Xuxa

“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” – An unexpected homecoming

From Sierra Leone to the Czech Republic, 18.03.2020-1.7.2020

I am an anthropologist, originally from the Czech Republic. I started writing my COVID-19 diary in Sierra Leone, West Africa. I had been living in Freetown with my family since September 2019. My husband works for a development organization while I am a freelancer, also looking after our two children.

This diary shows the context of coronavirus through the lens of international mobility. It describes aspects of West African life, expat communities, international families, mobility during times of restrictions, experiences of epidemiological procedures, quarantine, and returning to European homeland. Key themes that stood out to me during this period were how we all tried to navigate our sense of fear and its various manifestations. To me Freetown and Prague feel like village communities. My social circles are close-knit, so beyond anonymization, I blurred personal backgrounds of most persons and used a pseudonym for myself.

Xuxa



Xuxa, L and O at Tokeh, Sierra Leone. Photo: Xuxa's husband.

18th March 2020, Freetown

Hi,

I am a Czech anthropologist, currently between jobs, living in Sierra Leone with my two kids aged 5 and 8, and my husband, who is a British aid worker. My background is in disaster management, conflict, gender, education and I am now newly exploring public health. I am interested in taking part in your Corona diaries project, [...].

Right now, there are no cases of coronavirus that have been recorded in Sierra Leone. However, the two neighbouring countries Guinea and Liberia have recorded

at least one or two cases as of yesterday. I was told today at the [name of school] School, where my kids go, that these two countries shut down the schools based on just these one or two cases. This is a much lower threshold for action than in Europe.

West African countries are closely observing what is going on globally. They may not have the robust health systems of Europe, but they have the relatively recent experience with an Ebola outbreak. It seems Salone, as Sierra Leone is fondly referred to, is waiting for its first case to shut schools down. We are bombarded by WhatsApp updates. The government has banned gatherings of more than 100 people. Government officials are not allowed to travel. (The first case in Liberia was a government official who came back from Switzerland). Brussels Airlines and Air France – the two major airlines servicing this part of the world – are going to stop flights out of the country by Friday and next week, respectively.

As individuals, we are observing the situation and reacting. My Facebook feed is full of posts from my mostly European friends, and they all show life in lockdown in Europe. For days now, I have been consuming images and videos of empty shelves, face masks, stay at home messages and rude rants about impotent governments. I often speak to my parents living their isolated lives in Prague. They do not have visitors anymore. The city's streets seem empty and cold.

After putting my phone away, I venture out into the 30-degree West African heat and bustling streets full of vendors, taxis, motorcycles. Although I am here, in West Africa, I have absorbed my European friends' experience, internalized it. The feeling of the lockdown clings to me and the fear is now here with me in sunny virus-free Africa.

Here, in a country with one the worst health records and weakest health systems on the planet, we know that if Salone gets affected, there will not be enough respirators, and severe cases likely will not have access to the needed care. We are not kidding ourselves. It is probably already here, just undetected.

But if we board a flight now, we will probably catch it on the way and deliver it to my mother's or my mother-in-law's doorstep. They are both more vulnerable as older people. And so we have nowhere else to go. So, we decided to stay. Even if we did leave, my husband would possibly not be allowed to enter the Czech Republic due to travel restrictions. And if we went to the UK, we would probably catch it from the first border police officer. And who knows how the already overstretched NHS would cope with people like us on top of everything else?

I spoke to my brother yesterday. He and his family are in Prague. He bought supplies about a week before everybody else. He lived through the SARS crisis in China. Back then he had no kids and he was highly critical of the media reports in Europe. They were spreading unnecessary panic, he said. He was very relaxed about it then. Today, his reaction is noticeably different. He told me: "This is no time to be cool. Go and stock up on everything that you will need for 2 weeks. Wear face masks. The virus was brought here by cool people who went to Italy during school holidays saying they were not worried about the coronavirus." In other words, the virus did not concern them. It could not touch them. They were above it. For years, the Central Europeans have been used to observing dramatic global events from a distance. Most have never been directly affected them. SARS, tsunamis, earthquakes, Ebola, famine in Yemen – all these were distant, abstract. It is only now, when they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.

At night, I decided to stock up properly. And I spent this morning driving around, stocking up on groceries, gas canisters, water. The supermarket owner said, "You are staying then". Our driver H noticed I was stocking up. Mr T my Krio teacher said a lot of his expatriate pupils were leaving. L – our housekeeper observed that a lot of people were shopping. All three agreed that Ebola had prepared Sierra Leone for this situation. People here know that disease can be real, that it can touch them. So, while the country may not have enough respirators, the people here may be even more ready for what will happen than Europeans.

I think it was my turn to host a playdate this afternoon. But I did not send out the invite. I guess I am being a cautious uncool chicken. Now it occurs to me that I was acting totally insane five days ago, when I hugged a friend in a restaurant.

21st March 2020, Freetown

Dear Curare Corona diaries,

Greetings from Sierra Leone. Today is Saturday 21st March 2020, and we are still in Freetown. No cases of coronavirus are confirmed in Sierra Leone. Today is the last commercial flight out of the country. The only exception will be emergencies.

A lot of people from the expat community have already left the country. Some were ordered to by their organizations. Some had underlying health conditions and some just left. My feeling is that many of those who left had been prepared to leave even before the coronavirus craze. Some had been here since September and were looking forward to their Easter break outside West Africa. Some were about to leave in June for good. So, with the prospect of flights being suspended for three months, they just moved up their departures. I would say that only a few of them seemed really scared of coronavirus arriving in the country.

A lot of the embassies are starting to charter flights now. They do not talk about it openly though. We hear rumours. My husband is a British citizen, I am a Czech citizen and our kids have dual nationalities. I registered us all with the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But there is no embassy here. So, I am not sure what effect this will have. My husband keeps emailing and calling British diplomats. No answer. It seems to us they are first trying to sort out their own people before offering information and seats on flights to anybody else. Just yesterday a friend whose husband works for [development organization] said she was not sure whether

they were staying. The rumour is that there was an order from [organization's headquarters] saying that nonessential staff were to leave. Interesting paradox that: They want to evacuate people from a country with zero cases to a country which has hundreds of cases!

The leavers also leave stuff behind. We got a new shoe rack from S. She is an important member of the International Women's Committee, with whom we walked every Wednesday on Lumley beach. She and her family will be leaving on the German flight. WhatsApp group used by expats in Sierra Leone keeps bringing more information/rumours. There is a whisper about the French Embassy organizing a charter flight, too.

There are fewer people in the streets. Nobody is wearing face masks. But there is a new order by the government, as our driver H told me, imposing social distancing on public transport. There should be only 2 passengers in kekes (engine threewheelers, normally these have 3) and only 3 people in taxis (usually they have 4). People have stopped shaking hands. They do not even bump elbows. Apparently, people can cough into their elbow. Handwashing and sanitizing stations are available at the entrances to many places, guards make sure people adhere to the rules. Schools are still open, but the government ordered all schools to close after 31st March.

There are fewer people in restaurants, too. We have not been to a restaurant for a week. When we went for lunch to the Hub today, we sat on the terrace in the open air. The kids got in the pool. Chlorine kills everything. The staff seemed happy to see us. They say that especially the last two days have been quiet.

We are still staying. We hope that the virus situation stabilizes in the Czech Republic and in the UK in a couple of weeks or two months. And when the virus arrives here, we will be able to evacuate. My husband's organization have a duty of care to us. We believe they will not let us and others stay here if the situation becomes unsafe. Fingers crossed.

Xuxa

Our soon-to-be-five-year-old daughter is not 100%, complaining of an aching tummy and such. But no temperature, or cough or anything. I took her to the Aspen clinic. They took a blood and urine sample from her. The tests for malaria, typhoid, and other things were all negative. Her CRP is slightly higher, but nothing else. “Just observe her”, said the doctor. I think she picks up on adults’ nervous feelings. And also, the constant 30-degree heat is very tiring. Maybe that is why she is a bit off.

The school taught our kids how to wash hands properly – palms, between fingers, wrists, back of hands. They are both professionals now and wash their hands frequently. We still went for tennis training today though. It is in the open air and there is no touching or personal contact involved. I think the coaches are glad. A lot of people are losing their source of income with foreigners leaving.

When I was in town yesterday, near Kroo Town road, some small shops had handwashing stations. Some did not. And there were people in the streets but fewer.

In this atmosphere, people reminisce about the Ebola epidemic. Our driver A, told me “People know what to do. We remember Ebola.” And then he told me he had been a part of the response team, collecting Ebola patients outside Freetown and bringing them to hospitals. People did not want to go. They were scared and many lost their lives, including A’s 19-year-old sister. He does not want to experience it again. And he squirts another bit of sanitizer on his hands.

Mr T told me his neighbour died in labour during the Ebola epidemic. Her baby died, too. And H told me how her sister and uncle died during Ebola, but of other causes. They just suddenly dropped dead. When a health system becomes overwhelmed with one issue, there are still lot of other casualties. These are often not counted. But a lot of them are buried the same way as those who succumbed to the epidemic.

Death is all around us here in Freetown. When I went to the Aspen clinic with my daughter yesterday, there was a picture of a nurse who worked there. Her name was

E. She was beautiful and kind. I remember she had taken care of L in September when she had an allergic reaction to some repellent. The sign announced E's passing. She was 35. They did not know why she died. A lot of people die here young without known causes. During the last three months, two relatives of my colleagues and one colleague died. They were all in their 20s.

Praying to God is a great way to cope with this uncertainty. Local church services are full of singing and dancing, togetherness, relief, and healing. Yesterday a new order was announced, banning church and mosque gatherings. "During Ebola times we did not go to church either" L tells me. How are people going to cope then? Pray in private.

So far, we can move around, and we are fine. We just do not go out as much. Our entertainment is Netflix and reading for now.

Monday, 23rd March 2020, Freetown

On Saturday evening, the last commercial flight departed from Lungi airport. Now the feeling has set in. We are trapped here for three months. That is 90 days. I hang on to the idea that if things get bad, we will get evacuated somehow.

There are still no cases of coronavirus recorded here though. And suspected cases are tested three times. Emotions are running high.

I had a phone call with Lu, a friend, on Sunday morning. She is an aid worker and medical professional working here. We are compatriots. According to her an airplane which was supposed to bring HIV medication did not arrive due to the closure of the airport. She is worried that if supplies stop and food prices go up, there will be unrest and she is concerned for our security. She is also fed up with everyone mentioning Ebola. Clinically speaking, it was a very different disease, which did not

spread as easily as coronavirus.

We discussed rumours of embassies organizing emergency flights – British, French, Germans, the EU. When we got in touch with embassy staff, they all denied it. I registered myself and my family, with my own Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There is no Czech Embassy here, but as an EU country, surely, we would not be left behind. When filing out the online form, I mentioned that there was a compatriot (Lu) here and put down her contact details in the comments box. When I told Lu that I had mentioned her in the form, she objected that I had shared her personal information without her consent. In my view, personal information would be date of birth and a passport number. But she saw the situation differently, and that was OK. I deleted the entry about her, but in my mind, I half-jokingly wondered, whether she was secretly evading justice in our country. We had a slightly heated exchange. I realized, I had probably mothered her too much, when in fact, she was a completely competent adult capable of looking after her own safety. This is what being a mother can do to a person. You start treating everybody like children. Moreover, we were both clearly nervous.

My kids picked up on the nervousness and acted up accordingly.

I emailed the EU delegation in Freetown with my family's details. They responded that we belonged under the German Embassy's competence. So, I emailed them. I have not heard back from them yet.

Our friends, two families with small children, messaged us on WhatsApp. We were to meet up in the Lodge on Sunday morning to hang out by the pool. We trusted that chlorine would kill everything. But the pool was closed, "because of the virus". So, they invited us to their compound pool instead. I suspected one of the families were doing this to say goodbye. I still thought there was a secret evacuation going on for some of the chosen ones.

The streets are quiet. People are no longer allowed to go to church and mosque services. When we get to the compound pool, we are greeted by four calm adults and four playful children. They all reiterate that they are staying. There are no flights. One of them says, “if the sh** hits the fan, we will pool together, hire a yacht from the Canary Islands and go to Portugal. We have a house there on the coast. It is not that far. And no one is staying there. There are four bedrooms, so we all can stay there.” This is the first sensible and concrete evacuation plan I have heard. And I instantly feel better.

My husband thinks I am an alcoholic if I want to have four bottles of wine, two crates of beer and some gin and vodka in the house, in case we need to hunker down for two weeks. While we are by the pool, I make N tell my husband about his stocks of alcohol. They have three bottles of whisky, four bottles of gin, four bottles of vodka, and twelve bottles of wine. This makes me feel better about my habits. I am no alcoholic – I wink at my husband with a sense of victory.

While we are by the pool, [diplomat] arrives in his swimming trunks. He greets us, gets in the pool, and then chats with us. He seems very composed and calm.

We agree that being here, while most people in Europe are stuck indoors, is good. Many of us have been in emergency situations before. This is different though. When you are in a warzone or a disaster area, you always had the option to get on a plane and get to safety. Now that option is off the table. But we will try to make the best of it. Somehow being together, makes it all better.

I feel much calmer when we get home that Sunday afternoon. I message Lu that we can find refuge at the embassies in Freetown. She replies, “I do not have an embassy here”. Well clearly, she is still nervous. She and I have the same passports, but still I believe we would not be left behind. I message her back “you can always be with us. And together we can always find refuge at an embassy, whichever EU state embassy. Or in the worst-case scenario we can always get a yacht to take us to Portugal.” She

thinks that I am crazy.

Today I met another friend. I recently left the organization we had both worked for. She told me that the last few days were really hard. She was surrounded by highly anxious young people who constantly needed reassurance that they were going to be on those last flights. "The kids have left", she says with a relief. And we continue the celebration of her birthday by having lunch together. She revels in the fact that she spent her birthday weekend with mature people with decades of experience abroad. They stayed. They are calm. However, she comments on her health professionals' colleagues who themselves do not adhere to rules they had introduced in the hospital. They plan meetings for lots of people in small rooms, making social distancing impossible. They do not wash their hands at entry points. Hypocrites! They do not share information. They share too much information. They invite the wrong people to meetings, they invite too many people to meetings, they invite too few people to the meetings...

Then I go and pick my kids up from school. I drive our car. The streets seem quieter. At school, the teacher shows me how to work with the online platform for home-schooling. I am slightly nervous about that. We start next week. Being with both kids at home for indefinite period seems daunting. We have a garden though and we can always escape to the beach. So, we will be fine. We just need to develop a routine and stick to time schedules.

We decided to move our daughter's birthday celebration. We will do it at school on Friday. Three days before her actual birthday.

I am desperately trying to get as much done now as I can. I take my online courses as fast as possible. I know that once the kids are being home schooled, I will not be able to do anything.

Wednesday 25th March 2020, Freetown

Did I make it up, or did the man in the supermarket jump out of my way today? There are rumours that white people spread coronavirus. People do keep their distance from me. But then again, they keep their distance from each other, too.

I feel safer now. I sent a WhatsApp message to the wife of [German diplomat] A yesterday morning. She sometimes walks with the International Women's Committee group on Wednesday mornings along the Lumley beach [...]. I write to her in my very rusty German. In the absence of a Czech Embassy, the German Embassy is responsible for Czech citizens here in Sierra Leone. Did they get my email with our names and passport numbers? She kindly replies. Yes, it arrived, our names are on the list. There are no flights planned yet. It seems that none of the embassies are organizing a repatriation flight, at the moment.

But there are rumours that people employed with [development organization] might fly out in the next two weeks or so. Still, I find the idea, of flying people out of a country with zero cases to a country with lots of cases, strange.

Yesterday morning, I got a phone call from the Czech Embassy in [west African country]. Mr. L.J. asked me how we were doing and what our plans were. I told him we were staying, there were no cases (of coronavirus recorded) yet. The only help we would need was liaising with the German Embassy here, should the situation become more difficult. I instantly felt better, safer. They (Czech authorities) know we are here, and they are looking out for us.

I am preparing for the start of home-schooling next week. Government ordered that all schools close on 31st March. I realize that being at home with two kids will be difficult. So, I am making last minute preparations. I am trying to finish the online courses I started. I also book in an online psycho-therapy session, which should make me more mentally resilient. I do feel calmer afterwards. I wonder for how long.

Xuxa

Teachers keep sending us emails with mock online exercises. We test how things work. The experience is far from smooth and some things – websites, online exercises – do not work. We go through them with the teachers one by one.

I wonder how those Sierra Leoneans who do not have computers will manage when the schools are closed.

Yesterday, the Sierra Leonean president Bio, declared a state of emergency. A state of emergency means that the army and the police have special powers and that a potential night curfew can be imposed as the next step. I hear that during Ebola, there was a night curfew. We do not know when it may be imposed. So, when my husband and I go out for dinner with two other couples who also have young kids, we wonder, whether this is our last night out, since babysitters will no longer be able to work in the evenings.

It will be our daughter's fifth birthday on Monday. We are not sure about how to proceed with organizing her celebration. Should we have a party? Is that wise? As soon as the first case of coronavirus is confirmed here, everything will change. We think we may bring cake to the school and celebrate together with her classmates on Friday. And we may invite people over on Saturday… if it is still possible.

The weather plays to the tune – the winds are picking up. The evenings are cooler and I feel the chills. It is still 30 degrees during the daytime, but breezy and dark clouds are on the horizon.

This morning we woke up to a new WhatsApp message. A government document was leaked. A Congolese woman in the country may have the coronavirus. Her full address and contact details are leaked as well. We are appalled. There is palpable anti-foreigner sentiment here. In the end the Congolese lady's results are negative. However, I pray that the first case of coronavirus will be a Sierra Leonean rather than a foreigner. Later during the day another suspected case is declared negative.

Xuxa

This morning I join the International Women's Committee's walk again. It is lovely to see everyone. Sa, Ch, R, K, A, So and her mother who had come here only for 10 days from Belgium but got stranded here. But Al is missing. She is Italian. Her husband's company said that all dependents must leave. And so, she left. Ch's son got her two face masks for the flight. She is now in Italy, alone in a flat above her mother's flat.

Si keeps getting rid of her furniture. I am going to buy a new bookshelf from her.

I learn that some organizations offered their staff the possibility to leave last Thursday. By then all of the remaining flights were fully booked. And when the people stayed, they were asked the following day to sign a paper saying they were here on their own risk. This is for insurance purposes, and it is evil and unfair.

Those who have left, on the other hand, are facing the problem that their jobs are linked to being in Sierra Leone. And they face the prospect that they may lose their jobs. People need reassurances. Can anyone give them reassurances? I do not know.

It also seems that some organizations my not receive funds to start projects funded by EU.

Mr. T, my Krio teacher did not come today. I have not heard from him. We did not have firm plans for today, but I thought we would be in touch. I was not in touch with him, so it is also my fault. responsibility.

I hear from a good friend of mine in the Czech Republic. She tested positive for the virus. She has been feeling off for some time. She says that deep down she knew it, even before the symptoms occurred – cough, burning windpipe. She has been sewing face masks on her sewing machine and home-schooling her daughter. She does not know where she got it from. She does not want people to know she got it. "Do not put it on Facebook" she says. I would never do that. She only informed her family and people she had been in contact with. She says their reactions were unexpectedly calm. Some of her contacts even envied her, because "the wait" (for

being infected) was over for her. From what she tells me, there seems to be a stigma associated with being positive for coronavirus. People are afraid of coming out as corona-positive.

I ask my mother, what she feels the attitude is in the Czech Republic towards those who become ill with coronavirus. She says that whole villages got infected by outsiders – visitors attending village parties, firemen's balls and such. There is a public sense of anger against those outsiders, not necessarily foreigners, who carelessly brought the virus into their communities.

On the way back from the beach, I take pictures of the fading signs on Spur Road, in central Freetown "Ebola e du so" (Ebola, this is enough), "Ebola stops with me". Thanks to Ebola being in the living memory, people here seem to follow the rules more obediently. Or so I am told.

There are hand-washing stations in front of every shop and institution I go to.

