Foreign Corresponding

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Mr. Walter S. Rogers  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Rogers,

A year ago, I started working in earnest as a foreign correspondent. Before that I frequently wrote what some call "news features" - a topical story which pointed up or reflected the hard facts of an event. But news features are about as close to foreign correspondence as the society page.

Now, in the daily routine of a copy desk, I have been thinking about the year on the foreign beat. And at your instance, I shall pass on some of these thoughts.

The first thing I needed was accreditation. This meant applying for membership in the local press association - in the case of Berlin there was a foreign press association and I joined that too. The benefits, outside of conviviality, were few, although our groups held press conferences nearly every week. Nevertheless, the membership card served as a press pass and opened many doors that are otherwise shut. Most of the correspondents I knew also registered with the American and or British military commands in West Germany. For those working in Berlin, it enabled them to make use of considerable logistical support from the army. I never bothered to do this and I don't think I suffered for it. Generally speaking, however, accreditation is inexplicable - especially in sensitive areas.

The second requirement is to read the papers. That sounds all too obvious, of course, but there is no ersatz. In Berlin, I read or skimmed a dozen a day. They included the independent West German daily, "die Welt;" the conservative and usually favorable -to-Adenauer "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung;" the breezy and aggressive tabloids, "Berliner Zeitung;" and "Bildzeitung;" the independent Berlin "Tagesspiegel;" the Communist Party organ, "Neues Deutschland," and the Communist labor paper called "Tribüne."

These I read from front to back. It was particularly important to do so with the Communist papers. For often there was an important item tucked away in the back pages.

One of the oddest things about the Communists since Stalin's death at least, is that despite all the censorship and agitation-propaganda which deforms their press, they simply must print everything of importance -

ideological, economic, and governmental. It may take time, but sooner or later it's all there: the agricultural crisis, the trade deficit, the self-criticism, the purges.

Often such matters are described in that strange dialectical cipher which the Germans call "Party Chinese." But they do turn up inevitably and one must pay close attention to catch them.

Reading does not stop with the daily papers. There are magazines, pamphlets, major novels, and even technical literature. Some of the best stories I dug up in Berlin resulted from regular reading in professional journals - electronics, aviation, shipbuilding, precision instruments, and so on. Where the Communists are concerned, it is also vital to follow the ideological journals. These range from straight Party publications to the philosophical quarterlies and the literary gazettes.

The latter reading amounts to homework. It is something you can skip, but it helps immeasurably to stay on top of the subject.

While still on the topic of reading - I found it important to reread all the speeches made by government leaders. Above all those of the Communists. They blather a lot less than one might think at first glance, no matter how poor or excruciating their rhetoric may seem to be. Also, and this applies to western as well as to eastern leaders, you never know if the guy contradicted himself unless you read the earlier speeches.

Propaganda I found to be a difficult element. One's first reaction is to turn away in disgust: "This is just plain propaganda." It is a response which might apply to any effulgent advertisement.

One day, however, a Communist friend said apropos of the Berlin crisis, "Watch the Nationale Front. When they issue a declaration, it's always the signal of the new line on something." (The National Front is literally the "front" organization of the Socialist Unity Party which runs East Germany. In theory it is made up of the five "democratic" parties permitted to establish themselves by the Soviet Military Administration after 1945. Other representatives are sent from the "mass organizations" of the labor movement, women, and youth. The National Front is not a legislative body; instead, it's main task is propaganda.)

After my friend told me this I began taking a greater interest in propaganda statements and articles. Always asking the question: "What's in it for them?" The cui bono query applies to the timing too, where propaganda is concerned. Though less acute, I believe these rules are just as valid for western propaganda.

Newspapermen are usually congenial and helpful, making it easier for a fellow to start in a new and unfamiliar place. They willingly share information when it does not involve an exclusive, hush-hush story; and they gladly tell one where to look for various kinds of information.

Beyond this, I found several foreign correspondents who rose above the call of collegial relations to be helpful. One was the representative of the great Swiss newspaper, "Neue Zuercher Zeitung." Another was with PAP, the Polish news agency. Both worked hard. Both had good sources and were well informed. Invariably, they were willing to share their stories with me. I, in turn, passed on tips, quotes, and information which I had gathered. The results were precious - to me at least.