Xuxa



Ebola Stops with Me sign on Spur Road, Freetown. Photo: Xuxa.

Xuxa



Hand-washing stations at St. Mary's Supermarket, Freetown. Photo: Xuxa.

Friday 27th March 2020, Freetown

My head hurts. I went out last night to the Hub and drank a rather large amount of white wine.

Restaurants are definitely less busy these days. While there were a few people after work, by 9 o'clock we were the last people there. I first ran into T. She works in my husband's organization. A young British woman, she came for a swim. She says she

gets a lot of caring protective messages from her male colleagues. She does not want to leave. And she does not need to be protected. I tell her to look at the bright side – they care about her.

My companion for the night was Lu. She is no longer upset that I mothered her and registered her with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We both agree that getting a phone call from the Czech consulate officer in [West African country] was reassuring, and helped us feel like we were not forgotten. We value the consular service our country offers us. Lu's friend B is Nepalese. His experience with his government is very different. Nepal has closed its borders to everyone, including their own citizens. He was due to travel before the airport shut and he learnt he would not be allowed in the country. So, he did not go. This left him distraught.

Lu tells me, her family have a WhatsApp group where they post funny things. This helps all of them cope better with the quarantine back home in the Czech Republic. Before they used to post there only pictures of kids growing up. Now the group is doing more – making everyone laugh.

Yesterday and today, it rained heavily in the morning. It is the harvest or mango rain, which is common in March. Some people say, it is too early and say that it is connected to climate change. Nobody knows anymore what weather is supposed to come when.

I collected a bookshelf from Si's house. They are going to leave on the next plane available to Germany. She will need to find an apartment in Berlin. Her kids will go to an international school first before they learn German. Her husband works for a German development agency. She said "We are not a priority for the embassy here. They first collect people from affected countries and then only will they come and get us. We have a problem. My daughter has a [Latin American country] passport, and since 19th March, all [Latin American country] citizens need a visa. It is some kind of EU blanket rule to curb coronavirus. She is only 10 years old. She did not need a

visa before. And we did not have time to sort out her Italian passport. They told me, they will let her in, since she is a child and cannot be left alone. It is good that we are married. We did not get a "[development agency] marriage", we married before he started working for them. Some people marry only when they start working for [development agency] because there are a lot of benefits. But this situation is a problem for those who are not married. [DEVELOPMENT AGENCY] will only help this woman who works for [DEVELOPMENT AGENCY] but not her Italian partner. Being married has its advantages."

I was not sure how to proceed with organizing my daughter's 5th birthday. There could be a lockdown at any point. So, I delivered doughnuts and juice to her school, so she can have a party with her peers.

And tomorrow only a few friends are supposed to come. A dad who confirmed said that one of his sons has been ill at home for two days now with temperature and cough. He said he would bring his brother. The brother who plays with him all the time and is likely to have it, too. I am not sure how I can say no. Should I cancel it altogether? I do not know. Let us hope people have some sense. But then again, they do not. That is how things spread.

We had a special cake made for our daughter. With a unicorn horn and ears! It cost us an arm and a leg (85 dollars). It was made by Chi – the wife of my husband's colleague. She is a medical doctor and she learnt baking when the Nigerian doctors were on strike. I have mixed feelings about medical doctors not seeing patients and baking cakes instead. However, the cake looks stunning. She delivered it by car this morning. She gave me a hug. So, no social distancing here then. Awkward.

I was offered a job of [...] at a local Research Centre. Fantastic news! However, I had to be honest with them. From next week I will have to home school my kids. They have online learning activities and I need to assist them. So, I do not think I can realistically work. I thank them for their offer and tell them that I could work on

small concrete pieces until the situation settles down. I think maybe in September we may be able to go for a full-time appointment. They say yes, let us do this. I am glad.

My housekeeper has injured her finger. It got swollen last week. She thinks a piece of tile might have got in when she was cleaning the kitchen. She has to go to hospital every other day to change dressing and drain more of the puss and blood. The finger still looks swollen and the bandage is always bloody. I wash the dishes. I hope she will get better soon. I give her money for treatment. They gave her five different kinds of medication and antibiotic injections.

I asked her about school during the Ebola epidemic. She says, kids did not go to school back then. Now her daughters will finish their exams, schools will close and they have books at home to study. The older one wants to study public health and is finishing up at a nursing school. The younger one wants to be a doctor.

I worry about potential looting. If all food supplies stop, people will not have anything to eat. So, I hide some of the non-perishable food behind clothes in the wardrobes. Just in case our kitchen is attacked. I also hide bits of cash in various secret places around the house. You never know.

We learn that even the British prime minister Boris Johnson tested positive for COVID-19. The Czech measures seem to have worked. The rate at which new cases appear is slowing down. The UK has taken a completely different approach, did not introduce any restrictive measures for ages, and the NHS is now under immense pressure. Stories that babies are ill with it and that a 21-year-old woman without underlying health issues died of COVID-19 are worrying.

Sierra Leonean president Bio closed down the boarders of Sierra Leone for 30 days. “He is rubbish in development, but he is good when it comes to discipline.” Comments our driver. There are still no cases here. We do not know what it means

yet. We have a pub quiz with our friends on Zoom tonight.

Monday, 30th March 2020, Freetown

There are still no cases of coronavirus COVID-19 recorded in Sierra Leone. Today, the BBC reports that there are 720,000 infections globally and almost 34,000 deaths. How extraordinary is that? On Saturday I learned through my husband's work channels that a person, who recently arrived in the UK from Sierra Leone tested positive on the virus. But we do not know whether they caught it here. We do not know whether they were on the last flight on 21st March or before that. They might have caught it after their arrival in the UK. We simply do not know.

When I talk to friends here, nobody seems to be aware of this case and I do not bring it up. Similarly, I feel they do not bring up things they learnt anymore. It is just too dull in a certain sense. We are all just waiting to hear about case confirmation here. And then things will start happening.

We only learn about a new government measure. They are trying to trace and monitor people who arrived in the country on the last few flights. But they cannot get hold of at least half of them. Contact information provided on arrival does not work. What does that say about our responsibility as global citizens? Carelessness? Let me just fill something in this blank box? Nobody will ever know. Well now they need to know. And your selfish decision not to bother with something can now cost lives.

My girlfriends and female acquaintances here keep telling me about male friends and colleagues suddenly being somewhat highly protective towards them, checking on them more frequently, telling them they should evacuate as soon as the opportunity arises. I feel the same from my husband. Protector's syndrome I call it. He keeps

mentioning that the kids and I need to be evacuated as soon as there is a plane. I do not know. I do not like it. I do not like the idea of flying on my own to the Czech Republic where there are 2663 cases currently recorded and 11 deaths. I do not like the idea of having to stay in a friend's flat with two kids, with no toys and without their dad. I guess I might feel different when a case gets confirmed. I still wonder how Al who evacuated from here to Italy, which has among the highest number of deaths, must be feeling. Back home but isolated.

This makes me think about gender and conflict, the topic of my doctoral thesis. Apparently, when male and female soldiers are in direct combat situation, the male soldiers often forget their training and become protective of their female peers, ignoring orders. Insubordination. And for that reason, many armies still choose not to put women in direct combat roles.

[...]

We are not sure, who amongst us is vulnerable. Is it my husband who is in his mid-forties and is a smoker? Is it me, because I had pneumonia and sepsis in the past, but am still below 40? Are we learning the truth about how the virus can affect children? Can they be in danger? Or are we in danger purely because the health system here will be overwhelmed and people may easily die of other conditions, such as malaria, etc?

It turns out that while people here are trying to be careful about washing their hands and social distancing, they do slip occasionally. When we go for a swim to the Hub and my daughter tells the waitress, it's her birthday weekend, the waitress lifts her up off the floor and starts a celebratory dance, jumping up and down with her, their faces millimetres from each other. So are children the super-spreaders here, or are they seen as the pure ones?

We went ahead with L's fifth birthday celebration on Saturday afternoon on a small

scale. We asked three children to come over. Amongst those, two were brothers. One brother had been ill, so he did not come. We were a bit apprehensive but decided that it had to be their parents' call. They can decide. They came with the other brother. He woke up in the middle of the night and was a bit grumpy. Hmmm. Are these tell-tale signs that he is not ok? Still we manage to shake these suspicious thoughts off. At what point can we say, no, do not come?

We, the four adults had wine, while the four kids – L, her brother and two visiting children were playing. If it were normal times, I would organize something grander. We ate the unicorn cake. L tried a bit of the horn and threw it back up. Yuk. We are worried about home-schooling. Why self-isolate prematurely, pre-emptively? We know that staying at home with little children is hard work. So, we better enjoy each other's company. No touching of course.

We also have a great online social life, through which we learn about more infections and economic hardships. We had a Zoom pub quiz with friends in the UK. We win and we learn that our friend who works for the NHS had it. Along with her son, her sisters and cousins. Apparently, a cousin of theirs arrived in the UK with her two kids on one of those evacuation planes from China in February. They probably caught it in the UK. When they developed symptoms, they called the 111 number and were told, they were not the right symptoms and so they were given the green light to go out. They visited the whole family, and most members got it. However, all seem to be getting over it fine. But another friend's sister in the UK is asthmatic and is quite unwell. During a Skype catch up with [another group of UK-based] friends, I learn that their boss had it, all classic symptoms, along with the loss of a sense of smell. Another friend is in the vulnerable shielded group because she had lung cancer. Some of her acquaintances from her support group got letters they needed to stay indoors for 12 weeks! We learn that some people started receiving 80% of their salary as their companies are going to go under. They do not have to work though. But some other people have to work and go down to 80% of their salary, too. They all

agree that home-schooling is very, very hard. Will we appreciate our teachers more after this experience?



Adapted Decathlon face mask.
Source:https://prazsky.denik.cz/galerie/cvut-vs-covid-19.html?photo=1&back=2610410245-2784-63, last accessed 09/11/2020.

Xuxa



“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

My son wearing Decathlon face mask. Photo: Xuxa.

To cheer them up, I send around a picture of a Decathlon underwater easy-breathe mask that the Czech Technical University has altered into a face mask for healthcare workers.

Knowing all this makes me anxious. Everyone around me in Sierra Leone says they drink more alcohol than usual, about a bottle a night. I do not drink a bottle, but I do have a drink or two every evening.

We prepare also by trying out some new games at home with the kids. Playing softball in the garden.

On Sunday, the Hub restaurant and swimming pool was full again, Lebanese families everywhere, as if nothing was happening. Chlorine and outdoors. My kids have their Decathlon masks on. We are here to protect our sanity.

Towards the end of Sunday, I went out and took some pictures in our neighbourhood. Life seems pretty normal. I meet a lady called Mariama. She works for a British family. They left three weeks before the flights were grounded. They have not come back yet. So, we say she is on vacation. I do not know whether she is getting paid or not during this time.

Xuxa



Evening football game on Spur Loop, Freetown, March 2020. Photo: Xuxa.

31st March 2020, Freetown

Yesterday, H our driver told me that the country did not get coronavirus because people were praying for it not to affect Salone. The country has suffered too much with Ebola, floods, mudslides. “Please God, have mercy on us” she says.

Well today, it happened. At 11.30 am, the president confirmed that the first case of COVID-19 coronavirus has been detected in Sierra Leone. Apparently, the person infected was a 37-year-old male who had travelled on a Brussels Airlines flight on 16th March 2020. He was isolated in Lungi airport and then in a hotel in Freetown. He was

only seen in isolation by his wife, herself a medical doctor.

When I heard the news, I prayed the person was a Sierra Leonean. If it was a foreigner, there may be consequences. Within minutes my International Women's Committee WhatsApp group forwards an internal government memo, with the full name of the person. He is a Sierra Leonean. I can breathe a bit easier again.

I read the message again and see, we are NOT in a lockdown situation yet.

I am frantically trying to prepare for home-schooling that is starting tomorrow. I make a schedule for the kids and myself. And I realize, there are lots of logins to learn. Lots of things to get my head around. I will try and sneak in some Czech learning too. Each child will have to do maths, English literacy and reading and some fun stuff like art. And Czech on top of it.

I speak to my mother. Her friend who lives in France feels the virus is getting close. Her neighbour, a taxi driver, is self- isolating. She and her husband are in a vulnerable group. He is 75. When he takes out the trash, he has a face mask and gloves. Suddenly, the world feels very unsafe for my parents' generation, especially when you know someone who has it.

I speak to my friend J in Prague. She tells me, people who had so far been just about making it, are now running out of money. She is worried that the crime rate is going to go up. If you have kids to feed, you are going to steel. [...] A lot of freelancers and private businesses have lost their income, especially restaurants and short-term accommodation rentals.

There are far fewer people in the streets today. People we encounter have heavy hearts and worried expressions. H shows me a video message, with the Sierra Leonean first patient speaking to the nation. He explained how he travelled to France for 10 days and then back. She says God save us.

We pick the kids up from the school for the very last time.

Thursday 2nd April 2020, Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Decision day

We are still in Freetown. We have now done two days of home-schooling. Day two definitely went better than day one. On day one I shouted at the kids only four times. I found that the things I needed to teach them with were in different rooms, so I had to create a special home-schooling corner, where I put all the books, craft materials, tablets, computers, chargers, pens, crayons, sticky tapes and scissors so that it was all in one place. I teach them Czech first thing in the morning. I joined a special online programme called Czech Every Day, where she posts activities that both kids can do together. We talked about eggs and how different birds look after them. Then my son does a bit of advanced Czech on his own, while my daughter plays.

Then we do a bit of Maths, Reading, Literacy and Art. I need to assist them both. On day one we went to the swimming pool at the Hub. There were only two tables occupied. Whilst in the pool my daughter started coughing and everyone stared at us.

Yesterday and today were quite nerve-racking. When we get back, we learn from my husband and from WhatsApp that a second case of coronavirus was confirmed in Sierra Leone, Freetown. It was Dr. X – a well-known paediatrician. We last visited her with my kids some two months ago. She did not have contact with the first case. They are not related and she has no idea how she got it. Therefore, the virus has already been spreading around in the community. Dr. X attended many EOC meetings, one of the emergency pillars. So, the virus has potentially spread to a lot of people at the meetings – government officials and INGO representatives. Among

them lots of expats. There will be a lockdown.

My husband says that the kids and I need to leave. I disagree. We discuss it. I cannot sleep at night.

WhatsApp is rife with discussions about face masks. And there is a hopeful message on Facebook, too – Salone will endure.

At 1 am today, I get an email from the German Embassy. There is a special plane coming on Sunday 5th April 2020 to Freetown to evacuate people to Brussels. The onward journey to Prague would have to be arranged by ourselves. That is in four days. We need to make a decision by the end of the day.

I first call my brother in Prague, to ask more about the situation there. His view is that it would be foolish to arrive during lockdown. I would need to be in quarantine with the kids for two weeks. Where would we go? To my friend's apartment, which she normally rents out via [popular accommodation website]. "OK, but who would bring you from the airport? I cannot", my brother says. "I would need to be in quarantine myself. Who would bring you food? You cannot visit anyone. Your husband would not be allowed in the country as he is not a citizen and he does not have permanent residency permit."

I speak to L.J. at the Czech consulate in [west African country]. His view is "Get out as soon as you can. Africa is going to be really bad really quickly." I ask whether my British husband can enter the Czech Republic. "Yes, he can as a spouse". We could take commercial bus from Brussels to Prague. It would cost 2000 Czech crowns (60 pounds) per person. And in Prague, the public health authorities can transport us to our accommodation – place of quarantine.

I am trying to imagine what it would be like. Travelling on a plane for 6 hours, then wait for a bus in Brussels, travel on it for 11 hours. With two small kids. On my own.

And then arrive potentially to my friend's flat. No toys, or other usual homey comforts, except for those in our suitcase. Locked down for two weeks. And then we would only be able to go out with face masks.

I speak to my friend in Prague via Messenger. It is possible. We are welcome. I can do online grocery shopping now. So that the food is there when we arrive.

I speak to my brother's partner. She is surprised to hear that foreign spouses can enter the Czech Republic. She [works] for [transport institution] and she is not aware of this exemption. I better call the Czech Ministry of Interior just to make sure. They say that if we have marriage certificate, he can enter the Czech Republic. Even better if he has the birth certificates of our children. He can enter the Czech Republic even without me being there. They call me again a few minutes later. They have found out that marriage certificate would be enough only until the 5th April. As of 6th April, only our kids' birth certificates would allow him inside the country. If he travels to the UK, he cannot re-enter the Czech Republic.

So, we could potentially go now, and he could join us later. It is possible. But I do not like the idea of being apart. Neither does he. We postpone the decision till the end of the day.

But then L.J. calls me from [west African country]. "How did you decide?" "We are not going," I say. I explain that it would be too hard for me to be on my own with the kids for two weeks. He does not pressure me. He says he understands. I am relieved. I am relieved, I finally said it. There will still be lots of expats left behind in Freetown, so in case of civil unrest – the real worry we have got here, there will be another plane, I think. A lot of the expats are healthcare workers. They work on post-Ebola programmes. They feel they need to stay. He says that it is possible, there will be another plane. He is staying in [west African country]. That is a good sign for me. As long as the diplomats are staying in the region, there is hope we can get out.

My husband does a lot of shopping. I give my housekeeper extra cash to buy food. There will be a lockdown from Sunday until Tuesday, to trace all the contacts of the two positive cases. She will need it. She is going downtown to shop for the lockdown. I would not be surprised if she borrowed a couple of things from our house.

I speak to my mother on WhatsApp. It is all good. She wholeheartedly supports my decision to stay. She had been thinking about it, too. She says it would be really harmful for our family to be apart. My husband on his own and me on my own with the kids, both settling into our own ways, getting used to living alone, without knowing when we would be able see each other again. It could be months.

4th April 2020, Saturday, Freetown

I cannot sleep. I am extremely worried. It is 5:23 am. The government announced a lockdown from Sunday through Tuesday. Only three days. But masses of people have been trying to do shopping for essentials, creating traffic jams everywhere.

Suddenly, I view our lovely housekeeper as a security threat. I feel the obscenity of the economic inequalities when I bring additional stocks of food, water and beer into the house. She is ironing and observing. She cannot afford any of this. An obscene parading of wealth. I give her baked beans and a bit of extra cash because that is all I have on me at the moment. But I feel I should have given her more. I should have also given some money to my Krio teacher. He is unwell. I texted him to see how he was a couple days ago and whether he needed anything. He said he did not. He is dependent on his income as a freelancer and he is ill. I resolve to call him during the day. I worry about them; our Sierra Leonean friends and colleagues.

My husband gives the compound guards money to buy extra food and stay put during the lockdown.

I go out one last time to the Hub, where the staff are now wearing face masks. And most people sit only at tables outdoors. Some people are really close to each other, ignoring social or physical distancing. My two friends and I sit at a1,5 metres distance from each other. Lu is giving a disapproving look to the people who are sitting close to each other. We run into an acquaintance. He is a doctor and someone who should be self-isolating now because he was at meetings with case # 2. He clearly is not. Hypocrisy all around.

Finally, we spell it out. We are not worried about the coronavirus pandemic per se. The nature of the danger here in Africa for us is that in a country with people suffering from hunger under normal circumstances, a lockdown is devastating. People will be going hungry and they will target those who have food and resources, us. I realize that this is what dawned on me during the day, when I saw our housekeeper carefully observing how we stocked up and I started feeling unsafe.

I feel like I have made the wrong decision to stay. One of our friends, L the French manager of [institution] told me: “Take your kids and go. Do not listen to your family there [in the Czech Republic]. They have no idea what it is like here. Taking them [kids] calmly or taking them out last minute in a dangerous situation is a big difference.” He experienced several coup-d’états in Africa. He has grown up kids in France.

I freak out. I cannot sleep. And finally, at 2:37 am I email the German Embassy, asking about whether they would still take me and the kids on the flight. I mention only the names of myself and my kids. I have no idea how we would get from Brussels to Prague. I do not mention my husband because I know he would need to stay. At least I know he would be able to come and join me in Prague. It still feels like I am betraying him. So, part of me hopes that the German Embassy says “no, it’s too late”.

While Lu had told me, she decided not to fly on Sunday, she had still registered interest to go to keep her options open. This is a surprise. In retrospect, I think I

partially based my decision to stay on the fact that other people are staying. People say they would do one thing and then they do something different. They change their minds. It is understandable. But I have to learn to make my own decisions and not take into account the decisions of others.

I used to feel much calmer after interacting with H and A, mums of kids who play with our kids. They are staying. However, I learn that at meetings H has been saying that she would evacuate her family. A's family are staying and self-isolating because her son has been going to the same nursery school as the child of case number 1. They will be on a [development organization] airplane at some point.

If things go bad, there will be another plane. I just do not want to traumatize my kids and do it all in a bad way. The problem for people like us is that we have nowhere to go in our countries. If we have homes, they are rented out. We often stay with our parents, but at the moment we cannot. My mother is in her 60s. But I still can go to my friend's flat though, so we still have some options.

My daughter coughs. No temperature. The cough sounds dry to me. One of the symptoms of the virus. But my husband says the cough is wet. I suspect wishful thinking. We often see things we want to see. In this case he hears what he wants to hear. We decided to not take her to tennis. I wonder if she would be allowed on the plane. It is clear that with a paediatrician being case number 2, the likelihood is that the community of kids have it, including those in the international schools.

On the plus side – home-schooling went well on Friday. However, the kids spent a lot of time watching YouTube. I need to up my game and make the school a bit more physical and fun. So, I looked up various ball games. Will try them out after the weekend.

I bought face masks and gloves. I resolve to prepare evacuation bags.

Sunday 5th April 2020, Freetown

On Saturday morning my son and I played tennis. Another family did not show up. They sent a message that they had returned to the US, although last Saturday they told us they would be staying. There are more tennis coaches than kids. Only 2 adults and 2 kids came to the training. We use hand sanitizers. We hear sirens, the atmosphere is tense, but we continue to hit the ball. It is a kind of relief, a respite for an hour. I pay the coaches the usual fee as if both of my kids were there. I can at least do this for them. The coaches say "We shall overcome. We have managed during Ebola".

Before we leave, I speak to T, the father of V – the other child who played tennis. He works for the [donor organization] . Health emergencies are his field. He is American, his wife is Russian. They have a 5-year-old and a baby. They are staying because they would have to split up their family for god knows how long. I say that we can take another plane either to the UK or Europe. My kids have dual citizenship. He says he would not recommend going to the UK. It is terrible there right now. His sister works there as a GP. I tell him about my concern for security. He tells me, that Sierra Leone has food reserves for two months. This calms me down a bit.

As we drive back, I see people carrying lots and lots of yellow jerry cans on their heads and in their hands. They want to stock up on water.

When we get back home, I read my emails. The German Embassy responded to my email. We got Stand By tickets numbers P, Q, R. I am supposed to go to the German Embassy by midday to get the right paperwork. It is 11.15. I need to go. I grab our passports and jump in the car.

I arrive and it takes a while to find a spot to park. So many cars everywhere. I enter the embassy compound. I have to wash my hands as usual. The guards wearing face masks measure my temperature. The bloody thermometer starts beeping, it says my

temperature is 38°C. I just came out of a hot car (my AC doesn't work), I haven't slept and I was standing in the sun when they were measuring my temperature. The air temperature is always around 30°C here. These distance thermometers are about as reliable as crystal balls. There is no way I am ill. Nervous maybe, but not ill. They measure me in ten minutes (37.7) then again (37.4) and then again (37.6) and then they give me a face mask to wear during the entire time. Their face masks are better than the ones that I bought. Mine smell like old socks. Must have been lying around for a while. I need to wash them.

And so started a 6-hour-saga of waiting around at the German Embassy compound. I knew it was unlikely we were going to get a spot on the plane. But then again, some people might have expressed interest and would not show up. It was worth a try. It felt like I was at least doing something to protect my children, to be a good mum. In this world most things are out of our control. But this I could do.

The system was fairly well organized. There were some 30 plastic chairs in the shade on which people regularly shuffled as the queue moved. Some people sat on low walls or on stairs. Mrs. A, the ambassador's wife prepared snacks for people. Water and cups were freely available. We were comfortable and calm. I was chatting in the queue with D, Si's husband, while she and their kids J and O went to hang out with the ambassador's wife in the kitchen. They have lived here for 3 and a half years. He worked for [development agency]. They were supposed to leave in June. This flight was primarily organized to get the [development agency] staff out.

Finally, after two hours it was my turn to present our papers to the ambassador and his team. They said that we may be lucky, that as things were at that moment we would get on the plane, but I needed to wait for confirmation. I was happy. I started typing a message to my friend in Prague. We may come to her flat after all. This coming Tuesday. Is it still available? She too is happy. Of course, her flat is still available. I also need to let the Czech consul in [west African country] know, but I want to wait for confirmation before turning his weekend upside down. And then my

phone runs out of battery.

I am then getting second thoughts. Do we really want to fly out? Do I really want to leave my husband behind and see him in 3 months if we are lucky? But then I speak to Si. For her, the main reason to leave is that she feels her family's health is at risk. She feels that if they became ill, they would be given the message: use your own country's resources. She recounts the various experiences of utter incompetence and lack of empathy she had experienced here in health facilities. About two years ago she broke her leg. The X-ray technician said it looked broken. The doctor, however, said it was not. After four weeks of pain and agony, she went back and another doctor told her, her leg was broken indeed. So, she had to have metal rods and crutches for 3 months. Getting a cast was no longer an option. Also, when her son was in hospital with malaria, she told everyone, right, left and centre he could not have paracetamol. He was then given a drip with paracetamol. She complained to the doctor. He discharged them from the hospital and prescribed medication. It was paracetamol. And, finally, when her husband got a really bad case of malaria, she had to pay for various examinations in cash spending about 700.000 Leones. They did not accept card payments. And then, when it was time to admit him, she was supposed to pay a 350.000 Leones admission fee. But she was 70.000 Leones (7 USD) short and they refused to admit him. She had to create a scene. She said she would make sure that [development agency] no longer used that hospital. And only after this did they agree to admit him. Hearing this swung me around again. Yes, we are going as soon as we can.

There are also two lovely German tourists from Berlin. They had been travelling around the country and loved it. Their commercial flight was cancelled. So, they spent two weeks at Tokeh Sands, one of the most beautiful beaches here. Their tickets are confirmed. They are a priority for this flight, along with [development agency] staff.

I am invited inside the residence by Si and A. After all, we have regularly walked

together on Lumley beach every Wednesday here in Freetown, so we know each other. Our connection matters. It is nice to be able to escape from the heat for a bit and chat in the massive air-conditioned embassy kitchen and lounge. I then re-join the queue. D and I take turns holding spots for each other. When it is my turn to get the pass for the vehicle to be able to drive us during the lockdown to the ferry to get us to the airport, I am told that if our tickets are not confirmed, I can not get the pass. So, I need to wait longer for confirmation. I go back to the waiting chairs. D and Si and their kids have left. The tourists from Berlin have left. There is only about 15 of us left waiting around. It is not going to take much longer I am told at about 4.15.

But then newcomers start showing up. V and O, two Brits, come through the door. I used to work with V at [name] Hospital in central Freetown. She used to teach nurses. Now, all of that has stopped. She only had a couple of months left on the project and with education stopping, there is no point in hanging around. This was her gap year before retirement. Her husband O is a retired GP. He is going to be 70. So when they arrive in the UK, they will have to hunker down in their house in Ipswich, for 12 weeks if they follow the government recommendation for 70+ people. But they might just do two weeks like everybody else. Their garden needs some work and V is looking forward to doing some gardening. They already had to self-isolate here for 2 weeks here because they had been in contact with someone who later tested positive for the virus in Europe. So, they know the self-isolation drill.

V and O only learnt about the flight on Friday evening. It makes me think about the prioritizing the embassy staff have to do. This applies not only to the selection of passengers but also to sharing the information about the flight. It only became public gradually. First, they sent a message to their staff, then German tourists, and then others – EU, Norway, Switzerland citizens and then the other others. I learnt about the flight on Thursday at 1 am. The Brits became aware of it only 36 hours later.

V and O listen to my story of sudden fear for safety. And they tell me, wisely, if I do not get on the flight, I need to start thinking positively about Sierra Leone. Tru dat.

(That's right – in Krio).

As we speak, they get a WhatsApp message, there are now 4 confirmed cases of the virus in Sierra Leone. They may get the flight information late, but they get the health information pretty fast. They may not be on priority communication list for flights but they are for health.

I notice that a lot of the last-minute arrivals in the compound are Germans. Our chances are diminishing. They will be given priority. Finally, the ambassador comes out of his office and says, "The flight is full. There are no more seats. I am sorry. If people do not show up, we will call you and send a car for you tomorrow."

So that is that. I leave with a sense of accomplishment. I have done the right thing – I have tried. No worries, it did not work out. I also learnt something about inner workings of diplomacy, and people's stories. I get home at 5.45 pm. I give L my housekeeper additional 200.000 Leones. She gives me a warm happy smile and a thank you. I feel better for it.

I am absolutely exhausted. I have not slept for two nights. I get in bed with my daughter during her bedtime and fall asleep and wake up only at 7 am on Sunday morning. There are now 6 cases of coronavirus recorded. There is unusual quiet – the sound of a lockdown.

There are five points I want to make here:

When you make preparedness plans, you forecast a scenario – if A, B, and C happens, then action D follows. But in real life, things A, B, C and X happen, making you decide to go for action E.

In life we have little pieces of information that make up a picture. Add one small new piece and the picture changes completely.

These days are marked with constant changes to the situation and the overall picture, making the pendulum swing back and forth on the decision of should we stay or should we go several times a day. It is utterly exhausting.

There is a lot of instinctive behaviour taking place right now inside me and other people here. My fear for safety was triggered by my instinctive reaction when I saw our housekeeper closely observing our stocking up. My instinct is highly influenced by having responsibility for two little people.

Most expats do not have homes in their countries. Our house in [UK city] is rented out. Others are in the same position. If we go to the UK or the Czech Republic, we have to organize [popular accommodation website].

Tuesday 7th April 2020, Freetown

Day 3 of the lockdown.

WhatsApp groups show two videos of civil unrest somewhere near Mount Aureol in Eastern Freetown. It shows crowds of young men gathering and running down the hill in urban area. My husband checks with the local staff of his organization. Apparently, it has nothing to do with the lockdown. Rather a policeman went to visit his family, left his charged gun unattended and someone took it and then a shooting accident happened.

I am slightly frustrated with home-schooling. Both kids need guidance most of the time. When I write to my son's teacher that we may not be able to do everything she assigned to them, she is very understanding. When I write a similar message to my daughter's teacher, I get back a message which I perceive as patronizing, saying she will continue to give us the same amount of assignments. I am slightly annoyed. But I refrain from responding.

Fortunately, our house has enough rooms that we do not need to meet each other if we do not want to. So that is a plus. I am at peace with us being here at this moment. But I do think we will need to leave on the next flight. I hate to be apart as a family, but I do feel the kids may be safer in Europe. I am equally aware that I might see things differently tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

There are now 6 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. Another European lady posted a photo on WhatsApp group from Cockle Bay – an Informal settlement in central Freetown. The picture showed a group of people preparing a football match. She went to tell them that there was a lockdown, and they should not do this. And they told her there was no coronavirus and they did not care if they died. So, she alerted some military patrols who started chasing the group. I worry she may be in trouble now.

An Australian news channel reported that Monash University think ivermectin – the drug routinely used to treat river blindness in West Africa, might work against COVID-19. That would be good since the drug should theoretically be readily available here.

The government has finally started storing medicines in my husband's company's warehouse. The plane organized by the German Embassy from Brussels brought over 100 pallets of stuff. And, finally the government agreed to store the drugs in a warehouse that actually provides the correct conditions.

I am looking forward to the end of lockdown tomorrow. I will go and buy some fresh food – fruit and vegetables. Other than that, I think we did ok. It is still hard to imagine that some people have already done this for seven weeks.

Reports from Mali and other Sahel countries on Reliefweb showed that with the arrival of COVID-19, the numbers of those suffering from hunger doubled. It is a crisis on top of a crisis. My friend Lu – a medical doctor says the pandemic will have

an absolutely natural development here. Those who are meant to die, will.

I finished my online course on Public Health in Humanitarian Emergencies by [university].

Thinking back to my reptile brain taking over on Friday and perceiving our housekeeper as a security threat, it occurs to me that we place a lot of trust into the people we let into our homes. And our housekeeper is probably much better off than others in Freetown. And she is a very warm-hearted woman, well-known and vetted by my husband's company.

Thursday, 9th April 2020, Freetown

Three days of home-schooling behind us, two days to go.

Yesterday, Mr T came to teach me Krio after nearly three weeks. He looked thinner. I was glad to see him. He has leukaemia, so he is especially vulnerable. We did not wear face masks, but kept our distance. The lesson turned into an interview about the lockdown.

Mr. T thinks that a three-day lockdown is the maximum that poor people who live from hand to mouth can do. Everyone around him was grumbling. During Ebola there was a three-day lockdown two or three times. He says people share what they can (sheb sheb) – sugar & gari (ground cassava). Mr. T lives in a room without any cooking facilities. So, during the lockdown he ate gari and bread. He did not have rice. For Sierra Leoneans, proper food is only a meal that contains rice. But Mr. T is no ordinary Sierra Leonean.

Before the lockdown started, he had 300.000 Leones on him (30 USD). He could survive on 100.000. So, he shared the 200.000 between 6 of his friends, giving each

20.000 or 30.000 and sending phone credit to them. There is a saying in Krio “Troki wan box an short.” (Turtle wants to send a blow but the hand is short). It means, even if you give just a little, it can still go somewhere, it can help. One thing that Mr. T forgot about was to buy water. “Ah no de pan count.” (I didn’t count it in). Meaning I did not think of water. Fortunately, a neighbour asked whether he wanted water. So, he was fine.

Believing or not believing in the virus:

“Ebola tich wi a lesson”. (Ebola taught us a lesson). “You can not say we do not want a lockdown. We know it’s good for us.” Yet, that is true only to a certain extent. During the lockdown, videos were circulating on WhatsApp – police beating up some guys. Mr. T’s friend was very upset about it saying it was a human rights violation. But Mr. T’s view, and he is not alone, is that “We do not have the facilities like in developed countries. We need to listen to the government”. Rumours are circulating, such as that blacks are immune to the virus or that hot weather kills the virus. Such rumours make “pipuldem no bisin” (people do not care), meaning people do not take the virus seriously. So, on the one hand, the Ebola experience makes people take it more seriously and on the other, rumours are making people not take it seriously at all. Mr. T follows CNN and BBC. He sent to his WhatsApp group a video of the US Surgeon General stating that the majority of deaths in the US was among African Americans. Young people die as well. People should not be carefree. Everyone has to be careful.

The US ambassador in Sierra Leone sends messages to local staff every 2 days. She uses Krio proverbs and people appreciate her more. For example, “One finger no de pick stone” (One finger alone cannot pick a stone). Or “Fambul tikdem ben but in no de bruk” (Family trees can bend, but will not break), meaning no matter what our differences, we need one another. And “All an on deck” (All hands on deck). He sends me the US ambassador’s messages on WhatsApp.

He tells me, he now takes keke (tuk tuk). Only two passengers are allowed. People in

a keke talk and many are surprised to see the USA, country number 1 to be so severely affected by the virus.

On the way to my house he passed Connaught Hospital. There were many people waiting by the mortuary. During the lockdown people could not bury their dead. Now they can.

Now there seems to be a new measure in place according to Mr T. When someone dies, you need to call the government to collect the body and test it. If there is no coronavirus, they will give the body back to the family for the burial.

“With medical facilities here not being good we have different weapons – government measures. Police now have canes, to discipline people.” Mr. T is not worried about looting. He says people will prefer to beg.

I feel calmer.

After our Krio lesson, we go out for first time in three days. We go to the Hub. It is great to be outside. During the lockdown, the hotel was still running. Two rooms were occupied and just two staff members were around all three days to service the rooms. A lockdown stay-cation.

After lunch, we go home, I finish home-schooling with the kids and I feel completely exhausted. I have slightly heightened temperature 37.3°C. I go to bed.

In the morning I video my daughter’s cough and send it to my friend who is a doctor. She says it is a wet cough (dry cough is a sign of the virus, I am relieved). We do not want to go to Choitram Hospital. That is now our alternative, because the Aspen clinic where we normally go to is closed for another week. Case #2 Dr. X worked there.

Xuxa



Drying our mouldy smelling masks. Photo by Xuxa.

Xuxa



“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

Playing our own snakes and ladders. Photo: Xuxa.

Sunday 12th April 2020, Freetown

The Hub is closed. We tried going in on Friday for lunch and a swim. We were told by the guard to leave. That wasn't part of the plan. My friend Lu told me that the owner had informed her the evening before that they would be open. Something is off. And sure enough, one new confirmed case and one inconclusive case were an older South African couple self-isolating in the Hub. They did not arrive from abroad. They arrived from the mines. I do not know what the diamond mines look like, but there seem to be a lot of internationals there, including Chinese and Italians. We had not seen them around. They were in their room. But who knows, they might have given it to one of the staff who then served us or handled our food. COVID-19 is getting closer and closer to us.

Around 1.7 million people around the world have fallen ill with COVID-19, and over 100.000 have died. The situation in the US is particularly terrible, with 20.000 dead and counting. We keep following the news. We keep talking to our friends in the UK and in the Czech Republic. Boris Johnson – the British prime minister is out of the intensive care unit. Czechs keep on wearing face masks. I now see posts on Facebook by Si from Berlin. I just spoke to her 7 days ago in person. Now she is so far away.

There are ten confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone now. No deaths, and over 400 people in quarantine. The two newest cases were Fourah Bay College lecturers, who disobeyed isolation rules and were then considered on the run. They were later found, explaining their behaviour with shock. My friend Lu brought 100 fabric face masks made of lapa – local colourful fabric. They are quite beautiful. I choose some 20. We will now have to step up and wear them. At least they are not the masks that I had bought, they smelled mouldy.

If I just look at how things are right now right here, we are fine. We are living in a big

house, with a garden, with food to eat and toys to play with, with internet and Netflix. I try to focus on this. I will worry about other things when they happen. We are having great time with the kids – we properly play. We created our own snakes and ladders in our garden and used a cardboard box as a die. Lots of fun.



Lapa face masks made in Freetown. Photo: Xuxa.

We repeat – the pandemic is going to have a natural development here. Those who become very ill, will most likely not make it. We are in god's hands. All these thoughts run through our heads whilst we are decorating Easter eggs with the children.

There is now a partial lockdown for two weeks starting from today – curfew from 9 pm to 6 am, travel between districts is banned, essential travel only and only food shops and pharmacies are open. The government advises that people wear face mask.

We stopped playing tennis and we are no longer going to the beach. I read somewhere that running together makes people run through each other's clouds of droplets. My husband is very conscious of what message it would send to people here if we continued to be seen on the tennis court. We are still going out though. We went to Gigibonta at Lumley beach for ice cream and take away pizza yesterday. When we arrived there, we had to hide inside, as there was an epic storm with thunder and lightning. I tried to drink a mojito, but the kids were too wound up for me to take any joy in it.

Tuesday 14th April 2020, Freetown

Both kids are ill. At night from Sunday to Monday, L threw up about five times. On Monday morning they both had temperature, with O's running up to 39.4°C and L's to 38.0°C during the day. They both had diarrhoea. Aspen, the clinic we usually go to, is closed. I was consulting throughout the day with my friend Lu, who is a medical doctor. Following her advice, I pricked the kids' fingers to carry out the rapid malaria test. We have test kits at home. But the tests are not always reliable. After much screaming, I managed to get their blood drops and the results were both negative. It puts our minds at ease only partially.

During the night, I slept with my daughter and my husband slept with our son, to keep an eye on them. They still had fever at night. L got worse towards the morning. We needed to decide where to take them. There are not too many great options in Freetown. After consulting with Lu who proposes Choitram's, Life Care and Ecomed, I also message D who is also a medical doctor. He says Choitram's and Ecomed. Our friend here knows the executive director of Choitram's and it is close to our house. We decide to go there.