This was not pooling in the strict sense, but sharing. I did some pooling too on those few occasions when I thought it would make a better story. There is less conflict of interest than I suspected in newsgathering.

The wire services use their material one way, the newspapers another. So the bartering of it between the one man and the next did not necessarily reduce the quality or "originality" of a given story. As a rule, I found it better to try and give more than I got.

The Associated Press was invaluable to me in Berlin. Of course I subscribed to the service. But in addition, the AP men who were on the job around the clock often called me on a late or unforeseen story. In return, I did my best to pass on information I couldn't use but useful perhaps to AP. I also gave them carbons or exclusive stories or features which were still fresh after my papers had used them.

From my point of view, this was fair trade.

Equally helpful were some of the local reporters for the German papers. Time and again they would share their exclusive stories. When I could, I tried to pay just compensation for their services.

Many stories in Berlin were difficult to check. Not just the biographical data or historical facts (first names are often extremely hard to find), but also the background and interpretive stories were tough to shore up.

Fortunately, I knew several persons in Berlin who specialized in German affairs and eastern affairs. When there was a problem of interpretation or prognosis I would go and talk to one of these men. The eastern affairs specialist at the United States Mission was especially valuable to me in this respect.

We would discuss an issue like Communist labor union strategy. Usually, the Mission man had a file of recent speeches and articles concerning the subject. Some of them I had missed. With them and with some opinions expressed here and there in the discussion, I was usually able to get a fix on a hitherto cloudy matter.

It was my good luck that none of these men tried to influence me to write a slanted story. Naturally, some of them had special causes to plead. However, I think good will and critical judgement usually can prevent one from becoming the victim of planted information or tendentious material.

Officials, on the other hand, tended to be stuffy and sometimes utterly useless when it came to explaining the background of a situation. Perhaps it was the relatively short time I spent in Berlin. Perhaps it was Berlin's exposed position, but I seldom left a private audience with a public official - either western or Communist - feeling the wiser.

Almost always they indulged in obfuscation and sometimes in vanity - unless of course they were angry about something.

Certainly it is important to obtain policy statements from the official. Often they are significant. But my experience was that the man in his public capacity was no help in clearing up involved stories. Furthermore, unless such a man is on the spot, there is not much to be gained from the "exclusive" interview he may grant from time to time.

Communist officials are even more wont to preen themselves for the western visitor, at least those who are close to the center of power. The farther away from the center, the more accessible and reasonable they became. But those in East Berlin were interested only in planting propaganda. They did so neither subtly nor imaginatively. Time spent listening to them was wasted, for it meant only a repetition of already familiar themes.

One of the things I came to feel very strongly about was the treatment of news sources - especially those in touchy positions. Several times I saw how colleagues would take confidential information and splash it in such a way as to damage the person who gave it.

There was the wire service bureau chief who sat with us in a private session with the United States commander in Berlin. The general told us how he met his Soviet counterpart in a very delicate matter last fall. He then instructed us how we could compose the story without compromising him. Heedlessly, the agency man went out and wrote a needled-up piece which depicted the commander "telling off" the Russkies. This was not only unfair. It was, in the case of Berlin, an unpatriotic act.

In quite a different area there was the correspondent in an East European country who was thrown out recently. His "revenge" was to write a series of brilliant despatches about the current political situation in that country. Some of us felt he overstated his case. However, the thing that shocked me was his method of partially identifying his sources.

This reporter would describe his informant as a high Party official recently returned from Peiping, or as the publisher of an intellectual journal recently withdrawn from circulation. The identity was unmistakable. The effect was to put the finger on the source, obviously a confidential one. In a tighter situation it could have been the crucifixion of such a source. This is unconscionable reporting.

There are times, I suppose, when one simply has to "sacrifice" a news source. But they ought to be very rare indeed. Generally speaking, such sources are the most valuable things a reporter has besides his integrity.

The number of interesting people, or people who can help one to understand a situation are few enough. When they come along, you must hold onto them.