I am very worried. I do not enjoy this bit about our nomadic lifestyle. I like my

hospitals and doctors to be known, not to be unknown. Will it be the same dirty dark brown walls and old facilities as in Connaught Hospital, where I used to work? I hope not.

We call the insurance company. We put our lapa face masks on and set out in a car. At the hospital gate a guard takes our temperatures and none of us seem to have any. We arrive in a leafy spacious compound. We are pleasantly surprised. The buildings are several decades old but well maintained, painted and clean. (All, Connaught Hospital needs really is a fresh coat of paint). There are not too many people waiting. There are lots of attendants and guards in face masks who help us navigate the process. First wash your hands at the non-touch, peddle operated hand wash station. Then sit at pre-screening chairs. Get screened – a nurse behind a counter protected by glass registers us. My husband has to go to a container cubicle to make sure our insurance papers arrived. She again took our temperatures: Did you travel anywhere recently? Do you all have symptoms? Do your children cough? Just a little, I lied about my daughter's wet cough. And no, just the children are ill. We are fine. I lied again about not having small temperature. Then we are asked to wait at post-screening chairs, set about 1,5 metres apart.

After getting our children's folders we are taken to the paediatric department. We divide the children between us. All of us could not fit in the room. First me and L, then my husband and O. Dr. M sees us. He hears something in L's chest. He wants blood tests and a chest X-ray to rule out pneumonia. We leave our boys and go wait in yet another chair queue for lab tests. A little boy cries as they are taking his blood. L who is five gets nervous. And at that point our boys arrive and sit in the queue too. It is our turn. L holds on to the chair. I have to drag her and pin her down for blood to be taken. She tries to sing to distract herself. It occasionally turns into screams.

Xuxa



Distancing at Choitram's hospital, Freetown. Photo by Xuxa.

We then walk to the Radiology department. We sit down. Our boys meanwhile are already in the car, waiting for us. L is still sniffling and complaining of pain. She is worried about what comes next. Will it be painful? I explain to her it is just like taking a picture. It does not hurt. After some 20 minutes of waiting, we are finally done. The Indian radiologist was quick. The doctor wanted to see the X-Ray straight away. There was an issue with the printer. The radiologist took my phone and took a picture of the X-Ray for me to show to the doctor. The paediatrician looked at it and ruled out pneumonia. She seems asthmatic. I need to continue giving her Solbutamol / Ventolin when her breathing becomes "noisy". But for now we need to tackle her fever. It is on its way back. I can tell from her eyes. The doctor prescribes

antimalarials. We cannot take any risks, with her being so young. If the test comes back negative tomorrow, she can stop taking those meds. He also prescribes antibiotics for a suspected gastrointestinal bug, Calpol (British strawberry-flavoured paracetamol for kids) and zinc. I love the fact we have calpol. I ran out and could not find it in local pharmacies. We collect the medicine from the Indian pharmacists in the hospital and we go home. O just got paracetamol, antibiotics and zinc. No antimalarials for him until the test results arrive.

When we get back, L has 38.4°C. Our housekeeper is very worried. She keeps coming and checking on her. She lost one of her four children when he was only 6 months old, presumably to malaria. Such is life in Sierra Leone. People die and nobody knows why.

I give L all her medicines and she falls asleep still very hot to the touch. O seems a bit better. He took his medicine and watches TV. May the mending begin.

More developments on the exit from Sierra Leone front. There is a rumour that the Brits are organizing a plane to the UK, possibly for the weekend. I also get an email from the Czech consul in [west African country]. The Delegation of the EU in Liberia are organizing a flight and they are collecting information about EU citizens in the region. Can I send my kids and my husband's details? Yes. I can. Are we planning on staying or leaving? I think we are planning to leave and we would prefer to go to Prague. This experience has made us feel again quite vulnerable.

Thursday 16th April 2020, Freetown

There are now 15 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone. Two more cases were identified in Port Loko – an isolation site for people who arrived from abroad. There is now a rumour of case number 16. A laboratory worker in Kenema with 12

contacts and potentially many more. Again, the WhatsApp group shared their address in Kenema. The members of the [message group for expats in Sierra Leone]pointed out that in future those forwarding these messages should delete personal details.

The kids are feeling better. Fortunately, it was not malaria. Just a gastrointestinal bug. Antibiotics seem to be working for them both. They do not have a temperature. Their appetites are back. They are still a bit weak. So, we did only a little bit of home-schooling today – just a bit of math and reading.

We are all at home. My husband now works from home as a default. It is nice not to be solely responsible for educating our two small people. Although we do get a bit bored. On that account, I stitched trousers for my daughter's Ken doll.

I finished the fifth course of my six-course online specialization on Global Health with Johns Hopkins University. They seem to be particularly well-known about now as they are providing the most up-to-date COVID-19 related statistics. Just one more course to go.

Otherwise the day is fairly quiet. The Czech consul in [west African country] advises that it is better that we try getting out on all fronts. At the moment, I am feeling again like staying here. We are going in circles. From a career point of view, it is probably better for me to stay here as long as possible and observe.

I am looking forward to going out again, once the kids are OK.

It rained a lot last night. I thought of people who live in slums and houses that do not have sturdy roofs or are in low lying areas. I wonder how the COVID-19 will play out during the rainy season, in combination with poor housing in areas prone to mudslides and flooding. Everything seems to be in god's hands in Sierra Leone.

Xuxa

Sunday 19th April 2020, Freetown

I miss the sound of church services – the singing that one heard every Sunday morning in the neighbourhood, the beautiful dresses that the women wore. Now there is only silence.

The WhatsApp [message group for expats in Sierra Leone] tells me that the country now has 35 confirmed cases. Exponential growth has begun. Some 112 nurses have been crammed together inside the Ola During Children's Hospital in Freetown because the hospital has been closed and they are quarantined together in very bad conditions. It is because two of their nurses have tested positive for COVID-19. People who came into contact with a laboratory worker who left Freetown and went to Kenema are also quarantined in a school, with a shared toilet, no running water or electricity. And Dr. X (case number 2) was released from 34 Military Hospital after she tested negative twice for COVID-19. She is thankful to God and all the staff there.

People on WhatsApp debate whether lockdown is a good measure or not for Sierra Leone. I personally think it is not the most suitable way of stopping the spread when so many people can go hungry. I saw a really good documentary about this on VIMEO called COVID on the Breadline. I also found a report called Finding Africa's Path: Shaping Bold Solutions to Save Lives and Livelihoods in the COVID-19 Crisis. It looks good. I just need to find the time to read it.

We have not been anywhere really, have not gone out. We do not want to appear as if though government recommendations (limit unnecessary outings) do not apply to us. My husband is adamant. We have a new word for people who are overly strict and indulge in adhering to coronavirus rules – corona fascists.

Just at home with the kids. They seemed to be better, but then my daughter got temperature again yesterday evening. So, we are not out of the woods yet. So far, a lot of confirmed COVID-19 cases have been among healthcare workers. It seems that

the government close health facilities as soon as someone on their staff tests positive. With the kids being in worse health recently, I feel the time has come for us to go. We are not worried about the virus. We are worried about running out of healthcare options, should we need treatment for the kids for other problems.

The British High Commission announced yesterday, there will be a flight to London Stansted on Wednesday 22nd April, arriving on Thursday 23rd April, 4 am. Priority will be given to British nationals – tourists and those with no permanent residence here. We registered our interest for me and the kids to go. We had to pay 1800 pounds upfront. It will be refunded if we do not get on the flight. There is a deterrent to those who are not serious in their interest or broke. My heart feels heavy with the thought that our family will be separated for eight weeks, if not more. My brother's marriage fell apart after a similar separation, though it was longer. I know we are different. But I also worry – what could happen to my husband here. What if he becomes ill? We have a duty to take care of our children. With our daughter still coughing and being unwell, I have to get somewhere where she can be treated.

Is the UK the right place? Well, that is a question that merits research. Essentially, we are evacuating from a place with 35 cases and no deaths, to a place with over 10,000 deaths on the presumption that NHS will be able to cope with our minor ailments. Also, where will we stay? Our house in [UK city] is rented out long term. We could go to [town in the Midlands], where M's mother lives. We could rent an [popular accommodation website] house. But my mother-in-law is 70 and her husband is isolating himself because of his kidney condition. So, we would not be able to see them. M's brother K would be able to help us with shopping and the like. We could also rent a house in [English city]. Friends could help with shopping. It is all a bit hard in the rural UK when you do not have a car. (We sold ours before moving to Sierra Leone). We went online. [popular accommodation website] stopped operating its UK platform. No [popular accommodation website]! It is because they were criticised for marketing homes as isolation retreats and not offering the places

to essential workers. Fortunately, A suggested looking on [another accommodation website]. We looked but could not find much. Also, real estate agents offer places – but most are unfurnished and do not have internet or Netflix… I do not know. I give up.

“Having your own piece of land is the future”, my friend B tells me. “Not only having an apartment for 8 million (Czech) crowns.[240.000 GBP]” This is what coronavirus has seemed to reveal to people in the Czech Republic. Well here in Africa it reveals that people are constantly on the breadline. B gives me a pep talk. “If you decide that you want to come to Europe, you need to make a fuss, create a scene, be a pushy mother. No more of this polite ‘I understand’ rubbish of yours.” So, I begin to think about it all more seriously.

My husband meanwhile emails the [UK diplomat]. We know him. S is nice. We make sure he is aware that we are expressing an interest. Our kids are UK citizens, I am their mother and legal guardian. Surely, we meet some of the criteria, even though we have resident visas in Sierra Leone. He emails back, having noted our interest.

What if we tried travelling from the UK to Prague? I read again the email from LJ, the Czech consul in [west African country]. He says there are transport providers licensed by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs who repatriate people from various parts of Europe. I contact a few of them – would they be able to transfer us either from Stansted or from Brussels (we found out the Eurostar is still running)? If so for how much? One of them responds straight away. Yes, it could be done. The prices range from 1250 GBP -1800 GBP from Stansted and from 770GBP to 1200GBP from Brussels. Evacuation is not for the faint hearted or those who do not have money. In Prague we could stay at my friend’s [popular accommodation website] flat for the quarantine period. She is holding it for us. Prague would be so much better. With friends, family and no need for a car. I could use public transport or borrow my mother’s car, once quarantine is over. In the UK, nobody can lend you their car because their insurance policies are usually bound to named drivers. I spoke to my

friend in Prague and to my mum. They are both happy to help. So are people in the UK. Our friends with whom we talked with on Zoom yesterday were all supportive. My mother-in-law and my brother-in-law. It is great to feel their support and love. Thank you.

We went out for a walk in our compound – my daughter and I. We needed some fresh air and the sun. The boys are happy to stay inside. Accompanied by three compound dogs, we discover corners of the compound we had never seen before. There are vegetable patches, the compound keeper's wife has planted – cassava and groundnut. Green insects – grasshoppers or locusts – with red legs jump from underneath our feet. We touch trees, their bark. We walk on soil. We feel calm. We will learn on Tuesday whether we are flying or not.

Tuesday 21st April, Freetown

We are waiting to hear officially from the UK High Commission. We got an unofficial message from the [UK diplomat] yesterday that we may book our onward travel from Stansted Airport because our names are on the passenger list.

We decided that going to Prague would be better. I have a better base there than in the UK – a furnished flat with the internet, the possibility to borrow a car, family and friends close by. I have managed to find a Czech company that will transport us for 800 GBP from Stansted to Prague. Their driver will leave tonight to meet us at the airport. It will be an epic journey from Stansted by ferry across the channel and then via France, Belgium, Germany and finally to the Czech Republic. But possibly worth it. It will take some 20 hours.

I have been quite nervous lately. So, I am glad we are moving somewhere with a functioning health system. I hope we will get on the plane. The kids were very

excited when we told them. Another adventure. We do not know when we are going to be able to see my husband again. Hopefully, it will only be two months.

Now, all that remains to be done is the packing. I have tried home-schooling the kids this morning, but my capacity to do so is really limited right now. I raise my voice too quickly.

Our housekeeper L knows now. She said that she will miss us.

Saturday 25th April, Prague

Hello from Prague, my beloved home city. We made it!

The journey took some 36 hours altogether. The kids and I set off from our home in Freetown just after noon on Wednesday and arrived in Prague on Friday at 2 am. My husband had to stay there. There are some 70 members of his staff that he needs to look after.

The goodbyes were quite moving. L seemed sad to see us go, but understanding. “Medical care is better there” she said. My Krio teacher Mr T came to say goodbye too. He had a stressful time trying to get his medicine for leukaemia. Since no more planes are landing, his medicine was sent to the Gambia and a DHL courier had to go and get it. But that is quite hard with the ban on travel between districts. Eventually, it happened. It cost a lot of money, but his American friends helped him. I left some money with him as well by prepaying for six lessons. We will figure out whether we can continue classes via WhatsApp or not. My husband, though sad we were going, was also quite glad that we were on our way. Now he can concentrate better on his work. The constant worry about whether the kids were going to get ill had been distracting him, and for us. One last kiss and a hug. Goodbye, not sure for how long.

H our driver who had done most school pick-ups with me, came for us. It was important that she was our driver now. She had been sitting at home for the past three weeks with nothing to do. The company have repurposed their activities. Not much driving is required now as most staff are working from home and it is more the warehouse personnel who suddenly have lots to do.

Lu was supposed to come the night before but she didn't. She said it would be too emotional. She planned to come to the ferry terminal to say goodbye instead.

H drove us through Freetown. It was much quieter than usual. But by the Sea Coach ferry terminal by the Aberdeen Bridge, there was some slight congestion. Guards in face masks, their foreheads sweating heavily, were checking passenger list – only passengers and their drivers were allowed in. So, no goodbye to Lu then. I call her, "we'll have a drink in Prague in the summer and in the meanwhile communicate via WhatsApp."

At the ferry terminal, we meet S – the [UK diplomat], four members of his staff and many passengers we know. There is Mr. B – the school headteacher, and his wife E. They rented a cottage in Devon. They are going to the UK to be close to their granddaughter. There is also L, a tall high school teacher with tattoos on her arms. There is S, the Japanese lady who used to give me a lift to ballet classes when things were still normal in Freetown. There is V and her husband, with whom I had waited at the German Embassy two weeks ago. There are other families with kids, some remotely familiar.

Xuxa



My children at the ferry terminal. Photo: Xuxa.

Porters carry bags. They wear fabric face masks and sweat is pouring down their cheeks. Protective garments are really uncomfortable in a tropical climate.

We get on the ferry. About 40 of us. “This is the kids’ boat” one passenger exclaims when he gets on by himself. Indeed, there are about 10 kids on board. Many of the kids are accompanied just by their mothers or female relatives. So, this is it: the evacuation of the vulnerable. This is what “women and children first” means. One last ride over the bay to Lungi airport. We see plastic floating in the sea and beautiful hills in the background.

At the airport we meet more people we know. My daughter’s former teacher J and others. We hang out in the restaurant with A and M, the parents of two-year-old M

and nearly five-year-old C. The kids play very loudly, sometimes borderline violence ensues. We sweat and wait. My phone has only 7 % battery and the charger is not working. How will I call the driver on the other side? I do not know.

Then the plane lands. It is Jet2 – a low-cost airline. We get on among the first people at nearly 7 pm. And we find our own seats. They are not allocated. There are two paper bags of snacks on each seat – no catering is provided for the flight. We sit behind the family of our friends. We cannot recline the seats, there are no seat pockets and no on-board entertainment, no little TV screens on seats in front of us. This will have to do. We were charged 600 pounds a ticket. I give my kids their tablets with preloaded films. Within an hour they are both asleep with their heads on my lap, whilst I sit completely up right.

Our row of four seats has one more person – M – a GP (medical doctor) who has worked all over Africa. She works in Freetown's [name] Hospital improving palliative care. During the flight she is approached by one of the cabin crew. Someone on the flight is feeling sick. Not COVID-19 -related, she assures us. M goes with her. The patient seems sick.

After two and half hours, we land in Las Palmas at Gran Canaria to refuel and change crew. Already landing there felt like a different world – street lights, neat rows of houses, so orderly and … well… developed. How is it possible that just two hours away, there is the poorest, the least developed country in the world? How can they be in such close geographical proximity? The sick patient gets off the plane there, delaying the plane a bit.

When we take off again, it is only another four and a half hours to London Stansted. I have not slept all that much. I am tired and grumpy as we walk through the deserted corridors of the once busy airport. We stand in a queue marked as "Fast Track" standing 2 metres apart on marked lines. Staff in face masks and rubber gloves every now and again remind people to stand apart. I give my kids surgical gloves. They

touch everything in them. Then they lick them. And then they drop them on the floor and put them back on inside out. I bin them in 10 minutes. What was I thinking? We get through the passport control using my kids UK passports. Now it is time to get their Czech passports out for the next leg of the journey.

I get the suitcases. We say goodbye to A and M and their sweet kids. They are heading to Windsor for a rented property. Goodbye to B and E heading to Devon. And finally, farewell to V and J heading to Ipswich. This is probably the last time in my life I will see some of them. A had transformed my life in Freetown – with playdates and pool dates for the kids, and dinners for grown-ups only. It felt weird, such a mundane setting to be saying goodbye to such an important pal.

Using M's phone, I call the driver who was supposed to pick us up. He is some 30 minutes away. We wait. I manage to charge my phone at the charge point. And then Mr. LG arrives to pick us up in the Mercedes Vito mini bus at 7 am. The car is very nice and new. The driver is in his forties and he looks sensible. I ask whether we need to wear face masks. He says no. And passes me a bottle of sanitizer. I use it. I squirt a bit on my daughter's hands. She licks it. And then starts spitting all over the car.

And so, our journey across Europe begins. We are equipped with various COVID-19-related paperwork. Document by the Czech Embassy in London requesting cooperation of all authorities during our repatriation. My husband's written and signed consent with our travel. A letter to the Czech Hygiene Authority about our repatriation.

It reminds me of the early 1990s when I used to travel from the Czech Republic to the UK by mini buses. I was surprised by how many people called me "brave" or "courageous" for undertaking this journey with two kids. It seemed that for some people this journey may be unthinkable, so so far and so long. But having done this multiple times before, as well as many of my friends, it was quite a normal prospect –

yes we were going to spend some 20 hours in a car. But in a way, aren't long journeys in a car part of the adventure?

I slept all the way to Dover. The ferry port seemed deserted. Only trucks around. We were the only car with passengers. We board a vessel at 10 am and we get a free breakfast. The weather is beautifully sunny and crisp. There are seagulls and the white cliffs of Dover as a backdrop. And I am humming the "Once the war is Over" song. The ferry seems to be less than one third full. Truck drivers. There are only two other women on board and so the women's toilets are closed. We use disabled toilets. Kids are loving the adventure. O enjoys observing the Dunkirk tugboats and cranes.



Travelling in Corona time. Empty car park in Dover ferry port. The only vehicle is ours. April 2020. Photo by

Xuxa.

We then drive a bit through France. We are supposed to have an official paper explaining why we are transiting through France. So, I write it out by hand. But nobody stops us. There are no border controls when we cross into Belgium. The motorway seems peaceful, not too busy, but not completely deserted either. The landscape is lit with beautiful spring sunshine. The grass is fresh and green. Leafy trees in neat rows along the roads. Muscular white cows chewing away. If I hadn't been told by the driver that Belgium was particularly badly affected by the virus, I wouldn't have known. Everything looked fine and peaceful. I chat with the driver and he misses a turn. So, we go through Central Brussels. It is probably shorter than using the ring road. Brussels is gorgeous, I find.

And then we drive through Germany with its smooth, efficient, fast German motorways. There are many more cars on the Autobahn. Germany is known to be doing very well during this epidemic. Testing around 500.000 people a week. Their deaths numbers are looking much better than anywhere else in Europe. Some say it is because of the large numbers of tests as well as special care on specific days when patients are known to deteriorate (around day 10 I think). There were no border checks to Germany either. As we pass through Germany, we stop at a petrol station for sausages and coffee. Nobody wears face masks. I start receiving emails from the Czech hygienic authorities: All three of us – myself and kids are officially ordered to undergo quarantine for 14 days and undertake a test at the end of it either with our GP or with them.

We cross the border into the Czech Republic at midnight. There are three police officers stopping cars and checking documents. The police are wearing face masks. They insist that we wear face masks too. They leave the kids who are asleep alone. They tell the driver that since he's been away from the country for longer than 24-hours he, too, will need to undergo a 14-day quarantine. Oh dear. That was not part of the plan. I was told he did not have to be quarantined. The crew check with their

superior. It is true. I feel genuinely bad about this. I give him a big tip. He wanted to hunker down at a deserted farm for about 9 days anyway because his father suffers from leukaemia. But 2 weeks is a bit much. We chat on the way. He is curious about life in Sierra Leone. So, I tell him what I know. We arrive in Prague at 2 am at my friend's flat. I am completely exhausted. The driver helps me with the luggage all the way. And he shakes my hand as he leaves. I wish him well and am thankful he has managed the long journey so well. True human to human connection.

We spent Friday unpacking and settling in. The flat has two bedrooms and a kitchen and a bathroom. Beautiful antique furniture and high ceilings, working internet. There is food in the fridge brought over by my mum during the previous day. There is a yard and chickens. My friends tell me as long as we keep our distance we do not need to wear face masks. I am glad. The lapa face masks I got hurt my ears terribly. We are home now.

During the day, I get the message that the number of infected people in Sierra Leone has risen to 60 and that 3 deaths occurred. Meanwhile, just as we arrived, the high court in the Czech Republic has ruled that the restrictions on movement need to be lifted against the prime minister's wishes. I think we managed to arrive at the right time. I post about our journey on Facebook and get some 50 comments – mainly people enquiring why we left and how was the journey possible in these COVID-19 times. It is good to be back.

Tuesday 28th April 2020, Prague

This is day 5 of our quarantine in Prague. It took us good three days to recover from our journey. The upside is that I now have access to Pilsner Urquell beer and to sauerkraut, camembert cheese, salami and radishes. The kids love Czech párek v rohlíku (frankfurter sausage in a roll, a.k.a. a hot dog) and bread and rolls in general,

ham, eidam cheese, and strawberries. We have settled in this flat really well. I could already remember the address [...] Prague 10. I had to do some online shopping – getting groceries and some long-promised toys – a Barbie Airplane and the Thomas & Friends Super Cruiser – not the kind of items one can get in sweet Salone.

There is a garden, where we occasionally meet up with my friend's family. They told us not to wear masks. But every now and again, I try to wear them. Especially when their grandmother in her 80s is in the yard. It is also especially after having a morning full of coughing and snot. My daughter is still coughing – I administer her inhaler and she now has a runny nose. My other friend B, with whom I use Messenger, tells me her nearly three-year-old triplet sons and her 5-year old daughter have runny noses too, because like my kids, they do not like wearing socks and garments in general. We do not think it is COVID-19.

The kids chase the white fluffy chickens outside in the garden. They (the chickens) are some kind of special breed that look as fluffy as chow chow dogs.

The driver, Mr. LG texted me that he is not in quarantine – great news. He still is alone on a farm avoiding his father. He is asking how we are. Any signs of illness? I reply, saying my daughter has the odd cough and snot. Nothing conclusive. I wish I could give him better news.

I am in communication with the Czech authorities. We are required to be tested for COVID-19 at the end of our quarantine. Our GP is supposed to write a referral for us to get tested. However, we do not have a GP as we have not lived in the Czech Republic for several years. So, the Office of Hygiene will have to write us a referral. I am supposed to call them next Wednesday. But how to get tested? There are drive-in testing places. But I do not have a car here and we are not allowed to use public transport. They will send an ambulance crew to test us. The officer tells me the rapid test when they prick your finger is the easiest. But I know my kids. They will scream. Let's go for a swab. She says it may be worse for them. Well, we will see about that.

The test is covered by national health insurance. My kids are covered. I am now in communication with the insurance company, whether I am covered too. I have my health insurance in the UK. Although the UK has left the EU, the rules still apply until the end of the year – that I cannot have two insurance policies. Therefore, I hope I am covered by my blue EHIC (European Health Insurance Card) UK card. If not, I will probably have to pay around 3000 CZK (100 GBP) for the test.

We all miss my husband. Now he can concentrate better on work in Salone. We were a distraction. I also miss L our housekeeper. The dirty dishes do not magically disappear here.

I spend some evenings drinking wine with my friends in the garden at an appropriate distance. My mother dropped off some supplies here. She is still keeping a 4-metre distance. I have not spoken to my brother yet. He never calls. He was the one who told me not to come to the Czech Republic. But it seems that situation is getting better here now. While it is going downhill in Africa. I stopped looking at the stats.

I home school the kids. It is OK. We have managed to catch up on last week's learning and we have a more relaxed daily rhythm.

I try to work. I am taking the final few modules in my Global Health specialization by Johns Hopkins University on Coursera. Yesterday, I was invited to join a meeting with the [organization] for which I am supposed to work and [UK education institution] about a group of students who were supposed to visit Freetown and do some field work. People at the Zoom meeting were curious who I was. I introduced myself, but it all still felt a little weird. I did not re-join them today. I have other things to do. I took part in a Webex meeting today for funding applications reviewers. The great thing about having such a meeting – where your camera is switched off and your microphone is muted – is that you can still help kids put their socks on and wash up.

Xuxa

This is a great experiment – living back in Prague. I wonder what ups and downs we will have here. So far, I am loving it. For many years now I have been longing to be back here. For that reason, I have started to collaborate with a career coach. We are trying to figure out ways of how we as a family can successfully relocate here. This can be a hard task for international families.



Front cover of Respekt Magazine I found in my flat from late March 2020. It says: Nation Helps Itself.

"When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them." - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

Xuxa

Friday 1st May 2020, Prague 9:45 pm

Today is the eighth day of our quarantine. We are doing OK. The first five days flew by, as if though they were only two. The sixth day felt long. I felt very tired on the seventh day, yesterday. So, I cancelled all schoolwork and we just watched films and hung around. It was great to have this kind of freedom. We did the kids' schoolwork today instead. Normally, today would be a bank holiday. It still is. But it does not mean much during the time of coronavirus.

I sit here, exhausted. My five-year-old daughter L coughs every morning. It has been a month since she started coughing. Mornings are the worst. Every morning I think we will need to go to the doctor's office. But as the day goes by, she improves and is happy in herself. I noticed a little spot on her thigh yesterday. This morning, it was bigger and red. Throughout the day, a red circle appeared around the spot. And it kept growing bigger. I tried putting on the smelly brown ointment – ichtoxyl. It speeds up the progress of infection and makes things happen faster. L did not allow me to touch it or put any trousers on her. She was limping. She had a slight temperature 37.2. When I finally managed to touch her spot, I found it feels hard and deep, about 2 cm deep. I began to worry and texted my medical doctor friend Lu in Sierra Leone. According to photos, she said it may be a boil or a giant spot. But her verdict was limited by photos. So, I also got hold of an old friend J, who is a GP for adults here in Prague. She said she could not come to see us as we were in quarantine, and she had to go and see her parents the following day. She recommended we go to Motol Urgent Paediatric Care department. But we do not have a car here. She suggested we could call the hospital and ask for transport. So, I called the hospital. They said they would be happy to see us, but we would have to come using our own transport. "But we are in quarantine", I say. "Well you can still take a taxi", they say. I call a taxi company, they say they can not take people in quarantine. Suddenly, my homeland does not feel so welcoming. So, I call my mum, who normally keeps her distance – by standing at least 2 metres away and wearing a

face mask. She says she will drive us to the hospital. We should be ready in 20 minutes. She is brave to take us when we are not out of quarantine yet. I start packing the bag and arrange for J's son S to look after O while I am gone. L starts packing her bag while limping. It is 8.45 pm. L says she wants to sleep. She lies on bed and falls asleep. Her temperature is normal, I had given her Calpol – paracetamol for kids – before. So, I call my mother, who is only five minutes away by now, and tell her not to come. I call again J – the doctor in Prague and explain to her what happened. She tells me, it is OK and mentions the signs I should look out for – redness spreading, or high fever. I can call 155 – the number for health ambulance. COVID patients call it when they cough, so why shouldn't I be able to in my situation?

Let's hope this will pass and L will be fine. If not, we will get the necessary medical attention. Somehow – even if it means calling the ambulance.

Yesterday, there were three fires in Freetown, including a riot in Pademba prison, and an explosion of fuel tank of a water delivery truck outside the American Embassy. I do worry about the safety of my husband.

Saturday 2nd May, Prague

This morning, I discover, that my son O has a giant spot, too. Above the knee. It is at least 2 x 3 cm big. I squeeze it and lots of puss comes out. Something infectious is going around. I remember that L our housekeeper suffers from big spots and some 8 weeks ago, she injured her hand cleaning a broken ceramic tile. Her index finger swell, and then also her hand. I had to send her to the hospital (and pay for her treatment). They cut and cleaned the finger and gave her antibiotics. And she got better. But her finger is still now in bandage and it is slightly swollen. I gave her rubber gloves to wear around the house, but I do not think she wore them much.

Touching all our clothes and plates with her bandaged finger. I wonder whether an infectious bug could have been passed around. A golden staphylococcus, for example?

I call the 1212 – a line that provides information related to coronavirus. They tell me to call the nearest hospital – Vinohrady. I speak to their emergency paediatrician on duty. She asks me to send photos over. She says the boils are not red enough for her to prescribe antibiotics. If she did, the person who sees us after her may not be able to carry out proper investigations. And my daughter has only 37.3°C temperature, so not high really. We have to wait and see.

I understand. I see a picture of A's baby's abscess from a year ago, and I see the angry redness they are waiting for. However, I hate this waiting to meet the threshold for action. It is probably because 8 years ago, I nearly died of sepsis. I had tonsillitis in the UK. I called the doctor, he asked if I had runny nose. I said yes. And he concluded it was viral. Ten days later I was feeling worse. I got antibiotics. But it was too late. I lost my appetite and three days later I developed high fever, was shaking uncontrollably, I lost control of my bowls and I felt like I was dying. Our friend drove me to the hospital. I could not walk straight. People thought I was drunk. When I finally saw the triage nurse, she immediately had me admitted to the resuscitation unit. I then spent days in isolation room with no windows on a drip, in nappies. They told my husband they were not sure whether I would make it. Finally, I got better and was moved to a single room with windows. But it was close. I know that waiting around can lead to terrible things.

The doctor advices me to contact Bulovka Hospital in the future because they are set up for COVID-19 patients, and have a dermatological department, and a children's emergency department. So, they can carry out all the appropriate swabs and tests.

I now learnt that a person who was on the same flight as us from Freetown to London tested positive for COVID-19. Oh dear! Well we are self-isolating anyway.

Today, there are 155 cases of COVID-19 in Sierra Leone, 8 deaths, 126 in isolation and, 1,535 in quarantine. There will be another lockdown from Sunday until Tuesday. For lockdown, the government will pay Le. 250,000 direct cash transfer to 8,000 (Le2billion) amputees, orphans and disabled individuals in all 16 districts. (Awoko 2.5.20). There are 7,740 cases in Czechia, and 241 deaths.

My Czech friend Lu told me a few days ago that one of her Sierra Leonean colleagues had an accident on his bike. He was rushing back home and crashed into some police barriers, flew over the handlebars and landed on the ground. He survived, though he broke his jaw. Since then his wife was calling Lu several times a day. They had to sort out his operation. He needed a transfusion. Apparently, when you have transfusion in Sierra Leone, your family is asked to donate blood to keep the blood reserves up. Lu had given blood before and knows how draining it is, making one very tired for 2 weeks or so. She does not have the energy to do that now. In the end, her boss donated blood. His wife called her one day, saying he died. But that was not true. He was alive. The wife was in a strange state of mind. Later when they talked about it, the wife denied that it ever happened. Then when they were taking him to the operating room, she called again in state of fear. Lu had to tell her to calm down. The operation was planned and he was going to be operated on by Italian surgeons who know what they are doing. Lu was also bombarded by other expat friends of her injured colleague, constantly messaging. Finally, she had to say, “stop it, calm down, you are not helping.”

I think his friend felt they were doing something for him by messaging her. In a situation when you really cannot do anything, messaging the person’s medical friend feels like doing something. Also, his wife may have been distraught and acted in ways that she later forgot. She was probably in a state of shock. Also, in Sierra Leone, people do not go to the doctor much. Many prefer to go to the traditional healers first. So, she may not have ever been in a hospital, or only a handful of times. It might feel like when you fly for your very first time or second time. It seems that people

from countries with more robust health systems, tend to be like frequent fliers.

Tuesday 5th May 2020, Prague

Saturday, when I wrote my last entry, turned out to be more eventful. My daughter's temperature went up, the red area on her thigh growing to 7 x 5 cm. And, so I called 155 – the Czech number for emergency ambulance service at about 6.30 pm. We were classed as not a high priority, but since we are in quarantine and do not have a car, we were entitled to the service. We just had to wait a bit. By 7.45 pm a special ambulance for infectious cases (a.k.a. a COVID ambulance) arrived with only a driver. He looked like an astronaut, dressed in full PPE kit – goggles, face mask, full white body suit, blue rubber gloves, black rubber boots. He did not introduce himself. I could tell from his dark brown eyes and voice that he was young, in his twenties perhaps. The ambulance was parked on the main road outside the house with blue lights on. As the kids and I were going down the stairs in face masks, I saw a few people from the opposite five-storey building observing us from the window. He strapped L on to a gurney, and O and I sat down on seats. The vehicle door was open for another 20 minutes, while he was taking down our details – the kids' Czech health insurance cards, my ID card, a brief description of the kids' condition and taking our temperature using a remote thermometer. During that time, there were a few passers-by, each peeping inside the ambulance. When he was driving us to the Bulovka Hospital, he seemed to turn into a racing driver, going through the red lights with sirens and blue lights on, which was completely unnecessarily in our case. We were tossed around in the back of the ambulance, buildings of Prague zooming past us in a blur. This was the first time in 9 days that I actually saw the city of my birth, since arriving here from Africa.

He brought us to the infectious diseases department. They were expecting us. He rang the bell, we were let in. L was placed on a stretcher. We walked to the window,

where the nurse on duty registered us. She took O's and L's Czech Health Insurance cards, my ID and then she asked whether I was insured. A moment of anxiety on my part – will this be OK?

I am registered with the British NHS (we have lived in the UK until mid-2019 and I still work on and off for British organizations, and I have settled status in the UK), and I have their European Health Insurance Card. A few days ago I arranged for the Czech insurance company VZP to issue a certificate that I would be covered in the Czech Republic within the EU rules for emergency care. I showed the nurse the certificate and she was happy with that.

Once the registration was completed, the ambulance driver was still there. I asked his name. T, he said. We say goodbye and thank you. We are then shown into a room, with a bed, a desk and two chairs. Soon a young female doctor arrives. She says : "Hello, my name is doctor S", clearly not a Czech name, more eastern, Slovak perhaps. This is the first and last time, somebody tells us their name in the hospital. She takes a look at the children's legs. She runs CRP tests – pricking kids' fingers. They scream. They ask for toys as rewards. Of course, I cave in. O's is below 5, L's comes back at 23. It is not for antibiotics yet, the doctor says. She brings a senior doctor in, who agrees. L coughs, they take a swab for a "respiratory pathogen". (This seems like a code word for COVID-19). We are then sent to children's emergency surgical department. It is about 10 pm. We get there, the three ladies in PPE kits look really tired. It is Saturday, and Friday was a public holiday. They have probably been on duty for the last 48 or 72 hours. They take a look at the legs. They decide the boils are not ready for cutting yet, so they put special brown stinky ointment (Višňovka) and bandage the boils. As we hold L down, she screams in English: "What is wrong with you people???!!!" And the doctor replies in English, "stop freaking out." Since L had temperature of 38°C, they give her antibiotics.

We are then driven by hospital ambulance, with a stop-over at the hospital pharmacy, back home. The driver has again a full suit. He drops us off a few houses

further away. So I have to walk with the kids some 30 metres down the street. 30 metres more than I have walked so far on the soil of the Czech Republic. As I carry L, I drop my Czech phone in the bushes. I have to fish out my UK phone, to call my Czech phone and find it in the dark. Finally, it is midnight and we are back home. The kids in bed, I drink some wine with J. My Czech friend. She thinks that they had COVID in January. So, I am allowed to move around freely. Something I greatly appreciate.

We then have a lazy Sunday, not doing much and having an early night. I only did a piece of work for J. She works for the [state institution] as an [position] and she has to collate all the relevant information about COVID measures in one place. I help her research one chapter – on quarantine. In the process, I learn about a fundamental difference between the Sierra Leonean and the Czech approach to infected health workers. In Sierra Leone, they tended to close down health facilities, when their workers tested positive. Whereas in the Czech Republic, this was not the case – facilities were not closed down per se. Even health workers who had been in risky contact, could still work but had to wear protective gear and avoid contact with anyone. However, in anticipation of all the COVID cases, many scheduled operations and interventions were cancelled, and departments closed down to normal patients and beds were to be used for COVID cases. It seems now, that the number of cases needing this level of care was much lower than expected. And departments are gradually going to reopen and resume normal services and deal with the backlog of patients. A lot of people with health issues have suffered these indirect consequences – their conditions worsening, because of the departments not working in their usual way.

On Monday, we go back to the hospital by their ambulance. The driver and his assistant are only wearing their face masks. They do not tell us their names. They do not say anything except for “Children’s surgical department?” I nod. We have to wait outside for a bit. We cannot share a waiting room with others. We sit on a bench and

observe the springtime nature – a little birdy fearlessly coming close to us hunting worms. Bees pollinating flowers. Beautiful.

We are then taken in the surgical department. The doctor and nurse are wearing a full PPE kit. They clean and dress O's boil. And they open and clean L's, taking a swab of the pus. There were several millilitres of it. I cannot believe how this could have fit into such a tiny leg of girl weighing only 17 kg. She screams. I remind her of her toy, which is coming soon. (We shopped online on Sunday for a train depo and for a crown and make-up). They disinfect and dress the wound. Her test for COVID is negative, yay! We are on our way back home. We have spent an hour away from home.

While the Czech people are not the most polite bunch under the sun, the health system here is efficient and quick. Much more so than in the UK, where I had to wait for days and hours in pain and agony to get any help, when I was developing sepsis and suffering from pneumonia. Although everyone in the UK was super-polite. I am beginning to think, I want to stay here, as I feel safe, among these grumpy, efficient compatriots. It dawns on me that in Sierra Leone, I have been constantly feeling anxious and worried for the whole family's health, especially the kids'. It is the country with the worst health statistics globally. I could not sleep for months because of that when we first arrived in Sierra Leone. I gradually learnt to sleep and put the worries in the back of my mind. In Sierra Leone we are privileged. We are rich and connected to the top doctors and facilities by local standards. Still for anything serious, one would be medi-vaced (evacuated for medical reasons) out of the country. In the Czech Republic, we are not privileged, but still well connected. I know a lot of doctors here, who can always facilitate access to the right care. In the UK, we know only one GP, who is a neighbour. She is lovely, but her ability to facilitate contacts is seriously limited by the system. Of course, things may be different with private insurance. The UK has one of worst survival rates for cancers in Europe, especially when it comes to gynaecological problems, as women there do

not have routine gynaecological checks. They do pap smear tests only once every three years. Here, we go to the gynaecologist regularly and we get a pap smear test every year.

When I read an article in the Financial Times about why the Eastern European states have done so much better number wise in the COVID pandemic, they say we took measures early because our health systems are weaker! Well that is bollocks! I am sick and tired of this Western superiority that comes out anytime people mention Eastern Europe. The Czech Republic was one of the 10 most developed countries in the world between 1918 and 1938. And it was the most developed country in the Socialist block during the Cold War. Our cancer survival rates are way better than in the UK and the US. When we come to A&E, the waiting times are short. If it is one hour, people say it is too long (in the UK you have to wait 4 hours!). I would kindly like to ask my Western friends to stop looking down at us, including Financial Times reporters. I have experienced the difference first-hand.