If they are from "the other side" (Communists), they must be handled with special care. It doesn't do much good to argue with them, to preach, or to assault their viewpoint. Needling is good in small doses. Checking them on facts and ideological points is essential. Nor does it hurt to engage in dialectical discussions. Sometimes a very usable tidbit drops into your lap. But it does no good to hit one over the head.

I believe I must be a minor expert on professional time-wasting. Certainly there were plenty of opportunities in Berlin. One of the principal means was talking to Russian journalists. With a single exception - and he was full of vodka at the time - they had nothing to say and took a long time saying it.

Then there was the *Isvestia* man who used to come in for his version of light conversation. One day he stopped by, said hello, and followed with this astonishing statement: "Your soldiers were all cowards at Corregador...I read about it. If they had been Russians they would have fought to the last bullet..."

About half the press conferences were a waste of time, and there were many. I learned to be choosy after awhile. This may well apply to press conferences everywhere.

Being a foreign correspondent obliges you to act the part of the social puma from time to time, if not that of the social lion. There are parties and receptions - diplomatic, political, and professional - to be prowled nearly every week.

I may be unsophisticated, but I felt they were professionally useless, despite their occasional amusements. After a time, bought drinks taste better than free ones.

On the other side, private dinners, snacks, or cocktails with news or background sources always proved worthwhile.

For the correspondent, who usually has more time at his disposal than the agency man, it is also easy to waste time on insignificant stories.

Certainly, there are many small stories which must be written and transmitted, no matter how "insignificant" they may seem. Often they are the meat and potatoes of the daily file. I am referring rather to a frequent situation when there are two - or more - stories on a single day.

Frequently enough both can be covered adequately. But there are other times when this is not so. Then one must choose the more important subject and concentrate exclusively on it. Otherwise, one ends up doing a poor job on two or three pieces rather than a good job on one. The wrong choice means time-wasting.

Some of the other things I learned surely apply to local reporting as much as they do to international correspondence. Among them were:

1--The telephone is a magical instrument. There is always a friend, an official or another newspaperman, be he hundreds of miles away, who will talk to you and tell you what you want to know.

2--The fellow who has a grudge usually has more to say than the one who is comfortable. This goes for people in high places particularly.

3--When one is more than a hundred miles away from the home office, it is best to write the story at the length it will probably be printed. Distant editors have no compunctions about slashing copy or throwing it in the wastebasket. Brevity, in this instance, is the soul of printability.

4--Reference books are invaluable - the local who's who, history books, political tracts, and dictionaries. After three years in Germany I found the thesaurus was indispensable for telling me the English word I knew in German but couldn't pull out in English.

Finally, I think it was my greatest pleasure to make the gradual discovery of the merits of British journalism. I approached the English in General and the London Daily Mail in particular with wariness. I was suspicious, despite British birth and affections.

But I learned that my British colleagues had many virtues. They wrote better by far. They had a sense of milieu that made most American newsmen abroad seem like hothouse petunias.

They went after stories with more determination, got them faster, wrote them quicker, and were easier to get along with afterwards than the Americans. They also had that unbuyable instinct - being able to sniff out a big story before it broke.

The explanation for this lies partly in education, I suppose. The British do know their language better. More than that, however, I believe it is the competitive situation in British newspapering. Those men must get the story first, or nearly so. Or George and Ian and Louis will get it before them.

With the exception of the wire services - and even they are often lax - our American reporters just don't face competition today. What little there is seems phoney on closer analysis. The monopoly press argument is fallacious here. I mean the claim that competition degrades while monopoly liberates a man to do more thinking. I recall several major stories when we were burning up the wires to London while the monopoly men were sleeping or partying.

Even the worst British newsman I can think of had his merits. He, alone among Western newsmen, crashed into Budapest for the Seventh Party Congress when none of the rest of us made it. He knew his visas, and he knew his train, plane and bus schedules. That counts in my ledger.

Reading this over, it seems a dusty-dry account. Perhaps I should make one more comment: I had the time of my life as a foreign correspondent.

Best wishes,  
*David Binder*  
David Binder

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