Saturday 9th May 2020, Prague

This is our 16th day of quarantine. They tell you quarantine is for two weeks. What they do not tell you, is that you have to get tested after completing two full weeks and only when you get negative results, are you allowed to go out. An ambulance came yesterday morning at 8 am and swabbed our noses on the staircase outside the house. The two-member female team – one dressed in a full PPE kit and the other only with a face mask and gloves. Someone, please, explain to me why they were dressed like this. They tell me, they like to do these swabs outside in the open air. As it was public holiday (8th May) marking 75 years since the end of World War II, fortunately, there didn't seem to be any onlookers. The swab is not pleasant, they put the stick in really deep. It feels as if though they are touching your brain. I was going

to show the kids how it's done, and ended up howling myself. We should get the results in 2 to 5 days, they say. 2 to 5 DAYS ?!!! Granted part of this might be because it's a public holiday. I am beginning to feel fed up, with all this nonsense.

The feeling is aggravated by the fact that we lost our access to the garden as we are an infectious bunch.

Last Wednesday, 6th May, O's finger got so inflamed – white around his fingernail and very red. I had to call the hospital, email the doctor pictures and he emailed me back an e-prescription for baktroban – an antibiotic ointment. I had to ask my mother to pick it up from the pharmacy along with needles and plasters. It is clear, something infectious is going around. The doctor thinks it is golden staphylococcus, but we have to wait for the results of the swab. My friend J, who has so far been welcoming, asks me to stop using common spaces. She touches our things with gloves. I understand, but my feelings are hurt. I am tired. And unwelcome.

Then on Thursday, 7th May I take the kids out to the front path – we play games, using our ball and chalks. It is not a space that their family normally uses and I tried calling J to inform her that I would take them outside. J comes out. We get into a heated debate. She tells me she is not a bad person for wanting to be safe. And I say, I understand, but I do not think it might be that infectious. She shows me a spot on her hand. She thinks it is golden staphylococcus. I can not understand how she could get it, when I am with the kids 24/7 and I didn't get it. She says she can not understand my complacency. Why haven't I called the doctor's today about the results? If it was her, she would be on the phone, trying to get information. She is clearly worried. She read terrible things about golden staphylococcus online.

I am upset. I call the hospital. They confirm it is golden staphylococcus. It should be treated by amoxiclav, the antibiotics my daughter got. My son doesn't need treatment if he has antibiotics ointment, the doctor says. I text my two doctor

friends- Lu in Sierra Leone and J in Prague. They both say, he should get oral antibiotics. I inform my landlady J about the development.

Throughout Friday, 8th May, we – J and I – keep texting each other about it. We have different views. For J, it is clear she got it from us. For me, I can not understand how she could get it, when I didn't get it being with the kids all the time. Who knows the source of infection? They have chickens after all. But I understand it is better to be cautious. I wash clothes in hand. She thinks she got it from handling our washing. I call the hospital again and ask for oral antibiotics for O. No, they say. We have to wait for our check up on Monday. My mother visits us. She brings soup and breaded pork chops. We sit 2 metres apart and sip coffee lifting our face masks. It is a nice 30 minutes. The kids have been instructed – do not touch grandma, do not come near her. When she leaves, I realize we just missed my daughter's Zoom meeting with her class. She had been looking forward to it the whole day. Luckily, she doesn't mention it. Neither do I. In the evening I open some red wine and chat to various friends on Skype, WhatsApp and Messenger until 10 pm. It is the right release. I miss my husband.

Xuxa



29th May 2020. Waiting for Covid test results in quarantine. Photo by Xuxa.

On Saturday morning, J texts me, it is confirmed. She has golden staphylococcus. She must have got it from handling our washing. I am truly sorry and embarrassed. She forwards me really scary information from the internet – hospital protocol for handling patients with golden staphylococcus. Everything we touch is infectious, everything has to be thrown away. Well the doctors in the hospital didn't seem to be that concerned. But I do understand that she now views us as a health hazard.

She suggests, I get my own washing machine. That would of course make sense if we were planning to stay in Prague. However, our long-term plan is to go back to Sierra Leone for the next two years. And then move to Prague for a year or so. So if I buy a washing machine, what do I do with it in three months when we go back? I am beginning to contemplate, that maybe it would be better to move out by 23rd May. I

paid for one month rent here. It was great asylum for our quarantine. Also staying here has helped my friends out. They lost all of their [popular accommodation website] business and needed to rent the flat out. But now, I feel, our every move is monitored and we are not welcome. They may not have been scared of COVID, but they are of golden staphylococcus. I understand. We can just move to my mother's flat with enough space for me and the kids. When M comes, we can perhaps rent another [popular accommodation website] flat for a month as a family. I am not making any decisions yet.

Friday 15th May 2020, Prague

Let me summarize the week gone.

In the end we waited only 36 hours for our COVID results. They were negative! I learned this by calling the lab. The line was very busy, it was difficult to get through. After an hour of trying I finally managed. I was to inform the Hygiene Authority's Ms V, who immediately responded that our quarantine was thus officially over. This happened last Saturday 9th May at 5 pm after I finished my previous diary entry. We were free! It was a very strange feeling unlocking the gate and going down the stairs to the main road and off to explore our surroundings. I do not know this part of Prague too well. [Quarter in Prague 10] used to be the periphery. A mixture of 1920's villas, 1950's brick apartment blocks, and the communist era panel apartment blocks now beautified with flammable cladding. We turn right and walk some 50 metres before reaching the first green space – a public park on a slope. We walk around in the sunshine. We hope to discover a playground, but we find only climbing wall for teenagers. We are not remotely disappointed. We are just happy to be outside. We then walk further along the main road to a shop – Penny market. After living in Africa, being present in a European supermarket is amazing, especially after 16 days

quarantine. We buy some sweets for the kids and sit outside in beautiful 19 degrees sunshine. We observe the crematorium opposite. I was there just 4 months ago in mid-January, bidding farewell to my grandmother. Back then we did not have any idea about coronavirus. Who would have guessed we would be so close by in just a few months under these circumstances?

We spent our first Sunday of being free (10th May) with my mother. It seems that from now on, we are going to do our laundry at her house. Bless her. She picks us up in a car (we are advised against using public transport) and we go to her house. It is so lovely seeing Prague in the daylight. The weather is glorious. We cook lunch at her house – rice and pork and salad. The kids rediscover her place and their old toys. We take their scooters from the cellar and go to the wood just across the road [name of the wood]. It has 284 hectares. And is such a vital green space for the inhabitants of Prague 4. We go to a kids' park there. I feel like we are in heaven. The kids cheer in delight.

The following Monday, 11th May is the day when first relaxation of the rules takes place. From today, not only grocery stores but also other shops can open. Also, hospitals are resuming their service. We first do a bit of school, then we have online speech therapy. Our teacher is surprised we are back in Prague. We agree that we will definitely meet in person for one of the future sessions.

We are going back to the Bulovka Hospital for a check-up of the kids' healing abscesses. They are definitely on the mend, says the surgical consultant. She was among those three ladies who saw us when we first arrived in the hospital. (They had been informed beforehand about our arrival. She had been in full PPE kit for over 30 minutes, and that's why they all looked so tired when we got there.) I tell her about passing the staphylococcus on to our friend. She refers us to the dermatological department. We go straight there. It is just past midday. In the UK, we would most probably have to wait for a letter before being able to see a dermatologist. The

system is just so much quicker here in the Czech Republic for non-life-threatening cases than in the UK. And so much more orderly than in Sierra Leone. We wait for our appointment in a small kiosk where we order hot dogs. I revel in the brilliance of the medical reports each doctor produces for us – clear, concise, informative. No confusion. The doctors here complain about having to do too much paperwork. The dermatologist gives me some more ointments for the kids. When the wounds are healed, they should not be infectious anymore. But the occasional bacteria can be on the surface, hence the ointments. Next check up in a week with a GP.

We spend the afternoon in the Railway Kingdom. My son O is a šotouš (a person loving trains). He gets his fix in this model railway place. We park the car in a nearby shopping centre at Anděl. It looks fairly busy. It seems like people had been desperate to come out and go shopping. There is also some heavy rain and a traffic jam – the first in two months – when we go home.

In the evening, my Czech friend B, who lived for years around the corner from me in [UK city], comes over for a chat. We drink a bottle of Prosecco. She has 5 kids – a sixteen-year-old boy, a nearly five-year-old girl and nearly three-year-old triplet boys. We catch up in a loud noisy way.

The following day, Tuesday 12th May was a busy day. I managed to teach the kids before 10 am. Then my mother picked them up and babysat them until the afternoon. I managed to work on some [development organization] grant applications reviews. And then I went out. I had about 40 minutes by myself outside. It was cold, around 12 degrees. But walking around the villa neighbourhood was lovely. I sat down on a bench in the park. This was the first day since 31st March when I was by myself. A thought occurred to me: it is hard to keep on top of everything with pieces of my life in three countries. Something is going wrong with the house in [UK city] – an electric fault of some kind. I could do with a car here. But my car is in Sierra Leone, and so is my husband and housekeeper. Dishes here do not magically

disappear. I also realize that school in Freetown may not open in September. What would we do then? I need to contact O's Czech school and nursery in [part of Prague 4], to give them the heads up our kids may need to join them. It is brilliant to have unpaid childcare here. Thank you, mum.

Then, on Wednesday 13th May I have the kids. I teach them at home. It's not going well. We argue a lot. We go out. I ask a lady walking a dog about playgrounds in the area. She points me in a direction and within five minutes we are there. The kids have not been to a proper playground for over a month. They love the swings, the slide, the seesaw, the adult gym and climbing frames. When we get back L becomes upset. O filled his star chart and she did not. I explain that she only needs a few more, so if she does all her chores and schoolwork, she can also fill her chart by tomorrow morning before grandma picks them up. She cannot stop crying. We talk about it and discover that the real issue is that she is missing having other children around. She has not played with a friend for over 6 weeks now. I promise to set up video calls with friends and visit friends with children. In the evening I have wine with J – the friend who caught golden staphylococcus from us. Her hand is healing. The tension has eased. We seem to be back to being OK.

On Thursday 14th May my mum babysits again. I have a headache, but I have to work. So I go for a jog. I discover a different part of the neighbourhood. When the kids get back, they are tired and snappy. O tells me that if he goes to Czech school, he will kill himself. My husband now reads bedtime stories to the kids via WhatsApp. At least some kind of communication. We do not seem to talk much.

Friday 15th May consist of home school and playground. We're all fed up with this cold weather. L has a WhatsApp meeting with her classmate C. And then there is Zoom meeting of her African class in the afternoon. It is utter chaos. I am not sure how much benefit it brings to the kids, especially if the teacher's connection keeps dropping. However, she seems to acknowledge the effort to socialize in this kind of

way. She tells everyone we live in a hotel. Later, I watch a conspiracy video about COVID vaccine development. I feel like I do not understand anything anymore. And my brother messages me something vague about not being able to meet us.

Saturday 16th May 2020, Prague

The temperature is warmer and I feel better. Maybe also because my husband and I had a date – one hour of talking on WhatsApp with a glass of wine. I put up the map of the world. I stick it on the door. Somehow, it allows me to think of all the people I have in the world. My husband in Sierra Leone, my mother-in-law, and my friends in the UK, and us in the Czech Republic. It allows me to show the kids where their friends are. Some are in the UK, and some from their Freetown school are now in the USA, Europe or Africa. The kids are telling me we should also try and live in Australia, and China, and Italy. Hmm. Little globetrotters.

Being back here in the Czech Republic, I now am confronted with the task of reinserting ourselves somehow into the lives of "our people" here. But of course, "our people" -family and friends – are busy. They cannot just drop everything to see us. Almost nobody managed to achieve any of the things they had planned to do during their home-office/ quarantine/ lockdown. The dreams of self-improvement shattered amid the chaos. Planning a get together with anybody seems a real struggle limited by nap times, work, and activities. Having an online date with my husband yesterday made me feel much better. An hour of mutual undivided attention makes everything seem OK again.

There is a big discussion in the Czech media about whether the borders will open for holiday makers during the summer. At first it seemed to me like needless talk about an unnecessary luxury. But then during the cloudy day at the playground it dawned on me that Europeans are coming out of winter – cold wet dark weather. The past

few days were not much better. So having the hope of sunny holidays keeps some people sane. Taking away that hope can make everything fall apart. There are glimmers of hope – Croatia and Greece may open up. The discussion is whether tests will be needed or not and how much they would cost.

When I go out, I always forget to wear a face mask. It is only when I see passers-by that I realize, I need it. I have to go back. Despite this, having face masks feels normal. I see pictures in the media of people wearing face masks during the Spanish flu pandemic one hundred years ago. How come I have no recollection of seeing pictures of people in face masks from that time? I have read about the Spanish flu in various novels, i.e. such and such died from Spanish flu. But I have never seen or heard of face masks from that time, yet now the internet is full of them. Will we also forget a few years down the line about the all- important face masks?

During this time, I have identified my favourite mask – the surgical light blue or light green ones made of some kind of mesh. We do not wear the ones made of lapa fabric at all anymore. The rubber bands hurt our ears.

Friday 22nd May 2020, Prague

Our days are now very busy, giving me less time to keep Corona-diary. So, here is a bit of summary of the past week:

On Saturday 16th May, I visited my father in the afternoon. He and his wife are doing fine. Nothing has changed for my father during the time of coronavirus. He has been disabled since 2002, not being able to walk much at all. So, he has stayed at home all the same. Keeping to his passions – food and fire water (slivovice – plum brandy). His wife looks after him and tries to keep his consumption at a reasonable level. Nevertheless, he is now about 15 kg heavier than he was when I last saw him four

months ago bringing his weight to 136 kg. My stepmother is about 60. She goes to her daughter's house in a village just outside Prague where she spends two days a week looking after her nearly five-year old grandson. The nursery school has been shut and parents had "home-office" (Czech people literally use the English term "home-office") going crazy due to the childcare, household chores and work demands. Most grandmothers are providing such services to their working adult children.

We then walked with my brother's family (he has teenage kids) from [part of Prague 4] to Hamerský rybník. The months of sitting around swimming pools and beaches in Sierra Leone have paid off – our muscles have completely disappeared, and my kids and I are completely shattered after just 3 km. We arrive at the Hamr Sport complex – with tennis courts, beach volleyball courts, and a large terrace with refreshments. It is packed, people everywhere. Yes, people are wearing face masks, but most of these protective devices are tucked under their chins. They only put them on their noses if someone comes close. Face masks half-way down are a great way of covering up double chins. We all look thinner in photos. Great deception. It seems to me like people have had enough of the coronavirus restrictions.

We have a low key-programme on Sunday. My mum comes for lunch to my place. I have to work a bit while she plays with the kids. We go to the park. The state of emergency is declared over at 23:59 on 17th May 2020. Nevertheless special measures prevail until 25th May 2020 – face masks must be worn in public, people still must keep their distance and mass events are still not allowed. However, people can have food again in pub gardens. Hurray. The pub gardens are full.

Xuxa



“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

Xuxa

Enjoying Prague playground. Something we missed in Sierra Leone. Photo by Xuxa.

On Monday we try to catch up on the home-schooling assignments. It is getting harder and harder to stay focused. I work on Tuesday and Wednesday while my mum looks after the kids. I still go out for a jog and discover another part of the neighbourhood. My 8-year old son Zooms with his classmates. He thoroughly enjoys himself, squealing in delight at the screen. He suggests that the school hold a sports day in celebration when they reopen. We have a barbecue in the garden with my friend J's family. Her 12-year-old son plays with my kids and it's brilliant fun.

On Thursday, another friend M comes over with her 9-year old son. The kids play and love it. It's been so long since they have actually regularly seen their peers. Both, my friend and I, can feel how they are missing company of other kids. We order pizza and put a film on for them while we chat. M tells me about the start of the state of emergency here back in March. She drove the kids from Prague to Beskydy, to an isolated cottage in the middle of the mountain forest to be there with her 70-year-old mother-in-law. Then the following day, she was doing some long-overdue clear out, which included the discovery of a 70-year-old bottle of whiskey and tasting it. Then her husband came home. They are both lawyers. They discussed what the state of emergency meant. Perhaps, Prague would be in a complete lockdown and no travel would be permitted. Their kids being several hundred kilometres away with their elderly grandmother with a weak phone signal and no Wi-Fi for god knows how long. What if something happened to the grandmother? Fear settled in. So even with two shots of whiskey in her blood stream, she packed her bags and jumped in the car and drove 380 km to Beskydy. She was there within some two and a half hours, driving no less than 150 km/hour on the deserted D1 motorway. It felt like driving through zombie land or some kind of apocalypse. The D1 is never empty. She spent five weeks at the cottage with her sons and mother-in-law. They only had enough data to do online school. So, she could not work. She drank alcohol every night with her mother-in-law. And she gained weight. And her hair looked awful. But there was

something nice about it, too. She walked everyday with the dog for two hours. The pace of life was slower. Now she is sitting here drinking herbal tea trying to adhere to her resolution of not drinking alcohol for two weeks. After four cups of herbal tea, I lose my nerve and get a glass of prosecco. She does not. Well done her. She tells me that when they came back from their refuge in Beskydy, her husband in Prague was slightly hostile. He had had the house to himself for over a month. And he loved it. Yes, some people just grew to love staying in.

Other friends told me as well about the moment when they suddenly felt the FEAR. Fear of what the state of emergency may bring, fear of getting infected, fear for others. It was the moment when the penny dropped, it dawned on them. We all drink lots of alcohol, daily. My friend Lu, in Sierra Leone, confirms this. My husband is an annoying exception to the rule, thus confirming the rule. I try not to drink some evenings, but it is very, very hard. I managed on Tuesday. We all have gained weight.

Lu has had enough of Sierra Leone and working all the time.[...]. I say she needs to get on a dating site to meet someone and she may consider her next job being somewhere outside Africa – maybe London, Geneva, Brussels, Paris or someplace like that. There she can meet lots of potentially great partners. Freetown is too small to be able to find an eligible bachelor. Still it is difficult to meet someone during a lockdown or when you are advised to stay at home.

On Friday, I took my daughter to the GP. In the Czech Republic we have paediatrician GPs. We go to Dr. L. She was also my GP back in the day. She checks L – her cough continues, she wees herself 6 times during the morning, and she has loose motion. We are given mild medication – three different sirups, we are sent for lab test on Monday morning and we get a referral to an allergy specialist. So much swifter than the NHS, where you are always turned away on your first visit. I cannot help but compare the three systems now.

On Friday, we go to the hairdressers. P has been my hairdresser for over 16 years. It is great, to look like a human. The kids are excited to get haircuts, too. They do not wiggle at all. We have lunch at a restaurant with a garden. It's a fantastic feeling. Feeling human again.

My husband calls during the visit and he is jealous. He then calls back. His hair and beard are much shorter! DIY job. He has made a funny video for his company. Changing haircuts and outfits in the course of it. Such a professional manager, has now turned himself into video maker. Strange times.

My hairdresser P spent the first two weeks of the state of emergency at home, with her fear. She lives by herself with a dog. She was worried she might be vulnerable as she had pneumonia in November 2019. After the two weeks, she needed to keep her income at a small level. So, she set up a routine of serving one client a day. She went to their homes, dyed their hair, they washed it themselves. Then they gave her lunch and paid her. She also got some support from the state. It was not that bad she says. To limit her anxiety, she stopped following the news.

My friend J passed her state clerk's exam. Fantastic. Now she has a long-term contract and a bit of job security. She complains of how the lockdown and studying for the exam have made her fat and unable to move. Most people around me gained weight, myself included. Everyone is itching to get out and get moving. Her plan is to start on Monday by regularly walking to work and back. We celebrate with a glass of wine.

Tuesday 26th May 2020, Prague

I ran out of energy yesterday. Not sure why, perhaps too much socializing, the change of climate,...

I spent Saturday cleaning the apartment. Having left L behind in Salone, I have to do these things myself. The kids help, something to form their character. But it is time-consuming.

I have stopped watching the news. I only check the COVID numbers once in a couple of days. Today, the situation in Sierra Leone is 42 deaths, 735 confirmed cases in all districts, except for 1 – Karene. In the Czech Republic, there are 9,002 cases with 317 deaths. In the UK, there are 261,184 confirmed cases and 36,914 deaths. Only now, are people in the UK beginning to share videos about how to make face masks. There is also a lot of media coverage on Dominic Cummings – a high-level UK government's advisor – on breaking the lockdown rules.

On Sunday, we hop on the tram (to my son's delight) and visit my friend that is an architect KV and her partner AW at Letná. Their kids are the same age and sex as mine. So, they disappear almost immediately and go play, while I chat to the parents. They want to know everything about Sierra Leone. KV makes delicious food. The kids make their own pizzas. KV and AW think they had COVID-19 in January. They were in the mountains with a group of friends. Nearly everyone became ill with a really nasty flu. Several weeks later one of the friends was tested for antibodies and it was positive. She had experienced COVID and she had not been ill since that nasty flu. It is probably for this reason, that they did not experience the moment of fear, as most other friends. They just hunkered down in other people's cottages for several weeks. She suggests my kids start going to a forest school.

In the evening, I chat with my Czech friend JR. She lives in the UK with her British husband and two kids, who are 10 and 8 years old. She is a great patriot and she persistently teaches her children Czech. She had planned to fly to the Czech Republic on 25th March. Her plan was that the kids would attend Czech school to become more fluent speakers. But her flight was cancelled and she stayed in [UK town] instead. She told me the system in large supermarkets was bonkers. If you

forget yoghurt, the system of arrows does not allow you to go back. The supermarkets ran out of pasta and many non-perishables. Now, she shops for groceries in small stores, especially the Coop and a Polish shop. They are in a lockdown, not going anywhere. She gives me tips what to do with the kids here – English theatre, swimming classes, Czech speech therapy and tutoring. She gives me contacts of people who know a bit more about how to navigate the Czech and British bureaucratic systems. To help me sort out my health insurance unclarities here. I am a bit overwhelmed.

On Monday morning, L has some blood tests. No waiting. Three nurses are present. Two of them and myself hold her down, while the third one takes her blood. She screams half English and half Czech, and sings three songs- one in English, two in Czech to distract herself from the needle in her arm. As we are leaving, the eyes of everyone in the waiting room are on us. In [UK city], they did not used to hold children down for injections. So the process could take much longer and be filled with persuasion techniques. Pinning them down is swifter. I remember my British friends looking at me oddly when I pinned down my child to give them medicine. They preferred to use persuasion. I wonder whether there is something about freedom in this. For me, and for the kids, it is quicker the unpleasant pinning down way. Our freedom is taken for a bit, but not for that long. For me, the persuasion way feels somewhat meek. I was taught that you have to learn to endure unpleasant things, the quicker you do it, the quicker they are behind you. But in the UK, anything unpleasant is to be avoided, or talked through to be finally agreed to. But this approach comes at a cost. This applies to the COVID rules too. They introduced them too late and now the cost is 36,000 lives.

Tuesday 2nd June 2020, Prague

Last Wednesday my whole body started aching – my left hip, right knee and

everything else as well. I was exhausted. I still took the kids to another playground in our neighbourhood called Gutovka. We met up with friends – a mixed American-Czech couple S and M and their two sons – 8 -year-old D and 5-year-old L. My kids enjoyed the playground – lots of things to do – slides, water features, sandpits, climbing frames. Even things that were more suitable for slightly older kids. D and L are into water features. Perched on a bench, we, the adults, chatted about how we had been. S and M are both freelance language teachers and interpreters. During the state of emergency, due to coronavirus, M spent most of the day with the kids, while S worked online. She took the kids cycling to the woodlands and parks around Prague. They cycled there and back, sometimes doing 25 km a day. They avoided public transport for about six weeks. Until one day, their younger son had a nasty spill and injured his chin. Then they started using the public transport again. There was nobody there. So, they thought it was OK. And soon enough they started using it much more. Unlike most other people, they decided not to follow school instructions and preferred to spend their time with the kids educating them about things they thought were important. And while most people became fatter during the emergency state, M had actually lost weight, as she was constantly out and about. M's parents live in Sedlčany – a small town outside Prague. They do not want M and S to come and visit them, because they would have to use public transport. They do not have a car and do not drive. And "that makes them risky".

I went to bed with the kids at 8 pm that day. On Thursday I woke up and could not move. I stayed in bed until 10 am and then started getting up slowly. The kids had to make their own breakfast, which they managed well enough. I could not do any work or schoolwork. I was just happy to be able to put one foot in front of the other. Gradually, I managed to put together some lunch, tidy up and pack a small suitcase. My friend B picked us up with her nearly five-year-old daughter O and we went to her old farmhouse in southern Bohemia. My kids were delighted to be out of the city. I needed a break after two full months of home-schooling and the upheavals brought on by our travels and health issues. Now there was time for me to enjoy myself. B's

partner is a British man called R. B has a 16-year-old son, and 4 young kids – a nearly five-year-old O and three 3-year-old boys – triplets. The kids were out in the garden while we chatted, cooked, listened to music and drank prosecco.

B and her partner met in the UK. Their kids were born there. And I know her from the UK, as we were neighbours. But then, she decided it was time to go home and they made the move. R, her British partner, has been doing handyman jobs in the Czech Republic. He said when he first heard about the coronavirus spreading, he did not believe it. He thought it was a conspiracy, based on his Facebook circles. He says he follows a lot of science. But when I ask him, which sources he follows, he just says Facebook.

B, on the other hand, believed that coronavirus was spreading. However, she was not afraid of it, because she gets ill very rarely. She has a very strong belief they will never get ill. She just did not want to be stuck in a flat in Prague with four little children. So as soon as the state of emergency was declared, she packed the family off to southern Bohemia, so that they could be outdoors. Nobody wore face masks in the village, where her farmhouse is. So life felt very normal. She just got quite a lot of visitors – friends escaping Prague for a day or two.

We had a lovely time in her farmhouse – walking in the countryside, drinking alcoholic beverages and talking about adult stuff, while the kids entertained themselves outside on the trampoline, slide, swing or chasing the cat. The great thing about the Czech countryside is, that although fields belong to private owners, most of them are not fenced off. So, you can walk anywhere freely. You can drive anywhere, stop anywhere and go for a walk on a dirt road, through a meadow, in a forest. In the UK, fields are most often fenced off, one has to park at a designated parking space, pay for the parking, and follow a signposted “public footpath”. I have always felt incredibly un-free in the UK landscape, because I was used to the freedom of driving, stopping anywhere and just going, where I wished. So, from my perspective, Brits are not free, when it comes to their landscape.

Xuxa





“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

Xuxa

Enjoying the glorious South Bohemia. Village B. and its surroundings. Photos by Xuxa.

Whilst we all loved the brilliant outdoors, my daughter developed incredibly strong case of hay fever. Each night in the beautiful spring, she spent two hours sneezing large volumes of phlegm, with red watery eyes. I had to give her antihistamine sirup. We will need to get to the bottom of this allergy of hers. I also discovered a tick on my left shin. Got it out before it could grow.

Despite this, I felt very much refreshed. On Sunday, my mother came to pick us up in her car. I drove back. It was raining the whole day. We stopped at my brother's house on the way. He had his youngest son who normally stays with his ex-wife with him. The kids played nicely together.

We then started our last week of home-schooling. O started to learn how to tell time. At least something useful. We decided to go shopping to get my daughter some new shoes. The shops seem to be quite busy. People wear face masks in the mall. I go grocery shopping with the kids for the first time. I preferred online shopping. I found it less tiring. However, sometimes they did bring borderline out of date vegetables. The kids are getting pretty good at not touching too many things unnecessarily.

I woke up this morning with a splitting headache and lights flashing in front of my eyes. After taking some paracetamol and ibuprofen, I was able to function, albeit wearing sunglasses throughout the day. It seems I am sensitive to air pressure changes and a storm was gathering. As soon as it rained, I instantly felt better. When I went into a shop with sunglasses and a face mask on, I felt like a robber. People are no longer wearing face masks when they are outdoors. Some keep them on their chins and put them on only when they walk indoors.

I ran into an old high school classmate. His wife works in the neighbourhood. This is what I love about Prague. Sooner or later, I always bump into old friends and acquaintances.

O's class had their final Zoom meeting today. He enjoyed it. It was "a party". I am impressed how much an 8-year-old can enjoy virtual socializing. The kids were playing goodbye messages to their class. He loved it. My daughter put her best dress on. The teacher, her assistant and even the headteacher and his wife joined the meeting. It is now likely the [name of school] school in Freetown will not reopen until the end of September. The prospect of the kids attending school here in the Czech Republic is becoming ever more real. L got place in the nursery school in [part of Prague 4]. We've got options. Although many of my friends say "Do not put your kids in the mainstream state schools here. They still have socialist mannerisms" (i.e. rude, disrespectful) ways of communicating with children. I'll have to go around and see for myself.

Sunday 7th June 2020, Prague, 1:53 a.m.

I can not sleep. This life in limbo is taking its toll. I am more dependent on others than I would like to be. I wash our clothes at my mother's. I used to wash it at my friend's flat below ours until the staphylococcus incident. It is putting unfair pressure on my mother. One washing machine load nearly every day. I also do not have a freezer. That's making my life a bit more complicated. I use J's freezer. But then I can not access it for a good part of the day. I do not have a car and so my mother drives us around quite a bit. But she appears to be quite exhausted now. She is 69 and her life is already busy as it is. She finds it hard to say "no" to me. I will need to start using public transport more. I will probably need to get a monthly ticket. Also, the internet connection is very bad. It may be easier to get a freezer, washing machine, my own internet, and hire a car. But then it seems like a waste of money if we are only staying a couple of months.

My husband and I just had our 12th wedding anniversary. We celebrated by chatting

on WhatsApp for 1 hour with a glass of wine. I wore a nice dress. We did our annual audit and concluded the past year has been downright crazy: living in [UK city]- UK a year ago, then moving to Sierra Leone, and now being apart – us here in the Czech Republic and him in Sierra Leone. Being apart sucks. We miss each other's company; the kids miss their dad. And the prospect is now that Sierra Leone may reopen the airport and Brussels airline resume flights only in mid- to late-July. We may not see my husband for another eight weeks.

Finally, the academic year of the [name of school] School has officially ended. I do not know who was happier – me or the kids? O had his final lesson on Thursday and it was torture accompanied by screaming. We were supposed to work out how much time had passed since 8 am to 3.30 pm. He just could not concentrate, and it took us ages. But we got there and now it's behind us. We got school reports – simplified versions which really measured just the level of their parents' commitment to police their children, teach them and send in assignments. O got excellent grades – above expectation. L, whose learning was completely put on the back burner got good grades – met expectation. I am aware of the privilege – I could stay with my kids and teach them, I could use our tablets and a laptop. (However, in the Czech Republic, there were lots of families, where children could not access computers. There was no systemic measure by the government to address this problem. NGOs had to step in. The prime minister Babiš – a food manufacturing and media oligarch – constantly spits vitriol on NGOs and disregards their service to the public. However, it seems he will be re-elected because Czechs like the way he dealt with coronavirus – our COVID deaths being way lower than in France, UK, Italy or Spain). To mark the end of school we bought new toys for the kids and some clothes for their mummy.

I am beginning to experience the reverse cultural shock that many returnees have. I have not lived in the Czech Republic for the past 12 years. Although it is home and I speak the language, I increasingly have a feeling that there are things that I do not understand and forget. There are new words and expressions – such as „to je značka

ideál“ (“that’s brand perfect” – meaning this is perfect solution), „o tom už žádná“ („there is nothing to add” – meaning this is undisputable), „nub“ („noob“ – apparently someone who is not very good in a game, beginner player). I have forgotten the names of streets, or I remember the names of streets but forget where they are. This is especially hard because I used to work as a tour guide in the city, knowing every corner, nook and cranny. The city is different now – so many new buildings, new metro stations, and there are also old buildings that have disappeared. People may seem a bit more polite than they used to be, but I already had unpleasant encounters at the playground. (Incident 1: There were four benches. I sat on one and two other benches were free. I had a rucksack and oversaw my two kids. A lady in her 60s arrived with her three grandchildren. She asked whether the rest of my bench was free. I said, I had two kids with me and that there were two other free benches where she might be more comfortable with three rucksacks and two scooters. She seemed offended. Was I impolite? Did she want to stay on the same bench as me to chat? That would have been nice, but it seems people do not do that here. Did she want to save space in case other people arrived? I do not know. Incident 2: My daughter was on a climbing frame. An older child, probably 6 years old, in front of her was shaking the rope violently. I asked her to stop shaking it because there was a younger wobblier child behind her. She told me, she could shake anything anyway she wanted. I replied that if she shook it violently, the younger child may fall and end up in hospital. I know kids all around the world are unkind, ego-centric and lack empathy. They are supposed to learn empathy throughout life. But I can not help but think there is something about the way Czech people communicate. It seems in a certain sense that kindness is not being encouraged. Assertiveness is. (Kindness is being constantly mentioned as mantra for life in discourse with my British friends.)

What I like about Prague is that I can hang out with my many friends. I saw M and her three kids (7 year-old boy, 5 year-old girl and an 11 month-old baby girl) on the rooftop of a former union’s house. The views of Prague were beautiful – with the Main Railway station, the Prague Castle, the National Museum, Vitkov, and Zizkov

Tower within view. The kids were running around. She is a diplomat and her husband is a media writer, art critic and author. They live in a beautiful loft apartment in Vinohrady – a well-to-do neighbourhood in the central part of Prague. Their kids go to a private school. The kids' mental well-being is a factor in their learning in their private school. And so I am beginning to consider, whether in case we stay until December, it may be better for O to go somewhere, where he is not treated in such manner as we were (children were being talked to with much disrespect and this has apparently not changed). M and her husband spent the state of emergency at home, following the hygienic rules. But they did not experience fear. If anything, her husband enjoyed it. He is an introvert [...]

Another friend KV, who loves cooking suggested we organize a Sierra Leone-themed dinner party in her apartment at Letná. She cooked jalof rice, groundnut stew, okra stew and barracuda. It was delicious. There is a shop in central Prague with African groceries, including Maggi cubes. Who knew? And I showed friends photos from Sierra Leone. They were shocked by the amount of deforestation, the pollution and the depletion of ocean life. They loved the fact that people carry things on their heads and wear earrings with Obama family photo. They liked the beaches and the lapa fabrics. They were shocked by the health statistics. Another one of my friends KB shared her experience of having coronavirus. She figured out she contracted it in the Albert supermarket in Chodov on Friday 13th March. Gradually she developed all the symptoms except for COVID toes. She had to be tested privately and the private lab results showed a high viral load in her system. She was ill for about a month, but she stayed at home. Her partner did not get it. Her 7-year -old daughter was not tested as she didn't have any symptoms. She is OK now. And she is OK to share her story. Originally, she did not want anyone to know.

It was brilliant to have a night out. And great to have a morning for myself.

Wednesday 10th June, Prague

We just got back from the city centre and I am in shock. My mother, my kids and I, went to the Old Town's Town Hall to see the World Press Photo exhibition. Interesting photographs, though less shocking than other years. In other years, it felt like voyeurism – being in cosy Prague, in comfort and looking at photos of crises far away somewhere else in the world. This year it felt more like reminiscing about the world as it had been before – with wildfires in the US, deforestations in Indonesia, patients in Syria and demonstrations in Sudan. It now felt like – OK these were the issues of the pre-COVID world. We now have our own special, weird experience. An added feature to the World Press Photos exhibition were photos about the COVID epidemic from Czech photographers. People in gas masks, various other face masks, face mask silhouettes here against the backdrop of beautiful Prague. Somehow it was important for me to see those pictures here. They were an important part of the story about the current state of the world.

I was shaken today. As we were walking through the Old Town, many shops were closed and only about 5% of the usual amount of people were in the streets. It felt like a ghost town. We walked into Erpet – a shop with Bohemian crystal that had been at the corner of Old Town's Square and Melantrichova for 30 years. Both my mother and I used to take tourists there if they wanted to buy crystal. The shop owner greeted my mother as an old acquaintance. They were going to close down by 30th June. Their landlord had not agreed to give them a discount on their rent. They were selling everything at half price. My heart aches for all my colleagues that work in tourism, as I was one of them some 18 years ago. They have been hit really hard by coronavirus. What will become of them? What will happen to the empty shops? My mother said the city centre felt the same as it did in the 1970s, when there were no tourists around.

I had been shopping at the Westfield Shopping Centre in Chodov for groceries and

clothes in the southern outskirts of Prague a few days ago. Although less busy, it didn't feel this empty. Have the real inhabitants of Prague really deserted the city centre? Is the city centre still a part of Prague's regular inhabitants' mental map at all? Has it become disowned? Has it become a no-go zone for locals, where only tourists are? One of my acquaintances runs a restaurant at Wenceslav's Square in the city centre. He says, Czechs go past his pub, but no one sits down. He says – Czechs have given up their right to Wenceslas square and to the city centre.

I saw my friend KB at the playground in [part of Prague 4] yesterday. She now found the real source of her COVID infection – the head of building control department, on 11th March. So, she had not gotten infected in a supermarket, but in a state office. She was preparing a building control visit for her exit game[1] at the time. And yesterday was the only day when the inspection could be carried out. The inspector asked her whether she had been ill with COVID. When she said yes, the inspector told her it might have been from contact with her superior. The dates fit well.

Stories of mismanagement of infection are beginning to emerge among people. The inspector said, that although their boss had been ill, her team were only told two weeks after the fact. Similarly, a boss of the revenue department in one part of Prague reported being ill with COVID and the information was deliberately not shared with his co-workers, so that the office would not have to close down. It remained open to the general public as well. He died of COVID. It is likely there may be any number of scandals down the line.

KB's daughter goes to the same school that O would go to in September if we stay here. She is happy about the school. At the playground, she introduced me to another mum whose child is at the same school and happy. So, I think I am going to drop the school hunting for now.

Wednesday 17th June 2020, Prague

The weather in the Czech Republic is summery now with temperatures in mid- to high 20s. It has rained a lot recently with some parts of the Czech Republic experiencing thunderstorms, hailstorms and flash flooding. While the top layers of soil are very wet, the deeper layers are still affected by the long-term drought that started five years ago and was exacerbated by the absence of snow. The climate is changing. It is windier than it used to be with more wind coming from the north. There is an idea emerging on social networks that when national leaders want something, they can achieve it. The COVID response has shown that people can change their ways and damaging behaviour can be stopped. Why aren't we humans doing more about climate change? Ultimately it is more dangerous than COVID-19.

From other news:

An officer in Prague city hall has been confirmed as COVID-19 positive. This means that some 40 councillors who attended a meeting with him on Monday have to self-isolate.

Facebook shows videos comparing the response of New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to the UK's Boris Johnson. Asking "Don't you wish that the UK had a real leader?"

Facebook shows video of government premises where people with suspected COVID are supposed to isolate in in Sierra Leone– filthy, bug infested premises.

Czechs are no longer required to wear face masks indoors. People are still wearing them though on public transport.

The UK economy has shrunk by 20%. Inflation in the Czech Republic is really high.

It's been announced that Oxford's COVID-19 vaccine human trials have gone well.

Production can start in August. There are other labs around the world which are also moving towards vaccine trials. Countries are beginning to position themselves to gain access to the vaccines.

On Thursday we went to the park by Průhonice castle, just outside of Prague. I told the kids „Půjdeme do parku“ (“We are going to the park”). In Czech, “parks” are beautiful places where you can go for a walk. In the UK, among the children, “parks” are places with swings, slides and climbing frames. My kids were utterly disappointed when all they found were flowers, paths and wooden bridges. Mentally, they seem to be more British and so we tend to have cultural misunderstandings. After two hours of moaning they finally enjoyed the walk, playing catch, and hide and seek. They are especially respectful of Czech mythical creatures such as a „vodník“ (water goblin/sprite). They thought they had seen one in the pond.

Xuxa



“When they are also getting sick, they realise, it can happen to them.” - An unexpected homecoming
https://boasblogs.org/curarecoronadiaries/when-they-are-also-getting-sick/

Xuxa

Průhonice Chateau park. Photo by Xuxa.

On Friday we went to Štvanice Island in Prague to attend my friend's son's birthday. L has just turned eight. I was taken aback by how much the island has changed. Surrounded by the Vltava River (Moldau), it lays between the Karlín and Holešovice districts or the metro stops Florenc and Vltavská with beautiful views of the Prague Castle and various ostentatious ministry buildings and corporate offices. My grandmother V used to practice figure skating here at the winter stadium in the 1930s. She remembered she had attended the figure skating classes with posh arrogant girls who had been rude to normal people. Štvanice with its winter stadium used to be the playground for the affluent people of Prague. Oh, how things have changed! The stadium is now dilapidated and been turned into a squat-like pub. Skating championships are organized here. And there is a track for mountain bikes. Grass grows high here. It is like an island of tranquillity in the city. Although I had lived in Prague for 25 years, this was my first time on the island. It was the perfect place for a celebration with family and friends, picnic style.

I have discovered an app for public transport called Lítačka. Literally it means swinging doors. It is a slang word we used to use for our monthly transport ticket. And now it is a name for an app. Had my mother not told me about it, I would not have known it existed. Signs in public transport do not mention it at all. I now can buy tickets via my phone. Fantastic.

My friend M invited us to her house in [city quarter] in Prague on Saturday. Both she and her husband are lawyers. He has his own firm, his father used to be the minister [government department]. It was 27 degrees. We swam in their swimming pool with sea water. My kids and her kids were playing and chasing their dog. We had a barbecue lunch. My kids did not eat any of it, except for the bread. Most people in Prague live in apartments, not in villas with swimming pools. We are indeed friends with well-to-do people. M is beautiful. But she looked tired. She had been to several birthday parties. It seems we are now in post-COVID time. We discussed uncertain

plans for the holidays. Her kids are now back at school. But in July, it will be holiday again. So, the kids are going to be at summer camps. She did her bit by having them for two months in a row during the emergency.

In the afternoon, we went on a steam train ride from Smíchovské railway station. My son is a steam train lover. Šotouš, as train lovers are called in Czech. The train was full of them. We took pictures with the locomotive. We enjoyed the views. People were waving at us. Photographers ready with their tripods along the way. Perhaps to take photos for the next calendar. It started raining heavily, there were hailstones. Good to be inside. The magazine informed us about all the railway museums in the Czech Republic. So much we still have to explore.

On Sunday I took the kids to [place name], a village some 50 minutes of car drive away from Prague. My acquaintances T and his sister KP live there. They have a gardening and landscaping business. Apparently, they were commissioned for more work than usual during the COVID emergency. People sat at home or in their cottages and realized their gardens needed work. There was a group of friends I had not seen in 12 years. Now with their kids, most of them younger than mine. The kids played happily, and we could chat and catch up. One friend is an architect. He has also had more work since COVID. People want to travel less and make their properties cosy. They still have money. They may run out in a few months. Another friend is a Czech diplomat in Russia. He talked about [using coronavirus in Russian politics]. I look around and see all those families – couples with kids and I realize I miss my husband. Still it is great to catch up. They are curious about Sierra Leone. I show them pictures from my phone and report on life in this beautiful, poor, hot country. We say goodbye and hope to meet again earlier than in 12 years.

Today we met friends, the Czech-American family of S and M and their two sons D and Lš. We met at the Jarov bus stop, just by a Kaufland supermarket. Together we walked to Třešňovka – a cherry orchard nearby. The orchard has lots of cherry trees, perhaps hundreds. It is municipal property, so people are free to come and pick

cherries as they like. There are people walking, cherry picking, riding their bikes. S understands when I talk about the landscape and freedom I feel in the Czech Republic. He says, in the USA, everything is a private property and such cherry picking would be trespassing. The orchard used to be full of rubbish, M tells me. Some two or three years ago an NGO started taking care of it, organizing public events. Last week, there was an event when people could come, borrow ladders, and pick cherries for a small donation. It is great to see such initiatives. Until recently, this would have been considered too communist and therefore bad. But now it seems to be OK to be pro-community crows again. Perhaps kindness is making its way back into public values after all. The orchard is now clean, no rubbish in sight. There is a viewpoint offering great views of Prosek and Palmovka – quarters of Prague. We do not have a ladder, so we go for the low hanging fruit, which to be honest is not quite ripe yet. The kids end up having a running contest. And then my son O throws up. Do not run after eating fruit, is the moral of the story.

I learn a lot from this family. Although, M is originally from [place name], a small town outside Prague, she and her husband know more about Prague than me. I grew up in Prague 4. I know it like the back of my hand. I also know the city centre very well as I used to live, work and study there. But I do not know much about the other parts of Prague. Perhaps a little about Žižkov, where I lived for two years. But S and M have been systematically exploring the city, and the beauty of its peripheries. They know all the green spaces, woods and parks. They do not drive, so they know the public transport well, especially buses and trams. Their way of knowing the city is so different from mine. This says a great deal about the value of outsiders. They see what is already known to the dwellers with fresh eyes, differently without the stories and values attached to them in the dwellers' minds. They see potential where settled dwellers wouldn't think to look twice.

Xuxa

Saturday 27th June 2020, Prague

Last week was hard. My mother was away for six days from Tuesday until Monday. She left me her car for four days, which was good but the last two days without a car were hell. While I was seeing friends, being on my own with two kids all of the time was tricky. Then, when I had to give her back her car, things got much harder. It was compounded by the fact that I have no washing machine, no sensible telephone deal that means paying crazy amounts of money for my pay-as-you-go calls, living in a city quarter which I do not know, and the kids going to bed at 10 pm, since it only gets dark after 9.30 pm. This is a proper state of limbo. And I physically feel like I cannot take much more of it. I got a tingling in my right foot and pain shooting along my leg from my spine. It seems I have done something to my back, constantly carrying heavy bags with laundry and bottles of water. I feel like things need to change – I either need my husband to join us, or buy a washing machine, or rent a car, or move house to [part of Prague 4], where most of my family live and where my kids are supposed to start school in September. I decided to start by buying a better rucksack to alleviate the pain in my back. The other remedies will hopefully follow suit.

I asked J, my landlady to buy a washing machine, arguing that I am only going to stay for a few months and will not be able to deal with the washing machine afterwards. She may have a washing machine for her subsequent tenants. She said that, at the moment, money is tight for them and she can not afford to buy one. And if other people move in, they usually would have their own washing machine. She suggested I buy washing machine and she could try and sell it and send me money when I leave. OK. This is going nowhere. I am going to park the washing machine issue for now.

We do not know yet when my husband is going to join us. Nobody in Sierra Leone knows and it is pretty hard on the people who have stayed behind. The Lungi airport has been closed for three months. It was already supposed to reopen, but that has

not happened yet. ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States recommended that countries reopen their airspace and airports. There are rumours that Brussels Airlines are planning to do two commercial flights per month, starting mid-July. That could be an option of getting my husband over here. Still, I do not like the idea of us going back to Sierra Leone when there would be only two commercial flights per month. What if there is an emergency and we need to fly the kids out again?

Most of my friends in Prague have cars, so they organize events in places where one can park easily, on the outskirts. On Sunday, it was my friend's daughter's eighth birthday, in a bowling alley in south-eastern edge of the city. We were without a car. We slept at my mother's flat and went there by bus. A lady with strong Ukrainian or Russian accent advised us how to press the signal button for the bus to stop. We got off and crossed a field to reach the bowling alley! When we reached it, it was great. We wore face masks on public transport but in the bowling alley, the only people with face masks were the staff. Everyone else was without. While the government orders are still to wear face masks in enclosed spaces, it seems people are sick and tired of them. There is an unspoken agreement among everyone there – nobody is wearing face masks, nobody is talking about face masks, nobody is to mention anything to the authorities. This is interesting because one of the leaders of this mutiny was my friend's boyfriend – a police officer. The kids try their hand at bowling. O didn't want to at the beginning, crying and biting his T-shirt. But when I joined, he played, and won! I asked the other children's parents, all from [part of Prague 4], what they did during coronavirus state of emergency. They all moved to their cottages outside Prague and one of them, usually the man, spent some time in Prague on their own, working. I found that interesting. Because being from [part of Prague 4], they live in a house with a garden, and still they felt it was better to be outside Prague? I understand that people who live in apartments wanted to leave the city, but why leave the city when you have a garden? It seems like during coronavirus – men stayed in the city and women and children were sent to rural areas. For

safety? For comfort?

On Wednesday, I saw my Czech career coach. I first approached him before the coronavirus crisis, in February, I think. I wanted to explore how us, as a family could move to the Czech Republic in about two-years-time. What we could do career-wise and be happy, all of us. That is no mean feat. My husband thinks there are no jobs for him. The fact is, we do not know how our CVs translate into the reality of the Czech Republic in 2020s. I left the Czech Republic in 2010. And for several years now, I have been feeling very homesick. Seeing my kids growing up in the UK, feeling British and not an ounce of Czech-ness in them, always replying to me in English, while I stubbornly keep speaking in Czech in response to them. At least by us moving to Sierra Leone, this has improved. Being in an international school where most people's families are mixed – half – this, half- that or even, quarter this and that. By being in Sierra Leone, they have accepted they are half British and half Czech. When I approached the coach, I wanted my kids to immersed in the Czech way of living – attending a Czech school with its (silly stringent) discipline, summer camps, cottages, swimming in lakes, cycling, mushroom hunting, skiing and ice-skating in the winter, and speaking Czech. It seems, the coronavirus has made my dream come true to a certain extent. We are here. My kids are learning much more about the Czech way of life than ever before and they are beginning to speak Czech, and even though they are not doing so perfectly at least they are trying. My career coach M and I have met only twice before, online. This is the first time we meet in person. I imagined he was taller, otherwise no surprises. He has nice elaborate tattoos on his forearms. We know the task has somewhat changed – we now live here, and we do not know whether we are going back in September or in December to Sierra Leone. We try to focus on my options in the Czech Republic as situation is. We arrive at a conclusion that I do have some international reputation, but none here in the Czech Republic. Nobody knows about me professionally. My task now is to update my online profiles and insert paragraphs in Czech and make contact with all the professional bodies I would potentially like to collaborate with. I might be able to

start some kind of collaboration despite the uncertainty whether we are going to be here, in Sierra Leone or elsewhere.

The coronavirus has affected me professionally. I was offered a job [...] at the end of March. I could not start because I had to home school the kids. I still got an email from them recently asking for my photo and a short bio to put on their web site. That's nice. They are counting on me to take the position. I keep buying clothes for professional encounters in the tropics, hopeful, I will one day be able to resume my professional life there. I was asked by another organization to apply for a consultancy with them. I did. But I didn't get it. Life is a mixed bag. Still I have some more reviewing jobs ahead of me. So things are good.

On Wednesday evening I see K, my friend of 21 years. She is a theatre director. She is [foreign nationality], but she has studied theatre here in Prague. Her Czech is impeccable. Her work and personal life takes place mainly in two countries – [European country] and the Czech Republic. Her partner is Czech. They have a flat in Prague 7. She also keeps a small flat in [foreign city]. She usually makes the six-hour train journey to [foreign city] a few times a month. Her performances are staged in both countries. She is my guru when it comes to balancing one's mental health and life in more than one country. We discuss this topic often. We drink ridiculous amounts of wine and talk about coronavirus. She was in Prague when the state of emergency was declared and when the borders were closed. She said this made her feel highly anxious. But after a week or two, she got used to it. She and her partner were sometimes home-schooling his daughter, and they worked things out creatively, treating it as a kind of holiday. She didn't lose much work, but the schedules got turned around. As a result, she also did not lose much income. She knows she was lucky compared to plenty of others in her industry. Actors were especially hard hit. She still felt like she was being treated with much greater suspicion or inhospitality for being [foreign nationality]. Czech Radio would no longer let her use her usual rehearsal space, because she was from a country with

lots of cases. It didn't matter when she told them she had not been in that country recently. Suddenly, her nationality mattered much more, it emerged as an obstacle. She was only allowed to use the shabbiest of rehearsal rooms in the evening when nobody else was in the building. She laughs about it now and I wonder about the rigidity of such systems and mindsets. For now, life seems to be back on track for her. Theatres will reopen in August. They are normally closed in August, so the rhythm of the year will be quite different than in previous years.

I travel back to my mother's place for the night. My kids are with her. I am on wobbly feet. There are some people on the public transport without face masks. But most still have them. The following day I need to get something from the shops in the Chodov shopping centre. It is packed with people. Every ten minutes or so, there is an announcement urging people to wear face masks. Most comply. Similar announcements are also made on public transport. Most people comply. But people in cafes do not wear them, for obvious reasons. When we go to a doctor's clinic, the nurse says, "we do not wear face masks here", and the patient is relieved and takes it off. This is again under the unspoken agreement that people will not tell anyone else.

I speak to my friend C. Half [foreign nationality A] and half Czech, having grown up in [foreign country B]. She says they left Prague on 13th March for their cottage. Coming back only last week to sort out some issues. And for her son to get his school report. She teaches at the [foreign nationality] Institute. Most of her colleagues have some plans for the summer but know they may not happen. There is a high level of uncertainty about the upcoming summer holidays, which normally take place here from 1st July until 31st August. People want to travel, but they do not know whether it will be possible.

My 13-year old nephew C got accepted to a six-year Gymnasium. It is a type of high school for academically gifted children. It is seen as a university prep. Two years ago,

his twin sister got accepted to 8-year Gymnasium. My brother must be relieved. The coronavirus crisis has affected children and teenagers significantly in their exam preparation. The 19-year olds had to take A-levels (maturita) and university entrance exams in the same two weeks. The 11-year olds, 13-year olds and 15-year olds were taking exams to Gymnasiums. Those 15-year olds who had not been accepted had to find other vocational high schools. My Facebook feed is full of posts by jubilant or desperate mothers – my friends about their offspring's success. My friends with kids in these age categories have not been able to see me yet, because they had been preparing their children for these exams. Hopefully, that will change now. But wait, there is holiday, and everyone had made plans for it in January, so god knows what will materialise. It seems that most people used computers in one way or another. This only goes to show that families without technological equipment are stuffed in this system.

Yesterday was the last day of school for most Czech children. The playgrounds were full. Restaurants on the outskirts of Prague with parking spaces were full. My kids get lunch and ice-cream. At a playground in the wood, my son and daughter play when a group of school kids arrives. Soon I see my son running away, crying. Two boys poked him with a stick. They were his age, maybe slightly older. I talk to their teacher, who then proceeds to tell them off. O is upset. He is worried that this will happen to him in his new Czech school. His Czech is not good enough for defending himself. We need to start training some Czech phrases to deal with bullies.

In other news. Our new neighbour's wife gave birth to a baby girl. She was in labour for 3 days. They are OK now.

[...]

[...]

I spoke to Mr. T, my Krio teacher on Messenger. He got bad news. He has been told

that he has only one year to live, due to his leukaemia. We often talked about his treatment during our classes in Freetown. So, I am sorry to hear this. He has also fallen on hard times financially. Most of his students left Sierra Leone. I asked my husband to send him some money.

Lu tells me that a well-known surgeon from Connaught Hospital passed away due to COVID-19. He was 41 years old. He needed ventilator. Although the hospital has ventilators, the staff are not confident in operating them. So those who need to be put on ventilators, are not due to the lack in human capacity. This is the case with many things in Sierra Leone. Hospitals all over the country get high tech equipment only to see it rot away and never be used. My husband's team see it all the time in their work.

Wednesday 1st July 2020, Prague

We just got back from [name of town], a small town in central part of the Czech Republic, on the border between Bohemia and Moravia. We visited my friend Mar. We worked together 15 years ago as humanitarian workers in Sri Lanka. She is a renowned journalist now, usually reporting from war zones like Syria, Libya, and the DRC. During the COVID crisis she was reporting from Czech hospitals. She is highly critical of the government's crisis management. She says the state should have protected the vulnerable, but otherwise the world should not have stopped.

What she saw in hospitals made her cry. Elderly ladies suffering dementia admitted to hospital for other issues, and tested positive on COVID-19, suddenly being in isolated hospital rooms treated by people in PPE. To them, it was like appearing on a different planet. "Why am I here? When will I see my children? Why can I not see my children?" Mar interviewed an expert in rare diseases. He labelled COVID-19 as such – a rare disease. According to him, the virus does not spread as easily as the public

has been led to believe. Mar sums his testimony up: “You would have to lick a shopping trolley and within a minute someone else would have to lick it too, in order for them to contract it in a supermarket.“

She is upset about the way media have reported on issues during the pandemic. When she talked to the hospital frontline staff, very few journalists, actually visited them. Most worked remotely, constantly peddling numbers, getting addicted to sky-high viewer ratings boosted by people locked down in their homes, stewing in fear. Successfully.

She was critical about the spending of the state. As a freelancer, she applied for government support and got 50.000 crowns, some 1700 pounds. Just like that. How can the state afford this? she asks.

Mar was also seen as a threat by some people. Her best friend visited her after two months of isolation and when she returned home, her husband caused a scene. He screamed that she had been irresponsible, that for sure Mar in her line of work must have contracted the virus and now she – his wife- had brought the virus to him. He was convinced he was going to die. Similar moments of madness, when fear struck in the hearts of otherwise sensible and intelligent people, were common during the lockdown and in its aftermath. (Even my mother’s boyfriend does not want to meet me for the fear of infection, because he associates the black continent with disease and misery).

Mar’s brother returned home from the UK where he had been working on a farm. Upon his entry into the Czech Republic, he informed the Hygiene Authority that he would be staying at his parents’ address during his quarantine period. He did not. Nobody knew where he went. And then one evening, an officer from the Hygiene Authority knocked on the door, demanding to see him, checking his adherence to the quarantine. Well of course they have not found him, and the consequences remain to be seen.

I enjoyed being in the Czech countryside- rolling hills, lots of woods, no fences – far away from Prague, in the midst of small towns and villages. We travelled by train, something my son enjoys. L enjoyed playing with Mar's 8 – year old daughter and O worked on his cycling skills. Mar recommended I get a second-hand bike from an NGO website Kola pro Afriku (Bikes for Africa). She bought one and was very happy with it. So I did. Somehow, we still seem to be linked to Africa.

Finally, my husband's company have booked a ticket for him from Sierra Leone via Morocco and Germany for mid-July. It is all tentative. The airport hasn't opened yet. But at least there is the hope that we may be able to reunite soon. He may have to be in quarantine until he can produce a negative COVID-19 test. I will need to arrange that.

Yesterday, on Tuesday 30th June 2020, there was a party at the Charles Bridge in Prague to celebrate the end of COVID measures. There was a 500-metre-long table and people could sit down, bring their own food and share it with people around them. People were celebrating and saying goodbye to the peculiar beauty of the deserted city centre. For sure, tourist will be back. We have already seen a few Germans and Brits. Also lots of tourists from around the Czech Republic.

Xuxa



500 people celebrating "the end of COVID" at Charles Bridge in Prague on 30th June 2020. Source: Getty Images, as used by BBC on https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53244688, last accessed 09/11/2020.

As of 1st July, people are no longer required to wear face masks indoors or on public transport, except for on the underground – the metro in Prague. Also the region Karviná in northeast of the country is experiencing an outbreak among the coal mining community, so people in that region have to carry on with face masks. Media speak of this as the end of COVID era here.

On our way back from the railway station, we see ticket inspectors get on. They immediately move in the direction of six Roma men. They are dressed like labourers, repairing roads. None of them have tickets and so they get off and they are issued fines. Some things seem to never change, like the certainty of these inspectors and their race-induced behaviour.

Footnote

[1] Exit games have become popular in 2010s. A group of people get locked in a room and they have to solve various riddles to get out.